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Story Reader

Beyond borders

South Asia will continue to exist even if Saarc as an institution becomes redundant

- ABHI SUBEDI (/author/abhi+subedi)

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Nov 1, 2015- With great dismay, I have begun to feel that the Saarc as an organisation is slowly losing its relevance. I have examined this caveat in some of my articles in the past as well. The major reason behind this is that its member countries, instead of getting rid of their colonial past, appear to be haunted by it. This can be observed in the way the eight countries look at each other from their own position of strength in the region's power dynamics. Most alarming is the failure of the big countries to realise that this persists even after so many years of independence. We are worried by the Indo-Pak antagonism, which is taking a turn for the worse each day. Their reckless actions even when they are moving dangerously close to a catastrophic confrontation is the cause of utmost concern. I would like to reiterate how other nations feels about it.

Failure of Saarc

At a Saarc literary seminar in Lahore in March, 2004 where I was invited to present a paper, I problematised this issue in the critical literary discourse and said that the smaller countries of the region, like Nepal, have one latent force—they are in a position of giving advice to India and Pakistan to realise their problems and resolve their problems. Later, someone from Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper, photocopied my paper for news. I waited nervously until the next morning

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(/news/2015-11-15/an-uphill-struggle.html)
Nov 15, 2015
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when Dawn published the gist of my paper under the title 'Pakistan and India advised' on its front page. I was extremely delighted not by the coverage but on knowing how such psyche haunts the minds of the citizenry in other countries too. But another tendency is unfolding now—efforts to weaken the smaller countries of the region who wish well of the larger ones.

This makes me wonder if the Saarc is getting redundant because the big countries in South Asia do not listen to smaller nations anymore. This does not bode well for the region. It is not a question of size; it is a question of destroying a fabric from which you draw strength, by using wanton measures. The simple reason large countries do this is because they can do so. I am not a jingoist in the traditional sense, but I would like to repeat what Professor Krishna Khanal wrote in the Kantipur (October 11) about the ongoing 'embargo' imposed by India on Nepal: "a nation does not die due to blockades; but the patients in hospitals might die."

It is a well-known fact that it is not the Madhesi leaders but politicians of the Nepali uplands who are famously and in some cases notoriously, known for maintaining close links with the politico-bureaucratic structure in India. Blaming Mahantha Thakur, therefore, for being close to the Indian establishment is a fabricated lie. But instead of rendering the entire country stagnant and blocking supplies to the hundreds of thousands of earthquake victims, letting patients die without oxygen and destroying the fabric of a nation, he could talk to the ruling parties in good spirit.

South Asian historicity

I am not a pessimist. I have the following reasons for my optimism. But it is not as simple as it sounds. There are many levels and many interpretations of this subject. Indian scholars have written brilliant books on it. Homi K Bhabha has said, that the colonial past has left something called "an in-between, hybrid position of practice and negotiation." He argues that the history of coloniality has created a culture of mimicry or imitation, but the same can be turned into a force, a power, which has become more of the academicians' cup of tea.

In recent days, Romila Thapar's The Past as Present (2014) has become my favourite book. The content of this essay is directly related to that question of writing history, interpreting the world around oneself on the basis of the historiography. Its source is South Asian historicity. Though such historiography is being challenged, I see the power of this historicity continuing either under protection or even without that in folklores, ancient texts, colours, stones, old texts, woodworks, houses, water conduits, castles, plays, poetry, and music. I have seen the patterns of these genres and all these forms discussed by South Asian scholars, and practised by the cultural sites-restorers, translators of India and Bangladesh, Sufi singers and dancers of India and Pakistan, sculptors and wood carvers of Nepal—part of whose works lie trapped in the rubble after the quake and others standing majestically in architectonic forms—paintings and stone works, singers and performers of Bangladesh and dancers of Sri Lanka, Thumri singers, poets and Sufis of Afghanistan and Buddhist art interpreters of Bhutan.

Creative forces

I am writing this as literary writer whose rhetorical vantage point is South Asian creative bonding, and it is perpetually present there. And if any

political ideologues want to evoke that bonding, they cannot do so by harping merely on the political formulas and government reshuffles. Instead, if they really care about the bonding of South Asia they should focus on the creative side that I am talking about here. Politicians and rulers have time and again stressed on the power of the creative people to guide them.

That evening in Lahore, the Punjab governor, an erstwhile military elite surrounded by his guests—the writers of South Asia—at a dinner said in a very humble tone that it was the responsibility of the writers of South Asia to show them the right path. I remain intrigued by that. And whether the Saarc an institution becomes redundant or not, South Asia will continue to exist and sail forward as it has always done even in hard times.

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