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## South Asian Maritime Trade -The Role Of Himalayas And Monsoons

**Bristi Neog**

**Research Scholar**

**Gauhati University**

**Political Science Department**

### Abstract

There are various historical narratives about South Asia as a region. The economy and agriculture of many countries of the South Asian region are mainly depended on the monsoon. The use of the monsoon wind in the Indian Ocean for maritime trade help the sailors to reach overseas territory. The presence of highlands like Himalayas across the path of the monsoon winds. This mountain range plays a significant role as an orographic barrier for the monsoon throughout the region. This paper is an attempt to reveals how the Himalayas and Monsoons have defined South Asian maritime trade and see its functional aspect. This paper also tries to find out the continuity of knowledge over different periods and focus on the structural and functional aspects of the physical structures.

### Introduction

According to Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, the term 'South Asia' is mainly a geographical expression and the region is comparatively a recent construction, it is only about seven decades old and consists of eight diverse sovereign states with very different sizes. These are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The terms 'South Asia' refers to a huge geographical land expanding from the Hindukush, Karakoram, Himalayan Mountain ranges in the north to the Indian ocean in the south and from the Brahmaputra Valley in the east to the Indus River valley in the west. The region is surrounded by West Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and South East Asia.

South Asia has a long and complex history, which can be traced back to five millennia. One of the earliest civilizations of the world Indus valley civilization was flourished here. At present, South Asia is home of about 1.9 billion populations of the world. Being the origin land of two great religion-Hinduism and Buddhism as well as homeland to the world's largest Muslim Population this region represents a crucial characteristic 'Unity in Diversity' at the world stage (Bose & Jalal,1997). In his autobiography J.L. Nehru

also wrote that in South-Asia there had been a continuity of a cultural tradition throughout the five thousand years of history.

### **Different Historical Narratives about South-Asia as a region-**

There are many sources from which we can find many historical narratives about South Asia as a region, such as -Ancient narratives from different Purans -Shiva, Vishnu, Kurma, Matsya Purans, Mahabharata (Bhisma Parva). Medieval narratives from the accounts of foreign travellers came to this subcontinent at different points of time entered into different parts of the region, modern narratives from British Colonial sources and many others. In Vishnu Puran and many others the whole land of South Asia was depicted as 'Jambu Dweep'. Iranian polymath Alberuni travelled to the Indian subcontinent and wrote on culture the culture of the subcontinent. His 'Indica' was great record of the cultural history of South Asia about 1030. In many British colonial sources there can be also found the description of South-Asia as a one region. Such as 'The Indian Empire: Its Peoples, History and Products' edited by Sir William W. Hunter.

### **Physical structure of the Region -**

There are many bases through which we can examine the framing of South-Asia as a natural region. 'Geography' is considered as one of the important bases for the demarcation of a region. There are some regions which are demarcated and framing on the basis of their unique physiography. The presence of natural geographical barriers such as oceans, sea, deserts and ranges of mountains help in the separation process of certain region from others.

The contemporary literature has often suggested South-Asia as 'geographically discrete region' because of its physical and geographical unity. Sometimes the term 'Indian subcontinent' is used to refer collectively India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The geographical formation of South-Asia is mainly defined by Indian Ocean and Himalayan cordillera, in the words of O.H.K Spate these are the principal boundaries of South Asian region. South Asia refers to a huge geographical land expanding from the Hindu kush (in northwest), Karakoram (in central north), Himalayan Mountain ranges (in northeast) to the Indian ocean in the south and from the Brahmaputra Valley in the east to the Indus River valley in the west. In the North the mountain ranges and in the south Indian ocean help to block South Asia. They have been performing as a forbidding barrier throughout the history. South of the mountain range is mainly Indo-Gangetic Plain which is formed by the plains of Brahmaputra, Ganga and Indus River.

In the west, Arabian Sea is the border of Pakistan and India and in the east the Bay of Bengal is the border of Bangladesh and India. The western boundary is the desert region where Pakistan shares border with Iran. There are two island countries - Sri Lanka is situated in southeast coast of India and the Maldives, an archipelago situated in the southwest coast of India. The Deccan plateau in southern part of India is a flat highland situated between the Western Ghat and the Eastern Ghat mountain.

### **Himalaya- its structural-functional aspects**

The Himalaya which separates South Asia from East Asia is the highest mountain range in the world and it is a dominant physical feature of the northern part of South Asia. Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Pakistan are the countries which share Himalayas with their borders. The mountain of the subcontinent are a wall-like structure, which define boldly the northern borders with Tibet, a province of China, and the Central Asian states. The mountain ranges have been forbidding the overland people's movement from China to India and vice-versa. In words of the famous Urdu poet of the M. Iqbal the Himalayas are like door keepers and stand like a sentinel they give safety to the inhabitant from any danger and evil intention on our northern frontiers. He described Himalaya as a sharp-eyed guard on our territory.

It is the opinion of Aizaz Ahmad that because of the existence of Himalaya, the inhabitants of this land have been able to hold on their uniqueness and distinctive ethnical and racial features. These mountain ranges have been playing an important role in defining the ethno- cultural attribute of South-Asian subcontinent. It has been argued that the social history of the subcontinent is a result of the geographical location. (Ahmad ,2009)

### **ENVIRONMENTAL HOMOGENEITY OF SOUTH ASIA**

Environmental homogeneity also serves in the framing of a particular separate region. It can be said South Asia as a region based on both physiography and Agroclimatology. It has a rich bio-diversity. The region has more or less a homogenous environment, there are similarities between the eco- system, flora& fauna and soils. The climate of this region is influenced by the monsoon.

### **THE USE OF MONSOON IN MARITIME TRADE**

The economy and agriculture of many countries of the South Asian region are mainly depended on the monsoon. The use of the monsoon wind in the Indian Ocean for maritime trade help the sailors to reach overseas territory. The presence of highlands like Himalayas across the path of the monsoon winds. This mountain range plays a significant role as an orographic barrier for the monsoon throughout the region. There are many historical proofs which indicate that the maritime traders were aware about the flow of monsoon wind and its use for the trade since the last two thousand years and felt that the forces of wind help in the driving of ship faster than the normal condition.

The description of monsoon is found in 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea' there was mentioned about the maritime activities of the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal such as name of the costs, port, movement of wind, conditions of sailing imports etc. Harappans were the first mariners who started to use the monsoon winds for their overseas trade. They sailed up to the coast of Meluha and Mesopotamia using monsoon winds. The flow of monsoon and the current of water help both in the onward and return journey in ocean and sea. The Arabs sailed in the Indian Ocean with the help of monsoon wind and the Portuguese navigator sailed their ship in such a way that they could help to reach the port of India. Monsoon wind and currents assisted them during their voyages.

Greek and Roman traders were able to reach the Indian coast to achieve extensive maritime trade with the help of southwest monsoon winds and were able to return during the winter monsoon. The traders from India started their voyage during the time of north east monsoon, the winds and currents flow from the direction of northeast helped to sail the east coast of India to Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries and return during the southwest monsoon because the maritime traders from the east coast of India first went to Sri Lanka then to other countries and returned through the same path because of direction of the wind. The southwest monsoon wind blowing from southwest automatically helped the ships to return from Southeast Asian countries, Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Bengal coast. During the time of the northeast- monsoon they started return journey (Tripathi &Raut 2006).

Due to the seasonal monsoon wind the maritime trade of this region has become more seasonal. During the monsoon season, the current and velocity of winds are faster and it helped in the speed of the cargo ships to reach their ports in a less time. So, the monsoon has been greatly influencing the maritime trade in Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea since a long time.

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