SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPERATIVES OF SOUTH ASIA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE REGION

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South Asia is marked by a significant level of heterogeneity. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region with an uneven distribution of national power hierarchies. There exist also diverse socio-political and religious elements. With an exception of India, no remarkable commonalities exist between any of the two countries in the region. If there is anything in common that influences the lives in South Asia transcending national boundaries, it is religion. Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism are the major religions of the region either of which is overwhelmingly practised in each of the countries in the region. However, this factor too does not affect the Indo-centric nature of the South Asian region in any significant way. It may, thus, be interesting to see how the countries in the region could overcome the diverse socio-political situation in order to achieve meaningful regional cooperation.

The idea of regional cooperation has become a popular concept in South Asia ever since it was mooted in May 1980 by the late President of Bangladesh, General Ziaur Rahman. However, the idea seemed to have a weak basis since the fact that no favourable changes had yet occurred in the socio-political milieu of the region. Although all the countries were not enthusiastic about the proposal in the beginning, the personal initiatives taken by the late President, evoked positive response from the coun-
tries of the region. As soon as the idea was formally endorsed by the first meeting of the South Asian Foreign Secretaries held at Colombo in April 1981, it has become a popular concept at home for respective governments in the region. At the same time, it has also gradually taken shape and matured.\(^1\)

However, the South Asian governments are shy of taking up crucial issues like trade for regional cooperation. This does not mean that there is no scope for regional trade in South Asia. Since long, prospect of regional cooperation, including matters of trade had existed among the countries of the region. During the British rule, for instance, jute and cotton were produced in the areas which now constitute parts of Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively and cotton mills were located in the areas which now are parts of India. But such “instances of interdependence” did not help “in materialising cooperation among the countries”.\(^2\)

Why? One factor might be that the colonial basis of interdependence could hardly be considered as complementing the interests of the newly created state—Pakistan. Moreover, the reasons could obviously be seen as more based on political factors. If there had been a favourable political atmosphere, mutuality of interest between the two countries could have been evolved. However, as a consequence of antagonistic interactions between these two countries, the situation in South Asia as a whole has not yet undergone any significant socio-political changes. Notwithstanding the present regional malaise it appears that the implications of the socio-political set up of the region seem to be greater for regional peace and cooperation.

While considering the socio-political imperatives of South Asia this paper aims to analyse such socio-political factors which have caused stresses and strains in the domestic milieu of the countries in the region with likely spill-over effects across the respective national boundaries. In this context, factors like the nature of the political regimes, emerging socio-political forces, some of the basic problems commonly confronted by the countries in the region and the like will be taken into account.
While analysing these factors attempts will be made to see how these factors have contributed to the cohesion and conflict in the region. Furthermore, attempts will also be made to see the implications of these factors for regional peace and stability. It may also be mentioned here that with the exception of relevant references, Bhutan and the Maldives have been excluded from this study.

**Socio-Political Structures and Characteristics**

While talking about the socio-political structures and characteristics of South Asia, all the important phases of South Asian historical cross-currents—pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial need to be taken under consideration. Throughout these phases, the region far from being a melting-pot, had preserved all the major socio-political and cultural traits that intruded into the region. Pre-Aryan, Aryan, Hindu, Buddhist and Mughal traditions in socio-cultural and political lives are not only traceable—despite politico-administrative and military penetration by various regimes including colonial ones for centuries—but also influenced their respective patterns of behaviour till the post-colonial era. Thus, many of the present day complex problems of South Asian politics are deeply rooted in history, and the South Asian societies throughout history have remained fragmented units.

The very basis of the socio-cultural pattern of life never suffered in any significant way under the mighty empires of the past, including the one under British colonialism. But with the dawning of independence in the British colonies and change of political system within Nepal a decisive departure in the hitherto existent socio-cultural set up expected and efforts were also made accordingly in this regard. The post-colonial socio-political movements have indeed been marked by both changes and continuities. It has changed in the sense that new forces such as regional, ethnic, and even military, bureaucratic groups, etc. are making their appearances in the socio-political milieu of the region. The masses of people, who were previously steeped in
backwardness or overwhelmed by the sentiment of national movements, have also come into sharp contrast with the dominant ruling class. Moreover, the rural population, due to their increasing exposure to modernisation have increasingly become discontent and are making efforts to articulate their growing demands. The changes, thus, are distinctly marked by the growing pressures upon the post-colonial socio-political structures and processes.

