CHAPTER V

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SECURITY AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA

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COOPERATION AND SECURITY BUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

While South Asia may be characterised by trends of both conflict and cooperation, the region is known more for underdevelopment, instability, security problems and endemic inter-state distrust. Conflicts are seen both at the perception level and in issue-specific areas, while cooperation moves on haltingly. In addition to the domestic problems, there are security issues that tend to bedevil bilateral relations and regional environment in South Asia. The end of the Cold War and the disengagement of the former Soviet Union from South Asia do not seem to have made any remarkable impact on the regional cooperation mechanisms and security situation in the region.

Attempts have been made at the official and non-official levels for confidence building, and economic and security cooperation in South Asia. Some have been successful and some not. The objective
of this paper is to explore the role of civil society in building cooperation and security in South Asia. The paper will deal with the various pathways to peace, stability, development, cooperation and security in South Asia. It will then focus on the role of civil society in improving the situation in the region as well as on the inter-state relations. Here, the need for civil society activities will be highlighted, a partial inventory of civil societies will be made and their possible contribution assessed.

1. PATHWAYS TO PEACE, DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

There have been at least five models suggested, some of them practised, for promoting and enhancing peace and security in South Asia. These are: (i) the socio-economic approach to peace and security in the region; (ii) regional cooperation through constructive bilateralism; (iii) the security route to cooperation; (iv) the hegemonic stability model; and (v) the civil society approach.

1.1. Socio-Economic Approach

The socio-economic approach is actually the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) model. As mentioned, inter-state relations in South Asia have been characterized by endemic conflicts and mistrust. The roots of SAARC lay in the neo-functionalist assumption that cooperation in socio-economic fields would benefit socially and economically the peoples of South Asia irrespective of divergences in political, social and economic
performances of the individual countries\(^1\) and that would build mutual confidence and help create environment conducive to solving contentious issues, to security cooperation, and to gradually moving towards strategic convergence in the region. This may also be called security through development. In reality, however, cooperation at the bilateral level seems to proceed on ‘one step forward and two steps backward’ basis, while cooperation at the regional, SAARC level moves ahead at a frustratingly slow pace.

### 1.2. Cooperation through Constructive Bilateralism

In his article entitled “Regional Security Cooperation through Constructive Bilateralism: Prospects for South Asian Stability”, Suranjan Das is of the view that enormous scope exists for mutual economic cooperation between India and Pakistan. He argues that constructive bilateralism between these two countries would create the conditions for regional stability in the whole of South Asia.\(^2\) He seems to subscribe to the institutional approach in international politics, which considers that interdependence and cooperative bilateralism can play role in changing traditional state behaviour and preferences and that institutions are capable of discouraging states from calculating self-interest, thereby reducing possibilities of war and creating conditions for a peaceful world.\(^3\)

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1.3. The Security Route to Cooperation

Shireen Mazari holds such views. She maintains that diverse states have achieved differing forms of regional cooperation through consensus building, but all show the primacy of first establishing consensus. "It would be absurd to indulge in the obsession with economic utopias and accept the fallacious logic the West would have us believe that the altered global structures have led to the primacy of economic power in global politics at the expense of politico-military power. Even a cursory glance at global history since the Gulf War will show the falsity of such claims. The need for South Asian states to therefore alter the focus of their cooperation agenda has become critical if this region is to preserve its evolving identity...." Therefore, in South Asia the security framework will have to take precedence – with the security concerns of the states being given precedence. In other words, it is only with the resolution of the political conflicts of the region that substantive moves can be made towards diverting resources from military spending towards socio-economic goals and increased productivity.

1.4. Hegemonic Stability Model

According to this model, the preponderance of one country is more likely to produce peace and stability in a region, because weaker states dare not attack while the stronger state need not

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5 Ibid., p.110.
attack.\textsuperscript{6} India's emphasis on 'fact of life' in South Asia, which is a reference to natural hierarchy in the region favouring New Delhi, implies her desire for regional order through preponderance. This may be implemented through coercive or non-coercive means, with or without extra-regional recognition. Some governments in India have been successful in pursuing such policy for some time and some have not.

1.5. Civil Society Approach

When the intergovernmental approach to peace and security in South Asia was found to be wanting, when pressure built up from the non-governmental sector and when international environment seemed conducive, civil society leaders wished to take part in the efforts to maintain and enhance peace and security in the region. Let's now turn to this relatively new area of interest in South Asia.

2. ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING COOPERATION AND SECURITY

2.1. Concept of Civil Society

There is no consensus on the concept and history of civil society. Some scholars tend to believe that civil society is an ancient concept. Some are of the view that the very emergence of the state was the outcome of a civil society agreement. Yet some others hold the opinion that the concept of civil society essentially belongs to the tradition of political modernity of the 17\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} century Europe.

The concept of civil society can be found in the works of Locke, Adam Smith, Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville and Gramsci, among others. We will be concerned here more with the recent discourse on civil society. Needless to say, civil society has historically been understood in reference to the state. The recent debates have been characterized by constant references to good governance, the rule of law, empowerment, efficiency, accountability, transparency, decentralization, participation, etc. "Civil society describes the associations in which we conduct our lives and which owe their existence to our needs and initiatives rather than to the state...." As such, civil society can be referred to as professional associations like those of lawyers and teachers, the media, community-based organizations (CBOs), women's forums, research groups, private think tanks, student fronts, trade unions, environmentalists and cultural groups which take keen interest in safeguarding people's civil and political rights, in establishing justice and the rule of law, in promoting democracy, pluralism and good governance. What civil society means is a loose conglomerate of diverse organizations and networks with varying philosophies and objectives.

As Kramer states, "Civil society has historically been associated with attempts to control the state and subject state practices to critical

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Mohsin writes, “Civil society has often been regarded as a counter hegemonic force to the state. It is the arena that provides the space for dissent, for interrogation and above all for reformulation of the state apparatus of governance.”

Blair defines civil society as those NGOs that are concerned with influencing state policies and are autonomous from the state and also from political parties. This definition also excludes those NGOs that are concerned only with service delivery, relief or productivity functions. And those NGOs, where income-generating activities have become a priority and where social mobilization programme has taken a back seat, may not also qualify to become civil society.

For a well-developed civil society, a balanced relationship between state and civil society is necessary. If the state develops at the expense of society, the result will be the suppression of the society, which will lead to chaos and anarchy in the political, economic and social institutions. “But the existence of civil society alone is not enough. An inactive civil society leads to unresponsive


14 Naeem Ahmed, op. cit, p. 269.
states, while only a politically self-conscious civil society imposes limits upon state power."

"States invariably seek to control and limit the political practices of society by constructing the boundaries of the political. The state attempts in other words to constitute the political discourse. However, politics ... are not only about controls and the laying down of boundaries. They are about transgressions of these boundaries and about the reconstitution of the political. The site at which society enters into a relationship with the state can be defined as civil society.... The institutions of civil society are associational and representational forums, a free press and social associations." Civil society refers to the varied forms of social organization that lie between the individual and the state.... Civil society is an expression of the basic human desire to socialize with others through voluntary association. And the civil society institutions of two or more countries constitute international civil society.

A civil society institution is thus characterised by certain principles and values. It must be democratic. It cannot ask for a democratic state if it itself is undemocratic. A civil society organization must have accountability and be transparent, must not be repressive and corrupt. Such CSOs cannot demand the same thing of the state. The major objective of a CSO is public good/welfare and
not private or individual gains. CSOs are voluntary and not profit-seeking enterprises.

2.2. The Role of Civil Society in South Asia

The civil society, which is autonomous from the state and political parties, limits state power, puts pressure to enhance state responsiveness and influences state policies. But civil society organizations also develop transnational networks for creating space and benefits for themselves as well as for delivering services to the needy. Given the limitations of the state in an ever more complex society and rise in demand of the people, there is space for civil society activities.

Civil society networks can have a moderating influence on the otherwise stiff officialdom in the countries of South Asia.

Civil society activities could contribute to changing the mindset of the policy makers and practitioners in South Asian countries.

Official channel or Track I is not sufficient these days, necessitating the presence and work of civil society.

Civil society can link and promote Track I and Track II initiatives.

