



South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal

10 | 2014
Ideas of South Asia

Afterword. On Region and Nation

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3826>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.3826

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, « Afterword. On Region and Nation », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 10 | 2014, Online since 25 December 2014, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3826> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.3826

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Afterword. On Region and Nation

Sanjay Subrahmanyam

- 1 Geography, the Greek philosopher and geographer Strabo (d. 24 CE) is alleged to have thought, was Destiny. Many major political thinkers have disputed this claim in one fashion or another over the past some centuries. In his celebrated lecture entitled *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, delivered in Paris in March 1882, Ernest Renan (1823-1892) declared:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received. (Renan 1992 [1882])

- 2 Speaking only about a decade after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, and heavily aware of other arguments on nationhood being made across the border (by the followers of Fichte, for example), Renan also declared:

Man is a slave neither of his race, his language, his religion, the course of his rivers, nor the direction of his mountain ranges. A great aggregation of men, in sane mind and warm heart, created a moral conscience that calls itself a nation. As long as this moral conscience tests its strength by sacrifices that require the subordination of the individual to the communal good, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. If doubts are raised along the frontiers, consult the disputed populations. They certainly have a right to express their views on the matter. (Renan 1992 [1882])

- 3 Nation in this view then was neither natural nor inevitable, nor indeed flowing from geography and ethnicity; rather it was something based, as it were, on elective affinities, akin perhaps to a marriage built on romantic love. As for the people on the frontier, they were perhaps comparable to the children divided in a fraught marriage.

- 4 Renan did not write in a world of nations, but rather one where the nation-state as a 'modular form' was only beginning to emerge fully into its own. On the other hand, the twentieth century, which began as a period when the world was still dominated by a series of empires—British, French, German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Qing and Russian—ended, as is well-known, with the nation-state as its dominant political and sovereign form. Indeed, the second half of the century saw a veritable explosion in the

number of nation-states the world over. The United Nations, which at its foundation in 1945 only had some 51 nation-states as members, had as many as 80 by 1956, then 122 by 1966 (largely on account of African decolonization), 147 in 1976, a small further expansion to 159 by 1986, thereafter a major push to 185 in 1996 (essentially due to the collapse and disaggregation of the Soviet bloc), and eventually had reached the number of 192 by 2006. This progressive overall proliferation of nations was accompanied, curiously enough, by a scholarly production which regularly proclaimed that the nation-state as a form was obsolete and doomed, especially on account of large and levelling forces such as 'globalization', or the extreme neo-liberal dream of the 'end of history'. But if 'world government' was the notional *telos*, there were few proponents of a road-map of how this would in fact come about. The UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, had already had as many as 58 members at its height in the mid-1930s. A substantial number of these were what could be called post-imperial nations, having emerged either from the break-up of the Spanish empire (largely in the 1810s and 1820s), or that of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Again, of the 'new' nations that were born after 1945, a very great number came out of the debris of empires, in particular the European colonial empires in Asia and Africa. Their logic was varied and complex. Some referred above all to ideas of ethnicity in order to define their limits; others harked back to administrative divisions that had existed under colonial rule; and still others drew above all on religious distinctions. If the borders between some used precisely the natural divisions such as rivers, lakes and mountain ranges that Renan decried, in other cases the frontiers were apparently made using a simple ruler and pencil on a map, often in the context of earlier inter-imperial rivalries. The current frontiers of Mali and Namibia are interesting examples of this phenomenon, but by no means the only ones.

- 5 Almost all of these nation-states have had ideologues, proclaiming (unlike Renan) their inevitable and 'natural', and even near-eternal, character. Yet, the historian is usually struck, quite on the contrary, by the highly contingent character of the processes that permitted these states to emerge. We may take the case of Spanish America, where decolonization initially led to the formation, amongst other significant entities, of the state of *Gran Colombia*, under the leadership of Simón Bolívar between roughly 1819 and 1831. This state, which emerged from the Spanish viceroyalty of Nueva Granada (that had itself been created in the first half of the eighteenth century) and also used its rough boundaries, eventually was dissolved on account of internecine disputes to produce the separate states of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, which have existed ever since. Yet, should we see this process of fragmentation as inevitable, rather than the product of difficult negotiations between fractious elites and their larger followings? Had Bolívar himself not had excessive centralizing ambitions, bordering on the dictatorial, and also not wished to push the physical limits of this state further, and well into the Andes, could *Gran Colombia* not have held together in some form and thus provided a more substantial bulwark against the ambitions of the United States, and the 'doctrine' of its President James Monroe (1817-1825) in the region? These questions may not be entirely absurd. After all, in 1830, even the limits of the United States itself, which was sometimes apt to use the providentialist language of 'manifest destiny' by the mid-nineteenth century to justify its own westward expansion, were far from being set in stone. In sum, the relationship between region and nation is anything but self-evident to the modern historian, and is itself the centre of ongoing debates.

