SAARC and Ethnicity: 
A Dream in a Cauldron

Syed Anwar Husain

Introduction

To many, SAARC is still a dream that remains distanced from fulfilment. Despite frequent meetings/summits the advance towards the cherished goal has so far remained hopelessly slow. South Asia before the launching of SAARC and South Asia now, that is seven years after, do not look different, either economically or politically. Even the scenario of bilateral relations in the SAARC community remains unimproved. Indeed, the overblown rhetorics in the name of SAARC that characterize summitry do not square with the prevalent reality. It does not need much of mental or intellectual exercise to explain this discordance between ideal and reality. The plain and simple explanation is that, SAARC remains hostage to those contentious issues that negate cooperation but beget suspicion and mistrust, even conflict or confrontation. One such issue, a hangover from the past, is the ethnic dissonance that affects all members of SAARC except the Maldives. Originating within a state boundary South Asian ethnic issues, thanks to the very nature of political demography shaped by the colonial legacy, have always been of the nature of producing transborder ramifications. Thus the simple point that is laboured in this paper is that, ethnic issues of such nature are antithetical to the spirit and goal of SAARC, and the past seven years have not witnessed any improvement in this crucial area.

Hypothesis

Regionalism is predicated on a commonality of perception vis-a-vis a number of issues that affect the component units of
the region one way or the other. To achieve such a commonality or convergence of perception perceivers of regionalism concentrated on non or less controversial issues at the initial stage with the benign intention to transform such issues into genuine push factors. While there may not be two opinions as to the desirability of such a strategy to achieve regionalism in a volatile region it is posited here that such push factors may not materialise, or even if materialised, may be neutralised in the long run by the controversial bilateral pull factors. It is also hypothesised that the component units of such a region, if victims of such pull factors, cannot reach across to each other with the required spirit of interests befitting and facilitating the emergence of the desired framework of regionalism. The ethnic flash spots across South Asia with transborder ramifications are a category of such pull factors that have dangerous potentialities to impede and even scuttle the SAARC process. Indeed, in the wake of the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia countries and regions with plural societies stand endangered by a possible spillover impact.  

Propositions

The paper divides into four sections. The first section refers to a paradigm illustrating the origin of the ethnic problem in a postcolonial state and in the context of nation-building process. The second section draws attention to the South Asian ethnic scenario insofar as it vitiates interstate relations and creates an environment contradicting the spirit of regionalism. The gap between the projected goal of SAARC and the reality linked to ethnic scenario is dealt with in the third section. As such a situation is undesirable the final section draws attention to some recommendations.

Ethnicity in a post-colonial State: A General Framework

In this section an attempt is made to understand state-1 ethnicity interactions in the context of a broad nation-building process. The figure below is, however, not country-specific, but seeks to explain the phenomenon in a general context. Yet it is implied that such an exercise is relevant to understanding the South Asian ethnic Scenario.
The figure shows the web of interactions that dominate state-ethnicity relations as the former addresses the task of nation-building in the postcolonial stage.

In the postcolonial stage states situated similarly as those in South Asia, because of their poor resource endowment and other economic constraints quickly turn into major consumers themselves of scarce resources. Nevertheless, they remain soft and therefore unable to carry out their ambitious programmes. This also leaves the state less capable of exerting a top-down hegemonic control over society. In such a context of poor resource endowment and state weakness, the intermediaries of ethnic and religious groups carry on an active competition for an access to the scarce resources controlled by what is, in reality, a "Lame |state| leviathan." ²

To begin with, it is necessary to relate the regimes of hegemony (bureaucratic centralism), hegemonic exchange, and

polyarchy to the latent grievances in the environment (over inequality, status, identity, recognition, and so forth). These grievances can be tapped by political elites intent on making demands for change as well as for maintenance of status quo. In general it can be surmised that those situations tending toward the establishment of hegemonic regime patterns will reflect the subjective factors giving rise to intergroup conflicts, and those situations tending toward hegemonic exchange and polyarchical regime types are likely to indicate competing interests over tangible goods. Whereas the former frequently involves destructive, even intractable, conflicts where group security and survival seem to be threatened in one manner or another, the latter, which bring less intense passions to the fore, allow greater scope for creative conflict resolution based on understood norms of political exchange and reciprocity. Whether an ethnically related group acts like any other interest group competing in the market place for publicly controlled resources is, therefore, likely to reflect the systemic conditions and reciprocal perceptions that prevailed in each situation.

