

Original Research Article

Contact Zones and Epistemic Equity: SAARC Cultural Diplomacy, Shared Heritage, and Regional Integration in South Asia

Kismode Doha¹, Asif Anwar^{1*}, Md Samim¹, Abdul Karim Sk², Mir Masudul Hoque³, Md Toufik Molla³¹Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India -202002²Department of Arabic, Faculty of Arts, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India -202002³Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India -202002**Article History**

Received: 28.02.2026

Accepted: 24.04.2026

Published: 27.04.2026

Journal homepage:<https://www.easpublisher.com>**Quick Response Code**

Abstract: South Asia contains deeply interconnected histories, cultural routes, and shared traditions, yet its museums and public narratives often present heritage through rigid national frames shaped by colonial knowledge systems. This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and archival documentary research. It examines how the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and its cultural arm, the SAARC Cultural Centre, have sought to create alternative regional imaginaries through sustained cultural programming. Using official records, activity archives (2015-2025), research grant calls, and institutional publications, the paper analyses Talk Series lectures, Cultural Trails seminars, research grants, festivals, artist camps, and literary initiatives. The paper argues that these programmes should not be read as evidence of completed regional integration, but as the gradual construction of institutional conditions for dialogue, recognition, and cross-border cultural exchange. Through the lenses of cultural diplomacy, decolonial theory, and Pratt's concept of the contact zone, the manuscript shows how SAARC initiatives create spaces where shared heritage can be debated and reinterpreted beyond nationalist boundaries. Particular attention is given to SAARC's recent museum-oriented research agenda, which reflects a broader shift from identifying shared heritage toward rethinking how that heritage is interpreted, curated, and communicated to the public. The paper concludes by proposing a practical framework for decolonised museum practice based on relational curation, inclusive participation, transnational collaboration, and digital connectivity. Despite political and financial constraints, SAARC's cultural institutions remain significant as low-intensity but durable mechanisms of regional engagement in South Asia.

Keywords: SAARC, Cultural Diplomacy, Decolonised Museology, Intangible Cultural Heritage, South Asian Heritage, Regional Solidarity.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia is one of the most culturally dense regions on earth, home to more than 1.9 billion people who share rivers, myths, culinary traditions, architectural vocabularies, textile languages, and centuries of entangled history, yet who are habitually represented in museums, school curricula, and popular media as inhabitants of rigidly separate national civilisations. The irony is acute: the very material culture that most eloquently speaks of cross-border continuity is routinely curated to articulate discontinuity. Colonial-era Museum practices, which prioritised taxonomic classification and national provenance over relational storytelling, are a

principal reason for this fragmentation (Hein, 2000; Gamberi, 2019). Post-colonial states, in inheriting these institutions, largely perpetuated the categories they inherited.

Against this backdrop, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, established in Dhaka in 1985, has gradually developed institutional conditions for greater regional understanding through sustained cultural, scholarly, and public engagement. This paper describes that evolving framework as a "cultural architecture" for regional unity. It does not eliminate political tensions or interstate disagreements, but it helps preserve channels of interaction through

*Corresponding Author: Asif Anwar

Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India -202002

which shared heritage can be interpreted, discussed, and reimaged across national borders. This cultural architecture functions through a network of recurring initiatives, including lecture series, thematic seminars, research grants, artist camps, film screenings, children's festivals, culinary events, and museum-related forums. Many of these programmes are coordinated by the SAARC Cultural Centre, established in 2009 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, as SAARC's principal cultural institution with the explicit mandate of promoting "regional solidarity by way of cultural integration and intercultural conversation for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the region" (Islam & Karim, 2019).

The SAARC Research Grants 2026, issued by the SCC under the theme "Interpreting Shared Heritage: Cross-Cultural Narratives in Museums in the SAARC Region," represents the most recent and clearest institutional expression of this architecture. By directing scholarly attention to museums as sites of narrative construction and calling explicitly for the inclusion of marginalised voices, decolonisation of curatorial practices, and cross-cultural linkage, the 2026 Call acknowledges what museum studies scholars have long argued: that museums are not neutral repositories but "active agents in the construction of cultural narratives" (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, p. 1). In making this acknowledgement, institutional policy, SAARC signals a meaningful shift in how the organisation conceptualises the relationship between culture and regionalism.

This paper asks: how, and to what extent, does SAARC's broader cultural programming ecosystem, its Talk Series, seminars, workshops, annual festivals, research grants, and allied activities, constitute a coherent cultural-diplomatic project capable of producing decolonised, cross-cultural museum narratives and genuine regional solidarity? To answer this question, the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the inquiry within relevant theoretical frameworks. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 provides an overview of SAARC's institutional mandate and cultural objectives. Sections 5 through 8 analyse specific programmatic domains in detail. Section 9 synthesises findings into a framework for decolonised museum narratives. Section 10 concludes with policy reflections.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interlocking theoretical traditions: cultural diplomacy theory, decolonial thought, and the concept of the contact zone.

2.1 Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Joseph Nye's foundational concept of soft power, "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (1990, p. 166), provides the first analytical lens. Nye identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy as the three

primary sources of a state's soft power. At the regional level, multilateral cultural diplomacy extends this logic: rather than a single state projecting attraction, a consortium of states collectively cultivates shared aesthetic and intellectual resources that build mutual goodwill and identity. Cull (2008) provides a more granular taxonomy of public diplomacy, distinguishing listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting as distinct but complementary instruments. SAARC's Talk Series, research grants, and festival programming map with particular clarity onto Cull's "cultural diplomacy" and "exchange diplomacy" categories: they involve the deliberate engagement of foreign publics through the export of ideas, arts, and cultural practices. Crucially, however, SAARC's model differs from state-centric cultural diplomacy in that it operates through a multilateral, consensus-driven body that, in principle, privileges regional benefit over any single national interest.

