Political culture and social change in South Asia

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Introduction

The coexistence of primordial loyalties based on caste, kinship, ethnic identities, religious communities and extended family networks (biradari) with modern political institutions like elections, political parties and other institutions is a puzzling feature of South Asian politics. Political actors in these societies appear to travel effortlessly between these two contradictory norms. Individual preferences that go into the making of electoral outcomes are deeply affected by collective, organic identities. This has two main consequences. First, despite occasional spells of military dictatorship, politics in South Asia is conducted mostly through elections, professional bureaucracies, judiciaries and legislative processes. However, while these institutions have a family resemblance to similar ones in Western liberal democracies, the contents sometimes look beyond liberal values. Second, the stability of these modern institutions varies greatly within the region as a result of differences in the evolutionary path taken by the country that provides the contextual background.

How does one explain the seamless link between social, political and economic organisations that draw on basically different value systems? An equally potent puzzle for students of comparative politics is to explain the emergence of hybrid structures, such as ‘caste associations’ and bodies that function simultaneously as social, religious and voluntary associations. These anomalies are explained by the entanglement of traditional social structures and modern politics that underpin the political process of South Asia. The analysis of the complex political process of transition in the states of South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, helps explain how organic social networks and political competition can get conflated and, depending on the context, act as motors promoting transition to democracy and its consolidation or serve as constraints on democratisation.

As a whole, South Asia has been relatively more successful than other regions of the world in transition to democracy and its consolidation. Unlike other regions of the non-Western world, all the states of South Asia currently display some form of electoral democracy. In spite of deep inequalities, terrorist attacks or long-standing insurgencies, the region as a whole is not affected by the kind of civil war, violent extermination of whole communities
or frozen one-party rule that one finds in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East or Eastern and Southeastern Asia. South Asian states – particularly those like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka that experienced long years of British colonial rule – developed a political culture of intermediation between the state and society, which, in turn, generated a mutation of traditional values and modern culture of individual rights and political transaction. This was facilitated by intermediary institutions like the Indian National Congress, which acted, simultaneously, as a vehicle for participation in colonial politics, thanks to elections with limited franchise and, occasionally, also acted as an agent of resistance to colonial power.

Collective identities based on caste, kin, religion, region and language were challenged through market penetration, limited enfranchisement and political competition during colonial rule. This led to the creation of short-term alliances based on new and broader organisations. This is a dynamic process that has helped open up the limited horizons of local societies, leading to the creation of larger, political identities. This general process has acquired different forms specific to the states of the region, depending on the nature of leadership and anti-colonial movements; the solidity of social organisations, such as the local caste system; the hold of religion on belief systems and the different forms of collaboration with natives adopted by colonial rulers. In the Indian case, Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph (1967) show how Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi effectively pulled together tradition (the caste system), modern politics (elections and party-building) and the saintly (sacrificial) traditions of Indian religions to generate the political culture specific to India and how this entanglement in the Congress party effectively accelerated India’s democratic transition. The absence of such political synthesisers among the elite has prevented the creation of a synthetic political culture that appears as an Indian speciality. In the following analysis, we concentrate on the acquisition of political attitudes, the difference in the process of socialisation within their state and the impact of the political environment in the evolution of attitudes towards politics. In view of the limitation of space, we restrict the analysis to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Since these states represent different contexts with differing levels of market penetration, political competition and party systems, the nature of political cultures varies in consequence.

India

Three major identities make up Indian society. It is a multireligious, multilingual and hierarchical structure. The hierarchical structure is deeply embedded into the Hindu religion, notably the caste system. Such is its lingering effect that despite conversion, modernisation and social change, caste-like structures are to be found in other religions of India, such as Islam, Christianity, Jainism and Sikhism, despite their scriptural opposition to inequality of status (Mitra 2011: 47). The caste system remains the basis of ranking and relation of social categories “in a complex reciprocal relationship, based on the core idea of purity and pollution” (Mitra 2011: 471). The membership of a caste comes with implications for the social but also the economic and religious standing.

In spite of the fact that close to 80 per cent of Indians are Hindus, the Indian state does not assign Hinduism a superior status over all the other recognised cultures, creeds and religions. “The word ‘secular’ was inserted into the preamble to the constitution in 1976. In Indian usage, it implies both a wall of separation between the church and the state, and an equal status to all religions” (Mitra 2011: 50). Despite the secular appearance of the state; the variations even within the religions, especially Hinduism; and differences in region and
language, religion is a major source of identification within the Indian context and a critical influence on electoral choice.

