

## POLITICS, TOURISM AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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### Abstract

*The paper analyzes the impact of political problems and overall regional political environment on the process of regional cooperation in the field of tourism in South Asia. It explores the problems and prospects of tourism expansion in South Asia, mainly in the regional cooperation perspective being carried out under South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It highlights the potential benefits of diverse nature that can accrue to South Asian Countries (SACs) through growth of international and regional tourism. It also identifies several kinds of tourism that present immense potential for regional cooperation, including adventure tourism, religious tourism, social tourism, cultural tourism, sports tourism, eco-tourism and leisure tourism. The paper surveys the SAARC actions, policies, and activities aimed at promoting tourism in the region and it analyzes their effectiveness. It also examines the present situation of tourism in South Asia and investigates into the factors and forces that impede its growth. Finally, the paper analyzes how the impediments to growth of regional tourism are linked to bilateral ties of SACs and the overall political environment in South Asia.*

### Key words

South Asia, Regionalism, SAARC, Tourism, Growth, Conflicts, India.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism is a vital area that can substantially enhance “people-to-people contacts,” expand economies of South Asian countries (SACs) and promote interdependence among them. In a rapidly integrated world, international tourism is considered as one of the most vital economic and social phenomena that can have immense social, economic and political effects on people’s lives. The world witnessed an astonishing growth in regional and global tourism since middle of the twentieth century. Reportedly, overall number of international tourist’s arrivals rose 32 fold in a period of 55 years, i.e. from 25

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million in 1950 to 808 million in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Advancement in transport facilities and information related technologies, availability of knowledge about tourist resorts, removal of restriction on people's movement across national borders, economic affluence, business activities and social and religious factors have helped growth of tourism in the world.<sup>2</sup>

SACs possess most of the features capable of captivating domestic, regional and international tourists with immense potential to help them to achieve economic growth at higher rate, alleviate poverty and provide job opportunities to millions of their youth and unemployed people. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) after recognizing this very fact from the onset had included tourism in its agreed areas of regional cooperation. It charted out action plans and devised various sorts of activities to promote tourism in South Asia. However, these efforts produced meager results. Still SACs lag far behind than many states and regions of the World in terms of overall number of tourist arrivals and earning from this sector. Despite huge prospects of growth of tourism in South Asia, the region could not exploit its potential to its fullest.<sup>3</sup> It necessitates a systematic study to explore the prospects of and the problems including the political factors that impede growth of tourism in South Asia. The present study ventures to accomplish this task.

The study has been divided into five parts including the first one being introduction. The second part defines and elucidates the importance and kinds of the concept. Third part surveys the potential and prospects of tourism in South Asia. Fourth part surveys the SAARC programmes and activities undertaken to promote tourism in the region. It also delves into the factors that impede growth of tourism in South Asia. The section also analyses as to how the overall regional political environment particularly the bilateral relations of SACs and Indian policies in the region affected growth of tourism in South Asia. Fifth part concludes the paper.

## **2. Tourism: Kinds and Importance**

According to "the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs," tourism is a "social, cultural and economic phenomenon related to the movement of people to places outside their usual place of residence, pleasure being the usual motivation."<sup>4</sup> "The United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO)" describes it as a social, economic and cultural phenomenon that involves people's movement to states or "places outside their usual environment" for professional, business or personal reasons. These people are known as

“visitors” who include excursionists or tourists; non-residents or residents. Tourism is related to visitors’ “activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.”<sup>5</sup> It includes people’s activities who tour to and stay in places outside their normal milieu for “not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited.”<sup>6</sup> The visitor’s activities “may or may not involve a market transaction.” They might be similar to or different from the activities usually performed in visitors’ normal life routine. If these activities are similar, their intensity or frequency may be dissimilar.<sup>7</sup> Tourism is different from travel and as such all travels do not necessarily mean tourism. Generally, the following three measures are used to typify a travel as tourism: 1) it entails a dislocation from the usual milieu; 2) the journey can transpire for any purpose, and; 3) it can be for a maximal period of one year, but no minimum duration is required. Tourism journey can be “with or without an overnight stay.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2.1 Importance of Tourism

In the contemporary world, tourism has enormous significance due to its far reaching economic, social and political benefits. It has multifaceted and multiplier effects. It can help promote culture, values, traditions and other elements of soft power of host country besides bringing various social, economic, developmental and environmental benefits, particularly to less developed and backward but scenically attractive areas.