The distributive issues between different ethnic groups that share a common sense of destiny normally are policy questions with tangible referents - goods, jobs, taxes, roads, schools and frequently amenable to easy political solutions. But where differential rates of modernisation and political and economic practices have combined to create a profound sense of comparative deprivation, the objective and subjective sources of conflict can reinforce one another and exacerbate latent tensions. Perhaps the Sudanese experience may be cited here by way of illustration. As Dunstan Wai wrote in 1983,"A feeling of relative economic deprivation is growing, and the intransigent refusal of the Arab Sudanese to share real political power and revenue from within and aid from without the Southern Sudanese will gradually erode any desire in the South, to identify with the Sudanese State." These were also the reasons why the Bengalees could not identify themselves with the Pakistani state between 1947 and 1971.

In the development of predictable hegemonic or exchange routines, a pivotal factor has been the nature and intensity of ethnic demands. Made by elite representatives on those in power at the centre, these demands represent the injection of
dynamic elements into the relations between state and ethnicity. Such background factors as the inequality of rates of modernisation among the subregions inhabited by ethnic communities, unequal exchange, degree of social mobilisation, the communications revolution, and the fragility of political institutions no doubt explain much about the collision among social forces. But an understanding of the interactional process at work in a particular country requires more in the way of specifics - in particular, a probing of latent grievances, the role of state-ethnic relations, and the responses of state. 5 The possibilities for conflict resolution are higher when ethnic demands are reasonable and negotiable and do not challenge the integrity of established political order. But non-negotiable and strident demands bring on an aggressive response on the part of state. Different kinds of state and ethnic claims are influenced by the reciprocal perceptions that rival elites have of one another, and they in turn, relate and reinforce the kinds of regime strategies put into play by those in political power.

The nature of response by state to ethnic demands depends largely on the intensity of demands, the structure of power and the skill and effectiveness of leaders. Much as the nature of demands sometimes changes over time, the responses of state can also be expected to shift as governing coalitions realign and elite preferences alter.

Regime types make a significant difference in the management of ethnic demands. Thus hegemonic regimes that consolidate power at the political centre and emphasize hierarchical control by government and party often tend to impose serious restraints on the aggregation and channeling of ethnic demands to decision elites, leading to a greater likelihood of antagonistic relations. Hegemonic exchange and polyarchical regimes, by contrast, are more prepared to accept routines that organise predictable state-ethnicity interactions, providing avenues for the voicing of ethnic demands at the political center. The greater openness and flexibility of the latter regime have a positive feedback effect: ethnic demands can be more moderate because ethnic leaders have reason to anticipate a greater responsiveness on the part of state. This type of regimes, fully aware of the fledgeling nature of their institutions, are most inclined into negotiations with a wide array of interest groups in
order to promote their nation-building activities.

At this stage it is pertinent to draw attention to the types of response by the hegemonic state. Hegemonic state may opt for a strategy of isolation, that is attempting to manage conflict by separating the contending groups into distinct political systems. This strategy of isolation may lead to *de facto* autonomy (Chad in the early 1980s), *de facto* partition (Cyprus and Lebanon), attempted secession (Biafra and Katanga), or full separation and the emergence of distinct, sovereign entities (Bangladesh and Pakistan). Cultural assimilation takes place as the dominant elite uses the machinery of state to interpenetrate and absorb politically weaker identity groups into the core culture (northern Sudan over southern Sudan). When a state attempts to elude openly expressed divisiveness by circumscribing and containing conflict it follows a strategy of avoidance. Thus President Siaka Stevens imposed a single-party system in Sierra Leone in 1978 to prevent an "unnecessary" institutionalisation of "tribal or ethnic" warfare." Finally, the hegemonic state can pursue a strategy of displacement, endeavouring to transform the inter-ethnic encounter by moving an ethnic population permanently from one locale to another, (settling plains people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts). In the hegemonic regime thus the state perceives ethnic conflict as intense and threatening to the organising principles of the political system.

