Adopted as a resolution in a Conference of the Nature-Human Centric Peoples Movement at Jaipur on 25-27 November 2005

Question Before SAARC

What First—Humanitarian And Environmental Issues or Trading And Economic Concerns

This is the question that SAARC has not able to resolve within the past 20 years since its inception (i.e., 1985) and this is why it has not so far been able to take off.

Why SAARC has not been able to sort out the above question? The reason lies in not attending to the basic mutual questions facing the SAARC countries and thus not starting from the ground realities.

1. First And Foremost Ground Reality Of SAARC

The first and foremost ground reality of the region is the prevalence of a continuous tense and suspicious atmosphere (born out of their past history and the present policies of different ruling groups in SAARC countries) among the seven SAARC members (i.e., Maldive, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India). Unless this tension and suspicion based situation is not transformed into a cordial and trustworthy situation, the SAARC cannot make any meaningful advance.

An association for regional cooperation needs an attitude of friendship and confidence among its members. It can not be built in an atmosphere of mistrust, suspicion, tension and confrontation: Unless the causes generating such an atmosphere are removed, the genuine relations of mutual reliability among the SAARC members cannot be established.

The responsibility for creating a congenial atmosphere within the SAARC logically and necessarily falls on India. Because, it is the biggest party in almost all bilateral disputes in the region. To inculcate goodwill among its trade partners even at the cost of concessions is an appropriate sacrifice which will serve the cause of peace, democracy and development not only in South Asia and the world, but also India.

Firstly, the sorting out of a proper solution to Jammu-Kashmir problem would defuse the principal global flashpiont and put an end to the wasting of public funds on unnecessary arms race between India and Pakistan. Consequently, both these countries have, due to their unbearably high defence expenditures for 50 years, become marginal in terms of development and social welfare on the global scale.

Proceeding from Jammu-Kashmir problem's basic nature (i.e., a bilateral issue in the legal sense but a trilateral question according to the political criterion) and its ground realities (i.e., putting at stake their national honours by India and Pakistan to secure the exclusive control of Jammu-Kashmir and the Kashmiris' desire to opt out of India, while other Jammu-Kashmir ethnic communities having their respective aspirations and concerns), a just, fair and viable solution to this problem is the one that reconciles the respective national interests of both India and Pakistan, on the one hand, and fulfils the aspirations and concerns of all the ethnic groups of Jammu-Kashmir state, on the other. Based on this principle, an appropriate option is the establishment of either an Indo-Pak or SAARC condominium over the entire Jammu-Kashmir state (which will handle only defence, foreign affairs and currency concerning this state), with full autonomy to each of the eight ethnic regions of Jammu-Kashmir under a federal setup. Such an arrangement will result in creating a partnership of India, Pakistan and Jammu-Kashmir people, on the one hand and open the way for the development of SAARC, on the other.

Secondly, the removing of the anxiety of the SAARC's smaller members about Indian goods overwhelming their markets by giving proper Indian guarantees to the former would give a new fillip to trade and development in this region, thus benefitting one and all.

Thirdly, the easing of the bilateral irritants—like the matters relating to Ganga waters, Chakma tribals, common borders, transit facilities to India, Bangladeshi immigrants in India, etc., between India and Bangladesh; the questions relating to Kalapani, 1950-lndo-Nepal friendship treaty, water-sharing and some power projects, etc., between India and Nepal; the issues relating to LTTE militancy, fishing in each other's sphere in the Indian ocean, etc., between India and Sri Lanka; the question of Bhutan's displeasure on India's refusal to help the former in its dispute with Nepal on Nepali settlers in Bhutan; and Maldives security concerns—would generate new friendly spirit among the concerned countries.

Fourthly, the tackling of the contentious issues with other SAARC members would lead to the eradication of anti-Indian feelings among the people of these countries.

Fifthly, the cultivation of friendly relations among all the SAARC countries would change India's 'Big Brother' image into a democratic and rational personality.

Today, it is more than obvious that if the SAARC fails to take off, the consequences would be disastrous for all concerned in general and India and Pakistan in particular. In general, it would retard the developmental process of all the South Asian countries as compared with other nations in the World. In particular, the economic deterioration in India and Pakistan, coupled with their confrontationist politics and sharpening internal ethnic conflicts, would create destabilising effects on both these multi-ethnic countries.

2. Other Remarkable Ground Reality Of SAARC

The other notable ground reality of SAARC is its paradoxical state of affairs in the present day world. On the one hand, it presents a great developmental potential in its human and natural resources, and, on the other, it constitutes the poorest and the most backward area of the world.

On its positive side, it is characterised by a geographical contiguity, one-fifth of human community, with a shared history and socio-ethnic affinity, 700 million effective consumers, second largest railway network (a total of 92,256 kms) after the US, the largest irrigated land in the world (about 680 million hectares), a large number of scientific and technical personnel, surpassing even certain developed areas and a rich stock of bio-diversity and natural resources. All these helpful characteristics can become the basis for developing a prosperous South Asian community and contented societies within it.

