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Report

Equinox 2023: The Annual International Conference

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The Centre for Research, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, organised its three-day Annual International Conference, Equinox 2023, under the aegis of *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, from 23rd to 25th August 2023. Prof. Haritma Chopra, Officiating Principal, Maitreyi College was the coordinator of the conference and Dr. Gopi Devdutt Tripathy (Department of Sociology), Dr. Pinky Gandhi Bajaj (Department of Chemistry), Dr. Brototi Roy (Department of Zoology) and Dr. Meena Yadav (Department of Zoology) were the conveners. The theme for the conference was **Research, Development and Social Transformation**.

The conference converged theory with on-ground findings to enable a dialogue on the positive relationship between research, development, and transformation. It highlighted the social importance of research as something that is undertaken not only to answer questions and further knowledge but also to innovate and rebuild society. Research carried out with knowledge of its immediate social context, and its application to our contemporary problems contains the power to trigger widespread changes. Thus, the conference celebrated research as an agent for collective good. To enhance participation, the conference was organised in a hybrid mode. There were more than 118 participants in the conference who not only represented different states within India but included eminent scholars from international institutions- Prof Mohammad Talib, Senior Associate, Professor, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, School of Anthropology, University of Oxford, Dr Debojyoti Das, Edinburgh University and Prof Bal Ram Singh, Institute of Advanced Sciences, Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Together, they all brought out the transformative impact of research on classrooms, culture, health, and scientific development.

The first day of the conference kicked off with the Inauguration Session that began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp accompanied by a Vandana and the university Kulgeet by the students of Riyaaaz, the Indian Music Society of Maitreyi College. The session was graced by the presence of Prof. Balaram Pani, the Guest of Honour, Prof. T. S. Rao, the Chief Guest, Prof. Haritma Chopra, Principal of Maitreyi College, and Prof. Vijaya Laxmi Singh, Chairperson, Governing Body, Maitreyi College. After the Welcome address by Prof. Haritma Chopra and Dr. Brototi Roy, the Abstract Book was unveiled. Thereafter, Prof. Balaram Pani shared his views on the role of research and development in bringing social transformation and aiding humanity, and Prof. T.S. Rao on “*Translational Innovative Research and Social Impact: Perspectives and Challenges*.” Prof. Vijaya Laxmi Singh took the session forward with her talk on research and development as the locomotive of positive change in any nation-state. The session concluded with a formal Vote of Thanks by Dr. Meena Yadav.

The Inauguration Session was followed by **Technical Session-1 (TS-1)**, conducted in hybrid mode comprising two guest lectures by the invited speakers. The first guest lecture of TS-1 was chaired by Dr. Rukshana Zaman, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National

Open University. The guest speaker was Prof. Kallur Nava Saraswathy (Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi) who spoke on the topic “*Human Health Complexities: Lessons from Anthropological Research.*” Prof. Saraswathy connected the dots between food, health, and education and described how these three work as a consequence of one another. She also talked about health as a consequence of cultural attributes and the need to understand the socio-cultural connotation.

The second guest lecture of TS-1, chaired by Dr Gazala Ruhi, Department of Chemistry, Maitreyi College, was on “*Waste Plastic Management: Issues and Solutions*” by Dr. S K Dhawan (Ex-Chief Scientist, CSIR-NPL and MD, Vikas Lifecare Limited). Dr. Dhawan elaborated on the need for solutions for the safe disposal of plastic waste. He highlighted the circularity in the economy and shed light on scientific researches which are being conducted to utilise waste plastic scrap for designing tiles and building construction.

Offline Poster Presentations were made after the conclusion of TS-1. Based on the conference’s theme, posters were presented by students of various reputed institutions like Sri Venkateshwara College and Maitreyi College of University of Delhi, Indira Gandhi National Open University, TERI School of Advanced Studies, New Delhi, and IISER, Pune. The session saw active interactions between the participants and judges, Dr Suman Govil, Retd. Senior advisor in the Department of Biotechnology, GOI, and Prof Rakesh Kumar Parashar from the Department of Chemistry, University of Delhi. offered the participants suggestions to further develop their ideas.

Technical Session-2 took place after the Poster Presentation and was conducted in the form of three parallel sessions involving offline oral presentations by faculty members and research scholars representing different institutes all over India, and a jury of academic experts for each session. Presentation topics ranged from issues of informal women workers and awareness of contraceptives amongst young males, to eco-sustainability of fibers, water and soil health etc.

