Peace, Prosperity & Democracy in South Asia: Role of Governance

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Abstract
South Asia is a region inflicted with several problems like rampant corruption, unstable political system, social turbulence, poor social and human development and terrorism. These factors are posing a serious threat to political stability, social cohesion and economic growth of South Asian Countries. In addition to it, Mal governance and consequent poor delivery of services have resulted in economic inequality, social conflicts and ineffective political system. The region inherited an administrative system which was basically created to serve colonial interests. Centralized, authoritarian and unaccountable administrative system could neither resolve myriad problems of poverty and underdevelopment nor is it suitable for people’s participation in administration. Moreover, there is paradox of economic and social development. While the region achieved robust economic growth in the recent past, it could not make the same progress in social development. Decentralized, participative and accountable governance could play a significant role to provide good governance and to promote social and economic development. A healthy and cordial multilateral relation between South Asian countries and cooperation is prerequisite for economic development and ever lasting peace. India being the largest political and geographical entity in the region, it should allay the fears of its small neighbor of its domination in polity and economy in the region. Harmony and cooperation thus, generated will promote peace, security and development in South Asia.

Keywords: Political System, Socio-Economic Development, South Asia, Good Governance Democratic Institutions, Human Development, Quality of Services

1 Introduction
Governing system of a country plays significant role in the process of nation building and socio-economic development, the twin goals of developing countries in the post independence period. South
Asia is most populated, conflict ridden and poverty stricken region\(^1\). It is also a region inflicted with several problems like rampant corruption, unstable political system, social turbulence, poor social and human development and religious fundamentalism threatening the political stability, social cohesion and economic growth of South Asian countries. There is an abundance of natural resources in the region. Geographical location, if fully exploited, has immense potential for trade, growth and investment. Therefore, there is urgent need to strengthen the politico-administrative system to counter the problems and challenges before the region but also to achieve the development goals and objectives so urgently required to resolve the myriad problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

2 Democratic political cultures

It is essential to strengthen the democratic institutions to enhance the capacity of political system to cope up with changes in society, polity and economy. Democracy is either absent or has not taken deep roots in the region. Democratic political culture is sadly lacking and people’s participation in political system is cosmetic rather than real and meaningful. Prevalence of inscriptive values, absence of secular political culture, defective electoral system have rendered the functioning of political system ineffective and not of any real worth. Consequently due to these inherent weaknesses in political system and myriad problems at the time of independence, an effective administrative system best suited to needs and aspirations of people could not be evolved. Mal governance, the logical outcome of absence of efficient, accountable and responsive politico-administrative system have alienated the people and their frustration and dissatisfaction with the existing system made it difficult to restore the rule of law. Corruption is rampant as it is reflection of both social and political values as well as weak institutions\(^2\). People’s empowerment and accountable administrative system at all levels, an essential prerequisite to curb this evil practice, is sadly lacking. The absence of vibrant and effective political system has tempted the non political organs of state to encroach upon areas exclusively reserved for political system. Attempt in the recent past to overthrow the democratically elected government in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Maldives bears testimony to this fact. The Army in Pakistan is most powerful and unaccountable institution. “Whenever a civilian government has tried to assert and dilute the Army’s power and control, the former has been bootstrapped out through legal or illegal means”\(^3\). The coup staged by Police and sections of Army forcing the resignation of President Mohammed Nasheed, the first democratically elected head of government in Maldives,\(^4\) In Bangladesh coups and counter –coup following bloody changeover saw the destruction of democratic institutions.\(^5\)

Similarly, penetration of extreme religious philosophy in state and its institutions have played havoc with democratic institutions in the region Failure of administrative system to respond to genuine and legitimate concerns of people prompted judiciary to over-reach its jurisdiction and issue directives even on public policy matters, the exclusive domain of executive in India and Pakistan. In India, it has directed the construction of roads or bridges, orders seeking a timetable for the running of trains, orders directing the beautification of railway stations, decisions on environmental law, and directive for speedy trial of corruption cases\(^6\). In Pakistan, the Supreme Court has been exerting pressure on the government to reopen graft cases scrapped under the National reconciliation ordinance promulgated by Pervez Musharraf Regime against Zardari and others\(^7\). In view of these problems and challenges, it is essential to strengthen the political institutions to enhance their capacity to ensure responsive, transparent and accountable governing system. The Weakness of democratic institutions and norms can be seen in all of India’s neighbours\(^8\). As the democracy in these countries is still in nascent stage, the role of masses to exert pressure on the governing system to accommodate their

