



## **SARI Colloquium, University of Paris 13, 2016: A Report**

*Subhendu Mund\**



*SARI (South Asian Research Institute), Paris, members, in the colloquium, 2016*

There are any number of seminars and conferences held everywhere in the world and I have myself attended not less than a hundred such academic events and being associated with a number of academic and cultural organizations I have been involved with organizing them. Without sounding hyperbolic, I must admit that the SARI 2016 conference I attended has been for me a unique and memorable experience. There was everything one expects in a seminar: very kind hospitality,

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quality presentations with a great range of interpretations, camaraderie among the participants and the organizers, very comfortable stay, good French food (including an *Indian* lunch with fried rice, naan, paneer-capsicum, raita, chicken butter masala, gajar ka halwa and all) and the great feeling of being in PARIS!



The Annual and International Colloquium of the Society of Activities and Research in the Indian World (SARI) 2016 was held in the serene and picturesque atmosphere of Campus de Villetaneuse, Université Paris 13, Sorbonne Paris Cité, on 26-28 May 2016. The theme of the conference was a bit offbeat (without any postcolonialist hangover), in the sense that it chose a subject like ‘Variations, Rewritings and Adaptations of the Jataka Tales and Buddhism in

India Today’. And who would know that this apparently dowdy sounding title would invite so complicated scholastic responses! The papers presented were of an amazing variety and committed scholarship and explored a wide range of reception that the Buddha and the Jatakas have effected down the ages and across cultures.



At the inaugural, Professor Didier Guével, Dean of the Faculty of Law, Political and Social Sciences and President of Paris 13, and Professor Cornelius Crowley, University Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, welcomed the participants on behalf of the University. There were of course, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, President of SARI and Ludmila Volná, Coordinator of the Colloquium, along with Michel Naumann, a founding member of SARI and its Honorary President, who greeted us all with love and kindness.

The colloquium had several sessions under various captions: ‘Lives of the Buddha in Himalayan Art and Literature’, ‘Emancipation from Oppression’, ‘New Manifestations’, Jataka Tales in English, Anglo-Indian and Indo-Anglian Writing’, ‘Jatakas in Performing Arts’, and ‘Sri Lankan Gazes on Jataka Tales’. However, on the

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basis of presentations, the entire proceeding can be divided into such broad categories as ‘Metaphysics’, ‘Literature’, ‘Emancipation from Oppression’, and ‘Fine Arts’.



The first session itself, appropriately titled as ‘Lives of the Buddha in Himalayan Art and Literature’ set the tune of the colloquium with Professor Cornelius Crowley in the chair and the colourful presentation of Jayita Sengupta (Associate Professor, Department of English, School of Languages and Literature, Sikkim University, India) on ‘Buddha in New Resurrections: A Comparative Analysis of *The Birth of the Maitreya* and *Buddhas of the Celestial Gallery*.’ The two texts she had selected are Sipra Bhattacharya’s English translation of Bani Basu’s novel *The Birth of the Maitreya* (2004), and the narratives of aesthetic imagination in the *thangka* paintings by a Himalayan artist, Romio Shreshtha in *Buddhas of the Celestial Gallery* (2011). Her presentation, through narratives, paintings and a *thangka* demonstrated how the Buddha himself has become a text.

Now, the presentations in the ‘Metaphysics’ category. Jon Solomon (Professor, University of Jean Moulin, Lyon, France) presented an intellectually stimulating plenary on ‘Translating Enlightenment: Towards a transcultural meaning of Enlightenment’ which sought to explore a transcultural meaning of “Enlightenment” through an encounter between Madhyamaka Buddhism and contemporary critiques of Kantianism inspired by Object-Oriented Ontology. Through his paper, he explained the concept of ‘translation-as-Enlightenment’ in relation to the affective multitude of existence in relation to ideas about causality, compassion, translation, aesthetics, epistemology and politics. The presentation of Michel Naumann (Professor Emeritus at the University of Cergy, France), entitled ‘The Jātakas of Non-believers or the Accounts of Non-believers on the Origins of Buddha’ may also be placed in this category. In his paper, Naumann examined some texts which present the Buddha and his vocation from an external point of view. According to him, the external representations on Buddha are sometimes unjust and ill-informed, sometimes noteworthy and sometimes revelatory of unaccustomed aspects of the personality of the founder of Buddhism. He based his arguments on his readings of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, as well as a few other texts.

Understandably, the category of the ‘Jatakas and Literature’ enjoyed the largest number of takers, in which the speakers illustrated how the Jatakas travelled far and wide. Dr Naomi Appleton (University of Edinburgh, UK) in her plenary on ‘Jataka Stories as Indian Literature’, traced the

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early history of the Jataka genre and its relation to other bodies of Indian literature. In her presentation, she also discussed the relationship between Jataka literature and other early Indian narrative texts, such as Jain scriptures and the Hindu Mahābhārata.

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru (Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Bucharest, Romania) spoke on “*Jataka Tales and Kipling's Commitment to India*”. Her paper analyzed the impact of the Jataka Tales and of the Buddhist background in Rudyard Kipling's fiction, focusing on *Just-So Stories*. Nishat Zaidi (Professor of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India) talked about the engagement of a great Urdu storyteller with the Jatakas in her paper ‘Partition, Migration and the Quest for Meaning in Times of Moral Crisis: Intizar Husain's Adaptation of Jatakas in his Urdu Short Stories’. She tried to explore the various ways in which the tapestry of Jataka Tales is interwoven in the fictional fabric of Intizar Hussain, one of the greatest Urdu writers, and how they become a significant tool in the writer's quest for meaning in the time of moral crisis caused by the Partition of India in 1947. Deborah Jenner, who teaches History of Art and Civilization different universities in Paris (France) presented a paper called ‘Could American "tricksters" be Bodhisattvas?’.



In her presentation, she argued that ancient Buddhist stories may have echoes, parallels or even direct inspirations in America from pueblo tricksters through Mark Twain and on to New York Dada. Elizabeth Dahab (Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department of Comparative World Literature and Classics at California State University, Long Beach, USA) made a presentation on “The Rebirth of Ganesh in VS Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*”. She pointed out that Ganesh, the Hindu God with an elephant head, worshipped by a number of Buddhists under a variety of names, such as Ganesha, Vinayaka, and PhraPikanet, is also associated with overcoming obstacles and worshipped as the deity of grace, and prosperity. The affinity Buddhism has with Ganesh is well documented, and His association with potentials of rebirth and success is the backbone of Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, where the protagonist named Ganesh, evolves under the auspices of his namesake through trials and tribulations that eventually catapult him to fame, success, and, ultimately, politics.

Ludmila Volná, researcher at ERIAC, University of Rouen Normandy (France), who teaches Indian writing in English at Charles University, Prague (The Czech Republic) sought to locate the echoes of the Jatakas in a Czech opera by Antonín Dvořák in her presentation ‘*Devadhamma*

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*Jātaka* and *Rusalka*: Water, Sprites, and New Beginnings’. The premises of her discourse was that water and associated elements in *Devadhamma Jataka* can be analyzed as making dramatic transformations that occur for the characters within the story, which is also the case for the story of *Rusalka*. She highlighted the ways in which the paradigms behind the imagery of water function in these two works, to pinpoint the perceptions common to both as well as to bring to light the imagination structures inherent in the cultures that have respectively produced them.



In his presentation entitled ‘Travelling Tales: Migration, Translation, Adaptation and Appropriation of the Jataka Katha’ based on archival research, Subhendu Mund, an Independent Scholar (Former Head, Department of English and Principal, BJB Autonomous College and Former Visiting Professor, IIT Bhubaneswar, India) showed how the Jatakas had migrated to almost all cultures through translation, adaptation and appropriation. Dr Mund showed how the Jatakas kept being adapted to various cultures,

times and histories; and even in India, there has been a good deal of intertextuality through the overlapping of the stories in different frames. The paper of Debashree Dattaray (Assistant Professor, Comparative Literature and Deputy Coordinator, Centre for Canadian Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India) was on ‘Cultural Memory and the Birth of a Nation: Jataka in the Writings of Gandhi and Rabindranath’. In her presentation, she discussed how the reception of the Jataka Tales in the twentieth century India thrives on the concepts of plurality and inclusiveness and mobilize the categories of ‘caste’, ‘class’, ‘religion’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ to define alternative understanding of ‘individual’ and ‘community’. Further, through ideas on education, social movements and community involvement as articulated in the writings of Gandhi and Rabindranath, the Jataka signify a real, complex trajectory of a nation with its triumphs and failures, strengths and weaknesses, clarities and confusions.

Two papers presented in the colloquium: ‘The Paradoxes of Realism: Martin Wickramasinghe and *The Jātakas* in Sinhala Literature’ and “A Fictional Evaluation of Buddhism in Postcolonial Sri Lanka: Manuka Wijesinghe's Trilogy” dealt with the relevance of the Jatakas in contemporary Sri Lankan literature. The first one was presented by Anupama Mohan (Assistant Professor of English at Presidency University, Kolkata, India) and the second by Geetha Ganapathy-Doré,

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(Research Accredited Associate Professor of English at the Faculty of Law, Political and Social Sciences, University of Paris 13, Sorbonne Paris Cité, France). While Mohan took up Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), generally regarded as the ‘Bard of Sri Lanka’; Ganapathy-Doré spoke on the Srilankan born German resident poet, playwright, dancer and actress, Wijesinghe. Mohan focused on Wickramasinghe’s own discussion of specific tales in his well-known essay called *Landmarks*, and argued that he did not follow the model of social realism in his own novels. Paradoxically, she pointed out, he emulates the western model of psychological realism as a creative writer. On the other hand, Ganapathy-Doré submitted that in her trilogy -- *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006), *Theravada Man* (2009) and *Sinhala Only* (2014) -- Wijesinghe offers a rather bold, satirical and fictional evaluation of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics in fiction. She elaborated how Wijesinghe examines the relevance of Buddhism, and how she offers a fusion of different literary forms and narrative resources to defend cultural diversity as the only path to non-violence in contemporary Sri Lanka.



In the category of ‘Emancipation from Oppression’, there were two papers: Neekee Chaturvedi’s (Head, Department of History, University Maharani College and the Deputy Director, Centre for Museology and Conservation, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India) ‘Recovering the Repressed, their Oppression and Coping Strategies through the Jataka Tales’, and Shruti Das’s (Head, P.G. Department of English and Associate Director, Centre for Canadian Studies, Berhampur University, India) ‘Renaissance of Buddhism, Ambedkar and Dalit Emancipation in India’. According to Chaturvedi, the Jatakas are a valuable resource for reconstructing various aspects of everyday lives of ordinary people. They also touch upon aspects of their relations with the elite, the repression that they had to suffer and the strategies they devised to cope with a society marked by deep differences based on caste, class and gender. In her paper, she sought a symbolist analysis of the tales. The presentation of Shruti Das analyzed Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Buddhist ideology and maintained that he wanted the Dalit intellectuals to use the community strength and property to build a formidable post-Hindu Buddhist *Sangha* towards Dalit empowerment. She also submitted that in the early twentieth century, Ambedkar endeavoured to revive the *Sangha* Doctrine of Buddhism whereby a vision of Dalit emancipation could be ensured.

In the category of ‘Fine Arts’ we had two items of visual delight and a presentation. Binay Kumar Behl’s exhibition titled as ‘The Path of Compassion: Buddhist sites and Art Heritage’, organized

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at the Café Expo was quite in tune with the colloquium. Two presentations were made by Chris Dorsett, an artist and exhibition-maker, and Janaki Nair, a trained Kathakali and Bharata Natyam Indian danseuse, both presently in the United Kingdom. Nair, in collaboration with Dorset, made a performance-based presentation which was the most exciting moment of the conference. It was followed the next day by their paper called ‘Revisiting Tantra: Contemporary British and Indian Responses to the Tantra-oriented Songs of Rabindranath Tagore’. The way the young scholar-dancer presented her arguments utilizing *mudra* [symbolic hand gestures associated across the Indo-Himalayan world with ceremonial/theatrical storytelling and yogic/meditative exercises] to contrast ancient methods of transmitting narratives (i.e. the Jataka Tales) with the unconventional character of the Tantra belief system took the deliberations to an aesthetic height.



Volná, Elizabeth Dahab and Subhendu Mund.

The various sessions were chaired by Professor Cornelius Crowley, Professor Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Professor Madhu Benoît Jain (University of Grenoble, France), Dr Ludmila Volná, Professor Michel Naumann, and Dr Joelle Weeks (University of Paris 1, Pantheon Sorbonne, France).

There was also an informal creative session in the colloquium, in which Shruti Das, Savita Singh, Ludmila

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Over all, the SARI 2016 was an intellectual soiree of its own kind, and we must acknowledge that it served a great scholastic purpose by reviving studies in the Buddha and the Jatakas, and exploring the diverse manifestations it has acquired down the ages and across the globe.

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