NEPAL, SAARC AND SOUTHASIA

KANAK MANI DIXIT

There are certain advantages that accrue to being the oldest nation-state in the subcontinent, and Nepal enjoys them. In a country which was established nearly two-and-a-half centuries ago through the unification drive of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, society developed a resilience that can only come from a shared and continuous history, outside the colonial embrace. It is true that nation-building in the nation-state is an incomplete project, and the marginalised communities of mountain, hill and plain are crying foul against the Kathmandu Valley-centric state. But Nepali, the link language, oils the political discourse and the resulting earthiness gives the polity an edge that is not available to the colonised parts of Southasia where the English-to-vernacular emerges as a sharp class divide, also impacting the practice of politics.

Nepal is also the only subcontinental country that has a historically evolved land frontier (with India), rather than being carved out at the hands of the departing *saheb*. This has also meant that the border is open, even as elsewhere Partition generated inter-capital animosities that foisted closed borders and harsh visa requirements that continue to this day. Because of various historical factors and the lack of obvious 'enemies' in the neighbourhood, plus its touristic orientation in the modern era, Nepal has the most liberal visa regime in the region. Citizens from all over the subcontinent, except Afghanistan, get visa-on-arrival in Kathmandu, and this also holds true for arrivals from much of the rest of the world.

As a country, there is a particular public attitude evident to most visitors to Nepal—that the country is 'friendly'. This seems to help the growth of tourism as an industry, which has prospered

Winter 2014–Spring 2015, Volume 41, Numbers 3 & 4

since the 'opening' of the country in the 1950s, not only because of the natural wonders of Nepal, but also the openness to outsiders exhibited by the population. This is not a romantic notion meant for the tourism brochures, but has actually to do with the national demography. The national population is the cumulative total of many small communities, with the largest caste/ethnicity being no larger than 17 per cent. There is no one big numerical majority or a significant minority group, which makes Nepal a country only of minorities, though of course there are those communities which are privileged and others that have been marginalised. The micro-communities are required to be open to each other for the sake of economic survival, which is what gives Nepal that particular flavour of social harmony, a reading that is based on sociological rather than fanciful notions.

Nepal has geographical centrality between the nation-states of the northern half of the subcontinent, where in fact the bulk of the Southasian population lives—more than 700 million in the catchment and plains of the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Indus. Nepal is thus accessible both by visa regime and geographical placement, with an open border linking it to the largest country of the subcontinent in terms of economy, population and geopolitical prowess. The lack of bilateral animosity linked to the fallout of Partition makes Nepal a country that is acceptable to all. This is also the reason why Kathmandu was the obvious choice for the establishment of the Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

AREAS OF DISSONANCE

While history, geography and demography thus allow Nepal to emerge as an important hub and meeting place for a Southasia that seeks to prosper through regionalism and cross-border contact, there are nevertheless weaknesses in terms of Nepal's ability to engage with Southasia and utilise its centrality for the sake of regional peace and prosperity. In particular, there are some incongruous factors in relation to Nepal's relationship to big neighbour India. The most important factor which would challenge Nepal's image as well as engagement with Southasia is the fact that Nepali citizens were in the Indian military as part of the Gorkha regiment and other units. This is a historical legacy dating back to the British military's use of

Nepal's citizenry as soldiers through formal bilateral agreement. This formal relationship was extended to India after 1947, when there was a division of what was then the 'Gurkha' regiments between the UK and the Indian republic. This incongruous situation sits heavily on Nepal as a member of SAARC, and is also something deliberately ignored by all members of the regional organisation for the sake of general amity. And the reality is that, in its continuing state of economic distress throughout the modern era, Nepal is not in a position to pull out of the arrangement, given the important income Gorkha service brings to the 'martial tribes' and to the national economy as a whole. However, there is no denying the dissonance when it comes to the reality of a sovereign country of Southasia allowing its citizens to fight for another (against a third country).

