The Thing Called SAARC: Beyond Modernist Perspective

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There is an element of truth in what Aurobindo, Gokhale and later Subhas had once said that 'What Bengal thinks today, the rest of India thinks a week tomorrow.' Now, why on earth would we say such a thing in 1992, knowing well that Bengal today, far from being a model of development for the rest of South Asia, remains divided and impoverished? Not attempting to indulge in chauvinistic rhetorics, it must be kept in mind that the statement reflects the boldness of human imagination and not what has been accomplished historically. It is true that Bengal remains divided and impoverished at this historical conjuncture; at the same time, however, it is also true that a part of Bengal has succeeded in constructing a state of its own with all the pride and imaginations of its ablest members, from Rammohun to Mujibur Rahman, from Rabindranath to Shamsur Rahman. Our reason for referring to Aurobindo's, Gokhale's and Subhas' statement, however, is somewhat different. It is primarily intended to invoke a sense of awareness to the content and spirit of the SAARC process.

SAARC could well have been a gathering in the fashion of the courts of Chandragupta Maurya or Asoka the Great or even that of Akbar the Great, courts which prided on the not-so-forceful membership of people from different regions of South Asia. In more recent times, however (of course, for our own faults and fallacies), history has not been very kind to us. With the onslaught of colonialism and modernity, our own mind and body had become subservient to the knowledge and discourses of the West. We became so dazzled by the latter's performance (the
sheer weight of its might, that is) that we soon lost all power to think independently and instead kept on following the West blindly to replicate its history. Needless to say, our performance and experience had been pathetic and painful.

In the name of modernity, nationalism and modern nationhood, we simply kept on dividing and redividing our people. Even at the end of the 20th century our thirst for that occidental wisdom - nation, that is, which otherwise nurtures the politics of `artificially organizing the people' - has not ended [Tagore, 1917:7-8]. A quick and a nonemotive look at a South Asian daily will show that today the Sikhs are fighting the non-Sikh Indians, the Muhajirs are fighting the Punjabis, the Hill Peoples are fighting the Bangalees, the Tamils are fighting the Sinhalese, the Kashmiris are fighting the Indians, and so on. The external situation of these modern states has not been pleasant either. Three well-publicized wars between India and Pakistan, the post-1975 skirmishes between Bangladeshi and Indian border security forces, the not-so pleasant experience of the Indian `peacekeeping' troops in Sri Lanka, and, of course, the very bloody birth of Bangladesh with a horrifying death figure between 300,000 to 3 million people,¹ which included, aside from Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Indians as well.

But as if these were not enough, the people of South Asia have been doubly cursed by the twin pillars of poverty and dependence. The situation is so horrible that often the figures become meaningless. Internationally, the entire region is dubbed as a `low-income economy'. If we translate that (and indeed, it requires translation given the nicety of the term), what it actually means is that the majority of its people are living in poverty and a sizeable portion of them living below the poverty-level. The best and most humane way to project the pitiful situation would be to narrate the tale of Mallika. Mallika, right after her birth, is literally living a life in the pavement - sleeping, dining and playing (if you want to say that!). When we first saw her in the pavement near Bailey Road she was only a week old, now she is nearly a year old. How long she will survive, in what manner, with what hope, with what dreams are matters about which we relieve our guilt by passing them onto the commands and wishes of the divinity. But Mallika is no exception to the fast growing modern city of Dhaka. Her cousins
and friends could easily be found in Bombay, Karachi, Jaffna and elsewhere.

In the midst of this pathetic and painful experience of modern state-building in South Asia, where people, indeed, have given up counting death-figures through bullets and ill-nourishment, where floods and famines have become divine blessings for some to profit, where chaos and confusions have replaced rational thinking, where tailored-made ideas of the West have naively been superimposed on the region to resolve its own peculiar contradictions, where the youth have lost all interests in the affairs of their respective countries and are bagging up with godspeed to resettle abroad, there arose yet another son of Bengal with a vision to arrest our past failures and work for the prosperity and well-being of the region as a whole. We are, indeed, referring to Ziaur Rahman and the launching of the idea of South Asian regional cooperation during his tenure as the President of Bangladesh.

That the idea was bold and sincere few would deny. It quickly brought the Heads of State and Government of South Asia to a series of roundtable summits and conferences. It already has to its credit nearly a decade of institutional moulding of the idea - the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. It also has to its credit the meetings of minds from fields as diverse as agriculture and archaeology, population control and mural paintings, medicine and meteorology, and interestingly from places as far as Male and Mahabalipuram, Punakha and Puttalam, Kathmandu and Khanpur. But above all it ignited our imagination, to think boldly about the almost impossible task of reversing the current state of affairs in South Asia towards a better and healthy future. That imagination is boundless and still open for further contemplation. It is this we shall now highlight in some measures. But first let us briefly conceptualize the scope of our imagination.

