RESEARCH NOTES

Sheikh Abdus Salam

INFORMATISATION : THE SAARC SCENARIO

To Wilbur Schramm, mass media in any country can facilitate development as a 'great multiplier'. Media and for that matter, other forms of communications can thus help countries to reach the point of self-sustaining stage of development[1]. Apart from development' point of view, the role of mass media is nowadays being perceived from other dimensions too. Those dimensions are: people, infrastructure and economy. A renowned author, ECY Kuo, had combined those dimensions and termed them as 'informatization'[2]. To be informatised, a nation must have some attributes like literacy, a better educated people, mass media use, a higher propensity to introduce and use telecommunications and achieve competence to apply computer technology. This article is aimed at analyzing the general level and recent trend of technological development among the SAARC countries and thereafter, assessing the economic prospect and compare the countries as potential hubs in the information superhighway against the background of their infrastructure development.

Sheikh Abdus Salam, Ph.D., is Director General, Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB), Dhaka.

Nowadays both developmentalists and communicologists are arguing that the developing countries have no option but to enter the information superhighway to compete the 'material global' economy. Many of the countries of the world today are working for building an integrated information society. The emergence of the information society has been reflected by a variety of profound transformations. With the introduction and use of information technology (IT) and networks becoming widespread, the computerisation of the advanced society is now a reality concretely reflecting the concept of the 'information society'. The digitisation of information, the computerisation of production and information exchange methods over the world, the growth in percentage of many countries' wealth represented by material goods and the development of new networks, such as the Internet, have serious consequences for their economy and also for the lives of the people. Marked by increasingly rapid technological development, the IT revolution is being accompanied by an internationalisation of information flows in which the new multimedia networks know no boundaries. Today, we see government initiatives to prepare their entry into the information society. Countries like France have identified some areas of concern to this end. They are : - (1) New information and communications technology tools in the education sector; (2) An ambitious cultural policy for new networks; (3) Information technology as a tool for modernising public services; (4) Information technology, an essential tool for companies; (5) Meeting the challenges of industrial and technology innovation; and (6) Encouraging the emergence of effective regulation and a protective framework for new information networks[4]. Countries like Singapore and Malaysia have now become the capitals of Southeast Asia in respect of information technologies. The ASEAN countries are sharing this benefit mutually and are almost ready to enter the information superhighway corridor within a very short time. The

countries without this technological blessings and information links cannot effectively participate even in the running of their state affairs. Bangladesh in particular and other SAARC countries in general are lagging far behind in operationalising new technologies, and thus remain poor in every sector of economic, political, social, organizational and administrational spheres. In respect to many other countries of the world we are still remaining without entering into the race of commercialization, privatization, deregulation and internationalization. SAARC as the seed of cooperation and advancement among the member countries, can address the issue in a proper manner. Before we go into that discussion, let us first be introduced with some indicators of the media *vis-a-vis* communication scenario of the countries in this region.

A number of authors have offered a few dimensional models to measure the process and level of inforamatisation by identifying relevant indicators. Those dimensions are: people, infrastructure (mass media, telecommunications, computerization) and economy[3]. Let us now present those dimensions with indicators (data) prevailing in SAARC countries.

Table 1 presents the basic demographic and economic indicators for SAARC countries. It appears that the real growth (GDP) varies from country to country with significant margin. In respect to GDP i.e. real growth it ranges between 2.3 to 6.6 per cent. The general literacy indicator supports some countries' real strength (Sri Lanka and Maldives) and, but also shows the weakness of others (Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh).

Table 2 provides us with the picture related to infrastructure dimension of mass media in SAARC countries. These are also relevant in determining each country's general mass media penetration.

Table 1 : Basic Demographic, Economic and Literacy indicators

(For people dimension)

Selected Indicatos → Country ↓	Total area in sq. km ('000)	Population in millions mid-1996 (est.)	Urban population (per cent)	GDP 1995 in $ billions (Purchasing Power Parity)	GDP 1995 per capita income $(PPP)	GNP 1996 per capita income $	GDP : real growth	General Literacy Per cent of those aged 15 and above
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Bangladesh	144	123.06	17.7	145.5	1,130	340	4.6	38.1
Bhutan	47	1.82	6.2	1.3	730	415	6.0	42.2
India	3,287.6	952.11	26.5	1,408.7	1,500	335	5.5	52.0
Maldives	0.3	0.27	26.6	0.39	1,560	900	6.6	93.2
Nepal	140.8	22.09	13.1	25.2	1,200	200	2.3	27.2
Pakistan	803.9	129.27	34.1	274.2	2,100	465	4.7	37.8
Sri Lanka	65.6	18.55	22.1	65.6	3,600	660	5.0	90.2

Source : Gunaratne S.A; Satar Hasim, M and Kasenally, R. "Small is Beautiful: Information Potential of Three Indian Ocean Rim Countries" in *Media Asia,* Vol. 24, No. 4, AMIC, Singapore 1997. PP. 188-205.

