

Saarc

# Why Fall Behind?

By Harun ur Rashid



SOUTH Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) consists of seven countries, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The 10th summit of Saarc was held in Sri Lanka in 1998 and the 11th Summit was to be held in Nepal in November 1999. This Summit has yet not been held.

It is a good time to ask the question: why has the momentum of Saarc stalled?

Three major developments mark the moment. First, the postponement of the summit, second, the helplessness of the other member-countries to press India to agree to hold the summit and finally, the future of the organisation.

Why are these developments and what do they tell us? At the initiative of Bangladesh, a regional institution, Saarc was formally set up in December 1985 at its first Dhaka summit. The summit adopted a Charter containing the principles and objectives of the Saarc.

The region covers about 3.3 per cent of the surface area of the world while the region is inhabited by 21 per cent of the world's population of over 6 billion. About 50 per cent of the world's poor live in the region and more than 450 million people live below poverty level (UN Development Report). The region constitutes 1.5 per cent of world's GDP. Thirty-two rich individuals are reported to have assets exceeding the total gross products of South Asia (around 500 billion).

All the countries shared a common colonial experience except Nepal that was under the British security umbrella. During the British rule there were few legal barriers to trade and investment within the region and there was considerable mobility of traders and workers within this area. Therefore there was a realisation that a common "golden

thread" ran across the region for mutual cooperation in every possible human activity.

Saarc was created to remove the tension in the region. It was based on the concept that if one could not put a jigsaw puzzle together all at once, one could do it piece by piece, starting at the edge and moving toward the centre. That was the reason why Saarc adopted cooperative areas on peripheral subjects and not on core ones, such as trade and security.

One of the objectives of Saarc is to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realise its full potential. If one goes through the principles and objectives of Saarc, they are not only lofty ideas but also usher in a new vista of cooperation among the seven countries of South Asia. It is a manifestation of the determination of the countries in the region to work together to alleviate the sufferings of the people of the region.

Saarc identified initially five broad "innocent" areas of cooperation, such as Agriculture, Rural Development, Telecommunications, Meteorology and Health and Population activities. Later Transport, Postal Services, Scientific and Technological Cooperation, Sports, Arts and Culture were added.

The first summit also decided that decisions at all levels in Saarc would be taken on the basis of unanimity. Emphasise the words "at all levels" and "unanimity". The expressions were used deliberately and its implications have been enormous. The summit agreed that "bilateral and contentious" issues were to be excluded from the deliberations of the association. These formulations were adopted because both India and Pakistan had some initial reservations to the motivations of Saarc. There is a view that India thought Saarc was a forum "ganging up" against India while Pakistan perceived it as a "tool" of India's domination in

The question is: can India frustrate the convening of the Saarc?

The precise answer to this question appears to be difficult. One could argue that since India agreed in Colombo in 1998 that the summit would be held in Nepal in 1999, India could not now retract from the position. But India may well argue that the time and date of the summit need to be decided unanimously.

It appears that one of the one hand the rule of "unanimity" applies, on the other all bilateral issues should be excluded from the purview of the summit. India's sentiment against Pakistan is considered to be a bilateral matter and this should not be pushed against the holding of the Summit. Therefore a view prevails that the reported reservation of India to the Summit is contrary to the provisions of the Charter of Saarc.

If the summit does not take place then the policies and programmes, especially the new

countries to impress India to agree originates from the fundamental fact that the region is asymmetrical in nature. The territory, the resources and the population of India are larger than the territories, resources and populations of other six countries. This has placed India arguably as the dominant economic and political power in Saarc.

There is a view that Saarc has

not been moving ahead to achieve its goals because of friction between India and Pakistan. Some believe that if Saarc cannot deliver the goods, the five countries in South Asia without India and Pakistan may build their cooperative relations through a separate institution towards finding solutions to their common problems. What else is to do?

But the difficulty in realisation of the idea is that both Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked countries and are surrounded by India. For

trade and communications they need India's agreement on transit rights to other countries. Furthermore India is a big trading partner with many of the countries in the region. Some analysts believe that regional institution in South Asia without India will be a "toothless" tiger and will not be a viable regional organisation. Here lies the crux of the matter and India is well aware of it.

The institutional set up of Saarc is that the highest authority rests with the heads of state/government who meet annually at summit level to decide policies and actions. The Council of Foreign Ministers is responsible for formulating and reviewing policies while the Standing Committees of Foreign Secretaries is entrusted with the task of overall monitoring and coordination of programmes and modalities of financing the programmes including determination of inter-sectoral priorities. The Technical Committees consisting of officials formulate and prepare programmes.

