RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A BOTTOM-UP WAY TO PEACE AND STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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“A policy of rural development is a policy of national development.”

—Julius Nyerere

South Asia is the only region which until recently was conspicuous by the absence of any framework for intra-regional interaction of component units. With the launching of South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) things have started assuming a different shape. But SARC is still in its embryonic stage and emergence of it into a full life remains beset with a good deal of problems. The *modus operandi* is humble and simple. Despite a political and strategic underpinning in the initial proposal the initiators have by now been constrained to go for a low-key approach and limit cooperation to only less controversial or non-contentious areas. So far nine such areas have been taken up for multilateral cooperation. These are agriculture, rural development, meteorology, telecommunications, science and technology, health and population, transport, postal services, sports, arts and culture. But it would be too naive to hope that all these nine areas could bind the seven nations together in quest for a
common goal. The present state of bilateral relations casts a heavy shadow over absolute success of many of these projects. But in this welter of pessimism rural development seems to be the area where these nations could exert both unilaterally and then cooperate multilaterally. This paper posits the view that unless each member nation of SARC attains an optimum level of national socio-economic development regional peace and stability would ever remain a far cry and any exercise in regional cooperation would either be frustrating or unsatisfactory.

The major problems that weigh heavily on the societies of South Asia (in common with all other developing countries of the Third World) are poverty and inequality between and among sectors of society. In their attempts to solve these problems most governments have tried various measures to improve the quality of life and to lessen the gap or chasm between the urban and rural sectors. All these efforts brought from above either through government mechanisms or through other agencies have failed miserably.¹ These measures step down from above, from one bureaucratic layer to another, from one elite group to another, hardly reaching the common men who, in the words of Robert McNamara, allow in "absolute poverty", a condition of life characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy of infant mortality and low expectancy of life.² In developing countries where two-thirds of the population lead such a life in the vast and sprawling countryside, rural development, or in other words a policy for removing poverty, should be seen at the core of any viable strategy for national development. It is almost synonymous with national development. This is because the goal of development is the total development of human potentials.

Theoretical Framework

Development is related to human needs. Under differing political systems the concept of ‘human needs’ assumes varying connotations. For example, two governments, one representative and the other unrepresentative, cannot share a common view
as to the scope of human needs and developmental strategies. We are however concerned in this analysis with a view that takes into consideration all segments of society. In suggesting a theoretical context for the discussion that follows we propose to juxtapose two models: one explains types of human needs arising from genetic drives and the other, stages of development responsive to these needs.

### Model A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Human Needs</th>
<th>Model B</th>
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<td>Genetic drive</td>
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<td>Significant needs</td>
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Model A identifies three significant genetic drives and needs released from these drives. A success in these drives achieved through fulfilment of needs create a “full life” that utilises all human potentials. Hunger is the most ancient and basic of human needs. The hunger drive prompts the individual to secure food and other materials adequate for survival, by finding, consuming and storing food. The teleological drive is expressed through developing mental images and objectives as to the material life. Human urge for planning for the future ahead provide the example for such drives. The security drive prompts the individual to protect himself from any type of danger. If a society that a man lives in is not developed to a level where he can satisfy all these needs his life is certainly “beneath any reasonable definition of human life”.3
To be meaningful and effective development is to have the stages as suggested by model B. The four stages are shown in an inverted order. At the base are those developments that are addressed to such basic human needs as poverty, hunger, disease and unemployment. A satisfaction of these needs leads to a higher set of economic, social and political developments and ultimately to the full flowering of human potentials or 'total development' that retrieve peoples from absolute poverty. It seems, in the final analysis, all developmental strategies should have twin objectives: growth and equity which entail a restructuring of the socio-economic, and hence political or power relationship, in a given society. The World Bank groups all the SARC countries under the heading of low income countries. The staggering magnitude of rural poverty in South Asia requires that the major thrust of developmental activities should be in the rural sector.

South Asian Poverty: A Product of Common Historical Heritage

In South Asia lives about one-fourth of world's population on 3.3 per cent of the world's land area. Except Nepal and Bhutan all other nations of this region share a common colonial heritage. Much of what we see as poverty is mostly the product of the negative impact of colonial rule. The economy of the colony was organised in a way that served only the interest of the metropolis.

