INDIA AND BHUTAN IN INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

I

Bhutan joins the Colombo Plan

India won Bhutan’s friendship not only by assisting the latter in the process of modernization but also by helping it in securing an international recognition of its status as an independent and sovereign country. With India’s sponsorship Bhutan became a member of the Colombo Plan in 1962. The Colombo Plan consists of sovereign states originally restricted to the members of the Commonwealth, and subsequently it encompassed South-east Asia and beyond. At the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Colombo Plan Consultative Committee held in Melbourne (Australia) in November 1962, Bhutan was admitted to its full membership. Bhutan’s admission to the Colombo Plan had a considerable bearing on its sovereign and modern status and registered its first entry into a regional group of sovereign states. Since then the Himalayan kingdom had received help both in the form of capital aid and technical assistance from Japan, Australia, India, Canada, New Zealand and England. The major Colombo Plan projects assisted by India in Bhutan were development assistance, construction of trunk roads, provision for telecommunication facilities, carrying out of geological surveys and maintenance of hydro-meteorological stations.¹ The impact of Colombo Plan on Bhutan has been more political rather than economic.

¹ Ravi Verma, India’s Role in the Emergence of Contemporary, Bhutan, (Delhi; Central Publishing House; 1988) p. 207-209
II

Role in United Nations

Not only did India sponsor Bhutan's application for membership of the United Nations, it also made every possible effort to canvass support among the member nations of the UN for Bhutan's admission. On 21 September 1971 the twenty-sixth session of the General Assembly admitted Bhutan to the UN, as a member recommended by the Security Council. After securing its entry into the UN, Bhutan began to contribute to peace and stability of the world in general and Asia in particular.

2.1 Albanian Issue

On 25 October 1971 Bhutan and India voted in the UN in favour of the Albanian resolution, which sought People's Republic of China's admission to the UN expelling the KMT China. Since late 1950 China had adopted different policies to alienate Bhutan from India. On the one hand it endeavoured to befriend Bhutan by offering them economic aid in 1951. On the other hand China allowed its troops in Tibet to make incursion into Bhutanese territory in 1966 and 1970. Chinese attitude towards Bhutan thus exhibits clearly the policy of carrot and stick. According to Kapileshwar Labh, "China did it possibly to coerce Bhutan to seek redress from Peking. In fact China is not inclined to recognize Bhutan as a distinct political entity. It looks upon it, more or less, as an extension of Tibet and is resolved to liberate it sooner or later".  

China had been preaching Communist ideology through pamphlets in Bhutan. At a press conference in Thimpu on 26 April 1970, the Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Wangchuck disclosed that China had airdropped some pamphlets on Mao's thought in northern Bhutan in 1969. Thus in the light of Chinese attitude towards Bhutan, it was the victory of Indian diplomacy over China to secure UN membership of Bhutan before China entered into the supranational organization as a member. Had China entered into UN before Bhutan, the latter's aspiration to become a member of the UN probably would have remained unfulfilled due to Chinese veto in the Security Council.

Bhutan favoured Albanian resolution, because it perceived, that being flanked by the two big powers, China and India, it would be wise to maintain normal relationship, that is to say, the policy of equidistance with both the neighbours without involving itself in big power politics. However ethnically, Bhutan proved its statemanship by voting in favour of China inspite of the fact that China looked upon Bhutan as an extension of the Tibetan part of China.

2.2 Bangladesh issue

Bhutan had strong sympathy for Bangladesh during its war of independence in 1971. The King was a strong critic of China, when the latter was in favour of Pakistan. Though he said that Bhutan could not afford to annoy the Chinese, nevertheless, “no other party’s likes and dislikes can affect my sense of values, my right to speak and do what I think right”,³ he declared. The late King, Jigme Wangchuck personally inspected Calcutta’s refuge comps. In a door-to-door drive to raise fund, Bhutan through charity and cultural shows contributed about Rs. 7 lakh to the relief of Bangladesh refugees.⁴

