

DYNAMICS OF DEMAND FOR SOUTH ASIAN REGIONALISM: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE NEEDS OF SMALLER MEMBERS IN SAARC

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Abstract

An assessment of the dynamics of demand for a regional cooperation arrangement is the key to evaluate its performance. The paper explores the dynamics of demand for South Asian regionalism by employing content analysis method. The smaller regional countries (SRCs) had taken the lead to initiate the idea of South Asian regionalism that necessitates exploring as to what motives SRCs had intended to pursue through a regional cooperation organization. An analysis of the speeches delivered by the leaders of SRCs at SAARC summits during initial years after its inception reveal that they had intended to pursue various strategic, political and economic objectives. They mainly wanted to contain India's hegemonic policies and to preserve their separate identity, secure national independence and sovereign equality and to protect their territorial integrity. They also wanted to meet challenges to their security such as terrorism; threats from nuclear build up and arms race, and; environmental degradation and rise in the sea level. They also wanted to achieve economic independence and self-reliance, rapid industrialization and equitable distribution of gains from regional cooperation.

Key Words: SAARC, regionalism, South Asia, India, smaller states, needs, cooperation.

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Introduction

An assessment of member states' needs in a regional cooperation organization (RCO) is important for at least two reasons. First, the institutional arrangements of any cooperative scheme must correspond to the needs of its member states, otherwise, it cannot move forward effectively.¹ Second, one of the yardsticks to measure performance of a RCO is to assess whether it has helped achieve its members' needs or otherwise.² Thus, in order to evaluate performance of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), one must begin with an objective and comprehensive assessment of the needs of its member states. Since, the smaller regional countries (SRCs) had made the main initiative to create SAARC, it is worth-exploring as to what objectives these states had sought to pursue through regional cooperative arrangement.

The needs of member states are reflected in the aims and objectives, generally defined clearly in the charter – the basic document – of a regional arrangement. Sometimes, members can have even some covert and quite different objectives than those mentioned in the charter.³ Occasionally, RCOs might include partners with diverse or even competing aspirations and contain in its charter the objectives reflecting a compromise among the members. As such, its charter may not truly mirror the real aspirations of its all members, particularly who had made the main initiative to create it. Under these conditions, a critical analysis of the speeches, generally delivered during the proceedings of the organization, of the leaders of member states would help comprehend their needs and aspirations. Thus, the scrutiny of the speeches of the leaders of SRCs at the SAARC summits can help analyze the needs and aspirations of their respective government.

This paper aims to make an objective and detailed assessment of the needs of SRCs which had taken the lead to initiate and support the idea of SAARC. The study involves a critical analysis of the speeches delivered by the leaders of SRCs mainly at the SAARC summits in its initial four years, i.e. 1985–1988. The paper has been divided into four parts. First part introduces the topic and the conceptual framework of the study. Second part describes a brief profile of South Asia. Third part involves survey of India's policies and their impact on dynamics of the demand for South Asian regionalism. Fourth part covers a detailed and objective assessment and critical analysis of the speeches of leaders of SRCs at SAARC summits. Fifth part concludes the paper.

1.1 Rational Behind Creation of RCOs: The Conceptual Framework

It has been fascinating for scholars to explore as to what motivate states to create RCOs. The scholars of International Relations have explained differently the motives of the states behind forming RCOs in different parts of the world. Succinctly, these objectives can be summarised as strategic, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental etc. The nation states can be motivated to form regional arrangements due to their strategic and political motives such as: to get out of under the domination of a hegemonic state; to face a common external security threat; to get power and prestige at the international level; to maintain peace and order, and; to enhance their political influence and bargaining power at global level. Nation-states also pursue the economic goals such as: to strengthen their national economies and increase economic competitiveness; economic development; rapid industrialization and to attract foreign investment through expansion of markets and to reap the benefits of economies of scales; to facilitate pooling of regional economic resources and sharing of each other's

knowledge and experiences. The growth of regionalism is also “driven by the dynamics of an economic security dilemma” because the creation of economic grouping in one region stimulates the need to establish regional arrangement in other areas of the world. In sum, the states create regional arrangements to address their individual and collective (regional) problems – security, political, economic, social and environmental etc.⁴

