

Friendship, Cooperation And Prosperity

— Moosa Bin Shamsheer

SOUTH Asia was the only region without regionalism until the idea of SARC was mooted by Bangladesh in early 1980 ostensibly for mutual gains on the socio-economic front for the peoples of the region irrespective of existing divergences in political, social and economic performances of the individual countries. Since then the idea has germinated and has taken institutional shape through the Declaration of the Foreign Ministers of the member countries on August 2, 1983. An Integrated Programme of Action has been evolved and certain specified areas of co-operation identified. Despite the initial hesitation on the part of some countries SARC has made slow but steady progress. Of late, it has gained irrefutable momentum and the first ever summit of SARC leaders, is expected to provide it a new start.

It is because the realisation has dawned that collective approach and concerted endeavour are the sine qua non for peace, friendship and prosperity of the countries in the grouping both individually and collectively. Structured regional co-operation commonality of views and shared approach hold enormous potentials for improving the life standard of close to a billion people who comprise almost half of the world. Close interactions at people to people and leader to leader level are expected to gradually clear the atmosphere of discord, mistrust and suspicion which so long characterised the scenario of the region paving the way for lasting peace and stability conducive to economic growth and development. SARC is in line with South-South Co-operation and will enable the countries in its fold to have a better bargaining power in the international spectrum. South Asian Regional Co-operation is, therefore an imperative for peace, stability, friendship and development in the region. It has been aptly described as a dialectical response to the existing geo-political-economic compulsions in the region.

SARC stemmed from the conviction that increased co-operation contacts and exchanges among the countries of the region will contribute to the promotion of friendship, amity and understanding among their peoples (vide: Declaration on South Asian Regional Co-operation). They share common history and heritage. Except Bhutan and Nepal, all the five

countries have a colonial legacy. All the countries of SARC are members of the Non-Aligned Movement. A majority of them are members of the Commonwealth and some are again members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The SARC countries are also bound by their membership of the world body. Ethnologically and culturally, there is also identity inherent in them. Besides, they have the regional identity which separates them from those of their like elsewhere. Three great religions—Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—flourished here. The region was also a cradle of a great civilisation steeped in history.

Subjective conditions for regional co-operation were always there. But the advent of colonialism and its aftermath caused xenophobic condition unleashing in its wake mutual mistrust and misperception, endemic suspicion and tension and occasional enmities and hostilities. Peace and stability remained a far cry in the region to the chagrin of the people and sane elements in the countries under SARC who thought their hard-won freedom from the thuggeries of the domain of colonial yoke will herald a new dawn of peace, prosperity and harmony.

Indeed, SARC holds a great promise of fostering a climate of friendship in the region hitherto characterised by rivalry, competition, hatred and tension. Viewed dispassionately, the extra-economic benefits expected to be generated by the interaction and exchanges will be enormous and compounded in course of time.

Cohesion and solidarity are at the core of SARC which explicitly precludes dictate and dominance by any single country. Mutuality and commonality are stipulated to be its guiding principles. The weak are not to be dominated and exploited but should be supported through a gradual process of evolution to overcome their existing problems. Decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity and not consensus which means that all the countries will stand on an equal footing.

To make the atmosphere of regional issue congenial and cordial, it has further been decided that bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from deliberations. But there will always remain the scope of bilateral approach to disputes and differences.

Friendship encompasses com-

plimentarity and compatibility which SARC hopes to nurture among its components. It has not been designed to intrude upon multilateral and bilateral cooperation rather SARC shall complement them.

There are examples that when regionalism unfolds, creative interaction and exchanges replace hostility with friendship. Countries initially hostile to each other have subsequently become partners in progress burying schism and squabbles. SARC holds such a promise: the promise of enduring friendship among the countries of the region. It is believed that the spirit of equality and partnership will accrue mutual benefits and promote and stimulate solidarity through mutual cooperation. It has succeeded in other regional corporate efforts. So with SARC, there is no reason why it will not work, and in the process be sustained. There is the shared aspirations, the shared cravings for uplift, and the shared vision of a better future for the region as a whole. This cross-pollination of minds is perception of one another's aspirations and viewpoints.

