Epilogue:

South Asia: The Way Ahead.

-"Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators". (British General Stanley Maude to Iraqis on 8 March 1917.)

-"The world needs order", Richard Perle, "Thank God for the death of the UN", (***The Guardian,*** 21 March 2003.)

-"The sheer violence of it, the howl of air raid sirens and the air-cutting fall of the missiles carried its own political message; not just to President Saddam but to the rest of the world. We are the super-power, those explosions said last night. This is how we do business. This is how we take our revenge for 11 September". Robert Fisk, "Bubbles of fire tore into the sky above Baghdad", (***The Independent***, 21 March 2003.)

-"…liberal and progressive force in the Muslim world would be marginalised… Pakistani contribution to the US war on terror had already led to the erosion of the human rights and a war against Iraq would exacerbate the situation". (Asma Jahangir, human rights activist, as quoted in the **BBC report**, 18 March 2003.)

-"The current Gujarat experiment is success, declared Ashok Singhal, after the massacre of over 2000 Muslims in Gujarat and the election of the Hindu nationalist BJP. He and the BJP leaders went to assert that this `success' would be replicated all over India". Arvind Rajagopal, "Gujarat's `Successful Experiment'", (19 March 2003 on: www.opendemocracy.net or www.aiindex.mnet.fr.)

-"Do not idealise soldiers in an `unjust war'", (Natasha Walter in ***The Independent***, 20 March 2003.)

South Asia has meandered its way through a half century of strifes and strides though usually preferring a middle-of-the-road course, which sometimes looks stalemated especially when one looks at the inter-state relationship and the rising graph of exclusionary policies. Its cultural, historical, ecological and economic mutualities and their multiple benefits for all have been more often sacrificed at the altar of antagonism and suspicion. The ruling elite and official establishments, despite routine mantra of co-operation, democracy, accountability and peace, have totally failed to seek a common platform away from mutual recriminations and accusations. In the process, not only the one-fifth of humanity stays peripheralised regionally and globally, the private outfits espousing intolerant ideologies have equally obtained the centre stage. The specific

articulation of Jihad merely as a militarist concept joined with Sunni statism, and full-fledged projects like Hindutva, Khas Hindu movement and Islamic Bangladesh are similar manifestations of a majoritarian fascism. Such an ethos is invariably shared all over the region whereby exclusionary forms of nationalism and identity are increasingly being ordained in the name of history, religion, demography and such other denominators. These irredentist ideologies offer reductionist, dangerous and simplified solutions to immense human problems. Their simple formula is through a constant `Othering' whereby an `enemy within' is shown conspiring in league with the enemies from outside. The Muslim and such other religious communities in India, religious minorities in Pakistan, and the ethno-religious sections in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan suffer from various forms of discrimination, displaying a growing convergence between official policies and societal clusters, all justified in the name of an *imagined* national identity. In the process, pluralism remains the main casualty and despite a wider politicisation, comparatively freer press and vocal civil societies, the ethnic, gender and religion-based *othering* has been on the increase. These dissenions exacerbate the inter-state conflicts over several unresolved issues and, at populist levels, the mundane problems are juxtaposed as irresolvable conflicts between Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity and Hinduism, Hinduism and Sikhism, and Islam and Christianity. The Bihari issue is, of course, an exception where an undefined citizenship has led to statelessness of a quarter of a million people while religion—unlike in the cases of Bangladeshi Hindus and Christians--is the not at contention at all. However, in every other case, the discretionary interpretation of religion

and a so-called majoritarianism appear to be feeding into each other to deny human rights to smaller communities, which, in most cases, are already disadvantaged.

In a way, South Asia may not be such a unique case, as one finds the rise of Ultra Right and discretionary nationalist ethos overriding pluralist prerogatives even in the developed democracies such as in the North Atlantic regions or the former Eastern bloc. The insecurity of the majorities, though ostensibly incomprehensible, especially after 9/11 and in the wake of vengeful attacks on Afghanistan, Chechnya and Iraq, has unleashed a plethora of tensions on the existing pluralism. The saga of "fortress Europe", the harassment of non-whites, specially the Muslim elements, and a growing accent against political exiles, despite a hyped globalisation, have increased amidst the rolling back of civil liberties. The subtle forms of institutional racism and sheer physical and verbal violence against the non-whites, in several cases, have increased and the pervasive fear is of a sudden rise in the graph in case of any new terrorist attacks in these regions. The negative spotlight on Islam and rather irresponsible use of disputatious terms like "Islamic Fundamentalism", "Islamic Terror", "Muslim Militancy" and the "Crusades"—not always used innocuously and value free—reverberate in the rising popularity of electoral performance of the racist outfits. Like their Hindutva and such other so-called majoritarian proponents in South Asia, specific pressure groups and powerful media trajectories egg on these racist parties in the West. The dividends of a global peace movement, with its massive and immensely plural participation, may still offer hope for an alert global civil society, away from the scavenging forces of abrasive power and profit, yet its incapacitation in the United States, Britain and Australia in the face of official regimentation, highlights the enormous problems ahead. The disregard for the

