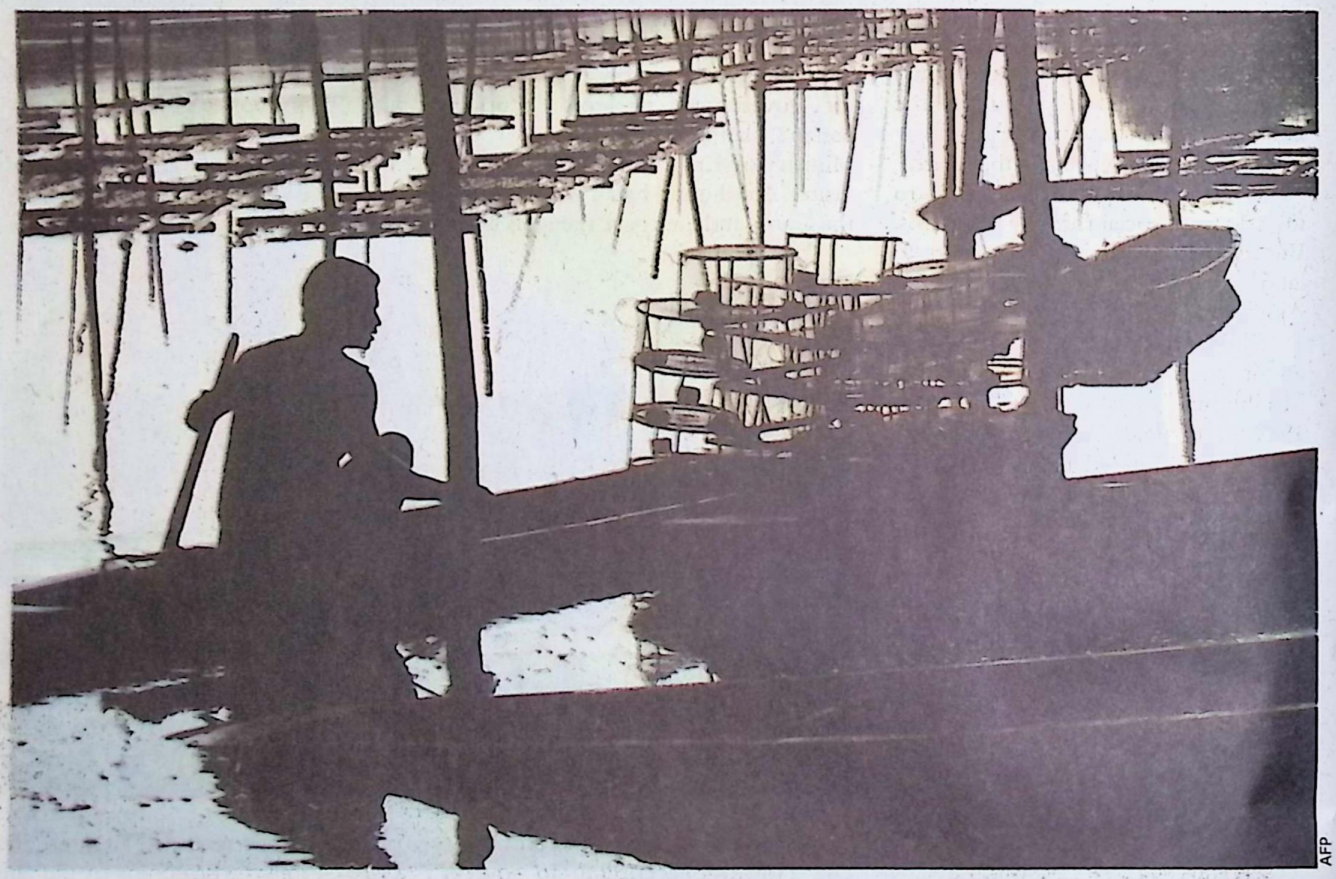
14th Saarc summit: The way forward

Now that India appears to be taking Saarc seriously, we can finally look forward to some concrete results, suggests Farooq Sobhan



AFP

THE recently concluded Saarc summit in Delhi was noteworthy on several counts. All the heads of government attending were on their best behaviour. The usual fireworks between India and Pakistan, a hallmark of several previous summits, were missing on this occasion. Bonhomie and friendship was in the air.

Most important of all, the chair of the Summit, the Indian prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, made it abundantly clear at the outset that India this time round was serious about injecting some life and vitality into Saarc. This was a welcome change from the days when Indian skepticism was palpable. India, in the past, made no secret of the fact that she preferred to deal with her neighbours bilaterally. Moreover, given her stormy relations with Pakistan, Indian enthusiasm about regional cooperation in recent years was, at best, lukewarm.

Dr. Manmohan Singh has always been a great believer in south-south cooperation and regional integration in South Asia. Eight years ago, when he was still in the opposition, I was able to persuade him to attend a conference that a few of us had jointly organized in Kathmandu, on how best to accelerate the process of regional cooperation in South Asia. His belief in a common destiny for the people of South Asia was evident then, as it was in Delhi earlier this month.

Of course, the fact that the Indian economy today is doing so well, and that India is being courted and wooed by both the developed and the developing world, has clearly invested India with a sense of confidence, sufficient for it to shed its inhibitions about regional cooperation and the involvement of others in Saarc. For the first time, Saarc was attended by observers from China, Japan, the EU, Republic of Korea, and the United States. Afghanistan became the eighth full member of Saarc.

But what will make the Delhi summit an important turning point for Saarc was the shared conviction of the Saarc leaders that the time for pious, and occasionally pompous, statements was over.