INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTH ASIA

Socio-Cultural Structures and the Post-colonial Challenges of State Construction and Nation-building in South Asian States

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At independence, every South Asian state faced two great tasks at the same time. First, it had to **build a working state**: institutions, territorial control, administration and the capacity to govern. Second, it had to **build a nation**: a shared sense of belonging among people divided by religion, caste, language, ethnicity, tribe and region. These tasks were made harder by the region's complex **socio-cultural structures**. How each state handled

these structures largely decided whether it achieved stability, or faced ethnic conflict, civil war and even breakup.

Key concepts

- **State construction (state-building)**: creating and strengthening the institutions of the state: bureaucracy, army, police, courts, tax system and constitution, so that the state can control its territory and provide public goods. Francis Fukuyama (*State-Building*, 2004) distinguishes the **scope** of state functions from the **strength** (capacity) of state institutions; many South Asian states have wide scope but low strength.
- **Nation-building**: the process of creating a common national identity, loyalty and solidarity among the people living within a state's boundaries, through shared symbols, language, education, citizenship, history and participation.
- **Socio-cultural structures**: the deep and lasting social arrangements of a society, such as caste, kinship, religion, language communities, tribes and gender relations, which shape people's identities and behaviour.
- **Integration**: Myron Weiner ("Political Integration and Political Development", 1965) distinguished several kinds of integration needed by new states: **national** (one identity), **territorial** (control over all areas), **value** (agreement on basic values), **elite-mass** (linking rulers and ruled) and **integrative behaviour** (capacity to organise for common purposes).

Why these tasks were especially difficult in South Asia

1. **State before nation**: boundaries were drawn by the colonial power and Partition, not by the people. So the state had to create a nation within borders that cut across communities.
2. **Extreme diversity**: South Asia has all the world's major religions, hundreds of languages, thousands of castes and many tribes.
3. **Colonial legacy of classification**: the census and separate electorates had made religious and caste identities rigid and political.

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4. **Violent birth**: Partition created fear and suspicion between communities and between states.
5. **Poverty and inequality**: scarce resources made groups compete for jobs, land and power on community lines.
6. **Simultaneous demands**: unlike Europe, which built states over centuries, South Asian states had to build institutions, a nation, democracy and economic development all at once (Ayoob's "late state-makers").

The central question

Should the new state **assimilate** all groups into one common culture (one language, one religion, one identity), or should it **accommodate** diversity through federalism, language rights and group recognition? South Asian states gave different answers, with very different results. This is the core theme of this topic.

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Theories of Ethnicity and Nationalism

To explain why socio-cultural identities become politically powerful, scholars use three main approaches. Using them in answers shows conceptual clarity.

Primordialism

- Ethnic and national identities are **old, deep and natural**, based on “givens” such as blood, language, religion, region and custom.
- **Clifford Geertz** (“The Integrative Revolution”, 1963) argued that in new states, **“primordial attachments”** compete with “civil” loyalty to the state. The new states face the challenge of turning primordial loyalties into civic loyalty.
- **Edward Shils** also wrote about primordial ties.
- **Application**: explains the emotional power of religion in Partition, language in Bangladesh, and Sinhala-Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka.
- **Criticism**: identities change over time; the same people can stress different identities in different situations.

Instrumentalism

- Ethnic identities are **tools used by elites** to compete for power, jobs and resources.
- **Paul Brass** (*Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1991; *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, 1974) argued that elites select and mobilise certain cultural symbols (for example, Urdu for Muslims in north India) to build political communities. Muslim separatism, in his view, was produced by elite competition, not by ancient hatred.
- **Myron Weiner** (*Sons of the Soil*, 1978) showed how competition for jobs between local and migrant groups led to nativist movements in Assam, Maharashtra and elsewhere.
- **Application**: explains the rise of the Muslim League, the Shiv Sena, and the use of ethnic politics in elections.
- **Criticism**: elites can mobilise only identities that already mean something to people.

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Constructivism (modernist approach)

- Nations are **modern creations**, “constructed” through modern processes such as print, education, the census and the state.
- **Benedict Anderson** (*Imagined Communities*, 1983): the nation is an “imagined” community, created through print capitalism.
- **Ernest Gellner** (*Nations and Nationalism*, 1983): nationalism is the result of industrialisation, which needs a common high culture and mass education.
- **Eric Hobsbawm** (*The Invention of Tradition*, ed. with Terence Ranger, 1983): many “ancient” traditions are recent inventions.
- **Colonial construction**: Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks (*Castes of Mind*, 2001) and others show how the colonial census and ethnography made caste and religion fixed and political.
- **Application**: explains how “Hindu”, “Muslim”, “Sinhala” and “Tamil” became political categories in the colonial period.

Other important ideas

- **Karl Deutsch** (*Nationalism and Social Communication*, 1953): nation-building happens through **social communication** (roads, media, markets, schools), which creates a common community.
- **Donald Horowitz** (*Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 1985): ethnic conflict in new states is driven by group comparisons of worth and legitimacy (“advanced” vs “backward” groups), and electoral systems can either increase or reduce it.
- **Arend Lijphart**: **consociational democracy** (power-sharing among groups through grand coalitions, mutual veto, proportionality and segmental autonomy). In “The Puzzle of Indian Democracy” (1996), he argued that India’s success was based on consociational features.
- **Selig Harrison** (*India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, 1960) predicted that India would break up because of linguistic nationalism. India’s survival proved him wrong, which

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shows the value of accommodation.

- **Civic vs ethnic nationalism**: civic nationalism bases membership on citizenship and shared political values; ethnic nationalism bases it on descent, religion or language. India’s Constitution adopted civic nationalism; Pakistan and Sri Lanka leaned towards ethnic or religious nationalism.

Socio-Cultural Structures of South Asia: An Overview

South Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world. Its society is made up of many **overlapping and cross-cutting identities**: a person may be at the same time a Muslim, a Bengali speaker, a member of a particular biradari or caste group, a peasant, a woman and a citizen of Bangladesh. Which identity becomes politically important depends on the situation and on how the state treats it.

Main structures

1. **Religion**: Hinduism, Islam (Sunni, Shia, Ahmadi and other sects), Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and tribal faiths.
2. **Caste and kinship**: the jati system among Hindus, and caste-like hierarchies among Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists; clans, tribes and biradaris.
3. **Language**: hundreds of languages from four major families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic.
4. **Ethnicity and tribe**: Pashtuns, Baloch, Sindhis, Tamils, Sinhalese, Madhesis, Nagas, Mizos, Chakmas, Hazaras and many more.
5. **Region**: strong regional cultures (Punjab, Bengal, Kashmir, Assam, Sindh, Terai) that often cross state borders.
6. **Class**: landlords and peasants, industrialists and workers, the urban middle class and the rural poor.
7. **Gender**: patriarchy shapes family, property and political participation.

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Diversity profile (approximate figures from the latest available censuses)

State	Religious composition	Main linguistic or ethnic groups	Main diversity challenge
India	Hindus about 80%, Muslims about 14%, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains (Census 2011)	22 scheduled languages; hundreds of mother tongues; Scheduled Tribes about 8.6%	Religion, caste, language, tribal identity
Pakistan	Muslims about 96% (Sunni majority, Shia minority); small Hindu, Christian and Ahmadi minorities	Punjabi (largest), Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, Urdu, Balochi	Ethnic and provincial identity vs Punjabi-dominated centre; sectarianism
Bangladesh	Muslims about 91%, Hindus about 8%	Bengali speakers about 98%; hill peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts	Religion vs Bengali identity; minorities
Sri Lanka	Buddhists about 70%, Hindus about 13%, Muslims about 10%, Christians about 7%	Sinhalese about 75%, Sri Lankan Tamils about 11%, Muslims (Moors) about 9%, Indian (Hill Country) Tamils about 4%	Sinhala–Tamil divide
Nepal	Hindus about 81%, Buddhists about 8%, Muslims about 5%, Kirat about 3% (Census 2021)	142 caste and ethnic groups; 124 languages	Hill elite vs Madhesis, Janajatis and Dalits
Bhutan	Buddhists about three-fourths; Hindus most of the rest	Ngalop (west), Sharchop (east), Lhotshampa (south, Nepali-speaking)	Lhotshampa citizenship
Maldives	Muslims almost 100% (citizenship requires Islam)	Dhivehi speakers	Relatively homogeneous; religious conservatism

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Afghanistan	Muslims over 99% (Sunni majority, Shia Hazara minority)	Pashtuns (largest), Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and others; no reliable census	Ethnic fragmentation, Pashtun dominance

Key features of South Asian social structure

- **Hierarchy**: caste, class and gender create a deeply hierarchical society, opposed to the equality promised by modern constitutions.
- **Group identity over individual identity**: people often act politically as members of communities (caste, biradari, tribe, sect), not only as individuals.
- **Cross-border communities**: the same groups live across borders, so identity politics in one state affects its neighbours.
- **Coexistence and conflict**: centuries of shared culture (Sufi and Bhakti traditions, syncretic practices, shared festivals) exist alongside periodic violence.
- **Politicisation through democracy**: elections encourage leaders to mobilise voters on community lines, which strengthens identity politics.

Caste and Kinship

Caste is the most distinctive socio-cultural structure of South Asia. It affects not only Hindus but, in different forms, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists across the region.

Nature of caste

- **Varna and jati**: the classical four-fold *varna* order (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra), with “untouchables” outside it, is an ideal model. In practice, society is made up of thousands of **jatis**: endogamous, hereditary, often occupational groups ranked in a local hierarchy.
- **Louis Dumont** (*Homo Hierarchicus*, 1966): caste is based on the religious principle of **purity and pollution**, and hierarchy is the core value of Indian society.

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- **M.N. Srinivas**: introduced the concepts of **Sanskritisation** (lower castes adopting upper-caste customs to rise in status) and the **dominant caste** (a caste that is numerically strong, owns land and has political power locally, like Jats, Marathas, Reddys and Vokkaligas).
- **B.R. Ambedkar** (*Annihilation of Caste*, 1936): caste is a system of "graded inequality" that divides labourers, not just labour, and is incompatible with democracy.

Caste beyond Hindu society

- **Muslims** in South Asia have caste-like divisions: **ashraf** (claimed foreign or upper origin), **ajlaf** (converted occupational groups) and **arzal** (lowest groups). The Pasmanda movement in India raises the issues of backward Muslims.
- **Pakistan**: **biradari** (kinship-clan networks such as Jat, Arain, Rajput, Gujjar) shapes voting and patronage, especially in Punjab. **Qaum** and tribe matter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.
- **Nepal**: the **Muluki Ain (1854)** legal code formally ranked all castes and ethnic groups in a hierarchy, with the hill Brahmins and Chhetris (Khas-Arya) at the top. Dalits and Janajatis were placed lower.
- **Sri Lanka**: Sinhala society has caste (Goyigama the largest and highest), and Tamil society has the dominant **Vellalar** caste, though caste is less openly political than ethnicity.
- **Bangladesh**: caste divisions remain among Hindus; Dalit groups and "Harijans" face discrimination.

Caste and the post-colonial state

- **Constitutional response in India**: abolition of untouchability (Article 17), equality before law (Article 14), prohibition of discrimination (Article 15), **reservations** for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislatures, jobs and education (Articles 15(4), 16(4), 330, 332), and later for OBCs after the **Mandal Commission** (implemented 1990; upheld in *Indra Sawhney*, 1992) and for economically weaker sections (2019).

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- **Caste in politics**: **Rajni Kothari** (*Caste in Indian Politics*, 1970) argued that democracy **politicised caste** but also **secularised** it: caste groups became interest groups and formed alliances. The Rudolphs called caste associations an example of **“the modernity of tradition”**.
- **Rise of lower castes**: Christophe Jaffrelot (*India’s Silent Revolution*, 2003) described the rise of OBCs and Dalits in north Indian politics through parties like the SP, RJD and BSP.
- **Nepal**: the 2015 Constitution provides proportional inclusion of Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, women and other groups in state bodies.

Significance for nation-building

- Caste **divides the nation horizontally** and makes national solidarity difficult (Ambedkar warned that a society based on caste could not be a true nation).
- But democratic politics has also made the state an arena where lower castes can claim **dignity and power**, deepening democracy (the “second democratic upsurge”, Yogendra Yadav).
- Affirmative action has become a key tool of **inclusive nation-building**, though it also produces new conflicts (demands for reservation by Jats, Patidars, Marathas; anti-reservation protests).

Religion

Religion is a powerful source of identity, morality and community in South Asia. It has been used both to **unite** (Pakistan’s founding idea, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism) and to **divide** (Partition, sectarian violence).

Religion as a basis of the nation

- **Pakistan**: the **two-nation theory** made religion the foundation of the state. But religion alone could not hold the nation together: Bengali Muslims broke away in 1971. Inside Pakistan, the question “what kind of Islam?” has created **sectarian conflict** (Sunni–Shia

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violence), the exclusion of **Ahmadis** (declared non-Muslim by the Second Amendment, 1974) and persecution under **blasphemy laws**.

- **Sri Lanka**: the revival of Buddhism under **Anagarika Dharmapala** (late 19th century) linked the Sinhala people, the island and Buddhism (the idea of *Dhammadipa*, the island of the Dhamma). This **Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism** became the basis of state policy after 1956.
- **Bangladesh**: national identity has swung between **Bengali nationalism** (language-based, secular) and **Bangladeshi nationalism** (territory-based, with stronger Islamic content, promoted by Ziaur Rahman).
- **Afghanistan**: Islam is the main common identity across ethnic groups, used by the mujahideen and the Taliban.
- **Bhutan**: Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism is central to national culture and the monarchy's legitimacy.

Religion and the secular state

- **India** chose a **secular, civic** nation based on citizenship, not religion. Nehru saw secularism as essential for holding together a diverse country after Partition. Gandhi preached *sarva dharma samabhava* (equal respect for all religions).
- Challenges: communal riots (1984 anti-Sikh riots, 1992–93 riots after the Babri Masjid demolition, Gujarat 2002), the rise of **Hindutva** (V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva*, 1923) as an alternative idea of the nation, and debates on personal laws and a Uniform Civil Code.
- **Nepal** moved from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic (2008–15), but debates continue.

Communalism

- **Communalism** in the South Asian sense is the belief that people of one religion share common secular interests that are opposed to those of other religions. **Bipan Chandra** (*Communalism in Modern India*, 1984) traced it to colonial policies and elite competition.

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- Communal violence damages nation-building by creating fear and segregation, and it often has cross-border effects (for example, attacks on minorities in one country causing reactions in another).

Minorities and nation-building

- **Hindus** in Pakistan and Bangladesh, **Muslims** and **Christians** in India, **Tamil Hindus** and **Muslims** in Sri Lanka, **Christians** in Pakistan, **Shia Hazaras** in Afghanistan and Pakistan all face, in different degrees, questions of security, equality and belonging.
- The **Nehru–Liaquat Pact (1950)** was the first India–Pakistan agreement on the protection of minorities, showing how minority questions became international issues from the start.
- A nation that defines itself by one religion tends to treat minorities as second-class citizens; a civic nation offers equal citizenship but must constantly guard against majoritarianism.

Language

Language has been as important as religion in shaping nation-building in South Asia. Two of the region's biggest crises, the **breakup of Pakistan** and the **Sri Lankan civil war**, began as language conflicts.

India: accommodation of linguistic diversity

- The Congress had accepted the principle of **linguistic provinces** in 1920 (Nagpur session). After independence, Nehru hesitated, fearing division (the **JVP Committee**, 1948–49, of Nehru, Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya, advised caution).
- The death of **Potti Sriramulu** after a fast for a Telugu state led to the creation of **Andhra State (1953)**. The **States Reorganisation Commission** (Fazl Ali, 1953–55) led to the **States Reorganisation Act (1956)**. Later, Maharashtra and Gujarat (1960), Punjab and Haryana (1966) and other states were created.

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- **Official language**: Hindi in Devanagari as the official language of the Union, with English continuing (Article 343; Official Languages Act 1963). **Anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu (1965)** led to the assurance that English would continue as long as non-Hindi states wanted.
- **Three-Language Formula** (1968) in education.
- **Eighth Schedule**: now 22 languages.
- **Result**: linguistic states, once feared as a threat to unity, actually **strengthened national integration** by satisfying regional aspirations. This disproved Selig Harrison's prediction of Balkanisation.

Pakistan: imposition and its costs

- Jinnah declared in Dhaka (March 1948) that **Urdu and only Urdu** would be the state language, though Urdu was the mother tongue of only a small minority and Bengali was spoken by the majority.
- The **Language Movement** (climax on 21 February 1952) made Bengali identity the core of East Pakistani politics. Bengali was recognised as a state language in 1956, but the grievance had already become part of a wider struggle for autonomy.
- In West Pakistan, the **Sindhi language riots (1972)** and Baloch and Pashtun movements showed similar tensions. The **Muhajir** identity (Urdu-speaking migrants from India) became political through the **MQM** (Muttahida Qaumi Movement) in Karachi.
- **Lesson**: imposing one language on a multilingual state weakened, rather than strengthened, national unity.

Sri Lanka: "Sinhala Only"

- The **Official Language Act (1956)**, called "Sinhala Only", made Sinhala the sole official language, replacing English. Tamil-speakers lost access to government jobs and higher education.

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- The **Bandaranaike–Chelvanayakam Pact (1957)** and the **Dudley Senanayake–Chelvanayakam Pact (1965)** promised some use of Tamil and devolution, but both were abandoned under Sinhala pressure.
- The **standardisation** policy (1970s) in university admissions further alienated Tamil youth.
- The **13th and 16th Amendments (1987, 1988)** made Tamil an official language too, but by then the civil war had begun.

Nepal: “One language, one dress”

- Under King Mahendra’s Panchayat regime, the policy of **“Ek bhasa, ek bhesh”** (one language, one dress) promoted Nepali and hill culture as the national culture.
- Madhesis (speaking Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and others) and Janajatis (Newar, Tamang, Magar, Limbu and others) felt excluded. The 2007 Interim Constitution and the 2015 Constitution recognised all mother tongues as national languages, with Nepali as the official language of the federation.

Bhutan: Dzongkha and Driglam Namzha

- In the 1980s, Bhutan promoted **Dzongkha** and the code of conduct and dress (*Driglam Namzha*) as part of “One Nation, One People”. Teaching in Nepali was stopped in schools in the south, contributing to the Lhotshampa crisis.

Significance

Language is closely linked to jobs, education and dignity. States that **recognised linguistic diversity** (India after 1956, Nepal after 2015) reduced conflict; states that **imposed one language** (Pakistan in 1948–52, Sri Lanka in 1956, Bhutan in the 1980s) produced resistance, ethnic conflict and refugee flows with international consequences.

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Ethnicity, Tribe, Region, Class and Gender

Ethnicity and ethno-regional movements

Ethnic groups combine language, region, history and sometimes religion. In South Asia, ethnic demands range from cultural rights to autonomy and outright secession.

- **India**: Naga (since the 1950s; the Naga National Council's demand for independence), Mizo (Mizo National Front, settled by the **Mizo Accord, 1986**), Assam movement against migrants (**Assam Accord, 1985**), Khalistan movement in Punjab (1980s), Kashmiri separatism (from 1989), Gorkhaland, and many others.
- **Pakistan**: Bengali nationalism (leading to 1971), **Baloch** insurgencies (1948, 1958–59, 1962–63, 1973–77 and since 2004), **Pashtunistan** demand and the recent Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, Sindhi nationalism, Muhajir politics (MQM).
- **Sri Lanka**: **Tamil nationalism** moved from federalism (Federal Party, 1949) to separatism (Vaddukoddai Resolution, 1976) and armed struggle (LTTE, defeated in 2009).
- **Bangladesh**: the **Chittagong Hill Tracts** insurgency (Shanti Bahini) by the Chakma and other hill peoples against Bengali settlement, ended by the **CHT Peace Accord (1997)**.
- **Nepal**: Madhesi movements (2007, 2008, 2015) and Janajati (indigenous nationalities) demands for identity-based federalism.
- **Afghanistan**: competition among Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks shaped the civil war (1990s) and continues under the Taliban.

Tribes and indigenous peoples

- Tribes (Adivasis in India; Janajatis in Nepal; hill peoples in Bangladesh; tribal areas of Pakistan) have their own cultures, land systems and often weak links with the state.
- The colonial state governed many tribal areas separately ("excluded areas", the Inner Line in the north-east, the Frontier Crimes Regulation in north-west India).
- **India** adopted Nehru's **"Panchsheel for tribals"** (1958, influenced by Verrier Elwin): development without imposition, respect for tribal rights and land. Constitutional tools

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include the **Fifth and Sixth Schedules**, **PESA (1996)** and the **Forest Rights Act (2006)**.

- **Pakistan** kept the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) under the colonial **Frontier Crimes Regulation** until FATA was merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the **25th Amendment (2018)**.
- Displacement by dams, mines and development projects (Narmada, Kaptai dam in the CHT) has often alienated tribal communities.

Region

- Regional identities are often stronger than national ones: Bengal, Punjab, Kashmir, Sindh, Assam, Tamil Nadu, the Terai. Many are **divided by international borders**.
- Regional inequality (for example, East vs West Pakistan; the north-east vs mainland India; Balochistan vs Punjab) fuels a sense of **internal colonialism**: the feeling that the centre exploits the periphery's resources.

Class

- Feudal landlords (zamindars, jagirdars, waderas in Sindh, sardars in Balochistan) have dominated politics, especially in Pakistan, where land reforms (1959, 1972, 1977) were largely ineffective.
- **India's** land reforms abolished zamindari but had uneven success; class conflict appeared in the Telangana movement (1946–51) and the Naxalite movement (from 1967).
- The **urban middle class** has grown with economic growth and plays a key role in protest movements (the 2022 Aragalaya, the 2024 Bangladesh uprising, the 2025 Nepal Gen Z protests).
- Class often **overlaps** with caste and ethnicity (for example, upper castes owning land; Dalits as landless labourers), which makes social conflict more intense.

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Gender

- **Patriarchy** shapes family structures, property rights, honour codes and political participation across the region.
- Paradox: South Asia has produced many women leaders (Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first woman prime minister in 1960, Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia), mostly through **dynastic routes**, while ordinary women face low representation and violence.
- The nation itself is often symbolised as a mother ("Bharat Mata"), and women's bodies became targets during Partition and the 1971 war (studied by **Urvashi Butalia**, *The Other Side of Silence*, 1998, and **Veena Das**).
- State responses include India's reservation for women in panchayats (**73rd and 74th Amendments, 1992**) and the **Women's Reservation Act (2023)** for Parliament and state assemblies; Nepal's 33 per cent quota for women in Parliament (2015 Constitution); Bangladesh and Pakistan's reserved seats for women.
- Under the Taliban, Afghan women have been excluded from secondary and higher education and most work, a central issue of the state's legitimacy.

Post-colonial Challenges of State Construction

State construction means building the **institutions and capacity** that allow a state to govern its whole territory and population. South Asian states faced the following challenges.

Territorial integration and consolidation

- **Integration of princely states**: about 565 princely states had to be absorbed (Junagadh, Hyderabad and Kashmir were the difficult cases).
- **Disputed and porous borders**: Kashmir, the Durand Line, the McMahon Line, enclaves on the India–Bangladesh border (exchanged in 2015), Kalapani and Lipulekh (India–Nepal).

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- **Remote peripheries**: the north-east of India, the tribal areas and Balochistan in Pakistan, the hill tracts of Bangladesh, and much of Afghanistan were weakly controlled.
- **Remaining colonial and foreign enclaves**: India took Goa, Daman and Diu from Portugal in **1961** and Puducherry and other French settlements were transferred (de facto 1954, de jure 1962). Sikkim, a protectorate, became an Indian state in **1975**.

Constitution-making and legitimacy

- **India** completed its Constitution quickly (Constituent Assembly, December 1946 to November 1949; in force 26 January 1950), giving the state early legitimacy.
- **Pakistan** took nine years (1956), saw the Constituent Assembly dissolved (1954, the *Tamizuddin Khan* case and the **"doctrine of necessity"** used by Justice Munir), and has had three constitutions (1956, 1962, 1973).
- **Sri Lanka** has had three (1948 Soulbury, 1972, 1978), **Nepal** six or seven (1948, 1951 interim, 1959, 1962, 1990, 2007 interim, 2015), **Bangladesh** one (1972, heavily amended).
- Frequent constitutional change shows a **lack of consensus on the basic rules** of the state.

Building administrative and coercive capacity

- Inheriting the colonial bureaucracy gave **India** continuity, but **Pakistan** and **Bangladesh** had to build ministries and services almost from nothing; Nepal and Bhutan had very small modern administrations.
- Keeping the **army under civilian control** proved one of the hardest tasks outside India.
- **Low tax capacity**: states depended on indirect taxes, aid and borrowing.

Managing refugees and population movement

- Partition refugees (1947–50), the 1971 crisis (about one crore refugees to India), Tibetan refugees (1959), Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, Lhotshampas from Bhutan, Afghan

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refugees in Pakistan and Iran (millions since 1979), and Rohingya in Bangladesh (since 2017).

- Refugees strained resources and created **citizenship and security** problems (Unit IV).

Economic development and welfare

- The new states had to fight poverty, illiteracy, famine and disease. Development became a central source of the state's **legitimacy** ("performance legitimacy").
- But development projects also caused displacement and regional inequality, creating new grievances.

Democracy and participation

- Introducing **universal adult franchise** in poor, largely illiterate societies (India in 1951–52; Sri Lanka already in 1931) was a bold experiment.
- Participation brought new groups into politics but also raised demands faster than institutions could respond (Huntington's "political decay"; Kohli's "crisis of governability").

External pressures

- Wars and rivalries (India–Pakistan, India–China), Cold War alliances, foreign aid conditions and great-power interventions (Afghanistan) shaped state construction. Pakistan, in particular, built its state around security against India.

Assessment

India succeeded relatively well in state construction because of an inherited central government, a strong nationalist party, an early Constitution and civilian control of the army. **Pakistan** faced the hardest start and became a military-bureaucratic state. **Sri Lanka** had a smooth start but failed in ethnic accommodation. **Nepal** and **Bhutan** modernised late from monarchical structures. **Afghanistan** never fully completed state construction and remains fragile.

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Challenges of Nation-building: Country Experiences

Nation-building asks: **Who are "we"? On what basis do we belong together?** Each South Asian state gave its own answer.

India: "Unity in Diversity" and the civic nation

- **Idea of the nation**: Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946) described India as an ancient palimpsest, with layers of culture added over time, united by a shared civilisation and the freedom struggle. The Constitution defined the nation through **citizenship and shared values** (justice, liberty, equality, fraternity), not through religion or language.
- **Tools**: federalism, linguistic states, secularism, reservations, special provisions for tribal and border areas, a common civil service, national symbols, planned development, and democratic participation.
- **Successes**: survival of a democratic and united state despite predictions of breakup; integration of many regional movements through accords (Punjab Accord 1985, Assam Accord 1985, Mizo Accord 1986).
- **Continuing challenges**: Kashmir, Naga and Manipur conflicts, Maoist insurgency, communal tensions, caste violence and debates over the meaning of Indian nationalism (civic vs cultural).

Pakistan: religion as the basis of nationhood

- **Idea of the nation**: Pakistan was founded on the **two-nation theory**: Muslims of the subcontinent as a separate nation. But after independence, Islam alone could not bind together Bengalis, Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, Baloch and Muhajirs.
- **Assimilationist approach**: Urdu as the national language, a strong centre, the **One Unit Scheme (1955)** and the denial of Bengali majority rule.
- **Failure in 1971**: Bangladesh's secession showed that religion could not override linguistic and ethnic identity and economic grievances.

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- **After 1971**: the 1973 Constitution gave more space to provinces, but Zia's Islamisation, Punjabi dominance and military rule continued ethnic tensions. The **18th Amendment (2010)** was an important step towards accommodation.
- Scholars like **Stephen P. Cohen** (*The Idea of Pakistan*, 2004) and **Christophe Jaffrelot** (*The Pakistan Paradox*, 2015) show that Pakistan's national identity remains contested between Islamic, ethnic and civic ideas.

Bangladesh: language nation to contested identity

- **Idea of the nation**: born on the basis of **Bengali linguistic nationalism**, secularism and the liberation war of 1971.
- **Debate**: Bengali nationalism (Awami League) vs **Bangladeshi nationalism** (BNP, Ziaur Rahman), which defined the nation by territory and gave more place to Islam, partly to include non-Bengali minorities and partly to distance itself from India.
- **Challenges**: the hill peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who were not Bengali; the place of Hindus and other minorities; the polarised memory of 1971 (war crimes trials from 2010); and, after 2024, a new debate on national identity and the legacy of the Awami League.

Sri Lanka: majoritarian nation-building and civil war

- **Idea of the nation**: after 1956, the state was increasingly identified with the **Sinhala-Buddhist majority**.
- **Policies**: disenfranchisement of Indian Tamil plantation workers (1948–49), Sinhala Only (1956), the 1972 Constitution (Buddhism's foremost place; no minority safeguards), university "standardisation", and state-sponsored colonisation of Tamil areas.
- **Result**: Tamil demands moved from equal rights to federalism to a separate state (Eelam); the civil war (1983–2009) killed tens of thousands and drew in India (1987 Accord, IPKF 1987–90).
- **After 2009**: military victory but limited political reconciliation; the 13th Amendment's devolution remains incomplete.

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Nepal: from a monocultural Hindu kingdom to an inclusive federal republic

- **Old model**: the monarchy defined the nation as Hindu, Nepali-speaking and hill-centred ("Ek bhasa, ek bhesh"; the Muluki Ain hierarchy).
- **Change**: the Maoist insurgency and the Madhesi and Janajati movements demanded inclusion. The 2006–15 transition produced a **secular, federal republic** with proportional inclusion of excluded groups.
- **Challenges**: Madhesi grievances over provincial boundaries and citizenship (the 2015 blockade); slow implementation; the 2025 Gen Z uprising against corruption shows a new generation demanding a more effective state.