1.2 Genesis of SAARC: The Existing Literature

In some cases, literature suggests, the outside powers or external factors have encouraged nation-states to form regional arrangements in different areas. For instance, the US government had played an important role in growth of regionalism in Western Europe and Southeast Asia. Were there any external forces behind pushing the South Asian Countries (SACs) to create SAARC? Inayat claimed that Western powers particularly, the US had encouraged SACs, particularly SRCs, to take the initiative for a regional arrangement.⁵ However, the assertions of regional leaders and most of scholarly works contradict this claim. Particularly, the leaders of SACs had proudly declared that the South Asian regionalism was an indigenous scheme. For instance, the President Ershad of Bangladesh had asserted: “It is a matter of pride that our resolve to cooperate regionally was not an external imposition but a choice of an association freely forged.”⁶ Several scholars have also endorsed this view. Besides others, Dash observed that unlike other regional groupings of states, “no external actors or developments” contributed any role in the creation of SAARC which was formed in “a response to the domestic political and economic needs of the” regional countries.⁷

The existence of a common external threat also helps promote regionalism. The communist threat was one of the several reasons that had forced countries in Western Europe and South East Asia to start

regional projects. But no such causal variable was observed in case of South Asian regionalism. There existed no outside power perceived as a common enemy by all SACs. The SAARC members faced severe external security threats twice in their post independence history but both the times they could not adopt common positions against the aggressors. The regional states could have united when China had attacked India in 1961. But Indian neighbours did not perceive China as their enemy. Earlier, India itself had rejected Pakistani proposal of joint defense in 1959. The second opportunity came in 1979 when Soviet forces had occupied Afghanistan and reached at Pakistani border. Despite Pakistan's efforts to adopt a united South Asian stance against Soviet action, India had even not bother to condemn it.⁸

India is a dominant power overshadowing all other regional states in every respect. At times, it allegedly strived to exert its hegemony on SRCs which would naturally aspire collectively to get out of under the India's dominance. Was this an objective pursued by SRCs? Were there any other political and economic objectives they had sought to pursue? Narain and Upreti observed that SRCs were motivated primarily by two objectives: first; to get a "cover against Indian domination" and second; to "accelerate the pace of their economic development."⁹ In the backdrop of the unique geo-strategic features of South Asia and its past history, particularly, Indian attitude towards smaller states, these observations look sound.

Some of SRCs particularly Nepal and Bhutan were faced with identity crises and due to their centuries old isolation from the world they had fallen "behind times." Consequently, they were put along-with Bangladesh and the Maldives in the list of LDCs. As such, Rizvi argued that SRCs wanted regional arrangements that could provide them opportunities of unrestricted interactions with the "rest of the world" and

ensure “equality to all states.”¹⁰ Muni noted that SRCs sought recognition as “distinct” and “independent entities” on principles of equal sovereignty of all members. They further wanted “equitable distribution of benefits” of cooperation. Meanwhile, Pakistan had joined SAARC to avoid its possible isolation in the region and to advance its political interests in the region.¹¹

None of these prepositions can tell comprehensively about the needs of SRCs which had taken the initiative to create SAARC. Nevertheless, an objective analysis of the speeches of the national leaders of respective countries, besides writings of different scholars from member states, can help comprehend the dynamics of demands for South Asian regionalism. It will also provide an understanding of the “attitude and perceptions” of SRCs towards SAARC and its future directions.¹²

1. South Asia: A Regional Profile

South Asia occupies about 3 percent of the world geographic area where about one-fourth of humanity, i.e. 1.5 billion people, live. It is “a world in miniature” due to wide divergences among its states and people religiously, culturally, racially, linguistically, politically and ideologically. Regional states have huge dissimilarities in almost every respect. Religiously, India and Nepal are predominantly Hindu states, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives have largely Muslim population while Sri Lanka and Bhutan have mainly Buddhist populace. In terms of military might, India is a “major power,” Pakistan a “cohesive middle power” and Bangladesh “a weak middle power.” The rest of the regional states are weak small powers (Sri Lanka and Nepal) or mini-states (Bhutan and Maldives). At the time of its creation, four out of seven founding members of SAARC, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Nepal, were categorized as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), while rest of them fell among the category of developing countries. India,

inhabited by 74 percent of South Asian population, is the most developed state. It shares about 80 percent of regional GDP. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal inhabit 13 percent, 10 percent, 1 percent and 2 percent of regional population, respectively. Their share in regional output is about 11 percent, 6 percent, 2.3 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively. The share of Bhutan and Maldives in South Asian GDP is minimal.

