



SAARC: Achievements and Problems

Kamalesh Podder

Assistant Professor,

Department of Political Science,

Srikrishna College, Bagula, Nadia, West Bengal

Email: kamaleshpodder96@gmail.com

Abstract: *In the face of the growing importance of regionalism, SAARC is an organization of South Asian countries established in 1985 to facilitate economic, technological, social and cultural development which emphasizes collective self-reliance. Its seven founding members are Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan. Afghanistan joined the organization in 2007. Since its formation in 1985, by organizing various meetings and summits at different levels it has played an important role in bringing member countries closer together. SAARC has had success in many issues, but it also has some problems. Conflict between India and Pakistan is a major obstacle to SAARC's progress. This article highlights the achievements of SAARC and the problems of SAARC.*

Key Words: SAARC, Regionalism, Economic, Conflict, achievements, Problems.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the current international situation, there is a growing tendency for different countries to form alliances on a regional basis. Different countries have taken the role of complementing each other by forming small organizations. One of the goals of the regional international organizations is to improve political and diplomatic relations and at the same time to build trade relations. In the face of the growing importance of regionalism, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is an indispensable and important organization in South Asia. Since its formation in 1985, by organizing various meetings and summits at different levels it has played an important role in bringing member countries closer together. Although the overall development of the organization has been hampered by internal strife and various other factors, the sense of its establishment and the development of regional integration have created a hope for its future progress.

2. ORIGIN:

Until the 1980s, South Asian leaders did not show much interest in cooperative joint ventures. The late President of Bangladesh Ziaur Rahman was the first to take initiative in this regard. He started his campaign during his state visits to various countries in South Asia from 1977 to 1980. He wanted the exchange and communication among the various states of the region in the fields of economy, technology, education, science, and culture to become easy and normal and ensure the possibility of mutual improvement. For this, in May 1980, he proposed regional cooperation to seven South Asian countries. Among these was the proposal to convene a summit. The Government of Bangladesh prepared a Working Paper on the occasion of the Summit, entitled Regional Cooperation in South Asia. In this regard, 11 areas of cooperation have been selected, namely (1) Telecommunication, (2) Meteorology, (3) Land Transport, (4) Ship Transport, (5) Tourism, (6) Agricultural Research, (6) Joint Initiatives, (6) marketing, (9) science and technology cooperation (10) education and technical cooperation and (11) cultural exchange. Then, on 2 August 1983, the foreign ministers of seven Asian countries met in New Delhi, the capital of India, and stressed the need to form a regional cooperation body. The objectives of the organization are: (1) welfare of South Asians, (2) improvement of living standards, (3) socio-economic development, (4) enhancement of collective self-reliance, (5) expansion of mutual trust and understanding, (6) Expansion of mutual aid and cooperation, (6) Establishment of cooperative relations with other targeting regional groups. The second meeting of these foreign ministers was held in July 1984 in Thimphu, the capital



of Bhutan. At the meeting, the participating countries agreed to form a regional cooperation organization, and it was decided to name this potential organization South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In addition, a SAARC Charter was finalized at this meeting for consideration at the next meeting. Then the first SAARC Summit was held in Dhaka on 7 December 1985 and the official journey of SAARC began with the adoption of the 'Dhaka Declaration' on 8 December. Afghanistan was added as the eighth member of SAARC in 2007.

3. OBJECTIVES OF SAARC:

SAARC adopted its charter providing for the promotion of economic and social progress, cultural development within the South Asia region and also for co-operation and friendship with other developing countries. SAARC wants respect for principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference of internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of all disputes. It is dedicated to technological, economic, social and cultural development that emphasizes collective self-reliance. It further confirmed that regional cooperation among South Asian countries is mutually beneficial, desirable and necessary for improving the living standards of the people of the region. The objectives of SAARC, as defined in its charter, are as follows:

- i. Promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and improve their quality of life;
- ii. Accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region by providing all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and realize their full potential;
- iii. Promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia;
- iv. Contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems;
- v. Promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields;
- vi. Strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- vii. Strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forms on matters of common interest; and
- viii. Cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

4. ACHIEVEMENTS OF SAARC:

Economic and trade cooperation is crucial for the success of SAARC and indeed for the development of South Asia. Many years of negotiations have laid the groundwork for cooperation, at least in this particular area. During the 1990s, SAARC member countries discussed the Preferential Trade Area (SAFTA) which was implemented in the form of the Free Trade Agreement, now known as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). According to the agreement, a tariff reduction plan was drawn up in 2006. Although the initiatives taken for free trade in the region have faced many difficulties, we cannot ignore the fact that the member countries are moving forward with their plans to improve regional growth and cooperation.

