

SAARC: Dawn of New Hope

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Abstract:

In an era of Globalization, the world is shrinking and becoming one market. As part of this economic and geopolitical cooperation among various countries in the world, regional economic blocks are emerging on the pattern of European Union. The South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a block of eight member nations that are primarily located in South Asia continent. The idea of regional political and economic cooperation in South Asia was evolved in 1980 which gradually led to eight member countries at present. The SAARC policies aim to promote welfare economics, collective self-reliance and to accelerate socio-cultural development in the region. Permanent diplomatic relations have been established with EU, the UN (as an observer) and other multilateral entities.

Keywords:- regional, economic, geopolitical and Co-operation

The idea of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) came into existence in 1980 at the initiative of President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh.

(This Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). He visualized regional cooperation at South Asia level to solve common problems of the countries in this region. Actually, the common problems/factors like common culture, tradition and religion; common history; common problems like poverty, unemployment, low per capita income; geographically a natural region and the socio-economic and political compulsions of the SAARC members compelled and challenged them to form an economic organisation i.e. SAARC.¹

In view of the growing significance of SAARC, some scholars have taken cognisance of this phenomenon and have studied its various aspects. A numbers of publications have recently appeared on the SAARC. But they do not high light the problems and prospects i.e. (SAARC at crossroads). For this purpose of the study

¹ Grish Mishra, "Economic Science", World Focus, Vol. 4, Nos. 11-12, November-December 1983, pp.21-26.

both primary and secondary sources are utilized.

The Aims of the SAARC

are:²

- I. To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance of the countries of south Asia.
- II. To promote economic, social and cultural development in the region.
- III. To have mutual trust and understanding.
- IV. To have respect for the principle of equality, territorial integrity and non-interference.
- V. To increase mutual interaction.
- VI. To solve common problems.
- VII. To create congenial atmosphere to solve political problems.
- VIII. To co-operate with International and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

The response from SAARC countries was by and large positive. The initiative taken by Zia-ur Rahman was welcomed by all the countries of South Asia. As regards the story of the development of South Asian regional

² P.K. Mishra, "Toward a Framework of South Asian Regional Co-operation : Colombo to Kathmandu" Indian and Foreign Review, Vol. 31. No.2, 1984, pp. 215-16.

cooperation is concerned, not much progress could be achieved till the last ministerial conference and summit. First four meetings from 1981-1983 were organized by foreign secretaries to make the ground for the meeting of foreign ministers. The two meeting of 1983 in New Delhi & 1985 of Male were organized by foreign ministers to give the shape of summit for the meeting of heads of the states.

Table – 1: SAARC and its various conferences

	<u>Ist Phase</u>	
I	Colombo – 1981	Identifying the areas for cooperation
II	Kathmandu – 1981	Called for mutual Prosperity
III	New Delhi – 1982	Called for greater cooperation in different areas
IV	Dhaka – 1983	Reviewed different Areas
	<u>IInd Phase</u>	
I	New Delhi – 1983	A declaration for collective self-reliance
II	Male – 1984	They realized that the SAARC is a meaningful and fruitful cooperation for all the nations

* First four meeting were organized by foreign secretaries to make the ground for foreign ministers.

** Two meetings were organized by Foreign Minister to give the shape

of Summit for the meeting of Heads of the States.

Table – 2: Designated SAARC Decades

1991-2000	SAARC Decade of the Girl Child
2001-2010	SAARC Decade of the Rights of the Child
2006-2015	SAARC Decade of Poverty Alleviation
2010-2020	SAARC Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity

Table – 3: Designated SAARC Years

1989 :	SAARC Year for Combating Drug Abuse and Drug Trafficking
1990 :	SAARC Year of Girl Child

1991 :	SAARC Year of Shelter
1992 :	SAARC Year of Environment
1993 :	SAARC Year of Disabled Persons
1994 :	SAARC Year of Youth
1995 :	SAARC Year of Poverty Eradication
1996 :	SAARC Year of Literacy
1997:	SAARC Year of Participatory Governance
1999:	SAARC Year of Biodiversity
2002-2003:	SAARC Year of Contribution of Youth to Environment
2004:	SAARC Awareness Year for TB and HIV/AIDS
2006:	South Asia Tourism Year
2007:	Green South Asia Year

Table – 4: SAARC SUMMITS

S.No.	Year	Place	Main Agenda
1	1985	Dhaka	Accepted the objectives of SAARC
2	1986	Bangalore	Women’s participation and development
3	1987	Kathmandu	South Asia Nuclear Free Zone
4	1988	Islamabad	To stress on basic needs in SAARC Region
5	1990	Male	Promote peace unity and progress in the region
6	1991	Colombo	(SAPTA) South Asia Preferential Trade Agreement
7	1993	Dhaka	Eradication of poverty and unemployment
8	1995	New Delhi	Literacy, Environment issues and Terrorism
9	1997	Male	Formation of South Asian Free Trade Area(SAFTA)
10	1999	Sri Lanka	Postponed
11	2002	Kathmandu	Pledged to make collective efforts to stamp out terrorism

12	2004	Islamabad	All the Nations agreed to establish and adopt SAFTA . Resolution against Terrorism
13	2005	Dhaka	Terrorism and issue regarding membership of Afghanistan
14	2007	New Delhi	Welcomed the entry of Afghanistan into SAARC
15	2008	Colombo	Partnership for growth for our people
16	2010	Bhutan	Towards a green & happy South Asia
17	2011	Maldives	Building bridges
18	2013	Nepal	Was to be held in Nepal but it never happened. Issue was climate change.

But on 26th May 2014 all Heads of countries of SAARC except Bangladesh (which was represented by its Speaker) came to Delhi on the occasion of Oath taking Ceremony of the newly elected Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi and the very next day fruitful discussions took place among the leaders of SAARC.

Problems:

Although the SAARC is going to try for the betterment of regional issues but the problems in South Asia have become more acute not only because of the historical and political differences but also due to many other factors such as different attitudes and perceptions of SAARC members, economic disparities, political set-up of institutions, preponderance of suspicion about India among the south Asian nations, etc.

No doubt, problems of regional cooperation in South Asia have of late engaged the attention of scholars but they do not believe that SAARC is going for betterment of the region like ASEAN or EU. They think that it is like a mirage. The meetings of SAARC countries are just only for a cup of tea, without any concrete steps except mere discussions. Therefore, it has not been able to chalk out any specific framework for a model as there are many problems in the way of SAARC today.

The disparities in the economic field are a hindrance in the way of SAARC. The countries have neither equal per capita income nor have an equal growth rate in industrial and agriculture sector. There is no common market for goods like tea, jute, cotton and rice. Even competition exists in certain products such as tea (India-Sri lanka) jute (India, Bangladesh) and cotton textiles (India, Pakistan). This rivalry and conflict of

common interests act as a stumbling block in the way of greater cooperation. Furthermore, some members like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal have signed collaboration agreements with the companies in Europe and America in similar fields of manufacturing. While Pakistan tends to go in more for economic integration with the Islamic States, Sri Lanka has inclinations towards ASEAN.³

The different political systems in South Asia tend to accentuate the already existing differences in attitude and perceptions towards the regional cooperation. India and Pakistan are parliamentary democracies and Sri Lanka is a presidential democracy. Bangladesh had spells of military regimes. Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives had three different forms of monarchies, each having its own peculiar institutional framework. However, monarchy has recently been abolished in Nepal.

