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The integrated development of the South Asian region is one of the greatest challenges we face today. The 30th anniversary of the establishment of SAARC we felt was an appropriate opportunity to bring out this issue on Thirty Years of SAARC: Society, Culture and Development.

People and areas comprising the South Asian region have had deep linkages and coexisted for a long time. Religious, cultural and linguistic bonds have brought people and nations together in the past. The large and expanding number of centres for South Asian studies in universities around the world that study historical, sociological and cultural issues, in addition to the economic and political scenarios, is testimony to the significance of the region. Common sense—and serious analyses—suggest that economic cooperation between the countries that comprise this region is more important now than ever before.

According to its Charter, SAARC was set up to ‘promote peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation’, but the hope generated by this development has largely been belied. Nations in other parts of the world have faced and overcome challenges to cooperation to create workable and meaningful associations of nations. It should be possible to make this happen in South Asia too.

Articles in this volume endeavour to trace SAARC’s journey so far and provide pointers for the future. Several papers discuss economic and political issues. Economic cooperation is the core around which prospects for regional cooperation depend. This is even more important in the light of globalisation and the increasing role other countries wish to play in the region. While there is a long way to go, there has been some progress though trade agreements, infrastructure projects, pooling of energy resources, and other
measures that have been put in place, such as efforts at achieving ecological collaboration.

Economic integration must go hand in hand with political will. Limited regional cooperation in South Asia is largely attributed to political instability, as the contributors demonstrate. Recent attempts at building bridges between South Asian governments is a welcome step and has given hope for a new phase in South Asian cooperation.

The contributions also include discussions on human rights; trafficking; gender empowerment; literature; and civil society efforts at people-to-people integration. Collaboration in the arts is visually re-created in the photo essay, ‘Art Without Borders’. It is a documentation of four art camps organised by SEHER with participants from the eight countries and Myanmar.

Were it not for constraints of space, we would have liked to include sport, music, tourism and many other areas of existing and potential cooperation between nations. Readers will find some repetition across papers, which is inevitable, but also necessary for those who might want to read the papers selectively. We have had the enthusiastic support of our contributors from all eight countries. Without them, this attempt to re-visit SAARC would not have been possible.

OMITA GOYAL
The South Asian region has had deep cultural and civilisational ties down the ages and its rich and diverse religious, cultural and linguistic groups have coexisted for centuries. Rich in resources and mineral wealth, it attracted the unwelcome attention of Western powers across the globe, leading to a long era of colonial domination and exploitation. The advent of the 20th century saw the emergence and strengthening of nationalism and freedom movements across the region, led by our own freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The need for regional cooperation and a closer association among neighbours for the entire region of South Asia led to the setting up of SAARC in 1985.

In fact, the idea of cooperation in South Asia was discussed as early as the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in April 1947. The two conferences following this, the Colombo Conference (1954) and the Bandung Conference (1955), contributed towards regional cooperation in South Asia. Regional bodies like ASEAN were a welcome step towards regional cooperation. Deliberations over the years among the neighbouring countries in the South Asian region enabled the establishment of SAARC exactly 30 years ago with its headquarters in Nepal. Coming at a time when the trend towards regional and international organisations was found useful for mutual understanding and peace, especially the spectacular emergence of the European Union that overcame centuries of enmity, animosity and constant warfare between the nations of Europe, in particular Germany, France and the United Kingdom, SAARC gave hope for a similar progression in South Asia. Unfortunately, these hopes have been largely belied.

In this era of globalisation, the challenges that we face today are crucial to the integrated development of the South Asian region. These include the protection of the environment and development of natural resources, provisions for protecting human
rights, preservation of the cultural heritage of the region enabling transit facilities, sporting events, and so on. SAARC was established basically for promoting the welfare and improving the quality of life of the people of the region. Meaningful progress can be sustained by political understanding, mutual trust and confidence between the member countries. However, inter-state relations within the region have not remained free from tension, and India's relations with its neighbours are a grim reminder that bilateral relations have vital bearing on the progress of SAARC.

More people live in the SAARC region than in China. It does lag behind in terms of contributing to global gross product, but most of South Asia is in a phase of rapid economic growth. Further, democracy in multiple forms is a variety of government now common to all SAARC members. This is a vital region at the crossroads of South East and West Asia, Inner Asia and the Indian Ocean Littoral. Its stability and progress are essential in the context of ensuring a sane and harmonious world order. Issues in regional cooperation must be defined and addressed so that they lead to mutual and balanced gains. SAARC over the last 30 years has made some strides in socio-economic cooperation, but there is tremendous scope to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. Food security, climate change and disaster management require close cooperation, and SAARC's effectiveness has been disappointing in these areas. Though cultural exchanges between SAARC countries has led to a better understanding of the cultural ethos of the entire region, there is need to further encourage cultural tourism in the area. This includes religious tourism—Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and the Muslim sufi shrines.

The recently concluded 18th SAARC Summit in November 2014 adopted 'Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity' as its motto and emphasised regional cooperation in trade, investment, finance, energy, security, infrastructure, connectivity and culture, and the implementation of projects and programmes in a prioritised, result-oriented and time-bound manner. It is the collective responsibility of all member states to maintain stability, protect democracy, preserve national unity and encourage regional cooperation. Mutual cooperation and understanding between member states will help SAARC realise its objective of giving every individual the opportunity to live in dignity and realise their
full potential. The people of South Asia have been heirs to a great past and can be builders of a great future. If they face the challenges of the future together and cooperate to make use of all the available opportunities, they can be the veritable architects of a peaceful, healthy, vibrant and affluent region.

Our double issue this year brings together an interesting spectrum of articles from all the SAARC countries which analyse various aspects from their respective viewpoints brought together painstakingly by our Editors Omita Goyal and Rajiv Kumar. We hope that this will be of interest to the membership of the India International Centre, and also the wider interested public in India and the SAARC nations.

KARAN SINGH