

24 July 2024

A statement on a participant being asked to leave ICME-15

The Executive Committee (EC) of the International Commission on Mathematical Instruction (ICMI) is saddened to learn of the incident that Professor Jayasree Subramanian (Jayasree) was asked to leave the 15th International Congress for Mathematical Education (ICME-15) in Sydney on Friday 12 July 2024. Intercultural communication, mutual respect and inclusivity are important values of ICMI, and asking a participant to leave is an extremely serious matter. Most of the ICMI EC members were actually present at ICME-15, but we were not aware of the incident until Jayasree had been asked by the Chair of the Local Organising Committee and the Convenor of ICME-15 (the Organisers) to leave the Congress.

We were told by the Organisers after the incident that they had received reports from at least five delegates that Jayasree's behaviour at the Workshop in the Friday morning of 12 July titled "Reviving Ancient Wisdom: Vedic Mathematics for Modern Learning" (the Workshop) was "unprofessional and inappropriate in an academic conference", that "the presenter was distressed by the comments directed at him in her statement (reported to have lasted up to 7 minutes)", and several of the delegates were also "distressed by what they had witnessed". The Organisers said that they acted in accordance to "the policy of zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour", by that we take the policy to mean the Event Code of Conduct (the Code, <https://icme15.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Arinex-event-code-of-conduct-1.pdf>), which can be found under the section Code of Conduct in the Registration page of ICME-15 ([Registration - ICME-15 \(icme15.org\)](#)). The first bullet point under the Code stipulates that attendees should treat all attendees or others associated with the delivery of the Congress "with respect, dignity, impartiality and courtesy". According to the Code, the Organisers of ICME-15 have the right or power to remove from the venue or Congress "at any time any attendee deemed to be causing, or potentially causing, a disturbance or exhibiting disruptive or inappropriate behaviour", and "all attendees are expected to comply with" the Code. Given this policy of zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour which "had been clearly conveyed to all delegates", the conclusion of the Organisers was that Jayasree "needed to be required to leave" the Congress. The Organisers said that they met with Jayasree and provided her with the information about the reports of her behaviour from several delegates, and reminded her the consequence under the Code. They said Jayasree's response was "I did nothing wrong", and this was said several times.

On Saturday 13 July, the EC received a letter from Jayasree registering her protest against the way she was expelled from the Congress "without any scope for redressal". She said that on Friday 12 July after the Afternoon Tea break, she was told by Mr William Morony (Chair of the Local Organising Committee) that she was "no longer allowed to attend the conference" and that she "must immediately leave the ICC". She asked Mr Morony why she was asked to leave, and she reported Mr Morony as saying that "your behaviour in the session at 9am was inappropriate and there were complaints against you", and that "there would be no discussion about what happened (at the Workshop)". According to Jayasree, she told Mr Morony that she shared her perspective on Vedic Mathematics at the Workshop, she "did not abuse anyone or say anything offensive", and she "did not yell at anyone or use abusive language". She said that she was not "given a chance to present" her side. Subsequently, Jayasree received a mail from Prof. Kim Beswick, Convenor of ICME-15, saying that Jayasree was allowed to attend the ICC for participating in the plenary panel on Saturday 14 July, after the other panellists had pleaded her cause to Prof. Beswick. But Jayasree was allowed to participate in the panel only under some "strict conditions", including not to "speak to anyone about the events or issues". Jayasree was escorted in and out of the conference venue by security guards. Jayasree said she feels "insulted and

humiliated” by the way she was treated by the organisers, being “treated like a dreaded criminal”. Jayasree complained that she was asked to leave the conference without being told exactly what the complaint against her was about (she was not given a copy of the complaint), and she was not being given a chance to be heard or defend herself, and that she was not “given the final decision in writing”. Towards the end of her letter, Jayasree said she wondered if this incident has something to do with her identity as a dark complexioned Asian “whose very voice and body could be perceived as threatening by some”, but concluded by saying that she felt her “identity would not be the reason” why she was “treated with utter disrespect”.

Subsequently, the EC received a number of enquiries and complaints from ICME-15 participants, including the Indian Country Representative Prof. Rakhi Banerjee, and a letter from the Co-Chairs of TSG 5.5, co-signed by past President Prof. Hyman Bass. In the letter by the Co-Chairs of TSG 5.5, they expressed “serious reservations about the decision made by the local program committee and particularly the process that was followed to make the decision”. The letters to the EC included a testimony from Prof. Theodore Chao, who was present in the Workshop. Prof. Chao said Jayasree “spoke loudly” and “with passion”, yet that her comments “seemed respectful and in line with opening up academic discourse”. He did not find Jayasree to be “antagonistic or confrontational”, and he did not feel “there was any risk of violence or threats in the room”. He felt that Jayasree was “being unjustly targeted because she dared to call out injustice and the relationship of the Indian caste system to the content” of the Workshop. He noted that Jayasree “is an Indian woman who speaks with a strong and authoritative voice”, and said that positioning Jayasree “as a threat seems to invoke the same form of misogyny and racism that continually oppress women of color globally”.