Civil society networks form linkages and enhance people-to-people contact, cutting across national boundaries.\(^{18}\)

Civil society can help develop regionalism, confidence building and security cooperation, and good governance. Let us get into some details on these points.

**Regionalism in South Asia:** Despite the formation of SAARC, regionalism has been limited. 19 Regionalism also remains in the shadow of bilateralism.20 Many factors are militating against economic, political, cultural and psychological regionalism. Civil society could play a role in developing new paradigms for economic development and in creating constituencies across borders that would create pressure on the respective official circles for economic cooperation.21

**Confidence building, security cooperation, good governance and human security:** Regionalism from below may be engendered in the domain of civil society.22 Here the argument is that the task of creating a South Asian mind and necessary political and social milieu to forge a South Asian regional consciousness to develop a South Asian community must be rooted in the domain of civil society. The civil society actors and institutions need to forge links.

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22 See for details, Navnita Chadha Behera, “Regionalism from Below: The Domain of Civil Society” in Shaheen Afroze (ed.), *ibid.* pp. 448-461
and develop sectoral networks across the region with an ultimate goal of creating a regional civil society so that dialogue among the countries could be de-politicised.\textsuperscript{23}

Civil society can help develop paradigms for confidence building, security cooperation as well as conflict management and conflict resolution in South Asia, develop alternative approaches to security in the region. Civil society institutions and actors can contribute to security and strategic discourse, alternative thinking, strategy and paradigms for confidence building. In this regard, Dipankar Banerjee has written a good paper on the role of the research institutes in South Asia.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, civil society can contribute to improving political environment.\textsuperscript{25}

In the South Asian context, civil society can provide a stable basis for building security and cooperation at the regional level. Civil society initiatives enjoy a comparative advantage over the government in this regard, for the former is not bound by political expediencies, and the absence of the media pressure and mass expectations also provide them with relative freedom to work out their agenda. The psychological dimension of CBMs indeed can

\textsuperscript{23} ibid.


\textsuperscript{25} Talat A. Wizarat in Moonis Ahmar (ed.), 2001, \textit{op. Cit.}
create a favourable environment for the states to consolidate and institutionalise the groundwork done by the civil society initiatives.26

**Create social capital:** In economic sense, social capital consists of the economic potential embedded in social organisations and the norms of trust and reciprocity that animate them. In other words, social capital refers to the wealth-producing potential that flows from various forms of collective association.27 The World Bank defines social capital as “the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions”.28 Social capital is equally used in the political arena. The chief virtue of civil associations lies in their capacity to socialize participants into the norms of generalized reciprocity and trust, which are essential components of ‘social capital’ needed for effective democratic governance.29 The political use of social capital may be seen in the form of initiatives for confidence building, conflict management and security cooperation, movements against state repression and violations of human rights and for the marginalized and disadvantaged both within and between states.

Let us now see some of the civil society institutions and actors that are working between and among South Asian countries.

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2.3. Profile of Civil Society Institutions and Organisations in South Asia

Civil society organizations have proliferated in South Asia since the 1990s. An excellent inventory of these CSOs came out in 1997. There may be more now but according to the inventory there are more than forty dialogue channels operating in the region and about a dozen more outside the region in which South Asians participate on a regular basis. The dialogues were divided into seven categories according to their objectives, proximity to government, participants and funding sources. Some of these are given below.

- India-Pakistan Friendship Society (1987)
- India-Pakistan Neemrana Initiatives (1991)
- Patna Initiative (1992)
- Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy (COSNUP) (1994)
- Indo-Bangladesh Dialogues (1994)
- Pakistan-India People’s Forum for Peace & Democracy (1994)
- US-Pakistan Dialogues (1993)
- Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) Regional Initiative (1998)
- Eastern Himalayan Rivers Study (1987)
- South Asian Gender Network (SAGN)
- Climate Action Network South Asia

South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre (1989)
Independent Group for South Asian Cooperation (1990)
South Asia Dialogue (1991)
South Asia Forum for Human Rights
Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) Initiatives (1992)
South Asian Youth Association for Regional Cooperation (SAYARC) (1994)
Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT) (1994)
Coalition for Action on South Asian Cooperation (1994)
South Asia Women’s Forum (1995)
Initiative on South Asian Cooperation (1995)
Women Initiative for Peace in South Asia
South Asian Union of Journalists (1992)
South Asian Press Club Association (1994)
Civil Society Network on Small Arms in South Asia (2001)
South Asian Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR)31

Concluding Remarks

While a rosy picture has been drawn about the role of civil society in South Asia, there are in fact several constraints in practice. There are domestic constraints like opposition criticism and also logistical problems in organising dialogues.

The major problem is the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust in South Asia, especially in the India-Pakistan relationship, not only between governments but also between civil society organizations and government officials. The prevailing political culture in South Asia is responsible for this. The salient features of culture in politics and security in the region are the primacy of the political considerations at the expense of the socio-economic ones and the absolute dominance of the state organs and of the ones who man these. Theoretically speaking, the differences are also in the statist and liberal perspectives on civil society, and cooperation and security building in South Asia. The statist doctrines prescribe strong, autonomous states and weak, dependent societies.

Protagonists of realism in international relations have recently challenged the thesis of increased interaction and interdependence as guarantors of ‘strategic stability’. As Das mentions, in an effort to rehabilitate the legitimacy of the balance of power politics, they have undermined the role of international or regional cooperative institutions in promoting the cause of global peace. Liberal doctrine wants to curtail the power of the state and even to liberate the society from the state. The liberal stress on associationalism actually drastically shrinks the sphere of power traditionally occupied by the state.

32 Navnita et al, op. cit. pp. 5-6.
34 See Skidmore, op. cit.
However, the reality is that strong states need strong societies. As a matter of fact, the growth of civil society requires a renegotiation and restructuring of state-society relations. This process may force the state to share power to a greater degree than in the past, but it does not necessarily entail a net loss of state capacity because the relationship between state and society is not zero-sum, as statist perspectives would have us believe. In South Asian context, civil society organizations, institutions and actors have been understandably less effective in critical areas such as cooperation, confidence and security building. It is hoped that state-society perspectives will change with more organized networks and concerted demand for good governance, peace, stability, development, and security cooperation in South Asia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of managing and resolving conflicts in the post-World War II era got an impetus with the involvement of civil society in creating conditions for holding official (Track-I) and non-official (Track II) negotiations. The East-West cold war, particularly in Europe got diluted after the strong initiatives taken by various civil society groups to pursue NATO and Warsaw Pact to follow the road of arms reduction and relaxation of tensions after the signing of historic Helsinki Accords on August 1, 1975. With the end of the cold war at the superpower level, Track-I and Track-II initiatives to resolve inter and intra-state conflicts in various tension-ridden areas of the Third World got a new impetus. The Arab-Israeli peace process, Indo-Pak normalization talks, Sri Lankan peace talks, Sino-Indian normalization talks and North-South Korea peace talks were launched partly because of the pressure exerted by different civil society groups and partly by the role played by domestic compulsions and the role of external elements.

Unlike Europe, where the civil society played a vital role in terminating the cold war through a process of negotiations, both at
Track-I and Track-II level, in South Asia, the situation has been quite different. Theoretically, civil society is ideal to act as a bridge between the two antagonists and through sustained pressure it is able to defuse the level of tension and unleash the process of dialogue. Civil society groups like political parties, workers, students, journalists, artists and other segments of public opinion can play an assertive role if the state structure is democratic in nature and is amenable to the voice of people. In a situation where an authoritarian political culture exists, the role of civil society in creating awareness among people on fundamental issues becomes critical. After the end of the cold war in 1991, a valuable opportunity was available for India and Pakistan, the two warring states of South Asia, to take advantage of positive changes at the global level and launch the process of serious dialogues, both at the governmental and non-governmental level for the management and resolution of their disputes. The civil societies in the two countries were also expected to make use of that opportunity and act as a catalyst of change in South Asia. Unfortunately all such opportunities were lost because of the ego-centric and retrogressive approaches held by the ruling elites of India and Pakistan and the failure of intelligentsia of the two countries to come forward and create a strong constituency of peace.