- 6 The collection of essays to which this brief text serves as an afterword emerged from a day-long meeting held in November 2012 at the Centre d'Etudes de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (or CEIAS) in Paris. Its subsequent evolution as a collective enterprise has been briefly explained in the introduction, and involved both an expansion in the themes treated, and a modification, so to speak, in the cast of characters. However, from the very outset, the intention of the organizers was to open up the conversation beyond the now all-too-familiar revisiting of the dyad of India and Pakistan. This is how a key section of the initial statement for the meeting ran.

South Asia, another name for the Indian Subcontinent, is a recent concept (only about six decades old), forged outside the region in the wake of the establishment of area studies by American universities. While it may be preferred to Indian subcontinent for its political neutrality, it is nonetheless a contested concept, both externally and internally. Whether in South Asia itself or in international institutions or research centres outside the region, there is no general consensus about the countries the concept encompasses: it primarily refers to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, as per the definition of the SAARC, which has however included Afghanistan lately (2005) among its members. Some would also include Burma (Myanmar) as it was a province of British India till 1937. Internally, the concept is contested on the political level but in a fairly paradoxical way: on the one hand, as a concept closely associated with India, it is in some contexts rejected by its neighbours; on the other hand, neighbouring countries (especially Nepal and Sri Lanka) have been instrumental in making the concept exist through the creation of journals, associations, and websites that mobilise the term.

- 7 At the same time, it was clear both to the organizers and to the other participants that a problem of asymmetry, or considerably unequal weight, existed when all these national entities were set side-by-side. On the one hand, there was the Indian behemoth, and on the other, countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, which barely measured up—whether in terms of demography or economy—to one of the Indian provinces. This, for example, is how the demographic comparison looks in the baldest terms.

Table: Comparative Demography of South Asia, ca. 2012

Country	Population (millions)	Regional share (%)
India	1267.40	76.3
Pakistan	185.13	11.1
Bangladesh	158.51	9.5
Nepal	28.12	1.7
Sri Lanka	21.33	1.3
Bhutan	0.76	
Maldives	0.35	
TOTAL	1662	100.0

Afghanistan	31.28	
Myanmar	53.72	
TOTAL	1747	

Source: <http://data.worldbank.org>

- 8 This is a level of disproportion that is considerably more extreme than many of the other salient cases of regional hegemony: the United States in the context of North America, or Russia in relation to Eastern Europe. Mexico's population, for example, is today around 120 million compared to a US population of around 316 million, greater than a third; Ukraine has a population of 45 million in comparison to 143 million for Russia. It is only in East Asia that one finds a similar situation to that in South Asia, with South Korea (50 million), North Korea (25 million), and Japan (127 million), providing a relatively slim counterweight to China (1350 million), although the economic importance of Japan exceeds its demographic weight by some margin.
- 9 If these macro-regions of the world are thus internally constituted quite differently today in terms of geopolitics, their histories do share something, especially in the centuries after 1600. East Asia can be seen as being in fair measure heir to the political tradition of the Qing (or Manchu) dynasty, founded in the 1640s, and its at-times difficult coexistence with the Tokugawa shogunate and the Korean Chosŏn dynasty; the political map of eastern Europe emerged from a complex negotiation with the processes of Tsarist and Habsburg expansionism; and North America was formed in the crucible of the struggle for power between the Spanish and British empires (with the French in a tertiary role). In South Asia, again, the long-term legacy of an early modern empire weighs heavy, and it is that of the Mughals (or Indian Timurids), who emerged out of Central Asia and dominated the area between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth century, but formally continued to be present there as a dynasty as late as 1857-1858. The geographical limits of Mughal power extended, at its height, from Kabul and Qandahar in the north-west, to the Brahmaputra valley and the Chittagong Hills in the east, and from Kashmir in the far north to Mysore and Tanjavur in the extreme south. Significantly, at least two parts of South Asia fell outside the Mughal ambit, and these were Kerala and Sri Lanka, of which the Mughals were quite well aware, but never seem to have coveted in their imperial ambitions.
- 10 Can we think of South Asia then as an entity with strong 'natural boundaries', which lend it a certain stability as a macro-region in world history? If the Himalayas on the one hand, and the Indian Ocean on the other, support this thesis, both the north-west and the north-east suggest a fair greater degree of porosity. These were also areas of failed Mughal expansion; their campaigns against the Ahom kingdom were prolonged but ultimately unsuccessful, and the campaign under Shah Jahan in the 1640s to take the area of Balkh, and make a claim to the southern part of Central Asia (the Mughal ancestral *watan*), also failed. But a close examination of their histories shows that these failures were not entirely inevitable, and might also have eventually produced a different geopolitics. It was only the consolidation of the British Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the slow and painful definition of frontiers that followed, that actually set clearer limits to what we think of now as South Asia. It has often been

erroneously claimed that the British were solely responsible for producing the 'idea of India'; it is possible, on the other hand, to defend the view that the British in their dealings with the Qing dynasty and Tsarist Russia eventually produced at least two rough boundary-lines to complete a sense of South Asia. Further, even the consolidation of the Nepal kingdom as a stable political entity dates precisely to this moment of the emergence of British hegemony, effectively culminating with the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-1816, which shrank that kingdom's borders to more-or-less its present limits (and which thus remains a matter of ongoing resentment in some circles).¹

