

## **Moving towards SAARC citizenship**

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Paradigm shift in world politics as consequence of 9/11 and arm twisting in the name of globalization under the World Trade Organization made the people of the developing and least developing countries in South Asia more vulnerable to multiple crisis and resource constraints.

Under neo-colonialism, the players of globalization are manipulating world resources at the cost of the poor and the marginalized. They are dictating their terms in the name of trade liberalization and withdrawals of agriculture subsidies under the WTO agreements. Inter and intra state conflicts, particularly Pakistan and India tension, have been costing heavily on the people of the world's one of the largest regions, the South Asia. Having common heritage, historical linkages and traditional commonalities, the South Asian countries and people share common problems. The major problems are poverty, under development, resource constraints, and crisis of governance, religious fundamentalism and growing threat of HIV/AIDS.

Amid these grave problems, the SAARC leaders arrive in Dhaka on February 05 for the stalled 13th summit to be held on February 6 and 7 need to look beyond their set agenda to look at really serious issues confronting the SAARC region. Current Saarc Chair, Pakistan formally announced the new dates after Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz had consulted all members and there was consensus on the new dates. The summit had originally been scheduled to take place between January 9 and 11, but Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia deferred it in the wake of December 26 tsunami disaster that badly hit some of the Saarc member states.

The 12th SAARC Summit, held in Islamabad from 4 to 6 January 2004, was groundbreaking on two fronts. On the bilateral front, the meeting and productive dialogue between President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee paved the way for the resumption of a "Composite Dialogue", leading "to peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides". On the multilateral front, the Framework Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area and the SAARC Social Charter were signed. There was a realization that, in a region containing over a billion and a half predominantly poor people, peace and progress must and should remain their greatest expectation.

We need to take into account major outcomes of the 12<sup>th</sup> summit summarized in The Islamabad Declaration. They include:

\* The signing of the Framework Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) under which trade tariffs between member states would be reduced by the beginning of 2006, paving way for increased intra-regional trade.

\* The signing of the SAARC Social Charter which aims at bringing the much needed social change in the living conditions of South Asians, over 30 percent of whom live below the poverty line.

\* The Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation, prepared by the SAARC Ministers of Finance and Planning was adopted to provide a concrete macro framework for national and regional efforts to address all issues related to poverty in a meaningful manner.

\* The leaders agreed that a study on South Asian Energy Cooperation, including the concept of an Energy Ring needed to be undertaken by the Working Group on Energy.

\* Member-states agreed to look closely at the prospects of setting up a South Asian Development Bank.

\* The year 2004 was declared as SAARC Awareness year to promote awareness of and prevention from HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other serious communicable diseases.

\* The signing of the Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Combating Terrorism was a further manifestation of the Summit's commitment to eliminate terrorism from South Asia.

These outcomes and commitments express the realization that SAARC should not be subject to the volatility of the Sub-continent – rather it should itself prove a stabilizing element to bilateral relationships. SAARC needs to become a dynamic organization, on lines similar to the EU and ASEAN. The idea of working on the line of the EU, the 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit should specially focus on adopting a regime that crystallizes the idea of a SAARC citizenship at first leg of integration into a possible monetary union.

We need to capitalize on the above outcomes in letter and spirit to fight against common enemy, the poverty and under development, South Asian countries particularly Pakistan and India need to join hands to benefit from each other's experiences, development and peaceful co-existence. But unfortunately both India and Pakistan seem reluctant to opt for a peaceful solution of their conflicts, particularly of Kashmir and now the issue of Baglihar dam after successive bilateral talks could not produce tangible results.

The stereotype enemy approaches of the establishments of both India and Pakistan are the basic hurdle in the way to normalization. Contrary to this, the people of Pakistan and India want close relations and cross border legal free movements. Way back in May 2003, I happened to be at the Chandigarh Pres Club where I reciprocated a speech by the President of the Club. Right from the Attari border crossing to Chandigarh, over 100 Pakistani delegates were given a warm welcome and the atmosphere was so peace friendly that some of the jubilant youth demanded that there should not be any border walls between the two countries. At the Chandigar Press Club, I had cautioned against the political and vested interests of our establishments. I still believe that border walls are not the issue, if at all the establishments want to retain rather build these walls even higher than they are now, at least, they should open doors for movement of people across the settled borders without restrictions or with little formalities such as visa.

In South Asia, visa regime in Nepal and Sri Lanka is flexible and could be an example for rest of the countries in the region. The visa regime in Bangladesh is at somewhat moderate level but the visa system between India and Pakistan is cumbersome. The two important nuclear nations of South Asia due to enemy image of each other are not roping the tide of opportunities that is lying ahead in case they join hands for the development of the two countries. Only by freeing or relaxing visa regimes, both India and Pakistan could get benefits in coin and kind. But establishments of both the countries do not want that

because they fear that it would endanger their vested interests. Both the governments announced in newspaper that journalists and development researchers would be given multiple visa entries and that too without police reporting process. But the on ground situation is different.

I am sure if today both the establishments and intelligence agencies of India and Pakistan decide not to send their agents for sabotage in each other's countries, there would be no sabotage activity in either of the countries. You would agree that no common Pakistani or Indian national need to damage interest of their fellow human beings rather they would like to strengthen friendly bonds between the two peoples. The establishments of the two countries should realize that South Asia, one of the most diverse regions on the planet, is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, and the most deprived region in the world largely because of Pakistan-India tensions and politics of sabotage and now the terrorism and counterterrorism.

We need to realize also that while the region contains nearly one fifth of humanity, just the increase in its population each year exceeds the total population of the fifty smallest UN member states. If we look at the Mahbub Ul Haq Centre's Human Development Report on South Asia, we find a devastating picture of colossal human deprivation in South Asia. Nearly one half of the world's illiterate people and forty percent of the world's poor live in South Asia: around 500 million people live in absolute poverty; more than one half of adults are illiterate and over one fourth of the total population, 350 million, is unable to access the daily necessity of safe drinking water. Eight hundred and thirty million people have no access to basic sanitation.

At one hand the extent of human deprivation in South Asia is widespread; on the other hand resources are being diverted to maintaining large armies, modern weapons, and military spending. Pakistan and India are the two among the largest armies in the world. Military spending in rest of the world declined by about 37 percent from 1987 to 1994, from a peak of US\$ 1200 billion in 1987 to around US\$ 800 billion in 1994. However, military spending in South Asia during the same period went up by 12 percent from US\$ 12.5 billion in 1987 to US\$ 14 billion in 1994. Since 1987, military holdings, combat aircraft, artillery ships, and tanks have declined by 1.5 percent globally, but have increased by 43 percent in South Asia.

This kind of militarization is jeopardizing health, education, environment, food security, access to resources, security of movement of the people and livelihood indicators. We need to unite to reverse this tide of misuse of resources so as to re-diverting them to improve social development indicators. The 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit should ensure that the poor South Asian establishments should focus on security not in military terms but of the security of the people in terms of respect for their fundamental human rights, free movements and more and more livelihood options. That the leadership in South Asia should not rely on their establishments, military and civil, rather on the people to address the worst form of power imbalances at all levels in our societies.

The civil society and development media in SAARC countries should lobby for a common South Asia Citizenship that is a key to socio economic development in the region. There should not be visa restriction for the people of South Asia to move across region. Either visa should be abolished for South Asian citizens or there should be flexibility in grant of visas. There should be a resource pool that should address issues relating to abject poverty with a view to get it alleviated

The South Asian countries should establish a powerful trading group in the world to take common stands at the World Trade Organization while taking part in negotiations on certain international trade issues. The South Asian countries should rise above petty conflicts and steer their agricultural economies out of the clutches of the multilateral corporations' monopolistic designs, thus ensuring food security and food sovereignty. The South Asian countries should have a free media regime, allowing free exchange of each other's publications and media productions into their countries.

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