CHAPTER - VIII

CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter sums up the observations made in the preceding chapters.

The first ever regional association of South Asian nations was formed on 8 December 1985 at Dhaka. It was the brain child of Zia-ur-Rahman, President of Bangladesh. The initiative taken by Bangladesh, on 2 May 1980, to forge the spirit of cooperation among the South Asian countries, culminated in the launching of South Asian Association for Regional cooperation (SAARC) on 8 December 1985 at the first ever summit meeting of the Heads of state or Government held in Dhaka. The basic objective of the association is to hasten the process of socio-economic development in the member states through joint endeavours in the agreed areas of cooperation.

The evolution of SAARC has been marked by three distinct phases. The first phase marked the involvement of the Foreign Secretaries and senior officials of the region in the process of formulation of the concept of the association and development of the rationale for the sake of consideration by the regional policymakers. It commenced with the first meeting of the Foreign Secretaries in Colombo in April 1981. Three more meetings at the level of Foreign Secretaries were held in Kathmandu (November 1981), Islamabad (August 1981) and Dhaka (March 1983) respectively. The second phase began in August 1983, with the convening of the Foreign Ministers’ meeting in New Delhi. In this meeting the Foreign Ministers signed a Declaration on South Asian Regional cooperation. It also witnessed the launching of the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA). In the third and the final phase, the seven Heads of state or Government assembled at Dhaka in December 1985 to set up a regional organisation i.e., SAARC. It was an epoch-making event in the history of South Asia. At the first summit meeting, the
Charter of the regional grouping was adopted. The Charter laid down the objectives of the association and its principles.

The second SAARC summit was held in Bangalore on 16-17 November 1986. This summit took a major step towards institutionalising SAARC by setting up a permanent Secretariat to coordinate the fruitful implementation of SAARC programmes and projects. A new subject—child survival and development—was introduced at this summit.

Next SAARC summit was held in Kathmandu in November 1987. This summit is memorable for the adoption of two conventions in two crucial areas. The SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism marked an important breakthrough on a trans-border problem that thwarts the peaceful life of the people living in South Asia. The agreement establishing the South Asian Food Security Reserve underlined the significance of collective self-reliance for promoting development and constitutes an important step forward in eradicating the curse of hunger from South Asia. It was at Kathmandu that the leaders took into account the endemic vagaries of nature and expressed their profound concern at the fast degradation of the environment.

Fourth summit of SAARC countries was held in Islamabad from 29-31 December 1988. An outstanding feature of this summit was that it brought together the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan for the first time since 1972. In order to meet the various basic needs of the people in South Asia, the leaders adopted a regional perspective plan known as “SAARC-2000 - A Basic Need Perspective.”

Fifth SAARC summit was held at Male in November 1990. Signing of the SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Taking into account the misery, hardships and suffering borne by disabled people in South Asia, the SAARC leaders at Male, accorded topmost priority to the problems of disabled persons.
In December 1991, the sixth SAARC summit was held in Colombo. Here, the SAARC Heads of State or Government devoted considerable amount of time to the discussion of poverty eradication and commissioned the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation.

Dhaka was chosen as the venue for the seventh SAARC summit. The summit was held on 10-11 April 1993. One of the important steps taken by the seventh summit was the signing of the framework agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA).

The most important achievement of the eighth summit held in New Delhi in May 1995 was the operationalisation of SAPTA. The Delhi Declaration adopted at the end of the summit approved the establishment of a South Asian Development Fund (SADF) with the merger of SAARC Fund for Regional Projects (SFRP) and the SAARC Regional Fund (SRF).

At the ninth SAARC summit held in Male from 12-14 May 1997, several important proposals including that of informal political dialogue among the members of SAARC were placed at the inaugural session of the summit. Male summit was overshadowed by Indo-Pak talks which began after a gap of four years with a meeting between I.K.Gujral and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif to discuss all major issues.

Tenth summit of the SAARC nations was held in Colombo from 29-31 July 1998. It occupies a prominent place in the history of SAARC summits as it was held at the backdrop of the nuclearisation of the sub-continent. As an aftermath of the nuclearisation of the sub-continent, the focus of the Colombo summit was on bilateral relations.

After a prolonged interval since July 1998, the eleventh SAARC summit at last took place in Kathmandu from 4-6 January 2002. Never before in the history of SAARC, a summit was held amidst such uncertainty and tremendous bilateral tension. In view of the tensed atmosphere prevailing in the South Asian sub-
continent, it has been decided beforehand by the Summiteers that there would be no bilateral meetings between India and Pakistan – on the sidelines of the summit. Since most of the South Asian countries have been affected by terrorism in varying degrees, it was quite natural that the main focus of the Kathmandu meet was on terrorism. Like earlier summits, India-Pakistan relations remained at the centre-stage.

It appears from the above discussion that although SAARC has not achieved success worth-mentioning its achievements have been modest mainly in the non-political fields.

1) Launching of SAARC Audio Visual Exchange Programme (SAVE) at the second summit held in Bangalore in November 1986 to promote cultural awareness among the people of South Asia.

2) The Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve (SFSR) was signed in Kathmandu during the third SAARC summit.

3) Another significant agreement by the SAARC leaders was signed at the third SAARC summit in Kathmandu – the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. The main purpose of this convention was to combat terrorism regionally.

4) To curb the menace of drug-trafficking, the SAARC Heads of State or Government signed an agreement on “SAARC Regional Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic substances” at the fifth summit held in Male in 1990. It entered into force on 15 September 1993.