If one examines the complexion of civil society in South Asia, it is quite heterogeneous in nature because of divisive groups who are ideologically poles apart. On the one hand, there are liberal, moderate and progressive elements who want to democratize the society and resolve conflicts through a process of dialogue. Whereas, on the other hand, there are groups who are extremist, hawkish and
chauvinist in their approach. Therefore, when one talks about civil society in South Asia, it doesn’t mean only those who believe in human rights and freedom but powerful ethnic and religious groups have emerged over last two decades who call for an open persecution of religious minorities and who are also against the process of official or unofficial dialogue for the management and resolution of conflicts.

The role of civil society in mobilizing support and pressure for holding official and non-official initiatives is undeniable. From 1991 onwards, several Track-II and Track-III initiatives were launched in South Asia, particularly between India and Pakistan to reduce tension and work out a plan for the management and resolution of their outstanding disputes. Similarly, such initiatives were also noticeable in Tamil-Sinhala conflict and insurgency at the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Given the fact that in most cases, the civil society of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka lacked proper coordination and influence on the policy-makers to accept their role for the management and resolution of conflicts, it failed to bring any qualitative change in South Asia. Yet it did evoke a debate at various levels to use dialogue as a means to break the impasse and resolve conflicts.

This paper attempts to examine the role of civil society of South Asia in linking and promoting Track-I and Track-II initiatives by responding to the following questions: How the civil society can play a meaningful role in promoting Track-I and Track-II initiatives in South Asia? What is the nature of linkage between civil society and Track-I and Track-II initiatives? What are the problems and challenges in linking civil society with Track-I and Track-II
initiatives? What lessons can be learned by the civil society of South Asia from other regions in promoting official and non-official dialogue? What are the prospects of civil society in South Asia for playing a meaningful role in promoting official and non-official dialogue?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To a great extent, civil society in South Asia is in its rudimentary stage because on various critical issues ranging from communal, ethnic, sectarian, economic, territorial and political conflicts at the inter and intra-state level, it has not been able to influence people at the helm of affairs to formulate policies aiming for the reduction of tension and the management and resolution of conflicts. Yet, the role and relevance of civil society in creating conditions for holding official and non-official dialogues cannot be undermined because it gives a lot of hope and optimism in an environment of despair and gloom prevailing these days in South Asia. Most of the Track-III initiatives, which come under the framework of people to people dialogue primarily belong to the civil society. It is another question that because of rupture in Indo-Pak relations, not only Track-I but also Track II and III are not functioning.

While dealing with the conceptual framework of this paper two things will be covered. First, the basic definitions of civil society, Track-I and II initiatives and second how the three concepts are relevant or irrelevant in bringing a qualitative change for peace and conflict resolution in South Asia.

Civil society is a Western concept, which brought significant changes in the European and then in the North American societies in
the post-industrial revolution period. As defined in the *Dictionary of Political Thought*, civil society denotes the state of society in which patterns of association are accepted and endorsed by the members. Most users of the term were influenced by state of nature theory, seeing the individual as an atomic constituent of the civil society, which is composed by contract, consent or submission from these self-dependent atoms.¹

When Western Europe was passing through the stage of industrial revolution, a new class emerged which represented the intelligentsia composed of industrial workers, traders, journalists, teachers and students. Such people shaped the civil society with an objective to check and balance, and challenge state policies and democratize society. Particularly, those segments, who remained out of state power structure formed a strong component of civil society. A non-Western description of civil society is given by an Indian writer in the following words, “The idea of civil society, which entered political theories, began to insist that a social community is capable of organizing itself independently of the specific direction of state power. The freedom of civil society formed the central plank of democratic movements in eighteenth century Western Europe against absolutist states. Civil society is essentially a concept, which belongs to the tradition of political modernity founded on individualism and defense of human rights”.²

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The writer further says that, "the focus on civil society has arisen from an equal disenchantment with the notion of participation in the formal structures of political power. It is the task of civil society to maintain an ethos different from state, from its bureaucracy, and from that of the economy. Civil society is conceptualized as a space where people can pursue self-defined ends in an associated area of common concerns". Hence, "the concept of civil society essentially belongs to the tradition of political modernity founded on individualism and defense of human rights and manifested in attempts to challenge the state in the seventeenth-eighteenth century Europe". Four important aspects of civil society could be derived from the above discussion.

- Civil society is a parallel to state power
- Civil society represents those sections of society who disagree with the policies of the state and want to express their sentiments through a common platform
- Civil society is a result of a process of industrialization and urbanization
- The strength of civil society is composed of those who are conscious of their rights and have an ability to raise their voice in the corridors of power.

However, the most important requirement of a civil society is the presence of a strong middle class and its ability to mobilize public

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3 Ibid., p.32.
opinion through various means. Technically speaking, civil society
can prosper in a democratic and de-centralized environment. If the
state structure is authoritarian and oppressive, the civil society’s
basic objective is to free itself from the bondage of dictatorship. If
the relationship of society and state is unstable and conflict-ridden, it
becomes difficult for civil society to effectively play a role for the
management and resolution of conflicts. Ideally, a civil society can
prosper when there is freedom of expression and the majority of
people are conscious enough to distinguish between right and wrong.
History is full of examples to prove that a democratic and
enlightened society has an edge over a society, which is under
constant suppression. The break-up of Pakistan, Soviet Union and
Yugoslavia were primarily the outcome of a centralized state
structure incapable of dealing with economic, political and various
issues of national integration. As pointed out by a Pakistani writer,
"For a well-developed civil society, a balanced relationship between
state and society is necessary and a strong civil society can control
state power. If state develops at the expense of society, the result will
be suppression of society, which will lead to chaos and anarchy in
the political and social institutions. The objective of civil society is
to strengthen the political, economic and social institutions, which
protect and safeguard individual rights from any kind of
authoritarianism at both state and society level". 5

5 Naeem Ahmed, “The role of civil society in CBMs in South Asia,” in Moonis Ahmar
(ed.,) The Challenge of Confidence-Building in South Asia (New Delhi: Har-Anand
Publications, 2001), pp.267-268. Civil society works for political, economic, social and
human development where all the people enjoy equal rights without the fear of majority-
minority conflict. Civil society is a network of relationship among states, society,
political, economic and social institutions, and a cluster of interest groups such as
political parties, religion and cultural association. Civil society seeks to create a condition
The question is: are the requirements and conditions for a viable civil society present in South Asia or the region is still not ready for an assertive role of different segments of society for directing ruling elite in pursuing right policies? Two different perspectives exist on this issue. Firstly, civil society in South Asia is passing through a transitory phase and its efforts, though limited, to promote official and non-official dialogue, should be recognized. Although, the voice of civil society groups may not be effective at this stage, yet their potential for mobilizing opinion against any future Indo-Pak war or seeking a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute cannot be undermined. Secondly, "civil society does not exist in South Asia because the prevailing ground realities do not suit in this regard. The region has just completed fifty years of its independence and lacks any political culture suitable for a strong civil society. Deliberate efforts have been made to weaken the civil structure by the forces of status quo and power-hungry ruling elite in order to fulfill their ulterior motives. The fragile societal forces also provided a chance to the ruling class to exploit them".6

On many occasions, human rights groups and various political parties do rise against the threat of nuclear war in South Asia and the violence in Jammu and Kashmir but when the majority of people remain silent vis-à-vis impending showdown between India and Pakistan it means the failure of civil society to compel the ruling elites of the two countries see reason and resume the process of dialogue. The standoff between New Delhi and Islamabad since the

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6 Ibid., p.270.
terrorist attacks at the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001 indicate the upper hand of hawkish elements within the civil society who because of their vested interests want to perpetuate the environment of hate and conflict in South Asia. Hence, the predicament of civil society in South Asia is because of its internal contradictions.

