

Postponement of Saarc Summit

Opportunity for engagement of leaders should not be lost

THE 19th Saarc Summit has been postponed, and we have not heard of a new date as yet. It is obvious that, the Islamabad Summit would have been only the nineteenth in the thirty one-years of its existence, the heads of government or state, of the member countries, have not been able to meet annually as envisaged in the Saarc Charter, for some reason or the other.

The postponement has come in view of India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan initially deciding to abstain from the meeting. India's decision has been compelled by the attack on Uri while Bangladesh has taken umbrage at Pakistan's blatant interference in its internal affairs related to the trial and punishment of the war criminals. Pakistan's alleged role in Afghanistan has caused it to take the decision that it has.

It is true that Pakistan's stand on various issues has generated tensions and instability in the region. And perhaps Pakistan deserves more than a rap in the knuckles for it. And the Saarc Summit would have offered the appropriate forum to confront Pakistan. Although one might argue that the respective issue the three countries have put up as the reason for the boycott falls with the realm of the bilateral, one could also counterpose the argument that extremism and terrorism that Pakistan is accused of fomenting are no longer bilateral issues and ought to feature in the Summit agenda.

However, we feel talking to each other is better than talking at each other and for that the Summit is indispensable. Moreover, the boycott may create a precedent that may be replicated on flimsy grounds. We need more of Saarc not less of it. Notwithstanding its flaws we cannot let Saarc die.

Reception to PM

Celebration turned into torment

WE hail the prime minister for winning the UN "Planet 50-50 Champion" and the "Agent of Change" awards for her resolute and visionary statesmanship. We also congratulate the PM for being praised as a champion of women's rights and empowerment in South Asia at the 5th Global Fund Replenishment Conference in Montreal. And it is natural that people would celebrate at a moment like this, but why should the celebration come at such high cost of public suffering?

Unfortunately, that was the case in Dhaka on Friday when the city came to a virtual standstill as leaders and workers of the AL and its allies blocked various arterial roads to organise a grand reception for the PM who returned home that day after a two-week visit to Canada and the US. Thousands of commuters -- among them children, elderly and patients -- were left stranded on the road for hours in the blistering heat and the suffocating humidity. To make matters even worse, the festivity coincided with the admission tests at Dhaka University, Jagannath University and the 37th BCS preliminary exams.

This is not the first time that the residents of the capital have had to suffer such inconveniences. Can this be a norm in a society governed by law? Does any party have the legal authority to block public thoroughfares by making roads off limits to commuters? What is the role of the police? The policymakers should be conscious of the degree to which such activities are loathed by people. We seek the intervention of the Prime Minister to put a stop to this culture of celebrating at the expense of public suffering.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Incomplete flyover construction

Flyovers across the city have significantly eased traffic congestion in recent years. But the Moghbazar-Mouchack flyover construction has turned extremely irksome.

Planned for completion by 2014, the Rampura to Shantinagar wing is only 47 percent complete. It's supposed to be wrapped up by December this year, but similar promises have often produced no result in the past, with project costs going up with each extension of the deadline.

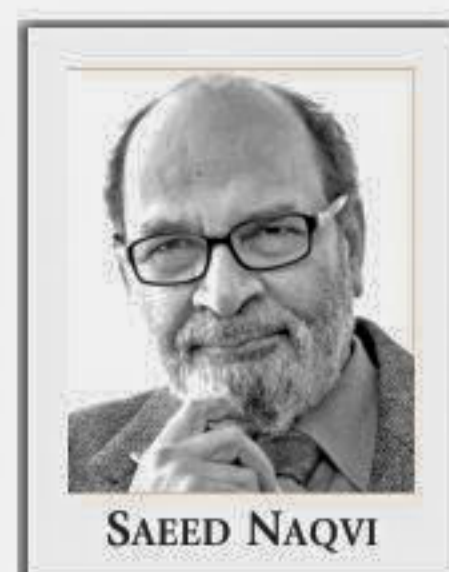
Construction materials continue to occupy the streets. The 10-15 minute journey from Shantinagar to Rampura Bridge now takes an hour, and the vehicle congestion is inconvenient to commuters. We urge the authorities to complete these projects as soon as possible.

