CHAPTER VI

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Despite its uniqueness, abundant natural resources and geographical set up, the South Pacific region finds itself ill prepared for the centuries ahead. As on the one side, the Forum Island Countries (FIC) are beset with geographical pitfalls, on the other side, the economic and socio-cultural factors also serve to frustrate the realization of developmental aspirations. It is also realized that over the past decade most of the FIC have not achieved success in developing their economy despite favourable natural resource endowment and high level of external assistance. This "Pacific Paradox" has created enormous confusion in the minds of the tiny island countries.

Further, the FICs, as has been analysed in the previous chapters, are not free from complex issues. The tiny island states continue to witness several crises like colonial order, constitutional disorder, nuclear proliferation, economic underdevelopment and aid dependence, environmental and security threats. The resolution of these problems has become fundamental to the realization of their full economic and social potentials. The on-going issues like secessionist movements in Bougainville, legitimacy of Fiji's post-coup constitutional system, the progress of the Matignon Accord process in New Caledonia, environmental threats, excessive logging by outside companies, marine and mineral exploitation by foreign countries by luring the political leaders, dumping of hazardous wastes and continuous nuclear testing programmes by the outside countries are the issues of immense importance for the long-term future of the region. Tackling of such issues has become the high priority stuff on the part of the SPF countries.

The SPF evolved in 1971 is working sincerely towards meeting such necessities. Since its formation, it has been serious about these contentious issues. But despite this, nothing much has been gained by the FIC. For example, on the issue of nuclear testing, despite Forum's intervention, France has not stopped its nuclear testing programmes and conducted nuclear tests in 1995 at the Mururoa atoll of French Polynesia.
South Pacific countries have limited standing in the international fora, including the United Nations. The Uruguay Round of talks and subsequently World Trade Organisation (WTO) have neglected the FIC. Only two South Pacific Island countries, PNG and Fiji are the members of the leading world trade body.

The globalisation of economy, signing of WTO, emergence of the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC), and extra-regional powers' economic and security interests in the region have attached very little importance to regional interest. In the post Cold War era, the foreign powers' budgetary support to the FIC has been drastically reduced.

On the issue of regional co-operation the Pacific way of life, as has been discussed frequently in the South Pacific, has not gained momentum due to the conflicting stands on certain regional issues. The geographical division of the South Pacific on ethnic and cultural lines has brought severe cleavages regarding opinion on the contentious issues.

Leaving all the odds aside, the SPF is successfully working in developing and managing the resources of South Pacific. It has already signed and ratified a number of treaties to resolve its problems. The important treaties towards this effect are Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty (1985), the Convention to ban Driftnet Fishing (1987) and a number of treaties to enlist economic co-operation. Over the period of time, several bodies have come up to facilitate the smooth functioning of the Forum i.e. South Pacific Regional Environment Programmes (SPREP) and Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). The decision of the Forum and the activities of the auxiliary bodies have reaffirmed its commitment to address the increasingly complex social, political and economic issues that severely affect the islanders' day to day life. The SPF Meet at Brisbane in 1994 has reiterated that concrete action is required to manage the abundant resources of the South Pacific.

Now there are sixteen members in the SPF and many tiny islands are lobbying hard to join the Forum. The widening of its membership and the scope of its activities into new areas has led to new divisive conflict within the Forum. The advent of new
leadership after the colonial era and frequent changes of the government in the South Pacific has created "generation gap" between the "older statesmen" and "younger leaders". The new leadership is more impatient for results and eager to remain in the limelight in foreign affairs. That complicates the consensual style of decision making and subsequently affecting the developmental pace of the region.

The Forum leaders should work towards regionalism as a real concept. New Zealand Prime Minister, Mike Moore's suggestion of a 'Pacific Parliament' and the endeavour of making the area free trade-zone are concrete steps in the realm of regionalism. This means that although differences exist among the leaders of the island states these would be resolved for the sake of regional cooperation through constant arguments and discussions.

Presently, the outside countries are trying to influence the decision-making vis-à-vis South Pacific. The division of the region on cultural line has also created mistrust in the minds of the Forum members. Not only that, the division of the region on the basis of 'rich vs. poor', 'big vs. small', 'developed vs. underdeveloped' has also resulted in the division of the region.

The absence of consensus in the Forum is very much affecting the stability and development of the region. Therefore, what is required at the moment is to work as a 'group' so that outside countries and major financial institutions should not get a chance to neglect the South Pacific. The quest for 'Pacific Way of Life' may not hold true but this may lead to the strengthening of the regional cooperation. Australia, a major player in the South Pacific affairs, has shown concern and interest over the developments and eager to play more constructive role towards the benefit and welfare of the Forum Countries.