India is a multilingual society. There are major Indian languages, each of which has its own dialects. Most of India’s 22 major recognised languages, each of which has evolved over the course of many centuries, are concentrated in different regions (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Census of India 2001). Hindi and English are, next to the regional languages that are used as official mediums in their regions, also official link languages. Language has been a major component of identity throughout the history of India. This is true for the Indo-Aryan languages of the North as much as for the Dravidian languages of the South.

The political and legal transformations in India have served to politicise those identities based on caste, religion and language. Equality before the law, introduced by the British rulers, was one of the main factors to influence the self-perception of lower castes and those who used to be considered ‘untouchable’ before the constitution of India conferred the basic right to equality to all Indians, and subsequent legislation criminalised the practice of untouchability. Moreover, the inclusive politics of India’s anti-colonial movement led by Gandhi helped mobilise lower castes as well as former ‘untouchables’, commonly referred to as Dalits (the suppressed ones) in contemporary political discourse. The issue of social inequality based on caste has been brought to the centre of politics in post-independence India by the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Thanks to the social policy promoted by him, legislative reform and administrative measures have whittled away social privilege and introduced punitive measures against discrimination. The possibilities of participating in the democratic process, the political and economic success of members of the lower castes and their impact on policies as well as constitutional change have transformed the perception of lower social orders from subjects into full-fledged political agents and quickened their upward social mobility.

Despite efforts by prominent leaders of the independence movement, such as Gandhi and Nehru, religion has become a source of politicised identity. The politicised identity of the Muslim community led to a call for a separated state for South Asian Muslims, finally resulting in the partition of India and the formation of two independent states, India and Pakistan, in 1947 (Kulke and Rothermund 2006). The atrocities of the partition and the migration of large communities into the respective state still remain embedded in the memories of the communities, and the still unresolved issue of Kashmir reinforces politicisation of identities based on religion (Malik 1993). Religious minorities are becoming increasingly politically active, demanding material and other benefits similar to those given to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes through a quota system known as ‘reservation’. At the same time, resentment against what some see as “minority appeasement” leads to support for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which is currently in power at the centre, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as well as in some of the major regions of the Indian Union.

The politicised identification with languages is as old as the Indian nationalist movement itself. These “sub-national loyalties based on regional languages” had developed as early as the 1920s. After Indian independence, the demand for the recognition and equal treatment of Tamil compared to Hindi in the 1960s, especially, serves as an example of those politicised, language-based movements. The pride based on the long existence, traditions and history of literary art continues to nurture these identities and regional governments that draw on them. Out of those identities and their perceived relation with the Indian state, new aims and political interests, some of which demand radical changes to the state’s structure...
and foundations, have emerged. The perception that one’s own identity is either not secured by the state or even threatened by it may, for example, lead to the demand for significant change, such as a separate state to act as a homeland.

Demands, opinions and ideas are transported easily towards a wide range of society due to modern mass media. In the time of globalisation, information – based on internet, television and mobile phones – travels easily to groups that, due to lack of infrastructure, education or literacy, had not been penetrated before. The breaking up of the traditional environments of socialisation, such as the family, kin, village and other social structures, due to processes of modernisation, enables widespread political mobilisation. While education in India may not be able to further a common culture and identification, it may significantly add to the legitimisation of the political system. The multiplicity of other channels of political education, such as political parties, TV as well as radio channels and modern social media, further diversify the political socialisation.

Political agents in India have resorted to a varied repertoire of political behaviour. Some include the means offered by the modern state, such as the “the competitive process of articulation and aggregation of interests” (Mitra 2011: 56), participation in elections and political campaigning; some are rather traditional direct actions, such as *rasta roko* (stopping and disturbing the traffic) or *hartal* (“a form of boycott accompanied by a work stoppage”) as was applied during the Indian freedom struggle; and some resort to violence. Many of those actions, be they modern or rather traditional, are accompanied by the (religious) symbols and traditional concepts ingrained in Indian religions and values (Mitra, 1999, 2011).

The Sikh nationalist movement is a case in point. The Sikhs, adherents to Sikhism, a religion incorporating elements of Hinduism and Islam that emerged as a resistance movement against the invasion of India by Muslims, form a majority in the State of Punjab. Feeling their identity threatened by assimilation with Hinduism, they demanded the creation of a sovereign, territorial state serving as the homeland of the Sikhs. The political movement, called the Khalistan movement, that had emerged changed gradually from non-violent protest to violent forms of action. The army was employed to operate against the leaders of the secessionist movement holed up in the Golden Temple of Amritsar. This eventually culminated in the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Politics in Punjab returned to democratic means after “a firm combination of repression of dissidents and accommodation of some of their leaders” (Mitra 2011: 53).

This changed behaviour can be explained by the changed perception of the state and the relation of the group seeking to assert its collective identity. When the state was considered to be inefficient in preserving and securing the Sikh identity – or, by itself, even posed a threat to it – the movement resorted to means of violence. As soon as the leaders of the movement were included in the political system, and accorded a share of political power within the framework of the modern state, the political system was considered by them to be efficient in absorbing the demands and changing the self-perception of these agents from an alienated group into efficacious citizens of the state.

This Indian two-track strategy, which combines suppression with accommodation, turns rebels into stakeholders and rebellious attitudes to legitimacy. This can be seen in a number of ethno-national movements, like the Tamil language movement in 1960s. India has witnessed a “steady rise of the sense of efficacy in the population as a whole, going up from 48.5 per cent on the entire population in 1971 to 67.5 per cent in 2004” (Mitra 2011: 59). Similarly, there has been an increase in the perceived legitimacy of the political system; “the percentage of those who see the political system as legitimate has gone up from 43.4 per cent in 1971 to 72.2 per cent in 2004” (Mitra 2011: 60). The relatively small but stable group of
citizens who do not feel efficacious tends to pertain to those groups who have not been subject to political mobilisation (Mitra 2011).

The recent widely publicised cases of (gang) rape have opened a door for the political mobilisation of identity based on gender. Similarly, the provision of simplified access to information may lead to an increase in both efficacy and legitimacy. One of those examples could be the implementation of an election app for the 2016 assembly polls in Kerala, providing easily accessible information and means that facilitated participation. “Titled ‘e-voter’, the app is envisaged to help voters search electoral rolls, locate polling stations, obtain information about candidates and the affidavit filed by them, file complaints and so on” (Times of India 2016).

Pakistan and Bangladesh

The state of Pakistan split in 1971, when the Eastern wing separated from West Pakistan and emerged as the state of Bangladesh. The creation of Pakistan was the result of the Muslim League’s demand for a homeland for all South Asian Muslims. This led to the partition of colonial India into two independent states, India and Pakistan, in 1947. The demand for a separate state for Indian Muslims had been mobilised on the basis of the argument that only a Muslim state would bring about the security for Muslims, which could not be gained within a Hindu majoritarian state (Kulke and Rothermund 2006). However, the split of 1971 showed that the homogeneity of Indian Muslims was a politically convenient myth. It also proved that other identities, such as language – equal status for Bangla as opposed to Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, was the main rallying cry of East Pakistan – can be strong components of the political culture of a people.

Compared to Bangladesh, Pakistani society is ethnically and linguistically very diverse. Mixed ethnic groups are found within every province (Rais 2002: 220–246). Despite the shared religion, several ethnic communities have seen mobilisation of their ethnic-lingual identity, leading to demands of a homeland, as was the case for the Balochis, reminiscent of the successful separation of Bangladesh. The question of federal arrangements and the role of the majority province “first East-Bengal, and later Punjab” continues to be a contentious issue (Waseem 2011: 213). Even more, the Muslim identity is challenged by the Sunni-Shia rift and the presence of various religious minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis and Baha’i.

The mobilisation and justification based on Muslim identity and the question of Islam’s role within the state has served the military as well as civilian agents, both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The place of Islam and Islamic law (sharia) within the state and society remains a contested issue. Especially under the rule of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq from 1977 to 1988 in Pakistan, the fusion of state and Islam was given an institutional form. He used the idea of creating an ideal Islamic society to justify his military rule and the suppression of democratic elements. Tendencies towards Islamisation of the state and secularity have alternated, both during the civilian government of Benazir Bhutto (1988–1990, 1993–1996) and the military government led by Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008). This rift between secularism and Islam is also transported to education. Conflicting opinions about the Islam and Islamic rules shape the educational environment both in Pakistan and Bangladesh, though it is more extreme in the case of the former compared to the latter. The education of girls and the education within madrassas (Islamic educational institutions) are contested and lead at times to violent attacks against schools, teachers and children (Oldenburg 2010). The most prominent case that illustrates this is the case of Malala Yousafzai, who survived an attack.
by the Taliban and got the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 for her efforts to promote (girls’) education in Pakistan. The discrepancies in the quality of as well as the access to education hinder a shared socialisation and the promotion of shared values as well as a shared trust in the political system.

