

INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE **IIIC** Diary

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Power of Epics

PERFORMANCE: *Songs from Iceland and Richard Wagner's 'Villa Wahnfried'*

PRESENTED BY: *Sigurður Bragson (baritone); and Hjálmur Sighvatsson (piano)*

COLLABORATION: *Embassy of Iceland*
9 June 2023

This was the first concert of Icelandic music ever presented in Delhi. Although the two countries share a love of epics and preserving traditions, music styles are vastly disparate. In India baritone voices are rare, whereas in Iceland even Santa's laughter is imagined in baritone!

Sigurður Bragson's voice filled the auditorium with warmth and friendship with his virtuosic singing across the bass, baritone and tenor ranges. He began with a selection of lively short snippets of folk music. Surprisingly, these songs lacked the rhythmic repetitions of Indian folk music, but had sequences of differently-paced motifs.

The second part of the concert gave us a taste of the power and strength of their epics, with songs of valour, heroes, giants, war and wounds. With these pieces the piano became a more distinctive voice, as Hjálmur Sighvatsson's fingers nimbly scaled tunes that seemed to speak alongside the vocals. Again, unlike the Indian *jugalbandi*,



the two voices offered distinct aspects making a whole. This was most notable in the exquisite works 'Ride of the Gods', and 'Heroic Death', where the piano continued after the vocals stopped. The strong music crumbled into silent pauses, and the fading was as palpable as a wounded man stumbling into oblivion.

The next selection from composers Nietzsche, Liszt and Wagner, was closer to what Indian audiences are exposed to—longer pieces in the semi-classical style. What most brought alive the landscape of long and bleak nights with winds howling in the rocks was the concluding Icelandic song—a moving composition about a young woman abandoning her child to escape the law that spelt death for an unwed mother. As she dances with friends, her dress gets torn. The baby's sad voice is heard offering the rags she is wrapped in to protect her mother's modesty.

■ BHARATI MIRCHANDANI

More than a Great Singer

TALK: *The Extraordinary Life and Times of Harry Belafonte*

PRESENTATION BY: *Paranjy Guha Thakurta*

MODERATOR: *N. Madhavan*

23 June 2023

The programme was a joyful and fitting tribute to Harry Belafonte who had died a month earlier, aged 96. Paranjy Guha Thakurta treated the audience to an action-packed evening with audio as well as video clips, including examples of how Belafonte's originals have been mimicked often in Bollywood.

Belafonte enrolled in a school for acting, working as a janitor and singing at bars to pay for expenses. He did act in films, but it was singing that brought him fame. With his

amazing vocal range despite no formal training, and the introduction of styles like calypso, blues, salsa, Belafonte helped break the colonial mindset that black culture lacked quality. Thakurta even suggested that were it not for the colour of his skin, Belafonte, not Elvis Presley, would be called 'King'.

His influence went far beyond music. His intense humanism and generosity of spirit translated into his every action. He was just 26 when he met a 24-year-old preacher, Martin Luther King, and was immediately motivated to use non-violence as a tool to channel anger into constructive action. In 1963, Belafonte arranged a concert that raised \$50,000 for King's cause; and after his assassination, continued to help the latter's family till the end.

Belafonte used his own connections to help other musicians establish themselves. In 1985, the famine in Africa inspired

him to motivate many musical talents to collaborate. The resultant album, *USA for Africa*, raised funds that enabled food aid all through the year. He befriended Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and others who had been labelled terrorists or communists by US Presidents of the time. Belafonte even likened President Bush to a terrorist, and spoke out against President Trump.

He felt artists should not merely present the world as it is, but as it ought to be. His courage to speak the truth, and to express it non-violently, manifests in the lyrics of his songs. Happy tunes that could be played before any audience that people across the world still sing and dance to, have words that clearly express gross injustice and deep suffering. Belafonte was a great human being, not merely a great singer.

■ BHARATI MIRCHANDANI

Seasoned with Humour

PLAY: *Ajib Dastan Hai Ye!*

PRESENTED BY: *Wings Cultural Society*

DRAMATISED NARRATION IN URDU AND

HINDUSTANI BY: *Rajguru Mohan (Bey); and
Tarique Hameed (Marhoom ki Yaad Mein)*

25 July 2023

Wings Cultural Society presented *Ajib Dastan Hai Ye*, which was a collection of two dramatised soliloquies, in Urdu and Hindustani, which lampooned the absurdities of human behaviour. The humour was created by the imaginative craft of the authors and the punctuated timing with which the actors narrated the tales.

Bey is a hilarious anecdote penned by Shaukat Thanvi about a gullible protagonist who is warned by Tripathi, an astrologer, to beware of the Urdu alphabet 'bey' as his impending death would be caused by it. Thus began the narrator Rajguru Mohan's roller-coaster ride to avoid anything and anyone remotely connected to this alphabet, only to discover that the whole universe was nothing but 'bey'. It included objects he handled, his family members, friends, and even strangers. This first performance had the audience in splits and set the pace for an equally uproarious next performance.

True to the style of the production of investigating comic text through soliloquies, the performance of Patras Bukhari's *Marhoom ki Yaad Mein* was engagingly delivered by Tarique Hameed. The tale, as told, begins with an uninspiring conversation between two friends who



have known each other for decades and have said it all, so there is nothing new to communicate. To spice up the conversation, the protagonist decides to impress Mirza Sahib by boasting that he intends to buy a motor car. Amused, and knowing his limitations, Mirza advises the narrator to think more realistically about buying a humble bicycle instead, which, too, it appears, was way beyond the narrator's means. At what appears to be a bargain, Mirza offers his own cycle. Thus unfolds a hilarious series of disasters when the author discovers that he has been taken for a ride on a contraption that he cannot even ride. So ends his fantasy to be the owner of a motor car, when he could not even afford to repair the antique cycle, in which each part had a mind of its own.

■ MANOHAR KHUSHALANI

A Labour of Love

TALK: *What's American about American Music?*

ILLUSTRATED PRESENTATION BY:

Sharon Lowen

CHAIR: Sunit Tandon

28 July 2023

With its intriguing title, 'What's American about American Music?' was presented by the noted dancer Sharon Lowen with a disarming disclaimer—'I am not a musician nor a musicologist'. But, what a world she covered—quickly, lovingly and fascinatingly—treating the audience to a musical 'tour de force'. Tracing the roots of American music, she included African-American, Native American, Appalachian folk, ragtime, and even Louisiana Bayou! Rooted in all of these, modern American music is a true melting pot of varying musical influences.

Lowen defined American music as that which was native to the United States. Although originating elsewhere, it was developed and shaped in the US, consequently undergoing a complete transformation.