2.2 Decolonial Theory

Walter Mignolo's (2011) concept of the "colonial matrix of power" identifies how colonial logics of knowledge production continue to operate in post-colonial institutions, including museums. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies* argues for the systematic dismantling of research frameworks that centre Western epistemologies at the expense of indigenous and local knowledge systems. Applied to museology, these frameworks illuminate the persistent tendency of South Asian museums to reproduce colonial taxonomies, placing "high culture" objects in frames that valorise metropolitan aesthetics over local and vernacular traditions, and privileging monological national narratives over relational, trans-regional ones (Gamberi, 2019; Bautista, 2013). The 2026 SAARC Research Grants explicitly invoke this decolonial imperative by calling for examination of "museums' colonial legacies and decolonisation" and by seeking to "explore ways to include marginalised voices in heritage narratives" (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, pp. 2–3).

2.3 Contact Zones

Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) concept of the "contact zone" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 34) provides a nuanced vocabulary for understanding SAARC cultural events. Pratt's formulation acknowledges that intercultural encounter is not inherently harmonious; it is a site of negotiation. This is analytically productive for SAARC contexts, where political tensions between member states (most notably between India and Pakistan) mean that cultural forums carry significant diplomatic weight precisely because they maintain channels of exchange when political channels are closed. The SAARC Cultural Centre functions, in Pratt's terms, as a deliberately convened contact zone: a space where scholars, artists, and cultural practitioners from member

states encounter one another's traditions in a structured setting designed to surface commonality without erasing difference.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and archival documentary research. Three primary data sources are used.

First, official SAARC and SCC documents are analysed, including the SAARC Charter (1985), the SAARC Agenda for Culture (2007), the SAARC Research Grants Call for Proposals 2026, the SCC Activity Archive (2015–2025), and the SCC Publications Programme. These documents are treated as institutional texts whose language, thematic priorities, and structural choices encode particular visions of regional identity, heritage, and solidarity. CDA, as developed by Fairclough (2007), is used to examine how these texts construct relations between member states, position cultural heritage as a regional rather than purely national asset, and frame the relationship between knowledge production and political solidarity.

Second, the SCC Activity Log, a comprehensive record of all SCC-organised and SCC-supported events from 2015 to 2025, covering over 100 distinct activities including Talk Series sessions, film days, seminars, workshops, art camps, children's literary festivals, culinary exhibitions, and heritage forums, is subjected to systematic content analysis. Activities are coded thematically against five dimensions: (a) intellectual exchange and knowledge production; (b) artistic and creative co-production; (c) festive and community-oriented programming; (d) youth and intergenerational engagement; and (e) heritage and museum-focused inquiry. This quantitative profiling of qualitative data enables an assessment of programmatic breadth, frequency, and thematic coherence.

Third, the SAARC research grants archive covering thematic cycles from 2017 to 2021 on Cultural Heritage and Climate Change, and the 2026 cycle on Shared Heritage in Museums, is analysed as a longitudinal record of how the SCC has progressively constructed and institutionalised a framework for cross-cultural knowledge co-production. Particular attention is paid to the progression of themes, the selection criteria applied, the publication outcomes, and the geographic distribution of grantees.

The study is interpretive in epistemological orientation and draws on the tradition of qualitative institutional analysis (Yanow, 2000). The study does not claim causal impact, but assesses institutional intent, continuity, and programmatic design. The limitations of the approach are acknowledged: it relies on publicly available institutional documentation and does not include primary fieldwork, oral histories from grantees,

or museum ethnography. Future research should supplement the present documentary analysis with qualitative interviews with SCC staff, research grant recipients, museum curators, and event participants.

4. SAARC: Institutional Architecture and the Cultural Mandate

SAARC was formally established on 8 December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with seven founding member states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and Afghanistan joining as the eighth member at the 14th Summit in 2007 (Islam & Karim, 2019). The combined region represents approximately 3% of the world's geographical area and approximately 21% of its population, over 1.9 billion people, making SAARC the most populous regional organisation on earth.

Article I of the SAARC Charter identifies eight core objectives, of which several carry direct cultural significance: to "promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life"; to "accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region"; to "contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems"; and to "promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields" (Islam & Karim, 2019). Culture, in the Charter's original framing, was one axis of a multidimensional cooperative framework alongside agriculture, trade, energy, and poverty alleviation.

However, the specifically cultural mandate of SAARC was substantially deepened at the 13th Summit in Dhaka in November 2005, when Heads of State recognised that "culture could play a major role in promoting relations and understanding among South Asian countries" (Islam & Karim, 2019). This recognition catalysed the adoption of the SAARC Agenda for Culture at the Second Meeting of SAARC Culture Ministers on 31 October 2007, which instituted a range of activities, including the promotion of SAARC culture online, the production of cultural source materials, and exchange programmes. The establishment of the SAARC Cultural Centre in Colombo in 2009 gave this agenda an institutional home and a dedicated operational budget.

