
India: Children, Contrasts and a Conference

by Margo Lanagan

I was invited to speak on ‘Children’s Rights and Literature in Australia’ at a conference at the University of Madras in January this year. I’m not an expert on children’s rights, but a fiction writer whose work has included novels for children and novels and short stories for young adults (people aged about 15 and older).

I was travelling with poet (and member of the Australia-India Council) Bruce Bennett and non-fiction author John Zubrzycki, and all three of us spoke at the Inaugural Session before travelling on to Kolkata for the Book Fair.

The Conference on Situating Literary Studies within the Discourses on Development Studies and Democracy was convened as part of the celebrations to mark the sesquicentenary of the University of Madras. It ranged broadly across issues affecting democracy, development and minority and disadvantaged groups. The papers relating to Australia were:

- ‘Multiculturalism: Democracy and the Destitute: A Study of Immigrant Issues in Hazel Edwards’ Australian Fictional Discourse’ (Dr Meenakshi Hariharan)
- ‘Narrativisation of Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography with Reference to Sally Morgan’ (Ms N. Jayasree)
- ‘Nova Peris: Telling a Personal Story’ (Ms Supala Pandiarajan) while other papers covered such topics as:
 - ‘Literacy and Democracy: Rethinking Genres in Multi-literacy’ (Dr Pavanandi)
 - ‘Double Subjection of Woman: A Study of

Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers*’ (Ms P. Tamilarasi)

- ‘Changing Thinking on Gender and Development’ (Ms Ranjini Krishnamoorthy)
- ‘Intervention on Cultural Issues through Theatre’ (Dr Mangai)
- ‘Media and Dalits [formerly ‘Untouchables’]’ (Dr S. Armstrong)
- ‘Globalisation, English and Society’ (Mr Varadharajan and Mr Gokul)
- ‘Power Politics and Maternal Identity in African-American Women’s Writing’ (Ms M. Angkayarkan Vinayaka Selvi)



Schoolboy at wedding ceremony, Khanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.

My own talk dealt with Australian children’s rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the issues presently facing children in our country. The most significant issue, the continued disadvantage faced by Indigenous children, also happened to be the issue that most interests Indian people, whose history is of continual invasion and adaptation by different powers and whose society is a rich and troublesome tapestry of tribal and immigrant cultures.

I also talked about the detention of immigrant children, the inadequacy of health, child care and education services, workplace relations reforms, health problems, youth suicide, abuse and the tokenism of recent youth consultation mechanisms. I finished with

some remarks on how these issues were dealt with in Australian literature for children and young adults:

A literature that is useful for growing people will admit that some problems cannot be solved and that we must find ways to live alongside them. It will point out that others, like those faced by that small indigenous child, *seem* intractable, yet there are people of all ages with the courage to tackle them at all levels, from helping one indigenous child with her reading skills to standing up and forcing family members, other powerful adults, government departments and the wider public to see the issues and to act systematically to resolve them. A useful young people's literature insists particularly on the existence of resources young people do not necessarily know they possess, on the peculiarity and power of each individual to apprehend, comprehend and to some extent take control of his or her circumstances. It does not offer hope where hope does not exist; it looks the dark stuff, the strong stuff, in the eye, and tries, like adult literature, to find ways in which it can be understood.

Dr Beatrix D'Souza, former MP and member of the Feminist Association for Social Action, responded to my paper with a question relating to the 'stolen generation', reflecting the general curiosity I encountered about white Australians' dealings with Indigenous people.

I only had a short taste of India (two weeks), but my general impression was of a society with a strong emphasis on stratification by birth, wealth and influence. In the Communist states of Kerala and Bengal, this was less marked, but certainly in Chennai (old Madras) there were a great many beggars and people sleeping on the streets, including many children. There, education was a privilege, not a right.

The State's [Tamil Nadu's] literacy rate increased from 62.66 per cent in 1991 to 73.47 per cent in 2001. The female literacy rate increased from 51.33 per cent in 1991 to 64.55 per cent in 2001, while the male literacy rate grew at a slower pace from 73.75 per cent in 1991 to 82.33 per cent in 2001. This is in line with trends elsewhere in the country, with female literacy growing more rapidly from a lower base level, but of course considerably behind male literacy levels. (*Frontline*, volume 18, April–May 2001,

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1809/18090930.htm>, accessed 12 February 2007).

Such dry figures as these translate into busloads of cheerful, neatly uniformed schoolchildren bursting into smiles, waves and 'Hello's' at the sight of a Westerner, while less well-fed children follow you along the street at all hours of the day or night, persisting in their begging until you give them money or a definite signal that you are not going to pay.

This was my first visit to India, and the only place I have seen comparable poverty was in Aboriginal communities in outback Australian towns. It was ironic that on the one hand I was hearing stories of the Indian middle-class children being brought up to stare steadfastly past the beggars around them, while on the other I was talking to that very same middle-class about Australians' ability to not-see Indigenous and other children's rights issues.

Margo Lanagan travelled to India courtesy of the Asialink Literature Touring Program, which 'aims to raise the profile of Australian books, writing and publishing in the Asian region and to increase understanding of Asian markets for Australians'. See http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/our_work/arts/literature/current_touring_program

BUDGET: INDIGENOUS SPENDING TO BENEFIT BUT STILL GAPS GALORE 9 May 2007

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma welcomes some of the initiatives announced in the Budget in relation to education and employment, but was critical of the missed opportunity to close the gap in Indigenous health – including the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

“It is a matter of great disappointment that there is no recognition of the enormous health challenges facing us for Indigenous peoples, who have barely shared in the gains of this past decade, nor any recognition that improving this situation amounts to one of the major challenges facing us into the coming decade.

Mr Calma also questioned the changes in Community Housing funding and the sustainability of programs to develop the Indigenous workforce and said any initiatives must see government willing to work with local communities.