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Understanding Culture through Language, Literature and Cinema
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Report of Session II: Understanding the Past
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The session Understanding the past was chaired by Dr. Ravnee Thakur, Associate Prof., Faculty of Social Sciences, Delhi University. Dr. Rosy Singh, Assistant Prof., Delhi University, commenced the session with her paper on ‘Culture and Cosmology in the Poetry of Shah Hussain.’ Shah Hussain, is one of the most prominent Sufi poets of Punjab. The paper focussed on those compositions which draw their language, idiom and imaginary from the culture of the medieval Punjab. Some selected Hymns of Shah Hussain were presented by her in which the three most significant events in the cultural milieu of Punjab i.e birth, marriage and death were being highlighted. In Hussain’s poetry, one can find numerous symbols like the spinning wheel, stringed chair, cotton, thread etc. The motive of spinning wheel, one of the most powerful literary signifiers employed by Shah Hussain, developed almost indigenously as it is not found in the other orders of Sufism. Hussain’s language is saturated with images and idioms drawn from the anthropological parameters of Punjab which invariably interact with the pure forms of Sufi cosmological metaphors. In the process there is a shift from the physical world to the metaphysical universe, from the human love to the divine love and from the most ordinary empirical realities to the most sophisticated abstraction of human nature.

The session was followed by the paper on ‘Understanding India through the German Poetry of Early 19th Century.’ by Chandrika Kumar, Assistant Prof., Doon University. The paper, as the title suggests, enlightened the audience about the Indo-German encounters of the late 18th and early 19th century, where German literature, in particular German poetry, played a significant role in understanding India, its society and culture. The speaker supported his paper with the help of various examples. One was of Kalidasa’s Abhijnanshakuntalam translated into English by Sir William Jones and then into German by Georg Forster. The paper also dealt with the prevailing social issues in India
which primarily were widow burning and the ill treatment of the lower caste people. It also talked about the excitement for the Philological studies of an ancient Indian language, Sanskrit and last, but not the least, the motifs and images from Indian philosophy and mythology. Apart from all this, German poetry also showcased several names of Indian Gods, such as Brahma, Vishnu, Indra etc. the speaker mentioned many eminent German writers like Heinrich Heine, Geothe, Freed and so on with their works on the German poetry reflecting the Indian traditions. He concluded by mentioning that there was lot of German poetry of early 19th century, which not only offered information about India but also attempted to understand Indian society. All this resulted in an increased volume not only in German literature but also an encounter with the foreign element which later on became more of a domestic element.

Taking the session towards China, Tanvi Negi, Assistant Prof., Doon University presented the paper on understanding Chinese society in early 20th century through Bin Jin’s Jia. The main focus of this paper was to appreciate the changes that the Chinese Society was undergoing in the backdrop of May Fourth Movement, which was a period of social and cultural change which is often dubbed as “China Renaissance”, through Ba Jin’s novel Jia. The paper attempts to explore the themes of contradiction, intergenerational conflict and pathos of women in modern Chinese society as dealt within the novel. The primary motive was to understand old Chinese family system and the struggle of Chinese youth for their survival as also the position of women in traditional Chinese society. The Chinese family unit was seen as an obstacle to the modernization of Chinese society, a backward looking brake on the energies of the young, holding them in patterns of behavior which had led China to decline and defeat. The Goa family in the novel is the true representative of such a feudal and patriarchal family that follows the Confucian theory of the family where three generations live together and is headed by the grandfather, which leads to inter-generational conflict, without ignoring the condition of women and changing gender dynamics. The Chinese society in the early 20th century went through radical changes, where the youth and the women of the country were determined to destroy the stagnant old traditions and forge a new culture.

The session further continued with the paper on ‘Quixotic Diaries: Journey Taken to Understand Spanish Society’ by Mala Shikha, Assistant Prof., Doon University. She talked about Don Quixote which is undoubtedly Spain’s most important literary work. The paper
allowed the audience to be a part of the protagonist’s life and his journey where chivalric romances are read with enthusiasm and passion with which he starts to consider himself a knight errant till faces the realities of the society and how the ideal succumbs to the real. Don Quixote sets out his journey to regain the sophisticated culture of chivalry but it was not fulfilling the necessity of that condition. The depiction of Spanish society in Don Quixote is similarly divided between ideal and reality. Alongside the peculiar chivalric persona of Quixote, more mundane versions of the same principles were reflected in the casual violence, sexual attitude and racial prejudices of his ordinary, ‘sane’ countrymen, suggesting Cervantes’ lunatic may stand for, rather than that out from, his wider setting. She concluded by saying that the novel depicts the secularism, ambiguity and relativity of modern era.

The last paper of the session was on ‘Understanding Confrontation With The Past: A Case Study Of The Film “The Nasty Girl”’, by Roshan Jahel, Assistant Prof, Doon University. The paper attempts to understand the issue of confrontation with the past and why it is necessary for the contemporary society to have an honest approach to the same. The film is a story of a young girl Sonja who lives in southern Germany and is liked by everyone so much that she gets question papers a day before the exams. The paper talked about the term Vergangenheitsbewältigung i.e Struggle to deal with the past and the past here is the Nazi era, Holocaust and how the protagonist recognises parallels between her victimization in the hands of her husband and the persecutions during the war, as the same led to incomprehensible crime that happened under National Socialism. The film connects past with present by drawing parallels between Nazi atrocities and victimization of the protagonist. However, this film tries to establish a powerful point that Nazi ideology cannot be simply termed as a matter of past, contrary to that, it needs to be confronted in the present so that the future generations do not forget the deadly past and learns from it.