

**Fresh Breeze in South Asia**

A fresh breeze has started blowing in South Asia. In the recently concluded SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Summit in Islamabad, Pakistan has drawn up a new road map of peace and regional cooperation. It is expected that South Asia would be a free trade zone within two years leading towards an impressive economic union. The region has suffered immensely economically due to antagonistic political positions and mutual mistrust. In the process the smaller countries have had to face the major brunt of economic problems. It is heartening to know that the past baggage has been cast aside and new initiatives leading to mutual trust and understanding have been set in motion.

The history of South Asia is a shared history spanning over thousands of years. This shared history belongs generally to all the inhabitants of the region. However, the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the inheritors of the shared great civilizational, cultural and political traditions. The India Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee alluded to this reality philosophically during the SAARAC Summit. He proposed that all the three countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh should jointly celebrate the 150th anniversary of first uprising against British rule in 1857. This joint celebration would be symbolic and would send the positive signals of resurrecting the bonds of love and brotherhood among the inhabitants of the region. These bonds have been glaring feature of sub-continent over centuries. The indications are that there is greater realization today than ever before to resurrect these historical bonds.

The people of sub-continent have traversed history of more than half a century now. There is little relevance in apportioning the blame of division of the sub-Continent on colonial rulers. That is the past. A new future holding the promise of peace and prosperity has to be built for the younger generation. However, the bitter truth remains that a constituency, across the board, still exists which would employ every trick to sabotage the new initiatives and processes. This constituency has thrived on the politics of hate, prejudice and bigotry. This constituency does not believe in dialogue and accommodation. Its main tool is violence. The managers of this constituency have mastered the art of defeating peace moves and generating the conflicts. They know the art of muzzling history, distorting the perceptions and generating a phobia. There is an urgency in taking on these spoilers both at the official and the public level.

The glaring outcome of recent SAARAC Summit is the agreement to restore stalled road and railway links between India and Pakistan. The proposed bus service between Uri in J&K and Muzaffarabad in PoK is bound to rekindle the bonds of friendship and affection of pre-partition days. In the same vein the reopening of railway link between Rajasthan in India and Karachi in Pakistan is bound to strengthen the bonds of friendship.

The New Year (2004) has dawned on the sub-Continent with great hopes of peace and cooperation. Let us hope that the pace is sustained.

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