

Chapter 18

Cultural Worldviews and their Foundations: The Case of Southern Asia

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Introduction

Cultural data consist of measurements of the worldviews, or the systems of mental constructions, that people use to interpret and respond to the world around them and of the values and behaviors that this sense-making process generates. Culture evolves through a process in which people actively create and change their worldview over time. To understand a cultural landscape, it is therefore critical to build an in-depth knowledge of the worldviews and the historical process of their construction, evolution and diffusion. This chapter attempts to study the culture of the Southern Asian cluster through an analysis of

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worldviews, as reflected in dominant religious ideologies and their historical foundations.

Following Gupta et al. (2003), the Southern Asia cluster is defined to include cultures ranging from that of ancient Persia to the modern Philippines. In addition to India, on the western side it includes Iran, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Pakistan and Nepal. On the eastern side, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines are included. In addition, other places such as Mauritius and Fiji Island in Oceania, Zimbabwe in Africa, Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean and the UK and Canada have significant migrant influences.

While the Southern Asia cluster is characterized by diversity both in perspective and in the choice of social and organizational arrangements, common elements in the underlying worldviews of these peoples promote an impression of overall homogeneity. Mainland Southeast Asia, consisting of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, each have distinct linguistic scripts, which share no direct linkages. Being geographically separated by dense forest-laden mountainous terrain, the development of cultural and economies ties among these societies were limited. Similarly, each state in India has its own distinct language, cuisine, arts, dances, clothing and customs and may even be considered a separate nation. Nevertheless, a commonality of worldviews, the outcome of centuries of cross-border cultural, religious, economic and political exchanges, provides a critical integrating force.

Societal Landscape of the Southern Asia Cluster

The identity in Southern Asia is a complex concept, defined in terms of multiple affiliations such as religion, language, caste, social and income class; workplace, occupation, ancestry, hometown, family and kinship groups; teachers and school ties; and education levels. Philosophical systems that talk about monotheism, brotherhood or unity tend to downplay diversity, as if people were inter-changeable and their beliefs and values would converge under rational, scientific information. Other systems focus too much on diversity and the role of hereditary, family and ethnicity shaping the divergent views of people. In Southern Asia, this pair of opposites is perceived to be two sides of the same coin, or what is termed as unity in diversity. As shown in Table 18.1, the region