

A BRIEF REPORT OF
THE CULTURE COURSE
CONDUCTED BY NINASAM
DURING OCTOBER 2013

This year's edition of the Culture Conference, held over seven days (13-19, October, 2013), was designed around the theme 'Living with Traditions'. Human beings have lived with and in traditions ever since they turned self-aware beings. They have not only evolved traditions but have also evolved with them themselves. While traditions have provided us with a sense of continuity and belonging, a mental and metaphysical sustenance - in short a cosmic context to our existence and a meaning to our life, they have also troubled us many times with their prescriptive, restrictive and sometimes even life-denying features. Over time, some of them have been questioned, challenged, adapted, modified and some even destroyed or replaced by new traditions. Traditions encompass the entire range of human life and activity – the mundane and the divine, the utilitarian and the artistic, the religious and the scientific. They enjoy a special significance and exert a special influence, especially in societies like India, where they also give rise to a specific kind of problematic in our times. Here, any reference to 'traditions' generates sharply polarised debates, where concepts and descriptions like revivalism, fundamentalism, orthodoxy, regressive on the one hand and progressive, liberal, democratic, transformative on the other, are brought into play immediately. Such debates have created more heat than light. Ninasam's attempt at the Culture Conference was to move beyond such fruitless, uni-dimensional, conflictual engagements and to explore diverse and creative ways of renegotiating with traditions, of developing synergic modes of co-existing with them. The focus of all the lectures/discussions at the conference was on this theme/sub-themes. In addition, the conference had general art appreciation sessions, and a festival in the evenings featuring plays, music and dance recitals.

The key note address was by U R Ananthamurthy, celebrated writer and thinker, and director of the conference since its beginning in 1992. Drawing from both his personal experience as a writer-thinker and the collective Indian experience with traditions, he pointed to personalities, both past and recent, who had encountered traditions without being over-deferential or dismissive. These persons, acting as 'critical insiders', had strengthened the positive aspects of their traditions even as they had challenged and eradicated their negative elements. Through their re-visioning of tradition, they had not only reclaimed it from vested interests but also revitalised it and made it relevant to contemporary times. These were 'conservatives', the best of 'traditionalists', who were far different from 'reactionaries', bigoted, self-styled defenders of tradition. The problem of making a choice or finding a balance between tradition and modernity was a deeply exercising one, Ananthamurthy admitted. M K Gandhi, for instance, was a traditionalist, yet he made full use of the liberating potential of modernity. And when it came to choosing his heir apparent, he chose none of his traditionalist followers, but Jawahar Lal Nehru, a staunch modernist. Gandhi also made highly nuanced choices between the old and the new, as seen in his rejection of the traditional sacred thread but retention of the sacred tuft. The former, a traditional symbol of caste superiority would have alienated him from a majority of his compatriots, while the latter, a

common feature amongst the same majority, helped them identify themselves with him. Gandhi was traditional in the best sense of the term in another way, too. He believed that all religions (and by implication all traditions) were imperfect and therefore we needed all of them. It was this long line of ‘critical insiders’ like Gandhi, Ananthamurthy asserted, that had carried out the most creative disputes and dialogues with traditions, not just keeping the traditions alive but also healthy and responsive to changing times and ethos. Besides, most traditions behaved very much like human bodies do, in renewing themselves every minute, generating agents of resistance from within to threats from both within and without. Only a proper recognition of the realities like the ones described above would benefit us in our engagement with traditions, he concluded.

In other lectures, various scholars, artists and activists discussed different aspects of the main theme. HS Venkatesha Murthy, Kannada poet and scholar, spoke about ‘Ramayana Darshanam’, a 20th century reworking by the Kannada writer Kuvempu of the great epic, illustrating how Kuvempu had worked modern concerns into the traditional text. In a lecture about ‘Folk Oral Poetry Traditions’, Krishnamurthy Hanur, novelist and folklorist, threw light on the salient features of folk poetry forms, demonstrating the manner in which traditional performing arts responded to the challenges of their times. Giraddi Govindaraja, critic and writer, in his session on ‘Masti Stories and the Traditional Narrative Forms’, spoke about the way in which a modern Kannada writer like Masti had made creative use of native narrative devices. Focussing attention entirely on one particular stanza from ‘Pampabharatha’, an acclaimed medieval Kannada epic based on the Mahabharatha, Padekallu Vishnubhatta, classical scholar, offered an overview of how that one stanza had endlessly excited the imagination of critics down the generations, and how this story could be seen as encapsulating an entire tradition of Kannada literary criticism. Laxmisha Tolpadi, scholar and philosopher, in his session on ‘Epics and Tradition’, dwelt at length upon the mutually influential manner in which epic consciousness and tradition interacted with each other. In his presentation entitled ‘The Vernacular Traditions of India’, Ganesh Devy, critic and activist, provided a perspective on the situation of the little language-traditions of India which were facing severe threats to their existence by the forces of globalisation and homogenisation. Using various film excerpts in their session on ‘Satyajit Ray and the Indian Cinema Tradition’, Shamik Bandopadhyaya and Sudheshna Banerji, scholars and cultural critics, pointed to Ray’s original, individuated use of several classical narrative, visual, and musical traditions in his films. Ravikumar Kashi, artist and art critic, brought to light the ways in which modern day Indian artists carried indirect yet indelible influences of their local traditions.

