

Doddu Habba

Gaur Festival & International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 8-9 August, 2014

The concept of the festival came about through a series of discussions pertaining to the theme of engaging local populace in conservation efforts. A conclusion was arrived at after many conversations involving various people, the idea that a “celebration”, rather than a conventional and exclusive gathering of academicians, activists and experts might aid our outreach efforts. It was also planned to combine with the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples celebrations, in order to have better outreach and provide exposure to a diverse audience.

Conception:

The idea of a celebration, as a mode of disseminating information crystallised during the “*Blue-sky Thinking*” session. To be more detailed, the celebration entailed, non-conventional modes of spreading awareness, through dance, music and storytelling for instance, as well as through conventional modes, such as displays, information brochures, documentaries.

Our efforts were initially focussed on evolving the theme of the festival, and to identify and communicate with potential participants. Efforts were made to reach out to people who live in culturally different landscapes frequented by Gaur (outside the Nilgiris as well).

The festival envisioned was a space, where people from diverse backgrounds and cultural landscapes would have a platform to share their experiences of/with Gaur, as well as help us spread awareness about Gaur and Nature itself. The space was to be a multicultural one, with focus being given to the local narratives involving the Gaur.

The Gaur as an animal was chosen to be the theme of the festival for a variety of reasons; A small research study being conducted on them in the Kotagiri region, a belief that Gaur have not yet been considered “conflict animals”, their almost continuous interaction with Humans in a variety of places, as well what appears to be a disposition which they possess which enables them to interact with humans in rather easy and unstrained manner (for most parts).

With such a diverse canvas of ideas and perspectives, the platform would be well suited to tackle different problems and ideas that came about in working out a manner in which to peacefully and fruitfully engage with this majestic creature. The space was also being considered as a platform where different cultures would be exposed to each other, and attempts could be made at influencing, sharing and showcasing them.

Execution:

The initial list of confirmed artists had to be changed to accommodate a few cancellations and a few last minute changes, resulting in the information on the posters and flyers being inaccurate. There was a delay in putting up publicity material and creating awareness among the locals. While our initial idea was to engage with the public outside the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve as well, due to the delay in the availability of publicity material, much of those efforts could not be made given the duration available before the festival.

While the publicity for the event happened only in the week preceding the event, it was clear that publicity done in a timelier manner could attract a greater and more diverse crowd as well. The final list of participants included tribal musicians/dancers/storytellers from Orissa, performers from the Kaanakam Institute of Education & Culture Centre, Dasanur, Attapady, a group of musicians and artists from Kerala called Oorali (Sadhana Center for Creative Practice Samithi), a shaman from Kerala, a shaman storyteller from Darjeeling, West Bengal, musicians and dancers representing Kurumba, Toda, Irula tribes from the Nilgiris, and a folk music group titled *Karinthalakoottam* from Kerala.

The Event:

The audience was an interesting mix of people, with people from diverse backgrounds and landscapes gathering together at the event. One of the biggest drawbacks of a multicultural event such as the *Doddu Habba* is translation. The multilingual presentations and crowd posed quite a challenge in communicating some of the finer nuances of the performances. This potentially could be a fundamental concern in figuring out how to encourage more active participation at events like these.

The variety of performances provided an interesting backdrop for the event (a celebration and showcase of various narratives of the Gaur as well as indigenous knowledge and traditions).

While quite a few performances were dance and music based, there were also a few storytellers who captured the attention of the audience. The music and dance based performance drew quite a crowd and a good fraction of the audience gaily joined in the dance celebrations. The school children were quite receptive to the storytelling sessions and the displays. The performance group *Oorali* also conducted a workshop for school children on acting and music, which was very well received and even had a few participants from the older audience joining in. The performance by the indigenous people from Orissa was quite an interesting one, and one by a group from Attapady was a well scripted performance of hunting and effects and our interactions with Nature.

One of the storytellers narrated a folktale from the North East titled *Motizee* or the Z stone, while the other had a short narrative about the Gaur. The local musicians were quite a hit among the audience. There seemed to be a little reluctance in attempting to fuse musical styles between different communities, but there were no issues with the dance forms as everybody joined in.

The displays about the Gaur attracted quite a bit of attention, and most people were quite receptive to the displays and information being shared.

Another drawback would be that a good share of the performances were in a language not easily understood by the locals, this could have resulted in a loss of interest in the performances and some of the ideas being shared.

The event was also planned targeting the indigenous communities and people Keystone Foundation works with, and providing them a platform to interact with alternative perspectives to themes they engage with.

There were 4 stalls set up at the venue, the first stall showcased Toda Embroidery, the second one housed the Aadhimalai Pazhangudiyinar Producer Company Limited, the third displayed handmade paper from Nepal, as well as some printed stories collected from around the Eastern Himalayas and the fourth showcased some tribal art and Music discs of the folk group from Kerala, *Karinthalakoottam*.

Takeaways:

- Defence Personnel and their families are interested in learning and understanding more about Gaur. They were quite keen on using a Gaur observation system as well to keep a tab on the local population. Some of them were also quite keen on having us do awareness presentations at DSSC, as well as engage with the administrators of DSSC in the process of making Wellington more Gaur friendly.
- A few schools in Kotagiri are quite keen on contributing to the work being done on Gaur. The familiarity of this animal, and curiosity among the students and faculty was quite encouraging. The faculty from a couple of schools asked if we could do awareness sessions at their respective schools.
- Quite a few civilians (resident locals and migrants) were quite excited to learn how to differentiate between Male and Female Gaur and hear more about their behaviour and their interactions. They were also interested in contributing to the ongoing work.
- The local Police have shown an interest in learning more about the Gaur, as they often encounter them around town while on Night Rounds. Approaching them to help out with Gaur monitoring especially at night and around town (likely conflict zones) is an idea that needs to be worked upon.
- New modes of engaging with various cultural phenomena to a multicultural and multilingual audience have to be explored.
- Would it be possible to encourage a healthier and non-hostile attitude and discourse towards situating other communities and people?

