

SAARC: Structure and Development

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Abstract

SAARC was established by the nations of South Asia which were standing on almost equal platform of economic development and fallen in category of under developed nations. To follow the example of European economic council, ASEAN and many other regional organization, nations of South Asia also decided to form a regional organization to enhance cooperation in various areas such as agriculture, trade, education, health etc. Before the establishment of SAARC most of the nations of South Asia have various apprehensions about the proposed organization but finally, they agreed to establish it. Along with main organs such as Summit, council of ministers, technical committee, programme committees, many regional centers and specialized bodies have also been established to speed up the progress in selected areas of cooperation. To enhance public contact, many steps have been taken by SAARC.

Key words: South Asia, Economic Development, Tourism, Terrorism, Cooperation, Regional Organisation.

Historical Development

All the Nations fallen in the region of South Asia are developing Nations which were under the Colonial rule for a long period. The cold war politics of Western and Soviet Block affected the foreign policies of these countries. Pakistan joined the Western block when she adopted the membership of military treaty SEATO, while India, Bhutan, Sri Lanka ascertained to join the non-aligned movement. India, along with Indonesia and Egypt, was the pioneer of this movement. After the second world war Europe was completely demolished. Europe decided to restructure its economy and led off cooperation, first, in the field of coal and steel then other field and finally developed as a strong European Union. The nations of Southeast Asia formed an organization for economic cooperation and development of the region through ASEAN- Association of Southeast Asian nations in 1967. North American Nations organised themselves through the OAS. But the regional economic cooperation in developing countries started in 1960 through the formation of Latin American free trade Association.¹ But Countries Of South Asia could not organised themselves till 1985, however the idea of such organisation had been mooted by President of Bangladesh Zia ur-Rehman in 1971. He visited other South Asian nations to converse on the formation of Regional organisation in South Asia. After receiving initial responses from the other South Asian nations Zia ur Rehman wrote a letter to the heads of government of the South Asian nations and sent it to them by special envoys and proposed for Regional organisation.

Different countries had various ideas and apprehension about the proposal. Pakistan was wary that great interaction with India might block her political stands in regional and global affairs. Pakistan was greatly attached itself with Islamic world than the region of South Asia. He was afraid of the dominance

of India in the proposed organisation and in South Asia. Besides its Pakistan had the fear that greater identity with south Asia would hurt its newly found image in the Islamic world.ⁱⁱ Since Soviet intervention in Afghanistan this urge has become stronger and she had tried to forge closer links with Islamic states and gulf countries.ⁱⁱⁱ Sri Lanka accepted the proposal and hosted the first meeting of foreign secretaries of South Asian countries in Colombo in April 1981. Although initially Sri Lanka was concerned to join the ASEAN but she did not find the way to join it. Sri Lanka joined SAARC very late when it was convinced that it would not be granted membership of ASEAN.^{iv} Then she decided to join the SAARC. It is also supposed that Sri Lanka was supported by Britain, China, and USA to gang neighbouring countries against India. Nepal saw the hope in organisation to fight against the widespread poverty and to minimise the external interference so she supported the proposal of Zia ur Rehman. Bhutan considered that mutual apprehensions and mistrust can be removed through regional corporation and it would be beneficial for economic growth of the region. Maldives also consider its existence beneficial for her identity, security, and prosperity. India was highly in favour of regional corporation in south Asia. But she was suspected about the hidden agenda of the western world behind the proposal of Zia ur Rahman. She was also feared that proposal might be against USSR and pro USA. India also apprehended that her neighbours could collectively scuttle India's beneficial bilateralism and could use the proposed organisation as a tool and thus undermine her vital National interest in the region.^v Although all nations of south Asia had some apprehension about the proposal yet finally, they accepted it and adopted it in three phases strategy for the evolution of SAARC i.e. foreign secretaries level meeting, foreign ministers level meeting, and summit level meeting.

