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## PEOPLE TO PEOPLE CONTACTS IN SAARC

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### Abstract

In this era, when the world is being viewed as a global village, there is more and more need of constructive dialogue among the countries of the South Asian region to create greater cooperation and understanding under the auspices of SAARC. The need to exercise collective will of people and leadership and the emphasis on people-to-people contacts have become more and more imperative for fostering friendship and promoting natural understanding among the states of South Asia. Introducing a visa-free regime, facilitating intra-regional tourism, improving communication infrastructure and transport, developing effective telecommunication network, cooperating in the education sector and exchange of sports and culture would contribute significantly in promoting people-to-people contacts in this region. SAARC is often viewed as an organization, which facilitates the meeting of the Government officials, policy makers, political leaders and experts. The regional members have somewhat failed in bringing SAARC closer to the people of the region, but the impoverished,

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downtrodden, marginalized people of the region also need to take interest in the organization, strengthening it and exert pressure upon their Governments to initiate more far-reaching and radical steps to make the SAARC more useful and beneficial for the people and develop SAARC into a truly people's SAARC.

South Asia, with over 1.3 billion people, is home to one-fifth of world population where the teeming millions reel under the yoke of abject poverty. It is the most militarized zone and has the highest number of illiterates, unemployed, malnourished, most deprived and socially backward people. Some 44 per cent of the world's poor, which come to approximately 522 million people, whose income is less than one dollar per day, live in this impoverished region. Most of the governments in this region making national security a pretext, spend more on their armed forces and purchase of military hardware, arms and ammunitions than to protect their citizens against omnipresent disease, poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. And there are occasions when many instead of facing any foreign aggression or dying of disease and hunger, are attacked, bombed and killed by their own militarized groups and so on. In so many ways, the concept of national security is manipulated to its fullest extent by some South Asian states. In this era, when the world is being viewed as a global village, there is more and more need of constructive dialogue among the countries of the region to create greater understanding among them. The need to exercise collective will of people and leadership in shaping a better future is greater today than ever before.

During this century of technical advancement and revolutionary changes in all spheres of knowledge, the emphasis on people-to-people contact has become more imperative for fostering friendship and promoting natural understanding among the states of South Asia



to ward off any threat of external aggression, and utilize their resources to alleviate poverty, end backwardness and increase the rate of literacy among their peoples. South Asia, with a burgeoning twenty-three per cent of the world population, faced with formidable challenges, has a legacy of ethnic resurgence, separatist tendencies and left-over tensions of the colonial rule. It has witnessed conventional conflicts every now and then and also suffered frequent outbreak of internal conflicts. In order to prepare itself to counter such conflicts it has acquired more and more arms and equipment from all its available means and has thus exhausted most part of its resources handicapping itself from marching towards progress with the required pace matching the world. Leaders of these countries, being conscious of their individual and regional strengths, their potentials as a huge market, their substantial human and natural resources and the strength of their economy, with a confidence that with their effective regional cooperation, they could make optimum use of their capacities for the benefit of their peoples, accelerate the pace of economic development and enhance their national and collective self-reliance, decided to move beyond rhetoric. They, therefore, resolved to work together towards a meaningful development strategy with a comprehensive action plan and resilient will to take South Asia out of the morass of poverty, illiteracy, backwardness and disease. With this determination, the seven countries of the region - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - exchanged views at different forums and through continuous efforts finally mooted the concept of regional cooperation in South Asia in November 1980. After a lot of parleys, consultations and deliberations, the foreign secretaries of these seven states met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981 and discussed the modalities of the Association. This was followed

by the Committee of the Whole a few months later which, taking a bold step, embarked on five broad areas of mutual cooperation for the regional countries under an Integrated Programme of Action (IPA). These five broad areas of mutual cooperation are: agriculture, rural development, telecommunication, meteorology, and health and population. Consequent upon this decision, later in August 1983, the Foreign Ministers of these regional states in their first meeting held in New Delhi adopted the remarkable declaration of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and formally launched the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA). The next two years saw some developments in the positive direction until 1985 when the epoch-making summit was held. The seven heads of state or government of South Asian countries met in Dhaka on December 7-8, and adopted the Charter formally establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The objectives contained in the SAARC Charter are: to promote the welfare of the peoples of the South Asian states and to improve the quality of their life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and provide all individuals an opportunity to live with dignity and to realize their full potential; to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia; to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems, to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries; to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums and matters of common interests; and to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and objectives.



