South Asia

A geographical, environmental and historiographical introduction

Geographical and political South Asia

As the subtitle of the book indicates, the narrative of this work does not place national states, their historical legitimation and their history in the foreground, but rather aims instead to accentuate the trans-regional and trans-local historical aspects of South Asia. This approach has been favoured as state and national borders are, after all, drawn somewhat arbitrarily and are fleeting. The first emergence of the term “South Asia” as well as “Southeast Asia” dates from a German school atlas of the late nineteenth century. Following the Second World War the geographical label of South Asia gradually became vernacular within the sciences after which US military strategists defined the zone of operations east of British India as Southeast Asia. In this way political correctness has inhibited the identification of independent India embodied in the newly formed Indian Union and with that the whole geographical area.

Meanwhile, within the academic community the synonym “South Asian subcontinent” is commonly used alongside “South Asia”. The term “Indo-Pakistan subcontinent”, championed in Pakistani national historiography, has, however, not been able to assert itself internationally. Thus, South Asia is able to take its place in the contemporary nomenclature of terms denoting the different major regions of the Asian continent alongside that of East Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. That said, however, defining what comprises South Asia as a major region is contentious as, according to the United Nations’ geographical region classification, it comprises the countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, whereas other definitions and interpretations also sometimes include Burma and Tibet, but omit Iran. For the purposes of this book, however, South Asia will be taken to include only those territorial states marked as dark grey in Map 0.1.

Geographically, South Asia marks the southern reach of the Eurasian subcontinent which can be distinguished by its distinctive triangular form surrounded by the Indian Ocean. The west coast of the peninsula is defined by the Arabian Sea, and to the east the Gulf of Bengal in which the Maldives and Sri Lanka, both independent states, as well as the Laccadive and Andaman archipelagos are located. Politically, these island groups belong to the Indian
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Map 0.1 A map showing the overlapping definitions of the term “South Asia”

Union; although the location of the Andaman Islands, at least, would rather assign it to Southeast Asia. The Arakan Mountains and the Brahmaputra River in the northeast, the Himalayan mountain range in the north and the Indus Valley in the west with the Sulaiman and the Kirthar mountains form the “natural boundaries” of the region (see Map 0.2).

Since ancient Greece, India from a European perspective has been denoted as the land of the Indus. This is reflected in the Arabic-Persian culture which names India as the “land beyond the (S)Indus” and the inhabitants of which are understood to be called Hindus. In the course of the history of South Asia, four empires have ruled over the entirety, or at least a large part, of the subcontinent. Of these four, the Maurya Empire commanded by Emperor Ashoka (c. 274–236 BCE) succeeded in bringing all but the islands and the southernmost tip of the entire subcontinent under his control. At its height, the Gupta Empire (CE 320–500) spanned the whole of north India and parts of the Dekhan Plateau. During the eighteenth century and the reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707), the Mughal Empire encompassed virtually the whole subcontinent. This expansion of control was then emulated in the middle of the nineteenth century with the creation of the British-Indian Empire or, as contemporary Britons called it, the British Raj. It is clear that the emergence of the empires was something of an exception in the long history of South Asia and that regional realms and states were the organisational rule of societies and polities.

Agriculturally, the Indian subcontinent can be roughly divided into three distinct regions: namely the Himalayan mountain range, the north Indian lowlands of the Indus, Ganga (Ganges) and the Brahmaputra Rivers, and finally the Indian peninsula known as the Dekhan Plateau. The Himalayan
Map 0.2 A map showing the topography and natural borders of the South Asian region

Mountain range can be divided into five regions. First, the high mountains of the Tibetan Himalayas followed, second, by the almost entirely snow-capped range with its ten summits all over 8,000m. Third, the lesser Himalayas which gains in width and height as it stretches from east to west forming the Kathmandu and Kashmir Valleys. Despite access difficulties, this narrow mountain chain, or more specifically its valleys, are an old and significant settlement area which has been used to different agricultural ends.

In front of this ridge lies the fourth sub-region, the Sivalik Hills, a range of mountains rising to 1,200m covering a strip of land 1,700km in length and between 10 and 80km in width. Occasionally the inhabitants of the river valleys in the Sivalik region migrated into new areas bringing with them intensive farming and forestry techniques. Such areas are known as Duns. South of the Sivalik Hills lies the Terai, a 25 to 50km wide humid marshy forest area,
which, on account of its high infection rate of malaria and the barren soil, has long been sparsely inhabited compared to the nearby Gangetic Plain. 

Even today the area has a low population density. The fifth agricultural sub-region that can be identified is the highly fertile Ganges-Brahmaputra valley running between the Himalayan Mountains and the Dekhan Plateau which profits from layers up to 2000m thick of rich sediment topped with alluvial deposit.

