

# A Report of the III International Science Fiction Conference in India

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In order to Popularize Science Writing and to Celebrate Science Fiction, Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS) had organized the fourteenth Annual Science Fiction conference which also happens to be the third World SF conference. It was in collaboration with the Department of English, St. Teresa's College, Kochi. It was held from February 14 to 16, 2014 at Ernakulam, Kerala State in India. Malayalam being the local language, and no such remarkable progress seen in the development of SF genre here, IASFS aspired to create a platform for the younger generation to be exposed to SF atmosphere through this International Conference.

After the traditional invocation, Former Ambassador, Vice-Chairman and Executive Head of Kerala State Higher Education Council Mr. TP Srinivasan lighted a lamp symbolizing the inauguration of the Conference. In his speech he imagined how scientific progress would be in the ensuing fifty years. In his '*Thought Experiment*' he referred to the highly sophisticated vehicles which would transport him to the venue of the conference without the present traffic jams and indicated that on his arrival at the venue the thoughts would have been transformed into a written speech in the desired language. He also predicted that the passage between the real and the virtual worlds would be narrowed.

The Executive Vice President and Ex-officio Principal Secretary of Kerala State Council of Science & Technology Education Mr. Rajashekar Pillai delivering the presidential address narrated how the state government programs have been successful in popularizing Science writing.

In his report, General Secretary of IASFS Dr.Srinarahari said that Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies was established on January 2, 1998 which marks not only Asimov's birthday but also the completion of a century of the publication of the Indian Science Fiction work "Agosh" by a scientist Jagadishchandra Bose. Primarily, the association had organized 11 National conferences at Chennai, Gandhigram, Pondicherry, Aurangabad, Bangalore, and Mysore. The three World conferences were held consecutively at Coimbatore, Pune and Ernakulam (present one). He informed that the association brings out quarterly News Letter and biannual journal namely, *Indian Journal for Science Fiction Studies*. It publishes the papers read at the conferences, stories, scholarly articles, letters and others.

In his keynote address Dr. Ramachandran Nair traced back SF to five hundred years BC when Vashishta rishi (saint) had made attempts to introduce Science Fiction elements in his creations. Further, he discussed the works of Jules Verne, Arthur C Clarke, Raymond Jones, John Christopher, Frederic Brown, John Wyndham, Robert Heinlein, Daniel Keyes, Tom

Godwin, Clifford Simak, Fritz Leiber, Isaac Asimov and Jayanth Narlikar, Also at length he spoke about the contribution of British and American Science Fiction writings in the growth of the genre from possibility to plausibility.

IASFS President Purushothaman asserted that in the first conference only a dozen SF enthusiasts had attended. But it is a wonder that there was a gradual increase in the number of participants since then.

Mr.Krishnan Kutty a Malayalam Science writer and Dr.Arvind Mishra an Indian Science Fiction writer were together honored on this occasion. Speaking on the occasion, Mishra appreciated the years of efforts of IASFS in bringing all the Science Fiction aspirants together in the country.

Frank Roger a leading world SF writer from Belgium said that he had so far attended a number of conferences in North America but the present one is the first one in India. Alessio Dominic a History Professor & Dean of International programs from Richmond American International University in London, UK expressed his happiness in finding the present conference to be unique compared to the rest.

Dr. Helen the Principal of the college highlighted the achievements of the students during its 125 years of its establishment. Dr. Celine welcomed the gathering and Dr. Renuka gave away the vote of thanks.

A number of plenary sessions were held during the three day conference. In the first session, professor Rangarajan spoke on “The Signs of Science Fiction and Nebulous Itineraries.” In his speech he tried to trace the history of Science from Homer’s *Iliad*. In his conclusion he said that presently, the man’s life is confined to the web, net and cell.

Dr. CG Ramachandra Nair former Chairman, Science, Technology, Environment committee and Ex-officio Secretary to the Government of Kerala; Former dean, Faculty of Science, University of Kerala spoke on “The Enchanting Worlds of Modern Science Fiction”.

Dr.Atanu Bhattacharya Chairperson, Department of English, Central University Gujarath speaking on Bengali SF explained how different the Indian atmosphere is in the development of SF compared to the west as the English departments in Indian Universities are still skeptic in considering SF to be included as a research topic.

Malayalam Science Fiction session was graced by Professor Babu Joseph, Professor S Shivadas, Professor VPN Namboodiri, Dr. Ambatt Vijayakumar, GS Unnikrishnan, and PN Krishnankutty. Professor Thomas Mathew had chaired the session.

Science writer in Malayalam Shivadas initially established how effective fiction writing is and calls for the writers to shift their writing from traditional way to the one which inspires, imparts lofty feelings, induces great ideas and uplifts human mind. Citing the attempts made by PT Bhaskara Panicker and NV Krishna Warriar the pioneers in establishing Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, he acknowledges them for having inspired authors to write for the children.

Speaking about the latest trend in Science Writing in Malayalam language, Shivadas observes that ecospirituality and ecological ethics in writing stories are catching up fast.

Another Malayalam Science writer G.S. Unnikrishnan spoke on “Writing Science for Children of the New Age”. He said that Science Literature in our country has to get well equipped to meet this challenge. Hence the Science writers are to shift to new ways and styles of writing rather than sticking on to the traditional style of writing. He suggested that science writers should suggest a few activities, use story telling techniques, at the same time making use of reliable sources and above all know one’s own market.

Dominic Alessio presented a paper on “Re-thinking the History of Science Fiction, Space Exploration from a British Colonial Perspective: The Tale of New Zealand’s *The Great Romance* (1881)”. The first volume accounts the nineteenth century protagonist John Brenton Hope who awakes after 193 years after a deliberate chemical sleep discovers a wonderful future society replete with mechanical marvels, immense orderly metropolises, and interestingly a beautiful young woman Edith Weir. Though, volume second is a continuation of the journey, it describes the spaceship *Star Climber* which helps in colonizing Venus. Alessio discovers that this is the first work in the history of science fiction which seriously deals with colonization and the alien species in particular.

Speaking on his ‘life in Science Fiction’ Frank Roger said that he got introduced to SF at the age of fourteen. At that time Philip K Dick and Ballard were his favorite authors. The former had made use of philosophy as the latter had made a powerful impact on Frank with his poetic style, original treatment of ideas and avoidance of traditional themes and formats. Being in Belgium, he says he is gifted to learn Dutch, English and French so as to experiment SF writing in different languages resulting in the production of more than 500 SF short stories to date. He asserted that he is habitual to make notes whatever he observes during his journeys and meeting people and a few have been utilized to make them as short story whereas the rest of the notes remained as notes still. His new arrival *The Burning Woman* is also the result of one of his keen observations made when he was aged seventeen. His works are typically Belgian in nature, very international in scope, which have reached people in the world in 40 languages.

An interview with the SF writers from different vernacular languages was arranged in one of the sessions. Dr. Arvind Mishra (Hindi), Venkatesh Vijay (English), Rajashekhar Bhoosnurmutt (Kannada), Nellai S Muthu (Tamil), Ramakrishnan ND (Malayalam), Frank Roger and Dr. Alessio Dominic took part in the session. The topics discussed were on what is and what is not SF, forms of SF and how each one of them became SF writers. The session generated maximum interaction from the delegates and dignitaries. Srinarahari summarized and gave the concluding remarks.

Two SF books written in English were released during this event. One was written by a youngest writer and the other was by a veteran SF writer. The two SF books released were *The Greek Mission* (2013) authored by a 14 year old boy Venkatesh Vijay and Rajashekhar Bhoosnurmutt’s *The Art and Craft of SF/F Writing* (2014).

Being the Guest of Honor of the conference Professor James E Gunn founding Director of Centre for Science Fiction Studies, Kansas University, Kansas, USA told that he had accepted the invitation to be here as he had a desire to meet Srinarahari who was in constant touch with him since two decades. The latter was doing research on Asimovian works in those days. Gunn's speech was beamed during the conference. Admiring the tremendous progress of the genre in India in a short span of time the professor first of all salutes for the same.

One of the interesting aspects of SF is the way the development of the genre took shape in different countries. According to his theory the acceptance to Science fiction is related to industrial revolution and the way it changed people's life. It changed the course of civilization and people's attitudes toward existence.

Writers recognized that the nature of existence was being changed by science and technology and responded with stories speculating about those changes. Mary Shelley from Britain, EA Poe from the US, Jules Verne from France, H.G. Wells from Great Britain wrote stories contributing to the development of the genre.

Professor Gunn discussed about the types of stories published from the pulp age, detective, love, weird, and then to the non-pulp quality of the stories published under the guidance of John W Campbell and others.

Further he said that the turning point in the movement of SF was the attempt of Michael Moorcock's in Great Britain. He said how it brought new horizon for SF that is the New Wave which could shift the emphasis from the exploration of the outer world to the inner world. At the same time a shift from the magazines to book form and their increase in the number of their production took place year by year. Speaking about the movements, he explains in detail the cyberpunk, movement pioneered by William Gibson.

Praising the part played by the present day SF magazines; Gunn says that magazines still play a vital role in providing new ideas and introducing new authors. He has made a mention of a few magazines of the world namely *Hayakawa's SF Magazine* of Japan, China's *Science Fiction World* and Britain's *Interzone*.

Throwing light upon the digital revolution and online publications the learned Professor observes that the author has been playing multiple roles like editor and publisher by which raising the question of leadership and quality of the production in a world where information is to be freely accessible.

As a flash back Gunn asserts that Science Fiction has given him enough imagination, suspense, adventure, speculation, and unique ideas in his childhood and gave him opportunities to write it, to teach it, and to write about it. He hopes that it would continue to entertain, instruct, and inspire further. Concluding his speech Gunn quotes Fred Pohl's remarks at Hungary as he said that Science Fiction has the ability to make us all brothers. Further he calls that Science Fiction is the literature of the human species, and we are its citizens and its custodians.

One hundred and five papers were presented during the conference. Dr.Srinarahari, Dr.Panneer Selvam, and every member of the faculty of English, St.Teresa's College had chaired the sessions. The papers on SF movies outnumbered other forms. Some of them are on *12 Monkeys*, *Avatar*, *Ender's Game*, *Enthiran*, *ET*, *Gravity*, *Hancock*, *I am Legend*, *Jurassic Park*, *Oblivion*, *Prometheus*, *Quarantine Terminal*, *Resident Evil Series*, *Signs*, *Slither*, *Solaris*, *The Last Man on Earth*, *The Matrix series*, *The Rise of the Planet of Apes*, *Transformers*, *War of the Worlds*, and others. Among star war series *The Phantom Menace* was chosen for study.

The paper readers had chosen *Dr.Jekyll and Mr.Hyde*, *Dune: House Atreides* by Kevin J Anderson and Brain Herbert, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, George Orwell's *1984*, Hadrian's *Eve's Tomb*, HG Wells' *The Time Machine* and *The Invisible Man*, Ian McEwan's short stories, Isaac Asimov's *I Robot* and *Foundation* series, Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Richard K Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, Robinson's *Red Mars*, Salman Rushdie's *Grimus*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and the works of Jayanth Narlikar, Niranjan Ghate and Bal Phondke as well as C. Radhakrishnan's *Ullil Ullathu* for critical study.

Also, there were papers on "Fictionalizing Science", "Science Fiction: Importance and Future", "Prophesying Life and Technology", "SF in Malayalam", "Hindi SF", "Kannada SF", "Marathi SF", "Science Fiction in Class room Teaching", " Science fiction in ancient Indian myth", "Artificial Intelligence", "Humanizing Robots", "Extra Terrestrials", "Worlds of Imagination" and others.

The participants mostly belonged to the following states of India: Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttara Pradesh, Gujarath, Pondicherry, West Bengal and Delhi. There were no barriers of age, creed, race gender, qualification, experience, countries, borders, and others. Every one could breathe and feel Science Fiction.

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