

Ninasam Samskriti Shibira 2004

Part 1: Presentations:

Dr. Shiv Visvanathan, eminent social scientist, set the framework for the deliberations in his three lectures, which included the inaugural address. Recounting in broad terms the history of Activism in modern India, bringing in autobiographical elements into his presentation, since he himself happened to be member/founder of many activist groups, he traced the paradigm shifts that had taken place in the field over the last five decades. Activism began as a search for alternatives vis-à-vis establishments of various kinds, he said, but it has now become either enervated or degenerated, owing to many factors. The innocence and the idealism of the initial period were not only disarming but truly democratizing too, evidently because this phase was flushed with the spirit carried over from the times of the Nationalist movement, where Gandhi was the most inspiring figure. Later, however, not only did the momentum begin to sag, but activists, once staunch dissenters, came to allow themselves to be co-opted by the system in their respective areas. Today, under the insidious influence of globalisation, besides losing much of its energy Activism also seems to have lost its original meaning as well, getting inverted into a wide variety of consumerisms, where the supermarket is seen as the central arena of 'action', and the acquisitive shopper is regarded as an admirably tireless 'activist'. Societies too have suffered a similar degradation, with the synthetic/syncretic socio-cultural groupings of the old, which organized the bewilderingly disparate elements of life into a connected and meaningful whole transforming themselves into multiplex systems that reduce everything to a commodity, a situation where nothing is seen as intrinsically more or less valuable than some other thing. At the same time, though, one should not ignore the contributions of Activism. It, for instance, laid bare the hidden hegemonic designs of such modern powers as the nation-state, and modern projects as development, science and technology. It made us deeply aware of the value of diversity not only in the eco-system but also in fighting the forces of standardisation. Mounting a strong critique of the ruthlessness behind modern economics, it sought to infuse it with some degree of aesthetics in order to make it less heartless. Though Activism in its various incarnations is being increasingly appropriated by the forces of globalisation there were, Viswanathan pointed out, still some means available through which it could hope to resurrect itself. One was to reclaim its language and poetics from the clutches of the dominant powers, and then to reinvent them and reinvigorate them all over again. Only such constant re-imagining of the self would help Activism survive; only then would it be able to contribute to the realization of a truly pluralistic, democratic world order.

Bhaskar Chandavarkar, one of India's foremost musicologists, in his two lectures, dwelt at length on the element of Activism latent in music as a whole. Even though in all cultures and times music has been recognized as possessing a profound affective power, there has not been a commensurate acknowledgement, he pointed out, of the fact that that power could be, and has indeed been, used by activists in the sphere of music. This might be due to the very widely held misconception that while vocal music, containing a strong verbal part as it does, can articulate conscious thoughts, instrumental music -- or, for that matter, even 'pure' vocal music that uses no words but only sounds -- cannot replicate that effect, since it employs only abstract elements. Such a belief is, however, disproved by the simple observation that throughout the history of war, instrumental music has been used to generate altered mental states so that soldiers go into battle all fired up. The same instruments, he explained with illustrations, have also been used as tools of subversion, where the subalterns have evolved an esoteric musical code intelligible only

within their own groups, an idiom that protests against, or pokes fun at the master classes. And when sounds and words combine in music, the blend can be a potent one, as shown by our saint-poets, who while ostensibly singing about spiritual values also launched critiques of contemporary social ills. This activist potential of music was best recognised in a comment by Vinoba Bhave when he lamented that in comparison with the older social reformist movements his Bhoodan Movement had not exactly been a success precisely because it lacked one ally which the former had -- music. From mythological times through the historical period of the Sufis down to the modern period, music, for all its supposed innocence and sweetness, has drawn not only wary but even repressive responses from establishments, as evidenced in the fact that Sergei Eisenstein's film classic 'Battleship Potemkin', suffused with Marxist-Leninist ideology, and banned, for a certain period, in most capitalist regimes owing to fears that it would stir the working classes to rebellion, was allowed to be screened in Scandinavia, but with Prokofiev's rousing musical score completely silenced. Today, however, Chandavarkar said, the activist power of music seems to be facing yet another challenge, in the form of control wielded by multinational companies, which decide what music people get to hear and what not. Still, the sound of music has such an intrinsic strength that, although muted for a time, it can make its presence felt in a resounding manner. And this is something to be nurtured carefully, and patiently.

