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‘Himalayasia’: Reclaiming Regional Identity in South Asia

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Abstract

South Asia is a conflict-prone region with numerous humanitarian challenges. South Asian states have long been struggling to bridge the political gaps among themselves. Regionalism has not been instrumental enough in this regard. This paper identifies a lack of regional identity for the South Asian peoples as one of the major obstacles why regionalism has never had much impact on the political map of South Asia. It is argued here that South Asia needs a major regional reorientation to reclaim its historic and cultural commonalities. And, that can be facilitated by a unique and meaningful geographical identification. In this regard, the Himalayan Mountain Range can be regarded as a geographical connector of the major South Asian States; hence, ‘Himalayasia’ could be a suitable name for their regional reorientation. The proposition is an outcome of a people-centric approach to constructing collective identity through social interaction among the peoples of South Asia based on their geographical identity and its already existing socio-cultural and civilizational legacies, which is expected to have gradual and incremental political implications in the states of this region. The research is qualitative-constructive as well as normative. It uses information, concepts and ideas from secondary sources and based on that substantiates new propositions vis-à-vis regional identity in South Asia.

Keywords: Himalayasia, South Asia, regional identity, regionalism, constructivism

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Introduction

South Asia, home to almost one-fourth of the world's population, is a loosely defined region characterized with political, military, economic, social and cultural challenges among the states and peoples in this region. It is one of the most militarized regions in the world, which remains largely impoverished even after seven decades of its political independence from British colonial rule. It can be considered a region without much regionalism, if by regionalism we understand “a state- or states-led project designed to reorganize a particular regional space along defined economic, institutional, and political lines” (Sever, 2019, pp. 7-8). Regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have been somewhat active over the past three decades without much functionality due to the high politics in the South Asian capitals. Two nuclear-powers in this region- India and Pakistan- have been locked in perennial power struggles between themselves resulting in a number of military conflicts with regional implications for others. This politico-military rivalry has negative ramifications in economic, socio-cultural and even in environmental aspects of South Asian region. Amidst these dismal circumstances, optimistic scholars pose questions like “Can we remodel or even reimagine contemporary South Asia with fewer borders and boundaries?” (Tripathi & Chaturvedi, 2020; pp. 173-181), indicating a desirable and possible regional integration in South Asia, however unfounded it might seem in the current scenario.

Figure 1

The Himalayas from Bangladesh



Source: Sabah, 2021.

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In this context, rethinking South Asian regional identity to reclaim its historic and cultural commonalities could be, and normatively speaking should be, a new regional-political agenda of the states and peoples of this region. And, that can be facilitated by a unique and meaningful geographical identification. In this regard, the Himalayan Mountain Range can be identified as a geographical connector of the major South Asian States; hence, ‘Himalayasia’ could be a suitable name for the region. The primary goal, of this proposition, is to approach the people of South Asia, not the governments, to bypass the obstruction of high politics with a specific appeal to regional identity. It is expected here that more identity-conscious South Asian people will be able to influence the political sphere to unite for the common good of the region.

This qualitative research uses constructivist and normative methods in proposing some possible identity formation or construction in South Asia. Therefore, the research is based on the existing works of literature and studies to draw inferences from, which is associated with normative arguments.

South Asia as a region and the problems of regional identity

South Asia is, in the first place, a geographical direction indicating term. The genealogical discussion about the origin and usage of the term reveals that the term is exogenous and has been almost nonexistent until the 1950s (Mohammad-Arif, 2014, pp.1-27). However, the more relevant and arguably significant concern should be what this term or name means for the people of this geographical area and whether it gives them any sense of regional identity.

The South Asian landmass, from Afghanistan to northeastern India, has never had a common name politically. It has always been divided into various empires and native states. The largest political unification ever in this region happened after the advent of European colonialism. The British imperial power united the whole of South Asia except Afghanistan by the mid-nineteenth century. And, for the first time, South Asia had got a proper name-India, politically. Before that various versions of the same name- Hind, Hindustan etc. had been prevailing, which were also originally exogenous names used by the people of the western neighborhood of South Asia.

After the partition of British India and the creation of two separate independent states- India and Pakistan, the name ‘India’ lost its regional-political significance considerably. Though the region is, still, often identified as the Indian Subcontinent, it could not provide an all-encompassing common regional identity. And, this is because the region has experienced one of the most troublesome and painful political separations in modern history through which modern South Asian states were born, the humanitarian consequence of what is yet to be measured thoroughly. While writing on the violent partitions in 1947 and 1971 and their consequences in the three countries- India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Swaran Singh commented, “This is enough to create divergence and friction between the policy priorities of the countries concerned, including constant scepticism by the other two about India’s capabilities and intentions. Mutual mistrust flowing from each of these disjunctions is

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further fed by colonial and cold war legacies and by the resultant nature of their contemporary political culture and preoccupations. All this inevitably generates deep-rooted distrust between, and other limitations for, India and its immediate neighbors in South Asia.” (Singh, 2007, pp. 25-37)

Apart from that, South Asia is the only region in the world where nation-states came into existence not based on ethno-cultural considerations, but on religious division. As a result of that, the rivalry among the South Asian states turns out to be some sort of religious tension often, which can be qualified as enmity in the case of India and Pakistan. The nature of this enmity is rightly described by Professor Aatur Rahman Khan: “Rivalry within the subcontinent was transferred to inter-state relations between India and Pakistan with the effect of institutionalizing the communal antagonism through the powerful organization of two sovereign state machineries” (Khan, 1976, p. 3).

So identifying the people of South Asia as Indians is not only politically impractical but also potentially offensive to many. Hence, it is quite understandable that this region needed a major reorientation and identification. In this case, the name South Asia came as an umbrella identity for the newly independent states of the region. However, the question is: to what extent does this really create a sense of regional identity among the South Asian peoples who are mired with the bitter historical experiences of artificial state formation, boundary demarcation, forced migration, communal riots, armed conflicts and wars in recent history?

Apparently, the answer to this question is largely negative. South Asian identity is not appealing enough when it comes to regional cooperation. The most significant regional organization the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed in 1985. Since then, almost four decades have passed and failure rather than success is what the organization is generally identified with. Regional Integration seems to be a far-fetched idea when it comes to South Asia. No wonder why Sudipta Kaviraj questions “the relevance of the notion of ‘South Asia’ when confronted with the challenges posed by the two political processes of modernity, nationalism and state-formation: the state formations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh thus make it difficult ‘to think of South Asia as a space of emotional inhabitation’” (cited in Mohammad-Arif, 2014, pp. 1-27). Aminah Mohammad-Arif also writes that “several decades after its appearance and increasing use in regional and international institutional circles, the term ‘South Asia’ remains however largely debated and often contested as an artificial and exogenous category. It does not have a mythical tale, such as the story of Europa who gave her name to Europe” (Mohammad-Arif, 2014, pp. 1-27).

However, there is little doubt among scholars that geographic South Asia has all the attributes to qualify as a distinct region of people with shared cultural practices, values and common historical experiences. In fact, South Asia is a unique region where diversity and commonality are simultaneously, if not equally, visible. The region is the homeland of peoples of various ethno-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, the major South

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Asian languages like Hindi, Urdu and Bengali have numerous similarities. Linguistically, these languages belong to the Indo-European language family with Sanskrit being the common origin. In terms of food habits, South Asia is identified with numerous spices and curries. Despite all the sub-regional variations there is a common culinary identity that is generally known as ‘Indian food’ to outsiders. When it comes to religion, the region offers all the variety of that. However, almost 95% of South Asian people follow only two religions: Hinduism and Islam. Despite all the cultural evolutions South Asian people had to go through because of their religious transformations at different times, many cultural practices transcended religious divides, which are manifested in their clothing, food habit, folklore and even in many social norms and values.

Based on these commonalities there have been a substantial number of scholarly works on the necessity and importance of having a regional identity for the people of South Asia. However, what seems to be a significant absence is a discussion on the necessity of renaming the region for the sake of a more coherent and cogent identity formation in South Asia.

Therefore, here, I make an attempt to propose a name for South Asia based on its most emblematic geographic feature: the Himalayas. Before that, we need to understand why naming is important and how it matters. We should also understand man’s connection with nature and the natural environment he belongs to.

Collective Name and Identity: Why does it matter?

Collective names are the primary bearers of collective identities, which are of utmost importance for any community with distinguishable characteristics. While discussing the dimensions of an *ethnic* or an ethnicity, A D Smith wrote, “...collective names are a sure sign and emblem of ethnic communities, by which they distinguish themselves and summarize their ‘essence’ to themselves – as if in a name lay the magic of their existence and guarantee of their survival” (Smith, 1986, p. 23). For sure, the South Asian peoples do not qualify to be considered as a single ethnicity, but they might have a ‘super-ethnic identity’ based on the ethnocultural commonalities. I am aware of the fact that there is no such category as ‘super-ethnicity’ either. However, the idea of ‘super-nationality’ could be a more appropriate category for the South Asian people, though the term’s current usage is mostly limited to the international organizations or unions that require the member states to do a certain level of compromise on their sovereignty. Something close to this, derived from the idea of regionalism, is already in practice in Europe- the European Union (EU).

