

Identity Politics in South Asia

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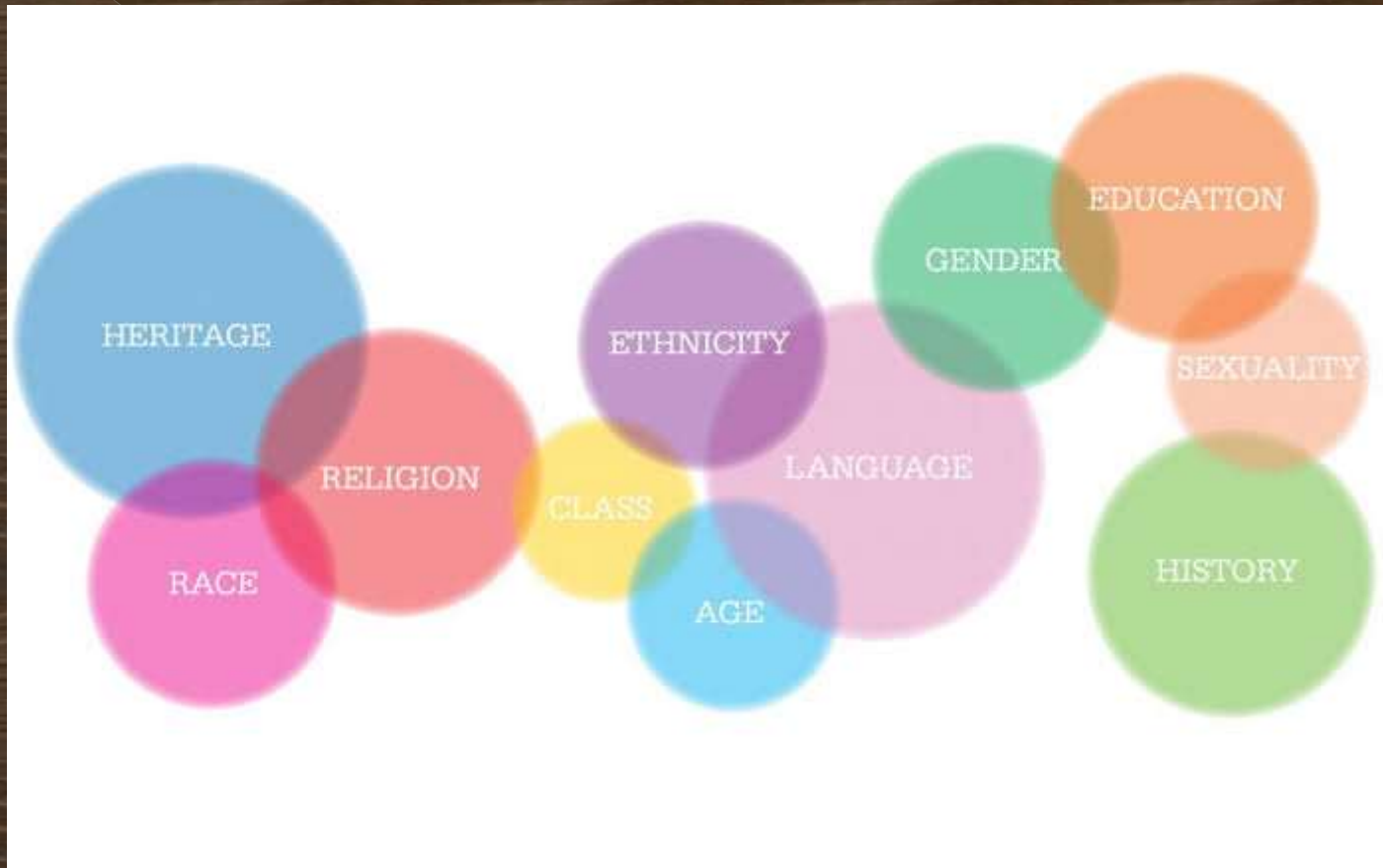
Introduction

South Asia is a cluster of countries with asymmetric economic and political profiles.

