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DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT
Context, actors, strategies and approaches in South Asia

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Deradicalization and disengagement (DD) of radicalized individuals and organizations is a worldwide concern. Since radicalized locals have national, regional and global repercussions, their DD is a hot topic at the United Nations (UN) and regional forums and for concerned governments. The issue is more complex and multifaceted in South Asia, as the causes and motivation for radicalization are woven in religious and ethnic intolerance, nationalist and separatist movements and socio-economic disparities.DD on the other hand still lacks strong theoretical underpinning and sustainable institutional approaches.

This chapter highlights the DD processes in the South Asian countries, i.e. Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. All the selected countries experienced conflicts of a different nature and are still prone to them due to many unsettled disputes and prevailing active root causes of radicalization, militancy and conflict. For a better understanding of DD, a detailed account of country-wise radicalization status is presented. The diverse causes of radicalization are also highlighted.

Deradicalization is a course which leads individuals to discard extremist perceptions about the world, renounce violence for bringing about social change and adopt more acceptable political pluralism (Bertram, 2016; Rabasa et al., 2010; Rana, 2011; Horgan, 2009). Deradicalization programmes became attractive and catchy to describe creative, unique and varied initiatives. Broadly speaking, deradicalization includes any effort to change or re-direct views that are supportive of violent action (Horgan and Altier, 2012, p. 86). It is a process of changing the attitudes of the militants towards the use of violence for the attainment of their ideological or political goals (Ashour, 2009). Defence and security experts were realizing the limited scope of intelligence and security approaches for counter-radicalization and terrorism and felt the need for “de-radicalization which involves the process of changing an individual’s belief system, rejecting the extremist ideology, and embracing mainstream values” (Bajpai and Kaushik, 2017, p. 2).

Worldwide more than 40 DD programmes are in process (El Said, 2015; M.M. Khan, 2015). These programmes focus on the rehabilitation and reintegration of extremists into society rather than punishing them or marginalizing them from their respective communities. There are,
however, some definitional issues with deradicalization. Counter-radicalization and anti-
radicalization are proactive measures used to reduce the risk of radicalized society (Bajpai and
Kaushik, 2017) but often ignore radicalized individuals and detainees, while deradicalization
involves reactive measures trying to reverse radicalized individuals and groups (Bertram, 2016).

Causes of radicalization in South Asia

In South Asia socio-economic disparities, uneven power and resource distribution, ethnic
and religious divisions, ideological contradictions, foreign interference and conflicts and dif-
terent movements are still providing fertile ground for radicalization and militancy (see, for
example, Basit et al., 2019; ICSR, 2010; Moed, 2014). Further, the Jihadist philosophy in
Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, separatist movements in India and Sri Lanka and pov-
erty and exclusion in Nepal are major factors in extremism and radicalization (D’Souza,
2017; ICSR, 2010; Kaushik, 2015; Moed, 2014). Development is the dream in South Asia
but most countries failed to trickle down the benefit of the available growth and prosperity
to the common people, resulting in frustration and radicalization. Here we briefly explain
the major reasons for extremism and radicalization in South Asian countries.

In Pakistan, the Afghan conflict, i.e. the Russian invasion, fighting among Mujahideen
groups and US and NATO attacks, created passion and lust for Jihad among the youth of
Pakistan. The madrasas and religious leaders were fanatically promoting the spirit of Jihad
among the youth (Taha, 2012). In 1989, the USSR left Afghanistan but the repercussions of
the Afghan war and Jihad still prevail in Pakistan in the form of crimes, drugs and arms
smuggling and proliferation, extremism and radicalization in society (ibid). The decades-long
unrest on the western border, fighting and conflict with India and internal political, eco-
nomical and social instability left a substantial population of Pakistan unstable and extremist.
Poverty, high population growth and unemployment also contributed to anarchy in Paki-
stani society. Weak institutions and a slow justice system and the emergence of militancy
both as an ideology and as a kind of business for youth resulted in radicalization and terror-
ism. As a result, Pakistan today is plagued with ethnic, sectarian and economic instability.
Bad governance, rifts among provinces, economic disparity, illiteracy and unemployment all
contribute to radicalization, particularly among the youth (M.M. Khan, 2015).

