

# Religious Conflicts in South Asia and Impact on Security

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**S**outh Asia is confronted with grave security threats which are product of many factors.

Not only the hasty British departure left many inter state conflicts unresolved including festering border issues but they also did not bother to look back and facilitate the South Asians to secure the much desired resolution of their disputes. However it is indeed too late to put the entire blame on the British alone, the regional states have also exasperated the existing complex situation. While many inherited conflicts still continue to affect the relationships, the policies of regional states have also given birth to many new threats such as ethnicity religious militancy and terrorism. This short paper is divided in five sections highlighting initially four major sources of tensions in South Asia, major factors causing rise of religious extremism, analysing South Asian situations, discussing security debates and finally suggesting recipe. It needs to be mentioned here that the paper is written in a much generalised form taking full cognizance of developments in most South Asian countries.

## I

South Asia is a peculiar region in many ways. It is an area where one witnesses simultaneous acknowledgement of operational complementarity of interests as well as the existence of conflicting interests. That may be the reason why love-hate relationships frequently manifest in one form or the other. At the declaratory level most leaders of the region have repeatedly asserted their utmost desire to work for peace but at the practical level the efforts have been viewed with suspicions and cynicism. Since the roots of security problems are indigenous (both domestic and regional), the threat perceptions are sufficiently diverse to preclude a common approach. For India the major sources of external threats are China and Pakistan despite the march of normalization processes and the advent of regional organization. Similarly for Pakistan and to a lesser degree for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and even Nepal the main threat emanates from Indian policy

pursuits. The Indian threat perceptions also include threats originating from outside the region.

While South Asia is a region that has been experiencing periodic upheavals ever since the British departed and the countries of the region attained independent status. Conflict and tension arose in South Asia mainly because of the hasty departure of the British who left many complicated and potentially explosive issues unresolved. The situation was further complicated when the apprehensions generated, not only exacerbated the existing sense of insecurity but also induced the leading states of the region to opt for divergent paths. In addition the early linkage of regional interest with global developments not only cemented the adopted divergent pursuits within the region but also periodically caused certain amount of adjustments among the involved powers like US, SU and China.

Four major sources of tension have contributed considerably towards the perception formulation of regional states; tension generated by the emergence of asymmetrical power balance after British departure, tension caused by regional conflicts, tension produced by linkage between the insiders and the interested outsiders; and tension caused by domestic development and the emerging new threats such as the religious militancy, sectarianism, ethnicity terrorism etc.

Undoubtedly, the South Asians regional perceptions have been, and in many ways still continue to be, greatly influenced by the unbalanced and asymmetric power structure that emerged after the departure of the British. The tyranny of geography manifested itself in such a way that while almost all the regional states acquired common border with India, they do not enjoy physical proximity among themselves. India is situated right in the middle of the region, blessed with large territory, massive population, endowed with enormous resources, and over the years it has built an impressive military machine.

The towering Indian position in the region coupled with India's assertion to secure recognition and respect for its policies and its desire to establish a natural hierarchy or as many often refer to it as hegemony within the region generate apprehensions among the regional neighbours.

The tension generated by outsider's involvement is likely to reduce. The constructive engagements of great powers could cause total elimination of tensions that are often credited to their presence. A great power's involvement in any region of the world is primarily caused by two major reasons; either to meet its global responsibilities or to serve its own interests in the given region. The involvement of the great powers during the Cold War was the product of their global objectives and South Asia was no exception. During the Cold War the Americans perceived threats from the Communist world and were feverishly engaged in enlisting players, friends and supporters for their own team. The local states that opted to join the Cold War alliance system were more influenced by regional compulsions and domestic reasons.

Following the death of the Cold War, the tragic events of 9/11, and the initiation of war against terrorism, the policies of great power changed and appear to be more akin to what is called partnerships with a select group of nations.

As far as the tension caused by the regional conflicts is concerned, the South Asians will have to grow up and demonstrate maturity in resolving their regional disputes. Among the regional conflict, the most important one has been the conflictual cobweb surrounding Indian-Pakistani relations. A good beginning was made when Hizb-ul-Mujahideen offered a cease fire in July-Aug.2000, which started a chain of events all aimed towards resolution of the ongoing Kashmir dispute. Admittedly the process was interrupted by events like the attack on Indian Parliament and India's consequent action of massive concentration of its forces on Pakistani border invoking somewhat similar reaction from the Pakistani side. The forces of the two countries faced eye ball to eye ball for more than ten months. Eventually the Indians decided to withdraw. On April18, 2003 the Indian Prime Minister offered to talk on contentious bilateral issues. This offer initiated a chain of positive developments which led to the normalisation of diplomatic relations, restoration of communication and transportation links, successful conclusion of 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit, and the initiation of the much awaited dialogue on Indo-Pak contentious issues.

