

REPORT ON COMMFEST '06

COMMFEST '06, a seminar on “Youth, Media and Democracy”, organized by St. Andrew’s College and the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre of India, was held at St. Andrew’s Auditorium, Bandra (W), Mumbai from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on 25th August '06 and from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m on 26th August 2006. For the third year in succession Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Germany-based voluntary agency provided the sponsorship and financial support for the seminar.

The planning group, consisting of the chairperson of AMIC-India, faculty of St. Andrew’s College and students drawn from the Bachelor of Mass Media (BMM) programme, initiated the planning process in early June. The Organising Committee comprised of the following members:

Prof. A D Mascarenhas, Dean, St. Andrew’s College,
Mr. Vijay Menon, Chairperson of AMIC-India
Mr. Ernest Fernandes, Visiting Professor, St. Andrew’s College
Dr. Sujatha Rao, Coordinator, BMM, St. Andrew’s College
Ms. Saudamini Bhagwat, full- time faculty, BMM, St. Andrew’s College
Mr. Lavy D’Costa, placement Officer, St. Andrew’s College

Several rounds of deliberations of the committee resulted in identifying the topics and speakers. Over 70 students contributed the basic components in terms of documentaries, debates and short films besides skits, music and dance. A large group of enthusiastic student volunteers also helped with marketing (including visits to colleges), organizational and logistic support.

The theme for the keynote address was “Youth Power for a Better Mumbai”. One of the goals of the seminar was to encourage widespread youth participation. In keeping with this goal, it was decided to hold an essay competition on the key theme for college students from across the city. The I prize winning essay was to be read out on the first day of the seminar. There would be handsome cash prizes for the 3 best essays. The format agreed upon for the seminar was to invite 2 students to present the views and counter-views on the issues at different sessions, with a well-known professional/ expert acting as the moderator. This would be followed by Question- Answer sessions, so as to facilitate wider youth participation.

Invitations for the essay competition evoked enthusiastic response from different colleges. A 2-member panel comprising well-known author judged the essays Dilip D’Souza and Mr. Ernest Fernandes.

The proceedings commenced with a Bharat Natyam recital by BMM students. Principal Dr. Marie Fernandes welcomed the participants on behalf of the organizers

while Mr. Vijay Menon of AMIC-India thanked Ms Nandini Sahai of FES for the positive response and generous support accorded by FES for the third year running.

CommFest'06 started with the keynote address on Youth Power for a Better Mumbai by Gerson De Cunha, leading environmentalist and activist with AGNI. This was followed by the reading of I prize winning essay by Nandita Bose (S.I.E.S College, Sion) on the seminar theme. The session on Media and Self Regulation was ably moderated by Nandini Sahai, who enlightened the youth audience on the nuances of the current regulatory framework. A student debate on "Should youth be Civic activists?" set the tone for a talk by Hansel D'Souza on the same topic.

A well-appreciated documentary produced by students on Mumbai's deteriorating environment bore testimony to the concern of today's youth for Mumbai and the sustainability of the current model of development. Dina Mehta, well-known qualitative researcher and blogger in her audio-visual presentation highlighted how blogging can be used for building social/ community networks in times of calamities such as the recent tsunami and the Katrina tragedy. The thought-provoking Lok Satta film on the vicious nexus between crime, corruption, muscle power prevailing in Indian politics today was followed by Hansel D'Souza and Srivastava of Lok Satta answering a wide-range of questions from students.

Siddharth Bhatia's talk on 'Does Industry Promote An Inclusive Society' was followed enlightening speech by Samir Harlankar, (Editor of Hindustan Times) on 'Should Market Forces Determine News Coverage'. The final session on Creative Freedom in Media Organisations was moderated by Ranjit Hoskote, Deputy editor of the Hindu. The sessions included a blend of inputs from the students and lively Q&A Sessions. The seminar offered a rich experience to the participants with debates, short films and documentaries relevant to the theme.

Various speakers opined that the CommFest concept deserves to be replicated to enable youth from across social, cultural and ideological divides to get together, to discuss current issues with candour, to interact with opinion leaders and shapers, to give expression to their own views and to imbibe positive values in life.

The interactive sessions were followed by prize distribution by Ranjit Hoskote. Prof. Mascarenhas, the Dean of St. Andrew's College thanked Mr.Rajeshwar Dayal and Ms Nandini sahai of FES for the financial support and Mr.Vijay Menon of AMIC-India for encouragement and advice which helped in making CommFest'06 a great success. Thanks were also conveyed to all the speakers and organizers.

The seminar ended with the national anthem.

Dr. Sujatha Rao
BMM Coordinator
St. Andrew's College
Mumbai 400050