Assessing the Efficacy of SAARC in Fostering Socio-economic Integration Across South Asian Nations

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Abstract

The objective of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was to foster regional integration and collaboration amongst South Asian countries when it was founded in 1985. This paper evaluates SAARC's effectiveness in promoting socio-economic integration among its member nations. Though initially optimistic, the organization has encountered substantial obstacles in accomplishing its goals. Significant socio-economic integration has not happened quickly, despite the fact that SAARC has promoted communication and collaboration in a number of areas, including trade, health, and education. The implementation of comprehensive regional programs has been impeded by enduring political divisions and historical tensions among member nations. Furthermore, the organization has not been able to work together to address urgent socio-economic concerns because of institutional limitations and a dearth of efficient dispute resolution procedures. In addition to the differences in development between member states, the lack of a formal framework for economic cooperation makes integration attempts even more difficult.

SAARC is still a crucial forum for communication and interaction in South Asia in spite of these obstacles. To fully realize the promise of regional socio-economic integration, measures to improve institutional capacity, fortify diplomatic ties, and create focused economic initiatives are necessary. For policymakers looking to break down current barriers and encourage real collaboration amongst South Asian countries, a critical analysis of SAARC's accomplishments and weaknesses offers significant insights.
Keywords: Socio-economic, SAARC, South Asia, Regional Cooperation, Association

Introduction

The aftermath of World War II marked a significant shift in global politics, with the decline of European hegemony and the rise of the United

States as the sole superpower, leading to the Cold War era. This period saw the formation of various pacts, alliances, and organizations as nations sought to increase their influence and counter opposing factions. Regional cooperation became a key focus as groups of nations with commonalities formed joint ventures. The awareness of the benefits of regional cooperation prompted the creation of regional organizations worldwide, driven by the need for collective self-reliance, particularly in smaller nations in the South (Robert, 2015).

However, structural upheavals, such as the end of the Cold War and the emergence of uni-polarity, coupled with globalization and technological advancements, reshaped the global system. The flow of resources, the revolution in information technology, and demands for greater allegiance from ethnic factions made national frontiers porous, weakening national sovereignty. Powerful nations engaged in organized institutions at both global and regional levels, giving rise to the prominence of regionalism in the post-World War II international political scenario (Zaidi, 2022).

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence of regional organizations like the European Economic Community (EEC), the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). However, by the 1980s, some of these organizations weakened or ended. The end of the Cold War, coupled with globalization, brought about new dimensions and increased interdependency, prompting a resurgence of regionalization in various parts of the world (Hooghe,2019).

The 1980s marked political and economic upheavals, and regionalization began to reappear with the rise of globalization. While both regionalization and globalization lead to the process of integration, they function at opposite stages and do not necessarily complement or contradict each other. The process of regionalization began in the 1960s with the emergence of ASEAN, while regionalization in South Asia started later with the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985(Arshad and Ali, 2017).

Unfortunately, regionalization faced challenges in South Asia due to factors such as the protective stance of newly independent states, reluctance to compromise sovereignty, lack of a common regional approach during the Cold War, internal threats surpassing external threats, and historical conflicts like the Pak-India dispute. Additionally, India's bilateral approach and dominance in the region hindered the development of a common regional policy. As a result, the process of regionalism struggled to take root in South Asia.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. SAARC comprises of eight Member States: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The

Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on 17 January 1987 (Ahmad, 2016).

Objectives of SAARC

The objectives of the Association as outlined in the SAARC Charter are: to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potentials; to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia; to contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems; to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields; to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries; to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests; and to cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes (www.saarc-sec.org).

Structure and Process

Cooperation in SAARC is based on respect for the five principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs of the Member States and mutual benefit. Regional cooperation is seen as a complement to the bilateral and multilateral relations of SAARC Member States. SAARC Summits are held annually and the country hosting the Summit holds the Chair of the Association. Decisions are made on the unanimity basis while bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from the deliberations of SAARC. In addition to the eight Member States, nine Observer States join SAARC Summits: China, the US, Myanmar, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Mauritius and the European Union (www.saarc-sec.org).

Administrative Set-Up of SAARC

SAARC has five layers of administrative set-up.

Summit Conference

SAARC summit is the highest body of this organization that rests with heads of states or Governments. Since its inception, 16th summits have been held so far. It is quite amazing that throughout 27 years old history, the last one summit was held for the first time in Thimpu (Bhutan) in the year 2011.

Council of Ministers

The council consists of the Foreign Ministers of the member states. Its meetings are bi-annual, and an extraordinary session can be convened if the member states agree. This second highest body formulates the policies, reviews the progress, explores new areas of cooperation and establishes any additional mechanism if necessary.

Standing Committees

It comprises the Foreign Secretaries of the member states to monitor and co-ordinate the overall programs. It also mobilizes the regional

and external resources and identifies, new areas of co-operation based on appropriate studies. Despite these Standing Committees, Technical Committees and Action Committees are also there to coordinate, formulate, and implement the different decisions taken by the higher level forums of this organization.

Programming Committees

This committee consists of the senior officials of the member states. The important assignments of this body are to scrutinize the budget of the secretariat, finalize the annual schedule and assess the reports of technical committees.

Technical Committees

The representatives of each member state form this committee. The functions of this committee include the formulation of projects and programs, monitoring and execution of projects and submission of reports (www.saarc-sec.org).

SAARC Secretariat

Like other organizations, SAARC has also its Secretariat, which was established on January 16, 1987 in Kathmandu (Nepal) and is considered as accountable for coordinating and monitoring the execution of decisions. Secretary General heads the secretariat. Council of Ministers appoints him for a period of three years in alphabetical order (Iqbal, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The study applies Bjorn Hettne's new regionalism theory to analyze the regional dynamics of South-East Asia and South Asia. According to the author, South-East Asia has progressed to the third stage of regionalism, making it an intermediate region. In contrast, South Asia is deemed a peripheral region as it has not reached the second stage. Hettne introduces the concept of region and regionalism, distinguishing them based on shared interests or identities and political processes fostering integration in a specific geographical area.

The five levels of regionness proposed by Hettne are explained in the study. The first level is a regional space, where regions are united by historical or cultural values. The second level is a regional complex, marked by regional identities dating back to pre-modern history. The third stage is regional society, characterized by transnational cooperation and the formation of organizations to formalize cooperation. The fourth level is a regional community, where the region gains distinct identity and legitimacy. The final stage is a region state, which surpasses individual states in terms of territory. The progression from the first to the fifth level constitutes the process of regionalization.

Hettne defines regionalization as the mechanism shifting a geographic locality from a dormant entity to an active subject capable of articulating transnational interests. He emphasizes that regions may not

necessarily evolve from one stage to another, and the failure of regionalization can lead to decreased regionness, impacting both development and security in the region ((Hettne, 2001).

Hettne categorizes regions into core, intermediate, and peripheral regions based on the success of development and security. Core regions are politically strong, economically dynamic, and organized at the trans-state stage. Intermediate regions are linked with core regions and tend to imitate their political and economic systems. Peripheral regions, in contrast, face political disturbances and economic stagnation, often dealing with conflicts, wars, underdevelopment, and domestic crises (Hettne, 1998).

The study delves into the concept of regionalism on political, geographical, and social or economic bases. Geographically, regionalism arises from the proximity of more than two regions and their international interaction. Political regionalization involves conflict resolution, foreign policy-orientation, decision-making, and political actors contributing to national and regional stability.

The factors influencing the growth of regionalism include proximity, homogeneity in social, political, and economic dimensions, functional interest, common threat perception, similarity in foreign policy-orientation, the pivotal role of a specific power, strategic harmony, and the role of regional institutions (Paul, 2020). In conclusion, the study highlights the significance of regional cooperation and the role of various factors in shaping regionalism. It underscores the need for states to represent their people and adopt broad-based development strategies to foster successful regional cooperation.

Socio-economic Problems of South Asia

"Socio-economic" is a comprehensive and multidimensional term that includes a variety of usages. It indicates the way social and economic variables interact to influence many facets of a society. This phrase is frequently used to characterize the interactions and mutual effects of social and economic components. Numerous variables fall under the category of socio-economic aspects, such as access to resources, social class, work, education, and income.

