

## SAARC AND ITS PERFORMANCE IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC SECTORS

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The 12<sup>th</sup> Saarc Summit which will be held in Pakistan from 4 to 6 January 2004 will hopefully prove as a turning point in the tense and complex geo-politics of South Asia. Since January 2000 when the 11<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit was held at Kathmandu, SAARC could not meet again at the heads of government's level because of the impasse in Indo-Pakistan relations. The South Asian Association for Regional cooperation consists of seven countries of South Asian sub continent.

As a matter of fact, education and other essential socio-economic sectors have been neglected by the successive governments of the South Asian region on the whimsical pretext of territorial security. ***This article is an attempt to assess the origin and accomplishments of the SAARC in vital socio-economic sectors.***

Together these countries constitute 20% of the world population and have 3.5% of its land area. The population of South Asia is more than 1.4 billion. "South Asia, with 21 per cent of world population, has barely 1.5 per cent of the world's GNP and 3.3 per cent of the world's total area. Obviously it has the largest concentration of the world's poverty<sup>1</sup>". Thus it has been ranked as third major concentration of population in the world. Surprisingly, its share is more than 40% in the total number absolute poor, 45% in total number of adult illiterate females and 49% in the total number of malnourished children. South Asia is unique in the world in having a concentration of third world economic problems, at the forefront of which is the poverty of its population.

There is no region more in need of the alleviation of the lot of its people than South Asia. By all indices of economics, its people have been

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ranked as the poor and the region itself is in throes the hard core world poverty. The per capita income of the regional countries is estimated between \$ 100 to \$ 800, on the basis of which it can be said that South Asia has the bulk of poverty. This implies horrifying living conditions of hunger, deprivation of life necessities, malnutrition, disease, squalor and living death of peoples. "These conditions have eroded the quality of peoples as deprivations of opportunities for education and humanistic pursuits have reduced their existence to primitive levels".<sup>2</sup>

The blight of poverty in South Asia is evident from The Human Development Report 2003. It reveals that, unfortunately, more than 500 million people out of 1.4 billion population live in absolute poverty, 270 million people lack access to even rudimentary health facilities, 350 million are without safe drinking water, 830 million have no access to sanitation and 430 million, of which two third are women, are unable to read and write, yet the ruling elite of South Asian countries are spending more than 60 billion dollars every year to accumulate weapons of mass destruction. That's why the South Asia has emerged as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished and least gender sensitive region in the entire world due to avarice of self-annihilation.

These appalling figures agitate the conscience of sane person that why south Asia despite abundant natural and human resources has remained economically impoverished, politically fragile and intellectually barren. It is shocking to know that the region which only three decades ago was far ahead of the now prosperous economies of South East Asia has slid behind even the Sub-Saharan states in almost all economic and social indicators.

What should be the strategy to arrest the trend of under-development and to curb the greed of rulers, and how to make this unfortunate region socially united, politically strong and stable, and economically prosperous. These appalling and miserable conditions forced every one to ponder. One can have faith that only forging ahead cooperation among the South Asian states can reverse these negative and adverse trends. Thus people of this region have high hopes in organization like SAARC. The aims and objective of SAARC, if implemented in letter and spirit would dramatically transform the future of the 1.4 billion poverty ridden people of south Asia. Hitherto the cooperation and development of the region has remained hostage to the exigencies of mutual mistrust and conflict. Despite being plagued by political disputes and socio-economic imbalances, SAARC as a regional organization has

procured profound accomplishments in mutually agreed areas of cooperation.

SAARC region has achieved social progress and rapid economic development following its establishment. The World Bank has appreciated the performance of Saarc in vital and essential socio-economic sectors. While it has been among the world's fast growing regions, improving the health and education of its people and reducing poverty rates, it remains a region enormously challenged to improve the quality of life for all its 1.4 billion citizens.

