CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to inquire into various aspects of regional cooperation in South Asia in the preceding chapters with the objective of gaining a meaningful understanding of SAARC as a phenomenon. This study started with the basic conceptual discussion on regions, South Asia as a viable region and proceeded to study the evolution of SAARC as a regional organization of South Asia. The socio-economic and political dimensions of the states of the region, their internal problems, their interrelationships, the role and importance of the region in international relations and the impact of the global powers on the regional organization of the South Asia have been discussed in detail. An evaluation of the functioning of SAARC and the progress made by it during these years has also been undertaken.

The study started with a conceptual discussion of world war II and its consequences and arrival at a working definition of region. It indicates that there were strong factors in South Asia, like the geography, proximity, history, society, security perception and nation building process etc. commonalities in the social and cultural aspects and economic background. These factors and interference of the big powers in someway or the other paved the path for regional organization in South Asia.

The genesis of SAARC is also one of them. The origin of SAARC in its present form could be traced to the proposals mooted by the late President Zia-ur-Rehman of Bangladesh in 1980 followed by the circulation of Working Paper on South Asian Regional Cooperation in November 1980. The formal
discussions for the establishment of an institutional mechanism for regional cooperation in South Asia started with the Colombo meeting of the Foreign Secretaries of the seven states of South Asian region, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in April 1981.

The evolution of regional organization in South Asia has indeed been very late in comparison to various other regions of the world, including other Asian regions. There were several reasons but the most important among them was India and Pakistan. The turning point in the evolution of regional cooperation in South Asia as the study indicates was the New Delhi Meeting of Foreign Ministers in August 1983 where an embryonic form of regional cooperation viz. South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) was launched. After a few more meetings at the Foreign Ministers level the formal launching of SAARC in its present form took place at Dhaka in December 1985. The Dhaka Summit of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Heads of States or Governments adopted the Charter of the SAARC and marked the beginning of the regional cooperation.

The SAARC Charter reaffirmed the conviction of the member states about the necessity and desirability of regional cooperation and declared that SAARC was intended to ‘promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life, to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region… and to promote and strengthen collective self reliance among the countries of South Asia’.¹ The Charter also

enunciated that cooperation within the framework of SAARC should be based on ‘respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit’. The principles of Non-Alignment and the UN were also affirmed as the guiding forces of SAARC.

Another theme of the work is the influence of the major external powers i.e. the United Kingdom, United States, Soviet Union and China, on the intra-regional relations of South Asia and the prospects of regional cooperation. It has been attempted to analyse how these major powers affected the South Asian region and the South Asian states. The relations between India, the core of the South Asian region and its neighbours, particularly Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have been affected adversely by the involvement of these major powers in the region.

As regards the institutional framework of the SAARC, a four-tier institutional set up is envisaged and became operational for SAARC. At the Apex level is the summit meeting which takes place once every year. The second tier of the structure is the Council of Ministers. The third one is the standing committee and the bottom line consists of Technical committees on various subjects of cooperation consisting of representatives of the member states. The SAARC Secretariate came into existence in February 1987 with headquarters at Kathmandu. It is headed by a Secretary-General and also consists of seven directors, one each from the member countries.

The study also indicates that the countries of South Asia are characterized by eternal internal turmoils and problems of political stability and
national integration. All the states of the region have been facing this problem during the past few decades. Moreover the social, cultural, ethnic and religious affiliations of the people of the region transcending national boundaries created a crisis of mutual confidence and distrust. It is a common feature of the region that each of the states alleges its neighbour states for its internal troubles. These intra-regional and inter-regional conflicts have also been discussed in the study.

The study also examined the Indo-Centric nature of the South Asian region, India’s efforts and initiatives towards regional cooperation, its bilateral issues with the neighbouring countries. Most of the states of the region over the past six decades developed an adversary relationship with India. The basis for this is partly the bilateral problems they have with India and partly it is psychological. This adverse relationship of the states of South Asia with India give rise to small states tendency and their fear of big Nation. As India is the largest of all the member states of the South Asia. Most of the bilateral issues revolves round India and other member states.

