

10th SAARC SILENT ON GRAFT

The key addresses, made to the 10th Annual Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], by the Chairperson, Sri Lanka President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, by the Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif had been focused upon. The 10th Annual Summit of SAARC was to have focussed upon as a priority, fundamentally and primarily on economic issues. The Sri Lanka Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar was quoted to have pronounced – "It will fundamentally and primarily be an economic summit"

Quite obviously, the economic issues that were to have been fundamentally and primarily focused upon necessarily had to be the basic economic issues that pertained to the SAARC countries and nowhere else. It was acknowledged that the SAARC region is the home to one fifth of the entire population of the world. President Kumaratunge, herself, underscored the pathetic economic conditions of the SAARC region, when she stated that a large number of the people in the region lives and dies in abject poverty and ignorance. The Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee espoused the aspirations of the people of the SAARC region stating that the people of the region expect to see economic benefits touch their lives. Is this not a truism?

PATHETIC SOCIO-ECONOMIC PLIGHT

The Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was more focussed on the ground realities pertaining to the socio-economic conditions of the people of the SAARC region emphatically pronounced – "prosperity should not be the monopoly of a few". Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went on to espouse the cause, that the interests and the will of a powerful few should not be allowed to be imposed on the many, who are weak. By implication therefore, according to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, would this tantamount to be an acknowledgement that there is a widespread phenomenon characteristic of the SAARC region, where the interest and the will of a powerful few is being imposed on the many who are weak?

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif further exhorted that the inertia that had kept the people of the SAARC region imprisoned in under-development and poverty must be overcome, or otherwise that they will continue to be enslaved by want and deprivation. Prime Minister Sharif further stressed that if affluent societies do not help the deprived and the under-privileged, that instability and conflict will emerge with turmoil and chaos. President Kumaratunge, herself, had similarly cautioned, that those who are marginalised would give birth to more and more movements of protests, whose destructive violence will resound.

The above in a nutshell summarises the pathetic socio-economic plight of the people of the SAARC region, as acknowledged by the contemporary political leaders of the region, itself. Poignantly, the theme of the Annual Summit having been the economic issues pertaining to the people of the region, from the addresses made to the 10th Annual SAARC Summit by the political leaders of the region, one undisputed phenomenon admittedly conceded and accepted, was the abject poverty of the people of the region enslaved by want and deprivation. What have been the real causes that have resulted in such pathetic situation?

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The above ground realities acknowledged, however, do not pay a great tribute to the political leadership of the people, that had hitherto prevailed in the SAARC region, that has so resulted in the people of the region being subject to abject poverty and being enslaved by want and deprivation. Whilst describing such poor socio-economic plight and conditions of the many of the region, regrettably some of the prime underlying causes for such pathetic plight and condition, however, were not identified and/or analysed, and/or dealt with at the Annual Summit, with a view to correcting and/or rectifying and/or eliminating such causes, that has resulted in a region, where many are acknowledged to be subject to abject poverty, want and deprivation. Why ?

On the other hand, diagnostic studies pertaining to the region carried out by the World Bank have revealed that corruption is pervasive in the countries of Asia and that government monopoly of economic activities, combined with conditions of "political softness", widespread poverty and socio-economic inequalities and systematic mal-administration, provide fertile grounds for corruption, with consequent deleterious, often devastating effect on economic development, corroding public confidence and even favouring the privileged and powerful few. The prestigious Harvard University, internationally acknowledged as the fountain of economic prognosis and diagnosis, in its recent research studies had also determined, that corruption was a major issue causing concern and worry to people.

In fact, the new SAARC chairperson, President Kumaratunge, herself, gave leadership to a crusade against corruption, as a major plank in the People's Alliance government's Presidential Election Campaign in 1994. It was in such background and the high profile focus upon the paramount need to fight corruption, that one of the very first acts of the new People's Alliance government was to enact new legislation on bribery or corruption and to set up a permanent Commission to investigate allegations of bribery or corruption. The public concern decrying corruption being undisputedly acknowledged, the opposition United National Party, under the new leadership of Ranil Wickremasinghe, readily and willingly voted with the government to unanimously enact such legislation in Parliament to deal with the cancerous menace of corruption.

TOLERANCE OF CORRUPTION ?

Given such scenario, is it not incomprehensible and incredible, that the political leaders of the SAARC region, whilst lamenting on the pathetic socio-economic plight of the people of the region, as that of abject poverty enslaved in want and deprivation, that the political leaders of the region, did not consider it fit, apt and pertinent to focus upon the cancerous menace of corruption, that has been deemed to be one of the main causes of such pathetic economic plight of the many, in their deliberations at the Annual SAARC Summit in Colombo, notwithstanding that Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar having reiterated, that the 10th Annual SAARC Summit will fundamentally and primarily be an economic summit ?

On the conclusion of the 10th Annual SAARC Summit, the Colombo declaration had ironically dealt, inter-alia, with the subject of "eradication of poverty in South Asia". The issue of corruption, however, apparently had found no place, either in the deliberations or in the declaration, whereas, one of the main causes of the poverty stricken plight of the people of the SAARC region has been deemed to be corruption according to expert socio-economic research studies. In fact, do not the very words of the Pakistan Prime Minister Navaz Sharif in his address to the 10th Annual SAARC Summit echo and reverberate in this regard, when he pronounced that – "prosperity should not be the monopoly of a few" and that the interest and the will of a powerful few should not be allowed to be imposed on the many people of the region, who are weak and imprisoned in underdevelopment and poverty enslaved by want and deprivation ?

Even the contemporarily fashionable issue of "environment" had found space and place at the 10th Annual SAARC Summit and in the Colombo declaration, but not the crucially and pertinently vitally important issue of corruption that stifles and stultifies economic development and emancipation of the people. Is it not by the growth and the spread of the cancerous menace of corruption, that the powerful few impose their will on the poverty stricken many, who are enslaved by want and deprivation, resulting necessarily in prosperity being the monopoly of a few ? Would not the crusade against the growth and spread of corruption be far more vitally important to the poverty stricken people of the SAARC region, than the issue of "environment" *vis-a-vis* their economic development and emancipation ?

How is it that the issue of corruption did not find space and place at the 10th Annual SAARC Summit and in the Colombo declaration ? Is it that the people of South Asia are destined to be servile and subservient and compelled to survive in a social environment of corruption enmeshed and intertwined with politics ? Is it that contemporary politics in South Asia is so enmeshed and intertwined with corruption, that the cancerous menace of corruption that is deleterious to the socio-economic development and emancipation of the people of the region, cannot be boldly addressed and dealt with, for the greater good and upliftment of the poverty stricken many of South Asia ? But on the contrary, ironically such very poverty stricken socio-economic plight of the people of the SAARC region is being openly lamented, whilst the need to deal with the issue of corruption is not only not being addressed, but also seemingly is seen to be tolerantly ignored.

ECONOMIC DEBACLES & DEVELOPMENT

Is it not in the very circumstances of such very socio-economic turmoil, that at the 10th Annual Summit the political leaders of the SAARC region repeatedly referred to the recent economic debacles and the consequent social predicaments in the neighbouring South East Asian countries ? Has not the cancerous menace of corruption enmeshed and intertwined with politics been identified, as one of the main causes for the South East Asian economic debacles, that have consequently caused socio-economic hardships to the people of the South East Asian countries ? If not, on the other hand, what have been the under lying causes for such South-East Asian economic debacles ?

Even in reference to such recent economic debacles in the South East Asian countries, the 10th Annual SAARC Summit epitomed significant silence on the issue of corruption that has been deemed to be one of the main causes that had led to such economic debacles in South East Asia. The question logically and naturally comes into focus, as to why, the issue of corruption was deftly avoided at the 10th Annual SAARC Summit, even in dealing with the recent economic

debacles of South East Asia, where political leaders have been forced out of office as a consequence thereof ? Has not public opinion erupted in recent times even in South Asia against political leaders on allegations of corruption inimical to public and national interests and some of them arraigned before the judiciary ?

On the other hand, one observes that the growth and spread of corruption is well addressed, dealt with and contained in economically developed countries. Socio-political institutions and legal and regulatory framework are in place and effectively function devoid of political influences and pressures, to deal with the cancerous menace of corruption in economically developed countries. Would it not therefore stand to logical reasoning, that the containment and stifling of the growth and spread of corruption has indeed contributed towards economically developing countries and emancipating the people from poverty, want and deprivation ?

If so, why is it that political leaders in South Asia, whilst publicly lamenting over the poverty stricken plight of the people of the region, are not willing and/or able to strengthen the socio-political institutions and legal and regulatory framework to deal with and contain the growth and spread of the cancerous menace of corruption, so as to improve the pathetic socio-economic plight of the people of South Asia ? Is it because that politics in South Asia is enmeshed and intertwined with corruption, where prosperity is the monopoly of a few and the will of a powerful few is allowed to be imposed on the many, who are weak and enslaved in want and deprivation ?

CORRUPTION AN ISSUE AT ELECTIONS ONLY ?



SAARC Chairperson President Kumaratunga
— Is corruption only an election issue?



Justice Minister G. L. Peiris —
Architect of anti-corruption legislation

Ironically, is it not because that corruption is an issue of grave concern and worry to the people of Asia, that crusades against corruption are espoused as planks on election platforms by politicians aspiring for political office and power ? How is it that such crusades espoused against corruption do not go beyond the election platforms in South Asia ? Is it because that the very

election process to political office and power is so enmeshed and intertwined with purveyors and peddlers of corruption, that once elected to political office and power, political leaders are coerced into compromisingly surrendering to such interests ? Is this the ground reality, whereby crusades against corruption is limited to mere rhetoric and is like the manna promised to the poverty stricken people ?

Has the People's Alliance crusade against corruption also got enmeshed and bogged down in the quagmire of such ground realities ? What tangible results in the eyes of the public have the People's Alliance government achieved over four years, notwithstanding the repeated reverberating rhetoric espousing the cause against corruption ? What tangible results has the permanent commission on bribery or corruption achieved during almost a four year period, particularly under the tenure of the People's Alliance government, that gave birth to the permanent commission on bribery or corruption, which was a major plank on the People's Alliance presidential election platform, espousing the crusade against corruption. ?

Ironically, on the contrary, the public of this country have witnessed a tragi-comedy, where the wheel has turned a complete circle, in that the very permanent Commission headed by a retired respected Supreme Court Judge has made known that there is an inquiry into allegations against the private secretary/personal aide of the Justice Minister, G.L. Peiris, who euphorically presented the very legislation in Parliament to establish the permanent Commission on allegations of bribery or corruption ! The Commissioners have therefore opined, that under the circumstances, that it was not proper for the of Justice Minister, G.L. Peiris to participate in the matter of the People's Alliance government admittedly faulting the permanent Commission for lack of tangible results, whereas on the contrary it was an agency established by the People's Alliance Government, itself, and therefore ought to have been adequately supported to have achieved the desired and required objectives.

One of the very first investigations by the Special Presidential Commission into one of the main cases of alleged fraud and corruption made on the People's Alliance election platform, that of the Hilton Hotel scandal, is yet to be completed, after show cause notices on grounds of fraud having been issued on several persons, after an independent examination by a panel of Architects ! The Justice Minister, G.L. Peiris, himself, had repeatedly assured the public, both within and outside Parliament, that such investigation will be pursued to its conclusion and the wrong-doers dealt with severely under the laws of the country !

In fact, did not the highly respected former Auditor General, P.M.W. Wijayasuriya, one of the very first Commissioners resign as a Member of the permanent Commission, as a disillusioned man, lamenting on the lack of apparent commitment of the People's Alliance government to deal with the issue of corruption ? If not, why did such a highly principled and committed man resign ? Is this not, by itself, an indictment on the crusade against corruption espoused by the People's Alliance, as a major plank on its election platform ? How could the criticism of the comparative performance by the previous United National Party regime be a defence in this regard ?

Is it that, the very investigations into bribery or corruption have caused embarrassment to certain circles in and/or associated with the very People's Alliance government itself, and such investigations have got stymied thereby, in terms of the phenomenon of the ground realities of corruption being enmeshed and intertwined with the complexities of the election process to political office and power and elected governments being coerced by pressures and influences as

a consequence thereof ? Is it not in issue, as to whether the will of the powerful few is allowed to be imposed on the many, who are weak and enslaved in want and deprivation?

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