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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### AN ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH ASIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

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#### Abstract

Environmental politics is a relatively new and evolving trend in world politics, yet it has far-reaching significance and consequences. It emerged in the 1970s, and it has completely revolutionized the global political scenario. South Asia today is much more prone to climate change and global warming than ever. Reports alarmingly suggest that cities such as Karachi, Mumbai, and Maldives are under the immediate threat of being drowned by 2050, if the sea level keeps rising due to the melting of glaciers. Environmental challenges in South Asia range from air pollution, water scarcity, land degradation, deforestation, flood, drought, cyclones, marine ecology to a comprehensive loss of biodiversity. Unfortunately, however, it seems that environmental issues are not one of the primary concerns in South Asia, for the region is still struggling to ensure the basic necessities of life and a humane society – the necessities such as food, shelter, employment, health, education, and so on. This paper assesses South Asia's environmental politics. The paper's findings advocate that there is a pressing need to develop and implement environmentally oriented political programs before it is too late in the region.

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#### Introduction:-

The emergence of environmental problems as major issues in world politics reflects growing awareness of the stresses human activities place on the earth's resources and life support systems. Until the late 1980's most governments regarded global environmental politics as minor issues, marginal both to their core national interests and to international politics in general. Then the rise of environmental movements in industrialized countries and the emergence of global environmental threats that affect the welfare of all human kind such as ozone-layer depletion, climate change, and the dangerous decline in the world's fisheries elevated global environmental issues to a higher status in world politics. Today, environment issues are understood as globally important not only in their own right but also because the effect other aspects of world politics, including economic development, trade, human health, humanitarian actions, and even security.

Thus, global concern about the environment evolved in response to expanded scientific understanding of humanity's increasing impact on the biosphere including the atmosphere, oceans, forest, freshwater, soil cover, and many animal and plant species. Many by-products of economic growth such as the burning of fossil fuels, air and water pollution, hazardous waste, toxic chemicals, plastics, and increased use of natural resources put cumulative stresses on the physical environment that threaten human health and economic well-being. The realisation that environment threats have serious socio-economic and human costs and that unilateral actions by individual countries cannot solve these problems produced increased calls for international cooperation to halt or reverse environmental degradation.

Environmental problems do not respect National boundaries. Trans-boundary air pollution, the degradation of share the rivers and the pollution of oceans and seas are just a few examples of the international dimensions of environmental problems. The sources, consequences, and actors involved in an environmental issue can be local, National, regional or global. If the sources or consequences are global or transcend more than one international region or the actors involved in creating or addressing the problems transcend more than one region, then we consider the activity and its consequences to be a global issue. The main actors in global environmental politics are states (national governments), International organisations, regional organisations, environmental non-government organisations, corporations, industry groups, scientific bodies, and important individuals.

Similarly, the questions of environmental protection have always been of key relevance for South Asia, shaping agricultural output and the live realities of millions of people in the region. The region is also no stranger to environmental extremes, ranging from seasonal droughts to annual monsoons<sup>1</sup>. Due to its continued dependence on agricultural production as well as the frequency of natural disasters, South Asia is amongst the main regions likely to be hit severely by the negative environmental impact of climate change. Rising sea levels in particular, threaten to submerge island States such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka alongside the low coastal geographies of the region. The detrimental impact of climate change on regional affairs adds another policy issue for countries in the region, many of which already struggle to develop responses to growing national populations while also seeking to combat endemic poverty. South Asian economies have partially been successful in poverty alleviation efforts through rapid industrialization, spurred on by liberal economic reforms,<sup>2</sup> that have helped to enable rapid regional GDP growth since the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Many South Asian countries now find themselves in a transitional phase marked by increased urbanization and industrialization, with industrialization in particular resulting in growing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and surging environmental degradation. Via liberalizing reforms, regional actors such as Bangladesh and India have partially adopted development models heavily focused on the expansion of heavy industries, resulting in growing industrial output and heightened environmental degradation. Growing degradation, in turn, further intensifies resource scarcity, undermines agricultural productivity and intensifies extreme weather patterns.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the immediate environmental impact of climate change on South Asia, the effects of global warming and growing environmental degradation are thus also economic in nature and have come to disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged communities. These problems often pose a region-wide threat rather than merely a local or national threat.

