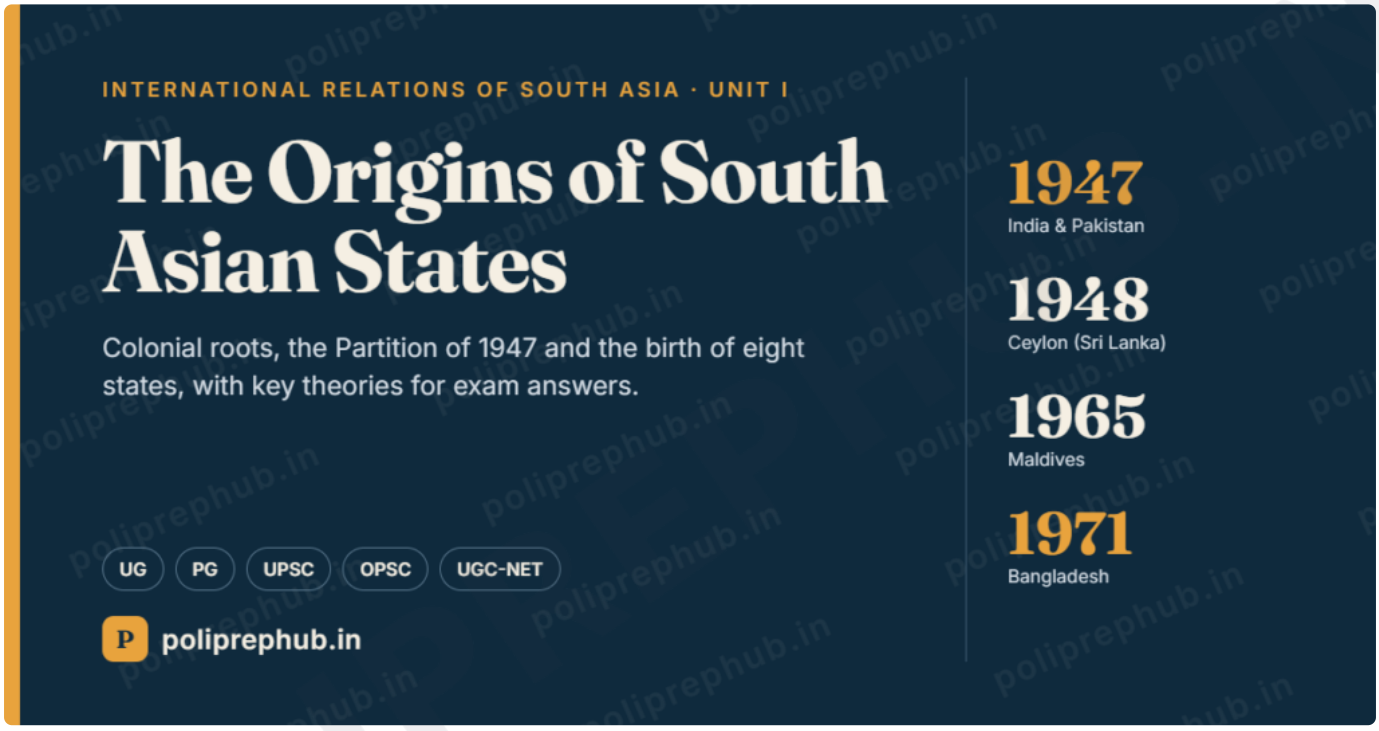
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTH ASIA

The Origins of South Asian States

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 17, 2026 • 34 min read



The modern states of South Asia are mostly **post-colonial states**. Almost all of them took their present shape between 1947 and 1971, largely out of the territory, institutions and laws of the British Indian Empire. To understand their origins, we must study three layers together: the **pre-colonial past**, the **colonial state** and the process of **decolonisation and Partition**. The way these states were born explains many of their present problems: border disputes, ethnic conflicts, refugee flows, weak democracy and the India–Pakistan rivalry.

Basic concepts: state, nation and post-colonial state

- **State**: Max Weber defined the state as a human community that successfully claims the **monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory**. The Montevideo Convention (1933) lists four elements of a state: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.
- **Nation**: a group of people who feel they share a common identity based on history, language, culture, religion or political ideals, and who want to govern themselves. A nation is a psychological and cultural idea; a state is a legal and political organisation.
- **Nation-state**: when the boundaries of the state and the nation broadly coincide (for example, Japan or France in the classical view).
- **Post-colonial state**: a state that emerged after the end of colonial rule. It usually inherits the boundaries and administrative machinery of the colonial state, but must now win legitimacy from its own people.

Meaning of “South Asia”

- The term **“South Asia”** became popular after the Second World War, mainly through American **“area studies”** programmes during the Cold War. Earlier, the region was usually called the **“Indian subcontinent”** or simply “India”. Many neighbours of India prefer “South Asia” because it is a neutral term that does not suggest Indian dominance.
- Today, South Asia normally means the eight member states of **SAARC** (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, founded at Dhaka on 8 December 1985): India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan. Afghanistan joined as the eighth member in 2007.
- Myanmar (Burma) was part of British India till 1937. It is usually treated as part of South-East Asia, but it is closely linked with South Asian history.
- Geographically, the region is bounded by the **Himalayas and the Hindu Kush** in the north, and the **Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal** in the south. These natural barriers gave the region a separate identity from Central Asia, China and South-

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East Asia.

- The region holds about **one-fourth of the world's population**, but has a large share of the world's poor.

Why study South Asia as a region?

1. **Shared history**: most of the region was ruled directly or indirectly by the British. Even the states that were never colonised (Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan) were shaped by British power.
2. **Shared culture**: common religions (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism), related languages, and similar caste and kinship structures spread across borders. Cultural regions like Punjab, Bengal and Kashmir are divided between states.
3. **India-centric structure**: India lies at the centre and shares borders with almost all other South Asian states (all except Afghanistan, if we exclude the disputed Pakistan-occupied territory, and Maldives and Sri Lanka, which are maritime neighbours). Most of the smaller states do not share a land border with each other. India alone has about three-fourths of the region's area, population and economy. This creates deep **asymmetry**, a key theme in South Asian IR.
4. **Common problems**: poverty, ethnic conflict, border disputes, cross-border migration, refugees, terrorism, climate change and nuclear rivalry.
5. **Interlinked security**: Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver describe South Asia as a **Regional Security Complex**, where the security of each state cannot be separated from the others, especially India and Pakistan.