India-Pakistan bilateral relations occupy the centre stage of the South Asian relations. The major bilateral problems are India’s problems of Kashmir with Pakistan, river water disputes with Nepal, smuggling and sharing river waters problems with Bangladesh. Tamil insurgency and LTTE problem with Srilanka. These problems are purely bilateral and no other South Asian country has any role to play. India also played a positive role in SAARC by encouraging cooperation among the South Asian states. It has good relations
with Maldives, Bhutan and also cordial relations with other South Asian states regarding the economic cooperation.

The study also highlights the SAARC’s comparison with other Regional organisations like ASEAN and EU. SAARC though a latecomer on the international scene, has been quite ahead of other regional organizations like ASEAN in matters of institutional framework. But the institutional mechanism established by SAARC is rather modest compared to other similar organizations. While comparing SAARC with other regional organizations it is found that in most of the cases political, social and ideological convergence facilitated their evolution. In the case of SAARC in spite of the existence of social, cultural and ethnic commonalities, the strategic, ideological divergence stemming from religious divergence and antagonistic political postures are found to be causing most of the damage to the unity of the region. However, the evolution of SAARC indicates the desire of the countries of South Asia to bring about a unity to realize the regional cooperation. By analyzing the above discussion this can be said that there is no problem about the general framework of regionalism as far as SAARC is concerned. Infact SAARC is quite in order as a regional organization of South Asia. Its need was felt for quite a long time and its actual emergence took longer time than other similar regional organizations. SAARC with its noble objectives is quite compatible with the ideals and objectives of the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement.

The commitments of the members of SAARC to its avowed objectives of cooperation, peace, progress, prosperity and stability of the region
sometimes vacillates. It is quite difficult to say that they are committed to its avowed objectives. As India and Pakistan’s mutual rivalries is still unresolved. It has been clearly mentioned in SAARC’s objectives that no bilateral issues would be discussed in SAARC summits. But still SAARC summits cannot spare themselves from such discussion. Many a times SAARC summits postponed due to tensions between these two major powers.

There is mutual suspicion among the member states of SAARC. Especially it was questioned how far Indian hegemonism in South Asia is real and how does it affect the Regional Cooperation in South Asia. It is quite true and that the basic reality of the size and strength of India in relation to its neighbours gave scope for this kind of suspicions in the bilateral relations between India and its neighbours. The mutual suspicions in the bilateral relations have their roots in the social, cultural, religious, ethnic and political factors. The suspicions were rather psychological and by no means insurmountable. Once they are removed there will be closer interaction between India and its neighbours both at the state level or at the state level.

The talk of Indian hegemonism or Indophobia has its roots in the bilateral problems between India and its neighbours. India’s ambitious foreign policy postures and its insistence of bilateralism in its dealing with its smaller neighbours is construed as dominant aspirations.² But the fact is that India is generally keen in maintaining good neighbourly relations with all its smaller neighbours. In fact India has been more interested in economic relations with

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its smaller neighbours. The problem of India’s big size is in actual an imaginary problem fostered by Pakistan for obvious reasons and actively supported by the external powers, particularly the USA and China. The talk of India’s big size is in a way assertion by identity by the smaller states of South Asia. This way they were more or less successful in wresting quite a few concessions from India apart from isolating it both within the region as well as SAARC.

As far as the influence of major powers are concerned. It is true that the major powers of the world like US, USSR and China have a definite influence on the SAARC. They were someway or the other responsible for the emergence of feeling of regional cooperation among the South Asian states. And in the recent time both China and USA got the observer status in SAARC.

There are few problems which can be easily resolved through political will and change in mindset. These problems can be divided into three categories i.e. (i) the intra-regional politics, (ii) the external interference, and (iii) the structural problems of SAARC.  