Starting with the music of the cotton fields, 'Hoe, Emma Hoe' (c. 1700), Lowen gave us an illustrated glimpse of American music—gospel and spiritual, the Cakewalk,

ballads, and then on to ragtime—as it evolved, shaped and transformed. Scott Joplin (1868–1917) was dwelt on at length, with a glimpse of Lowen's own video production of his song. Antonín Dvorák (1841–1904) was covered, along with Aaron Douglas' rousing painting, *Let My People Go*. It was followed by the remarkable composer George Gershwin (1898–1937), whose 'Swanee' (1919), she felt, needed to be in textbooks for its portrayal of racial history. Gershwin was a Jew from Odessa, as was Lowen's Lithuanian grandmother. Aaron Copland (1900–1990), the 'Dean of American Composers', a kindred spirit, also hailed from Lithuania. Jazz featured Ma Rainey (1886–1939) and Bessie Smith (1894–1937), followed by Louis Armstrong's (1901–1971) 'It Don't Mean A Thing, If It Ain't Got That Swing', echoed by Duke Ellington (1899–1974) and Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996).

If Dizzy Gillespie (1917–1993) was the high priest of bebop, Aretha Franklin (1942–2018) was the queen of soul. Lowen spoke of her missed chance of dancing at Franklin's birthday, as she was in India. She concluded with Elvis Presley's 'Love Me Tender', a personal recollection of Stevie Wonder, who had once been her neighbour, and the famous folk-music hero Pete Seeger (1919–2014), who fell afoul of US senator Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957). She concluded with her favourite rock band MC5, leaving us dizzy and asking for more!

■ SRIDHAR BALAN

A Sense of Urgency

EXHIBITION: *Create, Collaborate, Catalyse: Reflections on Sexual Violence in South Asia* by Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange

CURATED BY: Laxmi Murthy and Pawas Manandhar

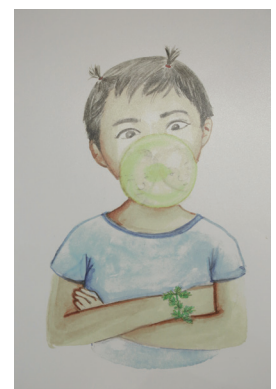
8 to 17 July 2023

The utterance of '*hri*' is said to awaken the empathy that is an inherent part of every sentient being. The organisation Hri emerged out of a felt need for serious scholarship and research towards developing a distinctly South Asian regionalism and sensibility, of cross-border political and cultural relevance. The Hri Institute is a unit of the Southasian Trust in Kathmandu.

A weariness with the stereotyped images of cowering terrified women, domineering men gloating over their prey, and graphic and two-dimensional portrayals of the actual act of violence encouraged the Hri team to critically examine

through an intersectional lens the prevailing imagery and discourse around gender inequality, and challenge the stereotypical depiction of sexual violence on the female body. A few questions highlighted were: Is the reproduction and visual stimulation of gendered violence the only way to communicate its seriousness? How realistic must representations be to communicate the urgency?

Towards that end, Hri brought together film-makers, researchers, activists, graphic novelists, cartoonists and artists to evolve new thinking around the visual representation of gender-based violence in cinema, media and popular culture, featuring photographs, artworks, illustrations, installations, text and digital displays. Kathmandu sought to share glimpses of explorations undertaken to comprehend and explain the 'structural roots' of sexual violence against women in four countries of South Asia—Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.



Some of the participating artists included Subha Wijesiriwardena and Shermal Wijewardene from Sri Lanka; Nikita Tripathi, Prasuna Dongol and Barkha Mukhiya from Nepal; Niharika Popli, Pakhi Sen, Pushpa Rawat and Parismita Singh from India; and Muktasree Chakma and Rawyan Shayema from Bangladesh.

Empathetic Voices

FESTIVAL: *Travelling Film South Asia 2023: A Festival of South Asian Documentaries*

COLLABORATION: *Film Southasia, Kathmandu*
5 to 8 July 2023

A set of interesting documentaries was screened during the festival, 'Travelling Film South Asia 2023'. Each work revealed both the psychological as well as the political state of countries in the region. Set in Dehradun, *Heartbroken Lover* (2021) by Ridhima Sharma had a distinctly bizarre—comic flavour. In it, a deeply religious Brahmin lad, barely in his twenties, advises heartbroken males how best to manage their lives. He even runs a teashop of sorts where jilted lovers can grapple with puzzling problems of real or imagined thwarted love!

Bishal Roka Magar's *Gurkha Girl* (2021) reveals with deep empathy the sorry economic state of Nepal. To improve their lower-middle-class economic status, girls just out of high school, aspiring to join the Gurkha regiment of the British Army, train very hard in testing weather conditions. Disappointment follows when the British government decides not to recruit any Nepali women. The aspirants try to join the Nepali Army, and fail. Finally, some get jobs in the police with difficulty and are grateful for it.

To Sir, with Gratitude

BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP: *New Facets of Early Historical Archaeology and Buddhist Art and Architecture (Essays in Honour of Dr. R. C. Agrawal); Edited by C. B. Patil and Vinay Kumar (Sharada Publishing House, 2022)*

DISCUSSANTS: *Himanshu Prabha Ray; Alok Tripathi; C. B. Patil; and Vinay Kumar*

CHAIR: *Shri K. N. Shrivastava, Director, IIC*
8 June 2023

A tribute to archaeologist R.C. Agrawal's lifelong passion, commitment and dedication to his discipline, this Festschrift is not just a labour of love, but also guru *dakshina* to a revered teacher.

The exhibition may have had one wonder, however, that if hair-raising stereotypical imagery failed to register the seriousness of the subject of sexual violence on women, how far could lighter, more pleasant, albeit nuanced, imagery succeed in doing so?

■ ARUNA BHOWMICK

Highways of Life (2020), directed by Amar Maibam, and produced by the Films Division of India, is set around a truck driver who, along with his fellow truckers, carries goods across the state of Manipur under extremely hazardous conditions. Their lives are in constant danger as militants as well as the state government and local police collect tax from them, separately, without offering them and their goods the slightest protection.

Priyanka Chhabra's *Iqraar-Naama* (The Agreement, 2021) deals with the partition of India and the overwhelming nostalgia it evokes in those directly affected. The study of dusty, crumbling documents legitimising the occupation of a middle-class property by a refugee in Amritsar in exchange for one left behind in Pakistan is juxtaposed to a parallel story, narrated in voice-over by Urdu writer Joginder Paul. It tells of an old Lucknow man who fantasises how his favourite part of Lucknow has been recreated in Karachi!

Bani Singh's touching documentary, *Taangh* (Longing, 2021), is about her father Grahnanandan aka Nandy Singh, an Olympic hockey player who in crumbling old age is helped by his daughter to recollect his glory days in Government College University, Lahore, as a hockey player, and later in India.

■ PARTHA CHATTERJEE

The editors described in detail the genesis of the volume, and the basis for the curation of its themes and content. Divided into two sections—early historical archeology, and Buddhist art and architecture—the topics chosen reflect and resonate with Agrawal's own explorations and ideas.

