

South Asia: Has the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) failed?

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This region is termed 'poor' not because it lacks any potential - natural or human - but it has not been able to guarantee accountable democracy.

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In a few days from now, the 18th Saarc summit will be held in Kathmandu, Nepal. November 26-27 will witness the head of states arriving at this Himalayan capital with their cavalcades, engage in wishful conversations, momentarily setting aside their mutual distrust, hostility, and enmity.

This indeed is a time for celebration for most South Asians. The pious declarations to tackle the immediate problems of the region, to lift us out of poverty, deprivation, and exclusion would certainly create an immediate happiness.

We wish that the South Asian realities would reflect the contents of those sanctimonious declarations made in the previous 17 summits, and also the one to be made soon. We wish we can be eternally happy.

There are also more reasons to feel proud of our economy, our political systems, and the governance. For instance, recent estimates made by the World Bank projects South Asia as the second fastest growing region in this planet after East Asia and the Pacific. It assures us of an economic stability and a pick-up in growth.

The "growth happy" Chinese would surely spare no chances to nourish us with growth, from breakfast to dinner. The figures projected by the bank are rosy, undeniably. We can be contented by the fact that this part of the world has arrived at the world stage with a bang. South Asia looks ready to reap enormous economic gains, finally. The optimism portrayed by the bank is enough to raise our expectations for the next two years and leave us contented in abstraction.

The reality and issues

However, beyond this bright picture, the region is mired in a pale gloom of darkness. While we hear of brutal internecine confrontations around the world, we too are doomed in a conflict-ridden part where living is getting dangerous every day. Apart from four full-fledged wars in the past, between India and Pakistan, we have witnessed a series of conflicts within the national frontiers - something that has not spared any South Asian nation state.

The recent border clashes between the two big brothers are tellingly evident that we have refused to learn any lessons from the past. Continually haunted by militant religious fundamentalism, majoritarian dominance, and acute democratic deficit, our region is synonymous with endemic poverty, chronic hunger, mass undernourishment, abysmal illiteracy, and ill health; the scenario is replete with social deprivation and marginalisation resulting in systemic exclusion. The youth wake up every morning to discover themselves “well placed” in overwhelming underemployment and rising unemployment.

Rampant environmental degradation caused by “development” efforts in the interest of the regional elites and the ruling classes, looms large. Home to around half of the world’s poor, perhaps no other location encounters more acute threats from global warming than South Asia. Therefore, it is already beleaguered by unpredictable levels of internal security threats from food, water, and energy crises; livelihood and unemployment crisis, etc.

With its closer integration into the global capitalist economy, the informal and family-provided social security and safety nets have collapsed without any formal arrangement to substitute it. South Asia exists on the faultlines of a fragile internal security threat that can potentially compound with the existing external security threats and apprehensions for each state with its own internal dynamics and complications.

The creation of Saarc

It was assumed that a regional forum created to foster regional goodwill and reduce intra-regional disagreements and discords could steer the region away from this embroilment and impasse. The official forum of the South Asian states, Saarc, created in 1985 for the advancement of peoples’ welfare and collective self reliance, has miserably failed in this account.

This 29-year-old entity has too little to show in terms of political consolidation, conflict mitigation, regional harmony, free movement of citizens, intra-regional trade and economic cooperation, financial and monetary integration, etc.

To be more precise, the progress, or a progressive evolution of Saarc, is dependent on the settlement of the Kashmir issue. A genuine settlement of this question and the Kashmiri interest of self-determination is nowhere in sight in the near future, as Kashmir is sandwiched between two powerful states that only look at the valley as a strategic “real-estate” that has to be retained at any cost or human sacrifice. Therefore, Saarc appear as an entity held ransom by its founders.

People’s Saarc

It’s in this context that a number of South Asian people’s movements (women, youth, peasants, labour, socially marginalised groups, and civil society organisations) have planned to converge in a people’s assembly at Kathmandu from November 22-24. People’s Saarc Regional Convergence 2014, being held in parallel to the official Saarc summit, would involve participation from grassroots seeking answers to various issues and problems that they endure.

With the dreams of a “People’s Movements Uniting South Asia for Deepening Democracy, Social Justice & Peace” and being motivated by visions of alternative political, social, economic, and cultural systems, the convergence would attempt to seek alternatives to majoritarianism, violence, and oppression based on gender, caste-ethnicity, religion, etc.

We are faced with the worst forms of developmentalism (at times mutually competing) ensuring a catastrophic future for all of humanity – economically, ecologically, socially, culturally, and politically.

This region is termed “poor” not because it lacks any potential – natural or human – but it has not been able to guarantee accountable democracy, an end to oppression, and external interventions. Even with galloping economic growth, we would not be able to lift ourselves out of poverty if each one of us in the region does not have the opportunity to realise the fullest development of human potential.

A society free from exploitation can create a climate in which all of us live in accord and prosperity; re-establish the ecological balance and harmony with environment; abolish the artificial and human barriers that divide lands, people, and minds; and transcend all boundaries. The convergence would bring all such issues to prominence, which could ensure sustainable development in the region.

The road ahead

It is in this context that people’s movements of the region, in collaboration with the global ones, need to play an immense role in the future of South Asia. Since it is only they who can compel Saarc to put more importance on human security in lieu of “national” security, and trade agreements which follow the neoliberal paradigm.

An organic alliance and the unity of people’s movements and organisations while retaining their autonomy, can bring changes through a sustained movement for a just, sustainable, and egalitarian society.

They would be able to confront all anti-democratic forces like some businesses, communal and religious fundamentalists, patriarchy, caste systems, and discrimination of all kinds. A unity of movements through shared ideology and strategies has the potential to give rise to a strong political force that can alter the current regionalism of the ruling class. It can also create conditions for developing an alternate regionalism and building South Asia from below.

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P.S.

* <http://www.dhakatribune.com/op-ed/2014/nov/21/has-saarc-failed#sthash.aqDdmfHA.dpuf>

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