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legitimate demands and concerns is ineffective. Independent and impartial electoral system, freedom of speech and expression, ideological commitment to Human rights and Right to information has significant potential to make the political system more democratic. It will bring the voice of masses in policy making processes to address their problems like education, health, illiteracy, poverty and employment. The consequent public opinion will restore the credibility and legitimacy of democratic system. For example the people in South Asia particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh are no longer in favour of army rule and feel that only a democratically elected government can redress their grievance. Facing the possibility of Army takeover, The Pakistan Parliament passed resolution securing support for democratically elected government. Bangladesh Army defeated the coup attempt against the Sheikh Hasina Government hatched by section of army and religious fanatics. Republic and secular government was established in Nepal after years of long struggle for democracy. Presidential elections in 2008 saw the new era of democracy in Maldives after long struggle of three decades to end dictatorship. democratically elected government in Pakistan have successfully completed its five years term for the first time. Thus there are hope for revival and strengthening of democracy in the region.

3 South Asian countries conflict

The record of South Asian countries mainly conflict ridden, in respect to protection of Human rights has not been credible and leaves much to be desired. There is, therefore urgent need to incorporate necessary provision for human rights and their implementation with due concern for rights of minorities, women and underprivileged. Similarly right to information (RTI) has significant potential to change the relationship between citizen and Administration. The functioning of R.T.I. in India has played a significant role to promote transparency and accountability in the governance and in the process strengthening the democratic system.

South Asia is multi religious, multi racial and multi-ethnic region. Therefore, pluralistic and inclusive approach in policy making could minimize the conflicts and tensions and promote equitable and balanced development in the region, lopsided regional development and unjust political and social order has created disturbance and anarchy in the various parts of the region. Frustrated with failure of Indian political system to deliver, Maoist or left extremists have resorted to armed rebellion against Indian State. Their total number is pegged at 2 lac. Their movement has spread to areas under 2000 police stations in 222 districts across India. “They are acting like well trained army and are equipped with modern weapons.” Similarly; various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups are creating violence in various parts of the north-east. In the same way, faulty policies in Sri Lanka including the Sinhala only policies and the government’s failure to share power with minority Tamil Community gave rise to armed rebellion of Tamil Community for separate homeland. An essential pre-requisite for peace, stability and strong government is democratic and pluralist state, but the present Sri Lankan Government is disinclined to concede land and police power to North. Therefore viable and lasting solution to political problems seems to be distant and farfetched. The persistent mal governance in Nepal created political instability and growth of leftist movement in the country. Therefore building consensus among the major political formations on the issue of constitution making is a major challenge before the new government of Baburam Bhattarai. Also the Maoist parties have to abandon the politics of coercion and violence to achieve political objectives. The biggest failure of Pakistan Government has been its reluctance and inability to initiate and nurture elected, decentralized, local government system. Lack of balanced regional development and failure in resolving sectarian problem in Pakistan have given rise to separatist movement in many parts.
Therefore inclusive and pluralistic approach to policy-making can get the region out of the trap of instability, chaos and disorder, but it is also essential to find political solutions to problems having political, historical and ethnic implications as in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan and India. Centralised political system proved a failure to satisfy the needs and aspirations of different regions and sections of society. Various regions and ethnic groups are clamoring for autonomous status. In India the movement for separate statehood or devolution of more powers is continuing in various parts of North East, Tamil Nadu, Punjab etc. In Nepal, the aspect of form of Government and the nature of federation are extremely complex questions to be resolved by new ruling dispensation. Similarly in Sri Lanka Tamil People’s demand for more political power and equality can be met only by addressing the core issue of conflict and evolving acceptable political solution that will bring about genuine reconciliation and harmony among different communities.

4 Human Development Progress

In the same way, centralized administrative system is suitable neither for successful implementation of centrally sponsored schemes and programmes in a vast country like India, nor for people’s participation in administration. In India, one third of its population suffers from hunger. It occupies 67th position in Global Hunger Index. Public Distribution System (PDS) designed to provide food grains at concessional rate is victim of rampant corruption and poor delivery. The Centralized system of procurement, storage, transport and distribution results in Wastage of time, money and resources. Decentralized system of PDS will be less expensive. It will not only minimize the possibility of corrupt practices, but also bring about the qualitative improvement in delivery of services. The emphasis should be on the participation of people especially the underprivileged and women and on the holistic approach that integrates biodiversity, natural resource management, rural livelihoods and empowerment. Such an inclusive approach to policy making is sadly lacking in almost all South Asian Countries.

