

## Article – 1

# 66TH Y'S MEN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION IN RETROSPECT

Far from being a polite social observance of a group of privileged people merely to get away from serious work and have fun, a Y's Men International Convention is, for the most part, serious business that calls not only for re-appraisal of our activities, but also for re-dedication to our *raison d'être* and renewal of our efforts with added vigour. Of course, it has its lighter moments too, and ours was no different. After such a convention that was attended, no doubt, by its pomp and panoply on the one hand and, more importantly, by the nitty-gritty of its meetings, seminars and decision-making on the other, it is time now to try to experience the pleasures of retrospection and maybe its pains as well. Therefore, a hark back to the just concluded **66th Y's Men International Convention 2004 held from 12th August through 15th August in Kochi, South India**, would, I believe, be 'just what the doctor ordered'. After all the stresses and strains of having held such a convention, we can now heave a sigh of relief that this mammoth venture went off without any serious setbacks.

### **Day 1 - Thursday, 12th August 2004**

Early that afternoon, as a prologue to the 'jamboree', gathered at the portals of Hotel Le Meridien was a phalanx of our Movement's grand old 'pioneers', each carrying, with considerable dignity and with no less considerable effort, a *muthukkoda* or highly-ornamented silkparasol of more than usual bulk, all tasseled and tinselled to set off its visual variety. They then processed to accord a traditional Keralite welcome to the international delegates at the convention. Close on their heels, and forming very much a part of the procession was the *Panchavaadyam*, or a local troupe of percussionists, horn blowers and cymbalists, alternately hitting a high note and then a low note, to vary the cadence and the tempo of their music. Bringing up the rear was a mounted elephant, resplendent in all its ornamental caparisons, processing with ponderous dignity not to be outdone by the pioneers. The parade thus ceremonially wound their way to at a stately pace to take their bows at the Galfar convention centre, a hop, step and jump away from the Hotel.

The convention began formally at the Oman Hall a little after 15.00 hours. To start it at the stroke of three, as had been planned, wouldn't have been true to our way of doing things, would it? We in India believe that Time, like all other dimensions, is an illusion that we do not set much store by. Life goes on, regardless! In the event, our clock-watching delegates, who were the exception rather than the rule, did not have to fret for too long.

After the opening ceremonies, there was a parade of men bearing an assortment of Y's Men flags, at the end of which the 'colours' that had been 'trooped' found their pride of place on the dais. Next to come was the invocation by Rt. Rev. T. Thomas Samuel of the Church of South India. That was followed by a moment of silent prayer by the delegates,

the formal Lighting of the Candle by the International President Elect Benson Wabule of Kenya and the equally formal Opening of the Bible by the International President John L. Choa of the Philippines , in that order. Incidentally, that Bible has the rare distinction of carrying the signatures of every International President from our Founder Judge P. W. Alexander downwards.

Immediate Past International President Jacob Cherian thereupon declared the Convention open. As a prelude to that,he touched *inter alia* upon his attempts to establish greater contacts between the First World clubs and those of the less well-endowed countries. He also talked of his unremitting attempts to re-interpret the concept of Christian Emphasis in non-sectarian terms in order to stress that selfless service, and not sectarian theology, was what mattered most to Y's Men.

Next in order was the Roll Call of Nations by International Secretary General, Rolando Dalmas. Then there was an interlude of music by the choir even as the chief guest and the other guests of honour were being ushered into the conference hall. A word about the choir in passing would not be out of place here. The golden oldies they later sang so well were certainly evocative, but it would have been more moving if they had managed to carry the whole audience with them and had made them wholeheartedly join in, to a man.

After ushering in the chief guest, Past International President Dr. Kim Bong Hee of Korea, formally welcomed him and others on and off the dais, and then went on to install the International Executive Officers for 2004-2005.

The Chief Guest of the day, Shri I. K. Gujral, former Prime Minister of India, opened his inaugural address with a general appeal that we protect at all costs the vulnerable sections of our society against the growing obscurantist conservatism that had of late called into question our deeply ingrained democratic sensibilities and our sense of social justice. He took care to add that this fundamentalist onslaught was not confined to any one belief.

He averred that a democratic civil society was possible only when our cultural, religious, racial and linguistic diversities were reconciled and a man's worth was determined not by his caste or creed or social status, ever, but always by his intrinsic qualities. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mahatma Gandhi as much for having reclaimed for us, as he put it, 'the soul of India ', as for having reclaimed our motherland from the colonizer. He stressed that along with the Mahatma's exhortation to us to absorb new ideas and influences, his philosophy of *ahimsa* or non-violence that he had campaigned all his life for formed the bedrock of our democracy.

