

Covering South Asia: Media and the SAARC Region, a panel discussion organised by IIC, NFI and PSAARC was held at IIC on April 13th, 2016.

The discussion was chaired by Senior Journalist and Author, Kishalay Bhattacharjee and joining him were Nirupama Subramanian of The Indian Express, Suhasini Haidar of The Hindu and former diplomat Deb Mukharji.

Bhattacharjee contextualised the topic by illustrating how skewed the media coverage is of South Asia despite the fact that a quarter of the world's population resides here. Though it is easy to get professionally seduced by the exotica of South Asia, the coverage is largely disaster and crisis driven. Whatever is covered or reported is usually by the Western press and wire agencies as if Asia has no voice of its own at all. Development reporting for example doesn't even exist.

The panel was in agreement that there is virtually no coverage of South Asia except for Pakistan which also ends up as talking heads in noisy television studios. The one point that was emphasised was the lack of ground reportage and understanding of each other. How many of us have travelled the SAARC countries really? How much do we teach about our neighbourhood to the younger generation? It was also pointed out that the media has been interested only in the 'bad' news happening in our neighbourhood and that stereotypes the places and people.

It was also reiterated that media has no appetite for foreign news but it is our duty to record history's first draft. But despite the cynicism some observed that SAARC is a blessing because there is an opportunity to work together. The readers and viewers too must expect more from journalists. If Indian media pays little attention and devotes even lesser space, the other countries coverage of their neighbourhood is abysmal.

Circulation of newspapers, collaborations and opening up visa regime were a few recommendations by the panel to improve South Asia coverage. All agreed that we have to travel and go to the ground to get the reports.