

CULTURE CONFERENCE 2009

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Held during every October, the Culture Conference has been one of our major annual events. Four editions of the Conference, those of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009, have been held with Hivos assistance so far. Here is a brief report about the 2009 Conference, which comes under the reporting year.

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The Conference was held 4-10 October, 2009. As with the previous editions of the conference, this edition, too, was composed of two interrelated segments: (1) day sessions, running from 9.30 am to 6 pm, which had lectures, discussions and demonstrations, a large majority of which centred on the theme of the Conference, while the remaining were used for imparting to participants basic skills in art appreciation and (2) evening sessions, from 7 pm to 10 pm, devoted to performances of various kinds as part of a week-long cultural festival.

The theme of the 2009 Conference was 'Turbulences of Our Times.' Turbulence, as both physical scientists and social scientists point out, is a ubiquitous phenomenon that characterizes every age. Still, many individual human cultures tend to believe that their historical periods have been turbulence-ridden while some other periods have been free from it, and some other cultures have tended to believe it the other way round. The first category of societies look back wistfully at a past which they feel was turbulence-free and look forward hopefully to a future which they think will have rid itself of the turbulence of the present. Those of the second kind love to believe that their times mark a golden age that neither the past nor the future can ever match. Both the categories are unwilling to admit that turbulence manifests itself in varying degrees of intensity and visibility across spatial and temporal divisions and that behind and between the forms of turbulence that appear to be unique to every culture and time, there could be a fundamental commonality.

Our times, the first decade of the new millennium, seem to many as particularly -- even spectacularly -- turbulent. While at the global level there are, amongst others, the spectres of international terrorism, clash of civilizations, hegemonisation, and climate change troubling us, at the local level (that of Ninasam, which consists of the realities of the Indian nation, the state of Karnataka, and the Malnad region) there are the spectres of cross-border and domestic terrorism, rightist as well as leftist violence, environmental degradation, unbridled developmentalism, and uncontrolled corporatisation threatening us. Daunting indeed as our situation appears to be, Ninasam was interested in exploring possibilities of comparing and contrasting the turbulences of our times with those of other times, with particular reference to India, so that a better understanding could be had of both our present and past and our common future better envisioned. Further, in keeping with its essential nature as an organization dedicated to culture but not unaware of or uncaring about the political implications of cultural activity, Ninasam also wished to gain

a perspective on the specific ways in which art engages with turbulences of its times in different ages.

This concern was articulated in a certain way in the invocation marking the beginning of the conference. The practice of Ninasam at the culture conferences has been to use poems or parts or poems or even composite forms of several poems for invocation. These pieces are not sung in the conventional manner but recited or declaimed with just a touch of the dramatic so that both the aesthetic and the intellectual aspects of the compositions are brought out together and a connection is made between the two. This time, a combination of excerpts from a recent Kannada translation (done by U R Ananthamurthy, one of our foremost writers and intellectuals and the director of the culture conference all these years) of some poems by the German writer Bertolt Brecht was used for the invocation. It ended, appropriately enough, with a little poem which goes: 'In the dark times/Will there be singing?/Yes, there will be singing./About the dark times.'

In his inaugural address titled 'Time/s and Turbulence/s', Dr. Gopal Guru, School of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, discussed some of the significant ways in which human beings have lived in and with time, and the ways in which the very constructions of time by different cultures/ages/groups/individuals cause turbulences as well as represent attempts to control or overcome them. Observing that we live in psychological time as well as physical time, with the two aspects sharing a complex relationship, Dr. Guru pointed out that both the two were being increasingly brought under a centralised control, thanks to globalisation. Previously, for instance, farmers and housewives could live with a loose, fuzzy notion of time even as industrial and office workers lived with a sense of time governed by regulated working hours. Now, however, flexible ideas of time were being turned into a universal, mechanical idea of time, mainly for the benefit of global power structures. Fruit and food items were being forced to ripen prematurely, so that they could yield financial profits more and more quickly. This compression of time was compression of space, too, as reduction of travel time meant contraction of geographical distances. This development might appear to be equality-oriented and emancipatory at one level but at another it actually serves the interests of capitalism, which turns time-space complex into a marker of socio-economic hierarchy. Those with more money power, both to invest and to spend, monopolise prime time/space on our media while those less fortunate are forced to content themselves with non-prime time/space. The *Kaliyuga* might seem to groups such as women and Shudras an age to be welcomed for the way it frees them from the constraints of space and time that bound them in traditional societies but one cannot be too sure of the extent of this freedom because the same age also puts them into new forms of subjugation. In a second lecture titled 'Food as Metaphor for Hierarchy', Dr. Guru analysed the manner in which food, far from merely being the common essential need that it is, has also been used a marker of socio-economic status. Just as the story of food represents the story of man's journey from nature to culture, he said, it also represents the story of the development of human civilization as a hierarchic structure. Processes of preparing food, preferences as regards food tastes, protocols concerning what food items to eat when and in what order, all reflect the political dimensions of food, said he, providing rich examples for each one of the points.

Dr. Sundar Sarukkai, Dept. of Philosophy of Science, National Institute for Advanced Studies, IISc, Bangalore, in his lecture on 'Turbulence' provided a rare perspective on how our obsession with modern technology-driven notion of speed was at the root of not just ecological but also social and psychological turbulences in our times, and on how art with its insistence on slowness and patience could help us negotiate these turbulences. The self-justifying and self-accelerating modern notion of speed had actually transmogrified into that of hyperspeed, he observed, and this had created a hyperworld where almost everything was forced to exist in one exaggerated form or another, and where we were all compelled to look at the real world through some mediatic structure or lens virtually all the time. This virtual world, based not on a natural but culturally constructed idea of speed and efficiency on the one hand promised us instant gratification and on the other generated entirely new kinds of frustration and anxiety, with the Internet and the cell phone being prime examples in this regard. Further, the violation of the natural principles and over-intervention in natural processes by modern man had produced new kinds of violence, both physical and epistemological. In such a turbulent context only art, argued Sarukkai, held the promise of a resolution and clarity because, with its natural 'slowness' and 'patience', (two qualities that enable 'self-reflection'), it created a 'hyporeality' that countered the 'hyperreality' of modern science and technology.

Nagesh Hegde, Bangalore-based journalist specializing in science and environmental issues, spoke on 'Ecology and Turbulence'. Offering an overview of the environmental crisis of our times, Hegde argued that in the cyclic, harmonic system of nature, turbulence was as much a part of the system as tranquility was and the two were, in fact, mutually-balancing twin-processes/phases. The story of man-induced turbulence of our times, however, was a different one because it indicated modern man's overexploitation of natural resources, which was robbing nature of its regenerative capacities. In the present politico-economic context where a universal model of development was dominating all corners of the globe, every part and process of nature was being turned into a market commodity, with disastrous consequences -- climate change being the most frightening of them all. Hegde concluded with a warning that if we did not quickly find alternative models and eco-friendly options, we might soon have to learn the truth of Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying about the earth having enough to meet everyone's need but not greed the bitter way.

In his lecture on 'Turbulences in Present-day West Bengal', Prof. Samik Bandopadhyaya, literary, theatre, and film scholar, traced the rise of Naxalism against the background of the history of the state in the post-Independence era. He offered an analysis, with historical evidence, of how the gradual decline in the quality of the leadership of the major parties and the quality of governance had over several decades produced a sense of disenchantment in the people, which in turn, aggravated the turbulence caused by the Naxalite movement. The first generation of leaders in the state, he observed, were, despite their different political affiliations, stalwarts that were also freedom fighters, intellectuals, cultural figures, and academics. Infused with the idealism typical of their times they regarded politics as nothing less than a mode of public service. Later leaders,

however, came mostly from sections that had no experience of suffering and considered politics more as a career than anything else. This naturally led to a situation where betrayals, opportunism, conviction-less dissension, and massacres became the order of the day. With party cadres taking control of the administrative bodies even at the grassroots level, an increasing widening gap opened up between the governments and the common people. The state's swing from one extreme to the other, as seen in its uncritical promotion of the modern Western model of development in recent years, Bandopadhyaya said, was only alienating the people further, as seen in the turbulence centering round the Singur and Nandigram cases.

