

# India's Policy towards its Neighbours during the Period of P.V.Narasimha Rao:1991-96

## Abstract

Often there are allegations that India has opted the policy of sternness, bullying and non accommodative approach to its neighbours but that is not true. Every Prime Minister has accommodated its neighbours keeping its national interest in mind but despite their efforts these neighbours have their own national prejudices, egos, whims and petty squabbles. Rather than giving any credit to good gesture of India they always played the game of allegations towards India. That scene is also discernible in the period of Mr.P.V. Narasimha Rao. Like his predecessors Mr.Rao also laid stress on good neighbourly relations despite a lot of irritants and uncongenial behavior from these neighbours. The aim of this paper is to visualize that what type of problems erupted between India and its neighbours and how India has tackled and sorted out these problems maintaining India's national prestige and interests.

**Keywords:** Unprecedented events, interstate relations, regional security dimensions, consolidation of democracies, irritants, domestic politics, global changes, transcending, neighbourhood, territorial dispute, water sharing, ethnic issues, nuclear issue, internal disturbances, vitiation of atmosphere, accommodativeness, confidence building, magnanimity, taking into confidence.

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## Introduction

Sometimes history takes very dramatic turns, in this lieu the decades of the eighties and the nineties were witnessing some unpredictable and unprecedented events in international politics as well as regional politics of South Asian sub-continent. In the international arena, it witnessed the end of cold war, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the emergence of United States as the single most powerful nation in the world thereby designating today's world system as a unipolar world. The collapse of communism and Soviet Russia not only lead the way for the victory of global economic system, democratization and liberalization but also changed international politics from confrontation to cooperation, from arms race to non-violence and so on<sup>(1)</sup>.

On the other hand, when the world was witnessing these tremendous global changes, locally the South Asian sub-continent was also undergoing significant dynamic changes in domestic, political and economic fields. Not only were these aspects of domestic politics, but interstate relations and the regional security environment were also influenced by these global changes. Some new dimensions were added to them in the post-cold war period<sup>(2)</sup>. The upsurge of democracy and freedom appeared to be engulfing nation after nation, be it Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh or even Bhutan and Burma. The beginning of the decade of the nineties was marked by the consolidation of democracies in South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, in particular. Sri Lanka's democratic structure remained intact despite the periodic ethnic Sinhala-Tamil violence.

The trend towards freedom and democracy in South Asian countries not only reinforced the global trend this direction transcending even geographical as well as ideological barriers but it also provided a favourable climate for promoting regional peace and harmony<sup>(3)</sup>.

So far as the relations with neighbouring countries of India during Mr. Rao's premiership is concerned, after taking oath on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1991 in his telecast address, it was emphasized upon the fact that our relations with our neighbours, will receive the priority they deserve so that our region become an area of peace, prosperity and stability<sup>(4)</sup>.

This statement was further highlighted in the Presidential address to the Parliament on July 12<sup>th</sup> 1991, "In foreign policy, we accord the highest priority to strengthening our relations with our neighbours in South Asia on bilateral basis as well as through the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation"<sup>(5)</sup>. Just as his predecessor has done, Mr. P.V. Narsimha Rao also stressed upon the policy of strategically secure, political stable and harmonious, economically cooperative neighbourhood. In this paper, here is an effort to visualize the type of relationship that existed between India and its neighbours during P.V. Narsimha Rao's premiership.

#### **Irritating factors between India and its neighbours**

During Mr. Rao's period many issues clouded India's relations with neighbours, prominent were- territorial disputes, sharing of water resources, ethnic tensions, internal turbulences, nuclear issue. In addition, demand for renewal or renege of their bilateral treaties also contributed in vitiating the atmosphere.

#### **Territorial Disputes**

As far as territorial dispute is concerned, Kashmir quintessentially represents a territorial dispute of massive dimensions. So does Siachin. Lesser focal dispute between India and its neighbours were Kachchathivu, New Moore Island and Sir Creek regarding the demarcation of naval boundaries.

