

BOOK REVIEW

Sundeep Waslekar, *South Asian Drama: Travails of Misgovernance*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1995, 388 pages, Price Rupees 395.

At the fag end of the millennia the world is indeed awakened to a new series of realities and events of far-reaching consequences. South Asia and the world beyond it are going through a period of unprecedented transition marked by difficult challenges as well as tremendous opportunities. South Asia is undergoing a process of economic liberalization and democratic regeneration. This process is, however, highly complex and full of contradictions. While South Asia's economy and politics are displaying some signs of dynamism, the region is facing a host of difficult challenges on both the fronts. Its economic life is characterized by highly underdeveloped infrastructure, low level of growth and even much lower level of savings and investment, predominance of the agricultural sector that is primarily dependent on the mercy of nature and can not meet the requirements in food grains, extreme dependence on foreign aid and, above all, lack of discipline in the overall management of the economy. Similarly, its political life is undergoing a process of degeneration the most vivid manifestation of which are the declining effectiveness and popular legitimacy of democratic institutions, degeneration of political processes, centralization and personalization of state power. Today in South Asia, we deal with societies riddled with violence trapped in mass poverty and steeped in wide scale illiteracy and inequa-

lity. In such a period of epochal significance, it is necessary to evaluate the state of affairs in and the tasks facing the region in all spheres of its life - socio-economic, politico-cultural as well as moral-ethical. It is in this backdrop that the bold and quite provocative critique of what is wrong with governance in South Asia as put forward by Sundeep Waslekar in his *South Asian Drama: Travails of Misgovernance* is a timely response to a series of burning issues that the region is facing in managing the escalation of history. While India attracted greater attention on the part of the author, other regional countries also figured prominently in the book.

The book could be summarized as an account of monumental failure as displayed by the elites in South Asia in governing their respective societies. The idea, as it appears, predated the writing of the book. And this led him to vociferously advocate even in the first chapter titled "An Inevitable Change" a radical departure from the past in South Asia with regard to governance. With a view to impelling "the people of South Asia to think seriously about their travails resulting from misgovernance", in subsequent four chapters, Waslekar rather ruthlessly exposes numerous distortions associated with and resulting from under-development and asymmetrical development, political decay, intra-state conflicts along ethno-religious and other parochial lines, and mistrust and conflicts among regional countries. The process of socio-economic and politico-cultural development during the post-independent period and its outcomes as seen through his eyes are much more than just utterly frustrating. His study leads to an inevitable conclusion that all these have put the region on the verge of a catastrophe. Even the ongoing process of economic liberalization and democratization does not constitute any hope for a better future. In the final chapter, he came out with a set of suggestions that are designed to save the region from the impending catastrophe.

With convincing arguments Waslekar has singled out the ruling elite in South Asia as the main villain to be blamed for the whole mess. Similarly, he has also identified the possible saviors - the people. With penetrating analyses as he reveals the greed of the ruling elites for power and pelf, highly immoral means of achieving these, and the innumerable sufferings of the common people and their helplessness *vis-a-vis* the ruling elite, his assertion that South Asia is in a conceptual crisis as it moves towards the third millennium becomes convincing. Furthermore, his conclusion that people need a fresh idea which can bring them together in search of a promising future is highly thought-provoking. The same implies to his assertion that when "South Asian rulers face no threats from within, they will automatically discover that they do not face threats from outside". However, political pundits and practitioners concerned with governance would continue to wonder how far realistic is his prescribed solution for a way out of the grim situation which puts a rather singled-minded emphasis on the moral-ethical regeneration.

Waslekar - a visionary with high degree of personal commitment to the well-being of the region and its people - deals with the issues raised in his book with a missionary zeal. It is both a strength and an weakness. Strength in the sense that he has got clear perception of the ideas and institutions, forces and factors, and events and phenomena which matter in the process of governance as well as determine the outcome of this process. This enables him to present a bold or rather merciless critique of everything that went wrong with governance and everybody who are to be blamed for these wrongs. Weakness in the sense that his analyses occasionally become burdened with emotions. Owing to this, not seldom, he fails to avoid over-statement in presenting his critique as well as making suggestions that are aimed at overcoming the ills of misgovernance. Another remarkable weakness of his academic endeavor is that the book underesti-

mates South Asia's incredible capacity for survival despite misgovernance and resultant traumas.

