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## Some reflections on our participation in the Indian Institute of Social Reform and Research (IISRR) World Conference 2024

**Robin Groves**  
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Professor Asit Kumar Das has asked us to make some observations about our attendance at the Indian Institute of Social Reform & Research (IISRR) World Conference in December 2024 and some associated events we attended whilst in India. How can we make observations about something that was a whirlwind of excitement and activity, that was jam-packed with highlights, uncertainty, achievements and meeting wonderful people, many of them eminent and important? What can we say to sum up some of this?

To set the scene, we took part in major events in three cities. Arriving in Kolkata on 3 December we participated in the IISRR World Conference based at Jadavpur University from 5-7 December. On the evening of 7 December, we travelled by road to Santiniketan, where we visited sites of interest on 8 December and attended Seacom Skills University on the morning of 9 December, before heading back to Kolkata. Then we flew to Visakhapatnam (Visag) to present talks and sessions at Sri Prakash Academy and participate in the Academy's annual AROMA end-of-year celebrations.

### **IISRR 2024 World Conference:**

As IISRR World Conference Honoured Guests at Jadavpur University we, Dr. Robin Groves and Dr. Elaine Horne, participated in the opening ceremony 'Lighting of the Lamp', the traditional ceremonial commencement, gave short introductory addresses to the conference participants and received a plaque of welcome and attendance.

Then in a special ceremony Dr Robin Groves received the IISRR 2024 Award for worldwide contributions to STEM education and innovative teaching and learning, consisting of a large engraved wooden plaque and a gold medal. We were delighted that our long-time colleague and friend Professor Sudhakar C. Agarkar from Mumbai also received an IISRR 2024 Award. Professor Sudhakar Agarkar then joined us for

the whole of our stay in India, in Kolkata, in Santiniketan and in Visag, and was a tremendous help to us with all the necessary arrangements.

Dr Robin Groves then presented the Conference Keynote address to an audience of university teachers and researchers and approximately 120 school students and their teachers. In his address Dr Groves outlined changes in priorities in teaching and learning over the fifty years of his involvement, how the emphasis had shifted from being information-deliverers to helping students to learn, and the implications from this for the kind of learning that can take place in schools and universities today. Slides related to this address were published in the Conference Program.



The morning's proceedings were completed with the Inauguration of the Project-Based Poster Exhibition by Dr Elaine Horne and Professor Amitava Dutta, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Jadavpur University.

After lunch Dr Groves chaired the Students Incubation Workshop 1 – Fun Science conducted and led by our longstanding ICASE colleague Professor Janchai Yingprayoon, Prince of Sonhkla University, Thailand. This included many toy-based activities, puzzles and hands-on activities for students to develop concepts in science and mathematics.

Dr Horne chaired a Technical Session consisting of ten papers delivered by researchers from different parts of India. Some ideas and issues included portals for community engagement to encourage empowerment and informed decisions, creative commons, selecting and using appropriate AI statistical tools to recognize relationships, connections and patterns in research, inclusivity and 'leaving no-one behind', understanding the limitations of AI, teaming human and AI, open availability and the importance of recognizing sources.

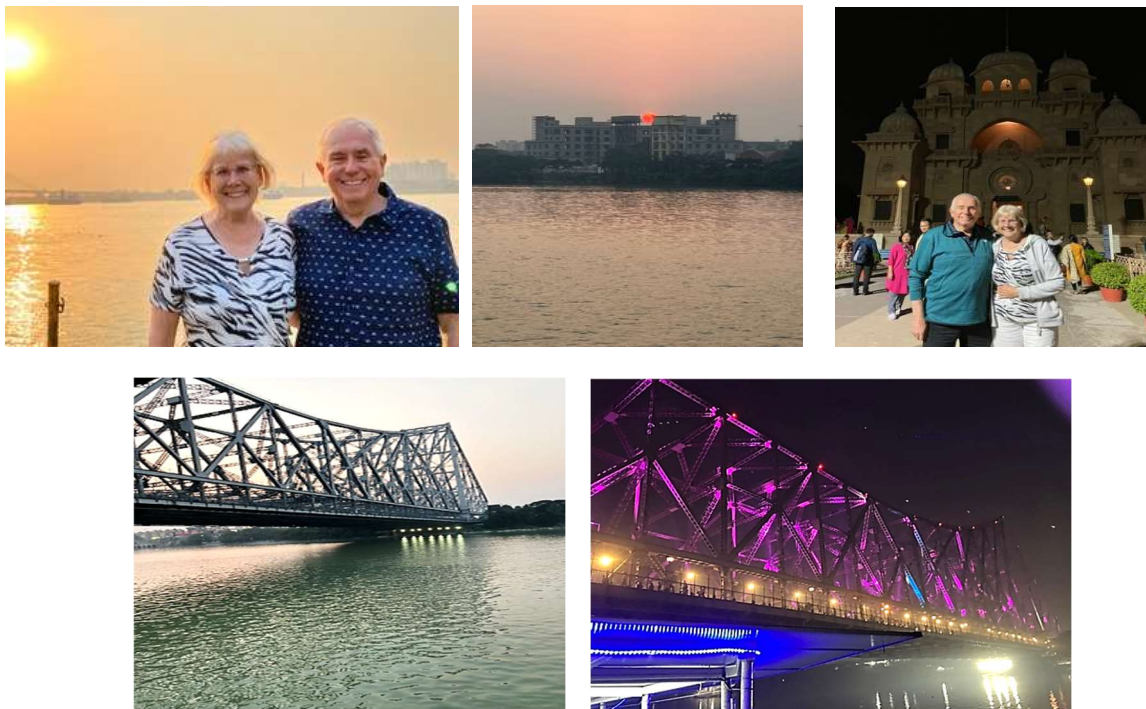




On the second day of the IISRR Conference, Dr Horne delivered Keynote Speech 2, 'Introducing Einstein's Physics to Children' to 80 researchers. She outlined how Einstein communicated and interacted with India's heroes, Gandhi, Tagore and Bose and explained a program called Einstein First (EF), led by the University of Western Australia, which encourages exploring Einstein's concepts early in schooling using a hands on- /minds on- approach. Several activities were illustrated to explore gravity waves, space-time and interactions with moving masses. Surveys of teachers and the growing number of research papers generated from this extensive program were highlighted.