Rumana Raufun
East West University

All the best for England series

England will tour Bangladesh later this month and it is a wonderful opportunity for Bangladesh to increase their ratings in ODI cricket. England great form will certainly be a tough challenge for Bangladesh. It was a good move by BCB to arrange a series against Afghanistan as a preparation for the England series. I believe the matches against England must be played on slow and turning pitches as such conditions will enhance our opportunity to win due to the England players being less accustomed to slow tracks. May the team selectors take the right decisions and may we win the series against England.

Nasif Ferdous
Toronto, Canada



SAEED NAQVI

SHAILA died in a Karachi hospital on the day the Army camp in Uri was attacked. Threatening war drums kept her brother, Nazim, a dear cousin of mine, from

travelling for the last rites. That was the best he could have done. Forbidding paper work would have been in the way for Shaila's burial in the family graveyard in Mustafabad near Rae Bareilly. So she was buried in Karachi. Nazim wept on my shoulder in New Delhi.

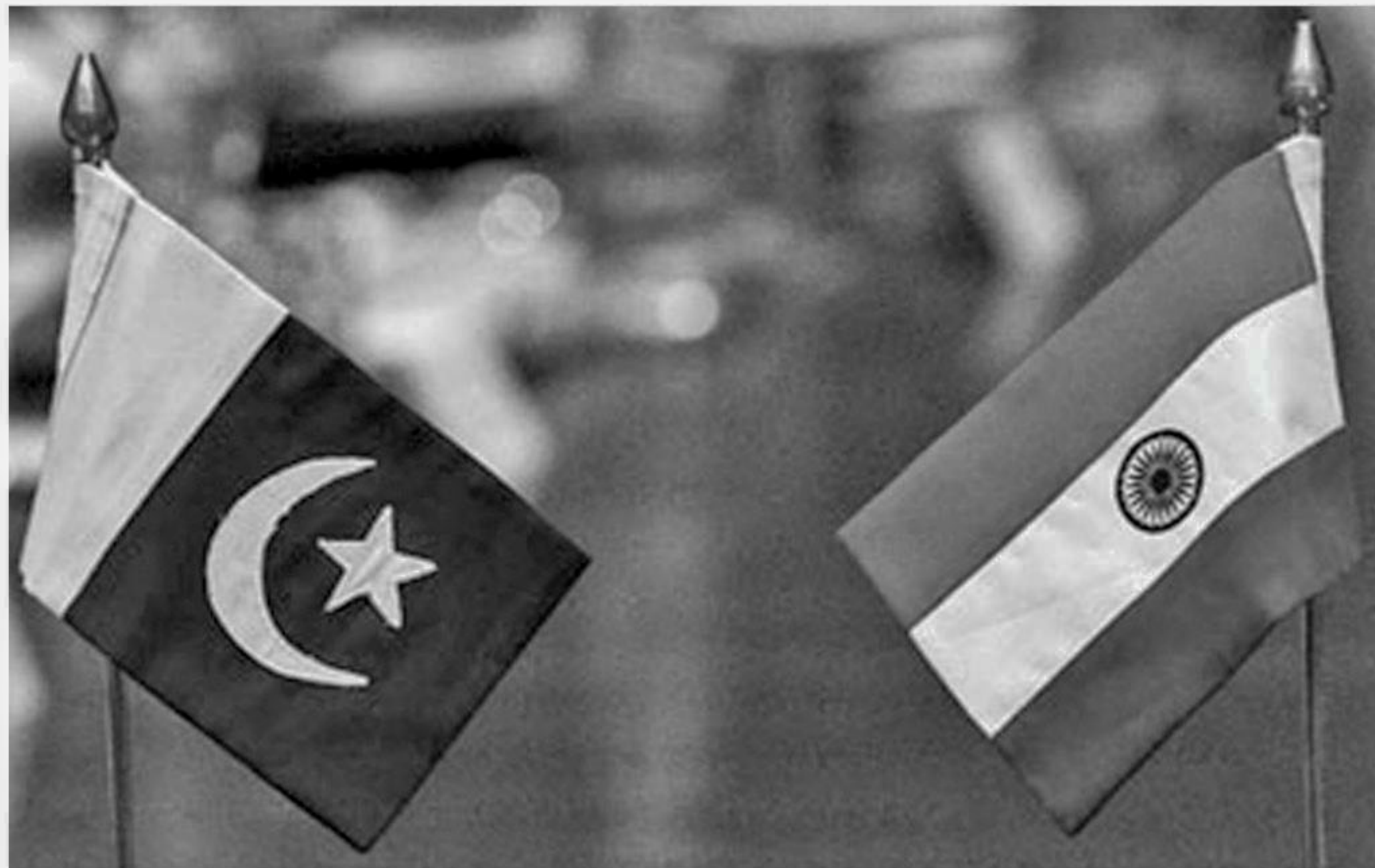


PHOTO: AFP

Joint families have dispersed but the sentiment to get together for marriages and death still lingers. This week, even as you read this column, we shall congregate at Nazim's house to remember Shaila.

In Dubai, my cousin Shireen's dilemma is of a different order. With some effort, she could have attended the funeral in Karachi. She decided not to. Shireen lives with a paranoia: she is averse to having her Indian passport stamped by Pakistani immigration. Thereby hangs a tale.

Daughter of left liberal author, my uncle, Saiyyid Mohammad Mehdi, Shireen did her Masters in Sociology from JNU, married a Pakistani cousin

Abbas, and had a daughter, Mariam. Given her background, Shireen was obstinately opposed to giving up her "secular" Indian identity for a Pakistani one. Mariam, born in India, equally stubbornly clung on to her Indian passport.

These compulsions forced Abbas to find work as a banker in neutral territory -- Cayman Islands. In the balmy weather, when Shireen was in the family way again, she decided to hop across to Florida for good gynecological support. Thus came Rabab into this world, not only pampered by the most opulent medical facilities but also with access to a gift from the gods -- an American passport. She was born in America.

In Herbert's great poem, *The Pulley*,

