

Transitions in Southern Asia: Implications for India

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The title, “Transitions in Southern Asia: Implications for India” is openly Indo-centric. At a recent panel discussion on the current developments in Bangladesh, responding to a query about India’s concerns, I had mentioned the concerns, but had added that the developments were of primary concern to the people of Bangladesh. I was firmly rebuked by the eminent anchor for not confining myself to India’s concerns alone. However, I remain unrepentant, for I am convinced that we cannot take a holistic view of what affects India unless we first have an understanding of the dynamics of developments in our neighbourhood. To look at issues only through an Indian prism is to be only reactive to events.

What would India’s concerns be at internal changes – or transitions taking place in the neighbourhood? My understanding, particularly when we look at South Asia, is that concerns or implications are often a mutually reinforcing matter. India’s neighbours too have concerns about internal developments or changes taking place in India. These concerns or interests are sometimes deeply held or felt, as we still carry a lot of historical baggage. However, these need not necessarily be negative in substance. The implications of rapid economic growth in India, for instance, would for most, be a comforting development. On the other hand, political instability or the emergence of a government in New Delhi, which is not broadly centrist, would be a matter of concern. To arrive at a holistic understanding, it is important also for India to see itself as others see it.

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South Asia offers an extremely complex web of relationships. It cannot be equated with Europe where each nation had a distinct historical identity and experience. Some South Asian nations do, but not all. India itself cannot be compared to the Soviet Union, which was the successor to a Tsarist empire, many territories of which had only recently been acquired. It cannot be compared with China either, which resembles somewhat of an empire with all its provinces not happily or voluntarily integrated. India is a state born of an ancient idea of togetherness, even if amorphous, where each component has no difficulty in living together. Political unity may only have been occasional, but the underlying concept was always there. Happily, we take ourselves and our togetherness for granted. Nevertheless, we can also be at times a bit confusing to others. In addition, even among ourselves, we can be ambiguous to those who confuse unity with uniformity.

The 'unique' position of India in South Asia is very well known. Besides our rather forbidding size, we are the only country to have land and/or sea borders with all the other countries. With the exception of Nepal with Tibet, Bangladesh with Myanmar and Pakistan with Afghanistan, none of the others has any common frontiers except with India.

However, there is another aspect that influences our relations with the neighbours, directly or subliminally. There are strong cultural, linguistic, ethnic connections between several of our bordering states with our neighbours. Punjab with Pakistan; UP, Bihar, Paschim Banga and Sikkim with Nepal; Paschim Banga again with Bangladesh; Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland have ethnic connectivity with Myanmar; Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka. Divehi is common to Lakshwadeep and Maldives. Speaking the same language, and with Heer Ranjha in their common folklore, an Indian Punjabi would have more in common with his neighbour in Lahore than he would in discussing Tagore in Kolkata, while Bengalis from either side could converse on Tagore and Nazrul without fatigue. I think these realities of connectivity do need to be factored in whether by academicians or by decision makers. We are all Indians, but there are also many Indias.

If these are possible elements in enlarging understanding between India and her neighbours, we also have to recognise that these commonalities can also at times cause flutters among our neighbours. When an Indian says cheerfully to a neighbour that we are the same people, this can be seen as a negation of the distinct identity of the other. Oversensitive, possibly; but this too has to be recognised.

The connection between neighbouring areas raises another question when we speak of implications for India in neighbourhood developments. Some

parts of India are affected directly, both emotionally and physically, by what happens in the neighbourhood, than are others. The question of Tamils in Sri Lanka and reaction to the developments there in Tamil Nadu is a case starkly in recent focus. This is true of other areas as well. India as defined by the centre has to take these public feelings into account. But while it does so, and while the primary responsibility of the state is to its own citizens, a balance has to be maintained in how far the desires of a unit can be allowed to influence the considered judgement of the state. Here I have in mind the impasse on the sharing of the Teesta waters with Bangladesh.

We must remember that most of us are fairly new nation states. Hence, the desire to assert our nationalism in the comity of nations is still fairly strong. I am confident that with the passage of time many of these edges will wear away as we gain the self-confidence that comes with maturity. Also, though several of the states are successors to British India, with the passage of sixty years and more, we have all acquired some distinctive national identities where some commonalities have diminished and we are not 'the same people' that we once might have been. The Urdu spoken in Pakistan today is quite different from the Urdu spoken when I was there forty-five years ago. Our respective senses of self have followed different trajectories.