Yet, at the same time, the region as a whole and its individual countries present a pathetic picture all around. Compared favourably with other developing countries of the world in the middle of this century, the South Asian nations are now caught in a two dimensional crisis, both human and environmental, pushing its people to a subhuman level.

As regards human resources, over 400 million South Asians go to bed hungry every night Another 300 million hover just above the poverty line. More than half the South Asian people are illiterate, one-third homeless, 40 percent under-employed, one-third devoid of safe-drinking water and other health-care facilities and three-fourth do not have access to latrines. Fiftythree percent of children below 5 years are underweight. About 100 million children in the 5-14 age group work as labourers. The condition of women is highly distressing. South Asia tops in gender-based violence the world over.

The average annual income of the people at $399 is even far below $555 of Africa's Sub-Saharan region, the most deprived region of the world two decades ago. Country-wise also, national incomes are among the lowest in the world, ranging from Bhutan's $200 to $500 for India.

The problem of poverty is further aggravated by various other social deprivations.

South Asia requires primary schooling for 140 million children, health-care for 750 million and safe-drinking water for 990 million people, adequate nutrition for 87 million children and provision of family planning services to 287 million married couples.

All this demands a huge amount of finance. But the ruling elite pursues its own priorities. The internal and external conflicts, generated by wrong official policies, devour much of the region's financial resources.

Taking up its environmental resources, the region has witnessed an extensive erosion of its natural resource base over the last five decades. As a result of rapid deforestation, the forest cover of the region has declined to 15 percent of the land area. Some of the worst natural disasters, like floods and

drought, are directly linked to the pressures on its eco-system. Global warming caused by the greenhouse effect is bound to have serious implications for all coastal regions, with the Maldives and Bangladesh being the most vulnerable.

The wastage of resources, coupled with the low growth rate, has increased the official debt burden, both internal and external. The growing debt service payments along with the rising military expenditure and wastage and misuse of funds have declined the region's credit worthiness, increasing its ineffectiveness to attract adequate portion of investment and aid from global resources which are being diverted to other seemingly more promising regions. It receives just 4.6 percent net long-term flows to developing countries and accounts only for one percent of the world trade, while comprising 20 percent of the world population. The effect of these trends is further marginalisalion and a substantial reverse flow of resources—human, natural and financial from South Asia to the developed countries.

3. Why SAARC Agenda Should Be Based On Humanitarian And Environmental Issues

Proceeding from the afore-mentioned two ground realities, the first thing before us is as to what should be the fundamental principle of our agenda. Whether it should be an agenda based on humanitarian and environmental issues or concerned with trading and economic concerns.

The first principle emerges from nature-human oriented approach and is related to people, while the other comes from corporate capital-centric outlook and is linked to traders, financiers, industrialists, etc.

The first suits the human community in general and the South Asian People in particular, while the other benefits the corporate capitalists in general and the merchants, businessmen, Arhtis and bankers, in particular.

Further, the name South Asian Association For Regional Co-operation itself, by any rational, logical and ethical principle, was primarily meant for dealing with South Asian peoples concerns and not attending exclusively to mercantile interests.

The humanitarian and environmental agenda may briefly comprise the following points.

Humanitarian Issues

1. Resolving all contentious issues or tension-points between the SAARC members, particularly the problem of Jammu- Kashmir, through peaceful means. This will finish off the South Asian brand of state as well as group "terrorism."
2. Involving the people in decision making at all administrative levels concerning environmental, political, economic and cultural processes.
3. Working out of concrete plans to end poverty, begging, unemployment, child labour, child malnutrition, gender inequality, illiteracy, newly-emerged dangerous diseases, like AIDs, cancer, bird-flu, etc., unsustainable rise in population, black money, border smuggling, lawlessness, crime, corruption, ensuring human rights, making SAARC a conflict and nuclear free zone area, reducing country-specific defence expenditure, trading in all sorts of essential articles, building mutual infra-structure, etc.

Environmental Issues

(a) Planning to reduce the level of all greenhouse gases.

(b) Filteration of all types of polluted water, harvesting of all rainwater and stopping of all types of water pollution and wastage.

(c) Intensive campaign and work to increase the forest cover, both dense and thin.

(d) Regeneration of all types of degraded land, improving the quality of all varieties (dry or irritated) of land, and prevent desertification.

(e) Working out joint schemes for energy generation.

4. Relevance of Humanitarian-Environmental Agenda To All Regional Groups

Humanitarian and environmental agenda, in our view, is relevant to all existing regional formations, some of which (including EU) are now faced with insoluble obstacles, generated by the crisis ridden corporate capitalist system and its EU regional agenda.

5. Our Task

To awaken the people for establishing SAARC on a humanitarian and environmental agenda. 17-11-2005