#### **Kashmir Issue**

So far as the Kashmir issue is concerned, this issue not only hampered the Indo-Pak relations but it also drew the attention of entire world due to some specific complexities. Having its strategic importance, Pakistan tried to acquire Kashmir through military ventures, but failing in it, Pakistan gave a new twist to this question. Since the beginning of the 1990's Pakistan has not only openly come out in support of Kashmiri people but it has also added to it some other issues: demand of plebiscite under UN Resolutions, suppression of human rights by Indian security forces and even threatening of nuclear war if it is not sorted out on its terms<sup>(6)</sup>. Due to inclusion of these two issues, Kashmir became a flashpoint at international forum.

Since the post-cold-war period, the issue of human rights had become a fashionable theme in world politics so Pakistan found this subject a conveniently effective diplomatic and propagandistic ploy. So devising it as a tool to put India in the dock internationally, it started highlighting "violations of human rights" and alleged "excuses by Indian security forces against genuine anti-Indian mass movement in Jammu & Kashmir". It not only raised up this question in every possible international organization, but it even linked India with Israel and urged NAM to set up a mechanism to find a solution to the Kashmir issue<sup>(7)</sup>.

Pakistan not only used the issue of human rights as a weapon against India but it also brought up nuclear weapons issue for achieving its aim regarding Kashmir. It started propagating the idea that if India did not allow Kashmir to become a part of Pakistan, there was a likelihood of an open war between India

and Pakistan which could lead to a nuclear holocaust<sup>(8)</sup>.

#### **Super Power's Approach towards Kashmir Problem**

Inclusion of these two points by Pakistan in Kashmir issue provided a fertile ground for external agencies to meddle in the internal affairs of the countries of the region. This was evident in the behaviour, specially of the USA, Russia and China in relation to India and Pakistan.

As usual, the US government had traditionally taken an anti-India attitude over the Kashmir issue and this trend became even more noticeable in the Clinton era. In the beginning of the nineties, human rights issues were used as a weapon by western powers to bring developing countries into line. This was done by the USA too as leverage against India in the context of NPT and Human Rights. Various statements made by US government officials reflected the anti-India bias of the USA.

The US officials not only questioned India's human rights record in Kashmir and Punjab but a US official during the crisis of Hazratbal Mosque, even questioned Kashmir's accession to India. Her statement reflected the US views about Kashmir as a "disputed territory" which in turn meant that instruments of accession did not make Kashmir as integral part of India<sup>(9)</sup>.

Even Mr. Clinton, in his address to UNGA compared Kashmir to other conflicts by noting "blood, ethnic, religious and civil war rage from Angola to the Caucasus to Kashmir". Regarding the solution of the Kashmir problem, the USA insisted that the people of Kashmir had to be consulted if any final settlement was to be achieved and that Pakistan complicity in fomenting insurgency in Kashmir with arms was no excuse for human rights abuses in the Kashmir valley.

So far as Russia's attitude towards this problem is concerned, there was a tremendous change. During this period, Russia supported the Pak's view urging India to resolve the Kashmir issue according to the International agreements, while before disintegration Russia had supported India on this issue on every international forum. Along with supporting Pakistan over Kashmir, it also supported Pak's proposal for the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in South Asia<sup>(10)</sup>.

While China maintained a reasonably balanced attitude towards this problem and insisted upon a bilateral solution.

This Kashmir issue was not related only to human rights and nuclear war, even this issue was also connected with the closure of consulates in respective countries. Mrs. Bhutto while ordering the closure of Indian consulate in Karachi warned that a third war might break out if India continues to ignore Kashmir's right to self determination<sup>(11)</sup>.

Though several confidence building measures were taken but as Pak adopted the policy of "an all or nothing policy" about Kashmir, so there was no major breakthrough in this period despite Mr. Rao's several reiterated offers for talks.

