

# **NINASAM CULTURE COURSE 2016: A REPORT**

The Culture Course has been one of the most important annual events of Ninasam for a quarter of a century now. Widely acknowledged as a rare blend of the artistic and the academic, of poetics and politics, it has been drawing groups of participants from the most varied kinds of background imaginable. Its insistence on taking in diverse types of people, who may differ in terms of age, education, exposure, and expertise but are united in a common desire to seek and share aesthetic and intellectual experience, has brought it recognition as a most unusual and model socio-cultural activity. The 2016 edition of the Culture Course, held at Heggodu from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> of October, 2016, marked a continuation of this history.

## **THEME**

The theme of the Course this year was “Pluralism/Plurality”.

One of the fundamental paradoxes of our life is that the more we try to comprehend and control the reality around us through certain means, very often the means themselves become the biggest obstacles to the realization of our ends, particularly when we forget or ignore that a multiplicity of means is the best approach in this regard or when some specific means begin to assume the character of the sole means. While we, especially in India, have been conducting our lives with a sense of plurality and a sensibility of pluralism at the level of practice over countless generations, plurality and pluralism, in their conceptual form, have come into greater prominence in recent centuries, mainly owing to historical processes and pressures. In a world where, to cite just one example, both conservatism and modernity are acting equally dogmatically, albeit in opposite ways, and are severely constricting our range of choices, particularly as regards forms of feeling, knowing, sharing, remembering and so on, it is becoming increasingly imperative that we recognize and reaffirm the value of diversity in the many spheres of our life. Forces of conservatism, on the one hand, have been laying a monopolistic claim over the past, erasing its tensions and fissures and reducing it to an age either of glory or humiliation. Forces of modernity, on the other have been charting a single route to the future, decrying all other paths as inferior or impractical. Such reductionist modes allow no space for negotiation or accommodation, for exploration of middle ways or multiple worldviews. Extreme discourses like these impoverish both our material and experiential world. They promise utopias, but very often lead only towards dystopias.

It is precisely to meet such threats that we today need to strengthen our pluralist practices and consolidate the concepts underlying them. An enhanced awareness of the vital significance of ‘plurality/pluralism’ of interests, convictions, lifestyles and worldviews would give us the courage to admit our limitations, ignorance, and doubts as also help us conduct the ‘self-other’ dialogue with greater empathy and open-mindedness. It would free us from the tyranny of rigid, exclusivist ideas, absolutist ideologies and enable the creation of a polyphony of

heterogeneous concerns, life-visions and cosmologies. A ‘multi-verse’ is always far more exciting and enduring than any kind of ‘uni-verse’ could ever hope or promise to be. And a multi-verse is possible only when multiple, even mutually contending, alternative forms of experience and expression are not just tolerated but actually honoured and treasured.

The Culture Course attempted to explore and understand the many kinds of realities and possibilities that go together to constitute the irreducible, rich complexity of our ‘multi-verse’, with special focus on intellectual and aesthetic traditions.

## **SESSIONS AT THE COURSE**

The Course had five types of sessions. There were lectures by eminent resource persons followed by discussions with them. There were lecture-demonstrations by accomplished artists and performers. There were open house-type discussions about the theatre shows presented at the cultural festival held in the evenings. These three kinds of sessions were scheduled in the 9.30 am – 6 pm time slot. The Course was accompanied by a cultural festival held 7-10 pm every evening. This festival featured theatre performances by several groups. Besides these formal sessions, informal early morning sessions gave the participants a chance to enrich their walk or coffee or breakfast with closer personal interaction with the resource persons.

## **LECTURES**

The inaugural address was delivered by Javed Akhtar, celebrated writer in Hindi and Urdu and socio-political activist. Describing in detail the diversity and plurality that has characterized Indian civilization over long centuries, Akhtar noted that this richness was now facing threats from the forces of fundamentalism and homogenization. On the one hand, fundamentalists were trying to cut us off from our cultural roots by proposing a rigid and imagined cultural identity while on the other homogenizers were attempting to bulldoze every form of uniqueness and difference, he observed. Although the idea of India as one nation was a welcome one in some respects, it should not be allowed to endanger the idea of India as a civilization, as a cluster of many co-existent cultures, Akhtar warned. Drawing deeply from his own experience of living and growing up Lucknow, Akhtar showed how the city used to embody the best of composite culture where Hindus and Muslims, for all their differences and distinctions, complemented each other very well. Arguing that one had to choose plurality over ‘purity’, he asserted that plurality is not only desirable but also natural and inevitable since it allows, even honours, diverse ways of life and thought. ‘Purity’, on the other hand is not only unreal, it also creates false and unnatural hierarchies. This in turn leads to segregation and persecution of selected communities all over the world. Such threats can be met successfully only by liberal humanism and positive secularism, Akhtar noted, as these modes allow for an infinite variety of human experience besides treating all of these varieties as equally valid.

