Inter-Asia Cultural Studies

The idea of South Asia: a personal note on post-Bandung blues
Ashis Nandy

To cite this Article: Nandy, Ashis , 'The idea of South Asia: a personal note on post-Bandung blues ', Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 6:4, 541 - 545
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/14649370500316828
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649370500316828

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

© Taylor and Francis 2007
The idea of South Asia: a personal note on post-Bandung blues

Ashis NANDY

ABSTRACT  This paper mainly discusses the transformation of the idea of South Asia in Post-Cold War era.

KEYWORDS: South Asia, India, Pakistan

South Asia is the only region in the world where most states define themselves not by what they are, but by what they are not. Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal try desperately not to be India; Bangladesh has taken up the more onerous responsibility of avoiding being both India and Pakistan. To do so successfully, it has started by insisting that it is not West Bengal. I once used to think that India was different, given its size. But the Indian politicians have now begun to say, at the drop of a hat, that India is not Pakistan. The region can be called a collective of reluctant states, which are afraid that positive self-definition will not take them far. Sometimes, even historians, legal scholars and public figures join the fray. Both Ayesha Jalal and H.M. Seervai have in effect claimed that only the short-sighted leaders of the Indian National Congress during the last days of British rule virtually ‘forced’ the father of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, to reluctantly opt for an independent Pakistan. Pakistan has even institutionalized this awareness in a somewhat touching fashion. Scholars have repeatedly shown cultivated bias and prejudices against Indians and the Hindus in Pakistani school texts, but not noticed the disproportionate space given in the same texts to the history of the geographical region now called India – at the expense of the history of the region now called Pakistan. Pakistani children study biased history all right, but it is mostly the history of India, not Pakistan, because Pakistan’s past glory is tied up more with Delhi, Agra and Lucknow than with present-day Pakistan.

In this sense, the idea of South Asia is partly artificial and so are its nation-states. That does not mean that these nation-states are automatically fragile or doomed to extinction. It means that, as individual entities, they will always act as if they were fragile and facing collapse. Indeed, they probably are fragile to the extent that they believe they are fragile, and act to remove their fragility by being hard, tough-minded, national security states.

The idea of South Asia is also partly an imposed one, a response to other more successful regional groupings like Southeast Asia and the European Union. The idea does not fit the self-image and ambitions of the states in the region. South Asia’s constituent nation-states are modelled on the pre-Second-World-War nation-states of Europe, the kind that builders of nation-states in South Asia came to know during their formative years in colonial times. These states are poorly grounded in the everyday lives, cultural and political preferences, and moral frames of the ordinary citizens. Hence, the fear pervading the ruling culture in each of the countries that the state might not survive the carelessness of its citizens and the demonic conspiracy of its neighbours. The more the scholars, artists and writers...
talk of the common heritage of the region, the
more the functionaries of the state in the
region nervously eye their neighbours as
enemies planning to wipe out their distinc-
tive identities. Nation-states are supposed to
have distinctive cultures, many well-
educated South Asians feel, and anyone talk-
ing of two or more legitimate nation-states
sharing a broader cultural frame has to be
either a romantic visionary or a person trying
to undo one or more of the nation-states.
Hence also the frequent, desperate attempts
to whip up nationalist frenzy by each of the
regimes, and the ruthlessness with which
each of them treat anyone speaking of sepa-
ration or even autonomy.

The idea of South Asia emerged in the
1970s and acquired serious public status in
the 1980s because the medieval name of the
region, Hindustan or Al Hind, and its
ancient name, Bharatvarsha or its lesser
known variation, Jambudvip – including
their geographical approximation, what
used to be and is still sometimes called the
Indian peninsula or subcontinent – had
become ideologically tainted. All had
become associated with a brand new nation-
state called India. Since India’s relationship
with most of its neighbours has not been
particularly happy, these neighbours are
even more uncomfortable with geographical
names that endorse or invoke Indian domi-
nance. They try to create a space for South
Asia by offsetting it not merely against other
regions, such as Southeast Asia or Central
Asia, but also against things past, like
British India or Hindustan.

The effort has never quiet succeeded.
Thus, while reading Rudyard Kipling’s
novel Kim, which some sensitive social
scientists consider the best fictional ethnog-
raphy of India, a young Pakistani is likely to
be confused when, in the context of Lahore,
Kipling brings in themes of Indianness and
Indianisms. The traits he mentions cannot
be re-read as either Pakistani or West
Punjabi, and talking of them as British-
Indian sounds silly. Nor can these cultural
and psychological traits have vanished with
the disappearance of the Raj. Likewise, the
works of Jibanananda Das, arguably inde-
pendent India’s greatest poet, invokes a
Bengal that is primarily Bangladesh. He is
an Indian poet only by his passport. Indeed,
he could be called the unacknowledged
national poet of Bangladesh. His creative
imagination is linked more directly to what
is now Bangladesh than that of Kazi Nazrul
Islam, who came from West Bengal.

