Chapter 3

Human Security, Ethnicity, and Ethnic Conflict: South Asia

South Asia can claim a distinction in that it is a region where the impact of the end of the Cold War has not been that significant. The region is still characterised as too conflict-prone. However, South Asia's security discourse has not been so free from the paradigmatic shift in the international order that resulted, *inter alia*, in changes in security thinking. An attempt will be made here to briefly examine South Asia's security discourse to determine both conceptually and practically the status of human security in the region.

3.1 SECURITY DISCOURSE IN SOUTH ASIA

The discourse on security in South Asia takes place at two levels—the traditional level and the non-traditional one. From another perspective, one strand is donor-driven and another essentially an attempt to indigenise the discourse and make it truly South Asian.

Traditional security studies is conducted and promoted mainly in government institutions and think tanks and in some "sponsored institutions." Research and deliberations on non-traditional security are done mostly in non-government institutions and forums. These studies and research attempt to both widen the content of security by including economic, environmental and other non-traditional aspects and deepen the analysis by according a role also to non-state actors in security management (Khan, 1996; Iftekharuzzaman, 1997; Basrur 2001; Banerjee, 2000; Chari, 2001; Khan, 2001). The Western donor community has funded many of these studies, allegedly demonstrating in the process a bias for western concepts and models of political institutions. However, there have been serious and genuine attempts at evolving a *South Asian discourse* on security that would interrogate the validity of modern notions of 'nation' and 'state' and also de-masculinise
and engender the concepts of security as well as the state (Behera, 2002; Mohsin, 2001: 11-43).

The debate on human security in South Asia has been gathering pace over the last decade, although alternative ideas on security, including concerns for people's security are not new in the region. The Colombo-based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) (Basrur, 2001: 165-2000; Banerjee, 2000), the New Delhi-based Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) (Chari and Gupta, 2003), the South Asia Partnership-International (SAP-I), and Kanti Bajpai (Bajpai, 2001) have done pioneering work in this field. The current study on human security, undertaken by the Dhaka-based BIISS and sponsored by the Ford Foundation, is aiming to make a substantive contribution to the South Asian discourse on human security.

However, it appears that although the concept of human security has gained wider recognition than before, it is yet to be mainstreamed in South Asia in terms of conceptual integration and policy space. The realist paradigm remains the dominant discourse in the region. Studies and research undertaken in South Asia on non-traditional security mentioned above show that realist views are entrenched in various state institutions and elite perceptions and, hence, any alternative ideas on security or the role of the state are resisted. For example, Uyangoda states, "The dominant paradigm of security studies... is based on the 'centres of modern nation states' leaving the 'margins' outside its purview .... Consequently, security studies then focus entirely on this elite perception to the exclusion of real and live causes threatening 'security'" (Uyangoda, 2000:15-23).

Basrur holds a similar view when he maintains that the expanded people-centric conception of security is gradually finding a voice; yet older elitist notions of security remain well-entrenched within the power structures of the state and society (Basrur, 2001). As a matter of fact, South Asia is notorious for inordinately privileging the “political”, irrespective of the nature of the issues at stake. The theoretical and empirical implications of this primacy are that this often leads to subordination and, at times, neglect of human security issues.

Why does the political dominate the discourse of security in South Asia? Scholars attribute this to incomplete state building in South Asia. Banerjee, for example, declares, "...state building and consolidation is yet to be completed in most [South Asian] countries. Hence, perceptions of national security based on defence of territories and interests and on
ensuring the integrity of the nation in the face of ethnic divisiveness remain strong” (Banerjee, 2001: ix). Ayoob agrees with this view. He argues that the security problematic needs to be placed in a historical context that underlies its links to the evolution of the modern state and believes that the security predicament of most Third World states is a function of the early stages of state-making at which they find themselves (Ayoob, 2002: 67-90).

State building in South Asia has been affected by at least three factors: (i) legacies of colonial rule; (ii) the relatively short history of independent state building; (iii) and the ideological inclination and mindset of the new ruling elites in South Asian countries. All seven South Asian countries were either under direct British rule or under varying degrees of its influence. The state and society in the subcontinent were often moulded in accordance with imperial needs and not necessarily with the political, economic and socio-cultural aspirations of the native population. This brought about distortions in the natural growth of society, the body politic and even affected the development of a healthy collective spirit and personality in British India and other countries in the region. State making is a long-drawn, arduous process. But because most states of South Asia achieved their independence only several decades ago, they had not yet had the full benefits of the temporal space essential for adequate state building.