SAARC is the manifestation of the resolve of the peoples of the seven countries of the region to work in unison towards finding the solution of their nagging problems in an atmosphere imbued with the spirit of friendship, mutual trust and understanding and to create an order based on respect for each other, equity and shared benefits. The first and foremost objective before the association is to help each other in the alleviation of poverty and increasing the rate of literacy by accelerating the pace of economic and social development in the member states. In this respect, during the course of its establishment, the member states endeavoured and have been able to lay down a firm foundation for mutual cooperation for the socio-economic development of their peoples. The SAARC has now come of age, and since its inception in 1985, a lot of time has passed. During the period from 1985 to 2001, eleven summits of the Association have been held: 1985 Dhaka, 1986 Bangalore, 1987 Kathmandu, 1988 Islamabad, 1990 Male, 1991 Colombo, 1993 Dhaka, 1995 New Delhi, 1997 Male, 1998 Colombo, and 2002 Kathmandu. During these meetings a lot has been done, various committees have been formed and resolves made to bring socio-economic changes in the region through mutual cooperation in the agreed fields and take the teeming masses out of the morass of poverty and improve their lot. But the burgeoning population, conflicts and insurgencies in these states have made the achievements negligible, and the story of any success achieved by SAARC nations on development fronts has failed to reflect itself in the lives of the peoples. It is a Herculean task to bring about any visible and tangible change in such countries of the region which have dismally low level of education. The SAARC summit held at Kathmandu in 2001 had witnessed a difficult situation in the region. Over a million troops had remained amassed along the Indo-Pakistan

border with guns trained at each other. During such strained bilateral relationship between individual countries, South Asia was gravely affected and as such has not been able to make any visible progress, consequently the other states also had to suffer. India and Pakistan, the two largest countries of the South Asian region, have a chequered history of hostility and antagonism, and at the time when the twelfth summit was due tension was at its peak which did not allow it to be held according to its schedule.

After years of being held hostage to the Pakistan-India hostile relationship, the SAARC has managed to move ahead. The two nations after finding themselves at the dead end of confrontation, and having realized that the wars they had fought instead of solving their problems had compounded them and in its wake had brought death, destruction and miseries to their peoples besides destroying the infrastructure of their countries, they developed stronger inclination towards negotiated settlement of the long-standing issues. The temperature gradually cooled and sanity prevailed. The troops that were poised against each other eye-ball-to-eye-ball with nuclear threat looming large, were withdrawn. Shuttle diplomacy further eased the situation and promoted confidence-building measures (CBMs). And all this was because the peoples of the two countries showed their abhorrence towards war and expressed their desire to live with peace and amity. Then all was set for the twelfth SAARC summit and preparations were started to hold the conference with grandeur from January 4-6, 2004. On January 3, Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha claimed: "Islamabad is making history as the winds of change are blowing in the SAARC region" while referring to the important breakthrough achieved on a number of contentious issues during the Council of Ministers' meeting on the eve of SAARC summit. He further said: "I have absolutely no



hesitation in saying that the winds of change are blowing in SAARC region. In Islamabad I have a sense of history. He said: "Agreements have been reached on issues that were considered not only as conflicts but also perhaps impossible. We have made a new beginning here in Islamabad." He told the conference that after the summit was over, SAARC countries would begin a new phase in their relationship. He further added: "And I am not merely talking about relationship between Pakistan and India, I am talking about a new relationship, a new spirit in all the seven countries of the region." There is no doubt that a little improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations or a proportionate degeneration in their ties inevitably and equally exercises healthy or adverse effect on SAARC. This has been the single irrefutable reality retarding the growth of the organization. The process of normalization between India and Pakistan and lessening of tension in their relationship is certain to have positive effect on the association and would help accelerate economic collaboration among the member states.

### **Social Charter**

The twelfth SAARC summit, held after two years' delay in Islamabad, concluded on January 6 on a positive note. At the summit, which was termed a great success, the leaders of the seven South Asian nations signed the 10-point Social Charter for the Association as the first document of commitment marking the beginning of the region's wakening to what the teeming millions had remained denied for over half a century since their freedom from the yoke of slavery.

The signing of the Charter by the member states is a good omen for the Region's multitude of impoverished people. The 10-point Charter requires the signatories to take legislative, executive and administrative measures for the social uplift of their peoples. It also binds the seven South Asian member states to share and review the implementation strategies of their respective socio-economic development plans in the field of education, health, human resources development, poverty alleviation, women's development, youth mobilization, population stabilization, drug rehabilitation and reintegration of minorities immigrants programmes.

### **SAFTA Accord**

The declaration signed during the twelfth summit on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) is a landmark agreement reached between the seven states. The accord aims at broadening the scope of economic collaboration and ensures equitable distribution of benefits of trade as well as cater to the needs of the LDC (Least Developed Countries) member states by providing them special and preferential treatment. The SAARC states pledge to scale down their tariffs in two phases to 0-5 per cent that will come into force on January 1, 2006. The decision to study the feasibility of setting up South Asian development bank and the concept of South Asian energy cooperation at concerned expert levels is a good decision for the mutual cooperation of the regional states in the future.