By 2014, at the 18th Summit in Kathmandu, SAARC leaders had committed to implementing the cultural agenda and promoting a "cultural trail concerning major Buddhist historical places in the region"; to "adopt appropriate means for the protection and restitution of all cultural properties, sites and heritage"; and to facilitate "access to major famous and sacred religious sites of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity" (Islam & Karim, 2019). The year 2016 was designated the SAARC Year of Cultural Heritage, signalling the elevation of heritage as a strategic regional priority.

This institutional evolution is significant because it demonstrates that SAARC's engagement with culture is not peripheral to its mandate but increasingly central to it. The SCC's programmatic record, analysed in the sections that follow, shows how this institutional

mandate has been translated into concrete activities across the decade. The comprehensive programmatic record of the SCC (2015-2025) is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: SCC Programmatic Ecosystem (2015–2025)

Activity Type	Primary Theme(s)	Key Locations	Years	Heritage Diplomacy Contribution
Intellectual Exchange (Talk Series & Special Lectures)	Archaeology, Gender, Decolonisation, Numismatics	Colombo (Headquarters), Online	2023-2025	Facilitates "intellectual diplomacy"; creates a relational South Asian archive.
Epistemic Architecture (Research Grants & Seminars)	Buddhist, Hindu, & Islamic Cultural Trails; Museum Narratives	Colombo, India, Afghanistan	2017-2019, 2026	Fosters collective self-reliance; challenges colonial taxonomies through co-produced knowledge.
Creative Co-production (Artist Camps & Symposia)	Visual Arts, Sculpture	Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan	2015-2019	Builds non-verbal solidarity; provides a "contact zone" for practitioners from conflicting states.
Affective Infrastructure (Festivals & Film Days)	Cinema, Puppetry, Culinary Arts (Rice/Spices)	Colombo, Bhutan, Galle, Rural Sri Lanka	2015-2025	Drives people-to-people connectivity; engages grassroots and youth audiences through shared sensory heritage.
Vernacular Heritage (Handicrafts & Literary Fests)	Folktales, Artisanal Traditions, Women in Culture	Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka	2015-2021, 2025	Repatriates marginalised/intangible traditions; promotes gender-conscious and inclusive heritage narratives.

5. The SAARC Talk Series: Intellectual Diplomacy and Decolonial Re-Narration

Among the most consistently maintained and programmatically significant of the SCC's activities is the SAARC Talk Series, an ongoing series of public lectures and discussions hosted at the SAARC Cultural Centre in Colombo. Between 2023 and 2025 alone, the SCC delivered twenty-three confirmed sessions of the Talk Series, with attendance by scholars, cultural practitioners, and dignitaries from across member states (SCC Activity Archive, 2023–2025). In 2024, the series was supplemented by a programme of Special Lectures delivered by invited scholars including Dr. Pramod Jaiswal, Professor Ghani-ur-Rahman (from Pakistan), Dr. Selvakumar Veerasamy (Sri Lanka), and Ms. Ashwini Natesan (India), illustrating the pan-regional reach of the intellectual exchange.

The Talk Series is analytically significant for several reasons. First, it constitutes what might be termed "intellectual diplomacy", the sustained exchange of ideas and perspectives across national borders within a structured, institutionally supported setting. Unlike state-sponsored cultural diplomacy, which tends to project a sanitised national image, the Talk Series opens space for scholarly disagreement, critical reflection, and complex interpretation. The inclusion of lectures on archaeology, women's contributions to culture (the "Remembering 20th Century South Asian Women in Culture" forum, March and May 2025), and cultural heritage constitutes

an ongoing, peer-engaged process of re-narrating the region's intellectual and artistic history.

Second, the thematic breadth of the Series signals an inclusive approach to knowledge that resists the reduction of "South Asian culture" to any single religious, ethnic, or national tradition. Sessions have covered subjects as diverse as Buddhist archaeology, Islamic architecture, Hindu iconography, women's literary traditions, and contemporary cinema, suggesting an editorial policy that actively curates cross-sectoral and trans-denominational perspectives. This pluralism is itself a form of decolonial practice: it declines to privilege one master narrative while suppressing others.

Third, the Talk Series generates institutional memory. As lectures and their associated publications accumulate, they constitute a growing archive of South Asian cross-cultural scholarship produced within a regional, multilateral framework rather than within the disciplinary and national structures of individual universities or state academies. This is consonant with Mignolo's (2011) call for what he terms "epistemic disobedience", the production of knowledge from within suppressed or marginalised perspectives rather than from the universalising perspective of former colonial metropolises.

The SCC's Special Lecture on Archaeology held on 26 June 2023 and the celebrated Special Lecture by Professor Osmund Boparachchi on 28 July 2023, one

of the world's leading numismatists and experts on Indo-Greek civilisation, exemplify how the Talk Series can function as a platform for precisely the kind of transnational, decolonial scholarship that the 2026 Research Grants aim to stimulate. Bopearachchi's work on coins and cultural contact along the Silk Road and in the Gandharan tradition explicitly undoes nationalist boundaries, demonstrating that the material culture of South Asia belongs to entangled rather than separate histories.

In short, the Talk Series functions as an ongoing intellectual contact zone (Pratt, 1991) in which scholars from across the region encounter each other's research, challenge inherited categories, and collectively build a more relational, decolonised understanding of South Asian culture and heritage. When seen against the backdrop of the 2026 museum theme, which calls for the examination of how museums might "re-interpret and present shared cultural heritage", the Talk Series emerges as an essential complement to grant-funded research: it sustains the intellectual community within which grant work is embedded.

