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I A S F S

INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SCIENCE FICTION STUDIES

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IASFS

Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies

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EDITORIAL

ONE OF THE MAJOR QUESTIONS UNDER consideration at the various forums provided by IASFS has been the national specificity of Indian science fiction and fantasy literatures. What is uniquely Indian about Indian SFF and why is this “Indianness” of such vital importance in any serious engagement with this corpus of literature? This question has, paradoxically, confronted me all the more insistently during my current sojourn at Melbourne to research Australian fantasy literature. As I engage with the writing of a relatively new nation that has nevertheless established itself firmly in the field of SFF in the recent past, it is impossible not to notice that the resurgence in this field coincides in the 1980s in both the countries – India and Australia – two countries that could not have been more far removed in their respective history, culture, and economy.

**IASFS SHORT STORY COMPETITION:
ORIGINAL STORIES INVITED.
LAST DATE FOR SUBMISSION JUNE 1, 2007
Award for the BEST INDIAN SF STORY
will be Presented at the
9th National Conference, 2007**

FOR DETAILS SEE “CONCLUSION” ON PAGE 7

There are also, however, strong connections between these two countries ranging from the anthropological debate about the first Aborigines having migrated to Australia from India about 40, 000 years ago, to the British colonial heritage with a very large number of Anglo-Indians choosing to settle in Australia rather than going back to England after India’s independence in 1947, to the most recent and the most popular of the connections forged by cricket and commercial Indian cinema with movies like *Salaam Namaste*, *Nala Damayanthi*, and many

others including the forthcoming SF movie *Love Story 2050*. The two countries even share an important national holiday, the 26th of January, which is celebrated as the National Day in Australia and the Republic Day in India; the same date being a mere coincidence. Which brings me back to the “coincidence” of the simultaneous SFF revival in the 1980s. Nor does the coincidence end here – native publishers in both the cases were reluctant to risk money on SFF to begin with and authors in both countries (those writing in English in the case of India) turned to overseas publishers.

It remains extremely difficult to pin down a unique national quality considering the linguistic and regional diversity along with the influence of the West in India; and the strong affinity to European culture coupled with geographical divergence, the international nature of migration, and the Aboriginal heritage in Australia. However, Dr. Srinarahari’s report of the 8th IASFS conference shows that a consistent engagement with this question has resulted in several possible

**9th IASFS NATIONAL CONFERENCE
to be held at LUDHIANA in the
1st Week of November 2007**

FOR DETAILS SEE NEXT ISSUE OR CONTACT DR. PURUSHOTHAMAN

answers in identifying those elements of Indian SFF that can be seen in stories written in all the major Indian languages. This emphasizes the need to bring together practitioners and readers across the different languages for a fruitful analysis of Indian SFF. The process begun by the conference should not end with it and we need to create one exhaustive database of Indian SFF which will not only provide opportunities for researchers in this area but also spread information about this body of literature throughout the world.

- REEMA SARWAL

**A REPORT ON
8th IASFS NATIONAL CONFERENCE
Held on**

11 Nov. 2006 and 12 Nov. 2006

Jointly Organized by
Marathi Vidnyan Parishad – Aurangabad
Vibhag, IASFS, and Vignyan Prasar

DR. M. H. SRINARAHARI
General Secretary, IASFS

INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SCIENCE FICTION STUDIES (IASFS) organized the Eighth National Science Fiction Conference in collaboration with Marathi Vidnyan Parishad (MVP), Aurangabad Chapter, and Vignyan Prasar, New Delhi at Maharashtra Mahasool Prashikshan Prabodhini, Aurangabad, in Maharashtra, India on the 11th and 12th of November 2006.

The keynote address to this major national event was given by eminent astrophysicist and leading science fiction writer Dr. Jayant Narlikar. The sessions included Science Fiction writing in Indian Languages - past, present and future, Science Fiction and Media, Literary Criticism on SF, Science Fiction Narration, and also a Video Conference with Professor James Gunn, who is the Director, Center for Science Fiction Studies, Kansas University, Kansas, USA.

