

CULTURE CONFERENCE 2007

The theme for the Conference (held 7th to 13th October) was ‘New Idioms/Concepts for the New Century’. One major debate throughout human history has been about the nature of language, terms and concepts: whether these merely, and objectively, describe the world around us or whether they come loaded with a subjectivity that privileges certain forms of thinking and feeling over the others; whether the language, idiom, or terminology of one section of human society can ever fully comprehend the realities of the other sections; whether the modes of intellectual formulation developed by one part of humanity can ever be—and should be— adapted by other parts in their original form. Over the many years of its engagement in arts and culture Ninasam has become aware, through direct experience, of the acuteness of this problem where the macro-level chasm of mutual incomprehension and dissension between cultures and nations is found replicated at the micro-level where it works with little organisations and institutions as also loosely connected groups of individuals. This politics of knowledge-forms has been given, in the modern global context, a new twist by the neo-colonial forces that seek to subject every other part of the world to what scholars have called the ‘imperialism of categories’, an attempt to dominate not only our physical areas but also our mental spaces, to homogenise not just our material life-patterns but also our epistemological varieties. At the same time, though, there have also been concerted efforts by thinkers of the embattled communities to question the very foundations of these dominant categories of conceptualisation, to expose the remnants of the colonial enterprise that underlie this process, to revalidate the hitherto ignored strengths of non-Western, non-modern modes of enquiry and action, and above all to celebrate the diversity and open-endedness of these latter, alternative forms of being, feeling, thinking, and doing. Ninasam had for a long time thought of exploring this particular area of modern human experience when, by a happy coincidence, it found its sister concern, Akshara Publications, bringing out a Kannada translation of some selected entries from a very important work in this field, ‘The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the 21st Century’ (2005) edited by Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy, published by Penguin/Viking, India. This further spurred Ninasam’s desire of holding an entire conference on examining the essentially problematic nature of some of the concepts/terms/languages that have virtually monopolised our public discourse today and hence the theme for this conference.

As every year, the Culture Conference consisted of two interrelated components: (1) day-time sessions devoted to lectures, discussions and demonstrations, a large majority of which centred on the theme, while the remaining were used for imparting to participants basic skills in art appreciation, and (2) evening sessions devoted to performances of various kinds as part of a week-long cultural festival.

Persons of eminence from a wide range of disciplines and art forms took part in the conference which had Dr. U. R. Ananthamurthy, distinguished writer, teacher, thinker, and a Jnanapith Awardee as the Director. The inaugural session was by Dr. Ashis Nandy, socio-cultural theorist, New Delhi, and Dr. Vinay Lal, Professor of History, University of California at Los Angeles, both editors of the abovementioned book, who, in discussing the historical perspective in which they had come to conceive the book, also provided the

conference with a comprehensive intellectual framework. Over the following days, Dr. Nandy spoke on certain aspects of ideological violence in his lecture titled 'Heroic and Unheroic Killers' while Dr. Lal delivered two lectures, 'The Politics of Nation-state & Civilisation: A Study of India's Progress through the modern times', and 'The City in Modern Indian Cinema: A View through *Deewaar*'. Prof. Samik Bandopadhyaya, literary and media scholar from Calcutta, spoke on 'The Politics of Performance' besides making invaluable contributions to the theatre and film discussion sessions. Dr. Sundar Sarukkai, Dept. of Philosophy of Science, National Institute of Advanced Studies at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, dwelt on 'New Paradigms in Philosophy' while his colleague Dr. Raghavendra Gadagkar, a biologist, spoke on 'Recent Findings about the Evolution of Co-operation and Altruism in Animals and Humans'. Prof. Manu Chakravarthy, literary and cultural theorist from Bangalore discussed 'New Perspectives on Culture & Literature' and Prof. Mukunda Rao, writer and teacher, Bangalore, spoke on 'New Idioms in Religion'. Dr. Rajendra Chenni, writer and teacher, Kuvempu University and Sri Rajashekhar G., activist and thinker, Udupi, both offered their analyses on 'New Idioms in Politics.' Prof. Ki. Ram. Nagaraj, scholar and teacher, Bangalore, gave a talk on 'New Idioms in Kannada Poetry' and Sri Suresh Jayaram, visual arts teacher and practitioner from Bangalore introduced the participants to 'New Idioms in Indian Sculpture.' Sri Vivek Shanbhag, software engineer and writer, and Sri Avinash T., literary critic and teacher, both discussed 'Recent Trends in Kannada short fiction'. Sri Vasudhendra and Smt. Sunanda Kadame, both young writers of promise on the contemporary Kannada scene, took part in a story-reading session, each reading out a story of his/her own, and answering questions from the audience. A similar session devoted to poetry had Sri Manjunatha S., Sri Hanumanthayya, and Smt. Sandhya Devi, all acclaimed poets of the present generation, reading out some poems of their own, and sharing their experiences of the creative process.

There were many interactive sessions as well: The three major theatre productions that were staged as part of the Cultural Festival in the evenings, for instance, were all followed by open-house discussions in the first session the next morning. These were, as has been the case every year, some of the most lively sessions of the entire Conference, with participants from a very wide range of backgrounds all getting an opportunity to voice, without any inhibitions, their responses in particular about the plays as also in general about the condition of the theatre and art movement in Karnataka and India as a whole. These discussions were moderated by a panel of experts, who, in their turn, helped participants learn how to move meaningfully between concrete observations and abstract formulations, especially in the case of a medium like theatre which has its own unique way of negotiating between reality and images. Smt. Sudheshna Banerjee, literary and media scholar from Kolkatta, showed, through a screening of 'Fahrenheit 451', a science fiction film by the renowned French director Francois Truffaut, the various ways in which modern totalitarian regimes tried to suppress natural human expression and turn every individual into something little more than a machine. *Janamanadaata*, a little travelling theatre group, comprised largely of the alumni of the Ninasam Theatre Institute, performed *Rahasyavishwa*, a play based on a story of the same name by one of Kannada's great writers, Poornachandra Tejaswi, and followed it up with a very rich discussion with the participants about such points as the process of adapting from

literature to theatre, the challenges of doing theatre of an extremely modest, unadorned kind, and so on. Some of the artists who performed at the evening Cultural Festival, like 'Aadishakti', the dance troupe from Pondicheri, Pandit Ganapathi Bhat, Hindustani vocalist, the Rudrapatnam Brothers Thyagarajan and Tharanathan also conducted lecture-demonstrations during the day-sessions.

The week-long, evening-time Cultural Festival this year featured the following programmes: October 7th —Ninasam production of *Cherry Topu*, an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Sri Channakeshava; 8th and 9th— premiere shows of the Ninasam Tirugata 2007 productions *Ee Naraka Ee Pulaka*, a composite version of seven one-act plays by P. Lankesh, directed by Sri Raghunandana S., and *Lokottame*, a translation of Aristophanes' Greek classic *Lysistrata*, directed by Sri Channakeshava; 10th—*Atikaaya Neeti*, a taalamaddale performance, and *The Hare & the Tortoise*, experimental play by Aadishakti, Pondicheri; 11th—Hindustani vocal recital by Pandit Ganapathi Bhat Hasanagi; 12th—Carnatic vocal recital by the Rudrapatnam Brothers, Thyagarajan and Tharanathan; 13th—Kathak and Bharatanatyam Performance by Nirupama and Rajendra, Bangalore.

A statistical overview of the people involved in the Course is as follows:

- Total number of Participants: 184
- Male: 117; Female: 67
- Students: 109; Teachers: 18; Professionals: 20; Others: 37
- Resource Persons: 41 (Male: 23; Female: 18)
- Performing Artists: 81 (Male: 62; Female: 19)