While agents are able to use politicised identities for aggregation of interests and mobilisation of support, the political system has hindered the emergence of the perception of its efficiency in taking up demands from below, leading to high levels of dissatisfaction. Both military and democratic rulers have failed to enable the participation of all sections of the population, the provision of fundamental freedoms and the equal access to power and resources (Rais 2002: 220–246). Moreover, the frequent takeover of power by the military has hindered the development of functioning democratic institutions and the necessary experience in democratic rule. In Pakistan, the military has dismissed democratically elected governments three times, leading to long periods of authoritarian military rule lasting from 1958 to 1971, 1977 to 1988 and 1999 to 2008 (Waseem 2011). In these periods, the participation of vast elements of the society has not been possible. Instead, military rulers, like Zia, have included only some of the provincial elites in order to secure their power. But authoritarian and exclusive tendencies are found in the periods of civilian governments as well. All this has added to the evaluation of the political system as inefficient by vast sections of the society. In marked contrast to India, in 2013 – 66 years after independence – for the first time in Pakistani history, an elected government was able to complete its full term. Even more, the elections in 2013 have been the first to enable the peaceful shift of power from one democratic government to the next and the first that had taken place in conformity with the constitution (Federal Foreign Ministry 2016).

Institutions like the media play a significant role in the socialisation of individuals within a particular system. Compared to the fiercely independent media of India, the media in Pakistan has an ambiguous position, with the legal freedom of articulation continuously under threat. However, in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, modern media, like social platforms on the internet, offer space of relative security compared to more risky forms, such as participation in public rallies and election campaigns. The flow of information tends to be censored through political and legal means, such as the blockage of YouTube in 2012 based on the blasphemy law, which was lifted only in January 2016 due to a local version of YouTube that allows the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to ask offending material to be blocked (Reuters 2016). The denial of the free flow of information is further enhanced through the self-censorship of journalists who fear persecution by militants and militaries alike, as one can see from the recent cases of the hacking of bloggers who had spoken up for the need of greater toleration in Bangladesh. In contrast to India, the politicisation of identity-based interests and the perception of lack of efficiency of the prevalent political system and low trust in politicians explain the growing support for increasingly violent organisations throughout Pakistan’s history (Fair et al. 2014). While the foundations of democracy are relatively more solid in Bangladesh, the fractured party system generates deep lack of trust in the political system. While elections take place more regularly in Bangladesh than in Pakistan, violence, nevertheless, lurks in the background.

**Sri Lanka**

The Sri Lankan society encompasses diverse ethnicities, languages and religions. The two major ethnic communities, the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, are concentrated in particular regions. Despite its being a majoritarian Buddhist country, there is a hierarchical
caste system similar to those influenced by Hinduism. Religion, ethnicity, region and caste are sources of identity in Sri Lanka. Yet the politicisation of identity has largely taken place based on religion and ethnicity – along the lines of majority and minorities.

The politicisation of identities began mainly during the British colonial rule and the political representation of communities based on their ethnic membership. When Sri Lanka, formerly called Ceylon, became independent in 1948 (as Dominion), it was regarded as the role model of the British Empire, with universal suffrage since 1931, a comparatively high rate of literacy, a well-functioning economy and even elements of social welfare. Ceylon’s transition to independence was peaceful; it was negotiated rather than fought for. The political elites were moderate and willing to accept the benefits offered by British rule, including their status within the political system. The preservation of the British legacy, materialised in the adaption of the Westminster system and even the transfer of the last British governor as the first Governor-General of the independent Ceylon included the preservation of the classification of the population along the ethnic-religious lines and the division’s representation in the political parties. Although Ceylon was a democratic and secular state (de Silva 2011: 591–598), the vast majority of the population – despite high literacy and universal suffrage – had not become politically active. Compared to India, the ruling elite was relatively distant from ordinary masses, leading to the perception that Sri Lanka’s (i.e. Ceylon’s) independence was not real but rather a conspiracy between the ruling elite and the British (de Silva 2011: 591–598). The elite lacked the political will, or, indeed, the need, to engage “the masses” in the political process – before and after independence – and lacked a charismatic leader like Nehru, Gandhi or Jinnah. In this environment, people kept away from engaging in politics through voting (Manor 2011: 599–606).

The politicisation of the masses based on ethno-religious identity was instilled by the Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (1956–1959) who came to power largely through the support by Buddhist organisations and their influence within (Buddhist majority) society. He first made Sinhala and Sinhalese Buddhist culture central concern of the state. He gave Sinhalese Buddhists greater confidence in themselves and their culture, even as he failed to prevent their insecurities from producing excesses, and from becoming a firmly institutionalised element of the island’s politics (Manor 2011: 599–606). This enabled the participation in the electoral process for many elements of the society who were excluded from it before, due, among others, to the provision of infrastructure that enabled the “common man” to cast the ballot (public transport to the poll site, more poll sites in the rural areas) (Manor 2011: 599–606). With both, and the implementation of a wider social welfare system, Bandaranaike had taken up the subliminal conflict of identity and the perception of the state as the provider for entitlements for the communities (Manor 2011: 599–606). What Bandaranaike had started became an institutionalised element of Sri Lankan politics – namely, the focus on identity politics and the mobilisation of the people by ethnic–religious identities – rather than other, e.g., economic issues. The Westminster system allowed the majority to implement laws that affected the minorities without giving them a say.

The Westminster system together with the major focus on ethnic and religious issues and increasing economic decline led to a situation in which the state had become the “enemy” rather than the “friend” for two major youth movements. The Sinhalese-Buddhist youth, who had gained higher education but did not have access to appropriate jobs, thereafter saw themselves as neglected by the state. Means within the system did not allow for change. The youth’s perception of themselves as liberators and the state authorities as suppressors, led to the implementation of violent methods to subdue dissidence. The JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/People’s Liberation Front) demanded better economic conditions for the youth.
but failed to mobilise or represent the interests cutting through the ethnic-religious divi-
sions. The state authorities put down the JVP insurrections in 1971 and later in 1987–1989 in
which less than 2 per cent of non-Sinhalese-Buddhists participated, with enormous brutality
by police and military. The state did not give in to demands, and many of the insurgents and
most of their leaders were killed (Kearney and Jiggins 2011: 618–640).

The Tamil youth developed a sense of alienation from the state, which had radically
reduced their opportunities to gain higher education and employment within the public
service, and which did not allow an equal and prominent place to the Tamil minority.
Government politicians reneged on their promises. Two negotiated agreements with the
Tamil political leaders, the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Agreement in 1957 and the
Senanayake-Chelvanayagam Agreement in 1965, did not prove to be effective (Perera 2000:
74–91). These measures allowed the change of the constitution (successful in 1972 and 1978)
without a major influence of the Tamil parties – leading to making Sinhala the major Sri
Lankan language, to providing Buddhism the foremost place in the country and to insisting
on a unitary and not a federal state. While the older generation of Tamil politicians – due
to their experiences in pre-independence period – still trusted in the Sinhalese politicians
and at least in the diplomatic means to reach their political ends, the calls for an indepen-
dent Tamil state and for other means of reaching their ends were growing louder. When the
government responded to non-violent Tamil protests with violence, the doors were opened
for retaliations. The situation escalated and culminated in the pogrom against Tamils in
Colombo and other cities in Sri Lanka in 1983, leading to the start of the civil war, which would
be interrupted by ceasefire agreements between the major rebel organisation LTTE (Liberation
Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the government of Sri Lanka, last until 2009 (Swamy 2010).

The notion to not being able to actively participate within the framework of the state,
the evaluation that the political system and its actors were dysfunctional, the identification
along the lines of religion and ethnicity as well as the lack of cooperation based on shared
socio-economic issues beyond the own ethnicity, led to distrust between the communities
and the absorption of violence in the political behaviour of Sri Lanka. A leading commen-
tator on Sri Lanka says,

When a political system does not follow its own rules or does not operate according to
standards set by itself, the rulers themselves prepare the stage for violent, anti-systemic
movements, which may, of course, be rooted in the larger social system.

