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Asymmetric Neglect of Humanitarian Aid in Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the diverse nature of Asia, encompassing a wide array of cultural, religious, and personal identity choices, and linguistic communities. Such diversity often coexists in an environment of tolerance or conflict. However, the representation of Asia in First World and influential countries has been disproportionately asymmetric over an extended period, leading to contemporary issues of underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and dissemination of misinformation. Consequently, this biased portrayal fosters harmful and prejudiced attitudes of bias, neglect, and intolerance among global audiences. The conventional media depiction of "Asian" individuals predominantly hailing from South-Eastern nations results in the neglect of major geopolitical countries like India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Israel, etc., in the broader "Asian" narrative. The correlation between inadequate representation and, in extreme cases, improper representation, creates a sense of indifference towards these nations. This indifference can manifest as insensitive behavior, particularly concerning humanitarian aid, thereby exacerbating crises and even leading to victim-blaming for their inability to maintain higher living standards, positive development, and education.

The article focuses on the promotion of apathetic sentiments and the exclusion of Central and Southern Asian countries from the broader "Asian" narrative. As a result, these nations are deprived of global recognition and humanitarian support. Despite numerous treaties and the signing of conventions, politics and monetary benefits take priority over providing security to war victims. This article advocates for a comprehensive evaluation and correction of the current distortions in media representations of the varied nations and peoples of Asia, emphasizing the need to address the consequences of biased depictions. Furthermore, there is an immediate need to address the neglected war crimes and humanitarian crises in multiple Asian countries and the lack of enforceability of International Organisations and their conventions.

Keywords: Humanitarian Aid, Geopolitics, International Organisatio, Central Asia, South Asia, Racism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Central and Southern Asian Nations despite having an extensive history, polyglot culture, and wealthy natural energy resources are perpetually plagued by either a lack of representation or misrepresentation, these countries have yet to showcase their grandeur due to their pre-existing image as being proponents of war, unstable, and impoverished. While these Central and Southern Asian nations are major players in the global power structure, they have largely been left side-lined despite hoisting multiple energy-resource-rich countries- such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic^[2] as well as including a potential superpower such as India having growing soft power over influential global matters ^[3]. Much of the geographical and national boundaries of the Central Asian Countries remain to be unknown to the majority. This inherent Euro-centric vision of geographical demarcation as well as in the idea of being “progressive” produces prejudicial tendencies as well as insensitivity toward acceptance of different lifestyles and cultures.

Here, media portrayal plays a significant role in the normalisation of a pattern of improper representation or labelling of Nations that allows for the propagation of Nations to be seen as impoverished and inhabitable. This reinforcement of stereotypical labels of different cultures promotes so much more than a mere superiority complex amongst Western Nations and its citizens. It makes it a way to visualize the Euro-centric norms and values as a set universal bar to critique and determine the standing of Nations. This may be formulated in terms of beauty standards (i.e., preference for fairer skin), literature and media representation, and most importantly in matters of humanitarian projects.

When one axis of the World is considered innately superior or ahead, striking a feeling of balance and equality amongst the Nations can only be considered to ever exist in an “ideal” situation. However, the lack of respect and the unilateral positive development, or at least the projection of it as such, has multiple implications- First, it attempts, and many a time, succeeds in repainting world history to showcase the Western Nations as the “saviour” and harbinger of progress for the undeveloped and uneducated Asian and African Nations. This is an attempt at influencing the historical narratives to showcase how ahead these Nations were in the fields of rationalism, science, and innovations instead of bringing attention to the history of violent,

^[2] ARIEL COHEN, PH.D., WESLEY A. HILL & DANIEL TOMARES, *Central Asia: A Source of Energy for the 21st Century*, CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM (2022), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a789b2a1f318da5a590af4a/t/637404f634d6b626ec26dfe0/1668547832144/Central+Asia+A+Source+of+Energy+for+the+21st+Century.pdf>.

^[3] MUKULIKA BANERJEE ET AL., *India: The Next Superpower?*, THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE 28 (2012), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-India-Superpower.pdf>.

unjust, and brutal colonisation across the globe^[4]. This takes away from the colonised Nations, the intensity and severity of the struggle for Independence as well as undermines the global acknowledgement of this struggle for freedom and the severe acts of brutality that generations of families suffered. Second, euro-centric beauty standards have been considered a bar for decades. It is only in recent times, that South Asian countries such as India have started promoting the embracement of different, especially darker skin tones. Yet, the majority of the Asian and African Nations put fair skin or “European-like” skin on a higher pedestal. Disregarding facial features and making fair skin the sole bar for describing “beauty”^[5]. Thirdly, and what makes the crux of this paper, is the hierarchy that Eurocentrism builds in geopolitics. This hierarchy that it builds makes up for the global perception of the Nation and how its socio-economic context is understood and respected. The enduring durability of Eurocentrism persists, despite deliberate endeavours to transition towards an inclusive comprehension of the globe. It shapes how diversity is embraced, the significance given to an event, and to an extent persuades the Nations to align their International political thoughts with the first world countries for better resources and armament diplomacy.

