



SAARC: NOT YET A COMMUNITY

ATIUR RAHMAN¹

If many minds can come together in any occasion surely there will be great yields. In a community where this tendency of coming together is in-built as an intrinsic value, definitely its members do create and nourish civilization. The attribute of a civilization is the power of uniting the diverse.

— Rabindranath Tagore

INTRODUCTION: SAARC YET TO ‘GROW UP’

In December 2003 the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) celebrated its 18th anniversary. There was, however, no jubilation in the streets of South Asian capitals. The high hopes that were raised in the mid-1980s by the concept of South Asian regional cooperation have not even partially materialized. Today the region houses about 600 million people who earn less than one dollar a day.² It is home to perhaps the largest concentration of poor in the world, accounting for nearly half the world's total. This vast poverty persists in South Asia despite some notable gains in economic growth and a number of interesting experiments in the areas of poverty reduction through micro-credit and women's empowerment. Apparently, there has been a massive failure in governance in almost all South Asian countries leading to a huge gap between economic growth and poverty reduction.

Beyond this, the region suffers from deep-rooted mutual suspicions, nuclear proliferation, violent ethnic cleavages and a decline in regional social capital as shown in interstate and trans-state relationships. The Indo-Pakistani rivalry has been at the center of the depletion of most traits of an age-old South Asian identity. In an age of massive globalization, instead of closing their ranks for greater economic and social integration, South Asians have opted for further isolation from each other. This has been happening despite SAARC. While most other regional blocs are emerging as close-knit communities, SAARC has not been growing at all. It is still in its infancy. The

¹ I am grateful to Mahfuz Kabir, Research Officer, BIDS for assisting with necessary materials in preparing this chapter.

² World Bank, *World Development Report 2002* (Washington DC: World Bank 2002), pp.234-5.

promises made by its main architects remain far from fulfilled.³ It has become more of an occasional talking shop for officials and ruling elites than a venue for substantive action.⁴ SAARC stood by individual member states experienced major gains or failures, without playing any effective role. This when it could have played a coordinating role in bridging the gaps in economic policies vis-à-vis globalization and learning replicable lessons from the innovative developmental activities related to poverty eradication pursued by some member states. Except for establishing two commissions on poverty alleviation, SAARC has not done enough in either of these areas. Only very recently has it started compiling a South Asian poverty profile to address abysmal poverty.

A number of interesting things, both positive and negative, have happened in the region despite SAARC. Bangladesh has found its own way forward in terms of establishing institutional democracy, reducing poverty by more than one percent annually, empowering women, developing a broad-based environmental consciousness, and fostering creative developments in the arena of micro-credit. Sri Lanka has shown promising signs of ending its 18-year ethnic rebellion. On the other hand, Pakistan has witnessed a return of military government notwithstanding its latest bid for 'democratization', the rise of religious ethnic groups in politics, and a spate of terrorist attacks. Both India and Pakistan have gained nuclear status, mobilized and demobilized armed forces along their border, and experimented with missile development. India, of course, has shown better results in economic reforms and technological development. Nepal, unfortunately, has seen tragic bloodshed in its royal palace, the rise of a Maoist insurgency and the crumbling of democratic edifices in the face of massive failures in governance.

SAARC has played no part in any of these vital issues affecting South Asians. The citizens of each member state of SAARC have, as a result, felt betrayed by this passive regional body which has played little, if any, role in revitalizing the South Asian community. This is quite frustrating at a moment when immense opportunities and challenges have been created by globalization. The millennium development goals set by the UN cannot be realized unless the elite of South Asia decide to come together and learn from each other's success stories, mainly created by the ordinary, hard-working citizens of the region.

³ Iftekharruzzaman, 'Reforming SAARC: In Spite of Governments', S. Afroze ed., *Regional Cooperation in South Asia: New Dimensions and Perspectives* (Dhaka: BISS, 2002), pp.18-19.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.19.

