Top essay probes inequality in Asia

BY KENNY CHEE

I T IS a familiar sight to many here: An elderly woman selling tissue paper in bustling Orchard Road to make ends meet.

The plight of such people spurred Singapore permanent resident Sarabjit Singh, 26, to pen his thoughts on the pervasive inequality in Asia, both in developed countries like South Korea and developing ones like India.

For his stark reminder about the urgent need to share economic success with the poor, Mr Singh won a regional essay competition that aimed to generate fresh ideas for tackling key challenges to Asia’s competitiveness and development.

The business-development manager at Singapore information-technology firm Paper Terminal beat 400 other contestants from 21 countries including China, India and the Philippines.

He was originally from the Indian state of Uttarakhand but moved to Singapore in 1999 to study at Raffles Junior College. He then read computer engineering at the National University of Singapore and graduated in 2007.

The competition’s three runner-ups are two Indian nationals and Singaporean Loh Su Hsing, 31, a PhD student at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs in Shanghai’s Fudan University.

The Asia’s Challenge 2020 competition was organised by the Asia Business Council, Time Magazine and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

It was open to Asians aged below 32 to get the perspectives of young professionals. The judges included Mr Michael Elliott, deputy managing editor for Time, and Professor Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

The award ceremony was held yesterday with Mr S. Iswaran, Senior Minister of State for Education, Trade and Industry, was the guest of honour.

Mr Singh’s essay will appear in next Monday’s issue of Time. He wrote that “the only way for countries to ensure that their economic growth is sustainable...is to offer inclusive development to their citizens”.

One way to achieve this, he noted, was to look at policies that helped developing nations to equalise opportunities in the past, correspondingly leading to improvements in income equality.

Mr Singh’s essay was rated highly because “he outlined a very important challenge and a way to tackle it”, said Mr Zohar Abdoolcarim, the Asia editor for Time and one of the contest’s judges.

Ms Loh’s essay discusses how Asia should decouple from the West and reduce its reliance on the region – but not at the expense of disengaging the West or isolating Asia.

“The key is to engage and cooperate with the West but allow more room for Asia to find its own niche and maximise its potential,” wrote Ms Loh, who has contributed articles to The Straits Times.

Dr Astrid Tuminez, assistant dean and director of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said her essay stood out because it addressed decoupling in a “convincing and original way”.

Mr Singh added that, while Singapore has achieved much, more can be done to improve equality here.

“We’ve done a lot of things right in Singapore, and we need to be able to have a platform for people to come up with new ideas,” he said.

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HELPDESK 我的字典

Pervasive: 普遍的 - pǔ biàn de

Regional: 区域性的 - qū yù xìng de

Inclusive: 包容的 - bāo róng de

Decoupling: 脱钩 - tuō gōu