

Wither Away the White Elephant Called SAARC ?

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Abstract : *The present article seeks to make a critical assessment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). On the basis of facts it has shown that SAARC has not yet performed upto expectation in providing real benefits to member states. It has identified two main reasons - constitutional and political - for the failure of the organization to deliver goods so far which also explain why SAARC does not promise bright prospects, i. e., it cannot succeed.*

It has been argued that SAARC is premature to some extent. Seldom have SAARC activities been consciously directed towards realizing the prime objectives set forth in its Charter, viz., "to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life". Instead of directing concrete activities towards such projects as joint ventures, etc., which would have helped realize the SAARC objectives of accelerating economic growth of member countries, the bulk of its activities have remained confined to organizing workshops, seminars and conferences, arranging essay contests and debates, holding, SAF games, and exchanging cultural activities such as SAVE, etc. which "have little more than symbolic value with no tangible benefit for the peoples of the region." Moreover, SAARC has not been found attractive from a cost-benefit analysis.

Apart from the political reason of existing mutual distrust and suspicion of the member countries against each other which SAARC are more concerned with projecting their self-image rather than cooperate wholeheartedly with one another within the framework of SAARC, the constitutional reason of keeping an escape clause in its Charter that "Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations" has rendered the organization ineffective in dealing with matters of great importance and mutual interest. As a result, SAARC has, as it were, turned into a white elephant which hardly serves any useful purpose.

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The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in Dhaka on December 8, 1985, at the conclusion of the first ever summit of the South Asian Heads of State or Government. It was the culmination of a process which began five years earlier when late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh felt the necessity of creating the South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) in May, 1980. The Bangladesh President, being encouraged by his personal experience of coming to contact with the Indian Prime Minister at that time, Morarji Desai, which facilitated the conclusion of an interim agreement on the sharing of the Ganges waters between the two countries in November, 1977, mooted the idea of SARC with the intention that if the leaders of South Asian region can be brought to conference tables within the framework of a regional forum, many outstanding problems may be tackled more easily. Thus SAARC was initially conceived by late Ziaur Rahman to provide that forum where the South Asian Heads of State or Government would get an opportunity to sit together to discuss matters of great importance and mutual interest.

SAARC has thus been in existence for more than five years. Though it may be considered too early to make an evaluation of SAARC, it would however not be out of place to make an attempt to see whether it is moving in the right direction to assure us of a successful journey. Already many scholars have made critical evaluation of the organization. A number of scholars have also shown how the organization can be made more effective. For example, noted Indian scholar Mohammed Ayoob¹ has shown the primacy of the political whereas an eminent Bangladeshi scholar, Emajuddin Ahamed,² has identified the primacy of the socio-economic cooperation for the success of the organization. Muhammad Shamsul Huq,³ the former Foreign Minister of

Bangladesh, who played a crucial role in the formation of the organization in its embryonic stage, has evaluated the potential of SAARC on the basis of the perception of the Seven South Asian Heads of State or Government. He seemed optimistic because of the fact that all of them expressed their desire to support the organization at the Dhaka summit. Iftekharuzzaman, another Bangladeshi analyst, has also been idealistic in saying that "the shared heritage, values, goals and inspirations could be the source of enormous strength and potential for nationbuilding efforts, and motivations for mutually beneficial cooperation."⁴ Both Professor Huq and Zaman represent the Institute (Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, abbreviated as BIISS) established by late President Zia and hence it is only natural that they would be enthusiastic about SAARC, the brain-child of their mentor. Indira Vidyalkar,⁵ an Indian analyst, by identifying a number of relevant variables, raises the question whether SAARC can succeed. She concludes with a 'if . . . then' proposition which casts doubt about the viability of the organization. Many other scholars have also studied SAARC from various perspectives. Of them, the opinion of Abul Ahsan., the first Secretary General of the organization, that "unless SAARC can address some of the major economic, social, technical and scientific problems being faced by the region, the present interest and enthusiasm in the organization cannot be sustained"⁶ deserves special mention as one of the realistic statements about the expectations from SAARC. Thus we can see that there are divergence of opinions about SAARC - some scholars seem enthusiastic, a number of others are cautious optimists, and still a few are realists. In such circumstances, it is necessary to depict a clear picture of SAARC. In the present article an attempt has been made to make a critical assessment of the organization. Evidently such an assessment needs to be pragmatic, *i.e.*

based on facts rather than fiction. Our main purpose is to evaluate the actual performance of the organization to see how much have the member states been benefited by it till date. It will be seen that SAARC has not yet performed upto expectation in providing real benefits to member states. It has also identified two main reasons - constitutional and political - for the failure of the organization to deliver goods so far which also explain why SAARC does not promise bright prospects, *i. e.*, it cannot succeed.

