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In other words

At Lekhana, Bangalore's first literary weekend, the focus is on city writers and regional languages rather than on building a celebrity quotient by flying in star writers

Indulekha Aravind / Bangalore Feb 12, 2012, 00:05 IST

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"It is a literary weekend, not a festival". "We are bending over backwards to emphasise the informal feel." "There are no megastar writers." The organisers of Lekhana, Bangalore's first literary weekend, seem to intentionally want to distance themselves from the Jaipur Literature Festival and the many clones it has spawned. Over the past couple of years there has been an explosion of festivals in the literary firmament. Ashok Banker, author of the popular *Ramayana* series, recently wrote that over the past few years "an astonishing sum of 143 invites appears to have filled my inbox." (all of which he turned down). And of course, this year's edition of the Jaipur festival hit the headlines for the author who did not or could not come rather than for those who did. So perhaps it is just as well that Lekhana has chosen not to go down that path.

"Lekhana is specifically meant for city writers in many languages, and that is the 'niche' it occupies. There may be a surfeit of lit fests in India but ours steers clear of the hype and hoopla. And we have chosen local over 'imported'," says C K Meena, chairperson of Toto Funds the Arts (TFA), one of the four organising partners. It is only apt that the theme chosen for the weekend (February 10th to 12th) is "The City." Nearly half the readings will be in Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi. Thus, Lekhana does more than give the token nod to regional languages that is often the case at high-profile literary jamborees. The inaugural discussion was about the representation of Bangalore in literature and arts. Subsequent days will have discussions on translations as conversations and new writing in Kannada.

Lekhana came into existence as an expansion of the readings held by Sangam House, a four-year-old writers-in-residence initiative for Indian and foreign language writers who are invited to spend 12 weeks near Bangalore. "We wanted to graduate from the small readings held by the writers in residence to a larger public platform where writers and readers could meet," says D W Gibson, a director of Sangam House. Separately, TFA, a non-profit that supports young artistes, had been thinking of hosting a literary weekend for youngsters, when "Sangam House suggested we join hands with it and broaden our scope to hold a full-fledged literary festival," says Meena. *Reading Hour*, "a magazine for short reads," and Kannada literary journal *Deshakaala*, too, came on board.

The venue for Lekhana is Manikyavelu Mansion on Palace Road which once belonged to the Mysore royal family and now houses the Bangalore arm of the National Gallery of Modern Art. While not exactly "cosy" or small, it provides a lovely location for writers and readers to hobnob and on Saturday morning, the second day of Lekhana, that's exactly what they seem to be doing. The Kannada readings by Jayant Kaikini and Arathi H N on the library terrace attract a bigger audience than those by Francesca Marciano and Douna Loup in English and French, two of the writers currently in residence in Sangam. (To be fair, that might also have to do with the fact that the latter is in a room tucked away in a corner). And the succeeding panel discussion in the auditorium on "Writing about writing," moderated by Anjum Hasan, is well-attended and the audience, attentive. In between, there is a short performance titled "Trivial Disasters" at the cafeteria.

Being the first edition, it is easy to maintain the "small and intimate" tag but the challenge would be to retain that, while balancing it with the fact that the audience could grow bigger in successive editions. Gibson says they would do this by not hosting "celebrity" writers, and spending most of the sponsorship money on flying in authors from London, while more readers and attendees would always be welcome. It sounds like a sensible course of action. But this is what Jai Arjun Singh, writer and *Business Standard* columnist had to say on his blog after returning from the very first edition of the Jaipur Literature Festival: "One of the charms of the fest for me was that it wasn't a lavish, media-infested event with journos crawling about the place like maggots on rotting meat. What this translated into was small but enthusiastic audiences and a merciful lack of cameras and microphones." So who knows what Lekhana will be like six years on?

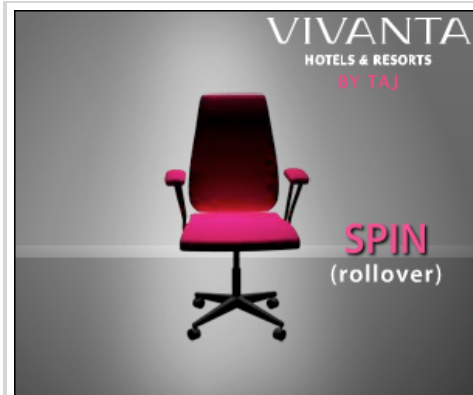
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microphones. So who knows what Lekhana will be like, six years on?

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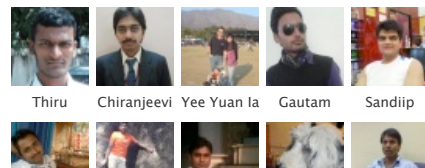
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