

## Education for Building Bridges and Strengthening Physical Infrastructural Linkages in South Asia: A Case Study of South Asian University

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Abstract

*Multi-track diplomacy provides an effective theoretical model, which considers education as an important track integral in ushering peace, building bridges, creating the necessary infrastructure, changing mindsets and ultimately enabling a transformation from conflict prone to peace-oriented societies. Thus, giving rise to the idea of a regional higher education institution, primarily to build a regional center of excellence, with a shared common vision, that would help create a South Asian community and provide equitable access to students from all over the region. However, functioning for a decade now, the South Asian University has not been able to achieve many of the aims associated with it, largely due to the inherent hurdles and regional politics. This study will highlight the impediments faced within the region for utilizing education as an effective bridge builder and agent for positive conflict transformation & further examine the SAU's ability to transcend the deeply entrenched conflict narrative.*

**Key Words:** South Asian University, SAARC, Madrassah, COSATT, Covid-19, Literacy Rate, RCSS,

### Introduction

South Asia, the world's most densely populated, resource rich yet one of the poorest regions now, more than ever requires efforts toward peace building, increased and better interaction, settlement as well as transformation of the various conflicts that have multiplied over time. Riddled with a combination of perceived and real security challenges as well as a mindset that is increasingly becoming more conflict than peace oriented and ultra-nationalistic, there is a dire need after more than seventy years of post-colonial independent existence to develop infrastructure and sustainable mechanisms of peace and mutual coexistence. One of the many areas in which the region drastically lags, besides a plethora of other dismal indicators is education which can both bridge and distance the regional countries from one another. Unfortunately, neither at the individual countries level nor at the regional level, there has been sufficient allocation made towards this critical area. According to World Bank statistics for the year 2011 South Asia's contribution to education has been only 5% of its total public sector expenditure, which was even lower than the most impoverished region of Sub Saharan Africa. Although the collective adult literacy rate (of people aged 15 and above) stands at 61.3% (UNESCO, 2012), not only is this figure misleading as individual countries have very disparate rates, but also the literacy rate may be judged as simplistically as the reading or writing of one's own name.

Education and discourse development constitute an integral component of multi-track diplomacy. It is an effective bridge builder, means of communication, empathy, and learning, if taken in the most literal sense. Yet, typically symptomatic of conflict prone regions, textbooks in our region have often been used as an effective tool to build an ultra-nationalist narrative as well as for documentation of selective history. With the aforementioned

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alarming indicators and a general lack of appreciation for this critical tool of human resource development, at a time when the world is moving in a totally different dimension, the region at both inter and intra state level remains embroiled in multifold conflicts of identity, indigenization and self-actualization. Such increased attempts have manifested itself through hate violence towards other communities, religions, sects, and nationalities. There have been attempts by governments concerned to purge curricula off such biased text, however, these attempts have often come about after a deadly wave of ethnic, sectarian or religious incident, that claims many precious lives as a direct consequence of inculcating such a parochial discourse, whereas the more damaging effect of indoctrinating generations on a particular mindset and its long term consequence have often been ignored.

Can education really become a regional weld and a bridge builder? In answer to this, again we can take the multi-track diplomacy as an effective theoretical model, which considers this particular track very important in ushering peace, building bridges, creating the necessary infrastructure, changing and transforming mindsets and ultimately enabling a transformation from conflict prone to peace oriented societies. Bridge building can facilitate and bring together conflictual actors at a common platform, create empathy and mutual understanding, rebuild trust, and enable the protagonists to explore and revisit the root causes, needs, and interests that underlie stated positions. It is a commonly observed phenomenon that during any crisis or conflict situation, the first casualty is breakdown of communication, which gives rise to misperceptions and a breach of trust. According to Notter and Diamond (1996), “to *build* peace, you must have a viable infrastructure or foundation on which to build it, thus the activities of peace-building are about creating infrastructures”. These infrastructures would range from political, structural to social peace building efforts. Where political peace building or conflict transformative efforts may center around negotiations, legal regimes, fact finding missions or technical working groups, the structural and social layers are most important in bringing about mid-tier efforts and creating institutional mechanisms that affect behavior, institutions and actions which in turn are the key essentials for creating a viable and sustainable peace culture (Notter & Diamond, 1996).

