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Adventures in Mumbai

SARAH SPELLS*

When the International Association of Law Libraries (IALL) Conference for 2007 on “Global Challenges and the Indian Legal System” was advertised I got very excited and told everyone I knew that I just *had* to go; it was the perfect conference for me as I work with Asian legal materials every day.

As the only law librarian at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) I have a responsibility to maintain the Asian, African and Middle Eastern law collection alongside other jurisdictions. Having completed an undergraduate law degree, my familiarity lies in UK law, and I had actually been looking for some way to develop my knowledge of these other jurisdictions (primarily without having to take another Masters degree!) when I noticed the conference. I knew this would be an excellent opportunity to understand more about Indian law and its culture so I was very grateful to receive an IALL bursary to help me attend and I heartily thank the IALL Board for awarding it to me.

I knew this was going to be an exciting trip when the taxi driver taking me to my hotel kept falling asleep at the wheel and turned a corner with his eyes completely closed and promptly drove right past my hotel! It was certainly an interesting beginning....

Conference Overview

The opening ceremony began with an inaugural speech by the retired Chief Justice of India, followed by traditional folk and Bollywood style dancing. It was certainly a great way to start the conference.

Over the following days we had lectures from eminent speakers including senior judges, lawyers and legal experts, together with the Librarian of the Supreme Court of India and representatives from Indian and

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international legal publishers. We learned about the fundamental rights as laid down by the Constitution of India and had a fascinating insight into Article 21 relating to Human Rights and the practicalities and realities of administering justice in India. It was pointed out that due to a high illiteracy problem within India many people have no idea what rights are available to them; and even if they did, legal information is not readily available to the public. The India Information Legal Information Institute (INDLII) is making some progress to address this problem and aims to provide free access to Indian primary legal information online at <http://www.indlii.org/>.

On a more sobering note, we had a passionate presentation on women's rights from Flavia Agnes, a prominent feminist activist and advocate at the Bombay High Court. She talked about the Indian Women's Movement and the various campaigns to tackle legislative reform. This was incredibly useful to me as most of my students are studying this area and I now have a better understanding of the issues involved.

We also learned about Indian legal education and India's legal profession. The need for change was also discussed as there has been a general and gradual fall in standards. Other topics covered included:

- intellectual property law and technology transfer,
- international trade law,
- legal issues of outsourcing, and
- a very useful survey of Indian legal literature.

The conference was well organized and I'd like to thank Uma Narayan and her team for such a full and diverse program. Each speaker was entertaining and informative and I didn't feel too exhausted at the end of the day! I might also add that I was pleasantly surprised to see that law librarian conferences are newsworthy with two articles appearing in *The Times of India*. It was gratifying to see our profession being recognized outside its own field.

Cultural Program

With an estimated population of 15 million; from the sky scrapers to the sprawling slums - I don't think anything can really prepare you for a city like Mumbai. It's such a diverse society; whole families live on the streets outside your hotel and children beg for change round every corner. Juxtapose this with the wealthy Mumbaikers working in the financial center of India and the thriving Bollywood film industry. However, it's hard not to fall in love

with Mumbai with its mixture of beautiful Victorian buildings, modern skyscrapers and friendly, welcoming citizens.

As part of the conference program, various visits and excursions were organized. We went on a guided bus tour of the city, taking in the sights of the Gateway of India, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay Stock Exchange, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formally Victoria Station), University of Mumbai, Bombay High Court, Oval Ground, Marine Drive, Jain Temple, Hanging Gardens and Mani Bhavan where Gandhi lived for 17 years. And that was in just 3 hours!

We were also lucky to be able to visit various libraries, including the Public Library of Bombay, Asiatic Library, Sassoon Library, University Law Library and the Oriental Institute Library. It was certainly interesting to see how libraries cope with very little money or resources and how they deal with issues of conservation (I remember an interesting conversation about mice!).

For our last day there was an excursion to Elephanta Island, one of the Islands within Mumbai harbour. We were treated to a guided tour of the Hindu caves and temples, which were carved out of the rock between the 5th and 8th centuries. I learned much about the Hindu Gods, but especially how to deal with the local monkeys! It was a great way to end the conference and my adventures in Mumbai.

Conclusion

I've certainly learned a great deal about a legal system that I deal with on a regular basis. And it was wonderful to meet other librarians from around the world who deal with foreign and international law. The contacts I've made will be invaluable throughout my career at SOAS. I've come away from Mumbai with a greater understanding of the Indian legal system and the many problems it faces and the issues involved in its development. Thanks to this opportunity, I feel more able to answer the many queries I receive on Indian law, and better able to maintain the SOAS collection of Indian primary and secondary materials.

Thanks go to all of you I met at the conference for making a first-timer feel very welcome, and I shall hopefully see you all next time.