

President Mahinda Rajapaksa inaugurated on 20 March the two day International Buddhist Conference on the theme 'Cultural interface between India and Sri Lanka based on Buddhist History, Art, Literature and Philosophy' at the Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy, Pallekelle, Kandy.

Scholars and delegates from eight countries participated in the conference organized as a joint commemoration by India and Sri Lanka of the 2600th Sambuddhatva Jayanthi. The organizers yesterday identified the Conference as one which would further nurture the mutual bond of friendship between India and Sri Lanka.

The conference was organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), in association with the External Affairs Ministry, Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs Ministry, the SIBA and Peradeniya University. The conference is an outcome of bilateral talks between President Rajapaksa and Indian leaders during his visit to New Delhi last year.

External Affairs Minister Prof G L Peiris addressing the conference noted that Buddha's teachings were more relevant than ever to address matters during these troubled times. He said that at a time when the world was marking the 2600th anniversary of the attainment of enlightenment, Buddha's teachings could illuminate the world.

Speaking on the dawn of a new chapter in Sri Lanka, the Minister said that the Government's focus now was on the distribution of equal facilities and opportunities to all areas and among all Sri Lankans to supplement achieving equity in development.

Addressing the gathering, Indian High Commissioner Asok K. Kantha emphasized the continuing relevance of the fundamental and universal values and philosophies that Buddha propounded. He underlined that cultural interaction between India and Sri Lanka had been marked by constant cross fertilization in the spheres of art, literature and philosophy and the journey of the Holy Tree from India to Sri Lanka demonstrated this amply.

High Commissioner also highlighted the other activities being undertaken by India to commemorate the Sambuddhtva Jayanthi. These include an exposition of the Kapilvastu Relics in Sri Lanka later this year, setting up of an Indian gallery at the International Buddhist Museum in Kandy and installation of a specially crafted idol of Buddha in Sarnath style from the Gupta period at the entrance of the International Buddhist Museum complex in Sri Dalada Maligawa.

He also announced that Indian Railways was planning to launch a special Buddhist Train Dambadiva Vandana later this year from Chennai catering to Sri Lankan pilgrims, adding that all these initiatives were reflective of India's desire to strengthen her cultural and people-to-people linkages with Sri Lanka, with which India shared deep historical bonds. He identified Buddhism as one common language which binds Asia together.

The two-day conference will be addressed by 18 eminent scholars from Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam.

Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs Ministry Secretary Cashian Herath and Peradeniya University Vice Chancellor S B S Abayakoon also addressed the gathering.

During the occasion the first issue of Academic Journal of SIBA Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies was presented to President Mahinda Rajapaksa by Sri Dalada Maligawa Diyawadana Nilame Nilanga Dela Bandara.