

PREPARING UNIONS IN SOUTH ASIA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION:

The South Asian Region consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These countries are members of the United Nations, the Non-aligned movement, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC] and the Group of 77 Developing Countries. The paper on preparing unions for the next century, however, concentrates on Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka [primarily because unions are either non-existing or are not allowed to function in the remaining countries].

South Asia accounts for 3.3% of the world's landmass and one fifth of the world population. The size of countries varies from very large (India) to very small (Bhutan and Maldives). Nearly half of the world's poor live in this region. The region has over one and half billion population with a gross domestic product (GDP) merely at about US \$350 billion, as poverty is widespread. All the countries, since their inception, have accorded pivotal importance to development work, still poverty, unemployment, lopsided development and widespread illiteracy continue to be their basic problems. While assessing the trends in development in South Asia, Mahabubul Haq concluded that South Asia is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, and the least gender sensitive in the world.²

Although for the majority income from work is the only source of livelihood, labour issues have receive negligible attention of the concerned authorities. The worker's weak social status and its unorganized nature are primary reasons for this. Consequently, workers' organizations are either ignored or at worst are considered as a disturbing factor. The employers as well as the governments have been treating unions as less than equal partners in progress, in particular during the post-liberalization period.

On the trade unions part, there had been negligible collective efforts to see that the labour issues are included not only in SAARC agenda but also in other regional based activities. The South Asia Region Trade Union Congress [SARTUC], the lone trade union body at the regional level, exists more on paper than in practice.

SOUTH ASIAN REGION SCENARIO

Social Diversity:

The countries in the region have a diverse social character. Pakistan is an Islamic Republic while Nepal is a Hindu kingdom. Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka are secular nations. Over 80% of the population are resident in rural areas and, in the absence of any industry, are dependent on subsistent agriculture for their livelihood. A joint family system, nevertheless is a common feature prevalent in all the nations in the region.

Table 1:

| | Population [million] | Real GDP [\$ billion] | Absolute Poverty [million] | Illiterate adults [million] |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | 1993 | 1993 | 1993 | 1993 |
| World | 5,508 | 30,542 | 1,314 | 853 |
| South Asia | 1,191 | 1,632 | 527 | 396 |
| Share of SA in World (%) | 22 | 5.3 | 40 | 46 |

Source: UN, 1994; UNESCO, 1995 and World Bank 1995 & 1996

The region's population as of 1995 stood at 1.2 billion accounting for about 22% of the world's population. The declining death rates with high birth rates are the principal cause for a rapid population growth. India's population, according to the 2001 Census, stands at 1.05 billion. It is being projected that by the year 2025 the share of this region would increase to 24% of world's population. There is a significant level of intra-region migrations but immigration from countries outside the region is negligible.

The Region has the lowest level of human development records. According to the South Asia Human Development Report, the region's per capita income of \$309 in 1993 is lower than in any other region in the world; the region accounts for almost 40% of the world's poor population; 46% of the world's illiterates; 50% of the underweight children.³ The region has the dubious distinction of being the most militarized. It accounts for the two of the largest armies in the world. India and Pakistan possess nuclear capacity and have declared the need for its inclusion in respective defence armament.

According to UNDP, the rural poverty ratios around 1990 were: Bangladesh 51%, India 49%, Nepal 43%, Pakistan 31% and Sri Lanka 36% of the country's population. Similarly, the urban poverty ratios for the same period were: Bangladesh 56%, India 38%, Nepal 19%, Pakistan 20% and Sri Lanka 15%. The figures accordingly indicate that in South Asia the level of poverty is higher in rural than in urban areas. On health, despite a significant increase in life expectancy, about 850 million people [85%] lack access to even basic sanitation.

600 million people [60%] suffer from malnutrition; about 420 million [42%] are illiterate; and about 48 million children are out of primary school.⁴

Politics:

The region is politically most active. All the concerned countries have democratically elected governments with a parliament as the supreme body. However, in the recent period political instability has now come to be the order of the day in almost all countries, e.g. in Nepal there exists a fragile government appointed by the King; in India the federal coalition government under the Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpai is facing difficult times due to conflicting demands by constituent members; in Pakistan elections have just concluded and a new Prime Minister having support of Islamic clergies and President has just taken oath of office; Bangladesh too is passing through rough tides in so far as their newly founded democratic political system is concerned. Sri Lanka is relatively peaceful after decades of insurgency by LTTE.

