



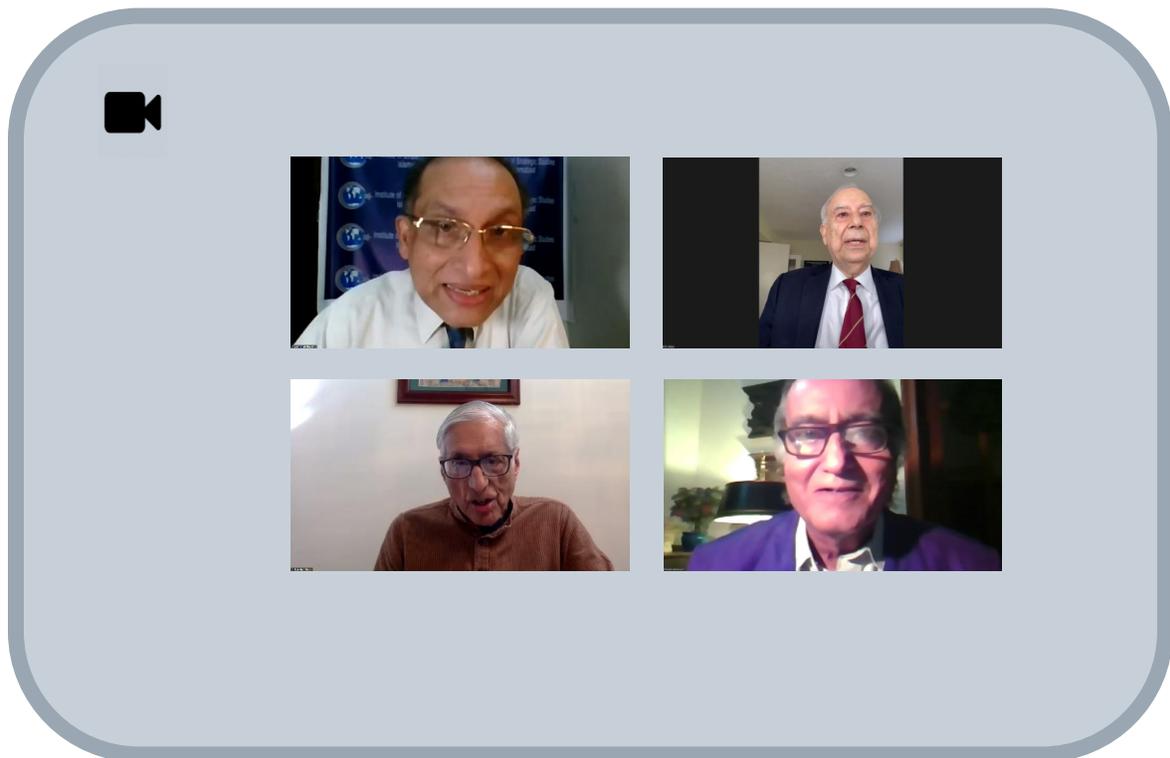
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Report – WebTALK

“India and Pakistan: Searching for Humanity in South Asia”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a webtalk titled, “*India and Pakistan: Searching for Humanity in South Asia*” on August 6, 2020 by Dr. Akbar S. Ahmad, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies and Professor of International Relations at School of International Service at the American University in Washington DC. Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi, Research Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was the discussant at the occasion.

In his introductory remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry welcomed the distinguished guests and highlighted the recent developments in Kashmir, India’s controversial decision to build Ram Mandir, the treatment of minorities in both India and Pakistan and the hostilities between the two countries. He highlighted that since Modi has taken over India he has embarked upon a different philosophy from the one that India has followed in the past. Modi is pursuing the Hindutva ideology which is exclusionary in nature and is having severe implications for the minorities living in India and the international image of India which used to be associated with democracy and pluralism. He further added that big power politics is going on in South Asia. US-China competition and US tilt towards India is impacting the regional dynamics and Pakistan’s relations with India. Unfortunately, India and Pakistan are not on talking terms at all, even their ambassadors have been recalled. Hence, it is crucial to explore humanity in these troubling times.

Dr. Akbar S. Ahmad, in his presentation, highlighted the plight of minorities in South Asia, particularly India, and cautioned that if Indian politicians are allowed to breed unchecked hatred against Muslims the result might be an unwanted conflict with Pakistan. His presentation was divided into three sections: Madness; Hatred; and Hope.

Drawing on French philosopher, Bernard-Henri Lévy’s ideas, who has called this age as the age of madness, Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed pointed out that religious and ethnic divisions in society have been exacerbated. He stated that we in South Asia are creating our own bubble of hyper madness within this age of madness. There is a battle brewing that will define not only India but the entire region. If the mood of unchecked hatred grows in India, a clash with Pakistan will be inevitable and it could involve a nuclear exchange. The leaders in India can huff and puff against Pakistan, but in their hearts they can never be sure that Pakistan if attacked and backed into the corner,

would not press the nuclear button. The two nuclear nations, India and Pakistan seem to be at the brink of a nuclear armed conflict. Now, with the China-India confrontation in the Himalayas, the situation has become even more dangerous and complicated. There are now three nuclear powers rubbing against each other in and around Kashmir and with the US explicitly lining up with India, it makes four. He highlighted that it is this uncertainty that gives the confrontation an existentialist edge, a single miscalculated move can plunge the entire region into an apocalyptic chaos.

