



Research Article

People-to-People Diplomacy in South Asia: A Historical Study of SAARC's Cultural and Educational Initiatives

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Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of people-to-people diplomacy within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), focusing on the institutional mechanisms through which the organization has attempted to build regional identity through culture and education rather than through formal political or trade agreements. While SAARC's record on economic integration and conflict resolution has been extensively studied and widely criticized, its parallel investment in cultural and educational institution-building has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Using qualitative historical analysis of primary institutional documents, summit declarations, and secondary literature, the study traces the emergence and development of four key initiatives: the SAARC Cultural Centre (2009), the South Asian University (2010), the SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange (SAVE) programme, and the SAARC Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme. The article situates this institutional history within a soft power framework (Nye, 2004) and a functionalist framework (Mitrany, 1966), arguing that these initiatives represent a distinct, quieter register of regionalism that has persisted even as formal summitry stalled after 2014. The findings suggest that people-to-people diplomacy in South Asia has functioned less as a substitute for political cooperation and more as a residual channel of regional contact that survives inter-state friction, though its reach remains constrained by uneven funding, low public visibility, and dependence on the same bilateral rivalries that paralyse SAARC's political track. The article concludes that cultural and educational regionalism, though modest in scale, constitutes an under examined but historically continuous dimension of India's South Asian neighborhood engagement.

Keywords

SAARC, Cultural Diplomacy, South Asian Regionalism, Soft Power, Educational Cooperation, India's Neighbourhood Policy.

1. Introduction

SAARC was established in 1985 to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia through economic, social, and cultural cooperation. In the four decades since, its record has been assessed almost entirely through the lens of failure: stalled trade liberalisation under the South Asian Free Trade Area ([Perera, 2009](#)), and the repeated postponement of summits, most consequentially after the 2016 Uri attack, when India withdrew from the Nineteenth Summit and Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan followed ([The Diplomat, 2016](#)). This scholarship, much of it produced from within Indian strategic studies, tends to read SAARC primarily as a vehicle for managing India-Pakistan hostility and to judge it a failure because that hostility has never been resolved through the forum ([Dash, 2008](#); [Baral, 2010](#)). The implicit

standard of success in most of this literature is what might be called "hard" regionalism: binding trade commitments, functioning dispute-settlement mechanisms, and regular summitry capable of producing joint declarations on contentious political questions. Measured against that standard, the verdict on SAARC is close to unanimous, and this article does not seek to overturn it. What the hard-regionalism standard tends to obscure, however, is a second, quieter register of regional cooperation that does not aim at binding commitments or joint political declarations at all, but at the slower and less visible work of building sustained contact between the region's citizens, students, scholars, and cultural practitioners. This second register, sometimes labelled "soft" or "functional" regionalism (Mitrany, 1966), has its own institutional history within SAARC, one that has unfolded largely independently of, and proved considerably more resilient than, the summit-level political track that dominates existing assessments of the organization.

This article takes a different point of entry. Alongside its stalled political and economic track, SAARC has, since the late 1990s, built a smaller set of institutions dedicated explicitly to culture and education: a regional cultural center, a regional university, a scheme of scholarships and academic chairs, and a broadcast-content exchange programme. These were conceived, in the language of the summit declarations that authorized them, as instruments for cultivating awareness of shared civilizational heritage among the region's peoples, distinct from cooperation among their governments (SAARC, 1998, 2007). They form what this article calls "people-to-people diplomacy": efforts to build habits of regional contact intended to operate independently of, and outlast, the fluctuations of inter-governmental relations.

The research problem is twofold. First, how and why did SAARC's cultural and educational institutions emerge historically, from the cultural cooperation clauses of the 1985 Charter through their institutionalization between 1998 and 2010? Second, what do these institutions reveal about the character of Indian engagement with SAARC, given that India has been the principal financial and political sponsor of the University, the Cultural Centre, and the scholarship scheme? The objective is not to rehabilitate SAARC as a successful regional organization, a claim the record does not support, but to establish that a historically continuous, India-anchored cultural and educational track exists within SAARC, operating on a different logic from the political summitry that dominates existing scholarship (Baral, 2010).

The term "people-to-people diplomacy" requires brief clarification, since it is used loosely across policy and academic writing. Here, it refers specifically to state-sponsored or state-authorized institutions and schemes designed to create sustained contact between citizens of different countries, as distinct from both formal inter-governmental diplomacy and unorganized private contact such as tourism or migration. A university that admits students on a regional quota, a cultural centre that funds artist exchanges, a scholarship scheme that sends postgraduates abroad, and a visa-exemption arrangement that permits certain categories of citizens to travel without formal clearance all fall within this definition because each is a deliberate institutional mechanism, authorized and at least partly funded by governments, whose explicit purpose is to multiply the points of direct contact between the populations of member states rather than only between their representatives. This definition matters for the historical account that follows because it draws a boundary around what counts as evidence: the article traces the history of authorized institutions and schemes, not the far larger and more diffuse history of unofficial cultural contact, trade-driven migration, or diaspora linkages across South Asia, which, while real and significant, fall outside the institutional history this study is equipped to reconstruct.