It is about building an economic, military, and community infrastructure that provides concrete and realistic avenues through which a new peace system might express itself. These structures are necessary because political peace building can never accomplish conflict transformation by itself. A signed peace treaty does not create peace; it only creates a basis for peace, or a legal infrastructure to support peace. Without the corresponding societal infrastructure to support it, the peace will never hold. ... Structural peace building is not the exclusive domain of either governments or nongovernmental actors—both can be effective in this realm. ... [whereas societal peace building] is about building a human infrastructure of people who are committed to engendering a new “peace culture” within the social fabric of communal and inter-communal life.

Therefore, it deals with grass root transformations in behaviors, attitudes, shared values, and skill building. In short, it is building or remolding human resource infrastructure. And can be actualized through trainings, orientation sessions, discourse development, through a commitment to successfully alter deep rooted divergent and parochial sentiments through dialogue and education. One aspect for bringing about such an institutionalized makeover is to have a common education body, a center of excellence that serves as a common platform, rising above and independent of nationalist stance to build a common narrative that can become a binding force for regionalism, cutting across narrow administrative lacuna.

The idea behind the creation of a *South Asian University (SAU)*, for the countries of the region was primarily to build a world class regional center of excellence, sharing a common vision, with equitable participation of all SAARC member states; to create a sense of South Asian community amongst them, and providing equitable access to students from all over the region, regardless of their disparate resources. Like the idea of SAARC, Bangladesh had the honor to moot the idea of the university as well, however, it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit (Dhaka 2005) that the foundation of the university was laid. The first academic session of the university commenced in 2010 with 50 students, at its temporary working campus in New Delhi, the city which would also host its actual campus once the construction starts. The South Asia University was meant to be *THE* regional grid that would bring all the member states at a common platform, with a regional vision transcending individual national narratives and perspectives, with faculty, administrative staff, students and curriculum having a regional interface rather than conforming to any single country.

After a decade, a timeframe that may appear less in certain regards less to access the work function of the university, but sufficient to realize the founders' vision, there remains much to be desired. Since the inception of the idea, there have appeared a number of issues that are typically symptomatic of the region which it represents. Firstly, the issue of location of the university campus, then the highly problematic issue of visa regime, setting up of a South Asian mindset and curriculum in order to build a collective South Asian consciousness, allocation and ratio of students and faculty per country, as well as building a sense of ownership in the entire process.

The concept of having such a decentralized *Higher Education Institution* (HEI) by no means is new as there have been previous success stories, such as the United Nations University, an alternative perspective institute such as the *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)*, the *World Order Models Project (WOMP)* and the *World Future Studies Federation* (Parmar, 2006), however, to make it more inclusive and regional in outlook according to Professor Imtiaz Ahmed one of SAU's main proponents, the SAU by definition should not have been placed in one location or even in one country. This would have been instrumental in inculcating a sense of ownership on the part of all the SAARC member-states to ensure a meaningful reorientation and revitalizing of education at a regional level. Also, issue-based faculties should ideally be spread throughout the region and "based on the expertise and interest of the sponsoring country is deemed credible and certainly the most rational option" (Ahmed, 2007). However, choice of New Delhi as the main campus site, has somewhat killed the purpose (Dixit, n.d.),

The placement is already problematic. The first university of South Asia must be one that promotes a regional vision quite distinct from the capital-centric model of the SAARC organisation. As such, the university needs to be physically removed from any capital, in particular the region's most powerful one."

In this regard, proposals such as a South Asian University Grants' or Higher Education Commission were put forth, which could be located in any of the regional members capital, with the SAU functioned more as an Umbrella institution providing support to select HEIs (both in the public and private domain) in member states. Or even respective commissions, in individual member countries could have a dedicated division that could help regulate, liaison and coordinate the SAU's functioning across the region.

