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**Secularism and the Politics of Religion:
Whither South Asia?**

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Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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PART ONE

Introduction

Disagreement is at the root of all conflict. Differences occur in matters as simple as the choice of food, to those as complex as the road to salvation. A more serious stage of conflict arises when the conviction that the “other” is wrong leads an individual or a society to give precedence to the argument of force over the force of argument.

In the post World-War II era, religious factors have either directly caused or served as background contexts in many international disputes, territory and border issues. No continent can be said to be free from conflicts that if not directly inspired by religion (as in the Middle East or Northern Ireland), have it as a subtext along ethnic lines (Caucasus and Africa). In some cases religion might just be exacerbating an already difficult situation (Iraq).

Apart from causing immediate physical, social and economic damage, such conflicts leave wounds to fester on the mindscape of societies. In addition to leaving a regressive imprint on the development of populations, they tear asunder the idea of camaraderie of cultures. Engendered by the use of religion for achieving political aims, it could be said that such conflicts constitute the ethical dimension of the peace environment.

Despite this, the contemporary world political environment presents a picture of contradictions. Accompanied with an increase of religiosity in their people, state actors across the world have shown greater inclination to use the language of religion in their political discourse.¹ At the same time, non-state actors have used religion as the rallying cry in their fight against democracies.²

As a region, South Asia too has not escaped from this phenomenon. If anything, owing to its colonial and post World-War II history, religion’s role in the subcontinent’s respective national polities has shown greater durability than in other parts of the world. The sectarian strife in Pakistan, communal tensions in India, ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and strengthening of the forces of radical Islam in Bangladesh—all have their roots in pandering to religious sentiments by the state.

Why Secularism?

After partition of the subcontinent along religious lines in 1947, India chose a secular constitution, and Pakistan’s creator Mohammed Ali Jinnah conceptualized a state that valued freedom of religion eschewing conflict. Later, the first constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, envisaged that newly independent state as a secular democracy.

Had the state actors stuck to the script, South Asia would have been a different story. But as its present shows, respective governments are struggling to keep their nations on an even keel, spending considerable energies on thwarting destabilizing forces at work. Be it the secessionist Punjab movement of the 1980s in India; the communal violence in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002; the violent bomb blasts and other attacks perpetrated by the Islamist group Jamaa’ tul Mujahideen Bangladesh and influence of the political party Jamaat-

¹ For example, there has been an interesting debate in recent years on the use of religious lexicon by US President George W. Bush. See transcripts of a television program on the influence of Bush’s religion on his politics, broadcast on the PBS Network and posted on their website May 6, 2004, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/etc/script.html> (retrieved June 4, 2006). See also, William Hamilton, “Bush Began to Plan War Three Months After 9/11,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17347-2004Apr16.html>.

² The most notorious perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden, was known to have frequented Beirut nightclubs once, but now claims to be fighting for God and justifies killing of civilians in the name of God. See, for example, how he and other non-state actors view the complex Mid-East crisis through the prism of religion in a *Washington Post* article, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A4993-2001Sep21>.

e-Islami in Bangladesh; or the rise of the Mullah party Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal in Pakistan; most of these forces, it can be argued, are offshoots of religious pandering.

Missed development opportunities owing to sectarian and communal tensions have meant that populations struggle for the basic requirements of daily life. Any numbers of human development indicators put forward by various international agencies find the South Asian nations at the bottom of the heap. The 2005 Human Development Report finds India placed 127th, Pakistan 135th, and Bangladesh 139th in a list that ranks 177 nations of the world.³ India is followed by Solomon Islands and Pakistan precedes Papua New Guinea in the development indices. The above quoted report also says that there is a strong association between low human development and violent conflict. Indeed, violent conflict is one of the surest and fastest routes to the bottom of the Human Development Index table—and one of the strongest indicators for a protracted stay there.

The Shia-Sunni conflict in Pakistan has claimed more than 4,000 lives;⁴ all of Bangladesh's opposition party's top leadership was almost eliminated in an August 2004 Dhaka grenade attack;⁵ and India lost face and more than 1,000 lives in the communal cauldron of Gujarat in 2002. Each nation continues to pay heavy costs in terms of repercussions that include—apart from lives lost—hampered economic growth and a weakened civil society. Each bombing or communal flare up means that many more man-days lost, infrastructure damage, and adverse international image.

It is uncertain if a direct connection can be proved between secularism of a state and sectarian peace in its society. But an absence of religion-based discrimination can surely make all constituents of a citizenry more comfortable with each other. A society at peace with itself in turn is more capable of understanding conflict and better equipped for resolving disputes. As discussed in some detail in subsequent parts of this paper, the human, economic and social costs of religion-based sectarian conflict that each nation in South Asia has paid show that it is in the vital interest of all state actors to work toward the objective of a more moderate and liberal citizenry. For ultimately, you have to make electricity work, water work, and ensure there is enough corn, rice and wheat for everyone to eat. Praying five times a day, attending a temple meeting every morning, or outlawing adultery and alcohol—while noble aims toward the realization of individual self-improvement—would not help achieve these more practical steps in improving access of the populace to such basic resources. Good policies and a modern, rationalist mindset among policymakers will.

Objectives

Despite the costs incurred, little effort seems to have gone into a systematic study of remedies to counter sectarianism in South Asia. The academic and political discourse on how politics of religion has harmed peace and growth in the region has existed only as a disjointed and nation specific effort. Many times the secularism debate is event-specific—as happened during Gujarat in 2002—and takes place only in various mass media. Moreover, the few writings that are available are not free from the limitations of ideological leanings. An authoritative work on the prospects of secular democracies in South Asia, and more importantly on South Asia's collective consciousness, is still awaited. The present study, exploratory in nature, is an attempt in this direction.

South Asia consists of eight sovereign states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, all members of a regional grouping called the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Of these, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives are small and relatively homogenous states in terms of ethno-religious composition of their respective populations. Among the three, Nepal's strife is more

³ Kevin Warkins, *Human Development Report 2005: International Cooperation at a Crossroads* (New York: United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2005), 154-221, <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/>.

⁴ Zaffar Abbas, "Pakistan's schisms spill into present," BBC.co.uk, October 7, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3724082.stm.

⁵ Staff Correspondent, "Assassination attempt on Hasina," *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, August 22, 2004, <http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/08/22/d4082201011.htm>.

socio-economic and political than sectarian in nature.⁶ Afghanistan joined the group only in 2005 and would take some time before it is integrated fully. Also, being an international theater of war, events in Afghanistan are influenced more by powers beyond South Asia.

This study occupies itself with the more complex and intractable communal relations in the rest of the four nations—Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Together, they constitute the major part of South Asia in terms of area and population. This paper discusses only a single dimension of conflict in these states—that of communal clashes within the respective borders, and their influence on regional polity with its destabilizing consequences. Mention of inter-state conflicts has been intentionally avoided. The idea is to bring the element of “politics of religion” in each of these nations on a single platform to make possible a cogent analysis of the costs of sectarianism in essentially pluralistic societies.

The paper is divided into several parts. Part Two deals with the concept of secularism, its evolution through history, and how it is defined in South Asia. It would be put to interrogation in the backdrop of ever strengthening religiosity among the masses in South Asia. One Indian thinker has recently termed the fall from grace of secularism as an ideal by asserting, “Secularism is a noble but limited ethic...I don’t think it can replace religion.”⁷

A new debate is seeking to redefine secularism in its new backdrop: that of the return of religion in public discourse, and its influence on public policy. Some thinkers are already calling the post-9/11 world the age of post-secular societies.⁸ Matters are not helped when every terror attack or communal riot brings one more liberal on the street into the conservative fold. Events such as the July 7, 2005 bombings in London; the Muslim youth riots in France in October-November 2005; or the Danish cartoon row that caused controversy throughout the world all stand as question marks against the concept that the present study aims to showcase as an imperative.

As home to close to one-fourth of the world’s population (and that fraction still growing); practitioners of every major and minor religion; and more than thirty major languages and another 25,000 dialects, South Asia can lay a legitimate claim to being one of the most complex salad bowls of the world.

Giving a historical perspective, Part Two shows that secularism is not to be misconstrued as lack of religion. Rather, secularism has to be seen as a public policy tool that helps keep religious practice in the private domain and makes every citizen of each state feel that he or she is an equal stakeholder, thus reducing communal tensions in social discourse.

Part Three traces the history of the politics of religion in the subcontinent, and analyzes the region’s present sectarian conflicts and tensions. It gives a perspective on the costs respective societies are bearing due to these conflicts. Part Four examines the willingness of present leadership in the region to emerge from their historical biases and seek a new direction for their people. Part Five deals with an event in 2005 that brought a region-wide focus on the subject of this study. India’s opposition leader L. K. Advani, by calling Pakistan founder M. A. Jinnah a “secular” leader, opened a debate that is discussed in detail in this part. In the light of this discussion, the study would finally make some suggestions in Part Six, which might, if implemented by some well-meaning administrators, bring about intended results. The accent is on politics and its actors—not history, not religion. It’s about how state actors can, by choice, influence the course of events.

The study uses secularism and pluralism, as also sectarianism and communalism, interchangeably, just as they are used in the subcontinental polity. The qualitative research tools of content analysis, interviews, participant observation and archival research have been used in the study.

⁶ The restored Parliament of Nepal, the only Hindu nation that existed in the world, declared Nepal a secular state on May 18, 2006. Though meant to curtail the Nepal monarch’s authority, which he exercised as a link between the state and religion (Hinduism), the step—and its peaceful welcome by the people of Nepal—only strengthens the present argument that the concept complements pluralism.

⁷ Gurcharan Das, “Religious Narcissism,” *The Times of India*, Delhi, January 14, 2006, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-1372142,curpg-3.cms>.

⁸ Jurgen Habermas, one of the most influential thinkers in the West, explains religion’s return in public discourse, in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002). *Passim*.