Nevertheless, most of the author's stark warnings and bold suggestions should be taken seriously as South Asia is going through the most critical juncture of its history. And, this makes the book a timely contribution to contemporary South Asian studies that would be of immense value to the academicians as well as practitioners.

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S.D. Muni and Lok Raj Baral (eds.), *Refugees and Regional Security in South Asia* (Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi 1996, for Regional Centre for Strategic Studies), 245 pp., (Indian Rs. 275.00).

The flight and the plight of the refugee is an age-old phenomenon, perhaps predating the formation of the pre-modern state. Ancient histories, chronicles and legends abound with tales of historically formed aggregates of people migrating from their habitual places of native settlements under real or perceived threats of insecurity. Often these take the form of transmigration to contiguous or adjacent areas of relative security, but sometimes across the seas. It may be recalled here that the legendary

beginnings of the majority community in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, is traced to a band of refugees from North-East India fleeing from the wrath of the state ruler.

Since the days of the medieval Fiddler on the Roof, the refugee problem has now assumed gruesome proportions affecting a wider section of the humanity. It is this scenario, in particular its South Asian manifestation, which forms the central theme of this book. The bulk of the material embodied in this volume represent the papers submitted for the first seminar project of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS). Much of the groundwork of this seminar was accomplished by the doyen of the RCSS, late Professor Shelton Kodikara, whose timely call for collaboration in this endeavor found a ready response from a team of dedicated South Asian scholars, while two of the leading experts on regional affairs, S.D. Muni and Lok Raj Baral undertook to edit this volume.

In the introductory chapter the editors have neatly summed up the causes, course and magnitude of the refugee crisis against the background of their regional epicentres. No doubt in consideration of the ever-widening spiral of refugee generating situations obtaining in the modern world, the definition of refugees adopted here is much broader than what was envisaged in the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees held in 1951. The economic and developmental migrants are subsumed under the same category as those who are being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political dissent. It is precisely for the same reasons that Shikha Bose acknowledges that the use of the terms *refugee* and *migrant* interchangeably is *deliberate* in her paper on the Chakmas of Bangladesh.

Admittedly, such loose classifications avoid semantic controversies but infuse an element of confusion to comparative analysis. Suffice it to point out the asymmetrical privations of the "Bihari Muslims" and Afghan refugees in Pakistan or those of the Tibetan refugees and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India.

The main focus of the book is to relate refugee flows with security concerns within the context of the South Asian polities. Each chapter provides a vivid picture of the security threats posed by the respective refugee community to the host country. Understandably, by far the most serious of these, levelled at the regional super power, India, by the Sri Lankan Tamil exiles on her soil has received a wide coverage in the chapters authored by Bertram Bastiampillai and V. Suriyanarayan.

In spite of Kodikara's able attempt to locate the root causes of the major refugee exoduses in the upsurge of ethno-nationalism in South Asia, the contents of the book do not provide adequate discussion on the theoretical postulates of either the refugee syndrome or the concept of Security. However, it needs to be mentioned here that Imitiaz Ahmed and Dawa Norbu in their contributions have made a brief theoretical exposition of these two terms but do not elaborate beyond making certain passing remarks. Shikha Bose, on her part, speculates that 'deprivation' is the omnibus term encompassing all refugee generating issues, which, in turn, begets the question: will then the refugee exoduses remain an intractable problem for ever? Her own answer to this question provides a fitting ending to this review: 'Fences and border patrols will not succeed in preventing the march of people away from a place of insecurity to a place of security. As demonstrated by the Chakmas, unless their security is guaranteed, people will come and go, back and forth across the border line, violating every rule of international behaviour and internal law'.

An epistemological purist would look for a finer definition of the term refugee as it is used here, and, probably a Buzanian encapsulation of the extended meaning of the term national security, but for those who wish to read succinct analysis of the refugee and the security interaction in South Asia, this book is of immense use.

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