The continuity is perceived in the sense that the fundamental nature of the problems that these societies face today do not differ significantly from the past. This is also evident from what Myron Weiner observed two and half decade ago. As he stated at that time, the South Asian states were facing two basic challenges: to bring together "diverse loyalties" into a single nation-state, and to absorb "new social classes" into the political processes. These two still remain as the most challenging problems.

One of the crucial chains of continuity in the South Asian politics can be seen by the fact that no qualitative changes have taken place in the basic elements of the composition of governing elites. The same class of people, representing the higher social strata have continued to be at the centre of power. No mass resurgence with an effect to change the ruling socio-political hierarchy has taken place and, the elite-mass gap has increased at an alarming rate without prospects for a reasonable bridge in the near future.

The slow-change or no-change social scenario of South Asia attributes to the way the new leadership in the post-colonial South Asian states looked at the problems. Besides, this might also be attributed to the nature of political movements that spread in this part of the world. To start with their newly acquired national status, the new leadership in South Asia did not intend to change the basic fabric of the old societies. This was but natural for the post-colonial South Asian states because the immediate target of the nationalist movements was the colonial regime, rather
than the socio-economic structures and processes. That is why, some critical observers stated that both India and Pakistan "inherited a colonial system" which had worked previously as "an instrument to resist change." The bureaucracy and military, the major creation of British colonialism, instead of contributing to the socio-economic transformation of the society, have developed vested interests in perpetuating their own interests or that of the ruling elites in general.

The post-colonial ruling elites in South Asia, thus, tried to maintain national unity through a policy of balance, without seeking any major shift in the existing social composition. However, in course of time, the old social set up began to experience pressures. Such pressures could be seen at first when a particular community because of its numerical majority or even a minority, enjoyed an overwhelmingly dominant position in the country's bureaucratic, military and economic structures and tended to perpetuate its interests ignoring the hard-won democratic norms and values. Thus the peripheral groups emerged as a consequence, and adopted a more confrontationist posture when the interests of the ruling elites had begun to be identified with those of the nation. Secondly, maintaining the existing social set up or changing it was also considered unjust and detrimental to their interests by the tribal communities and assertive ethnic minorities. In case of those enjoying privileges or influences, they were reluctant to bring about any change because that would demand submission of the privileges and influence on their part. But in reverse condition, the peripheral groups pressed for changes favourable to them such as special legal protection, reservation, etc. Besides, these groups felt that the dominant elites had rendered their condition to be worse and they needed to fight it out on a group basis. The present political mechanism too has shown its inefficacy to resolve the emerging crises.

While looking at the current socio-political scenario of the South Asian region there seems no encouraging prospects for
SARC. Politically speaking, the South Asian states vary substantively. At present, the region has three distinct political patterns: democracy, military dictatorship, and monarchy. India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka have democracy. Bangladesh and Pakistan are governed under military dictatorship and Bhutan and Nepal have monarchical systems. Even in these patterns there exists no uniformity. However, there is significantly one common element i.e., all the regimes in the South Asian region are non-communist. But this commonality has not inspired them to come closer. Since communism hardly constitutes a threat to any of them. It was, thus, in the democratisation of South Asian politics that there seemed to be enough prospects for providing amicable solutions to the domestic constraints regarding better regional understanding and cooperation.

While looking at the socio-political characteristics of the South Asian region, it appears that there were at least certain cohesive factors for the evolution of regional understanding and cooperation. India could have contributed greater understanding at the regional level, since it shared a greater degree of commonality with each of the South Asian countries. More so because of its geographical contiguity with the countries of the region, common socio-cultural traditions and customs, economic factors especially its technological progress and manpower resources, etc. Besides, to begin with, a considerable degree of commonality had existed among the political leadership, especially in their perceptions, value premises and preferences, etc. But the urgency of sociopolitical and geographical characteristics failed to find an adequate consideration in the post-colonial behaviour of the South Asian countries.

However, the same factors contributed more to intra-regional conflicts and tensions. The trauma and issues of partition not only jeopardised the commonality between India and Pakistan, but also led the two countries into collision courses. Nepal and Sri Lanka feared the overshadowing effect of India in the growth of their individual national personalities. The socio-
cultural and religious commonalities existing between India and Nepal and India and Sri Lanka was not enough for both these countries in developing tension-free relationships. The fear of India, particularly of a socio-political nature, tended to make them identity conscious.  

