

# South Asia's Dreary Experience in Peacemaking

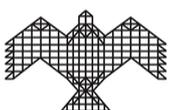
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Picture Credit: The New Indian Express

*Conflicts in South Asia can be divided into three main categories: Peace process is a major event in most of the dominant identity group and centralist conflicts. In the second category of conflicts involving mostly the marginal groups, the peace process is largely a low-key or peripheral affair. It is typically a case of peace talks without a process. The third category includes conflicts that are marked by absence of peace process or peace talks*



## South Asia's Dreary Experience in Peacemaking



**P. Sahadevan**

South Asia hosts some of the oldest conflicts in the world and, consequently, making peace with numerous aggrieved groups has long been one of the main preoccupations of the states. In most cases, therefore, conflict and peacemaking have proceeded as concurrent events, raising hope and causing despair in societies. That many conflicts have neither been resolved nor become amenable to the states' coercive strategies indicate the resilience of the groups and the limits of state power in conflict situation. The experience the world over is that groups do not easily give up their goals under the state's pressure, but they tend to alter their core demands if, at least, some of their genuine grievances are redressed.

What do the peace processes in South Asia exemplify? Are they productive exercises? What is the kind of peace the states largely prefer? Are they willing and committed to create a positive peace—defined as a comprehensive strategy or phenomenon that addresses the underlying causes of conflict and establishes a 'just' social and political order in conflict societies? Or, are they merely interested in achieving a negative peace—defined as a situation devoid of manifest violence in such societies? In answering these questions, this essay provides a comparative analysis of South Asia's peacemaking experience in scores of internal conflicts.

### **I Profile of Conflicts: Causes, Goals and Strategies**

South Asia has experienced over forty conflicts in the post-colonial period, the largest number of them have been in India. As conflict is not a monolithic category, viz., no one conflict is similar to the other even though certain features are common to all, categorization of South Asia's conflicts is necessary for understanding their innate nature and dynamics. This is done along the following lines:



Conflicts in South Asia are primarily of two types: Identity conflicts are a numerically large category as they are widely prevalent in most of the countries, and centralist conflicts are very few in the region. As identity of a group involved in conflict is grounded in ethnicity or religion or language, it is given a generic name accordingly—ethnic or religious or communal or linguistic or sectarian conflict.

Identity conflicts are between two or more distinct groups, which make them inter-group events. In South Asia the inter-group conflicts are further divided into two sub-categories—dominant and marginal group conflicts. A dominant group conflict involves two larger identity groups, with one enjoying the status of a majority and the other is labelled as a minority. It is thus called a majority-minority conflict where the state plays a partisan role by openly identifying with the majority community through its policy and actions. This eventually transforms such a conflict into one between the state and the minority community. Conflicts in India's Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Kashmir; Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern provinces; Pakistan's Baluchistan, and Nepal's Terai region could be included in this category.

In contrast, a marginal group conflict is typically between two or more weak groups settled in a common peripheral region. This type of conflict by and large remains a local event wherein each group targets the other and the state seeks to play a non-partisan role while being merely interested in maintaining law and order. India's northeast is gripped by several such conflicts. Unlike an identity conflict, a centralist conflict is deeply rooted in opposing ideologies of both the state and rebel group, with the latter directly challenging the former's power and authority. As both the entities are wedded to their respective political orthodoxies, they become direct parties to a conflict. The Maoist insurgency against the Indian and Nepali states and the Taliban militancy in Afghanistan are the major centralist conflicts in South Asia.

Every conflict is a purposive activity caused by a set of perceived or real grievances. The causes of South Asia's identity conflicts are invariably linked to the groups' deep sense of relative deprivation and alienation from their respective states, most of which are seen as exclusivist entities whose discriminatory policies have created a structure of inequality in many societies. Denial of equal political, linguistic, cultural, religious, educational and employment rights for the minority identity groups is the hallmark of such state





policies. This has cumulatively made them suffer from a chronic sense of powerlessness and, at the same time, privileged their counterparts—majority identity groups—to control state institutions and exercise authority. In pursuing such skewed policies, many South Asian states have developed an enduring majoritarian streak or become full-blown majoritarian entities.

Consequently, conflicts have become means by which a number of minority identity groups have sought to redress their genuine grievances by bringing about changes in the state structure and policies. If power is central to every identity conflict in the region, it has also been a critical factor in all the centralist conflicts where the radical or extremist forces have found the state to be their ideological adversary, whose policies are seen as regressive (by the Taliban in Afghanistan), meant to deprive the dispossessed (according to the Indian Maoists), and a source of an oligarchical system (in the Nepali Maoists' view). In each conflict the state has been made out to be the target, and reforming it or capturing its power has become the solitary goal of the rebels.