- 11 There is thus plenty of evidence to show how national boundaries as they exist today in South Asia are artificial and contingent, and the consequence of both deliberate political acts and more inchoate political processes. Even fervent Indian nationalists implicitly admit this when they dedicate a cult to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950), who they sometimes refer to as the 'Indian Bismarck'. Among Patel's more notorious actions was the mounting of 'Operation Polo', the military intervention in September 1948 to bring the Nizam of Hyderabad into the Indian Union. Estimates of the deaths in this 'police action' (as it was euphemistically termed) range from thirty to forty thousand at the lower end, to as many as 200,000 at the upper end. Perhaps a geographical logic eventually would have dictated the incorporation of Hyderabad into India, but geography often provides no real answers to the directions or ends of such processes. The enduring dispute over the region of Kashmir, which is now nearly in its seventh decade, has over that period cost a far larger number of lives than the relatively pointed intervention in the Deccan. As in the case of Palestine, which the British pulled out of and partitioned at roughly the same time as South Asia, it has thus turned out to be extremely difficult (if not entirely impossible) to establish stable national boundaries in South Asia even over an extended time-span. In both these instances, therefore, some theory of 'incomplete territorial sovereignty' as an enduring feature may be necessary, rather than a view where the emergence of the nation as a stable entity is inevitable.
- 12 In a recent and more-or-less persuasive essay on the question, entitled *How India Became Territorial* (2014), political scientist and international relations theorist Itty Abraham points to how internal compulsions and external drives (the latter to be understood under the broad head of 'foreign policy') have closely interacted in the past decades to produce an Indian national state that 'is hostile to the provision of equal citizenship' and based on the creation of 'a hierarchical political community that defines minorities as social collectives of lower standing.' Abraham is concerned to break down the convention that separates questions of borders and 'international relations', from the internal politics of nations, as well as question the fraught relationship between nation and national diaspora. As is well-known, the Indian diaspora in the West (and especially in North America) has played a significant role in ideological terms in the past three decades, including in sharpening tensions between India and its neighbours and has also contributed to pushing forward the agenda of *hindutva*. Yet, concluding his work, Abraham returns to a familiar left-wing trope. He writes: 'The prevailing tendency of the international community has been to affirm how important it is for global order not to challenge or overturn existing territorial boundaries. The far greater and [more] important challenge, in my view, is how to transcend territory as the basis for the formation of political community.'
- 13 But what precisely does it mean to speak of 'transcending' territory in the early twenty-first century? Many different answers are possible. To some, a revamped pan-Islamism or

the arrival of imported Muslim ‘jihadi’ fighters in Kashmir in the 1990s is precisely a form of transcending territories. To others, vast class-based solidarities that trump borders and boundaries remain a utopian horizon. Certainly, we know what the major debates on this question looked like a century ago. On the very eve of the First World War, Vladimir Lenin famously launched a vigorous polemical attack, centring precisely on the ‘national question’ and taking as its principal target many of his fellow leftists such as Rosa Luxemburg. The latter had expressed strong scepticism regarding the legitimate role of any form of nationalism, which she saw as being no more than a cunning political device of bourgeois interests, to the exclusion of other classes in society. On the other hand, Lenin—here making common cause with Karl Kautsky and some others—insisted on taking a ‘realist’ line, in which many (but not all) national movements should be supported for strategic reasons. This Leninist *doxa* was then both a resource and burden for other Marxist ideologues in the decades that followed. Stalin, participating in the same debate, had for his part defined a nation as ‘a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture’ (Stalin 1950 [1913]) Yet, neither he nor his direct political successors considered this a sufficient reason to afford extensive political autonomy—let alone political independence—to the various ‘republics’ that eventually formed a part of the USSR. In a similar fashion, the Communist Party in post-1949 China did not for the most part believe that the western regions that had only quite recently been conquered by the Qing merited a place as separate ‘nations’. Indeed, profiting from the shifting frontier of influence that Qing confrontations with the British and Russians had produced, Mao Zedong and his supporters even went on to make claims over regions and peoples over which the Chinese state did not have a deep historical claim of hegemony or even dominance, let alone a commonality of ‘language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up’. In other words, the USSR and Communist China have, despite their ostensible claims of loyalty to Leninist and Stalinist dogma, in fact followed the inertial territorial and expansionist logic of the Tsarist and Qing states respectively.

