THE CHALLENGES OF INTERGRATION IN MULTI-ETHNIC AND MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES IN ASIA: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Asia is unique and rich in terms of ethnic and religious diversity. In many instances, religious identity is closely related to ethnic identity and also in many cases, ethnic identity is derived from religious identity. Besides ethnicity and religion people identify themselves in other social categories too, notably class and caste (in South Asia). Post-colonial Nation States have tried to impose a national identity upon their citizens; but ethnicity and religion remain as borderlines and “constitutive identity markers” (Waltzer 2011). In the former Soviet Union identity was elevated to a supra-national citizenship, which was met with resistance and hostility and, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, proved to be totally unsustainable.

Asia has witnessed prolong conflict and war within the Nation State, over the issue of national identity. Some of such conflicts have originated from the colonial past, or from historical grievances of being discriminated against by majority chauvinism. Some are based on misinterpretations of religious text, often deliberate and for the purpose of inciting violence. It is indeed a major challenge for the Nation State as well as religious and ethnic communities to be engaged in a process of dialogue, develop understanding, and evolve common goals and visions which inspire everyone towards integration without compulsion. Towards an enabling environment in which each and everyone can contribute and strive for sustainable development and peace.

In absence of such integration inter-ethnic, inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts flare up. Most of the Asian countries have experienced such protracted conflict. It is more frequent and visible in multi-party democracy than one-party

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governing systems. At the same time forced integration (Panchasila in Indonesia under Suharto, the Soviet Union and China under communist rule) have produced only temporary stability and a sense of negative peace (Johan Galtung 2002). Violent conflicts and prolonged war obviously cost human lives, money and divert energy, which otherwise could have been spent for much-needed development and promoting the wellbeing of the people.

The challenge is to explore how to undertake such discourse and provide space in which critical awareness and empowerment processes take place, so that ethnic and religious communities; young generations, women, secular civil societies, academic institutions and government agencies play creative and dynamic roles based on the principle of the right to self determination, mutual respect, recognition and accountability. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that at each level there is an enabling environment for conscious, informed and participatory decision making which inspires each community and sector to contribute, without giving up ethnic and religious identity, to adopting a common national goal, vision and road towards self sustained integration, sustainable development and enduring peace.

Based on the above outline this paper shall: (1) discuss meanings and principles of integration; (2) analyze problem arising out of forced integration and lessons learned from three case studies: Buddhist Nationalism and Southern Malayu Muslim identity conflicts in the Deep South in Thailand; Bengali Nationalism and the Tribal People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts; and Buddhist Nationalism and Tamils aspirations for a homeland in Sri Lanka; and (3) finally, the paper will explore ways towards prevention of conflict and promotion of meaningful and mutually enriching integration which nurtures co-existence and cooperation for enduring peace, progress and sustainable development.

The Meanings and Principles of Integration in Asian Contexts

The word “integration” has many connotations and meanings. Integration can be interpreted from perceptions and feelings. It can also be understood from the perspective of power. From perception, integration can mean desirable and meaningful union or connectedness. It is a relationship between and among people based on the principles of mutual respect for identity, culture, tradition and religion. The main objective of integration is to advance common goals. It is also to enhance creative interactions, dialogue cooperation and complementarities based on due recognition of community’s needs and problems in order to find solutions.

Towards finding solutions, the integration process can be considered as a forum for raising questions, seeking clarifications, evolving strategies. It is also to
develop an understanding that all problems cannot be solved in a short time. The process is to help strengthen relationships, mutual trust and confidence; and evolve mechanisms for continuing such processes to address present and future challenges. From such processes people experience mental, emotional and physical benefit (Emile Durkheim). Such integration processes prevent isolation, depression, accumulation of anger and grievances which might lead to violent conflict and war.

The opposite of integration is fragmentation. Fragmentations, divisions and disunity among people make a society weaker. From the perspective of power, the rulers conceive territorial integration as a positive action, because their understanding is, that a weak society or a nation is unable to progress. At the same time forced integration remains negative until peoples see benefit and enjoy freedom and their dignity and right to participation in decision making process is protected and ensured. In the absence of a common vision, integration becomes meaningless.

The challenge is how to develop a common vision which reflects people’s dreams. People in a given society or in a country are not homogenous. Socially, people belong to different tribes, ethnic and religious communities. Economically in our societies and countries people belong to different strata, occupations and professions. Their skills and capacity vary. Politically, people belong to different ideas and ideologies. There are political organizations of various orientations and trends. That means, we live in diverse societies and nations with diverse interests and ideas.

