Zena Daysh
Inaugural Annual Lecture

India and the Commonwealth: Policies, People and Politics – can the media help with the future?

Speaker: Sir Mark Tully

Chair: Michael Mutter OBE

The Inaugural Zena Daysh Lecture – the first such annual lecture in memory of Dame Zena Daysh Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (CNZM) – was held on Thursday 13th September 2018 at the Royal Overseas League, Park Place, St James’s Street, London, in front of an audience of some 80 people. Attendees were welcomed to the Royal Over-Seas League, Princess Alexandra Hall, by Diana Owen the recently appointed Director General – indeed the first woman DG of ROSL. Michael Mutter, as Chair of the Lecture introduced himself as one of the CHEC Governing Board members, on behalf of Sir Levi Oguike, the President of CHEC who was unable to attend from Nigeria. Michael outlined the purpose of the Annual Zena Daysh Lecture Series, recalling the many significant achievements and the remarkable dynamism of Zena Daysh, the founder of CHEC, who died in 2011. The inspiration of Zena and her philosophy of international cooperation has held the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, and indeed The Commonwealth as a whole, in good stead.

The Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC) was founded in 1969 by Zena Daysh, the world-renowned campaigner for human ecology, as the embodiment of the philosophy she developed during the Second World War years – as a framework for development planning. Her work brought issues surrounding environmental changes to the heart of the international development agenda long before ‘climate change’ emerged as an established global concern.
Zena’s life has been remarkably eventful. At the first Commonwealth Conference on Development and Human Ecology held at Malta in 1970, she ensured that human ecology was put at the forefront of development planning, and as a result CHEC was given consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in the same year. By the turn of the millennium, CHEC had established links to universities and heads of governments throughout the Commonwealth.

Zena touched the lives of hundreds of people. Many were changed by their contact with her and found themselves doing things they had never expected to do. She was an example of determination, sometimes so much so that even she did not recognize that it might be more appropriate to wait for another occasion to push her case. Sitting on her laurels was something that never occurred to Zena. However, she never gave up. She would come to CHEC’s office in London, climbing four flights of stairs, right into her 97th year. She left the Commonwealth and the wider world a better place through her efforts and her kindness will long be remembered. One young UN intern, Catherine Bonet, wrote: “It was an unforgettable experience for me to work with Zena. I admire her dedication to those that do not have her strong voice in our society”.

In the 1999 New Zealand New Year Honours, Zena Daysh was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit – for services to human ecology – by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She was also awarded the UN Habitat Scroll of Honour in the same year. When in 2009, in her 95th year, she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Waikato, Jim Bolger, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand and Chancellor noted that Zena is “The real story of sustainability”.

CHEC continues Zena’s legacy of work with both the Commonwealth and the UN. In recent years, CHEC has developed a close working partnership with both UNEP and UN-HABITAT in Nairobi, focusing on the combined programmes of the United Nations and the Commonwealth to implement Agenda 21 and The Habitat Agenda. Eventually CHEC played a key role in establishing an official pan-Commonwealth ministerial level collaboration known as the Commonwealth Group on Human Settlements (CCGHS) with an administrative committee COM-Habitat based at the CHEC Headquarters in London. The CHEC Governing Council has organised this Annual Lecture Series in memory of Zena Daysh, to recognise her pioneering work in the field of Human Ecology, but more importantly to spread an understanding of Human Ecology and its global relevance to a wider audience.

Lecture by Sir Mark Tully

We welcomed Sir Mark Tully, the renowned veteran BBC journalist and author to give his own personal thoughts about India and the Commonwealth: policies, people and politics and the role that the media can help with the future, as a reflection to mark the Zena Daysh Inaugural Lecture, and to pave the way for this lecture series to be seen as a significant annual event.