Research Questions

The following are the key research questions raised and investigated in this study:

1. What is the South Asian context of secularism? How do the region's politicians and scholars define it?
2. What is the history of secularism in South Asia? How has it fared vis-à-vis politics of religion in the region? What is its present status?
3. Is a secular state compatible with a religious society?
4. What has been the impact of politics of religion on general societal relations in the region?
5. Is there a realization among the ruling elite that moderation seeking secularism is better than the confrontationist systems presently existing in South Asia, albeit in various degrees?
6. What are the ways in which secularism as a tool for societal moderation can be strengthened in the subcontinent?

PART TWO

Secularism: The Subcontinental Semantics

“...You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State...”

M. A. Jinnah, Speech in the
Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, August 11, 1947

This part attempts to arrive at a conception of secularism specifically as it is manifested in South Asia. The chapter begins with various definitions of secularism as outlined by scholars; gives a historical perspective on the separation between the state and religion dating back to the Mauryan Empire of Ashoka during the third century B.C.; outlines the debate as it has unfolded post-1947; and concludes with some observations on how secularism has fared in the subcontinent.

Dictionaries define “secularism” as pertaining to this world or to things “not spiritual,” “not concerned with religion,” “a system of belief which rejects all forms of religious faith and worship,” “irreligious,” etc. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines secularism as a “utilitarian ethic” designed for the physical, spiritual and moral improvement of mankind that neither affirms nor denies the theistic premise of religion. *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* defines it as an attempt to establish an autonomous sphere of knowledge purged of supernatural presuppositions.¹

Secularism in the west came into existence as a result of the clash between the Roman Catholic Church and the medieval kingly states of Europe, which struggled with each other for political supremacy. Many states resolved the conflict by accepting the doctrine of the separation of church from state. In the day-to-day affairs of the government, interference of the church was excluded and the states ceased to have a state religion.²

Here one might add that no country in South Asia has, or had, this preceding situation: that of organized church hegemony and subsequent conflict with the state. To that extent in the South Asian context, the use of the word “secular” is more about a general temperament of disassociating religion from politics. As emphasized in the introduction, it is the pluralisms in South Asia—those of religions, languages, sects and communities—that underline the significance of tolerance within and between its societies.

Before we begin to analyze the history of secularism in the subcontinent, some terminological clarification is in order. In Hindi, India’s national language, a literal translation of the word secular is *dharma nirapeksha*—“religion neutral.” In Urdu, Pakistan’s national language, it becomes *Ladinyat*, meaning “non-religiousness”—close to atheism.

And herein lies the grain. With the return of religion in the public domain across nations, these definitions become easy targets of attack by the extreme elements of society. If the political set-up of India worked around this semantic bump to coin a new conception—that of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*—treating all religions alike or giving equal respect to all religions³—in Pakistan this semantic confusion has made mainstream politicians of all hues reluctant to be branded secularists.⁴

¹ Subhash C. Kashyap, *Our Constitution: An Introduction to India’s Constitution and Constitutional Law* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), 56-57.

² T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2-15.

³ Kashyap, *Our Constitution*, 56-57.

⁴ Irfan Husain, “The Struggle for Islam’s Soul,” Bitterlemons-international.org, July 14, 2005, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=377> (accessed March 15, 2006).

Pre-1947: Pluralism and the Empires—Three Kings, Three Religions and Their Responses

As subsequent parts of this paper deal with the post-colonial history of South Asia, it would be pertinent here to briefly take a look at the pre-1947 situation so far as secularism is concerned in the region. Historians have chronicled that whenever an empire assumed subcontinental proportions in South Asia, it has had to grapple with its diverse populace. And in doing so, secular ethos have found their way into the realm of state policy.⁵

We shall briefly discuss three examples: that of Ashoka, a Hindu turned Buddhist who ruled over the largest empire of his times in the third century B.C.; Akbar, the sixteenth century Muslim Mughal emperor of medieval India; and Ranjit Singh, a Jat Sikh, who ruled over much of North India just before the advent of the British colonial period. The reasons for choosing these rulers for mention are three fold: one, they represent three periods of subcontinental history: ancient, medieval and modern; two, the emperors represent three main religions of South Asia: Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism; and three, each of these empires rose in times when the region was passing through an intense period of conflict and turbulence. Each empire succeeded in providing a measure of stability, partly because of the policies as explained.

Grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka had been bequeathed a large, centralized empire that ran from present day Afghanistan to Mysore in South India. Diverse communities, regions, cultures and sects inhabited it, resulting in differences of opinion expressed in direct and antagonistic ways amongst the various religious sects. A discerning ruler, Ashoka must have realized the harm that these sectarian conflicts would produce. It was against this backdrop that he expounded his policy of *Dhamma*—a system of ethics.⁶ Publicized through a string of rock and pillar edicts, it emphasized tolerance of the “other” and civic responsibility.

According to a historian of the Ashoka era, Romila Thapar, there was a practical necessity to Ashoka’s *Dhamma*. So we see that at a time when Buddhism was in the ascendant (Ashoka himself was a follower for some time), the third rock edict declares, “Liberality to Brahmins and Sramanas is a virtue.” In the thirteenth year of his reign the king donated two caves in the Barabar hills to the Ajivikas, a sect disapproved of by Buddhists. The seventh rock edict pleads for toleration amongst all sects and asks communities and sects to mingle in their places of habitation. The twelfth rock edict is a direct and emphatic plea for toleration amongst the various sects. Toleration, or respect for all religions, and non-violence in the face of inter-sectarian differences were fundamental to Ashoka’s conception.⁷

In the sixteenth century A.D., the expansion and consolidation of the Mughal Empire was roughly coeval with that of the Safavid Empire in Iran and the Ottoman Empire based in Turkey. Though it had much in common with these empires, the Mughal setting was different in one important respect: a majority of its subjects were non-Muslims. Acutely aware of this demographic fact, Jalaluddin Akbar devised his policies, and indeed politics, to be more accommodating than those of the Safavids or Ottomans. Be it his network of marriage led alliances, his giving top military and administrative posts to Hindus (Raja Mansingh of Amber and Raja Todarmal, respectively), or having artists in his courts of all hues—all of it was an attempt to work within a heterogeneous environment. His abolition of *Jizya*—a tax imposed on non-believers in Muslim states—and switching from the (Islamic) lunar to the (Hindu) solar calendar showed a pragmatic streak and a determination to adapt to the Indian environment.⁸

If Ashoka had his *Dhamma*, Akbar propounded *Din-e-illahi*, a new set of beliefs, drawing on elements from the mystical strains in both Islam and Hinduism and deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism.⁹ And just as Ashoka made a distinction between his personal belief in and support for Buddhism on the one hand, and his obligation as a king to insist that all religions must be respected on the other, Akbar did not try to impose *Din-e-illahi* as a state religion. If Ashoka had his share of problems with Buddhist clergy, Akbar too had his famous

⁵ It should be noted that use of the word secularism as a well-formed concept in political discourse has emerged in South Asia only post-1947.

⁶ Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143-145.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-165.

⁸ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1998), 39-40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-43

run-ins with the *ulema* (scholars of Muslim religious law). But despite these objections, supremacy of the temporal over religious authority was clearly maintained.

The Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century is referred to as a precursor to secularism as it became embodied in the Constitution of the Republic of India.¹⁰ After unifying much of turbulence prone Punjab under his direct rule, Ranjit Singh erected a wall between the polity and the personal religious faith of the ruler. He also followed a broadly defined policy of non-discrimination toward all communities by personally celebrating their religious festivals, and by proclaiming the equality of all citizens before the law.¹¹

Post-1947: Secularism and the Constitutions

From the downfall of the Mughal Empire in early eighteenth century to the advent of the British, South Asia got fragmented into small regional kingdoms. Under British rule from the mid-eighteenth century to 1947, much of South Asia again became a single political entity. And though the British achieved a political union, the colonial nature of the administration prevented them from uniting the masses as a homogeneous nation. Many historians squarely blame the British and their policy of dividing various communities along religious lines for the growth of communalism in the Indian subcontinent.¹² The argument is that the colonial state used divisive forces to counter the ever-strengthening national movement, thus permanently jeopardizing the cause of subcontinental unity. Also, recent declassified British government documents have shown the stakes the colonial rulers had in leaving behind a fractured South Asia—a condition more amenable to their cold war era machinations.¹³

The process that gave birth to Pakistan with the partition of India in the summer of 1947 has been well chronicled and need not be reiterated here. For the purposes of this study, however, it might be stated that the partition was based primarily on religion. According to the two-nation theory, majority Hindus and minority Muslims constituted two separate nations. The partition was succeeded by one of the worst human tragedies in recent world history. Mass migrations—of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India, and of Muslims from India to Pakistan—scripted a human tragedy unparalleled in those times. Accompanying communal massacres, rape, looting and mayhem left millions dead and poisoned people's minds to a degree that it has taken more than a generation to heal the wounds.

The oft-cited quotation of Jinnah's Constituent Assembly speech reproduced in the epigraph at the beginning of this part of the paper is perhaps the clearest exposition of a secular state. And yet, this speech marked the beginning and the end of secularism in the state of Pakistan. Just after the death of Jinnah, the *ulema* registered their first success in the shape of the Objectives Resolution that was passed by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in 1949. Immediately after independence, the *ulema* had launched a forceful campaign for the enforcement of *Shariat* and an Islamic constitution. The Objectives Resolution, though leaving out the word *Shariat*, said that all sovereignty belonged to Allah and emphasized Islam as the *raison d'être* of Pakistan. To that extent it was seen as a victory for the *ulema*.¹⁴ Islam was later declared the state religion in the 1973 constitution.¹⁵ As the subsequent part on the politics of religion will show, despite sectarian strife, a pluralistic

¹⁰ Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 58-59.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bipan Chandra, ed., *India's Struggle For Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999), 408.

¹³ Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Untold Story of India's Partition: The Shadow of the Great Game* (Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2005), *passim*.

¹⁴ The significance of the Objectives Resolution is also highlighted by the fact that it became the preamble to subsequent constitutions of Pakistan in 1956, 1965 and 1973, each time with some modifications though to suit the rulers of the day. See http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/annex_objres.html.

