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## REGIONAL PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA\*

A collective vision of South Asia is a recent phenomenon. It is only in the wake of the launching of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation that scholars and analysts have projected South Asian perspective on the issues and problems of the region focussing at the same time on its potentials, possibilities and prospects. There proliferates substantial literature highlighting the cooperative developments in the region as well as their promises and pitfalls. The euphoric signing of the Charter of the association in late 1985 was both preceded and followed by a flurry of events and activities bringing together leaders and officials of all the seven countries—a feature unprecedented in the chequered history of South Asia. While all these generated great hopes and raised expectation, the process is yet to make any breakthrough either in the fields of regional cooperation or in the growth of regionalism. Although the routine progress of the SAARC organisations goes on, other concerns of South Asian politics appear to have overtaken the SAARC dynamics which apparently dim in the dazzle of more dramatic developments taking place in the region. Today domestic scenes are, in general, dominated by ethnic conflict, communal strife, social and economic stagnation and relations between the nations of the region are still charged with mistrust and suspicion. It appears in retrospect that the “hesitant seven”<sup>1</sup> while deciding to give the regional cooperation a chance,

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1. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 November 1981 and 13 August 1982.

had never perhaps been unaware of the differences and bitternesses that divided the nations and the peoples in the region for ages. It was not without a reason that the nations—notwithstanding the warmth generated in the first summit—soon retreated to their usual inflexible positions and the region reeled back to a scenario as disconcerting as ever.

‘Internal and crossborder tensions are high again in South Asia, where more wars have been fought than in any other Third World region’.<sup>2</sup> While the Pakistani President was conspicuous in Bangalore Summit by his absence, at the year’s end 500,000 troops faced each other across the Indo-Pakistan border—scene of three earlier wars. Although the crisis was averted, Indian authority keeps blaming Pakistan for aiding Sikh extremists and Pakistani leaders suspect Indian hand in bomb ravages in Pakistani cities. The entire developments in Sri Lanka from a military escorted relief mission in Jaffna to an abrupt Peace Accord promptly followed by Indian peace keeping force taking position in North Sri Lanka make qualitative changes in South Asian politics raising more doubts than assurances. The communal violences in India have touched a new peak creating fresh consternation among fellow compatriots across the border. The resolution of bilateral issues between the nations as well as the steps towards sharing of common natural resources between the countries remain stalemated.

The South Asians are accustomed to such a state of protracted and occasionally heightened tension and conflicts in the region. However, in the prevailing SAARC spirit it could be reasonable to expect a less turbulent South Asia. On the contrary the recurrence of violence and renewed tension in the region raise serious question not only about the future of South Asia but also about the chances of success for the nascent organisation of SAARC. Bewildered observers wonder: What are really the problems of the region? How deep or intractable are

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2. *South*, August 1987, p. 32

they ? What stands in the way of their resolution ? Can SAARC process resolve some of these problem ? Is SAARC instead handicapped by the vicissitudes of these problems? This paper seeks answer to some of these questions.

## A FRAMEWORK

It is indeed difficult to have a precise assessment of South Asia's multidimensional problems having multiple ramifications. There are more than one way of looking at them and in fact attempts have been made in the past to view them from various perspectives. These perspectives, of course, vary from nation to nation and the individuals have, of course, their own viewpoints.

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I would like to argue that the problems or their resolution in the region are essentially a function of India and her relations with her neighbours in South Asia which is virtually Indo-centric in nature with India having international borders or proximity with all neighbours while, none other has border with any other. This peculiarity of geo-politics offers India a central role in the region and at the same time places her in the complexities of interaction with all her neighbours. The physical juxtaposition of the nation states in the region as well as India's central position offers her a place in which it is she who matters most in maintaining regional harmony. There are contentious bilateral issues between India and almost all other nations of the region. Little is known about any bilateral problem between other countries except that Bangladesh and Pakistan are yet to resolve some of their outstanding problems. It is, however, not to suggest that there can be no problem without India's involvement or interaction. For instance, multi-ethnicity is a universal problem

of South Asia and so are the socio-economic ills of the region—a common inheritance of the nations from the colonial exploitation of the past. Problems can also develop from extra-regional intervention in various guises.

