



RESEARCH PAPER

Xenophobia: Consequential Impacts on South Asian Politics

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ABSTRACT

The success of European Union (EU) as an economic cum political community gave hope to many regional areas around the globe to follow their example for regional stability. South Asia is one of them. Thickly populated, strictly religious, and full of territorial controversies are those dynamic which not only identify as major characteristics of south Asians but also proved a hindrance for the fulfillment of that dream in which they wished to work as one unit like EU. The hypothesis which initiates this research is that, avoidance of religious zeal in politics, helped the formation and success of EU, either this concept is applicable in South Asian political scenario. The objective of this research is to analysis those factors particularly religious xenophobia (Augustine & Jonathan C. Augustine, 2012) which maintained a statuesque in south Asian political dynamic and hinders its working as one unit like EU. There are two questions which are needed to be answered before reaching any conclusion, first, what are the dynamics of south Asian politics and How religious intolerance drives and effects regional politics in South Asia internally and externally. Apparently the failure of SARC indicates after the two decades of twenty first century, that the states of south Asian region are not yet prepared to take a leap where their economic preferences outnumbered their religious feeling even regarding diplomatic relations.

Introduction

The successful adventure of EU as bloc, provided many regions in the world, a hope to work as unit for their progress, South Asia is one of them. In spite of encountering multiple conflicts, it wished to build an economic bloc, the establishment of South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) in December 1985, was

first step towards that dream which still waited to be fulfilled. Besides, the ongoing war on terror, internal strife, communal/ racial violence and hegemonic tendencies, each state of the region is confronting different constraints of its own.

South Asia is considered as the most prominent region for the imminent rise of new Asian led world order, besides the challenges of population explosion and poverty. The present study aims to analysis that religious extreme tendencies among the masses are creating hurdle and helped the decision makers for maintaining a statuesque in the region for their vested interests. That approach has become a major obstacle in achieving the dream of united bloc in South Asia.

Historical Significance of Religion in South Asia

The South Asian region is that part of Asia which mostly described as the “museum of people, cultures and way of living”(Ahmad, 2009). Apparently, the significant characteristic of the south Asian states (India, Pakistan Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan) is their religious influenced internal and external policies which affected the stability of the region and became the source of the continuity of conflicts among the nation states.

The initial traces of religion in south Asia can be found in ancient Indus valley civilization (2800-1500 BCE), later in Vedic era(1200 BC). Mostly local religions has their roots from Hinduism like, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism while Islam and Christianity are imported in later centuries by foreign rulers. Currently, the region has inhabited with 64% Hindus, 29% Muslim and 2%, the rest of the population.

Religious Xenophobia in South Asia: An Upshot of Nationalism

The diversity in behaviors and values due to religious beliefs among the South Asians creates multicultural society which not only threatens the unity of the region but also make it less possible to achieve a united economic front like EU. Religious difference had become more violent during the colonial era because British government used them to achieve its financial cum political agendas in the region. Consequently, the nationalist feelings of 20th century among the local poisoned and resulted in the severe religious riots in India. The division of India in 1947, only nurtured these difference because various political groups camouflaged themselves under religious umbrellas for their own vested agendas. The fact is that the genesis of the problem never lied in the religions but with the practicing fellows who deemed it necessary to impose their ideas cloaked in religious aspirations. For example, Hindutva ideology or Hindu nationalism in India has amalgamated with those religio-political ideals which asserts that to be Indian is to be Hindus and that India’s huge Muslim population (14%) and other religious minorities are at best conditionally Indian. It is also argued that Indian state which is secular in its crux has failed to safeguard the Hindu interests under secular constitution. (Chattopadhyay, 2019) Murdan says that religious extremism basically originated due to the perceived threat of secularism and modernity in the world.(Ali, 1983) The

emergence of Hindutva in India and Muslim brotherhood in Egypt are the prominent examples of that hypothesis.

The idea and the term of Hindu nationalism was emerged and coined at the end of 19th century by using the definition that “civilization composes the nation” so Hindus are a nation. Famous Indian politician, Lajpat Rai stated in 1899, that “Hindus are a nation in themselves, because they represent a civilization all their own.” (Mathur, 1996, p. 01). This early moderate definition by Lajpat Rai transformed Hindu Nationalism into the concept of Hindutva in later which means that there is only one nation having right of ruling and living in India that is called Hindu. This idea was largely propagated by the Hindu extreme nationalist organizations like Vishva Hindu Panchayat (VHP), Shiv Sena of Bal Thackeray, etc. later, Sangh Parivar, which composed of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), Bajrang Dal, is held responsible for championing the cause and ideology of Hindutva.