By contrast the hegemonic exchange and polyarchical regimes allow a broader range for legitimate conflict among the elite representatives for ethnic, regional and other interest groups. But of the two, polyarchy is more flexible as it allows competitive elections and a degree of public accountability, and, thus, more effective in regulating public access to decision makers than their hegemonic exchange counterparts. By the very nature of its origin hegemonic exchange regime (emerging through the decolonisation process) cannot become as flexible as the polyarchy. But the latter two types of regime are undoubtedly more equipped to deal with the ethnic demands than the hegemonic regime. A willingness on their part to engage in political exchange and reciprocity naturally gives rise to a proclivity to accept buffering as a conflict regulating strategy. Buffering, which takes such forms as good offices,
conciliation, mediation, and arbitration, involves initiatives by the state or by internal or external third party interveners to organise the rules for social interaction.

State elites can adopt a strategy of protection, granting constitutional and legal guarantees to minorities to reassure them about their status in the new political order. Moreover, despite constraints of economic scarcity the state may pursue a strategy of redistribution.

Finally, polyarchies, and to a lesser extent hegemonic exchange regimes, initiate strategies of sharing. In situations where demands are moderate and groups share pragmatic perceptions of one another's intentions, a sense of common fate may develop. Collective conflict does not disappear, but focuses largely on such negotiable issues as resource allocation and the distribution of political positions and social opportunities. 6

It is thus apparent that ethnic demands and state responses are interwoven and reinforcing. But the development of a responsive state appears critical in the context of conflict management. Such a state encourages ethnic intermediaries to frame their demands in moderate terms; it also facilitates action before reformist possibilities are eclipsed by the emergence of an intransigent opposition. On the contrary, a non-responsive state's insistence on regional submission or a military solution provokes defiance.

South Asian Ethnic Cauldron

As ethnic turbulence across the South Asian region is a well-known fact it necessarily follows from the above framework that this turbulence has causal linkage to the non-development of a responsive state. But this does not mean that no state has ever addressed the ethnic issues. Indeed, there have been sporadic attempts by states at developing what may be termed hegemonic exchange or polyarchic type of responses. But persistence of ethnic demands, and in most cases, with growing militancy attest to the fact that these responses have either been misdirected or not reciprocated. But in general, the states in South Asia afflicted with ethnic turbulence may be taken as states whose non-responsive character has so far brought ethnicity to the stage here it remains festering today. The most affected states are India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh,
Nepal and Bhutan. But the cross-border nature of ethnic problems in these countries arises out of a fact that has been drawn attention to by Raju Thomas. As he sees it, India includes every linguistic-ethnic group located in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan; and so India acts "as though it does not know where its borders are and treats neighbouring states as though it is almost a domestic problem." In fact, 16 out of 25 states of the Indian Union are inhabited by cross-border tribes.

A major factor vitiating bilateral relations in South Asia is ethnicity with its cross-border implications. A Survey of South Asian ethnic scenario reveals how neighbouring states are pitted against each other on ethnic issues. This section, however, omits reference to those ethnic issues which do not have transborder implications or bearing on bilateral relations. Thus we can pick up such issues as Kashmiri Muslim's demand for self determination, the Sikh demand in the Punjab for the separate state of Khalistan, the United Liberation Front of Assam's (ULFA) struggle for separation, Tamil insurgency for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka, tribal insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, ethnic Nepali minority in Southern Bhutan; and the Terai plains people in Nepal.

India-Pakistan

Any discussion on South Asian scenario boils down to the strategic equation between the two big states, India and Pakistan and their adversarial relations since decolonisation. Ethnicity has had its quota of contribution in such a state of relations between these two neighbours.

Against the background of residual communal dissonance these two states had the first taste of strained relations over the Kashmir issue, a taste that has remained sour till today. But the Kashmir issue, as it needs to be mentioned, does not fit into the type of ethnicity this discussion is concerned with. The issue grew simultaneously with decolonisation as the heterogeneous demographic composition of Kashmir drew forth claims of sovereignty over the territory from both Pakistan and India. But over the years the Kashmir issue, both in its internal and external ramifications, has assumed the character of a typical ethnic problem that is created by a non-responsive state. As one
Indian analyst points out, India has so far failed to initiate "a political process in Kashmir and thus is "not able to project a Kashmiri leadership". Wars have been fought and skirmishes short of war resorted to by India and Pakistan over this issue, Again, there have been allegations by the Indian ruling elite of Pakistan's hands in the growth of terrorism in Kashmir and Pakistani support for the Muslim terrorists.

