THE WORLD BANK
SOUTH ASIA

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

ADVANCING REGIONAL INTEGRATION, COOPERATION & ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

Mandakini Kaul and Nikita Singla, Editors

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A key objective of the World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation and Engagement (RICE) approach is broadening evidence-based communication and outreach activities that will help strengthen the case for RICE and generate domestic demand. The 'Good Neighbours' series showcases successful cross-border stories demonstrating regional cooperation to build support for regionalism in South Asia.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

The editors, Mandakini Kaul and Nikita Singla, would like to thank Cécile Fruman, South Asia Director, Regional Integration and Engagement, World Bank for her valuable guidance and support throughout the process.

We thank the external contributors for the close partnership in documenting the ten case studies of the Good Neighbours series - Aditya Valiathan Pillai, Auranzaib Khan, Nalaka Gunawardene, Nirvana Bhandary, Nitin Koshi, Oishee Kundu, Sagar Prasai, Samavia Batool, Smriti Daniel, and Vaqar Ahmed.

We acknowledge all the counterparts who graciously made time for interviews and provided information during the writing of the case studies. These include officials at Charali Snakebite Management Center, Dabur Nepal, Fortis Healthcare, Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology (FECT), Himal Southasian, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, Reliance Spinning Mills, Seher, and Unilevel Nepal. We are grateful to the participants and organizers of the South Asia Economics Students' Meet (SAESM), and to Amb. Nirupama Rao (former Foreign Secretary of India), Dr. Sanjib Kumar Sharma (a snakebite researcher and clinician who teaches at Nepal's BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences), Jazaya Hassadeen, Renu Vij (who heads international sales for Fortis healthcare group), Sanjeev Bhargava (Founder of Seher), Yogesh Patel (who heads Fortis Healthcare's internet-based sales operations) and fashion designers in Pakistan (who prefer anonymity) for sharing their key insights with us.

We thank the World Bank's South Asia External Communications team, especially Elena Karaban, Julie Ann Vorman and Pawan Bali, for their editorial support throughout the process. Namita Vij supported the team during the entire cycle of production.

Finally, thanks are due to Martin Raiser and Cécile Fruman for writing the Foreword, and to the eminent South Asians – Dr. Abid Suleri, Ms. Kasturi Chellaraja Wilson, Amb. Maleeha Lodhi, Ms. Naina Lal Kidwai, Ms. Nandita Baruah, Amb. Nirupama Rao, Mr. Pema Gyamtsho, Dr. Rubana Huq, Mr. Sujeev Shakya and Dr. Swarnim Waglé - who shared their thoughts and introduced the case studies.

Foreword

Nearly one-quarter of the world's population resides in South Asia, but only a small share may have ever come across people from the neighboring countries in the region. Bringing these diverse 1.9 billion individuals together is not easy.

However, we remain optimistic. Around the world, regional integration efforts have made progress in recent decades, sometimes against the odds. African countries have recently considerably liberalized trade among each other and are realizing several cross-border investments. The Asian Pacific region has signed a new regional trade agreement—Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership— amongst 15 countries which account for about 30 percent of the world's population and 30 percent of global gross domestic product. The European Union has strengthened its crisis response capacity in the face of severe economic shocks.

South Asia can seek inspiration in these examples. Once part of an integrated geographic, social, political, and economic entity, South Asians still have many things in common even if political dialogue and economic integration remain challenging amongst certain countries. Building on these commonalities and enhancing engagement between South Asians is vital to build bonds, generate goodwill, and foster a strong sense of community—creating what we like to call #OneSouthAsia.

Good Neighbours: Advancing Regional Integration, Cooperation and Engagement in South Asia showcases remarkable yet often-overlooked instances of South Asians cohesively building neighborly intra-regional relations. Each of these 10 case studies uniquely complements aspects of the World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation and Engagement (RICE) approach, which aims to enable economic connectivity, reduce vulnerabilities and build resilience, and invest in human capital. This collection, written and edited by South Asians, makes a strong case for drawing on the local sensibilities, linguistic similarities, historical interrelations, and cultural connections that have long linked the region's peoples in order to advance their shared aspirations, in a sustainable and socially inclusive manner.

Neighbors, by themselves, are merely those who are near. Good neighbors, usually, are those that are endeared. Neighborly relations between South Asian countries offer an opportunity for collective prosperity, peace and stability, which would be in the interest of the rest of the world as well. This publication is thus not just for South Asia. It is also for all those outside the region who follow its progress and see the potential for a more integrated and resilient #OneSouthAsia.

Martin Raiser
Vice President, South Asia Region
The World Bank

Cécile Fruman
Director, Regional Integration, South Asia Region
The World Bank

About the Contributors

Editors:

Mandakini Kaul is the World Bank's Regional Coordinator for South Asia Regional Integration & Engagement and is based in New Delhi. She works on issues of regional cooperation, economic connectivity, and engendered approaches in traditionally gender-blind sectors among countries in South Asia and with neighboring regions in Central Asia, East Asia and beyond. She leads high-level policy-influencing dialogue and knowledge platforms with government and non-government, and manages regional relationships with key counterparts in government, civil society, development agencies, private sector institutions and chambers of commerce, and think tanks. Most recently, she authored the World Bank's Approach to South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation, and Engagement and was co-author of the World Bank's flagship report India Systematic Country Diagnostic. She read Economics at St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, and at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Nikita Singla is Consultant, Regional Integration and Engagement, South Asia at the World Bank. She is an International Trade, Logistics and Inclusion Specialist with 12 years of experience in South Asia and has worked on more than 40 ports in the region. She has advised the Governments of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka in varying capacities on trade, logistics and inclusion-related issues. She was formerly Associate Director at Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals, where she led the Time Release Studies, in compliance with the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement. Some of her recent publications include 'Women's Inclusion in India's Trade Ecosystem' supported by the US Embassy in Delhi, 'Unilateral Decisions Bilateral Losses' focusing on the fall-out post suspension of trade between India and Pakistan, and 'National Time Release Study' focusing on the annual assessment of cargo clearance at ports in India. She is an engineer from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi and studied International Economic Policy at Sciences Po Paris.

Case Study Authors:

Aditya Valiathan Pillai is an associate fellow with the Initiative for Climate, Energy and Environment (ICEE) at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR). He writes about the politics and governance of climate change in India and South Asia. His current work focuses on building systems for climate adaptation in India across multiple areas of vulnerability. He also studies climate governance at the South Asian scale, with prior work spanning trans-boundary river governance, regional electricity trade arrangements, and grain trade. He previously worked on adaptation in South Asia's three Himalayan trans-boundary river basins – the Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra – with a focus on institution-building as a programme officer at The Asia Foundation.

Auranzaib Khan is a journalist and journalism trainer based in Peshawar, Pakistan. With 25 years of experience in research, active journalism, media training and development, he has worked with press clubs and journalism schools in the region to strengthen newsroom practices through running practical journalism programmes. As a media trainer, he has trained hundreds of journalists all over Pakistan, with focus on the border regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. Over the years, he has remained engaged with press clubs and journalists' unions on issues of freedom of expression and safety in journalism. He has also researched and written extensively on media and human rights issues, moderated radio programmes, conferences and seminars all over the country. His stories have appeared in the Herald – a magazine dedicated to long-form, investigative reporting – and the English newspaper Dawn.

Nalaka Gunawardene, trained as a science writer, is widely experienced as a journalist across print, broadcast and web outlets in Sri Lanka and internationally. Over the past 30 years, he has been a news reporter, feature writer, science editor, TV and radio host, foreign correspondent and national level columnist. After leaving active journalism, he collaborated with various development organizations, research institutes and the UN agencies as a communications specialist. Since 2010, he works as a freelance media and communications consultant, working on media development, journalist training and communication strategies for the development sector.

Nirvana Bhandary is a freelance writer, interdisciplinary artist and digital activist based in Kathmandu. She is the founder of The Feminism Project Nepal - a writer's collective and digital platform for feminist storytelling. Her work focuses primarily on feminism, sexuality and community mobilisation with young Nepali women. Nirvana's written works include essays, articles and opinion editorials that explore themes of identity, gender, cultural relativism and conscious travel.

Nitin Koshi is an economist and journalist by training, and a communicator by trade. He has been freelancing as a writer and editor for more than a decade, and is currently based in New Delhi. He has worked with The Economist Group, The Hindu Group, Himal Southasian, The India Today Group, The Indian Express Group and The Deccan Chronicle Group, among several other publications.

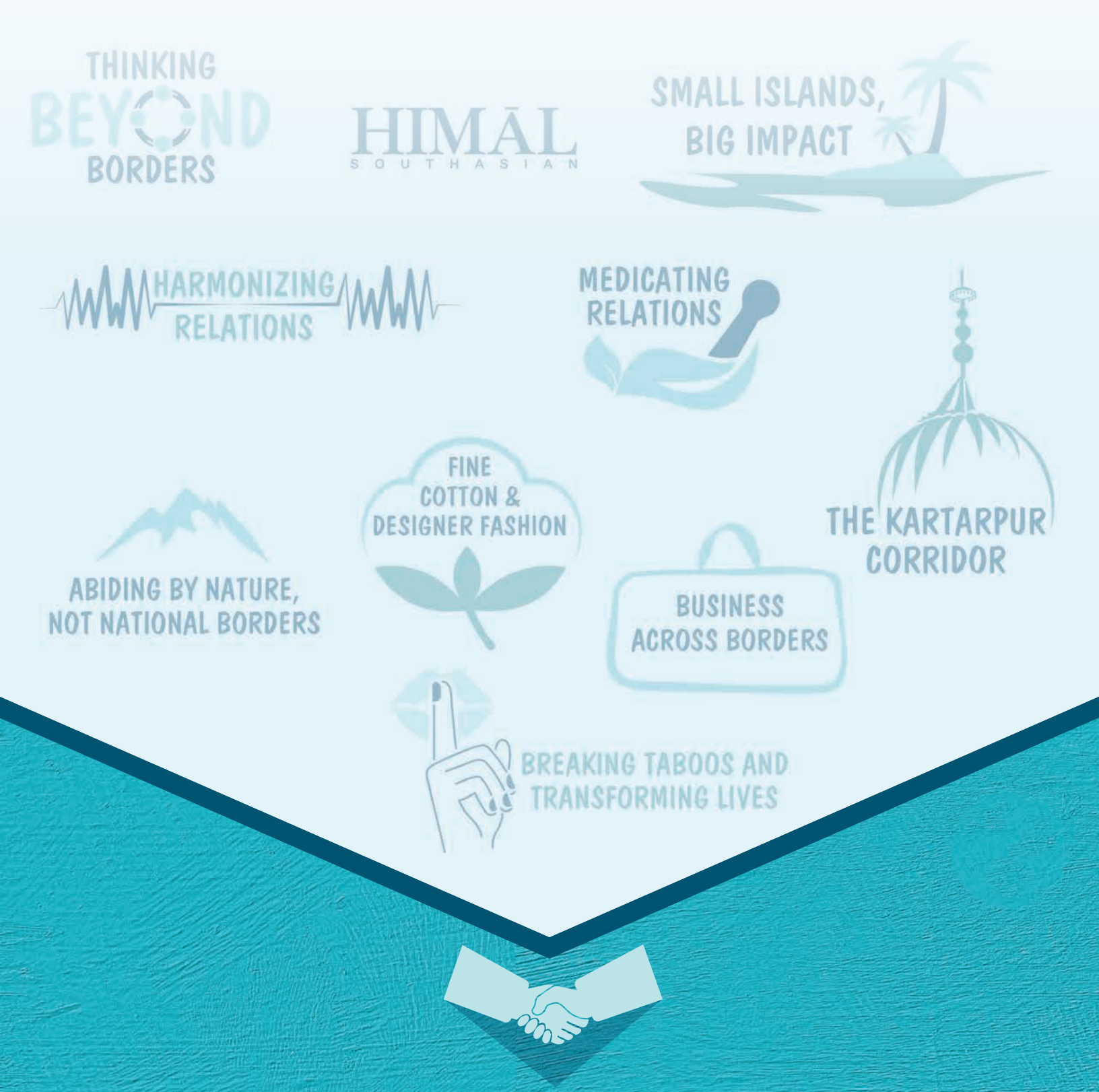
Oishee Kundu is a researcher at Y Lab (Cardiff University) and is involved with the Innovative Future Services (Infuse) programme in the Cardiff Capital Region. Her research focusses on the possibilities and challenges of using public procurement for strategic purposes like innovation, sustainability, and social well-being. She studied economics at Delhi University and pursued her Masters in International Economic Policy at Sciences Po Paris. Her master's thesis was awarded the 2017 Defence Economics Prize by the French Ministry of Defence. She completed her PhD at the University of Manchester in 2021 on the topic "Public procurement and innovation: is defence different?" She is also South Asia Economics Students' Meet (SAESM) alumnus from 2014.

Sagar Prasai is a free-lance consultant based in Kathmandu. He was formerly The Asia Foundation's Country Representative in India. He has worked for UNDP as District Development Adviser for two years before pursuing Masters' Degree in Urban Planning from University of Hawaii in USA and obtaining Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Degree in Regional Planning from University of Illinois in USA.

Samavia Batool is a former Senior Research Associate at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and is currently pursuing education in rural development from the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany. She studied MSc in Economics from Quaid-e-Azam University, Pakistan.

Smriti Daniel, in over a decade as an award-winning journalist, has followed her diverse interests across a number of subjects ranging from the arts to science and health reportage. Her long form pieces have explored the intersections of culture, politics, development and history. Smriti was a Falling Walls Science Journalism Fellow (2016), a Gabriel Garcia Márquez Cultural Journalism Fellow (2017) and a two-time winner of the Feature Writer of the Year Award from the Editors Guild of Sri Lanka. She has seen her work featured in Al Jazeera, Reuters, Motherboard, The Atlantic's CityLab, and The Sunday Times.

Vaqar Ahmed is a former civil servant and currently Joint Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). He has been a part of the government's Advisory Panel of Economists in 2008, Task Force on Private Sector Development in 2009, Working Group on Macroeconomic Framework for 10th Five Year Plan (2010-15) and Working Group on Social Sector Development for Vision 2025. He is also a visiting faculty member and researcher at different institutions, including University of Le Havre in France, National University of Ireland, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad and Pakistan Institute of Trade and Development. His research work focuses on inclusive growth, trade, public finance and sustainable development. He holds a PhD in economics.



Chapter - 1
Overview

Mandakini Kaul and Nikita Singla

Overview: Good Neighbours of South Asia

– Mandakini Kaul and Nikita Singla

Regional Cooperation in South Asia

As development practitioners, we habitually analyze the low levels of intra-regional cooperation in South Asia and highlight how trade, connectivity, and infrastructure within these countries are amongst the lowest in the world. However, what we often overlook are the small but significant ways in which people of the region come together, usually with a great deal of innovation and fortitude and mostly in the face of significant barriers. For instance, hundreds of students convening at a one-of-its-kind South Asia meet, or a symphony orchestra that aims at harmonizing a South Asian cultural dialogue, or an innovative social enterprise attempting to break taboos that are common to the region.

Fostering an authorizing environment for regional integration and cooperation is a slow & incremental process. South Asian countries enjoy geographical proximity, cultural similarity, common languages, and a shared history. Translating their individual growth ambitions into tangible pan-regional gains requires momentum on the ground and a recognition that the regional can significantly contribute to and enhance the domestic.

> Conflict usually takes precedence over cooperation in public discourse and examples of people to people connect, value chain linkages, business connections, and trading partnerships tend to get overlooked.

Regional cooperation in South Asia has several challenges but at the same time the possibilities are compelling. For example, World Bank research finds that trade between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN countries) grew six-fold between 2005 and 2019 and the unexploited potential is massive with an estimated growth rate of 93 percent for Bangladesh, 50 percent for India, and 76 percent for Nepal.[1] Similarly, the implementation of BBIN Motor Vehicles Act and full transport integration between Bangladesh and India could potentially increase the national income in Bangladesh by around 17 percent, and for India by 8 percent[2]. Based on detailed econometric models[3], estimates suggest that annual intra-regional trade in goods in South Asia could be as much as USD 67 billion, almost three times the current trade value of USD 23 billion.

More than 250 million people in South Asia still live without access to electricity–roughly a quarter of the global unserved population.[4] Power shortages and inefficiencies cost the region significantly–around 4-7 percent of its total GDP.[5] Regional cooperation can expand hydropower and clean energy capacity three-fold by 2040, from 64 GW in 2015 to 170.2 GW in 2040[6] and the benefits of unrestricted cross-border electricity trade in South Asia between 2015–40 could be about USD 226 billion, that is USD 9 billion+ per year. This estimated benefit is even higher now.[7] Unrestricted cross border electricity trade has the potential to reduce regional power sector carbon dioxide emissions by

8 percent, mainly from substitution of coal-based generation with hydro-based generation.[8]

Trade and connectivity between the two largest countries of South Asia, India and Pakistan, has been for years an interplay between politics and economics. Bilateral trade has immense potential to spur development in both countries, despite a complex political economy landscape. Both economies are facing significant inflationary pressures. This has been exacerbated by the recent devastating monsoon rains in Pakistan, impacting mainly Sindh and Balochistan, and also fertile areas of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Commodity trade could be an important means to stabilize domestic market prices and restore employment for people in the border areas. However, even small beginnings like re-initiation of limited bilateral trade solely depends on the political inclination of both the sides.

Good Neighbours

A key objective of the World Bank's South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation and Engagement (RICE) Approach is to generate domestic demand for a regional narrative through evidence-based communication and outreach.

> It is in this context that we envisaged the 'Good Neighbours' series – to showcase successful examples of cross-border cooperation that demonstrate that regionalism is possible and even replicable in South Asia. All it requires is some initiative and a whole lot of fortitude!

With this background in mind, we began an arduous process of sifting through informal anecdotes, interviews, and documents to identify unique stories of cross-border engagement and cooperation that could be backed up with evidence & documented for posterity. Some stories led to dead ends while other were hard to verify; ultimately, we were able to narrow down on ten examples of successful South Asian cooperation. During the course of curating these path breaking initiatives, we met a range of stakeholders – some supportive, many skeptical – and hopefully evoked some degree of conviction among them about regionalism in South Asia.

An important part of our endeavor was to pursue a collaborative approach by working with eminent experts from within the region to document these inspiring stories. This enabled us to establish crucial partnerships with a diverse set of champions of regionalism - youth representatives, think tanks, academics and journalists - to support the capacity and appetite for working on issues of regional cooperation in South Asia.

The Ten Case Studies

The ten *Good Neighbours* stories that we present are as diverse as the region they represent. We call them case studies with the hope they will be studied, understood, replicated and eventually scaled up across the region.

1. The first case study describes three "islands" of success in *cross-border business collaboration between India and Nepal* and makes the case for the potential to scale-up Indian investments in Nepal, particularly in the manufacturing sector. It argues that three pre-conditions appear to matter – first, a deliberate policy effort by both countries to retain the openings created by liberal trade regimes of the 1990s, second, the ability to capture quality-driven consumers across the

border and, third, the ability to increase and leverage domestic market share to hedge against policy instability in international trade.

2. The *International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)* is a unique regional institution, based in Kathmandu that has on its board eight Himalayan nations – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. It has managed not only to function but grow in 35 years and lead a massive network of research organizations across these eight countries, coordinating and disseminating crucial scientific evidence on the region's vulnerabilities to climate change. It's experience highlights the importance of a distinctly apolitical outlook focused on technological application and rational policy planning.

3. Our third case study covers cross-border medical cooperation in South Asia, focusing on the *Charali snakebite treatment center* that provides critical and timely treatment against a tropical disease that primarily bites at the health of South Asia's rural populations, and *Fortis Healthcare* that uses its size, reach and medical proficiency to provide quality care to people across the region. These are by no means the only examples of cross-border medical cooperation in South Asia. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, reciprocity between South Asian countries in providing health assistance helped protect millions in the region, evincing how a readiness to go to one's neighbours in times of need and an inclination to take care of one another can build much camaraderie, trust and appreciation between South Asians.

4. South Asia's vulnerability to climate change -related disasters cannot be overstated. The fourth case study elaborates a successful collaboration that has involved climate researchers at the *Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology (FECT),* a non-profit research institute in Sri Lanka, working closely with Maldivian scientists, environment officials, resource managers and educators for years. The institute's multi-disciplinary approach brings together experts in meteorology, hydrology and oceanography to study climate-change trends and how these impact the northern Indian Ocean region covering Sri Lanka and Maldives, and, in some cases, all of South Asia.

5. Taboos and myths around menstruation cross borders in South Asia. Some degree of period poverty—a lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, hand washing facilities, and waste management—is relatively common across South Asia. Women and girls in these countries occupy distinct landscapes, eat different food, speak different languages, follow different faiths, and yet share common experiences when it comes to their periods. Our fifth case study tell the *inspirational story of how an Indian social entrepreneur built one of the world's first low-cost machines to produce sanitary towels*, and how his simple invention inspired an ongoing partnership between India and Sri Lanka that will soon expand to Nepal and Afghanistan.

6. Political wrangling often eclipses efforts aimed at strengthening ties between India and Pakistan, but little in recent times speaks to the triumph of goodwill between the two countries like the opening of the *Kartarpur*

Corridor, a passage that connects India to one of the holiest Sikh worship sites in Pakistan. Our sixth case study documents how the coming together of families, friends, acquaintances and even strangers via initiatives like the Kartarpur Corridor illustrates how the region's peoples, if given a fair chance, time and opportunity, realize their shared cultures, identities and histories that have survived time and division, and re-constitute their heritage as South Asians.

7. Our seventh case study explains how *Himal, a regional magazine* has been playing an instrumental role in transforming independent journalism in South Asia for over 35 years. The magazine strives to be a neutral, non-partisan voice of reason in a geographical region that has seen numerous civil wars, colonization, neo-colonization and terrorism over the last few decades. There is a strong ideological base to the magazine that is not just about the articles they publish. What is most powerful is the 'Southasian' ethos and passion to promote the 'Southasian' identity.

8. *The South Asia Economic Students Meet (SAESM)* annually brings together nearly a hundred South Asian economics students for one week to debate issues of regional economic development. For most participants, it is their first exposure to regional cooperation and often leads to opportunities with peers for future research collaboration. For many students, crossing the border is a first-hand lesson about the challenges of regional cooperation - visas can be difficult to obtain and travel restrictions mean travelling a circuitous route for a neighboring country.

9. Our ninth case study describes how clothing and apparel are more than just products and *fashion trade has the ability to bring neighbours together*. Pakistan and northern India share similarities in cultural traditions, climate – and fashion tastes. The newspaper headline 'India goes nuts over Pakistani textile products' during Pakistan's first ever exhibition in New Delhi foreshadows the business potential if market forces were allowed to function unhindered.

10. An orchestra requires cooperation, banding together diverse instruments in harmonious unison, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Our tenth case study describes the efforts of two path-breaking platforms, the South Asian Symphony Orchestra and South Asian Band Festival, in using *music to promote harmony and peace in the region*.

Regional cooperation is not a low-hanging fruit, and requires vision, innovation, and above all perseverance to bring together people, businesses, nations. This is particularly relevant given the polycrisis facing the world today which makes it imperative for us to work together by pooling in resources, ideas and effort.

These successful examples of cross border cooperation have the ability to renew our optimism in the spirit of #OneSouthAsia, and hopefully provide impetus to much more by many more in the region.