Reverting to India, I think we are extremely fortunate in having kept the name. There had been a debate in the Constituent Assembly where both Bharat and Hindustan had also been considered. Bharat, of course, remains, but it is India that gives us the key to inclusivity and past heritage. I recall reviewing an article by a Pakistani scholar who seemed deeply suspicious of India as a state. Interestingly, however, he wished in conclusion that there were an India with an amorphous centre and semi-independent states as constituents. They would all be part of India in a larger sense and yet manage their own affairs. Speaking in Kolkata in 1954, the recently elected chief minister of East Pakistan, Fazlul Haq – the man who had moved the Pakistan resolution in Lahore in 1940, had spoken of the inherent loyalty of the peoples of Pakistan and India to the larger concept of India, or words to that effect. He was of course, charged with treason and dismissed as soon as he returned to Dhaka. These are not practicable, possibly not even desirable, trains of thought today when objective conditions have changed so greatly in the lands watered by the Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Indus. But, they may remind us of the not so distant past and help us moderate extreme nationalist urges.

As stated earlier, India is fortunate in retaining the name and the lien to the heritage of South Asia. This creates some interesting sidelights. Here, let me

refer to a book I first read over fifty years ago, and still refer to at times. It is called “The Wonder that was India” by A. L. Basham. The India that Basham was referring to was not today’s political India but South Asia. Indians today have an unfair advantage with regard to the past because they have appropriated as their heritage all the great individuals of the past. They have been able to do it because others have sometimes not claimed theirs. When Gautam Buddha was born, there was neither Nepal nor India. Was Sita Nepali, Indian or just Maithili? It would do us good to remember that Panini, who gave us the first definitive grammar of Sanskrit, was from Attock on the Indus near Peshawar - surely one of the greatest sons of Pakhtunkhwa, earlier known as the North West Frontier Province. Then there was the prince of Uddiyana, now known as Swat, whose birth had been foretold by Gautam Buddha – the Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche, He who established Buddhism across the Himalaya and into Tibet. He too is part of our common heritage as is Atish Dipankar from a village near Dhaka. I do not believe we can ascribe nationalities to them. Speaking of nationalities, *gharib nawaz* Moinuddin Chishti, revered by all communities was an Afghan and Nizamuddin Auliya’s family members were recent emigrants from Central Asia.

All these great people are a part of our common consciousness. Indians are fortunate that by virtue of the name of their national state, they can lay immediate claim to this heritage. Here comes the question of the duality in the definition of India – the civilisational, and the political, as defined by the boundaries on the map, by the flag and columns marching to the beat of drums. Our South Asian heritage is a common heritage. At times, our sense of nationalism and assertion of our respective national identities has not enabled us to fully appreciate our great common heritage. Europeans take pride in the many achievements of ancient Greece. So should it be with the states of South Asia. India, too, has to keep this duality in mind when interacting with her neighbours.

However, let me utter a word of caution here. Civilization ties may provide a welcome foundation, but they do not necessarily translate into political ties, which are based on a different set of calculations and perceptions of national interest.

From these broader issues of connectivity let me turn to politics and security, which is the staple of diplomacy and inter-state relations. It has often been said, and I think with justification, that the thrust to regional understanding and groupings is provided by a common perception of security. The original impetus to the European Community was provided by the perceived threat from the Soviet Union, as it may have been with China with

regard to the ASEAN. Other factors, notably economic, later became dominant. We should also note that in the groupings there may be disparities in size and power, but no one country is overwhelmingly large. This is not true of our region where India is paramount under all parameters, and where one country considers India an existential threat. This is the underlying factor in the anaemic performance of the SAARC. Other means of achieving meaningful cooperation have been tried, but they do not add up to a unified view of the region. Purely on the economic front, the latest experiment seems to be a tri-lateral engagement between India, Bangladesh and Bhutan. It would hopefully, be successful.