The Khalistan movement in the Punjab is a typical example of an ethnic problem with domestic origin but having external repercussions straining relations with Pakistan. Since its inception in 1981, the militant Sikhs, as India always argued, have been receiving patronisation from across the border. In 1984, at the time of storming of the Golden Temple it was reported that some Sikh militants slipped across the border into Pakistan. The Indian charges of Pakistan providing arms, training and sanctuary to Sikh militants have remained frequent and consistent. Even scholarly works of Indian provenance repeat such allegations with equal or more stridency. A quotation from one such work reads: "there is hardly any doubt about the fact that Pakistan has had training camps on its soil meant for Kashmiri and Punjabi terrorists."

In December 1986, Rajiv Gandhi was reported to have been more categorical: "Pakistan has set up training centres for terrorists from where they are being trained in sabotage and subversion to create internal disturbances in the Punjab and other parts of the country". He also warned that "we shall give them [Pakistanis] a crushing defeat and they will meet their Waterloo." It needs to be mentioned that this was the state of India-Pakistan relationship even a year after the launching of SAARC (as SAARC had been launched in December 1985). A Wellington and a Napoleon can hardly sit across the table for harmonisation of their views; their only meeting place is battlefield. A battlefield spirit certainly works at crosspurposes with the SAARC spirit. The present state of India-Pakistan relations is not better than what it was in 1986.

India-Sri Lanka

The Indo-Sri Lankan imbroglio over the Tamil issue provides the worst case scenario that arises out of cross-border ethnicity. There are at least four reasons why India is drawn
to the Tamil issue. First there are more than 50 million Tamils living in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, separated from their Tamil brethren in the northern region of Sri Lanka by only a 22-mile Palk Strait. Any turmoil affecting the Sri Lankan Tamils is bound to have a reflection among the Indian Tamils. And there have been reports of Indian Tamils pressurising their government to seek redress of the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Especially, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam are on record for having supported the Tamil irredentist cause. Second, the Tamils in Sri Lanka have always looked across the Palk Strait as the land of their origin and source of inspiration. Third, militant Tamils sought and got shelter, training, arms and money from India. Fourth, about 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees live in Southern parts of India. 

The overbearing Indian diplomacy *vis-a-vis* this issue was demonstrated at least twice. First, on 4 June 1987, India violated the Sri Lankan air space in its arrogant bid to drop food and medicine for the blockaded Jaffna people. Second, India was able to impose the controversial Indo-Sri Lanka Treaty and send the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) into Sri Lanka. But the Indian forces, although on one of the costliest missions, both diplomatically and financially, failed to keep peace, and had to withdraw with a severely lost face. The Tamil Tigers, once trained and armed by India, keep marauding and prowling. Despite the overriding Indian goal of seeking a political solution to the Tamil problem within the framework of the Sri Lankan state, the nature and extent of its involvement in the issue over the years have certainly complicated matters for both the neighbours, with their bilateral relations having become the major victim.

**India-Bangladesh**

Bangladesh and India have many contentious issues straining their bilateral relations, but those relating to ethnicity have emerged most difficult over the years. Both the countries are found engaged in trading allegations for providing support and sustenance to the ethnic insurgents who threaten their stability and integrity.

From the Indian side it is alleged that the terrorist activities along the Agartala-Bangladesh border, and in Mizoram,
Nagaland and other eastern parts of India have received assistance and encouragement considered such activities of Bangladesh as "unfriendly". Even as late as November 1991, Assam Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia came up with the allegation that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) had been receiving shelter and support from Bangladesh. At about the same time, on a visit to Calcutta, Sheikh Hasina, the opposition chief in Bangladesh Parliament, was confronted with the allegation that ULFA had bank accounts in Dhaka. She, however, improvised a strong retort: "I don't believe this too. Give the account numbers and I will look into it." As she was not given any account number the allegation seemed to be a mere propaganda gimmick to counter Bangladeshi accusations of Indian role in sustaining the "Shanti Bahini" insurgency. In fact, considering the fledgeling nature of polity and proverbial resource constraint any such venture by Bangladesh remains highly improbable. On the contrary, in May this year, Bangladesh handed over a Manipuri insurgent to the Border Security Forces.