SAARC from Above / SAARC from Below

Since the formal launching of the idea of South Asian regional cooperation in 1980, SAARC has necessarily and for all practical purposes remained a vehicle for economic, social and technical cooperation among the countries of South Asia from
above. What it actually means is that cooperations between the member states are to be organized within the framework of state-to-state relationship. This is made explicit in Article II of the SAARC Charter [From SARC to SAARC, 1988:97]. Such modus operandi, however, poses serious limits to the purpose envisioned by the SAARC for much of the weaknesses and miseries experienced by the South Asians are related to the very structure of modern statehood. To give one example, there is little in the SAARC mechanism to contain the modernist urge of some of the South Asian states to attain the goal of 'regional hegemony' and 'great power status', which, if anything, runs contrary to the spirit of the SAARC. This, however, does not mean that all is lost. As we indicated earlier, the very idea of regional cooperation ignited our imagination, a matter which could well be addressed under the banner of SAARC from below.

SAARC from below is a phenomenon which is only partially governed by the statutes and principles of modern statehood. In fact, it includes intellectual and practical interventions to overcome the weaknesses of modernity and the organization of modern statehood. It must be admitted here, however, that conditions for its contemplation have often been provided by the very forces who had been close to the organization of SAARC from above. Khaleda Zia's call for a SAARC policy of 'Dal-Bhat' (Lentils and Rice) is one such case in hand. There is no doubt that such a declaration by a Prime Minister of a South Asian state opens up space for many, and incidentally from diverse political shades, to wit and contribute to the cause. A plethora of non-governmental institutions and civic forums, not to mention a host of intellectuals and private citizens, have already made their presence felt in the task of organizing and constituting the agenda of SAARC from below. Keeping that in perspective, we too would like to make our interventions known. For the sake of limiting our discussion, we will limit our interventions to five areas (culture, education, economics, military and sub-state nationalism), three of which are directly related to the current activities of the SAARC and the rest two are the ones that the SAARC has left out for reasons of being contentious.
I. Culture

There may be a sense of uneasiness filling the mind of the reader at this very moment as to why the authors have chosen to begin with culture and not with other more apparent priorities of the SAARC. But if the region intends to make a sharp departure from the current state of affairs or, what the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh has once opined as, 'inherited colonial legacies, obvious asymmetries, and (self-defeating) push for national self-assertion', it is important that the minds of women and men of South Asia must first settle for the transformation that is to come. It is an undeniable fact that our cultural priorities have altered following our experience with colonialism and modernity. We now live with the modernist idea that our salvation lies in developing our societies in the image of the modern 'Western' state. Apart from reproducing the hegemonic interests of the ruling elite, the idea itself has helped nurture not only decades of political and economic dependency but, and far more dangerously, intellectual dependency as well. The central task of SAARC today, therefore, is to correct this situation, to ponder upon ways to free the minds of women and men of South Asia from the colonial-imposed structures and thought processes, before embarking upon the more gigantic task of altering the economic fate of a billion people.

Now, let us for a moment see how far SAARC has succeeded in this respect. A quick look at the activities of the SAARC will show, first and foremost, that the concept of culture has been narrowly, if not poorly, defined by the concerned authorities. It did not take long for this all-important area to be levelled along football coaching, trekking and workshop of terracotta artists. While we have no intention of downgrading the contributions of such activities to the task of transforming the current fate of this region, it is quite evident that they fall far short from the task of transforming the minds of the people of South Asia.

But as we have indicated earlier, all is not lost. Serious and more bold task requires to be undertaken in the area that is commonly defined as culture. To give one example, there is an urgent need to innovate ways to overcome the impact of modernity in the conceptualization of things, particularly the ones which have contributed so much to violence and mutual hatred in our societies. To wit for a moment, this is true not only
regarding nationalism, about which we have already indicated, but also with respect to the understanding of ‘religion’. Whereas the South Asian or Sanskrit word for religion is *dharmā*, from the root *dhr*, meaning to hold up, support, carry, sustain, or maintain, almost like that of a mother, the (Western) word ‘religion’, derived from Latin *religio*, meant ‘to link back, or bind’ [Campbell, (1962) 1976:13, 23-24]. Indeed, religion in South Asia today is understood more in the sense of the Western notion than *dharmā*, bringing with it the appeal for the otherwise ill-fated religio-communal unity than mutual tolerance. How to bring back the South Asian wisdom of *dharmā* in the place of today’s understanding of religion and contain the seeds of religio-communal animosity in our minds we do not know yet. We are, indeed, short of specifics, the space remains open for all of us to ponder, think and innovate.