Shri Gujral went on to commend the humanistic impulses of the people of Kerala and the concept of Service in its Statecraft. He had a word of appreciation for the pioneering Christian teachers in this part of the world who had inculcated in their pupils the inviolable dignity of the individual. In summing up, he said that a monarch or a ruler or, by extension every Y's Man, gained the moral authority to perform his *Dharma* only when he is guided by the principle of 'Service before Self'. Indian sages of old had been the first to show the way. He was sure that our movement would be equal to the task offighting against all kinds of inequities and, in particular, gender bias.

In recognition of this Y's Men International Convention, which was the first of its kind in India, the Department of Posts had released a commemorative cover with special cancellation. It was released on this occasion by Mrs. K. N. K. Karthiayani, Chief Postmaster General of Kerala and was duly received by the International President, John L. Choa.

Prof. K. V. Thomas, Minister for Excise and Fisheries, Govt. of Kerala, who spoke next, offered his felicitations to the convention and, among other things, touched upon the long tradition of tolerance and harmony that was obtaining in Kerala, 'the melting pot of all religions and faiths'. And he hoped that our guest Y's Men would, in his own words, be 'our goodwill ambassadors abroad' when they went back to their own countries.

Not much of consequence was slotted into the rest of the day's programme, save for a graphic exhibition, until early in the evening, when the delegates assembled at the lawns to 'let their hair down' in a manner of speaking. A cash bar was open and our 'bartenders' were busy ringing the till and measuring out to each 'indulging' delegate his particular brand of 'poison'. True to our renowned restraint, no one attempted to drink more than he could hold. A glass or two may have been broken in that convivial gathering, but where hundreds jostled together, not to speak of scores of waiters weaving in and out between them with fully-laden trays finely balanced, that could easily have happened even among the abstinent who imbibed nothing even remotely as potent.

True, tongues were loosened, but only just, and that helped break the ice quicker and let animated conversation flow freely. New friends were made and old bonds were strengthened. The resulting Babel of voices nearly drowned out the announcements and the awards presentation that IPIP Jacob Cherian had been valiantly soldiering on with, regardless. Try hard as he might, he could hardly have made himself heard notwithstanding the Public Address System.

Then followed the cultural programme under the title, 'Colours of Kerala'. Among the items on offer, two were easily noticed. One was the Kerala Muslim folk dance form the 'Opana' - usually performed at Muslim weddings - presented on this occasion with verve. So was 'Mohiniattam', Kerala's own dance form, the 'dance of the temptress', except that the former was rendered more vigorously than was the slow, languorous latter one.

Judging by an incident that somewhat marred the even flow of an otherwise pleasant evening at the Taj Malabar the following day, Friday, one suspects that in the mindset of some of us, the term 'Culture' might apply only to the art forms of India, to the exclusion of all other art forms. A paradigm shift in their thinking might help if there is to be appreciation of other cultures. To the Korean and the Japanese delegates, in particular, who had travelled half way round the world with their paraphernalia, gongs and masks and costumes and what not, this 'apartness' was almost palpable. More of that, anon.

## **Day 2 - Friday, 13th August 2004**

At a little after half past eight in the morning, the convention was called to order for Devotion in the Oman Hall. The devotional talk by Y's Man Paul Henrik Jakobsen of Denmark centred round a text from the Gospels (Luke Ch. 6, Vs 27-29). It reads, "**Love**

**your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee in the one cheek offer also the other...**" At the end of the talk, the delegates stood and sang the well-known hymn, 'O God our Help in Ages Past' with the choir in the lead.

The International Secretary General's report was presented next in an open plenary session. With the help of an overhead projector and a clutch of graphic transparencies at his beck and call, ISG Y's Man Rolando Dalmas went over the movement's activities of the past year; its highs and lows, its finances and its extension work. He laid particular stress on the need for expressing our solidarity with the YMCA and its activities. He touched upon the TOF (Time of Fast) and how it had a bearing on our involvement with the YMCA. Referring to the diversity of opinion in decision-making, he was sure that what made for this diversity was our loyalty to the movement that was happily reflected in its spirit of give and take, which was the essence of democracy. He suggested that there was room for making the movement more attractive to women lest they stagnated without being able to assume more significant roles. He also touched upon the importance of training a new crop of young leaders to take over the reins from the present 'ageing' leadership. In a fast-changing world, unless we adapted to these changes we would fall behind and fail to ensure ongoing validity. He summed up by hoping that our vision of Peace, Hope and Justice would be seen on the faces of the people we served.