On the other hand, the Bangladesh perception of India as a provider of support and sustenance to the Shanti Bahini is based on incontrovertible logic and evidence. In the post-1975 period Indian support to the insurgents has remained consistent. At present there are more than 25 camps in Tripura and six to ten in Mizoram. Besides getting moral and material support from India the Shanti Bahini insurgents get also tactical advice from the relevant quarters. Towards the end of 1991 Upendralal Chakma, once a conduit between the Government of Bangladesh and the "Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghti Samiti" (PCJSS) for the series of dialogues that were held between them during the Ershad regime, now living in India, had to admit that the insurgent leadership "is now in the hands of Indian intelligence officials." But the recent declaration of a three-month cease-fire (10 August to 10 November 1992) by PCJSS and the reported readiness of the Indian government to send back the tribal refugees by the end of this year have somewhat improved the scenario.

India-Nepal

The 37 percent plains people in Tarai (as per 1971 census)
growing out of the influx of Madheshis from the adjoining Indian states Bihar and Uttar Pradesh create a problem that occasionally strains Indo-Nepalese relations. While the Madheshis resent the treatment meted out to them, a Task Force Report stated in 1984 that the "Indian commuters who are either commuting to work or are seeking jobs also outnumber the Nepalese. Indians are more numerous than the Nepalese in business activities". Therefore, the Report came out with a 70-point recommendation for containing the population growth by tightening the citizenship laws. On more than one occasion the Indians have revealed their displeasure as they argued that the recommendations focussed on the Indians alone in Tarai. Another point raised by Indians was that these recommendations were out of tune with the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship obligation.

But the most serious aspect of this ethnicity-related strained mutual relationship is the Indian accusation of Nepal's support for the activists of Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Despite strong denial by the Nepalese government, Indian police once crossed the border and raided deep into Nepalese territory in pursuit of the GNLF militants.

Nepal - Bhutan

The ethnic Nepalese who constitute 35 percent (as per 1988 census) of Bhutan's population of 600,000 raise, for the Bhutanese the spectre of Sikkimese parallel. After years of migration by ethnic Nepalis into the Kingdom of Sikkim sovereignty was lost in 1974 when the government was confronted by a Nepalese majority opting to become a part of India. But on the other hand, the Nepalis in Bhutan alleged discriminatory government policy against them. Thus in the early sixties the beginning of their protest movement coincided with the formation of the Bhutan State Congress. Soon this front was eclipsed by the Bhutan People's Party with bases across the border. On numerous occasions the guerilla wing of this party made raids into southern Bhutan. Other Kathmandu-based groups stepped up anti-Bhutan propaganda campaign, with support from political parties, and a section of the Nepalese press. In the recent past about 65,000 ethnic Nepalese, reportedly victims of discriminatory Bhutanese policy, have fled.
to Nepal. Bhutan, however, maintains that the Nepalis stir up trouble with the intention of undermining the monarchy; also that they want to gain a larger share of power under the guise of a pro-democracy movement. It seems these two Himalayan Kingdoms are locked in a dispute that has a potentiality for producing a crisis with regional implications. As Swatantra, a weekly close to the ruling Nepali Congress noted: “The problem is as serious as that of Afghans in Pakistan or Burmese in Bangladesh.”

The above survey shows that out of five case-studies four have India as the common factor affecting bilateral relations. It thus becomes clear that even in the context of South Asian ethnic situation India looms larger than any other state in the conflict scenario. Perhaps the implication is clear: South Asian conflict resolution is predicated upon a large role of India.

**SAARC Spirit and Ethnic Dissonance:**
**Gap Between Ideal and Reality**

SAARC is still not a regional forum to deal with contentious bilateral issues. Politicised ethnicity with cross-border implications being one such issue is thus apparently outside the scope of SAARC. But there are enough indications in the SAARC Charter and the subsequent documents for a regional and thus harmonised approach to deal with common problems facing South Asian nations. The Dhaka Declaration, for example, clearly stated the determination of the participating Heads of State or Government" to cooperate regionally, to work together towards finding solution towards their common problem in a spirit of friendship, trust and mutual understanding." The brief survey of ethnic scenario in South Asia leaves no room to doubt that ethnicity is a challenge faced by all but one members of SAARC. Moreover, the leaders meeting at the Dhaka Summit identified problems of national cohesion, poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, social injustice, turbulence and violence as "the common enemy" of all the countries of the region. In fact, the "common enemy" syndrome is writ large in every ethnic issue, because the problems covered by this syndrome lie at the root of every ethnic dissonance created by a non-responsive state.
If we stretch our imagination a little and try to read the implied meaning we may find that the SAARC Charter has the relevant provision to deal with cross-border ethnic problems. The charter requires the member countries to show respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of all disputes."