Moreover, élites in most South Asian countries have invested their efforts more in consolidating their authority and power than in developmental aspects and national integration. State building efforts in diverse societies have often been ill-directed, and have led to ethnic conflicts. Adequate attention has not been paid to these problems insofar as they relate to human security. Most South Asian countries have been plagued with ethnic conflicts, leading to violence and wars. As the causes of these conflicts lie largely in the nation building processes in these countries, a theoretical exposition may be well merited here.

3.2 ETHNICITY, ETHNIC CONFLICT, AND NATION BUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA

Nation building has been defined as “the totality of a continuous and endless process through which the country, by holding a national value consensus overarching the values and expectations of different sections of the society, would so develop as a cohesive socio-politico-economic
entity that it would strengthen itself from their strength mobilised in concertive participation” (Iftekharuzzaman and Rahman, 1986: 17). Rounaq Jahan et. al have used the term ‘nation building’ interchangeably with ‘national integration’ (Jahan, 1973: 3). The American scholar Wriggins states that national integration generally implies bringing together the disparate elements of a society into a more integrated whole, or to make out of many small and diverse societies a closer approximation of one nation (Wriggins, 1966: 181-191). This is an example of the assimilitionist model of integration.

Myron Weiner defines national integration as the process of bringing together culturally and socially disparate groups into a single territorial unit and the establishment of a national identity. This, according to him, involves five tasks: the creation of a sense of territorial nationality, establishing a national central authority, bridging the elite-mass gap, creation of a ‘minimum’ value consensus, and devising integrative institutions and behaviour (Weiner, 1965: 52-64; Weiner, 1971: 643-654). These tasks may be attempted or accomplished, according to Jahan, by creating a national political system that supersedes or incorporates all the regional subsystems.

If national integration supersedes particularistic identities the process may be called ‘assimilation’, but if the same process involves incorporating them it may be termed as ‘pluralist’ (Brass, 1975; Phadnis, 1983). The former approach to national integration implies assimilation of the entire state population into a common identity without properly differentiating corporate identities, while the latter entails recognition of corporate sections along with a role for diversity in the development of the personality of the state. In other words, while the assimilationist perspective aims at unity of diversities, the pluralist approach envisages unity in diversity.

Most South Asian countries have adopted in varying degrees the assimilationist approach in their national integration policies, although these are ethno-linguistically and culturally pluralistic, heterogeneous societies. Moreover, as mentioned, the ruling elites of these countries have often shown preference for state building in place of nation building. Differences between the two concepts are significant, particularly in terms of their implications for the state, people, governance, development, etc. According to David Easton, state building requires the creation and concentration of authority and an emphasis on the role of government in the social process, while nation
building often calls for dispersal of power and stresses responsiveness and participation in the political process (Cited in Iftekharuzzaman and Rahman, 1986). In fact, state building efforts in diverse societies of South Asia have often led to ethnic conflicts.

What has gone wrong in South Asia in terms of nation and state building, and nation-state building? A brief comparison with European experiences will make things amply clear.

The idea of the nation-state germinated in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In France and England, absolutist systems created the framework of the modern state and, in the process, levelled many political, economic and social differences: legal systems, market systems, currencies and languages were standardised (Welsh, 1993: 63). In the 1860s, two eminent British philosophers debated the nature of the nation-state. In his essay on representative government, John Stuart Mill reached the pessimistic conclusion that “it is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with nationalities” (Mill, 1910: 362). In a response, the historian Lord Acton rejected Mill’s views and reaffirmed his faith in a multinational world. According to him, the multinational state “provides against the servility which flourishes under the shadow of a single authority, by balancing interests, multiplying associations... diversity preserves liberty....” (Acton, 1956: 169).

A crucial difference between the nation building in Western Europe and that in Asia and Africa is that the processes in Europe occurred when nations already existed as relatively cohesive citizenries. In the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa, on the other hand, nation building was the first task in countries that had ethnic diversity following the creation of the state. These countries were, in fact, only “nations in hope” (Emerson, 1960: 94).

Nationality may be defined in either of two way: by ethnic or civic criteria. Ethnic nationality is based on the consciousness of a shared identity within a group, rooted in a shared culture and a belief in common ancestry. Civic nationality, on the other hand, is inclusive within a territory. Membership in the national group is generally open to anyone who is born or permanently resident within the national territory, irrespective of language, culture or ancestry (Greenfield, 1986: 21-46). Unlike the territorial and civic versions of nationalism, ethnic nationalism conceives of the nation as a genealogical and
 vernacular cultural community. Whereas civic and territorial conceptions of the nation regard it as a community of shared culture, common laws and territorial citizenship, ethnic concepts of the nation focus on the genealogy of its members, however fictive, and on vernacular culture (Smith, 1993: 55). Ethnic nationalism is seen to be a potent ideology in Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa.

Amena Mohsin argues that what went wrong in South Asia can be understood by comparing the Asian experience with the European one. She writes that in Europe the evolution of the ideas of ‘nation’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘nation-state’ and their acceptance, at both the conceptual and institutional levels, was the outcome of a long-drawn-out process. “During this process of evolution, the societies in the West had acquired a certain degree of cultural and political uniformity. In the West the modern state was thus grafted on the culturally and fairly coherent ethno-religious or ethno-linguistic political entities called nations. The ex-colonial states did not go through this process of transformation. The nationalist leaders of these states borrowed the ideas of ‘nation’ and ‘nation-state’ from the West and attempted to construct homogeneous nation-states out of societies that in most cases were heterogeneous in their composition” (Mohsin, 1997: 1).

While the model of state/nation building may have been the root cause of ethnic conflicts in South Asia, there are other causes too.

3.3 CAUSES OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE/CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA

Here we shall briefly explore the causes of ethnic conflicts in South Asia as well as identify conflicts plaguing the countries of the region.

Sumit Ganguly has identified four sources of ethnic conflicts in South Asia—the dramatic expansion in political mobilisation during the last half a century that has galvanised ethnic conflict in important respects; the impact of modernisation on ethnic problems; large-scale population movement; and challenges to the secular state (Ganguly, 1993: 88-109). Political mobilisation and demands for political participation go hand in hand. Such demands are increasingly leading to violence as they challenge the prerogatives of long-dominant social and ethnic groups, as in the Indian Punjab and Kashmir.

A relevant question is what is the relationship between ethnic conflict and democratisation? Democracy can both temper ethnic tensions and also exacerbate ethnic conflict. Democratisation can prevent or
dampen ethnic conflicts if the forces pushing for democratisation, first, recognise and acknowledge the ethnic differences that exist within the state and, second, if they can accommodate the interests of different groups in a way that is perceived to be fair and even-handed (Nevers, 1993: 31-48).

Neither Marxian nor Weberian variants of modernisation theory attach much significance to ethnicity. Most Marxists dismiss ethnicity as a form of ‘false consciousness’—an integument that merely masks underlying class conflicts (Marx, 1971: 26-52). Social scientists, working in the Weberian tradition, have tended to see ethnicity as a remnant of traditional societies. It notes that the forces of modernisation, which rest upon technical competence as well as rational and legal authority, can quickly undermine ethnic identities (Gerth and Mills, 1946). Contrary to the expectations of both Marxist and Weberian social thought, ethnic identity is often seen as a consequence of modernisation, as is evident in Sri Lanka and in Assam of India. The new-found assertiveness of ethnic groups has been directed towards members of other ethnic groups, often culminating in a spiral of violence (Ganguly, 1993: 89).

The migration of different ethnic groups may at times threaten to alter the demographic composition or the social/power balance of a country. It leads to competition between ethnic groups for scarce resources, power and privileges. Such competition, in turn, reinforces ethnic identification and group solidarity, while it can also generate resentment against ‘outsiders’ who are seen as usurpers of the region’s resources, as is evident in the Sindh province of Pakistan. Interestingly, Ganguly holds the view that the challenge to the secular state of India comes from the right wing, chauvinist Hindu organisation, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). No illustration on this point is given, as it is not deemed relevant here.

Most South Asian countries are bedevilled by ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. The most prominent ones can be identified easily enough. In India alone, there are about a dozen or so of such problems. The ones in Kashmir, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal may be mentioned. There are six ethnic conflicts in India’s northeast alone. These are: Naga (Nagaland-Manipur), Meitei (Imphal Valley), Bodo (Lower Assam), ULFA (Assam), HALC (Meghalaya), and NLFT (Tripura). The MQM and Baluchistan problems are mentioned in the case of Pakistan,
the CHT problem in Bangladesh, the Sinhala-Tamil problem in Sri Lanka, and the ethnic problem affecting both Nepal and Bhutan.

In the next two chapters we shall study the CHT and the Sindh cases in relation to ethnicity, its consequential violence, and a set of human security problems that arose because of the ethnicity factor as well as the non-ethnicity factor.