In the ensuing discussion, which was limited to ten minutes owing to time constraints, two pertinent points were raised from the floor. One was the proneness of some clubs to under-representing their membership roster when it came to paying their international and regional dues in full. The ISG felt that only self-corrective measures would help gain the desired end of absolute honesty in such matters.

The other speaker from the floor, taking the ISG up on his hope that women should assume more significant roles in Y'sdom, wondered why we should continue to have gender-specific Y's Men and Y's Menettes, instead of just calling ourselves Y's Persons, when we did not classify our Lings as gender-specific boy lings or girl lings. He added that in India, sadly, the women merely lurked in the periphery of the movement instead of being seen actively at the top levels of leadership. Could we not change the name of the organization to reflect a change in our outlook? The ISG hoped that in time a change in the movement's name and in its scope could be contemplated. Was he afraid that a prompt change of name might lead to loss of global goodwill and in particular among patriarchal societies?

The Guest of Honour for the day was to be the Union Minister for Tourism, Mrs. Renuka Choudhary. She was to speak on '**Women's empowerment and Social Service**'. She failed to turn up. So, what else is new with Indian politicians? But as good luck would have it, the CEO of a well-known firm in the city, the petite Ms. Sushama Shrikandath, graciously agreed to take her place at short notice and played her part as to the manner born. Empowerment, she said, was to be a process whereby the powerless gained greater control of knowledge-resources so that they could make informed choices at the individual, social, economic and political levels. Women could thus collectively influence the direction of societal change. Above all, **personal empowerment** was the 'key' that unlocked their potential. She used the catchphrase '**The Power of One**' to

underscore this point; that **one person** can make a difference, if she worked without being emotional, but rather by being passionate, in trying to reach her goal. She was given a standing ovation that shook the rafters.

Brainstorming sessions on five different topics came next. The topics were, “**YMCA–Y’s Men Partnership**”, “**Our Identity and Community Service**”, “**Club Life–What Attracts me**”, “**Y’s Menettes’ Forum**” and “**The Need for Training**”. Delegates parted company, depending on what topic grabbed their interest the most.

This correspondent sat in on, ‘**Our Identity and Community Service**’. Quite by chance, the International President was also present there. A brainstorming session is a misnomer for what is obtaining in this part of the world in a discussion. In practice, a monologue is delivered to the accompaniment of a few respectful murmurs of concurrence from the floor to give it the appearance of group participation. However on this occasion, when the chairperson’s longwinded opening monologue tended to pall somewhat on the delegates present, one of them tactfully intervened and persuaded both him and the IP to come down from the dais and join the participants on the floor to initiate an interactive dialogue. It provided the delegates an opportunity to compare notes on the kind of community service that was offered at various levels of our organization. The IP lent the main thrust of the discussion when he pointed out that the International Council had earlier voted to initiate a United Global Project (UGP) that could become the core of our service to the community. They had a list of three projects to choose from: 1. **WATER**, 2. **HIV/AIDS PREVENTION**, and 3. **CARE FOR THE AGED**. **They chose the second option.**

He conceded that clubs had their freedom to order their priorities depending on the immediate needs of each community. In that context, Dominic Yoko of Thika , Kenya , made the point that a club should have a two-pronged approach to community service: that is, having a rapid reaction mechanism to act in an emergency as well as having long-term goals. A delegate from Denmark felt that it was important for Y’s Regions and Areas to be made more aware of each other’s problems -presently there was a paucity of such information- so that a helping hand could be extended across continents if the situation called for it.

The IP urged that a unified effort be made across the board, in this regard, from the club level all the way up to the International. That would make a greater impact in our outreach activities. What was important for us was not so much to overtly seek to be high profile in the service we offer as to **LET OUR LIGHT SHINE** and leave it up to society to recognize it or not. Be fully committed to the work you have set out to do and your work will serve the community. Time constraints prevented the group from discussing at length the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the HIV/AIDS CONTROL project and how to go about it. Time is always of the essence regardless of how differently you and I view it, wouldn’t you agree?

Later that day, three representatives of the local Media took turns at addressing the delegates in a plenary session. To put it briefly, they said that the NGO’s have to be open to both social and quality auditing and the media play the role of conscious auditors. In the process they become activist adjuncts to genuine service organizations not only by

highlighting and encouraging their activities but also, more importantly, by keeping a finger on the pulse of NGO's in general. When the occasion called for it, they could then name and shame the fly-by-night outfits that pass for NGO's in order to make them more accountable to society. It was important, one of them pertinently added, that the NGO's ought to transcend political push-and-pull factors to function more evenhandedly. In sum, they observed that only genuine, need-based community service elicited recognition from the community.

