Ethnicity and Environment in South Asia

Nahid Islam

Introduction

In a world where super power rivalry is low at the moment, threat perception in South Asia generates right within the boundary of the region. Moreover, the real threat perception in the region emanates more from the socio-economic, political and ideological factors than from the military build-up or power relation between states. The region is in the process of nation building with accompanying traumas and upheavels common in the formation stage. The countries are struggling with the mounatanious task of national integration in highly pluralistic social settings. Outcome of this is that the intra-state violences are frequent and they have reached a peak on parochial, religious, linguistic and ethnic differences with their effects spilling over national boundaries and often turning them into inter-state conflicts, hence insecurity. Thus any security study in the region would require the identification of systematic and extra systematic challenges that are salient features of the region and the way they interact with each other.

Ethnic turbulence in the multi-ethnic societies of the region is a significant input in this respect. Although the countries of the region specially India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal are overburdened with the problems associated with underdevelopment, ethnic disturbances in these countries often get salience over the others because such disturbances have the tendency to turn into separatist or irredentist movements, questioning the territorial integrity of the affected state. Moreover it surfaces the weakness and vulnerability of the country concerned in integrating the various group interests as
well as various stratas of development which in turn pronounces its vulnerability. Such vulnerability often receives a transboundary dimension which affects the foreign policy orientations specially in case of smaller states in the Indo-centric region of South Asia. Moreover ethnic tension in South Asia has the potential to hamper regional cooperation.

While various factors work behind the rise of ethnic turbulence (viz., long years of economic deprivation, non-recognition of ethnic identity, culture and values, unrealistic division of boundary between state irrespective of linguistic, cultural or religious factors and so on) environmental degradation of the countries of the region, particularly population pressure, whereby the land-man ratio as well as lack of economic opportunities led to mass migration within or beyond the national boundaries, further magnify the problem. The aim of the paper is to show that environmental degradation is either the source of ethnic disturbance or adds to the existing disturbance and gives it a new dimension. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part shall give a general idea as to the ethnic canvas of the region. The second part is an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between environment degradation and ethnicity. Finally it is argued that environment management through sustainable development strategy as it would provide the opportunity for regional cooperation will pacify the intensity of ethnic turbulence in South Asia, hence security.

Ethnicity in South Asia

An ethnic group can be broadly viewed as a historically formed aggregate of people with shared objective, cultural traits and symbolic referrents connoting its distinctiveness vis-a-vis other groups and regarded to be so by the latter.

However, ethnic distinctiveness alone is not a cause for instability or insecurity. It becomes a security issue only when it is politicised. Ethnicity is the outcome of some period of gestation through a few identifiable stages of the growth of ethnic consciousness. It has been indicated that a particular ethnic group, as it becomes politicised passes thorough at least six stages of varying consciousness about its identity and how best to retain the same. The stages are
1. Ethnic awareness;
2. Ethnic evaluation;
3. Demands for equality, fairness, justice in various spheres of national life against perceived or real discrimination and grievance;
4. Demand for separate province, region, state or larger share of power from the dominating elites;
5. Threat of secession (which may be a bluff secession) to extract concessions made at the third and fourth stages; and
6. Actual secession when politicised ethnic group refuses to recognise the legitimacy of the larger political community and engage in a struggle for a separate state or for its merger in a neighbouring political community.

However, there is no set rule that every politicization of ethnicity would follow this model meticulously. The first two stages, which are psychological, become politicised when pushed by hostile environment and control by larger community and start asserting its distinctiveness at the third stage and become a larger security issue from the fourth stage. At the sixth or final stage, ethnicity gets militant with its tool of a violent struggle with cross-border or even with extraregional linkages and ramification.³

However, not all the ethnic groups acquire a conflictual mould. Nor all the multi-ethnic societies turn out to have ethnic explosions.⁴ Ethnicity is basically a devise in the pursuit of collective goals, through competition and interaction.⁵ There are two main causes for its exacerbation. First, linkages of ethnic consciousness to broader processes of social change. Secondly, continuing expansion of state activities leading to increasing intrusion of the institutions of power and authority into the ethnic realm, the expanding role seen at different times as one of domination (perceived or real), competition, threat or advantages.⁶

Ethnic disturbance is one of the most important obstacles to internal stability and security in South Asia. The region houses the most varied and complex webs of inter-ethnic group interaction in the world. All the major religions have their followers in the region. About 20 languages have been recognised by states as official languages at centre/state levels,
in addition to the innumerable dialects spoken in various parts of the region. A substantial number of castes/tribes and sects criss-cross groups formed by religion, race, language and geography.

