

CONFERENCE/SEMINAR REPORT

Published in Vihangama Vol. VI 1998



Mind, Man and Mask

An International Seminar on Mind, Man and Mask was organised by the IGNCA from 24-28 February, 1998.



A five days International Seminar focussed on an interdisciplinary exploration of the many different ancient and contemporary notions about the nature of Mind - Man - Mask interrelationships. The discourse through different domains of knowledge closely linked the notion of mind, consciousness, and to the varied assumptions about Man. The interlinkages were explored from many view points, such as science, neuro-sciences, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and psychology. The delebration was conducted under the following themes :

Mind, Man and Self : focussed on interdisciplinary exploration of the ancient and contemporary notions of the Self/Person and Creation, as reflected in masks of different cultures.

Mask in the Ancient World : explored the historical beginnings of the use of masks such as expressed in pre-historic cave paintings, or those found in the ancient archaeological relics of different cultures. Specific cultural forms of mask expressions, in the ancient world, such as, in Greek, Mayan, and Indian civilization; archetypal representations which embody powers of the primeval nature, and how these relate to the underlying worldview or cosmologies.

Mask and its Expressions : this is one of the many ways in which cultures have given expression to their artistic faculties. These range from the use of masks in theatre and performance, to the use of the metaphor in visual expression as literary discourse.

Mask and its Social Role : as a communicative device to express the many aspects of the person in ritual context, such as, celebrations, carnival and collective festivals; the use of mask as a social comment and social satire, explores the 'revealing' function of the masks or the 'unmasking' techniques devised by cultures to depersonalize the psyche, while using the mask.

In her keynote address Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan narrated a story of a fig from the *Upanishads*, where a man repeatedly peels and breaks the fig until only the seeds remain. She said, "it is the mind which creates and it is the mind which breaks. We should therefore look at the seed of the mind". Speaking during the inauguration, John Emig, Professor at the Brown University, also known for his one man shows on Balinese mask techniques said, "mask originates from deep philosophical concept. It is used to convey

paradoxes which relate to mind and body."

About 35 scholars of varied disciplines from India and other parts of the world participated in the Seminar. Professor Emanuel Anati in his paper entitled 'Mind, Man and Mask in Pre-Historic Art' spoke about the cow cult which was prevalent some 1,000 years before the vedic period, which takes the Indian history beyond the 4,000 year period. He said that there was ample evidence in the form of rock engravings which suggest that there were groups of people in India who practised vegetarianism, which again dates back to over 8,000 years. Professor Anati stressed the need of proper study and methodology of rock art, which will reveal the truth.

David Napier's presentation on 'Masks and Metaphysics in Ancient World' explained a certain metaphysical continuity existing among versions of masked performances as they are represented in ancient India and in pre-classical Greece, and in contemporary Bali. He introduced some new evidences that indicate both a cosmopolitan awareness of cultural difference in the ancient world and an epistemological and ideological difference that are apparent in the ancient shift from sacred masked performance to a more secular form of mask art.

Alexander Adampoulos presented 'Man Mind and Mask in Hellenic Classical Theatre' emphasising the use of masks which were one of the most essential means for performance, as they represented a very fundamental element of the ancient Greek drama, with deep roots in worshipping of the God Dionyssus. The followers of the God reached at some moment at the point of ecstasy, losing, consequently - their personality. Therefore masks were needed.

The other papers presented on the theme Mind, Man and Self include 'Mind, Mask and Culture' by John Emigh, 'On the Mask of Mind' by Subhash Kak, 'The Self and the Other in Early Indian Tradition' by Aloka Parasher-Sen, who spoke of human mind which understands the 'other' in the context of a larger human environment which in turn constructs a particular cultural worldview of both the 'self' and the 'other' in the process of understanding its ideas and expressing its actions. 'Mask : A Question of Self-Identity : What Tradition Reveals, Modernity Conceals' by S.C. Malik, dealt with the crisis faced by humankind today, at many levels due to positivistic-reductionistic, empiricist and anthropocentric assumptions. 'Mind the Elephant : A Sacred Science View of Reality' by B.N. Saraswati related the dialectic between mind and matter in the larger framework of cosmological systems.

The deliberations on masks and their expressions livened up the Seminar, as scholars from different regions from India and abroad dwelled on the living traditions and practices of mask dances. Some of the papers presented here were, 'Mask as Decorative Motif' by M.C. Joshi, 'Masks in West Africa : Manifestations of Bush Spirits in Villages' by Eberhard Fischer, 'Identity and Impersonation : Masquerade and Subversion in Pottan Teyyam' by Sudha Gopalakrishnan, 'Chhau : Mind, Man and the Mask of Seraikella' by Rajkumar Surabhanu Singhdeo, 'Working with Masks with the Puppet and the Human Form' by Dadi D. Pudumjee, 'Mask without Masks' by M.K. Raina, etc.

The last theme, Mask and its Social Role discussed the 'Traditional Lenten Carnivals in Europe : Social Implications and Male Identity', by Donatella Bernsten. Madhu Khanna spoke about 'Unmasking the Mask of Adharma : The Celebration of Guru Padmasambhava at the Hemis Festival, Ladhak' and the participant from Ivory Coast, Goorges Niangoran-Bonan spoke about 'Mask and Peace-in Cote D'Ivoire'.

Speaking at the concluding session of the five days international seminar on Mind, Man and Mask, Kapila Vatsyayan said, "the discussions had transgressed several subjects and has entered many areas of the world and the regions beyond. If one were to look at them at circuits, the first circuit dealt with Archaeology bringing out evidence of the existence of mask from pre-history to history, the rock art etc. The second circuit that was concurrent to the first one was the discipline of Anthropology and the third was the field of history and sociology and also the religious circuit." Dr. Vatsyayan said "the area of psychology and masks brought out the interplay between the brain and the mind. This in turn gave way to

discussions on the artistic expressions, the literature and the other derivations of the mind."

Previously in five international seminars and exhibitions, IGNCA had dealt with the fundamental concepts of the cosmos. The seminar Mind, Man and Mask was the beginning of a new series of exploring the fundamental concepts of the Self, complemented by the festival of mask dances and an exhibition of masks from the world over.

Richa Negi