This paper situates the environmental politics in the context of South Asia. Firstly, the paper reviews the structural environmental issues facing the region today. The paper then outlines the environmental cooperation initiatives in South Asia and moves on to first discussing how two intergovernmental organizations, SAARC and SACEP, have responded to the challenges posed by growing degradation. Later the paper also suggest appropriate remedies.

### **South Asia: Regional Context**

South Asia is one of the world's most complex and dynamic regions. Domestic politics play an increasingly important role in shaping and constraining regional policies and approach throughout South Asia. The South Asian subcontinent comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The climates of this region range from monsoon to warm and humid, from hot and dry deserts to tropical upland climates. Large areas are tropical, and these areas too have a rich and diverse ecosystem. The ecological balance of flora, fauna and forests, however, is threatened by rapid growth in human population.

South Asia habitats a total population of around 1.5 billion, burgeoning at the annual rate of 1.8%, in spite of covering only 4.8 per cent of the world's total land area. This figure is expected to rise to about 25 per cent by 2050. India is the most populated country in the region, followed by Pakistan. Countries like Bhutan and Maldives are comparatively less populated than the other nations in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> A monsoon is a seasonal change in the direction of the prevailing, or strongest, winds of a region. The season when it rains a lot in Southern Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Gnanon, 2018; Manni, 2012

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, 2021

<sup>4</sup> Zakaria & Bibi, 2019

South Asia as a region has unique features and many contradictions. It is culturally, socially, economically and politically diverse, with a common cultural base but linguistic and religious differences. Given the economic, social and cultural context of the countries of South Asia, similar challenges confront them in protecting their environment and natural resources. For instance, high rates of population growth, urbanization, and widespread incidence of poverty are common, although improvements have been witnessed in all major indicators of human development over recent years (UNDP 1998)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Shared Environmental Problems of South Asian Countries**

According to Global Risk Index 2021, Pakistan and India are included in Bottom 10 (Bottom 10 is the 10 countries most affected by climate change).<sup>6</sup> India ranked 7<sup>th</sup>, one of the most prone to climate changes. Drylands and mountain regions are likely to be more vulnerable than others and ecosystem degradation is the largest in this region.

A growing population reduces the per capita availability of land and water, which consequently impairs the people's ability to produce food. Land degradation and water scarcity are thus closely tied to food security concerns. Urbanization and poverty, particularly the concentration of population in a few large South Asian cities, is another important challenge. It poses a strain on the limited resources of these cities, where infrastructure is already overstretched. In prioritizing shared environmental concerns in the subregion, the most important are:

#### **Land degradation**

South Asia has the largest area of irrigated land in Asia and the Pacific (nearly 90 million ha). However unplanned and badly engineered irrigation developments have resulted in land degradation through factors such as soil erosion and salinity. Irrigated croplands of many countries, such as India and Pakistan, are severely affected by salinity. Wind erosion also presents a serious regional issue. Afghanistan, Pakistan and India suffer most from desertification. The worst sufferers as a result of land degradation are the poor.

#### **Water scarcity, flood and water pollution**

Siachen are the 2nd largest glaciers in the world lies in South Asia at the northern borders of Pakistan and India. Climate change results in melting of glaciers very fast and exposing new surfaces to absorb more energy, which in turn result in more melting of glaciers. The ultimate consequence is the floods, partially due to water mismanagement, as witnessed in recent years in Pakistan from 2010 onward.

Besides, melting of glaciers also results in depleting of fresh water sources. South Asia hosts the one fifth population of the world with depleting water resources, making it a water stressed region. A number of areas within Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan are suffering from water scarcity. Groundwater depletion has also emerged as a major concern in parts of India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in recent years, and depletion of freshwater aquifers is threatening water supplies in the Maldives. Adding to these problems is the cross-border degradation of existing sources specifically through uncontrolled release of sewage, industrial wastes, agricultural run-off, commercial pesticide, and arsenic contamination.

#### **Deforestation and biodiversity loss**

Estimates suggest that habitat loss in South Asia is among the highest and most severe in terms of biodiversity loss. Diverse habitats such as mangrove have also faced severe pressure through aquacultural developments in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka.

