

## FESTIVAL OF SAARC LITERATURE, 2011

– AJEET COUR

– ALOK BHALLA

“There is a Hebrew saying: Hold a book in your hand and you are a pilgrim at the gates of a new city.” *Fugitive Pieces*, Anne Michaels (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 156.

The vision of a literary and cultural festival bringing together, in mutual curiosity, and in interested dialogue with each other, writers and scholars, peace activists and artists from each of the eight member States that constitute SAARC (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), is not beholden or committed to any charter of demands, summit declarations, political promises, economic commitments, and other pieties of officially sanctioned politicians and bureaucrats. Politics is only a fleeting part of the present instant; we can give it our uncritical support only if the masters are unconscionably brutal or we are insatiably greedy.

National borders are merely acknowledgements of a concrete historical moment. We can see them as our natural inheritance and give them our unjudgemental allegiance only if we suspend reason. Offices of nation states are always located within structured, rule-governed boxes; we can only be suspicious of their intentions and our steps must hesitate and drag as they approach them as they never do when we enter a bookstore, walk through an art gallery or stop to catch a musical note or see a theatre performance or film. That is why, perhaps, some so-called festivals are often such sad and scarred affairs. Those who organize them seem to hold together a ruin; while those who participate in them seem to concede that a word can be

dangerous, a colour can invoke something beautiful but forbidden, and music can be an ecstasy which violates permissible limits.

The imaginative impulse of literary and cultural festivals ought to be to create democratic, secular, agnostic spaces where every visiting stranger brings new and welcome information. No one who chooses to participate in them has a sacrosanct national, linguistic, caste or religious identity which is either fated or precludes criticism. Imagination, like dreams, has no sacred boundaries and respects no interdictions.

Every writer is a neighbour, every painter or singer responds to the same world of colours and musical notes, and every one present brings tentative solutions to questions of common concerns so that they can be tested and affirmed or discarded in favour of another quest and another answer. It is this willingness to speak without fear of censorship, to criticize without invective, to defend the right of others to live a life of the mind which is constantly seeking and questioning, and to be always ready to walk beside the other looking for something one had not known before, which makes a festival like the one being organized by the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) separate from 'business' of culture and, therefore, worth celebrating.

The important concerns of FOSWAL's SAARC Festival of Literature, being organized on **March 25, 26 and 27, 2011** emerge from present anxieties over the impact of globalised economies on the poor and the marginalized communities in the region, as well as, the fact that religious and ethnic terrorism has once again begun to determine the agendas of some communities. The relentless demand for greater profits and expanding industrialization continues to degrade forests, pollute rivers and water bodies, and push rural and tribal

populations out of homelands which have sustained them over generations. There seems to be an emerging consensus among creative thinkers of the SAARC region that those whose life-worlds are threatened by such unreflexive growth have the *right to resist*, and that writers, painters, singers, theatre and film artists, should have the *courage to refuse* to give their critical support to any process of development which tries to expel and humiliate by using the power of the state in the name of the people or development or God.

The critique of the dominant model of development cannot, of course, be dependent on sentimental nostalgias for a past which, it is assumed, was gentler and more ethically responsible to the earth and all those who live on it. Instead, it has to be based on critical awareness of the pathologies which could and did inflict the past as they do the industrialised present. Resistance and refusal may become purposive only if they simultaneously make each of us critically self-aware, because our collective future depends upon building societies in which we are always willing to question and debate every proposition, however sacred and authoritative.

Hope can only be built on a willingness to discard every faith once held to be sacred. That is, perhaps, why writers, painters, singers, theatre and film artists who confront issues that matter are feared by dictators and targeted by groups which try to confine people into narrow structures of national, religious, caste or tribal identities. Despots fear the cold-eyed skepticism so essential for any creative selfhood because it threatens their sense of omnipotence and indispensability. And identity politics is almost always based on an irrational feeling of eternal victimhood which not only demands perpetual vigilance, but also justifies genocidal rage.

We always have **Focused Seminars** before lunch, every day. And after lunch, we have **Poetry Festivals**.

In this Festival we will also be celebrating and paying homage to the great poets of the Region : Tagore and Nazrul Islam, Faiz and Ghalib.

