

CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA WILL GO ON AND ON: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT This brief article, an extended review of two recent important publications, problematises the continuity of inter-state and intra-state conflicts since the partition of British India in 1947. Territory and identity are the main triggers of those conflicts, many of which will remain, while others will take on new forms relating to resource scarcity, mainly water. Conflicts are unlikely to be settled fully through various interventions, as sub-dimensions will linger on, develop new roots and new issues will constantly crop up. The article argues that past, present and future are visibly and invisibly connected through the fallout of patterns of myth and memory, dissatisfaction with the status quo and present conditions and often completely unrealistic expectations of a better future. Identifying elements of interconnectedness as central, the review assesses the contributions these two new studies make for a deeper understanding of the scenario of continuing conflict within the context of South Asian Studies.

KEYWORDS: *Bangladesh, conflict, India, Nepal, Pakistan, partition, South Asia, violence*

The Conflict Scenario and the Two New Books

In 1947, India and Pakistan were born to remain in conflict (Wolpert, 2011) and those predictions have clearly turned into reality. Since the partition of British India in 1947, the two countries have already fought three wars (1947–49, 1965 and 1971), one limited war over Kargil (1999), faced a series of war-like situations (1987, 1990 and 2002) and remain in constant tension, as cross-border firings are going on even at the time of writing. Besides inter-state conflicts, the partition also generated intra-state tensions because many aggrieved groups, which expected or even vociferously demanded sovereignty in 1947, were forced to be a part of either India or Pakistan. Over the years, many such groups or regions have given up their demands and/or accommodated themselves in some form within their respective sovereign country,

but some are still adamantly pursuing their decades-old political objectives.² Despite the fact that some demands have been dealt with by the respective states, there is no closure. As a result, since 1947, conflicts over the status of territory and the identity of people in certain localities have been simmering, with limited chances of getting fully resolved, at least in the near future.³ Not only in this region, conflicts and violence, arguably a latent feature in all human societies since time immemorial, quite evidently remain features of postmodern, post-colonial reality. That does not mean to say South Asians are primitive in a Hobbesian sense but they and the societies and states they live in manifestly struggle to manage various competing claims in scenarios of scarcity, sociocultural diversity and difference, as well as connected identity issues. All of this is complicated further by a plethora of negative memories from the past, including importantly the partition of 1947.

As most present conflicts in South Asia appear to have roots connected to this partition, any academic analysis of conflicts requires a deeper understanding of that life-changing historic ‘moment’ in South Asian history, the partition. The two recently published edited books discussed here together aptly describe both the signal moment of 1947 and the continuation of conflicts in South Asia. In the book edited by Butalia (2015), various authors talk specifically about partition-related memories, the post-memory generation and how and why such memories have been constructed. The central argument of this book is that there is a preserved individual and collective memory of the partition of India in 1947, which guides one’s emotions towards ‘others’ or an ‘alien land’. The articles in the book edited by Webb and Wijeweera (2015) focus on the sociopolitical history of conflicts, their evolution and especially political economy considerations. As most present conflicts in South Asia concern unsettled questions over territory and identity, the themes of both books are closely linked to each other, though it does not appear so at first sight.

This review article endorses the view that most of the present conflicts in South Asia have their roots in the partition-related violence of 1947 and remain indeed connected to memories of various kinds. Linked into political economies that today contribute, visibly and invisibly, to conflict scenarios that cannot be simply resolved by taking incremental measures, one finds literally explosive high-risk conditions. The article traces the historical roots of conflicts in the region and examines their continuity. It then traces the relationship of conflicts and memories and adds specific resource-related factors. To what extent the resulting explosive mix can be handled by region-specific expertise rather than internationally focused interventions is raised in the concluding section.