There are indeed strong imperatives for the leaders of South Asia to work together despite differences in their security perceptions, governance style and ethnic values. Their citizens earnestly aspire to a higher level of human development, parity in intra-regional trade, an end to the bitter communal conflicts of the past, and mutual trust so that South Asians can move forward into an era of love, well-being, harmony and intimacy—the intrinsic values of a community. Indeed, South Asians badly need this vision.

SOUTH ASIA STILL TRAPPED IN HISTORY

Historically, South Asia was one political entity with many decentralized structures. Each sub-region had its own shade of culture. This unity in diversity continued even after colonization by Britain. However, some kind of standardization, particularly in legal and administrative frameworks, tied together the diverse units during the British era. When colonial rule ended, those diverse units got truncated, leaving behind not only unprecedented ethnic flows of population across the borders but also a permanent source of ethno-religious discord.

Colonial rulers had largely created the South Asian states by executive orders. The burden of resolving the unresolved and bitter territorial or border disputes fell on subsequent national elites. The concept of nationhood was often negotiated by colonial powers and materialized in truncated forms. In many cases the creation of a state went against territorial, ethnic, religious or cultural traditions. Very often, national governments were imposed on a society, which was itself divided by the gap between traditional beliefs and modern attitudes, and by sectoral differences, religious beliefs or differential access to power. The state, in order to assert its domination, most often became bureaucratic and coercive and became entrenched well before a coherent idea of nationhood could develop.⁵ There are also at least two nations (Pakistan and Bangladesh) in the region that experienced ‘neo-colonialism’ and ‘internal colonialism’ and therefore have a bitter past. The internal difficulties faced by most South Asian governments have contributed to a deterioration in law and order, increasing ethnic and sectarian conflict, the theocratization of societies, degradation of the environment, rampant corruption, massive violation of human rights and the marginalization of the

⁵ A. Rahman, *Imperatives for Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Creating an Environment for Sharing Expenditures of Knowledge-based Development* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), p.219.

poor and the weak.⁶ Given the regional politico-economic divide, substantial cooperation in the region cannot be achieved overnight.

Notwithstanding this difficulty, SAARC has developed itself into a fairly elaborate institutional infrastructure. Some core areas of economic cooperation such as poverty alleviation and intra-regional trade in the form of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) have been gradually included in the agenda. Though differentiated in pace and content, all the South Asian countries have embraced economic liberalization. On the more optimistic side, SAARC has also shown potential for emerging as a forum for dialogue, negotiations, preventive diplomacy, and confidence and peace building. This potential is, however, clearly far from been effectively tapped, perhaps due to institutional bottlenecks and lack of strong political will among ruling elites.⁷

The South Asian community 'personality' broadly depends on three inter-linked economic and political factors: First, the character of economic transactions such as formal and informal trade relationships and whether there has been an honest attempt at reducing trade imbalances; second, how leaders feel about the outstanding regional problems, especially bilateral ones, such as the Indo-Pakistan conflict, India-Bangladesh border disputes, and those leaders' efforts to minimize these tensions; and third, the level of consciousness among citizens of the region toward the status of human rights in the region, and specifically, how they feel about states which at times, instead of promoting freedoms, curb them.

THE SOUTH ASIAN ECONOMY

The South Asian economies are summarized in Table 1. Clearly, there is a considerable diversity in economic performance. There is a great fear in smaller countries about India's domination in trade. India is the largest country in the region, with the largest production capacity in industrial and traded goods, and therefore has a natural advantage over others. Unfavorable trade balances with India create enormous psychological burdens in the smaller states, much more so than from the negative trade balances many of them have with the world's industrially developed countries. Even after seventeen years of existence, SAARC has very little to show by way of cooperation on the trade and economic front.⁸ The regional body has impacted only

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Iftekharuzzaman, *op cit*, p.19.

