



NINASAM SAMSKRITI SHIBIRA

October 2018

A REPORT

A flagship event on the Ninasam's annual calendar for over a quarter century now, the Samskriti Shibira (Culture Course) is held at Heggodu, Karnataka, every October. Now a 5-day event, it facilitates the coming together of renowned thinkers, artists, activists and culture enthusiasts in both a formal and an informal atmosphere. It has earned wide recognition as a unique experiment which attempts to blend the aesthetic, the intellectual, and the socio-cultural modes of sharing human experience in an organic manner. One of its highlights is the heterogeneity of its participants, in particular, who hail from varied age-groups, educational and vocational backgrounds, and from different parts of Karnataka and sometimes of India. This diversity enriches the course and distinguishes it from other similar activities.

This year's edition of the Culture Course was held from 6th to 10th of October 2018, and it was conducted on the general model of the previous editions.

THE THEME

The theme of the Course this year was “Education in Crisis”.

Even as education has grown to be one of the defining sectors of the modern world and various systems of formal education have come take strong roots all over the globe, there has also been a rise in the questions being asked about the very fundamental nature and purpose of this idea of education. While some may mildly describe this as “crisis in education”, others prefer to characterize it more strongly as “education in crisis”. This latter formulation stems from the observation that the modern system of education has not just ceased to aid the spread and growth of knowledge but has actually proved to be a hindrance to it. Proponents of this argument point out that traditional forms of education, despite their limitations, did manage to impart education that was organic and holistic. They did help us realize a fuller range of human potential and also clearly marked the subtle and crucial distinctions between information, knowledge, and wisdom. The modern education system, a product of the modern Western civilization, in sharp contrast, privileges information over illumination, the professional over the philosophical, and the material over the ethical. Sad as this trend may be, we cannot go back to a past, real or imagined, because of the sheer impossibility of such a return and, even if that were to become a real possibility, because of the material and metaphysical dangers that such a time-travel is fraught with. The best we can do in such a situation is to explore the vital elements in both those general categories and adapt them to our contexts, if not as full-fledged systems then at least as counter-weights restoring the balance in the field. Ninasam’s search, through the Course and through the interaction amongst the experienced and the enthusiastic participants in it, was to evolve an idea of education, flexible and ever-expanding, that would save us from blind conformity, lack of discrimination and deficiency of sensitivity and take us towards originality, creativity and independent thinking. Only such an evolution, where the sciences and the arts, the intellect and the intuition, complement each other, Ninasam believes, would help us in turning our life-experience into life-vision and the activity of education into a process of transformation.





SESSIONS AT THE COURSE

The Course had four different types of sessions – lectures and panel discussions by eminent resource persons; lecture-demonstrations by accomplished artists and performers; open house discussions about the theatre shows presented at the cultural festival held in the evenings. These three types of sessions were scheduled in the 9.30 am – 6 pm time slot. The fourth type was a cultural festival held 7-10 pm every evening. This festival featured theatre performances by several groups. Besides these formal sessions, the participants also had an opportunity to interact informally with the resource persons over their walk, breakfast, dinner or lunch.

LECTURES AND PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The inaugural session consisted of two separate short lectures – one by Tridip Suhrud and the other by Claude Alvares, both subjecting contemporary education systems to an intense scrutiny and both highlighting the alternative modes that they had found worth pursuing. Suhrud, a Gandhian scholar, drew deeply from the various experiments that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore, had conducted in the field of education. The Gujarat Vidyapeeth, a university that Gandhi founded, taught, Suhrud recounted, courses of a wide diversity not only of subjects but languages and religions, too, in the true spirit of a ‘university’. Personally, too, Gandhi exuded the same confidence of being a ‘universal being’ in his insistence, in the face of great opposition by bigots, that anyone who had an innate sense of equality would earn a natural right to speak critically about others’ religions and scriptures, too. At the same time, in another part of India, Suhrud added, Tagore was building a counterpart to his more famous creation, the Shantiniketan. This other institution, the Shriniketan, with its emphasis on learning through crafts and practical engagement sought to achieve what Shantiniketan, with its focus on the fine arts, could not, as seen in the fact that it had

