

Saarc summit in Thimpu

The need is ensuring connectivity on bigger scale

HERE may be, and for all the right reasons, a good number of questions about the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc). To what extent it has been able to solidify links between and among its eight member nations in the last twenty-five years of its existence is a question that will have many answers. Whether the cup has been half full or half empty, as India's Manmohan Singh would like to put it, is a matter of analysis. For now, though, there are some encouraging signs of how Saarc can move ahead from here on. Principal among the pointers to the future is the unanimity Saarc heads of government and state have reached on the issue of tackling climate change at the 16th summit of the organization in Thimpu. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina clearly set the mood through her call for a Himalayan Council, on the pattern of the Arctic Council, to handle the fall-out from climate change. Understandably, her counterparts have agreed with her, which again is a sign of the seriousness with which Saarc takes the issue.

A good number of other ideas have emerged from the summit. Sheikh Hasina's call for the development of a regional power grid and harnessing renewable energy sources is one that ought to be dealt with on a priority basis. If the suggestion is to be considered a basis for further cooperation between the nations in the region, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has happily gone a step further with his view that regional cooperation should mean an opportunity for a free movement of people, goods, services and ideas. Quite pertinently, it is a shared heritage he speaks of, one he feels needs to be rediscovered. But rediscovery will in the end depend on the degree of trust and confidence the states in the region are able to bring about in their interaction with one another. A pointer to some of the issues that have kept Saarc from moving forward has come from the Maldives' Mohamed Nasheed. His reference to relations between India and Pakistan was quite a departure from the norm, seeing that Saarc has studiously avoided handling bilateral matters. But his hope that the two countries will find a way of resolving their problems could just be an indication of the changes that may soon be called for in Saarc. And Hamid Karzai's reference to terrorism, extremism, narcotics and organized crime capture the insidious nature of circumstances in a large part of the region including Afghanistan. It is in these areas that Saarc member nations must coordinate their activities.

In an increasingly inter-dependent world, more so because of the common threats countries face, as over climate-related issues, poverty and militancy, Saarc must adapt to changing needs. The feeling among many that since its inception in 1985 it has not gone beyond being a talking shop must be dispelled, through ensuring a more pro-active Saarc. And that is a job only the leaders of the eight member states can do, given an intensity of purpose on their part.

Noise pollution, the least addressed issue

Enforcement of law and mass awareness needed

OBSERVING the 15th International Noise Awareness Day, 2010, through a sit-in programme organised by a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the speakers underscored the need for enforcement of the law against noise pollution and creating mass awareness on the issue.

While admitting the importance of the occasion, one cannot but say that the audience will forget it as soon as the day is over. And in spite of the general concern and suffering of the people, blaring of horns by vehicles, loudspeakers blasting out songs and tirades and booming stereos in cars and shops etc, will continue to pound the eardrums of the hapless public.

Though a very serious issue that has important bearing on the health of citizens thus exposed to sound levels beyond the tolerable limits, yet curbing of noise is still a least addressed matter. And sad to say, even environmentalists, who have successfully influenced the government and mobilised the people against other forms of pollution, have done precious little so far to protect the public from increasing level of noise pollution everywhere.

It is therefore time the environmentalists gave a more focused attention to the issue of noise pollution as a major threat to human health and linked it with the general environmental concerns on an equal footing.

The job, however, is not done with the giving of recognition to the noise threat by the environmentalists. In fact, it has to be matched by appropriate actions. For all we know, the government has a law to control noise. But the law is yet to be made conspicuous by its enforcement. As suggested by the speakers on the Awareness Day, traffic police and mobile courts should be mobilised to take action against horn-blasting vehicles. But what about bringing other sources of pollution such as grinding and welding machines, the blasting loudspeakers and other producers of noises also to book?

It would necessitate providing the law with necessary teeth for its effective enforcement by the government. At the same time, it calls for making a proper assessment of the level of noise that is most hazardous to health and identifying their main sources with a view to devising ways to combat them.