II. THE EUROCENTRIC ATTENTION AND AWARENESS DISSEMINATION

The implication of having this “upper hand” in a practical sense is that certain Nations wield the power to mediate the global attention and distribution of resources as per their personal politics and national values. This is in terms of geopolitical factors such as forming of alliances, resource distribution such as humanitarian aid, media coverage, providing military backing, and mediating Nations to settle disputes with neighbours. As Tom Peyre-Costa, spokesperson of the Norwegian Refugee Council has previously pointed towards this issue stating, “a form of eurocentrism, or even racism, in the distribution of the international aid.”^[6]

This issue can be observed more and more evidently as one looks at the lack of aid and attention provided to Central and Southern Asian crises in comparison to coverage of issues of certain Nations such as the European countries, superpower nations, and important strategic alliances of the first-world Nations. This is so because of the historic importance given to a sect of Nations that has allowed the manipulation of global resources and ideologies.

⁴ J Sundberg, *Eurocentrism - an overview* | ScienceDirect Topics, WWW.SCIENCEDIRECT.COM (2009), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/eurocentrism>.

⁵ Kelly M. Lewis et al., *Investigating Motivations for Women’s Skin Bleaching in Tanzania*, 35 PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN QUARTERLY (2011).

⁶ Sophie Douce, “*There is a form of eurocentrism, or even racism, in international aid distribution*,” LE MONDE (2022), https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/06/02/there-is-a-form-of-eurocentrism-or-even-racism-in-international-aid-distribution_5985487_4.html.

The very perceptible unilateral attention and resource allocation to the recent Russia-Ukrainian War portrays how the aforementioned geopolitical factors are manipulated in a Euro-centric manner. In a very evident manner, the crisis has been given increasingly large media attention globally, comparatively, almost doubling or even tripling the amount of coverage over any Central Asian crisis that has occurred in the past couple of years. Despite being a bias issue that needs to be enquired through better legal efficiency in international organisations, this issue is deeply connected to media representation.

In 2022, media outlets across the globe as well as all Nations witnessed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, European media coverage was at its peak^[7], naturally given that the invasion was the largest invasion in the region since World War II. However, the contention here is not the attention provided to this matter, it is that whilst an issue that concerned the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA), global attention was diverted towards this matter urgently and instantly while during the same period of time, three Central Asian nations also had been facing severe humanitarian crises- Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan^[8]. These serve humanitarian crises were not given the similar nature of global attention or aid.

The year 2022 witnessed humanitarian crises in different parts of the globe. Kazakhstan entered the year with a series of anti-government protests that subsequently developed into grotesque and combative conditions owing to the retaliatory measures. The human rights situation in the Nation had deteriorated further, exacerbating preexisting difficulties. The crisis has resulted in an enormous number of injuries, estimated in the thousands, and at least 10,000 fatalities had been reported^[9]. The concerning number of torturous measures and the lack of any sort of accountability further make the possibility of any future resolution of the matter bleak.

Since unilateral coverage is established, it is now important to understand and further analyse the desperate need for media attention. While it cannot be contested that European Nations may provide more concern for the Russia-Ukrainian War as there are territorial concerns and immediate effects over matters of resources, the problem arises when it is realised that these countries hold a prominent hand over the global allocation of resources, therefore, there may be (as is present) an unproportionate division of allocation and aid to Countries that these powerful

⁷ Kirsten Eddy & Richard Fletcher, *Perceptions of media coverage of the war in Ukraine*, REUTERS INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF JOURNALISM (2022), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/perceptions-media-coverage-war-Ukraine>.

⁸ Kirill Krivosheev, *Crises in Central Asia Belie the Region's Ability to Democratize*, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE (2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87495>.

⁹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *World Report 2022*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (2022), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/kazakhstan>.

nations are not immediately affected by. Thus, the role of media becomes very important. Given the significant attention and time consumed by media, it holds the power to persuade beliefs and shape perceptions of the worldview^[10]. Hence why proper representation is raised as a concern across platforms very often.