To begin with, the rationale provided in the first working paper prepared and circulated by Bangladesh on November 25, 1980 for the creation of a South Asian regional forum was not very strong. President Ziaur Rahman's mentioning in his letter addressed to the Heads of Government of the region that "while other regions [of the world] had evolved institutional arrangements for consultations on matters of mutual interest and cooperation in the economic, social and cultural fields on a regional basis, and had consequently benefited immensely from such cooperation, the only region which did not have any such arrangements for regional cooperation was the South Asian region" is no good justification for attempting such a venture. The sound reasoning would be to judge whether conditions were propitious for regional cooperation in South Asia. To think, as did late President Zia, that "recent positive developments in the region had created a better climate of understanding . . . [and] distinct possibilities of regional cooperation" was misleading to a great extent, as later events such as the Sinhalese-Tamil racial conflict and consequent schism between Sri Lanka and India, the unresolved Ganges waters dispute between Bangladesh and India, etc. had proved. Viewed from this angle, SAARC may be considered premature to some extent. Clearly SAARC cannot be expected to learn any lesson from the

EEC which has proved to be a fruitful attempt at regional integration because unlike the SAARC member countries where nation-building activities are at a preliminary stage, the members of the EC had already completed national integration process on which its success depends. As to other attempts at regional cooperation among the developing countries, the primary driving force has invariably been common external threat perception⁷ which is conspicuous by its absence in South Asia.

Even so, SAARC would have been proved beneficial to the member countries had it succeeded in realizing the prime objectives set forth in its Charter, viz., "to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life." As Emajuddin Ahamed has succinctly maintained, the performance of SAARC is to be judged on the basis of its success in "solving the socio-economic problems", or in other words, how far positively it has succeeded in enhancing and enlarging "economic gains of the member nations through mutually beneficial regional transactions, exploitation of regional resources and to handle regional problems through understanding and peaceful means."⁸

South Asia, though a comparatively resource poor region of the world, has immense potentials which cannot be realized by the efforts of individual countries as these potentials cut across notional boundaries. SAARC would have proved useful if the member countries could have made joint efforts in a regional framework in realizing those potentials which have hitherto remained untapped. Godfrey Gunatilleke has identified two such potentials: the Himalayan water system and the Indian ocean resources.⁹ If properly exploited, the Himalayan water resource can generate sufficient hydro-electric power and be utilized for

irrigation purposes to make countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan, which are dependent on this system, self-sufficient in food and energy. Also, the harnessing of the Indian ocean resources with appropriate technology and in joint collaboration would have paid rich dividends for such member countries as Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Srilanka., but unfortunately this has not been the case so far.

As to the Himalayan water resources, during the Dhaka summit, the King of Nepal magnanimously proposed : "From the side of Nepal with the high Himalyas as one of our assets and a vast reservoir of yet untapped water resource that can give to the millions of our people a means to fulfil their basic needs, I wish to draw the attention to the fact that there exists this priceless resource waiting to be harnessed for the benefit of our people." The Indian Premier Rajiv Gandhi, being moved by the atmosphere of cordiality prevalent during the summit, apparently showed his goodwill by offering at a press conference in New Delhi upon his return from Dhaka the "willingness to discuss the possibilities of trilateral examination of Ganges water issue involving Bangladesh, India and Nepal, a long-standing Bangladesh suggestion." ¹⁰ If the Indian Prime Minister would have been sincere in his offer to include Nepal in the Ganges waters negotiations between Bangladesh and India, it might have facilitated the augmentation of water in this international river which could have been profitably utilized by the three riparians involved. But that was not to be the case because once the euphoria of the Dhaka summit cooled down, India showed no respect to Rajiv's offer. Not only did India not sustain this enthusiasm, she even refused to include the participation of a third country (implying Nepal) in the bilateral talks on Ganges water between Bangladesh and India.¹¹

As far as the Indian ocean resources are concerned, it is clear that its harnessing would require gigantic efforts for which joint ventures would be needed. But so far SAARC has not paid any attention to this. Instead of directing concrete activities on these projects which would have helped realize the SAARC objective of accelerating economic growth of member countries, the bulk of its activities have remained confined to organizing workshops, seminars and conferences, arranging essay contests and debates, holding SAF games, and exchanging cultural activities such as SAVE, etc. Hence it is no wonder that even an ardent supporter like Iftekharuzzaman has to contend that "Many of the activities that are already implemented or are in hand may reasonably appear to have little more than symbolic value with no tangible benefits for the peoples of the region".¹²

It is worth mentioning here that socio-cultural activities undertaken by SAARC are not ends in themselves but a means to an end which is the vision of a good life for the people. Still these activities would have proved valuable had they produced any spill-over effects, but there is no indication as yet in that direction leading to concrete cooperation in productive economic activities. In fact, seldom have SAARC activities been consciously directed towards that which may be better understood if we examine the progress made in the areas of cooperation undertaken by it.

