

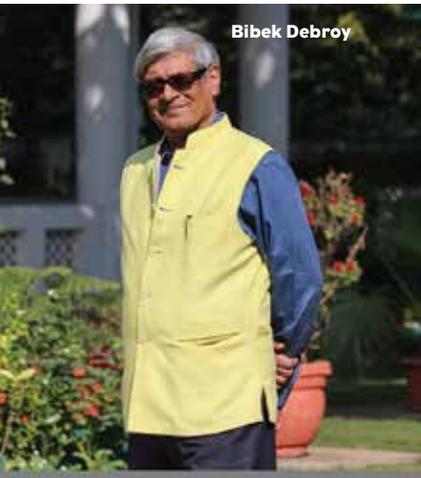
Valley of Words

The literary festival that gives a stage to people from all walks of life

By **ASHALI VARMA**

For the second time in the last two years Valley of Words (VoW) organised a very successful literary festival in Dehradun (November 23-25). Sanjeev Chopra, who I know is an avid reader as well as a distinguished civil servant, is the force behind it. From poetry to Hindi literature to military affairs, English novels and biographies, there was something for everyone.

I particularly loved the fact that students from many schools as well as many young people got to meet with authors and showed a passion for reading. Two budding reporters from a university of mass communications were allowed to interview the participants. Not all the authors were well known but such is the format of VoW, to give budding writers a chance.



Bibek Debroy, Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, had the audience enthralled by his talk on the translation of the Valmiki Ramayana. The fact that he has also translated an unabridged version of Mahabharata in a series of 10 volumes amounting to 2.25 million words as well as the Bhagavad Gita, the Harivamsa and the Vedas bears testimony to the amazing scholarship and industry of this world-renowned economist. His fluency in Sanskrit and

his painstaking efforts to translate the works as faithfully as possible show how much work and time go into translating just one Indian epic. Especially admirable is that his work will be read by millions and further immortalise our epics all over the world.

Debroy also focused on the importance of Sanskrit in the modern era and highlighted that the total number of publications ever since the beginning of printing of books began, according to the United Nations, was estimated to be around 130 million. The total number of currently available manuscripts in India was more than 40 million, of which roughly a third were in Sanskrit, which evidences the wealth of this language. He was saddened by the fact that more than 95 per cent of the Sanskrit manuscripts had not been translated and the world did not know what was contained in them.

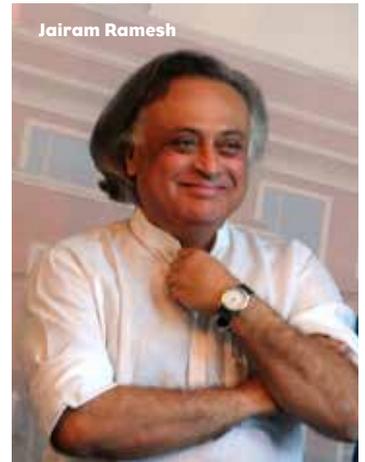
Jairam Ramesh's book *Intertwined Lives* was also featured

in a session and is the story of an unusual relationship between a Prime Minister and her alter ego. A relationship that steered India through turbulent times. PN Haksar was Indira Gandhi's ideological compass during 1967-1973 but had influence and voice thereafter as well. This is a biography based very largely on an extraordinary treasure trove of papers left behind by Haksar which have been tapped for the first time to rescue him from our collective amnesia. Ramesh described how, when he went through the letters, it was like finding a treasure trove of history.

Robin Gupta's *Milestones @70* is a book of startlingly moving poetry describing moments and milestones of his life and capturing the essence of the people and places that have had an enduring impact on him.

In keeping with the location there were discussions on Uttarakhand such as Drivers of Change; Narratives of Migration in Uttarakhand; and Ballads of Garhwal. Exploring economic and sustainable development, tourism and history, one got to know so much more about the state.

