

Two days at JNU & some thoughts on People SAARC Assembly

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Attending the latest Peoples SAARC Assembly in Delhi was a pleasant experience. The Assembly was organized in Jawaharlal Nehru University campus on 22-23 April 2010. The venue was JNU auditorium of School of Social Sciences (SSS). This scribe was among over 200 delegates from South Asian countries participated in the two-day event, attended by a number of parliamentarians, intellectuals, civil society/political activists, academics and human rights campaigners.

The moot was a good opportunity to interact with delegates across the region. Most of the speeches from the podium and interventions from the floor were a true reflection of the genuine aspirations of the marginalized peoples/communities of South Asia who are chronically neglected by the respective governments and states. Serious contributions on issues ranging from water, climate and militarization to gender justice were made by some impressive speakers like seasoned parliamentarian Mani Shankar, Iqbal Haider, Kamla Basin, Kuldeep Nayyar, Babu Methew, Karamat Ali, Arjun Karki, Sarba Rajkathka, Babloo Loitongbam, Prof. Kamal Chenoy, Anuradha, Farooq Tariq, Jatin Desai and others.

Mani Shankar beautifully explained the socio-cultural history of the region and interpreted the South Asian question from civilizational perspective. He convincingly made the audience realize the importance of sub-continental diversity. Most of the nation states anchor on the concept of cultural homogeneity, while India celebrates its diversity, said Mani Shankar. To be different from one another is essential for an Indian and acceptability to this cultural heterogeneity is the unique hallmark of the South Asian region, Mani Shankar opined. He spoke at length on the philosophy of two-nation theory and presented his powerful rationale to disagree with the same.

Co Chairperson HRCP Iqbal Haider made equally impressive speech. He was critical of SAARC states for lacking interest in the 25-year old process. He told how vital is the water issue for the South Asian region and there is urgent need to address it. He suggested declaring the LoC as temporary border for a certain period and called for visa-free borders. He condemned the blame game being played between governments of India and Pakistan since decades to hoodwink the people. He exposed the hidden mechanisms and agendas aimed at fanning hate politics and termed it a faulty barometer of patriotism, being practiced on two sides of the border.

Renowned journalist Kuldeep Nayyar advocated the ideas of a common South Asian identity, emphasizing that we should be South Asians first and nationals of our respective countries later. He suggested an integrated regional economic system for S Asia, declaring joint currency following the model of European Union. Sharing his dream, Kuldeep said that sovereignty should stay with peoples and it is practicable to have a joint South Asian Parliament. Regarding water issue, he argued that rivers are not property of any country; rather these are the joint assets of the peoples of this region including, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. If we really want prosperity of South Asia, let us have an integrated regional mega development plan for Indus water basin and Bahramputra water basin, he suggested.

Kamla Basin put the South Asian people's case in a powerful way. Using beautiful poetic references,

she threw intellectual lights on the high hopes for South Asian people's unity. Perhaps she was the only one who kept on reminding the delegates that how much equally important was the fight against powerful patriarchic patterns in the S. Asian societies. To her gender justice is a prerequisite to social justice in any society.

To hold this assembly at JNU campus was a sane decision because of two reasons; firstly it was cost effective and secondly it provided delegates opportunity to observe the quality academic environment of this unique campus. Kamal Chenoy and Anuradha Chenoy, two well known professors at JNU were the real minds behind efforts to organize this mega event. Their efforts are really appreciable.

During informal meetings/interactions with Indian friends and local students I learnt that JNU is only 40 year old, was established 1970 by late Indira Gandhi in the memory of her great father. The University is situated at rugged terrain of the Aravali hill range, where the 1000-acre lush green campus is housed. Parts of it host dense forests as well. The grand vision behind the establishment of JNU, as told, was that ideas are a field for adventure, experimentation and unceasing quest and diversity of opinions. Bringing new perspectives on old disciplines into Indian university system was one of its fundamentals. That is why JNU major focus is social sciences.

In a way the JNU campus is a microcosm of the Indian nation, one can see students of every color and creed from every nook and corner of India and from every group and stratum of society. 22.5 per cent of seats are reserved for students from the underprivileged castes and ethnic groups. Only 15 per cent or so of total admissions are from Delhi, the rest being from all parts of India.

Students' hostels and blocks of faculty residences are built in unique and simple manner interspersed with one another, underlining the vision of a large Indian family. In the center the student hostels are standing in a circular manner, covering them the second ring of teachers' hostels and third ring comprises guest houses and residential blocks for the support staff. Every hostel is built in pyramid shape, reflecting symbolic importance that student rooms are meant to sleep only and not for formal lodging. The purpose is urging students to utilize maximum time outside, for instance in library or interacting with other students. Every hostel has 4 wardens responsible for different tasks related to students. Over 4000 students are residing in 18 hostels, named after different rivers passing through different parts of South Asia.

It was pleasant to learn that hostels are named after different rivers, passing through South Asia. Contrary to this, I still remember that in Lahore Punjab university hostels are named after different Islamic heroes. JNU has also around 400 foreign students from around 50 countries including South Asia, South-East Asia, Central Asia, Africa and Europe.

When 47-member Pakistan delegation reached at JNU in the early hours of 22 of April, we were allotted rooms in three different guest houses inside the campus. We 12 delegates were taken to guest house in old campus. It was wonderful place. We were put in very cozy double-bed rooms with facilities of international standards. The 5-storey building with simple elevation was equipped with maximum facilities.

Noor Jehan, a young volunteer and student of Central Asian Studies at JNU was responsible for transportation, pick and drop delegates. For two days she took care of us and impressed by her hospitality. She was a good guide to us as well.

On the first day when we reached the venue it was pleasant to see the entrance beautifully covered with colorful sketches/drawings of Lenin and Che. JNU has a strong students' union culture. Students have affiliations with different political parties. The CPI student wing is most powerful,

while BJP student wing has also significant presence. I also learnt that in early 1970s the whole university including, students and academic staff belonged to the extreme left but after 1990s BJP also made some inroads and its student wing is now in comfortable position. Interestingly students affiliated with Jamat-e-Islami here generally support the Communists in union elections.

Another good point like to mention that I did not see any sort of sketches on the walls of toilets, which, in case of Pakistan, more like a culture of public toilets. Good to see nothing like that in JNU; no vulgar comment or slogans against opponents groups or filthy sketches/drawing of females inside the toilets. Perhaps JNU students enjoy real mental freedom. In case of Punjab University I still remember the hostel toilets walls were always covered with a variety of filthy comments and nude drawings; an obvious reflection of social and political repression.

It was great to have wonderful informal discussions with various Indian friends like Dr. Chaman lal, a great fan of Bhagat Singh, Ajit Kaur, Ashim.K Roy Comrade Ashok, Veda Bharadwaja and Dr. Suman Sharma over a number of common issues confronting South Asians. It was also inspirational to talk to Ms Rooma, who is in great struggle for the rights of communities living near forests.

Last but not least opportunity of meeting with South Asian friends was provided by our common friend from Action Aid India, Sandeep Chachara, who had arranged an informal meeting for a selected group of south Asians on the last day.

At the end of the Assembly, a People SAARC declaration was issued [1] which calls for Asian Peoples commitment to creating a South Asia free from all forms of discrimination, exclusion and domination. It urged all SAARC countries to struggle against militarism and jingoism; and demandss of the governments to reduce defence spending and make available funds for socially useful spending on public welfare and social security for all.

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Footnotes

[1] See [People's SAARC: New Delhi Declaration](#)