The day ended with **Technical Session 3**, chaired by Prof. Savyasaachi, Jamia Millia Islamia. The session was conducted in hybrid mode and consisted of a talk on “*Self-Directed and Participatory Learning in Higher Education: Reflections on Challenges and Possibilities*” by Prof. Mohammad Talib (Senior Associate, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, School of Anthropology, University of Oxford). Prof. Talib provided an insight into the history of nationalist education in India as a way to identify and examine alternative principles of educational transactions, and to critique the top-down pre-set agenda of education.

Day 2 of the Conference was conducted in hybrid mode with online speakers and physical participation of the audience in the college. The day began with Technical Session 4 which comprised Invited lectures by three speakers. The first Invited lecture of TS-4 was delivered by Prof. Amman Madan (School of Education, Azim Premji University), who gave a talk on “*Educational Interventions in Social Conflicts: Some Possibilities and Limitations*”. Dr. Madan expounded on the works aimed towards better ways of negotiating conflicts caused by status, power, resources, and limitations. The second Invited lecture of TS-4 was on the topic “*Climate Migration and Environmental Refugeehood in the Sundarbans Delta: A Global South Approach to Climate Change Mitigation,*” by Dr. Debajyoti Das (Edinburgh University). Dr. Das elaborated on lesser-known but vital anthropogenic factors for migration, not only the well-known ones- that make climate mobility not simply a “cause-effect” phenomenon triggered by global climate change. The third Invited lecture of TS-4 was delivered by Dr. Pranjal Chandra (School of Biochemical Engineering, IIT BHU) who gave a talk on “*Intelligent Nano Bioengineering for Point-of-Care Diagnostics*”. He focused on the engineering design of sensor systems and touched upon other aspects such as the recently

developed nanoscale materials-based transduction system, promising personalised smartphone-assisted electrochemical sensing platform for disease diagnosis etc. Technical Session-4 was followed by the parallel oral presentation sessions as part of **Technical Session 5**. These presentations engaged with topics dealing with adulterated fruits, the medical potential of plants, women's studies, artificial intelligence, influencer marketing, and so on.

The second day concluded with Technical Session-6, in which Prof. Bal Ram Singh (Institute of Advanced Sciences, Dartmouth, Massachusetts), gave a talk on “*Fusion of the Future with Past for the Integrative Education Pedagogy in Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities.*” In his talk, Prof. Singh emphasized on the role of education in societal transformation. In the context of the educational challenges and changed pedagogy brought by communication technologies, he talked about drawing positive inspiration from the past, so that the fundamentals of the purpose of education can be realised and adapted to suit the current times rather than rote learning.

The third and final day of the conference began with Technical Session-7. Devangana Jha (Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi) was the session chair and the guest speakers were Prof. Siva Kumar and Ms. Jennifer Pandiyan (Founder & CEO, Thales Cleantech (OPC) Pvt. Ltd), who spoke on the topic, “*Innovation in Water: How they change the Questions in Social Transformation.*” The session focused on the theme of water management while addressing the evolving challenges of our time. The speakers mentioned the pressing challenges faced by contemporary society like groundwater depletion, and elucidated groundbreaking innovations in the management of water resources to remedy this and transform the society.

The conference concluded with the Valedictory Session. The session included a welcome address by Dr. Suman Govil, Session Chair, and a talk by Dr. Subeer S Majumdar, the Chief Guest, on the topic, “*Generating Human Therapeutics in Milk to Reduce Cost and Increase Affordability by Masses*”. This was followed by engaging addresses by Prof. Haritma Chopra, Principal of Maitreyi College, and Dr. Michele Friedner (Medical anthropologist from the University of Chicago). As a Special Guest, Dr. Friedner spoke extensively about her research on disability in India, and how institutions in India can borrow valuable insights from medical anthropology to create a more inclusive space for the disabled. Dr. Meena Yadav announced the prize winners of the Oral and Poster Presentations, the winning Cover page of the October 2023 issue of Vantage, and the winners of the Best Questions. The Valedictory Session concluded with a Vote of Thanks by Dr. Pinky Bajaj Gandhi and a rendition of the National Anthem.

With India in a unique position of being at the cusp of global leadership on the one hand, while the citizens continue to face discrimination in access to education and healthcare on the other hand, the conference was the need of the hour. It served a two-pronged purpose by providing an academic space for the free flow of ideas and questions on blending research with a social goal of people-led development and societal transformation. More importantly, it proved to be an effective forum for academically curious and some of the best minds from all over the world to put forth a brilliant paradigm through which research can be better understood and developed.

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