Key idea for exams: "State before Nation"

In Western Europe, nations slowly formed over centuries, and states were built around them. In South Asia, generally **the state came before the nation**. The boundaries and institutions were drawn first (mostly by the colonial power, sometimes in a hurry), and the task of building a "nation" inside those boundaries came later. For example, Pakistan was created in 1947, but the question of whether its national identity was based on Islam, on

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Urdu, or on regional cultures remained unsettled, and the country broke up in 1971. This is why **state-building and nation-building remain unfinished projects** in South Asia, and why this topic is the foundation for the rest of the syllabus.

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Pre-colonial Background

South Asia had a long tradition of states, kingdoms and empires before the British came. But these were not **modern sovereign territorial states** of the Westphalian type (named after the Peace of Westphalia, 1648, which established the European idea of states with fixed borders and exclusive authority inside them).

Nature of pre-colonial polities

- **Rise and fall of empires**: large empires such as the Mauryas (4th–2nd century BCE), Guptas (4th–6th century CE), Cholas, the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals rose and fell. Even the biggest of them, the Mauryas under Ashoka and the Mughals under Aurangzeb, did not control the whole region permanently.
- **Frontiers, not borders**: a pre-colonial ruler had a frontier zone, not a precise line. Authority was strongest near the capital and became weaker towards the edges, where it overlapped with other rulers.
- **Layered or shared sovereignty**: a local raja, chieftain or zamindar paid tribute to a bigger emperor but ruled his own area in his own way. Loyalty was personal (to a ruler or dynasty), not to an abstract state.
- **Mandala and galactic polity**: Kautilya's *Arthashastra* describes the **mandala** theory of inter-state relations, a circle of friendly and hostile kingdoms around a central ruler ("the neighbour is the natural enemy, the neighbour's neighbour is a friend"). The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah used the term **"galactic polity"** for such systems, where smaller kingdoms revolve around a powerful centre like planets.
- **Segmentary state**: Burton Stein described the Chola state as a **"segmentary state"**, where the king had ritual supremacy over the whole area but real political control only in the core.
- **Local identities**: identity was mainly based on caste, region, language, sect, clan or village. There was no single "national" identity in the modern sense, although there was a

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broad sense of a shared civilisational space (often called Bharatavarsha or Hindustan).

- **Society stronger than the state**: village communities, caste panchayats and religious institutions handled many tasks locally. The state mainly collected revenue and kept order.

Roots of some present states

- **Nepal**: Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the small hill state of Gorkha, conquered the Kathmandu valley in 1768 and unified many small principalities. He called Nepal “a yam between two boulders” (China and British India), an idea that still guides Nepal’s foreign policy of balancing between its two big neighbours.
- **Bhutan**: unified in the 17th century by **Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal**, a Buddhist lama who came from Tibet in 1616. He created a dual system of religious and civil authority and built the famous *dzongs* (fortress-monasteries).
- **Sri Lanka**: had ancient Sinhalese kingdoms (Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, later Kotte and Kandy) and a Tamil kingdom in Jaffna. The Portuguese (1505) and the Dutch (1658) controlled coastal areas before the British. The memory of an ancient Sinhala-Buddhist kingdom later became central to Sri Lankan nationalism.
- **Maldives**: an independent Islamic sultanate from the 12th century (conversion to Islam in 1153). Its island and maritime character kept it separate from mainland politics.
- **Afghanistan**: the modern state traces its origin to **Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali)**, who was chosen as king by a Pashtun tribal assembly (*loya jirga*) in 1747. Afghanistan remained a tribal confederation rather than a centralised state.

Significance for the study of origins

The pre-colonial past gave South Asia a rich **cultural unity in diversity**, traditions of statecraft and memories that nationalists later used. But it did not give fixed borders or a modern centralised bureaucracy. Those came with colonial rule. Therefore, scholars often say that India and Pakistan are **“new states built on old civilisations”**. The present states also use pre-colonial history selectively to build national identity: Pakistan

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emphasises its Islamic and Indus heritage, Sri Lanka its Sinhala-Buddhist kingdoms, and India its civilisational continuity.

Colonial Roots of the Modern South Asian State

The British colonial state is the **direct parent** of most South Asian states. It gave them their borders, bureaucracy, army, police, legal system and even the basic structure of their constitutions. It also changed how people saw their own identities. That is why scholars say South Asian states were **“made” by colonialism**, even though they were imagined and claimed by nationalists.

Growth of British power

- The **East India Company** received its royal charter in 1600 and came to India as a trading company.
- The **Battle of Plassey (1757)** and the **Battle of Buxar (1764)** made the Company the real ruler of Bengal. With the grant of the *Diwani* (revenue rights) of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha in 1765, a trading company became a territorial power.
- Through wars (Anglo-Mysore, Anglo-Maratha, Anglo-Sikh) and policies like **Subsidiary Alliance** (Lord Wellesley) and the **Doctrine of Lapse** (Lord Dalhousie), the Company expanded across the subcontinent by the 1850s.
- After the **Revolt of 1857**, the **Government of India Act 1858** transferred power from the Company to the British Crown. The Governor-General became the **Viceroy**, and a Secretary of State for India was appointed in London.

What the colonial state created

1. **Centralised administration**: a powerful bureaucracy led by the **Indian Civil Service (ICS)**, often called the “steel frame” of British rule. The district collector became the key figure of local administration. Independent India and Pakistan kept this structure (the ICS became the IAS in India and the CSP in Pakistan).