Turning to the genesis of the problems it is again difficult to specify any particular point of time when a problem or the problems originated in South Asia. Most people see them as the product of historical process while some prefer to go back even to a mythical origin as in the case of Indo-Sri Lankan relations. For our purpose many of today's problems originated from the partition of the Sub-continent and eventual withdrawal of the British from South Asia. It is within this general framework that we would try to look at the problems of South Asia.

## REGIONAL PROBLEMS

### India's Role Perception

India's foreign policy and security considerations have always been marked by a distinct role consciousness. An urge for acquiring a central role in the region and an active involvement in world affairs guided the Indian policies since independence. Indian leaders and policy makers seldom concealed their conviction that India with her enormous power potential is destined to play a leading role in the region as well as in the world at large. This role consciousness considerably increased after the restructuring of South Asian sub-system following the crisis of 1971 from which India emerged almost unchallenged as the dominant power in the region. India's role consciousness, in fact, emanates from her role perception which is worth going a little deep into. But before that one must clearly understand that in an Indo-centric South Asian region the preeminence of India is an accepted fact. India, the core country in South Asia, has 72 percent of the region's area and 77 percent of its population and generates 78 percent of its GNP and also has "concomitant natural

superiority that constitutes power".<sup>3</sup> It is many times the size and the power potential of all other South Asian countries combined—a fact which neither India nor the other state can do much but accept.<sup>4</sup> It is only natural that India exercises an enormous influence on South Asian politics. Moreover, India's perceived role in the international system to be a strong, stable nation and to "acquire a world mission commensurate to her size, population, resources and power capabilities—military, political, economic"<sup>5</sup>—is justified. One can not but appreciate when India develops economically and builds itself into the world's one of the largest industrial power with advanced nuclear technology and space programme. One also gets impressed with her post-independence achievements in agriculture, health and education sectors in terms of boosting food production, raising life expectancy by more than 20 years than before and doubling the literacy rate. Most spectacular is—particularly to the outsiders—her practice and preservation of a resilient democracy in a highly pluralistic society. Internationally India made her mark as one of the leaders of the Non-aligned Movement as early as in fifties. When Indian scholars portray its image as a country "which is within the top 12 industrial producers of the world, has the fourth largest armed forces, is a nuclear power, has launched satellite and has world's second largest population"<sup>6</sup> it is again the whole truth. None disputes when India's intellectual elite places it only alongside four great centres of power and asserts that it (India) with her power potential "has to look at international relations in terms of its interaction with China,

3. Dieter Braun, "India's Relations with Indian Ocean States," in Ian Clark and Lawry W. Bowman (eds.), *The Indian Ocean in Global Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981), p. 27.
4. Imtiaz H. Bokhari, "South Asian Regional Cooperation", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, April 1985, p. 380.
5. Paul H. Kreisberg "India after Indira", *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 3, Spring, 1985, p. 876.
6. K. Subrahmanyam, "India's Image as a Major Power, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 March 1982.

the Soviet Union, USA and West Europe".<sup>7</sup> India's neighbours would be wise in recognising these hard facts about the country. In fact, none ever demurred in doing so.

Problems do, however, arise when this pre-eminence is turned into predominance to project India's role as one of security guardian in the region. Since independence she wanted to put on the British mantle as far as the security of the region is concerned and called for a strategic unity in the region envisaging an orbit of her control in the immediate neighbourhood. Time and again, she asserted the strategic unity of the entire region—a concept inherited from British who envolved it on a continental basis for the defence of British Indian empire keeping in view the geo-strategic realities prevailing them. She (India) still insists on its validity though in a modified form. Earlier the proclamation of strategic unity of India and her regional smaller neighbours became the recurrent theme of Indian pronouncements on her relation with these states. Although such pronouncements changed later they reappeared in some guise or another in Indian writings and pronouncements even after the modern South Asia state system had started to function. Even when "the official Indian policy came to assert India's interest in the integrity and territorial inviolability of India's smaller neighbours as a variant of the policy of integration with India"<sup>8</sup> she (India) never ceased to exert her strategic influence on her neighbours in one form or other. The latest formulation of such influence is, perhaps, one that has come to be dubbed in Indian elite circle as 'Indian Doctrine'.

Notwithstanding India's attitude and assertion the quest of the countries in the neighbourhood to steer their course clear of its sphere of influence has remained indomitable. They obviously wanted to use their option of choosing a course suiting their own peculiar

7. Abdur Rob Khan, "Strategic Aspects of Indo-Sri Lankan Relations" *BISS Papers*, No. 4, June, 1986, BISS, Dhaka, p. 5.

8. Shelton Kodikara, "Strategic Factors in Interstate Relations in South Asia", *Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence*, No. 19, Canberra, 1979, p. 17.

security requirements. That gave rise to inevitable conflicts taking different manifestation in South Asia. An eminent South Asian scholar comments: "One of the biggest dilemmas of South Asian politics is that India conceives of her neighbouring countries as lying within the defence perimeter and being integral to the security of India while India's neighbours themselves regard India itself as the source of their insecurity against whom it is necessary to organise their own security interests, some times on an extra-regional basis".<sup>9</sup> It is distinct that there exists wide gap in the security perceptions among the nations of South Asia. This gap, accompanying mistrust and subsequent friction, constitute a major problem in the region. In spite of crafty salesmanship the idea of strategic unity could seldom be sold well. Even the small nations like Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan — tied down by treaty obligations and other carefully cultivated politico-cultural connections—attempted to assert their independence. In sum, the total effect of such perception gap has been one of strain and bitterness in inter-state relationship.

India's insistence on her neighbours' conformity with her policies does not confine to only security matters. Indian scholars and authors

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keep harping on a completely harmonious approach to all aspects of nation state functioning and often lament over the lack of identity among South Asian nations in political system, foreign policy orientation, threat perception, nation building strategies and economic policies. Somehow this divergence also has been a recurrent theme for accusation against the smaller nations in the region. However, asymmetry is also a fact of life and a global phenomenon. Divergence among nations can occur because of many factors—social, human and

9. Shelton Kodikara, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

historical. And it does not stand in the way of establishing amity among nations. There is a need to allow the nations a natural growth of their mechanism to be on the same wave length with each other.

Nation state comes into being or exists with its own vision of things which provides necessary dynamics for its growth, development and progress. South Asian states are no exception to it. From the beginning Pakistan has taken a defiant posture and it appears in retrospect that she did remarkably well in pursuing her own independent policies. Although distinct disadvantage (in terms of economic and military capabilities as well as geographical location) on the part of other neighbouring countries do not allow them to assert their independence in the same way, a new articulation in their posture to seek a greater balance is clearly evident in recent time. Later we shall refer to some such instances in this paper. In the meantime reference, may however be made to the events in Sri Lanka which is significant in this context. A recently concluded peace accord in Sri Lanka has brought a Sinhala—Tamil schism seemingly to an end. But more than that it appears to have brought to an end a small neighbour's assertion of its independence. Viewed in the backdrop of the long history of Sri Lanka's ethnic problem, its government's policy pronouncements from time to time as well as the violence and uncertainties surrounding the accord there is a great deal of scepticism as to how productive will this accord be in the long run.

### **Ethno-Religious Conflicts**

The region is a queer amalgam of people and faiths. A bitter division on the basis of religion, race, language, caste and ethnic group make it a 'fertile ground for conflicts'.<sup>10</sup> An ethno-religious divide and its cross border implication is another major problem in South Asia. Although this is a part of the greater problem of national integration in post-colonial nation building process in most Third World countries where a complete ethno-religious assimilation is still

10. *Newsweek*, 24 August 1987, p. 16.

awaited, this problem has long been source of instabilities in the region.

"Ethnically South Asia is one of the great melting pots of the world and its racial diversity perhaps the most complex to be found anywhere outside Africa".<sup>11</sup> There are six main religions, viz. Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism and Jainism, hundreds of languages (including local dialects) and scores of ethnical groups subdivided into countless ethnical tribes. Rarely is there a region with such a great diversity in religion, language and ethnicity. All religious, linguistic and ethnic loyalties run deep and religion played great role in shaping the nation state system in the region while political boundaries of most of the state/provinces follow linguistic (as in India) and ethnical boundaries (as in Pakistan). In many cases the ethnic bondage has transcended national boundaries and as a result ethnic problem in one country has created instant repercussion in another. And in some cases ethno-religious problem has been connived or abetted from across the border with political motive.

In South Asia the earliest known ethnic problem was that in the strategic North East of India. The ethnic tribes of North East India who are in fact the last surviving aboriginal inhabitants of India comprising mainly of Khasis, the Mizos, the Garokuki, Meithei and Nagas apart from numerous other tribes of Arunachal. Best known of them are the educated Nagas who have since been demanding total independence from India. Precise reason for protracted upheaval in the area is difficult to be pinpointed. But it can be largely attributed to the societal transition of the primitive tribes suddenly awakened to twentieth century ideas, technologies and way of life after a long period of negligence and sufferings. "While in Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur the ethnic discontent is openly recessionist at other places it is inexorably taking a separatist hue."<sup>12</sup> Although the

11. *Encyclopaedia of the Third World*, Revised Edition, Vol. II, Mansell Publishing Limited, London, 1982, p. 779.

12. V.I.K. Sarin, *India's North-East in Flames*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980, New Delhi, pp. 1-2.

central Government of India after protracted direct rule settled the ethnic problem in the North East by creating autonomous state on the basis of ethnical identity the grievances persist and an uneasy peace often disturbed by sporadic insurgency prevails in the entire region. Any turmoil in isolated strategic seven states of the North East has the potentialities of great power involvement engulfing neighbouring countries in the region in any future conflagration. The ethnic problem of Nepalese Gorkha demanding 'Gorkhaland' in the strategic southern approaches to Himalayas is yet another complex issue capable of having repercussion in its neighbouring areas.

In Pakistan restive minority ethnic groups i. e. Baluch, Sindhis and Pushtuns make it constantly live under the shadow of a possible Balkanisation. As against overwhelmingly majority Punjabi ethnic group all these minority groups making up only 42 percent of Pakistan's population but occupying 72 percent of the country's land desperately look "to Moscow or New Delhi or both to rescue them from Punjabi domination."<sup>13</sup> Any response or help from outside the region is sure to be engulfed in a big conflagration. As a democratic polity is yet to shape up in Pakistan, there are few alternative to get ethnical grievances redressed. On the contrary, Government policies "are inadvertently promoting the growth of separatist movements that could carve up Pakistan into four independent states".<sup>14</sup> The most significant separatist challenge to Islamabad is in strategically located Baluchistan which stretches across West Pakistan, eastern Iran Southern Afghanistan. The Baluch homeland commands more than 900 miles of Arabian sea coastline including the northern shores of the Strait of Hormuz. A Soviet temptation to intervene looms large although such possibility may look distant in view of present Soviet imbroglio in Afghanistan.

Problem of Sri Lanka is a classical example of ethnic conflict with deeper and wider implications. The crisis took serious turn at one time

13. Selig S. Harrison, "Fanning Flames in South Asia", *Foreign Policy*, No. 45, Winter 1981-82, pp. 84-85.

14. *ibid*, p. 85.

and it brought the process of regionalism in South Asia almost to a standstill. Although a politico-strategic divide already set in between India and Sri Lanka particularly after UNP Government siezed power in Colombo in 1977 it was the ethnic violence of 1983 and subsequent developments with its serious cross-border implication that made the relations between both the countries highly acrimonious. While the dissident Tamils openly received support from India's Tamil Nadu state—the home of 50 million Tamils—the Indian Government had a serious stake in the issue because of domestic political compulsion, heavy financial drainage for the swelling refugees and more importantly India's security concern emanating mainly from Sri Lankan security posture in terms of bringing in external elements. Although a peace accord has recently been signed between India and Sri Lanka, in four years' violent clashes 6000 Sri Lankas were killed apart from serious set-back for Sri Lanka in all spheres of national life. Then again how and how long the accord will last in view of continuing undercurrent of Sinhala-Tamil schism is a question difficult to be answered just now.

Much more disturbing is, however, the spectre of communal violence that has escalated afresh in recent time. Almost all the countries of the region are multi-religious and each has religious minority—big or small. Although there are deliberate or inadvertant discrimination against some minority community in some of the countries,

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violences victimising the minorities is a phenomenon almost unknown outside India and Pakistan. Even in Pakistan after the great killings of Punjab in 1947 there has rarely been communal violences except some sporadic incidences only in retaliation of violences in

India. Again such retaliation was confined only to its eastern wing in those days. There seems to prevail a total tranquil on communal front in Bangladesh and other smaller nations in the region. It is, however, in India that the communal violences are regular feature of the national life. Since independence rarely a year passed without some serious violences taking place in India. So whenever we talk of the problem of communal violence today it invariably refers to violences taking place in India and their emotional repercussion among the compatriots across the border and consequent bitterness. Religion plays a very significant role in South Asian politics. The Subcontinent had to be partitioned on the basis of religion with India becoming pre-dominantly Hindu and Pakistan and subsequently, Bangladesh, predominantly Muslim countries.<sup>15</sup> The cross-currents of religious sentiments among these countries are important factor in determining peace, harmony and stability in the region.

Although the intensity of these violences as seen in immediate post-partition period gradually waned and some accommodation was shown for minorities' aspiration and sentiment, the trend seems to have reversed in recent days. Religious conflicts are gaining strength in almost every faith, pitting Hindu against Muslim, Sikh against Hindu. 'While in all of 1960 the country recorded only a score of violent communal clashes, this year (1987) there has been an average of one every day. In Punjab alone 700 people have been killed since January. In May at least 150 Muslims died in clashes with Hindus in Uttar Pradesh.'<sup>15</sup> Alarming is the fact that much of the blame for resurgence of Indian communalism lies right at the top. It is evident in the creation of Sikh militant faction by the ruling party itself with a view to dividing the Sikh political structure in the seventies. It is nothing more than political expediency when Muslim community is wooed only to be used as a vote bank.

The Hindū-Sikh conflict has set in a chain of events that is likely to go on indefinitely. 'Khalistan'—the product of this conflict—

15. *Newsweek*, 24 August 87 p. 17.

has its fallout not only in India, its implication stretches across the border vitiating Indo-Pakistan relation. While India's Hindu majority is stiff not to yield to Sikh's demand for any sort of 'homeland' (fearing that such concession would only encourage other ethnic or religious minority group for similar demand) Sikhs are determined to drive out all Hindus from Punjab. A recalcitrant Sikh community forming only 2 percent of India's population has given the worst jolt to India's federalism. It is both interesting and significant that they could do it while enjoying much more privilege than any average Indian and having virtually nothing favourable for their secessionist design.

A large Muslim community forming 15 percent of India's total population remained in India as a result of the expediencies of the partition. They also happen to be the largest Muslim minority community in the world. Indian Muslims are thus conspicuous enough a target constantly envied and victimised by Hindu majority. They live in constant fear and uncertainties because of growing Hindu chauvinism. This year India saw some of the worst Hindu-Muslim communal riots since independence in which mostly the Muslims were killed. Most alarming aspect of this riots is the participation of law enforcing agencies in killing the Muslims. It is reported that scores of Muslims in Meerut were cold bloodedly executed by Hindu members of the Provincial Armed constabulary.<sup>16</sup>

"With 620m Hindus and 100m Muslims living together cheek and Jowl across the country, their historical animosity presents a far greater potential threat"<sup>17</sup> than the regional challenge posed by Sikh extremists. Awakened by India's growing wealth and influenced by Islamic resurgence all over the world, Muslims are becoming increasingly vocal in their demands for an end to decades of discrimination. This new assertion vis-a-vis growing Hindu chauvinism may bring both the communities in a deadlier confrontation in the days to come. And how will that be reacted by religious compatriots

16. *ibid*, p. 19

of the other countries in the region as well as world at large is a question difficult to be ignored.

### **Bilateral Issues**

Indeed South Asia continues to be bedevilled by a host of outstanding bilateral issues of both retrospective and prospective nature. The issues are obviously between India and most of the other countries in the region. Most of the bilateral issues are chronic in nature and remain unresolved for a long time. And with passage of time new complications are added making them more difficult to be resolved. In turn, they increase acrimony in relation, vitiate environ and the tension persists.

Indo-Pakistani relations continue to pose the gravest threat to peace and stability in South Asia. The major issues that led to the armed conflict between these countries thrice before still remain unresolved with the Kashmir problem remaining the central one. The issue drags on for four decades with no resolution of the question of self-determination of the people of Kashmir. Other irritants include the issue of US arms supply to Pakistan and the latter's alleged involvement in the Punjab crisis. The nuclear debate has added a new dimension to Indo-Pakistan dispute. In recent times there are distinct efforts on both sides to resolve conflict and avert crisis situation. The two countries however, remain as apprehensive and suspicious to each other as ever. Even today "an influential section of Pakistan perceive the conduct of India vis-a-vis its neighbours as aggressive and expansionist",<sup>17</sup> likewise the Indians find Pakistan's nuclear programme unfriendly and military build-up redundant. Simultaneously, goes on desperate arms race in the region. India builds up her forces with Soviet assistance and USA supplies most of Pakistan's sophisticated armaments. The arsenal thus built up might one day ignite a confrontation in the area and trigger off a chain reaction 'engulfing in its flame' much of South Asia.<sup>18</sup>

17. *ibid*, p. 20.

18. Pran Chopra, *et al.* *Future of South Asia* (Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd. 1986), p. 100.

Comparatively minor but persistently irritating discords on account of boundary, sharing of common resources, apprehension over political hegemony and economic domination and the like, have continued to exist between India on the one hand and its smaller neighbours on the other. Although Bangladesh's problems with India do not create sensation they are complicated and have potentials of escalation if left unresolved for long. Most serious of the bilateral problems between Bangladesh and India was one on constructing of Farakka Barrage by which India had already done an "irreparable damage" to life and economy of Bangladesh. Negotiation started on sharing of Ganges water after the barrage was commissioned in early 1975 and until now no *modus vivendi* has been found. The critical issues on the Ganges which has been eluding a solution for more than three decades ironically remains where they were was before. Since Indians have a leverage by being upper riparian, they obviously want solution on their own terms in water sharing agreement. As the stalemate goes on Bangladesh heads for second Farakka at 'Gazaldoba' in Jalpaiguri as India has almost completed a dam which would divert Tista river water from upstream.

The land border agreement of 1974 remains major irritant because after 13 years of agreement it is yet to be ratified by India. India was to provide Tinbigha corridor to a Bangladesh enclave. The terms of the lease agreement on Tinbigha although finalised remains unimplemented on this or that ground. South Talpatty remains another unresolved problem. Bangladesh has been keen on achieving progress on the delineation of the maritime boundary including the sovereignty of South Talpatty but India remains passive on solving the dispute.

Nepal's problem with India essentially centres round a strong Nepalese desire "for the projection of Nepal's independent identity". Weary of the treaty obligations with India in early fifties e.g. strong Indian influence in the internal politics of Nepal, the King Mahendra started asserting Nepal's independence by staging a 'royal

coup' in which he dismissed pro-Indian Koirala ministry. Ever since then, the Nepalese monarchy assiduously maintained Nepalese independence of actions (as was reflected in her signing a friendship treaty with China and concluding also a boundary agreement with her) and Nepal began gradually to move out from under Indian's domination in foreign relations. That portends a phase of misunderstanding and bitterness between the two countries. Nepal remains suspicious because of its overwhelming dependence on trade and transit with India. India also is constantly worried of Nepal's tilt towards China while Nepal does not like that Nepalese political activists receive supports from India. Nepal's dismay of India is also due to India's non-acceptance of Nepal's declaration making it a 'Zone of Peace'.

Bhutan's primary problem still both internally or externally is one of "establishing its own personality as a nation". Bhutan's relation with India is threatened by the cross-country implications of the conditions of Bhutias living in Sikkim and parts of Northern Bengal<sup>19</sup>. Though India's relationship with Bhutan is comparatively harmonious, yet beneath the surface there exists a deep discontent of Bhutan's desire to revise some of the treaty obligations imposed in 1949 and its keenness to diversify its trade and foreign relations. Moreover, both Nepal and Bhutan—the two landlocked countries of South Asia are keen to have access to sea through multilateral approaches partly to escape from deep dependence on India. In addition, there exists a strong lobby in Bhutan which prefers a Nepal pattern equidistance or balancing India vs China to derive maximum leverage. Though in a low key way it also supports Nepal's Zone of Peace. These growing divergences may one day bring Bhutan in clash with Indian interests adding to the existing tension in the region.

