



RAPPORTEURS REPORT

Culture as a Factor in Regional Cooperation in South Asia November 26-27, 2015



Inaugural Session: South Asia is a Microcosm of a Multicultural World: Keynote Address by Dr. Karan Singh



In an apt beginning to the 9th South Asia Conference on ‘Culture as a Factor in Regional Cooperation in South Asia’, Dr. Karan Singh, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, hailed the region as “a microcosm of a multicultural world”. Dr. Singh was delivering the Keynote Address at the inaugural session of the two-day conference organised by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) on November 26-27, 2015.

Describing the sub-continent that is home to many cultural traditions as a ‘cultural superpower’, Dr. Singh said that the world today is precariously poised between a disappearing past and an indeterminate future. South Asia should aim at emerging as an area of peace and stability, he noted.

The South Asian countries have in the past shared deep economic and socio-cultural links that have been shattered by colonialism, said Dr. Singh. The region should pick up the threads and try and reconnect economically, politically and socially, he added, citing the recent border agreement between India and Bangladesh as a classic example of such initiatives.

Dr. Singh spoke of building the cultural unity of South Asia in the context of music, dance, painting, literature and sculptures as part of its shared legacy. Terming ‘a multicultural society as a blessing’, he said that could be a prerequisite to a peaceful and harmonious world order.

Commenting on Huntington's classic work on ‘Clash of Civilizations’, which he said is “sadly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Dr. Singh argued that South Asia believes in ‘confluence and not a clash of civilisations’ and it is up to the region to prove Huntington’s theory wrong.

Drawing reference from his idea of ‘Triveni’, Dr. Singh described diplomacy as a confluence of three rivers – the Ganga of political diplomacy, the Yamuna of economic diplomacy, and the invisible, but most important of the three, Saraswati of cultural diplomacy and people to people connect.

Earlier, in his welcome address, Director General, IDSA, Shri Jayant Prasad said that the social context and political dynamics determine how cultural connectivity is used as an instrument of fraternal co-existence

or a tool to overcome fractious divisions. He added that the conference would seek out the healing factor of culture for repairing the ruptures caused by history and politics and explore how cultural connects across communities can play a positive role in building bridges across national frontiers.

The two day annual conference is being attended by a cross-section of policy makers, academics, civil society actors and young professionals from the South Asian region.

Session 1: Cultural Profile of South Asia and Foreign Policy

Chairperson: Amb Virendra Gupta

Prof Partha S Ghosh

Dr Yaqoob Bangash

Dr Smruti S Pattanaik

Dr Rubina Saigol



Prof Partha Ghosh in his paper titled “Culture, Cultural Productions and South Asian Spaces”, said South Asia is more a cultural rather than a geo-political construct and it will survive even if SAARC were to disappear. The intra-regional and inter-regional migrations of people demonstrate that the South Asian cultural space is not limited to what is usually conceived as South Asia — for example, the Rohingyas of Myanmar or the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Afghanistan was not part of SAARC until recently and Myanmar is not part of it even today. However, due to cultural affinities across states or regions, such migrations were acceptable. He held that culture is a very difficult social science construct, which encompasses both everyday life and the psychic realm. It is easier to approach culture through cultural productions, meaning those expressions of culture which get reflected in literature, music, cinema, lyrics, drama, paintings, architecture, culinary innovations, etc. Culture crosses borders. He referred to the writings of Sadat Hasan Manto, Sahir Ludhianvi, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh, Sunil Gangopadhyay, which reflect the transboundary nature of culture. The connections between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Bangladeshis and Rohingyas, India and Nepal and Nepal and Lhotshampas demonstrate that cultural connections do play a role in inter-state and inter-regional migrations. The twin cases of Manto dying a frustrated man in Pakistan and Sahir Ludhianvi returning to India to pursue his literary career suggest that there should be a conducive atmosphere for culture to flourish and the Nehruvian approach to politics provided such a context in India. He expressed his concerns at the way cultural interactions and exchanges are being discouraged today in India, citing the recent case of the cancellation of Ghulam Ali’s ghazal concerts. He argued that culture transcends borders and that is why at the level of people to people there was a tremendous reservoir of goodwill towards each other despite inter-state tensions. The run-away success of Bajrangji Bhajjan and the case of an Indian girl Geeta lost in Pakistan but raised as a Hindu in Pakistan demonstrate that there are many common threads that bind people in the region and these connections will continue to bring people together in the region.