The Ganges valley itself can also be divided into different sub-regions. The western part is composed of a number of Doabs (lit.: do ab: two waters), the most well-known and the longest of which is the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The Gandak and the Son are major tributary rivers feeding the Ganges east of Allahabad (confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna) on the Awadh plain. The eastern part of the Ganges Valley forms the delta region of the Brahmaputra and the Ganga with their numerous tributaries, which over time have produced the Sundarbans, an ecologically unique area of mangrove forest. To the west of the Ganges Valley, separated from Delhi only by the Aravalli Range, lies the Panjab (lit.: parch ab: five waters/rivers: the Satlej, the Beas, the Ravi, the Chenab and the Jhelum), the upper part of the Indus River system. The fertile flood-plains defined by the curve of the river from its mouth to the Ganga-Yamuna Doab played host to the Harappa civilisation, South Asia’s earliest advanced urban civilisation. Moreover, the greater area of Delhi is recognised as the oldest permanently populated region of South Asia.

The Dekhan Plateau, the third largest biosphere of subcontinent, is found in southern India. The plateau differs succinctly in its geological makeup and regional characteristics to also be divided into sub-regions. The easterly sloping large inland plateau is the first of such characteristic features. Other than the Narmada and the Tapti rivers, all of the other major rivers flow eastwards. Although the southern part of the plateau experiences copious precipitation, the run-off is too fast on account of the geological composition of the area for the water to be used agriculturally. This has given rise to a culture of irrigation distinguished by the building and maintenance of a number of dams. The northern area of the Dekhan Plateau is characterised by a number of rifts and trenches such as Narmada Valley and mountain massifs such as the Satpura and Vindhya Ranges. The mostly wide river valleys provide for surface irrigation of agricultural land.

The highlands of Chota-Nagpur (covering parts of the present-day federal states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh) mark the natural boundary of the Ganges Valley in the east. The hilltops of this area were the chosen territory of the Munda people as they retreated from the advancing invaders from the west. Today, the area continues to be something of a retreat, though admittedly now it is from the invasion of the large mining industries attracted by the wealth of the natural minerals in the surrounding area. The so-called Adivasi (lit.: original inhabitants) live in this area of the subcontinent that is known as the Tribal Belt; a relatively dense forest strip that stretches from Gujarat in the west to Assam in the east.
The mountain ranges of the Western and Eastern Ghats define the limits of the plateau. Whilst the Western Ghats, known for their dense forest and biodiversity, rise to a height of 2600m, the Eastern Ghats reach less lofty heights of 1600m. The plateau is lined by a narrow, flat coastline constituting a second physical region characterised by the large deltas of the Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri Rivers along the Coromandel Coast. The area with its highly fertile alluvial soils continues to earn the region the title of the “rice bowl” of South India. Despite the mere 20 to 50km wide strip of rugged coastline that comprises the Malabar and Konkan Coast, intensive agriculture is made possible through the interception of the abundant monsoon rains.

Ultimately, it is the monsoon rains (Arabic: mausim: season) that determines the climate and the agro-economic cycle of South Asia. As approximately 70 per cent of the current agricultural industry is dependent on the amount of natural precipitation, the timing and the length of the monsoon rains are determinant factors for crop yield and harvest success as well as water supply for the population. Generally speaking the monsoon is divided into the southwest summer monsoon occurring in late June until September, fading between October and December and the northeast monsoon from December to February followed by a hot spell from April to May. By virtue of the monsoon being a relatively shallow air stream, precipitation can vary considerably from season to season. Weather conditions, humidity, wind speeds and temperature all have a deciding influence in the onset of the monsoon, its advance and its precipitation levels.

As the warm monsoon winds that gather over the Arabian Sea are forced up over the Western Ghats the air is cooled, producing sudden cloud bursts of torrential rain and giving rise to the oft cited “burst of the monsoons”. Once over the Western Ghats the monsoon front advances fairly rapidly over the rest of the subcontinent whereupon the westerly winds over Bengal force the monsoon along the southern flank of the Himalayas as the monsoon proceeds in a northwesterly direction. As a result the highest annual precipitation levels of up to 2,500mm fall in the Western Ghats and the southern slopes of the Himalayas in east India. The lee side of the Western Ghats experiences relatively little annual precipitation of 400 to 600mm whilst levels in Rajasthan and Pakistan, to the west of the subcontinent, record levels under 400mm and often less than 150mm.10

The unpredictability in levels of precipitation has, and continues to represent a serious problem for South Asia’s agriculturists. Fluctuations in rainfall affect the drier regions of the subcontinent most dramatically, particularly when lack of rainfall leads to drought conditions and the loss of the harvest. On the other hand, rain-laden regions, especially those areas around the Himalayan foothills as well as the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta, are equally prone to harvests being destroyed by flash flooding. The monsoon’s rainfall is so fundamental for agriculture that farmers distinguish between the harvests that follow each monsoon: with the kharif crop following the summer monsoon and the rabi crop following the winter monsoon. In Tamil Nadu and in the northeast of Sri Lanka the rice harvest following the main wet season
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Map 0.3  Monsoon and precipitation in South Asia. Adapted from Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, A History of India, 5th Edition (Routledge: 2010), p. 3