If the summit does not take place then the policies and programmes, especially the new

ones are in limbo and cannot proceed. The engine of activities of the Secretariat of Saarc becomes stalled. The whole process appears to be in jeopardy and as a result the future of Saarc is placed in uncharted waters. The Secretary General (Nihal Rodrigo of Sri Lanka) of Saarc visited the capitals of the member-countries to reschedule the next summit but the impasse created by India could not yet be resolved.

In recent years Saarc has

been able to work closely with the ESCAP (Economic and Social Council for Asia Pacific of the UN) in Bangkok. It has also established relations with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) and OAS (Organisation of American States). It appears that all the fruitful linkages are being frustrated by the postponement of the summit.

Each country within the region has been moving continuously towards greater engagement with its neighbours and near neighbours. For example, Singapore is concluding bilateral free trade agreement with Australia and New Zealand. The global mantra is to set up a regional club and each and every region has established its trade blocs.

A stage has come that inter-regional blocs are being set up. Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) is an instance in point. South Asia is lagging behind and it is feared that the postponement of the summit has placed Saarc in a drift. South Asia as a region cannot engage deeply in multilateral forums and as a result the region will be left behind and is likely to be isolated.

There is a view that Saarc appears to be going nowhere as an institution and there is increasing despair at the postponement of the summit. The earlier the stalemate is resolved the better it is for Saarc and by extension for the people of the region.

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## Diversity and Democracy

# Need for a Regional Approach

Ekram Kabir, back from Colombo



"UNIQUE other regions and countries in the world, South Asian countries are far away from devising a cooperative mechanism among themselves for protecting and ensuring rights for the minorities in the region", was the unanimous consensus among the delegates at the three-day (November 16-18) conference on South Asian Diversity and Pluralism Sri

Lankan capital Colombo. But acting on the basis of an inherent respect for diversity, the civil society can certainly make a difference.

The Colombo-based regional think-tank International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) organised the conference which was participated by 40 delegates from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In this vital exchange of information and perspectives, which was an opportunity to commence a dialogue and forge links with other international standards. Originally conceived by late Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam who was killed last year by a Tamil suicide

bomber attack, the conference was a follow up of an ambitious project that seeks to provide a framework for constructive cooperation between scholars and policy makers as they try to develop and improve structural arrangements that will encourage community level coexistence and stem collective and communal violence.

In searching answers to South Asian commonalities in regard to minorities, some specific goals were set, and the Colombo Principles on diversity in South Asia was adopted - an evaluation of the current state of diversity and minority protection in the participating countries, and consideration of existing international instruments relevant in the South Asian context.

Sri Lankan Minister of Justice Batty Weerakoon formally inaugurated the conference on November 16, putting forward the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka - the main reason of 17-year war in the country. He however did not provide any suggestion except for President Chandrika Kumaratunga's recently proposed draft constitution that failed to acquire two-thirds majority in the parliament.

While speaking on the rights of the minorities in the region, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the director of the ICES said: "No South Asian nation has successfully developed a strategy that preserves and promotes diversity to foster peace and prosperity. The turn of the century sees existing structures that support diversity facing ever more strenuous tests, and the region seems more fragmented and factional - and tragically more violent - with each passing year." "Whatever we do for the minorities in the region, there's no alternative to a constitutional approach in respective countries," she added.

Given the obstacles in this approach, a glimmer of hope for the purpose would be to try it under the Saarc (South Asian Association of Regional Association), because Saarc is only regional organisational body, opined an ICES researcher Vikram Singh, who received nods from majority of the participants.

Respect for diversity is an aspect of human rights and respect for ethnic, linguistic, cultural, national, gender and hybrid identities is indeed a prerequisite of a democratic society. Unfortunately in South Asia, despite being one of the most diverse regions in the world, majoritarianism still continues to prevail in many forms, contradicting the fundamental principles of "inclusive democracy" which is so very much needed for peace in the region.

All diverse communities have a right to effective political participation at the national, regional and local levels, including power-sharing arrangements, if needed. But unfortunately, almost every country in South Asia is facing ethnic crisis. For example, Bangladesh's long strife in Chittagong Hill Tracts has not been addressed even after a peace accord between the government and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghat Samiti (PCJSS) - an organisation of hill movement. It's an embarrassing situation for the government because it's been alleged that government establishments have failed to resolve the debates between it and PCJSS. While government's CHT affairs ministry in its recent report claimed that 98 per cent of clauses of CHT peace accord have been implemented, the PCJSS in a statement said that the former is yet to rehabilitate all internally dis-

placed Jumma people and repatriate refugees from India. Moreover, the government is yet to pull out the army, ansar and village defence force camps and prepare voter list with permanent residents of CHT.