Everyone knows that something called
India had entered the region’s imagination
by the time British India splintered into a
number of nation-states, exactly as some-
thing like Hindustan had begun to make
sense during the days of the Mughal Empire.
South Asia is yet to enter our consciousness
the same way. And it may or may not do so
in the future, given that it is eventually an
acultural, emotionally empty, territorial
concept. Its real status is akin to that of
Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India,
two states that have, even after 50 years,
failed to take off as viable cultural entities.
You can meaningfully talk of Biharis, Tamil-
ians and Bengalis, but you cannot in the
same breath talk of Uttarpradeshis and
Madhyapradeshis, UPwallahas and MPwal-
lahs. If from Uttarpradesh or the former
United Provinces, you usually identify with
a city – as a Lucknavi or a Banarsi – or with a
region, as an Avdhi or Purvaiya.

The term ‘South Asia’ remains a
compromise, a neutral terrain. I have never
been happy with the improvisation, though
I use it in deference to my friends and
colleagues from the rest of the region. The
usage has frozen a cultural region
geographically (tearing asunder countries
like Afghanistan, which have played a
crucial role in the region from epic times, as
any one acquainted with the Mahabharata
or classical North Indian music knows). It
has also allowed the Indian state to hijack
the right to the Indic civilization, forcing
other states in the region to seek new bases
for their political cultures and disown
crucial aspects of their traditional cultural
repertoire; and it has made important civili-
zational strains look subservient to the
needs of nation-states. (Many speak as if
Islam was the responsibility of Pakistan;
Hinduism that of India, and Buddhism of


The idea of South Asia

Sri Lanka; as if these faiths could not take care of themselves. As if a Hindu-majority country like Nepal and a Muslim-majority country like Bangladesh were destined to be only spectators in matters of faith.)

Painful though it may be to admit for many, the idea of South Asia actually stands for India in its older, broader sense, not for India the nation-state. This is the India the likes of A. L. Basham talk about and celebrate as the Indic civilization, which is of course another way of describing the region as only a partly territorial entity that has been a point of convergence of a number of civilizations and cultural areas. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam and Muhammad Iqbal endorse this formulation.

This other India and its inhabitants – known for more than a millennium as Hindustanis or Hindis – have subversive potentialities. Although some, like historian Ravinder Kumar, have tried to resolve the tension by talking of India as a civilizational state, Bharatvarsha, Hindustan and Hind are in constant tension with the Indian nation-state. For the aim of the Indian nation-state is nothing less than to change the ground rules of the civilization according to the needs of a modern state and to engineer the cussed, change-resistant, everyday Indians into proper modern citizens of a state that, idea-wise, is only a pirated copy of a pre-war European nation-state, infiltrated by the idea of an imperial state internalized during the colonial times. As it happens, that is also the official vision of a desirable future in all South Asian states. When they talk of the SAARC, they have in mind a compact among them to live or fight together within the format of the global nation-state system, not within the format of the cultural system within which they have survived for centuries. Hence their paranoiac fear of anything that might push the region towards a people’s SAARC – involving free exchange of news, books, information, ideas, literature, art, films and, above all, free circulation of free-thinking human beings. Many refer to the size of India and its hegemonic ambitions as the main reasons for this fear. This is not entirely convincing. The relations between the other six members of the SAARC are no less officious and frigid and sometimes they are as bitter. It was as if all the states in the region were trying to become copybook examples of garrison states.

The Indic civilization inverts the process. An edifice built on layers of civilizations and a plethora of cultures, it is a confederation of lifestyles and life-support systems. The different strands within it are telescoped into each other, so that none can be described adequately without reference to others. Islam in South Asia is unthinkable and incomprehensible without an understanding of Hinduism and Buddhism, which in turn are inconceivable without an understanding of South Asian Islam.