Bhutan was the second country after India to recognize Bangladesh. It is conjectured that Thimpu did not consult New Delhi on this issue. It proves the assertion of Bhutan’s sovereign right to conduct its foreign policy independently. India’s approval of the action was an indication of recognition of Bhutan’s independence and sovereignty even in foreign policy matters. On 24 April 1973, the External Affairs Minister, Swaran Singh expressing India’s appreciation over Bhutan’s forthright recognition of Bangladesh, told the Lok Sabha, “I would like to say that this was entirely at the initiative of the late king; we did not approach him in this connection”.⁵

The King justified his recognition of Bangladesh in the Tsongdu. He said, “In uniformity with the recognition which the India Government had given to Bangladesh as an independent country; bearing in mind that although we share no common border

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with Bangladesh, the distance between us is very small and that it is one of our closest
neighbours; and giving thought to the fact that it greatly needed relations with other
countries, we gave recognition to the independence of Bangladesh.” 6

2.3 Nuclear Issue

Bhutan signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 contrary to
India’s position over the issue. It too was considered as Bhutan’s step to adopt an
independent stand. In the words of Parmanand, “India does not seem to have made it
a prestige point; in fact there appears to be some understanding between the two over
the issue. In a personal and exclusive interview Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Dawa
Tsering told me that as Buddhist state Bhutan naturally does not believe in nuclear
proliferation; hence this step.” 7

Bhutan’s attitude towards India’s nuclear explosion was very significant. In the UN
General Assembly in October 1974, Bhutan’s ambassador at the UN, Sangye Penjore
informed that his country did not favour nuclear explosion and proliferation. He however
expressed Bhutan’s belief in the peaceful use of nuclear energy and appreciation of India’s
assurance in this regard. He categorised the peaceful and military use of nuclear energy.
He observed that while military use of nuclear energy is catastrophic, its peaceful use could
accelerate the much needed development activities. “Under the existing conditions, India’s
search for solution to the complex problem of development and use of the nuclear energy
potential for peaceful purposes are understandable. It was in this spirit that Bhutan
welcomed with confidence assurance given by India. Bhutan did not take notice of the
proposal sponsored by Pakistan for a nuclear free zone for the region.” 8 In the same spirit
Bhutan was the first country to support India’s nuclear test in May 1998 and the King Jigme
Singye Wangchuck himself sent a congratulatory letter to the Indian Prime Minister,
Atal Behari Vajpayee.9

p.200.
8. Ravi Verma, India Role in the Emergence of Contemporary Bhutan, (Delhi, Central Publishing House,
Both India and Bhutan voted in favour of the resolution of the UN condemning all nuclear weapon tests in whatever environment they might be conducted and asking all the nuclear weapon states to suspend the testing of nuclear weapons by agreement. Both Bhutan and India abstained from voting on a resolution which asked all nuclear weapon states to bring about the cessation of the nuclear arms race. India stated that it would not support the resolution due to its opposition to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is discriminatory in its principles. Moreover, according to India though the resolution referred to nuclear explosive devices, but it did not make distinction between nuclear explosion for peaceful purpose and the testing or manufacture of nuclear weapons to strengthen the military potential of any country.10

Bhutan and India were the only countries to vote against the UN resolution of 14 December 1978 which called for the endorsement in principle of the concept of nuclear weapon free zone in South Africa. In 1979 sponsored by Pakistan the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on a nuclear weapon free zone in South Asia. Once again India and Bhutan did not vote for the resolution. Pakistan's effort to move the same resolution in the UN Political and Social Committee was thwarted by India and Bhutan in a similar way”.11

2.4 Miscellaneous issues

Bhutan welcomed the outcome of the 1972 Simla summit between India and Pakistan, which resulted in significant progress towards durable peace on the subcontinent. Bhutan is deeply interested to ensure that Indian Ocean and it adjoining areas be free of superpower confrontation and be called as a zone of peace. Bhutan earnestly supports India's claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.12

On 10 January 1980 both India and Bhutan abstained from attending the emergency session of the General Assembly which adopted the resolutions calling for immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan. India's abstention can be explained by the fact that India and former Soviet Union were genuine friends especially after the signing of Indo-Soviet Friendship treaty of 1971. Bhutan's absence was perhaps due to an influence of India.