There were three panel sessions at the conference this year. In a panel on ‘Traditions and the Modern World’, corporate and IT icon Mohandas Pai, political scientist Gopal Guru, and cultural critic Sundar Sarukkai shared observations and concerns about the desirable and the undesirable modes adopted by different sections of modern society in negotiating with traditions. In the second panel on ‘The Ramayana Traditions’, Ramayana scholars Paula Richman, Arshia Sattar, and Samhitha Arney presented three different dimensions of the topic under discussion – of making sense of the rich, bewilderingly complex tradition of Ramayana variants from around the world, of

interpreting an ancient text for one's own self as well as the modern world, and of retelling the traditional story in a way that would engage the young, modern-day readers without affecting the vision of the original. The third panel was on 'Traditional Economies and the Contemporary World', where thinker-activists Uzrama and Rajni Bakshi, and writer and management teacher MS Sriram unravelled at three different levels the utter incapacity as well as the unwillingness of modern economic systems and theories in understanding traditional economies. With specific references to the traditional weaving industries and the modern co-operative movements of India, they demonstrated how the mega industrial and developmental model pursued by the British colonial system in the first case and the centralised and bureaucratised administrative model imposed by the independent Indian government in the second case had systematically destroyed modes of production and wealth distribution which had great democratising potential. The concluding address was by Shiv Viswanathan, renowned social scientist. Recalling his years of growing up in a family steeped in two particular traditions – of modern science and of south Indian classical music – Viswanathan described how these two traditions were felt to be as much a burden as a boon. Treating his extended family –which includes two Nobel Physics, besides a large number of scientists, intellectuals, and administrators – as a miniature of modern India, he illustrated how the family tradition of the pursuit of pure science gradually changed to a pursuit of applied science and technocracy as a result of historical processes that began in the India of the 1960s. The idealism of the initial days of independence was replaced by pragmatism and careerism by the 1980s. Viswanathan also offered insights into the way the women-members of his family, subjugated by the tradition of patriarchy on one level, proved to be the 'silent, yet strong revolutionaries' on another level. The 'transformation of tradition' wrought by these women, both at the family and the society level, Viswanathan observed, was far deeper and more enduring than the changes brought about by their male counterparts. Cases such as these, he argued, compel us to be more sensitive to the complex ways in which people have been living in and with traditions.

Interactive sessions:

- All the four plays performed at the cultural festival held in the evenings were discussed in open house sessions the following morning. Three other theatre performances (of which one was a traditional folk performance, a second an experimental piece dramatising parts of a highly renowned Indian sacred text, and a third an adaptation of a modern Kannada short story, done in the intimate style) held during the day sessions were also followed by discussions immediately afterwards. All these discussions were moderated by specialists so that a fine balance could be achieved between the responses and questions of the participants and the insightful observations of the experts.
- Ramakrishnan Murthy, south Indian classical vocalist who performed at the evening festival also gave a lecture-demonstration at the conference.
- Two activity-oriented sessions, related to (i) theatre and dance, and (ii) photography were conducted in the early mornings at this year's conference, too. Delegates who received basic skills training in these two fields by experts also showcased their learning on the last day of the conference.
- A traditional style poetry recital, called 'gamakavachana' in the local language, of a modern reworking in Kannada of the famous Indian epic 'The Ramayana', gave

the participants a taste of how texts were transferred down generations and preserved over centuries in the oral tradition.

- Another performance in yet another traditional mode, a ‘taalamaddale’ session based on the famous ‘Karnabhedana’ episode from the other great Indian epic, the Mahabharata, demonstrated to the participants how certain traditional performing arts had the power of integrating the most modern kind of elements within an essentially classical framework. And how rhetoric and logic, politics and aesthetics, the material and the metaphysical, the personal and the universal, could all be fused into a seamless whole in an effortless manner.

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

- Premiere shows of the theatre repertory Ninasam Tirugata’s two productions of the season: ‘Seethaswayamvara’, a Kannada play by M.L. Srikanthesha Gowda, directed by Manjunath Badiger, and ‘Gandhi Versus Gandhi’, a Marathi play translated by D S Chowgule, directed by Ganesh M.,
- Ninasam production of ‘Jugari Cross’, a stage adaptation of a Kannada novel by Poornachandra Tejaswi, directed by Nataraja Honnavalli,
- ‘Stories for a Song’, a theatre production by Arpana, Mumbai, directed by Sunil Shanbhag,
- A Carnatic classical vocal recital by Ramakrishnan Murthy, Chennai,
- A Hindustani classical vocal recital by Shounak Abhisheki, Mumbai,
- An Odissi classical dance recital by Adyasha Ensemble, Bangalore
- ‘Aangla Nowka Captain’, a Ninasam amateur troupe theatre production based on a story by Masti, directed by Akshara K V
- ‘Purushasooktha’, a theatre performance based on a sacred traditional Indian text about the genesis of the world, performed by Abhjnana, Bangalore, and conceived and directed by Dr. J. Srinivasa Murthy.