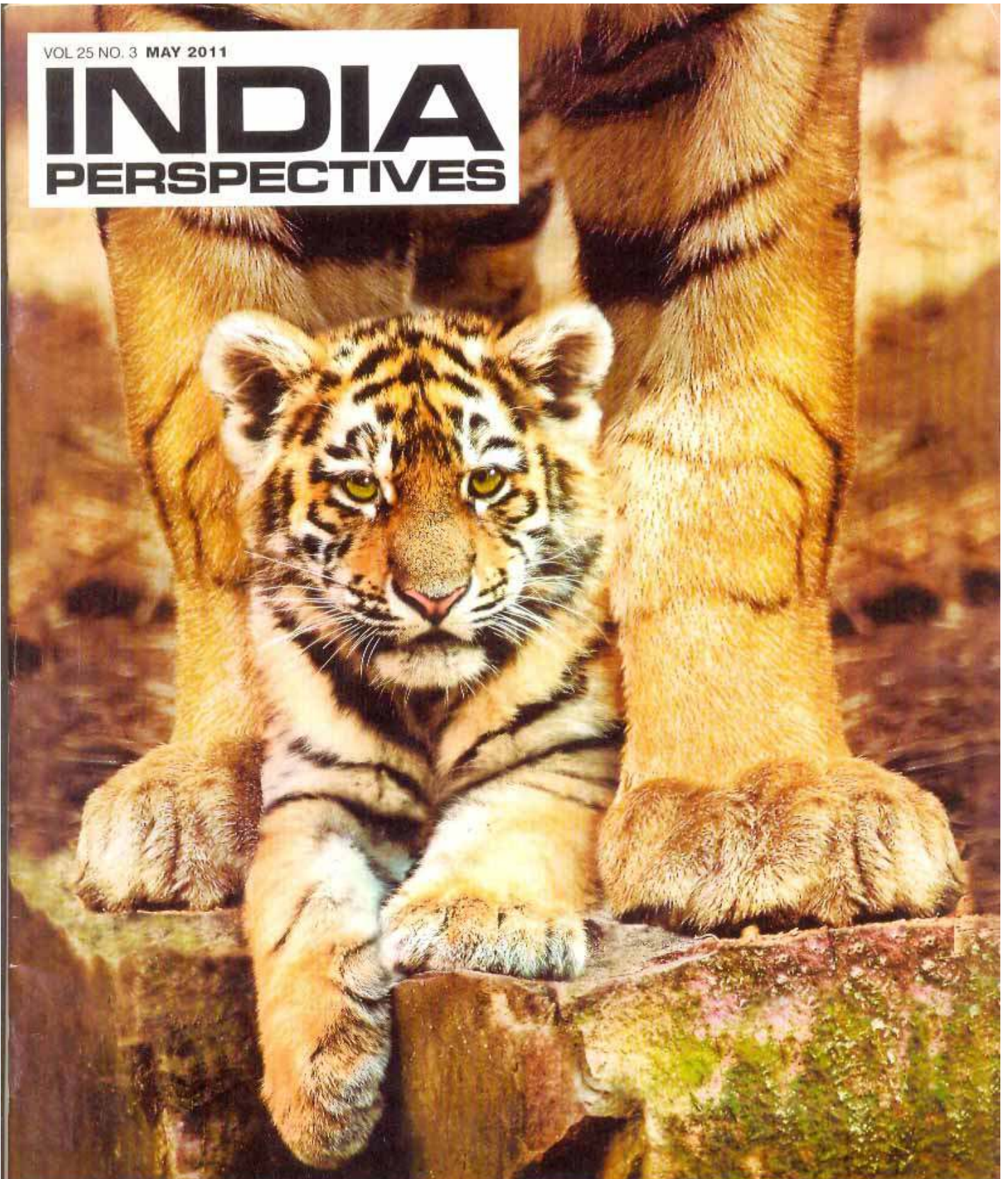


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# INDIA

## PERSPECTIVES



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# LETTERS OF PEACE

The SAARC Festival of Literature builds bridges beyond borders



TEXT: MEENAKSHI KUMAR

Every year writers, poets, thinkers, scholars and artists from eight countries overcome bureaucratic hurdles and personal problems to be part of poetry sessions and literary discussions. For the past 36 years they have been following their hearts and their love for literature which brings them to the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) Festival of Literature.

