

Report

'State of Art Schools; A conference on Art education'

Date: 26 & 27 November 2016

Venue: Casino Hotel, Willingdon Island, Kochi, Kerala

Organised by Foundation for Indian Art and Education (FIAE) & Kochi Biennale Foundation

Day 1, 26 November 2016

The conference opened at 9.30 am with a welcome speech by **Prof Indrapramit Roy** (Secretary of FIAE), who gave a brief background of how FIAE came about and the idea of the conference and **Mr Riyas Komu** (Joint Director of KMB) spoke on behalf of the Kochi Biennale Foundation introducing how the foundation is engaged in furthering the cause of art education. This was a brief introduction and he elaborated on this after the keynote address.

After the formal opening with the traditional lamp lighting the **Chief Guest Professor (Dr). J. Letha**, Vice Chancellor of Cochin University of Science and Technology, spoke about how during her tenure as the head of Directorate of Technical Education she came to realise the importance of art teaching institutes of Kerala in the higher education scenario of the state and expressed her happiness that such a conference was being held at Kochi.

The **District Collector of Kochi Mr M. G. Rajamanickam** spoke about Kochi being a centre of art and education and how the Biennale has made it a talking point. In a lighter vein he mentioned that before the KMB Kochi was known only for its prawns and spice exports. He shared his vision about Kochi's future as one of the 100 proposed smart cities. The Central Business District would be at Fort Kochi. He stressed the need to protect heritage, improve infrastructure and increase the potential for tourism.

This was followed by a short speech by **Mr P. K. Hormis Tharakan**, who was a retired IPS officer and a trustee of the Kochi Biennale foundation. He mentioned that he was a former policeman who strayed into art. He reminded the audience that 26/11 was also the anniversary of the Mumbai attacks in which five of his colleagues lost their lives. He felt there was a need for cultivating approaches that were non-violent and art remains an important aspect; there is a need for art education for peace.

Mr Bose Krishnamachari (Director KMB) spoke briefly about How to make arts an integral part of curriculum. He emphasized the importance of educating people through public art, galleries and museums and a need to invest in art infrastructure. Art education is an integral part of such infrastructure. He cited examples of Florence, London and Basel. He underlined the importance of visual literacy and how the Biennale Foundation is working with students, people from different walks of life and the local community. Bose said that although it is said that in the beginning there was 'word' he believed otherwise. It was the 'image' that started the ball of civilisation rolling.

In the **Keynote address Prof. Raman Sivakumar** (Head of Art History, Kala-Bhavan, Santiniketan and FIAE Trustee) briefly outlined the history of academia for art education in the world to contextualise the conference. He mentioned that the first such Academia could be traced back to 1563 in Florence followed by Royal academy of London that started functioning in 1648 and Kensington School in 1837. The Kensington model was imported in India and it was E.B. Havell who attempted Indianisation of art education helped along by Abanindranath, but from the onset Art and Craft/Design were two distinct categories. Santiniketan tried to break this mould and looked at art education more holistically. The next experiment was at Baroda, the first post-Independence art institute that was an integral part of the M.S. University of Baroda. It did not carry the burden of anti-colonialism. Sought to educate the mind and not just the hands. Aesthetics, art criticism, art history were integral parts of pedagogy in Baroda and it sought to make students self-reflective and articulate. Since this experiment there has been no major rethinking in art education in India. He emphasised how contemporary practices such as video, performance, installation etc. are still not part of pedagogy. New media art practices have at times suggested the erasure of disciplines of conventional art. It accompanied the new global order. It is for us to ask whether we should have a

reasoned acceptance or a reasoned resistance to this new order. No one programme will suit all art colleges. Art schools have different kinds of students. Some are first generation learners in Indian art schools while some learners are familiar with Western art. Each art school should provide for basic infrastructure (library, studios, digital access), trained teachers. Should have administrative structures (policy for recruitment). Many of our education policies are framed keeping science (and not humanities) in mind. The distinctions between conventional art practices - painting / sculpture/ printmaking should be dissolved or at least, loosened. Lack of museums and galleries must be made up for by bringing together art history and art practice in colleges. Learning takes place through interaction between fellow travellers - and teaching should be seen as an extension of learning.

