

ESCAP-SSWA Lecture dwells upon South Asian identity, explores common future

India-Pakistan, long lost brothers, whose time is right to reconnect



ESCAP-SSWA Office, New Delhi, 24 January 2014 -- A thought-provoking lecture by outstanding, award-winning Pakistani academic Dr. Adil Najam, Professor of International Relations and Earth & Environment, Boston University, urged South Asian to revisit the concept of South Asian identity and explore a brighter common future, beyond the immediate challenges and predicaments.

Organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) South and South-West Asia Office and the South Asian University, the lecture was held on 24 January 2014 and brought together over 100 academics and policy makers, students, from India and other South Asian countries.

“The ‘peace process’ [between India and Pakistan] is less stalled than one may think. Official relations are much more mature than they have been in the past”, stated Professor Adil Najam, former Vice Chancellor of the prestigious Lahore University of Management Sciences, and recipient of one of Pakistani’s highest civil awards, the Sitara-i-Imtiaz. “A composite dialogue needs to take place, both simple and complex issues should be addressed. But one needs to get going, taking small steps and focusing on the ‘practical ideal’ model,” he said, describing the current conditions as most favourable for lasting changes and resolution.

Keeping away from political statements, Prof. Najam invited South Asian countries to bridge the current disconnect by taking a leap into a longer-range future, to transcend immediate obstacles, avoid being “caught up in the present and unlock a grandparents’ type of reflective perspective on the issue”.

The lecture examined challenges and opportunities for the subregion and brought forward five central ideas:

1. The idea of South Asia is strong even as the structure of South Asia is weak; unlike that of the European Union;
2. Competitiveness and not cooperation defines South Asian institutions;
3. The South Asian state is overbearing, falling short of expectations;

4. Security and development are central issues but face competing challenges across the subregion;
5. Hope for the future of the South Asian-ness or South Asian identity likely to emerge from people more than from state actors.

“Institutions across South Asia have been built to manage competition rather than inculcate cooperation”, Prof. Najam stated, explaining the transformational shift that had to take place to nurture collaborative attitudes and overcome distrust. He cited the sport of cricket and the “Bollywood” film industry as essential elements of the South Asian culture and a major source of labour movements within the subregion.

Prof. Najam stressed that development and security had to be interlinked and that stability in the subcontinent was needed as too much was at stake, with external as well internal push factors influencing the search for lasting resolutions to conflicts.

India and Pakistan having both nuclear weapons capabilities, Prof. Najam said: “Deterrent forces work and we may tend to take up different fights when one has tough neighbours. There is a development logic and people-to-people logic, also owing to technology and communication and a generational shift”. “A new generation of South Asian people does not remember hostilities.. Ultimately, it will depend which of the stories will prevail”, he noted.

Delivering his opening remarks, Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Chief Economist, ESCAP and Director, ESCAP-SSWA underscored the common heritage that binds South Asia, in spite of the gaps. “South Asia has become a growth pole of the world economy and has performed well on several parameters of development, including poverty alleviation. However, it remains one of the least integrated subregions”.

“Despite having a long shared history and culture, common languages and similar systems of governance, the South Asian identity is lacking”, Dr. Kumar stated.

Hosting the lecture in the South Asian University campus, Prof. GK Chadha, South Asian University President, stressed the event’s value “to develop the South Asian identity and argumentativeness around its definition and concept”. He welcomed the highly stimulating and inspiring discussions, to prepare South Asia “for a changing reality”.

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