Though economy registered remarkable growth in recent past, yet it made no significant impact on the improvement of social and Human development. The Human Development Report (2011) of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in respect of South Asian Countries is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>HDI Rank</th>
<th>HDI Value</th>
<th>Life Expectancy at birth (years)</th>
<th>Mean years of schooling (years)</th>
<th>Expected years of schooling (years)</th>
<th>GNI per Capita</th>
<th>GNI Per Capita Rank Minus HDI Rank</th>
<th>HDI Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>0.398</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>1416</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>0.522</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>5293</td>
<td>-36</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0.547</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3468</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>0.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>0.661</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>5276</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>0.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>0.458</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1160</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>0.526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>0.691</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4943</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HDI – Human Development Index
GNI – Gross National Income

The above table shows that the progress in respect of human development is dismal in South Asian Countries. Moreover there is paradox of economic and social development in South Asia. “While GDP rates have soared from 5 to 9 percent, growth rates in HDI values in South Asia have ranged from a low of just 0.5 percent to a high of just over 2 percent.”27

The quality of services in health, education, nutrition, infrastructure availability and provision is poor in South Asia as compared to that in developed Western Countries which made provision for public health, employment allowance, old age pension scheme and compulsory school education to empower the state during the phase of Industrialization.25 Due to lack of political will and scarcity of resources the governing system of south Asian Countries could not ensure development with human face. Therefore the present model of development could not ensure economic growth and development with social justice and equality as it could not make any qualitative impact in terms of social development of disadvantaged section of society. Also income disparity as well as the gaps in access to basic human needs between the better off and worse off is steadily growing.28 As such, there is urgent need to overhaul the administrative system. Better targeting of schemes and programmes, community participation and fixing accountability at different administrative levels of officials responsible for implementation will provide better results. More than that it will require sincere political will and greater investment in Human development so as to provide equitable development and opportunities for women, under privileged and minority communities. Right to Education (RTE) and proposed bill for food security in India is progressive measure in this respect. But to translate these measures into reality requires imaginative and visionary leadership with firm commitment to democratic ideals with capacity to rise above narrow vested interests and willingness to promote peace and development in the region.

5 Cooperation & Agreements

The present leadership and public opinion in South Asia are in favour of promoting cooperation, mutually beneficial development and people to people contact in the region. There is tremendous scope to increase the trade among the countries of South Asia. Volume of trade in the region is negligible in comparison to that in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), APEC and NAFTA. The official trade between India and Pakistan is 2.7$ billion a year despite geographical proximity between the two nations.29 If both countries engage in direct trade instead of trading through third country, will not only lessen the time and formalities but also reduce the cost of commodities by reducing transportation cost.30 Pakistan can benefit, in many ways, for example common medicines which are seven times costly than in India. Similarly there are many commodities that India could import from Pakistan.31 India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have many commonalties and potentials that could be positively developed through policy of trilateralism.32 Bangladesh has agreed to be a partner in some power plants in India’s North East. It is likely to attract major investments from India, which will promote development in its backward regions.33 Energy is key to development and the South Asian region has the potential of generating 200 gigawatt of hydro-power for common use. Also there is an urgent need for a common power grid linking Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India.34

Similarly agreement has been reached between India and Pakistan on royalties payable for delivery of gas through the 1680 Kilometre Turkmenistan Afghanistan- Pakistan-India (TAPI)
Pipeline. As the majority of population in South Asia does not have access to modern cooking fuel, this pipeline will be helpful to avail this facility.

India has committed to building 900 Kilometre rail line in Afghanistan. This will not only facilitate movement of passengers and goods in the region but will also promote friendly relations between India and Afghanista. India’s decision to construct railway line between Agartala and Bangladesh Border town of Akhaura that will enable Tripura to get food supplies through Bangladesh. It will not only save time and cost but also prove gateway to south East Asia. These countries have significant potential to extend cooperation in energy, food security, transportation and environmental friendly policies.

6 Suggestions

Also this region faces the challenge of climate change. It is estimated that projected impact of half metre rise in sea level by 2050 will affect 38.9 million population. Therefore there is urgent need to evolve a strategy to counter this threat and cooperation to conduct relief & rescue operations during calamities caused by natural disasters. Collective efforts can help in sharing technologies and exploiting each other’s strengths. However for all this, political will to overcome petty regional differences has to be evolved and displayed first. India being the largest political and geographical entity in the region, it should allay the fear of its small neighbour of its domination in polity and economy in the region. Harmony and cooperation thus, generated will promote peace, security and development in the South Asia.

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