The second session after the tea break began at 11.40 with **Mr Riyas Komu's** presentation of the various extension activities undertaken by Kochi Biennale foundation. He provided an impressive list of activities that KBF is already engaged with such as:

- The Student Biennale
- PG Residency Programme for fresh art-college graduates.
- Pepper House International Residency Programme
- Master Practice Studio (14 students and 4 masters)
- Children's Biennale
- Artists Cinema
- Talks and Seminars
- Arts and Medicine(contribution of arts to healing; arts in hospitals)
- Cultural Programmes (committed to promote traditional art forms)
- Video-Lab (Lab for Video-Art and Experiential Films)
- 10 ALT (Art, Literature Theatre; Art Learning Tools) leads to ABC (Art by Children).

Riyas concluded by saying the secret of the success of KMB is to involve people from all walks of life.

After the tea break **Prof. Vasudevan Akkitham** (FIAE trustee and Head of Painting, M.S.U of Baroda) presented his paper. The need to have a nodal agency to monitor certain basic parameters before permission to start an art college is given requires to be seriously considered because colleges are opening without any standard and at will, disregarding the bare minimum. He referred to the Architecture Council or the Medical council in this regard but also pointed out that this needs to be carefully thought out as such agencies also have a tendency to turn arbitrary and overbearing and all is not well with such Regulators. His other contention was better interaction between institutes of higher learning which would lead to sharing of resources and expertise that would be mutually beneficial.

Prof. Indrapramit Roy presented the report collected from 33 Art Colleges of the five southern states. The problems of collecting data and formulating a questionnaire that balances quantifiable data with more qualitative ones were discussed. The chart that showed some key information of the colleges such as the course structure, teacher student ratio, access to library and internet, space per student were some of the highlights of this data. At least in the physical sense it was easy to see the best and the worst-case scenarios. He mentioned that data collection would continue in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan in the next few months so that FIAE is ready with another report covering the western Indian states before the next conference. The idea is to collect detailed information regarding courses offered and their structure, teaching, student activity, learning in studios and outside it, access to visual and other information etc in a comprehensive manner so that it can be used to understand, analyze, administer and improve. The absence of any such comprehensive database on Institutes of art education makes this undertaking necessary and important.

Lunch (1.40- 2.40 pm)

The post-lunch session started with **Mr Sadanand Menon**, who lucidly raised certain fundamental questions. He began by narrating how when he told his friend T. N. Krishnan that he was going to attend a conference on the state of art education his immediate response was, "I think it is going to be a sad conference with a lot of lamenting and breast beating." Should we be lamenting?"- Sadanand's poser to the audience was, "Are things so bad?" He went on to raise some pertinent questions such as who do such a conference wanted to address? The answer to that was the State. But the state does not have a policy on art and it is completely ad-hoc.

- You cannot isolate the problem of art education from the problem of education.

- What is art education all about? He peppered his presentation with anecdotes and stories like the Zen story that showed that 'immersion' is a way to learn. Art can be learnt in an osmotic way, not necessarily in a formal, time-bound manner. In other words he emphasized that art education needs a different paradigm from the ones we are used to since the inception of colonial art schools. He cited the example of Chennai's Govt. Art College where despite a hallowed history, for several years the Principal is a non-artist and things are falling apart.

Our art institutions are malnourished. Art-discourses full of pettiness; bristling at the smallest things, Camp-isms etc. There is lack of healthiness in art education itself. The data (about Southern Zone art colleges) presented earlier in the day suggested cultural deficiencies. This led him to ask "Are we inherently incapable?" or "Are we disinterested?"

Shri Menon's presentation ended with a caveat that if things didn't change, in all likelihood, we would be having a similar conference in two years time.

The next speaker **Prof. Ajay Kumar's** (artist and retired Principal of Trivandrum college) paper mentioned several such forums/ discussions and conferences in the past that discussed similar issues and there indeed were some changes visible, at least in the state of Kerala, as a result. He went on to talk about how the workshop method that he employed while teaching students of the National Institute of Design worked.

Mr Suresh Jayaram (Trustee FIAE) in his presentation about alternative spaces spoke about the experiments going on at 1 Shanthi Road, which is an artist cooperative and not a formal Institute. Education does not have to be confined to only the formal space of a college or a university. Artists and art needs spaces to experiment and forums where the dialogue is multifarious. An informal space run by artists for artists is a necessity that also serves the function of carrying on post degree research and innovation. The illustrated presentation highlighted that a shared space where dialogue takes place amongst art practitioners of different predilections works as an incubator and is conducive for creating and sustaining an eco system.

