

## 'The 7th Summit is a Turning Point in SAARC's History'

**I**t was not by chance that Faruq A Choudhury, 59, was appointed the Chairman of the SAARC Preparatory Committee for the just concluded 7th Summit. His experience and expertise made it obvious. He was there when it started in December, 1985. As the Foreign Secretary of the host country, he was the chief organiser of the First SAARC Summit, and in the absence of any SAARC secretariat, served as the Secretary-General of the Conference. So it was only natural that the government should call on his expertise once more. A career diplomat, he joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1956 and served in various capacities in Italy, China, Holland and Algeria till our independence in December 1971.

He was Bangladesh's first Chief of Protocol and served as Deputy High Commissioner in London from 1972-76. From 76 to 82 he served as Ambassador to UAE and EEC and Benelux countries. He became an Additional Foreign Secretary in 1982 and served as the Foreign Secretary from 1984-86. From 86-92, he was Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India. Choudhury retired from service in January 1992. He served in an honorary capacity as the Summit's chief organiser.

The Daily Star (DS) — You remarked to me earlier that instead of one Summit, you ended up organising three. Tell us about your experiences while organising the Dhaka Summit.

Faruq A Choudhury (FC) — This conference, in a way, tested the limits of an organiser's patience. Given the two postponements, and the volatile situation in the region, one could never feel confident that all could turn out well at the end, as it did. It was really a test of our tenacity and patience. The cabinet decided that there will be an overall chairman and several sub-committees under the leadership of relevant ministers and the mayor of Dhaka.

There was a foreign ministry subcommittee. That was the main sub-committee, that prepared all the substantive documents. Then we had the cultural subcommittee, headed by the state minister for culture; the information subcommittee, headed by Information Minister; security sub-committee headed by the home minister etc. These were the main groups. I sat in all the sub-committees, so did the chief coordinator, Qumar Rahim, Director-General of the SAARC desk. I must say that this Summit would compare very unfavourably to the first in terms of ceremonies and lavish spending. Think of the airport arrangements for the leaders in the first Summit. Head of our government was at the airport, guard of honour, thousand of school girls lined up along the road, displays etc. Some of these were done away with, and others scaled down. Because of the change in protocol our Prime Minister was not to go to the airport to receive any heads of state or government. That saved us a lot of trouble and time. We combined the guard of honour, and the playing of the national anthem in the inaugural ceremony. Then of course, things like visiting national mausoleums had been done away in SAARC. Because heads of governments would do so in bilateral visits. We really went for a simple but highly dignified Summit.

DS: Let me clarify this point, did SAARC Summit decide to do away with visits to national monuments, or did they decide that it is not necessary, but left it to the host government?

FC: The idea is to simplify the procedure. And since visits to national monuments is covered in bilateral visits, so for SAARC, the leaders thought it was not necessary. This event of going to Late President Zia's mazar was our own idea. It was not in the programme. President Premadasa suggested it at the end of the river cruise. He thought it was the duty of SAARC heads of delegations to pay respect to the originator of SAARC idea. Others thought it was a jolly good idea and we had to make last minute preparations for it. Security aspect was to be taken care of. In fact this sudden programme put a lot of strain on our organizing capacity.

DS: Give us some of the highlights of the just concluded Summit.

FC: You see everyone is saying that it was a successful conference. We think there were no major hiccups but there were few minor ones. I remember on the concluding session we had a table for signing. There is a ceremonial aspect to this. For this we had rehearsed. I kept things ready. The table was in a straight line, and in alphabetical order. Just before the beginning of the conference one delegation, I would not name, suggested that it should be perhaps — a 'U' shaped table. The proposal came to me and I said 'No way'. I mean in 15 minutes time the thing was going to start and he wants changes. Then a Foreign Minister forgot his pen. I couldn't understand why the signing process was delayed. I thought that either he was a slow writer or his name was terribly long. The fact was, he had wait to borrow the pen from the person next to him.

DS: Was that the only hitch?

