INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTH ASIA

The Nature of South Asian States

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 17, 2026 • 30 min read



The **origin** of a state tells us how it was born. The **nature** of a state tells us **what kind of state it became**: who controls it, how power is organised, how it relates to society, what ideology it follows, and how secure or insecure it is. South Asian states share a common colonial origin, but their nature varies a great deal: India is a stable federal democracy, Pakistan is a hybrid state dominated by the military, Bangladesh and Nepal have swung between democracy and authoritarian or monarchical rule, Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy, Maldives a presidential republic, and Afghanistan is under Taliban rule.

Dimensions used to study the nature of a state

When an examiner asks about the “nature of South Asian states”, the answer should cover these dimensions:

1. **Regime type**: democracy, authoritarianism, monarchy, military rule, theocracy or a “hybrid regime” that mixes elections with authoritarian control.
2. **Structure of power**: unitary or federal; centralised or decentralised; parliamentary or presidential.
3. **State–society relations**: is the state strong enough to penetrate and change society, or is it captured by powerful social groups (landlords, castes, clans, religious leaders)?
4. **Civil–military relations**: are elected leaders in control of the army, or does the army control politics?
5. **Ideological basis**: secular, religious (Islamic, Buddhist-majoritarian, Hindu-majoritarian), ethnic or civic.
6. **Political economy**: role of the state in the economy: developmental state, welfare state, rentier state, or market-friendly liberal state.
7. **Security orientation**: is the state mainly worried about external enemies or internal threats (insurgency, separatism)? Is it a “security state”?

Why the nature of the state matters for International Relations

- In South Asia, the **internal nature of a state directly shapes its foreign policy**. For example, the dominance of the army in Pakistan makes India–Pakistan relations security-centred; the majoritarian nature of the Sri Lankan state turned the Tamil question into an India–Sri Lanka issue.
- Regime changes in neighbouring states quickly affect relations with India and China: for example, the fall of Sheikh Hasina’s government in Bangladesh (August 2024) and the Gen Z uprising in Nepal (September 2025) changed regional equations.
- Weak or failing states (Afghanistan) become bases for terrorism and refugee flows, which are regional security problems.

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- Therefore, liberal and constructivist scholars argue that we cannot understand South Asian IR only through the realist “billiard ball” model; we must open the “black box” of the state (this links to **Unit II**, Limits of Structural Realism).

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Approaches to Understanding the Nature of the South Asian State

Different schools of thought explain the nature of the post-colonial state in different ways. A good answer compares at least two or three of them.

Liberal-pluralist approach

- Sees the state as a **neutral arbiter** among many competing groups (parties, interest groups, castes, regions).
- Emphasises constitutions, elections, rights, rule of law and institutions.
- Applied to India by scholars like **Rajni Kothari**, who described the early Indian polity as the **“Congress System”** (1964): one dominant party that absorbed many interests and managed conflict through consensus.
- **Limitation**: it assumes the state is above society, but in South Asia the state is often captured by dominant elites.

Modernisation and political development approach

- **Gabriel Almond, Lucian Pye, Samuel Huntington** (1960s): new states would move from “traditional” to “modern” through economic growth, education and urbanisation.
- Huntington’s *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) warned that when political participation grows faster than institutions, the result is **“political decay”**, disorder and often military rule. This was used to explain coups in Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- **Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph** (*The Modernity of Tradition*, 1967) showed that in India, tradition (caste associations) can help modernity, not only block it.

Marxist and neo-Marxist approach

- The state serves the interests of the dominant classes.

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- **Hamza Alavi**: the post-colonial state is **“overdeveloped”** and **relatively autonomous** , run by a **military-bureaucratic oligarchy** that mediates between the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the indigenous bourgeoisie and the landed classes.
- **Pranab Bardhan** (*The Political Economy of Development in India*, 1984): the Indian state is shaped by a coalition of three **“dominant proprietary classes”**: the industrial capitalists, the rich farmers and the professionals (including the bureaucracy). Their competing demands led to subsidies and slow growth.
- **Dependency theorists**: South Asian states remained economically dependent on the capitalist core.

Statist or institutional approach (“bringing the state back in”)

- Theda Skocpol and others argued that the state is an **independent actor** with its own interests and capacity.
- **Joel Migdal**: Third World states are often **“weak states” in “strong societies”**; local strongmen limit the state’s capacity.
- **Gunnar Myrdal**: South Asian states are **“soft states”** that cannot enforce their own laws.
- **Atul Kohli** (*Democracy and Discontent*, 1990): India faced a **“crisis of governability”** as institutions weakened and demands increased. In *State-Directed Development* (2004) he contrasted cohesive-capitalist states (South Korea) with India’s **“fragmented-multiclass”** state.

Post-colonial and cultural approaches

- **Partha Chatterjee**: the post-colonial state continued colonial rationality; the poor relate to it through **“political society”** (negotiation, patronage), not civil society.
- **Sudipta Kaviraj**: the Indian state is a modern Western form placed on a society with very different traditions, creating a gap between the state’s language and the people’s language.

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- **Subaltern Studies**: the state represents elite interests; the masses have their own forms of politics.

Realist and security approach

- Realists treat the state as a unitary actor seeking power and survival.
- **Mohammed Ayoob's "subaltern realism"**: South Asian states are **"late state-makers"**, insecure from within. Their security behaviour is driven by the need to build the state and protect the regime, not only by external threats.
- **Barry Buzan's "weak states"** idea (*People, States and Fear*, 1983, revised 1991): states with weak **socio-political cohesion** feel threatened mainly by internal forces. In such states, "national security" often means **regime security**.