Beginning of Conflicts

Theoretically, conflict is an actual or perceived opposition of interests, understandings and values. It has to do with differences of various kinds, and how humans, anywhere in the world, manage them. The notion of conflict explains various contested aspects

of sociocultural, socio-economic and sociopolitical life, including social disagreement, opposition of interests and fights between individuals, groups and organisations (Druckman & Paul, 2006: xii). The standard primary reason, ultimately given for violent disagreements between the Hindus and Muslims of South Asia, was that they belong to two different nations, and so they cannot live together. Vociferously raised by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in his speeches and assertion of the 'two nation theory' (Jaffrelot, 2015), it was echoed by Hindu leaders like Veer Savarkar (Joglekar, 2006). Talking about 1947, it has been assumed by many scholars that the beginnings of conflicts originated in the 1930s (Dhulipala, 2015; Jalal, 1983). Yet differences, discriminations and tensions have been existing between the two communities since medieval India (Khosla, 2012), and within the region as a whole also much before. Communal riots and practices of religion-based discrimination in a region where the demand for Pakistan was raised first were 'normal' and intermittent, and increased further through publications of religious literature promoting Hindutva (Mukul, 2015). Some of those incendiary practices are still being carried out today, when a group like Jamat-e-Islami in Pakistan portray India as 'the enemy' of Islam, or hate speeches made by politicians and others in India suggesting that all Muslims should either be subjugated to the majority or driven out of the country. Such irresponsible claims reflect that basic values and conditions of democratic pluralism have not matured in South Asia, but also feed off troubled memories. All of this also indicates, if any doubt about the continuity of such mental agony was needed, that living together with an imagined or real 'other' in that crowded space called South Asia with its multiple conditions of scarcity remains a huge challenge for many individuals. What would appear to be needed now is the basic acceptance of the fact that multiple differences exist and need to be managed in a spirit of give-and-take, or live-and-let-live, fitting into the globally cherished elastic concepts of 'democracy' and 'rule of law'.

In British India, after the suppression of the sepoy-led revolt of 1857, the central rule by a Mughal dynasty came to an end. This constituted a severe setback to the Muslims of South Asia, until then the politically dominant group at the centre in India, if one can speak of a centre in such a way. After all, there were many centres of power, and a complex picture of polycentricity existed, rather than a single uniform power structure. Under the Mughals, though, the Muslims were the ruling elites; this changed with the establishment of colonial rule (Ali, 2011). Their sociopolitical situation further deteriorated after the introduction of English as an official language. Further changes made by the British relegated many to lower rungs of the power ladder. Such change in position and status particularly irked Muslim landlords and nobles. It was this group that was increasingly vociferously in favour of a separate state to re-gain lost status (Shaikh, 2009). In addition to lost status and religious revival, economic division between the two major communities encouraged communal polarisation, as in certain regions and some sectors of the economy the balance was sharply one-sided (Prasad, 1999). The Muslim League was formed in 1906 by a Muslim leadership who had lost trust in Congress and considered it as a representative of Hindu interests

(Hasan, 2002). Soon after this, confrontation over myriad issues with the Congress leadership started. The rift between them was so deep that when they got a chance to run an interim government jointly in 1946, they simply could not do this.

As the two parties did not agree on any power-sharing formula and the Muslim League was increasingly glued to the demand for Pakistan, partition became the only option left to the political leadership of the day. But how should one go about this? To partition the country, Sir Louis Mountbatten, the last Governor General, proposed an idea that British India was to be partitioned into two parts and the Princely States had the right to join either of the two (Pande, 2011), a right which was later limited to states touching the borders of India and/or Pakistan.⁴ As rulers started negotiating beneficial terms with the political leaders of Congress and the Muslim League, a few states like Hyderabad and Kalat remained in favour of sovereignty. The Nizam of Hyderabad acceded to India only after the Indian Army entered the city in September 1948 (Noorani, 2014) and defeated the Razakars, the Nizam's fighting squads. In Junagadh in what is now Gujarat, whose Muslim ruler wanted to be a part of Pakistan, the local people were in favour of joining India. Popular pressure forced the ruler to flee to Pakistan (Pande, 2011). What happened in Kashmir has of course become much more complex over time, and the literature on this now fills entire shelves.

