

“Following the 2010 Chennai Sangamam -- Thoughts about the Future”

by Eric Miller, PhD

The Fourth Chennai Sangamam occurred 10-16 January 2010. As we look forward to many decades of future Chennai Sangamams, this might be a good time to consider ways in which this wonderful annual Festival might grow and develop.

1

It might be good to have more performances and other cultural presentations that are related to specific and particular communities, geographical locations, and natural environments.

Exhibitions and demonstrations of handicrafts could be arranged. For example, from forest areas there could be demonstrations of basket-weaving, and other household and workplace objects made with bamboo and other leaves, branches, bark, vines, and other forms of vegetation. This could be done in coordination with Poompuhar, the State-run crafts organisation.

2

The 2010 Chennai Sangamam’s opening production was entitled, “Pirapokkum”, which can be translated as, “All are born equal”. Many folk performing arts and artists were utilised for this performance. However, due to lack of translation, the performance could only be fully appreciated by those who are fluent in listening to Tamil. This kind of situation might benefit from projecting translated words onto a large screen beside the stage.

There was one storytelling event (held in Nocchikuppam, the sea-fishing community beside Marina Beach’s Lighthouse) in the 2010 Chennai Sangamam which did use this method of simultaneous visual translation. Some of the words were typed into the computer in advance, and some were typed during the performance itself:



Chennai Sangamam is known as an Open Festival, because it occurs in public spaces. Displaying translated words makes the Festival open in an additional way, opening the experience even to those who are not yet fluent in listening to Tamil.

3

In many folk performing arts, it is typical that topical subjects are referred to in improvised speech. However, in the formal atmosphere of the Sangamam, some artists might be shy to do this. Therefore, there could be sections of the Sangamam in which the folk performers might be especially encouraged to include improvised words in the songs, storytelling, and drama.

4

In 2010 for the first time, storytelling was a major part of the Sangamam. Every day in the early evening, at each of the 14 locations, there was a storytelling session. College students were among those who told the stories. It might be good to also bring some storytellers skilled in *Story and Song (Kathaiyum Paattum)* to Chennai from around the State.

Dr. A. Ramanathan (Professor, Folklore Dept, Tamil University; and Secretary, Folklore of South Indian Languages Association) has recently led a team of scholars around the State in collecting folktales (Grandmother stories, Raja-Rani stories, Tenali Raman stories, Talking Animal stories, etc) from storytellers. The project has published these stories in 15 volumes in Tamil, and publication in English translation has also begun. Dr. Ramanathan would be a great resource for helping to find expert storytellers for Chennai Sangamam.

5

The “video call” revolution is upon us! BSNL’s 3G (Third Generation) network is in operation, and other networks are scheduled to be activated soon, enabling “mobile videoconferencing”. The use of Skype and other programs for “video chatting” on computers via the Internet has also become very popular. Chennai Sangamam could plan ways to use this technology for performance of, training in, and discussion about folk performing arts with interested parties around the world, such as students and scholars in schools and universities, and members of the Tamil Diaspora.

The following three projects present ideas that might be useful for Chennai Sangamam: A) Nirantar (New Delhi), B) Smithsonian Folklife Festival (Washington DC, USA), and C) Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour (Tamil Nadu).

A) Nirantar (www.nirantar.org) -- Ethnographic Fieldwork and Research, Applied to Literacy Training.

Nirantar, based in New Delhi, sends fieldworkers to visit with members of rural communities, to find out how people talk, and what they talk about -- and then it uses this data to design local literacy-training courses. Some members of folk communities are interested in becoming more proficient in reading and writing (in various languages). Such literacy could help some members of a folk community to manage, display, and promote some of the traditional aspects of the community.

B) The Smithsonian Folklife Festival (www.festival.si.edu) -- Celebrating the Local.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is an annual international exposition of living cultural heritage. It occurs for two weeks every July, on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The Festival is produced by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. (The Smithsonian is the USA's federal museum.) The Festival is a free educational presentation.

The term, Folklife, refers to traditions and customs relating to social and work experience.

Initiated in 1967, the Festival has become a model of a research-based presentation of living cultural traditions. It features community-based cultures. Performers and craftspeople demonstrate skills and knowledge that embody the creative vitality of community-based traditions.

Along with the programs of music, song, dance, and storytelling -- there are demonstrations and illustrations of crafts, cooking, architecture, and culture relating to professions. Some physical settings of the traditions are re-created. The Festival includes signs, panels, and posters composed of photos, paintings, and words; a program catalog; teaching-and-learning centers; shops for books, photos, and audio-video recordings; and shops for food.

The Festival is an exercise in cultural democracy, in which cultural practitioners speak for themselves -- with each other, and with members of the public. There are sessions for discussing culture. The Festival is designed to enable visitors to learn about and participate in aspects of the traditional cultures, and to converse with the tradition-bearers.

The Festival has had impacts on cultural policies, scholarship, and folks "back home." Many states and several nations have been inspired by Festival programs to generate local institutions, books, documentary films, recordings, museums, and traveling exhibitions. One result has been the development of Heritage Education (both for members of communities, and for visitors), and Community-based Tourism. By energising local and regional tradition-bearers and their communities, the Festival has helped to conserve, develop, and create many cultural resources.

C) Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour (www.storytellinginstitute.org/30.html) -- Experiencing Storytelling in Villages.

The Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour, facilitated by the World Storytelling Institute, is one of many Heritage Tours being developed around the world. Some of these tours are described at www.folktalk.org/tours.html , www.experiencecovington.com, www.washingtonfolkarts.com , and www.northwestheritageresources.org .

Story Tours involve visiting the geographical locations and communities at which episodes of a story took place. *Storytelling Tours* involve visiting places, listening to people telling stories in those places, and learning how to tell stories in local styles.

Kannagi is a unifying figure of Tamil culture, as she interacted with people from various levels of society, and passed through each of the five geo-cultural areas: 1) the coast, 2) agricultural areas, 3) pasture areas, 4) barren areas, and 5) mountain forests.

The Places of Kannagi Tour has been conceived of as an annual two-week pilgrimage -- and also as an experience that is available anytime, as individuals along the route are being trained as storytelling tour guides (with translation when necessary), and can be visited year-round. The WSI has begun coordinating with Dr. Ramanathan, the scholars in his story-collection project, and the storytellers with whom these scholars have been working, to further develop the Tour experience.

The Places of Kannagi Tour is an instance of eco-tourism, because the stories that are told along the way relate to the local nature. In this way, members of the public are educated and entertained about Tamil Nadu's natural environments; and it becomes clear that culture and nature are often intertwined and mutually-supportive.

In summary:

Chennai Sangamam is the week of the year in which folk artists from around the State come to Chennai. The rest of the year, people from Chennai could visit the folk artists in their home locales -- to learn about the folk arts in their social and nature-related contexts.

Chennai Sangamam could expand its work with NGOs, scholars, folk artists and other members of folk communities, tour guides, museum organisers, and others, to develop an even larger team to present folk culture to the public.

The above essay follows-up on the essay written following the 2009 Chennai Sangamam. That essay can be accessed at www.storytellinginstitute.org/9.pdf .

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