

## **CULTURE CONFERENCE 2011**

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Conducted every October, the Culture Conference has been one of our major annual events. So far five such Conferences, those of 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011, have been held with Hivos assistance. Here is a report about the 2011 Conference, which comes under the reporting year.

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Held from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2011, the Conference, like its previous editions, 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 sensitising them to important socio-cultural issues of the day and (2) evening sessions, from 7 pm to 10 pm, devoted to performances of various kinds as part of a week-long public cultural festival.

### **THEME NOTE**

The theme of this year's Culture Conference was 'Vernaculars Today'.

Across the world today, vernacular languages are facing a variety of challenges and opportunities. In olden times, they existed happily with their communities, evolving their own solutions to the socio-cultural challenges from the other vernaculars and the classical languages of their respective lands and ages, surviving invasions by alien groups, or enriching themselves through absorption of foreign influences. However, modern civilisation, along with its attendant forces of printing technology, means of mechanical reproduction, and mass media, confronted regional tongues with an entirely new set of challenges. In those parts of the world that came under colonialism, not only geographical areas but cultures and minds, too, were colonised. Communities were now forced to make a choice between their vernaculars as a medium of self-expression and the language of the rulers as a means of power, liberation, and progress. In more recent times, the processes of globalisation and neo-colonialism, the exponential spread of the television, the computer, and the internet have thrown up challenges of the kind not even imagined before. Today, the fate of vernaculars seems to hinge less on their own strengths and weaknesses and more on the socio-cultural and professional preferences of their communities.

Some regional languages – or, 'deshabhashas', to use a term advocated by some who hold them dear – have gone into extinction or suffered a decline. Some others somehow survive, through conscious individual as well collective efforts. Yet others have shown a rare resilience, asserting themselves in various ways against the onslaught. The defeat, the survival, and the resistance of the vernaculars all pose vital questions. Should one apply the principles of natural selection and survival of the fittest in the case of languages, particularly vernaculars, too? What forms of resistance put up by the vernaculars are to be regarded as genuine, justifiable, creative, desirable, or otherwise?

How acceptable would it be if some communities preferred the dominant language for material advancement and limited their vernaculars to the field of cultural articulation? Should we not make a distinction between the efforts at the preservation of various disappearing languages/vernaculars as efforts that value the antiquity of those languages and efforts that look at them as of antique value?

These were some of the haunting contemporary questions that prompted Ninasam to choose 'Vernaculars Today' as the theme of the Conference.

## LECTURES

UR Ananthamurthy, director of the Conference right from its beginning about two decades ago, delivered both the key note address and the concluding lecture at the conference this year. In both of them, he offered unique insights into the condition of the vernaculars today and suggested possible practical as well as creative solutions to their problems. Drawing attention to the successful negotiation that Kannada, the local language, had had with the classical language of Sanskrit for over a thousand years, he remarked that Kannada had to show the same sense of self-respect with regard to the challenge posed to it in modern times by English. For all its strength and reach, English was after all, in the present local context, the language of commerce and science while Kannada was the language of intimacy and culture. The story of English itself was not much different some centuries ago, he recalled, with Latin and French enjoying a high status and English being considered as no more than a vernacular within England, even at times when such geniuses as Shakespeare and Milton were creating their master works. It was the persistence of writers like these in using English, alongside the growing imperial power of England that helped English find an unmatched place in history in the succeeding ages. This position of English gave rise to a series of great debates in a vernacular-rich country like India, in both the colonial and the post-colonial times, debates joined by such stalwarts as MK Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. And a poet-intellectual like AK Ramanujan provided another perspective when he observed that in his own case, which is not dissimilar to that of most Indians, three different languages governed three different physical spaces of his daily life: English in the study, where he read books and discussed issues with his father; Tamil, his mother tongue, in the kitchen, where he conversed with his mother; and Kannada, the local language, in the streets of Mysore. Even though Indians have acquired remarkable felicity in English, their English, Ananthamurthy noted, finds its most powerful expression in discursive writings and not in creative literature where the best achievements have come through the use of the native languages. In the present situation where one just cannot ignore English, Ananthamurthy observed, the challenge is to find a proper balance between English and the local languages. This challenge has another edge to it as English is also held up as the language of modern knowledge and the software industry. Yet, one must not forget, Ananthamurthy argued, that knowledge resides not only in the brain but in the limbs, too, and limb-skills are nothing but vernacular knowledge forms. Further, software has no life without the support of hardware, and hardware with its emphasis on practical use, concreteness, and technology-orientation is another form of vernacular resource base, as contrasted with software which leans towards abstraction and theoretical science. So, privileging the classical and the global over the vernacular and the local would only

aggravate existing socio-economic inequalities. The best option in the regard, Ananthamurthy affirmed, is to make children learn in common schools which combine excellence with social representation, and to teach English as a language and teach the core subjects through the local languages.