II. Education

Education could be a way out; but then, what kind of education are we talking about? Is it not true that the South Asian states following their independence have spent considerable time in developing their respective educational sectors? Is it not also true that one or two of them have attained a high degree of mass literacy which one could sincerely feel proud about? But then, did that make the educated souls less violent prone, more tolerant about contrary viewpoints? If we take the case of Sri Lanka, the country with the highest literacy rate in the region but now embroiled in a bitter civil strife, the answer is obviously in the negative. What is wrong with our education then?

A part of that answer could be found in the Indian response to Zia’s SAARC initiative in 1980 when it opined that:

Cooperation in the field of science and technology is particularly significant in view of the fact that experience gained by the South Asian countries can be shared with greater advantage than the technology *borrowed* from the industrialised countries of the developed world (emphasis ours) [From SARC To SAARC, 1988:18].

The idea definitely was to invest more on indigenous
possibilities of science and technology than remaining dependent on Western inputs. In fact, to implement this view, SAARC invested considerable time in exchanging ideas about 'renewable energy resources', 'solar energy and biogas', 'low-cost housing technology', 'use of organic fertilizer in agriculture', and so on. These are, no doubt, good beginnings, but we are afraid they limit our vision to the task of replicating our societies in the image of the modern 'Western' state. Put differently, they do not help us overcome (what we regard as) South Asia's intellectual dependency on the West.

The beginnings have to be made even much earlier; indeed, to the point of changing our school and University curricula to meet the needs and vision of the SAARC. An example will suffice to make our point clear here. The entire region is infested, so to say, with the problem of not enabling to keep 'good young brains' at home. They bag up with godspeed to take the first opportunity to fly abroad and contribute to the prosperity of the West. The blame, we firmly believe, lies less with our 'sold-out youngsters' than with the education which has helped her trained in this business of selling-out to the West.

Indeed, you can hardly blame a student of Physics in the University of Dhaka who has been trained thoroughly in the knowledge of fission and fusion of atoms for flying abroad and seeking a job there, for she finds it very unreal, not to mention the knowledge unworkable, when after a day in the Curzon Hall she sees only rickshaws after rickshaws and thelagaris (push-carts) in the streets of Dhaka! Her 'trained' mind is already sold out. The task here, therefore, is to come up with a curriculum which would make her teachings in the Curzon Hall correspond with the rickshaw she must ride everyday. Incidentally, the environment-friendly rickshaws failed to receive our 'scientific knowledge' (or R & D) ever since it was introduced in Dhaka in 1938, although today more people are employed in the rickshaw industry than the entire modern industry sector in Bangladesh [Rashid, 1986; Gallagher, 1992]. But this was only a particular instance. Curriculum requires to be changed in every sphere of our knowledge and knowledge-production, from physics to political science, from architecture to agriculture, from engineering to economics.
III. Economics

As far as economic issues are concerned, it is notable that the most commonly labelled criticism against SAARC - more often reasonably than not - is that the Association at the time of its launching had kept the 'core economic areas' (like trade, industry, investment, manufactures) out of the agenda of cooperation. The reasons for this have since been the subject of intense debate. By now there is a clear indication that the political impediments that prompted the so-called 'functional approach' have been overshadowed by realpolitik imperatives. In recent times there has indeed been an upsurge of studies, seminars and conferences focusing on enormity of the benefits of inclusion of these core areas into SAARC programmes and of the huge costs of leaving these apart. These have aroused what may be regarded as a regional popular consensus to the effect that in order to make an impact SAARC must now move gradually into the vital economic activities.

As a matter of fact some major steps have already been taken in this direction. These include a firm commitment to launch a regional programme for poverty alleviation as the first step towards which the SAARC Poverty Commission has been constituted, which is mandated to submit its recommendation to the Dhaka summit; and the establishment of the Committee on Economic Cooperation and subsequently the Inter-Governmental Group on Trade Liberalization. This latter is supposed to draft an agreement on a SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement.2

These are certainly developments of substantive nature. But the question we raise here is whether all these promise to be different from what South Asia has so far been used to. Take the case of poverty alleviation where past efforts in this region, if anything, have ended up in making poverty endemic. The dominant development strategies, modelled after 'industrialization' and 'modernization' of the West, were basically growth oriented and failed to take the 'potential power of the poor' into consideration. Pre-occupied with generating the scarce factor, e.g., capital from whatever source at whatever expenses, we in this region have absolutely disregarded the abundant factor, e.g., people, particularly the vast majority of them who remained poor, and failed to mobilize and utilize their
latent capacity as the factor of production and development.

