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SOCIO-CULTURAL VISION OF SAARC IN THE THIRD DECADE

Abstract

SAARC has recently entered its third decade. On the eve of the third decade there are new imperatives in socio-cultural areas for combating social problems in the region. The Social Charter signed in the 12th SAARC Summit must be fully linked with the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Some major institutional reforms within SAARC are essential for attaining the socio-cultural development goals. Suggestion for a Summit Group comprising of the current, outgoing and the forthcoming chairs of SAARC to ensure implementation of the Summit decisions may be made in this context. Secondly, status, function and power of Secretary General should be raised to that of Minister and the position should have adequate flexibility to take initiatives aimed at enhancing regional cooperation and resource mobilisation for SAARC programmes. Thirdly, highly professional experts should

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be appointed in the Secretariat from within the region to give it a truly regional character and enhance its institutional capacity.

Two decades ago the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was launched on 8th December, 1985. The initiative to promote regional cooperation was based on the vision of late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh. It is a happy coincidence that Bangladesh would be hosting the 13th SAARC Summit at Dhaka in January 2005 under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. On the eve of the third decade, it is befitting to wish Prime Minister Khaleda Zia every success in giving clear and concrete shape to the vision of her late husband.

SAARC was based on the consciousness that in an increasingly interdependent world the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in South Asia by fostering mutual understanding; good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among the seven member States which are bound by ties of history and culture. Thus the principal objectives of the Association were derived from this fundamental premise. These objectives were to promote the welfare of over one billion peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through accelerated economic growth, social and cultural development in the region. The SAARC Charter acknowledges the bonds of history and culture among the nations of South Asia. This provides a basic framework that is inherent to common civilizational consciousness of the South Asian people.

As is well known, the concept of regional cooperation was initially received with scepticism. Lack of mutual confidence and intraregional rivalry directly influenced the slow and cautious evolution of the concept of regionalism in South Asia. In its first

decade of existence, SAARC mainly concentrated on cooperation in agreed technical areas such as agriculture and rural development communication and transport, meteorology and forestry etc. The Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) provided the overall framework of activities that would yield tangible benefits to the people of South Asia.

It was in the second decade that socio-cultural cooperation was given the proper and action oriented priority. It was asserted that improving the quality of life of the peoples of South Asia warranted equal priority for social development in the region. It must proceed side by side with purely economic cooperation. This was based on the realization that the social problems of the SAARC region remained the most formidable both in terms of number and their intensity.

Group of Eminent Persons (GEP)

The Ninth SAARC Summit at Male mandated the Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) to undertake a comprehensive appraisal of SAARC and to identify measures including mechanisms to further vitalize and enhance the effectiveness of the Association in achieving its objectives. The GEP was further mandated to define a long term vision of SAARC in 2000 and beyond. The socio-cultural dimension which had not received due attention was duly emphasized for the first time by the GEP. It cautioned that SAARC will face enormous challenges in the 21st Century due to rapid population growth. The population of SAARC region was estimated in 1998 at about 1.3 billion. It was anticipated to rise to 2.3 billion by 2050 and by the end of the 21st Century the population was estimated to rise to 2.6 billion. The GEP stated emphatically that the key to the success of the SAARC region in reducing poverty, increasing per

capita income, decreasing pressure on natural resources controlling violence, promoting human resource development and achieving other social objectives critically depended on managing population growth. The GEP recommended concrete steps which the member states should undertake at the national and regional level to implement the crucial social objectives. In addition, the GEP highlighted the imperatives of adult literacy programmes, the universalization of primary education empowerment of women who constitute half of the SAARC population, special emphasis on the problems of children, health problems particularly to combat HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases etc.

Taking into account the multidimensional facets of the social and cultural cooperation, the GEP stressed the need for preparing a Social Charter for SAARC highlighting the broad objectives of the social and cultural agenda. The GEP noted that little attention has been paid so far in the SAARC discourse to the important and complex realm of culture. The societies of South Asia have produced some of the world's richest and most distinctive cultures, many of them of great antiquity and depth. SAARC must pay serious attention to maintaining and enriching the diversity and distinctiveness of the cultures of South Asia, not only in terms of preservation and protection of tradition and heritage but also in the historic process of contemporary cultural development and change.

The GEP report stimulated discussions at the Tenth SAARC Summit in Colombo in 1998 which reaffirmed the need to develop, beyond, national plans of action a regional dimension in the social and cultural sector. It was thus a natural development that the Eleventh SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in January 2002 directed that a SAARC Social Charter be concluded as early as possible.

After preparatory meetings held mostly in Colombo the Social Charter was prepared and submitted to the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad and approved by it in January 2004.

The Social Charter and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The Social Charter is a historic document which would have a far reaching impact on the lives of millions of South Asians. Issues covered under the Social Charter such as poverty alleviation, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children are vital key to the welfare and well being of South Asians.

