

Remarks by Shri Suresh K. Goel, Director General, ICCR

Conference on Buddhism: Cultural Interface between India and Sri Lanka

Venerable Members of the Maha Sangha,
Your Excellency President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,
Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa,
Hon'ble Prime Minister Mr. D M Jayratne,
Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs Prof. G L Peiris,
High Commissioner of India, Shri Ashok K. Kantha,
Vice Chancellor of Paradeniya University,
Scholars from India, Sri Lanka and several other countries who have gathered here
for this important conference,
Distinguished participants and the audience

I am delighted to be present on this important and unique platform to discuss amongst scholars from India, Sri Lanka and the region, the cultural interface between India and Sri Lanka which is prominently visible in our common Buddhist linkages, not only between each other but also with others in the region such as South East Asia. I must underline at this stage that this cultural interface is equally manifest in other aspects of our common heritage such as linguistics, art, philosophy, family values and traditions, civilizational and societal structures etc.

The presence of the Hon'ble President of Sri Lanka is both significant and a great honour since it symbolises our mutual desire and efforts to find common ground in our quest for strong understandings and friendship between our two peoples and nations.

Culture and civilisation are important contributors to development of dialogue and communications between two societies and therefore, by corollary between two sovereign nations. The understanding of thinking processes, sensitivities and subconsciously ingrained values form the subtext of this dialogue as well as enhance its value and strength. The cultural communications and dialogue, in what is now-a-days popularly known as cultural diplomacy, therefore, have increasingly evolved as a durable basis for understanding the other, particularly, perhaps, more sensitive and critical areas such as economic and commercial partnerships, political and strategic relations.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations established in 1950 by the first Education Minister of India, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad stands for the communion of Indian cultures with diverse international cultures, and dialogue between a variety of ideas and thoughts through a large resource of instruments available to it. This process has all the elements of the interfaith dialogue and cultural conversations, becoming now a popular element in international diplomacy, almost a cliché.

Starting with the exchanges of performing groups, both in music and dance, and both through international festivals and single group visits, ICCR has begun to play an eminent and key role in promoting academic collaboration through almost 3000 scholarships for studies in India on an annual basis, organisation of seminars and conferences on cultural and civilizational themes, establishment of Indian Chairs in universities abroad the number of which are going to soon reach a century, exchange of exhibitions of a diverse media and much more.

This conference clearly illustrates the higher priority being attached by India to intellectual collaboration with its key partners because of its enduring nature. The subject which relates to the common religious and cultural path, India and Sri Lanka have travelled for almost two millennia, and have been instrumental in its propagation to farther reaches of the world, provides an important context for this effort on a broader basis. ICCR would also be celebrating internationally, the 150th anniversary of Tagore this year in which Sri Lanka will be an important partner.

This conference in Kandy is particularly important since it is a result of the common legacy of India and Sri Lanka in the South Asian region. The two countries being multi-ethnic, multi-lingual with a number of religions being practised by their peoples, this legacy is reflected in rich Sinhalese and Tamil cultural traditions and texts, their history and the common origin of many practices in the two societies.

The cultural dialogue between India and Sri Lanka aims at building on this common legacy and our common aspirations for social and economic upliftment of their peoples.

I hope this conference will make a valuable contribution to this process. I wish success to all the participants in this project.

Thank you