The indicators for reproductive and children's health have improved since 1985; maternal mortality has declined from 87 to 73 per 1,000 live births in 2000. "Mortality rates for children under 5 years have declined from 129 to 99 per 1,000 children. Child malnutrition has declined from 140 in 85 to 99 in 2000 in the region, but remains among the highest in the world with almost 50 percent of children below the standards for weight by age. While primary school enrollment and adult literacy rates have increased, South Asian illiteracy rates at 45 percent are still the highest in the world".<sup>3</sup>

Before assessing the accomplishment of SAARC in socio-economic and other sectors it is *sin qua non* to have peep into the origin of this organization.

Following the end of World War II the world has experienced a new kind of cooperative spirit that is formation of regional cooperation groups by countries situated in geographical proximity having close historical and similar cultural background and common economic problem with identical capabilities to manage them. The international attention was shifted to economic and social issues and nations were mobilizing their resources to raise the level of living standard. They found regional integration as the most effective and efficient way to maximize social and economic development. As corollary of this positive trend the RCD in 1964, ASEAN in 1967, ECO in January 85 and SAARC in December 1985 were established inspite of serious and chronic intra-regional and bilateral disputes and differences. Regionalism and inter-regional cooperation have evolved as a new innovative phenomenon in the post war international system. "They are perceived as panacea for avoiding traumatic course of conflict and maximizing efforts for development".<sup>4</sup>

The South Asian countries until 1985 have not been able to establish regional group and maintain amicable relations amongst themselves. The obvious result is that today they are classified as the

poorest amongst the poor nations of the world. "Impulses toward cooperation in South Asia have been weak historically, primarily because of political discord and the existence of bitter disputes among the states of the region".<sup>5</sup> Neither a common threat perception and maturing of nationalism that actuated states of West Europe to abandon old patterns of conflicts, nor a shared vision of security through cooperation that motivated countries of South East Asia, has been prevalent in South Asia. Unfortunately, in South Asia conflict and disputes have often emanated from within the region. Consequential tension and bitterness over a prolonged period have left teeming millions to face untold miseries in the region. There were various external and internal factors and pressures which compelled the regional states to establish regional organization in South Asia.

The SAARC region has been beset with numerous interrelated domestic and inter-state conflicts owing to their origin to a large number of sources. These were rooted in the colonial past as well as dynamics of post colonial socio-economic and politico-cultural development of South Asian societies.

The avowed purpose of establishing SAARC was to mitigate suffering of the people and to reduce confrontation among the member states. The SAARC comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka is manifestation of the peoples of South Asia to work together towards finding solutions to their common problems in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding and to create an order based on mutual respect, equity and shared benefits. General (Retd) K.M Arif has described the members of SAARC family as "the seven member constellation of Ursa Minor in South Asia".<sup>6</sup>

The SAARC was established following the letter diplomacy initiated by President Zia Ur Rahman of Bangladesh, with the objective of bettering the lot of the South Asian people, to accelerate economic, social progress and cultural development. The prime objective of SAARC is to eradicate poverty from South Asia and enhance economic cooperation in various vital fields. The leaders of South Asia acknowledged during the first Summit held in Dhaka on 7-8 December 1985 that "the countries of South Asia who constitute one-fifth of humanity, were faced with the formidable challenges posed by poverty, underdevelopment, low level of production, unemployment and pressure of population compounded by exploitation of the past and other adverse legacies".<sup>7</sup> The basic and lofty goal of poverty eradication is to be achieved by gradual step by step

collaboration and mutual assistance in unanimously chosen programmes in the economic, social, technical and scientific fields. Progress in these non-controversial and mutually beneficial areas is expected in turn to contribute to "mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems leading to peace and stability in the region".<sup>8</sup>

Poverty is no longer contained within national boundaries. Poverty has become globalized. It travels across borders, without a passport, in the form of drugs, diseases, pollution, migration, terrorism and political instability. Poverty is a complex, multidimensional problem that casts adverse shadow over many areas of existence. Poverty is an enormous threat to the political stability, social cohesion and environmental health of SAARC region. The World Health Organization termed it as "the world's deadliest disease".<sup>9</sup>