By way of introduction, we can note that Sir William Mark Tully, KBE, was born in 1935 at Tollygunge in the then British India where he spent the first decade of his life growing up firstly in Calcutta (now Kolkata), and at a British boarding school in Darjeeling. From the age of nine he went to Twyford School, Hampshire, and on to Marlborough College and to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He joined the BBC in 1964 and moved back to India in 1965 to work in the BBC office.
In 1972, Mark was appointed Chief of BBC’s Delhi Bureau. He covered all the major incidents in South Asia during his tenure, ranging from Indo-Pakistan conflicts; the Bhopal gas tragedy; assassination of Indira Gandhi, assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the demolition of Babri Masjid. He was barred from entering India during the Emergency 1975-77 when Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi imposed censorship curbs on the media.

Mark resigned from the BBC in July 1994 after presenting an episode of BBC’s Great Railway Journeys “Karachi to the Khyber Pass” travelling by train across Pakistan. Since 1994 he has been working as a free-lance journalist and broadcaster based in New Delhi, and presenter of the BBC Radio 4 programme *Something Understood*. He has said his experiences in India, and the fact that it has historically been home to all the world’s religions has taught him that there are “many ways to God”.

Mark Tully was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1985 and awarded the Padma Shree in 1992. He was knighted in the New Year’s Honours in 2002, receiving a KBE, and in 2005 he received the Padma Bhushan. In 2015 he was conferred the coveted Red Ink Lifetime Achievement Award of the Mumbai Press Club. He is the author of many books and particularly in 2002 he published *India in slow motion*, written in collaboration with Gillian Wright and published by Viking. Reviewing the book in *The Observer*, Michael Holland wrote of Tully: “Few foreigners have managed to get under the skin of the world’s biggest democracy the way he does, and fewer still can write about it with the clarity and insight he brings to all his work.”

For the Inaugural Lecture, Mark Tully talked about the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and particularly India. Mark mentioned that India is now at the forefront of global issues, which CHEC has highlighted - environment, sustainability, and human ecology are all of vital importance to India, and the issues of ‘habitat’ in particular are crucial considering that India is home to the world’s most polluted cities.

The media is an important element in keeping these issues in front of the public, discussing problems and solutions. He asked: “How good a job does the media do, and what prevents them from doing a better job?”

Television he believes is also free but corporatized, but radio news and current affairs is restricted to Government controlled *All India Radio* and although ‘social media’ is now widespread with no government control, the problem there is of ‘false news’.

He mentioned that there are widespread allegations that the mainstream media is not independent under the current government; pressure is exerted by government, for example with government advertising being withdrawn. Many newspapers and TV channels self-censor because they do not want to damage business interests by antagonising government. That said, *Indian Express* and *Business Standard* do carry highly critical articles as well as articles supportive of government policies. The journalist *Ravish Kumar* nightly criticises the government on *NDTV India (Hindi)*, commenting that he is very popular; and the digital newspaper *The Wire* also criticises government.

Mark commented that the media content is dominated by politics, economics – such as GDP growth – and immediate events with television’s strong emphasis on ‘breaking news’. Unfortunately, the environment has a comparatively lowly position on NEWS agendas. Air pollution is an issue but does not lead to much background coverage of
causes. However, the regular column by Sunita Narain is an exception.

Corruption is a major cause of government inaction on environment issues. Even though the media does cover corruption issues when they first come up, and in some cases investigative journalism uncovers corruption, the weakness is that there is no follow up. For example, during preparations for the Commonwealth Games the media mounted a trial of certain officials alleged to be corrupt, but as ever, after the games nothing was heard of the outcome.

Mark believes that corruption is a major problem in journalism itself. The long-running problem of politicians paying for news has still not been resolved. A ‘sting’ operation by Cobra Post appeared to reveal a willingness of many media organisations accepting money for running pro JP and RSS material, since denied by the media organisations. “From time to time cases of blackmail and other corrupt practices by an individual journalist surface, but not as far as I remember involving journalists working on national media”.

Media is however weak on one of India’s problems affecting government – the implementation of policies, particularly the delivery of services like health and education, being corruption and the cruelty of local officials of the unreformed colonial administrative system particularly but no means exclusively in rural areas. “The media is often rightly accused of being urban-centric, sometimes of being Delhi-centric and sometimes of being centred on Lutyens’ Delhi – columns by economist and activist Jean Dreze are a shining exception, and investigations of reports of farmers’ suicides also LEAD to reports on malfunctioning local administration.”

Mark talked about Indian politicians failing to respect the autonomy of the institutions which are so important in a democracy. He was particularly critical of the police who he said were misused as a tool of government which meant they did not perform their duty to uphold the law.

Mark pointed out a fundamental weakness of governance in India – the country is still administered and policed as it was in the British Raj. The result is that civil servants and the police still see it as their right to command as they would do when working for a colonial government rather than serve as they should do in a democracy. However, the introduction of the Right to Information Act Mark felt has helped the press and the public to question governments and their employees. Mark believes that the legal system is sometimes an impediment to journalism. He mentioned that it is very easy to file a libel case against a journalist which can result in the harassment of long drawn out and expensive hearings.

In response to a point raised by Michael referring to his friend and colleague Professor Amartya Sen’s observation that in South Africa the overthrow of apartheid had been very much assisted by “the very brave journalists” in the field – Mark agreed that the role of journalists and the press media in general has been somewhat under-valued, and that they have played an important role in maintaining a “pluralist and tolerant nation”. He believes that the current threats to pluralism and tolerance would be overcome. He compared India to “A big ship in a very rough sea which rolls and pitches alarmingly but sails through until the weather calms down”.

In reference to violence against journalists, Mark mentioned a high-profile case of Gauri Lankesh Kerala, a freelance investigative journalist, who was apparently murdered in Kerala; Shujaat Bukhari, editor of the Kashmiri paper Rising Kashmir questioned government policies and accused separatists of instigating violence, was murdered in 2018; and Sandeep Sharma was crushed by a truck following reporting illegal sand-mining in 2018, very much AN environmental issue. The police have been notably inactive in all these cases.

Mark offered a comparison with Singapore as a nation that started from a very impoverished base, but exceeded all expectations in growing as a significant ‘city state’ amongst the Commonwealth nations, and that this was in no small measure down to them embracing the skills and foresight of the town planning professionals, much as had happened in Chandigarh, established as a ‘green-field’ new city to be the state capital of the subdivided Punjab after Independence.

Michael mentioned on his own visit to Chandigarh with his friend the architect-planner Romi Khosla, whose father had been appointed the first Chief Justice of the state,
that the army was still very much ‘in residence’ even some 50 years after Partition – safeguarding the perception of a fragile state within the nation as a whole. Indeed, the fine planning offered by Jane Drew and Le Corbusier, although it had provided a perfect setting for this wonderful new capital, it still relied heavily on the people of the city to make it ‘work’.

In conclusion, Mark feels that the media can and do play a role in creating awareness of issues such as of environmental concern, but that it is hampered by corporatization, government pressure, and the seeming low priority on the news agenda, as well as corruption and a lack of protection for journalists. However, he feels that it is “better to have a free press with limitations than no press freedom!”

Vote of thanks

In thanking Mark Tully for his thoughtful lecture that raised the issues of the role that the media has held in the formation of India as an established nation within the Commonwealth, the Chair expressed his sincere appreciation for Mark Tully having set the bar at this extraordinarily high level.

CHEC is very grateful to the contribution of the sponsors of the event – the Commonwealth Association of Journalists, the Ramphal Institute, and Council for Education in the Commonwealth, and particularly to the Royal Over-Seas League for hosting the event.

For CHEC, as an organisation that promotes current affairs as its mainstay, the lively discussion prompted by the lecture, I think illustrated the power of persuasion that Zena Daysh had instigated amongst the kind of people that had come to the lecture, and that we can look forward to a series of annual lectures of a similar very high calibre.

Notes from the Lecture – by Michael Mutter, CHEC Governing Board Trustee and Chair of the event

These observations have been compiled from references by many of the CHEC Governing Board members including John Bonham, Kabir Shaikh, Mark Robinson (Chair), and Eva Ekehorn (Trustee and Hon. Secretary). See also CHEC Points Number 36 of June 2011 (https://www.checinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CHEC-Points-36-Z.Dayshl.pdf) which outlined many recollections of the life of Zena Daysh. These notes are also abstracted from Wikipedia and other sources, together with Sir Mark Tully’s own lecture notes.