massive loss of human lives in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya or of innocent civilians in Palestine or Gujarat abysmally reveal the limitations of the local and global civil societies while confronted with the statist and societal unilateralisms. The states, in all these cases, have utilised national, cultural and even religious symbols to justify their brutalisation, or have simply sat back to let the perpetrators take their toll from disempowered minority groups. The heroic role of responsible media, democratic groups, the resistance through civil disobedience and a constant exposure of immoral as well as partisan nature of these brutalities at a time when the UN, OIC, SAARC, EU and such other international alliances remain sidelined or totally disinterested, is no mean achievement.

Looking at South Asia within this global and rather painful perspective is both an academic and human imperative. Though South Asian states and societies have their own distinct features yet it will be equally ahistorical to posit this region, or the Middle East or even the Balkans, as eternally conflict-prone regions. Their encounter with the Western forms of modernity and globalisation may be comparatively recent but their civic societies have cherished pluralism in the past, even during their imperial phases. The evolution of nation states, on the back of decolonisation, is neither unique nor totally instrumentalist in unleashing discretionary policies. While *partition* has been and is a major component of universal dissolution of empires, this process converged with the sundering of communal harmony within these former colonies. Thus, positioning partitions of 1947 or 1971 as the total and sole cause of communal discord or inter-state dissension may not hold the total truth. The annulment of these partitions—even in the name of undoing one *wrong*—may unleash many more *wrongs*. The states, such as in South Asia, have to grow out of this time warp and a static victimhood to begin a new era

in regional and inter-community co-operation. The reversals of territorial decisions, irrespective of their being just or bad, will only keep on exacting more human tragedies and a taxing waste of precious resources. The EU and ASEAN offer useful parallels for South Asia though the ruling elite, as witnessed in the last half century, may persist with the politics of hostilities either out of sheer indifference or for the sake of sectional interests, but the respective civil societies must not leave this soley to the former. The challenges of redefining the politics of an inclusive identity, fortified by plural, democratic and participatory systems, are definitely formidable but the alternative is a simply a million volatile mutinies.

South Asian states and civil societies are vulnerable to extra regional forces and in an international system, where unilateral actions by powerful nations, as seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, certainly transmit powerful challenges. In most cases, the region espouses similar concerns over events in Southwestern and Western Asia as has been witnessed during the Afghan crisis or the three Gulf wars. Such spontaneous but real economic, social and geo-political apprehensions over similar ramifications for the entire region underline a shared view on regional security. While religions are social and historical realities in South Asia as elsewhere, their expropriation for narrow nationalist or such other temporary benefits needs to be seen as a region-wide malady. The tolerant and plural traditions of all these religions have been forsaken to suit specific interests with the results that the Jihadi outfits, Sunni activists, Kar Sevaks, Sinhala nationalists, Tamil separatists, or Khas Hindus now find it expedient to deny civil rights to other fellow citizens besides aggravating the inter-state conflicts. The politics of competition as well as cooption to seek a greater legitimacy through religious symbols both by the

political and societal elements have only allowed the extremist and exclusionary policies to prevail. The dependence of entire national identity on such exclusive religious infra structure or the other way around may yield some temporary gains for a particular ruling or aspiring elite, but its cost for the societies at large is too horrendous, as has been seen time and again across the region. Of course, Jinnahist and Nehruvian postulations on secularism have been misunderstood—sometimes not without logical reasons—yet a greater debate on their merits within the context of South Asian pluralism, equal citizenship and a due respect for all beliefs and a "hands-off" policy on such matters are worth investigating. The de-Indianisation of Pakistan and Bangladesh is as dangerous as is the de-Islamisation of India. Their security and identity-related concerns will be better met through a greater awareness of their historical pluralism and shared contributions towards larger human harmony. This has to come about by withholding the transformation of textbooks to suit discretionary needs, a responsible use of media and a greater debate on collective advantages to be had from a vigorous and fresher regionalisation without, of course, surrendering sovereignty. The regional co-operation will not only preclude any more possibility of `balkanisation' of this immensely plural and populous region, it will also usher South Asia into a long-cherished era of peace and stability.