Likewise, the commonality of political orientation and the value premises of the political leadership that eventually ascended to the position of political authority also invited adverse reactions in the region. For instance, the Nepali Congress leadership which had shared many things with the Indian political circle, was attacked as pro-Indian. The situation became worse when Nepal and Pakistan switched over to more authoritarian patterns of regime. The Indian concern for the 'set back' of democracy in these countries, including Bangladesh in 1975, invited more reactions and helped the new regimes to inculcate the fear of India in the public mind.

**Domestic Threat to Peace and Stability**

The domestic situation in each of the South Asian countries, today, could hardly be held conducive for peace and stability in the region. Each of the countries in the region is plagued by numerous problems. Many of them have hardly been able to fulfil such primary responsibility as maintaining law and order. The tendency to blame others for many rising problems has increased. In such an environment there is no need for an external threat to peace and stability. Like many third world countries, the South Asian countries also suffer from the lack of viable institutional order and stability. As a consequence, no country in the region is free from domestic threat to peace and stability. In view of the socio-political characteristics and experience of the South Asian nations, it seems that such threats could possibly have intra-regional linkages and impacts. In order to deal with this aspect it may be convenient to review some of the problems commonly faced by the countries in the region. They may be summed up as follows.
The tide of nationalism in the Third World not only successfully reversed the colonial political course, which till World War II was a dominant feature of the global system but also affected the traditional regimes outside the colonial fold to change. The liquidation of the colonial order had thus unleashed new forces at the national as well as international levels. However, soon after, the nationalist force remained far from being cohesive and coherent. After independence the new elites who have assumed governmental responsibility had to face numerous challenges and were to be confronted simultaneously. Foremost among them was to give a complete national expression to the newly independent states with legitimately exercised political authority on the basis of popular participation. Although these countries had achieved political independence, they had yet to do a lot to become nation. The models most of them, including the South Asian ones, picked up were from the West.

The fundamental challenge to the task of nation-building in South Asia, as in most Third World countries, came through the split of nationalist parties, which had evolved a broad national basis during the fight against colonialism. The Congress in India, the Muslim League in Pakistan, the Awami League in Bangladesh, all had ceased to be national representatives soon after the independence. The reasons are obvious. Previously, they had become a dominant national force, not because they had rationalised such a need in order to consolidate the nation, but because of the urgent need to fight against foreign domination. But after independence because of the high degree of inequality among the various sections of the population, various units, including those among the nationalist movement, had become desperate and suspicious of their position in the newly acquired state-hood. For instance, in India and Pakistan, many ethnic and tribal groups found themselves least effective and ill-equipped for competitive bargaining so as to preserve their respective interests. So long as their interests did not clash with the domi-
nant ruling party they tried to articulate their interests through the ruling party but when there was a clash, these groups became more confrontationist and posed threat to national unity. This was particularly so in the case when such communities were more backward and illiterate as was evident from problems in India’s north-east provinces. Another pattern of problems could be witnessed in Sri Lanka in the majority Sinhalese approach to the minority Tamil after independence. The third pattern may be seen in Pakistan. A section of Muslims “salariat class”, that was in the forefront of the Pakistan movement, had maintained its dominance in overall spheres of the state activities. Many regional and ethnic forces in Pakistan were compelled to fight hard in order to preserve their interests vis-a-vis this class. The cost involved in such a conflict was the greatest—the disintegration of the country itself. The fourth pattern of split could be seen in the problems of accommodating the tribal group norms in the national system. This is evident from the cases of conflict in the north-east region of India and Baluchistan and NWFP of Pakistan.

South Asian states could have overcome many problems related to nation-building, had they been able to maintain the national parties in the post-colonial period. India, one of the most diverse nations in the world relatively did better when the congress system maintained its basic elements for a longer period after independence. This was not a small gain for India in its nation-building efforts. Unlike in India, the other South Asian countries could neither sustain their nationalist movements, which spearheaded political independence, nor could they live up to the democratic political process. Therefore, what is missing significantly in these countries’ endeavour for nation-building is a genuine democratic process. As it is observed, “South Asian nations who have worked with the democratic political system, are in the process of nation-building. Those who have abandoned this process without giving a fair trial are still suffering from the problems of nation-building”.8

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The problem of nation-building in South Asia, thus, stand out distinctly. This is *sine qua non* to stability, peace and cooperation in the region. The failure to evolve harmonious nation-states in the region will certainly vitiate the prospects for mutual cooperation and invite a lot of other problems. For this problem, each country in South Asia finds linkages with India and India too has considerable grounds for placing the blame on her neighbours in her bid to evolve a sound nation. It has been succinctly observed by a scholar that "the failure of national development and national integration often leads to domestic crisis and instability sometimes spilling over national boundaries and affecting peace and stability in the region." Therefore, the success in this field will, no doubt, constitute an asset for stability and cooperation in the region.

*b. Dissident Socio-economic and Political Tide*

Another major hurdle for smooth democratic functioning and nation-building in the countries of South Asia seems to be diverse socio-economic and political trends. South Asian states today are characterised by "extreme poverty, social and economic disparities and low production base with a possibility of leading to political unrest and upheaval." The failure of these countries to make a breakthrough in economic production and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities has been manifested in an ever-increasing socio-political unrest. Besides, there exists a high degree of inequality among peoples of the region. The gap between urban and the rural population is widening at an alarming rate. Even in the urban area wide scale diversity exists and the rich families are emerging richer day by day by taking advantage of their closer links with the ruling elites. Rampant corruption has contributed to the emergence of a new class of well-off people who have not only rendered the administrative system to be ineffective but have also been enjoying greater leverage in manipulating the political process to their advantage. Minor reforms in the existing socio-political set up are bound to be foiled by this group. As a result, these societies are facing dissension, decay and disintegration.
Today, all the political regimes in South Asia derive their support basically from the higher socio-economic strata. Even the established democratic regimes like that of India and Sri Lanka fear facing the people. Behind major politico-economic innovations, the shared interest of the higher echelons of the country has been a motivating factor. In any of the South Asian countries today, there is a vicious circle comprised of such groups like politicians, high-ranking bureaucrats (including military ones), business groups and big landed interests. The continuity of political regimes depends on how effectively they maintain accommodation and balance of these groups. Although the degree may vary, all the political regimes have been a part of this vicious circle. This has been so due to the fast erosion of public accountability in the political process. Nothing other than the complete restoration of public authority and full-fledged democratisation of the political system would break this vicious circle and provide ground for equitable economic growth in the region.

The result of such a socio-political and economic situation in the region has been greater for the domestic instability and conflicts. Dissident socio-economic and political tides have been progressively ascending over the countries' overall situation in the South Asian region. There exists no consensus among the socio-political forces in regard to major national problems. Spirit of mutual accommodation and coexistence among the political forces have disappeared. Even in a democracy like India, the ruling party held the opinion that opposition political parties constituted a "threat to nation". The role of political parties had been deliberately set aside. Whereas the political parties, even in countries where they have not been allowed to take part in the political process, have contributed in bringing together the diverse sections of the people through their principles and programmes.

The divisive tide in South Asia is, thus, caused by the failure of the political systems to accommodate emerging political forces. For instance, the interim constitutional set up in both India and Pakistan was conceived in a way to facilitate federal autonomy
to the constituent provinces. The emergence of regional political parties, both in India and Pakistan could have been considered as concomitant to the spirit of the constitution and also to the geographical reality of both the countries. But the ruling elites tended to consider the emergence of regional parties as not a welcoming one and in certain cases they were regarded as detrimental to national unity.

c. Erosion of System's Effectiveness and Efficacy

Another problem in the South Asian countries may be described as caused by the erosion of political system's effectiveness and efficacy to cope with emerging problems. This problem has two dimensions: one is related to the political system itself and the other to its capabilities. While the former is associated with the non-democratic regimes where establishing a consensual and democratic political system is the foremost task, the latter is concerned with the strengthening of its capabilities.

Even in the democratic countries of South Asia, the political systems have been considered weak in dealing with the emerging problems. Parliamentary system has been replaced by the presidential system in Sri Lanka. There has been a debate in India since last few years to shift over to the presidential system. Even the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was stated to have said that "old systems are not able to cope with the problems" emerging in India's changed socio-political scenario. The critics of the Congress (I) rule, too held that India needs to shift over to the presidential system in order to effectively deal with India's numerous and complex problems.

