

South Asia beyond historical amnesia: the utopian possibility of a return to geopolitical calculus

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In seeking to “narrate organic linkages *in* South Asia” whilst identifying the region’s “evident cleavages along socio-political lines”, this discussion note enacts something of a double movement. It at once naturalizes the geographical object, South Asia, whilst at the very same time it seeks to cast into doubt the concreteness of the geopolitical calculus that gives rise to the object itself. ‘What is South Asia?’ This, it seems, is the question posed. But the very formulation of this question presupposes the existence of object to-be-grappled-with: South Asia. This tension is neither new nor avoidable, simply because one of colonialism’s most problematic yet profound intellectual legacies is its concrete geographical inheritance, its cartographic normalizations. South Asia *is* a region, yes, but it is also a way of looking, a way of writing global space in a taxonomy of regions and states that has its roots in colonial encounter and the European gaze. South Asia *is* inescapably a result of geopolitical calculus, as are other regional mappings through which we organize this textually inscribed material planet.

It is therefore with some degree of caution that I offer a response to this discussion note. There is no doubt that flows, connections, organic linkages and dialogues continue to bind, and to (re)produce, this region. But two points are worth emphasizing in response to such an effort to stake these out.

First, when does the desire to stake out connections, flows and organic linkages lapse into the essentialization of a region, the instantiation of a geographical imagination born from the assertion of antecedent pre-colonial purity? If at the regional level this is a benign, even progressive, exercise in producing South Asia, then the scalar regression of such organicist logic can all too quickly fall back into the retrogressive kinds of anticolonial nationalisms and racisms that have riddled the postcolonial politics of nationhood across South Asia. Second, that very same search for flows and linkages – organic or not – must, as I have stressed above, recognize that South Asian particularity is at heart a relational and historical product. It exists as a relational product of other global and colonial flows. For example, I am minded here to consider how difficult it is for South Asian studies in Europe and North America these days to proceed without due reference to, and recognition of, diasporic South Asian populations who have traced those flows back to their respective imperial metropolises. We might also consider that South Asian literature, cinema, fine art and other forms of aesthetic modernism exist, and have evolved, in relation to their global counterparts. Furthermore, even the particularities of South Asian religions only exist as objects that cohere under the proper noun ‘religion’ because of the invidious Orientalist science of comparative world religion scholarship. So, it is not just the flows within South Asia that are worth mobilizing when we interrogate regional identity, it is of paramount importance that the flows and relations with ‘South Asia’s’ constitutive outside are made visible too.

In other words, let us not forget those brutal but formative colonial encounters and histories that have given South Asia to the world *as* and *through* geopolitical calculus. Let us also stress again the brutality of colonialism, because to do so is to also remind

that there was little organic about the colonial violence through the 'age of discovery' that constituted and consolidated South Asia as a discrete cartographic region, subject to and of the European gaze. This much cannot now be undone. But that is no bad thing. Instead it is precisely that geopolitical calculus that constitutes grounds for radical possibility. Because it is also the common experience of colonization and oppression, of independence and incipient postcolonial nationhood, that offer a structure of feeling articulating trans-continental potentials and solidarities for utopian South Asian possibilities going forward. South Asia itself remains a hopeful horizon for postcolonial possibility.