Once it was consensually decided that India was to be partitioned, a Boundary Commission under Sir Cyril Radcliffe was set up to demarcate the borders between the new states (Chester, 2009). This Commission took demography, administrative unity and 'other factors' such as railway lines, water canals and telegraph lines into consideration (Chester, 2009: 80), but also made strange mistakes causing local pandemonium in many cases (see Ghosh, 2014 for Bengal). Inevitably, this cutting and slicing led to a situation where, in some cases, people became a part of one country while their property became a part of another. The line demarcated was so complex that even after decades of separation India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are today enmeshed in local disputes over territory. In the east, India and Pakistan were at loggerheads over many enclaves and *chars*.⁵ To sort out these territorial disputes, in 1948, the two countries agreed to set up a Tribunal under Algot Bagge, former member of the Supreme Court of Sweden, to interpret the Boundary Commission's report. The Tribunal submitted its report on 5 February 1950. Among many conflicting interpretations, only four came before the Tribunal, two on the western border and two on the north-eastern part of the boundary with East Pakistan (Shewly, 2008). As both countries showed reluctance to implement the Tribunal's award where they lost out, over the years, tensions over those disputes have deepened (Shewly, 2008). A few matters on the eastern side were resolved in 1971 after the liberation of Bangladesh. Only in 2015, through the implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement signed in 1974 between India and Bangladesh, have almost all bilateral territorial disputes now been resolved.

The only territorial dispute India and Pakistan managed to settle concerned the Kutch area, in 1965, achieved through international arbitration (Bajwa, 2013: 91–5).

While major territorial disputes between India and Pakistan are still alive over Jammu and Kashmir, both post-partition countries have from the start relied on competing claims related to sovereignty to cultivate their respective dominant ideology. Unsettled boundaries, however, continue to stoke bad memories, create a sense of competitive struggle and lead to the emergence of irredentist and anti-irredentist claims and groups.

The Continuity of Conflicts

Coming to the books chosen for review, both studies talk about various conflicts which are the leftover of partition. The conflicts discussed, especially in Butalia (2015), are due to and manifest in the form of human emotions, memories and perceptions, while the contributions in Webb and Wijeweera (2015) focus mainly on territorial conflicts in South Asia within the wider context of political economy.

As only religion was taken into consideration in 1947 and no other ascriptive identities, Pakistan later lost its eastern wing once various differences and competing claims became unmanageable politically as well as emotionally. The establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 encouraged some other groups fighting for secession or separation from one or the other country. A few years before 1947, Sikhs under Master Tara Singh had demanded a separate homeland, but gave this up and became a part of India. Yet, in the 1980s, the demand for Khalistan was revived by Sikh hardliners, leading to the assassination of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, followed by anti-Sikh riots. During these riots, the Sikh community realised that they are a minority, constituting only per cent of India's total population (Chakravarti & Haskar, 1987: 23). Jugdeep Singh Cheema (chapter 2, pp. 32–56), in the second book under review which is picked up first here, discusses the political economy of the Sikh separatist movement in India. The movement for Khalistan has been crushed by the Indian state, but the whispering voices in its favour can still be heard. Syed Serajul Islam (chapter 1, pp. 12–31) focuses on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and discusses the movement of Chakmas in East Pakistan, later Bangladesh. The Buddhist Chakmas became embroiled in the religion-based majoritarian partition games of British India. Their geographical location, of course, left them with no option but to become a part of Pakistan. In the 1960s, many CHT Chakmas, dislocated after the Kaptai dam submerged their lands, entered India through the Lushai hills in Mizoram. Second generation Chakmas are now demanding Indian citizenship based on their birth in India (Kashyap, 2015), while in Bangladesh, the Chakma uprisings ended with a peace deal in 1997.

