

World on Word Stage by Sudeshna Banerjee

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Publishers and Booksellers Guild president (in blue kurta) Sudhangshu Dey and Sankha Ghosh light the inaugural lamp of the Kolkata Literature Festival on Thursday as (from left) Khaled Al Khamissi, Sujata Sen, Francisco Munoz Soler, Jenny Brown (at the back), Tridib Chatterjee, Richard Davies and Neal Hall look on. Picture by Pabitra Das

Feb. 2: The written word united Scotland, Wales, Egypt, Spain, America and India as writers and publishers came together on stage on Thursday for the inaugural session of the fourth Kolkata Literature Festival (KLF), held at Milan Mela in association with The Telegraph. The festival promises to bring together around 60 authors over 25 sessions. The characteristically quiet but resounding presence was of Sankha Ghosh who presided over the inauguration, representing the best of Bengali literature today on the Book Fair stage, alongside Sudhangshu Dey, the president of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, and Tridib Chatterjee, the guild's honorary general secretary. Welcoming the confluence of authors to the city, festival director Sujata Sen said: "It's a great opportunity for readers to access writers and writing". Describing the KLF as "unique", she said it was the only festival held inside a book fair which happens to be the largest retail book fair in the world. Both Spanish poet Francisco Munoz Soler, who recited a poem, and Egyptian novelist and cultural activist Khaled Al Khamissi said they felt at home in Calcutta. Cairo is like Calcutta in so many ways. "The current global tension on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean resonated on stage through voices of protest.

Al Khamissi said: "We are living in a hard moment these days. From (Donald) Trump to (Theresa) May, we have conservative and dangerous ideas coming to the fore. With culture and books, we have to continue to hope for a new era. That is why I am here."

There was a light moment after American poet Neal Hall recited a powerful poem on the draining effect of British colonialism on India. Coming to speak immediately after him, tongue strictly in cheek, publisher and theatre personality Richard Davies clarified that he was Welsh and not British, before quickly retracting. "I am very much British and a guest of the British Council," he said, as the audience broke into peals of laughter.