How does the incongruous situation arise—of a sovereign country in the modern era that seeks regionalism to also allow its citizens to fight for a neighbour against another neighbour? The answer lies in the anti-democratic system and subsequent political chaos which have acted like a cap on the polity and economy throughout Nepal's modern-day existence, sapping the genius of the people while preventing economic growth and equity. As a result, among other things, Nepali society has no recourse but to continue with the recruitment of its citizens into foreign armies.

Indeed, the economic distress that has dogged Nepal is the result of the continuing political turmoil and democratic challenges that the country has faced throughout its modern era, which started in 1950 with the end of the Rana family oligarchy. The political turmoil continued through the autocratic panchayat regime (1960–1990), the Maoist 'people's war' period (1996–2006), and the peace process and political transition thereafter. This ongoing instability has first and foremost impacted the lives and livelihoods of the Nepali citizenry, to such an extent that they lack the ability to exploit the plentiful natural resources with which the country is blessed. Therefore, the poorest continue to migrate out—to India, the Gulf, Malaysia and elsewhere—for subsistence and survival. Besides the resolute inability to rise from the 'least developed country' category to the 'developing country' category, Nepal has been rendered diplomatically weak, unable to carry out the activities of a proud and sovereign nation-state in the international and regional/subcontinental arena.

There was a fleeting moment in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Nepal did attain stature in the international arena under the leadership of the social-democrat leader Bisweshwor Prasad Koirala. He stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the greats of the global South of the day, from Gamel Abdel Nasser to Jawaharlal Nehru to Chou En-Lai, both because of his personal capabilities as well as Nepal's emergence in the 1950s as a promising young democratic nation. Koirala's government was able to take several initiatives both regionally and internationally, but the coup by King Mahendra placed it in the ranks of autocracies and the pride and positioning of the country was affected.

The Panchayat autocracy was followed by a parliamentary democracy, where social change, economic growth and equity became a priority. Political pluralism and economic growth were a requirement for the people to finally be freed from the curse of history, but also for the country to take its place of pride among the regional nation-states. However, the national momentum as well as socio-economic advance were derailed when the Maoists went underground and started a 'people's war' in 1996, a conflict that was to last till 2006. Society was scarred, and the positive international image of Nepal suffered, with the idyllyic image replaced by one of a country with 'killing terraces'. Even after the conflict ended in 2006, Nepal has not been able to bounce back because the peace process and the political transition have dragged on for a decade, even as the country converted to a republic, became constitutionally secular, and was declared as 'federal' (with the definition of federalism left pending).

With turmoil within, during the conflict and transition, Nepal became preoccupied with internal affairs, leading to neglect of both international and regional relations. Even ambassadorial appointments became less important, also due to inter-party horse-trading in an unstable polity, to the extent that Nepal did not have an ambassador in its most important international outpost, New Delhi, for nearly four years between 2011 and 2015. Nepal's politicians succumbed to the directorial hand of donor and diplomats, and even unaccountable 'operatives' of India, and it became even more subdued than earlier in its dealings with Beijing. The international donor community in Nepal, more powerful than in any other country of the subcontinent, rather like a bull in a china

shop, got involved in a myriad of sensitive areas during a time of constitution writing, including on federalism and inter-community affairs. This led to additional polarisation and a weakening of the democratic parties.

HELPING SAARC

Thus, over the 1990s and 2000s, Nepal has become a scarecrow of its former self when it comes to international relations. On internal affairs, it has become much more susceptible to international pressure, especially from the two powerful neighbours. Nepal suffers as ambassadors in Kathmandu engage most undiplomatically in domestic political affairs. The constitutional debates are constantly jostled by real and perceived positions of Beijing and New Delhi. Amidst the internal preoccupations, there has been neglect of international affairs and a resultant weakening. This is evident in Kathmandu's inability to have its army generals appointed to command positions in the UN's peacekeeping units, even though it is the fifth largest contributor of peace-keepers. It is not able to negotiate important treaties and agreements with its neighbours because of populism that is rife at home, and the capacity of diplomats and bureaucrats to engage internationally in myriad areas, from climate change to money-laundering and security of labour migrants, is severely compromised because the political class is too distracted.