The first working paper prepared by Bangladesh identified the following eleven possible areas of cooperation in a regional framework in South Asia: i) Telecommunications, ii) Metereology, iii) Transport, iv) Shipping, v) Tourism, vi) Agriculture (Rural Sector), vii) Joint Venture, viii) Market Promotion: Selected

Commodities, ix) Scientific and Technological Cooperation, x) Education and Technical Cooperation, and xi) Cultural Cooperation. In the first meeting of Foreign Secretaries, held in Colombo from 21- 24 April, 1981, study groups on five areas were set up. On the recommendations of the Committee of Foreign Secretaries which acted as a coordinating body in examining the reports of the study groups whose numbers were increased in the subsequent meetings at the Foreign Secretaries level, an Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) was launched at the first Foreign Ministers' meeting held in New Delhi on August 1, 1983. The IPA included nine areas of cooperation, *viz.*, i) Agriculture, ii) Rural Development, iii) Metereology, iv) Telecommunications, v) Scientific and Technical Cooperation, vi) Health and Population Activities, vii) Transport, viii) Postal Services, and ix) Sports, Arts and Culture. Subsequently, IPA added a few more areas such as Prevention of Drug Trafficking and Abuse, Women in Development, Audio-Visual Exchange, SAARC Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships, Youth Volunteer Exchange, Prevention of Terrorism, etc.

If we closely examine the proposal for possible areas of cooperation in a regional framework contained in the Bangladesh working paper and the IPA adopted by SAARC so far, we find two glaring omissions from the original Bangladesh proposal in the latter, *viz.*, Joint Venture, and Market Promotion in Selected Commodities. In the Seventh session of the Standing Committee meeting held on November 13, 1986, Bangladesh proposed for the creation of a multisectoral investment institution which was endorsed by others but it has not yet been implemented. If the SAARC activities are thus confined to only socio-cultural and sports fields by ignoring vital sectors like trade, industry and investment, etc., its usefulness will naturally be questioned

by observers. SAARC must exhibit seriousness by undertaking concrete programmes and projects to deliver real economic benefit to member states in an effort to prove its worthiness to them, otherwise mere rhetorics would not suffice.

In order to judge whether SAARC is attractive from a cost-benefit point of view, we may turn to Iftekharuzzaman who has shown that the total contribution of the member countries for SAARC till 1987-88 has been \$ 1, 473, 190 for Bangladesh, \$ 707, 800 for Bhutan, \$ 4, 247, 930 for India, \$105, 490 for Maldives, \$ 1,067, 260 for Nepal, \$ 3,945, 810 for Pakistan and \$ 647, 110 for Srilanka. As percentage of GDP, these amounts represent merely 0.012, 0.453, 0.002, 0. 117, 0.046, 0.011 and 0.019 for Banglaadesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Srilanka respectively. And as percentage of their defense expenditure, these amounts represent merely 0. 58, not available, 0.07, not available, 3.88, 0. 15 and 0.82 respectively.¹³ Thus it is seen that though India contributes the largest absolute amount (closely followed by Pakistan) and Maldives the smallest amount, as percentage of GDP and percentage of defense expenditure, she bears by far the lowest burden, whereas Bhutan and Nepal bear by far the largest burden on these two separate counts respectively.

The above-mentioned amount seems to be low if seen in terms of the percentages of GDP and defense spending of the member countries; but it is to be remembered that it is more true for India, not other poor countries. Moreover, it is doubtful whether expenditures made in holding summits, seminars, conferences, etc., have been included in the calculation of the overall cost incurred by the member countries in supporting SAARC. However, what is more important here is that Iftekharuzzaman has not been able to

show any tangible benefit for the member countries from SAARC for the cost they have borne, however meagre the amount may be in absolute terms, or low it may be either as percentage of GDP or military expenditure. Hence his argument that "the SAARC process, and its various activities have 'generally been cost effective'"¹⁴ only on the basis that it involves comparatively small amount does not hold water because it matters little whether the amount involved is meagre or not-what actually matters is whether more benefit, or at least comparable benefit, has been derived or not in judging cost efficiency.

