

A SRI LANKAN LOOKS AT SAARC

A DECADE LATER

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The European Union (EU) receives regular reportage in the Media, the Association of South Asean Nations (ASEAN), the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) are constantly commented upon. Ironically the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) is relatively indifferently treated by the International Press. So much so once the North American Media commented on SAARC's "timid bark". On the contrary not co-operation but conflict within South Asia attracts the greater attention of the rest of the world; the conflicts in Kashmir, Karachi, Sri Lanka being some of them, not to mention the regularly exciting past duel over constitutionality in Bangladesh.

No doubt, the SAARC is an incipient institution¹ when it is compared with some of the other regional associations. Yet South Asia has for long enjoyed a unity and earned for itself a distinctiveness as an entity. The principal religions of the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have a hoary history in the South Asian Region of general tolerance of one another. This has endowed to the region a singular record of religious co-existence despite occasional convulsions of intolerance. As a result of the social intermingling of these religions, common forms of existence, and a culture built on the mixing of different characteristics permeated the whole region. It lent to South Asia a unity and separate identity from any other regional grouping² along with a fairly widespread separate composite culture.

The environment was quite suited for the practice of regional co-operation. Nevertheless, from the time Zia Ur Rahman, the late President of Bangladesh, mooted the idea of formalizing such co-operation progress toward it however has been tardy, hindered by one

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¹ See from SAARC to SAARC - *Milestones in the Evolution of Regional Co-operation in South Asia* (1960 -1988), Vol. 1, SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu, 1988.

² Debendra K. Das, (Ed.) *SAARC - Regional Co-operation and Development Perspectives, Problems and Policies*, (New Delhi, 1992).