

CULTURE CONFERENCE 2008

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Held during every October, the Culture Conference has been one of our major annual events. Three such Conferences, those of 2006, 2007 and 2008, have been held with the Hivos assistance so far. Here is a brief report about the 2008 Conference, which falls under the reporting year.

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‘Swarajya--Ideas & Forms’ was the theme of the Conference, which was held from the 5th to the 11th of October, 2008. While the choice was made keeping in view the historical fact that this year marks the centenary of the publication of Mahatma Gandhi’s seminal work *Hind Swaraj*, there were other, very compelling intellectual and socio-political reasons, too. The nascent twenty-first century has lent us a certain kind of perspective on the twentieth century that helps us to see Gandhi’s discourse in a new light of understanding and appreciation. Dismissed by his detractors as utterly deficient in logic, and politely ignored even by his long-time followers as romantic rhetoric or impractical spiritualism over a major part of the previous century, *Hind Swaraj*, from amongst all of Gandhi’s works, is now being rediscovered and recognised as a foundational text of an alternative vision of human, and humane, life. Alongside being acknowledged as inaugurating a new critique of certain ways of life and thinking that pride on calling themselves the modern civilisation, it has also, over the past several decades, been used as a major source of inspiration by a wide range of human beings battling many ills characteristic of the modern world. Environmentalists, economists, political activists, social workers, cultural enthusiasts, educationists, and even artists have continued to draw strength from it for both their theory and practice. In designing the conference around *Hind Swaraj*, Ninasam wished not only to pay tribute to the work but also to explore the rich dimensions of its relevance to our world and age, particularly through discussing the many possible ideas and forms of ‘swarajya’ i.e., ‘self-rule’.

As every year, the Culture Conference consisted of two interrelated components: (1) day-time sessions, running from 9.30 a.m. to 6 p.m., 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, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., devoted to performances of various kinds as part of a week-long cultural festival.

Ninasam was privileged to have to a scion of the Mahatma’s family itself, Shri Tushar Gandhi, himself an activist of rare conviction and commitment, inaugurated the Conference through a lecture on the place and meaning of his great-grandfather’s life and work in the modern times, with specific reference to *Hind Swaraj*. Recalling his days as a boy growing up in a household suffused with memories of the Mahatma, Tushar Gandhi said that his introduction to his great predecessor had been through anecdotes narrated by his immediate elders. This experience had stood him in good stead all through his life, since it had enabled him to see the Mahatma first and foremost as a living human being genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of every element of nature and only then as a

thinker and leader of world stature. Interpreting or following *Hind Swaraj*, or Gandhism for that matter, in the literal sense, he warned, would be a futile exercise because it would be self-defeating as well as a grave disservice to the essence of Gandhi's philosophy of life; yet, one could not but admit that *Hind Swaraj* had a timeless quality which helped it transcend the specificities of the context of its composition. Gandhi himself seemed to be aware of this strength of his debut work. For a man who repeatedly said that his latest view in his experiments with truth was closer to truth than the prior ones and one who kept constantly revising himself and re-envisioning the world, he refused to change a single line in *Hind Swaraj* when a chance came, thirty years after its first publication, for preparing a revised edition, for he firmly believed that what he had said then stood good even now, three decades on. And a century later, Tushar Gandhi remarked, the truth of Gandhi's criticism of the modern Western industrial civilisation in the tract is making itself more than evident. To quote just three instances, the railway system, the target of an impassioned attack by Gandhi, has, as he had already foreseen, opened an ever-deepening divide between the rural areas and the urban areas, a chasm that has led to disastrous consequences on both sides. Secondly, unheeding of Gandhi's fine distinction between industrialisation and mechanisation, between machines that enhance human capabilities and enrich the quality of human life and machines that make human beings redundant and replace them, the modern world has blindly pursued the path of mechanisation, thereby leading to a general impoverishment of the myriad aspects of life. Thirdly, the kind of lifestyle promoted by the modern West, which ignores one of the cardinal principles of Gandhi's philosophy, that we use the earth for meeting our need and not for satiating our greed, has today brought us all to the brink of an ecological catastrophe. One of the most remarkable features about Gandhi, Tushar Gandhi said in conclusion, is that he cannot be preached; he can only be experienced and understood at the individual level.

