

Regional Integration or Disintegration: An Appraisal of the Current Trends in South Asia*

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Abstract:

South Asia that once formed a single administrative, political and economic union under the British rule underwent divisions on religious, political and ethnic basis. The divisions were reinforced due to ideological differences and political problems among the regional states in the post-independence era. A number of Indian leaders and scholars term partition of India a grave mistake and argue to mend it through creation of a South Asian union by using the platform of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This paper scrutinizes the prospects of creation of any such union through analyzing the ongoing integrative and disintegrative trends in the region. It utilizes qualitative and analytical approach through relying on available secondary sources to investigate if the centrifugal forces causing partition of India have either receded over the years or otherwise. The study finds that all regional states more or less continue to face secessionist movements of diverse nature and intensity and they are likely to consolidate their sovereignty and control at home instead of pursuing any grandiose goals of political or economic union in South Asia.

Keywords: Ethnicity, identity, religion, diversity, separatism, integration, disintegration

INTRODUCTION

Under the British rule, Indian sub-continent comprising most parts of present-day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan formed a unified and single administrative, political and socio-economic unit. Then, the British rule also encompassed Myanmar and Sri Lanka while Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim were British protectorates (Muni 2003, p.2). The British also interfered in and took control of security and foreign policies of other states in the region including Afghanistan - from 1880 to 1920s - (Runion 2007, pp.81-92) and Iran (Axworthy 2008, pp.177-220). Even the coins of British Indian Empire were used in some parts of the Gulf States.

The British influence receded gradually especially in the wake of the two World Wars that forced it to relinquish its colonies including the Indian sub-continent. It also led to the disintegration of a unified single Indian political unit (formerly British Indian Empire) into several independent states. Afghanistan recuperated its sovereignty on its security and foreign affairs. Both Myanmar and Sri Lanka were separated from British Empire in 1930s, and both ultimately got independence. Similarly, Nepal and Bhutan were able to get recognition as sovereign states, though with some limitations, especially in case of Bhutan. The British departure coincided with partition of India on communal lines, that gave birth to Pakistan and India on August 15, 1947. Pakistan was disintegrated in 1971 giving birth to Bangladesh. The post-British Indian sub-continent marked divisions of the land politically, socio-economically and administratively. The political differences, bilateral disputes, contentious issues and recurrent tense relations among the regional states reinforced these divisions.

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The leadership of the South Asian countries (SACs) sought to mend these differences and overcome divisions through promoting regional cooperation at the platform of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Nonetheless, the SACs had diverse motives behind the idea of regional cooperation and launching of SAARC in 1985, especially the smaller regional countries (SRCs) including Pakistan intended to protect and promote their separate religious and cultural identity, political independence, economic freedom, progress and prosperity (Ahmad, 2016). Conversely, a number of Indian scholars and leaders envision that South Asian regionalism can and must bring back the same political and economic unity to the sub-continent. They even condemn partition of Indian sub-continent and argued that division of the sub-continent was a grave “mistake” committed by the British that must be mended through integration of regional states into a single union (“Star enters new era,” 2012; Nayar, 2014).

The desire to retain the unity of Indian sub-continent dates back to the colonial era. The Indian founding fathers had bitterly opposed the partition. They not only intended to retain unity of British Indian Empire but also aspired to expand it. The speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, a leader of All India National Congress (AINC) and the first Prime Minister of India give valuable insights. As early as in 1939, he imagined establishment of an Asian federation that could possibly comprise “China, and India, Burma and Ceylon, Afghanistan and possibly other countries” (Acharya 2009, p.33). Later on, he suggested the establishment of a “South Asian federation” encompassing all parts of the Indian sub-continent besides Burma in the east and Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq in the west (Jayasekera 2003, p.346).

Indian leaders reiterated, time and again, their commitment to achieve this goal. In 2003, for example, Yashwant Sinha, the then Indian minister for external affairs, avowed that his country was devoted to the aim of a South Asian union. He proposed SACs to “start thinking of a South Asian Union.” If people of other regions could attain “this kind of Union,” he maintained, “there is no reason why we should deprive our people of this opportunity” (“Sinha proposes South,” 2003). Also, Jayant Prasad, a former Indian ambassador, asserted that establishment of a “South Asian Union” should be the long term goal (Prasad, 2014). A number of Indian scholars and intellectuals share this dream. Kumar (2005), for instance, in his comparative analysis of SAARC and European Union (EU), contended that the definitive culmination of regional integration should be the establishment of a South Asian Union. Nair urged the SACs to forget SAARC and concentrate on establishment of a “South Asian Union” (Nair, 2001). Hitherto more strongly, Kuldeep Nayar argued: “Even an economic union of SAARC countries falls short of the region’s requirements. Our aim should be to constitute a South Asian Union, from Afghanistan to Myanmar, having soft borders, having one currency and having no custom or excise barriers” (2004).

