International Summer School for Jain Academic Studies (ISSJS): a unique, innovative and successful program

By Dr. Sulekh C. Jain

What started out as a small effort towards introducing western world to teachings of Jainism in 2005 has now blossomed into a big program titled ‘International Summer School for Jain Academic Studies’ (ISSJS)

In the last week of May, around 20 American scholars were selected for participating in the 7th annual ISSJS in India. The group consisted of professors, graduate and under-graduate students of religion and philosophy from 8 different American universities and was carefully selected by a team of senior level professors in American universities. But the most striking aspect of this group – “None of them was Jain.”

A 31 year old PhD student at Department of Philosophy of Religion and Theology at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California, Brianne Graham Donaldson, who is one of those attending this summer, says, “I am so pleased to be learning about Jainism. I want religion and philosophy departments to teach it. And also experts in other disciplines like Economists, sociologists, animal ethists, political scientists, so many other people who can profit from understanding it.”

Or consider Volkmar Ensslin. He is a Ph.D. researcher & lecturer at the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University in Thailand. Volkmar is already a graduate of Oxford Brookes University in the U.K. There he was inspired by Professor Richard Gombrich (a pre-eminent scholar in Buddhist studies at Oxford University) to pursue his study in Jainism. Prof. Gombrich emphasized Volkmar the importance of studying Jainism if one wants to understand Buddha’s teachings fully.

This group was joined in India by 25 other participants of the same academic background but from different regions of the world - Canada, Europe and other Asian nations. In all, 62 participants are attending the challenging program this year—a great increase. They represent 12 universities from 8 countries. Nineteen (19) scholars have already attended a similar ISSJS program last month in Thailand, where Jainism has vigorous roots.

The class comprised Nineteen (19) full time participants including Mr. Pramod Jain, President Jain Samaj Bangkok. Their breakdown is as follows:

Four Professors: including Coordinator of the program from Mahidol University and director of Sripattam International College, five PhD students; one with an MBA from Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania, USA), one from Oxford University UK and one from Heidelberg University, Germany and two Thai scholars, seven Post Graduates with degrees in Finance, Law etc from Thai universities and State University of New York, USA and three undergraduates and retired professionals. Interestingly three participants were US Nationals and one was a German. Two Indian Sikhs also attended.

Twenty eight interactive lectures as per schedule were delivered by Dr. Shugan Jain from New Delhi, India from April 25- May 7. Prof Priyadarshana Jain, a senior full time faculty member at Dept. of Jainology at Madras University, Chennai took over from May 8 to 12 and delivered eight more lectures. Because of the strong interactive interest by the participants, most of the lectures stretched beyond scheduled time to complete discussions. Participants were also asked to submit their unanswered questions at the end of the day which were taken up the next day before starting the scheduled program. Further, there was one special session just for questions and answers which was very intensive also. Use of PowerPoint presentations for each lecture (these were also provided to each participant for reference), examples from our daily lives to make a concept understandable and drawing comparisons from Buddhism (to some extent) were also made as most of the participants had strong background in Buddhist studies. All participants expressed the highest level of satisfaction for each lecture and wished to have more of these. Prof Sophona Srichampa, coordinator of the program from Mahidol University who attended all the lectures, in her valedictory address showered full satisfaction and honored the lecturer Dr. Shugan Jain by the title – Guru.

Event highlights:

» Mahidol University has made this program a permanent feature and will now offer it as its own university program in association with ISIS.

» Prof. Srichampa (Mahidol University) wishes to come to ISJS for further research on Jainism herself.

» In 2011 there will be two ISSJS in Thailand.

» Mr. Arjan Prassong of Ramkamhaeng University, Thailand has submitted a proposal to his university to start Jain studies department at his university. His Department Head has accepted the proposal and is now awaiting approval of the university management.

» An exhibition of Jain Temples of India was organized at the university for the entire month.