IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...

Dear Readers,

I would like to begin with the accounts of two literary events

that I attended abroad in November and December 2011. The

first one was in Seoul, South Korea from 9th to 12th November;

the second, in Perth, Australia, from 4th to 7th December.

The Government of South Korea had invited to Seoul

writers from Asian countries, for an International Workshop on

Asian Narrative Traditions. I represented India. There were

representatives from Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia,

Singapore, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and The Philippines,

besides Korean scholars. Upon arrival on 9th, all the delegates

were taken around from the airport itself for a tour of Paju Book

City north of Seoul, a hub of publishing situated very close to

the North-South border that is very sensitive owing to the everlive

hostile posturing between the two Koreas. The state of

publishing in South Korea is really complex and sophisticated

on the one hand and simple and elegant on the other. Very

advanced technology coupled with fine editorial and art inputs

ensure lively texts, layout and design especially in children’s

literature.

The presentations in the Workshop that began on the 10th

morning went on till late afternoon. Very different and varied

storytelling traditions, including myths and folktales of countries

like Vietnam, Mongolia, Thailand, Indonesia, The Philippines,

Singapore, Bangladesh and Nepal brought about the feeling that

the whole of Asia was present in a hall. Through the variety,

there emerged a strange unity in tone—the deeply spiritual planes

bringing about the human virtues of compassion, love for fellow

beings, piety towards parents etc.: merging into one harmonious

whole. Tales of heroism, statecraft and conquest alongside those

of simple human joys and sorrows, captivated the audience of

Korean poets (the revered Korean poet Ko Un had inaugurated

the Workshop earlier in the day), scholars, academics and students.

My presentation was of three parts— the grand narratives of

the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the various regional

variations of them, other narratives including tribal ones from

the different parts of the country formed the first part; the second

part was a general introduction to the folk narratives of Kerala,

including the *Vadakkan Paattukal* (Northern Ballads), *Thekkan*

*Paattukal* (Southern Ballads), The Songs of the Mid-regions,

*Maappilappaattukal* (The Songs of the Mappilas of Malabar), the

various performance texts of folk forms etc; finally focus was

laid on the main streams of the Northern Ballads.

The International Workshop marked the launch of the

Gyangshu Cultural Hub City Project of the Government of South

Korea. In a meeting with the Deputy Minister for Culture, he

outlined the aims of the project. He made it clear that the Hub

City was being set up for artists from all over Asia to come over

and work in total independence. To begin with, it would be

the Workshop earlier in the day), scholars, academics and students.

My presentation was of three parts— the grand narratives of

the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the various regional

variations of them, other narratives including tribal ones from

the different parts of the country formed the first part; the second

part was a general introduction to the folk narratives of Kerala,

including the *Vadakkan Paattukal* (Northern Ballads), *Thekkan*

*Paattukal* (Southern Ballads), The Songs of the Mid-regions,

*Maappilappaattukal* (The Songs of the Mappilas of Malabar), the

various performance texts of folk forms etc; finally focus was

laid on the main streams of the Northern Ballads.

The International Workshop marked the launch of the

Gyangshu Cultural Hub City Project of the Government of South

Korea. In a meeting with the Deputy Minister for Culture, he

outlined the aims of the project. He made it clear that the Hub

City was being set up for artists from all over Asia to come over

and work in total independence. To begin with, it would be

story writers, screenwriters and playwrights who would be invited.

When asked whether the governments of their home countries

would have any control over their freedom of expression, the

Minister categorically stated that the artists concerned will be

totally free, and that the South Korean government would not

compromise that freedom in any way. When I asked about

monetary support for artists who would have to forego their

earnings back home because they would have to stay away from

their jobs, who would be economically free in their mind only

if financial support is extended to them to sustain their families

while they are away in Korea, the Minister said those details

will be worked out later. On the whole, the representatives from

all countries felt that this was a unique gesture from the

Government of South Korea. All the representatives were made

honorary consultants to the Government of South Korea for the

next two years.

The Biennial Symposium on Asia-Pacific Writing that has

been happening for the last thirty years in the Westerly Centre,

University of Western Australia in Nedlands City, Perth, had the

theme, “Writing in the Asia-Pacific during the Age of the Digital

Revolution,” this year. Writers from the US, UK, Australia,

Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, The Philippines,

Japan, India and Macao participated. There were poets, fictionwriters,

playwrights and academicians among the participants,

who read their works. I presented a paper on “Indian Writing

in the Age of the Digital Revolution, with Special Focus

on Malayalam.” I discussed the emergence of eBooks, blogs,

literary websites, web-magazines etc., in India and the

proliferation of blog poetry and literary discussions in the

social media in Malayalam. I also read my poems and released

a book published by the Westerly Centre. The combined

creative voices from the Asia-Pacific region, integrated with the

western creative atmosphere, was a singularly different kind of

experience.

There were a number of very good poets who took part

in both the above events. I solicited contributions from all of

them. Most of them obliged. Reviving one of our prestigious

sections, “Kinspeople Near and Far,” we are publishing them in

the next issue.

Vaclav Havel who died on 18th

December, was a Czech playwright,

political theatre activist, poet and

essayist who was the symbol of

resistance against Stalinism. Many of

the leading Indian intellectuals, notably

of Kerala and Bengal of the ‘80s and

‘90s, upheld his life as an example for

opposing tyranny and oppression in

any form. His accounts of the long

years he spent in Communist jails in

inhuman conditions for a long time,

have etched in indelible detail, the

horrors of Stalinism in Eastern Europe.

His plays and essays have caught the

imagination of successive generations.

