

South Asia Human Security Series

Evolving Security Discourse in Sri Lanka

From National Security to
Human Security

Gamini Keerawella

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South Asia Human Security Series

South Asia Human Security Series is the product of a three-year regional collaborative research project titled, *Human Security in South Asia: Discourse, Practice and Policy Proposition* conducted by BISS under the aegis of the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, 2003-06. The aim of the project has been to provide an understanding of the prevailing discourses and practices on human security in South Asia as well as to generate inputs for policy making at regional and national levels. Five individual country papers on Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and five thematic areas: (a) Constructing a Human Security Index for South Asia; (b) Violence, Terrorism and Human Security; (c) Ethnicity and Human Security; (d) Gender and Human Security; (e) Marginalization and Human Security – were covered. The outcome is the present series.

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) is an autonomous research organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. The Institute was founded in 1978 to undertake research and promote deliberation on foreign policy, security and development. The Institute published regularly a quarterly Journal, *BISS Journal*, organizes seminars/conferences and undertakes research projects. More about the Institute at: www.biiss.org

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Preface

At the time of Independence in 1948 Sri Lanka was considered 'an oasis of stability, peace and security' in the region. During the first two decades after Independence, Sri Lanka was continuously cited as a shining example of parliamentary democracy taking exemplary root in a Third world plural society. However, with the deepening of the structural crisis of the Sri Lankan State in the 1970s, this complacent picture changed rapidly. In the 1980s, the armed challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the state, the declarations of emergency rule, the manipulation of the electoral process, ethnic conflict and political violence and the continuous erosion of the welfare safety-net became the order of the day. Today Sri Lanka is considered a most volatile locus of ethno-political conflict in the region.

Parallel to this transformation, the security thinking of Sri Lanka has also undergone a noticeable change. At first, the mainstream conceptualisation of security fashioned the thinking of the policy-makers. Security was defined as the protection of the territorial integrity of the state vis-à-vis military threats that originated from external sources. Security remained exclusively within the domain of the state and its prerogative. With the collapse of the earlier picture of political and social stability, the limitations of the mainstream national security paradigm came to the fore. The state is no longer considered the only reference of security and the need to bring other units of reference such as ethnic identities and the individual in the security configuration is acutely felt. As a result, security could not be defined only in terms of military-strategic security of the state and its territory. With the inclusion of other units of reference, the non-military aspects of security were found to be equally important.

This shift of emphasis of security thinking is further reinforced by the emerging discourse on human security that evolved in the post Cold War context. The issues raised in the new security discourse as key elements of the human-centric security approach are not just academic issues to the Sri Lankan polity. In the light of the Sri Lankan ethnic

crisis and its multifaceted socio-political implications, it is not difficult to understand the significance and rational of the heuristic constructs developed in the discourse on human security. The present study argues that so long as the individual and his collective identities have become the focus on security configuration, diverse sources of threats and vulnerabilities are to be taken into account. This book reconstructs the symbiotic relationship between different sectors and other references of security to human security.

The book traces the symbiotic relationship between the 'other' references of security and the human security. It highlights the need to locate the human security problem in the context of the crisis of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. The crucial factor here is how to restructure the institutions of power and governance to ensure a high degree of human security. The book argues that the conceptual breakthrough on the security of the state which is to be brought about by the discourse on human security in the thinking of policy and opinion makers is essential to find a way out of the complex emergencies arising from the internal crisis of Sri Lanka.

This book has its origin in the invitation extended to me by Dr. Abdur Rob Khan of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Dhaka, Bangladesh to take part in its Regional Collaborative Research Project on 'Human Security in South Asia: Discourse, Practice and Policy Propositions.' I got involved during the last leg of this regional research initiative. I am grateful to Dr. Rob Khan for his valuable comments on the draft manuscript. I would also like to record my gratitude to my friends in the research staff at the BIISS who made my visits to BIISS pleasant.

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