



EXPERT SPEAK

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COVID-19 pandemic has had profound effect on South Asian countries like much of the rest of world. This interview tries to dwell into the questions pertaining the response and efforts made by South Asia as a region and try to project the future course of South Asia. In this session of Expert Speak, Prof. S. D. Muni, Professor emeritus at the School of International Studies, JNU answers the questions regarding South Asia's position in the post COVID world order.

Expert Speak is an initiative by Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu. It is one of the ways we are conducting Dialogue between the curious and the expert. These experts are from different fields with different experiences. Similar is the case with the interviewers. Under the project, Expert Speak, we are undertaking a series of interviews, not just in Nepal but from experts worldwide. The project intends to dwell current international scenario and issues, focusing Nepal and South Asia in particular.

EXPERT



Prof. S. D. Muni

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About the Expert:

Professor S.D. Muni is member of IDSA's Executive Council. For nearly forty years, he taught, conducted and supervised research, in International Relations and South Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (1974-2006), National University of Singapore (2008-2013), Banaras Hindu University (1985-86), and University of Rajasthan (1972-73). He served as India's Special Envoy to SE Asian countries on UNSC Reforms (2005) and represented India's Minister of External Affairs at the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Paris Peace Conference, held in Phnom Penh, Kampuchea. He was also India's Ambassador to Lao People's Democratic Republic (1997-99). Prof. Muni was nominated to the first ever constituted National Security Advisory Board of India during 1990-91. He was the founding executive member of the Regional Centre of Strategic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and also served on the Executive Council of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, India. In 2005 he was bestowed with 'Sri Lanka Ratna', Sri Lanka's highest national honor for a foreign national. The Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka, Colombo, offered him affiliation as Honorary Distinguished Fellow in 2016. The Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he held the prestigious Appadorai Chair of International Politics and Area Studies, conferred on him the status of Professor Emeritus

Interview

Q: How do you think that this pandemic will impact South Asia as a region and India in particular?

A: Well, it is affecting the whole region very seriously and for two specific reasons; one is because of the population. This is a region of very high population quite densely located with each other. And secondly, our health infrastructure, public health infrastructure is very poor and therefore we are finding it difficult to cope with it. It is good to see that some of the countries have not been very seriously affected as India has been affected largely because of dense population in various areas. Now it's not only the human beings which have been affected, the economies have been seriously affected. Because of lockdown, most of the production centres have been closed. Most of the supply chains have been disrupted and the people are facing difficulties and problems all around. Now, how the governments are able to cope with it is still a big question.

There were lot of hopes in India that we would be able to come out without much difficulty and those hopes have now vanished. Even with the government putting in as seriously as possible their relief packages and putting all kinds of efforts. And it is difficult that this feeling is gathering around that we will have to live with the virus. That being so, I think when normal activities start and it will still take a few months. This year's rate of growth is going to be very low. And they hope that 2021-22, we'll pick it up. But all that remains to be seen. Therefore, after COVID, what I find is that the region as a whole and India in particular would be much starved, will feel much challenged. Starved in the sense of economic growth and prosperity, much challenged and lot of pressure for keeping the neighbours happy in terms of keeping the region happy in terms of helping them come out of this crisis.

Q: When you talk about neighbours, India has been following 'Neighbourhood First Policy' under the current regime. And it has been giving aids and building infrastructure project across the neighbourhood in all the countries. So do you think that post these things, we are able to get through this pandemic? Will this policy receive a boost or will India retract?

A: In fact, it was a very imaginative approach I would say. Initially, the Neighbourhood First call by Prime Minister Modi aroused lot of hopes and expectations. But soon I would say after many months, the hopes have started withering away. Largely, reason was that we got into conflict with Pakistan- first from the trade talks and other talks which were to happen. They broke down suddenly and then, you know the terrorism issue came in every way. Then Pakistan also even at the SAARC, did not allow some of the connectivity projects which were proposed which all other countries were willing to and we thought "let us get out of the SAARC." So Pakistan got spoiled out on terrorism, on Pakistan's own very attitude and other countries were affected because of two factors. Because behind this Neighbourhood policy was also an assertive India,

India which was far more confident and wanted to get its instincts through and in its own way. In a way it was trying to tell the neighbours "you should do this, you should not do that" directly or indirectly and that became evident particularly in Sri Lanka and Nepal. In Nepal, on the constitution issue I think India in a very undiplomatic manner, diplomatically intervened at a time when the Nepal Constituent Assembly had accepted the Constitution. Then the Indian government even imposed the economic coercive diplomacy which did not go well and I think that has spoiled relationship with Nepal.