#### **Impacts to the marine environment**

Pollution and over extraction of resources are both key concerns in relation to South Asia's marine environment. Unplanned developments are also affecting the coastal zone, and leading to erosion, while changes in the region's seawater temperatures are impacting on its coral systems. Coral bleaching is also one of the major issue in the Region.

#### **Atmospheric pollution**

Rapid growth in energy demand and the reliance on coal have translated into significant increases in the emission of air pollutants. Urban air pollution has emerged as a major problem in many cities, in addition to fly-ash generated

<sup>5</sup> Human Development Report 2021 by United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>6</sup> The international environmental think tank 'Germanwatch' released the Global Climate Risk Index 2021.

through coal mining and thermal power plants. Effects of acid deposition in excess of critical loads have been recorded in areas of North-eastern India and Bangladesh. An increase in slash-and-burn agriculture is also contributing to incidents of haze in certain areas.

### **Deficient urban infrastructure**

The capacity of urban infrastructure (water supply and sanitation, waste management etc.) has not been increasing at a rate commensurate to urbanization. Surmounting deficits are growing particularly acute in sub-urban sprawls and inner-city squatter settlements, where it is the poor who are the most vulnerable.

### **Natural disasters**

The north-eastern Indian subregion represents the greatest area of seismic hazard in the Indian subcontinent. Floods, cyclones and landslides are other common hazards. Floods regularly cause widespread havoc in India and Bangladesh, and also occasionally in Pakistan and Nepal.

Growing environmental degradation has multifaceted effects that can come to negatively shape the long-term sustainability of economic growth models. Considering that nearly 60% of South Asia's population is employed in the agricultural sector (Trading Economics, 2021)<sup>7</sup>, growing environmental degradation poses not just structural issues for short-term economic revenues and employment structures but also for long-term food security considerations.

These trends, shaping revenues and government expenditures, have direct economic effects: for a big economy like India, for instance, the total cost of air pollution is estimated to range between 4.5% and 7.7% of the national GDP and is likely to double by 2060 (The Energy and Resources Institute, 2019)<sup>8</sup>. Growing resource scarcity issues exacerbated by global warming also overlap with potential health issues, for instance as water scarcity can lead to water-borne diseases.<sup>9</sup> As such, the current extent of environmental degradation, which is likely to rise further as industrialization increases, will create additional economic and governance problems for the region.

To conclude, environmental degradation is likely to emerge as one of the main policy issues in South Asia in the coming years and decades. Crucially, environmental issues present not an isolated policy area but are connected to other policy issues, ranging from public health to economic sustainability and political security.

### **Policy Response**

The transnational nature of environmental issues has resulted in some multilateral efforts to address climate change.

### **National Initiatives**

Notable initiatives have been undertaken by the governments of South Asia in recent years to strengthen institutions; improve regulatory systems; implement financial and policy reforms towards sustainable development; and enhance private sector involvement. Many new public sector institutions have been established, including environmental ministries, while independent environment agencies, departments and pollution control boards have also been created to support them. A number of common limitations are, however, observed in relation to achieving sustainable development in the subregion. These relate to bottlenecks facing the legal, industrial, policy, and NGO communities, and are as follows.

### **Legal**

Legislation in several countries of the subregion has failed to respond to changing paradigms of development, and many resource laws and statutes have been rendered obsolete by recent developments. Moreover, there is a weak regulatory framework, and problems of implementation and enforcement are acute. This is manifested in slow adoption of EIA<sup>10</sup> practices, and inadequate public participation in formulation and implementation of laws. The

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<sup>7</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/>

<sup>8</sup> The Energy and Resources Institute is a research institute in New Delhi that specializes in the fields of energy, environment and sustainable development. Established in 1974, it was formerly known as the Tata Energy Research Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Ebi& Hess, 2020

<sup>10</sup> Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a tool used to assess the significant effects of a project or development proposal on the environment.

paucity of financial resources to implement laws, inadequate penalties for violation and lack of political commitment are also observed.

