

Art, literary and cultural festivals are proliferating in the last couple of decades the world over. This phenomenon seems to be a sequel to the age of cultural movements, which have waned in the last three decades. That is also a period of a great upsurge in the new market economy.

Some of the best known literary festivals are incredibly huge — the Medicine poetry festival in Columbia, The Hay festival at various locations and our very own Jaipur literary festival. The number of participants in these events is quite impressive and they also draw huge crowds. I witnessed personally at the Hay Festival in Seville in Spain, a presentation by the Peruvian Nobel laureate Vargas Llosa held in a four-storey auditorium packed so thick that not even a tiny needle could get in.

Barring the ones sponsored by the state, few business these days is courtesy, the generosity of a whole gamut of companies and organisations. The directors of such festivals, thus, have to balance cultural elitism on the one hand and populism on the other. They invite not just the stalwarts of literature and humanities but also the stars of media and cinema. An exception to this rule was Unmesh, a colossal festival organised in Shimla by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, in collaboration with the Himachal Pradesh Government. This three-day fest held from 16-18 June even surpassed the glories of JLP in scale and magnitude. It was an international festival very different from JLP. Though the participating Indian writers and scholars are quite well known in their genres and regions, the foreign invitees included mostly Indian writers like Vijay Sheshadri settled in far-off lands.

An Inclusive Festival
What was most impressive about this festival was its inclusiveness. Invited Indian writers not only represented the 22 mainstream but also a huge number of tribal languages still bristling with creativity. The true literary traditions appear to be following two different but parallel stages of evolution. As pointed out by one of



A many-hued tribute to pluralism

An international lit fest organised recently at Shimla sparked with the voices and thoughts of a diverse range of Indian writers, says renowned Kannada poet and playwright H S Shivaprakash

the participants, the well-known Gujarati poet, fiction writer and tribal activist Kargi Patel. "The mainstream and tribal literary traditions are very different from each other in spite of being contemporaneous." What is the main difference? Says Kargi Patel, "the best of mainstream literature is marked by an idiom which is sophisticated and self-conscious whereas tribal literature today is more rooted in the living context and speaks in a language earthy, raw and immediate."

He quoted lines from a Bhatti poet from the Vasava tribe, Jendra Vasava, in Dehwali language: "The language flowing through our ears into our blood, the granary's story sessions after sunset, the language going into our eyes through the path of hills, roads and valleys while we sit on grandpa's shoulders, Vasava remembers with anguish how it is being



threatened and supplanted by an alien tribe, parasite Macha."

One of the biggest achievements of this first of its kind festival is the huge catch of tribal literary figures.

While chairing one of the multi-lingual poetry sessions, I was exposed for the first time to the poems composed in the Himalayan languages like Dogri, Kangda and Poodi. I could mostly get the essence of those poems because of

my fairly good grasp of Hindi. However, having imbibed quite a bit of Hindi poetry in the last couple of decades of my life, I could see that the tone and tenor, the rhythm and music, and the smell and colour of these languages were markedly different from mainstream Hindi. What if these languages disappear like hundreds of other tribal languages in the last half a century? There will be a complete erasure of the

intimate world views and visions embedded in these little-known cultures. Apart from whatever good measures the Akademi and other government institutions are taking to preserve those languages, I pleaded that the poetic torch of these languages be kept alive.

Dalit writings

The festival had given enough space to women and Dalit writings. This was another way in which a state-supported institution like the Akademi moved away from the orthodox canon. Leading Indian women and Dalit writers present included Thambiachandran, Selma (Tamil), Geetanjali, Anamika (Hindi), Manjushala (Assamese), H L Poojya, M N Ashadevi (Kannada) and others. Further, there was a whole session focusing on LG BTQs writers and artists chaired by a well-known Indian English poet Hoshang Merchant. The presentations made in the sessions by Keki Subramanyam and her counterparts from other languages yielded the audience from their comfort zones.

Apart from attempting to present the best of writers, young and old, the festival also focused on the past and future of Indian literary traditions and practices. The two key sessions were focused on Bhatti movements, which have shaped and transformed the expression of our literature for over a millennia.

Nature and survival of classics

The tackling of the nature and survival of classics was another highlight of the festival. Well-known Malayalam writer Paul Zacharia pointed out that the question of classics in all languages is pro-

re-specific. In Malayalam, fictional classics are not even a century old whereas pre-modern poems like Thachachan's Ravayana are much older. Normal Kashi Bhatnagar, the former secretary of NRT, drew an important line of demarcation between classics and the classical tradition.

However, one of the problems of this excellent session was that it started and concluded with Euro-centric assumptions about what a classic is.

It is hard to give a comprehensive idea of Unmesh, probably the biggest festival the world, not just India, has seen. But it is important to highlight not just its unprecedented scale but also its catholicity of inclusiveness. Also worthy of mention is the fact that this state-sponsored festival steered clear of the much sought after generosity of big business.

Eminent Hindi writer and sociologist Prof Radha Narayan Tiwari raised a pertinent question: Can such literary gatherings be free from the pervasiveness of the state? He answered it himself by stating that it is perhaps all right because the state as a gift of democracy, also because there seems to be no censorship of any kind visible in this particular festival of cultural inclusiveness. In effect, state presence is not a problem unless it curtails inclusiveness. But what I found most refreshing was the absence of big business.

Prof Chandrabekka Kambar, President, Madhya Kambar, Vice President and Dr K Srinivasa Rao, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, deserve great encomiums for this tour de force.

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