
Preface

South Asia is home to nearly one-quarter of the world population. The region's cultural diversity, rich history, social and economic developments have always fascinated thinkers, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, to Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal, who titled his famous magnum opus on the region, *Asian Drama* (1968). South Asia provided a rich testing ground for development practitioners, and leading paradigms in development economics can be traced back to the region.

For a while, though, there was a loss of interest in South Asia with the ascendancy of East and Southeast Asia. Since the 1990s, the focus of development economists has begun to shift back to the region, with the region poised to take off, following economic reforms. However, as always, the region's experience is diverse; the challenges of and responses by different countries of the region are varied. Even when they faced the same challenge, their responses were not the same. Thus, the efforts to understand the complex development experience of the region have spawned a large amount of literature.

This volume is a collection of chapters on economic and social development in South Asia. The analytical narratives on the economic transformation of South Asian economies are based on the wide-ranging extant literature, and highlight the interactions of sociopolitical factors as they impact on development outcomes. In particular, they examine the role of economic policies that were influenced by historical and political circumstances of the time. Each chapter, written by country experts, begins with a brief discussion of the political history of the country and ends with a discussion of future prospects and challenges.

The introductory chapter by the editors attempts to provide a comprehensive survey of South Asian economic development, highlighting the economic policy reforms, their outcomes and their political economy contexts. It seeks to understand the drivers of accelerated economic growth in South Asia – such as India's high-tech software exports – and the various pathways to social development, such as those followed by Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala and, more recently, by Bangladesh. It wonders whether, in spite of the diversity of experiences of South Asian countries, there is a unique South Asian development model. And if so, what are its salient features? Do the varying experiences of economic reforms across South Asian countries, with their distinctive socioeconomic settings, governance environment, and public cultures, provide fresh perspectives on the emerging development paradigms?

Four decades ago, after completing the three-volume *Asian Drama*, Gunnar Myrdal 'frankly' confessed 'that I have found my task much more difficult than I expected'.¹ We must admit, we have the same feeling. Since then, the literature has grown much more and there are more contesting hypotheses. However, like Myrdal, we were not without friends and colleagues who provided generous feedback and materials. Among them are T.N. Srinivasan (Yale University), Shantaganan Devarajan (World Bank), Sadiq Ahmed (World Bank) and Iyanatul Islam (Griffith University), to name a few. We are extremely grateful to them. We also acknowledge the support of our families. Finally, though, we

drew inspiration from the resilience of the quarter of the humanity who toil everyday to better their lives under the trying conditions of South Asia. We dedicate this volume to them.

Note

1. *Asian Drama* (1968), New York: Pantheon (Random House), p. x.