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Identity Politics and Decolonising the Construct of 'South Asia'

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Abstract

Colonialism not only affected the economy and political structures of the colonised regions, but it also had long-term impacts in shaping and re-shaping the identities of those regions and the people. The colonial rulers saw everything indigenous through the Western lens and tried to simplify it to control and govern. For similar purposes, the colonial rulers tried to erase the multiplicity of identities in the region deliberately and labelled it as 'South Asia' and used it as a tool to simplify governance over the region's vast and diverse populations. In this way, colonials not only strengthen their control over the region but also try to change the cultural map of the region. This paper will explore how the term 'South Asia' originated and became so popular. This paper also explores how the colonial rulers tried to shape the region's identity through the Western perceptions of the region, presenting it as a monolithic, exotic, and often inferior in culture through the tools such as modern education, census politics, bureaucratic correctness and oriental historiography.

Keywords: Identity; Politics; Decolonisation; History; South Asia.

1. Introduction

In pre-colonial Sub-continent (which is now commonly referred to as South Asia by Western scholars), identity was not defined by a singular regional or national construct, as it is often seen today. The region consisted of diverse states or kingdoms, each with its own language, culture, history, and religion (Trivedi, 2022). There were more than 1600 languages in the sub-continent, diverse religious traditions that were not opposed to each other but overlapped in so many ways. Most of the religious traditions were deeply connected to the culture and history of religion, and a peaceful coexistence prevailed, unlikely the West, where Christians and Jews had a long history of opposition. In the sub-continent, the regional identities were mainly shaped by the local kingdoms or empires, and they were deeply connected to the religious traditions. For instance, according to Patterson and Israel (2023), the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka (circa 250 BCE) played a key role in spreading Buddhism across the region, while the Gupta Empire (circa 320-550 CE) is often associated with a flourishing of Hindu culture and art.

2. Trade, Migration, and Syncretic Culture

The multiplicity of identities in South Asia was further enriched by the influence of trade and migration. The Deccan, Gujarat and Bengal coasts engaged in seaborne trade, and travellers from Rome, China, and the Middle East had arrived here (Gupta, 2024). This way, a culture of integration with outside ideas was promoted, and local culture became more syncretic. Similarly, the religion played a significant part in reshaping the identities of the locals, for example, the Vijayanagara Empire or Mughal Emperor Akbar adopted both major religious traditions, Islam and Hinduism, which had a deep impact on the society, which eventually led to a syncretic society and culture (Ringrose, 2018). This multiplicity of culture and society was not in favour of the colonists; they tried not only to make it simple as per their understanding of the West, but they also consciously sharpened the religious divide to control the people and region.

During British colonial rule in South Asia, the imposition of a unified identity, often termed "South Asia(n)," was a deliberate tool to simplify governance over the region's vast and diverse populations. From a colonial perspective (which is Western in nature), the term appears to simplify bureaucratic and academic processes. Grouping such a diverse region under a single label makes it easier to categorise and manage populations for paperwork, funding, and policy decisions. However, the effects of this convenience are harmful. One dominant community, because of sheer numbers, can become the default representative of all, further marginalising other groups. This categorisation benefits the institutions that enforce it, but disadvantages the people it attempts to define.

3. Census and Administrative Categorization under British Rule

South Asia before colonisation comprised a cultural map of local and regional affiliations of ethnic and religious inclination (Uddin, 2019). However, the British administration tried to impose division into such conglomerates for administrative efficiency and power, mainly through the census that started in 1871 (Mukharji, 2021). Religious, caste, and ethnic differentiation was ascertained during the colonial period through census exercises, enabling rigid definitions of people's identity when such a class system was not rampant before. Ghoshal also notes that by 1881, classifications became even sharper, and people had to state their religion in a way that froze the social relations between communities such as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. This classification was not only for the administrative purposes of categorising people but also an effective segregational measure aimed at discouraging potential union against British rule. The census made religion one of the main ethnicity indicators, thus deepening religious tensions that had been less acute earlier and were regional rather than general.