Table 2 : Daily Newspaper Circulation, Radio and Television

Density in SAARC countries] (Infrastructure dimension - Media)

Media → Country ↓	DAILY NEWSPAPER Circulation per 100 people				RADIO Receiver per 100 people				TELEVISION Receiver per 100 people			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	1980	1985	1990	1992	1980	1985	1990	1993	1980	1985	1990	1995
Bangladesh	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.7	4.1	4.5	4.7	.09	.26	.49	0.7
Bhutan	-	-	-	-	0.6	1.3	1.6	1.7	-	-	-	-
India	2.1	2.6	3.1	3.1	3.8	6.5	7.9	8.0	.44	1.3	3.2	6.1
Maldives	0.6	0.8	1.2	1.8	4.4	10.3	11.6	11.8	0.7	1.7	2.4	4.0
Nepal	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7	2.0	2.7	3.4	3.5	-	.12	.18	0.3
Pakistan	1.2	1.1	1.5	0.6	6.4	8.3	8.7	9.1	1.1	1.3	1.6	2.2
Sri Lanka	3.0	2.4	3.2	5.7	9.8	15.8	19.7	20.1	2.4	2.8	3.5	6.6

Source : as in Table 1.

In daily newspaper circulation per 100 people, Sri Lanka leads the SAARC countries (5.7) even though it is far behind the minimum standard (10.00) set by the Unesco in 1962. In the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal the figures are very low.

Regarding radio penetration (i.e. receivers number per 100 people) Sri Lanka again tops the list (20.1 per 100 people) followed by Maldives (11.8). The other SAARC members are not even in a position to reach the double digit figure. The Unesco standard is 5 radio receivers per 100 persons. Regarding television, the SAARC countries are well below the world average (22.8 per 100 person). In this case, Bangladesh and Nepal even do not reach 1 per 100 persons.

Table 3 gives us the picture about telecommunications dimension of informatisation. Telephone density i.e., the main telephone lines per 100 people is an important indicator of informatisaiton. The telephone lines average for Asia is 5.38 per 100 people and for the world is 12.4 per 100 people. As shown in Table 3 all the SAARC countries except Maldives are well below the average for Asia. It is observed from the table that India and Pakistan have crossed Sri Lanka in this respect. The current projections show that by the year 2000 Maldives, Pakistan and India will substantially increase their lead over Sri Lanka.

Cellular telephone density and radio paging density have emerged very vital indicator of the infrastructure dimension. Table 3 shows that the data for international outgoing telephone traffic (minutes per person) - another indicator of informatisaiton - do not give any good picture for the SAARC countries (except Maldives).

Computerisation is a closely related indicator of informatisation. Telecommunication and computerisation have a mutually causal relationship with country is economic development. Table 4 gives us

Table 3 : (Infrastructure dimension - Telecoms.)

[Telecommunications Scenario and Their

Projections for the year 2000 of SAARC Countries]

Telecom dimension → Country ↓	Telephone Penetration Rate and its Projections for year 2000				Cellular, paging and International Telephone Traffic		
	No. per 100 People 2000	Projected No. per 100 People 2000	Estimated investment 1996-2000 US$ (mil.)	Estimated per year investment US$(mil.)	Cellular telephones per 100 people	Radio paging per 100 people	International outgoing tel. traffic (minutes per person) 1995
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bangladesh	0.24	0.26	80	16	-	-	0.2
Bhutan	0.62	0.73	14	3	-	-	0.5
India	1.29	2.78	24,441	4,888	0.01	0.02	0.3
Maldives	5.67	11.13	25	5	0	0.37	12.6
Nepal	0.36	0.61	103	21	-	-	0.6
Pakistan	1.64	3.62	4,856	971	0.03	-	0.5
Sri Lanka	1.11	1.81	209	42	0.33	0.12	1.5

Source : as in Table 1.

Table 4 (Infrastructure dimension - Computer/Internet)

[Indicators of Computerization: Penetration of

PCs and Internet in SAARC Countries.]

Computer/Inter-net Indicator / Country → ↓	Estimated personal computers				Internet	
	Total ('000)	No. per 100 people	Total No. of hosts	Hosts per million people	Total estimated users	Users per million people
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	1995	1995	1995	1995	1995	1995
Bangladesh	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bhutan	-	-	-	-	-	-
India	1,200	0.13	788	0.85	10,000	10.76
Maldives	3	1.23	-	-	-	-
Nepal	-	-	19	0.87	185	8.44
Pakistan	155	0.12	17	0.13	160	1.23
Sri Lanka	20	0.11	6	0.33	60	3.27

Source : as in Table 1.

the estimated number of computer as well as computer & internet density, i.e. computer per 100 people for the SAARC countries. The world average for this is 4.23 and for the Asia is 1.23. It is to be mentioned that the information technologies like telecommunications (telephone, cellular, paging, telex, international telephone traffic etc.) and computerisation linked with electronic media are the main feature of the present day digital age. TV and the computers are in the process of merging now. This has indeed turned the concept of 'global village' into 'global family'. This indicator thereby carries a special significance in measuring informatisation i.e. quality of people, level of information technology and their penetration as well as economy. In comparison to other parts of the world the SAARC countries' achievement for these is not that mentionable.

Regarding economy dimension it is to be observed that the data on information economy, i.e. share of primary information workers (percentage of information workforce in the total labour force) is not easily available. Inspite of the absence of economic scene, the people and the infrastructure dimensions provide a sufficient profile of the degree of informatisation in these countries. It is found that as the highest scorer on literacy Sri Lanka can become the winner to formulate an information society vision. Maldives, Pakistan and India despite the latter two's weakness on people dimension can beat Sri Lanka in telecommunications front by the year 2000. Bangladesh and Nepal can follow them too. We have seen that some countries with 'fertile sport' (As for example - Banglore in India) is leapfroging into 'cyberspatial heights' in the global information society. 'Cyberjaya' another 'fertile spot' in Malaysia is an exciting example, which has a vision of informatising the nation by 2020 through its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). The SAARC countries can think together to work on joint 'fertile region' to

become the information gateway to Asia at the turn of this century. They can thus generate multiplier effect in the process of economic development throughout this region.

Today we are just living in a new communications environment which is called digital age. In this new environment of technological hybridization the issues, ideas, elements and the sharing are mixed and overlapped among the nations so largely that we can't keep ourselves isolated except as labels of identification. Any innovation that happens in America today cross U.S borders faster than the physical movement of the innovator himself. On the other day I had a sharing with a British. He was from Northern Ireland. While discussing media and other socio-political issues of our two countries he was found to be so influenced and so impressed about the Peace Treaty in CHT of Bangladesh which he saw on the TV screen in his own house. It was possible because of the information technologies. He described his feelings in the way - 'When I saw the telecast of surrendering of arms in exchange of white roses by the CHT rebels it stroke me so profoundly that at the moment I thought could this scenario be happened in our parts of land? Very recently, of course, it has happened in Ireland too. So, it is media *vis-à-vis* communications that can sensitize and mould peoples' mind even for such a peace searching mission. Informatisation that deals with people, communication infrastructure and economy has to be looked at technically, structurally, politically, economically, ideologically and socioculturally[5]. No single nation can remain isolated or advance independently in today's word environment. It is known to us that the technology is science. If technology is science, then the ability to predict the future of technology is an art. Like all art, it often raises more questions than it answers[6]. This is the time to think, then raise the question and find the answer - how can we the people of SAARC countries participate in designing and using new

technologies which addressing the issues surrounding the world today? To this end it is time to join our hands together to face the challenges of communication technologies and thus accrue their blessings. SAARC emerged with the spirit of cooperation - now SAARC should go with infusing and expanding this spirit for the search of peace and advancement through adopting information technologies during these days of new communication environment.

References :

1. Schramm, W "The Role of Information in National Development" in *Mass Media and National Development* Stanford University Press, California and the Unesco, Paris 1964. PP 20-57.

2. Kuo, E.C.Y. "Informatization among Asian NIES : A comparative Study" in A Goonasekera & D. Holaday (Eds.), *Asian Communication Handbook*, AMIC, Singapore, 1993. PP. 319-332.

3. Gunaratne S.A;Satar Hasim, M and Kasenally, R. "Small is Beautiful: Information Potential of Three Indian Ocean Rim Countries" in *Media* Asia, Vol. 24, No. 4, AMIC, Singapore 1997. PP. 188-205.

4. A report - Preparing France's entry into the information society. Government action programme 1998.

5. Raboy, M. "Rountalbe : Where Does the Future of Broadcasting Lie in the Digital Age?" in *Media* Asia Vol. 24, No. 2, AMIC, Singapore 1997. P 90.

6. Address by George Conrades, delivered to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, 1998 Network Operations and Management Symposium, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 19, 1998.