**Siachin Glacier**

So far as the question of Siachin glacier is concerned it also intrinsically connected to a settlement of the vexing Kashmir problem unless Kashmir problem is sorted out, Siachin issue will continue to overshadow Indo-Pak relations. Just as in Kashmir's case Pakistan insisted on a total Indian withdrawal from the entire Siachin area and on the establishment of "zone of disengagement"<sup>(12)</sup> to balance India and Pakistan claim lines.

**Sir Creek**

As far as Sir Creek is concerned, the demarcation of the frontier in this area has major consequences on account of the likely presence of oil and gas along the sea bed in this zone. So Pakistan, keeping the high commercial importance of the area in mind, insisting on defining the extremity of its land frontier in the Sir Creek area in a manner which will give it control over a large EEZ that would be enlarged by around 250 square miles. Introducing many complexities, Pak also makes this issue as a stumbling block in normalization of Indo-Pak relations.

**Teen Bigha Corridor**

So far as the issue of Teen Bigha is concerned thought it created some heat between India and Bangladesh due to some domestic compulsions but lastly it sorted out by opening it for Bangladesh keeping India's sovereignty over it and control all movements along it and maintain law and order there<sup>(13)</sup>. It was decided that the Bangladesh government would pay only one Taka a year for Teen Bigha corridor.

It was a major achievement for Mr. Rao that he removed one of the nagging irritants in the relations between India and Bangladesh and it marked a change from its predecessors towards neighbouring countries<sup>(14)</sup>. Besides this Teen Bigha corridor there were also some territorial disputes such as Muhurichar, Belonia, Khowai and in fact the Bangladesh government had refused to recognize the midstream of the Muhuri river as the international boundary pending final demarcation, despite the agreement between the two countries.

Some exciting events especially exchange of fire also took place, but the Bangladesh government did not take it seriously stating that it was a minor problem and it should not be a problem of serious magnitude.

So far as the question of demarcation of boundaries with Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka is concerned, there was no as such any problem.

**Sharing of Water Resources**

Another major point of discord between India and its neighbours was proper sharing of water resources especially with riparian waters. During this period this issue became main bone of contention between India and Bangladesh as well as India & Nepal. As Bangladesh also, on the line of Pakistan, tried to internationalize issue even incorporated the aspect of Human Rights.

Bangladesh not only insisted its permanent solution, but it also preferred involvement of co-riparian countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and even China. Moreover, Bangladesh demanded water in

excess of its geographical areawise dependence on equality basis. Since India was trying to sort out its permanent solution, it opposed the involvement of other nations. Besides other reasons, main reason of the reference to other countries was intended more to corner India than to find a solution<sup>(15)</sup>.

Bangladesh raising the issue at the UNGA in October in 1993 alleged that the Farakka barrage had caused the desertification of much of Bangladesh and had hampered navigability of its rivers. She also lamented that fish and animal resources in her country were on the verge of extinction. Adding the Human Rights dimension to this problem, she alleged that it was a violation of human rights as well<sup>(16)</sup>. Even Begum Zia adopted a new strategy for unleashing a diplomatic offensive. It took 32 accredited envoys in helicopters for an aerial view of the areas alleged to have been rendered into a 'desert' as a result of India's withdrawal of Ganga water at Farkka<sup>(17)</sup>.

Similarly India had to face problem with Nepal, when Nepal on the issue to Tanakpur Barrage Project alleged that it was a 'sell-out' of the dignity and prestige of Nepal as a compromise to the Indian security<sup>(18)</sup>.

**Nuclear Issue**

After the end of cold war and with the disintegration of the Soviet Union the international security scene changed drastically. South Asia became a potential flash point of nuclearization. Pak acquisition of nuclear missiles and arms from China complicated the South Asian security system<sup>(19)</sup>. Pakistan saw these weapons as a currency of security<sup>(20)</sup>. It looked to the nuclear teeth to settle bilateral disputes like Kashmir with India.