Vijayashankara S R, Kannada critic and executive with Intel (India), in his lecture on 'Turbulences & Developments in Present-day Indian Democracy' offered a reading, in the main, of two major steps forward taken by the modern Indian polity and the turbulences that had engendered them as also the turbulences that had been caused by them. These were the introduction of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) and the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Both the events represented the growing significance and power of the individual in a democratic system and also, the self-correcting capacity of the modern Indian state and judiciary. Though the two developments took place amidst much turbulence (as witnessed in the case of the RTI Act in the recent years, with different levels of the judiciary entering into conflict with one another and the judgments of the lower levels sometimes forcing the higher levels into a defensive mode, especially over the point whether judges should publicly declare their property details, and the unprecedented case of the Delhi High Court giving a verdict that went against its own superior, the Indian Supreme Court and the latter now having to hear a case against its own self) the two acts were here to stay, remarked Vijayshankara, concluding that the scenario for such a creative relation between turbulence and progress had already been written into the Indian Constitution by the founding fathers of the nation.

KANNADA-SPECIFIC SESSIONS

These were sessions which discussed the theme with specific reference to the Kannada literary and socio-cultural context.

Dr. Rajendra Chenni, Kannada writer and critic, Professor at Dept. of Post Graduate Studies in English, Kuvempu University, speaking on 'Our Turbulent Times and Kannada Literature', lamented that the present generation of Kannada writers were not responding as sensitively and sharply as their senior generations had. Earlier writers had engaged, with great passion and conviction, with important issues of their own times, like for instance, the freedom struggle, nation-building, the establishment of a true democracy, the eradication of evils (both within and without), writers of the last decade or so in general sadly did not show the same level of involvement. Present-day threats, both to our political and cultural autonomy, like the processes of globalization, homogenization, and commodification, which manufactured not only consent but also dissent, needed to be critiqued /resisted in an authentic manner, said Dr. Chenni, hoping that contemporary Kannada writers would rise to meet this new challenge of their times.

In his lecture on ‘Turbulence in Kumaravyasa’s *Mahabharata*’, Dr. H S Venkatesha Murthy, Kannada writer and teacher, offered an analysis of turbulence as depicted in the great 15th century Kannada poet’s reworking of the epic *Mahabharata*. Using five selected parts from the work, Murthy demonstrated how for Kumaravyasa the breaking of family bonds was the major cause of turbulence. This turbulence was not restricted to the small family circle of the cousins Pandavas and Kauravas but engulfed the entire cosmos because apart from their own blood bonds, the two families were also related to gods and demons intimately and their human feud drew the divine and demonic figures too into the fray. Krishna, as portrayed by Kumaravyasa, attempts with all his diplomatic skill to re-establish harmony between individuals and groups by constantly invoking family ties and values, and takes to battle only as a last resort when all his efforts at mediation and reconciliation fail. Dr. Murthy also delivered the valedictory address where, besides appreciating the unique nature of the Conference, he also expressed his conviction that such activities had greater strength than any other in helping us overcome the divisive forces and the geopolitical turbulences threatening us today.