A number of experts are inclined to argue in favour of SAARC by saying that after its creation the subcontinent has not gone through another war. But the credit for this should not go to SAARC as such because of the alleged possession by the two main contending powers - India and Pakistan of nuclear weapons which actually acts as a "deterrent. The leaders of the two countries are not psychologically prepared to go through the process of suffering and loss should another round begin in the subcontinent, and this good sense prevailing in them has been the main reason for not engaging themselves in armed hostilities. This can be proved by the fact that even before the creation of SAARC, since the Simla Accord (July 1972) there have been ups and downs in Indo-Pak relations on a number of occasions but neither India nor Pakistan allowed them to cross the breakpoint or cause serious rupture which might have led to another war. At the present stage of development of weapons technology, they seem to fully appreciate the dictum: "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."¹⁵ Thus just as the US President Kennedy and the Soviet leader Khrushchev saved the world back in 1962 on the eve of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the gloom of a nuclear holocaust in which case the UN had little to do, likewise mutual restraint

shown by the leaders of the two countries, as in the case of the Siachen Glacier episode of 1984-89 or Operation Brasstacks in 1986-87, rather than the existence of SAARC has been primarily responsible in keeping the subcontinent out of war. This view has been corroborated by noted Pakistani journalist Mushahid Hussain who has aptly maintained that "the only reason India was deterred from attacking Pakistan during exercise *Brasstacks* in 1987 or during the [latest] Kashmir uprising [since late 1990] has been due to the fear of Pakistan's nuclear capability . . ." ¹⁶

The foregoing proves beyond doubt that SAARC has not succeeded in providing such benefits to the member states as its founders expected it to do. There are two main reasons for the failure of the organization to deliver the expected goods to the member countries. These are constitutional and political.

The constitutional reason for the failure of SAARC to deliver the expected goods so far stem from the fact that bilateral and contentious issues have been kept outside the purview of it. It has been done so primarily on the insistence of India, the biggest country of the region. As India has built-in power advantage over her lesser neighbours who, except perhaps Pakistan, do not pose any real threat for her, she feels comfortable to deal with them bilaterally. In such a situation, when the proposal for the creation of a South Asian regional organization came from Bangladesh, India perceived that the proposed organization would be a "gang up" against her, and hence insisted that it "should not deal with matters bilateral in nature; otherwise, India indicated, it would not participate in this organization."¹⁷ India made her intentions clear in the very first meeting of the seven South Asian countries held in Colombo in April, 1981. In that meeting attended by the foreign secretaries, all had to agree

to the Indian insistence that bilateral and contentious issues were to be excluded from all the future deliberations of the proposed organization.

This principle was later enshrined in the Charter of the SAARC adopted in the first ever summit of the South Asian Heads of State or Government held in Dhaka on December 7-8, 1985. Article X (2) of the Charter provides that "Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations."

The other South Asian countries had to give in to the Indian pressure for inserting what may be termed as an 'escape clause' in the SAARC Charter only because they knew that they could have the organization without such an escape clause but that would also be without the participation of India, the dominant country of the region. Here it may be mentioned that just as the lesser members of the UN could have created that world body back in 1945 without the participation of the "Big Five" had they insisted on doing away with the much maligned 'veto' in which case the UN itself would have been meaningless, likewise the other members of SAARC could have formed a South Asian regional organization without the inclusion of Article X(2) which would have also meant the non participation of India in which case the value of this organization would have been lessened. India knew this very well and hence her opinion prevailed. Evidently the members agreed to India's insistence in this matter as a policy of appeasement, and as it is well known to all, the consequence of such a policy is hardly beneficial.

It is thus seen that the organization was designed in such a way that it kept some loopholes. This constitutional weakness was the result of existing suspicion in India's

mind. It is clear that India lacked sufficient enthusiasm and goodwill necessary for the successful working of any organization.

Apart from the above mentioned constitutional loophole which kept many of the outstanding issues away from the purview of SAARC, another serious problem which hinders the success of this organization is largely political in nature. It ostensibly springs out of the contradictory self-image of the two dominant powers of the South Asian region, *viz.* India and Pakistan, who are expected to 'guide'¹⁸ SAARC for its successful journey.

Even with the creation of and participation of the two prominent regional powers in SAARC, there has been no perceptible change in their self-image as well as behaviour pattern. Conflicting images espoused by India and Pakistan arising out of political factors prove, as has been mentioned earlier, that SAARC was really premature because they were more concerned with pursuing their individual national interest rather than keen to cooperate within the framework of SAARC.

The self-image of these two dominant countries in the subcontinent needs to be analyzed properly if we have to make a fair assessment of the prospects of SAARC. This is because on their attitude and active or lack of support the success or failure of this organization depends to a great extent. The Indian self-image is that her built-in power advantage bestows on her the inherent right to play a dominant role in the subcontinent which she has sought to do by establishing a series of patron-client relationships with her neighbours. As only Pakistan has been partially successful in thwarting this Indian design initially with the help of US military assistance, and then matching Indian

nuclear power with acquiring her own nuclear capability, Pakistan's self-image is that she is in a position to play the useful role of balancing Indian bid to establish hegemony in the subcontinent. India is displeased with Pakistan even after the latter's avowed policy directed at ensuring "that no one State acquires a dominating position in the region,"¹⁹ because India is not satisfied at Pakistan's playing the role of a balancer which goes against her interest. India has no genuine reason to treat Pakistan as a potential source of threat to her security - what annoys India is Pakistan's resolve to deter India from exercising hegemonistic influence in South Asia by "bullying" her neighbours.