First phase started with the meeting of foreign secretaries at Colombo in April 1981. At this level total four meeting were conducted. In the meeting of foreign secretaries, members were agreed that decision of proposed regional organisation should be taken unanimously, bilateral and contentious issues should be excluded from their deliberations.

The second phase started with the first meeting of foreign ministers at new Delhi in August 1983. Total four meeting were held at this level. In the first meeting of foreign ministers declaration of south Asia regional cooperation was signed and setting out the objectives and principles of the proposed organisation.

The third phase meeting i.e. summits of heads of government or state was convened in Dhaka in 1985. The leaders formally established the regional organisation of south Asia, named SAARC- South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation. Initially five areas were selected for cooperation - Agriculture, Rural development, Telecommunications, Meteorology, Health & population activities.

Structure of SAARC

Summit: In the structure of SAARC, Summit is the highest authority with the heads of state or government. It meets annually. First SAARC summit was held in Bangladesh. At the first Summit (7-8 December, 1985) the Charter establishing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was adopted.^{vi} The 19th SAARC summit was decided to be held in Pakistan. But because of terrorist

attacking Uri, India decided to boycott the summit. Along with India Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh also boycotted it. Thus, finally it was cancelled by Pakistan.

Council: The council of ministers, which comprises the foreign ministers of member states, is responsible for formulating policies reviving progress in different areas of cooperation. It is also empowered to establish additional mechanism as it deemed necessary. It generally meets twice a year. But if required, its extra ordinary session may be convened.

Standing committee: The third authoritative part of the SAARC structure is standing committee. The Foreign Secretaries of the member states are the members of this committee. This committee entrusted the responsibility of overall monitoring and coordination of programmes. It determines the inter-sectoral priorities and mobilizes the internal and external resources of its member states. It also identifies the new areas of cooperation. This committee submits its report to the Council of Ministers. To execute its functions, it is assisted by a programming committee, an ad hoc body. Normally it meets twice a year.

Technical committees: Representatives from the member states are the members of Technical committees. These are formed for specific field with the task to formulate programs and prepare projects in their respective fields.

Programming committee: It comprises the senior officials of member states which generally made prior to the standing committee session to finalize the schedule of activity and to scrutinize the budget of secretariat.

The Secretariat: The secretariat of SAARC was established in Kathmandu on 16 January 1987. The role of the Secretariat is to co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities, to provide service to the meeting of the association, and to serve as the channel of communication between SAARC and other international and Regional organisations such as UNO, European Union, ASEAN etc. The secretariat incorporates a secretary general and eight directors, each one from its member states and the general service staff. The secretary general of the secretariat is appointed by the Council of Ministers for three years.^{vii} Each Nation gets this post on the principle of rotation in alphabetical order. The directors are appointed by the secretary general upon nomination by member states for a period of 3 years.

The finances: The expenditure of SAARC is afforded by its member states. Its member states make provision in their National budget for the finance to SAARC programmes, its activities and contribute their allocated share to the annual budget of the SAARC on the basis of agreed formula. A minimum of 40% of the institutional cost of regional institutions is born by the respective host Government and the balance is shared by all member states.

Membership: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka joined the Association in 1985. Later SAARC allowed the entry of Afghanistan as its eighth member in 2007. The People's Republic

of China, Iran, and Myanmar have conveyed their desire to become the member of SAARC. The membership of China is greatly supported by Pakistan and Bangladesh but strongly counterbalanced by India. Pakistan wants to balance India through the entry of China in the organisation. Iran has deep Economic, political and cultural relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Myanmar is already the member of ASEAN yet his seeks the membership of SAARC also. Along the member states some Nations enjoy the status of observer and other seek the status. The Nations with observer status are European Union, United States, China, Australia, Iran, Japan, Mauritius and South Korea. Russia and Turkey have applied for the status of observer.