The major economic dislocation caused by colonial rule was the creation of a wide gap between the rural and urban sectors. In South Asia prior to colonial rule this gap was not so great. Rural settlements were not only the producers of agricultural commodities but were also the centres of cottage industries. There was a fine blend of agricultural and industrial functions, of course, in tune with the needs of the time. In between the relatively larger urban centres, which were in essence administrative, trade and cultural centres and settlements, there were a number of
market towns which provided opportunities for a part of the rural population to pursue non-agricultural vocations. This was how the problem of surplus labour was also solved. Instead of using this system of human settlements as the foundation to build an urban industrial society the colonial rulers pursued policies which created a hiatus between rural and urban areas. The industrial function of rural settlements was deliberately neglected to make room for imported European goods. This led to a further pressure of population on limited agricultural resources.

What resulted was an exploitative urban rural relation. The system of urban settlements were used as suction points to drain agricultural surpluses into the metropole. Intrusion of capitalist interests in agriculture coupled with differential access to productive resources made this suction mechanism continue even after the colonial rulers had left. A kind of capital intensive industrialisation also played a key role in creating rural poverty.

Rationale for Rural Development

a. Poverty: Common Threat to SARC Countries

It is quite often suggested that of all the experiment in regional cooperation made after the World II, only those inspired by common threat perceptions have made any headway. This explains the success of the E.E.C. and ASEAN. Some other regional organisations, for example, the Arab League and the OAU, could not make much headway because of lack of a shared security perspective. Such a line of argument has a strategic security context. And considered in this context, the prognosis is that SARC would not be successful. But this is a very narrow and misleading view. Threats to a society emanate not only from external sources but from internal as well. The common internal threat to South Asian societies is poverty. Poverty, hunger, malnutrition and rural-urban imbalance created by uneven economic development and growing economic disparities in wealth and income contribute to make an imbalance in socio-
economic structure. A cumulative result is the lack of societal consensus on fundamental issues and broadly the unrepresentative and repressive character of the regimes. Since fundamental issues are involved in politics on which there is endemic lack of consensus, domestic political scenario very often assumes a violent character. Under the impact of such politics the divisions, both vertical and horizontal, within these societies are exacerbated and the level and intensity of internal threats to state structures escalate. Such a generalisation, more or less explains the existing political scenario in South Asia. The only way to bring about a change for the better would be to recognise poverty as the most important source of internal threats common to all the countries and to explore a common platform to fight against it through a concerted and co-ordinated programme of action.

b. Use of Human Resources

Throughout the past the battle-cries that have echoed across development decades ranged from community development to self-reliance, green revolution, integrated rural development, integrated area development, participation and rural based planning and so on. The only permanent feature of this rather desolate landscape are the rural poor. Despite the changing strategies and profusion of programmes "the poverty of lowest 20 to 50 per cent of the population (depending on the country) is increasing, and societies are becoming increasingly polarised". But the other side of the picture is that, most of this multitude of rural poor can provide human resources who are either underemployed on the farms or seasonally unemployed where there is not much work to be done on the farms. It is estimated that agricultural work on the farms provides employment for a maximum of 180 days or 6 months in a year. On the whole, the predominantly agricultural economies of South Asian countries are rich in at least human resource. But this vast resource, although mostly unskilled and often illiterate, is now being wasted with serious consequences. The most immediate and challenging task
for development strategists in South Asia is to mobilise this vast reservoir of human labour and channel it to productive use. The People’s Republic of China has shown how, given an ideological frame and imaginative leadership, such vast labour resources can be effectively used to build a society at an accelerated pace. This is a promising field of cooperation where SARC countries could profitably exchange experiences and technical know-hows without the risk of tampering with any touchy issue.

c. **Indigenisation**

A corollary to the argument for a proper utilisation of human resources by a correct rural development strategy is the plea for indigenisation. In rural development, the commitment to indigenise is to launch a direct attack on mass poverty. Indigenisation places prior emphasis on social goals of development and puts man as the central focus. This is the reason why this process, despite certain misgivings, has earned renewed advocacy on the discussion of social development.

The strategy of development in South Asian countries is mostly based on the technocratic growth approach which emphasises technological modernisation, managerial efficiency and high capital investment in all of which the rural poor are unable to participate. This development strategy has been largely successful in terms of increased GNP. But its benefits are not meant for the rural poor but for the few elite landlords, and rich peasants. But the paradox is that much trumpeted ideology underlying development planning is the promotion of economic productivity and the improvement of the quality of life of the generally agricultural and largely traditional poor sections of society. Indigenisation is an alternative to this purely technocratic model. Against the purely economic bias of development strategies and approaches, this process pays due accord to the human and social dimension of rural development. As one analyst aptly puts, “it is now becoming increasingly clear that possession of technical knowledge alone is not enough in getting agricultural development moving on its path of attributing to overall economic

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development. This has to be buttressed with knowledge of some of the sociological factors such as land tenure, family and village organisations, values and norms, and the role of strong solidarity among the people”. Therefore indigenisation is a process that calls for a continuous effort to consider rural development both as a complex process encompassing equal emphasis on technical and socio-cultural factors.  

