

## EVENT

### ACCOUNT OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON “THE RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL CULTURES FOR THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE”, NEW DELHI, MARCH 24–26, 2014\*

The International Conference on “The Relevance of Traditional Cultures for the Present and the Future” was held at the India International Centre (IIC) on March 24–26, 2014. The conference was organised by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Chairperson of the IIC-Asia Project and Life Trustee, IIC. During the last two years she contacted all the interested scholars, selecting and inviting those who could contribute to the topic. The conference was attended by about 30 delegates who represented the African, Latin-American, Asian and some European civilisations. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) helped in the work, too.

A concept note for the conference had been circulated in advance, and the purpose of the meeting was to bring together intellectuals from far-away countries who have reflected on the fundamental question: what the long history of civilisation in their countries contains, what kind of rich and varied knowledge-systems and cultural traditions are still maintained. Do the traditions have a meaningful and significant role to play in the contemporary world, and more importantly, in the world of the future? This should be discussed in the context of the shift that has evidently begun to take place in the structure of power from the West to the East and/or from the North to the South.

The conference started with an inaugural session wherein Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan introduced the conference. The Inaugural Address was delivered by the chief guest, H.E. Mr. M. Hamid Ansari, Vice President of the Republic of India, while H.E. Mr. N. N. Vohra, Governor of Jammu & Kashmir, Life Trustee of IIC, gave the Presidential Speech. Thereafter, there were four sessions including lectures by participants

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from Africa, Asia (two sessions), Latin America and Europe respectively, and a fifth open discussion session. The conference concluded with a Valedictory Session at which the Rapporteur presented his report on outcomes and highlights of the discussions. The Valedictory Address was delivered by Dr. Karan Singh, President, ICCR.

At the Inaugural Session the Chairperson, Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan explained that this conference represented the fifth phase of the work undertaken by the IIC-Asia Project since its inception in 1993. She clarified that at this time the objective was to place the developing world in the context of the ongoing international political and economic discourse, and drew a distinction between two separate tendencies: the Earth and the Globe. There is tension between these two tendencies because of the undue focus on GDP considerations. She has noted that developing countries are homes of old civilisations, multiple identities, maintaining continuity of oral traditions, knowledge systems, etc.

H.E. M. Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India, raised a series of questions to which the Conference should seek answers. He gave a number of examples to underline, that traditions are indispensable, that they do not impede the forward movement of societies, but actually lend authenticity to them. He stressed that tradition and modernity are not antipodes, that the examination of the past has to be critical rather than adulatory, and must steer clear of imagined glory and must not be an incentive for chauvinism. He suggested the need to rethink modernity by criticising it from within, in its own terms and thereby enriching it. His speech set the tone for the discussions that followed.

H.E. N. N. Vohra, the Governor of Jammu & Kashmir added several new dimensions to the issues under discussion. He asked whether the past can contribute to finding solutions to the challenges facing the world today, including for instance those of internal insurgencies in different parts of the world, overcoming the problems inherited from the colonial systems of education, and imperial thought. He spoke about changes required in the framework of the international economic system and its impact on defence and other policies. He thought that the concept note was quite comprehensive, but was not sure whether a shift in power had actually begun. He underlined that the tradition in India and Asia was based on brotherhood and living in peace, that pluralism as defined in the concept note was badly needed today. He stressed that in today's world the capacity to dialogue needs to be enhanced. His views were appreciated and served as an important guidepost for the discussions that followed.

The first session of the conference started with presentations by scholars Mr. Mohamed Salmawy, Dr. Wafaa Taha El-Saddik (both from Egypt), Dr. Elizabeth W. Giorgis (Ethiopia), Prof. Akosua Anyidoho (Ghana), Prof. Ousmane Sene (Senegal) and Prof. A. Parsuramen (Mauritius). The session was chaired by Prof. O. B. Joseph Yai of Benin who introduced the discussions and also summarised them at the end.