Comparative democratisation approach

- Why did India stay democratic while Pakistan and Bangladesh did not? Scholars such as **Philip Oldenburg** (*India, Pakistan, and Democracy*, 2010), **Maya Tudor** (*The Promise of Power*, 2013) and **Ayesha Jalal** compare their paths.
- **Maya Tudor** argues that the **class basis of the nationalist movement** mattered: the Congress was backed by a broad middle class with an interest in democracy, while the Muslim League was led by a landed aristocracy that preferred limited democracy.
- **Jalal** argues that the difference is less than it appears: both have strong centralised states with powerful non-elected institutions.

Core Characteristics of South Asian States

Despite their differences, South Asian states share several features that come from their common history and social structure.

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Post-colonial character

All South Asian states (except partly Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan) carry the stamp of British colonialism: the steel-frame bureaucracy, the district administration, the police acts, penal codes and parliamentary forms. The state was designed to **control and extract**, not to serve, and this top-down habit continues in many areas (for example, colonial-era sedition and preventive detention laws were used by post-colonial governments).

Centralised and "overdeveloped" state

Power is concentrated at the centre, in the capital and in the executive. Even federal states like India have a strong central bias (Indian federalism is often called **"quasi-federal"**, as K.C. Wheare said, or a **"holding-together"** federation, in Alfred Stepan's term, as against the American "coming-together" type). Pakistan and Bangladesh have had long periods of highly centralised military or executive rule.

Strong in appearance, weak in capacity

The state is large and visible (huge bureaucracies, armies and public sectors), but its capacity to deliver services, collect taxes and enforce laws is limited. Tax-to-GDP ratios are low in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This is Myrdal's "soft state" and Migdal's "weak state in a strong society".

Plural societies and the problem of national identity

Every South Asian state is deeply plural in religion, language, ethnicity and caste. The central question for each state has been: **one identity or many?** States that recognised diversity (India's linguistic states, Nepal's federalism in 2015) have managed better than those that imposed one identity (Pakistan before 1971, Sri Lanka after 1956).

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Majoritarian tendencies

In many states, the largest community has tried to define the nation in its own image: **Punjabi-dominated Islamic nationalism** in Pakistan, **Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism** in Sri Lanka, **Bengali and later Islamic nationalism** in Bangladesh, the **“One Nation, One People”** policy of the Drukpa elite in Bhutan, the hill **Khas-Arya** dominance in Nepal, and debates on **Hindu nationalism** in India. Minorities therefore often feel excluded.

Patron–client and dynastic politics

Politics often works through personal networks, patronage and family dynasties: the Nehru–Gandhi family in India; the Bhuttos and Sharifs in Pakistan; Sheikh Hasina and the Zia family (Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman) in Bangladesh; the Bandaranaikes and Rajapaksas in Sri Lanka; the Koiralas in Nepal. Parties are often weak in internal democracy.

Civil-military imbalance

Outside India (and Sri Lanka till recently), the army has played a direct political role. Pakistan has had four periods of direct military rule; Bangladesh has had military rule and army-backed caretaker governments. (Details in the section on civil-military relations.)

Hybrid regimes and democratic fragility

Many South Asian states are **“hybrid regimes”**: they hold elections but restrict opposition, media and courts. Recent mass uprisings show this fragility: the **Aragalaya** in Sri Lanka (2022), the student-led uprising in Bangladesh (2024) and the **Gen Z protests** in Nepal (2025) all forced governments out of office.

Developmental and welfare role

After independence, almost every state took on the task of planned development, land reform and welfare. Later, from the 1970s to the 1990s, all moved towards market reforms. The state remains the main agent of development.

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Insecurity and the “security state”

Internal conflicts (insurgencies in north-east India, Kashmir, Balochistan, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Tamil north of Sri Lanka) and external rivalries (India–Pakistan, India–China) make security a central concern. Special laws such as India’s **AFSPA (1958)** and Pakistan’s anti-terrorism laws show the security orientation of the state.

India-centric asymmetry

India’s size makes it the core of the region. The nature of the smaller states (their nationalism, alliances and fears) is partly shaped by their relationship with India. This is why India’s neighbours often practise **“balancing”** with China or the USA.

Comparative Table: Regime Types and State Structures

This table summarises the present nature of each state (as of November 2026). It is very useful for short answers and MCQs.

State	Form of government	Unitary or federal	Religion and the state	Present Constitution	Periods of military or non-democratic rule
India	Parliamentary republic	Federal with a strong centre	Secular (the word added by the 42nd Amendment, 1976)	1950	None (Emergency 1975–77 was civilian)
Pakistan	Parliamentary Islamic Republic; hybrid civil-military	Federal (four provinces)	Islam is the state religion; Objectives Resolution part of the Constitution	1973	1958–71, 1977–88, 1999–2008
Bangladesh	Parliamentary republic	Unitary	Islam is the state religion, with secularism also in the Constitution	1972	1975–90 (military rule); 2007–08 army-backed caretaker government
Sri Lanka	Semi-presidential (executive president since 1978)	Unitary, with provincial councils (13th Amendment, 1987)	Buddhism given the “foremost place”	1978	None, but a long civil war (1983–2009)