Analyzing the interactions between social elements like culture, education, and demography, economic conditions and structures is necessary to comprehend socio-economic processes. Understanding the intricate and linked nature of social and economic processes within a particular neighborhood, region, or society is made easier with the aid of this multidisciplinary approach. Socio-economic analysis is frequently used by academics and decision-makers to evaluate and address problems pertaining to poverty, inequality, development, and well-being (vocabulary.com). Cursory view of the socio-economic plight of South Asia reveals the following portrait.

Social Inequality

The region of South Asia is the home of socio-economic disparities in the global community. It can be defined as the relational mechanism in society which produces the effects of limiting or harming a particular social class, or community. The scope of social inequality has different dimensions like approach to have political rights, free atmosphere of expression and gathering, approach to education, health, lodging and mobility. Moreover, the quality of family, neighborhood life and occupation come into the domain of this menace. If such economic factors harden, they can be considered social inequality (Cohen, et al 1998). The issue of social inequality is associated with inequality in race, gender and wealth. Thomas M Shapiro has explained the degree of disparity in his book, The Hidden Cost of Being African American. In an instance, he narrates how a black family could not get a bank loan to construct her house, while a family having white origin was granted. Moreover, the most important way of getting wealth is to be a home owner. This thing provided black families the opportunities to be rich and wealthy (Shapiro, Thomas M, 2004).

Poverty

The term poverty can be defined as the situation where the basic needs like food, clothing and shelter of people are not being fulfilled. Moreover, there are no opportunities and chances to flourish in the society. It also refers to insufficient resources for feeding, clothing and treating the family members or to acquire a piece of land to generate one's own job... In other words, it leads to powerlessness, insecurity and exclusion of individuals, households and communities (Indicators of Poverty…, 2011). According to World Bank, this menace is known as deprivation in well-being in different aspects. It includes low incomes and inability to get the basic goods and services that are very important for survival with honor and respect. Moreover, poor health and educational facilities, improper provision of clean water and sanitation, security threat and poor capacity and opportunity to make one's life prosperous are few instances in this regard (Poverty and Inequality…, 2011).

Illiteracy

Illiteracy can be defined as the inability to read and write. Literacy plays fundamental role in developing human activities and gaining other rights. Literacy has always been a very important factor for the development of any nation. It is the gateway of learning all kinds of skills and disciplines. The current emerging challenges in socio-economic sector have highlighted the importance of literacy to work as a survival tool in this competitive era. It refers to empowerment and the right to have education means the right to literacy, which is fundamental pre-requisite to learning and completing the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (Regional Seminar on Literacy…, 2008). More than one-half (nearly 52per cent) of the world illiterate people reside in the South and West Asia. In addition, the 22per cent of all illiterate

people reside in Sub-Saharan Africa, 13 percent in East Asia and the Pacific, 6.5per cent in the Arab countries while in Latin America and Caribbean, this ratio is 4.7percent. It is estimated that less than 2 percent of the global illiterate population lives in the remaining regions combined (Adult and Youth Literacy…, 2012).

Population Explosion

The menace of overpopulation has deteriorated the socio- economic situation in South Asia is putting tremendous strain on natural resources, food and fuel supplies employment and housing. According to World Bank statistics that published in 2012, the total population of this region was 1656464573 in 2011.Total population is based on the figures that reflect the de facto definition of population including all the populace of the locality except for refugees. It has also been observed that during the last 100 years, medical facilities and agrarian productivity caused to increase the growth rate owing to this rapid growth rate, India is marked at 33rd while Pakistan at 39th, among the most crowded nations of the globe, as investigated and researched by optimum population trust based in the United Kingdom.

Human Trafficking and Child Labor

The menace of trafficking can be termed as illegal trade of human beings for commercial sexual exploitation, forced labor, reproductive slavery, or a modern day form of slavery. It is one of the complex social issues that global world is confronted with due to prevalence of globalization (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2012). Economic and social disparities coupled with free mobility of capital have given rise to flourish this criminal activity across the globe. According to a report 1 to 2 million people are trafficked globally. Among them, 225000 belong to South Asia. Similarly Maiti, an NGO based in Kathmandu (Nepal) estimates that 5000 to 7000 girls are trafficked to India for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Moreover, boys are also transported for bonded labor in Construction Company, tea plantation, brick kilns, tea and manufacturing industry (Huda, 2006).