Starting in early 1996 Maoists in Nepal used economic deprivation, inequality and dis-
 crimination against minorities as a tool for violent conflict in Nepal which continued over
a decade between 1996 and 2006 (Arino, 2008). Maoists were frustrated with the monar-
chical regime and wanted to seize power and establish a Maoist republic (ibid). Maoists
mobilized marginalized community members, women and lower-cast Hindus (Arino, 2008;
Ansorg and Strasheim, 2019; Kantha, 2011) and started a violent conflict called “The
People’s War”. Initially the conflict started in the Rolpa and Rukum districts in Western
Nepal and gradually spread into 75 districts and Maoists seriously challenged state authority
and legitimacy. This changed the social structure of society and the overall political land-
scape of the country (Thapa, 2017). The disgruntled youth played a vital role in the escal-
ation of the armed conflict (Subedi, 2015, 2014) as they were radicalized the most (Thapa,
2017).

The Maoists used three strategies to advance their narrative: firstly, they radicalized the
Nepalese by arguing for hard-line revolutionary changes in the then political system in
order to achieve economic equality; secondly, they further divided people using ethnic strife
(Thapa, 2017). The Maoist narrative proved very effective and attractive to women since
they were marginalized and had fewer socio-economic and upward mobility opportunities
from the state (Ram and Oliva, 2005). The Maoist army comprised a large number of female combatants (Arino, 2008) due to their policies of volunteers and aggressive recruitment drives (Manchanda, 2004).

India is facing violent extremism in different forms. The separatists and Jihadists in Kashmir, Maoist (also called Naxalite) separatists in the centre and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) presence in the southern part of India are active (Narain, 2016; Telford, 2001). There is rising religious and ethnic-based Hindu extremism and frequent cases of insurgency and violence across the country. These movements are triggered by freedom struggle, socio-economic exclusion of minorities and untouchable and caste systems.

According to Banerjee (2017), the causes for the radicalization and violent extremism in India include provision of poor education curriculum, religious extremism, cultural influence and involvement of the state itself in its promotion. He also provides suggestions for drastic changes in schooling, systematic changes in eradication of violence from society, alternate livelihood facility, sports and outdoor activities for physical exuberance. Communication technology and social media played an important role in connecting youth with extremists and militant networks in India (Penn, 2016). As a result extremism and radicalization are flourishing and terrorist activities are growing in the country (Narain, 2016). The inadequacy of moderate religious guidance, poverty, human rights abuses, anti-Western sentiment, lack of personal meaning and radical Islamic fundamentalists are also causes of violent extremism.

In Sri Lanka, the root cause of historical conflict and recent tension is separatist movement on ethnic affiliation, tension among majority Buddhist and minority Hindu, Christian and Muslims and power grabbing among major ethnic groups. As a result, since the 1980s, Sri Lanka has been confronted with the dilemma of two armed militancies (Manoharan, 2006). In the north, Tamils created the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on ethnic lines and took up arms against the state for separation and an independent state. In the south, the government encountered the People’s Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), with most Sinhala fighters grabbing maximum power (Manoharan, 2006). This shattered the social harmony and unity of the country. In May 2009 the government eliminated the LTTE (Jabbar and Sajeetha, 2014) and the demand for a separate state ended after 30 years (Keerawella, 2013). The Sinhalese and Tamil conflict is almost over but ethnic strife between Sinhalese and Muslims has the potential for new conflict. In recent years, Sri Lanka has also been confronting religious extremism. The radical Buddhists are inculcating an anti-Muslim narrative (Jabbar and Sajeetha, 2014). The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) is becoming deep-rooted in the local communities with a hard-line political-religious extremism narrative (Zylva, 2017). The BBS cause is also supported by some political parties and young Buddhist monks with an agenda of upsetting Muslims (Jabbar and Sajeetha, 2014; Zylva, 2017). The recent ISIS attack on churches in Sri Lanka shows hidden tension among ethnic and religious communities in that country.

