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Reimagining South Asia in 2030

Speech

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Reimagining South Asia in 2030

The future of South Asia, as a community does not look too promising in the wake of the postponement of the SAARC summit. As a person who has been engaged over 40 years in civil society initiatives to recreate a South Asian community I have witnessed a number of such fluctuations in the fortunes of the SAARC process.

At all such troubled moments it has remained important for civil society, across the region, to keep the idea of South Asia alive and moving forward. It is civil society, operating through the market place and through increasing movement of peoples across borders, who have continued to interact with each other. It is through such civic interactions that we have attempted to preserve our South Asian identity and ensured that set-backs at the inter-state level would not erode the concept of South Asia. Such civil society initiatives have fortunately been sustained by the commitment of particular governments especially from the smaller states of South Asia, to retain their faith in the idea of a stronger South Asian community.

Within the long tradition of a pro-active civil society I would invite South Asians assembled here today to let their minds roam free and try to imagine a South Asia in which our children and grandchildren may come of age. Through such an exercise in reimagination let us cast our vision towards the Himalayan peaks of South Asia rather than tracking all the holes in the ground which have, in our recent history, threatened progress in our journey to a shared destination. The challenges I lay down before all the distinguished participants assembled at SAES IX from across the region is to apply your creative imagination to explore pathways which will help us to clear the obstacles to our ascent. This is an altogether different challenge from investing our time and energies in identifying the obstacles and then concluding that we had better not attempt such a forbidding journey.

To encourage all of you to look upwards I present my own vision for how I visualize South Asia in 2030. You are each free to challenge aspects of my vision and substitute your own but I would still encourage you to always look upwards.

My vision of an imagined South Asia is constructed around four challenges:

- Imagining a genuinely just, inclusive and democratic society
- Imagining a South Asian community living at peace with each other

- Imagining South Asia as a lynchpin in a wider Asian community which is emerging as the centre of the economic universe during the 21st Century

A just, inclusive and democratic South Asia

My vision of a just and inclusive society visualizes exclusion as the outcome of an unjust society and international system. This injustice remains the source of poverty, income inequality and social disparity. This sense of injustice which permeates the more excluded segments of society across South Asia is expressing itself in social instability, alienation and resort to violence in our countries. Such tensions threaten to spill across national borders and disturb inter-state harmony. My idea of justice envisions a social universe where the more excluded segments of society, the resource poor, women, minority groups are provided with equitable opportunities to participate in the economic and political market place.

The right to economic justice can only be realized through a politically just order which demands a South Asia in 2030 where our elective bodies are competitively elected, free of the influence of money and the threat of muscle power or invocations to primordial loyalties and faith based identities. Such elective bodies would thereby include women representatives in numbers commensurate with their share of the population, working people, minorities and representatives from other excluded groups. These genuinely representative bodies should always remain responsive and accountable to their electorate who should be free to recall them if they fail to discharge their mandate to their constituents.

Fully representative elective bodies, should feel empowered to give voice to the concerns of the excluded and hold governments accountable to honour their commitments and for all their actions at all times. Corruption should be constantly challenged within institutions of governance which are kept fully transparent, accountable and non-partisan. Such a system of governance should always seek to draw upon and reward efficiency and integrity while punishing malfeasant conduct among public employees. To underwrite such a system we should look forward to a South Asia sustained by the rule of law.

Imagining a South Asian community

By 2030 we should aspire to construct an economic community which would provide for the free movement of goods, people and capital across the region, through a common market

backed by integrated labour and capital markets. A South Asian economic community would need to provide opportunities for the growth and diversification of the smaller economies of South Asia through leveraging the growth of the Indian economy which by 2030 would be the third largest in the world. We would accordingly need to construct value chains across the region in the same way that China has linked itself to its East and South East Asian neighbours and thereby stimulated their export and economic growth.

To underwrite the common market of South Asia we would need to integrate its economic infrastructure through establishing seamless connectivity which provides for uninterrupted movement of goods and people through rail, road, air and water transport across the region. Dr. Manmohan Singh's dream of having breakfast in Dhaka, lunch in Delhi, tea in Lahore and dinner in Kabul must be realized. We further need to integrate energy grids which trade power across the region and are serviced by regional conduits which link the oil and gas fields of West and Central Asia with South Asia. We must finally work together to exploit the enormous energy potential of the Himalayan waters through cooperative action among South Asian countries served by these waters.

Imagining South Asia as the pivot of a new Asia

In conclusion we should recognize that South Asia today serves as a pivotal link between the most dynamic economies in the world in China and East/South-East Asia with the enormous energy and natural resource of West and Central Asia. These linkages should be strengthened through building transport connectivity which permits for uninterrupted travel originating in China or Singapore, across Myanmar and North East India into Bangladesh, across India to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. China already has its own plans to establish such connectivity but South Asia should position itself as a pivotal route for the Asian Highway and Railway networks and link up with China's *belt and road* initiative for building connectivity across Asia.

Within the Asian region, apart from its pivotal location, South Asia is possessed of a unique resource, its people. Given the rapidly aging populations of China as well as in East Asia and the sparse populations of West and Central Asia, South Asia's demographic dividend should emerge as one of Asia's most important sources of wealth. South Asia's citizens, equipped with universal quality education and democratization of economic opportunities, could leverage its partnership in the Asia region as the principal source of labour services which will remain

integral to the sustainable growth of the region. We should also recognize that South Asia presides over one of the largest untapped markets in the region in the form of its millions of low income households. A policy agenda, which is targeted to significantly enhance the inclusion of these millions in the development process and in the process, significantly enhances their incomes, would generate market demand from the bottom of the pyramid which has not been witnessed since China's managed to lift millions of its people out of poverty.

Ascending the mountain top

The challenge before us is to move beyond the realm of the imagination to explore what we need to do together and within our own boundaries to scale the Himalayan summit. The journey may look forbidding but it must begin. South Asia cannot condemn itself to travel towards 2030 moving sluggishly along the swamps and marshes which hold us hostage today. Let me therefore conclude with an uplifting message inspired by the immortal verses of Rabindranath Tagore from his epic poem, *Gitanjali*,

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where *South Asia is no longer* broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand or dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action---
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let *the countries of South Asia* awake.