

# NINASAM CULTURE COURSE 2015

## A REPORT

The Culture Course, a major event on the Ninasam annual calendar for over two decades now, has been widely regarded as an unmatched socio-cultural activity not only in Karnataka but across India. It derives its strength mainly from its unique fusion of the formal and the informal modes of seeking and sharing knowledge, of theory and practice, of the aesthetic and the intellectual aspects of common human pursuits. The 2015 edition of the Culture Course was held at Heggodu 8-12, October, 2015. As every year, it brought together one of the most heterogeneous groups imaginable of participants and resource persons.

### THEME

The theme of the Course this year was Chintane-Prathichintane, roughly translated as “Thinking against Thinking” or “Thinking and Counter-Thinking.” And the reasons behind the selection of this theme were as follows:

Every age in human history attempts to make sense of the developments of its times through frames of thought that it thinks are best suited to its context. Societies try to evaluate the events and processes of their times using such criteria as whether they are desirable or undesirable, progressive or regressive, helpful or harmful, and chart their future plans on the basis of such discrimination. Such modes of thought appear not only in intellectual form but in a multitude of forms, and in diverse fields, ranging from philosophy to politics, abstractions to concrete day-to-day actions, from aesthetics to science and so on.

Of these modes of thinking, some, which are lucky to receive support from dominant intellectual circles, establish themselves as mainstream codes of thought, as thesis, theory, even ideology. The not-so-lucky ones remain dormant, hiding in recesses and crevices, waiting for temporal and spatial contexts which are more willing to receive them. Sometimes, with modes of thought developing not in sync with their time-and-space, there also appear disconnects and dissonances between the two. In such cases, the mainstream schools of thought themselves become obsolete and sometimes oppressive. Lacking organicity and all-encompassing vision, they can eventually turn utopias into dystopias, dreams into nightmares. When they begin to convert patterns of thought into prescriptions for thought, and sometimes even regimentation of thought, it becomes vitally necessary to evolve and employ entirely new modes in order to counter their hegemony. This seemingly endless cycle of “thesis v/s anti-thesis” helps us understand the significance of “counter-thinking” and its relevance for all times.

The 2015 Culture Course aimed at initiating a modest debate concerning the value of such “thinking against thinking”, especially in the backdrop of the many crises of our times.

Rather than being a seminar of an exclusively intellectual kind about the abovementioned topic, the Course attempted to look at certain social and cultural sectors, at particular areas of the creation and critical perception and reception of arts and literature, with a focus on questions like what are the areas in which such a “thinking against thinking” is urgently needed, whether such attempts are already underway, and if so, where and how, and what are the ways in which we could respond to, draw from, and build upon them. It did so through lectures, discussions, demonstrations, performances and the like, in a mode which gathered scholars and students, artists and activists, experts and laypersons together in a common exploration.

## **SESSIONS AT THE COURSE**

There were three types of sessions at the Course. The main lecture and discussion sessions ran from 9.30 in the morning to 6 in the evening. These sessions consisted of lectures by eminent resource persons followed by open discussions. The second type of sessions consisted of lecture-demonstrations by reputed artists and performers. The third type of sessions, held early in the morning each day and of an informal nature, provided an opportunity to the participants to interact more directly and personally with resource persons from various fields. Besides, each of the theatre productions presented at the evening cultural festival were discussed in an open house session the following mornings, while performances held as part of the Course were discussed in a similar manner immediately after they ended.

## **LECTURES**

In his inaugural address, H S Venkateshamurthy, Kannada writer, discussed the many ways in which ‘thinking against thinking’ has always been a characteristic trait of both the Indian and the Kannada traditions. ‘Thinking’ and ‘counter-thinking’, he noted, are processes that are actually mutually engendering and enriching. Even the most conservative/traditional of our writers and thinkers of all times have been open to the most radical critiques, he observed. Such accommodativeness towards difference and dissent, he lamented, was coming under severe threat in the present times. It was only through strengthening the spirit of tolerance that India could continue to remain India, he added. In the second lecture, Ganesh Devy, literary scholar and cultural activist, delineated the manner in which modern day forces of intolerance were doing violence to our diverse, natural ways of living, feeling, thinking, remembering, and speaking by imposing their own standards. Drawing attention to the fact that hundreds of languages were today facing the danger of extinction owing to such hegemonic powers, Devy called upon activists to resist the process, since the death of a language, however minor, also meant the death of a unique world-view.

H S Shivaprakash, Kannada writer and thinker, delved into the history of the relationship between ‘thinking’ and ‘counter-thinking’ in various cultures and ages, pointing out that in the past, the two modes had co-existed peacefully because neither had lost its cosmological

view. In modern times, however, he said, the modes had begun to get less cosmological and hence more confrontationist. This imbalance, he warned, needs to be corrected, since true knowledge is gained only through a dialogue with the other and not a suppression of the other. M S Ashadevi, Kannada critic, dwelt upon the contribution made by feminism towards addressing the lacunae of the older, male-centred modes of thinking and counter-thinking. Sundar Sarukkai, physicist-philosopher, highlighted the fundamental differences in the Western and the Indian approaches to knowledge and truth. The Western mind typically believes in a system where contradictories do not exist and absolutes rule, whereas the Indian mind is characteristically at ease with opposites because it values the mode of continuing debate. This makes Indian philosophy more capable of living and working with ambiguities and ambivalences. It also makes it more naturally non-violent and tolerant towards dissenting world-views, Sarukkai argued.

