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India wants to grow and prosper with neighbours: Prabhu



IAN S New Delhi, June 25 (IANS) The South Asian region could cooperate in the fields of agriculture, water conservation and climate change besides trade and tourism to make the region more prosperous and inter-connected, Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu said here on Thursday.

Prabhu, speaking at the launch of the RIS South Asia Development and Cooperation Report 2015, said the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region despite being home to nearly one-fourth of the world's population lacks the clout it should rightfully have because of poor development.

Remarking on the connectivity projects being launched by SAARC countries, Prabhu said India's policy towards neighbours is that it wants to be "extremely friendly towards neighbours and wants them to be equally friendly towards it".

"We want to grow together and prosper together, and we are willing to pay a price to make that happen" by way of building infrastructure projects for the use of neighbours.

He said that while the ASEAN region, which shares some of the rivers, has prospered, the South Asian region has not done so due to infighting.

"It is time to cooperate by leaving the challenges out and see the possibilities of benefits. Then, automatically they will realise that the challenges no longer exist," Prabhu said.

He said with South Asia being predominantly agriculture driven, the countries should focus on cooperation in this sector, especially on new seeds, less water consuming crops and heat resistant crops.

Besides, the countries could cooperate in water conservation and use, the overarching issue of climate change, flood control, in energy and tourism.

Prabhu also said that the region can focus on enhancing trade, which would in turn boost the GDP growth and improve the human development index of the region, which is poor.

"The development should be people centric. As regards India, we have a responsibility and we always feel we must take care of our neighbours in a way that we will take care of our brothers and sisters. We consider this as a bounden responsibility given to us by history but also an obligation we have taken upon ourselves which we feel we should do to promote goodwill in the countries and the region," he said.

RIS (Research and Information System for Developing Countries) chairperson Shyam Saran said there are asymmetries in the South Asian region among countries and the report has sought to see how to turn these into drivers for growth.

He said there is a feeling that "if India can give a stake in its own prosperity to its neighbours, not because of generosity, but because it is important to India, perhaps this would begin the process of overcoming some of the divisions that we see in South Asia".

The former foreign secretary said that "India has been prepared to make a big political and economic investment in trying to get the regional integration story moving at a faster pace".

"There is no doubt that India will have to play the leading role (in SAARC); there is no other country that can play it," Saran said, adding that in order to boost transit among South Asian neighbours, India will itself have to become a major transit country and allow goods to flow from one country to another.

Referring to the sub-regional connectivity projects, he said that while Bangladesh has benefited by linking up with the energy grid in India which has helped to ameliorate the power situation in that country, in the case of Pakistan a similar electricity sharing project was shot down in Islamabad due to "political differences".

A.M. Gondane, joint secretary (SAARC) in the external affairs ministry, said that though the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was inked in 2005 for trade in goods, it is far from being fully implemented.

He said trade was one of the major pillars for boosting integration in the region. It comprises 23 percent of the world's population but its share in the global GDP is around 3 percent.

RIS director general Sachin Chaturvedi said the report, which has focused on the theme 'Economic Integration for Peace-Creating Prosperity', was in line with the theme of the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu last year.

He said the report focuses on achieving prosperity in the region through economic integration, which in turn would be 'peace creating'.

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