The Poverty Commission suggests that potential exists in South Asia for doubling the per capita income by the year 2000 so that the worst form of poverty can be eradicated. The condition for the realization of such optimism, in our view, is 'putting the people first'. In essence, we suggest a break from the tradition of considering poverty alleviation as a charitable or welfare programme of offering some occasional delivery of benefits of 'development' to the poor. We are talking about a participatory approach to development suitable to specific South Asian situations and needs rather than replication of success stories of Western models. In this context, some of the brighter examples of poverty-sensitive projects like Grameen Bank and BRAC in which the poor are genuinely breaking out of poverty and contributing to development can be much more successful alternatives to Western models of development. To be able to generate tangible benefits to the peoples of this region, the SAARC must work out methodologies to rationalize the experiences of such examples. Arrangements should be made to exchange ideas and experiences of such successful NGOs throughout the region on a regular basis. It may be useful to hold annual 'counter-summit of South Asian pro-poor NGOs' to coincide with the Summit of Heads of State or Government. One main objective of this would be to arouse South Asian consciousness in favour of the poor and an awareness that the poor do not necessarily need to remain poor.

But will some of the interventions outlined above suffice to transform this region and make it a prosperous one? Certainly not. They will, at best, help create an environment towards meeting that goal. There are, indeed, other more critical issues faced by the South Asian states which need to be tackled simultaneously if the vision of the SAARC is to be realized. Such issues incidentally for reasons of them being contentious have been left out from the purview of SAARC's official discourse. Article X of the SAARC Charter is a reminder to that effect. We will limit our discussion here to two such issues - military and sub-state nationalism.

IV. Military

With respect to the military, the SAARC appears playing a
game to indicate that 'charity does not need to begin at home'. Since the first SAARC summit, it has been a regular practice for the SAARC Heads of State or Government to review the global situation in terms of the negative impact of global arms race. They have been critical of the superpowers and the two erstwhile military blocs for their failure to achieve progress in arms limitation talks, whenever found applicable. They have also welcomed all positive developments in this regard. They underlined almost invariably the inherent relationship between disarmament and development. They called upon all countries, specially those possessing the largest nuclear and conventional arsenals to re-direct additional financial resources, human energy and creativity into development.

Conspicuously, however, they have remained silent, as if absolutely ignorant, about what they themselves have been doing in this regard in their own region. They have never said a word about the fact that South Asia recorded one of the highest rates of growth of arms spending by global comparison in the past decade. It never bothered them that despite abject poverty, the SAARC countries' military spendings have been amongst the highest in terms of ratio of government expenditures. The question was never raised in the SAARC that it is South Asia which is the largest Third World arms producing region (actually India alone accounted for over 30 per cent of total production of major weapons by developing countries while ASEAN, for example, produced only 2 per cent during 1954-1984) [McNamara, 1991]. It escaped the attention of SAARC that South Asia was also the Third World's leading arms importing region for last several years. Member States of SAARC pretend focusing on poverty alleviation while two of them are categorized as 'de facto nuclear weapons states'. In the home of world's largest concentration of poverty with hundreds of millions deprived of proper shelter, clothing, education, medicine and nutrition, the SAARC does not appear disturbed that an average South Asian citizen is forced to pay over US$10.00 annually for so-called defense out of his income of barely US$160-400.00 per annum.

It is our contention here that it sounds absolutely ridiculous when during their annual summit meetings the SAARC leaders appeal to the world to re-direct 'peace dividends' for promoting
development in the Third World, at the same time bypassing their own responsibility in this regard, and continue to spend tens of billions of dollars on a dangerous and sense-less arms race. What we intend to point out is that the time could not be any better than now for SAARC to include matters related to defense and disarmament in some form or other into the agenda of cooperation. This should be aimed at not only releasing funds for development purposes but also at building mutual confidence. Furthermore, instead of the present ambiguity and communication gap on defense related matters there must be attempts at achieving mutual transparency and information exchanges. There can be common training programmes, and joint exercises and the like with the objective of reducing mutual threats which are more often perceptual than real. Senior officials of the Ministries of Defense and of the three services of the member states may have periodical meetings under the aegis of the SAARC for exchange of information and views which may go a long way in building up mutual trust and confidence. A Committee on Disarmament and Development in SAARC countries may be established with the participation of concerned officials and experts to recommend ways and means for benefitting from 'South Asian peace dividends'.

