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Report

By

Achal Mehra
Report of the Conference on

Economic Perspectives of SAARC

Dhaka, 19-24 November 1988

Organized by the
Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre
Press Institute of Bangladesh

with support from
The Asia Foundation
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Report prepared by
Dr. Achal Mehra
Workshop Director
AMIC-PIB Conference on Economic Perspectives of SAARC
Dhaka, 19-24 November 1988

REPORT

INTRODUCTION

With the objective of enhancing professionalism in the presentation of economic information, creating better awareness of the problems and opportunities in South Asian countries, aiding understanding and cooperation and promoting the concept of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre and the Press Institute of Bangladesh organized a six-day conference on economic perspectives of SAARC in Dhaka from 19-24 November 1988. The conference was supported by The Asia Foundation, the Commonwealth Media Development Fund, and the World Bank.

The principal objective of the conference was to educate participating journalists from SAARC countries about the economies of their respective countries and those of their neighbours and to upgrade their professional skills. It was designed to deepen the participants’ understanding of the economic environment, the interplay of various economic factors, economic terminology, and economic inter-dependence of nations in a regional and global context as well as familiarizing them with sources of data and the nature and implications of economic trends.

PARTICIPANTS

Fourteen journalists from seven SAARC countries participated in the conference, including six from Bangladesh, two each from India and Nepal, and one each from Pakistan, Bhutan Sri Lanka and Maldives (Appendix 1). All
the participants had substantial experience in the media and either worked on an economic publication or on the economic beat of their publications. They all prepared and presented a background paper on the country's economy at the conference. The background paper comprehensively covered recent economic developments in the following sectors: rural, manufacturing, energy, services, international trade, international financial institutions, economic relations and trade with other SAARC countries and national economic policy.

WORKSHOP FACULTY

Dr. I.N. Mukherjee, Professor of South Asian Studies and author of several books on South Asia served as the moderator of the conference on the first three days. Several eminent economists and academics in Bangladesh served as resource persons, including Dr. Mahbub Hossain and Dr. Atiq Rahman, of the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies, Mr. Rafidul Islam Khan and Dr. Salahuddin Ahmed, Joint Chief and National Expert respectively of the Bangladesh Planning Commission; Prof. Sadrel A.L. Reza, Prof. Mosharraf Hossain and Prof. Ayubur Rahman Byuyan of the Department of Economics at Dhaka University. Mr. N.S. Jagannathan, formerly editor of the Financial Express and currently Editorial Advisor to the Indian Express handled the skills training segment of the conference. AMIC's Senior Programme Specialist, Dr. Achal Mehra served as the Workshop Director. (Appendix 2)

PROGRAMME

The six-day conference was held at the PIB Auditorium in Dhaka from 19-24 November 1988 (Appendix 3).

Inauguration. The inaugural ceremony was held at the Dhaka Sheraton on 19 December before more than 100 invited guests and representatives of the
major media in Dhaka. Opening the conference, Mr. Mahbubur Rahman, Bangladesh's Minister for Information, said journalists as the "bridge" between Governments and the people "can play a vital role in cementing the bond of cooperation among the SAARC countries by projecting their socio-economic developments in their true perspective." He expressed the belief that the seminar would "help the journalists to understand the needs of our time in this region."

**Keynote Speech.** In his keynote speech, SAARC Secretary-General Ambassador Abul Ahsan too asserted that the "Press has an important role in carrying forward the message of peace and progress that SAARC represents... as SAARC must, in the last resort, depend on the support of the peoples of South Asia for its sustenance and future growth."

SAARC, Ambassador Ahsan said, represents a "bold new vision for South Asia: a vision of peace, friendship and co-operation." Journalists, he said, can help realize this vision by mobilizing people around what unites rather than divides the region and by focusing on what is good, constructive and mutually beneficial.

**Social and Economic Development.** At the first working session of the conference, Dr. Atiq Rahman, Senior Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies, discussed the economic characteristics of the countries of South and Southeast Asia, as well as trends in growth rate, poverty and income distribution. He concluded by relating these trends with various economic measures, development strategies and programmes, such as land distribution, industrialization and rural development. He concluded that agrarian and rural reforms had not served to significantly reduce poverty or improve distribution patterns. Growth had been more successful in alleviating poverty, but not in establishing a more egalitarian order. "A successful programme for a more equitable growth and poverty alleviation depends on
correct identification of the poor so that appropriate programmes can be directed towards them for providing maximum benefits for the poor," he said.

**The Rural Economy.** Dr. Mahbub Hossain, Research Director at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, focused on developments in the Bangladesh rural economy in his presentation, which was supplemented with the regional scenario by Prof. I.N. Mukherjee, of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Dr. Hossain noted that 82 percent of the Bangladesh population lives in rural areas and that despite rapid rural-urban migration, nearly two-thirds of the population would be living in the rural areas into the year 2010. He discussed the government's agricultural policy and its impact and trends in rural incomes, which showed a moderate improvement in the 1980s. He attributed this improvement to migration from rural areas, growth in productivity, non-farm labor absorption, diffusion of modern rice technology, and special anti-poverty programmes.

**The Energy Sector.** Noting that economic growth and balanced socio-economic development are closely related to the quantum of energy consumption of a country, Mr. Rafidul Islam Khan, Joint Chief of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, discussed the energy scenario and perspective of SAARC countries, through a case study of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, he said, 70 percent of the total energy need is supplied from traditional energy sources. He outlined the commercial, traditional and alternative energy resources in Bangladesh and projected the country's energy needs to the year 2000. He then focused on the energy policy and development strategy of Bangladesh by outlining a 13 point development strategy. He said that the country had been successful in reducing dependence on imported oil, rural electrification programme, pricing policy, removal of regional disparity, and increase in per-capita consumption of commercial energy. He identified the failures as: development in alternative rural energy sources, reduction in
power system losses, imbalanced development within the power and natural
gas system, disparity in intra-sectoral investment, conservation and
environmental protection and in manpower development. He argued for
increased regional cooperation in the energy area among the SAARC countries
in three broad areas: software development, joint ventures and trade and
commerce.

The Manufacturing Sector. Dr. Sadrel Reza, Chairman of the
Department of Economics at Dhaka University, began his presentation by
discussing the economies, structure of products and trade in South Asia. He
noted that intra-regional trade has been low and declining. He noted that
import policies of all the SAARC countries are generally restrictive and have an
implied bias against imports from within the region. A strategy for promoting
trade in this sector within the region, he argued, would be on the basis of
comparative advantage.

The Service Sector. In his presentation, Dr. Salahuddin Ahmad,
National Expert, Bangladesh Planning Commission, examined the status and
growth of various service sectors in the SAARC countries. He evaluated the
performance of these sectors in the region with other regions in the developing
countries and concluded by analysing policies on the service sector and
potential for regional co-operation for sustained development of the sector in
the SAARC region.

The Economic Impact of Floods. Prof. Mosharraf Hossain, of the
Economics Department at Dhaka University, noted that only one-third of the
1200 million acre feet of water which flow through Bangladesh annually
originate from within the country. Normally 2.6 million hectares of land
surface are inundated every year; during severe floods it is twice that amount.
More than 50 percent of Bangladesh's total land surface is vulnerable to floods.
While no systematic analysis of the economic impact of floods had been
conducted to date, he presented the results of a one-shot survey of some selected flood prone areas conducted by him and some colleagues in 1985.

**International Trade.** Dr. Ayubur Rahman Bhuiyan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, focused on Bangladesh’s external trade relations in his presentation. Foreign trade plays an important role in Bangladesh’s economy, but the share of its trade with South Asian countries was small and falling, he said. The low level of intra-regional trade was not merely prompted by policy obstacles, but because of structural problems as well. He identified these as: narrow range of specialization in agricultural and manufacturing sector; traditional and historical links with developed countries; and use of imported technologies. He also identified several political, psychological and trade policy barriers. His suggestions included, preferential trade agreements, trade agreements, sectoral specialization, joint ventures, harmonization and coordination of plans, etc.

**International Financial Institutions.** In his presentation, Mr. William Bradford Herbert, Senior Operations Officer of the World Bank, began with a discussion on the general economic performance outlook of the seven SAARC countries. The SAARC countries as a whole, have claimed over half of total IDA resources and fifth of total World Bank lending, so far. He discussed World Bank operations generally in the region, but more specifically in Bangladesh.

**SAARC Trade.** This session was handled by Prof. I.N. Mukherjee, as Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Deputy Director of the Bangladesh Institute for Strategic and International Studies, was unable to attend because of illness. His paper was however distributed to the participants. In his paper, Prof. Iftekharuzzaman began by outlining the rationale for regional trade cooperation. He then presented a comparative profile of SAARC and ASEAN. He concluded that trade cooperation among SAARC countries “both intra-regionally and inter-regionally is much below what is warranted by the state of
complementarities and potential opportunities."

**Skills Workshop.** The last two days of the conference were devoted to a skills workshop on conceptualizing and researching economic stories, sources of information, writing the economic story and presentation, editing and use of graphics. The workshop was handled by Mr. N.S. Jagannathan, formerly editor of the *Financial Express* and currently editorial advisor to the *Indian Express*. The objective of the workshop was on ways to communicate economic intelligence to the lay public. Participants undertook exercises on conceptualising, sourcing and researching economic stories, in which they broke up into small groups to discuss story ideas. Their presentation was then critiqued by Mr. Jagannathan. He also listed a broad range of sources, human and documentary for economic journalists in South Asia. He then explained techniques to enliven writing and presentation with the help of several examples from the regional and foreign media.

**Closing Ceremony.** At the closing ceremony, Bangladesh Finance Minister Dr. Wahidul Haque exhorted participants to develop the skills to present complex economic issues in simple language for the general audience. Modern economics is laden with jargon and complex developments, such as differential topology, infrastructural adjustments, etc., he said. Journalists have to be conversant with these latest developments and then to translate them meaningfully to their publics. He later distributed certificates to the participants.

**EVALUATION**

The workshop was generally commended by the participants. On a scale of 1 to 10, participants rated the relevance of the conference to their work at 7.8. In all other categories, such as programme design and content, resource persons' presentations, discussions, workshop facilities course materials and
workshop coordination, they evaluated the workshop at 7 or higher.

Most participants said the workshop had served to considerably expand their knowledge about the SAARC economies. A few of them noted that the conference had helped them put their country's economic problems in a regional context, including such problems as poverty alleviation and structural weaknesses of the economies of SAARC. Most of them found the discussion informative and enlightening and several found the opportunity to interact with each other particularly useful.

The organization of the conference was uniformly commended, although some of the participants felt the conference should have been of longer duration, and a couple of them complained of the conference hours, which from 8 am to 2 pm conformed to Bangladesh office hours.

It was suggested that the resource persons should have been more broad-based, including, for instance, the Bangladesh Bank Governor and the Finance Secretary and that they should have come from all SAARC countries so that focus was not on any one country, but regional. Some participants also complained that many presentations were overly long and academic, limiting discussion time. The contribution of the participants also came in for some criticism from one participant, although another suggested that they did not get adequate opportunity because of the length of the presentations.

Participants suggested that future workshops should be more skill oriented and should include a writing session and field visits. In fact, practical exercises scored the lowest in all categories with the participants. Other suggestions included a focus on specific topics and other areas: single theme workshops tied to field visits; exploration of the potential for regional investments and joint ventures; environmental and human resource development aspects; the pressures imposed by international financial institutions, etc. There was a general desire for more skills training and the use
of more professional journalists as resource persons.

Comments. While the participants' desire for a more broad-based selection of resource persons is understandable, this would require a substantial increase in the conference costs. Likewise, a more intensive training programme would require an increase in the conference's duration, also involving an increased outlay in costs. The complaint of some participants on the length and academic character of the presentation has some validity. Although the resource persons had been repeatedly cautioned to target their presentations to journalists, some of them insisted on delivering very turgid academic presentations. As the moderator, Prof. Mukherjee helped to translate the salient points of such presentations in simpler terms, which several participants commented was very gratifying. Perhaps the only way around this problem is to use specialised journalists for the presentations in the future.