South Asian geopolitical traits are unique in the world. The region is entirely “Indo-centric” as India lies at its centre and separates all SRCs from one another. It shares land or sea borders with all of them but none of other founding members of SAARC had contiguous boundaries with each other. India is most resourceful as well as the biggest country of the region – even about three times larger than the rest combined. Due to its huge size, resources, development level, military and political power and central position in the region, India is the “core state” of South Asia. India’s attitude and behavior towards other SACs can be a major determinant of the needs and concerns of SRCs as well as the dynamics of demand for South Asian regionalism.¹³

2. India’s Policies And Their Impact On Dynamics of The Demand For South Asian Regionalism

The realists and neo-realists argue that global and regional hegemonic powers take the lead to form regimes to advance their national interests. However, India did not take any interest to initiate any proposal for regional cooperation arrangement in South Asia. But its policies towards SRCs certainly had an impact, in a negative way, to create the need of such an arrangement. India’s policies had instilled a fear among SRCs that created the demand for formation of a regional arrangement in South Asia.

South Asia was probably the only area of the world which had no exclusive regional cooperation organization till 1980. There were various reasons behind this lack of regional consciousness. Indian policies and assertions to impose its hegemony in the region was certainly one of its causes. It was eloquently elaborated by President Jayewardene of Sri Lanka while addressing the first SAARC summit. He had said:

South Asia had been slow in organising regional cooperation. It is no secret that certain clearly identifiable historical as well as geo-political factors have militated against regional closeness. Historical legacies of conflict; vast prevailing disparities of size and resources; different levels of development, both socio-economic and technological; and differences of strategic perception stemming from these factors. These were a stumbling block.¹⁴

The King of Nepal, however, not only analyzed more accurately the causes of slow growth of regionalism in South Asia, but also regretted over the resultant losses. He had stated:

Unlike the people elsewhere, we in this part of the world have been slow in giving proof to our ability to organize ourselves through a recognition of the fact that the other's existence and identity are just as important as our own. If we had succeeded in creating an order based on the principles of mutuality in matters of common interest, we could certainly have stolen a march in progress in many fields. But providence had ordained it otherwise. As a result, we lost time and suffered from the ills common to the countries of the Third World.¹⁵

In the post independence era, India perceived itself as the inheritor of the imperial British rights and privileges in South Asia. It

signed treaties with Nepal and Bhutan which were formerly imposed on them by the British Indian Empire. These treaties practically left both the states as Indian protectorates. India had also tried to impose alike treaty on Bangladesh soon after its independence in 1971.¹⁶ Earlier, Indian leaders had not accepted the existence of Pakistan sincerely and had supposed partition as an “unavoidable expedient” which would be “short lived.” At worst, they hoped that Pakistan would “settle down as a deferential junior partner within an Indian sphere of influence.”¹⁷

India time and again strived to impose its hegemony in the region and politically and militarily intervened in neighbouring states. It forcefully occupied and annexed variously princely states of British India and later on Sikkim. It also supported insurgencies in neighbouring states at different phases of history. It did not heed to the Nepalese demand of revising their bilateral agreement of 1950 and opposed Bhutan’s aspirations to establish direct diplomatic relations with other states including China.¹⁸ New Delhi generally strived to obstruct SRCs from establishing relations with outside world. It raised objections over Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on having links with China and the West, particularly the US. Indian leadership continued to express its concerns and protested whenever SRCs sought to purchase arms and improve their military capabilities for their genuine security needs. This attitude on the part of Indian leadership suggested that it wanted its neighbours weak, overshadowed under huge Indian size and capabilities and as such dependent on New Delhi. When, these states tried to establish relations with the great powers, they were maligned, by New Delhi, over “bringing foreign influence” and “external powers” in the region. India did not hesitate to exploit the inherited weakness of its smaller neighbours which lived under the fear of India’s “expansionist” policy. Their fears were reinforced due to persistence of their unresolved

disputes with India and occasional Indian attempts to show “hegemonic flavour” towards them. Particularly, Nepal and Bhutan constantly lived under the threat of being annexed, like Sikkim, by India.¹⁹ At different times and on different issues “Indian policy and diplomacy” towards its neighbours, reflected “a colonial mindset and a domineering personal style.”²⁰ Occasionally, its policy was characterized by “an attitudinal aggressiveness and a value-oriented arrogance” that was interpreted by SRCs as Indian “hegemonism.” Majority of Indian ruling elites tried to justify this policy believing that it was “natural” for a big state and “often necessary to assert the undeniable but nevertheless unaccepted fact of India’s primacy in the region.”²¹

3. Dynamics of Demand For South Asian Regionalism

An assessment of the speeches of the leaders of SRCS shows that they wanted to pursue diverse objectives, including, strategic, political and economic etc. They had formulated and prioritized their goals according to the objective geo-political realities and economic conditions of the region in general and of their respective countries in particular. Broadly, these objectives can be categorized into two types: a) strategic and political objectives, and; 2) economic objectives.