How India should interact with non-democratic governments in the region is a debate that brings forth opposite points of view. We have had, in particular, a lively debate on this with regard to Myanmar. Whatever may be its inadequacies, India has pursued a democratic path since independence. At the level of the state, it has also dealt with neighbouring governments, which have been in uniform or otherwise autocratic. We do not dictate what kind of governments our neighbours choose. But, we cannot be indifferent to the peoples' concerns. Some time ago after the severe cyclone in Myanmar, the BBC had asked me sharply, why we had sent relief supplies to a country ruled by a military regime. I had replied that it was all very well for people far away to spout moral principles, often in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. However, India could not be indifferent to the acute sufferings of a neighbouring people and our assistance was not our vote of confidence in the military.

Even if the state of India had to deal with any government regardless of its nature, quite clearly our preference would be for democratic governments. I say this based on three assumptions, which I believe to be valid. One is that the chief concern of authoritarian regimes is not the welfare of the people, but the perpetuation of their own rule. Second, that India is not anxious to strike deals for short term benefits, but would like to strengthen and deepen relationships on a long term basis, which is feasible only with representative governments; and third, is that close ties with India are beneficial to the people of both countries and that this objective can only be pursued with governments which reflect the will of the people.

There are some very practical considerations as well. Over the past sixty years or more, all movements against authoritarianism in Nepal have had cross border bases or assistance. The only exception was possibly the Maoist insurgency. Assuming the emergence of a non-democratic establishment in Nepal, it is inevitable that there would be opposition and that such opposition would have supporters in India. Let me state that in such a situation even if

the government of the day in India were to be favourably inclined towards the dispensation in Nepal, it would be simply unable to prevent the involvement of Indians or the Indian territory. This would of course, have repercussions even in state-to-state relations. A similar situation could also unfold in Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Separately, instability in neighbouring countries affects India in terms of migration as we saw during the Maoist insurgency when large numbers fled to India from the Nepali countryside.

There are different viewpoints in India with regard to neighbours. One view is that if countries are unwilling to enter into a framework of cooperation with India, then there is no need to worry and we should go our way without undue concern. Another may hold that if we feel that our interests are affected, either politically or in the treatment of minorities, then we should impose our will. At the other extreme are those who believe in unstinted generosity.

Personally, I do not believe India can be an island in a troubled or hostile neighbourhood. Moreover, the proponents of a more robust neighbourhood policy may not have thought through the implications and consequences. I also do not believe in charity, which diminishes the prestige of either party and ultimately causes resentment. It is all too easy to slip into an attitude of 'big brother' from 'elder brother', and India must not be encouraged by her neighbours to fall into that trap. There would need to be realisation by all that absolute parity exists with regard to sovereignty, even if, obviously, there cannot be parity in all respects. In addition, as a sovereign nation, just as each has a responsibility to its own people, it must also be responsible for its own actions. India, on its part, must make every effort to build on the foundations that exist historically, but which have been overlaid by the moss of suspicions and lack of sustained engagement. This, of course, is a two way street. My experience does not show India acting out of malice. Nevertheless, we have at times been negligent. India must pursue a uniform policy of strict fairness in dealing with neighbours, keeping in mind their interest even as we pursue our own. My own preference would be a policy of 'fair plus'. India's neighbours have to reciprocate by treating India as a challenge and not a threat. The documents signed after the mutual visits by prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Manmohan Singh lay out a framework of partnership, which is unique in the history of South Asia. Its implementation should encourage similar agreements between India and others. All goodwill notwithstanding, India needs to determine - and let be known its red lines, primarily with regard to security, which neighbours should note.

There is talk sometimes of prevailing anti-India feelings in some neighbouring countries. I have spent some dozen years in three countries in the neighbourhood and must confess that I have not found any significant anti-Indian feelings among the people. Perhaps I am not sensitive enough to negative feelings; but as I see it, 'anti-Indianism' is very largely politically motivated and has no wellsprings in public thought. Concerns of far smaller neighbours for a giant next door with cultural and ethnic affinities need not be interpreted as feelings of antipathy.

Referring to the exercise of caution in trying to promote cohesiveness in the current Nepali political differences so as not to be seen to be intrusive, one is reminded of the experience of late Rishikesh Shaha, eminent Nepali politician and diplomat. As foreign minister in 1962, he had sought an appointment to see Pandit Nehru. The latter had responded that Mr Shaha was always welcome. However, whenever advice was sought by Nepal and was tendered, it would subsequently be described as interference. Things have not changed much in the past fifty years.

The other observation I would like to make here is that in my understanding, none of our neighbours – with one possible exception – would truly wish India ill. On the contrary, I have seen many take pride in our achievements. Political posturing is another matter.