6. Seminars, Workshops, Art Camps, and Literary Festivals: Fostering Cultural Diplomacy and Inclusive Heritage

Beyond the Talk Series, the SCC maintains a rich ecology of programme types that collectively constitute a comprehensive framework for cultural diplomacy. These include thematic research seminars on cultural trails, workshops on intangible cultural heritage, SAARC Artist Camps, handicraft exhibitions, film festivals, children's literary festivals, and culinary expositions. Each warrant specific analytical attention.

6.1 Thematic Research Seminars and the Cultural Trails Programme

The SCC's most intellectually ambitious programmatic strand outside the research grants themselves is the recurring series of thematic research seminars on "Cultural Trails." Each seminar brought together scholars, archaeologists, historians, and heritage professionals from across member states to examine shared material and intangible legacies that transcend national borders.

These seminars are significant for at least three reasons. First, they model the scholarly practice that the 2026 Research Grants seek to institutionalise at a wider scale: the co-production of cross-cultural knowledge by researchers from multiple member states, using shared heritage as the object of inquiry rather than national traditions as the unit of analysis. Second, by sequentially engaging Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic traditions, the Cultural Trails programme embodies an inclusive, non-hierarchical approach to South Asia's religious and cultural diversity, one that implicitly challenges the sectarian nationalisms that have periodically disrupted SAARC's political functions. Third, the seminars

generate published outputs that contribute directly to the scholarly literature on South Asian heritage and museum practice, thus building the evidential base for the kind of "inclusive methodologies" and "interconnected histories" that the 2026 Call explicitly mandates (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, p. 3).

The 2021 proposal for a "SAARC Research Seminar and Research Grants for Protection of Cultural Heritage from the Impact of Climate Change and Disasters", although placed on hold owing to COVID-19 disruptions, demonstrates the SCC's capacity for programmatic innovation and its willingness to link cultural heritage to contemporary global challenges. The 2026 pivot to museum narratives and decolonisation represents a further evolution of this innovative trajectory.

6.2 Artist Camps, Handicraft Workshops, and Puppet Festivals

The SCC's Artist Camps, held annually in rotating member states, including Nepal (2017), Maldives (2019), Bhutan (2016), Sri Lanka (2018), and Afghanistan (2015), bring together visual artists from across the region for periods of co-creative practice. The SAARC Sculpture Symposium (Pakistan, 2019), the SAARC Puppetry Fest (Sri Lanka, July 2025, a three-day event), and the SAARC World Puppetry Day (Galle, April 2024) illustrate the SCC's commitment to forms of artistic practice that require no translation and cross linguistic barriers with particular ease.

From a cultural diplomacy perspective, these events are significant because they demonstrate that regional solidarity need not be constructed solely through elite intellectual exchange. The SAARC Puppetry Fest 2025, for example, is a form of popular culture engagement that reaches audiences, particularly children and young people, who may not attend academic seminars or read grant-funded research. Puppetry, moreover, is itself a form of intangible cultural heritage with deep roots across the SAARC region, from shadow puppet traditions in India and Sri Lanka to string puppetry in Pakistan and Afghanistan. An event celebrating this tradition within a SAARC framework is simultaneously a cultural celebration and an act of heritage repatriation: it returns a marginalised vernacular art form to a position of regional dignity.

The SAARC Handicraft Exhibition and Workshop programme held in Bangladesh (2017), Bhutan (2018), Nepal (2019), and others similarly recuperates artisanal traditions that colonial museum practices often relegated to "decorative arts" or "ethnographic curiosities," positioning them instead as central to the region's shared cultural vocabulary. This curatorial re-framing is precisely the kind of "decolonisation" that the 2026 Research Grants invite scholars to examine in museum contexts.

6.3 Literary Festivals and Women's Cultural Forums

The SAARC Literary Festival (Bangalore, 2015), the SAARC Literary Award and Ceremony (held in Bhutan in 2019, Sri Lanka in 2018 and 2021), and the SAARC Children's Literary Festival (Colombo, August 2025, celebrating South Asian Folktales) represent the SCC's engagement with the literary and narrative dimensions of shared heritage. Literature, particularly folk literature and oral narrative, is a domain of cultural heritage that museums have historically struggled to accommodate, given its performed, ephemeral, and community-embedded character. The SCC's literary programming thus complements the museum-heritage focus of the 2026 grants by demonstrating that "shared heritage" encompasses not only artefacts and monuments but living narrative traditions.

The "Remembering 20th Century South Asian Women in Culture" forum (March and May 2025), delivered both in-person and online, is particularly notable for its gender-conscious approach to heritage. By centring women's culturally marginalised contributions in both colonial and post-colonial heritage narratives, this forum directly enacts the 2026 grant objective to "explore ways to include marginalised voices in heritage narratives" (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, p. 3). It also demonstrates that the decolonial agenda within SAARC programming is not confined to ethnicity and nation but extends to gender, reflecting a more intersectional understanding of whose heritage counts and who gets to speak.

7. Research Grants as Structured Knowledge Production

The SAARC Research Grants programme is arguably the most durable and consequential of the SCC's instruments for building regional solidarity through culture. By directly funding original scholarly research on themes of shared cultural heritage, the programme creates a pan-regional community of scholars who have a material and intellectual stake in the project of cross-cultural knowledge production. Its significance extends beyond the individual research outputs it generates; it constitutes what this paper terms "epistemic architecture", a structural arrangement that shapes what questions can be asked, by whom, within what intellectual community, and for whose benefit.

7.1 The Thematic Progression of Research Grants

The SCC's research grants have followed a coherent thematic progression that maps onto the Cultural Trails programme and the broader SAARC cultural agenda. The 2017 grant cycle on Buddhist Cultural Trails (Sri Lanka), the 2018 cycle on Hindu Cultural Trails (India), and the 2019 cycle on Islamic Cultural Trails (Afghanistan) collectively constituted a tripartite examination of the region's major religious and civilisational heritage systems. This tripartite structure is itself a decolonial gesture: by treating Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam as equally legitimate objects of

scholarly inquiry within a single research programme, the SCC implicitly challenges the hierarchies that colonial scholarship imposed on South Asian religions and the geopolitical nationalisms that subsequently weaponised those hierarchies.

The 2021 proposed cycle on Intangible Cultural Heritage and Food Storage (subsequently placed on hold), and the 2026 cycle on Museum Narratives and Shared Heritage, extend the programme's reach into new scholarly domains, food heritage, material culture, and museology, while maintaining its core commitment to cross-cultural, relational inquiry. The 2026 Call is notable for its explicit engagement with decolonial theory: it names "colonial legacies and decolonisation," "marginalised voices," and "inclusive methodologies" as focal concerns (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, pp. 2–3), and frames museums explicitly as "active agents in the construction of cultural narratives" rather than neutral depositories (p. 1). This represents a significant degree of theoretical sophistication that positions the 2026 grant programme at the cutting edge of contemporary museum studies discourse.

7.2 Structural Features Supporting Epistemic Equity

The structural design of the SAARC Research Grants programme merits detailed attention. The US\$3,000 per grantee award (2026 figures), distributed in two instalments, US\$1,500 at commencement and US\$1,500 upon submission of the final report (SCC, 2026, p. 1), is modest by the standards of major research funding bodies such as the European Research Council or major foundations. However, in the context of SAARC member states, many of which are low-income or lower-middle-income economies, it represents meaningful support, particularly for early-career and mid-career researchers who lack access to substantial institutional research budgets. The submission process, requiring transmission through SAARC Divisions of the respective Foreign Ministries, ensures that proposals are officially recognised at the governmental level, lending them diplomatic as well as scholarly legitimacy. The Mid-term Review process, in which all grantees present progress reports to a Team of Experts and incorporate their recommendations, creates a peer-learning community that transcends national boundaries. The eligibility rule that scholars who have received SAARC grants within the last five years are not eligible to reapply is designed to maximise the geographic and demographic spread of beneficiaries across member states, ensuring that the research community constituted by the programme is genuinely pan-regional. This structural commitment to breadth of representation reflects an understanding that epistemic decolonisation requires not just new research topics but new researchers: voices from different national, linguistic, disciplinary, and social backgrounds.

7.3 Research Grants and Collective Self-Reliance

Perhaps most significantly, the research grants programme instantiates one of the SAARC Charter's original objectives: to "promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia" (Islam & Karim, 2019). By enabling South Asian scholars to co-produce knowledge about South Asian heritage within a South Asian institutional framework, the programme reduces the epistemic dependence on Western academic institutions and publishing industries that have historically characterised the study of South Asian culture. This dimension of the research grants programme connects directly to the decolonial agenda articulated in the 2026 Call's objective to "develop inclusive methodologies and foster an understanding of interconnected histories" (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, p. 3). Inclusive methodologies, in this context, means not only methodologies that include marginalised communities as research subjects but also methodologies that include South Asian researchers as producers of knowledge about their own region, within institutions of their own making.

8. Cultural Festivals and People-to-People Connectivity

If the Talk Series and research grants constitute the intellectual infrastructure of SAARC's cultural architecture, the annual festivals and popular cultural events constitute its affective infrastructure, the activities through which regional solidarity is not argued but felt. The SCC's activity record for 2015-2025 documents an extensive programme of popular cultural events spanning film, food, dance, handicrafts, and visual arts, distributed across member states and designed to reach beyond elite scholarly audiences.

8.1 Film Festivals and Film Days

The SAARC Film Festival, held annually since at least 2015 in Colombo and rotating annually through member states, is perhaps the SCC's most consistently high-profile public event. Film is a particularly potent medium for cross-cultural solidarity because it combines narrative, visual, and musical languages in a single art form, and because cinematic storytelling has historically been one of the most powerful vehicles through which South Asian peoples have imagined each other's lives. The SAARC Film Days, a complementary series of single-screening events that present films from individual member states to Colombo-based audiences, with venue partners including Ananda College and Hindu College Colombo, as well as community screenings in Seruwila and Passara (SCC Activity Archive, 2025). The inclusion of community screenings in non-metropolitan venues is significant: it reflects a commitment to reaching audiences beyond Colombo's cultural elite and extends the programme's people-to-people reach into provincial and rural communities.

8.2 Food Festivals and Culinary Heritage

The SAARC Festival of Rice Culinary Arts and Spice Exhibition held in Bhutan in both 2024 and 2025 (Paro and Thimphu) exemplifies the SCC's creative approach to heritage programming. Rice is a staple food across virtually all SAARC member states, and its cultivation, preparation, and ceremonial uses constitute a vast intangible cultural heritage that connects communities across national borders. By presenting rice as a shared cultural artefact with its associated agricultural knowledge, culinary traditions, and ritual significance, the festival performs, in a public and festive register, precisely the kind of cross-cultural narrative work that the 2026 Research Grants invite scholars to examine in museum contexts. Food festivals, in this sense, function as living museums: they make heritage tangible, sensory, and participatory in ways that static museum displays typically cannot.