If the historical background of ethnicity in South Asia is examined, it would reveal that it has its source in the colonial rule which encouraged the internal differentiation within the subject population for its own interest. This gave rise to numerous parochial attachments and structural conflicts. Conflicts of groups which could not be resolved remained as ethnic groups. Discrimination against these groups continue during the colonial period. Later the creation of post colonial states often required artificial boundaries drawn irrespective of language, religion, culture etc resulted into further division of ethnic groups. In the post colonial period, the policy followed by the ruling elite was the repeated version of the colonial rule. Discrimination against the Tamils in Sri Lanka viz disfranchisement and subsequent stateless status, downgrading of their language and reduced intake in government services, discriminatory practices of resource allocation etc., were largely resented by the Lankan Tamils. Same happened in case of the Sikhs as well as the people in Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan or in the CHT in Bangladesh. Adoption of western model for developing the country only resulted in further distancing between them and the peripheral societies were dismissed as impediments to development. Moreover the ruling elites idea of national integration was not practical which further exacerbated the inter-ethnic tension viz the rejection of Bengali as state language by Jinnah which ultimately resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In addition to these, ethnicity gained pre-eminence in South Asia because of the rise of sectarian political parties throughout the region who always use the ethnic sentiment to serve their own parochial interest. Transboundary involvement in the ethnic movement further exacerbates it, as happened in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils who have their support in Tamil Nadu in India or the Khalistan movement in India who allegedly have their base in Pakistan.

Urmila Padhnis has divided the ethnic configuration in South Asia in power terms as follows.7
1. A politically dominant majority versus a subordinate minority or minorities: Sri Lanka (Sinhalese vs Tamils, Moores, Burghers); Pakistan (Punjabis vs Sindhis, Pathans, Baluchis); Bangladesh (Bangalis vs tribal groups).

2. A politically dominant minority vs subordinate majority as in most colonial situations. Bhutan (tribal groups vs Nepalis); Nepal (Valley Hindus vs Terai People, Newaris, tribal groups).

3. A multiplicity of ethnic groups of various sizes and power confounded by a multiplicity of loci of contracts among them make ethnic configuration in terms of politically dominant and subordinate groups at the state level well neigh impossible. India falls in this category. However the focus of ethnic political interaction on ethnic lines assume the dominant-subordinate configuration and even stratification - critically at the federal polity at the tiers below the central authority.

However she maintained that this categorization is not static but may vary from time to time and illustrated this by the ethnic configuration in Pakistan before 1971 where the Bangalis and tribals in East Pakistan were subordinate groups which changed after 1971. Moreover the typologies outlined do not explain why some ethnic groups tend to be more volatile than others and for this she suggests to use other variables viz, geographical, demographic, psychological, social, political and economic. As for geography, the greater the concentration of an ethnic group within a territorial confine, the larger its potential for demand articulation and aggression e.g., the East Pakistan-West Pakistan conflict or the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka. Numerical dimension is of great relevance as its weakness limits the capacity of the group to bargain with the centre. Historical insularity may act as additional input in its demand for greater autonomy or self determination as it projects the state authority to be non-representative of their ethnic culture and ideology as it happened in CHT in Bangladesh or the Baluchis or Pathans in Pakistan.

However, inequality in power terms amongst two ethnic groups need not per se invoke conflict. The precondition of conflicts are (a) a socially mobilized population; (b) the existence of a pool of symbols connoting the distinctiveness of an ethnic groups; (c) selection, standardization and transmission of these symbol pools to the community by the group leadership; and
(d) presence of a dominant or competing group with which an adversary relationship is perceived and a sense of relative deprivation (real or perceived) engendered.8

While every sections of society suffer from the impact of environmental degradation, ethnic groups who are at the receiving end of national policy and economy, are the worst sufferers. Environment means not only air, water, land or forest separately but an integrated system of a nation's natural resource base. Any degradation of any part of that system affects the entire system whereby the socio-economic and political infrastructure of a country collapses. Thus security of the entire country is threatened. Simultaneously it allows or induces the government affected to adopt further discriminatory policies against the minority groups. This aggravate the feeling of deprivation among this later groups which further fuel the ethnic awareness and turn into secessionist movement. Apart from the discriminatory policies, environmental degradation contributes to ethnic unrest as degradation gives rise to scenarios like decreasing carrying capacity of natures, resource base whereby it pressurises population displacement, migration, competition with the local people of the migrated land, clashes between various religion, culture, language, social injustice, crime, hostility, conflict, etc.