¹⁵ Ironically, this constitution was ushered in by Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto, who had contested the parliamentary elections on the socialist slogan of *Roti, Kapda, aur Makan*—"Bread, Cloth, and a Home."

secular ideology has only been a fringe idea in the Pakistani mindscape, mainly engaging academics, left leaning liberals and the media elite.¹⁶

Proving the bond of religion to be feeble, as Pakistan approached the silver jubilee of independence its eastern wing separated amid severe repression by its western arm, giving birth to Bangladesh. The movement for Bangla nationalism was fully supported by India, with the Indian Army training the rebel Mukti Bahini (freedom force) as a build up to the revolt in the eastern Pakistani province. Secularism was one of the four fundamental principles of state policy enshrined in the constitution of Bangladesh, which was written within a year of its liberation.

But subsequent developments following a military coup brought forth a leadership in Bangladesh that, lacking in public mandate, chose religious rhetoric to rally the masses around it. This was made easier by the rising Islamic consciousness around the world in the 1970s. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), set up in 1969, was gaining strength. Arguably, it also helped the nascent nation's rulers economically to align in the name of Islamic solidarity. As explained in the next part of the paper, Bangladesh expunged the word "secular" from its constitution in 1977. Article 12, which embodied secularism and freedom of religion, was omitted by the same amendment. Article 2A, declaring Islam to be the state religion, was inserted by the Constitution (Eighth Amendment) Act, 1988.¹⁷

The Constituent Assembly debates of India in 1946–1949 saw rigorous arguments over freedom of religion, which was to be enshrined in the national document. The Preamble describes India as secular.¹⁸ Articles 25 to 28 provide all individuals guarantees of the right to freedom of religion in all its aspects. Also, given the backdrop of the nation's birth, the Indian leadership at the time thought it fit to give additional rights to minorities under articles 29 and 30, which essentially embody rights of minorities to conserve their culture, language and script and to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Having placed all these articles in part III of the constitution under the chapter on fundamental rights, the framers of the constitution sought to ensure that they were protected against arbitrary invasion by the state.¹⁹

Despite such a strong constitutional mandate, secularism has turned out to be a political hot potato of sorts in the Indian scenario. With the growth of majority and minority communalisms in the country, the concept has seen challenges that are only beginning to be addressed. Constitutional experts have suggested the term be more clearly defined in the constitution itself, firmer legislation passed and already existing legislation firmly implemented for preventing misuse of religion for political purposes by any party or person.²⁰ As the next part shows, the constitutional provisions have been misinterpreted and misused by various political denominations to suit their ends, and in the bargain disturb the environment of communal harmony in the country.

In contrast to India, there was little violence or social unrest on the eve of Sri Lanka's independence from the British in 1948. Still, the island nation had its share of important unresolved ethnic problems that had to be addressed soon. The most immediate of these problems was the political status of Tamil Hindu immigrants from South India who worked on the highland tea plantations.²¹

Beginning in the 1950s, Sri Lanka's politicians committed acts that one after another facilitated Sinhalese ascendancy over various spheres of social and political life, at the same time fueling Tamil antagonism. The nationalist government of S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike brought the Sinhala-only Official Language Act in 1956, seen

¹⁶ Secularizing Pakistan, which the constitution proclaims as an Islamic republic, has been a troubling notion for a majority of Pakistani liberals. See for example, Tarik Jan et al., *Pakistan between Secularism and Islam: Ideology, Issues and Conflict* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1998), *passim*.

¹⁷ See <http://www.pmo.gov.bd/constitution/index.htm>.

¹⁸ Secularism was, however, inserted in the preamble of the Indian constitution in 1976 by the Constitution (42nd) Amendment Act.

¹⁹ Kashyap, *Our Constitution*, 86-117.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹ An exhaustive account of the genesis and evolving complexities of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka can be seen in Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed: Religion, Violence, and Politics in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

as attacking Tamil cultural interests by the minority community. The 1972 constitution brought by Bandarnaika's wife Sirimavo put majority Buddhism on a higher pedestal than other religions, thus broadening the divide. Article 9 of chapter 2 of the new constitution calls it the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism.²²

To conclude, the phenomenon of secularism in South Asia is not a product of the church-state dichotomy as it developed in the west, but rather a societal response to its pluralism with a historical context. Also, despite being an issue of constitutional debate across the region, secularism has been equally contested in all nations, as we shall soon see.

²² See http://www.priu.gov.lk/Cons/1978Constitution/Chapter_02_Amd.html.

PART THREE

The Politics of Religion: The Mistakes

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

Matthew 22:21

This part attempts to bring on a single platform those critical moments in the post-colonial history of South Asian nations when political responses as determined by religious and ethnic considerations pushed each one of them into the arms of conflict and strengthened respective right-wing movements.

Pakistan: Muslim Unity, Ethnic Divide

The circumstances of its birth made early leaders of Pakistan use religious sentiment to strengthen the country's national identity. Beginning with the Ahrar movement of 1953, Pakistan's ruling elite chose to appease the country's Islamists, assuming they would never be strong enough to challenge the elite's power structure. In allowing the *ulema* backed Ahrar movement to paralyze Punjab before it acted, the then government of Khwaja Nazimuddin allowed the Islamists to build a reserve of counter hegemony against state power.¹

The nation paid a huge price for this ideological mooring with the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. It demonstrated the failure of using religion as a political tool without at the same time pursuing much needed socioeconomic and political justice.² With the Pakistani Army discredited, the situation after 1971 led to the religious right exerting an influence disproportionate to its strength. Saddled with a further truncated Pakistan, a cautious Z. A. Bhutto preferred to appease the *ulema* rather than fight them. The result was a constitution that went a step further than the earlier two in incorporating Islamizing principles in it. While the constitutions of 1956 and 1962 had no religion of the state, that of 1972 declared Islam as the state religion of Pakistan; the Ahmadiya Bill and the second amendment saw Ahmadiyas being thrown out of the fold of Islam; and a Ministry of Religious Affairs was set up for the first time in Pakistan. This spiral saw Bhutto, a secular and liberal politician who had contested the 1970 elections with the socialist slogan of "*Roti, Kapda, aur Makan*," choosing a more religious "*Musawat-i-Muhammadi*" (Islamic egalitarianism) as his theme song in the 1977 general elections to the National Assembly. This choice was made to counter the "*Nizam-i-Mustafa*" (system of Prophet Muhammad as based on Islamic democratic law) cry of the opposition alliance of nine religious parties.³ In one of the most poignant responses to the excommunication of Ahmadiyas, Pakistan's only Nobel laureate and then scientific advisor to the national government, theoretical physicist Abdus Salam, resigned and left Pakistan. Salam was ignored at best and ill treated at worst by respective governments until he died in 1996.⁴

All this was not enough and the Islamists carried out street protests, making governance impossible and prompting the military to intervene again with General Zia ul-Haq at the helm. Scholars are coming round to the view that it was a military-mullah alliance that brought an otherwise comfortably placed Bhutto government down, ending in his execution in 1977. The purge of Bhutto and his supporters during the Zia ul-Haq period

¹ Followers of the Ahmadiya sect, though asserting that they are Muslims, do not agree to the final prophethood of Muhammad. They follow the teachings of the nineteenth century religious figure Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and do not recognize the obligation of *jihad*. The Ahrar movement of orthodox Muslims sought to declare Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims. Beginning in 1949, it gathered steam and turned violent in 1953 with the support of the *ulema*.

² Syed Mujawar Hussain Shah, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan (1972-88)* (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University, 1996), 118-119.

³ *Ibid.*, 209-211.

⁴ Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Salam, Science and Secularism," *chowk.com*, January 11, 1998, http://www.chowk.com/show_article.cgi?aid=00000120&channel=university%20ave&start=0&end=9&chapter=1&page=1.

saw the ultimate ascent of the *ulema*, with the Council of Islamic ideology playing a vanguard role in the formulation of Islamizing laws. Beginning with the setting up of *Shariat* (Islamic law) appellate benches in Pakistan's four High Courts, and the infamous Hudood ordinances of February 1979, the Islamizing spiral carried out by the Zia regime culminated with the Shariat Ordinance of June 1988, just before Zia's death in an airplane crash.⁵ Part of the Islamizing revision of the criminal law system of the country, the Hudood ordinances are known for their strict penalties for sex related crimes that were heavily tilted against women.

Zia also passed the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance in 1979, accelerating religious activity by providing for *Maulvis* (Muslim religious scholars) joining *Zakat* (an Islamic tax on income) committees, and giving them responsibility for the distribution of collected money to the poor. In rural areas, Maulvis became Ushr collectors, changing their status altogether, giving them legitimacy with the district administration and local government. The ordinance raised their status and gave them social and political power, as they began contesting elections, first at the local bodies level and then for the legislature. With the Afghan war in the neighborhood having religious overtones, many *madrasas* in Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) became war-training centers, thus introducing a militant character to Pakistan.

A cursory analysis of General Pervaiz Musharraf's seven-year rule since October 1999 reveals how his military government has sought legitimacy by sidelining the mainstream secular political forces, and providing free space to the religious parties to spread their wings. According to scholars this has led to three interlinked problems in Pakistan's polity. First, part of the state apparatus used religion and religious groups for a political purpose. Second, the extent of the religious groups' influence and the sentiment unleashed by them could not be controlled. And third, the military stepped in to deal with the symptoms of the chaos generated by religious-political agitation, without any effort to deal with the causes of the agitation.⁶

We can conclude by saying that the Pakistani state's search for identity has been deeply intertwined with, and to that extent held hostage by, the struggle between the forces of Islamic modernism and Islamic traditionalism. Pulling from one crisis to another, Pakistani ruling elites have sought legitimacy under Islam, in the bargain reducing the religion to a political slogan and strengthening the Islamists.

Bangladesh: Islamization and the Recession of Secularism

As mentioned before, secularism was one of the four fundamental principles of state policy enshrined in the constitution of Bangladesh. Before we see how it was jettisoned out of state ideology, it would be pertinent here to outline the background in which secularism found mention in its first constitution.

