

The need of the epoch

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The remarks made by the Director-General of the Bangladesh Rifles, Major-General Khan Chowdhury, at the joint press conference with the Indian Director-General of the Border Security Force are disturbing to say the least. Maj-Gen Chowdhury told journalists that India and Bangladesh were both responsible for the August 17 bomb explosions in Bangladesh. He also alleged that India was harbouring 700 criminals wanted in Bangladesh, of whom 200 were Indian Government officials. When questioned by journalists, the General left the conference room in a huff.

To India's west, there is the invariable denial by Pakistani officials of the existence of cross-border terrorism or training camps in POK. Sardar Abdul Qayoom, the former president of POK who visited India recently, was the last one to deny the obvious. So much bad faith made me wonder if there was a common future for South Asia. On August 15, 1947, Sri Aurobindo had declared: "The partition of the country must go; it is to be hoped by a slackening of tension, by a progressive understanding of the need of peace and concord, by the constant necessity of common and concerted action, even of an instrument of union for that purpose. In this way unity may come about under whatever form - the exact form may have a pragmatic but not a fundamental importance. But by whatever means, the division must and will go."

Looking at the subcontinent today, it seems obvious that India and its neighbours have not progressed an inch since 1947. Is there still hope that the South Asian nations would collaborate, at least in some domain, and strive to build a brighter future for their people? Nobody denies that the situation is difficult, but if one

looks at the state of the European nations just after the end of the World War II, was it very different?

Probably it was not. However, Europe had the fortune to have had someone who, with sheer will, vision and obstinacy, tirelessly worked for decades towards making Europe a concrete reality. This man is not well known in India, but for many in Europe he is at par with Charles de Gaulle or Konrad Adenauer in the history of the 20th century. His name is Jean Monnet. Since his youth, he followed a rather atypical path. Born in Cognac, he inherited one of the most famous Cognac brands. He did not like studies and never graduated, though he had other talents.

In 1914, at the age of 26, his brilliance was noticed when the young man developed a theory revolutionary for his time: Since France and Great Britain were allies in the war, why could they not share their resources and order their war equipment together? The French Prime Minister got interested in Monnet's concept, and the latter soon ended up in London, where he began giving a concrete shape to his scheme.

In June 1940, Monnet once again made a proposal far in advance of his time. He proposed a Union between France and UK: One flag, one parliament, one people. Winston Churchill and de Gaulle were a bit reticent, but finally the British and the French Cabinet accepted the proposal. It is only due to the fall of the government in France that the scheme collapsed. But Monnet continued to organise the sharing of war resources between the allies. At the time, he was known as "a French man, on deputation with the British Government, working for the Roosevelt Administration". It is probably for this reason that de Gaulle (ironically) called him "The Inspirer". For the General, Monnet was too 'inspired' by Franklin D Roosevelt, but the nickname followed him as he continued to inspire generations of politicians and bureaucrats.

Immediately after the War, he thought of a still more revolutionary scheme: To unite the enemies of yesterday, France and Germany. Monnet later wrote: "The course of events must be altered. To do this, men's attitudes must be changed. Words are not enough." Monnet believed that both countries should collaborate

to construct the future. Can South Asia find its own Monnet?

The 'Inspirer' wrote in his memoirs: "When an idea answers to the needs of an epoch, it ceases to belong to those who invented it and becomes more powerful than those who serve it." Despite the appearances, has the time come for South Asia to share some basic amenities? If yes, the region would need one or several Monnets to be able to convince too often selfish political leaders that their own interest lies in 'sharing'.

Monnet always remained down-to-earth. Just after the war and regardless of the bitterness which still existed between Germany and France, Monnet knew that both nations had no alternative, but to rebuild their industries. His proposal was therefore to create a High Authority which could manage the resources in coal and steel for both nations: This was the birth of the European Coal and Steel Community, the embryo of the European Economic Community (EEC).

Sharing increased during the following years and in March 1957, the Treaty of Rome sealed the foundation of the EEC and Euratom (for atomic energy). Today, 25 nations hope to share one day the same Constitution. What could be 'shared' between the states of South Asia? There is no doubt that 'water' is the most obvious resource to be immediately shared in the subcontinent. It is very unfortunate that more than 50 years after partition, there is hardly any common management mechanism for this most essential resource.

In June 1999, the New Scientist published an article, 'Flooded out - retreating glaciers spell disaster for valley communities'. Professor Syed Hasnain, then chairman of the International Commission for Snow and Ice, explained that most of the glaciers in the Himalayan region "will vanish within 40 years as a result of global warming". It was predicted that freshwater flow in rivers across South Asia will "eventually diminish, resulting in widespread water shortages".

Whether the South Asian nations agree or diverge ideologically, the fact remains that there is a pressing need to study the region's glaciers for a variety of reasons. Further, the rivers of South Asia could be commonly managed. Ironically, a year before Katrina ravaged the coast of Mississippi, a secret Pentagon report obtained by the Western media warned that major European cities will be sunk beneath rising seas by 2020. Nuclear conflict, mega-droughts, famine and widespread rioting could erupt across the world. The Pentagon concluded that the threat to global stability vastly eclipses that of terrorism.

If India is serious about studying the feasibility of a River Linking scheme (the Indian President is constantly advocating such a plan), the first step should certainly be to associate other South Asian nations in the scheme. Would it not be a natural way to share a resource belonging to South Asia as a whole? Is it possible to envisage a group of 'experts' like Monnet, shuttling non-stop from one SAARC country to another, dialoguing with Gen Pervez Musharraf, Mr Manmohan Singh or Ms Khaleda Zia to convince them to 'share' the resources of the region?

Monnet had prophesied: "Europe will be built through concrete realisations, creating at first a de facto solidarity." For him, it was essential to "develop habits of cooperation among nations which had so far only known relationships based on power." Watching the current tragedy in Kashmir, one could not help thinking: Why can't the South Asian nations put into place a Regional Authority for Disaster Management which could concretely help to share resources, manpower and expertise in case of natural calamities. There is no harm in dreaming of more cooperation. Monnet called it: The needs of the epoch.