



Kabita Dhara accompanied 11 Australian writers to India on an Asialink tour whose highlight was meant to be the Kolkata Book Fair—but things didn't go entirely to plan.

AUSTRALIAN CRICKETERS HAVE LONG BEEN household names on the sub-continent but judging from the response to Australian writers touring India these last two months, Australian authors are not far behind. Australia was the Focus Country at this year's Kolkata Book Fair (otherwise known as the Kolkata Boi Mela). The Fair is the biggest book event in Asia and the most attended book fair in the world—an annual event that is really for the general public, not the trade.

The reason for this is clear. One only has to wander through the streets of Kolkata to notice that this is a city of booklovers like no other. Crammed in between dilapidated dwellings and street stalls selling fake Rolexes are tiny, well-stocked bookstalls, eagerly patronised by locals.

However, the 32nd Kolkata Book Fair got off to a shaky start when the courts ruled that it could not be held in its traditional venue—a leafy park called the Maidan in central Kolkata—for environmental reasons. The Fair was subsequently postponed and relocated to the Salt Lake Stadium on the outskirts of the city.

Fortunately, while negotiations and construction were taking place, the beautiful National Library in Kolkata stepped in to play host to a 10-day display of books and presentations by Australian authors. This was also the venue for a trade event organised by Austrade, New Delhi, originally scheduled to be a curtain-raiser for the Fair when the Indian publishing industry would be present in Kolkata. Well-attended nonetheless, it gave those present a chance to hear about the Australian publishing industry and see the broad range of books on display.

Every second Bengali is a poet

Thomas Keneally headlined the Australia Day Dinner where he emphasised the need for direct links between Australia and India for publishers and readers, instead of a relationship mediated by British and American publishers. The authors present—John Zubrzycki, Margo Lanagan, Bem Le Hunte, Kirsty Murray, Bruce Bennett and Graham Reilly, as well as a contingent of poets—Luke Beesley, Ron Pretty, Kevin

Above: Aussie writers had pride of place in Kolkata.

Oh, Kolkata!

Brophy, Lizz Murphy and Brook Emery—were kept on their toes as they gave readings and presentations all over the city. Some of these were:

- Events organized by the Australia-India Council and the Indian Association for the Studies of Australia where the authors interacted with Indian academics and students of Australian literature
- Presentations and workshops at high schools and universities where authors were mobbed like rock stars
- A lively evening at the legendary Oxford Bookstore where the topics of questions ranged from Indian royals to the Australian republican movement.

There is a saying that every second Bengali is a poet and this was not only evidenced in the enthusiastic audiences at poetry events but also by two very special book launches held at the National Library. *The Road South*, an anthology of Australian poetry, and *Two Spaces of Poetry*, an anthology of Australian and Bengali poetry in translation, were both published by local publishers, the results of meetings between Australian and Bengali poets and publishers at last year's Book Fair. This was a fitting testament to Keneally's earlier expressed belief that such direct relationships between Australians and Indians are essential and make all the difference in a global market.

Accidents of Empire

When the Fair finally opened, Keneally gave an incisive yet entertaining inauguration address where he once again picked up on this theme saying: 'I would like to see those accidents of Empire overcome by direct conversation between Australian and Indian publishers.'

The Australian delegation received a touchingly warm welcome from Kolkata and its readers. Unexpected golden moments, like Le Hunte's meeting with the pastry shop owner who inspired her novel about Jewish settlers in Kolkata or Keneally's much publicised meeting with Kiran Desai at the Oxford Bookstore, only added to the rich experience of the Kolkata Book Fair.

Australia's status as Focus Country was part of AusArts India, a broader cultural initiative of DFAT's Australia International Cultural Council in partnership with the Australia Council and the Australia-India Council. The literature program was managed by Asialink and builds on previous activities as part of the Literature Touring Program. □

Special mention must be made of Barry Scott who acted as guide to many of the authors, Nikki Anderson from Asialink and Anthony Ellis from AusArts.