⁸ Q.A.M.A Rahim, *Economic Cooperation in SAARC: Getting on Act Together*, Speech, BIISS, Dhaka, 2002, p.3.

marginally on the flow of intra-regional trade, which is generally taken as an effective indicator of regional economic cooperation. While the average share of intra-regional flows in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, was 22 percent for exports and 15 percent for imports in the 1990s, the corresponding shares in SAARC were 4 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively.⁹

Table 1: Key Economic Indicators of the South Asia Region

Country	Population millions 2001	Per capita GNI (US \$) 2001	Life expectancy at Birth 2000	Population below National Poverty Line	FDI US \$ m 2000	ODA per capita US\$ 2000	External Debt US \$ m 2000
Bangladesh	131.2 ¹	370	61	44.3 (2000)	280	9	15,609
Bhutan	0.8	640	61	-	-	-	-
India	1,033.4	460	63	35.0 (1994)	2315	1	99,062
Maldives	0.3	2,040	-	-	-	-	-
Nepal	23.6	250	59	42.0 (1995-96)	4	17	2,823
Pakistan	141.5	420	63	34.0 (1995)	308	5	32,091
Sri Lanka	19.6	830	73	25.0 (1995-96)	173	14	9,065

Sources: Bangladesh Economic Survey 2002, MoF, GoB, and Preliminary Report of Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2000, BBS, GoB.

In Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) free trade arrangement, AFTA, was implemented in 2002 with the objective of having almost all goods traded within a 0-5 percent tariff range and averaging 3.2 percent. South Asia compares poorly, with a tariff burden of 30 percent and a plethora of non-tariff barriers. South Asia is not yet ready for an equivalent free-trade arrangement, SAFTA (the South Asian Free Trade Area).¹⁰ Even if the current preferential trade agreement, SAPTA, is successful, it may be restricted only to trade in goods. If such trade is agreed through

⁹ K. Raipuria, 'ASEAN and SAARC: Select Futuristic Scenarios', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, 2002.

¹⁰ A. Rahman, 'Track II Diplomacy as a measure of confidence building in South Asia for Regional cooperation', *BIISS Journal*, 2002.

negotiations, there is a fear that it can be still restricted through non-tariff measures and other barriers.¹¹

A group of South Asian leaders tried to create a sub-regional South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) between Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and India—the eastern end of the sub-continent—but this remained trapped inside political folders. Sub-regional initiatives in South Asia have raised large questions, concerns and political passion rather than providing any answers or creating growth mechanisms and cooperative understanding. By contrast, Southeast Asia already has witnessed some decades of sub-regional growth driven by factor inputs, economic complementarities, and the twining of market forces and the private sector, all serving as engines of growth. By adopting a notion of interdependent development, ASEAN mobilized its collective strength and developed itself as a truly merchandise trade-oriented society creating a momentum towards a modified structure for sub-regional growth.

It seems that a credible modified structure for sub-regional growth remains beyond the imagination of South Asian leaders, who are quite simply trapped in their inability to develop policies, prisoners of their own political trappings.¹² The SAGQ region lacks the political will to convert the huge geography and population into a thriving market, serious policy coordination to maximize the complementary gains, infrastructural facilities to exploit the latent potentials and the will to make use of socio-cultural similarities for collective enhancement in the quality of life of their citizens.¹³

THE SUPREMACY OF ‘MINDLESS’ POLITICS

The failure of the region to run regular air flights between the South Asian capitals and the closure of a modest train connection, the *Samjhanta Express*, which once existed between India and Pakistan, speaks volume about the supremacy of ‘mindless’ politics over people’s concerns. Societal desires for substantive cooperation in the fields of developing natural resources, human resource and infrastructure remain unsated. Specific areas of cooperation in the fields of natural gas, water resources, ports and waterways, transportation, communications and hydropower remain to be explored. Vast areas of the

¹¹ Rahim, *op cit*, p.3.