'Lies for Truth' was the theme of two lectures by Shamik Bandopadhyaya, one of India's most versatile scholars, whose interests span literature, film, theatre, and mass media. Offering an overview of the way in which modern mass media, which originally held a promise of strengthening activists' striving towards democratic systems, had been progressively colonised by a collusive group of corporate industry and the nation-state, he laid bare the various steps through which the welfare state came to betray its own citizens. Keener on self-preservation than on bringing about equality, the statist forces, funded by corporations and backed by the military, exploited the unprecedented demographic reach of the media to manufacture consent; or even dissent that would give them a benevolent image in the eyes of the unsuspecting subjects. Fascism which thrived, and reached its peak, by clever manipulation of the media during the times of Hitler, Mussolini, and Nero, continues to prosper even today, in less visible, and therefore more virulent forms. Some prime examples in this regard have been the US-slanted coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the questionable film version of the first Moon-landing by American astronauts produced and projected worldwide by the US Govt.-Nasa-Western media nexus. Growing awareness of, and horror against such imperialism in the field of information and knowledge is today resulting in several small sections organizing themselves into activist groups, raising hopes that the media-demon could at least be tamed, if not slain. Such groups include not just social workers but also scientists who, for instance, have launched websites offering alternative information networks that counter the official governmental, bureaucratic, and corporate versions of events of life, in a committed attempt to reclaim reality for the laymen.

Sadanand Menon, eminent art critic, discussed the ways in which art could realize its activist potential, and the variegated forms that it could adopt in the activity, since the problems that activism seeks to fight are more than one, and each problem occurs in more than one form. Recounting his college days, which were also the days of Emergency, he recalled how he and his friends protesting against the totalitarian imposition used to employ a wide array of battle tactics, ranging from signature campaigns to satirical street-plays, from dramatic demonstrations in public places that would begin and end in the blink of an eye to cultural jamming where

government hoardings grandiose slogans would be smeared at night by volunteers and the meanings of their proclamations totally subverted. Forced to work underground, and on meagre funds, the protestors rose to the challenge, displaying remarkable inventiveness in achieving maximum results with minimum resources. Keeping aside, for the time being, the luxury of artistic experimentation that demanded expensive materials, they concentrated on the socio-political obligations of art, improvising with the most basic and unlikely of materials and coming out with most unforeseen, yet most effective works. In the process, they came to gain some valuable insights into the interrelationships between art, technology, economics, politics, and life. Today, though, one is not so confident whether such old strategies would bring success against the enemy who has taken on dimensions hitherto unimagined. But then there is always hope in the fact that the human spirit has an uncanny knack of evolving ways and means of resisting even the most formidable of foes.

Sudheshna Banerji, a young culture studies scholar from Kolkata, in her lecture-demonstration titled 'Satiric Activism in Kolkata: 1850s-1930s', provided insights into the way in which the subaltern classes in and around the first capital of the British Indian Empire responded to the new regime, which besides dispossessing them of their traditional means of livelihood also displaced them from their lower, yet integrated niche in the older hierarchic social structure. These sections targeted two groups simultaneously: one, the alien oppressors and two, the alienated natives. Through caricatures in the newly sprung little journals, and through reworking of the older, popular folk songs, they lampooned the Bengali upper and middle classes that were either aping or colluding with the colonisers. Some would combine both forms, as for instance, in the case of a writer-publisher, who would sing and dance while selling his magazine on the streets. Others used their medium to construct specific varieties of nationalism, some of which would attempt to counter the dominant discourses. Thus, a folk singer would take up the docile Bharatmata of the mainstream nationalism and transfigure her into a fiery Kali. A closer study of such mutations and metamorphoses would, evidently, yield a much richer story of our history.

G. Rajashekhar, and Manu Chakravarthi, both distinguished scholars and committed activists, shared a session where they discussed certain situations/cases where activism could, and has indeed acquired perverted forms, the most frightening of them being communalism. Rajashekhar traced, through some case studies, the upward trajectory of religious fundamentalism in recent years in his native district of South Canara. In each case, he demonstrated with clinching evidence, a minor local incident (sometimes, nothing more than a fabricated lie about such an one) had been blown up into an issue of national import by bigots, who then proceeded to attempt creed-based cleansing in a Fascist style. Putting such developments into a theoretical framework, Manu Chakravarthi elaborated on the ideologies of nation-state, development, and standardisation that force 'the others' to conform, or pay the price for being 'different'.

