

IN SEARCH OF UNITY IN THE TRADITION OF THE SAARC COUNTRIES

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In a bird's eye view, SAARC countries can be easily identified as a physically contiguous geographical unit that coincides well with our political imagination. It comprises, indeed, a single continuous land-mass of the Himalayan system bounded by the sky-high snow-capped peaks of the Mount Everest and K-2 on the north and the deep sea of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean on the south, by the silhouette Lusai ranges on the east and the Arabian sea on the west. With the predominant influence of the Monsoon rains, the whole region may also be considered to belong to a single eco-system.¹

Nevertheless, its contiguous unitariness is sharply cut across by divergent levels of heights of the land-mass and widely variant climates obtaining from country to country and even place to place. As it slopes down from north to south, from the highest of heights to the deepest of the depths, it traverses through almost infinite variations of climatic conditions in between — round the year snow of the Himalayas stooping over Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim and the never-snow condition of neither-too-hot nor-too-cold climates of Bangladesh, South India, Sri Lanka and Maldives and elbowing them in the midst by innumerable varieties of cold mountainous fringes and extreme cold and extreme hot spots throughout North India and Pakistan. Besides, it also contains the hottest *Thar* desert of Sind and the highest rainfall area of Cherapunji in Assam.²

Thus, in point of land and climate, SAARC region presents a world of varieties that exert deep influence over the nature of *fauna and flora* and through them also, on the bodily structure, disposition, habits, customs and usages of human beings inhabiting therein. For example, the short statured Nepalis, lean bodied and soft

skinned Bengalis, stalwart Pathans and the Panjabis, orange coloured Kashmiris, rosy U.P.-walas and Rajputs, brownish Mongoloid, yellowish Chinese accretions in the northern and eastern borders and blackish Polynesian and Negroid accretions in the southern borders of the region, present more variety and contrast than unity.³ Hence, the physical features of the land and of the people taken into consideration, the SAARC region rather tends to vetoing the case of unity altogether. Nor could we find any solace in the functioning of the ruling institutions. Looking at the present shapes of the States and forms of Governments obtaining in South Asia, we are further baffled by the points of disagreement. For example, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are avowedly secular democracies even though with many a question mark, Pakistan and Maldives are declaredly Islamic democracies and the Nepal and Bhutan are kingdoms, which make it extremely difficult for all of them to come to a general agreement on any point of internal or external policies. Not only that; it is even difficult for them to choose common friends from amongst the Super Powers, Big Powers or Aid-giving States.

Strategic Consideration:

Yet the impulse of life, human cravings for enjoyment, comfort and prosperity, urge for peace and happiness, the strategy of socio-political existence of group life and the exigencies of national survival in the modern world, especially in a hard competitive economic life of the modern times, even more especially as obtaining amongst the long exploited down-trodden, poverty-stricken and disease-infested peoples of the SAARC region cry out for unity. In this highly competitive modern world where the developed countries have monopolized the world market, turned money and currency into their hand-maids and whose capitalistic free-styled economy and *unjust* trade strategy are making the rich countries richer and poor countries poorer, the SAARC countries have no alternative except tightening their belts and standing together for the sake of survival, self-preservation, maintenance of political independence and ensuring social and economic progress.⁴ In view of the above considerations, a proposal for a regional cooperation association of South Asian States was mooted by the late President

Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh in 1977 and pushed forward throughout the later years of his life till 1980, and the SAARC came into existence by dint of the pushfulness of President H.M. Ershad of Bangladesh in December, 1985.⁵

Emergent Necessity:

The emergent necessity for organizing the South Asian States into a close association for regional cooperation arose first and foremost from strategic reasons as stated above; that is to say, their common interests in overcoming similar type of economic backwardness generated by the selfsame process of imperialistic subjugation and colonial exploitation by Western Powers and in this case coincidentally mainly by the British, for a long period of one to two centuries at a stretch, which dislodged the peoples of the whole region from their normal path of progress and threw them headlong into the abyss of poverty, helplessness, ignorance and disease.⁶

