

Why have we been such bad neighbours down the decades?

India has not invested in scale to build subregional cooperation, says Dubey

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In 1996, when retired Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey came out with a vision document for subregional cooperation, many in the South Block still believed in the principles of 'benign neglect to neighbours'. That was two decades before the arrival of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN). Dubey is still considered one of the finest scholars on regional integration. In a recent interview in Delhi, he criticised the foreign policies of the past and the present for the Centre's inability to improve ties with neighbours and promote regional integration. Excerpts:



What is keeping you busy nowadays?
I am writing books, seminal papers and giving lectures. The revised edition of *India's Foreign Policy* was published by Orient BlackSwan last year. I have just completed the Hindi translation of 100 songs of Lalan Shah Fakir (a Bengali saint) for Sahitya Academy. It should be out this

year. Next on queue is a book on multilateralism.

In the book you mentioned about the 'big neighbour-small neighbour syndrome' being a major hurdle in improving ties with neighbours?

The subcontinent suffers from this syndrome. Anything that the big neighbour does is initially viewed with suspicion by the small neighbour. They are too afraid of coming close.

So the full potential of cooperation is not realised. And the big neighbour has the habit of ignoring the small neighbour, which feels ignored, humiliated.

Then the process becomes cumulative and misunderstandings pile up.

How else you don't have a single hydel project with Nepal in spite of trying for the past 40 years?

Bangladesh earlier opposed transit (allowed in 2015), fearing that in the name of goods, the (India) Army will occupy them.

Give us some examples of

our neglect of smaller neighbours...

During my days as High Commissioner in Dhaka (1979-82) I had numerous ideas on how India could help Bangladesh. But the Finance Ministry used to oppose them. One day the Foreign Secretary, RD Sathe (1979-82), told me: "Muchkund, why can't we adopt a 'policy of benign neglect' towards our smaller neighbours?"

Another term they used was "why can't we let them stew in their own juice for some time?" I used to reply: "Sir, they will regard neglect as insult, and resentments will accumulate."

This percolated from the Nehru era. Most of the senior officers I dealt with were reared in this cult. They had scant regard for neighbours.

So the patchy relationship is more a consequence than coincidence?

A few things happened. One was lack of sensitivity. Second, taking a longer term view about our relations and investing in their future on the required scale — that never happened.

Three, we gave them concessions but we did not enter into economic arrangements and pacts with them on the



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scale that was needed. In 1982, while I was leaving Bangladesh for the next posting in Geneva, I pleaded for one-way unilateral free trade concession to Bangladesh. It happened in 2011.

Has our approach changed now?

Where is the scale? When (Bangladesh Prime Minister) Sheikh Hasina visited in 2010, the Manmohan Singh government announced a \$1-billion package. Now, its 2016 and the \$1 billion is still under utilisation

(just completed). Even the \$2 billion (sanctioned by the Modi government) is not sufficient.

If Bangladesh gives you access to the North-East, solving one of your major problems, you should invest in Bangladeshi infrastructure — enabling it cope with the increased traffic — as your own.

If China can commit \$46 billion to Kasgar for CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), you can commit \$10 billion (to Bangladesh) in four-five years and that can dramatically change relations.

Are resources an issue?

Since India's higher rate of growth from the 1990s, we have plenty of play with the resources. I wouldn't say that we are at par with China. But the scope is much larger. It's about mindset.

Why did the proposal of South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), combining Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and North-East India, fizzle out in 1996-97?

The idea of SAGQ was agreed at the SAARC ministerial in Delhi. But there was strong opposition from Pakistan. Even Sri Lanka media criticised it. In the next min-

isterial in which (former Prime Minister) IK Gujral participated, in his typical way to not take a strong view and go along with everybody, he diluted it.

You were close to Rajiv Gandhi. How do you rate him in foreign policy?

He was immature and quite often guided by the last man who advised him. He had unleashed a barrier when some of the problems with Pakistan, including Siachen, were very near solution.

Suddenly he was advised by Arun Nehru to go one up on Pakistan and fold back negotiations. This led to the indecent dismissal of then Foreign Secretary AP Venkateswaran (January 1987). Siachen was almost solved. They went back and we went back.

So we missed chances of smoothing relations with Pakistan?

Yes. But, one good thing about Rajiv Gandhi was, he was restless to take initiative.

Therefore I was able to transfer some of the ideas — like the move to create G-15 or call for action plan for elimination of nuclear weapons — that were a landmark in the evolution of India's foreign policy.