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Chapter - 2

Business across borders

Sagar Prasai

Ms. Nandita Baruah

India Country Representative, The Asia Foundation

"Policymaking in India tends to assume that the country's sizeable consumption can propel enough growth and widespread prosperity. India's market is undoubtedly large, but only accounts for about 4% of global GDP. Despite tremendous manufacturing capability across sectors, India's integration into global value chains remains superficial.

India's abundance of human capital and raw material, provides a supportive and conducive setting for developing its manufacturing potential. Only large-scale investment in manufacturing can address the employment needs of the 12-15 million young people entering India's job market each year. The government is providing production-linked incentives to spur domestic manufacturing in traditional export-intensive sectors, like textiles, pharmaceuticals, automotive, steel and white goods, and in sectors of the future, like solar panels, telecommunications, advanced-cell batteries, food processing and electronics products.

To attract investments and optimize economic returns from this initiative, product-based value-chain integration with neighboring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka is important. This can deepen economic integration in the South Asian neighborhood, contribute to the region's economic health, and minimize risks of social and political instability. This case study showcases a framework for such integration by highlighting successful business partnerships between India and Nepal, and identifying areas for further expansion."

Business across borders: India-Nepal links thrive and grow

– Sagar Prasai

2021

Economic integration in South Asia has moved at a very slow pace. Compared to other global regions, South Asia lags with intraregional investments, connectivity infrastructure, and simpler digital procedures to help shipments cross borders. These costly non-tariff barriers are a key impediment to expanded trade among the eight nations of the region.

Still, there are islands of success in cross-border businesses that demonstrate the potential to scale up Indian investments in Nepal, especially in manufacturing. The experiences of two consumer products companies, Dabur Nepal and Unilever Nepal, and yarn maker Reliance Spinning Mills have several things in common. First, they were attracted by business-friendly policies that grew out of liberalized trade regimes in the 1990s. Second, the companies were able to capture quality-driven buyers across the border. Lastly, management of all three companies grew domestic market share to hedge against policy instability in international trade.

The companies share other features. Each has operated for more than two decades and demonstrated resilience amid a civil conflict in the early 2000s, years of unreliable electricity supplies, and a 2015 earthquake followed by civil unrest because of imposition of an economic blockade in Terai region that borders India. All three companies have manufacturing plants in Terai.

Unilever Nepal and Dabur Nepal are multi-nationals controlled by parent companies in India.[1] Reliance Spinning Mills is a wholly Nepali-owned company that imports raw material from India, and exports finished products to India and other countries. Reliance Spinning Mills and Dabur Nepal are among Nepal's top 10 annual exporters. Unilever Nepal recently turned its focus to the domestic market after years of significant exports to India.

Dabur Nepal - capitalizing on liberal trade regimes

Dabur Nepal Private Limited (Dabur Nepal) was established in 1989 with majority ownership held by a subsidiary of Dabur India Limited and 2.5 percent owned by a Nepali investor. In 1992, Dabur Nepal began operating with an annual turnover of Nepalese rupees (NRs) 5.3 million. By 2019, Dabur Nepal's annual turnover was NRs. 10 billion, 60 percent from exports.

Dabur made its initial investment in Nepal to process Himalayan medicinal herbs for personal care and health supplement products, including Ayurvedic medicines. In addition to collecting herbs from the wild, the company built greenhouses to establish a bigger source of raw material that allowed it to ramp up production and begin exporting to India, which was in the midst of liberalizing trade regulations.

India's 1992 export-import policy dropped a requirement for a license to trade most goods, except for a short list of specific items. India and Nepal amended their trade agreement to reduce to 50 percent the requirement for domestic content in goods and to allow certification of content by a designated Nepal institution.

All three actions – scrapping import licenses in India, reducing domestic content requirements, and making it easier to certify domestic content - opened the doors for Nepal manufacturers to target India's big market.

Dabur Nepal moved quickly to capitalize on the policy changes with its personal care and health products. A new opportunity came when Dabur noticed Indian consumers were shifting from carbonated, sugary drinks to healthier alternatives with natural fruit juices. In 1996, Dabur Nepal launched a juice plant in Nepal, then one of the largest in South Asia with a capacity of 6,000 liters per hour. Two decades later, the company's juice brand, with 30 variants, accounted for one-fifth of Dabur's total revenue[2] and the company added production in India and Sri Lanka. Today, Dabur Nepal supplies India's northern markets and its sales volume is so significant in Nepal that Real Juice is often listed by name in the nation's top 10 export items. The company buys raw materials for juices from Israel, Holland, China, and India, and buys packaging materials from India, Thailand, and Singapore.

While favorable trade policies helped Dabur Nepal in the 1990s, other trade issues limit or disrupt how companies do business in South Asia. For example, Dabur Nepal would like to sell its popular juice products to consumers in neighboring countries, such as fast-growing Bangladesh. Both Bangladesh and Nepal signed the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) to promote intraregional trade. However, Bangladesh imposes a prohibitive tariff of 105 percent on imported juices to protect domestic juice makers.

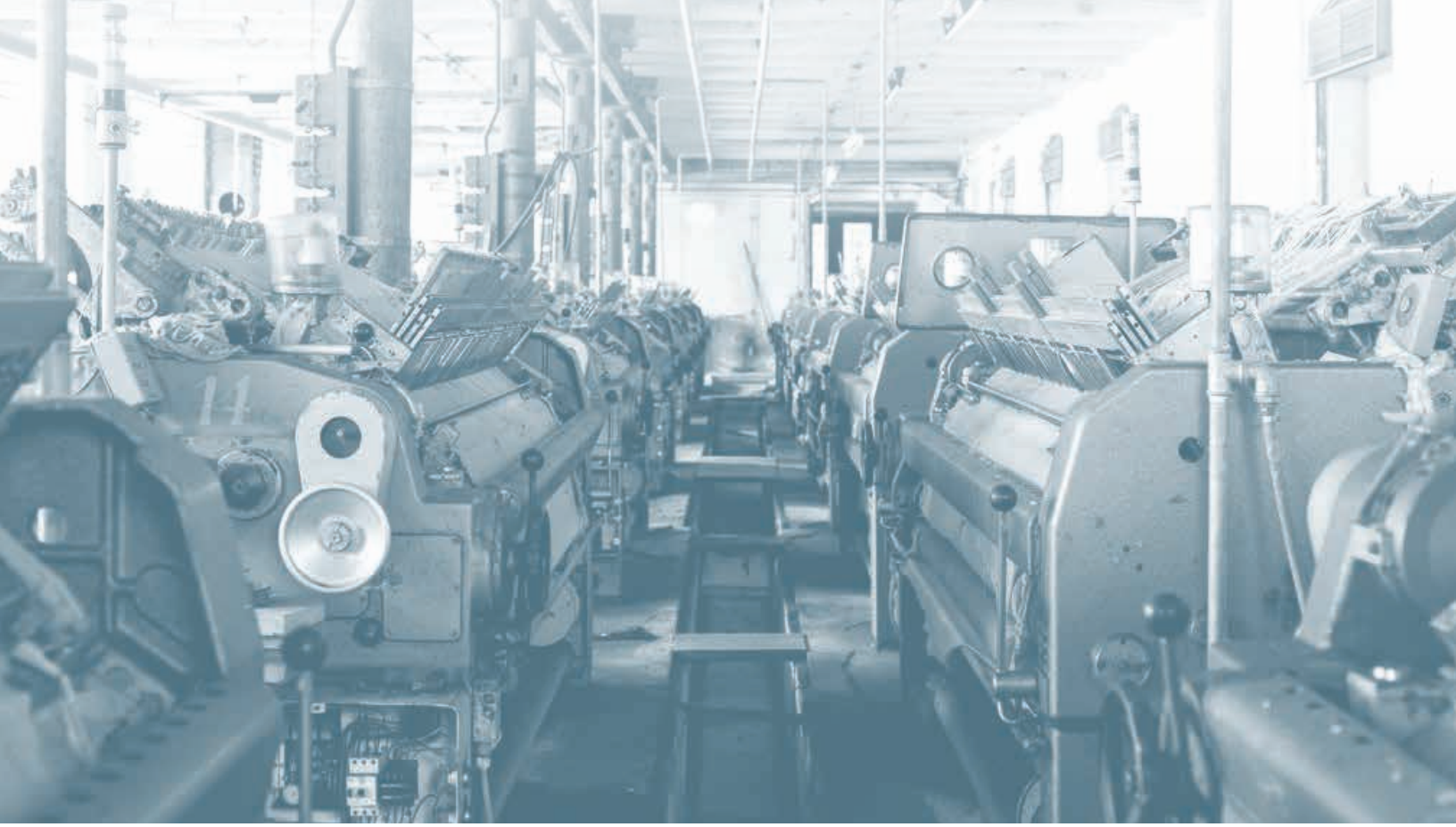
At home in Nepal, the company faces unstable trade and tax policies. In 2018, Nepal doubled to 30 percent its import duty on sugar, a key ingredient for Real Juice. Nepal later introduced an import quota on sugar to limit cheaper foreign shipments. Such restrictions tend to create shortfalls, hoarding, and prices that affect company profit margins or export competitiveness.

Unilever Nepal - leveraging domestic market to hedge for changes in the trade regulations

Unilever Nepal (UNL) began in 1992 with a manufacturing unit in Makwanpur and an initial investment of NRs. 70.37 million.[3] Eighty percent of UNL equity is held by Hindustan Unilever Limited, 5 percent is held by a private holding company, and remaining 15 percent of shares are traded on the Nepal Stock Exchange. UNL, like Dabur Nepal, took advantage of liberalized trade policies in the 1990s to build its business. Although the company at one point exported about 40 percent of its products to India, UNL today is focused on Nepal's domestic market.

That shift – the ability to target the domestic market when changes in international trade rules make it harder to export – is a big factor in UNL's success in Nepal.

UNL sells consumer products for home care, personal care, food, and refreshments. In Nepal, it



produces 35 products that include Lifebuoy soap, Sunsilk shampoo, Lux soap, Fair & Lovely face cream, and Ariel and Surf laundry detergents. Raw materials for the products are imported from India, Japan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and China. In 2018, UNL's total revenue from operations was NRs. 4.87 billion with a net profit of NRs. 999 million[4] and 10 percent annual growth. UNL directly employs 243 people and claims to provide indirect employment to an estimated 20,000 across its value chain[5].

Nepal's growing consumer market has helped UNL offset unstable trade and industrial policies. Companies planning export-oriented production facilities typically look for stable tariffs, low trade costs, and efficient infrastructure. Nepal has struggled to provide these to prospective foreign investors. UNL started with commercial production of Wheel washing powder and began exporting its products in 1995, mainly to India. At its peak, UNL's exports accounted for 42 percent of annual turnover. However, exports began declining in the early 2000s and stopped in 2005-06 due to Nepal's withdrawal of quota-free exports and changes in import tariffs on certain raw materials.

The shift in focus – from exports to domestic sales – required two big changes. UNL re-engineered its value chain to add supplies from a large number of small- and medium-scale manufacturers in Nepal. The company then created an extensive domestic distribution network to promote its products. Despite poor infrastructure and connectivity, UNL mobilized a network of distributors, sub-stockists, carrying and forwarding agents, wholesalers, retailers, logistics experts, and women entrepreneurs to penetrate the market. Today, UNL products are available nationwide, including remote districts such as Humla, Kalikot and Jajarkot.[6] The company uses marketing tools and community engagement programs with retailers and distributors to build consumer brand loyalty.

Nepal's growing middle-class market has caught the eye of other companies with well-known brands. Britannia Industries, an Indian food

company, is among several companies that plan to enter Nepal with joint-venture production facilities[7]. This model of investment and production remains attractive as long as Nepal's domestic demand expands and India-Nepal trade arrangements continue to improve.

UNL faces significant challenges from counterfeit products and rising labor costs. Nepal's weak enforcement of intellectual property rights has encouraged a proliferation of look-alike and fake products carrying the labels of well-known consumer products. Loopholes in Nepal's trademark and registration rules have been brought up in trade talks. Counterfeit products result in lost sales for companies and lost tax revenue for the government. Another crucial factor is Nepal's higher wage rates and the adoption of progressive labor laws during the past five years. The wage rate increase is largely a result of labor scarcity created by approximately two million workers from Nepal who migrated to East Asia and the Gulf. A 2017 labor law raised the minimum wage and made workers eligible for bonuses under certain conditions. While these changes raised workers' household income, they also made Nepali production costs less attractive for some companies.

Reliance Spinning Mills - capturing quality driven consumers across borders

Reliance[8] Spinning Mills Ltd. is a Nepali-owned enterprise that makes synthetic yarns for weaving, knitting, and textiles. Reliance is controlled by the Golyan Group and the MS Group. The company was established in 1996 with an initial investment of NRs. 1.5 billion when Nepal opened its doors for trade, investment, and technology transfers. Reliance, unlike Dabur Nepal and UNL, does not have Indian investments because during mid-1990s, interest rates in India were significantly higher than in Nepal.

Reliance produces up to 80 metric tons of yarn daily in various blends of acrylic, polyester, and viscose.[9] It imports nearly all raw materials from several countries, including India, and exports about 90 percent of its finished products, including shipments to India. Unlike Dabur Nepal or UNL, Reliance lacks a significant domestic market. The import-dependent spinning mill in Nepal is able to export yarn to India, beating the price and quality of well-established competitors in India.

Reliance's unique niche comes from its capital- intensive, quality-focused production facility. It has invested approximately NRs. 30 billion over more than two decades to maintain state-of-the-art equipment, creating a high barrier to entry for potential competitors. Reliance holds less than 1 percent of India's vast market, generating more than USD 60 million in annual export earnings – a welcome contribution to reducing Nepal's nearly USD 8 billion annual trade deficit with India.

> By obtaining raw materials from a half-dozen countries – and exporting goods to seven or eight countries – Reliance has the flexibility to negotiate low prices for raw materials and export its goods to countries with content rules that make value-added re-entries possible.

In that sense, Reliance is not dependent on any single nation's import rules and tariff structure and can survive without a significant domestic market to hedge the risks.

Reliance has not been able to enter other significant South Asian markets such as Bangladesh, the world's second largest exporter of ready-made garments. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh exported about USD 32.9 billion[10] worth of garments annually. But Reliance is unable to sell yarns to those garment-makers because of high transport costs. Landlocked Nepal is separated from Bangladesh by a narrow strip of Indian land known as the "Chicken's Neck" and Bangladesh has not opened a land route for imports of Nepali yarn through the Phulbari-Banglabandh highway route. If that route was available, it would cost around 2-2.5 US cents per kilogram to ship yarn from Nepal to Bangladesh. But only a sea route is now available, costing a much higher 15 US cents per kilogram that makes shipments unaffordable.

What can we learn from these cases?

The experiences of the three companies indicate that the trade, transit, and investment policies of Nepal and India operate at an acceptable level of functionality, although they could be improved. Both countries are addressing nontariff barriers by increasing investments in regional connectivity and border infrastructure, reforming customs procedures, and addressing road congestion. In that sense, there are no visible structural constraints that should inhibit wider and deeper business collaborations between Nepal and India. As the Dabur Nepal case shows, there is an early-bird advantage in positioning a company to exploit anticipated reforms and the market may respond to these signals faster now than two decades ago.

The foreign direct investment and equity investment rush that started to enter India in a significant way beginning mid-2000s was attracted by India's growing domestic demand and consumer market. Nepal's size and stage of growth are vastly smaller. But as the Unilever Nepal case shows, Nepal's domestic consumption has reached a stage where the nation can offer nominal risk hedging for manufacturing companies that are willing to cultivate internal demand. The real opportunity in Nepal, however, lies in manufacturing goods for shipment to nearby India.

Two of the three companies examined see Bangladesh as an emerging opportunity, which means even a modestly functional economic integration of the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) sub-region could attract more regional joint-ventures. A stronger and active BBIN would also be a more efficient vehicle for those countries to egotiate trade terms. All are signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement but Bangladesh, India, and Nepal still conduct bilateral trade negotiations on virtually a product-to-product basis.

It is normal for developing countries in South Asia to be sensitive to potential external threats to domestic industries. But as threats change over time, so do policy responses – resulting in business casualties or discouraging investments along the way. The challenges and successes of Dabur Nepal, Unilever Nepal, and Reliance Spinning Mills show why it is important to keep international trade and investment policies as stable as possible, for as long as possible.

ENDNOTES

1. Although Dabur Nepal's investment comes from Dabur International and not Dabur India. Unilever Nepal's ultimate parent is the British-Dutch conglomerate, Unilever plc, the world's largest producer of soap.
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8. Bears no relation to similarly named companies in India.
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- Picture credits: The World Bank Images

Chapter - 3

Abiding by nature, not national borders

Aditya Valiathan Pillai

Mr. Pema Gyamtsho

Director General, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)

"Biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region are not confined within the borders of each country here. Both their causes and effects are transboundary in nature. The need to address environmental issues, such as air pollution, sporadic rainfall, floods and heat waves, is common across this region and growing urgently. While all the countries in the region are taking concerted actions to address these issues, there is an urgent need to adopt cross-border approaches to help comprehensively tackle these issues.

Having spent many years pushing for the HKH mountains to be recognized as a unique ecosystem that demands urgent global attention, I have learnt that creating regional institutions and mandates that suit HKH countries' collective requirements is crucial. Regionally coordinated planning and development, as fostered by the work undertaken by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), has been wonderfully highlighted by this case study aptly titled 'Abiding by nature, not national borders: Institution building in the Himalayas'.

Institutions like ICIMOD can contribute towards enabling HKH countries to protect their fragile mountain ecosystems and put forth a unified voice when seeking global financial and technical support to enhance the resilience of the region. ICIMOD strives hard to show how despite relations between HKH countries often being as delicate and fragile as their ecosystems, promoting informed and collective action can go a long way towards ensuring that future generations are not deprived of the rich cultural and biological heritage that the region offers."

Abiding by nature, not national borders: Institution building in the Himalayas

– Aditya Valiathan Pillai

2021

Mountains are hard to govern. National boundaries rarely reflect mountain geography and carve mountains into ecologically and socially incomplete sections. Mountain ecosystems, glaciers, rivers and communities are deeply intertwined, bearing all the complexity of systems that have evolved over millennia. Understanding this complexity and then governing it is an especially challenging task. In the Himalayas, the borders that divide the mountains are hard and sometimes militarized, and states have traditionally been only been mildly interested in cooperating on cross-border issues, such as melting glaciers because of global warming, river basin governance, and disasters.

Regionally owned institutions attempt to bridge these jurisdictional divides. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), based in Kathmandu, does this by presenting a unified picture of natural systems that evolved independently of the modern nation-state. In doing so, ICIMOD attempts to force state machineries to adopt a higher vantage point and think about problems and solutions as though borders do not exist. This project is difficult because states are naturally inclined to act to preserve their interests.

ICIMOD is a unique regional institution; on its board sit eight Himalayan nations – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. It has managed not only to function but grow in the 35 years since it was founded despite the somewhat precarious relationships between countries on its board. It is the face of a large network of researchers across the region, coordinating and disseminating scientific evidence on the region's dire vulnerabilities to climate change.

The Himalayas, which include some of the highest peaks on earth, have an outsized influence on South Asia and beyond. The Himalayas indirectly support about 1.9 billion people through rivers that culminate in the East China Sea in the east, and the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan in the west. But relatively little scientific data is yet available about the impact of warming temperatures and the implications for ecosystems, societies, politics, and even borders in the region.

This case study is based on 11 interviews with ICIMOD's leadership and senior staff, and a former Indian environment minister. Interviews were supplemented by reviews of ICIMOD's annual reports, independent five-year reviews, academic papers, and program reports.

Foundations

ICIMOD was conceived in a movement that recognized mountains present a unique set of governance challenges. Social changes driven by industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, were, and still are, damaging mountain environments. Erik P. Eckholm, writing in Science in 1975 describes the mood at the meeting where ICIMOD was conceived:

"An unusual meeting was convened in Munich, Germany, in December 1974. Any organizing principle, any common thread among the participants, would have eluded an outsider. The group included biologists, anthropologists, foresters, ecologists, economists, geographers, businessmen, and civil servants, and they had travelled to Munich from Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia. What drew this disparate group together was a shared concern for a problem that has scarcely been recognized as one deserving attention in its own right: the deterioration of mountain environments in the poor countries."

– Erik P. Eckholm

Participants discussed the need to create institutions to promote ecologically sound mountain development. In the years that followed, UNESCO and the governments of Switzerland and Germany put forward financial resources, and the eight Himalayan nations endorsed the concept at a UNESCO general conference. In 1983, ICIMOD was established in Kathmandu as an intergovernmental organization. From the start, ICIMOD said its role was to assist, collect, review, and coordinate mountain research produced by institutions in member countries. Its mandate was designed to prompt regional cooperation by sustaining scientific collaboration between member countries.

A unified lens for a fragmented mountain range

ICIMOD's board has a key role in carrying out the institution's mission to stimulate regional collaboration amid national interests. At its inception, the board had uneven representation from member countries (three from Nepal, and one each from Bhutan, China, India, and Pakistan) along with the three founding donors and UNESCO. In 1991, after several years of organizing and setting up the institution, the board overhauled its structure in an important balancing step, giving each country one seat and allocating an equal number of board seats to scientists.

Initially, ICIMOD carved a niche for itself with small programs that focused on sustainable development in mountain areas, from rural energy to off-farm jobs. In 1995, the institution reoriented itself to urge member nations to collaborate on difficult transboundary environmental issues. The regional cooperation program attracted new donors that year and has been an important reason for European and Australian financial support since.

ICIMOD's explicit regional orientation has been a useful political channel for incremental cooperation. Between 2009 and 2011, during Jairam Ramesh's tenure as India's environment minister, ICIMOD was part of a fledgling and unfulfilled period of environmental multilateralism. For example, in climate negotiations then, India signaled a willingness to adopt a more proactive emissions mitigation policy and to engage with multilateral platforms such as ICIMOD, a change from Delhi's traditional preference for a bilateral approach. India agreed to a program to restore and protect the Mt. Kailash region – a remote area revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and other religions – that required China, India, and Nepal to agree on national program plans. Ramesh said he saw this as a small but useful first step toward better environmental cooperation between India and China. India increased its annual support to ICIMOD, pledging USD 500,000 over 2009-11 compared to its total contribution of USD 1 million

from 1983 to 2006. ICIMOD's expertise in glaciology was seen as an asset to Indian institutions such as the National Institute of Himalayan Glaciology in Dehra Dun and the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development in Almora. Of specific interest was ICIMOD's research on mapping Himalayan glacial lakes, large natural reservoirs of water contained by depleting glaciers that pose a significant downstream threat.

The transboundary landscape program has grown in recent years to cover some of the most politically and ecologically sensitive parts of the region and world. Bringing China, India, and Nepal together to protect the Mt. Kailash region, ICIMOD runs a program in the border regions of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, at the intersection of the Karakoram, Pamir, and Wakhan ranges. Less sensitive is a program that brings Bangladesh, India, and Nepal together for the Kanchenjunga zone. These programs aim to find a balance among developmental needs, delicate ecosystems, and climate change pressures. They involve, to varying degrees, generating more information about these areas, creating systems for governments to exchange information, and building local capacity to manage the landscape. ICIMOD's work generating governmental sanction for these efforts was a significant political achievement. As ICIMOD's website notes, its approach "implies coordination and cooperation among all those responsible for an area, regardless of jurisdiction, as defined by ecosystems rather than administrative boundaries." The vision of abiding by nature rather than national borders is hard to execute in a region with relatively few examples of functioning cooperation, and little trust. However, the seeds of regional cooperation planted in ICIMOD's apolitical projects may eventually help support broader changes when environmental crises in the Himalayas become harder to ignore.

