

South Asia: People's movements uniting South Asia for deepening democracy, social justice and peace

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South Asian people's movements (women, youth, peasants, labour, socially marginalised groups) and civil society organisations have planned a convergence from 22 to 24 November 2014 in the form of People's SAARC or people's assembly, parallel to the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal.

People's SAARC has been committed to visions of alternative political, social, economic and cultural systems that enable sustainable development of societies in the region that will do away with majoritarian rule and all forms of discriminations based on gender, caste/ethnicity, religion/culture, nationality/country of origin, language and geo-political location of habitation; lead to a situation of inclusive and accountable democracy free from exploitation, oppression and external interventions; create a climate in which each individual will have the opportunity to realise full development of human potential; restore the ecological balance and harmony with nature; eliminate the artificial and human barriers that divide lands, people and minds; and transcend all boundaries. People's SAARC has evolved as a process based political platform or space for South Asian people to come together and coordinate among themselves to voice their concerns, consolidate and strengthen their work and networks as well as take forward an institutional engagement with the SAARC and its members. While People's SAARC does relate and respond to the SAARC agenda, it also goes beyond them to envision a South Asian-ness that resonates with the necessities and priorities of the people of South Asia.

The South Asian people and civil society began to connect and converge in the 1980s and 1990s under the banner of People's Summits and People's Assemblies that coincided with the fall of the socialist regimes, increase of the profit mongering neoliberal upsurge and weakening links between human rights and workers' movements all over the world. In this context, there was much discussion among activists for the need to devise a South Asian civil society mechanism for collective voice on regional issues and in 1995, a People's Summit was organised in New Delhi alongside the 8th SAARC Summit. In 2005 in Dhaka, the current name - the People's SAARC was adopted. With the development of significant political and social dynamics, People's SAARC saw significant mobilisations in 2007 (Nepal) and 2008 (Sri Lanka) and relatively smaller convergences in 2010 (New Delhi) and 2011 (Maldives). The 2014 People's SAARC regional convergence will be held in Kathmandu, parallel to the 18th SAARC Summit (Kathmandu). These regional convergences are the culminations of country initiatives and processes of People's SAARC that precede the regional processes.

Present Predicament

There are many complex forces operating globally and in the South Asian region that are both

creating roadblocks and challenging the emergence of new possibilities for remaking our societies and developing our economies on more sustainable, equitable and just bases. Business driven globalisation has reached unprecedented levels, and global governance involves a range of actors and institutions several of which are against the people surviving at the margin. The dominant neoliberal growth model that is at play currently has been severely and even violently restructuring the region's economic policies and cultural life of the people and curtailing and devaluing the very essence of democracy directly or indirectly. The growing economic hegemony of transnational corporations (TNCs) and multinational corporations (MNCs) and the role of international financial institutions (IFIs); the unequal trade relations under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) regime, including under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, have resulted in severe erosion of the power of people and of States, to decide our futures, use of natural resources, agriculture and other means of livelihoods.

The current economic and repressive political systems and the crises spearheaded by them have presented a threat to democracy and unleashed the demon of nationalism, communalism and fundamentalism; increased disparity and discrimination; eroded sustainable livelihood opportunities; increased securitisation and militarisation of society in the name of combating 'terrorism' and national security threats; and reduced space for democratic dissent. Arbitrary detention, torture, custodial rape and extra-judicial killings have become common occurrences. There has been increasing violence especially against women and the most vulnerable in society and violence has also frequently manifested where there is competition for accessing livelihood resources. Landlessness and unemployment (especially of the young), declining health and social services sector, and greater dependence on women to carry the burden of care, have become persistent features of many countries in the region. Reformulation of the link between capitalism and patriarchy is leading to further commodification and objectification of women, undermining their dignity and efforts for emancipation. These processes further reinforce and reconstitute the traditional forms of exploitative and oppressive structures in new forms, in the name of progress, modernisation and reform.

Furthermore, global challenges, such as climate change, poverty, energy crisis, and the transnational nature of many emerging threats to human security in South Asia pose the question of the capability of the nation states to contend with challenges that go beyond national boundaries. Business as usual is a sure recipe for persistent social crises and turmoil and conflicts, which threaten human security and aggravate ecological disasters on different scales. Augmenting the resilience of South Asian societies and building cross border solidarities is essential given the continued use by global and regional powers of the guise of conflict resolution to further reinforce their economic and political hold on this region through aid, 'humanitarian' and military interventions.