As far as the concepts of Track-I and Track-II initiatives are concerned, these became common during the East-West cold war period. With the end of cold war in 1991, the art of diplomacy at the official and non-official level in managing and resolving conflicts in South Asia also underwent a degree of change. While Track-I initiatives were not uncommon in South Asia before the end of the cold war, Track-II diplomacy became a new area of interest for those interested in peace building and conflict resolution in the region. Track-I initiative is launched by the officials of the two or more countries to hold dialogue aimed at resolving contentious issues. It is also defined as a second line of communication between the officials of the two countries. Track-II initiatives mean policy related discussions which are technically non-governmental but which in other parts of Asia and Asia Pacific, often involve the participation of government officials in the meetings in their private and personal capacities and have the explicit intention of influencing or informing

7 These initiatives were launched in the event of crisis like the one during 1986-1987 Indian military exercises when the Pakistan President General Zia-ul-Haq paid a visit to Jaipur, India to visit a cricket match but succeeded in defusing tension by holding talks with the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. On several accounts, high ups of India and Bangladesh, India and Nepal and India and Sri Lanka have kept the channels of negotiations open in order to defuse a crisis situation.

8 Navnita Chadha Behera, Paul M. Evans, Gowher Rizvi, Beyond Boundaries (New York: University of Toronto York University, 1997), p.4.
public policy. Hence Track-II initiative may be defined as a process of unofficial dialogue between disputing policies conducted directly or with the help of a third party by influential citizens who have an access to the governments or have an ability to influence public opinion.

According to an Indian expert on Track-II diplomacy, the evolution of non-official dialogue in South Asia could be divided into four important phases.

**Phase One:** In the first phase beginning in 1980, the Government of Bangladesh floated the idea of an association for regional cooperation.

**Phase Two:** In the second phase beginning in 1991 the United States public diplomacy program decided to engage the civil society in South Asia to promote nuclear non-proliferation.

**Phase Three:** In the third phase beginning around the middle of 1990s those involved in civil society initiatives began to emphasize the importance of resolving bilateral and regional conflicts rather than focusing on economic cooperation or nuclear non-proliferation.

**Phase Four:** The fourth phase became operational in 1999-2000 when the emphasis shifted from group efforts to the use of services of individuals for facilitating communication between government

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decision-makers at the highest level to explore concrete solutions to specific aspects of intractable conflicts.\textsuperscript{11}

As far as South Asia is concerned, Track-II initiatives began to take shape during 1980s involving non-official individuals but having good influence on the policy-making process. Academicians, journalists, lawyers, businessmen, human rights activists, former diplomats and retired military officials were involved in Track-II initiatives. Some of them represented civil society and made an effort to narrow the gap between official positions taken by India and Pakistan on contentious issues by providing channels for testing new ideas.\textsuperscript{12} Even if some of these ideas lacked practicality it was useful on the part of participants at the Track-II dialogue to discuss things in order to give a new perspective on various contentious issues. Track-III initiative is principally composed of those who represent general people and the concept is primarily used by the NGOs and social activists. They are composed of individuals and groups representing different segments of civil society and looking across national frontiers and states, aiming to build constituencies for peace, which can question conventional practices and beliefs and present alternatives to official government positions.\textsuperscript{13}

A classical example of Track-III initiative is the Indo-Pak Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy, which since last seven years is involved in cross border dialogue to create better

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\item[11] Ibid.
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understanding among the people of India and Pakistan. Other initiatives like the summer and winter workshops organized by the Regional Center for Strategic Studies, Colombo also contributed in building opinion in South Asia about the mechanism to build confidence and resolve conflicts in the region. These workshops involved young participants and experienced faculty members from South Asia and abroad on discussing the issues of arms control and confidence-building, traditional and non-traditional security threats to South Asia. In most of the sessions of these workshops former and serving policy-makers, retired military officials, academicians, journalists, human rights activists and people representing different segments of civil society played an important role in creating a constituency of likeminded people supporting the process of dialogue for the management and resolution of conflicts.

Therefore, the relevance of civil society in Track-I and II initiatives in South Asia exists depending on the response of state and the ability of various activist groups to put pressure on the policy-makers to seriously hold negotiations and encourage those participating in Track-II or non-official dialogue. On the other hand, the irrelevance of civil society in Track-I and II initiatives becomes a reality when the vast majority of people are a hostage of extremist groups and policy-makers subscribing to hawkish approaches. In such a case, the role of moderate elements in civil society becomes less meaningful and their ability to promote sanity, rationality and tolerance particularly while dealing with unresolved foreign policy issues decreases significantly.
3. THE LINKAGE

When one talks about the role of civil society in linking and promoting Track-I and Track II initiatives, four important realities should be taken into consideration. First, the concept of civil society, which is Western in nature, cannot be applied in case of South Asia because the societal conditions in this region are different. Yet, in the last 55 years, some headway has been made to create awareness among people about unresolved inter and intra-state conflicts through media drive, seminars, peace marches and so forth. When India and Pakistani tested their nuclear devices in May 1998, civil society groups raised their concerns and fear about the survival of people of South Asia in the event of a future showdown between the two erstwhile adversaries. They demanded the holding of talks at the official level for dealing with the issue of preventing the use of nuclear weapons. The Lahore Declaration, which was issued after the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Pakistan in February 1999, contained a special reference to measures for nuclear safeguards and the prevention of inadvertent use of nuclear weapons by the two countries. That achievement was very much the result of the pressure, which was exerted by different civil society groups for Track I negotiations between India and Pakistan for the resumption of dialogue. Moreover, a basic fact about the role of civil society in

14 The first initiative, which was taken in Pakistan against the nuclearization of South Asia after the Indian nuclear tests of May 11 and 13 was by teachers concerned about human survival formed at the University of Karachi by some academicians. The group organized a seminar on May 25 at the University of Karachi and raised its voice against the nuclear tests.

15 For further information, see, the text of Lahore Declaration in Daily Dawn (Karachi) February 22, 1999.
linking Track-I and II negotiations must be remembered in the context of several rounds of Foreign Secretaries Talks, which were held between India and Pakistan from 1991-1994 on discussing conflicting issues. Although these meetings were suspended after January 1994 and were resumed in 1997, some diplomatic headway was made by Islamabad and New Delhi to understand each other’s position by submitting several working papers.

Through meetings, seminars, press releases and other methods of mobilizing public opinion for peace in South Asia, different segments of civil society were trying to seek better coordination between Track I and II dialogues. Indo-Pak and Indo-Bangladesh Track I dialogues to some extent are dependent on the ideas and suggestions on various initiatives launched under non-official, i.e. Track-II exercises either done by various think tanks or groups of individuals. In case of the role played by the civil society to improve relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh, it must be remembered that 51 civil society organizations of Pakistan in an advertisement published in various Pakistani newspapers in the first week of August 2002 demanded from their government to formally apologize for the excesses committed by the Pakistan military against the people of the then East Pakistan during March-December 1971 military operation. The Bangladeshi newspapers welcomed the gesture expressed by the civil society groups of Pakistan as a major headway to unleash the process of reconciliation between the two countries.

Second, the civil society in South Asia is in its formative phase because of illiteracy and economic backwardness. The basic issues in South Asia are about human survival and because of this reason civil society is not able to play a leading role in promoting official and non-official dialogue. Since the bulk of the population of South Asia has no access to the basic facilities of life it is unable to raise a cogent voice against growing tension in Kashmir and other issues like conventional and nuclear arms race in South Asia, huge defense expenditures in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal under the pretext of security, environmental dangers and so forth. In the Western world, because of the high quality of life and the resolution of basic issues of human survival, the civil society is in a position to take a stand on foreign policy and other related issues. But in South Asia, the weakness of the civil society is evident from the ability of state structure to deny any space to those groups who differ with the policies of the government and want to express their grievances.

South Asia is passing through a transitory phase in which the non-state actors are trying to assert their position but the state structure is still strong enough to prevent any formidable challenge to its authority. Had this not been the case, civil society groups would have been able to stop communal violence in Gujrat, sectarian killings in Pakistan, ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and political violence in Bangladesh and Nepal. In all these cases of domestic instability and crises, the civil society could have played a leading role in unleashing the process of dialogue between or among antagonistic groups. As far as communal violence in Gujrat is concerned, the Indian civil society, composed of human rights groups, trade union organizations and others launched peace marches
in affected areas of that State so as to cool down the temperature. Even then, the killing process continued in Gujarat because the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party was patronizing the militant sections of civil society to continue with the process of communal schism. Hence, even in the world’s largest democracy, India, those segments of civil society who believe in non-violence and peace feel handicapped in their drive against communalism. They have also miserably failed in pursuing their government to resume talks with Pakistan, which have been suspended after the failure of the Agra summit. The Indian civil society also failed to compel its government lift restrictions on land and rail travel with Pakistan which were imposed in the aftermath of terrorist attacks on the Indian parliament in December 2002. Hence, one can see a deep polarization in the civil societies of South Asia, particularly of India and Pakistan in dealing with issues, which require immediate resolution.

