

# PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH ASIA: IMPACT ON REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND WAY FORWARD

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## ABSTRACT

*South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions of the world despite several efforts by the states in the region to engender cooperation. This lack of integration has been primarily attributed to a whole range of Social, Economic and Political factors ranging from historical animosity to religious animosity and the presence of India as a hegemon. Numerous scholars have provided a significant number of ways which have helped in speeding up the integration process, but overall the progress remains abysmally low. Perceptions which are formed through several communicative mediums such as school textbooks, print and electronic media and sports, provide an alternative way of understanding the regional dynamics within South Asia and how these mediums could be employed further to enhance the integration process.*

**Keyword:** *South Asia, Cooperation, Regional Integration, Perceptions*

## 1. Introduction

South Asia with its vast geographical expanse ranging from the Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean in the South and from Khyber Pass in the west to the borders of modern-day Burma, encompasses of eight nations namely, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The region is one of the most populous (one-fifth of the world population) and among the most diverse regions of the world with certain convergence in culture but diversions regarding language and religions. India, the country occupying the central and dominant position within the region is an emerging economy and a major power in the international arena. Along

with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are other two major economies of the region (see Table 2.2) and were once a part of British India. Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal and the two island states of Sri Lanka and Maldives have much smaller economies. Below the Table 2.1 takes a look at the size and diversity of the South Asian countries regarding area and population. Table 2.2 depicts the GDP growth rates of South Asian countries from 2005-2009 and where do they stand regarding human development in the world. A correlation between GDP and HDI shows that though most of the South Asian states have been experiencing unprecedented rates of economic growth since the 1990's onwards, this higher growth rate has not translated into any significant improvements in the lives of people, evident in the lower HDI rankings of all South Asian states barring Sri Lanka.

**Table 2.1:** South Asia at a glance

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Total Surface Area (in Sq. Km)</b>	<b>Population (in numbers)</b>	<b>Major languages (by number of speakers)</b>	<b>Major religious groups</b>
<b>Bangladesh</b>	143,998	166,280,712	Bengali	Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists
<b>India</b>	3,287,263	1,236,344,631	Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi	Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains
<b>Pakistan</b>	796,095	196,174,380	Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi	Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	65,610	21,866,445	Sinhala, Tamil	Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims

**Source:** From 'The World Factbook'- CIA. (URL: [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region\\_sas.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region_sas.html))

\*Population as of July 2014.

\*\* Data on religious groups and languages is from varied sources.

**Table 2.2:** GDP Growth Rate (Growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency) and HDI Ranking of South Asian Countries.

Countries	GDP growth rates (annual %)				HDI RANK(2013)
	2010	2011	2012	2013	
<b>Bangladesh</b>	5.6	6.5	6.5	6.0	142
<b>India</b>	10.3	6.6	4.7	5.0	135
<b>Pakistan</b>	1.6	2.7	3.5	4.4	146
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	8.0	8.2	6.3	7.3	73

**Source:** The data in GDP column are from World Bank database (URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>), and HDI rankings are from the Human Development Report 2014, published by UNDP (URL: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-1-human-development-index-and-its-components>)

“There is a broad-based consensus that promotion of regional integration and co- operation including enhanced intra-regional trade will constitute an effective avenue for accelerating economic growth, employment generation and poverty reduction, advancing the well-being of South Asian citizens” (Razzaque & Basnett, 2014)[10]. But despite the known advantages of an integrated region, South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. The barriers to intra-regional trade within South Asia remain more stringent than on the trade with the rest of the world. Not just the barriers on trade but the NTB's (Non-tariff barriers) also have a major role in hindering the integration processes. NTB's include measures related to price controls, financing, quality control procedures, and technical regulations (Razzaque & Basnett, 2014)[10].

This low level of integration within South Asia is more discouraging since the region boasts of “geographical contiguity, common colonial past, historical ties, religious and cultural traditions, linguistic affinities and values and social norms” (Dash, 2008, p.45)[4].

To improve this poor state of affairs and to foster integration, the countries of region established SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Organisation) but "since its origin, SAARC has experienced only limited growth regarding institutional developments and program implementation” (Dash, 2008, p.3)[4]. The countries also signed the SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) in 2006 with an aim to boost regional trade and commerce. Apart from SAARC and SAFTA “numerous geo-political initiatives, economic fora and trade exchanges, cultural get - together, ‘friendly understandings ‘to promote regional integration have taken place, yet the region is not free of political strife, mutual distrust and occasional clashes” (Chadha, 2005, p. 146)[2].