In Bangladesh, strong religious extremist groups are a nursery for radicalization and extremism. For example, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS)-affiliated groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI-B), Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), Shahadat-e-Al Hikma and Ansarullah Bangladesh Team (ABT) are the main fundamentalist Islamic groups blamed for terrorist activities.

The polarization in politics and institutional repression of religious parties has led to the growth of extremism and radicalization in Bangladesh (Macdonald, 2016). Weak institutions and justice system, uneven economic growth and governance issues provide space for
extremist narratives (Khan, 2017). Social media and cyber crimes targeting youth are considered to be the potential causes of radicalization in Bangladesh (Munir, 2017). The spread of online radicalization of terrorist ideology has increased tenfold in Bangladesh since 2016 (Basit et al., 2019). A transnational crime nexus is becoming rooted in Bangladesh due to around one million Rohingya refugees and their involvement in drug, human and arms trafficking on the Bangladesh–Myanmar border (ibid). Targeting and victimization of the religious parties might cause a new brand of radicalized youth (Macdonald, 2016).

Deradicalization and disengagement approaches in South Asia

Pakistan

After the completion of the army’s counter-terrorism offensive against militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Swat, Pakistan started its first deradicalization programme in 2009. Most of the militants arrested during the army assaults were juveniles who were indoctrinated and trained as suicide bombers. 1 With time the government has learnt that violent and radical Islamic extremism cannot be defeated by the use of force. They understand that dialogues and rehabilitation and deradicalization of militants might help curb violent ideology and deviant interpretations of Islam. 2 For this purpose an institutionalized effort has also been started by the state of Pakistan with the help of civil society organizations to deradicalize the extremists in society (Qazi, 2013).

At present there are six main deradicalization programmes running throughout the country, including the Sabaoon, Mishal, Sparley, Raasoon, Pythom and Heila rehabilitation centres, mostly run by government and civil society organizations (S.A. Khan, 2015; Basit, 2015). The main purpose of the centres is to impart formal education to the detainee militants. The curriculum includes formal education, moderate religious education, skill training, advice and therapy. More specifically, rehabilitation training includes psychological counselling, religious education and their proper interpretation, information education and vocational training and reintegration back into society (Basit, 2015). In addition detainees are given an opportunity to discuss social issues (Qazi, 2013). To achieve speedy and good results, militants are first separated into groups, based on their level of indoctrination and age, and then training is provided accordingly (S.A. Khan, 2015). Most of these centres were initiated in 2009, with a good success rate: more than 2,500 Taliban fighters have been rehabilitated in different rehabilitation centres in Swat (Basit, 2015; Rana, 2011). In Punjab more than 1,000 Jihadists went through DD training to make them part of mainstream society (Basit, 2015). In the absence of independent evaluation, however, these statistics cannot be corroborated. Three of the rehabilitation centres working in Punjab are now closed due to lack of funding (ibid).

Most of the rehabilitation centres are run by civil society organizations but under the overall supervision of the army. These include deradicalization projects that incorporate interfaith dialogues and establishing madrassas to counter the existing religious schools that promote violence (S.A. Khan, 2015). Project Mishal, which is run by the Pakistan army in Swat, focuses its efforts on adult detainees; Project Sparley extends the initiative to the families of detainees. Limited assistance in finding jobs is also provided by the Pakistani authorities. The ultimate aim is to reintegrate former terrorists and radicalized individuals back into mainstream civil society. Other programmes operate across the country, especially in Punjab, but are poorly resourced (Burke, 2013). A few are run by the police and have seen success when the police have been able to keep up surveillance after prisoners have been released. However, it is important to note that Pakistan’s efforts to date have essentially
concentrated on low-risk militants – foot soldiers or low-level facilitators. Very little, if any, effort has been made, unlike in Indonesia, at rehabilitating high-risk or high-ranking militants (Abuza, 2003). Disengaging militants and the general population without violating sacred beliefs is critical (ibid).

