17

Crises of national unity in India

Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeast

Gurharpal Singh

Introduction

The recent sixtieth anniversary of India's independence (August 2007) was marked by the absence of the usual angst about national unity[1] that has all too often been expressed in familiar anxieties about territorial integration, separatist violence, and fissiparous tendencies.[2] Instead, the occasion was notable for the celebration of India as an emerging economic power that is redefining conventional assumptions about its polity and helping to shape a new architecture of peace and development in South Asia. In this changed environment, which by happenstance has coincided with better relations with Pakistan (post-9/11) and China, some of the old intractable issues—Jammu and Kashmir, the Indo-China border and northeastern states, and the periodic regional tensions in Punjab—have begun to unravel while other concerns such as energy, development, and reservations' policy now dominate the national agenda. Indeed, as India's economic development proceeds apace, it can reasonably be conjectured that the issue of national unity, which has traditionally been associated with the management of the peripheral regions in the northwest and the northeast, might begin to diminish in political salience.

While most serious students of Indian national unity are likely to be weary of such an optimistic reading, noting the importance of events like Kargil (1999) or the potential of resurgent Hindu nationalism to decouple such long-term trends, any meaningful understanding of contemporary—and likely future—developments in this area needs to address *how* the Indian state has dealt with crises of national unity in the 1980s and 1990s. The rest of this chapter will review the literature on this subject. It then examines these approaches in more detail with reference to Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern states, each of which has followed different trajectories. Finally, the chapter assesses whether we have entered a new phase in the understanding of India's national unity.

Understanding the crises of national unity

In the 1980s and 1990s, the peripheral states within the Indian Union became the battlegrounds for ethnonationalist and regionalist struggles. In a period of almost 20 years (1980–2000), nearly 100,000 people were killed in terrorist and counterinsurgency violence as these regions tied down the majority

of India's armed forces.[3] Such conflicts created a state of high anxiety concerning violence "against the nation," giving rise, among other things, to a virulent form of Hindu nationalism led by the BJP, which grew from a marginal force in the early 1980s to a national governing party by the late 1990s. This meteoric rise was not unrelated to the inability of BJP's opponents—whether the Congress or non-Congress parties—to manage the troubled borderland states, and climaxed in two dramatic showdowns with Pakistan as well: the Kargil war and the nuclear standoff between the two countries in 2002. External threats to national unity and internal politics of religious identity became inextricably intertwined, resulting in official promotion of cultural nationalism, violence against religious minorities (for example, pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat and elsewhere), and efforts to restructure the politics of the peripheral regions. The election of a congress-led United Progressive in Alliance coalition administration in 2004 marked something of a turning point but also coincided with external events (particularly the regional implications of 9/11) that have had profound consequences for India's relations with its neighbors.

Given these developments, in what ways has scholarship addressed the crises of national unity since the 1980s? How do the approaches utilized provide meaningful insights into the way these crises have been managed as well as indicators of future developments? In the section that follows, we review some of the approaches identified.

Crises of national unity as result of "external threat"

Perhaps the most common approach to the subject is to argue that the difficulties of managing the peripheral states arise principally from "external threats"; that is, historically the malevolent policies of India's neighbors, principally Pakistan and China, but also on occasions, Nepal and Bangladesh, with whom India has territorial disputes.[4] Violent secessionist and militant nativist movements that have flourished in these states off and on since Independence are regularly associated with "asymmetrical warfare" and targeted "terrorism" directed against India from foreign countries and designed to wrest these territories from Indian control. During the Cold War, moreover, the polar alignments of South Asian states turned the peripheral states into battlegrounds for "proxy wars." For Pakistan, the humiliation of the loss of Bangladesh, it is frequently argued, has resulted in renewed efforts since 1971 in support of insurgents in India, whether they were operating in Kashmir, Punjab, or the northeast. For China, the territorial dispute that led to the 1962 war, and remains largely unresolved, led to support for secessionist groups in the northeast. In more recent years, the Nepalese and Bangladeshi authorities have also been accused of harboring dissidents who have been instrumental in acts of violence and terrorism in the borderlands.[5] In addition, the transnational diasporas from these peripheral borderlands—the Kashmiris, Sikhs, Nagas, and communities settled in the developed countries, for example—are seen to be especially active in promoting the external threat by mobilizing resources, "soft power," and diplomacy against Indian sovereignty .[6]