In South Asia, parallel with natural degradation, environment is being degraded at a faster rate for reasons totally different from the industrial West i.e., underdevelopment and overpopulation. Population pressure and decreasing land-man ratio in combination with unplanned development activities are degrading the environment at such a faster rate that people failed to keep pace with it. Ethnic groups, who are already discriminated, face the problem more acutely because these people are on their own without any support from the government or administration. This further shifts the allegiance of these groups from the centre. Cases in which people move beyond the national border, it becomes a transboundary issue affecting inter-state relation.

Environmental Degradation and Ethnicity in South Asia.

In South Asia, almost all conceivable type of environmental
degradation is going on at a dangerous level. The region houses almost a quarter of the world’s population and is organised in seven states with diverse ethnic, religious, social and political grouping, intent on industrializing even at the expense of a rapidly eroding natural resource base. Population pressure is already having its mark on the environmental balance. Rising subsistence needs are placing even larger demands on water, agricultural lands, forests and coastal habitats and as these natural resources deteriorate they set in motion a continuous stream of ‘environmental refugees’, to the urban centers or to the remote areas of hill or forest or even beyond the national borders. These people create extra pressure not only on the resources of the migrated land, causing the environment to degrade, but also causing social disorder as well as transboundary political tension. Population pressure, land-man ratio as well as environment quality will determine the habitability of the region in the coming decade which in turn would shape its security perception as it is already affecting the inter-and intra-state relationship, political stability, foreign policy maneuverability, economic reform, degree of population displacement and direction of environmental refugees within and beyond border.

South Asia has 20% of the world’s population but only 3.31% of the land area. One square kilometre of land has to support an average of more than six times as many people on an average square kilometre of land in the world as a whole. The land under forest is less than 2% of the world’s total. However the position of the region is not too bad in respect of arable land and land under permanent crops as well as irrigated land, which are required for agricultural purpose. But population increase at a faster rate ranging from 1.5% to 3.7% is causing the land to be exploited to a non-renewable limit. In India, the population which was 283 million in 1901 increased to 860 million in 1991; in Bangladesh, the population which was 42 million in 1951, became over 116 million by 1991. Same has happened in other states of the region, but the land remained the same.

While population pressure has contributed to overuse of natural resources, poverty has induced the people to address short term needs even if such action contributes to long term depletion and degradation of resources. Diminishing carrying
capacity of the land in the rural areas, where majority of the population in the region resides, has resulted into the never ending march of the environmental refugees in and around the urban centers, destroying the marginal forests, wetlands there. But the basic services available in the cities are inadequate or in despair and the additional burden placed on them by the environmental refugees, put an intolerable load on the system. In India, the rate of urban growth has increased from 2.3% annually in 1951-61 to over 3.9% at present. In Bangladesh, 30% of the total population live in urban areas, while it was less than 3% at the beginning of this century, an increase of 6.5% per annum. In Pakistan 28% of the population was urban in 1991, which was 15.4% in 1947. Such urbanization in South Asia do not necessarily indicate development but an indication that the land and resources in the rural areas have been exhausted to the limit.

Population pressure has resulted into numerous fragmentation of land, unsustainable land use practice, cultivation of marginal hilly areas, absence of food grain gap etc., leading towards diminishing return from the land. Bangladesh, which is totally arable except for stripes of land in the hilly areas of south-east and north-east has been exhausted to the extent that per capita land today is 0.29 acres. In Nepal, the picture is more desperate. With an arable land of 20% of the total land area and with a dependence of 7 persons per hectares of land, the country is very much a hostage for food security on the bordering Terai lowland. Migration from the mountain to the lowland is indicative that upland areas can no more sustain population. In Pakistan, the number of hectares per person has been reduced from 0.45 in 1947 to 0.20 in 1982. Bhutan, where only 9% of the total land area is arable and per head land is one hectare, had to adopt shifting cultivation but population pressure induce them to adopt unsustainable land-use practice. In short, potential for boosting food production in the region is therefore limited. Need to expand land for producing more food for the growing population within this limited land have resulted not only in competing claim on the region's water resources but also deforestation, soil erosion, siltation, salinity, land degradation etc. This leads not only to the loss of huge productive land but also socio-political and economic disorder in
Deforestation is occurring not only due to the desperate attempt to get hold of more land for agriculture but also to meet the need for domestic as well as industrial fuel consumption. Deforestation is occurring at such a faster rate in the Himalaya that it would be bald within 25 years. Deforestation is directly linked with soil erosion and siltation which not only cause the fertile land to degrade but also the decrease of river depth and increase of flood. Bangladesh, part of Pakistan and India regularly suffer from flood. Siltation also results into river bank erosion whereby a huge population is subject to displacement at a regular basis. Deforestation also results into saline water intrusion in the coastal areas whereby a huge areas of land are lost as it happened in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. Soil salinity also occurs in India and Pakistan due to water logging which is the outcome of intensive irrigation. Moreover the geographical location of the region specially Bangladesh and some areas of India are subject to cyclone, storm surges etc. which bring havoc for life and property through destruction and dislocation. All these factors further shrink the already overburdened land and resources. In addition, a future scenario of sea level rise whereby Maldives, a part of Bangladesh and India would be inundated, appears to be frightening in view of more population and lesser land to accommodate them.