4.1 Strategic And Political Objectives

South Asia is centered on India and so is the regional cooperation among SAARC members. The genesis of South Asian regionalism is deeply linked with Indian policies in the region. In the post-Independence era, New Delhi viewed itself as successor of British Indian Empire with its entitled rights and privileges and strived to practice imperial policies towards SRCs. It instilled a fear among SRCs which struggled to ameliorate this situation through creation of a regional arrangement. A critical analysis of the speeches of the leaders of SRCs suggests that they wanted to pursue diverse objectives through creation of SAARC but the

strategic and political goals topped their agenda. These objectives were unmistakably shaped by India's policies in the region and reference to it can be found recurrently in the speeches of the leaders of SRCs delivered at the SAARC summits. Nevertheless, SRCs wanted to pursue several strategic and political objectives, such as: to preserve their national identity and political independence, and: to protect their national security in its various dimensions.

4.1.1 Preservation of National Identity and Political Independence

SRCs had intended to achieve several strategic and political objectives through regional cooperation in South Asia. However, preservation of their political identity and to get recognition as independent states with universally accepted rights of sovereign equality was their foremost concern. In the context of India's hegemonic policies in the region and its efforts to deny the SRCs their right to live as equally sovereign states in the comity of nations, it seems quite natural for them to pursue this objective. President Ershad of Bangladesh had highlighted this very fact while addressing the first ever South Asian summit. He had expressed the hope that the creation of SAARC would provide an "opportunity to reshape the post-independence political culture of our respective societies within the framework of sovereign equality and independence."²² Likewise, the King of Nepal stated: "it is our common concern to preserve the independence and security of each country in the region."²³ He also pointed out that the inability of the regional states to recognize that others' "existence and identity" was as important as their own, was the prime reason of slow growth of regionalism in South Asia. Nepalese King had the conviction that SAARC would help create a new regional order in South Asia. He declared: "The time has therefore come to enter into a new era of partnership among ourselves. It is in this spirit that I see the establishment of this regional association holding great

promise for the future.”²⁴ King Birendra had also underscored: “the solidarity we all seek in common cannot and will not be achieved unless we respect each other’s identity in strict adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence together with a policy of Non-alignment.”²⁵ He had further declared: “It is indeed a genuine pursuit of these principles that holds the key to a new order in South Asia which, in fact, will allow the genius of each individual nation to reach its highest fruition in peace and harmony for the benefit of this region.”²⁶ King of Bhutan also recurrently highlighted these objectives in his speeches. While supporting the adoption of the first SAARC summit declaration, he stated: “In our view, the essence of the Declaration is that all seven of us, setting aside our difference, fully respecting each other’s sovereignty and freedom of independent judgment, are determined to work together, both within and outside the region, to promote the welfare of our peoples.”²⁷

SRCs’ abhorrence to the prevailing hegemonic culture and policies of coercion to put the weak states under one’s submission were also reflected in the speeches of their leaders. They argued that the time had come to turn away from the past practices and to establish a new relationship based on sovereign equality, friendship and mutuality of interests. King Birendra had summed it up in these words:

There was a time, for example, when many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America sought freedom from the clutches of foreign domination. In continuation, recent events in countries not far from our borders unequivocally point out that no matter what the odds are against a people, no country can indeed be coerced into submission. One wonders if the time has not really come when each country should come to terms with one another in peace, harmony and amity with a view to achieve the new frontiers of cooperation in a spirit of

give and take despite differences or divergences of views in this day and age. I feel that unless we are able to overcome the inhibitions we each have inherited from our past we will not really be able to forge new bonds and new relationships which the times demand of us.²⁸

The King of Bhutan had also sought these objectives. Once he had said:

After a long winter of mistrust, coldness and suspicion this region of South Asia certainly looks forward to a new spring giving birth as it were to a new era of enlightened selfinterest based on a common desire to replace conflict with cooperation, to substitute discord with harmony and finally, move from an attitude of selfcenterdness to a widening horizon of contacts in the region in a spirit of reciprocity, give and take, live and let live.²⁹