For a welcome change, that evening's dinner, as also the cultural programme that went with it, was laid on at the Hotel Taj Malabar to which the delegates were all bussed from the various hotels they were staying at. At the meeting prior to the dinner, International President Elect, Y's Man Benson Wabule spoke to the delegates about his vision for the movement. He began by saying that there was no community that had no needs. Every community, whether affluent or otherwise, had its own needs. And if these needs were not promptly addressed with affirmative action, everything would fall by the wayside. While not all Y's Men could solve all the problems all the time, they could at least make a start by identifying them and then prioritizing them before subsequently offering what was within their means to address some of those needs. He added that along with Community Service, which is the underpinning of our movement, Leadership Training, Youth Involvement and Public Relations would also form the main pillars of our superstructure as a service organization. He declared that the theme for his tenure was to be **"Be Y's Men of/in Deed, not Y's Men of/in Need"**.

Then there was the cultural programme. The Handbook had only reflected 'a single-point agenda', "The Magic that is India", which turned out to be a well-nigh two-hour long mixed bag of Indian dances put on by a paid professional outfit from Trivandrum. Needless to say, they performed with panache. They had to give us our money's worth, didn't they? But, there were two Y's Men International 'honorary contenders', the Koreans and the Japanese, who had come all the way to India carrying with them their stage gear and what have you to show the audience a slice of their culture as well. For free. And they could not be denied their 'moment of glory'.

Again, apart from the sundry other, spur-of-the-moment local volunteers who offered to perform, and in fact did, there was the Mylapore Youth Club that had travelled from Madras and had been chafing in the wings in their 'steamy' costumes to get their item over with expeditiously. Understandably, the sponsor of the item was seen, and heard, fretting and fuming in the background and had at one point even asked one of his surrogates to muscle in. Luckily, good sense prevailed. When his boys eventually had the stage, they performed with a gusto that belied their long-suffering wait for their turn and ended it with a roar that brought the house down. Oh, I almost forgot. The Busan Y's Men had also come prepared for a DVD presentation of IC 2006 as reflected in the programme, which also had to be squeezed in. The overseas amateurs too did their part, especially the exquisite *Puchi Chum* (the Fan Dance) by a bevy of Korean charmers followed in its wake by a dance by masked men to the accompaniment of pounding gongs and clashing cymbals. Then came the 'Lion Dance' by a rather un-lion like Japanese 'lion'.

Needless to say, the MC for the evening had the unenviable task of slotting them all into an already tight schedule and reconciling their conflicting 'demands' for specific time slots. He had the unenviable task of managing a crisis. This business of the organizers having to 'take things as they come' could only have argued a lack of prior planning on their part. Is it not strange that they had not cared to ascertain if our guest delegations from across the seas did have something by way of their culture to show us reciprocally? It did not help matters in the slightest when one of those 'decision makers' even tried to pull rank on the MC and to question his right to be there. His crassness spoke louder than his words.

Again, two other leaders, who had earlier ushered the MC to the front, had just as soon vanished into thin air. Could they have had an inkling of what was in store for him? To mix more metaphors merrily, they had left the MC high and dry. And yet another leader, who had only the day before personally requested him to act as the MC for the evening, was browbeaten into washing his hands of the hapless man when his help would have mattered the most.

These 'contrary signals' could not have come from these 'leading lights' if they had indeed all been 'shining together'. The communication gap between them was there for all to see. That collective responsibility was more honoured in the breach than in the observance of it would be a logical inference anyone would make from seeing this cavalier approach to planning, wouldn't it? A typical example of how not to do things!

Be that as it may, the MC managed without losing his equanimity to take it all in the stride. But only just. Was it not St. Paul who had enjoined all good Christians to be 'fools for Christ'? The MC must have felt reassured at the thought that he, a mere man, was, if only for a brief moment, in saintly company! Incidentally, seeing the plight of the MC, a few well-wishers did discreetly come up to sympathize and encourage, but by then the worst of it had passed. When he finally called it 'Curtains', the sun had been gone over the yardarm a good six hours and the dinner had 'Long gone!' as the Caribbeans would say. The day just ended was a Friday, and in configuration with the 13th, would have been a bad one for those who believed in omens, if you get my drift. Phew! The famished MC was seen at last 'plodding his weary way' to the food counter, long after all the foreign delegates had made short work of their dinner even as they were watching the goings-on in some puzzlement not unmingled with pleasure.