With an emphasis on the work of younger scholars, a few examples of the wide array of research papers the book offers include recent excavations on the sites of Gottiprolu, Sarnath and Talagunda, terracotta tablets from Ghoghamba, early historic settlements in Karnataka and Gujarat, Jataka representations from Aihole and syncretic Buddhist images. Himanshu Prabha Ray commended the editors and acclaimed the paper on Aihole by V. Padigar for its innovative methodology, while underscoring the multireligious nature of sites covered. She bemoaned the long gap between excavations and release of their reports, and was critical of younger scholars who ought

to have not only acknowledged the work done by their predecessors, but also presented newer research and insights. A comprehensive introduction and conclusion, she suggested, would have tied the various strands of the articles together.

Alok Tripathi highlighted the common trajectory of his own journey with that of Agrawal's, and his close working relationship with him in Satdhara and Chambal. He lauded

the geographical range, variety and erudition of the topics covered, and rang a note of optimism by flagging the rising budget for excavations and increasing insistence on the prompt release of annual excavation reports.

Agrawal was overwhelmed and expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the editors and contributors.

■ AJAY JAISINGHANI

Reviving *Baolis*

EXHIBITION: *Baolis: Restoring Stepwells, Providing Life*

COLLABORATION: *Aga Khan Trust for Culture*

22 to 31 July 2023

The exhibition, '*Baolis: Restoring Stepwells, Providing Life*', showcased the work of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), India, in the conservation of six baolis at the Qutb Shahi Heritage Park, Golconda, Hyderabad; and the Nizamuddin and Arab Serai baolis, Mughal-era wells and rainwater harvesting at Sunder Nursery in Delhi.

When the Hazrat Nizamuddin baoli collapsed in 2008, there was talk of filling it up to make more room for people to walk to the dargah. The AKTC worked with the community, including building 18 alternate flats for people who lived above the baoli. The team removed 40 feet of sludge and layers of epoxy that had caused the rest of the walls to bulge. The baoli itself was a freshwater spring with exquisite circular steps all around it, with a secret passage to the dargah.

At Humayun's Tomb, the AKTC created 128 groundwater-rainwater recharge pits when they started restoring the gardens in 1997. They also discovered and desilted a



well and restored the Arab Sarai baoli, built in Mughal Emperor Jahangir's times in the early 17th century.

The AKTC started the restoration of baolis in the Qutb Shahi necropolis in 2013. The six baolis—Bagh, Eastern, Badi, Idgah, Western and Hammam—are rainwater harvesting tanks with a combined capacity of 20 million litres, used in the plantation of over 15,000 tree saplings.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the work of the stone carvers and masons who used traditional building crafts and tools to repair the monuments and baolis.

Both the Delhi and the Hyderabad baoli projects have won UNESCO awards. In the words of Ratish Nanda, 'The idea of this exhibition was to show people that conservation is possible and to ensure that it becomes part of public policy. I believe there would be at least 10,000 baolis in India and at least 20,000 water structures like baolis. We spend so much money creating water tanks for rainwater harvesting when tanks already exist.'

■ RITIKA KOCHHAR

Poland's Renaissance Man

EXHIBITION: *Nicolaus Copernicus, 1473–1543: Life and Work*

PRESENTED BY: *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Govt. of Poland and Archives of the Polish Academy of Science*

COLLABORATION: *Polish Institute, New Delhi*
5 to 11 July 2023

The exhibition marked the 550th anniversary of Copernicus' birth, the 510th anniversary of the origin of the heliocentric theory, and the 480th anniversary of his death and release of his magnum opus—*De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres), first printed in 1543 in Nuremberg.

The book theorised that the Sun, rather than the Earth, occupied the central position in the motions of the planets—a view that challenged the 1,400-year-old belief that the Earth was the centre of the universe.

It also made Copernicus a central figure in the Polish Renaissance that lasted between the late 15th and 16th centuries, and is widely considered to have been the golden age of Polish culture. This was because, like many Renaissance men, Copernicus' contributions extended beyond his role as an astronomer.

Mathematician, physician, diplomat, cartographer and economist, Copernicus was a polymath with multiple titles and diverse expertise, including a doctorate in canon law.

In recognition of Copernicus' revolutionary ideas and his remarkable achievements, the exhibition took visitors on a journey through his life and accomplishments and provided an opportunity to delve into both his growth as a scholar

and significant contributions to astronomy and various other fields. Furthermore, it showcased an impressive collection of portraits, monuments, commemorative coins and stamps dedicated to honouring Copernicus not only in Poland, but also in several countries worldwide.

Towards the end of 1542, Copernicus was seized with apoplexy and paralysis, and he died aged 70 on 24 May 1543. Legend has it that he was presented with the final printed pages of his treatise on the day that he died. It is believed that he awoke from a stroke-induced coma, looked at his book, and died peacefully.

■ RITIKA KOCHHAR

Abstract Expressionist

EXHIBITION: *Celebrating Ambadas*
CURATED BY: *Shruti Lakhanpal Tandon in association with Dhoomimal Gallery and Prayag Shukla*
16 to 27 June 2023

The exhibition of paintings and drawings by Ambadas Khobragade to commemorate his birth centenary included pen and ink drawings, oils and watercolours, quotes by contemporaries and early Dhoomimal exhibition catalogues. Also displayed were insightful notes on the artist's whereabouts through education, art practice and travel, e.g., a letter from leading American art critic Clement Greenberg inviting Ambadas on a three-month tour of America to visit the studios of Abstract Expressionist artists of the time. We learn how the artist gained entry into the prestigious Sir J. J. School of Art from 1947–52, with contemporaries like Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee.

While the show began with a small group of pen and ink drawings, what largely adorned the walls of the vast gallery were oils on canvas, and smaller works in watercolour on paper. In the pen and ink drawings, forms were often stylised or distorted to the point of abstraction, with a wild boar and some resembling the human being the only recognisable shapes.

The oils and watercolours with the artist's recognisable coiled ribbons of colour showed remarkable stylistic consistency through the entire span of his working years. His long-standing friend J. Swaminathan observed: 'There is no beginning and no end to an Ambadas painting, no



particular point of departure or arrival, the canvas invoking the eternal flux of the universe outside it and palpitating with a cosmic movement and passage within the frame', summing it up with 'born and sustained by the ethos of a caste-bound India, Ambadas lived in a world of turmoil and tranquillity, of fusion and poise, of despair and love, but never one of hate or a fixed standpoint, nor even of supplication'.

Of particular interest were handwritten letters to friends Nand Katyal, Akhilesh and Prayag Shukla, written over the years, about travel, work, getting married, and trips to India. Related to the exhibition were well attended associated events: 'A Day with Prayag Shukla'—poet, critic, and good friend; 'Poetry Reading' by Gagan Gill; 'Ambadas and his Relationship with J. Swaminathan'—talks by Ashok Vajpeyi and Shridhar Iyer. A 'Special Curated Walk and Drawing Session for the Hearing Impaired', with sign language interpreters, was conducted by the Noida Deaf Society. *The Way I See—Celebrating Ambadas*, a film by Shruti L. Tandon, compiled from interviews with the artist's close friends and associates, was screened as a finale, followed by discussions between the audience and the film-maker.

