International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice

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This journal will resonate the themes of resilience and hope. Practitioners and academia will take the opportunity to present reflective thinking, innovations and advance a community of practice that features strengths based practices and narratives and research that informs, educates and celebrates the infinitesimal capacity of human coping, resilience and hope. Writings that are refreshingly new that celebrate ethical conduct, practice of human values, eco-social justice international security and peace and those that advance non-violent development alternatives in governance of our societies will be welcomed.
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Book Review

Regionalism and Regional Security in South Asia
- The Role of SAARC

Zahid Shahab Ahmed

Undoubtedly, this book is a marvellous treatise of regionalism on South Asia. The most distinctive feature of the book is the theoretical focus that has been maintained from the start to the very end. Being written in functionalist paradigm, Zahid Shahab Ahmed has explored the avenues of future collaboration among the SAARC members. The asymmetric relations of the South Asian countries have been extrapolated with the commonalities to balance the equation of regionalism.

All chapters are full of facts descending in a very crude manner and the analysis in a quite succinct one. Impartiality of the author in reflecting his opinion and narrating the views of others is apparent. The upfront comments on the lax attitude of institutions made his account more robust and worthy. The book has been divided in nine chapters; starting from; introduction, An introduction to South Asia, SAARC: An overview, Economic Cooperation, Environmental Security, Human Welfare, Cooperation in Security Matters, South Asian Regionalism: Possible Lessons to be Drawn from ASEAN and finally conclusion.

First Chapter reveals the making of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) proposed by General Ziaur Rahman, President of Bangladesh in late 1970s. Initially leaders of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka established SAARC. Author has analysed the wake of WWII, which resulted in regionalism all over the world. He has explained how ASEAN came into being as a collective security mechanism against communism and human security concerns. Here he points out the real concerns of the area and the lack of attention to them by the global as well as national institution. The areas that either have been ignored or could not be addressed adequately surpass border implication, like climate change, natural disasters, environmental challenges and most importantly domestic conflicts; involving insurgencies and transnational crimes. Interestingly, all his narrative is supported by the examples. He nicely draws the attention of the reader towards the core argument of his thesis by quoting significant regional connections that bind the region together through its geographic, natural and environmental dynamics. A dam breaking in Nepal that flooded Koshi River in Bihar India, dependability of landlocked Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal on neighbours and energy transfer from Bhutan to India are most appropriate examples of interdependence prevailing in South Asian Region. On the other hand bilateral rivalries leading to nuclear proliferation, arms race, drug/human trafficking and terrorism are common threat for the security of the area. He segregates here, the consensus building phase of 1985-2004 from the implementation phase of SAARC afterwards. His research objectives revolve around the collaboration based on human security but leading to traditional security mechanism from a functionalist outlook in its typical cascading manner. The proposition entails issues from economic to environmental and energy to transnational crimes in South Asia. At this stage, he has identified knowledge gap that enhances the significance of the study, scope and his methodology in gathering primary data through semi-structured questionnaire and face-to-face interviews.

Comparing the organisations through their style, way of work and especially their doctrines have conferred more authenticity to his arguments. His approach is not only structured under the influence of the incidents but the evolution of strategy and theory. The analysis goes hand in hand with contemporary challenges to SAARC and the need to adopt the most successful processes to enhance its productivity in achieving its goals. His focus is on creating regional links to recent human security threat of economic, food, water, energy, transnational crimes in south Asia. He called these threats of inter-reliant nature and delve into the big picture of environmental and climatic nature in South Asian. Dealing with human security related uncontroversial issues first and traditional security later could yield better result according to Ahmed (p.4). Yet another unique thing is the neutrality of the author, despite being Pakistani he has reached beyond Pak-India centric debate quite optimistically. Whilst indicating knowledge gap on crucial areas of cooperation; free trade in the region and in contrast, areas of collective instability like terrorism, drug trafficking and human smuggling a crucial debate has been stemmed (p.5).
Chapter Two dwells on regional categorization of South Asia, territorial disputes of demarcation between the states and inclusion of Afghanistan in the SAARC as eighth member despite being culturally a Central Asian nation. Here he has given an overview of the SAARC member countries population, area, GDP and religious orientations. Author has highlighted the prevailing security challenges of intra and inter-state nature. The tug of war for power concentration and the root cause of the enmity have been traced to ethnic, religious, irredentist and territorial rivalries. He has mentioned that how domestic problems have been multiplied in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka due to non-strategic handling of the issues (p.15). Herein he has stroke the real chord leading to regional rivalry by mentioning the role of big players in the region, particularly in the backdrop of the intensive increase in war on terror. He has narrated the incidents of Indian fighter jets entry in Sri Lankan airspace and dropping relief supplies in Jaffna for the insurgent Tamil minority and Pakistani support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. The discourse is balanced in way that the conflicts are discussed cursorily on the horizontal axis and the solution sought in vertical way by in depth analysis. The maze of problems in South Asia where India has sour relation with three of his neighbours, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan and Afghanistan with Pakistan can only be resolved when attention is given to internal issues like Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Taliban Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Tamil Nadu in India (p.19-20). His rationale is simple but weighty that the regional security is primarily at stake not because of external threat to the region but the intrinsic evils promoted like nuclear arms race at the cost of human security and multilateralism in South Asia. He indicate that how the conflicts are resulting in migration and internal displacement in whole region and not only eating up the resources but creating further quarrels over the cross border issues among India Bangladesh and Af-Pak border.