(Hettige 2000: 9)

The long-lasting civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE came to an
end with the killing of the LTTE leadership. The abuse of power, corruption as well as the
increasing intimidation of political opponents and journalists led to a tense and mistrusting
situation in post-war Sri Lanka. The authoritarian rule by the Rajapaksa government was
brought to an end by a coalition of the opposition parties, including the minority par-
ties. The cooperation in the presidential election campaign between the various parties –
including members of the President’s own party – based on the shared interest to bring back
more democracy and end the authoritarian rule by Rajapaksa – presented a new form of
politics. The overthrow by democratic means based on cooperation between the majority as
well as the minority parties and the acceptance of his defeat by Rajapaksa as a part of normal
politics point towards change and may help to socialise people in an environment of trust in
peaceful and democratic means. Despite the call to bring back Rajapaksa as a strong leader
in various sections of the Sri Lankan society, the parliamentary elections in 2015 confirmed
the cooperative strategy. The new government is engaged in an attempt to create a new constitution, in which minority demands are incorporated and in the making of which also the minority parties shall be engaged. Even the formerly violent Buddhist organisations that targeted minorities and their property after the end of the civil war have shifted their activities towards more democratic means.

**Nepal**

The case of Nepal poses an exception among South Asian states as it was never directly colonised. Today, the country includes different regions, religions, ethnicities and next to Nepali many (minority) languages. Not having been directly colonised unlike other states of South Asia, Nepal did not need develop the structure of intermediary elites between colonial rulers and native subjects. As such, the political culture of mediation did not develop nor did political organisations that could have experienced limited franchise and representation as in colonial India. The structure of the Nepalese society has been fundamentally shaped by the hierarchical and centralised organisation of the Hindu kingdom, which existed for 240 years.

In 1768, Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the territories of the adjacent principalities and unified them under his kingship. The kingdom has been structured according to the Hindu caste system, in which the different groupings were subsumed according to their socio-economic status but also as an expression of their relation to the state (Malla 2013).

The process of state building resulted in the ethnic stratification as different groups of people were incorporated in the state on unequal terms. [...] High-caste Hindus residing in Nepal’s central hills were closely aligned with the state from the beginning and have continually held positions of power.

*(Whelpton 1977: 44)*

The order of the state was characterised by the unequal access to political and social resources, the economic exploitation of the lower ranks of the society and the mobility based on the groups’ relevance for the central state. The Kathmandu valley formed the political as well as the social power centre. In 1846, the Rana family took over, vesting the state powers in the office of the prime minister – from then on hereditary – making the king a simple representation of his role as unifier of the diverse people and territories. In 1854, the first comprehensive legal code was established that institutionalised the social ideas of the Rana rule. The legal code reflected “a Hindu world order” within which the social elements were integrated in the caste hierarchy, underpinning and reinforcing the “high-caste Hindu dominance” (Hangen 2010). The centralisation of power – on the one hand within the hands of high-caste Hindus and on the other hand within the region of the Kathmandu valley – and the incorporation of such power structures into the legal and ideological framework of the state underpinned the perpetuation of the political and socio-economic configurations.

This led to the politicisation of identities based on caste and ethnic affiliation and with that, the changed attitudes towards a centralised and high caste, hill-country dominated political system. Subsequently, political movements were initiated by the Nepali elites based in India, who modelled their politics on the Indian freedom struggle. The Rana authoritarian system stood in great contrast to the participatory ideas imported from the Indian independence movement. Within the 100 years of Rana rule, there had never been taken any measures to include people from all strata in decision-making (Hangen 2010).
The exclusion from power, the politicisation of identities and the mobilisation of interests set in motion a desire for participation and democracy; increasingly incompatible with the autocratic Rana rule and a centralised state culturally, linguistically and religiously dominated by the high-caste Hindu elite. A violent overthrow of the Rana regime and the reinstallation of the king who ruled in cooperation with a new prime minister and the political parties, for a short time, satisfied democratic aspirations, until the king dismissed the government and vested the powers on himself. The introduction of the Panchayat system in 1962 can be understood as an attempt to preserve the king’s power and that of the Hindu high-caste elites in a unified, religiously and linguistically homogenous society, while at the same time concede to the democratic demands by giving a more participatory veneer. The Panchayat constitution, which had been in effect until 1990, paid a lip service to democracy but allowed the king to keep his powers, to diminish political parties and to control the opposition (Hangen 2010). In effect, it repressed political freedom and participation of the broader population, and sought to promote societal unity and cultural homogeneity, especially through the school education. The school education was used to promote the Nepali language, the Hindu religion and the political system. But many were excluded, and socialised within their socio-economic environment and its particular conditions often leading to a self-identification based on ethnicity, language and caste. The inequality and poverty in many Nepalese regions as well as the exclusion from participation of particular castes and ethnicities were not addressed. A moment of relative political freedom led to politicisation and radical mobilisation of various communities and calls for democracy finding expression in the emergence of various social movements (Hangen 2010). The call for more participation, access to resources and satisfaction of certain interests reached out to communities that had not considered themselves as legitimate political agents before.

