

Peace and Conflict Studies in South Asia

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Abstract

The western claims on democratic peace were further weakened by the failure of international community to pre-empt the genocidal civil war in Rwanda and the acrimonious interventions in the Middle East. Even the doctrine of human security came under criticism in the postcolonial parlance as a new western ploy to re-colonize the Third World. Several South Asian scholars sought transnational partnership to explore a whole range of cross border challenges including the non-traditional threats to peace and security. The expanded template included such wide range of issues including climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion, spread of diseases and crimes natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, piracy and smuggling, drug trafficking, and other forms of transnational crimes. As such, the paper explores the trajectory of South Asian discourses on peace analyzing the vital role of the traditional image of care, tolerance and inter-religious coexistence. As well as regional legacies of reconciliation and multicultural peace which holds the promise to serve as practical resources for community-based peace building.

Key Words: Peacemaking, conflict resolution, human rights, global governance, local communities

Introduction

In recent decades, peace and conflict studies have begun to take roots as a significant interdisciplinary site of teaching and research. It has proliferated globally in its various rubric ranging from peace research, peace studies, conflict resolution, conflict management and conflict transformation among others. In South Asia too, the academic programs that teach about and research peace are rapidly gaining a foothold. More and more universities and colleges in the region have set up independent departments and Centres dedicated to peace studies. It is a befitting recognition to the perennially growing template enriched by scholars and philosophers both in the north and the south.

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However, the fledgling field of peace and conflict is beset with a range of contestations and criticisms. There are issues about its overwhelming and often schematized research agenda, the domination of positivists and heavily quantified and empirical methodology, uncritical stance towards terminology and the disconnection between research and action. One of the lingering challenges of teaching or researching peace and conflict in South Asian has been the enduring shadow of western perspectives, which tend to relegate indigenous discourses and frameworks. In fact, the most of the pedagogic approaches in the region have imitated, evolved and intersected around western perspectives often reflecting their conceptual trajectories as well as faultlines (Upadhyaya, 2013). There are of course some notable counter currents and alternative perspectives in South Asian scholarship, which have critiqued the Western-inspired notions of peace, often with a postcolonial bent (Samaddar, 2009).

The truth is that despite its widespread appeal, the term peace defies a consensual understanding. There are substantive and interpretive variance in terms of its anthropological underpinnings and underlying philosophies and also regarding its preferred values and methodologies. While statist discourses, embedded in the dominant sway of power and authority, defined peace as the absence of inter-state wars; civil society perspectives critiqued it as a negative approach to peace. Drawing from Gandhi, Johan Galtung (1969, 1975) described 'positive peace' as the negation of both direct and indirect violence and conceptualized structural violence as the lead leitmotif of peace building. The dominant strand of peace research, conflating peace as a natural counterpart of conflict, in course, prevailed over more variegated and locally interpreted narratives of peacebuilding. However, the dichotomy of positive/negative peace (Lawler, 2008) has been lately challenged along with the relationship of the peace researcher to the object of his analysis (Jutila et al., 2008).

The reductionist and universalistic approaches emerging from the west, and its influential institutions, were also challenged from varied angles of postmodern, post-colonial and feminist perspectives. The new generation scholars especially from the revisionist and critical schools (Lederach 1995, 2005; Samaddar 2005; Mac Ginty 2003; Richmond 2006, Dietrich 2008, Ramsbotham et al. 2011) emphasize the importance of local culture and trans-cultural tools in conflict-sensitive areas.

These critical currents expanded the peace discourse by bringing on board the hitherto neglected issues of rights and justice in peace pedagogy and research activities. Peace is thus

construed as a diverse and relational phenomenon, which must accommodate the images and efforts from diverse cultures as well as from the subaltern and marginal strata of the society. Rather than a coherent set of ideas, peace can be understood as contextually situated. Notions and concepts of peace and conflict, the ways peace is understood and experienced and the ways conflicts are taking place or being solved, vary from region to region, from culture to culture, and from society to society. A critical reflexivity in academic pursuits, thus, calls for dismissing the idea of scholarly experts being the solely privileged knowers of the field (Tickner, 2005). Accordingly, a growing number of voices/scholars demanded the opening up of the field to the grassroots (Lederach 1995; Darby and Mac Ginty 2008; Ramsbotham et al. 2011). Peace activists and scholars from the South have questioned the conventional knowledge and solutions, prescribed from 'above' seeking inclusion of rights and justice in peace pedagogy and research agenda.

The neo-liberal and post-liberal/global governance approaches also lack the conceptual insights to address the generic causes of non-traditional security threats like the upsurge of ethnic conflicts, terrorism, migrations and refugee flow, crimes and health hazards, gender and environmental security etc. The western claims on democratic peace were further weakened by the failure of international community to pre-empt the genocidal civil war in Rwanda and the acrimonious interventions in the Middle East. Even the doctrine of human security came under criticism in the postcolonial parlance as a new western ploy to re-colonize the Third World.