The main problem relating to cooperation in this region is the domination of India. India is presumably held as a big brother, by virtue of its size, population, resources, economic and military strength. In the region India occupies 72 percent of the area, is

³ Brij Mohan, "Trade Prospects," World Focus, Vol. 3 No. 3, March 1983, New Delhi.

inhabited by 77 percent of the population, has 84 percent of the land under permanent crops and accounts for between 90 and 100 percent mineral resources of the region. In the light of this it is hardly surprising, therefore, that a fear psychosis has overtaken the smaller nations.⁴

Another problem relates to the role of super powers in South Asia. The interest of super powers has, no doubt, played a decisive role in continental conflicts. They have involved themselves as actors and managers in these conflicts. The goals and styles of the greater power politics towards the sub-continent have been dictated by their respective strategic and economic interests. Their concern for the right and wrong in a given crisis or its consequences relating to short and long term interests for the sub-continent has been negligible and incidental.⁵

⁴ Surjit Man Singh, *India's Search for Power, Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy 1966-82*, New Delhi; Saga Publication, 1982, pp. 402-3, New Delhi.

⁵ S.D. Muni, "South Asia," *Conflict and Intervention in the Third World* (ed) Mohammed Ayoob, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1980, p. 68.

Table – 5: Psycho-Fear has overtaken to Smaller Nations (some facts about SAARC countries)

Regional performance Figure	Bangla-desh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pak	Sri-Lanka	Afghanistan
Areas (1000 Sq.Km.)	130	38.39	9596	0.03	143	803	62.71	652
Population (Million) 2014	164	0.74	1244	0.31	26.4	186	20.2	25.5
Per capita GDP, US \$ (Billions) 2014	160	2.0	1996	2.5	18.2	241	71	21.7
Power capacity installed (MW) 2013*	5819	1505	189300	62	717	20,200	3139	489
Life expectancy (years) 2014**	70.65	68.98	67.8	75.15	67.19	67.05	76.35	60.51
Literacy rate 2014	57.7	52.8	74.4	99	66	55	91.2	28.1

Source: * MecoMeter.com – Electricity installed generating capacity.

** Geoba.se:Gazettes – Life Expectancy

We may also take note of the mutual suspicion that exists among SAARC members. Some- times the suspicion is based on a genuine clash of interests but in most cases it simply stems from an exaggerated perception of such a clash. Most of the issues, for instance anti-Tamil

riots, Lanka’s claim of terrorist havens in Tamil Nadu, military base for US at Trincomalee, Nepal’s demand for a zone of peace, China as a factor, Kashmir issue and Farakka barrage and Fencing issues etc. Involve India in one way or the other.

Table – 6: SAARC: Sphere of Suspicion⁶

Sr .No.	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Pakistan	Bangladesh
1	Anti-Tamil Riots	Peace zone demand	Anti minority Riots	Farakka barrage question
2	Tamil Plantation workers citizenship	Talk of Vikas by India	Border problem	Fencing issue
3	Military Base for USA at Trincomalee	The China factor	Kashmir issue	Refugee problem
4	Ealem demand controversy and Terrorist activities	Political in-stability due to leftist movement	Pak encouraging terrorist activities	Border demarcation Issue

⁶ S.S. Bindra, Indo-Pak Relations, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 17-39.

Most of the regional differences arise because of the different irritants determined by their respective national interests. Bangladesh's main interest lies in management of river water. Pakistan's approach is mainly political. It is seen to be least interested in major regional economic interactions. Nepal joined SAARC only to demand that it should be declared as a zone of peace. Sri Lanka's main interest is to solve its domestic problems.

No doubt, these differences have been reflected in the various meetings from Colombo to Islamabad . In the first meeting, Pakistan did not openly challenge the idea of regional cooperation but in the Kathmandu meeting, she changed her stand. At the third meeting of the foreign secretaries of South Asia held in Islamabad, Pakistan did not want to over-project its escapist attitude on the viability of a regional platform in South Asia. In the Colombo meeting, India's attitude towards the idea of regional cooperation was relatively cold. It was largely because India wanted to know the responses and attitudes of the other countries.

