

# **Saman Kelegama: A tribute to a citizen of South Asia**

**Rehman Sobhan**

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## **Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)**

**House - 6/2 (7th & 8th floors), Block - F, Kazi Nazrul Islam Road**

**Lalmatia Housing Estate; Dhaka - 1207, Bangladesh**

**Tel: (+88 02) 8124770, 9141703, 9141734; Fax: (+88 02) 48110414**

**E-mail: [rsobhan@cpd.org.bd](mailto:rsobhan@cpd.org.bd); Website: [cpd.org.bd](http://cpd.org.bd)**

## **Saman Kelegama: A tribute to a citizen of South Asia**

It is even today difficult for me to absorb the sad reality that Saman Kelegama will not be making his quiet presence felt at SAES 10. Over our long years of association he was not only a respected professional colleague but became a treasured friend. For me as for many of you here, his untimely departure remains a personal loss.

Saman will be remembered by all of us as one of the founding fathers of the South Asia Economic Summit (SAES). He laid the groundwork by organizing the very first SAES at Colombo in 2008 which I attended with some of you present here. Since that auspicious inaugural Saman has, to the best of my knowledge, attended every SAES across South Asia including the second SAES convened by him at Colombo in 2013. Yet to recollect Saman's low key presence and understated communication skills, it would be difficult for an unknowing newcomer to the SAES process to take note of the fact that this youthful looking, modest personality, who never raised his voice even when he spoke publicly, was the ideologue and also the man of action behind these heroic events.

I choose to contextualize Saman's memory within the SAES process because he has been my partner on our South Asian safari ever since he took over as the Executive Director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 1995. I have been engaged in the process of conceptualizing and constructing a South Asian community since the late 1970s when Sardar Tarlok Singh, possibly the godfather of the idea of constructing a South Asian community, brought together a number of research institutions across South Asia to constitute the *Committee for Studies on Cooperation in Development in South Asia* (CSCD). I represented the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), a partner institution, on the Board of CSCD.

After doing some pioneering research on the scope and specifics of South Asian cooperation. CSCD faded away by the mid-1980s to be replaced by the *Coalition for Action on South Asian Cooperation* (CASAC) coordinated by the Center for Policy Research (CPR) in New Delhi, then led by Pai Panandiker. Some of us such as Godfrey Gunatillike of Marga and myself who had been active in CSCD carried forward our initial commitment to the idea of a

South Asian community into SAD where we joined hands with George Verghese, Muchkund Dubey, Ibrahim Zaki from the Maldives, Mubashir Hasan from Pakistan, Sridhar Khatri and Mohan Man Sainju from Nepal to engage civil society across the region to take forward the SAARC process.

After Saman took over as Executive Director, IPS became actively involved through CASAC in undertaking work on South Asian economic cooperation. I first encountered Saman in various South Asian dialogues organized by CASAC and was deeply impressed with the high level of professional competence of this modest young man, his quiet dependability to take on research challenges and his commitment to the mission of building a South Asian community.

Some members who were active in CASAC such as Muchkund Dubey, Ibrahim Zaki and myself were invited to serve as members of a *Group of Eminent Persons* (GEP) constituted by the heads of state of SAARC at the Malé summit of 1997 to prepare a vision statement for SAARC laying out the road map towards establishing a South Asian economic community by 2020. With a view to carry forward the GEP initiative, it was decided by some of us who were involved in SAD and later in the GEP to establish a regional think tank. In 1999 the *South Asia Centre for Policy Studies* (SACEPS) was set up. It was initially hosted by CPR in New Delhi, but the secretariat was then moved to CPD in Dhaka. Arjun Sengupta and Syed Babar Ali from Pakistan were elected as Co-chairs and I took over as Executive Director. The partner institutions which made up SACEPS, included CPR in Delhi, CPD in Dhaka, Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) in Kathmandu, Lahore University of Management Science, Ibrahim Zaki representing the institutional persona of the Maldives state and the Marga Institute of Sri Lanka. I persuaded my colleagues who were invited to the foundation meeting at CPD to also invite Saman Kelegama to join our Board so we could draw in someone from a younger generation to join us in the task of building South Asia as he led an organization, IPS, with some of the strongest research capacity in the region. For similar reasons of enhancing SACEPS's research capacity we subsequently invited Nagesh Kumar to join our Board, thereby drawing on the available strengths of RIS.

Over the next 17 years, through our various interactions at SACEPS and other South Asia centric fora, I continued to be deeply impressed by Saman's sincere commitment to the idea of constructing a South Asian community. In his association with SACEPS and in other

initiatives related to South Asia, Saman drew on his exceptional capabilities as a development economist, his organizational skills and his complete dependability to carry through any task to which he committed himself or IPS.

Among the many who joined our odyssey towards South Asia Saman appeared to be one of the few who sustained his faith in the enterprise. He demonstrated his commitment through his diligence as a researcher, his creative ideas and research leadership whereby he built up a strong body of work identifying both the problems as well as opportunities for cooperation within the region. In the process he inspired a generation of younger colleagues, led by Dushini Weerakoon, to develop a strong research capacity on South Asian issues within IPS. Saman had also built up a strong working relation with his peers at RIS, SAWTEE, SDPI in Islamabad and CPD to carry on the tradition of keeping abreast of the challenges facing South Asia and identifying possible solutions. Now that he has left us this present generation will miss the natural leadership provided by Saman, who not only constituted a bridge between generations but carried over some of the passion of the pioneers who committed themselves to building a South Asian community.

While all of you assembled here who constitute the institutional partnership which sustains SAES have demonstrated impressive research skills in introducing new ideas and knowledge into the South Asia dialogue you need to invest your skills with the same degree of passion and commitment which Saman brought to this mission. This is even more important today than it was at any time during the last four decades because the very idea of a South Asian community is receding. Today the member governments of SAARC, particularly its larger members, appear to have lost faith in the regional entity which brought them together and are looking towards alternative regional grouping both within and beyond South Asia.

This move away from SAARC, in my experience, is not an altogether new phenomenon. We witnessed such a phase two decades ago when SACEPS was being born at the turn of the century. In this period civil society needed to be particularly pro-active to keep the idea of South Asia alive. Then and now this requires more than research skills projected at periodic conferences, it needs sustainable engagement. In my view the idea of South Asia can only be kept alive if it remains embedded in your professional concerns and institutional priorities. Saman demonstrated his commitment through the untiring persistence which drove his substantive body of work on South Asian concerns.

As ED of SACEPS I personally benefitted from Saman's valuable contributions to our mission through the SACEPS Task Force he co-chaired with Muchkund Dubey on *The Implications of Building a South Asian Free Trade Area*, based on research carried out at IPS and the CPD-SACEPS work on *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty in South Asia*. Many of you present here, who partnered Saman in some South Asia related project will remember that he was usually the first to deliver on whatever task was assigned to him or his organization. As a consequence Saman's research contributions on South Asia, in partnership with CPD, RIS and SAWATEE, his dedicated co-editorship of the South Asia journal and his many individual writings on South Asia leave behind a rich legacy of work which can serve both researchers and policy makers in the region.

Saman had the good fortune to have his research leadership and skills recognized and appreciated by his own government where successive regimes drew upon his services to provide papers and guidance, over a period of two decades, to Sri Lanka's position on various economic issues related to South Asian cooperation. Among many such tasks Saman was seconded by his government to serve on the second SAARC Commission on Poverty Alleviation which he eventually chaired. As a result Saman has always served as a valuable link between official and civil society on South Asian issues. As a regular member of Sri Lanka's delegation to various SAARC summits he was an important conduit for delivering policy inputs from SACEPS and perhaps SAES to the SAARC summit deliberations.

Saman's pioneering role in the conception and operationalisation of the SAES process evolved out of his extended engagement with the idea of constructing a South Asian community. The SAES process was conceived by Saman, drawing on his association with SACEPS. In the early days of SACEPS when I was its ED, the Board had conceived the idea of initiating a SACEPS project to establish a South Asian Davos. We had imaginatively thought of locating this project on the Maldives Island of Bandos and had been assured by our Board Member, Ibrahim Zaki, then a senior Minister of the Maldives government, of the full support of his President and government for the project. A number of feasibility studies were carried out to carry the idea forward which at one stage, involved the CII. Sadly the project languished due to our inability to mobilise the enormous resources needed to underwrite a South Asian Bandos and the changing fortunes of our Maldivian partners.

It was Saman's idea to reconceptualise the idea of a South Asia Davos, on a more modest, manageable scale, where selected partner institutions would convene an annual 'summit' in their respective countries which would, as in Davos, bring together governmental leaders, senior business persons and civil society leaders from across South Asia to collectively discuss the current challenges facing the region and share ideas on how to promote greater cooperation. Saman demonstrated the doability of his more scaled down project which precluded the need for accumulating the large capital investment needed to construct a permanent base in Bandos for a South Asian Davos. Instead, he established that each partner institution could assume the more manageable responsibility of mobilizing resources needed to convene an annual summit. In this endeavor he drew in as partners for the SAES project, some of the partner organizations of SACEPS such as IPS, CPD and RIS, and brought in SAWATEE and SDPI. The SAES partners were all led by capable researchers from his own generation, each backed up by well established institutions with strong professional and organizational capability. By organizing a high level, well organized first summit at Colombo, Saman demonstrated that his organization could successfully implement such a herculean task. He thereby presented a challenge to each of his prospective partners to match his pioneering effort.

History notes that the SAES partners have commendably responded to Saman's challenge and we are now attending the 10<sup>th</sup> SAES summit at Kathmandu. Each of the partner institutions have now managed to host two such well attended South Asian events. All of you assembled here should take pride in the sustainability of the SAES process which began its journey in Colombo a decade ago through the commitment of Saman to take up the challenge of launching the first summit. It is only fitting that this tenth summit should serve as an epitaph on Saman's life and work. It also provides us with the occasion to pay tribute not just to his bold initiative but to his contribution to the ideas which underly the SAES process.

It is important for all of us assembled here to ensure that the SAES process not only survives the loss of one of its most committed founders but it can also withstand the inclement winds which threaten to capsize the SAARC process. The most enduring tribute that all of you assembled here at SAES 10 can pay to the memory of Saman Kelegama is to not just persevere with SAES but to absorb more of Saman's passion and commitment towards building a South Asian community which can transcend the fluctuating fortunes of the

SAARC process and continue to nurture deeper roots for sustaining cooperation within the peoples of South Asia.