



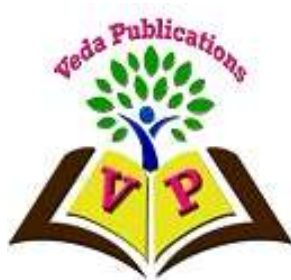
LITERATURE, CULTURE AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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ABSTRACT



This paper will provide the analyses of unnoticed relation namely that of cultural familiarity as a possible source for successful regional cooperation, in order to provide better access and opportunity to people for harmony and religious beliefs. Indian subcontinent which is known as South Asian countries, are mostly post-colonial political organisation. Due to their collective colonial past, South Asian region is unique with shared in history, heritage, literature, culture, religion and languages. South Asian culture is also very rich and varied, which seems to be originated from the rich Indus Valley civilization that saw the influx and mix of the Aryan and Dravidian races. But in the recent past with lot of small countries booming as emerging economic centres synchronized with civilization, these south Asian countries identities in cultures was basically hampered by various religious practices that prevails in these Nations.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), aims for a collective development through economic cooperation, maintenance of peace and security, social unity, promotion of cultural synthesis and regional integration in the Indian sub-continent. However, a major obstacle that has to be considered towards regional integration is frequent political and military conflicts happening between the states of this region. Many of the nations in the South Asia, are plagued by diverse social and economic problems where high rates of illiteracy and unemployment take the major part. Education and employment remain two important areas in the nation-building discourses of most South Asian countries in the recent years due to an alarming increase in population growth. Hence, there is a need for greater cooperation among the Nations in the South Asian Region, in the field of education to improve the situation. Culture and literature go hand in hand in shaping the growth of any of the nation by addressing all social-economic issues which is believed to be an integral part in bringing regional cooperation with similarities in lifestyle, recreation and entertainment.

Keywords: *Region, Cooperation, Indian Subcontinent, Culture, Literature.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The South Asian regions are inseparably linked through geography, shared history, and culture heritage, but they are divided by their internal politics and geopolitical environment. Economic imperatives drive them towards connectivity and cooperation, however the lack of coherence of interests keeps them apart. Consequently, South Asia's economic development has failed to reach its optimal level and hamper the progress towards integration within the regionⁱ.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the regional inter-governmental organisation, founded in the year 1985 with seven South Asian countries - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Later, in 2007, Afghanistan joined the Association making the member list grew to eight. The main aim of the organisation is to promote a shared understanding, good neighbourly relations, and meaningful cooperation in order to achieve peace, freedom, social justice, and economic prosperity in the regionⁱⁱ.

South Asia occupies around 3.4 % of the world's available land, which is ultimately home to approximately 24 percent of the world's population (1.749 billion), making it the most densely populated place on earthⁱⁱⁱ. SAARC occupies a land area larger than the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Nonetheless, despite of such traits, SAARC has failed to achieve its objectives and South Asia in present scenario, is treated as "one of the least integrated regions" in the world as per the World Bank (2017) statistics^{iv}.

Promoting intra-regional connectivity through trade is one of the primary focus areas of SAARC. However, even after three decades of existence, intra-SAARC trade stands at a mere 5% of overall South Asia's total trade. In contrast, intra-regional trade constitutes 35 % of East Asia's total trade, and 60 % of Europe's^v.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN SOUTH ASIA

Culture is nothing but the knowledge of a group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Before we

analyse the concept Culture, first we may answer the question, does culture matter? Looking back at the place of culture in social science, the answer in the 70s and 80s would have been negative. But as contribution to an anthology on economic development and democracy, David Landes answers the question affirmative: "If we can learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture that makes almost all the difference" but also "On the other hand, culture does not stand alone"^{vi}.

If we look at the South Asian Region, there is an evidence of Neolithic culture that has been found throughout the modern states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka which represent South Asia or Southern Asia (also known as the Indian subcontinent). Following the Indo-Aryan settlement in the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the establishment of the characteristic social groups (Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) in the caste system based on the Jatimodel in the Varna order, the tribal entities variously consolidated into oligarchic chiefdoms or kingdoms (the 16 Mahajanapadas), beginning in the 6th century B.C. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are major world religions that originated in South Asia^{vii}. These arguably represent the furthest reaching, most profound and permanent South Asian ideas on other cultural spheres.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are situated at the western periphery of South Asia, where the cultural character has been made by both, Persia, a civilization rooted in Mesopotamia and the Indosphere. Pakistan's two eastern regions of Punjab and Sindh share cultural links to Northwest India. The Brahui are a group of tribes who live primarily in Baluchistan and Sind provinces of Pakistan. Brahui is a Dravidian language and, as such, is distinct from the languages of the neighbouring Pathan, Baluch, and Sind people. It is reported that many Brahui are bilingual in Baluchi and that Brahui contains numerous loanwords from Baluchi and Sindhi. The heart of Brahui territory is the district of Kalat, in Baluchistan. Politically, the Brahui are best described as a loose confederation of tribes, which was ruled from about 1700 to Pakistan's independence in 1947 by the Ahmadzais dynasty^{viii}.



Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal share a common heritage and culture based on the Bengali language. Urban Bengali elite culture has produced one of South Asia's finest literary traditions, including not only the novel, short story, and poetry but drama and film as well. Some of India's best classical musicians and greatest exponents of the dance have been Bengalis. Bengalis have also made major contributions to Indian and world cinema. Rural Bengal has an old and well-developed folk literature, including narrative poetry (*puithi*), drawn from history, myth, and legend, as well as a very popular itinerant theatre (called *jatra*)^{ix}. Despite industrialization and the spread of commercially manufactured products throughout the region, the Bengali rural economy still depends on the services of traditional craftspeople weavers, potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, metalworkers, and the like whose lifestyle often represent a high quality of both technique and aesthetic design.

Nepal is culturally linked to both India and Tibet and the varied ethnic groups of the country share many of the festivals and cultural traditions which were used and celebrated in North and East India and Tibet. Nepali, the dominant language of Nepal uses the Devanagari alphabet which is also used to write many North Indian languages. Nepal is a Hindu kingdom in which the king is considered an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Although the majority of the country is Hindu, a number of groups of sizable populations are Buddhist. There are a few groups of Muslims in the country and an even smaller number of converts to Christianity. Generally, Hinduism in Nepal is based on the Dharmashastras, Puranas, and various developments in Vaishnavism and Shaivism that have largely originated in India. Buddhism in Nepal blends Mahayana, or the Great Vehicle, with Vajrayana, the Diamond Way^x.

Bhutan is a culturally linked to Tibet with significant influences from India. Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion in Bhutan and the Tibetan alphabet is used to write Dzongkha, the dominant language of Bhutan. In Bhutan about 20 dialects are spoken which also includes Nepali^{xi}. The national dress is the symbol of unity without which the nation lacks meaning. In Bhutan, culture is largely shaped by religion (Buddhism). Before Buddhism, the bonism

culture (worshipping of animals and nature) was widespread. The first temple is being constructed in the capital city of Thimpu. One can also see the film industry growing where Bollywood certainly has an influence.

Sri Lanka is culturally tied to both India and Southeast Asia. Sinhalese, the dominant language in the country is written in the Sinhalese alphabet which is derived from the Kadamba-Pallava alphabet, certain cultural traditions, and aspects of its cuisine, for example, show South Indian influences. Cultural festivals, aspects of its cuisine and Theravada Buddhism, the dominant religion in Sri Lanka, show a Southeast Asian affinity. The unique culture of Sri Lankan Tamils took on distinctiveness early from its close proximity to the Sinhalese and from waves of immigration from diverse regions of southern India. Many features of Sri Lankan Tamil culture, including village settlement patterns, inheritance and kinship customs, and domestic and village "folk religion" stand in sharp contrast to mainland Tamil customs. One possible reason is that the immigrants who created the first Tamil settlements in Sri Lanka appear to have come not just from the Tamil region of south India but from the Kerala coast as well^{xii}.

Indo-Aryan languages are spoken in Pakistan, Sinhalese of Sri Lanka and most of North, West and East India and Nepal. Dravidian languages are spoken in South India and in Sri Lanka by the Tamil community. Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken in the North and North East India. Iranic languages are spoken in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. The main languages of Afghanistan are Pashto and Dari.

The above stated infusion of languages in different parts of the country apart from their country of origin, shows how varied the trade happened between those places in earlier days with the merger of different culture and traditions. At present day scenario trade between two countries is not happen as olden days as conflict of interest arises between different political parties which show their supremacy to retain their position in their own country. Despite these hurdles, there is still lot of scope and hope in the rising generation which can put a barricade to difference in opinion between the



political parties and ruling government which they have to abide based on their constitution.

LINKAGE BETWEEN CULTURE AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Apart from economic gains, regional cooperation is needed for maintenance of peace and security, social unity, promotion of cultural synthesis and for religious integrity. Prof Partha Ghosh in his paper titled "Culture, Cultural Productions and South Asian Spaces", said South Asia is more a cultural rather than a geo-political construct and it will survive even if SAARC were to disappear^{xiii}.

Peace and security has always been the focus of Bhutan's foreign policy. Cultural identity is also part of the nine points of Gross National Happiness in Bhutan. Bhutanese culture is composed of Buddhist identity, competence in the mother language, knowledge of art and craft, and manifestation of various views. Culture is of course one of the factors in Indo-Bhutan relations. This cultural foundation brings together many people from both the countries including writers and artists. Culture can be used as a unifying factor to build bridges^{xiv}.

There is a rise of identity at the social, political and religious levels that have acquired far serious proportions. The intermingling of politics and identity is poisonous as the cultural space is fragmented by political divisions. Prof. Muni in his paper, emphasised that culture retains the potential to promote harmony. It is, however, important to keep politics away from cultural aesthetics^{xv}. There is another author correctly mentioned that, the Culture could be used as an instrument for foreign policy and where the policies belonged to the states and culture belonged to the people, with a constant tension between the two. There were framed consciously by bureaucrats and politicians to serve their interests while culture was organic and constantly evolving, which she says is a complex and diverse concept^{xvi}.

For India, culture as a foreign policy tool in the neighbourhood had limited appeal and was often perceived with suspicion. However, there has been a metamorphic change in South Asia in recent years and there is greater openness to accept diverse identities and use culture as an instrument to bring countries and people together which seems to be an

ice breaker towards religious and cultural cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Culture is one of the leading subject having very effective elements that will directly help people in the nations to lead their development strategies. So the SAARC Cultural Centre should engage in implementing programmes to promote culture in South Asian Countries. There should be more access to each other's repositories of culture. Apart from Governments initiatives, other Cultural societies and NGOs must work for new harmonisation, a realignment of interest. The future of South Asian integration lies in the strategic use of soft power to promote values which are beneficial for the region as a whole.

Since the China's presence in South Asian Region, has been increasing in the recent time, India should take all the possible ways to have collaboration with each Nation in the region. Literature and Culture would be the one of the best way for that. Another option would be through SAARC, India may cooperate with nations in South Asia. This cultural collaboration may not change the prolonged political issues, between the Nations, however, this may change the mind set of people in positive way.

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