Secondly, the destruction of the upper strata of the people by the occupation powers in the first flash of their aggression in the 18th and 19th centuries and systematic suppression of the indigenous trade and commerce as well as the indigenous impulse of initiative and leadership by the imperial ruling elites and colonial interests and the resultant socio-economic down-troddenness of the masses of the people everywhere in the whole region, almost of a similar type, coupled with an acute lack of investmental capital resources, perennially begot frustration, instability and turmoil in the society providing fertile grounds for political agitation.⁷

Such a combustible situation calls for mutual agreement, mutual compact and collective decision amongst the neighbouring States for non-interference, non-intervention and non-aggression amongst themselves lest they should cross one another's road to progress, subvert one another's constitutional advancement and peaceful political process and/or stand in the way of one another's implementation of development projects.⁸

Thirdly, due to the chronic poverty arising out of one to two centuries of subjugated life and consequently hunger-ignorance-and-disease-infested SAARC countries may also fall easy victim to the unwholesome tactics and propaganda campaigns and even to

armed sabotage of the Super Powers and Big Powers which have become covertly notorious at the present juncture of the diplomatic history of the world, which can seriously mar the peace and tranquillity of a developing country and jeopardize her developmental activities.⁹

Fourthly, unlike many other regions of the world Providence has made South Asia Indo-centric like South-East Asia which is Indonesia-centric — providing the great countries of India and Indonesia a very facile scope to extend Big Brotherly treatment to the smaller countries surrounding them. At one time Indonesia created a havoc to the Malaysian nation by assuming a Big-Brother-like *unfriendly* role but later on corrected herself by returning to the stance of sovereign equality in order to allow the ASEAN to function smoothly.¹⁰ In South Asia, India's geo-political position is even more advantageous than that of Indonesia. In ASEAN, Indonesia is surrounded by other countries whereas in SAARC other countries are effectively surrounded by India. Here India has common borders with all other countries whereas no two countries besides her have common borders. As such, some of the vexatious conflicting problems that are threatening or likely to threaten the amity of the SAARC countries are bilateral with India, whereas there is hardly any multilateral problems that are visible in the region. That being so, bringing only multilateral problems within the purview of the SAARC and keeping bilateral conflicts outside its scope as per provisions of the SAARC Charter,¹¹ is bound to jeopardize the very existence of this organization.

The SAARC countries being thus more effectively Indo-centric than similar other instances in any other regions of the world, the effectiveness of the SAARC would mainly depend upon the attitude and policy that would be assumed by India. Therefore, we cannot but contemplate as to what type of role India is likely to play, or else, what role the other countries of the region can persuade India to play in the politico-economic field of the region. In this respect, India may assume the Western Machiavellian policy of "aggressive defence" or the Indo-classical Kautilyan policy of *Danda*, i.e. aggressive conflict with smaller neighbours — both being equally adventurous, are likely to nip the SAARC in the bud. Or else, India may don the garb of Nehruistic idealism and take the role of a Big Brother either in the style of earlier Indonesian policy

in South-east Asia or in the fashion of the former British policy of posing herself as more than equal in the West European region, which would savour of a domineering stance and is equally bound to mar the objectives of the SAARC. Only if, India can give an objective lead in devising a homogenous SAARC policy for all the States concerned in such a way as to herself assuming within the greater framework a realistic policy of sovereign equality towards other members as envisaged in the Charter, in the greater interest of all,^{1,2} then and only then, SAARC would gain a new lease of life and can move in full confidence on the road of mutual cooperation, prosperity and progress. It is well to remember in this context that, the Super Power and Big Power strategies, often infested with heart-rending ferocity, sabotaging and nefarious tactics of Western Capitalistic *versus* Socialistic ideological conflicts with damaging and lethal effects on the developing countries could neither be resisted nor neutralized by the small countries acting in isolation. Nor could even the bigger developing countries escape the bite of their poisonous fangs, once any of them got a foothold anywhere within a region. Well-meaning, realistically objective, determined and persistent collective efforts are necessary and acute but well-balanced diplomatic endeavours are pre-requisite for keeping every country's own house free from global diplomatic pollution, intervention, neo-colonial domination, sabotage and aggression which were the anxieties *cum* driving forces that went for making up the Charter of the SAARC.