FC: No, there was another. The event that caused a lot of worry, for a while though, was the blackout on the night that the Foreign Minister was hosting a dinner at the Purbani Hotel. The lights went out in the entire city. I cannot recall such a massive power failure in Dhaka before. President Premadasa was to arrive at 11.40 that night, and we were all worried whether he would arrive in city without lights. It was definitely not the best way to welcome the sitting Chairman of SAARC. Anyway the lights came just on time and everything went alright.

DS: After the Summit got postponed, how did you all feel and what did you do?

FC: When the Summit got postponed the first time, after most of the delegations had arrived, we felt terribly frustrated. Officials and some ministers were already here in Dhaka. Preparations, as you can imagine, were all completed. Conferences like a Summit has to be very meticulously planned. The preparations have a momentum which is difficult for those outside the process to understand. It is a huge inter-ministerial machine which come into motion and gradually gathered speed and efficiency. For us to have completed the preparatory process and then to suddenly find out that we are back to zero, — not zero in the real sense — was quite devastating.

The first time I heard about the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya, was over the radio, and at that very moment, I knew in my heart that the Summit was off.

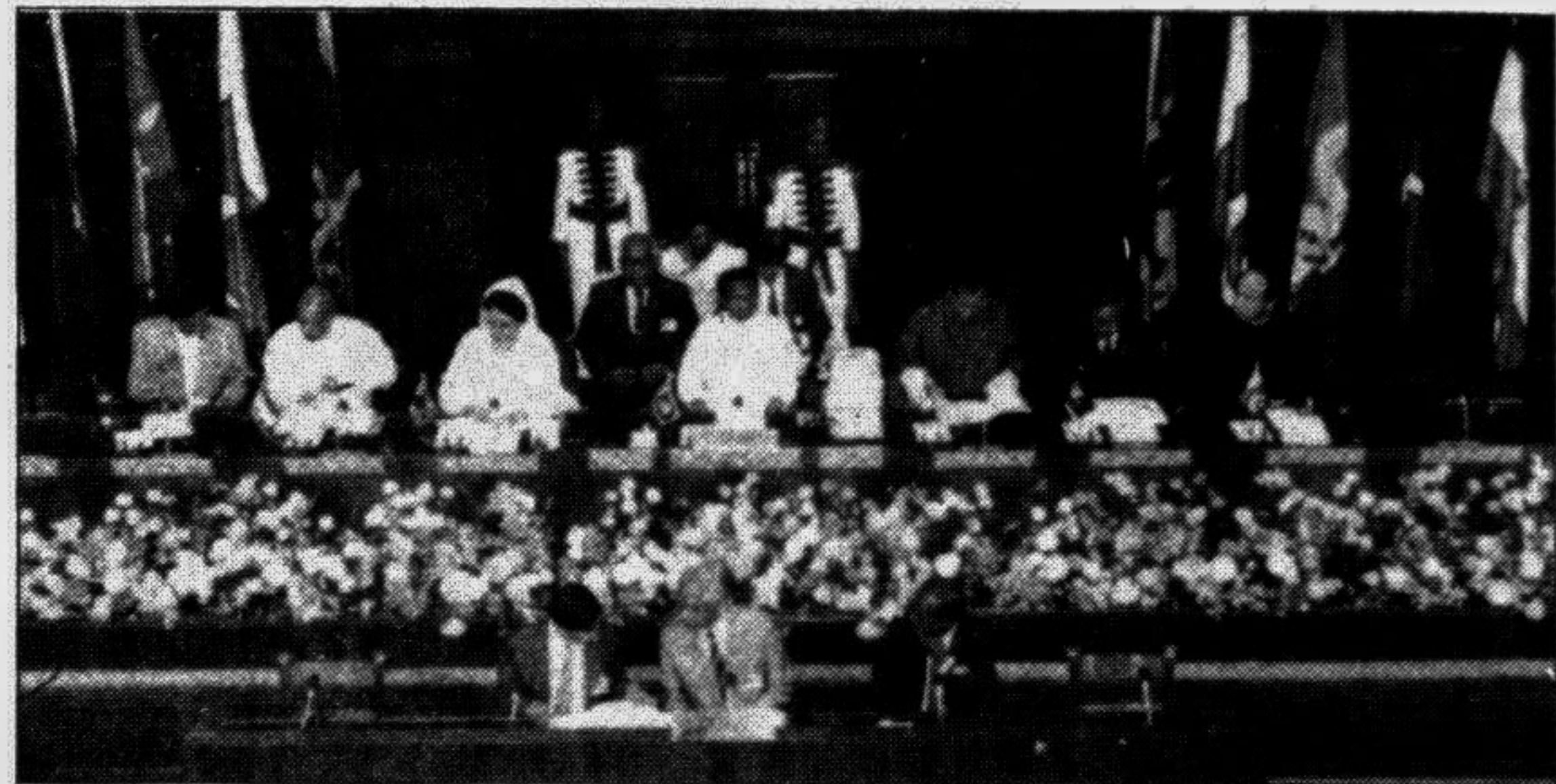
DS: By that time many of the officials were already here?