To transform and harmonize such heterogeneity and diversity is a strength. That would require a higher level of capacity and compassion and a caring mind to lead a process which promotes coordination, cooperation, empathy and solidarity. It demands imagination to construct a different kind of interdependent society, state structure and governing system which might be very different from what we have experienced in the past and in the present. The future can be built on past and present experiences, while at the same time there is a need to foresee the future. People will not accept mere repetition of old experiences which had not prove to be meaningful for them.

Integration and its Moral Dimension

In the past, there have been efforts to respond to conflict and war situations and to forge regional cooperation to prevent conflict or to stop it from further escalation. Political confidence paves the way for social, cultural and economic integration.
In a pluralistic society we observe several sets of perspectives. One is the aesthetic perspective which symbolizes beauty and symmetry. It is a unitary and self-sufficient type of human experiences. The economic perspective evaluates everything in terms of monetary value and efficiency. Whereas, the moral perspective is quite in contrast with aesthetic and economic perspectives. Moral perspectives begin from the idea of moral worth. The Moral person has a special set of value. That means the person has a sense of dignity. One would expect a kind of relationship from a moral person where she or he is willing to consider others too as having moral worth equal to one’s own. It applies to individual, to community and to the community of nations. If a nation state treats another nation state from moral and ethical standpoints then it must accord equal status, rights, dignity and of course with mutual responsibilities. Refusal to take responsibility for the death, devastation caused by its own policy and often justified by false “self defense” is an utter hypocrisy on the part of the hegemonic Nation State, Regional Power or Super Power. Regional cooperation, or ASEAN integration will be meaningful, if it follows not only economic terms but ethical and moral terms as well.

The Nation State and Minorities

The following three case studies can be seen more as addressing the political component of integration. But they impact upon social, cultural and economic components too.

Thai Nationalism and Southern Malayu Muslim desire for Self Determination

In Thailand about 85 percent of the people are Buddhist, Muslims are about 10 percent and the rest belongs to indigenous communities, Christianity and Hindus.

The history of Malayu Muslims and their Pattani Sultanate goes back to the 14th Century. The Sultanate was divided into two parts by the Anglo-French Treaty. Half of it went to Malaysia and the other half was annexed by Siam State in 1902. The Malayu majority Southern-most provinces include Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and part of Songkhla. There, the Muslim population is about 74 percent. The rest are Thai, Chinese Buddhists and a small number Christians. The Muslim people speak Malayu and uphold Islamic and Malayu cultures. For Thailand it took years to transfer power from local Sultanates to Thai bureaucracy. The Thai government removed privileges enjoyed by the Sultan’s family. They replaced local officials with Buddhist bureaucrats from outside the southern region. Given the deep religious and cultural roots of Muslim Malays, the Thai authorities could control the territory but failed to win the heart of the people. So a resistance
movement started since 1902. The tension and mistrust remain till today. The Malay Muslim cannot accept Thai Buddhist intrusion in their territory, which locals consider as their sacred land.

Within the Malay Muslim political struggle, there are four milestones: the first, Sultan Abdul Kadir Kamruddin opposed Siamese annexation but he was arrested and jailed. After he was freed he continued to mobilize and support the Malay Muslim movement for self determination, even after being exiled in Malaysia, and until his death. The second, from 1935 the Malay Muslim nationalist movement became stronger. Haji Sulung submitted a 6 point proposal in 1947 to the Siamese government which included (a) appointment of a Malay Muslim High Commissioner, (b) an eighty percent quota for Malay Muslims in regional government positions, (c) recognition of Malay language (d) the application of Malay law, (e) full authority for the provincial Islamic Council and (f) control over regional financial revenues. The Siamese state rejected the proposal outright. The third, from 1970s the Malay Muslim identity struggle started and insurgents groups emerged and remained active except for a brief period from the mid 1980s to the end of the 1990’s. The fourth, in 2004, the Kruse and Takbai massacres gave new life to the insurgency movements which are continuing till today. From January 4, 2004 more than 5000 people have lost their lives. In spite of a large military presence and a large budget allocated for restoring peace security and development projects, the violence is continuing unabated.

Thai Scholar Decha Tangseefa’s sees complexity of Southern Thailand from the lens of a cultural map and a juridical map which are not congruent. The cultural map in the Deep South is shaped by historical allegiances and also by the border trade with Malaysians, both of which are not recognized by the Thai state. But local people consider them as normal and any restriction is not acceptable. The juridical map emphasizes the national sovereignty and integrity of the territory of the nation state.

Decha Tangseefa discusses the implication of the term “others” used by the Thai state and society. Chinese in Thailand are considered as an ethnic group but they are within and they are part of Thai society. Their contribution to Thai economic development is recognized. They are not considered as a security threat but as part of the imagined community. Whereas, the Malay Muslim in the south are considered as “others” meaning outsiders. The author compares them to the Communists who were once the security threat and the enemy of Thailand. Muslims as “others” are considered as a threat to national security and sovereignty. Therefore Muslims are not part of the imagined community. So the guidelines in the
manuals for the government officials prescribe treating Muslims from the perspective of "others".

Thanet Apornsuvan expresses a similar view to that of Tangseef, in the way the Thai government and a large section of the society consider Malay Muslims as untrustworthy. The reason is that since the Ayuthaya period and the whole Rattanakosin era, the Malaya Muslims have continued to rebel against the government and the Thai State.

Imtiyaz Yusufs' reading is that during World War II (1939-1945) the nationalist movement started under the leadership of Haji Sulung. In the 1970s, it evolved as an ethno-religious, Malay-Muslim identity movement which seeks to separate the region from Thailand. In 1990 the movement was dormant but resurfaced even stronger in 2001.

Yusuf also sees that the southern Malay Muslims have no trust in other Muslims who are living in other parts of Thailand. Though Muslims who have come and settled in other parts of Thailand have sympathy for Southern Malay Muslims, they don’t support the separatist movement. They think Thailand has provided enough space for them to develop. The difference between the two groups is the Malay people are rooted in their land and once enjoyed sovereignty and lost it; whereas outsiders came empty-handed and built their wealth, so they are grateful for the space given by the Thai State.

We can see here two Thai scholars highlighting historical aspects of the conflict and at the same time focusing on the inability of Thai leadership and majority Buddhist people to comprehend the underlying causes of conflict in Southern Thailand; but still they would like to continue the failed policies in the South.

Whereas a Muslim scholar, such as Imtiyaz Yusuf, finds space in Thai society within which Muslims in other parts who have come and settled in Thailand and are doing well. He does not see the Southern conflict the same way as Malayu Muslims themselves do

Bangali Nationalism and the Movement of the Chittagong Hill Tribes for Autonomy

Bangladesh earned its independence in 1972, According to the 2001 census the total population reached 129.25 millions: Muslims 88.3 percent, followed by Hindus 10.6 percent, the tribal population is about 1 percent and the rest are Buddhists and Christians. According to the census there are 29 tribes in Bangladesh living in the east and northern part of Bangladesh bordering Myanmar and India.
The major discontent of Tribal people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) started in the 60's when the then Pakistan government constructed the Kaptai Dam to generate electricity. This displaced thousands of tribal people. They were not rehabilitated and compensated adequately.

During the liberation struggle the CHT people fought against Pakistan side by side with the Bangali. After independence of Bangladesh, during the constitution making process the representative of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) people urged the Constituent Assembly and the Father of the Nation Shekh Mujibar Rahman to recognize the distinct identity and culture of the CHT people. But their demand was not accepted. They were told all people are Bangladesh citizen and have equal rights. The CHT movement grew and led to the formation of the Parbatla Chattagram Janasanghati Samitee (PCJS) and they launched an armed struggle. The Bangladesh government responded militarily to defeat the movement. About 70,000 tribal people went to India and took refuge in Tripura state. Simultaneously, the government implemented a policy of transmigration of Bengali settlers to grab the land of the Tribal people. Bangali Muslim population from 12 percent in 1961 increased to 44 percent in 1991. After a long war, in 1996 a peace treaty was signed. Based on which, CHT now enjoys limited autonomy in the form of a Chittagong Hill Council headed by a Tribal person. The agreement has not been implemented fully. At least active war has now been stopped. So it can be concluded that efforts of the Bangladesh government to ignore the demands of the CHT people in terms of recognizing their distinct ethnic identity, history and culture; was a major misstep which did not work. Forced or negative integration efforts did not succeed.

In the Bangladesh case it is ironic that the Bangali people separated from West Pakistan due to discrimination and injustice. But after independence failed to recognize the CHT people's aspirations for preserving their autonomy in order to protect their identity, heritage and culture. Transmigration policy and militarization both aggravated the situation.

**Sinhalese Nationalism and the Movement for Tamil Elam**

Sri Lanka gained it's independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Sri Lankan population is composed of Sinhalese 74.9 percent, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2 percent, Sri Lankan Muslims 9.2 percent, Indian Tamil 4.2 percent and the rest are other ethnic communities.

Differing positions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities can be traced back to the pre-independence negotiation process with the British
government. Being a minority community, the Tamils had to accept the Sinhalese position after independence, but they continued to express their grievances inside and outside Parliament. Their major demands were (1) devolution of power and (2) recognition of Tamil as a second national language.

