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# Journal of Peace Studies

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# Can Culture Act as a 'Unifying Tool' in South Asia?

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**Raee Sahu\***

## Abstract

*The eight states of South Asia have a long way to go in terms of building a meaningful regional cooperation. This paper explores SAARC and its limitations in terms of its performance as an economic body of cooperation, the cultural linkages in the larger South Asian subcontinent, postcoloniality and how the efforts undertaken in different states to build national identities have interrupted a sense of larger South Asianness, and similarities found across various cultural productions, namely, the productions of film, television, and the literary form the novel. It argues that moving on from historical linkage that unites them, the priority of these postcolonial states was a strong belief in the nation-state, creating a rift between separate national identities and South Asianness that continues to this day. The paper argues through an analysis of cultural productions that there is a particularly South Asian way of approaching the themes of gender and generational gaps, centred on indirectness and metaphor, and in a literary context, stylistic similarities in the nonlinearity of time in the narrative, straying away from realism which is a marked feature of South Asian narratives. Such commonalities can be used as building blocks of a South Asian cultural identity which can, in turn, bring the states together as a robust regional entity.*

Key Words: Nation-state, Cultural linkage, South-Asianness, Regional Cooperation.



There are plenty of historical tensions between the eight South Asian nations (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Maldives, Nepal). After all, these states have their own distinct cultures and foreign policy orientations based on their so-called 'national interests'. However, there is enough historical evidence to

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assert that these countries had similar historical experiences and cultural overlaps which could have led to inter-state understanding and harmony. Benedict Anderson says, emphasising the importance of history in shaping national identity: "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future."<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting in the case of South Asian nations that all of them share the same historicity which shaped their national identities and the political systems they adopted in the post-colonial days. Even if countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan were not colonised, they were greatly affected by the British colonial policy in the region since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, as theories of ethnicity and nationalism would suggest, when a nation-state progresses and asserts its identity, economic forces and their push-and-pulls become the dominant propellants, and the same is the case with South Asian nations. In addition, security concerns also weigh in on policy making as these nations embark on their separate journeys as independent sovereign states. At present, the other forces like political, cultural, and humanitarian are at best subservient

to these nations' economic drives. However, as the states try to reach out for partnership with others in the region, they have to internalize and adapt to the global environment as well.

All the South Asian nations are linked to India historically and culturally. It is thus natural that there would be elements in the nation-building exercises in these countries that could emphasise similarity in content and approaches. Taking from Anderson, "Nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind."<sup>2</sup> A state's nationhood is thus inherently bound to its culture, and the ambivalence and broadness of the term "culture" lends itself well to the wide expanse of the South Asian subcontinent. This article will explore the role of culture in bringing South Asian nations together, and investigate it as an alternative mode of unification as opposed to current cooperation efforts in the political and economic realm.

### **Present efforts at cooperation/unification: SAARC**

The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded in 1985, is a regional

cooperation body in South Asia comprising of eight member states: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The organisation exists with the "larger aim of promoting the development and progress of all countries in the region."<sup>3</sup> It has held 18 summits so far; the latest summit took place in Kathmandu, Nepal on 26-27 November 2014. India has hosted three SARC summits so far: the second one in Bengaluru, in November 1986, the eighth one in New Delhi, in May 1995 and the fourteenth one in New Delhi, in April 2007. In the broadest terms, SAARC aims to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, and improve the quality of life of the people in South Asia. The idea is to find solutions to the member states' common problems in a "spirit of friendship, trust and understanding and to create an order based on mutual respect, equity and shared benefits."<sup>4</sup> Trade, economy, finance, infrastructure, connectivity, energy, security, culture, education, environment, disaster management, health, science and technology, youth, women, children, poverty alleviation, agriculture and cross-border terrorism are some of the areas of cooperation under SAARC.

The current economic modalities of interaction are promulgated under the Agreement On South Asian Free

Trade Area (SAFTA), signed on 6 January 2004 in Islamabad, Pakistan. Two main objectives under SAFTA are:

- a) promoting conditions of fair competition in the free trade area, and ensuring equitable benefits to all Contracting States, taking into account their respective levels and pattern of economic development;
- b) creating effective mechanism for the implementation and application of this Agreement, for its joint administration and for the resolution of disputes.<sup>5</sup>

SAARC operates through four Specialized Bodies and five regional centres. Among the Specialized Bodies, special mentions include the following:

1. SAARC Development Fund (13<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, Dhaka, 2005) as a "comprehensive funding mechanism with the provision of three Windows (Social, Economic and Infrastructure)"<sup>6</sup>
2. South Asian University (SAU) (14<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, New Delhi, 2007) "to provide world class educational facilities and professional faculty to students and researchers from SAARC countries."<sup>7</sup> India provides the largest contribution towards SAU.

Among the regional centres, key ones are:

1. SAARC Agriculture Centre (SAC), Dhaka
2. SAARC Energy Centre (SEC), Islamabad
3. SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC), India. Since its foundation in 2016, SDMC is providing policy advice, technical support on system development, capacity-building services, and training for holistic management of disaster risk to all member-states.<sup>8</sup>

During the pandemic, India created a COVID-19 Emergency Fund towards the supply of essential drugs, protection and testing kits, and lavatory and hospital equipment. India developed a SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX) that trained healthcare personnel in the region and facilitated exchange of specialized information and tools on COVID-19.<sup>9</sup>

The problem facing SAARC nations right now is that their intraregional trade is too low. As the World Bank states, "Intraregional trade accounts for barely 5 percent of South Asia's total trade."<sup>10</sup> Further, SAARC nations have failed to meet their expected trade of \$67 billion, instead only reaching a total of \$23 billion.<sup>11</sup> Factors affecting trade

involve the following: inadequate road, marine, and air transport, protective tariffs, restrictions on investments, and a "broad trust deficit" among South Asian nations.<sup>12</sup> India and Pakistan, the largest economies in South Asia, are not investing enough in the region. India's exports in the region only amount to 4.89% of its total exports, with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal being its top recipients.<sup>13</sup> The bilateral trade relations between two major economies, India and Pakistan, is overshadowed by exaggerated security concerns. The total trade volume between these two economies stands at an abysmally low volume of 2.5 billion (2018-2019).<sup>14</sup>

The non-availability of transport and transit facilities is a formidable barrier of economic integration of the region. However, the most dominant economy India has excellent bilateral trade relations with almost all of the SAARC countries and it is looking rosier by the day in recent years. Yet, "the fear of being overwhelmed by Indian imports and consequent enlarged deficits [...] has been a limiting factor in the regional preferential agreements."<sup>15</sup> Also "successful bilateral treaties may act as a disincentive to join larger regional/sub regional groupings unless the latter are distinctly more beneficial."<sup>16</sup>

Bangladesh is India's biggest trade and development partner in South Asia today. India is the second biggest trade partner of Bangladesh and its largest export destination in Asia. Despite COVID-19 related disruptions, bilateral trade grew at an unprecedented rate of almost 44% from USD 10.78 billion in FY 2020-21 to USD 18.14 billion in FY 2021-22 [...]. Both India and Bangladesh are committed for greater modernization of border infrastructure and strengthening of cross-border connectivity. The operationalization of the Halidibari (India) – Chilahati (Bangladesh) rail link in 2021 paved the way for greater sub-regional connectivity among India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. With the highest ever exchange of freight trains, the bilateral trade via rail is witnessing an unprecedented growth in recent years. The visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in September 2022 saw the signing of seven MOUs on bilateral cooperation, including on river water sharing, capacity building and space cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is one of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction for the past 2500 years. Sri Lanka is the first SAARC country to join the National Knowledge Network (NKN) launched by India's initiative and now extended to

Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives. NKN is a "revolutionary step towards creating a knowledge society without boundaries." NKN aims at serving the knowledge community by providing high-speed connectivity towards information sharing for R&D and innovation. It also facilitates advanced distance education in specialized fields like engineering, science, medicine, etc. and e-governance. Further, it facilitates the connection between different sectoral networks in the field of research.<sup>18</sup>

In the year 2000, India – Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) was initiated, which has given a significant boost to trade and development partnership in areas such as infrastructure, connectivity, transportation, house, health, livelihood and rehabilitations, education, and industrial development. Sri Lankan exports to India have increased substantially since ISFTA came in being and more than 60% of Sri Lanka's total exports to India over the past few years have used ISFTA benefits. Sri Lanka is among India's largest trade partners in SAARC, with overall bilateral trade standing at USD 5.45 billion in 2021. India is also one of the largest contributors to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Sri Lanka (total FDI from India exceeds USD 2.2 billion).<sup>19</sup>