God exhausts all his treasurers on man but keeps for himself the "Rest". This has multiple meanings. In other words, God's gifts will come with "repining restlessness" so that man does not forget Him.

Well, Shireen had her share of convoluted gifts. A tall, lovely, 28-year-old, on a wheelchair, immobile and comprehensively challenged is Rabab, carrying the world's most priceless travel document -- an American passport.

For long years, Dubai has been their chosen "neutral" territory from where they branch out to relatives, resident in either of the countries for which their papers are valid.

To make life easier for her beloved

Rabab, Shireen has kept an option in New Delhi near our daughters, her adoring nieces. The problem is that Rabab needs a visa, which is difficult to obtain when Indo-Pak temperatures are high. But she has an American passport? That does not matter. Her father is a Pakistani citizen. Period. But she is challenged. Doesn't matter.

God's other gifts to Shireen were soon to be packaged with further complications. The older daughter did superbly at a university in Canada, fell in love with a Haitian filmmaker with a Canadian passport. It therefore made sense for her to acquire a Canadian passport, supremely confident of her Indian attachment. She was born in India and if an Indian passport is no longer

facility being one of your parents of Pakistani origin."

But wait a minute, she was born in India; until two years ago she had an Indian passport. That does not matter. Her father's nationality trumps every detail in her past. Shireen and Mariam are frantic. Will she get a visa for a wedding in the family in India in November?

I realise more than most people that these are abnormal times. In fact, my career as a foreign correspondent would have been impossible without unstinted help, on a personal basis, from friends in the foreign office. Additionally, visas for friends and relatives, on both sides of the border, were there for the asking. My friends were a strand in the vast mosaic that kept the nation's sanity. Thanks to them, visiting relatives from Pakistan envied us for the friends we had. "Bhaiyya, can we buy land here?" It all seems so distant in time.

When some of us accompanied the then Indian External Affairs Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Pakistan, I invited colleagues K.K. Katyal and M.L. Kotru, among others, to visit relatives in Karachi. The idea was to share with them the Mohajir experience. A teenage cousin of mine took my breath away:

"Bhaiyya, are they Hindus?"

"Yes, but why do you ask?"

"Because they look just like you." The boot was on the other foot those days.