At the eruption of the Iraq-Iran military conflict Bhutan along with India appealed to the warring countries at the UN General Assembly Session of 1980 to exercise minimum restraint and permit immediate mediation. Since Bhutan’s entry into the United Nation, India and Bhutan acted in close understanding and in consort on all vital issues at various international fora. The Foreign Minister of Bhutan Dawa Tsering, said that being in the same part of the world, India and Bhutan had complete identity of views on all important world issues.

Bhutan however differed from India on some important issues. Bhutan regarded India’s West Asia policy as pro-Arab and hence differed with its friendly neighbour. Bhutan did not agree with India because it preferred a policy of neutrality in the Arab-Israel dispute. The Foreign Minister, Dawa Tsering specified, “we do not feel any need to follow India’s active pro-Arab policy, since Bhutan is not directly involved in the issue”. The King rather is in favour of Israel’s total and unconditional withdrawal from all Palestinian and Arab territories occupied since 1967. According to him it is the most comprehensive and lasting settlement in the West Asia problem. Above all the King upheld that the UN should play a more active and decisive role in settling disputes and solving political, social and economic problems. India supported the UN resolution in Falklands war while Bhutan abstained.

Speaking at the Sixth Session of the UNCTAD – VI in Belgrade in June 1983, Bhutan Ambassador to India, Om Pradhan said that after the collapse of the monetary system developed in Bretton Woods and the subsequent establishment of a floating rate system since 1973, the international community faces a crisis. In this condition, he thinks that increased, predictable and assured flow of resources to the developing countries is of crucial importance for these countries to reassess their individual position. In this way the targets laid down in the New International Development strategy can be attained by the developing countries.

At Manila in the UN General Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD - V) Bhutan’s voting diverged from India on the right of landlocked countries.

The Foreign Minister, Dawa Tsering urged the Special session of General Assembly on 7 September 1975, to look into the special need of the landlocked countries like Bhutan. He renewed the demand that the landlocked countries should receive a fair and an equitable share of the wealth of the seas and oceans. In view of the serious and specific difficulties that the landlocked countries encounter, the Ambassador of Bhutan to India, appealed to the donor countries to pledge adequate contributions to the Special Fund for these landlocked countries at the UNCTAD-VI on 9 June 1983. He further said that all the transit countries should take action to improve and facilitate the “traffic-in-transit” of landlocked developing countries. He urged that effort should be made to ensure the development of appropriate and adequate means of transportation by road, rail, air and waterways. Whenever necessary and feasible the transit countries should even seek external assistance to create and provide adequate transport facilities for the benefit of the landlocked countries. The Foreign Minister, Dawa Tsering pleaded at the UN that the landlocked countries should be guaranteed the right of free access to the sea and freedom for transit facilities. But even this claim was judiciously qualified. He said, “Fortunately, we have been receiving the genuine understanding and generous cooperation of our coastal neighbour, India, not only in expanding our trade but in modernizing our economy.” Tsering added that consistent efforts towards a just and durable peace in South Asia would provide the opportunity for the countries of the region to attend the task of nation building. As the hinterland state of the Indian Ocean, Bhutan is concerned with the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a peaceful zone. His country supported the convening of the conference of littoral and hinterland states with cooperation of the major powers and maritime users of the Indian Ocean.

A five year plan for the provision of services to children was signed in New Delhi on 9 September 1983 by the Royal Government and the United Nations International Children’s (Emergency) Fund (UNICEF). This formalised an UNICEF commitment of $2.08 million aid to Bhutan for the period of 1981-85 as well as $4.16 million in special contribution for specific ‘noted’ projects for the period 1982-83. This plan of operation was signed by

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19. Ibid, p.17301A.