Numerous scholars have offered several perspectives on how to approach the question of integration in a region. So a multitude of approaches on how to foster integration in South Asia have been explored by scholars, but as shown integration remains low.

This paper would briefly trace the history of the region and evolution of the modern South Asia. Then, it would elaborate upon the challenges and impediments, which have stalled the process of integration through economic, political, and socio-cultural lenses. Eventually, it attempts to address three questions:

- Why despite several agreements on economic and political matters, integration remains low?
- Why has it been so difficult for South Asian states to resolve their disputes and forge an integrated and economically vibrant peaceful South Asia?
- How by analysing different communicative mediums and developing an understanding of perceptions shaped through them can help in speeding up the integration process?

## 2. Contextualising Modern South Asia:

The contemporary South Asian region was previously known by many ancient names like 'Bharatvarsha' or 'Jambudvip' and in the later periods as 'Al-Hind or Hindustan'. It was in 1970's, and 1980's that the term South Asia gained prominence in the public discourse (Nandy, 2005)[8]. Though both South Asia and India are geographical expressions, South Asia is politically more neutral in the present context than the term Indian subcontinent (Bose and Ayesha, 2011). The Indian subcontinent as it was previously known was once a part of the British Empire, and it was the division of the subcontinent in 1947(formation of Pakistan) and subsequently in 1971(formation of Bangladesh) that led to the drawing of contemporary boundaries of the region.

The nation-states that emerged in the aftermath of 1947 are "modelled on the pre-Second World War nation-states of Europe, the kind that builders of nation-states in South Asia came to know during their formative years in colonial times. These states are poorly grounded in the everyday lives, cultural and political preferences, and moral frames of the ordinary citizens. Hence, the fear pervading the ruling culture in each of the countries that the state might not survive the carelessness of its citizens and the demonic conspiracy of its neighbours" (Nandy, 2005, p. 541)[8].

So it would not be wrong to argue that "South Asia is the only region in the world where most states define themselves by not what they are, but by what they are not. Also, the idea of South Asia is also partly imposed one, a response to other more successful regional groupings like Southeast Asia and the European Union" (Nandy, 2005, p.541)[8].

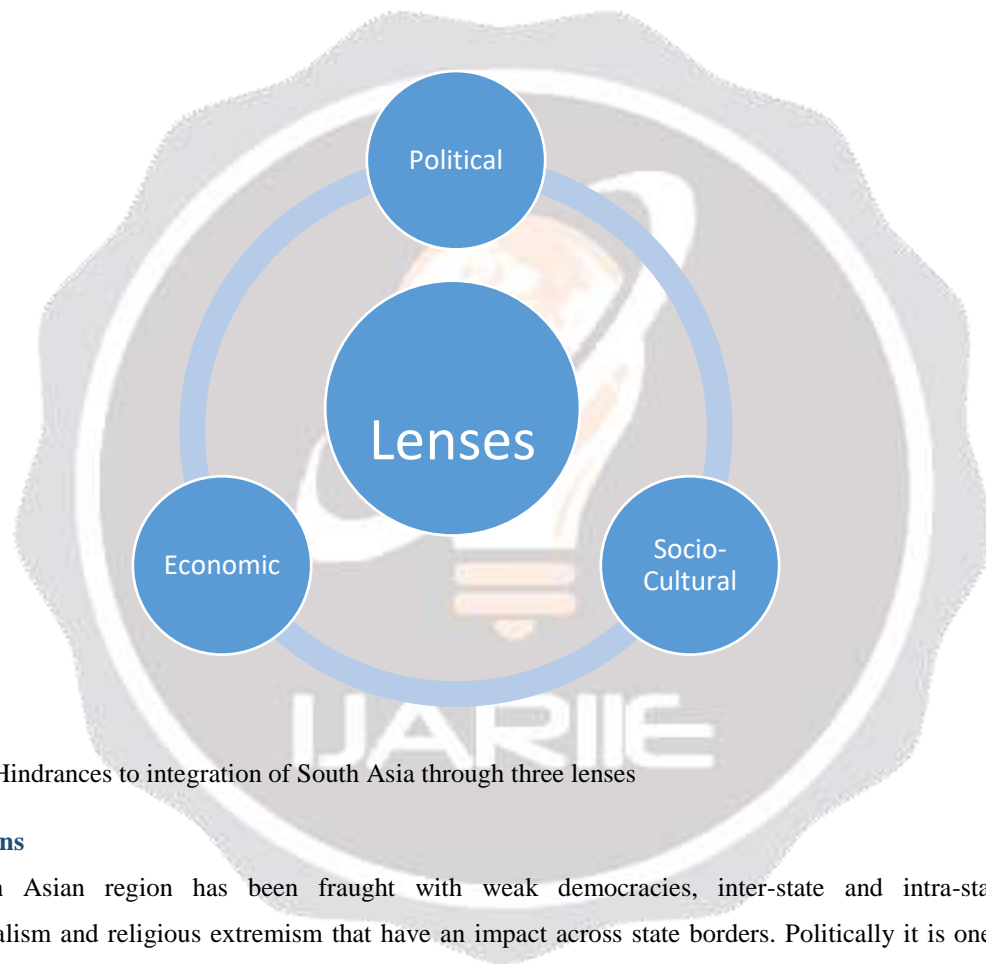
The broader picture that thus emerges is a South Asia where the states seem to be in search of a unique national identity which defines them as self-constituted entities, rather than a product of their past. By disassociating themselves from a common past, they attempt to establish and assert an identity which is either incomplete or false.