Immediately after the birth of Pakistan, the country faced a hostile language movement from its predominantly Bengali eastern wing in 1948. The Bengali nationalism engendered by West Pakistani (read Punjabi) hegemony rejected imposition of Arabic alphabets and opposed the Objectives Resolution of 1949 on the grounds that it engendered an orthodox Islamic state. The East Pakistan Muslim Students League dropped the word "Muslim" from their name in 1954 and so did the Awami Muslim League in 1955. The following year, the Awami League opposed the use of "Islamic" before the Republic of Pakistan and the Assembly voted for the adoption of joint electorates.⁷ The build up to the 1971 struggle for East Pakistan's (later Bangladesh's) independence was accompanied by an experience of the most corrosive nature of religion as ideology: Pakistan was killing countless innocent Bengalis in the name of Islamic unity, and called all those who opposed them—intellectuals, students, artists, etc.—as un-Islamic.

So it was natural for rulers of the nascent nation to conceive a state that stayed clear of such repressive ideological leanings. A good beginningz however, did not translate into safe continuity for the secular idiom. The anti-secular forces began to make use of religious functions and places of worship to mount an attack on secularism and propagate their own ideas. They finally got their chance with the assassination in August 1975

⁵ Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan Between Mosque and Military* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2005), 112-126. See also Shah, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan (1972-88)*, 244-245.

⁶ Haqqani, *Pakistan Between Mosque and Military*.

⁷ Anisuzzaman, "Religion, Politics and the State in Bangladesh," in *Religion Politics and Society in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. N. N. Vohra and J. N. Dixit (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1998), 61.

of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the so-called *Banghabandhu*—“friend of Bangladesh”—and first prime minister of the country), and the coming to power of military man Ziaur Rahman.

Now here begins the story of mistakes. Zia under the martial law that he imposed in November 1975 started the Islamization project when there was hardly any scope of protest. The Islamic parties had not demanded that Islam be made the state religion, and there was no demand whatsoever from the general public to remove secularism from the constitution. Zia could have easily chosen to take Bangladesh on the road to moderation and cultural nationalism. He chose the religious path instead. Jettisoning secularism had two objectives: one, to integrate Bangladesh more with the Islamic world, whose assistance Zia sought for his economic programs; and two, to distinguish Bangladeshi nationalism from Bengali nationalism, which was seen as a mere sub-culture of Indian Bengal.

Since then it has been more a story of competitive Islamism that has guided the political parties of Bangladesh. The 1982–1990 period under General H.M. Ershad saw this trend taking a permanent structure with his declaration of Islam as the state religion. He also instituted Friday in place of Sunday as the weekly holiday. Wooing of the right wing political party Jamaat-e-Islami began with the acceptance it got in the late 1980s movement to oust Ershad, culminating with its coalition with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) just before the 2001 general elections.

The first Begum Khaleda Zia regime of 1991–1995 made Islamic features effective on the ground. The latest has been the meteoric rise of the militant group Jamaa’tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), held responsible for a series of bombings and attacks on members of the political, intellectual, and judicial elite, and the movement against Ahmadiyahs and Shias (both along the lines of similar movements in Pakistan). The unsuccessful attempt to have a Blasphemy Act, and the excitement engineered against people like Taslima Nasreen—a writer and women’s rights activist who was targeted for death in a *fatwa* by Islamic fundamentalists—are cases that serve to strengthen the impression of Bangladesh becoming a hotbed for radical Islam.

Sri Lanka: Political Patronage of Buddhism and the Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict

The Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in the island nation of Sri Lanka has claimed over 70,000 lives, and shows no signs of abatement. The slide into chaos is a story of how the competitive politics of religion led a society down the spiral of strife.

The state patronage of Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the first republican constitution of 1972 and retained in the second republican constitution of 1978. But the beginning of competitive communal politics goes back to the 1950s, and to the advent of S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike, leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Bandarnaike became Prime Minister in 1956, piggybacking a wave of Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalist revival, by dislodging the westernized United National Party (UNP) government. Some of the first actions taken by the new SLFP government reflected a disturbing insensitivity to minority concerns. Shortly after its victory, the new government presented parliament with the Official Language Act, which declared Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka. Subsequent violent Tamil protests, and a compromise federal agreement (the Bandarnaike-Chelvanayakam pact), led to Bandarnaike’s assassination by a lunatic Buddhist monk in 1959.

The Buddhist opposition to this pact was supported by the UNP, itself a victim of Bandaranaike’s communal politics. When it came back to power in 1965, the UNP paid more attention to Buddhist sensitivities than it had in the past. In an effort to widen the party’s popularity, the Christian Sabbath was replaced with the Buddhist *poya* full-moon holiday. This decision had ethno-religious overtones, since in ancient village communities of Sri Lanka the Sinhalese attended temple on *poya* days addressed by Buddhist monks in gatherings that discussed civil and religious matters, thus adding to the already prevailing Tamil sense of isolation.

A stage had been set and the next wave of communal pitching was just waiting to happen. Coming back to power in 1970, the SLFP-led United Front government brought out its 1972 Buddhist constitution. A “standardization” policy that Bandaranaike’s government introduced in 1973 made university admissions criteria lower for Sinhalese than for Tamils, particularly irking the Tamil youth. The Tamil community—the Federal Party, the Tamil Congress, and other Tamil organizations—reacted collectively against the new

atmosphere that the new constitution produced. In May 1972, they founded the Tamil United Front, which became the Tamil United Liberation Front—TULF—in 1976. It is no coincidence that the same year saw the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has since been in the vanguard of the anti-government guerilla war.

As many historians have indicated, the creation of the Sri Lankan state was a product of assimilation between the Sinhalese and the Tamils.⁸ And yet, driven by the ambitions of the day, Sri Lankan politicians chose to pit the two groups against each other. Scholars attribute this to the failure of Sri Lankan Buddhism. In tending towards nationalism, it failed to devote enough attention to the Buddha's call for compassion and non-violence.⁹

India: Majoritarianism vs. Minoritarianism

The presence of a towering personality in Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru for seventeen years after independence saved India from the sort of regression that plagued most of its neighbors. Lacking the stature of Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi, who succeeded him after a brief spell of Lal Bahadur Shastri, embroiled herself in the Sikh politics of Punjab in the 1970s, the northern state of India with a predominantly Sikh population. Punjab was facing a separatist movement led by the Sikh group Akali Dal. The Congress party of Gandhi sought to counter the Akali Dal by competitive communal politics. Gandhi's lieutenants in charge of Punjab propped up a more fundamentalist force in Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, which they subsequently failed to control. The final offensive to eliminate the Frankenstein monster she helped create culminated with the entry of Indian troops in the holiest of Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple of Amritsar. The resulting Sikh anger led to her assassination at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in October 1984. Subsequent anti-Sikh violence marked the first serious contest to secularism in India. The nation paid a huge price for the blatant political game of the Congress party to play Sikh communal politics in the state of Punjab.¹⁰

And just when everything looked like it was going right for Indira's son Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded her as Prime Minister, the twin bombs of the Shah Bano verdict and the Ayodhya dispute—both linked in a way—gave a fillip to Muslim and Hindu fundamentalisms respectively in the 1980s. Religion at best was used as an instrument in both cases.

Shah Bano had been married for forty-three years to Mohammad Ahmad Khan, a lawyer, when he threw her out in 1981 under the Islamic practice of triple *talaq* (divorce). Bano appealed and a lower court ordered Khan to pay her a maintenance allowance of 25 Indian rupees a month. The High Court of Madhya Pradesh raised this to 179.20 Indian rupees a month. Khan appealed to the Supreme Court of India, which upheld the lower court verdict in April 1985. The Muslim clergy did not like the verdict as it applied a secular criminal code to a matter that in their view was essentially in the domain of Islamic personal law. It brought out a swell of mass protests led by Muslim religious leadership of the country. A simple attempt at differentiation between the civil and criminal laws got bogged down in an emotionally charged environment. The central government reacted to the conservative Muslim protests by bringing in "The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill" in the Parliament, overturning the Supreme Court verdict in effect. Scholars show it as an example of mutual complementarity of government and religious leadership in reinforcing community identity, ultimately harming both secularism and the community.¹¹ With both the Congress and right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeking to mobilize their respective vote banks, the episode sharpened the Hindu-Muslim cleavage in India and secularism was a casualty by default.¹²

⁸ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed: Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 130-135.

⁹ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Revenge And Reconciliation* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999), 319.

¹⁰ See Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986).

¹¹ Kumkum Sangari, "Gender Lines: Personal Laws, Uniform Laws, Conversion," in *Pluralism and Equality: Values in Indian Society and Politics*, eds. Imtiaz Ahmad, Partha S. Ghosh and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 280.

¹² Asghar Ali Engineer ed., *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1987), 1.

And even as the Shah Bano controversy was at its peak, a Faizabad district court in the central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh made a ruling in February 1986, ordering the opening of the disputed Ayodhya site to prayers by Hindus. Mir Baqi, a governor of Mughal emperor Babur, built a mosque in Ayodhya in the sixteenth century. He chose a site held sacred by Hindus as the birthplace of Lord Rama, making it one of the most hotly contested religious spots (along the lines of Temple Mount). It was a long-standing issue, but one which had been lying dormant for years. Facing a right wing motivated Hindu backlash for appeasing Muslims on Shah Bano, the Rajiv Gandhi government moved ahead with the foundation stone laying ceremony of a temple at Ayodhya on November 9, 1989, this time seeking to appease the majority community. The unlocking of the complex saw subsequent mobilization by Hindutva forces that culminated with the bringing down of the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992. The then BJP president L. K. Advani's *Rath Yatra* (chariot journey) through the length and breadth of the country to mobilize Hindu sentiments for a temple in place of the Babri Mosque threw India into a communal cauldron with repercussions in neighboring Pakistan and Bangladesh.¹³

These two events – Shah Bano and Ayodhya – might have only helped Advani sell the right wing to the masses, but a majority centric movement had been in the making since the days of India's pre-independence freedom struggle. The rigid stance of the Hindu right wingers only fueled the separatist Muslim streak as a build up to the partition, even as latter's shrill intransigence hardened the stance of Hindus led in the main by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a secluded Hindu nationalistic society that later spawned a number of other right wing groups, including its political arm the BJP, post-independence.

