

THE REVIVAL AND RESURGENCE OF FESTIVALS OF INDIA ABROAD



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1. August 2013 - Barely a few days after I joined the Ministry of Culture, I received a telephone call from my old friend and Joint Secretary (Latin America Division) Ministry of External Affairs Dammu Ravi, that the Vice President of India would be visiting Peru and Cuba, and if it would be possible for the Ministry of Culture to coordinate an international cultural event on the sidelines of the visit. When I checked the institutional memory of the Ministry of Culture, it appeared that some nascent efforts had been initiated to organize Festivals of India abroad in Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba and Trinidad & Tobago. The Ambassador of India to Venezuela had responded on telephone that conditions there were not conducive for an International Cultural Engagement in August 2013. The Embassy of India in Trinidad & Tobago indicated that it wasn't possible to conduct the event in 2013. The Embassy of India in Colombia did not present any viable options for taking the initiative forward. There was very little response from the Missions to take the Ministry of Culture's initiative forward.

2. I was eager to take the Festivals of India abroad as I corresponded vigorously with the Embassies of India in Lima and Havana. The Ambassador of India to Peru and the Ambassador of India to Cuba responded enthusiastically to the proposals to host cultural events in Peru and Cuba respectively. We got venues and dates in Peru and Cuba. The Ministry of Culture and its Akademies had to get firm up the events, participants and budgets for conducting the events for the Festivals of India abroad to be revived. The Embassy of India in Lima intimated me that the Inca Sala auditorium was booked for October 26th and 27th 2013. The Vice President of India's participation in the Festival of India abroad ceremonies was confirmed for October 26, 2013.

3. It was in the backdrop of the Vice President of India's visit to Peru and Cuba that the remarkable revival of the Festivals of India abroad happened. Sustained international engagement could be developed in a short period of time. Small teams working in cohesion enabled generate a significant momentum. Faced with the challenge of conducting 2 major events abroad in a month's time, I met everyone

concerned –Joint Secretary (Latin America); Director General Indian Council of International Relations; Secretary Sahitya Akademy for the Festival of Letters; Secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademy for the Festival of Dance; Member Secretary IGNCA, senior colleagues in the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting for the film festival, officials in ITDC and Ministry of Tourism for the Food Festival to firm up participation and the events. We were racing against time, to coordinate a number of events, financial sanctions, ticketing, in an administrative set-up that had not been used to conducting events of the scale or size we were envisaging.

4. There was a lot of confusion in the run-up to the events. Culture Minister was to come for the visit, and after considerable preparation her visit did not materialize. The IGNCA exhibition on masks did not materialize either. The folk artists for the event had to be dropped as their quality was poor. When I watched the preparatory full dress rehearsal at the SNA, I found the invocation of Shiva presented in the composition mesmerizing. The mosaic of Indian dances was beautifully choreographed and had a unique resonance about it. Secretary Culture led the Ministry of Culture delegation to Lima and Cuba comprising of myself, 8 writers from Sahitya Akademy and 8 artists from Sangeet Natak Akademy. The films division forwarded the films for the Film Festival. India Tourism Development Corporation deputed 2 cooks for the Food Festival to Havana. Thus began the revival of the Festival of India abroad with a limited budget, limited artists and only 4 events.

5. The first event when we reached Lima was the Festival of Letters, the Sahitya Akademy had an impressive array of authors and the Peruvian side too participated with considerable rigor. Day 1 of the Festival of India in Peru, which had the Literary Festival – “Symposium on India and Latin America: Literary Exchanges and Influences” was quite well received by the audience. Day 2 of the Festival of India in Peru, we went to the Festival of Letters. The Symposium on “Contemporary Literary Trends and its Challenges in a Multilingual Society” did not draw the audiences we expected. For a moment it appeared as though the Festival of India in Peru may not be as successful as we had envisaged.

6. **5.30 pm, Lima, 26th October 2013** – Secretary Culture and I were driving from the Sahitya Akademy’s Panel discussion to the Inca Sala auditorium in the central part of Lima. The Festival of Dance was to be presented by Sangeet Natak Akademy which was to be attended by the Vice Presidents of India and Peru along with a number of Cabinet Ministers from the Government of Peru including the Culture Minister of Peru. The mood was tense. We were uncertain of the response. The Film Festival with the silent film of Raja Harishchandra was screened to very modest audience. The opportunity given to us for reviving the Festivals of India abroad in a distant land, during a VVIP visit, the contours of which we weren’t familiar with, seemed to be slipping away. Secretary Culture said, *“I hope Dance Festival is successful, for on this one event would rest the success of Festival of India,*

Peru. If we don't succeed, we would face tremendous criticism for presenting the Festivals of India abroad with inadequate preparation which did not evoke adequate response". I mumbled that I had seen the Nrityarooma composition a number of times and felt that it had tremendous appeal to the viewer. The distance seemed unusually long. When we reached Inca Sala auditorium, we noticed that the auditorium was filled to capacity. All that was needed was a performance to aesthetically please the dignitaries. The welcome speeches by the Culture Minister of Peru and Culture Secretary of India were received with courteous applause. **Then the magic began.**

7. Two hours later, the SNA composition Nrityarooma with a mere 6 dancers of Odissi, Bharata Natyam, Chau, Kathak, Manipuri and Kathakali had received a standing ovation from the Vice Presidents of India and Peru and the entire auditorium. The Culture Minister of Peru warmly complimented Secretary Culture. The Ambassador of India to Peru received high accolades from many dignitaries of the host country Government for bringing the event to Peru. The Secretary West MEA said the event was magical and a tremendous success. At the post event reception for hours the artists were applauded and congratulated. The Festival of India abroad was truly reborn as a scheme from that moment onwards.