Speaking on 'Translation and Philosophy', Sundar Sarukkai, renowned thinker who has doctorates in both physics and philosophy, unravelled some of the intricacies of language, inter-language relationships, and translation. Arguing that a language was also a form of consciousness and culture, he said that the loss of a language was nothing short of a loss of a form of culture. Since culture included unique ways of thinking, the disappearance of a culture also meant the extinction of a specific mode of thinking. Human beings may speak to other human beings using a language, but languages speak only to other languages and not to human beings. In this context, any translation was essentially an act of negotiation between not only two languages but also two cultures, two worlds that the respective languages represented, Sarukkai noted. This reality, he concluded, renders translating from and to languages, including vernaculars, not just desirable but also extremely challenging and problematic.

In his lecture on 'Urdu Poetry', Atul Tiwari, a Mumbai-based theatre director, film and television writer, provided an overview of the history of Urdu and the way in which poetry came to be the soul of the language. Citing numerous examples, he demonstrated how Urdu, far from being a minor/minority tongue as some currently hold, was actually a medium much loved and enriched by a wide range of communities across India. Unique in being the only homeless, stateless language in India, Urdu was distinguished by its rare balance of sacred and secular, personal-romantic and socio-political expressions. Tiwari lamented recent historical developments, particularly post-Partition and post-Ayodhya, which have led to a devaluation of Urdu and an increased suspicion about its identity.

HS Venkateshamurthy, Kannada writer and translator, in his lecture on 'Kannada & Sanskrit' discussed the three major modes in which a vernacular like Kannada had negotiated with the classical Sanskrit over many centuries. The three were (a) a conscious attempt to Sanskritise Kannada (b) an equally conscious attempt to keep Kannada completely free of Sanskrit influences, and (c) a blending and balancing of the two languages, without going to the extremes. While the first two modes did have a validity and success of their own, Murthy observed, it was the third mode that had proved far more enduring and enriching. The great Kannada poets of all periods kept their minds and hearts open to the influences of the Sanskrit masters and yet evolved an original language and style of expression. It was this creative confidence and spirit of synthesis that has sustained Kannada all through, Murthy asserted.

Giraddi Govindaraja, teacher and critic, in his survey 'Shakespeare and Kannada' discussed the manner in which Kannada culture had interacted with the great bard. Important as direct translations of Shakespeare were, the adaptations presented a more complex picture of this interaction, Giraddi noted. The latter had attempted to recreate Shakespeare in their own cultural and linguistic environment, sometimes taking liberties with the original and making bold innovations. This only augmented the natural ability

that Kannada had to absorb external elements and further increased its expressive capacity, commented Giraddi.

Shamik Bandopadhyaya, Kolkatta-based polymath, and a most regular and valuable member of the Ninasam resource persons team over the past two decades, delivered three lectures. In ‘Bengal and Shakespeare’, Bandopadhyaya traced the way in which Bengali culture had received Shakespeare, from the early days of colonialism when it was considered ‘sacred’ to play Shakespeare in the English original and ‘sacrilegious’ to translate him to the Emergency days when the poet was put to political use through translations and imaginative productions with contemporary resonances. Bengal of the nationalist struggle period, Bandopadhyaya pointed out, showed a greater interest in the history plays of the master rather than his comedies or tragedies, mainly because the histories abounded in the themes of state, power, and political intrigue – all of immediate relevance to the period. In the lecture titled ‘Bengali Literature’, alongside providing a survey of the birth and development of modern Bengali literature, Bandopadhyaya illustrated the manner in which Bengali had engaged in constant negotiations, first with Sanskrit and then with English. In his third lecture, ‘Rabindranath Tagore-Poetry and Paintings’, Bandopadhyaya provided rare glimpses into the hitherto largely unknown facet of the versatile genius, whose one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary is being celebrated this year. Tagore, a much acclaimed poet and thinker by the middle part of his life, stopped writing completely and took to painting instead in his later years. Bandopadhyaya showed how the reasons behind this shift, indications of which are found mostly in Tagore’s later poems and his correspondence during his painting phase, ranged from his growing concern over the rise of ultra-nationalism and fascism, his anguish at the unprecedented violence unleashed by the two World Wars, his increasing understanding of the fundamental and qualitative differences between the concepts of civilisation and culture, the East and the West, to his belief that not words but only visuals could ever hope to capture the crises and the horrors of his times. So, Tagore even left his paintings untitled, saying that if he could give them titles then he would have turned them into poems instead.

Atamjit Singh, a Punjabi theatre writer, actor, and director, gave the delegates an introduction to Punjabi theatre and drama. Ironically, although the long history of Punjab was full of drama, the form of drama did not thrive there, he said. No variety of drama, either of the classical, the ritualistic, the sacred, or the folk type existed in historical Punjab, unlike the case with other cultures. The main reason for this was that Sikhism forbade any representations of its founder and spiritual leaders. So, Punjabi drama, when it did originate about a hundred years ago, began as a secular form and has continued to be so, he explained. Historical developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after Independence, had their own impact, turning Punjabi drama and theatre into a site of indirect power struggle between and amongst the national state, the religious authorities, the theatre community, and the common audience, he said. The future of Punjabi theatre looked promising, he said in conclusion, because it had grown strong not only locally but also in foreign climes, with the Sikh diaspora, especially in North America, patronising it as part of its attempt to rediscover its cultural roots. Atamjit Singh also gave a short

performance, with Ms. Sujata, composed of excerpts from Punjabi poetry and dramatic compositions.

In his session ‘Kathana Vaividhya’ (Varieties of Narrative), Divakar S, writer and critic, discussed four major narrative techniques as used in four representative stories by as many writers belonging to different languages of the world. Kum. Veerabhadrappa and H. Nagaveni, both Kannada writers, shared their experiences and thoughts in a panel session titled ‘Vernaculars in a multi-lingual environment’

A highlight of the conference was a poets’ meet where different languages and dialects of Karnataka were represented through Muddu Moodubelle (Tulu), Melwyn Rodrigues (Konkani), Ga. Su. Bhatta, Bettageri (Havyaka), and Mohammad Ali (Byari). While Havyaka is a Kannada dialect, the other three are languages in their own right. Interestingly, none of these three have their own script. Tulu and Byari have adopted the Kannada script while the Konkani community spread across Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Kerala, is still divided over the choice of script between Devanagari and Kannada.

There was also a Marathi poetry session, where an ensemble read out, recited, or sang excerpts from Marathi poetic works of different ages, right from the times of saints like Jnanadev, Tukaram, Namadev, Eknath to the current times of modernist and Dalit poetry, along with providing conceptual inputs linking all the segments.

The valedictory address was by N R Narayana Murthy, of Infosys fame, where he spoke about the vitality and significance of cultural and linguistic roots. For all his success and achievements in the material and technological world, said Murthy, his heart still yearned for the emotional world that had shaped his consciousness in his formative years. The challenge for people like him was to evolve a meaningful balance between science and art, commerce and culture, and so attending conferences of this nature, he said, gave him a rare opportunity of revivifying his inner self and reorienting himself to the wider world.

### **LEC-DEMS, PERFORMANCES, FILM SCREENINGS HELD AS PART OF THE CONFERENCE:**

These activities, held within the regular day-schedule, complemented the lecture sessions and they were:

- ‘Aroopi’, performance of a Malayalam theatre production, Trivi Acts, Trivandrum.
- A lec-dem session by Mahmood Farooqi and Danish Hussain on Daastaan- e-go, a performative art, part of north Indian Urdu culture, close to extinction but now being revived through a special project
- An intimate style performance by Atamjit Singh and Sujata from Punjab, consisting of extracts from Punjabi plays and poetry
- A screening of and discussion on ‘Nero’s Guests’, a documentary film on the crusading journalist P Sainath, made by Ms Deepa Bhatia
- A screening of and discussion on ‘Streer Patra’, a film based on a Tagore story, directed by Purnendu Patreya

## **PHOTO EXHIBITION**

The conference featured a photo exhibition this year, too. It had two themed segments. The first one was ‘An Artist Prepares’, a series of photographs by AN Pratheek, a young software engineer and promising photographer, depicting the process through which a Kathakali artist in Kerala transforms himself for a performance. The second part consisted of a collection of highly evocative photographs of eminent Kannada writers taken over the last two decades by AN Mukund, an electrical engineer from Bangalore.

## **INTERACTIVE SESSIONS**

(1) **EARLY MORNING SESSIONS:** Added to the regular schedule of the conference two years ago, these sessions offered the participants an opportunity to get hands-on training from experts in a field of their choice from amongst theatre, dance, and photography. Experts KS Rajaram and AN Mukunda (photography), Channakeshava (theatre), and Charan (dance and movement) volunteered their services at these sessions which were of a very informal, and therefore, of an invigorating nature. At the end of the training, each of the three groups put up a performance/exhibition displaying the fruits of their labour.