The ghosts of Advani's Ayodhya movement refuse to die down. On February 27, 2002, fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive by a riotous Muslim mob in an attack on the Sabarmati Express train outside Godhra railway station in the western province of Gujarat. The pilgrims were part of a right-wing mobilization and were returning from Ayodhya. Like the Congress in 1984, the ruling BJP in Gujarat led by Advani protégé Narendra Modi was quick to engineer a mass riot in the state, scripting a political ascendancy that is too fresh to merit a total recall. More than 1,000 lives were lost in the anti-Muslim pogrom, harming the inter-communal relations between Hindus and Muslims, and jeopardizing state security by giving an opportunity to anti-national elements to stoke communal fires.

There seems to be no sign of stepping back. In March 2006, the communist parties of India decided to lead protests directed against US President George W. Bush on the occasion of his visit to India, tapping into the Muslim resentment against the Bush administration. In pitting a communal sentiment against the potential national gains from a new relationship with the United States, the parties sought to leverage an emotive issue to narrow electoral advantage.¹⁴ And in one of the most dangerous and ill conceived maneuvers yet, the Congress party led union government pushed the idea of job quotas for Muslims in early 2006. The step is presumed to address socio-economic backwardness of the minority community. However, in the backdrop of a long-standing and strong right wing movement against religion-based incentives in a pluralistic society like India, the divisive nature of such a step cannot be overemphasized. One might also argue that religion based differentiation goes against the grain of secularism.

In sum, we see that no political party in India, and none of the ruling dispensations in South Asian nations, has been able to stay away from the temptation of playing the communal card to bolster their grip over power. In almost all cases the gains made by those using religion out of political expediency have been ephemeral, while elements emboldened by such actions in respective societies have developed into uncontrollable forces that challenge the state power. Each nation continues to pay a heavy price.

¹³ Here it would not be wrong to claim that this contributed to the Kashmir crisis that was in the making in 1987. See Nikhil Chakravarty, "Secularism Segregated in Rajiv's India," in *The Shah Bano Controversy*, ed. Asghar Ali Engineer (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1987), 118.

¹⁴ The communist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI (M)—had crucial elections lined up in five states of the country at the time of Bush's visit. They were the main contestants in the states of Bengal and Kerala.

PART FOUR

The Politics of Religion: The Price in the Present

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

English proverb

During one Friday prayer in early March 2006, tribal clerics of South Waziristan province in western Pakistan announced the enforcement of *Shariat* (Islamic law) in the federally administered area, saying that feuds would now be resolved through Islamic laws instead of tribal assembly.¹ The internecine Shia-Sunni conflict has claimed more than 4,000 lives across Pakistan, in addition to leaving a legacy of bitterness between the two sects of the same religion. It is no coincidence that most radical organizations belonging to the two sects (Shia Tehrik-e-Jafaria or Sunni Sipah-i-Sahaba, for example) were born in the immediate aftermath of Zia's Islamizing laws in the late 1970s.² The tribal rebellion in the western provinces of Baluchistan and Waziristan that began towards the end of 2005 forced Pakistani authorities use helicopter gunships to control the situation. An April 2006 newspaper report from a Pakistani English-language daily suggested that up to 60 percent or more of the country is without proper writ of the state.³

The turbulent 1990s also marked a lost decade for Pakistan in terms of economic growth. Poverty showed a reverse trend, increasing from 17.4 percent in 1988 to 32.2 percent in 1999.⁴ Inflow of foreign funds was limited to monetary aid from various international agencies. Accounting for low foreign direct investment in Pakistan, one prominent Pakistani economist has indicated that it may be due to a general negative perception of Pakistan in international business circles, complete with images of gun-toting, anti-western Islamic fundamentalists and sectarian warfare.⁵ And despite efforts at painting a rosy picture of the present by the incumbent military regime, unemployment increased from 6 percent in October 1999 to 8 percent in June 2003.⁶ By marginalizing liberal, secular politicians and parties, and creating the space for religious extremists, General Pervez Musharraf has ensured his country's isolation and cut off much needed avenues for economic growth and development.

In Bangladesh, the consequences of accommodating religious extremism have been similar. In August 2004 a grenade attack during a political rally almost wiped out the opposition Awami League top leadership. In August 2005 more than 450 bombs exploded in 63 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh, injuring more than 200 persons and killing three. Jamaa'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility for the bombings. Leaflets recovered from some of the bombing sites called for implementation of Islamic law in Bangladesh and warned US president George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to stay away from Islamic countries. Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali, the alleged ringleader of the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, was

¹ Editorial, "Taliban Law in Waziristan," *Daily Times* (Lahore), March 12, 2006, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006\03\12\story_12-3-2006_pg3_1.

² Zaffar Abbas, "Pakistan's Schisms Spill into Present," *BBC.com*, October 7, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3724082.stm; "Pakistan's Militant Islamic Groups," *BBC.com*, October 7, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3170970.stm.

³ Editorial, "The Mess in NWFP," *Daily Times* (Lahore), April 5, 2006, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006\04\05\story_5-4-2006_pg3_1.

⁴ Sultan Ahmad, "Coming to Grips with Poverty," *Dawn*, December 11, 2003, <http://www.dawn.com/2003/12/11/op.htm>.

⁵ Shahid Javed Burki, "Foreign Direct Investment: Has Pakistan Missed the Boat or Could It Play Catch-Up," a paper presented at a workshop sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on Pakistan's Future and US Policy options, Washington, DC, November 27, 2001, <http://www.csis.org/saprog/011127PKevent.pdf>.

⁶ Faisal Cheema, *Macroeconomic Stability of Pakistan: The Role of the IMF and World Bank (1997-2003)*. ACDIS CHE:1.2004, ACDIS Occasional Paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, <http://www.acdis.uiuc.edu/Research/OPs/Cheema/CheemaOP.pdf>.

allegedly heading to Bangladesh when he was captured in Thailand. Reports say the arrested top leaders of JMB have confessed to having links to and patronage of some top leaders in the present government.⁷ The rise of the forces of radical Islam in Bangladesh has been so sudden that a comprehensive silver jubilee review of the country brought out in 1998, and sponsored by the Ford Foundation, does not even take note of such an element taking shape in the nascent nation's society.⁸ As elsewhere, terrorism in Bangladesh is an offshoot of religious extremism. The blending of politics and religion has divided the people in so many ways that it has become difficult for the political establishment to manage the differences. First, there is the division between Muslims and non-Muslims. Then there are tensions of the Shia-Sunni conflict. This has in turn fanned fires of minority separatism with the religious minorities grouping under the Hindu-Buddha-Khristan Aikya Parishad (Council for Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity).

Meanwhile, for the common masses in Bangladesh the struggle to gain access to basic goods and services continues. Power shortages are chronic.⁹ A plethora of reports show how the radical outfits have made life miserable for common Bangladeshis. In their confessions, the JMB leadership has said that their version of Islam does not permit watching movies, viewing *Jatras* (a form of folk drama combining music and dance) and visiting Mazars, all symbols of Bangla syncretism.¹⁰ A fiscal year 2005 mid-term review of Bangladesh's economy conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (Dhaka) terms the country's macroeconomic situation as fragile. Income inequality increased between 1999 and 2004, and investment stagnated.¹¹

Echoing the neighborhood's sentiments, India too has seen cynical communal manipulations, mass killings and periodic sectarian strife through its post-independence history. The March 2006 anti-Bush protests in towns of central India turned violent, leading to four deaths, curfew and communal tensions. The nation is presently contending with three major fault lines in Kashmir (separatism), North East (tribal unrest and separatism) and Central India (naxalism). Of these, none is directly related to communal or sectarian conflict. In all three cases the insurgency is targeted against state hegemony. Of greater concern for this study are the communal events of Delhi and Punjab in 1984, in Ayodhya and Mumbai in 1992–1993 and Gujarat in 2002. If we add the Nellie (1983), Bhagalpur (1989) and Bhiwandi (1992) riots to this, the total death toll would easily cross the 10,000 mark, more than that of communal riots in Pakistan and Bangladesh put together.¹² Every communal riot burns a hole in the economy of the region that takes months to heal. In the case of Gujarat in 2002, the economic damages during the first month of violence were pegged at Rupees 5 billion (approximately US dollars 110 million) per day.¹³ Having knowledge of the schisms that such communal incidents cause, forces have sought to destabilize the country with terror incidents like the January 1993 Bombay terror bombings that left more than 200 dead; the September 2002 Akshardham terrorist attack on the Gandhinagar temple that left forty-two dead and the nation on tenterhooks in the immediate aftermath of the Gujarat violence; and the March 2006 Varanasi

⁷ A.N.M. Nurul Haque, "By The Numbers: Financiers and patrons of militancy," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), March 19, 2006, <http://www.thedailystar.net/2006/03/19/d603191501109.htm>.

⁸ Abdul Bayes and Anu Muhammad, eds., *Bangladesh at 25: An Analytical Discourse on Development* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd, 1998).

⁹ Sheikh Mohiuddin, "Power Crisis Turns Worse," *The New Nation* (Dhaka), front page, March 27, 2006, http://nation.ittefaq.com/artman/publish/article_26724.shtml.

¹⁰ Staff Correspondent, "Disclosure of JMB Patrons Awaits Green Signal from Authorities," *The Bangladesh Today* (Dhaka), March 15, 2006, <http://www.thebangladeshtoday.com/leading%20news.htm>.

¹¹ Debpriya Bhattacharya et al. eds., "State of the Bangladesh Economy in the Fiscal Fear 2004-2005," Centre for Policy Dialogue, http://www.cpd-bangladesh.org/IRBD2005_2nd.pdf.

¹² Most of the communal violence in post-independence India has been sporadic and local in nature, limited to some towns with a history of bad inter-community relations. But the events quoted above were much larger in scale, and in the nature of organized massacres. The February 1983 Nellie massacre in Assam left more than 3,000 Muslims dead. Close to 3,000 Sikhs perished in the October 1984 anti-Sikh killings in Delhi. Both the Delhi killings and the March 2002 Gujarat pogrom had visible administrative complicity. For details, see Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986); Siddharth Varadarajan, ed., *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy* (Delhi: Penguin, 2002); Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (London: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹³ Abhishek Kapoor, "Traders Eager to Get back to Business," *The Indian Express*, March 26, 2002, http://cities.expressindia.com/archivefullstory.php?newsid=13067&creation_date=2002-03-26.

bombing of an important Hindu religious site in the temple town. No political party in India can absolve itself of the sin of communal politics leading to one or more of the episodes as quoted above. If India has escaped bad press of late, it is mainly owing to its economic profile rather than its social standing in the comity of nations.

And despite a better showing by Sri Lanka than the other South Asian nations on human development indices, its defence budget shot up from a mere 0.8 percent of the GDP in 1978 (the year LTTE gained strength) to 4.6 percent in 1991 (when the war with LTTE peaked).¹⁴ More than 55,000 lives have been lost in the conflict, which shows no sign of calming down.

Apart from the massive and visible human and material loss, there are indirect costs resulting from the politics of religion in terms of a destabilized society. It becomes a vicious cycle: the state first engenders a conflict; then it arms itself by clamping down on human rights and civil liberties; the clampdown in turn gives rise to discontent, in turn further fueling the conflict.

¹⁴ K. M. de Silva and S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe, "Sri Lanka—Country Paper 1992," in *Perspectives on South Asia*, eds. V. A. Pai Panandiker and Navnita Chadha Behera (New Delhi: Konark, 2000), 273.

PART FIVE
The Advani-Jinnah Debate

There might be a succession between peace and growth but the reverse does not seem to be true. An analysis would show that the communal strife in all South Asian nations has continued unabated despite their good showing on the economic front. Pakistan was the second fastest growing economy in the world in 2004–5 with no effect on the Baluchistan and Waziristan violence; India has consistently clocked above 7 percent GDP growth for almost a decade now and yet the otherwise progressive state of Gujarat became a communal cauldron in 2002; and Bangladesh crossed the 5 percent GDP growth mark for the first time last year, yet the intensity of terrorist violence gained ground. Where does all this lead? Do the ruling elites comprehend these trends? Do they have ideas, and more significantly the will, to manage intra-society conflict?

On a visit to Pakistan in June 2005, India's leader of the opposition and president of the right-wing BJP, L. K. Advani, called Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah a "great" leader who wanted a "secular" Pakistan. Media on both sides of the border analyzed Advani's digression from his party position as proof of the irreversibility of the on-going peace process. An editorial in *The Indian Express* of June 7, 2005 called it an "act of courage." One of the more succinct comments, however, came from Pakistan in *Dawn*, a newspaper Jinnah helped set up. Commenting on Advani's statement, columnist Irfan Husain wrote: "Many younger readers might find this entire subject academic and irrelevant. But in reality, this ongoing debate is nothing short of a battle for the soul of Pakistan. Indeed, its outcome will determine what kind of country future generations will grow up in."¹

What was the real motive of this Advani turn-around? Analysis of a cross section of opinions, media reports, subsequent events and some interviews with people closely associated with them bring out two points. One, Advani intended to assure a broad cross section in Pakistan that India has accepted Pakistan's nationhood without doubts. His statement that "the emergence of India and Pakistan as two separate, sovereign and independent nations is an unalterable reality of history" was intended to do that.² Two, his reading of Jinnah's speech sought to target two audiences: the Pakistani ruling elite (how far they have strayed from the ideals of their founding father) and the right wing back home (that they had better understand the futility of a "Hindu only" approach and accept 150 million Muslims of India as a reality).

Himself a victim of India's partition—his family migrated from Sindh in present day Pakistan to India in 1947—Advani might have succeeded in temporarily stabilizing the Indo-Pak peace process that his party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government started in 2002, but his message was lost on the extreme right on both sides of the borders. He was made to resign as president of the BJP in December 2005, amid public denouncements of his Jinnah comment. The "two-nation theory" and an elusive equality with India continue to define the Pakistani policy establishment's reactions.

Here, making a brief comparative study with that of another trouble spot on the international scene—the Israel-Palestine conflict—would be in order. During the time that Advani was making his ideological leap of faith, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was charting an about-face of his own, making unilateral withdrawals from Gaza strip settlements. Much like Advani's stewardship of India's extreme right in the preceding two decades, Sharon had been the force behind Israel's right-wing consolidation, the Likud. Having engineered and sustained conflict in their respective polities to achieve their career objectives, both leaders, after spending a couple of years in government, have shown a newfound proclivity to moderation. Some scholar of comparative studies in South Asia might want to study this phenomenon of right-wing leaders shifting to the center in greater detail. Such a study, if properly placed in the context of the elemental human desire for peace, should help

¹ Irfan Husain, "Battle for Pakistan's Soul," *Dawn*, June 26, 2005, <http://www.dawn.com/weekly/mazdak/20050625.htm>.

² This was part of a lecture given by L. K. Advani at the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in Lahore on June 2, 2005, available at http://bjp.org/Press/june_0205.htm.

arrive at some theory of limitations of right-wing politics and help shape a more conciliatory political discourse in the region.

The architect of the Kargil war, General Pervez Musharraf (now president of Pakistan) in a widely publicized article of June 2004, called it a time for “enlightened moderation” and “renaissance” in Pakistan:

My brother Muslims, the time for renaissance has come. The way forward is to head towards enlightenment and concentrate on human resource development through poverty alleviation, education, health and social justice. If this were our direction, it cannot be achieved through a confrontationist approach. We have to adopt the path of moderation, and a conciliatory approach, to wash off the common belief that Islam is a religion of militancy and is also in conflict with modernization, democracy and secularism.³

Musharraf’s declaration might be meant more for the consumption of western governments and funding agencies than his own people, but this espousal of a moderate Pakistan is nevertheless significant.

The problem begins when Musharraf wants to project a soft image of Pakistan and yet does not back the few vocal enlightened moderate people of his society. Asma Jahangir and Mukhtaran Mai come to mind. Jahangir is the former chairman of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, a lawyer and an activist. She was publicly beaten and stripped by hooligans in the presence of security and intelligence agencies in June 2005 in Lahore, for organizing a mixed gender marathon. Mai, 30, was gang raped on the orders of a local tribal council, in June 2002, in Muzaffargarh district of Punjab province. Her ordeal to get justice continued for more than three years, attracting international media attention, and turning her into a celebrity activist empowering women in Pakistan. Initially supportive, the Pakistan government however became wary of the bad press the whole case was attracting, and prevented Mai from traveling outside the country. To add insult to injury, during a September 2005 visit to the United States, General Musharraf termed Mai’s attempts at garnering support as a moneymaking concern.⁴

In nurturing the *ulema* as a counter to mainstream political forces, Musharraf has marginalized the same moderates in Pakistan whose cause he seeks to champion in his speeches. This effort at running with the hare and hunting with the hounds has meant four life-threatening attacks on the general. Ideally, this should have been indication enough to evolve a more sincere and long-term strategy to contain sectarian influences in the body politic of Pakistan. But cursory analyses of daily media reports refute all possibility of his message percolating down. In yet another instance of sectarian conflict, the Pakistani commercial capital, Karachi, lived through five days of curfew when a gathering of politico-religious Sunni-Tehrik (ST) was bombed on April 11, 2006, killing fifty-seven persons including all of the top ST leaders.⁵

In Bangladesh, after dithering for a long time and publicly denying the existence of a problem with violent extremism, the Khaleda government finally acted by arresting the leadership of many radical groups in a crackdown carried out in March 2006. In May, a court convicted and sentenced JMB’s leaders Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai to death, in connection with the murder of two judges in November 2005 in the southern Bangladeshi town of Jhalakati.⁶ These punitive actions occurred, however, only after a string of bombings across the country and the high-profile terror attacks on judicial institutions, lawyers, and judges between August and November of 2005. A sincere administration would also want to act against those who patronized the JMB terrorists. Instead, the ulcerous conflict between the two largest political parties, the BNP and the Awami League, has shifted the focus away from the issue. It might just be the beginning of a long and arduous road to salvage a nation that began with secularism as its principal ethos, with its society still wedded to a liberal religious idiom.

³ General Pervez Musharraf’s speech on enlightened moderation. Available on his website at <http://www.presidentofpakistan.gov.pk/FilesSpeeches/Policy/1022200423601PMTIME%20for%20Enlightened%20Moderation.pdf>.

⁴ Terence McKenna, “Land, Gold and Women,” CBC News, February 28, 2006, http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/pakistan/mckenna_pakistan.html.

⁵ Sarfaraz Ahmad, “The Burden of Bomb’s Proof,” *Daily Times*, April 18, 2006, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C04%5C14%5Cstory_14-4-2006_pg12_5.

⁶ BBC.co.uk, “Death for Bangladeshi Militants,” May 29, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5026382.stm.

And on the southern tip of South Asia, newly elected president Mahinda Rajapakse came to power on the slogan of a “New Sri Lanka” that envisages peaceful coexistence for all communities of the country. To achieve this he announced during his acceptance speech to Parliament that all communities, including Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher and Malay, would be equal before the law and would get equal protection of the laws.⁷

In practice Rajapakse has only continued with the policy of his predecessor Chandrika Kumartunga, waging a war for peace. The shrillness of his Sinhala nationalist coalition partners over the four year old ceasefire (the monks’ party terms it as a dangerous precursor to splitting the country) has put paid to all chances of reconciliation. The latest round of violence between rebels and Sri Lankan forces that began in April 2006 has effectively put a stopper ahead of peace with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) withdrawing from the Norway brokered peace process.⁸

In sum, despite an enlightened Pakistan, a harmonious India, a moderate Bangladesh and a new Sri Lanka becoming objectives of the present day ruling elites of these respective South Asian nations, a coherent strategy to attain these is elusive. Many times their actions are found to be working at cross-purposes with their declared objectives. Given their interconnected past, as also the present, each country in the region can share and learn from each other’s mistakes. An attempt will be made in the next part of this paper to see if national policies that also help structure a region-wide strategy can be worked out.