The article proceeds as follows. It reviews the existing literature on SAARC regionalism and situates the study within cultural diplomacy and soft power theory. It outlines the historical-qualitative method used. The results present a chronological account of the initiatives, drawing on summit declarations, institutional charters, and secondary sources. The discussion interprets this history against the theoretical framework and considers the limitations of cultural regionalism as a substitute for political cooperation. The conclusion summarizes the argument and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The dominant strand of scholarship on SAARC approaches the organization as a case of failed or arrested regionalism. Comparative regionalism scholars have long measured SAARC against the European Union and, more proximately, against ASEAN, and have typically found it wanting on both institutional depth and trade integration (Dash, 2008). Intra-regional trade within SAARC has remained persistently low relative to the region's total trade volume, a fact usually attributed to the unresolved India-Pakistan relationship, non-tariff barriers, and the absence of a credible dispute-resolution mechanism within SAFTA (Perera, 2009). A second strand, informed by realist and hegemonic-stability perspectives (Kindleberger, 1973), argues that India's structural weight, roughly three-quarters of South Asia's population, economy, and territory, has produced ambivalent regional leadership: New Delhi is too large for smaller neighbors

to trust as an equal partner, yet unwilling to fully underwrite the organization's institutional development as a genuine regional hegemon might (Baral, 2010; Muni, 2003). A third strand, drawing on constructivist theory, argues that SAARC has never generated a durable regional identity comparable to the "ASEAN Way," in part because its founding logic, proposed by Bangladesh and shaped by smaller states seeking to balance India, was defensive rather than integrative (Acharya, 2001). A closely related body of work has documented the specific institutional symptoms of this weakness: the Charter's Article X requirement that decisions be taken unanimously and that bilateral and contentious issues be excluded from discussion, a provision intended to reassure smaller states of India's good faith, has also had the effect of preventing the organization from addressing precisely the disputes, chiefly between India and Pakistan, that have repeatedly caused summits to be postponed or cancelled altogether, most visibly after the 2016 Uri attack, when the Nineteenth Summit scheduled for Islamabad was abandoned and has not been rescheduled in the years since (SAARC, 1985; The Diplomat, 2016; Associated Press, 2016). Taken together, these three strands converge on a shared diagnosis: SAARC's institutional design and its members' underlying threat perceptions have combined to produce an organisation that survives procedurally but rarely delivers substantively on its founding economic and political ambitions (Dash, 1996, 2001).

A closely related descriptive literature has catalogued SAARC's technical and functional committees, in agriculture, meteorology, disaster management, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS control, and human resource development, several of which continue to operate from host locations distributed across member states (Dash, 1996). This descriptive literature is a valuable reference record but has generally stopped short of asking why cultural and educational cooperation specifically followed the institutional trajectory it did, or what that trajectory reveals about the political economy of Indian regional leadership, questions this article takes up directly.

These three strands share a common evidentiary base: the record of summits, ministerial declarations, and trade negotiations. Far less attention has been paid to the Technical Committee on Human Resource Development, later renamed to encompass culture, which oversaw the slower work of building cultural and educational institutions. This article treats that gap as significant for two reasons. First, cultural and educational cooperation is the domain in which SAARC has actually built permanent, physically located institutions with continuous operating histories, the Cultural Centre and the University, in contrast to the largely aspirational status of SAFTA. Second, it is the domain in which India's role has been least contested by smaller states, since a regional university or scholarship scheme carries none of the sovereignty-sensitive implications of a trade regime or security arrangement.

To interpret this history, the article draws on two theoretical resources rather than the neofunctionalist, constructivist, or hegemonic-stability frameworks that have anchored prior studies of SAARC's political and trade track. The first is Nye's (2004, 2008) concept of soft power, understood as the capacity of a state to shape the preferences of others through the attractiveness of its culture, values, and institutions rather than through coercion or payment. Nye's framework, developed originally to describe great-power competition, has since been extended by regional studies scholars to describe how larger states within a regional order use cultural and educational institution-building to cultivate favorable perceptions among smaller neighbors. Applied to South Asia, the framework helps explain why India has consistently been willing to fund cultural and educational SAARC institutions, bearing the largest share of the University's capital costs and hosting the bulk of its scholarship intake, even while remaining reluctant to make comparable commitments on trade liberalization or dispute settlement: cultural investment offers reputational and relational returns without requiring India to cede regulatory authority to a regional body.

