

WELCOME ADDRESS

—AJEET COUR

Let me welcome all of you, my friends, writers and scholars, and members of the Intellectual Think Tank of FOSWAL.

I take the proud privilege of welcoming our Chief Guest Prof. Chandrasekhara Kambara, eminent writer and President of Sahitya Akademi; Keynote Speaker, eminent scholar Prof. Ashis Nandy; and the eminent personalities who are giving Special Addresses: Prof. Muchkund Dubey, former Foreign Secretary; Mr. Piyush Srivastava, Joint Secretary, SAARC Division in the Ministry of External Affairs; and Mr. Buddhadeb Dasgupta, eminent Film Maker.

And our Guests of Honour: H.E. Mr. Mohammad Khairullah Azad, Charge D’Affaires of Afghanistan in India; H.E. Mr. Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India; H.E. Dr. V. Namgyel, Ambassador of Bhutan in India; H.E. Mr. Bharat Kumar Regmi, Ambassador of Nepal in India; Her Excellency Ms. Chitranganee Wagiswara, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in India.

And honoured scholars from the neighbouring countries who will speak on the Contemporary Literary Scenario in their countries.

In our South Asian region, besides sharing our clouds and monsoons, our birds and animals, our oceans and rivers, our flora and fauna, we also share long civilisational journeys, horizontally and vertically, on micro and macro levels.

We share our pains and anguish too.

We, the people of South Asia, are connected at a deeper level through different forms of articulation; through our shared myths, traditions, cosmologies, rituals and folk knowledge systems and folklore, that together constitute our cultural identity.

When I look back, way back in 1986, the launching of a mad dream of catching that elusive golden sparrow called Peace in a rather turbulent region, through meeting of creative and sensitive minds, seemed really mad to everybody in power. Whosoever I went begging for granting visas for writers from the neighbouring countries.

I launched my rickety boat in the turbulent sea with a Writers' Conference in 1987, which became a historical milestone.

Ever since, I never had time to look back.

The endeavour grew into a full-fledged movement over the years, with a push from the then Joint Secretary SAARC Division in the Ministry of External Affairs, the visionary Ms. Meera Shankar, in 1999.

We also have a third eye with which we could see beyond SAARC in which seven countries were members. We could see the civilisational links which spread from Afghanistan to Myanmar. So we reached out, in 1999, to writers & scholars of Afghanistan, and two poets from Afghanistan participated in the SAARC Writers Conference in 2000, much before Afghanistan officially became part of SAARC in 2007, as its eighth member.

FOSWAL emerged as the first NGO working for Track II Diplomacy, in the specific area of culture, for creating cultural connectivity through a Think Tank of intellectuals and writers, creative fraternity and peace activists, Folklore-Budhist-Sufi scholars, Folk performers, Painters and Dancers, Musicians and Singers, who have common sensitivities and common concerns for the socio-cultural-political-economic-tribal-gender issues of the region”.

Beginning with no funding totally, now since several years limited funds from the MEA are kindly given, though they are the bare minimum. But we are going ahead tirelessly. Major part of the expenses are looked after from the personal earnings of my painter daughter, Arpana Caur.

Our Foundation has so far done 54 mega events during the last 3 decades, not only in India, but in all the neighbouring countries: Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, including the very expensive Maldives. And has translated and published 48 anthologies of SAARC fiction and poetry on our own, to be given free to the delegates.

The current South Asian Literature Festival is our 55th mega event.

In the end I extend my deepest gratitude to all of you, my writer friends from the neighbouring countries, including those of my country, and also the dignitaries sitting on the dais.

I apologise for the limited time given to the delegates presenting their favourite passages from their fiction, and their poems. Actually we never knew that we will be getting such overwhelming response and more than 190 delegates will be participating. Next year I promise it will be a five day Festival when everybody will get ample opportunity to present their brilliant ideas. If MEA is with us, it could be early March 2019, a Sufi Conference, and we will welcome you once more, the FOSWAL family, with open arms.

Thank you.