(i) **Intra-regional politics**: It includes the problems like the bilateral relations between the member states, their internal problems, religious diversities, anti-Indian attitude of the south Asian states and Indian-Pakistan rivalries.

(ii) **The external interference**: It includes the major power interference and their effect or the regional evaporation in south Asia. The role of

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major problem is affecting the regional cooperation in south Asia either positively or negatively is quite significant with the dissolution and disintegration of the USSR, the major power that are likely to affect the south Asian relation are only the US and China, the success of SAARC, therefore, depends on the future policies of these two power towards south Asia.

(iii) **Structural changes in SAARC**: It includes the problems relating to the decision making process of SAARC. The exclusion of contentions and bilateral issues from the purview of the SAARC deliberations has not only made it a non-starter but also brought in a situation of a status quo in the conflict ridden relations among the South Asian states.

Above mentioned problems of SAARC are not such which cannot be resolved. If SAARC members thinks positively and behave patiently there will be a hope for its end. An objective and open-minded approach will clear the misunderstandings and mutual distrust in bilateral relations among India and other South Asian states. A strong political will and a spirit of accommodation based on give and take will not only solve all the bilateral problems among these states but also will pave way for the progress of regional cooperation.

The internal problems or turmoils in various states of South Asia is a major factor in fomenting troubles in the bilateral relations of these countries. Most of the problems are systematic oriented and they can be solved by introducing necessary changes and confidence building measures.
Another factor that has been influencing the progress of SAARC is small states tendency and their suspicion about India. Something has to be done by all the member states of SAARC to remove this dubious phenomenon which has created a lot of bad blood in the intra-regional politics of South Asia.\(^4\) As the problem is centred around India, India needs to do some efforts as discussed and proposed in Gujral Doctrine.

India needs to adopt a more accommodative approach in resolving the issues with its neighbours. The issue include Kachchhatrivu with Sri Lanka, some disputed territorial enclaves, Ganga waters, and cross border migration with Bangladesh, and issues pertaining to Mahakali and Kalapani with Nepal. It is encouraging that some issues have been settled. Gujral Doctrine’ envisaged that India would go an extra mile to iron out differences with its neighbours. India has certainly adopted a positive approach and is constantly engaged in substantive dialogue with them. There is no substitute to dialogue. A composite dialogue to resolve all the differences with Pakistan is underway. Nepal and Bangladesh though not very friendly, are free to take their own stand on international issues as they perceive. Sri Lanka also dealt LTTE problem without India’s instruction. India will certainly be happy if peace and stability return to this Indian Ocean Island.\(^5\)

Kashmir has been the focal point of discord between India and Pakistan since the partition of the country. Four wars also occurred between them but could not solve this problem. Both sides now moving away from their earlier

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\(^4\) Ibid., pp. 207-208.

rigid positions towards a mutually acceptable solution. 26/11 incidence created a severe bitterness between the two countries. But at the sixteenth SAARC summit both Delhi and Islamabad once again expressed their willingness to minimize the gap, which had jolted the rhythm of the bilateral dialogue process.

Bhutan is helping India in flushing out ULFA extremists from its territory and handing them over to India security forces. It is hoped that Nepal and Bhutan, will soon reach an amicable solution regarding problem of Nepalese settlers in Bhutan.\(^6\)

As far as smaller states are concerned, the very establishment of SAARC has brought about a sovereign equality among all the states of the region irrespective of their size or strength. Hence, there is no scope for identity problem of the smaller states. Thus the smaller states of South Asia have to adjust to the reality of the core status of India in the region. Mutual trust and confidence among the smaller states on the one hand and India on the other, is the only way out of this peculiar ailment of SAARC.