Bhutan: cultural homogenisation

- **"One Nation, One People" (1980s)**: promotion of Drukpa culture, Dzongkha and national dress, stricter citizenship laws (1985) and a census (1988) that classified many southern Lhotshampas as illegal immigrants.
- **Result**: protests in 1990, and the exit of about one lakh Lhotshampas to refugee camps in Nepal; most were later resettled in third countries (mainly the USA) from 2007.
- **Bhutan's view**: the policy was necessary to protect a small nation's culture and survival, given the fate of Sikkim (merged with India in 1975).

Maldives and Afghanistan

- **Maldives**: relatively homogeneous (Muslim, Dhivehi-speaking), so nation-building issues centre on Islam, democracy and island inequality.
- **Afghanistan**: a multi-ethnic society without a stable consensus on national identity; Pashtun-dominated rule (monarchy, Taliban) vs demands of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. Repeated wars have destroyed state and national institutions.

Strategies of Nation-building: Assimilation vs Accommodation

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Strategy	Meaning	South Asian examples	Usual result
Assimilation	One dominant language, religion or culture imposed as the national identity	Urdu in Pakistan (1948–52); Sinhala Only (1956); “Ek bhasa, ek bhesh” in Nepal; “One Nation, One People” in Bhutan	Resistance, ethnic conflict, secession or refugee flows
Accommodation	Diversity recognised through federalism, language rights and group protections	Linguistic states and the Eighth Schedule in India; Nepal’s 2015 federalism; Pakistan’s 18th Amendment	Reduced conflict, though new demands arise
Power-sharing (consociational)	Groups share power through coalitions, quotas, autonomy and vetoes	Reservations and Sixth Schedule autonomy in India; proportional inclusion in Nepal; CHT regional council in Bangladesh	Stability, if implemented sincerely
Coercion	Force used to suppress separatist or ethnic movements	Operation Searchlight (1971); Sri Lanka’s war against the LTTE; counter-insurgency in Balochistan, Kashmir and the north-east	Short-term control, long-term alienation, human rights concerns
Negotiated accords	Peace agreements with rebel groups	Mizo Accord (1986); CHT Peace Accord (1997); Nepal’s Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006); Bodo Accords	Often successful when backed by autonomy and development

Instruments used by states

- **Constitutional design**: federalism, special status, autonomous councils, minority rights.
- **Language policy**: official languages, multilingual education.
- **Affirmative action**: reservations and quotas for disadvantaged castes, tribes, regions and women.
- **Education and national symbols**: common curriculum, national anthem, flag, festivals and heroes.

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- **Economic development**: reducing regional inequality (special category states in India, development packages for Balochistan).
- **Democratic participation**: elections and local self-government give groups a stake in the state.
- **Accords and negotiation** with movements.

Consequences for International Relations of South Asia

The way states handled socio-cultural diversity has had direct **international consequences**:

1. **Wars and state breakup**: Pakistan's failure to accommodate Bengalis led to the 1971 war and the birth of Bangladesh, which changed the regional balance of power.
2. **Interventions**: India's involvement in Sri Lanka (1987–90) was driven by the Tamil issue and Tamil Nadu politics.
3. **Cross-border ethnic links**: Pashtuns (Pakistan–Afghanistan), Baloch (Pakistan–Iran–Afghanistan), Madhesis (Nepal–India), Bengalis (India–Bangladesh), Tamils (India–Sri Lanka), Nagas (India–Myanmar) make domestic issues international.
4. **Refugee flows**: 1947, 1971, Tibetans, Sri Lankan Tamils, Lhotshampas, Afghans, Rohingya, all creating inter-state friction (Unit IV).
5. **Mutual accusations of interference**: India and Pakistan accuse each other of supporting insurgents; smaller neighbours accuse India of interfering in their domestic politics.
6. **Diaspora politics**: Tamil, Sikh, Kashmiri and Baloch diasporas influence foreign governments and international opinion.
7. **Obstacle to regional cooperation**: identity-based mistrust makes SAARC weak and regional integration slow.

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Conclusion

South Asia's socio-cultural structures (caste, religion, language, ethnicity, tribe, region, class and gender) are among the most complex in the world. After independence, the new states had to build **working institutions** and **a sense of nationhood** at the same time, within borders they did not choose and amid poverty and insecurity. The experience of the region shows a clear lesson: **states that accommodated diversity** through federalism, language rights, affirmative action and democratic participation (India's linguistic states, Nepal's 2015 Constitution) proved more stable, while **states that imposed a single identity** (Pakistan before 1971, Sri Lanka after 1956, Bhutan in the 1980s) faced secession, civil war or refugee crises. Yet even successful cases face new challenges from majoritarianism, inequality and youth discontent. State construction and nation-building in South Asia therefore remain **unfinished processes**, and their outcomes continue to shape the region's international relations, from wars and interventions to migration and regional cooperation.