My mother, an eternal optimist, a great favourite of Shaila, Nazim, Shireen, Abbas, indeed our entire universe, died three years ago, determined to believe that sooner or later mists will lift and peace will descend. The following couplet was an article of faith with her:

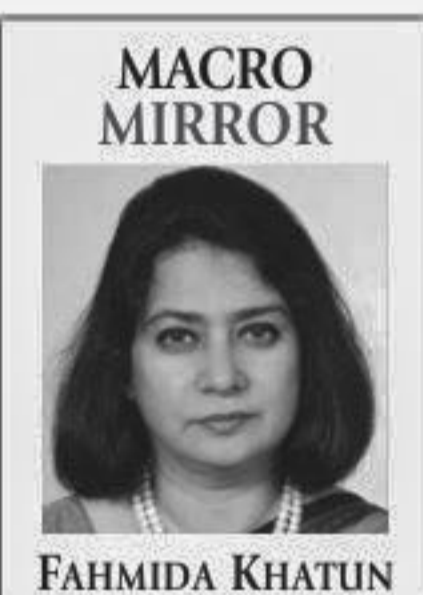
"Banda maza us milap mein hai,
Jo sulah ho jaaee, jung ho kar?"

(There is great pleasure in the togetherness
Which happens after a big quarrel.)

The writer is a senior Indian journalist, television commentator and interviewer.

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It's the people who matter



FAHMIDA KHATUN

CONNECTING with people is an inherent urge in human beings. Movement of people and ideas contributed towards the progress of societies. Sustainability of societies depends on movement of people from one region to another. As societies have progressed and economic activities have expanded, the world has also become more

interlinked. People in one country depend on people from other countries for economic and social needs such as food, medicine, education and entertainment. People travel from one corner to another to fulfil their demands. With technological progress, people can also avail various services without travelling, and just by hitting the keyboard of their laptops or touching the screen of their mobile phones. But, at the heart of getting any services either from within or outside the country is the idea of getting connected through people.

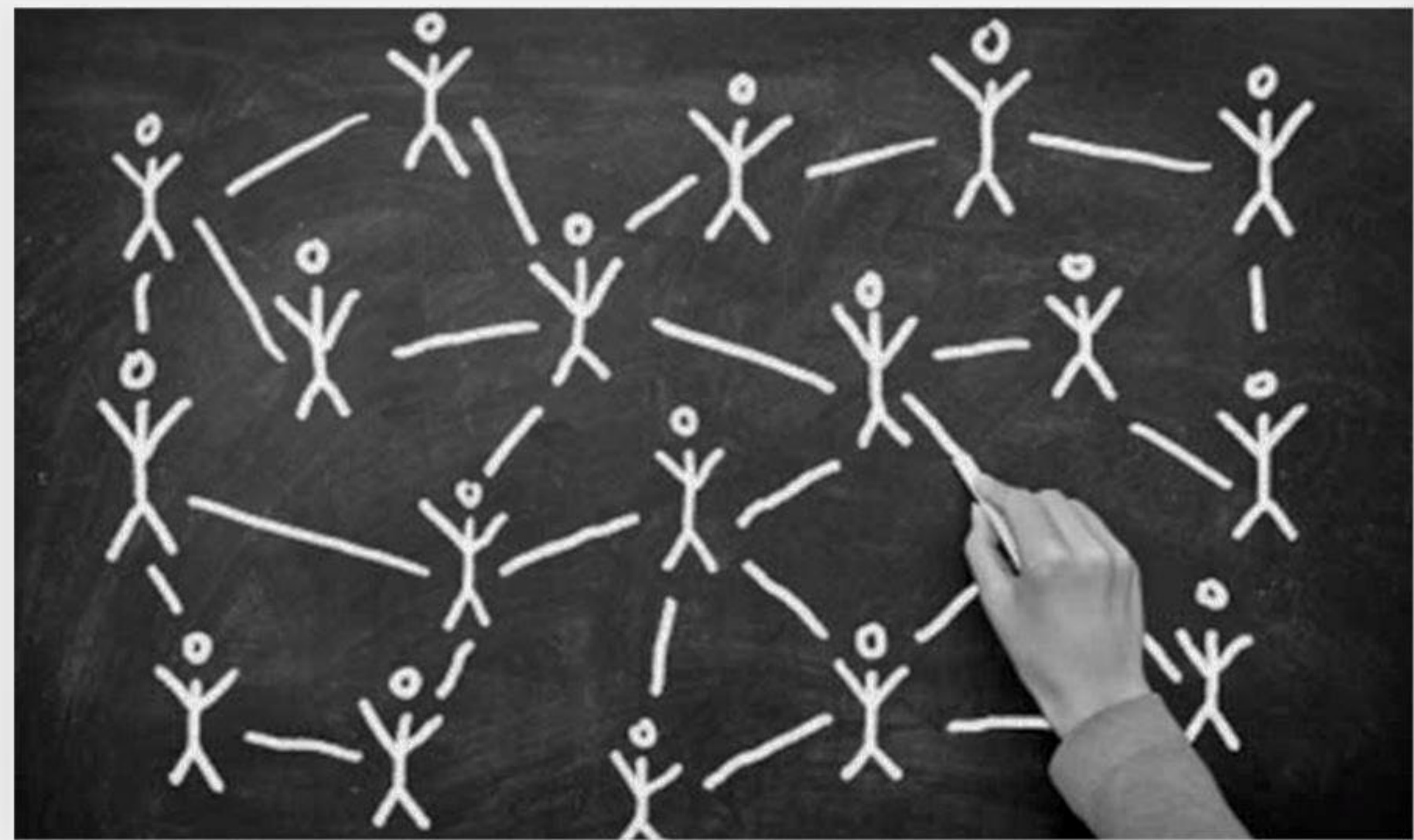
Such realisation rewarded the advanced countries despite various problems that accompanied this strategy. South and East Asia has engaged into various groupings such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM), Bangladesh-Bhutan-Nepal-India (BBNI) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Of these, BIMSTEC covers the entire Bay of Bengal region. Countries in this initiative - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand - have several complementarities in economic and social areas. This makes the initiative a prospective one, even though these countries are divergent in terms of economic, social and political development. However, launched in 1997, BIMSTEC is yet to get momentum for cooperation among its member countries. Thus, with a GDP of USD 2.7 trillion and a population size of 1.3 billion, the potential of the initiative remains untapped.

