

SAARC GETS A NEW DIMENSION

Despite many limitations South Asia is poised for a vigorous step forward towards enhanced regionalism. This is clear from the inaugural statements of the leaders of the seven countries attending their fifth summit in six years in the Maldives capital Male. The tone of the meet was set by Maldives President Gayoom when he called upon the assembled leaders not to turn back and look to the lapses of the past but to move ahead drawing strength from the successes achieved. The mood at the Male summit is certainly one of optimism, of faith in the future and the new era of relaxation unfolding before the world.

The three-day meeting of the Heads of State and Government of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka is taking place at a time when new opportunities for peace and stability are visible. The events in Europe, the new relations between the two former military blocs, the NATO and Warsaw Pact, and the camaraderie between the two super powers have created a new climate the impact of which cannot be overlooked in South Asia. So also is the spin-off from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait affecting lives of one billion South Asians. The declaration at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Iraqi occupation of the Gulf state are events of a contrary nature but they highlight a singular point: the need to reassess the present globalism and draw up strategies for South Asian cooperation accordingly.

South Asia, first of all, must project a visible identity to the outside world. The seven countries should be able to take identical stands on international issues of common concern. Second, it must be able to intensify cooperation in the areas already chosen and identify new areas where their common resources can be pooled for mutual benefit. President Ershad, who has carefully nursed the regional forum in the initial days as its first Chairman, urged upon the summit participants to take steps including amending the SAARC Charter to make regional cooperation more effective. Despite all the scepticism about regionalism in an area which has a history that has spawned divisiveness and mistrust, SAARC has become a reality. None can now think of South Asia without the forum. It has also generated people-to-people contact in the region through exchange of audio-visual programmes, common tourism projects, fashion shows, and sports meets. These indicate that there is still immense scope for such contact at the level of the masses, a point that has been clearly outlined by President Ershad. He echoed the popular sentiments in the region by underlining that there should be more vigorous exchange of news and other media material, free travel with the relaxation of restrictions and closer telecommunication links within the region.

SAARC will be as strong as the regional countries desire. The treaty on curbing terrorism and the expected agreement on prevention of drug abuse in the region are two vital steps taken by the regional countries to expand cooperation in areas which directly affect the lives of the people. It is also reassuring that the regional forum has addressed itself to the task of ameliorating the condition of children and the status of women, two disadvantaged groups in the region who need an enhanced attention.

Bangladesh, which has initiated the regional forum, is clearly committed to its rapid growth. It is apparent that the benefit of SAARC has often crossed the immediate confines of the Charter. Although bilateral issues have been kept out of the scope of regional cooperation, SAARC has been able to create a benign effect on efforts for solutions to contentious issues.

It has often acted as a safety valve in a highly explosive situation. The countries have been seen to fall back on SAARC in critical moments in their bilateral relations. The forum indirectly kept the doors of peaceful negotiations open during difficult periods when many other avenues seemed blocked.

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