### **Industrial**

Environmental awareness among the industrial sector is increasing and is substantially better today than a decade ago. However, the region is dominated by small and medium scale industry, a significant number of which produce hazardous wastes. The scale of industry in the subregion is analogous with meagre budgets and scant, if any, resources for allocation to research and development. A need for closer ties between industry and the universities is recognized, together with the development of appropriate environmental management capacity

### **Policy**

While it may be difficult to gauge the overall impact of environmental policies on the environment, it appears from the existing literature that local level decentralized approaches are having a far greater impact on resource management than other policy instruments. This is borne out, for instance, by the success of water user organizations in much of India and Nepal and also through similar approaches in forestry. A critique, however, has been that such approaches have focused exclusively on the accomplishment of physical targets, often to the detriment of participatory goals

### **NGOs**

Several factors hamper the working of NGOs in the subregion, including lack of financial resources, training and strategic goals. In addition, numerous cases have been identified where, even when funds have been available, NGOs remain unable to access them due to insufficient organizational capabilities.

### **Subregional Cooperation**

Opportunities for subregional policy cooperation are promoted through two principal programmes: the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP); and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

#### **The South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP)**

Since its inception in 1982, SACEP has initiated a number of projects, which are building national capacity to manage environmental issues. The overall focus of SACEP's activities includes capacity building and institutional strengthening; conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity; ecosystems conservation and management; environmental information and assessment; and education and awareness-raising. SACEP's members include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of Iran), Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

**South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** SAARC<sup>11</sup> was established in 1983, with its headquarters in Kathmandu, and includes the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. SAARC has a particular focus on economic cooperation, although it also covers many aspects of regional cooperation (including environment). SAARC has grown steadily and, as a result of recent coordination initiatives between the two programmes, its environmental activities are complementary to those of SACEP. SAARC has set up several technical committees in many fields. The Committee on Environment was given the status of a Technical Committee in 1992, in which year a special session of this Committee was held in Pakistan to prepare modalities and programmes of action. The implementation of the recommendations of the Regional Study on Greenhouse effects has also been mandated to this Committee.

### **International Programmes and Projects**

Countries of the subregion are also participating in four transboundary efforts being promoted by the World Bank in Asia and the Pacific. URBAIR<sup>12</sup> and the Two-Stroke Vehicle Engine Initiative address the rapidly worsening air pollution problem in South Asia's largest cities. The Bay of Bengal Environment Programme funded by GEF and jointly implemented with FAO<sup>13</sup>, addresses fisheries research, environmental emergencies, large marine ecosystems,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.saarc-sec.org/>

<sup>12</sup> Urban Air Quality Management Strategy in Asia (URBAIR)

<sup>13</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is an international organization that leads international efforts to defeat hunger and improve nutrition and food security.

and coastal zone management in and around the bay. Both South and East Asian countries are involved in this programme.

The South Asia Development Initiatives seeks to improve regional cooperation in the poorest part of South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and eastern India) in water resource management, energy development and trade, and transport and commerce. Lastly, a programme for the preservation of Cultural Heritage in South Asia is being implemented in Bangladesh, India and Nepal to promote active involvement and financial support of the public, NGO, and private sectors to rehabilitate and protect national heritage sites.

In line with the general trend observable in regard to multilateralism and regional integration in South Asia, collective regional responses have remained weak or absent. As a result, both SAARC and SACEP have only registered minor successes in the effort to create a regional approach to tackling climate change. Constrained by distrust between member States, regional responses have hence been of limited efficacy. Responding to environmental issues has consequently remained a largely national task.

### **Environmental Politics of South Asia: An Assessment**

As above stated, that South Asia is one of the world's most complex and dynamic regions. Here, domestic politics play an increasingly important role in shaping and constraining regional policies. Political leaders play a major role in setting the course for their nations. Unfortunately, political leadership of South Asia is so oblivious that they consider environment a redundant object imposed on poor nations by Western authorities. Politics is done on the basis of giving jobs, raising wages and salaries, tax cut, prioritizing education and health sectors and so on. No political leader has given a due attention to the environment in spite of having environmental laws. For instance, the countries of South Asia are the signatories of Kyoto Protocol (1997)<sup>14</sup>, Paris Climate Accord (2015)<sup>15</sup> and many more. Hence created related authorities and agencies in each domain with no effective functions. Laws and Policies are there, the real issue is enforcement; which people take very lightly.

