

Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL), the Apex Body of SAARC, organised a three day SAARC FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE in collaboration with Ministry of External Affairs and Arpana Fine Arts on March 25, 26, 27. 2011.

Writers are said to be the conscience keepers of society. For continued peace, mutual understanding, reciprocal respect of our cultural diversity, love for our shared civilization and history, it is important that writers should meet, hold discussions, raise queries and discover and share answers. Writers of all age groups and genres converge to the SAARC Festival of Literature is proof that they feel that all this has to be addressed urgently.

The need for such meets is intensely expedient, one would say almost crucial, because of the remarkable changes in the political climate and social fabric of the world. While the eight countries of SAARC can proudly claim to be democracies, there still remains a lot of work to be done before we can say that democracy has reached the grass-root levels and has become a way of life in all these nations.

In each and every society there are the unheard voices of the minorities, the unaddressed, often unacknowledged subaltern issues, oppression of the women, the aggression on tribals, their culture and livelihood, and the marginalization of languages. These are amongst the several issues that need to be openly discussed by the intellectuals. Effort has to be made that what the intellectuals think, believe, suggest and advise is taken note of by the powers that be.

All congregations of writers organized by FOSWAL have been aimed at raising contemporary issues that need to be addressed.

It is with all this in mind that SAARC Festival of Literature, an annual conference of writers is organized by FOSWAL, the Apex Body of SAARC. This is a platform for writers to share their creative processes in the form of poetry, short fiction and scholarly papers. But more than this, it is also a forum to discuss relevant issues of ethnic insurgency, the rising crime against women, insensitive attitude towards environment, and most importantly the loss of indigenous culture in an era of globalization.

SAARC Festival of Literature is aimed at creating democratic, secular and agnostic spaces, where everyone is welcome with their innovations and their ideas. That is perhaps the reason why the FOSWAL Festival is a three day celebration of imagination, dreams, beauty, aesthetics, and the manifold variety in poetry and fiction.

With this focus, more than 250 delegates from all the eight SAARC countries, converged to the venue of the SAARC Festival of Literature at the NCUI Auditorium, 3 August Kranti Marg, New Delhi. In these three days they deliberated, exchanged, discussed, recited and debated, issues that are important for their own country, for the region, and for literature and aesthetics.

MARCH 25, 2011

INAUGURATION



The Chief Guest : Sardarni Gursharan Kaur, floating rose petals in the 'urli' : Inaugurating the Festival.



Dr. Karan Singh, President, Indian Council For Cultural Relations, floating rose petals in the 'urli'.

The SAARC Festival of Literature conference was formally inaugurated on March 25, 2011 by **Sardarni Gursharan Kaur**, wife of the Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh.

The Chief Guest Sardarni Gursharan Kaur was welcomed by Ajeet Cour and dignitaries from the SAARC countries.

In her Welcome Address, the President of Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) **Ajeet Cour**, an eminent Punjabi fiction writer with more



Ajeet Cour

than twenty five books to her credit, passionate crusader for human rights, historical heritage to environment; social and cultural activist, who launched the crusade for cultural connectivity in the SAARC Region 26 years back, spoke about the journey of FOSWAL from being just an idea and a 'mad dream' to achieving the unique status of being

the SAARC APEX BODY.

In her usual style, that brims with zeal, humour, and is full of awe-inspiring passion and enthusiasm, Ajeet Cour re-told episodes from the journey that had brought this organization from its inception to the present state. Today this is a conclave where writers from all the eight countries can be part of the celebration of the vision because this is now a forum that gives voice to the aspirations and dreams of the writers of this region, she said that this platform today is not just a meeting place of writers from this very important cultural region, it is a ground where a lively exchange of ideas takes place, where untapped concepts are discussed, and new formats experimented with. It is a place where connectivity is explored and found.

While speaking about the past years Ajeet ji, specially highlighted her experience of standing under the Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka. Here she was told by a Buddhist Bhikshu, that the original Bodhi Tree at Gaya, under which Gautam Buddha had



attained Nirvana had been destroyed in a fire. Fortunately, Emperor Ashoka's son had brought a sapling from the original tree to Sri Lanka, with about eighty Bhikshus as messengers of peace for the spread of Buddhism. This tree thrived in Sri Lanka, and when the original one in Gaya was destroyed, a sapling from this very tree was taken and planted in its place.

