

NINASAM CULTURE COURSE: October 2012 Report

seven-day Culture Conference, which was held 7-13, October, 2012, and was structured around the theme 'Crossing the Borders', discussed sub-themes like the permeability/impermeability of the boundaries between disciplines, art forms, knowledge-systems and the like, the desirability or otherwise of transgressing/transcending these boundaries, the creative gains made/losses suffered through such activities. In addition, the Conference had general art appreciation sessions, and a festival in the evenings featuring plays, music and dance recitals.

In his key note address, Dr. U R Ananthamurthy, acclaimed writer, thinker and director of the conference since its beginning in 1992, provided a wide perspective on the theme 'Crossing the Borders', using examples from a large variety of fields. Crossing the borders also meant transgression and transcendence, he noted, as evidenced by seekers of both material and spiritual kinds. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a great seer of modern India, for instance, threw away his sacred thread – a traditional symbol of Brahminic superiority - considering it as a barrier to his goal of realising God in all his myriad manifestations. Basavanna, a visionary poet and social revolutionary of 12th century Kannada culture, for his part, transgressed the boundaries laid down by his birth in a Brahmin family in his quest of establishing the transcendental equality of all beings. Modern West witnessed such pioneering explorers in the socio-political domain as George Orwell who intentionally took up various working class jobs renouncing his initial privileged position, with the purpose of experiencing first-hand life of those who were 'down and out'; and Christopher Caudwell, leftist theorist, who took part (and lost his life in) in fighting a war, consumed by a passion to break down the borders between an intellectual's and an activist's life. Speaking of his own experience, Ananthamurthy noted that he could not become a creative writer without first giving up many of his caste identity markers and breaching the caste-imposed barriers. There have also been many collective quests in this direction, Ananthamurthy observed, as demonstrated in independent India's attempts to demolish age-old barriers through legislative means, such as granting Harijans, traditionally regarded as untouchables and social outcasts, constitutional rights to equality and to temple entry. These different instances of crossing the borders not only invite us to re-examine the old borders and identify the new ones but also invigorate us in finding our own ways and means of transgressing/transcending them, Ananthamurthy concluded.

In a lecture about 'Castes and Transgressions', Dr Gopal Guru, social scientist, analysed how for all the progress made by modern India towards eradication of the caste system and its attendant discrimination, the system was surviving, even strengthening itself in some sectors. New forms of caste hierarchy were coming up, he observed, using the very forces of globalisation that were believed to be basically inimical to caste structures. Modernity was actually redrawing and reconfiguring caste distinctions in such an invidious manner that women and dalits, who were presumed to be the beneficiaries of modernity, were in truth, becoming its victims. Responding to Dr. Guru through a lecture of his own on the same topic, philosopher of science and culture critic Dr. Sundar Sarukkai demonstrated the ways in which caste continued to

exercise its power in forms both covert and overt in various sectors ranging from family to higher academic institutions and multi-national corporations. With participants responding to the lectures with great excitement, an extra session was used for a panel discussion where other resource persons too took part, extending the debate beyond expectation.

Shamik Bandopadhyaya, literary scholar from Kolkatta, delivered a lecture on 'Rabindranath Tagore's Transgressions in Literature', showing how Tagore was constantly defying and crossing the borders drawn by colonialism, nationalism, revivalism, the modern, Western version of globalism and the like in both his creative and socio-cultural writings. In a lecture on 'Crossing the Borders and Kannada Poetry', H S Venkateshamurthy, Kannada poet, illustrated through chosen examples how Kannada poetry had through the ages broken barriers placed in its path by various interests. Kannada writers Gopalakrishna Pai and Vasudhendra shared their experiences of crossing the conventional boundaries in their creative writing. Writer Vaidehi and critic M S Ashadevi examined the nature of the borders that usually separate creative writing and autobiography and the modes of dissolving such borders. S Diwakar, writer and critic, dwelt upon the ways in which cartoons handle the question of the borders between fact and representation, taking off from the recent cartoon controversy. Culture critic and media expert Sadanand Menon delved into the issue of how the Internet which had the potential to erase conventional, physical frontiers was being used by certain forces to set up new rigidly defined boundaries. Painter and visual arts critic Ravikumar Kashi showed through a collection of works by various artists the ways in which they were moving both within and out of the frames of established modes of expression. Vidyarthi Chatterjee, film critic and social commentator from Kolkatta, discussed certain developments in the tribal-majority areas of eastern India where the natives of the land were being forced out their traditional geographical locations by authoritarian powers seeking to extend their own boundaries.

Interactive sessions:

- Each play performed at the cultural festival held in the evenings was discussed in open house sessions the following morning. Two other theatre performances, held during the day sessions were also discussed immediately afterwards. All these discussions were controlled and guided by moderators so as to enable a proper balance between the spontaneous responses and questions of the participants and informed, insightful interventions by the resource persons.
- There were also discussions following the screening of three films at the conference.
- There was a discussion with Humdrum, Bangalore, following their public performance 'Kaavyageetha' the previous evening. Humdrum is a band composed of musicians with strong classical training who are experimenting with entirely new idioms of presenting poetry, breaking the walls between classical and modern schools of music.
- As in the past many years, there were two activity-oriented sessions scheduled in the early mornings this year too. These related to theatre and dance, and photography. Delegates who received basic practical training in these two fields by experts also mounted little performances and an exhibition on the last day of the conference.

Three films were shown and discussed at the conference. They were 'Jai Bhim Comrade', a documentary on Dr. B R Ambedkar by Anand Patwardhan, 'Jaan Denge, Zameen Nahin', a documentary on the tribals' struggle for land rights in Jharkhand, and 'Koormavathara', a national award winning feature film by Girish Kasaravalli

Performances at the evening festival and during the day-sessions of the conference:

- Premiere shows of the theatre repertory troupe Ninasam Tirugata's two productions of the season: 'Vigadavikramaraaya', a Kannada play by Samsa, directed by Manju Kodagu, and 'Mokkam Post Bombilvadi', a Kannada translation of a Marathi play by Paresh Mokashi, directed by Omkar
- Ninasam production of 'Uttararamacharithe', a Kannada translation of the classic Sanskrit play by Bhasa, directed by Venkataramana Aithala
- 'Vanity Bag', a theatrical presentation of selected poems by Vaidehi, a Kannada writer, directed by Mangala N.
- A Carnatic classical vocal recital by the Bangalore Brothers, Bangalore
- A performance of Krishnaparijata, a folk play, by Mallikarjuna Mudkavi and party
- 'Kaavyageetha', a musical rendering of Kannada poems, by the Humdrum band of Bangalore
- An Odissi classical dance recital by Madhulitha Mahapatra and group, Bangalore
- 'Babugiri', a Ninasam amateur troupe theatre production based on two Tagore stories, directed by Akshara K V
- 'Aadaab, Manto Saaheb', a theatre production based on stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, performed by Museum Theatre, Bangalore
- 'Bayalu Baduku', a theatre production dealing with transgenders, performed by Janamanadaata, Heggodu
- 'Giribaale', a solo theatre performance based on the biography of Saraswathi Bai Rajawade, an important source of inspiration for the feminist movement in Karnataka