Governments in an attempt to remain in power and to cover their failure in supplying the basic necessities of people adopt short term development project irrespective of long term degradation of nature's support system. Moreover these agro-based countries are overburdened with loan and in their attempt to pay the loan back they exploit the limited resources to a non-renewable limit. Project aids are overburdened with conditions of donor countries, which degradates the environment further as the project planners who are mostly western educated do not have the sound knowledge of environment of these countries or do not assess the viability of the projects. Trade imbalance is another factor that contributes greatly to environmental degradation whereby the countries of the region have to sell their raw materials at a cheaper price to compete in the world market. Abandoning the development projects of the earlier government by the successive
governments as well as unplanned development activities are destroying the environment in these countries as well. Most of the development activities are undertaken without Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or impact on social, cultural or economic life.

Thus while the decreasing resource to population ratio is degrading the environment in South Asian, aid conditionalities, trade imbalance, unplanned development activities, lack of vision of the governments, etc., are also degrading the environment. While the entire population have to share the burden of such degradation, the already deprived section of the population, i.e. the ethnic groups, get the worst burn because the governments in their attempt to patch-up the scars of such degradation have to allot less or to exploit more from these section. While sometimes this is done intentionally to subjugate these section, sometimes governments are induced to do it in their desperate attempt to stay in power. While sometimes population dislocation due to various disasters results into exodus of refugees in to the closed tribal societies causing further hardship and competition for the ethnic groups, various developments projects without an EIA or socio-economic implication dislocate the minority group causing further grievances and unrest among them. Sometimes degraded quality of any particular area may force a community to move into the fertile land and subsequent competition between them and the local people further create ethnic unrest if in such situation the uprooted people face social injustice and political discrimination. The ethnic dissatisfaction in the Tarai lowland of Nepal, Sikh unrest in Punjab, Uttarkhan movement in Uttar Pradesh, ethnic unrest in Bhutan, Narmada Valley unrest in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, etc., are cases in point.

According to the data of early eighties, more than two-third of the population in Nepal lived in the mountains and hills. Agriculture is the main occupation and almost 90% of the population subsist in agriculture or agricultural related activities. Demands of the increasing population resulted in reckless cutting of trees, marginal cultivation and over grazing in the country, that has brought serious land degradation. No plans, programmes and policies for regulating land use in Nepal exist as yet 17. A comparison between land uses status in the
country shows substantial reduction in forest cover and increase in agricultural land.

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land use</th>
<th>1974</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Percent Difference</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Forest</td>
<td>4823</td>
<td>34.19</td>
<td>4100</td>
<td>28.91</td>
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<td>2. Agriculture</td>
<td>2326</td>
<td>16.49</td>
<td>3127</td>
<td>22.05</td>
<td>- 5.56</td>
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<td>3. Grazing</td>
<td>1786</td>
<td>12.66</td>
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<td>12.59</td>
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<td>4. Water</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Urban</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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<td>6. Wastes</td>
<td>2629</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>2629</td>
<td>18.53</td>
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<td>7. Himalayan</td>
<td>2112</td>
<td>14.97</td>
<td>2112</td>
<td>14.89</td>
<td>0.08</td>
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Source: Ajaiya Mani Dixit, "Regional Sediment Erosion and Conservation in Nepal", Paper presented at a regional seminar organised by Federation of Engineering Institute of South and Central Asia (FEISCA) and Bangladesh Institute of Engineers, Dhaka 8 – 10 September, 1986.

