

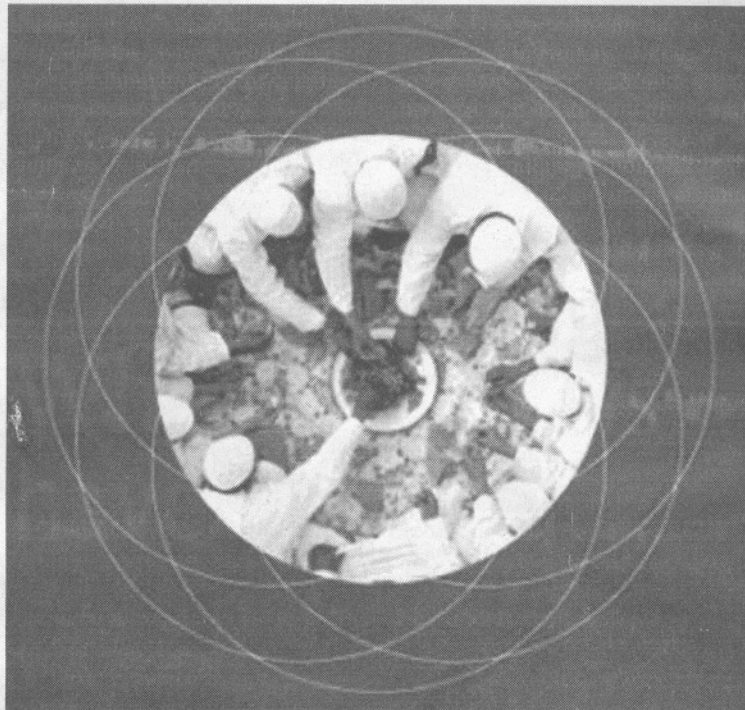
**d**oes every country in the world have its own distinct culture or is there an overlapping of cultures because of neighbourhood, shared history regional influences and even religious overtones? A modern educated person, aware of international impacts, must agree that individual cultures do not exist in watertight compartments. For instance, there is so much common by way of culture between some of the SAARC countries of South Asia. I shall come to that by and by.

My mind has been drawn to this subject after reading an article by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, appropriately captioned "European Union must rediscover its cultural heritage." We know the British, the French, the Germans, the Italians and other nations which now form the European Union, as distinct entities with pronounced cultures of their own, and yet, according to Mr Prodi, there is a common link among them which, he believes, has to be "rediscovered." This premise is equally applicable to any other region of the world.

Many people in Europe itself believe that the European Union is simply a political and economic alliance. However, Mr Prodi has come up with its cultural implications too. He says, "We must rediscover our common cultural heritage and exploit it to our mutual advantage, thereby developing mutual respect and understanding." This thought is repeated parrot-like within SAARC too, but it does not go beyond thinking and expression of pious intentions.

For instance, let us take India-Pakistan relations. I don't know about the Indians, but most of us in this country are certainly afraid of what has come to be known as "cultural invasion" from across the border. The basic difference in the outlook towards culture of the two nations is that we tend to view everything cultural through the prism of religion, while the Indians do not. We are apprehensive that this "free-thinking" attitude will spoil our young people. I shall say more about this as I proceed.

Mr Prodi says he has called for rediscovering the common European cultural heritage, particularly in the context of the trans-Mediterranean Muslim countries, because



## Rediscovering cultural heritage

HAFIZUR RAHMAN calls for promoting world amity through culture

"there is an ever clearer risk of an ideological and cultural split, not only between Europe and the Arab and Muslim world but actually within European and Arab and Muslim societies. That is why our objective is to develop a special relationship between Europe and the Mediterranean in the context of our policy towards our neighbours, using all the instruments available to strengthen our Mediterranean partnership."

He continues, "We want a dialogue that respects different cultures and the people who embody them, as long as these cultures uphold fundamental human rights.... Dialogue between cultures is an essential instrument for promoting harmonious relations between neighbours based on tolerance, mutual respect and fairness. It will also help us to establish the shared values and common humanity with which to organise co-existence."

One must greet such thoughts and ideas with the respect they deserve. I say this with particular reference to Pakistan-India relations. We may have our faults too, but the current outlook of our

neighbour's government whereby it does not permit such cultural contacts as cricket matches and tournaments can only be described as unfortunate. Obviously it doesn't believe in the ancient adage that you can convert your most inveterate enemy into agreeing with you through a show of affection and goodwill but never through hatred and aggressive posturing.

I have mentioned above how some of the SAARC countries have common cultural features. A unique example is that of Nepal which is the only other Hindu country in the world and has had deep relations with India spreading over centuries. And yet, despite the huge size and strength of India and the comparatively miniature size and strength of Nepal, India's sense of superiority and the desire to exercise hegemony over everyone around, has not permitted it to have cordial relations with Nepal.

Claiming a cultural past of at least two millennia India has not been able to put politics aside and lay stress on culture — even Hindu culture — and to shed its obsession with being a world power so far as

Nepal is concerned. Thus, it has not been able to have amicable and trouble-free relations with the only Hindu kingdom in the world, whereas Pakistan and Nepal, with almost nothing in common, are the best of friends. Maybe Europe is not faced with such a problem.

I think it is in this context that Mr Prodi must have added, "A dialogue between cultures is not, nor should it be, an instrument of political dialogue or a substitute for one. That would be counter-productive for both dialogues. But it is true that if an inter-cultural dialogue takes root in civil society, it could bear fruit in the form of amicable and fruitful political dialogue." I am sure the European Commission President did not have India and Pakistan in mind, but it seems as if he wrote these words for the two countries. Maybe that is why everyone lays stress on continuing the cultural dialogue with India despite the horrendous political differences.

Apart from India and Pakistan, there are other countries of SAARC which have common features in their cultures. There are the Sri-Lanka-Maldives connection, the old Pakistan-Bangladesh connection, and the India-Bhutan-Nepal connection. If any efforts are being made they don't seem to be yielding fruit. Maybe just as we complain that culture has always come at the bottom in the list of priorities for successive regimes in Pakistan, similarly cultural mutualities do not seem to get high priority with the SAARC countries. Or maybe its India's hegemonic attitude that stands in the way of meaningful cultural exchanges.

Whenever there is talk of a cultural dialogue between India and Pakistan some people in both the countries rise up and start shouting "No" to it. While Pakistan, with its religious handicap, may have something to fear from Indian culture (despite the wide common features) what does India have to lose? The only explanation can be the wave of extreme Hindu nationalism that is nowadays sweeping over that country in the form of hatred for anything associated with Islam and Muslims. Even Christians are not spared by this bigotry.

All said and done there is much good sense in what Romano Prodi has said in his article. Although it has been written purely in the context of Europe, the leaders of the seven South Asian nations can learn a useful lesson from it for the benefit of their peoples. ●

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