The second theoretical resource is the older functionalist tradition associated with Mitrany (1966), who argued, in a body of work predating and distinct from the neofunctionalism of Ernst Haas, that international cooperation is most durable when it begins in technical, welfare-oriented domains, education, health, communication, that are insulated from high politics, on the premise that habits of cooperation in low-stakes areas can accumulate value independently of, rather than automatically spilling over into, political integration. Mitrany's functionalism differs from neofunctionalist spillover theory in an important respect relevant here: it does not predict that functional cooperation will necessarily generate pressure toward political integration; it simply argues that functional cooperation has independent value and may persist even where political integration stalls or reverses. This distinction matters for SAARC, where cultural and educational cooperation has continued, and in some respects deepened, during the very period, after 2014, when the political summit process collapsed entirely. A functionalist reading treats this persistence not as evidence of an unrealised spillover but as evidence that low-politics cooperation in South Asia has, to a limited degree, achieved the kind of insulation from high politics that Mitrany's theory anticipated.

A useful point of comparison is offered by the literature on ASEAN's own people-to-people track, which is considerably more developed than the corresponding SAARC literature and provides a benchmark against which South Asia's institutional effort can be measured. ASEAN's cultural and educational architecture, including the ASEAN University Network established in 1995 and a dense calendar of youth and cultural exchange programmes, is generally credited by comparative regionalism scholars with having contributed, over several decades, to a measurable sense of "ASEAN-ness" among younger generations of Southeast Asian elites, even though scholars are divided on how far this elite-level identity extends to mass publics (ASEAN University Network, n.d.; Acharya, 2001). The comparison is instructive rather than directly transferable: ASEAN's people-to-people institutions developed alongside, and arguably reinforced, a functioning political and economic community, whereas SAARC's equivalent institutions have had to operate without that reinforcing context, since the political and trade track they might have been expected to complement has itself remained largely unrealized. This divergence sharpens the research question addressed here, since it raises the possibility that cultural and educational regionalism in South Asia has had to function as a comparatively freestanding project, more dependent on Indian sponsorship and less supported by parallel political integration, than its Southeast Asian counterpart.

A further body of relevant literature concerns cultural diplomacy and Track II or unofficial diplomacy more broadly, which has generally argued that non-governmental and quasi-governmental channels of contact, academic exchange, cultural programming, and expert dialogue, can continue to function as channels of communication and confidence-building even when official Track I diplomacy is suspended, a proposition with obvious relevance to SAARC's post-2014 trajectory (Davidson & Montville, 1981). This literature has typically been developed with reference to Cold War-era superpower relations and specific bilateral rivalries rather than to institutionalized multilateral settings of the kind examined here, and applying it to SAARC's cultural and educational institutions requires an adjustment: unlike classic Track II initiatives, which are usually informal, ad hoc, and organized by non-state actors such as universities or think tanks, the Cultural Centre, the University, and the Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme are formally chartered intergovernmental bodies, funded and governed by the same states whose Track I relations they are, in this reading, meant to insulate against. This hybrid character, formally intergovernmental in structure but functionally insulated in practice, is a defining feature of the South Asian case that the existing Track II literature does not fully anticipate, and it is one that the functionalist framework introduced above is better suited to explain, since Mitrany's account specifically concerns cooperation that remains embedded within state authority while still being functionally separated from high politics.

No study identified in the course of this research systematically traces the institutional chronology of SAARC's cultural and educational initiatives as a connected historical sequence, from the 1985 Charter through the Cultural Centre and University to the present. This article addresses that gap.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative historical research design, appropriate to a question concerned with institutional origin, sequencing, and continuity rather than measurable outcomes. The unit of analysis is the institution, defined as a formally chartered SAARC body or scheme in the cultural or educational domain, and the period of analysis runs from 1985 to 2024.

Primary sources consist of SAARC summit declarations and Charter texts (SAARC, 1985, 1998, 2007), the founding instruments and governing-board records of the Cultural Centre and University, and statements of the Technical Committee on Human Resource Development and its successor bodies. These were supplemented by institutional websites and annual reports (South Asian University, n.d.; SAARC Cultural Centre, n.d.; SAARC Secretariat, n.d.-a, n.d.-b), used to establish factual sequencing and mandate rather than interpretive claims. Secondary sources consist of the academic literature on SAARC regionalism, comparative regional-organization studies, and the theoretical literature outlined above.

The analytical procedure followed three steps. First, a chronological institutional timeline was constructed by cross-referencing summit declarations against the founding dates and mandates of individual bodies, in order to establish which, summit or ministerial decision authorized each institution and how long the interval was between authorization and operational launch. Second, each institution's mandate and activity was classified according to whether it primarily targeted elite or expert audiences, such as scholars and academic chairs, or mass and youth audiences, such as broadcast content exchange and student scholarships, in order to assess the intended reach of people-to-people diplomacy across different segments of the regional population. Third, the historical account was read against the two theoretical frameworks described above to assess the degree to which the pattern of institution-building is more con-

sistent with a soft-power interpretation, emphasizing India's disproportionate sponsorship, or a functionalist interpretation, emphasizing the insulation of cultural cooperation from the political deadlock affecting SAARC's summit process.

The periodization was derived inductively from the source material. Three break points emerged consistently: 1985 to 1998, when cultural cooperation existed only as Charter language; 1998 to 2010, when the decision to build institutions was taken and implemented; and 2010 to the present, during which the resulting institutions have operated, with the 2014 to 2016 collapse of summit-level activity serving as an internal marker rather than a break, since the institutions under study continued operating across it. This periodization is used descriptively in the results and interpretively in the discussion, where continuity across the 2014-2016 marker is the key evidentiary basis for the functionalist claim advanced there.

Limitations should be stated plainly. The study relies on institutional and documentary sources rather than interviews or survey data, and therefore cannot directly measure attitudinal effects on South Asian publics, only institutional design and historical persistence. Documentation is also uneven across member states; SAARC Secretariat and Indian government sources are considerably more accessible than equivalent material from other states, an asymmetry the analysis notes rather than disguises.

4. Results

4.1. *Origins in the 1985 Charter and Early Stagnation, 1985 to 1998*

The SAARC Charter, adopted at the founding summit in Dhaka in December 1985, listed the promotion of cultural cooperation and mutual understanding among the organization's core objectives, placing culture alongside economic, social, and technical cooperation rather than subordinate to them (SAARC, 1985). In its first decade, however, cultural cooperation existed largely as stated aspiration rather than institutional programme. The organization's early technical machinery concentrated overwhelmingly on agriculture, rural development, and health, areas of little political sensitivity, while cultural cooperation remained folded into the Technical Committee on Human Resource Development without dedicated budget or standing institution (Dash, 1996). Historical accounts describe this period's cultural cooperation as occasional festivals, artist exchanges, and study tours, real but episodic rather than institutionally embedded. This asymmetry is unsurprising given the circumstances of SAARC's founding: the organization emerged amid considerable mutual suspicion among smaller members regarding Indian intentions, and its architects, principally Bangladesh, deliberately designed Article X to exclude bilateral and contentious issues from the agenda in order to secure smaller states' participation (Dash, 2008). Cultural cooperation, precisely because it touched no contentious bilateral question and required no state to cede any measure of sovereignty, could in principle have been prioritized from the outset; that it was not suggests that in SAARC's first decade, institution-building bandwidth, financial and administrative, was directed toward the developmental sectors that donor governments and international financial institutions were most willing to support, rather than toward culture, which lacked an equivalent external constituency of interested funders during this period.

4.2. *The 1998 Colombo Turn: The Decision to Build a Regional Cultural Institution*

The decisive shift occurred at the Tenth SAARC Summit, held in Colombo in July 1998. The Heads of State or Government meeting there formally recognized South Asia's shared civilizational continuum as a historical basis for regional cooperation and, in response, welcomed Sri Lanka's offer to host a meeting of Ministers of Cultural Affairs to prepare a practical action plan, including the establishment of a dedicated South Asian cultural centre (SAARC, 1998). This 1998 decision marks the point at which cultural cooperation moved from rhetorical inclusion in the Charter toward a concrete institution-building agenda, though the process that followed took nearly a decade to mature. A Second Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Culture, held in Colombo in October 2006, directed the preparation of a formal SAARC Agenda for Culture, which was finalized by SAARC senior officials meeting in Kathmandu in December 2006 and approved by the Standing Committee in New Delhi in early 2007. The Agenda for Culture was launched by the Heads of State or Government at the Fourteenth Summit, held in New Delhi in April 2007 (SAARC, 2007), the same summit at which the intergovernmental agreement establishing the South Asian University was signed (Government of India, 2007). Later that year, the Programming Committee discontinued the Technical Committee's cultural mandate and transferred it to a dedicated cultural affairs track.

The SAARC Cultural Centre, established in Colombo in 2009, was the outcome of this decade-long process. It was established as a regional institution with its own governing board comprising representatives of all member states, headquartered in Colombo, and mandated to promote regional unity through cultural integration and to support preserva-

tion of South Asia's tangible and intangible heritage under the Agenda for Culture (SAARC Cultural Centre, n.d.). Its programme spans dance, music, drama, painting, cinema, and archaeology, and it has convened regional festivals, an annual Charter Day commemoration, and a running lecture series bringing scholars from across member states into dialogue, an activity that has continued into the mid-2020s notwithstanding the collapse of SAARC's political summit process after 2014. Sri Lanka's hosting of the Centre is notable: it is one of the few instances in which a smaller member state, rather than India, has served as the institutional seat of a major regional body, reflecting the lower sovereignty stakes attached to cultural cooperation. The Centre's governing board structure, comprising nominated representatives from each member state alongside the SAARC Secretariat and the Sri Lankan Ministry of Cultural Affairs, mirrors the governance model later adopted for other SAARC regional centers, and its programming has evolved over its first fifteen years of operation from an initial emphasis on documenting endangered intangible heritage practices toward a broader calendar that now includes a recurring public lecture series bringing historians and archaeologists from different member states into direct scholarly exchange, collaborative publication projects on shared regional history, and periodic engagement with diaspora and diplomatic communities, evidenced by joint programming with individual member states' diplomatic missions in Colombo. This evolution from a narrowly heritage-preservation mandate toward a broader scholarly convening function suggests an institution that has, over time, found a stable operating niche within the space the Agenda for Culture created for it, even as the political summit process that had authorized that Agenda fell into abeyance after 2014.

4.3. The 2005 to 2010 University Project: from Proposal to Campus

Educational cooperation followed a parallel but distinct trajectory, driven more explicitly by Indian initiative. At the Thirteenth Summit, held in Dhaka in November 2005, the Indian Prime Minister proposed a South Asian University providing research and teaching facilities of international standard, drawing students and faculty from across the region. The proposal was formalized at the Fourteenth Summit in April 2007, where member states signed the Inter-Governmental Agreement for the University's establishment and agreed it would be hosted in India, with India bearing capital costs while operational costs would be shared according to an agreed formula (Government of India, 2007). A Government of India project office was established in 2008 under a former Vice-Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a foundation stone for the permanent campus was laid at a hundred-acre site in Maidan Garhi, south Delhi, in May 2008. Task forces from all member states drafted the University's statutes and governance rules through 2008 and 2009, approved at the Sixteenth Summit in Thimphu in 2010. The University opened to its first cohort in August 2010, initially from temporary premises in Chanakyapuri, offering programmes in economics, international relations, biotechnology, computer science, applied mathematics, sociology, and legal studies (South Asian University, n.d.).

By the mid-2020s, the University's academic offering had expanded from its original seven postgraduate and doctoral fields to include undergraduate and integrated degree programmes as well, including engineering, alongside its founding disciplines of applied mathematics, biotechnology, computer science, development economics, international relations, legal studies, and sociology, with admission for most programmes conducted through a dedicated entrance test alongside recognition of national-level examinations such as India's Joint Entrance Examination for engineering candidates. The University's funding structure has remained consistent with its founding agreement: India has borne the substantial majority of capital expenditure, including the cost of the permanent hundred-acre Maidan Garhi campus, while the University's recurrent operating budget is shared among all eight member states according to a formula agreed at the University's establishment, meaning that, in practice, India's financial exposure to the institution's success has always been considerably larger than that of any other member state, a pattern that recurs across every institution examined in this study and is returned to directly in the discussion. The University's admissions architecture reflects a deliberate design toward regional rather than purely bilateral cooperation: a common regional entrance examination is open to nationals of all SAARC member states, and its degrees carry recognition across the University Grants Commission structures of all eight member states under the terms of the founding Inter-Governmental Agreement (Government of India, 2007), distinguishing it from ordinary Indian universities that happen to enroll foreign students. At the same time, its location in Delhi, its dependence on Indian capital financing, and the continued involvement of Indian academic leadership in its administration mean that, in practice, it has functioned as an India-hosted regional public good rather than a genuinely dispersed multinational institution, a pattern consistent with the soft power interpretation developed above (Nye, 2004).

4.4. Complementary Schemes: Scholarships, Chairs, and Broadcast Exchange

Alongside the Cultural Centre and University, SAARC's people-to-people architecture includes smaller, longer-running schemes. The SAARC Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme, administered by the Secretariat with member-state contributions, offers a structured annual allocation of fellowships and scholarships for study and research spanning

economics, environment, agriculture, mass communication, and sociology, hosted primarily, though not exclusively, at Indian institutions ([SAARC Secretariat, n.d.-b](#)). Parallel to this multilateral scheme, India has separately operated bilateral scholarship and cultural-exchange programmes for SAARC nationals through its Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, channels that predate and run alongside it and that, together, make India by a wide margin the largest single provider of higher-education access to students from other SAARC countries.

The SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange programme, generally known by its acronym SAVE, was established to encourage the exchange of television and radio content, including documentaries, cultural programming, and educational broadcasts, among the public broadcasters of member states, with the aim of increasing the visibility of neighboring countries' cultures within each other's domestic media environments, a channel of people-to-people contact aimed at a mass audience rather than the comparatively small elite audiences reached by the University and the Chair and Fellowship Scheme. Youth-oriented cooperation has been pursued through periodic SAARC youth exchange programmes and youth award schemes, coordinated through the Secretariat's social affairs track, though these have generally operated at smaller scale and with less institutional continuity than the Cultural Centre or the University.

4.5. Mobility Infrastructure: the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme

Underpinning these institutions is a less visible but foundational mechanism: the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme (SVES), through which member states permit designated categories of citizens to travel across the region without individual visa clearance. Its origin predates the Cultural Centre and the University by two decades. At the Fourth SAARC Summit, held in Islamabad in December 1988, the Heads of State or Government explicitly linked the scheme's rationale to the value of people-to-people contact among the populations of member states, and directed that a Special Travel Document be developed for this purpose. The scheme became operational in 1992 and has since been reviewed periodically by the SAARC Council of Ministers, with the list of eligible categories expanded over time to the twenty-four categories in use in the mid-2020s, spanning dignitaries, judges of higher courts, parliamentarians, senior officials, businesspersons, journalists, and sportspersons, among others ([SAARC Secretariat, n.d.-a](#)). Unlike the Cultural Centre or the University, the scheme was never intended to reach a mass public; its explicit design target was a professional and elite travelling population whose regular cross-border movement was judged likely to reinforce habits of regional familiarity among precisely the classes of citizen, officials, journalists, and businesspeople, who shape domestic public perception of neighboring countries.

The scheme's subsequent history illustrates, more sharply than any other institution examined here, the vulnerability of even long-standing people-to-people mechanisms to acute bilateral crisis. Following a terrorist attack at Pahalgam in April 2025, the Government of India suspended the SVES for Pakistani nationals with immediate effect, cancelling previously issued travel documents and requiring departure within forty-eight hours; Pakistan responded with reciprocal cancellations and border closures within days ([All India Radio News, 2025](#)). This episode, at the very end of the period covered here, demonstrates that the mobility infrastructure underlying SAARC's people-to-people track, unlike the standing institutional operations of the Cultural Centre and University, remains directly exposed to the state of India-Pakistan relations, qualifying the functionalist claim developed later.

A related but formally non-SAARC initiative worth noting is the South Asia Foundation, established in 2000 by UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madanjeet Singh as an independent organisation operating through autonomous chapters in each member state and funding regional institutions of excellence ([South Asia Foundation, n.d.](#)). Although outside SAARC's formal structure, its activity illustrates that the appetite for South Asian cultural and educational regionalism has not been confined to inter-governmental initiative alone.

4.6. Persistence after 2014: Cultural Cooperation During Summit Collapse

The period after the Nineteenth Summit, scheduled for Islamabad in 2016 and cancelled following India's withdrawal in the aftermath of the Uri attack ([The Diplomat, 2016](#)), is instructive for assessing the relative durability of SAARC's cultural and educational track against its political track. No SAARC summit has been convened since 2014, and the organization's political and trade cooperation machinery has been effectively dormant for a decade. The Cultural Centre and the University, by contrast, have continued to operate without interruption through this period: The Cultural Centre has continued its lecture series, cultural-heritage documentation projects, and Charter Day commemorations into the mid-2020s, while the University has continued to admit regional cohorts of students and to expand its academic programme offering. The Visa Exemption Scheme's 2025 suspension for Pakistani nationals, discussed above, stands as a partial exception to this pattern of institutional insulation, since it shows that the mobility layer of people-to-people diplomacy, unlike its standing institutional layer, remains directly coupled to acute bilateral crisis. This divergence be-

tween insulated institutions and exposed mobility infrastructure is central to the argument developed in the discussion below.

4.7. *Elite and Mass Reach: A Classification of the Four Initiatives*

Applying the classification procedure set out in the methods section, the four principal initiatives traced above divide unevenly between elite-oriented and mass-oriented channels of contact. The University and the Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme are unambiguously elite-oriented: both target a small, academically selected population, in the low thousands at most across the University's entire history and in the low hundreds annually under the Scholarship Scheme, and both confer benefits, a postgraduate or doctoral degree, a funded fellowship, that accrue disproportionately to individuals already positioned to enter national policy, academic, or professional elites. The Cultural Centre occupies an intermediate position: its governing structure and formal programming, lecture series, heritage documentation projects, are elite-oriented in the sense of primarily engaging scholars, artists, and cultural officials, but its festivals and public-facing cultural events are designed for broader audience participation within host communities, giving it a wider, if shallower, reach than the University or the Scholarship Scheme. SAVE is, by design, the only initiative among the four aimed explicitly at a mass audience, since its entire rationale rests on inserting neighboring countries' cultural and educational broadcast content into the domestic television and radio environments that ordinary citizens, rather than students or officials, actually consume.

This classification carries an important interpretive implication that is developed further in the discussion below: the initiative with the greatest theoretical potential to shape mass public perception, and therefore the greatest theoretical relevance to a soft power framework concerned with shaping the preferences of foreign publics rather than foreign elites, is also the initiative about which the least independent documentation could be located in the course of this research. Where the University and the Cultural Centre maintain active institutional websites, annual activity reporting, and a continuous public presence, SAVE's contemporary operational scale, broadcast hours, and audience reach are considerably harder to establish from published sources, a pattern consistent with the discussion's later argument that South Asian cultural regionalism has achieved greater institutional durability than public visibility.

5. Discussion

The historical record supports two related but distinct interpretive claims, corresponding to the two theoretical frameworks introduced above.

The first is a soft power claim about the character of Indian sponsorship (Nye, 2004, 2008). Across every major institution examined here, with the partial exception of the Sri Lanka-hosted Cultural Centre, India has served as principal financier, institutional host, or both. India bore the capital cost of the University's campus, hosts the largest scholarship intake under the Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme, and operates parallel bilateral channels through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations that dwarf the SAARC-administered scheme in scale. This is consistent with a soft power reading of Indian regional strategy: cultural and educational investment offers New Delhi a way of cultivating goodwill and structural centrality within the region that does not require it to accept binding constraints on trade policy or dispute settlement of the kind that a functioning SAFTA or a regional security mechanism would demand. It is a mode of regional leadership that is generous in resources but light in the institutional obligations it imposes on the sponsor, precisely the combination that critics of India's ambivalent regional leadership toward SAARC's political and economic institutions have identified as a recurring pattern (Baral, 2010; Muni, 2003). Read this way, cultural and educational regionalism is not a departure from India's broader SAARC posture but an extension of it into a domain where the costs of leadership are lower and the reputational returns are more assured.