**Ethnic Tensions**

The third main point of contention was ethnic tension in respective countries as it has multidimensional aspects. On the one hand, it had created a security dimension in the Indian subcontinent consisting of the problem drug trafficking, insurgency and cross border terrorism<sup>(21)</sup>. On the other hand, it had created ethnic, political and separatist movements in the concerning states<sup>(22)</sup>.

So far as security dimension was concerned, these ethnic groups got involved in espionage and other covert activities in the host country and further it gave rise to cross border terrorism. Resurgence of militancy in Punjab and Kashmir was attributed to the infiltrators of Pakistan's agents in great numbers. Similar allegation was made in Pakistan about Indian infiltrators to support the Mohajir movement. Besides, ISI and LTTE were fanning their wings through Nepal for subversive and nefarious activities in India.

Besides security dimension, this cross border movement generated ethnic consciousness entailing inevitable fallouts. This ethnicity was consolidated to a large extent by the spread of democratic forms of governance. On the other hand, the rise of religious fundamentalism as part of global phenomena too heightened the sense of ethnicity.

This ethnicity emerged in the ethno-political movements versus separatist movement ranging from Sindh, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam to Chittagong hills tracts to Bhutan to Tamil majority areas in Sri Lanka.

The result was the conflict persisted between India and Sri Lanka over Tamil issue, India and Bangladesh over the Chakmas and other infiltrators, India's dilemma over the flow of ethnic Bhutanese refugees, India and Nepal over Indian settlers (Madhesies) in Nepal.

#### **Internal Turbulences**

Another important issue that had vitiated India's relations with its neighbours was internal turbulence in neighbouring countries and India itself. As internal conflicts and power rivalries intensify the different political groups in the region tend to indulge in India bashing. India has been a strong political factor for the countries in its neighbourhood.

All political and power seeking groups in India's neighbourhood turned against India when they do not perceive it as a supporter of their respective causes and make India-bashing a part of the power game. In playing this game nationalist passions are aroused and relations with India vitiated. It is amply demonstrated in the behaviour of the opposition parties in neighbouring countries, whether it was Nepal or Bangladesh or Pakistan.

Similarly, in India also affected parties or elements make a hue and cry regarding their interests such as Tamil Nadu's uproar over Tamils and West Bengal's over Teen Bigha.

#### **Demand for Abrogation or Renege Bilateral Treaties**

Besides these aspects, there were some minor issues also which created a bit tension between India and its regional allies such as demand for review of treaties or renege of treaties by Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka respectively the treaties of (1) Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950, (2) The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between India and Bangladesh, 1972, (3) the Indo-Sri Lanka accord of 1987.

The above mentioned factors were responsible for vitiating the atmosphere of cordiality, cooperation between India and its neighbours.

#### **India's Efforts for Confidence Building**

Mr. Rao on taking charge as Prime Minister, in accordance with the fundamental principles of Indian foreign policy to build this South Asian region into an area of peace, prosperity and stability, tried to his best for promoting good and cordial relations with the neighbouring countries. He paid utmost attention to resolving contention issues, to peaceful settlements of disputes and to promote friendship with all the neighbouring countries despite these countries involving in irresponsible or irritating behaviour.

Firstly, Mr. Rao tried to assure Pakistan by saying that India would endeavour to improve its relations with Pakistan keeping aside matters where reconciliation was not immediately possible. This assurance was given despite Pakistan's undiminished support to terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir and its mischievous attempts to internationalize the Kashmir issue. He stressed upon continuing good relations and forging friendship.

In order to fulfil this assurance and for the sake of confidence building, India took some major steps such as the agreement for no attack on each

other nuclear installations<sup>(23)</sup>, dialogues at Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary level held from time to time<sup>(24)</sup> and package of six proposals send in January 1994<sup>(25)</sup>. India took the initiative to offer an autonomy package short of full independence to sort out of the Kashmir problem<sup>(26)</sup>.

Secondly, in the case of Indo-Bangladesh relations, the government of India tried to sort out some of the nagging problems between the two countries. The leasing of the Teen Bigha corridor to Bangladesh was a major achievement<sup>(27)</sup>. When the Babri mosque was demolished in India on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 in the reactionary anger, the fundamentalist parties threatened to prevent Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao for attending the SAARC summit. But Mr. Rao reflecting the spirit of cordiality between the two countries went to attend the SAARC summit in 1993 at Dhaka<sup>(28)</sup>.

Similarly, when the demand of abrogation of treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation, 1972 between India and Bangladesh was aired, India displayed diplomatic and political maturity in promptly clarifying that if Bangladesh did not wish to continue the treaty, India would be willing to accede to the request<sup>(29)</sup>. In the case of sharing of the Ganga water, Mr. Rao agreed to evolve a permanent solution of the problem.

Thirdly, so far as India's relation with Nepal is concerned, Mr. Rao showed a lot of magnanimity and accommodative attitude. His readiness to consider the demands for review of the peace treaty of 1950, 1965 and the Tanakpur Hydel Project amply reflects it. When Nepal raised the issue of revision, Mr. Rao rather taking it otherwise, immediately assured Nepal that once Nepal informed of such a decision, it would be a matter for the government of India to consider<sup>(30)</sup>.

Finally, so far as India's relationship with Sri Lanka is concerned, Mr. Rao tried to develop a good understanding and cordiality through the adoption of "hands-off" policy and the just an "interested neighbour" stance as opposed to being an interventionist or one getting involved. India encouraged Sri Lanka to deal with the ethnic problem itself<sup>(31)</sup>. Besides, at this time, there was a conscious move on both sides to set aside irritants and focus on strengthening ties with the emphasis on trade and commerce rather than on the political context.

#### **Responses of Neighbouring Countries**

Though the responses of the neighbouring countries to India's overtures were not commensurate to the efforts made by India despite its efforts the regular political and strategic bickerings continued. Just like his predecessors Mr. Rao made a conscious and purposive effort to improve bilateral relations and multilateral cooperation with its neighbours. But despite this accommodative and cooperative approach towards its neighbours the climate of trust could not be generated. The attitude and behaviour of the neighbours made this evident.

India tried to break the ice with Pakistan but Pakistan adopted a rather negative approach and got involved in anti-India activities. It adopted the policy of 'an all or nothing policy' about Kashmir. The issue darkly clouded over not only all other related issues

between India and Pakistan but also Indo-Pak relations ultimately, either its encouragement to ISI, maltreatment to India diplomats, inflammatory statements regarding the demolition of Babri Mosque or closing its consulate in India.

Similar was the case of Indo-Bangladesh relations. The goodwill that emerged from the leasing of Teen Bigha corridor to Bangladesh evaporated within six months when the Babri Mosque was demolished in India. Reacting to the incident, Prime Minister Begum Khalida Zia warned India of "far reaching and adverse developments in South Asia if the Ayodhya issue is not settled to the satisfaction of Muslims all over the world".

In fact, rather to give any credit to good neighbourly gestures of India in transferring the Teen Bigha corridor, it was said that it was indicative of the success of the foreign policy pursued by the government.

So was the case of Indo-Nepal relations also, where on the one hand, Nepal wanted to seek every advantage for the Nepalese through the treaty of 1950 and so on the other hand, it wanted the that clause should be deleted from the treaty that enjoyed that the two countries would give each other's citizens the same privileges in the matter of residence and ownership of property.

Secondly, it tried to ignore security concerns of India in the name of equidistance. Thirdly, Nepal indulged in discriminatory behaviour towards people of Indian origin. It tried to introduce work permit system also.

Similarly, Bangladesh's conditionality about transit facilities through its territory for sending Indian goods to its North Eastern states, exports of natural gas to India presented a most glaring example of short sighted political considerations. The India initiative to quantify Dhaka's share of the Ganga flow was a pre-condition to any reciprocal gesture for cooperation from Bangladesh side.

