

Building trust in South Asia

C M SHAFI SAMI

SOUTH Asia is a region of paradoxes. On the one hand it is a region of immense harmony and amity. On the other hand, it is also a region of enormous distrust and conflicts.

It is the home of a vast number of adherents of three principal religions of the world who live their daily life side by side with each other in an atmosphere of amity and peace. With a long history of its own South Asia is the fatherland of an ancient civilization and a rich and varied cultural heritage. Here the indigenous and the immigrant cultures and traditions have found a balanced amalgamation. Many South Asian states accommodate a rich mosaic of ethnic multiplicity within the confines of nation states. Some of these ethnic nationalities also transcend national boundaries creating added bonds of interstate understanding. It is endowed with immeasurable wealth of linguistic diversity with numerous written and spoken languages. The diversity of religion, culture, language and ethnicity has found in South Asia a significant degree of harmony and space. The cultural cross currents and the socio-economic interactions over centuries have promoted in South Asia a remarkable affinity of values and perceptions. Many common resources including rivers and ecosystem and complementarities of economies further consolidated a sense of empathy and compassion. South Asians living beyond the region anywhere in the globe are natural friends surpassing national, religious and ethnic identity.

South Asia is also a region of discord. There are occasional eruptions of religious intolerance and violence that damage social and political fabrics of nation states. Not infrequently, these spill over beyond the political boundaries of states causing incalculable harm to interstate relations in the region. Some linguistic and ethnic minorities are in strife, a number of them in a protracted and prolonged manner, to find political liberties, economic rights and social privileges within their national boundaries. Because of the inter-state presence of such ethnic groups these conflicts create reverberations beyond national boundaries and impact unfavorably on interstate relations in the region. Disputes relating to sharing of shared resources like common rivers among the nation states also aggravate their relations.

The region has also inherited some political excess baggage from the days of its subjugation by colonial forces. The struggle for freedom from colonial subjugation in the South Asian sub-continent was unified in the idea of achieving independence but was fractured and fragmented in the determination of the objectives of emancipation as well as the strategy for their realisation. This often put the competing political forces that constituted the later day nation states in South Asia into acrimonious and adversarial situations. In the post-colonial era that bitter memory gave rise to well-entrenched psychological inhibitions that seem to linger on. There are also the colonial legacies of undemarcated boundaries and displaced ethnic and religious minorities that impact unfavourably on interstate relations.

When the seven heads of states/governments of South Asia formally launched South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on the 8th of December 1985

in Dhaka, they were deeply conscious of these positive and the negative characteristics of the region. At the same time they also recognised that there existed a vast potential of benefits that could be derived by the countries of the region individually and collectively through regional cooperation. The heads of states/governments realised that fuller exploitation of these potentials would critically depend on developing 'mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems', a concept that is enshrined in the SAARC Charter as one of the objectives of the organisation. Also in the preamble of the Charter the concept of peace, stability, amity and friendship are repeatedly emphasized. It is evident that at the inception of SAARC the leaders demonstrated a clear and unmistakable determination to make conscious efforts to create an atmosphere of trust in the region by pulling down the high walls of suspicion, mistrust and fear.

The draft Charter as was earlier drawn up by the senior officials after extensive intergovernmental consultations and duly approved by Foreign Secretaries and the Foreign Ministers of the seven South Asian countries provided for a Summit level meeting after every two years. During this process some governments, including that of Bangladesh, were of the view that a one-year periodicity would provide the organisation the desired momentum at the formative stage. A few others, including India and Pakistan, were of the view that a two-year periodicity for the Summit would be more realistic. For the sake of consensus a two-year periodicity was thus incorporated in the draft Charter. During Summit level consultations at Dhaka a day before the adoption of the Charter Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India sprang a surprise. He proposed that the Summit should be held once a year and not once in two years. His proposal was enthusiastically seconded by President Ziaul Huq of Pakistan and generated immediate positive response from all others. All the leaders recognised that periodic meetings at their level were central to the promotion of mutual trust, confidence and cooperation among their countries; and more frequent these meetings were the better.

This decision obliged us to abandon seven beautifully hand written calligraphic texts of the Charter that were painstakingly prepared over the preceding weeks for preservation as historic documents. Instead we had to opt for a hurriedly prepared computerised version for signature of the heads of state/government the next day. That, however, was a very small price for the environment of trust that was instantly generated.

SAARC was basically launched as a regional socio-economic, and not as a political, cooperative association. However, it was anticipated that socio-economic cooperation at a regional level would contribute to and, with the passing of time, consolidate mutual trust and understanding among nations. The association was envisaged by many to serve as a vehicle of creating trust among member states. It was further hoped that such cooperation will have a beneficial impact on political relations of the member states and will render the bilateral disputes between nations more amenable to peaceful resolution, notwithstanding the statutory provision of the Charter that 'bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the

deliberations' of SAARC.

As we enter the third decade of regional cooperation in South Asia it is pertinent to ask ourselves as to how have we tackled the impediments to building trust in the region and how far have we succeeded & how far we have not. It is also relevant to examine what is the state of trust in the region.

SAARC has in the past made contributions to the building of trust

dissipate.

Another important way to build trust in the region is to seriously address and resolve bilateral disputes between member states. Resolution of such disputes has an immediate and direct impact on the bilateral relations between the concerned states. It also has an overarching beneficial influence in creating an atmosphere of regional trust.

states still remain unresolved and outstanding for long, like the ratification by India of the Indira-Mujib Land Boundary Agreement between Bangladesh and India signed in 1974. The peculiar geographical reality of South Asia uniquely places India in a situation of sharing land or maritime boundaries with all other South Asian states while no other member states share common

public reaction. Contrary to that assessment the bus service has proved extremely popular. Significant economic benefits would accrue to the peoples of the region if a given country were to consider economic and trade cooperation issues on their intrinsic merit and in terms of economic parameters without being unduly prejudiced by extraneous and unconnected considerations or being

exceedingly high proportion of their budget on defense against each other while they together with other member states of SAARC are placed at the lower end of Human Development Index. Since 1998 with the explosion of nuclear devices by both these countries the situation has assumed a nuclear edge. The stability of the region has been exposed to an increased vulnerability, as the two countries seek to develop missiles to reach deeper into each other's territory. To promote regional trust, the possibility of an open ended nuclear arms race between these two countries needs to be curtailed. To this end there is urgency for the two nations to agree on strategies and confidence building measures. This issue can not be seen as merely a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan; with its ominous economic consequences for the region as whole and the threat regional trust and peace, it is a matter of grave and legitimate concern for all other member states of SAARC.

There are many unresolved disputes, concerns and issues between and among the member states of SAARC including cross border terrorism, ethnic insurgency and its spill over effect, allegations of illegal migration, border management and trade issues. In dealing with the unresolved issues the member states need to make sincere efforts to reach mutually acceptable solutions and/or dispel misgivings through a process of negotiations. Member states of SAARC have to demonstrate patience, as the process of diplomatic negotiations can some times be very slow. One may occasionally fail in the negotiations but one should never fail to negotiate. As the process of negotiation engenders and nourishes the environment of trust this has to be sustained and never given up in favor of unilateral actions.

South Asian leaders also have to recognise that recent global developments have demonstrated that in the changing political dynamics to day no one country, not even the only super power, can fruitfully follow a policy of go it alone. The South Asian countries big or small regardless of their comparative economic and military strength need each other. In an atmosphere of trust and cooperation they can effectively maximise their political role in world affairs and their economic opportunities as well as their security situation. It is also vitally important that South Asia recognises that poverty, malnourishment, disease and natural disasters like floods, cyclones and tsunamis are our common enemies and not one another. Mobilisation of our limited resources not to confront one another but to combat these common enemies and for the amelioration of our socio-economic condition is of crucial significance. Increased economic cooperation and regional trust augment and mutually reinforce each other and South Asia could immensely benefit from the resultant virtuous circle.

There is another interstate attitude in the region that thwarts and drags down trust building process. It is the tendency in South Asia to see issues as zero-sum or win-lose game. Past experience shows that the member states of SAARC have failed to display the ingenuity to turn these into a win-win situation. For example the water sharing issues are perceived purely as a sharing dispute and not in terms of harnessing of the potentials of the water resources for the benefit of the peoples of the region. The countries of

the region need to understand that larger benefits could accrue to each country beyond the apparent short-term concessions if the issues were seen rationally over time and space. In a regional context it is also essential for these countries to decide on and implement some prestigious cooperative projects that could demonstrate to the people tangible economic benefits of cooperation. Such projects would provide tremendous boost to building trust in the region and amongst its peoples.

It is a sad commentary on the collective vision of the leaders and policy makers of the region that two decades later we are still trying to grapple with a question that engaged the attention of the founding fathers of SAARC: how to extricate the region from the debilitating impact of mistrust and build an atmosphere of trust. Admittedly an answer to this vexing question is not easy to find. There is, however, a strong feeling among the peoples of the region that the governmental approaches have failed to demonstrate the required vision, insight and courage to rise above the stereotyped perceptions of interstate relations. Additionally the governmental initiatives have lagged behind those taken by the peoples of the region as manifested by the sustained efforts in Track II diplomacy by the civil societies to promote understanding and friendship and those by the chambers of commerce to enhance intraregional trade and encourage intra-regional investment. There have also been commendable initiatives by professional communities like lawyers and media people to develop friendly professional ties in addition to the efforts made by common citizens to re-establish trans-border personal and familial linkages. As against these initiatives we have not seen matching ventures at the governmental level. For decades we have only heard our leaders proclaim that 'South Asia is at a crossroads today.' If we have stayed that long at the crossroads an inescapable conclusion would be that we do not have the vision or the courage to seize the opportunity and take the right direction. The other obvious conclusion could be that the ruling elites of South Asia only pay lip service to the concept of building trust and confidence between and among South Asian countries and are not genuinely interested in taking concrete steps. A heavy onus lies on the leaders of South Asia to prove that both these conclusions are erroneous.

In the context of South Asia or for that matter in any other region in the world, it must be recognised that private sector initiatives to foster regional trust can merely supplement governmental efforts and not supplant them. The governments have to lead the way. The only way to redeem the lofty promise made in the SAARC Charter to, 'promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life,' would be for the governmental leaders at the highest level to reenergise themselves and marshal the political will to assume the onerous responsibility of leading the way. It is imperative for them to decisively move forward and create an atmosphere of trust and understanding in the region. Popular support, undoubtedly, will be forthcoming.

Dr. Aftab Alam Khan, a former Foreign Secretary, was the Chief Coordinator of the first SAARC Summit held in Dhaka in 1985.

In the context of South Asia or for that matter in any other region in the world, it must be recognised that private sector initiatives to foster regional trust can merely supplement governmental efforts and not supplant them. The governments have to lead the way. The only way to redeem the lofty promise made in the SAARC Charter to, 'promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life,' would be for the governmental leaders at the highest level to reenergise themselves and marshal the political will to assume the onerous responsibility of leading the way.



The SAARC was launched in Dhaka in 1985: The then Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi arriving for the summit.

in the region, although they may be seen as modest by many. Apart from the beneficial impact of regular meetings at the highest level which itself enhances trust, the informal arrangement of retreat of the Heads of State/ Government during the Summits has been frequently taken advantage of by them to develop and improve mutual understanding and trust. Besides, the decision to establish South Asian Free Trade Area is a laudable achievement that will augment regional trust. It is praiseworthy that the treaty has accommodated some of the concerns of the LDC member states. It provides that the special needs of the LDCs would be clearly recognised by 'adopting concrete preferential measures in their favor on a non-reciprocal basis'. However it sets no deadline and gives no concrete plan for the identification of the special needs of LDCs. The rules and regulations for the effective implementation of the Trade Liberalization Programme and the granting of Special and Differential Treatment to LDC members and the Revenue Compensatory Mechanism for them have not also been clearly spelt out. These grey areas need to be addressed with urgency and these ambiguities removed so that the benefits of the SAFTA Treaty and its favorable impact on regional trust and amity is conserved and not allowed to

The landmark Ganges water sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India, signed in 1996, saw the resolution of a dispute that soured relations between the two otherwise friendly neighbours ever since the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state, and that for almost a decade in the late 1980s and early 1990s seemed insoluble. Its resolution dispelled a long and dark cloud of mistrust bilaterally and contributed to the strengthening of relations between the two neighbors as much as it provided a significant stimulus to the enhancing of trust across the entire region of South Asia. There have been a number of other recent developments in the region, which while improving bilateral relations have similarly contributed to the promotion of regional amity and trust. These include the agreement between India and Bhutan to construct the Chukha hydro-electric project and establish a power sharing arrangement, the India-Nepal agreement to undertake the integrated development of the Mahakali river; the establishment of free trade zone between India and Sri Lanka; and a decision to negotiate the sale of surplus power by Pakistan to India.

While one duly recognises the above positive developments one must also reckon that many more bilateral issues between member

borders between themselves. Understandably, therefore, in most of these unresolved issues India appears as a party in the dispute. This together with India's preeminence in geographical size, its population, natural resources, economic strength and military has also fuelled a creeping suspicion of India's 'hegemonic designs' and of its lack of political will to resolve the disputes. A greater onus thus devolves on India for the resolution of bilateral issues. She has to demonstrate the political will to resolve the outstanding issues and take sincere and bold initiatives in that direction. Other neighbours would be well advised to reciprocate with equal political will and matching sincerity; there should be no reason for any one to be afraid of peace and amity.

In approaching certain issues relating to economic cooperation governments in South Asia seem to unnecessarily suffer from an imagined fear of popular backlash while in reality the peoples of the region are ahead of their governments in forging cooperative relations. Moreover when people see tangible economic benefits they react rationally. For years successive governments in Bangladesh hesitated to establish direct bus links between Dhaka and Kolkata on the perceived fear that it would be an unpopular move and would provoke violent

guided by hidden agenda. By the same token other member states need to grant that country the necessary space, time and opportunity to take its own decision according to its own perception of its best national interest. Such an ambience would greatly enhance & stimulate trust among nations of the region.

Not infrequently, the countries in the region have allowed foreign relations to be dragged into domestic electoral politics, which complicates interstate relations. The political leaders of the region have to appreciate that such moves impede the growth of trust. The governments also need to be aware that unilateral action by one country in harnessing resources and endowments that it shares with other member states hinders the development of trust building. In fact these have a debilitating impact on the process, as the proposed River Linking Project in India has done. This infringement has been further aggravated by a lack of transparency of the project coupled with an unwillingness to engage Nepal and Bangladesh in an open and frank discussion of the relevant issues.

Undoubtedly the state of Indo-Pakistan relations, which however, are seeing signs of improvement, poses the most serious impediments to building trust in the region. It does no credit to the region that both these countries are spending an

SAARC can play an important role in combating natural disasters

DR ABTAM ALAM KHAN

SOUTH Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is undoubtedly a potential forum for bringing socio-economic emancipation of the people of the vast region extending from Himalaya to Indian Ocean and from Khorthar-Sulaiman to Arakan-Yoma. This has four fold potentiality than European Union (EU) considering population around 1.4 billion in comparison to 300 million approximately for EU. The task in bringing the versatile and wide range of culture, habit, religion, attitude, outlook, and philosophy under one umbrella for the benefits of the mankind of this region is an enormous challenge. Ironically, this vast region and population, on the otherhand, is cursed with multi-dimensional natural hazards. The natural

hazards undoubtedly pose enormous threat for South Asian Disasters (SAD). The disasters have very frequently brought acute miseries for the people of South Asia. The miseries are so enormous that would not be recovered in generations.

Even in one single generation of this region have faced multiple phases of disasters. Even, if we forget the impact of devastations caused by 1897 Great Assam earthquake, or 1905 Kangra earthquake, or 1935 Quetta earthquake wherein hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, hundreds of thousands of people lived with utmost miseries, and billions of dollars development investments was ruined in a flick of a moment, we cannot forget the devastations in very recent times caused by 2005 South Asia Quake, or 2001 Bhuj earthquake, or 1993

Undoubtedly, this is a massive task that could be achieved through creating a SAARC centre of excellence to deal with all kinds of impending natural hazards. The SAARC centre of excellence must be linked to every national centre of excellence of the South Asian countries in free flowing of data and exchanging ideas, views and research.

Killari earthquake, or 2004 Asian tsunami.

We cannot even forget the recent time devastations caused by 1970 cyclone killing about Three Hundred Thousands people and 1991 cyclone killing about 150,000 people alone in the coastal belt of Bangladesh. In addition to all these sudden disastrous events, the regular seasonal events like floods, landslides, rock falls, debris flow, and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) are causing such enormous miseries to livings, damage to properties, and economic loss those remain

unaccountable and unnoticed.

Nonetheless, all these disastrous effects have direct bearings on the livelihoods and sustainable developments of the South Asian region. The effects and miseries are tied up in a single thread. The action, whether political, social, or economical, in one region is equally reacted in the other region of South Asia. Similarly, the disastrous actions of nature in one region is equally impacted on the other regions, may not be in the same form.

The magnitude of landslides, rockfalls, debris flows, and GLOFs

in the Himalayan belt of Nepal, India, and Pakistan carry billions of tons of sediments depositing in the Bengal delta plains, Ganges plains, and Indus plains every year deteriorating its river morphology, and choking the natural drainage. In turn, the impact is attributed to increased flooding, inundation, riverbank erosion, land loss, miseries and economic loss of the people for the sink regions as it has the disastrous impacts in the source regions.

The people of the South Asian countries are quite frequently being tested, punished and filled with

miseries. It seems that the society of this region had enough of ignored humanity, or distressed humanity or deprived humanity! If the human beings are the part of the natural system then for obvious reasons and logic it is to be believed that the acts, the views, and the attitudes of the society should have impact on the nature. The ignorance and non-caring attitude about the nature's behaviour and the processes seem to be the major disastrous effects for the South Asian countries and people. We never know.

But time has evolved to think and

act to save and serve mankind of this region. SAARC can play an important role in combating such disastrous natural events. The major constraints in combating disasters lies greatly with ignorance pertaining to nature and trend of the disastrous events, induced anthropogenic factors and practice, pre-disaster planning and preparedness, and post disaster managements. The primary task lies with the processes of awareness drive to motivate people of their living practices in accordance with the natural hazard scenario likely to emerge.

The next parallel tasks are to acquire, monitor, and analyse real time data of all the natural hazards in the South Asian region for setting early warning and disseminating it to every corner of the region. Undoubtedly, this is a massive task that could be achieved through

creating a SAARC centre of excellence to deal with all kinds of impending natural hazards. The SAARC centre of excellence must be linked to every national centre of excellence of the South Asian countries in free flowing of data and exchanging ideas, views and research. If SAFTA can have a vision of economic boost and emancipation for the people of South Asia then an agreement like SAFTA could have visions of education and research for emancipation from ignorance. Death is inevitable but painful death is not desirable. Should we not innovate mechanism to combat such natural disasters for the benefit of the humanity?

Dr. Aftab Alam Khan, Professor, Geology, Dhaka University, is Vice President, Bangladesh Earthquake Society (BES).