In addition, in Pakistan governments have framed and passed numerous anti-terrorism laws and have banned many militant groups in different stages (Ahmed, 2014) after the brutal Army Public School (APS) attack on 16 December 2014 in Peshawar which unified the Pakistani nation and institutions. Hence, the National Action Plan (NAP) was announced by the government of Pakistan (Farwa, 2016). The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) was established through an act of Parliament in 2013. According to this act the NACTA is mandated and empowered to prepare, plan and provide guidelines for DD. It is also empowered to evolve and review mechanisms for their implementation (NACTA, 2018).

The government of Pakistan developed NAP for counter-terrorism and DD. As of today NAP measures are predominantly counter-radicalization, reactionary, administrative and legal to stop radicalization and terrorism. Little focus is given to rehabilitation and DD. The NAP provides a broad framework of action in diverse areas but specific mechanisms and its implementation in each sector are still not set out. There are apex committees represented both at federal level and in the four provinces to serve as a forum for civil–military coordination and to monitor progress in NAP implementation. Despite these initiatives, the status of NAP implementation in the federal and provincial governments of Pakistan needs further clarity and proper implementation (PILDAT, 2016). There still seems to be some gaps that cause delay in the full implementation of NAP. New efforts are underway in the current government for full implementation of NAP as this is demanded of all political parties and international communities.

In 2014, the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) was formulated. In this policy, the Ministry of the Interior pledged to ensure the internal security and interests of Pakistan. The policy constitutes the Comprehensive Response Plan (CRP), also called the soft plan, as well as the Composite Deterrent Plan (CDP), known as the hard plan. The government of Pakistan is aggressively pursuing the hard plan through ongoing Radd-al-Fasad operation of the security forces; however, few interventions are in place in the proposed soft plan which should focus more on DD. Dialogue with all parts of society is the main theme of CRP. Development of infrastructure, rehabilitating victims of terrorism, process of reconciliation, legal reforms, developing national narratives and the larger process of reintegration are the main focus of this plan. The NACTA coordinates with all relevant agencies for impartial reconstruction, rehabilitation, reintegration, reconciliation and creating national narratives to counter violence and extremism and DD.

Similarly, the main purpose of CDP is to ensure the internal security of Pakistan through a shift from reactive policy to proactive policy. However, efforts are needed to bridge gaps in coordination with the intelligence agencies to develop proactive systems for the elimination of extremism and implementation of DD approaches (Government of Pakistan, 2014). NACTA, through federal and provincial stakeholders, also developed policy interventions in six key governance areas: (1) rule of law and service delivery; (2) citizen engagement; (3) media engagement; (4) integrated education reform; (5) reformation, rehabilitation, reintegration and renunciation; and (6) promotion of culture (NACTA, 2018).

Quite recently, the government of Pakistan also built a national counter-narrative “Pigham-e-Pakistan” for handling radicalization, extremism, sectarianism, terrorism and militancy as an ideological response to non-traditional threats (Government of Pakistan, 2018). In Pigham-e-Pakistan, key relevant stakeholders from across society were engaged for the promotion of peace, tolerance and values of democracy that could lead to
freedom ownership and hence DD. In this process, religious and academic scholars sat together and first drafted the ideology of Pakistan and the major progress and achievements of the country since independence. Afterwards, issues and challenges being faced by the country, such as fighting and militancy against government and public and misinterpretation and misuse of Jihad, were elaborated. At the end of the Pigham-e-Pakistan, a joint declaration negated the narrative of militants, the punishment of Fasad Fil Ardh (corruption on earth) and promotion of peace with reference to the Quran and the saying of Prophet Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH). In this initiative, the broader segment of religion, academic circle and government collectively condemned terrorism and opened up avenues for DD.

**Nepalese efforts**

In Nepal the seven political parties signed an agreement with Maoists in 2006. The parties agreed on the 12-point agenda for future cooperation and restoration of peace (NIPS, 2013). Building on this agreement a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by the Maoists and the major political players of Nepal (Tandukar et al., 2016). This resulted in the end of a decade-long violent conflict in which over 13,000 people lost their lives and over 200,000 were internally displaced (Arino, 2008). Subsequently an interim government was created with the representation of Maoists (Valente, 2013).

