

## SF in India

- Dr. Srinarahari

Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies, Bangalore, India has organized the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual National Science Fiction Virtual Conference in collaboration with Indian Science Fiction Writers Association, Ayodhya, Kalpabishwa, Kolkata, Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, Mumbai, Malayalam Science Fiction Association, Trivandrum, and Deogiri College, Aurangabad as the host institution.

The two days' conference which was held during the last week of August 2021 had focused on the theme "Indian Science Fiction: Contexts, Texts and Practices".

To begin with the Music Department students of the Deogiri College presented the invocation and the welcome song. Professor Ashok Tejankar Principal of the host College welcomed the august guests and participants.

Briefing about the conference, Dr. Srinarahari Secretary – General, IASFS, quoted the definition of SF from *Science Fiction in the Real World* (1990) by Norman Spinrad, tracked the impact of SF from the Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and narrated about the steady growth of SF in India during the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the pioneer attempt made by Narlikar, Phondke, Marathi Vidnyan Parishad and others.

Further he explained in detail how the emergence of a number of associations, webzines, journals, special issues, forums, active interactions over the social media, publications of research works, dissertations, contributions to the visual media have contributed to positive growth of the genre in India. He concluded by providing the highlights of the conference such as the special lecture by Bal Phondke, keynote address by the Entrepreneur & Product Manager, the webmaster of [www.adbhut.in](http://www.adbhut.in) Mr. Dinakar Charak, valedictory address by Dr. Jayaraman, release of the IASFS special issue of the SF scholarly journal INSIGHT by university publication division, Sri. Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kerala State and others.

Inaugurating the event, Secretary, Department of Science & Technology, Jaipur, Government of Rajasthan Ms. Mugdha Sinha, referred to the semblance of harmony in the combination of rationality with communication skills of the left and the right parts of the human brain which are the essence of science fiction.

Further, she informed about the utilization of the combination of the Government of India schemes under the department of Arts and Culture as well as the department of Science and Technology which encourages the budding young writers to get yearly scholarships for their contribution to this field of Science Fiction. Furthermore, after touching upon the milestones of SF history, as a writer she focused her speech on the content, target audience and the purpose of writing. Ms. Mugdha Sinha with a positive note offered the association budding writers to Jaipur to partake in the SF writing workshop in the near future.

International Science Fiction writer, story teller, sci-fi critic for *The Guardian*, BBC, *Wired*, *Buzzfeed* and *Aeon* magazine Mr. Damien Walter who also teaches Indian SF Community". He quoted how JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Arthur C Clarke's work and Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* could revive mythology and create fantastic worlds. Recollecting his experiences during his visit to India he reflected that Hindu mythology is one of the greatest one in the world. He observed how the ancient Indian mythical works could hint at the modern technology. Hence, he called for a simulation of myth and technology to carry out further exploration in the field of science fiction.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Purushothaman the Founder-President of IASFS briefed the activities of the association during the past twenty-three years and announced that attempts would be done in the following years for exposing the youngsters to the genre SF under the proposed program entitled "Catch them Young".

Dr. Bal Phondke Nuclear Biologist, Baba Atomic Research Center; Director, Publication & Information division, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research; Science Editor, "Times of India"; Editor, *Science Today*; Chief Editor of *It Happened Tomorrow*; Eminent first-row Indian Science Fiction Writer, Critic and Translator while delivering the lecture as the chief guest of the event, clarified how unlikely the Indian families are not confined to the parents and the two children concept but has extended to encompass the distant relatives in the family nucleus. In this regard, there are several science fiction stories depicting the family life and the impact of technology narrated in individual languages like Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Malayalam and other languages. To make them all Indian science fiction, he suggested that the need of the hour was to get them translated into English as he had done a pioneer attempt in bringing out *It Happened Tomorrow* (1993). On the one hand, he pointed out the weaknesses in a few of the present day Indian science fiction works like the

mismatch in the temporal depiction and others. On the other hand, he highlighted the strength of the works in terms of dealing with the themes like Nano-technology, man-machine symbiosis, the way of finding roots, finding meaning of life and human relationship as in the case of Archana Mirajkar's *All the Way Home* (2018).

Being the Guest of Honor Mr. A. P. Deshpande, Hon. Secretary, Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, Mumbai, Maharashtra, highlighted the achievement, activities, and future projects of the association.