In the following section, we take a look at the major challenges to integration of South Asia.

### 3. Impediments to Integration through three lenses:

There are certain challenges to South Asia's integration that have been dealt in detail by various scholars, but they remain largely unresolved, despite several attempts at resolving them. "India's hegemonic status and Pakistan's continuing challenge to India's position, the existence of weak ruling coalitions, ethnic crisis, and nuclear issues" are cited as the major challenges to integration (Dash, 2008, p.110)[4].

Below we employ three critical lenses to examine different aspects of the major challenges to integration of South Asia:



**Figure 2:** Hindrances to integration of South Asia through three lenses

#### Political lens

The South Asian region has been fraught with weak democracies, inter-state and intra-state conflicts, fundamentalism and religious extremism that have an impact across state borders. Politically it is one of the most turbulent and unstable regions in the world.

The contemporary challenges to integration could be traced back in the past. Historically, the partition of British India (1947) and Pakistan (1971) were two events, which had a major impact on the psyche and popular imagination of the people because of the pain and suffering associated with it. Millions of people were killed or rendered homeless due to the communal riots and forced migrations during the partition of British India and later on during the partition of Pakistan also known as the liberation of Bangladesh. The pain, the suffering and the horrendous experiences of the partitions haunt the popular imagination of the people of the region even till today. It is this historical baggage of the memories of partition which has held the integration of the South Asia to a certain extent.

The violence that followed the partition redefined the boundaries of communities and is still in the collective memory of the people (Pandey, 2001)[9]. Starting off on such a violent path began the virulent relationship between India and Pakistan, which remains unresolved since a long time. The relationship is fraught with the dangers of zero-sum approaches followed by both the states, which has led to three major wars, an unresolved boundary dispute and poor economic ties between them.

The impact of India- Pakistan's relationship on the integration of South Asia is drastic because a large number of projects are held back due to disagreements between these two countries. The approach followed by both India and Pakistan has been detrimental to the growth of SAARC as an institution. The diversion and channelizing of huge funds to the militarisation of the two states and the nuclearisation of the region in the year 1998 could also be attributed to the rivalry between these two states.

The second major political challenge to the integration of the region is the fact that all the South Asian states are a creation of the recent past. All of them were carved out as nation states in the aftermath of the British rule. Consequently, the states within the region perceive a higher level of integration as a threat to their national sovereignties and independence on domestic matters. "When they talk of the SAARC, they have in mind a compact among them to live or fight together within the format of the global nation-state system, not within the format of the cultural system of which they have survived for centuries. Hence their paranoiac fear of anything that might push the region towards people's SAARC – involving a free exchange of news, books, information, ideas, literature, art, films and, above all, free circulation of free-thinking human beings" (Nandy, 2005, p. 543)[8].

The third major political impediment to integration is India's central and dominant position in the South Asian region due to the huge size of its geography, population, economy and military. Due to the vast differences in resources and capabilities, India is always perceived as a hegemon by the other countries of the region, thus barring them from integrating. Power asymmetry with India and geographical dependence on it for trade and connectivity have played important role in adding to this hegemonic perception of India (Kher, 2013)[7]. But there are disagreements within the scholarship on whether India should be seen as a hegemon or not. As Madhavi Bhasin quotes Cohen, "India in South Asia is powerful enough to be feared but not powerful enough to be respected" (Bhasin, n.d.)[1]. So, on one hand, India might be perceived as hegemonic, but on the other, its failure to hold the leadership of the region downplays this factor.

With regards to terrorism, though the South Asians states have committed themselves to international agreements, there is no consensus within South Asia over 'what constitutes terrorism'. So the phrase someone's terrorist is someone else's freedom fighter seems to hold true in the South Asian context.