FC: Yes, yes. In fact I was at the reception given by our Chief Co-ordinator, for the members of the Programming Committee, when I heard this news over the radio. So you see the Programming Committee's meeting of the Summit was already on.

DS: What did you do immediately? Did you call the Foreign Minister, or the PM's

To get an insider's view of the 7th SAARC Summit, The Daily Star decided to talk to Faruq A Choudhury, the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee, and one who was intimately involved with every facet of the substantive and organising work of Summit preparation. In an in-depth and wide-ranging interview, Choudhury reveals to our readers the fascinating story of how Summit meetings are organised and how leaders interact to make historic decisions.

Interview by Mahfuz Anam, Star's Executive Editor.



Left: Faruq A Choudhury in his office.

Above: Leaders at 7th Summit session.

office, or what?

FC — I called the Foreign Minister.

DS — How long after the Babri Mosque destruction, did you get the official confirmation that Prime Minister Rao would not be coming?

FC — Within twenty four hours.

DS — Tell us about the second postponement.

FC — The second postponement was taken with a bit of cynicism, I think. The first postponement was in December. The second one was in January '93. If I remember correctly, the political affairs committee of the Indian cabinet advised Prime Minister Rao against leaving the country at that time. It was a very difficult time for them, they said. Well again the whole process had to be brought to a halt and again we felt terribly frustrated.

Sp when we told people about the third time, that we will finally hold the SAARC, many people found it to be a big joke. And coincidentally, it was on the 1st of April that we started telling people that the Summit was to be held. They would really look at me and laugh.

DS — When you are preparing the schedule, what is the balance of time you allow say, for example, for common discussions and for bilateral discussions. How is the time apportioned?

FC — I would say half and half. This time we left a full morning for bilateral talks. I think it is a very important aspect of the SAARC Summit.

DS — Let me clarify my question. As I see it, there are three types of meetings — one is the formal session, then there is time for bilateral talks. But there is the third, like the 'Retreat' where it is neither formal nor bilateral. There you have seven heads of governments talking to each other in an informal atmosphere, without any set agenda or structure to the discussions.

FC — I would say that going by the clock you have more time for unstructured talks. There is more time for free discussions.

DS — So would it be right

for me to conclude that the emphasis was more on allowing leaders time to get to know each other better, become comfortable in each other's company, develop informal relationships, etc.

FC — Yes, exactly. The 'Retreat' idea is also there in the Commonwealth heads of government meetings. A whole weekend is allocated for that purpose. In the case of SAARC the 'Retreat' is even more important. The rapport between leaders in our context is extremely important because SAARC decisions have a direct bearing, unlike the Commonwealth case, on member countries.

DS — How would you assess the outcome of this conference?

FC — I will try to be as objective as possible. I think the 7th Summit will be remembered as watershed summit in

important bearing on national policies. So there is a qualitative change and SAARC has moved into the very serious business of development. Expectations are high and SAARC will now have to come up with results.

DS — There is a lot of scepticism about SAPTA.

FC — Much of it come from a lack of understanding as to what it is. Now the countries will have to work out the details, according to their comparative advantage. What the Summit has achieved is to begin the process.