These transformative currents heralded a 'post bipolar renaissance' and opened up interdisciplinary spaces to raise alternate visions of peace and non-violence. Several South Asian scholars sought transnational partnership to explore a whole range of cross border challenges including the non-traditional threats to peace and security. The expanded template included such wide range of issues including climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion, spread of diseases and crimes natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, piracy and smuggling, drug trafficking, and other forms of transnational crimes.

The rise of critical peace studies during this phase saw greater emphasis on the hitherto sidelined issues of human rights, justice and gender (Samaddar, 2004) which sought to transform emphasis from conflict management to peace, from national security to human security, and suggested that a sustainable peace process must draw on the predicates of rights, justice, and democracy. It also highlights experiences of women as agents and visionaries of peace in South

Asia and redefines peace as a quest for women to transform their position in society by ending the repression across the lines of caste, class, and gender. Many of these new writings interrogated the lineage of human rights to reveal how people's struggle against specific forms of institutionalized violence takes the form of calls for 'peace'. Increasing numbers of South Asian peace researchers are emphasizing the generic links between the denial of basic human needs, exclusion and oppression as generic causes of violent conflict. Likewise, the non-military threats transcending national borders are increasingly seen as a greater challenge to peace and stability than the conventional threats of interstate wars and conflicts.

Similarly, many regional writings in recent times have emphasized the pitfalls of applying western values of human security and humanitarian intervention in the southern hemisphere. Highlighting the west-centric orientation of the human security discourse, Amitav Acharya (2001) suggests a culturally sensitive set of Asian values to guide the discourse. Priyanka Upadhyaya (2004) has analyzed the third world anxieties over the way human security doctrine might provide grounds for politically motivated humanitarian intervention. The pedagogies of peace and conflict resolution in the region were nurtured in large part within the broader discipline of international relations sharing the brunt of hegemonic west-centric approaches. However lately there is a growing recognition that the indigenous approaches of peace-making have far greater chances of success as compared to the template style international peace interventions effectuated through liberal or democratic peace. Such respect for plural visions could open up non-hegemonic spaces to interrogate the schematized understanding of South Asia, which defies specificities, as well as the diversities of the region.

For instance, the umbilical links between conflict, development and environment has begun to receive greater scholarly attention in regional discourses. There are perceptive writings on how unmanaged conflicts lead to severe development consequences, destroying resources, infrastructure, human lives; and how the scarcity of renewable resources, often a consequence of unbridled development, might produce irregular migration, ethnic clashes and insurgency. Similarly growing scholarly attention is being accorded to gender-related structural violence and the role of women in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Defying the narrow confines of the statist notion of security, these new writings are unraveling everyday insecurities faced by South Asian women.

Peacebuilding in new millennium

The tumultuous developments of nineties caught South Asian leaders and intellectuals largely unawares. The decline of nonalignment amidst the emergence of a unipolar world along with the rising scale of internal conflicts and other non-traditional security threats altered the peace and security imperatives in South Asia which served long decades of the cold war. This historic transference demanded alternative paradigms of peace specially to meet the post-bipolar challenges in the southern hemisphere. However, the protagonist of international peace in India and other South Asian countries largely remained indifferent. Seemingly they were far too engaged in dealing with internal turmoil, which often triggered regional upheavals and conflicts. No doubt, a small band of intellectuals and authors did offer worthy critique of how western discourses, realist and liberal, failed to address the conflict realities in the southern hemisphere. But their discontent did not lead to any concerted movement or school, to generate alternate values and methodologies for peacebuilding.

The transformative post bipolar shifts, however, impacted variedly on regional perspectives. Like elsewhere, it expanded the scope of peace building through the inclusion of the issues of justice and structural violence. The strivings to include traditionally precluded voices from the 'peripheries' within the epistemological and discursive frame of peace pedagogy and research has been an achievement of this era. In the similar vein, a significant number of studies illustrated the issues of human security and feminist perspectives especially around the South Asian conflict experiences. Many of these critical commentaries are recognized globally as they showcase the transformative potentials of women in peace politics. The recent peace literature is also enriched by several innovative studies around Gandhi's visions and their relevance in the globalized world. Gandhi's non-violent activism has inspired a range of ideas, action and protests. It is instructive to begin with an examination of how the non-violent activism based on *satyagraha*, *swaraj* and *sarvodaya* was carried out in post-Gandhi India and the world at large. Contributors from across the globe have explored whether the Gandhian visions of non-violent activism can realistically provide alternative visions of peacebuilding in today's world. The continued sway of Gandhi has, in fact, opened up the debate whether the application of non-violence was abandoned justly, or whether there is merit in resurrecting their principles for contemporary conflicts.

In the seventies, Jaiprakash led a non-violent movement, mostly involving youth, to transform society through *lokniti* (peoples' participation) rather than *rajniti* (political power). But Jayaprakash's vision and his nonviolent protest movement, seeking 'total revolution', petered out amid acrimony, chaos, and state repression. Unlike Jayaprakash's movement, the Chipko Movement (the act of hugging trees to protect them from falling) represents a remarkable success story of non-violent activism which in course inspired many similar protests to advocate for and support people-sensitive policies based on values of justice and ecology. The Chipko protests, led in the seventies by Sunderlal Bahuguna, achieved a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on tree cutting in the Himalayan forests of Uttaranchal. The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement), opposing the construction of a huge dam on the Narmada River, is yet another example of civil disobedience. The two main protagonists, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte, follow the Gandhian critique of modern development projects and insist that the state cannot ignore the basic needs of its marginalised population.

The inadequacy of top-down peacebuilding efforts to deal with the complex, culture-sensitive requirements of local peacebuilding has opened up possibilities for working out innovative strategies to achieve peace around the Gandhian vision of non-violent activism. There is a growing recognition that indigenous approaches of peacemaking have far greater chances of success as compared to template-style international peace interventions. This in turn shifts the emphasis from state-centric conflict resolution to non-state actors. Foremost of these is the role of civil society in the peacebuilding process. Studies demonstrate that the existence of social networks of civic engagement across communal lines is the key to prevent violence. Similarly, recognition of the importance of cultural dimensions and multi-religious synergy may also imperceptibly contribute to the peacebuilding process in urban centres where the episodes of communal and ethnic violence occur with greater frequency.

It is indeed important for the current generation of scholars to critically interrogate the realist assumption that non-violence does not work in the practical realm and is perhaps even antithetical to conflict resolution. The continued influence of Gandhi has, in fact, opened up the debate whether the application of non-violence was abandoned justly or whether there is merit in resurrecting its principles for contemporary conflicts. It will be a challenge for peace studies to conceptualize practical methods of non-violent activism, among policymakers, as an alternative to neo-realism. The need is to explore various tactics of active non-violence and the political dividends they accrue, drawing lessons from the success stories and the failures. Gene

Sharp's 146 techniques of non-violent action, known as Civil Based Defense (CBD), to cope with social injustice and external aggression might be instructive in this regard. The non-violent protest led by Anna Hazare should also be an instructive case in point. The perceptive criticisms of realism would not help much unless the pragmatic prospects of non-violent vision are demonstrated at policy level. It is imperative therefore to evolve a composite template for the study of non-violent actions and their political dynamics. It should go beyond the well-known examples of the Indian independence and American civil rights movements to include the overthrow of President Marcos in the Philippines, as well as peaceful protests in Eastern Europe, and in the democratic churning of Arab spring in more recent times.

We should aim to assess the viability of these ideas in contemporary public policy, exploring ongoing discussions of the utility and applicability of non-violence and peacebuilding, and the key questions that arise from these debates. Will nonviolent stances encourage the avoidance of war? Can visions of nonviolent action constrain recalcitrant states from violating internationally accepted norms? Could nonviolent techniques pre-empt a conquering state from reaping the dividends of victory? How does nonviolent activism contribute to social justice and the defense of human rights?

Way forward

The South Asian discourses on peace have been less focused on the rich streams of pacifism and the ethics of accommodation in Indian heritage. Not many writings of this era emphasize the vital role of the traditional image of care, tolerance and interreligious coexistence. Regional legacies of reconciliation and multicultural peace may also serve as practical resources for community-based peace building. Similarly, we could examine afresh about the applicability of successful narratives and models of peace building at domestic and even local, regional levels. It is possible to draw lessons from the domestic analogies to evaluate anew the relationship between local, domestic and regional peace building on the one hand and peace building on the global stage on the other. The innovative expansion of pedagogic and research activities within the ambit of peace studies however requires a transformative uplift of this traditionally neglected field. Mostly it has been studied as an extension of the state centric discourses of international relations or taught as a sub-field in law, philosophy and religion. This academic approach would neither allow interdisciplinary explorations nor would this

include the recent conflict transformation trajectories like problem solving workshops, public diplomacy mediation, consultation, dialogue groups, networking etc.

Although South Asia's modern history is marked by violent events and conflicts (wars, terrorism, insurgencies, communal violence etc.) the region has also seen an incredible amount of peace events and movements, and has given visible testimony to viable and variable cultures of peace. In recent years new forms of nonviolent resistance and new movements for social justice and peace have been growing throughout the region, e.g. civil society movements challenging the political order of non-democratic regimes, socio-environmental groups opposing state-led liberal development projects, marginalized indigenous/subaltern people who currently face struggles against the ever-increasing encroachment and usurpation of their land and natural resources by settlers, prospectors, private industries, multinational companies and the state – to mention but a few examples.

The truth is that the South Asian academia, despite being rich in normative ideas on peace and conflict resolution, has not been sufficiently forthcoming in promoting study and research in the area. It is only recently that a handful of universities in the region have initiated teaching and research programs/Centres with a holistic focus on peace and conflict resolution. However, most of these institutions are languishing in the absence of resources both intellectually and materially. Unsurprisingly the South Asian academic institutions are lagging behind their northern counterparts in drawing indigenous pedagogies and analytical tools. This is a result not only of paucity of information and research on the subject, but also due to the fact that the disciplinary boundaries of Peace and Conflict Studies are epistemologically so constituted as to largely preclude voices from the marginalized southern hemisphere. The net result is a substantial epistemological and discursive gap in academic literature on peace work in South Asia.

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