One evening will be devoted to paying Homage to TAGORE and NAZRUL ISLAM.

The other evening will pay Homage to FAIZ AHMAD FAIZ and GHALIB.

Their works will be presented in Bangla and Urdu, but will also be read in English translations so as to facilitate understanding by those who know neither of the languages. And will be sung by eminent singers.

Third evening will be for sight-seeing. Soaking in the ambience of the historical city of Delhi.

The pre-lunch Academic Seminars of our Festivals are devoted to deliberations on the most important current concerns of the SAARC Region. This time the Focus of the Academic Seminars are on : **Contemporary Creativity and Political-Social Conflicts, Voices of the Oppressed and the Excluded, Literary Legacy of Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Faiz, Ghalib , New Voices of Young Writers, SAARC Identity and Global Culture : Literature and Ground Realities.**

In addition to dealing in a scholarly manner with issues of terrorism, extremist violence, and misuse of power, calamities like nuclear plant damages and all else, during the pre-lunch Sessions, the post-lunch Sessions will be devoted to poetry and music from the member countries.

Poets from different countries, writing in different languages, will read from their works, thereby creating a genuine confluence of voices and images. Poets will find, as they always do, ways of understanding each other

even if they do not speak the same languages and so mock the politicians and the thugs who want to reduce the world into antagonistic centres of power. In addition, writers will be encouraged to read their favourite poems of protest written against irrationality and coercion in any language from any country in the world. After all, the human body and the earth suffer the same pain, and demand the same courage to protest.

To modify the title of a painting by Arpana Caur, the hope is that these poetry reading sessions will renew our understanding of the elementary fact that all human beings carry the burden of the sky, and all of them walk on the same earth.

At the end of the Festival, it should be possible to draft a mutually agreed-upon Resolution drafted by volunteer writers from all the eight SAARC countries, making a straight forward to those in power that there can never be a violent resolution to conflicts of interest and perception, nor can there be a single and permanent solution to any issue. There can only be a resolve to pay attention, refuse to cause pain, and insist that everyone has the same inalienable right to food, shelter, education, equality and dignity.

It is a pity that such appeals have to be made again and again, but our times have lost the vocabulary of '*ahimsa*' and non-injury to all that has its place on earth, and morality has become a fugitive.

We will also pass the resolution, for the thirty sixth time, in this thirty sixth SAARC CONFERENCE-FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE AND CULTURE, that in sync with some other categories, **visa regulations should be abolished for writers and artists too.**

FOSWAL was the first positive endeavour which worked tirelessly for the mad dream of

getting writers and creative people from across the borders, immediately after the SAARC Charter was signed in December 1985 which was primarily a business-centric document. The first Charter did not make any provision for cultural exchanges which create genuine emotional bonds among people.

FOSWAL's tireless journey, against all odds, over long years, eventually succeeded in convincing the Heads of States during the SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, on January 1, 2002, that FOSWAL's work of 'cultural connectivity' should be recognised and SAARC CHARTER amended accordingly.

It is an intellectual space created by FOSWAL **since 1986**, the first visionary organisation in the region, for which we have been honoured with the unique status of **SAARC APEX BODY**, the only Think Tank dealing with culture, literature and common socio-economic problems of the SAARC countries.

FOSWAL is officially authorized to organize cultural, literature-related and issues-based programmes, under the **SAARC banner** and **SAARC logo**.

A selection of the Papers from the Seminar will be edited and published in a special number of BEYOND BORDERS, the SAARC Journal, while all the Papers, Short Stories and Poems will be put together in well-edited Anthologies, and will be posted in our Website : [wwwFOUNDATIONSaarcwriters.com](http://wwwFOUNDATIONSaarcwriters.com).

All are welcome to participate in the seminars and the readings being organised by FOSWAL at the NCUI Auditorium.

In the interest of proper arrangements, organizers **will be able to serve Lunch only to the Invitees who have lunch-coupons**.

There is no Entry Fee, and no Registration Fee.