Such assertions, however, generated strong reaction and criticism. It met stark denunciation from critics. Some of them interpreted such assertions as a part of a plan to establish an “*Akhand Bharat*” or “United India” (Abedin, 2013). Possibly owing to the same reasons, a number of intellectuals cautioned about such avowals. Besides others, Dash (1996) contended that the setting such “grandiose” goals can be “counterproductive” for SAARC. The goal of a “South Asian Union” or even an “Economic Union,” in the perspective of the existing environment of mutual suspicions, unsettled bilateral disputes, political problems, contentious issues and “spillover effects” of the ethnic and religious conflicts, appears overambitious and impractical. Instead, SACs must focus on modest

goals such as “joint development projects, creation of economic complementarities” and pursuance of “modest trade objectives” (Dash, 1996). These divergent goals and conflicting outlooks on the visions of South Asian regionalism render SAARC’s future undefined and directionless.

An exhaustive analysis of the prevailing circumstances and tendencies in the region can help providing SAARC an explicit route and the vision to chase with complete commitment and sincerity of all members. An objective evaluation of the centripetal and centrifugal forces operative in the region can help accomplish this goal. This study aims to this end by using the qualitative data, employing descriptive and analytical tools and content analysis of the data collected mainly through secondary sources. This paper comprises three sections, besides an introduction and a conclusion: first section builds the conceptual framework of the study through outlining the conditions necessary for successful process of regional integration; second section entails a brief discussion of profile of South Asia, and third section involves evaluation of the contemporary political environment and intensity of the conditions that caused fragmentation of Indian sub-continent and the investigation if they have incapacitated over the years or otherwise. The appraisal of the current movements and forces operative in the region would help predict the future of the South Asian regionalism.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

The European integration process was built on the foundations laid down by decades of political and intellectual work. The influential and prominent writers such as Pierre Dubois, Dante Alighieri, William Penn, Saint-Pierre, Sully, Rousseau, Kant, Lamartine, Victor Hugo and John Stuart Mill had long advocated for integration of European states under one name or another. Their writings were very influential to make the required foundation necessary to construct upon, later on, “peace project” that climaxed into the formation of EU by the start of the twenty-first century (Haas 1948, p.528; Smith 1992, p.55). Horrified by the death and destruction of recurrent wars and pursuant of peace, progress and prosperity, people across the Europe ran large scale, continent-wide, and well organized movements that campaigned for a united Europe in the interwar period. Though their aims varied, as some of them wanted free trade while others sought political unification of Europe on either religious or political ground. During World War-II, such movements advocated either political or economic integration of European states. In the immediate post-war period, hundreds of organizations, movements, and publications, staunchly promoted the idea of some kind of unification of European nations (Haas 1948, p.528) that paved way for launching of the European integration process in 1950s.

The European nations were ideologically, culturally and religiously homogeneous and before launching of the integration process, they had completed the processes of state building and national integration etc. Some of them were earlier politically unified through peaceful means. For instance, the economic integration schemes with varying outcomes heralded political union of several states including the Scandinavian area, Switzerland, Spain Austro-Hungarian Empire Germany, and Italy etc. (Palmer & Perkins 1985, p.560). Some outside factors, like existence of an external security threat, i.e. Soviet Union and yearning of European leaders to reduce their dependence on America also influenced the integration process positively. Some of the conditions found helpful in the European integration process were inimitable to Europe alone and did not exist in any other part of the world. It led Haas (1961, p.389) to assert that the integration process on

European pattern could not be experienced in any other part of the world. Likewise, Nye asserted that integration arrangements among the developing states beheld sometimes “to resemble the European animal but in causal terms turn out to be of a different genus or species” (Nye 1968, p.2).

The literature demonstrates that numerous factors either promote or inhibit growth of regionalism. The conditions that facilitate the process include: ideological, religious and socio-cultural uniformity, common external threat perception, convergent national interests, feeble nationalism, economic complementarities, equal level of industrial and economic development, and previous successful integration experiences etc. Conversely, numerous factors certainly inhibit the course. As Haas highlighted, the dissimilarities in the level of industrialization and socio-economic development, political and ideological differences, inequalities in resource-base and national economic planning among members inhibit progress of regional integration. Member states having vibrant nationalism and strong central government tend to obstruct the process. Meanwhile, leadership of states “poorly integrated internally” exhibits averseness in integration arrangements fearing that it would “further undermine their control at home.” Likewise, the smaller and less-developed states mostly tend to elude their “dependence” on the core state “with varying degrees of intensity and consistency.” Thus, they become “eager to minimize dependence on the more developed” partners. Haas labeled such relationship as “a disintegrative force” (Haas 1970, pp.614-21).