The nature and intensity of group grievances determine the goals of conflict. South Asia's identity conflicts have had diverse goals, ranging from autonomy to secession, with the former being the dominant objective defined and defended by the respective group leaders. In their view, autonomy is a comprehensive goal that encompasses not just devolution or decentralization of power, but also equal sociocultural recognition, status and freedom, and economic inclusivity. The groups have placed their demands solely on their respective states, which are considered as the principal sources of their problem as well as part of any solution. In questioning the states' sovereignty, the secessionist groups have set a high-end goal of dividing them along the ethnic lines.

Secessionist conflicts have broken out in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, some of them resulted from rejection of the autonomy demands. As regards the centralist conflicts, the goals of rebel groups have primarily centred on capturing the state (in Nepal and Afghanistan) and restructuring it along their ideological lines (in Nepal). It is, however, unclear as to what the Indian Maoists aim to achieve by launching an armed struggle against the state.

External involvement in what is claimed to be internal conflicts is a distinct feature. Given the high stakes of

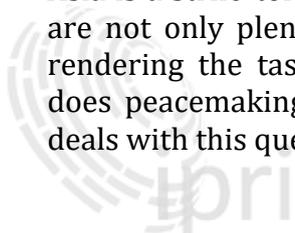
the parties and intensity of violence, many of the dominant group conflicts have drawn in some interested regional or extra-regional actors—both the states and international organizations. At the same time, most of the marginal group conflicts have remained internal, allowing the respective states to deal with them in an unconstrained manner. As regards the centralist conflicts, South Asia's experience is mixed. While both the Nepali Maoist and Afghan Taliban conflicts have seen strong external interventions, thereby adding greater international dimensions, the Maoist conflict in India has remained an internal affair. The twin goals of external intervention have been to 'wage conflict' (by extending tangible or intangible support to one party against the other) and build peace in the strife-torn societies.

Strategies adopted by the conflict parties in pursuit of their set goals determine the type of conflict—whether it is political violence or armed conflict or internal (or civil) war. South Asia has seen all three types of conflicts, with the last one causing a large-scale civilian death and destruction and rendering thousands of people refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Both civil wars and armed conflicts have caused a great deal of international humanitarian concerns and interest among the external actors whose direct or indirect intervention has added greater external dimensions to violence and peace processes in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghanistan.

Importantly, some insurgent groups have resorted to terrorism as their strategy and certain states have been equally brutal in their responses particularly to the secessionist movements. In view of the heavy civilian casualties caused by their military operations, Sri Lanka (in the Eelam war) and Pakistan (in the East Pakistan crisis) have been widely accused of committing crimes against humanity.

## **II Making Peace: The South Asian Experience**

The profile of conflicts reinforces the cliché that South Asia is a strife-torn or conflict-ridden region. Conflicts are not only plenty but also complex in many ways, rendering the task of making peace daunting. What does peacemaking in the region reveal? This section deals with this question.



**Peace process is an intermittent activity and not an intensely regular political exercise, whose outcomes are far less tangible than what is generally desired**

Peace process is defined as a long political engagement of adversaries in negotiations. It thus entails a “cycle of activities”, stretching “both backward and forward from the actual negotiations”, in pursuit of a “just and lasting agreement”. The steps taken are “not linear but often occur simultaneously and at different speeds” (Darby, 2001: 11).

According to Darby (2001: 11), a peace process is premised on five conditions: (i) the parties must show their utmost willingness to negotiate “in good faith”; (ii) all the “key actors” are included in political negotiations; (iii) the negotiations must address the “central issues” in conflict; (iv) the use of force is eschewed, and (v) the parties commit themselves to a “sustained process”. In applying these criteria to South Asia’s conflicts, the following trends can be discerned:

Peace process is a widely and loosely used term in South Asia, yet it is in reality not a regular phenomenon. Therefore, peace processes in a true sense have not been many in the region. This shows that the choice of a number of parties, more particularly the states, is to view their conflict as a ‘zero-sum game’ and strive for a military victory. That said, they have often sought to engage in negotiations when their violence used as a conflict strategy has failed to yield the desired outcome or when international pressure exerted in the wake of serious concerns over human rights situation has become hard to ignore.

In the context of peacemaking, conflicts in South Asia can be divided into three main categories: Peace process is a major event in most of the dominant identity group and centralist conflicts. While the peace processes in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghanistan have had enlisted extensive external role, India’s peace engagement has by and large remained internal. In the second category of conflicts involving mostly the marginal groups, the peace process is largely a low-key or peripheral affair. It is typically a case of peace talks without a process. The third category includes conflicts that are marked by absence of peace process or peace talks. Pakistan accounts for many such conflicts. In all these the peace processes have often become sporadic events in that their total or partial



breakdown and resumption are not an unusual phenomenon.

