Distinguished guests, my colleagues from the Government of India and all friends gathered here, it is indeed my privilege to address this Second High Level Meeting on South-South Cooperation for Child Rights in Asia and the Pacific. From today, we are starting technical deliberations that will focus on the three themes of this meeting: adolescence, early childhood development and urban settings. Before we start discussions on these themes, we have this first session on progress review in promoting and practising South-South Cooperation for Child Rights in Asia and the Pacific since the first HLM in Beijing in 2010.

Although, in the inaugural ceremony, Ms. Sujata Mehta, Additional Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India has already shared views of my country on South-South Cooperation. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a few additional points with focus on child rights.

South-South cooperation has been practised for decades, it has gained far greater prominence in recent years as a direct result of economic growth and capacity development in the region. Countries have increasingly found it desirable to establish direct partnerships among themselves for development or humanitarian purposes.

From the time of our emergence as a free nation, we have recognized the importance of human resource capacity building as a requirement for economic growth and independent policy making. This recognition has informed the course of our cooperation with other developing countries with whom we share the aspiration of eradicating poverty and under development.

Over the years, we have considerably expanded our cooperation portfolio to include infrastructure, power transmission, etc. We believe that South-South cooperation is both an ever-increasing reality and a source of huge promise and potential for development and for fulfilment of child rights.

Before I talk about child rights, I would like to inform or as you would already know, India is home to the largest child population in the world. The Indian Constitution has a framework within which ample provisions exist for the protection, development and welfare of children. There are a wide range of laws that guarantee children their rights and entitlements as provided in the Constitution and in the UN Convention. The Government of India has been making consistent efforts to ensure
that each child born in this vast and complex country gets the best start in life, thrives and develops to his or her full potential. This is a complex task, keeping in mind the diverse socio-cultural, economic and political milieu that children in our country belong to, but it is our responsibility to ensure that children are not denied their basic fundamental rights.

Today, global awareness of human rights, including children’s rights, is at an all time high, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has brought about an understanding that children are not the property of parents or guardians, nor objects of generosity or goodwill, but are rights-holders, just like adults. This understanding has marked a shift in the way we view children, enabling us to see them as individuals with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development. The obligations of the Governments in implementing child rights is underpinned by the concepts of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child.

Against this background of our commitments towards realisation of child rights and the significance we attach to South-South Cooperation, I would now like to talk about the initiatives taken by India.

As we know, Asia and the Pacific Region face challenges that are multifaceted, multidimensional and interlinked, and require collective resolve to address them. We are committed to counter terrorism, trafficking in women & children and prostitution, monitoring of drug offences and cooperation on police matters through various regional forums and conferences.

India has entered into bilateral and multilateral agreements, Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in Criminal Matters (MLAT) and Joint Working Groups (JWG) with various countries. We have operationalised MLATs with 31 countries which include Asia Pacific countries -- Mongolia, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In addition, Treaties with Hong Kong, China, Bangladesh and Indonesia have been signed. These agreements help in combating transnational organized crimes, trans-border terrorism, crimes and other serious offences, such as, drug trafficking, money laundering, counterfeit currency, smuggling of arms of explosives, etc. The Joint Working Groups also serve as a useful platform to exchange information and strengthen international cooperation to combat international terrorism and transnational organized crime.

We have signed MoUs/ Agreements with Cambodia, Pakistan and Vietnam. These are essentially a framework designed to facilitate exchange of information and combat organized crime and terrorism.
India is a participant at the SAARC Summit of Interior Ministers that meets annually to discuss developments in strengthening commitment towards countering terrorism and trafficking.

Our partnerships with UN agencies, NGOs and professionals have led to the formation of a South Asia Forum against Human Trafficking. The Forum facilitates exchange of information and experiences and supports activities of National, Regional and Local networks. A South Asia Professionals against Trafficking unit has also been set up, comprising of committed police personnel, prosecutors/lawyers, judges/magistrates, doctors and media persons, as a non-formal pressure group of professionals against trafficking.

We all know that Asia is home to the largest share of the world's children. The problem across the continent is that this is not always a safe and secure place for every child. Asia is also home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies. The challenge is to ensure that economic growth does not overlook the imperative of public good. We have been taking several steps to ensure children are protected wherever they are.