India Pakistan bitter relations are also one of the hurdle in the way of success of SAARC. The future of the SAARC directly related to the Indo-Pak relations. While India seems to have shown keen interest in bringing about harmony in Indo-Pak relations, Pakistan has been consistently trying to vitiate the chances of reapproachment.\(^7\) Pakistan continues to harp on the Kashmir issue and makes it a basic precondition for the Indo-Pak normalization, while

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\(^6\) Ibid.  
\(^7\) Indian Express, 1st July, 1992.
India considers Kashmir as an integral part of India and the issue is closed. Remedies for this problem are really difficult to find but it is not impossible. The past and present pattern of indo-Pak relations do not indicate any dramatic improvement in the near future. However, one can hope that saner counsel will prevail in the ruling elites of both the states, especially in Pakistan so that a permanent peace could dawn on the Indian sub-continent heralding a bright future of economic prosperity and social and cultural harmony.

The expansion of SAARC has not only been confined to the Asian region, but it has also spread its wings outside the region. The United States government in April 2006 approached the SAARC Secretary General about its willingness to join the orbit of SAARC. In its twenty-five years of history, it is quite unrealistic to believe that its achievements as a regional organization have been a history of failure. During these years SAARC’s performance has been mixed and its political leaders have met regularly and banked on informal discussions to address their mutual problems. These informal discussions produced some noteworthy results in South Asia. The informal talks between the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers at the second SAARC Summit meeting at Bangalore in November 1986 led to the diffusion of tension between the two countries on the issue of India’s military exercise, operation Brass-tacks, on the Indo-Pakistan border, and the India-Sri Lanka talks at the 1987 SAARC Foreign Ministers’ meeting, leading to their accord on the Tamil problem. As a result of an informal meeting and discussion between Prime Minister of India and Pakistan, Narsimha Rao and Nawaz Sharif respectively, at Davos (Switzerland) in 1992, the Pakistani government took action to
prevent the move of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) to cross the ceasefire line in Kashmir later that year. The Davos meeting was possible because of an earlier informal agreement between the two leaders at the sixth SAARC summit meeting at Colombo in December 1991. In this way SAARC on many occasions has displayed its expanding role.\(^8\) One of the important achievements that the SAARC has made during these years is that the Heads of State or Government at the Ninth SAARC Summit agreed, for the first time, that a process of informal political consultations would prove useful in promoting peace, stability, amity and accelerated socio-economic cooperation in the region. The leaders reiterated this intent during their Tenth and Eleventh Summits held in Colombo and Kathmandu respectively. As a result, the Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed in 1993 and four rounds of trade negotiations have been concluded since then. With the objective of moving towards a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU), the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was signed during the Twelfth Summit in Islamabad in 2004. It aims at the liberalization of regional trade by abolishing trade barriers and greater cooperation. In this summit, the signing of social charter, Additional Protocol on Terrorism and South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement are the three most important achievements of SAARC. The signing of the social charter was described “a historic development, which would have far reaching impact on the lives of the millions of South Asians”. The issues covered under the Charter included poverty alleviation, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth

mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children.\footnote{SAARC, Islamabad Declaration, Twelfth SAARC Summit, Islamabad (4-6 January 2004), http://www.saarc-sec.org/mainphp?id=14&t=4}

Besides this, at the 12th SAARC Summit, the Foreign Ministers of SAARC signed Additional Protocol to the 1987 SAARC convention on Terrorism. The protocol was signed in the backdrop of 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Therefore, by signing the social charter, launching of SAFTA and acceptance of global obligations to suppress and eradicate terrorism, SAARC has become an eminent organization. If not only making progress in the areas of regional integration and social development but also showing willingness to share the responsibilities to fight the war against international terrorism. All these initiatives have encouraged the other countries of the globe to enhance the level of their interaction with SAARC members in areas like trade, investment, energy, infrastructure, education and security. This became the major basis of the desire of some countries like United States, China, Japan and European union to seek observer status in SAARC.