O L Nagabhushana Swamy, literary scholar, in his two lectures on ‘Turbulence in pre-modern and modern Kannada Poetry’ dwelt upon the ways in which three important stages in Kannada poetry had discoursed on turbulence, its causes and its resolutions. All times were turbulent times, Swamy claimed, irrespective of the historical age or the role of science and technology and this fact was amply illustrated by Kannada poetry. The First Poet of Kannada, Pampa, for instance, distinguished between two forms of time: ‘mukhyakaala’, basic time, which is without any property or form and ‘vyavahaarakaala’, material time which is defined by human action and has therefore form and properties and is quantifiable and divisible into such stages as good and bad times. According to Pampa, it was the material form of time which was subject to turbulences and three turbulences common to all men were those caused by sex, memory, and death. The 12th century Kannada Vachana poets, for their part, believed that fragmentation of the world and being resulted in turbulence, some even going to the extent of arguing that turbulence begins even at the moment when we employ a medium like language to describe reality because no language can ever fully comprehend or represent reality without violating it in one way or another. Hence, some poets like Allama try to transcend this unbridgeable gap through mystical poetry. This in turn led to other great debates of the period, such as the one concerning the question which was more important between the two -- the exterior or the interior, the natural order or the human structure? In 20th century, too, Kannada poetry had responded with sensitivity to the turbulences of its times such as the destruction of the environment in a uniquely metaphorical mode.

Ashok Hegde, Bangalore-based Kannada writer and executive with Mindtree, a software company, and Dr. Guruprasad Kaginele, Kannada writer and a practicing medical doctor in the USA, shared a session on ‘Modern Kannada Fiction and Turbulence’. Hegde provided a survey of the way in which every phase of modern Kannada fiction had responded to the turbulences of its times, beginning with idealism, liberal humanism, and patriotism of the pre-Independence era as well as the decades immediately following the achievement of freedom and moving through the 1960s-70s marked by a belief in the emancipatory potential of modern education and migration from villages to cities, the

1980s characterised by caste-based identity affirmations, the 1990s with the turbulence caused by liberalisation and the entry of multi-national corporations, and the 2000-09 period which witnessed the emergence of a Kannada/Indian diaspora within/without India struggling with questions of rootedness/rootlessness and nativity/hybridity. Kaginele complemented this with as well as a reading of his story 'Beeja' (The Seed), a recounting of the circumstances in which he had migrated to the USA and the crises he had to weather in his new homeland, particularly as a scientist working in a foreign country and an artist articulating himself in his native tongue.

Diwakar S, Kannada writer and translator, formerly with USIS, Chennai, read out some of his stories prefacing each one of them with a reference to the micro-turbulences in his personal life that had compelled him to write them.

Vaidehi, Kannada writer, speaking in the session on 'Women's kind of Turbulences' read out a couple of her stories interspersing the reading with a recollection of her experiences as a young woman growing up in a traditional milieu in a small town, where even a girl stepping out of her home alone or going to college or writing a story or poem used to cause immediate turbulences in the family and social circles. In such a situation, she had found a great ally in literature, she said.

Apart from the lectures/presentations by resource persons, who also participated with equal passion in discussions that followed lectures/presentations by other resource persons, valuable contributions were made through interventions by special invitees like Atul Tiwari, Mumbai-based theatre director and film and television writer, Shrinivasa Vaidya, Kannada writer, Anand Talavayi, software industrialist and arts patron.

M H Krishnaiah, a Bangalore-based teacher of literature and visual arts, engaged a session where he introduced the participants to some of the paradigmatic shifts that had taken place in the field of visual arts in recent times, with specific reference to the visual arts scene in Karnataka over the last two decades, and with special emphasis on the way the Karnataka artists had engaged with turbulences of their environs.

Besides the plays in the evenings, a theatre production was presented during the day-schedule of the Conference. This production, by Janamanadaata, a little theatre group based in Heggodu was a stage version of 'Sooryana Kudure', one of the most discussed short stories of Dr. U R Ananthamurthy (Director of our Conference ever since its beginning). The story portrays, through the figures of two childhood friends who later go their different ways, the turbulence that erupts when tradition and modernity encounter each other. In the discussion that followed the performance, many significant questions were raised about and several valuable insights gained into our contemporary reality.

In the film segment, two films were used. Akira Kurosawa's feature 'Dreams' and Anand Patwardhan's documentary 'War & Peace' both made for excellent discussion as well as engrossing watching, concerned as they were with turbulences of both physical and philosophical kind. In fact, these two films have been used in the last three editions of the

Conference, including this one, but as we have discovered, the way they stir up fresh, contemporary debates around timeless questions is truly extraordinary.

The lecture-demonstration segment had two separate sessions. Pandit Parameshwara Hegde, Hindustani vocalist, and Charudatta Aphale, Marathi naatyasangeet and keerthan artist, both of whom performed at the Cultural Festival held in the evenings, later interacted with the participants in the day sessions, providing the group valuable insights into their respective art forms as well as the way these forms handled turbulences, both within their domain and without.

INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

Discussion of plays: As every year, the Conference had specific time-slots where the plays put up at the evening cultural festival were discussed in an open-house session the following morning. As before, these sessions were some of the liveliest and enriching ones, mainly because of their strange, alchemical composition. Participants – forming one of the most heterogeneous groups to be found anywhere at such courses – were invited to share their responses to the plays, to pose questions or seek clarifications about them in a free manner; knowledgeable moderators controlled the proceedings with as much good humour as sense; resource persons and special invitees intervened with their own observations and answers at nodal points of the discussion. All this made for an invigorating blend of spontaneity and variety, innocence and experience, youthful zest and mellowed wisdom.

A novel addition to the Conference schedule this year was in the form of Early morning sessions. These were activity-oriented sessions, where for an hour early every morning all through the Conference participants could receive basic practical training from established practitioners in an area of their choice from amongst three on offer -- (i) dance and movement (ii) photography, and (iii) painting. This not only enabled participants to exhibit their own artistic talents before others but also to further hone their innate skills with the aid of tips from experts (for both of which no time-slot had been set aside in the previous Conferences). The fruits of this experiment were immediate and impressive in most cases, with the participants displaying an unusual degree of involvement and achieving a corresponding level of improvement in their preferred modes of expression. As a result, the routine early morning walk turned into a photographic expedition, the daily loosening of limbs into dance and purposive movement, and the casual play with lines, forms, and colours into a philosophy of perception.

Alongside the regular sessions at the Conference, there was also, as last year, a photo exhibition, titled ‘Transformations and Turbulences’. This was in the form of a display of photographs taken by artists of varying degrees of stature in the field of different stages of human life characterised by turbulences and fundamental changes of several kinds.

Feedback: Every year Ninasam makes it a point to collect feedback from participants, resource persons, visiting artists, patrons, and Ninasam workers concerning all aspects of

the Conference and it does this through informal as well as formal means. The same model was followed this year, too. While at the informal level Ninasam workers solicited the views of the participants and the resource persons at every stage of the Conference, at the formal level a major part of the concluding session was made available to a representative cross-section of the participants to voice their impressions and assessments of the entire programme. The group was also requested to communicate their views in more detail upon returning home, through mail or e-mail. Many obliged us and some participants, in fact, published little articles about their experience in both state-level and local newspapers and magazines.

Performances presented at the Cultural Festival held in the evenings:

1. *Venissina Vyaapaara*, a theatre production in Kannada of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, performed by Ninasam Tirugata; directed by K V Akshara
2. *Aakaashabheri*, a Kannada-Hindi play based on the life and times of Bhagat Singh, performed by Ninasam Tirugata; music & direction by Sanjay Upadhyaya
3. *Aakaashabutti*, a Ninasam production of Jayanth Kaikini's Kannada play; directed by S Raghunandana
4. Carnatic vocal recital by Prashanth Hemmige
5. Carnatic veena recital by Smt. Shubha Santhosh
6. Keerthan and Natyasangeet by Charudatta Aphale
7. Hindustani vocal recital by Pt. Parameshwara Hegde
8. Bharathanjali, classical dance performance by Smt. Bhanumathi's troupe

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

- Total number of Participants: 132
- Male: 92; Female: 40
- Students: 71; Teachers: 20; Professionals: 15; Others: 26
- Resource Persons: 38 (Male: 28; Female: 10)
- Performing Artists: 42 (Male: 31; Female: 11)