We obviously have to accept the manifestations of change and shape our responses. But, can we fashion responses without an understanding of the stimuli that is causing the change or influencing developments? In addition, what makes this a further tricky exercise is that our understanding may itself be influenced by national mindsets or prejudices, and thus be flawed. Unless we are able to objectively gauge the driving forces, our responses to developments would be inadequate.

Take for instance, the current developments in Nepal. The hurdles to constitution making, the unresolved questions on federalism, the holding of elections, are all of immediate concern. However, we should also look at the assertion of people's power as seen in *jana andolan II*, and what it implied. We should try to analyse what lies behind the demands of federalism by different groups keeping in mind that they are not all the same because these issues lie at the root of the differences whose outward manifestation we see in political uncertainties.

From an image of stability and steady progress, Bangladesh has been plunged into turmoil. The leader of the opposition has spoken of an impending civil war. I think momentous developments are taking place and we need to

understand what is going on. Some of the comments I have heard in recent days do not reflect the ground reality or the history that lies behind. Shallow comments sometimes emerge from otherwise learned people. Clearly, these internal developments in Bangladesh have very great implications for India.

Sino-Indian relations are a vast subject with many different elements, one of which is the question of Tibet. India hosts a large number of Tibetans in exile, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. These are issues between India and China. An additional dimension has been added by Chinese concerns about widespread movements in Tibet for greater autonomy. The geographical position of Nepal makes it an important factor in future developments in Tibet. At least that is what the Chinese appear to apprehend. Hence - what we see as their activism in Nepal. A recent Chinese statement opposing federalism in Nepal is a pointer to their concerns. What will be the impact of China's recent activism in Nepal on Indo-Nepal relations? I think we would need to bear in mind that China is not interested in, or concerned with, either democracy in Nepal or the welfare of its people per se. While adapting to any form of government, it would be the happiest dealing with a strong central government, regardless of its nature. Thus, while both India and China desire stability in Nepal, their understanding of what this should comprise differs.

The uncertainties with regard to the future of Pakistan are many. It is not only a question of the army stepping in. After all their shadow has always been there. What is important is that we also look at future developments in Baluchistan. The end game in Afghanistan could, according to some analysts, lead to unexpected developments, which may not be too comfortable for Pakistan. Within Pakistan, there are voices from the civil society critical of Pakistan's past policies treating India as an existential threat. Do such voices indicate a change in Pakistan's mindset about India? Recently, General Kayani described terrorism as the number one threat to Pakistan. How should Indian policy makers look at these developments?

A reference has been made in the Concept Note to consensus with regard to our foreign policy. I think this is a vital issue. Some months ago when the document Non Alignment 2.0 was being released in Delhi, the authors of the study were of the view that the traditional consensus on foreign policy had broken down. Establishment representatives felt, however, that there had not always been consensus on all issues. As I see it, a distinction has to be made between consensus and complete agreement. It is possible to hold a different opinion, but accept, nevertheless, that the government's decisions are honestly taken in the larger national interest. If this definition is accepted then there was national consensus on the major issues of foreign policy, until it broke

down on the issue of the nuclear deal with the US in 2008. Without going into the merits of the deal, I feel that the government's inability to communicate and engage adequately with those with a different point of view, led to an avoidable breakdown and a divide. Since then matters have not improved. Presently we have the opposition seemingly bent on stalling the protocol on the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh, which makes no sense whatsoever by any rational yardstick. The larger foreign policy interests of India are being cynically subjected to political one-upmanship and gamesmanship

The government must accept its share of the responsibility for this state of affairs for not reaching out enough. More fundamentally, it seems unfortunately to demonstrate either lack of trust that in foreign policy issues the government is acting in the best interests of the country, or that India's external relations can be made cynically hostage to the numbers game regardless of consequences. I think it is critically important to resume the earlier practice of sober reflection by political parties on foreign policy issues. Of course, the mindless stridency of the media has not helped. Regrettably, many members of the 'strategic community' appear more committed to promoting their own convictions than in developing an objective analysis.

The whole of Southern Asia is indeed in a process of transition. Some changes are visible while some are incubating. The deliberations of this conference should be able to identify the challenges these pose for India and suggest how we should face them for our own benefit and for the benefit of Southern Asia as a whole. The two are inseparable.

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