Wajahat Habibullah chaired a session on Pakistan, A Challenge for Itself and the World. Habibullah gave a brief history of Pakistan's founding fathers and its travails over the years. He said the military was responsible for the anti-India



“The total number of manuscripts available in India is more than 40 million, of which roughly a third are in Sanskrit.”

mindset in Pakistan. I discussed how in 2018 the most worrying thing about Pakistan was extremism and gave facts and figures on just how much Pakistani society and its neighbours suffered from the carefully nurtured terror proxies of the Pakistani deep state. Pakistan's lack of education for its youth and the influence of some medieval mullahs on politics and the state were also troubling issues.

Tilak Devasher, an expert on Pakistan and the author of two books on the country, spoke on how the rulers of Pakistan had not governed it but instead leveraged it on a global scale. It had become the centre for jihadi outfits. He talked about



Tilak Devasher

the economic problems and the fact that we need to have a deeper understanding of its schisms. Water scarcity and a huge undereducated or uneducated youth bulge are major problems that haunt Pakistan.

There were fascinating sessions on India's maritime

history and how India was a great seafaring nation and traded worldwide taking its culture and knowledge to distant countries. Another session was on India's maritime strategy and how India was developing its infrastructure and building up institutions towards becoming a naval superpower.

Maria Wirth, a German by birth who had made India her home for the last 38 years, launched her book, *Thank You India*, at the festival. With her publisher Sankrant Sanu (Garuda Prakashan), who was chairing her session, she described how



Maria Wirth

she fell in love with the spirituality and wisdom of the country, which led her to meet with many gurus and made her realise that Sanatana Dharma was indeed the best possible guide to the universal truth. She also realised that the subtle indoctrination by the British education system had left many

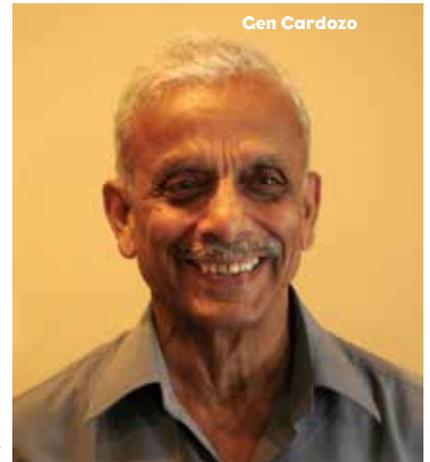
Indians unaware of their cultural traditions and rich history. She started writing a blog about her experiences in 2013 and within five years had crossed one million viewers!

I got to know Maria through her blogs and realised the wealth of information she had and was ashamed that she knew more about my heritage and history and our wonderfully inspiring epics than I did.

After being brought up as a Catholic, Maria has written about how she was drawn to Hindu philosophy because it

made so much sense and there was no hell and original sin as mandated in the Abrahamic religions, and your way of finding divinity was left to you. There are many paths to universal truth, like jnana, bhakti and karma yoga, and everyone has the freedom to explore and find out for oneself the divinity which unites us all and is the very essence of Sanatana Dharma. Maria makes it clear that she disapproves of conversions. In fact, she considers Hindu philosophy the best option for humanity as it is inclusive of all, and does not divide humanity into those who are saved and those who are damned.

Perhaps the most moving speech was given by General Cardozo on military morale. He spoke about an incident that concerned his battalion. A unit was in Sri Lanka when the commanding officer was killed by the Tamil Tigers. The CO had a young son and daughter who were weeping at the loss of



Gen Cardozo

their beloved father. When other soldiers and their families started arriving where the body was laid out, the CO's wife realised that she had to stay strong as she was now head of all the families with the battalion. This is what she told her children, "You are the commanding officer's children. If you are seen as weak and broken, it will break the spirit of the families. Go inside and wipe your tears. Your sorrow is now a personal matter."

The sheer courage of India's armed forces' widows is something that all Indians should remember.

Besides the various discussions that took place, there were also art shows, local handicraft shops showcasing pottery and shawls, as well as evening entertainment. It added to the ambience and interest of visitors and highlighted the best of Uttarakhand. ■

“There are many paths to universal truth and everyone has the freedom to explore and find the essence of divinity which unites us all.”