In the final analysis the process of indigenisation seeks to achieve such goals as:

1. promotion of social strategies in the planning and implementation of rural development,
2. utilisation of development approaches aimed at ensuring development benefits (economic productivity and quality of life) to the poor, and
3. the active participation of the poor in all phases of the decision-making process.

In the South Asian context rural development presents a field where the process of indigenisation could be used with rewarding experience.

d. Balancing Rural-Urban Gap

We have observed in the beginning of this discussion that a rural urban gap is the product of colonial legacy. Such a state of affairs has been exacerbated by a strong urban bias in development planning.

Despite the fact that majority of the population in these countries live in rural areas, the rural sector has not received a proportionate share of development resources. In some cases, they have even experienced net outflow of resources resulting in their gradual impoverishment. In most countries of South Asia today, the rural sector suffers from large scale poverty. Agriculture, the main occupation of the rural people remains poorly developed at a low level of technology without proper linkage with growing urban sector except as suppliers of food and raw materials. The ina-
adequate linkage between the urban and rural sectors means that benefits accruing from urban industrial growth do not trickle down sufficiently to the rural poor.

On the contrary, the urban sectors have grown at an impressive rate. Both income and modern amenities of life have increased at a much faster rate. This imbalance between urban and rural sectors have serious socio-economic and political repercussions. On the one hand, the rural sector languishes and loses all potentialities. On the other hand, the urban sector is swarmed by rural destitutes in quest for better amenities of life. But the urban sector cannot guarantee adequate job opportunities. Consequently, the rural migrants are constrained to eke out a living by doing odd-jobs. Many of them become a part of the urban destitutes leading to an increase in poverty and squalor in urban areas. The only way out of this dismal circumstances is an intensification of rural development with the twin goals of growth and equity.

SARC and Rural Development

We have already observed that one of the nine areas of cooperation is rural development. As the initiator Bangladesh, in her Working Paper of 1981, very wisely and farsightedly pointed out, “the areas selected should only be those in which cooperation will mutually benefit all the countries irrespective of existing economic disparities so as to make regional cooperation meaningful, strengthen the spirit of mutual trust and ultimately bridge the developmental gaps existing among the countries of the region”. The Working Paper also identified eleven areas of cooperation and the sixth of which was agricultural rural development. The initial discussions, however, finally produced nine specific areas of cooperation (mentioned earlier) and rural development was not left out.

The tenor of this discussion is that, in view of the existing socio-economic realities and the existing strong grounds for it rural development seems to be an area where cooperation of the
seven nations can produce elements of mutual benefit. Again, by the stretch of another argument it can be said that, rural development of South Asian region offers a scope for making SARC a meaningful framework for cooperation. A leading analyst of Bangladesh has rightly pointed out that a mass-level, not elite-level cooperation is the *sine qua non* for the success of SARC.\(^\text{16}\) If pursued along the lines suggested in this discussion rural development offers the potential for a mass-level cooperation among the South Asian nations.

**Conclusion**

The main thrust of argument in this paper is to rationalise rural development as an area of cooperation which calls for attention of SARC countries with priority. This is because with uneven socio- economies and consequent socio-political ills none of the seven nations can hope to go for a meaningful multilateral cooperation. As rural development is concerned with tackling basic human needs of the overwhelming majority of the population of all the South Asian countries all other areas of cooperation appear to be subsidiary to it. Rural development is also an area wherein efforts could be directed to coping with poverty, the only common threat to SARC countries. Attention is also drawn to the fact that an approach based on an equal emphasis on technical and socio-cultural factors is necessary to make rural development strategies meaningful.

This emphasis on rural development should not be construed to mean a rejection of urban sector as an area of development. Rural and urban sectors are mutually interdependent and complementary and they make a composite whole of national economy.\(^\text{17}\) It is suggested here that in the context of each nation of South Asia as well as in the context of the region rural development could be a bottom-up way to peace and stability.
NOTES

1. For analysis of the rural development efforts in South Asia see A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan, *Rural Development in South Asia* (Dhaka: Centre for Development Research, 1983).


3. Ibid.


for the Public Policy and Rural Development Community, Community Development Research Council and Policy Studies Programme, College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines, 1982.