Ajeet Cour remarked that she herself felt an elevation, a feeling of butterflies fluttering over her head as she stood under the Bodhi tree. She ended her welcome speech by emphasizing on the fact that all the eight countries of this region have a shared inheritance. We can but hug each other and show our love for each other because we share the shade of the same Bodhi tree.

Sardarni Gurusharan Kaur ji was introduced to the audience by Ajeet Cour not only as the wife of the Indian Prime Minister but also as an activist who stood up for justice and for the rights of the down-trodden.

In her inaugural speech, **Sardarni Gurusharan Kaur** expressed her immense pleasure to be with the prominent literary figures of the South Asian region. She said she was honoured to share the platform with so many well-



Sardarni Gursharan Kaur

known creative voices of the SAARC countries. Though it was a political requirement that had made the SAARC to come into being, it was literature that remains the best way to understand society. It is through literature that we understand and appreciate the similarities between us, and it is again literature that teaches us to cherish the diversities that are inherent in the existence of so many societies.

SAARC, she said, was one roof under which so many literary heads can converge, exchange, create and analyze the written word.

**Dr. Karan Singh** is both a politician and a scholar. Born heir apparent to

Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, he has been the governor of the state and also held important portfolios as Minister in the Government of India. He is at present the President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations {ICCR}.

In his Keynote Address, **Dr. Karan Singh,**

began with saying that he, as a fellow writer,

was one of the community, as he had been publishing articles since 1963, and has a number of book penned by him.

He said that writers are the ones who set the values of the society. Writers do not just pick up themes from their own country but also write on universal subjects like love, humanity, brotherhood, peace etc. that cut across man-made borders of caste, religion, race and nation, and influence the people around the world.

Today the SAARC community is a family of eight countries, though it started out with being only seven. Afghanistan joined later in 2007, mainly because FOSWAL brought in poets from Afghanistan right from their First Conference in 2000. FOSWAL hope that Myanmar too shall one day join the body. He said that it was necessary for us to come together, because we have a shared civilizational history of colonial domination. Rule of the western imperialists has shaped our economies and eroded our cultural heritage.

He went on to elaborate that the basis for this coming together is that there is so much sharing between the SAARC countries. He talked about the languages that we share Tamil with Sri Lanka, Bengali with Bangladesh, Urdu, Sindhi and Punjabi with Pakistan, Persian with Afghanistan.

He emphasized the point that it is writers who decide the kind of society we build because it is they who dictate the morals and create the spaces for individual growth. It is literature that builds bridges of friendship and compassion, or else we would always be at each other's throats.



Dr. Karan Singh

He recounted that in his opinion European Union was the most remarkable thing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People from nations that had been at war for centuries, now travel across borders without visa or money exchange. SAARC too must work on



Dr. Abid Hussain

these lines, or else we shall not have used our full potential. In this endeavour the role of the writer is foremost.

Dr. Karan Singh ended with a ghazal by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, remarking that we are in the midst of celebrating the great poet's birth centenary.

Author, scholar and diplomat, **Dr. Abid Hussain** is the Additional

Chairman of FOSWAL. He is also Chancellor Rai University of Raipur and Special Repertoire to UN on Freedom of Opinion and Expression.

In his Presidential Address, he appreciated the fact that **Ajeet Cour** had, as the backbone of creating and nurturing SAARC cultural and literary platform, continued to labour for and hold such well attended cultural and literary dialogues. He emphasized that such meets provided a base for peace and tranquility in the Region through cultural connectivity.