As regards the outcomes of peace processes, there are certain peculiarities too. Not all political negotiations have resulted in peace deals, but some of them yielded accords. More than one peace accord has been reached in a few conflicts, yet not all of them have established peace. Effectively, this means that in South Asia, there are not many post-conflict societies; even if they are free of violence, they still remain largely un-peaceful. Wherever a peace accord is claimed to be a success story, the reality on the ground is quite different. In the post-accord period some identity groups have tended to develop a sense of latent or manifest discontent, as is evident in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). While some peace accords have lost their relevance in a short time (for example, the 1985 Punjab accord), others have paved the way for new conflicts, as is the case with the Madhesi problem in Nepal.

**Peace processes have often faced challenges from the forces within the polity and the stakeholders themselves**

Internal conflict, by nature, involves multiple factional organizations belonging to the same identity group, but they jointly oppose the state or the rival groups. At the same time, all of them stake a claim to be recognized as the principal conflict parties and, as such, seek a place at the negotiating table. If a peace process is made inclusive with the participation of all the main actors, the table inevitably becomes crowded to cause uncertainty over its continuation and outcomes. At the same time, an exclusionary peace process tends to produce spoilers from within the same identity group. Yet, the states generally prefer to negotiate peace with the most powerful leaders and strike a deal with them to end their conflict.

At another level, politics in conflict-ridden democracies tend to create challenges to a peace process when the opposition parties, interested in denying the government political gains or drawing political mileage for themselves or concerned about the interests of the identity group they represent, seek to interpret a peace deal as a sell out and mobilize people against the ruling elite to delegitimize their decision.





South Asia abounds with the spoiler problem. Sri Lanka's protracted but intermittent peace process since 1983 had faced resistance from both the rival Tamil groups and Sinhalese opposition parties. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) remained opposed to anyone negotiating peace with the Sri Lankan government, while both the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had constantly sought to reject each other government's peace overtures to the Tamil minority when they were in opposition. If the SLFP successfully mobilized the hard-line Sinhalese nationalists to delegitimize the India-Sri Lanka peace accord (1987), the UNP scored a political victory by thwarting President Chandrika Kumaratunga's efforts to find an autonomy solution during 1995-2000. Likewise, the CHT peace process experienced a spoiler problem when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) had opposed the peace accord of 1997, albeit rather unsuccessfully. Many of India's peace deals with various northeast insurgent groups led to emergence of many splinter groups to carry on their militant movements. However, the democratic opposition parties seldom play a spoiler role in India's peace processes, which hold a limited electoral value for them.

A bipartisan, and not a partisan, approach to peace process tends to greatly increase the prospects of its success. As peacemaking is a joint activity involving all the actors, peace needs a sustained partnership and ownership. These positive elements are hard to find in South Asia's peace processes where many identity and centralist conflicts are considered as national issues and, hence, peace is viewed as a national goal. Yet, the politics of peace is paramount to keep the parties factionalized and self-centered. Ideally, depoliticization of peace process is necessary for its success, but in practice it is truly a tall order.

**While the states are largely interested in negative peace, the groups are unable to promote their comprehensive positive peace goals**

The states' interest in political negotiations does not imply their readiness to agree on a comprehensive deal to establish a positive peace. Rather, their immediate task and primary interest are invariably to end violence without conceding much to the rebel groups' demands. Ending violence is not only a short-term but also a long-term goal of every state.

The South Asian states share this goal, for which they have adopted certain strategies. First, they have given primacy to coercion, which is often used very excessively rather than sparingly, either in response to massive violence unleashed by the rebels or as a chosen strategy to counter them. In this context, both the states and rebels have not realized that a coercive strategy lacks credibility since it is invariably used indiscriminately and excessively. It is however argued that a limited application of coercion to create 'ripe moments' so necessary for political negotiations may be an undesirable yet a practical strategy as far as the conflict parties are concerned.

Second, the South Asian states have often sought to co-opt the factional group leaders into the system by providing them power, position and privileges. Importantly, this has been made part of their larger counter-mobilization strategy aimed at weakening and fractionalizing their asymmetrical opponents—the identity and ideological group leaders—without realizing that such a classical divide and rule policy has added more complexity to their conflicts.

Third, some of the South Asian states have emphasized development as part of their peace strategy. Particularly, India has factored development of its protracted conflict-affected regions such as Kashmir and northeast in its peace strategy by pumping into a huge amount of money for various projects. This approach however has not yielded the desired returns for the state in real terms. The experience underscores the point that development is an essential but not necessarily an exclusive source of peace in a conflict society. People expect development, but they do not compromise on their identity-related goals.