The peace agreement included political and military reform, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the Maoist combatants (Ansorg and Strasheim, 2019; Kantha, 2011). Under the DD programme, within a week of the peace agreement, Maoist combatants moved into different camps which were set up under a UN mission. All weapons were stored (United Nations, 2007). Afterward DD became part of the wider demobilization agenda, focusing on changing the potential of violence rather than opinions (Dahal, 2012). During DD, more than 15,000 ex-combatants opted for a “retirement package” that included a cash payment (Bogati, 2015). A total of 1,400 ex-combatants joined the National Army (Subedi, 2015). Under the peace agreement the Maoist militant group was converted into a political party, even won an election and came to power and thus this is one of the successful reintegration processes in South Asia (Ishiyama and Anna, 2011). In order to gain societal legitimacy the political actors pledged to establish a high-level Truth and Reconciliation Commission to reach truth and identify those who had committed human rights violations and crimes against humanity during the process of violent conflict (MOPR, 2011), as well as the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction in March 2007, which was demanded by civil society during the peace process (Thapa, 2007). This ministry has a mandate to lead the peace process negotiations and agreements. The ministry established the national level commission supported by the local committee to identify conflict-affected communities and displaced populations, meet their grievances and develop social harmony in the reconciliation and reconstruction process (Tandukar et al., 2016). In this sense Nepal focused on allowing the voices of former combatants to be heard, and in so doing remove the potential for violence. The government of Nepal also introduced the “Enforced Disappearances Enquiry Commission and Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act #2071” in May, 2014. The aim was to investigate and explore the facts related to human rights violations at a mass level during the armed conflict (Nepal Gazette, 2014).

In 2015 Nepal introduced a National Youth Policy (NYP). The objective was to streamline the youth population and ensure their basic needs and aptitude building (Thapa, 2017). Unfortunately, this youth policy was not as successful because the earlier youth who became
part of the Maoist movement and were recruited as combatants were ignored. Therefore, the repercussions of an almost decade-long armed conflict are very negative, particularly for the youth of Nepal. The increased level of aggression and violence in the youth is an adverse result (ibid).

As a considerable number of ex-Maoist fighters have been disengaged but have not reintegrated into society completely, there is a chance that these ex-combatants may reorganize and promote violence if not completely reintegrated into society (Subedi, 2014). Currently, the newly organized federation in Nepal has a great responsibility to make the peace process sustainable through developing and promoting tolerance and harmony in politics. If the federation of Nepal fails to fulfill its responsibilities then it is possible that the society may become violent, radicalized and extremist. Therefore, terrorism may emerge which will swamp the whole of Nepal (Thapa, 2017).

**India**

To handle the Islamic radicals, intelligence and security capabilities have been built up as preemptive measures (Bajpai and Kaushik, 2017). In 2010 the central government started a surrender-cum-rehabilitation approach for Naxalites (Indian Maoists). Under this a 0.15 million initial and 2,000 monthly Indian Rupees (IRS) stipend would be given to those who surrender for three years along with vocational training (ibid). This amount was increased to 2.5 million and 3,000 IRS for senior members in 2013. As a result of this policy around 4,000 radicalized left-wing extremists surrendered. For long-term proactive measures the government also focused on security, development, ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities and management of public perception to counter home-grown left-wing extremists. Some developments of infrastructure, sports and vocational training were undertaken and still continued but their volume, relevance and impact are considered as inadequate.

Similarly, in Maharashtra state, in order to include youth and the minority community, the state introduced activities such as National Cadet Corps and Bharat Scout Guides in minority schools. Some reforms were introduced in education, sports, urban planning, law and order, skill development, women and children, social justice and health for mainstreaming the youth and minority population (Vyas, 2016). Other initiatives include teaching the text of all religions and Urdu in selected minority schools, provision of subsidized textbooks, promoting democratic values and developing minority urban clusters (ibid). The Maharashtra state government had engaged and trained religious, academic and community leaders for deradicalization (Rasheed, 2016). As in the Maharashtra and Telangana states, it worked with Muslim community members and clerics.\(^3\) The state authorities and Muslim clerics/leaders provide counselling which stops youths from engaging in violent activities.