From October to January is known as samba and maha, respectively. Temperature is another important element affecting the harvest. Temperatures rise in the summer months along the latitudinal lines, developing distinct continental conditions. In north India, for example, temperatures can occasionally exceed 50°C whilst annual averages for the area are between 27–29°C. Temperature fluctuations are lowest along the humid Malabar Coast and in Sri Lanka.¹¹

One noticeable element concerning the climate of the subcontinent is the contrast between the seasonal wet regions and the year-round rather dry zones, both environments deeply influencing the way of people’s lives. Alongside the differing methods of cultivation and staple crops such as wheat and rice which are grown in the areas of heavy rainfall, the thinning forests and light groves are the natural, vegetative border to the Arid Corridor which extends from the Thar Desert through the Dekhan Plateau on the Coromandel Coast to the
so-called Dry Zone in northern Sri Lanka. Not only did this corridor influence the migratory movements of the semi-nomadic and nomadic populations of the area, but also military lines of approach. In stark contrast to this arid area, those regions that experience high levels of precipitation covered with dense forests, such as the Tribal Belt in the east of the subcontinent, have been influenced little by migratory peoples. It was first with the discovery of rich minerals during the nineteenth century and then the development of deforestation methods that opened up this area, allowing the settlement of outsiders who brought with them the lucrative undertaking of agriculture.\(^{12}\)

Whilst the area of the South Asian subcontinent is considerably larger when compared to that of Western Europe, a number of historically important regions have been formed on account of the subcontinent’s natural landscape, climatic, geological and ecological conditions. Furthermore, these conditions have had a formative effect on the regional and local cultures of the people. Such a historical region, so often marked by some geological or climatic communality, was often settled with familial groups, clans and societies who were aware of their own pasts, histories and specific culture by virtue of the numerous forms of traditions. Whilst such a region can be denoted by specific linguistic regions, this is rather the exception than the rule in the South Asian subcontinent. It is rather the case that a historic region is characterised by common symbols, myths, history, clothing habits, rituals, celebrations and customs. Noteworthy examples of such historic regions include Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Orissa and Gujarat, smaller historical regions include the Ganga-Yamuna-Doab, Bundelkhand, Chhattisgarh and Khandesh, among others.\(^{13}\)

The South Asian subcontinent can be roughly divided into three main regions wherein the process of state and empire building was a constant characteristic, which, at its core, was based on historical regions. The first such region is that of the north Indian floodplains of the Indus and the Ganga, the second being the east coast of the continent with its main focus of the Coromandel Coast, and third, the highlands of the Dekhan which is separated by the central Indian vegetation belt from the north Indian floodplains. An integral moment in the formation and stabilisation of rule over this area was the extent of military range featured under pre-modern organisation and logistic conditions which featured a 300km radius around the centre of power and the ability to intervene militarily within 900km of the centre.\(^{14}\) Even the modern Mughal Empire was based upon such conditions giving rise to provinces of appropriate military operational size. Likewise the state-building process on the provincial level of the Mughal Empire was also based on this organisational pattern during the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, the area of the Ganges Valley encompasses the Delhi-Agra (Doab) region, followed by the Awadh region with the cities of Allahabad, Kanpur, Lakhnau and Varanasi (Banaras), as well as the Bihar and Bengal regions with the urban centres of Patna, Dhaka and Kolkata. The area of the Tribal Belt also felt the effects of state formation such as in the east on the
fertile levels of Chhattisgarh (lit.: 36 castles), in the area of the central Indian city of Nagpur, further west on the Malwa Plateau with its cities Ujjain and Indore as well as Rajputana in the west with Udaipur and Jaipur. These regions were by no means isolated power or cultural centres, as in every direction trade relations and cultural contact could be found. Also the Arid Corridor offered possibilities of migration and military action and it was via this corridor that the Mughals were able to advance south at the end of the seventeenth century and then to the Maratha to the north in the eighteenth century.

The macro-geographical region of the Coromandel Coast can be subdivided into four historical areas in which the year-round abundant water supply from the river deltas is not only advantageous for rice cultivation, but also makes textile production of the colourful printed fabrics, so iconic of the region, possible. This is particularly true for the Krishna-Godaveri-Delta, the Kanchipuram region, the Kaveri-Delta and finally the Madurai area. In turn, the central highlands of the Dekhan Plateau can also be differentiated into four historical core areas: first the fertile area around Aurangabad and the region of Maharashtra in the north, second the area of Haiderabad/Golkonda in the southeast located roughly in the provincial region of Andhra, third Chota Nagpur-Orissa in the east and last the area of Mysur-Bangaluru/Bangalore in the south. Malabar, far in the south on the west coast of the subcontinent, is also a separate historical region.