Apart from these, several other bilateral disputes stall the integration process in South Asia. The disputes between Bangladesh and India over river water sharing, illegal migration from Bangladesh to India and the killings of these migrants by Indian troops. The dispute between India and Sri Lanka over the fate of Sri Lankan Tamils are some of these major bilateral disputes.

"Finally many countries are constantly in the news for a multitude of reasons: territorial disputes and political, military rivalry between countries, varying from and intensity of political rhetoric, diverse types of domestic agitations, law and order disturbances, religious conflicts and so on. All these have their own cumulatively threatening effect on regional stability which in turn affects the peace and pattern of growth, for individual countries as well for the region as a whole. As Chadha points out "trust deficit still looms large in the region" (Chadha, 2005, p.144)[2].

### **Economic lens**

The low level of cooperation in trade and economic matters within South Asia has to be taken into account while dealing with challenges to integration. The barriers to economic integration are several and these include trade barriers between the states, non-complementarity of the goods produced, poor infrastructure, widespread poverty of the masses, and geographical location of India in the midst of all states makes it impossible for easy cooperation between the other countries of the region which are located on its either sides.

Economic integration is marred because the "production and trade structures are characterised by an identical pattern of comparative advantage and low trade complementarities and a lack of an efficient regional transport network" (Din and Nasir, 2005, p.961)[6]. Apart from these, there are several policies induced and structural constraints, which hinder economic integration. Policy-induced constraints include the existence of NTB's, Sensitive lists under SAFTA, lack of policy coordination and consolidation. Structural constraints include poor connectivity and infrastructure within countries and at borders, asymmetries in standards, language barriers, security concerns, and hidden barriers such as stringent regulatory and bureaucratic processes, hidden taxes, and lack of business information (Das, 2009)[5].

### **Socio-cultural lens**

The socio-cultural factors which impede the integration of the region include low levels of literacy, the radicalisation of the masses, and the diversity of South Asia regarding languages, religion and cultural practices. All these factors are considered as roadblocks for the integration of the region. Another prominent cause of the low level of integration is the lack of people to people contact within the South Asian region.

The comprehensive picture that emerges from all the three lenses is a South Asia which is embroiled in conflicts over boundaries and sharing of river water. It remains largely underdeveloped despite being endowed with huge natural and human resources. All these hindrances to integration have been debated and discussed, and several attempts to resolve them have been made, but ground realities have not changed for the region. The efforts seem to have made a little difference to the lives of the people in the region.

## **4. An alternative vision for regional integration of South Asia**

States through several communicative mediums have been shaping the perceptions of their citizens. So states do play a major role in the construction of the identities of their citizens. People learn about themselves, their society, their nation-states and the world through several such mediums like the

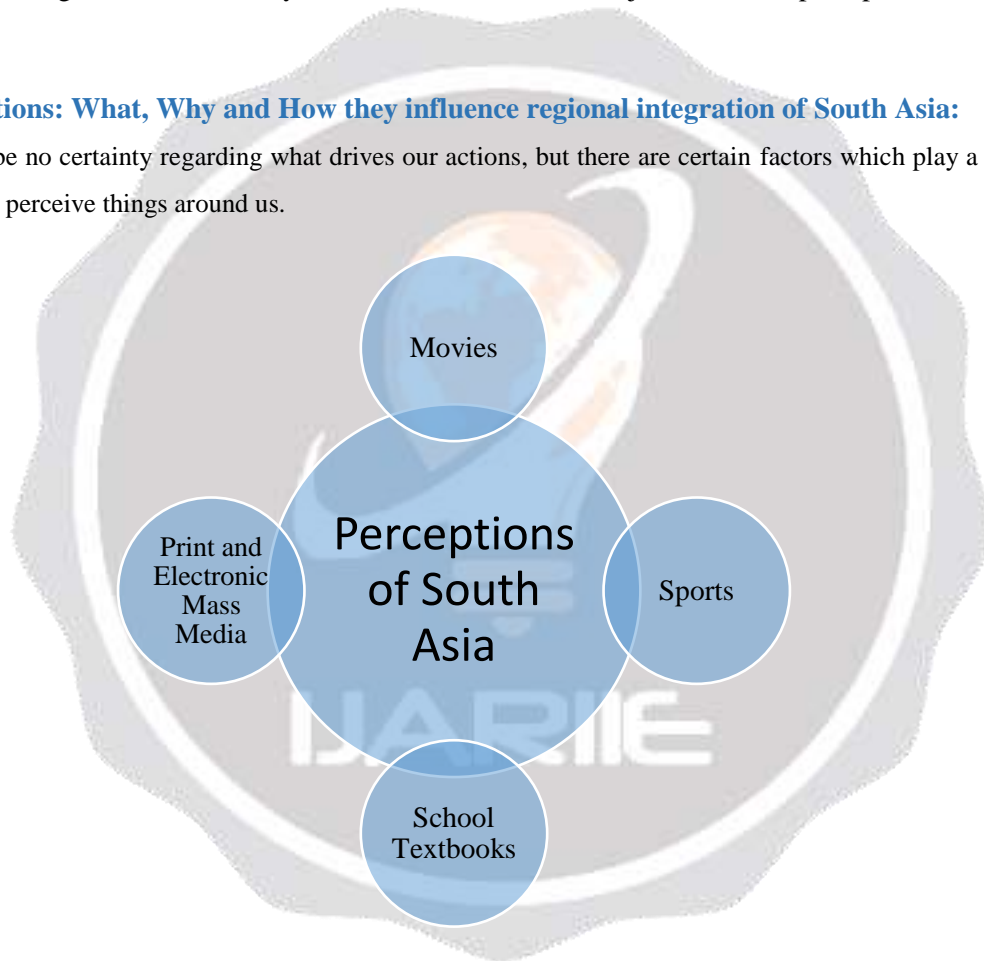
textbooks, media, newspapers, movies, etc. And over time, they begin to associate themselves with a certain identity and develop a certain consciousness of the world they live in.

