Human Security and Extremism in India: 
Synergy and Conflict

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Introduction

The states in the South Asian region suffer from extremism in various forms and in all these countries human security situation remains poor. Extremism is a vague term, which may mean taking an idea to its limits regardless of unethical consequences, with the intention of not only to confront but also eliminate opposition; intolerance towards all contrary views; adoption of means, which disregard accepted norms of conduct in general; and disregard for life, liberty and human rights of others in particular. Thus extremism stands exactly opposite to the ideas of human security, which presupposes protection of life, liberty and essential rights of the individuals. If extremism undermines human security, by extension of the same logic but applied in reverse, human security may also diminish extremism. This paper delves into an exploration of the theme of a relationship between extremism and human security and in view of the Indian experience suggests multi-pronged efforts to develop human capital as the best asset of state as a check on authoritarian shifts under pressure.

Extremism and Human Security

Existing political systems are mostly not perfect mechanisms for redressing the multifaceted grievances of all people within their respective jurisdictions, especially in the
developing countries plagued with poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and backwardness. Still, these systems at various levels and in varying degrees provide for articulation of demands. Nevertheless, dissent, protest, and resistance to particular policies, dominant group or class, the ruling elite, or the existing political system are quite natural and often they take violent forms. However, violence provokes state to use coercive machineries at its command, and when the opponents begin to use force liberally, the root cause is forgotten and the validity and justification of a protest is then judged by the results. Often the long-drawn, never-ending and ostensibly futile negotiations create a sense of exasperation on both the sides, radical elements within the groups gain upper hand over the moderates, and extremism offers a way to challenge the authority of the state. The state uses coercive measures to compel the unwilling group to fall in line, thereby making perceived threats of the group increasingly real.

Extremism occurs for various reasons but at the root lies the failure to identify oneself with mainstream life of the land or the failure to grow a stake in the continuity of the prevailing system. Such disenchanted elements fall easy prey to the masterminds having ulterior designs from within or beyond the borders. It can be argued that militancy stems from a sense of deprivation. In the developing states of South Asia, there are many who harbour a feeling of deprivation and these sentiments are not necessarily directed against the state or the administration but also against other groups in the society. In order to build a homogenous identity of the group, others who do not share the agenda of the group are excluded as the outsiders and often become targets along with the state or the administration.

Poverty and backwardness can be conducive to extremism – though not a necessary cause of extremism – as they generate a steady supply of combatants. Extremism thrives when people
have little stake in the prevailing system and are easily mobilized by those who preach a new creed, rekindle their hope for betterment, and lead the way. If the system makes itself beneficial to them, it may be assumed that the wayward would gradually be sucked into the system itself.

Terrorism - which is characterized by attacks on soft targets i.e., mostly the unarmed, innocent civilians - is one form of using violence to pressurize the opponent and thereby to achieve a political goal. Rebels and insurgents who organize themselves in militias to take on the coercive machineries of the ruling regime may also indulge in occasional terrorist acts. However, except under extra-ordinary circumstances, terrorism has little chances to ensure effective redistribution of power by itself. Terrorism till very recently has been viewed as a supplementary means with limited objectives in a bigger political agenda but the very nature of a terrorist act i.e., killing the innocents distinguishes itself from all other forms of legitimate resistance. As countermeasures are adopted by the state, these measures provoke retaliatory terrorism instigating far stricter countermeasures in turn. With the global recognition of ideas impinging on protection of human rights and upholding human security, terrorism is fast losing validity as a politically expedient device. However, despite the intermittent challenges the terrorists pose and the occasional strains they cause, terrorism without a strong parallel political movement of mass support base would hardly succeed. Terrorists, however, can be used as pawns in bigger strategies of the states and both terrorism and counter-terrorism can be used as an excuse to consolidate state power domestically and beyond the borders. Terrorism is increasingly appearing as a scourge of the world which like organized crime syndicates would persist having linkages with illegal trade in narcotics, small arms and other transnational crimes providing employment to surrogate terrorists.3
With each passing day the security discourse is further enmeshed in everyday life of the common people leaving askance the great games of power politics, competition and conflicts among states. Facing common threats like climate change, experiencing common challenges like extremism and terrorism, realizing the common objective of economic development, states find erstwhile policy patterns established for centuries as inadequate to cope with the contemporary world. Indeed, ideas and policies are in transition creating a complex matrix of state relations, on the one hand and relations between the state and the individual, on the other.

Security understood in terms of basic human needs call attention to the fact that ‘an individual’s survival and development as a human being is crucially dependent upon certain basic needs of sustaining life, such as adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, education and healthcare’ and ‘the scale of such problems might threaten economic, social or political collapse.’4 As Amartya Sen argues, the problem is more of distribution than of availability, thereby creating a reality in which many ‘will go hungry amidst a world of plenty.’5 Mere economic growth does not necessarily result in human welfare and therefore ‘the meeting of basic human needs must logically be considered the starting point for any meaningful understanding of human security.’6 When security is not state-centric but individual or community-centric, it in effect denotes essential conditions of dignified living covering almost all vital aspects of human life. However, very often the main agency responsible for creating such essential conditions – the state that protects the rights of the individual, fails to live up to the mark. In view of the magnitude of the challenges faced in the developing nations, the inadequacy is glaringly displayed.

However, to ensure human security, the state itself has to inculcate a comprehensive national strength with hard as well
as soft substance. It is through the state machineries that the
great family of human kind operates. Individuals and
communities or groups claim the right of protection by the
state; Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can articulate
and mobilize the demands and lobby for the protection of such
rights; programmes of international bodies are materialized
through tangible concrete measures adopted by the state.
Human security is, in fact, no security in a weak state\(^7\) so far as
a crumbling structure fails to provide a semblance of
governance. On the other hand, human security networks –
even at the non-governmental level supported by the state –
would provide legitimacy to a state and thereby contribute to
its viability. A powerful state needs to ensure human security
in the interest of its own survival and legitimacy. It is important
that a democratic set up responsive to its people is instituted so
that the elitist notion of serving to ‘what the people need’ is
intertwined with a response to ‘what the people want’. ‘Security
and development have a symbiotic relationship,’ argues Sanjeev
Bhaduria, ‘one has no meaning without the other.’\(^8\)

South Asian states are good examples of relatively fragile
states struggling with the enormous challenge of ensuring
human security with varying success. When the individual is
placed at the core of security, the challenge gets bigger with the
increasing multitude of individuals. Moreover, South Asia as a
security complex has been known for ethnic and religious
divides, poverty and backwardness, a colonial past that focused
more on the division among the people than their common
destiny in the region. States in South Asia in building their own
national identities and securing their own national interests,
often perceived as opposed to the interests of other states in the
region – pursued policies with the consideration \textit{what is good
for the state itself} and in the process often missed out \textit{what is
good for the people of the states in this region}. If South Asia is
rich in anything, it is the human resource, and it is this human
resource that must be nurtured, developed, managed and used for greater benefits of the states in the region. The multitude of people need not be viewed as a liability but on the contrary, as the instruments of development.

India: The Conflicts

India has suffered extremist violence of different brands ranging from communal hostility, ethnic conflicts, radical revolutionary upsurge and cross-border terrorism over the years. In the post-independence days, when the state, armed with a federal constitution and five year plan, took up the responsibility for building a nation out of fragmented ethnic territorial collectivities, little did it realize the magnitude of the task and the difficulties of implementation. The efforts to build a nation-state gave birth to sub-national tendencies, attempts to assert the state authority provoked ethnic assertions, and lopsided development led to regional and sub-regional troubles. To make matters worse, cross-border terrorism became frequent over the years. Not all violent protests deteriorated in extremism but in more than sixty years after independence, India has seen a variety of extremist activities. Perhaps a very brief thematic survey of extremist activities would not be out of place here to ascertain the types and nature of extremist conflicts in India, which follows next.

There is a general understanding that 'the states in this region that emerged following colonial dispensation hardly reflected coincidence of 'state' with 'nation'. The structures and the form of government inherited mainly from the British Raj have to cope with a very uneasy mix of multi-ethnic entities fused together.' India is a multicultural, multiethnic society while nation-building requires some degree of homogeneity. The very idea of nation-state imported from the West is sought to be applied in a society, which is essentially pluralistic in character.
Nation-building process of the states in South Asia has created an environment of distrust in the external domain by accentuating an 'us versus them' attitude. While within the state, the process harped on the unifying features and common objectives, goals and destiny. The moment the state seeks to absorb or submerge the group identities and interests in an over-whelming all-pervasive cloak of nationalism, ethnic schism becomes primarily an instrument of sub-nationalism gradually assuming the shape of a security threat from within. Perceptions vary regarding the exact mainstream duties and responsibilities in a multicultural society especially when the interpreters are identified with the dominant groups in society. In a competition to establish perceptible group identity within the state, divisions occur on ethnic, communal, cultural or linguistic basis, splitting up the national collectivity into smaller entities not unlike pressure groups but with ominous portents.

"What the people wanted", argued M. J. Akbar, "was not so much independence as the feel of self rule, the satisfaction of having control over their own destinies... The fear in some regions of the subcontinent was that feudalism and colonialism would only be replaced by a new form of domination in a democracy." This new form of domination was interpreted in different ways. Ethnic extremism with strong religious undercurrents came from the states of Jammu and Kashmir and the Punjab that challenged India's democratic ethos. The secular India was conveniently interpreted as a Hindu India out to dominate its religious minorities and politics of gaining and sharing power gradually developed apprehensions among people about a fractured nation. The non-Hindi southern states were not comfortable with the possible dominance of the Hindi-speaking states. In the northeastern region in India, the struggle of various groups is backed by self-interpretations of distinct identity and culture. The fear of being submerging in
the waves of immigrants and consequent economic, political, and cultural loss instigated a movement in Assam. In fact, in the northeastern region of India, the demands of re-organization of the states might require re-drawing of international boundaries as the conflicting demands of the Nagas, the Mizos and the Kukis for Greater Nagaland, once-famous demand of Greater Mizoram, and Kukiland respectively, cut across the political boundaries of India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China.\textsuperscript{11}

Homogeneity can be a matter of intense debate, as even groups tend to divide themselves into subgroups and sub-subgroups sprouting a plethora of conflicting demands, which might go against the holistic group interests.\textsuperscript{12} A group’s cohesiveness depends upon the perceived common threat or its sense of deprivation \textit{vis-à-vis} other groups. Such groups are many but not necessarily exclusive in nature. Linguistic differences occur within the groups subscribing to same religion. Co-religionists unite overriding the linguistic differences. The Indians have different identities at the different levels of ethnicity, race, caste, language, region or religion and even the tribal societies are so stratified that very rarely a typical ethnic group with exclusionist common culture and custom, language, origin and heritage is encountered.\textsuperscript{13} Some scholars prefer to brand India as a ‘civilization state’ rather than a ‘nation state.’\textsuperscript{14}

India has never been a unified political entity. However, within the naturally defined boundary an awareness of India at the level of vague consciousness thrived that was strong enough to engulf the invaders and the natives – their religion, language, culture and customs. Particularities existed in pockets of territorial isolation and competition for political assertion has brought out apparently dormant sources of differences. Samir Das argues, “the nation that the Indian state sought to protect or secure was or is … divergent from the one
that we were ethnically, territorially and historically endowed with... Today the state territoriality becomes one of the key determinants of Indian nationhood...Borders in other words, serves as a means of capturing and securing the essence of nationhood.\(^{15}\) It is this concept of homogenous unified nationhood that brings in ethnic assertions for self-determination. Since the Indian state structure has been imposed from above instead of an evolution where society’s interests gel with state interest, the Indian nation building is plagued with too many paradoxes. However, even the smaller territorial entities taken out of a bigger unit would face the same fate because composite homogeneity is increasingly becoming a myth where identities become subjective, evolving and flexible.

Sense of composite culture and unity where crosscurrents of different cultural tenets coexist can prevail at the level of cognizance. It will be utterly wrong to interpret this process as an assimilation of subculture by the dominant mainstream culture. In fact, the mainstream culture is also evolving, incorporating, shading off. No culture can claim to remain as pure and authentic as it was at a given point of time and to try to go against the inevitable is utterly useless.

Regional economic imbalance as a result of the lack of appropriate policies pursued by the administration has been highlighted as a major cause of discontentment among the people of different regions in India. The effects of development campaigns – in terms of incentives for industries, public and private sector investments, infrastructural development including transportation and communication, market accessibility and promotion – are not immediately perceptible neither all the groups are in a position to derive the benefits at an equal rate. Especially, some disadvantaged groups that remain at the periphery of socio-economic advancement are willing to resort to challenge the
system to change it. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) now operates in 231 of 626 districts of the country with 20,000 armed activists.\(^\text{16}\) Obviously, it is not without reason that the left extremism has spread over the years and the reason lies in the failure of the state to reach to its people. Both the sides have long battle plans drawn out and while the government plan 'involves aggressive thrusts by the security forces followed by the implementation of the targeted development schemes for the overall socio-economic development of the local population', the Maoists believe that 'a broad-based countrywide mass movement' is possible 'linked to the seizure of political power establishment of base areas.'\(^\text{17}\) However, in the incessant struggle between groups where along with armed conflicts negotiation leading to accommodation remains a possibility, intermittent armed operations in fluctuating waves become a technique of communication between the parties.

In the past decades terrorist attacks in India have been a plenty. While the externally sponsored ones are a matter of national security policy, homegrown terrorism is essentially linked with a situation where the lack of opportunities for individual upward mobility breeds alienation from the system. In India, insurgency movements, according to some, 'degenerate' into terrorism and therefore, 'the problem is that democracy in India runs the risk of slowly slipping into authoritarianism' and the state's success in handling terrorism does not always count as democracy's success.\(^\text{18}\) Nevertheless, as long as terrorism blurs the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the state of necessity would strike back. Be it insurgency or terrorism, it is doubtful whether a big country like India could be coerced into submission by extremist activities of a particular group but in a violent war of attrition involving extremist attacks and state reprisal, the people would be the ultimate loser.
The state's very survival as an integrated system depends on the willful participation of its constituting elements. Even if the ruling elite actually execute the task of governance, it is finally the people of a state who determine the fate of the state and thereby also the standing of the state in the international system. If large groups of people of a state are alienated and withdrawn, they themselves become a source of threat to state security and disrupt the functioning of the state system.

**India: The Synergy**

India is a democracy. Democracy exists in many forms. It still faces serious challenges and the spread of democracy – as it appears – is a constrained process. Though the idea of democracy is ancient, the practice of universal adult suffrage is not and in that sense the ideology of democracy is still very much in its youth. If democracies are divided into two categories and in the absence of more suitable words, they are termed as the adult democracies and the young democracies with different levels of maturity. Mostly the western European political systems qualify as the adult democracies and the young ones – comprising the rest – are expected to follow the footsteps of the adults and conform to the standards set by them. The adult democracies are also economically affluent and they advocate the benefits of a capitalist free market economy. It is a different story, however, that the countries have gathered their economic strength by exploiting colonies and through means, which can hardly be called fair trade practices. Young democracies roughly treated by the adults remain poor.

In the category of young democracies, on the other hand, there are states where the overwhelming majority of persons are related to the state through ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic groups. The evolving identities operating at various levels obfuscate state-individual relationships. In India,
however, each fragment being too small to appropriate and monopolize power remains under compulsion to uphold democratic principles. As Dahl argues, “Democracy, one might say, is the national ideology of India. There is no other. Weak as India’s sense of nationhood may be, it is so intimately bound up with democratic ideas and beliefs that few Indians advocate a non-democratic alternative.”19 However, the young democracies too operate within their limitations. “Democracy has been an important ideological preference for India”, argues Muni, “not only in the construction but also in the pursuance of its foreign policy. But this preference has been pursued within the constraints of perceived strategic and security interests…”20

Since consensus over nationhood is sought to be engineered, democracy follows evolutionary expansionism but the process is never smooth and easy. Since the process of change in democracy is essentially evolutionary, democracies can coexist with and accommodate non-democratic elements till it is pressurized or jeopardized by the non-democratic elements to the extreme. Democracies then use force and the outcomes decide the pace of progression. Interestingly, rights of individuals or groups (for example, rights of self-determination) are not treated as so absolute as to create a threat to international order and infringe the rights of ‘other members’ of international community. It may follow then that in young democracies some transitional conflicts are natural.

On the other hand, in a democratic set up, non-governmental organizations and the civil society have a role to play. NGOs, not as the competitor of the state but as the collaborator, may initiate lobbying, generate awareness through sustained campaigning, or join in the government programmes. As it is rightly pointed out, “in the light of wide-ranging human security concerns emerging from multiple sources... the government should realize the futility of trying to tackle them alone.”21 The civil society viewed as the non-state human
collectivity based on the principles of humanism and rationalism is apparently a loose entity without precise functions. Very broadly, the members are associated as a family of human beings on the basis of fellow-feeling and work for the betterment of the members of the family and protect them against state excesses. Multiple media channels expose the cases of corruption, abuse and misuse of power on part of the political and bureaucratic establishments. In fact, an array of NGOs, increasing civil society participation and a vibrant media make Indian democracy resilient to threats and pressures. It does not mean that atrocities are not committed or the basic rules of the accepted code of conduct are not violated but it means that such acts do not go unnoticed and hence a deterrent effect broadly ensures compliance. While the aberrations are highlighted, it is to be remembered that in a state of one billion plus people, the overwhelmingly large section comprising of diverse multi-cultural groups and sub-groups silently follow the democratic norms.