The unchecked use of land has caused severe degradation of the surface lowering both the insite quality of land and creating offsite damage by increased sedimentation. The state of land degradation in Nepal has been estimated by the watershed condition. The watershed conditions have been classified into five categories: (a) very poor, (b) poor, (c) moderate, (d) good, (e) excellent. Watershed condition of the first category involves areas that are so badly eroded that it can not be restored economically. Almost 1% of the land area of Nepal fall in this category. Another 1% area is in poor conditions which can be brought back to productivity with extensive engineering conservation methods. 10% of the land area has unsatisfactory land use conditions which requires both engineering measures and management to bring them back to full productivity. The condition on remaining areas in Nepal range from good to excellent, which are fast declining. Less than 25% of the country’s land area was under the forest cover back in 1984 which is decreasing at a faster rate (4.3%). There was 32,000 sq miles of land under forest in Nepal in 1961, which reduced to the size of 12,000 sq mile by 1982. According to a study, if the present trend of deforestation continues, the Himalaya would be bald
and barren in the next 25 years. Deforestation in Nepal is taking place not only due to the need to expand agricultural land but also to meet the need of energy because 75% of Nepal's energy need is met by fuel wood.

Unsustainable land use practice have decreased the carrying capacity of the hill in the Himalayan region to such a non-renewable limit that people has to move from the uplands to the still fertile lowland of Tarai. These environmental refugees have to compete with the local people for land, natural resources, business and job market. The result is the fast degradation of environmental quality and carrying capacity of the Tarai lowland. Apart from deforestation, the land is losing its quality because in absence of any alternate energy, people have to use the biomass, the essential nutrient of land. 45% of both the animal dung and crop residues in Tarai are used for domestic energy consumption. While deforestation in the upland hilly areas have increased the sedimentation rate as is evident from the huge load of sediment being transported by the Nepali rivers, deforestation in the Tarai have also increased the local rate of soil erosion and sedimentation. The result is the decreasing soil fertility in Tarai. Also widespread settlement in the flood prone areas in Tarai, as well as decreasing river depth and changed river course due to deforestation and soil erosion have increased the intensity of flood damages in Tarai in the recent years, displacing thousands of people.

The increasing population in Tarai due to degraded carrying capacity of nature in the mountain and decreasing soil fertility in Tarai is threatening for socio-economic political and environmental stability of the country. While on the one hand the demographic changes in the Tarai has given rise to ethnic unrest there, population movement beyond the border has given it a transboundary dimension. The open border policies as well as the liberal citizenship, employment and business policies followed by Nepal have attracted people from beyond the border. On the other hand the economic possibilities in India have also attracted the poverty ridden people of Nepal to India, but the ratio for the later case is much lower compared to the reverse migration. Due to migration in Nepal both from upland as well as from India have resulted into a demographic change in Nepal. Muslims were the original habitants in the Tarai lowland.
Although the percentage of the Muslims were 2.6% in 1981, 97% of that population lives in the Tarai. Competition with the migrated Hindus who have become a majority there have given rise not only dissatisfaction among the Muslims but also various ethnic, religious and cultural classless. Decreasing land-man ratio gave rise not only the rate of deforestation in Tarai but also to the rate of litigation regarding land ownership. In these districts where the immigrant population has outnumbered the natives, conflicts over resource-sharing have erupted.  

Government endeavour to supply facilities like health, education, housing, sanitation and so on at the expense of depriving the people of other areas (because the Tarai people contribute greatly to the economy and in politics) also create dissatisfaction among the people other than Tarai. Another reason of dissatisfaction is the large scale influx of Indian's who have reduced the opportunities for local people. Government in its attempt to check that introduced the work permit system as well as identification card which was viewed by India as unfriendly gesture and took revenge in the form of trade embargo in the middle of 1989. The result was the tremendous increase of deforestation in Nepal which further degraded the environment there. Thus there are two dimensions of ethnic unrest in Nepal i.e., (a) the conflict between the minority Muslims in Tarai with the migrated upland Hindi speaking Nepali as well as the Indian Hindus is one dimension of the ethnic unrest in Nepal, and (b) conflict between the Nepalese and the migrated Indian regarding job opportunities, business etc is another dimension of ethnic unrest particularly in view of the pre-dominance of India over Nepal and acquiescence of Nepali government to the rules favoring India. Although the change of government from absolute monarchy to the constitutional monarchy and the pro-Indian Nepali Congress as the holder of real power emerged as a result of countrywide demonstration for a democratic order in Nepal, it gave rise to the apprehension that the anti Indian unrest in Nepal i.e. ethnic unrest in the greater sense, would increase further. It may again poison Indo-Nepalise relations as in the past.