If the present profile of the SAU is reviewed, both in terms of faculty and student intake, there are hardly any non-Indian faculty members and fewer students from the entire region. Whether this is reflective of the lack of interest on the part of member states, the highly problematic visa regime and other administrative issues or a limited number of subjects which are still a far cry from reaching the level of excellence expected from this HEI are issues that hound the success of the SAU. The founding administrative head of the SAU had been under a lot of criticism for his handling of the University affairs (Vishnoi, 2012). However, issues such as the latter can be dismissed as minor teething problems in comparison to the greater task at hand. But, South Asia still remains a region, where personalities and individual visions have a great role to play in the success or failure of a pioneering concept, and the importance of an eminent scholar who can realize the vision of a truly regional centre for academic excellence cannot be overlooked. With the current political set up in India and Bangladesh being highly belligerent towards Pakistan, the rest of the South Asian neighbors are not strong enough to stand up to New Delhi's whims. Which more or less makes the SAU more an India led, and India dominated University than a regional platform, as originally envisaged.

After a decade, what future do we foresee for the SAU? Will it be able to overcome its inherent hurdles and not just become yet another HEI churning out regular discourse but with a slight regional tilt? Does the region need another regional level center for academic excellence? Or build upon the existence infrastructure available? These are the few questions that need to be critically reviewed, along with an appraisal of the impediments and difficulties faced within the region for utilizing education as an effective bridge builder and agent for positive conflict transformation.

## **Issues and Problems**

The first and foremost problem countries of South Asia face when it comes to drawing a common curriculum, is not only the differential and unequal educational systems around the region, but also within each country. This problem is further compounded by the highly differential literacy rates, and the *culture of literacy and education* that each member state has or the lack of it. At one end of this spectrum are Maldives and Sri Lanka showing 97.74%

and 91.71% plus literacy rate respectively in comparison to Afghanistan, which were not calculated for the longest time since the 1979 civil war. However, for 2018, the literacy rate in Afghanistan stood at 43.02% a significant increase from 31.74 % in 2011 ([World Bank, 2020](#)). Secondly, within each country, there is no uniform curriculum, which although can be ideally sought but in realistic terms may not be possible, still the discrepancy in the quality and deliverance of curricula found in different systems of education spreading across private, public and state-run institutions is increasingly becoming wider to bridge. Furthermore, as the poverty gap widens in these countries, the state's role as the basic provider of education and discourse development is being overtaken by other agencies. Schools run by religious or ideologically motivated actors have been used in the past as well as present to impart not only education but run as social service providers. Students in religious seminaries or madrassahs primarily come from highly populated lower income groups, whose parents are often unable to feed them, let alone provide for education and basic needs as well as a prospective employment opportunity. In Islam, the *Madrassah* traditionally and culturally has been the center of learning and excellence which over the centuries produced great scholars, theologians, researchers and scientists who, though belonging to a particular branch or sect would excel in all aspects of life.

Unfortunately, with Afghan jihad the madrassahs gained notoriety by becoming synonymous with violent militancy and terrorism, as a good number of such institutions were either purpose built to serve the cause of *jihad* or the preexisting ones were infiltrated through money, curriculum and resources to inculcate such a mindset. The education imparted at many such madrassahs is often biased, subjective, and insular, intentionally used to spread hatred and alienation not only between different sects, ethnic or religious groups but also nationalities. Interestingly such parochial sentiments are not the exclusive domain of religious seminaries, but studies of different educational (i.e. state, public and private) systems revealed that students from elite private educational institutions are no exception when it comes to expressing and nurturing extremist and radical sentiments.

Secondly, curricula are often devised to reinforce and conform to a strong sense of nationalism in young minds. The South Asian member states are no exception, as not only are they individually adept at this skill and tend to outdo each other in this effort; there has also been an increased attempt at charting exclusive historical roots that make common heritage and ancestry as elusive as possible. The textbooks are replete with tales of heroism against the *other*. With selective narration and intentional omission of critical cultural and historic facts which even if the effort is not to seek commonality, totally distort the historical and political foundations of the countries concerned. This intentional creation of the enemy image or the "other" has often been narrowly interpreted and perceived, resulting in ethnic and sectarian intolerance with very lethal consequences. This attempt at seeking deliberate and differential historical narratives becomes highly politicized and adds to mutual distrust and suspicion both at interstate as well as intra state level. Very often it is witnessed that regional neighbors tend to know about each other, but really do not know each other, leading to stereotypes and misperceptions.