Mr. Dinker Charak, Entrepreneur & Product Manager, Bangalore, Author of the book #ProMa and Webmaster: <https://www.adbhut.in>; delivering the Keynote-Address focused his speech on the issues of Indian Science Fiction: Identity, Issues and Priorities. He began his lecture by pointing out to whom he is addressing namely, academicians, great scientists, great writers and prolific readers. He was very straight forward in asserting the humbly the reason to accept to deliver the note was that he was a believer of science fiction and has the courage to put and share the imagination. Sharing his life journey starting as a troubled teenager from Jammu and Kashmir state of India, how the life took innumerable twists and turns during his formative days, to professional growth and finally aiming at the personal fulfillment. He asserted that technology became the great leveler of human and he had come from that technological background where he could shake hands with Nobel Laureates, exchange ideas and practice them. He told that travelling through nineteen countries he could gain experience in entrepreneurship. Fiction is a very important tool which could take us away from the reality. He asserted that he started the webzine with a clarity that it should not publish anything that is a commentary of the contemporary world instead, it should provide opportunity to imagine a world beyond today, as the future would be quite different from today's world. Citing Arthur C Clarke had worked in the past and became a legend. Similarly, the works should not limit to the life time problems. It would be a heritage for the future. Hence, the publication should aim at long term goal. Though based on present day scientific progress, the story should speak about the technology of tomorrow. In order to do so the students of science should learn the writing skills, expressions from the languages and conversely, the literature students should learn biology, physics, astronomy to take up writing in SF stories. The webmaster was curious to know how much of SF is science based and how many are technology based. After deciphering the terms fiction and science, the

speaker has tried to analyze the term 'Indian' and explored whether it refers to the names, feelings, context, writer as Indian or it is written in Indian languages. Why SF because it inspires, to take risk, make mistakes, let go of, creates mythology.

Mr. Dinker Charak expressed his desire that if any one writes a story or produce a serial like 'Star Trek', others could take it to the next level. His suggestions were to find unusual partnership. In this regard, a student of Geology could have a Bengali language student as a partner to explore how he or she could communicate to the Bengali mass through a science fiction story. He also aspired that the one could dream one's own creator (Brahman) like Isaac Asimov who created "Three Laws of Robotics". Thus, the science fiction stories could be shared and set free. He thanked the organizers at the end.

The secretary, Indian Science Fiction Writers Association Ayodhya Dr. Arvind Mishra while giving a special lecture on "Science Fiction Ideas in Indian Mythology" cited the airplane "Pushpaka Viman" in the epic the *Ramayana*; revolving disc "Sudarshan Chakra" in the epic the *Mahabharata*. Sudarshan Chakra used by Lord Krishna and the arrows used to shoot the enemies were returning to them after its making devastating effects to the opponents. Linking the mythology with SF, he said that Science Fiction of today is the modern mythology. The striking difference lies in its application. He opined that the application should be limited in taking the mythical ideas. He cited an example how the idea is applied in the latest works. There was a fight between devas and demons in one such story. Lord Krishna was not capable of killing the demons at that time. Hence, there is a solution that the child Pradhyum the son of Lord Krishna had a boon to kill them when he attains the age of puberty. The idea is utilized in his own story entitled "Professor".

Justifying the use of Kannada as an Indian language instead of vernacular language the eminent columnist and critic Mr. T Gautham Shenoy threw light upon the "The Glimpses into Kannada Science Fiction" in a special lecture series. He highlighted the contribution of eminent science fiction writers Rajashekar Bhoosnur Mutt, Saritha Jnananand, Bairnatti, Savitha Srinivas, Sanjay Havanur, Drs.Y. S Louis, Nalini Murthy, Srinarahari and others. He explained *Mahasamparka* (Great Connectivity) by Manu as an ancient mythological alien story of the *Rigveda* viewed through a scientific lens. Further, he examined Ganeshaiah's *Mooka Dhaatu* which deals with human evolution. Most prominently he cited how SL Byrappa's *Yana* describes the story of astronaut man and woman travelling to 'Proxima Centauri' in a generation ship.

He added that Dr. Shantala's *3019 AD* is the latest Kannada Science Fiction novel which depicts the scenario of world and life forms in a century ahead of now. In his concluding remarks Mr. Shenoy gave a call to the editors and publishers of other languages to arrange to pick up the best of SF from Kannada language to get them translated and published.