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2. **A modern army**: the British Indian Army was a professional, centrally controlled force recruited mainly from the so-called **“martial races”** (Punjabis, Pathans, Gurkhas and others). In 1947 it was divided between India and Pakistan. The heavy recruitment from Punjab later gave Pakistan a strong Punjabi-dominated army.
3. **Uniform law and courts**: codified laws like the **Indian Penal Code (1860)**, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Evidence Act created a single legal system for the whole territory. These laws still form the base of legal systems in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (India replaced them with new codes only in 2023–24).
4. **Fixed territorial boundaries**: for strategic reasons, the British converted vague frontiers into hard lines on the map:
    - **Durand Line** (1893), agreed between Sir Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, between British India and Afghanistan. It divided the Pashtun tribes and is now the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, which Afghanistan has never formally accepted.
    - **McMahon Line** (1914, Simla Convention), between British India and Tibet, drawn by Sir Henry McMahon. China never accepted it, and it became the main cause of the India–China border dispute and the 1962 war.
    - **Radcliffe Line** (1947), dividing India and Pakistan in Punjab and Bengal.
5. **Census and classification**: the colonial census (first all-India census 1871–72; first synchronous census 1881) counted people by religion, caste and language and ranked castes. As scholars like **Bernard Cohn** and **Nicholas Dirks** argue, this made fluid identities more **rigid, countable and political**. Religion and caste became the basis of political demands.
6. **Divide and rule**: the Partition of Bengal (1905) and **separate electorates for Muslims under the Morley–Minto Reforms (1909)**, later extended in 1919 and 1935, encouraged politics along religious lines. This prepared the ground for the two-nation theory.
7. **Constitutional framework**: the **Government of India Act 1935** introduced provincial autonomy and a federal plan. It became the base of the constitutions of India (about 250

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articles were drawn from it) and was used as Pakistan's interim constitution until 1956. Its features included a strong centre, emergency powers and the Governor's discretion.

8. **Colonial economy**: railways, ports and canals were built mainly for trade and control. Regions like Punjab and Bengal were tied into a single economy. Partition later broke these economic links (for example, jute grown in East Bengal but mills in Calcutta).

Different colonial relationships

Territory	Colonial status	Key treaty or date
British India	Direct rule through provinces	Crown rule from 1858
Princely states (about 565)	Indirect rule under British "paramountcy"	Subsidiary alliances and treaties
Ceylon (Sri Lanka)	Separate Crown colony, not part of British India	Crown colony from 1802; Kandy annexed 1815
Nepal	Independent buffer state under British influence	Treaty of Sugauli (1816); Treaty of 1923
Bhutan	Buffer state; foreign affairs guided by Britain	Treaty of Sinchula (1865); Treaty of Punakha (1910)
Afghanistan	Buffer state between the British and Russian empires	Treaty of Gandamak (1879); independence 1919
Maldives	British protectorate	1887
Burma	Part of British India, later separated	Separated on 1 April 1937

Buffer states and the "Great Game"

In the 19th century, Britain and Tsarist Russia competed for influence in Central Asia. This rivalry is called the **"Great Game"**. To protect British India, the British kept Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan (and also Tibet) as **buffer states**: they were not annexed, but their foreign relations were controlled or guided by Britain. Independent India inherited this **"Himalayan frontier policy"**. Nehru's treaties with Bhutan (1949) and Nepal (1950)

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continued the idea that these states fall within India's security zone. This is one reason why smaller neighbours often see India as a successor to the British Raj.

Legacy of the colonial state

- The colonial state was **strong, centralised, bureaucratic and distant** from the people. It was built to control, not to represent.
- Post-colonial states inherited this structure. In **India**, it was placed under parliamentary democracy and an elected leadership, and the Congress party gave it legitimacy. In **Pakistan and Bangladesh**, the bureaucracy and the army became more powerful than elected politicians.
- The colonial state also left behind **unresolved borders**, **divided communities** and **politicised religious and caste identities**, which became the raw material of later conflicts.

Decolonisation and the Partition of 1947

The single most important event in the origin of South Asian states is the **Partition of British India in August 1947**, which created two dominions, India and Pakistan. Partition decided the territory, population and identity of both states, and its effects still dominate South Asian international relations.

Indian nationalism and the idea of a united India

- The **Indian National Congress** (founded 1885) claimed to represent all Indians, irrespective of religion. Under Gandhi, it became a mass movement (Non-Cooperation 1920–22, Civil Disobedience 1930–34, Quit India 1942).
- Congress leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad and Patel believed in a **composite, territorial nationalism**: India was one nation with many religions.
- But the Congress could not fully win the confidence of the Muslim elite, especially after the formation of Congress ministries in 1937.

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Growth of Muslim separatism and the two-nation theory

- **Sir Syed Ahmad Khan** (founder of the Aligarh Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, 1875) argued that Hindus and Muslims had separate interests and that Muslims should stay away from the Congress.
- The **All-India Muslim League** was founded at Dhaka in 1906 to protect Muslim political interests.
- **Muhammad Iqbal**, in his presidential address to the Muslim League at Allahabad (1930), proposed a consolidated Muslim state in north-west India.
- **Choudhry Rahmat Ali**, a student at Cambridge, coined the name **“Pakstan”** in his pamphlet *Now or Never* (1933), from Punjab, Afghania (NWFP), Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan.
- In the **1937 provincial elections**, the Muslim League performed poorly, and the Congress refused to form coalition governments with it in the United Provinces. This convinced Jinnah that Muslims would be a permanent minority in a Congress-ruled India.
- **Lahore Resolution (23 March 1940)**: the Muslim League under **Muhammad Ali Jinnah** declared that Muslims were a separate nation and demanded independent states for the Muslim-majority areas in the north-west and east. It is called the **Pakistan Resolution**. Note that it spoke of “states” in the plural, which later became an argument in East Pakistan.
- **Two-nation theory**: Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations with different religions, customs, literature and history; therefore they cannot live together in one state.

Road to Partition

1. **Cripps Mission (1942)**: offered dominion status after the war, with the right of provinces to stay out of the Indian Union. This indirectly accepted the possibility of Pakistan. Both Congress and League rejected it.
2. **C. Rajagopalachari Formula (1944)** and **Gandhi–Jinnah talks (1944)**: failed attempts at compromise.

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3. **Simla Conference (1945)**: failed because Jinnah insisted that only the League could nominate Muslim members.
4. **Elections of 1945–46**: the League won almost all Muslim seats, strengthening its claim to be the sole voice of Muslims.
5. **Cabinet Mission Plan (1946)**: proposed a weak centre (defence, foreign affairs, communications) with groups of provinces. Both sides first accepted it, but disagreement on grouping led to its failure.
6. **Direct Action Day (16 August 1946)**: called by the Muslim League; it led to the Great Calcutta Killings, followed by riots in Noakhali, Bihar and Punjab.
7. **Attlee's announcement (20 February 1947)**: Britain would leave India by June 1948.
8. **Mountbatten Plan (3 June 1947)**: accepted Partition; provinces of Punjab and Bengal would be divided; referendums in NWFP and Sylhet.
9. **Indian Independence Act 1947** (royal assent 18 July 1947): created two independent dominions.
10. Pakistan became independent on **14 August 1947** and India on **15 August 1947**.

