

Understanding unique India

Shanmugam shares outsider's perspective at local conference

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THE world needs to understand India, just as India must understand the world better.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam, giving an "outsider's perspective", said at a conference yesterday there were political and social realities which had to be recognised in the make-up of the one-billion-strong country.

"The bottom line therefore simply is this: India is different and unique... If we apply the yardstick of other societies, we will end up being frustrated," he told the International Conference on South Asia organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies.

But even though India should not be judged using normal benchmarks, New Delhi had to understand that it would be judged by those standards if it wanted to be a global player.

He was responding to a member of the audience, who said that many observers did not understand India and had compared it to America and Western nations. He asked why this was so.

Mr Shanmugam said they had that view partly because India wanted to be compared to the rest of the world.

"As much as outsiders should not

misperceive India, or must perceive India with a better understanding, equally Indians must realise that when they compare themselves with Japan, China, the US or want a seat on the United Nations Security Council, and they want to be an actor on the world stage, then people will apply the international yardstick to them," he said.

They will ask, for instance, about its gross domestic product, economic power and the "value-add" it brings to the global stage.

Rather than fret over misperceptions, both sides should learn to accept the realities. "There's no point saying 'I want it', but at the same time, 'don't apply the yardsticks to me'. It's best not to be defensive about these things. Accept them as they are and move on."

His reply followed the theme of his conference speech, in which he gave the 150 participants an outline of why India's situation was unique.

The country was engaged in a political experiment that had not been attempted by any other society, he said.

He also contrasted India's model with two other models of growth: the Anglo-Saxon and East Asian models.

Unlike in India's case, nations operating under those models enjoyed relatively stable political systems in the early stages of economic development.

India had a democracy that applied to a large, ethnically diverse population full of competing interests. The electorate's mix meant there were

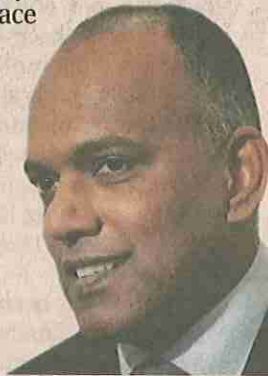
ADEQUATE SECURITY FOR APEC

"We have not come across any seriously credible, known threat but that doesn't mean there can be no such threats.

We obviously take it very seriously and, I won't go into the details of our security operations, but people know that Singapore will take this very seriously.

And we have put in place what we consider to be adequate measures. We are confident about the measures we take, but security is something you never take for granted."

Law and Second Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam, on security for the upcoming Apec Summit



competing interests for power. Also, the ability to win elections may depend on championing a narrow ethnic or religious cause rather than on the ability to govern.

Such a political system encouraged a mindset of trying to get a share of existing, scarce resources for a particular group, rather than engaging others to increase the resources available.

But while such a system imposed economic and other costs, he was ultimately optimistic about India's future after the current economic crisis.

"The answer is fairly straightfor-

ward. The crisis is transient, temporary. Indian growth is a permanent story," he said, adding that it should easily show 6 per cent to 8 per cent growth.

The minister was similarly upbeat about India's role in Asean and Singapore. "From an economic perspective, there is reason to be optimistic. India will grow; India's economic engagement, particularly private-sector engagement in this region, will grow; and Singapore's role in that engagement will grow as well."

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New project to link South Asians

THE Institute of South Asian Studies has unveiled a project it hopes will make Singapore the focal point for the 30 million members of the South Asian diaspora around the world.

Called the South Asian Link, it is starting with a website and newsletter that document the latest developments in South Asian communities around the world.

The institute plans to build up a database of South Asian communities, host conferences for the diaspora in Singapore, and set up international chapters to represent

the different South Asian countries. The first three chapters are being set up in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

The South Asian Link is the brainchild of President S R Nathan and he, fittingly, was the one to launch it during a ceremony at the Grand Hyatt hotel yesterday.

Speaking at the launch, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, chairman of the institute's management board, said Singapore was ideally suited to be the base for the diaspora because it has a large South Asian community.

Around 9 per cent of citizens and permanent residents here are of South Asian descent, and a further 350,000 from that region are living, working or studying in the Republic.