As a country accounting for more than 70 percent of the region's population, GDP and defence expenditure India has had a dominant presence in South Asia, which has given rise to unnecessary concerns among its neighbours about its power and intent. An observer has noted that "Indian policies with regard to the liberation movement in Bangladesh in 1971, the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the attempted military coup in Maldives in 1988 are cited as illustrations of India's hegemonic authority in the region."<sup>20</sup> Yet, it can be argued that given India's initiatives under SAARC in recent years and its continuous and promising bilateral relations with all South Asian nations barring Pakistan, the country has positioned itself as a leader rather than a hegemon in the regional context. In fact, some neutral commentators have called India a 'reluctant hegemon'<sup>21</sup> and found it strange that India has refrained from using force to fulfil its national interests. But the big question is whether this is reflecting in the perception of others towards India.

The increasing presence of China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Maldives) is reflective of both China and the respective nations' desire to contain India's regional power and influence in South Asia. China shares borders

with India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan and hence its increasing presence in South Asia is commensurate with its desire to be a global superpower (as opposed to the US) and enhance its influence in the neighbouring regions. The leasing by Sri Lanka of the Hambantota International Port to China for 99 years can be regarded as an attempt by the small island nation to use China as a balancer vis-à-vis India in the region. However, recent years show that these kinds of engagements are ending up with huge debt obligations to China prompting sinister meltdowns of the respective countries' economies (Sri Lanka and Pakistan). Nevertheless, China continues to attract countries in the region as a loan-giver and enabler, building infrastructure with the loans it makes available to the host countries with high interest rates.

The countries in the region do look at China as a balancer vis-à-vis India, as they fear India's preponderance in the region. India's recent experience with Maldives proves this point too. Maldives enjoys a strategic position in the Indian Ocean and has now become a "triangular political flashpoint between India, China, and the US."<sup>22</sup> In a five-day visit to Beijing in January 2024, the newly elected Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu was seen courting China, especially after asking Indian

security personnel to leave at the earliest. Muizzu's warming up to China was seen by New Delhi with unease. After coming back, Muizzu set the deadline of 15 March 2024 for Indian troops' withdrawal from Maldives.<sup>23</sup> India's anxiety over China's inroad into South Asia is real as it exposes the region to future uncertainties.

Against this backdrop, it is useful to ask: is a historically shared background strong enough to salvage intra-regional cooperation in South Asia? In this context, can cultural unity among the nations pose as a harbinger of South Asian unity?

### **A look into history: cultural linkages**

The term "India" itself etymologically means river-frontier. It comes from the term Indus which comes from Old Persian and is a cognate of Sindhu. India was not a local term; the terms in use were *Bharat*, *Madhyadesha*, *Aryavarta*, and *Jambudvipa*. However, 1200 CE marked a turning point in India's cultural identification as the Turks invaded the region, an Islamic way of life came in contact with the Indian way of life, which gave rise to the popular use of the word "Hindu" to define broadly the Indian way of life.<sup>24</sup>

As with all humans, the first Indians were descendants from Africa and they were primarily hunter-gatherers. The first South Asian farming community began in Merhgarh, Balochistan around 7000 BCE. The cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa dating back to 2500 BCE to 1900 BCE provide rich archeological evidence of an indigenous civilisation that was urban and sophisticated. Macedonians under Alexander the Great invaded the region in the fourth century BCE, using the term *Indos* for the river and *India* for the surrounding land. The Indian civilisation's heritage involves "intellectual patrimony" as it included the use of learned texts, the "artistic and aesthetic" found in stylistic jewellery and toys, and a "vision of a morally ordered society [...] generally at peace with itself."<sup>25</sup>

Ancient Indian society was ethnically diverse. The indigenous peoples, that is, the aborigines or Adivasis have existed in the region since time immemorial. The peoples who came from abroad were Aryans, Iranians, Turco-Afghans, Graeco-Macedonians and Tibeto-Burmans. It was also a land of religious diversity. As historians would argue, "[t]he Harappans, were perhaps beginning to develop some rituals and practices that formally metamorphosed into a more sophisticated religious structure

known later as Vedic Hinduism. This new structure was the result of a cultural fusion between ancient Indians and the incoming Indo-Iranian Aryans."<sup>26</sup> While we do not have a clear idea of the Harappan language, the two main language families are the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. "It is believed that the Dravidian family is indigenous to India; and Tamil, the premier Dravidian language, is perhaps the oldest Indian language in use today."<sup>27</sup>