To counter radicalization, mass media and social networks have great potential in India. Yet, instead of winning the hearts and minds of militants, India often uses more common counterinsurgency (COIN) approaches involving violence and enemy-centric approaches of suffocating insurgency through saturation of forces (Mukherjee, 2010; Lalwani, 2011). Torture, disappearance, encounter killing and mass graves are counter-militancy approaches that are commonly used in India (Lalwani, 2011).

**Sri Lanka**

In countering radicalization, the government of Sri Lanka legislated and used several counter-terrorism mechanisms (Manoharan, 2006). The government is now working on Sustainable
Development Goals (SDGs) to address the grievances of socio-economically excluded classes. The national anthem in Tamil as well as Sinhala is also promulgated (Arnmarker, 2017) to please separatists. Further legislative efforts include: (1) the Public Security Ordinance (PSO) and its promulgation; and (2) the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) 1979. These laws were seen as discriminatory and against human rights; thus the UN Human Rights Committee Council and EU pushed Sri Lanka to replace the PTA with a new counter-terrorism act (PLFCT, 2017). As part of the drafting process, the government held many consultations with civil society and international actors, who were critical about the early drafts of the counter-terrorism act and aimed to make it conform with international standards (Government of Sri Lanka, 2016). More recently, the country adopted the Policy and Legal Framework of Counter-Terrorism (PLFCT) of Sri Lanka on 25 April 2017 (PLFCT, 2017).

Counter-terrorism policies in Sri Lanka mostly revolved around the elimination of LTTE, while an external threat was seen in 2016. Law enforcement forces continued to act under the PTA, promulgated in 1982 to counter terrorism, check, arrest and detain people (Government of Sri Lanka, 2016). It is still the LTTE that is the main focus for DD efforts (Hettiarchchi, 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2014). In Sri Lanka, the focus was on the rank and file of the militants of LTTE but not on their leadership as such, who were presented before the courts. Under the PTA government ensured one-year rehabilitation for captured LTTE ex-combatants. Earlier, around 12,000 ex-combatants were rehabilitated. There were also DDR-focused groups targeting both ex-army soldiers and Tamil fighters from the De-Mining group DASH (Delvon Association for Social Harmony) (ibid). Prison deradicalization efforts were also common.

In another approach towards deradicalization, disengagement and reintegration (DDR) programmes, the Sri Lankan government invited successfully disengaged key figures from the LTTE, as well as former LTTE members turned businessmen, to use them as role models in the media (Hettiarachchi, 2015). The DD programmes of Sri Lanka were and still are successful because the government addresses those weak areas that motivated the LTTE community to become radicalized and militants. Another reason for the success could be that the LTTE were already defeated and they have few options and hope to remain militants (ibid). The main actor carrying out DD in Sri Lanka remains the state, using tools targeting LTTE; it remains to be seen if this is efficient in the new wave of religious violence facing the country.

**Bangladesh**

The government of Bangladesh initially focused on mitigative measures in 2005 by stopping radicalization instigated by Jama’atul Mujahideen of Bangladesh (JMB) and Harajat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI). Here the government used tools of incarceration, intelligence and intellectual intervention (IPI, 2010). The government of Bangladesh initiated hybrid programmes of counter-radicalization and a series of DD programmes (Fink and El-Said, 2011; Harrigan, 2011). For example, already radicalized and vulnerable groups were targeted in a series of village/madarsa/mosque level seminars, workshops and training by engaging Imams, village leaders and civil society organizations. Anti-militant commercials were prepared and aired to stop radicalization. In 2017, the elite force of Bangladesh published a book on “Misinterpretation of Verses by Militants and the Right Interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith” as a move towards disengagement and reintegration (Hasan, 2017). The Bangladesh Islamic Foundation worked with the imams of the mosques to make DD part of their Friday sermon (Anik and Rabbi, 2018; Rahman, 2016). The Ministry of Education launched
a programme for teacher and student awareness in academic institutions through seminars and workshops.