3.1 Colonial Education and the Politics of Division

The other important colonial tool was the installation of a colonial education system that sought to advance European perception of power and organisation of society with minimal regard to indigenous understanding. The British imposed policies for their way of teaching English and the histories of Europe, ignoring our indigenous languages and culture. This Western-style education system was established in 1901 and cultivated a small but significant number of Indians who shaped India in the British perception of South Asia (Ideland, 2018). For example, according to Cohn (2021), average literacy rates during British rule remained starkly unequal: Hindu literacy level was 13.1 %, while the literacy of Muslims was even less and was only 6.8% These figures reflected that the socio-political bias was inherent in this system of education. While the education policies of Hindus entrenched social hierarchies, 33% of the Brahmins were educated, while the depressed caste had a meagre 1.6%. The British, for instance, still used the 'divide and rule policy', and tended to side with one party

against the other. For example, as it was revealed by Ray (2018), they gave preference to Hindus in civil services, while Muslims faced neglect, leading to hostility between these two entities. This began a policy of mistrust which later culminated in the 'partition' of India in 1947. This table illustrates the literacy rates in colonial India from 1872 to 1941. Male literacy increased steadily from 8.1% in 1881 to 24.9% in 1941, while female literacy lagged, rising from just 0.35% to 7.3%. The combined literacy rate reached 16.1% by 1941.

Year	Male %	Female %	Combined %
1872			3.25
1881	8.1	0.35	4.32
1891	8.44	0.42	4.62
1901	9.8	0.6	5.4
1911	10.6	1.0	5.9
1921	12.2	1.8	7.2
1931	15.6	2.9	9.5
1941	24.9	7.3	16.1

Table 1: Literate Population Growth in Colonial India: Male, Female, and Combined Rates (1872-1941).

3.2 Orientalist Scholarship and the Western Construction of South Asianness

Orientalist scholarship, as defined by Edward Said, played a crucial role in shaping Western perceptions of the region, presenting it as a monolithic, exotic, and often inferior culture (Biswas, 2022). This portrayal, which emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries, created a stark distinction between the "rational" West and the "mystical" East. Orientalist scholars like William Jones, Max Muller and many others preferred to work on classical religious texts and tried to look at the society through that lens (Pruss, 2023), while emphasising these texts, they completely ignored the rich history and diversity that existed in society. They often elaborate on the sub-continent as a mystical, mythical society following thousand-year-old traditions. However, they simply overlooked the diverse nature of the society.

Later on, the Western world, including the educational institutions, adopted the colonial lens to look at the region, which later on led to the construction of South Asianness. They prefer to represent the region as a home to mystery and spirituality instead of trying to understand the diverse identities in the region (Prakash, 2023). This was a reinforcement of global stereotyping, which to this day continues to present 'South Asia' as the land of Yoga, spirituality, and colourful festivals, all depicted in the media and in literature. However, Orientalist scholarship served colonialism and justified the Western powers' control over Indigenous peoples. This was through presenting locals as being incapable of rational political administration, thereby implying that colonialism was needed to 'civilise' the land (KC, 2021). Thus, these inferiority discourses were not only a part of the academic discussions but also played a significant role in shaping Britain's colonial policies as well. For instance, according to Singh (2024), the categorisation into fixed religious and ethnic identities, such as "Hindus" and "Muslims," reflected Orientalist views that saw religion as the primary marker of identity in the region, rather than recognising the complex interplay of caste, language, and regional affiliations. The legacy of Orientalism continues to influence global perceptions of the region. Even in contemporary times, the region is often understood through the lens of these Orientalist constructions, which oversimplify the region's diversity. This enduring impact reveals how

Orientalism not only shaped Western knowledge production but also contributed to the homogenised concept of South Asianness that persists today.

4. Academic and Policy Origins of the Term "South Asia"

The term 'South Asia' did not originate in the region itself. After the end of World War II, a large number of research centres were established in North American universities. The term came out of these research clusters. The first use of the term is found in the 1960s (Cohen, 2006), US State Department briefings about the region (Mohammad-Arif, 2014). The 1960s and 1970s were the decades when the use of this term started not only in North America but also in the Western world, for example, in 1962, Heidelberg University of Germany established the South Asia Institute. It is important to note here that these institutions in South Asia also include all countries of East Asia in South Asia as well, so mainly they focus on South Asia. It was a popular narrative in academia that 'Southern Asia' stands for both South Asia and East Asia (Brecher, 1963). So eventually the term has become widely used worldwide, all the international agencies like the United Nations, the WHO, the World Bank and the universities throughout Western and Northern America widely use this term in their documentation, but they all define the region in their own ways. However, the people of the region never called them South Asians at that time, nor did they claim to be. It was purely a term coined by people with lesser knowledge of the region, who tried to simplify it for their own understanding.

4.1 American Academic Framing of South Asia

To understand the term "South Asia" and its usage, it is crucial to trace its origins, though claiming its exact coiner is challenging. According to Arif (2014), one of the earliest occurrences of the term is in Horace Bleackley's 1928 work, where he refers to the area as "Southern Asia". Scholars generally believe, however, that "South Asia" emerged as a formal term within U.S. Area Studies, driven by the strategic interest in contemporary Asia after World War II exposed a lack of specialists adept in addressing the region's economic, social, and political issues. Norman Brown, a Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Pennsylvania, significantly shaped South Asian Area Studies between 1926 and 1966 (Dirks, 2003). Brown's approach emphasised Hinduism and the Sanskrit language as the core of Indian civilisation, viewing Muslim influence as disruptive to Indian unity. This perspective influenced South Asian studies in American academia, positioning the term "South Asia" not as a reflection of civilizational unity but rather as a framework for interdisciplinary study. The establishment of research centres and journals named "South Asia(n)", such as SAMAJ, helped to consolidate the region as a unified cultural construct in academic and public discourse, though with an "asymmetrical" focus on India.

5. Regional References and Political Usage within the Subcontinent

The reference for the term from within the region can be traced to the Aga Khan III, who referred to it as "Southern Asia" in a 1935 letter written from London to Fazl-i Husain, head of the Punjab Unionist Party, before the concept of separate sovereign states had fully developed. Historians Ayesha Jalal and Anil Seal (1981) note that Aga Khan expressed concerns about the unity of Muslims, which was weakened by regional divides in Muslim-majority areas. He envisioned "a United States of Southern Asia," where Muslims would leverage majority provinces against a new federal centre while reaffirming their commitment to India's welfare. He wrote that Muslims' "Indian patriotism" should be beyond doubt, emphasising to Hindu compatriots that their care for India's well-being was as sincere as any other group's (Jalal & Seal, 1981).

5.1 Institutionalization of the Term in Global Discourse

The use of "South Asia" as a term was also institutionalised from the 1940s to the 1970s by policy-making bodies like the U.S. State Department, which in 1959 published a document titled The Subcontinent of South Asia, and by international organisations like the United Nations and the World Bank. This genealogy reveals the exogenous roots of the term, as it was officially conceptualised and applied outside of the Subcontinent.

5.2 SAARC and the Revival of South Asian Identity

The term "South Asia" gained renewed importance in the 1980s with the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985, following earlier discussions on regional unity before and after Partition. Despite decades of usage, "South Asia" continues to face criticism, seen by some as an artificial and externally imposed label, which raises issues both within and beyond the region. Whether in South Asia or at international research centres, there is no consistent agreement on which countries make up "South Asia." For example, SAARC includes Afghanistan, while the World Bank does not. Some research centres include Burma, since it was a part of British India until 1937 (highlighting the influence of colonisation in defining the region), and even Tibet, but leave out Afghanistan and the Maldives. Naming can be competitive, particularly between "India" and "South Asia." Over time, "South Asia" has gradually gained more use or exists alongside "India."

Additionally, countries listed in SAARC's South Asia definition may appear in different categories elsewhere. For example, Sri Lanka was once considered part of Southeast Asia by some scholars, possibly due to colonial history. British colonial administration linked Sri Lanka with Fiji and New Zealand, not with British India, influencing its classification. Also, Sri Lanka has a Southeastern University, established in the mid-1990s, indicating regional ambiguity. Meanwhile, the Washington-based Middle East Institute includes a Centre for Pakistan Studies, suggesting it sees Pakistan as part of the Middle East.

6. Dominant Narratives and Religious Majoritarianism

In South Asia, the narrative of South Asianness has been disproportionately shaped by dominant groups, particularly upper-caste Hindus, who hold significant influence in cultural, social, and political spheres. Ethnic minorities, including indigenous and tribal communities, have also faced significant marginalisation under the narrative of South Asianness. Religious diversity in South Asia has similarly been eroded by the construction of South Asianness, which often privileges Hinduism as the region's defining religion. This narrative has excluded other religious groups like Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists, who remain invisible in the dominant Hindu narrative. The religion-wise population details of India as per the census of 2011 reveal that 79.8% of people are Hindus, 14.2% are Muslims, 2.3% are Christians, and 1.7% are Sikhs (Dubey and Haneef, 2021). The oppression of these religious people can also be as old as history itself. During British colonialism, when the religious communities used religion as the basis for definition in the censuses and the practice was later continued to influence other administrative works, as well as education and eventually led to the formation of religious colonialism-based identities. Nonetheless, Hinduism was gradually identified with Indian nationalism after independence, especially when political organisations such as the Hindutva sought to make India a Hindu state. It has also resulted in the rise of tensions and clashes among religious groups in a bid to dominate other religions. For instance, Malji (2018) has reported that the recent wave of Hindu nationalism has been associated with religious tensions between

Hindus and Muslims and the Gujarat riots in 2002, where many Muslims were killed and properties destroyed. Similarly, the Sikh community, which has historically played a significant role in Indian society, particularly in Punjab, has faced marginalisation. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, are a stark example of the violent exclusion faced by this community (Mann, 2021). The same is the case with other countries, like in Pakistan, where Hindus and Christians are facing discrimination and violence.