8.3 Children's Literary Festivals

The SAARC Children's Literary Festival (Colombo, 30-31 August 2025, "Celebrates South Asian Folktales") represents what is perhaps the most strategically significant long-term investment in SAARC's cultural architecture: the cultivation of regional solidarity among children and young people. Research on national identity formation consistently shows that the cultural identities acquired in childhood are the most durable and influential (Anderson, 2020; Hobsbawm, 1992). By introducing South Asian children to the folktales of their neighbours' stories of comparable structural types (trickster tales, moral fables, origin myths, love stories) that reveal deep civilisational commonalities beneath the surface of national particularity, the festival plants the seeds of a regional cultural imagination in the generation that will inherit and operate SAARC's institutions in the coming decades.

Folktales, moreover, are a form of intangible cultural heritage that is particularly well suited to the decolonial agenda: they are oral, vernacular, community-embedded, and non-elite, belonging to the "marginalised voices" that both the 2026 Research Grants and the SCC's broader programming seek to include. A children's literary festival that celebrates South Asian folktales is thus simultaneously a cultural event, a pedagogical intervention, a heritage preservation exercise, and a decolonial act.

8.4 The SAARC Heritage Forum 2025

The SAARC Heritage Forum 2025, held in Colombo from 30 September to 2 October 2025 under the theme "SAARC: Promoting Regional Art, Culture, Heritage Sites, Museums and Archives", is the most direct precedent for the 2026 Research Grants' museum-focused agenda. By convening professionals from across member states in the fields of art, heritage management, museum practice, and archival studies, the Forum provided a platform for precisely the kind of expert dialogue that a decolonised museum narrative

framework requires. The Forum's explicit inclusion of "museums and archives" in its thematic remit signals the SCC's recognition that institutional memory, the ways in which cultural objects, documents, and records are collected, catalogued, and made accessible, is as important as the objects themselves in shaping public understanding of shared heritage.

9. Towards Decolonised Museum Narratives: A Practical Framework

The foregoing analysis suggests that SAARC's cultural programming ecosystem has, over the decade

from 2015 to 2025, assembled the intellectual, human, and institutional resources needed to support a substantial shift in how South Asian museums interpret and present shared cultural heritage. Building on this analysis, the present section proposes a framework for decolonised museum narratives oriented towards regional unity. This synthesis is visualised in Figure 2, which illustrates the necessary overlaps between intellectual, epistemic, and affective infrastructures to produce decolonised.