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Nepal	Parliamentary republic	Federal (seven provinces)	Secular since 2015	2015	Royal direct rule 1960–90 (Panchayat) and 2005–06
Bhutan	Constitutional monarchy	Unitary	Buddhism as “spiritual heritage”	2008	Absolute monarchy till 2008
Maldives	Presidential republic	Unitary	Islam is the state religion; only Muslims can be citizens	2008	Long one-man rule (Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, 1978–2008)
Afghanistan	Islamic Emirate under the Taliban	Highly centralised	Theocratic	No constitution in force since 2021	Taliban rule 1996–2001 and since August 2021

Points to note from the table

- Only **India, Pakistan and Nepal** are federal. Most other states are unitary, partly because they fear that federalism will lead to secession (for example, Sri Lanka and the Tamil demand).
- Only **India and Nepal** are constitutionally secular. Four states give a special place to Islam (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Afghanistan) and two to Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Bhutan).
- **India** is the only state with uninterrupted civilian democratic rule since independence, though with the Emergency (1975–77) as an exception.
- **Pakistan** and **Bangladesh** show long periods of military rule. **Nepal** and **Bhutan** made the transition from monarchy only in 2008. **Maldives** moved to multi-party democracy only in 2008.
- **Sri Lanka** has had continuous elections but a strong executive presidency, which critics say concentrates power.

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Nature of the State in Each Country

India: a federal, secular, democratic “state-nation”

- **Democratic continuity**: India has held regular elections since 1951–52, with peaceful transfers of power (1977, 1989, 1996, 2004, 2014). The army has stayed out of politics. The only break was the **Emergency (1975–77)** under Indira Gandhi.
- **Federal but centralised**: the Constitution gives the centre strong powers (Article 356, emergency powers, residuary powers, all-India services). Political scientists describe India as **“quasi-federal”**, with **“cooperative”** and **“competitive”** federalism in practice. Coalition governments (1989–2014) increased the power of states; single-party majorities after 2014 strengthened the centre again.
- **Secular and plural**: the state follows **“principled distance”** (Rajeev Bhargava) from all religions, rather than strict separation. Debates on Hindu nationalism, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 and minority rights show this remains contested.
- **State-nation model**: linguistic states, many official languages and special provisions (Fifth and Sixth Schedules, Article 371) accommodate diversity (Stepan, Linz and Yadav).
- **Developmental state**: from Nehruvian planning and a mixed economy to liberalisation in **1991**, the state remains central to development and welfare (MGNREGA, food security, direct benefit transfers).
- **Scholarly descriptions**: the Rudolphs’ **“weak-strong state”**; Kohli’s **“fragmented-multiclass state”** and **“crisis of governability”**; Kothari’s **“Congress System”** for the early years.
- **Challenges**: insurgencies (Kashmir, north-east, Maoist areas), communal tensions, concentration of executive power, and questions about the independence of institutions.

Pakistan: a “garrison” or “hybrid” state dominated by the military

- **Military dominance**: the army has ruled directly four times (Ayub Khan 1958, Yahya Khan 1969, Zia-ul-Haq 1977, Pervez Musharraf 1999) for about 33 years in total. Even

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under civilian governments, it controls defence, nuclear, Afghanistan and India policy.

- **Key descriptions**:
  - **Garrison state**: Harold Lasswell's idea of a state run by "specialists in violence", applied to Pakistan by scholars such as Ishtiaq Ahmed (*The Pakistan Garrison State*, 2013).
  - **"Military Inc."** (Ayesha Siddiqa, 2007): the army is also a huge economic actor ("Milbus": military business).
  - **"Between Mosque and Military"** (Husain Haqqani, 2005): the army and religious groups support each other.
  - **"Hybrid regime"**: a civilian government operates under military oversight. After the 2024 elections, many commentators described a **"hybrid-plus"** system.

- **27th Constitutional Amendment (November 2025)**: it created the post of **Chief of Defence Forces**, to be held by the Army Chief (Field Marshal Asim Munir), abolished the post of Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, and set up a new **Federal Constitutional Court** that took over constitutional cases from the Supreme Court. Critics, including Chatham House, see it as moving Pakistan closer to authoritarian rule; the government says it improves governance and the justice system.
- **Islamic character**: the Objectives Resolution (1949), the 1973 Constitution (Islam as the state religion, the President and PM must be Muslims), Zia's Islamisation (Hudood Ordinances, blasphemy laws, Federal Shariat Court) and the declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslims (1974).
- **Federal tensions**: Punjab dominates; grievances in Balochistan, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The **18th Amendment (2010)** devolved many powers to provinces.
- **Security state**: identity built against India; heavy defence spending; use of militant groups as proxies; terrorism inside the country.