### **Day 3 – Saturday 14th August 2004**

More reports, announcements and area meetings took up all the morning slots. The much-awaited Backwater cruise 'through the heartland of Kerala' turned out to be a damp squib, literally. Well, at least personally speaking. The boat ride was too long in the first place. If there had been local guides to talk our guests through the run-of-the-mill landmarks on either shore and make them come alive, things might have been different. The sudden downpour that took us unawares later, just as we were being 'marshalled' back into the boats from the Mattancherry Palace right after we had polished off our 'meagre' TOF lunch packets there, did not help matters. Those who held back chivalrously, to let our guests scramble back first, looked like wet chicken after their drenching. The delegates were in no further mood for sightseeing or shopping. The

waiting coaches at Mattancherry took the delegates back to their hotels without further ado.

Later in the evening, the Youth delegates from the Youth Convocation joined their elders at the lawns for dinner and dance. The cultural programme that was laid on was as usual entertaining. Of all the numbers presented, the one that everyone enjoyed the most was the mimic who imitated not only animal calls but also mechanical sounds, of which the whirring of the helicopter rotor blades was something special. The much-awaited President's Ball, though, turned out to be more an informal discotheque for the youthful than a formal ball for the ageing delegates with their preference for the slower, more languid waltzes and shuffles and foxtrots. 'And the evening and the morning were the third day'.

#### **Day 4 – Sunday 15th August 2004 Independence Day of India**

The Youth delegates, having earlier concluded their Convocation at the Mermaid Hotel, which had been held concurrently with the IC, joined their elders formally on the final day and presented the morning worship service. That was followed by the submission of the Youth Convocation Report by Kennedy Wabule. In this day and age of the Information Superhighway, electronic networking has made worldwide interaction easier and faster for the youth to aim at improving not only their communication skills but also their leadership potential. Their declared theme was 'Build a Culture of Peace' that went under the acronym BCP. Each youth, symbolically lighting a candle for the less privileged, then formed a part of an exuberant chorus on the stage as they sentimentally bade goodbye to each other and to us.

The guest of honour for the day was none other than Shri. J. Alexander, President of the National Council of YMCA's. At the outset he said that although the 'umbilical cord' that attached Y'sdom to the YMCA had been severed for administrative reasons, the movement still carried the blood and the genes of its 'mother'. He wished us all 'the gift of eternal youth' to keep alive our capacity to dream; to give wings to our dream! The local Onam festival, which was just round the corner, he pointed out, was the symbolic celebration of a dream for a social order where justice would prevail. True, man could land on the Moon but if he were able to 'land on the hearts and minds of his neighbours', in other words, to 'be his brother's keeper', that certainly would be more momentous.

Referring to his thrill and excitement at India's achieving Independence, at a time when he was still very young, he likened his feelings to Wordsworth's sentiments expressed soon after the French Revolution, "*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven!*" Praying for the fulfillment of our hopes was all very well, he added, but that only led to complacency. That must be challenged, he felt. And he cited the example of a Latin American bishop who prayed God that He did not let his flock rest content. It went thus, "Disturb us O Lord! We have fulfilled our dreams, but we have dreamed so little. We have reached our haven safely, but we had merely sailed close to the shore. Disturb us, O Lord, evermore!" He wanted the Y's Men to be disturbed evermore. He ended his talk with the tale of the setting Sun, which was worried that there would be no more light to dispel the looming darkness after he was gone. Guessing at the



quandary of the Sun, the little glowworm reassured the great Star “I will shine”. And in their thousands, the little fire-flies in unison gave their mite to the night.

Early that afternoon, the convention slowly wound down. The Bible was ceremonially closed and the Candle flame was blown out. The International President declared the convention closed. The Bible, the Gavel and the Flags were solemnly carried out the by the processing International Executive Officers even as the farewell song was rendered by the choir.

All is well that ends well. A word of thanks to the organizers is due, and in particular to Y’s Men P. Gopinath and Josey Joseph who had toiled hard for so long to see this venture through to a successful conclusion in spite of the hiccups. Their efforts took the cake and the icing on the cake was the traditional, all-vegetarian Onam Lunch served on banana leaves, no less. Despite the strangeness of the ‘culinary delights’ on offer to the uninitiated, our international friends were seen tucking in with relish after their first tentative pecks had proved that the offerings were not only edible but also delicious, the spiciness notwithstanding. So until the next international meet, it is Goodbye, Au revoir, Auf Weidersehen, Arrivederci, Hasta la vista’, Sayonara, *Veendum Kaanaam*.

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