In the late afternoon and evening of Day 2 the invited speakers and some delegates boarded a riverboat for a delightful cruise on the River Hooghly, including passing under the historic Howrah Bridge. During a pleasant, colourful evening, Indian and popular songs were sung with a backdrop of the sun setting and birds flocking and calling. A stop was made for a walk-through market and to the spectacular Belur Math, and dinner was served on the return journey. It was a very enjoyable outing, highlighting an iconic and spiritual river and unique environment and culture.





On the third day, following more keynote talks and technical paper presentations, Dr Groves, Dr Horne and other honoured guests awarded certificates and prizes to students, teachers and schools. Prominent guests, including Dr Groves and Dr Horne made valedictory speeches to conclude the conference. We enjoyed a small informal presentation of mementos from Perth, Australia to Professor Asit Das and Professor Sudhakar Agarkar.



Our heartfelt thanks go to Professor Asit Kumar Das for inviting us to the conference and for making all the arrangements to ensure that our participation was enjoyable and successful. Our congratulations and thanks also go to the secretaries and convenors of the 2024 IISRR World Conference and the dedicated teams that worked with them to ensure all the arrangements were in place for such a successful conference.



Visit to Eden Gardens, Kolkata on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024 by IISRR World Conference 2024 Resource Persons

Our account of our time in Kolkata would not be complete without mentioning what a remarkable day we had on Saturday 4 December, having arrived in Kolkata with a day to spare before the commencement of the conference. Professor Asit Das and eminent colleagues arranged a special private tour of Eden Gardens Cricket Ground, which was a great thrill as we are cricket lovers and it was such a moving and wonderful experience for us. To follow that we then visited the Jorasanko Thakur Bari at Rabindra Bharati University to learn about the life and times of Rabindranath Tagore, topped off with a spectacular light show just after sunset.



Visit to Jorasanko Thakurbari, Kolkata and Light & Sound Show on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024  
by IISRR World Conference 2024 Resource Persons

#### Santiniketan and Seacom Skills University:

Following the IISRR World Conference, invited guests and their hosts travelled to Santiniketan. On 8 December we visited the estate and several fascinating museums in Bolpur, which was the home of Rabindranath Tagore in his later life. Later we visited markets and joined in some colorful local dancing. The next morning, we visited Seacom Skills University and met with senior staff. After introductory talks by all, we discussed important issues in education and were shown around the very interesting university with its emphases on sustainable futures, emerging technologies, biotechnology and agriculture. In the afternoon we were transported back to Kolkata in time for our flight to Visag. The road trip was not only an opportunity to visit fascinating places but also a chance to interact with colleagues and get to know each other very well.



Visit to Shantiniketan on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2024 by IISRR World Conference 2024 Resource Persons

### Sri Prakash Academy, Visakhapatnam (Visag):

After a flight of 900km to the south of Kolkata, Dr Robin Groves, Dr Elaine Horne and Professor Sudhakar Agarkar arrived in Visag, a lovely city with a long, beautiful corniche on the Indian Ocean coast. We were welcomed by the Director, Chitturi Vasu Prakash, as honoured guests at the Sri Prakash Academy. Over two days we met many members of the administration, teachers and students and gave several keynote addresses.

On the first day Dr Groves made a presentation to about 150 students on 'Becoming a better learner', also discussing similarities and differences between India and Australia. Powerpoint slides from the talk were left with the school. Dr Horne also gave a talk to the students about biodiversity and the major threat to it from Climate Change. The talk concluded with photos of the biodiverse animals, plants and environments of Western Australia's UNESCO World Heritage Area of Shark Bay.



On the evening of Day One we participated in AROMA - the Sri Prakash Academy Annual end-of-year celebration and prize-giving ceremony, with an audience approaching 1000 parents, students and community members. Dr Robin Groves made one of the keynote addresses and both he and Dr Horne presented prizes to successful students and commented about other aspects of the evening. The music, dancing, public speaking, displays of students' work in technology, science and art - including producing a massive artwork live on stage – were outstanding.



On the second day at Sri Prakash Academy Dr Horne gave a presentation to about 70 primary and high school teachers on the Einsteinian Physics in Schools project, similar to her IISRR presentation but also involving the teachers in an enjoyable hands-on activity with a flexible fabric spacetime simulator. Dr Groves made a presentation on teaching, learning and assessment to the teachers, again using PowerPoint slides that were left with the school.



Our wonderful experience at Sri Prakash Academy came to an end after less than 48 hours when we headed off to the Airport for our flight to Kolkata, where we were delighted to catch up again briefly with Professor Asit Das, and on to Singapore and home to Perth. Both of us were pleased to comment to the Director, Chitturi Vasu Prakash, that in all our time in education we had not seen a better school than Sri Prakash Academy. Our deep thanks go to Chitturi Vasu Prakash for inviting us and making all the arrangements for our visit, which we thoroughly enjoyed and from which we greatly benefitted.