Institutional trial and error

ICIMOD's budget grew by an average 7 percent annually in real terms during the three decades from 1986 to 2015.[1] Its average growth masks relative stagnation in the first two decades followed by a decade of remarkable growth. Its growth since 2006 has been shaped by two factors: a strategic re-orientation toward regional relevance – especially in climate change – and an overhaul of institutional practices.

ICIMOD regional member countries contributed only 4 percent of average annual income over three decades from 1986 to 2015. Their contributions fluctuated, sometimes drastically from one year to the next. European aid provided stable funding that represented 42 percent of annual income during the period. The remainder, about 54 percent of annual income, came from a large and diverse basket of smaller donors that funded individual projects or contributed directly to one of ICIMOD's larger programs. In the decade leading up to 2015, more than 30 donors, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, European Union, and the United States, were program contributors.

Reliance on donors instead of stable, interest-generating financial assets affects an institution's form and priorities. Scarce resources must be devoted to fundraising, which requires building relationships with donors, establishing public credibility, communicating results, and ensuring sound management. Most importantly, a reliance on donor funding requires an institution to demonstrate relevance through impactful agenda setting and consistently high-quality research.

ICIMOD stopped growing in the decade between 1996 and 2005. Its annual funds had peaked in 1999 at USD 6 million, a milestone that took six years

to surpass. An independent five-year review of the organization in 2006 found ICIMOD had not done enough to make itself relevant to member countries. The review said ICIMOD's 'institutional positioning was unclear,' member states were 'unaware of its strengths and impacts,' and its work rarely translated into policy. A regional focus was sometimes missing in its programs and ICIMOD risked overstretching itself by moving beyond the Himalayas and beginning work in places like Sri Lanka. The review painted a relatively dire picture, saying that "all donors interviewed (…) said the time has now come for regional member countries to take more ownership through financial commitments. Some had questions about the impact ICIMOD was having (…)." The review report asked ICIMOD to prioritize regional interests, develop deeper links with governments, and adopt a more forward-looking strategy.

The 2006 review also identified internal challenges. ICIMOD's management was based on command-and-control principles rather than confidence in the staff. Its governance was choked by a long list of committees, administrative procedures, and clearance requirements. ICIMOD was having a challenging time retaining its most talented staff beyond their three-year contracts. The review called for an internal overhaul. It directed leaders to recruit core staff by offering better incentives and job security that was not tied to fluctuations in project funding.

In the years since that 2006 report, ICIMOD has turned the tide through staff trainings, a restructuring of administrative functions, and efforts to ensure longer tenure. Staff were organized in larger interdisciplinary teams with multiple, more stable lines of funding. An independent five-year review in 2016 indicated the efforts paid off. It noted that "the ability to attract and retain experienced professional staff within ICIMOD and also within the strategic partners is a key factor in ICIMOD's success." The report found the organization had adopted "a well-structured and organized approach to operational management with progressive practices." However, the 2016 review said ICIMOD needed to improve communication with member countries and to align its programs with national needs, echoing a previous review. The report cautioned that recent growth might come at the cost of coherence in regional programs. Indeed, about 60 percent of ICIMOD's income in 2006-15 came from splintered funding tied to projects while only one-third came from core funding. By comparison, in the prior decade, core funding and project finance were nearly equal. Short-term project finance can be difficult to manage because each grant has separate transaction costs and expectations. The impermanence of such funding creates uncertainty, often curtailing long-term vision.

ICIMOD's restructuring of internal machinery served an important strategic change. Its quest to be more regionally relevant led to a focus on climate change in the Himalayas. In 2014-15, its four largest programs, by expenditure, were on transboundary landscapes, regional climate adaptation, the Himalayan cryosphere and atmosphere, and transboundary rivers. These programs designated climate change as a focal point and together totaled nearly one-third of ICIMOD's spending.

The collective effect of these institutional changes is a remarkable increase in funding since the plateau of the late 1990s and early 2000s. ICIMOD's average growth rate was 12 percent from 2006 to 2015, adjusted for inflation. By comparison, its inflation-adjusted growth was 0.5 percent for the decade from 1996-2005. ICIMOD's increasing relevance as a front-line research platform for climate change was a particularly crucial factor in its growth.

An aerial view of the melting Siachen glacier. Photo from the World Bank Images

The inevitability of climate change

ICIMOD was founded in 1983 to create avenues for ecologically sound development in the Himalayas. In the decades since, climate change has transformed how the world sees mountains. The Himalayas, which include the 10 highest mountain peaks on Earth, are particularly vulnerable because they warm faster than other regions. A substantial portion of our understanding of Himalayan vulnerability comes from ICIMOD and its partner institutions.

A crucial climate question for the region, and for ICIMOD, is the future of retreating Himalayan glaciers. The glaciers sustain billions of people across Asia with water supplies and unleash massive flooding when large lakes formed by melted glaciers break through natural dams. Glaciers attained public prominence after the 2007 publication of a now-discredited prediction that Himalayan glaciers could disappear by 2035 in the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report.[2] That report was also influential because it formally confirmed the Himalayas as a "knowledge gap for adaptation" and said a large number of potentially hazardous glacial lakes "far exceed the capacity of countries

in the region to manage such risks." The report was important in narrowing ICIMOD's focus on climate change.

Glaciers have been part of ICIMOD's work since at least 1999. Its early work was the first to document that Nepal had more than 3,500 glaciers and a surprisingly large number of glacial lakes – more than 2,300, of which 20 were potentially dangerous. The study was pioneering because of the paucity of data on the Himalayas. Analyzing glacier melt and threats from unstable glacial lakes requires meticulous inventorying, categorizing, and monitoring of glaciers. The information is crucial to seven downstream countries and countless vulnerable communities.

Between 1999 and 2005, incremental progress was made with assessments of Bhutan, Pakistan, and part of the Indian Himalayas. It was not until 2018 that all Himalayan glaciers were fully mapped from Tajikistan's Amu Darya basin in the west to Myanmar's Irrawaddy basin in the east. That study, conducted by ICIMOD and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, used satellite data to capture the state of these glaciers from 2003 to 2007. Previous efforts to isolate glaciers in time were less reliable because of the varying timeframes of data sources. ICIMOD's study is a baseline for future research on glacial floods and climate change-induced glacial shrinking.

But how fast are Himalayan glaciers disappearing? That central question was not answered until recently. ICIMOD's 2019 synthesis of knowledge about the Himalayas made international headlines as a landmark report for its alarming conclusions. The report, The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People, says, "Even if warming can be limited to the ambitious target of +1.5 °C, volume losses of more than one-third are projected for extended HKH glaciers, with more than half of glacier ice lost in the eastern Himalaya" by 2080-2100. The report states that "the most negative scenarios in the Eastern Himalaya point towards a near-total loss of glaciers."

ICIMOD's report was styled after the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Assessment Reports, with contributions from 210 authors, 20 review editors, and 125 external reviewers. It collected and synthesized data about several mountain themes, from glaciology and basin hydrology to the governance implications of mountain change. A key achievement is that the report was put together by authors from the Himalayan region, with cooperation and financial backing of ICIMOD's member countries. The report fulfilled ICIMOD's organizational objectives: to act as a platform for regional research, to stimulate member country cooperation and information exchange, to see the mountains as an undivided natural system, and to clarify the climate vulnerabilities of the region.

The 2019 assessment was also part of ICIMOD's broader strategy to publish more research in top peer-reviewed journals, initiated in 2012. This was a major shift. Since its inception, ICIMOD had acted as a documentation center for knowledge produced elsewhere and had generally showcased its own work in self-published reports. In the first year of the new strategy, ICIMOD set a target of producing 15 peer-reviewed articles but published more than twice that number. In 2006, ICIMOD published work in only a dozen journals that were unknown to a general audience. A decade later, in 2016, ICIMOD staff published work in 67 mostly well-recognized journals. In recent years, ICIMOD researchers have

published articles in Science and Climate, and had a notable cover story in Nature Climate Change. While ICIMOD's academic output ranges from governance to conservation, a sizable portion is core climate research related to the cryosphere and atmosphere. ICIMOD's management sees the academic shift as a key reason for its financial stability, with over USD 130 million of assured funding for the current five-year cycle. Such publications bring ICIMOD international credibility and help it attract talented researchers.

The strategic embrace of climate change may also increase ICIMOD's value to member countries. Rigorous assessments of climate vulnerability can be used as diplomatic tools in global climate negotiations. They could act as the empirical foundation from which member countries make claims for greater mitigation ambition from developed countries and reinforce demands for financial and technological transfers.

Conclusion

In 1983, ICIMOD was born into a world that was just beginning to recognize unsustainable patterns in mountain development. It has matured in the age of climate change. In the process, the institution transformed itself from a regional mountain documentation center into a platform for the co-production of crucial climate knowledge. ICIMOD survived a trough in the late 1990s by restructuring itself internally and more firmly aligning itself with the climate agenda, and in the process, the global research agenda and regional interests. Its role as an apolitical platform for regional mountain collaboration and research gives it access unavailable to most other institutions.

Two elements of ICIMOD's growth are worth wnoting. First, its ability to redefine and communicate its political salience to diverse regional constituencies. ICIMOD began as an effort to organize and communicate knowledge to a global network of scientific institutions. Over time, it has been useful to governments of the region and the global scientific community in clarifying the state of Himalayan glaciers. It has also tried to execute smaller programs of value to vulnerable mountain communities, which can generate good will if communicated to governments correctly. Today, the institution is part of several member countries' environmental policy processes and has taken on features of a regional public good.

In the Himalayas – where national interests are often seen as contradictory to regional interests – regional institutions are forced to devote considerable effort to making their case. ICIMOD's story demonstrates useful methods of achieving this objective: proactive engagement with political constituencies; efforts at reputation building through research to earn a place in like-minded global and regional networks; and hiring recognized subject experts to carry the institutional flag. These efforts are still a work in progress at ICIMOD, but they seem to be producing results.

The second element is ICIMOD's institutional checks and balances. It has ridden a wave of growing public interest in mountain fragility and climate change because of its internal mechanisms for course correction. A series of five-year reviews by independent panels have improved ICIMOD performance because review recommendations, once accepted, must be executed by board and management. ICIMOD benefits from other annual and biannual reviews with board involvement, and measures for public transparency.

We might be at the cusp of a proliferation in climate-focused institutions as global funding for the issue increases and domestic concern grows. To tackle the many dangers of climate change in an ecologically and hydrologically interconnected South Asia, some of these institutions will have to be regional in their mandate. This case study might be useful to them, and other institutions hoping to improve prospects for regional cooperation.

ENDNOTES

1. All data sourced from ICIMOD annual reports available at http://lib.icimod.org. Calculated in 2019 dollars.
2. The IPCC's Assessment Reports are periodic compilations of the current state of knowledge on the causes, effects and responses to climate change. They are generally regarded as definitive and are put together by leading experts in various fields of study on climate change.

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Chapter - 4
Medicating relations

Nitin Koshi

Dr. Swarnim Waglé

Chair, Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS);

Former Vice-Chair, National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal, and Chief Economic Advisor, UNDP Asia-Pacific

"South Asia has one of the highest disease burdens in the world, and swathes of remote, lagging regions with healthcare that is unaffordable, inaccessible and ill equipped. For tens of thousands of people, a trip to a neighboring South Asian country that has the requisite facilities often proves to be the easiest recourse. Such cross-border travel fosters people-to-people cohesion while being socio-economically viable.

This case study explores how greater awareness regarding India's medical hubs, and critical access to timely treatment in rural Nepal have fostered medical tourism along and across borders to save lives. It also points to the need to invest in reducing the region's shortages in medical human capital, and for frugal innovations in medical treatment. Broadening the medical travel industry in South Asia can go a long way in enhancing mutual understanding and fruitful areas of regional cooperation."

Medicating relations: Seeking healing within South Asia

– Nitin Koshi

2022

Every day thousands arrive from across South Asia to seek treatment in India's medical hubs. Many of them take flight from a dearth of remedies, long public-healthcare queues, and high-priced operations at private hospitals. For a number of these South Asians, eyes regain sight in Madurai, smiles are brightened in Hyderabad, appearances are altered in Mumbai, limbs are replaced in Kolkata, holistic wellness is embraced in Trivandrum, and broken hearts are fixed in and around Delhi.

Affordability, perception of care quality, proximity, connectivity, and the comfort of similarities in culture, food and language largely determine medical travel destinations in South Asia. Precisely gauging the extent of such intra-regional travel is difficult, as the purpose of cross-border movement is often undocumented, the large numbers of diaspora members receiving medical care in the region are mostly unquantified, and differences arise in what is considered health tourism.

The government of India, which receives most of the medical tourists from South Asia, reckons that 63% of the 697,357 individuals who arrived in the country on medical visas in 2019[1] came from within the region, notably, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Although global travel declined following the COVID-19 outbreak, nearly 72% of the 323,748 people that arrived in India on medical visas in 2021[2] came from South Asian countries.

Healthcare has certainly become more footloose in South Asia over the last few decades, but accessibility and quality of care varies widely between the region's rural and urban areas as well as its public and private health facilities. The Charali snakebite treatment center and Fortis Healthcare provide a glimpse into some of the ways in which more than 1.9 billion South Asians use the region's healthcare systems, while highlighting how robust relations between South Asian countries can offer a good prognosis for the health of the region's peoples.

Charali snakebite treatment center: Biting down on a rural South Asian disease

In the late 1990s, Nepal's army set up a field hospital to treat snakebites, at its barracks on the outskirts of Charali forest, in the country's Koshi Province. The medical facility is near the Mechi river, which snakes along stretches of the porous India-Nepal border.

Armed with little more than vials of antivenom, in 2000[3], the handful of doctors, paramedics, and other staff at the facility attended to more than 629 snakebite victims; 66 of these patients had received venomous bites from serpents and the facility saved the lives of 62 of them. By 2003, the field hospital in Charali had been scaled up into a more permanent brick-and-mortar structure, known locally as the *Sarpadansha Upchar Kendra Byabasthapan tatha Sanchalan Samiti*.

Word of the hospital spread. Indians and Nepalis traveling between border-straddling towns and villages, to shop, work, and meet family and

friends, would tell local acquaintances of this rare recourse for snakebite victims in their neck of the woods. This drew more people to the medical facility, from across Koshi Province, and the neighbouring Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal and Sikkim.

Snakebites are rife in the largely rural areas near the border, but options for medical treatment remain few and far between. Superstition, unawareness, and modest financial resources deter locals from seeking medical treatment against snakebites. Limited transport connectivity, accessibility, and mobility are further hindrances. Hospitals and health centers here are often staffed with doctors and paramedics that lack the training required to treat snakebites, having studied medicine in major cities, where such incidents are infrequent. Moreover, these medical facilities seldom stock antivenom. It is in short supply globally.

In the absence of viable medical treatment for snakebites, locals usually seek remedies from the snake charmers, faith-based healers, and traditional-healing proponents that abound around the border. Many of these practitioners appear to have cures, as non-venomous serpents account for most snakebite incidents, and bites by venomous snakes do not always inject venom into the victim.

Seeking to limit local reliance on such practitioners, in the early 2000s, Dr. Sanjib Kumar Sharma, a snakebite researcher and clinician who teaches at Nepal's BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences, and a few of his associates began to trace and train these individuals. The practitioners were taught to spot symptoms of venomous snakebites, provide first aid to victims and send them immediately to the nearest snakebite treatment facility — notably, the one in Charali.

"The faster a victim of snake envenomation (poisoning by snakebite) is treated, the better. People die if they don't get treatment. One hour is the golden time, after a snakebite, to save the victim. As more time passes, paralysis and breathlessness increases. Therefore, it is particularly important that the snakebite treatment center is in the border zone," says Dr. Sharma.

Most snake envenomation deaths occur before the victim reaches suitable medical facilities. To bypass this roadblock, in the early 2000s a volunteer network of motorcyclists got into gear in eastern Nepal. They started bringing snakebite victims, sandwiched between the two-wheeler's driver and a pillion rider, who would hold the victim steady during the journey to the treatment facility in Charali. From remote villages and often via trails that are unpassable for four-wheelers, day and night, more began to arrive at the center.

"Motorcycles are the quickest mode of transport in these areas. We had initially gathered details on motorcycle owners from the local district vehicle registration office. We requested these motorcyclists to help out, issued them volunteer cards from the Nepal Red Cross Society, and even provided for fuel costs. We put up lists of these volunteers and their phone numbers in schools and community areas. If someone was bitten (by a snake), their family or friends would inform a volunteer, who would bring the patient to the center. Many of the volunteers would actually get angry and refuse (the offered fuel-cost reimbursements), saying that it was their duty to assist their neighbours," recounts Dr. Sharma, who helped put together the motorcycle-volunteer program in Nepal.

This community-driven initiative considerably reduced the death and debilitation caused by

snake envenomation in eastern Nepal. Its success even led to similar efforts being implemented across the border, bringing several snakebite victims from eastern India to be treated at the facility in Charali. By and by, border guards became accustomed to the passage of snakebite victims from India. They started to prioritize processing requests for the victim's transit, saving the latter's time.

"Even following the closure of official checkpoints along the India-Nepal border, owing to the COVID-19 outbreak, snakebite victims were allowed to travel to Charali," says Dr. Sharma. In 2021, the facility received up to 1,600 snakebite victims, of which about 10% arrived from India. "After all, borders are manmade, humanity is not," he remarks.

The Charali snakebite treatment center is jointly run, round the clock, by Nepal's army, government, and locals. It has 25 beds, a few mechanical ventilators and an intensive care unit. Maintaining ventilators here is difficult as technical expertise is lacking nearby, but simpler methods are increasingly being used to provide respiratory assistance, such as bag-mask ventilation, in which a bag is manually inflated and used to fill the patient's lungs with air.

Images of various serpents are displayed on the center's walls. These are used to help snakebite victims identify their attacker's species, as treatment varies accordingly. The center's staff communicates with patients in Nepali, and a smattering of Bengali, Hindi and Maithili – languages which are widely spoken along the border — that they have picked up over the years. Linguistic familiarity helps the staff when reassuring worried patients and their attendants, and while gleaning information from them in order to accurately assess symptoms and provide due care.

The center's electricity supply is backed up by a 1.5-kilowatt solar-power system[4], installed in 2017 with the assistance of Nepal's government, the UN and the Global Environmental Facility, a multilateral fund for the environment held in trusteeship by the World Bank. The system ensures that snake antivenom is continuously refrigerated, and fans, lights, and nebulizers are kept operational.

Nepal's health ministry procures snake antivenom from manufacturers in India, at about USD 10 a vial, and stocks the facility at no charge. An envenomed patient is administered prolonged doses of antivenom at the center, consuming 16 vials on average, although dosage can range from 2-140 vials[5]. The antivenom is administered for free at the center, but patients may pay up to a few thousand Nepali rupees for intravenous saline drips, and other medicines and supplements. The center depends on these payments and local charity to sustain its operations but discounts or waives off charges if the patient cannot afford them.

As yet, snake antivenom is the mainstay medicine against serpent envenomation. It is made by capturing snakes and repeatedly milking their fangs for venom, which is then injected into large, robust animals such as horses, who generate antibodies that are collected by drawing their blood in order to purify and isolate the active ingredients needed to produce the antiserum.

This raises concerns over the welfare of these snakes and horses, and regarding the antiserum's animal antibodies, which can harm a human immune system. Furthermore, as venom composition varies between and within serpent species, the snake antivenom manufactured in

Motorcycle Ambulance Service

India, which supplies most of South Asia, does not effectively neutralize all the venoms produced by the region's diverse ophidian fauna.

Establishing venom-collection centers in areas rich in snake biodiversity, as around the India-Nepal border, can facilitate the production of antivenoms that are more suitable to counter local incidents of envenomation, says Dr. Sharma. Government support for such initiatives, as well as to replace animal-derived antivenoms by developing affordable alternatives that would be safe and effective against several venom compositions, can go a long way towards preventing or reversing most of the venomous effects of snake bites.

Knowledge-sharing collaborations play a notable role too. The Snakebite Interest Group[6], a WhatsApp group that was started in 2015, has helped staff at the Charali snakebite treatment center to connect with doctors, herpetologists, paramedics, researchers, social workers, and others from India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Group members regularly exchange ideas, share research findings and materials to promote public awareness, help accurately diagnose snakebite cases, and provide training and advice on treating snakebite victims.

South Asia's rural and agricultural communities benefit from the natural pest control that snakes provide, but are particularly likely to face conflicts with the latter, especially during the monsoons (June-September), when rains flush several serpents out of their homes and into human habitats in search of warmth, shelter, nourishment and mates. "Snakes are farmers' friends. If they aren't around, there will probably not be any rice to eat," observes Dr. Sharma. The Charali snakebite treatment center helps raise awareness, encouraging local farmers, cattle herders, woodcutters, and other workers to wear rubber boots and gloves, and use proper lighting to reduce the risk of snakebites.

The World Health Organization states that half of the estimated 5.4 million people that are bitten by snakes each year are envenomed.[7] This envenomation annually kills nearly 138,000 people and maims a further 414,000 of them. Researchers

reckon that each year snake envenomation kills 58,000 of the 1.4 million people that are bitten by snakes in India[8], and 1,000 of the 20,000 individuals bitten by snakes in Nepal[9]. The real numbers are likely to be higher, as many snakebite victims never reach medical facilities, and India and Nepal, do not always require government officials or police to be notified of snake envenomation deaths.

The Charali snakebite treatment center — which has administered to more than 17,000 people since 2003 — caters to only a small share of the snakebite incidents that occur in India and Nepal, but its ability to prevent nearly all the death and impairment caused by snake envenomation in its vicinity has made it indispensable to communities living on either side of the India-Nepal border. Its success has led to more such facilities being set up; as of June 2022, Nepal had 84 snakebite treatment centers, of which 29 facilities were near the India-Nepal border.

The Charali snakebite treatment center exemplifies how South Asia's governments, armed forces, doctors, paramedics, herpetologists, academics, researchers, businesses, and others can come together to help save the lives of the region's peoples, and its snakes, too. It shows that even amid adversity in the remotest areas of the region, often, all you need are good neighbours.

Fortis Healthcare: Scaling medical care in the region

In February 1996, Fortis Healthcare was incorporated, initially as Rancare, in India to set up and run a chain of hospitals. In June 2001, commercial operations commenced at its first facility, in the Indian state of Punjab.

During that year, about 26% of the foreign tourists arriving in India were from South Asian nations.[10] Most of these 660,405 South Asian travelers came by road from Bangladesh, and flew in from Sri Lanka. Several sought care, placing their hope in India's growing medical talent, healthcare infrastructure and innovativeness in providing affordable treatment.

At the time, India's government had started actively courting international patients in order to tap the country's potential as a medical tourism destination. Having already eased regulations, in 2000, on foreign investment in local hospitals, it launched tourism campaigns, such as 'Incredible India' two years later, via which the country was marketed as a unique destination that offered a mix of innovative medical technology and ancient holistic therapies, like ayurveda and yoga. Furthermore, in 2003, the government began issuing medical tourist visas.

