

Habitat Centre, New Delhi: Wednesday 9 January

Remarks by HE Kieran Dowling, Ambassador of Ireland to India, at the inauguration of the first Irish Literary Festival in India

Professor Kapil Kapoor, Chandrima and the Directors of the India Habitat Centre, Sinead MacAodha, Professor Daithi Ó hÓgáin, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends.

Let me first thank the India Habitat Centre for providing us with this lovely auditorium this evening and more generally for collaborating with us in this series of events. Thank you, Chandrima. I am particularly happy that Mrs Suleka Kumar, wife of Saurabh Kumar who until very recently was Indian Ambassador to Ireland, is with us this evening. I am pleased too that some Indian friends resident in Clane in County Kildare made the journey to join us here.

It is my great honour to welcome you to the formal inauguration of the first Irish Literary Festival in India - a collaborative programme between the Embassy of Ireland and the Ireland Literature Exchange, with support from Culture Ireland and the India Habitat Centre.

As a mood setter for the inaugural literary event this evening, some of us were most delightfully entertained last night at the Sri Sathya Sai International Centre with a dramatic recital, 'Molly Says No!', by the renowned soprano Judith Mok, singing songs from the James Joyce era.

Introducing Judith, and her accompanist, Kevin Sharpe, I borrowed from James Joyce in describing Judith, like Aunt Julia and her two co-hosts in Joyce's excellent story 'The Dead' in 'Dubliners', as also being one of the true Graces of the Dublin music world.

Many of you will know how important music had been for James Joyce, both personally – he had a good tenor voice – and in his works. As Richard Ellmann said about 'Finnegans Wake', "in a way the whole book is an arabesque on the Irish ballad of that title".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a moment I will invite on stage Sinead Mac Aodha of Ireland Literature Exchange to tell us a little about the forthcoming events in the programme. Thereafter Professor Kapil Kapur will introduce this evening's event - a Lecture on Early Irish Mythology and India by the Irish writer and academic, Professor Dáithi Ó hÓgáin. Let me just say in brief that, after this evening's event, the series of literary interactions and entertainments will continue next week and run until Thursday 31 January. And the travelling James Joyce and Samuel Beckett anniversary exhibitions will be on show in the Habitat Centre from 26 to 31 January.

As Irish Ambassador to India, I value the tremendous intellectual affinity and connection which so many Indians feel in relation to Ireland's rich literary heritage - and the very evident sense of identity you feel with so many of the great Irish writers.

Pandit Nehru in his works was flattering in the extreme in the admiration he expressed for so many of the Irish writers, and Shaw in particular.

Nehru's interest in Ireland was stimulated at a very young age. We know from Nehru's autobiography that it was Ferdinand T. Brooks, the resident tutor who took charge of him when he was about eleven, who developed a great taste for reading in his young pupil. The Irish connection is clear in that Brooks, who was partly Irish, on his father's side, had been recommended to Nehru's father by Annie Besant who, as known, drawing on her Irish experiences, made such a contribution to the Indian political awakening.

So the literary – and other - bonding between Ireland and India goes way back. It manifested itself too in the friendship and understanding which existed between Tagore and Yeats. The works of Swift, Wilde, Joyce and Beckett are widely appreciated here - and contemporary writers such as John Banville, Roddy Doyle and now also Anne Enright, the most recent Booker prize winner, all have their following in India.

Our poets, including Patrick Kavanagh and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, are also very much on the literary radar here - as too are many of our modern world-class playwrights – and I am thinking in particular of Brian Friel.

Building on those well-rooted literary links, I know this Festival of Irish Literature will serve in creating new interactions and connectivity between the participating contemporary Irish writers and present day Indian audiences and readers - offering a valuable window into the creative and imaginative impulses at work in the literary Ireland of today.

The Festival will also, I believe, stimulate new linkages and friendships between creative people – both established and emerging – on both sides, to the undoubted artistic advantage of both our countries.

Again with sincere thanks to the India Habitat Centre, allow me to wish every success to all involved.

I would now like to invite Sinead Mac Aodha to come and stay a few words.

Thank you