Crises of national unity as result of regional factors

Although most commentators recognize the importance of external factors in the instability that has reigned in the peripheral regions, some emphasize the primacy of regional factors as the principal causes of the failures of these states to develop along the lines of "mainstream"[7] states. In Punjab, for instance, the militancy of the 1980s and 1990s was seen as the direct outgrowth of the consequences of the Green Revolution, which accelerated the process of agricultural modernization but also produced a Sikh political leadership frustrated with the limited economic developmental opportunities for the state. That this agitation

eventually took the form of religious discrimination and ultimately turned violent was due to the particular dynamics of social and political formation in the state.[8] Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, the uniquely contested political heritage of the state notwithstanding, the mismanagement of the Abdullah-Farrouq dynasty in the 1980s is seen as the root cause of the Kashmiri *intifada* which began after the rigged elections of 1987. As in Punjab, the religious and social dynamics of Kashmir political life transformed regional dissent into a generalized revolt that was subsequently *exploited* by external influences.[9] And, also as in Punjab, external intervention by Pakistani-sponsored groups occurred *after* a prolonged period of conflict among the major political forces within the state over competing visions of governance. A similar pattern prevails also in the northeast, a region that is desperately underdeveloped and beset by perennial conflicts between locals and new migrants, between settled populations and tribals, and between those who have cornered the scarce resources of development and the rest. Most commentators agree that these conflicts have not, by and large, been contained by "developmental federalism,"[10] that is, the gradual establishment of various subnational units and institutions for this region, which is home to myriad social groups, but rather have been exacerbated with the onset of modernization as ethnic group competition has intensified. Heavy-handed interventions by New Delhi have, more often than not, added fuel to the fire. In short, the regionally based accounts highlight the need to focus on regional processes in the peripheral states which, because of the unique social, religious and political formations, often reinforce cumulative cleavages and, as a consequence, quickly assume an exaggerated national importance.[11]

Crises of national unity as result of national factors

The main political science explanation put forward for the crises of national unity in the peripheral regions is that it is an acute manifestation of the centralizing tendencies unleashed by the post-Nehruvian leadership, in particular Indira Gandhi. Whereas the objective tendencies within Indian politics since the mid-1960s were towards regionalism, pluralism, and decentralization,[12] the response of the national leadership to these pressures was to centralize power in New Delhi, a process that coincided with the destruction and "deinstitutionalization"[13] of the Congress party from the early 1970s onwards and climaxed with the emergency (1975–77). It is alleged that Mrs Gandhi both undermined the historic congress organization and turned the conventional relationship between congress and religious minorities on its head by courting a Hindu majoritarian vote bank during her last administration. In most mainstream states, the growth of powerful regional parties had mediated these centralizing pressures, but in the peripheral states the unstable competition between the regional, and often religious and ethnic parties and Congress frustrated such a development with the consequence that Congress's pursuit of regional and national dominance drove the main political formations in these areas, which were essentially moderate, first into agitational politics, and, subsequently, the arms of militants. Although the dynamics of these developments were substantially different in Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeast, what distinguished the center's policy were repeated impositions of President's Rule, efforts to undermine regional parties, and virulent rhetoric against these parties on the grounds that they were anti-national. The key to reversing this process, it was argued, lay essentially in restructuring center–state relations to better reflect India as a diverse, regional, multicultural, and de facto multinational society.[14]

Inevitability of crises of national unity due to "wrongsizing" of India's borders and because India is an "ethnic democracy"

Although the centralization thesis is clearly valid in some cases, it fails to explain the

persistence and resilience of ethnonationalist movements in the peripheral regions. Reflecting more critically on these movements as well as the failure of the center to manage them, one school of thought has suggested its roots might lie in the wrongsizing of India at independence, referring to the inheritance of undemarcated colonial borders and borderlands over which the Indian National Congress exercised limited influence before 1947.[15] However, the partition seared the "lineaments of India's territorial boundaries deep into the national consciousness . . . [through] the popular sacralization of territory,"[16] and in so doing created enduring dilemmas concerning how these regions were to be governed. Post-1947 experience suggests that governance in these regions has veered between authoritarianism and "violent control," that is, where Indian nation and state building has been accompanied by regional "nation destroying." The distinction between peripheral and mainstream states, moreover, corresponds to a religious divide in that the former have non-Hindu majorities: (Kashmir [Muslim], Punjab [Sikh], Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya [Christian], Arunachal Pradesh [Buddhist], Manipur [Christian and Nativist], Tripura [a majority tribal population classified in the census as "Hindu"] and Assam [similarly with a "Hindu" majority that includes a substantial tribal/native population]). The religious composition of these regions has led some to suggest that India is in fact a de facto ethnic democracy accommodating majoritarian Hindu sentiment while violent control is exercised over religious minorities in the peripheral states. The inbuilt, structured predominance of Hindu majoritarianism within Indian democracy—whether articulated through congress or BJP—creates a perpetual momentum to administer the peripheral states through the "official regime"[17] and violent control. In fact, because Indian and Hindu nationalism substantially define themselves largely in terms of territory, crises of national unity arising out of the management of peripheral states are inevitable.[18]

Crises of national unity after 9/11

Post-9/11, the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's emergence as a frontline state in the "war on terror" have marked something of a turnabout in the relations among South Asian states. Coming as these events do on the back of the latest wave of globalization and national polices directed towards economic liberalization, they have been seen as an opportunity for rethinking the fraught relations among South Asian states that have all too often been characterized by territorial disputes and nation-building failures. Central to this change has been the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan, which has led to the de-escalation of hostilities, a peace process involving the disputed issue of Jammu & Kashmir, and a reemphasis in both states on economic development. To what extent these changes mark a fundamental shift in priorities remains to be seen, and one might question whether it will be possible in the long term to place territorial disputes such as Jammu & Kashmir on the backburner while development imperatives further strengthen the processes of normalization and mutual economic dependency. Despite these reservations, the positive example of improved Indo-China relations suggests that there are possibly new avenues for redefining the Indo–Pakistan relationship in ways that would provide a more enduring settlement of the crises of governance in the peripheral regions while also disarming the powerful religious nationalisms in both countries that have undergirded state and nation formations since partition.[19]

Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeast

The general approaches outlined earlier are useful as overarching explanations but need to be contextualized with reference to regional specificities and histories since 1947. It will be argued that their main value lies in providing useful insights into *how* crises of national unity have been constructed, especially by institu-

tions and parties at the center of Indian politics, while the role of regional institutions and actors—the more important dimension—has been largely overlooked, if not deliberately misrepresented. In this section we reassess the events in Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeastern states in light of the literature reviewed at the beginning of the chapter and what has happened after post-crisis phases in each case.

Punjab

Apart from the wars with Pakistan (1948, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1999), it is often argued that the Punjab crisis (1984–93) was the most serious challenge to India's national unity since Independence. The campaign for regional autonomy led by the main Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, from 1982 onwards, climaxed in Operation Blue Star (June 1984) in which the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple, the Sikhs' holiest shrine. The fallout from this event led to the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi, pogroms against Sikhs in several places in Delhi and elsewhere, and almost a decade of sustained militant and counterinsurgency violence in which, by conservative estimates, some 25,000 people were killed. The number of involuntary disappearances and illegal detainees was never ascertained, although the latter were estimated to vary between 20,000 and 45,000.[20] At the height of the insurgency in the early 1990s, almost a quarter of a million military and paramilitary personnel were engaged in counterinsurgency operations against groups campaigning for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. These groups were not without significant popular support: in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, their representatives or supporters won 10 of the 13 parliamentary seats from Punjab and captured the majority of popular support; and in June 1991, had the newly elected national congress government not postponed the impending assembly elections in Punjab, the militants would certainly have won and made a declaration for a new independent state of Khalistan. In the event, Congress aborted these polls, launched an aggressive counterinsurgency operation against the militants, and held elections in extremely difficult circumstances that were boycotted by the Sikh militants and moderates, resulting in a Congress landslide that was used as pretext to intensify the "war on Sikh separatism." By the end of 1993, most leading Sikh militants and their organizations had been eliminated, the moderates had been muzzled, and Punjab was being hailed as a model for combating separatism.[21]

The conventional explanation of the Punjab crisis is to argue that it was mainly the outcome of centralization pressures unleashed by Mrs Gandhi. Brass, in his systematic review of the subject, argues convincingly that Mrs Gandhi deliberately engineered the Punjab problem in order to cover the weaknesses of her party, which had become increasingly personalized, as well as to cultivate a new constituency of Hindu majoritarianism. In so doing, Mrs Gandhi subverted the unwritten rules of ethnic conflict management that had been carefully crafted by her father.[22]

There are, however, a number of limitations with this approach. First, it does not satisfactorily explain why centralization drives should have *disproportionately* adverse consequences for India's religious minorities, especially a minority like the Sikhs, who were so effectively integrated into state structures (notably the army and bureaucracy). Second, the differences in the centralization drives of Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian leadership were one of degree rather than kind: a more critical reading of the Nehruvian era in Punjab (and Kashmir and the northeast) reveals, even by a set of objective criteria, the high degree of "bossism," constitutional subversion, and authoritarian rule. Third, few scholars, Brass included, recognize that underpinning the Sikh demand for autonomy was a parallel claim to sovereignty which would have been difficult to accommodate within the existing structure of Indian federalism. Indeed, the Sikh Magna Carta, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, around which Sikh demands for autonomy were

articulated, called for confederalism rather than neofederalism. And fourth, the Punjab crisis was managed without a restructuring of center–state relations. To be sure, a number of developments since the early 1990s—economic liberalization, the legal obstacles to the imposition of direct rule from New Delhi by means of the imposition of President's Rule, and the regionalization of Indian political formations—have undercut the pressures towards centralization, if not reversed them, but these secular changes are still unable to accommodate Sikh demands, which remain largely unrealized.[23]

Given the obvious shortcomings of the centralization thesis, how can we better understand the causes and consequences of the Punjab crisis?