what could well be regarded India's very first agricultural science institute. Suhrud observed that the "thinking through-and-with hand" mode that these two visionaries so highly favoured and was so integral to their respective systems of went sadly missing from the systems that we came to adopt in later times. A second basic problem with modern education, Suhrud noted, was its omission of religion and spirituality owing to its fear that they would weaken and corrupt modernity. There was, however, a tragic irony in this, Suhrud observed, as the same element of religion has come back into the midst of modernity with a vengeance, haunting and corrupting us through its various perverted forms today. In Suhrud's view, the crisis in modern education, especially in India, could be measured through its own parameters. A large proportion of engineering seats continue to remain unfilled these day and the teaching posts continue to remain vacant, these very facts turning the rationale of the system itself upside down. With schools and colleges neglecting laboratories and more and more students preferring to attend tutorial/coaching centres focusing only on the theory component, 'experimentation' as a trial-and-error exploration, as a subjective experience has lost its significance. Thus, youngsters jump straight from coaching centres to engineering and medical colleges and the IITs and IIMs without ever properly tasting the vital joy of the interplay of hand and mind that laboratory practical sessions naturally provide. Such indifference, even aversion, towards touch of things, towards materiality of experience, Suhrud averred, could very well be symptomatic of the deep-rooted malaise in the Indian upper caste mind which in turn manifests itself in caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability. And knowledge gained through incomplete, imperfect means, Suhrud warned, could only be severely stunted and dangerous as well.

The second lecture of the opening session was by Claude Alvares, renowned philosopher of science and environmental activist. Beginning with the provocative remark that modern educational systems were themselves the cause and the source of present crises in learning, Alvares went on to illustrate it with various examples from the contemporary world. If the learning process during human childhood is so natural in the case of eating, drinking, speaking, walking, running and so on, why should we not allow it to be equally natural in the case of education, he wondered. The 'artificial' modern education system, he added, only aims at indoctrination. Arguing that more education is only resulting in less learning, he said he favoured a system where the spontaneity and creativity seen in young children is not only valued for their own sake but made an indispensable mode of learning in their future years, too. Such a system, for instance, cherishes living trees as the real sources of knowledge and hates turning them into books and benches, made from dead wood, he said.





In a joint session on 'Reimagining Education', Claude Alvares and his wife Norma Alvares, social and environmental activist, teamed to offer alternative models of education. Asserting that reimagining education needs to begin with reimagining our selves, Norma Alvares spoke mostly in an autobiographical vein, describing how she and her husband, both from conventional family and educational backgrounds and both from the metropolis of Bombay, eventually came to grow roots in a remote village in Goa, and got acclimatized and acculturated to rural life. They sent their children to the local Konkani medium school, which gave the children a far richer exposure to real life than would have been possible in a city English medium school. Far from putting any pressure on the children to become conventional academic achievers, they as parents, she said, enabled them develop deeper and stronger bonds with the community and nature around them. All this greatly helped the children in learning the value of such qualities as compassion, tolerance, faith and the ideas of freedom and responsibility. None of this would have been possible, Norma Alvares declared, if they had not dared to take the untrodden path. Complementing Norma Alvares' concrete instances drawn from real life with his abstract formulations and conceptualizations, Claude Alvares showed how Western colonialism had systematically devalued native traditions of knowledge and conditioned the natives into feeling inferior. Calling for a proper revaluation of non-Western and non-modern knowledge systems, he argued that we needed to demythologize the modern Western systems in order to gain a balanced perspective on the history of knowledge systems. 'Multiversity', a project of which he is a part, he said, was an attempt in this direction, aiming as it did at establishing the validity of multiple modes of acquiring and imparting knowledge in sharp contrast to the uni-mode of the modern West which has been valorized as the only universally valid mode. He concluded by saying that decolonizing our past alone could set us free in our present and future.

There were fourpanel discussions at the course:

In a panel discussion on “Crisis in Primary Education”, moderated by Krishnamurthy Hanooru, writer and folklorist, G S Jayadev and Sanjeev Kulkarni, both social activists, shared their experiences of founding and running non-conventional educational institutions for children, many of them from traumatic backgrounds, like orphans and destitute. Jayadev, who runs Deenabandhu Seva Trust in Chamarajanagara in south Karnataka, was of the view that interaction with his wards taught him that it needed a person with a real mother’s heart to look after children. Factors like unconditional love, acceptance and a sense of belonging, he remarked, greatly improved the learning atmosphere in his institution. The blending of conventional subjects like science, maths at one level and morality and creativity at another level made for joyful, experiential, and holistic learning on the campus, he said. With the realization that no real education was possible without the aid of spirituality, he observed, his school made it a point that the students imbibed the idea of social responsiveness and responsibility, that social debt can be and should be repaid not only in monetary terms but also conduct based on integrity and altruism. Sanjeev Kulkarni, who runs a school named ‘Balabalaga’ in Dharwad in north Karnataka outlined the non-formal and humanizing modes they followed with the formal, mechanical system of education in their institution. They helped develop intimacy between students and teachers by encouraging the former address the latter in terms of familial relations and use local Kannada words in doing so. Significant weightage was given to physical and material-based activity. There was no ‘uniform dress code’ as such and the only ‘uniform’ to be seen on the students’ body was that of the dust-coat which they accumulated during outdoor activities. No recorded music was used in any of the activities and children were encouraged to make their own, live music. They were taught to recycle/reuse waste creatively. In sharp contrast to the prevailing trend, the medium of instruction was Kannada, the local language and not English. The primary objective of their entire pursuit, he said, was to help students learn to pay equal attention to 3 H’s – head, hand, and heart.