Continuous and fierce media coverage of an issue can create political and diplomatic pressure for the Government of the Nation to take a morally “correct” stand on it. Media must not only be perceived as a means for dissemination of information, it has the power to sway political decisions. Various research has displayed the control of the allocation of aid by a Nation to be correlated to the media presence, this maybe not only due to awareness created amongst the citizens but also because it provides the Government a chance to pursue favourable public image^[11]. However, this argument may appear to get rather astray and disoriented as the influence of media is not the crux issue of the problem. The issue is rooted in the fact that global matters have a Eurocentric approach when it comes to addressing crises.

The dismissal of Central or Southern Asian matters comes to the extent, wherein even the connection of these countries with any Eurocentric issue is not addressed. The Russian-Ukrainian War had severe implications on majorly five Central Asian Countries^{[12][13]}, however, these implications (that have further aggravated the pre-existing conditions) have not been addressed either. It may be said that matters concerning these powerful Countries often dominate global attention, even if there may be comparatively more severe matters elsewhere^[14].

III. UNILATERAL ORGANISATIONS AND AID

However, no matter how much the Media bias is criticised and realised to be an important factor, it cannot, after all, be narrowed down as the biggest factor in the euro-centric global structure. International Organisations, Treaties and general political play of powerful countries render the lower-standing Nations in a manner that there remains a hierarchy. Further, it is not the duty of the Media nor is it the primary duty of the Citizens to constantly monitor global play to ensure

¹⁰ Catherine Happer & Greg Philo, *The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change*, 1 JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY 321 (2013).

¹¹ Martin Scott, Mel Bunce & Kate Wright, *The Influence of News Coverage on Humanitarian Aid: The Bureaucrats’ Perspective*, 23 JOURNALISM STUDIES 167 (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2013129>.

¹² Ayjaz Wani, *The Ukraine war weighs down on the Central Asian Republics*, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION (2022), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-ukraine-war-weighs-down-on-the-central-asian-republics/>.

¹³ Barmak Pazhwak, *Russia’s Ukraine War Weighs Heavily on Tajikistan*, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE (2022), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/russias-ukraine-war-weighs-heavily-tajikistan>.

¹⁴ Robert Bociaga, *Does the Russia-Ukraine war overshadow other humanitarian crises?*, FAIRPLANET (2022), <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/does-the-russia-ukraine-war-overshadow-other-humanitarian-crises/>.

accurate distribution. The most prominent International Organisation, United Nations, has been criticised heavily on almost every account for focusing more on Western Nations. The criticism stands on the ground of unilateral attention, fund allocation and successful missions. The United Nations has been associated with its multiple failures to be able to provide progress or dispute settlement in different non-European contexts or regions¹⁵. This is a matter of grave concern, given the global significance the organisation has and the importance its branches have in the domain of international security, humanitarian aid, cultural conservation etc.

Institutionalised racism is pervasive in international relations, it is inevitable and near to impossible to eradicate the phenomenon entirely, however, it is necessary and possible to increase sensitivity towards suffering countries. Observations of debates, resource apportionment, and peacekeeping missions unravel a trend of failures in Asian Countries as compared to White Nations. Not only does this help in the persistence of past racist structures and tunnel of vision, but it also obstructs any manner in which this hierarchy could be dissolved or at least, diluted. Such behaviour by International Organisation eventually seeps into the perceptions of the public as well. One of the major problems with the unilateral view is the lack of awareness about any crisis in Asia. The problem here runs deeper than the knowledge of crisis, citizens of powerful countries such as the USA, are not even aware of the mere geographical location or demarcation of the majority of Asian nations- even the strategically important ones¹⁷. Such unaware populations make up for the powerful nations.

With an understanding of the very basic functions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and observation of its history of involvement, the appalling nature of self-interest and benefits seem to dominate the need to formulate efficient resolutions so as to maintain global peace. The permanent members, very conveniently play selectively, calculating the stakes. During the 1990s, the Sudanese Crisis dominated the table of discussion of UNSC as well as media outlets globally, however, the Sri Lankan Crisis was not brought a similar nature of care whilst being equally grave in nature¹⁸. This one such instance is more than a mere coincidence nor is it a case of evaluation of comparison between the severity of the two cases so as to “prioritise and tackle” the situations. Sudan has geopolitical and strategic value to the USA¹⁹.

¹⁵ Jonah Fisher, *UN failures on Rohingya revealed*, BBC NEWS, Sep. 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41420973>.

¹⁶ Tomi Oladipo, *The UN's peacekeeping nightmare in Africa*, BBC NEWS, Jan. 5, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38372614>.