5) The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme was initiated in 1992 to encourage the people to freely travel within the region. It became operational from 1 March 1992.
6) In order to provide member-states with credit on easy terms, the SAARC Fund for Regional Projects (SFRP) was set up in 1991.

7) Recognition was given to the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) – a non-governmental organisation.


9) To promote economic cooperation and facilitate trade among the SAARC countries, the Council of Ministers of SAARC states signed the Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) on April 1993. It came into force on 7 December 1985.

These steps taken by SAARC to promote regional cooperation in South Asia are indeed laudable. But, unfortunately, most of them have not been properly implemented. This is solely because SAARC is confronted with a number of problems that prevent it from functioning properly like other regional organisations. The problems have been discussed in great detail in the previous chapter. Prominent among them are the asymmetry factor, mutual mistrust, structural impediments, Indo-Pak hostility and above all the issue of cross-border terrorism.

Asymmetrical relationship between India and its neighbours is the root cause of SAARC’s poor performance. In terms of size, population, economic resources, military might and industrial development – India far outweighs its neighbours. India is like a giant in the South Asian region. The other members of SAARC, except Pakistan, are like dwarfs. This factor of asymmetry generates a fear-psychosis among the smaller members who always perceive a threat from India. Other regional organisations like the European Union or ASEAN do not suffer from a similar asymmetry caused by the dominance of one of its members. Absence of this factor in case of ASEAN or EU explain their successful performance compared to the slow progress of SAARC.
Feeling of mutual mistrust which is a by-product of the above mentioned factor, creates impediments for SAARC. In South Asia, almost all the members of SAARC have bilateral problems with one another. Since SAARC does not have any conflict resolving mechanism, the problems remain unresolved. These unresolved problems, in turn, make the members suspicious of one another’s motives. It should be mentioned here that, as a result of Indo-centric nature of the region, most of the SAARC states have some sort of problems with their giant neighbour – India. This type of situation is not found in either EU or ASEAN.

When the proposal for regional cooperation in South Asia was first mooted by the then President of Bangladesh, Zia-ur-Rahman, India as well as Pakistan expressed their hesitation and indifference to the concept. India was hesitant for two reasons. She thought that the Zia proposal had indirect Western sponsorship. Secondly, India apprehended that smaller countries were trying to put collective pressure on India through this proposed regional forum. On the other hand, Pakistan did not want to join the grouping as it had its own suspicions about the proposed organisation. Pakistan perceived SAARC as a forum which would primarily satisfy the interests of a giant neighbour like India. This is why Pakistan expressed her desire to join a grouping with Iran and Turkey. Sri Lanka too was least interested in SAARC. She was much more interested in ASEAN membership. So it is clear since some members were reluctant to join SAARC, consequently the regional organisation suffered from a lack of ‘driving force.’ On the contrary, there were political and security concerns regarding cooperation in case of European Union(EU), similar kind of driving force against the spread of communism acted as a catalyst in the case of ASEAN too. But, in SAARC, there is no such driving force.

While framing the Charter, the founders of SAARC thought that it would be wise to exclude discussion of bilateral issues from the purview of SAARC deliberations. But in practice, member-states have repeatedly brought in political issues before the summits. For instance, at the third SAARC summit in
Kathmandu in November 1987, Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, Rajiv Gandhi and M.K. Junejo met and agreed to hold bilateral meetings in future.

The provision of the Charter which lays down that decisions at all levels shall be taken on the basis of unanimity is another constraint. Incorporation of this rule in the Charter has made SAARC almost invalid. It is a fact that most of the members of SAARC share bilateral problems with one another – specially with India. These problems in turn have made them inimical towards each other. Quite naturally, it is very difficult for them to be unanimous.

In SAARC, unlike other regional groupings, summits have been entrusted with enormous powers. Annual summits have been made the engine of SAARC. Summits which are held once in a year cannot be expected to do justice to all matters. Often, summits are postponed. In case of postponement, the functioning of SAARC suffers a lot.

Indo-Pak hostility is no doubt the most important obstacle that has impaired the development of SAARC. There are a number of contentious issues between them such as the Kashmir issue, nuclear arms race, Siachen Glacier, cross-border terrorism etc. Inimical relationship between the two principal actors of SAARC is largely responsible for the poor performance of SAARC. Both India and Pakistan are so pre-occupied with each other’s threat perception that they cannot dedicate themselves towards the cause of building a South Asian community. The evolution of SAARC into a regional community is still a distant goal because there are no signs of improvement in bilateral relations between these two arch-rivals.
Some recommendations are suggested which would enable SAARC achieve its cherished goals.

Firstly, an attempt can be made to discuss the contentious issues within the framework of SAARC. It is hoped that a free and fair discussion of bilateral issues would enable the members to solve some of their unresolved problems.

Secondly, economic cooperation should be given top priority. Because it is generally believed that cooperation in the economic sphere would in the long run, encourage the SAARC members to initiate cooperative endeavours in the political fields.

Thirdly, since India and Pakistan are the two major members of SAARC and the success of SAARC depends upon their good bilateral relations, both India and Pakistan should try to resolve their bilateral disputes and remove their traditional animosities.

Moreover, a change in India’s attitude towards its neighbours would be able to remove their anti Indian feelings. India should be ready to sacrifice some of its non-vital interests.

SAARC, since its inception in 1985, has travelled through more than one and a half decade. But it is still suffering from a host of problems explained above. This have made the future of this organisation rather gloomy unlike that of ASEAN and EU. It is earnestly hoped that SAARC would be able to cope with the problems, solve them and ultimately succeed and reach its avowed objectives -- by taking into proper consideration the measures recommended here.