In a historically based account, I have argued that events that led up to 1984 and unfolded afterwards have to be situated in a broader context that recognizes how claims of Sikh ethnonationalism have been accommodated within the Indian Union since 1947.[24] Such accommodation has tried to undercut Sikh claims to sovereignty by exercising hegemonic control, which makes an "overtly violent ethnic contest for state power either 'unthinkable' or 'unworkable' on [the] part of the subordinated communities," and has co-existed with the formal structures of democracy.[25] When hegemonic control has broken down, as after 1984, violent control has been imposed, although not as often as in other peripheral states.

In Punjab after 1947, hegemonic control was exercised by Congress, which successfully divided Sikh elites by co-option, accommodation, and symbolic agreements while thwarting, until 1966, the linguistic reorganization of the state. However, the reorganization was subsequently hemmed in by so much conditionality that it led to the autonomy agitation that climaxed in Operation Blue Star. This agitation marked the culmination of Sikh ethnonationalist resistance, a "freedom movement," which reopened the Sikh national question by drawing on the cumulative failures to achieve Sikh national aspirations in post-Independence India. This failure was also indicative of a type of statecraft used by the Indian state to manage ethnic conflict in Punjab. Repetitive symbolic accommodation was used in place of real tangible concessions, with special emphasis on the co-option of Sikh political leadership. Between 1982 and 1984, as the negotiations with the Center proved futile, Bhindranwale, a charismatic leader, was able to revive a vision of Sikh nationhood by drawing on a rich pool of Sikh religious and historic symbolism that cut the ground from under moderate Akali politicians. Of course, this occurred at a time when there was a rapid commercialization of Punjab's agriculture, external support to Sikh militants from Pakistan, and growing involvement in Punjab affairs by the Sikh diaspora, but these were auxiliary factors which, on their own, could not have marshaled the resources of Sikh ethnonationalism.

Similarly, the role of the central congress government needs to be reassessed against traditional explanations. By the 1980s the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state had provided a bridgehead for resistance against hegemonic control, which had become increasingly thin. The Nehruvian approach of disarming Sikh ethnonationalism through accommodation, co-option, and symbolic agreements that were never implemented, had more or less exhausted the limits of statecraft by the mid-1960s. Mrs Gandhi's innovations included more direct interventions in Punjab politics, coupled with a search for an alternative hegemonizing ideology in the form of Hindu revivalism. If the Akali agitation of 1982–84 ultimately led to disaster, it was mainly because Mrs Gandhi was hemmed in by the compulsions of national politics and could not entertain making concessions to Akalis that would have meant dismantling hegemonic control and surrendering to the discourse, and potential realities, of autonomy and secession.

Although, after 1984, attempts were made to re-establish hegemonic control with the Rajiv-Longowal Accord (1985), the failure of

the center to deliver on the terms of the accord undermined the newly elected moderate Akali government while emboldening militants to declare an open campaign for a Sikh state. Thereafter the center quickly reverted to violent control in which counterinsurgency operations practiced in the northeastern states were heavily utilized, with minimal regard for political legitimacy in the region, resulting in well-publicized human rights abuses. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the annual death toll from militant and counterinsurgency violence regularly hovered around 4,000 to 5,000 as the state became an area of darkness, with the virtual collapse of the civilian administration and the rule of paramilitaries and the police. In a crescendo of violence in 1992 involving 250,000 military and paramilitary personnel, the militants were eliminated and the khaki assembly elections held that restored a Congress administration to the state.

The return to normalcy in Punjab through the use of violent control by successive union governments between 1986 and 1993 had one primary objective: to restructure Sikh politics within the framework of hegemonic control that had characterized the pattern of Punjab politics since 1947. Sikh ethnonationalism, which had underpinned the politics of the militants, was intellectually discredited and physically smashed, with the result that, given the limited resources available for Sikh nation-building, a return to hegemonic control was the only realistic strategy open to Sikh political leadership, although this would occur only after some time given Congress investment in violent control.[26] Indeed, this is precisely what happened with the return of the Akali Dal to power in the state in the assembly elections of 1997. The Akali Dal not only eschewed a renewal of a campaign of demands for autonomy that have so far remained unrealized, but also formed a strategic alliance with the BJP to secure a national patron against the center's continued intervention in the state. Since 1997, the Akali Dal and congress have alternated in power in the state while the leadership of both parties has sought to deflect Sikh ethnonationalist aspirations into the discourse of development in light of the post-Green Revolution collapse of agriculture and the new opportunities opened up by economic liberalization. Nevertheless, these efforts to erase the Punjab problem underestimate its potential to evoke a multiplicity of unsettling memories for the Sikh community, which could yet undermine the foundations of hegemonic control, especially if large sections of Punjab's peasantry remain unable to secure gains from the growth of the non-agricultural sector of the economy.[27]

Jammu & Kashmir

As in Punjab, developments in Kashmir in the 1980s and 1990s posed a serious challenge to national unity. Yet most of the literature that has addressed this subject focused on either the changes in national government policy in New Delhi or regional factors as the main drivers of this threat.[28] Although this approach recognized the rupture caused by the rigged elections to the regional assembly in 1987, it fails to address adequately the periodic oscillations between violent control and hegemonic control, or the new dimension created by the intensity of violent control and its intersection with developments in Afghanistan since the withdrawal of the Soviet forces and the engagement of Pakistani-based *jihad* groups in the Kashmiri insurgency. The latter undoubtedly further internationalized the insurgency, leading to Kargil (1999) and, indirectly, the nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan in 2002, but in retrospect it also provided a new point of departure in Indo–Pak relations after 2002 that hold the potential to unlock the dispute that has blighted relations between the two countries since Independence.

The decision of the Hindu ruler of a Muslim majority kingdom to accede to India in October 1947 resulted in hostilities between India and Pakistan, United Nations intervention, and a de facto division of the province in January 1949 along the ceasefire line. Jammu

& Kashmir's accession to India was secured by concessions to Kashmiri nationalism, most notably Article 370 of the Indian constitution that provided a substantial measure of autonomy. However, at the time of United Nations intervention in the dispute, this article was projected as a transitional measure towards the exercise of self-determination by Kashmiris. Nehru personally gave an open pledge to ensure that the "fate of Kashmir is to be ultimately decided by the people," and accepted the Security Council resolution of April 1948 that the dispute should be "decided through democratic method of free and impartial plebiscite." Nevertheless, this commitment soon waned as Congress first promoted National Conference of Kashmir nationalists, led by Sheikh Abdullah, and then, in a volte face as a result of Hindu nationalist pressure in 1952–53, Nehru began the piecemeal integration of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian Union. Abdullah, the "Lion of Kashmir," was interned for almost two decades while a compliant state legislative assembly, established by extensive vote rigging, opted for merger with the Indian Union in 1956. Thereafter, India's response to renewal of the Security Council resolution (in March 1957) for a "free and impartial plebiscite conducted under the auspices of the United Nations" was to cloak its integrationist intent under the pretext of the Cold War threat emanating from the US policy of encirclement that included a military alliance with Pakistan.

Three wars (Indo-China [1962], and Indo-Pakistan [1965 and 1971]) and the emergence of India as an atomic power (1974) convinced Abdullah of the unattainability of the demand for Kashmiri sovereignty. Towards the end of his life, he signed an accord with Mrs Gandhi (1975) that recognized Kashmir as a "constituent unit of the union of India" in return for the formal survival of Article 370, although its actual provisions were extensively diluted in the application of central powers to the state. The accord enabled Abdullah to nurture a political dynasty, and on his death (1982), his son Farooq took over. Farooq's tenure was marred by the need to straddle regional nationalism and the limits of autonomy imposed by New Delhi; his efforts to establish an all-India oppositional front for more autonomy resulted, first, in his dismissal, and, then, his return to power in alliance with Congress in the rigged assembly elections of 1987. It was the rigging of these elections and the unwillingness to recognize the growing support of the Muslim United Front, that triggered the uprising in the Kashmir valley from 1987 onwards. Thereafter, the separatist groups (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and Hizbul Mujahideen) transformed decades of ethnic oppression, into a generalized uprising against the Indian state. Between 1990 and 1995 25,000 people were killed in Kashmir, almost two-thirds by Indian armed forces; Kashmiris put the figure at 50,000.[29] In addition, 150,000 Kashmiri Hindus fled the valley to settle in the Hindu majority region of Jammu. In 1991, Amnesty International estimated that 15,000 people were being detained in the state without trial.[30]