Thus it is that Nepal, a country with great potential to contribute to Southasian regionalism due to its history and placement, is unable to take the required initiative within SAARC or without. Kathmandu, as mentioned, is the location of the SAARC Secretariat which has a core group of directors from each of the member countries, and which helps in consultations and negotiations on topics ranging from surface transport agreements to cross-border spread of infectious disease. In 2015, the constellation of forces would also seem to be in favour of Nepal's proactivism within SAARC, given that Nepal has the current chairmanship of SAARC following the 18th Summit and the current Secretary General of SAARC happens to be a Nepali diplomat.

Given Nepal's broad-based acceptability among the eight member countries, and the particular coming together of the Secretariat, chairmanship and secretary-generalship in one place, in

theory Nepal is ideally placed to shake SAARC from its stupor. It is not that there is a lack of ideas for the improvement of SAARC; what is needed is their being activated. The extant suggestions include strengthening the staffing of the Secretariat; increasing its autonomy and funding; making the SAARC agenda less beholden to the consensual dictate of eight foreign ministries; rationalising the activities of the organisation; encouraging independent scholarship on SAARC and Southasian matters; and helping conceptualise visions and concepts of Southasia as a region that go beyond the straitjacketed nation-state formula of SAARC.

In a different time, Nepal could certainly have aspired to play such a proactive role, but its internal crisis for the moment does not allow it that flexibility. The concentration and motivation is lacking among the spectrum of politicians, intelligentsia and civil society. But we need also to consider whether it is possible for any country, howsoever dynamic, to try and shake up the SAARC organisation. The sad reality is that nation-statism, and its strident sibling ultra-nationalism, define the national ethos of each country of Southasia, even the oldest nation-state (Nepal) which should have over time attained some maturity in these matters. In the newly formed post-1947 nation-states, in particular, the national elite of the capitals have so defined nationalism that the resultant populism flattens all who seek different paths in international and regional engagements.

The sharp-edged ultra-nationalism is what SAARC was meant to counter. Fortunately, at every summit, at the very least the heads of states/government do voice their commitment to regionalism, but that seems to be about as far as it goes. Even as the countries profess commitment to SAARC, there seems now to be a subtle shift in the wind, and a trend away from SAARC's eight-country regionalism to other formulae. These include bilateral attempts at cohabitation (such as with two-way most-favoured-nation status and free trade agreements) and subregional groupings within Southasia as well as with parts of other regions, especially Southeast Asia. The most public articulation of this willingness to move away from SAARC regionalism came from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who said in his speech at the 18th Summit in Kathmandu: 'The bonds will grow. Through SAARC or outside it. Among us all or some of us.'

In the context of what SAARC set out to do, unfortunately, six decades (in the case of much of post-Partition Southasia) seems too

little a timespan for a mood of regional camaraderie to up-end the ultra-nationalism that mires each country. In particular, the India-Pakistan rivalry is so all-consuming that it crops up at all times, including at SAARC summits, much to the exasperation of the other countries who would want to set a new threshold for debate. The lock-hold of nationalism over regional relations in each nation-state of SAARC leads to the conclusion that there is little possibiity for Nepal to use its position to bring about a transformation of regional relationships—at least for now.

ECONOMIC CONNECTIVITIES

The clarion call to cultural continuities and shared histories as a means to invigorate regionalism in Southasia has proved inadequate, not having the strength to tackle shrill ultra-nationalism in each country. To create long-lasting and beneficial regionalism, this stridency has to be whittled down through other means, and the best method seems to be creating cross-border commercial stakeholders. This is probably the arena where the nation-states of SAARC should concentrate in the coming decade in order to develop a regionalism that is both healthy and practical. The goal would be to develop stakeholders that would protect the gradual growth of camaraderie across the borders. The opening of economic and infrastructural connections would help in creating, as far as possible, the conditions that existed before 1947, or even 1956, when there was still relatively easy passage across the frontiers. Thus, the goal would be to help in concretely promoting connectivity all over Southasia—through highways, railways, water navigation, airways, the Internet, customs procedure rationalisations, electricity transmission lines, visa regimes, and so on.

During the time of its chairmanship of SAARC, even as its own internal political situation begins to normalise and stabilise with the writing of a new constitution, Kathmandu is required to activate itself on the Southasian agenda through SAARC and outside SAARC. In doing so, it must take a realistic position on what is practically feasible and what is merely visionary. It must see how its positioning can be used in promoting the connectivities already mentioned. It could start by publicising the historical open border with India, as an exemplar for other frontiers of Southasia, and ensure that Kathmandu itself is better connected with the rest of the

region in terms of air connections, transmission lines, visa regimes, etc. This is also the time to take advantage of the evident personal interest of India's Prime Minister Modi in better engagement of India with its immediate neighbours.

To become an effective player to promote the re-engagement of Southasia with itself, however, first Kathmandu must emerge from the morass of overt and covert interventionism in which it is mired. The primary blame for this is to be borne neither by the two immediate neighbours to the north and south, nor the overseas 'diplo-donor' community, but by Kathmandu's political class and the intelligentsia which has allowed matters to come to such a pass. It is this political class that must wake up to the possibilities of Nepal and of Southasia.

However much Nepal may stabilise and its intelligentsia rise to the occasion, there may be little that Kathmandu can do to open the door to Southasian dialogue. The SAARC train is a slow one, and Nepal may not be able to do much within the organisation. On the other hand, Nepal is ideally placed to create a niche for itself in Southasia in a manner that it can be an exemplar. More than any other arrangement, the open Nepal-India border stands out as livewire example of what we seek for the rest of Southasia, where the borders are locked by barbed wire, halogen lamps, guard dogs or maritime surveillance. There are many other areas where Nepal, with its relatively small size but with 'sovereign dynamism', can act the way many of the other neighbours cannot.

Further, Southasian regionalism need not only be defined as 'SAARC regionalism' of eight countries working in unison. Indeed, a region as complex, diverse and vast as Southasia should not be straitjacketed into one kind of regionalism based on the conglomeration of individual nation-states. Beyond the declared SAARC agenda, there are numerous areas where Nepal could promote Southasian regionalism. To name just a few, tourism could be the glue for regionalism; leading the campaign to connect Southasian capitals and cities across borders by air; being the entrepôt country between China and Southasia through the Himalayan corridors; seeing how the slow-starter South Asian University can be energised; how to make 'subregionalism' a Southasian agenda; and so on.

Beyond the 'SAARC definition', there can be several other ways to define the regional conglomeration that is Southasia—a

coming together of sovereign nation-states and sub-entities of similar size, the collaboration between border regions across soft frontiers, the division between North Southasia and South Southasia, linguistic groupings (such as Bengal–Bengal, Punjab–Punjab), and so on. Any country of the SAARC region can experiment with one or more of these various regions, but perhaps it is easiest for Nepal.

Given the knotted history of the modern era of Southasia, the bilateral animosities, the power of the capital elites, and a host of other ills, Nepal is a country whose 'good intentions' are the least in doubt. It may not be able to do much for Southasia, but it can contribute by evolving as an exemplar nation-state, where there is high economic growth as well as guarantee of equity, where ultra-nationalism is held back, and where democracy and development is 'inclusive', tackling age-old marginalisations and the sense of being left behind by so many communities. Nepal could utilise its size, sensibility and sovereignty to convert the Westphalian nation-state into a workable formula for itself, a format and formula to be useful for Southasia as a whole.

◆