The Social Charter provides a clear vision in the social-cultural development of South Asia. What is required now is to translate this vision into a set of measures to implement the Social Charter.

The SAARC summits have taken important decisions since the inception of the Association. Most of these decisions have remained unfulfilled. This crucial fact is transparent in SAARC's activities in the various sectors. Often the implementation of Summit decisions have slowed down by the lack of political will and often by the vicissitudes of political climate which has contributed to a perceptible disjuncture between major summit decisions and their implementation. However, this disjuncture in no small measure also derives from the structural weaknesses in the prevailing institutions of SAARC. The performance of some of the principal SAARC institutions have suffered due to inadequate prioritization, lack of concrete regional plans and programmes, inadequate resources, ineffective follow up and monitoring of their performance.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration is a forward looking document for the new Century. Adopted in September 2000 it reflects the concern and resolute commitment of 47 Heads of States and Government and 191 nations in total who participated in this largest-ever gathering of world leaders. The leaders have set specific targets to be achieved by 2015. These targets are:-

- ❖ To halve by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water.
- ❖ To ensure that, by the same date, children every where, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levers of education.
- ❖ By the same date, to have reduced maternal mortality by the three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their current rates.
- ❖ To have, by then, halted, and begun to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the scourge of malaria and other major diseases that afflict humanity.
- ❖ To provide special assistance to children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.
- ❖ By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers as proposed in the "Cities Without Slums" initiative.

- ❖ To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulated development that is truly sustainable.
- ❖ To develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.
- ❖ To encourage the pharmaceutical industry to make essential drugs more widely available and affordable by all who need them in developing countries.
- ❖ To develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication.
- ❖ To ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, in conformity with recommendations contained in the ECOSOC 2000 Ministerial Declaration, are available to all.

The Millennium Targets underline the socio-economic imperatives and are fully in consonance with SAARC Social Charter. The SAARC Social Charter must be correlated with the UN Millennium targets to facilitate their implementation at the regional and international levels. Such a co-relationship would entitle SAARC to receive multi dimensional and sustained assistance and cooperation from the entire UN System and particularly from those UN specialized agencies dedicated to promotion of social and economic advancement of the developing countries.

Furthermore, SAARC will soon be given an Observer status at the United Nations.¹ This would enable SAARC to participate in the related sessions and meetings of the concerned UN bodies and to appraise them on a continuing basis about the progress achieved in various social and cultural sectors. More importantly the Observer status would help to mobilize sufficient funds from donor countries institutions and agencies to meet the targets set forth in the SAARC Social Charter.

The Asian Parliamentary Assembly in its session just concluded in Islamabad has approved the creation of a Poverty Alleviation fund to mobilize enhanced financial and related resources to provide sustenance to the most impoverished segments of Asian civil societies.

Institutional Reforms for Socio-cultural Development

However, SAARC member states should initiate on their own crucial institutional changes to improve the over all performance and implementation of decisions particularly those taken at the Summit level. It must be acknowledged that several decisions taken at the Summit level have remained unimplemented. Consideration may be given to establish or Summit Group to ensure the implementation of the Summit decisions. Such a group may be composed of the current Chairman, the outgoing and the incoming chairman.

The Summit Group should be assisted by the Secretary General of SAARC. The enhanced role of the Secretary General would necessitate raising the status, functions and powers of the Secretary

¹ It has been reported on 9th December 2004 that the UN General Assembly had accorded SAARC the status of an observer at the UN.

General. The status of the Secretary General should be enhanced to that of Minister and his role strengthened by providing him with flexibility to take initiatives and aimed of enhancing regional cooperation and mobilizing resources for SAARC programmes and activities from interested funding sources both from within and outside the region.

The annual cycle of SAARC Summits should be maintained and such Summits should be carefully prepared with clear focus on specific issues where decisions at the highest political level would be necessary. The Summits should be made more businesslike and functional by convening executive sessions and cutting down on ceremonial aspects.

The Summit should be preceded by sectoral Ministerial level meetings with clearly defined and precise agenda concerning economic trade, financial and socio-cultural issues. The procedure for appointing the Directors should be changed. The Secretary General ought to be assisted by a well equipped and highly efficient Secretariat.

In a highly competitive and globalized environment the Secretariat must appoint highly professional experts from within the region to assist the Secretary General in carrying out his functions within the widening scope of increasing SAARC activities.

SAARC must open up to world community at large and especially to other regional groupings international and regional organizations. In an interdependent world SAARC would not prosper in isolation. The expansion of ASEAN upto Myanmar has sharply restricted the physical space for SAARC. The Fundamental issue of asymmetry has been sharpened in the SAARC region.

The goal to establish a South Asian Economic Union must be pursued with vigour and consistency. The 13th SAARC Summit to be held in Dhaka represents a crucial stage in the realization of the agreed objective.