Australian decision-makers are of the opinion that it has a special responsibility and interest towards the South Pacific region for covert and overt reasons. On the other front, the FIC who are at present enjoying modes of "subsistence affluence" cannot afford to ignore the Australian opinion if they wish to move towards further developments. The Australian government as well as the FIC have realised that most crucial problem that the South Pacific region facing today is
sustainable development. And no amount of regional, international, for that matter Australian assistance, will bring sustainable development in the region unless the FIC themselves work unitedly towards this effect and adopt policies accordingly. The individual Forum members should formulate policies along the line of the Forum; otherwise, differences will again crop up within the Forum.

Australia is very well adjusted with the South Pacific region's resource endowment and development aspirations, and is committed not to impose its own ideas on the FIC. Its enduring commitment to the SPF is also reflected in its decision with regard to the regional issues and financial grants. Not only that, Australia also provides technological 'know how' and other support to the FIC.

In recent years, however, there is a growing assertiveness among the Australians to protect their interests in the South Pacific. It has a clear geo political or strategic interest in preserving and promoting peace in the region and to keep the region free from destabilising activities by any external power or group. At the same time, it is also committed to the sustainable development of the region and always tries to maintain a relationship of equals with the Forum countries networking. But, paradoxically, an asymmetric relationship has evolved through the "relationship of equals" within the SPF's structure which has created problems for both Australia and the FIC. Therefore, for as long as Australia is the major donor, and the islanders are the recipient, and as long as the islanders are treated with special care and sympathy, it will be very difficult to operate on the line of real partnership.

However, the period 1985-95 has been marked by a phenomenal change in Australian approach towards the South Pacific. Over the years, the Australian role has changed to be friendly and helpful and pushes essentially a policy to active and committed engagement. It is interested not merely in defending Australian interests but to evolve a community of interest with the FIC in which the advancement of their welfare and their prosperity is explicitly seen as essential.

On the institutional front, the Forum Secretariat has grown from a small coordinating body with a restrictive and essentially economic mandate called SPEC, to a policy-oriented professional body, serving the Forum and its member countries in
a wide variety of areas of expertise, from marketing to law enforcement, civil aviation to international law, energy to aid coordination. The 1997 Rarotonga Forum Meet has clearly demonstrated the variety of matters on which leaders now deliberate and cooperate, some of them even going to the heart of national competence. Leaders in the Forum have learned that it is possible to work together to mutual benefits, even on matters which once might have been thought to be too sensitive to discuss or even mention outside the national circle, that sharing problems and challenges can ease their solution.

The Australian government has co-operated with the FIC through a separate department of the Pacific affairs, and it is constantly reviewing its regional goals and objectives, including prospects for boosting regional cooperation and trade. The new Australian government which came to power in March 1996 has also been focusing on the Pacific islands as their immediate priority. The current coalition government under the stewardship of John Howard has a vision for Australia in the 21st century as a co-operative, economically competitive and secure nation, fully engaged, while maintaining and developing important links with countries within the region. The present government has already announced that the South Pacific is an area of special interest for Australia and will remain as a major aid donor while reaffirming its commitment to the SPF. It is understood that Australia is playing the leadership role in the SPF. But the argument is that Australia must do so through assistance and constructive advice, rather than through assuming the role of a pious lecturer and adamant leader.

The present Australian government's foreign policy reform agenda categorically emphasises the importance of the South Pacific region for a variety of reasons. The priorities of the new government give greater focus to the Pacific Islands, by announcing that the government will upgrade the status of the region by retaining responsibility and assist the SPF nations in ensuring to have nuclear-free-zone.

On the other side, the objective of Australian aid to the Pacific Islands region must be made to encourage increasing self-sufficiency and economic prosperity in the region. In order to achieve that the Australian government will focus on:
a) Community level development rather than provision of large infrastructure projects, which may be better completed on the basis of private or public sector financing;

b) Continue to assist with detection and surveillance of the territorial waters and fishing zones of the island states, to the extent that such help is requested;

c) Create opportunities for sharing technical information and facilities with the Pacific Islands; and

d) Examine the possibility of further coordination in aid programmes towards the region.

Besides that, Australia is reviewing the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Agreement (SPARTECA) for free flow of trade and investment relations. Today, Australia is a net exporter to the Pacific Islands with the trade surplus in 1994 of over $850 million. This needs to be balanced and reciprocated. Australia has been involved in welfare activities in the South Pacific. It has people-to-people relations for the past 150 years or more, through the churches, sports, education, voluntary organisations and many other channels. It is so powerful and self-sustaining relationship that cannot be ignored.

Finally it can be stated that Australia is the most important regional actor in South Pacific, whose interest are intricately linked with the interest of the countries in the South Pacific region. They are aware that the economic advancement, stability and peace of the South Pacific nations are essential requirements for sustaining their special position at the regional level. The development of the FIC would be complimentary to its growing affluence in the region and in the absence of that there can be unpredictable developments.