Tourism has become very important element of services sector of modern economies and is a quite complex activity. It has multiplier effects on the economy and it can directly and indirectly boost economic growth, help increase national wealth through earning valuable foreign currencies and supporting the balance of payment situation of countries. Tourism development possesses huge economic spillover effects, as it can pace up economic growth, enhance government revenues and augment foreign exchange reserves, contributes quite significantly to poverty reduction, raising people’s living standards, and generating employment opportunities in different parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> It stirs up economic activities in a number of other but related sectors, such as retails, accommodation, hotels, restaurants, transports – land, sea, air – banking, catering and beverage, recreation and excursions, food production and supply and other areas of agricultural, and industrial sectors besides directly contributing to revenue and employment generation including housekeeping and tour guides etc.

Tourism also has social, cultural, political and environment benefits. Prudent expansion and management of tourism contributes significantly to preservation of indigenous culture and conservation and protection of local environment. It also helps strengthen local identities and national pride and preservation of distinct values and native cultures. It encourages the local people and authorities to conserve and protect environment, such as forests, water and other natural resources that attract visitors and tourists to these destinations. Socially, it helps to increase people-to-people contacts among nationals of different countries and improves mutual knowledge and understanding, remove suspicions, distrust and misunderstanding and contributes to spread of novel ideas and beliefs in the world. Contacts with visitors inspire social progress and change among local people. Notably, through enhanced “people-to-people contacts” international tourism promotes mutual understanding and trust among nations, and, thus, serves as harbinger of regional peace and security.<sup>10</sup>

## **2.2 Potential Negative Consequences of Tourism**

Tourism can have some negative consequences as well which need to be avoided or addressed with proper planning and adequate strategies. For instance, tourism can lead to price hike, increase in cost of goods and services that can adversely affect the economic lives of local people. The jobs associated with tourism industry may be seasonal and temporary in nature and also underpaid. Socially, tourism may have some adverse impact on local culture, traditions and values and can introduce crimes and immoral things, such as use of drugs, alcohol, sex crimes and prostitution etc. It can also damage the natural environment due to construction of hotels, restaurants and shopping centers on cultivable land or by removing forests etc. and causing congestion, crowding and air pollution because of increased traffic, overuse and erosion of natural resources that can ultimately compromise the quality of lives of native people.<sup>11</sup>

## **2.3 Kinds of Tourism**

Tourism can be of various kinds such as domestic and international; the latter includes inbound or outbound travel. Further, it can be regional or global one. On the basis of purpose of travel, tourism can be categorized into various types. Most important and common among them are listed below:

1. Leisure tourism that involves travel for pleasure-seeking, excursion, rest, relaxation and sightseeing at some hill station, beach, island and picnic resort etc.

2. Social or family tourism involves journey to visit relatives and friends etc. on different occasions of happiness or otherwise, generally for interpersonal reasons.
3. Religious tourism involves travel for pilgrimage and visit of holy places and sites such as shrines and places of worship of different religions all around the world.
4. Cultural tourism entails tours aimed at exploring diverse cultures, customs, traditions, dressing, dance, jewelry, music, arts, architectures, fairs, festivals and cultural exhibitions etc. of various regions particularly people from contemporary folk societies in different parts of the world.
5. Educational tourism involves journey to acquire knowledge and to discover several aspects of the culture and diverse systems of the host country. It sometimes also include students and educational exchange programmes, training, research and capacity building initiatives, foreign scholarships of short period and study tours as well as sponsorship of specialized lectures by eminent scholars and distinguished personalities.
6. Health or medical tourism comprises of travel, domestic or international, for medical treatment and health reasons due to distinct and better medical facilities or low cost advantages.
7. Sports tourism include journeys to participate or view and entertain various sports events including international cricket and football matches, such as FIFA World Cup, Cricket and hockey tournaments, and Olympic Games besides regional and bilateral sports events etc.
8. Business tourism involves foreign or domestic visits related to one's work, such as to attend conferences, seminars, business meeting, conventions, exhibitions, and exploration of supply markets and for marketing and selling of products etc. Business tourism is also known as meeting, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism.<sup>12</sup>
9. Adventure Tourism involves activities and actions that mix experience of excitement with actual or perceived danger and risk to the extent of potential loss of life and / or injuries etc. Trekking, rock climbing, mountaineering, rafting, caving and paragliding etc. are the examples of adventure tourism.<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Prospects of Tourism Development in South Asia**

South Asia has huge potential with wide range of prospects for tourism development and enjoys all essential features with the potential of becoming a main tourists' destination in the World. The region is

rich with physical, biological, religio-cultural and civilizational diversities that provide great potential and broad prospects for the growth of diverse kinds of tourism including eco tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural and religious tourism.<sup>14</sup> For instance, SACs are home to some of the most eye-catching places on earth including the World's tallest mountain peaks, deserts, rivers, mangrove areas, swamplands, neat and clean sea beaches, grasslands, hill-stations, forests, archeological, historical and religious sites, as well as variety of delicious foods and generous people.<sup>15</sup> The social, cultural, historical, and religious affinities of the masses across national borders and even beyond South Asia could magnetize considerable number of visitors to SACs.<sup>16</sup>