Since the formation of SAARC in 1985, the level of cooperation among the member countries has increased significantly. SAARC was established to enhance the living standards of the people, cultural and regional economic growth and increase cooperation with other regions of the world. SAARC members have made sense to accelerate regional economic development and have moved towards practical implementation of various plans and policies to turn this weak region into a potentially developed region. This cooperation has led to the establishment of various programs and forums for mutual benefits like South Asian University, New Delhi; SAARC International College, Bangladesh; Agreement on Judicial cooperation on Counter-Terrorism; Telemedicine Network; SAARC Writers and Literature Foundation; South Asia Foundation; South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme; South Asia Centre for Policy Studies; South Asia Women's Centre South Asia Olympic Council (South Asian Games).

In the field of science and technology, there have been meaningful and constructive exchanges that are relevant to the South Asian economy. These include solar energy, bio-fertilizers, low cost housing, shrimp hatcheries, electronics and molecular biology, biomass gasification; Wastewater recycling and pollution control, post-harvest and development of food technology; Renewable energy resources; Photovoltaic; Pesticides; Instrumentation, maintenance and calibration, cultivation and processing of medicinal and aromatic plants, weather forecasting, radar weather, telecommunications and much more.



SAARC has made great strides in education, sports, culture and media. The South Asian University has become fully operational and has scholarships and fellowships for research in various fields. Cultural exchanges are taking place through film festivals, literary seminars, cultural festivals, media programs and food festivals.

SARSO has been established to achieve and enhance coordination and cooperation among SAARC member countries in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed to develop harmonized standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.

It is a fact that youth in developing countries are neglected. Although the youth are an important part of the development of any nation, they are not consulted when making important policy decisions. Given the age-sensitive brackets in which young people fall. They are extremely risky and if there is no chance of progress, they even cause the government to fall. There is a growing rate of young population among SAARC countries and they must become the focus of attention that SAARC has considered. The SAARC Youth Award is given to outstanding individuals in the SAARC region. The award is significant in recognition of the award winners in the SAARC region. The award is based on specific themes that apply each year. The award recognizes and promotes the commitment and talent of young people who give back to the world at large through various initiatives such as innovation, environmental protection and disaster relief.

5. PROBLEMS OF SAARC:

SAARC lacks the favorable political environment that is essential for a regional alliance to succeed. There is enmity and mutual distrust among the countries of this region. The relationship between India and Pakistan is born of bitterness and this bitterness is growing. Needless to say, SAARC was not spared from the ill effects of the bitter relations between the two countries. In 1997, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that SAARC cannot and must not remain indifferent to or pretend to be oblivious of the differences and tensions between its members. Not only is there a conflict between India and Pakistan, but India also has conflict with other countries. Due to these problems in the bilateral relations, the bonds of cooperation among the SAARC countries could not be strengthened.

Another problem of SAARC is the wide disparity in resources among the member countries which hinders the growth of their cooperation. Compared to other SAARC countries, India is far ahead not only in terms of population but also in terms of natural resources. As a result, small countries have always feared that becoming members of SAARC would make them increasingly dependent. SAARC member countries are all developing countries, but Significant differences in the level of their development can be noticed. Countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. are more developed than Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan. The backward countries are fearful of falling behind in the SAARC Cooperation Plan.

The fear of India among the South Asian countries is seen by many as an obstacle to the success of SAARC. These countries have expressed fear that India will use this regional organization to expand its hegemony. Several countries have again tied the knot with foreign countries to reduce India's influence. On the other hand, India is also keen to thwart the anti-India activities of its neighbors. Such a situation has slowed down the progress of SAARC.

The SAARC Summits have consistently focused on development, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, trade expansion etc. But in each case, the SAARC has had zero success. The sincere efforts required by the member states for the development of the region have always been lacking here. SAARC has shown ultimate failure in the fight against terrorism.

The role of foreign states is not less in increasing mutual distrust and enmity among the South Asian countries. The neo-colonial states, especially the United States of America, never want an atmosphere of peace and co-operation in the region. Rather, it wants to keep the atmosphere of mutual distrust and animosity among these states alive. The United States of America is helping Pakistan with arms to keep India weak. China is also following this policy in some cases. Thus the intervention of foreign states continues to erode mutual harmony among the South Asian countries and hinders the success of SAARC.



The failure of SAARC is evident in its poverty alleviation programs. Poverty has been talked about since the very first day of SAARC's birth. Even today, 40 percent of the people in the region live below the poverty line. So SAARC is still a 'men's club'.

There are also substantial deficiencies in the infrastructure required to increase communication and transport among member states. Naturally, the progress of SAARC has been slow.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

6.1) The role of the individual governments of the eight member countries is crucial in strengthening SAARC. Lack of confidence and sincere efforts has hampered the development of this organization. There is no doubt that SAARC can go far beyond the European Union (EU) if all steps are taken with a view to constructive thinking and regional integration.