Bhutanese Ambassador to India, Dasho T. Tobgyel and the UNICEF Regional Director for South Central Asia, David P. Haxton at UNICEF House in New Delhi. Under the agreement a small UNICEF office will be established in Thimpu.22

III

Bhutan joins NAM

With India’s sponsorship and support, Bhutan was admitted to the non-aligned group at the summit meeting held in Algiers in September 1973. Bhutan’s application for the membership was reviewed by the Steering Committee and forwarded for the consideration of the Foreign Ministers’ meeting. India welcomed the development. It is another step in the direction of Bhutan’s emergence as a sovereign and modern state on the international scenario. Bhutan said that while she is desirous of fulfilling its role in international relations, she had no intention of plunging into the vortex of international relations and its turmoil. Since she had newly emerged in the international area, with limited resources she could not afford getting caught in the flames of conflicts. At the same time it was not her intention to shy away from playing a rightful role in foreign relations on the basis of sovereign equality. Bhutan, therefore would continue to follow a non-aligned course and a policy of peaceful coexistence.23

The King Jigme Singye Wangchuck warmly expressed appreciation about Bhutan’s relations with India which he described as “extremely good”. In an interview to the German journalist, made public, the King said “we place our trust in the Indian government and have great respect for what Rajiv Gandhi has been able to accomplish, particularly in the area of foreign affairs. We also never forget the fact that India, through its historic ascent to the status of an independent nation, has set shining example for many other countries which have liberated themselves from the yoke of colonialism and foreign rule.” 24

Answering a question on the reason for Bhutan joining the Non-Aligned Movement, the King argued: First, "declared neutrality is a type of protective shield" and secondly the movement offered a forum on which Bhutan "can voice its interests and requirements to the world". Thirdly, the movement was advocating the cause of humanity. "We should strive to continue in the same spirit that the founding fathers of the movement—Nehru, Nasser, Tito—originally voiced their appeal and fourthly, I particularly support the principle of non-interference in the domestic and foreign affairs of other nations no matter how small or weak they may be." He further said that Bhutan had always opposed armed intervention in South East Asia. He said "we will continue to do so until the affected countries are freed and can determine their own destinies. Bhutan cannot tolerate the continuing violation of basic principles of non-alignment, nor can it forgive or excuse them, if it wished to retain its credibility." 25

3.1 Bhutan’s position in different issues

At the Algiers Summit of NAM in 1973, Bhutan hailed the proposal to declare the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. According to the King, Middle East continued to constitute a violation of the UN principles, a challenge to the aims of non-aligned countries and a grave threat to peace, but he hoped the return of the peace to the region. Bhutan also expressed concern at the widening gap between the developed and the developing countries. At the Colombo session of the NAM summit the King urged for international disarmament. He suggested for a world disarmament conference or a special session of the UN to specifically deal with disarmament. He expressed concern about the regional aspirations of both India and China and encouraged Bhutan’s normalization of relations with both India and China as neighbours.26

At the Havana summit of NAM in 1979 the King expressed his grave concern about the increasing tensions and conflicts in South East Asia and condemned the intervention in Kampuchea. It is a very significant issue on which India and Bhutan expressed difference of opinion and such divergence attracted international attention. In fact Bhutan’s stand on Kampuchea ignited a controversy in India-Bhutan relationship. India


wanted to keep the Kampuchean seat vacant, while Bhutan voted to allow it to be occupied by the representatives of the ousted Pol Pot government. On this issue Bhutan stuck to the position it took at the meeting of the foreign ministers of non-aligned countries in Colombo in June 1979 that the representatives of the ousted Pol Pot government should be allowed to attend the meeting but not to participate in it. Though India under Morarji Desai wanted Pol Pot government to attend the Harare Conference, but not participate, under Charan Singh (replacing Desai) India decided to shift its stand in favour of Vietnam backed Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea. Moreover Charan Singh wanted the Kampuchean seat to be left vacant for the time being. It was apparently expected that like the preceding cases, Bhutan would endorse the India’s stand. However it did not happen. The pattern of voting on the same issue was repeated by Bhutan later at the UN General Assembly. It voted against an Indian amendment seeking to command the world body the non-aligned formula of keeping Kampuchean seat vacant rather than ousted Pol Pot regime occupy the seat. Eyebrows were raised in India’s External Affairs Ministry when Bhutanese took a different line in Havana and it went on to suggest: “The treaty has a provision for modification of its terms by mutual consent. If Bhutan thinks the time for that has come, India should respond constructively.”27 It can be argued that the furore over the Cambodian issue convinced Bhutan that it would be wise to expand its diplomatic ties abroad as a means of countering the Indian pressure. This stand of Bhutan definitely was encouraged by China at the great unease of India.

“The use of force by Iraq to resolve its dispute with Kuwait is a serious breach of international law and constitutes a flagrant violation of the basic principles of the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement to which Iraq belongs” said a press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government of Bhutan.28 Bhutan urged Iraq to cease its armed aggression and withdraw its armed force from Kuwaiti territory.

At the NAM summit held in Yugoslavia in 1989, the King reaffirmed his deep commitment to the principles of non-alignment. He called upon all the nations to cut back expenditure on nuclear weapons for the military expenditures are incurred by the

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27. The Indian Express, 12 September 1979.
poor developing countries at the cost of basic human needs, when the superpowers are making dramatic breakthrough on the issue of nuclear arms reduction.\textsuperscript{29} Ascertaining its position for nuclear disarmament and concurrently in its quest for an independent identity, Bhutan unlike India has signed the Nuclear non-proliferation treaty in 1985.\textsuperscript{30}

IV

Bhutan suggests improvement of NAM

The King advocated the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the states. Moreover in line of the United Nations, Bhutan, in the words of the King, “constantly strived to promote the peaceful settlement of disputes.” \textsuperscript{31}

Adhering to this principle, Bhutan therefore eulogised the UN sponsored cease fire between Iraq and Iran and the Geneva accords on Afghanistan followed by withdrawal of Soviet troops. Hinting at the goal of achieving the establishment of a New International Economic Order, Bhutan called upon the nations to improve efficiently their respective economic systems together with strengthening the South–South cooperation. In this regard the King expressed his desire to forge closer ties with the developed nations and increase the efforts to renew the North-South dialogue.\textsuperscript{32}

The Foreign Minister of Bhutan, Dawa Tsering said that Kampuchean and Afghanistan issue “should not stand in the way of making the non-aligned summit a great success”. While attending the NAM summit in New Delhi in 1983 he said that every member nation has the right to express its own view. Some nations might raise these issues at the summit, but he felt that “these issues ought to be relegated to the background and the nations should concentrate on more important issues to make the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Supplement for NAM, \textit{Kuensel}, 16 September 1989, p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Supplement for NAM, \textit{Kuensel}, 16 September 1989, p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.3.
\end{itemize}
summit a success”. He stressed economic improvement and nuclear non-proliferation issues at the summit. The arms race among the big powers should be stopped and the amount spent on the arms should be diverted to the welfare of human beings. He further suggested that a new international economic system should be adopted for an equitable distribution of wealth among the developed and developing countries” 33

Appreciating the importance of India, the Foreign Minister stated that at this crucial global situation, India could ably lead the non-aligned movement to champion its cause. Replying to a question on Diego Garcia, Dawa Tsering asserted that the Indian Ocean should be made a zone of peace. He said that the objective of the NAM meeting should be to give thrust for expeditiously implementing the UN decision to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. Bhutan’s Foreign Minister was aware that since UN decisions cannot be implemented without the cooperation of the big powers, the Colombo NAM Summit should invite the big powers, in regard to making the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. He is confident that NAM is competent enough to strengthen the “UN in its efforts to maintain world peace and serve the mankind better” 34

However speaking about the effectiveness of the NAM the King perceived that the real danger in NAM was the emergence of two blocks within it. These two blocks were represented by the radicals and the moderates. He hoped that in adhering truly to the NAM principles the danger of divisions within the forum would diminish. 35 The King of Bhutan expressed that economic dimensions should get greater priority and prominence in the NAM deliberations. He suggested that greater scope of cooperation among the developing countries must be broadened through NAM and SAARC. Citing as an example he said that already it is a positive phenomenon that SAARC has gathered momentum and nine areas of cooperation has been identified in the SAARC.

34. Ibid, p.3.
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

Despite being a small and least developed country with very little trade with other SAARC countries except India, Bhutan is an enthusiastic supporter of regional cooperation within SAARC. This is because, Bhutan perceives that regional cooperation goes far beyond mere economic cooperation. At the concluding session of the First SAARC summit in December 1985 at Dhaka, the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, pledging Bhutan’s full support to the SAARC charter, said, “it has always been an important objective in the foreign policy of Bhutan to develop close ties of friendship and cooperation with all neighbouring countries in our quest for regional peace and stability. We see in SAARC a process to facilitate the realisation of this aim and the fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of the people of Bhutan. The establishment of SAARC has certainly come about at the most opportune moment in the light of the present global environment and the geopolitical realities of our region.”

Bhutan is convinced that the SAARC activities have important bearing on the welfare of the Bhutanese people and on the political stability and ethnic balance. Hence at the second SAARC summit in November 1986 at Bangalore, the King said, “the establishment and further growth of SAARC, therefore fulfils an important foreign policy objective of Bhutan”.

Both India and Bhutan called for strengthening of the SAARC. Although differences were evident between India and Bhutan in UN forum or NAM platform, but in the context of SAARC the two countries have identical viewpoints. Consequently, there were no differences of opinions between the two countries on the issues brought to SAARC. Both Indian and Bhutan find the existence and continuity of SAARC in the animated “shared spirit of South Asia”, evident in the sense of shared values rooted in common past, fellow feeling and geography. Highlighting the fact that South Asia constituting one fifth of world population, is confronted with formidable problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and disease, the heads of both the states at the inaugural session of the First SAARC summit

36. First SAARC Summit, 7-8 December 1985 Dhaka, Concluding Session, Address by His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck, King of Bhutan, p.33
share the view that "regional cooperation with its stress on collective self-reliance offers a viable alternative development strategy." Moreover Bhutan says, "In our view, collective self-reliance and independence through interdependence within the framework of regional cooperation is not only desirable but imperative in the face of the present global realities. At the inauguration of the second SAARC summit in November 1986 both India and Bhutan selected, postal, telecommunication, air links and transport links as integral aspects of regional cooperation and the essential precursor of intensifying such cooperation.

India has agreed to create sub-regional geo-economic blocks among South Asian neighbours. The ninth SAARC Summit held at Male on 14 May 1997 endorsed the proposal of the "growth quadrangle" formed by India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan in specific projects such as energy and water resources. This sub-regional grouping within the SAARC has the potentiality to become the vanguard in the sub-regional cooperation in the specific area chosen for the first instance. Indo-Bhutan cooperation in these two selected areas have already been regarded as a beacon over the entire South Asia region. The four countries are already engaged in exploring integrated development and new cross border transport and trade links. India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are also discussing to explore joint development prospects of the Brahmaputra basin and the Chittagang port.

The regular annual SAARC summits hosted by each of the seven member nations in turns since 1985 suddenly received a jolt in the Sixth Summit scheduled to be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 7 November 1991. For the first time the summit was postponed to 21 December 1991 due to the inability of the Bhutan King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck to participate in it. He was apprehensive of serious internal problems arising

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37. *Inaugural Session, First SAARC Summit, 7-8 December 1986, Dhaka, Address by His Majesty Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan*, p.12 and *Address by His Excellency, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi Prime Minister of India*, p.15.
39. *Second SAARC Summit, 16-17 November 1986, Bangalore, India, Inaugural Session, Inaugural Address by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India*, p.55 and *Address by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan*, p.63.
41. Ibid p.41.
out of the Nepalese immigrants in the southern part of his kingdom for which he decided to remain in the country. As a follow-up measure, the Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Indian Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao decided to abstain from the summit. Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa openly alleged the underhand of India in the Bhutanese absence from the summit. He along with Pakistan Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif vociferously demanded a revision of the SAARC Charter and the deletion of the "unanimity formula" so that in future no single member in a small group would be able to veto it by boycotting any meeting. At the event of the annoyance of the government of India, with Sri Lankan President, Premadasa for his decision to arm the Tamils in the Eastern province to fight against the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) and his opposition to Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, Sri Lanka alleged India of pressurising Bhutan not to attend the Colombo summit and scuttle the meet due to Bhutan’s absence. Bhutan denied that its decision to skip the Sixth SAARC summit was taken at the behest of India. The reluctance of Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives to attend the summit, despite strict security arrangements due to the Tamil militants, was being interpreted as "circumstantial evidence" of New Delhi’s involvement in forcing the postponement of the meet. Bhutan’s decision not to attend the summit had rendered it infructuous. India insisted on consensus. New Delhi held that the principle of majority should guide the regional cooperation. It also insisted on the personal participation of the King at the summit and not a duly accredited representative as suggested by Sri Lanka.

In the meantime, the Bhutan People’s Party (BPP), one of the rebel groups of Bhutan had appealed to the SAARC countries to censure Bhutan for human rights violations. The delegation of the BPP requested Koirala of Nepal to take up their case with the heads of the SAARC nations. Launching a bitter offensive the BPP accused, "by staying away from the meeting the king has saved himself from being questioned by member nations and international media on the flagrant violation of human and democratic rights in the kingdom." However the Nepalese Prime Minister on a reversal of policy did not raise the issue of human rights and pro-democracy movement.

43. The Telegraph, 7 November 1991, p.4.
44. Ibid, p.4.
in Bhutan at the postponed one day Sixth SARRC summit on 21 December 1991 at Colombo. On the contrary he decided to take up the issue of continuing influx of Bhutanese refugees of Nepalese origin separately with the King in the summit.45

In the one day SAARC Colombo summit undertaken in a business like, manner, Bhutan decried “large-scale terrorism” indulged in by illegal immigrants and subversive elements in the southern part of the kingdom. “Terrorists with their creed of violence and bloodshed are not only striking at our political and economic institutions but at the very foundations of our social order”. Calling for ‘crusade’ against terrorism, the King warned; “We must now work together to eradicate this menace before it engulfs our societies and tears our nations apart.”46 Bhutan impressed upon India, Pakistan, Bangladesh the need for implementing the SAARC regional convention on suppression of terrorism. Bhutan had signed the ‘enabling Act’ for the SAARC regional convention on suppression of terrorism during the 70th session of the National Assembly held in October –November 1991. All the SAARC member nations have to pass an enabling Act for implementation on suppression of terrorism. Though prior to Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal have adopted the enabling Acts. The Bhutan Home Minister said, “I hope India and other SAARC nations would pass the enabling Acts soon so that we can launch a coordinated move to contain terrorism in the region and extradite terrorists and criminals whenever necessary.”47

The Bhutan National Assembly had also adopted the Bhutan Extradition Act of 1991 in its 70th session. Bhutan’s move in adopting these two Acts is significant in view of the defection of a large number of Nepali speaking people in south Bhutan. Bhutan feels that these Acts, are necessary to improve the country’s law and order situation. However the summit leaders at Colombo were worried at the slow pace of progress in the implementation of the SAARC conventions for the mutual coordination among the south Asian states to check the twin evils of terrorism and drugs. It was clearly conceded that the future of the SAARC would be at stake unless some urgent steps are taken by all the member states to implement these conventions on drug and terrorism in letter and spirit. Pakistan is alleged to be damaging the SAARC spirit by

45. The Telegraph, 18 December 1991, p.4.
continuously raising the contentious political issues at the SAARC platform. Even in
the one day Colombo summit, Nawaz Sharif did not hesitate to undermine the image
of India and Bhutan for their non participation in the abortive summit scheduled to be
convened in November 1991. By raising the issue of “nuclear weapons free zone in
South Asia” Pakistan was trying to belittle India’s role in the region in the summit.48

The Ninth SAARC noted with deep concern that economic growth in the least
developed and land locked countries is not progressing well. The heads of the seven
SAARC states have stressed the need to take special measures for accelerating the
process of development. They emphasised the need to fulfil the international agreed
aid targets for ensuring accelerated and sustained economic growth in developing
countries.49 SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) came into force on
7 December 1995. The importance of achieving free trade area by the year 2001 was
recognized in the Ninth SAARC summit held at Male on 12-14 May 1997. SAPTA is
the first visible symbol and perhaps the most important symbol of political will of the
countries of the region to enhance economic cooperation among these countries. The
mechanism for liberalising regional trade under SAPTA include measures to reduce
tariffs, para-tariffs, new tariff barriers as also to initiate direct trade measures such as
commitment in respect of long and medium term contracts, preference in government
and public procurement, state and public procurement, state trading and buy back
arrangements.50 On the occasion of the Tenth anniversary of the SAARC, held at
Colombo from 29-31 July 1998, the member countries endorsed an Indian proposal to
create a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 2005. India has drawn up an
ambitious agenda of offering tariff concessions on more than 100 items to SAARC
members to accelerate the pace of establishing SAFTA.

In an exclusive interview with me on 8 June 1999, the Trade Minister of Bhutan,
Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuck, said that Bhutan has preferential trading arrangements with
India and also with Bangladesh, the two closest neighbours. According to the Trade
Minister, the SAPTA is more of a prompting trade within the region. He suggests, “We

48. P. K. Misra, 'Colombo Summit and SAARC', Foreign Affairs Reports, 41, No. 1 and 2, (January-
February 1992), 7.
have to overcome political and other barriers to look at the economic institutions. We should give economic cooperation the priority to remove the political discontentment, we would support it to strengthen it”.

However Rajiva Misra, the Deputy Chief of Indian Embassy in Thimpu in an interview with me on 8 June 1999 does not appreciate any special role of SAARC because he feels that India already has bilateral preferential trade arrangement with Bhutan. During interview with the Bhutanese Foreign Secretary, Ugyen Tshering on 9 June 1999 on Bhutan’s role in SAARC, he told me, “Whether we have a role or not, we are part and parcel of SAARC. Geography has determined that long time ago”. He said that Thimpu was the first country in South Asia to “take currency to the rupee”, because Bhutan recognizes that economic interaction demand certain things. “We see most of our economic activity in SAARC region for a long time. He stated that Bhutan has direct interest in SAARC because of many reasons. First, if SAARC develops and becomes prosperous, Bhutan will be benefiting from that. Secondly, Bhutan will have wealthier market to sell their products. Thirdly, Bhutan itself will be a gainer if the quality of products and quality of things improve in the region. She can buy things easily instead of buying from the Western countries or the Far East. Optimistically the Foreign Secretary comments that in spite of disappointments, “the fact is that twenty years later SAARC is still around and it is not dead yet”

The King of Bhutan reiterated, “India has played a vital role in giving shape to our common vision of collective self reliance through SAARC.”51 In an era of globalization and liberalization, adequate political will among SAARC leadership and public is required to improve trade and industrial cooperation in the region. Discriminatory trade practice among the member states has to be abandoned. To make SAARC more relevant with the present scenario, collective negotiating mechanism in dealing with multinational institutions is called for. Intra- SAARC trade should be promoted. SAARC nations can sell primary products and manufactured products to its members. As for instance Bhutan is providing India electricity from its Chukha hydel project which is also a major source of export revenue for Bhutan. Finally bilateralism should be strengthened to improve and normalize political relations.

51. Indian Express, 19 October 1988.