PROFILE OF SOUTH ASIA

An effective regional integration process generally matches to the ground conditions of its respective area. In order to comprehend the accurate nature of South Asian regionalism, it is vital to tangibly and systematically examine the predominant socio-economic and political circumstances that tend to influence the regional integration process. Familiarity about South Asia and its constituent states would thus be necessary.

Mighty Himalaya, Karakorum, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges separate South Asia, used interchangeably with Indian sub-continent, from the rest of the Asian continent. South Asia forms a sole geographical unit, though the use of the word South Asia itself has a very short history. The scholars, however, disagree as where does South Asia begin or end. A number of scholars argue that the region comprises only the seven founding members of SAARC, but other contend that either Afghanistan or Myanmar or both of them are also part of South Asia (Muni 2003, pp.1-2). South Asia contains around three percent of the world landmass which is World’s most thickly inhabited area populated by, according to the World Bank latest data (2019), approximately 1.8 billion people, or a quarter of global population.

There exists numerous similarities among its dwellers, including shared history, civilization, traditions and culture etc. Meanwhile, it is also perhaps “the most diverse region of the world.” In fact, South Asia is, in the words of a Bangladeshi scholar, “a world in miniature” which is heterogeneous racially, ethnically, linguistically, culturally, religiously, ideologically and politically (Khan 1991, p.48-50). Former Sri Lanka President Junius Richard Jayewardene, while addressing the first SAARC summit in 1985, underlined South Asian diversities in the following words:

The countries in the South Asia Region assembled at this Conference consist of Monarchies; Republics with elected Presidents and multi-party system and

Republics with Presidents but no multi-party system yet. They are populated with people of Aryan, Dravidian, Arab and Mongolian descent. A billion and a quarter people live here; some of them the richest and some the poorest in the World. Two of the World's great religions Hinduism and Buddhism originated here, and Christianity and Islam have millions of followers going back to the years of their origin (SAARC Secretariat 1990, p.26).

Not only South Asia as a region, but also the regional states are religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse. For instance, India is inhabited by the six major religious groups of diverse ethnicity and cultures with about 780 different sub-dialects inscribed in 66 scripts, having 122 major tongues (voiced by more than 10,000 people) and 22 official languages (Naazer 2018-b).

The population of each SAC is characterized by the predominance of a single religious group. Both India and Nepal have predominantly Hindu population, while the Muslims comprise the majority of the population in Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives. In Sri Lanka and Bhutan, Buddhism is professed by most of the populace. Hindus make up 79.8 percent and 81.3 percent of the Indian and Nepalese populace, respectively. Muslims comprise 96.28 percent and 89.1 percent of the inhabitants in Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively, and 100 percent of that of the Maldives. Buddhists share 70.2 percent and 75.3 percent of the Sri Lankan and Bhutanese populace, respectively (Naazer, 2018-b).

Assorted religious and ethnic minority groups reside in different SACs. Hindus form the biggest minority religious group in Bangladesh (10 percent), Sri Lanka (12.6 percent), Bhutan (22.1 percent), and Pakistan (1.6 percent) - followed by Christians (1.59 percent). Muslims make up the biggest religious minority group in India (14.2 percent) and the second biggest religious minority group in Sri Lanka (9.7 percent) and Nepal (4.4 percent). In Nepal, Buddhists with 9 percent of national population make up the biggest religious minority (Naazer, 2018-b). The grievances, concerns, demands and political activities of the minority groups fuel conflicts within states and also inflame tensions across the border. The religious differences, ethnic diversities, and political divisions, besides several other factors, are the main reasons of tensions and conflicts between and within SACs causing wars and internal strife in the region (Khan 1991, pp.48-9).

INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION TRENDS IN THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

Indian sub-continent stayed fragmented and underwent political mayhem and disorder during most of its recorded history; with no evidence of its voluntary integration. It was unified into a single state only through military means, at least three times in the past; first, under the rule of Chandra Gupta who founded the Maurya Dynasty (321-185 BC) that reached to its zenith in the reign of his grandson Asoka in the third century BC (Viotti & Kauppi 2013, p.62-3); second, during the Muslim rule, initially in the period of Delhi Sultanate and then Mughal Empire. Both the times, i.e. under the Maurya Dynasty and the Muslim rule, the monarchs displayed great forbearance and whole-heartedness towards their subjects especially those adhering to other religious beliefs. Gupta, initially a Hindu and champion of using fierce methods for political goals, embraced Buddhism and became a torchbearer of non-violence. Equally, the Muslims monarchs exhibited unparalleled patience towards indigenous populace, including Hindus. Akbar, one of the six great Mughal rulers, went to the extent of originating a new religion, *Din-i-Elahi* (an amalgamation of

Islam and Hinduism), to appease Hindus at the cost of annoying Muslims. The unity of India brought by him and his successors persisted despite little interludes owing to the rebellions of local power claimants, for about a century. The weakening of Mughal Empire led to the disintegration of India that gave the British an opportunity to intrude and unite the sub-continent under its iron hands till 1947 (Inayat 2007, p.13).