The curbing of noise pollution, however, cannot be left to the government alone. Citizens and communities would have to come forward for the desired change. Campaign to create mass awareness of the people about this yet another health risk should go hand in hand with the enforcement measures. On this score, the NGOs, the print and the electronic media as well as the various publicity organs of the government need to come in a big way to mobilise the people to curb this grave threat to their health and peaceful and productive living.

Solving the wrong problem

Yes, all of this is true. But, come on. Let's not kid ourselves. Just between you and me, we know that even putting all these happy stories together and trying to spin them into something great is a preposterous charade.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

Not long ago, the Economist put out a survey which ranked Dhaka as the second least liveable city in the world, beating out only those poor saps in Harare.

The outrage was massive. We Bangladeshis are apparently very sensitive about these kinds of slights, and always feel that some dire conspiracy is to blame, as though the entire world is conspiring to do us down.

The chatter on the internet and in university canteens and editorial columns worked itself up into quite the froth of righteous indignation.

All of a sudden, we were all arm-chair social scientists, rubbishing the Economist's self-evidently flawed methodology and scoffing at the notion that we could possibly rank lower than the likes of Karachi and Nairobi.

I am surprised no one called for a boycott of the Economist and that there were no bon-fires of old issues of the magazine. Bangladeshis are truly sensitive about how others see us.

Who can forget the gnashing of teeth and rending of garment that accompanied our annual assignation as the most corrupt country in the world, courtesy Transparency International.

So pervasive is this grievance of ours that there is now even an entity, the Bangladesh Brand Forum, which is dedicated, as far as I can tell, to improving Bangladesh's image in the world.

Don't get me wrong. There is no doubt that this is a noble and necessary effort, and I have no doubt that the good men and women at BBF and elsewhere who are fighting the good fight are doing yeoman's work.

But I would like to humbly suggest that in this obsession we have with our image and our brand and how we appear to the rest of the world, we are solving the wrong problem.

Now, it is true that we get a raw deal in terms of public perception. It is true that for most people Bangladesh is a by-word

for floods and cyclones and population problems and poverty.

Climate change has only made things worse. No sooner do we solve one problem, it seems, then we are hit with another, even more insoluble.

The gloomy predictions of up to 40 per cent of the country under water by the end of the century make Bangladesh seem even more benighted and god-forsaken than it did before (thanks a bunch, Al).

My, oh my. How terrible for our image. Well, yes. Up to a point. But come on. Let's call a spade a spade.

Certainly, it is true that there are many success stories that we could tout about Bangladesh.

We could talk about Grameen Bank and we could talk about Brac, and in fact, we could talk about the entire non-profit sector as a whole.

We could talk about our tremendous success when it comes to human development, what we have achieved in health and education and women's empowerment.

We could talk about our tireless garment workers and our fearless UN peacekeepers and our intrepid migrant labourers.

We could talk about all that we have achieved since 1971 from food production to population control to poverty reduction.

There is no question that there is much to be proud of and that we have many successes to our credit.

It is also true that outside of Dhaka we live in a beautiful and culturally rich country and that travelling the waterways and small towns and villages is food for the soul.

Yes, all of this is true. But, come on. Let's not kid ourselves. Just between you and me, we know that even putting all these happy stories together and trying to spin them into something great is a preposterous charade.

Let's get real for a moment. This



Shhh ... not so loud!

obsessive focus on our achievements obscures the real picture.

This is still a country where 40 per cent live in dire poverty and where there is shocking brutality and inequality. Don't even get me started on the power and water crises.

We are facing potential environmental catastrophe, and, most crucially, our entire society is a dysfunctional and morally compromised wreck, to say nothing of the polity.

These are deadly serious problems, and we need to focus on them seriously, far more urgently than putting a smiley-face on everything and polishing up our

image for the outside world.

Want to know a secret? If we manage to make headway in solving these deep-seated problems that plague us, our image problem will resolve itself.

So, I'd like to make a deal with my fellow countrymen and women. Fine, for public consumption, we can cluck about our image problem and our brand.

As long as we don't lose sight of the real reasons why we have this problem in the first place and don't start to believe our own propaganda, I'll play along. promise. I won't tell a soul.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

Treating the disease

The disease is the bias, suspicion and mistrust which appear in one form or another. You can solve one issue but another will rear its ugly head because the basic Hindu-Muslim divide stays. How do the two nations get away from it? The sooner we find an answer to this question, the stronger will be the Saarc.



KULDIP NAYAR

IT may well have been another futile exercise, another attempt to scale the mountain of difficulties. Yet, the people's Saarc held its meeting -- the fifteenth -- at Delhi this week to re-emphasise upon the official Saarc summit at Thimpu that the countries in South Asia would continue to lag behind in development until they realised that they have to cooperate.

Representatives of human rights organisations, trade unions, women's groups and others from all the eight countries in the Saarc -- Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka -- vied with one another to demand a union of South Asian countries, like the European Union, while retaining their individual identities and sovereignty.

Some even saw prospects of one market, one visa and one currency. In the statement they adopted after the two-day conference, the representatives (60 from Pakistan alone) "reaffirmed the South Asian people's commitment to creating a South Asia free from all discrimination, exclusion and domination."

Indeed, these are lofty ideals. But they

are worth pursuing. The participants were not only passionate about them but also committed to rise above nationalism and parochialism to make the dream of a South Asia Union come true. Their speeches had no rancour, no bitterness and no allegation. They seemed to read one another's minds, and talked of how to live together as friendly neighbours.

All the eight countries are different in their own ways. Yet, they are similar in one way -- the years of foreign rule has hammered their outlook into a civilisational mould which reflects commonality. But, unfortunately, they seek solutions to their basic problems not from within the region but from outside.

This dependence is the fallout of their slavery. The British, who ruled practically the entire region, were ruthless masters. They used people in the region as brick and mortar to build the structure of the empire. Any big or odd stone that did not fit in was crushed or thrown aside. Not many rose to challenge the system, and a few who did were nipped in the bud. Others were eliminated.

Still this region, with people of different traditions, defeated Great Britain and pushed out the mighty empire. In their

journey towards independence they fell and rose, but reached their destination. It is a saga of suffering and sacrifice which is recalled even today.

South Asia has learned the lesson that every enslaved country does from humiliation. But what it has not is that people have to tie hands with one another to overcome the problems. Together they can fight to determine the path they should take, the

democratic system. Our struggle in different parts of the region was to have more and more elected representatives.

We shed one another's blood, although we were independent. The subcontinent of India was partitioned into India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. Sri Lanka was only given freedom, and Bhutan as well, when it was not the British protectorate. When the constitutions in the newly independent countries were framed, the people had the most say. The biggest achievement through the constitution was to keep the rights of people supreme and to ensure that the nations did not substitute white masters with brown sahibs.

It was not the question of government alone. It was also the question of constitutional guarantee whereby sovereignty stayed with the people; how to ensure that the right of the voters in elections was theirs. And does democracy mean only going to the polling booths and registering votes? The answer to such questions may be able to tell whether democracy will survive in South Asia.

The people's wishes -- and prayers -- would have fructified to a large extent by this time if the hostility between India and Pakistan had been overcome. The fact is that even what the two countries agree upon at the summit remains on paper because the decisions are not acceptable to the establishments, the ultimate arbiters, in their respective countries.

Both India and Pakistan have not been able to overcome their differences that go back to the days before partition. In a way, it is the same old bias between Hindus and Muslims. Parochialism spoils the thinking of secular India when it comes to Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan has never adopted secularism even after Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's declaration that the state would have nothing to do with religion.

Between August 1947 and 2010, the two countries have fought a Kashmir war and two general wars in 1965 and 1971, apart from covert wars like the Raan of Kutch, Gibraltar, Siachin, Grand Slam and Kargil. Both are also nuclear powers. Still they love to hate each other.

Kashmir and water are symptoms, not the disease. The disease is the bias, suspicion and mistrust which appear in one form or another. You can solve one issue but another will rear its ugly head because the basic Hindu-Muslim divide stays. How do the two nations get away from it? The sooner we find an answer to this question, the stronger will be the Saarc.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.