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SAARC

A Post-Summit Review

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THE SAARC fever has subsided. But it has set off unending ripples of benign growth which may give the regional entity enough strength to stand up on its own feet or, if not nursed with care, turn malignant into a skeleton of unfulfilled aspirations.

In the aftermath of the first ever gathering in Dhaka of the heads of State and Government of the seven countries, there is no sign or reason for one to be pessimistic. The historic meeting has generated so much of expectation that future course of events may find it difficult to meet. Disappointments and pitfalls cannot be ruled out, but the leaders, determining the course of action, will have adequate justification to go slow, for the ship has only sighted the iceberg. It will have to steer clear of the barrier through a slow, gradual and very cautious movement. The summit leaders demonstrated their awareness of the danger, which explains why the DHAKA DECLARATION is devoid of the rhetorics, nuances and clichés that usually fill the literature of such conferences.

Contentious bilateral issues which appeared at the termination of imperialism, ethnic, cultural and religious diversities, uneven level of development and uncommon political perceptions had not only intensified mutual suspicion but also manifested in violent outbursts in the region. There have been bloody wars in the sub-continent. There have been bloody riots. Terrorism and political turmoil marred peace and stability in many countries of the region. There have been natural calamities and man-made tragedies that shook not only the

region but also the entire world. There have been violations of human rights against which no protests were allowed to be voiced. All these compounded by economic deprivation caused by extra-regional fluctuations had left deep scars on the body politic and pushed the people of South Asia into a state of virtual despair.

The Dhaka Declaration has kindled a light, feeble may be at first sight, of hope with the message that united we stand divided we fall. We have to survive together, face the challenge together and move ahead together. The fact that big and small, have joined hands as equals to make a solemn pledge for collective self-reliance is itself a great achievement; an incredible feat of success that pulled up from slumber the one billion people of the region of South Asia. No matter how far it goes, how much or how little of the expectations materialise, Dhaka, the capital of one hundred million people have reason to take pride for initiating the process and showing the way how acrimony can be sunk, bitterness forgotten and conflicts turned into friendship. A new spirit is born a fresh awareness has evolved and a new era has dawned.

When it was first conceived in 1980, the climate in the sub-continent looked conducive to floating the idea of regional cooperation for collective benefit. The late Bangladeshi President Ziaur Rahman's letter to the other leaders of the region sought to initiate consultations on matters of mutual interest and cooperation under some sort of institutional arrangement. It did not intend to rush things through the wall of sus-

picions and apprehensions but to begin cooperation in the limited fields of economic, technical, social and cultural spheres. The countries are at different levels of economic development. Any proposal for economic cooperation must, therefore, be formulated with the greatest care in order to ensure that the weak are not exploited and that the strong do not dominate.

The areas selected are only those in which cooperation will mutually benefit all the countries irrespective of economic disparities. That would make regional cooperation meaningful strengthen the spirit of mutual trust and understanding and bridge the gaps in development. Uneven level of development would not matter; rather it would inspire the less developed to catch up with the relatively fortunate neighbour and encourage the more developed to narrow the gap. The Pakistan President must have referred to this perception when he told a group of journalists in Dhaka that the countries would draw strength from one another instead of going into competition.

The gains of periodic consultation and collective approach would definitely spill over the regional boundaries to influence decisions in the international sphere. Who would disagree that it is through regional cohesion that South Asia can hope to have an effective voice in the international forums. All the countries have similar stakes in the international economic transactions and need to take identical positions in the multi-national forums like the GATT North-South dialogue, World Bank, IMF UNCTAD and other agencies in the U.N. system. It is only groups of coun-

tries—be they big or small—that can aspire to make decisive impact on the decision-making process in these forums. The institutional arrangement—SAARC would help take a coordinated stand on behalf of the one-fifth of the world population to play a role commensurate with their intrinsic global importance.

One important element that cannot be missed is the fact that SAARC as a regional grouping has been the latest in the series of regional associations formed in other parts of the world. Economic and technical cooperation on a regional basis has long been accepted by the developing countries as a desirable and necessary strategy for collective self-reliance. With global interdependence assuming greater importance regional cooperation is considered to be a strong springboard for global cooperation. SAARC can draw from the experience of other associations to lead its way to the realisation of its objectives.

The experiences elsewhere indicate the possibility of such cooperation in spite of bilateral problems. Even where bilateral problems crop up, this should not stand in the way of regional cooperation in the economic, technical, social and cultural spheres. This is evident from the fact that the countries whose bilateral relations may be strained are still prepared to cooperate with one another within a regional framework. As regional cooperation grows, it also tends to generate a climate of mutual understanding reducing the scope of such disputes. SAARC has already demonstrated this possibility in the appreciable developments in the bilateral relations shortly before and after the historic Dhaka summit.