Fifthly, in view of the existing disrupted political, economic, social, educational and cultural situation, widespread administrative corruption prevailing amongst the ruling *elites* and consequently ignorant, cunning, knave and opportunistic psychological make-up of the masses of the peoples residing everywhere in this region, turn the avowed objectives of the planners and policy-makers of the SAARC nations of achieving rapid and planned development of the socio-economic conditions of the peoples and modernization of their law and society an uphill task. In order even to make a go in this field, the SAARC countries can profitably start with mutually exchanging expert ideas, field experience and technical know-how amongst themselves as have been successfully done in South and South-east Asia in the field of agriculture, particularly in propagating IRRI, BRRI, MAXI PAK and Potatoes cultivation. They

can also promote and accelerate the development process by exchanging expert cultivators, as was done by Japan in 1950s, bartering commodities and transferring small scale capital investment and by increasing the volume of trade and commerce amongst themselves as well as by exchanging students and teachers through the grant of scholarships, fellowships and visiting professorships.

Similar contemplation had led to the Bandung Conference of the Afro-Asian Nations in 1955 and the selfsame objectives have presently encouraged the South Asian nations to organize the SAARC. As such the emergent but inevitable necessity for uniting the SAARC countries into a common international regional forum calls for a penetrating investigation for identifying, unfolding and searching out all possible avenues of unity and points of common interest that might lie buried under the debris of historical traditions of South Asian peoples.¹³ Specially as it is hinted in the SAARC Charter, we may turn our attention underneath the colossal debris of Western imperialism and colonialism and their unholy progeny of *divide et impera*, communalism and selfish rivalry — deep into the religious doctrines, cultural arena, historical background and the civilizational milieu of this region so as to prop up the hardearned sense of SAARC amity that has been heartily achieved by dint of the political initiative of the heads of the States and Governments.

From Material Arena to Spiritual Vista:

When we turn our gaze from the material arena to the spiritual vista of vision, we come across a happy ground and even intuitively discover a good many common values which beacon and bestir our minds and hearts and souls and tend to blend our feelings and realization into a blissful combination.

For instance, as we cherish the values of (a) *Manabātā bodh*, *Insiyāt*, i.e. humanitarian feeling (?) (b) *Sraddha*, *Ikram*, reverence to the older persons; (c) *Sneha*, *Muhabbat*; affection to the younger persons; (d) *Mamata*, *Sanman*, friendliness, respect to the equals; (e) *Imandari*, *Satata*, fidelity, honesty and truthfulness towards the Lord Creator and fellowbeings; (f) *Sambit*, conscientiousness; (g) *Pabitrata*, *Hurmat*, sanctity of *Jan*, *Mal*, 'Izzat, life, property and self-respect of all persons; (h) *Nyay*, 'Adl, justice;

(i) Sanctity and respect to the duly wedded wife and the children of wedlock; (j) (*Rahm, Daya*, kindness; (k) help to the needy and protection to the weak and shelterless; as well as abhorrence and hatred towards the opposites of these values, such as (l) *Bi-imani*, dishonesty; (m) *Jhuta, Mithya*, lie; (n) *An-nyay, Zulm*, injustice etc. and as well contemplate about them, we realize at once, that we are not alone nor can there be any exception in this whole system of love and hatred. As such, we realize that in this value system we partake in a pervasive solidarity with the peoples of every walk of life throughout the whole region of SAARC.

Indeed, South Asian peoples belonging from the Chinese borders of Pakistan, North India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam to the Burmese borders of Chittagong Hills and Teknaf stretching seawards through South India, Sri Lanka and the islands of Maldives, all and sundry, are born and bred in the family circles and social arena under the pervading shades of these and related values, which taken together constitute a full-fledged moral system which is generally recognized in the day-to-day conversation as *Insaniyat* or *Manabata bodh*.¹⁴

In the whole region of South Asia from the northern tips of Nepal and Bhutan to the southernmost islets of Maldives and from the western tips of Sindh and Peshawar to the eastern borders of Chittagong Hills one can talk about *Manabata bodh* and *Insaniyat*¹⁵ as an axiomatic truth, as *a priori* value or as a categorical imperative, as a topmost value under which is subsumed all other human values, one can talk to anybody and everybody whether a sage, a king or a layman, an officer, teacher, clerk, peon, politician, businessman, a hewer of wood or a drawer of water, a fisherman, a day-labourer and what not, with equal moral force. It is rated as the highest value of humanity, second or subservient to the Divinity alone.

There is no exact equivalent of it in the Western languages. The term "Humanitarian feeling" comes near to it.¹⁶ But *Manabata Bodh* does not pertain to the nervous process of knowing, feeling and willing; it pertains to realization that proceeds from the soul, conscience and moral discrimination. On the other hand, the popular Western term of "humanism" is *Manabata bad*, which is a slogan, an idea or even an ideology reminding us of the enthusiasm of the Renaissance of the modern West, which if fructified may reach to

Manabata bodh. *Bad* or *ism* may be regarded as a means to *Bodh* to be realized as an end. Thus, *Manabata bodh* can only be construed in Western terminology by conceptually skewing it as humanitarianism. Indeed, humanism or *Manabata bad* is regarded as the moulder of the modern Western civilization whereas *Manabata bodh* is the essence of the South Asian civilization, the end product of the great religions in combination with the indigenous human attitude towards life.

In exploring the roots of *Manabata bodh* in South Asia, first of all, we come across the Indo-Aryan migrants who brought with them the great Vedic religion which imbued them to devote their lives to the attainment of an ideal of "total man" or "complete personality". That seems to comprise of a harmonious combination of the human body (*Kaya*), the human mind (*Mana*) and the human soul (*Atma*) in the wholesome personality of a man by means of sustained practices of austerity (*Samjam*), devotion (*Tapasya*) and worship (*Puja*). By dint of their painstaking devotion and highly developed religious doctrines and practices they had also attained to the nearness of one Supreme Lord of the universe, whom they called "Brahma", which literally means "one who became lord by himself". It savoured of a highly developed humanitarian value.

But in view of keeping their distinctive qualities intact in a newly settled foreign land and in the midst of a vast majority of strangers, the Indo-Aryans called themselves *Dvija* i.e. twice born, that is to say, once born as *Manusya putra* i.e. human child, and a second time born at puberty with *Bibek* i.e. conscience, as a full-fledged human being. They established an initiation ceremony for installing themselves into *Dvijahood* by wearing the *Paita* i.e. the sacred thread and began to regard themselves as more equal or superior to the rest of humanity. This is dated in between 1500 to 3000 B.C.

Then during the first millennium B.C. in protest to the Indo-Aryan discrimination between man and man, there arose two great religious movements in South Asia, namely Jainism and Buddhism, which put before them "humanity" as the focal point of human attention. They cherished equality and brotherhood of mankind, deprecated Indo-Aryan caste system and regarded kindness, amity, love and charity as highest values of life. Specially, Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism upheld the moral quality of

Bodh i.e. realization as the source of divine enlightenment: *Budhi*, the attainment of which makes one *Buddha* i.e. enlightened. He ruled that once a human being reaches the state of *Budhi* by dint of his practices of austerity, devotion and strivings, he would know the truth by himself, that is to say, the truth will bare itself to him. Thus, Buddhism re-established with greater enthusiasm, the value of humanitarianism to the highest position in human life.