Further poor economic condition of most of the South Asian Countries stopping them not to allocate much fund towards the sustainable development. For example, Pakistan's worst economic condition, terror funding and hostility against India leading to overburden of security related expenses for her. So, how can we imagine about more focus on environmental issues. Similarly with the presence of Afghanistan's Taliban government how can we imagine regional cooperation towards the environmental issues of South Asia.

Enforcement is guaranteed only through using authority; and using authority to implement environmental laws is not in the best political interest of our political leadership. Hence, it is also a big reason for miserable condition of environmental politics in South Asia, because the politics on environment can only be done when there are concerns with environment and in matter of the region the case is just opposite. Besides, major cities of India like Mumbai, Kolkata, Surat, and Chennai are among the top 20 most prone cities to be drawn due to the rise of sea level;<sup>16</sup> and sea level is rising due to rapid melting of glaciers which is a direct impact of global warming. But lack of political will abrogated all those cashing instances and the region still stays far from ecological related politics in spite of abundant ecological challenges.

So, another common aspect of the region is the need for strengthening the landscape of policies and legislation and their implementation. Many environmental policies in South Asian nations have yet to realize their full potential. Due to resource constrains and limitations in institutional coordination, these policies have not been fully implemented. Governments and policy experts advocate integrated and comprehensive approaches to policy creation as well as science-based policy as fragmentation of policy and non-scientific policy design often leads to ineffective implementation. Transformative change would require a strengthening of policies, policy coherence and a corresponding bolstering of their implementation.

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<sup>14</sup> Kyoto Protocol operationalizes the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change by committing industrialized countries and economies in transition to limit and reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions in accordance with agreed individual targets.

<sup>15</sup> The Paris Agreement's central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

<sup>16</sup> Ghose, 2013

Policy assessment and evaluation is a crucial step to determine the effect of a policy intervention. Policy formulation and its assessment requires comprehensive methods and trained personnel. Sound scientific and actionable solutions are needed not only for emerging environmental issues but also to address shortcomings in existing environmental policies.

The 2030 Agenda for ‘Sustainable Development’<sup>17</sup> also recognized regional organizations as key actors in coordinating the implementation, follow-up, and review process of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This statement clearly highlights the importance of the roles that regional organizations like SACEP play in the achievement of the United Nations global goals by supporting its member states with the design of action plans for sustainable development, and monitoring the implementation of these commitments.

### **Methods of Study:-**

The study regarding this paper has adopted several research methods. Some are primary and more instrumental, while some are secondary and relatively less applicable. The predominant method has been ‘descriptive analysis’. The paper has attempted to describe or review various issues and challenges pertaining to climate change and South Asian politics. The study has relied on the method of data interpretation as the correct assessment and remedy is not possible without having an exact account of the levels of various threats. In addition, the nature and method of the study is evaluative as well, in the sense that it not only seeks to understand various politico-environmental problems but also suggest appropriate remedies. The study, thus, is often prescriptive or second order type.

In part, the comparative method also has been adopted, as the study aims to compare i) the persisting problems in different nations of South Asia, and ii) the role and impact of various regional organizations. However, it may be noted here that comparison is not just a frenzy search for various parallels or dissimilarities. By comparison, we seek to find differences in similarities and similarities in differences. It seeks to comprehend various parts in relation to the whole and also vice versa.

### **Conclusion:-**

South Asia today faces large-scale environmental issues. The issues are compounded by complex and interrelated factors such as growing industrialization, urbanization, population growth and international trade. These factors, in synergy with the severe impact of climate change, have exacerbated pre-existing environmental issues, and problems will certainly be intensified in the coming decades, if necessary, steps are not taken.

The regional actors are critically instrumental in this regard. They must take decisive and essential steps to create and enforce environmental regulations. Among many, one effective policy approach could be to advocate for the support of ‘bottom-up’ initiatives. In addition to this, forums such as SAARC and SACEP should be more frequently and liberally used as a means of negotiating. They would perhaps offer better collective approaches to tackling cross-border issues, than those suggested or implemented by individual nations or parties.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that the advancement of regional environmental co-operation, if strategically designed, is pivotal to both ecological preservation and fostering mutual trust and the creation of peace in the region. Through gradual improvements in relations, it may also reduce the threat of war and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region to a very large extent.

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