

Report

‘Viraasat ke Bol’

By Neha Dabhade

“The plays were like a moral map for the society showing us the direction. The painting exhibition, Vedi Sinha’s rendition of Kabir’s songs and plays were all fascinating. The songs sung by Vinay and folk dances touched my heart. More such festivals should be organized!” observed Arya. Arya’s sentiments were echoed by other audience who attended the cultural festival called ‘Virasaat ke Bol’ in Bhagalpur on 19th and 20th November, 2022. This cultural extravaganza was organized collectively by Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Paridhi in Bhagalpur, Muhim in Allahabad, AAMRA in Kolkata, Prerana Kala Manch in Varanasi and Buniyaad in Ahmedabad at multiple venues- Kala Kendra and Mukti Niketan Kendra and street plays in different parts of Bhagalpur. The festival featured plays by Prerna Kala Manch, musical performance by Vedi Sinha, Pakhi Sinha and Sumant Balakrishnan from Ahvaan Project and storytelling session by Ankur. The festival was inaugurated by prominent historian and film-maker, Sohail Hashmi. *“The festival was beautiful. Its attempt to show a new direction to the society and this generation is praiseworthy. It was a good attempt to bring together so many artists on the same platform. It is important that we know our cultural and heritage and way to protect them. This kind of programme should take place every year since it will inspire the youth to work for our society”*, said Sudhir Tiwari, one of the members of the audience. The overwhelming response to this festival could be gauged from its attendance- over 500 persons attended each day at each venue.

In plural society like that of India, every community and its culture bring richness to the society and contributes to culture. India is home to a rich shared culture. The objective of this programme was to highlight this cultural diversity and shared heritage. *“We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their colour”* is a famous quote of thinker Maya Angelou. This quote captures the essence and significance of diversity in every society.

India is a plural society with multiple religious communities, linguistic, ethnic and caste communities. To add to the complexity of this social fabric, none of these communities are monolith and there is diversity within each community. In a society where conflicts arise from faultlines drawn on religion, language and caste, this rich diversity and its contribution to culture



Figure 1. Historian and Filmmaker Sohail Hashmi

in India acts as cement to bind the society together. Diversity and shared heritage are also a counter narrative to that a deeply divisive narrative based on a demand of homogenization of culture. This point was emphasized by Sohail Hashmi who said, *“the integrity of India lies in its diversity. But some people are trying to bind India in a single thread which is dangerous for India’s*

integrity”. While giving examples of the rich diversity in India, he emphasized on linguistic diversity of India which is also re-enforced by Indian Constitution which recognizes 21 languages as national languages. He presented a detailed historical perspective on the diversity in India in terms of food, costumes and festivals. He shared fascinating facts which show many of the food items used in daily consumption of Indians is actually introduced to India those traveling to India but became integral to our cuisine. After emphasizing on how each community has its unique culture, Prof. Hashmi discussed how this culture should be protected.

The festival was held together beautifully by Anshu Malviya, reputed poet, who was the master of the ceremony. He ensured there was never a dull moment by enhancing the flavor of the festival with a beautiful sprinkling of his poems and *shayaris* which had the audience glued to their chairs. The uniqueness of this festival was that different elements of culture were captured in variety forms of performances. The journeys of some of the artists and also the art forms were equally inspiring as their performance. For instance, Vinay Bharati, a Dalit artist was refused admission to Kala Kendra and Sangit Gharana in Banaras to learn music. But his music and singing enthralled the audience who appreciated his journey. Similarly, this festival also sought to promote some dying art forms including folk music- give specifics. A fitting encouragement to such important performances and art forms was that the audiences sat through the performances for five hours- engaged and absorbed with the stories being told in the biting cold.

Today unfortunately our society is witnessing conflicts over places of worships- demands of demolishing or digging up shrines from one religion to find temples underneath or attacks on places of worships. Amidst such tensions, it is soothing as well as imperative to resort to cultural resources or repositories of our past has which help us to overcome divisive identities and view the Supreme Being in a new light. The saints in India have contributed immensely to the rich lived realities and culture of Indian society especially the marginalized communities. The saints like Kabir gave message of love transcended boundaries of caste and religion. This message of Kabir



Figure 2. Singer Vedi Sinha, Pakhi Sinha and instrumentalist Sumant Balkrushanan

was conveyed in a melodious form by artists from Ahvaan Project. Vedi Sinha from Ahvaan Project accompanied by other members of her team sang compositions of Kabir and her own which dwelled into the concepts of *nirgun* (formless) and Kabir. Her rendition of the folk songs enthralled the audience. The central message of their performance was that human beings seek love

and this love is not based on religious identity but on humanity and is transcendental. She also sang a composition which reflected her own journey as a woman explored and depicted the struggles of a woman and the social attitudes she encounters. This moving performance left an emotional mark on the audience.



Figure 3. The Play "Amaanat:" presented by artists from Perna Kala Manch

The festival featured stage and street plays by Perna Kala Manch. The play 'Amaanat', based on the writings of Munshi Premji deconstructs the binaries of Hindus and Muslims and depicts how the two communities live in harmony, was a visual treat for the audience. The compelling performance inspired some members in the audience to reflect on the current

public discourse dominated with such binaries which seek to divide the society and dehumanize members of marginalized communities. In addition to the musical, there was also a story telling session by Ankur, who through a story problematized the struggles of farmers, corporate culture

and unemployment. The street play '*Bhook banam Dharma*' by Prerna Kala Manch also attracted many viewers outside the station.



Figure 4. Exhibition of paintings and handicrafts

The theme of diversity was very innovatively and sensitively dealt with through a photo- exhibition which was a yet another thought-provoking feature of the festival. The diversity of Bihar in all its subtle nuances were captured in photographs by photo-journalist, Shashi Shankar who works with Dainik Bhaskar. The exhibition included paintings of around twelve artists reflecting this diversity. The viewers were very impressed with this exhibition, which was a visual treat. The viewers of this

exhibition have urged the organizers to have this photo- exhibition every year.

This two-day festival was conducted on the first day in Bhagalpur city and the second day in Goga in rural Bhagalpur. Both days around 600 audience attended the festival on each day. The photo-exhibition was attended by over thousand people. The audience consisted of a cross section of the society wherein the success of the festival lies. The festival was attended by journalists, teachers, doctors and youth in large numbers. The festival was attended also by political leaders of Congress and JDU. These leaders went unacknowledged from the organizers yet sat through the whole performances like ordinary members of audience. The audiences were from both Hindu and Muslim communities. The festival provided a common platform and inspirational space for the audience to reflect on our rich shared heritage and question the boundaries drawn by constructs of religion and caste. The audience enjoyed the festival which spanned over 5 hours on both the days. Some members also expressed their appreciation how the festival generated an atmosphere of hope and positivity in an overwhelming discourse of polarization and hatred. They went back feeling more hopeful and with greater appreciation of diversity and shared heritage we all a part of. Almost all the feedback from the audience while praising the festival also consisted of vehement demands of having more of such festivals and having this festival every year. The organizers too felt encouraged by the response and appreciation of the audience to continue to undertake such cultural interventions.