

## newindpress on **Sunday**

**How about a SAU**

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Though France has massively rejected the new European Constitution, analysts tend to agree that this decision is probably due to the incumbency factor. The European MP (and former leader of the 1968 student revolution in France) Daniel Cohn-Bendit even declared that had President Jacques Chirac resigned before the referendum, 65 percent of the voters would have voted Yes.

There is some truth to this. The future will tell us if France will remain one of the motors of Europe, but it is difficult to imagine how 50 years of work done by visionary pioneers could be undone in one day. The existing common institutions will stay.

New technological and communication discoveries shrink the planet every day to the size of a small hamlet, and international institutions have no choice but to follow the process, even if a few decades later. History goes in one direction only: Towards a greater unification of the people of the world.

At least, this is true of Europe. The preamble of the new Constitution made clear that the European Community is "drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, in other words, a common past."

Reading through this unique document made me thoughtful. Could a similar process happen in the Indian subcontinent, with a longer shared history but a territory divided 58 years ago?

The European Constitution did not disown its thorny past, but it resolutely tries to face the future "believing that Europe, reunited after bitter experiences, intends to continue along the path of civilisation, progress and prosperity, for the good of all its inhabitants, including the weakest and most deprived."

My question is: When Europe has gone so far along the path to unity, why has the Indian subcontinent remained divided, unable to share its basic resources?

One of the answers is that Europe has had the fortune to find someone who, with sheer will, vision and obstinacy, has worked all his life towards making Europe a concrete reality. This man is not well known in India, but for many in Europe he is at par with de Gaulle 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, but he had other latent qualities.

In 1914, his brilliance was noticed when, at the age of 26, he managed to obtain an appointment with René Viviani, the French Prime Minister. The young man had 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

Prime Minister got interested by Monnet's concept, and the latter soon ended up in London, where he started giving a concrete shape to his scheme. He continued till the end of the war.

In June 1940, once again Monnet made a proposal far in advance of his time. He proposed a Union between France and UK: One flag, one parliament, one people. 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 Reynaud's cabinet in France and the arrival to power of Pétain 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 sometimes 'inspired' by Roosevelt, but the nickname followed him as he continued to inspire generations of politicians and bureaucrats.

Immediately after the war, he had an even more revolutionary proposal: To unite the enemies of yesterday, France and Germany. Monnet wrote: "The course of events must be altered. To do this, men's attitudes must be changed. Words are not enough."

To avoid the mistake made in 1919, when the winner imposed its diktat on the loser, Monnet's plan was that both countries should collaborate to construct the future. The main characteristic of Monnet was to always remain down-to-earth. Both Germany and France had 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 first embryo of the European Economic Community (EEC). That came into existence in March 1957, when the Treaty of

Rome created the EEC and Euratom (for atomic energy). The Treaties of Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2000) saw new steps towards unification. Today, 25 nations hope to share a Constitution.

So why can't South Asia find its own Monnet, who himself said: "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." Perhaps the time has not yet come.

Another difficulty seems to be the circulation of people and ideas between South Asian nations; even at the end of the war in Europe, it was much easier to travel from one European country to another than it is today in the subcontinent.

Is it possible to envisage a bureaucrat shuttling non-stop from one SAARC country to another, dialoguing with Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Manmohan Singh or King Gyanendra to convince them to 'share' the resources of the region? Probably not.

One difficulty is that the SAARC Charter is based on ideals and principles but not on concrete needs. From the start, 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." Unfortunately these habits do not exist in South Asia.

Another hurdle is the fact that the subcontinent was partitioned on a divisive ideology. This makes the original division more difficult to overcome. In the European case, 'United in diversity' is the stated foundation of the Community, but the Constitution says: "Europe offers them (the States) the best chance of pursuing, with due regard for the rights of each individual and in awareness of their

responsibilities towards future generations and the Earth, the great venture which makes of it a special area of human hope."

Today, are all the South Asian nations ready to accept the very concept of 'unity' behind apparent 'diversity'? It is a difficult question to answer. Monnet once wrote: "I was convinced that the union of Europe was not only important for the European themselves. It was valuable as an example for others, and this was a further reason for bringing it about."

Considering that it takes decades to build such institutions (the process, as we see in the case of the French referendum, going through ups and downs), is it not time for South Asia to make a concrete start? India certainly can and should take the lead. One of the measures could be to create a Ministry of South Asian Affairs with a good communicator and excellent administrator familiar with international institution at the helm. When Narasimha Rao decided to reform the Indian economy, did he not appoint a bureaucrat above the petty politics to accomplish the task? And it worked.

"To develop habits of cooperation" is certainly another priority, but will the politicians on each side of the fenced borders listen to the crying needs? The exercise could easily be started with water, a resource which belongs to the subcontinent as a whole and which has to be fairly shared amongst all the South Asian nations. But are politicians interested?