PROSPECTS

The various meetings have approved the idea of regional cooperation as beneficial, desirable and meaningful. Although at times, prospects have appeared gloomy but what has been done in the past shows that SAARC can hope to achieve some success in the future.

The SAARC can be meaningful only if each nation of South Asian Region will go along to solve the basic problems more effectively and with greater speed ; to make bilateral relations in all the common fields such as jute, cotton, tea, and rice etc. and to create mutual understanding to remove distrust and create joint ventures programmes. By this they can achieve more bargaining power for their products by creating common markets.

SAPTA and SAFTA both agreements are meaningful for all the nations. SAFTA will come into force from Jan. 1, 2006. The whole process of instituting the free trade in the region was to be completed in 10 years. The trade liberalization was to take place in two stages. In the first stage, the tariff rates were to be brought down to 20% by India and Pakistan in two years. In the Second

stage India was to further bring down the import duties to five percent or less in next five years. The SAFTA agreement has given a new hope to the region.⁷

It will be to the benefit of all the members of SAARC if they do not allow their political conflicts to come in the way of their regional cooperation and to make all out efforts towards co-operation in feasible areas. Such a co-operation may eventually lead to the solution of political objectives.

The most important thing that is needed to make SAARC successful is to remove the fear, suspicion, distrust and jealousy among the member states. It is essential that country like Pakistan should move with will and determination. A half hearted approach can never lead to success. It may also be emphasized that members of SAARC should recognize geo-Political realities. Only then it may be possible to curb the tendency to look to outside forces for a solution of their real or imaginary problems.⁸

⁷ G.K. Sharma, Regional Economic Cooperation Signing of SAFTA see in YOJANA, Feb., 2004.

⁸ Stephen P. Cohen, "Prospects in South Asia: How to promote cooperation See in Times of India (New Delhi) December 18, 1984.

Bangladesh is primarily interested in management of river waters, Pakistan's approach is mainly political. Nepal joined the SAARC only to demand that it should be a zone of peace. Sri Lanka's main interest is to solve domestic problems. Hence, such type of selfish interests cannot lead toward success.

In nutshell this regional cooperation can be more meaningful if all the nations of the region work together on one platform and it also depends upon the attitude and perceptions of all nations towards this organisation. The SAARC is a good beginning in this direction. It can take up the issue of better pricing of few commodities like tea, jute and cotton in international markets. By way of conclusion, the success of SAARC will depend on whether the member nations will show the prudence and wisdom to take advantage of good-will and understanding generated by the new Modi government of India ,for resolving bilateral disputes and differences and thereby creating a climate of regional peace and stability.⁹ India's attitude from the very beginning has been positive, co-operative & non-interfering as it realises the

⁹ Pillai K. Raman, "Tensions within Regional organisation: A Study of SAARC see in the Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 50, No. 1, January-March, 1989.

importance of having good relations with its neighbouring countries.

Indicating that the country is ready to take on a bigger role in the region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a joint session of the Bhutan Parliament on 16th June, 2014 that a stronger more stable India is in the best interest of South Asia.

“Strength of a democracy is very important. The stronger India is, the better it is for Bhutan and other SAARC nations. A strong and stable India is needed to make sure that we can help our neighbours,” he said in his address¹⁰.

Conclusion:-

Lasting peace and prosperity of the Indian subcontinent has been elusive due to various ongoing conflicts in the region. During the 12th and 13th SAARC summits, extreme emphasis was laid upon greater co-operation between the SAARC members to fight terrorism. Efforts are also being made to draft a comprehensive treaty framework for creating a free trade area within the region. This movement has received a tremendous boost recently when all SAARC heads of state were invited and attended the swearing in ceremony of Sh. Narendra Modi, the newly elected Prime Minister of India. Being the biggest

member country, India is on path to provide afresh leadership to this regional economic and GEO political movement and the coming months/years will see further growth of membership by adding countries like Burma and Mauritius and granting observer status to many more countries ushering in an era of stability and growth in the region.

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