There were many more sessions on Gandhian philosophy and its relevance to diverse fields of human activity today. Culture critic Manu Chakravarthy, who teaches English at NMKRV College for Women, Bangalore, gave the participants a comprehensive introduction to the basic structure and discourse of *Hind Swaraj*. Shri Sadanand Menon, freelance journalist and photographer, now teaching at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, in his lecture on the theme 'Swarajya and the World of Arts', discussed the challenges involved in defining and distinguishing the 'sva-' or 'self' as also recovering and liberating it wherever it has been imprisoned through overt or covert means by various power structures. Gandhi's emphasis upon soul over the body does create certain problems, especially for body-bound art pursuits like the performing arts and the visual arts, but then one cannot ignore the other aspect of Gandhi's fight where his ultimate goal was to free the body as well as the spirit from the shackles of all kinds of colonialism, he said. The task of retrieving and re-establishing the self in its true place in the times of globalisation had been made more complex, he argued, by the new phenomenon of cultural imperialism that had replaced older forms of hegemony. Further, in a country like India with a long tradition and with a myriad forms of dance, music, even breathing systems, he observed, the task of locating the 'self' was made even more overwhelming. In his lecture 'Freedom and Self' Dr. Sundar Sarukkai, Professor of Philosophy of Science, National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISc, Bangalore, discussed the significance of Gandhi's thoughts on freedom and self in the background of the views on

the two concepts of several important philosophers of the world. One of Gandhi's greatest insights, Dr. Sarukkai remarked, was that he saw right and duty, self and other as interdependent and inter-defining and not as mutually exclusive as the West and modernity had done. 'Gandhi and Khadi' was the theme of a presentation by Dr. Rahul Ramagundam, Dept. of History, Jamia Milia University, Delhi, who has recently published a full-length book on the same subject. Dr. Ramagundam traced the history of Gandhi's fascination with and promotion of khadi as also the opposition he faced over the matter both from his political opponents and close followers. For Gandhi, khadi was a 'weapon of peace', chiefly because it signified simplicity, self-denial, and sacrifice. Constantly foregrounding it in the freedom struggle, he exhorted his countrymen to see it more as a politico-economic tool than a mere fabric, and to appreciate it more through its appeal to the heart than to the eye. Neither the snide comments of his bitter rivals, some of whom actually hoped to see the day when he would be cremated on a heap of broken, discarded charkhas, nor the logical arguments of his followers, that khadi was a severely limited kind of cloth in terms of texture, colour, and maintenance, could ever shake his trust in khadi. It is one of the sad ironies of history, Dr. Ramagundam remarked, that today khadi enjoys the kind of popularity and visibility that it never had during the Mahatma's own time, but does so through an inversion of its original role. It is now more a fashion statement and less a statement of character; more a conscious choice of uncommon people for special occasions rather than a simple, unpretentious, economical attire of the common people in their daily life.

Shri Subrato Bagchi of Mindtree, Shri Anand Talvayi of e4e, both software entrepreneurs shared a panel discussion on 'Gandhi and the Modern Business World' where they voiced their views on adopting Gandhian principles in the modern economic systems and on making the much-preferred shift today from the paradigm of corporate social responsibility to that of socially responsible corporates. Ashok Hegde of Mindtree, not just a longtime worker in the corporate field but a writer in Kannada too, complemented the above two with his own observations.

Some sessions focussed specifically on the Kannada context and Gandhi. Dr. Chandrashekhar Kambar, writer and folklorist, spoke on his idea of swarajya as contained in the microcosm of Shivapura, the fictional village where he has located most of his literary creations, relating it to his childhood experiences in a rural part of north Karnataka. His ballad 'Mao tse Tung', which he sang during the session, had a special resonance on the occasion since it passionately condemns the great Chinese leader, even as it fervently celebrates him, for establishing a dystopia in place of the utopia he had initially promised his people. What a contrast, the song seemed to say, to Gandhi, who always preferred the mode of compassion to that of coercion. Ki. Ram. Nagaraj, Kannada scholar, extended this theme still further with his lecture on 'Kannada Poetry and Gandhi' where he demonstrated, with textual testimony, the love and veneration with which Kannada poetry has treated Gandhi. In his lecture on 'The Idea of Kannada Swarajya' writer and critic Dr. Rajendra Chenni, of the Dept. of English, Kuvempu University, dwelt on the manner in which the modern Kannada community had striven to evolve an identity of its own, particularly through a long and free debate in the regard among some of the great writers and thinkers of the 20th century. Though sometimes strains of

chauvinism and ultra-subnationalism had reared their ugly head in this process, Chennai said, the dominant spirit of Kannada has always been one of accommodation and tolerance. Another Kannada-specific session on Gandhi moved the focus from poetics to politics, with D. S. Nagabhushana, socialist thinker and J. S. Sadananda, social scientist, offering their interpretations of recent developments in Karnataka in particular and the world in general in the light of Gandhian thought. Crises like the aggravation of the local Naxalite problem and the global economic meltdown, the rise of communalism and terrorism and the tragic plight of the Indian farmers, they said, were symptomatic of a serious malaise affecting the modern world which has for long ignored the calls of the likes of Gandhi. M. K. Raghavendra, film scholar from Bangalore, set a fresh perspective in which to view Kannada cinema through his presentation 'The Politics of Selfhood in Kannada Cinema around the time of the linguistic reorganisation of states'. Through a micro-analysis of three major films of the 1950's he illustrated how even in these films which used plots from mythology and folklore, contemporary questions about the uniqueness of the Kannada identity and the Kannada imaginary were debated and resolved in particular ways via subtle sub-plots and seemingly minor details.

The theatre and film components of the day-time deliberations, too, were oriented towards the main theme of the Conference. Janamanadaata, a little amateur theatre troupe gave a performance of its latest production *Ambedkar*, which again had Gandhi's presence, this time as engaged in a seminal, often irresolvable debate with Ambedkar, the protagonist of the play. The range of the Conference theme was further widened by the production, with crucial points coming up about the idea of Dalit swarajya in the discussion that followed. Of the films screened at the Conference, *Narmada Diary*, an hour-long documentary film by Anand Patwardhan about the Save Narmada Movement led by Medha Patkar raised several disturbing questions about the development model which has taken us in a different direction than the one that Gandhi loved. The centrist, statist powers that drive such projects, the film showed, have no qualms about sacrificing the underprivileged at the altar of progress, a danger against which Gandhi had warned us a long time ago. *Village of the Watermills*, the concluding episode from the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's film *Dreams*, seemed to come right out of the pages of *Hind Swaraj* presenting the debate of Gandhi's work in a fictionalised capsule set in a different land and a different time. Werner Herzog's *Where Green Ants Dream* explored similar territory, depicting the tragic impossibility of the lone survivor of an Australian aborigine group ever being able to communicate his predicament to others, most of all those 'modernisers' who have been directly responsible for his present plight by their destruction of his natural and cultural environment in the name of development and the consequent extinction of his community and language. *Gulabi Talkies* by the Kannada filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli portrayed a society in transition, thanks to the advent of satellite television, and the indomitable spirit of a woman who fights bravely against many odds to find her true self. The Iranian film *Close Up* by Abbas Kiarostami explored, in a meditative mode laden with its own special kind of delight, the labyrinthine ways in which human beings try to find/develop/borrow/steal a 'selfhood' through the story of a penniless, identity-less man impersonating a famous film director, and the sublime way in which the quality of mercy can radically alter the 'self-other' equation, thereby opening up chances of mutual convergence and hopes of redemption for both.