Finally, ceasefire is found to be a negative peace strategy pursued in some dominant group and centralist conflicts as it has suspended violence temporarily or indefinitely, or created conditions for successful or failed peace processes. The Naga conflict is an interesting case, where the prolonged ceasefire (since 1997) has established negative peace but finding a permanent solution has become a daunting task. In Sri Lanka, the ceasefire during 2002-2006 provided a temporary yet uneasy respite from the armed hostilities, but it neither sustained the negative peace for long nor paved the way for a negotiated political solution. In contrast, in Nepal's case, the ceasefire in three phases during 2003-2006 produced both the results—a negative peace first and a lasting negotiated solution at the end of the process.





The nature of peace agreement determines the quality of peace. Nepal's peace accord of 2006 is said to be comprehensive, but it has not addressed the grievances of some of the marginal groups. While privileging the communities settled in the hill region, the country's post-civil war state reform agenda has tended to undermine or ignored the interests of people in the Terai region. Similarly, some of India's peace accords have given symbolic recognition to the identity of conflict groups, but the cumulative gains in terms of protection of their interests have been far less than the level of grievances they have developed.

Take, for instance, the now defunct 1985 Punjab accord, which ended the conflict, but some of its main provisions have become either infructuous or unimplemented. While the Mizos were generally satisfied with the recognition of their cultural and territorial identity under the 1986 accord, the protracted Naga peace process has got stuck mainly in the group's demand for a greater recognition of the community's political and territorial identity beyond culture. In some cases, even after reaching peace accords, difficulties are encountered in resolving the marginal group conflicts involving, for instance, the Bodos in Assam and the Gorkhas in West Bengal. While peacemaking in Sri Lanka continues, rather intermittently, to be on the government's political agenda without a final outcome in sight, the discontented CHT tribal groups have not been able to exert pressure on the Bangladeshi state to fully implement the peace accord of 1997.

### III

#### The Lessons from South Asia

The peacemaking experience in South Asia offers some invaluable lessons for all the principal parties—both the states and identity groups—to learn and take appropriate corrective steps:

First, ethnic majoritarianism as a state's regressive ideology in a multi-ethnic society does not always go unchallenged. Identity groups, when threatened with state policies of marginalization, resort to political and violent campaigns to challenge and change the nature of their state. South Asia's terrible experience with violence underscores the need for a balanced state ideology incorporating the liberal and pluralistic ideals.

Second, realistically speaking, conflict cannot be banished from societies but can be prevented by all



means. That violence does not necessarily mark a conflict in its early phase gives the state and identity groups an ample opportunity for its prevention and resolution. In South Asia peace processes are linked to the intensity of violence. A common tendency of the states in the region is to treat at first conflict as a law and order problem until it becomes serious enough to cause a durable political disorder.

Third, conflict is fundamentally a governance problem. Hence, good governance is all about making peace with the disaffected or aggrieved sections of society. South Asia lacks political culture to recognize and remove mal-governance as a source of conflict.

Fourth, identity groups do not usually compromise on their 'basic human needs' such as equality, identity, recognition, security, etc. They seek a comprehensive peace deal to satisfy all their needs. As such, the state's development strategies (pumping money into the conflict areas) alone cannot produce a stable peace. The South Asian states need to adopt a broader peace approach based on the principles of social, political and economic equity.

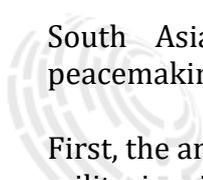
Fifth, being typical modern entities, the South Asian states consider themselves to be enjoying the monopoly of power to use coercion in conflict situation. In the interest of peace, however, they must exercise extreme caution. The excessive use of coercive state power has created deep wounds in many conflict societies and thus ruptured the relationship between the respective states and their identity communities. Healing wounds entails a long and difficult process. Every coercive state must also realize that the victims are its citizens, after all.

Finally, terrorism as an instrument or strategy does not promote the group interest. Rather, it tends to backfire badly on the same terror groups and identity communities whom they claim to represent and whose interest they seek to promote.

#### **IV Trends in Conflict and Peacemaking**

South Asia's dreary experience in conflict and peacemaking reveals certain trends:

First, the armed conflicts have given rise to a culture of militarism in South Asia. It is an ideology that governs the inter-group and state-group relationships, and a strategy that each actor employs against the other.



Neither the so-called post-conflict states nor societies in the region are able to end or reverse militarism

Second, the good news for the states is that the threats to their sovereignty seem to be waning in qualitative and quantitative terms. The forces threatening them have now become weaker and the states have developed a greater strength to challenge them in a comprehensive manner.

Third, in practice, peace in South Asian societies has assumed a different meaning: it denotes normalcy, order and stability. Redressing the grievances of the communities and rendering justice to the victims are not given the primary importance. Therefore, peace with justice is a pipe dream for a vast majority of them.

Finally, as a result, reconciliation has virtually become a political rhetoric than a real goal. All the talk of reconciliation is bereft of meaningful steps and commitment on the part of the state actors, who seek to define the virtuous term in a skewed manner without grounding it in the internationally accepted best principles and practices.

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## Reference

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## About the Author

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