Chapter 3: Contemporary South Asia

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Identify the country: (a) The struggle among pro-monarchy, pro-democracy groups and extremists created an atmosphere of political instability. (b) A landlocked country with multi-party competition. (c) The first country to liberalise its economy in the South Asian region. (d) In the conflict between the military and pro-democracy groups, the military has prevailed over democracy. (e) Centrally located and shares borders with most of the South Asian countries. (f) Earlier the island had the Sultan as the head of state. Now, it is a republic. (g) Small savings and credit cooperatives in the rural areas have helped in reducing poverty. (h) A landlocked country with a monarchy.

(a) Nepal; (b) Nepal; (c) Sri Lanka; (d) Pakistan; (e) India; (f) Maldives; (g) Bangladesh; (h) Bhutan.

Q2 Which among the following statements about South Asia is wrong? (a) All the countries in South Asia are democratic. (b) Bangladesh and India have signed an agreement on river-water sharing. (c) SAFTA was signed at the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad. (d) The US and China play an influential role in South Asian politics.

(a) is wrong. South Asian countries do not all share the same political system: Pakistan has repeatedly seen military rule, and Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives became democratic systems only recently.

Q3 What are some of the commonalities and differences between Bangladesh and Pakistan in their democratic experiences?

Commonalities: Bangladesh was part of Pakistan until 1971, and both countries have alternated between elected civilian governments and military rule. Military leaders in both (Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, Musharraf in Pakistan; Ziaur Rahman and Ershad in Bangladesh) took power by coups, and both saw strong pro-democracy movements, often led by students and civil society, that forced a return to elections. Differences: Bangladesh was born out of a movement for autonomy and the Bengali language and culture against West Pakistani domination, and after the mass protests that made Ershad step down in 1990 it has worked as a multi-party representative democracy since the 1991 elections. Pakistan, by contrast, saw the military, clergy and landowning elite dominate society, and its conflict with India strengthened pro-military groups. Its democracy was interrupted again by the 1999 coup, and elected rule resumed only in 2008. Pakistan also received more Western support for military rule.

Q4 List three challenges to democracy in Nepal.

1. The monarchy: the king, backed by the army, kept control over government and restricted democracy, and in 2002 he dissolved parliament and dismissed the government. 2. The Maoist insurgency: from the 1990s the Maoists used armed insurrection against the monarchy and ruling elite, creating a triangular conflict among monarchists, democrats and Maoists. 3. Disagreement over the new order: parties differed over whether to keep a nominal monarchy and over the Maoists' radical social and economic programme, and some groups were suspicious of India's role. Short-lived, troubled democratic governments after 1990 added to the instability.

Q5 Name the principal players in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. How do you assess the prospects of the resolution of this conflict?

The principal players were the Sri Lankan government and the majority Sinhala community, whose nationalists opposed concessions to Tamils; the Tamil minority, including those of Indian origin; and the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which fought from 1983 for a separate Tamil Elam. India was also drawn in: it signed the 1987 accord and sent the IPKF, which withdrew in 1989 without achieving its objective. Norway and Iceland tried to bring the parties to talks. The armed conflict ended in 2009 when the LTTE was defeated, so the war has been settled militarily. Lasting resolution, however, depends on addressing Tamil grievances and sharing power fairly, since neglect of Tamil concerns originally caused the militancy. Sri Lanka's strong democratic system and high human development give grounds for cautious optimism.

Q6 Mention some of the recent agreements between India and Pakistan. Can we be sure that the two countries are well on their way to a friendly relationship?

Agreements and measures include the Indus Waters Treaty (1960), the Tashkent Agreement (1966), the Simla Agreement (1972), the 1988 agreement not to attack each other's nuclear installations, the 1999 Lahore Peace Declaration, and SAFTA (2004), along with confidence-building measures, summits, new bus routes, easier visas and increased trade. We cannot be sure of a friendly relationship. The Indus treaty survives, but Kashmir remains unsettled, and the Kargil conflict (1999) and the failed Agra Summit (2001) show setbacks. Both sides have nuclear weapons and remain suspicious: India blames Pakistan for aiding militants, while Pakistan blames India for trouble in Sindh and Balochistan. Disputes over Siachen and Sir Creek continue, and the text notes that recent times have seen the situation change. Peace is a process, not an assured outcome.

Q7 Mention two areas each of cooperation and disagreement between India and Bangladesh.

Cooperation: (1) Economic ties have improved considerably over the last twenty years, and Bangladesh is part of India's Look East (Act East) policy to link with Southeast Asia via Myanmar. (2) The two countries cooperate regularly on disaster management and environmental issues; in 2015 they also exchanged certain enclaves. Disagreement: (1) Sharing of the Ganga and Brahmaputra river waters; Bangladesh feels India acts like a regional bully on this. (2) India objects to Bangladesh's denial of illegal immigration, its support for anti-Indian Islamic fundamentalist groups, its refusal to let Indian troops cross its territory to the northeast, and its decision not to export natural gas to India. The long-unresolved boundary dispute is another irritant.

Q8 How are the external powers influencing bilateral relations in South Asia? Take any one example to illustrate your point.

No region exists in a vacuum, and outside powers, mainly the United States and China, shape South Asian politics. Take the US. After the Cold War its involvement grew rapidly. It has good relations with both India and Pakistan and increasingly acts as a moderator between them. Economic reforms and liberal policies in both countries deepened American participation, and the large South Asian diaspora in the US and the huge regional market give it a stake in regional peace and security. Earlier, Western countries supported Pakistan's military rule because they feared 'global Islamic terrorism' and saw the military as a protector of their interests. China is another example: Sino-Indian relations have improved, but China's strategic partnership with Pakistan remains an irritant for India.

Q9 Write a short note on the role and the limitations of SAARC as a forum for facilitating economic cooperation among the South Asian countries.

Role: The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), begun in 1985 with its charter signed at the Dhaka summit, is the major regional initiative to build cooperation through multilateral means. Its most important economic step is the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), signed in 2004 and effective from 1 January 2006, which aims at lowering trade tariffs and creating a free trade zone across South Asia. Free trade, India argues, brings benefits to all and helps political cooperation. Limitations: Persisting political differences, especially between India and Pakistan, have kept SAARC from achieving much. Smaller neighbours fear that SAFTA lets India 'invade' their markets and influence their societies and politics. Some in India doubt SAFTA's worth since India already has bilateral agreements with Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Q10 India's neighbours often think that the Indian government tries to dominate and interfere in the domestic affairs of the smaller countries of the region. Is this a correct impression?

The impression is partly understandable but not wholly correct. In its favour: India's size, power and central location, bordering most others, make smaller neighbours suspicious. Bangladesh feels India behaves like a regional bully over river waters; Nepalese leaders say India interferes in internal affairs, eyes their water and hydroelectricity, and hinders sea access; and India's 1987 military intervention in Sri Lanka was resented as interference. Against it: India has a special, cooperative relationship with Bhutan and Nepal, offers development aid and hydroelectric projects, helped the Maldives against mercenaries in 1988, aided Sri Lanka's post-tsunami reconstruction, and now follows disengagement in Sri Lanka's internal troubles. India also feels exploited by neighbours and worries that instability lets outside powers gain influence. Perceptions of dominance arise from asymmetry, and mutual sensitivity is needed.