In a second panel session titled “Life-Education” and moderated by Vaidehi, eminent Kannada writer, two achievers described how they had received the highest form of education from life itself. Sadanand Maiya, a member of a famous hotelier family and the man behind the legendary MTR and Maiya’s range of food mixes detailed how each one of his innovations in food preparation and preservation techniques were the products of larger social or community pressure situations such as the critical food needs of the Indian defence personnel fighting battles or guarding the borders or those of their fellow countrymen, especially the IT, BT professionals facing cuisine problems when they had to live and work for long periods in alien countries and cultures. An electrical engineer by training unexpectedly thrown into the food industry, he illustrated the ways in which he met every challenge in his new career with imaginative yet practical adaptations/modifications of the basic principles of chemistry he had learnt in college and the food processing and preservations methods he had seen women in his family as well as community employing. Shivananda Kalave, environmental activist and journalist spoke about the sweet little ironies of life that took a commerce graduate like him on a discovery of the great truths of ecology. Beginning as a village-based journalist exploring themes for articles in his surroundings, he quickly came, he said, to see that the geology and geography of every little village also led to a corresponding cosmology and cosmography of its own. Here all things – human, animal, plant, object, were deeply interconnected in ways that transcended their mundane material identities. Here nature and native community were the greatest teachers to any one open to real learning. Kalave concluded by saying that the most urgent need of our times was to desilt our minds just as we desilt our water bodies and to look at the world with the fresh, unaffected eyes of children.

A third panel, moderated by N S Gundur, literary scholar and teacher, discussed “Education & Social Conflicts.” Gopal Guru, political thinker, argued that the fundamental problem with the current educational system was not just of delivery but of its basic objectives themselves, intent as it was on only turning us into parrots and never on teaching us to raise vital questions. Further, the use of technology today in classrooms as also in the world in general was creating its own challenges, as seen, for instance, in the technologically induced modern hedonism of the ‘selfie’. Lamenting the fact that today’s systems educate us not to co-operate or agitate over significant social issues but to compete against and dominate others, he said he dreamt of the establishment of such educational environments where students like self-taught birds soar into the sky and not limit their flight only

upto the roof like trained birds. Pruthvidatta Chandrashobhi, historian, offered a perspective on human life in the near and distant future and the possible forms and role of education in the times to come, also noting that with the speed at which the human species is increasingly impacting the world, it is well nigh impossible to make predictions even concerning the next twentyfive years. Any such attempt, he remarked, would only end up raising more questions. One such question related to the kind of influence psycho-engineered personas like Batman, Superman, Spiderman and bio-engineered figures like the cyborgs would wield on us in the future. A second question was whether Artificial Intelligence would eventually surpass and overpower its own creator, human intelligence; whether AI would bring about greater leisure and comfort for its originators or take away their livelihoods. Third, if AI or cyborgs should indeed gain dominance, would they also show signs of consciousness, conscience, moral discrimination which the human beings have and which are the products of religion, faith, and spirituality. Further, what would the future world be – a utopia or dystopia? And can our educational systems, of the present and of the future, Chandrashobhi wondered, help us in confronting such possibilities and resolving their dilemmas.

The fourth panel session, moderated by Deepa Ganesh, of The Hindu, featured Sukanya Ramagopal, a South Indian classical percussionist and Keremane Shivananda Hegde, a yakshagana artiste and organizer. Sukanya Ramagopal, who holds the distinction of being the first female ghatam player in the field of Carnatic music, spoke about the many seemingly insurmountable challenges she had to face in her musical journey, owing to gender discrimination. These included the restrictions placed on women in a patriarchal system, the pressure of customary domestic duties within one's family, the superior attitude of the male performers towards their female counterparts. However high a woman's individual talent and deep her commitment, she has, Sukanya Ramagopal said, to suffer extra tensions and work harder many times over before gaining acceptance in a male dominated milieu. Thus for her, she remarked, education had meant both musical and life education. Shivananda Hegde dwelt upon the history of his family – one of the great families of yakshagana performers and organizers over four generations – and recounted how the family itself provided virtually all the vital education that one needed, both at the aesthetic and the material levels. He observed that it was the love for the arts deeply ingrained in the successive generations of the family that had helped it sustain itself against many challenges, especially the general social tendency to hold traditional artists' careers as far inferior to modern day professional careers. He was, however, heartened, he said, by certain recent developments where even youngsters from hitherto underprivileged sections were seeking to make the arts not just a passion but also a profession, and if not as a full time profession then at least as a part time one.