The relations between countries in the region are less than cordial. In the case of India and Pakistan, there is long history of tension, as is the case with Nepal and Bhutan [on the issue of refugees]; and also in the case of India and Bangladesh [on the issue of sharing water and Chakma refugees]. Recent positioning of defence forces on the Indo-Pak boarder to check cross border terrorism has escalated the degree of tension between India and Pakistan. There has been a love and hate relationship between India and Nepal on the issue of water sharing [Maha Kali Agreement] as also on matters relating to granting of access to landlocked Nepal.

In the above political scenario SAARC had no doubt played constructive role in improving opportunities for consultation amongst representatives of member countries. Initiatives in the past by leaders of Pakistan and India have resulted in reducing degree of tension between the two countries. The relevance of SAARC in promoting regional cooperation is, however, being questioned. The next meeting of the SAARC, planned to be held during January 2003 in Pakistan, is likely to be deferred due to the reluctance on the part of India and/or Pakistan.

Economics:

South Asia consists essentially of agrarian economies as the agriculture sector, apart from being the largest employer of the workforce, is also the single largest contributor to the nation's GDP. Agriculture, however, is practiced on a traditional basis using generations old tools with a heavy component of labour. Manmade irrigation facilities are negligible. Consequently, economic performance in the region is greatly influenced by weather conditions. Agriculture production in Bangladesh, parts of India and Sri Lanka continues to be affected by severe drought and in Nepal by poor monsoon. Flood too is a common occurrence in the region.

The industrial activities in the region have been preoccupied with primary produce export orientation and import substitution in the background of a rather close economic environment. Average tariffs are high. Trading with other Asian countries are as low as 10 per cent of its export while intra-regional trade is limited to 13 per cent. According to South Asia Human Development Report the export of primary commodities from South Asia floundered because of weak international demand and declining commodities prices. Import substituting industrialization in South Asia was neither efficient nor equitable, as quantitative controls lead to corruption and rent seeking behind high tariff walls.⁵

The share of the sectors in the GDP in 1995 was: the agriculture sector's share varied from 41.9% in the case of Nepal to 19.8% in the case of Sri Lanka; the industrial sector's from 31.3% in the case of Sri Lanka to 19.3% in the case of Nepal; and the services sector's share ranged from 48.9 % in the case of Pakistan and Sri Lanka to 34.1% in the case of Bhutan.

Labour:

A look at the socio-economic indicators of the level of development achieved by countries in South Asia indicates that all the countries fall within the identical socio-economic conditions, e.g. a rapidly increasing population with a majority living in rural areas and dependent primarily on the agriculture sector. The percentage of people living below the poverty line ranges from 31% in Pakistan to 51% in Bangladesh; data on the occupational structure depicts the domination by the agriculture sector with the highest being in Nepal (93%); also agriculture accounts for the highest share in the GDP, e.g. in Nepal 41.9%, Bangladesh 32.8%; India 27.8% and Pakistan 24.0%.

Table 2:
Population and Occupational Distribution in South Asia, 1995

| Country | Population in millions | Labour force in millions | Female % | Agriculture % | Industry % |
|------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------|---------------|------------|
| Bangladesh | 120 | 60 | 42 | 64 | 16 |
| India | 929 | 398 | 32 | 64 | 16 |
| Nepal | 21 | 12 | 40 | 95 | 00 |
| Pakistan | 130 | 70 | 26 | 56 | 20 |
| Sri Lanka | 18 | 12 | 32 | 49 | 21 |

Source: World Bank: World Development Report, 1997

South Asia is a labour surplus region as job opportunities are much fewer in number as compared to the size of the work force. The tables show not only limited involvement of women workers but also the concentration of workforce in the agriculture sector which is in any case subsistent in nature. It is also evident

that except in the case of Pakistan the percentage of workforce involved in the industrial sector had been about 10% only.

