1 Introduction

The tendency of grouping all of ‘Asia’ and ‘Oceania’ together often imbalances perspectives on global themes. This is the case with minority rights in a more pronounced manner than many others, where there is often concerted focus on sub-regions in Europe, while Asian issues remain superficially touched upon. Asia, containing 60 per cent of the world’s population, may be understood as comprising at least five distinct sub-regions. This chapter is focused on South Asia, which, for the purposes of this review, includes the States of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Legitimate questions could be asked as to whether Afghanistan is more logically grouped with other Central Asian States, with which it shares significant minority populations. We have resolved this dilemma for the purposes of this commentary by relying on how the States self-identify, and thus considerable emphasis has been placed on membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). It needs to be highlighted

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2 See for instance Minority Rights Group International, State of the World’s Minorities 2007 (MRG, London, 2007), which dwelt as long on ‘Asia and Pacific’ as Europe. This has since been rectified in subsequent yearbooks.


5 E. Sudhakar, SAARC: Origins, Growth and Future (Gyan Publishers, New Delhi, 1994).
that relying on this organization’s view of the States to be included will not entail any detailed description of the work towards what remains a fledgling (and some would argue, an unsuccessful) attempt at gaining regional co-operation.

Three contextual elements need to be outlined in order to engage with any emerging view concerning minority issues in the region. First, the States themselves are young actors, having emerged in the middle of the last century, and having been defined largely in the process of rejecting British colonization. This necessarily means that the boundaries that delineate one State from its neighbour are contested, and that the ‘national identities’ that are traded are necessarily artificial and configured along the lines of a dominant majority. Second, as a consequence of the first point, inter-State rivalries remain at the forefront of regional politics and act as a serious bulwark against meaningful regional co-operation. Ventures such as SAARC are, at best, talk shops for soft diplomacy, or instruments through which regional trade agreements can be forged in line with those required from emerging global administrative law. The rivalries themselves are nourished by a shared and contested history between the States, and contemporary practice that has involved considerable cross-border interference. While this may conjure up the well-rehearsed frenzied ‘nuclear rivalry’ between India and Pakistan, regional contentions exist in the relationships between Bangladesh and India, Bangladesh and

7 For an interesting analysis of this see A. Tambe and H. Fischer Tiné (eds.), The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region (Routledge, Oxon, 2009).
10 S. Ganguly and W.R. Thompson, Asian Rivalries: Conflict, Escalation and Limitations on Two Level Games (Stanford University Press, California, 2011).
13 For an unashamedly American perspective which does nonetheless reflect this see J.E. Peters, et al., War and Escalation in South Asia (Project Airforce, Rand, 2006).