

Successful lift off for the Tamil Diaspora

The idea of organizing an international conference on Tamil diaspora germinated in my mind for quite sometime. With limited means and time at our disposal, we managed to organize a modest one in 2007 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Tamil League, grouping Tamil diasporic countries of the region only. That was a promising start.

It is true that many international conferences on Tamil language, culture and traditions have been held at different times in various countries, including Mauritius but this is the first time that we have focused full attention on the need to establish a solid and permanent network with all countries of the Tamil diaspora. How did it come about?

Two years ago, Dr John Samuel, the dynamic Founder-director of the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), based in Chennai, proposed to his Executive Committee that the time was ripe to convene the first conference of the Tamil Diaspora in view of the changing configuration, needs and aspirations of the Tamil diaspora world wide. Professor Armoogum Parsuramen unhesitatingly picked up the idea. Last year, he called a meeting of staunch lovers of Tamil diaspora and formally proposed that Mauritius should host the historic conference.

The response was tremendous. All the main Tamil organizations rallied around the conference project and worked tirelessly during the past twelve months on the elaborate arrangements to be put in place to receive the dignified representatives of the Tamil Diaspora across the world and create an international platform where research studies and papers on various facets of the Tamil diaspora could be freely discussed and shared. The academic support of the IAS in this landmark conference was remarkable in all respects.

Tamil Diaspora has of late spread horizontally and vertically at a faster rate. No precise statistics are available. Some say that there are over 100 million Tamils in more than 100 countries. Others realistically estimate that there are 70 million concentrated in 50 countries.

The first international conference on Tamil diaspora, held at the MGI from 23 to 25 July, 2014 and inaugurated by the Prime Minister, attracted some 200 local and 75 foreign delegates from 20 countries. It was a highly emotional moment not only for the delegates but also for the millions of Tamils who watched the inaugural ceremony on television and via internet.

The theme chosen for the conference was “*preservation of Tamil culture and identity*”. As it was essentially an academic conference, it assembled eminent researchers, historians and scholars on Tamil diaspora. We were privileged to take stock of the high quality of research papers dealing with issues as wide as history, language, migration, culture, society, information and communication technology, identity, science, traditional medicine and preservation of manuscripts on palm leaves. The presentations were characterized by rich interactions between the local and foreign delegates, leading to the emergence of new facts on the history of the Tamil diaspora. There is no doubt that the necessary follow up will be ensured by subsequent conferences which will be held every two years in a diasporic country.

At the end of the conference, substantial resolutions were enthusiastically voted for implementation. They are posted on website www.tamil-diaspora.org . As a matter of fact, they constitute a robust Action Plan which should now be translated into reality.

When the second conference meets in Durban in 2016 we shall critically evaluate progress made and move up gear when necessary. In the meantime, the Mauritius Chapter of the international conference on Tamil diaspora(INTAD) will assume the pivotal role of coordinator under the guidance of an international advisory body consisting of top academicians and influential personalities of the Tamil diaspora.

We are receiving countless messages of praise and appreciation for the professional manner in which the conference was conducted. We feel humbled, but at the same time we are encouraged and inspired to strive harder in our noble quest to share the fruits of our research among the Tamil diaspora and other diasporas so to create a greater understanding and harmony among the world population.

So much on the Tamil diaspora, but what about the Mauritian diaspora? This is equally our wealth and we should find ways and means to organize in Mauritius the first conference of Mauritian diaspora with the participation of representatives of the diaspora, spread in all five continents. When I was interviewed by a Melbourne radio a few months back, I made a strong plea for such a conference to be organized under the aegis of the government of Mauritius. I hope the Ministry of Arts and Culture can take up the challenge. Soon after the interview, I received excellent feedback from the Mauritian listeners settled in Melbourne. Our people occupy important and at times top positions in various countries. The strength of the Mauritian diaspora should not be underestimated as it has the potential, like the Tamil Diaspora, to explore invaluable avenues of partnership.

Krish Ponnusamy,CSK