Supriyo Das the editor of Bengali Online Science Fiction magazine while delivering his special lecture on "Past, Present and the Future of Bengali *Kalpabigyan* and *Kalpabishwa*" narrated how the Bengali science fiction began with "Shukra Vraman" (1895) by Jagadananda Roy; "Palatak Tufan" (1896) by Jagadish Chandra Bose and the pioneer feminist writer with a feminist theme "Sultana's Dream" (1908) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and continued to contribute the translated works of HG Wells' and other works for the first fifty years. Then it turned to be a golden era by the contribution of Adrish Bardan, Sathyajith Ray, Premananda Mitra, Ranen Ghosh, Dilip Roy Choudhury as well as the emergence of the first science fiction magazine *Ascharya* in 1963; establishment of science fiction club (1966) followed by the publication of second SF magazine *Fantastic* in 1975.

The movement gathered momentum from the 1980's by the additional force brought out by the creation of the character 'Professor Shonku' by Sathyajith Roy and the writings of Anish Deb, Siddhartha Ghosh, Sunil Gangopadhaya, Shirshedhu Mukhyopadhyaya, Abhigyana Roy Choudhury, Lila Mujumdar, Narayan Sanyal, Saikat Mukherjee, Debajyothi Bhattacharya, and others. By 2010 the trend of writing was turned to focus the writings addressing the children and the youngsters.

A group of authors and mostly software engineers by profession established [kalpabishwa.com](http://kalpabishwa.com) a free quarterly webzine in Bengali language dedicated to the genre of speculative fiction in 2016. The main objectives of the webzine are to provide a platform for the young authors to establish themselves and conduct a variety of thought experiments and also to re-publish the works of the past to revive and preserve them for posterity.

To enrich the Bengali literature, attempts are made to publish Japanese, Russian, detective, climate, golden age, and punk science fiction works. The webzine had organized a seminar on the occasion of the bicentennial year of the publication of *Frankenstein* in collaboration with the department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata in 2018.

Mr. Dip Ghosh the founder and former editor of *Kalpabishwa* speaking on the occasion explained the cause for the emergence of the magazine. Bengali

science fiction was a forgotten literature and this group of science fiction enthusiasts attempted to bring it to limelight. He asserted that in the beginning the team made use of the social media to popularize the magazine and there was no turning back. He said that much of the experiments were carried out to bring it to this form. In 2020 the webzine had published a special issue with women science fiction as a theme in which exclusively the women authors, editors and illustrators were involved. A documentary on Bengali SF was made in collaboration with the University of Oslo. The Bengali science fiction works in 'Gate way to Indian Science Fiction' section was exhibited in Asian Science Fiction conference held at Chengdu, China. They had a book stall in the Kolkata book fair in which there was a good response even. Concluding his speech, he said that the only way of popularizing Indian Science Fiction is to start the translation work from one language to another Indian language. He assured that the team would be available for any kind of collaboration and assistance to any other sister organization.

Dr. Sowmya the chief editor and publisher of University Research Publication, North Mazhuvannoor, Valamboor, Ernakulum, Kerala State releasing the special Issue of Science Fiction peer reviewed ISBN numbered journal *Insight* a collection of scholarly papers presented during the fifth international conference observed that Indian science fiction genre is unique in its use of ambience, characterization, and novum as compared to western science fiction. She thanked the Secretary- General and the team IASFS for assigning the work of editing the papers and publishing them. She told that it was a Herculean task to contact the authors and paper presenters a number of times while editing the scholarly papers. She explained the difficulty in understanding the SF concepts, conceive the essentialities of the genre and visualizing the unseen imaginary worlds.

Mr. Debraj Moulick a science fiction research scholar speaking about his work *The Need to Popularize Indian SF* pointed out that there is no new kind of research possible in SF as there is lack of innovative resource; little accessibility of secondary resources and non-availability of translated works in Indian Science Fiction works and the circumstances impose a researcher to refer to English version only. Alternatively, he observes that reading SF books is the only way of doing research. He cited the trend of the popularity of the translated versions being popular in contrast to the knowledge of reading the Holy Bible in Adamic and the Bhagawat Geetha in Sanskrit. On identical lines, he drew home the point that it is the mother tongue or the regional languages to which a student at an

early age is exposed to and not to other foreign languages. The reader is fluent and understand clearly if the material is available in the mother tongue. When the books are available in the mother tongue or in the regional language the reader need not venture to learn a second language at all.

But mostly the science fiction works are available in English. Attempts are made to translate SF works to be translated to English and to some extent *vice versa*; but one cannot read and comprehend the books in the language of the neighboring state or a language spoken in another state within Indian territory. The scholar hopes that attempts will be made in the near future to fill this lacuna.

To be continued...