The Mughal and British rule, most notably the latter, united the entire sub-continent into a single unit by introducing similar administrative, political and socio-economic systems and building an extensive communication (roads, and) railways network (Bokhari, 1985, p.372). Administratively, the British Empire stretched to the areas encompassing Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Myanmar and the Maldives. As such, entire area became a single market where people, goods and money moved freely. This integrated market (economic and political union) was buttressed by the use of a single currency since the Mughal era. The coins of Aurangzeb were used in Southern India as well as Ceylon while British rupee was used not only in entire South Asia but also in parts of the Gulf region. In their bid to pursue their colonial aims, the British also enforced a unified administrative, judicial, political (parliamentary) and educational system in South Asia. The entire region became physically integrated because of communication, energy, and transport network. The roads, railways, rivers infrastructure, and telecommunications developed either under British era or before it, facilitated people's free mobility across the region. As Sobhan noted, at the time of partition of India, SACs possessed the integrated physical infrastructure developed to the level that European nations took 50 years to reach (1998, p.5). The leadership of AINC sought to preserve the unity of the British Indian Empire but it could not stop division of the sub-continent into several states.

Centripetal or centrifugal forces operative in South Asia

Does South Asian regionalism belong to the same category or specie to which the European integration comes from? Were any integrationist movements of some significance operative in the region before or at eve of establishment of SAARC? Does South Asia currently experience centripetal or centrifugal forces? Have the factors that led to the disintegration of South Asia become debilitated, neutralized or otherwise? This necessitates an investigation of the conditions and factors that caused political divisions and economic disintegration of the sub-continent. It would help comprehend the dynamics of demand of South Asian regionalism that can be a guiding source to put SAARC on the right track.

Before partition 1947, most parts of the sub-continent formed a single administrative, political and economic unit having same parliamentary, judicial, educational, communication, and transport systems that provided political leaders and people of all parts to communicate with each other. The region possessed all characteristics of an economic and monetary union and hence, its people were more integrated than the members of European Union (EU) after decades of the integration process (Sobhan 1998, pp.4-5). Nevertheless, sub-continent had to be partitioned on religious and ideological basis because of numerous factors.

The main cause of the partition of Indian sub-continent was the fear among Muslims, the second largest religious community in South Asia, of Hindu domination in the post-British era. Hindus on the being perpetual majority and politically and socio-economically in superior position could rule

the Muslims incessantly. Under such circumstances, Muslims under the banner of All India Muslim League (AIML) strove to guard their political rights, economic interests and separate cultural identity as they were afraid of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural assimilation by the Hindu majority. Disregard on the part of Muslims for the western educational system relegated them to socio-economically backward situations whereby they would not find themselves in a position to safeguard their economic security in a united India where better educated Hindus were already in pre-eminence position in all walks of life. Thus, one of the main causes behind Muslim leaders' desire to have a separate homeland was to achieve political sovereignty that could ensure enhanced economic fortunes for their masses (Sobhan 1998, pp.6-8).

Muslims were not only concerned about their political and economic rights but also their religious and cultural distinctiveness. Their leaders were worried that majoritarian Hinduism would absorb Muslims into its resilient culture and their destiny would not be far different from earlier people (nations) who had arrived in India as conquerors but eventually lost their distinctness and were absorbed into Hinduism (Ahmad 2005, pp.1-11). Their worries were not unfounded. The fate of earlier invading nations substantiated it and Punj, a leader of BJP, has depicted this very fact in these words: "The ethnic diversity of India has never been a problem – for throughout her history she has been able to absorb different races and impose on them one common culture and tradition. The most important cementing factor has been the Hindu religion." He maintained, from 327 BC to 400 AC the invaders including Greeks, Huns, Kushana, and Sakas, captured parts of Indian lands "for some time before being won back by the Hindus. But the most important thing to note is that long before they have been physically defeated by the Hindus they became culturally Hindutised." Punj contended that Huns were the most ferocious among them because they were "more interested in destruction than in victory." Their brutality was unmatched but eventually they had to "yield before the resilient Hindu confederacy." Mihir Gul, the cruelest king among Huns, was converted to Hinduism and ultimately worshipped Shiva. Huns "remained alive in genealogical currency but culturally, religiously and historically became Hindus" (Punj 2003, pp.13-5).