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19. S.D. Muni, "Building Regionalism from Below", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, No. 4 p. 392.

### Socio-economic Dimension

In the confrontational mood of South Asian politics the socio-economic dimension of the problem has often been lost sight of. While debating on South Asia's problem we talked almost of everything from that of asymmetry syndrome to possible nuclear proliferation with the region's stark poverty rarely figuring in our concern for a South Asian destiny.

South Asia inhabiting one-fifth of the humanity is the poorest belt of the world. The region covers only 3.3% of the world's land area and has less than 1% of the world's natural resources. "The region's poverty in natural resources partly explains why its per capita GNP was less than eleventh of the world's average (US \$ 1650) in 1976 ... The region's future prospects for development are severely constrained by this poverty". The problem is compounded by a high rate of population growth and chronic food deficiencies in most of the countries. Also present are other indicators of backwardness like low literacy level (with a few exception) and the unskilled labour force. Added to these are pervasive disease, malnutrition and hunger with a large number of people living below the poverty line. To make things worse, some countries in the region are disaster prone with cyclonic storm, floods and droughts visiting them frequently. Then there is a terrible discrepancy in resource endowments of the countries making it difficult to have a uniform development and progress of the region as a whole. India possesses virtually 100% of the total mineral resources of the region, while Pakistan is relatively better endowed with land resources with 9.3% of population of the region living in 19% of the its land area. Resource endowments of the rest of the countries are just negligible. Although India tops the list in the region in respect of natural resources it "does not appear to be better than other countries at the present" in terms of per capita resource base. Also in absolute terms India's resource is not really very significant. An unequal distribution of wealth in prevailing socio-economic structure also does not allow the optimum utilization of available meagre resource to the benefit of the masses of the region.

This bleak picture on the socio-economic front is one that squarely affects the masses of the region. In the ultimate analysis the aim of any national efforts should be to provide its people a better quality of life. After four decades of nation states coming into being in South Asia little has been achieved to that effect. The region did not keep pace with progress achieved elsewhere in the world. Little has been realised that underdevelopment breeds chain of problems domestically and between the nations leading to continuing insecurity. Instead of much needed developmental programme nations remained obsessed with military build-up disproportionate to their efforts in other sectors of nation-state building.

#### **PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION—THE SAARC CONTEXT**

The problems I have attempted to present are nothing new. They existed earlier. They exist even today. In spite of these problems SAARC has come into being. The debate about SAARC's future prospects started much before the SAARC was formally launched. While initiatives were underway to develop a process of cooperation in South Asia, the sceptics raised doubts about its feasibility bringing in the questions of the primacy of political factors in such a venture as well as prevailing asymmetry syndrome. They also raised the questions of political disharmony and lack of strategic consensus — two serious impediments for regional cooperation. Even for purely socio-economic cooperation questions were raised about imbalance in social progress, present state of trade and bleak possibility of its expansion. There were also genuine apprehensions among some as to its 'real' motive and purpose. Following hectic exploratory process spanning over more than half a decade, happily at long last much of the haze disappeared and realisation grew that it was an initiative really worth trying. The realisation was later translated into the reality of SAARC coming into being. What else could have happened in South Asia ? After a protracted confrontation, hostility and acrimony what else alternative could be found for South Asia — languishing in poverty, hunger and backwardness for ages ? Choice was between

continuing confrontation and possible cooperation. In post-war world cooperation has become the way of life. Many nations hostile to each other have today settled down to mutually beneficial regional cooperation. No wonder that South Asia—henceforth only a geographical expression—also now goes to develop regional cooperation of its own.