Day-2, 27 November, 2016

The session started with **Prof. Raja Mohanty**, a faculty member of Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT-Powai. Professor Mohanty's paper 'A Luna(r)tics view of Art' was an overview that contextualized art education in the larger frame of liberal arts education. It started with a stunning visual of thousands (over 7000 to be precise) of satellites hovering over the earth and noting how the perspective of how we look at ourselves changes when seen from such great distance. This withdrawal in space was intended as an inward movement that allowed a philosophical gaze. He highlighted how the glut of information and our enhanced visuality is changing the paradigm of art making itself. His paper raised many fundamental and pertinent questions about how the quest for rationality has given rise to the desire to quantify everything and how non-quantifiable realities such as art is sidelined in such a discourse. He drew attention to the fact that economic progress or development unless nurtured by a culturally rich and sensitive understanding of our place on this planet, will fail to create equity and sustainability. In this sense, it is a myth that an education in the arts is suited only for affluent nations; the value of an aesthetic education is all the more important for a developing nation with a large population. The idea of liberal education as opposed to technical or vocational education helps in understanding our place in this world. Questions were about the self, about our relation to society as well as to the world - which constitutes a philosophical enquiry about the world and ourselves; as also in artistic responses.

Prof. SaradaNatarajan, an Art historian and teacher was the second speaker of the second day. She was emphatic about the necessity of an Art historical component that needed to be meaningful, accessible and integrated to the studio courses and not done in a perfunctory manner that seem to be the norm. She talked about specific instances of how some innovative methods of teaching can bring about a change in the perception of students, especially those from studio practice courses. Her presentation was made visually interesting as she chose to illustrate them with photo documentation of experimental and alternative teaching methods; using theatre to understand Egyptian art, making a *camera obscura* to understand *trompe l'oeil* or extreme illusion, field trips to experience art in its natural environ, workshops with artisans of *Kumartuli* etc. that she conducted while teaching Art history. The methods employed make even remote and difficult concepts accessible to students who

had had no prior exposure to art before joining the art school and are weak in English, the lingua franca of most theory classes.

Post-Tea break there were two papers by **Prof. Sashidharan Nair**, faculty of Fine Arts Faculty, M.S. University of Baroda and **Mr Ravi Kashi**, faculty of Architecture school of Bangalore. Both the speakers could not make it to the conference and Indrapramit Roy presented their papers. Sasidharan's paper was about how the UGC stipulations and quantifications in matters of appointment and promotion of teaching faculty in Art colleges are being totally counterproductive and stifling art education all over the country. Norms developed for art education is largely derived from approaches for technical education that are clearly unsuitable for an education in the arts. The emphasis on quantitative measures, such as publications in peer-reviewed journals, insistence on text-based PhD's are clearly not the best parameters for grasping the suitability and understanding of an artist or an art-educator. By privileging those who acquire such degrees, many of whom lack any practice-based insights into the arts, the current norms promote mediocrity over genuine merit. It would be pertinent to develop frameworks that are more suited to the arts.

Ravi Kashi's paper was concerned more with definitive suggestions to improve art education in the near term. Among his many useful and practical suggestions were the stress on the importance to move from a result oriented system to a more process oriented system and questioned the logic of persisting with specialization/departments on the basis of medium when increasingly artists are prone to utilize multiple media in their work. He also highlighted the need for having a Regulatory mechanism such as the Architecture Council but advised extreme caution (echoing Vasudevan Akkitham's contention) lest such a body becomes a hindrance rather than a facilitator. Ravi Kashi's paper also highlighted the need for completing a comprehensive survey of Art schools across the nation.

Ms C. P Krishnapriya, a young academic from Chennai with teaching experience in Govt. Art College of Chennai, one of the oldest colonial era art colleges in the country, spoke about her experience of the college and the general drift of art education in Tamilnadu. The college is in a pitiable state, due to years of utter neglect in almost all aspects and is a case in point of all that is wrong with art education in the country. The philosophy of art education, the bureaucratic myopia, the bankruptcy of imagination, financial and administrative neglect, mismanagement and Governmental apathy all add to its woes.

The last speaker **Mr Santhosh Sakhinala**, the researcher who undertook the survey of the Andhra, and Telangana Art colleges made a detailed presentation about his experience and findings. His presentation was also accompanied with visuals.

The Conference came to an end with a spirited open mike session where the audience interacted with the speakers (who were requested on the stage for the session) with suggestions and questions. Professor Siva Kumar concluded by offering the vote of thanks, where he, on behalf of the foundation for Indian Art and Education, expressed deep appreciation of Kochi Biennale Foundation for being such an excellent partner and host.
