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Opportunities for Educational Diplomacy in South Asia

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ABSTRACT :

The South Asia is at the focus of Post 2015 developmental agenda primarily because of the largest concentration of poor population. Though the region is growing at the rate of 6 % during past 20 years the inequalities are on rise. It is a major impediment in the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The glaring socioeconomically inequalities in the region call for major educational interventions in the region. Open and Distance Learning systems (ODL) have emerged as a viable option due to its potential to smooth out inequalities.

However the growth of these systems has been largely uneven in the region. Whereas some of the countries have been able to develop world class capabilities to design and deliver such programmes, the smaller countries have little policy level sensitization on these matters. The Quality, Scope and Diversity of these programmes make them ideal option for Educational Diplomacy. Regional Cooperation based on ODL can help the South Asia to achieve SDGs. Such soft diplomatic initiatives will build "People to People Contacts", create workforce to Strengthen Trade, develop Mutual Appreciation and Trust in South Asian Communities. Further it will counter the hard diplomatic interventions of developed countries and balance the geopolitical environment of the South Asian region. This article evolves a perspective for networking of ODL institutions for meeting the emerging developmental needs and describes the issues which come across such a networking.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Educational Diplomacy, Satellite, Sustainable Development Goals, SAARC, South Asia, Space Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION :

With one fourth of world population and 36 percent of world's poor, South Asian Region is plagued by major developmental gaps, barriers and bottlenecks (UN-ESCAP, 2017). Despite striking complementarities and similarities the region is least integrated in the world and the enormous potential for Regional Cooperation is largely unutilized (World Bank, 2017). With 614 million people (approx 37% of the population) under the age of 18, South Asia is the most youthful part of the world and education is on the forefront of developmental agenda (The Economist, 2013).

However the region suffers from a weak Human Resource base which seriously jeopardizes its developmental initiatives and slows down its economic growth. The low expenditure for Human Development and increasing expenditures for militarization due to volatile geopolitical environment of the region perpetuates such a condition of the sub region. The inequalities in the region are getting more and more striking which pose a major impediment for the implementation of post 2015 development agenda (Kanbur et al, 2014).

South Asia performs poorly in terms of opportunity which affects the overall socioeconomic scenario of the region (Rama et al, 2015). There has been a major apprehension across the world that rising inequalities in South Asia can potentially affect the pursuit for Sustainable Development Goals. The economical deprivations largely stem from their poor capacities, geographical remoteness and poor infrastructure in such areas. It has prevented the people to productively participate in the economic growth of the region which implies that the global achievement of the SDGs will not be possible without South Asia achieving them (UN-ESCAP, 2017). It is difficult for the Governments to initiate mass capacity building programmes primarily due to scarce resources. Furthermore the target groups cannot participate in conventional systems of education due to their livelihood pursuits. Open and Distance Learning systems due to their innovative and flexible systems of delivery presents a viable opportunity for the National Governments in SAARC countries. However these options have not been sufficiently explored.

This paper is organized as below:

a) The first part gives an overview of the context for Regional Cooperation in South Asia. It further takes up all the SDGs one by one and examines how Open and Distance Learning systems have potential to realize Sustainable Development.
b) The second part gives a chronological sequence of concerns for Regional Cooperation as highlighted by various SAARC summits.
c) The third part gives an account of various opportunities and competitions in contemporary geopolitical environment of South Asia.
d) The last part gives Conclusions and way forward for ODL led socio economic development in the SAARC region.

THE CONTEXT FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

The South Asian region has similar colonial past, shared values, cultural similarity and almost similar socioeconomic conditions which have resulted in similar educational issues (Table 1).

The major segment of South Asian population is dependent on agriculture sector and is largely unskilled, highly vulnerable for shocks and dependant on monsoon based agriculture. Most of these target groups are too vulnerable, almost disconnected from urban based centers of excellences and poorly capacitated to adopt new practices. The people need to be capacitated to adopt new and scientific practices to effectively participate in the process of development. It has been a big challenge to reach out to such disadvantaged population, sensitize them and equip them with necessary skills & scientific knowhow to strengthen their livelihoods. The areas requiring immediate attention are poorly connected by the transport and communication infrastructure and the intended beneficiaries find it difficult to travel long distances to get educated. It is well realized and understood that capacity building systems for such target groups need to be radically different from "business as usual approach". It is well realized and understood that we need to employ "out of box approaches" primarily aimed at helping the people to get knowhow right at their doorsteps at an affordable cost. Open and Distance Learning systems are favorably positioned to address these issues (Sharma, 2005). However despite sincere efforts of the Government the situation on the ground leaves much to be desired. There is an urgent need for development of Human Resources and up gradation of Skills in areas like Education, Health, Agriculture, Rural Development and Business.

