

## **Crossings, Lines, Borders: Celebrating and Undermining South Asia**

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16 January 2009

As nation-states define themselves in opposition to each other, creating lines and borders in order to define and mark their own unique sense of national unity and identity, ideological, economic, political and cultural trends often cut across such lines and borders in defiance of such imposed limitations. Often, such crossings come in the form of celebration – art, music; at others, in the form of oppression, war or terror. South Asia is similar, perhaps to any other artificially constructed and delineated region, open to such influences, yet, because of continuing and unresolved problems, continues to intensify the scale and intensity of issues which have been settled elsewhere. Europe, whether New or Old, Latin America, East Asia and other regions, have been able to give clearer indications of notions of ‘unity in diversity’, but perhaps not South Asia, where differences, contradictions and antagonism, probably still define what lies outside and within each units borders.

Like many other regions of the world, the term known as ‘South Asia’ was constructed after the Second World War by US policy analysts, for whom such simplified and completely arbitrary compartmentalisations may have made it easier to deal with complex geographical and political entities. Yet, even six decades after the ‘creation’ of South Asia, even the residents of this region are not clear what constitutes their region. While the collective known as SAARC – the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation – with its seven member states simplifies the idea of a south Asia, with India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives as members, this construction serves little for analytical or for any other purposes. Moreover, in a highly globalised and inter-related, yet differentiated, world, such arbitrary boundaries and classifications seem to be self-defeating. In addition, even if we were to put aside these rather problematic issues and formulations and looked simply at how SAARC defines itself, the question of why the Maldives should be included and not Afghanistan, with the latter perhaps having a far more lived and significant influence on at least two countries of SAARC, raises issues which have not been addressed, leave alone resolved. Clearly, how South Asia is defined and constructed, allows us to examine different sets of boundaries, lines and crossings within and outside this region.

Despite these problems of delimitation with regard to what constitutes South Asia, every such region is bound to have a core set of countries perhaps more dominant and more powerful and hegemonic than others, with others more on the fringe of this entity. Despite its two dozen members, the European Union is much more about France, Germany and the UK, the latter of which does not even subscribe to one of the key components of European unity, union and integration, that of monetary union. Yet, the UK, which is clearly the subservient part of an

Atlantic 'alliance' with the United States, is an integral part of Europe and a dominant member of the Union despite protestations and reservations from other more fully integrated members, such as Spain and Italy.

So it is with South Asia and SAARC, whether we include Afghanistan or not. Perhaps it would not be unfair to say that Pakistan and India dominate all notions and subsequent issues and problems related to South Asia, than do the other five member states. Moreover, perhaps Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh form the second string of members, but all dependent on the relations between Pakistan and India, with Bhutan and the Maldives on its furthest extremes. The location of Afghanistan in South Asia, not just because of its physical presence on the edge of its map, makes an honest and fair construction of South Asia even more complicated. Critics have argued, furthermore, that given India's huge domination, in every sense, over the entity designated as South Asia – it is the only South Asian country which neighbours all the other six – South Asia is just another name for a Greater India. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of India – or that of India and Pakistan – over South Asia, each of the seven (or eight) countries has more or less completely independent status defining the status of its nationhood and its ability to deal with other countries in the region. Or at least, that is what borders are meant to do. Yet, the relationship – particularly diplomatic and military – between and amongst South Asian countries has often been with complete disregard to their nationhood or their borders.

The hegemony of India over South Asia, or its bullying, is further emphasised by the fact, that this overly-dominant country in the region, has been involved in war or direct interference, in almost all the other countries in the region. With Pakistan, India has fought at least three wars and has had numerous military and diplomatic skirmishes, with both countries even threatening nuclear strikes; with Sri Lanka, Indian troops in the guise of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the 1970s, complicated an already grave situation and have continued to have significant influence; in Bangladesh, India's role in helping the creation of this independent nation is well-documented, yet after Bangladesh's independence, issues as diverse as migration, water and terrorism, have resulted in constant threats between the two countries; and, with both Nepal and Bhutan highly dependent on India, India has been able to determine almost all facets of their relationship with it. Nevertheless, it would be unfair and incorrect to single out India for policing its neighbourhood, for it has also frequently been provoked and challenged, and its borders crossed in ways that undermine its status of independent nationhood. In innumerable cases, it has only responded having been forced to cross borders only in self defence.

In so many ways, because of the lines that form the international borders that cut across what was a colonial India in 1947, identities have been forged on both sides of those lines emphasising differences at the cost of recognising similarities. The Indian and Pakistani Punjabs, Rajasthan and Eastern Sindh and Kutch, Eastern and Western Bengal, and of course Kashmir,

(as well as Afghanistan and Pakhtunkhwa in the north western frontier regions of colonial India), all emphasise the fact that the nation-state insists on many loyalties which have been crafted only over the last sixty years, rather than those which had existed for centuries. Where pluralistic traditions of language and culture may have dominated and forged markers of identity, religion has done so more recently as have the ideologies of all nation-states, breaking links with that past. Moreover, internally too, similar sets of markers of identity have been dealt with very differently.

In India, new states have been carved out of old, far more amiably than the way such differences within states been dealt with, in Pakistan and in Sri Lanka. The larger narrative of Hindu (or secular?) and Muslim may have forced Partition in 1947 but since then within the larger narratives, languages and culture have forced to redefine maps and borders internally. Along with these categories of identity defining groups of individuals against others within the nation-state, there have also been the resurgence of the meta-narratives of religion – variants of Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Hindu revivalism in India – which have also forced the nation-state to respond to such developments at a larger, national, level.

In the last decade or so, it has been these interpretations of Islam mixed up with notions of conquest, which have dominated crossings across lines and borders which make up the nation-states of South Asia. Whether it is infiltration from Afghanistan into Pakistan in the name of some generic entity called the taliban or talibanisation, or state-sponsored cross border terrorism (often called jihad) backed by the Pakistani military into Indian Kashmir from Pakistan, or infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslim extremists out to exploit India's 'north-east problem', Islam and Muslims may have been the biggest transgressors who have crossed sovereign boundaries. Where state actors have been involved, as is now recognised in the Pakistani case, it is not jihad or religion that has been the cause of such crossings, but perhaps the unfinished agenda of cementing borders which have been created by making lines across settlements dividing families and communities, as in Kashmir.

While jihadis and militants – and even states – have often failed to respect the lines drawn as borders undermining the notion of nationhood under perceived larger and more universal identities, there have been many others who have also worked to over-ride these man-made boundaries and borders. Peace movements, music, art and other manifestations of cultural identity have also attempted to redefine identities created by the nation-state. Cinema in Pakistan, for better and worse, is Bollywood; in India, sufi music certainly, and perhaps to some small though increasing extent also popular music, is Pakistani music. But beyond that, however, there has been far greater resistance to assimilation, exchange and intercourse even before this 'age of terror' began to dominate the lives of the majority of people in South Asia.

Mutual suspicion between state actors, the absence of the need and the reluctance to resolve the issues created as a consequence of partition in 1947, the politics of nation-states and of local constituencies, have all been responsible for the stiffening of national and sub-national identities. What have failed to emerge in South Asia, have been broader identities, identities which have cut across borders and redrawn lines despite the persistence of such political borders. Civil and political actors in search of peace and a larger south Asian identity, have been less successful at achieving their objectives. The power of war and terror, has been far greater than that of art or music, or even peace. Unlike most other regions of the world which, while maintaining their own national identities, have forged wider, more regional, broader identities, South Asia and south Asians have still many, many, years to travel before such identities emerge, if they do at all.