There were two separate lectures by Dr. Claude Alvares, renowned philosopher of science and environmental activist. In “Plurality/Pluralism and Environment”, he provided valuable insights into the way in which reductionist perceptions about environment were

impoverishing both our natural surroundings and our ethical and intellectual world. Recounting numerous instances where native, traditional ways have proved to be far more faithful to ‘eco-logic’ and therefore far more truthful than the new-fangled ‘scientific’ ways, Alvares called for a more honest and open reevaluation of the pluralist modes of perception and practice, which alone, he affirmed, could break the hegemonic hold of the modern Western systems, and offer sustainable models of life and development.

In “Plurality/Pluralism and Education”, Alvares dwelt upon one of his favourite themes - decolonizing history – laying bare the various strands that were put together during the colonial times to weave a false narrative of the liberation and ennoblement of the ‘savage natives’ by the ‘enlightened West’. He analysed the way in which colonial experience had clouded our eyes to the real achievements of our ancestors in various fields like agriculture, medicine, industry. Through ample examples, he demonstrated how modern formal education had actually moved man away from learning and knowledge. Stressing the need to ‘deschool’ ourselves, he discussed in detail the many alternative, non-formal modes of education he had successfully developed and employed in his own immediate environs.

Speaking on ‘Democracy & Plurality/Pluralism’, Dr. Ganesh Devy, literary scholar and social activist, traced the historical trajectories of the ideas of plurality and diversity, drawing attention to the fact that in the West, from the Greek times to the modern times, plurality was favoured over diversity at critical junctures. In India, however, there has always been an attempt to find a meaningful balance between the two, as ‘the sameness of everything’ has been one of the foundational principles of the Indian civilization. This was best illustrated in recent history by the Indian Independence Movement which was distinguished not by resistance but by a reformist zeal that helped India synthesize the best of its own traditions – like the reformist movements initiated long ago by its saint-poets – with the best of the modern West. There was, however, one growing danger across the whole world today, Devy warned, with even democracies turning into covert dictatorships, especially through their following one single, inflexible form of economic agenda. The only way to counter such developments, Devy said, was to strengthen democracy more through diversity than plurality.

In his lecture on ‘Plurality/Pluralism in Medical Systems’, Dr. Darshan Shankar discussed the problems created by the lack of proper official recognition of native, non-modern healthcare traditions and by the discriminatory attitude shown against them by the well-entrenched allopathic system. While governmental statistics themselves show that in India a great majority of the population still go to the practitioners of local medical traditions, the government, however, allocates about 97% of its annual national health budget to the allopathy-centred sector and a measly 3% to the native systems sector, without caring to re-examine its priorities or the strengths of the respective systems. Such biases and imbalances need to be corrected, said Dr. Shankar, adding that one effective way of doing this is to recover, research, document, and resurrect the various native systems and establish them not as alternatives but as legitimate practices on their own. Only such a recognition and inclusion of diversity in the modern medical field can make it a holistic system, he concluded.

There were four panel discussions, and they were:

- ‘Plurality/Pluralism in Pre-modern Kannada Context’ by S S Shettar, historian and Krishnamurthy Hanooru, writer and folklorist;
- ‘Plurality/Pluralism in Contemporary Kannada Socio-Political Scene’ by Chandan Gowda, social scientist and D S Nagabhushana, writer and activist;
- ‘Plurality/Pluralism in Indian Classical Music’ by K S Vaishali, literary scholar and Hindustani vocalist, Shylaja Venugopal, literary scholar and musicologist, and Deepa Ganesh, journalist and musicologist;
- ‘Plurality/Pluralism & Religions’ by Meera Baindoor, philosopher, Father Jose Nandikkara, priest and Abdus Salaam Puttige, mediaperson.