Fortis Healthcare embarked on rapidly expanding its operations in Indian cities in 2003-07, setting up another hospital, acquiring rights to eight more, and operating and maintaining two others. By early 2007, it had 17 satellite facilities as well, including an acquired cardiac diagnostic center in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital city.[11]

As private healthcare took off across India, more medical tourists began to arrive in the country. Apart from high-spending Western countries, Fortis Healthcare aimed to draw medical tourists from South Asia — especially Afghanistan and Bangladesh — the Middle East and Africa. According to Renu Vij, who heads international sales for the healthcare group, in fiscal year 2008 (April 1, 2007 – March 31, 2008), it received a few thousand foreign patients, who contributed nearly INR 36 crore (nearly USD 9 million) to its revenue — about 6.5% of its domestic turnover[12].

Fortis Healthcare continued to grow. By early 2012, it had a wide domestic network — of 68 hospitals, and a number of specialty and diagnostics facilities, that treated thousands of international patients — and overseas operations that extended to 15 hospitals and several specialty and diagnostic centers, in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates.[13]

Swift expansion secured the company's presence as the second-largest domestic hospital chain, after Apollo Hospitals, but its steroidal growth overseas led to an unhealthy debt, which, reportedly[14], reached INR 7,000 crore (nearly USD 1.3 billion) in September 2012. During the next two years, Fortis Healthcare sold most of its international assets and several non-core domestic facilities, reducing its debt significantly.[15]

Despite its financial ills, Fortis Healthcare extended its outreach in South Asia. In 2015, under the Indian government's five-year financial assistance program with the Afghan Red Crescent Society[16], the healthcare chain agreed to treat Afghan children suffering from congenital heart disease at concessional rates. Following a series of major earthquakes in Nepal in April-May 2015, a Fortis Healthcare team of 25 doctors, paramedics, nurses and other support staff undertook relief efforts with the help of the Nepal army, in remote areas of the country's districts of Lalitpur, Mustang, Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok, providing medical treatment and aid to more than 5,000 earthquake victims.[17]

Amid leadership and ownership changes over the next few years, Fortis Healthcare began to streamline its organizational structure and nurse itself back to health. Meanwhile, the number of foreigners traveling to India shot up. In 2019, about 3.3 million of India's international tourists — nearly 31% of its visitors — were from other South Asian countries. About 13% of these South Asians came on medical visas, although several that entered India on other visas also received medical treatment.

Fortis Healthcare is still turning around its commercial operations, but it retains a focus on the lucrative business of providing medical care to the increasing number of South Asians and other foreign tourists coming to India. In FY20 its international inpatients contributed revenues of INR 398 crore (USD 56.1 million), despite COVID-19-related restrictions affecting the inflow of patients in the last quarter of the fiscal year. Its domestic facilities treated more than 15,000 international inpatients[18] in FY20, of which nearly 2,700 arrived from neighbouring South Asian countries; Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan accounted for about 45%, 34%, 10% and 6%, respectively, of these South Asian inpatients, while less than 100 each came from Pakistan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka.

The healthcare chain was not immune to the COVID-19-induced travel slump, but it strove to provide international patients with life-saving treatment that was unavailable in their respective countries of residence. In early 2021, Hajara Paiker[19], a homemaker from Kabul who had been diagnosed with short bowel syndrome — a condition in which prior loss of one's small intestine deters absorption of essential nutrients — was airlifted to one of its hospitals in Bengaluru, the capital of India's Karnataka state. For three months, Paiker was given nutrients intravenously while the hospital sought to find her a suitable small-intestine donor. In July 2021, a donor was finally identified and, soon thereafter, Paiker received an organ transplant at the hospital.

"Now she can eat, drink and walk," said an upbeat Gulam[20], Paiker's husband, after her surgery. "They (the nurses, dieticians and physiotherapists) would come in every day for their work and responsibility (to take care of Paiker at the hospital). It gave a kind of confidence to me and my wife. We got hope that everything was getting better day by day," adds Gulam.

> Helping address the disparity in treatment availability and accessibility in South Asia, in recent years, Fortis Healthcare has organized observership programs that have enabled hundreds of overseas candidates, including several from Afghanistan and Bangladesh, to learn from its doctors and enhance healthcare in their respective countries of residence.

Candidates visit its domestic hospitals, over 2-6 weeks, in order to take part in medical lectures and discussions, observe hospital workflows and treatment protocols, and understand how new technologies are being integrated into medical activities. Post-graduates are even trained in special medical procedures and techniques, and methods used by tertiary medical care systems. Similar programs have been organized by other domestic healthcare chains as well.

As of end-March 2022[21], Fortis Healthcare's network comprised of 26 hospitals and more than 426 diagnostics centers, including two in Nepal. In FY22 international patients, reportedly[22], contributed about 10% of its total revenue, amounting to nearly INR 572 crore (USD 77 million). During that fiscal year, its domestic hospitals treated more than 8,000 international inpatients, of which about 1,250 of its inpatients arrived from neighbouring South Asian countries, notably Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan.

Like most other domestic hospital chains, Fortis Healthcare treats only a modest share of India's South Asian medical tourists, although this generates it sizeable revenue. The rest of these travelers seek out care at the numerous smaller facilities and specialty clinics that constitute much of the country's vast and fragmented system of private healthcare providers. Connectivity and cultural similarities often decide where medical tourists go in India, while cost concerns and the nature of treatment required determine their choice between healthcare providers. "New Delhi and Mumbai are popular destinations. Kolkata and Bengaluru are also frequently visited by patients from Bangladesh — they go all across the country — while many from Sri Lanka and Maldives are drawn to Chennai and Bengaluru," notes Yogesh Patel, who heads Fortis Healthcare's internet-based sales operations.

The distribution of Fortis Healthcare's domestic hospitals, across nines states and the union territory of Delhi, make them widely accessible. Accreditations for most of its facilities by reputed international and domestic agencies that assess healthcare programs help assuage medical tourists' concerns regarding care quality and safety. Favorable reviews by the healthcare chain's South Asian patients further boost its reputation across the region. "Every aspect of being treated at the liver unit has been fantastic," says Tareeq Naseer Ranjha[23], a Pakistani biology teacher, who underwent a liver transplant at a Fortis Healthcare hospital in New Delhi following recommendations by the healthcare chain's former patients from Pakistan.

Several provisions are made by Fortis Healthcare — and other domestic healthcare chains — to ease the experience of foreign medical tourists at

domestic facilities and to ensure that their stay in India is comfortable. Notably, the healthcare chain assists them in applying for visas to India and officially registering their arrival in the country; organizes their local conveyance; procures mobile phones and domestic SIM cards for them; and arranges currency exchange and interpretation services. Most of its facilities have plush lounge areas, quiet meditation rooms, and a team solely to help international patients and their attendants apply for visa extensions, book suitable external lodging and enroll for local sightseeing tours, among other things.

Some South Asian medical tourists team their treatment in India with convalescent vacations at pristine local locations. Others opt to visit historic sites and shrines in the country, such as the Taj Mahal. Nearly all seek to make the most of the opportunity to immerse themselves in local culture and hospitality, and broaden their understanding of the heritage that they share with their South Asian neighbours. Their travel to India helps several in the country, including tour operators, air carriers, insurance companies, hoteliers, residence proprietors, restaurateurs, interpreters and taxi drivers, to earn a living while learning of how other South Asians live.

Fortis Healthcare aims to keep its commercial operations, and its patients, healthy. The healthcare chain plans to increase the operational bed capacity at its existing domestic facilities, expand its local network of hospitals, and strengthen and broaden its medical offerings across therapies. These moves will serve as the arteries of its growth, boosting its capacity to cater to India's medical tourists from other South Asian countries — whose inflow is set to increase as India's government renews efforts to promote India as an economical medical tourism destination via its new Heal in India initiative[24] — and improving its ability to address their ailments. Fortis Healthcare highlights how leveraging scale and modern medical capabilities can be a shot in the arm to efforts to improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of quality treatment in the region. It enhances healthcare for South Asians, and fortifies relations between them as well.

Conclusion

The Charali snakebite treatment center and Fortis Healthcare are by no means the only examples of cross-border medical cooperation in South Asia. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, reciprocity between South Asian countries in providing health assistance helped protect millions in the region.

Other endeavors have gone a long way too. In 2015, Apollo Hospitals and the Pakistan-based Dr. Ziauddin Hospital launched an initiative, called the Peace Clinic, under which they set up a liver ward at the latter's facility, assessed patients' transplant needs and referred them to India for the procedure, when necessary. Meanwhile, the facilities and outreach programs run by the Nepal-based Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology have enabled thousands of people residing across the Himalayas to regain their eyesight.

Nevertheless, the tenacity of the Charali snakebite treatment center in providing critical and timely treatment against a tropical disease that primarily bites at the health of South Asia's rural populations, and of Fortis Healthcare — and other domestic healthcare chains — to use size, reach and medical proficiency to provide quality care to the region's peoples make these undertakings highly notable.

The Charali snakebite treatment center and Fortis Healthcare evince how a readiness to go to one's neighbours in times of need and an inclination to take care of one another builds much camaraderie, trust and appreciation between South Asians. They demonstrate that caring for one's neighbours is vital to healthy South Asian relations and, often, just what the doctor ordered.

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Chapter - 5

Small islands, big impact

Nalaka Gunawardene

Ms. Kasturi Chellaraja Wilson

Group Chief Executive Officer, Hemas Holdings PLC

“Cyclones, droughts, floods and heat waves, among other climate-related disasters, have intensified across South Asia over the past two decades, affecting more than 750 million people. The changing climate could worsen living conditions for up to 800 million South Asians, notably some of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations, who inhabit many of the region’s climate hotspots. Climate change, naturally, knows no boundaries. But neither should South Asia’s approach to reducing vulnerabilities and building resilience across the region. Technical expertise plays an essential role in devising an approach towards adapting to and mitigating climate change, but specific skills can be hard to find within a single country.

This case study calls attention to the collaborative efforts of the Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology, a non-profit foundation that has brought scientists, government officials, resource managers and educators from Maldives and Sri Lanka to jointly build climate resilience in these neighboring island nations, which are faced with the threat of sea-level rise, by enhancing the gathering and public dissemination of climate-related information, improving domestic water-supply management, contributing to the knowledge base for disaster risk reduction and strengthening local technical capacity.”

Small islands, big impact: Building climate resilience in the Indian Ocean through cross-border scientific collaboration

– Nalaka Gunawardene

2022

More than 80 percent of Maldives, an archipelago of about 1,200 coral islands in the Indian Ocean, is less than one meter above sea level.[1] According to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[2], global sea levels could rise by about 50 centimeters by 2100 even if the emission of planet-warming greenhouse gases are reduced in line with the upper end of combined pledges under the Paris Agreement, a legally-binding treaty on climate change between nearly all the world's countries. For Maldives, the world's lowest-lying country, this high vulnerability to climate change could be devastating.

Maldives has been raising the alarm about this existential threat for decades. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Maldives' president from November 1978 to November 2008, first highlighted the concern at the UN General Assembly in 1987. He was instrumental in drawing global attention to it.

His successor, Mohamed Nasheed, took climate advocacy to new depths. Notably, in October 2009[3], Nasheed held a meeting with Maldives' vice-president and 11 cabinet ministers underwater, where they signed a resolution calling for global cuts in carbon emissions.

In November 2021[4], Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Maldives' president since November 2018, told the 26th UN climate change conference (commonly referred to as COP 26) that his people "are already living the steady onset of this reality". He explained, "Just this past month, I was travelling within the Maldives. Of the six islands I visited, all of them were experiencing severe erosion. This is just one example of how our people are having to live with the harsh realities of climate change. Our islands are slowly being inundated by the sea, one by one."

While drawing global attention to Maldives' plight, the country's leaders have been pursuing strategies to adapt to and mitigate climate change, and building local capacity to do so, at diplomatic, technical, and community levels.

A foundation for collaboration

Technical expertise is needed to study and understand the atmospheric and oceanographic processes that shape Maldives. As only a limited pool of suitable experts exists among the++ 557,000-odd inhabitants – including at least 145,000 migrant workers — of these equatorial islands, successive Maldivian governments have encouraged international research collaborations.

One such collaboration has involved climate researchers at the Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology (FECT)[5], a non-profit research institute in neighbouring Sri Lanka, which has worked closely with Maldivian scientists, environment officials, resource managers, and

educators for years. The institute's multi-disciplinary approach brings together experts in meteorology, hydrology, and oceanography to study climate-change trends and how these affect the northern Indian Ocean region covering Sri Lanka and Maldives, and in some cases, all of South Asia.

The FECT grew out of a project under which a group of Sri Lankan researchers, since 2000, had been gathering and studying seasonal climate data pertaining to Sri Lanka's Mahaweli river basin in order to help manage the river's water resources. In December 2003, they incorporated the institute in Sri Lanka, seeking to ensure long-term continuity in recording climate data, and to foster research in environmental and climate science, and related technology.

Since its inception, the FECT has pursued collaborative research to provide reliable scientific information that is useful across many sectors, such as agriculture, water resources, and fisheries. Their data and analyses are routinely shared with multiple stakeholders and made available through several websites.[6]

In late 2008, Maldives' government sought inputs from experts at Columbia University in the United States, on how to enhance the archipelago nation's climate research capabilities. The University's Earth Institute, which was keen on research partnerships with small island developing states, nominated Dr. Lareef Zubair, a researcher from Sri Lanka at the Earth Institute and the FECT's co-founder and principal scientist, as its focal point.

Dr. Zubair is an engineer and physicist who works across disciplines such as meteorology and hydrology, had been occasionally engaging with the Maldives Meteorological Service (MMS) and Maldives' Ministry of Health since 2003-04, studying the health impacts of climate change. He developed work plans, for the short term (1-3 years) and the longer term (5-10 years), to enhance climate research pertaining to Maldives. In mid-2009, these plans were presented to Mohamed Aslam, a geographer and oceanographer who was Maldives' Minister of Housing, Transport and Environment at the time. Based on these plans, Aslam sought out help in building the Maldivian government's technical capacity in climate policymaking and negotiations. Soon, a government department was set up to formulate policies and standards in order to address challenges posed by climate change.

Similar to a weekly Sri Lanka-focused climate bulletin that the FECT has been providing since 2008, in 2011, Dr. Zubair and Dr. Zahid, who at the time was the Deputy Director-General of Climatology at the MMS, introduced a monthly climate bulletin for Maldives. It focuses on enhancing public awareness regarding trends in the climate, such as changes in rainfall and ocean temperatures, the far-reaching implications of these changes, and strategies to adapt accordingly. This knowledge is incredibly useful in Maldives, where nature- and ocean-based tourism generates close to a quarter of the gross domestic product (GDP), and where fisheries, which plays a key role in domestic food and nutrition security and still supports many local livelihoods, accounts for more than 4 percent of GDP.[7]

The bulletins are disseminated through email to hundreds of undergraduates, teachers, researchers, government officials, environmental activists, and others, most of whom are in Maldives. These bulletins are made available online at https://www.climate.mv/bulletin/, and corresponding highlights and links are shared through social media, primarily via Facebook and Twitter.

Small countries, diverse climates

Collaboration between FECT members from Sri Lanka, and scientists and other experts from Maldives has enriched their knowledge and work, as well as broadened understanding of the climate processes that shape both countries. "Single country climate research tends to be too insular," says Dr. Zubair. "We cannot properly study the climate patterns in Sri Lanka and its surrounding oceans without extending this to a wider part of the northern Indian Ocean."

He adds, "In fact, in climatic terms, the Maldives is a bigger country than Sri Lanka! Although the Maldives has a very small land area (of 300 square kilometers, compared to Sri Lanka's 65,610 square kilometers), the Maldives has a greater diversity in climate. This makes the archipelago a globally interesting location from which to engage in climate research."

Maldives experiences an equatorial monsoonal climate, which is warm and humid throughout the year, with seasonal fluctuations in temperature and rainfall due to the South Asian monsoon (June-September).

"Climate mechanisms change drastically from north to south (in Maldives), with the northern islands displaying a climate similar to India and southernmost islands showing a climate as in the Southern Hemisphere," says Dr. Zubair. The tropics affect the climate a great deal, even more than the polar regions. However, relatively limited climate data collection and analysis is being done on the tropics, compared to research on the temperate and polar regions.

Maldives has already experienced warming trends, with an increase of 0.8°C between 1978 and 2018, according to a profile[8] of the climate risks faced by the country that was published by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank in 2021. The report states that future projections are "clouded by the inability of current climate models to simulate changes over very small island states". This is a limitation that is being addressed through collaborations between FECT members from Sri Lanka and experts from Maldives.

Climate models apply mathematical equations to simulate the interactions and processes that govern the Earth's climate system, including the atmosphere, oceans, ice, and land. They are based on widely-recognized principles of physics, chemistry, and biology, and use a three-dimensional grid to map the Earth.

As natural climate systems are complex, modelling them requires significant computing power. Each cell that constitutes the grid of a global climate model (GCM), thus, typically spans 250 kilometers horizontally, although some models use cells with a horizontal resolution of 100 kilometers or 20 kilometers. Even at the 20-kilometers resolution, climate models still miss almost all of Maldives' islands, the largest of which, Gan, is only 7.8 kilometers long.

"Global or even Asian regional climate models are not immediately useable in the Maldives, and we have to gather enough data from different points in the archipelago to downscale the results skillfully for this very small but dispersed group of islands," explains Dr. Zubair.

To bridge gaps between measurements of global and local climate patterns, GCMs can be downscaled, which involves modifying these complex models with calculations that account for the impact of local features, such as water

bodies and vegetation. This may be done by nesting a higher-resolution local climate model into a GCM, thereby enabling data generated by the GCM to be fed into the local model in order to simulate local climate conditions with greater finesse. Actual measurements of the historical relationship of the climate over a specific area are also used to correct some biases in GCMs. As five Maldivian islands have historical data going back 25-70 years, this can be used to interpret predictions made based on these global models.

"We divided the Maldives into three regions used by geographers — northern, central and southern. IRI (International Research Institute for Climate and Society, of Columbia University) scientists helped by ensuring that there was at least one grid cell (pertaining to each of these regions) represented in the global models used for predictions. We then customized a seasonal climate prediction tool and a climate monitoring tool that offered higher resolution data for these small islands. We looked at the historical data and did some analyses to understand long-term trends," Dr. Zubair recalls.

In 2008-13, Dr. Zubair worked with the MMS to develop web-based tools for analyzing historical changes in the climate, and to monitor current data in order to make near-term predictions. Some tools that the FECT had developed in Sri Lanka were adapted for this purpose.

An automated weather station each was deployed by the FECT on two islands in Maldives' Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll: Fares-Maathoda in 2017 and Thinadhdhoo in 2018. In addition, the FECT had set up 12 such weathers stations in Sri Lanka as of end-2021. Collectively, these facilities have helped streamline the gathering and public dissemination, via websites and social media, of climate data pertaining to the two neighbouring countries. This information is, notably, used to improve the accuracy of rainfall and weather predictions, and supports local communities in managing the risks of water shortages and floods.

Managing freshwater

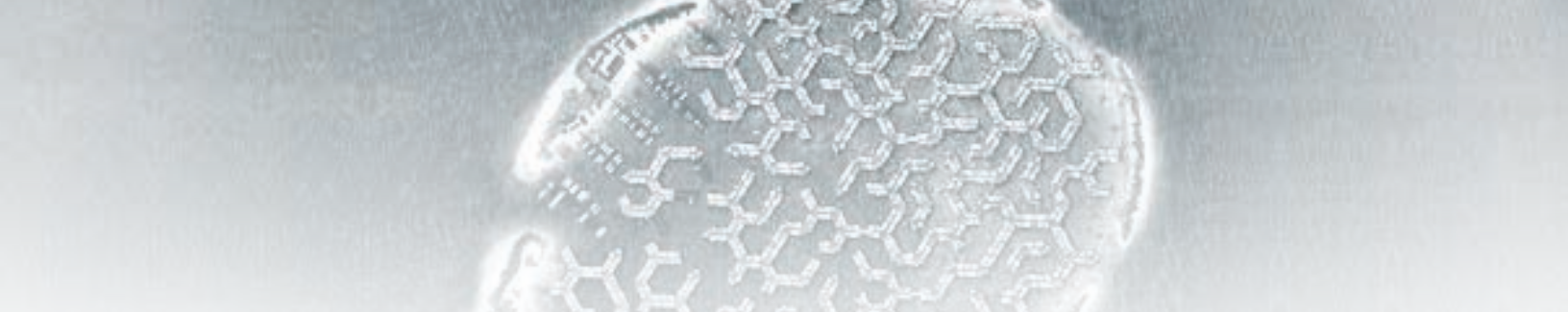
Collaboration with the FECT has helped Maldives in managing its water supply. Despite being surrounded by oceans, Maldives has a limited supply of freshwater. The country has no rivers or streams, and surface freshwater is limited to a few small wetlands and freshwater lakes. Most of its freshwater is found in basal aquifers, a body of groundwater that floats on a body of saltwater underground.

As sea levels rise and coastal erosion intensifies, saltwater is intruding into these aquifers, as well as wetlands and freshwater ponds on some of Maldives' islands. This reduces the freshwater available locally.

The problem is worsened by islanders extracting groundwater for domestic purposes and, in some cases, indiscriminately disposing sewage and other waste that can contaminate groundwater aquifers by seeping through the soil.

If Maldives' usable groundwater depletes faster than the inundation of its coasts from the rising seas, some islands may be unlivable within a few years to decades.

For several years, FECT researchers from Sri Lanka and Maldives have been conducting hydro-climatic analyses to understand how climate change impacts the management of water resources in Maldives. In 2013, an FECT study on drought and water scarcity was done in Greater Malé — which



comprises Maldives' more-developed islands of Malé, Hulhumalé, Hulhulé and Villimalé — by tabulating water sources and usage patterns in the area. Later, from 2015, water-scarcity assessments were done by the FECT for several other islands that have either resorts or local housing. The research has led to technical publications and improved the quality of data available to make short-term climate predictions, helping optimally manage the country's finite water resources.

Through environmental case studies and monitoring systems, the FECT has developed a tool for water budgeting — a way of accounting for the amount of water flowing in and out of a natural water system — to support decision making on each of Maldives' 187 islands that are inhabited by locals. In addition, in 2018, a tool for monitoring drought, using satellite data, was customized for Maldives' needs by the FECT, and an instrument to measure soil moisture was installed at the MMS head office, in Hulhulé island, to support studies on water budgeting.

When patterns of rainfall, humidity and temperature change, this affects the numbers of mosquitoes that are in a locality, and their breeding periods and tendency to bite repeatedly. As dengue is an endemic disease in Maldives, where each year outbreaks peak in June-July and December-January[9], Sri Lankan and Maldivian scientists collaborated in 2016 to conduct dengue risk assessments. This study, across Maldivian islands that are inhabited by citizens, was to be repeated periodically but that has not happened yet as the country's government, via the Health Protection Agency, has prioritized controlling the domestic COVID-19 outbreak since 2020.

Disaster risk reduction

Another key area for FECT collaboration in Maldives has been in disaster risk reduction (DRR). According to a DRR status report[10] published by the UN in July 2019, small-scale and recurrent hazards, such as increased rainfall, cyclonic winds, storm surges, saltwater intrusion, and coastal floods, have been causing damages and losses on an on-going basis in Maldives.

Scientists from Maldives have been contributing to the knowledge base and policy analysis for DRR in the country, including through tie-ups with the FECT. The contributions of the FECT have resulted in joint research with the MMS and partnerships with Maldives' environment ministry and National Disaster Management Centre, which was established by Maldives' government after a tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004.

"Climate change projections tell us to expect wetter conditions for most parts of South Asia. However, in recent decades, there has been an increasing tendency for droughts in Sri Lanka and in northern Maldives, as well as in East Africa. The credibility of these climate projections is thus in question," says Dr. Zubair.

To reconcile differences between global climate projections and locally-experienced realities, researchers in Sri Lanka and Maldives, including two junior scientists at the FECT and one at the Maldives National University (MNU), started working with a collaborator based at the Earth Institute. Under this cross-border research effort, which ran from September 2014 to October 2017, they evaluated regional climate mechanisms, the

decadal change in the climate, and the drivers of this change, such as sea surface temperatures.

The FECT and its research partners, the Earth Institute and the MNU, found a link between decadal change in rainfall and sea surface temperatures. They verified satellite estimates of rainfall over Maldives through direct observations and measurements. The research indicated that the IPCC's projections for Maldives and Sri Lanka had underestimated temperature rises and did not capture declines in rainfall in northern and central Maldives. It enabled new insights into how El Niño — a climate pattern that leads to an unusual warming of surface waters in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean – affects ocean current circulation in the Indian Ocean. The phenomenon, in turn, caused reduced rainfall in years in which El Niño occurred.

Building expertise and institutions

In addition to undertaking research and generating scientific data to support decision making, the FECT has been building technical capacity and research institutions in Sri Lanka and Maldives. "Both in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, public institutions were keener on short (seasonal) to medium term climate variability patterns. There was less interest on what could happen on longer (30-year) time horizons," says Dr. Zubair.

This was the reason for formally setting up the Foundation for Environment, Climate and Technology–Maldives (FECT–Maldives) in August 2018. The Maldivian non-governmental organization culminated from a decade's worth of engagement between the Sri Lanka-based FECT, and Maldivian researchers and government officials.

FECT–Maldives shares the same vision and mission of its counterpart in Sri Lanka: to be a repository of scientific expertise related to the climate and environment, and a driver of further research and development. It has also been able to share several lessons from its local activities, notably regarding the modelling of water budgets on islands and coastal strips, with its Sri Lankan counterpart.

By design, FECT–Maldives remains a small entity, relying on development partnerships and collaborative research within the country and internationally. Staff on FECT projects in Sri Lanka and Maldives gain experience as researchers, in using specialized tools, such as geographical information systems, and in undertaking climate analysis and water resources management.

Aishath Afaaf, secretary of FECT–Maldives, says, "FECT–Maldives is now doing monthly rainfall data analysis. Very few people in the Maldives collect such primary data. We have also started assessing air pollution in Malé and other neighbouring islands. We have set up a weather station in southern Maldives, and another one on Hulhulé island."

Besides such capacity building, the FECT has been promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education through an interdisciplinary and applied approach in schools in Maldives. There is limited exposure to scientists and technologists for students at most schools in Maldives' remote islands. Since 2017, the FECT and a few Maldivian and international partners have provided middle and high school students in Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll access to instrumentation used for measuring weather conditions, air and water quality, and soil moisture and temperature; to information and communications technology systems; and to data obtained from prior projects,

undertaken by the FECT and these partners, on water resources, drought and various hazards. Students and their educators have been instructed on how to use these assets, and an internet-based portal has been created to provide them access to resources of the FECT and its partners. The FECT aims to extend its provision of STEM education to schools in Malé and also in Sri Lanka.

In Maldives and Sri Lanka, the FECT has also enhanced formal learning at the higher education level. Since 2010, it has assisted in putting together a Masters in Development Practice (MDP) program at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. The MDP program prepares students to identify and address challenges to sustainable development, and has a notable focus on climate change in South Asia. The FECT has contributed to the MDP program through curriculum development, providing research support, supporting qualified Maldivians in enrolling for the program, and securing placements for Maldivian students pursuing the MDP degree.

Afaaf, of FECT–Maldives, was selected to pursue an MDP degree at University of Peradeniya in 2015. While doing so, she took part in Maldives-focused FECT projects, on climate monitoring, and water security and climate.

The MDP program has had a huge impact on her career, says Afaaf. "I was working in the development sector since the 2004 tsunami, focusing on issues like migrant workers, disaster risk reduction and gender. The MDP (program) gave me new clarity on social and policy aspects.As a result, I have become more passionate inmy work," she adds.

Young professionals like Afaaf form an integral part of her nation's — and region's — struggle against climate impacts. The FECT's educational tie-ups with the MNU and the University of Peradeniya enables many such Sri Lankans and Maldivians to enhance their knowledge and skills, and link up with each other for cross-border collaborations. It helps them develop a deeper understanding of the similarities in the difficulties neighbouring South Asian countries face in adapting to and mitigating climate change, and encourages them to tackle common problems through cohesive action.

"We believe that building resilience of the entire community is necessary," said Aminath Shauna, Maldives' Minister of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, in an interview[1] in late 2021 while highlighting that the Maldives government's approach to coping with the challenges posed by climate change is a holistic one. "We are a very small country and our greenhouse gases are negligible, as is our contribution to climate change. But we want to show that if the Maldives can do it, why can't the rest of the world? We are not here to tell a story that we're just victims. We are also willing to lead by example," she added.

The FECT exemplifies how cross-border collaborations that foster knowledge and resource sharing between scientists, researchers, educators, governments, NGOs, private companies, citizens, and others can help South Asian island nations adapt to and mitigate climate change. It highlights that just as climate change knows no boundaries, neither should South Asia's approach to tackling this challenge to the region's prosperity.

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Chapter - 6

Breaking Taboos and Transforming Lives

Smriti Daniel

Ms. Naina Lal Kidwai

Chairperson, Rothschild India

Chairperson, India Sanitation Coalition

“While some countries are talking about period-tech, many in South Asia still rely on reusable cloth to manage their menstrual cycle. The stigma and taboos that surround menstruation have long affected the health, security and prospects of millions of girls and women, especially in rural areas. Girls are known to miss school over their periods because of the lack of facilities at school. This is primarily because of a lack of access to inexpensive menstrual products and to adequate facilities for menstrual-hygiene management. While I have encountered many individuals and organizations that have done excellent work to improve awareness, hygiene and sanitation locally, there are probably only a few initiatives that have demonstrated the potential to be scaled up or recreated across the region.

This case study brings to the fore one such endeavor that shows how, in recent years, South Asians have empowered women in India and Sri Lanka to run women-led community-based businesses that are scalable and replicable, and make effective, affordable and biodegradable sanitary pads, which can be sold for a small profit. It highlights the role that innovation, entrepreneurship and cooperation can play in nurturing a robust South Asian neighborhood, where women can take control of their own menstrual health and flourish.”

Breaking taboos and transforming lives: India's Pad Man to Sri Lanka's Pad Women

– Smriti Daniel

2021

In South Asia, taboos and myths around menstruation ignore geographical, social, linguistic and political borders. Women and girls in these countries occupy very distinct landscapes, eat different food, speak different languages, follow different faiths, and yet share many experiences when it comes to their periods.

For starters, whether you are a girl growing up in the shadows of the Himalayas or by the bustling ports of Colombo, whether you are a teenager or a mother of two, you have likely been told that your periods are some how impure. In Sri Lanka, the subject is rarely discussed and 66 percent of girls[1] were unaware of menstruation until their first period. Nearly half[2] of married women in northern India do not share a bedroom with their husband while menstruating. And Nepal's poorest communities still practice *chhaupadi* — a tradition banishing women and girls to live in unheated mud huts during their periods.

The shame and secrecy surrounding menstruation has a cumulative impact on women's education, job prospects, home life, and overall health. An estimated one-third of girls in South Asia miss school[3] during their periods because they do not have access to sanitary pads, toilets, or hand washing facilities. Menstruation pads available in stores are expensive luxuries for many women, and the plastic components in most commercially made products make them difficult to dispose of properly.

An entrepreneur from India tackled the problem by designing low-cost machinery to produce sanitary pads and jobs for women. The invention of Arunachalam Muruganantham – known as Muruga – has inspired a partnership between India and Sri Lanka that is expected to expand to Nepal and Afghanistan. The initiative empowers women in poor, remote areas to take charge of their own menstrual health and earn an income. As of 2019, small manufacturing sites have been established in some 5,300 locations across 27 countries, with the number set to grow.

It is an extraordinary movement that began with one man, his wife, and a pile of rags.

India's 'menstrual man' entrepreneur

The son of two weavers, Muruga was born in Coim batore, in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. After his father died in an accident, Muruga dropped out of school to support his family with a series of jobs as a farm laborer, welder, and machine tool operator – jobs requiring mechanical know-how and versatility.

Muruga met and married his wife, Shanthi, in 1998. Theirs was a conventional marriage until Muruga realized Shanthi was hiding something from him: she was collecting rags to use instead of sanitary napkins. Muruga was confused and then worried.

The rags seemed less than hygienic — "I wouldn't even use it to clean my scooter," Muruga recalled — and Shanthi was uncomfortable talking because of the social stigma around menstruation.

Muruga decided to buy Shanthi menstrual pads but was shocked by the price. He calculated that each lightweight pad was made with just 10 grams of cotton, then worth about 10 paise, but sold for 4 Indian rupees (INR) – 40 times the cost of raw materials. Muruga felt certain he could figure out a way to make cheaper, effective sanitary pads.

Muruga first turned to Shanthi to test his experimental pads but was frustrated by having to wait a month in-between trials. He needed more volunteers. However, few women were interested in helping and even his sisters turned him down. Muruga eventually decided he would test the pads on himself. He filled a rubber football with animal blood from a local butcher and added an anti-coagulant to keep it from clotting. He attached the football to his waist and connected it to a tube that led to his underwear. The device slowly leaked blood into his makeshift sanitary pads, allowing him to measure absorption rates as he moved throughout the day. The experience was revelatory.

> "That makes me bow down to any woman in front of me to give full respect... Those five days I'll never forget – the messy days, the lousy days, that wetness. My God, it's unbelievable." –Muruga

Muruga's pads didn't always work, leaving his pants stained with blood. He washed his clothes at a community well, and some assumed the blood stains were from a sexually transmitted disease. Suspicious neighbours ostracized him while others thought Muruga had lost his mind. Then Shanthi left him. "I started the research for my wife, and after 18 months she left me," he said. Even his elderly mother moved out of his house after she saw Muruga closely examining used sanitary pads in the backyard. Eventually, the entire village turned against him. Convinced that Muruga was possessed by an evil spirit, they prepared to chain him to a tree so a local soothsayer could heal him. Muruga escaped by promising that he would leave the village.

Though profoundly shaken, Muruga wasn't ready to call it quits after investing so much time testing and refining his invention. He had learned that pure cotton was ineffective and the key absorption component in sanitary pads is cellulose, made from the bark of pinewood and other trees. However, expensive, large factory machines were typically needed to produce cellulose.

It took Muruga four years to create alternative tools and equipment that were simple, affordable, and suitable for rural areas. He designed a sanitary pad that could be made in four simple steps. First, cellulose sheets were inserted into a machine similar to a kitchen grinder to break down the fibers until they were light and fluffy. Next, another machine pressed the fluff into rectangular cakes, forming the core of a pad. The cakes were wrapped in non-woven cloth and disinfected with ultraviolet light. And lastly, a plastic rectangle was added to the back to protect the sticky side of the pad. The simple manufacturing process could be taught to anyone in an hour. The machines he designed cost about INR 75,000 for a basic version that created jobs for 10 women and produced 200 pads a day.

Muruga had realized his vision: an effective, affordable, and environmentally friendly sanitary napkin that rural women could make and sell for a source of income. He showed his invention

to faculty at the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras and they entered it in a national competition for innovation. Out of 943 entries, Muruga's machine came first. Pratibha Patil, then the President of India, handed him his award. Overnight, Muruga was famous.

Over 18 months, Muruga built 250 machines to make pads and took them to poor, underdeveloped states in Northern India. Women there face difficult conditions, often walking miles each day to fetch water.

> "My inner conscience said if I can crack it in Bihar, a very tough nut to crack, I can make it anywhere." –Muruga

Encouraging poor women to make pads was at times difficult because of menstrual taboos but Muruga found supporters among NGOs and community-based organizations for women. Over time, the machines spread to 27 of India's 29 states. In each location, women run the business and choose their own brand name. As his fame grew, Muruga became something of a legend. He spoke at the prestigious Indian Institutes of Management and was the subject of a 2013 documentary, "Menstrual Man." He gave a TED talk that has been viewed more than 1.6 million times. And in 2018, his story was made into a Bollywood film, "Pad Man."

As interest soared in his designs, Muruga remained committed to the vision that started him on his journey. He refused to sell his patents to corporations, determined to keep the technology accessible to poor communities. Accordingly, he provided the blueprints of the machines for free to community-based businesses where women made the pads and sold them for a small profit. His organization would continue to provide the raw material for a cost. (The latter process has been somewhat complicated by the pandemic, as additional requirements and constraints around exports have come into play.) Muruga's approach has its critics and many have since attempted to improve on it.

At home, things also changed as his community learned more about his innovation. Muruga's neighbours welcomed him back. And Shanthi reached out to him, proud of his work to help poor, rural women. Today, she speaks about menstrual hygiene to women across the country and is no longer embarrassed to talk about periods.

Ending period poverty in Sri Lanka

In a dark hall in Kitulwatte, a neighborhood in the Sri Lankan city of Colombo, M. Kamala was among a group of women who giggled awkwardly as the movie, "Pad Man," flickered to life on the TV in front of them.

Kamala watched as Akshay Kumar, the actor playing Muruga in "Pad Man," struggled with a design for an affordable pad. "It was funny," she remembers, "but I could see he was doing it to make his wife happy." The group of women watched the film as part of their training to use Muruga's technology to launch a menstrual pad business in Sri Lanka. Kamala said the evening helped her understand why the Indian inventor made it available to women who lived in a different country but had much in common with his wife.

For Jazaya Hassadeen, the evening program was the result of a yearlong campaign to persuade Muruga to share his technology with Sri Lankan women. Hassadeen, treasurer for the SAARC

Chamber Women Entrepreneurs Council, read about Muruga in a book and wanted to replicate the pad-making business for poor women in Sri Lanka. It took months to convince him that the council had the right intentions and should be his first expansion outside India.

Before agreeing to a partnership, Muruga asked Hassadeen to visit a manufacturing site to see how the technology worked. She remembers walking into a women's shelter in Delhi, and seeing a young physically challenged girl using her feet to operate the machine – clear evidence that the technology could empower women as well as provide affordable menstrual pads. The SAARC team gathered data showing some 63 percent of Sri Lankan households with a menstruating female bought sanitary pads but nearly 40 percent of the households purchased the product only once or twice a year. Many of the households said they could not afford to buy menstrual pads regularly because of the high cost.

The SAARC team decided to sponsor a project for manufacturing sites, or production centers, in Sri Lanka. "We could see that there was a common interest for women across the region," said Rifa Mustapha, then Council Chairperson for the SAARC team, adding the process would nurture entrepreneurial skills and empower the women involved.

> "Each production center could come up with their own plan. They could run it for just three or four hours, or increase their labor force and produce more, depending on what they chose." – Rifa Mustapha

The SAARC group arranged imports of raw materials, which incurred heavy taxes, and equipment and several months later they were ready to run a pilot. Because Muruga made the design of his machine freely available, the council was able to build its own equipment with local metalworkers. The group timed the launch for the same day that the Bollywood movie, "Pad Man," premiered.

In January 2019, the Kithulwatte plant opened its doors. Fifteen women, including Kamala, learned the manufacturing process from trainers with Muruga's organization in India. The women decided to sell their pads under the brand name, *Sinidu,* which means soft in Sinhala. Sales have steadily increased for Sinidu packets, each containing 10 pads. "Today, there is a lot of demand," said Rifka, one of the early trainees, who earns a steady income from selling about 100 packets a month, each for 75 Sri Lankan rupees (LKR). A packet costs LKR 60 to make and Rifka keeps the profit. The LKR 75 sales price is much lower than a similar package of commercially-made pads that command between LKR 130 and LKR 470, including taxes.

Customers said they were pleased that the Sinidu pads are easy to wear and rarely result in rashes or discomfort. Rifka is eager to tell potential customers how the pads are made and their benefits. "Without fear, I can recommend these pads to women because I make them myself," she said. Some customers are motivated by other factors – such as having water available only three hours a day from a community well. Washing bloodstained clothing in public is embarrassing so women rush through the process and hide the items instead of drying them out in the sun, she said.

Kamala also sells about 100 packets a month, mostly to teachers at her son's school, the local church, and neighbours. "And because it is cheap, women are able to use pads for their whole period,"

she said. Another plus is that used Sinidu pads do not need special waste management and can be thrown out with household food waste. That is not the case with most commercially-made pads containing non-biodegradable plastics.

Garbage disposal is a serious challenge throughout South Asia. In 2017, Sri Lanka's Meethotamulla garbage dump collapsed during the night, triggering a landslide that buried nearby houses and killed 32. Before the collapse, the 21-acre garbage dump was more than 150 feet tall, according to some estimates. Hassadeen said the accident showed why waste management must be improved. "When we visited the site, the women were talking to us and one of the things they said is that even after two or three years, the sanitary napkins in the dump had stayed intact," she said. The community-made pads, however, are completely biodegradable except for one strip of plastic that can be pulled off and separately disposed.

Transforming women's lives

Kamala said being an employee of Sinidu has changed her life in significant ways. The young mother can count on her income to pay for her son's medical needs and her financial independence has made her more confident. "Before I used to stay at home only," she says, "but now I feel like I can do anything." Kamala's confidence was put to the test when the SAARC team identified her as a potential trainer of other women. Even more challenging was the location for Kamala's course — Colombo's Welikada Prison, where more than 300 women are confined. The SAARC team proposed that the prison sponsor a manufacturing site where women inmates could make menstrual pads and learn business skills.

Prison officials approved the project and the pads produced are distributed to inmates, who formerly received only three sanitary napkins per person because of the prison's tight budget. "Women were trying to get relatives to bring them napkins or stealing each other's napkins. For the authorities, our machines were really a godsend," Hassadeen said.

Jani Perera, a member of the SAARC group, donated funds to have local metalworkers build pad-making machines. Kamala went to the prison and trained 10 women. In total, the women had 45 days of training and mentorship, resulting in production of about 80 pads a day. "These are women that have been put aside by society, and I was glad I could help them," Kamala said. "It is about giving women, wherever they are, some dignity." When the women leave prison, they have marketable skills to earn a living. The women are also likely to be ambassadors for Sinidu within their own communities. The prison supplies commissioner, Chandana Ekanayake, said he was impressed with the results.

> "This production, we are planning to send all over Sri Lanka's prisons... This is a sustainable project." – Chandana Ekanayake

Women trainers such as Kamala can have a substantial impact on other women who are searching for livelihoods. "It's good that we have women as trainers," says Deepa Edirisinghe, a municipal councilor in Colombo. As a city official, Edirisinghe has visited the neighborhood where Kamala and the other Sindhu employees live and sees enormous potential for women entrepreneurs. "The women are interested in self-employment," she said. "All we think about is teaching them how to make garments and sell food, but this is an option we haven't explored."

Younger women, in particular, are more open to unconventional jobs like those offered by Sinidu, she said.

In the early days of the pandemic, when Sri Lanka's case count was low, the factory remained operational providing a much needed source of income to the women. Unfortunately, as cases soared in the latter half of 2020, health authorities asked them to halt work. With the vaccine roll-out now underway, Hassadeen says they will open their doors again as soon as it is safe to do so.

The SAARC Chamber Women Entrepreneurs Council wants to expand the pad-making technology to other communities in Sri Lanka and to Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan where women face similar challenges. Mustapha said conversations are in the preliminary stages. The SAARC team envisions building more machines in Sri Lanka then shipping the equipment to interested communities that could then contact Muruga's organization directly to obtain the raw material made of cellulose. (The recipe to make the cellulose remains a closely guarded secret.) Their first stop will be Nepal, where the local SAARC chapter has shown a great deal of interest.

The SAARC team members believe that the model that has worked so well in India and Sri Lanka will gain traction across South Asia. "The strength of this approach is that it is community-based," and driven by women, Mustapha said. "We have seen such a change in their lives." The pad manufacturing sites create jobs, teach women business skills, and give women confidence. And the environmentally friendly product improves the quality of life – and opportunities – for poor women.

The Sinidu employees, who began with so little, have been empowered by their manufacturing jobs, says Hassadeen. The work gives women from poor communities a greater measure of freedom from taboos that have held them back for decades. Kamala's journey from a woman at home without independence or work, to a confident ambassador for Sinidu, is an example of how entrepreneurial ventures change lives. "This girl was sitting at home looking after her physically challenged child, but today she is an international trainer, getting ready to board a plane to Nepal!" Hassadeen said with a smile.

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Chapter - 7

The Kartarpur Corridor

Aurangzaib Khan

Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi

Former Pakistan's Representative to the United Nations and Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States

"From the magnificent Badshahi Mosque and the Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan, to the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan, the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan and the Sixty Dome Mosque in Bangladesh; from the sacred Lumbini area in Nepal and the Taj Mahal in India, to the ruins of Sigiriya in Sri Lanka and the Baa Atoll biosphere reserve in Maldives, the richness and diversity of South Asia's heritage is evident and shared across the region. Preserving the cultures, faiths, languages, scripts, arts, literature, music, dances and philosophies, among other things, of this ancient and varied neighbourhood is essential to understand how our lives have been shaped by this heritage.

This case study tells of the steadfast efforts of citizens, diaspora, and governments of Pakistan and India that led to the opening of a transport corridor connecting India's Sikhs, past the border, to one of their holiest worship sites in Pakistan. It also points to how such efforts raise prospects for faith tourism between South Asian countries and encourage peaceful coexistence between neighbours."

The Kartarpur Corridor: A corridor to peace in South Asia

– Aurangzaib Khan

2022

Little in recent history speaks to the triumph of goodwill between the two countries like the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, a passage that connects India to one of the holiest worship sites in Pakistan for Sikhs — a community of about 30 million people who constitute the world's fifth-largest religion. The initiative is a step towards going beyond borders that have disconnected people in the region for more than seven decades, and, in good faith, pursuing peaceful relations.

A passage of faith

The cross-border passage runs between Dera Baba Nanak, a town in the district of Gurdaspur in the Indian state of Punjab, and Kartarpur, a town in Narowal district of Pakistan's Punjab province. It allows Indian Sikhs, who are a dominant community in India's Punjab state, to travel from Dera Baba Nanak — where a few prominent gurdwaras (Sikh temples) have been built, such as Gurdwara Sri Darbar Sahib, Gurdwara Sri Chola Sahib and Gurdwara Tahli Sahib — and go about 4.5 kilometers beyond the India-Pakistan border to arrive at Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan.

Sikhism originated and spread from the Punjab region. Guru Nanak, the founder and first of ten teachers of the Sikh faith, established the town of Kartarpur — the site of the first Sikh commune — in 1504[1] during his many travels. Guru Nanak spent the last 18 years[2] of his life at Kartarpur, where he established Sikhism's first *langarkhana* (house of alms), which drew people from across Punjab. The original structure of Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib was also built in the 16th century[3].

Local Hindus and Muslims considered Guru Nanak as one of their own and built mausoleums to his memory at Kartarpur after he passed away in 1539[4]. In time, the remains of the old commune and mausoleums were washed away by the shifting course of Ravi river, one of the five rivers that flows through the Punjab terrain, which was partitioned into territories of India and Pakistan in 1947. The gurdwara, as it exists today, on the banks of the Ravi river, was built in the 1920s on the foundations of the original structure during the reign of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, an erstwhile princely state that governed Kartarpur.[5]

Until recently, nothing existed around Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib but for the fields that Guru Nanak used to irrigate from a well in the compound of his *dera* (dwelling). The gurdwara complex, as it exists today, is a wide expanse of white marble. At its heart stands the gurdwara building, which has a large central dome surrounded by smaller ones. The sound of prayers and devotional music stream through its many windows and doorways, drifting over the marble flooring of the complex. "We would come here often as children and, as late as a few years ago,

freely enter the *darbar* (the gurdwara's hall) or walk around in the fields," said Ilyas Sadiq, a driver from Pakistan's Narowal district, who often brings visitors to the holy site.

A view from afar

Over the last few decades, most Sikhs who longed to visit this sacred place could only gaze at it from afar across the border in India. Instability in relations between India and Pakistan had often restricted travel through the border crossing that connects their respective villages of Attari and Wagah, and enables pilgrims and visitors from India to reach Lahore, a city in Pakistan's Punjab province, from where a 125-kilometer-long journey could be made to reach Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib. The opening of the Kartarpur Corridor reduced the distance of the entire journey to just 8.8 kilometers by linking Dera Baba Nanak and the gurdwara in Kartarpur.

Most Sikhs, as well as other visitors, living in Pakistan or flying into the country, travel inland by road or rail to reach Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib and other local holy sites. Until the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor, which enabled Sikh pilgrims from India to travel visa-free to the gurdwara all year round, visits were limited to important annual events such as the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak and *baisakhi*, the Sikh new year. Not everyone could afford to travel, and prospects for cross-border visits also seemed uncertain under the geopolitical landscape. For years, many would come to Dera Baba Nanak to only step onto a platform and use binoculars to have a *darshan* (viewing) of the gurudwara. The spiritual longing of the Sikh community for the heritage that they lost in the wake of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was inherent in the act of gazing across the Ravi river at the gurdwara in Kartarpur. This has abated with the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor in November 2019.

"Coming here feels like a daydream," said Dr. Pushpal Singh, a pilgrim from Amritsar, a city in the Indian state of Punjab during a visit to Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib. "For so long, we have only seen the gurudwara through binoculars," he added, while wishing for more such corridors that could provide access to other historically-significant gurdwaras and heritage sites in Pakistan. These Sikh heritage sites include the birthplace of Guru Nanak at Nankana Sahib, a district in Pakistan's Punjab province that was named after him, and Gurdwara Panja Sahib which is believed to have an imprint of Guru Nanak's hand in Attock district of the same province. Someday, Dr. Singh hopes to visit these sites too.

India's government has set up a dedicated website (https://prakashpurb550.mha.gov.in/kpr/) via which visitors from the country can register to travel through the Kartarpur Corridor to Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib. Once registered, applicants are emailed a bar-coded slip authorizing their travel to solely visit the gurdwara's premises. They embark on the journey in the morning and return the same day. At present, up to 5,000 pilgrims can travel daily (although exceptions may be made for public holidays or in case of exigencies) via this transport corridor, by foot or bus, using valid Indian passports or Overseas Citizenship of India cards. Each visitor using the Kartarpur Corridor must pay a service charge of USD 20 to Pakistani authorities. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the Kartarpur Corridor was closed in March 2020 and reopened in November 2021[6], only allowing travel by fully vaccinated pilgrims from India.

Year	Number of people that traveled via the Kartarpur Corridor
2019-20	62,786
2020-21	Pilgrims movement closed due to COVID-19
2021-22	31,869
2022-23	50,584

Source: Land Ports Authority of India, under the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India

Fall of a wall

The passage connecting India and Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib was an aspirational project, decades in the making. Following the partition of India and Pakistan, their respective governments put treaties and protocols in place to formally manage shrines that had been vacated by those migrating between the two newly-formed nations, and to enable pilgrim visits between the two countries.

Timeline of events

April 1950
Agreement between the Governments of India and Pakistan regarding Security and Rights of Minorities signed.

May 1955
Pant–Mirza Agreement to Prevent Border Incidents and Protect Places of Worship signed.

September 1974
Protocol constituting an Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on Visit to Religious Shrines signed.

December 1988
Cultural Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan signed.

September 2012
Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation between Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Pakistan National Council of the Arts signed.

November 2018
Foundation stones laid in India and Pakistan for the Kartarpur Corridor.

November 2019
Kartarpur Corridor commences operations.

In April 1950, the Agreement between the Governments of India and Pakistan regarding Security and Rights of Minorities was signed. Under this, a framework was created to uphold minority rights, notably, giving refugees from India and Pakistan the right to cross the countries' shared borders in order to repossess or dispose of their property. In May 1955, the two governments inked the Pant–Mirza Agreement to Prevent Border Incidents and Protect Places of Worship, building on prior pacts to protect and preserve certain places of worship, and to liberalize and facilitate cross-border visits to shrines. In September 1974, the governments of Pakistan and India signed a bilateral protocol on visits to religious shrines, agreeing to facilitate visits to certain religious shrines in each other's country. In December 1988, they signed the Cultural Cooperation Agreement, seeking to promote bilateral cultural exchanges and cooperation in the fields of arts, archeology, education, mass media and sports.

Since the 1990s[7], Sikh heritage and holy sites in Pakistan had started drawing droves of pilgrims. Local religious leaders of sizable congregations, and gurdwaras, community groups and families of the South Asian diaspora regularly organized tours to many of these shrines on important dates in the Sikh calendar. In April 1999, the *Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* was set up by Pakistan's government to control and manage local Sikh heritage sites.

Popular narratives on how the Kartarpur Corridor project came to fruition often cite a visit in February 1999 by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was India's prime minister back then, via a bus from New Delhi, India's capital city, to Lahore, where he discussed establishing the corridor with Nawaz Sharif, his Pakistani counterpart at the time.[8] General Pervez Musharraf, who ruled Pakistan as chief executive in October 1999-November 2002 and then as president until 2008, reportedly[9], approved a plan to construct a 1.5 km corridor but this project was not realized. Still, the possibility of opening a corridor to the gurdwara remained under discussion between leaders from the two countries.[10] Third-country initiatives played a part too; in 2010, the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, a US-based organization that focuses on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, prepared a feasibility study[11] for establishing the Kartarpur Corridor, and urged foreign ministers of India and Pakistan to initiate confidence-building measures that would help establish a 'peace corridor' between two of the holiest Sikh religious sites. In September 2012, a Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation was signed by the respective foreign secretaries of the two countries, seeking to enhance bilateral relations in art and culture.

Cordial relations between a cricketer-turned-politician from either side of the border — Imran Khan, then Pakistan's prime minister, and Navjot Singh Sidhu, then minister of local government, and tourism and cultural affairs of the Indian state of Punjab — helped spur efforts towards opening the Kartarpur Corridor. In November 2018, foundation stones were laid in India and Pakistan for the corridor. In 2019, the quiet, sedate Kartarpur village had started changing, in a direction that suggested hope and peace within the region itself. Kartarpur's bucolic calm was disrupted by the noise of builders turning the place from a rural outback into an international tourist spot.

The Kartarpur Corridor was made operational in time to celebrate Guru Nanak's 550th birth anniversary, on November 12, 2019. Narendra Modi,

India's prime minister, said that the opening of the corridor was akin to the "fall of the Berlin Wall", and signified a "mending (of ties), uniting and co-existing."[12] Ahead of the inauguration of the corridor, Khan said that the "road to prosperity of (the) region and (the) bright future of our coming generation lies in peace."[13]

António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, called the Kartarpur Corridor a "corridor of hope" and referred to Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib as "the best symbol" for peace and interfaith harmony, following his visit to the gurdwara in February 2020.[14]

A community effort

The Sikh diaspora, and officials and citizens of India and Pakistan worked steadfastly for decades to reconstruct and preserve Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib and other sites significant to Sikhs. The Sikh community's efforts helped build the popular will needed to open the Kartarpur Corridor as well.

Following a visit to Kartarpur in the early 1990s, Dr. Gurcharanjit Singh Attariwala, a Canada-based ophthalmologist, put together a working group to raise funds to restore Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib, and established the Guru Nanak Shrine Fellowship to mobilize Sikh diaspora to work towards ensuring greater access and preservation of historical Sikh sites in Pakistan. In the late 1990s, Dr. Attariwala and Lieutenant General (Retired) Jahandad Khan, a retired general in the Pakistan army and former governor of the country's Sindh province — who had become friends while collaborating on setting up an eye hospital in Pakistan — were able to persuade Pakistan's government to agree to the restoration of Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib, and to contribute Pakistani Rupees (PKR) 750,000 (USD 15,151) towards the project. In November 1999, the Guru Nanak Shrine Fellowship presented a check of Canadian Dollars (CAD) 20,000 (USD 13,423) for repairing the gurdwara at Kartarpur to Pakistan's Evacuee Trust Property Board, a government body that administers properties left behind by Hindus and Sikhs who migrated to India after partition.

Such efforts helped draw the attention of Pakistani authorities towards restoring and preserving several local shrines and holy sites. However, other Sikh heritage sites, either unknown or undocumented, have remained largely neglected. Following the commencement of construction activities for the Kartarpur Corridor, in June 2019, several UK-based Sikhs and organizations associated with them collectively pledged to invest British Pounds (GBP) 500 million[15] (USD 641 million) to renovate and modernize gurdwaras in Pakistan, and promote religious tourism projects here. They also established the *Guru Nanak Global Sewa Trust* to work globally towards restoring Sikh heritage sites.

Since 2010, Dr. Dalvir Singh Pannu, a Sikh dentist based in the United States, and his field team in Pakistan, have created a digital repository of more than 270 Sikh heritage sites that are located in the latter country. In 2019, Dr. Pannu commemorated the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak by publishing *The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders*[16], a book on Sikh heritage sites in Pakistan. Separately in 2014, Amardeep Singh, a Singapore-based Sikh of Indian descent who was on the board of a software company back then, began documenting Sikh heritage sites in Pakistan, and published details on his findings from 126 cities and villages

in that country via two books, *Lost Heritage: The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan*[17] and *The Quest Continues, Lost Heritage: The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan.*[18] Such efforts to document details of Pakistan's Sikh heritage have created records for posterity and given many, especially those who may not be able to physically visit associated locations, an opportunity to digitally explore these religiously significant sites.

Faith tourism beyond Kartarpur

In South Asia, faith and cultural identities often go beyond borders due to the shared history and heritage of the region's peoples. Here, cross-border religious and cultural tourism can help generate revenue and curb unemployment, while building confidence and promoting peace between South Asian nations.

"Imagine Pakistan, rich with architectural and cultural heritage that is holy not only to Sikhs but other religions (as well) — from the Buddhists remains of the Gandhara civilization (800 BCE–500 CE) in the north to the Shiva-lingam (a physical representation of Shiva, a Hindu god) in Manshera along the Silk Road (a network of trade routes, including some via Pakistan, that used to connect the Far East with the Middle East and Europe); the Indus valley civilization (3300–1300 BCE) to remains of the Vedic civilization (1500–500 BCE) in its wake; Barikot's past as a fortress for Alexander's army (the forces of Alexander III the Great, who ruled the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedonia, that traveled through Pakistan in 327–325 BCE) and the Greek worshippers of Dionysus (a Greek god); the site at Sirkap that Thomas the Apostle (a Christian saint), is believed to have visited; the Hindu temple at Terri in Karak; and the Jain temples in Sindh — and you can imagine the potential for goodwill, welfare and interfaith harmony that the country has," says Haroon Sarab Diyal, a well-known activist based in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan.

Similarly, India's rich religious diversity and heritage has long attracted tourists to the country, including several from Pakistan. For instance, the desire to pay respects at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah — the tomb of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a saint of the Sufi tradition of Islam — which is in the Indian state of Rajasthan, even drew visits from former Pakistan leaders, including General Mohammad Zia-ul Haq, General Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto. Often, the pilgrimages provided an opportunity for meetings and discussions between political leaders of India and Pakistan; in April 2012, when Asif Ali Zardari, who was Pakistan's president at the time, visited the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister back then, took the opportunity to host Zardari in New Delhi for lunch, during which they were able to touch upon 'issues of mutual interest'.[19]

To Diyal, who manages Faith Tourism International, an organization that arranges visits to historical and religious heritage sites in Pakistan, there is more to faith tourism than just political ice-breaking. "Inherent to such an activity is the potential for generating trade and economic activity," he says. "Tourists that visit the caravanserai (a roadside inn designed to welcome travelling merchants and their caravans) of Gorkatri in Peshawar, with its ancient Kanishka stupa (a Buddhist temple built in 101-200 CE) and the Gorakhnath Temple (a Hindu temple built in 1851 CE), always lose themselves in the old city streets and end up buying gems, carpets, brass and copperware at *Quissa Khwani*

(which, in Pashto, refers to a market of storytellers) and the best available honey from farms around the city. Those who visit Swat (a district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) for pilgrimage to Buddhist sites want local shawls, gems, jewelry and dry fruit to take home. As a result, local economy prospers and people get employed," adds Diyal.

In recent years, openness to faith tourism in Pakistan has grown. In November 2021[20], an international delegation of pilgrims arrived at the temple and shrine of Sri Paramhans Ji Maharaj, a Hindu saint and philanthropist, following extensive repairs at the site in the village of Terri, which is in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunhwa province. Many from Pakistan's Hindu community joined the delegation, which included pilgrims from India, the United States, Spain, Australia, Singapore and the United Kingdom, during their trip. The pilgrims witnessed the traditional hospitality of local Pashtuns, an ethnic group, who opened up their hujras (guest rooms) for the pilgrims to take shelter, and took responsibility for the latter's security, as according to Pashtun custom. "The markets near the temple were seen buzzing with tourists, and the children from the Hindu contingent were photographed playing cricket with the local kids," reported one newspaper.[21] Meanwhile, in Lahore's Anarkali bazaar, one of South Asia's oldest surviving markets, the historically-significant Jain Mandir was reopened in mid-2022[22], after extensive reconstruction, and is likely to draw pilgrims and tourists from all over the world.

A corridor of trust

Surrounded by a sprawling white-marble building complex that is often dotted with turbaned men, women and children serenely performing sacred rites, the spiritual calm exuded by Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib may draw observers to consider the operationalization of the Kartarpur Corridor as a harbinger of peace between India and Pakistan. Although the opening of the passage has not initiated a new peace process between the two neighbouring countries, this step towards enhancing bilateral ties highlights how enabling South Asians to share in their richly intertwined cultural history can go a long way towards overcoming mistrust and hostility.

According to Diyal, faith tourism can strongly incentivize peaceful coexistence, allowing people to see each other — and governments — as caretakers of their spiritual legacy and heritage. "There could be no greater incentive for peace because one cannot wish harm upon a land that is sacred to you, and (upon) a people that hold keys to, and are caretakers of, your mosques, shrines, churches, temples and gurdwaras," he says. In time, he adds, opportunities to visit religious sites allow people to learn more about each other and build trust by keeping communication open through times of tension.

> Strengthening cultural cooperation in South Asia could pay immense dividends, but such exchanges between India and Pakistan remain rare. This makes facilitating faith tourism, such as via the Kartarpur Corridor and other initiatives that enable pilgrims to visit holy and heritage sites in the region, assume greater significance.

Faith tourism, by itself, is no panacea for the tensions that have marred relations between India and Pakistan over the years, but projects like the Kartarpur Corridor are confidence-building measures (CBMs) that once started, may not

be easily scuttled by political altercations, given the religious sentiment associated with holy sites. For pilgrims, the Kartarpur Corridor is not a political issue but a spiritual one, of access to Guru Nanak's gurdwara at Kartarpur and, hopefully, to other gurdwaras and heritage sites in Pakistan in the near future. For this cross-border linkage to serve as a corridor of trust, or a bridge of peace, concomitant efforts are needed to build on its example and ensure progress towards peace.

Guru Nanak's legacy project

Individuals and governments struggled for decades to pave a way to open the Kartarpur Corridor and, in the process, created a hopeful allegory to the struggle for peace between Pakistan and India. Their sustained efforts demonstrate that despite peace often being elusive and fragile, a semblance of neighbourly harmony can be achieved, given a fair chance, time and opportunity.

The Kartarpur Corridor brings together on a matter of faith two countries that were partitioned on the basis of faith. Moreover, this project, which is subject to the political situation between India and Pakistan, also holds hope for reconciliation if political wrangling threatens to undermine bilateral CBMs.

The coming together of families, friends, acquaintances and even strangers via initiatives like the Kartarpur Corridor perhaps best illustrates how the region's peoples often learn of the palimpsest of shared cultures, identities and histories that have survived time and division, and constitute their heritage as South Asians. During a recent visit to Gurdwara Sri Kartarpur Sahib, a Sikh pilgrim from Amritsar sat with two men from Gujranwala, a city in Pakistan's Punjab province. They were young and had never met before, but their grandfathers had, and they shared with each other stories of how their families once lived on these lands together.

Another Sikh pilgrim reverentially touched his hand to a threshold in the gurdwara in Kartarpur before taking that touch to his brow and said, "we came here because Baba (Guru Nanak) called upon us."

> Guru Nanak's teachings call upon people to give peace a chance. Now it is for South Asia to heed the call.

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Chapter - 8

Himal

Nirvana Bhandary

Mr. Sujeev Shakya

Founder Chair, Nepal Economic Forum

"As a contributor to Himal, and former Chair and board member of the Nepal-based South Asia Trust, its publisher, I have had the privilege of journeying with this magazine. Himal took a trail no other publication has traveled by, when it decided to let its focus traverse from the Himalayas to the rest of South Asia. Since then, Himal has grown as a platform for voices from all South Asian countries that seek to tell the region and the world at large about this unique neighborhood. Thought leaders across South Asia have been connected with Himal in some way or the other.

This case study showcases how the platform has striven to build regional solidarity, by promoting the idea of a 'Southasian' identity that embraces the commonalities and the diversity of South Asians. Himal's 'Southasian' idea is one whose time has definitely come especially when regional connectivity – people to people, digital and multi-modal transport will be the future of economic growth. This case study brings to the fore the path that the publication has taken via its usage of a wide range of literary, creative and journalistic formats that continue to help it cover the region with imagination, incisiveness, rigor and depth."

Himal: How a regional magazine transformed independent journalism in South Asia over 35 years

– Nirvana Bhandary

2022

Himal came into publication in May 1987. The magazine was founded by Kanak Mani Dixit, a Nepali writer, journalist, and civil rights and democracy activist who worked back then at the United Nations in the city of New York, in the United States. It was inspired by magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic,* and initially focused on the Himalayas and its peoples.

Dixit returned from New York to Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city — where he had spent many early years — subsequently, continuing to develop *Himal*. He believes that the publication could only have come into development in Nepal, as he felt that the country had more press freedom at the time than others in the region. "Being based in Nepal helped us gain the foothold to do what we were trying to do," says Dixit.

In March 1996, *Himal's* coverage was expanded to focus on all of South Asia, home to one-fourth of the world's population. The publication, which soon also started going by the name of *Himal Southasian,* became South Asia's first regional magazine.

"The first three decades — from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s — there was a lot of South Asian activism, but it happened without a concept or an ontology. So even though we said South Asia, we didn't feel 'Southasian'. We remained Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Nepalis when we met in South Asian conclaves," says Dixit.

Himal takes pride in fostering discourse that goes beyond the mainstream, in terms of the issues covered and voices amplified by the magazine, putting forth the perspectives of peoples that do not often find expression in other media. It aims to define, nurture, and magnify the common voice of South Asian countries. The publication, which is free to access online, does not identify as a news website, but as a platform for in-depth South Asia-focused political and social commentary and reportage. It seeks to ensure that its coverage of South Asia is not overlayed by nationalism, and does not identify its contributors by their nationality. Over the years, *Himal* has featured the writings of renowned thinkers from across the region, including Ramchandra Guha, an Indian historian, Afsan Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi journalist, Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani nuclear physicist, Mushfiq Mohamed, a Maldivian lawyer and human-rights activist, Manjushree Thapa, a Kathmandu-born novelist, Ali Latifi, an Afghanistan-based journalist, and Jayadeva Uyangoda, a Sri Lankan political scientist.

"An important part of *Himal's* activity is to be a meeting point for various kinds of perspectives, concerns and expertise. One way we do that is by being an open platform for contributors from across the region and the world, where anyone can send ideas, pitches, or submissions for consideration. We find this in itself opens a lot of space for discussions and exchanges," says Shubhanga Pandey, who has been *Himal's*

editor-in-chief since 2020, having been associated with the magazine since December 2013.

Pandey first encountered *Himal* slightly earlier as a reader, while he was studying astrophysics at Williams College in the state of Massachusetts, in the United States. "What gripped me as a reader was the editing of the magazine: the quality of the prose, the complete absence of jargon, the commitment to clarity, and the occasional wit and levity — all of these made me an admirer and regular reader of *Himal*."

An ideology of 'Southasia'

> *Himal* has made the interesting decision to write South Asia as one word, citing that this stylistic choice "seeks to restore some of the historical unity of our common living space, without wishing any violence on the existing nation states."

The magazine strives to be a neutral, non-partisan voice of reason in a geographical region that has seen numerous civil wars, colonization, neo-colonization, and terrorism over the last few decades. There is a strong ideological base to the magazine that is not just about the articles they publish. What is most powerful is the 'Southasian' ethos and passion to promote the 'Southasian' identity.

"You cannot just have your interpersonal and national-state identity. You need a 'Southasian' identity. Cultural comfort, economic prosperity, and social justice requires this third element to the conceptualization of our space in what we call 'Southasia'," says Dixit. The 'Southasian' identity is not a romantic notion, but a social justice project, according to him.

"If the idea of 'Southasia' is to gain traction, it has to move into the political understanding of a larger mass of people. That can only happen by being present in the languages of 'Southasia'. Right now, 'Southasia' as a term remains an English-language concept, and that is not good enough. It has to move into the vernacular of 'Southasia'," believes Dixit.

Himal is an English-language publication. Although only a small share of South Asians can read and converse in English — and thus gather insight from *Himal* — the language is common to all eight of the region's countries and is popular amongst its diaspora as well. Discourse in English widens the span of *Himal's* communication but limits the depth of its reach in South Asia, where the usage of local languages, such as Bengali, Dari, Divehi, Dzongkha, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Meitei, Nepali, Odia, Pashto, Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu, can be essential to connect with the majority of the region's peoples. When asked what effect translating the magazine's content into local languages could have, Dixit responded, "'Southasia' becomes real when local languages pick up the idea, whether that is Nepali or Sinhala or Bangla. They will take it up only when it makes economic sense, or for social upliftment."

A cartography of 'Southasia'

In 1998, the magazine commissioned Subhas Rai, a Nepali artist, to make its Right-Side-Up Map, which playfully portrays a traditional map of South Asia that has been rotated so that Maldives and Sri Lanka appear on top, and the rest of the region toward the opposite end. Through this map, *Himal* seeks to creatively reconceptualize regionalism in South Asia to focus more on the local inhabitants.

"The nation-states are locked into our minds through the medium of maps. The sharp boundaries remind us repeatedly of individual countries rather than the historical continuum in which there was such intimate mixing. So, how could we tweak the map to say what we wanted to say?" asks Dixit.

"There has always been an easy syncretism amongst the people of 'Southasia'. That is what is being lost gradually, within the countries and between the countries. We need to keep the older ethos alive and nurture it for the day that we all realize that the nation states should remain, but the boundaries should become progressively softer," believes Dixit.

Publishing in 'Southasia'

South Asian countries have dozens of local magazines and newspapers that cover politics and culture, in English and local languages, however, the focus of these publications is often on country-specific issues or layered with a nationalist lens. There is minimal journalistic or literary interaction between these countries, bar for *Himal*.

"Given the rigorous editing and production process that *Himal* articles go through, it has become a go-to resource for journalists and researchers — in the region as well as outside — to get in-depth understanding and credible analyses of the region," says Pandey.

Himal publishes a wide range of literary, creative and journalistic formats — from reportage and long-form essays to opinion editorials, photo essays, fiction and memoir. Over the years, the number of stories, both fiction and non-fiction, annually published by the magazine has increased, from approximately 30 stories in 1988 to more than 100 stories in 2021. The non-profit magazine operates through grants as well as membership plans, which allow readers to financially support *Himal's* journalism.

The magazine has transformed and evolved significantly in the last 35 years, particularly with the development of technology, which has enabled the utilization of different formats of multimedia content in order to reach a wider audience globally. Dixit sees this evolution as something that happened naturally, as *Himal's* team listened and responded to the changing landscape of modern-day journalism.

The first two print issues of *Himal's* magazine were published in a monthly format. Thereafter, in 1987-95, the publication produced 38 print issues as a bi-monthly magazine. As *Himal* expanded its coverage to all of South Asia, it continued to experiment with form, establishing a web presence in 1998, and printing 139 monthly editions and 16 bi-monthly issues of the magazine in 1996-2011. The publication took a hiatus from bringing out its print magazine in 2012, reportedly[1], due to financial constraints, but continued to offer new content through its website. In January 2013, *Himal* relaunched its print magazine, putting out 15 editions as a quarterly publication before suspending operations in November 2016.

The Nepal-based South Asia Trust, *Himal's* publisher at the time, cited difficulties in obtaining work permits for non-Nepali editorial staff, and bureaucratic delays in approving grants and in processing payments for international contributors, as reasons behind its decision to discontinue the magazine's publication.

Despite the setback, the team at *Himal* persisted with its vision and relaunched the publication in

a digital-only format in April 2018 from its new headquarters in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city, amid press freedom improvements in the island country. *Himal* has since been published by Himal Southasian (Guarantee) Limited, a not-for-profit holding company that has a South Asian board of directors.

Regarding freedom of expression in South Asia, Pandey believes, "Journalism, which should be distinguished from the media industry, is in a poor economic shape around the world. This is arguably much worse in 'Southasia', because there are very few institutional protections in the region that allow one to practice serious journalism outside the confines of the mass media market."

"Our move to Colombo means that now *Himal* has travelled the distance of South Asia, from the northern edge to the southern edge. So, psychologically to me, that is a fine evolution of where *Himal* should be based," says Dixit.

From 2018, Himal started regularly producing various digital audio programs, including podcasts, interviews, group discussions and author-narrated literature that have been made available on digital-media platforms, such as SoundCloud, Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube, and have gained popularity among hundreds of listeners across the world. In March 2020, following the COVID-19 outbreak, *Himal* launched *Southasiasphere*, a newsletter providing brief updates and analysis on developments in South Asia, that is published on its website and dispatched via e-mail. The first ten issues of the newsletter, which included a mix of text, illustrations and photographs, were produced every fortnight. Since then, 18 editions of *Southasiasphere* have been published, in July 2020-June 2022, that feature podcasts of *Himal's* editors discussing regional affairs.

Since 2009, social media has made *Himal* more accessible. As at mid-2022, the publication's Twitter account had more than 13,700 followers, and its Facebook and Instagram pages had about 28,000 and 1,600 followers, respectively.

Having expanded its internet and social-media presence over the years, *Himal*, reportedly[2], reaches tens of thousands of readers each week, nearly half of whom are in cities outside South Asia. Dixit, reportedly[3], sees *Himal* as South Asia's "best known and least read magazine". Indeed, the publication's reach is sizeable, but in South Asia, where more than 1.9 billion people reside, the potential to further expand readership remains substantial. Gaps in digital literacy, a lack of data and device affordability for the poor, and a dearth of relevant content and applications, are partly responsible for 61% of the people living within the range of a telecommunications network in South Asia not using the internet, and thus not being able to read digital-only publications such as *Himal*. As this digital divide narrows, internet-based translation and language-learning services, such as those offered by Google and DuoLingo — although far from perfect at present — hold hope for increasingly bridging language barriers in South Asia, and bringing *Himal's* content and ideology to the masses.

Himal's core team, as of mid-2022, comprised of a chief editor, deputy editor, senior assistant editor, engagement editor, multimedia editor, researcher and fact checker, and finance and administration manager. Dixit, who is *Himal's* founding editor, seven founding advisors and six contributing editors are involved with the publication to a lesser

capacity. Most of *Himal's* team is of South Asian origin; more importantly, they all are imbued by a 'Southasian' sensibility.

"Anyone who is part of *Himal's* editorial team has the great privilege of helping shape what this platform for cross-border, non-nationalist and independent conversation looks like. As the chief editor of the magazine, what I enjoy most is being able to freely engage with amazing writers, journalists, scholars and activists," says Pandey.

"What *Himal* does is provide a sense of intellectual comfort to scattered individuals around 'Southasia' and the world that there is a magazine with a decidedly open-hearted, liberal focus where you are not responding to day-to-day politics. There is a place for intellectual freedom," says Dixit.

Himal has redefined the 'Southasian' identity to a depth unlike any entity or organization before. However, when it comes to facilitating regional cooperation, Dixit sees the role of the magazine as minimal. "We are a journalistic product, and we are careful to remain that. *Himal* is more so a magazine that tries to develop an intellectual sensibility about being 'Southasian' and appreciating the idea of 'Southasia'," says Dixit.

"We feel that our motto of non-nationalist, independent journalism is an important way of building regional solidarity. This is important because by not narrowing our vantage point to how various governments, states or nationalities think, we keep our journalism critical and transparent. This is reflected even in the choice of words. You will, for example, rarely see the phrase 'our country' or 'our politicians' in a *Himal* article, purely because most readers come to our magazine not for some national, or nationalist, perspective," adds Pandey.

Articulating 'Southasian' issues

Articles published by *Himal* delve into details that are often glossed over by other publications. Many of them present multi-layered perspectives on how historical events in South Asia have shaped contemporary thinking on subjects of national and cross-border relevance.

Himal has documented historical trajectories in social, economic and political issues of South Asian countries for decades, creating a valuable archive of knowledge about the region along its way. In its very first issue, the magazine published an article[4] by Dixit that detailed the worsening environmental degradation in the Kathmandu valley. As the crisis has gradually intensified, *Himal* has continued to provide a repository of information on how this has affected Kathmandu, which now has one of the highest levels of air pollution in South Asia.

Writings in the magazine often delve into details and critiques of social and political issues of South Asia that may not find space in other publications, offering a literary home to several unorthodox thinkers. An article[5] by *Himal's* editors, published in May 1997, highlights India's influence on public understanding of South Asia owing to its sheer size and distinctiveness on geographical maps — an outlook that, in part, explains *Himal's* stylistic choice to reverse its map of 'Southasia' in its imagery and motifs — but also expresses optimism in how, beyond the activities of the South Asian Association

for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an intergovernmental body of the eight South Asian nations, civil societies, activists, and businesses, among others, in the region had begun to network across existing borders and show interest in regional cooperation.

In March 2014, *Himal* published an analysis[6] by Shanthie D'Souza, an Indian researcher, that explores how a greater emphasis on intra-regional trade, transit and energy linkages, between India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, could yield huge economic benefits for all three countries. It underscores Afghanistan's ability to achieve economic development by better integrating into the SAARC economic zone.

"While it can be difficult to directly track policy or political impact of journalism, what is clear is that *Himal Southasian* has been an essential resource for both advocates of policy, and, sometimes, those involved in designing policies. This is one reason why it has been extensively cited in academic and policy literatures, and is also frequently present in university curriculum," says Pandey.

Along with reportage on regional politics, trade and environmental concerns, *Himal* provides significant coverage on the ever-evolving social and cultural practices of the region. A *Himal* article[7] from December 2015, by Paavan Mathema, a Nepali journalist, details how brass bands have increasingly replaced groups playing traditional music at weddings in Nepal, and highlights the influence of Bollywood, the Hindi film industry, in reshaping functions at these weddings. Another *Himal* piece[8], published in December 2020, by Sehyr Mirza, a Pakistan-based journalist and creative writer, delves into the modernization of antiquated attitudes and expectations of relationships in the region amid the growing popularity of online-dating apps, such as Tinder and Bumble, in India and Pakistan.

Himal has often sought to detail the diversity in South Asian ethnicities and shed light on how they live their day-to-day lives. An essay[9] written for Himal in May 2008 by Awadesh Coomar Sinha, an Indian anthropologist and sociologist, draws parallels between three ethnic South Asian communities, in Nepal, Bhutan and India, that have faced neglect, discrimination and exploitation for decades, and suggests ways in which to uplift these groups and promote neighbourly co-existence.

Himal has continuously espoused commonalities between South Asians, even in the languages that they share. In 2021-22, the magazine published *Dialectical*[10], a series of seven articles written by Abhishek Avtans, an Indian linguist, that explore several intricacies, connections, and historical linkages of the languages of South Asia. In an article[11] about Braille — a system of letters and numbers, which are represented by raised bumps, that blind people use to read and write through touch — Avtans explains how Bharati Braille was first approved for use in India in 1951, and later adapted for various South Asian languages, such as Sinhala in Sri Lanka, Nepali in Nepal and Bengali in Bangladesh.

Ahead of its time when it came to covering lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) issues, in December 2015, *Himal* published a photo essay[12] by Sunil Gupta, a photographer and activist of Indian descent, documenting the lives of gay men in New Delhi, India's capital city, well before the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized same-sex acts in 2018. The

publication's inclusive and socially progressive outlook has encouraged members of the LGBTQIA+ community to share their stories anonymously and given grassroots activists an international platform to write and raise awareness about these issues.

Himal has also helped voice the struggles of South Asian women. In January 2019, *Himal* published a commentary[13] by Hafsa Khawaja, a Pakistani academic in politics and history, on how the #MeToo movement, which encourages women globally to speak out on sexual harassment and abuse, did not truly take off in Pakistan, largely attributing this to the taboo and ostracization in the country around disclosing sexual assault, and the shortcomings of existing legal provisions in ensuring that victims of workplace harassment gain justice. In February 2020, *Himal* published another commentary[14], by Subha Wijesiriwardena, a Colombo-based feminist activist, which outlined how the #MeToo movement made its way to South Asia, and focused on how this was contextualized in Sri Lanka, where many women refrained from exposing perpetrators publicly but chose to stand together in solidarity and create spaces to offer each other support.

In March 2022, a *Himal* report[15] by Namrata Raju, an Indian specialist in labor rights and migration, detailed how the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the marginalization of female South Asian laborers in the Arab Gulf. Through its publication of Raju's interviews with some of these women, *Himal* was able to give a platform for them to share, with complete autonomy and protection of identity, their harrowing experiences.

A magazine of and for 'Southasia'

Himal is not the only publication to focus on South Asia. Since 2010, *The Third Pole*, a London-headquartered digital platform, has been publishing free-to-access news and analysis, in Hindi, Nepali, Urdu, Bengali, English and Russian, about the Third Pole, an area spanning the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region and the Tibetan Plateau, that has ice fields containing the largest freshwater reserves outside the regions surrounding the North Pole and South Pole, and where ten major Asian river systems arise. Other publications have strived to cater to other South Asian niches. Initiatives such as *The Juggernaut*, a New York-headquartered subscription-based digital publication launched in February 2019, target the South Asian diaspora — the world's largest — by focusing on South Asians in its business, politics, science, technology, lifestyle, culture and sports coverage.

While several South Asia-focused publications exist, *Himal's* long-standing endeavor to tell in-depth and nuanced stories that inform South Asians, and others, of important but often less-discussed aspects of the region, and to promote a 'Southasian' identity that focuses on local inhabitants, has helped peoples from South Asian countries deepen their understanding of their shared heritage and fostered closer ties between many of them, making this publication a notable case study in nurturing neighbourly relations in the region.

"*Himal* represents not just an organization run by a group of people in Colombo, but also a three-decade-long network of well-wishers and

professionals, who constitute an important aspect of regional civil cooperation and dialogue," says Pandey.

When asked what he envisioned for the future of the magazine, Dixit responded, "*Himal* would like to feel, rather than only conjecturing that we have made a difference. To see that the practical ideas that we have evolved can benefit a fourth of the world's population, which, right now, is being kept within individual nation states. *Himal's* idea of 'Southasia' is devolution into further units within the nation states so that there is more local and provincial government, and less of a central, powerful state."

> "This is a region of penumbras; there is no black and white. The greys define the region," says Dixit.

ENDNOTES

1. https://scroll.in/article/971159/this-magazine-is-building-a-new-revenue-model-based-on-solidarity-in-south-asia-and-beyond/.
2. https://today.williams.edu/stories/at-the-helm-of-himal-southasian/.
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Chapter - 9

Thinking Beyond Borders

Oishee Kundu

Dr. Rubana Huq

Managing Director,
Mohammadi Group,
Bangladesh

Vice Chancellor, Asian
University for Women

"While South Asian history is plagued by political debates, the minds of the youth can be particularly helpful in bridging differences. Most South Asian economies currently remain challenged with high global inflation. For years, we have spoken about intra-regional trade accounting for barely 5% of South Asia's total trade, and yet nothing has changed.

The South Asian Economics Students' Meet (SAESM) offers a new and unique South Asian approach towards framing a combined economic dialogue for the next decade. Therefore, there couldn't be a better time to highlight SAESM and bring it to the forefront of discussions on the region. Young minds meeting and approaching each other through academic discourse will perhaps be the finest solution to the lack of cohesion in South Asia.

Moreover, it is not just about academic meetings that will connect these young scholars, but also about their stumbling upon bureaucratic blocks during their journeys and overcoming these difficulties. SAESM should not and will not just be about new economics at play. Rather, it will continue to be about the hikes, the casual conversations over tea and reaching out to others who are similar yet separated by borders."

Thinking Beyond Borders: South Asia's budding economists unite since 2004

– Oishee Kundu

2021

Each year, nearly a hundred South Asian economics students gather to share research papers, listen to lectures by distinguished scholars, and debate the finer points of economic theories. For many, the South Asia Economic Students Meet (SAESM) is their first experience of regional cooperation in an area with a long history of political divisions.

SAESM is a notable example of how people-to-people contact can change hearts and minds. The annual conference focuses on regional economic development issues. More importantly, it encourages conversations, friendships, and trust among students from the region.

Students who attend the event are seen as future leaders who can help influence regional cooperation and peace initiatives in South Asia. SAESM is loosely based on Europe's successful student exchanges after World War II to rebuild institutions and national relationships. The annual SAESM conference invites economics students to exchange ideas on regional trade and economic growth that can reduce poverty. Such discussions are important for South Asia, which is home to 36 percent of the world's poor and half of all malnourished children.

For Ritwika Sen of India, SAESM was a life-changing event. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Illinois, USA, and participated in SAESM in 2011 as a student of St. Stephen's College. "SAESM was essentially the first time that I met like-minded peers from across South Asia. It helped to broaden my outlook on the region and the amazing things that we can accomplish with more cooperation," she said.

The journey since 2004

At the heart of the SAESM story is a group of dedicated academics in different colleges across South Asia, investing their time and skills to organize and lead the conferences year after year. The idea of an economics students meet to build cross-border friendships began in 2004 when Dr. Deb Kusum Das of Delhi University's Ramjas College visited Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. Back at Ramjas College, his students in the Economics Society club were excited about creating a regional platform. The grassroots initiative quickly drew support from Prof. Turab Hussain of Lahore University of Management Sciences, followed by professors and students at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh and the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka.

The first SAESM was held in 2004, hosted by Ramjas College. Ninety-four students from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka attended. "Bright smiles, lots of energy, and plenty of good will" is how the Times of India described the proceedings in an article on 4 February 2004. Since then, the conference has been held every year in different South Asian countries. In 2005, SAESM was held in Pakistan at Lahore University of Management Sciences. In 2007, Nepal's Tribhuvan University joined the event and the World Bank began supporting SAESM. In 2011, the event

widened to include Bhutan's Royal Thimpu College followed in 2013 by Afghanistan's Kabul University. SAESM has survived domestic tensions, border skirmishes, and cancelled SAARC summits, and also managed to build a good reputation for itself within the economics circuit in South Asia.[1]

> Overall, the idea behind SAESM seems to be born out of two motivations. The first motivation is to promote people-to-people contact, despite not-so-favorable political discourses. The second motivation is to improve the state of economics education in the region and use the knowledge from the subject in service towards regional growth, development, and cooperation.

Firsthand experiences of crossing the border also gives the participants a concrete idea of the challenges to regional cooperation in the region. Unlike much of the world, visas can be difficult to obtain for certain nationalities in South Asia. Some students have had to book circuitous routes through other countries because of sudden coolness in their home country's relationship with the country hosting SAESM. For example, in 2014, the delegation of Pakistani students had to fly through Dubai and Nepal to reach the conference in Bhutan due to non-issuance of visas from India. SAESM thus not only becomes an opportunity for improving theoretical knowledge on regional cooperation, but also contributes to practical understanding of the status quo.

First impressions to lasting legacy

SAESM unofficially begins with an ice-breaker in the evening when all teams have arrived and is usually organized by the World Bank representative at the event. Polite greetings rapidly blossom into enthusiastic exclamations of shared ancestry (*"my grandmother came from Sylhet!"*) and common tastes (*"I love kottu roti too!"*). Fans of Bollywood are quick to begin a game of *antakshari* with the musically-inclined forming strategic international partnerships to make a winning team. The next morning, at the official inauguration, everyone stands for the national anthems of all participating nations. It is a very moving display of mutual respect and understanding.

During the week-long SAESM, speakers lead panel discussions on topical economic issues. Over the years, the quality of research papers and presentations has steadily improved, attracting top students throughout South Asia. Judges choose a best paper for each of the competition's annual subthemes and the best overall paper wins the Sen-Haq Award. 'Budding Economist'- an economics quiz competition- is the more gladiatorial event. Participants go through a written test and quiz to qualify for a final round where their mettle is tested on an individual basis in a publicly-held panel interview that is as interesting to watch as it is to participate in. The last person standing is crowned the 'Budding Economist of South Asia' and this marks the end of the conference.

Dr. Selim Raihan, Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka and Executive Director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, a key mentor of the SAESM initiative from Bangladesh, said SAESM is about much more than prizes. The real benefit is for students "to see someone from another country in South Asia,"[2] something unimaginable a generation ago, and still out of reach for millions in South Asia today. The most dramatic demonstrations of such meetings are

made by students from India and Pakistan who are surprised that the people on the other side are human beings just like them.

Students are also able to identify opportunities with peers for future research collaborations, a crucial step for those planning post-graduate study in economics at home or abroad. For many, the SAESM experience shapes their future research interests and professional choices.

Trade economist Nishant Khanal said he attended SAESM as a student from Nepal. After graduation, he worked on a regional trade promotion network project with a German development agency and participated in the South Asia Economic Summit. “Recently, I worked as South Asia program manager at Students for Liberty with more than 100 volunteers from South Asia. The network which I built at SAESM has helped me a lot in my professional life.”

The conference, with its paper presentation sessions and keynote lectures and panels over three days, is also a great opportunity to learn about new topics and methods of doing research. Tshering Wangdi, a SAESM alumnus from Bhutan says, “SAESM has helped me to not only gain knowledge of people representing different nations, but also enhance my skills in economics and statistics.”

SAESM has proved to be a great networking opportunity for its participants, but it goes even further to cement that friendship through a two-day retreat which is held at the end of the conference. The retreat organizes activities giving students a cultural, geographical, and social

snapshot of the host country. For example, the 2014 SAESM in Bhutan included hiking to a monastery perched 10,000 feet high in the Himalayas. The six-hour hike gave students plenty of time to argue, debate, and challenge each others' ideas while developing trust.

On the last evening of SAESM 2014, all the participants sang "we shall overcome," to join their voices together. What began as a sweet and soulful rendition of the same melody in English, Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu ultimately swelled into an energetic and enthusiastic chorus with a fast beat, because everyone was buoyed by hope and the meaning held by the words of that song. Students express surprise when they discover how much they have in common.

Nearly a thousand students have participated in SAESM since it began. Some of the early participants now have established careers as economists, academics, journalists, and other professionals exercising considerable influence in policy making of their respective countries. Cyril Almeida, 2004 alumnus of SAESM, is a senior journalist in Pakistan who served as the assistant editor for Dawn - Pakistan's oldest and most widely read English-language newspaper. After graduating from Lahore University of Management Sciences, he studied jurisprudence as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He was named the International Press Institute's 2019 World Press Freedom Hero.

What's next?

SAESM is evolving into a formal institution with more transparency and accountability. In 2016, it formed a governing council with plans to enlist academics and experts from outside the SAESM network to provide advice and support. As the council focuses on the coordination of all activities among different countries and expanding the network beyond the annual conferences, it has also created a rotating secretariat. Dhaka-based South Asian Network on Economic Modeling was chosen to be the first host.

Country coordinators are discussing ways to expand the organization, possibly by sponsoring research projects, publishing high-quality papers in a journal, and holding week-long classes in advanced research techniques. There is potential for expansion by collaborating with entities such as the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling in Bangladesh; the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment network in Nepal; and research centers on South Asian issues at the London School of Economics, University of California - Berkeley, and Sciences Po in Paris. Many SAESM alumni from the past 15 years are now well-placed to help an expansion.

SAESM faces some critical challenges in the coming years, one of which relates to establishing formal institutions to manage the event. Each conference takes enormous resources to organize, especially in a region where bilateral tensions are high and government institutionsdo not reliably grant visa applications. Some thought has been given to organizing future conferences in neutral locations outside South Asia just to avoid logistical nightmares, and while the proposal may be sensible, the boost to the local economy from hosting a large-scale event and other benefits of internationalization will be lost to South Asia.

There are issues related to participation as well. Critics say several South Asian countries send students from a limited set of universities, whose student bodies may not fairly represent the nation's population. SAESM could be a more

effective platform for regional peace building by adding more universities as partners. Greater publicity about the annual event could generate more interest and improve accessibility to the forum.

Overall, SAESM has managed to grow simply on the hard work of the country coordinators and the enthusiasm and trust of students, without having a permanent office or an address.

There is little doubt that SAESM has helped create better economists who are aware of regional development. Participants warmly recount their experiences and their Facebook pages show deep interests in transboundary issues and cultural practices. Many former students say they pay close attention to elections, communal violence, and natural disasters that affect neighboring countries.

It is not an exaggeration to say that SAESM changes the participants. If regional cooperation seemed inconceivable or hadn't crossed their minds before, the memories of conference and the retreat serve as a constant reminder of the possibility.

"SAESM alumni are future ambassadors of their countries and of the idea of South Asia." – Sanjay Kathuria, former lead economist and coordinator, South Asia Regional Integration, The World Bank.