As can be seen in Map 0.4 the thick lines of division between the different regions indicate the relative isolation of those regions they encompass. Of particular note are the regions of Kashmir, Nepal and Assam with their relative impermeable borders. Whilst the Tribal Belt forms one barrier region between the lowlands of the north and the mountains of the south, a second barrier region can be distinguished along the Eastern Ghats from Orissa to the Godaveri made notable by its paltry soil, moderate agriculture and low population density. A further barrier region can be found to the south of Krishna. The varied landscapes and natural areas found on the Indian subcontinent have consequently led to relatively stable agricultural relations and thus, in the course of history, also to the establishment of stable political governance. Such areas found themselves in intense political, economic and cultural exchanges with one another. However, marginal regions also existed, which remained relatively isolated due mainly to their geographical location.

**Historiography of modern South Asia since the 1980s**

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the historiography of modern Indian history had been divided between that of the British “imperialist history” (which focused heavily on the long-term benefits of colonial rule), and that of the “nationalist history” originating from Indian scholars. One branch of this nationalistic history writing broached the subject of the exploitative character of colonial rule whilst a second branch, somewhat radically,
Map 0.4 The historical regions. Adapted from © miljoshi/CC Licensed

postulated a prior superiority of the Indian civilisation compared to that found in Europe in ancient times. This approach, on the one hand, aimed to reject the British claim of enacting a civilising mission in India, whilst on the other hand, stressed the necessity that Indians need remember only their own values in order to accomplish the establishment of a new nation. Despite the different approaches Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi historians were occupied until well into the 1980s with the question as to why their respective states had not yet been able to secure the national basis on which the nation-state could be established and to ask why the nation-building process was not yet complete.¹⁵

Meanwhile, however, questions have been raised of the continuities of Indian socio-economic structures as well as the longevity and transformative
ability of institutions before, during and since British colonial rule – a topic that has inspired some fascinating debates. At the beginning of the 1980s, Christopher Bayly laid the foundations for a paradigm shift. Yet it can be observed that with the growing nationalisation in Indian politics at the end of the twentieth century a partial renaissance of the nationalistic-Indian historiography (re)emerged. As a variant of the well-known constructs this re-emergence attempts to idealise the pre-colonial conditions of the subcontinent whilst describing the role of the British as brutal “colonial-imperialist destroyers of culture”, something, which in such a sweeping nature, is unacceptable. Of course, it cannot be denied that in the course of British colonial rule fundamental socio-economic transformations in South Asia were enacted; however, these were by no means uniformly applied across the subcontinent and moreover differed in their intensity over a period of 150 years.

Aside from the emphasis on the long-term developments of the subcontinent, since the end of the twentieth century a growing number of historians have come to understand, and interpret, the Indian Ocean in line with the literature conceptualising the Mediterranean Sea as a world region. The Indian Ocean’s neighbouring areas are seen in a larger context whilst the ocean, despite the many dividing elements, is regarded as a means of connection. In the meantime original research has been undertaken into trade history, migration movements and cultural exchange in which trans-locality and inter-continental exchange comes to the fore. Above all, following this change in research perspective, the historiographical paradigm was reopened for assessment; this starting with the European “discovery” of a maritime route to South Asia in 1498 which initiated the economic development and the intensive trade between the coastal regions of the Indian Ocean. The paradigm shift has made the realisation all the clearer that, contrary to first thought, the Europeans, initially at least, merely participated and hardly instigated this trade in the Indian Ocean, whilst “Indians” were considerably more economically and socially mobile than was believed.

A number of notable books concerning Indian history have been published since the paradigm shift in the historiography of South Asia. Among them is Stanley Wolpert’s A New History of India. In what can be termed a “classic” manner, Wolpert’s 1977 work comprises a history of the subcontinent dating from its ancient times to the current day. Whilst the 20 chapters in the eight editions since its original publication can only be seen as a partial success, the book triumphs in its chapter covering the political development of South Asia since the implementation of Emergency Rule (1975–77) under Indira Gandhi. The major shortcoming of the book is that Wolpert seems to hold an ever-present teleological belief in the unity of South Asia as the significance of its history which is exemplified in the numerous chapter titles that include the idea of “unification”. Despite this the period following the independency of British India in 1947 is almost entirely dealt with from the perspective of the development of India whilst Pakistan is portrayed, at best, as an opponent, and at worst as a secessionary state.
Herrmann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund's book, *A History of India*, is similar to that of Wolpert's in more than merely its title. First published in German in 1982 and then republished in an English translation in 1986, the book has reached its fifth edition following a change of publishers. This fluently written text is, above all, a political history of the subcontinent spanning the Indus civilisation to the present day. The book's shortcoming however, is, likewise, its presentation of the period following the independence of British India in 1947 as it restricts itself to the Indian Union whilst Pakistan and Bangladesh are only referred to in connection to the Indian state. The book's major merit is the clearly noticeable shift to the South Asian perspective in which the presentation of South Asia's realms and states as well as the "Indian freedom fight" is duly highlighted. Without doubt, Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India, 1885–1947* is among the best grand narratives of the new history of South Asia, which, since its first publication in 1983, has been re-edited a number of times, most recently in 2003. Whilst the book is organised around traditional topics, a conventional emphasis of theses and periodisation, the book manages to deliver, for the first time, what can be regarded as a modern social history of South Asia. Its only limitation is that of the narrow period the author has chosen to cover.

Judith M. Brown's *Modern India* has also developed into an important resource for the history of South Asia, albeit if occasionally rather too detailed for an introductory text. In the context of the forming of political will and that of the Indian states, Brown is able to emphasise continuity of the Indian institutions. Led by its idiosyncratic observation that the Indian Union is, reportedly, the only decolonised Asian state to have been able to establish a stable democratic political system, the premise of the work focuses on the democratisation process of British India. Such an approach is, however, problematic in as far as Western democracies are taken as a point of reference. Such a criticism can also be applied to many of the grand narrations of the history of South Asia mentioned thus far in which Western values such as human rights, freedom, democracy, development, to name but a few, are either explicitly or implicitly dominant in the presentations and relegate the states of the South Asian subcontinent to positions behind that of the West.

It is widely acknowledged that Crispin Bates' *Subalterns and the Raj* ranks among the best general overviews of South Asian history since the turn of the millennium. Bates begins his account of South Asian history in 1600 and thereby is able to mark the modern developments in the history of the subcontinent, which is a gratifying innovation. That said, however, the first four chapters present something of a prolegomena to the actual account of the book which concentrates on the British *Raj* post-1858. Where the aforementioned titles fall short, Bates excels as he is able to consolidate not only Pakistan, but also Sri Lanka, in the accounts of historical-political developments following decolonisation. Admittedly, however, Bates’ book is not free from critique as the all too often presented Western values are, once again, included; this is especially the case with regard to the political development of
the region. For example, the South Asian postcolonial states are portrayed as a poor copy of the colonial power. In this way the contemporary states of the subcontinent are dealt the double burden of, first, accepting the colonial heritage in which many of its faults are ignored, and second, faced with the necessity of creating the postcolonial state according to Western parameters.

The book’s merit, however, is in Bates’ innovative use of research trends since the paradigm shift of the historiography of South Asia of the 1980s, including the findings of the Subaltern Studies group. Not only are the South Asian actors elevated to the focal point of historical events, but also Bates is able to add increased attention to the resistance movements, a field that had hitherto been underrepresented in the history writing of South Asia. Having said this, however, Bates could have gone further in his exploration of subaltern agency within resistance itself which remains somewhat restricted when compared to the focus paid to the formation of social movements. In some instances the historical narrative of the colonial power is perpetuated, as in the case of the political development, for example. The narrative consists of a strongly actor-orientated history in which, on the face of it, political leaders single-handedly crafted the fortunes of a state regardless of whether this refers to the state-building in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka.

The approach taken by the French South Asian scholar Claude Markovits, is a successful attempt at presenting a modern history of the subcontinent in a number of separate chapters covering the period from 1480 to 1950. Markovits succeeds in handling a comprehensive period from a procedural, as well as a method-orientated approach. Such an analytical method also provides the chance to settle a number of recent research findings and interpretations. Admittedly, however, the text is not free from conventional presentation norms, notably as exemplified in the repeated standardised phases of periodisation. Despite this, history seems only to take place in British India whilst sections pertaining to the princely and monarchical India that comprised some 40 per cent of the land area of the continent and approximately 25 per cent of the population is awarded a single sub-section of 25 pages. The same 25-page treatment is given to the account of the French exploits in India in a book totalling some 600 pages.

Peter Robb’s handling of the history of India is similar in that it focuses strongly on the actor-orientated influence of Indian history at certain key dates. Whilst most of the South Asian historians have recently focused on the cultural, political and economic variances of the subcontinent, and, above all, its history, Robb adopts the opposite position in his postulation over the entity of “India” in stark comparison to the disunity exemplified in Europe. Apart from this, the many subtitles portray something of a general account. According to Robb, the modernisation process began in the West with the spread of British colonial rule. From the second half of the eighteenth century British rule is presented as virtually the single dynamic force within the subcontinent in which Indians appear, if at all, simply as the governed. Clear diagrams to such end are included in the cartographic material that
accompanies the publication in which the growing territorial extent of British colonial occupation is depicted as a shaded area of land whilst the rest of India is simply shown as blank space.\textsuperscript{25}

In the same year (2002) David Ludden's \textit{India and South Asia: A Short History} was also published.\textsuperscript{26} As with many of the overviews of South Asian history, Ludden also begins with the pre-history of the subcontinent by introducing the Harappa civilisation which is followed by an account of the "Classical-Vedic-Age". This is followed by a violent "Muslim Middle Age" including the Mughal Empire. Ludden's modern period of South Asia's history begins with the British colonial rule over the subcontinent. The history of the successor states in British India is handled in a rather curious way as the newly formed nation-states are portrayed as poorer versions of the colonial regime. An area of contention within the book surrounds Ludden's concept of "ethnic identity", which, according to the author, emerged during the Middle Ages. However, it is not always clear to the reader what is meant by this. As a result a variety of ethnic groups are introduced, intermixed and used almost interchangeably between the titles of "ethnic groups", "religious communities", "castes" and finally as "colonial elites". In general, the overriding impression of the text is that it was the elites that were the catalyst driving the history of South Asia. It is therefore by no means surprising that here, too, the modern history of South Asia once more appears to be the history of the British in India.

It is in this point that Barbara and Thomas Metcalf's compact presentation of Indian history differs. In just over 300 pages, the authors are able to present a wide spectrum of topics which are well-conceived and handled in a balanced fashion. Although this narrative and descriptive approach is successful, the book lacks analytical sharpness. Despite this drawback, however, the book impresses and should be recommended as a short but solid introductory overview of the field.\textsuperscript{27}

Conceived explicitly for use as a textbook, Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal have succeeded in delivering a very course-orientated introduction into the history of South Asia by incorporating fitting debates and research results of late. In compact chapters of around ten pages each, the authors are able to guide the reader chronologically from the early twentieth century through a number of notable points in South Asian history, often portrayed in an authoritative manner, to the present day. The goal of writing South Asian history is fulfilled in as far as the history of the successor states of British India are equally treated and also in the fact that Sri Lanka too is mentioned occasionally.\textsuperscript{28}

Burton Stein offers a highly innovative view of the history of India.\textsuperscript{29} As a self-confessed opponent to teleological, development-orientated historiography, Stein is able to animate past events within contemporary occurrences as history is not merely a succession of incidences taking place as time unfolds, but should rather be understood as a collection within which the individual entries are variable and can therefore always be repositioned or reordered. Speaking also for this approach is not only the fact that numerous new findings are able to
be discovered in comparison to conventional historiography, but that a new methodology and a re-evaluation of existing evidence as well as the consideration of facts hitherto not considered as historical evidence affords the possibility to construct a genuine Indian history of intrinsic value.

The attempt of opposing the perspective of the Indian Union, and the Hindu perspective accordingly, in the conventional presentation of South Asian history by a Muslim-accented history of British India has been only partly successful. S. M. Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi's voluminous historiographical work entitled *The British Raj in India: An Historical Review* seems to be an ideologically prefabricated text which establishes the necessity in henceforth creating a Muslim state within the subcontinent from a historical perspective – which is, in fact, ahistorical. This, however, is also true for many of the “pro-Indian” overview histories mentioned above since they too often pay tribute to the founding fathers of the Indian Union and most prominently to Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. Neither is Burke and Quraishi’s work void of such political tribute to the fathers of Pakistan.30

In contrast, Christophe Jaffrelot’s edited edition of competent authors offers insights into individual aspects of Pakistan’s history and is thereby a critical introduction into the history of the country. The authors attempt to distance themselves from the previous stereotypes and to allow the country and the state its own history without falling into nationalistic trappings.31 Ian Talbot provides a further offering of Pakistan’s history in a work which effectively offers easy access to a still difficult historiographical field.32 Meanwhile, a useful overall view of Bengal history can be found in the form of Sirajul Islam’s guide-like history of Bangladesh which covers the history of this region from 1704 to the formation of the Bengali state.33 Recently Willem van Schendel succeeded in offering a highly innovative and superb presentation of Bengal’s and Bangladesh’s history. Entitled *A History of Bangladesh*, the work takes on a long-term examination of the historic region of Bengal starting with the geographical, ecological, geological and climatic characteristics before moving on to focus on the Mughal period and then further on to the present-day history of the country and its people, including the young nation-state after 1971.34

Despite its age, the best introductory text to Sri Lankan history remains Kingsley M. De Silva’s *A History of Sri Lanka* published in 1981, and subsequently re-edited for its reprint in 2007, which places the political history of the island along with its socio-political and economic history at the forefront of the book’s aims. Admittedly the book does exhibit a strong concentration on the developing constitutional process of the twentieth century; this, however, is not detrimental but, on the contrary, helps develop a good and knowledgeable overview of the island.35 A more updated history and historiographical account of the island state that does not slip into the trappings of a national narrative is imperative for the academic field. In contrast, John Whelpton’s *A History of Nepal* couples conventional political history with the concepts of culture, environment and society in his account of Nepal.36
This recent publication updates and replaces Rishikesh Shaha’s two-volume *Modern Nepal*. The representations of the history of South Asia, and specifically of individual nation-states of the subcontinent since the turn of the millennium, are increasingly considered in the context of the paradigm shift of the 1980s. However, the “classical” historical representations continue to find their own place and succeed in providing re-editions for the readership. The danger hereby, however, is that old narratives, obsolete views and national parameters continue to be handed down to future generations of South Asian (history) scholars. The more recent grand overviews that exhibit a tendency of over-playing a Hindu-national bias do not serve to offer a timely historiographical account of South Asia. This is especially true of D.R. SarDesai’s book which is based on the historiographical concepts of the 1950s and 1960s, presenting history as a chronological sequence of Indian rulers (Mughal, Maratha) and prime ministers of the Indian Union. The aim of presenting a new form of historical enquiry into the history of India which makes use of a new periodisation and focuses on the lower classes has, unfortunately, not been delivered.

