

Future of saarc



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The vast South Asia subcontinent was split into two nations in 1947 when India and Pakistan came into existence because of their irreconcilably divergent religions, political perceptions and ethnic cleavages. It became impossible to make the Hindus and Muslims live under any single arrangement. They could not get along side by side any more. The other States which became independent were Sri Lanka (1948), the Maldives (1996) and Bangladesh 1971, whose story of creation is somewhat different. Nepal and Bhutan are other two small sovereign States who matter much in the South Asian affairs.

All these States have relations with each other, good or bad, but they have been able to erect a common platform in the name of SAARC to promote bilateral relations and eradicate some of the common problems being faced by them. In the 80s, urgency of a social uplift attracted their attention and they felt the need to converge on a platform for economic development in the South Asian region. On the pattern of ASEAN, they formed an association called South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, in 1985.

In the last ten years, besides summit-level meetings, frequent Ministerial and Secretary-level meetings, workshops and seminars including training programmes have been organised in the name of the organisation to find out ways and means to eradicate poverty and deprivation existing in the region. But so far they have not been able to find any concrete solution owing to a number of problems. In this context, one of the greatest obstacles is the hegemonic attitude of the powerful member, India whose indifference on several occasions has foiled all efforts for achieving a suitable solution to certain thorny problems.

In spite of seriousness of certain intra-regional bilateral disputes and differences, concerted efforts are being made by the Member States to achieve meaningful results in certain fields. With its secretariat at Kathmandu, the Association has made some headway in different areas since 1987. It may be pointed out that efforts for the evolution and promotion of the SAARC have been thwarted by India which is a “Giant” of the Association.

Though there are a few instances of differences amongst other member States, the fact remains that the hindrance is caused less by the smaller States than by the biggest one, India due to its uneasy relations with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. India has not even spared the smaller States such as Nepal and the Maldives. At one time, Nepal remained its hapless target while Bhutan too felt concerned over Indian pressure. It is because of this reason that SAARC has suffered badly right from its beginning. Obviously one cannot expect any effective multilateral cooperation in South Asia until bilateral problems are resolved amicably.

From whatever angle we see, we would find that India's feeling of being bigger in size and a sense of arrogance of being militarily stronger has kept SAARC in balance besides being the main impediments in the way of peaceful coexistence and regional cooperation. When any of her neighbours resist her subtle move for hegemonism, the Indian government threatens the very existence of the State. A close study of interstate relations in the region would enable us to understand the factual position which is obstructing the pace and progress of SAARC.

The main constraints in this connection are largely political in nature added by internal political unrest within the member States and inter-country disputes and differences including conflicting modes of bilateral alignments. There is a typical tendency in this part of the world that whenever any internal problem emerges in any State, it is attributed to external intervention without caring for the consequences of such allegations. It may be noted that none of these is engaged in combating conflict be it pertaining to socio-economic inequality, ethnic bitterness or a feeling of political alienation and deprivation.

Besides internal tensions, all these nations are in the grip of external threats either of politico-economic nature or those pertaining to religion-cultural issues. But of all these, it appears, that the most dominating pressures are related to politico-economic nature. In other words, the story revolves round a strong urge for political supremacy and economic dominance in the region. In such a state of affairs, one may find India playing a zigzag role in SAARC. It is because of India's uncompromising posture that interstate relations have not been able to stand on sound footing necessary of evolution of South Asian cooperation.

Besides having common land boundaries with almost all the South Asian States, India is tremendously large in size and fairly resourceful in different ways as such. She is involved in disputes with all the smaller States, whether minor or of serious nature. It must be recorded that except for a few differences of historical nature, most of these are primarily based on India's hegemonic instinct and partly because of her aggressive foreign policy. In

the given situation, how is it possible for the smaller states of the region to play their role in contributing to the progress of SAARC?

Obviously, it would not be realistic to expect an effective role from the small States. One may find that the imposition of political will and economic pressure is the main tool in Indian hands to hinder smooth running of SAARC. Be it Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination, Sikhs' struggle for liberation; Tamils' fight for safeguarding their rights; Bangladesh's disputes over Farakha issue and some boundary problems; Nepal's economic problem and Indian migrants, it would appear that all these issue are interwoven with Indian hegemonic attitude.

It crystal clear that the relations between the two major South Asian countries, India and Pakistan, are not cordial. Without resolving the fundamental disputes between the two, one cannot visualise any real progress in SAARC. India is not prepared to concede the right of self-determination to the Kashmiris whereas Pakistan holds it firmly that they be given their right as enunciated in the Independence Act of 1947 and, in the light of the UN resolutions which clearly define this right for the people of Kashmir.

Besides, India constantly interferes in Pakistan's internal affairs which further embittered relations between the two strong SAARC neighbours. India-Bangladesh tension is another barrier that adversely affects SAARC. Bangladesh is concerned over India's recalcitrant attitude towards river waters issues. Ganges River and construction of Farrakha barrage including some maritime boundary issues and the question of Talpathi between the

two are clear signals that the two would remain at loggerheads for a long time to the detriment of the SAARC progress.

In the last two decades, the Indo-Lanka relations have worsened, but the relations between the two States were tension-free in the early years. The question arises as to what has spoiled these cordial relations? The answer is again to be found in the Indian hegemonic policy which ruffles the concept of peaceful coexistence. Her aggressive policy of interference in the neighbouring State's internal affairs is perhaps the fixed objective of her foreign policy. Indian support to Tamils previously in Northern Sri Lanka against the government caused serious rift between the two SAARC countries to estrange their relations.

Such a state of affairs has already damaged one of the SAARC Summits in the nineties when the late President Premadasa faced extreme degree of Indian arrogance. The two small members of SAARC, Nepal and the Maldives are also not in a comfortable position. Nepal is at the mercy of India's exploitation or irrigation and hydro-electric potential of major tributaries of the River Ganges which affects the economy and ecology of Nepal. The Nepalese Prime Minister's visit of 1991 did not help much to bring about an improvement in relations. Nepal seeks to have access to the trade transit facilities but has not met any success so far.

Apparently there appears no real issue between India and the Maldives but it should not be forgotten that the Maldives have had a bitter experience of Indian intervention in her territory, though in good faith, when India rushed her Armed Forces to crush Tamil terrorists group attack in 1989. At that

time, some critics termed this event as an India-managed drama which was intended to exhibit her military strength. Whatever motives, the outstanding feature of this act was that the Indian forces crossed international borders at its will which was against the norms of international law.

Bhutan, being a small neighbour, has been in a low profile. Bhutan remained unmoved during the unrest amongst the non-indigenous residents of Bhutan who were mainly of Indian origins. Nevertheless, Bhutan suspects that Indian might leap-frog into its territory and there is not much that it could do to resist India. It must be recalled here that while almost all the major States are having conflicts with India, they have hardly any serious issue for comparable magnitude with each other.