Ebadulrahman Hashemi, former Research Subject Matter Expert with Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and a recent graduate in policy economics from Massachusetts, USA, attended the conference as an economics student from Afghanistan in 2018. The week of conversations with other students from the region permanently changed the way he views himself, Hashemi said. "SAESM transitioned me from an Afghan to a South Asian."

ENDNOTES

1. In prestigious universities of South Asia, one of the indicators of success for an economics major is to get selected to represent their country at SAESM. Only 11 percent of students in India who apply are selected to attend SAESM.
2. 'Reflecting on SAESM 2018' (SANEM, 6 February 2018)

- Picture credits: Nikita Singla

Chapter - 10

Fine cotton & designer fashion

Samavia Batool & Vaqar Ahmed

Dr. Abid Suleri

Executive Director,
Sustainable Development
Policy Institute, Pakistan

"South Asia lags behind other regional blocs in terms of connectivity, infrastructure and intra-regional investments. Its annual intra-regional trade is currently valued at about one-fifth of its estimated potential. Yet, as this case study demonstrates through the successes of businesses in Pakistan and India in nurturing apparel trade between the two neighbours, there is significant scope for expanding exchanges and increasing investments between countries in the region.

Fostering cross-border trade associations that actively pursue collaborative business dialogue, and regularly organizing intra-regional trade fairs and exhibitions can help connect South Asia's designers, manufacturers, exporters, distributors and retailers, among others. Easing import duties and visa requirements, facilitating business-to-business meetings, and enabling seamless e-commerce between the region's countries can help too. Such switches offer many riches to the future that South Asia stitches. They encourage creating and developing value chains in other commercial fields as well.

This case study showcases how trade exchanges can bring the region's economies together, but, more importantly, it also weaves in a narrative of South Asia's diverse tapestry of aesthetics, values and traditions being elegantly entwined together by threads of mutual appreciation, which can fashion future people-to-people co-operation that brings this neighborhood together."

Fine cotton & designer fashion: Connecting Pakistani exporters to Indian markets

– Samavia Batool & Vaqar Ahmed

2021

The news story headline, 'India goes nuts over Pakistani textile products,'[1] captures the excitement of Indian customers in 2012 when given direct access to Pakistani apparel at a trade exhibition in New Delhi. Pakistan's famous lawn cotton became a quick hit with Indian women who scooped up apparel made with original patterns, fresh designs and soft quality.

The successful trade show marked a brief but important softening in Pakistan-India trade relations. It was soon followed by shipments of Pakistani fabrics and designer garments to Indian cities. Between 2012 and 2015, chambers of commerce and textile ministries on both sides of the border organized trade fairs at least twice a year to connect fashion designers, clothing manufacturers, exporters, distributors, and retailers. Pakistan and northern India share similarities in cultural traditions, norms, and climate – and fashion tastes. Hence, the trade relationship is a natural one.

Despite soaring demand, Pakistani exports of clothing to India became increasingly difficult as import duties increased and business visas became harder to obtain. Trade fairs are now held in third countries such as Turkey and Dubai to keep a connection between Pakistani exporters and Indian importers alive.

Some Pakistani designers use online channels and courier services to cater to individual Indian customers. Others count on the Indian diaspora to carry the latest styles in their suitcases during trips home. In fashion, buyers and sellers only focus on rich fabrics, elegant designs, and innovative styles, irrespective of country and region.

Pakistani fashion is a natural fit in Indian wardrobes

The Lifestyle Pakistan trade show that debuted in 2012 produced unambiguous evidence of the potential for garment imports and exports. Pakistani designers saw an opportunity to use fashion to promote cultural harmony. Indian shops were eager to respond to the pent-up customer demand for Pakistani products. After the exhibition, a multi-label fashion store, Pakistan's Fashion Design Council or PFDC, opened a franchise in New Delhi as part of the shop, Rubaaiyat, by Mini Bindra of Bindra Ventures.

> "We did not even have to do marketing for our products. I remember the time when the tag 'made in Pakistan' was enough for our products to sell like hot cakes." – an apparel exporter from Pakistan[2].

As the trade relationship flourished, PFDC offered display space in its Lahore and Karachi shops to the Fashion Design Council of India, a not-for-profit organization promoting the fashion design industry in India. In 2014, India-based Rubaaiyat launched its own store in Lahore. Even before the exhibition, Pakistan's exports of clothing to India were on the

rise. For a decade beginning in 2005, apparel shipments rose annually by more than 20 percent, according to fashion industry experts. Major Pakistani fashion brands rushed to claim space in the Indian market. Smaller suppliers in Pakistan selling replicas of high-end lawn brands also began to establish their mark in Indian apparel market. Trade fairs and other events gave Pakistani exporters direct access to Indian apparel distributors.

The fashion trade was made possible with the active support of Indian High Commission in Islamabad and consulates in both countries. Pakistani apparel businesses were able to expand operations to New Delhi and designers were granted 6-month visas to directly manage their sales in India, though most of these visas were city-specific and restricted marketing activities planned for other Indian cities. Trade officials on both sides facilitated business-to-business meetings, and a memorandum of understanding between business associations in India and Pakistan. The access provided to some businesses under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) visa exemption regime was also helpful.

Bollywood stars were photographed wearing Pakistani designer labels, increasing demand for the apparel on both sides of the border. "Leading Bollywood actresses were contracted to promote our products across borders and it used to be a race, even in the domestic market, as soon as our lawn collection was launched. I mean, who wouldn't want to wear a design advertised by Karina Kapoor?" said a Pakistani exporter of fashion knock-offs. Television also boosted consumer demand. In 2014, India's Zee Zindagi TV channel began broadcasting Pakistani dramas that became a showcase for fashion trends.

The fashion industry stitched up more sales as part of a broader shift in relations between the two countries. In 2012, India and Pakistan agreed to ease strict visa requirements, especially for small businesses, religious pilgrims, and tourists. The change meant Pakistani businesses could get a multiple entry visa for one year that would allow them to visit up to 10 Indian cities. During this time, the India-Pakistan Joint Business Council and the Pakistan India Business Council were established to promote trade and people-to-people contact. Academia, think tanks, and civil society groups advocated investment cooperation and peace in the region. The momentum led to business dialogues in Islamabad and throughout Pakistan about creating and developing value chains, and collaborating in energy and water sectors, among other things. A 2008 initiative created the successful South Asia Economic Summit, co-hosted by a group of think tanks. The annual meeting continues today and rotates among South Asian cities, giving businesses of all kinds and policy makers a venue to discuss regional economic cooperation.

Fashion proved to be two-way street. As Pakistani exporters expanded shipments, they made frequent trips to India and developed links with distributors. Those distributors began exporting traditional Indian garments such as sarees made from six yards of fabric, Rajasthani dresses, and ankle-length lehengas to Pakistan's Punjab and Sindh provinces. Experts see much more trade potential between the two nations, especially in items such as shalwar kameez (trousers with a long tunic) and richly embroidered bridal wear.

> "There is a huge demand for Indian lehengas in Pakistan, especially during the wedding season. We had a two-way relationship with our distributors in India. We used to send them Pakistani clothes and, in

turn, they used to sell us Indian clothes."
– a Pakistani exporter

Many of the Pakistani exports were produced by women-owned businesses. India's demand for Pakistan-made apparel opened new opportunities for existing companies, and attracted women entrepreneurs in urban centers of Pakistan.[3] Even today, most members of the Islamabad Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry identify apparel exports as either their sole or secondary business.

Cutting a new pattern for garment sales

Source: UNCOMTRADE database (2019)

Since 2015, clothing exports from Pakistan to India have declined significantly despite strong consumer demand.

The political vagaries of India-Pakistan relations along with a number of tariff and non-tariff barriers restrict access to the Indian market. For example, some Pakistani shipments have customs clearance delays of up to 45 days. A delay adds costs and means seasonal garments – such as lightweight Pakistani lawn – fail to reach the final market on time. The main trade route for Pakistani shipments to India has been through the border crossing near Lahore at Wagah, Pakistan. Attari, India, lies on the other side of the border and is about 25 kilometers from Amritsar. Apparel exporters say the effective tariff (including para-tariffs) at that location is a steep 21 percent, leading to apparel trade via informal routes.

In 2016, visa rules were further tightened that made it even more difficult for Pakistani exporters and Indian distributors to meet.

"The last shipment I sent to India was back in 2015. The last three consignments were a total loss to me as I had to pay more in taxes and tariffs than the cost of the products exported."
– former exporter in Lahore.

The period from 2009 to 2015 witnessed an increase in direct export of cotton suits (Harmonized System code – 620412) from Pakistan to India that peaked in 2015 at USD 247,800 from USD 4,100 in 2009. Since the India-Pakistan trade ban in 2019, the supply of these Pakistan-made garments was once again re-routed via Dubai; India imported USD 68,100 of cotton suits via the United Arab Emirates in 2019, jumping significantly from USD 3,600 in 2018[4].

The Indian diaspora has become an ambassador for Pakistani fashion. Pakistan pavilions at trade fairs mostly organized in the United Arab Emirates, Britain, and Turkey are filled with Indian retailers, importers, and even individuals willing to buy in bulk to obtain Pakistani apparel.

The diaspora is also serving as a delivery service for Pakistani garments. Small exporters send casual shalwar kameez dresses, unstitched lawn suits, formal wear, and hand-embroidered dresses to India in the suitcases of Indian nationals returning home for a visit. Some exporters use social media

such as Facebook to accept orders[5]. Indian customers flock to Facebook pages like 'Pakistani Suits'[6], 'Pakistani Designer Suits'[7], 'Designer Lawn Suits,[8] among others to browse the latest Pakistani fashions. Indian customers also use major online stores such as Flipkart, Amazon, and Jabong whose vendors offer international delivery for clothing orders, often at a lower price than Dubai shops. Pakistani businesses that sell products through foreign online stores could reduce their costs if Pakistan adopted more and better online payment gateways and consumer protections.[9]

Despite the setback, exporters hope bilateral relations will eventually improve and result in lower tariffs for apparel exports and lower import taxes in India. Demand for Pakistani apparel in the Indian market remains encouraging.

Clothing and apparel are more than just products. Pakistan and India share a rich cultural history and many people in both countries use their wardrobe to reflect historic values and traditions. Political tensions and trade barriers have not stopped Pakistani products from entering India, and vice versa. Fashion designers and entrepreneurs have turned to e-commerce, informal trade, and sales through third countries to meet consumer demand, though to a limited extent.

"I am a regular buyer of Pakistani clothes in India and one of the chief attractions towards the Pakistan textile is their quality but given cold relations between the two neighboring countries, Pakistani dresses have now become prized possessions of an Indian wardrobe." – Fashion enthusiast in Delhi.

ENDNOTES

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Chapter - 11
Harmonizing relations

Nitin Koshi

Ambassador Nirupama Rao

Former Foreign Secretary of India

"South Asia, as has been said before, is a geographical integer. Even today, local sensibilities and linguistic similarities transcend national borders. There is no better example than the regional popularity of music composed in languages and melodies that are native to South Asia. Social media and video-sharing websites make this music accessible beyond borders, including to the South Asian diaspora spread across the world, enabling the music to resonate in the hearts of all. We need to address the challenges posed by the limited availability of funding, training, infrastructure and facilities that are needed to nurture the region's budding musical talent, in order to enable music to foster harmonious relations between South Asians.

This case study gives centre stage to the efforts of two platforms, the South Asian Symphony Orchestra — which I co-founded — and the South Asian Bands Festival, that have each brought talented South Asian musicians together to perform in melodious unison, and that have used music for promoting co-operation in the region.

In an orchestra or a band, members must make a concerted effort to function as a well-coordinated unit, listening to each other and understanding the purpose of creating harmony. And, as this case study points out, so too must all the peoples of South Asia in their pursuit of peace and wellbeing."

Harmonizing relations: Platforms for music in South Asia

– Nitin Koshi

2021

Radios, speakers, smartphones and television sets across the South Asian neighbourhood crackle with tunes from Bollywood, the Hindi film industry. Coke Studio Pakistan, a television program, strikes a chord with millions of viewers through live studio performances that meld contemporary Western, Sufi, bhangra and classical music from the region. Across South Asia, people go about their day-to-day lives with a folk or film song on their lips, distinctive to their native language.

South Asian music, despite its diversity in styles and instruments, intrinsically connects its people. But being a musician in the region is not easy, especially for artistes outside the film industry. Many of them face similar challenges: limited funding, lack of public exposure, and a dearth of training, infrastructure and facilities. Others experience social or political pressure, such as a ban on musical instruments in Afghanistan while under Taliban rule in the late 1990s.

Still, over the last few years, there have emerged more musicians making a living by playing non-film music; more venues in South Asian cities showcasing live music; and more live-music festivals—providing local talent a stage to perform. The South Asian Symphony Orchestra (SASO) and South Asian Bands Festival provide platforms that give ear to talented musicians from the region while helping bridge political divisions and build understanding within South Asia.

South Asian Symphony Orchestra: A baton for cooperation

A symphony orchestra comprising South Asian musicians was conceived of in 2013 by Nirupama Rao, a former foreign secretary of India, in conversation with Viswa Subbaraman, an American orchestra conductor of Indian origin. Well-versed in diplomacy — having even served as India's ambassador to China and Sri Lanka — and music as well, Rao envisioned a South Asian orchestra that could be a unique platform for dialogue, cultural synergy and understanding among youth in the region.

Following a few years largely in academia, in February 2018, Rao began fine-tuning her musical vision by helping bring eight musicians from India and two of the South Asian diaspora — including Subbaraman — in concert with the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka. Their performance, titled Music Beyond Borders, in Colombo, marked the island nation's 70th anniversary of independence. Five months later, Rao and her husband, Sudhakar Rao, a former chief secretary of India's Karnataka state, registered the South Asian Symphony Foundation[1] in Bengaluru, Karnataka's capital city. This laid the groundwork to establish SASO. In August 2018, the foundation organized a five-day music workshop in Ooty, a hill town in India's Tamil Nadu state, where instructors from India and

Sri Lanka guided a dozen young musicians from Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The vibrant musical and cultural interplay at the workshop moved the foundation to finally start putting together a South Asian orchestra that would perform eight months later.

After a week of relentlessly rehearsing side-by-side, an ensemble of more than 70 musicians with familial roots in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka debuted as SASO on April 26, 2019 in Mumbai, India's commercial hub. The performance, titled Chiragh: A Concert Beyond Borders, was an eclectic mix of South Asian and Western classical music. It featured indigenous instruments, such as the *timpani, matka, tumbaknari, rubab, santoor* and *tanbur*, alongside traditional orchestral sections. The concert commemorated the lives lost in terror attacks that took place five days earlier across Sri Lanka.

Rao is confident that strengthening music education in South Asia can be instrumental to help "promote democratic values and reject terrorism and extremism." SASO teaches its members to listen, not just to sounds but each other as well. Understanding, inclusiveness and cohesion builds between these musicians as they rehearse together, in pursuit of a shared goal – harmony. On achieving this aspiration, the orchestra — like South Asia — can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Assembling the orchestra took considerable effort. The foundation invited musicians to audition for the orchestra based on recommendations, and by scouring ensembles and music institutions, in South Asia and abroad.

Many of these artistes rendered performances via recordings for selection as logistical & infrastructure constraints limited in-person auditions. The foundation had difficulties obtaining visas for some of the selected musicians. A group of Afghan musicians faced flight cancellations, transit delays and soaring ticket prices after the Pakistan government closed its airspace for flights to and from India in 2019.

> "Putting so many new people together in a room and creating a team from all over South Asia has been a fascinating experience… It is also really interesting in the breaks to see them interact with each other and ask each other questions about where they are from, how they play, the type of technique they use, and what their instrument is – all the standard things we do as musicians. You soon begin to realize that it doesn't matter where you come from. Simply being a musician gives you a common language and basically a common nationality of music" – Viswa Subbaraman, conductor of the orchestra's inaugural concert.

Nivanthi Karunaratne, a U.S.-based horn player of Sri Lankan heritage, points out that the orchestra helps bridge communication barriers. Recalling SASO's debut performance, Karunaratne says, "One of the Afghan musicians came up to me after the concert, chattering away, and hugged me tightly. Her smile conveyed everything our lack of a mutual language couldn't."

SASO's inaugural concert was not financed by governments, but by Indian donors and corporate sponsors, making it a unique initiative of, by and for the people. Cross-border investment could build the foundation's finances, while increasing the interest of India's neighbours in the orchestra.

The foundation seeks to nurture promising young musicians of South Asia by organizing music workshops, master classes and lectures. It intends to take SASO across South Asian cities, and the rest of the world as well, thereby providing orchestra members valuable experience in public performance. The orchestra offers a rare opportunity for musicians that often remain marginalized in local communities, especially in Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal. This includes some students of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music[2] (ANIM), which aims to improve gender equality in music training in Afghanistan and has nearly 60 percent of its students coming from economically-disadvantaged families. A dozen students of ANIM, which receives some support from the World Bank, played at SASO's inaugural performance. Since its debut, the orchestra has performed in Bengaluru to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth.

Over time, the foundation plans to build a repertoire of indigenous South Asian music, in the form of a songbook that will comprise 30 folk and popular pieces, arranged for orchestral performance. It commissioned wo orchestral works, *Bhadke*[3] and *Hamsafar*: A Journey through South Asia[4], that were performed by SASO at its debut, alongside compositions by Beethoven, Bizet, Brahms, Mozart, and Puccini, among others. *Bhadke* is a rearrangement by Kamala Sankaram, an Indian-American composer, of *Shola jo bhadke*, a classic Bollywood song. Meanwhile, *Hamsafar*: A Journey through South Asia is an arrangement of eight popular songs from the region, by Lauren Braithwaite, a British conductor teaching at ANIM. The commissioning of more such orchestral works could help South Asian composers flourish, while helping preserve the region's musical heritage.

The symphony of peace amongst people is perhaps impossible to ever complete, but SASO plans to continue playing to this tune, exemplifying what can be achieved via harmonious co-existence between South Asians.

South Asian Bands Festival: All aboard the regional bandwagon

In April 2007, the eight member nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) launched an initiative[5] to promote regional unity through cultural interaction. A few months later, the first SAARC cultural festival was launched. It showcased South Asia's diverse art, apparel, food, handicrafts, textiles, folklore, theatre and even music — a three-day outdoor SAARC Bands Festival was organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, an autonomous body under the Indian government, India's Ministry of External Affairs, and Seher, a cultural organization.

> "The government had asked us to make SAARC more popular among the general public, especially youth. The idea was to bring people closer, so that they could connect with their South Asian neighbours and take in the spirit of SAARC" –Sanjeev Bhargava, the founder of Seher.

"Music, dance and art had long been the preserve of the elite. Shows were accessible only to a select few in restrictive venues. Cultural events need to be within easy reach, free and for the masses," reasoned Bhargava. The organizers lined up bands from each South Asian nation and had them perform at Central Park, in the heart of New Delhi, India's capital city. They estimate about 3,000 people gathered here as inherently South Asian sounds blended with traditional and Western styles of music. "Watching musicians from eight countries play, the audience began to identify with them. The audience saw the similarities in aesthetics, beliefs, cultures, languages, thoughts and music," Bhargava added.

A second music festival of South Asian bands, planned for November 2008, was postponed in the wake of terror attacks in Mumbai during that month. The festival eventually took place in February 2009, but did not include a band from Pakistan amid strained India-Pakistan ties. The event was renamed the South Asian Bands Festival and relocated to Purana Qila, an imposing stone fort founded by the Mughal emperor Humayun in the 16th century in New Delhi. This was the first rock concert held at the fort, which until then had only hosted classical dance and theatre performances.

Pakistani musicians returned for the next South Asian Bands Festival, in December 2009. Hereon, the event was held annually and its line-up was expanded beyond musicians from each South Asian nation; a band from a SAARC observer country, namely Myanmar, South Korea, and France, was included every year from 2010 to 2014. The audience also grew. Organizers estimate the festival drew more than 10,000 concertgoers in 2014. Despite this popularity, the festival of South Asian bands has not been held since then amid a lack of political will and scarce funding. Festivalgoers, however, did fill the grounds of Purana Qila for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India Music Festival in 2017. More than 20,000 people attended the three-day event, where they heard bands from India and the 10 member nations of ASEAN. Although the musical instruments and amplifiers are now silent at Purana Qila, the good music and goodwill created at the festival of South Asian bands assures that efforts to restart this annual event would receive resounding support from audiences and musicians.

Listening, watching and interacting with bands from other countries gave these audiences and musicians a sense of the hopes, beliefs, frustrations and aspirations shared across South Asia, thus making the festival a rich cultural experience. Camaraderie developed among musicians at the festivals. Many of these artistes joined in with other bands as they performed. Some friendships even led to later musical collaborations. Each festival brought a hundred or so musicians on the same stage, giving several of them their first opportunity to perform abroad. For others, the festival marked their first time in front of a large audience. "Our trip to India is very important. It is an experience and a turning point in our professional career. The SAARC event has given us the exposure and opportunity to share our music with the rest of the region," said Siddique Sohrab of the Afghanistan-based Aryan Band after performing at the 2007 festival. The Aryan Band played again at the February 2009 festival, relishing the rare international platform for Afghan musicians. Some festival musicians also performed at the presidential palace in New Delhi and local venues during their visit to India.

Many musicians featured at past festivals voiced messages of peace and unity, and embodied the spirit of regional co-operation at these events. "If we can be musical ambassadors for our country and spread the message of peace, joy and hope, that is what we actually aim for. Music cuts through all barriers," said Soundarie David Rodrigo of Soul Sounds, an all-women choir from Sri Lanka, after they performed at the February 2009 festival. "We need to have this more often, in every SAARC country," said Faisal Kapadia of Strings, a now-defunct Pakistani band, after performing at the first festival, in 2007. Another member of Strings, Bilal Maqsood, rhetorically asked at the 2009 festival, "What can be more beautiful than Indian bands and Pakistani bands playing on the same stage?"

Resuming the annual South Asian Bands Festival can go a long way towards building regional understanding and social cohesion, especially among the performers and spectators. Similar regional music events could be organized even in other South Asian countries with funding from various sources, including corporate sponsors and multilateral organizations. Holding a festival at one of the region's many heritage sites would also draw global attention, generate tourism, and ensure the site lives on as part of the contemporary cultural heritage of all South Asians.

Conclusion

SASO and the South Asian Bands Festival are by no means the only platforms for music from the region. Amid the technology-driven surge in smartphone usage, the key to South Asian hearts may just be hidden in their music playlists, driving many to tap digital-media platforms and audio-streaming services. Other endeavors go a long way too: the Border Movements Residency, a fellowship program, takes South Asian musicians each year to Berlin, Germany's capital city, to network, produce music and perform for up to 3 months; and DesiHipHop, a US-based digital-media company, offers artist management, record-label operations, and music-based applications, to propel South Asian hip hop beyond co-option into film. However, the focus of SASO and the South Asian Bands Festival towards bringing South Asian musicians to perform on the same stage makes these initiatives highly noteworthy.

South Asia's rich and varied traditions of music are deeply rooted in the diverse lives of its people. The region's music mirrors its society, tells stories, expresses emotion, shares ideas and acts as a form of historic record. Promoting regional platforms for music can protect these traditions from neglect while helping the South Asian community connect, and, in time to come, sway them to the beat of the same drum.

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