In Sri Lanka, we were unhappy with Rajapaksa regime. We were asking for a solution which was not acceptable to them. Eventually the Rajapaksa regime went out and they blamed India that "you have helped in..." And the new coalition could not sustain itself. So India was almost back to square one so far as Sri Lanka was concerned and Nepal we had spoiled. Pakistan we had spoiled earlier. Bangladesh- we have supported Haseena very strongly but again due to some of the domestic agenda like the National Register in Assam created a problem and later on, the whole communal element in approach to some of the issues within India have seriously affected Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Prime Ministry even came and said "we could not understand". So all sum and total what I want to say is that the kind of hopes and expectations which were aroused out of the Neighbourhood First could not be sustained. Then we started the softening the whole issue and to some extent we had started expediting the projects, we have started becoming far more polite to the neighbours. Modi ji personally has been approaching most of the leadership either on telephone or otherwise. And we're trying to do what you can call course correction. That course correction will take us through the Corona offer which means there is an element of reviving the SAARC because Modi ji called the SAARC meeting on the Corona while earlier we said "SAARC is not going to help us". Now Corona helped. India is doing its best so far as neighbours are concerned both financially, medical wise, assistance wise. But you know, simply Corona help would not blunt the alienation which had set in between India and the rest of the leaders. So, much depends upon how this alienation can be blunted off.

Q: You talked about the assertive diplomacy which was there in the Neighbourhood First Policy. Initially it was there and especially with the case of Nepal and now again we have seen that the recent issue of this Lipulekh Pass has also come up. So, and the recent statement made by the Army Chief regarding it that it's been done at the behest of the third party. So, do you think that this will have an impact on India's relation with other countries? Will it bring back the 'Big Brother' debate back in South Asia?

A: Well, 'Big brother' debate- Big Brother is a western concept. In our part of the world, it is the elder brother. Elder brother sometimes scolds you and sometimes also affectionately hugs you and gives you all the assistance. If at all it should be the elder brother concept, it should apply. So far as Big brother is concerned, if India was really a Big Brother, it would have its way in all the neighbourhood which it is not having, not even now. For the last fifty years, there are so many issues on which India has not succeeded in taking the neighbours around and the neighbours for one reason or the other. You know you need *two to tango*. It is always easy to say India has not done this, not done that failed here, failed there, which is correct to a very large

extent. But it doesn't mean that the other side has had no contribution. Therefore, when the two countries or two people have to go together, I think both have to adjust with each other and I find there is a big, what you call an 'identity problem' in the neighbourhood largely because of the neighbour. You know we were one people. The political boundaries have been drawn up either by the British after partition or Bangladesh emergence or whatever it is. And even when Sri Lanka was there, largely historically civilisationally we are one people. Therefore, the political boundaries have created a serious identity problem. And the sovereignty question is there. And the much bigger issue before the neighbours of the country vis-a-vis India is that how close is not too close. They want to remain close to India. There are inter-dependencies which are structurally built in. Therefore, one would depend upon the other. But they find how close you can go and while retaining your own identity or your own interest and this struggle has come in the way. That's why every time they want other outside powers to come in. Earlier it was US, then to some extent even Pakistan became affected. Now China has become affected, now which seriously irritates the Indian decision makers. So you know this is a conflict which is a perpetual one. It has nothing to do with Corona specifically or nothing to do even with China's rise specifically. But, both these factors have somehow aggravated.

Q: SAARC has come into the picture. But India in the second, especially PM Modi in the second regime was seeing in the Indian diplomacy that we were pushing towards BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC was reviving with all the Track II and Track I diplomacy happening. And BIMSTEC also has public health in one of its fourteen sectors. Why haven't we heard anything on the BIMSTEC till now?