### **Fight Against Terrorism**

The Additional Protocol to the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism is another milestone achievement by the SAARC. The summit reaffirmed its commitment to this protocol and vowed to deal effectively the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and



manifestations in South Asia. Indeed these are landmark decisions, and if the Charter is adhered to and its articles implemented in right earnest by respective governments, it would bring the much needed change in the living conditions of the South Asians.

### **People-to-People Contact**

For increasing regional cooperation for collective well-being in South Asia, there is a need for greater involvement of their peoples and efforts to promote people-to-people contacts at various levels among the member countries. And for this purpose, steps are required to be taken to create awareness and public opinion. At the very first summit held in Dhaka in 1985, the need for increasing people-to-people contact among the regional countries was emphasized. Various committees were formed and programmes chalked out for the purpose, but the progress made so far in the implementation of an integrated programme of action has made a little headway, and hence the achievement is insignificant.

### ***Visa Policy***

The first and foremost thing for the SAARC states to promote interaction of their peoples and bring them together is to introduce a visa-free regime. And if that is not possible at this stage, then at least to liberalize the visa policy and make its acquisition simpler and easier for the peoples of the member states. At the twelfth summit held in Islamabad on January 4-6, the Foreign Ministers of SAARC countries promised to liberalize visa policy to promote people-to-contact in the region. Realizing that media plays a vital role in bringing the peoples together, changes their minds and creates an atmosphere conducive to peace and amity. According to the Foreign Minister of India, the proposal of South Asian Free Media

Association (SAFMA) for visa-free regime for media people would be considered soon. He said that the meeting of the SAARC Foreign Ministers scheduled for July in Islamabad, would formalize freer visa regime for media men. It was a kind of dateline to complete bureaucratic formalities, he added. The foreign ministers of other countries of the region endorsed his views and there was a consensus among them on the issue. But why a freer visa regime for the media men alone? All citizens are equally important. The facility should be extended to them all too to create an atmosphere imbued with love and friendship.

### ***Tourism***

To bring peoples closer and increase interaction among them the tourism industry needs to be promoted among the member countries. South Asia is a region which boasts of its 45 of the world's 50 highest mountains. It has beautiful valleys and scenic places extended from one end to the other. Tourism is the area where exists vast potential for intra-regional cooperation. After easing of tension between India and Pakistan through CBMs the restriction on the use of airspace has gone, air traffic has opened and bus and train services have resumed. An agreement has also been reached between India and Pakistan to open consular offices in Mumbai and Karachi and increase the number of staff to ease issuance of visa. Such steps and revolutionary growth in air traffic can make tourism among the countries of the region one of the largest industries and get greater share. The potential of the region to attract tourism is virtually unlimited. The combined efforts of the countries of the region can be geared to develop their potential to the common benefit. This can be done by strengthening the infrastructure at home and by vigorous marketing campaign abroad. The rich and ancient heritage of the



subcontinent and the varied scenic beauty of different parts of the region will provide the necessary attraction for the tourists of the SAARC states among others.

Bus and ferry services should also be introduced for the peoples of member states within and among the countries of the Association to facilitate tourism and promote people-to-people contacts with a view to fostering friendship among them. But the rates should be reasonable keeping in mind that these people belong to impoverished South Asian region with low per capita income and hence cannot afford exorbitant rates of accommodation and transportation. Tourism has the potential to educate people about the socio-economic and geo-political status of the member countries. If the combined resources of South Asia are tapped, better facilities are provided to the tourists it would certainly increase tourism and serve the purpose of people-to-people contacts. This also needs joint packages, reduced group and individual fares for tourists from SAARC states with visa-free regime.

### *Telecommunication*

Telecommunications happen to be an integral part of the economic infrastructure in every society. Economic activities, dissemination of knowledge, vastly expanded social contacts of highly mobile individuals in contemporary societies, and last but not the least, trade and commerce depend on effective telecommunication network. Therefore, it is a must that this sector should be technically advanced matching the world. A meeting of the SAARC communications ministers held in Islamabad in June 2004, has decided to reduce telecom tariff considerably. Recognising the rapid technological advancement taking place globally in the field of telecommunications, the delegates agreed to enhance

regional cooperation in the field. They also agreed to share information and resources, besides exchange of fellowships and training facilities in telecom discipline. The delegates also agreed to facilitate intra-regional communications for travelers. A decision was also taken to promote technology transfer, standardization and human resource development by evolving a coordinated approach on issues of common concern in international telecommunication fora. These are encouraging decisions and if adhered to in letter and in spirit are bound not only to promote regional cooperation but also promote healthy people-to-people contact.