A second joint-session, conducted by Indudhara Honnapura, a prominent Dalit activist and journalist, and K.S.Puttannaiah, a major farmer leader, focused on the past, present, and the future of the relationship between the outcastes and the ryots, a relationship, which if consolidated, could well prove to be a decisive force in contemporary Indian politics. The two shared the view that these groups, one of the lowest social order and the other of the backward strata, could, on joining hands, transform the current national politico-economic scene, and lend a sharp edge to the fight against globalisation. There had been in the past serious misunderstanding between the two sections, both the leaders confessed, but now the two were

trying to forge an alliance, since they had realized that both had been in an equal degree victims of the phenomenon of globalisation.

G.K.Govinda Rao, teacher and actor, H.M.Marulasiddappa, teacher and critic, and Vivek Shanbhag, software engineer and writer, sharing a session, discussed the challenges before Kannada Activism today. While Rao offered an analysis of the socio-political challenges, Marulasiddappa dwelt on the linguistic aspects of the issue, and Shanbhag shared his perceptions on the state of the still developing relationship between Kannada language and the new force of Information Technology.

Sudhanva Deshpande, Keval Arora, and Raghunandana, all theatre activists held a panel discussion on 'Theatre and Activism'. The common theme of the session, minor differences notwithstanding, was that Theatre itself was one of the oldest and most powerful forms of Activism. The most 'human' of all art forms, since it demands nothing less than a physical presence of the actor and the viewer, unlike other forms, especially cinema and television, it has other advantages too, in that it provides an 'immediate' experience, creates a far more interactive relation between artistes and the audience, and makes possible collective viewing, where an individual is as much an individual as part of a community. There is thus, the magic of individual voluntarism gaining strength as group action in theatre. Sadly, though, the widening divide between individual and society in these times has turned the former into a helpless loner and the latter into an apathetic mass, throwing new challenges at committed theatre practitioners. With theatre, as is the case with virtually all art forms, being increasingly regarded by the dominant power centres as yet another useful tool in their pet domains of management and human resource development, activists wedded to the cause of theatre are facing new dilemmas not only of the ethical but also of the economic kind. There are no easy answers to this problem, and each activist is forced, as all the three panelists concluded, to find his/her own solution and balance.

In his address marking the formal closure of the Course, Roddam Narasimha, distinguished scientist, presently at the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bangalore, spoke on the theme 'Science, Human Action, and Activism'. Observing that the question of the ideal balance between knowledge and action has exercised the human mind ever since ancient times, Roddam said that the Indian tradition had evolved a resolution of the problem even in the old days, as evidenced in a certain formulation found in the much-revered classical Indian text, Yoga Vasishtha, which regarded knowledge and action as the two wings of a bird: one cannot perform its specific function without helping, or receiving help from, the other. Today, though the same question has come back to haunt us in a new form, precisely because Science, the most modern form of human knowledge, is being increasingly seen in certain quarters as having torn asunder the two 'wings', mainly owing to a widespread perception that it while having made unprecedented advances in the field of knowledge, has not shown proper concern at the destructive uses that it is put to in the realm of action. This, however, is a misconception since such a problem is not limited to science alone, but affects virtually every form of human intellectual pursuit. One great advantage that science enjoys over others in this regard is that it is based on a method that cherishes continuous examination, verification, experimentation, evaluation, and re-invention and reformulation. It has, in its true form, never privileged theory over practice, insisting instead that any theory is acceptable only insofar as it is practically applicable. Far from claiming for itself the mantle of absolute truth, it has in reality acknowledged that even its own findings are only of a tentative and unstable nature and therefore open to rectification. Science recognizes, Roddam concluded, that the gap between private knowledge and public knowledge could ultimately be an unbridgeable one, but yet tries its best,

since it regards it as its special mission, to lessen the gap, for the well-being of both the private individual and the social group.

Part 2: Interactive sessions:

Conceived as complements to the lecture sessions, the interactive parts were structured around some of the plays performed and films shown at the Course. Allowing for participation all round, they made for some of the liveliest sessions, combining forthright articulation of one's convictions, wit and sporting introspection not only on the part of the participants but that of resource persons as well. A happy coincidence was that all the art works that formed these sessions contained strands of activism, of explorations of the nature of human action and its consequences, which were, during the course of the discussions, elaborated and commented upon, examined and critiqued.

(a) The first two evenings of the Course saw the staging of the two plays of Tirugata - the Ninasam Theatre Repertory--this year, and this was followed by discussions on the productions on the succeeding mornings. The first play, *Dyavanooru*, a composite form of three literary pieces by Devanoor Mahadeva, a Dalit activist-leader and a major writer in contemporary Kannada, generated a passionate debate, not just because it depicted the problems of the untouchables in the present times but also because it brought in the author himself as author/character/ideologue/activist into its design. The second play, *Raja Mattu Rani*, based on Ravindranatha Tagore's work, concerned the dilemma of the individual caught in larger socio-political cross-currents, where his/her private action is seen as challenging the power and the future of the collective. The discussions therefore acquired a rich texture, debating the possible and the desirable relationships between politics and art, human action and social processes.

(b) A different dimension was lent by a little theatrical piece, *Karnadarsha*, based on the episode of Karna's tragic death in the Mahabharata War as depicted by Kumaravyasa, a great poet of medieval Kannada, and the screening of the video-recording of a production of *Shmashana Kurukshetram*, a modern Kannada play by Kuvempu, centring on the terrible aftermath of the same war. While the former work depicted the moral conflict in Karna, torn between private feelings and public obligation, the latter presented the unhappy consequences that follow when such tension is not creatively resolved. The discussions took note of the manner in which ancient myths could be reworked and rewritten to interpret a writer's own times, a method that could simultaneously bring in associations from various periods of human history in order to voice one's contemporary concerns.

(c) Two documentary films screened at the Course were *The Dark Side of the Moon*, and *A View from Manipur*. The first exposed the fabricated lie behind the audio-visual document of the first landing on the Moon, explaining how the Government-Industry-Corporate Media nexus hoodwinked the world into believing that the 'imaged' reality was also the factual reality. The second showed, besides horrifying scenes of repression in the currently troubled state, how the modern media, official or otherwise, indulges in a selective presentation of the events of life, thereby carrying out a virtually undetectable campaign of dis/misinformation. It also explored possibilities of individual activists breaking the shackles imposed on society by the modern media. All these features generated a heated debate in the group, where the relative powers and limitations of individuals, communities, and the nation-state were discussed.

(d) One of the best interactive sessions was the one conducted by Sudhanva Deshpande, a theatre theoretician-practitioner from Delhi. Introducing to the audience the primary details of a typical folk story with a conventional theme of the rich-poor, master-servant

divide, then stopping his narration at the nodal points, Deshpande invited the participants to develop by stages the story-line according to their personal preferences, but with the rider that they justify their choices to the satisfaction of the others at every stage. This made every participant get involved emotionally as well as intellectually, compelled them to perceive the utter difficulty of making purely subjective choices, and opened their eyes to fact that the life of activism is not all that easy.

(e) A similar session was seen on the last day, when in a 'Meet the Author' programme, Vaidehi, a renowned woman writer in Kannada, read a story of hers, *Gulabi Talkies and Small waves*, which records the small but significant changes that come over a little rural town with the arrival of a cinema house there. The catalyst in this process, albeit an unconscious one, is a socially unprivileged woman, who defies orthodox norms in an activist fashion of her own. The point concerning the more enduring influence of invisible kinds of activism was further developed in the discussion where Vaidehi elaborated on the real life persons on whom she had come to base her characters-persons who cannot be regarded as 'activists' in the current, politically over-loaded sense of the term, but who have been some of our best, and most integrated activists. The theme was continued into the evening, too, which marked the production of a dramatised version of three of Vaidehi's short stories, all examining the range of women's emancipation, of their search for an identity, and their various modes of activism.

PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE: Open to everyone, irrespective of their academic backgrounds, the Course attracts a wide variety of participants from almost every walk of life, the heterogeneity of the group probably unmatched anywhere in India. The only qualification that is insisted upon is that the applicant is genuinely interested in involving himself/herself in progressive social and cultural projects and processes, and that he/she be interested in not only practical work but also theory which underpins it. Thus, the participants ranged from University Professors to college students, from farmers to housewives, from software professionals to government clerks and so on. In fact, this group represents a microcosm of Karnataka, as these details illustrate:

Total number of participants: 121

Male: 79, Female: 42

Districts represented: 19 (out of a total of 27 in the state), Regions represented: All,

Age-groupwise breakup: -20: 9, 21-30: 56, 31-40:23, 41-50:19, 50+ 14,

Profession-wise breakup: Students:42, Teachers: 28, Professionals and Service: 25, Media: 8, Housewives:5, Agriculturists;4, Others: 8

4. RESOURCE PERSONS /EVENTS/ EVENING PROGRAMMES

Day Sessions: 9.30am-1pm, 2.30pm-6pm, Evening Performance: 7.15pm

10th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Screening of video film: <i>Shmashana Kurukshetram</i> , as an introduction to the anti-war theme in Kannada Literature
		Session 2	Panel Discussion Recent Trends in Activism in Karnataka Rajashekhar G., Manu Chakravarthy
	Evening	Performance	Tirugata Play: <i>Dyavanooru</i>

based on Devanur Mahadeva's works,
Directed by Basavalingaiah C.

11th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Discussion/ Feedback on the performance of 10th Oct. evening - <i>Dyavanooru</i>
		Session 2	Activism and Democracy Shiv Vishwanathan
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Screening of video film: <i>Gokula Nirgamana</i> As an introduction to the process of reinventing the epics in Kannada Literature
		Session 2	Theatre and Activism Panel - Sudhanva Deshpande, Keval Arora Raghunandana S.
Evening	Performance	Tirugata Play: <i>Raja Mattu Rani</i> Adaptation of Tagore's <i>Raja O Rani</i> by K.V. Subbanna, Directed by Venkataramana Aithal	

12th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Discussion/ Feedback on the performance of 11th Oct. evening - <i>Raja Mattu Rani</i>
		Session 2	Alternative modes of Activism Shiv Vishwanathan
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Presentation of a Play by Ninasam: <i>Karnaadarsha</i> (based on Kumaravyasa's rendering of the epic <i>Mahabharata</i>) directed by Venkataramana Aithala
		Session 2	Activism - A Retrospective Sadanand Menon
Evening	Performance	Saxophone Recital by Kadri Gopalanath	

13th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Music and Cultural Activism Bhaskar Chandavarkar
		Session 2	Activism - An Activist's Story Sadanand Menon
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Presentation of a one -woman performance: Sae Haladhule
		Session 2	Linguistic Activism in Kannada Panel-G.K.Govinda Rao, Marulasiddappa K., Vivek Shanbhag
Evening	First half	Kudiyattam Performance by Usha Nangyar	
	Second half	Contemporary Dance By Nritarutya, Bangalore	

14th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Activism - Contribution of Sufi Music Bhaskar Chandavarkar
		Session 2	Activist Songs of Bengal Sudeshna Banerjee
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Activism and Cinema : screening of documentary on the Manipur problem
		Session 2	Activism: Dalits and Farmers of Karnataka Panel: K.S.Puttannaiah, Indudhara
Evening	Honnapura, Dr. U.R. Ananathamurthy	Performance <i>Kabeer</i> by Shekhar Sen, Mumbai	

15th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1-2	Samik Bandyopadhyaya Short films and the Activist Cinema With screenings
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Activist Potential of Theatre- an interactive session, conducted by Sudhanva Deshpande
		Session 2	B.M.Sri. Award Presentation- for the first poetry collection of a Kannada poet To K.P.Suresh, <i>Dada Bitta Doni</i>
Evening	Performance	Kuchipudi Performance <i>Bhamakalapam, Ushparinayam</i> By Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma, A.P.	

16th Oct:	Pre-lunch	Session 1	Lecture-Demonstration on Kuchipudi Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma
		Session 2	Science, Human Action and Activism Roddam Narasimha
	Post-lunch	Session 1	Meet the Author: a short story reading session by Vaidehi, a woman writer
		Session 2	Concluding and feedback session U.R. Anantha Murthy
Evening	First half Second half	Hindustani Vocal by Ravikiran, Udupi <i>Mallinathana Dhyaana</i> based on Vaidehi's Stories by Dhyana Repertory, Bangalore	