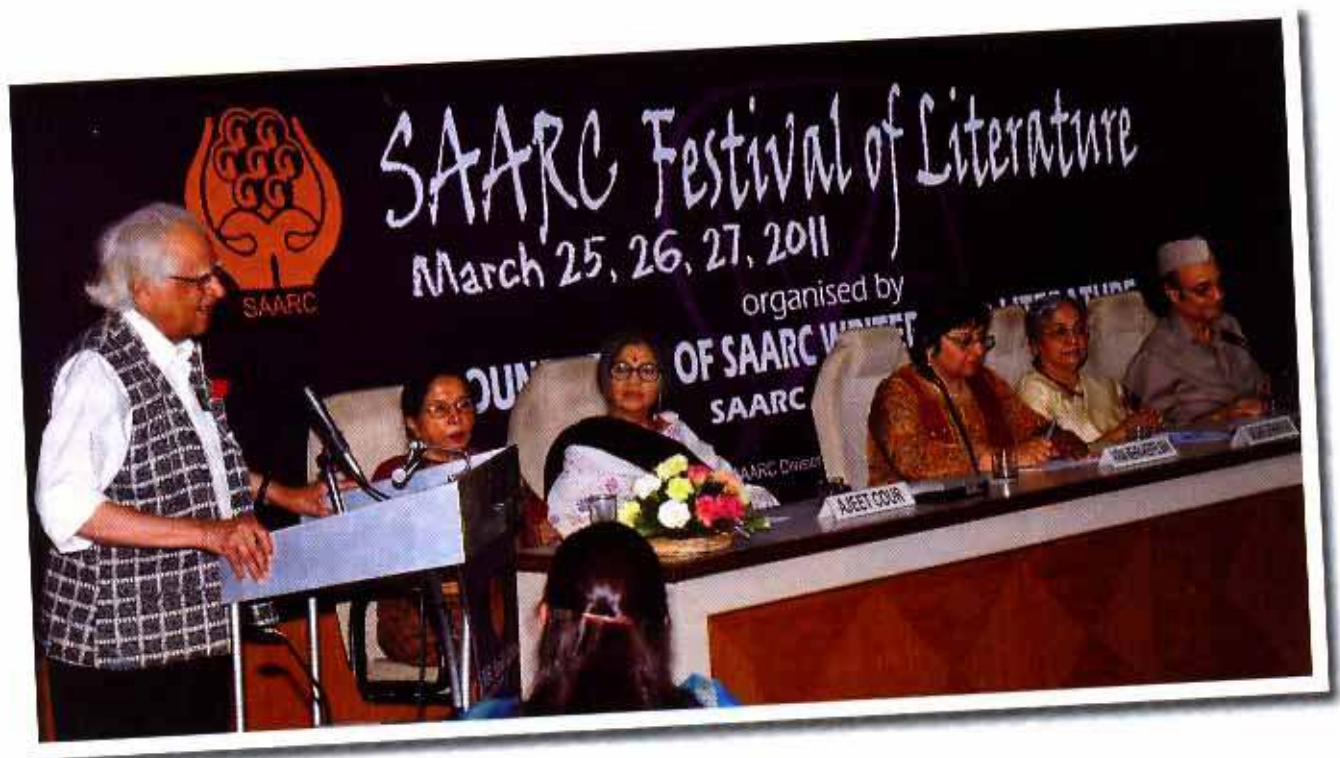
This year the festival was organised from March 25 to 27 in New Delhi. The topics of the various seminars were:

'Contemporary creativity and socio-political conflicts', 'Voices of the oppressed and the excluded', 'Literary legacy of Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Ghalib and Faiz', 'New voices of young writers' and 'SAARC identity and global culture: Literature and ground realities'. The SAARC Lifetime Literary Achievement Award was given to Urdu poet Joginder Paul.

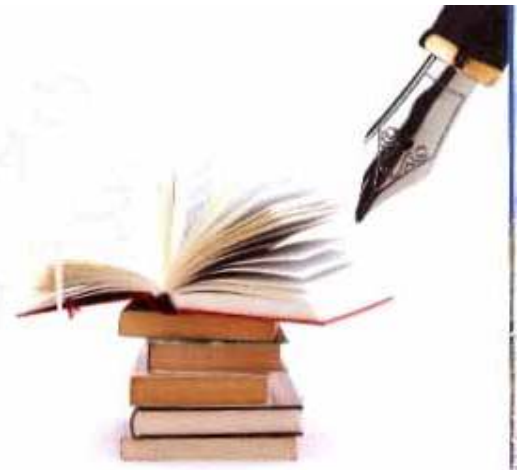
The festival is a brainchild of eminent Punjabi writer Ajeet Cour. Initially, Pakistan was the only participating country. Cour, a spunky woman who runs the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature in the capital, had

been organising the Indian languages writers' meet since 1975. She strongly felt the need for a cultural exchange between India's neighbouring countries and was keen that a dialogue on peace be initiated through a writers' meet and thus started the whole process.

"It wasn't an easy task to get all the permissions," recalls Cour. The first conference in 1987 saw the visit of Jamilludin Aali, a poet who has the unique distinction of writing *dohas* in a mix of *khari boli* (a dialect of Hindi spoken in Uttar Pradesh) and Urdu.







**WORD POWER:** (clockwise from facing page) Dr Abid Hussain on the podium; Dr Joginder Paul, Gursharan Kaur, wife of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Mani Shankar Aiyar, and Ajeet Cour with Professor Shafi Ahmed from Bangladesh.



The first conference turned out to be a success, with prominent names from Pakistan such as Fakhar Zaman, Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed participating. The conference proved that cultural contact between the two neighbours was possible.

For the next 12 years, this cultural exchange has continued to grow with more writers joining in. Then in 2000, Cour was asked to include other SAARC nations in the conference. So in April 2000, the first SAARC Writers Conference was organised along with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL). The first-ever resolution beautifully summed up the spirit behind the conference: "We are the mad dreamers of the SAARC region. Let

us, the writers and the creative fraternity of the region, endeavour to create bridges of friendship across borders and beyond borders."

It has indeed been a journey of long-lasting friendships and relationships. As Prof Razaqat Ali Khan, who has been associated with this conference for nearly 20 years, says, "It's after the day's sessions, when we sit down for dinner that we loosen up and discuss matters which are close to our hearts. We talk about Ghalib, Faiz, visa problems but never Kashmir."

Cour has constantly striven to find new writers from across the SAARC region. She fondly remembers how she discovered Mano Manzil, a young writer from the Maoist region of Biratnagar in Nepal. "When the Maoist problem began,

I went to Kathmandu and after a long search discovered this young man who wrote poetry. I invited him to our conference in 2002-03." He was obviously thrilled. Today, he sources new writers for the conference.

When funds run short, Cour's celebrated painter-daughter Arpana steps in with her generous assistance. Yet, Cour can never think of giving this project up. For her every moment is a high point. Whether it was the visit of Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, the Pakistani poet whom lyricist Gulzar considers his guru and who seldom attends any seminars or being complimented by noted singer Ghulam Ali or even getting writers from the neighbouring countries to sit together at the conference, it has been a most satisfying journey. ■