This Hindutva ideology has caused Muslim Massacre in Gujarat (2002) because according to Vanaik, many proponents of Hindutva think that secular politics in India has discriminated against the majority Hindu population (Savarkar, 2019). M.S. Golwaker, famous leader of RSS, states that for the glorification of Hindu culture, the non-Hindus must respect it, give up anti-Hindu attitude by creation of love and devotion towards it, they must cease to be foreigners and completely subordinate to the Hindu nation (Bardhan, 1992). These feelings of Hindutva are so strong that when their own leader Gandhi (to whom they called as Mahatma) when attempted to calm down the situation of Hindu/Muslim killing in 1947, was targeted and killed by a Hindu fanatic.

In the RSS-Mahasbha dictionary, the partition of India was non-condonable crime, so, Indian Muslims were treated as the anti-state element (Dalrymple, 2015). Even before partition, Hindu nationalist when speaks of India, they meant it to be a state for Hindus that's why Bal Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena stated in one of his famous speeches that Muslims should leave India as they have their own homeland, Pakistan. (*Bombay's Militant Voice*, 2000) The other minorities including Sikhs and Christians have to abide by the political structure of the country to view the whole scenario as an Indian. For them, anti-nationalism and anti-Hindus are synonym. For example, L.K. Advani, the hardcore Hindu leader of BJP stated in harsh words that if someone attempts to indulge in anti-Hindu politics under the cover of secularism, BJP shall stand against it and never restrain from the sacrifice in this way. The philosophy against Muslims in particular and Sikhs and Christians in general is even named as Hindu-Zionism (Ateek et al., 2005, p. 121). The tragedies of 1984, 1992 in India are the result of the same philosophy.

The dilemma of xenophobia in South Asia is that it is a direct byproduct of the insecurities of majority populations in respective religions either in India or Pakistan, etc. Muslim nationalist feelings in British colonial period were openly

accepted on religious division named as Two Nation Theory. Consequently, the independent movement which was launched by Muslim leaders to save Indian Muslims from Hindu atrocities resulted in a separate homeland for Muslim – Pakistan. This religio-politic approach chalked out the future internal and external policies of Pakistan as nation state.

So, Pakistan's efforts to sturdy implementation of Islamic rules in the constitution was actually the fulfillment of its existence requirements (Fuller, 1991). The addition of Islamic rules and laws in the constitution had become a dilemma for the decision makers till 1980s when Pakistan had become a sandwich between two extreme ideologies – communist attack in Afghanistan and Islamic revolution in Iran. According to Nasr, Pakistani military government decided to ride the tiger and exploit the waves of religious feelings rather than suppressing it in view of Malaysian experience and in return, they had a long-standing support from the rightist and Islamist parties (Nasr, 2001). That limited approach to deal the external and internal challenges, later, transformed the moderate society of Pakistan into extreme division based on religious basis not only among Muslim and other religious minorities of Pakistan.

Europeans moved towards the concept of nation states when they succeeded to separate religion from politics in 19th century, on contrary within south Asia, religion, was the only possible anchor which bound the different groups and later turned them into nations either it was Hindu nation or Muslim nation. These religious based groups when turned into nation-states, they could not separate themselves from the expectations of majority religious groups even at external affairs which complicate the achievement of regional stability. Unfortunately, this type of nationalism in South Asia constantly requires sources and ways for motivation mainly based on religion.

The amalgamation of nationalism and religious philosophies in south Asia is so common and misused for worldly agenda of gaining power and prestige in this world.. The Ahmedabad Carnage 2002, famously called as "Gujarat Program" the Hindu extremist while busy in torture, rapes, and all kind of violence were reported to bring along yellow ribbons, scarf and yellow dresses: the religious color of Hinduism. Currently, the Hindutva is not the manifestation of any religious anxiety, but a political abuse of individual affiliations. Even in Nepal, a Hindu extremist group Nepal Defense Army (NDA), wished to oust all non-Hindus from Nepal, and an analysis of their demands and methods made it clear all this fuss is not to satisfy any religious command or wishes (Kaur, 2005).

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are two other examples of same phenomenon of intolerance to the minorities. The warning of the army chief of Sri Lanka that: Minorities may live in Sri Lanka yet they "cannot make any unnecessary demands." (*Sri Lanka's North I*, 2012) The use of word "may" and conditionality for their own citizens in this statement show the real attitude and images of ruling elites in South Asia. The brutal firing with heavy arms negating any respect for "safe zones" in Sri Lanka was not mere violation by Tamils but government also, which

retaliated in the same manner. A website of Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM). (*Bangladesh - Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM)*, 2016) reported some hundreds of violation cases of the rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh. For example, a report published on 1st January 2004, some local Bangladesh National Party officials set 20 houses belonging to the Hindu community on fire and further a survey conducted by researchers including those from the Jahangir Nagar University's Department of Anthropology was released in May 2008, documenting extensive land loss by indigenous and minority peoples in ten north-western districts." (BARUA & Jyoti, 2017).

Regional Dynamic of South Asian Politics: A Hurdle

Colonial legacies of south Asia left its marks more visibly in the regions of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh rather than Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. The fact is summed up by Mishra in these words, "the basic problem of south Asian borders is that they are artificial and they separated local community who had long history of togetherness" (Mishra, 2014, p. 19). These artificial border and territorial conflicts further enhanced due to religious difference like India (officially secular with 80% Hindu) has its borders with two largely Muslim populated states Pakistan (96%) and Bangladesh (89%). The gravity of the diplomatic relations further enhanced when the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh was the direct result of first religious (Pakistan in 1947) and then cultural differences (Bangladesh in 1971). A brief review of their diplomatic relations will help the readers to comprehend the objective of the research.

Bangladesh, once East -Pakistan got independence in December 1971, with the armed help of Indian Army from Pakistan. Initial warmth and cordiality between the two neighbors India/Bangladesh vanished with the disappearance of Awami League (pro-India political party in Bangladesh) from the political landscape of the country. Thus observers noticed that the situation of bilateral relations with India directly related with the fact that Awami League is in power or not. Bangladesh shares 2400-kilometer-long porous border with India. The complaints of Indian governments about human trafficking and Bangladesh, for annexation of area by India are the direct result of porous border and faulty demarcation between the two neighbors. This loose demarcation raised another dispute linked to water – the use of Ganges water- between the two states. A number of commissions and diplomatic efforts in this regard proved to be futile till now, yet despite all those mutual complaints, the volume of trade between the two is ample proof to terms the relations healthy and forwarding (Ray & Māmuna, 2011).

Bhutan, with Nepal have looked at Bangladesh as good alternate for sea route where they can avoid India and China, so they enjoyed good trade and economy based relations with it. Beside the small areas like Bhutan and Nepal, Sri Lanka is somewhat friend of equal status to Bangladesh. Both enjoy their special relationship in areas of security, culture, and trade. Maldives is not only a peace loving Muslim state that match with the foreign policy preferences of Bangladesh

but also promising in terms of provision of jobs to unskilled and semi-skilled labor of Bangladesh. (Rashid, 2015) Relations with Pakistan naturally at start were just sore and remained same whenever Awami league was in power. Beside the presences of Bihari's in Bangladesh which are numbered in 540,000, has created a complex social and political dilemma for both states to accept them as their citizens (Cheema, 2013).

Bhutan is a small princely state that due to some unexplained historic factor remained aloof from the integration process of Indian subcontinent. It entered in a treaty with United Kingdom in 1910 so that it's foreign and defense policy be "guided" by United Kingdom. After independence, India wasted no time to bound it in "treaty of friendship" providing some economic incentives and holding the position of a "guide" for its foreign and defense relations. The position of Bhutan as satellite state of India was strengthened when China annexed Tibet in 1950. India having 605 km shared border with Bhutan give it due importance for its "Himalayan frontier" security policy. Currently, Bhutan Government tried to loosen its ties with its "guide" yet not succeeded fully but it has established relations with more than twenty nations, it has membership in 45 international organizations. At the demand of Bhutan, the Treaty of Friendship was revised in 2007 with far more liberal terms than the previous one regarding, its decision about security and economy. The issue of border demarcation between Sarpang and Geylegphug and the eastern frontier of Bhutan with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh affected the bilateral relations between the two 'neighbors'.

The relations between Bhutan and Nepal could be stated as love-hate relationship. Despite having so strong cultural bonds, and being in same geographical reality of operating between China and India, the two countries fail to be friendly. The main contention is the issue of more than 107,000 alleged Bhutanese refugees of Nepalese origin. (*Bhutan's Forgotten People*, 2014) Those refugees live in camps provided by UN and supported by US and other western countries. Though those camps are located in southeastern Nepal, both states are unwilling to extend its citizenship to those refugees. The issue is so many times reached to its logical conclusion of resettling those refugees with the help of US, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, and Netherlands. Still the three parties fail to reach mutually agreed settlement. Bangladesh provide an alternate opportunity for Bhutan to reach the sea without touching India or China so, Nepal and Bhutan have same primary interest in retaining relations with Bangladesh. Bhutan has nominal relations with Sri Lanka, Maldives and mostly follows Indian guideline to maintain relations with Pakistan.