On the political front, 13 lac plain-land adivasis have not been empowered even after the country's independence long 30 years ago. In spite of the fact that 90 per cent adivasis are Awami League backer, they have never been nominated for any election after the independence. Attitude of Bangladesh Nationalist Party was also same. The last time an adivasi was elected was one Sagam Majhi from Godagari constituency who was nominated by Jukta Front and was elected to the then Provincial Assembly in 1954. There are however one Union Parishad chairman and 56 members, including 20 female members, from the plain-land adivasis. This certainly is not an expected scenario in the country.

India, being a place of numerous social, cultural, religious and racial diversities, still remains a unified society. Every part of India is governed under the same Constitution. But one has to agree to the fact that in India, political parties appeal

to caste interests, or Hindu emotions, or Muslim rights, or state loyalties, and these are the primary sources of caste violence, communal conflict and provincial insurrection. Politics is caught up in the violence of opposing factions by which they are shaped and through which they prosper. In these circumstances, democracy is a spur to violence.

According to John Dayal, an Indian human rights and religious freedom activist, minorities suffer at the hand of the majority. "Muslims and Christians are the main targets of a very focused, deeply organised and well-funded hate campaign throughout India. Islam and Christianity are branded as alien religions; and Hindus and Buddhists are constantly exhorted to give a united 'Asian' challenge to these faiths." Babri Mosque demolition in 1992 remains a testament to the fact, and the episode has scared the psyche of the Indian nation, and brought death, destruction and pain in its aftermath and the wounds are yet to heal.

The hate campaign against Christians questions our roots, attracts the tenets of our faith, our priests and nuns, institution and social work. Despite 20 centuries of Christianity in India, the Sang Parivar pillories the community as a remnant of the British colonial empire," he said.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka is paying dearly for its ethnic problems and is caught up in a cobweb. It has lost 60,000 lives in its 17-year ethnic war. It can conveniently be put into the ethnic basket as the modern physiognomy goes. But its vital economic and cultural vantagepoints cannot be glossed over. When deep-rooted vested interests of communities and peoples are disadvantaged, chances are that such communities and groups of people would resort to emotional outbursts.

Nepal, with its amazing bio- and socio-cultural diversities, are not yet successful in upholding the rights of its indigenous people.

Ethnic dissonance in South Asia has its roots in the policies that had been pursued since the colonial and post-colonial days. At that time, the empire-building was based on the imperative that required trans-border placement of ethnic groups. Even the geo-political map was drawn in a manner that left ethnic groups on both sides of the borders. This explained why internal ethnic turmoil crossed the border and acquired an international dimension. Ultimately what really happened was that the ill-perceived priorities and misdirected policies that suited the ruling elite made ethnic communities marginalised and politicised, and they reacted with demands ranging from share of resources, power and even territory.

Therefore, ethnicity is a component of the socio-political realities of multi-ethnic states in South Asia. Today, ethnicisation of politics and politicisation of ethnic communities have become quite common and have diffused mutual tolerance, and have thus sharpened ethnic consciousness among various communities. At this juncture, we need tolerance more than anything else; we need to respect the ethnic dimensions and make sure that every member of a minority community of a South Asian country doesn't feel insecure while s/he following his/her religion, culture and right to choose. The onus of protecting the minorities from being abused by politics rests on the civil society. The members of the civil society need to form a regional alliance while upholding the rights of the minorities in South Asia.

## Pakistan

# Forging Unity against the Military

By Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury



TWO main political parties in Pakistan - the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) - have come closer in the recent months. These two parties are otherwise at loggerheads because they ruled the country in recent years by turn in stiff rivalry till the nation lost democracy when army chief General Pervez Musharraf seized power in October last year. The PML and the PPP and their two leaders have competed against each other in national elections that followed the end of the military government headed by Gen. Ziaul Haq which ended with his death in a mysterious plane crash in 1988.

Pakistan, which has a long history of undemocratic rule, was back to democracy and it was these two parties that swapped power through elections till last year. Both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto became prime ministers twice, but on both occasions no one could complete their terms - cut short not because that the government lacked majority in parliament, recent months. These two parties are otherwise at loggerheads because they ruled the country in recent years by turn in stiff rivalry till the nation lost democracy when army chief General Pervez Musharraf seized power in October last year. The PML and the PPP and their two leaders have competed against each other in national elections that followed the end of the military government headed by Gen. Ziaul Haq which ended with his death in a mysterious plane crash in 1988.

Benazir was twice dismissed by presidential power to sack elected governments while Nawaz was once by the presidency and later by the army. These two leaders have always been at daggers drawn which is once again is not unlikely in politics. When their respective governments were removed despite having a popular mandate, the other was seemingly happy because of the fact that the rival is no more in power. They failed to

realise that politicians should not feel content about such developments when democratically elected authority is disregarded. As such, the PPP also was in upbeat mood when Sharif's government was toppled by the military last year.

But this euphoria evaporated soon as the new regime came down heavily on the politicians regardless of their party affiliation and political leaders who were against Sharif were also disillusioned. The realisation began to dawn on the need of their coming closer not only for restoring democracy but also to save themselves. For, the regime embarked upon a number of measures to defame the politicians on corruption and other charges and set up national bureau of accountability (NBA) and took other steps. Politicians charged that the "culture of politics" is being systematically destroyed with a view to malign persons engaged with public life.

The military government has come down heavily on two main leaders on corruption and other charges. Sharif is languishing in jail on a life sentence. He tried to stop a plane carrying coup leader Gen. Musharraf from landing in Karachi from a trip to Colombo. He is also serving sentences on other corruption charges.

Benazir was earlier convicted for five years for corruption and chose to stay abroad. The army has ruled that leaders convicted in criminal charges for more than two years cannot lead their respective parties. Smaller parties in collusion with the PPP formed a grand democratic alliance (GDA) for restoration of democracy in the country. The PML was outside but moves are underway so that it also joins the alliance that has been strengthened and pose a formidable challenge to the regime.

Gen. Musharraf said he would restore democracy by end of 2002 as the Supreme Court ruled that the army must return power to elected representatives within three years. The desire of the political parties to come closer on a broad agenda of early national elections towards a civilian government is seen by political analysts as a positive move by the main parties. This may help mount bigger pressure on the government for elections earlier than planned. However, political parties themselves are also in a kind of disarray. The PML is in crisis as Sharif's opponents in the organisations are planning different strategy and the four such dissident leaders including stalwarts Mian Mohammad Azhar

have been suspended for anti-party activities. The PPP is not also much in a good shape because its leader lives abroad fearing that he will be arrested if he returns to the country.

Besides, the politicians have another handicap, as most people believe top leaders are corrupt. This applies to both Sharif and Benazir. There is no denying the fact that Gen. Musharraf rode to power on a wave of anti-Sharif public sentiments. Corruption by public leaders has undoubtedly put them in bad light. But the euphoria is disappearing and Gen. Musharraf admitted recently that his popularity is on the wane and there is a perception of despondency and discouragement. Political observers say people are getting disenchanted with the state of affair. However, Musharraf says the failures are being blown out of proportion.

Pakistan's politicians have not been able to launch any strong challenge to military during the last 12 months. But they can certainly cause serious headache for the military regime if main parties come out of inertia and internal differences in one hand and forge greater alliance on the other for early restoration of democracy in Pakistan.

## Indo-Pak

# Still Time for Mending Fences

By AMM Shahabuddin



WITH rising incidents of violence and killings in Indian-held Kashmir and continuous shelling across the Line of Control (LoC) on both sides, the relations between the two new nuclear powers of Asia, India and Pakistan, has further nose-dived, causing worldwide concern about the future of peace and stability in South Asia. A big question-mark hangs over there as both countries seem hell-bent for a 'show-down', throwing to the winds all efforts made so far for an amicable settlement through a dialogue. The military launched by Kashmiri Mujahed in 1989 has today assumed an alarming proportion against the Indian army and Park-military forces stationed in Jammu and Kashmir. India alleges that their army is fighting the militants, trained in Pakistan, who intrude into Indian Kashmir to destabilise the area.

Pakistan always denies such allegations, saying they only extend diplomatic and political support. But, as such arguments and counter-arguments raise storms over the political horizon, the poor Kashmiri people continue to suffer. They get only lip-sympathies from political leaders who, using their trump card of Kashmir, stabilise their own position in their respective countries. That is the greatest tragedy of Kashmiri story.

The leaders would hardly hesitate to push their countries on the brink of war. The renowned Indian columnist, Khushwant Singh, in a speech at a recent seminar held in Karachi, apprehended that the two countries have been closer to (another) war, adding "we have fought three wars and have been preparing for the fourth one which will be the final one because there will be nothing left of either of you or us (perhaps an oblique reference to both countries being nuclear powers)." He also stressed the need for a dialogue not between two, but three (India, Pakistan and Kashmir).

Rule of Maharajas 1846-1947

In this context, it may be recalled that the people of Kashmir had the least voice in shaping their destiny since the days of Maharaja Golab Singh who purchased Kashmir, along with its people as 'chattel', from the British in 1846 for a paltry sum of Rs 75 lakh. In fact, it was a token gift from the British to the Maharaja, for his collaboration against the Sikhs. The nightmare for the Kashmiris ended in 1947 when India and Pakistan emerged as two independent countries under Indian Independence Act, 1947, which granted option to the rulers of the so-called 'princely states', like Kashmir, Hyderabad, Junagarh and Manvader. As the population of the last three states was Hindu in majority, India had no problem to take care of them. But the problem arose with Kashmir which was ruled by a Hindu Maharaja, majority of population being Muslims. After dilly-dallying for a couple of months