The inaugural function began with the invocation by Ms. Manali Garge, followed by the traditional event of 'lighting the lamp' by Dr. Naganath Kottapalle, the honorable Vice-Chancellor of Dr. Ambedkar University, Aurangabad and other dignitaries who were on the dais. In his inaugural speech, Dr. Kottapalle brought out the rationale in the combination of Science and Fiction. Later, Subodh Mahanti of Vignyan Prasar; Dr. Srinarahari, General Secretary of IASFS; Dr. Ranjan Garge, President of MVP, Aurangabad Chapter; and Mr. Ananth Deshpande, Chairman of National Centre for Science Communicators, Mumbai, highlighted the activities and achievements of their respective organizations.

DAY ONE

Dr. Purushothaman in his presidential address said that the shift in the focus from writers to readers was a major breakthrough in the growth of its members and for bringing out a variety of themes for discussion among the

participants in its annual conferences. In this regard, the sessions in the present conference were especially devoted to discussions on the developments of the genre in various Indian vernacular languages.

In his keynote address, Dr. Jayant Narlikar said that SF writing is vital for the growth of science as today's imagination can turn into tomorrow's reality although emphasizing that scientific literature must indicate the real progress of science. While sharing his personal experience, he drew home the point that among the various modes of writing namely, research papers, reviews, articles, books, encyclopedia and science fiction, the last one is the most difficult mode of writing. With a number of examples, he distinguished between SF and science writings and explained in detail about the difficulties faced in writing SF stories. He pointed out that SF must represent the development in science and that there is no science involved either in horror stories or in the *Star War* series. He further cautioned the writers that writing biographies of scientists is not SF and finally condemned the absence of both science and literary qualities in many SF stories. Dr. Narlikar cited a number of examples to distinguish good SF stories from bad SF stories. He concluded his speech by appreciating the role of IASFS in its efforts to bring together all sections of people under one umbrella. Ms. Akanksha Kashikar the award winner of the Mumbai based Baba Atomic Research Center was then felicitated by Dr. Narlikar. Dr. Y.H. Deshpande, IASFS secretary for West Zone, introduced the guests. Dr. Garge welcomed the gathering. Dr. M.V. Kataria thanked the organizations and individuals responsible for making the conference possible and Dr. Vibhavari Deshpande anchored the inaugural session. In all, the presence of more than two hundred participants (including the press) from various parts of India made the inaugural function a grand success.

In continuation of the pre-lunch session, Dr. Srinarahari in his speech on "The Indian Responses to the World Science Fiction" made a critical study of the translations, adaptations, dissertations, theses, and research works in English as well as vernacular Indian languages pertaining to the works of Mary Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Karl Capek, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and others. Among them, the attempts

to immortalize Isaac Asimov in India were highlighted. The causes of retardation of the genre and the positive growth of Indian SF were also discussed. Speaking about the Indian contribution to the World SF, he mentioned a few names among the galaxy of Indian writers – beginning with attempts made by Satyajit Ray followed by the works of contemporary writers like Amitav Ghosh, Anil Aggrawal, Ashok Banker, Bimal Srivastav, Deepak Chopra, Dilip Salwe, Hari Kunzru, Jayant Narlikar, Kalpish Ratna, Kumar Arunachalam, Laxman Londhe, Nandini Pandya, Salman Rushdie, Samit Basu, Subhash Jairath, Suniti Namjoshi, Upendra Mehan, Vandana Singh, and others. Apart from hard Science Fiction, he elaborately dealt with the ingrained element of myth present in Indian SF works. He thus concluded that the unique feature of Indian SF is the combination of Indian myth with modern technology, which will often be projected to the future. He added that World SF writers Alan Dean Foster, Bruce Sterling and Frank Roger are making use of Indian settings in their writings. At present, Indian SF writing has been making a positive impact on the World Science Fiction. Therefore, there is a healthy exchange of cultures on both the sides in its real sense.

The next session of the conference, “Science Fiction Writing in Indian Languages: Past, Present and Future” included speakers on Hindi, Assamese and Kannada languages. They were Mr. Devendra Mewari, Dr D. C. Goswami, and Prof. Rajshekhar Bhoosnurmath respectively. Marathi SF writer Subodh Jawadekar chaired the session.

Continuing the same theme in the second part of the session, Dr Dhole, Dr Devendra Pal Singh, and Mr. Nellai Muthu spoke on Marathi, Punjabi and Tamil SF respectively and Mr. Subodh Mahanti was the chair. In general the speakers traced the publication history of SF works in the various languages. They cited the lack of readership and publishers as the major causes of retardation of SF in India. SF is a recent phenomenon, which is gathering momentum by the efforts of the Vignyan Parishads in each vernacular language as part of the larger aim to popularize science in the country. There is gradual transition from hard SF to soft SF in the second half of the twentieth century. A remarkable shift in themes from

magic and the supernatural to Biotechnology, Nano-technology, Genetic Engineering, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and others could be noticed from reading various stories. However, there are abundant stories, which combine myth and technology in equal proportion.

The major discussions regarding SF in the various languages are summarized below:

Hindi SF:

Arvind Mishra and Manish Mohan Gore opined that though Hindi SF made its pioneer attempt as long ago as 1884 with the publication of “Aascharya Vrittant” by Ambika Dutt followed by “Chandralok ki Yatra” by Keshav Prasad Singh in 1900, SF in Hindi did not gain popularity for the span of a whole century. However, with the establishment of Indian Science Fiction Writers Association, Faridabad there is a tremendous progress in the field. A number of writers have published stories on the themes robotics, colonization of other worlds, matter transmission, time travel and others.

Assamese SF:

SF has earned due reputation in Assam in the past seven decades. Hariprasad Barua, an engineer by profession, wrote a short story in *Awahan* (1937). The writer as well as the speaker Dr. Dinesh Goswami has made a significant contribution to the field of SF. So far, he has aired a number of stories over radio broadcast. Other writers include Amarjyothi Choudhury, Amulya Kumar Hazarika, Banidta Phukan, Ranju Hazarika, Santanu Tamuly, among others. Radio dramas are also enacted.

Kannada SF:

The paper presented by Prof. Bhoosnurmath highlighted the common problem faced by other vernacular languages in popularizing SF in India. He also mentioned SF workshops conducted in Kannada language for scientists, science writers and children.

Marathi SF:

According to Deepak Ghare, whose paper was titled “SF in Marathi – A Critical View,” Marathi SF dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Initial works show the pulpy quality of SF. Adventure stories based

on the writings of Verne and H.G. Wells became popular. Presenting alien worlds and bringing suspense into SF stories are gathering popularity among the Marathi readers. Narayan Dharap, the editor of the magazine *Naval*, has supported this trend. Jayant Narlikar, who made his debut as SF writer in 1974, laid the foundation for the development of hard SF in Marathi. Since three decades, Marathi Vidnyan Parishad has been conducting SF story writing competitions thereby popularizing SF among readers and creating hundreds of writers. Maharashtra has an indigenous tradition of story narration in its annual literary meet called *Sahithya Sammelan*, which is a mega event in the state where at least fifteen lakh people gather. Among them eminent SF writers like Bal Phondke, Subhodh Jawadekar, Kishor Kulkarni, Yashwant Deshpande, D.V. Jahagirdhar and others narrate SF short stories. Recently Yashwant Deshpande's "Guinea Pig" has been serialized on the national channel. The positive impact of these efforts is the gain in terms of respectability for SF.

Punjabi SF:

SF is a recent phenomenon that began in the second half of the twentieth century. Leading writers are Amandeep Singh, Amarjit Singh, Colonel Jasbir Bhullar, D.P. Singh, Hardev Chauhan, Ajmer Sidhu, Suresh Rattan, Ukhwant Kaur Maan, and Vidwan Singh Soni. The Newspapers that have published the stories, are *Ajit*, *Des Sewak*, *Nawan Zamana*, and *Punjabi Tribune* while the magazines that have promoted SF by way of publishing it, are *Jagriti*, *Pakharian*, *Jan Sahit*, *Nirantar Soach*, *Primary Sikhia Samdarshi*, *Samkali Sahit*, and *Vigyan Jot*. D.P. Singh feels that in spite of these productions, Punjabi SF is still in the infant stage.

Tamil SF:

Nellai S. Muthu traced the germinal seeds of SF in poetry form in Tamil epics like *Jeevaga Sinthamani*, *Manimekalai*, *Perunkathai*, and *Kamapa Ramayanam*. Further, the poets Subramania Bharathiyar and Puthumaippithan have carried forward the SF elements in their works.

He also mentioned the SF films like *Kalai Arasi* and *Ulagom Sutrum Valiban*, which visualized lunar habitation and nuclear explosions in the sixties. The speaker made a

critical study of the works of Arniga Nasar, Deivasigamani, Malan, Nalini Sasthri, Murugan, Nellai Muthu, Sivadas, Sujatha, and others under the categories science stories, science novels, science dramas, science poetry and also classified their works as using fictitious, futuristic elements of science and their effects on society.

Malayalam SF:

Though Kerala has a comparatively higher level of literacy in the country, and though people have initiated a movement to popularize science, the speaker Prof. Kaliyath Damodaran said that it is an unfortunate thing that SF is still in its infant stage. The reasons are lack of interest by reading public, lack of SF writers and publishers among others. However, he was optimistic that this conference would trigger the growth of Malayalam SF.

Bengali SF:

Samarjit Kar stated that SF writing in Bengali began during the period known as the Bengal Renaissance (when West Bengal and Bangladesh were united) when the English introduced modern science from Primary to University level in this part of the country. Some authors began writing of science in story forms during that time. Jagadish Chandra Bose's story "Palatak Toofan" (Absconded Tempest) describes the saving of a ship by making use of a kind of oil, probably highlighting the effect of surface tension. Later S.N. Bose, M.N. Saha, Satyajit Ray, Premendra Mitra and others carried the relay stick forward. Anish Deb speaking on Bengali SF highlighted the works of Jagadish Chandra Bose and while also providing a chronological account of SF in the language. He is hopeful of the plausible developments in the field in the days to come.

DAY TWO

A variety of topics were discussed on the following day. The session "Science Fiction and Media" was chaired by Dr. V. B. Kamble. The speakers were Mr. Rajendra Kulkarni, Mr. Jayant Erande and Dr Y. H. Deshpande. During the second session on "Role of Media," Mr. Rajendra Kulkarni said that Marathi language has accepted SF as a part of mainstream literature. Some magazines and publishers have

generated curiosity among the readers of SF. Speaking on "Science Fiction Broadcast" Jayant Erande traced the pioneer attempt in broadcasting SF in the eighties on radio, which requires special knowledge of science, imagination, visualization of the sound effects, and action. He acknowledged that sincere attempts were made only by a few select stations. The risk was taken only by All India Radio and not private commercial radio. In this regard, the radio station, Kolkata has broadcast the works of Satyajit Ray, Ray Bradbury, and Aldus Huxley. Director of Vigyan Prasar, Dr V.B. Kamble said that all segments of media have equal responsibility in communicating SF. Vigyan Prasar has produced TV serials like "Aisa Bhi Hota Hai" and organized a nation wide Vigyan Yatra.

Dr. Purushothaman chaired the session on "SF Literary Criticism." The speakers were Mr. Deepak Ghare, Mr. Samarjeet Kar, and Dr. Arvind Mishra. During this session, the speakers reviewed at length SF as literature in Marathi and Hindi. Every speaker opined that very little has been done in the area of criticism.

SF writer Mr. Laxman Londhe chaired the session on "Science Fiction Narration". Dr. Yashwant Deshpande, Dr. Dingankar, Mr. Vasant Shedje and Ms. Vishakha Nanir narrated SF stories written by them.

From the lively interaction of the audience during the sessions, it was inferred that magical realism dominates in some of the stories. Most of the stories narrate only fantasy part while science elements flash here and there. A technological symbol like a robot or a computer has been the central idea or central character in most of the Indian SF works. At a later stage, there have been several biotechnological stories which discuss the preference of Artificial Intelligence of the silicon based to carbon based ones. Many scholarly works like dissertations and theses on SF topics were located in English, a few being in some of the vernacular languages like Tamil and Marathi.

VIDEO CONFERENCE

As a part of the conference, the Chairman of National Center for Science Communicators, Mumbai, Mr.A.P. Deshpande (Anant), Science Fiction writers Drs.Bal Phondke (Bal) and Yashwant Deshpande (Yash) had an interactive videoconference with Professor James Gunn,

Director, Center for Science Fiction Studies, Kansas University, USA. After a brief self-introduction by each participant, the relevance of the videoconference as part of the eighth National SF conference was highlighted. Bal Phondke set the ball rolling by asking Dr.Gunn about what attracted him to the genre of SF. The professor committed to SF recalled that his father used to bring fairy tale books when he was in grade two. He was further encouraged by his father to go through SF stories from magazines like *Amazing*, *Astounding* and others, as he asserted that they have created enough impetus on his creative and speculative abilities. While making a cross reference, acknowledged the contributions made by the deans of SF namely, Fred Pohl and Jack Williamson. He disclosed that he has had a long writing career of about six decades recalling his debut in 1948 under the able editorship of John W. Campbell. From 1974, Gunn began to teach SF. From 1992 onwards, his efforts were to bring together SF of all kinds. Answering a question on the 'pulpy' literature, he recalled that pulp was made use of in printing SF works. He explained how the 'pulpy' quality of the genre has vanished and SF gained respectability in contemporary times.

In response to a query by Anant on introducing SF to beginners, Jim said that though it is customary to begin teaching SF with the Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the doctor of the novel does not behave as a learned scientist and the work reflects elements of both horror and fairy tale. Hence, he suggested that one might make a beginning with the works of Jules Verne and E.A. Poe. Yash questioned whether *Tarzan* by E.R. Burroughs is SF. Jim not only refuse to classify it as SF but also argued that it is a work of magic and fantasy, which takes the reader to remote places.

To a question posed by Bal to define SF, Jim, after quoting Delany and Campbell, explained that it describes marvelous, speculative and cultural existence. Further expressing his own view, he said that SF is a literature of the study of human conditions, which is confronted by significant change. Bal drawing attention toward the two phrases namely 'human condition' and 'literature of change,' questioned whether SF describes only anthropocentric society as it often addresses the alien problem. Further, he said that the change is brought out through cultural revolutions and political

upheavals, not being confined to the effect of science and technology alone. Jim agreed, and added that SF often deals with these conditions in future history series, which describe cultural revolutions, rise of dictatorship, primitive societies and others. As in *Caves of Steel* by Isaac Asimov, SF discusses the cultural impact on people. People adapt to cultural changes in SF as they would in real life. The genre has dealt with cultural and psychological impact on people in the light of science and technology. In this regard, the term 'Social Science Fiction' is referred to in Asimov's works.

Yash then questioned whether SF should be categorized as American SF, Indian SF, Chinese SF and others. Significant changes like the fascination caused by the news of American President's Election over Radio is an example showing how a particular culture is affected by technology. Hence, each country has SF with a cultural difference. Fantasy and fantastic elements in SF are also a result of inheritance and the environment. With regard to viewing SF under different cultural contexts, Anant argued that occidental world is based on materialism, where as the orientalist rely on spiritual or metaphysical concepts. In this context, he asked Jim to distinguish the West from the East. Accepting Anant's analysis, Jim confirmed that materialism has been of greater impact on the US culture and history. The US is recreated every decade and the SF culture is to explore the possibilities of change in the attitude of the people, particularly reaffirming the peoples' concerns every now and then. But there is no tendency to look back. In other words, it always marks the progress, reinforcing the brick laid earlier. It is better to work the plausible solutions for the possible problems in the near future like five years from now.

After several other questions regarding the changing themes in SF, there was a shift in the direction of the discussion when Anant brought out the issue of selecting a few good stories from hundreds of entries received for competitions and anthologies with special reference to the collection of stories in *Road to Science Fiction #6*. Jim explained his criteria of selection and then recalled how a much younger Narahari had given him "Einstein the Second" by Laxman Londhe as the chosen the best story from India for publication in the anthology.

Finally, Yash wondered whether the scientists who turn to SF writing are a loss for the field of science. Citing the case of Campbell, Jim remarked that SF can serve the two-fold function of warning about the possible dangers of scientific progress as in Orwell's novel *1984*, as well as of creating a positive impact on science like Huxley's work in 1934, which gave a clue to cloning. The professor concluded by remarking that science and science fiction must go hand in hand for the progress of humanity.

CONCLUSION

This conference was not the end but the beginning for the ensuing 9th National SF Conference to be held at Ludhiana, India during the first week of November 2007 when an award will be instituted to the best Indian SF story for the current year! The story should not have been published anywhere. There is no bar of age, qualification, experience, gender, community, or geographical location.

Please mail the story before June 1, 2007 to Dr.M.H.Srinarahari at: drsrinarahari@gmail.com or sciencefiction_india@yahoo.com

Stories may also be sent through surface post to:

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SNAPSHOTS FROM THE CONFERENCE



(Photos by Dr.M.H.Srinarahari)

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Send to: Ms. Reema Sarwal
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