Although the use of the term "terrorism" to mean the activities of ethnic insurgents may be controversial the reality is that this is the term found suitable by SAARC for the purpose. The second SAARC summit held in Bangalore in November 1986 expressed concern for the rising tide of terrorism in South Asia. The Declaration had the following relevant points:

a. for prevention and elimination of terrorism from the region cooperation amongst SAARC states would be vital;

b. unequivocal condemnation of all acts, methods and practices of terrorism; and

c. recognition of the importance of the principle laid down in the UN Resolution 2625 which amongst others required that each state should refrain from organising, instigating, assisting or participating in acts of civil strife or terrorist act in another state or acquiescing in organised activities within its territory towards commission of such acts.

The Kathmandu summit held during 2-4 November 1987 endorsed the draft "Regional Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism." Moreover, the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, the most affected member state, at the Third Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers held in New Delhi during 18-19 June 1987 had already pressed for "a SAARC convention that would bind member states together by a solemn declaration to respect one another's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity by refraining from any acts of aggression, interference, violence of oppression." 24

Such pious wishes and rhetorical declarations aside the survey of the South Asian scenario confirms that there is indeed a wide gap between the SAARC ideal and the South Asian reality. Such a gap may scuttle the SAARC spirit, and on quite a few occasions came very near to scuttling. At the Fifth Summit held in Male in November 1990, some member states came up with a proposal that the Kashmir issue be discussed. The newly
appointed Indian Prime Minister Chandra Sekhar brushed aside the move and retorted that SAARC was not the forum to discuss the issue. The matter ended there but certainly revealed the divide in the perception of India and other members of SAARC. It also demonstrated the state of relationship between India and Pakistan a legacy of the past on which SAARC had had no impact at all. In August 1992 the Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao categorically warned, "No power on earth could snatch Kashmir from India. It is and will remain an integral part of India." In the same statement he asked Pakistan to stop meddling in Kashmir. Such a state of mind of leaders and state of relations between two big members do not square with the SARC spirit.

There are at least three instances when the state of Indo-Sri Lankan relations soured by the Tamil issue put serious obstacles in the smooth functioning of the SAARC process. Sri Lanka threatened to boycott the Third Foreign Ministers' meeting that was scheduled to be held in Thimpu in May 1985 "in protest against a speech by the Indian Foreign Minister in parliament." Another such meeting of SAARC foreign ministers scheduled to be held in Islamabad on 1 July 1989 had to be deferred as Sri Lanka made the departure of IPKF from its soil a precondition for attending the meeting. Worst of all, the Tamil issue was responsible for moving the venue of 1989 summit from Colombo to Male; and the summit could be held one year after the scheduled date. Although sufficient diplomatic moves could tide over such impasses for the time being the message was clear: contentious bilateral issues, especially those arising out of cross-border ethnicity could and would create road-blocks in the journey towards the destination named the SAARC spirit.

SAARC: The Road Ahead

Notwithstanding a pessimistic note that has permeated throughout the discussion so far it is in the interest of sustaining the SAARC spirit that something must be done to change or at least significantly improve this disquieting scenario. This is more so in the context of the changed World Order (or in cryptic terms 'disorder'). With the extraregional mediating elements slackened the chances of regional conflict scenario getting more
complicated have heightened. The present state of Kashmir crisis bears out such a generalisation. As one close watcher of South Asian ethnic scenario has recently put across a warning signal in the followings words, "South Asia being a region consisting of multi-ethnic states cannot any more look at the issue merely as an academic one. Not only has the region seen two dismemberments so far there are several potential cases of disintegration. Unless palliative measures are taken now, soon it may be too late."

It seems, considering the enormity of the problem, 'palliative' is too inadequate to be relevant; what is needed is curative. There is, however, no harm in starting off with 'palliative', but the goal needs to be curative. The distance between 'palliative' and curative may be far; and the curative goal may appear to be too ambitious to be realistic. But, if the curative goal is earnestly set and sought, the distance to be covered in the process may go beyond 'palliative'. And, may be in the future, near or distant, the curative goal would not be difficult to reach. After all, man-made problems do not always defy man-made solutions, if hammered out in the right spirit and with the required strategy.