The ethno-religious nationalism is hitherto vibrant among SACs and centrifugal forces endure to threaten the unity and territorial integrity of the regional states. The separatist movements, based either on religion or ethnicity, continue to haunt regional peace through unleashing ferocity with varying intensity in different parts of South Asia. Even after about seven decades of their independence, SACs have not been able to successfully achieve the goals of state building or national integration. They could not fully assuage the grievances and concerns of their ethnic and/or religious minorities living within their national boundaries. All SACs are more or less preoccupied with their domestic security challenges and confront grave problems of internal "political order and national integration." Thus, leadership of SACs has to give more attention on integrating groups and communities living within their national borders instead of focusing beyond them (Rizvi 1991, pp.206-8; Naazer 2018-b).

The partition of India could not stop course of political disintegration and economic fragmentation of the sub-continent. Instead, it rather provided a motivation to several groups and communities to seek political and economic freedoms, to preserve cultural identity and to pursue emancipation from domination of others. Thus, pursuit of political autonomy, separate ethno-linguistic and/or religious identity, and economic freedom affluence and freedom by minority groups persistently

haunt security and territorial integrity of SACs. These threats manifesting the prevalence and intensity of centrifugal forces operative in the region are discussed below.

The problem of national integration, arising out of sub-nationalism or micro-nationalism, prevails in all SACs including India, the largest regional state. India since its inception faced centrifugal forces of diverse nature and intensity and its territorial integrity is challenged by several separatist movements in different parts of the country (Muni 2003, p.3). According to a recent study, over 36 separatist movements including 22 large-scale movements are currently operative in India (“36 separatist movements,” 2018). Another report claimed that India faced 135 separatist movements. Though many of them were small and dormant but they show prevalence of centrifugal tendencies in India (Sehgal & Robotka, 2019). According to Griffiths (2018), India is one of “the most secessionist-prone countries in the world.” The notable secessionist movements in India, as Griffiths (2018, pp.216-7) described, included Nagas (1948-2011), Meitei (1964-2011), Mizos (1966-2011), Tripuras (1978-2011), Assam (1979-2010), Sikhs (1981-1993), and Boro/Bodo (1986-2011). Freedom movement in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) is the fiercest one being fought since 1947. IOK is not only a core issue between India and Pakistan but Kashmiris are also an important party to the dispute. Kashmiri nationalism is strong in IOK, and to a lesser degree in Pakistan’s controlled Kashmir also, which wants to form an independent state. The movement for independence or to accession to Pakistan gained momentum after 1989 that has taken lives of over 100,000 people in the disputed territory. Like elsewhere in India, New Delhi uses brute force to suppress the separatist elements in IOK. Indian state of Punjab also witnessed the bloody secessionist movement in 1980s. Sikh separatists wanted to create an independent state, Khalistan, which was crushed by Indian forces (Griffiths 2018). However, the supporters of Khalistan are still active inside or outside India (Sehgal & Robotka, 2019). India faces several secessionist movements in its north-eastern region since its independence. Historically, India accused China, Pakistan, Bangladesh (after Pakistan’s breakup in 1971) and Myanmar (formerly Burma) of supporting separatists in its north-eastern region including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura, etc. (Bhaumik 2009). Meanwhile, the Naxalites pose serious threat in several Indian states. Out of 683 total districts in India, 106 spanning in 10 Indian states including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, are badly affected by Maoists insurgency. Reportedly, 44 districts are “worst-affected” by their activities (Singh 2016). The red corridor endures to loom large on Indian security and territorial integrity. In 2010, Manmohan Singh, the then prime minister of India, termed Maoists as the greatest threat to Indian security (“Naxalism gravest internal,” 2010).

Pakistan being formed on the name of two nation theory based on Muslim nationalism confronted several secessionist movements from the onset. In North West Frontier Province (NWF), now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Abdul Ghaffar Khan, an old ally of AINC and the leader of Khudai Khidmatgar Tehreek (KKT) or Red Shirts Movement, demanded creation of Pakhtunistan, a separate homeland of Pakhtuns, comprising Pakhtun majority areas of NWFP and Baluchistan. The movement could not get enough public support and died down despite creating several problems for Pakistan at domestic and international level. The movement was supported both by India and Afghanistan in their bid to undermine the newly created state of Pakistan. Indian leadership was also supportive of every probable secessionist movement formed on the basis of either geographic affinity of the people or ethnicity that could potentially undercut the basis of Muslim nationalism,

