

South Asia's Conflict Societies

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A few months ago, in these pages, an analysis was made on the nature of conflicts in South Asia. An attempt was made to answer why in our region, conflicts tend to be protracted, and its final solution complicated. None of the other regions would have as many conflicts as we have in South Asia – both intra-state and inter-state. Also, the region has multitude forms of conflicts – with their primary demands based on ethnicity, religion, autonomy and independence.

Conflicts are galore in South Asia. But do we have adequate understanding to resolve them? Do we learn from each other in terms of our success and failure stories in dealing with conflicts? Are the existing approaches and analyses adequate to address the conflicts and identify its contemporary trends?

Who studies Conflicts in South Asia?

Despite numerous conflicts and their protracted nature, there are not many institutions/individuals who study and analyse the conflicts in a sustained and systematic fashion in the region. Though there are a few programmes in Universities, they remain and at times are condemned to be “academic”, devoid of ground applications. There are a few think tanks in South Asia, with a self-imposed mandate to work on peace and conflict; but, how many of their policy recommendations have been made use by the government? The State would rather ask, where are the “policy” recommendations from the “think tanks”?

Perhaps, there is an element of truth in the above. How many institutions in South Asia can claim to have the quality and rigour of the databases prepared in the University of Uppasala in Sweden? Certainly, the question is not just only funding; the University Grants Commission in India, for example, should be considered as one of the well-funded organization in the region. The issue, perhaps, is focus and capacity.

And from whose perspectives?

The second question that we need to address is – whatever little is studied/analysed in the region – whose perspectives do we study it from?

Conflict is mostly approached and analysed through a security prism in South Asia. While conflict does impact the security of the state, it affects the society more. Unfortunately, our focus on conflict and its resolution remains primarily – unidimensional – focussing the State more, that the society it is bound to serve, and the people who form the backbone.

The question in this context is – while analysing conflict and its resolution, should we bring the society in and make it as the primary unit of focus?

Towards a Mapping: Five Conflict Societies

Society should be the primary unit of analysis for conflict analysis in South Asia. This by no means is a question of society vs State; rather, it is an issue of priority. Since the existing State-based approaches has not helped South Asia to address multiple conflicts, there is a need to reorient the approach, and look at the priorities.

In this context, “Society” as the primary tool of analysis will yield better results. The focus will have to be on the following five: Pre-Conflict Societies, Conflict Societies, Conflict Transformation Societies, Post-Conflict Societies, and Peace Process Societies.

Conflict Societies are easier to identify; these are societies, where the conflict is ongoing – manifest and latent. These societies need a conflict mapping. What is the history of conflict? Who are the actors? What have been the political and military initiatives to address the conflict? How effective are they? And what measures need to be taken? The above questions need analytical answers, with periodic interventions, including policy recommendations to the State and Civil Society.

Identifying the above is easier in South Asia. There are enough indicators – political upheaval and the presence of violence – to identify these societies.

Pre-Conflict Societies, on the other hand, need better planning and experience to identify. As a rule, all the conflict societies of the contemporary era in South Asia, should have been “pre-conflict” societies at a point in time. Repeatedly, people would speak regarding – “if those issues were addressed then.”

Pre-Conflict Societies should become an additional focus in South Asia from a forecasting/early warning perspective. All conflict societies would have crossed through a pre-conflict phase; if this phase could be identified and proper measures taken in time, one could prevent the emergence of a conflict society. At what stage, the society gets prepared to accept violence as a means to achieve the goals? Is there a threshold one could identify?

Identifying a “pre-conflict” society at the right time, and taking appropriate measure could prevent it from escalating the society into the next level.

Post-Conflict Societies need a larger focus. The State in South Asia generally believes, that once the violence declines, the conflict comes to an end. Whereas the civil society's expectations grow and

expand in a post-conflict society. The State believes it has won the conflict; while the civil society wants to see peace in ground. There is a huge difference between the State and Civil Society. Sri Lanka and Nepal are best cases in South Asia. How to bring State and Civil Society on the same page in perceiving peace? How to ensure that there is no relapse of violence? How to avoid the emergence of new groups in post-conflict societies that would undermine the ongoing peace process?

Besides, the above three, there has to be a special focus on “Conflict-Transformation” Societies. Conflict is a dynamic process and does not remain the same. Especially when the conflict remains protracted and is sustained for more than a decade, nature, objective and strategies are bound to change. Some conflicts in South Asia have seen multiple generations. The first generation would have witnessed their society at peace and would have fond memories of a golden past.

If the conflict has sustained and remained unresolved for a long duration, the second generation who were born during the conflict period, would have never experienced their society at peace with itself. The idea of “normalcy” would be “theoretical” to them. This is dangerous and unfortunately true, to most of the conflict societies in South Asia.

When the conflict is present in a society and if there is a second generation, nature, objective and strategies are bound to change. Worse, the transformation may not be positive.

Finally, there is a need to study what is referred as “Peace Process Societies” in South Asia. These are those societies where there is an official political process between the State and the leading actors of the conflict. In some case, there may have been a complete cessation of violence by the actors aiding the process. In other cases, some actors would have declared a ceasefire, while others would still engage in violence.

As a result, the peace process societies may have an official ceasefire, but normalcy would not have returned yet.

So what is needed?

Simple. More analysis from a “Societal” perspective. A strong societal perspective in resolving the conflict would, in fact, strengthen the State. So, the approach should be society and state, and not society vs state. This has to be a State-Society partnership.

Second, there is a need to build strong institutions and build capacity with scholars across the region. Who knows, one could learn from Afghanistan in India's Northeast, and from Sri Lanka in J&K. There has to be rigour in pursuing alternative approaches. For this, we have to build strong capacity.

Third, there has to be enough focus from sub-regional perspective, than from the national capital. Across the region, the national capitals have taken pre-ponderance in analysing what is happening in the regions, and worse, providing solutions to what would be in the best interest of the latter. In this context, the sub-regions also will have to invest substantially.

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