

Thiru S.X. Swamikannu Endowment Lecture 2015

By

**Prof. Dr. Brenda Beck, Anthropologist and Folklorist, University of Toronto
held on 12th February 2015 at 11.30 AM in Yedanapalli Hall**



At Fr. Principal's Office



Students giving a traditional welcome

Prof. Dr. Brenda Beck from the University of Toronto, Dr. Eric Miller, director of the World Storytelling Institute, Dr. Louis Joseph Chandra, Head of the Department of English and Dr. P. Mary Vidya Porselvi, Organiser, Endowment Lecture 2015 met Rev. Fr. Principal, G. Joseph Antonysamy in his office.

On 12th February 2015, the annual Endowment Lecture was held at Yedanapalli Hall. The title of the lecture was 'Relevance of a Singing Bard', and the Chief Guest / speaker for the day was Dr Brenda Beck from the University of Toronto, Canada.



Dr. Louis Joseph Chandra, Head of the Department of English welcoming the gathering and the dignitaries lighting the lamp

The event began with a customary prayer song, followed by the Welcome Address by Dr D. Louis Joseph Chandra, Head of the Department of English. In his address, Dr. Chandra greeted the attendees, namely Fr John Kumar, Director of Social Watch, Chennai; Dr A. Devaraj, UG Professor, Department of English; Prof Ragamalika, Coordinator, Department of English [Shift II]; Dr Brenda Beck; Dr Eric Miller, Director of World Storytelling Institute, Chennai; the professors and students.



The Head of the Department of English, Dr. Chandra presenting a memento to the Chief Guest and Dr. Devaraj, UG Professor presenting a memento to Dr. Eric Miller

Dr Mary Vidya Porselvi, organizer of the event, introduced Dr Brenda Beck as a scholar who has completed fifty years of research in oral literature. The audience learnt that Dr Brenda first came to India in 1965, when she began her doctoral research on the ‘Annanmaars’ of erstwhile Ponnivala Naadu (now Kongunadu) near Kangeyam.



Dr. Brenda Beck’s inspiring endowment lecture on the relevance of Ponnivala Legend

When it was Dr Brenda’s turn to begin her lecture, her endearing Tamil instantly connected with the audience. She began by stressing on the significance of bards, who told stories through songs. She proceeded to describe how she landed in India, and how she spent two years in a village near Kangeyam, interacting with the locals and learning about the story of the Annanmaars. Her gradual realization that the story sung by the local bard was 44 hours long—which required her to erase all her pre-recorded cassettes in order to capture his songs—left the audience amused and enthralled in equal measure.



Questions from the enthusiastic learned audience

Dr Brenda’s scholarship was evident when she began narrating the Annanmaars’ story – a tale of kinship, social change, and power struggle across three generations. She described it as a perfect example of world literature, because of the “universal story, literary construction, and historical relevance”, placing it on par with some of the world’s lasting epics, including Beowulf, Odyssey, and Gilgamesh. She also noted her amazement at finding similarities between this story and the Icelandic sagas. She identified the Puranic undertone in the story, the strong women characters, the degeneration of a civilization, and the various tropes that depicted Tamil culture of yore. Dr Brenda explained that she has adapted her research project into a 13-hour 2D film, illustrated by the grandson of one of the bards who originally sang the story.



The Organising Team with Dr. Brenda Beck

As she concluded the lecture, the deafening applause indicated that her audience had heard a remarkable story, from a remarkable lady.

Prof Bertilla rounded off proceedings by proposing the Vote of Thanks, in which she expressed gratitude to Dr Brenda for enhancing our knowledge of the Annanmaars. She also acknowledged the various people involved in organizing this event, and thanked them for their contribution.

Report prepared by
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