Far too much hot air had been generated since the birth of Saarc in Dhaka, back in December 1985. People, our people, asked (and continue to do so): "After all these years what have we achieved?"

Countless studies and reports have shown over and over again the very high cost of non-cooperation, and the enormous benefits for everyone, both people and states, if we could work together. The Indian premier spoke for the 1.5 billion people of South Asia when he said: "The time has come to move Saarc from a declaratory phase to action and implementation."

It was agreed at the summit that priority would be given to cooperation in the fields of trade, energy, the environment, food security and combating terrorism. A whole range of implementation issues would be tackled. Special importance was given to the implementation of the Social Charter, which was adopted at the Islamabad summit in January, 2004.

The importance of connectivity was recognized in fulfilling these objectives. But improving rail, road and air connectivity within the region was only half the battle. More important was the need to further expand and strengthen people to people connectivity. Indeed, any objective analysis of regional cooperation in South Asia would lead to the conclusion that the greatest achievement of the past twenty five years has been in the area of people to people connectivity. But much more needs to be done.

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True, Dr. Manmohan Singh offered to make some concessions in issuing visas to journalists. The visa business remains a very sore subject, with endless tit for tat battles. If we are really serious about connectivity, then it is high time that a concerted effort was made to totally abolish all visas throughout the region. After all, if the common vision is that of a South Asian community, then the free and unrestricted movement of people must be given the highest priority. After all smugglers, terrorist, insurgents, and others operating outside the law, generally prefer not to queue up for visas.

The announcement by the Indian prime minister that India would provide duty free access to its market to all the LDCs in Saarc was warmly welcomed, as was the offer to reduce the number of items on the sensitive list.



AMIRUL RAJIV