Havel was an oft-quoted intellectual in

Malayalam literary, political and social

discussions in the late 20th century. As the Iron Curtain fell away

towards the end of the ‘80s, the Czech people found in him

the leader for national reconciliation and reconstruction, though

Czechoslovakia fell apart eventually and formed two national

entities, The Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. He was

the last president of Czechoslovakia (1989-92) and the first

President of the Czech Republic (1993-2003), and a nominee for

the Nobel Prize for Peace. The reception he got while on a visit

to India some years ago was effusive and celebratory. We may

join Milan Kundera in concluding that “Vaclav Havel’s most

important work is his own life.”

In our “Masters” section Loknayak Jayprakash Narayan, the

legendary presence in our political, social and cultural life during

the Nehruvian and later, Indira eras, is remembered, with a story

by himself, and also by poems on JP by great masters such as

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar and Dharamvir Bharati. These are times

of rising popular awareness resulting in social and political

churning as is evidenced by the Arab Spring, the Occupy Protests

that began in Wall Street and spread across major cities of the

world, like Athens, Rome in our own country, the campaign

against corruption being led by highly revered social activists etc.

In such times of social and cultural awakening and burgeoning

people’s movements for a just and equitable society by the

eradication of corruption, JP’s ideals will certainly inspire us and

show us the way.

Paul Zacharia, the Malayalam fiction-writer, has spanned

the different phases of modernist fiction with ease and elan.

Rather, he galloped past these, like the “Bridegroom on the White

Horse,”(in his enigmatic story with Yusuf Sarai, Delhi, as its

locale), reinventing himself with ingenuity, keeping his feet

firmly on the ground and trying to live life anew every wakeful

moment, as revealed through his latest story, “Madyasaala.” I

remember once the Rajasthani doyen of fiction Vijay Dan Detha,

thoroughly captivated by the mastery of this wizard in weaving

tales, describing, in his inimitably suave style, Paul Zacharia as

his ‘guru’ in story-writing, obviously hyperbolising the point to

make it clear to the average reader. A couple of years ago, Bijji

had translated a few of Zacharia’s stories into Rajasthani and

published them in his journal, in a gesture of tribute. In the

story we carry in this section, “The Death and Funeral of Sister

Alphonsa,” we find the surreal element predominating the real,

blurring the line between the world of the living and that of

the dead. We soon enter the realm of the eternal present through

the artistic dexterity of this master.

The special focus of this issue is on fictional works—short

stories and novels—that have been dealing with the theme of

Alternative Sexuality, a topic that has gathered vital importance

lately as the expression of the self of long-suppressed segments

of society which is now gaining recognition worldwide, with

several universities turning their attention to canonising their

literature. LGBT, Gay Pride etc., are now receiving proper media

space nowadays, instead of the ‘curiosity’ news and features they

generated until recent times. The Delhi High Court’s landmark

judgment in 2009 amending Section 377 of the Indian Penal

Code, practically decriminalised homosexuality, and made it

possible for the Indian citizen to be his or her own self, according

to their self-perceived identity of themselves vis a vis gender.

This has lent a wider scope for related gender identity studies

in our country, necessitating the construction of an academic

base structure for this branch of knowledge. Kuhu Chanana, an

Associate Professor in Delhi University, has taken the trouble

to collect the material

presented here, and to

write an exhaustive

study, for which we are

thankful to her. It is

hoped that her initiative

will go a long way in

inspiring more academic

inquiries in this area.

Extending on the

theme of Alternative

Sexuality, it may be noted

that in our last issue, we

had carried a graphic essay comprising some of the famous

paintings of Bhupen Khakhar, who dedicated his life in defining

gender identity and the many problems it faced. One of the

earliest artists to openly state that he was a homosexual he could

be considered a pioneer in ‘Gay Pride’ in a serious way. The

declarations a few years ago by many Indian artists, writers, fashion

designers etc., about their gay identity would certainly have been

inspired by Bhupen Khakhar’s life in some way.

The Photoessay in this issue is “The Hijras of India.” The

renowned Japanese photographer, Takeshi Ishikava, has made

noted exhibitions using these photos. He has kindly extended

permission to use these photos in our pages. Seen along with

the above-mentioned texts, this photo-essay on the “Third Gender

of India” adds value to this issue, it is hoped.

As all the texts in the section on Alternative Sexuality

constitute expressions from the margins, our regular feature

“Writings from the Margins” is dispensed with in this issue.

The poet being the prophet has been a strong tradition

in our country as well as in other ancient societies. The Druids

of ancient Wales is an example; further, the arcane nature of

the art of poesy has been immortalised by Coleridge in his “Kubla

Khan.” The act of poetic creation happens when the human mind

momentarily traverses different realms of reality or different

“worlds.” There are any number of instances of some poetic

or fictional fancy coming true, the accounts of which we come

across often. However, the celebrated Malayalam poet

Vijayalakshmi had literally prophesied that the killing of Ishrat

Jehan and three others in 2004 was through a ‘fake’ police

encounter, in her poem “Oozham” (The Turn) which she wrote

on the very night of viewing the news item. Her intuition came

true as the Special Investigation Team dealing with the case has

revealed recently. Please read in our section, ‘Special Feature,’

the reprint of the translation of the poem we had published

in IL225.

Another item in this section is a narrative on the poetic

personality of Gulzar, by Padma Sachdev in her inimitable style.

We are reviving after an interval, the section “Second

Tradition,” in which we used to carry translations of texts

belonging to the times before modern literatures began to

develop in our languages. In this issue we carry “Thiru Kutraala

Kuravanji” a classical folk play on Lord Siva of Kutralam by

Thirikuuda Rassappak Kavirayar of the 18th century, translated

by G. Kalvikkarasi. This is a verse play, and the translator has

striven to retain the flavour of the original as far as possible.

I wish our readers a very happy and prosperous 2012.

A.J. Thomas