The Indian government's response to the Kashmir crisis has been to use violent control, justified according to four principles: that the insurgency is externally supported and directed by Pakistan; that it is rooted in Islamic fundamentalism which poses a serious threat to Indian state secularism; that the separatist movements have no legitimate claim to independence; and that the insurgency is a threat to India's overall security, territorial integrity, and nationhood.[31] In furtherance of these objectives, the Indian Army and paramilitaries, aided by lumpen counterinsurgents, were unleashed against Kashmiri separatists to contain the violence and re-establish control. This strategy was partially successful and paved the way for fresh elections in September 1996, which produced a dismal turnout of less than 30 percent, and led to the reelection of Farooq.[32] But this "restoration" was soon undermined by the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kargil (1999) and the mobilization by both countries in 2002 following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that

brought the two countries to the brink of a nuclear war.[33] In the fallout and the emerging peace process brokered by the US,[34] new assembly elections in 2002 marked a firm rejection of the dynastic National Conference of Farooq and brought to power a Congress-PDP (People's Democratic Party, a progressive regional party) coalition that has begun a dialogue both with New Delhi and the local militant groups. The outcomes of these processes will be determined by the broader peace process with Pakistan, but India's determination not to alter the boundary or "abandon the people on the other side of Jammu and Kashmir" (Azad Kashmir) in favor of a "people-centric approach"[35] is unlikely to provide a new legitimacy for governance in the province or undermine the claims for Kashmiri self-determination, or, accession to Pakistan.

Indeed, India's response to the Kashmir dispute in the post-2002 dialogue with Pakistan has been to pursue a piecemeal approach rather than a grand settlement, one that aims to make borders irrelevant rather than redraw them. This approach, if allowed to develop to its logical conclusion by India and Pakistan, holds the potential of re-establishing political autonomy in Kashmir. However, given the bitter rivalry between the two countries for control of the state's territory, it is likely to be a punctuated process, whose outcome will be determined by the enduring difficulties of settled governance in Pakistan, on the one hand, and India's vast experience in managing a "people-centered" approach to maintain its continued sovereignty over the province, whether through hegemonic or violent control, on the other hand.

Northeastern states

In the northeastern states, Indian nation and state building have been bitterly contested since Partition. After 50 years of independence, the region is still tormented by separatist insurrection, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism, with some of the movements having been campaigning for independence since before 1947. The original inhabitants of the region, nearly half of whom are from aboriginal tribes, are uncertain of their place, whether within India or outside it. In a visit to the area in 1996, the former Prime Minister, H. D. Deve Gowda, acknowledged that people in the northeast feel New Delhi treats them like a stepmother and pledged to provide basic services to bring the region "to the standards in the rest of the country."

In August 1947 Nehru's response to self-determination movements in this region was blunt: "We can give you complete autonomy but never independence. No state, big or small, in India will be allowed to remain independent. We will use all our influence and power to suppress such tendencies."[36] Thereafter the strategic importance of this area in state expansion led to state building and "nation destroying" as the inaccessible regions were brought within the parameters of New Delhi's rule. Where economic exploitation of the region's vast natural resources resulted in indigenous opposition to migration from the mainland, a variety of administrative and constitutional provisions were adopted to placate tribal sentiment, including the creation of tribal zones and councils, autonomous districts, union territories and, eventually, new states. According to one commentator, state building in the face of separatist pressures has followed a three-step strategy: "to fight the insurgency with military force for some time; then, when the rebels seem to be tiring, offer negotiations; and finally, when the rebels are convinced that no matter what the casualties are on either side, they are not going to be able to secede, win them over with the offer of constitutional sops, invariably resulting in power being given to them in the resulting elections."[37] Although the same commentator emphasizes the *capacity* of the Indian state to control these movements, he is silent on numerous cases where constitutional rehabilitation ("sops") has been followed by renewed struggles, violence, and endemic terrorism. Since the 1950s, the histories of Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur have been filled with "accords" with

separatist groups signed by New Delhi that remain unimplemented. In Assam, as in Punjab, much of the resentment that fuelled the separatist movement was the failure of New Delhi to deliver on the regional accord agreed in August 1985. This failure revived the fortunes of the United Liberation Front for Assam, resulting in the repeated deployment of the army to crush the movement.

Unlike Kashmir or Punjab, coercion tempered by minimal consent has been the main strategy by which New Delhi has maintained its hold on the northeastern states. In this sparsely populated region, what is surprising is not the willingness of the insurgents to accept hegemonic control in face of overwhelming odds against any other alternative, but their determination to sustain such opposition to the Indian state for so long. Current developments suggest that these states have been far from pacified or politically integrated into the Indian Union. The emergence of a first generation of educated youth among these communities combined with a growing realization of India's "internal colonialism"—Assam produces 70 percent of India's oil and the bulk of its tea—has strengthened the arguments and the support base for separatism.