Even before the formal establishment of SAARC in the Dhaka summit, the widely circulated Pakistani Urdu newspaper *Jang* could capture the mood of Pakistan as it wrote on December 6, 1985, that "India was a shark in the ocean of SAARC . . . and unless this shark changed its attitude, one could expect little from it."²⁰ India is not satisfied even after being treated as the 'first among the equals' by her neighbours. In his speech delivered in the Dhaka summit, the Srilankan President, Junius Jayewardene, referred to India as the 'Big Brother.' And when calling for the "magnanimity of the larger states," the king of Bhutan was obviously implying India as one which "would be matched by the genuine friendship of the smaller states."

India is undoubtedly by far the most powerful state of the region. Yet, as has succinctly been declared in the National Assembly on November 20, 1986, by the Pakistan Foreign Minister, Yaqub Khan, "Indian logic is unintelligible. Complete security for India and the absence of future security for its neighbours cannot become the basis of permanent peace and stability"²¹ in the region or, for that

matter, the basis on which SAARC can expect to operate as well as succeed. Though her neighbours have genuine reasons, as the following events suggest, to "perceive India as the threat against which security is necessary,"²² India with huge built-in power advantage should not 'bully' her neighbours, who are ready to extend friendship to her, as was eloquently revealed by the king of Bhutan, for no good reason. India should not consider even Pakistan a potential threat to her security because the latter can at best play the role of only a balancer. But India, paying no respect to "the sound assumption that [her] primary interest should be friendly neighbours,"²³ makes no effort to build confidence among them about her honest intentions, if any, rather operate on "the assumption of Indian diplomacy that interstate relations would be conducted with the acceptance of its dominant position by its neighbours."²⁴ This has been especially true for the Prime Ministers from the Congress (I) Party whose high-handed, neo-Moghul-like behaviour is so well-known. Perhaps two examples will suffice.

First, a five-year Farakka agreement on sharing the Ganges waters with Bangladesh was signed by the Janata Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, in 1977 - "the very same agreement Mrs. India Gandhi could have signed . . . but did not authorize at the last minute because of her pique over an anti-Indian statement made by President Ziaur Rahman at that time."²⁵ Secondly, it was during the same Janata Government which ruled India from 1977 to 1980 that "Nepal got separate trade and transit treaties it had long been clamouring for."²⁶ However, following the expiry of this pact in early 1989 which India did not renew in spite of Nepal's repeated bid to do so, the former instead took a drastic action in blocking transit points into the latter causing untold misery for her. This Indian action of blockade in

Nepal was prompted by the displeasure of the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, at Nepali monarch's decision to lessen dependence on India by moving closer to China from which Nepal decided to purchase anti-aircraft guns. However, the issue was resolved after V.P. Singh, heading a National Front Government, came to power in December 1989.

Perhaps more important than the above two incidents, the long-term design of India to dominate in the subcontinent is better understood by the Indira Doctrine for which it was promulgated. The primary objective of the Indira Doctrine is to guarantee that India reigns supreme in South Asian affairs. To ensure Indian predominance in the region, if required, she would not even hesitate to intervene militarily in the neighbouring countries. Its essence was contained in a speech made by Mrs. Gandhi in the Lok Sabha in August, 1983, when at the height of the Tamil crisis, the Srilankan armed forces took stern action against the Tamil separatists and blockaded Jaffna, and fearing an imminent Indian aggression, President Jayewardene hinted that he might seek assistance of the US, Britain and Pakistan to counter such a probable Indian action. Mrs. Gandhi's statement served a warning to the outside powers that India would not brook any third party involvement in the Tamil crisis which affected only Srilanka and India. Thus the Indira Doctrine was promulgated to deal with a specific case involving the Tamils in Srilanka. However, it was soon elaborated through an article titled "The Indira Doctrine" contributed by noted Indian scholar Bhabani Sen Gupta in the weekly *India Today* in its August 31, 1983, issue to signal that it would have general application for the South Asian region as a whole :

India has no intention of intervening in the internal conflicts of a South Asian country and it strongly opposes any intervention by any other. India will not tolerate an external intervention in a conflict situation in any South Asian country if the intervention has any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implication. No South Asian government must, therefore, ask for external military assistance with an anti-Indian bias from any country. If a South Asian country genuinely needs to deal with a serious internal conflict situation it should ask help from neighbouring countries including India. The exclusion of India from such a contingency will be considered to be an anti-Indian move on the part of the government concerned.²⁷

