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**RAJIV GANDHI AND SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
REGIONAL CO-OPERATION (SAARC)**



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**ABSTRACT**

*The idea to establish a regional grouping in South Asia can be traced back to the year 1977. The idea of South Asian co-operation was proposed by the Bangladesh President Late Zia-Ur-Rahman in course of his good will visits to several South Asian countries. The issue was broached with the Indian leaders when he (Zia-Ur-Rahaman) visited India in December 1977 and his visit was returned by Prime Minister Morarji Desai on April 15-1, 1979. It however could not be anticipated that the Janata rule in India was on its*

*way out. Subsequently when Mrs. Gandhi came back to power in January 1980, Bangladesh leader approached her on the subject. The formal launching of SAARC through the first Summit of the seven Heads of States or Government of the region in 1985 was the culmination of a long and strenuous process. The path to the summit was smoothened by five years of meeting of officials and foreign ministers.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Rajiv Gandhi, SAARC, ministers, PM, Model*

**RESEARCH PAPER**

India considered launching of SAARC as an historic opportunity to overcome the contentious bilateral, political disputes with her neighbours through regional cooperation in economic and

cultural fields. The First SAARC Summit generated high hopes and expectations. The launching of SAARC was seen as not only a logical outcome of a global process of regionalism but also holding promise of a wider Asian grouping in future.

Mr. Rajiv Gandhi made it a point to improve relations with all neighbours through regional cooperation. He attended and actively participated in four SAARC Summits. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in his speech in the First SAARC Summit held at Dhaka 1985 asserted that the South Asian cooperation was an important step towards realising the larger Asian consciousness. MR. Rajiv Gandhi expounded Indian policy towards regional cooperation in South Asia when he said: "Certainly we have problems and difficulties and these do impose constraints on us. Enduring cooperation is cooperation adapted to the realities of our condition. The model we have evolved for ourselves is a model which is in accord with our realities, our compulsions and our genius. We have not sought to melt our bilateral relationships into a common regional identity, but rather to fit South Asian cooperation into our respective foreign policies as an additional dimension"

Mr. Rajiv Gandhi also emphasised involvement of the people in regional cooperation efforts when he said: "Above all, let us involve our people in every facet of our activity, South Asian Regional Cooperation, must be a people movement, involving the hearts and minds of our people" it was in this context that he explained that the objective of South Asian cooperation was towards the attainment of collective self-reliance and to strengthen the forces of multilateralism and world-wide cooperation.

The second SAARC Summit held at Bangalore in November 1986 provided an opportunity to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi to reiterate the Indian Policy objectives in SAARC when in his speech he said: "Ours is not a political association. We have much to gain from peace, progress and stability in our neighbourhood. This is the logic of our working together" Mr. Rajiv Gandhi while talking of non-political nature of SAARC also mentioned the logic of South Asian nations working together as the 'gains' to be achieved through peace, progress and stability. There seemed to be an apparent contradiction in these assertions since peace and stability could not be achieved without political harmony and shared strategic perceptions.

In the Third Summit held at Kathmandu in November 1987. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi wanted to expand the scope of cultural cooperation and bring on SAARC agenda, on the issue of cooperation in trade. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in his address to the Third Summit expressed that "There is also much more we can do in the area of culture, especially forms of culture which draw in large number of people as participative spectators'. We might consider a South Asia

Festival which brings together from all parts of our region a diversity of arts and crafts, poetry and songs, dance and drama, and traditional sports.

India wanted to underline the political dimension of the regionalism in South Asian when, Mr.Rajiv Gandhi explained India's viewpoint on the implications of regional cooperation beyond the stipulated area. He said; foremost it fosters a sense of regional identity, a sense of shared density. This adds a second common dimension to our respective foreign policies. The first, of course, is the membership of each of our countries in the non-aligned movement. SAARC is thus taking shape as a factor in determining our place in the world, collectively as a region and individually as independent countries. In a broad perspective, such regional understanding is a positive political development."

Mr.Rajiv Gandhi in his address at the Fourth SAARC in December 1988 expressed his frustration at the slow pace of growth of cooperation among SAARC nations. One of the basic reasons for Mr.Rajiv Gandhi's frustration probably was lack of cooperation in the core economic areas, particularly trade. This was reflected in his statement; "We also need to strengthen linkages between ourselves to give us strength, individually and as a region. This calls for increased economic exchanges within our region, covering the gamut of economic activities from agriculture to industry-infrastructure, technology and human resource development. Economic cooperation must lie at the heart of a regional cooperation.

Mr.Rajiv Gandhi tried to measure and assuages the apprehensions of the smaller SAARC Member Countries, regarding India's undue advantage on account of size and economic potential. He also said that India has no hesitation in declaring at the outset that it is fully conscious of its special obligations and special responsibilities. He further clarified that India will not seek to secure any unfair advantage at the expense of any of our partners. Indeed, the interests of none of us can be secured by damaging the interests of any one else.

### **Rajiv Peace Mission to Maldives**

Maldives is a democratically elected Republic. It is an independent member of the commonwealth. India has very warm relations with Maldives. In 1980's Mr.Rajiv Gandhi followed a dynamic foreign policy in case of Maldives. A notable event in November 1988 was the successful India military intervention in Maldives, one of this country's closet neighbour and friend.

Sudden coup on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1988 at dawn struck the island with awe and horror. The ring leaders of the coup have been identified. Abdullah Lutufee, the coup leader and his collaborates Sagar Nasir and Ibrahim Manik-all three Maldivian exiles living in Colombo,

had long dealings with SriLankan Tamil militants in gun-running and drug smuggling. The hired Tamil mercenaries came in ships, entered the capital city Male unnoticed, took over the radio and television center, cut off the supply of electricity and water. At this Juncture the then President of Maldives Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, made frantic appeals to India, SriLanka, Britan and Oman for help. But India responded within 17 hours. The first Indian plane, load of Indian troops landed in the morning of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1988.

The dispatch of Indian para troopers saved the small republic from the coup. India kept the big power and her neighbours in close touch with the action she was taking at the Maldives President's specific request. The Indian troops successfully completed their mission of driving out foreign mercenaries and restoring control of Maldives republic to the President Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Some armed rebels were captured in the neat operation which was carried out in an extremely tight time frame without a single Indian causality. The Indian paratroopers withdrew soon after restoring peace, though about 500 were asked to stay on, for peace keeping duties, at the Maldives Governments request.

The troopers that stayed on helped the Maldives Government in mapped up and search operation in other islands at the instance of Mr.Gayoom. The Indian action had the support of both Super Powers-the USA and the USSR. The Ambassadors and High Commissioners of the SAARC Countries were informed about it. The Indian Prime Minister Mr.Rajiv Gandhi stated that the decision to send troops was not taken on the suggestions of any other country. It was India's own decision based on the request received from the Maldives President. He further stated that "we informed the friendly countries about it so that they did not have to take similar action".

After the successful completion of the India's military intervention, Maldives President Mr.Gayoom paid a good will visit to India in September 1989, to discuss issues before the coming SAARC Summit, as well as bilateral relations. At the conclusion of his talks in New Delhi with India's Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, The Maldives President Mr.Gayoom was assured of India's full cooperation in providing safeguards against repetition of any coup attempt against his government. The issue figured high on the agenda during the wide ranging talks between Mr. Gayoom and Mr.Rajiv Gandhi was all praise for India's timely help in warding off the threat of the mercenaries. An important decision taken at the talks flowed from India's positive response to the Maldivian request to impart training to its National security personnel in Command. Operations and in the handing of the latest

sophisticated weapons. Mr. Gayoom also made it clear that the Indian troops would stay in Maldives as long as Maldives Government would need them.

### **Rajiv Gandhi's Peace Mission to Sri Lanka**

Rajiv Gandhi's Sri Lanka policy was sound and correct even though it can be argued that the diplomatic and army leadership had perhaps underestimated the real nature and the fighting capacity of LTTE. It was on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1987, that Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and Mr. I.R. Jayewardene signed at Colombo, the famous Indo-Sri Lanka Accord under which India agreed to send its peace keeping force to Sri Lanka to help her fight the menace of LTTE. The agreement was signed after Sri Lanka's attempts to find a military solution to the ethnic problem has failed. The Sri Lanka Government had imposed a controversial fuel ban on Jaffna Peninsula and many other parts of the Northern Province and cut off telecommunications with the peninsula at the dawn of 1987, ostensibly to hamper militant activities. But it was the ordinary people rather than the militants who suffered as a result of the Government's actions. The Government followed up the fuel and communication ban with large scale military operation which culminated in a major security offensive in the Vadamarchi area of peninsula, considered the stronghold of the militants. An estimated 700 people, mostly civilians, were killed in Vadamarchi in the operations which left towns in the area flattened by aerial bombardment. With the people of the peninsula reeling under the combined economic embargo and the security offensive of the Government, India unilaterally air-dropped food over Jaffna in early June 1987, to alleviate the sufferings of the people. India's action followed refusal by the Sri Lanka Government to allow a flotilla of Indian boats carrying relief supplies for the people of Jaffna to enter the island's territorial waters. The Indian air drop was also intended as a "message" to Colombo that it would not allow a military offensive on the thickly populated Jaffna town. The two countries signed the accord less than two months after these developments.

Two days after the agreement was signed on July 31<sup>st</sup> a determined attempt for Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination was made at Colombo by a Sri Lankan naval rating who hit him with the butt of his gun during the farewell inspection of guard of honour. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi suffered bruises on his head and shoulder and could have been killed had he not ducked in a quick reflex action. Throughout the period 1987-89, the agreement was attacked by the Sri Lanka authorities as well as the opposition leaders in India who had their own selfish interest in the politics of South India. The IPKF did a marvellous job in Sri Lanka in the midst of gravest difficulties. They were being attacked not only by the LTTE but also by the Sinhalese

politicians and the opposition leaders in India. Their problem was compounded by the duplicity of LTTE and the political compulsions of Sri Lankan President Mr. Premadasa to get the IPKF out, no matter what the consequences. On the other hand Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's position was that the IPKF could be pulled out only when the Accord was fully implemented by Sri Lanka. After all, India was responsible for the security of Tamils in the Island. At any rate, the withdrawal must be phased. The Government of Mr. V.P. Singh pulled out the IPKF on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1990; nearly three months after Rajiv Gandhi lost the election.

### **Conclusion:**

After his thumping victory in December 1984 election Rajiv Gandhi declared his foreign policy principles, which include like ensuring world peace. Strengthening NAM and SAARC, new world economic order, peaceful coexistence etc. These principles, guided his stand on major world issues. He made recent fewer efforts to call the attention of world community for disarmament. He made special appeals to nuclear fives to put an end to arms race. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi turned the attention of NAM towards the increasingly important economic issues. At the instance of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi a unique multi-billion dollar Planet Protection Fund was created to conserve energy and combat atmospheric pollution in third world countries. He out-rightly condemned the apartheid, which was in existence in some of the African countries. He extended his support to the Independence of Namibia. Keeping in view of the Indian interests and security, he made several international fora, for the declaration of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace Mr. Rajiv Gandhi made it a point to improve relations with all neighbours through regional cooperation. So, he extended whole hearted support to SAARC. To ensure peace and stability in the region, Rajiv Gandhi send Indian troops to neighbouring countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka. His peace mission in case of former proved fruitful but in case of later in proved costly. He lost his life for the cause of peace of Sri Lanka

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