SRCs wanted to get rid of the Indian domination and build a new relationship based on a new regional order in a spirit of accepting open heartedly each others existence on the basis of sovereign equality. They wanted to act freely within and outside the region to protect and promote their interests on the basis of reciprocity of benefits, and opportunities to conduct independent foreign policies. The desire of SRCs to establish and maintain their relations with the outside world, both states and international organizations, is illustrated in the Bangladesh's Working Paper, as well as acknowledged in the proceedings of Foreign Secretaries meetings prior to the launching of SAARC. Subsequently, it was also mentioned in SAARC charter that regional cooperation would not limit members' freedom of action and substitute their multilateral obligations.³⁰ Earlier, The King of Bhutan had stated: "the seven South Asian States had already implicitly come to accept the fact that political

heterogeneity and independent national foreign policies are compatible with close regional cooperation.”³¹ The desire of the government of Bhutan to conduct an independent foreign policy, free of external control or guidance, is also illustrated in the following statement: “It has always been an important objective in the foreign policy of Bhutan to develop close ties of friendship and cooperation with all neighbouring countries in our quest for regional peace and stability. We see in SAARC a process to facilitate the realisation of this aim and the fulfilment [sic.] of the hopes and aspirations of the people of Bhutan.”³² President of Pakistan had supported the claim of SRCs and said: “Our orientation to conduct relations of each other on the basis of the universally accepted principles of sovereign equality of states, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use of force against each other and non-interference in internal affairs is the harbinger of amity and harmonious and cooperative relations.”³³

4.1.2 Protection of National Security in Various Dimensions

SRCs wanted to reinforce their national security in all its dimensions. Though, there was no common external threat to them, but they were faced with various security challenges from within the region. At times, they had witnessed the use of force to settle political problems in the region. Some SRCs, such as Sri Lanka was faced with internal strife and terrorist attacks, apparently with external (Indian) political, military and financial support. Moreover, some member states believed that their very survival was at stake due to arms race, development of nuclear weapons in the region, global warming and rise in the sea level.

a. India’s Hegemony and Threats to Regional Peace and Security

SRCs wanted to strengthen their security under a regional framework. The leaders of Bangladesh and Nepal in particular were apprehensive of Indian ambitions after disintegration of Pakistan and forceful annexation of Sikkim. They believed that peace and stability was

of “fundamental importance” to create suitable environment necessary for achieving economic potential of regional cooperation in South Asia. These concerns were also shared by Pakistan. For instance, President Zia had once said: “Elimination of suspicion and mistrust and the reinforcement of security in this region could make a vital contribution to international peace and security and the emergence of a more equitable political and economic order in the world.”³⁴ Likewise, President Jayewardene of Sri Lanka had stated: “It is the establishment of peace and stability in each of our country and in our region as a whole, which is of fundamental importance and it is this element which should enable us to create conditions for better lives of our peoples now and even better lives for the next and coming generation.”³⁵ King of Nepal had declared: “We have also a common commitment to promote the cause of peace and development for our people.”³⁶ President Gayoom of Maldives had stated that SAARC could be an “instrument for the promotion of peace, progress and stability in this part of the world. It can also enhance our sovereignty and foster peace, freedom and social justice among member states.”³⁷ King of Bhutan had observed: “Creating an environment of peace and stability in South Asia is of vital importance for SAARC if it is to realise its full potential for growing into a major force both in our region and in the world at large.”³⁸

b. Concerns over Arms Race and Introduction of Nuclear Weapons

SRCs were deeply concerned over the growing arms race, looming threat of introduction of nuclear weapons and their adverse affects on peace and stability in the region, particularly on security of the smaller states and the process of socio-economic development in South Asia. The valuable resources required for socio-economic development and eradication of poverty, diseases and illiteracy, were being utilized for military buildup against each other. Prime Minister Bhutto had elaborated

this very fact in these words: “Some of us are spending too great a proportion of our national resources on defence, maintaining large military forces that face each other. The truth is that our people face the same common problems - poverty, disease, slums and ignorance and it is to the vanquishing of these enemies that we should direct all our efforts.”³⁹ SRCs wanted to take a collective position on the issue of global disarmament as well as address this issue at the regional level. They believed that “SAARC can and must play a decisive role” to address problem of arms race and the growing threats of development of nuclear weapons in the region.⁴⁰