But how does this consciousness of the people influence the integration of South Asia? For this we need to examine that does the states in the region feed in their citizenry a consciousness of South Asia? If yes, then, are their efforts visible in the communicative mediums which drive the perceptions of the people within the region?

In the following section, we firstly take a brief look at the major drivers of perceptions of South Asian people.

### 5. Perceptions: What, Why and How they influence regional integration of South Asia:

There can be no certainty regarding what drives our actions, but there are certain factors which play a major role in the way we perceive things around us.



**Figure 3:** Constituents of Perceptions

To begin with, it is the school textbooks which play an extremely significant role in shaping the perceptions of the students. An analysis of the textbook could serve as an invaluable resource to dig into what a state wants the future generations of the country to know about their state, their neighbours and their region. Textbooks thus become an important conveyor of national as well as regional identities.

But what if this very account in the textbooks is misleading and is based on hatred? It poses a grave danger to the relations between different countries and integration of a region because textbooks play an important role in shaping



perceptions. So it becomes imperative to analyse structures of knowledge and models of identities conveyed via state education.

Sports is another dimension which requires a critical scrutiny regarding how it influences our perceptions about other states. As Chopra rightly argues that we need to realise the “importance of sport in constructing and strengthening identities at various levels of society, especially in the nation building process” (Chopra, 2014, p.11)[3]. For example, India and Pakistan are considered archrivals in Cricket. At times emotions run high amongst the fans of the two countries which turns into hatemongering for the people of the other country. These instances undoubtedly influence and harden the existing perceptions the people have.

Also, it is the movies or films which too feed into our memory and consciousness. They feed in the image of our society, our culture, our state and the world at large. Simultaneously they also provide us with an image of other societies, their cultures and other states. People watch movies based on themes like wars as well as on everyday life. The depiction in the movie of the ‘other’, does have an impact on the way people would perceive the ‘other’ and all their actions. A movie which depicts the ‘other’ in a negative light might have implications for the way the other is seen and dealt with. So movies are an important part of the consciousness built in the people of South Asia.

Apart from movies, the role of state media, corporate news channels and newspapers within the region are also imperative in providing accurate and unbiased news to the large masses of South Asia. Failing in which could also have implications such as having negative perceptions of other countries in the region.

## 6. Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper has been to bring forth a comprehensive and an all-encompassing picture of South Asia. It traces the origins of the modern South Asian region by analysing how and why the idea of South Asia came up and what are the different contestations to its contemporary form. After providing the historical background, it goes on to cite the major problems/challenges that have been hindering the integration process within the region.

Eventually, it cites perceptions as an important driver of integration in a region, by analysing which, we can get a better understanding of what holds back the integration process. There are several mediums through which the social reality around us is constructed and presented before us. Perceptions are a part of this constructed social reality and are continuously being shaped and influenced by the communicative mediums.

To comprehend a deeper understanding of the perceptions, and their influence on the regional integration of South Asia, the states in the South Asian region need to go beyond the traditional understanding of the South Asian region and look for newer ways to speed up the integration process.

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