Through its practice when need arises, such as the despatch of a contingent of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Srilanka under an Indo-Lankan agreement in 1987, and sending of Indian armed forces to the Maldives in November 1988 for what was declared as a mission to save President Mamoon Abdul Gayoom's Government from being toppled by an attempted coup by Srilankan sailors, India has utilized the Indira Doctrine as a mechanism to dominate in the South Asian region. Thus if India gives more preference to her own narrow perception through which she considers she can serve her regional interests better rather than extend whole-hearted cooperation through exhibiting SAARC spirit, it is in vain to expect anything good from this regional body. This is because the primary responsibility for the sustenance of SAARC rests with India which can contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of cordiality and trust, so much necessary for the continuation of that organization, with a change of heart by viewing Pakistan not as a competitor but as an equal partner, and also by showing more sensitivity to the interest of her lesser neighbours. Otherwise only the show of force would not serve her purpose better as it was evident from her so-called peace-keeping operation in Srilanka which cost her about

US \$ 1 billion²⁸ but had to withdraw ultimately in March 1990 without deriving any real benefit out of this costly exercise.

A general lack of seriousness on the part of those leaders who matter most in solving the common problems of South Asia, mainly arising out of the political reason just mentioned, explains why a number of lofty ideals contained in the declarations made at the conclusion of each summit have no value in actual practice. For example, the Dhaka Declaration expressed the determination of the participating Heads of State or Government "to cooperate regionally, to work together towards finding solution towards their common problems in a spirit of friendship, trust and mutual understanding, . . ." Evidently the sharing of the Ganges waters between Bangladesh and India is one such common problem. But already we have seen how India's non-cooperation has been responsible in shelving rather than solving the problem.

Another common problem faced by these two countries is flood. It is a common belief among the experts that if India would extend cooperation on the basis of the true SAARC 'spirit of friendship, trust and mutual understanding', if any, it would have been easier to find out a satisfactory solution to this pressing problem. However, owing to India's non-cooperation, that was not to be the case, as it was evident in 1988 when after an unprecedented flood, Bangladesh requested the UN General Assembly's special session convened to consider the flood situation there to find out an appropriate regional solution. At that time, India, paying no respect to the SAARC spirit, which is actually non-existent, and also in complete disregard to the objective situation, "successfully prevented the inclusion of any clause calling for a regional approach to solve the flood

problem in Bangladesh. Dhaka wanted to include in the relevant resolution a reference to the need for South Asian countries to participate in a regional plan for solving the flood problem in Bangladesh."²⁹

In the Kathmandu Declaration, "The Heads of State or Government expressed their deep concern at the fast and continuing degradation of the environment, including extensive destruction of forest, in the South Asia region." They also decided to "intensify regional cooperation" to tackle this new threat. But in the wake of harsh Indian action in blocking Nepal's trade and transit routes, which has already been mentioned, the Nepali King was constrained to threaten India to inflict more damage to her (which would also inadvertently cause suffering for Bangladesh as well) by cutting more trees of the Himalayan rain forest for the purpose of meeting Nepal's energy needs through this alternative way at that time.

It can hardly be doubted that nowhere does the importance of SAARC seem greater than dealing with one of the burning problems of the earth at present, *viz.*, environmental degradation and consequent recurring natural disasters like floods which demand regional approach for any viable solution in which the cooperation of relevant member countries is a must. But the above-mentioned Indian attitude and Nepal's constraint lead us to conclude that SAARC has not yet succeeded in convincing all the member countries to rise above petty national interest to be able to tackle any common regional problem successfully. Here the famous dictum of functionalist David Mitrany that "The problem of our time is not how to keep the nations peacefully apart but how to bring them actively together"³⁰ is well understandable. In keeping with this, SAARC would have been considered valuable if it could have made positive

contribution in enhancing functional cooperation in these fields so that all members could have been benefited.

At present SAARC is beset with a number of problems. Here we will mention only a few of them. It is once again to be kept in mind that these problems arise as a result of the activities of the member countries. Thus though the SAARC Charter provides that the Heads of State or Government of the member countries are desirous to show "respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of all disputes," the activities of a few raise doubt as to whether they are serious about it. It is proved by the fact that in the event of the Indian interference in Tamil-Sinhalese problem in Srilanka, an essentially domestic matter of that country, the Srilankan Foreign Minister at the Third Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers held in New Delhi from 18-19 June, 1987, had to call for signing "a SAARC convention that would bind member states together by a solemn declaration to respect one another's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity by refraining from any acts of aggression, interference, violence or oppression."³¹

Undoubtedly the two most outstanding problems which separate India and Pakistan, the two dominant countries in the region, and which also adversely affect the journey of SAARC, are the Kashmir question and the nuclear issue. The current situation is all the more volatile because of the eruption of the Kashmir problem once more as well as the successful launching of an intermediate-range ballistic missile, *Agni*, by India in May 1989—a success which has once again changed her behaviour pattern to become more aggressive. In these circumstances, SAARC

could have made an important contribution in keeping "their problems within manageable limits and defus[ing] periodic tensions"³² had these been under the purview of this body.

When after the recent uprising in Kashmir, a spontaneous movement by the Muslims in that only Muslim majority area of India to realize the right of self-determination from the Hindu-dominated State which has turned highly communal of late,³³ a few member States expressed willingness to discuss the Kashmir question-one of the pressing problems and matters of great importance in the region - in the fifth summit held in Male in November, 1990, the newly appointed Prime Minister of India, Chandra Shekhar, declared that SAARC was no place to discuss the issue. He had to do this ostensibly for the fear of being censured by other South Asian Staes. Unless these two countries can "harmonize and accommodate their differing interests"³⁴ with India stopping to provide the stimulus in which Pakistan has to respond, SAARC, rather than being an effective forum of reginoal cooperation, will turn into a stage for verbal wrestling between the member countries, especially these two. Already we have seen that in the third summit in Kathmandu where "considerable differences of opinion prevailed on-several issues - notably, the admission of Afghanistan and the communique on terrorism, etc." India was seeking to influence the opinion of other members in favour of its own point of view for which the Pakistani delegation accused India of "trying to turn SAARC into a bunch of yesmen."³⁵

Appart from the above mentioned problems, SAARC also suffers from the divergence in world view of the member states. The different stand taken on Afghanistan and Kampuchea issues by India on the one hand and the rest of the SAARC members on the other is very well-known.

Perhaps more discouraging has been the fact, as has been pointed out by Abul Ahsan, that SAARC has not yet succeeded in developing "an identity of its own in dealing with the outside world."³⁶ The SAARC Charter provides that the member states can seek external assistance "in case sufficient financial resources cannot be mobilized within the region" but they have not yet approached "any donor country or agency for any support for its programmes and projects".³⁷ As to the realization of another SAARC objective viz., to "strengthen cooperation among member states in international forums on matters of common interest" through concerting their views on the "on- going discussions [on the creation of a] new international economic order and the improvement of the world trade system through GATT", again, as has been maintained by Abul Ahsan, "there is very little that has actually been done in this regard." ³⁸

Moreover, the fifth SAARC summit, which was scheduled to be held in Colombo in 1989, could not be held there because of Indo-Lankan dispute over the Tamil issue. However, it was held later in Male from November 21- 23, 1990. It is not for the first time that a meeting under the auspices of SAARC could not be held in time or had to be postponed. Another such example is that the SAARC Foreign Ministers meeting, scheduled to be held in Islamabad on July 1, 1989, had to be postponed for a considerable period of time because the Srilankan Foreign Minister conveyed to his Pakistani counterpart that he would not attend the meeting as long as the IPKF remained in Srilanka. Still earlier, Srilanka had threatened to boycott the third Foreign Ministers meeting held in Thimpu in May 1985 "in protest against a speech by the Indian Foreign Minister in Parliament."³⁹ However, these were subsequently resolved by diplomacy. What is important to note here is that if

bilateral disputes between member countries overflow the surface so much so that summits and other high level meetings under the auspices of SAARC are in jeopardy, what useful purpose that body can realistically be expected to serve.

Of late, in the fourth summit held in Islamabad in December 1988, an attempt has been made at launching "SAARC 2000-A Basic Needs Perspective" providing for a regional plan with specific targets to be met by the end of the century in core areas such as food, clothing shelter, education, primary health care, population planning and the environment. Human resource development is another area currently engaging the attention of SAARC."⁴⁰ However lofty and pious these highly desirable objectives may sound, one has sufficient reason to believe that these may also meet the same fate of the Dhaka Declaration relating to the "optimum utilization of their human and material resources," or the Kathmandu Declaration relating to the "alleviation of environmental degradation facing South Asia today." If SAARC continues to fail to expand its activities "on the basis of growing regional complementarities and interdependence with a long term perspective,"⁴¹ the very purpose for which it was created will be lost, and it will not be able to demonstrate required performance to justify its existence.

Though the present Secretary General of SAARC, Kante Kishore Bhargava, declared in a press conference in Dhaka on January 3, 1990, during his familiarisation tour of Bangladesh, that "We should not think that SAARC is a panacea for all the problems in South Asia,"⁴² its relevance will naturally continue to be questioned by the analysts if it cannot settle the outstanding disputes owing to the insertion of the 'escape' clause in its Charter, or is rendered

ineffective for lack of initiative and agreement in providing positive economic benefit to member nations. They are not expected to continue to support the body indefinitely if it is not attractive from a cost-benefit analysis. If SAARC turns into a white elephant, no poor South Asian country would be ever ready to carry forward such a burden purely as a prestige symbol. Just as the neo-Marxists, being disillusioned by the role of foreign aid which does not promote actual development, rather results in underdevelopment and stagnation in the recipient countries, have argued for doing away with foreign aid, likewise the SAARC member countries could not be blamed should they become aware that they can no longer afford to support such a white elephant which hardly serves any useful purpose.