The hybrid counter-radicalization and DD approach of Bangladesh remains quite successful (Harrigan, 2011). However, most of these programmes were short-term and, due to a lack of proper coordination among the relevant government agencies, some of these initiatives have already been stopped (Anik and Rabbi, 2018).

In addition, in order to take a resolute stance on extremism and terrorism, the government of Bangladesh established 17 member committees to tackle these challenges and mobilize public interest to eradicate these issues. As a result, the government banned five extremist groups in the following six years. Bangladesh has also formulated laws and policies, including the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 and 2013, Money Laundering Prevention Act 2012 and Mutual Legal Assistance Act 2012 (CRI, 2015). Bangladesh also works with civil society organizations and religious leaders to raise awareness. Muslim clerics are engaged in madrassa education reforms to create awareness of extremism and terrorism and highlight the true picture of Islam (Basit et al., 2019). The government also organised community engagement programmes and inter-faith dialogues at different levels. The relevant government agencies are working with academic institutions in research on better understanding how to prevent radicalization and disengage radicalized individuals and organizations (ibid). However, very few concrete efforts are in progress for DD in Bangladesh. The legal and other interventions are mostly a reaction to counter terrorism. There is a need for more efforts to rehabilitate already radicalized youth and disengage militants.

Who does the deradicalization in South Asia? Common patterns

The main actors, i.e. militants, radicalized individuals and groups in South Asia, have different motivations, interests and goals. The initial motivations of individuals and groups who took arms against their state and people are for independence (for example, cases of Kashmiri and Maoists in India, LTTE in Sri Lanka), land, rights, control over resources (Maoists in Nepal) or undue occupation (again, Kashmiri in India). In the case of Pakistan, Taleeq-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) took up arms against government when they supported NATO allies in Afghanistan. In Bangladesh the Jihadists aim for Khilafat, i.e. Islamic State. The militants develop their narratives in the form of a freedom struggle, Jihad, fighting for rights, or fighting the illegal rulers. However, as time goes by, the fighting has been converted into business and attraction for the unemployed, illiterate and the poorest youth. This can be seen in the form of TTP (Ashour, 2009), Maoists in Nepal (Subedi, 2014; Ram and Oliva, 2005), LTTE in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi, 2015; Keerawella, 2013; Webber et al., 2018) and scores of Jihadist, separatist and freedom fighters in India (Lalwani, 2011; Mukherjee, 2010) and religious militants in Bangladesh (Khan, 2017). In South Asia, terrorism is a billion-dollar industry with different interest groups that make their ends meet. Such a complex nature of actors within militants would definitely need diverse DD strategies and approaches to bring them into mainstream society.

For DD, the government remains the most important actor in the region. Police and other relevant government institutions provide other required support, including information sharing on local dynamics and grassroots networking, or agents controlled by the army. The police, local administration, local politicians, civil society organizations and community are major actors. However, ironically most of these actors, except the army, have a limited say over the limited DD centres, for example, in Pakistan (Basit, 2015), Bangladesh (Khan, 2017) and India (Lalwani, 2011; Mukherjee, 2010). It is in general the armed forces that
decide who should be referred to the centres, which DD and rehabilitation approach should be adopted, what should be the content of the rehabilitation process and what kind of resources a person should use. These centres can take care of limited groups of radicalized individuals who are already engaged in militancy and terrorism. A close coordination among the relevant actors could make DD a successful and continuous model for mainstreaming radicalized individuals and groups in South Asia. A regional forum will provide opportunities to learn from the member countries’ experiences of how to make South Asia peaceful and progressive.