Confidence building measures (CBMs) between India and Pakistan is going on, and various contentious issues have been peacefully dealt with and are on the verge of being resolved. The Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan have met and the former has invited the latter to come to Delhi to hold composite dialogue on the core issue of Kashmir. These issues are, no doubt, bilateral in nature but if held in an atmosphere of peace and friendship and if some progress is made during these talks, then there would certainly be far reaching effect on the regional countries.

### ***Education***

Education is another important sector which may promote people-to-people contacts. There should be exchange of students and academicians among the SAARC countries to promote education, facilitate exchange of views and hold intellectual discussions to understand each others' perception. There should be increased opportunities for scholarship scheme for students of the regional countries to study at each others' prestigious educational institutions in the field of arts, science, medicine, engineering, and technology among other disciplines. The LDC states should be given preferential



treatment. There should also be exchange of teachers and scholars among these countries to enrich the minds of the students with their knowledge and experience. The countries of South Asia are heirs to some of the richest cultural traditions of the world. The influence of the major religions of the region, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, on different countries of the region in varying degrees, has contributed in the richness and diversity in the cultural heritage of these countries. This is, therefore, a field in which regional cooperation can be of considerable benefit in better understanding of the cultural heritage of the countries in the region and as a result promoting mutual goodwill.

### *Sports*

Sports helps a great deal in fostering friendship among the participating countries and bringing the peoples together. Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka are cricket-loving countries. The teams of these countries have played a number of matches and enjoyed the hospitality of the peoples. There should be more matches between cricket teams of the region. Football is also a favourite game of the subcontinent. The regional countries including Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka should organize their teams and play SAARC cup football tournament to foster friendship and amity among the regional countries. Cricket diplomacy, very much like ping pong diplomacy, has played a great part in easing tension between the neighbours. The recent series played between India and Pakistan brought the peoples of the two countries together and helped in easing tension and contributed to peace and friendship in the region.

Musical concerts are being held regularly and the artists of the two countries are enthraling the crowd of their host countries. The

concerts of Annu Malik, Sonu Niggam, Mehdi Hasan, Ghulam Ali and others have played a great role in bringing the peoples of the two countries closer. The artists of Bangladesh are no strangers to Pakistan. There should be frequent exchange of artistes and cultural troupe of the regional countries to strengthen cultural ties among these countries.

There also exists a vast scope of cooperation and interaction among these seven regional states in the fields of agriculture, science, technology including IT, architecture engineering, medicine, forestry, fisheries, meteorology and all such related disciplines. There should be frequent visits of experts in these fields among the SAARC states to share their experience and expertise to the benefit of the peoples of the countries of the region. After the culmination of the twelfth summit, activities of the SAARC countries have geared up. Various delegates of varied fields are visiting the regional countries. Frequent seminars and symposium are being held to make SAARC meaningful and viable by extending cooperation and sharing views in the fields of technologies, trade and commerce.

Confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan are continuing and various contentious issues such as Bughlihar project are being peacefully dealt with and it is hoped that these would be resolved amicably to the satisfaction of the two nations. These measures are taking place despite the change of government in India and top-level political changes in Pakistan. The Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan have met on the sidelines of the Boa conference in China and the Association of South-east Asian Nation (ASEAN) conference in Jakarta in 2004 in a very friendly and cordial atmosphere. The former has invited the latter to New Delhi to hold



talks on the core issue of Kashmir. The Indian Foreign Minister was expected to visit Pakistan to continue the talks.

These issues, no doubt bilateral in character, if discussed in a congenial atmosphere and show some sign of resolution, would, as a consequence, have far-reaching impact on the development of relations among the member countries.

### **Conclusions**

Indeed, the winds of change are blowing in the region and a new beginning is being made with true aspirations and hopes of the peoples of the seven-nation organization which would promote peace and harmony and usher in tremendous economic development of the region. The South Asian states are members of a number of regional organizations. They have benefited from these and have also contributed to the advancement of the concept and usefulness of the organizations. Again, the states have not only finally succeeded in founding the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation but have also succeeded in managing the organization quite well. However, the diverse works and activities of SAARC are not adequately appreciated at popular level. It is generally viewed as an organization which facilitates the meeting of the Government officials, policy makers, political leaders and experts and that's all.

SAARC is not imaged at popular level as people's SAARC. It is true that the regional members have somewhat failed in bringing SAARC closer to the people of the region, but the impoverished, downtrodden, marginalized millions of people also need to appreciate that they have to take interest in the organization, strengthen it and exert pressure upon their Governments to initiate more far-reaching and radical steps to make the SAARC more useful

and beneficial for the people. They need to mobilize themselves to actively campaign for this goal. The South Asian environment has clearly changed and changed for the better and it is time that vigorous campaigns are launched for promoting people-to-people contacts across the length and breadth of the region and develop SAARC into a truly people's SAARC