Table 1: Various Indicators for South Asian Countries

	Country	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Maldives	India	Pakistan
Demographic Indicators:	Population('000)	29157.1 (2016)	148692* (2010)	757 (2015)	26494.5 (2011)	20966 (2015)	331 (2012)	1210569 (2011)	191710 (2015)
	Population Density	44.6 (2016)	1077 (2015)	19.7 (2015)	180 (2011)	334 (2015)	1053 (2010)	382 (2011)	241 (2015)
	Urban Population(% of Population)	23.6% (2016)	28.76% (2015)	31% (2012)	17.1% (2011)	18.2% (2012)	35% (2006)	31.2% (2011)	77.9% (2015)
Education and Literacy:	Net Enrollment rate in primary education (in %)	77.20%	97.7% (2015)	95.2% (2015)	95.3% (2012)	97.5% (2015)	93.6% (2012)	90.8% (2012-13)	67% (2014-15)
	Literacy Rate (6 and over)(%)	NA	63.6% (2015)	63% (2012)	65.9% (2011)	95.7% (2012)	93.80%	74% (2011)	60% (2014-15)
	Public expenditure on education(% of GDP)	NA	1.85% (2015)	5.1% (2014-15)	3.6% (2010-11)	2% (2015)	8.10%	3.3% (2012-13)	2.1% (2013-14)
Poverty and Inequality:	Population living below poverty line	42 (2007)	24.8 (2015)	12.04 (2012)	25.2 (2011)	6.7 (2012-13)	15	21.9 (2011)	12.4 (2008)
	Human Development Index(2014)	0.465	0.57	0.605	0.548	0.757	0.706	0.609	0.538
	Female Headed Houses(%)	NA	12.7% (2015)	29.3% (2012)	25.7% (2011)	24.3% (2012)	56.1% (2009)	0.1% (2011)	NA
	GDP per capita at PPP USD)	NA	3123 (2014)	NA	NA	3925 (2015)	9332	77148 (2012-13)	NA
	GNI per capita (USD)	NA	1316 (2015)	2431.7 (2014)	737.33 (2014)	3837 (2015)	NA	76188 (2012-13)	1512 (2014-15P)
	Health expenditure as % of GDP	7.4 (2009)	0.7 (2014)	2.4 (2014-15)	1.1 (2011)	1.06 (2015)	8 (2009)	1.4 (2012-13)	0.42 (2015)
	GDP Growth Rate*	3.60	7.30	8.0	7.50	3.20	6.90	7.20	5.28
Communication Network and Access to Electricity:	Fixed telephone lines per 100	0.4	0.6 (2014)	2.3 (2014)	3.13 (2014)	13 (2014)	7 (2012)	2.4 (2013)	1.7 (2013-14)
	Mobile Cellular subscription per 100	39.2	74.3 (2014)	61.6 (2014)	83.23 (2014)	107 (2014)	169.5 (2012)	70.6 (2013)	60.7 (2013-14)
	Internet users per 100 population	3.3	24.2 (2014)	35 (2014)	26.1 (2013)	16.4 (2014)	26.5 (2012)	17.4 (2013)	12
	Household with electricity(%)	25 (2005)	77.9 (2015)	91.5 (2012)	67.3 (2013)	96 (2013)	99.8 (2009)	67.3 (2011)	93.5 (2014-15)
	Household electricity consumption(Kwh per capita)	NA	194.3 (2015)	252.7 (2012)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

SOURCE: Compiled from SAARC Statistics* at http://www.saarcstat.org/node/170 (accessed on 21st July 2018) and Web Site of Central Bureau of Statistics Kathmandu at http://cbs.gov.np/image/data/2016/SAARC%20in%20Figures%202016.pdf (Accessed on 21st July 2018)

The demand for trained manpower in such critical areas of development has been overwhelming. It's difficult for the governments to spend huge amounts of money to respond to such huge training requirements. National Governments have been laying increased emphasis on the need of skill up-gradation, to give them more diversified options of livelihoods and capacitate them without any clash with their existing livelihoods pursuits. The emerging systems of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) having a focus on "Innovation and Flexibility" are ideally suited to meet such requirements. Open and Distance Learning systems can provide opportunities for judicious utilization of the resources and expertise already available in the region.

However the available expertise, infrastructure and resources in all these countries have been markedly different (Nair 2013). There has been a growing realization that such variations in capabilities and resources can be effectively addressed through effective cooperation among SAARC countries. Ever since the SAARC was formed there has been an increasing understanding to address the gaps in the levels of development in these countries. With similarities in educational contexts of these countries cooperation there is a perceived need for sharing of expertise and resources (Dash and Menon,1997).There have been a growing feeling among the Distance Education Communities of SAARC countries to share experiences and insights and collaborate on common issues on developmental concerns of the region. Open and Distance Learning system have come up as a natural option for SAARC countries. Such collaborations can be meaningfully undertaken for course development, course delivery, sharing of infrastructure and training of human resource.

An effective South Asian Collaborative Network of ODL institutions can facilitate such cooperation.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND POST 2015 AGENDA

Table 2 describes how networking of Open and Distance Learning institutions can affect pursuits of South Asian countries on different SDGs.

Table 2: The likely Impact of Open and Distance Learning on various SDGs in South Asia

SDG	IMPACT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
SDG-01 Reducing Poverty	Several studies have proved beyond doubt that education can significantly contribute for poverty reduction (UNESCO 2014 and Fhi360 Report, 2016).The Educational Networking of ODL institutions can significantly enhance the educational outreach in smaller countries. It is expected to significantly reduce poverty.
SDG-02 Reducing Hunger	The educational programmes on agriculture and training can enhance the agricultural productivity. It will in turns reduce hunger and help to achieve SDG-02.There are several ODL based initiatives which can be replicated across the South Asia (UN Solution Exchange). The smaller countries of South Asia can get benefitted by satellite supported capabilities for agriculture extension by India.
SDG-03 Health	The education can significantly influence the health status (UNICEF 2015; UNESCO 2014 and Fhi360 Report 2016).The networking between ODL institutions will enhance educational outreach in South Asia which will have direct impact on the women's health status, incidents of malaria, diseases like HIV, child health and infant mortality.
SDG-04 Quality Education	The Regional Cooperation among ODL institutions will create the sharing of Infrastructure, Expertise and Market for all the countries .It will enhance educational outreach at much reduced cost. The Centers of Excellences can be linked to grassroots through ICT capabilities already acquired by bigger countries. It will ensure the availability of quality education up to remotest areas.
SDG-05 Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women	Women are uniformly disadvantaged across the South Asian countries. Open and Distance Learning systems can transcend the social barriers and enhance the educational outreach for women. Education of women can significantly improve their social status, employment, decision making and income status. It further reduces their tolerance for domestic violence, makes better control over their choice of children and enhances their choice about spousal partner (Fhi360 Report 2016)
SDG-06 Ensure availability and Sustainable Management of Water and Sanitation for All	Studies have shown that enhanced access to education improves the behavior of the farmers for rainwater harvesting and supplementary irrigation technology (UNESCO 2014 and Fhi360 Report 2016).The better access to low cost education right at the doorsteps of the rural population will change their behavioral patterns for Sustainable Management of water and sanitation.

SDG	IMPACT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
SDG-07 Ensure Access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Studies done across the OECD Countries show that people having higher education are more sensitive for sustainable use of energy at household level (UNESCO 2014 and Fhi 360 Report2016).Hence the enhanced access for education through networking of ODL institutions across South Asia can effectively address SDG-07
SDG-08 Promote Sustained Economic Growth	Several studies have documented that there is positive impact of education on GDP (R4D/EAC 2013) ,private returns and productive employment(Fhi 360 Report 2016).Hence South Asian countries can tremendously get benefitted by closing educational divides.
SDG-09 Build Resilient Infrastructure, Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	It is well established that education can significantly enhance the innovation capacity .It can also influence technology absorption processes and diversification(UNDESA 2015 and Fhi 360Report 2016)
SDG-10 Reduce Inequalities	The Education is known to reduce income inequalities (UNDESA 2015 and Fhi360Report 2016) .Further it has also been well documented that unfavorable socioeconomic status drastically reduces access to education.
SDG-11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	The higher educational attainments of people living in cities can enhance the productivity(UNESCO2014) ,can lead to better understanding of disaster preparedness plans(UNDESA 2015) and have better attitude for family planning(Fhi360 Report 2016)
SDG -12 Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns	It is believed that Education can make the people more receptive to adaptation practices. As per a study done among the farmers in 10 African countries , each additional year of education reduced the probability of no adaption practices to climate change by 1.6 % (cited in Fhi360 Report 2016 and UNESCO 2014).
SDG 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	As per a study reported to have conducted in 30 OECD countries (cited in Fhi360 Report, 2016), the better awareness of complex environmental issues can lead to better environmental science performance index. Similarly the studies have indicated that higher level of education can enable people to raise concern for environment (UNESCO 2014).

SDG	IMPACT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
SDG14 Conserve an Sustainably use the ocean, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	In the event organized by United Nations titled "Building ocean knowledge for sustainable development – How science will contribute to achieving SDG 14", it was observed that scientific knowledge on ocean will contribute for the realization of SDG(UNESCO,2017)
SDG-15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	It has been highlighted in (Fhi360 Report 2016) that people having higher levels of education are more likely to participate in protest or demonstration for conserving environment. While giving the reference of "International Social Survey Programme" the report says that the participation rates of people with less than secondary , secondary and tertiary education was 12%,26% and 46 % respectively in such political actions for environment (UNESCO 2014).
SDG-16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies	The (Fhi360 Report 2016) highlights that educated people have increased level of participation in democratic processes .People with higher levels of education show more tolerance towards other religions and face a lesser risk of war and conflict (UNESCO 2014).
SDG-17 Revitalize Global Partnerships	The web site of Global Partnership for Education(GPE 2017) demonstrates through their experiences that global partnerships have intimate functional relation with education.However reports have also shown that the relation between SDG17 and Education needs further research studies.

RISING CONCERNS FOR EDUCATIONAL NETWORKING

Need for development of Open and Distance Learning has been categorically felt in SAARC summit. There has been consistent concern in SAARC summits for networking and cooperation for Human Resource Development (Digital Library, 2018). Further deliberations on SAARC's platform has helped to sensitize member states for the need of sharing of expertise and optimum utilization of resources. These concerns have formed a conducive atmosphere for the cooperation through Open and Distance Learning mechanisms in SAARC countries.

A chronological sequence is given below. Only those points of the declarations have been highlighted which has drawn attention for the need of networking among ODL systems in SAARC nations:

Dhaka Declaration (7-8 December 1985)

It was the first summit of the SAARC nations in which the members states unanimously agreed to accelerate the process of Economic and Social development through optimum utilization of Human and Material Resources (Dhaka Declaration,1985, Para 4).It was also felt that Regional Cooperation is a logical response to the problems faced by these countries primarily because of the common

values rooted in Social, Ethnic, Cultural and Historical traditions of the member states. This contention made in first summit gained more ground in various summits of SAARC.

Bangalore Declaration (16-17 November, 1986)

Member states agreed for common policies and approaches for finding common solutions to the shared problems of different SAARC nations. It was emphasized that there should be greater "people to people contacts" through interchange of scholars /academic/Professionals. It was also resolved to achieve the optimum utilization of resources (human and natural) through increased cooperation keeping in mind complementarities among the economies of SAARC countries. Children were given highest priority with special emphasis on universal primary education and other issues.

Kathmandu Declaration (2-4 Nov 1987)

The summit highlighted the need to build up communications and cooperation with each other at the people-to-people level(Para 22). They further recognized the role of academics, researchers, non-governmental organizations for regional cooperation.

Islamabad Declaration (2-31 December, 1988)

The heads of the states emphasized on the need to cooperate in different sectors including Education. The heads of states decided to launch"SAARC-2000: A Basic Need Perspective" on core developmental issues including Education, Health etc (Para-17). It was further decided that National Perspective Plan be prepared by individual nations which should further be consolidated in to Regional Plan. It was agreed that Human Resource Development is the mean to achieve the developmental objectives.

The countries also felt that social, economic and technical themes be given emphasis by the SAARC Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) programme (Islamabad Declaration, Press Release).

Male Declaration (21-23 November 1990)

The heads of states expressed support for Paris declaration (1990) and programme of action (Male Declaration, 1990, Para 22).The heads of states also noted that millions of disabled persons living in SAARC region requires immediate action to reduce their sufferings (Male Declaration, 1990, Para 24).Male declaration did not explicitly reiterate need for Educational Networking among its member states. However special concern shown for Paris Declaration (1990) indicates SAARC's resolve to utilize Regional Cooperation for Human Resource Development.

Colombo Declaration (21st December 1991)

The member states resolved to attain the target of providing primary education to all children in the age group 6-14 years through sharing of experiences and technical expertise(Colombo Declaration, 1991,para18).

Dhaka Declaration (10-11th April 1993)

The member countries felt that there is a need for exchange of information through networking arrangements in the field of several science and technology disciplines (Dhaka Declaration, 1993, Para 32 and 33). They also showed concern about the need for strengthening of mutual cooperation through sharing of experiences .Members emphasized on the need for more investment in health and education and called for financial and technical support from developed nations and other international organizations (Dhaka Declaration, 1993 Para 20).

Formation of South Asian Forum for Distance Education for Development (SAFDED) (1994-1997)

South Asian Forum for Distance Education for Development (SAFDED) was established during the International Conference on Open University Systems and Development organized at Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) in Feb 1994.SAFDED was an informal platform formed in the workshop. Followed by this a SAARC workshop on Distance Education was held at Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan where it was emphasized that there is a need for greater cooperation among ODL institutions for Human Resources Development and Promotion of Distance Education. Subsequently in Nov 1995, the "International Workshop on Distance Education Initiatives in Teachers Education in South Asia" was organized by Open University of Srilanka which focused on possibilities of improvement in teachers education both at Primary and Secondary levels. SAFDED was given a more concrete form in this workshop. It was further decided that next workshop be organized for training of professionals through distance education in South Asia. This workshop was collaboratively organized by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and SAFDED with the financial support of UNESCO .The workshop focused on potential role of New Technologies and Networking for training of professionals in Teachers Education, Health education, Management Education and Rural Development & Agriculture Education. Further strategies were developed to overcome Socio-Cultural and political constraints which may come across such networking. The workshop also created a semi formal structure of SAFDED and established a network of professionals under the auspices of SAFDED.

Delhi Declaration (2-4 May1995)

The heads of states emphasized on the need to expand opportunities to enhance their capacities (Delhi Declaration 1995, Para 10).

Male Declaration (12-14 May 1997)

It was agreed that Open Learning and Distance Education could play an effective role in meeting regional needs in a cost effective and flexible manner. The leaders have directed the possibility of creation of a Consortium of Open Universities in the region should be explored.

Colombo Declaration (29-31 July 1998)

Colombo Declaration shows concern about low level of literacy in the region and emphasizes that it poses a serious challenge to the economic development and social emancipation in South Asia. Further summit suggested that cooperative efforts are required to eradicate illiteracy (Colombo Declaration, Para 39).The declaration highlights the relevance of Open and Distance Learning systems particularly its potential to provide equitable access to knowledge. The summit declaration further recognizes that substantial expertise is already available in the region which needs to be built upon through a SAARC forum of Vice Chancellors of Open Universities. It recommends that forum should strengthen cooperation for Development of Programmes, Translation of Programmes and Credit Transfers (Colombo Declaration, Para 40).Further plans to carve out the activities of the proposed Forum were also planned in this summit (Colombo Declaration, Para 40). 10th SAARC summit also laid increasing thrust for utilizing telecommunications for socio economic development as well as to promote people to people contacts(10th SAARC summit, Para 46).

First Meeting of the Vice Chancellors (Colombo January 1999)

As a follow up of Colombo Declaration, Vice Chancellors of Open Universities met in Colombo in January 1999 and made recommendations for the establishment of SACODiL to strengthen cooperation in the joint development of educational programs, credit transfers, and promotion of equal opportunities and access to knowledge.

Second Meeting of Vice Chancellors (New Delhi on 2-3 December 2002)

It was decided to operate SACODiL through a rotational Secretariat till arrangements were made to establish a permanent Secretariat. The meeting decided to establish the Board of Governors of SACODiL which had several successive meetings. The First Meeting of the Governing Board of SACODiL was held at New Delhi on January 2005, the Second Meeting in Colombo on 23-24 January 2006 and the third Meeting of the SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) was held in Islamabad in February 2007(SAARC web site). Several matters were discussed in these meetings which included the issues of granting equal status to the degrees/diplomas granted by Open Universities/Distance Learning Institution, creation of SACODiL Resource Centers in Member Institutions/States in the areas of ICT enabled distance education, ODL staff development and training, regional collaborations and networking and innovations in distance education.

Kathmandu Declaration (January 4-6, 2002)

The 11th SAARC summit declaration held at Kathmandu emphasized to exchange information among Universities and mutual recognition of educational institutions (Kathmandu Declaration, Para 28). It further resolved to develop national strategy and action plans to ensure that all children and specially the girl child have access to quality primary education.

The target was set to achieve this goal by 2015.Further the summit gave emphasis to improve levels of adult literacy by 50 % by way of elimination gender disparities (Kathmandu Declaration, 2002, Para 29).

Islamabad Declaration (2-6 January 2004)

The Islamabad Declaration reiterates the use of Information and Communication Technology, to bridge the digital divide and thereby develop the Knowledge Based Societies (Islamabad Declaration, 2004, Para 35).

Dhaka Declaration (12-13 November 2005)

The Dhaka Declaration emphasizes for sharing of experiences and good practices regarding achievement in primary education (Dhaka Declaration, 2005, Para 27).The summit highlighted the need for networking among professional bodies and people to people contact programmes (Dhaka Declaration, 2005, Para 42). The summit also reiterated resolve to pursue Universal Primary Education and also to initiate well planned and focused initiatives on Science, Technology and Higher Education (Dhaka Declaration, 2005, Para 27).

Delhi Declaration (3-4 April 2007)

The summit interalia emphasized on increasing use of ICT enabled projects in education. It further emphasized that telecom infrastructure need to be upgraded to strengthen people to people contacts in South Asia (Delhi Declaration, 2007, Para 14).One of the important decision taken by the summit was the establishment of South Asian University. It also impressed upon the need to strengthen cooperation through Exchange Programmes of Academics, Experts, Policy Makers, Students and Teachers. Further the summit called for inter institutional cooperation and partnerships ((Delhi Declaration, 2007, Para 20)

Colombo Declaration (1-3 August 2008)

The summit called for better connectivity not only within South Asia but also with rest of the world (Colombo Declaration, 2008, Para 7).The declaration further called for enhanced ICT based connectivity. The members desired to expedite the collaborative Heath Care and Education based project (Colombo Declaration, 2008, Para 22) and increased interaction between students (Colombo Declaration, 2008, Para 33)

Thimpu Declaration (28-29 April 2010)

The Thimpu Declaration called for greater cooperation in the Universities for joint programmes, collaborative research and exchange prorammes .Further the summit highlighted that mutual recognition of degrees , credit transfer systems and synchronization of educational curriculum in South Asia(Thimpu Declaration, 2010, Para 25)

Addu City (Maldives) Declaration (10-11 November 2011)

The summit called for synchronization of academic standards, establishment of long term linkages between Universities/Research Institutions/Think Tanks and expeditious recognition of academic and professional degrees(Addu City Declaration,2011,Para 15)

Kathmandu Declaration (26-27 November 2014)

The summit showed concern for reforming curricula, teaching methods and evaluation systems to conform with global goals of education for all. Further it was decided to promote regional cooperation in vocational education and develop a regional strategy to enhance quality of education (Kathmandu Declaration, 2014, Para 17).It was also decided to develop capacities to utilize space technology for experience sharing among themselves. Kathmandu Declaration, 2014, Para 23).

EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA

Huge variations in educational standards, creates a conducive atmosphere for Educational Diplomacy among the SAARC countries. There are drastic variations in infrastructural facilities, academic expertise and policy level experience in these countries. India is advantageously placed due to early starter of ODL system and its successful space programme. While other countries of the region were in initial years of their establishment, India had already got the status of Centre of Excellence in Distance Education. Country has the biggest network of Open and Distance Learning systems which has international recognition and presence. This expertise can be crucial for several SAARC countries which are yet to acquire such capabilities and experiences. It has created a competitive advantage for India among South Asian countries.

During the past few decades, there have been significant advancements in technology development and its applications for poverty eradication, enhancing the access to education, Health care, improving Governance, improving weather forecasting etc. The global commitments like MDGs and SDGs have emphasized upon the use of technology enabled systems to enhance the reach of such services. The Open and Distance Learning systems are therefore increasingly being preferred for Training, Telemedicine, Skill Development in Villages, Good Governance etc. However these opportunities for making a more cohesive South Asia through educational diplomacy have not been sufficiently explored.

The Open and Distance Learning systems can be instrumental primarily due to their flexible, innovative and cost effective nature. Moreover the ODL systems are capable of responding to diversities across the region. It can lead to several additional advantages like better people to people contacts, sharing of best practices and developing an appreciation for underlying cultural unity in the Region which will prove to be immensely useful for making a more peaceful and stable South Asia.

Despite a consistent realization for Regional Cooperation under the umbrella of SAARC, overall geopolitical environment in the region tends to undermine the developmental cooperation among the SAARC member states. Hence despite a positive role to be played by Education Diplomacy in the region, SAARC has not been able to take full benefits of such diplomatic opportunities available to member countries.

SPACE DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA

With the increasing space capabilities acquired by China and India, new diplomatic initiatives have started in South Asia.

There is a growing realization at policy level that space is not just domain of Science and Technology. It needs to be seen from a strategic and foreign policy perspective also (Arora, 2017). It has given new opportunities to smaller countries to strengthen their ODL based developmental initiatives. Diplomatic initiatives to woo their neighbors by two South Asia giants China and India have initiated a hitherto unheard "Space Diplomacy" in the Region (First Post, 5th May 2017).The space communication facilities are offered by these countries under diplomatic initiatives to fulfill its geopolitical ambitions. However it's a good opportunity for the smaller South Asian countries to enhance educational outreach in their countries. Most of the smaller countries have so far been badly in need of one or two transponders but such opportunities were not utilized by successive Governments. The Pakistan and Sri Lanka have very strong dependence on China to build and launch satellites. Similarly Bangladesh has been taking its help to strengthen its space programme. The Bangladesh has been taking help of other European countries to develop launch its satellite next year. Afghanistan has now been extended lucrative help from China. Further China has also been trying to enter in to partnerships with other smaller countries like Nepal, Maldives and Myanmar.

Such developments have given ample scope for India to step in and establish a balance in Space Diplomacy in the Region (Jasola & Sharma, 2007). With India developing more and more reliable and credible facilities to launch satellites weighing nearly 5000 Kg, India can significantly counter the Chinese influence in the region. ISRO's capabilities in low-cost, high-success-rate space launches can be well utilized for the Regional Cooperation and effectively counter growing Chinese influence in Space Race in South Asia. The ISRO has demonstrated exceptional expertise while sending a low-cost orbiter named Mangalyaan to Mars and that of Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) rocket creating a world record by placing 104 satellites into orbit in a single launch (Business Standard 5th May 2017).With all the participating countries getting access to at least one of the Ku-band transponders of South Asia satellite and a communications backbone for a secure hotline linking , all these countries will significantly be benefitted .During emergencies and natural disasters, this facility will prove to a lifeline for them. There are estimates that all these countries will together benefit to the order of $1.5 billion over the satellite's lifespan(about 12 years). The remarkable fact is that the facility offered by India is for free whereas other consortia that jointly operate satellites, are all commercial and for-profit enterprises (Business Standard 5th May 2017).

SOUTH ASIA SATELLITE

In a significant move India launched a 2230 Kg South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9) on 5th May 2017 The South Asia satellite is the major step forward for creating soft influences in India and is likely to initiate a major space race in the region. This satellite has unique capabilities to support communication, broadcasting and Internet services, disaster management, tele-medicine, tele-education and weather forecasting in South Asian region that is geographically challenging and

economically backward with limited technological resources(The Hindu,5th May 2017). This satellite, equipped with KU Band Transponders is designed to provide a range of communication services over the South Asian region (ISRO, 5th May 2017). The India is the only country among the SAARC countries which have developed the capabilities to design, develop and launch the satellites through its own launch vehicles. The move to launch the satellite for the benefit of neighboring countries is being viewed as a major strategic move to take a lead for Regional Cooperation and thereby create soft influences in the Region. It has also been seen as a major diplomatic move to counter growing Chinese soft influences (The Dawn, 5th May 2017).The initiative which, India called a gift to SAARC countries, was well received among most of the SAARC countries except (unsurprisingly) Pakistan. The satellite is expected to offer a variety of services to participating countries like television services, communications technology for bank ATMs, e-governance, and backup for cellular networks, especially in places where the terrestrial connectivity is weak. Though the initiative was largely lauded by the heads of all the SAARC countries as a major effort for Regional Cooperation, the Pakistani Government tried to downplay the initiative refusing to call it a SAARC project (India Today,5th May 2017).The Government of Pakistan further blamed India for not launching the project on collaborative basis (Indian Express,5th May 2017). However, there is an exciting media response which has viewed it as biggest move India has ever made in space diplomacy (First Post, 5th May 2017).

All the participating countries will get at least one free transponder for enabling services ranging from disaster management to internet connectivity. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal are already involved in the Project. Though Afghanistan badly needs satellite connectivity as its existing satellite (Afghanistan -1) is going to complete its normal life.

The satellite connectivity can help this country to operate its television channels, gain access to mobile telephony and internet connectivity. However despite having given encouraging response, the Afghanistan has not yet signed for the satellite's services (First Post, 5th May 2017).That could be due to some arrangements for more comprehensive satellite services which Afghanistan had developed with China at heavily discounted cost.

The South Asia Satellite converges the interests of all the South Asian Countries like Regional efforts in humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations (HADR), weather monitoring, Need for collaborative maritime awareness and telemedicine projects championed by India. South Asia is a disaster prone region, where a regional satellite would enable a region-wide response. It became evident after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that India alone in the region possessed the capacity, capability and will to lead such a response. South Asia being the disaster prone area and India having acquired significant level of capabilities to handle such disasters positions India favorably to lead collaborative weather forecasting, study of effects of global warming and regional telemedicine projects (Business Standard 5th May 2017). The smaller countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives and Sri Lanka are not technologically advanced to develop their indigenous capabilities which create a conducive situation for all these countries to collaboratively work and handle the issues of common concern (Financial Express 5th May 2017). As emphasized by the Prime Minister of India in his popular radio programme "Man Ki Baat"(5th of May), the South Asia Satellite will prove to be a boon for the region as it can address South Asia's economic and developmental priorities ranging from Natural resources mapping, telemedicine, the field of education, deeper IT connectivity or fostering people to people contact.

Among all the countries which the South Asia Satellite aims to benefit, Bhutan and Maldives will be the biggest beneficiaries. The rest of the countries have their own upcoming facilities space programmes (NDTV, 5th May 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Despite the repeated concerns shown by various SAARC summits, not much seem to have begun on the ground (Lama, 2000). The role of SAARC has increasingly come under sharp criticism in research literature (Lama, 2000). Such a criticism is primarily due to poor follow up, monitoring and impact of the concerns shown by SAARC.Moreover initiatives for Regional Cooperation have largely remained confined to summit discussions and failed to generate policy level impacts in member states.

However everything is not grim about the role of SAARC.There has been an overall consensus in the region that Sharing of Expertise, Development of Human Resources and Optimum Utilization of Resources need to be promoted among the nations. Education is one such area which can bring the SAARC member states close and get benefitted by each other's expertise.SAARC has emphasized in various summit declarations to encourage such projects. Such a consensus has given rise to a feeling that Open and Distance Learning can be instrumental for the development of South Asia. The region severely lacks capacity to handle the problems and infrastructural facilities are limited. The countries spend insignificant share of their budget on education. The inadequate infrastructure, poor expertise for various sectors of development e.g. Health, Education, Engineering, Management, Business etc have seriously jeopardized the developmental initiatives of Government in various SAAARC countries. The knowledge explosion in all these disciplines has further necessitated the in-service training requirements at various levels which is again difficult primarily due to lack of expertise.

There is a dire need to make educational delivery innovative and accessible to such new aspirants of knowledge, Open and Distance Learning therefore emerged as obvious and natural choice for the region. However despite the fact that SAARC has initiated several ODL based initiatives, it could not take them to logical conclusions.

Learning from Pioneers of the ODL systems

The deep rooted similarities in the socio economic conditions create a conducive situation for collaboration among distance Learning Institutions of SAARC region. There are big role players like IGNOU which have acquired significant experience of practicing distance education in a heterogeneous and challenging situation like India. There are several success stories and also not so success stories which present a crucial knowledge base for future Open Universities of the region. The countries which have not yet started utilizing Open and Distance Learning systems have a crucial advantage to learn from the good as well as bad experiences of those who have started earlier. Hence it gives rise to viable option for such countries to collaborate with pioneers of ODL systems in the region. However such initiatives have not been adequately undertaken. There is a need to encourage the networking between various role players, document their experiences and thereby benefit the upcoming ODL institutions. Documentations of good practices have not been sufficiently done which has prevented such a networking in the region.

Technology Enabled Cooperation

Modern Communication Technologies particularly Transport, Communication and Information Technologies have led to the shrinking of geographical distances and created great opportunities for interactions and networking. It can lead to new possibilities for Regional Cooperation in the field of Education and Human Resource Development (Singh, 1997).Hence Modern Technologies can be an exciting opportunity to link the Centers of Excellences in SAARC region to the areas which are cut off from mainstream development. Satellite Technologies offer great opportunities due to its cost effectiveness, easy maintenance and wider coverage. Despite their tremendous scope to cover the entire region this possibility has not been fully utilized. The satellite based networking has led to good results within India at various places. There is tremendous amount of experiences available in India which can be fruitfully utilized for setting up such networks in other SAARC countries. Further such networks can also be utilized for community sensitization activities on health, nutrition, child care, governmental schemes, teachers training etc. An international network of satellite interactive terminals across the SAARC countries will bring the people closer, will help to share expertise and ultimately build up much needed psychological atmosphere for peaceful South Asia. Such a satellite based infrastructure will help to share good practices, develop human resources and develop mutual appreciation for each other's problems. The sharing of experiences will be useful as the countries which have already gained experiences in similar socioeconomic conditions can be fruitfully utilized by other smaller countries.

Reaching Out to Children in Conflict Ridden Communities or Disaster Prone Areas

One of the major problems being faced by South Asian countries is poor access to quality elementary education. Various declarations of SAARC summits have been consistently showing their concerns in this matter (SAARC Summits Declarations). The situation is more aggravated in conflict ridden areas or the vulnerable regions for natural disasters (UNICEF, 2009).The conventional infrastructure in such areas is not only weak but also gets destroyed by such adversities. The social barriers further compound such problems. Open and Distance Learning systems can lessen the hardships in such areas through innovative technology enabled interventions, teachers training programmes(in situ) and quality self learning materials(UNICEF,2009).

Such systems, due to their innovative and flexible nature have done quite well in terror affected areas to benefit the disadvantaged groups (Hasan and Pandey, 2018). The practice followed by institutions, their experiences and expertise can be immensely useful in other similar regions of SAARC. However such platforms for sharing of expertise are not available. Open and Distance Learning systems can offer viable networks of professionals of interactions in region which will benefit the people to enhance the access to education. Distance Education can drive mass education in the region so that knowledge does not remain monopoly of the few privileged segments. It will smooth out inequalities and help to progress towards realization of Sustainable Development Goals.ODL systems can therefore turnout to be instrument for structural transformation of the region.The inequalities if allowed to persist in the region can be a major security threat for SAARC nations.

Emerging Possibilities through South Asia Satellite

"South Asia Satellite" carries special relevance in the emerging security situation in the region. Further it can effectively counter and the increasing presence of hard diplomatic influences of developed countries having major strategic interests in the area. The population growth, the peculiar demographic pattern, poor capacities of the people and shrinking resource base of the region has implications for peace and stability in the region.In a report published by Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change, (Ghazi, Muniruzzaman and Singh 2016) have interestingly related the issues of climate change and security concerns in South Asia. The development of capacities through partnerships and collaboration will create a contusive situation for regional cooperation. The south Asia Satellite will prove to be crucial in this regard. Climate change may aggravate the mass displacement across the international borders in SAARC countries. The problems of environmental refugees have already started appearing. The satellite based networking will be crucial for a positive diplomatic environment between these countries. The biggest unique feature of South Asia Satellite is that it's absolutely free and takes care of common strategic interests of the participating countries. It would have cost the participating nations almost $1,500m (BBC, 5th May 2017).Though the country has effectively addressed growing influence of China through this satellite. However , in this space race , China already has the first-mover advantage.

Space Diplomacy: Crucial Opportunities Smaller Nations

South Asia has seen increasing diplomatic activities between China and India with space as foreign policy tool (Hazarika and Mishra 2016).

India and China have been competing to exercise their diplomatic influence in the smaller Asian countries(Palit and Palit 2011). China's "One Belt One Road initiative" and India's recent South Asia Satellite initiative (ISRO,2017) and ongoing efforts for the National Development in Afghanistan are examples of competition between these two Asian giants. With the new Government to the power in 2014, there has been a consistent policy thrust in India to enhance its space capabilities and use it as an instrument to create soft influences in the region. The space capabilities are increasingly being utilized by these countries to woo their neighbors and thereby attain strategic advantages. It has created enough opportunities for smaller countries to take benefit of Chinese and Indian expertise in satellite communications and develop a strong Open and Distance Learning system in their respective country. Open and Distance Learning systems certainly can act as soft power in South Asia. However it has not been utilized sufficiently.

Sharing and Networking for Sustainable South Asia

Though the SAARC could not fulfill its mandate, the issues highlighted through summits have prompted unofficial initiatives or bilateral collaborations among the nations. Some of the initiatives like South Asia University and Tele-Medicine Networks are commendable. It has been rightly observed that the SAARC region can progress only through mutual cooperation. However its vast potential for development of Open and Distance Learning in the region can be explored only in a wider perspective of collaboration and networking. It will require a broad vision truly based on South Asian consciousness.

A more cohesive and cooperative South Asia can grow fast sustainably, make optimum utilization of its resources and can smooth out inequalities. Regional Cooperation is therefore a compulsion of the times we are living in.

A non cohesive South Asia is likely to perpetuate the systems which perpetuate poverty, will breed inequality and make development unsustainable. However, with better cooperation countries can share resources sustainably, foster a sense of common destiny and mutual belonging and bring about peaceful coexistence.

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