Integrated Programme of Action: The integrated programme of action is a key component of the SAARC process. It includes the 12 areas of cooperation. Initially five areas of cooperation were identified by the committee composed by Council of Ministers. Other areas of cooperation have been added with the development of associations activities. The technical committees are designated the function to co-ordinate work in the area of cooperation selected by the committee. A comprehensive set of guidelines and procedures was adopted in 1992 to further consolidate and streamline IPA and to make it more result oriented. Identified areas of cooperation are Agriculture, communication, education, culture and sports, environment, health and population activities, Meteorology, prevention of drug trafficking and drug abuse, rural development, science and technology, tourism, transport, and women in development.

SAARC Regional centres

To strengthen and promote Regional Cooperation different regional centers of SAARC have been established in different member states. These Regional Centres are: -

1. SAARC agriculture Centre, Dhaka (1989)
2. SAARC energy Centre, Islamabad (2006)
3. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo (2009)
4. SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/ AIDS Centre, Kathmandu (1992)
5. SAARC disaster management centre, Gandhinagar (2016).

These regional centres are superintendent by different governing board board comprising representatives from all member states.

Specialised Bodies

To enhance cooperation and development some specialised bodies have also been established by Association. These are:

1. SAARC arbitration Council, Islamabad (SARCO)
2. SAARC development fund, Thimphu (SDF)

3. South Asian University, New Delhi (SAU)
4. South Asian regional standard organisation, Dhaka.

Regional Conventions and Agreements

1. Agreement on establishing the SAARC food security reserve: - This agreement was signed in 1987 during the third Summit. It ensures a reserve of food grains to meet emerging situation in member countries.
2. SAARC regional convention on suppression of terrorism: - This convention was signed in 1987 during third summit in Kathmandu to enhance cooperation among member states to suppress terrorism in South Asia through exchange of information, Intelligence and expertise. To analyse and disseminating information related to terrorism, the SAARC terrorist offences monitoring desk has been established in Colombo.
3. SAARC Convention on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances: - It was signed during 5th SAARC Summit in Male in November 1990. The implementation of the convention is monitored by the technical committee on prevention of drug trafficking and drug abuse.
4. SAARC preferential trade agreement: - This agreement was signed in 1993 during 7th SAARC Summit. It was a step-by-step liberalisation of intra-regional trade. It contains the provision of special and favourable treatment to the least developed countries.

Public contact

To strengthening mutual understanding and good will among the people of South Asia always in high priority. For this different programmes and schemes have been initiated by SAARC. These are:

1. SAARC Audio- visual exchange program (SAVE): - This programme was started to bring awareness among peoples about the region, to disseminate information about member countries. To producing and implementing the SAVE programmes regular TV and radio programmes are functioning. Quiz programmes on TV and radio are being organised to develop keen interest among youths. It is an effective medium to bring the people of SAARC nations together.
2. Scheme for promotion of organised tourism: - All issues related to it are addressed by technical committee on tourism. This programme offered concessional air fare, arrangement of Limited convertibility of foreign exchange through a travel voucher system.
3. Chairs, Fellowship, and scholarship scheme: - This scheme aims of providing increased cross fertilization of ideas for great interaction among students, Scholars and academics in the SAARC countries.

4. Youth volunteer programme: - It enables young people to work in other countries in the field of agriculture and Forestry extension work. It is implemented by technical committee on rural development.

5. Visa exemption scheme: - This scheme has been initiated in 1988 and became operational in March 1992. Visa requirement are waived for specialised category of person to travel within the region such as judges, parliamentarian etc.

6. SAARC youth award scheme: - It provides suitable recognition to extra ordinary young talents and encourages the overall development of youth in the region.

Achievement of SAARC

Agriculture: Agriculture is one of the identified areas of cooperation under integrated programme of action. The first meeting of technical committee was held in 1983.^{viii} Forestry was also included later with agriculture. The first SAARC regional institution SAARC agricultural information Centre (SAIC) was established in 1988 to enhance cooperation in the area of agriculture and forestry. The responsibilities of compiling lists of Institutions and disciplines capable of offering training in member countries had been entrusted to SAIC.^{ix} The regular meeting of counterpart scientists is held among the member Nations. The member nations exchange germplasm breeding material on livestock and fishery, prototypes of farm tools and equipments. Two important projects are conducted in this area. First is promotion of bio villages and second is training of farmers and farm women. Member nations annually choose one agriculture topic for discussion.

Poverty eradication: All the nations of SAARC are poor nations and major challenge is to eradicate poverty and improve the living standard of their citizens. In this direction on 6 March 1991 it was decided to establish an independent South Asian Commission on poverty alleviation consisting of eminent persons from member states. In 7th SAARC Summit members adopted a consensus on poverty eradication. The 8th SAARC Summit endorsed the Recommendation of finance and planning ministers to establish a three-tier mechanism for exchanging information on poverty eradication. In the 13th Summit it was decided to establish a poverty alleviation Fund with the contributions both voluntary and/or assessed, as may be agreed.^x

Women in development: An area Corporation regarding women in development was included in IPA in 1986.^{xi} The standing committee on women in development took the issue of education health and violence against women etc. and took steps in this direction to check the trafficking in women. A convention has also been signed by member states. The technical committee on women in development is directed to review the progress every year on the implementation of the plan of action on women. It also organised seminars, workshops and training courses in the area of women in law, women in agriculture, education of women, and women employment etc. A women's cell has also been established in the SAARC Secretariat to act as a data bank and store house of information on women in development in the region. In the 8th SAARC Summit New Delhi, 1995, recognised the serious threat

faced by certain groups of girl children, in especially difficult circumstances including those of disabled and exploited. In the eleventh SAARC Summit 2002, held in Kathmandu agreed to establish a voluntary Fund with contribution from member states, individuals and donor countries and agencies for the rehabilitation and integration of the victims of trafficking. SAARC nations also signed convention on combating and prevention of trafficking in women and children for prostitution.

Drug Trafficking: Problem of drug trafficking is faced by all the member states of SAARC. SAARC convention on narcotics drugs was signed in fifth Summit, held in Male, 1990. It was a serious effort to eliminate drug trafficking. The convention seeks to enforce supplement at the regional level, the relevant International Convention and promote Regional Cooperation among member states in both law enforcement and demand reduction. The SAARC drug offences monitoring desk has been established in Colombo to collate, analyse, and disseminate information on drug related offences in member countries.

Trade and Commerce: The process of Regional Cooperation had started earlier with the origin of SAARC in itself. The first SAARC ministerial meeting on international economic issues was held from March 31 to April 6, 1986 in Islamabad.^{xii} To Promote mutual trade and economic cooperation the agreement of SAARC preferential trading arrangement (SAPTA) was signed in April 1993. SAARC countries agree to gradually lower traffic with in the region. SAFTA agreement was signed on 6 January 2004 during 12th SAARC Summit held in Islamabad. This agreement was came into force on January 1, 2006. Under this agreement SAARC members would have to bring their duties down to 20% by 2009 The SAFTA Ministerial Council has been established comprising the commerce ministers of the member states.

Communication and transport: The transport and communication facilities are essential for trade, commerce and people to people contacts. To explore the possibility of links across the borders the SAARC countries agreed to undertake trade facilitation measures including transit among SAARC countries on the basis of understanding among concerned countries for enhancing regional trade and other economic activities.^{xiii} SAARC Transport ministers have identified specific corridors for implementation a link between Nepal, Bhutan, India and Bangladesh. It is also has been decided by the member states that there should be collaboration and engagement among public authorities and private stakeholders to lower telephone tariff rate. It would facilitate greater contacts among the people of the region to enhance mutual cooperation in this area. A conference of SAARC communication ministers was organised in May 1998 at Colombo. The technical committee on telecommunication which was established in 1983. Which organises seminar and workshop on different related topics. An Information Network also has been established to improve the transit facilities within the region.