In and around the fifth century BCE, the Vedic Brahmanism faced Buddhism head-on. Buddhism was based on the teachings of the founder Siddhartha Gautama who was born in Lumbini in modern-day Nepal. Universally known as Buddha the Enlightened One, Gautama never claimed divine status and "had left the endeavour of achieving bliss, or *nirvana*, to each individual through a rational understanding of his ideas and methods expounded in his Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path."<sup>28</sup> Later, Buddhism split into two main groups, *Mahayana* (the Great Vehicle) and *Theravada*. *Mahayana* being more inclusive and *Theravada* being associated with the traditional ideas of the principles of the Three Jewels. Later, the *Theravada* came to be known as *Hinayana* or the Lesser Vehicle. Under successive royal patronage, Buddhism spread across

the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, and travelled past borders to central Asia and China, to the far east and Sri Lanka in the south. Among the Indian patronages, special mention can be made of the Maurya king Ashoka (273 to 232 BCE) and the Kushan king Kaniska (127-150 CE). Ashoka sent emissaries to the Sri Lankan king during the second century BCE, whereupon the island kingdom adopted Buddhism. "At the same time, the *thera* (Buddhist elder) Mahinda, a son of Asoka, and five companions were requested by other elders to leave India and 'convert the island of Lanka.'"<sup>29</sup> However, by the sixth century CE, the Buddhist monasteries were suffering from lack of royal patronage as well as internal strife, which finally led to the disappearance of the sect from India, the land of its origin. Today, Buddhism is the main religion of Sri Lanka and Bhutan and has a strong presence in Nepal.

The first Muslim invader Mahmud of Ghazni of the Ghaznavid empire came from Afghanistan in the late tenth century. The Muslim rule spread through the whole length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent through the successive rules of the Ghurids, the Delhi Sultanate, the Khaljis, the Tughlaqs and lastly the Mughal Empire. The Mughal empire lost the seat of Delhi and the central rule of

India when Nadir Shah of Persia ransacked Delhi in 1739. The Sultanate rule extended to Gujarat, Malwa, Bengal and the Deccan. The Mughals, especially under Akbar, sought an expansionist policy in the South which led to considerable engagements. Though Muslim rulers now ruled over the majority of the territories in the subcontinent, the majority Hindu population maintained their polytheistic, caste-based communal life. Conversion was encouraged indirectly through higher administrative taxes on Hindus, and better professional and trading opportunities for the new converts.

On the other hand, even as tolerated non-believers, Hindus were subject to discriminatory tax demands, which in the case of commercial levies were several times the amounts paid by Muslims. Hindus were also denied access to lucrative administrative and military offices to which Muslims were entitled [...] The inducements were even greater for those engaged in international trade, whose ships negotiated Muslim sea-lanes and ports in a great arc of commerce stretching from China to Spain, but especially through the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, the continuous intermingling of Hindus and Muslims for six

centuries brought out the most critical aspect of South Asian subconsciousness, that is, a way of life which is syncretic. The norm of coexistence pervades all aspects of South Asian culture like language, literature, cuisine, and clothing. The two centuries of colonial rule and the British policy of divide-and-rule on the basis of religion could not overturn this innate syncretism. Considering languages, Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and the language of two hundred million Indian Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

A dialect of the western Hindi spoken for centuries [*sic*] in the neighbourhood of Delhi and Meerut which was directly descendent from Sauraseni Prakrit proved to be a good and living base for Urdu which when blended with Persian became a popular language in and around Delhi.<sup>32</sup>

Urdu poetry is the most influential literary sensibility across the region and Urdu poets like Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, Momin, Faiz Ahmad Faiz are widely revered, quoted, and sung. Another site of subcontinental syncretism is *sufiyana*, which means the ways of *sufi*. Sufism came to India during the eleventh century from Ghazni, Afghanistan via Persia. It preached a direct communication with the Divine through meditation and musical recitation (leading to a