¹² A. Kalam, ‘Sub-regional Growth Mechanisms: SAGQ and IMS-GT in Comparative Perspective’, Afroze, *op cit*. p.197

¹³ M.P. Lama, (2000:6); *South Asia Growth Quadrangle: Opportunities, Policy Interventions and Growth Prospects*, Conference Paper (Dhaka: BIISS, 2002), p.6.

service sectors and human development opportunities utilizing regional human development infrastructures have remained out of focus. The present low-level of intra-regional trade is a result of bad policy. Kashmir and other border conflicts have been used as instruments for the deprivation of the people of India and Pakistan from economic and social opportunities by some influential policy makers. The leaders have not been trying earnestly to reduce intimidation and state-sponsored violence against people of the related regions. What South Asians face today is a deep absence of pro-people governments and policies for reducing poverty, ending violence, arresting environmental degradation and improving human development status, balancing inter- and intra-regional trade, and fostering peace and harmony.¹⁴

There has been a lack of enthusiasm and interest among the people and their leaders in the region in Track I initiatives, or official-level diplomacy, which is heavily formal, procedural, and complex. On the other hand, Track II initiatives, or 'beyond the state' diplomacy has been widely recognized as more likely to lead to better steps in confidence building towards the reconstruction of South Asia as a community.¹⁵ In understanding people-to-people cooperation and interactions towards making a community, as a proxy for necessary state-to-state cooperation, we need to focus on at least three types of issues: integrative factors, constraining factors and possible areas of non-governmental interventions.

INTEGRATIVE FACTORS

Regional communities such as the European Union and ASEAN have flourished due to a number of integrative factors. SAARC, on the other hand, has not experienced these integrative factors in any substantive way and will need to if the region is to develop any sense of community.

Political Will

The political will of the leaders of Europe and Southeast Asia to come together despite differences in size, level of development and security perception has been substantial. The moves in those regions towards the

¹⁴ A. Rahman, 'Imperatives for Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Creating an Environment for Sharing Experiences of Knowledge-based Development', *South Asian Survey* 7:2, 2000.

¹⁵ The initiatives include academia, research institutions and various professional groups including the media, aid workers, election observant, accountants and management experts, engineers, educators, business representatives, students and youth, even political parties, trade unionists, parliamentarians and speakers. See, Iftekhharuzzaman, *op cit*, p.25.

common goal of enlarging regional markets for intra-regional as well as inter-regional trade reflected a conscious choice by the leadership.

This will has not only been missing in South Asia, but also at times regional leaders have helped to dissipate any residual good will and energy for mutual cooperation. The biggest harm has been caused by persistent conflict between India and Pakistan. SAARC can never take off until this issue is resolved. The people of South Asia feel betrayed by this tension. There is a strong perception in the region that India fears a 'gang-up' by smaller states led by Pakistan and hence does not encourage SAARC to grow. Yet there is another view that Pakistan wants to stall the progress of the association because it fears that India will dominate it. The smaller states, of course, find themselves caught in between these two perceptions and are hesitant to move either too close to India or too far from it. In that sense Indo-centric perceptions still haunt most South Asian states, including Pakistan. This is acting as a brake against natural growth of the South Asian community.

South Asian leaders have lacked the political will to address these perceptions for the greater cause of improving the lot of South Asia's timid millions through effective cooperation. The only exception has been the relatively short interlude of Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral (1997-1998), including his tenure as foreign minister, when South Asians began to break most barriers and come together. Even the tensions between India and Pakistan began to ease. The Indo-Bangladesh relationship reached a new height and two of the most pressing problems, the Chittagong Hill Tract ethnic crisis and the Ganges water-sharing problem were tackled up front, mainly because of Goral's proactive foreign policy initiatives. All this created an atmosphere of mutual trust between both the leaders and the people of the region as a whole. However, this was a short-lived period of peace and harmony in South Asia. With the fall of the Gujral government, the 'Gujral Doctrine' was quickly eclipsed. Indeed, the subsequent regimes both in India and its neighbors opted to reverse completely the good will created in the Gujral period. Divisiveness has been further accentuated recently, leading to SAARC becoming almost a non-entity.

