

**WELCOME ADDRESS BY AMBASSADOR (RETIRED) NIRUPAMA MENON RAO, FOUNDER-TRUSTEE,
THE SOUTH ASIAN SYMPHONY FOUNDATION ON THE OCCASION OF “CHIRAGH” – THE DEBUT
CONCERT OF THE SOUTH ASIAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, MUMBAI, APRIL 26, 2019**

Honourable Vice President of India, Honourable Governor of Maharashtra, distinguished guests, dear friends

On behalf of the South Asian Symphony Foundation, Conductor Viswa Subbaraman and all members of the South Asian Symphony Orchestra, I extend a warm and most cordial welcome to the Honourable Vice President, the Honourable Governor and all present. We are here to celebrate the idea of South Asia, a region whose sons and daughters we are, sharing the same atmospheric space, mountains and rivers, customs and folklore, music and artistic traditions. Our orchestra, the South Asian Symphony Orchestra, is playing for you today a musical offering dedicated to fraternal ties, peace and mutual understanding among the more than one and a half billion people who inhabit the region from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, from the Hindu Kush and the Himalaya mountains to the shining waters of the Indian Ocean. For the outside world, we are seen as South Asians, people of the great subcontinent, whose civilizational influence has stretched far beyond our traditional borders.

To all those who are involved in our mission to express the idea of South Asia, co-existence and cooperation are more than mere metaphors. These concepts when lived, and acted upon, can truly transform the direction we take to the future – a future of wellbeing, progress and gross regional happiness for all.

Orchestras teach us this concept of co-existence. They promote the art of listening, of empathy, of mutual trust. Walls crumble – and communication flows. Our orchestra, our Chiragh, aims at that. We wish to illuminate the darkness, we want to shine a light on the path to our shared future. Let us not forget that we can grow strong together. Let us sweat in peace, rather than bleed in war.

Our orchestra has members from India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, besides some musicians from the South Asian diaspora. Our conductor, Viswa Subbaraman, the son of parents from Tamil Nadu, grew up in Texas. As you can see, we come to you from so many directions, bearing the gift of music.

We hope you will enjoy this evening's programme which has been brought before you as an expression of our collective passion for peace, and our desire to embody through our music, our common humanity, our love of fundamental freedoms and democracy. Two of the pieces played today, have their world premieres – Hamsafar by Lauren Braithwaite, and Bhadke, by Kamala Sankaram, both young composers, both women, we are proud to say. The Egmont overture by Beethoven is a timeless exposition of one individual's brave struggle against foreign domination, the piece by Bizet is a wonderful expression of exuberance and liberation, and the arias sung by soloist Tharanga Goonetilleke of Sri Lanka will again transport you all, I am sure, to a world of deep and sublime emotion. I sincerely hope you will look back on tonight's performance with joy, convinced of the need for unity and harmony amidst our many diversities. Please do share in the joy we have in bringing this offering – this Gitanjali – to you.

I wish to invite the Honourable Vice President to the podium to kindly deliver his speech.