



# News About SAARC

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EVERY time there is an official SAARC event the regional media carry some good news — real or perceived — about the region. Ever since Bangladesh circulated the Working Paper on the establishment of regional cooperation in South Asia in Nov. 1980 there have been at least three hundred such events, more than fifty of which were of political and/or official nature at various levels.

Beginning in Dhaka in 1985 the Heads of State or Government have already met thrice, the fourth is scheduled to be held later this year. Counting from the first meeting of Foreign Ministers held in New Delhi in August 1983 when the Integrated Programme of Action was launched, the Ministers have so far met nine times (although as the Council of Ministers they have now met on five occasions). The Foreign Secretaries within or without the purview of the Standing Committee, and other senior officials have met many more times while there have been the whole series of meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences at working group, study group, expert group, technical and professional levels.

All these events have produced thousands of pages of declarations, reports, recommendations and reviews which are supposed to contribute to the growth of regional cooperation and regionalism in South Asia — a region that has had the 'dubious distinction' of being known as the only geographic cluster without even any rudimentary regional organisation. There have been historical reasons for this which are well-known and the pace of progress in SAARC will discourage those who may have anticipated that the association has emerged as the magical panacea to resolve the myriad of problems that bedevil South Asian inter-State relations. Despite that, the emergence of the association has certainly led to certain degree of rising expectations at the popular level, and apparently there have been some efforts to respond to these expectations by offering some 'good news' in the wake of each of the SAARC events. Between the lines of such good news, however, ev-

ery time one could read the bad part bad part of the news — the reason for continued scepticism around the prospect of SAARC and its effectiveness for the people of the region.

## Kathmandu Outcome

The same has happened in the case of the fifth session of the Council of Ministers held at Kathmandu during 11-12 August, 1988. As usual, the Minister's meeting was preceded by deliberations at the secretarial and senior official level meetings. The main outcome of the series of meetings include (i) approval of the establishment of the SAARC Agricultural Information Centre (SAIC) to be set up in Dhaka, (ii) instruction to expand the SAARC audio-vision exchange programme; (iii) advisory measures to expedite outstanding actions regarding Youth Volunteer programme, institution of SAARC chairs, fellowships and scholarships; and (iv) decision to encourage participation of NGOs in SAARC activities. Besides, formal announcements were made on coming into force of the SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and the SAARC Food Security Reserve, both signed during the third Summit held at Kathmandu in November last year. Other matters that came up for consideration included the study on possibility of cooperation in trade, disaster management, inclusion of new members and/or observers, particularly the case of Afghanistan, cooperation and linkage with other regional and international bodies. Like in all previous occasions Bangladesh continued with its tradition of enthusiastically proposing new areas of cooperation. This time these were education, including the establishment of a SAARC Friendship University and a Women's Forum. The ideas apparently received favourable response of other members.

So far so good. What in terms of real cooperation? It seems that SAARC is increasingly becoming hostage to vagaries of Parochial nationalism, bureaucratic foot-dragging, lack of dynamism and sterility. It would be recalled that most of the items that were consi-

dered this time in Kathmandu have been on the agenda for years together now. The establishment of SAIC was indeed approved during the first session of Council of Ministers held in Dhaka in August 1985. Whether and to what extent an institution like SAIC would generate tangible benefit is a separate issue. Even if it was found appropriate to establish SAIC for benefit of only those who professionally deal with agricultural information, or even for the sake of mere symbolism, it should not have certainly taken six meetings of Council of Ministers and two summit meetings to finally endorse a foregone conclusion. One wonders whether and when the institution would finally start functioning in real terms. The same more or less is true for the youth volunteer programme, institution of SAARC fellowships, scholarships and chairs. The ideas were endorsed, it will be remembered, at the Bangalore summit in 1986. Ironically enough even non-contentious matters like these by all indications would have a long more way to go before being actually implemented.

It appears from the way the reports have been formulated that the leaders and officials have run short of what to convey to the people. It should hardly require a Ministerial Meeting to provide instruction to expand programmes like audiovision exchange or to encourage participation of NGOs, since on both these matters there have already been summit decisions. What seems to be happening is that on matters that are more vital and decisions on which are more strongly wanted, the association is repeatedly failing to make any progress. What for example, about the question of cooperation on investment, trade, disaster management Areas, cooperation in which have been already endorsed to be of enormous potential benefit for the region. It appears that these have fallen victim of the jargon of "in-depth study" used most often to practically shelve any decision. One wonders why it should take months or even years together to decide what should be the methodology and terms of reference for expert groups which would study

such matters.

The the decision on membership of Afghanistan would be deferred until the next summit — it will not be surprising if appropriate wording is found even during the next summit to defer the issue once again — was indeed obvious for the Indo-Pak polarisation, if not for anything else. Moreover, there is yet to be any set provision in the Charter on this. But it is more than a breach of shared commitment on the part of the member-States to have failed to come up with a unanimous position on the question of Bangladesh's membership to the UN Security Council, particularly when they have already agreed to project a common front in all international form. Nothing other than parochial nationalism of some particular member states can perhaps explain it better.

## Need for Behavioural Change.

It is well-known that the States of South Asia have a lot of issues of bilateral and contentious nature which do not come under purview of SAARC and which are indeed more important for them than cooperative activities under SAARC. It can hardly be disputed nevertheless that their commitment to SAARC should by now be real, in the sense that whatever has been agreed upon should be carried forward for the sake of a better future for the region. SAARC activities cannot bring immediate solution to most of the problems that the region faces. But pragmatically speaking, these would help create a psycho-social foundation for greater cooperation in the future for regional peace, prosperity and stability. What is required most critically is the widening of the outlook of the leaders and officials, greater degree of real political will in favour of SAARC, increasing dynamism and above all, enlightened national self-interest rather than parochialism in dealing with each other within the SAARC forum. The longer it will take to bring about such behavioural changes the farther will take to bring about such behavioural changes the farther will be the prospect of regionalism in South Asia. (The views expressed in the article are those of the author's)