SARC is a positive development designed to set a new trend of inter-state relations to help stabilise the situation by contributing towards confidence building, tension-reduction and collective self-reliance. SARC is not a new power bloc or military alliance. It is essentially a polarisation for mutual gains in a peaceful environment, peace and stability are its cardinal principles without which no tangible development is possible.

SARC visualises that commonality of interests will bridge communication gap among the countries of the region fostering mutual and better appreciation of one another's problems. There is the increasing realization that intra-state tensions or tension within an individual country may have their spill over in the entire region with cumulative debilitating impact on all fronts. This realization is a welcome sign and is expected to open a new chapter of lasting peace and stability in the region. In essence, SARC seeks unity in diversity. The widening of psychological horizon from the nation to the regional level will generate South Asian solidarity turning in its wake the region into a zone of peace which is the cherished goal of all in the fold of SARC. South Asian Regional Cooperation has, therefore, rightly been defined as a so-

cio-economic approach to peace and stability.

All the seven countries of the region belong to the acronym of the Third World and also the Group of 77. They are still under-developed and together form one of the poorest belts in the world with over 50 per cent of the population below poverty line and 64 per cent illiterate. In respect of resource endowment except manpower and population growth the region can be termed as poor. It has only 3.31 per cent of the land area of the world. They are at varying levels of development, with India better off economically than the rest. The degree of complementarity in the economies of the region is not very much significant, the present level of inter-regional trade not exceeding 67 per cent. Economic linkage or leveler between the South Asian countries is yet to have strong moorings. Global economic constraints, adverse international trade situation tilting towards developed countries and uncertain climate of aid have happily convinced SARC member-states that "regional co-operation in South Asia is beneficial, desirable and necessary and that it will help promote the welfare and improve the quality of life of the peoples of the region." Promotion and strengthening of collective self-reliance in the region is, therefore the objective of SARC. The progress achieved so far in the realm of non-political co-operation is significant. Nine different areas of economies and cultural activity have been identified and an Integrated Programme of Action taken for their implementation. Working groups set up in this regard are monitoring their progress. Never before in the history of South Asian countries such a wide spectrum of areas has been explored for mutually beneficial and desirable cooperation.

There are many more fields in which this co-operation can be stretched to the collective benefit of the region. They can go for complementarity in production planning, in trade and commerce harnessing of their vast water resources, generating and sharing energy and power and market mechanism. In the infra-structural field, regional co-operation can encompass transport, shipping, tourism, insurance, banking and market mechanism.

Scientific and technical research can be directed towards exploitation of seabed, fishery, medicine.

(See page 8)

Friendship

(From Page 5)

care, industry, agriculture and forestry and veterinary. Education, sports and media are other fields where the countries of the region can profitably share their expertise. In fact co-operation can be multidimensional touching all the facets of life of the peoples of the region.

The rationale of this regional co-operation is that "uneven levels of development should inspire on the one hand the less developed to catch up with their more fortunate neighbours while on the other hand, encourage the more developed to help narrow the gap existing between them." It will undoubtedly help achieve collective self-reliance for which SARC has been designed.

Besides, through SARC the countries of the region can hope to have an effective voice in international forums and can play a role commensurate with their intrinsic global importance. Region to region co-operation can also be fostered through such regionalism.

SARC is a product of cooperative agreements with bright prospects and vast potentials of widening its horizon of co-operation. It has the promise of developing into the first truly regional arrangement that has emerged in South Asia. In the words of Bangladesh President Hussain Muhammad Ershad—"South Asian Regional Co-operation is a unique programme for development. It is not in any way prejudicial to the interest of any nation or grouping. The prospects of such co-operation are wide and bright".