India has progressed with her economic reforms in the recent years with an increased growth rate and general well being of the economy but she has slipped downwards in the Human Development Index in the recent years. Whether the report reflects the exact state of affairs is a matter of debate but it is symbolic of the inadequacy of the theme that economic growth leads to all-round development. Development today, as Duffield argues, "...is better described as an attempt, preferably through cooperative partnership arrangements, to change the whole societies and the behaviour and attitudes of the people within them." He continues to argue, "In attempting to promote direct social change, development has increasingly come to resemble a series of projects and strategies to change indigenous values and modes of organization and replace them with liberal ones." This, in other words, looks for yet another kind of homogenization
calling for attention to an attitudinal change towards the western path of modernization. In young democracies indigenous values are largely adhered to and such a process would be definitely slow and sluggish.

Over the decades since independence, India has pursued numerous poverty alleviation programmes, basic education and health care projects, policies to provide shelter, sanitation, and drinking water to its people, strategies to uplift the vulnerable sections of the society with limited success. In concrete terms, it would appear that the Indian experience would reveal a low-level development due to lack of adequate resources and a distorted pattern of public expenditure. As Gopal Ji and Suman Bhakri argue and prescribe, India produces sufficient food but also must ensure that all citizens have the required purchasing power to obtain the food they need. Population growth might slow down in the coming years but India’s greatest challenge will be to expand the opportunities for the growing labour force, as gainful employment is one of the most essential conditions for food security and economic security. India’s health care scenario has improved significantly but it would be necessary to increase the level of public expenditure to create a more equitable and effective health care system with universal access. As a solution, it is advocated that changes be made in terms of budgetary priorities, reducing the losses of public enterprises through phased privatization, restructuring development priorities, curtailing defence spending and rationalizing subsidies without recouring to additional mobilization and resources. Prioritizing goals are often debatable, for example, curtailing defence spending or phased privatization of public enterprises are themes that are bound to generate detractors. But parallel programmes can always run given the will and commitment to do so.

Very broadly, it has been outlined that in India, erosion of any of the core values would erode legitimacy of the state
constituting a threat to its security. It may be assumed that lessons have been learnt by the policymakers of different shades and colour after years of friction. Constitutional guarantees are still there, human rights commissions are functioning, NGOs are active, and the media is alive to its task. It is the billion plus people of India, which is India's best asset. Aware that still a lot to be done, in the era of global interconnectivity, the synergy emanates from the realization of common ends where the government, NGOs and people are partners in the steps forward. Conflicts would delay the process and undermine whatever has been achieved so far.

Conclusion

Homogeneity is and will remain illusive in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious India. However, an all-round development and creation of opportunities for individual upward mobility ensures that an economic man would be more inclined to relate himself with the state through pressure groups leaving behind his ethnic, religious or regional particularities. It goes without saying that ensuring human security for a billion plus people is a Herculean task. But if the situation is given and one cannot wish away the challenges then the challenges must be accepted. In a world where global concerns are fast becoming national interests, self-preservation and self-help would require partnership and cooperation.

In a young democracy like India, extremist activities might persist for some more years to come. It is not expected that the state will succumb to extremist pressures but the traditional Indian ethos of toleration, accommodation and non-domination will be put under severe test. It is important that democracy matures in India with people-centric strategies. Authoritarian shifts will not only hamper the rights and freedom of the people within the country but also disturb her relations beyond
the borders. In the interconnected world of today, South Asian states need to build bridges and partnerships towards a common destiny for the betterment of the people in the region. The days of talking only in terms of confidence-building and risk reduction have passed; mutual blame games have only delayed what could have been achieved by now; it is time to make way for positive and meaningful cooperation of the willing states in the region.

Endnotes


15 Samir Kumar Das, *op. cit.*, p. 54.


