

up pro-poor plans in their respective countries. In Bangladesh under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia, work has already commenced to finalise such a pro-poor plan at the earliest. Similar actions need to be taken in other member countries as well. More importantly, the member countries must seriously seek a regional approach and orientation to this issue. This is a matter requiring great seriousness of purpose, conceptual rigour, examination of pros and cons of several alternative options and clear identification of action to be initiated in several key and interrelated areas in a holistic manner. The Seventh SAARC Summit for understandable reasons, stopped short of specifying the de-

tails in this regard. Now, is the time to start serious action-oriented thinking in this key area to work out details and go into action.

Among one of the most important decisions taken by the Dhaka Summit was the finalisation and signing of the framework Agreement of SAPTA. First initial steps are now being taken for negotiations on the exchange of trade concessions of a product by product basis. Majority of the member countries have already submitted their list of concessions. The process needs to be brought to an expeditious conclusion before further progress can be made. One formidable factor which stymied increase in trade among member countries in the past was the lack of complementarity among their respective economic structures, different sizes and relative differing strength of their economic bases. If trade were to pick up among the member countries these other issues will also have to be seriously addressed for practical policy initiatives. The member countries may thus seri-

ously consider expanding intra-regional trade in the SAARC region through establishment of joint ventures and co-production facilities etc. and other selective steps to enhance the complementarity of their economic pursuits.

The member countries of SAARC have also lately adopted a greater private sector orientation in their respective domestic economic policies. An emphasis on promoting private initiative, increasing deregulation, efforts at general reduction in public spending deficit have become a significant feature of the economic priorities of most of the member countries. Where private capital can be attracted for investment and private business accepts the risks (and a fair share of the rewards) of enterprise, governments of most member countries are now encouraging this process. Initiatives at different levels are certainly in order to supplement state level regional cooperative efforts to undertake appropriate initiatives to make best use of this new policy orientation. This is high time to carefully examine how this could be done and this should be done pretty quickly if we were not to allow a fissure to develop between the objective reality and our many initiatives to promote and strengthen helpful collective actions on all possible directions with speed, purposefulness and commensurate sense of urgency.

SAARC's social agenda as they relate to women, children and the disabled, its emphasis on health, population, science and education are also equally important. But more importantly we should constructively start thinking about our serious common environmental problems which can be addressed effectively

primarily through a combination of well thought national and regional approach.

This is necessary because of the very nature of the problem itself and the all pervasive nature of its consequences and potential threats. Environmental issues are also not totally delinked from maximum utilisation of our shared natural resources in our region, particularly water in an optimal, fair and equitable manner. We can remain silent and inactive on this crucial issue to our own risk both individually and collectively. Some suggestions continue to be made from time about tapping the huge untapped hydro-electric resources of the Himalayan region through collective regional efforts. Are we ready yet to begin a forward movement in this much desired direction?

CONCLUSION :

It may sound like repetition of an old cliché but it is important to remind us that we are better off with SAARC than without. As members of this Association our objective, through our collective efforts, is to improve the quality of life of our people in an environment of peace, harmony and unfettered freedom. The importance of the objective itself is undeniable. We have no other viable option to pursue.

The imperative need and the impulses of cooperation in our region must be understood and nurtured in a sustained manner. To the extent that meaningful cooperation is possible only in a climate of peace characterised by a willingness on the part of each of us to be in empathy with our neighbours and understand their concerns we must harness our efforts to create it. Recent developments in the region have demonstrated in ample measure how very important this other factor is. At the onset of yet another important SAARC meeting this pre-eminent fact should also be very much in our mind.

34