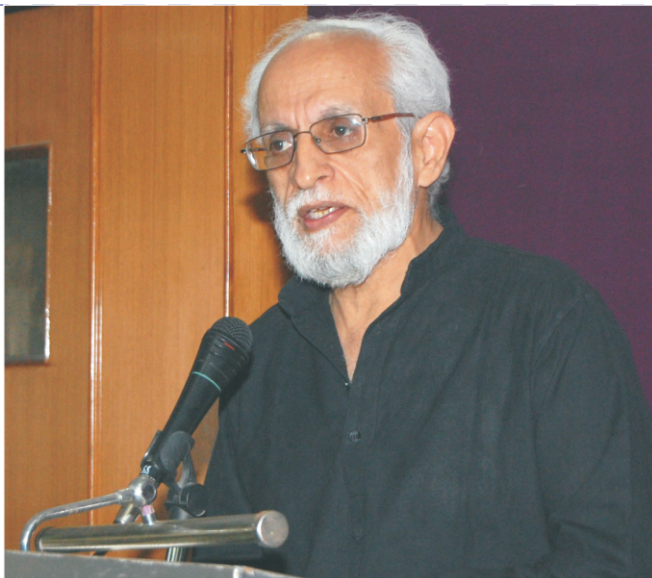
He stressed the point that no warrior can do what writers can achieve. They can break down barriers and boundaries to show the world that there is only one humanity and its demands for peace, love and understanding are the same.

A writer can rise beyond time and social norms and convince the world that injustices shall no longer be tolerated. A writer and a poet can do so because they are always free. Physically they might be in shackles and confined to a prison cell, yet their spirit is free. That is why even from a dingy, desolate prison, a poet like Faiz Ahmed Faiz could write:

Speak, for your lips are free.  
Speak, because your tongue is still yours.

**Ajeet Cour** made an important point here that the man who conceived, worked





Prof. Alok Bhalla

for and finally achieved the European Union, **Jean Monnet**, took twenty years to do so. When he was asked whether it was worth it, he replied "Each minute of those twenty years was well spent. However, I wish I knew the short cut."

That shortcut, Ajeet ji said, was through 'Culture'.

**Dr. Alok Bhalla**, well-known scholar specializing in Partition Literature, and Convener of the English Board of Sahitya

Akademi, he as the Director of

the SAARC Festival of Literature and the person instrumental in giving it the multi-pronged thrust, in one of his interventions, made a significant point. He remarked that though there was a lot in common among the SAARC nations, it was still important to make Translations a vital part of all deliberations. Literature in the languages of these countries needs to be translated and widely circulated for providing depth to the understanding we have of our social and civilizational set-up.

He also pointed out that there are no archives of the paintings, sculptures, monuments and buildings of the SAARC countries. This is another major issue that needs to be addressed.

**H.E. Mr. Prasad**

**Kariyawasam**, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in India, said that he had always been in the awe of writers and literary figures, and was honoured to be



H.E. Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in India

here amongst so many of them. He said that he believed that writers were the eyes and the heart of the people because they had the power to turn the thinking of the people and give shape to policies of the governments.

As an example he mentioned FOSWAL, the main intellectual forum of SAARC writers which though is supported by the government, its success depends on the writers and the artists who can pressurise governments towards regional cooperation. He underlined the fact that we have shared cultural links with our neighbouring countries, which is the reason why people from one country support and stand by the other.

He said that the fact that we feel at home anywhere in this region of eight countries, goes to show that our relations go beyond history.

**Kiran Mehra-Kerpelman**, Director UNIC, affirmed that she has come back to India after almost thirty years. She felt that after such a long gap, there could be no better platform than the SAARC Writers Festival to reconnect, with the country of her birth.



Ms. Kiran Mehra-Kerpelman

She emphasized that such bodies need to build on artistic efforts and endeavours. The writers need to be provided platforms to speak directly to the youth in universities and colleges, and tell them that words like peace, development, human rights and justice are not abstract concepts. They need to answer difficult and awkward questions of the youth, and work towards internal cooperation which is crucial for the present times to address glaring problems like climate change, natural calamities and political conflicts.

She also said that the SAARC nations should work on resolving the copyright issues, not just of the creative works but also of industry and agriculture. It is perhaps now time to work towards the stamp : MADE IN SAARC.

She too ended with an Urdu couplet which said:

Who says that the stones cannot weep,  
How then do springs burst forth from them?