upon which Pakistan was founded. India, nonetheless harboured other ambitions and goals against Pakistan as well. Pakistan also witnessed intermittent separatist tendencies in Baluchistan (in 1950s, 1970s, and after 2005) and Sindh (1980s). A few elements aspired separation of Karachi from Pakistan. The separatist movements in KP, Balochistan, and Sindh (or Karachi alone) were mainly backed by India and occasionally by Afghanistan, both motivated by diverse goals. The most manifest Indian support to a secessionist movement in any part of Pakistan was witnessed in 1971 when initially New Delhi secretly supported Mukti Bahini, an armed wing of Awami League led by Sheikh Mujeeb-ur Rehman, and then openly intervened militarily to dismember Pakistan (Naazer 2018-b; Naazer 2019). Besides, external causes, internal forces were also working behind the secessionist tendencies in different parts of the country especially in East Pakistan (Islam 1989). The main reason has been the failure on the part of Pakistan's ruling elites to assuage the concerns and grievances of its own people, especially those from the smaller provinces and minority ethnic groups. The people of smaller provinces as well as those of former East Pakistan could not get their due share in decision-making process mainly because of the rule of non-democratic governments in Pakistan. The sense of relative deprivation arising out of their political estrangement, economic deprivation, social segregation and cultural domination in the hands of ruling elites mainly from Punjab province created strong resentment and generated separatist tendencies among the people of East Pakistan that was fully exploited by India to its advantage and dismember Pakistan in 1971. Thus, a sub-national conflict led to disintegration of Pakistan in 1971 (Sobhan 1998, p.7; Naazer 2018-b; Naazer 2019).

Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim (89 percent) country, has a considerable Hindu population (10 percent) which forms the largest religious minority. Both Muslims and Hindus speak Bengali or Bangla, the official language of Bangladesh, a vernacular spoken by about 98 percent people of the country. It makes Bangladesh, unlike other SACs, linguistically a monolithic state. Still Bangladesh is not immune from the secessionist tendencies. Soon after its birth midwifed by India, Bangladesh faced an insurgency led by Chakma community that predominantly professes Buddhism (90 percent), comprises just one percent of the overall population of Bangladesh and live in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southeastern part of the country. The concerns and grievances of this community are rooted back to the British rule that persisted and reinforced under the successive governments of Pakistan (before 1971) and Bangladesh. Their quest to gain their political, economic and cultural rights led Chakmas to first struggle politically under the banner of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) formed in 1972 and then through armed struggle for which they formed a militant group, Shanthi Bahini (SB) or Peace Force, in 1973. SB launched a bloody separatist movement in 1975 that lasted for about 5 decades or so. It was reportedly supported by India after killing of Sheikh Mujeeb in a bloody military coup in 1975. Chakma insurgency has been apparently eliminated due to cooperation extended by India after Mujeeb's daughter Hasina Wajid came into power in Dhaka (Husain, 1997; Mohsin, 2006; Naazer 2018-b; Saha, 1999).

Sri Lanka too faced a secessionist movement, in fact, the most manifest, strongest and fiercest of all of such tendencies in the region. Sri Lanka is inhabited predominantly by Sinhalese who mostly profess Buddhism. Sinhalese' domination is well established on the country's politics, economy and culture that alienated Tamils, the largest ethnic and religious minority in the country. Though Sri Lanka had already witnessed a ferocious wave of terror unleashed by left-wing Sinhalese under the

banner of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1970s but the more vicious terrorism it witnessed was launched by Tamil separatists supported by Indian since early 1980s (Muni 2003, p.3; Naazer 2017; Naazer 2018-b). Tamils had almost been successful in liberating their territories away from the control of Sri Lankan government and they established their de facto government centred in Jaffna in northern part of the country for about two decades or so. However, they were crushed in a military campaign by Sri Lankan armed forces in 2009. Despite this military defeat, the separatist tendencies among Tamils are still alive (Naazer 2017).