⁷ Mahinda Rajapakse’s acceptance speech during swearing in ceremony, November 11, 2005, http://www.presidentsl.org/data/html/speeches/2005/swearing_in_ceremony.htm

⁸ BBC.co.uk, “Tamil Tigers Call off Peace Talks,” April 20, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4925690.stm.

PART SIX
The Road Ahead

God cannot alter the past, but historians can.

Samuel Butler

As we saw in the last part, realization with the state actors of the importance of tolerance and respect for pluralism is not translating into better communal relations on the ground. L. K. Advani might have made a sincere attempt to grapple with the remnants of the two-nation theory that left more Muslims in India than Pakistan, but only ended up sidelining himself. General Pervez Musharraf seems to be hardly making an impact. If anything, his glaring failures are even making his intentions suspect. It can be easily seen that speeches, be they of Advani, Musharraf, or Mahinda Rajapakse, are not an influence on societies brought up on the idiom of hate. Minds not taught to understand the “other” with a spirit of “acceptance” fail to comprehend the significance of moderation.

The SAARC Conundrum

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a regional grouping of the South Asian states, was formed in 1985 at the initiative of Bangladesh in Dhaka. Three decades later it still remains a mere biennial photo-op for the region’s leaders. Its avowed objective of amity through regional integration remains in the realm of cherished goals at best. Each nation’s sense of insecurity, internal conflict and apprehensions has meant that a minimal level of economic interdependence is yet to be achieved. The SAARC inter-region trade stands at 4.4 percent of total international trade of member states. In contrast, the respective figures are 20 percent for the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), 55 percent for the European Union (EU), and 51 percent for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) countries.¹ In March 2006 all nations ratified the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement that had been signed during the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad in January 2004. Though the terms of the agreement begin to go into effect in 2006, a full-fledged free trade area is envisaged only by 2016.

Within the ambit of SAARC, innumerable efforts have been made to evolve a general spirit of understanding and conciliation among its peoples. Initiatives like the SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange (SAVE), SAARC Scheme for Promotion of Organized Tourism, SAARC Youth Volunteers Program, and the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians among others, have existed more as seasonal clubs with little impact on respective societies. As various SAARC resolutions show, most remain mired only in homilies even as entrenched bureaucracies of respective states thwart practical efforts. A case in point is freer movement of people across borders. The procedural encumbrances for individuals attempting to acquire visas and restrictions on movement within the host nation mean that despite summit reiterations for greater people-to-people contact, such interaction remains minimal.²

The Fault Lines

Where does the fault lie? In the context of the India-Pakistan relationship, there is a historical baggage to the Advani-Jinnah debate. Jinnah, having led the movement for the creation of Pakistan, is a villain from the Indian perspective, seen as the man behind the country’s division. Historically, and still today, the identities of India

¹ Indo-Asian News Service, “PM Calls for Partnership of Prosperity in South Asia,” *South Asia Monitor*, November 17, 2005, New Delhi, <http://www.southasiamonitor.org/2005/nov/news/18saarc-diplo1.shtml>.

² Shahid Kardar, “People-to-People Contact in South Asia: Scope and Constraints,” in Navnita Chadha Behera et al. eds., *People-to-People Contact in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 87-105.

and Pakistan confront each other. The very existence of Pakistan, an Islamic state, seems to challenge the notion that Indian Muslims can coexist with majority Hindus in a secular India; that the Muslims of India remain loyal to their secular government seems to challenge the existence of Pakistan itself, for was it not born a model homeland of South Asia's Muslims? In the case of Sri Lanka, the minority Tamil population feels threatened in the midst of the majority Sinhala community, even as similar sentiments are reciprocated by the Sinhalese, overwhelmed as they are by the gigantic Tamil presence across the Palk Straits in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The argument could be extended to Bangladesh, for a Hindu majority India looms large over the quasi-Islamic nation. Each community and nation feels threatened and vulnerable by the mere existence of the other. Stephen P. Cohen calls them paired minority conflicts. According to him, these conflicts are able to draw an inexhaustible supply of hatred toward the other side with trust in a state of dynamic imbalance, thwarting prospects of long-term negotiations.³

Clearly then, before peace prevails in South Asia efforts have to be made that engender a mind that is ready first to know, and then understand the "other." It can be argued that the generation that lived through the division of South Asia in 1947 was the most obstructive to peace as it had lived through the agony of mass migration and carnage. The post-1947 generation still had stories told to them of what bad times each of the nations had to pass through to attain freedom. The present youth, though, is only vaguely connected to those hatred-producing events through books and literature. To give an example from India, with 540 million persons under 35 years of age, half of its present population was born after the 1971 Indo-Pak war that led to the birth of Bangladesh. As much as 30 percent of present Indians were born after 1984, the year that saw the assassination of Indira Gandhi and subsequent anti-Sikh pogrom.⁴ This generation then provides South Asia's political and intellectual leaders with an opportunity to mold a new mindset.

A New History: South Asian Consciousness

Uncorrupted by the influence of the past, how can we develop a South Asian consciousness in these minds? Is it possible to develop, and disseminate, a perspective that shows historical wrongs as enunciated in this study in their true light? This writer has a suggestion. In two separate projects let historians and social scientists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka come together and write one book each on their subjects for the high school level. These two books on post-colonial South Asian history and social science should be made common reading in all nations. Subsequent projects could include a teachers' training program in each nation emphasizing the pedagogical importance of the curricula. Who would do this? It could be done either under the aegis of SAARC, or some other neutral agency involved with South Asian studies. If the project is suitably understood and backed by respective governments, it should not be difficult to identify possible historians and social scientists from each of the countries to participate in the project, particularly if the task is presented as one that will bring the authors prestige, and if the positive impact of their efforts will be abundantly clear. In a different context, a noted critic in Pakistan of history textbooks, K. K. Aziz, had once mooted this idea of joint textbook writing between India and Pakistan. In a paper presented at the third South Asia Dialogue in 1993 at Lahore, Aziz had argued that given the geographical continuity between the two countries, the historical events of India and Pakistan are so connected that scholars cannot write a comprehensive work without consulting sources in possession of each other. To give an example, if a Pakistani scholar of history needs to know of organizations set up by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, much of the relevant material is available in Aligarh, the town where he set up the MAO College (now Aligarh Muslim University) in India. It equally applies to Indian scholars if they have to write on Sikh history or the reform movement *Arya Samaj*, as both thrived and left significant history in Pakistani Punjab with Lahore as their cultural center.⁵

Examples abound of South Asian scholars coming together during seminars and retreats to write on complex security issues like nuclear capability and environmental interdependence. A major limitation of such

³ Stephen Philip Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 198-200.

⁴ Shekhar Gupta, "Long Live Our Dead Ghosts," *The Indian Express*, April 8, 2006, <http://www.indianexpress.com/story/2013.html?PHPSESSID=5b5d528d3a296c060d3f839288a866b4> (accessed April 26, 2006).

⁵ K. K. Aziz, *Studies in History and Politics* (Lahore: Vanguard, 2002), 216-227.

efforts is that they address people who already have well formed opinions that are difficult to change. This project would address youth in their formative years. As things stand today, an individual's knowledge about a given neighboring country in South Asia depends on personal initiative. Media reports are filtered down through the same prisms that suffer from the limitation of well-formed opinions. The attempt in this project should be at a historical, sociological and anthropological construct that can be made to work for both a secular India and Islamic Pakistan; a text that can trace a common genealogy of the Sinhalese and Tamils; of the significance of the fact that Islam in Bangladesh came through Sufis and not the sword.

Every majority is made up of constituent minorities, and as has been the experience of Pakistan, once a minority separates out to become a new majority, it finds other new minorities within it asserting their identity. An education system that can iron out this difference of minority and majority, and prevent them from looking at the "other" as a source of fear and conflict, can go a long way in bringing up a moderate South Asia.

And Some More Ideas

Another step with immediate positive results in terms of greater cross-cultural understanding could be the provision of multiple entry five-year visas to accredited journalists of top media houses of each nation by each country. This can facilitate quick flow of information; at the same time, it loosens up control of intelligence agencies on news filtration. The European Union has the Schengen visa for all its residents. South Asia can at least begin with a few journalists. Subsequently it could be extended to other categories of professionals.

There is an association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians that was launched in 1992 in Kathmandu. Also, there have been occasional interfaith meetings of religious leaders of the region. Why not institutionalize these bodies? An interfaith Parliament that meets every year to discuss events and theological issues has the potential of building up a consensus among an important set of non-state actors toward co-existence. Suggestions for a regional human rights organization, as also a supranational women's rights body, have been made earlier by some scholars. Such bodies already exist in regional groupings like the European Union (EU), Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) with varied success. The EU and OAU also provide for a court on human rights with regional jurisdiction. But no action has been taken in South Asia as yet. The presence of conflict zones like Kashmir strengthens the arguments of skeptics that the well-meaning steps might become hostage to bilateral issues. The many occasions when the SAARC process has taken the brunt of India-Pakistan bilateral heat lends some credence to the skeptics. But if realized, they can bring about a major change in the way national bureaucracies react to human and women's rights issues.⁶

Each of the SAARC countries faces a formidable task of mainstreaming its subaltern citizenry—the poor, religious and linguistic minorities, women, and other marginal nationalities. To achieve this mainstreaming, a strong civil society that embodies a radically pluralistic conversational process, and that can weigh on respective governments, is needed. Also, in the long run there is a regional need to downplay national sovereignty, which is easier said than done. South Asia is yet to reach a stage where supranational bodies like the European Union or the ASEAN can exist and function without hindrance. So what are the options available to each state?