In the context of the South Asian countries little attention has been placed on DD. Some of the successful DD programmes in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal were short-term and limited. Most of the DD initiatives were good with some impact but still not really in line with the main causes of radicalization and militancy. Organized efforts are still lacking in addressing the root cause of radicalization such as poverty reduction, illiteracy, inclusion of the marginalized segment of society, and so on. Also how to deradicalize youth and others is not prioritized. Very little input is taken from local administration, local politicians, police, civil society and the local community who live with the issue of extremism and militancy and need to be engaged in the process of DD. They have local cultural and traditional knowledge of the root causes and psyche of youth and radicalized individuals and groups.

Overall in South Asia, fighting terrorism and terrorists is a commonly used approach. Fighting militants (mostly natives) is a long and tiring journey and has a huge cost in terms of financial and human losses. For example, in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka the waves of militancy and freedom struggle before 9/11 were all subdued by use of hard components, i.e. military forces. Sri Lanka was at war with LTTE for three decades before defeating them by military means. After a decade of fighting and human suffering, Nepal reconciled with the Maoists. India is still struggling with freedom fighters, separatists and radicalized militants. All these countries used the hard option (fighting) to eliminate militants. In post-9/11 South Asia, religious radicalization took place in Pakistan and Bangladesh and a hardcore military approach was used. The real fighting and wars in South Asia have somehow subsided but their ramifications are still continuing in the form of extremism, radicalization and sporadic militancy. The root causes triggering radicalization and taking arms are still in effect. Instead of addressing the root causes, the respective governments in the region are more inclined to use force to eliminate the militants. The danger with this approach is that you kill one and five new terrorists are produced, and a handsome amount of others are radicalized. Despite some success stories in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, the South Asian countries, however, still have to develop target-oriented effective DD programmes for radicalized individuals and groups.

In a counter-radicalization approach in South Asia, militants who survive or put down their arms are arrested. In such cases different options prevail in handling those arrested militants. In Pakistan, the government established military courts for two years (2015–16) which were extended for two more years until 2018. The trial of militants took place in these courts. In Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka arrested militants are generally detained and put in isolation centres for investigation. The whereabouts of such militants are not known to the public and, most of the time, rights-based organization would declare them missing. The numbers of enforced disappearances and missing persons are claimed to be in the thousands in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, while in Bangladesh this number is reported to be in the hundreds. The security agencies would usually categorize radicalized individuals and militants into hard and soft categories. The hard-core militants remain in jail
for an indefinite time while the soft militants (freshly radicalized, mostly youth) are sent to a small number of rehabilitation centres. Yet individuals going to these centres are the exception. As of today, normally militants spend time in jail without passing through any DD process and when they are released from jail, instead of normal citizens, they remain frustrated and prone to further radicalization (Bajpai and Kaushik, 2017).

**Conclusion**

South Asia is hit hard by conflicts and terrorism. Socio-economic disparities, uneven power and resource distribution, marginalization and exclusion, separatist movements and Jihadist movements against Western policies and invasion are common reasons for radicalization, insurgency and terrorism. The root cause for this menace may vary from country to country and region to region; however, the DD policies, strategies and approaches, though successful in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal, are short-term and need to be strengthened.

Extremism and radicalization are still on the rise in South Asian countries. Unfortunately, none of the South Asian countries has ever made a serious effort to understand the causes of radicalization and address them. No evidence-based policies and strategies are ever drafted and implemented for DD. The DDR programmes of Sri Lanka and Nepal can be considered quite successful but need to be adapted in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. There is a need for research on concrete, and also non-military, soft approaches and strategies and how to engage the local population in developing evidence-based DD approaches, strategies and action against militancy.

There is also a need for grassroots level DD institutions where the selection, rehabilitation and mainstreaming of radicalized youth and militants are carried out by local institutions with the support of local people. The respective governments in South Asia need to carefully address the root causes of radicalization and bridge the economic, social, institutional and religious gaps in society.

**Notes**

3 The government plans several strategies to counter ISIS threat to India; see www.dnaindia.com/india/report-government-plans-several-strategies-to-counter-sis-threat-to-india-2110252 (visited May 2019).

**References**

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