There are various issues which are not allowing SAARC to come to the expectation of the people. Besides other minor irritant, *Kashmir problem* is, to a great extent, hindering the progress of this regional organization. "Kashmir is a festering wound".<sup>10</sup> A renowned Pakistani General stated and expressed the mindset of Pakistan in 1995 that "durable peace may elude South Asia so long as the Kashmir dispute remains unsettled".<sup>11</sup> Intellectuals of various shades are agreed that "without settlement of Kashmir dispute, durable peace between the two countries cannot be maintained".<sup>12</sup> It has the dubious distinction of being the oldest unresolved dispute on the agenda of UN. This issue has eroded the credibility of the UN in the eyes of Muslims of the world. No doubt the Security Council recommended measures to stop the fighting, including the use of observers, and to create conducive conditions for a plebiscite. It established a United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan. India had since then flied in the face of UN resolutions with impunity. As a matter of fact, "almost all efforts and every constructive proposal to resolve the dispute were dashed by the consistent and unyielding Indian obduracy".<sup>13</sup> The burning issue is Kashmir dispute which triggered 1947-48 and 1965 wars, and the Indian invasion of East Pakistan, dislocating ceasefire line in Kashmir and dismantling East Pakistan. Among the troop advances in Siachen, the nuclear arms race problem, fierce clash in Kargil and amassing of Indian troops on Pakistan border on the whimsical ground of cross border terrorism and severing of diplomatic channels and reluctance on the holding of twelfth SAARC summit are some of the crucial issues which hinder the process of SAARC since its inception:

Any analysis of the SAARC progress divulges that the main obstacles in the progress are political and economic in nature. These include internal political tension affecting the relationship between member states. "Bilateral tensions also prevent SAARC from adopting a politico-security role. Indo - Pakistan bilateral tensions have played a particularly detrimental role in the growth of South Asian regionalism. The two countries have failed to resolve their main issue of contention that is Kashmir dispute".<sup>14</sup> Kashmir dispute is a thorny problem between India and Pakistan and is universally recognized as such - "While the main dispute between East and West was ideological, the Indo - Pakistan problem is complex, over which both have fought three wars and still causes tension with no respite in sight. Not only that, this geographical dispute has become compounded with historical and cultural animosities".<sup>15</sup> Serious political disputes are an insurmountable hurdle in the way of SAARC progress. The persistent denial by India of the right of self determination to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, agreed to by the two neighbouring countries and guaranteed by the United Nations, has not only embittered relations between them for over five and half decades but also resulted in wastage of SAARC region's scarce economic resources in futile and fruitless military preparations. "Both India and Pakistan are spending billions on maintaining armies in Kashmir. Both of these countries are afflicted by an appalling poverty. It is obscene that money should be squandered on fighting and killing, when it could be used constructively for saving lives".<sup>16</sup>

The magnitude and cost of this economy wrecking confrontation continues to escalate with the grim prospect of an ever-stagnating quality of life in the region. The dreaded possibility of a ferocious clash, far worse than those of 1948, 1965, 1971, should it come to happen, again, would be a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. Apart from large-scale human misery and life loss, it would cause colossal damage to the economic infrastructure of the two most developed members of SAARC. "Today this paradise on the earth has turned to hell, once a Shangri-La Kashmir is now a battle field",<sup>17</sup> says a prominent Indian journalist Surrender Oberoi.

The indigenous uprising from 1989 speaks of eighty five thousand killing of innocent Kashmiries in the region that is besieged by over one million Indian troops that are meant to forcibly suppress and subjugate them through an orgy of death and destruction. The Amnesty International while listing hundred of custodial killing in Kashmir observed that

brutality of torture in Jammu and Kashmir defies belief. "By ignoring its own citizens and challenging the basis of their citizenship, the Indian state helped transform into rebellion, and thus become party to the armed revolt against it".<sup>18</sup>