Since gaining independence, South Asian states have yet to settle down to mutual co-existence, let alone to cooperation and a peaceful relationship. Even though under the guise of SAARC the region has created heaps of declarations promoting regional cooperation and mutual support, real cooperation and support has been lacking. Contemporary developments pose an even greater challenge to reimagining South Asia and South Asian regionalism. The present situation calls for new responses.

Concept and Programme

The overarching theme will be 'People's Movements Uniting South Asia for Deepening Democracy, Social Justice & Peace'.

People are finding themselves more and more politically alienated, denied fundamental rights as

well as access to instruments necessary for realising their rights. The State which is conceived as a space for peaceful resolution of conflicts remains fragile even as States are capturing more and more draconian powers of control aimed at curtailing people's movements and legitimate forms of organisation and resistance. More and more decisions affecting the everyday life of the people are being dictated by MNCs and global financial institutions to which there is no democratic access and from where there is no accountability.

We have neither seen nor can we expect a real move from the government and economic elites toward real integration that is based on cooperation, equity, fair trade, solidarity, and complementarity. Hence, the impetus will have to come from civil society and peoples' movements. Contemporary experience around the world is showing that in fact it is the people's movements that can deepen the process of democracy, contend ideologically and politically with all forms of regressive and chauvinistic regimes, viewpoints and ideologies, and build a secular framework for peaceful co-existence.

Reclaiming the region and developing sustained regional alternatives requires that we amalgamate politics and the economy that serves people and opposes the greed of elites. Reclaiming the region means recreating regional integration based on human rights principles – people-centred and people-oriented. The challenge, then, for civil society and peoples' movements in the region is to come up with and assert an alternative vision of regional integration or new regionalism based on peoples' needs and aspirations, taking into consideration the different levels of developments in the region; a regional integration that will challenge the neoliberal model – a People's SAARC or a People's Union of South Asia.

The people of South Asia are coming together at People's SAARC 2014 challenging systematic marginalisation of people, groups, communal division and fragmentation and degradation of environment and impact of climate change through widespread voicing of ideas and experiences and by forging solidarity across the borders.

Thus the theme of this year's People's SAARC Convergence is focused on People's Movements Uniting South Asia for Deepening Democracy, Social Justice & Peace.

Key Areas, Issues and Concerns:

Alternative Regionalism

Food, Food Security, Food Sovereignty and Trade

Migration, Freedom of Movement, Human Trafficking

Attack on Labour, Expanding Labour Rights regionally

Climate Change, Ecological Justice, Economic Cooperation, Livelihoods

Gender Rights, Women's Rights, Women and Armed Conflicts

Human Rights, Social Justice, Exclusions, Caste Discriminations, Politics of Hatred (Protection of Minority Rights and strengthening ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural pluralism and diversity)

Refugees and Indigenous People's Rights

Sustainable Development

Peace, Democracy, Rule of Law, De-Militarisation (expanding spaces for civil society and social movements)

Tax Justice, Fiscal Responsibility, and Corporate Accountability

Community control over natural resources, resource commons, water commons

Energy security for people

Organisation of Events:

Participating groups are encouraged to organise workshops, forums, cultural activities, exhibitions, and documentary/movie shows around the above Key Areas, Issues and Concerns. We not only want to discuss, dialogue and debate but also celebrate our steadfast spirit and solidarity towards our struggles!

Complete proposals received at People's SAARC Host Country Organising Committee peoplessaarc gmail.com (with copy to People's SAARC Regional Secretariat praman rrn.org.np) by 10 October 2014 by using the Event Registration Form, will be given priority slots. The form can be downloaded from People's SAARC Website.

Contact: People's SAARC Host Country Organising Committee at peoplessaarc gmail.com and People's SAARC Regional Secretariat at praman rrn.org.np

People's SAARC Regional Convergence 2014

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<http://www.peoplesaarc.org/index.php/press-room/people-s-saarc-events/people-s-saarc-2014/42-concept-note-people-s-saarc-2014>