8. Two days later we went to Cuba. Havana with its warm climate represented a world of difference from cold temperatures we had encountered in Peru. The Indian cooks had reached Havana and the Food Festival had commenced, which was added to our enthusiasm as Indian food was available. The Embassy of India in Havana had undertaken considerable efforts for publicity. The response was visible.

9. Day 1 Literature Festival, in Havana, was graced by full audiences, Cuban writers participating with great vigor and the Culture Minister of Cuba joining the 3 hour long session. The Cubans loved the literature reading sessions. All six Indian authors were received with huge applause. The knowledge filled sessions at the Casa del Alba were extremely memorable.

10. October 29, 2013 The Theater Mella was the venue for Festival of Indian Dance. When Secretary Culture reached the venue, the Culture Minister of Cuba was already there and they were to address a joint media conference. There were large crowds and long lines, and even in the Theater Mella there was lot of crowd making it difficult to hear the media questions and bilateral discussions. By the time the Vice President of India had reached Theater Mella, it was clear that the Nrityarooma composition would be presented to a packed house and would receive tumultuous response. The performance was awarded the "Best Cultural Event of the Year 2013" by the Ministry of Culture, Cuba. It was a phenomenal achievement for the artists.

11. The Film Festival in Cuba was well received too. We had dropped the notion of going with dated classical films and chose contemporary Bollywood films some of which were shot in Cuba. The movies of Bollywood stars were huge attractions in

Havana. There were additional events like Yoga and Mehendi which were also held and there was good response to these events.

12. The success of the Festivals of India in Peru and Cuba had largely to do with the commitment to excellence shown by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with Ministries of Information & Broadcasting, Ministry of Tourism and the Autonomous Institutions. It provided us in the Ministry of Culture the confidence to conduct large events in a short period of time by coordinating with multiple agencies. It also made the “Nrityarooopa” artists favorites for performing in many future events of Festival of India abroad. We received a lot of support from the Ministry of External Affairs after the event. Several Missions contacted me and several Ambassadors and High Commissioners wanted to know if we could conduct the Festivals of India in their countries.

13. By February 2014, the International Cultural Relations division, Ministry of Culture had scheduled Festivals of India abroad in several countries of South East Asia – Lao People Democratic Republic, Cambodia and Vietnam. We now had a template of a successful Festival of India abroad, namely a Literary Festival, a Dance Festival, a Food Festival, a Yoga Festival, a Film Festival and some exhibitions. Given the large number of Buddhist Institutions under the aegis of Ministry of Culture we requested Director Central Institute of Himalayan Studies and the Director of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara to present a Buddhist Festival in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Buddhist Festival comprised of a Buddhist Exhibition, Lama Chanting, Lama Dancing and Sand Mandala. We also presented the Kalakshetra Foundation’s Ramayana series in Cambodia and Lao PDR. In Lao PDR, the Ambassador had arranged a river cruise on the Mekong.

14. It was on this 3 hour river cruise that Secretary Culture and I realized that we could get more ambitious in presenting Festivals of India abroad. We discussed the feasibility conducting prolonged Festivals of India in China, Japan and South Africa. My view was that Ministry of Culture should conduct the Festivals in important countries where we had significant bilateral engagement to present the soft power of India and enhance people to people linkages. Secretary Culture’s views were that we should focus on East Asia and Africa after venturing into Latin America. We went with his views and planned all year long Festivals of India in China and Japan and a prolonged event in South Africa in addition to Malaysia and Indonesia.

15. There is one unforgettable memory of the Buddhist Festival in Ho Chi Minh City. Almost a one kilometer long line of people welcomed the Buddhist monks from India. We met the High Priests of the Ho Chi Minh city monastery and attended the Buddhist Festival that commenced shortly thereafter. The Buddhist chanting, sand mandala and Lama dancing were received with tremendous enthusiasm by the thousands of people in the audience.

16. The Festival of India in China 2014 was the first time a Festival of India was being conducted in China since 1984. It was held in 5 cities, and had a number of events. The dance festival, the yoga festival, the Buddhist exhibition of the Indian Museum were huge success stories.

17. The Festival of India in South Africa had some special events in addition to the SNA's hugely popular Nrityarooma performance. These were the Gandhi – Mandela Exhibition of Archival Papers and the Exhibition on India – South Africa Cricket relations.

18. The Festival of India in Japan was held in 21 cities and had 7-8 events including exhibitions on Indian Cinema and India's Scientific Progress including the Telecom Revolution. By end 2014, Ministry of Culture had lined up events in Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Korea and Australia. The Planning Commission and Ministry of External Affairs came forward to support a separate Plan Scheme called the Festivals of India abroad with a budgetary allocation of Rs. 100 crores for the 12th Plan. When I look back at where we started in 2013, we had a meager Rs. 2 crores non plan allocation. It was a huge turn around, a huge success story which was sustainable and replicable. The institutional frameworks were well defined and synergy existed to conduct the huge events.

19. To conclude, the success story of the Festivals of India abroad goes back to that one wintery evening in Lima, at the Inca Sala auditorium when six motivated artists under the aegis of the Sangeet Natak Akademy came forward to wean their special magic on a captivated VVIP audience, resulting in a significant step forward for policy making in people to people contact redefining the contribution of Ministry of Culture to cultural diplomacy on a global arena.

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The views expressed in the Article are his personal.