state of mystical ecstasy). The sufi order or the *silsilahs* that propagated through successive spiritual heirs were the pinnacle of the sufi movement. Particular mention can be made of Khwaja Muinud-din Chishti (d. 1236), the founder of the Chishtiyya order and of Khwaja Nizamuddin Aulia. Both put great emphasis on tolerance towards non-Muslims and their way of worship. "The mystical teachings of the Sufis converged with indigenous devotional forms of worship, making this form of Islam well adapted to the Indian condition."<sup>33</sup> Sufism borrowed mystic tendencies and philosophies of Christianity, Neoplatonism, Buddhism and Hinduism and in its turn leant its "[p]ersianate cultural forms and Islamic perspectives"<sup>34</sup> to the *bhakti* movement. In fact, Sufism is directly concomitant with the *bhakti* movement that gained ground in northern India from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. *Bhakti* entailed "an all-immersing love for and an unmediated personal relationship with the Divine."<sup>35</sup> It preached in vernacular accompanied with performance and recital of poetry written by poet-saints like Kabir, Mirabai, Tukaram, Namdev and Guru Nanak.

### **Postcoloniality and the "nation"**

Under British rule, which started with British acquisition of Bengal in

1757 and finally enveloped the larger part of India in 1857, brought the continent under unified administrative control and gave India its present shape. There were more than 500 principalities operating as vassals within the same territory. The popular resistance against the British assumed the shape of a freedom movement that was pan-Indian and engendered a 'national' identity that went on to define Indian nationalism after independence. It was informed by syncretic and catholic values; it was inclusive and expansive. However, the political ambition of the Muslim elite led them down the path of violent communal assertion that culminated in the 'partition' of British India and formation of Pakistan. Muslim nationalism of Pakistan came up as an antithesis of secular Indian nationalism and the resultant friction has adversely affected bilateral relations between India and Pakistan since partition. The vivisection of Pakistan after the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 has made matters worse. The cultural unity that characterised the anti-colonial freedom movement in British India and laid the foundation of Indian national identity did not hold its appeal in the changed circumstances.

For India in the immediate aftermath of independence, the nation in the public sphere necessarily set itself against the

British. This interrupted any sense of "South Asianness" per se and replaced it with a sense of "Indianness." The postcolonial state created a peculiar kind of nationhood. It has been said that [t]he existence of wide social, cultural and economic cleavages and the multiplicity of identities initially hinder[ed] the emergence of a nation. Hence, the postcolonial states initiat[ed] a rigorous task of building a national identity by assimilating the diverse cleavages."<sup>36</sup> In the case of South Asia, the cleavages, the distinctions found throughout the region were smoothed over in a process of homogenization characteristic of the postcolonial period. However, in the smoothening the elements across South Asia are common; that is why the nations end up with more or less a similar outlook.

After the British left, "[t]he postcolonial state focused all developmental efforts towards the fulfillment of the objective of modernisation – through an effective process of national reconstruction – reconstruction of their ideologies, culture, administration, economy, social norms and education structure."<sup>37</sup> The problem was that while India inherited a colonial administrative framework and used it as a tool for its modernisation and nation-building processes, a state like Pakistan had to start from scratch and

build its own institutions with undue emphasis on religion that militated against the idea of a modern state. The colonial framework that it put in place to run the affairs of the state was not acceptable to an assertive religious constituency that the Pakistan Movement had enabled in the zeal to establish a state where Muslims could practise their faith, Islam, without a sense of fear and intimidation. The resultant disjunction between these two separate sets of aspirations to build a modern state with a Muslim majority where they can avert the prospect of having to operate under a Hindu majority, and an Islamic state for the Muslims, where Sharia will be the defining principle for running the affairs of the state continues to hobble the process of state and nation-building in Pakistan till today.

As Homi J. Bhabha argues: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye."<sup>38</sup> Such is also the case of the nation in the South Asian context. After Partition, the British left the Indian subcontinent in a state of fractured identity. Pakistan was formed on the basis of religion while India advocated a secular nationalism for itself and did not accept the principle but agreed to partition. As the two states emphasised their nationhood, and went ahead with

their separate nation-building projects the idea of cultural unity received a big jolt. The cultural continuum on historical lines was disowned and discouraged even if it persisted at the societal level. The idea of a South Asian unity will benefit a lot if such a cultural continuum can be re-emphasised and acknowledged by the states of the region.