In clear distinction to the above-mentioned works, the aim of this present account is to attempt to not present the history of South Asia along national narratives paying strict adherence to chronological depictions, but rather to approach South Asian history from a thematic perspective. Themes such as migration, environment, work, urbanisation, transformations in agricultural techniques and agricultural economics, colonial-capitalistic asymmetry, social change and the formation of political will form the focus of this work. The approach of dealing with Indian history and South Asian societies from a thematic perspective is advantageous in that such organisation will allow for a break from the conventional historiographies, as well as providing the foundations to introduce a new form of history writing of the subcontinent in which a multitude of actors form the centre of the historical analysis and interpretation.

**The concept of this book**

This books aims to considerably distance itself from the previous master narratives indicated above with their noted failings; this will largely be achieved in the organisation and conception of the book along thematic rather than chronological lines. Such a reorganisation contrary to conventional practice has been deemed necessary on account that the sheer size of the area of study with its variety of regions, landscapes, inhabitants and cultures make a uniform sequential narration (and narrative) impossible. Only when approached from a plurality of perspectives can an adequate history of the subcontinent become achievable. Under the guiding headings of “State formation and empire building in South Asia c. 1660–1800”; “Patriotisms and nationalisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”; “State formation and empire building in South Asia 1858–1998”; “Agriculture and agro-economy”; “Silviculture and scientific forestry”; “Migration, circulation and diaspora”; “Urbanisation and
industrialisation”; and “Knowledge, science, technology and power”, this book will attempt to map a social history of the South Asian subcontinent. It goes without saying that it is not the aim herein to pass final judgement on the difficult historiography of the area, but rather to comment on and synthesise contemporary historical research.

In order to facilitate the introduction to each topic area, each chapter is fronted with a general, theoretical outline. Furthermore, the numerous cartographic materials and pictures serve not merely as illustrations, but should rather be seen as supplementary material aimed at expanding the knowledge expressed in the text. Historiographical debates as well as the most recent research results will also be introduced and built upon. Such additions aim to show that history is not a static given, but is rather a dynamic process that evolves through constant discussion, interpretation and reinterpretation not only to illustrate contemporary societies’ conditionality, but also to give them meaning. This meaning does not lie in the nation-state itself as the bastion of history as if history would no longer exist if that state were to cease in its existence. Instead the attempt will be undertaken to offer and develop other avenues to historical understanding and realisation along a thematic field of historical study.

Following the paradigm shift in the 1980s a new research focus has developed in the area of historical sciences in South Asia which has influenced the selection of thematic blocks explored in this publication. The emergence of modern states, and specifically the process of state and empire-building, is still of great academic interest. This, among other things, has contributed to the necessary revision of the stereotypical image of South Asia being politically static. Under such changed paradigms, even the eighteenth century – so often characterised as “anarchic” and “chaotic” – becomes dynamic as it depicts the Mughal Empire not as simply collapsing, but of undergoing a process of state-building initiated from below, as well as from within, forcing organisation and reorganisation. A comparison with the “Empire” – as the British labelled the Holy Roman Empire until the middle of the eighteenth century before it was replaced with Britain’s own “Empire” – could well be helpful for our purposes herein. Furthermore, the South Asian wars of dynastic succession of the eighteenth century, so similar to those occurring in Europe at the same time, will not be viewed as bringing about the collapse of the Mughal Empire, but instead rather viewed as serving the necessary method in bringing in what is known in history as the early modern period during which early modern states were formed on the foundations of historical regions out of the centrally controlled Mughal Empire into a more federally transformed structure.

The South Asian agricultural practices have always, and still continue to, attract the interests of the historians, anthropologists and ethnologists. According to accounts originating from such sources, peasants formed the backbone of all the regimes in South Asia. In recent years interest in agricultural history with regards to technology and maximisation of production has now become a subject of social history. Following changes in land division, taxation systems and yield maximisation, an increased social mobility of
landed individuals is noticeable and forms the forefront of such social studies. The question of where and when levels of society and even classes of the new wealthy peasants and conversely the impoverishment of the landless peasants began to develop is of importance here. This broad question encompasses others, such as the extent to which peasants had access to land and their abilities to secure it. Here too, it is necessary to investigate in what way the British colonial state influenced this development, where it may have accelerated this crystallisation of social levels and, similarly, where it may have successfully attempted to halt it.

Just as in the field of agricultural development the issues of mobilisation and immobilisation are of importance when examining industrialisation and the control of the emerging workforce. Even before industrialisation in British India began in the middle of the nineteenth century – rather limited and hesitant in a number of regional cities at first – British plantation owners were already looking to recruit labourers in South Asia for the British colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean in order to compensate for the chronic labour shortage following the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century. Issues pertaining to labour and migratory organisation played an integral role for the British colonial state in the whole of South Asia, which, from the middle of the nineteenth century, was visible in the factories in the industrial centres of Bombay, Ahmedabad and Calcutta, as well as on the tea plantations in Assam and on the sugarcane fields of Mauritius to the Caribbean islands, Malaysia and Fiji. This plantation industry became characterised by the division of labour organisation and agro-industrialisation.