The “In Conversation with Dr Prakash Amte & Dr Mandakini Amte” session, moderated by Jayaram Patil, was one of the highlights of the entire course. The Amtes, whose entire family has been engaged in phenomenal social work over three generations now, shared their experiences of working with tribals and villagers deep inside the thick forests of Maharashtra. Dr Prakash Amte, in particular, gave an entirely unsentimental yet deeply moving account of his father Baba Amte’s transformation from a privileged youth to a renunciatory figure seeking to find fulfillment in the service of the less fortunate of his fellow beings. He also narrated how his father’s idealism radically influenced not only himself and his wife but also a whole group of city-bred, highly-trained professionals, most of them doctors, in dedicating themselves to social and ethical causes. The education he and his band of companions received in living and working with the children of nature, he observed, was far more valuable and ennobling than the one he had received through the formal modes.

Speaking at the closing session, Shamik Bandopadhyaya, eminent scholar and teacher from Kolkatta, pointed to how he had personally come feel once again, through the course, the great power and vital relevance of the non-formal ways of sharing experience and knowledge, especially through creative forms like theatre, music, dance, film and the like. The deadening impact of the modern formal education system could only be countered, he argued, through recourse to cultural and aesthetic modes which help make learning an organic and holistic activity. And the Ninasam Culture Course was a meaningful as well as successful exploration of that alternative path, he remarked.



PERFORMANCES, RECITALS, & SCREENINGS HELD AS PART OF THE COURSE

There were a few performances and screenings held during the day-sessions of the course which complemented the lectures and panel discussions and added to the all round experience of the event in their own way. These were

Yallamma Songs, a presentation of folk devotional songs from north Karnataka, by Shilpa Mudubi and group of Urban Folk Project, Bangalore;

Naaribayi, a one-woman theatre performance by Sushmita Mukherji, Mumbai;

Mohanaswamy, a theatre adaptation of a story by Vasudhendra, performed by Mahadeva Hadapad and troupe;

Maduve Henu, a theatre performance by Theatre Samurai troupe, Tiptur;

Walk, an experimental, interactive dance performance by Maya Rao, New Delhi;

a documentary film on Drs. Prakash Amte and Mandakini Amte

EVENING CULTURAL FESTIVAL

The Course proper is accompanied by a cultural festival held in the evenings during the Course. Featuring theatre shows, music and dance recitals, it, on the one hand, provides the registered participants who come from diverse parts of the state an opportunity to watch some important cultural works which they might not get to see in their own locations. On the other hand, it also provides the local community valuable exposure to art creations from the world outside. This year's festival featured the following programmes:



Sethubandhana, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory performance of a Kannada play, written and directed by Akshara K V; *Aashcharya Choodamani*, a Ninasam Theatre Repertory production of a Kannada version of the Sanskrit play by Shaktibhadra, directed by Joseph John; *Oedipus*, a Ninasam production in Kannada of the Greek play by Sophocles, directed by Ganesh Mandarthi; *Poozhippaavai*, a Tamil theatre production, performed by the *Manal Muguditroupe* of Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, and directed by Muruga Bhupathi; *Kola*, a theatre performance of a Kannada adaptation of the Marathi play *Magna Talakathi* by Mahesh Elkunchwar, performed by Theatre Tatkal, Bangalore, directed by Achyutha Kumar.

RESOURCE PERSONS

This year too, the resource persons came from diverse fields. They included writers, artists, performers, thinkers, teachers, and activists.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants, too, came from a wide range of backgrounds, as shown by the following statistical details:

STATISTICS

Participants: Total 154 (Male: 95, Female 59)

Students: 67 (Male: 35, Female: 32)

Others: 87 (Teachers, Students, Professionals, Art and Culture Activists, Self-employed, Homemakers etc): Male: 60, Female: 27



FEEDBACK

In keeping with its regular practice, this year, too, Ninasam paid special attention towards collecting responses about the experience of the Course using a variety of ways. Most of the participants, resource persons, special invitees, and observers found the design and conduct of the Course refreshing and rewarding.

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