There exist enormous potential of regional social, religious and eco tourism in South Asia. A huge number of people and families who became divided and lived away from each other after partition of subcontinent in 1947, seek to meet up their relatives and families or trip their native lands in bordering countries. Religious places, shrines and cites of worships of people from diverse faiths are located in different states creating an immense prospects of religious tourism in South Asia. Remarkable economic development has produced a sizeable middle class in some of SACs in the recent past which can afford to visit neighbouring nations for leisure, sightseeing and recreation. The growing commerce and trade links among SAARC members have enhanced the prospects of business or economic tourism.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, SACs have a rich heritage of traditional medicines and some of them, particularly India have modern and quite better medical facilities, on lower or affordable prices as compared to those in the developed countries, which create prospects for medical tourism. Regional or bilateral sports events such as South Asian Games, Asia Cup cricket tournament or bilateral cricket and hockey matches series etc. provide immense potential for growth of sports tourism.

#### **4. Tourism Development and Regional Cooperation**

Being aware of its magnitude and significance, SACs took numerous regional, sub-regional and unilateral enterprises to promote tourism. They strived, in their individual competencies, with dissimilar results, to catch the attention of tourists from around the globe. A few of them, such as India and Maldives, accomplished a number of achievements in the recent years.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, international donors, including "the Asian Development Bank (ADB)" also acknowledged the enormous potential of this vital area and as such provided aid for tourism development through regional and sub-regional projects. For

instance, since 2002, ADB extended around US\$20 million in “concessional loans” and US\$3 million in technical assistance grants annually for sub-regional projects for the growth of tourism sector to “the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC)” which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In 2009, ADB further approved US\$ 0.45 as technical assistance for development of Economic and religious tourism in SASEC.<sup>19</sup>

Numerous factors necessitate transnational cooperation to promote tourism as it could attract tourists from within and outside South Asia and pace up the development process in the region. In fact, regional tourism contributed a great deal in the growth of this sector in other parts of the World. Reportedly, around 66 percent tourists in “the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 70 percent in “the Common Market of the Southern Cone (MERCOSER),” and 55 percent in “the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)” come from their respective regions, i.e. Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific, correspondingly.<sup>20</sup> However, the situation is dismal in case of South Asia. For instance, a study suggested in 2010 that India and Pakistan – two main members of SAARC – had annual tourism trade of about US\$ 15 million which they could raise up to US\$ 155 million per annum by easing visa procedures and improving interconnectivity.<sup>21</sup>

## **5. SAARC and Tourism**

SAARC members were cognizant of the multifaceted potential and importance of regional cooperation in tourism sector that could help create regional identity, enhance mutual understanding and boost their economies. They noted that tourism could “promote people-to-people contacts,” magnetize regional and global tourists and contribute to the process of regional economic development, poverty reduction and employment generation.<sup>22</sup> In 1986, second SAARC summit underlined the need of taking concrete measures to facilitate and develop tourism. In 1991, SAARC created a technical committee on tourism (TC–Tourism) which in its very first meeting convened in Colombo in October 1991 devised an “Action Plan on Tourism.” In 1999, SAARC entrusted the task of promoting tourism to “the Tourism Council of Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SCCI)” but sooner it realized the importance of the subject and decided to compliment SCCI’s activities in a public – private partnership. In January 2004, thus, SAARC Council of Ministers in its twenty-fourth session decided to form a Working Group on Tourism (WG–tourism) under regional integrated programme of action (RIPA).<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.1.1 Involvement of Civil Society and Exchange Programmes**

SACs acknowledged from the beginning that the growth of tourism, enlarged participation of civil society organizations and increased interactions among their citizens was crucial for growth of South Asian regionalism. They underlined the need of promoting frequent exchanges of academics, businessmen, scholars, writers and artists etc. They noted that promotion of tourism as well as cultural exchanges and enlarged participation of professional groups and NGOs could augment extensively to create “the SAARC spirit” and develop “regional identity.”<sup>24</sup>

Second SAARC summit approved a number of proposals aimed at increasing people-to-people contacts and promoting regional tourism that included: extending South Asian tourists the facility of restricted convertibility of national currency; granting access to researchers, scholars, and students to data on developmental, scientific and technical matters, chiefly by the “regional documentation center” capable of serving as a data bank; promotion of relations among members’ academics, scholars and students; launching of scholars exchange programmes, creation of SAARC fellowships, scholarships and chairs; and engaging youth in development programmes predominantly through introduction of “Organized Volunteer Programmes” which provided that volunteers from any of SACs could work in any other SAARC member in agriculture and forestry sectors. Subsequently, SAARC successfully launched its “Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarship scheme” and “the Youth Volunteers Program.”<sup>25</sup> SAARC also underscored the need of portraying jointly South Asia as a “single tourist destination”<sup>26</sup> and decided to begin organized tourism program, effectual from 1991.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, SAARC decided to enhance participation of business community, professional groups, NGOs and civil society organizations, and also to increase “youth exchange programmes” in the fields of arts, sports, culture, and tourism.

#### **4.1.2 Travel Facilities and Special SAARC Document**

In 1986, SAARC decided to commence a “travel voucher system” for growth of regional tourism in South Asia.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, it introduced “the Special SAARC Travel Document (SSTD)” that exempted entitled people from the visa requirement for touring South Asia. The scheme which became effectual from 1st of March 1992 was originally applicable for the Supreme Courts’ judges, national parliaments’ members, and national educational institutions’ heads along with their spouses and dependent children. Sixth SAARC summit

emphasized the need of extending the scheme to embrace other groups of people, and consequently, it was expanded to cover 24 categories of people including dignitaries, parliamentarians, senior officials, higher courts' judges, journalists, businessmen and sportsmen etc. Meanwhile, SAARC also underlined the need of simplifying and easing up travel procedures especially for pilgrims, journalists, eminent persons, artists, intellectuals, and other professional and private groups.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4.1.3 Improvement of Travel Linkages**

SACs identified various barriers to growth of regional tourism and agreed to overcome them. They noted that lack of adequate linkages among regional countries, paucity of people's involvement particularly that of professional bodies, NGOs and private sector groups were among the main problems. SACs realized the need of linking their capitals to each other through direct air services. They agreed to engage their "civil aviation authorities" and to convene meetings of their national air lines' heads to facilitate regional tourists.<sup>30</sup> In 1997, first SAARC Tourist Ministers meeting, convened in Colombo, decided to pronounce special regional fares, ease visa requirements for pilgrims and tourists, develop air and other travel links, strengthen private sector participation in promotion of tourism, and enhance collaboration among tour operators.<sup>31</sup>

#### **4.1.4 Plan of Projecting South Asia as a Common Tourist Destination**

WG-tourism ventured to identify and prepare various proposals, programmes and activities in order to promote tourism in South Asia. In 2004, WG-tourism in its first ever meeting convened in Colombo, proposed numerous recommendations with regard to: tourism development programmes; sustainable growth of Eco-Tourism, Cultural Tourism and Nature Tourism; launching of exchange programmes; and deepening cooperation and coordination with international and regional tourism organizations.<sup>32</sup> It devised an action plan to promote eco and cultural tourism as well as to project South Asian identity and to develop human resources in order to draw more tourists to South Asia. Later on, WG-tourism was tasked to regularly review the progress on the action plan. WG-tourism in its second meeting held in Colombo in July 2006, prepared recommendations to promote South Asia as a "common tourist destination" that included: national airlines of SACs should use SAARC logo and promotional brochures; national airlines of SACs should use SAARC flags besides their national and airlines flags at their offices; heads of the mission representing SAARC chairs should organize events to observe SAARC

Charter day aimed at promoting tourism in South Asia. SACs also organized several SAARC Travel and Tourism Fairs on regular basis. It declared 2006 as “South Asia Tourism Year.” Meanwhile, SACs decided to charge each others’ citizens entrance fees, into their heritage and archeological places, equal to the rate applied for the people of the host country.<sup>33</sup>

Earlier, thirteenth SAARC summit had underlined the value of youth exchange programmes in sports and culture, facilitation of travel among SACs and creation of linkages among regional professional bodies to strengthen people-to-people contacts and help promote tourism. Fourteenth SAARC summit reiterated these cherished goals and called for increased contacts and exchanges of parliamentarians and members of civil society in the region. In general, SAARC summit meetings repetitively underlined the need of building infrastructure and air connections, simplification and harmonization of regional administrative requirements, enhancing training and joint projection of South Asia as a “common tourist destination.”<sup>34</sup>

#### **4.1.5 SAARC Action Plan on Tourism (SAPT)**

In May 2006, second SAARC Tourist Ministers meeting, convened in Cox’s Bazar Bangladesh adopted a comprehensive “SAARC Action Plan on Tourism (SAPT).” However, a number of the programmes stated in SAPT were reiteration of such initiatives announced in the past. The Ministers announced the programmes that intended: to connect members’ capitals through direct air services; to ease visa requirements for regional tourists; to engage private sector individuals and organizations; to promote programmes for human resources development (HRD); to project South Asia as a “single regional identity;” to promote eco and cultural tourism, and; to create contacts and collaborate with international and regional tourism development organizations.<sup>35</sup> Fifteenth SAARC summit reaffirmed to take every measure to implement SAPT and to facilitate people’s movement through better regional connectivity and improved infrastructure, to strengthen HRD programmes and to promote SAARC as a “common tourist destination” through joint campaigns and public-private partnership. Third SAARC Tourism Ministers meeting held at Katmandu in January 2011 reviewed the progress on implementation of its previous decisions and SATP. It noted with satisfaction that SACs had already implemented most of its decisions.<sup>36</sup> They agreed to project the region as Destination South Asia at global level through private sector participation. Eighteenth summit directed the concerned bodies

to initiate public–private collaboration for effective and full implementation of SAPT.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4.2 Tourism in South Asia: Present Situation**

SAARC members made too high claims and lofty promises to develop regional tourism but did too little to materialize them. Several of the programmes and initiatives decided by them were either symbolic or of little significance. If and when some substantial steps were announced they were rarely put into practice. For instance, the decisions to simplify visa regime and ease travel restrictions, improve regional connectivity and enhance people–to–people contacts and pace up interactions among people from various folks of life were not implemented. If something was done that was cosmetic or symbolic with no substantial impact on overall situation of tourism in South Asia. Most of the activities and programmes carried out by SAARC had little practical efficacy, if any. The present state of tourism in South Asia clearly reflects this reality. Reportedly, around three–fourth of visitors currently tour the region for conventional or leisure tourism, i.e. for sightseeing and pleasure. Most of other features of tourism are yet unexploited.<sup>38</sup>

Despite some unilateral gains by some of SACs, the overall situation of tourism in South Asia is dismal. Several indicators reflect the true picture of tourism in South Asia. The total share of SACs in the World's tourist market is minute. In terms of overall tourist arrivals and income from tourism, South Asia stood far behind than other regions such as North America, Europe, and East Asia and Pacific. It was even ranked below the Middle East and Africa.<sup>39</sup> Reportedly, SACs attract just about one percent of the overall World's tourists. For example, out of overall 800 million and 898 million international tourist arrivals globally, only 8 million and 9.7 million came to South Asia, in 2005 and 2007, correspondingly.<sup>40</sup> South Asian share in global tourism is about 1 percent, i.e. US\$ 5.4 billion out of total US\$514 billion.<sup>41</sup> Though, in the recent past there was some improvement in their receipts from tourism, still the share of SACs in terms of per capita receipts in global tourism market has been very low. Reportedly, SACs' per capita receipts from tourism has been lowest in the World, i.e. US \$6, and a country like Thailand earned far higher from tourism than all SACs combined. Thailand's per capita income from tourism stood US \$ 157, i.e. 26 fold greater than that of all SACs combined. Similarly, tourism market share of SACs in the Asia–Pacific region is smaller than that of Thailand. The latter's tourism market share stood

7.9 percent weighed against former's 7 percent share in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>42</sup>

South Asia recovered gradually in terms of tourists' arrivals since 2010 after global economic crises of 2009 that had further undermined the growth of tourism in the region. There was over 12 percent growth in tourists' arrivals in South Asia in 2010, and plus 8 percent in 2011.<sup>43</sup> In 2012, growth in tourists' arrival underwent a decline. Since then, there has been a steady growth in tourists' arrivals as well as in earnings from tourism in South Asia. For instance, there was plus 4 percent growth in tourists' arrivals in SACs in 2012, while it grew by plus 5 percent in 2013 and plus 7 percent in 2014. Meanwhile, there was over 8 percent growth in income from tourism in the region in 2014.<sup>44</sup>

Tourism sector could not contribute significantly in the economies of SACs except the Maldives, both in terms of its share in their overall GDP or creation of employment opportunities.<sup>45</sup> Tourism contributes far less to the GDP of SACs as compared to those of other regions particularly of some of the Southeast Asian nations. The data of the last two years, i.e. 2014 and 2015, are worth citing. In 2014, tourism's direct contribution to Indian economy was 2.2 percent of its GDP and its overall contribution (direct and indirect) was 6.7 percent of its GDP. The figures remained 4.3 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively for Nepal, 2.9 percent and 6.9 percent, respectively for Pakistan, 4.8 percent and 11.1 percent for Sri Lanka, and 1.9 percent and 4.1 percent for Bangladesh.<sup>46</sup> The same statistics were 13.5 percent and 29.9 percent for Cambodia, 8.6 percent and 19.3 percent for Thailand and 5.7 percent and 14.9 percent for Malaysia in 2014. In 2015, tourism's direct contribution to Indian economy was 2 percent, and its total contribution was 6.3 percent of its GDP. In the same year, these figures remained 4.6 percent and 10.6 percent for Sri Lanka, 4 percent and 8.1 percent for Nepal, 2.8 percent and 7 percent for Pakistan, and 2.4 percent and 4.7 percent for Bangladesh. On the other hand, these figures were 13.5 percent and 29.9 percent, respectively, for Cambodia, 9.3 percent and 20.8 percent for Thailand, 6.6 percent and 13.9 percent for Vietnam and 4.4 percent and 13.1 percent for Malaysia. Among the five SAARC members, whose data is available, only Sri Lanka stands somewhere near to these countries.<sup>47</sup>

SAARC members stand far below in the list of 184 countries of the World on the above criteria. In 2014, Sri Lanka and Nepal were ranked at no. 61 and 66, respectively, in terms of tourism's direct contribution to their GDP and at no.70 and 101, respectively, in terms of tourism's total contribution to their GDP. Pakistan, India and

Bangladesh ranked at no.113, 138 and 151, respectively, in the World in the context of tourism's direct contribution to their GDP and at no. 125, 130 and 168, respectively, in terms of tourism's total contribution to their GDP.<sup>48</sup> In 2015, Sri Lanka stood at no. 64 and 76, Nepal at no. 82 and 114, Pakistan at no.115 and 128, Bangladesh at no. 138 and 165, and India at 153 and 142 among 184 countries of the world. On the other hand, Southeast Asian nations rank far higher than SAARC members, For instance, Cambodia stands at no.16 and 19, Thailand at no.24 and 34, and Vietnam at no. 40 and 55, respectively. It is worth noting that India is ranked among the top countries of the World in terms of real and overall contribution of tourism to its GDP.<sup>49</sup> These facts naturally lead the one to conclude that SACs have not been able to completely exploit their tourism potential.

### **4.3 Barriers To Regional Tourism in South Asia**

SACs could not fully exploit the prospects and benefit from the opportunities to promote tourism due to various factors. There exist several administrative, procedural, infrastructural, social and political barriers that undermine the prospects of tourism development in South Asia. There are several factors that prevent or discourage tourist arrivals in SACs from within and outside the region. These factors are briefly discussed below.

#### **4.3.1 Administrative, Procedural and Infrastructural Impediments**

There exist a number of barriers to people's free movement across the borders that impede growth of regional tourism in South Asia. For instance, SACs generally have "restrictive visa policies," and a few of them only provide for city-wise authorization with police reporting procedures. These practices are most prevalent in India and Pakistan which discourage each others' citizens from travelling to them mostly for security concerns. Besides, the staff and "visa-processing system" in SACs is generally incompetent and aloof towards growth of tourism.<sup>50</sup> The wretched communication and transport contacts, by roads, railways, air, and sea and internal waters, mainly hindered the free movement of people across national frontiers. Even the established rail and road facilities, especially between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – that in combination form 97 percent of region's entire GDP and population – were not wholly used because of assorted border restrictions.<sup>51</sup>

SACs do not present tourists' friendly milieu at majority of their railways and bus stations and air-and-sea ports etc. The weak interconnectivity, poor facilities and inadequate infrastructure,

compounded with relatively higher consumers' rates in restaurants and hotels, troublesome currency convertibility mechanism, information deficit, negative regional image in the outside world, and bad law and order situation in a number of areas adversely affect tourist arrivals in South Asia.<sup>52</sup>

#### **4.3.2 Security and Safety Related Problems**

The safety and security related issues also discourage tourist arrivals in South Asia. Several foreign countries most notably the US and European nations generally issue, from time to time, travel advisories for their citizens directing them to not travel to some of SACs or any particularly area therein because of interstate tensions, public turbulence, political volatility, bomb blasts, terrorist assaults, frequent strikes, political violence, ongoing insurgencies and civil wars, etc. Most of SACs generally stand poorly on the global safety and security index.<sup>53</sup> These factors discourage local and regional tourists from visiting the troubled areas and adversely affect the tourist industries of SACs.

The growth of tourism largely depends on better law and order conditions and healthy peace and security situation in a region. The unabated wave of violence, unrest and political instability and terrorist activities in different areas of India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, affected negatively tourists' arrival to these destinations. For instance, tourist arrival fell by one-half in three years between 1999 and 2002 mainly due to Maoist insurgency in Nepal.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, civil war in Sri Lanka and insurgencies and terrorism in India and Pakistan hit badly the growth of tourism in these countries.<sup>55</sup>

#### **4.4 Regional Political Environment and Tourism**

Some of the factors that apparently impede growth of tourism are not the real causes but effects of some other factors, mainly political issues. For instance, a large amount of the restrictions imposed on people's cross-border movement, including long and complex "visa procedures," police reporting mechanism, and city-specific visa regime etc. are the consequences of political problems, mutual suspicions, fear of subversion and terror threats which in some cases are the outcomes of unsettled political problems, bilateral disputes or support for cross-border insurgencies. These bilateral problems and political disputes mainly cause resentment, misunderstanding, suspicions and distrust among regional states which in turn and as a consequence of these factors erect barriers to free movement of people. In fact, free movement of people is conditioned to good, normal and friendly

relations among SACs that depend on amicable resolution of outstanding disputes, avoidance of interference in each other internal affairs and abandoning support for insurgencies and terrorist groups operating in neighbouring countries. Some of the above mentioned problems are linked with Indian policies in the region and its behaviour towards others SACs.

India has contributed to or aggravated some of these problems. For instance, India has direct conflicts and bilateral disputes with most, if not all, of its smaller neighbours. Some of smaller regional countries (SRCs) face internal disturbance and insurgencies, reportedly with Indian support, that cause security related issues for the concerned state and bedevil its bilateral relations with India that impede arrival of potential visitors from within and outside the region. For instance, India had supported Tamil revolt in Sri Lanka that not only deteriorated its bilateral ties with Colombo but also badly affected the process of socio – economic development including growth of tourism in the country. India also has a hand, behind Maoists' insurgency in Nepal and current wave of terrorism in various parts of Pakistan. India support to terrorist activities in Pakistan has also severely curtailed growth of tourism in the country.<sup>56</sup> Hence, Indian policies and actions towards its neighbours are seemingly also contributing factors to obstructing tourists' arrival and growth of tourism in South Asia.

The political problems and border tensions also adversely affected religious tourism in South Asia. Especially, Indo-Pakistan tense relations since the Modi government came into power in India impeded free movement of pilgrims across the border. In the recent past, New Delhi recurrently refused to grant visa to Pakistanis intending to visit Muslims shrines and other religious places in India.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, New Delhi stopped hundreds of Hindu and Sikh pilgrims from coming to Pakistan due to political tension with Islamabad.<sup>58</sup> This shows the extent how political environment overshadow each and every shade of life and prospects of transnational cooperation and people-to-people contacts in South Asia.

Nature of bilateral relations, particularly tension in Indo-Pak ties have adversely affected sports tourism in South Asia. Cricket is the most popular game in the region and bilateral cricket series have provided nationals of both India and Pakistan to travel each other's countries to see matches between their teams. For instance, in 1955, during India's first tour to Pakistan, Wagah border was for once left open for Indian spectators. Reportedly, 10,000 Indians had come to watch a test match at Lahore, and many more living in Amritsar were permitted to "cross back each night to their homes." Similarly, in 2004,

about 20,000 Indians were given visas to visit Pakistan to watch matches during Indian tour to Pakistan. Next year, Pakistani team toured India during which a large number of Pakistan got the opportunity to visit India.<sup>59</sup> However, political problems overshadowed sports in South Asia, particularly ties between India and Pakistan. New Delhi has declined to allow its cricket team to tour Pakistan or even to play scheduled bilateral cricket test matches series at a mutually agreed neutral venue. India has refused to send its team to Pakistan since 2008 in the background of Bombay incident and in the last four years or so it has also decided to not play any bilateral cricket series with Pakistan. Recently, India has announced to not play cricket with Pakistan even in the multilateral events such as Champions Trophy or World Cup etc. Reportedly, India has increasingly strived to politicize its sports ties with Pakistan that badly affected growth of sports tourism in South Asia.<sup>60</sup>

Regional countries spend too much on their defense and weaponry, thus, dragging each other into a costly arms race, and leaving too little for their socio-economic sector particularly to invest on infrastructure development essential to facilitate and promote tourism. Some of regional countries have to increase defense expenditures due to internal armed conflicts, civil wars and insurgencies backed by India. The case of Nepal and Sri Lanka besides Pakistan is worth citing. India has also instigated conventional and nuclear arms race in South Asia that forced Pakistan to spend on its defense beyond its means in order to keep minimum deterrence and to meet any security challenge from New Delhi. High defense expenditures divert valuable resources away from socio-economic sector thus leaving too little for development of various important sectors including tourism.<sup>61</sup> A cut or at least moratorium on defense spending can help save resources to invest on infrastructure development necessary for growth of tourism. Failure of regional states to limit arms buildup and defense expenditures ultimately adversely affected the efforts to promote tourism in South Asia. This failure is obviously linked with India's policies towards its smaller neighbours in South Asia.

India, being the most developed and biggest regional country in terms of its size, population, GDP, military might and economic resources coupled with its largest middle class and most advanced tourism industry in the region, might play a central role in growth of regional tourism. Besides, it could significantly contribute to help ensure regional stability, peace and security by showing its willingness and sincerity towards amicable resolution of regional political

problems, bilateral disputes, conflicts and contentious issues that would ultimately prepare the ground for elimination of restrictions on free movement of people that impinge upon the growth of tourism in South Asia.<sup>62</sup> Late Rajiv Gandhi, a former prime minister of India, had once stated that “SAARC will start becoming a tangible reality when the people of South Asia find that, without let or hindrance, they can travel around the region.”<sup>63</sup> However, his country did not do enough to realize his dream. In order to make such dreams true, it was essential to do away with the obstacles to growth of tourism, and in fact, many of them were the upshots of persistent bilateral disputes of SACs and regional political problems, mostly centered on India. New Delhi needed to take the lead in the process of removing these barriers. Conversely, India did not assume the role expected of it in order to promote, facilitate or actively participate in any possible process of amicably resolving its political problems and bilateral disputes with other SACs. India’s policies and behaviour towards its neighbours naturally create distrust and mutual suspicions that mainly cause erection of barriers to the free flow of people in South Asia. India did not take any serious moves to allay the fears and apprehensions of its neighbours that was vital for growth of tourism in South Asia.

It is worth mentioned that leaders of SRCs recurrently cautioned that durable regional cooperation in any field would require conducive political environment in South Asia that would not be possible in presence of outstanding political problems and lingering bilateral disputes among SACs. They were of the view that these problems and issue would continue to bedevil overall regional political environment overshadowing any prospects of meaningful cooperation among SAARC members. They underlined the need to adopting some conflict resolution mechanism and provision for deliberating upon contentious issues, political problems and bilateral disputes of members states at SAARC forum in order to put the process of regional cooperation on solid foundations. However, India persistently opposed such demands claiming that cooperation in functional areas, enhanced trade and increased people-to-people contacts would help overcome these problems and thus process of regionalism would get its own momentum. The above analysis, however, suggests that Indian perspective was unrealistic and its claims were hallow as New Delhi itself was not serious or sincere to move regional cooperation process forward. The failure of SAARC to promote regional tourism in South Asia and regional cooperation in this field has affirmed the primacy of politics in South Asia. Political problems, contentious issues, and bilateral disputes haunt process of regional cooperation while political

preferences of ruling elites and overall regional political environment can and does determine the scope and pace of regionalism in South Asia.<sup>64</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

SACs possess vast potential of growth of tourism that can help them to stimulate and pace up socio-economic development, earn and increase valuable foreign exchange reserves, generate employment, ameliorate poverty, increase people-to-people contacts, develop mutual trust and understanding, create regional identity and strengthen their bilateral ties and improve overall political environment in the region. Besides taking unilateral and sub-regional measures, SACs under the framework of SAARC took various initiatives to promote tourism in South Asia with scanty results. There exist several administrative, procedural, infrastructural and political barriers that prevent tourists' arrivals to SACs from within and outside the region. Most of these factors are, however, actually effects of some other issues and not the real causes of impeding tourism in South Asia. They are the consequences of nature of relations among SACs, mostly characterized by mutual suspicion, mistrust, resentment, tensions, arms buildup, power show, occasional border skirmishes and hostilities etc. This state of affairs naturally hinders growth of tourism but stems out of long standing and unresolved political disputes and political problems among SACs. The situation is accentuated due to arms race, nuclear buildup, intervention or support of insurgencies in neighbouring countries by New Delhi and politicization of sports and culture by India.

The failure on the part of SACs to promote regional tourism because of assorted reasons including a range of factors associated for the most part to the nature of bilateral ties of SACs most notably between India and SRCs have once more confirmed the primacy of politics in the process of South Asian regionalism. It has shown that track –III type diplomacy would not work in the context of South Asian politics and regional political environment would continue to undermine every effort of promoting regional cooperation in various fields including tourism. Unless, SAARC members overcome political problems and amicably resolve their bilateral disputes and contentious issues, they cannot make substantial progress towards regional cooperation in any field.

SAARC members, particularly India, need to realize the bitter realities of South Asian politics and come up with the courage to remove the root causes of all problems that hinder regional cooperation.

The efforts to put hot issues on the back-burner or in the cold storage generally backfire and thus need to be adequately resolved. SAARC needs to devise a mechanism and provide its members a forum to deliberate upon and find solutions of their political problems, contentious issues and bilateral disputes that would pave the way for lasting peace, stability and harmony among its members that is vital for any significant progress towards regional cooperation in various fields including tourism in South Asia.

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