This initial transoceanic migration, which enabled the high mobility of the South Asian population, laid the foundation for what would become known as the “Indian Diaspora”. This mobility has, in recent years, been characterised by Indian nationalists at the turn of the millennium who see the millions of Indians at work overseas not as exploitation and in line with the former terminology of a “brain drain”, but instead as a profitable contemporary global “brain bank”. Furthermore, it must be recognised that the Indian diaspora plays a growing role in the societies in which they find themselves. Often many will become first truly aware of their Indian origin, despite the many differences in the Indian society, whilst away. However, the Indian diaspora is much more multifaceted when compared to other diaspora groupings around the world; for example, the religious importance as paid to the Jewish diaspora is but a single feature, if at all, among many characterising the Indian diaspora. Far more influential and telling is the global networking of the Indian diaspora via the internet, mobile telecommunications and international travel, which in turn reiterates the mobility of south Asian migrants.

Industrialisation and urbanisation are two phenomena of modern history that cannot be separated or viewed in isolation. Once again the issue of migration (i.e. mobilisation) of the labour force and their settling (i.e. immobilisation)
comes to the fore. On the one hand this implies identity as well as class formation of the labour force in their new urban surroundings, whilst on the other hand it also makes the issue of work organisation in the context of factory production relevant. If the influx of job seekers was particularly noticeable in the industrial areas in which the population density was already extreme, so too was the rapid population growth recorded in the other cities in British India. Soon many suffered in South Asian towns, and still continue to suffer, from housing shortages, lack of water supply, inadequate waste, refuse and sewage disposal and poor medical care. Whilst in Europe urbanisation was attempted to be managed through town planning, the British colonial power in South Asia failed to address these problems adequately, the effects of which continue to be seen, and felt, today.

The question of whether India was modernised during British colonial domination is a highly contested arena of research within which a number of ideological skirmishes are fought. For example, steam-generated power supply, and its implied social mobilisation, continues to be the yardstick against which many historians measure modernisation. As a testament to this modernisation process such commentators enthuse in the ability to catalogue impressive lists of figures pertaining to the progressive nature of development whilst the long-term use and harm caused by many of the gigantic canal and railway construction projects, pursued with vigour by the successor states of British India, especially in the Indian Union, have only been analysed since the 1970s from a rather naïve positivist belief in progress. In the meanwhile such interpretations have been reassessed.

It is clear that the conventional, well-known topic areas have acquired a new relevance through a new approach of enquiry. Simultaneously, new topic areas have become the subject of historical interest in the research on South Asia. The main trends of this shift are presented in this book whilst further important areas are also addressed. The thematic organisation of this book will allow for, on the one hand, the historicisation of the nation-state and thereby also pave the way for a social history of the subcontinent that is free from the nation-state as a point of reference. On the other hand, such organisation will also permit long-term developments in trans-national and trans-local perspectives to be highlighted whilst also firmly placing various actors, not states, at the centre of historical events.

The research results from the 1980s have, for the most part, shed light on some magnificent findings in relation to the history and society of South Asia, permitted the development of theoretical models and delivered a basis for the new historiography of this world region. Curiously, however, such impetus has seldom found its way into the master narratives of the area. The goal of this book, therefore, is to fill this historiographical gap whilst remaining a readable and useful account of the modern history of South Asia. Given the sheer wealth of material discovered in undertaking this work it became obvious that not all aspects of this history would be able to receive the same attention. Furthermore, some thematic holes had to remain unfilled. Completeness,
however, was also, understandably, never envisaged from the outset, yet
despite any shortcomings I hope that this book remains enlightening and
entertaining.

Notes

1 Debes, Kirchhoff and Kropatschek 1905: 49. Edition first awarded at the International
Geographical Congress in Bern, 1891. Map no. 33: “South Asia”, map no. 36:
“Southeast Asia”.
2 Bose and Jalal 2004: 3.
3 Pye and Pye 1985: 133.
6 Wink 1990: 1–3.
7 Cf. Kulke and Rothermund 2010: see maps pp. 69, 90, 201, 256.
9 Bohle 1995: 19–28. The following sections also refer to this work.
12 Farmer 1993: 8.
13 Cohn 1987a: 100–35.
14 The following paragraphs are based on Kulke and Rothermund 2010: 9–12.
15 Cf. The Subaltern School volumes published after 1982 address the question of
why India so far has failed to become a nation. The Subaltern School will be
dealt with below.
16 Bayly 1983.
17 Two such works include: Chaudhuri S. 1995, Parthasarathi 2001.
19 Wöpelt 2009.
26 Ludden 2002.
27 Metcalf and Metcalf 2002.
28 Bose and Jalal 2004.
29 Stein 1998.
30 Burke and Quraishi 1995.
32 Talbot 2005.
34 Schendel 2009.
35 De Silva 1981.
36 Wheeldon 2008.
37 Shahi 1996.
38 Embree and Wilcox 2000.