A: BIMSTEC firstly let me tell you, to my mind, BIMSTEC cannot be an alternative to SAARC. Let us be very clear. BIMSTEC was set up much earlier, you know. In 2005, it started becoming very active. It was in the late 1990s and largely it was a Thai idea that BIMSTEC came into being. Later on, India has tried to bring in Nepal and Bhutan also. So except for the three, you know Islamic countries of the SAARC, that is Afghanistan, Pakistan and Maldives, all other SAARC members are in BIMSTEC. So what- if SAARC cannot do something, it is the same carry over which goes into BIMSTEC. There are only two new countries which are different from SAARC. One is Myanmar and the other is Thailand. Now Myanmar and Thailand have a very specific relationship with China- you like it or not. And this organisation has not kicked off for all these years. And, we are trying to push it; India is trying to push it. I mean lot of diplomatic investments and policy investments have been made into that. It is showing some results. But, I don't feel that BIMSTEC can ever be an alternative to SAARC or it can be as close in terms of various identity and other issues.

Q: So in these times, connectivity will be a problem because we are disconnected in every way. Like, people to people and other ways also. So, do you think that digital connectivity will emerge as an alternative in this region? And can India play a role in building this digital connectivity?

A: Well, I would say that digital connectivity will play a factor. It will play a role. But it cannot be a substitute for physical connectivity, you understand. And when we talk about connectivity in South Asia it is actually reconnecting South Asia. We were connected in many ways, at people to people level and other ways. Therefore, connectivity issues and I may recall for you that we raised this question of connectivity very seriously in SAARC meeting in 2007- much before the BRI came into being, much before China thought of. Much before that we thought about it, but unfortunately, there is a huge what I call, the delivery deficit in India's foreign policy approach. We have wonderful ideas but we cannot implement them. We cannot deliver them so far as possible. So on connectivity also we have faltered. The Chinese started connectivity also early in South Asia. You will call the BCIM- there was an idea which was then called the Kunming initiative: connect South Asia with Kunming so that Kunming could develop. Now China has brought it to both China and Tibetan Xinjiang which should be connected to South Asia and they are doing this Pakistan project or Sri Lankan projects or various other projects which have come up. So they have pushed their connectivity far more faster and far more efficiently than what we could and we could not do largely because of the resource constraints on India's part, we don't have that much of the resources. And secondly, the hesitations on the part of India's neighbours, for example, you heard of BBIN. It was a very small... that let all the vehicles move around. And the objection came from where? From Bhutan, first which is the closest of India's neighbours and later on Bangladesh also drew now. We are trying to do BBIN in different ways on developmental issues but the connectivity question got first for one reason or the other. So I would continuously say that yes, I mean India has constraints, India has problems but other neighbours also need to sit down and think inside as to what do they want really out of this region.

Q: So, if we bring like connectivity and infrastructure project was central to South Asia, the relation which we have with all these countries. And now I think that health diplomacy will take and will also work parallel with physical infrastructure connectivity. In this, if we compare the scale and volume of aid given by China in South Asia to India, it's been huge. So do you think that this health diplomacy which has been carried out by China in South Asia will increase its influence and move these countries further closer to China?

A: Well, the China factor is already very powerful besides human health diplomacy because all the South Asian neighbours of India have accepted BRI. India has not, and India didn't want to and they did not care about it. Coming specifically to the health diplomacy, what is happening is that China and also India are giving lot of medicines, the health equipments, and the kind of training that is not going to build a viable health system in South Asia. For viable health system you need doctors, you need infrastructure in terms of hospitals which are properly equipped. You need a whole sense of cleanliness and sense of public health which you like it or not South Asia lacks all said and done. Look at Pakistan's condition, look at Nepal's condition look at India's condition, look at Sri Lanka or Bangladesh' condition. So, unless you build this infrastructure

and for that you need a lot of resources. It's a long term project, my dear. I don't think that these, you know cargoes which are coming with the immediate help to meet the crisis will build a health system which is viable to cope with such problems in future.

Q: Since China is playing a role in this region and US has also tried to revive itself with vocabulary such as Indo-Pacific and all. And now US and China are having problems as Trump is making statement. The counter statement is coming from China. So do you think that China-US relationship will play a part in the geopolitics of South Asia?