Social Acceptability

Regional economic integration has to be preceded by social acceptability of the regional personality both among elites and the people. South Asia had a common past, a common heritage and culture.¹⁶ The contemporary leaders of

¹⁶ N. Acharya, 'South Asia: our common home', South Asian Regional Dialogue, *South Asia: Vision & Perspective*, (Lahore, 1994), p.43.

South Asia need to revive that commonality among its people as has been done in both Europe and Southeast Asia. They too need their version of civilizations. This is a very slow process and at times quite difficult. But farsighted leaders must arouse consciousness about the virtue of regional cooperation among both ordinary people and opinion makers.

Mutual Benefits

Strong regional cooperation will never be effective unless both people and their leaders can comprehend the mutual benefits of coming together. Unless the comparative advantages of intra-regional trade are realized by trade and economic leaders, and until the cost of non-cooperation is calculated by the elites of each member country, the development of SAARC as a community will remain a far cry.¹⁷

Globalization

Globalization has unleashed both opportunities and challenges. It has been proceeding at such a pace that unless South Asian states act together there is every possibility that they will be left behind in repeating these opportunities by the fast-moving train refueled by the World Trade Organization. As yet South Asia has been unable to act together, even in terms of articulating common ills like poverty while dealing with global leaders who are setting the tunes of future trade, environmental protection, and poverty reduction strategies throughout the World.¹⁸

CONSTRAINING FACTORS

There are obviously serious constraints against South Asian cooperation. Some of these constraining factors are:

- ## Indo-centric strategic perceptions both among India's neighbors as well as among the big players in global diplomacy.¹⁹ This has created problems and natural impediments for equal participation in SAARC. The fear of Indian domination has largely guided diplomatic and politico-security decision making in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.
- ## Lack of trust among South Asian elites. Moreover, the ruling elites in South Asia, from the very inception of their nation-states—partly due to nationalist

¹⁷ Research and Information System for the Non-Aligned and other Developing Countries (RIS), *SAARC Survey of Development and Cooperation* (New Delhi: RIS, 1998/99), p.62.

¹⁸ SAARC has recently begun compiling a regional poverty profile. South Asian heads of governments have also initiated a Second Commission for poverty alleviation in South Asia.

¹⁹ A. Rahman, *Relations Between South Asia and ASEAN* Bangladesh Country Paper (Sri Lanka: UNITAR, 1985), p.7.

passion and inter-state conflicts inherited from the past but mostly to preserve their vested interests—embarked upon a development strategy that featured a preponderance of security considerations over socio-economic and politico-cultural development.²⁰

- ## Weak financial positions, reflected through the trade imbalances of smaller states vis-à-vis the larger states, especially India, encourages the former to go for extra-regional trade and aid arrangements.
- ## Poor infrastructure negates greater levels of intra-regional trade. Also, South Asian countries share some basic economic similarities such as low incomes, abundant labor, and comparative advantages in similar commodities such as tea, ready-made garments and similar non- or low-value-added commodities. These common characteristics often reduce the potential for intra-regional trade driven by comparative advantages. The low level of per capita income also constrains the potential for intra-industry trade.²¹
- ## Leaders have obviously not made serious cost-benefit analyses of the cost of non-cooperation versus the benefits of cooperation.²²
- ## SAARC was born with disabilities and constraints, which were essentially self-imposed. It adopted a functional approach of cooperation in non-controversial areas like social and cultural fields, hoping that if successfully carried forward, opportunities for cooperation in more vital areas could open up. Moreover, SAARC follows the principles that all decisions have to be made unanimously and that no bilateral and contentious issue can be on the SAARC agenda.²³ This clearly exhibits a weaker inter-state relationship toward equitable participation in policy making for South Asian people.
- ## The smaller countries in the region feel uncomfortable about their trade relationship with India because under the present tariff structure India runs a large trade surplus with its neighbors.²⁴ Also, India's volume of informal trade with most of its neighbors is substantial.²⁵
- ## Inter-state relations in South Asia are marred by mistrust, mutual threat perceptions, confrontation and hostility. Sources of conflicts are mostly structural in nature. Divergences in security perception between states are

²⁰ A.K.M.A. Sabur, 'Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Problems of Conflict Management', Afrobe, *op cit*, p.111.