[Dr Yaqoob Bangash](#) presented his paper on “Culture, Identity and Politics: Pakistan’s Experience”. He argued that the leaders of Pakistan could not define its identity well. There was no clarity as to what role Islam would play in the making of Pakistan. Jinnah talked about liberty, equality, justice and democracy according to the principles of Islam. He argued that Jinnah invoked Islam to justify democracy in Pakistan and held that the new state will operate within the limits set by Islamic ideals. However, it was never made clear by the leaders of Pakistan as to what such Islamic ideals were. They implied that there was no conflict between Islamic principles and what Jinnah called ‘Muslim democracy’, but there was no effort to clearly define the role Islam would have in the affairs of the state. Referring to the ‘Objectives Resolution’ which provided the template for the first Pakistani constitution, he said that while the resolution stated that ‘sovereignty’ belonged to Allah, it acknowledged that ultimately the representatives of the people would have to exercise such sovereignty. He held that the non-Muslim members of the Pakistani constituent assembly kept pushing the leaders of the Pakistan movement to clearly lay down the Islamic principles according to which the affairs of the state would run, rather than leaving them vague. However, the leadership failed to bring enough clarity in this regard. He argued that lot of the debates about Islam during Zia-ul-Haq’s period were actually discussed in the constituent assembly of Pakistan and that there were no clear answers as to what exactly the leadership meant when it said that democracy in Pakistan would be run according to the principles of Islam. Jinnah, he said, wanted to interpret Islam as a modernist and constantly referred to the ‘golden rules of conduct as laid down by the Prophet of Islam’ while discussing democracy, but never tried to define what these golden rules were, leaving it open for leaders following him to define it according to their convenience. Moreover, such emphasis on Islam alienated the non-Muslims of Pakistan and denied them equality in Pakistani society and culture. He also talked about the imposition of Urdu on non-Urdu speaking people and held that there was an inbuilt aversion for diversity in Pakistan. Citing the recent verdict by the Pakistani Supreme Court to replace English with Urdu, he said that the tendency to disregard diversity was operative even today in Pakistan. He held that Pakistan has a lot to learn from India and Bangladesh in accommodating diversity and Pakistan would survive even if Islam and the two-nation theory were to be discarded today. This would help Pakistan to acknowledge and value the socio-cultural bonds that bind it with India and the rest of South Asia.

[Dr Smruti Pattanaik](#), in her presentation titled “Culture as a Foreign Policy Tool: India’s Experience in South Asia”, held that the states of South Asia defined their identities in exclusive and monolithic terms and there was a tendency to gloss over diversity. She held that culture played an important role in a nation state’s political life and there was a need to acknowledge diversity within the states even when the state tried to build an identity of its own. She argued that while the drawing of the geographical boundary at the time of partition divided people, the construction of national identities drew new boundaries as the states engaged themselves in building exclusive national identities that rejected commonality. For India, she said that culture as a foreign policy tool in the neighbourhood had limited appeal and was often perceived with suspicion. However, there has been a metamorphic change in South Asia in recent years and there is greater openness to accept diverse identities and use culture as an instrument to bring countries and people together. This opens up an opportunity for India to use culture as a foreign policy tool to further regional understanding and bilateral relations.

[Dr Rubina Saigol](#), in her paper “Policies of the State and Culture of the People”, contested the proposition that culture could be used as an instrument of foreign policy and held that while policies belonged to the states, culture belonged to the people, and there was a constant tension between the two. She argued that policies were formed consciously by bureaucrats and politicians to serve their interests while culture was organic and constantly evolving. It is a complex and diverse concept. Policies are sterile, while culture is dynamic. Culture implies diversity and heterogeneity and there are sub-cultures within cultures. Policies of state aim at building monolithic cultures which militate against the basic idea of culture. She held that there was a temptation to discover commonality across cultures and countries and emphasise on similarities, convergences across religious and ethnic divides. Such platitudes overlook difference and

diversity. Pakistan has immense diversity and there are layers upon layers of culture and sub-culture. One single foreign policy cannot encompass the interests and preoccupations of different people. A centrist and monolithic foreign policy, designed ostensibly for the Pakistani establishment, has denied and denigrated diversity. This has also happened in varying degrees in other states. However, difference can be celebrated, diversity can be enjoyed without any threat to the state. Heterogeneity adds beauty, richness and strength to cultures. There is a need to learn to appreciate difference instead of perpetually seeking superficial commonalities and meaningless similarities.

The ensuing discussion focussed on the difficulties in obtaining visas and whether culture would become a hegemonic construct with a particular receiving the priority of the state. There were questions regarding the linkage between culture and foreign policy and whether the issue of culture can be left to the state alone. Answering the queries, the panellists said that the internet and social media have helped in establishing contact and exchange of views. There are cultural groups and activists who have been performing and these initiatives have been largely private.

Session II: Culture as a Soft Power: Can it further Regional Cooperation?

Chairperson: Amb Suresh Goel

HE Sayed Mossadeq Khalili	Mr. Kunzang Delek	Dr Sarala Fernando	Lt Gen. M Akbar Fazle	Aref Dostyar
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Amb Suresh Goel in his opening remarks, said that “Culture should not be treated as a soft power and instead it should be used to develop among societies an understanding for global good.” He further noted that “The term cultural diplomacy should be used rather than the term soft power.”

H E Sayed Mossadeq Khalili, Deputy Minister of Culture, Afghanistan in his presentation *Can cultural diversity and cultural commons be harnessed to further Regional Cooperation?*, argued that for knowing the present, an understanding of the past is important. It is interesting that our culture is a product of the rich empires of the past that patronised culture. According to him, Afghanistan was never inhabited by a single ethnic group, rather, various groups who share some common traits lived together. Religion is what unites them. In the last three decades Afghanistan has suffered a lot politically as well as culturally. For example, it has lost the Buddhas of Bamiyan that were a part of the plural cultural heritage. A stable Afghanistan can ensure regional stability and its strategic location cannot be ignored by anyone as it connects South Asia with Central Asia. Afghanistan can benefit from the diversity of the South Asian region. Diversity of South Asia enriches the country as Afghans learn about other cultures. Multiculturalism does not allow racism to creep in and a refusal to understand others is like belittling them. He said that we can benefit from cultural commons and cultural diversity that could help to bring our Nations together. Therefore, we should focus on collaborating on regional cultural exchange like cultural heritage programs and conferences. Culture makes it easier to understand each other and overcome political barriers and if cultural commons can be leveraged to foster common understanding, South Asia can be a successful region.

Mr. Kunzang Delek, in his paper titled *Using Cultural commons in Regional Cooperation: Bhutanese Perspective*, said Buddhism is the back bone of Bhutan’s culture. Buddha was born in Nepal and died in India; through this we can realize what potential our cultural heritage has which could lead towards successful regionalism. South Asian countries have been together culturally as well as civilisationally. All religions of South Asia are ritualistic and philosophic and religious interactions should be guided by the principle that all religions are equal.

Dr. Sarala Fernando, in her paper *Can Heritage further Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Sri Lanka's Experience*, said that culture is interwoven with geography and history. Bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka reflect the linkages of the past. One area which needs attention is bilateral economic connection that can strengthen the relationship. She observed that we should prioritize each other's interests and need to look on comprehensive economic project. She argued that economic asymmetry in South Asia is the cause of the slow pace of regional integration. According to her, public diplomacy is significant where you can listen to others and uphold the idea of respecting each other. She further argued that cross cultural sensitisation should be taken up so that the negative stereotypes that enter into countries through TV channels can be mitigated.

Gen M Akbar Fazle, speaking on *Culture and Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Bangladesh's Experience*, said culture is the sum total of learned behaviour. Culture can play a role in propelling regional cooperation. South Asia is a mixed bowl of influencing societies. It is home to all major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. The culture of this region springs from the Indus Valley Civilization. India, Bhutan and Nepal have great cultural similarity in terms of religion, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Sufism has illustrious impact on the societies of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. This strand of Islam became more visible in the 10th or 11th century during the Delhi Sultanate. It promotes a liberal philosophy of life and intermingling with others. Sufism in Bangladesh is similar to what is practiced in the whole of South Asia. External boundaries in South Asia hardly coincide with linguistic boundaries. We have common festivals across South Asia which has had direct impact on our food habits. People from all ethnic groups participate in festivals. Some festivals bear the impression of politics as well. Mujeeb ur Rehman created Bangladesh in accordance with the linguistic and cultural aspirations of the people. Bangladesh's cultural bond with South Asia is obvious. It shares a common history and civilisation. It shares an inherent culture with West Bengal. There should be more access to each other's repositories of culture. Cultural societies and NGOs must work for new harmonisation, a realignment of interest. The future of South Asian integration lies in the strategic use of soft power to promote values which are beneficial for the region as a whole.

Aref Dostyar, in his paper titled *Distant Neighbours: Could People and Culture Build Bridges between Afghanistan and Pakistan*, stated that the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is based on mutual distrust which has had an adverse impact on the whole region. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are victims of past adversarial relations. Although there is cultural similarity between the two neighbours, the two governments' reach out to each other is not appreciated by the people of both countries due to deep seated suspicion. Afghanistan has the potential to become a transit hub for the whole region. The key challenge that currently confronts Afghanistan is the sponsorship of terrorism by neighbouring Pakistan. Both countries should understand that if either of them is unstable both will find it difficult to attain stability. Culture is one element which has the potential to bridge the gulf between the two. There are three ways through which Afghanistan and Pakistan can move forward smoothly: 1) the governments of both countries should build trust and support people-to-people initiatives; 2) civil society activists should work to harness the cultural contiguity that exist between the two countries; 3) the international community should come forward and help civil society groups and governments of both the countries to interact with each other and develop synergy through common culture that can bridge the trust deficit plaguing bilateral relations.

Session III: Culture, Identity and Politics and its Impact on Bilateral Relations

Chairperson: Amb P. Stobdan

Prof Sonia Nishat
Amin

Dr Pradeep
Jeganathan

Dr. Abdul
Rasheed Ali

Prof S.D. Muni

Mr. Raza Rumi

Dr. Krishna
Hachhethu



Amb P Stobdan initiated the discussion by highlighting the intricate relationship between culture and politics in South Asia. He pointed out that culture is an instrument of power in inter-state ties and a factor in national security. He also dwelt on the cultural underpinnings and obligations of several strategic relationships.

Prof. Sonia Nishat Amin speaking on *Cultural Symbols as Resistance and the Making of the Bengali Identity*, emphasised that history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present. She dwelt on Bangladesh's youth movement (Shahbagh) of 2013 to 'explore the Bengali identity through the prism of cultural symbols that were deployed during the course of the movement.' She argued that several elements of the movement, like the demand for death penalty for 1971 war criminals, was an expression of a deeper cultural assertion. Prof. Amin stressed that the Bengali quest for identity in East Bengal, which is often hyphenated on the 'Muslim–Bengali' theme, assumes greater significance in South Asia, since the region faces an increasing right-wing and extremist onslaught.

Prof. Amin referred to Ziaur Rahman's analytical essay on the Shahbagh Movement, wherein he has viewed it as an example of the new social movement led by the youth. She emphasised that the over-riding metaphor of the Shahbagh protest was cultural and artistic. While the general atmosphere may have been cacophonous and chaotic, the majority were expressing themselves through some kind of artistic activity. Despite the chaos, there was an element of cohesiveness – a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern. Teachers, students, poets, professionals, writers, intellectuals, artists, singers, and actors had all joined in spontaneously. The mood throughout was fusionist, sometimes surreal but never violent. The movement was also free from sexist incidents, let alone rape or molestation. The litmus test was the death of a fellow activist, Haider, but the activists turned their grief into silent strength and the funeral was conducted in utmost solemnity.

The protestors had argued that they were against those whose allegiance to the country and the cause (1971) was suspect. In doing so, this movement went far beyond a simple battle cry for death penalty to war

criminals. In the end, it was a fight against the enemies of secular democracy. This aspect separated the protestors from those at Tahrir Square, who had wittingly or unwittingly supported right-wing Islamist forces.

Prof. Amin also touched upon the criticism that has been directed against the movement. In particular, the demand for death penalty had caused the greatest amount of anxiety among casual observers not familiar with the history of war crimes in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the Leftist parties saw the seeds of fascism in a movement that laid over-riding emphasis on nationalism, death penalty and justice. They even suspected links with the ruling party and raised questions about funding. Moreover, the counter movement that was launched by the Hefazat-e-Islam – an association of Muslim clerics who opposed the Movement – further complicated the situation.

Prof. Amin concluded by stressing that the Movement, despite its shortcomings, was able to reclaim the spirit of 1971, bring the trial of war criminals to the fore and reformulate a national identity as embodied in the Constitution of 1972.

Dr. Jeganathan began his presentation on “*The Dilemmas of Relatedness: India and Sri Lanka*” by arguing that culture does not always unite. He referred to the ‘awkward’ cultural disturbance between India and Sri Lanka even though the two countries have a shared cultural heritage. Therefore, the need of the hour is to think critically if one has to strengthen the bilateral relationship.

Dr. Jeganathan pointed to the ‘grievances, massacres and militancy’ of the Sri Lankan Tamils that have been key themes in India-Sri Lanka ties over the last 30 years. He pointed out that these had not always been the central issues, since factors like repatriation of Tamil plantation workers and the question of non-alignment were also discussed. He elaborated on the differences between Sri Lankans and Indian Tamils and explained the Sinhalese cultural perception of India.

Dr. Jeganathan dwelt on the heritage of Buddhism and argued that the very idea of Buddhism divides Sri Lankans. The Tamils of the North have long forgotten that they that too were Buddhists and now see Buddhism as an element of Sinhala colonisation. In the imagination of Sinhala Buddhists, Dambadiva is the home of Buddha and they undertake frequent pilgrimages there. However, Dambadiva is distinct from Indiyava – a place where the Tamils come from. Therefore, the heritage of Buddhism harbours a ‘double division’.

Dr. Jeganathan also elaborated on the heritage of Ramayana and termed it ‘a part of the living heritage of Sri Lanka’. However, he stated that Ramayana can be ‘inscribed with cartography of places’ i.e. one tends to only identify places where the events had occurred. Meanwhile, Hanuman remains a God of the underworld and this was reflected in the IPKF being labelled as an ‘army of the monkey’ by the ultra-Sinhala nationalist JVP.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Jeganathan argued that there has to be an appreciation of the suffering of the past in order to find a common ground.

Dr. Abdul Rasheed Ali, in his presentation titled “*Folklore and Evolution of National Identity in the Maldives*”, highlighted the relationship between cultural identities and belief systems that have shaped the evolution of Maldivian national identity. He observed that the Maldivian population is largely homogeneous with a single culture and religion. Historically, Maldivians had remained close to the political system and practices as they were built on family relations and competition. Therefore, one can assert that the societal features, culture and local and national identities have been closely linked to the relationship between ideas and

practices of the local population and their political systems. The country's small population makes it easier to categorise the cultural features that form an identity.

Dr. Ali highlighted the folklores of Maldivian society. He observed that they are deeply rooted in the country's history and in many cases become part of the culture-norm system. Various tales propagating 'fear' have been passed down the generations. The peoples' beliefs are reinforced by religion, which require pious followers to believe in the supernatural (such as Jinn). This often results in the creation of fictitious beasts of folklore, which further reinforces the shared cultural identity. There also exist folk activities like black magic, evil eye and rituals which people believe in. Dr. Ali opined that these practises have an impact on the social construct and have over time begun to influence political processes in the country. Therefore, the state needs to be cautious in its decision-making whenever folk objects come into contact with the general ideas of the people.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Ali observed that one can identify and categorise norms based on folklore in South Asian societies by viewing political relations between states through the prism of folklore. An understanding of folklore can be vital to analyse real but often unconventional links that hold the people together. The model can be applied to South Asia and there is a need for greater cross-national research engagement.

Prof. S. D. Muni, speaking on "Civilisational and Cultural linkages in South Asia: Continuities and Discontinuities", attributed the spread of 'confluence of culture' (mixing of cultural streams) in South Asia to two major factors: a) South Asia having witnessed considerable intermingling of civilisational streams which generated competition as well as adaptation; and, b) The region being a hub of different religions. These factors have underlined tolerance and co-existence of civilisational streams. It also gets reflected in archaeology, architecture, arts, aesthetics, food, fashion, diaspora, ideas, institutions, thoughts and philosophies. Prof. Muni rebuffed the idea of cultural confluence being India-centric.

He opined that the confluence of culture was spread mainly by empires from the Mauryas to the British, while trade too played a major part in its spread. At present, South Asia faces several conflicts yet there are no religious or civilisational disputes.

On the issue of emergence of discordant factors, Prof. Muni referred to internal divisions and the lack of cohesiveness of almost every religion in the region. He also highlighted the competition injected by incoming religions/cultural stresses. However, it is the rise of identity at the social, political and religious levels that have acquired far serious proportions. The intermingling of politics and identity is poisonous. The cultural space is fragmented by political divisions.

Prof. Muni concluded by emphasising that culture retains the potential to promote harmony. It is, however, important to keep politics away from cultural aesthetics.

Mr. Raza Rumi, in his presentation "*Culture and Regional Cooperation: Pakistani Perspective*", argued that culture does not get the priority or the visibility that it deserves. It remains hostage to nationalistic status quo. This is even more evident in India-Pakistan relations. Mr. Rumi elaborated on the common trend in these countries to disown and re-interpret their pre-independence heritage. This had led to the emergence of fault lines where common history and cultural practises are not only denied but also erased from public life. As a result, culture is often contested and disputed.

Mr. Rumi emphasised that at the people's level, the state-led narratives are being made irrelevant, particularly by the social media. While SAARC retains enormous potential to bridge differences, yet it

remains hostage to India-Pakistan hostility. As a result, cultural developments like pop culture are being overshadowed by issues like terrorism and security.

Mr. Rumi drew parallels with the European Union (EU) which has managed to bridge generations of hostility between its members. This has seen EU member-countries attempt to develop common history textbooks for children which is a key instrument of promoting nationalism, while at the same time educate millions. In comparison, Pakistani textbooks are doctored to a large extent since the country has attempted to redefine its history.

Mr. Rumi suggested that a joint historical commission be set up that will seek to forge a regional understanding for South Asia. He also urged sports events to be promoted since it engages people.

Dr. Krishna Hachhethu elaborated on the “*New Constitution and Identity Politics in Nepal*”. He argued that the Constitution, despite having ‘remarkable’ legitimacy, suffers from the fact that the concerns of various social groups have not been adequately addressed. A shared social contract is missing in both content and process. Dr. Hachhethu emphasised that inclusion as an instrument for accommodating diversity has been largely ignored. Moreover, the establishment of federalism and adoption of a mixed electoral system is designed to retain the domination of the Hill high castes.

Dr. Hachhethu argued that the new Constitution curtails the scope of all three major instruments of inclusive democracy – reservation/affirmative action, proportional representation and federal design. As a result, Madhesis and Hill Indigenous People continue to be dissatisfied. The Constitution also removes the word ‘proportional’ from several important provisions. This makes a mockery of inclusion and permits tokenism.

Dr. Hachhethu also dwelt on several discriminatory provisions of the new Constitution. These include: a) Supremacy of Khas Nepali language and subordination of other linguistic groups. b) The provision of citizenship ignores open borders with India and a long tradition of cross-border marriage which places the Madhesis in a disadvantageous position. c) Unlike the constitutional provision of providing preferential treatment for women and Dalits, the Janajatis and Madhesis are not recognised as excluded groups or as bearers of collective rights. d) The hopes of Hill Indigenous People to transfer their social identity into political power through federal arrangement have been ruined substantially since the new Constitution rejects the idea of identity-based federalism.

Dr. Hachhethu suggested that the establishment of an indigenous peoples’ network at the bilateral and regional level is likely to expand the political space of Janajatis in the future. The ongoing Madhesh uprising has also raised the possibility of reviewing the boundaries of provinces. Dr. Hachhethu argued that Hill Indigenous People can influence Nepal’s internal politics and foreign affairs if they form a caucus in Parliament.

In the ensuing discussion, the following points were raised: Some argued that the state should not own a specific culture. It should merely facilitate the spread of culture. The way the elite interpret culture is important. South Asian culture may not be homogenous but it remains peaceful. Culture of cooperation should be encouraged in South Asia.

Session IV: Culture, Identity and Politics and its Impact on Bilateral Relations

Chairperson: Prof Partha S Ghosh

Mr. Sangay Chophel

Prof Prashanta Tripura

Dr. Azra Naseem

Dr Sudhindra Sharma



Sangay Chophel, in his presentation “*Bhutan-India Relations: Does culture matter?*” argued that for Bhutan, it was necessary to have good relations with both India and China. Peace and security has always been the focus of Bhutan’s foreign policy. Bhutan’s cultural identity is important and is also part of the nine points of Gross National Happiness. The Constitution of Bhutan considers culture as an evolving dynamic force which the state has to promote. Bhutanese culture is composed of Buddhist identity, competence in the mother language, knowledge of art and craft, and manifestation of various views. In Bhutan about 20 dialects are spoken which also includes Nepali. The national dress is the symbol of unity without which the nation lacks meaning.

In Bhutan, culture is largely shaped by religion (Buddhism). Before Buddhism, the bonism culture (worshipping of animals and nature) was widespread. The first temple is being constructed in the capital city of Thimpu now. One can also see the film industry growing. Bollywood certainly has an influence in the country. Culture is of course one of the factors in Indo-Bhutan relations. This cultural foundation brings together many people from both the countries including writers and artists. Culture can be used as a unifying factor to build bridges.

In Bhutan, economic progress can be witnessed. Nehru had paid a visit to Bhutan and India had financed completely the first Five-Year Plan of Bhutan. It still funds the Five Year Plan. As far as Bhutan is concerned, tourism is the main reason for which foreigners visit the country. However, it has very good and special relations with India.

Prashant Tripura, speaking on “*Ethnic Diversity and Cultural Hegemony in Bangladesh: Imperatives for More Inclusive National and Regional Identities*”, said Bangladesh is quite a diverse country. Bengalis themselves are very diverse. There are Buddhist Bengalis, Muslim Bengalis, Hindu Bengalis, and Christian Bengalis.

Muslim Bengalis could further be identified as Shia, Sunni and Ahmadi. Then there are multiple dialects of the Bengali language that are spoken throughout the country.

The idea of one nation, one language can only be sustained by ignoring others. There are many ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. This diversity needs to be recognised fully. In the 1971 Liberation War, Bengali nationalism was the main unifying force. However, Bengalis alone did not fight for liberation. The Bengali narrative does not recognise the contribution of others. In 2011, through a constitutional amendment, while ethnic diversity was recognised, the linguistic and ethnic rights of the indigenous people were not recognised by the state.

Azra Naseem, in her presentation “*Does Religion Triumph Culture in Identity Formation? The Arabisation of Maldives and its Regional Implications*”, underlined that Maldives has only one religion—Islam. One cannot be anyone else but Muslim. Secularism has been unacceptable. It is now considered a dirty word. In history, we were Buddhist but that is no more the case. The only identity now is that of a Muslim. Politics in the country is in a real flux. Islamists have destroyed the symbols of Buddhism. They have destroyed the museum that showcased Maldives’ rich cultural past.

In 1978, an Al-Azhar graduate became the President of the country. He tried to unify the country in an Islamic way—what he had learnt at Al-Azhar University. Only in 2008 was democracy.

In the aftermath of the Tsunami—which resulted in the death of 88 people while 24 reportedly disappeared—Saudi funding started flowing in. With funds came preachers who told the Maldivians that the Tsunami was the result of not following the real Islamic way, which meant not being proper Muslims or more precisely not being Islamists. These preachers captured the Maldivian consciousness and helped in Islamisation of the society.

In October 2008, dictatorship ended and democracy was introduced. In democratic society, extremists found it easy to penetrate and propagate their views. Maldivians went to Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia for study. The Wahabis/Salafists came to Maldives to teach Maldivians true Islam.

