

2010 marks one hundred and fifty years since the arrival of Indians in South Africa. They came as indentured labourers and after they had served their contracts, they settled in small communities mostly in Natal and the Transvaal.

Durban has the largest population of people of Indian origin.

Celebrations are being held wherever there are Indian South African communities. In Pretoria, a cultural bridge between Pretoria and Hyderabad is being established.

This is the brainchild of Vidya Bhandarker from Hyderabad, a journalist and sociologist, who travels around the world with her husband, an official of the World Bank.

They arrived in South Africa from Washington D.C. in 2009.

When she heard of the anniversary, she decided that there should be celebrations in India as well and set up a link between Hyderabad and Pretoria.

In July 2010, a number of South African artists exhibited their works in Hyderabad at the Chowmahala Palace.

An exhibition of Hyderabad art was then brought to the Association of Arts Gallery in Mackie Street, Nieuw Muckleneuk, Pretoria.

It opened on Saturday, 4 September and on 17 September was moved to the formerly Indian township of Laudium and opened there on 18 September at the Rosina Sedibeng Sports School.

Well-known artists, Aziz and Hanumantha Rao Devulapalli, represented Hyderabad artists at the exhibitions in Pretoria.

In Laudium, a small problem arose when the exhibition was being set up and one of Hanumantha Rao's paintings was not allowed to be displayed. Later in the day, the local artists overruled the decision and put the painting up.

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had resolved the matter, they had not actually addressed the crucial issue of differences in perception that arise from different cultural experiences.

I felt that w

ithout consideration of what makes for differences in perception, problems would continue to crop up.

I asked permission to speak at the official opening the following afternoon.

This is the speech that I wrote.

If we are working towards building a cultural bridge between Pretoria and Hyderabad, it is important for us to begin by building a bridge over the cultural gap that this art exhibition has exposed right here amongst us.

We can take our cue from the Hyderabad artist, Aziz, who is with us this afternoon. In his admiration for Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela he has bridged huge cultural gaps. Mahatma Gandhi gave us the strategy of non-violence and Nelson Mandela, the strategy of truth and reconciliation. Truth and reconciliation depend on empathy. As we all know, empathy means being able to put oneself in another person's shoes, being able to see things from another's point of view.

Mandela demonstrated his ability to do this before the whole world.

In 1995 when he walked out onto the rugby field after South Africa had won the World Cup, he was wearing a Springbok rugby jersey and in that he declared, not that he was an African, but that he was an Afrikaner and that he embraced the Afrikaners, his former enemies.

His gesture helped to bring the nation together.

Empathy is the basis on which reconciliation is built. Right here in this hall we need the ability to empathise with one another. This exhibition consists of work from Muslim and Hindu artists who come from very different traditions. In order to appreciate one another's art, therefore, it is necessary to understand how these traditions influence the work.

I am going to put myself in the shoes of both groups and if my understanding is wrong, I shall be very happy to be corrected.

When Muslims pray, all they need is a prayer mat and the Qur'an.

When Hindus pray they need a whole array of objects: a tray, camphor, water, flowers, red powder, turmeric powder, ashes, coconuts etc. Each of these items is representative of something else; they are all symbols. The coconut for instance represents the ego and has to be broken during ceremonies. As Hindu worship makes great use of symbolism, Hindus have a mystical approach to religion and life.

The only symbols that Muslim worship requires are words. Muslims don't need symbolic objects; Muslims speak directly to God. As they view the world with the same kind of directness, their approach to life is based on realism.

This difference is evident in the art on display in this exhibition. Take the work of Aziz; it

strives for realism. As a result it is almost three-dimensional.

If you look at his paintings of horses, you will see that the animals are dynamic and alive.

They look as though they are going to gallop right off the canvas.

This is not the case when you look at Hanumantha Rao Devulapalli's paintings of bulls. In his work, we see great swirls of light and shade that look like clouds taking the forms of bulls. The animals are spectral, not substantial and tangible.

We admire Aziz's horses for the beauty of form, composition, colour and the invigorating energy that they emanate. His horses are real, vibrant animals.

Hanumantha's bulls, on the other hand, are otherworldly forms, shrouded in mystery. They are symbols that draw us in and require our interpretation.

Hindus, in general, tend to see things in terms of symbolism. Even gods and goddesses are merely symbols.

According to Hinduism, one lives in a state of karma, i.e. ignorance, therefore nothing is real; everything is illusion. Through the union of opposites one can arrive at a transcendent reality.

That is why there are gods and goddesses.

The gods represent knowledge and goddesses represent energy and only in the fusion of knowledge and energy is righteous action (dharma) possible.

What Hindus revere most is the life principle and that, for South Indians, is represented by the lingam, a phallic symbol, a symbol of fertility and the source of life. Hanumantha's *Shivoham* paintings are mystical depictions of the lingam, demonstrations of his reverence for life.

At this exhibition, those not aware of symbolic meanings, were offended. And that was what had led to the rejection of one of his paintings.