(2) **DISCUSSION OF PLAYS:** As every year, some sessions were earmarked for the discussion of the plays put up at the evening cultural festival and in the regular schedule of the conference. As always, these open-house sessions were extremely lively and rewarding. The discussions consisted of responses, questions or seeking of clarifications by the participants, who came from the most diverse of backgrounds; responses and observations by resource persons and special invitees at crucial points; and a summing up by moderators or by the director. The proceedings at these sessions made for a rare blend of good humour and sense of discrimination, spontaneity and time-tested wisdom, intellectual energy and artistic passion.

## **FEEDBACK FROM DELEGATES AND RESOURCE PERSONS:**

### **(1) FEEDBACK SESSION**

As is the case every year, an entire session on the last day of the Conference was set aside for the participants where they invited to share with the organisers, resource persons, guests, and observers their views on the Conference and their suggestions towards improving its quality. Some of the important observations that the participants made this year (many of them were similar to the ones from the previous years) were as follows:

- Many participants thought of the Conference as a very significant, alternative model of art and culture education and wished that all general educational institutions, too, had similar programmes.
- The format of the conference, which created a natural environment where the resource persons and the ordinary delegates could live together like an extended family for about a week, drew special praise. This format also helped the delegates form strong bonds between and amongst themselves, and most participants intended to develop these bonds beyond the conference.
- Almost all the participants appreciated the commitment and easy accessibility of the group of resource persons, artists and thinkers at the conference. They were not only

greatly thrilled at the opportunity of living on the same campus with persons of eminence, they said, but also made the best possible use of their company by interacting with them while eating, having tea, or taking walks.

- Most delegates were of the view their intellectual and aesthetic interests had been broadened and deepened significantly by the conference. They had become aware, they said, of complexities of thought and diversity of expression that they had never known before.
- Many said they would attend the conference as many times as possible, making it a regular feature on their annual calendar of activities.
- Also, in keeping with Ninasam's regular practice at the feedback session, broad details of the income and expenditure figures of the Conference were presented before the entire group consisting of the participants, resource persons, guests, mediapersons, and Ninasam volunteers.

## (2) OTHER MEANS OF GETTING FEEDBACK:

Apart from the feedback session on the last day of the Conference, 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 mode 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, they were 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 Conference experience in both state-level and local newspapers and magazines.

## CULTURAL FESTIVAL

The programmes presented as part of the cultural festival held on the evenings of the Conference were as follows:

- *Kanthu*, a Ninasam Tirugata theatre production based on a Kannada story by Vivek Shanbhag; directed by Channakeshava, an alumnus of the Ninasam Theatre Institute,
- *Nammolagina Basheer*, a Ninasam Tirugata production based on the stories of the Malayalam writer Vaikom Mohammad Basheer, directed by Rajiv Krishnan, Chennai,
- *Shishira Vasantha*, a Ninasam theatre production of William Shakeshpeare's *Winter's Tale*, translated and directed by Akshara KV
- *Kathyar Kalajaat Ghusali*, Marathi musical play performed by Bharat Natya Samshodhana Samstha, Pune
- *Gora*, a theatre adaptation of Tagore's novel of the same name; script and direction by Prakash Belawadi; performed by Rangayana, Mysore
- Carnatic vocal recital, by Vidushi RN Srilatha, Bangalore
- Hindustani sarod recital, by Vijetha Anathi, Mysore
- Hindustani flute recital, by Samira Rao, Mysore

## A statistical overview of the people involved in the Conference:

- Total number of Participants: 165

- Male 117; female 48
- Students 70; Teachers 25; Professionals 15; Business persons 10; Farmers 14; Housewives 12; Others 19
- Resource Persons: 22 (male 18; female 4)
- Performing Artists (including Tirugata members): 115 (male 88; female 27)

#### RESOURCE PERSONS AND SPECIAL INVITEES

1. UR Ananthamurthy, (Director), eminent writer and thinker
2. Shamik Bandopadhyaya, culture critic
3. Sundar Sarukkai, scientist and philosopher of science
4. Narayana Murthy, pioneering software entrepreneur
5. HS Venkateshamurthy, poet and teacher
6. Giraddi Govindaraja, teacher and critic
7. Vaishali KS, literature teacher and classical singer
8. Atul Tiwari, theatre and film person and social activist
9. Vivek Shanbhag, writer and software engineer
10. Diwakar S, writer and translator
11. Deepa Ganesh, journalist and classical musician
12. MS Sriram, management expert and writer
13. Ashok Hegde, management expert and writer
14. Kum. Veerabhadrappa, writer
15. Nagaveni H, writer
16. Atamjit Singh, Punjabi writer, actor and director
17. Rajaram KS, photographer and engineer
18. Mukunda AN, photographer and engineer
19. Prakash Belawadi, theatre, film and media person
20. Channakeshava, theatre worker and visual artist
21. Charan, theatre worker and dancer
22. Tejashree JN, poet and translator