In trying to understand what was happening at the Workshop, the ICMI president was able to talk to another participant at the Workshop, an experienced educator whom he considers neutral in his views towards Vedic Mathematics and towards the people concerned. The participant gave a detailed account of what happened at the Workshop. He reported Jayasree as saying that she did not agree with the presenter’s views on Vedic Mathematics, that Vedic Mathematics is false information, it is a lie. When the presenter explained that what he presented was not his work, that the presentation was based on the work of other scholars in the field, it did not stop Jayasree from criticising the presenter. The participant described Jayasree as “aggressive” and “confrontational”, and that she was “wrong” in her behaviour. He also said that he and other participants of the Workshop were also wrong in that they did not stop Jayasree, which allowed the Workshop to degenerate into a confrontation of Jayasree against the Workshop presenter. He also commented that had there been a more experienced Chair of the Workshop, he/she might have controlled the situation better – the Chair was overwhelmed by Jayasree. At the end of the Workshop, the participant talked to the presenter of the Workshop, reassuring him that his presentation was okay and it’s nothing to do with him. The participant’s conclusion was that Jayasree was “wrong” in her behaviour, but he also thought that the behaviour did not warrant expulsion from the Congress. He thought issuing a warning would be enough.

By now, most of us are aware of the petitions going on in the mathematics education community to support the case of Jayasree, quoting the letter from Prof. Theodore Chao mentioned above, claiming that Jayasree was unfairly dismissed because “no due process or adherence to the conference rules of engagement were followed” and that there was “little transparency about how this decision was made”. It accused “ICME” of silencing Jayasree “for pushing back on oppressive views in mathematics education”. They demanded ICME to issue a public apology to Jayasree “for the way she was victimized as a woman of color, and to reinstate her registration and stature within the ICME community”.

Frederick K.S. Leung, ICMI President
<http://www.mathunion.org/icmi>

Taking the information above into consideration, the ICMI EC concluded that we do not have enough knowledge on what exactly happened at the Workshop, and whether the behaviour of Jayasree there constituted a breach of the Code or not. It was the role of the Organisers to make that judgement. But the EC does have concerns over the process and manner in which the incident was handled, as well as the compatibility of the alleged breaching of the Code with its consequence. We understand that, according to the Agreement between ICMI and the Congress Organisers, and in accordance with the Code, the Organisers of ICME-15 had the power to remove any ICME-15 participant from the venue or the Congress if the participant breached the Code. But we would have preferred the Organisers to inform us more on the content of the complaint, what exactly was Jayasree's behaviour that was deemed to be inappropriate and which item(s) in the Code Jayasree was deemed to have violated. Moreover, for the sake of transparency, we would have preferred the Organisers to have informed us of the process they had gone through in arriving at their conclusions.

At the moment, the Organisers have only given us the information mentioned in the 2nd paragraph above. The EC was not informed about when the Organisers met with Jayasree, whether the nature of her alleged breaching of the Code was explicitly pointed out to her, and whether and how Jayasree was given an opportunity to respond and explain herself. The ICMI EC does not know how the Organisers judged the severity of the alleged behaviour of Jayasree in arriving at the decision of removing her from the Congress. Asking a participant to leave the Congress is a very drastic penalty. We do not know whether the Organisers had considered consequences other than removal from the Congress. It would have helped the EC, as well as the wider mathematics education community, to understand better the incident if the Organisers could explain how the alleged breach of the Code warrants such a severe penalty. So far, we have not heard from the Organisers about these issues.

In conclusion, the ICMI EC feels that this is a most unfortunate and unprecedented event (we haven't heard of any previous expulsion from any mathematics education conference) happening in an otherwise very well organised and successful Congress. We feel extremely sorry for what Jayasree went through and is still going through, and for the distress experienced by all those involved. We are a community of mathematics educators working towards the goal of better mathematics education to all. We understand that the perception of what happened at the Workshop is mediated by one's culture. Some behaviour (e.g., confrontation) totally accepted in some cultures may be totally unacceptable in other cultures and people may be distressed by the confrontation. But it is the spirit of ICMI that we strive to understand each other, and appreciate and embrace cultural differences, in an attitude of inclusiveness. It is under this spirit that we hope the Organisers and Jayasree can work together towards reconciliation, and towards that end the EC is prepared to play a role.

From this sad experience, ICMI has already taken some initiative to prevent this kind of unfortunate event from happening again in future ICMEs. The EC is already working on adding some specific elements to the agreement with future ICME organisers to clarify our respective responsibilities. In future, while the ICME Organisers will still be responsible for organising the Congress, the ICMI President (or in his/her absence the Secretary General or Vice-Presidents) must be involved in any decisions arising from concerns about the conduct of attendees, so that ICMI norms and local codes of conducts can be aligned to each other. Of course, the primary goal of ICMI remains to uphold the values of intercultural communication, mutual respect and inclusivity, and to prevent any inappropriate behaviours that impede these values.

Frederick Leung
On behalf of the ICMI EC (2021-2024)