In a ‘Meet the Writer’ session, K V Tirumalesh, poet and literary scholar was interviewed by S R Vijayashankara, literary critic. In the ‘Concluding Remarks’ session, Sundar Sarukkai, philosopher, offered an overview of the proceedings of the Course, placing the entire activity in a firm perspective. Special Invitees like Prakash Belawadi, theatre and media personality, S Divakar, Kannada writer, Nataraja Honnavalli, theatre director, contributed valuable insights to the proceedings.

## **PERFORMANCES, RECITALS, & SCREENINGS**

The lectures were complemented by readings/performances/screenings where again pluralism was at the centre. The Kannada Poetry Reading session, moderated by Dr. Giraddi Govindaraju, and the Kannada Short Story Reading session, moderated by Dr. Krishnamurthy Hanuru, presented selections from a wide spectrum of writers, genres, styles and voices from different periods of the long history of Kannada poetry and prose, with a group of accomplished performers reading/reciting the selections. *Blank Page*, a performance by Tamasha Theatre, Mumbai, directed by Sunil Shanbhag, offered the participants at the Course entirely fresh and vigorous ways of experiencing poetry, through a presentation of simple but intense dramatized readings/enactments of an array of poems from several languages of India. *Odiri*, a theatre performance by Janamanadaata, based on Boluvar Mohammad Kunhi’s Kannada work, depicting the life of Prophet Mohammad, exemplified the best kind of creative engagements with potentially controversial themes, recreating the great messiah’s life and achievements with all respect to the beliefs and sentiments of the faithful as well as to the pluralistic possibilities of theatre art. *Kaavyakannadi*, a video series based on various Kannada poems and all made by young directors, put on display the rich yield that can be had when poetry meets the camera. These videos presented the multiple ways in which poetry can be approached – as interpretation, visualization, creative response, critique, and so on.

## **EVENING CULTURAL FESTIVAL**

The Cultural Festival, held in the evenings during the Course, is on the one hand an integral part of the Course for the registered participants and on the other, also open to the general public. This year’s festival featured the following programmes:

*Kalandugeya Kathe*, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory performance, based on three Kannada plays by H S Shivaprakash, in turn based on the famous Tamil epic work *Shilappadikaram*, directed by Venkataramana Aithala; *Itta Dari Atta Puli*, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory production based on the contemporary turmoils in the North-east, written and directed by Haisnam Tomba; *Malathi Madhava*, a Ninasam production based on the classical Sanskrit play by Bhavabhuthi, directed by K V Akshara; *Akshayambara*, a production by Dramanon troupe, directed by Sharanya Ramaprakash; *Shakespeare Manege Banda*, a performance based on the life of Shakespeare by the Theatre Tatkal troupe, written by Dr. Nataraja Huliyaaru and directed by Nataraja Honnavalli; *Bhaktibahuttva*, a music recital highlighting the pluralism of forms and expression in the Indian Bhakti tradition.

## RESOURCE PERSONS

As every year, this year too, the resource persons were drawn from diverse fields. They included writers, artists, performers, thinkers, teachers, activists and the like.

## PARTICIPANTS VARIETY

The participants group at the Course every year presents a most impressive picture, particularly in terms of the diversity of their backgrounds. The group this year was no exception. The following statistical figures illustrate this point:

	Male	Female	Total
General (teachers, professionals, activists, self-employed, homemakers etc)	67	30	97
Students from outside	26	26	52
Ninasam Theatre Institute students	15	4	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>168</b>

## FEEDBACK

Ninasam made it a point to gather responses from every group connected with the Course, like resource persons, special invitees, observers, and especially participants, both formally and informally, both during and immediately following the programme, and both orally and in writing. A majority of these found the Course an enriching and rewarding experience. The highly informal yet seriously academic ambience of the Course, in particular, received special praise, as did the rare blend of art performances and intellectual explorations. The common view was that Ninasam should continue with the basic structure, nature, and objective of the Course in the coming years, too.

## SUPPORT

The Culture Course 2016 was financially supported by: Rohini Nilekani, Bangalore; Prajavani, Bangalore; Karnataka Bank, Mangalore; TMA Pai Chair for Indian Literature, Manipal University, Manipal apart from the support-in-kind received from several friends and well wishers.