Through SAARC a tremendous thing is happening. People to people contact is increasing. I know this may sound like a cliché. But this is a fact. Once I feared that SAARC would be confined to contacts between government officials. This is no longer true. People are more involved and

very well with our Prime Minister. As one head of government said 'Being the only lady among us, we never seem to be able to say no to you.' So everybody said 'yes' to her. But to add, when you see these leaders from close quarters you realise that they all are very informal people. I cannot think of any single person, and I am not being diplomatic here at all, who is difficult to talk to, difficult to approach with a problem. They all are very easy people to get along with. They speak the same language, so to speak. They react to things in the same manner. They have similar background, similar problems — there really is a lot of common ground.

DS — One impression some people have as to why SAARC never took off is that the domestic agenda of some of the member countries influence the regional agenda too much. What do you think?

FC — This is true. But there cannot be any other way. Domestic politics will determine the main policies in any country's case. You have to accept it.

Broadly speaking, meaningful economic cooperation will make people look at political problems some what differently. Things that seem impossible today can be quite possible tomorrow. History moves very fast. We have reached the 1400th. Year of Bangla calendar. Think how far, and how fast, we have moved in the last one hundred years. When Bengal was partitioned in 1905, Dhaka was small, backward, district town. Today, after almost nine decades it is the capital of a sovereign nation. Dhaka gave birth to a regional body. Could anybody have imagined it? We have an independent country of our own. Imagine the role of Dhaka University. This institution has produced some of the great leaders who changed our history. Our nation has travelled a long way over the last hundred years. Things change, and change very fast. The next ten years may take us to places that we cannot foresee even now. The momentum of cooperation that we have set in motion through SAARC, and which got a big boost in the

last Summit, may take us to places that we cannot imagine today. It is better to prepare ourselves for such changes, for they are bound to come.

DS — Do you think the two postponements affected in anyway the substantive aspects of the outcome?

FC — No, not at all. We did not allow the fact of two postponements to affect the outcome. These were totally separate issues. The reasons for postponements had nothing to do with the matters that concerned SAARC or the Summit. No, there was absolutely no impact of the two postponements on the outcome of the meeting.

DS — Do you think.....

FC — If I may interrupt you. The very fact that the Summit took place speaks volumes about the inner strength of this body. Under what other circumstances would seven heads of government, leave their very pressing engagements and get together to talk and think about regional cooperation, unless SAARC existed. Everybody had their domestic problems. Yet they came. It means all these leaders attach tremendous importance to SAARC, otherwise why should they come?

DS: Tell us about some of the initial steps of the first Summit?

FC: In October 1984, I became the Foreign Secretary. Almost immediately we the work for building up to holding the first SAARC Summit in Dhaka. As SAARC was born in the mind of late President

Ershad of Bangladesh. Much had changed by the time we held the 7th Summit — second for Dhaka. Five heads of government from the first summit were not present in the second. There are only two common figures, the President of Maldives and the King of Bhutan.

In the first summit we had a very interesting situation. You see we went for the 'retreat' in the same boat 'Ostrich'. A lot of substantial things had to be discussed at the 'retreat'. In fact they were discussing the Declaration. There was going to be an official press release also. We were going para by para, when I realized, in utter horror, that we had forgotten to take a type writer on board. I was the Secretary General of the Summit and I was sitting there with no stenographer and no type writer. Well everybody took it in a good spirit and I took notes of what each head of government was saying. In fact I was the stenographer to seven bosses. They were all was giving their suggestions for the Joint Declaration. Everything was done by hand without any major mistake. The point I would like to make here is that everything was done in good humour. There was a lot of give and take, and at the end we had a declared that everybody contributed to. However for this Summit I made it sure that not only type writers, but also computers were installed on board the Ostrich. We all learn, some by wisdom, some by experience.

different', she felt the Board in contrast to the school cared little if her daughter passed in the examination. The mother believed the examiners could not appreciate her daughter as they were not 'efficient'!

It is appalling to find that many of our parents or guardians are totally ignorant about the future of their children, making us feel the future of our country is gloomy. Some of us are teaching our children to be insolent towards their elders and to abuse them when we are opposed to those persons for some reason or other. We do wrong ourselves yet try to show the children these deeds are for their good! Quite a number of parents do not know that students at the SSC examinations have to pass in all the papers. If the total marks in English happens to be 90; but if the student fails to get 33 marks in one of the two papers reserved for English, or any of the similar two-paper compulsory subjects, then that student does not qualify for the SSC. Again, a lot of unjustified stories are told by us against the examiners who happen to be very highly qualified; and at the same time we plead for justice!

