



INDIA'S ROLE IN SAARC-A CRITICAL HISTORICAL REVIEW

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Introduction:

SAARC has come a long way since 1980 when the late president Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh first issued a formal call for regional co-operation, envisaging a meeting of heads of the State or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Srilanka. That the imperatives for such a call stemmed from Bangladesh and that it received instant support from the smaller states of South Asia gave rise to speculation in some quarters about the impulse among the smaller states for gaining additional multilateral setting. India's efforts towards regional co-operation and integration are particularly noticeable.

It was during the Indian struggle for freedom that closer collaboration with fellow Asians became one of the basis objectives of Indians. It was as early as 1920, C.R. Das, President of the Indian National Congress, urged Indian participation in an Asian Federation which he regarded as inevitable. The need for Asian Federation was again stressed in the Congress Session of 1926. A resolution this effect was adopted by the organization in 1928.

From the very beginning, India's foreign policy is one of keeping aloof from the big bloc's of nations – rival blocs and being friendly to all countries and not becoming entangled in any alliances, military or others which might drag India into any possible conflict. In one of his speeches Nehru said "We are prepared to associate ourselves with other countries in a friendly way. We are associated today in the United Nations with a great number of countries in the world. Anything else that we might do will naturally have to be something that does not got against one association with United Nations. Alliances usually involve military and other commitments and they are more binding. Other forms of association which do not bind in this manner and which help in bringing together nations for the purpose of consolidation and where necessary of co-operation are therefore for more desirable.

In the light of above discussion, it is clear that India's perception regionalism in Asia has changed with the changing political and economic scenario. Nevertheless, basic approach to regional co-operation is the same



India today, as in the early years, is unwilling to go in for regional security arrangements, as they are likely to invite influences of extra-regional powers.

India is, however, prepared to seek regional co-operation for economic development. It has clearly expressed its views at the time of launching of the South Asian Regional co-operation. It took each step very cautiously and moved step by step without showing any over – enthusiasm to the whole concept of regionalism in South Asia, fearing that SAARC might not take the form of political union in the future. Therefore, the bilateral and contentious issues were deliberately excluded and collaboration was made the lynchpin of the regional organization.

India feared that sooner or later SAARC might also meet the same fate. India's foreign policy largely prevents it from these kinds of political and security pacts which invite extra regional powers. Besides, as said above, India's relations with its neighbours have not been very good. So, if India showed any kind of enthusiasm its neighbours, might view it as a demonstration of its hegemonistic attitude. Besides, India itself had the apprehensions of 'ganging up' by the neighbours against it.

On the other side, India also recognized the economic gains of co-operation. It assured itself that if closer interaction in the non-political fields are consciously fostered, it may prove equally fruitful to regional co-operation. It also felt that for basic economic activities in the region, some kind of mutual co-operation was essential which informally might help the member countries to come closer to each other and solve the interstate disputes. The proposal was confined to economic, scientific, technical and cultural fields. With all this in mind, India accepted the SAARC proposal in principle, maintaining a low profile, since it did not wish itself to be labeled as the one to have stifled the idea. This was the first major experiment of regional co-operation in South Asia, which strongly needed India, being the major partner, so India accepted the proposal with the hope that economic co-operation will help to remove political distrust.

India's approach to regional co-operation, right from the beginning, has been to promote collective self-reliance, alleviate poverty and backwardness through self help. This implied planning and execution of the projects for which internal resources both financial and technological can be mobilized in sufficient quantity. Right from the beginning, India made efforts for accommodation towards its neighbors and maintained a low profile in the whole in the whole SAARC set up. The institutional framework agreed upon when SAARC was launched in August 1983 could be regarded as the first pragmatic step in the right direction. Right from the very beginning, India's



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emphasis on the core economic areas has been linked with the objectives of taking her benefits of the SAARC to the people.

In the inaugural address to SAARC standing committee at New Delhi in February 1984, P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Indian Foreign Minister observed; Among the most important areas which offer possibilities of fruitful co-operation are trade and industrial development, these is considerable scope for the expansion of trade among the countries of the region. There are obvious advantages in increasing our purchases from neighbouring countries and to that extent reducing our dependence on countries outside the region for our essential requirements. The possibilities of co-operation in such sectors, as trade, industry, energy and environment should be explored through technical study. The objective of such study should be to find out a way of tapping the vast potential of the region derived from geographical continuity in the economics of the countries of the region.

The South Asian Region being a poor region and the mere contention that the foreign assistance will help establish economic balance vis – vis India are some of the factors which called for a ready approval by the other countries. As regards India, it has been opposing the concept of linking regional development to availability of foreign funds. India has expressed doubts whether the SAARC could raise capital from the commercial market, when international financial institutions themselves were suffering from a paucity of resources. Further, India considers the proposal as incompatible with the objectives of self-reliance and self-dependency. Besides, India has warned the member countries against the dangers of neo-colonialism, and external pressures, etc. In plea for retaining economic independence of SAARC.

India which was equally concerned over the problem related to terrorism. It took a long term view and drew the attention of member nations of the SAARC to several international conventions. Finally it was only under India's SAARC Chairmanship that the draft on regional convention for suppression of terrorism was finalized which was later on signed in the Kathmandu summit. Keeping in view the common values rooted in the social, ethnic, cultural and historical traditions of the region, India has all along favoured co-operation not only within the respective governments but among the people as well.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in his speech at the second summit at Bangalore in November 1986, stressed this point again as the first step towards sound co-operation between the member countries. He said, Regional co-operation cannot merely emerge from the fiats of the leaders. It has to grow from contacts between professionals



at all levels. It is also through building a network of contacts at all levels among professionals among many disciplines, that we can start giving real content to regional co-operation.

India is endeavoring to create an atmosphere of mutual trust, free from misperceptions, prejudices and predilections. This is evident from India's assuming low profiles in the SAARC summits, meetings and conferences with a view to assuring a greater say to other South Asian nations in promoting regional co-operation in various fields for mutual benefit.

Conclusion:

Thus there are several constraints on SAARC and it is not likely to be all smooth sailing for the association and co-operatives efforts under the forum in the future. In the absence of a common politico-security perception with trade and industry and the like core areas yet to be agreed upon as areas of cooperation with guidelines for keeping bilateral and contentious issues out; with the rule of the unanimity in decision making; with the bogey of 'Big Brother' all the time raised against India, with funding on a voluntary basis and with the possibilities of external attempts at giving the forum a slant, the SAARC cooperative efforts is going to require extraordinary diplomatic skill and political commitments that goes beyond the SAARC framework. Apart from the reaffirmation of the leader's commitment to SAARC objectives, what is more important is the reinforcement they bring to bear by demonstrating the broader concept of peace and stability in the region. The collective interests of the region for their individual compulsions and priorities. On balance, the answer to that question would hold the key to the future of SAARC.

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