■ ARUNA BHOWMICK

Tracing the Journey

TALK: *Of Things to Hold Close and Those to Let Go*

SPEAKER: Sumant Jayakrishnan

IN CONVERSATION WITH: Sujata Prasad and Oroon Das

COLLABORATION: Ahad Anhad
22 July 2023

Oroon Das introduced scenographer Sumant Jayakrishnan as a genius inhabiting myriad worlds from graphic design to fashion, to art, cinema, events, weddings, performance and theatre.

‘I am inherently a storyteller, so it doesn’t matter what the medium is. It’s the matter of either revealing a story, or finding one, and if there’s already a narrative, then embracing and enhancing it—you step back and become whatever’s required to be,’ explained Jayakrishnan.

He made apt use of the ‘iceberg’ metaphor when referring to the conscious and unconscious worlds, where the latter’s 90 per cent share comprises dreams, traumas, genetic memories, etc. One is far more aware of that while working in a creative space, leading to the choices one makes, he said, during the in-depth conversation that took the audience on his journey of professional and personal growth.

After graduating from the National Institute of Design, where he studied visual communications, graphics

animation and exhibition design, Jayakrishnan navigated the creative spaces, taking opportunities and building relationships along the way.

A grant from the British Council took him to the Royal Academy, London, where he trained at the Royal Shakespeare Foundation, the National Theatre and the BBC. Another grant, this time from the French Embassy, gave him an opportunity to learn puppetry, lighting design, and theatre for the mute and hearing impaired.

As art director and costume designer, his work in Tim Supple’s rendition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* remains one of the most remembered—‘a breakthrough ideation’, recalled Sujata Prasad.

Other milestones were Deepa Mehta’s *Water*, as art director; his collaboration with Pooja Sood for the exhibition ‘Khadi—from Empire to Emporium’, which also led to a collaboration on *Tashak* with film-maker Govind Nihlani; his association with the Serendipity Art Festival; and the installation *Chakraview* with Rajshree Pathy, designed for the India Pavillion at the London Design Biennale.

Echoing the programme’s title, Jayakrishnan said, ‘You hold close the values that are, and find out more about who you are as you go along. What you let go of are the things that you haven’t been given a choice of—not that you don’t respect it, but because that’s not going to help you be present in the moment and be the best possible version of yourself.’

■ SHWETA KESHRI

A Versatile and Remarkable Poet

SOUNDS OF POETRY: *Wandering Singer: Vignettes from the Poetry and Life of Sarojini Naidu*

POETRY READINGS BY: Sunit Tandon
20 July 2023

Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) was the first woman President of the Indian National Congress, and the first woman governor of the United Provinces. The Nizam of Hyderabad gave her a scholarship to study at London’s King’s College where she met Sir Edmund Gosse, who honed her as a poet.

Gosse described her as a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not only language but prosody as well. Known as the ‘Nightingale of India’, her

poetry embodies some revelations of the heart of India, flowers, fruits and trees, mountains, gardens and temples. Her language was opulent, late Victorian, her imagery Indian, and she showed mastery in rhythm and rhyme. She had travelled all her life which inspired her to write the poem ‘Wandering Singer’. She also wrote an ode to the Nizam of Hyderabad. Her first publication was *The Golden Threshold*. Gosse encouraged her to publish it. Naidu got married at 19 and had four children by 27 years of age. Hers was an inter-caste marriage.

Sunit Tandon said that she had started writing precociously, but stopped after India’s independence movement that absorbed most of her spirit. Thus, her works are those of a young woman and not very mature. He quoted from Makarand Paranjape’s selections of her letters, prose and poetry.

Her quintessential image of India was the ‘The Snake Charmer’. Some notable poems are ‘Nightfall in the City

of Hyderabad', and 'Royal Tombs of Golconda'. Other poems include 'Palanquin Bearers', 'Indian Weavers', and 'In Praise of Henna'. There are love songs, too, like 'Indian Love Song' and 'A Love Song from the North'.

A few of her sombre works include 'Poet to Death', 'God of Pain', and a poem dedicated to each of her four children. Tandon ended with a patriotic poem and 'Cradle Song'.

■ RACHNA JOSHI

A Flavour of Folk

PERFORMANCE: *Malvi Folk, Kabir Bhajans and Nathpanthi*

PRESENTED BY: *Ramchandra Gangoliya and Party from Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh*

21 June 2023

Folk artist Ramchandra Gangoliya and his troupe presented traditional folk music with mellifluous Malvi folk songs, Kabir and Mira Bai *bhajans*, and Nathpanthi songs to mark World Music Day.

Malvi folk songs reflect the liberal attitude and moral ideals of the people—high in both thinking and essence. Ramchandra Gangoliya is a well-known folk singer and musician from the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh. He was accompanied by artists, among his family members, on traditional folk instruments—*manjira*, *dholak*, *tanpura*, *timki*, and *kartal*, among others.

A major figure in what we know as the Bhakti Movement, Kabir was born to weavers in the holy city of Kashi, Uttar Pradesh. Critical of the religious orthodoxy of his times, Kabir spoke of spirituality beyond the politics of weaponised religion and guided people about the ethics of goodness in their own language—spreading his reformist message far and wide. The talented singer performed Kabir's beautiful, thought-provoking poetic bhajans.

The folk songs of this 15th-century poet and others, transcending time and space, reached a modern audience, playing divine music to each soul present. They sang with high metaphysical insight with voices that were soothing and remarkable.



Some of the songs were Kabir's 'Kahe Kabira Suno Bhai Sadhu', 'Muko Kaha Dhudo Re Bande', and 'Prem Dibani Hu Main Mera Dard Na Jaane Koi' by Mira Bai.

The audience was mesmerised by 'Guru Bina Jag Adhiyara', 'Achi Karni Karle Tu', and 'Mat Kar Kaya Ka Ghamand' by Kabir and their meanings were beautifully described by the singers. The concluding song, 'Balihari Damu Mehe Hari', a Nathbhajan, sung by Sunita Gangoliya, wife of Ramchandra Gangoliya, enthralled the audience.

The spontaneous overflow of music, though not didactic, touched the hearts of the audience with the soul-stirring voices of the singers, and the simple yet metaphysical words of the poets.

Along with their sons—Ajay and Bijay Gangoliya—and grandson, this outstanding family of folk artists carried on the unparalleled Indian tradition and kept secular, romantic, philosophical folk music alive.

Mystics, saints and sages have been born in India since time immemorial. The folk artists transmitted, in oral folk traditions, the remarkable songs of Kabir, Nath Sampradaya and Mira Bai.

■ MANDIRA GHOSH

Can Machines Report?

DISCUSSION: *AI and its Impact on Journalism: The Road Ahead*

PANELLISTS: *Ritu Kapur; Nikhil Pahwa; and Samarth Bansal*

MODERATOR: *Karishma Mehrotra*

CHAIR: *Harish Khare*

COLLABORATION: *The Media Foundation*

9 June 2023

Writing more than 70 years ago, Alan Turing posed a formative inquiry asking, 'Can machines think?'. This question seems all the more important with the public release of Chat GPT by Open AI. Many Indians have been struck by a sense of delight and wonder as they fidget with its large language model to compose emails, poems, even articles. While many embrace its optimisation, some are more cautious.