¹⁷ Bijal P. Trivedi, *Survey Reveals Geographic Illiteracy*, SCIENCE (2002), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/geography-survey-illiteracy>.

¹⁸ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/selective-attention-the-United-nations-security-council-and-armed-conflict/E447F15892260D4F4783AD1ABC11F151>

¹⁹ Karen Allen, *Why does South Sudan matter so much to the US?*, BBC NEWS, Aug. 30, 2015,

It is similarly another case of a euro-centric concern overshadowing a non-Eurocentric issue.

(A) Structural Change and Diversification

Recommendations for ways to dismantle racism such as “educating oneself and others”; “self-reflection” are to some extent now superficial. Yes, it is undisputed that education dissemination is extremely important however, the history of these recommendations and “steps being taken” by institutions and organisations has been very long. Yet casual racism and racism in global-level organisations persist. It is now the time to provide for some real-time actions along with education and awareness campaigns. Moreover, it is not difficult to publicly display shows of supporting global equality and being an ally on a paper-level. The eradication (in an ideal scenario) or the reduction of this mass prejudicial stance against Nations require much more, it needs a structural change, acceptance of diversification, education of topics that go beyond the narrative of mere new reports over the matters of crisis in different countries.

Education in the sense of understanding how, when and the brutal manner of colonisation, and struggle of freedom these nations have gone through. There also needs to come a sense of understanding how a lot of African and Asian regional and domestic issues stem from the very colonisation that was brought in the name “civilising” these societies²⁰. The criticism of the aid sector needs to be internalised and solving these shortcomings needs to be a made point.

The perpetual cycle of victim-blaming the suffering countries cannot be stopped unless the history of colonisation is not glorified. Until and unless society is made aware of the violent past, it will continue to condemn the religion, culture and people of the suffering countries. It is indeed very sad to see the lack of awareness about the drop in India’s economy after the British invasion. Ancient India which used to flourish and be called “the golden bird” spiralled into a devastating state with colonisation²¹, for which it is still facing repercussions. What is even more saddening to witness is the erasure of this side of history from the narratives in the coloniser countries^{22,23}. In this manner, this system of institutionalised prejudicial behaviour and ignorance is made to persist.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34083964>.

²⁰ Monika Chansoria, *Influence of Asia’s Colonization: Debating the Past, Present, and Future of Territorial Issues*, 2 JAPAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (2018), https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/japanreview/pdf/JapanReview_Vol2_No1_07_MonikaChansoria.pdf.

²¹ Johann Koshy, *Why Britain Needs to Teach Colonial History in Our Schools*, VICE (2017), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59mvbq/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-legacy-of-empire> (last visited Aug 12, 2023).

²² Deana Heath, *The British Empire Is Still Being Whitewashed in UK Schools – This Must Change*, THE WIRE (2018), <https://thewire.in/history/british-empire-whitewashed-school-curriculum-jeremy-corbyn>.

²³ Philip Ball, *Imperialism’s long shadow: the UK universities grappling with a colonial past*, 610 NATURE 593 (2022), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03253-y>.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, such ignorance at large is taught and indoctrinated. Hate or prejudice are not natural tendencies for a human. With the history of colonization, torture as a means of dominance, rape as a tool of war, and attacks on civilians, it is time that the institutions of religion and faith are put aside. In the end, it is humankind that is suffering. In order to actually maintain global peace, the institutional supremacist structure needs to be broken down rather than the use of sinister means for keeping one nation in a position to decide the actions of others. This idea to hold on to such an abusive structure is through the means of victim-blaming that overlooks the millions of people on the verge of their death each day.

There is a need for acceptance of different lifestyles, cultures, and socio-economic situations. These can be done through appropriate representation, less focus on profiting off of exploitation, and allocation of resources to aid domestic issues in a manner that does not benefit only a certain part of the world.

However, such radical change is much easier said than done. There are issues of internalized racism and misogyny that also need to be resolved in order to tackle this problem of euro-centric vision. Institutional changes often have had a history of being disputed and being controversial, so any implementation of a radical structural change should not be scrutinized on the basis of how prepared the society is to accept it. While there may be many parts of the Euro-centric parade that disagree with a more globalized outlook, the fact remains that millions require urgent humanitarian aid in different parts of the world. It is, in very blunt terms, cruel to feign ignorance of the mortifying conditions of the human crises based solely on grounds of personal interest, cultural difference, and/or securing power status. Conclusively, this radical change is necessary, as Maya Angelou puts it, “Prejudice is burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible”.

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