

Poised to provide a culture shock

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Santosh Kumar and Jayita Sengupta

Workshop at Sikkim

Jayita Sengupta, associate professor (English), Sikkim University, is passionately in love with music — in fact, all performing arts — and that led her to create *Caesurae*, an e-magazine, early this year. “Suddenly it dawned upon me,” said an excited Sengupta, “that all art is indeed political! Since my arrival here, I have been working on the cultures of Sikkim. It’s quite obvious from my experience how different the culture here is from the rest of the country. People here have a particular distaste for the word, ‘annexation’, but would rather use ‘merger’, which, according to them, is politically correct. But the fact is, the state is in its transitional phase to become a merger. It is indeed an annexed kingdom of a very proud race, who consciously wish for the preservation of their culture.”

According to Jayita, when she and Santosh Kumar, a talented, young flautist, joined this university last year, they gave the students culture shock after culture shock by organising music and dance sit-ins and workshops. The initial resistance or revolt is now gradually paving way for interest in other cultures not Western or Sikkimese. They are slowly becoming receptive.

“We realised that just as we were trying to understand their culture(s) and build bridges, they, too, started reaching out to us. And now under the aegis of *Caesurae* we inaugurated a Kathak workshop in Singtam, East Sikkim, a little way down from Gangtok. The Singtam workshop dates were 4-6 October 2015 (three days) and the Gangtok workshop dates were 7-12 October (six days). This was a whopping nine-day affair! And we found that there were about 40 students to start with.

“Registered as a non-profit organisation, we realised on the inaugural day of the workshop that our motive was forked. We work on these geographical areas with the Sahitya Akademi, to relate musically with a literary interface, and for the rest of the country we work on projects that are interdisciplinary. These are our goals.”

But all this did not come easy. Some of the members in the Caesurae community had viewed Jayita with tremendous skepticism, especially musicians from Kolkata. “We had no problem,” asserts Jayita, “getting across Namrata Mali, who has come all the way from Delhi by train as we could not afford air fare at this stage. She is staying with us as we could not afford a guest house or a hotel (very expensive here). She willingly, joyfully has joined Caesurae.”

Namrata is a young, dynamic and promising artiste. Initially trained by Guru Maheshwar Pati Tripathi in Vindhyaachal and Sangeeta Sinha, she received higher education in Kathak dance from Kathak Kendra, New Delhi, where she learnt new techniques, a different variant style, interpretative gestures, expression, Natya drama, fusion and composition from renowned Kathak maestro Pandit Jai Kishan Maharaj.

“We saw that all these experiences came very handy when Namrata handled the workshop. She was very professional, though it was a mixed group. The workshop on the first day was from 11 am-5.30 pm, with breaks in between. The interesting thing about this place is the youngsters here are very talented musically. Their pick-up is very fast, which Namrata too repeated many times to us. Music, dance, rhythm come naturally to the Sikkimese people.”

This success has come to the Jayita-Santosh duo as a huge incentive. They organised another sit-in featuring well-known sarod exponent Bhawani Shankar Dasgupta, worthy son-disciple of Pandit Buddhadev Dasgupta. “We are already mulling over some ambitious cultural events in the future apart from the Art History Symposium. Our plan is to organise a presentation of Tagore’s Red Oleanders, followed by Girish Karnad’s English translation of Agni aur Barkha (The Fire and the Rain). Apart from this, Santosh is working with his students on a musical presentation of the folk and dhrupad intervention with its interface with the cultural nuances here.”

She is now very positive that the world of Indian performing arts will be with her; that the artistes will rise above their doubts, negativism, skepticism to work creatively with her. “If you have ideas, projects to share, please let us work it out together. Please remember the next issue of the e-journal www.caesurae.com is the ‘Fugue’. Let’s make it happen too,” she pleaded with contagious positivity.

Read more at <http://www.thestatesman.com/news/marquee/poised-to-provide-a-culture-shock/100535.html>