Karishma Mehrotra posed a range of questions on the use of AI in Indian newsrooms. Here, Ritu Kapur explained that some form of digital automation has always been used by journalists. This is partly due to the rise of social media

and Internet-based distribution that requires a review of analytics and search engine optimisation (SEO) strategies. She also indicated some tentativeness on the future of newsgathering by stating, 'We are wary.'

Samarth Bansal was more optimistic; he described the capabilities of Chat GPT as representative of a 'paradigm shift'. He demonstrated the value in the automated curation of several forms of newsgathering, such as the reporting of COVID-19 statistics, which requires less human judgement and today attracts fewer resources from news media. His view of AI as an assistant, rather than a replacement for journalists, promoted the reduction of numbing work in favour of greater creativity. Here, Nikhil Pahwa underlined his approach towards using AI for tasks such as captioning, but subjecting it to a process of

human review. He also indicated the need for newsrooms to evolve and transparently disclose their approach to ethical practices to their readers.

A lively public discussion followed on the question of bias of large language models and the impact on the jobs of working journalists. Here, one may enjoy reading Brian Christian's *The Alignment Problem* and Frank Pasquale's *New Laws of Robotics*. Also, to enjoy the true depth of the discussion, readers are encouraged to view the recording of the panel discussion available on the Media Foundation's YouTube channel. It may not help us answer—'Can machines report?'—but may prompt a more considered use of AI in our lives.

■ APAR GUPTA

An Ongoing Battle

BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP: *Heavy Metal: How a Global Corporation Poisoned Kodaikanal* by Ameer Shahul (Pan MacMillan India, 2023)

SPEAKERS: Karuna Ezara Parikh; and Ameer Shahul

5 June 2023

In 1984, a mercury thermometer factory was established in the idyllic south Indian hill station of Kodaikanal. The factory, which was acquired by Unilever in 1987, operated for 17 years, during which it brazenly poisoned both workers and native population, and destroyed the local ecosystem. Ameer Shahul's book is a terrifying investigative account of the Kodaikanal mercury poisoning case by a tireless campaigner who led the movement against it.

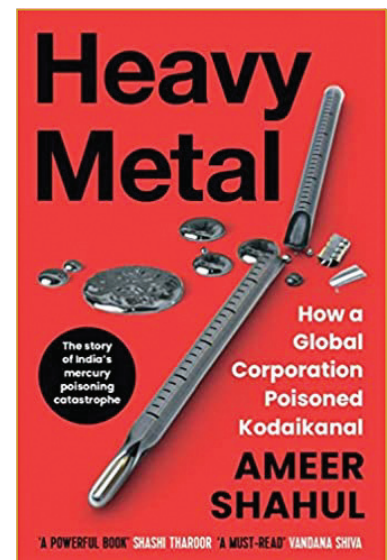
The book starts with the history of glass thermometer manufacturing in the United States, and how increased awareness about mercury poisoning led to the dismantling of a US-based thermometer plant and its move to India, where environmental regulations had not caught up. Less than a year after the Unilever acquisition, factory management began ignoring the precautionary measures determined to prevent mercury contamination. The impacts of these actions go far beyond the loss of human lives—28 by official count, though unofficial estimates claim over 100 deaths. While the human cost finds some quantification, Karuna Ezara Parikh regretted that there was no way to properly assess the impact on the Pambar Shola, the uniquely biodiverse and delicate ecosystem of the Palani Hills.

The campaign in Kodaikanal has had several triumphs. The polluting factory was shut down in 2001. In 2003, the campaigners successfully pressurised Unilever to collect and send back 300 tonnes of mercury to the US for recycling, including mercury waste that was improperly disposed of. In 2015,

Unilever settled out of court with 590 of its employees, agreeing to pay an 'undisclosed amount'. In 2017, India signed the Minamata Convention, signalling its intent to eliminate the production, import and export of mercury. However, as Shahul reminds us, the battle is far from won.

The compensation and remediation of the factory site are a small part of the struggle. The second, more significant aspect, pertains to the extensive destruction caused, which includes the release of gaseous mercury into the atmosphere and the disposal of mercury waste in river streams and adjacent areas. To drive this home, Shahul pointed to an IIT-Hyderabad study which estimated that, without remediation, unsafe levels of mercury will remain in Kodaikanal's soil for more than a century. He asserted that this is an unresolved issue that requires research, regulatory action and public outrage.

■ AKSHAY BHAGWAT



In Need of Hope

DISCUSSION: *Crisis in Sudan*

PANELLISTS: *Amarendra Khatua;
and John Cherian*

CHAIR: *K. P. Fabian*

26 June 2023

Two coups in recent years, a civil war tearing up the capital, many thousands dead, many more refugees in neighbouring countries. A country, potentially a granary of the world and also mineral-rich, dying of hunger—we are looking at a failed state of 45 million people; we are looking at Sudan.

A fight between the country's army and paramilitary forces is the reason for the current conflagration, but trouble has been brewing since 2019 (and perhaps, long before that) when Omar al-Bashir, the strongman-leader for two decades, and wanted for war crimes in Darfur, was ousted. As K. P. Fabian said: 'It's easier to get rid of a dictator than handle the after effects.'

Before moving to Afghanistan, John Cherian noted, Osama bin Laden—literally a house-guest from hell, and surely the world has judged Sudan by the people it has invited to stay—lived for a while in a Khartoum

suburb. And then, there was the war in Darfur, a province that wanted to break away; three lakh people, the United Nations estimates, died in the fighting and also, indiscriminate killing.

As the fires burn in what Amarendra Khatua called a 'failed state', millions have fled, inflation is at an eye-watering 236 per cent and humanitarian aid, principally food for the starving population, is barely available. Two attempts at peace, brokered by Saudi Arabia and the United States, have run aground; there is, sadly, some meddling by foreign powers, Cherian said. And of course, corruption is merely a way of life, he added. Mercifully, despite the fighting, India, a country Sudan has traditionally decent ties with, has managed to rescue its citizens; they have come back with horror stories.

The tragedy is still playing out, but there is regret, as Khatua believes Sudan did not have to become a basketcase and a perennial battle zone. The Nile flows through fertile land, and, as a member of the audience wryly noted, virtually everything but democracy takes root. Then, there is oil, though South Sudan, which broke away, has more of it, and also, gold and uranium deposits. Sudan, a young country (40 per cent of the population is below 15, Khatua pointed out) needs a ceasefire. And Sudan needs hope.

■ SRINJOY CHOWDHURY

China's Hydropower Interests

TALK: *China and the Emergence of a Global Small Hydropower Network, ca 1980s*

SPEAKER: *Arunabh Ghosh*

CHAIR: *Shri Shyam Saran, President, IIC*

COLLABORATION: *Centre for Chinese Studies, Ashoka University; and NYU, Shanghai*

10 July 2023

In his opening remarks Shri Shyam Saran, President, IIC, said that this was the first talk in the new bi-monthly 'Global China Lecture Series', focusing on contemporary China.