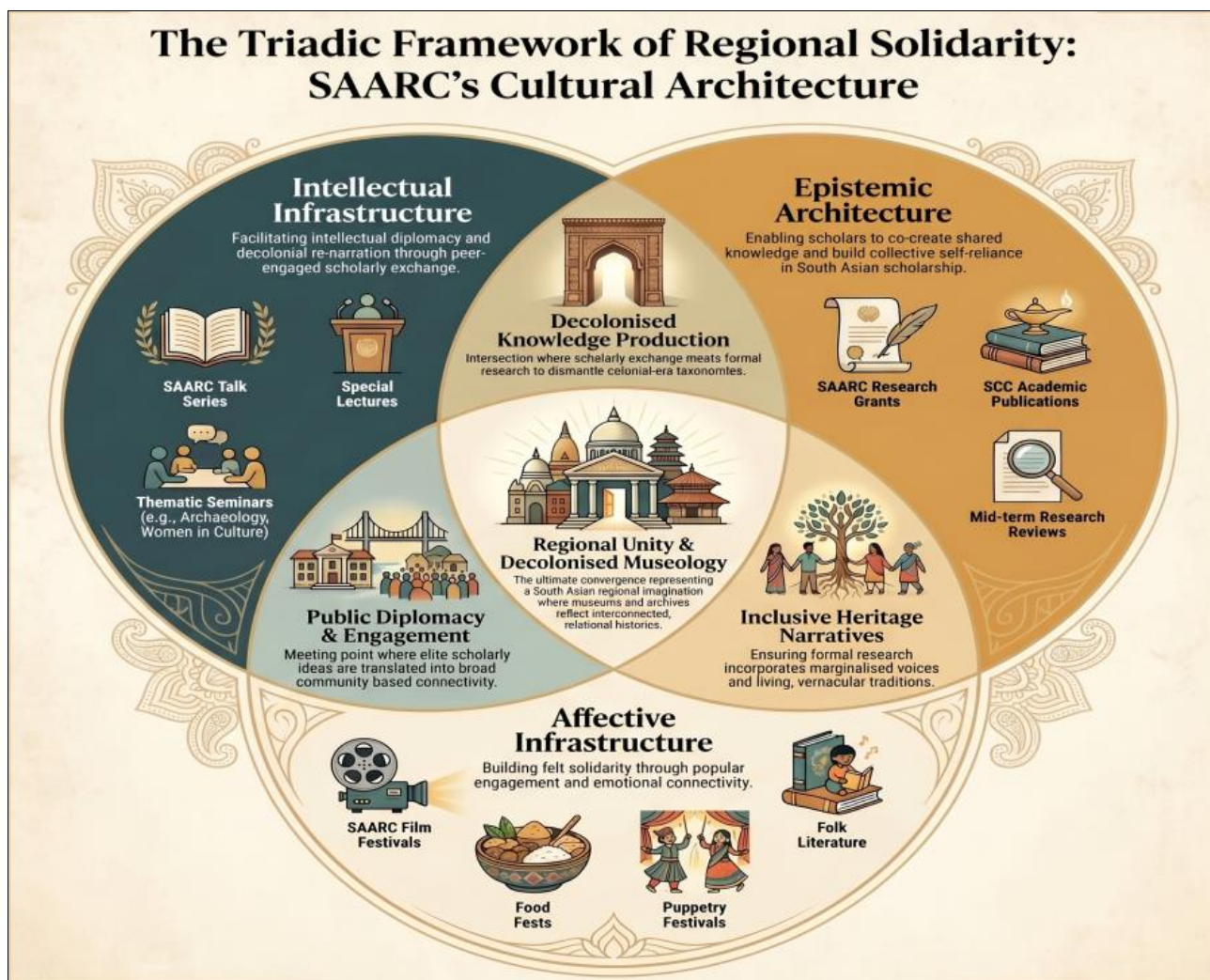


Fig. 1: Triadic Framework of Regional Solidarity

9.1 Relational Curatorial Practice

The first pillar of the framework is relational curatorial practice: the systematic reorientation of museum collections and interpretive frameworks away from national provenance and towards cross-cultural connectivity. This requires curators to ask, of any given object, not only "where was this made?" and "who made it?" but "what relationships does this object embody, and with whom?" A Mughal-era manuscript, a Buddhist votive sculpture, a shared weaving pattern: these objects are archives of relationship as much as they are

expressions of local tradition. Relational curatorial practice would make these archival dimensions legible to visitors through interpretive texts, comparative displays, and digital connectivity with sister objects in other member-state museums.

SAARC's Cultural Trails programme provides both the intellectual precedent and the scholarly network for this reorientation. Researchers who have participated in the Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic Cultural Trails seminars and research grants already possess the cross-

border comparative expertise needed to support relational curatorial practice. A SAARC-funded directory of scholars available to advise museums on cross-cultural interpretation, building on the SCC's existing intellectual community, would be a practical next step.

9.2 Inclusive Voice Architecture

The second pillar is inclusive voice architecture: the systematic incorporation of marginalised communities, including women, lower-caste groups, indigenous communities, religious minorities, and rural communities, into the processes by which heritage is identified, interpreted, and displayed. The 2026 Research Grants explicitly seek to "explore ways to include marginalised voices in heritage narratives" and to "develop inclusive methodologies" (SAARC Cultural Centre, 2026, p. 3). This objective connects directly to the decolonial tradition: as Smith (1999) argues, decolonisation requires not only different research questions but different researchers and different research relationships, ones built on reciprocity, consent, and community benefit rather than extraction.

SAARC's existing programmes offer practical models: the Women's Cultural Forums (2025), the Children's Literary Festival, the Handicraft Workshops, and the Puppetry Fest all engage communities whose knowledge and practices are systematically underrepresented in formal museum collections. A recommendation emerging from this analysis is that future SCC Research Grants require applicants to demonstrate a community engagement component, a methodological commitment to working with, rather than simply studying, the communities whose heritage is being researched.

9.3 Trans-National Exhibition Partnerships

The third pillar is trans-national exhibition partnership: the development of joint museum exhibitions and travelling collections that physically embody the cross-cultural narratives that SAARC scholarship produces. A travelling exhibition of "Shared Textiles of South Asia," co-curated by museum

professionals from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, would make visible the material connections that national collections routinely fragment. A joint digital archive of musical instruments common to multiple member states, drawing on the SCC's expertise in intangible cultural heritage, would extend this approach to the domain of sound and performance. These initiatives need not be expensive: SAARC's existing network of cultural centres, foreign ministries, and SCC contact points provides the institutional infrastructure for inter-museum coordination at minimal additional cost.

9.4 Digital Heritage and Archive Connectivity

The fourth pillar is digital heritage connectivity: the development of interoperable digital archives that allow museum collections across member states to "talk" to each other, enabling visitors and researchers alike to trace the relational histories of objects currently held in isolation. The SAARC Secretariat's existing information and communications technology infrastructure, and its Memoranda of Understanding with UNCTAD and ESCAP (Islam & Karim, 2019), provide a foundation for this connectivity. A SAARC Digital Heritage Platform linking the collection databases of major museums across all eight member states would be a transformative, long-term investment in the collective self-reliance mandated by the SAARC Charter.

9.5 Policy Translation: Operationalising the Decolonised Museum Framework in the SAARC Region

While previous sections proposed a conceptual framework for rethinking museum narratives, institutional reform requires practical pathways for adoption. Museums in the SAARC region often operate under financial limits, bureaucratic routines, uneven digitisation, and inherited colonial classification systems. For this reason, the framework must be translated into feasible and scalable actions. Table 2, therefore, converts the four analytical pillars into implementable measures, each linked to an existing SAARC programmatic precedent. In doing so, the paper moves from diagnosis to institutional strategy.

Table 2: Operationalising the Decolonised Museum Framework

Framework Pillar	Practical Action for Museums	SAARC Institutional Precedent	Expected Outcome
Relational Curatorial Practice	Interpret objects through trade routes, migration, faith networks, and shared craft traditions rather than national labels alone	Cultural Trails Programmes	Cross-border historical understanding
Inclusive Voice Architecture	Include oral histories, women's narratives, folk communities, artisans, and local custodians in exhibition design	Women's Forums, Literary Festivals, Puppetry Events	More representative heritage narratives
Transnational Exhibition Partnerships	Co-curate temporary exhibitions with museums from other SAARC states	Artist Camps, Handicraft Exchanges	Regional trust and shared visibility
Digital Heritage Connectivity	Create linked catalogues, shared metadata, and virtual exhibitions	Heritage Forum 2025, ICT cooperation	Wider access and collaborative research

10. DISCUSSION: CHALLENGES, LIMITATIONS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The analysis presented in this paper presents a broadly positive assessment of SAARC's cultural architecture and its potential to support decolonised museum narratives. However, intellectual honesty requires acknowledgement of significant challenges.