In the background of the above, the government policies as also its administrative machinery and workers' related programs/activities have been directed, primarily, at the workers in the organized sector. Trade unions too had been over occupied with the organized sector, and in particular with those employed in the public/government concerns.

Table 3:
Distribution of the Workforce

| Countries | Labour force as % of population 1989-91 | Women in labour force [% of total labour force] | Agri-culture 1965 | Agri-culture 1989-91 | Industry 1965 | Industry 1989-91 | Services 1965 | Services 1989-91 |
|------------|---|---|-------------------|----------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| Bangladesh | 30.0 | 07.0 | 84.0 | 56.0 | 05.0 | 10.0 | 11.0 | 34.0 |
| India | 38.0 | 26.0 | 73.0 | 62.0 | 12.0 | 11.0 | 15.0 | 27.0 |
| Nepal | 40.0 | 34.0 | 94.0 | 93.0 | 02.0 | 01.0 | 04.0 | 06.0 |
| Pakistan | 28.0 | 11.0 | 60.0 | 44.0 | 18.0 | 25.0 | 22.0 | 31.0 |
| Sri Lanka | 43.0 | 37.0 | 56.0 | 49.0 | 14.0 | 12.0 | 30.6 | 45.0 |

Source: UNDP Report, 1993

SAP and Its Impact on Labour:

The governments in the region, prior to liberalization, were not only an active economic partner but also the major employer of the workforce as well as a balancing factor in employer-employee relations. With the opening of the economies and the influx of multinational companies [MNC] as well as of new and advanced technologies, the nature of industrial development as also the power equation amongst employer, employee and government has undergone drastic change. Sri Lanka was first to adopt a structural adjustment programme [SAP] in 1977, followed by Bangladesh in 1982, Pakistan during the late eighties and India in 1991. Since the shift has taken place on the background of the IMF and World Bank, their policies towards market economy have almost been identical. For example, workforce employed in the organized or formal sector accounted for a very small segment of the total workforce, most of which were employed in government-owned undertakings or companies. The transformation of the government's role from active to passive and consequent dis-investment has led to large-scale privatization and also closure of units [including PSUs]. Furthermore, the introduction of labour saving technologies and policies of keeping establishment slim and trim have led to a further expansion of the number of unemployed as well as of the unorganized sector.

The changing industrial policies and consequent influence of industrial structure; a new occupational structure and skills in demand; an informalization of work through sub-contracting; an increased share of technology; etc. have collectively destabilized the traditional work environment. These have resulted in increasing cases of industrial sickness particularly in traditional industries such as jute, textile, automobile, etc.; lay-off and retrenchment [despite of existing legislation prohibiting the same]; sub-contracting of production units as also of jobs; lock outs; obsolescence of the existing skills and demand of new skills; use of hazardous materials; etc. The growth during the post liberalization period has been described as the “jobless growth”.

In his paper on "Labour Market and Employment in South Asia" Arup Mitra concludes that there exists a mismatch of considerable degree between the structure of production and the distribution of the workforce across sectors in South Asian countries. While the value-added composition had undergone a significant shift away from agriculture towards non-agriculture, the workforce structure is still dominated by the agriculture sector. The employment elasticity, particularly in the industrial sector in India and Pakistan, has been miserably low. On the other hand, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka reported high employment elasticity in this sector during the eighties. In conclusion the employment problem - the term which is perceived not only in terms of open unemployment rate, but more importantly, which is taken to capture the phenomenon of 'working poor' employed in low productivity activities - is highly intense in South Asia in spite of a significant improvement in the output growth rate in some of these countries.⁶

Trade Unionism:

Trade unions, as a representative body of the working class, are functional in all the countries in the region except in Bhutan and Maldives. In Bhutan trade unionism is not permitted, as such there are no unions. In other countries the union's presence is however confined to the organized sector, which engages less than 10% of the workforce while the unorganized sector accounting for over 90% remains out of their focus. Resultantly, one finds that on the one hand workers in the organized sector are fully protected and are in receipt of the benefits under various schemes, and on the other hand the workers in the unorganized sector, where employment is of informal nature, are practically deprived of protection accruable under various legislation, leaving them to be most exploited section of the population.

Table 4:
Trade Unions in South Asia

| Country | CT UO | Unions (Reg.) | Unions (Return) | Members | Year |
|------------|-------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|------|
| Bangladesh | 23 | 3789 | | 16,19,008 | 1990 |
| India | 12 | 48,054 | 9758 | 30.5 m. | 1991 |
| Nepal | 11 | 725 | NA | | 1995 |
| Pakistan | 10 | 7027 | | 9,51,990 | 1990 |
| Sri Lanka | NA | 2150 | 647 | | 1994 |

Trade Unionism is also facing difficult times in the post reform period. The old protective environment had given way to a competitive environment where their old strategies are proving to be worthless. As such member workers are increasingly becoming dissatisfied with the functioning of their unions as also with its leadership. The proximity of political party as also outside leaders is being questioned. The multiplicity of unions, narrow membership, neglect to workers in the unorganized sector, etc. too has become issues of concern particularly to lower tier of leadership. The emerging nature of trade unionism in South Asia, thus, is faced with declining membership in their traditional areas / industries of concentration in wake of expanding unorganized sector; multiplicity of trade unions; external and politically inclined leadership; emergence of non federated independent unions; obsolete strategies; desire for professionalization; etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH ASIA

An important feature of the union movements in South Asia is related to its origin. Many of the countries in the region were parts of India prior to their independence. Thus India had acted as a main source of labour philosophy, leadership and legislation. Consequently, the basic features of the trade union movement in South Asian countries are identical with those of India.

Sinha has given characteristic features of the Indian Trade Union Movement, which could be taken as representative of trade union movements in other South Asian countries as well. Accordingly the Indian Trade Union Movement is close to political parties, has a narrow support base, there is multiplicity of unions, centralized decision making, ad hoc management, obsolete strategies, external and over-aged leaders, personalized and power-oriented leadership, confrontationist attitude, non-existent second tier leadership, and negligible gender representation. Consequently, the movement is faced with declining power, declining membership, distancing from political parties, emergence of independent / non-affiliated trade unions, merger moves amongst trade unions, more co-operative attitude, professionalization of trade union management, etc.⁷

These trends have had a negative impact on the growth of trade union movements in the region in the form of:

Declining Membership: One of the most serious developments in the post liberalization period had been declining trends of the trade union membership. Almost all the central trade union organizations have confirmed that they have been losing membership, causing a further narrowing of the membership base. Some of the trade union leaders in India have claimed that decline in membership had been as high as 25%.

Declining Powers: With the onset of the liberalization process, the governments seem to have adopted a less than supportive attitude towards the trade unions. The unsettled nature of current politics and coalition forms of government has had an adverse effect on labour leaders' capability to extract additional benefits from the government. In fact in almost all the South Asian countries the traditional party in power as well as its labour counterpart have been dislodged. Consequently, the main trade unions are facing difficulties in exerting the same level of pressure on the political party in power. During a recent discussion, the General Secretary of one of the Indian CTUOs opined that the leaders of their political party of affiliation have ignored them even in matters relating labour policy matters.

In the current rapidly changing environment the manner of trade unions' functioning too is having its effect on the efficacy of decision taken since any delay in the existing scenario not only makes the decisions and directives a futile exercise but also gives the impression of insensitiveness of the leaders.

Declining powers of trade unions and fear of losing relevance have induced trade unions to come closer to each other and to even initiate steps towards merger or formation of confederations. For example, about eight national centers in Pakistan have recently come together to form the Pakistan Workers Federation [PWF]; in Bangladesh, the trade union Centre have joined to form Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies; in India, too, there are moves towards a merger of AITUC and HMS as well as towards a formation of a confederation by other CTUOs.

Another development in this regard had been concerning issue-based cooperation. On July 15th, 2002 the major CTUOs joined hands in opposing anti-labour policies of the Government of India. They have, furthermore, chalked plans for protest throughout the coming year.

Plant Level independent Unions: There had been emergence of plant level independent trade unions. Workers at most of the large private sector undertakings as also those having collaboration from outside have formed their own unions. Such unions are functional in companies, e.g. Philips, Voltas, NICOLAS, Siemens, WIPRO, NOCIL, etc. These unions are not affiliated to any of the Central Trade Union Organizations. Unions have been organised by workers in the Export

Processing Zones, fishery workers, construction workers, etc. and are functioning relatively well inspite of no affiliation with any of the political parties.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

In summarizing the prevailing situation as well as future trends in the South Asian labour market one could conclude that there are trends towards increasing migration to urban areas in search of employment [formal or informal] on the background of a deteriorating rural economy; increasing demand for people with higher skills whereas demand for people with old skills or no skills have drastically gone down; a widening wage disparity not only between skilled and semi/unskilled workers but also between male and female workers; non-existent or inadequate social security provision or coverage; sub-contracting of the production process; informalization of employment; etc. Consequently, there are increasing cases of home-based, part-time, temporary forms of work relationships. “The informalization of employment and individualistic trends are the greatest challenges for the trade unions as they are based on collective actions and collective benefits,” declares ICFTU.¹²

To meet the challenges posed by emerging conditions the unions would be required to take actions on three fronts:

1. Conducive Environment: At the outset there is a need to realize that the involvement of labour as a tool for promoting regional development through cooperation is not dependent on the working class itself. There are two other parties to this issue. The Employer in South Asia regards it to be his prerogative to decide all factors relating to an industry or establishment. This is on the background of him being the sole supplier of capital and thus the risk bearer. The other party is Government. In most of the countries the government was viewed as a balancing factor in the relation between the two unequal partners [i.e. employer and employee] till the onset of the reform process. The economic reforms transformed the role of the government from an active to passive partner, thus exposing the weak worker to a strong employer. The increased surplus workforce had further weakened the position of workers.

In the post-liberalized economies the labour finds its skill un-matched to the requirements of the emerging industries. The variances in labour market situations have lead to great disparity in the returns on various classes of work force. The most adversely affected are the unskilled and semi-skilled workforce. The productivity norms, the competitive environment, discussion on labour standards, retrenchment, skill obsolescence, etc. are causing workers immense concern as well as hardship. These problems are multiplied due to the rigid or unconcerned attitude of the employers and government. The primary need of the hour is to promote a congenial atmosphere wherein both the Employers and the Government treat labour at par with the capital.

2. Effective machinism: Labour has always occupied a prominent place in national plans and programs. Further the concerns of the government to promote a healthy industrial relations environment as well as sufficient welfare measures for workers are evident from the large number of labour legislation enacted as well as from the activities of the labour ministries of the countries in the region. Year after year a heavy sum of money is allocated to promote activities aimed at promoting workers' welfare. SAARC too has undertaken a number of training programs for the development of skills etc.

It is however unfortunate that despite a well-developed legal system and an administrative machinery of labour ministries in almost all the countries in South Asia, the majority of workers remains outside the purview of these provisions. There could be many reasons for this but ignorance and non-assertiveness of the trade unions on these issues could be the prime cause. Many a time labour leaders adopt a casual approach thus causing undue hardship to member workers. There is no alternative but to professionalize the functioning of trade unions.

3. Education and Training: The importance of training and education can never be over-emphasized. This is particularly true in the present-day South Asian economic environment, which is rapidly changing. There is need for training and education of workers as well as of their leaders so that they are adequately equipped to adjust to a rapidly changing industrial environment.

Workers' Education Programs in its broadest sense is aimed at developing the workers' understanding of "Labour Issues" such as working conditions; occupational health and safety; trade unionism; labour legislation; social security; applied economics; cooperation; social democracy; etc. Unlike the general education system, the workers' education has always to be need-based and adaptable to changing situations. In some of the South Asian countries there exists a well-developed network of infrastructure of workers' education institutions developed by either government or individual trade unions. The academics too are rendering assistance in such programs.

However, various studies evaluating workers' education programs in South Asian countries have pointed out that the nature and curriculum of workers' education programs have not been able to maintain the degree of desired flexibility. This has been primarily due to negligible importance accorded to training and education activities. The institutions are grossly under-equipped and courses being taught have little relevance to the existing or emerging situations. Further, with the industrial development, new areas of workers' concern have crept up but are not being handled or taught. There are many such issues which need to be highlighted and experience shared.

Trade unions are an interest group. As such their primary concern ought to be to safeguard and promote the interest of workers. While doing so they ought to keep

in mind that their existence is dependent on the viability and continuation of the establishment where they are employed. In the present day competitive environment the employers are too facing difficult time as their profit margin is rapidly decreasing. The workers and their unions therefore have to be considerate and cooperative. On the other hand employers have to see that workers' view are taken into consideration while incorporating any change.

PROGRAM OF ACTION:

1. **Tripartite Labour Meeting:** As of now there is no forum at the regional level where employers, employees and government representatives could meet to share concerns and adopt policy measures for the promotion of labour and issues concerning them. Frequent meetings and discussions are held including those organized by organizations of workers, employers and government, etc., but rarely these are able to secure adequate attendance of persons in power in the three categories. There is, thus, need to organize a South Asian Regional Conference on Labour. These conferences should be designed to be held annually and be of tripartite nature. The Conference could be held prior to the SAARC summit.
2. **Labour Cell in SAARC Secretariat:** While keeping in view the objectives of SAARC, there is need for the creation of a Labour Cell in the SAARC Secretariat. The justification of such a Cell is on the background of the existence of similar sections for employers. In this connection the national labour movement could put pressure on their respective governments through the Ministry of Labour for the creation of a labour cell in the SAARC Secretariat.

SARTUC was formed almost a decade back. The concept, although interesting, is still more or less on paper only as its activities are confined to annual meetings of ritual nature. Efforts could be made to activate this organization. In this connection it would be more practical if the membership to SARTUC was made open to non-ICFTU affiliates also. Alternatively, a new structure for consultation among all types of trade unions in the region has to be developed.

3. **Regional Resource Centre:** The importance of experiences and other information in development activities is of pivotal nature. A lot of activities in various spheres of labour are being undertaken in one or the other country in the region. The outcome or the benefits of these exercises however remained under-utilized as the same is not brought to the notice of others in the same field. A Regional Resource Centre for Labour could be established to collect, analyze and disseminate relevant information on Labour and Trade Unions.
4. **Labour Leaders Exchange program:** There is no alternative to first-hand exposure and experience. There exist a lot of gaps in information due to misconceived perceptions. Direct contact among labour leaders would go a

long way in reducing gaps and promoting cooperation and understanding among labour leaders in South Asia. In this connection a “Lectures and Exchange Program” could be organized.

Tools for action:

One of the major drawbacks of the practices in South Asia had been non-effective involvement of the stakeholders. The policies and program are formulated in haste and without the involvement of those who are expected to transform these into practice. Resultantly, the non-visible hurdles are overlooked causing non-achievement of the set objectives.

South Asia has a long history of cooperative action-based practices. Whether we look at the joint family system or to that matter securing Independence from the colonizers, it was the cooperation and cooperative actions that led to the achievement of the goals. However, with each successive stage of developments our willingness to consult the concerned partners received serious beating. The new competitive environment demands efficient utilization of resources. Cooperation in all spheres of action would prove useful in enhancing efficiency levels in the resource utilization. The spirit of cooperation has to be introduced in the economic sphere also.

The importance of workers’ participation in decision-making was felt as early as 1848 in Germany. Accordingly, demands for the establishment of factory committees with certain rights of workers’ participation were raised. In the absence of any concrete move with regard to formalizing the workers’ participation concept, workers’ committees were established on a voluntary basis with the right of being consulted.¹³

Under German law, the employees have co-determination and participation rights both on the shop floor level [works constitution] and in the decision-making bodies of the company [i.e. co-determination at the board level]. Such a method guarantees on the one hand full commitment of the employees towards the company and early identification of hurdles, on the other hand.

Joint consultation and collective action at all level is the only way to salvation. Gone are the days where one party had the overriding powers. The principles and practice of codetermination can only find ways to strengthen the already fragile South Asian trade union movement.

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