Talking about hatred, Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed stated that there are two sets of grievances poisoning the mindset in South Asia and we need to navigate between them. The Hindus see real or imagined insults and humiliation under Muslim rule over the centuries. Muslim grievances are more recent; they see themselves as the victims of Hindu prejudice and violent hatred in the last decades of independent India. He emphasized his point by mentioning a plethora of instances of discrimination and bigotry that Muslims in India are subjected to. He highlighted that Hindu extremists kill members of minorities in cold blood often aided by the police, while gangs film the gory details on videos that are then widely circulated. In the mayhem, Hindu Sadhus, Dalits, Christians and even nuns have been attacked. Muslims have been targeted in the name of cow protection by the mobs. They are now accused of bringing corona virus as part of their 'Corona Jihad'. Nationalist leaders at the national level have made public announcements on television that they are determined to finish Islam and Christianity by 2022, and by 2024 they hope that India would be exclusively Hindu. He quoted the Indian author, Arundhati Roy to highlight the “crisis of hatred against Muslims” and noted instances of police brutality against Muslims, the brutality in Kashmir, the negative stereotyping of Muslims and Pakistani’s in Bollywood and other similar examples that show how India has diverged from Gandhi’s vision of peaceful coexistence and Ahimsa (non-violence).

He reminded the audience of the contributions of Indian Muslims to Indian history and culture in order to show the rich Indian history of inclusion and diversity. He highlighted that one cannot contemplate Indian culture or history without the Muslim imprint whether it's on art, architecture or political leadership. He pointed out that India’s founding fathers Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru promoted coexistence between people of different religion, but their vision of modern India is facing an existentialist crisis.

Regarding hope, Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed stated that Hindu-Muslim confrontation should not be taken as an absolute. He ended his speech on an optimistic note by highlighting anecdotes of positive conversations and relations with his Indian friends, students and colleagues. He pointed out the ideals that scholars and leaders of South Asia like Ashoka, Buddha, Mahavira Guru Nanak, Shah Abdul Latif, Bullah Shah, Moinuddin Chishti, Data Ganj Bakhsh, Sir Syed and Allama Iqbal held; they embraced all, promoted justice and abhorred violence. This is the spirit that inspired modern Indian leaders Gandhi and Nehru and that Jinnah had for Pakistan. He stressed that the test of civilization will always be how a majority treats its minority community. Indians must stop killing defenceless members of the minority. He appealed to the leaders of South Asia to understand the depth and urgency of the pandemic crisis. He concluded with suggestions for both governments and said that we need to share information and personnel to help each other deal with the pandemic and that it is high time India and Pakistan stop using a military-strategic prism to view each other. Instead, he suggested, we need the lens of morality, compassion and humanity to guide our actions.

In his remarks, Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi stated that one feels deep disappointment and unhappiness that people in India are not raising their voice against coercion. But those who do speak need to be praised. He pointed out that there are a number of people on both sides of the border who believe in *Insaniyat* (humanity) and are doing the right thing. Doctors, teachers, neighbours, humble officials and policemen who quietly protect the weak from those who threaten the vulnerable. He highlighted that today, we know that the megaphone has been seized by merchants of hate but decibel levels are not everything; the murmurs of friendship and peace constitute another real story.

Dr. Rajmohan Gandhi noted that the construction of Ram Mandir is a testament of the fact that India has lost its secular nature. He stated that India's Prime Minister starting with his hands the building of a temple is a troubling additional step in India's journey away from the secular and pluralist state that was established in 1947 where all were equal before the law and the government. The greatest weakness is in our societies or in our approaches to one another. Hindu-Muslim mistrust is not the only mistrust on our Sub-continent. He pointed out that people of the Sub-continent are divided on the basis of sect, language, caste, tribe, class and profession. He suggested that it would be an asset not a crime if people living in Pakistan start learning

Indian languages and vice versa. He stated that currently, India-Pakistan relations are in a pretty deep ditch. However, he took this opportunity to highlight the similarities between India and Pakistan and particularly focused on the thoughts of an average Indian citizen. He stated that one can look at Indian and Pakistani diasporas communities to see how the two cultures can and do live together in harmony.

The remarks were followed by a question and answer session.

Both panelists answered questions about the Kashmir dispute and condemned all the instances of lynching, curfews, brutality and rape that have ruined the lives of ordinary Kashmiris. Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed, while answering a question, recalled the struggles he faced while depicting Jinnah in his famous movie about Quaid-e-Azam.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, concluded the webtalk by thanking both the guests for their remarks. He highlighted the importance of promoting peace between both the countries and bridging of all the political differences. He echoed the remarks of both speakers by highlighting the importance of greater communication between ordinary citizens of Pakistan and India.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