First, the political constraints on SAARC's functioning are real and documented. The SAARC Charter's provision that "bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations" (Islam & Karim, 2019) has meant that the organisation's political functions have been periodically paralysed by bilateral tensions, most notably the postponement of the 19th Summit in 2016 following the Uri terrorist attack and the subsequent diplomatic rupture between India and Pakistan. When political channels close, cultural channels often become the last remaining means of contact, but they also become more fraught, carrying political freight they were not designed to bear. The challenge for SAARC's cultural architecture is to remain robust in periods of political tension while remaining politically sensitive enough to avoid becoming a flashpoint for the very conflicts it seeks to transcend.

Second, the SCC's budget constraints, reflected in the relatively modest US\$3,000 research grant award and the limited geographic reach of some events, mean that the cultural architecture described in this paper, while impressive in its breadth of activities, remains thinner in some member states than others. The concentration of Talk Series events in Colombo, while institutionally logical (the SCC is headquartered there), means that scholars and cultural practitioners in, for example, Afghanistan, Bhutan, or the Maldives may have unequal access to the programme's intellectual resources. A rotational model for hosting Talk Series events, similar to the one already used for Artist Camps and film days, would address this imbalance.

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted SAARC's cultural programming between 2020 and 2022, placing multiple planned events, including the proposed Research Grants on Cultural Heritage and Climate Change, on indefinite hold. The resilience of the SCC's recovery, with a full and ambitious programme of events in 2023 and especially 2025, is encouraging, but it also highlights the fragility of cultural programming in the face of systemic shocks.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, the question of impact whether SAARC's cultural architecture is actually changing how South Asian museums curate their collections, how publics understand shared heritage, or how politicians conceptualise regional solidarity remains an open question. Therefore, future research should include impact assessments of specific SAARC cultural programmes, audience reception

studies at SAARC events, and longitudinal tracking of museum curation practices in member states.

11. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the cultural work of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation deserves greater scholarly attention as a form of regional institution-building beyond formal diplomacy. In a region often defined by conflict, mistrust, and interrupted summits, the activities of the SAARC Cultural Centre reveal a quieter but persistent mode of cooperation grounded in heritage, scholarship, and public exchange. The evidence examined here suggests that Talk Series forums, Cultural Trails seminars, research grants, festivals, literary initiatives, and creative exchanges do not dissolve political divisions. Yet they help maintain channels through which South Asians encounter one another as cultural neighbours rather than strategic rivals. Their significance lies less in symbolic celebration than in the institutional reproduction of contact, memory, and shared reference points. SAARC's cultural architecture, this paper concludes, is not proof that South Asia has already become unified. Rather, it is evidence that the region possesses an active institutional framework through which shared heritage, cross-border cultural dialogue, and decolonised museum interpretation can be developed over time. Even with these constraints, SAARC's cultural architecture matters. It shows that regionalism in South Asia may advance not only through treaties and summits, but through stories, archives, exhibitions, scholarship, and repeated acts of cultural encounter.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (2020). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. In *The New Social Theory Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 282–288). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060963-46>
- Bautista, S. S. (2013). *Museums in the digital age: changing meanings of place, community, and culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Cull, N. J. (2009). *Public diplomacy: Lessons from the past* (Vol. 12). Los Angeles: Figueroa Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2007). *Discourse and contemporary social change* (Vol. 54). Peter Lang.
- Gamberi, V. (2019). Decolonising Museums: South-Asian Perspectives. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 29(2), 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135618631800069X>

- Hein, H. (2000). *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1992). *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Islam, M. T., & Karim, M. E. (2019). A Research Guide on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). *Islam, MT, & Karim, ME (2019). A Research Guide on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Hauser Global Law School Program. https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4170848*
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press.
- Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Basic Books.
- Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 91, 33–40.
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2007). *SAARC Agenda for Culture*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2017). *SAARC Research Seminar on Buddhist Cultural Trails: Report*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2018). *SAARC Seminar, Research Grant and Publications on Hindu Cultural Trails*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2019). *SAARC Research Seminar on Islamic Cultural Trails: Journey through Time and Space*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2023–2025). *SCC Activity Archive [Comprehensive record of SCC-organised events, 2023–2025]*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo. <https://saarcculture.org>
- SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC). (2026). *Call for Proposals: SAARC Research Grants 2026 — Interpreting Shared Heritage: Cross-Cultural Narratives in Museums in the SAARC Region*. SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.
- SAARC Secretariat. (1985). *Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation*. SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu.
- SAARC Secretariat. (2015). *Project-Based Collaboration in Agriculture, Rural Development and Food Security: Overview of Ongoing Projects*. SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books / University of Otago Press.
- Thornton, T. P. (1991). Regional organization in conflict management. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 518(1), 132–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271629151800101>.
- Yanow, D. (2000). *Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis*. Sage Publications.

Cite This Article: Kismode Doha, Asif Anwar, Md Samim, Abdul Karim Sk, Mir Masudul Hoque, Md Toufik Molla (2026). Contact Zones and Epistemic Equity: SAARC Cultural Diplomacy, Shared Heritage, and Regional Integration in South Asia. *EAS J Humanit Cult Stud*, 8(2), 81-91.