India is also a Governing Board Member of South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) which is an apex body of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and is inter governmental in nature. The other members are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through SAIEVAC we aim to prevent and respond to all forms of neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence against children through a comprehensive child protection system at the regional and national level. A wide range of stakeholders including Governments, children, International Organisations, UN Agencies and Civil Society Organisations are engaged in a cooperative, innovative and participatory manner to share experience, formalize linkages and reinforce cooperation to end violence against children.

Our premier training institute – National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, (NIPCCD) is the nodal agency for training of SAARC representatives on anti-trafficking and child rights as part of the SAARC Convention. Under this initiative, NIPCCD has organised several training programmes for SAARC representatives.

India is a member of SAARC Gender Info Base which is a web-site that contains statistical data as well as important information related to gender issues. This Info Base was launched during the 6th South Asia Ministerial Conference commemorating ‘Beijing Declaration’ held in New Delhi in January, 2008. The themes of SAARC Gender Info Base are feminization of poverty, violence against women, especially trafficking and health issues including HIV.
Under the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, we have laid down Guidelines for both sending and receiving countries to ensure an ethical and transparent adoption system that adheres to international standards. India organised an International Meet on Adoption in February, 2013 in New Delhi with participation from China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to promote mutual cooperation and discuss issues and challenges on the subject.

The issue of missing and untraced children has been a matter of deep concern for India and other countries of this region. We have set up a National Portal for missing and found children called Track Child. This portal can assist other countries, which are sharing our borders and are also both a source and destination for trafficking of women and children. The database is a useful tool for tracking information of missing children between countries.

Recognising that children need to be consulted as per their age and level of maturity in matters affecting them, the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children has provided a platform for child representatives from all the member countries to participate in its deliberations. Children’s recommendations are considered and appropriately incorporated in SAIEVAC’s work plans.

Several workshops, conferences and discussions have been held since the first HLM to strengthen cooperation among the Asia-Pacific Region. In 2010, a sixteen-member delegation consisting of the officials of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Government of Afghanistan visited our Human Rights Commission and interacted with the Senior Officers of the Commission. The purpose of their visit to India was to provide the delegates exposure to best practices in countries that have similar socio political and legal bases for governance.

India organized a Workshop on South Asia launch of Global Campaign for making cities disaster resilient in collaboration with United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India. The Conference discussed case studies of various cities like Mumbai, Dhaka, Colombo, Karachi, Kathmandu and Kabul. Discussions were held to understand the dimension of urban risks due to climate change, urban flooding and enforcement of building and zoning regulation etc. besides exchanging expertise of disaster management.

In 2011, India attended the East Asia Summit of Education Ministers at Bali with heads of States from China, Japan and Republic of Korea. Discussions were held on various proposals of the ASEAN Secretariat regarding projects to be sponsored by various countries. India has offered to take up three projects outlined in the list of 13 projects presented by ASEAN Secretariat.
In 2011, we hosted the WHO High Level Ministerial Meeting on increasing and sustaining immunization coverage. This was set against the backdrop of WHO preparing to declare 2012 as the “Year of Intensification for Routine Immunization in the South-East Asia Region”. Participating members shared their experiences of success in immunization in their respective countries. The meeting ended with Delhi Call for Action for Intensification of routine immunization, adopted by all the attending Ministers. This call for Action reaffirmed their commitment to securing the basic right of every child to be immunized through intensified efforts of routine immunization coverage in the South-East Asia Region.

Government of India facilitated hosting of the 9th Asia Pacific Regional Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect by the International Society of Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). The conference produced a book on Child Abuse and Neglect: Challenges and Opportunities. It contained expanded and modified versions of the presentations and additional contributions by several experts. Various issues of particular relevance in developing countries have been highlighted. The wider implications of neglect and denial of rights to children in difficult circumstances and those requiring special needs, assigning responsibility of care and prevention of child abuse and neglect have been addressed. A “Delhi Declaration” was also adopted as a part of the conference.

The Progress review since the First High Level Meeting held in Beijing shared with you contains many more of the initiatives taken by us since then.

I am sure this Conference will make a valuable contribution to the process initiated in Beijing and look forward to rich discussions and deliberations around the three themes of adolescents, early childhood development and urban settings. I hope that the Delhi Declaration to be adopted at the end of the Meeting will identify key issues, conclusions, recommendations and commitments for future action.

It is encouraging to see such enthusiastic participation for this meeting and I hope that the discussions in the next two days will not just end with this meeting but start the journey of concerted commitment from all of us to ensure that right of every child in our respective countries is fulfilled.

We look forward to hearing from the distinguished delegates from the region over the next two days.

Thank You!