Arunabh Ghosh, who is writing a book on the history of small hydropower projects in China, pointed out that while the world knows and hears much about the Three Gorges Dam producing 22,500 MW, that China had at one time over 80,000 small hydropower projects producing 6,000 MW in all is not common knowledge. In the late 1970s,



China's achievements in small hydropower projects attracted the attention of scholars and technologists, and a conference was held in Kathmandu. More international conferences followed, sponsored by the United Nations and others.

Ghosh mentioned that in 1983, two experts from China were invited to recommend measures to revive the Bolton Falls Dam on the Winooski River in upper Vermont, USA. Green Mountain Power Corporation, having failed to obtain an affordable renovation plan from American consultants, had turned to China.

While the West depended on oil and coal for energy, especially in the 1970s, China also turned its attention to small hydropower. Despite that, China is better known for its lead in wind power. Ghosh wanted to hear from the

audience so that he would get good cues for the book he is writing.

Questions and observations covered a wide range. There was scepticism about the veracity of statistical data put

out by China. What might be the impact on India of the big dams China is planning in Tibet? There were many more questions; the bi-monthly series began well.

■ K. P. FABIAN

Public Health Discussed Threadbare

RELEASE OF THE IIC QUARTERLY (WINTER 2022–SPRING 2023): *Public Health for All* by Dr. Karan Singh

EDITED BY: K. Srinath Reddy and Omita Goyal

PANELLISTS: Atul Kotwal; Sandhya Venkateswaran; Rajib Dasgupta; and K. Srinath Reddy

12 July 2023

The launch of the special issue of the *IIC Quarterly* was well attended, despite the monsoon deluge preceding it. In his introductory remarks, Shri K. N. Shrivastava, Director, IIC, said that the pandemic reminded us of the importance of public health and, therefore, this issue was timely. Chief Editor Omita Goyal said that the issue had been planned for 2020, but had to be postponed as the pandemic struck that year. Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Editorial Board, observed that the volume was one of substantive coverage of the subject of public health for all. He recalled that during his tenure as health minister, smallpox had been eradicated.



In her remarks, Sandhya Venkateswaran stressed the intersection of politics and health, and that a greater emphasis on the ideology of social welfare by political parties would go a long way in improving public health. Rajib Dasgupta observed that valuable insights into the pandemic had been covered. Atul Kotwal spoke on public health implementation in the states. K. Srinath Reddy remarked that economic funding for public health was vital and stressed the need to emphasise urban primary health care. In his closing remarks, Shri Shyam Saran, President, IIC, said that the publication covered virtually all the health challenges the country faces, but lamented that the public most in need of health care do not have a voice, an issue that must be urgently addressed.

■ ARVINDAR SINGH

Ahead of Her Time

TALK: Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy:
Much Misunderstood Trailblazer

SPEAKER: V. R. Devika

CHAIR: Uma Chakravarti

31 July 2023

The highlight of V. R. Devika's talk was a fascinating slide show of photographs, painstakingly collected by the author, interspersed with a lively presentation that made Muthulakshmi Reddy come alive nearly a century later.

Reddy was the daughter of a *devadasi* dedicated to a temple in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu. Devika painted a picture of Pudukkottai's social life, an important element of which was the devadasi system. In this complicated social milieu, devadasi women, although dedicated to music and the arts, continued to be entrenched in relationships of patronage and concubinage. However, Chandrammal,

Reddy's mother, and her father Narayanaswami Iyer, a Brahmin patron, were no ordinary people. What the book foregrounds is the remarkable role that Iyer played in educating his daughters.

The book offers many fascinating insights into the texture of social relationships in the complex tapestry of life in this provincial town governed by the East India Company in alliance with the king of Pudukkottai. The author brought to the fore the ambivalence of the relationships between Iyer's legally wedded wife and kin, and with Chandrammal and their children.

Reddy blossomed into an exceptional personality, combining academic brilliance with a social conscience and commitment that was indeed rare. There was not a field or area that she did not touch—from issues of such social reform as the dedication of young girls to temples, to the campaign against wet nursing, to raising the legal age of marriage of girls to 15 years, and the issue of property rights for women. She was actively involved in the campaign of educational reform as well as in the stirrings

of the anti-colonial movement during the 1920s and 1930s. During those tumultuous times, Reddy was involved in the attempt to redefine womanhood in India.

Actively participating in a discussion on the conclusion of this engaging presentation on the social history of the life

and times of Reddy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were some in the audience who had been personally involved in the reform movement in the Madras Presidency.

■ VASANTHI RAMAN

An Analysis of Revitalised India

BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP: *Modi: Shaping a Global Order in Flux*; Edited by Sujan Chinoy, Vijay Chauthaiwale and Uttam Kumar Sinha (Wisdom Tree, 2023)

CHAIR: Harsh Vardhan Shringla

SPEAKERS: Santosh Mehrotra; Sujan Chinoy; Vijay Chauthaiwale; and Uttam Sinha
21 July 2023

Over the past nine years, India has relinquished the aura of timidity that once defined it. *Modi: Shaping a Global Order in Flux*, a collection of 23 essays, is a vibrant kaleidoscope of insightful analyses to understand the growing international prominence of a self-assured and revitalised India, said Uttam Sinha.

While talking about his article on vaccine and import restrictions, Vijay Chauthaiwale emphasised, 'We had the technology, we had the process, but a lot of raw material was being imported from the US. There was a hesitation from their side initially, but we overcame the hindrances and created vaccines successfully.'

Uttam Sinha seconded these points, and added, 'You will find in the book an evolving intersection of foreign affairs and domestic challenges. I think there's nothing called foreign affairs anymore. There are so many domestic challenges that bring in the foreign policy aspect, whether it is economic stability, climate adaptability, or issues of foreign investment.'

'While doing the research for this book, I found some very interesting statistics which I want to share,' said Santosh Mehrotra. While comparing the GDP of the Mughal era and the British period with the current economic situation, he said, 'We are at 7.09 per cent of world GDP by PPP, but we have clearly a long way to go.'

In a concluding remark, Mehrotra said, 'I think that this book has the potential to become a textbook for many young graduates and young researchers about the COVID era and how India responded to it.'

The book also delves into Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flagship initiatives on environmental issues and climate adaptation, analysing their effectiveness and contributions towards sustainable development. It further explores the power of India's soft diplomacy, examining how it resonates with the world and amplifies India's influence on the global stage, and brings together policy, people and partnerships.

■ M. SHAHID SIDDIQUI

India's Reformed Foreign Policy

TOWN HALL MEETING: *Nine Years of Modi Government: A Foreign Policy Overview*

SPEAKER: Dr. S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs

MODERATOR: Shri Shyam Saran, President, IIC

VOTE OF THANKS: Shri K. N. Shrivastava, Director, IIC

28 June 2023

The Indian prime minister's state visit to the United States in June this year reflects the broadest and most comprehensive vision for development in the history of this bilateral relationship. The town hall, with the minister of external affairs, was set against this backdrop.