Bhabha argues: "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."<sup>39</sup> In terms of language, there are more similarities than difference across South Asian nations. Most current languages have evolved from the mother language of Sanskrit and the Dravidian language Tamil is shared between India and Sri Lanka. The Dhivehi language of Maldives is an Indo-Aryan language closely related to Sinhala language in Sri Lanka. English is the lingua franca across South Asian nations, a remnant of the region's colonial past. Similar arguments can be made for food, clothing, and literature. For instance, the origins of specific cuisines are open to intense debate. Clothing has always been a medium of cultural expressions with an ongoing exchange of ideas and skill. At the

historical court of Vijayanagar, for example, Hindu men adopted the Islamicate dress of *kabayi* and *kullayi* to adhere to Islamicate norms of public decency.<sup>40</sup>

### **The lens of cultural productions**

This section will explore similarities across South Asian film, TV, and creative writing. There are many examples of commonalities in themes and style that come up across these areas that hint at a larger South Asian sensibility. The 2022 film *Hawa* written and directed by Mejbaur Rahman was Bangladesh's nomination for the 95<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. It was shortlisted for the 80<sup>th</sup> Golden Globe Awards. The film follows a boat of fishermen at sea who accidentally catch a live young woman in their net. Soon after the "catch," strange things begin to happen on board, ultimately spinning out into a revenge tragedy. One of the motifs of the film is the dark mysteriousness of the sea, which is repeatedly reinforced through rich nighttime shots of the sea. It is thus telling how the most mysterious character, the woman who was caught by the fishermen, comes out of the nebulous sea. The film portrays this character as initially mute, only speaking to one of the fishermen when she is finally given the respect she deserves (he is simply concerned

for her).<sup>41</sup> The woman wields a kind of mystical power over the men in choosing silence, and ultimately gets her revenge on the fishermen who tried to rape her through Providence.

The 2016 Bollywood film *Dangal* directed by Nitesh Tiwari is Bollywood's highest grossing film overseas. The film is based on the true story of the wrestlers Geeta and Babita Phogat and their father Mahavir Singh Phogat. The film uses an intense soundtrack and copious montages and slow motion to depict an inspiring story of women overcoming the odds to become world champions. Born into traditionalist Haryana society where the birth of a boy is celebrated and that of a girl is bemoaned, Geeta and Babita work with their father to change the narrative about young girls through the art of wrestling. Out of this comes the theme of women being just as strong as men, and the scene of a child bride in particular<sup>42</sup> reinforces the love and care that Mahavir as a father has for his girl children by wanting more from them than the traditional narrative of getting married young and spending one's life doing housework.

While *Hawa* is a quiet, reserved kind of film and *Dangal* is loud and dramatic, both approach the concept of gender in an indirect way rather than facing it head-on. In *Hawa*, the

heroine's silence represents the larger silence of women in male-dominated spaces (as the Bangladeshi fishing boat certainly is), while in *Dangal* it is ultimately a man's, that is, Mahavir's, wish that is being fulfilled through the vehicle of the two leading women. While inspirational, it was never considered what Geeta and Babita wanted to do with their own lives; they just had to follow the dream of their father which was to win an international gold medal. Thus, the women in both films have to constantly negotiate the skewed power dynamic in favour of the men in their lives, a theme that feels heavily pan-South Asian.

Pakistani soap operas are hugely popular in the region. For example, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) is a Pakistani show that was watched with interest across the Indian subcontinent. *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* mainly focuses on the two leads Kashaf Murtaza and Zaroon Junaid. Kashaf comes from a poor family, while Zaroon from a rich one. Kashaf is determined and dedicated in her studies, with a stubborn hatred for men owing to her strained relationship with her father who abandoned her mother and remarried because she was not able to give him a son. Zaroon, on the other hand, harbours strong misogynistic tendencies while having everything handed to him on a silver platter. He



is well aware of his own charm and intelligence. The depiction of gender roles is a key priority for the show and evidenced in the presence of a strong female lead in Kashaf and Zaroon's sister Sara and his mother Ghazala, who both believe in women being able to stand firmly on their own two feet without relying on a man. One particular scene in the first episode is telling in this regard, when on a date, Sara exclaims to her fiancée Farhan, "*Farhan, main darwaze pe khade ho kar intazar karne wale biwi nahi ban sakti.*"<sup>43</sup> Through this line, she refuses to be a passive wife and instead asserts her own independence as a woman in this relationship.

Differences between generations are also emphasized as a theme as exhibited in numerous disagreements that take place between the two leads' parents and them. The show makes it a priority, especially in the case of Kashaf's mother, to showcase the trials of the older generation trying to manage their own lives while looking out for their children. The younger generation in the show often butts heads with the older over etiquette and worldview: Kashaf's mother's passivity in the face of the injustice caused her by her husband is highly irritating to Kashaf, who believes in action rather than letting life pass one by. The Indian soaps *Jaissi Jaisi Koi*

*Nahin* (2006) and *Diya Aur Bati Hum* (2011) share the South Asian tropes of intergenerational conflicts and strong female protagonists.