As in Kashmir, geopolitical changes are likely to have a significant impact on the future of separatist and insurgency movements in this volatile region. India's increasing rapprochement with China—the territorial dispute over the Indo-China border notwithstanding—has removed one of the leading patrons of the separatist groups. Similarly, India's close relations with Burma, and efforts by both countries to develop this region economically, offer new horizons as well as potential risks in what has traditionally been India's Afghanistan, that is, a lawless borderland that has traditionally been hostile to modernization and an intrusive central state. And while the Indo–Bangladesh relationship remains fraught with persistent tension over immigration, border lines, and use of river waters, India's demand for Bangladeshi natural gas and other Bangladeshi goods are likely to exercise powerful influences in mitigating these tensions as well as strengthening New Delhi's hold over the traditionally "ungovernable" northeast.

Conclusion: Re-assessing crises of national unity

In light of the evaluation of the three case studies, what conclusions can we draw about the contemporary understanding of crises of national unity? How are these understandings likely to shape the future course of policy in managing these crises and their potential implications for India's relations with its neighbors?

An optimistic reading would suggest that the sixtieth anniversary of India's Independence in 2007 marked a decisive turning point in the nation's history, a new age of equipoise in which a critical threshold has been crossed in which peripheral regions will become increasingly less important in setting the parameters of national policy. The significance previously attached to these regions is likely to be displaced by new concerns such as economic development and redistribution policies, particularly with the growing mobilization of *dalit*s and lower castes. India's territorial integrity, always fragile in these regions, is no longer an issue for dispute or contestation. India's emerging economic might, like that of China before it, will ensure that such contestations, as in the case of Tibet, simply wither away. It is perhaps because of this new emerging reality that India's more belligerent neighbors (notably Pakistan) have redefined their strategic relationship from hostility to diplomacy. This turn marks a decisive shift in understanding the new economic realities in South Asia, with regional economic cooperation becoming the principal driver of change, and new patterns of economic integration are also likely to be accompanied by alternative forms of regionalization and decentralization. In the long term, these changes could also redefine for a globalized age the rigid post-1947 constructions of national unity in South Asia.

A less optimistic reading from the case studies, by the same token, would acknowledge the profound changes that have taken place both within the geopolitics of South Asia and within India politics, but would also offer more cautious insights about the potential of the Indian state to manage the peripheral regions and their capacity to invoke crises of national unity in the future. As the case studies have demonstrated, there appears to have been little innovation in the way the peripheral regions have been managed since the 1980s compared with their handling in the 1950s and 1960s. There are, of course, significant regional and historical differences, but as a general rule their administration has oscillated between hegemonic and violent control. Even the attempts to respond to post-9/11 developments are permeated with efforts to create new hegemonies, for example, by using the language of people-centered approaches, or by regularly restructuring the politics of these regions through the ballot box.

Perhaps the main reason why the peripheral regions are unlikely to decline in their ability to create issues of national unity is that Indian nationalism defines itself primarily in territorial terms that are heavily encoded with images of loss and "vivisection" at partition. Mainly because Nehru and other Congress elites were exceptionally successful in using Partition to embed beliefs about the new state's borders, the mere questioning of these beliefs subsequently became synonymous with subversion. Indeed, the self-determination movements in the peripheral regions have provided a mirror to the distorted image of Indian nation–and state–building that historically failed to command legitimacy in the Muslim majority areas, and since 1947 has struggled to accommodate effectively states with majority non-Hindu populations. Such an accommodation is possible, especially if the trends outlined in this chapter take hold. For it to be successful, however, it would have to overcome two major obstacles: Congress's historical soft *Hindutva* and the BJP's more strident vision that sometimes speaks of wrongsizing India through "akhand Bharat" (suggesting a united India that incorporates Pakistan and Bangladesh).

Notes

1 The focus of this chapter is on the crises of national unity that have posed a threat to India's territorial integrity as a result of ethnic, secessionist and/or regionalist movements in the peripheral states in the 1980s and 1990s.

2 The year 1997 provides an interesting contrast with 2007. For coverage of some of the literature and wider implications, see Gurharpal Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-Study of Punjab* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), ch.xii.

3 In Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, according to widely cited figures, at least 60,000 and 25,000 were killed, respectively.