Dr. Jaishankar highlighted the nine key developments in India's foreign policy over the nine years of the Narendra Modi government. He contextualised the crucial role played by India on the global stage by outlining its relations with the United States, Europe and Russia. India commands a strong position in this polarised world marked by power competition, where it is shaping global economy while building its own. He emphasised the 'Neighbourhood First Policy', where India has consciously taken a generous, non-reciprocal, long-term view of building relations. The Act East Policy, SAGAR Policy, and the augmented engagement with ASEAN and the Gulf are some drivers of India's approach towards its extended neighbourhood. In what he termed the 'world beyond', India has significantly increased its diplomatic footprint, especially in Africa.

The minister also spoke about the difficulties posed by both China and Pakistan, where border tensions with

China will determine the state of the relationship, and a departure from cross-border terrorism is needed to open up channels of communication for normal relations with Pakistan. While talking about more Indians going abroad, the minister highlighted the addition of 400 new passport centres since 2014. India's foreign policy today incorporates concerns relating to science, technology, health and the environment in addition to economic ones. India is leading by example in the domains of climate agreements, disaster relief and security of the diaspora.

Dr. Jaishankar responded at length to the questions raised by the audience. This discussion witnessed enthusiastic participation that expanded beyond the areas of cooperation reached between the US and India, expansion of the IFS, rogue elements in Canada, a gendered lens on India's foreign policy, etc. He stressed on India's stature as an equal stakeholder in world affairs, especially in light of



its G20 Presidency. He reiterated the transformed nature of India as the shaper of debates and provider of ideas on the world stage.

Shri Shyam Saran concluded the discussion by foregrounding the ultimate objective of India's foreign policy in the transformation of the country; this was followed by a vote of thanks by Shri K. N. Shrivastava.

■ SAURYA MISHRA

Another Classic Retelling

FESTIVAL: *Summer Sonata: A Festival of Opera, Ballet and Concert Films*

CURATED AND INTRODUCED BY: Sunit Tandon and Samaresh Chatterji

FILM: *Don Quixote (Kitri's Wedding)*

BALLET BY: Mikhail Baryshnikov with Cynthia Harvey; Richard Schafer; and Brian Adams

CHOREOGRAPHY: Mikhail Baryshnikov

MUSIC: Ludwig Minkus

CONDUCTOR: Paul Connelly

10 June 2023

Directed for TV by Brian Large and based on Miguel de Cervantes' masterpiece, Mikhail Baryshnikov's *Don Quixote* is a vibrant retelling of the classic novel, already immortalised by his Russian predecessors, Marius Petipa and Alexander Gorsky. Focusing on the romance between Basilio and Kitri, Baryshnikov's choreography eschews rococo flourishes and streamlines the narrative, perhaps attempting to woo the American audience.

Evoking 17th-century Spain in vivid detail, the stage bursts with colour and period design—from bullfights to flower-sellers, townsfolk to gypsies, wine to windmills. Richard Schafer as Don Quixote truly embodies the Knight of the Rueful Countenance, and Brian Adams as his lovable squire Sancho Panza is a delight. Victor Barbee's Gamache is a nobleman prodded by Kitri's father to woo his daughter. An object of derision, Barbee



<https://shorturl.at/rvBSW>

portrays Gamache with endearing vanity. The lissome Cynthia Harvey as Kitri matches her paramour step for step, leaving no one in doubt as to her desirability. But it is Baryshnikov as Basilio who towers over them all, not only in his consummate mastery but by his generosity as an artist, always striving to shine a light on his fellow dancers' talents. If ever Michelangelo's *David* came to life and stepped onto a ballet stage, then this would be him.

Drawing a balance between Petipa's more commercial adaptation for a Moscow audience, which included a weeping property moon, and a more classical version designed for the purist St. Petersburg crowd, which had 72 children from the Imperial School of Ballet as cupids, and his erstwhile student Alexander Gorsky's more dramatic retelling, Baryshnikov's *Don Quixote* is its own beast. Respectful to both forebears, yet striving for a more lucid middle path, Brian Large's dramatisation lets the dancing do most of the work, to great success.

■ SIDHARTH SRINIVASAN

Revisiting the Legacy

TALK: 6th Nelson Mandela Lecture 2023—*Regimes of Hatred, Regimes of Conviviality*

SPEAKER: Ashis Nandy

OPENING REMARKS: Shri Suhas Borker,
Trustee, IIC

CLOSING REMARKS: Joel Sibusiso Ndebele

COLLABORATION: South African High
Commission; and Working Group
on Alternative Strategies

18 July 2023

In his lecture, Ashis Nandy attempted to locate the towering political persona of the iconic Nelson Mandela in the global culture of knowledge and public service, and in the kind of regime Mandela created and bequeathed to South Africa.

Nandy began with the idea of ‘regimes of hatred’. Hate, according to him, has become a popular theme for political analysis in the contemporary world. No less than 80–90 countries today have turned autocratic in the last 150 years. While it started with Italy and Germany, today autocratic regimes are present in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where democratic processes have been systemically dismantled. The popular phrase, ‘wars make nations’, Nandy said, is also an indirect way of saying ‘hate makes nations’. Mobilising hatred, and people in the name of hatred, has become a game in large parts of the

world. Along with this comes anger, contempt, paranoia, adding to what he called ‘a miasma of hate’.

In contrast to this are what he called ‘regimes of conviviality’—much more difficult to define. Such states often play with utopian ideas, and in Nandy’s definition, include ‘a touch of anarchy’. Gandhi, too, was an anarchist, because he did not depend on the state to realise his ideas. Such regimes also have a healthy, robust belief in the ordinary citizen—in both their limits and potential. He traced these notions back to the second half of the 19th century and identified four charismatic figures whose ideas strengthened enlightenment values, scientific rationality and reason: Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein.

Coming to Mandela’s abiding legacy, Nandy cited the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa which remains representative of how to handle deep communal, racial and ethnic differences peacefully. The Commission did not confine itself to a legal text to define the torture and killings of the Apartheid regime, but was also sensitive to, and respectful towards, traditional local tribal customs and ethics; in fact, part of the idea of truth and reconciliation came from that awareness. In that sense, Mandela was not the pioneer, but remains the first critic of the main pathology of the 20th-century world, which we are living out in the 21st century, i.e., being disrespectful of ideas of traditional knowledge systems. In using that understanding as the basis for the creation of a new regime, Mandela left behind an enduring and unique foundation for a new South Africa.

■ FARAH NAQVI

An Impressive Ensemble

FESTIVAL: *Summer Sonata—A Festival of Opera, Ballet and Concert Films*

CURATED AND INTRODUCED BY:
Sunit Tandon and Samaresh Chatterji

FILM: *Spartacus*

BALLET BY: Yuri Grigorovich with Vladimir Vasiliev; Natalia Bessmertnova; Maris Liepa; and Nina Timofeyeva

MUSIC: Aram Khachaturian

CONDUCTOR: Algis Zhuratis

24 June 2023

Not so much a ‘filmed ballet’ as a ‘ballet film’, Yuri Grigorovich’s *Spartacus* retells the story of the iconic slave leader who revolted against his Roman captors and

triggered the Third Servile War. The ballet is most fondly remembered for its sublime music, composed by Aram Khachaturian. In particular, the ‘Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia’ has been immortalised on-screen from the fourth James Bond film *Thunderball*, to the Coen brothers’ *The Hudsucker Proxy*. The track even featured in Tinto Brass’ infamous *Caligula*, *Penthouse* magazine’s first-ever foray into film-making.

As choreographed by Grigorovich and directed by Vadim Derbenyov, the film deploys cinematic techniques from split-screens to cross-dissolves, and the action unfolds literally on a seemingly endless stage, probably in a studio backlot. Using re-takes, this is not a multi-camera recording of a ballet performance. The lighting, production and costume design prove how well-suited ballet’s celebration of the human body is to a Hellenistic drama.

Vladimir Vasiliev as Spartacus plays the archetypal hero to perfection. He is perhaps not as well known to international audiences as Rudolf Nureyev or Mikhail Baryshnikov, but

that is because he did not cross-over to America. Where *Spartacus* excels is in its ensemble—the other three principals match Vasiliev and even overshadow him in some sequences. In particular, Maris Liepa as Commander Crassus makes one believe evil can be a thing of beauty.

As a film-maker, I would have preferred viewing *Spartacus* as a 'filmed ballet', but, having said that, Khachaturian's classic score, the production values and the talent of the four leads are enough to take one's breath away.

■ **SIDHARTH SRINIVASAN**

India's Democratic Journey

DISCUSSION: *Run up to the 2024 Elections Based on The 2019 Parliamentary Elections in India: Democracy at the Crossroads? (Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2022); co-edited by Rekha Saxena; Subrata Mitra; and Pampa Mukherjee*

SPEAKERS: Ashutosh Kumar; Manisha Priyam; and Rahul Verma

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: Rekha Saxena; and Pampa Mukherjee

CHAIR: E. Sridharan

28 July 2023

With the fast-approaching electoral contest of 2024, this holistic account of political parties is timely. An edited volume, it focuses on Indian elections and party competition, and, at its core, argues that Indian democracy and political party rivalry are alive and well.

Ashutosh Kumar noted the volume's defence of democracy, along with its critique of spaces where it is shrinking. He contended that the book may have taken a rather formal perspective of democracy in India, and not as much of a substantive view. The attitude of the Indian

middle class and the representation of Muslims were cited as crucial in the run up to 2024.

Manisha Priyam noted that 'electoral democracy' is not India's only descriptor, and alluded to what democracies can, and cannot, do. She commended its worm's eye view, combined with its macro-level portrayal of the 2019 general elections. Its expanse, covering both political participants and political manipulations, appealed to her. Priyam's comments on voter preferences across different levels of government, the agency of women and Dalits, and the needs of rural India were thought-provoking.

Rahul Verma applauded the manner in which the volume avoided approaching elections as a standalone event with an outcome, but placed it in the broader context of India's democratic journey. Verma was also categorical about missing elements, such as India's young voter base, the BJP's penetration into rural India, and its geographical expansion eastward. Based on the structure of competition, which cannot be easily altered, one can discern where an election is heading. The devil lies in the details of alliance formation, seat-sharing and choice of leadership. Verma emphasised the need for theorising the structure of competition in dominant party systems (as in India) as well as framing hypotheses that will shape 2024.

■ **RITWIK SHARMA**

DEPARTURES

We are deeply saddened by the passing away of the following Members of the IIC family, and convey our heartfelt sympathy to the bereaved families.



MS. GITANJALI AIYAR
A-4731



DR. KALYANI ROY
A-5703



SHRI KALYAN KUMAR BHADURI
A-1644



MISS SHOBITA PUNJA
A-1689



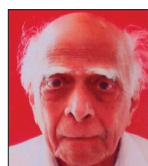
SHRI HIMALAYA S. RANA
A-2190



MS. NIRMALA BUCH
A-7053



MRS. PAMELA MALHOTRA
A-7655



PROF. M.C. CHATURVEDI
M-2268



SHRI M. K. GARG
M-2497



SHRI M. S. CHAWLA
M-0951



Message from the Director

Dear Members,

The past two months have seen many firsts in a long time—the unimaginable Delhi floods; July being recorded the hottest month indisputably due to climate change; and the first State visit of our current Prime Minister to the USA—to name a few. Closer home at the IIC, a Town Hall meeting was arranged between the Members and Dr. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister, who had also been part of the PM's US State visit. This opened up a platform for the Members for a one-to-one engagement with questions. The meeting was followed by tea with the Minister.

To manage the heavy footfall and waiting period in the Main Dining Hall during the weekend, it was decided to open the Lotus Lounge to Members for dinner service on Fridays and Saturdays from 21 July. Further, at the Annexe Dining Hall, a temporary bar has been set up in an attempt to provide prompt service; this will be followed shortly by the construction of a proper structure at the venue.

In our efforts to address Members' concerns regarding the washrooms at the Main Lounge, a work order has been issued for renovation; the construction work will commence shortly and is expected to be completed in three months.

The re-designing of Committee Rooms 1 & 2 of the Annexe into a multipurpose space, which had been under consideration for a long time, is ready to be tendered after due diligence and consultations with an eminent interior designer. The work is expected to be completed in four months.

For better viewer experience, Conference Room I has been equipped with a digital audio-conferencing facility. This facility is now being extended to Conference Room II and the work is expected to be completed in two months. The audio-visual equipments at other conference venues too will be upgraded. The upgradation of the sound and light system in the C. D. Deshmukh Auditorium is at an advanced stage and is likely to be completed by October this year. The upholstery of the chairs in the Auditorium is also being changed. The Rose Garden, Fountain Lawns and the Main Verandah Lawn, with freshly laid grass, are also a visual treat.

Continuing our efforts towards sustainable practices, a 29.1 KVA Solar Power Plant at the Annexe has been installed. The Plant has been connected to the grid through NDMC Net Meter and has been commissioned in all respects.

The IIC–International Research Division's 'SAMHiTA: South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive' project now has a dynamic website introducing the project and collaborators, and an online repository of digitised manuscripts from sources outside India, with information on the works they contain. Over the next two months, it will be populated with the content of over 1,000 manuscripts from repositories in Denmark, France, Nepal and the United Kingdom.

Ending on a high note, the much-awaited annual 'IIC Experience: A Festival of the Arts' is almost here. Members are requested to block the following seven days for a veritable feast of programmes and, of course, cuisine. The Festival will begin on 27 October 2023 and conclude on 2 November 2023.

K. N. SHRIVASTAVA