Contemporary Spaces Panel and Book Launch

28th May 2013 in collaboration with the High Commission of India

The Institute of International Relations had the pleasure of collaborating with the High Commission of India to Trinidad and Tobago for a panel discussion “Contemporary Spaces, New Horizons” and the launch of the book “The Contemporary Caribbean” on Tuesday 28 May, 2013 prior to marking Indian Arrival Day celebrations in Trinidad and Tobago (30 May).

In addition to the main panel discussion and the book launch the evening’s proceedings included two very visually stimulating and enlightening presentations.

In the first, the audience was taken on an eye-opening multi-media presentation by Mrs Sunita Pahuja, Second Secretary of the High Commission of India with responsibility for Hindi and Culture.

Mrs. Pahuja’s presentation supported by the excellent photography of Ms. Shehnaz Mohammed, a Trinidadian travel agent whom has visited India many times with various groups. This presentation was an extensive, but by no means exhaustive, insight into the experience which is India; starting in the North through the vast subcontinent not only in geographic terms but also from the ancient to the contemporary. The audience was led through an experience beyond the generally known India to many less known marvels of this fascinating country and its people; gaining an appreciation of the myriad facets from physical beauty, culture, history, development, academic and scientific prowess to spirituality.
In his welcome remarks, IIR Director Professor Andy Knight contemplated how the first arrival of Indian indentured labours and the sustainable bond created over a century ago continues to assist in forging the development of Trinidad and Tobago and India. Focusing on the edited book by panellist Dr. Priti Singh and her co-editor, Dr. Izarali, Professor Knight stressed the salience of such a volume at this time in its contribution of the literature on the contemporary Caribbean not only from within the Caribbean but also from an external and non-traditional perspective.

High Commissioner of India to Trinidad and Tobago, His Excellency, Mr. Malya Mishra in his opening remarks reminded the audience that contemporary India with its myriad of expressions goes beyond the cultural aspects integrated in Trinidad and Tobago brought across so many years ago through initial migration. The High Commissioner indeed charged us to ensure that today and as we go forward that the discourse on our relations and the relations themselves move swiftly beyond such traditional aspects and interrogate future possibilities of engagement and for the Indian experience to further the development of our countries through agreements, including trade, double taxation and investment, which are already in place but not yet utilised and explored to their full potential, as a two-way beneficial engagement.

The event was very fortunate that The Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Winston Dookeran, was able to take time out of extremely busy week, coming directly from the airport after bidding farewell to the Vice President of the United States, Joe Biden whilst in the midst of preparing for the arrival of His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the Peoples’ Republic of China on a State Visit to Trinidad and Tobago later in the week.
In receiving a copy of the book, “The Contemporary Caribbean: Some Issues and Challenges” in which the Minister contributed the foreword, Mr. Dookeran also made the observation that the book was a reflection of the contemporary relations of India and the Caribbean and an important contribution on the realities of a contemporary Caribbean which intertwines scholarship from India and the Caribbean on India and the Caribbean.

Striving to locate material history and empirical knowledge among living cultures, Mr. Suresh Pillai, in his introduction of his documentary film, Jahaji Bhai, which examines the process of migration and emergence of Indian communities in the English Caribbean, provided his reflections on perceptions of identity and migration and the longstanding connections of the Indian –Caribbean relationship. Excerpts of the documentary were viewed during the presentation.

The panel discussion, chaired by Dr. Indira Rampersad, comprised Dr. Priti Singh, Assistant Professor at the school of International Studies in the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi; Dr. Satnarine Balkaransingh, a well known former senior public Servant in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, currently a Consultant in Policy and Strategic Planning for National Development, in Project planning and in Culture and part time lecturer at the UWI, St Augustine campus; and Dr. Atlury Murali, Visiting Professor, ICCR Chair on Contemporary India, Department of History, UWI, St. Augustine Campus.

All panellists provided insightful presentation which facilitated a deeper understanding at many different levels, from identity to economics, the contemporary relations of Trinidad and Tobago and India on the approaching eve of the national celebration of the first Indian immigrants to Trinidad and Tobago; an event which certainly has contributed significantly to not just the history of Trinidad and Tobago but also to the over overall development of a nation and of a people; as well as to the wider Caribbean.

In particular, in the context of the launch of her book, Dr. Singh’s presentation provided not only perceptions of the changes in the global sphere but how such changes provide a history opportunity for
the Caribbean to reinvent itself given its geo-strategic and historical realities and the various associations and relations where its tentacles can expand – hemispheric, south-south and traditional links.