Notes :

1. Mohammed Ayoob, "The Primacy of the Political : SAARC in Comparative Perspective," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, No. 4 (April 1985).
2. Emajuddin Ahamed, "The Primacy of the Economic and Socio-Cultural Communication: The Case of SAARC," in Muzaffer Ahmad and Abul Kalam (eds.), *Bangladesh Foreign Relations : Change and Directions* (Dhaka : The University Press Ltd.), 1989, pp. 57-75. See also his *SARC : Seeds of harmony* (Dhaka : UPL, 1985).
3. Muhammad Shamsul Huq, *international Politics : A Third World Perspective* (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1987), Chapter 3 titled "SARC : Conceptual Framework and Potential", pp. 47-63. See also his contribution, "Problems and Promises," in Pran Chopra (ed.), *Future of South Asia* (Dhaka: UPL/ Macmillan, 1986).

4. Iftekharuzzaman, *The SAARC in Progress : A Hesitant Course of South Asian Transition* (BISS Papers No. 7, January 1988), 96 pp. See also his article "Bangladesh and SAARC : Reflections on the Region and Motivations for Cooperation," in Ahmad and Kalam (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 79.
5. Indira Vidyalkar, "South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation : Why this Experiment cannot succeed ?" in *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (July 1988), pp. 1-10.
6. Abul Ahsan, "Regional Cooperation in South Asia," address delivered at Columbia University, New York, USA, in 1990. See *The Bangladesh Observer*, (November 18, 1990)
7. For example, see Vidyalkar, *op. cit.*
8. Ahamed, "The Primacy of the Economic" . . . , *op. cit.*, p. 63.
9. Godfrey Gunatilleke, *Cooperation Among Small Nations in Asia in the Context of the Changing Asian Political Economy* (Colombo : Marga Institute, 1979), pp. 13-14.
10. Iftekharuzzaman, *BISS Papers* 7, p. 51.
11. See Satish Kumar, "India and the World - Trends and Events," in Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy, 1985-86* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988), p. 21, for Foreign Minister Shiv Shankar's view expressed at a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee on External Affairs on August 1, 1986, on this issue.
12. *BISS Papers* 7, p. 62.
13. See *Ibid.*, Table 4 on p. 54 for details.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 55
15. See *Our Common Future: A Perspective by the United Kingdom on the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (July 1988), p. 51.
16. *Dialogue* (Dhaka), (October 5, 1990).
17. Ishtiaq Hossain, "India's Policy in South Asia," in *Regional Studies*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (Summer 1990), p. 91.
18. The hypothesis that the more powerful nation than the other potential members should guide any unification process was

propounded by Amitai Etzioni. Quoted by Michael P. Sullivan, *International Relations : Theories and Evidence* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), p. 213.

19. This was expressed by a well-known Pakisani defense expert Lt. Gen. (Rtd.) A.I. Akram, See Samuel Baid, "Stalemate in South Asia," In Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Quoted in *Ibid.*
22. Shelton U. Kodikera, "Asymmetry and Commonality", in Pran Chopra (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 131.
23. See *Sunday* (a weekly Ananda Bazar Publication from Calcutta, India), (December 13, 1981), p. 53.
24. Ahamed, "The Primacy of the Economic . . .", *op. cit.*, p. 65.
25. *Sunday*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *India Today* (a weekly published in India), (August 31, 1983),
28. Inshtiaq Hossain has mentioned that India spent about US \$ 1 Billion on its operation in Srilanka, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
30. David Mirany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), p. 7.
31. See BIISS Papers 7, p. 52.
32. Hasan Askari Rizvi, "Pakistan-India Relations in the Eighties," *Regional Studies*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (Summer 1990), p. 26.
33. This has been especially true after Chandra Shekhar took charge as Indian Prime Minister in November 1990 from V.P. Singh after the latter's resignation on the question of Babri-Masjid-Ram-janambhumi dispute in Ayodhya, an incident which itself is a manifestation of Hindu Communalism. The riots at different places that followed took the toll of a number of Muslim lives.
34. Ahsan, *op. cit.*
35. Vidyalandar, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

36. Abul Ahsan, *op. cit.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. See Pran Chopra, "The Rising Salience of Politics in SAARC." in Satesh Kumar-(ed.) *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1984-85* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987), p. 100.
40. Ahsan, *op. cit.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. See *The New Nation*, (January 4, 1990).