6.2) South Asian identity needs to be built on the basis of common cultural, historical, social, ethnic and civilization traditions.

6.3) The overall success of SAARC in attracting foreign direct investment to the region needs to be highlighted to investors around the world.

6.4) India occupies 70% of the geographical area among the SAARC countries so India has the primary responsibility to unite the SAARC countries.

6.5) All kinds of people-oriented organizations such as civic, professional, political, and non government organizations should participate in the discussion and exchange campaign and contribute to building consensus within the region for order in South Asia based on recognition of people's priorities, sharing of common heritage and culture.

6.6) There needs to be a greater exchange of academics, poets and other cultural circles among the countries of South Asia. Easy access to each other's TVs and other electronic programs should be provided. Many more seminars and workshops need to be organized by academics and researchers highlighting the benefits of mutual cooperation.

6.7) Economic policy coordination is the need of the time to curb the rivalries in regional and international markets arising from South Asian nations and for similar trade profits and production. There is a need to develop a network for integrated production and joint-export activities.

6.8) The Secretariat of SAARC should be more involved with non-governmental organizations to coordinate and increase economic and infrastructural assistance.

6.9) South Asian countries should learn from each other's failures and successes on various issues.

6.10) India needs to play a more trusty and empathetic role in building trust among smaller neighbors.

6.11) Establishing an identity in the South Asian region for quality, brand names, standards, investment arrangements and other areas where a common approach would benefit all member states.

6.12) There is a need to enhance the communication among the citizens of South Asia by further improving the road, rail and air travel facilities.

7. CONCLUSION:

The formation of SAARC is an important step for the leaders of this region. The main reason for its establishment is to create a conducive environment where all nations can communicate peacefully, build lasting peace and promote mutual economic well-being through the peaceful process of economic cooperation using the resources available in the region. However, more than three decades after its establishment, no country in SAARC has been able to push the integration process to the fullest, or the organization itself has not been effective enough to bring about harmony and economic cooperation for preventing conflicts in the region. The rate of its economic growth and the slow pace and backwardness of development planning created problems in the socio-economic field. It is a relatively young regional organization burdened with huge social, political and economic problems. This is the world's largest regional organization by population but the smallest in terms of inter-regional trade. In a region plagued by poverty, religious problem, illiteracy, social discrimination, unemployment, terrorist activities, the organization faces a real challenge in achieving socio-economic development. Not everything in SAARC is gloomy. By submitting and reviewing their views at the Summit, the Member States have expanded their co-operation in trade cooperation, counter-terrorism, citizenship, socio-economic and political issues. Many projects have been taken up on priority basis. Establishment of the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu has strengthened the trend of development. Taking measures for food security, taking action



against terrorism, taking projects for the welfare of infants has increased the importance of SAARC. If such achievements are sustained and if the member states have the political will, this regional organization will continue to improve in the future.

REFERENCES:

1. Saini, B.L. 2018. SAARC challenges and prospects. Highbrow Scribes Publications.
2. Dalal, Kumar Pronab. 2020. International Relations. Book Syndicate Limited.
3. Sudhakar, E. 1994. SAARC: origin, Growth and Future. Gyan Publishing House.
4. Sharma, Nidhi. 2014. Regional Cooperation in South Asia. Kalpaz Publication.
5. Chatterjee, Aneek. 2010. International Relations Today. Pearson.
6. Sing, K. Anil. 2009. SAARC Development Goals: Commitments and Achievements. South Asian Network for Agricultural and Social Development.
7. Pattanaik, Smruti. 2011. South Asia: Envisioning a Regional Future. Pantagon Press.
8. <https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-achievements-and-failures-of-SAARC-Can-we-find-the-difference-between-SAARC-and-ASEAN>
9. <https://diplomatist.com/2020/06/29/saarc-a-journey-with-the-coexistence-of-success-failure-along-with-covid-19/>
10. <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/implacable-failures-of-the-saarc/>
11. <https://www.drishtias.com/important-institutions/drishti-specials-important-institutions-international-institution/south-asian-association-for-regional-cooperation-saarc>
12. <https://www.careerride.com/view/saarc-establishment-achievements-and-limitations-20313.aspx>
13. <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/south-asian-association-for-regional-cooperation-saarc/>
14. <https://blog.forumias.com/answered-discuss-the-potential-and-issues-of-saarc-as-an-organisation-to-emerge-as-a-successful-model-of-cooperation-among-nations-in-a-region/>
15. <https://www.insightsonindia.com/international-relations/india-and-its-neighborhood/india-and-south-asia-regional-co-operation/saarc/>