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Bangladesh: from liberation ideals to swinging between democracy and authoritarianism

- **Founding principles (1972)**: nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism (the "Mujibbad").
- **Instability**: one-party BAKSAL system (January 1975); assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (August 1975); military rule under Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad (1975–90), who added Islamic elements to the Constitution.
- **Return to democracy (1991)**: alternation between the BNP (Khaleda Zia) and the Awami League (Sheikh Hasina), with a neutral **caretaker government** system for elections (1996). An army-backed caretaker government ruled in 2007–08.
- **Dominant-party authoritarianism (2009–2024)**: the Awami League abolished the caretaker system (2011), and the 2014, 2018 and 2024 elections were boycotted or widely criticised. Scholars called it a **"competitive authoritarian"** or **"hybrid"** regime.
- **2024 uprising and transition**: a student-led movement against job quotas grew into a mass uprising that forced Sheikh Hasina to resign and leave for India on 5 August 2024. An interim government led by **Muhammad Yunus** ran the country and organised reforms.
- **2026 election**: in the 12 February 2026 election, the BNP and its allies won a large majority (about 212 of 299 seats), and **Tarique Rahman** became Prime Minister. The Awami League was barred from contesting. A referendum held at the same time approved reforms such as a two-term limit for the Prime Minister and greater judicial independence.
- **Nature**: a unitary, highly centralised state; strong role of the bureaucracy and army; tension between **Bengali** (linguistic, secular) and **Bangladeshi** (territorial, more Islamic) nationalism.

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Sri Lanka: an electoral democracy with a majoritarian and centralised state

- **Democratic but majoritarian**: Sri Lanka has had regular elections since 1931, but state policy favoured the Sinhala-Buddhist majority (Sinhala Only Act 1956; Buddhism's "foremost place" in 1972 and 1978).
- **Executive presidency (1978)**: J.R. Jayewardene's Constitution created a powerful president. Later amendments went back and forth: the 18th Amendment (2010) increased presidential power, the 19th (2015) reduced it, the 20th (2020) increased it again, and the 21st (2022) partly reduced it.
- **Unitary state**: the 13th Amendment (1987, after the India–Sri Lanka Accord) created provincial councils, but devolution has never been fully implemented.
- **Civil war and its legacy (1983–2009)**: militarisation of the state, especially under the Rajapaksas; questions of war crimes and reconciliation.
- **Economic crisis and Aragalaya (2022)**: the economy collapsed, and mass protests forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee.
- **Political change (2024)**: **Anura Kumara Dissanayake** of the National People's Power (NPP) won the presidential election (September 2024), and the NPP won a two-thirds majority in Parliament (November 2024), ending the dominance of old political families. This shows the democratic resilience of the Sri Lankan state.

Nepal: from Hindu monarchy to secular federal republic

- **Monarchy to republic**: a Hindu kingdom for centuries; Panchayat system under the king (1960–90); multi-party constitutional monarchy (1990); Maoist insurgency (1996–2006); King Gyanendra's direct rule (2005–06); Jana Andolan II (2006); abolition of monarchy (2008).
- **2015 Constitution**: Nepal became a **secular, federal democratic republic** with seven provinces and a mixed electoral system. Madhesi groups protested that the provincial boundaries and citizenship rules excluded them, leading to the **2015 border**

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blockade and tension with India.

- **Instability**: frequent changes of government; Nepal has had more than ten prime ministers since 2008, mostly from the same few leaders (Koirala, Deuba, Prachanda, Oli).
- **Gen Z uprising (September 2025)**: youth-led anti-corruption protests, triggered partly by a social media ban, left more than 70 people dead and toppled the K.P. Sharma Oli government. Former Chief Justice **Sushila Karki** became the interim Prime Minister.
- **2026 election**: in the 5 March 2026 election, the **Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP)** won a landslide (182 of 275 seats), and **Balendra (Balen) Shah**, the former mayor of Kathmandu, became Prime Minister on 27 March 2026, defeating Oli in Oli's own constituency.
- **Nature**: a young federal republic, struggling with weak institutions, ethnic and regional inclusion (Madhesis, Janajatis, Dalits), and balancing between India and China.

Bhutan: monarchy-led democratisation and Gross National Happiness

- **Democracy from above**: unusually, democracy was introduced by the king, not by popular struggle. The fourth king, **Jigme Singye Wangchuck**, gave up powers and started constitutional reforms; the first Constitution and elections came in **2008** under the fifth king, **Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck**.
- **Constitutional monarchy**: the king remains head of state with real moral authority; an elected National Assembly and Prime Minister run the government.
- **Gross National Happiness (GNH)**: the state's official development philosophy, with four pillars (sustainable development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation and good governance).
- **Cultural nationalism**: the **"One Nation, One People"** policy and the national dress code (*Driglam Namzha*) in the 1980s led to the exit of about one lakh **Lhotshampas** in the early 1990s.
- **Close partnership with India**, especially in hydropower and security.

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Maldives: a small Islamic presidential republic

- **Long one-man rule**: President **Maumoon Abdul Gayoom** (1978–2008).
- **2008 Constitution**: multi-party democracy; **Mohamed Nasheed** became the first democratically elected president. He was forced out in 2012.
- **Islamic state**: Islam is the state religion, and only Muslims can be citizens.
- **Swings in foreign policy**: governments have swung between pro-India and pro-China positions (Abdulla Yameen pro-China; Ibrahim Solih “India First”; **Mohamed Muizzu**, elected 2023, with an “India Out” campaign but later improving ties).
- **Nature**: a small, unitary, strongly presidential state, highly sensitive to great-power competition in the Indian Ocean.

Afghanistan: a fragile and contested state

- **Weak central control**: historically a tribal and ethnic confederation (Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks) with weak central authority outside Kabul.
- **Repeated foreign intervention**: the British (19th century), the Soviet Union (1979–89), and the USA and NATO (2001–21).
- **Republic (2001–21)**: the 2004 Constitution created a presidential Islamic Republic, but it depended on foreign aid and troops and collapsed when the Taliban captured Kabul on **15 August 2021**.
- **Taliban’s Islamic Emirate (since 2021)**: a theocratic, highly centralised, all-male government; severe restrictions on women’s education and work; no constitution in force. Most countries do not recognise it formally; Russia became the first to do so in 2025.
- **Nature**: often described as a **“fragile”** or **“failed”** state, a source of refugees, drugs and terrorism, and an arena of great-power and regional rivalry (Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia, the USA).