Third, in the prevailing situation there exists stalemate in both Track-I and Track II initiatives in the context of Indo-Pak relations. After the events of September 11 and the terrorist attack at the Indian parliament on December 13 last year, official dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad is almost non-existent. The “handshake” which took place between the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on the occasion of SAARC summit held at Kathmandu in January 2002 failed to resume the process of dialogue.

At the Track-II level also, not much is going on at the Indo-Pak level because of the suspension of road, rail and air links between the two countries since January this year. The biggest hurdle, which the adherents of Track-II initiatives are facing these days in case of Indo-
Pak relations, is the erosion of people to people contacts. Before the suspension of land, road and air links by India, at least there was some scope of non-official dialogue. But these days, the situation has become so tense that most of the Track-II initiatives, (except some discussion going on through the mode of information technology) which were going on between different groups, and organizations of India and Pakistan have either been abandoned or are almost non-existent. It means since 1990 when the process of non-official dialogue between India and Pakistan began under the Track-II initiatives, it is for the first time when one can see no major activity either at the Track-I or Track-II level. Therefore, the biggest challenge faced by the civil society in South Asia today is the deterioration of Indo-Pakistan relations since September 11 last year. As far as the role of civil society in Indo-Bangladesh, Indo-Sri Lanka and Indo-Nepal relations is concerned, much of the improvement in ties between India and its other South Asian neighbours has more to do with the success of Track-I talks.

Despite pending issues, Indo-Bangladesh relations are not hostile and the two countries are progressing well in bilateral relations. The Farakka Barrage Treaty of 1996 between India and Bangladesh is an evidence of success of Track-I initiative. In Bangladesh-Pakistan relations, civil society of the two countries, in view of historical cleavages and some unresolved issues, can play a significant role in improving ties at the non-governmental level but much depends upon more people to people interaction between the two countries and the expansion of trade, cultural and educational ties at the governmental and non-governmental level.
Fourth, civil society’s role in linking Track-I and II initiatives is affected because of sharp division within the fold of civil society in South Asia today. The traditional concept of civil society that it is composed of liberal, progressive and tolerant segments of society is being increasingly questioned. Parallel to the traditional concept of civil society, another segment is emerging which is highly militant, radical and intolerant in its approach and objectives. They have their own political parties, student groups, press and business interests. With the rise of religious nationalism, communalism, ethnic schism and sectarian cleavages, the outcome is the emergence of groups within the societies of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka who advocate the use of force and violence against their opponents. Such groups are becoming highly organized with a viable network of information, resources and training and in some cases they also enjoy the patronage of powerful state actors. Therefore, the reality is, civil society is now divided into moderate and hard line elements. The former is advocating official and non-official dialogue for the resolution of various conflicts at the inter and intra-state level, whereas, the latter is against the process of dialogue. In present circumstances prevailing in Indo-Pak relations the extremist groups of civil society have an upper hand because through their links with a powerful section of establishment, they have successfully managed to thwart the negotiation process and escalate tension between the two countries. On the contrary, if one sees the case of Sri Lanka, the opposite has happened because the hard line elements of society which always opposed reconciliation and accommodation between the Tamils and Sinhalese have given way to the resumption of meaningful talks between the Liberation Tamil Tigers Ealam (LTTE)
and the Sri Lankan Government leading to the enforcement of cease
fire and the possibility of a permanent agreement between the two
warring parties. It means, not only external mediation but also the
civil society groups of Sri Lanka succeeded in resuming meaningful
peace talks between the government and the LTTE.

With the division and polarization within civil societies of India
and Pakistan into moderates and hard liners, the future of Track-I
and II initiatives seem to be uncertain. The most dangerous thing,
which is noticeable in the recent phase of Indo-Pak confrontation, is
the hard line position taken by regimes in power of the two countries.
Till the Agra summit, there was a hope and optimism in the minds of
people that through accommodation and the policy of give and take,
something can be done to put India and Pakistan back on the track of
negotiations. But after September 11 and subsequent events, the hard
line element of civil society of India and Pakistan has assumed an
upper hand resulting into a near rupture of people to people contacts
and official dialogue. If there was "handshake" between the Pakistan
President and the Indian Prime Minister at the SAARC summit held
in Kathmandu under the initiative taken by the Pakistan President,
there was no "handshake" at the Almaty conference held in June this
year. The two leaders also failed to talk on the occasion of the annual
session of the UN General Assembly held in September 2002. It
means, for the variety of reasons given by India and Pakistan, there
is no immediate scope of the resumption of official dialogue.
Whereas, Track-II initiatives in India or in Pakistan are almost non-
existent because of the hostile environment, which has been created
against each other since the events of September 11 and the
suspension of direct travel between the two countries.
On this account, one can argue that the nature of linkage of Track-I and II initiatives in the context of civil society is very fragile. One should not blame different groups representing the civil society of South Asia of their failure to reactivate SAARC and resume the process of negotiations between the two key regional countries i.e. India and Pakistan. This is so because the very shape and structure of civil society of South Asia lacks dynamic leadership, proper coordination and professional approach to influence the policymakers. Another source of fragility of civil society in South Asia is the passive role of a vast section of society in matters of critical importance. Except political activists, both hard line and moderate, journalists, human rights groups, environmental activists and gender based organizations, one does not see the expansion of the base of civil society. Majority of the population of South Asia is simply not mobilized for the purpose of stopping state repression, human rights violations against minorities and massive expenditures on arms build up. As a result, one can find a huge gap in the arena of civil society, which makes state actors confident enough to continue with their neglect to the real issues and maintain the status quo. Unfortunately, despite revolution in the field of information technology, not much has been done to bridge the gap, which exists in the civil society of South Asia. On this account, when the very nature and shape of civil society is polarized and fragile, it cannot play a viable role in Track-I and Track-II initiatives. Its past role was to some extent viable but with the fragmentation of civil society into moderates and hard liners and the alienation of majority of people of South Asia from the real issues, one can see deadlock at the Track-I and II dialogue between India and Pakistan.
4. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Coming to the problems and challenges faced by the civil society in linking and promoting Track-I and II initiatives in South Asia, the basic issue is the powerlessness of people, particularly the suppressed sections like women and minorities to challenge policies which are unjust and based on exploitation. Three important problems could be identified for civil society in linking Track-I and Track-II initiatives. First, despite its importance, civil society has not been taught as a separate field of study in educational institutions. The subject is covered partly in political science but not as a specialized topic. When there exists lack of awareness among people about the role by which civil society can bring qualitative socio-economic changes and pursue official and non-official dialogue for the resolution of various conflicts it becomes difficult for the non-governmental actors to lead the society on resolving various issues. Second, state structure in South Asia still favors the traditional ways to deal with various security matters. It means, instead of following an approach favoring negotiations for a fair and just settlement of conflicts, state actors want to promote the "enemy image" in order to divert the attention of people from hard pressing economic, political and social problems and thus keep the status quo. This is very much true in case of India and Pakistan where successive governments since 1947 have formulated policies, which could maintain the level of animosity and ill will by all means. Because of its own weaknesses, civil society in South Asia has been unable to change the mindset of those state actors who follow a rigid and parochial approach on various unresolved issues.
Third, media, which is an important segment of civil society, has also not played a significant role in promoting official and non-official dialogue and pressing New Delhi and Islamabad to de-escalate tension along their borders by holding immediate and meaningful talks. In print and electronic media, there exists clear division between the moderates and hard liners. If the information from print media, particularly from the vernacular press about the Kashmir dispute, communal, sectarian and ethnic tensions in different South Asian countries is subjective and devoid of basic truth, hawkish policy-makers are encouraged to keep the channels of negotiations closed. Unfortunately, when the civil society in South Asia itself is divided into extremist and moderate groups, their cleavages are also reported in the media, both print and electronic thus creating lot of problems and embarrassment for those civil society groups who support the holding official and non-official dialogue for the management and resolution of conflicts in the region.

Based on the above discussion, the biggest challenge for the civil society of South Asia is to create consensus within its fold in pursuing India and Pakistan to resume the process of negotiations so as to dilute prevailing tension in the region. This would require restructuring of civil society and ensuring more and more participation of those groups who are outside its ambit so that adequate pressure is exerted on state actors of India and Pakistan to see reason and resume talks. If civil society succeeds in fulfilling this gigantic task, it can become a model for pursuing productive official and non-official dialogue to manage and resolve various inter and intra-state conflicts in South Asia. But what should be the
methodology to achieve this task? Is the civil society of South Asia capable enough to influence the policy-makers and if yes then how?

The foremost requirement to put pressure on the governments of India and Pakistan to resume talks is to seek proper coordination among various civil society groups of South Asia. If the militant elements of civil society can promote fanaticism and intolerance, it does not mean the saner elements should surrender or keep a low profile. Continuous Indo-Pak standoff is not in the interest of South Asian peace and security and the civil society of this region has a larger stake in preventing showdown between the two major regional countries. With more media campaign, peace marches, seminars and discussions at the grassroots level, the saner element of civil society in South Asia can certainly force New Delhi and Islamabad to follow the path of negotiations. Moreover, there is a need to re-link the civil society of India and Pakistan despite travel restrictions. This can be done through the channels of information technology and an aggressive media campaign for the de-escalation of tension. It is unfortunate that around 1.4 billion people of South Asia are cutoff from each other because of the Kashmir dispute.

5. LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The role of civil society in linking Track-I and II initiatives in other parts of the world is uneven. In a situation where the society is backward and the state structure is authoritarian in nature, it becomes difficult for different civil society groups to mobilize support for official and non-official dialogue. This is true in most of the Third World countries where the concept of Track-I and Track II initiatives
for conflict resolution and peace is in its formative phase and much is required to promote this field in the days to come.

In Europe, North America and other parts of the developed world, civil society has evolved as a result of a process since the industrial revolution. Issues like the U.S.-Soviet cold war, nuclear arms race at the superpower level, civil war in former Yugoslavia, Kosovo and the Irish problem involved serious negotiations at the official and non-official level. In most cases, these negotiations were the outcome of pressure exerted from the civil society of Europe, particularly by the peace and human rights activists, political groups, teachers, women groups, environmentalists, students and other segments of society. Examples outside the developed world in which civil society played a role in promoting Track-I and II initiatives could be found in the Middle East, South Africa and South East Asian countries. While, the Middle East peace process is in shambles because of the events taking place after September 2000, the PLO-Israeli accord of September 1993 was the result of the role played by those groups in Israel and also in Palestine who wanted to terminate the state of war, grant mutual recognition to each other and unleash the process of normalization. The shattering of the PLO-Israel peace process in the aftermath of Intifadah II and colossal use of force against the Palestinians by Israel since September 28, 2000 is also the failure of the civil society of Israel, Palestine and the front-line Arab states to restrain hard line elements in their fold. The formation of black majority government in South Africa was the outcome of a long civil rights movement resulting into the holding of negotiations between the white minority government and the African National Congress (ANC). As far as South East Asia is concerned, the
launching of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and subsequent efforts for promoting peace and cooperation among the members of ASEAN was the outcome of external factors and civil society groups who pushed their governments to follow the road of cooperation instead of confrontation.

South Asia can learn three major lessons from the role of civil society in linking and promoting Track-I and II initiatives in different parts of the world. First, the emancipation of suppressed sections of society, particularly women and minorities is imperative for raising voice against sustained conflict between or among states. In the Western world, political consciousness of people enabled the civil society to compel policy makers not to put their lives at stake by pursuing the policy of expediency. The Helsinki accords of August 1, 1975 can be called as the biggest achievement of civil society of Europe because it created conditions for terminating cold war and reducing the risk of a nuclear confrontation. But, it does not mean that civil society in the West has always succeeded in compelling their governments to seek peaceful resolution of conflicts. The 1991 Gulf war, the US-led war against Afghanistan in 2001, Israeli use of force against Palestinians and the recent Anglo-American drive to oust the Iraqi President Saddam Hussain from power prove the failure of Western civil society to curb unjust and unfair policies of their governments.

Civil society in South Asia, which is in formative phase, can thus strive for building better institutions in order to effectively play a role for promoting dialogue at Track-I and II levels. Second, a successful civil society requires that the gap between ruling and vernacular elite should be minimum. In South Asia, the ruling elite is
all-powerful, while the vernacular elite finds it difficult to make its voice heard at the policy-making level. Vernacular elite lacks ability to play a meaningful role in civil society because of an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political culture. Even in India, which is theoretically the world’s largest democracy, the level of fanaticism and intolerance is on the rise and the state structure still lacks decentralization. Pakistan has mainly been under the military or semi-military rule, which has denied civil society to play an important role. In Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, the gap between the ruling elite and the civil society is significant thus depriving the latter to raise its voice on matters of critical importance. Third, for a successful role of civil society in national and international issues, it is essential that the gap between state and society is minimum. Unfortunately, in South Asia, in most cases, state policies are beyond any accountability and the concerns expressed by various civil society groups are simply ignored. This is not the case in most of the developed states where civil society is able to influence the policy-making process and their voice is heard by the centers of power.

6. PROSPECTS

Prospects for a meaningful role of civil society in linking and promoting Track-I and II initiatives in South Asia are mixed because as discussed earlier the region is exposed to serious polarization at various levels. But, it doesn’t mean that civil society will continue to remain weak and ineffective in the days to come. Already, some cogent initiative has been taken by various civil society groups in India and Pakistan to reduce tension and resume the process of dialogue. In early June this year when New Delhi and Islamabad
were on the brink of war following the killings of Indian military personnel in Jammu, several Indians and Pakistanis representing different segments of intelligentsia appealed for calm and sanity. Although, the appeal made by civil society groups only had a moral impact on the crisis ridden Indo-Pak ties, it showed the concern on the part of people of the two countries against the alarming situation.

Short-term prospects of civil society of South Asia for playing a viable role in promoting Track-I and II initiatives are limited because of very inadequate interaction between India and Pakistan. Since the rupture of road, rail and direct air links between India and Pakistan, it has been very difficult for those involved in Track-II and III initiatives to continue with the process of dialogue. Earlier there was a time when the Indo-Pakistan Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy used to send a delegation of more than one hundred people to each other’s country for different programs aimed at building confidence at grassroots level. Other initiatives involving the younger generation, women activists, environmentalists, journalists and so forth were also in progress. But after January 1 this year, there has been almost a total suspension of such activities. Therefore, as long as there is no change of policy in New Delhi and Islamabad about the resumption of dialogue there exists a remote possibility of civil society playing any meaningful role in pushing the process of dialogue at the official and non-official level. It shows a meager clout of civil society in the realm of security and strategy at the policy-making level. However, unlike the Indo-

17 Several chapters of that peace forum were established in India and Pakistan by those who participated in such a process. The most significant part of forum’s initiative was the indigenous funding instead of resources mobilized from external sources.
Pak situation, things are better at the Indo-Sri Lankan, Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Nepal Track-I and II dialogue. After the visit of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to Dhaka, there has been an improvement in relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan but the dialogue at the non-governmental level, particularly those belonging to different sections of civil society of the two countries is also essential. This would require more people to people interaction, including trade and travel.

As far as long-term prospects are concerned, there is some hope because of two reasons. First, it is expected that the polarization and chaos, which exists in civil society today, will be over and one can expect some stability and dynamism in its fold. Since the extremist and fanatic elements, who have tried to hijack the civil society, cannot influence the majority of people for too long, it is possible that saner groups who do not propagate hate but advocate peace and justice will eventually succeed in their objective. In that case, civil society will be in a position to put more pressure on the policymakers of South Asia to abandon the politics of confrontation and follow the road of negotiations and cooperation. Second, the present state of confrontation between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir dispute which has badly effected the role of civil society will not continue for long because both sides have their breaking points. With the relaxation of tension in their relations, it will be possible for the civil society of India and Pakistan to resume their activities, particularly at the Track-I and II activities.
Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Nurakin, Margaret Spranger, Kate Millet and Germarine Greer are all universally acknowledged as pioneers in the world of Women’s Liberation. People in every nook and corner of the globe remember them with deep respect whenever they discuss women and their emancipation from the clutches of male chauvinism. But very few of us are really aware of the fact that the first person to advocate effectively the cause of the fair sex in history was not a lady — he was a man, born not in Europe or America, not in the Modern Age, but in Arabia, in the sixth century A.D. The first person to effectively champion and establish the rights and privileges of women — the most neglected and the most disparaged section of human race — was indeed the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In every country, women play a significant role in society. Most of us admit today that woman is the builder and moulder of a nation’s destiny. Though delicate and tender and soft as lily, she has a heart far stronger and bolder than that of a man. She is the supreme inspiration for man’s onward march — an embodiment of love, pity and compassion. She inspires not only ordinary men, men who are shaky and feeble-hearted but even the salt of the earth. Giants with unshakable conviction and dedication, titans with supreme qualities of head and heart also need
inspiration and assistance from the fair sex in the crucial hours. History testifies that even the greatest of creations, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) immediately after the first Revelation, received and enjoyed inspiration and consolation not from any man but from his wife Khadijatu’l- Kubra (RA), an exemplar among the womanhood of Islam. That is why even a great general and renowned statesman like Napoleon Bonaparte claims unequivocally: “Give me good mothers and I will give you a good France.”

But the situation was not always that favourable for women in the annals of civilization. National pride and religious bigotry gave rise to various divergent theories regarding the social exaltation of women among the cultured classes in history. It is true that the Greek philosopher Plato was a strong defender of female equality and even admitted a few women to his academy. In Republic, he argued that “since they are competent and of a like nature” as men, women should share equally in all rights and public affairs. But Aristotle disagreed with his mentor on this point and believed that women were inferior and should be ruled by men. The overall situation in ancient Greece was indeed very detrimental to the interest of the fair sex and women were not permitted to work outside the home. In early Roman times as well, a woman was under the sole domination of her husband. She never became a legal member of her husband’s family. She was, however, able to acquire her own property rights to some extent and had a greater choice in whom she married. But even these trifling rights enjoyed by Roman women were later denounced by early Christian leaders who saw it as a sign of moral decay.” As Christianity became dominant throughout Europe,” writes Bernhart J. Stern in the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, “women were deprived of that
freedom which they attained in Rome.” In the view of the Church, women were basically dependent and subordinate. “The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband” (Corinthians, II). Even divorces were forbidden – “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery” (Mark, 10: 11-12). St. Tertullian, the renowned Christian theologian, polemicist and moralist, represented the general feeling when he described women as “the Devil’s Gateway, the unsealer of the Forbidden Tree, the deserter of the Divine Law, the destroyer of God’s image – man.” St. John Chrysostom (347-407 AD), who is recognized as a saint of high merit, “Interpreted the general view of the Fathers”, says Lackey, “when he pronounced women to be a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic peril, a deadly fascination, a painted ill.” The “Original Sin” was universally accepted as the woman’s creation – “Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, was in the transgression” (Timothy 2: 13-14).

The position of the women in ancient India was equally terrifying and miserable. A woman was debarred from studying the Vedas or participating in the oblations to the manes, or in the sacrifices to the deities. The wife’s religion was to serve her lord; her eternal happiness depended on the strict performance of that duty. And the faithful wife, who sacrificed herself on the funeral pyre of her dead spouse, found a niche in the hearts of all the votaries of Hinduism as one of the best and noblest of her sex; and often became herself the object of worship. The great Code of Manu, of which Hinduism is justly proud, and which became in later centuries the model for the legal doctrines of other Eastern races declared
unhesitatingly: "Women have impure appetite; they show weak flexibility and bad conduct. Day and night they be kept in subjection". Prof. Indra echoes the sentiment prevalent in those days when he writes in Status of Women in Mahabharat, "There is no creature more sinful than woman. Woman is burning fire. She is the sharp edge of the razor. She is verily all these in a body ... men should not love them." (pp.16-17). According to Hindu Law, a woman had full and unrestricted ownership only over Stridhan, but she had no right or share in the property of the family. Even divorce was not permitted, however degraded, characterless or tyrant the husband might be. Hindu marriage was indissoluble. It was a union of two souls for good, an eternally unbreakable bond. "As the shadow to the substance, to her lord is the faithful wife. She follows her lord to death or life."

It was the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) who for the first time in history had the sagacity, courage and conviction to declare that the woman is not "a scorpion ever ready to sting," not "an organ of the Devil," but she is the Mohsena – an impregnable fortress against the conspiracies of Satan. He was the first to acknowledge that "the wife is the empress of the husband’s house", the first to declare that a man or woman’s first duty is not to help his/her father but he or she should attend to her mother’s need first. That is not all. It was the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who was the first to assert that he is the best who is considered best in the eyes of his wife (Tirmidhi). He also declared in unambiguous terms that the Heaven lies not at the feet of the father or husband, it lies at the feet of the mother. What is more, the Holy Quran denounces in unequivocal terms the heinous attitude of those who hate or dislike female children: "When news is
brought to one of them, of the birth of a female child, his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! what an evil (choice) they decide on?” (Sura Nahl, 16:58-59). It is true that the Holy Quran states: “Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means.” (Sura Nisaa, 4:34). But it also states: “Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may take away part of them ... would you take it by slander and a manifest wrong?” (Sura Nissa, 4: 19-20). No wonder, centuries before Anne Nurakin or Kate Millet could even dream of Women’s Liberation, the holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh) blessed the womenfolk with rights and status and honour based on the concept of equality, liberty and fraternity.

There must indeed be something most extraordinary, most chivalrous about this “Child of the Desert” that alone among the great teachers of mankind did he confer the first legal status of honour and responsibility upon women making them Sui Juris, ensuring their economic independence and providing them opportunities in every sphere of human activity and in every domain of thought, guaranteeing their rights in the properties of the deceased parents, of the husband and the children “from what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large – a determinate share”. (Sura Nisaa, 4:7) – rights and privileges that could not even be conceived of till the enactment of the Married
Woman's Property Act in England by the middle of the 19th century – rights which are being conceded by the civilized nations of Europe and America in the twenty-first century.

Mention may be made in this connection that in the case of marriage also a Muslim woman enjoys rights and privileges, which have never been granted in any other religion. Marriage in Islam, though considered a sacred relation between the husband and the wife, is not a sacrament, but purely a civil contract. No person can marry a woman without her consent, Liberty is allowed to a woman, who has reached the age of puberty, to marry or refuse to marry a particular man, independent of her guardian, who has no power to dispose of her in marriage without her consent or against her will, while the objection is reserved for the girl, married by her guardian during her infancy, to ratify or dissolve the contract immediately on reaching her adulthood. It is indeed essential to the validity of the marriage in Islam that there would be (1) declaration or offer on the part of the one, (2) acceptance by the other, and (3) before sufficient number of witnesses (in Hanafi Law, two). What is more, it is obligatory on the part of the husband that he should pay or deliver a sum of money or other property as dower to his wife. This settlement of money or property on the wife, without which a marriage is not fully legal, is known as Mahr. It is, therefore, evident that in a Muslim marriage it is the bridegroom who has to pay the Mahr. It is really, unfortunate that Muslim bridegrooms in our society nowadays force the brides or their parents to pay the dowry – an act, which is never permitted in Islam. And many among us are not even aware of the fact that Islam also empowers the wife to effectuate a divorce on
various grounds including cruelty, insanity and impotence of the husband.

The Holy Quran ordains: “Reverence God, through Whom ye demand your mutual rights, and reverence the wombs that bore you: for God ever watches over you.” (Sura Nisaa, Verse 1). It states without the slightest ambiguity that while the decencies of family life should be enforced, women should always be held in honour and their rights recognized, in marriage, property and inheritance. Never does Islam admit or assert that Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, was in transgress. On the contrary, Islam very rightly condemns both Adam and Eve for the unfortunate incident and both had suffered equally for the folly. It simply refuses to brand woman as the “First deserter of Divine Law who destroyed God’s image”. And it is to remove the age-old misconception and superstition that Islam eulogises woman as Mohsena – the fortress against the evil designs of Satan. What is more, the Holy Quran emphatically warns: “Those who slander chaste woman, indiscreet but believing, are cursed in this life and in the hereafter: for them is a grievous penalty.” It also declares: “And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce nor four witnesses (to support their allegation), flog them with eighty stripes, and reject their evidence hereafter; for such men are wicked transgressors.’ (Sura Nur, Verse 4).

The Holy Quran has also totally quashed the age-old belief that women have no soul and are not entitled to enter paradise. It declares in very clear terms: “Never shall I suffer to be lost the work of any one of you, be he male or female: you are members, one of another ... if any do deeds of righteousness, – be they male or female, and
have faith, they will enter paradise, and not the least injustice will be
done to them”. (Sura Al-i-Imran, Verse 195, and Sura Nisa, Verse
124). And that is why, about the Christian Era 620, when people
were still doubtful whether woman had soul or not, whether she was
human or otherwise, we find two women delegates amongst the 75
Yathribites (Medinities) who came to the Holy prophet (pbuh) asking
him to migrate to Yathrib (Medina) where there were better scope for
the Call of Islam (Da’wa). The two women were Nusaiba bint Ka’ab
(Umme Ammara ) of Banu Nasiba and Asama bint Amr (Umme
Mani) of Bani Salma.

With the advent of Islam a woman was no more considered a
mere chattel, she formed an integral part of the estate of her husband
or her father. It is true that Muslim woman do also fight and struggle
for greater rights and better facilities for them, but their ideas and
vision do not tally with those of Germaine Greer when she writes in
The Female Eunuch that “the majority of women drag along from
day to day in an apathetic twilight .... Women have very little idea of
how much men hate them”. On the contrary, the women in Islamic
countries have every reason to continue to find meaning in their
existence through motherhood, an honoured institution as the
presiding deity of every household. And Islam, which as a complete
code of life guides in every sphere of activity and in every domain of
thought, clearly ordains: “Ye are forbidden to inherit women against
their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness. .... On the
contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity.” (Sura
Nisaa, Verse 19). There is, therefore, nothing surprising that in every
sensible Muslim society in the world women are still considered to
be man’s “dearest partners of greatness” testifying so eloquently to
the emphatic declaration in the Holy Quran: “They (women) are your (men’s) garments and you are their garments.” (Sura Al-Baqara, Verse 187).

The Muslim women indeed look at the “Women’s Lib.” so popular in the West today, with a different angle of vision. The Western woman is pining to leave hearth and home to seek equality with man and an independent identity divorced from man. The protagonists of Women’s Lib. vehemently reject the assumption that a woman’s identity is never complete without a man around. But the Muslim woman continues to find meaning in her co-existence with man, an existence with honour and dignity and respect. With Islam as her religion, Al-Quran as her Holy Book, and Hazarat Muhammad (pbuh) as her Apostle and Guide, the Muslim woman still loves to dream and desire, think and work, smile and weep, plan and act in the light of Islam – a religion which even in the opinion of a devout Christian like Rev. Bosworth-Smith, “is the most perfect, the most sudden and the most extraordinary revolution that has ever come over any nation on Earth”. (Mohammed and Mohammedanism, London, 1874, p. 105)

But it is not only in household affairs but also in other spheres as well that Muslim women have a proud and glorious record. Women in Islam have never failed to rise to the occasion in the hours of crises. They have braved many an ordeal, fought many a crisis. The first person to embrace Islam was a lady – the *Sadiq ost* – Hazrat Khadijatu’l-Kubra (RA). The first *Shahid* was a lady – *Bibi Sumaya* (RA). The first person to know of the Holy *Miraj* was a lady – *Bibi Umma Hani* (RA). The custodian of the first compiled copy of the Holy Quran (*Al-Umm* or *Shaifa*) was also a lady – the “Mother of
the Faithful” Bibi Hafsa bint Omar (RA). What is more, Bibi Ayesha Siddiqua (RA), a wife of the holy Prophet (pbuh) and the daughter of Abu Bakar (RA), the first Caliph of Islam, personally commanded her own troops at the famous Battle of the Camel against the legendary Sher-e-Khoda Hazrat Ali bin Abu Talib (RA), the fourth Caliph. Bibi Fatima (RA), the daughter of the holy Prophet (pbuh), often took part in even serious discussions like those related to the succession to the caliphate. Zainab, the grand-daughter of the holy Prophet (pbuh), shielded her youthful nephew from the Ommayads after the butchery at Kerbala. Her indomitable spirit awed equally the ferocious Obaidullah Ibn Ziyad and the pitiless Yezid.

That women were allowed to move freely in society in the early days of Islam is an undisputed fact. Will Durant states in The Age of Faith: “He (Muhammad) improved the position of women. He allowed them to come to the mosque, but believed that their homes are better for them: yet when they came to his services he treated them kindly even if they brought suckling babies; if, says an amiable tradition, he heard a child cry, he would shorten his sermon lest the mother be inconvenienced. He placed woman on the same footing on man in legal processes and in financial independence, she might follow any legitimate profession, keep her earnings, inherit property, and dispose of her belongings at will .... A Tradition quotes the Prophet as saying to women, “It is permitted to you to go out for your needs.” “...We find Muslim women moving about freely and unveiled in his time, and a century thereafter.”

A historic incident during the caliphate of Hazrat Omar bin Khattab (RA) also vividly depicts the high respect commanded by the women in Muslim society. With the expansion of conquests,
wealth had begun to pour into the hands of the Muslims. They had naturally started spending lavishly and were conferring big dowries on their wives.

Omar (RA), who intensely desired the Muslims to stick to their original simple and abstemious ways, spoke to the congregation in the mosque denouncing indulgence in such luxuries of life. It is recorded that an old woman rose from among the audience to challenge the statement of the great caliph. Addressing him openly in the vast assembly by his mere name, she said, "Who are you to deprive us of our due rights which God has conferred on us?" And then she recited the verse from the Holy Quran in support of her claim, "And if you have given to any one of them (the woman you are divorcing) a heap of gold, take nothing from it." (Sura Nisa, Verse 20). The inference drawn from this verse, to the effect that there is no limit to the amount of dowry that can be bestowed by the husband on his wife, was readily accepted by the great caliph without demur. He declared at the same time that the woman of Medina had a better understanding of the Holy Quran than himself. How could a woman so admirably advocate the cause of her sex if women were not allowed to sit in the same assembly with men?

History testifies to the fact that right from the early centuries of Islam women continued to occupy as exalted a position as in modern society. Zubaida, the wife of Harun-ur-Rashid, plays a conspicuous part in the history of the age, and by her virtues, as well as by accomplishments, leaves an honoured name to posterity. Humaida, the wife of Faruk, a Medinite citizen, left for many years the sole guardian of her minor son, educates him to become one of the most distinguished jurist-consults of the day. Sakina, the daughter of
Hussain (RA), was the most brilliant, most accomplished, and most virtuous woman of her time. In the fifth century of the Hegira, the Sheikha Shuda, designated “Fakhrunnisa” or “the glory of women,” lectured publicly at the Cathedral Mosque of Baghdad, to large audiences of literature, rhetoric and poetry. She not only occupies in the annals of Islam a position of equality within the most distinguished Ulema but also occupies a unique and prestigious position in the history of the fair sex. No wonder, Annie Besant has very boldly declared in the Life and Teachings of Muhammad: “In Islam men and women are put perfectly on equal footings. Mussalman women have been far better treated than the Western women by the Law. By the Laws of Islam her property is carefully guarded whereas Christian women do not enjoy such absolute right according to the laws of Christian West. I often think that women are more free in Islam than in Christianity, women are more protected by Islam than by the Faith which preaches monogamy. In Al-Quran, the law about women is more just and liberal.”

The unprecedented and revolutionary improvement effected in the position and status of women by Islam under the inimitable and magnificent guidance of Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) has indeed been acknowledged by all unprejudiced writers, both in the East and in the West. Had the holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh) done nothing more, his claim to be a benefactor of mankind would have certainly been indisputable, Pierre Crabite very rightly declares: “Muhammad, thirteen hundred years ago, assured to the mothers, wives and daughters of Islam rank and dignity not yet generally assured to women by the laws of the West ... Muhammad was probably the greatest Champion of women’s rights the world has ever seen.”