This interpretation gains further support from a comparison across domains. Where India has been asked to accept binding, rules-based constraints, tariff schedules under SAFTA, a regional dispute-settlement body, a common security framework, it has historically negotiated slowly, hedged with exceptions and sensitive-item lists, and in practice preferred bilateral arrangements with individual neighbors over multilateral SAARC-wide commitments (Kaura & Rani, 2020; Aryal & Bharti, 2023). Where India has instead been asked to provide resources, capital for a university campus, operating funds for a scholarship scheme, diplomatic sponsorship for a cultural agenda, it has generally done so readily and, in the case of the University, has assumed a financial burden considerably larger than its formal one-eighth share as a single SAARC member state would require. The pattern that emerges is not one of general Indian reluctance toward SAARC, which the trade and security literature might suggest, but of a more specific reluctance to accept multilateral rule-bound constraints on its own policy autonomy, combined with a consistent willingness to fund multilateral public goods that expand its own regional visibility and goodwill without correspondingly constraining its freedom of

action. Cultural and educational institution-building sits squarely within the second category, which is why it has proceeded, relative to SAFTA and to SAARC's stalled security cooperation, with comparatively little friction and comparatively steady Indian sponsorship across three decades and multiple changes of government in New Delhi. This interpretation is further strengthened by the observation that India has continued, and in some respects expanded, this sponsorship precisely during the period in which China's own bilateral cultural diplomacy in the same neighborhood, Confucius Institutes, scholarship schemes, and Belt and Road-linked cultural programming, has grown substantially (Kumar, 2024; Brattberg & Feigenbaum, 2021), consistent with the broader logic of soft power competition that Nye's framework anticipates among states with overlapping spheres of influence.

The second is a functionalist claim about institutional durability (Mitrany, 1966). The continuity of the Cultural Centre's and University's operations through the decade of summit collapse after 2014 is difficult to explain within a purely political reading of SAARC, which would predict that all activity should track the state of India-Pakistan relations. Instead, the cultural and educational track has displayed a degree of insulation consistent with Mitrany's functionalist expectation that welfare-oriented, technical cooperation can accumulate independent institutional value and persist through political friction, provided it is structured to avoid direct dependence on summit-level decision-making for its routine operation. Both the Cultural Centre and the University are governed by standing boards that meet on their own institutional calendars rather than requiring summit authorization for continued operation, which appears to be a significant, if largely incidental, source of their resilience.

This qualification bears directly on the strength of the functionalist claim itself. The 2025 SVES suspension did not touch the Centre's governing board, the University's admissions cycle, or the Scholarship Scheme's annual allocation, all of which continued on schedule; it disabled only the specific mobility channel through which Pakistani citizens in affected categories could travel to India without a visa. The distinction that emerges from this episode is therefore not between a resilient cultural and educational track and a fragile one, but between two different kinds of institutional design within that track: standing bodies with their own governing boards and budgets, which have proved insulated from summit-level and even acute bilateral disruption, and cross-border mobility arrangements, which by their nature require the continuous, active cooperation of both states' border and security agencies and are therefore immediately reversible whenever either government judges the security case for reversal to be pressing. A functionalist reading of this distinction would suggest that Mitrany's insulation thesis holds well for the institution-building dimension of people-to-people diplomacy but holds far less well for its mobility dimension, since institutions can be chartered with a degree of operational autonomy from the states that fund them, whereas cross-border movement of individual citizens cannot, in the current South Asian security environment, be similarly insulated from the immigration and security prerogatives of the states whose territory is being crossed.

This institutional-design reading invites an obvious counter-argument, which deserves to be addressed directly rather than left implicit: perhaps the Cultural Centre and the University were never tested by the crisis of April 2025 not because their institutional design insulates them, but because neither institution had anything that either government needed to suspend. On this alternative reading, the Cultural Centre and the University persisted because they are low-stakes, elite-facing bodies that carry no direct security relevance, while the SVES was suspended precisely because it did, a matter of political salience rather than institutional architecture. This is a genuine ambiguity in the evidence, and the historical record assembled here cannot fully resolve it, since no comparable crisis has yet tested whether India or Pakistan would suspend the Cultural Centre's governing board seat or the University's admissions quota if either institution acquired the same security salience the SVES came to carry after Pahalgam. Two considerations nonetheless favor the institutional-design reading over the political-irrelevance reading, without fully settling the matter. First, the Cultural Centre and the University are not obviously lower-stakes than the SVES in reputational or resource terms, India's capital commitment to the University campus alone considerably exceeds the administrative cost of maintaining the visa scheme, which suggests their continuity cannot be explained by triviality alone. Second, the specific mechanism by which the SVES was disabled, a unilateral executive suspension announced within a day of the attack, was available precisely because the scheme requires no standing multilateral body to withdraw from; disabling the University or the Centre would instead have required India to unwind capital investment, withdraw from a governing board, or abrogate an intergovernmental agreement, a materially higher-friction action regardless of the institutions' political salience. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and the paper's institutional-design claim is best read as identifying a necessary structural condition for resilience rather than a sufficient one: low political salience may have kept the Centre and University off the list of possible targets in 2025, but their standing governance structure is also what would make them costlier to unwind even if that salience changes.

At the same time, the further limitations of this cultural and educational track should not be understated, and the discussion would be incomplete without registering them. First, reach remains narrow. The University enrolls a few thou-

sand students at most, and the Scholarship Scheme distributes a modest annual number of awards; set against a regional population approaching two billion, the direct beneficiary population of SAARC's elite-oriented cultural and educational institutions is vanishingly small. SAVE, designed to reach mass audiences, has attracted comparatively little independent scholarly or journalistic documentation of its actual programming reach or public visibility, which itself suggests a modest real-world footprint relative to its stated ambition. Second, the same bilateral frictions that paralyse SAARC's political track are not wholly absent from the cultural and educational track either: cross-border travel and visa restrictions between India and Pakistan in particular have long constrained the practical mobility of students, scholars, and cultural practitioners even where SAARC institutions formally welcome nationals of all member states, meaning that the University and the Cultural Centre operate, in practice, as pan-regional institutions with an uneven regional footprint rather than as fully realized expressions of the two-billion-person cultural community their founding declarations invoke. Third, public awareness of these institutions within South Asian societies appears limited; unlike the political failures of SAARC, which are widely reported, the organization's cultural and educational achievements have received comparatively little media or public attention, which limits their capacity to function as the kind of identity-building soft power instrument that Nye's framework would predict, since soft power depends on the target audience being aware of, and favorably disposed toward, the institutions in question, a condition of visibility that this history suggests South Asian cultural regionalism has not yet fully achieved.

These limitations qualify without negating the central finding. People-to-people diplomacy within SAARC has neither delivered the regional identity that constructivist accounts of successful regionalism describe elsewhere (Acharya, 2001), nor collapsed alongside the political and trade track. It occupies an intermediate position: a real, continuously operating, India-anchored institutional legacy more durable than SAARC's summit diplomacy, but whose scale and visibility remain too modest to constitute, alone, a foundation for regional identity formation.

6. Conclusion

This article has traced the historical emergence of SAARC's cultural and educational institutions from their origins in the 1985 Charter's cultural cooperation clause, through the pivotal 1998 Colombo summit decision to build a dedicated cultural institution, to the establishment of the Cultural Centre in 2009 and the University in 2010, alongside the longer-running Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme and the SAVE broadcast exchange programme. Read against a soft power and functionalist theoretical framework, this history indicates that India's sponsorship of regional cultural and educational institutions forms a continuous, financially disproportionate strand of its SAARC engagement, and that this strand has demonstrated an institutional resilience through the post-2014 collapse of SAARC summitry that the organisation's political and trade track has conspicuously lacked. At the same time, the modest scale, limited public visibility, and persistent mobility constraints affecting these institutions mean that their contribution to a shared South Asian regional identity remains partial and uneven rather than transformative.

The distinction drawn in the discussion between insulated standing institutions and exposed mobility infrastructure also carries a specific implication for policymakers responsible for South Asian regional engagement. If the durability of people-to-people diplomacy in South Asia depends on the degree to which a given mechanism is structurally separated from the immediate control of bilateral security relations, then institutions with independent governing boards and multi-year funding cycles, of the kind represented by the Cultural Centre and the University, are likely to remain more reliable long-term channels of regional contact than mechanisms, such as visa arrangements, that require continuous discretionary cooperation between security and immigration authorities. This suggests that future investment in South Asian cultural and educational regionalism, whether by India or by other member states, may achieve more durable returns by strengthening standing institutions than by expanding mobility schemes alone, even though the latter are frequently the more visible and more publicly discussed instruments of people-to-people policy.

The historical account developed here has practical implications for how SAARC's overall record should be assessed. Scholarship and policy commentary that measures SAARC solely against its failure to achieve trade integration or political reconciliation risks overlooking a genuinely continuous, if modest, institutional legacy in the cultural and educational domain, one that has outlasted the summit process that most analyses treat as the organisation's defining activity. Future research would benefit from primary survey or interview-based work directly assessing University alumni and Cultural Centre programme participants, in order to move beyond the institutional-documentary method employed here and establish whether these initiatives have produced measurable attitudinal effects among the individuals who have passed through them, a question this historical study is positioned to frame but not, on the evidence available to it, to answer.

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