While such potential will be explored through trade, infrastructural connectivity, through investment, and through linking productivity and value chains, the importance of establishing connectivity through people to people contact is no less important. If one looks at the flow of people travelling from one country to another within the region, it is obvious that the flow has been continuous and increasing. Be it for health care, education, business, seminars and meetings or tourism. One indication is the number of flights operating in the region compared to that of ten years back. Quite often, one would find it difficult to get an airline ticket to travel to India or Bangkok if seats are not reserved well in advance. A recent regional

consultation of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) in New Delhi discussed the prospect of people to people contact in the BIMSTEC. Trade and investment cannot take place without the service of people. At this day and age, services have international character. They have moved from domestic to global level mostly thanks to technology. Electronic banking, telemedicine and online education have proved to be popular among consumers across the world. But there is also a need for physical presence. Given the importance of trade in services which involve people, international agreements have been formulated. For

application form has been reduced to two pages from eight pages. Also, business visa for five years has proved to be useful. But apart from business people and senior citizens, long term visas are restricted even for genuine and frequent travellers. Similar problems exist in case of Thai visa. Sometimes due to visa related problems, patients do not tell the truth as that require more paperwork and delay the process even when there is an emergency. This results in post travel problems such as difficulty in transfer of money.

In addition to stronger political commitment, media can also play an important role in improving people to



example, General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) provides guidelines for services trade in various sectors. However, as the WTO negotiation is at stalemate, progress on GATS is also slow. BIMSTEC has not seen much progress on this either.

Several patients from Bangladesh and other countries in the region travel to India and Thailand. A good number of students also go there for studies. Intellectual and cultural exchanges have also increased than before. However, the visa process continues to be difficult for many travellers. True, the visa regime has improved over time. Online visa application form has done away with the physical queue which used to be tiring and painful, even though the rise of the middlemen has made the electronic application difficult of late. The visa application form has been simplified to a great extent. For example, Indian visa

people contact. Currently, news coverage from within BIMSTEC countries is narrow. Also, mostly negative news is focussed upon in the media. Instead of covering only political and social tensions, highlighting issues such as social and developmental changes happening in the region would be more constructive.

Movement of people from one country to another country is a necessity. It happens despite tensions amongst and between countries. Interests of governments and that of the people may not always be the same. But greater people to people contact can facilitate smooth solution of existing problems. It can help reduce fear and suspicion among countries. It can be complementary to economic and political dialogues at the policy level that is necessary for economic transformation of the Bay of Bengal region.

The writer is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.