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Civil-Military Relations

The role of the army is one of the clearest differences in the nature of South Asian states. All of them inherited parts of the same British Indian Army tradition, yet the results were very different.

Contrasting outcomes

- **India: civilian supremacy**. The army is firmly under elected leaders. Steps taken: the Commander-in-Chief post was abolished (1955), and the three service chiefs report to the civilian Defence Ministry. In 2019–20 the post of **Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)** was created, still under civilian control.
- **Pakistan: military supremacy**. The army is the strongest institution and the final decision-maker on key policies, whether in uniform or behind the scenes. In 2025 the 27th Amendment formally strengthened the Army Chief's position by making him Chief of Defence Forces.
- **Bangladesh: intermittent military role**. After coups in 1975 and 1982, democracy returned in 1991. The army backed the caretaker government in 2007–08 and played a key role in August 2024 by refusing to suppress the protesters and helping set up the interim government.
- **Sri Lanka: civilian control, but militarisation**: the army never took power, but it grew very large and politically influential during and after the civil war.
- **Nepal**: the army was traditionally the **Royal Nepal Army**, loyal to the king. After 2008 it became the Nepal Army under civilian control. The integration of Maoist combatants was a key part of the peace process.
- **Bhutan and Maldives**: small security forces under civilian or royal control.
- **Afghanistan**: the state's army collapsed in 2021; armed groups (now the Taliban) are the state.

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Why did India and Pakistan differ? (A favourite exam question)

1. **Inheritance at independence**: India inherited the established central government in Delhi; Pakistan had to build a new state quickly. The bureaucracy and army filled the gap.
2. **Nature of the nationalist party**: the Congress was a mass party with deep roots and internal democracy; the Muslim League was weak in the areas that became Pakistan and was dominated by landlords (Maya Tudor's argument).
3. **Leadership**: Nehru lived until 1964 and built institutions; Pakistan lost Jinnah (1948) and Liaquat (1951) early.
4. **Early Constitution**: India adopted its Constitution in 1950; Pakistan took nine years and its first Constitution soon failed.
5. **Security environment**: Pakistan felt insecure against a much larger India from the start (Kashmir war, division of assets). This gave the army a central place and large budgets.
6. **External support**: Cold War alliances (SEATO 1954, CENTO 1955) and US military aid strengthened the Pakistani army against civilian institutions.
7. **Social base of the army**: the Punjabi-dominated army identified with the state itself and saw politicians as corrupt and inefficient.

Concepts to use

- **Praetorian state** (Samuel Huntington, Amos Perlmutter): the army intervenes in politics because civilian institutions are weak.
- **Garrison state** (Harold Lasswell): a state organised around war preparation and run by "specialists in violence".
- **Military-bureaucratic oligarchy** (Hamza Alavi).
- **Milbus** (Ayesha Siddiqa): military capital used for the personal benefit of the officer class, outside normal accountability.
- **Hybrid regime**: a mix of elected civilian government and military control over key policy areas.

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Religion, Identity and the State

The relationship between religion and the state is a key part of the nature of South Asian states. Broadly, three models exist in the region.

Secular model: India and Nepal

- **India**: the state has no official religion, guarantees freedom of religion (Articles 25–28) and protects minority educational rights (Articles 29–30). Indian secularism is not a wall of separation like the USA's; the state can reform religious practices (abolition of untouchability, temple entry, Hindu Code Bills) and support all religions equally. Rajeev Bhargava calls this **"principled distance"**.
- Critics on one side argue it is "pseudo-secularism" that appeases minorities; critics on the other side (T.N. Madan, Ashis Nandy) argue that Western secularism does not suit a religious society. Today's debate is about **Hindu nationalism** (Hindutva) and whether it changes the secular nature of the state.
- **Nepal**: was the world's only official Hindu kingdom until 2006–08. The 2015 Constitution declared Nepal **secular**, but defined secularism as including the protection of "religion and culture handed down from ancient times"; some groups now demand the return of a Hindu state.

Islamic model: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Afghanistan

- **Pakistan**: Jinnah's speech of **11 August 1947** suggested a state where religion would be a personal matter. But the **Objectives Resolution (1949)**, the title "Islamic Republic" (1956), and Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation (1977–88) made Islam central to state identity. Blasphemy laws and the treatment of Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus raise human rights concerns.
- **Bangladesh**: began as a secular state (1972), but military rulers removed secularism and made Islam the state religion (1988). The **15th Amendment (2011)** restored secularism while keeping Islam as the state religion. After 2024, Islamist groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami gained more space (its alliance became the main opposition in 2026).

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- **Maldives**: the most strictly Islamic constitution in the region; citizenship is limited to Muslims.
- **Afghanistan**: under the Taliban, a theocratic Islamic Emirate based on its own interpretation of Sharia.