²¹ D. Weerakoon and S. Sayawriya, 'Economic Integration in SAARC with Special Reference to the Role of FDI in Regional Integration' (Conference Paper Dhaka: BISS, 2002), p.10.

²² RIS, *op cit*, p.62.

²³ Iftekhharuzzaman, *op cit*, p.18.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.20.

²⁵ For example, Bangladesh's volume of informal border trade with India is substantial. See, A. Rahman, A. Razzaque, 'Informal Border trade between Bangladesh and India: An Empirical Study in Selected Areas', F.E. Cookson and A.K.M.S. Alam eds., *Towards Greater Sub-regional Economic Cooperation: Limitation, Obstacles, and Benefits* Dhaka: UPL, 2002), pp.129-213.

compounded as threats to territorial integrity; political stability and economic development are considered to originate from neighbors. Citizens also are caught up in the cobweb of history. They are still victims of the traumatic transition to new national entities from a larger entity and the tragedies of communal violence, loss of wealth and identities that followed the end of colonial rule. As a result, they have not yet been able to generate sufficient demand for regional cooperation within their own countries. However, a number of exchanges have taken place between various groups of enlightened citizens from different SAARC countries, showing some hope for developing a peaceful South Asian community. But high hopes raised by these groups remain to be fulfilled. Indeed, these hopes can be shattered by terrorist and communal attacks from time to time.

As well, there are problems with the SAARC processes:

- ## Hard and fast rules followed by the SAARC secretariat;
- ## Bureaucratic hassles and paperwork at the secretariat, which is run by national bureaucrats drawn from different member states;
- ## Many unnecessary formalities;
- ## The requirement of consensus decision-making even for small things which could be solved bilaterally;
- ## A lack of political will and mutual trust among official leaders;
- ## The inability of leaders and officials to visualize the potential benefits of regional cooperation;
- ## The near-war situation prevailing in some border areas; often accentuated by accusations of terrorist infiltration;
- ## Deep-rooted skepticism about the viability of the South Asian regional project arising from the ideological schism between religious and secular nationalisms, internal problems of ethnic conflicts, lawlessness and poverty; and
- ## Lack of any collective new vision for a rejuvenated South Asia even in the face of the overwhelming pressure of globalization.

Given these limitations in the official approaches to cooperation, the citizens of South Asia cannot be oblivious of lost opportunities for their own prosperity and well-being. Indeed, they are well aware of the imperatives for closer cooperation between the nations of South Asia. The need to build a South Asian identity based on their common values rooted in the historical, cultural, social, and ethnic and civilization traditions can hardly be overemphasized. Historically, as hinted earlier, South Asians are closer to each other in their way of life, philosophy, ethics, literature, music, dance, paintings, and architecture than to countries of other regions. But the legacy of confrontation has overtaken these positive commonalities. It is, therefore, time to reinvent the wheel of South Asian identity through increased citizen

activism, which will lead to a better environment for confidence-building among the formal elites of South Asia and in turn lead to a better South Asia.

Despite these constraints, many believe that there is ample scope for meaningful non-official initiatives to enhance further confidence-building in the region so that leaders cannot continue to shy away from formal regional engagements.

POSSIBLE AREAS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTION

A fear of aggression, domination or embarrassment haunts most leaders of South Asia and prevents serious governmental initiatives. As a result, SAARC remains moribund and South Asian leaders tend to shy away from each other. As discussed above, a number of non-official initiatives have already been taken in South Asia. In order to create a better ground for mutual cooperation among the mainstream leaders, Track II diplomacy (i.e. non-official engagements) can prove fruitful.