Drug-Trafficking

Drug Trafficking is a global illegal trade that includes cultivation, manufacturing, distribution and sale of substance that are subject to Drug Prohibition laws. South Asia is the principal transit trade route for psychotropic drugs. Porous borders between the countries and poor monitoring mechanism have accelerated the flow of trafficking and abuse of drugs in the region stretching from Southeast Asia to central Asia. In Pakistan, it gained full momentum to penetrate in the poorest strata of society, when millions of Afghan refugees were forced to seek shelter due to the Russian invasion in Afghanistan in December, 1979. Since then, Pakistan is facing multifaceted problems spanning from militancy to extremism, social inequalities to political instability, and poverty to decline in human power.

Corruption

The menace of corruption can be characterized as the misuse of assigned power for personal benefits. In the prevailing global context, it has become a cause of serious concern, that requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional policy and feasible strategy to eradicate its deep- rooted germs from the society. It has affected the fabric and framework of many states throughout the world. Though it has gained popularity in many parts of the globe, yet it has reached its climax in South Asia. In India the media's disclosure about some ministers and government officers been arrested under the 'Prevention of Corruption Act' and the Anna Hazare fiasco, along with the much debated Lokpal Bill has forever been the point of discussion. Corruption can't be traced back to any specific time span. It doesn't have any certain place of origin, but is a combination of many elements that compel people to indulge in such malpractices. The United Nations Convention against Corruption, adopted in December 2003, today comprises 140 signatories to increased cooperation in fighting corruption (Sheth, 2012).

Women Empowerment

Women's participation is a key factor in boosting up the pace of progress and development of a society. Though South Asia has the honour of having first Lady Prime Minister and Bangla Dash, India and Pakistan have been ruled by women. But inspite of that, South Asia depicts the plight of this downtrodden segment of the populace, that has less access to and control over assets, information and decision making. With meagre chances of economic participation and educational attachments, women are subordinate to men. Though the constitutions of all South Asian countries reflect the rule of law and no gender discrimination, yet women representation in legislative bodies is nominal. For example, in the Maldives, women cannot be elected as President. Pakistan has reserved 17 per cent seats for women in parliament since 2002. In Nepal, Women don't inherit the property. Similarly the So-called practices like Satti in India, and Karo Kari in Sind (Pakistan) are heinous instances of gender discrimination (Patel, 2008).

Terrorism

The emergence of the new millennium has introduced a complicated phenomenon of terrorism, still deprived of full-fledged and agreed upon definition. Though some thinkers have tried to define this multidimensional term yet there is no unanimity among them. According to Brian Jenkins, it is the use or threatened use of force devised for political upheaval. Similarly, Walter Lagurar describes it as the illegal use of force to gain political objectives when armless and innocent citizens are victimized (Jewish virtual Library).

The tragic incident of September 9, 2001, proved a sign of tremendous upheaval in the global scenario, ushering in as the new era of war against terrorism. South Asia (Afghanistan) became the battlefield and

laboratory for testing highly sophisticated destructive weapons upon the innocent people of Afghanistan to take revenge of Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. Pakistan, important country of South Asia and Non-NATO ally of US had to bear the brunt of consequences for supporting the global war on terror in the form of bomb blasts, suicide-bombings, loss of civilians and forces personals, destruction of physical infrastructure and shattered economy.

Energy Crisis

Energy is considered as the important source of economic growth and development of any country. Rapid population growth and large scale industrial development have caused to enormous increase in global demand. But unfortunately the supply of energy is far less than the demand. As a result, the deficit of energy has become a common challenge for the entire global community, especially in South Asia. Huge demand of energy has triggered a clear competition among the major players of the South Asian region. With its geo-strategic location, Pakistan has become the energy hub for South Asia. Gawader can provide shipping to 40 percent of world oil. All the countries of South Asia are energy deficit. For example Pakistan has hydro- potential of 40,000 MW against what it generates only 6500 MW (Menhas et al, 2019).

Similarly, Pakistan has a tremendous reservoir of coal in Thar, which are still untouched due to lack of technology. India has done civil nuclear technology deal with US to tackle its energy requirements. In Bangladesh, less than 30per cent people have the facility of electricity while it has 12-15 trillion cubic feet of gas. In addition to aforesaid menaces, South Asia is confronted with numerous problems like environmental degradation, sectarian and ethnic conflicts, extraordinary defense expenditures, lack of industrial infrastructure and interstate conflicts especially Pak-India disputes. These complicated issues have endangered the peace, stability and progress of the region. Long-standing and multifaceted issues need an institutionalized collaborative venture to address them peacefully and amicably so that exploration of resources and their utilization can revolutionize the region with prosperity.