The end of the Panchayat rule in 1990 and the introduction of parliamentary democracy as well as the elections in 1991 on the one hand raised the hope for better interest representation, and on the other hand led to the mobilisation of diverse identities based on caste, region, indigenous nationalities and gender (Hangen 2010). An economic crisis and the perception of the failure of the elected government to cope with the demands as well as the perceived inefficiency of the parliament to address the grievances of the people and to reach the demanded aims resulted in the agitation of left-wing groupings. Protests soon escalated, leading to an armed resistance in 1996 led by the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) with the declared aim to overthrow the political system by a “people’s war” and to establish a people’s republic (Jha 2008: 268f).

Despite the deployment of the military, the Maoists could not be defeated and at times controlled about 80 per cent of the Nepalese territory:

[…] the near collapse of development work and civil governance in violence-affected areas, break down of the rule of law, and lack of democratization at the grass-roots level have, understandably, enabled the Maoists to not only set up parallel structures of governance in many parts of the country, including their own visa and taxation system, but also to exert considerable influence in the urban centres.

(Jha 2008: 246–281)

The civil war led to thousands of victims on both sides. In the course of events, in 2005, the king declared state of emergency and dissolved the elected parliament. Protests against the autocratic rule of the king culminated in a national strike lasting three weeks. The ensuing reinstallation of the parliament and the transfer of power to a seven-party alliance enabled
peace negotiations and the subsequent signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the alliance and the Maoists in 2006, ending the decade-long civil war and signing the beginning of the peace process in Nepal.

An elected constituent assembly, after several delays, presented a new constitution in 2015, which was passed in the same year. Democratic rule, federalism, equality of minorities, women's rights and secularism were enshrined in the new constitution, making Nepal a “Federal Democratic Republic”. Despite the stipulation of the demands of the politicised identities based on region, ethnicity, religion or gender, the satisfaction with the new framework for the political system is not utterly. Shortly after the adoption of the new constitution, ethnic groups put up resistance. The still unresolved definition of the borders of the provinces has led to protests and street blockages by the Madhesi people who live mostly in the Terai region in the southern areas of Nepal bordering India, and to the outbreak of violence.

**Conclusion**

The political culture of South Asia has been deeply affected by the transformation of traditional social structures through modernisation and political mobilisation. Our analysis of its main components and the variations across South Asian states has focussed on the questions of how the South Asian societies acquire political attitudes, how they differ in the process of socialisation among different states of the region, and which impact these have on the political environment in the respective states. We have seen how traditional social stratification, ethnicities, languages, religious affiliations and ideologies have been the major sources of political identity. The emerging self-consciousness of political movements based on shared identities has enabled the aggregation of interests specific for these groups and facilitated the mobilisation of various segments of South Asian society for political ends.

The politicisation of identities in South Asia has diverse reasons, but all of them include the demand for political participation and self-determination. The political socialisation within South Asia takes place through different channels and the combination of those different channels, ranging from more traditional ones of family and kin structures, ways such as education and schooling, to modern means, such as social platforms and digital media. In the process of socialisation, it is not only the self-awareness of a group that is passed along but also the evaluation of the political system regarding the group’s standing. The political system thus provides the environment in which individuals engage in various forms of political participation. On the one hand, this leads to strategies of interest articulation and aggregation that are institutionalised, and on the other hand, it can also lead to protest movements with various degrees of violence, leading to disorder and overthrow of the regime. In sum, the reactions of political agents within the system towards the interest articulation of certain groups shape the attitudes of the others towards the system.