Causes of Partition: a brief analysis

- **Colonial policies** of separate electorates and divide and rule.
- **Communal politics** and the growth of the two-nation theory.
- **Failure of Congress–League negotiations**, and mutual distrust.
- **Britain's hurry to leave** after the Second World War, as it was economically weak.
- **Communal violence** of 1946–47, which made Partition seem the only way to avoid civil war.
- Historians differ: Ayesha Jalal argues Jinnah wanted a strong Muslim share of power in a loose federation, not necessarily a separate state; others give more blame to Congress's refusal to share power or to British policy.

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The Radcliffe Line

- Sir **Cyril Radcliffe**, a British lawyer who had never visited India before, chaired two Boundary Commissions, one for **Punjab** and one for **Bengal**.
- He had only about **five weeks** and used outdated maps and census data. Criteria were “contiguous majority areas” of Muslims and non-Muslims, along with “other factors”.
- The award was made public on **17 August 1947**, two days after independence. So, on independence day, millions did not know which country they belonged to.
- The line cut through villages, farms, rivers, canals and railways. Controversial awards, such as giving parts of Gurdaspur district to India (which gave India road access to Kashmir), became a source of grievance in Pakistan. In the east, it left enclaves (*chhitmahals*) between India and Bangladesh, which were exchanged only in 2015 through the Land Boundary Agreement.
- It created the problem of **porous and disputed borders**, studied in Unit IV.

Human cost

- About **10–20 million** people crossed the new borders, one of the largest migrations in human history.
- Deaths are estimated between **two lakh and twenty lakh**; a figure of about 10 lakh is often used.
- Tens of thousands of women were abducted, raped or forced into marriage. Both governments later ran recovery programmes.
- Refugee rehabilitation (in Delhi, Punjab, West Bengal, Assam, Sindh and Karachi) became the first big task of both new states.

Integration of princely states

- About **565 princely states** were technically free when British paramountcy ended. They were advised to join India or Pakistan through an **Instrument of Accession** (covering defence, foreign affairs and communications), taking into account geography and the

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wishes of the people.

- **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel** (Minister of States) and **V.P. Menon** (Secretary) persuaded almost all states to join India peacefully, followed by **Merger Agreements** and the payment of privy purses.
- Three difficult cases:
  - **Junagadh**: a Hindu-majority state with a Muslim Nawab who acceded to Pakistan. After popular protest, India took control, and a plebiscite in February 1948 favoured India.
  - **Hyderabad**: the Nizam wanted independence; the Razakars spread violence. India integrated it through police action, **Operation Polo** (September 1948).
  - **Jammu and Kashmir**: a Muslim-majority state with a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh. After a tribal invasion supported by Pakistan, he signed the Instrument of Accession on **26 October 1947**. India took the matter to the UN on 1 January 1948. This led to the first India–Pakistan war (1947–48), the ceasefire line (later the Line of Control) and the **Kashmir dispute**.
- Pakistan integrated states such as Bahawalpur, Kalat (Balochistan, 1948, under pressure), Chitral and Swat.

Legacies of Partition for South Asian IR

- **Permanent hostility** and mistrust between India and Pakistan, often called an "enduring rivalry".
- The **Kashmir dispute** and wars of 1947–48, 1965, 1971 and 1999 (Kargil).
- **River water sharing**: Punjab's canal system was divided; this was partly settled by the **Indus Waters Treaty (1960)**, mediated by the World Bank.
- **Refugees, minorities and evacuee property**: the **Nehru–Liaquat Pact (1950)** tried to protect minorities in both countries.

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- **Identity politics**: Pakistan's identity was built partly in opposition to India; India's secular identity was built partly in contrast to Pakistan's religious basis.
- **Security dilemma**: the asymmetry in size pushed Pakistan to seek alliances with the USA (SEATO, CENTO) and China, bringing the Cold War into South Asia.
- **A divided Pakistan**: the two wings created by Partition later separated in 1971.

Origins of Each South Asian State

South Asian states were born in **three different ways**: (a) through **Partition** (India, Pakistan), (b) through **peaceful transfer of power** (Sri Lanka, Maldives), and (c) through a **liberation war** (Bangladesh). Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan were **never formally colonised**, but their modern form was shaped by British influence as buffer states. The mode of birth strongly affected the later political path of each state.

State	Mode of origin	Key date	Later milestone
India	Partition and transfer of power	15 Aug 1947	Republic, 26 Jan 1950
Pakistan	Partition (two-nation theory)	14 Aug 1947	Islamic Republic, 23 Mar 1956
Sri Lanka	Peaceful transfer (Dominion of Ceylon)	4 Feb 1948	Republic and renamed Sri Lanka, 22 May 1972
Bangladesh	Liberation war from Pakistan	26 Mar 1971 (declared); 16 Dec 1971 (victory)	Constitution, 1972
Maldives	End of British protection	26 Jul 1965	Republic, 11 Nov 1968
Nepal	Never colonised; buffer state	Unified 1768	Republic, 28 May 2008; federal Constitution 2015
Bhutan	Never colonised; buffer state	Wangchuck monarchy, 17 Dec 1907	Constitutional monarchy, 2008

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Afghanistan	Never colonised; buffer state	Durrani state 1747; independence 19 Aug 1919	Joined SAARC 2007

India

- **Birth**: India became an independent dominion on 15 August 1947, with Lord Mountbatten as Governor-General and Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister. The Constituent Assembly (first met 9 December 1946) framed the Constitution, and India became a **sovereign democratic republic** on 26 January 1950.
- **Successor state**: India was treated as the legal **successor of British India**. It kept the capital (Delhi), most of the bureaucracy, the larger part of the army and assets, and British India's international personality, including its membership of the United Nations. Pakistan had to apply as a new member.
- **Choices made at birth**: India chose **parliamentary democracy, universal adult franchise, secularism and federalism with a strong centre**. These were responses to its huge diversity of religion, language, caste and region, and to the fear of further division after Partition.
- **Nation-building measures**: integration of princely states; **States Reorganisation Act (1956)** on a linguistic basis, which reduced regional discontent; the Three-Language Formula; planned economic development (Planning Commission, 1950); and a policy of **non-alignment** in foreign affairs.
- **Challenges at origin**: refugees, communal violence, the Kashmir war, food shortage, and secessionist demands in the north-east (Nagas) and later Punjab and Kashmir.
- **Why democracy survived in India**: a well-organised nationalist party (Congress) with mass support, a leadership committed to democracy, an early Constitution (by 1950), civilian control over the army, and inheritance of the colonial centre's institutions.