Role of SAARC in addressing Socio-economic Issues

Keeping in view the basic purpose of providing social services, accelerating the economic and social development and ultimately improving the lifestyle of the people of this region, South Asian Association for regional cooperation (SAARC) was established with the adoption of its charter on December 8, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangla Dash by the leaders of the seven founder member countries. The organization got current shape, when Afghanistan joined it as the newest (8th) member during the fourteenth summit held in New Delhi in the year 2007. The tenth summit that held in 1998, in Colombo (Sri Lanka) assessed the progress made in the social sector by SAARC and a decision was taken to develop a social charter that would

determine the targets to be achieved across the region of South Asia in the areas like empowerment of women, youth mobilization, population stabilization, poverty-alleviation, human resource development, the promotion of health and nutrition, and the protection of children. During the 12th SAARC Summit held in January 2004, in Islamabad (Pakistan), the member countries signed the Social Charter. Next year at the 12th SAARC summit (Dhaka) the heads of states strongly reiterated their commitment to take initiative at national as well as regional level for achieving the objectives of social charter.

Social services are considered fundamental human rights and quite necessary for human development. These refer to the provision of opportunities for socioeconomic development of deprived people to make them productive and self-reliant citizens of the society. Keeping in view the same purpose, SAARC was formed in 1985 to uplift the living standard of the people of South Asia through economic integration. Moreover, SAARC social charter was signed in January 2004 to speed up the social activities of this regional entity.

Education plays a pivotal role in accelerating the process of nation-building. SAARC has done a lot in this regard also. SAARC Human Resource Development Centre was established in Islamabad as a result of the 4th SAARC Summit in 1988. SAARC Consortium of open and distance learning, establishment of South Asian University and SAARC chair, fellowship and scholarship schemes are such instances.

Health and population were the original areas of cooperation as identified by the member states. The initiatives taken so far include the establishment of Tuberculosis Centre in Nepal. Similarly, an MoU between SAARC and WHO was signed in 2000 to materialize the objective of "Health for All". SAARC disease Surveillance Centre, regional strategy on HIV and AIDS and telemedicine network projects are prominent steps to counter the threats of diseases in the region. Ms Shabana Azmi and Sanath Jasuriya were appointed as goodwill ambassador to raise awareness in the public against HIV and AIDS in 2009.

The term women empowerment has gained full-fledged importance in the social and political scenario at global level. The word empowerment is a multilayered concept that refers to granting legal and moral powers to an individual in all walks of life, including social, political and religious which are necessary for the development of mankind. SAARC has taken many measures to empower women in the economic and social sectors. The establishment of SAARC chamber women entrepreneur council established in 2001 focuses on achieving the tangible objectives of building markets and increasing business opportunities. The idea of launching South Asian women parliament was discussed during the first meeting of South Asian women parliamentarians in November 2012.

In South Asia, cross-border trafficking is posing a great threat but unfortunately the measures taken by SAARC are quite minimal. A convention on preventing and combating trafficking in women and children for prostitution was signed by member countries in 2002. They said treaty is the first one of its nature which reflects the regional political commitment and confers obligations on the state parties to adopt effective legislation to resolve the problem. Moreover the concept of SAARC Interpol is also under discussion.

Child labor refers to the work that deprives children of their childhood, dignity and potential which is detrimental to physical and mental development. Illiteracy, parents 'poverty, poor socioeconomic conditions, educational infrastructure and high rate of unemployment are some of the causes of this social menace. The types of child labor include domestic labor, child working in hazardous industries, in export industries, child trafficking and child bonded labor. The third SAARC ministerial conference in Rawalpindi Resolution in 1996 reaffirmed SAARC's adherence to the convention on the rights of the child. Moreover, two important conventions in the 11th SAARC summit (2002) were signed, namely the SAARC convention on preventing and combating the trafficking in women and children for South Asia and the SAARC convention on regional arrangements for the promotion of child welfare in South Asia.

Environmental degradation is one of the major issues of South Asia. SAARC has taken numerous steps to tackle the issue. SAARC coastal zone management center was established in 2004. The establishment of the SAARC disaster management center (SDMC) in New Delhi in 2006 and SAARC forestry center (2007) are also encouraging initiatives in this regard. Similarly, SAARC environment Acton Plan, Dhaka Declaration, SAARC action plan on climate change (2008) and the comprehensive framework for disaster management are worth mentioning steps.

At present, South Asia is facing grave security threats owing to the growing trend of extremism and terrorism. Unfortunately the world community could not agree to formulate its unanimous definition. SAARC regional convention on the suppression of terrorism is the first measure taken by the member countries during 3rd summit in 1989. Similarly, SAARC Terrorist Offenses Monitoring Desk (STOMD) was established in Colombo to analyze and disseminate information about the terrorist activities. Moreover, an additional protocol was signed during the 12th Summit to tackle with the financing of terrorism.

Formation of SAPTA and SAFTA

SAARC's programs were initially limited to only nine areas of regional cooperation while economic cooperation was intentionally kept outside of its jurisdiction. In the early 1990s, there was a trend of establishing regional arrangements. Owing to the experience of the growth and progress of different regional entities, it was felt to bring core economic areas within

the scope of SAARC activities. The sixth summit (Colombo, 1991) demonstrated strong determination to launch cooperation in economic areas and agreed to formulate an agreement on an institutional mechanism for trade liberalization among them. Recognizing its great economic strength in terms of its market potential, rich natural resources and capable human resources, a trade block among SAARC members was formed with the signing of SAPTA during the seventh Summit (Dhaka, 1993). The agreement reflected the desire of the member states to promote and sustain mutual trade and economic cooperation within the SAARC region through the exchange of concessions. SAPTA made a distinction between the least developed and other developing member countries. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal were declared as least developing while India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were classified as developing countries. SAPTA was basically considered as an instrument with capacity to revolutionize the South Asia through a greater regional integration. This optimistic concept began to wane with the slow progress of SAPTA under the four rounds of trade negotiations because it did not increase the volume of intra-regional trade and investment flows.

The most important achievement of SAARC towards trade liberalization process in South Asia is the formation of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) during its 12th Summit (Islamabad, 2004) and came into effect from 1st January 2006. According to the said agreement, the trade liberalization program started from 1st July 2006. The delay was due to the fact that rules of origin, sensitive lists, mechanism for compensation of revenue losses for LDC's and areas of technical assistance were negotiated subsequently. Moreover the procedural requirements for ratification of the agreement caused a delay in commencement of trade liberalization program. The highest decision-making body of this agreement is SAFTA Ministerial Council (SMC) which is responsible for the administration and implementation of the agreement. The said council is supported by a committee of experts (CoE) which monitors, reviews and facilitates the implementation of the provisions of this agreement. Moreover, the said agreement provides a dispute settlement mechanism for settling the disputes that may arise due to the interpretation and application of the provisions of this agreement The most important achievement of SAARC towards trade liberalization process in South Asia is the formation of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) during its 12th Summit (Islamabad, 2004) and came into effect from 1st January 2006 (Ishaq, Batool and Farooq, 2016).

Conclusion

In South Asia, the important initiative toward regionalism in the 20th century is the formation of SAARC comprising seven members. i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, which became the 8th member in 2007. These countries reflect an interesting combination of socio-economic realities, political regimes,

religious and linguistic diversity. Ultimately the process of regional integration could not establish deep-rooted foundations in this region.

SAARC, since its inception progressed gradually and continuously both in terms of institutions and programs. The establishment of regional centers, initiation of programs like poverty-eradication, SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA), South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), social charter, the SAARC Development Fund and people to people contact programs can be cited in this regard. Though bilateral contentious issues have been excluded from the SAARC Charter yet the regularly held summit meetings provide the leaders of this region an opportunity to have informal talks to discuss their mutual conflicts and contentious issues. For example, the sideline meetings between Indo-Pak leaders during the second SAARC summit (Bangalore, 1986) resulted in diffusing the tension between the two countries on the issue of India's troop exercise (operation Brass-tacks). As a result of informal talks between Indo-Pak Prime Ministers during the 6th SAARC Summit (Colombo, 1991) Pakistan responded well to prevent the move of a liberation movement to cross the cease-fire line in Kashmir.

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