**All are welcome !**

## SAARC Politics and Cultural Imagination

Abhi Subedi

Delhi was agog with SAARC on 3rd April 2007. Heads of Governments were trying to pull some strings to keep it going. SAARC as an organization has hit snags many times in its short history, and the countries have been noticed to suffer through inertia and animus after the SAARC jumboorees. But the SAARC has one quality. It rises like Phoenix at every grand meet.

Admission of Afghanistan as the eighth member of the organization added variety and provided a subject for conversation, excuse for the exchange of pleasantries, and opportunity to gloat over the concept of SAARC expansion initiated by Ajeet Cour's vision of civilizational connectivity by inviting writers and poets from Afghanistan in her SAARC Conference of Literature way back in 2000.

The presence of the 84-year-old Nepali Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, a Congressman trained into a secularist social democratic politics in the Nehruvian era, who was alternating between the healthcare room and the plenary sessions, marked a new

historicist turn in the region. He was representing among others the Nepali Maoists, now in his cabinet, once regarded as some of the most ferocious guerrillas in the world.

As we were problematising "Words, Culture and Identity : Dialogue in South Asia" at **Ajeet Cour's** 19th SAARC Writers' Conference at India International Centre, the SAARC Summit was being held at Vigyan Bhavan from where some tidings were being carried hither. It was said, now that America, Japan and European countries, too, would come as observers, we have been liberated from the tyranny of the here and now, as suffered by a frog in the periphery of a pond.

In my presentation I briefly gloated over the frog metaphor and questioned if we needed the above countries to liberate us from the inertia, if at all. We should question ourselves: Are we working with the post-colonial mindsets ? States are inundated with issues and problems ranging from politics to the burning frontiers. So to restore some normalcy they locate some limited areas where they all feel

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comfortable and pass them as work agenda. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh showed some light this time round.

I said in my speech that “To us this literary organisation started and conducted by a physically frail and spiritually strong fiction writer Ajeet Cour, whose claim to madness sounds like a narrative writ large on the blank sheets of anarchy, is more important than the political SAARC.”

A Bangladeshi poet **Kaiser Haq** and his poetry were perfect metaphors of the contact zone between literary creative heritage. This poet, a Mukti Bahini soldier who fought for independence in 1971, and who became an outstanding poet, scholar and professor, was a perfect metaphor of SAARC literary writings to me. By the time he came out of the trenches and Bangladesh was freed, a total of 3 million people had lost their lives. Kaiser Haq's continuous journey from the painful moments of history with poetry and creative visions is a perfect metaphor that represents literary writers' encounters with history in twilight zones.

SAARC writings have covered many 'ambiguous journeys', to use Ashish Nandy's expression, over half a century.

The colossal human casualties caused by the cartographers' borderlines have lived like live coals, shimmering like ambers, in literary writers' works.

I sat questioning myself as he read his poems, “Does journey and vision make writer a Bodhisattva who carries on with the works of spreading love, humanity and unpretentious literary solidarity in the region?” What Kaiser Haq says in response to Gore Vidal's pejorative remark “Published in the Streets of Dhaka”, becomes the central image of the SAARC Literary Identity today. I quote a stanza: “What are we to do, Mr. Vidal? / Stop writing, and if we do, not publish? / Join an immigration queue, hoping / To head for the Diaspora dead-end, / Exhibit in alien multi-cultural museums? / No way. Here I'll stay, plumb in the centre / Of monsoon-mad Bengal, watching / Jackfruit leaves drift earthward / In the early morning breeze...” (from ‘published in the streets of Dhaka’, *writers.ink*, 2007).

Writing, publishing and not getting carried away by the lure of queuing up to ‘head for the Diaspora’ have become the central questions of SAARC literary existence and continuity in South Asia today. A confluence of minds like those of the quiet fine poets like **Purna Vaidya** of Nepal and the wonderfully hilarious and wawa-ing poets of India and Pakistan represented to me a vibrant SAARC literary imaginary. I guess, no European writers' union would follow the trajectories of the EU with organizational agendas. But for us a thin veneer separates literature from politics in SAARC and a poet can embody the waves of history.