- 14 Yet, a hostility to considerations of territory still persists amongst certain sorts of Marxist analysts. In a muscular exchange with South Asian historians in the late 1980s, referred to in collective work *South Asia and World Capitalism*, the ‘world-systems theorist’ Immanuel Wallerstein declared: ‘South Asia is an invented abstraction (...). And world capitalism is an extremely complex and dense historical phenomenon which is not merely singular but unique. Nothing could be more concrete, empirical, idiographic than world capitalism. Nothing could be more abstract, theoretical, nomothetic than South Asia’ (Bose 1990: 162). On the face of it, this is a nonsensical deployment of Kantian categories, since Wallerstein’s devotion to the ‘empirical’ is contradicted by practically every line of his slapdash *œuvre*. But it can only make sense if we ask by whom South Asia has allegedly been elevated to the status of the ‘abstract’ and the ‘theoretical’. Here, the only identifiable culprits are the defenders of a concept of an ‘Indic Civilization’, which would provide the abstract essence of South Asia, of which concrete and variant manifestations are then identifiable. On the other hand, most of those who use the concept of South Asia in the social sciences today would probably prefer a weaker and more contingent notion, broadly compatible with Lewis and Wigen’s well-known ‘critique of meta-geography’ (Lewis & Wigen 1997).

- 15 The nation-states that make up the region of South Asia thus respond to a number of different principles, sometimes evoked separately and sometimes in combination. In some, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, a combination of ethnicity, language and religion provides a power motor for majoritarian nationalism, and a consequent and ever-present tension with a minority. Despite the fact that the Sri Lankan uplands and lowlands had never been unified under a single state after 1500, the brute fact of being an island geography has thus been deployed by Sinhala nationalists—especially in the face of a dominant northern neighbour. In other instances, such as Pakistan, religion alone is largely meant to suffice—and that too a notion of religion that has become progressively narrower and more exclusionary (even within the fold of Islam) in the past seven decades. Elsewhere, as in Bangladesh, language and religion combine in an effective way, to ensure that neither pan-Islamism nor linguistic nationalism can triumph. In India alone, it would seem, an older imperial legacy still plays a significant role, though this is seldom admitted openly or made a key element in political discourse. Analysts of the 1950s and 1960s often assumed that it was precisely this imperial dimension that rendered the Indian Union fragile and would lead to its break-up over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. This prediction has proven false, not only for India but for almost all of the very large, multi-ethnic states that emerged from the Second World War. But nor has it turned out to be the case that all or most smaller states have fused to produce larger agglomerations, and the early experiment between Egypt and Syria (running from 1958 to 1961) has had few if any successors. For the foreseeable future then, a more likely scenario is a continuation of the constellation of highly unequal states that make up this region, with all their festering resentments and border wounds.
- 16 How confident can we be then regarding the stability of South Asia as a concept? A salutary lesson in this matter is provided to us by a major work from a quarter-century ago on Southeast Asia. Its author, the New Zealander historian Anthony Reid, begins by asserting in no uncertain terms that ‘few major areas of the world have been so spectacularly demarcated by nature as has Southeast Asia.’ This specificity is all the more marked because the region ‘has been relatively free from the mass migrations and invasions from Central Asia which affected India and China.’ Moreover, Reid states, when one looks at ‘the popular beliefs and social practices of ordinary Southeast Asians, the common ground becomes increasingly apparent.’ This common ground includes linguistic elements—the dominance of Austronesian languages; what he terms ‘adaptation to a common physical environment’, leading to the ‘dominance of rice and fish in the diet and the small part played by meat and milk products’; the ‘predominance of forest and water’ which determines patterns of housing; and a variety of other cultural usages (from the cockfight to the bronze gong) that also apparently give the region both unity and an air of homogeneity. In this whole seamless pattern extending from Arakan to Maluku, only Vietnam poses a problem to Reid, on account of its proximity to the culture and lived environment of China. Yet, what of the commonalities between Myanmar (Burma) and parts of eastern India? Can we indeed assume a robustness to the concept of ‘Southeast Asia’, purely given by geography, and especially physical geography? Even the most fervent ideologues of the ASEAN seem less sure than the historian. Striking a far more sceptical note than Reid, I would propose that the macro-region is never quite a finished product, but one that ever continues to be in-the-making. The boundaries of the nations that make up South Asia will remain to an extent unsettled, but so will the limits of South Asia itself—depending on the usage to which it is put. If

nations are contingent products of political and social negotiations, so too are macro-regions.

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NOTES

1. A number of conservative nationalist websites and blogs thus refer to the Sugauli Treaty (1816) as an 'unequal' one, and demand the restitution of the ceded lands to Nepal.

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Keywords: region, nation, regionalism, South Asia, Marxism

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