In South Asia the differences between the nations have frequently been highlighted. Although such differences do exist we must not close our eye to enormous commonalities. Almost a contiguous landmass inhabiting a billion population presents a milieu ideally set for cooperation. All member states of the SAARC are developing countries with all accompanying traumas of the process of nation state building. We have common geography, traditions, shared history, common cultural crosscurrent and socio-economic interaction. We have striking similarity in our views, values and attitudes. Our scarcity and poverty are also common. The countries in the region have compatible perception of world issues. They do

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*South Asia does have a common threat which should bring the regional countries together so that the common enemy of underdevelopment can be effectively fought in a concerted manner.*

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have their exclusive view "towards the global correlation of forces but they all have been members of the Nonaligned Movement and are committed to the UN Resolution on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of peace". All seven countries of the region (unlike ASEAN where only 6 nations out of 11 participated in the cooperation) have become members of the SAARC. All of them favour an equitable world economic order and share similar views on North-South cooperation. Above all, South Asia has been the cradle of great civilisations which is a common heritage for all living in the region. Seen in this backdrop, South Asian regional cooperation holds great promise for success.

It is often argued that the countries forming regional cooperation must have a common threat perception binding them together

to face a common enemy. The examples of EEC and GCC have often been quoted to substantiate the argument. In the context of developed countries like those in EEC to perceive a common threat from an external source like Soviet bloc fits well in security doctrine prevalent in developed world. But in the developing countries where most of the insecurities emanate from within, the chronic underdevelopment of these countries can be looked upon as common source of threat. In fact, the whole spectrum of our underdevelopment i.e., poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, domestic instability, ethnic violence etc. are all elements of insecurities, but they do not ironically enjoy required priority in our security and strategic concern. Viewed in this perspective, South Asia does have a common threat which should bring the regional countries together so that the common enemy of underdevelopment can be effectively fought in a concerted manner. In addition, the physical presence of Soviets in Afghanistan, a country adjoining a physically homogenous South Asia points towards a source of common concern, anxiety and even security threat.

The SAARC objectives are not confined to economic cooperation alone. They also focus on promoting and strengthening "collective self-reliance and contributing to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problem" among the countries of the region. It implies that the broad objectives of the SAARC does not preclude cooperation in the politico-strategic field at a later stage. The present scope of cooperation although limited should pave the way for broader understanding and consequently cooperation in expanded fields at a future time. In fact the emergence of a unified stand on some of the international issues is a major pre-requisite for evolving a comprehensive regional programme for cooperation.

Distance breeds suspicion. Much of the misunderstandings are removed when hostile parties have a chance of meeting face to face. Earlier no mechanism was available to close the distance and as such rarely was there any opportunity to avoid misapprehension. The SAARC has provided that vital mechanism. The hectic SAARC process provided numerous occasions for wide interaction

both for officials and academics. As this interaction goes on there is enough scope of building confidence, averting crisis and creating congenial environ for cooperation. Some positive signs can be seen from the fact that degree and level of interaction between academics of various countries has substantially increased. That the academics of regional states have been able to meet and discuss various facets of our problems including sensitive security matters is an indication of breaking the barrier—at least psychological. Informally, the SAARC meetings have provided occasions for the member countries to sort out bilateral political matters. The Indo-Pak Foreign Ministers' dialogue that continued from Pakistan to Male in July 1984 even aboard the aircraft is a typical example. There are small but significant steps towards the resolution of contentious bilateral issues. And SAARC without getting directly involved is facilitating such steps. "SAARC has the potential to cast its long shadow on the contentious bilateral issues of the region even without getting involved in them. If this potential grows SAARC may acquire a politico-strategic dimension while continuing its forge and consolidate infrastructural and cooperative linkage in various fuctional areas".<sup>20</sup>

That SAARC has made a beginning in strife-torn South Asia is in itself a great achievement and a source enough for optimism. It has promise if India can help the process by resolving bilateral issues and

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steering it to a sense of common political purpose. If Pakistan, India and Bangladesh succeed in achieving a breakthrough in their relationship it would mean immense benefit for people of the Subcontinent. And it is India which stands to gain or lose the most,

20. *ibid.*, p. 404.

because the common benefit that it will accrue will be shared largest by the people of India and vice versa. For this "first and last, the challenge is for India to find the alchemy of trust with its small and sensitive neighbours"<sup>21</sup> to whom she should be a source of strength, not anxiety. While the SAARC is a reality today, the entire region is anxiously awaiting the moment when an 'alchemy' of trust will be found and a stagnant SAARC will reach a point of breakthrough.

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21. Jagat S. Mehta, "Towards Regional priorities".