Related to this aspect are problems such as law and order, threat to national integrity, forces of destabilisation, and the like. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka seem to have suffered most from such problems whereas Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal do not have disintegrationist threat. Similarly, with few exceptions in Bangladesh, these countries do not have
any insurgency problem. Likewise, law and order is not a serious problem in Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. However, many of the problems faced by the countries in the region account for the lack of mediatory institutions, lack of consensus, vested interests of the ruling elites to perpetuate their power and influence, and the like.

For instance, India witnessed a general decline of political parties since the end of the 1960s. Firstly, the “Congress System” which had remained a widely represented popular base of political authority and also of the nation was destroyed and personalised. Secondly, no opposition parties could rise to the national level and provide a national alternative. However, the Congress party continued to be dominant in India’s national political scene. The country, thus, on the one hand was deprived of “mediatory political institutions” and on the other hand, no alternative political parties ensuring the governmental stability were available in the largest democracy of the world. The implications of such a situation were wide-ranging. As Rajani Kothari observed, “a condition of alienation from a known and trusted path” had emerged and the people in the various parts of the country had been forced to think of “working outside the existing framework and for creating parallel structures—apni sarkars...”

In a democratic polity ‘conciliation’ and ‘moderation’ are considered best methods. Grave crises could not be resolved by an ordinary process of law, particularly when there is also a threat to national unity. ‘conciliation’, ‘mediation’ and ‘moderation’ were celebrated methods of the earlier phase of Indian democracy. As a consequence, crises challenging the very unity of the nation arising out of provincial issues, were amicably resolved. The use of force in the past had not been a convenient method in tackling the national issues.

But with the passing of the 1960s methods resolving the crises in India increasingly became an authoritarian one and use of force dominated the Indian political scene. For the first time in 1975 India had a state of emergency declared purely on internal
grounds. This, however, caused the ruling party's defeat later on when the nation went into the polls in 1977, but the authoritarian tendency continued in the Indian politics. Today, as mentioned above, in any crisis situation, the normal political machinery seems to have ceased to function and the para-military forces have to be called in. This, on the one hand, has led the government to expand paramilitary troops on a rapid scale with all likelihood of adverse effects on the efficiency of the police force, and on the other hand, has contributed to the loosening of public confidence in the political system. As K.C. Khanna observed that the expansion of para-military forces "does not quite explain why the ability of the state to combat sectarian militancy by political mediation is getting progressively weakened and it is having to rely more and more on brute force to contain it."17

Likewise, other countries in the region too seem to have suffered due to the lack of mediatory institutions, consensus, etc. Moreover, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan are facing an additional problem i.e. legitimacy to the political regimes. In their bid to overcome this and many other problems, they have been experimenting and expediating one type of regime after another. However, Nepal, where monarchy has been providing stability and continuity to the regime, may be an exception. Likewise, the problem of legitimacy in the Kingdom may not be regarded as a serious problem because the monarchy has traditionally been held as a legitimate sanction behind any political regime. Even then the King had sought popular verdict on the Kingdom's political system through a national referendum held in May 1980. But consensus has yet to emerge in the political process subsequently established after the third amendment to the constitution. The issue of popular participation has remained alive as the major political forces opposed to the Panchayat system, desisted from contesting the general elections subsequently held after the constitutional changes.

The situation in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the problem of restoration of democracy seems to be more complex, differ
significantly from that of Nepal. Unlike Nepal, in both these countries the military has been highly politicised and there has been frequent military takeover. The democratic forces had been weakened shortly after these countries came into existence when the political cleavages sharpened widely. The political forces which were instrumental in making these countries a reality could not emerge as mediatory political institutions. As a consequence, military and bureaucracy decisively became dominant forces in these countries.

Intervening Role of Extra-Regional Powers

Like in many other parts of the world the South Asian region too has been a place for involvement by major powers outside the region. Particularly, three such powers, the United States, the Soviet Union and China seem to have attached importance to the region in consolidating their influence. Internal political developments and the behaviour of the South Asian nations with each other had never been far from the influence of such extra regional powers. The intervening role of extra-regional powers in South Asia may be summed up as follows:

i. Politico-ideological: South Asia, as most parts in the world, has been considerably influenced by extra-regional powers on politico-ideological grounds. There are many political forces in the region who tend to perceive the images of these extra-regional powers generally on value premises. As a result one could see the polarisation of the national political scene on these patterns. In the absence of stable political institutions, the influence of extra-regional powers would be greater with a danger of general destabilisation of the polity. The conflictual and disappointing characteristics of the South Asian "political domain" are often attributed to "the extra-regional linkages of the countries of the region." This has become more likely because the extra-regional links of South Asian countries differ significantly.

