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City embraces slam poetry

Young people are turning their innermost thoughts into verse, and going live at colleges, cafes and bookstores

Express News Service

Queen's Road: Poetry is no longer something that is merely read; at many city venues, it is also performed regularly.

Poetry slams, as the performances are called, are becoming popular at colleges, cafes and bookstores.

Shaun, a 19-year-old in his final semester of a forensic science course at Jain University, performed his first poem just six months ago.

An spontaneous decision made with his best friend Bincy took him to a college festival event.

A professional swimmer — he has represented India at competitions such as the Asian Age Group Championships in Tokyo — Shaun had little time for anything but swimming and academics.

He had attempted to write short stories and two novels as part of the NaNoWriMo contests held online. But that first performance sparked something off and Shaun hasn't been able to stay away since.

He recently bagged the first place at the Slam Poetry competition at the St Joseph's literature festival, Meta.

"After that first poem, I learnt the power and influence that words can have on people. I think poetry is a great medium to create a global revolution in promoting art," says Shaun.

Shaun is also currently working with Tim Surdo, an Australian poet, and with Airplane Poetry Movement to create a global concept called Open Sky Slam, to transform "dead" spaces that are little used (like someone's rooftop, or a cafe with open space) into ones where passionate



POETRY HOTSPOTS

Here is where you can recite poetry and catch slam sessions

- Atta Galatta, Koramangala (4160 0677)
- Urban Solace, Ulsoor (99450 22177)
- Airplane Poetry Movement (www.facebook.com/airplanepoetrymovement)
- Open Sky Slam (90356 94602)

youngsters can showcase their creative skills for a friendly audi-

ence. Three of these have happened so far, the first one taking place on Shaun's roof.

Mobika Maring, an MA English student at St Joseph's, tried out slam poetry first at her college fest, although she has been following *YouTube* slam poetry channels for about a year.

But it wasn't until the competition that she realised that there were other young Indians who shared her passion for the form.

"Being with so many like-minded people felt good," she says, adding that even back in Shillong, where she hails from, she often took part in poetry readings.

"There is a platform, but it's much smaller. But I'd often try out free verse," she tells *City Express*.

Members of the Airplane Poetry Movement approached her at the college competition to perform for them, and she's looking forward to being part of more spoken word events with them as this

is a form she enjoys.

"It puts you in a vulnerable position to be up there on stage talking about your most personal thoughts. But again, it works as a support group for other people as they're probably going through the same things as you are," she says. **CONTD ON P2**

City embraces poetry as performance art

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And this encourages others to open up and 'embrace their artsy side', she feels.

"Spoken word poetry is spontaneous, energetic and it connects. The writers can't read out their work; they have to have it committed to memory," says Perry Menzies, who runs Urban Solace.

The cafe, located in Ulsoor, has had 200 sessions of weekly poetry reading, where performance poetry is gradually taking over.

And although it is mostly youngsters performing it, there is no age bar for the audience. In fact, far from being deterred by poetry slams, Perry has noticed that some seniors have begun to overcome their reservations to a form that deviates so much from the conventional classical poetry that they were brought up on, and take to writing and performing the spoken word.

For the past year, while it has been hosting its Let Poetry Be sessions, Atta Galatta in Koramangala, too reflects a similar trend.

"A theme is given to participants, and they have to submit their entries in advance, so we have a mixed set. But increasingly, youngsters are taking to performing it," says Lakshmi Sankar, co-founder of the bookstore. These are often theatrical, sometimes rehearsed in pairs, she adds.

According to Perry, the first exposure to slam poetry for Bangaloreans was through American and Australian visitors. "These were passer-by poets who came to the city before online channels became big," he adds.

Atta Galatta also played host to the first Airplane Poetry Movement (APM) event

last January. APM was founded in December 2013 by two law students, Shantanu Anand and Nandini Varma, with a vision to spread spoken word poetry across the country.

"The idea is not just to introduce people to spoken word, but also to nurture talents of amateur poets, develop their skill and put them on stage," says Shantanu, who is completing his final semester of law at ILS College, Pune.

The duo came up with the idea when they were completing a six month internship with Campus Diaries, in Bengaluru, who encouraged them to build the platform and funded them as well.

"Instead of just starting a small local poetry group, we wanted to do something that would make an impact and empower people," says Shantanu.

Apart from holding slam poetry events across the country, APM also hold workshops—these range from introductory

classes to annual summer workshops that run for six weekends, and also week-long intensive workshops.

"We are currently holding an internship to help people set up poetry slams in their own cities. We have three students from Bengaluru interning with us now. Hopefully, once their internships are done, the city will see three to four regular slam events," he says.

According to Shantanu, a regular on the slam poet circuit now, themes vary, including women's issues, political poems and letters addressed to parents or teachers. "The point is that they are able to talk about things they otherwise have to be quiet about," he says.

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