Rural development: Most of the population of SAARC nations live in villages. Rural development is one of the five original area of cooperation under the IPA. The technical committee on rural development focuses on the exchange of Information and literature among member states on issues related to rural development and to exchange experts and training facilities within the region.

Tourism: Tourism is also a tool of economic integration and cooperation. It plays important role in promotion of people to people contact in the region. During the Summit at Male, in 1997 member states recommended the appropriate measures to promote tourism within the region.^{xiv} In the eleventh SAARC Summit it was emphasized to develop tourist destination through joint efforts in the direction of tourism. In meeting of tourism ministers of member states was organised first time in Colombo. The member states called for the effective implementation of its decisions including the encouragement of active private sector participation in the promotion of tourism, simplification of visa procedure for tourist and pilgrims, and more convenient air and other travel link among SAARC countries. SAARC countries established technical committee on tourism in 1991 and working group on tourism in 2004. The year 2006 was launched as South Asia tourism year by SAARC Nations.

Terrorism: Almost all the members of SAARC are victim of terrorism. Terrorism has posed challenge to the security and safety of the South Asian nations. To combat terrorism in South Asia a regional convention on suppression of terrorism was signed, in 1987 during the third Summit at Kathmandu, to take effective measures to prosecute and punish those who are engaged in terrorist activities. An additional protocol on terrorism was also signed in January 2004 to prevent and suppress terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. The purpose of this additional protocol is to strengthen the SAARC regional convention on suppression of terrorism. The SAARC offensive monitoring desk has been established in Colombo to collate, analyse and disseminate information about the terrorist incidents, tactics, strategies and methods.

Cooperation with other organisations: SAARC has developed cooperation with other organisations such a UNCTAD, ESCAP, UNICEF UNDP, ITU etc. SAARC-UNCTAD Memorandum of understanding on the trade analysis and information system was signed in February 1993 to increase transparency in international trading conditions and to facilitate trade. A Framework agreement for cooperation between SAARC and ESCAP was signed in February 1994 to develop cooperation through joint studies, workshops and seminars and exchange of Information and documentation in poverty alleviation etc. A cooperation agreement between SAARC and UNICEF was also signed on 10 December 1993 to implement SAARC decisions related to children through joint studies, exchange of documentation and monitoring of implementation. Such types of agreements and MoU also signed with Asia Pacific tele community (APT), UNDP, United nations drug control programme (UNDCP), and International telecommunications Union (ITU).

Education and culture: A joint technical committee of education and culture was established in January 1993, which focuses on education of women, Universal primary education, Educational research etc. It organises workshops, seminar on priority themes.

Conclusion

SAARC was organised with the hope that it would play important role in solving the regional issues and would enhance the economic cooperation in the region. But its success has always remained below

expectation. Bilateral political disputes always negatively affected the collaboration in economic, social and cultural areas. India and Pakistan are big nations of this association but have long history of hostility. Although various institutions have been created to bring together the members of SAARC in the areas of tourism, education, culture, communication and trade etc., yet due to political disputes these institutions could not achieve expected success. The new areas of cooperation have been added in the SAARC agenda. But without putting aside the political bilateral disputed issues, they can not go ahead in the other areas of common interests.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p.95

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^{vii} Ibid. p.15.

^{viii} M.H.Syed (ed.), 'SAARC challenges Ahead', Kilaso Books, New Delhi, 2003, p.17.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x "Dhaka Declaration Thirteenth SAARC 13 November 2005". www.saarc-sec.org.

^{xi} Ibid., p.30.

^{xii} Dr. Surander Singh, "SAARC and South Asian Economic Union", K.K.Publication, Delhi, 2016, p.57.

^{xiii} "Dhaka Declaration thirteenth SAARC summit 13 November 2005", www.saarc-sec.org.

^{xiv} "Declaration of the ninth SAARC summit", www.saarc-sec.org.