CITIZENS' ACTIONS

Regional cooperation should be organized around non-governmental organizations in their respective civil societies. This is, of course, happening to some extent. SAARC, though at a lower scale, has been instrumental in bringing NGOs together and letting people talk to each other, and share ideas and information. They are indeed drawing inspiration from each other and learning many lessons from best practices in individual countries. For example, the success of micro-credit initiatives for poverty reduction in Bangladesh (the Grameen Bank initiative) has been widely shared by other non-governmental actors in South Asia. This non-state cooperation could be further accelerated by activities such as:

- ## More pro-active interaction between business leaders (such as SAARC chambers of commerce and industries) for furthering cooperation in trade and investment;
- ## Organizing many more citizens' press conferences, deliberations in public fora, seminars and workshops by academics and researchers highlighting the benefits of mutual cooperation and activation of Track 1 cooperation;
- ## Encouraging exchanges through video conferences and use of Internet facilities to strengthen the trust-building initiatives that are already in operation;
- ## Actions by the media (particularly the electronic media) to bring the people of South Asia closer. This is happening to some extent, though in a mostly Indo-centric way; and

- €# An increase in joint-venture initiatives in the service and educational sectors. Today, Bangladeshi and Nepali students and patients flock to Indian educational and medical institutions. This no doubt helps to bridge the cultural gap. However, it is simultaneously contributing to trade imbalances in the service sector. Further joint-venture initiatives in these sectors can be yet another form of people-to-people cooperation.

Civil-society organizations have been working together to bring eminent citizens together in many commissions, policy advocacy initiatives, dialogues, peace initiatives, etc. All these initiatives can be better coordinated if a South Asian network (or parliament) comprising representatives selected by non-governmental organizations (including think tanks) could be organized. They could even work with the tacit approval of national governments and be promoted by SAARC. In other words, there is a need for creating a greater space for the citizens of South Asia so that they can come together to shape a better future. The nation-states should come out of their restrictive shells and allow their citizens to intermix and intermingle for a better understanding of their regional, national and local identities. This kind of opening up at the people-to-people level will create moral pressure on leaders to strengthen the Track 1 approach of cooperation between the state actors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A move towards a South Asian community can be cemented and accelerated only if a number of policy initiatives and actions, both at the governmental and non-governmental levels, are taken by South Asian leaders. Some of these economic, political, social and cultural initiatives are mentioned below.

Economic initiatives:

- €# Experimentation with cooperation at smaller sub-regional levels (such as perhaps, Bangladesh-West Bengal, Bangladesh-Nepal-India) to develop sub-regional growth quadrangles.
- €# India has to play a more accommodating role to build up confidence/trust among smaller neighbors (for example, road transit between Nepal and Bangladesh should be allowed to flourish).
- €# In the face of speedy trade liberalization, there is a need for the monitoring of policy changes (such as the introduction of tariffs, or price controls) at the regional level for greater coordination and a more effective response to the challenges of globalization. The fallout of globalization needs to be monitored and appropriate coping mechanisms must be devised both at the national and regional levels.

- €# Smaller states should be allowed to benefit from the higher levels of development in the information technology sector in India.²⁶
- €# There is a need to expand trade and investment in the emerging global context to strengthen the regional economic bloc.²⁷
- €# Facilitate greater contacts among citizens of South Asia by further improving road, rail and air travel facilities. There are, for example, no easy air connections between the major cities of South Asia. One has to go to Bangkok to reach Colombo from Dhaka. Similarly, Pakistanis need to go to Dubai or Bangkok to reach Kathmandu. All of these practical hurdles diminish the potential for people-to-people contact in South Asia.
- €# There is a crucial need for economic policy coordination to curb rivalry in regional and international markets, stemming from South Asian nations' similar production and trade profiles. The development of integrated production networks and joint-export activities is necessary for this.²⁸
- €# Learning from each other's successes in responding to poverty, such as the micro-credit program in Bangladesh or decentralization in some states in India.