c. Threats from Growing Terrorism in South Asia

SRCs were concerned over the internal security threats being faced by them. They intended to use SAARC as a platform to tackle the growing menace of terrorism which was threatening the very security and territorial integrity of some of member states. The Tamil separatists supported by India had started to unleash terror in Sri Lanka before the creation of SAARC. President Jayewardene had expressed his concerns over it in these words: “All our countries need stability to develop and safeguard the freedoms they have. Terrorist movements have-raised-their heads among several of our countries; Heads of State and Government have been assassinated and violence preached and practiced. Their leaders hide under the umbrella of racial and minority discrimination and seek separation.”⁴¹ SRCs not only expressed their opposition to such activities but also sought that all members must act together in a way that terrorists receive “no support within or without.” They believed that terrorists posed threats to regional peace and security as well as to their territorial integrity. They declared that they were as much against the “balkanization” of countries as they were opposed to “all forms of occupation” of one state by another.⁴²

d. Threats from Environmental Changes and the Rise in the Sea Level

SRCs had serious security challenges emanating from the environmental degradation and climatic changes that were threatening not only the lives and property of thousands of their people but also the very survival of some of SACs. The recurring floods, droughts, cyclones, global warming and rise in the sea level were the problems beyond the control of any single state in the region. Every year thousands of people in South Asia suffered from these calamities putting losses in lives and property and debilitating the socio-economic development achieved by the regional states. Therefore, they sought to explore jointly the causes of “these sufferings and come out with enduring solutions.”⁴³ For instance, President Ershad had highlighted the desire of his country for “Multipurpose Himalayan Water Resources Development” covering various fields of cooperation, such as flood control, hydropower generation, navigation, irrigation, water supply for municipal and industrial needs, recreation, fish and wildlife protection, and water quality control. He had further stressed that over a billion people needed protection against death and destruction potentially caused by the adverse consequences of climatic changes.⁴⁴

The global warming and sea level rise was even perceived as the most potent threat to the very existence of some of SRCs. Particularly, Maldives and Bangladesh were deeply concerned over this looming threat. President of Maldives feared that climatic changes could put his country’s “very survival at risk.” For him, the protection and preservation of environment was a matter of foremost importance. He had stated:

Indeed, sea level rise, which is a direct consequence of global environmental changes, may in the next few decades, become a critical problem of ... proportions to at least two of our member countries, namely the Maldives

and Bangladesh. Other adverse environment trends such as desertification, deforestation and acidification pose an equal threat to other countries of SAARC ... the issue of environment demands more immediate attention. We are racing against time. It is imperative that we move from studies to action.⁴⁵

4.2 Economic Objectives

SRCs had intended to pursue several economic objectives through regional cooperative arrangement. These objectives include: economic independence and self-reliance; economic security dilemma; enhancement of collective bargaining strength internationally; equitable distribution of economic gains, and; external funding for regional projects.

3.2.1 Economic Independence and Self-Reliance

The most important economic objective for SRCs was the achievement of economic independence, development and collective self-reliance. President Ershad had stated it in these words:

It is true that our countries and our peoples have emerged into freedom but it is a freedom narrowly and legally defined. Our statesmen, our peoples recognise that the promise of economic independence is yet to be fulfilled. SARC symbolizes that promise in the fertile idea of regional self-reliance, regional cooperation and regional exchange. It is a symbol of hope and expectation transmuted by reasons and historical experience.⁴⁶

President Gayoom had also expressed the similar views. He had stated: “the moving spirit and objective, the very principles which gave birth to this association, is that of working together which has as its basic foundation, a promotion of the interests of this region, and essential aspect of which is the maintenance and indeed the strengthening of our

peoples' political, social and economic independence.”⁴⁷ King of Nepal had stated: “The problems of basic needs remain real for the large segments of our people in this region.”⁴⁸ President Gayoom stated: “It will, above all, be a framework for the promotion of the welfare and prosperity of our peoples and the improvement of their quality of life.”⁴⁹ President Zia of Pakistan had shared these views and stated:

Practically all of us in South Asia need to eradicate poverty and hunger, disease and illiteracy. We have the requisite material and human resources to address this challenge. Our peoples are resilient and enterprising, intelligent and industrious. Already, in each of our countries, enormous progress has been achieved. Through cooperation, we can accelerate this process. Given the similar nature of our problems, we can profit greatly from one another's experience in devising methods and techniques for resolving them.⁵⁰