Buddhist-majoritarian model: Sri Lanka and Bhutan

- **Sri Lanka**: Buddhism has the "foremost place", and the state must protect and foster the Buddha Sasana. The Buddhist clergy (*Sangha*) has strong political influence. This **Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism** is central to the Tamil conflict.
- **Bhutan**: Buddhism is the "spiritual heritage"; the monastic body has an official role, though the Constitution keeps religion separate from politics (monks cannot vote or contest).

Identity politics and the state

- **Language**: language has been as powerful as religion. Urdu vs Bengali broke Pakistan; Sinhala vs Tamil caused civil war in Sri Lanka; India avoided this through linguistic states and the Three-Language Formula; Nepal struggles with Nepali vs Madhesi languages.
- **Ethnicity and region**: Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtun nationalism in Pakistan; Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka; Madhesi and Janajati movements in Nepal; tribal and Naga identity in north-east India; Chakma and hill people in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts.
- **Caste**: deeply influences politics in India and Nepal; India's reservations and Nepal's inclusion quotas are state responses.
- **Citizenship debates**: India's CAA 2019 and NRC in Assam, Bhutan's citizenship laws and Nepal's citizenship rules show that the question "who belongs to the nation?" is still open.

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Significance for IR

Because religious and ethnic communities spread across borders, the identity policies of one state affect its neighbours: the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan becomes an issue in India; the treatment of Muslims in India becomes an issue in Pakistan and Bangladesh; the Tamil issue links India and Sri Lanka; the Madhesi issue links India and Nepal. Identity politics thus **internationalises** domestic issues.

Centralisation, Federalism and Devolution

A basic tension in all South Asian states is between a **strong centre** (inherited from colonial rule and justified by fears of disintegration) and the **demands of regions and ethnic groups** for autonomy.

Why South Asian states are centralised

- **Colonial inheritance**: the Government of India Act 1935 created a strong centre with emergency powers; post-colonial constitutions kept it.
- **Trauma of Partition**: the fear of further division made leaders suspicious of strong regional autonomy.
- **Planned development**: centralised planning (India's Planning Commission, Pakistan's Planning Commission) concentrated economic power at the centre.
- **Security concerns**: wars, insurgencies and secessionist movements were used to justify central control.
- **Dominant-party or military rule**: concentrated power in a single leader, party or institution.

Country experiences

- **India**: a federation with a unitary bias (Articles 249, 356, 360; single citizenship; all-India services). Over time, the **States Reorganisation Act (1956)**, the **73rd and 74th Amendments (1992)** for panchayats and municipalities, the **GST (2017)** and the

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Finance Commission shaped centre-state relations. The **Sarkaria Commission (1988)** and **Punchhi Commission (2010)** recommended reforms. The abrogation of Article 370 (2019) and the conversion of Jammu and Kashmir into a Union Territory are debated as signs of centralisation.

- **Pakistan**: Punjab's dominance and the **One Unit Scheme (1955–70)**, which merged the western provinces into one unit to balance East Pakistan, created deep resentment. The **18th Amendment (2010)** devolved many subjects to the provinces and the **7th NFC Award (2009)** gave them a larger share of revenue. Some recent proposals seek to roll back this devolution.
- **Bangladesh**: a unitary state with weak local government; the hill tracts got limited autonomy under the **Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (1997)**.
- **Sri Lanka**: a unitary state. The **13th Amendment (1987)** created provincial councils, but powers over land and police were never fully devolved. Federalism is opposed by Sinhala nationalists as a step towards a Tamil state.
- **Nepal**: moved from a centralised kingdom to a **federal state with seven provinces (2015)**, with three levels of government (federal, provincial and local). Implementation has been slow, and provinces lack resources.
- **Bhutan and Maldives**: small unitary states with some local government.
- **Afghanistan**: the Taliban run a highly centralised system, though actual control in the provinces depends on local commanders.

Significance

Where states shared power with regions (India's linguistic federalism, Pakistan's 18th Amendment, Nepal's federalism), they have generally reduced separatist pressures. Where they refused (Pakistan before 1971, Sri Lanka), conflicts escalated into civil war or secession. As **Stepan, Linz and Yadav** argue, **federal and asymmetric arrangements** are key to holding together multinational states.

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Developmental and Political-Economy Character

The economic role of the state is a major part of its nature. South Asian states began as **interventionist developmental states** and gradually moved towards **market-friendly states**, while keeping a large welfare and regulatory role.

Phase I: State-led development (1950s–1970s)

- **India**: Nehru–Mahalanobis model; Five-Year Plans (from 1951); public sector in heavy industry ("commanding heights"); import substitution; licence-permit system (later called the **"licence raj"**); land reforms (partial); Green Revolution (late 1960s); bank nationalisation (1969); "Garibi Hatao" (1971).
- **Pakistan**: rapid growth under Ayub Khan's **"Decade of Development"** (1958–68) with US aid, but wealth concentrated in **"22 families"** (Mahbub ul Haq's famous 1968 claim). Z.A. Bhutto then nationalised industries and banks (1972–74).
- **Sri Lanka**: a strong **welfare state** (free education and health, food subsidies) from the colonial period, giving it the best human development record in South Asia.
- **Bangladesh**: began with socialism and nationalisation (1972).
- **Nepal and Bhutan**: dependent on foreign aid, especially from India.

Phase II: Liberalisation and market reforms (from 1977 onward)

- **Sri Lanka** was the first to liberalise (**1977**, under J.R. Jayewardene).
- **Pakistan** under Zia (1980s) and then IMF programmes (from 1988).
- **Bangladesh** from the 1980s; growth of the **ready-made garments** industry and microfinance (Grameen Bank).
- **India**: the **1991 reforms** (LPG: liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation) under P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh after a balance of payments crisis.
- **Nepal**: liberalisation after 1990.

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Present character

- **India**: a fast-growing economy with a strong regulatory and welfare state (direct benefit transfers, digital public infrastructure, Production Linked Incentives). Scholars debate whether India is a **“developmental state”** (like East Asia) or a **“regulatory state”**.
- **Pakistan**: a **rentier-security state** that has relied heavily on external support (USA during the Cold War and the “war on terror”, China’s CPEC, Gulf states, and repeated IMF bailouts); low tax collection, high defence spending.
- **Bangladesh**: an example of strong growth and social progress (the **“Bangladesh paradox”**: good human development despite weak governance), driven by garments, remittances and NGOs (BRAC). It is set to graduate from Least Developed Country status.
- **Sri Lanka**: high social indicators but a debt-driven economy; the **2022 sovereign default** led to an IMF programme.
- **Nepal**: dependent on **remittances** (about a quarter of GDP) and aid; weak industry.
- **Bhutan**: hydropower exports to India and the GNH model.
- **Maldives**: tourism and fisheries; high external debt, including to China.
- **Afghanistan**: aid-dependent economy that collapsed after 2021.

Significance for IR

- Economic weakness makes smaller states dependent on outside powers and international financial institutions, which affects their foreign policy (for example, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port lease to a Chinese company in 2017, and Pakistan’s dependence on China and the IMF).
- Low intra-regional trade (only about 5 per cent of South Asia’s total trade) shows that the economic nature of these states has not encouraged regional integration through SAARC or SAFTA.

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Security Character of South Asian States

South Asian states can be described as **“insecure states”**: they feel threatened both from outside and from within, and the two kinds of threat are closely linked.

Internal insecurity

- **Separatist and ethnic insurgencies**: Kashmir and the north-east (India); Balochistan and the tribal areas (Pakistan); the Tamil north and east (Sri Lanka, till 2009); the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh, till 1997).
- **Ideological insurgencies**: Maoist (Naxalite) movement in India; Maoist People’s War in Nepal (1996–2006); JVP uprisings in Sri Lanka (1971, 1987–89).
- **Religious extremism and terrorism**: Taliban and other groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan; Islamist militancy in Bangladesh (Holey Artisan attack, 2016); the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka (2019).
- **Legitimacy crises and mass uprisings**: Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), Nepal (2025).

External insecurity

- **India–Pakistan rivalry**: wars of 1947–48, 1965, 1971 and 1999; crises in 2001–02, 2016, 2019 and May 2025; both states are nuclear powers since 1998 (Unit III).
- **India–China rivalry**: the 1962 war, the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan clash (2020).
- **Smaller states’ fear of India**: leads them to seek ties with China, the USA or the Gulf (“balancing” or “hedging”).
- **Afghanistan**: a battleground for great powers and regional rivals.

The link between internal and external security

- Because of cross-border communities, an internal conflict in one state often draws in its neighbour: India in East Pakistan (1971) and Sri Lanka (1987–90); Pakistan in Kashmir

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and Afghanistan; allegations of foreign support for insurgents on all sides.

- **Ayoob**: for Third World states, the main security problem is **state-making itself**; external threats often exploit internal weaknesses.
- **Buzan**: weak states with low socio-political cohesion confuse **national security** with **regime security**.
- This is why many scholars argue that **structural realism** (Kenneth Waltz), which looks only at the distribution of power among states, cannot fully explain South Asian security (**Unit II**).

Conclusion

The nature of South Asian states is shaped by **three forces**: the **colonial inheritance** of a strong, centralised, bureaucratic state; the **plural and hierarchical society** over which that state rules; and the **insecure regional environment** created by Partition, disputed borders and great-power rivalry. From these common roots, different paths emerged: India built a federal, secular, democratic state-nation; Pakistan became a military-dominated hybrid state with an Islamic identity; Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have swung between democratic openings and authoritarian or majoritarian tendencies; Bhutan democratised from above; and Afghanistan remains a fragile, contested state.

The recent wave of youth-led uprisings and elections (Sri Lanka 2022–24, Bangladesh 2024–26, Nepal 2025–26) shows that South Asian states are still in the process of **state-building and nation-building**. Their internal nature directly shapes their foreign policies and regional relations. Therefore, understanding the nature of the state is the starting point for understanding the **international relations of South Asia**: its security dilemmas, ethnic conflicts, border problems, refugee flows and the challenge of regional cooperation.