Although South Asia is segmented along various axes of differences—ethnic, caste, class, gender, religion, language—the mobilization of these identities is the result of particular configurations of local and global political, social, and economic forces and of the emergence of specific constituencies and identity politics based on new forms of politicized religion.

Contemporary South Asia has been problematic right from the beginning because South Asia has been plagued with ongoing conflicts both at the interstate level and at the domestic level.

- ⦿ Although the world is a global village in present age, yet the political system based on ethnicity is still persisting in certain norms.
- ⦿ From the time immemorial, humans have either inherited identity or are bound to adopt one.
- ⦿ Language and religion based ethnic identities are the dominant issues in the history and evolution of multi-ethnic countries of South Asia.
- ⦿ A primary concern in the political systems of multi-ethnic countries is the fear of domination or exploitation of some ethnic groups and assimilation by the other ethnic group.



Identity Politics

- ◉ Identity is a fluid, contextual, relational and multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is the social terrain, the historical context, political exigencies, particular interests and aspirations that propels a group to construct or deconstruct a specific identity at a given point of time.
- ◉ Subsequently, group leaders tend to define and demarcate the boundaries of these specific identities with reference and in contrast to their opponents and rivals in the existing political space.

- The demographic make-up of South Asia has helped reinforce identity politics in each country in the region.
- When individuals identify themselves racially, ethnically, or religiously as a consequence of being identified with groups, they often develop hostilities toward other groups and a sense of superiority over them.

- ❖ Francis Fukuyama, the author of the famous book, *The End of History and the Last Man* published his new book *Identity : The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* in September 2018. The practitioners of Identity Politics are not only people and their groups but also states. As Fukuyama states, there are two leading ideas in identity politics : religion and nationalism.

Religious Dilemma of South Asia

- Of the various common characteristics that the modern states in the South Asian region shared, their multicultural and multi-religious compositions have been the most conspicuous.
- They shaped the demographic pattern, influenced the course of social relations, defined the contours of cultural life and, above all, set certain parameters for the mutual relations of different countries in the region.

- The concerns and anxieties of the Muslim minority in India, the Hindu minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka were transmitted to their co-religionists in other countries in the region.
- The Hindus in India believed that they had a responsibility to safeguard the interest of the Hindus of Pakistan or Bangladesh or of Tamils in Sri Lanka.
- So did Pakistan and Bangladesh in relation to the Muslims who lived in India.
- Each of these countries looked upon itself as the protector of its co-religionists in the region.

This religious positioning had two implications :

- ⦿ First, it attributed a religious identity to each country, even in case of a declared secular state like India;
- ⦿ And secondly, it overlooked the fact that it amounted to interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Identity Politics in Democracy

- Democratic process intensifies power struggle, and hence, assertion of various identities assumes vital importance in a democratic set-up. Under authoritarian regime various identities may be suppressed or subordinated but it cannot be done under a democratic regime. Democracy is nothing if it does not give free play to power struggle between various sections of people.

Impact of Identity Politics

- The issue of identity politics is ripping apart the social fabric in democratic nations of South Asia.
- In India, agitations for the formation of linguistic states had mostly taken the form of uniting people rather than dividing them. But there are instances when the situation became devastating.
- Identity Politics is unfortunately the cause of these countries not moving forward in eliminating socio-economic deprivation.
- It destroys social cohesion and stands in the way of economic progress.

Conclusion

- Identity politics is an inevitability in democracies.
- The existence of identity politics in any democracy is an indicator of the vibrancy and health of a democracy because it means that marginalised sections are making an active bid for a share for power.
- Peace in South Asia can be assured only by secular democracy but thrust on identity politics is hampering it.
- Finally, it can be said that the existence of Identity politics is not the threat but how the government tackles the situation is the main challenge.

Thank you...