Quick Revision: Thinkers and Concepts

Concept	Thinker	Key work
Primordial attachments; integrative revolution	Clifford Geertz	"The Integrative Revolution" (1963)
Instrumentalism; elite construction of ethnicity	Paul Brass	*Ethnicity and Nationalism* (1991)
Imagined communities	Benedict Anderson	*Imagined Communities* (1983)
Nationalism and industrial society	Ernest Gellner	*Nations and Nationalism* (1983)
Invention of tradition	Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger	*The Invention of Tradition* (1983)
Social communication	Karl Deutsch	*Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953)
Ethnic conflict and group worth	Donald Horowitz	*Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985)

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Consociational democracy in India	Arend Lijphart	“The Puzzle of Indian Democracy” (1996)
Sons of the soil; types of integration	Myron Weiner	*Sons of the Soil* (1978)
Predicted India’s breakup	Selig Harrison	*India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (1960)
Purity and pollution	Louis Dumont	*Homo Hierarchicus* (1966)
Sanskritisation; dominant caste	M.N. Srinivas	*Caste in Modern India* (1962)
Annihilation of caste	B.R. Ambedkar	*Annihilation of Caste* (1936)
Caste in politics	Rajni Kothari	*Caste in Indian Politics* (1970)
Colonial construction of caste	Nicholas Dirks	*Castes of Mind* (2001)
Silent revolution (rise of lower castes)	Christophe Jaffrelot	*India’s Silent Revolution* (2003)
Communalism	Bipan Chandra	*Communalism in Modern India* (1984)
State-building (scope vs strength)	Francis Fukuyama	*State-Building* (2004)
Idea of Pakistan	Stephen P. Cohen	*The Idea of Pakistan* (2004)
Partition and women	Urvashi Butalia	*The Other Side of Silence* (1998)

One-line memory aids

- **Language crises**: Urdu vs Bengali (Pakistan, 1948–52), Sinhala Only (Sri Lanka, 1956), anti-Hindi agitation (Tamil Nadu, 1965), “Ek bhasa, ek bhesh” (Nepal), Dzongkha and Driglam Namzha (Bhutan, 1980s).
- **Peace accords**: Assam and Punjab (1985), Mizo (1986), India–Sri Lanka (1987), CHT (1997), Nepal Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006).
- **Assimilation leads to conflict; accommodation leads to stability.**

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Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

1. Discuss the socio-cultural structures of South Asia and explain how they have affected nation-building.
2. Distinguish between state-building and nation-building. What were the main post-colonial challenges of state construction in South Asia?
3. “Accommodation, not assimilation, is the key to nation-building in plural societies.” Examine with reference to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
4. Examine the role of language in the nation-building process of South Asian states.
5. How has caste shaped politics and nation-building in South Asia?
6. Compare primordialist, instrumentalist and constructivist explanations of ethnic conflict in South Asia.
7. How do the nation-building failures of South Asian states affect the international relations of the region?
8. Discuss the problems of nation-building in Nepal and Bhutan.

Short-answer questions

1. Primordialism
2. Sanskritisation
3. Dominant caste
4. Sinhala Only Act
5. Language Movement of 1952
6. States Reorganisation Act, 1956
7. One Nation, One People policy
8. Muluki Ain
9. Consociationalism

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10. Biradari

MCQs (UGC-NET / OPSC style)

1. The concept of “primordial attachments” in new states was given by:
   - (a) Paul Brass (b) Clifford Geertz (c) Benedict Anderson (d) Karl Deutsch
   - **Answer: (b)**

2. *Homo Hierarchicus* was written by:
   - (a) M.N. Srinivas (b) Louis Dumont (c) Andre Beteille (d) G.S. Ghurye
   - **Answer: (b)**

3. Which scholar predicted the breakup of India in *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*?
   - (a) Selig Harrison (b) Myron Weiner (c) Gunnar Myrdal (d) Paul Brass
   - **Answer: (a)**

4. The Sinhala Only Act was passed in:
   - (a) 1948 (b) 1956 (c) 1972 (d) 1983
   - **Answer: (b)**

5. The policy of “Ek bhasa, ek bhesh” is associated with:
   - (a) Bhutan (b) Nepal (c) Sri Lanka (d) Pakistan
   - **Answer: (b)**

6. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed in:
   - (a) 1986 (b) 1990 (c) 1997 (d) 2006
   - **Answer: (c)**

7. Match the following:
   - A. Sanskritisation – 1. Benedict Anderson
   - B. Imagined communities – 2. Paul Brass

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- C. Instrumentalism – 3. M.N. Srinivas
- D. Sons of the soil – 4. Myron Weiner
- **Answer: A-3, B-1, C-2, D-4**

8. Assertion (A): The linguistic reorganisation of Indian states strengthened national unity. Reason (R): It satisfied regional aspirations within a federal framework.
   - **Answer: Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A.**

9. Which amendment merged FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan?
   - (a) 18th (b) 21st (c) 25th (d) 27th
   - **Answer: (c)**

10. Arrange in chronological order: (i) Sinhala Only Act (ii) Language Movement in East Pakistan (iii) States Reorganisation Act in India (iv) Anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu
    - **Answer: (ii), (i), (iii), (iv)**

Suggested readings

- Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*.
- Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*.
- Rajni Kothari, *Caste in Indian Politics*.
- Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*.
- Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox*.
- S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*.
- Mahendra Lawoti and Susan Hangen (eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal*.
- Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*.
- Paul Brass (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*.

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