Pakistan

- **Birth**: Pakistan was born on 14 August 1947 on the basis of the **two-nation theory**, as a homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Jinnah became the first Governor-General

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and Liaquat Ali Khan the first Prime Minister.

- **A new state built from scratch**: it had to create a new capital (Karachi; later Islamabad), a central secretariat, a central bank and armed forces, often with very few resources. Disputes with India over the division of assets made this harder.
- **Geography**: two wings, **West and East Pakistan, about 1,600 km apart**, separated by Indian territory. East Pakistan had more than half the population, but power was concentrated in West Pakistan.
- **Early deaths of leaders**: Jinnah died in September 1948 and Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in 1951. This left a leadership vacuum.
- **Constitutional delay**: the **Objectives Resolution (1949)** declared that sovereignty belongs to Allah. Pakistan took nine years to frame its first Constitution (1956), which was abrogated in 1958 when **Ayub Khan** imposed martial law.
- **Problems from birth**: the role of Islam in the state; the **language question** (Urdu versus Bengali); domination of Punjabis and Muhajirs (migrants from India) in the army and bureaucracy; weak political parties (the Muslim League had little organisation in the areas that became Pakistan); and insecurity towards India. As Hamza Alavi argued, the **military-bureaucratic oligarchy** became the real centre of power.

Bangladesh

- **Background**: East Pakistan (East Bengal) had about 55 per cent of Pakistan’s population, but felt **economically exploited** (jute earnings used to develop West Pakistan) and **politically excluded** (few Bengalis in the army and civil service).
- **Language Movement (21 February 1952)**: students in Dhaka protested against Urdu as the only state language; several were killed in police firing. Bengali was accepted as a state language in 1956. UNESCO declared 21 February as **International Mother Language Day** in 1999.
- **Six-Point Programme (1966)** of **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman** and the Awami League demanded a federation with only defence and foreign affairs at the centre, separate

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currencies or accounts, and regional control over taxation and foreign exchange.

- **Agartala Conspiracy Case (1968)** against Mujib made him a hero in East Pakistan.
- **Elections of December 1970**: the Awami League won almost all East Pakistan seats and an **absolute majority** in the National Assembly. But President Yahya Khan and Z.A. Bhutto (Pakistan People's Party) refused to transfer power.
- **Operation Searchlight** (25 March 1971): a brutal military crackdown in East Pakistan. Mujib was arrested; independence was declared on **26 March 1971**, and a government-in-exile (Mujibnagar government) was formed.
- **Refugee crisis**: about **one crore refugees** fled to India, creating a huge economic and humanitarian burden for India.
- **India's role**: India signed the **Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation (August 1971)**, supported the Mukti Bahini, and entered the war in December 1971. About 93,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered in Dhaka on **16 December 1971** (Vijay Diwas in India, Bijoy Dibos in Bangladesh). The **Simla Agreement (1972)** followed between India and Pakistan.
- **Founding principles**: the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh was based on **nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism**. Later military rulers (Ziaur Rahman, H.M. Ershad) added Islamic elements.
- **Significance**: Bangladesh is the first successful secessionist state in post-colonial South Asia. It showed that **language and ethnic identity** can be stronger than religion, and many scholars see it as a challenge to the two-nation theory. Pakistanis, however, argue that it was caused by political mismanagement and Indian intervention, not by the failure of the theory itself.

Sri Lanka

- **Birth**: Ceylon gained independence peacefully as the **Dominion of Ceylon on 4 February 1948**, under the **Soulbury Constitution**, without a mass freedom struggle like India's. D.S. Senanayake became the first Prime Minister.

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- Ceylon was considered a “model colony” with high literacy, universal adult franchise from **1931** (Donoughmore Constitution, one of the earliest in Asia) and a good welfare record.
- **Majoritarian nation-building**: soon after independence, the **Ceylon Citizenship Act (1948)** made most Indian Tamil plantation workers stateless. The **Sinhala Only Act (1956)** under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike made Sinhala the only official language. The 1972 Republican Constitution gave Buddhism the “foremost place” and renamed the country Sri Lanka.
- **Consequences**: Tamil alienation grew; the Vaddukoddai Resolution (1976) demanded a separate Tamil state (Eelam). Ethnic riots in July 1983 started the **civil war (1983–2009)** with the LTTE. India was drawn in through the **India–Sri Lanka Accord (1987)** and the IPKF.
- **Lesson**: a peaceful transfer of power did not guarantee peaceful nation-building. A nation-state model based on one language and religion created conflict in a plural society.

Nepal

- **Never colonised**: unified by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768. After the **Anglo-Nepal War (1814–16)**, the **Treaty of Sugauli (1816)** made Nepal give up large territories (including Kumaon, Garhwal and parts of the Terai) and accept a British resident.
- Nepal helped the British in the 1857 revolt and supplied Gurkha soldiers. Britain formally recognised Nepal’s independence by the **Treaty of 1923**.
- **Rana rule (1846–1951)**: after the Kot massacre (1846), Jung Bahadur Rana established hereditary rule by Rana prime ministers, reducing the king to a figurehead. Nepal remained isolated and feudal.
- **1951 revolution**: the Nepali Congress and King Tribhuvan, with Indian support (the “Delhi compromise”), ended Rana rule.
- **India–Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship (July 1950)**: open border, national treatment for each other’s citizens, and security consultation. It still shapes relations, and

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many in Nepal see it as unequal.

- **Political journey**: brief democracy (1959 elections), then King Mahendra's partyless **Panchayat system (1960–90)**, the people's movement of 1990 (constitutional monarchy), the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), the people's movement of 2006, abolition of monarchy and declaration of a **federal democratic republic** on **28 May 2008**, and a new Constitution on 20 September 2015.
- **Identity issue**: tension between the hill elite and the **Madhesis** of the Terai (with close links to India) shapes Nepal's state-building and its relations with India.

Bhutan

- **Never colonised**: after the Duar War, the **Treaty of Sinchula (1865)** made Bhutan cede the Duars to Britain for an annual payment. Under the **Treaty of Punakha (1910)**, Britain agreed not to interfere in internal affairs, and Bhutan agreed to be guided by Britain in external relations.
- **Wangchuck monarchy**: **Ugyen Wangchuck** was elected as the first hereditary king on 17 December 1907 (now Bhutan's National Day).
- **India–Bhutan Treaty of Friendship (8 August 1949)**: Article 2 said Bhutan would be "guided by" India in external affairs. This was revised in **2007**, giving Bhutan more freedom in foreign policy while keeping close cooperation.
- Bhutan joined the UN in 1971 with Indian support.
- **Democratisation from above**: the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, introduced reforms and the idea of **Gross National Happiness**. Bhutan became a **constitutional monarchy** with its first Constitution and elections in 2008.
- **Identity issue**: the "One Nation, One People" policy (1980s) and citizenship laws led to the exit of about one lakh **Lhotshampas** (Nepali-speaking Bhutanese) to camps in Nepal in the early 1990s, a refugee issue studied in Unit IV.

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Maldives

- An old Islamic sultanate. It became a **British protectorate in 1887**: Britain controlled foreign affairs and defence, but the sultan ruled internally.
- It became fully independent on **26 July 1965** and a republic on 11 November 1968.
- India helped the government against a coup attempt in 1988 (**Operation Cactus**). Its small size and strategic location in the Indian Ocean make it important in India–China competition.

Afghanistan

- The modern state began with **Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747)**. In the 19th century, it became a **buffer state** between British India and Russia in the Great Game.
- **Anglo-Afghan Wars**: the First (1839–42) ended in British defeat; after the Second (1878–80), the **Treaty of Gandamak (1879)** gave Britain control over Afghan foreign affairs. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan accepted the **Durand Line (1893)**.
- After the **Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919)** and the **Treaty of Rawalpindi**, Afghanistan gained full independence, including control of its foreign affairs (Independence Day, 19 August).
- Afghanistan was the **only country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the UN in 1947**, because of the Durand Line and the **"Pashtunistan"** issue. This dispute continues.
- Its later history (Soviet invasion 1979, civil war, Taliban rule 1996–2001 and again from August 2021) has made it a centre of extremism and great-power rivalry. It joined SAARC in 2007, making it the eighth member.

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Theoretical Perspectives on the Origin of the Post-colonial State

In PG, UGC-NET and UPSC answers, examiners expect you to go beyond facts and explain **why** South Asian states took the shape they did. The following thinkers and approaches are the most useful. Quote one or two of them in every long answer.

Hamza Alavi: the “overdeveloped” post-colonial state

- **Work**: “The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh”, *New Left Review* (1972). Alavi was a Pakistani Marxist sociologist.
- **Argument**: the colonial power built a state apparatus (bureaucracy, army, police) strong enough to control **the whole colonised society**, including all its native classes. So, at independence, this apparatus was **“overdeveloped”** in relation to the weak and divided local social classes.
- **Relative autonomy**: in classical Marxism, the state is an instrument of one dominant class. Alavi said the post-colonial state is **relatively autonomous**, because no single class controls it. It **mediates between three propertied classes**: the metropolitan (foreign) bourgeoisie, the indigenous (national) bourgeoisie and the landed classes.
- **Military-bureaucratic oligarchy**: the real holders of state power are the senior civil servants and army officers, who inherited the colonial machinery.
- **Application**: explains the dominance of the army and civil service in Pakistan (military rule in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999) and also in Bangladesh after 1975.
- **Criticism**: it explains Pakistan well but not India, where elected leaders controlled the bureaucracy; it also gives less importance to ideology, religion and ethnicity.

Ayesha Jalal: common colonial inheritance

- ***The Sole Spokesman* (1985)**: Jinnah used the Pakistan demand partly as a **bargaining counter** to win an equal share of power for Muslims in a united, loose Indian federation. Partition and a “moth-eaten” Pakistan were not what he fully wanted.

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- ***Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (1995)**: India's **"formal democracy"** and Pakistan's and Bangladesh's **"formal authoritarianism"** look very different, but both share a **centralised state** inherited from colonial rule. In both, the non-elected institutions (bureaucracy, army, police) are powerful, and the centre dominates the regions. The difference between them is **one of degree, not of kind**.
- With Sugata Bose, she wrote ***Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (1998)**, a standard textbook for this paper.

Partha Chatterjee: nationalism and the post-colonial state

- ***Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986)**: Indian nationalism challenged colonial rule but accepted the Western idea of the modern, rational, centralised state. So the post-colonial state continued many colonial practices.
- ***The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993)**: nationalists first claimed sovereignty in the **"inner" or spiritual domain** (religion, family, language, culture), while the **"outer" or material domain** (economy, law, technology, statecraft) was under colonial control. Later, they captured the outer domain, that is, the state.
- His later idea of **"political society"** (*The Politics of the Governed*, 2004) explains how the poor deal with the state through negotiation rather than formal rights.

Gunnar Myrdal: the "soft state"

- **Work**: *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (1968). Myrdal was a Swedish economist and Nobel laureate.
- **Argument**: South Asian states are **"soft states"**. They make good laws and plans, but cannot enforce them because of weak social discipline, corruption, and the influence of powerful landlords and elites.
- **Relevance**: explains the gap between policy and implementation in South Asia.

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Joel Migdal: strong societies and weak states

- **Work**: *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (1988).
- **Argument**: Third World states look strong on paper, but **local strongmen** (landlords, clan leaders, religious leaders) control society. The state has low capacity to penetrate society, extract resources and regulate behaviour.
- **Relevance**: explains why South Asian states struggle to govern their peripheries, such as the tribal areas of Pakistan or the hill areas of the north-east.

Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph: the “weak-strong” state

- **Work**: *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (1987).
- **Argument**: the Indian state is **both weak and strong**. It is strong in some areas (economy, security) and weak in others (enforcing reforms against social interests). It acts as a **“third actor”** between capital and labour, which are both weak in India.

Charles Tilly and Mohammed Ayoob: state-making and insecurity

- **Charles Tilly**: in Europe, “**war made the state, and the state made war**“. European states were built over several centuries through war, tax collection and the suppression of rival powers.
- **Mohammed Ayoob**, in *The Third World Security Predicament* (1995), applies this to the Third World. South Asian states are **“late state-makers”**. They must complete state-making quickly, within borders fixed by colonial powers, under international norms that do not allow border changes, and while also meeting democratic and welfare demands.
- As a result, their main threats are often **internal** (ethnic revolts, insurgencies, legitimacy crises), not external. Internal and external security get mixed. Ayoob calls his approach **“subaltern realism”**. This links directly to **Unit II** (Limits of Structural Realism and South Asian Security).

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Nation-state versus State-nation

- A **nation-state** assumes one people, one language and culture, one state. It tries to make the population culturally similar (the French model).
- **Alfred Stepan, Juan Linz and Yogendra Yadav**, in ***Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies*** **(2011)**, argue that **India is a "state-nation"** : it creates loyalty to a common state while recognising and protecting many cultural nations within it.
- Key tools of the state-nation model: **federalism**, linguistic states, **asymmetric federal arrangements** (special provisions for some states), recognition of many languages, and **"nested" or multiple identities** (one can be both Tamil and Indian).
- **Comparison**: Sri Lanka (Sinhala Only) and Pakistan (Urdu and a narrow Islamic identity) tried the nation-state model in a diverse society. This led to the Tamil civil war and the breakup of Pakistan.

Other useful approaches

- **Benedict Anderson**: nations are **"imagined communities"** (1983). The idea of India or Pakistan was imagined by educated elites through print, schools and political movements before it became a state.
- **Modernisation theory** (Gabriel Almond, Lucian Pye, Samuel Huntington): new states would gradually become modern, democratic and industrial like the West. Huntington warned that rapid political participation without strong institutions leads to instability. Critics say this theory ignores the colonial legacy.
- **Dependency and Marxist views** (Andre Gunder Frank and others): independence was political, but economic dependence on the West continued. The new ruling elites served this dependent system.
- **Subaltern Studies** (Ranajit Guha, from 1982): the history of nationalism and state formation was written mostly from the viewpoint of elites. Subaltern historians studied peasants, tribals and workers, and showed that the new states represented elite interests

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more than the masses.

- **Post-colonial theory** (Edward Said's *Orientalism*, 1978): colonial knowledge about the East shaped how the colonised saw themselves, including their religious and caste identities.

Nature and Common Features of South Asian States

Because of their common origin, South Asian states share some basic features. These features explain most of the problems studied in the later units.

Colonial legacy

Borders, bureaucracy, army, police, laws and even constitutional structures are largely inherited from British rule. The "steel frame" of administration continued after 1947 with new names. This gave the new states administrative continuity, but also a habit of top-down, control-oriented governance.

Artificial and disputed borders

Lines such as the Durand, McMahon and Radcliffe Lines were drawn for imperial convenience. They divided ethnic communities, rivers and trade routes. This is the root of the Kashmir dispute, the India–China border dispute, the Pakistan–Afghanistan dispute, India–Nepal disputes (Kalapani, Lipulekh, Susta) and the **porous borders** that allow migration, smuggling and militancy.

"State before nation"

States were created first; building a common national identity came later and is still incomplete. Each state had to answer basic questions: Who belongs to the nation? Which language and religion get official status? How much autonomy should regions have? Different answers led to different outcomes.

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Cross-border ethnic communities

The same groups live across borders: Punjabis (India–Pakistan), Bengalis (India–Bangladesh), Pashtuns and Baloch (Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran), Tamils (India–Sri Lanka), Madhesis (India–Nepal) and Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas (Bhutan–Nepal–India). Therefore, **domestic ethnic issues quickly become inter-state issues**. For example, the Tamil question shaped India–Sri Lanka relations, and the Madhesi question shaped India–Nepal relations (the 2015 border blockade).

Multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies

Every South Asian state is plural. Where the state accommodated diversity (India's linguistic states), tensions were reduced. Where the state favoured one group (Urdu in Pakistan, Sinhala in Sri Lanka, "One Nation, One People" in Bhutan), conflict and even state breakup followed.

Strong centralised state with weak capacity

The state looks powerful and centralised (Alavi's "overdeveloped" state) but often fails to deliver basic services, collect taxes or govern its periphery (Myrdal's "soft state", Migdal's "weak state"). This gap creates frustration, insurgency and a crisis of governance (Unit IV).

Civil-military imbalance and regime variety

South Asia has seen almost every kind of regime: stable democracy (India), repeated military rule (Pakistan, Bangladesh), absolute and then constitutional monarchy (Nepal till 2008, Bhutan), one-party or presidential rule (Maldives), and theocratic rule (Taliban Afghanistan). The colonial inheritance of a strong army and bureaucracy partly explains this.

India-centric asymmetry

India is much bigger than all its neighbours combined in area, population, economy and military power. Smaller neighbours fear Indian domination and sometimes seek help from outside powers (USA, China). India, in turn, fears instability and the entry of outside powers

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into its neighbourhood. This asymmetry is central to South Asian IR and to policies like India's **"Neighbourhood First"**.

Identity defined against each other

Pakistan's national identity was partly built in opposition to India; Bangladesh's partly against West Pakistan; Nepal's and Sri Lanka's nationalism often includes fear of Indian influence. Such "negative" identities make cooperation (for example, through SAARC) difficult.

Insecurity is mainly internal

As Ayoob argues, the main threats to these states come from within: separatism, insurgency, ethnic violence, terrorism and legitimacy crises. But because of cross-border communities and mutual suspicion, internal conflicts become linked with external threats (for example, India's role in 1971, or allegations of cross-border support for militancy).

Conclusion (model ending for long answers)

The origins of South Asian states lie in the meeting of **old civilisations with the modern colonial state**. Colonialism gave them territory, borders and institutions, but not ready-made nations. Nationalist movements imagined the nations, and Partition decided their final shape in a hurry and amid violence. The breakup of Pakistan in 1971 showed that the questions of identity, borders and legitimacy settled in 1947 were not final. These unresolved questions of origin still shape the **international relations of South Asia**: the India–Pakistan rivalry and Kashmir, border disputes, ethnic conflicts that spill across borders, refugee flows, and the nuclearised security environment. Therefore, the study of the origins of South Asian states is not only history; it is the key to understanding the region's present and future.