The following consensus opinions emerged: There is need to redefine both modernity and tradition. Strengthening oral traditions is important; tradition does not exclude basic ideas but can include important matters. Modernity must devolve around the individual culture of each country, and there is need to sustain the tradition of resi-

lience in old cultures. The preservation of the centrality of language and the need to safeguard the lesser known languages are significant. Museums should be used for the virtual recreation of traditions, Egypt's example of setting up a museum for children is worthy of emulation. Ways and means should be devised to share our traditions with other cultures and civilisations, for example through establishing an institution of Asian traditions in Africa. The delegate from Mauritius suggested that Africa should hold a conference to follow up the present one.

Sessions two and three covered presentations by Asian scholars. The sessions were chaired by Prof. Sri Hastanto (Indonesia) and Ms. Samira Hanna El Daher (Lebanon). The speakers of the second session were Prof. MA Kamawal (Afganistan), Ms. Samira Hanna El Daher (Lebanon), Prof. Wen Haiming (China), Prof. Atsushi Ibuki (Japan) and Prof. Lokesh Chandra (India). In session three presentations were made by Dr. Le Thi Minh Ly (Vietnam), Prof. Sri Hastanto (Indonesia), Dr. S. Goonatilake (Sri Lanka), Profs Abhi Subedi and Tulasi Diwasa (Both from Nepal) and Prof. Aditya Malik (India).

During the two sessions in the discussions the following main issues emerged on which there was broad confluence of views.

Traditional cultures and Western culture (modernity) should not oppose each other, they can be synthesised. Advances in technology can potentially have an adverse impact on traditional cultures which can and actually have adjusted. Also traditional cultures impact on Western cultures. A nation cannot cease to exist unless you destroy its culture. There is need to create a "better world" in which diversity is important and one respects the other cultures. We should seek clues from traditional cultures. There is need to go back to basics. The soul cannot be reached through a computer. Culture must be harmonised with development. The trinity of knowledge, science and space is essential to sustain traditional cultures and maintain their relevance. If we want to create something new, it is necessary to reach out of the existing cultural boundaries and ideas. The critique of plurality and the affirmation of diversity were stressed. There is a serious need to move away from glorifying consumerism, sex and violence. We need to guard against the tendency to focus on comparing the dark side of Western civilisation against an idealised version of ancient civilisations.

Tradition does not offer solutions to all problems and should not always be idealised. Its link to ethics should, though, be stressed. Tradition as understood in India, i.e. "*paramparā*", is not a static state. If it were, this would imply an end of tradition. The importance of incorporating the study of cultural heritage in schools was recognised. New technologies are changing the way we do things. They even impact our mental processes. It is important to study the "language of silence" and non-verbal communication. Power should be shared for the betterment of humanity. We live in a broader world, cannot live in isolation, cannot have atomisation. Man has to be at the centre of the discourse. Culture is universal and exists at many levels, in time and space and has to be kept alive for humanity. People should not be culturally homeless.

Session four was chaired by ambassador Faust Godoy (Brazil) and presentations were made by the following scholars: Prof. Maria Del Carmen Valverde Valdes

(Mexico), Mr. Hugo Novotny (Argentina), Prof. Y. Andreadis (Greece), Dr. Sergei Serebriany (Russia), Prof. Géza Bethlenfalvy (Hungary), Ms. Emma Clark (UK) and Dr. Tom Cheetham (USA). The Chairman also presented a paper.

The session saw the presentation of seven fascinating papers that covered the Mayan–Mesoamerican, the Latin American, the European, the Greek and the Russian sphere. The Divine in art and some philosophical perspectives of the subject have also been discussed. Given the variety and diversity of the presentations, we will not try to summarise the outcomes in this section of the report, but will simply highlight some important takeaways. The specificity of Latin America is that there are essentially two related official languages and perhaps one semi-official religion, which makes communication and interaction much easier. The Mayan culture is indigenous and not traditional, its practice is still very much a reality even under changed circumstances. Cultures constantly adopt changes. Time and space cannot be separated in Mayan culture. Its vision incorporates a never ending sequence of creation and destruction. The expansion of one culture cannot be at the expense of another one. The need for a habitual change towards a new culture of non-violence, a dialogue among civilisations and respect for diversity of cultures are necessary. Related to this is a need for a “New Spirituality”. Brazil is the “melting pot” of South America. This gives rise to its own set of problems, including that of multi-identity. There was animated discussion on this proposition. As traditional cultures are concerned with the process of their adaptation and survival, individual decisions have to be taken because of the pressures of globalisation. However, there are non-negotiable core spaces. The importance of inter-cultural dialogue is clearly visible, as exemplified at this Conference, including horizontal communication among non-European cultures. There is need for a new universal contract among humans and between mankind and nature, and also for abstraction, imagination and permanent reinterpretation in our field of study, and in the subject of this Conference. Tradition is a living reality and the principles that underline it are based on timeless wisdom.

Session five was chaired by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan and rapports were made by Prof. Come Carpentier and Ambassador K. Raghunath, both from India.

Prof. Carpentier’s presentation included issues such as defining “tradition”, its preservation even at the cost of being anachronistic. He pointed out that traditions are often controversial and may have a negative impact, although they can also help to contain tensions. He recalled that the period of “Enlightenment” in the West was also subject to dual interpretation. He referred to the Free Masons and their impact on the development of human rights. He called for the need to seek connection points between traditions and the Supreme Truth. Saving a tradition is not enough, it needs to be corrected and reinvigorated. Finally, there is need to move away from the concept of “Western” Enlightenment.

Ambassador Raghunath noted that modernity was not related to time and asked whether it was feasible to resolve the gap between tradition and modernity. Does modernity allow us to relocate tradition? The impact of religious structures had also to be considered. For instance, is there a special aura around them? He argued that culture was all pervasive, it could be taught. There was in this regard continuity over

space and time. There were also good things in the West. On the issue of “modernity”, the matter is in our hands and we must find our own answers.

An animated and open discussion followed these two presentations. These were seen as having brought in a sense of balance in the discussions at the conference.

The final valedictory session was chaired by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan. The Valedictory Address was presented by Dr. Karan Singh, President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. His address was wide ranging and profound. He began by stating that he agreed with the outcome of the discussions as presented by the Rapporteur. He recalled the IIC–UNESCO project on Tradition and Modernity held fifty years ago. Crisis in the world community has persisted. We face a vanishing past and an indeterminate future with problems such as fanaticism, terrorism and inequality confronting us. In addressing this crisis, the development of cultures is critical. Traditional culture needs to be defined. He saw no conflict between chanting Vedic verses and listening to rock 'n' roll and hip hop music. Dr. Karan Singh recalled that the Global South was not always poor. Indeed, it was its riches that attracted the attention of freebooters and others. The South has again to develop and articulate its cultures and perceptions to add to the richness of global society and make due contributions to Asia, Africa and Latin America. The links within the South that had been shattered by colonialism should also be restored across the board. Furthermore, the importance of oral traditions should be stressed. In India, the latter had been central to its persistence as a civilisation. Despite outstanding achievements in S & T during our lifetime, the world has been full of tension, turmoil, inter-religious strife, poverty and degradation, huge income inequalities, global warming, etc. Dr. Karan Singh recalled that in addressing these issues we must greatly draw upon our traditional cultures that are of permanent value. The latter should be preserved, but their simple glorification is not acceptable. There is need to critically reassess and reappraise traditional cultures. He recalled in this context the work of The Inter-Faith Movement. The clash of civilisations must not become a self-fulfilling prophecy. There should instead be collaboration among them. In conclusion Dr. Karan Singh noted that in the 21st century the world could not afford the luxury of fanaticism. Truth is one, though the wise call it by different names. We must think, work and achieve together. There should be no hatred among us.

The vote of thanks on behalf of the foreign participants was given by Prof. Akosua Anyidoho of Ghana. She announced that there was need for a follow up Conference and that Africa would take up the baton in this regard. Details would be conveyed at a later date. This decision was received with applause. She also conveyed the special appreciation of all the participants for the outstanding contribution of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Chairperson of IIC-Asia Project, for conceptualising and organising the conference and guiding its deliberations. The vote of thanks on behalf of the organisers was given both by Dr. Kavita Sharma, Director of IIC, and by Ambassador Satish Mehta, Director General of ICCR.

It was a pleasure and an honour to participate in this Conference, it was a most educative and uplifting experience.

*Géza Bethlenfalvy*

