



Relations with its neighbours challenge India's federal system

Many of India's states share ethnic groups and borders with neighbours such as Nepal and Sri Lanka – a reality the central government cannot ignore.

THEME I: FEDERALISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

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In the matter of foreign policy, India has to ride two horses. One is the "Union of India", to quote the full name of the Indian federation as given in the Constitution. The other "horse" is collective: the constituent units of the federation. The former has a unitary temper, but the other, a federalist, has also begun to assert itself.

The two horses supplement each other when they pull in the same direction. But some times they do not, and that can complicate many aspects of Indian public affairs, including the foreign policy. This was quite visible in recent weeks. First when the King of India's northern neighbour, Nepal, came calling on New Delhi, and then at the opposite end, in India's relations with its southern neighbour, Sri Lanka.

There are several complex aspects to this story. But the one most relevant is that both federalism and democracy are galloping faster than India's expertise in managing the speed at which it is maturing. The constituent units assert their constitutional rights more forcefully as state level parties ripen quicker in the heat of India's universal adult franchise elections – an electorate of 600 million!

Regional predominance and rampant irredentism

The geography of South Asia is also very relevant to the problems of a vigorously democratic federation. So is the cultural map of South Asia, and the history, which has defined the map. India forms perhaps three quarters of the area and population of SAARC – the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. This organization is the only region-wide politico-functional organization of this continent sized region, which dominates

the vital maritime routes linking the Gulf region in West Asia with the major economies of East Asia.

Each member of SAARC has a common land or maritime border with India, but none among them has a border with another member. This gives geographical centrality to India in SAARC, which is further magnified by the size of the country. In terms of area and population, India is at least half a dozen times bigger than the next biggest among its SAARC neighbours, and at least a score times bigger than most of the smaller neighbours. In the same way one could contrast the size of India's economy and military to its neighbours. All of these

features of this region factor in the conduct of the foreign policy of the Indian federation.

The whole of India's neighbourhood is awash with irredentist possibilities. These can be slippery for the foreign policy of any country to handle but are even more so for India for two reasons.

First, many touchy and emotive issues lie on both sides of many a dividing line.

When parts of India broke away to form Pakistan, a couple of million Sikhs migrated to India. But many of their most sacred shrines remained in Pakistan. Large numbers of Muslims migrated from the northern Indian

Similarities lead to further complications

If the differences between the countries of South Asia were not factors enough to complicate Indian foreign policy, some of the similarities between them complicate it even more. Until about the 1940s, all South Asian countries had been a part of the British Empire for close to 200 years, and any that was not was only nominally independent of Britain. For a longer period in a deeper past, they had all been parts of the dense cultural and demographic mosaic called India. They were woven together by an economy nurtured by rivers shared by many of them. Therefore the political boundaries which separated one South Asian country from another were largely arbitrary lines, drawn according to where the advance of one army was stopped by another.

The same people live on both sides of practically every border that divides India from a SAARC neighbour. There are Kashmiris on both sides of the line dividing India from Pakistan in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the plains to the south, the line divides huge numbers of Indian and Pakistani Punjabis. At the southern end of South Asia assertive Tamils live in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and in the Tamil province of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. The east is teeming with the Bengalis of the Indian state of West Bengal, and the even more numerous Bengalis of Bangladesh, which was East Bengal once and then became East Pakistan, before the war of 1971 when it became an independent Bangladesh. India's northeast is a patchwork quilt of races, religions, languages, stretching up to Burma and Tibet. SAARC reaches its northernmost peak in Bhutan and Nepal, an area dominated by the vigorous Gorkhas and Bhots of these two countries.

plains, which are watered by the river Ganga, the holiest water body for Hindus. But the finest flowering of Muslim culture, including the world famous Taj Mahal and the Muslim face of Delhi, as well as the shrine of a Muslim saint which is visited by more South Asian Muslims than Mecca in Saudi Arabia, remained in India.

Sri Lankan Tamils claim they are the true repositories of ancient Tamil culture, not the Tamils of India's Tamil Nadu. The Bengalis of India's West Bengal bemoan the loss of Bangladesh, which is seen by the Bengalis on both sides as the seedbed of Bengali culture. So, neither side sees disputed territory on either side of a line as just a piece of land.

Second, India is a federation, and that brings us to the "two horses" mentioned at the start.

The biggest stakeholder in this policy is the Union of India, which believes that all authority for India's foreign policy belongs to the Union and resides in the national capital, New Delhi. In its dealings with other countries, India's sovereignty is as indivisible as it would be if the country were unitary.

But out there now roams the second horse, which increasingly claims that a federated state has a stake in India's relations with a foreign neighbour with which it shares a border.

The claim is justified because the irredentist background (*see box*) makes it inevitable for any large unrest on one side of the border to seep across to the other side. And the claim is now staked with more strength as Indian democracy and federalism jointly take more vigorous wing and state level parties multiply. Thanks to them, single party governments at the federal centre have given way to multi-party coalitions, giving state level parties a bigger role, not only in governing the states but at the centre as well.

This should not be confused with any separatist theory. In fact India is less plagued by separatism today than at any

time in the fifty plus years of its history as an independent country. Intercourse and interdependence are also denser than ever before, between the centre and the states and among the states. More threads of interchange between governments at all levels criss-cross the country than ever did before.

But in dealing with any neighbouring country India now has to consider more closely the views of the Indian states who share borders with other countries. All the more so if the matter in hand sits astride the line which, in India's federal constitution, divides or shares out the powers of the centre and the states (*see box*).

Maoists in Nepal

When the new King of Nepal came to New Delhi in the last week of June 2002 on his first foreign visit since his recent accession to the throne, the subject most on his mind was the internal security of his kingdom, which has lately been facing a serious rebellion by armed groups of radical extremists who call themselves "Maoists".

These extremist groups have successfully taken on the King's police and even the army in many clashes. India is worried about this and is willing to give all the help it can, as it has been doing for months. The matter clearly falls within the domain of the government of the Union of India.

But the federated states have also become a part of the scene, in the form of other groups, also known as Maoists, led by the Maoist Communist Centre. They roam the wilds of the state of Bihar, which is adjacent to Nepal. Identical peoples live on both sides of the border, and both sides are rife with armed disputes between landlords and the landless. The Maoists on each side are suspected of being in league with those on the other.

The governments of both countries are keen to end this problem but India faces a federal problem. The Constitution clearly places India's external security in

the domain of the Union government. But it places internal law and order and land relations in the domain of the federated states.

The Union government can press the government of Bihar only up to a point, a limitation which the King of Nepal might have had some difficulty in understanding. The Constitution allows the Union to expand its authority over a state temporarily by using its power to declare an "emergency". The Union often (mis)used this power in the past when the same party was in power at the centre and in many of the states, as it was for almost forty years. But now it is wary of exercising this power.

Tamils of India and relations with Sri Lanka

India has also grown more diligent in protecting the needs and sensitivities of Sri Lanka, which has been battling Tamil militants, the Tamil Tigers, for close to 40 years.

But the Union government is also obliged to be sensitive to the politics of Tamil Nadu, which has enough members in Parliament to affect the stability of the federal government. The Tamil Nadu state government has proceeded against a minor Tamil party there, which is a member of the coalition in Delhi, on charges of inciting people against the Sri Lanka government, and the Union government is caught in the cross-fire of Tamil as well as Sri Lankan politics.

The same is the case in the north-east, where some governments are demanding and some opposing the Union government's program of sending back large numbers of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Such glitches abound. But the bottom line is that both federalism and democracy are more set on course now than at any time in the past, despite the zigzags and roundabouts. 