

ART & CULTURE

A critique on Sahitya Akademi's Festival of Letters

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SahityaAkademi, India's National Academy of Letters, having its office at Rabindra Bhawan, Near Mandi House, New Delhi is a premier literary institution dedicated and devoted to the promotion of literature written in different languages in India. It was established with a purpose, which is quite evident from the excerpts of the speech delivered by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the then Vice President of Republic of India during formal inauguration of SahityaAkademi on March 12th, 1958 at Indian Parliament's Central Hall, New Delhi. He said, "The phrase SahityaAkademi, combines two words. 'Sahitya' is Sanskrit and 'Academy' is Greek. This name suggests our universal outlook and aspiration. Sahitya is a literary composition; Academy is an assembly of men who are interested in the subject. So SahityaAkademi will be an assembly of all those who are interested in creative and critical literature. It is the purpose of this Akademi to recognise men of achievement in letters, to encourage men of promise in letters, to educate public taste and to improve standards of literature and literary criticism."

Stepping ahead firmly thus fulfilling the aspirations of talent from across the nation, SahityaAkademi not only organizes national and regional workshops and seminars, provides research and travel grants to authors and publishes books and journals but also honours the literatures of 22 languages with four annual awards like Sahitya Akademi Award, Bal Sahitya Puraskar, Yuva Puraskar and Translation Award. It also gives Golden Jubilee Awards for translation, Bhasha Samman and confers Frenchard Fellowship, Ananda Coomaraswamy Fellowships and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship for life time achievements on the deserving ones.

In addition to all these activities SahityaAkademi hosts a critically acclaimed annual fair called "Festival of Letters." This year also it was organized at the capital city New Delhi from March 07th to March 12th 2023 that ran for six days and is acknowledged as Asia's largest literature festival. It was inaugurated by Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, the union minister for culture and tourism. More than 700 writers including young writers, women writers, Dalit writers, writers from North-East, Tribal Writers, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) writers representing over 50 languages graced the festival with their august presence. They presented their creative writings, participated in symposiums and had interactions on varied subjects across 100 sessions. The festival has an important segment of honouring SahityaAkademi Awardees. Mahesh Dattani, eminent English playwright was the Chief Guest at the award ceremony this year and Urmilaya Chatterjee, a distinguished writer and scholar presented this year's Sarvagat Lecture, an annual lecture of SahityaAkademi.

This year, the theme of the festival was 'Indian Literary Traditions'. A three day detailed discussion on the subject with eminent thinkers and authors was quite interesting and thought-provoking. The festival had special focus on Children having 'Children Literary Event' and 'Spin a Tale', a day long storytelling and creative writing program which was well received by the participants and literature lovers. In addition to literary activities, the festival also had cultural performances including Hote vocal by Rakesh Chaurasia, Hindustani vocal performance by Nalini Joshi and Dastan-e-Mahabharata storytelling by Foyia Dastango and Ritesh Yadav which enamoured the audience.

As, I had the privilege of being a part of 'Festival of Letters' as a Dogri writer, I experienced that it is not

merely a get together of writers and authors representing their respective mother tongues from across the nation, but an awakening call also for the much needed exposure for the languages at prestigious platforms for their survival. It acts as a booster for the efforts made by literateurs in their respective languages. The connect between different languages is a must as it gives an opportunity to come across what is being written in other languages and helps the authors to grow and experiment in their literary pursuits. The purpose of such events is to make the participants consciousness about their duties towards their language and culture. It surely shows positive outcome as the company of literateurs representing different regions and languages is an everlasting experience that helps a lot in shaping creative ideas through literature in a better way.



It needs to be added here that Sahitya Akademi has been coming up to the expectation level every time. Our mother tongue Dogri was recognized by Sahitya Akademi in 1969 much before it got included in the 8th Schedule with 90th Amendment of Constitution of India in 2003. It had inspired many to pen down their creative works in their mother tongue Dogri, as recognition from Sahitya Akademi is always a blessing. Sahitya Akademi award is the 2nd highest literary award in literature after Jangam Award. Although the National Akademi of Letters is offering all opportunities to writers and authors to explore them and mark a niche at national level if they have the potential for the same, but there is a concern for the regional academies and a big question mark is often made on their working for the purpose, these were established.

If we boast of having Jangam & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, established with the same purpose of promoting regional languages and culture then it will not be unfair to say that yes, of course the purpose was pious, but, what is the outcome, is a concern and the present scenario is alarming one. For the last so many years now, there is no Best Book Award and Annual Drama Script Award, Subsidy to writers is hiked in the past, irregular and below standard publication of magazines like SHEER-AJA, SADHA SAHITYA etc. gives a dent to the past glory. Every time lack of Budget is an excuse and when the budget comes, there is no strategy and all efforts are made to consume it at an earliest thus avoiding surrender of the same and responding to queries thereafter, why it was not utilized. Yes, they consume the same in different programs thus accommodating their favourites and then derive ink of ignored ones. How many qualified persons are handling the affairs of Academy, is the root cause. We have to understand that

it's not a routine office work and promotion from different cadres will not serve the purpose. The staff employed there has to deal with literature and culture. Unless you have expertise in the same, how can you handle such sections with all professionalism?

Now 'SAHITYOTSAVA, Festival of Letters' gives an opportunity to introspect while interacting with participants from other regions. We often say that South India and North East India are very rich in their culture, but we forget that they have a passion for their belongings and the Institutions meant for preserving and promotion of literature and cultural heritage have dedicated and qualified teams for the purpose. They know it well that if the talent is deprived of opportunities by favouritism and nepotism, it will be a grave threat for survival of their language and culture. They perform their duties with honesty

and never make compromises when their own existence gets on stake. The same instinct is missing in our case.

Honestly speaking, our Dogar Pradesh has no scarcity of talent, which is evident from the response this talent derives while presenting their literary works at prestigious platforms and sharing dias with stalwarts of other languages. But these are the individual efforts with apprehension, what efforts the Institutions entrusted upon are putting in grooming that talent. The need of hour is that an honest fair like Festival of Letters' should be

organized at regional level also thus catering to the expectations of immense talent from every nook and corner of Doggar Pradesh. Instead of accommodating favourites, the stage should be open to genuine talent so that those who have no access to the key persons holding the affairs of Academy should not feel disgraced with continuous ignorance.

Now, if Sahitya Academy is able to organize such big festivals quite successfully, then credit goes to well-planned strategies wherein Advisory Councils play a vital part. But in our case, the same is nonfunctional for years together. Let us hope that darkness prevailing among artists fraternity including authors and writers will pave way to dawn. Literateurs and Artists are always full of positivity and are hopeful with basic mantra that nothing is lost when hopes are there. Let SahityaAkademi be a role model for other regional academies in real terms and the purpose behind setting up them is not defeated.

Padmashri Mohan Singh Shastri, Convener Dogri Advisory Board at SahityaAkademi New Delhi, in a conversation while elaborating about the importance of such high profile festivals dedicated to literature says that SahityaAkademi New Delhi has been doing a tremendous job by offering an opportunity to literateurs from across the country to come and be an integral part of the movement. He further added that it's a good sign that Dogri writers are getting a platform on regular basis to showcase their potential at such a prestigious platform.

While concluding I will like to say that SahityaAkademi deserves all appreciation for such a grand festival of Letters, an annual affair that draws the attention nationwide and infuses a spirit to write even with more responsibility and creative input.