In November 2015, The Religious Unity Agreement was signed between Saudi Arabia and Maldives. As a result, Saudi influence and funding for madrassas have increased. This has given a boost to the Islamists who want to Arabise Maldivian culture.

Suddhindra Sharma, in his presentation “*India-Nepal Relations: Has Cultural Commonality Helped?*”, argued that Indo-Nepal relations are so special that no one needs a visa to travel to the other country. Only a simple identity card would work. It is like the border between Gujarat and Maharashtra, except that there are a few checkposts. Nepal too is a culturally and linguistically plural society. About 45 per cent of the people have Nepali as their mother tongue. Hindus are 85 per cent of the population. Nepal is an old State but an evolving nation. Nepal has always tried to maintain a separate identity. Nepalese people also undertake the Char-Dham-Yatra and religious pilgrimages. The same is true with the Buddhists who visit revered Buddhist shrines in India. Muslims would also love to go to Ajmer, Delhi, Faizabad, Bahraich and West Bengal for religious visits. For Nepalese people, India symbolises a place of excellent education and is known for its strong political institutions. They come here to study. It is also a marketplace for them. India is a Dukaan (shop). Large Indian companies employ Nepalese. Gorkhas are part of the Indian military. India is also seen as a cross-border kith and kin. The relationship is of *Roti-Beti ka sambandh*. BBC Hindi is as popular in Nepal as BBC Nepali. Therefore, this relationship needs to be understood in its complete perspective.

Concluding Session - Panel Discussion on the Way Forward

Chairperson: Prof. Muchkund Dubey			
Ms. Ajeet Cour	Amb Suresh Goel	Dr Ashok K Behuria	H.E. Sayed Mossadeq Khalili
Dr. Yaqoob Bangash	Dr. Sudhindra Sharma	Mr. Kunzang Delek	Prof. Sonia Nishat Amin
Dr. Abdul Rasheed Ali			



The session was chaired by Professor Muchkund Dubey, one of the foremost authorities on India’s foreign policy. The discussion was a summation of the proceedings of the conference. It sought to flag key recommendations for the way ahead on how cultural ties can be employed for greater understanding and regional harmony in South Asia.

Ms. Ajeet Cour, sharing her vast and rich domain experience, noted that writers and cultural activists in South Asia should get together and work towards regional integration. She referred to the SAARC Charter, where, initially, there was no reference to culture or cultural exchange. Later, the Charter was amended to include culture, festivals, etc. This move injected new blood into SAARC activities as issues concerning environment, climate and folklore were on the agenda of the organisation. The Ministry of External Affairs in India has, in the past, supported cultural exchanges within the region. However, there is a need to promote greater interaction along these lines by the governments in the region. Few years back, one such conference was organised where writers from Pakistan had come to India, thus providing them a valuable opportunity to engage fruitfully. Culture has the potential to contribute to better regional understanding that will facilitate bilateral relations.

Mr. Suresh Goyal, former Director General of the ICCR, advocated a dialogue between communities and identities especially in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguist social fabric such as that of South Asia. He noted that any effort to subsume these identities under one identity would be detrimental. There is need for cultural cohesiveness and a need to see how they could be converged towards a common goal – a way of living together in peace. It would really be useful if the South Asian region could develop an identity to deal with the rest of the world. There is need to forge consensus and to develop a common

platform – by sharing literature, translating manuscripts for wider reach and creating a common archive of manuscripts produced from within the region, nurturing common heritage – tangible and otherwise – across South Asia, and promote interaction and exchanges between scholars and encourage universities to collaborate on the same. SAARC should organise conferences on pertinent issues such as these and not just confine its deliberations to politics of the region.

Dr. Ashok Behuria noted that this particular conference was designed to elicit views from across the region as to whether culture can be used as an effective tool of regional integration. He stated that at the end of the deliberations it can be concluded, to some people’s dismay and to some people’s delight, that culture can not only be a binding agent but it can also act as a divisive force. We should not only think in terms of inter-State cultural linkages but also look at intra-State common cultural linkages in order to promote harmony and understanding among the people of South Asia who happen to be divided into different States. That is the way out if we are looking at ourselves as South Asians. There are anxieties expressed over how States are using culture to their advantage, looking at culture as a commodity of exchange. There is a need to look at culture as a plural concept which has several links and not as something monolithic. He quoted Mahatma Gandhi while saying that the culture of the mind should be subservient to the culture of hearts.

Sayed Mossadeq Khalili noted that culture has a significant role in promoting better relations among countries. Afghanistan has a lot of shared values and history with countries of the South Asian region – India, Pakistan, Nepal and others. Considering the diversity of the South Asian region, which is also its beauty, there is a need to encourage greater exchanges between countries with regard to music, lifestyle, etc. We need to understand the similarities and the differences between each other quite well before we can hope that culture could act as an agent of regional integration. Once such understanding is reached, we can further develop relations, identify common challenges facing the region and tackle them together.

Dr. Yaqoob Bangash noted that the timing of this particular conference is critical as cultural wars are taking place in many parts of the world. One needs to take into account that South Asia is not just India or for that matter India and Pakistan. There is much more to it but unfortunately there is very little knowledge in countries of South Asia about each other. There is so much knowledge that we don’t really have of each other’s culture. Overcoming this is of prime significance if we are to look at culture as a factor for regional integration. Bhutan, for instance, does not have an embassy in Pakistan – no one really knows where Bhutan is apart from the fact that it is a small country in the SAARC. Also, it is sad that there is practically little interaction between Pakistan and Bangladesh – for a Pakistani it is very difficult to get a visa for Bangladesh, so much so that it is easier for someone from Pakistan to get a visa for India. There is need to look beyond India and Pakistan and this would be possible only if there is more information sharing among the countries of South Asia about each other’s cultures and practices, etc. Such information sharing will also add to the economy and tourism within the region. This could be done bilaterally or trilaterally and all countries of the region are likely to benefit from such initiatives.

Dr. Sudhindra Sharma noted that there has been a tendency to regard culture as a residual factor while dealing with inter-State relations. He took a social anthropological view of culture, stating that one needs to take a broader and holistic view of culture which may not always be a thing of the past. Culture also needs to be seen in futuristic terms. For instance, in the debate on poverty, aspirations could be perceived as something that concerns the future. Taking a more comprehensive and anthropological view of culture may help us in dealing with some of the dilemmas that have been highlighted during the course of the conference. People-to-people contacts, which are in place in South Asia as part of several arrangements, should be allowed to flourish without intervention from the States. Besides, it is necessary that apart from democracy, States should acknowledge the plurality of ethnicities and cultures across the region.

Kunzang Delek, said that Bhutan is a landlocked country and it was only in the 1960s that the country opened up to the outside world. Bhutan is home to at least 20 dialects and many forms of folklore find their origin in the country. Most of these have not been shared with the countries in the neighbourhood. There are several commonalities which Bhutan shares with other countries in the region. Culture is a tricky concept and it can be divisive at times. SAARC has been working in this direction for so many years but unfortunately one cannot see solid results from these efforts. There is a need to share more information on diverse cultures among the countries of the region. One should also think in terms of bringing the politicians on board. The common people in the region are mere implementers. Governments should act as the driving force in this regard.

Prof. Sonia Nishat Amin noted that during the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, several pacts were signed. In these pacts, culture was given emphasis. There was an attempt to reverse the anti-India feeling, especially in the wake of the water sharing issue between India and Bangladesh. While doing so, culture can play an important role in bilateral ties to help in arriving at a common understanding. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has in the past organised several events in Bangladesh in an effort to bolster cultural links between the two countries. After one of his very well attended shows in Bangladesh, the famous Indian actor Hrithik Roshan asked a very fundamental question: why aren't Hindi films released in Bangladesh? This is despite the fact the large sections of Bangladeshi audiences remain hooked to Hindi and Bengali serials. Indian television soaps are very popular in Bangladesh and all television stars are known there irrespective of the fact that most of the soaps are regressive and appear to be contrary to the concept of women's empowerment. She argued that until the trauma of the 1971 war is healed, meaningful cultural integration is not possible.

Abdul Rasheed Ali stated that folklore and historical linkages have the ability to promote better relations among nations. Therefore, elected governments should make concerted efforts towards developing cultural ties between all nations of South Asia. India does share a lot of cultural affinity with the Maldives – for instance, Indian dance and Indian movies are quite popular in the Maldives.

Prof. Muchkund Dubey wrapped up the session by noting that culture is a component in both diplomacy and strategy. Today, with the advent of the technological revolution, governments have lost the monopoly over culture just as they have on information or on justice. Farida Khanum, Ghulam Ali and Runa Laila are as popular in the entire subcontinent as they are in their country of origin. Culture is something which does not need to be spread aggressively – one should never rub it in nor impose it but gradually nurture it. Otherwise, there is a possibility that it could instil a fear of cultural hegemony. India needs to ensure that cultural products from India do not create a sense of cultural hegemony and do not affect the unique cultural identity in the neighbouring countries, as they could be averse to getting flooded by such activities. On the other hand, even if neighbours put restrictions on the cultural inflow from India, India should allow their cultural products to flow to our side without any restriction. Their cultural products probably would not overwhelm us but our cultural products could overwhelm theirs. In most parts of the region, pluralism is in danger. Therefore, it is a common responsibility to protect the diversity of all the countries in the neighbourhood. Similarly, cultural equality is as important as sovereignty. There is a need to go out of the way to recognise the cultures of other countries. A conscious restraint on the projection of majoritarian culture needs to be exercised, as politics can impinge upon cultural cooperation and adversely impact bilateral ties.