There is a plethora of analysis and arguments as to why the EU, as a regional organization, is so successful. Theories like Functionalism and Neo-functionalism and the Integration Theory, in general, are quite instrumental in understanding this development in Europe. Later on, the Constructivists offered their perspectives based on norms, ideas and identities. One of the least discussed, but immensely significant, aspects of the reasoning behind the EU success, however, is its very name. The name ‘Europe’ is representative of the region

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since time immemorial. It has historical, cultural, and civilizational as well as political connotations. In the case of the name ‘South Asia’ almost all those connotations are absent. Even the name was first used by the Americans in 1950- 60s for the sake of the instrumentality in their foreign policy (Kaviraj, 2014, pp. 68-100). One may wonder, apart from simple geographical direction and location what else the name can offer. Besides, a barely seventy years old name is not mature and potent enough to invoke a strong sense of belonging to a vast region and civilization whose most prevailing historical name was India or Hind or Hindustan.

As explained in the last segment, South Asian peoples, in general, cannot use ‘India’ as their regional name anymore, thanks to the bitter experiences of the partition of undivided India. So, what are the other options for South Asia? In my opinion, a geographical name with profound cultural, spiritual as well as material significance could be a more viable option.

‘Himalayasia’: a name based on the relationship between the Himalayas and South Asia

O Himalaya, narrate some tale of the times
When thine valleys became the abode of Man’s ancestors
Say something about that simple life
Which was not stained with the rouge of sophistication
O imagination show me those eves and morns, that period again
Turn back O advancing time. (Iqbal, n.d.)

Muhammad Iqbal, a poet-philosopher in undivided India, depicted The Himalayas in his poem that goes by the same name as the age-old sentinel who has been the witness of the birth and development of civilization in the region that he identified as ‘the Indian region’. The name India has become the property of a state later on, years after Iqbal’s death, but the Himalayas is still here and so is its grandeur and its connection with the land and its people.

Figure 2

The Himalayan Mountain Range



Source: World Atlas, 2021

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The Himalayan mountain range is stretched across at least six states: India, China, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Though Bangladesh is the only mainland South Asian state, which does not have a direct territorial connection with The Himalayas, it is the land of many Himalayan rivers. In fact, the Bengal basin is filled mainly with orogenic sediment derived from the eastern Himalayas to the north and the Indo-Burman ranges to the east making the land as a part of the largest delta in the world: the Ganges Delta (Banglapedia, 2021). Besides, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh are actually transverse to that of the principal Himalayan belt. In this sense, Bangladesh is also a Himalayan country.

The connection between the Himalayas and South Asia is not just geographic but also civilizational. The Indus, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra basins are home of some of the oldest civilizations in the world. Thanks to the mineral-rich sediments coming from the Himalayas South Asia has one of the most fertile lands in the world. The fertility of land and availability of water and food made this region highly attractive. Thus, this region experienced waves of migration of peoples from various ethno-racial backgrounds from the surrounding areas and beyond at different phases of history. Today, South Asia is the home of one of the most mixed peoples on earth. One study by a group of American anthropologists suggests that nearly all of South Asia’s ethnic and linguistic groups are ‘the product of three ancient Eurasian populations who met and mixed: local hunter-gatherers, Middle Eastern farmers, and Central Asian herders’ (Wade, 2018). This racial and ethno-cultural intermingling gives South Asian people a cosmopolitan look also.

The Himalayas is present in almost every aspect of human life in South Asia. One observer noted that “Each Himalayan valley’s human history is intimately connected to its geography” (Norton, 2021). The truth of this statement is found with a degree of variation in every corner of South Asia. The religious significance of the mountain range is very well established also. In Hinduism, the Himalayas are considered as the holiest place on earth where the gods and goddesses live. Saints since the classical period have been frequenting the mysterious forest of the mountains to attain their spiritual fulfilment. The Himalayas has a special place in Hindu mythology also. Besides, even in modern times the Himalayas have never ceased to influence the thinkers, litterateurs and people in general in South Asia. Nobel laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore used to visit some Himalayan villages in today’s Uttarakhand, a state in India, to receive some solace and inspiration from the calmness and serenity of the mighty Himalayas (Upadhyay, 2015).

So, the connection between the Himalayas and South Asia is naturally settled. Even the very name ‘Himalaya’ comes from two Sanskrit words- *hima* (snow) and *alaya* (abode), which is a classical language of South Asia (Bishop & Chatterjee, 2022)

This bonding also represents a well-recognized men-environment relationship on earth. Even if we do not want to take the risk of running into some environmental determinism it is possible to discern valuable insights from the statement made by Ellen Churchill Semple in her seminal work *Influences of Geographic Environment*:

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Man is a product of the earth's surface. This means not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust; but that the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation or irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution. (Semple, 2005).

This brings me to emphasize, thus, that South Asia can find its ‘proper’ proper name in none other than The Himalayas. Combining the two names- South Asia and Himalaya- the region can be renamed and re-oriented as ‘Himalayasia’, which has the potential to instill in South Asian minds a strong sense of regional belonging and hence, identity.

Constructivism, geographical approaches for identity construction and the idea of Himalayasia

Constructivism is a social theory with profound implications in understanding how identities are socially constructed and how this construction depends on shared norms, values, histories and other cultural characteristics. On the other hand, identity matters significantly when it comes to actual interactions or relations, whether it is at the individual level or the collective level. So it is important to take identities seriously. And, when it comes to regionalism it could be even more important to look into the process of constructing or reconstructing regional identity, simply because we are living in an age of renewed nationalisms in different parts of the world. Though challenged by the forces of globalization at times, nationalism has been inspiring many in the world, often causing tensions along the borderlines of the states.

Due to the advent of nationalism as a mesmerizing political ideology and force some two hundred years ago, the age-old traditional and historical fabrics of human societies or collectivities have been fundamentally changed. People’s connection with land, territory or region has also been redefined. The outcome of this nationalist ‘onslaught’ has not always produced positive results for human societies. Catastrophic wars, genocides, and ethnic cleansing all happened in the name of nationalism along with peoples’ political liberation from colonial subjugation in various parts of the world.

However, a renewed interest in overcoming a narrow nation-centric worldview has been noticeable in the 1950s onward, especially in Europe as the Europeans had seen the ugliest faces of Nationalism in many nineteenth and twentieth-century wars including the two World Wars. Later on, the rest of the world had taken up the idea of regional integration and regional organizations like the Association of the South East Asian Nations (ASEAN); the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which has been succeeded by the African Union (AU); and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) came into being gradually. The degree of success in achieving regional integration varies though, from region to region. The question is: why?

The answer to this question can be sought in Constructivism that views identities as social constructions. State identities in South Asia, especially in the cases of India, Pakistan and

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Bangladesh, given their recent historical origin and development are clearly some vivid examples of that. The perennial problems of national integration in these countries with a number of ethno-cultural and religious conflicts culminating into political secessionism at times indicate the unfinished and hence, continuing construction of national identities. Though it might also be suggestive of the necessity of a Regionalist approach to address those conflicts in South Asia, the region is yet to develop a strong regional identity. And, not having a strong regional identity indicates lacking in social interaction and socialization among the South Asian peoples.

It is already argued in this article that the South Asians are deeply divided along their political and ethno-religious lines. This keeps the peoples of this region apart without a common ground to have a successful social interaction with each other. Hence, despite having many similarities, as mentioned earlier, the South Asians are strangers in a common geographic entity. However, this estrangement needs not to be permanent, as the Social Constructivists argue that through successful social interactions and relations collective identities can be constructed. It depends much on the social actors' ability to allow different national and subnational and transnational narratives or stories to interact and compete to shape collective identities (Eder, 2009, pp. 427–447). While theorizing the collective identity formation in Europe, Klaus Eder (2009) opined that “European identity is therefore to be conceived as a narrative network embedded in an emerging network of social relations among the people living in Europe.”

One of the champions of Constructivism, Alexander Wendt (1994), while recognizing the role of domestic factors, focused on the systemic level of identity formation to figure collective identity formation among the states. He differentiated between three types of mechanisms: structural contexts, systemic processes and strategic practices. Wendt emphasizes on the inter-subjective structures in which regional and global interactions take place, without denying the material structures Neo-realists focus on. According to him, “Inter-subjective systemic structures consist of the shared understandings, expectations, and social knowledge embedded in international institutions and threat complexes, in terms of which states define (some of) their identities and interests.” (Wendt, 1994, pp. 384-396).

While Wendt has little doubt that the Neo-liberal interdependence and societal convergence among the states do really matter in forming collective identities and interests, he is in opinion that those are not immune to states' suspicious attitude towards each other and “states may respond to these systemic processes, in other words, by redoubling their efforts to defend egoistic identities”. The question that we should ask then is: how do the states treat each other ‘in their changing interaction context? It can be observable even in the field of strategic practices. Production and reproduction of identities and interests is one of the outcomes of the strategic interaction of a group of states in a given context. (Wendt, 1994, pp. 384-396)

In the case of South Asia, states have largely failed to inculcate all the systemic mechanisms Wendt explained. Efforts have been made at different times and at the bilateral levels

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countries do enjoy some degree of affinity among themselves, which is not sufficient enough for a regional identity formation. Besides, identity formation, in general, is a contested and complex arena where various dimensions of human life can be viewed separately as well as holistically. Most of the scholars of identity formation have chosen, apparently, the piecemeal approach of identity formation. Thus, according to Victor Konrad (2014), “The concept of identity is defined by anthropologists as cultural and ethnic membership, by geographers as a place attitude, by political scientists as statist harmony, by sociologists as symbolic representation and by literary critics as diversity”.

The argument that has been substantiated here is that the South Asian states can restart the process of collective identity formation with one of the most basic geographical features of this region. And this is based on the ‘geographical approach of identity formation’, which is often presented as an alternative to the sociological/psychological approaches and which views identity formation as a ‘complex process of appropriation’. Referring to Henry Lefebvre, Anu Masso (2010) summed up this as a process that unites “the gap between physical and mental space, the first referring to given characteristics in the surrounding context (e.g. territory, spoken languages, followed media channels), the second indicating the individual interpretations of these physical aspects of space (e.g. emotional significance of homeland, evaluation of spoken languages). The contribution of the geographical theory of space is the replacement of such dialectical identity theory with a more complex approach”.

Here, I argue that the aforementioned complexity allows us to combine the geographical and the social construction approaches to provide us with a balanced approach of identity formation which can be called a ‘geographically grounded social construction of identity approach’. The proposed name ‘Himalayasia’ is actually an outcome of that. The main argument here is that geography often provides the common ground to have social actions to take place. Therefore, any construction of social identity must be influenced by the spatial, environmental and overall geographic elements.

Nevertheless, Himalayasia could be just one of the many potential names for South Asia to start with. The most important point is to have a strong proper name that would be emblematic of the collective identity of the peoples of so called South Asia.

There is no doubt that the proposed name may not seem to be very well defined always and in all the cases of the regional states. Especially, when it comes to the other side of the Himalayas- the Chinese and the Central Asian parts, questions will easily be raised about the name. The status of the Island nations like Sri Lanka and Maldives requires a befitting explanation, which is not within the scope of this article. However, it might be useful to refer to Andrew Hurrell (1996) at this point to take a general stance on those issues. According to Hurrell, “‘regional awareness’, ‘regional identity’ and ‘regional consciousness’ are inherently imprecise and fuzzy.” He is also in opinion that all the regions are defined subjectively to some extent, which can be understood as ‘cognitive regions’ using Emmanuel Adler’s famous terminology. And, Hurrell goes on to state the following:

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As with nations, so regions can be seen as imagined communities which rest on mental maps whose lines highlight some features whilst ignoring others. Discussions of regional awareness lay great emphasis on language and rhetoric; on the discourse of regionalism and the political processes by which definitions of regionalism and regional identity are constantly defined and redefined; and on the shared understandings and the meanings given to political activity by the actors involved. (Hurrell, 1996, p. 41)

Conclusion

South Asia is one of the oldest regions in the world, if by region we understand “a cohesive and homogenous area, demarcated from other areas by the dictates of history and geography,” (Misra, 1984, pp. 314-322). Unfortunately, the region has long been overshadowed by the modern political constructs and their identities. South Asia needs a strong regional identity which will be reflected in a common and acceptable regional name to the peoples of this region.

To solidify the existing regional identity in South Asia, a more coherent and politically neutral, yet potential, name for the region- Himalayasia has been proposed in this article. This is innovative, but innovation is not unprecedented in naming spaces on earth. Apart from that, the name ‘Himalayasia’ bears the connotation of an environment-friendly South Asia that identifies itself with nature itself. Arguably, the peoples of the South Asian countries are more similar to each other in different ways than it is depicted usually through prevailing political parlances. A meaningful collective name is supposed to bring them even closer and develop a better understanding of each other. Following the functionalist logic it is expected that a more identity-conscious people-to-people contact will have spill-over effects in numerous other sectors among the states of this region, paving the way for closing the gaps created by high politics in the South Asian capitals. Hence, ‘Himalayasia’ does not represent any empty utopia, rather some instrumentality in resolving contentious issues among the states in a region which is loosely known as South Asia.

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