Coincidentally, at that time, in all these South Asian countries, the duly elected governments were in saddle. Often it is stated that the similarity of the political system helps in fostering cordial relations with neighbours. But this maxim proved to be wrong, whether it was with Pakistan, Bangladesh or Nepal. The most surprising fact is about Bangladesh and Nepal where even though some personalities are regarded as pro-India because they are thought to have a soft corner for India, either it was Mr. Koirala or Mrs. Sheikh Hasina Wazed. They rarely missed an opportunity to make a hue and cry to malign India.

Against this backdrop of relationships, Indo-Bhutan relations were an exception. During this period none of the irritants existed as had earlier caused a strain in the relationship between India and Bhutan. In fact, at the time of the demolition of the Babri Mosque, when India was facing very harsh criticism from its eastern and western neighbours and from all over the world, it was the King of Bhutan who came down heavily on some countries, specially Pakistan and Bangladesh in his implication that their comments amounted to interference in the internal affairs of India.

Similarly, Indo-Maldives relations too were an exception in being unhindered and unrestrained.

In fact, in overall behaviour of these neighbouring countries two types of relationships are visible. On the one hand, were Bhutan and Maldives, their relations with India were unhindered and unrestrained. Perhaps, this was due to the fact that both the countries were well aware of their limitations in being small and tiny nations. They reconciled their power disparity with India and drew closer to turn their "power weakness" to their advantage. Here the King of Bhutan Mr. Jigme Singye Wangchuck may be quoted "We do not look upon India's size with any suspicion, we look upon the 900 million population as an advantage. It is a big market for anything we produce<sup>(32)</sup>. Similarly, Sri Lanka also translated political platitudes into concrete steps, economic collaboration for mutual benefit<sup>(33)</sup>. This is amply reflected in Sri Lanka's policy makers which may be cited here 'We simply have to trade, without it we are dead. To do business effectively, we have to be friendly with everybody<sup>(34)</sup>'.

While on the other hand, there were Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. India's relations with these countries saw a lot of ups and downs as in these countries the overall scenario of mistrust and hostility, the powerful anti-India lobby in and outside the government prohibited the development of friendly relationship between India and its neighbouring countries.

### **Conclusion**

Summarizing, it may be stated that regional cooperation and accommodativeness was the crux of India's neighbouring policy during the period of Mr. Rao's premiership. Mr. Rao's foreign policy seemed accommodative to a great extent which is discernible in the efforts that have been taken for confidence building.

It may be stated that as compared to his predecessor, Mr. Rao tried to go one step ahead for maintaining cordial relationship with the neighbours whether it was in the form of an assurance to provide an autonomy package of short of full independence to sort out the Kashmir problem with Pakistan or agreeing to discuss the review of treaty of 1950 and consider Nepalese reservations about Tanakpur issue with Nepal or readiness for evolving a permanent solution of Ganga water problem with Bangladesh. It was India's initiative that after the demolition of the Babri Mosque, despite all protests and threats, Mr. Rao went to Bangladesh to attend the SAARC summit. Ultimately Bangladesh has to reconcile to the fact that what had happened in Ayodhya was India's internal matter and it could not dictate to India to act according to their whims.

Showing a measure of political maturity, India cut clear of Sri Lanka's ethnic strife and persuaded Sri Lanka to sort out its ethnic problem itself.

In doing this, he showed a lot of magnanimity towards the neighbours. He gave a new dimension to regional policy by taking the opposition leaders of neighbouring countries into confidence. It showed that he believed in dealing with elected governments and

not with a particular political party or individual, no matter how friendly they appeared towards India. Whenever, Mr. Rao visited these neighbouring countries, he met with the opposition leaders of these countries. He did not show tendency to opportunism by trying to placate the anti-India governments by giving them concessions which were not available to a more friendly government earlier.

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