Similarly third chapter has endowed upon the motivating factors and process that led to the creation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. The analysis is deep and crisp in understanding the nature and role of member states in maintaining external linkages at regional and global level. The formation of the SAARC during the cold war was the result of realization that they need regional structures to watch over their interest. This chapter mainly focuses upon the Charter on the organization its informal retreat manner of discussing critical matter even during the bad diplomatic climate. Keeping some issue like the conflict over Ganges water and Muhurichar Island between Indian and Bangladesh on the back burner the author has reflected upon the realization of interdependence. The relief that have been felt by the landlocked Bhutan and Nepal in accessing the regional states via this forum is encouraging. (p.34) Contentions over the charter and interpretation between India and Pakistan have been discussed and the principle of unanimity in decision and setting aside contentious issue enshrined in Article X of the Charter are the credit of Indian lobbying. Though external sources of funding are last option in SAARC programmes author has explained how this approach is changing. Detail discussion has been done on the Informal SAARC its conflict resolution facilitation, structure and cost sharing formulae. In the hindsight of political, institutional and economic challenges author has drawn attention to the improvements, practical measures under the successful but slow functionalist approach. Next chapter has explored the possibilities of economic cooperation by profiling the growth rates of SAARC countries (p.63-66). SAFTA and SAPTA actions on trade matters and the development of sub-regionalism supported by charter are showing better results like South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) (p.69). This section of study has also referred to the creative actions of SAARC Energy Centre and pointed out critical shortcomings.

Fifth chapter entails issues of environmental security except water security being less focused area of the SAARC. The deliberations in this area are based on the primary data collected in Nepal and Pakistan by the author (p.87). Environmental challenge is doubtlessly an existential threat to the most densely populated area of the world, where more than 1.6 billion people are living only on 3.6 percent of the global land surface. The factors of multiplying population, increased urbanization, and deforestation, air pollution due to rice cultivation, coal use and catastrophic consequences of glacial melting in Himalaya are linked with the numerous people affected in the region (p.87-92). Author has attracted attention of every one towards the ground realties of natural disasters, floods, earthquake, draughts which know no borders and tie all South Asians in one thread of chain effects. He has indicated relief diplomacy as a parallel to the functionalist approach as reflected during the 2005 when India and Pakistan opened their controversial Kashmir borders for relief operation. (p.94). The creation of SAARC Disaster Management Centre and its consensus on the principle of voluntary help and only if requested by the state struck by the catastrophe is a landmark achievement (p.94). However, on implementation level there is still need to prove the worth of this agreement on ground. He has also not enumerated the problems but gone deeper in finding the remedial measures for climate change and a policy of funding according to the responsibility under the auspice of SAARC. He has appreciated the awareness strategy and nomination of persons like Appa Sherpa a 20 times Everest Summiteer as SAARC Goodwill Ambassador (p.103).