N S Taranath, Kannada scholar, provided an overview of the rich 'counter-thinking' tradition as seen in ancient and medieval Kannada literature, demonstrating how Kannada writers of yore had creatively critiqued not only colleagues from their own language but those from ancient classical Sanskrit schools too. Krishnamurthy Hanooru, Kannada writer and folklorist, illustrated how Kannada folk literature has always countered the dominant discourses through a rewriting of the dominant narratives of different times. Such rewriting did not always view the great and little traditions as oppositional, but also as complementary, he observed. In her talk on "The Notion of the Classical", culture critic Ananya Vajpeyi discussed the problems one faces in defining the classical and the modern in an exclusionary manner. Using examples from various texts and anecdotes, she argued that the two streams actually existed one within the other, manifesting themselves in different proportions at different times. This was the reason for the masters of classicism also being the most radical changers of it at critical points in history, she added. In a panel discussion on the theme in the light of the Sanskrit literary tradition, J Srinivasamurthy, Sanskrit scholar outlined how the tradition has always valued multiple modes of reading texts, not just literary texts but even treatises, and how this has encouraged the process of 'counter-thinking'. In the same panel, B N Sumitrabai, another Sanskrit scholar, subjected the seminal classical text of 'Naatyashastra' to a brief examination to show how its aesthetics were not completely free from the politics, especially gender-politics of its times.

In a panel discussion on Caste & Politics, B M Puttayya, Kannada scholar and social thinker, offered a counter-perspective to the conventional perspective on caste inequality and violence while J S Sadananda, political scientist, traced the career of the concept of caste in modern Karnataka politics, especially the way in which it had played both positive and not-so-positive roles in consolidation as well as ossification of caste identities. Exploring the theme of the Course in the context of modern Indian theatre, Shamik Bandopadhyaya, literary and theatre scholar, elaborated on the destructive influence that colonialism had on native Indian performing arts, on the manner in which certain committed artists had countered this through acts of conviction and selfless dedication to their medium. Devdutt

Patnaik, a physician and an expert on Indian mythology, in his lecture brought out the complex ways in which Indian epics have negotiated the contradictions of human existence and the rich answers they have offered to fundamental questions. In the concluding session, Laxmisha Tolpadi, classical scholar, provided valuable insights into how thinking counter to the prevalent modes of thinking has always been vital to human philosophical and metaphysical quests of the highest order.

Invitees like Prakash Belawadi, theatre and media personality, Giraddi Govindaraja, Kannada writer and critic, K S Vaishali, literary scholar, S.B. Vaidya, Kannada writer, Vaidehi, Kannada writer enriched the discussions through their formal and informal interventions.

### **PERFORMANCES HELD AS PART OF THE COURSE AND LEC-DEMS**

*Sathyashodhak* (translation of the Marathi play by G.P. Deshpande), an intimate style theatre performance by the Janamanadaata troupe, directed by Atul Pethe; *Hasida Kallugalu*, a theatre production based on *Hungry Stones*, a Tagore story, performed by the Theatre Samurai group of Tiptur and directed by Haisnam Tomba; *Neelagaarara Kathanagalu*, a folk narrative performance by Mysore Gururaja and team; a Kannada Poetry session, with poets Prathibha Nandakumar, Lalitha Siddabasavayya, Arif Raja, and Yograj Bhat reading their poems, and Jayantha Kaikini moderating ; a Kannada Short Story session, with writers Shriram M S, Nagaraja Vastare, Shanthi K A reading their stories, and Vivek Shanbhag moderating; a lec-dem by Charudatta Aphale of Bharat Natyamandir, Pune, about Marathi Natyasangeet.

### **EVENING CULTURAL FESTIVAL**

As every year, the Culture Course was accompanied by a cultural festival held in the evenings during the Course. The festival, open to the general public, was an essential part of the Course for the registered participants. It featured the following programmes:

*Gunamukha*, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory performance, written by P Lankesh, directed by Manju Kodagu; *Tartuffe*, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory performance of the French play by Moliere (translated by A.N. Murthy Rao), directed by M Ganesh; *Orestes Puraana*, a Ninasam production based on the Orestes play cycle by the Greek playwright Aeschylus (translated by Dr. Vijaya Guttal), directed by Venkataramana Aithala; *Maanapamaan*, a Marathi musical play by K.P. Khadilkar presented by Bharata Natyamandir, Pune, directed by Ravindra Khare; *Akku*, a theatre performance based on three stories by Vaidehi, performed by Rangamantapa troupe of Bangalore, directed by Champa Shetty.

### **ACTIVITIES**

The Course had 10 lectures, 2 lec-dems, 5 open house discussions, 7 theatre performances, 1 music demonstration, and 5 informal discussion sessions.

## **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:

Participants: **Total 166** (Male 122; Female 46; Students 76; Teachers, Professionals, Activists, Self-employed, Homemakers etc 90).

## **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**

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