In Pakistan, while the ethnic unrest in Sind, Baiuchistans and North West Frontier province, is the culmination of various deprivation and discriminatory policies followed by the Punjab
dominated center, diversion of the Indus Water from these states to Punjab is one of the major contributing factor of such unrest. Punjab’s geographical position in upstream areas allow her to divert most of the Indus water through various dams and barrages with little concern for the lower riparian state, Sind and Baluchistan. This is a major obstacle to the agro-based economy of those drought prone semi arid lands and aggravate the grievances of these states against the center. Moreover the influx of people both from India (Muhajirs) and from Punjab have decreased the land-man ratio, resource base, economic opportunities etc for the local people. Sindhis’ resents the fact that they have been ousted from some of the best and most fertile lands in the Ghulam Muhammad Barrage area of Sind which has been used for resettling the ex-servicemen who are mostly Punjabis. Also large tracts of valuable land in Sindh, brought under irrigation since independence, have been allotted to Punjabis, members of the armed forces or senior bureaucrats or their relatives. This has also reduced the land for the local Sindhis.

In case of the Pathans of North West Frontier Province the idea of a separate independent state was floated before the 1947 Partition. After failing to achieve such a goal, this ethnic group, who also have a significant portion of them inhabiting in Afghanistan, continued the movement of an autonomous Pathan state, called Pakhtoonistan. The movement has been velled over the years by various discriminatory policies followed by the Punjab dominated centre whereby the state remained underdeveloped. While Punjab diverts most of the Indus water to irrigate the arid lands, it denies the North West Frontier Province to build dams to divert water for its own use, even though it lies upstream of Punjab. This further adds to the deprived feeling of the ethnic Pathans because in absence of industrial development agriculture is their main source of sustenance and in absence of water agriculture is very tough for this drought prone area. In response to the unrest in NWFP, a water sharing agreement in April 1991 was executed. However implementation is doubtful in view of the Punjab based federal government sincerity to make concession at the cost of Pubjab’s development.

Punjab, one of the richest states of modern India with the
highest per capita income in the country, achieved the highest agricultural production rate in India. The “Green Revolution” was successful in Punjab because of an excellent system of irrigation and a steady flow of water. In 1976, a substantial quantity of the water was diverted to the neighbouring state of Haryana and Rajasthan as well as to New Delhi. Thus 75% of the water and energy allocated to the adjoining state left Punjab’s need unfulfilled. In 1978 the state government of Punjab brought suit for annulment of the settlement of the Supreme Court of India, but it was not implemented. In 1981, Congress Government under Indira Gandhi reached a new agreement between the Chief Minister of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan under which Punjab’s share was decided to be 24%. Apart from this, in another agreement, negotiated in 1978 under the auspices of the Janata government, Haryana was to receive 50% of the water from Sutlej Yamuna link canal to run water from Punjab’s Ravi and Bias rivers South ward. The construction of the project began in 1982 but serious ethnic agitation in Punjab prevented any development for the next six months. Another source of agitation in Punjab regarding water sector is the Bakra canal headworks which was built by Punjab after 1947 out of development funds allotted for the state. Yet from 1967 onward it has been controlled by the officials of the central government. In spring plantation seasons there were constant short falls in both water supply and power generation from the dam. Interference by the centre in Punjab’s water and energy sector aggravated the widespread discontent emanating from various discriminatory policies (viz., outflow of two third deposits from the banks in Punjab, denial of a state with Punjabi speaking population, denouncing of Punjabi as the official language of the state government, government’s fixed procurement pricing system which did not meet farmer’s production cost and increasing indebtedness among the Sikh farmers, the policy of non-industrialization of Punjab, the land reform policy whereby no one in Punjab was allowed to hold land more than 7 hectares as well as the curtailment of land right to minor son whereby the traditional concept of household was threatened etc.) followed by the centre and gradually gave rise to the feeling among the Sikhs that the centre government is all out to subjugate them politically, economically and socially. It gradually took the
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extremist form and induced the Akali Dal to push for autonomy through continued violence in Punjab. The assassination of Mrs. Gandhi unleashed communal violence to an unprecedented scale which is a great security concern for India. Alleged attachment and support of this insurgent group and their separatist movement in Punjab in Pakistan gave it a transboundary dimension with the potential of inter-state tension and hostility.

The recent agitation, among the tribal people in Maharastra and Madhya Pradesh, which has the potential to turn into widespread ethnic unrest centers around the construction of the world Bank funded Narmada Mega Project. Apart from several thousand small dams, it includes two big dams, one is the Narmada Sagar Dam and the other is Sardar Sarovar Dam. The aim of the project is to tame the 1.312 km of Narmada river and its tributaries passing through the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharastra and Gujrat. The backers of the Narmada, estimated cost of which is $5,000 million, say it will generate 3,000 megawatts of power and help irrigate at least 1.8 million hectares of land, raising farm output and ending the severe water shortage in Gujrat. However, when completed, the Narmada would submerge 250 mile areas, the homes and fields of around 70,000 tribal peoples and 11,000 hectares of forest. Moreover irreparable damages will be made to the ecology and lifestyle will disappear. Thus adds of agitators, led by Medha Patkar, the leader of the movement, under the banner of the Save Narmada Campaign, seek to stop the Sardar Sarovar dam. This movement has been successful to stop the World Bank, (which has pledged $450 million) to withhold the money until resettlement plans are completed for those who would be displaced. With the growing consciousness of environmental degradation, this movement received sympathy from all corners whereby the government has been facing a lot of embarrassment. If the government take the wrong decision and go ahead with the project displacing all these people, than it would definitely turn the movement hostile with the possibilities of bloodshed.

Uttarkhan movement in Uttar Pradesh centers around the question of the construction of Tehri Dam. Construction of the dam began in 1968 in Uttar Pradesh to provide hydro electricity
and to facilitate irrigation, flood control as well as to supply fresh water. But it gave rise to widespread controversy among various interest groups viz the local people who are afraid of being displaced, the religious groups who object to any tampering with the sacred Bhagarathi river, the Cultural Conservation Group (INTACH) who is concerned that the historical town of Tehri would be lost, the opposition political groups who object to the huge amount of money spent compared to the smaller return (upto December 1991 an amount of Rs.13,450 million has been spent and will require much more to complete the construction, while the generation of electricity would be 1,000 mw in the first phase and 1,4000 mw in the second phase) and the environmental groups, who greatly object to the location of the dam, which is situated in the earthquake zone of the Himalaya which has the magnitude of 6.5 to 8.5 on the Ricktar scale. It has been pointed out that 36 earthquakes took place in the course of 80 years within a radius of 30-320 km from the project site. Its expected 100 years life span no longer holds true because of high sedimentation. The Earthquake of October 1991, which killed 2000 people and devastated thousands of houses pose a huge question mark over the future of the Tehri dam. All these issues has retarded the fast completion of the dam, pushing the deadline back to June 1996. Apart from the controversy emanating out of the issue of using seismologist instead of the environmental engineers for the planning of the dam, large scale campaign for withdrawing the clearance of the dam from the Ministry of Environment on the one hand and pressure from contractors and politicians to secure clearance for the various stages of construction of the dam etc. on the other is shaping the issue into a very sensitive one. All these have contributed greatly to the awareness of the local people as to their coming suffering attached with the completion of the dam and gave voice to their fear of being displaced from homeland. This helped shape the widespread rise of the anti-dam movement by the group called Tehri Bundh Virodhi Sangharsh Samity, (particularly because of the rigid position followed by the government to go ahead with the construction irrespective of others interest), which launched a countrywide agitation in 1978 and which gradually took the shape of the demand for a separate hillland, Uttarkhan, thus giving rise to a new
ethnic unrest.

The unrest situation in Assam is the culmination of the state of underdevelopment, and neglect from the centre as well as the migration of people into the land from outside which gradually outnumbered the original inhabitants and reduced their share of land, resource as well as job opportunities. The source of such migration is the relatively unpopulated and fertile land of Assam vis-a-vis the over populated and famine stricken condition of the land from which migration had occurred, particularly from Bangladesh and West Bengal. At the turn of the century there was an exodus of agriculturists from Bangladesh to Assam, where thousands of acres of jungles were brought under permanent cultivation. The 19 Mongol tribes of Tripura, who comprised 93% of the population in 1947, were reduced to 28.5% by 1981. This resulted competition for jobs, reduction of political power as well as resources and wages of the original inhabitants giving rise to social unrest and agitation. Anti-foreigners demonstrations by the All Assam Student Union (ASSU) and the All Assam Gana Parishad (AAGSP) led the public outcry claiming the demographic balance in Assam. On 8 June 1979, the ASSU called a 12 hours bands (general strike) and demanded that the Union Government should ‘direct, defranchise and deport the foreigners’. The same issue triggered unrest in other neighbouring Indian state and the 1980 anti-Bengali uprising in Tripura subsequently became a move for independence from India. This issue has greatly deteriorated the relation between Bangladesh and these bordering states. What is notable is that the Central Government in India at one time encouraged the settlement of immigrants as they are considered a potential vote bank. Moreover unfriendly relation between Bangladesh and these bordering state will not only divert the attention of the later from various deprivation, economic, as well as political but also would make it impossible for the two to enter into any bilateral understanding or agreement superseding the Center’s power. However such encouragement backfired as the anti-foreigner agitation threatens the national security of India itself. Rajiv Gandhi entered into an accord with the anti-foreigner groups to deport everyone that entered Assam after 1971, but implementation of the accord faced uncertainties as Bangladesh
Government denies such migration. In response India decided to construct barbed fence along the border which affected the relationship between the two countries negatively with the possibility of open hostility in case the situation worsen further. Also the planned withdrawal of water of Brahmaputra river above Assam by the Central Government (which is going to be implemented shortly) deteriorates the center-state relation as it is viewed by Assam as a policy to bring the state under Union's political and economic control. This can further contribute to the unrest situation in Assam arising out of the pressure of immigration on their economy.