Quick Revision: Important Dates

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Year	Event
1747	Ahmad Shah Durrani founds the modern Afghan state
1757	Battle of Plassey
1768	Prithvi Narayan Shah unifies Nepal
1802	Ceylon becomes a British Crown colony
1816	Treaty of Sugauli (Britain–Nepal)
1858	Government of India Act; Crown rule begins
1865	Treaty of Sinchula (Britain–Bhutan)
1887	Maldives becomes a British protectorate
1893	Durand Line drawn
1907	Wangchuck monarchy in Bhutan
1909	Morley–Minto Reforms (separate electorates)
1914	McMahon Line (Simla Convention)
1919	Afghanistan gains full independence
1930	Iqbal’s Allahabad address
1935	Government of India Act 1935
1937	Burma separated from British India
1940	Lahore (Pakistan) Resolution, 23 March
1947	Mountbatten Plan (3 June); Indian Independence Act; Pakistan (14 Aug) and India (15 Aug) independent; Radcliffe Award (17 Aug); Kashmir accession (26 Oct)
1948	Ceylon independent (4 Feb); Operation Polo in Hyderabad (Sept)
1949	India–Bhutan Treaty of Friendship
1950	India becomes a republic (26 Jan); India–Nepal Treaty (July)
1951	End of Rana rule in Nepal
1952	Language Movement in East Pakistan (21 Feb)
1956	Pakistan’s first Constitution; Sinhala Only Act in Ceylon

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1965	Maldives independent (26 July)
1971	Bangladesh Liberation War; independence (26 Mar), victory (16 Dec)
1972	Ceylon becomes the Republic of Sri Lanka
1985	SAARC founded at Dhaka (8 Dec)
2007	Afghanistan joins SAARC; India–Bhutan Treaty revised
2008	Nepal becomes a republic; Bhutan becomes a constitutional monarchy

One-line memory aids

- **Three modes of birth**: Partition (India, Pakistan), peaceful transfer (Sri Lanka, Maldives), liberation war (Bangladesh).
- **Three never-colonised buffer states**: Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan.
- **Three colonial lines**: Durand (1893), McMahon (1914), Radcliffe (1947).
- **Overdeveloped state** = Hamza Alavi. **Soft state** = Gunnar Myrdal. **State-nation** = Stepan, Linz and Yadav. **Subaltern realism** = Mohammed Ayoob.

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions (UG/PG/UPSC/OPSC)

1. Discuss the colonial origins of the modern South Asian state system.
2. “In South Asia, the state preceded the nation.” Examine this statement.
3. Explain Hamza Alavi’s concept of the “overdeveloped” post-colonial state with reference to Pakistan and Bangladesh.
4. How did the Partition of 1947 shape the international relations of South Asia?
5. Compare the origins of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Does the emergence of Bangladesh disprove the two-nation theory?
6. Distinguish between a “nation-state” and a “state-nation” with reference to South Asia.

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7. Why are Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan called buffer states? How did this shape their state formation?
8. Why did democracy survive in India but not in Pakistan after 1947? Explain with reference to their origins.

Short-answer questions

1. Radcliffe Line
2. Durand Line
3. McMahon Line
4. Lahore Resolution
5. Treaty of Sugauli
6. Language Movement of 1952
7. Overdeveloped state
8. Soft state
9. Instrument of Accession
10. Great Game

MCQs (UGC-NET / OPSC style)

1. Who gave the concept of the “overdeveloped” post-colonial state?
    - (a) Gunnar Myrdal (b) Hamza Alavi (c) Ayesha Jalal (d) Partha Chatterjee
    - **Answer: (b)**
2. The Durand Line was drawn in:
    - (a) 1857 (b) 1893 (c) 1914 (d) 1947
    - **Answer: (b)**
3. Which South Asian state gained independence on 4 February 1948?
    - (a) Burma (b) Maldives (c) Ceylon (d) Nepal

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- **Answer: (c)**

4. The term “soft state” was used by:
   - (a) Joel Migdal (b) Gunnar Myrdal (c) Barry Buzan (d) Charles Tilly
   - **Answer: (b)**

5. *Crafting State-Nations* (2011) is written by:
   - (a) Stepan, Linz and Yadav (b) Bose and Jalal (c) Rudolph and Rudolph (d) Almond and Verba
   - **Answer: (a)**

6. Which country joined SAARC as its eighth member in 2007?
   - (a) Myanmar (b) Afghanistan (c) Maldives (d) Bhutan
   - **Answer: (b)**

7. Match the following:
   - A. Treaty of Sugauli – 1. Bhutan
   - B. Treaty of Sinchula – 2. Afghanistan
   - C. Treaty of Gandamak – 3. Nepal
   - **Answer: A-3, B-1, C-2**

8. Assertion (A): Bangladesh’s emergence weakened the two-nation theory. Reason (R): Bengali linguistic identity proved stronger than common religion.
   - **Answer: Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A.**

9. *The Sole Spokesman* was written by:
   - (a) Ayesha Jalal (b) Hamza Alavi (c) Sugata Bose (d) Stanley Wolpert
   - **Answer: (a)**

10. Who described the post-colonial state as a “late state-maker” and proposed “subaltern realism”?

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- (a) Kenneth Waltz (b) Mohammed Ayoob (c) Barry Buzan (d) Charles Tilly
- **Answer: (b)**

11. The name “Pakstan” was first used in the pamphlet *Now or Never* (1933) by:
    - (a) M.A. Jinnah (b) Muhammad Iqbal (c) Choudhry Rahmat Ali (d) Liaquat Ali Khan
    - **Answer: (c)**

12. Arrange in chronological order: (i) Lahore Resolution (ii) Morley–Minto Reforms (iii) Cabinet Mission (iv) Durand Line
    - **Answer: (iv), (ii), (i), (iii)**

Suggested readings

- Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*.
- Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*.
- Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*.
- Hamza Alavi, “The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh”, *New Left Review* (1972).
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- Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.
- Paul Brass (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics*.
- Rajen Harshe and K.M. Seethi (eds.), *Engaging with the World: Critical Reflections on India’s Foreign Policy*.

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