After Buddhism, Islam arrived in South Asia about the 8th century Christian Era (C.E.) with its well developed doctrine of humanity as the best of the creation in the universe (*Ashraf al-Makhluqat*). It declared human beings as the progeny of one father and one mother, namely Adam and Eve, and as such, regarded all human beings as basically brothers and sisters, equal in status without any distinction of race, colour and clime. It upheld equality, brotherhood and freedom and sanctity of life, property and honour as the inalienable rights of every human being. In order to ensure and preserve these rights, Islam also provided with a system of justice (*Adl*), and gave the Court of justice (*Adalat*) the highest power in the society and the state.

Thereafter came the Christianity in South Asia about the 16th century C.E. carrying with it the avowed humanitarian doctrines and objectives as it is manifest in the Christian endeavours of serving humanity by setting up educational institutions and hospitals and extending Red Cross services to the sick and needy.¹⁷

Thus, apart from the propagation of religions by the preachers of Veda, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, they also exerted a long standing civilizational influence on the peoples of South Asia that eventually generated a comprehensive system of values, not in the form of value judgement but in the shape of *Manabata bodh*, which has become the very essence of life in this region.

For instance, in a popular Bengali journal, Humayun Ahmed writes:

the dream for flowering the life, faith in man and unflinching belief in humanitarian values constitute the means of the journey for society's advancement.¹⁸

A popular Urdu-Hindi song pronounces:

The hijacker roams about in the garb of humanitarianism.¹⁹

Summary and Conclusion:

To sum up, in course of our investigation of the grounds of unity amongst the peoples of the SAARC region, in the first place, we examined the geographical situation and the climatic condition of the SAARC countries and found nothing common besides the geological skeleton of the Himalayan system and the Monsoon-dominated eco-system of the region. Secondly, in terms of human geography of the region, we found the bodily structures of human beings, the colours of their skins, their social customs, usages, habits, mores etc. almost entirely divergent from place to place by wide ranging varieties. Thirdly, even the forms and structures of States and Governments of the region are found to be widely divergent.

Thus finding no substantial physical or natural traits of unity in the material sector of the SAARC region, we turned our gaze to the spiritual vista and cultural arena and we found therein the humanitarian value of *Manabata bodh* as a single all-pervading spirit that universally resides in every human heart of this region.

We contended that the value of *Manabata bodh* is a somewhat unique trait which has grown uniformly in this region owing to the exposure of the people belonging to the whole region to a long standing influence of the humanitarian doctrines emanating from the *Vedic* religion, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity which respectively or alternately moulded the mentality of the peoples of this region, especially, in combination with a presumably pre-existent indigenous humanitarian accretion, into the ethos of *Manabata bodh*.

Our further contention is that the above ethos of *Manabata bodh* may be articulated (metaphysically speculating) to have generated a comprehensive system of ethical values, or else (sociologically reviewed) one might say that, the long standing humanitarian doctrinal influences of the great religious movements moulded the human consciousness in this region into the mould of a grand matrix of humanitarian values promoting it even to a state of group-feeling or group-mind centering round the supreme value of *Manabata bodh*, which has become the very essence of South Asian culture and civilization; or so to say, in the terminology of J.J. Spengler, the long standing civilizational influence of the region

moulded the value of *Manabata bodh* into the "symbolic framework" of the life of the peoples.²⁰

Thus considered, the humanitarian value of *Manabata bodh* stands on a good stead as a prop to the collective efforts of the SAARC nations aimed at removing the perennial backwardness of the masses of the people, modernizing their society and achieving rapid technological progress through mutual help, especially if we set it up on the firm grounds of justice, equity and fellow-feeling. Not only that, cultivation, promotion and just dispensation of *Manabata bodh* in the society, cultural arena, politico-economic field and in all other walks of life are likely to boost up the morale of the people and enthuse them for hard work for the amelioration of their overall condition of life.