The lingering dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir is not only a source of destabilization in the region but also casts adverse impacts on the progress of SAARC and "presents an insurmountable obstacle".<sup>19</sup> For Pakistan Kashmir represents the unfinished agenda of partition. Kashmir is recognized as a disputed territory by the United Nations and by the international community. Kashmir has the dubious honour of being the longest unresolved question on the United Nations agenda. Pakistan would like that the Kashmir problem should resolve in the light of UN resolutions and in accordance with the freely expressed wishes of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. As long as the Kashmir dispute is not resolved fairly and honorably, it is difficult to see how peace and stability can be achieved in SAARC region. In fact the settlement of Kashmir issue holds the key to any significant progress of the SAARC. As a matter of fact, "almost all efforts and every constructive proposal to resolve the dispute were dashed by the consistent and unyielding Indian obduracy".<sup>20</sup>

The existence of political problem like Kashmir and India's dispute with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh has left a wide margin between the promise of SAARC and its reality. It is logical to predict that the eventual elimination of other less serious issues and irritants in due course of time would be solved, if the major problem of Kashmir is solved in a manifestly just and fair manner. Till the dawn of such a realization, SAARC at best, can cater only the husk of superficial cooperation. A renowned Retired General of Pakistan by saying that "peace in South Asia cannot be achieved by short circuiting Kashmir cause" aptly vindicated this stark fact.<sup>21</sup> The shadow cast by Indo - Pak tension on SAARC is "unfortunate".<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, SAARC's record has been dismal due to perpetual and persistent bickering among its major constituents over the unresolved territorial issues and petty political issues thus diverting precious economic resources away from development.

Despite this chronic bleeding wound, the SAARC as largest regional organization of the world has procured enormous progress in mutually agreed areas of cooperation. The accomplishment of SAARC in the socio- economic field is commendable. It is proven fact that intra

regional cooperation is useful in diverse ways. The economic cooperation among the capitalist countries has made West Europe a stronger force in the world. The ASEAN countries have become Asian tigers of the world. The weakness of individual countries in the global market had caused South Asian countries to fall into the debt trap of the West.

It is a fact that regional cooperation may release the political tension in South Asia. Almost all the seven countries have the same history, religion, culture, and language. Thus South Asian States joined hands to explore the fruits of regional cooperation in South Asia through SAARC. The SAARC has convinced the leaders of South Asia that regional economic cooperation shares the problem and prospects of one another. Regional economic cooperation as envisaged by SAARC embraced many fields but the thrust is ostensibly on cooperation in the vital economic fields. However the declaration of objectives suggests that the "primary aim was neither political nor economic but human and humanistic".<sup>23</sup>

The SAARC, to great extent has been successful to improve the quality of life and welfare of South Asian people. Hence political, economic and other forms of cooperation contemplated are toward the procurement of lofty objective of poverty eradication and enhancement of economic cooperation in agreed areas of cooperation.

SAARC has successfully begun to make strides towards achieving benefits of regional integration in the socio-economic and cultural spheres in a structured and organised manner. The SAARC has achieved high rate of success through integrated programme of action, which is a vital and important component of the SAARC process and includes a number of important areas of cooperation. Technical committees that were established under Article VI of the Charter of the SAARC, numbering eleven, are performing designated function properly in the identified areas of cooperation. In response to the emphasis accorded by successive summits on the need to further consolidate and streamline Integrated Programme of Action, these standing and technical committees have catered tangible benefits to the people of South Asia. The SAARC, as regional organization, has prevailed upon the members to make their economies complementary for a balanced interdependence through proper production planning. There is possibility for comparative cost advantage in trading among themselves, rather than with countries outside the region, because of their geographical proximity and reduction of cost. The growing maturity of the association was demonstrated by the SAARC

leaders' decision to base their cooperation on a more lasting and long term basis.

SAARC had adopted various effectual steps for economic cooperation among the member states, as it would contribute to the generation of employment and increase in member country's purchasing power. During the sixth SAARC Summit held in Colombo on 21 December 1991, "the Heads of States or Governments were pleased to note the establishment of the Committee For Economic Cooperation as an important outcome of the regional study on trade manufactures and services. They declared their commitment to the liberalization of trade in the region through a step by step approach in such a manner that all countries in the region share the benefits of trade expansion equitably".<sup>24</sup>

It is a great achievement of the SAARC that all countries signed an agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1995. The leaders reiterated their firm belief that the operationalisation of SAPTA will herald the beginning of a novel and significant process of regional economic cooperation and would lend strength to SAARC as an institution for promoting the welfare of the peoples of South Asia. They have decided to establish SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) before 2005. Their ultimate goal is to form SAARC Union on the pattern of EU by 2008. During Ninth SAARC Summit held in Male on 12 - 14 May 1997 "the heads of States or Governments noted with satisfaction the entry into force of agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA). They reiterated the importance of achieving a free trade area by 2001, and reiterated that steps toward trade liberalisation must take into account the special needs of the smaller and the least developed countries, and those benefits must accrue equitably".<sup>25</sup> A Preferential Trading Area is by definition one in which member states brings down tariff on each other's goods and accord preference to the goods of member states as compared to those of the rest of the world.

SAPTA is an agreement among the SAARC states and sets down well-defined framework of rules and modalities for "incremental and gradual liberalisation of intra- SAARC trade".<sup>26</sup> The documents contains a preamble, 25 articles and 3 annexure including one which contains the nationally agreed schedules of tariff concessions for selected products, the extent of tariff cuts and several additional preferences accorded to least developed SAARC states, with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives falling into the category: The sixth round of talks on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) concluded in Kathmandu in November 2003 and

finalized the treaty. It will accelerate regional economic cooperation in South Asian countries. Following the finalization of the SAFTA framework treaty, the Heads of the SAARC member states will sign the treaty at the upcoming 12<sup>th</sup> Summit to be held in Pakistan from 4 to 6 January 2004. "It is going to be very significant milestone in the history of saarc".<sup>27</sup>

The SAARC has achieved positive results in these important areas. The heads of States or Governments recognised that illiteracy was a major impediment to economic development and social emancipation and that the eradication of illiteracy in the region through co-operative endeavors within SAARC must continue to be pursued resolutely. Therefore, SAARC established Technical Committee on Education, Culture and Sports. SAARC has made progress in these vital and important fields by identifying themes pertaining to Education. The priority themes for cooperation in the field of education are Women and Education; Universal Primary Education; Literacy, Post Literacy and continuing education; Educational Research; Science and Technical Education. SAARC has made progress by conducting workshops/seminars on the priority themes: Modernisation of curriculum; Environmental education including Population education; Planning and Management of education of teacher training; Higher education; Book production and marketing; and Publication of Anthology of South Asia poetry.

The SAARC has designated the year 1996 as the "SAARC year of Literacy".<sup>28</sup> The SAARC countries have pledged to attain universal compulsory education up to the age of fifteen before 2010. The member states in order to enhance the standard of education pledged to allocate 6% of the GDP by the year 2010 to the neglected education sector. Special focus has been placed on the girl child with a view to eliminating gender disparities in access to education. The SAARC is also engaged in the improvement and expansion of the SAARC Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships scheme. In this context, emphasis is being placed on augmenting the utility and effectiveness of the schemes, i.e. exchanging detailed information on schemes particularly relating to offers facilities, eligibility requirements and assessing the implementation of schemes.

The SAARC has established SAARC Federation of University Women (SAARCFUW) in July 1995 in Colombo with the objectives of, among other things, bringing together the University women of the region to promote understanding and cooperation and share responsibility in

society for the social upliftment in the region. SAARCFUW was granted the status of SAARC recognized body in May 1997.

The Saarc has established a Human Resource Development Centre in Islamabad, Pakistan, to assist in developing human resources in member states, inter-alia in social, economic, educational and environmental fields.

The SAARC has included Women in Development as an area of cooperation under the IPA in 1986. The Heads of States or Governments noted that "many groups of women and girl children in South Asia continue to be in disadvantaged position and lack equal opportunities for economic and social development".<sup>29</sup> Specific issues taken up by the Committee in charge include preparation of Regional Plan of Action for women, effective dissemination of technical information relating to women in development generated by member states. The SAARC has designated 1990 as the 'SAARC year of the Girl Child' and 1991-2000 as the 'SAARC decade of the Girl child'. The SAARC in order to curb the trafficking of women and children within and between countries pledged to coordinate efforts of member countries to adopt effective measures. The SAARC has established the 'Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution' on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2002. This Convention would be a vital instrument in dealing with this menace. The SAARC has recommended establishing a Regional Fund for Rehabilitation of Victims of trafficking in women and children for prostitution on voluntary basis.

The SAARC has also been at the forefront of these issues with commitment to issues of gender equality and to bring women into the mainstream of development. Two ministerial conferences have been held one in 1986 in India and the other in Pakistan during 1990. A Regional plan of Action has been drawn which has identified areas of concern and goals set for them. The Technical committee on Women Welfare and Development is mandated with the task of reviewing progress every year on the implementation of the Plan of Action in the field. The SAARC had successfully formulated collective position on issue before the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995.

The development and well being of children is another principal area of cooperation identified by SAARC from its inception. The Eleventh SAARC Summit has further accorded impetus to cooperation among the member states in tackling the important issues relating to women and children. Among many others, the Heads of States or Governments resolved to implement appropriate policies at the national level to achieve

the targets and objectives set out in Rawalpindi Resolution adopted at the end of Third SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children of South Asia held in August 1996, including the call to eliminate the evil of child labour by the year 2010. The SAARC has realized that the problems faced by children are inextricably linked to the prevailing socio-economic conditions and problems of the region and, therefore, adopted holistic approach to rectify them. The SAARC has formulated a "Convention on Regional Arrangements on the promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia"<sup>30</sup> in January 2002. The SAARC had designated 1990 as the "SAARC year of the Girl Child." The SAARC also designated 1993 as the "SAARC year of the Disabled persons". In addition 1991 – 2000 had been designated as the "SAARC Decade of the Girl Child".

In the area of child development, SAARC has been very closely cooperating with International agencies such as UNICEF with which SAARC has signed MOU in December 1993. The SAARC – UNICEF MOU envisages the relevant SAARC decisions relating to Children through an annual agenda which includes joint studies, exchange of documents and monitoring of implementation. The social agenda of SAARC focused on addressing the over-arching issues of population planning, human resources development, integration of gender concerns, especially the concerns of women and children and other disadvantaged groups, will constitute to be of enduring significance to the realization of SAARCs vision for the future".<sup>31</sup>

The above mentioned accomplishments in mutually agreed areas reveal that SAARC as a Regional Organization is performing a tremendous job since its inception in vital socio-economic fields. In its eighteen-year life it has done more than its counter part organizations, whether of European Union, ASEAN or NAFTA, as both have no internal problem to settle, while SAARC has a fatal wound which is still profusely bleeding. Like The United Nations, SAARC as a regional organization cannot be termed as failure but the members of it are unable to make it more effective, result oriented and dynamic organization. SAARC with plenty of natural and human resources could procure a profound rate of economic development and even become economic power to be reckoned with European Union, NAFTA and ASEAN provided member countries pool their energies and resources for the collective benefit of each other. SAARC is capable of emerging as a dominating bloc in the world politics.

Unfortunately, bilateral tensions are preventing SAARC from adopting a politico-security role. Indo-Pak bilateral has played a detrimental role in the socio-economic progress of SAARC. President Pervez Musharraf aptly said that "Jammu and Kashmir has been described as the most dangerous dispute in the world. A just solution to this dispute holds the key to peace and security in South Asia".<sup>32</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit will be held in January 2004 in Pakistan and it is expected that SAARC would take more steps to correct socio-economic imbalances and consolidate political stability in the region. The dynamic and effective SAARC could eliminate the ever increasing poverty from unfortunate South Asia which generates less than 2% of world income, yet supports 22% of world population and 44% of the world's poor (those who earn less than a dollar a day) and help reduce unnecessary and futile defence expenditure.

It is high time that the SAARC states should wake up to the realities of the situation, reduce the level of mutual recrimination, and build a strong base for regional cooperation. Without an amicable solution of bilateral and regional disputes bedeviling the political climate in South Asia, the dream of the Regional Cooperation of such a magnitude may not come true to as high and ideal a degree as could be visualized.

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