7. Linguistic, Cultural, and Ethnic Diversity of the Region

The idea to erase the diversity of the region and try to identify it under one single and large umbrella identity of South Asia is itself illogical and unreasonable. The diverse identities of the region, culturally, religiously, linguistically, and ethnically (Sarangapani, 2020), make it hard to unify it in a singular entity, and this single identity was a colonial construct for bureaucratic and administrative purposes and for an obvious reason, to control. It was not only an attempt to control but also an attempt to erase the cultural diversity and multiple identities within the region. It has over 1600 languages, and most of these languages are not understood by speakers of other languages in the region (Mandavilli, 2020). For instance, Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, and Urdu are used by millions of people, but they do not belong to the same language family. This linguistic diversification is enough to prove that it is impossible to have South Asian unity, as language is the core of a person and their group's cultural identity. This imposition of the existence of South Asianness as a monolithic identity also erases this language diversity and puts vastly different communities into one basket.

Religiously, the region labelled as 'South Asia' is equally diverse. The region's major religious traditions, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikhism further complicate any attempt to create a unified identity (Kapur et al., 2022). These religions have their own cultural influence, philosophies, and history, which differ from region to region. For instance, Freeman (2022) pointed out that there are variations in the cultural practices of Hindus in Tamil Nadu compared to Hindus in North India due to cultural and historical factors. Moreover, the interaction of people with Islam in Pakistan is entirely different from that of the people of Bangladesh or India due to the socio-political differences. So, by trying to label all of these under one umbrella term 'South Asia' while putting aside all the uniqueness of histories, culture and ethnicity, would never be justified or accurate.

Ethnic diversity is another important thing to consider in the case of this region. This region has multiple ethnic groups, such as Punjabi, Gujrati, Tamils, Biharis, Harianvi, Pashtoon, Sinhalese and many more. They all have their own language, culture, traditions and history (Shukla, 2021). Sometimes, they even have a long history of conflict with each other.

For instance, according to Venugopal (2018), the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka highlights how ethnic identities can be deeply contested, further complicating the idea of a singular South Asian identity. Globally, this region is seen stereotypically, in terms of exoticism and uniformity, due to the westernisation of thinking and representations. The region is often painted as a realm of mystery involving spirituality, lively celebrations, and rich cultures; however, the overall picture comprising the pertinent issues and sub-regional variations is overlooked. This perception can again be attributed to Orientalist scholarship, which sought to portray the region as an exotic 'Sphere' of irrationality vastly different from the progressive 'Sphere' of the West (Gorshenina, 2021). As is clear from these examples, Western colonisation established Orientalist views which still define the region today as having a monolithic, singular culture, despite the vast variety seen across today's area. The media, again through Hollywood and Bollywood, has been central in perpetuating such stereotypes, especially through curry cuisines (Yoo, 2018). The film

production industry, particularly from India, has gained increased visibility and popularity globally and is commonly referred to as Bollywood. Although Bollywood films have been noted for their representations of dynamic cultural identities, they have also used images that are likely to depict a set of preferred cultural values that border on family-oriented melodramatic themes and the exotic image of India. Thus, this distribution of Bollywood films across the globe does not portray 'South Asia' as a region that has political, social, economic, and cultural issues, conflicts within the region, and other aspects of modernity and advancement.

8. Popular Culture, Media, and the Exoticization of the Region

Similarly, curry has become a global symbol of Indian cuisine, particularly in Western countries like the United Kingdom, where Indian food is incredibly popular. However, the idea of "curry" as a singular dish is itself a colonial invention that simplifies the rich and diverse culinary traditions of the region (Varman, 2017). The cuisine varies significantly from region to region, with each area having its own unique ingredients, cooking methods, and flavour profiles. By reducing this culinary diversity to "curry," global perceptions of the region have further homogenised, contributing to the exoticization of the region (Jain, 2024). These global representations of the region labelled as 'South Asia' as a homogeneous, exotic land fail to capture the region's true diversity and complexity. It tried to simplify the region into a single entity and present an unreal colonial construct of the region as South Asia.

9. Conclusion

The construct of South Asianness has significant implications for identity politics within the region, particularly in the context of nation-building and the politics of diaspora communities. In many South Asian countries, political leaders have used the notion of a unified South Asian identity to further their nationalistic agendas, often to the detriment of minority communities. By promoting the idea of a collective South Asian identity, the term subtly supports political agendas that could further destabilise the region. This adds a troubling layer to the seemingly neutral label, suggesting that it may be part of a broader geopolitical strategy.

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