

EDITORIAL

We are very happy to present the inaugural issue of the bi-annual academic journal, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* (PDSA). With a population of over one and a half billion and a continuous, composite civilization going back several thousand years, South Asia is a fascinating ethnic, religious and linguistic mosaic. At present, South Asia comprises a number of territorial states whose ties with each other are imperfectly developed. There is a bitter legacy of conflicting claims to territory, water and other resources in this region resulting in border skirmishes, even wars. A region gains strength if the constituent states share common economic interests and foreign policy objectives. South Asia unfortunately does not represent such a region, although the South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC) has been in existence for quite some time arranging regular summits and a number of institutions to promote co-operation and understanding.

To any concerned observer there can be little doubt that South Asia needs to address the problems of abject poverty, unbridled population growth, illiteracy, gender and minority oppression, gross human rights violation and the rise of extremist religious and nationalist movements. One need not emphasize too much that such huge problems can be tackled more easily through joint initiatives coordinated policy inputs and concrete programmes and projects.

One of the fundamental premises underlying PDSA philosophy is that peace and democracy are pre-requisites for successfully tackling such challenges. Indeed one can visualize peace without democracy and democracy without peace. Historically, peace has been possible in a region sprawling with dictatorial regimes. For example, Latin American dictatorships thrived until recently without that region experiencing wars although serious class-based and democratic movements did bring about convulsions within Latin American societies. The dictatorships co-operated in crushing such popular movements. On the other hand, the introduction of democracy in a troubled society where extremist movements abound can be a major threat to peace within and without. Classically, the rise of Hitler comes to our mind. He employed extremist demagogy to get elected and then went about destroying the fragile German democracy. In our own times, the Bush, Blair and Sharon regimes represent the cruder face of democracy in periods of global turmoil. Therefore democracy and peace need to be conceptualised as mutually reinforcing and interdependent.

Concretely one can say that only when peace is based on democratic principles and democracy is practised through peaceful means that an environment comes into being in which a stable basis can be laid for reform, reconstruction and development. It is generally believed that democracies do not go to war and indeed the evidence from post-Second World War Western Europe seems to confirm this. One can therefore argue that regional peace is enhanced if democracy is prevalent in all the societies that constitute that region. However, peace can only be promoted if it is just and fair and this means that both the production and distribution of goods is equitable within societies and indeed between states. In other words, through mutually

beneficial trade and other productive ventures the material basis for both peace and democracy can be laid.

With regard to democracy, we need to keep in mind that its modern, liberal version was consolidated in Western societies, where religious and ethnic minorities were severely marginalized and full citizenship was denied to them. Only much later did such democracies become pluralistic; in fact their origins can be dated from the post-Second World War period. It is generally feared that in societies where religious and ethnic cleavages abound democracy can degenerate into majoritarianism rather easily. Therefore proper policy needs to be adopted to neutralize the ethnic imbalance.

In South Asia, the danger of democracy turning into majoritarian tyranny is real. Ethnic and religious cleavages are part of normal politics and some scholars believe that instead of individual rights, South Asia should look for formulae with which communities are empowered rather than individual citizens. Consociational models of democracy are believed to be more successful in such societies, but the break down of government in Lebanon cautions us from investing too much faith in consociationalism. One can also argue that illiberal communities can prove to be repressive towards their own members and hostile to other communities and thus defeat the whole idea of democracy. In any case, if majoritarian tyranny is returned through formal democratic procedures of electing government peace within South Asian states can be in jeopardy and its repercussions would be adverse for democracy. Therefore the state must continue to act as a neutral arbiter of disputes and conflicts within society. Moreover, under all circumstances individual human rights should be protected and consolidated, but depressed castes and other groups need special protection, and reservation of seats for such category of people should be introduced all over South Asia.

However, peace and democracy are also a matter of values and intellectual convictions. We need to examine the South Asian cultural heritage from the earliest to the present times to find out what can be learnt from the past with regard to the maintenance of peace and democracy. Ideas of democracy accompanied the colonial intervention. Therefore, the colonial period is of special interest since modernity and ideas of representative government entered South Asia during the British rule.

How can we promote peace and democracy in South Asia? This will be the most important question we will encourage our contributors to find answers to.

Editors
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