*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka of Sri Lanka won the Booker Prize in literature in 2022. The story is a second-person narrative that follows the plot of Maali Almeida, a dead photographer who is trying to find his killer during a week, or "seven moons," in which he can travel between the real world and the afterlife.

The novel is a blend of genres that combines magic realism, a whodunnit, a ghost story, and the state-of-the nation genre. One of the key features of the novel is a hazy sense of reality. This is depicted in surrealist imagery such as the man dressed in a trash bag who guides Maali through the afterlife.<sup>44</sup> The use of second person is also striking as it creates an intimacy between reader and narrator that implicates the reader in the horrors of the Sri Lankan civil war. "*The nation divides into races, the races divide into factions and the factions turn on each other. Whoever is in the opposition will preach multiculturalism and then enforce Sinhala Buddhist dominance in exchange for power,*" (emphasis in the original)<sup>45</sup> written in a letter from Maali to an American journalist

provides a central theme of the novel, that is, the blatant and nonstop confusion of war and how ordinary people fall prey to power structures.

Just as *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* won the Booker Prize in 2022, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy won the Booker in 1997. The novel, set in Ayemenem, Kerala, follows the lives of fraternal twins Rahel and Estha. It is a story about how the little things in life can have long-term consequences. Crucial to the story is a critique of the caste system as it manifests itself in South India. The story "offers grounds for a sensory engagement in which the human body turns from a bounded and detached entity into one that is highly responsive to and intimately entwined with its environment."<sup>46</sup> This takes place through vivid imagery and the author's particular sensitivity to acoustic ecologies.<sup>47</sup> As well, there is a temporal blending that takes place in the novel "reflecting the novel's magical realism, or postcolonialism, or postmodernism, which are all associated with various forms of time play."<sup>48</sup> Further, the disordering of time, and the resulting disorientation of the reader, is caused by the trauma undergone by the main characters.

When comparing *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and *The*

*God of Small Things*, it is easy to see the clear similarity in the authors' stylistic choice of wanting to play with time and thus disorient the reader. Both novels also have elements of magic realism, which can be attributed to both authors coming from countries whose postcolonial realities are often hard to stand: in the case of *The God of Small Things*, this is the lasting effects of the caste system, for *The Seven Moons*, these are the atrocities of the Sri Lankan civil war. The disjunction of time is also born out of trauma in both novels, whether it be childhood trauma or the trauma of experiencing mass violence during war. Both novels' main characters use of hazy time is a defense mechanism against their particular difficulties. Marginalization is also a theme that crops up in both novels.

Viewed from the prism of cultural productions, the writers from different states strike a common chord and speak to the same audience picking up similar existential issues pertaining to caste, gender, ethnopolitics etc. The problems they narrate and the plots they create invoke the same historical and cultural memories and they are cast in familiar social settings. Therefore, they have a regional flavour and appeal that underline a 'regional consciousness' waiting to be tapped.

## Conclusion

The eight states of South Asia have a long way to go in terms of executing meaningful regional cooperation. This paper has explored SAARC and its limitations in terms of its performance as an economic body of cooperation, the existing cultural linkages in the larger South Asian subcontinent, postcoloniality and how the efforts undertaken in different states to build national identities have interrupted a sense of larger South Asianness, and similarities found across various cultural productions, namely, the productions of film, television, and the literary form the novel. The study reveals that syncretism was demonstrated to be a key feature of the fabric of South-Asianness historically coming from the Indian culture understood purely in cultural terms where diverse faiths, clothing, and food were allowed to

coexist at once. Moving on from this historical linkage, the postcolonial state's priority has been a strong belief in the 'nation-state', creating a rift between separate national identities and "South-Asianness" that continues to this day.

Finally, the paper argues through an analysis of cultural productions that there was a particularly South Asian way of approaching the themes of gender and generational gaps which centred on indirectness and metaphor, and in a literary context there are stylistic similarities in the nonlinearity of time in the narratives which strays away from the realism which is a marked trait of South Asian narratives being spawned by the states. Such commonalities can be used as building blocks of a South Asian cultural identity which can, in turn, bring the states together as a robust regional entity. ■

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