The South Asian nation-states, on the other hand, are exclusive of each other by design, perhaps because they are similar in too many respects and have to declare their autonomy by pretending to be radically different from each other. Sometimes one suspects that these states are built on the lowest common denominator of South Asia’s cultural selves. These states are presumptuous enough to claim to be the guardians of the people who inhabit the SAARC countries, but would be happy to get rid of their peoples and populate the empty spaces with local versions of human beings that periodically catch their fancy. These versions at different times have included the rational, national-interest-minded English and the French in colonial times, the diligent Japanese and the disciplined Germans in the inter-war years, the progressive and egalitarian Russians and Chinese in the second half of the 20th century, and the rich, powerful, consumption-driven, individualistic Americans now. Sri Lanka has, in fact, done even better. Just when it was being praised as South Asia’s most successful state and a model for others, it decided to become a more monolithic Singapore-like entity and, in the process, unleashed a civil war that has set it back by at least a 30 years.

When the states – and those trying to capture them – run out of secular role models, they begin to chisel their people into proper Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. As if,
during their long tenure on earth, these people had not even learnt to be themselves and were waiting for their knowledgeable guides - the Taliban, the Jamaat, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the RSS or the fanatic, blood-thirsty Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka - to teach them to behave as respectable Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

The dislike for one's own people is coupled with a sneaking respect for one's declared enemies. The Indian élite suspects that, compared with the Indians, the Pakistanis are more aggressively nationalistic and driven by what in sporting parlance is called the killer instinct. Pakistanis return the compliment. Yet both countries score high on nationalism, a recent 44-country, cross-national survey reveals. Indeed, the survey shows India to be the world's most nationalistic country (Chaudhuri 2003).

As against these games being played out by the regional élite, there is another kind of South Asia emerging in reaction to the mostly brain-dead, colonial, state bureaucracies of the region and the stodgily strident tones of the security community and the utterly unimaginative, manipulative political parties. This South Asia has begun to take shape at the ground level and on the basis of a low-brow exchange of cultural artefacts. All cultures have high and low components; if high cultures cannot cross national boundaries, low cultures almost naturally do so.

One does not have to be an admirer of the dim-witted head of the world's only superpower to salute the barbers of Kabul, who have emerged unfazed at the fall of the Taliban, after being pushed underground for years by someone's harebrained idea of 'true' Islam. I salute them for having confidence in themselves and in their own understanding of Islam. I also salute those enterprising youth who have quickly begun selling smuggled picture postcards of Indian film stars among the rubble of Kabul. They have crossed borders to keep my idea of a South Asian self alive and open-ended.

The most important part in this emerging South Asia has been played by popular Bombay cinema. Indian and Pakistani TV, particularly their soap operas, have made important contributions. Popular cinema has, however, been the most aggressive, if unwitting, challenger of the mimic states of the region.

Secondly, the smugglers have consistently tried to establish, over the last 50 years, a free-trade zone despite all official resistance. Older estimates claimed that the value of the unofficial trade between India and Pakistan was four times that of the official trade. I do not know if this estimate took into account the flourishing trade in drugs. To spite the paranoid nation-states of the region, those involved in the game of smuggling seem to operate on the basis of cross-national trust, the poor man's version of what some political analysts have begun to call, a post-nationalist awareness.

Finally, there are the NGOs, as usual quarrelsome, flamboyant, self-certain and totally immune to the rational arguments and realistic politics in which the states supposedly specialize. They have bypassed the existing state-system to establish links among young activists who have never lived in British India and are not burdened by ideas of historical guilt and culpability. When people complain to me about the biased textbooks of history in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh or the hate propaganda mounted by ideologues of all hues, I always think of the young activist-scholars who so easily shed the knowledge they acquire in the schools and colleges of the region and the blinkers their states and political leaders expect them to wear as badges of nationalism. Obviously, the biased histories and strident advocacy of a whole range of nationalists coming out of the woodwork are not as effective as they are thought to be. The security community in South Asia has reasons to be nervous.

Notes

1. This note is an extract from an unpublished keynote address at the Seventh Sustainable Development Conference at Islamabad, organised by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute on 8–10 December 2004.
2. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: H.M. Seervai (or The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan)*.

3. For explorations of the idea of a people’s SAARC, see Imtiaz Ahmed (2001).

4. The column is based on the results of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which collected data from 44 countries, including Pakistan, United States, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom.

References


Author’s biography

Ashis Nandy is a political psychologist and sociologist of science who has worked on cultures of knowledge, visions, and dialogue of civilizations. He is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies and Chairperson of the Committee for Cultural Choices and Global Futures, both located in Delhi. Nandy is the author or co-author of 13 books, including *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (1995), *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism* (1993), *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias* (1987), *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), and *Alternative Sciences* (1980). Nandy has also co-authored a number of human rights reports and is active in movements for peace, alternative sciences and technologies, and cultural survival.

Contact address: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110 054, India