In 1970 The Tamil party proposed a structure of a federal state consisting of five autonomous states, three for Sinhalese, one for Tamils and one for Muslims which was rejected by the ruling party. The tensions gradually escalated to violent conflict and the Tamil leadership started to move towards a struggle for self determination and realizing a dream for a Tamil homeland or Tamil Elam.

In the midst of frustration among Sinhalese youth in 1971 a Maoist youth movement emerged under the banner of “Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna” or JVP. The Government was able to crush it but thousands of people were killed. In 1973 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam started to emerge. In 1983, 13 soldiers were ambushed and killed by the LTTE which was followed by anti Tamil riots in Colombo led by the Sinhalese which claimed 500-1000 death. Since then full-scale civil war continued. This civil war claimed over 80,000 people. India and the international community tried to facilitate peace talks but there was no result. In this conflict, the Muslims sided with the government. The LTTE evicted about 100,000 Muslim from the North. Finally, the government was able to defeat the LTTE in 2009. Their core leadership was killed. This last war displaced thousands of people. Their rehabilitation and settlement work is just starting. Both Muslim and Tamil IDPs have been suffering for a long time. It will take a long time and a lot of resources for resettlement, infra-structure and to facilitate dialogue for enduring peace.

In the Sri Lankan case this is peace time and government has the opportunity to reflect on the past and learn from experiences. Similarly, the Tamil population ought to analyze the past strategies which caused divisions within Tamils and lost thousands of people. For government this an opportunity to seriously think about devolution of power and adopt economic and cultural programs for recovery, healing and sustainable peace.

Common Features and Consequences

From the above three cases we can conclude that three national governments opted for one nation, one people policy and ruled the nation under strong centralized government. In a country where a substantial number of people belong to the same religion and ethnicity and live in a congruent landmass, they become an imagined nation. When the minorities are mistreated by the majority
chauvinistic nation state and their call for recognition of culture, language, religion and right to self determination becomes louder, the government tends to rule with force not with consent, they resist. Government’s military actions burn bridges and kill the possibility of meaningful integration.

Asian experiences show that in most cases the representatives of the majority community form and control the government. They exercise, manipulate and monopolize power. Minorities are discriminated. Oppositions parties are suppressed and sidelined. Development policies benefit economically dominant sections and exclude the poor and the marginalized. When the minority population do not feel at home, their rights are violated, ad eventually that leads people to think, plan and struggle for separation. Unless the government listens to the grievances and addresses the root causes, it is hard to achieve reconciliation. Most governments try to crack down on “separatist” leaders and activists, declare emergency or martial law, which helps to ease the situation temporarily but fails to produce understanding, unity and integration. This becomes a war from within. If a state curtails people’s basic rights, diverts resources from much needed development and spends on militarization, then these actions pave the way for instability and extremism to take roots. That is why the efforts of positive integration are so vital.

**Possible ways of Meaningful Integration**

The purpose of integration is not for stability from the perspective of the ruling elite but to “expand human freedom” (Amartha Sen, 1996) That means towards eradication of fear, intimidation, inequality, poverty, unemployment and enabling people to enjoy rights to express opinion and participate in the decision making process.

To support such processes, human resource development is a must. The present education system seems responding to day to day demands, for example for open market economy, or ASEAN integration we need trained economists, managers, computer scientists, bankers etc. But does it guarantee a more just, caring and compassionate society? Does it secure citizen’s from land-grabbing, eviction, nuclear, chemical disasters? Does it prevent exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of a few? European Union is failing to protect the interest of common people resulting from economic crises. Therefore basic foundation for integration is to empower grassroots communities and strengthen their economic base rather than benefitting only the middle man. Question remains how to halt ever-widening gaps between the poor and the rich?

The most important challenge is how to achieve a level of consensus about our common future. That in turn might require motivation from within towards
achieving social, cultural, economic and political integration. Integration through coercion or force did not work in the past and will not work in the future.

In a society where there are large numbers of under privileged people and government struggles to bring economic and social development, but government alone cannot do it. There is a need to encourage formation of voluntary social, philanthropic organization and specialized autonomous institutions to mobilize human and financial resources to build capacity, empower and serve the orphan, disabled or differently-able people, street children, destitute women and elderly people so that these groups of people feel that they are an integral part of the society and they are able to contribute. These initiatives require moral force.

Moral force means both the quality and virtue of persons or leaders who are intrinsically moral and profoundly harmonious. Moral force is esthetically, morally and socially sound and is manifested in benevolence and humaneness. According to Chinese literature “one who rules by moral force may be compared to the North Star – it occupies its place and all the stars pay homage to it”. But present day leadership continues to demands respect and submission.

References

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