ii. Security interests: The greatest leverage for the extra-regional powers in South Asia has been the security interest
of the countries in the region. Major countries of the region—India and Pakistan have maintained opposite extra-regional linkages. This is due to their threat perceptions of themselves being major enemies of one another. The three successive wars had led them to seek external help in strengthening their security. Pakistan has been relying on the US and Chinese assistance whereas India has received considerable help from the Soviet Union to build up its defence. Thus, the Indo-Pakistan hostility has been the greatest source of extra-regional intervention in South Asia. Besides, other countries of the region—Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka too have maintained very close and friendly relations with the United States and China. India tended to see in these relationship an element of containing India from her dominant status in the region.

iii. Economic Interest: Another aspect of extra-regional linkages to the South Asian politics can be seen in the bilateral and multilateral economic activities of the foreign powers. All the interested extra-regional powers enjoy certain political leverage in South Asia through their programmes of economic assistance to the countries in the region. The US and China have remained as major aid-donors for Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. India too has been a major recipient of loans and grants from western dominated international agencies, like IMF and IDA. Besides, India also has considerable economic stakes with the Soviet Union. No country could completely avoid foreign political influences concomitant to such foreign assistance programmes.

Implications for Peace and Stability

The socio-political scenario of South Asia as observed above indicates that the atmosphere of peace and stability in the region seems very likely to be vitiated by a number of factors. At present the most potential threat to peace and stability at the regional levels seems to be the issues of ethnicity, migration and democracy.
The handling of ethnic issues demands great care and patience from the countries concerned since the borders of South Asian countries are inhabited by such groups which find an identity with the groups across the border. Moreover, many such ethnic groups seem not to be satisfied with the existing system of accommodation in their respective countries and are seeking more autonomy and equitable opportunity for them. The respective governments of the countries concerned are not conceding to the demands of these minorities and suspect the foreign connection behind these movements. The situation had deteriorated considerably when some of these groups were involved in wide-scale insurgency.

The ethnic groups overlapping the national boundaries in South Asia could be summed up as follows:

1. About eighteen per cent of Sri Lankan population is Tamil who have a common identity with over fifty million Tamil-speaking people of India across the border. Sri Lanka, ever since the independence from colonialism, has been confronting with problems related to the accommodation and security of the Tamil people. At the same time, the Sri Lankan Tamil have also been able to influence the politics of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in particular and that of the centre in general. As a consequence, the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka has been a matter of concern for the Indian government and the Indo-Sri Lanka relations have been affected time and again. The Sri Lankan government generally tended to perceive the threat of Indian intervention.

2. There are considerable number of people of Indian origin in Nepal Tarai extending along the 500 miles Nepal-India border. The problem of the people of Indian origin has recently surfaced and this has received wide concern in the country. As these people are considered immigrants from India and have been maintaining close association with the Indian people across the border, the demands made by them in order to redress their grievances have often been suspected as provoked by the Indians. However, no serious problems have yet arisen between Nepal and India on
the issue of the people of Indian origin in Nepal. Besides, there are significant number of Nepali-speaking people in India. The policy of the Indian government towards the Nepali-speaking community often tends to invite reactions from the press in Nepal.

3. India's province of West Bengal and certain parts of the North-East and Bangladesh have Bengali-speaking people. Besides, there are Hindu minorities in Bangladesh. Although the linguistic and religious commonalities between India and Bangladesh have not yet influenced the politics of both countries, they often seem to have affected the relations between the two.

4. Although there is no distinct ethnic commonality between India and Pakistan, religious factors tend to cause adverse effects on the relationship between the two. The problems in Punjab and Kashmir illustrate well how both India and Pakistan are placed in a way that the ethnic trouble in one of them could affect the other.