Specifically, in order to create greater economic cooperation, SAARC's institutional needs are:

- €# Establishing a free trade area by eliminating all trade tariff and non-tariff barriers—that is, realizing the South Asian Free Trade Area.;
- €# Facilitating the freer flow of financial and physical capital and also streamlining the movement of personnel in the region;
- €# Targeted uplifting of the production and export base of the weaker economies in the region; and
- €# Establishing a South Asian identity in terms of brand names, quality, standards, investment regimes, and other areas where a common approach would be to the benefit of all.²⁹

²⁶ A. Rahman, 'Imperatives for Regional Cooperation', *op cit*.

²⁷ B.S. Gupta, 'A profile of the initiative' South Asian Regional Dialogue, *op cit*, p.9.

²⁸ RIS, *op cit*, p.139.

²⁹ *ibid*, p.137.

Political Initiatives:

- ## As most disputes and apprehensions are Indo-centric, India has to be more tactful and should present a low profile to gain the confidence of its smaller neighbors.³⁰
- ## SAARC should emphasize the need for resolution of outstanding bilateral issues and thus pave the way for mutual cooperation. While resolving those issues, it should be ensured that all negotiations are based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.³¹
- ## Exploited and weak segments of communities in the region should be liberated, not through violent means, but by a democratic process.³²
- ## States should act as the people's agents to improve levels of development, welfare and economic freedom.

Social Initiatives:

- ## All types of people-oriented organizations—political, civic, professional and NGOs—should participate actively to promote constructive dialogues and exchanges, and contribute towards building consensus within the region for a new order in South Asia based on recognition of the peoples' priorities.³³ As there is popular demand for greater South Asian cooperation, efforts should be made to increase people-to-people exchanges, sharing the common heritage and culture.³⁴
- ## There is a need to build a coalition of people across boundaries. Ultimately it is only by empowering the people and granting them control over their destinies that the shared goal of making South Asia a community can be realized.
- ## There is a need to build a South Asian identity based on common values rooted in the historical, cultural, social, and ethnic and civilization traditions.³⁵ Success depends on state patronization of civil society or in 'beyond the state' initiatives.
- ## There is a need for advocacy by civil society for further democratization.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² B.S. Gupta, *op cit*, p.11.

³³ K. Hassain, 'A New Order for South Asia'; South Asian Regional Dialogue, *op cit*, p.38.

³⁴ A. Rhaman, Recent global developments and new imperatives for South Asian Regional Cooperation, paper presented at the international seminar on New Imperatives for Regional Cooperation in South Asia, organized by Peace Council, Dhaka, 1992.

³⁵ *ibid.*

Other Initiatives:

- # More studies into the potential benefits of sub-regional/regional cooperation and proper dissemination of those findings is needed.³⁶
- # There should be greater exchanges of academics, poets, and cultural troupes among the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) countries, in particular, and South Asia in general.
- # There should be easy access to each other's TV and other electronic news and programs.

Despite all the bottlenecks discussed above, South Asians should continue to work hard to come together in making a community for the people of the region. People-to-people interactions should continue to flourish even when leaders do not see each eye-to-eye. We may conclude by quoting Tagore:

We know that during our childhood when we were alone we used to be afraid of ghosts. Indeed, this fear of ghosts was the fear of one's own weakness while one was lonely. Three-quarters of our fear relate to this fear of ghosts. This simply shows that we could not unite; we remained isolated from each other. The fear of poverty is likewise the fear of ghosts. We can cope with it provided we stand together.³⁷

Together we will surely survive. Divided we will perish.

³⁶ Centre for Policy Development, *Growth Zones in South Asia: What Can We Learn From South East Asia?* (Dhaka: CPD, 2000), pp.10-11.

³⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 'On Cooperation', *Collected Works of Tagore* (in Bangla), Vol. 14, p.313.