### **SARDARNI GURSHARAN KAUR (India)**

Mrs. Gursharan Kaur, born in 1937, completed her early education in NWFP, now in Pakistan. Mrs. Kaur received informal training in devotional music from her father, singing Gurbani. Her family's deep religious commitments enabled Mrs. Gursharan Kaur to participate in numerous School and College music competitions. She developed passion for music, and Graduated in Patiala. And got formal training under Ustad Zameer Ahmed Khan, of the Rampur Sehaswan Gharana, and later under Smt. Shashikala Kaikini and Smt. Shanti Hiranand.

Besides being a keen music lover, she loves cooking, baking, stitching and reading, and is the pillar of strength behind her family, particularly her husband, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh.

She is actively involved with the civil society groups working on creating awareness on various social, health, and women's issues. Always a sensitive person, she loves participating and lending her gracious presence to cultural and literary events in India and abroad, inspite of her busy schedule as the FIRST LADY OF INDIA.

“India is not merely an emerging market, it is an emerging idea. The ‘idea’ of pluralism, liberalism, idealism, socialism and multiculturalism, rooted in an ancient civilisation. India’s rise is not merely the rise of a poor people, it is the freedom of the human spirit.”

– **Dr. Manmohan Singh**  
Prime Minister of India

# FOUNDATION OF SAARC WRITERS AND LITERATURE

SAARC APEX BODY

warmly welcomes

**EXCELLENCY FATHIMATH DHIYANA SAEED**

The New SAARC Secretary General



The new SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Secretary-General, Excellency Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed from Maldives, has assumed office from March 1, 2011, for the next three years. She has taken over from Sheel Kant Sharma of India.

The 36-year-old Maldivian lawyer who has done her Master of Law from Osaka University, Japan. Has been Attorney General of the island nation Maldives, Member of the Maldivian Parliament and the Constitutional Assembly. Saeed was appointed as Head of the regional grouping by the 33rd Session of the Council of Ministers in February 2011 in Thimpu. Saeed is the tenth Secretary-General of SAARC. She is also the first woman, and the youngest Secretary-General of SAARC. She is the second Maldivian to assume the post after Ibrahim Hussein Zakee, who served from January 1, 1992 to December 31, 1993. She is also an intellectual and an author, and has been honoured with awards for her two published books. Seven members founded SAARC in December, 1985, and made way for Afghanistan in 2007 to join in. Maldives will host the 17th SAARC SUMMIT sometime between November and December this year.



### **ALOK BHALLA (India)**

**Alok Bhalla** recently retired as Professor of English from the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad and Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He was educated at St. Stephen's College and later obtained his Ph.D. from Kent State University, Ohio. He has published two books on fantasy tales: *The Cartographers of Hell: Essays on the Gothic Novel and the Social History of England* and *The Politics of Atrocity and Lust: The Vampire Tale and the Social History of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Amongst his more recent books are *Stories about the Partition of India* (3 volumes; to be reissued in an enlarged edition of 4 volumes in 2011), *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home* (Oxford University Press) and *The Place of Translation in a Literary Habitat* (Foundation Day Lectures, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore). In addition, he has edited critical works on Saadat Hasan Manto, two volumes on India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and two volumes on Latin American Literature. He has translated Dharamvir Bharati's play, *Andha Yug* (Oxford University Press; recently reprinted by *Manoa* and the University of Hawaii Press) and Intizar Husain's stories, *Chronicles of the Peacock* (with Vishwamitter Adil, from Oxford University Press), a novel by Nirmal Verma (*Dark Dispatches*), as well as, the fiction of Ram Kumar, Manto, Gulzar, and others, and the poems of Udayan Vajpai, Kedarnath Singh, Kunwar Narain etc. His writings on partition fiction, myth and folklore etc. have been widely anthologized and his critical articles have appeared in a range of journals. Over the years, he has been invited to participate in a number of seminars in India, Europe and America. He used to edit the journal, *Yatra: Writings from the Indian Subcontinent* (with U. R. Ananthamurthy and Nirmal Verma). At present he is a member of the Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi and the Convener of its English Board. He has also been a Visiting Fellow at the Rockefeller Institute at Bellagio, Italy, the Indian Institute of Advance Study at Shimla and a Lady Davis Professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

**Prof. ALOK BHALLA IS THE DIRECTOR OF  
SAARC FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE, 2011**