From the above scenario it can be said that while environmental degradation and the consequent decreasing land-man ratio, resource scarcity, migration etc. contribute to the existing ethnic unrest giving it a new or added intensity, fear of being displaced or uprooted and being enrolled in the list of environmental refugees also create new ethnic unrest, even to the extent of demand for autonomy or secession.

Conclusion

While various measures are suggested by the experts dealing with ethnicity ranging from understanding of ethnic values and minority problem, negotiation, economic development etc., to granting of limited autonomy and even incorporation of ethnic societies by altered political boundary, a new dimension in view of the issue discussed in this paper can be added in this regard i.e., environment management and improvement. The objective of such programme should be to increase the land-man and resource ratio as well as mobilization of resources on an equitable basis to work as a check to exploit the resource of any particular areas to a non-renewable limit. Evaluation of any development programme should incorporate not only engineering or structural viability but also the socio-economic and environmental implication of the programme area as well as the entire country. Ethnic peoples in South Asia are mainly agrarian and have a deep attachment with land and surrounding natural environment. Hence this section of people are very much vulnerable in case of any degradation of natural environment and find it very difficult to adapt to any other alternate subsistence livelihood. Hence special effort should be
made by the government concerned that the ethnic people do not have to bear the burnt of environment degradation any more than have to be suffered by the country as a whole because even the equal suffering of the ethnic and other section of people would appear much more for the former whereby it would either aggravate the existing grievances or create a new ethnic dimension. This would serve the deal purpose in the sense that while environmental consideration would help pacify the ethnic unrest, it would also help improve the environment. Since most of the ethnic unrests have a transboundary spill-over action, regional cooperation can be sought to mitigate them. But ethnicity itself involve so very numerous sensitive issues like weaknesses of national integrity, political vulnerability etc that governments feel very reluctant to go for bilateral or regional cooperation on this issue. Environment management can provide a very effective and secured facade in this regard. Incorporation of environment protection and disaster management etc in the SAARC agenda in 1988 would provide a feedback of such an idea. Thus regional cooperation in programmes like afforestation of Himalaya (through promotion of social forestry or providing alternate fuel like solar energy) might result into rewind migration of the hill peoples from the Tarai decreasing the population pressure on the resource of the Tarai as well as the intensity of ethnic unrest there. Such afforestation programme would decrease the soil erosion in the Himalaya and sidementation load that are carried away by the major Himalayan river, which would decrease the intensity of flood and river erosion in Bangladesh, the major recipient of this silt load and decrease the rate of dislocation of people which in turn would decrease the migration of people into CHT as well the potential future violence in CHT many times fierce than it is now. Regional cooperation to manage the Ganges drainage basis would help improve the environment of the basin as well as end such potential inter state tension. Regarding potential migration in case of sea level rise, South Asia is more of a victim than the factor. However poverty is identified as the prime reason for South Asia’s contribution to global warming. A regional poverty alleviation programme under the forum of SAARC or otherwise would reduce not only the possibility of sea level rise and dislocation of people, but an overall improved
economic condition of the region which would automatically
reduce the suffering as well as deprivation of the minority people
and reduced the intensity of politicised ethnicity. Policy makers
as well as strategists should take up this dimension of ethnic
unrest too and provide a guideline which would help reduce the
politicised ethnicity and improve the general ecosystem of the
region, through regional or bilateral cooperation and if
necessary though global.
Notes and References

2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
20. Shaukat Hassan, Adelphi papers, op. cit., p. 28.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid.