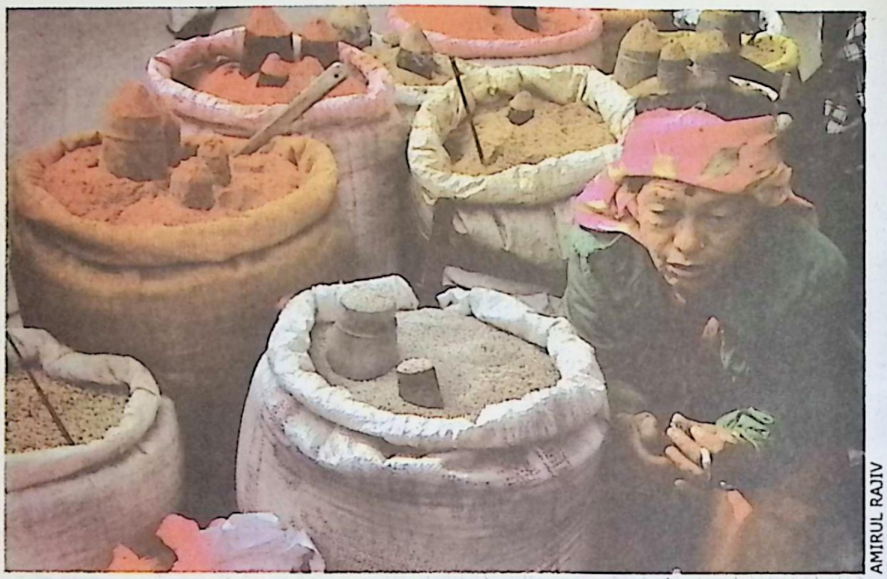
India can well afford to be generous, and earn for itself enormous goodwill amongst its neighbours by providing unhindered access to its market.

What will now be important will be a concerted effort to get rid of all the non-tariff barriers that stand in the way, and also to address various other trade facilitation issues. Based on recent experience, governments in the region would be well advised to tackle this subject within the framework of a task force, which includes both, government officials and the private sector. The task force should address a host of implementation issues in a practical and flexible manner. The Saarc heads of governments should collectively monitor the progress of work in this vital area.

Combating terrorism is priority number one for very nearly all the member states in the region. This was clearly reflected in the statements made by the heads, and in the final declaration. However, notwithstanding the fact that there is a Saarc Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, and the Additional Protocol to the Convention, in actual practice the cooperation and interaction in this field is minimal.

In the meantime, all the Saarc states have seen a substantial increase in acts of terrorism within their respective countries. It is high time that a regional expert group was established to devise a common strategy to combat terrorism in the region. Special importance will need to be given to the need to adopt a host of practical measures to combat terrorism.



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A rather tricky and delicate subject that Saarc will have to tackle in the very near future will be the role to be played by the countries and organizations that have been granted observer status. One possible way forward is to adopt the Asean practice of having dialogue partners.

This approach would be much more useful than having the observers deliver short speeches and do little else, as was the case at the Delhi summit. In this connection, some serious thinking will also have to be done about the Saarc Development Fund. In particular, what should be the terms of reference for the Fund and, most important of all, whether non-member states and multilateral institutions can contribute to the fund.

In his speech at the closing session, the chair, Dr. Manmohan Singh, in the light of the exchanges that had taken place among the heads at the retreat, said: "we have agreed to make tangible progress in the next six months on four issues which affect our peoples' daily lives: water (including flood control), energy, food and the environment." Equally significant was the indication that the help of "international agencies" would be sought for developing projects in these four sectors. For the first time, there is a clear sense of urgency.

Now that India and, above all, its prime minister have decided to take Saarc seriously, we can look forward to some concrete results. In the meantime, it is imperative that people to people contacts are intensified, and that civil society in South Asia maintains constant pressure on all the governments in the region to accelerate and intensify the process of regional cooperation. South Asia has to catch up with the rest of the world in respect of regional integration, and the sooner we get on with the task the better.



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