Periodic pressures emanating from internal dynamics confront them with ugly realities of realpolitik influencing them either to accelerate efforts to seek resolutions of the outstanding disputes/issues or face multiplied complex problems. The externalization of periodic internal problems could provide temporary relief, but in essence it would further complicate the existing complex problems deserving even more careful handling.

If South Asians did not pay heed to the dictates of time, they are likely to be left behind. A major war in the region could cause havoc (because of the likely deployment of nuclear weapons) and destroy the region. It is not just the question of retardation of growth, it would be total destruction. Even if the nuclear weapons are not employed, the war would destroy the carefully groomed SAARC, retard growth, provide extreme disincentives for the foreign investors causing their flight, and pave the grounds for increased religious militancy, ethnicity, sectarianism, drug trafficking and terrorism to acquire uncontrollable proportions.

## II

The fourth source of tension is rooted in domestic developments and consequential policy pursuits. South Asia is a region that is blessed with a great diversity of religions and cultures. The long history of South Asia clearly indicates that almost all the great religions managed to gain some sort of foothold in South Asia. For years these religions continued to live side by side peacefully. However with the arrival of British, one begin to experience tensions among the followers of various religions. All religions suggest a code aimed to provide a divine source of strength and to improve the human behaviour. However when the notion of imposition gains grounds, irritants is born which in turn tends to lead to conflictual situations. A simple glance at history of South Asia clearly depict that while the differences continued to be aired periodically but the religious conflict remained dormant and never acquired dangerous proportion where the state security was really jeopardized.

Admittedly the threats to regional security emanate from a combination of local, regional and global factors but in recent times religious violence has increased in South Asia. The advent and activities of Jihadis in Pakistan, the Hindutiva ideology of RSS and the activities of Sangh Parivar in India, separatist notions of Tamils in the north of Sri Lanka, and ideologies such as Maoist movement in Nepal all reflect this trend. The religious based nationalism along with ideological extremism has given alarming rise to violence. Three main factors have given rise to religious conflicts/extremism in South Asia; the manipulation and effective exploitation of internal frictions by the outsiders, poor economic growth and poor governance. A simple glance at the Indian history clearly reveals that there were hardly any major communal clash within India but after the British arrival religiously orientated clashes began to increase. Undoubtedly the British exploited the situation to their advantage initially to establish the British Empire, later to sustain it and at the time of departure to ensure the envisaged future dependence.

As mentioned above that an outsider major powers involvement in any region is primarily the product of either the changes in global environment or changes in its policy pursuits devised to attain their interests. For small powers the major consideration of forging closer ties with one or more major powers stem from a desire to sufficiently reduce the incumbent military imbalances and to accelerate its economic development. The ideological proximity and the complementarity of interests often make it easier for both the major power and small power to come closer to each other. The changing international environment and the emerging trends often cause adjustment and shifting loyalties in congruence with the dictates of emerging realities.

The second major factor that facilitates the rise to religious conflicts revolves around poor economic growth. Following the attainment of independence, neither of the South Asian maintained an impressive growth rate though in recent decades Indian appears to be doing rather well. While the growth rate was poor, the population rate was impressive. Poor economic performance has given birth too many problems such as unemployment, malnutrition and health problems, income equalities, along with the problem of ever increasing population growth. The decade of 90s saw a rapid rise in poverty. South Asian

has now the dubious distinction of having more than 40 percent world's poor surviving with less than one dollar a day.

By many accounts it has been stressed that the overall GDP growth rate in South Asia was not all that unimpressive during the 90s yet it is the same decade in which the poverty kept on rising. The average growth rate of South Asia was more than five percent though in 90s the smaller regional states' performance was not at all that impressive whereas India growth rate was indeed impressive.

The third factor that appears to have contributed towards the religiously orientated conflicts is the poor governance. The inability to improve the economic conditions and governments tendencies to employ religious and ethnic cards to sustain their rule has increased the influence of religious extremists in South Asian Societies. For manipulative politics some political parties are known to have links with the extremists whom they support and protect as well as use them whenever deemed necessary. Violence is employed by militant groups as one of the effective means of the manipulative politics. A combination of the above mentioned factors produce conflict situations and extremists in a society. Many of the ruling groups are known to have exploited the situation to the best of their abilities either to gain power or to sustain their rule.

### III

Almost all South Asian states have religious minorities but religions have not really caused an outbreak of a major war. It has always been a combination of various factors which also included religious contributions. Religious cleavages sometimes make the reconciliation path rather difficult. The era of typical religious wars such as crusade is over and modern times religion may be employed in conjunction with other developments or factors in order to make the best of the situation Admittedly the establishment of Pakistan is sometimes attributed to only religious factors. It would be appropriate not to ignore other factors such as economic reasons or the contributions of

the Congress leaders or the British designs etc. that substantively contributed and facilitated the advent of Pakistan.

Religions alone, in modern times, have not been a source of a major conflict but the effective use of religions in conjunction with other operative factors have prove to be an effective instrument especially in mobilising support of co-religionists or even to exploit the situation, religion have proved to a useful tool. The history of the region is replete with ample examples where religions were employed in order to attain stated or hidden objectives. Dwelling on religious exploitation facilitates policy pursuits.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the consequential US involvement along with support of Jehadis groups and Pakistan managed to force the Soviets out of Afghanistan but their hasty departure left Pakistan to face the dilemma of growing strength of these militant groups which in turn became a security threat in the post Soviet withdrawal period. Subsequent use of religion in politics further complicated the situation. Similarly the Iran revolution and its consequential support for Shia groups in Pakistan and Bangladesh further exacerbated the situation.

The rise of Hindutva forces as a political phenomenon in India provided the much needed support to militant forces which in turn resulted in the intensification of communal and religious based conflicts. The rapid rise of extreme Hindu nationalism not only resulted in periodic eruption of increased bouts of violence but also provided the government with opportunity to enact laws granting emergency powers. Over the years a series of black laws like TADA (Terrorists and Disruptive Activities Act), Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) etc. were passed.

The conflict in Sri Lanka is a product of a combination of communal, ethnic and linguistic factors along with majority-minority politics playing a key role. It is further complicated when one realises that religious divisiveness is along ethnic lines. The external factor also made its contributions.

The Nepal case is slightly different than the others as it is facing an ideologically based extremism led by Maoist which is indeed a major security threat. Again it was Nepal's communist party which proclaimed a people's war in order to seize power. However a close scrutiny indicates that the social and economic disparity among certain regions and classes is the real cause. A combination of politico-economic along with incumbent socio-cultural factors enabled the Maoists to mobilize strength.

#### IV

The security situation is a product of both the internal and external sources. Perhaps the most important prerequisite to analyse any country's security problems is the identification of threats emanating either from external sources or from within. Threat is an environmental condition which makes us realise that we are likely to be deprived of our coveted values and important possession. 'The operative military doctrine and the existing forces posture are often designed to meet the perceived threats'. The main function of a military doctrine is to maximise the effectiveness of a state's military capabilities.

Security, essentially negative terms, 'connotes the absence of real and perceived threats, whether stemming from external sources or internal turmoil or economic disparities and social inequalities to certain coveted values'. To deal with such threats effectively nations seek power (political, economic, and military). Power can lead to prosperity and prosperity may generate more power. While this process is still somewhat continuous under the existing international political system in which states are theoretically sovereign independent entities, the traditional paradigms of security are undergoing transformation primarily because of many significant global developments along with the technological revolution.

Global developments of far reaching consequences make it imperative to broaden the traditional concepts of national security in order to include areas like rapid depletion of resources, increasing population and environmental issues. For the developing world two other areas need to be incorporated into the new definition of national security. Among

them the economic related problems and social inequalities along with the surfacing of ethnicity, religious militancy and terrorism qualify to be included in the broadened concept of security. Expanded definition is usually referred as the concept of comprehensive security. Etymologically the comprehensive security implies a satisfactory sense of security in all essential walks of life.

To attain comprehensive security one has to initially identify and evaluate the incumbent threats emanating from varied external and internal sources. Among the external threats, traditional threat to physical boundaries, injection of subversive ideas and insurgency movements, deprivation of essential goods upon which a nation is heavily dependent through blockade or sanctions appears to be prominent. Similarly the internal threats may emanate from economic, political, social, ethnic and military sources. Among the threats that are frequently mentioned include illegal immigration, proliferation of small arms, drug trafficking, violence caused by ethnicity, communalism, widespread poverty, suppression of human rights, social and economic inequalities etc. All of these developments could and have often resulted into the destabilization which in turn may transform into a major security threat.

To cope with threats emanating from external and internal, military and non-military sources, different schools of thoughts have been promoting different approaches. Some advocate a violent means while the others opt for more peaceful pursuits. One major group believes that the most effective means to deal with perceived threats especially the external threats is via well-established institutions like the armed forces or the police.

What about internal problems like revolution, subversion, and violent struggle for power, coups d'etate? Internal disorder ranging from ordinary crime to a full-scale civil war. It has been often observed that a minor internal disturbance snowballed into an acute international conflict situation reflecting the known characteristics of national security problem. At what stage the rulers should undertake effective measures to deal with the situation. Should one wait and watch until the insignificant minor disturbance acquires the threatening magnitude or should one employ the violent corrective means almost

immediately. Minor disturbances are often the result of economic or social dissatisfaction.

The opponent of this group see heavy reliance upon the sole monopolies of sanctified means of violence (armed forces and police) as detrimental to the greater interest of the society. They tend to mistakenly project the institutions of armed forces and police as potential threats to the liberty of man in society. They tend to advocate the obsolescence of military and other violent means and often stress that alternatives must be found to replace this traditional methods of national survival. While criticizing rather heavily the sanctimonious means of violence, this group suggests that security must be perceived essentially in non military terms such as the provision of education, employment, social welfare, housing, food, health and sanitation facilities. It seems to be a logical extension of an old idea that security lay in the defeat of the five major evils of society-Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. Assuming that one has been able to get rid of all these evils of society and have acquired the much desired cultural refinement and economic prosperity, would it not then be right to assume that the principle concern in such a society would revolve around the preservation of what has been achieved. Experience indicated that economically prosperous and well-established states have also sought security in the traditional methods of building up their military machine. It defends their coveted values, deters aggression, provides effective support for their political and diplomatic bargaining, gives them confidence and serves as an index of their power and prestige.

Both schools seem to be obsessed with only on aspect, though a very important aspect, of national security and, therefore both are guilty of underplaying the other equally important aspects. The exponents of armed forces are over-projecting the utility of military. They are focusing on external threats exclusively ignoring that threat which emanate from within. They tend to accord almost negligible respects to those aspects of security, which stem from lack of economic security or well-entrenched social inequalities. Similarly the advocates of military are making the same mistake by over

projecting the usefulness of military aspect and underplaying the corrective abilities of economic prosperities along with social justice.

A comprehensive approach needs to be employed, which would include both violent, and non-violent means. It must take into considerations the external and internal threats as well as the threats emanating from economic insecurity and social inequalities. Comprehensive security requires that a state should protect its citizens from external and internal dangers as well as to provide economic and social opportunities with a view to improve the quality of life for its citizens. To deal with the external dangers emanating from aggression or an aggressive behaviour of another state, the development of armed forces is often deemed necessary. But to deal with dangers originating from domestic sources, a much more comprehensive strategy is required which would include the transformation of traditional concept of security and opting for a balanced approach conceding appropriate importance to economic, social, and military elements. For developing countries to provide adequate economic and social security along with military security is indeed not an easy task. While deeply engaged in developmental pursuits, some developing countries have been able to go beyond the military security.

## V

Sharp regional disparities along with social backwardness with sizable population excluded from economic, political; and social mainstream and deprived to enjoy the fruits of development provide ample grounds for religious exploitation. Communalising politics for political gains seem a popular instrument in South Asia. The religious cards often employed because of its effective influences in socially backward and economically deprived communities. BJP and Sangh Parivars persistent attempts to promote Hindu Chauvinism caused a reaction among the secularists and other religious minorities which eventually resulted in facilitating the advent of a new regime. Similarly in Pakistan the poor performances on both economic front and poor governance allowed sufficient space to religious groups to capitalise over it.

Being a man of optimism blended with realism, I feel the South Asians are likely to recognize the dictates of time and would opt far more cooperative attitude than what they have so far demonstrated. Indeed it would require concerted efforts from all involved. Not only governance needs to be improved and the aspiration of the people should be accorded deserving respect but steady improvement in economic sector aimed to improve the quality of life for the people could transform trends from extremism to moderation.

For obvious reason the regional conflicts should be subjected to intense and sincere search for resolutions. While there seem to exist recognition of being left behind if they did not resolve their regional bickering but the notion to get out of the complex issues on ones own terms still persists. Thinking in regional terms and promoting collective interests of the South Asian could eventually provide the much sought after panacea.