Keeping such a perspective in mind two types of solutions to the ethnic problems are suggested: domestic and regional. The first type of solution is called for as ethnic issues are primarily of domestic origin within a state. The solutions of the second type are necessary because of transborder and/or regional ramifications of ethnicity.

In the theoretical section it has been suggested that ethnic problems arise when state denies ethnic communities a proper access to scarce resources and bases of power, and also when ethnic demands/grievances thus created are not properly addressed by a non-responsive state. It has also been suggested that state responses to ethnic demands vary with variations in regime type. Thus hegemonic exchange and polyarchy belong to the category of responsive states that are endowed with better capability to cope with ethnic demands and more efficient in conflict resolution. Therefore, in the South Asian context it is posited here that the states need to become responsive so that they can respond to ethnic demands/grievances in the same way as hegemonic exchange and polyarchic regimes do. The basic
goal is to understand ethnic problems in the right perspective and devise solutions accordingly, which may mean granting of autonomy where possible and gearing up of economic development in such way as to satisfy the aspirations of all the communities in a given state. As all but one South Asian states are living under democratic polity there has never before been a better prospect for developing responsive state and resolving conflictual issues within a democratic framework. But experience suggests that mere existence of democratic order does not guarantee the emergence of a responsive state and resolution of conflicts. In fact, for all this to happen there remains the preponderance of political will.

The SAARC Charter, Declaration and the Convention on Terrorism contain enough well-meaning provisions to address the ethnic problems regionally. But so far these provisions have remained rhetorical ebullitions and pious wishes only. Again, the primacy of political will become prominent when we think about translating SAARC spirit into reality. What a reciprocative political will between two neighbours achieves is seen in the recent improvement in the scenario of CHT insurgency as demonstrated by India's intention to repatriate tribal refugees by the end of the year and the announcement of a three month cease-fire (August-November) by the Shanti Bahini. This gives the democratic government of Bangladesh a chance to turn responsive and try political solution.

A specific suggestion is also made here for having a think-tank like cell added to the SAARC Secretariat. The cell is to be entrusted with the task of delving deep into country-specific ethnic problems and coming up with specific solutions for consideration / evaluation by the relevant SAARC bodies. When evaluated and okayed these recommendations may be endorsed at the summit meetings. Because of an interlinked nature of ethnic problems the implementation of these recommendations requires efforts both at domestic and regional levels.

Finally, India, the big brother in the SAARC community, has much to gain while letting smaller brothers to gain if it plays the role of a benign, not benighted, big brother. It may be an accident of history or geography or even an outgrowth of colonial heritage that India has borders with smaller neighbours (in the case of Sri Lanka separated by the Palk Strait), and that
crossborder ethnic communities live astride these borders. No doubt, such borders have created and complicated problems. But these problems can be sorted out when India demonstrates benignity reciprocated by its neighbours. At least, both India and its neighbours need to realise that there is least chance of getting anything out of the much talked about peace dividend that follows the end of the Cold War. And, thus there is hardly any scope for squandering scarce resources by remaining non-responsive to ethnic demands or fomenting ethnic turmoil across the border or even by taking advantage of such ethnic turmoil.

Conclusion

The nature of ethnic problems clearly suggests that unless these are solved the SAARC spirit may be in jeopardy. It is also clear that given the political will in keeping with the SAARC spirit, and with demonstration of this spirit both within the country and in the region, a solution may not be very difficult to find. The political will should emerge out of an urgency to find solution, and this felt-urgency is linked to the broader context of changed world scenario. Under the changed circumstances it is imperative to free resources tied up with such unproductive business as militarily coping with ethnic insurgency and channel the same to such productive sectors that would improve the quality of life. And, improved quality of life is a goal that ranks highest in SAARC objectives.
Notes and References


11. Ibid p. 15.
18. For details see Syed Anwar Husain: "Ethnicity and Security of Bangladesh", op.cit.
20. Article 7 of the Treaty states : "The government of Nepal and India agree to grant on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of the country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature." For details see Lok Raj Baral, "Political Demography and Security in South Asia", in Sridhar K. Khatri (ed.), *Regional Security in South Asia* (Kathmandu : Centre for Nepal and Asia Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1987), pp. 143-166.