A: Well, it is already playing a part. In the sense that both US and one more country which you can name, Japan particularly, Finding out areas of mutual cooperation where the Chinese influence and Chinese push can be halted or resisted. There are various ways in which it is done. So, US and Japan in particular have even collaborative projects with India in order to see that. Not only India, they are also going out to the other countries in the name of as you said very rightly, the Indo-Pacific strategy concept. In which in Sri Lanka, US is assisting. To Nepal, to some extent US is assisting. Pakistan of course, it is assisting in various different ways. India has also been given assistance. So yes, I think and as what you call the gap between China or the rivalry between China and the US gets deepened. There would be more pressure on South Asia of the US and its allies to keep a distance from China. I may say here, that to the advantage of the US or India or Japan or countries like that. Many of the recipient countries of BRI are also finding it difficult to cope with BRI and China is aware of it in terms of that burden if not the trap. That burden which is increasing, their inability to pay back on the instalments on the loans and all that and China is also thinking of further softening. So how these projects would and the strategic underpinning of most of the infrastructure projects like in Gwadar or in Hambantota or the road system which you may have linked up with Nepal, whether it can be useful for strategic purposes or not remains to be seen. But it would always be a major question as to how China is able to finally succeed. Now China is finding for instance very difficulty to take the train to Kathmandu. There the preliminary report suggests that it is not an easy project. It will cost lot of money and lot of other problems. To what extent it will really connect with people? Because at the moment this train might go through the areas which are not populated. So people may not be beneficiaries of it. So it remains. The new question marks have come up before the BRI projects and there is an awareness growing into some of these countries that you know the Chinese assistance is not Rose's and honey. But still it is attractive. They are aware about it. They are depending upon it. More than that I may again put in a sensitive aspect that it is also helping them politically because some of the projects which are high valued. It is more than the cost like the Pokhara airport in Nepal, which was a controversy in which and the excess money which is being taken away by the company is being fed for political corruption. There are reports that Rajapaksa's election was funded by the Chinese. There are reports that the Communist parties in Nepal are being supported by the Chinese both financially and diplomatically and otherwise. So I think gradually that the situation is evolving and we will see how this shapes up.

Q: If we talk about this region, World Bank in its report says that there would be an economic slump and rise of inequality in the coming the months. So what would be the way forward? What would be the coping mechanism because food security will be a very big issue in this region along with rising inequalities. So will it lead to rise of protectionism in this region or will it lead to regional integration?

A: Well, protectionism is already there. If regional integration could succeed, SAARC would not have been eroded in the manner it got eroded. So I think every country will primarily look for itself and find out ways and means by which they can do. But so far as food is concerned and India is concerned, it is comfortably placed, all said and done. We are now not having a begging ball going around with others. So food security is one thing. But inequality would increase. I think job losses will take place with the new technologies which are coming up. This may lead to several social tensions further resulting into political stresses. We cannot easily map out what the political implications will be of the social stresses. You have seen protests in India for these migrant labourers. This kind of an issue would come up everywhere wherever people are affected adversely- they will rise up. Gone are the days of the 50s and 60s when we still could be managed. So I think there would be tremendous social pressure, the states in all of South Asia would be called upon to do and give much more to their people in order to survive or in order to really manage their affairs. This is a very challenging scenario to my mind.

Q: So I was talking to a Sri Lankan, Mr. Colambez. I was talking to him about what changes Sri Lanka has seen. So he was saying that now people are realising that we need to self-produce or food. People are thinking of increasing the agricultural activities they used to do because they think that they are not getting the cereals like dals and everything which they used to from India. So do you think there will be a push to agriculture in this region for self-sustenance in other countries? India is self-sustaining but other countries do import a lot from different places.

A: They can grow their own food. May be it will take time but it is not a problem. But talking about total self-sustenance is a wild dream. The globalisation all set and done has connected us very well. Right now we were talking about the US, Japan and India collaborating. There is a lot of pressure on how the WTO should change and this is not the way it should happen. Technology is a binding force. The supply chains are interrelated all over the world. So to think of a complete breakdown of globalisation again looks very unrealistic to me. Though in some of the critical areas, as you mentioned about food, may be it can be education, health care, how do you bring about technologies? I mean even India had to import ventilators from the US. Though India has produced its own alternative, but it had to import. It's a good nationalist sentiment to say that we will do our own things but interdependence is the law of the day.

Q: Right now if we look at the political leadership in South Asia, there are major populist leaders in lot of countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. So do you think that with the presence of such populist leaders, there will be a rise of nationalist feelings across this region also?

A: There is a rise of nationalism already and it will grow, there is no doubt about it. Populist leaders or no populist leaders I would say. Because as I said, people are becoming more and more conscious. Your generation, for instance, is a far more aspiring generation than the previous generations that are there. And they would want things to be delivered to them, whosoever delivered. But they feel pride in retaining their identity, retaining their national profile. So the nationalism as a factor has also become very prevalent. This is also a result of the weakening of the globalisation which we are talking about; America first or India first or China first for instance. Everybody wants to have their own things done in a way. That's why they are raising the trade deficit issues even with China which is an economic problem also. Nationalism would grow and well, populist leaders always succeed and are always more authoritative than the democratic leaders.

Q: I read some articles and reports in the foreign policy and other magazines that the pandemic will lead to rise of state power and state surveillance. So do you think it will happen in South Asia also? And if at all it happens, will it lead to cutting down of civil society rights and things of this kind?

A: No doubt it will reinforce that. This is already there. You've heard of the journalists and media being suppressed in Sri Lanka during the first Rajapaksa regime. It will be much more now. We are in India raising problems like Arogya Setu. Everyone is raising problems like what is this? Or surveillance has to be maintained. Or how Aadhar is being used everywhere. You're using Aadhar everywhere. The questions have already been there. They're going to rise now and this phenomenon is going to reinforce that. And the governments being stronger again and the leaders being stronger. They'd like to accumulate most of the powers in their hands. Take the example of Oli, take the example of Prime Minister Modi, take the example of Gotabaya in Sri Lanka and even Haseena in Bangladesh or army and Aung san Suu Kyi in Myanmar. People are generally complaining that the state is becoming stronger and oppressive. And to that extent this cutting on the human rights or civil society's space in which it could operate and there are also other aspects that civil society is also reacting very strongly. And I think the newly educated, newly enlightened people who are far more exposed than they were are finding it difficult to tolerate it. So this struggle would be there. This tendency would be there. But I think civil society must also try and muster its courage in one way or the other to contain the assertive instinct.

Q: All in all what I take out from this talk is regionalism will be on a rise with self-sustenance in the region and there will be some disruption and inequalities which will be rising. The times which will come will be tough. So, when we talk about these things, the last question I want to raise is about remittances. Lot of countries basically the poorer countries of this region like Nepal, Bangladesh, they depend on remittances even Sri Lanka also. So these remittances will occupy the whole year and remittances being a very important part of it. So how will that money which we will not be getting back for some time how will we be able to cope with it?

A: This will only worsen state's economy. Even now, not only are remittances are not coming; the source of the remittances is coming back. And they're asking for jobs and economic opportunities and be at home. And therefore the state has to provide much more jobs now. On the one hand we are moving towards the direction of artificial intelligence where you can get away without. A lot of automation may take place. There may be growth without jobs. On the other hand there are people who are poor who are not only uneducated. They can only sell their labour, lot of them and we are a young region. South Asia is a young region. Most of the countries have nearly 60-65% or more of the younger population. This younger population, as we talked earlier, is a far more aspirant population which is asking the state to be accountable for not fulfilling their aspirations. And what you pointed out about people coming from other countries, and getting back into their own countries is further adding to this problem. It is not easy. I may even end here that even rural urban balance is also under serious strain. You can see it about India. I think the people who have gone frustrated from the urban areas they say that may be somehow, even if it is 200 rupees less, we will work in the villages and find out. Now that will ask for a total if not restructuring, total overall reform of the economic structure as it is with all the necessary political equations. There would be more roads in the rural areas now rather than urban areas. There would be more demands from the rural areas. There may be more agitation in the rural areas. Similarly if these people are not accepted back say, in Saudi Arabia, Middle East or anywhere else where they are depending on what technology exposure because we're providing service people. We're providing only labour. They go and serve as domestic servants. They go and serve as security guards. They go and serve as small clerks who can write on computer, semi-skilled or not very high professionals. To some extent, professionals are also going. This is where the mismatch which has been created by this crisis of Corona is going to linger with us for quite some time.

About the Interviewer:



Alakh Ranjan is currently working as Research Assistant with Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS). He has done his Masters International Relations and Area Studies, specialisation in South Asia and Bachelors in Journalism from GGSIP University. He has also worked as Young Professional on politics and foreign policies of Nepal and Bhutan at Vivekananda International Foundations (VIF). His research focuses on Soft Power Diplomacy and Indian Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood.