

Report
Indo-Caribbean Literature and Culture

University of Warwick
26th-27th June 2008

By Letizia Gramaglia

The conference was organized to commemorate the 170th anniversary of the arrival of East Indians in the Caribbean and had the aim of stimulating intellectual dialogue on Indo-Caribbean literature and culture. It was an international conference which brought together academics and scholars from Belgium, America, Italy, Cyprus, Trinidad and Guyana, all working within the field of postcolonial studies and sharing a particular interest in the rapidly expanding area of Indo-Caribbean studies. The papers, presented over two days, explored the literatures of the English and French-speaking Caribbean and encouraged the debate on several aspects of social cultural and political dynamics in the region, as well as on theoretical frameworks for new and comparative approaches to Indo-Caribbean literature.

Given the recent passing of Guyanese writer Roy Heath it was thought appropriate to dedicate the conference to his memory and his son Roy Heath Jr was invited to open the conference with a brief speech.

A Cheddi Jagan Memorial Lecture was then given by Dr Michael Mitchell, who examined the complexities inherent to the construction of post-colonial identities in the divided and multiethnic context of Guyanese society and the reflections of these processes in literature.

The first panel highlighted the importance of preserving sources on the history of Indentureship and offered the readings of two recently rediscovered journals of inestimable historical value. Brigid Wells presented a critical analysis of the diary of her ancestor Dr. Theophilus Richmond, a ship's surgeon aboard the first vessel to transport East Indian workers from Calcutta to Demerara. As well as throwing light on contemporary attitudes the diary also, and more importantly, described conditions on board the *Hesperus* and the reasons for the thirteen deaths (12 Indians and one crew member) during the voyage. Subsequently, Letizia Gramaglia spoke about the *Asylum Journal (1881-1886)* compiled Dr Robert Grieve, Medical Superintendent of the Lunatic Asylum in British Guiana. This unique document contained a comprehensive record of all the statistics associated with the running of the asylum, along with the doctor's own research into the sanitary conditions, diseases and sociology of the colony. In particular the paper focused on Dr. Grieve's observations on the high incidence of insanity among East Indian immigrants in the colony. The great-granddaughter of Dr. Robert Grieve was also present at the conference.

The second panel was dedicated to the socio-cultural importance of cricket in Indo-Caribbean communities. In particular, Prof. Clem Secharan (*London Metropolitan University*) explored making of Indo-Guyanese identity through the seminal contributions of Indo-Guyanese cricketers in the 1950s-60s. Prof Secharan argued that these achievements were located within the wider socio-political milieu of British Guiana, culminating in the complex, but fascinating, interplay of

Indo-Guyanese perceptions of their two heroes after the Second World War: Rohan Kanhai and Cheddi Jagan (1918-1997), their political leader. Prof. Seecharan's presentation was followed by that of Dr. Claire Westall (*University of Warwick*) who linked the discussion of cricket to the field of literature and concentrated specifically on a set of poems dedicated to West Indies cricket heroes of Indo-Caribbean descent. The paper offered close readings of 'For Rohan Babulal Kanhai' by David Dabydeen and 'Call Him the Babu' by Sasanarine Persaud, and placed these against the interpretations of Kanhai's cricketing import offered by C.L.R. James and V.S. Naipaul.

The second day opened with a paper by Prof. Stephanos Stephanides (*University of Cyprus*) who considered the theme of the conference through personal reflections and meditations on the critical collusion of *nostos* (homecoming) and cosmopolitanism as affirmations of inessential commonality. The presentation was interspersed with showings from Prof. Stephanides's films on the celebration of the Kali cult in Guyana and in the USA. The writer Lakshmi Persaud then discussed the role of Indo-Caribbean cultural inheritance in the making of modern identities both in Trinidad and in wider international contexts, as well as offering readings from her novels. This was followed by Dr Shivani Sivagurunathan's paper, concerned with the revisitation of history in an attempt to challenge the boundaries between official and unofficial accounts of Indian indentureship and migration in the 19th century through a close reading of David Dabydeen's '*The Counting House*'.

The final panel opened with Dr Veronique Bragard's (*Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium*) comparative reading of Theophilus Richmond's diary and the 2003 novel *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* by the Mauritian novelist Appanah-Mouriquand that fictionalizes the travelogue of Dr. Grant on board the *Atlas*, a ship heavy with Indian laborers bound to cross the *kala pani* to work on Mauritian sugar plantations. Subsequently Dr. Lisa Outar (*St. John's University, NY*) moved between literary representations of Francophone Indo-Caribbeans (by both Indian and non-Indian authors) and contemporary debates around the place of Indians within Francophone Caribbean society. She offered close readings of Ernest Moutoussamy's *A la Recherche de l'Inde Perdue*, Raphael Confiant's *La Panse du Chacal* and Maryse Conde's *Crossing the Mangrove* as well as assessing the celebration of Indian Arrival Day in Guadeloupe and the forms that commemorations of the 150th anniversary of Indian presence on the island took in 2004. To conclude, Dr Michael Niblett explored how writers such as Michel Ponnamah and Ernest Moutoussamy, in seeking to inscribe the Indian presence into the historical and literary landscape on their own terms, have engaged with religio-cultural rituals as part of an approach to collective memory. Dr Niblett (*University of Warwick*) argued that, as they interrogate what it means to be both Indian and Caribbean, authors such as Ponnamah and Moutoussamy point to the need for formulations of identity in which the assertion of Indianité is simultaneously an assertion of Caribbean-ness.

BBC World covered the event; interviews with speakers and abstracts from papers presented at the conference were broadcast by BBC Caribbean radio services as part of their weekly Caribbean Magazine.

The conference was a great success and positive feedback was received from all delegates. To cement the connections established during the conference and to continue the networking among

scholars in the field it has been agreed that the organizer will work with Prof. David Dabydeen towards the creation of an Indo-Caribbean Studies Association. A collection based on the proceedings – edited by Prof. David Dabydeen and Letizia Gramaglia – will be published by Peepal Tree Press.