President of the Maldives had endorsed these views and expressed the hope that “regional cooperation can play a major role in the social and economic development of the peoples of the region.”⁵¹ King of Nepal had stressed the need to address common economic problems through collective efforts. He had stated: “We live in a region where want and poverty, dearth and destitution are common. There is no doubt that these socio-economic realities make heavy demand on us. The problems of poverty and population growth cry out for solutions that are far more complex, difficult and time-consuming than we would imagine at first.”⁵²

3.2.2 Economic Security Dilemma

The successful launching of regional cooperative organizations in others areas of the world also stimulated growth of regionalism in South Asia. A reference to it is found in Bangladesh's working paper, which

had stated that regional arrangements formed for mutual cooperation in economic, social and cultural fields in other parts of the world had proved to be “extremely beneficial” with varying degrees. South Asia, despite having enormous potential for regional cooperation, was the only area in the world without such arrangements. The paper stated that regional states must get benefits of the positive changes which had resulted in an improved political environment and had created prospects of regional cooperation in South Asia.⁵³ President Gayoom had underscored the same point in the first SAARC summit. He had stated:

Interdependence between nations has become a reality recognised by virtually every government in every land and in all the regions of the globe. The EEC and ASEAN to name just two, are regional organisations which have in recent years illustrated what interdependence can achieve in terms of political stability and social and economic development. Upto now, we have been one of the few regions in the world that have not formally established a framework for regional cooperation. We have come here, Mr. Chairman, to take that important step.⁵⁴

The King of Nepal had highlighted it even more eloquently. He had stated: “while Asia wakes up to a new age and a new dawn we who also have been heirs to one of the richest among the world’s most ancient civilizations cannot slip back to sloth, poverty, ignorance and disease.”⁵⁵

3.2.3 Enhancement of Collective Bargaining Strength

SRCs had the conviction that regional cooperation would enhance their potential of participating in global trade negotiations and economic integration. It was pointed out in Bangladeshi working paper that: “Regional cooperation is a dynamic process, it will grow, it will widen, and it will strengthen; just as global interdependence and cooperation

throughout the world, for there is no better way we can strengthen global cooperation than on the bedrock of regional cooperation the world over.” It further stated that formation of a regional organization was important to provide a forum for mutual “consultation and coordination” to devise collective strategies and “have an effective voice in international forums” like UNO and other global institutions where “only groups of countries – be they big or smaller – that can aspire to make a decisive impact on the decision-making process.”⁵⁶ The need to be united in the global context was further stressed by the President Ershad in the following words: “The world in which we live is a cruel and unforgiving one. It is a world that punishes the weak and rewards the strong. The harsh international economic environment of the last few years has built-in imperatives for the developing countries” of which South Asian states represented “more than half in terms of population.” He continued to state that regional cooperation had become “an overpowering necessity” for SAARC members. Ershad maintained: “The global economic compulsions that confront us require a joint and increasingly sophisticated response.”⁵⁷ Shah Dev also underscored these considerations and had stated: “Let us not forget that Nature has made us inter-dependent and that we, in concert, can accomplish and achieve what we cannot do by going alone.”⁵⁸ President Zia of Pakistan had shared these aspirations in these words: “South Asian countries, acting in concert, could exercise a collective influence far greater than the sum of their individual contributions. The convincing example of ASEAN in our vicinity is there for us to emulate.”⁵⁹

3.2.4 Equitable Distribution of Economic Gains

SRCs wanted an equitable distribution of benefits of economic cooperation. As contested by the realists and neo-realists, SRCs were concerned about the relative gains due to which they consistently

opposed inclusion of trade and commerce in agreed areas of regional cooperation in the beginning. Recognizing the fact that there were wide range of disparities in terms of sizes, resources and level of development compounded with small economic bases of SRCs, they anticipated that trade expansion would favour disproportionately to the largest and most development regional state, i.e. India. However, Sri Lanka was an exception which from the inception of SAARC had pushed for entering into “core area” of regional cooperation. Its President had once stated; “I believe we have to expand and enlarge our activities. We will have to enter important areas as trade and commerce.”⁶⁰