Maldives relations with India are based on its security concerns. These relations not only provide a good counter balance against Sri Lanka but also ensure security against any terrorist act like "Operation Cactus" in 1988. After this bucketful episode of security operation, the relation between Maldives and India increased in volumes by many fold. The border disputes almost settled with India in 1976, yet the territorial dispute over the southern Indian colony islands of the Minicoy Island of Lakshadweep time and again heard in public debate. The island is populated with overwhelmed majority of Muslims thus at times the debate gets the color of religious concerns, too. Especially, Pakistan support Maldives position over the island, but

Male does not wish to play this issue as major political debate. Within region, Maldives relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh are just extension of its efforts to maintain a balance of power and balance of terror. Relations with Pakistan, with its special emphasis on Islam, means a counter balance to India in case of any security threat (Trivedi, 2008, pp. 151-178). Relations with Bangladesh are again counter balance to Sri Lanka and India both. Thus it is worth noting that Maldives relations within region is strictly based on realist principals while with rest of the world it pursues with rigor the ideals of peace, human dignity and mutual cooperation for development.

Nepal like Bhutan signed, a Treaty of Friendship in 1950, which stated that the trade, security and all other areas of interest of both countries were, as one. Though this treaty for last half of the century ensure the economic wellbeing of the Nepal but all the time proved a blockade in pursuing independent foreign policy (Dahal, 2018). The revision and drastic changes in the treaty not only demanded time and again but also remained one of the popular theme in election manifestos of the political parties and speeches of the politicians. The treaty do revised on the demand of Nepal government many times yet still for Nepal it is not the Treaty of mere Friendship but is a protocol of limitations.

Besides common culture, economic interests there are some no-compromised areas where Nepal chooses to go publicly angry against India. This includes border disputes and religious sensitivities. Nepal openly protested against India's 1975 annexation of Sikkim by Nepal, as it was historically, politically and geographically the integral part of the Greater Nepal (Sharma, 1988). Besides Nepal's complains, India's basic criticism and suspicion regarding its satellite is the doubt that the government of Nepal is giving its consent for the promotion of terrorism against India on its land which make their bilateral relations plagued and sustained suspicion.

Nepal's relations with Pakistan like Maldives are mere reflection of Nepal's efforts to counter balance the Indian more-than-required influence and control. In case of Pakistan, Nepal sided all along Indian foreign policy and established formal diplomatic relations as late as 1963, and at the time when counter balance activity was high in Nepal. Again, in the proclamation of Independence by Bangladesh against Pakistan, Nepal was one of the first countries to recognize that claim. The decision was not only result of dependence on India but also a strong wish to have an alternate country to mitigate the same dependence. Pakistan's relations with Nepal are mainly in the areas of security and economy (Shah, 2018).

Within region, Pakistan is considered as true counter balancer against Indian state hegemony. This role Pakistan is endowed with by the first day of its independence and both countries go to actual war for more than three times due to Border disputes, especially the oldest one on Kashmir (Gupta, 2006). In South Asia, India Pakistan rivalry is mainly responsible for arms race, nuclear politics and even

religious extremism in the region. Both nations choose to go nuclear and spent billions of dollars on military and security purchase each year despite their bleak social conditions and financial status with wide spread poverty (Carranza, 2016). Indian hegemonic tendencies in the region have created a security dilemma for Pakistan which formulates its preferences in foreign policy.

Relations with Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh also depict that the main concern of Pakistan, as well as the respective states is to create a balance the power within region against India because within region Pakistan is considered as the only force to challenge India. The efforts to normalize relations between the two nations always disturbed due to some internal backlash either it is Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 being the latest or Indian attack on Balakot in 2019. There is very little chance of any meaningful and productive relations between two without addressing the basic hurdles such as, the dispute of Kashmir and mutual agreement of non-aggression.

Sri Lanka, a nation of strange talents in South Asia, having highest literacy rate in the region this eye- drop island is master of making wonderful political achievements. During cold war it was one of those few nations who maintained equally warmed relations with US and USSR. After cold war the list of its near contacts is astonishing to have with same degree of relations with such diverse and even rival states. Like Sri Lanka received constant supply of high tech weapons all along three decades from Pakistan and Israel. It manages to get economic aid from Arab nations and yet have very equal share of trade with India and China at same time.

Within region its relations are based on the need of national integrity and economic interests like during the long Civil War (1980s to 2009), Sri Lankan regional relations were mainly gauged on the only stick of loyalty with Sri Lanka against Tamil separatists. Pakistan supported government and state of Sri Lanka all along, regarding the supply of weapons, trainings and intelligence sharing. Pakistan also played a key role in developing the relations between Sri Lanka and China, a relationship that is now responsible for the major trade and weapons supplies to Sri Lanka (Czarnotta, 2015).

With India, despite cultural, historic and social similarities, its support for the Tamil Separatist Movement had destroyed mutual trust. In 1987, when Sri Lanka in effort to guard off Tamils blocked all supplies to Jaffna, India air lifted the food and weapons. This act, and later the conclusion of peace accord and stationing of Indian army on the soil of Sri Lanka give necessary fuel to anti-India sentiments in Sri Lanka. The streets filled with nationalist belonged to the common man and policy makers, with the demand to dislodge Indian army which established a negative approach towards the attitude of Indian decision makers. Yet it does not stop them to enjoy the economic fruits by the boost of Indian economy.

With Bangladesh, Sri Lanka relations are rooted in history date back to 2000 BC, but in modern political age, Sri Lanka supported Pakistan in war against India in 1971 and provided the facility of harbor and refueling. After Pakistan recognition of

Bangladesh as independent state Sri Lanka wasted no time in establishing its relations with a state that promise good trade and which counter balance to some degree to India. To date, Sri Lanka relations with Bangladesh is mainly in the realms of trade and security. Maldives maintain good relations with Sri Lanka for cultural but most importantly for economic reasons because their tourism is depended on Sri Lankan routes.

Political culture of mutual intolerance and mistrust among states of the South Asia in fact caused the presence of many complexities in the region generally and provided cushion for those factor who created anarchy like non-state actors (NSA). These NSA's can have the agenda of political, religious or both at the same time. So, this is not unusual to get funding and all required help by any anti-state actor by another neighboring state. Tamils got help from India, Khalistan Movement of Sikhs aided by Pakistan; the separatist movement in East Pakistan got political, financial and military aid by India. This culture of rivalry also penetrates into groupings and re-groupings of states against another state on any given issue. India supported Tamils for political reasons thus Pakistan extended its help to Sri Lankan Government with no direct interest except wining a friend in region against India. The intervention of India in neighboring states far worse which strained its relations within region like its patronage of Tamils in Sri Lanka, Bengali Separatists in Pakistan is case in point. Attack on world trade Centre and war on terror helped India to manipulate the regional situation for its own political agenda by accusing Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, as training and state sponsoring terrorist act against India.

In such political culture, the element of religious xenophobia finds the ideal to spread and strength its clutches for the vested interest of certain. Any xenophobic fanatic group capable to damage and challenge the state, unluckily having no problem in getting resources by another state within region for their cause. This nationalistic trend of intolerance and constant cold war in the region, coupled with poverty, inequality, and non-democratic traditions not only encouraged religiously motivated politics but also ensure its growth through constant foreign and local funding and support.

Conclusion

South Asia, being the hub of world's oldest cultures and religions, entangled in religio-politics conflicts since centuries. Generally in the past, religion and politics joined hands in the struggle for legitimacy of power acquiring and prolonging it. Hinduism successfully merged the resisting religious cum social movements and Buddhism and Jainism lost their identity as separatist entity in the society, Yet, Islam insisted its separate identity and during colonial era Indian subcontinent experienced political identity based on religion. Though this religious division proved beneficial for the extension of colonial rule yet it left its marks even after decolonization. This politico-religious identities and agendas has given birth the political aspiring religious xenophobic groups in the region.

The deprivation of political power, social injustice and the religious aspirations turned the emotionally charged masses into violent groups which can be exploited easily. This further strengthened by racial, parochial and other divides in these newly formed states. The Hindutva in India, Buddhism in Myanmar and certain Islam based organization in Pakistan and Bangladesh are true symbols of this theory.

The politics and political culture in the South Asia is just replica of what is being practiced in third world countries in post-colonial era. Agendas of nation building, defining national interest and setting preferences are made by few and for the few. No real democratic process is encouraged, thus result in a non-participator masses. Besides the poor quality of governance, coupled with corruption and non-creative procedures further make the gap between ruler and the ruled wide.

Apparently the research concluded that, religious xenophobia is indeed a major road-block in regional cooperation although this is not the sole reason. The context is the very state system in South Asia is based on the culture of intolerance, non-democratic, corrupt, and elitism. In such political culture, limited gains are more important than long term benefits which defiantly missed the chances of cooperation like EU in this region of the world. After two bloody world wars, European reached this miles stone which south Asian yet to miss. The dream of united south Asia can be achieved if the intentional practice of weakening neighbor states with any available way would be stopped and states accept the idea of cooperation and integration for mutual interests.

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