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People-Centric Partnership: The Way Forward for SAARC?

RAHUL TRIPATHI

The theme of the Colombo Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation held in August 2008 was “partnership of our people”. Until now, however, the body has remained an intergovernmental mechanism with the people hovering at the margins and its economic and political initiatives proving to be mere procedural exercises. Only a people-centric agenda and action plan will help address this fundamental lacuna.

A dispassionate reading of the Colombo Declaration of the recently concluded 15th summit meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), largely ignored by the mainstream media, fills one with a sense of *déjà vu*. Never short of good intentions and ideal statements, all SAARC declarations have remained reflective of that elusive regional idea that the grouping has aspired for since the last 23 years. Be it commitment to social development, poverty alleviation, economic interaction, cultural cooperation or combating terrorism, SAARC has said it all, with such regularity that one need not really be extra curious about summit declarations at all. There is nevertheless one single phrase in the declaration, given its location as the theme of the 2008 conference, which has the potential to catapult the grouping into the third phase of its much needed evolution. “People-centric cooperation”, listed as the first subheading of the declaration, may indeed be an idea in the lexicon of SAARC, whose time has come.

Mere Aspirations

Not that SAARC appears to be detached from people since its inception. Article 1 of the charter stating the objectives makes it clear that the grouping is all about “welfare of the people of South Asia”. Subsequent declarations talked about regional cooperation as a mechanism for betterment of people with amazing regularity. But somewhere down the line, as the SAARC moved on from the first decade of institutional consolidation to the second decade of programmatic intensification in core economic areas, people somehow remained at the margins of the discourse in the regional body. While there was a clear consensus for moving into certain core areas of regional cooperation, the people-centric dimension was very conveniently placed in a folder titled “people to people contact”, to

be examined and processed through officially scrutinised visa schemes, and fellowships for students which were often known for hindrances they created in promoting scholarship. To cap it all there were the SAARC audio-visual exchange schemes which were meant to be telecast on regional TV programmes on the national broadcasters on the first Monday of every month at an hour when they were hardly viewed.

SAARC was not doing very well in the economic or political domain either. Despite its recent thrust on economic interaction within, the region has always been guided and cautious in its approach. During the first decade of the grouping the discussion in trade and economic matters was at best inadequate. When it was indeed initiated, the long drawn South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement and the equally prolonged South Asian Free Trade Area appeared to be more a procedural exercise which could not really lift up the level of intra-regional trade to more than 6 per cent of its total trade with the rest of the world. It was as if expanding trade in the region was an end in itself, forgetting that it would merely have been an instrument for the region to revive its old connectivities which could spur further economic integration in the region through joint ventures, investment cooperation and financial cooperation. To that extent the dream of south Asia as an integrated economic unit which can collectively strike a better bargain for itself in the trans-regional and global sphere remains a distant dream today.

Second, the more fundamental aspiration of an economic consensus within the region paving the way for creating a constituency for addressing vexed political issues has remained a mere aspiration. South Asian countries remain mired in political conflicts – both internal and cross-border that often impede the regional spirit. Economic cooperation within the region without a certain minimum political consensus within the member countries will therefore remain susceptible to a certain lack of will. The nearly two-decade old SAARC convention on suppression of terrorism therefore remains a document which perhaps none of the member countries had the resolve to

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fully implement. To that extent the basic principle in SAARC of keeping bilateral and contentious issues out of regional deliberations does not appear to have helped much.

SAARC has at best remained an inter-governmental mechanism, guided by the political leadership and the bureaucracy with a very structured place for "people" within it. Frustrated by the lack of progress within SAARC of making it a medium of people's interaction, parallel fora were floated with a commendable performance in terms of the interaction they promoted within non-state constituents – such as South Asian Free Media Association and People's SAARC which held parallel meetings as the official SAARC summit deliberations took place. Unfortunately because of their ideological and professional disposition, the two parallel movements have had limited convergence with the official SAARC. It is in this context, a third voice, mainly emerging from an academia-policy advocacy combine which calls for the transformation of the official SAARC from its procedural-formal existence to a more people-centric organisation, appears to be well in tune with the basic postulates of what the Colombo Summit has finally laid down.¹

People as Basic Premise

By stating the need for cooperation to be made "people-centred" and giving a go ahead on identifying cooperation in areas where people-centric partnership projects could be initiated, the SAARC leaders have tried to address a fundamental lacuna that has been afflicting the regional process so far. There has usually been a "shopping list approach" which drives the SAARC process aided by a detailed bureaucratic apparatus covering a wide range of issues at the level of exchange, but fails to deliver in terms of concrete results at the grassroots, whether it is meteorology, health, communications or culture. One is yet to see a SAARC initiative, though meaningful in intent, making a lasting impact on the ultimate constituency it is meant to serve.

There is thus a need to prune the shopping list and make the deliberations output-driven. There is a need for SAARC to revisit its mandate and transform

itself into a people's institution rather than an intergovernmental institution. It should adopt a four-pillar approach based on knowledge, technology, commerce and culture and a host of multiple partnerships could be created at the level of civil society, business, scientific community and cultural groups which would be a manifestation of a People's SAARC or a SAARC from below. The official SAARC should play more the role of facilitator rather than initiator of this exchange.

The SAARC secretariat may therefore be well placed to initiate a feasibility study for a "people-centric partnership" model where the output and effectiveness of a project would be judged by the difference it is able to make in the lives of the target group. Such a study, premised on sound theoretical foundations for regional cooperation, has to be embedded in a sectoral micro application which makes the whole idea of regionalism output-driven and result-oriented positive sum game. This would be far removed from some of the existing studies where the ideal of cooperation has taken precedence over the pragmatic aspect of the same. Needless to say, the basic references for such a framework have to be the people of south Asia

themselves. If not, then SAARC will remain more of the same.

It is this premise on which perennial optimists would still be enthused by the theme of the Colombo Summit as "partnership for people". Building up on last year's theme of "connectivity" which did indeed see some meaningful activity on the ground level, apart from seminars and roundtables, the grouping will indeed be rightly placed by putting a people-centric agenda and plan of action in the designated areas of cooperation. The member states of the region have to realise that the ultimate sovereignty lies with the people of south Asia, therefore people-centric interaction and cooperation is indeed an idea whose time has come. The sooner the leadership translates the stated desire into practice, the better.

NOTE

- 1 South Asia Together Project of International Centre, Goa, recently concluded with a call for redefining the emphasis of regional cooperation in south Asia which becomes a vehicle for liberating the people from the shackles created by the excessive concern of the nation states with the "security of the state". It sought a people-centric regional interaction in the area of knowledge, technology, commerce and culture as one of the key paths to greater human freedoms in south Asia. For details see V A Pai Panandiker and Rahul Tripathi (eds), *Towards Freedom in South Asia*, Konark, New Delhi, 2008, p 373.



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