There were, in addition, two exclusively literary sessions. One was a poetry session where Kannada writers Smt. Vaidehi and Prof. H. S. Venkateshamurthy read out some of their poems and shared their thoughts on, and experiences of creating as well as appreciating poetry. The second was a short story session where Kannada writer K. Sathyanarayana read out a story of his, interspersing his reading with a narration of his childhood spent in a rural area and commenting on the manner in which the creative process reconfigures the raw material of life into works of art.

The Conference had many interactive sessions, too. The four 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 wide range of backgrounds all getting an opportunity to voice, without any inhibitions, their responses to the plays in particular and views and questions on the socio-cultural scene in Karnataka and India in general. In keeping with the regular practice, there was a demonstration session, too: Renan, the Kolkatta theatre group who performed a dance-drama at the Cultural Festival, interacted with the participants over a day-session, discussing and demonstrating various experimentations that they had done in their field. All these discussions were moderated by a panel of experts, who, through the manner in which they gave clarifications, offered their own comments and framed their own questions, set before the participants excellent models of intellectual discourse. In particular, the Conference immensely benefited from its Director, Dr. U. R. Ananthamurthy, writer, thinker, teacher, and a Jnanapith awardee, who through his passionate interventions and balanced moderation elevated the deliberations to a still higher level.

Feedback

Every year feedback from participants, resource persons, visiting artists, patrons, and Ninasam workers concerning all aspects of the Conference is collected both formally and informally. The very fact that all of these persons get to stay, eat, watch, listen, walk and talk together in an unsegregated manner for over a week creates a kind of ambience that would be hard to find in rigidly conventional institutions or stiffly academic activities. While at the informal level the Ninasam team makes it a point to solicit the views of all the guests, particularly the participants, at every stage of the Conference, at the formal level a substantial part of the closing session is made available to a representative section of the participants to articulate their experiences and evaluations of the entire programme. They are, also, requested to communicate their views after returning home, through mail, or e-mail. The feedback received from the participants at the valedictory session this year was not very different from those of the previous years. Even as some felt that the deliberations had been of an order a little too high for their comprehension, a majority thought that this was how it had to be with all real intellectual engagements: incomprehensible in parts, of course, (mainly because one had not been initiated into such modes of enquiry) but in a much larger measure, teasing and stimulating and so forcing one to evolve one's own way of being, thinking and acting.

This year, the week-long Cultural Festival featured the following programmes:

1. *Swayamvaraloka*, a Kannada play written and directed by Akshara K.V., and performed by Ninasam Tirugata, a theatre repertory,
2. *Nata Narayani*, a Kannada play based on Shankar Mokashi Punekar's novel of the same title, adapted and directed by Nataraja Honnavalli and performed by Ninasam Tirugata
3. *Lear Lahari*, a production in Kannada of selected portions from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, translated and directed by Akshara K.V., and performed by the Ninasam Core Group and, *Saddu, Vichaarane Nadeyuttide...*, a Kannada production of Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata, Court Chaalu Aahe*, directed by Prakash Belawadi and performed by the Ninasam Core Group
4. A Carnatic vocal recital by Vidwan O. S. Thyagarajan, Chennai
5. A Hindustani vocal recital by Pandit Jayatirtha Mevundi, Dharwad
6. *Crossings*, a dance-drama centred round Shakespeare's character, Lady Macbeth, directed by Vikram Iyengar, presented by Renan, a troupe from Kolkatta
7. *Seetha Kalyana*, a Yakshagana performance depicting the Ramayana episode of Rama winning Seetha's hand in marriage and the incidents leading up to it, presented by a band of accomplished artists from coastal Karnataka

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

- Total number of Participants: 140
- Male: 102; Female: 38
- Students: 99; Teachers: 15; Professionals: 14; Others: 12
- Resource Persons: 39 (Male: 23; Female: 16)
- Performing Artists: 58 (Male: 43; Female: 15)