V. Sub-state nationalism

Modernity has blessed (or rather unblessed) us with two powerful divisive ideological notions: the first one is the idea of the nation, about which we have already indicated, while the second one is the so-called democratic principle of the rule of majority. Sub-state nationalism is a political phenomenon arising from a fusion of the two. In all the instances of sub-state nationalism that we have cited above - that is, the Sikhs struggling against the non-Sikh Indians, the Tamils struggling against the Sinhalese, the Hill people struggling against the Bangalees, and so on - not only the idea of the nation played a powerful role in organizing the concerned communities but also the hierarchical levels posed by the majority-minority distinctions created a situation of ever-increasing fragmentation of the societies within each state. The whole of South Asia (about which Rabindranath once so instinctively observed that 'we, who are no nation ourselves' [1917:7-8]) is.
indeed, in the midst of a 'modern crisis', a crisis arising from our blind replication of the wisdom of the West.

There is no need to shy away from this problem, to feel uncomfortable about a situation which apparently looks very internal and domestic. Without exception, modern states within and outside South Asia suffer from the horrors wrought by our own demiurge. A case in point is Irish nationalism, about which England and the Crown need only to come to terms with reality. In South Asia, the situation is even more complex for nations and nationalities crisscross modern state boundaries, making sub-state nationalism an issue of inter-state relationships. The struggles of the Kashmiris, Tamils and Hill people (for example), internal though they are, have disturbed, in varied measures and ways, Indo-Pakistan, Indo-Lanka and Indo-Bangladesh relationships respectively. If Pakistan today is meddling in the Kashmir affair, it is because India has provided the opportunity; if India is meddling in the Sri Lankan Tamil affair, it is because Sri Lanka has provided the opportunity; and if India is meddling in the Hill people's affair, it is because Bangladesh has provided the opportunity - all of them, in one way or another, have failed in the noble task of modern statebuilding.

What must the South Asians do then to come out of this mess? A beginning obviously has to be made somewhere. Critics of modernity, we must remember, have already reprimanded the so-called democratic principle of majority rule. Gandhi is one such example, his remark in this respect is noteworthy:

I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. It means in its nakedness that in order to achieve the supposed good of 51 per cent the interest of 49 per cent may be, or rather, should be sacrificed. It is a heartless doctrine and has done harm to humanity. The only real, dignified, human doctrine is the greatest good of all, and this can only be achieved by uttermost self-sacrifice [ct. from Pantham, 1983:169].

We do not, however, propose to say that we must return to Gandhi. Rather, the purpose here is to highlight the fact that serious and notable thinkers of this region have already warned
us not to replicate things which are unsuitable for our cause.

In the backdrop of this observation, a decentralized state structure, devoid of the vices of modernity, for all the South Asian states remains an option worth considering. Indeed, with the exception of territorial security, all other powers must reside with the localities. In matters of education, for example, the people of Khulna must be free to directly negotiate with Kerala and vice versa. To facilitate free movement of people within the region, South Asians need only to have a common 'regional card'. Cross-boundary water sharing problem (for example) should be tackled by the concerned localities and not by the capitals of the respective countries. The Constitutions of the respective states must guarantee the freedom of people both within and outside their state boundaries; indeed, there ought to be a South Asian Charter of Human Rights. The possibilities are endless, the ultimate goal has already been well worded by yet another son of Bengal - Shamsur Rahman:

Politics is excessively a nasty maze, Ranjita. We fall into the pit of it repeatedly. We get ourselves digressed from our goals and lose our paths again and again. We embrace ideologies of which we make ourselves the prisoners!

Ranjita, the land where your predecessors were born now has become a poisonous land!! And I do not foresee even the shadow of future for our next generation!!!

Perhaps never will I visit Calcutta. And you, too, perhaps will never come to Dhaka. Then where will we meet again? Will we meet again on the crossing of an unknown path?

For sure, we will meet neither in Peking nor in Washington nor in Bangkok nor in Jakarta nor in Jeddah nor in Istanbul nor in Hamburg - nowhere. Perhaps we will meet once again in a bright capital absolutely unknown to us before. And we will call it humanity As the parents joyfully call their new-born baby.
This is a bold and profound projection, which, we are well aware, will not be fulfilled within a year or even five years term. Probably, it will take a struggling and waiting of fifty years or more. The important thing today, indeed, at this very moment, is to contribute to the task of creating a culture, an environment, a politics towards that ideal.
Notes

1. According to official Indian figures, three million died in the wake of Pakistan's suppression of the nationalist movement in Bangladesh in 1971. The most conservative estimate puts the figure around 300,000 (Sisson and Rose, 1990: 306).


4. Translation from the Original Bengali by Abu Taher Salahuddin Ahmed.

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