A major secessionist movement is still going on in Balochistan in Pakistan. Farhan Siddiqui (chapter 3, pp. 57–74) discusses this Balochi uprising against the Pakistani state, a problem existing since partition, when the king of Kalat favoured independence for his state, but was persuaded by M.A. Jinnah to become a part of Pakistan. Since then, Balochis have fought five wars with the Pakistani Army and remain today

engaged in multiple forms of struggle for their economic and political rights. Among separatist movements, probably, the most pertinent one is going on in the Kashmir valley,⁶ always cited as a nuclear flashpoint between India and Pakistan. Overall, there are three major Kashmiri Muslim groups with competing demands: One wants to remain with India, the second favours independent status, while the third favours joining Pakistan.⁷ These separatist movements, as Albert Wijeweera (chapter 9, pp. 149–70) tellingly indicates, feed on a combination of greed and grievance so that the resulting conflicts become very complex and are extremely difficult to handle. Many so-called strategic experts talk about following the Sri Lankan government's method in 2009 to wipe out the LTTE. However, that was clearly an ethnic genocide which any state, even with least respect for human rights, cannot legitimately follow as an example.

Conflicts and Memories

That all these disputes have their points of origin in 1947 and are largely connected to memories is systematically elaborated to good effect in the articles presented by Butalia (2015). Rita Kothari (chapter 2, pp. 30–47) discusses identity, which remains glued to an individual or a group, despite changes in their geographical space. She writes about the Banni tribe, who as a result of the International Tribunal's decision, became a part of India after the 1965 border settlement between India and Pakistan through arbitration. They still consider themselves, and are also considered by others, as Sindhis rather than Kutchis. Kavita Panjabi (chapter 3, pp. 48–63) discusses why people from her father's generation remain hesitant about visiting their ancestral place. Unlike many others, he did not want to memorise the past which is about an emotional attachment with 'his' land from where the family was uprooted in 1947. There are deep wounds here, which many do not want to even think about, and so would rather remain silent (Ghosh, 2015).

Talking specifically about re-surfacing of partition-related problems, Sanjib Baruah (chapter 5, pp. 78–101) and Jhuma Sen (chapter 6, pp. 102–27) discuss the post-1971 tensions between Bangladeshi migrants and India's eastern states. Cross-border movements and regional migration have been taking place here since the nineteenth century when oil was discovered and tea plantation started in Assam (Gait, 1926: 360–1). Many people crossed the national border in both directions even after East Bengal became a part of Pakistan in 1947 (Ghosh, 2014). Further, large-scale migration occurred when the Pakistan Army and its collaborators committed gruesome atrocities in 1971. At first, these refugees were welcomed to India, but as numbers increased, they became unwanted (Datta, 2013). Violence against them has been unleashed by groups like Assam Gana Parishad and All Assam Students Union. Jhuma Sen discusses specifically the Marichijhapi incident, where an attack was carried out on migrants when they 'occupied' an area in the Sunderban delta. Even today this incident plays a significant role in West Bengal politics. Mamta Banerjee's electoral promise during

the 2012 Assembly elections in West Bengal to form a committee to look into that incident and punish the perpetrators has politically benefitted her regional political party, Trinamool Congress. Conflicts, this indicates, can bring strategic benefits for some stakeholders. Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Amiya Sen (chapter 4, pp. 64–77) also discuss the 1971 migration of people from East Pakistan to India, doing so through sketches indicating the continuity of the past. Sukeshi Kamra (chapter 8, pp. 155–77) examines in some depth how collective memory is being reframed. Especially in India, films as a powerful means of communication narrate the trauma of partition to the post-memory generation, though there are also many efforts to cultivate silence (Ghosh, 2015). The interpretation of violence varies from one director to another. Tarun K. Saint (chapter 9, pp. 178–99) distinguishes ‘Revisioning’ and ‘Restorying’ of partition, discussing literature which presents a humane and poignant narrative of partition. Prajna Paramita Parasher (chapter 10, pp. 200–30) presents and interprets the expressions in the partition-related sketches of S.L. Parasher. Jyotirmaya Sharma (chapter 11, pp. 231–48) focuses on differences of religion, over which violence has taken place, or is interpreted to have taken place, at least since medieval times. Various religious symbols used by different groups create tensions between communities so that often one community’s symbol becomes the anti-thesis to the other’s debate and identity (Saberwal, 2012). Alok Sarin, Sarah Ghani and Sanjeev Jain (chapter 12, pp. 249–64) explore the psychological aspects of communal conflict. It is important to understand the mental trauma due to violence inflicted upon individuals directly or through witnessing such barbaric situations. Two other important chapters focus on issues which rarely find academic coverage. Siddiq Wahid (chapter 1, pp. 1–29) writes on Ladakh and Andrew Whitehead (chapter 7, pp. 128–54) discusses the role of communists in Jammu & Kashmir.

Since Webb and Wijeweera (2015) focus on the South Asian region as a whole, their book also includes an analysis by Wijeweera (chapter 8, pp. 132–48) of the civil war and conflict in Sri Lanka until 2009. Further, a discussion of the conflicts in Nepal by Pramod K. Kantha (chapter 5, pp. 75–92) offers good insights into recent conflict resolution efforts there after the successful people’s revolution in 2006, the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of democracy. In the initial days, the new democratic system in Nepal remained unstable, reflected in frequent leadership changes. For a long time, the various political parties were at loggerheads over constitution making, which has now been achieved in 2015.

Fanning the Flames through Militarisation and New Concerns over Water

The India–Pakistan conflicts and intra-state tensions have also given rise to increased expenditure on military technologies and weapons in South Asia. Michael B. Charles and Elisabeth Sinnewe (chapter 6, pp. 75–92) and Christos Kollias and Stephanos Papadamou (chapter 11, pp. 191–210) discuss that particularly in India and Pakistan

the expenditure on weapons is many times more than the total government expenditure on social sectors such as health and education. This expenditure is rarely questioned because it is largely supported by the middle classes of the two countries, which often argue that it is necessary to secure their borders against the enemy country. The nationalist classes from these two countries also harbour hatred against the other due to partition-related memories, reflected in how the other has been constructed through various means, such as textbooks and films.

Besides traditional form of security and conventional threat, the South Asian states also face challenges due to non-traditional elements of security. Lavanya Vemsani (chapter 10, pp. 171–90) discusses how the Himalayan glaciers, sources of precious water to all South Asian states except Sri Lanka and the Maldives, are giving rise to new conflicts. In 1947, not only borders were demarcated, but also water resources and constructions were divided. Today, the simmering political tensions between the various South Asian riparian states also influence their water-sharing policies. Growing hydrological nationalism, rise in demand for water and increasing non-seasonal floods create tensions among the riparian partners who are connected through old and new memories, and mostly new political economy issues relating now to water and food security. Though many times threats have been issued, trans-boundary river water has not yet become a cause of war (Ranjan, 2015). However, these conflicts too continue to simmer. They are bound to get worse as water becomes more of a scarcity, while South Asia's populations continue to grow.

Conclusions

This extended review article has discussed that the various memories about partition and their constructions have not only generated emotional bondage in terms of past events and their fall-outs, but also harbour the potential for much continuing hatred and violence against 'others'. Any attempt to understand or discuss the various existing conflicts in South Asia is incomplete without factoring in the partition of 1947 and its long shadows, as the book edited by Butalia (2015) pointedly highlights. Most of the present conflicts are located in partition and a few cropped up during decades of rebellion in the 1960s and the 1970s,⁸ still linked to the partition or related memories. To manage intra-state conflicts, draconian laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in India (Ngaihte, 2015) and the Anti-terror Act in Pakistan have to some extent further inflamed the causes of separatists and oppositions rather than scaling down conflicts.

This article has reiterated that the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims, in pre-partitioned India developed significant differences over a number of issues, which gradually led to the virtually inevitable partition of 1947. Even today, communal riots occur in many places at regular intervals while differences and discriminations against minorities persist everywhere, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan, but in India, too, quite apart from Sri Lanka. It is often difficult to identify whether

the root causes of such violence and conflicts are related to emotional and identity issues, including religion, rather than socio-economic concerns and matters of political economy.

This article further highlights that territories are also emotional spaces, which a group sees and uses as home, occupies, claims, demands or merely wants to trespass into. This is one of the reasons why many people living in borderlands seek to cross that border. Though it is often claimed that they do so for financial reasons, affective reasons (Datta, 2013) may impel them to do so, too. Whether at the India–Pakistan Line of Control in the Kashmir Valley or along the India–Bangladesh border, some people merely cross borders to meet their relatives, even at the cost of their lives, building on memories and connections that are part of their innermost identity. However, more often, migrations and border crossings are the start of fresh conflicts, as one can presently see again in Manipur (see note 3), when socio-economic and political economy factors become dominant. As the common and intensely crowded space of South Asians, the region as a whole nourishes many competing claims and the conclusion is unavoidable that conflicts will, regrettably, go on and on.

Given such depressing findings, to what extent can South Asian Studies contribute to conflict management or resolution? Two points are stressed here in conclusion. First, as the two books under review confirm, the field of study we are dealing with is intensely interdisciplinary so that participants in academic discourse have to be aware of many interconnecting factors. That in itself is a huge challenge but also constitutes an asset. It is good to see that detailed regionally focused studies and locally informed works continue to be produced. The search for viable compromises depends to a large extent on ascertaining what the various competing local positions entail, and that cannot easily be ascertained from a desk perspective far away despite the richness and abundance of global internet sources these days. Connected to this, the second point is that currently fashionable frequent calls for internationally focused solutions to local or regional conflicts may have some legitimacy, but cannot dictate or drive the agenda. First of all, such interventions may be violently doubted and challenged locally, as ongoing Pakistani campaigns against the War on Terror indicate. In addition, such outside interventions cannot replace the identification and constructive use of conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies that have direct local and regional connections, despite the risks that various subjectivities may import. Local insights retain the potential to consider and cultivate wider issues of public order and public interest, while local protagonists may benefit from more credibility and authenticity than imported solutions by foreign experts that look good on paper, but do not work out in practice. At the end of the day, there is no escape from the overarching conclusion that the continuing conflict scenarios in South Asia require more and deeper engagement of South Asian Studies with conflicts and their management, built on solid interdisciplinary engagement and also more sustained involvement of South Asian area expertise rather than just human rights inspired foreign interventions.

Notes

1. The views expressed in this article are personal and do not reflect or represent the views of the Institute.
2. On northeast India, a series of articles in this journal explored various dimensions (Haokip, 2013, 2015; Kipgen, 2013; Ngaihte, 2015; Piang, 2015). In northwest India, Kashmir remains troublesome. In Pakistan, Punjabi domination and the fallouts of the US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 have renewed tensions and violent conflict over a number of issues, including the position of Balochistan and the various tribal areas. In Sri Lanka, Tamils and Muslims remain 'outsiders' for Sinhals.
3. Currently, Manipur is again experiencing new disturbances, this time related to population movements and specifically the issue of the Inner Line Permit (ILP). A law to implement this was passed by the Manipur Assembly in July 2015. It created tensions among the tribes, and a few areas witnessed violence over the issue. The ILP system was introduced by the British to protect tribal populations from encroachment into their areas, but was later used to advance commercial interests. It involves a system akin to issuing visas to Indian citizens to enter a state of the union. This is a highly contested demand in India's northeastern states, especially due to increase in the population of people who are considered 'outsiders' by the indigenous tribes (see 'Manipur's Dilemma', Editorial of 16 July 2015 in *The Hindu*).
4. Parts of Kerala, for example, could not join Pakistan and/or become a separate *Mophlastan* (Punathil, 2013: 11).
5. These are shifting sandbanks in rivers that may change with every major flood.
6. On the Indian side, the separatist movement is focused on the Kashmir valley, with now more than 90 per cent Muslim population, not the entire Indian side of Jammu and Kashmir. In Jammu, Hindus are the dominant group, while Buddhists form the majority in Ladakh.
7. These conflicts of ambitions are reflected on the Pakistani side, where Azad Kashmir occupies a semi-integrated position within Pakistan, while for largely geostrategic reasons, the extensive northern areas have been incorporated more fully into Pakistan.
8. In South Asia, the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 was significantly influenced by the student movement of that period (Raghvan, 2013).

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