The stigmatisation of Islam—either by intent or by content—allows Hindutva and such other hostile elements to settle their scores whereas among Muslims it creates a greater sense of despondency. As a consequence, while the BJP may use Gujarat as a triumphal case study, the Muslim fundamentalists use Western and Indian unilateralism only to become more intolerant. Certainly, the Western expediency adds to regional

proclivities. For instance, the early promotion of the Jihadi elements vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and subsequent turn-about by the United States created a wider sense of betrayal among several former Mujahideen and their international supporters including Osama bin Laden. In the same vein, the peripheralisation of Pakistan after the 1999 coup and its democratic imperatives became a forgotten chapter when after 9/11 Washington once again needed Islamabad as a front line ally. However, the massive number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan, the American nonchalance over the resolution of Kashmir dispute contrasted with a steadfast support for Ariel Sharon and an unjustified invasion of Iraq have exacerbated anti-American sentiments. The unprecedented electoral victory by the religio-political parties in the Army-led elections in 2002 owed itself largely to this countrywide anti-Americanism. The sentiment, in a way, is a part of an global anti-American discourse, which multiplied in the wake of Iraq becoming one more victim despite dissuasion from the global public opinion. The Anglo-American impatience to attack Iraq has further strengthened fundamentalists of all hue and colour at the expense of democratic forces in the Muslim world and civil societies elsewhere. Political Islam of fundamentalist nature grows only on the heap of unfulfilled human needs and a massive politico-economic disepowerment across the Muslim regions. It is a populist rallying point for have-nots whose clerical leaders and militants—like the Kar Sevaks, Tamil Tigers and Shiv Sena activists—offer intolerant and simplistic solutions to complex mundane problems. It receives its sustenance from Western partisan policies in the developing world especially in the Muslim regions and thus becomes an anti-Western campaign.

In the same vein, the extreme elements espousing a Hinduised India, despite a thin yet powerful and prosperous veneer of its leaders, is a mass of troubled humanity, to whom, rather a quickly rehashed mish-mash of secularism, socialism, privatisation and abrasive globalisation amidst a pervasive global indifference engendered a plethora of anxieties and unfulfilled desires. The trishol (trident) bearing rhetoricians, spouting hatred and parading like traditional Hindu mythical heroes, are exploiting them to their best to suit their own desires. Their expediency is to obtain power by offering a convenient yet dangerous mix of extreme religion, partisan nationalism and selective historical discourse, all in the name of a so-called majoritarianism. Only the negative portents of religion and nationalism underwrite this discourse based on hatred, reductionism and a false pride. The street power helps the irresponsible politicians in their acquisition of power but in the process it has been causing serious cracks in the Indian civilisational heritage and makes its minorities such as Muslims and Christians hostages to an unbridled fascist assault. The challenges for a responsible, courageous and accountable leadership in India are gigantic but the country's own vitality, its valorous civil society and other responsible elements from within the cross-ideological groups still offer a major hope. The Muslims—not just those in Pakistan or Bangladesh—may feel that while the West and rest only focus on Islamic fundamentalism and its exaggerated threat, it shies away from accepting its own such powerful outfits and also looks aside when it comes to Jewish, Christian and Hindu fundamentalists. Such argument may go well with the populist Muslim opinion groups as they fume with anger but mere criticism of Western interventionism or a sheer indifference cannot overshadow the domestic and regional ingredients of the malady. It is in the interests of their civil societies and polities

to undertake bold measures without waiting for `sermons' and deliverance from across the Mediterranean and Atlantic. The turbaned groups have to be reined in simultaneous with the prioritisation of the democratic and participatory processes to ensure distributive justice for all.

While the global factors may not be that conducive to the regional peace and supportive of democratic forces, South Asia needs to steer itself out of a stalemated morass. The region can benefit from grassroots empowerment and greater celebration of pluralism. It needs to offer and protect equal citizenry by building multiple avenues of multidisciplinary co-operation across the borders and communities. In addition, it can operate as a vital bridge between Central, Western and Southeast Asia, helping these regions achieve stability and peace. Its human and civilisational assets are definitely waiting to be explored.