India: The Big "Insecure" Brother

It is said that one can change history, but not geography. If Bangladesh is India-locked, Pakistan is India-whelmed, Sri Lanka is India-shadowed and Nepal is India-circled. Bhutan is an Indian protectorate. This statement sums up the significance and stakes of India in regional stability. This geography also brings with it an added responsibility. To begin with, there is an urgent need for New Delhi to evolve a long-term policy on communal relations that can prevent any recurrence of Delhi (1984) and Gujarat (2002) violence. Urdu, the

⁶ Beena Sarwar and I. A. Rahman, "Strengthening Democracy in South Asia," and "South Asian Perspective on Human Rights," in V. A. Pai Panandiker and Navnita Chadha Behera eds., *Perspectives on South Asia* (New Delhi: Konark, 2000), 407-423.

Indo-European language of Persian descent and now the national language of Pakistan, has its roots in pre-partition central India. A classic example of Hindu-Muslim syncretism of medieval times, the language known for its beautiful poetry has fallen in disuse of late in India. Despite right wing efforts at coloring it as a Muslim legacy, it needs to be rescued and popularized. The Taj Mahal, after all, is also a Muslim legacy.

Next, India has to rescue its Sri Lanka policy from being held hostage to the local politics of Tamil Nadu—the Tamil majority southern state. This is important, as it would have a beneficial impact in the island nation of Sri Lanka. And though it is contested, the need for an optional uniform civil code cannot be denied. As things stand today, commercial and criminal law is the same for all Indians, but each community has a separate personal law in civil matters. There is a myth that only the Muslim community loses with a uniform civil code by giving up *Shariat* based Muslim personal law. Hindus too stand to lose the monetary benefits under the Hindu Undivided Family (HUF) system, and a majority of them might not be willing to give up on this. The need to find a balance between legal pluralism and a better-integrated civil society cannot be overemphasized.⁷

Pakistan: Secular Troubles, Islamic Dilemmas

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk shocked the orthodox Muslim world when he abolished the caliphate and secularized Turkey in 1924. Poet philosopher Allama Iqbal, one of the intellectual founders of Pakistan, then rationalized the separation between the church and the state by explaining that the caliphate can be vested in a body of persons, or an elected Assembly.⁸ Independent Pakistan has vacillated between democracy and dictatorships, and as the present analysis shows, has ended up in the grip of forces inimical to a moderate society, despite a majority of Pakistan's population being tolerant and peace loving.

How to convert this silent majority into a power-wielding majority is a complex question that is found difficult to answer even by Pakistani scholars. For example, there is a considerable consensus within Pakistan's moderate public that the *Hudood* ordinances can be done away with, as also some other relics of the Zia era that have had a debilitating effect on Pakistani society. And yet, General Pervez Musharraf, who claims Kemal Atatürk as his role model, has failed to deliver. In a progressive gesture the government of Musharraf scrapped the system of separate electorates in January 2002. The religion-based franchise was introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1981 and was seen as discriminatory to religious minorities of the country. Recently, Rana Bhagwandas, a Hindu, was the acting chief justice of Pakistan. There have been instances in the past of many Parsis and Christians occupying top positions in Pakistan's judiciary, and some in the Army. Elements that strengthen such strands of Pakistani society need to be identified and further bolstered. The Lahore Museum in Pakistan has the most complete and exquisite extant statue of the fasting Buddha in the world. Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama has expressed his wish to see it.⁹ Why can't Pakistan invite the Lama and still be a friend of China? There are many nations, including the United States, that have regular visits by the Lama and still keep good working relations with China. Although seemingly unconnected with the problem of secularism in South Asia, nevertheless this simple step can make a loud statement about Pakistan's willingness to respect religious diversity on its soil. There is also a consensus in Pakistan over an overhaul of its various textbooks. A report published in 2002 by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, on the curricula in Pakistani schools found that most of the textbooks are insensitive to the existing religious diversity of the nation; incite militancy and look favorably on *jihad*; and encourage prejudice and discrimination toward fellow citizens (women and religious minorities) among other things. The same report recommends an overhaul of the education system of Pakistan. It begins with a practical suggestion of setting up a National Education Advisory Board made up of eminent citizens and government nominees. India already has its National Council of

⁷ A Uniform Civil Code (UCC), though enshrined in Article 44 of the Indian constitution as a Directive Principle of State Policy, has been a sharply contested concept since the 1980s. For a comparative study on UCC that introduces one to all the divergent views see Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1987), *passim*; Arun Shourie, *A Secular Agenda* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1993), 81-137.

⁸ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publisher & Bookseller, 1962), 157.

⁹ AFP report, "Dalai Lama Wants to Make Pilgrimage to Pakistan," World Tibet Network News, August 7, 2001, http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2001/8/7_1.html (accessed April 10, 2006).

Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and ideas can be exchanged on setting up such a board in Pakistan.¹⁰ Rewriting of textbooks in Pakistan would also help the joint international book-writing project described above.

Bangladesh: Islam or Nazrul Islam?

The most significant step towards the point of harmony in Bangladeshi society would be a decline in the bitter rivalry between the two main political parties of the nation. The Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have histories so tailored that a détente seems difficult. Sheikh Hasina, the AL president, is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was assassinated in a military coup. The president of the BNP, Begum Khaleda Zia, is the widow of martial law ruler and former president Ziaur Rahman, who replaced Mujib's government. A lieutenant colonel on the eve of the Bangladesh war of 1971, Zia rose through the ranks and became chief martial law administrator following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib. His controversial decision of pardoning the Sheikh's assassins, and the politics of BNP subsequent to his assassination in 1981, sowed seeds of distrust between the two premier political families of Bangladesh. With both Hasina and Khaleda seeing each other as direct beneficiaries of their loved ones' deaths, the very personal nature of the rivalry has lent Bangladesh politics the least maneuverability on national issues. Both politicians have to realize that their well-nurtured hate toward each other is not helping the nation grow at a pace it needs in order to emerge from the status of being one of the least developed countries in the world. If the two can negotiate themselves out of the contested terrain of this rivalry, it would lead to a lesser bargaining power for the more radical political forces in the country.

The national poet of Bangladesh, Qazi Nazrul Islam, embodied the true spirit of Bangla culture, and is still respected as such by a majority of the Bangladeshi society. A poet, writer, musician, journalist and philosopher during the first half of the twentieth century, Islam represented a fine thread of Bangla syncretism. His poetic and literary works, both in Bangla and Sanskrit, intensely attack social and religious dogma and intolerance, as also reflect a fine blend of Hindu and Muslim traditions. His songs underline the quintessential equality of both religions. The nation has to make a choice between the Islam of Jamaa'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) or that of Nazrul Islam.

Sri Lanka: The Pearl Island or Sectarian Cauldron

The Sri Lankan struggle to find a patchwork quilt of its many pasts and multiple precedents, and to arrive at a negotiated future free of ethnic strife seems difficult in the present circumstances. The Sinhalese consider themselves of Aryan descent. Yet in the medieval times a Tamil ruler of Jaffna claimed the title of Arya Chakravartin. Sri Lankan history has many similar ironies and strands that indicate toward a continuous process of incorporation, inclusion and assimilation. Scholars have partly blamed a centralized and Colombo-centered state unresponsive to the grassroots, and inimical to the notion of devolution of power to regions and provinces, for the state's failure to reconcile the ethnic divide.¹¹ It is argued that a decentralized administration drawing its strength from local communities would better appreciate the integrated lives of the two poles of Sri Lankan political life, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. A heavily centralized and unitary state might be a colonial legacy, but after more than sixty years of independence, the Sri Lankan polity should think in terms of evolving a system that draws power bottom up from its villages, rather than top down from Colombo as things stand now.

Whither South Asia?

With close to one-fourth of the world's population, half its poor, an adverse food security scenario, and a plethora of intra- and inter-state conflicts, South Asia could easily be an implosion waiting to happen. The region's postcolonial history has left wounds that fester amid irresponsible and ill conceived actions of a

¹⁰ A. H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim eds., *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan* (Islamabad: SDPI, 2002), v-ix, http://www.sdpi.org/research_Programme/human_development/Education.htm.

¹¹ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 179-180.

myopic regional leadership. The consistent economic growth of the past few years, driven by globalization of world trade, has shown the path that needs strict adherence if the situation is to be salvaged.

Amid their military swagger, twenty-first century threats to the region seem essentially non-military. The way climate change is unfolding from drying Himalayan glaciers affecting north India, Nepal and Pakistan, to rising sea inundating much of lower Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, its global warming that is set to become a regional security threat, and needs to occupy much of the thinking time of policy makers.

This paper has discussed only a single dimension of conflict in South Asia—that of sectarian clashes within respective borders of constituent state, and their influence on regional polity with its destabilizing consequences. Actions guided by short-term career objectives of leaders have led the region to a point of severe societal stress. Another set of actions that aim at eschewing conflict and look at intra- and inter-society conflict in the region with a fresh mind would ultimately determine the future course the region takes.

PART SEVEN

Conclusion

Traveler, there are no roads. Roads are made by walking.

Spanish proverb.

Although modern secularism is a western concept, it need not be confined to the narrowness of that definition. As subcontinental history shows, secularism is sufficiently flexible a concept to be adopted by empires from ancient to medieval times, and by kings belonging to all major religions of the region. Also, secularism is not godlessness. Secularism does not require citizens to abandon their religion. It can exist within the ambit of a religious society, so long as every individual in that society is ready to accept the differentiation between personal religious preferences and common societal norms; and more importantly ready to eschew conflict in the interest of the greater common good of peace in civil society. To make secularism possible, it is important that the relationship between the state apparatus and its citizens is not guided by the religious preferences of those who administer that apparatus.

This study within its limited scope has made an attempt to show how secularism and its associated benefits can be achieved. Some of the examples worth repeating that strengthen respective civil societies in South Asia include: a modern secular education with a liberal view of the colonial period, greater interaction between the sectarian leaders holding divergent opinions, stronger associational links between professionals in the region, and a pan-South Asian effort at influencing young minds through common textbooks. The aim is to attain a critical mass of people with a South Asian mindset that can then influence policy in respective nations, resulting in government actions that eschew conflict and are positively pro-peace.

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