The rest of SRCs, being concerned about the equitable distribution of regional cooperation, had suggested some remedial measures. They had the conviction that the South Asian regionalism must be based on the “firm belief that the good of all presupposes the good of each.”⁶¹ The Bangladeshi working paper had proposed to include among the possible areas of cooperation the market expansion in order to reap the benefits of economies of scale and to attract foreign investment and transfer of technology etc. However, it stated that joint ventures had the “most potent field for reaping all these advantages” by SACs. It pointed out that the SACs were at different levels of economic development and they need to “identify potential areas for joint venture, evolve appropriate institutional framework and policy instruments on the basis of equitable benefits accruing to these countries.” The paper had highlighted that some SACs were “relatively less developed than others” and stated that:

Any proposal for economic cooperation must consequently be formulated with the greatest care in order to ensure that the weak are not exploited and that the strong do not dominate. The areas selected should only be those in which cooperation will mutually benefit all the

countries irrespective of existing economic disparities, so as to make regional cooperation meaningful, strengthen the spirit of mutual trust and understanding, and bridge the developmental gaps existing among the countries of the region.⁶²

Pakistani Foreign Minister, Sahibzada Yakub Khan had also emphasized the need of “ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits of cooperation” among SAARC members.⁶³ The regional countries were well aware of the adverse consequences of the asymmetric global trade structure and its fall out in the shape of third world debt burden. Pakistani Prime Minister had highlighted this issue in these words:

Third World debt has now reached the staggering figure of 1300 billion US Dollars. This debt is evidence of the structural imbalance between the developed and developing countries; it is also an index of the extent to which Third World borrowing helped to keep the wheels of trade and industry turning in the creditor countries, at a time of economic recession for the latter. It is evident that if the economies of the debtor countries are ruined or slowed down in order to meet the debt obligations, they will not be the only ones to suffer.⁶⁴

Therefore, they were averse to substitute or reinforce this global unequal trade relationship with a regional one. The Committee of the Whole, established by SAARC members in 1983, had also acknowledged “the need to impart an identifiable South Asian context to the proposed regional cooperation.”⁶⁵ The members repeatedly declared in SAARC summits that “equitable” distribution of gains of regional cooperation was crucial in order to “achieve and maintain a minimum acceptable level of economic and social development in each Member State.”⁶⁶

4.2.5 Foreign Funding for Regional Projects

SRCs wanted to accept funding from external sources and donor for regional projects.⁶⁷ They were starved with the necessary financial resources to invest into their socio-economic development. Therefore, they sought to pursue development projects with the assistance of foreign donor states and organizations keeping in view that ASEAN members had successfully implemented a few of projects with the help of industrialized countries.⁶⁸

Conclusion

South Asian region is unique in several respects. It is a religiously, ethnically, culturally, politically, economically and ideologically heterogeneous. India is the largest of all states. Its policies had directly contributed to generate the demand for South Asian regionalism and establishment of SAARC. In post-Independence era, India had perceived itself as inheritor of the rights and privileges of British India and pursued imperial policies towards SRCs. At times, it strived to impose its hegemony in the region. At different times, it politically and even militarily intervened in neighbouring states, forcefully occupied and annexed variously princely states of formerly British India besides Sikkim and supported insurgencies in neighbouring states. These factors had instilled a fear among SRCs which created the demand for creation of a regional arrangement in South Asia. Besides, economic security dilemma, the desire of SRCs to enhance their bargaining power internationally and catalyzing their strength to integrate in global economy also motivated them to pursue regional cooperation in South Asia.

SRCs had intended to pursue diverse strategic, political, and economic objectives. However, some of them were mainly concerned about their identity. They wanted to bring an end to post-independence

culture of domination by a big regional state over the rest, consolidate their political and economic independence and reinforce their security against potential threats in all dimensions, i.e. internal, external and environmental. They wanted to establish friendly relations, on the basis of sovereign equality and mutuality of interests, with all regional states as well as with rest of the world. They also wanted to solve their common economic problems and equitable gains of cooperation.

There was an inherent contradiction in the making of SAARC. SRCs wanted to reshape post-Independence regional political culture with new one based on political independence and sovereign equality of all states. To get a cover against Indian domination was one of their main objectives to create SAARC. Due to Indo-centrality of the region as well as regional cooperation in South Asia, the success of SAARC mainly rested on India's role and policies in the region. It made South Asian regionalism very complex. SRCs had mainly intended to use SAARC to thwart Indian domination but the chances of organization's success also rested on India's role in it. Nevertheless, a genuine evaluation of the performance of SAARC can only be made by assessing whether its members particularly SRCs had accomplished the objectives which they had intended to pursue through it or otherwise.

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