

## Report on the Seventh Biennial Conference of the IASA

23–25 January, 2014

Thiruvananthapuram

The Seventh Biennial Conference of the IASA was held at Mascot Hotel, Thiruvananthapuram, from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 2014, in collaboration with the University of Kerala and JNU. The supporting partners of the Conference were ICSSR, Australian High Commission, AIC, Kerala Tourism and Shin Maywa.

The Conference made a stimulating start with Prof Santosh Sareen, President, IASA welcoming the participants and outlining the history of IASA and its publications. Mr Bernard Phillip, Deputy High Commissioner of Australia to India who was the Chief Guest, made a witty and engaging speech during the Inaugural where he highlighted the role of people to people contact in strengthening Indo Australian ties; how the growing Indian diaspora was shaping things culturally and politically in Australia in so many different ways, evidenced by such facts as that Hinduism was the fastest growing religion in Australia or that twelve people of Indian origin contested in the Australian federal elections last year. Special Invitee, Ambassador TP Sreenivasan, Vice Chairman of Kerala State Higher Education Council, while acknowledging the facts outlined by Mr Phillip, pointed out that there was a dialogic relationship between the two countries; both countries engaged in oppositional relationships and often challenged each other. This he attributed to certain unresolved issues. Pro- Vice Chancellor of Kerala University, Dr N Veeramanikandan, referred to the need for building academic cooperation between the two countries. Four books were released at the Inaugural, written/edited by IASA members. They were: *Reimagining India and Australia Culture and Identity* edited by D. Gopal and Alan Mayne ; *Dynamics of Diversity Culture and Literature Australia and India* by Pradeep Trikha; *Globalisation State and Governance* by Shaji Varkey and *Silent Days Poems* by Jaydeep Sarangi. Shaji Varkey proposed the vote of thanks.

Jack Turner, writer and broadcaster, found a captivated audience as he read from his book *Spice: The History of a Temptation*. Raising the question as to why the spice trade existed in the first place, Turner looked at the various ways in which spice fulfils basic needs of human existence from cuisine and medicine to sex and religion. The excerpts he read certainly whetted the appetite of the listeners for more!

In the two and a half days of the Conference there were four Plenary lectures. Padam Shri Anvita Abbi, renowned for her work on the highly threatened languages spoken in the Andaman Islands, delivered a well documented and extremely interesting lecture. She indicated the chain of continuity between the Andamanese population and the Australian Aboriginal through the single dispersal theory and the presence of a 'possible human language' in the speech of the early colonisers of South Asia. Prof Richard Nile's talk focussed on the need for deeper intellectual engagement between Australia and India. He

made a case for the establishment of an Australian Studies Chair in India, a proposal welcomed by the IASA. Prof Devleena Ghosh charted the life of Komalam Craig, an activist and teacher at Shantiniketan who married an Australian and spent time in Australia where she joined radical womens groups and demonstrations. The presentation highlighted the fact that the transnational life of women and activists in India and Australia before and during the Cold War must not be forgotten in the annals of history. Prof Peter Gale's lecture followed along similar lines where he looked at the life of Sister Mary Theodore and the story of MITRA.

A panel discussion on the prospects of Australian studies in India in literature and the social sciences also took place steered by Prof Makarand Paranjape. The discussants were Profs Santosh Sareen, GJV Prasad, Shaji Varkey, Gopa Kumar and Peter Gale and significant landmarks in the growth of Australian Studies in India were indicated through their discussion as was the need to keep the pace strong.

Apart from the aforesaid, nine other sessions of paper presentations were held. That poetry and song can be used powerfully to validate the identity of such marginalised communities as the Indian Dalits and the Australian Aborigines was an aspect pointed out by Indranil Acharya and John Napier. Maritime issues were dealt with in the papers by Suresh R and Riddhi Shah in terms of the Indian Australian Cooperation. Jaydeep Sarangi and Suresh Frederick examined the nature of poetry by Michelle Cahill, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Rabindranath Tagore in an ecocritical framework. Exploring various aspects of fiction in India and Australia were three presentations by Sharon Rundle, Aleena Manoharan and Sheeba Princess which addressed such diverse aspects as strategies that might help to promote South Asian Australian publications of fiction; convergences in the lives of fictional heroes of Australian and Indian fiction writers and how a tinai perspective helps to reinforce Indo Australian connections. Vincent Alessi made a highly visual presentation of Aboriginal art in Australia where reclaiming identity through art has been a practice of contemporary Aboriginal artists. In the same session, Trevor Hogan reflected on the changing face of Australian Suburbia and pointed to links with India visible in this change. Yagamma Reddy and Rupakjyoti Borah studied the various dimensions of India Australia participation in the IndoPacific region, the challenges, the pitfalls and the prospects in the road ahead. That women can and do challenge male/ colonial hegemony through their writings was underlined in the papers by Shaweta Nanda and Anindita Sen. There were two papers on the Indo Australian Strategic Relationship and the various aspects of this relationship presented by Surojit Mahalanobis and Josukutty CA. The final session saw some interesting issues being raised regarding single parenting by Kamala and a study of the situation of the Indian Migrant in Australia by Roanna Gonsalves through a narrative that made use of irony in the most effective of ways.

The Valedictory Session was a time for looking at the Conference and the role of IASA in helping to promote Australian Studies in India through a critical lens, a task done ably by

Yagamma Reddy, Richard Nile, Swati Pal and Santosh Sareen. The Conference concluded with a vote of thanks by Meenakshi Bharat.

There was a scintillating Cultural Evening on the 23<sup>rd</sup> wherein Kerala Tourism sponsored a spectacular dance performance that saw around 20 dancers performing Mohiniattam and Kathakali. The colours, the grace and the expertise of the dancers had the audience charmed. This was followed by reading by Sujata Sankranti, Meenakshi Bharat, Sharon Rundle and Jaydeep Sarangi from their creative works with humorous inputs by GJV Prasad, a session that was truly memorable. And the delicious Kerala cuisine on all days of the Conference but especially the dinner post the Cultural Evening hosted by Kerala Tourism made for a palatable experience indeed!

Sunny climes, lush greenery, thought provoking papers and informal conversations made the Seventh Biennial a great success.