4 See Maya Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

5 See, for example, J. N. Dixit, *India and Pakistan in War and Peace* (London: Routledge, 2002).

6 See Government of India, *White Paper on the Punjab Agitation* (New Delhi, 1984). For soft power, see Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). For Nye, the term soft power is used in international relations theory to describe the ability of states to indirectly influence the behavior or interests of other political bodies through cultural or ideological means. The South Asian diasporas of these regions in the west have been quite influential in utilizing cultural and ideological means to advance their case.

7 Soon after Partition, policymakers in New Delhi, including Nehru, established a clear distinction, especially following the demands for linguistic reorganization of Indian states, between the border, or peripheral states, where special considerations applied, and the "mainstream" or "heartland states," where such considerations were unimportant. The distinction became especially popular in general discourse during Mrs Indira Gandhi's last administration (1980–84).

8 See Gurharpal Singh, "Understanding the 'Punjab Problem,'" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (December 1987), pp. 1,268–77.

9 Balraj Puri, *Kashmir: Towards Insurgency* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1995).

10 The term is Dasgupta's; see Jyotirindra Dasgupta, "Democracy, Development and Federalism: Some Implications of Constructive Constitutionalism in India," in Subrata K. Mitra and Ditmar Rothermund (eds), *Legitimacy and Conflict in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), pp. 82–103.

11 What distinguishes the peripheral regions is their non-Hindu majorities. The religious cleavage in which violence is sometimes directed against Hindus has played a central role in the construction of threats to national unity.

12 See, in particular, Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), chs iv–vi.

13 The term "deinstitutionalization" has been used with reference to the Congress Party under the leadership of Mrs Indira Gandhi, in particular in two senses: first, with reference to the destruction of the historic Congress Party organization and, second, with reference to the enfeeblement of state institutions. For further details, see Atul Kholi, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991).

14 Brass, pp. 212–13.

15 For an explanation of the concepts of "rightsizing" and "wrongsizing" and its application to India, see Brendan O'Leary *et al.* (eds), *Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), Introduction and ch. v.

16 Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.17.

17 The "official regime" is here defined as the organizations of the Indian state in these regions and their employees (including civil servants) and political formations that lend them permanent support.

18 This argument is most clearly developed by Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, chs iii and xii.

19 For useful insight into the "composite dialogue" between the two countries, see Dennis Kux, *India-Pakistan Negotiations: Is Past Still Prologue?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2006).

20 Shinder S. Thandi, "Counterinsurgency and Political Violence in Punjab, 1980–1994," in Gurharpal Singh and Ian Talbot (eds), *Punjabi Identity: Continuity and Change* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), pp. 159–85.

21 Shekhar Gupta, *India Redefines its Role* (Oxford: University Press and IISS, 1995).

22 See Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ch. v.

23 Gurharpal Singh, "The Punjab Crisis since 1984: A Reassessment," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1995), pp. 476–93.

24 Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India.*

25 See Brendan O'Leary and Arthur Paul, "Introduction: Northern Ireland as the Site of State- and Nation-Building Failures," in John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary (eds), *The Future of Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 9.

26 This point was made by Singh, "The Punjab Crisis."

27 For a detailed discussion of the challenges facing the Punjab economy, see World Bank, *Resuming Punjab's Prosperity: The Opportunities and Challenges Ahead* (Washington: World Bank, 2004).

28 See Puri, *Kashmir*; Sumit Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997); Vernon Hewitt, *Towards the Future? Jammu and Kashmir in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Portland Books, 2001); Sumantra Bose, *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Path to Peace* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

29 K. Balagopal, "Kashmir: Self-determination, Communal and Democratic Rights," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 43 (2 November, 1997), pp. 2,916–21.

30 See Amnesty International, *India: Torture, Rape, and Death in Custody* (London, 1992).

31 Jyotindra Nath Dixit, "Kashmir: The Contemporary Geo-Political Implications for India and Regional Stability," unpublished paper presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 8 April, 1994, pp. 6–7.

32 *India Today*, 31 October, 1996.

33 Gurharpal Singh, "On the Nuclear Precipice: India, Pakistan and the Kashmir crisis," *OpenDemocracy*, 7 August, 2002, http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-india_pakistan/article_194.jsp, accessed 23 November, 2006.

34 Gurhapral Singh, "The Indo-Pakistan Summit: Hope for Kashmir?" *OpenDemocracy*, 16 February, 2004, http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-

india_pakistan/article_1738.jsp, accessed 15 November, 2006.

35 Comments of Shyam Saran, Prime Minister's special envoy on Kashmir, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 23 November, 2006 (online).

36 Neville Maxwell, *India, the Nagas and the North-East* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1980), p. 4.

37 Shekhar Gupta, *India Redefines its Role*, p. 25.