Nepal, a predominantly Hindu populated state, confronts the rising Terai nationalist movement in response to the alleged domination of the Hill people. Terai region bordering with India is inhabited by several ethnic groups, one third of them belong to Hill people settled there by the government in the past. The majority of the people popularly known as Madheshi or Madhesi (both are used interchangeably) have a long and deep sense of deprivation due to political exclusion, economic dispossession, social segregation compounded with suspicions as disloyal to the state for having close affinities with people across borders within India (Gill & Paswan, 2017; Qazi 2019; Nayak 2011; Paudel 2016). Terai region remained a hub of activities, including political struggles, rebellions, armed movements, militancy or insurgency against several governments and successive Monarchs in Katmandu in the past. Many of them were backed by New Delhi (Naazer 2018-a). After monarchy was abolished, Nepal was declared a republic in 2008 (under a provisional constitution) and it adopted a new democratic (and permanent) constitution in 2015. Madhesi people increasingly felt politically marginalized and excluded. Their demand to amend the constitution on true federal lines were not acceded to by the ruling elites in Katmandu after which several armed groups and political parties ventured for separatism (Gill & Paswan, 2017; Qazi 2019; Nayak 2011; Paudel 2016). A few of them especially militant organizations such as Terai Cobra, Madheshi Janadhikar Forum and Nepal Defence Army besides others operate from Indian soil (Naazer 2018-a). The leaders of these groups, however, have divergence of opinion regarding their ultimate goals and means to achieve them, and some of them are ready to reconcile with Katmandu (Qazi 2019), albeit, they pose a serious threat to Nepal's security.

Even Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan kingdom, witnessed a bloody ethnic strife and threat to its territorial integrity in 1990s. The conflict arose due to presence of an ethnic group Lhotsampa, people of Nepalese origin living in Bhutan since long who were denied citizenship rights by the Bhutanese government. The Bhutanese government perceived people of Nepalese origin comprising about one-sixth of country's overall population as cultural and demographic threat and deprived them of their rights of naturalization that prompted strong protests and violence. Their protests and political movement were supported by their Nepalese brethren living either in India or Nepal that Bhutan construed as a part of the greater Nepal scheme. Thus, Bhutanese security forces forced thousands of ethnic Nepalese to flee the country and seek refuge abroad that triggered a human rights dilemma (Frelick 2008; Rizal 2004). Some sources claimed that people of Nepalese origin constitute 28 percent or even 53 percent of the total population of Bhutan (Minorities at Risk Project, 2004) that pose a security threat to the state.

The discussion in the foregoing paragraphs shows that all of the SACs faced secessionist movements of various kinds and intensity since their independence. Though some of them have successfully controlled or eliminated the separatist tendencies, mainly through use of force but

resurgence of such propensities cannot be ruled out. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka currently do not confront any serious secessionist threat, but centrifugal elements can again accomplish strength in the future. While Nepal has faced this challenge in the recent past and future course of action cannot be predicted. India and Pakistan, the two major states of the region, sustain such threats even more profoundly.

SACs also accuse others of sponsoring separatism in their respective states. Both Pakistan and India charge each other of supporting separatist movements in their respective country. India not only blames Pakistan, but also other states including Bangladesh, Nepal and China. For instance, a former Indian Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, as quoted by Naazer (2017), had once observed: "India is a country wounded by terrorism. Virtually all our neighbors, by choice or default, by acts of commission or omission, compulsions of geography or terrain, have been or are involved in receiving, sheltering, overlooking or tolerating terrorist activities from their soil directed against India." Albeit Indian accusations against its neighbours, New Delhi's own hands are not clean in this respect cannot be denied. Gonsalves rightly observed that non-state actors jeopardized the national security, peace and geographical unity of SACs. He noted that some of the secessionist elements in SACs were backed by the neighbouring states. "No major state in the subcontinent can claim to have clean hands in this context," he maintained (Naazer 2017). The ruling elites of SRCs believe and recurrently accuse New Delhi of sponsoring separatism in their countries. Indian support for separatist movements, armed rebellions, terrorist organizations and militant groups of diverse nature is well known and documented. It supported Bengali, Baloch, Pakhtun, Sindhi or Muhajir centrifugal elements in Pakistan, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Chamkmas in Bangladesh and Madeshi in Nepal (Naazer 2018-a; Naazer 2018-b).

Ironically, SACs have not extended each other any sort of cooperation in a significant and serious manner aimed at overcoming centrifugal tendencies in a neighbouring state. Instead, they generally strove to exacerbate the problem through coercing the victim state in order to extract political concession or advance one's own strategic interests at the cost of others. For instance, Indian efforts to mediate peace in Sri Lanka and Nepal (on several occasions) had some ulterior motives that not only worsened the situation but also created annoyance and resentment against New Delhi (Naazer 2017; Naazer 2018-a). SACs practice is contrary to their obligations and commitment shown in "the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism" and Additional protocol to it, signed in 1987 and 2004, respectively. The conventions forbade its members from allowing use of their territories for any subversive or terrorist act in any of the signatory state (Naazer & Hussan, 2016).

The SACs continue to confront centrifugal propensities both at the state and the regional level. The very reasons that caused Indian partition in 1947 still haunt the region at various levels in different forms and manifestations. The failure on the part of ruling elites mainly hailing from the majority religious and/or ethnic community of SACs, to satisfy the genuine concerns and resolve the grievances of minority groups prompted the latter to struggle for their political freedom in order to safeguard their ethno-cultural (or religious) distinctiveness and warrant their economic development and prosperity (Sobhan 1998, pp.7-8).