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the history of SAARC. The reason I say this is because the economic and social contents of this Summit is far more than before. SAARC has moved into core development issues now. We are now into the issues that will touch the lives of the people of SAARC countries.

I think this shift is a major change with immense positive consequences. SAPTA is a major achievement. Nothing much at the moment, but it is the beginning of something very important. The poverty alleviation report is also very important, which will have follow-up at both the micro and macro levels. Very clear responsibilities have been given to national governments to draw up their respective plans. These are major developments. Right to work, right to primary education, etc. have been highlighted. These have

more in touch with SAARC. I think the Prime Minister did a very good thing by thanking the people of Dhaka for patiently suffering all the hardships during the Summit, long hours of waiting in traffic jams, etc. People cooperated to make the Summit a grand success.

DS — Why were we not told from before about roads being closed, and the timing of it. Such information could have saved us a lot of time and reduced the traffic jams?

FC — You really have to ask the people in charge of traffic arrangements.

DS — This may be a tricky one for you to answer, but I will ask anyway. Which leaders do you think got along best with one another?

FC — This one I will pass. But one thing was evident. Everybody seemed to get along

## Wonders of Passing Exams

by Mujibul Haque

**At the SSC level there is a sudden change: a great number of students turn out to be unsuccessful. The differences could easily be solved with cooperation from the guardians and the school authorities.**

aminers goes on for ten minutes. Then suddenly she is heard to say her total marks were 620, which meant, according to her, she missed first division by 20 marks. It appeared 640 marks were the requisite for first division. Now there was a chance to challenge her: she was informed one needed a minimum of 600 to get first division. But she insisted she was right. No one argued further. It is not wise to do so with persons of 'little knowledge': it even endangers one's life. Ignorant people should not be bothered with; nor should anyone try to offer wisdom to a person who is not capable of understanding — or wants to — especially when the person happens to be a junior but acts senior.

Her son has passed announces another mother. He has gone out at the moment to meet his friends. He will be back soon. Before anyone can sit down the mother is back with a plateful of big roshogilas — the mouth-watering kind from a quality shop. Interest is expressed in details of the result. The mother obliges. He

has got star marks and four letters only. But she is happy. She says that when she rang his father to tell him about the son's results, he began crying. She cried that men were so silly at times. She had never heard him crying in their twenty years of married life. And now he had even made her cry over the phone. Recollection brought laughter. She could hardly control herself. Laughter brought tears to her eyes. It could be clearly understood these were tears of happiness and pride. She was a proud wife and mother. She has two sons. She will not be having any more children. Allah has not given her any daughter. She is not unhappy. This is her eldest son. She stops talking as there is a knock on the door. She revo-

nises his knock and jumps up from her seat to hurry towards the door.

A fine looking boy of medium height enters the room. He salaams in a shy manner almost wanting to bury his head somewhere to hide his face, like the ostrich is supposed to do. He gives his thanks on receiving congratulations at his success. He exclaims in surprise on learning of a girl who has got six letters but is not happy. It is explained to him: it happens that way in this world. Some feel happy even after failing to pass! They do not hold themselves responsible but on the other hand accuse the examiners for being unfair. Reasons are put forward in their defence. They were unable to study because of a sister's marriage before

the exam. Their health was not good. Their parents were at fault; no proper tutor was engaged for them. Others claim they could not study because guests were staying at their residence and all the rooms were occupied.

Another mother says bluntly there is nothing to be mentioned about daughter's results as she had informed the mother after the examinations she would not pass. Reason? She was weak in almost all the subjects and they could not afford tutors for all those subjects. Moreover her father refused to believe his daughter could be so weak. After all she did pass in all her school examinations. When the mother was asked how the daughter had done such a thing, she looked very indignant and furious until it was explained to her that all one wanted to know was how could she pass the previous examinations being so weak in the major subjects. The mother clarified those examinations had not been conducted by the 'Board'. Her school, where the mother had been a frequent visitor was