Our final contention is that the value of *Manabata bodh* as historically developed in the SAARC region, ethnically stands as an end that can be compared with *Manabata bad* or humanism as a means and as such *Manabata bodh* resides universally in the heart of every individual, which, if honestly promoted will act as a proud possession of the peoples and as a balancing force against all inequity and will prove to be a great incentive for mutual cooperation between persons, societies and states.

NOTES

1. For detailed geographical description of South Asia, viz., India, Pakistan and Ceylon, see (a) L. Dudley Stamp, *Asia: A Regional and Economic Geography*, London, 11th edn. 1962, pp. 188ff. and 365 ff. (b) O.H.K. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, London, 1964, and (c) C. Maxwell-Lefroy, *The Land and People of Ceylon*, London, 1964, Chap. VIII, "About the People", p. 56ff.
2. *Ibid.* See also O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, 2nd edn., London, 1967 and L. Dudley Stamp, *India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma*, London, 1960.
3. Cf. C.L. White and G.T. Renner, *Human Geography, an Ecological Study of Society*, New York, 1948, Chap. 41, "The Region as a Geographical Unit", p. 639ff.
4. Cf. *SAARC Facts and Economic Development*, ed. by M.L. Rahman, SARC Association, Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1986, "The Dhaka Declaration", pp. 8-6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 14f. and Atiur Rahman, *Political Economy of SARC*, Dhaka, 1985, p. 71f.
6. Cf. Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman (ed.), *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Princeton, N.J., 1960, p. 153: "The Politics of South

Asia" by Myron Weiner. For a case study, see *Muslim Struggle for Freedom in Bengal*, by the present writer, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1980, Chap. I, p. 5f. "Socio-economic Conditions of the Muslims of Bengal, 1757 to 1830."

7. For a Western observation, see Charles W. Anderson *et al.*, *Issues of Political Development*, New Jersey, U.S.A., 1967, p. 145, Chap. 9, "The Meaning of Revolution in the Developing World", "During the past generation, the public voice of the developing nations has often been one of frustration, resentment and condemnation of the past, and the presentation of a vision of the future that often sounds imprudent or at least unorthodox to Western ears".
8. Compare with Mohammad Ayoob, "The Primacy of the Political: South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) in Comparative Perspective", as analysed in Atiur Rahman: *Political Economy of SARC*, Dhaka, 1985, Chap. 2, pp. 8-13: "Preconditions for Regional Cooperation".
9. *Ibid.* see also Atiur Rahman *op. cit.* Chap. 3, p. 4ff.
10. Compare with Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
11. See *SAARC Facts and Economic Development*, *op. cit.* p. 13: SAARC Charter Art. 10, Provision 2.
12. *Ibid.*, Art. 2, Principle 1; see also M.L. Qureshi, "South Asian Economics During 1970s: An overall View", *South Asian Studies*, vol. 1, No. 1, Lahore, Jan. 1984, p. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, Dhaka Declaration, p. 9, and Atiur Rahman, pp. 65-67.
14. For instance see, Saptahik Bichitra, Eid Number, 1987, (*Eid al-Fitr*), "Shunyer Majhar" by Ahmed Humayun (in Bengali), pp. 11-12.
15. It is sung in Urdu-Hindi: *Insaniyat ke bhes me phirta he lutera*. That is to say, "The hijacker roaming in the garb of Humanitarianism".
16. For a discussion of values, see *The Ency. of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), Macmillan, New York, 1967, Reprint 1972, vols. I-II, p. 189: "Conscience" and vol. 4, p. 26, "History and Value Judgments".
17. For the sacred books of great religions see *Bibles of the World*, ed. Robert O. Bellou, New York, 1st edn. 1939, 9th edn. 1967.
18. See n. 14 above.
19. See n. 15 above.
20. Ralph Braibanti and J.J. Spengler (ed.), *Tradition, Values and Socio-Economic Development*, Durham, N.C. 1961, pp. 4-5 and Charles W. Anderson, Fred Mehden and Crawford Young: *Issues of Political Development*, New Jersey, 1967, p. 1457: "Meaning of Revolution in Developing World".