Chapter Six is about Human Welfare in South Asia. Ahmed has compared Human Development Index ranks of SAARC and ASEAN Region. However, the statistics are of 2011. To him South Asia faces the acute challenge of improving its worst Global Hunger Index. Issues of nutritional, educational and social status vis-a-vis increasing food prices are dismal
situation for SAARC performance. He has established a causal link of Crude Oil prices and food prices causing food security issues and effecting health related indicators of South Asians. Likewise the health problems, drugs usage and spread of HIV/AIDS are brought to fore. He has related the Millennium Development Goals with SAARC Development Goals but commented upon the translation of the commitments into the practical steps. The initiative of SAARC Development Fund is evaluated through analysis of the SAARC Village Programme for the rural community, Self Employed Women Association in India, and SUNGI Development Foundation in Pakistan for regional projects on maternal and child health. Similarly, SAARC Business Association of Home Based Workers (SABAH) in Bhutan and the Maldives and Bagh-e-Zenana in Afghanistan are progressive initiatives yielding good results under the multi-level functioning of SAARC. SAARC food bank is stalled due to the pending ratification of Afghanistan, which lead to confusion over the impact of decision on SAARC future performance particularly in area of health security and food.

Chapter Seven of Cooperation in Security Matters can be called a cardinal pillar of whole structure built by the author. Ahmed has used a broader regional canvass to paint the security picture of the region. While sauntering along the explosive topic of transnational crimes he points to post 9/11 developments of cross border crimes, illegal trade routes, smuggling, drugs and illegal immigration among states. He raises alarm about the terrorist links of South Asian organisations at regional and global level and the production of opium in Afghanistan. His analysis reveals a grim situation that how out laws and terrorists’ mafias are looting the treasure trove of South Asia with impunity. (p.135). His deliberations on terrorist activities attempt to propel a genuine response from SAARC policy makers to treat terrorist a resident evil to be eradicated. He points toward the agreement of SAARC on including terrorist funding and support as part of terrorism and unveil the multifaceted threat at political level. The role of SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk and in Colombo and Drug Offences Monitoring Desk has been amply exemplified. Other proposals on SAARCPOL on analogy of Europol and enhanced coordination with United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime to train member states in fields related to narcotics, human trafficking are emphasized by him (p.143). To him controlling the criminals movement is the basic demand of curbing organised crime and this can only be done by improving the legal regime of extradition through mutual legal assistance (p.149). His vision is clear about looking beyond the personal interest to wield relation in critical collective areas.

Second last Chapter crafts lessons from policy and practices of ASEAN being a comparable region of similar socio-cultural, historical and religious similarities (p.153). He has interpolated statistics of ASEAN’s GDP. Some lessons are for SAARC improvements while keeping commonalities and differences both in mind. This lends authenticity to his arguments and avoids erroneous comparison in dissimilar areas. While “Soft Institutionalisation” and “retreat” phenomenon are considered shared features, “cautious diplomacy” of ASEAN has been traced in the restraining attitude of SAARC in issues of bilateral nature. Differences mainly rest in the formation of ASEAN being a smaller countries alliance to overcome superpower influences and challenges of internal and external nature, in contrast with the establishment of SAARC for human security concern. Additionally, other distinguishing features of ASEAN being the initiative of Indonesia a major player in region and SAARC of Bangladesh being a medium size country yielded variant response from neighbouring states. The regional dynamics of India and Indonesia big states in their specific alliances are different (p.159). Further, SAARC has two rival nuclear powers as members, which put it at brink of more critical situation. Ahmed here longs for a better realization of big brothers role for India and Pakistan in comparison of Indonesia and Malaysia. Main lessons learnt are the Asian Free Trade Area (AFTA) and collective trade approach with other non-ASEAN countries. The concept of Regional Trade Agreements is not less than achievements. Now Afghanistan has also emerged as a dissident member focusing old disputes of territorial demarcation. (p.165) ASEAN flexible approach in dealing with the conflicts can be adopted by the SAARC but the chasm of mistrust prevailing among the SAARC countries cannot be bridged easily. The best lessons for SAARC members are to sideline their traditional and historical rivalries for the sake of survival and adopt more tolerance for each other. He has also stressed professionalism and organization development.

Zahid Shahab Ahmed concludes the complex debate in last chapter by mentioning the need to change hierarchical power structure of the region and India centric approach in SAARC, which is holding it from free flight. Additionally, he suggests a positive leading role to both big brothers of the region and stresses need of flexibility. Regionalism to him is quite a fragile process. Though he is apprehensive of SAARC performance at the same time, he is optimistic about the changing attitude of partners in the South Asian region. Throughout the discourse, Ahmed aspires for the supra national identity for the SAARC states binding them together for sustainable peace and development in the region.
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