Indian sub-continent is a conflict-ridden area where conflicts are expected to accelerate within and between SACs. Johnson (2006) highlighted four potential areas that could breed conflicts in South

Asia, which include: the challenge to Indian hegemony; resources; perceived cultural threats, and; environmental problems. He asserted that the “centrifugal forces of separatism” are expected to escalate in the twenty-first century (Johnson 2006, pp.232-4). Naqash also underscored the impediments to the growth of South Asian regionalism and asserted that:

South Asian states are ascriptive in character owing to low level of socio-cultural and economic conditions. Consequently, their regional policies have been naturally influenced by their religious and linguistic traditions. The ethnic and cultural diaspora in the region where minorities are scattered under the jurisdiction of different states provides a readymade potential for sparking off fanatical outbursts and turmoil (1994, p.103).

Both neo-functionalists and intergovernmentalists agree on the point that vibrant nationalism (or sub-nationalism) hinders progression of regional integration. Nationalist tendencies, ethno-religious attachments and primordial feelings are yet strong in the region. It makes prospects of EU modeled regional integration in South Asia bleak.

South Asian sub-continent witnessed neither a significant demand for political union nor any integrationist movement in the region, especially among the masses or intellectual in SRCs. Such assertions have only been made in India whose leadership did not want partition of the subcontinent. The people of the SRCs pursued to preserve their separate cultural identity, political independence, economic emancipation and socio-economic development and now they seek to consolidate these cherished goals. On one hand, they want to achieve the goal of national integration and state-building, while on the other hand, they are challenged by centrifugal forces at home occasionally supported from the outside. The process of disintegration of South Asia that began with partition of Indian sub-continent did not stop, and is likely to sustain in the future as well.

Under the given circumstances, the ruling elites of SACs, especially SRCs would endeavor to protect their national identities, political separation and economic self-reliance through focusing more on consolidating internal control and national integration. The imagination of South Asian union or even South Asian economic union has no popular or widespread support among the masses, thus, it appears improbable that leaders of SRCs would make any serious attempt for EU modeled regional integration in South Asia. Instead of transferring, wholly or partially, their national sovereignty to a supranational/ regional authority, they would attempt to consolidate it to the national level. As Bhatta contended, South Asia lacks a sense of “regionness” because of the predominant religious, socio-cultural, political, and ideological splits, and presence of multi-level and multidimensional conflicts that sour inter-state relations compelling SACs to pursue uncoordinated and self-centred policies. Under this environment, the European modeled regional integration in South Asia appears improbable (Bhatta 2004, pp.11-5).

CONCLUSION

South Asia as a region as well as SACs are religiously, socio-culturally, politically, ideologically, and economically heterogeneous. Assorted ethnic and religious minorities inhabiting SACs pose supposed or actual threats to their home states. They arouse grievances, stir up problems, produce and/or escalate tensions at domestic and regional level. The ethno-religious splits predominantly

originate intra and interstate conflicts and occasionally cause internal conflict or even civil war and interstate tensions and wars in South Asia.

The quest to preserve separate religious and cultural identity and seek political autonomy, and economic emancipation and development that had caused partition of Indian sub-continent did not stop in the post-independence era. In fact, it spurred several other ethnic and religious groups to seek freedom that catalyzed the separatist tendencies in almost all of SACs. The failure of national leaders of SACs to grant or effectively protect the political and economic rights of their religious and ethnic minorities and address latter's genuine concerns and grievances mostly produced discontent and unrest. The ideological and religious sensitivities, perceived political alienation, socio-cultural exclusion, ethnic estrangement, and economic dispossession cultivate a sense of deprivation among the minority communities provoking the latter to eventually challenge the writ of the government. Occasionally, the aggrieved communities revolt against the state in their quest to pursue either political autonomy or even complete independence.

Presently, there appears neither any significant movement nor an aspiration for political or economic union of South Asia at any level in SACs especially SRCs. Instead, the centrifugal forces of separatism threatening the disintegration of SACs appear to sustain in the future. The national leaders of SACs seem more interested to reinforce their control at the domestic level and to pursue the goal of national integration and state-building that could help consolidate their national sovereignty which is increasingly challenged from forces of separatism of diverse nature. To sum up, the prevailing religious differences, political and ideological splits, socio-cultural disparities, and economic discrepancies make any prospect of South Asian political or economic union improbable. In other words, the European modeled regional integration in South Asia appears unthinkable in the near future.

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