Cdr A N M Ishtiaq Jahan Farouqee, Bangladesh Navy

Cdr A N M Ishtiaq Jahan Farouqee, BN was commissioned in Bangladesh Navy in January 1999. The Officer is a graduate from Defence Services Command and Staff College, Bangladesh and obtained MSc degree in Defence Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals. He has done his specialization as Principal Warfare Officer from PNS BAHADUR, Karachi. He has commanded four Fast Attack Crafts and also served on various staff appointments in Bangladesh Navy.

INTRODUCTION

Global geopolitics and international relations are dynamic concepts. In their latest forms, states are seeking common ties for socio-economic development and security. This cooperation enables states, at least ostensibly to develop by way of sidestepping hostile trends and mistrust, if any. Accordingly, all nation states, whether developed or developing are forging cooperation to accrue larger benefits.

Likewise, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) came into being in 1980 with Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka as founding members with an aim of developing regional, political and economic ties. Later, Afghanistan joined the forum in 2007. About 30 years have since passed but SAARC has yet to achieve its desired objectives. In comparison to other regional blocs, especially ASEAN, SAARC has been unable to accomplish any meaningful headway.

Since Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, socio-economic and political development has faced various challenges. As a regional bloc SAARC has largely remained ineffective and keeping in view its less than desirable performance, it is debatable if it can promote socio-economic development in Bangladesh.
CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF BANGLADESH

Socio-economic development in a society is a measure of indicators, such as GDP, life expectancy, literacy, infant mortality, malnutrition, population growth, health, agricultural productivity and poverty level. In the following paragraphs, various socio-economic indicators of Bangladesh are listed:

- **Human Development Index.** HDI is a criterion to understand the development level of any country. The table below indicates Bangladesh’s gradual development of HDI since 1980:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth</th>
<th>Expected years of schooling</th>
<th>Mean years of Schooling</th>
<th>GNI per capita (2011 PPP$)</th>
<th>HDI value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>0.356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1,301</td>
<td>0.386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1,469</td>
<td>0.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1,688</td>
<td>0.468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2,025</td>
<td>0.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2,660</td>
<td>0.546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>2,793</td>
<td>0.559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>2,954</td>
<td>0.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3,082</td>
<td>0.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3,191</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table-1: Bangladesh’s HDI trends

- **Life Expectancy Rate.** Bangladesh’s male life expectancy rate is 69.29 years and female life expectancy rate is 73.26 years and as of 2016 it ranks 157th and 152nd respectively in the world.

Graph-1: Life Expectancy rate in Bangladesh
• **Education Rate.** Presently in Bangladesh, primary education is free, compulsory and even free books are supplied to all students throughout the country up to higher secondary level. Moreover, female education up to higher secondary level is also free. In addition, government has steadily increased the budget on education sector. In the last budget for fiscal year 2015-16, government allocated 17% for education expenditure. Literacy rate of Bangladesh is 61.5% as of 2015.

• **Income Index.** In the last few years, Bangladesh has made progress in reducing poverty, which declined at an annual rate of 2.5% from 1991 to 2010, exceeding the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of 2.1%. The rate of reduction between 2000 and 2010 (1.7% annually for the upper poverty line) was faster than the previous decade. In the following tables, GDP per capita income and GDP growth rate of Bangladesh in last few years are mentioned:

![Graph-2: GDP per capita income (US $) of Bangladesh](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GDP (%)</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GDP Growth (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table-2: GDP Growth rate of Bangladesh
Bangladesh has graduated to the World Bank’s lower-middle-income category from a low-income category in 2015. The country experienced steady growth in the 2000s and boosted its per capita income. Its income from 2.8% in 1970s to 6% in the 2010s, and per capita income increased from US $90 in 1973 to US $1314 in 2015.

- **Health Condition.** During past 40 years, Bangladesh has made improvements in life expectancy, child health and disaster preparedness. In the two decades between 1990 and 2010, under-five mortality rate has fallen by more than 60%, while infant mortality and neonatal mortality have declined by around half. The under-five mortality rate (46 deaths per 1000) in Bangladesh is lower than India (51 per 1000) and Pakistan (86 per 1000).

Bangladesh has seen reasonable progress in socio-economic sector. But it is still a developing state. To achieve further improvement in ranking the country will have to increase its literacy rate, food productivity, reduce child and woman mortality rate and reduce poverty.

**SAARC AND ASEAN**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a political and economic organization of ten Southeast Asian countries. It was formed on 8 August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Afterwards, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam were included in the association. It was aimed at accelerating economic growth, social progress, and socio-cultural evolution among member states alongwith protection of regional stability and opportunities for member countries to resolve differences peacefully. The graph indicates intra-trade relations with respect to ASEAN and SAARC countries.

![Graph-3: Intra-Regional Trade Share between ASEAN & SAARC](image)
The overall success of ASEAN can be narrowed in following aspects:

- Effective leadership in ASEAN member countries.
- Primacy of economic interests.
- Rising above political differences.
- Public opinion from the populace.
- Political will of member nations.
- Institutional support from the ASEAN secretariat.
- Multilateral approach with other international bodies.

**IMPEDEMENTS**

Impediments faced by SAARC are enumerated in the following paragraphs:

- **Inter-State Disputes in South Asia.** Major obstacles that have rendered SAARC as an ineffective regional organization are mistrust, insecurity perceptions and inter-state hostility.

- **Fear of Indian Domination.** Indian desire to participate in the regional talks as an unquestionable leader has caused concerns among the neighbours particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The political, diplomatic and economic analysts opine that this as a major hindrance in looking forward towards any cooperative engagements.

- **Low Literacy Rate, Lack of Awareness & Weak Economy.** Most of the SAARC members are developing nations and their literacy rate is not encouraging (except Sri Lanka). Thus it failed to create adequate awareness among the populace for greater socio-economic development in the region.

- **Absence of Inter-State Trade.** Weak financial positions reflected through the trade imbalances between states have encouraged nations to opt for extra-regional relations and trades.

- **Poor Port & Transport Infrastructure.** Delays in transit due to road and port congestion and customs procedures (non-tariff barriers) raise export costs. The limitations encompass both physical (e.g. lack of cargo/ship handling equipment) and non-physical infrastructure like excessive and cumbersome border clearing procedures.
Asymmetry between India & Member Countries. In SAARC, there is economic, technological and demographic imbalance among India and other member states. India holds more than three quarter of regional GDP and technological infrastructure and two thirds of the global exports of the region.

Graph-4: Major problems of SAARC hindering Socio-Economic development of Bangladesh

Graph-5: Causes of Mistrust/ Less Cooperation among SAARC members

REQUISITE MEASURES AND REFORMS

To improve the level of trust and political will of the member states, more interaction among politicians, beyond the SAARC summits, is needed. More active inter-parliamentary
group meetings, exchange of young leaders from political parties would provide significant outcomes. The role of social, electronic and print media needs to be reformulated to increase awareness in this region. Various scholarship programs may also be planned under the SAARC education curriculum.

Sincere efforts for protecting the interest of smaller nations, confidence building measures, removal of visa restrictions, removal of Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs), improvement of ports/harbours for effective transit facilities in favour of land locked states and formulation of common currency should be pursued.

Inter-state cooperation on food security, energy transfer, improving literacy rate through SAARC education scholarship curriculum, joint effort for combating epidemic diseases and vaccinations is needed.

Presently, performance of the governing body of SAARC is relatively weak in terms of mandate, institutional and human resource activities. And there is absence of dispute settling mechanism in SAARC’s charter. The secretariat should be reinvigorated to address all these critical issues and reduce unnecessary protocols, conventions which impede meaningful progress. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dhaka should work shoulder to shoulder with her counterpart offices of the region and SAARC secretariat for developing harmonious atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

Inter-state disputes, mistrust and lack of effective leadership are the overwhelming factors which hinder performance of SAARC. Moreover, India’s hegemonic attitude and giant economy compel smaller members to remain dependent on her for trade investments. Low literacy rate, declining life expectancy rate and unpredictable economic growth rate are impinging HDI of SAARC members. Delay in transit procedures, poor road and railway network among the members and non-tariff barriers are major impediments in trade relations. These are major impediments for lack of socio-economic emancipation among the member states of SAARC.

References: