

A SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE

Starting with an exhibition of photographs of a 1,000-year-old temple, Vikram Sampath is looking to rejuvenate the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Bangalore

INDULEKHA ARAVIND

Situated on Janpath, a stone's throw from India Gate, the red-and-white Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, or IGNCA, is a fairly well-known landmark in New Delhi, at least among the city's culture vultures. But in Bangalore, where the southern regional centre is located, it is a different story altogether. Not many are even aware of its existence, unlike other cultural hotspots such as the National Gallery of Modern Art. Drive through the gates of the centre, located near Bangalore University, and a building that still resembles a work-in-progress (you need to use a square block of concrete to climb the first step) greets you.

It is to transform this hitherto largely unknown set of buildings into a hub of the arts that the centre recently inducted a new executive director, author and Carnatic music aficionado Vikram Sampath. He is a well-known face among the city's literati, not least because he is also one of the founder-organisers of the Bangalore Literature Festival, which will be in its third edition this year. "On my first day, a staff member told me to

always look on the floor and under my desk because there is a snake menace," he laughs. Before I can look down warily, Sampath says the "menace" has been sorted out, primarily by clearing the undergrowth outside the building.

But as dangerous as they might have been, the snakes are just one of a seemingly unending to-do list in front of Sampath. At the top of this is publicising the fact of the centre's existence. "The biggest task is to create awareness about the centre, and to make maximum use of the resources here," he says. "Our library, for instance, has over 12,000 books and we have over 14,000 micro films of rare manuscripts from various parts of India. So far, very few people have been using it, which is quite strange considering we're very close to the Bangalore University."

IGNCA was set up in New Delhi in 1987, three years after the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi.

"The idea was to create a centre that looks at research, documentation, archiving and dissemination in the larger spectrum of all the arts. The aim was also to look at the arts in an integrated way, such as how one art form impacts another," says Sampath, who in a previous avatar was a team leader of analytics at Hewlett-Packard.

The southern regional centre was established in 2001 during the previous term of the National Democratic Alliance. The idea then was to create an arts and culture district spread over 20 acres, with the land divided between IGNCA and Kalagur next door, but like many fine ideas it seems to largely have remained just that. But Sampath says a lot of field-work for research and documentation has happened. "For instance, the rituals and tradition of the Melkote temple and a *yagna* in Thrissur that takes place only once in 12 years has been

documented," he says.

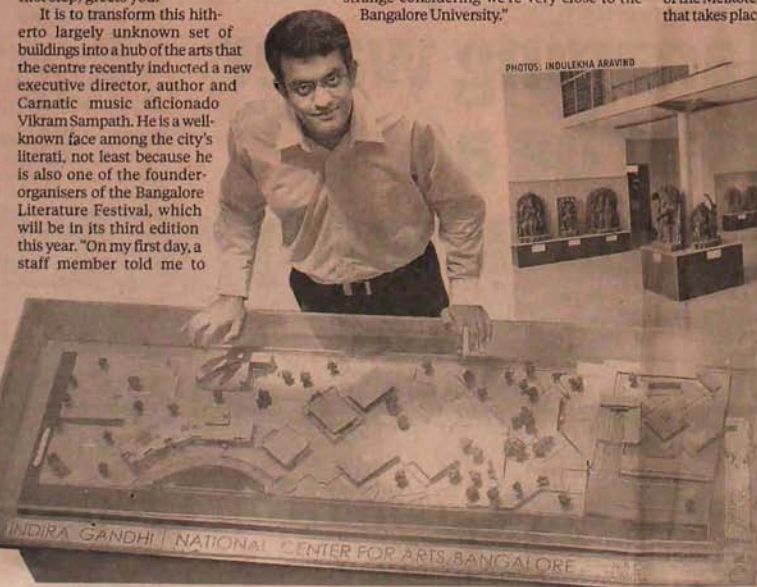
Kicking off the events that Sampath has planned is an exhibition of photographs of the 1,000-year-old Brihadeeswara temple in Thanjavur, the result of a 15-year research project. Photographs include those of sculptures of the dance postures as prescribed by Bharatha. Such was the attention to detail of Raja Raja Chola, the ruler then, that he even had inscriptions of the names, addresses and emoluments of the *devadasis* who worked at the temple! "And we say Indians never liked to keep records," Sampath says with a chuckle. This will be followed by an exhibition of vintage photographs taken by Raja Deen Dayal, who captured images of late 19th century India, especially in his role as the architectural photographer of the then British agent in central India.

A South India heritage lecture series is also planned at the Bangalore International Centre from next month, to be conducted by experts in the arts from different parts of the country, with the first talk on Badami's rock temples at the end of June. Documentaries made by IGNCA will be screened during the talks. Also in the works are a workshop on the board games played by the erstwhile royal family of Mysore and another on Swati Thirunai's *kritis*, for which his descendant Rama Varma will be invited to teach some of his compositions.

The other challenge is to take the activities to other cities in the south and to smaller towns as well, for which talks with other institutes have been initiated. The centre's mandate also include collaborating with universities abroad, which Sampath has included in his agenda. "But our first stop will be the universities next door," he says with a laugh.



PHOTOS: INDULEKHA ARAVIND



(Left) Kicking off the events that Sampath has planned is an exhibition of photographs of the 1,000-year-old Brihadeeswara temple in Thanjavur; (right) cards used by Krishnaraj Wodeyar III and the Mysore royal family in late 19th century