In India, Hinduism and the caste system have significantly impacted the emergence of identities. The Indian freedom struggle has served as the important, yet not the only basis for the politicisation of identities. Political agents have resorted to traditional ways of protest, such as satyagraha, modern ways of interest articulation, such as electoral campaigns and have endowed both with the symbols of the saintly tradition, with links to traditional belief systems and religion. Despite the appearance of violent clashes and radical demands for separation, the Indian democratic and secular political system has proven to be resilient. With a combined strategy of force and persuasion, the Indian state has been able to gain increasing legitimacy and trust by its people, thus turning rebels into stakeholders and subjects into citizens. The challenge of the emancipatory demands of women, cutting through various
other categories of identification, and the reaction of the state towards those demands will have the potential to change attitudes and to incorporate even more segments of the society into the political process.

In Pakistan, religion has played a significant role in shaping state and society. The struggle between the religious and the secular elements, the frequent alternation between democratic and military rule, and an authoritarian and restrictive style of the exercise of power have not enabled a secure environment for political activities. Channels of socialisation, such as education and media, have fallen prey to the political system and therefore have not been able neither to acquire subsystem autonomy nor to fulfil their appropriate function. The institutionalisation of lawlessness and resort to means outside the constitutional framework have added to the perception of inefficiency and inefficacy of the political system as a whole. This has culminated in the emergence of and support for extra-state – at times anti-systemic – actors to obtain political ends. The lack of trust in the state and the own efficacy have added to the overall instability in Pakistan. A major step towards the successful democratisation has been made recently, and the continuation of this process might change the attitudes towards the efficiency of the political system.

In Bangladesh, both religion and region have served as sources of identification. The legacy of the partition from India as well as the partition from Pakistan have invoked the emergence of contested identities and perceptions of the state. The constitutional changes regarding the status of religion within the state as well as the politicisation of the civil society along party lines also find expression in the political behaviour, partly taking place at the ballot box and partly, on the streets. The authoritarian style of ruling that was institutionalised in Pakistan continues to affect socialisation political attitudes in Bangladesh. The increasing centralisation of power in the two dominant parties might be as much an expression of this legacy as the military coups in Bangladesh’s short history.

In Sri Lanka, ethno-religious identities and the rift between the majority and the minorities have served as the basis for political identities. The politicisation of those identities was fortified under the British rule and passed on into the independent state. The exclusion from participation and decision-making processes as well as the defence of political elites’ power positions through violent and non-constitutional means has alienated the minorities as well as segments of the majority from the state and its institutions. The socialisation within kin structures and within a hostile political environment, exclusive and not responsive, led to the institutionalisation of violence as political tool for interest articulation. The new cooperation that cuts through the traditional lines of ethnicity and religious affiliation and the creation of a new constitution might positively affect political attitudes and trust in Sri Lanka.

In Nepal, the hierarchical structure of the Hindu kingdom and the Maoist insurgency have shaped the political attitudes of its people. Ideology, religion, region and ethnicity remain to be sources of politicised identities. After a long and intense struggle for more participation and equality, the Nepalese state has finally gained a constitution that offers the opportunity for the settlement of conflicts. The stability of this new democracy will also depend on the reactions to the demands of ethnic communities that do not consider their interests to be incorporated correctly.

In sum, the analysis of political attitudes in South Asia shows that primordial attitudes can change into attitudes that give legitimacy to the postcolonial state, as in the case of India, or to anti-system behaviour as in some South Asian states, depending on the context, collective memory and historical conjuncture in which a particular case is ensconced. Politicisation of identities based on ideology, religion, language, region and social stratification plays a significant role for the attitudes of the South Asian societies towards their self-perception as
legitimate political actors. The evaluation of efficacy within the political system is mainly shaped by the responsiveness of the state towards the demands of social groups. The stability of the political system is affected by the beliefs, attitudes and trust of its citizens. The responsiveness to demands and incorporation into the political process increases the satisfaction among the people and with that the perceived efficiency of the state and a positive evaluation of one’s own efficacy. For South Asia, it can be said that the ability to turn subjects into citizens and rebels into stakeholders accounts for the variations in the stability of democratic systems. As a prospect for the future, one may refer to the impact of politicised identities based on gender, which may mobilise yet other elements of the societies; the use of digital media and technological advances, and the conflation of party politics and non-conventional forms of political action will continue to affect the political mobilisation as well as socialisation of the people. In addition, globalisation and the role of the media will have significant consequences for the legitimacy, and evolution of national political cultures.

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