One of the important aspects of ethnic configuration in South Asia is such that it is Indo-centric. Each of the South Asian countries shares at least one important ethnic group with India and no other country, except India, have commonality on ethnic grounds. This seems to have one advantage that no third country in the region has to be directly affected in an ethnic conflict situation in South Asia. But in such a situation no neighbours of India can remain far from being worried. For instance, the Indian intervention during the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 has posed enough fear for Nepal and Sri Lanka. Similarly, a lot of public sensibilities were seen in Nepal when India showed its concern in the ethnic violence of Sri Lanka.21 The South Asian ethnic dimension, thus, as it is observed, constitutes 'the single biggest threat to the stability and integrity of all countries' in the region.22

Discussion on the ethnic aspect of South Asian politics would be incomplete without reference to the migration trends or so to say political demography, in the region. To put it briefly, the migration scenario in the region would appear as follows:
1. A large number of Nepalis as well as Indians cross the Nepal-India border in search of job opportunities and other economic activities. Centuries of friendly relations and the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship have contributed to the growth of migration from one country to another. Besides, in the past, such movements had been deliberately encouraged due to mutual needs. However, both the countries, have recently begun to feel uneasy and had adverse consequences in the existing relationship. Nepal’s fear, that the present trend of migration from India, if unchecked, would outnumber the Nepali people particularly in the Tarai area where the Indian migrants would easily mix up with the Nepali nationals. Aside from this an unchecked migration from India into the Tarai would further complicate the settlement of citizenship and many other problems.

The issue of migration has also caused concern for India. There are about 6 million Nepali-speaking people in India. Sikkim is India’s Nepali-speaking majority province. There are also many areas like Darjeeling in India where Nepali-speaking people constitute an overwhelming majority. The Nepali-speaking community in India feel themselves as completely ignored and a deprived community. They have been recently raising their voices for the redress of their grievances. India, thus, naturally does not want more Nepalis to enter into these areas.

2. The issue of migration is also a problem between India and Bangladesh. The internal migration especially by Bengalis to the adjoining areas has existed since the British rule. The partition of British India has left many Hindus, particularly in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). After partition India could not check the Hindu migrants from Bangladesh into many parts of the North-east region. Besides there has also been considerable Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and this continues till the present. The increasing number of migrants from across the border and their settlement in adjoining Assam have invited adverse reactions from the Assamese. The Assamese allege that the indigenous people have been reduced to the minority and many
opportunities such as employment have been taken by the non-Assamese. As a result, Assam has remained a troubled province since a few years.

India has started the fencing of Indo-Bangladesh border in order to check the alleged influx of migrants from Bangladesh which has been vehemently resented by the Bangladeshi government. There has been minor skirmishes between the border security forces of the two countries.25

3. The migration is also an issue between India and Sri Lanka. In the past many Indian Tamils had migrated to Sri Lanka for plantation works and other jobs. During the British rule the Sinhalese-Tamil clashes had not surfaced. There are about 825 thousand Indian Tamils (5.5 percent the population) many of whom are deprived of citizenship. According to two agreements of 1964 and 1974, India had repatriated 405 thousand of the Indian Tamils and nearly 200 thousand await repatriation by India. Whereas 375 thousand Indian Tamils remain as agreed by Sri Lanka to grant citizenship, over one thousand still await citizenship.26

The problem has become complicated due to ethnic clashes in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese and Tamils. Therefore, the problem of stateless Tamils in Sri Lanka has been directly related to the vexed ethnic problems and is likely to continue as a major issue for years to come.

What the above scenario suggests is that the political demographic problems too, like the ethnic ones, are India-centred. Therefore, problems are essentially of bilateral nature. However, this could not be expected without casting its shadow over South Asian cooperation. Prof. Baral has rightly observed, "The political demography in South Asia is going to be a crucial area of conflict in South Asia if it is not tackled with understanding and determination."27 India seems to have set certain preferred criteria to deal with a conflict situation in the South Asian region which are stipulated in an official version of the "regional security doctrine".28 Such "assertive postures", as it has been put, are "not likely to be positive" for promoting good relationship between India and its neighbours.26
Finally, the regional roots of conflict in South Asia would be attributed to the issue of establishing democratic polity in the South Asian countries. India, which is commonly perceived by the South Asian countries as a single most potent source of threat to their security, has been maintaining a democratic polity and has made it clear that it prefers stable democratic political order in the countries of the region. Besides there are certain political parties in the region with which India has considerable sympathy. For instance, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the banned Nepali Congress and the Awami League of Bangladesh are a few to be mentioned which enjoy considerable sympathy in Indian political circles.

Ever since its independence in 1947 India had been extending its sympathy and support for the democratic movements in the Third World. She had actively helped to establish democratic polity in Nepal in the early 1950s. She had been instrumental to make Bangladesh a reality in 1971. She had extended considerable support to the Awami League headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after the creation of Bangladesh. Besides, India has also shown her deep concern whenever there was an abrupt end of democracy in the South Asian region. Therefore, the authoritarian rulers in the region have perceived India as the greatest threat to the regimes they have established. Time and again India has been alleged as interfering in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries of the region when she raised her voice supporting the restoration of democracy in these countries.

India has also been a place for the political leaders of South Asia, especially those of Nepal and Bangladesh, to continue their activities for the restoration of democracy in their countries. This bad been a matter of serious concern for both Bangladesh and Nepal in the past. Although this problem does not exist at present Indian leaders have often been raising their voices at the state of democracy in neighbouring countries. It seems that India considers the "non-democratic" regimes of South Asia as a
Therefore, the issue of democratisation of the regimes in South Asia is likely to be a continuous source of intra-regional conflict in the region.

Summary

The foregoing observations would make it clear that the South Asian countries are facing more or less problems of a similar nature and that these problems, in one way or the other, find intra-regional linkages and consequences. Since the region is of the Indo-centric nature, such linkages and consequences are generally confined between India and the rest of the countries. Any meaningful realisation of peace and stability at the regional level, therefore, seem likely to rely more on the improvement of the domestic milieu as well as better understanding of each others' socio-political context.

However, it is quite difficult to generalise many of the problems faced by the countries in the region despite certain common socio-political features, because most of the problems in the region have also their origin with the distinctive peculiar conditions of the countries concerned. As a consequence, the possibility of greater cohesion in the region based on certain socio-cultural characteristics seem to have been affected by the political experiments that followed after the liquidation of colonial order in South Asia. The different types of political systems experimented by the countries in the region also did not help in evolving an atmosphere of peace and mutuality of interests. As a consequence, such commonalities as geographical contiguity, socio-cultural and religious traditions, certain common political values held by the political forces in the region provided a ground for conflict, mutual suspicion and fear.

Moreover, the implications of prevalent socio-political scenario seem to be greater for the peace and security in the region. The South Asian countries have developed a tendency to perceive the problems of peace and security from their own respective political perspectives and their perceptions in this matter differ from one
country to another. For instance, major countries in the region—India and Pakistan—have conventionally relied on militarisation as a primary basis for safeguarding the security and peace for their respective countries. They have been increasing their fighting power with the induction of new generation of sophisticated weapons whereas the smaller countries in the region are left with limited options. As for the smaller countries, they cannot go for a large scale militarisation, because this aspect of their security seems to be insignificant in the given context of South Asian power hierarchy. On the other hand, the non-military options, as one put forward by Nepal in the proposition of “Zone of Peace” has yet to get a regional consensus.

The issue of peace and stability in South Asia thus seem closely related the socio-political situation in the region and it is also very likely to create misunderstanding among the countries in the region. The socio-political factors of South Asia, therefore, seem to have played important role in determining the prospect of peace and stability in the region.
NOTES

1. The South Asian countries had mutually taken the issues involved in the proposed idea of regional cooperation. First, the Foreign Secretary level meetings of the seven South Asian countries held in Colombo (April 1981), Kathmandu (November 1981), Islamabad (August 1982) and Dhaka (March 1983) identified the areas of cooperation among the countries in the region as well as worked for developing modalities of such cooperation. And later on, the meeting of the seven South Asian Foreign Ministers held in New Delhi in July 1983 agreed to establish SARC. For detail see P. K. Misra, *South Asia in International Politics* (New Delhi: UDH Publishers, 1984) S. D. Muni and Anuradha Muni, *Regional Co-operation in South Asia*, (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1984) -


10. *Ibid*.

15. There are tribal peoples in the northern zone of Bangladesh especially in Gharo hills, Madhupur forest, Tangail and Chittagong Hill Tracts who have been resisting the government and are involved in insurgency. Although there are various dissident tribal organisations, the Shanti Bahini, mainly comprised of Chakma group has been posing challenge to the national integrity. See for detail D. C. Burman, "Regionalism in Bangladesh: The Study of Chittagong Hill Tracts", Runakant (ed.), Regionalism in South Asia, (Jaipur : Aalekh Publishers, 1983). pp. 116-141.
18. See Lok Raj Baral, "Regional and Extra-Regional Links and South Asian Cooperation". (Cyclostyled) (Kathmandu : CEDA, 1983).