Quick Revision: Thinkers and Concepts

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Concept	Thinker	Key work
Overdeveloped state; military-bureaucratic oligarchy	Hamza Alavi	“The State in Post-Colonial Societies” (1972)
Soft state	Gunnar Myrdal	*Asian Drama* (1968)
Strong societies, weak states	Joel Migdal	*Strong Societies and Weak States* (1988)
Weak-strong state; “third actor”	Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph	*In Pursuit of Lakshmi* (1987)
Congress System	Rajni Kothari	“The Congress System in India” (1964)
Dominant proprietary classes	Pranab Bardhan	*The Political Economy of Development in India* (1984)
Crisis of governability; fragmented-multiclass state	Atul Kohli	*Democracy and Discontent* (1990); *State-Directed Development* (2004)
Political society	Partha Chatterjee	*The Politics of the Governed* (2004)
Principled distance (secularism)	Rajeev Bhargava	*Secularism and Its Critics* (ed., 1998)
State-nation	Stepan, Linz and Yadav	*Crafting State-Nations* (2011)
Subaltern realism; late state-makers	Mohammed Ayoob	*The Third World Security Predicament* (1995)
Weak states; regime security	Barry Buzan	*People, States and Fear* (1983)
Political decay; praetorianism	Samuel Huntington	*Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968)
Garrison state	Harold Lasswell (applied by Ishtiaq Ahmed)	*The Pakistan Garrison State* (2013)
Milbus / Military Inc.	Ayesha Siddiqa	*Military Inc.* (2007)
Formal democracy vs formal authoritarianism	Ayesha Jalal	*Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (1995)
Class basis of democracy (India vs Pakistan)	Maya Tudor	*The Promise of Power* (2013)

One-line memory aids

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- **Federal states**: India, Pakistan, Nepal. **Constitutionally secular**: India, Nepal.
- **Islam as state religion**: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives (Afghanistan is theocratic). **Buddhism given a special place**: Sri Lanka, Bhutan.
- **Constitutions**: India 1950, Bangladesh 1972, Pakistan 1973, Sri Lanka 1978, Bhutan 2008, Maldives 2008, Nepal 2015.
- **Recent changes of power**: Sri Lanka (Anura Kumara Dissanayake, 2024); Bangladesh (Hasina ousted 2024; Tarique Rahman PM, February 2026); Nepal (Gen Z uprising 2025; Balen Shah PM, March 2026); Pakistan (27th Amendment, November 2025).

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

1. Discuss the nature of the post-colonial state in South Asia with reference to the views of Hamza Alavi and Ayesha Jalal.
2. “South Asian states are strong states with weak capacity.” Examine.
3. Why did India remain a democracy while Pakistan came under military rule?
4. Examine the relationship between religion and the state in South Asia.
5. Discuss the tension between centralisation and federalism in South Asian states.
6. How does the internal nature of South Asian states shape their external relations?
7. Analyse the recent political transitions in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. What do they reveal about the nature of the state in South Asia?
8. Explain the concept of the “security state” with reference to Pakistan.

Short-answer questions

1. Soft state
2. Garrison state
3. Hybrid regime

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4. State-nation
5. Principled distance
6. 18th Amendment of Pakistan
7. 13th Amendment of Sri Lanka
8. Gross National Happiness
9. Congress System
10. 27th Amendment of Pakistan

MCQs (UGC-NET / OPSC style)

1. *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* was written by:
   - (a) Husain Haqqani (b) Ayesha Siddiqa (c) Ayesha Jalal (d) Stephen P. Cohen
   - **Answer: (b)**

2. Who described the early Indian party system as the "Congress System"?
   - (a) Rajni Kothari (b) Atul Kohli (c) Paul Brass (d) Myron Weiner
   - **Answer: (a)**

3. Which South Asian country introduced an executive presidency in 1978?
   - (a) Bangladesh (b) Maldives (c) Sri Lanka (d) Pakistan
   - **Answer: (c)**

4. Which amendment devolved significant powers to the provinces in Pakistan in 2010?
   - (a) 8th (b) 13th (c) 18th (d) 27th
   - **Answer: (c)**

5. Which of the following states is constitutionally federal?
   - (a) Sri Lanka (b) Bangladesh (c) Nepal (d) Bhutan
   - **Answer: (c)**

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6. “Principled distance” as a model of secularism is associated with:
    - (a) T.N. Madan (b) Ashis Nandy (c) Rajeev Bhargava (d) Partha Chatterjee
    - **Answer: (c)**

7. Match the following:
    - A. Soft state – 1. Joel Migdal
    - B. Weak states in strong societies – 2. Gunnar Myrdal
    - C. Fragmented-multiclass state – 3. Mohammed Ayoob
    - D. Subaltern realism – 4. Atul Kohli
    - **Answer: A-2, B-1, C-4, D-3**

8. Assertion (A): Many South Asian states treat regime security as national security. Reason (R): They are weak states with low socio-political cohesion.
    - **Answer: Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A (Buzan’s argument).**

9. Which party won the Nepal general election of March 2026?
    - (a) Nepali Congress (b) CPN-UML (c) Rastriya Swatantra Party (d) CPN (Maoist Centre)
    - **Answer: (c)**

10. Under Pakistan’s 27th Amendment (2025), the Army Chief also holds the new post of:
    - (a) Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff (b) Chief of Defence Forces (c) Supreme Commander (d) Chief of Defence Staff
    - **Answer: (b)**

Suggested readings

- Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*.
- Hamza Alavi, “The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh”, *New Left Review* (1972).

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- Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia*.
- Paul Brass (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*.
- Philip Oldenburg, *India, Pakistan, and Democracy*.
- Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power*.
- Ayesha Siddiqa, *Military Inc.*
- Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament*.
- Stepan, Linz and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*.

Sources for recent developments

- Bangladesh 2026 election result (Dawn)
- Bangladesh's new PM sworn in (AP, via PBS)
- A New Generation Takes Power in Nepal (Carnegie Endowment)
- Balendra Shah sworn in as Nepal PM (Reuters, via Citizen Digital)
- Pakistan's 27th amendment (Chatham House)
- Pakistan dispatch on the 27th Amendment (JURIST)

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