Despite the slow progress of regional cooperation in South Asia. The actual working of the SAARC since its establishment has raised high hopes of peace in this region be-devilled by conflicts of all kinds. It is true that at present South Asian regional cooperation is far from the stage where EU and ASEAN have reached, yet it cannot be denied that a small beginning has been made in this direction, which would produce far reaching results in the future. The inception of the SAARC represents unity in diversity.
SAARC is at the threshold of its third decade has raised hopes that it has an abiding place in the modern era of regional groupings and that it has enough capability to go forward. A study of the working of SAARC since its inception, reveals that the concept of regional cooperation in South Asia has made considerable headway. It has gained meaningful acceptance on account of its vigorous efforts for effecting economic cooperation and cementing neighbourly relations among the member countries.

Though it is true that SAARC has been less successful to tap its full potential but it should be given time to grow and evolve. Twenty five years is a long period in the life of an individual but not in the life of an organization. Today all the member states are finding SAARC as a more acceptable forum for co-operation and have slowly changed their perceptions towards SAARC and core state India. India also has given up her initial hesitation and is today willing to undertake asymmetrical responsibilities without insisting on reciprocity as the address of the Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh highlighted at the 14th SAARC summit in 2007 (New Delhi).

The external interference also affects the success of SAARC as major powers like U.S. and China creates lots of misunderstanding between the two major states India and Pakistan of South Asia. Therefore it is necessary for South Asian countries that they should make SAARC a model of south. South Cooperation so that the South Asian states achieve collective economic self-reliance and progress. Now when both China and U.S. has joined SAARC as observer states it can be hoped that may be both countries will act positively and help in removing the misconceptions about them.
Lastly SAARC has been too cautious in trying to keep bilateral contentions issues out of its deliberations fearing that it may derail whatever progress is made. Once discussions on political issues are initiated it is apparent that such an approach of keeping bilateral politics out of SAARC deliberations has not worked. As an alternative therefore a more formalized apparatus could be created. This may help in addressing a range of issues which are of a transnational character even though their genesis may be within individual nations. Such a step may be accompanied with some appropriate changes in the SAARC charter. This would be necessary to take care of the concerns that SAARC visionaries had at the times of its inception that politically contentious issues might not mar the progress that could be made on other areas of social and economic significance. Such an approach would more in tune with the existing realities in South Asia.10

There may be two fold advantages in this. First, it will be able to bridge the trust deficit that exists between India and other South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. A discussion on contentious issues in a regional forum often allows the much needed outlet that otherwise is not possible in either bilateral interactions where often stated positions get repeated; or multilateral forum where the threat of an external imposition always exists. As mentioned earlier, SAARC summits at times have been known to be great icebreakers at times when bilateral relations seem to have come unstuck in some cases. The ‘pressure valve’ role of SAARC must be formalized rather than remain an ad hoc one. India would definitely have to

show greater openness and resolve in opting for the regional option as the bigger and more responsible actor in regional cooperation as it is often at the centre of controversy in many of the vexed South Asian issues. While SAARC may not become a problem solving platform as some of the problems in the subcontinent are endemic, rooted in deeper history and ideology, it can nevertheless become a starting point of key confidence building measures across the region. As the interests of external power (China and US) especially after the entry of Afghanistan in the grouping grows, internal coherence within SAARC has been of paramount importance.\textsuperscript{11}

Apart from all these, this can be said that new developments which generally emerge with the passage of time and change in global scenario also affect the regional associations positively or negatively. When SAARC was formed it was period of cold war intensity, bitterness and mutual suspicion that is why some of SAARC members were reluctant to frame and practice this forum. However they realized its regional and interstate significance they generally became keenly interested to the platform. SAARC itself wanted the support of member countries so that it might have performed well but more than that these South Asian states needed much SAARC forum’s support so that they come together. It is a stage on which these states discuss their basic and mutually fricting problems. Many things can be settled town, mediated among them itself and threshed out. According to the practicality of time it has to be ready to accept some challenges also but not on the cost of its regional unity and sanctity. If there are formations of many other groups as – Shanghai-5 ARF, ASEAN, APEC (Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation), IORC (Indian

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Ocean Rim Cooperation), PIF and recent Russia, Pak, Iran, Afghanistan, collaboration etc.; SAARC may also become strong and smart enough to build up an ‘Asian Order’.