Whereat one hand, there are problems pertaining to parochial mindsets and culture of conflict and animosity, on the other hand feeding such perceptions are tangible issues such as restrictive visa regimes & mirror imaging government policies. If it were difficult six to seven years back, with the Modi government in India since 2014, it is now next to impossible for citizens from India and Pakistan to visit each other's countries on academic-researcher visa. The situation remained the same even when there was a hype surrounding ease in visa regulations, there was and neither has been any betterment in obtaining visa for academics, scholars or researchers who would like to visit the other country.

Secondly, procedures involving laborious clearance, police reporting and no objection certifications from concerned ministries and agencies, make travel and physical access a near impossibility. Many a times visa is denied over flimsiest reasons which is a major hindrance in people to people outreach and contact. In such a restrictive environment, government, or public sector academic institution as well as academics cannot openly interact and exchange of scholars, conferences or scholarly activities and ventures cannot be easily pursued. Another issue that becomes problematic is for sponsoring agencies or governments to help facilitate such ventures as several countries in the region including India do not allow such practices.

## **The Way Out**

What is the way out of this quagmire? Would the South Asian neighbors remain hostage to their highly tainted nationalist visions, carefully crafting and reinforcing an ultra-nationalist narrative that remains the biggest hurdle in seeking a post nationalist discourse and capacity building. Interestingly, there is always an increased dialogue and discussion pertaining to the merits of multi-track diplomacy and increased people to people contact. Civil society, governmental bodies and interest groups do make the necessary sound bites with regards to the viability of such increased interaction, either to appease the sponsors or proponents of such an approach or to be in sync with global trends that support cooperation than conflict. South Asia is replete with examples and institutions that have been built to serve this purpose, but like the SAU, unfortunately they remain largely passive and much wanting in their performance. The need first and foremost is for an infrastructural and capacity building, which need not be done through bringing up new mechanisms but by strengthening and utilizing preexisting ones as well.

The state of educational institutions is much wanting in the entire region, for the common good of the region and the future human capital and resource base, there can be implemented minimal educational criteria and goal posts to better the standard of instruction and learning for the students. At the basic school level, by no means the attempt requires standardizing curricula, but setting quality standards and literacy requirements. This by no means is a small feat but required to upgrade the standard and quality of education throughout the region. This would not only focus on the students but instructors and teachers as well, an issue which is largely overlooked. At regional, as well as state level, there remains a dire need to review curricula from the basic to higher education level, to weed out hate, ultra nationalist & parochial text and literature. But firstly, are we ready for such a radical review and introspection? Especially when most of the member states are still proactively engaged in nation building projects? And would there be a uniform view on what constitutes biased, parochial or hate literature?

At the governmental level, attitudes and mindsets need to be reappraised. Mirror imaging, conditional and knee jerk reactions may only contribute to reinforcing a warped and narrow and biased nationalist viewpoint and by no means help in mitigating an environment for cooperation and trust or capacity building. To ensure a more accommodating and hospitable environment, the most important and most sought-after prerequisite is a much more tolerant, open and facilitative visa regime. At any level that we talk about, the most fundamental problem faced by regional neighbours is a restrictive and punitive visa regime. Except for Nepal and until recently Sri Lanka, none of the regional neighbors despite the spirit of SAARC have an open visa system (or visa on arrival). Where in terms of attitudes, Indian and Pakistani visa consulates mirror image each other, the Indian visa application system tops the list when it comes to bureaucratic hurdles and requirements. Again between these two countries, there also exists city rather than country visa with stringent restrictions on entry/ exit points etc. extensive and never ending clearance and non-objection certifications further censors the movement of individuals who genuinely seek to visit different areas in the other country for academic, research or mere tourism purpose that can enhance people to people contact.

To seek and build genuine connectivity, there is a need to promote and encourage collaborative and joint study projects. Already such projects are promoted by international or regional research bodies such as the Social Sciences Research Council, Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS) etc. however even then researchers are faced by similar hurdles and impediments. Collaborative research or joint study options can help facilitate a better understanding of each other's perspective; promote shared values, empathy and common thought which can further help us in achieving a post Nationalist discourse.

In terms of connectivity, South Asia of today stands at a much better position with regards connectivity issues that plagued it two decades back. CBMs on nontraditional issues signed in the 1980s specifically spelled out improvement in telecom facilities as well as access to newspapers between the regional neighbors and discouraging negative press and propaganda to better relations. Today, owing to the outreach of print, electronic and social media, many such physical barriers have been effectively circumvented. Although easy availability of books across the region may still be a problem, but accessing newspapers, viewpoints, official perspectives etc are just a click away. Although, these facilities may largely be available in urban or semi urban areas, yet the virtual media and internet has and can be effective in helping defuse this physical barrier.

The virtual space has been and can further be used to review hate literature and parochial, outdated, and biased curricula not only within the countries but across the region. India, Pakistan, and other regional countries have at various intervals, set up committees to review curriculum and upgrade the standard of instruction as well as education. The textbooks introduced in such pilot projects have been placed on the internet for open access; such practices can be replicated and adopted throughout the region without any strings attached.

Furthermore, soft editions of books, journals and all types of study material can be made available through an online library, which should be made accessible to all HEIs through respective University Grants' Commissions or equivalent bodies, similar to how Western databases such as JSTOR, Lexus Nexus or any other are made available.

Lastly, an online South Asian Archives can be developed and maintained. There could also be an attempt to work on a joint history writing project. Given the closure of physical borders and especially with the extended lockdowns globally owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a rising trend in holding webinars, online trainings, academic programs, which has helped transcend the physical barriers. Such trends can help and encourage greater connectivity and communication, which is fast disappearing in the contemporary South Asia, leading to a disconnect and lack of familiarity with each other. Such ideas have been brought up and explored in the past, but with a generation of scholars who do not carry the ideological baggage like their predecessors, the opportunity to seek such a task is a realistic possibility than an ideal thought. All such ideas and projects would require commitment and inputs from institutions located within individual member states, but they can group together under the common platform of SAARC, the SAU or the COSATT as a regional representative, that can infuse new enthusiasm and spirit in seeking a "common" culture and voice for the region. The best way is to create synergies through the diversities and handicaps at hand, build on and adopt the best practices and learn from the failures and shortcomings of the past. This can be done either by strengthening and building on pre-existing structures, or creating new ones, if the foundations of old systems are too weak to support new building blocks.

There is a need to create outreach opportunities both within and between states; there can be youth/ student exchange programs, trips, summer camps, student assemblies or youth parliamentarians at school, colleges and university level, as well as semester length exchanges between various educational institutions for better connectivity, openness and interaction. Already, an encouraging number of writers and academics are invited to literary festivals across the region, though again these visits become conditional to visa facilitation, but not only these issues should be looked into, but also promote such exchanges more often. Publications should be exchanged on a reciprocal basis, and to promote as well as acquaint readers with other countries' views, their socio political as well as literary views, mobile libraries can also be an effective outreach mechanism. These libraries can be sponsored by international publishing houses that have their country concerns in all member states, or again under the aegis of SAARC/ SAU or at best COSATT.

There are hardly any research or academic institutions that have a formal arrangement to collaborate and carryout joint ventures, even if there does exist such a mechanism at public sector level, such as the MoU signed between IDSA (New Delhi) and ISSI (Islamabad), there is hardly any collaboration in real terms. There is a need to carry out annual academic conferences on South Asia in all SAARC member states by circulation, for which the SAU can be the most appropriate forum. In this regard, the role of SAARC Secretariat is critical in providing the main impetus behind such ventures, by bringing together stakeholders from different institutions cross country who would in turn help in capacity building in their individual capacity. This would help in creating a community of like-minded individuals who believe in and would be the stakeholders in actualizing the regional vision needed for the common good and progress. It may at this point sound idealistic, given that SAARC has been rendered ineffective, there is a dire need to campaign and build constituencies of peace and connectivity for better communication and and travel regimes as well as looking at common problems through a focused and concerted approach that is critical for the survival and growth of the region. Unless and until we aim for the ideals, we will not be able to work on realistic and achievable goals.

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