

State of the Art Schools: Keynote Address

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We have gathered here to discuss the state of art education in India its reality and prospects. The title of the conference is like a folded map, my job as the keynote speaker is to unfold it and lay it before you. I am enjoined to this not because you are not familiar with the terrain it represents; it is in fact the terrain most of us gathered here inhabit and move through daily in our professional life. But being familiar, perhaps all too familiar, we navigate it without paying conscious attention to its contours and to the realignments that take place within it from time to time. When we are about to set ourselves to re-plan something, as many of you will certainly do during the next two days, it would be useful to look back and take a broad view of what exists and how and why it came into being.

Education is an essential feature of our humanness, of what sets us apart from other animals. Unlike other animals man creates and accumulates knowledge and values. Education is the instrument for achieving this. On the one hand it transmits knowledge and civilisational values from one generation to another, here its main concern is preservation. On the other hand it trains the next generation to create new knowledge and add new strands to our civilisational goals based on these, here its main concern is to stimulate innovation. There is as we can see a counter pull built into these two functions. On the one hand it induces us to hold on to what is there and on the other it encourages us to break new ground. This tension is not necessarily a negative feature, it allows us to reconsider our accumulated knowledge, preserve what is good, and act ethically while moving towards the future. In short it allows us to have continuity and change in our civilisational values. To conserve knowledge is as important as the need to move ahead, because our forays into the future is an act of adventure which need not always lead us to desirable ends. In such instances our store of historical knowledge allows to retrace our steps, make the necessary course corrections and move forward again.

Although the history of the creation, accumulation and transmission of knowledge is as old as human history, the history of setting up institutions for this purpose is relatively recent and has a varied timeline. It did not happen all at once in different disciplines or across the world. In art for instance the guilds, which were agencies for art production and art training during the medieval period, gave way to studios or workshops during the Renaissance in Europe and during the late medieval period in India. The first academy for art and design was established in Florence in 1563 by Cosimo Medici with Vasari and Michelangelo as its guiding lights. It was not a teaching institute but one which helped in conserving the achievements of Renaissance art

practice. The first academy of Arts that taught art was the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture established in France 1648. Here too the aim was to conserve the classical tradition through training. The Government School of Design was set up in London in 1837 and was later shifted to South Kensington and renamed the National Art Training school in 1853. Its primary aim was to improve standards in industrial design and train art teachers. The first art schools set up in India during the middle of the 19th century were based on the Kensington model.

Given their roots the first art schools in India carried the same burden as the British art schools. On the one hand they aimed at producing artists with knowledge of post-Renaissance representational skills who could be useful in colonial administration; and on the other hand they wanted to re-educate Indians in their own traditional craft skills from which they had been alienated due to incursions from the industrial West, and the forces of colonial trade and economic policies. This brought about two changes, firstly it created a division between arts and design which was traditionally alien to India but central to European art since the Renaissance. And secondly, it instilled the idea that the basis of all art practice is representational skill and art education was essentially a graded progression towards an acquisition of such skills that enabled an artist to produce certain predetermined genre of images.

Although E. B. Havell, a South Kensington trained art teacher who headed at first the art school in Madras and later the one in Calcutta, tried to question the desirability of transplanting an art education programme that was totally alien to Indian traditions of art practice, the first departure from the Kensington model of art training was made at Santiniketan. The main features of the pedagogic programme developed by Nandalal Bose were the following. Firstly he undid the separation between art, craft and design. Secondly, he saw them as a connected spectrum of visual communication moving from functional designing to personal expression with corresponding levels of language structures operating within a common cultural space. The art school was to function as a common training centre for all these, not just for high arts or fine arts. The teaching programme therefore had to be flexible, and student centred. The teacher's role was not to lead all his students through graded exercises to the production of the same kind of work, but to help each student find his or her area of competence, and to help them acquire the skills and the conceptual and aesthetic framework that will serve them well. The success of such a programme depended a great deal on the resourcefulness of the teacher.

The next shift in Indian art education took place at Baroda. In some respects it was a continuation of the Santiniketan model but in other aspects it charted an independent course. It did not (at least collectively as an institution) pay much attention to the art/craft continuum that Santiniketan stressed, and as a university faculty that came

into existence in post independent India it did not carry the burden of anti-colonialism. It was more open to the academic rigour brought in by the university based art teaching programmes developed in America. Thus while the importance of keeping the programme flexible was recognised, it sought to educate the mind as much as the hands. The studio practices were therefore complemented with the inclusion of aesthetics, art criticism and art history in a more programmatic manner to encourage the critical discussion of art objects and their conceptual basis. Although art history as an academic subject was also introduced alongside studio practice at Santiniketan in the late 50s, at Baroda there was greater stress on making the art student aware of developments across disciplines and in different cultures so that the student might become more self-reflective and articulate.

The Santiniketan and Baroda colleges in their early years were educational institutions involved in giving a new direction to modernist art practice in India. Such instances of art schools playing the innovative role rather than the role of conservation and transmission are rare. However, since then there has not been any major rethinking in art education in India, all the art schools in India today continue with one of these models with some amount of cosmetic changes at best. While these models might hold some lessons for us even today, these were essentially educational programmes developed in response to the needs of their time with specific ideas of art practise in mind rather than universal models for all times. The world and the practice of art has changed a great deal since these programmes were devised. Therefore we need to relook at our art education programmes and see if they are adequate for responding to our times and its art practices.

The changes in art practice that have happened during the last few decades have been on the one hand due to changes in the understanding of what is considered art and its social functions, and on the other due to the availability of new technologies and mediums for image making and communication. Every new medium opens up new possibilities and leads to the creation of a new aesthetic. While history of art is replete with stories about the introduction of new mediums and techniques and their impact on art practice, the impact of the new mediums being introduced today combined with digital technology and new conceptual frameworks is more radical than any of the previous shifts we have seen. They for instance mark an important shift from the modernist idea of medium based art forms and their mutually exclusive aesthetics which differentiated painting from sculpture and both from literature. The new mediums are based on technologies that erase the disciplinary boundaries on which modernist practice was based and this makes the older modes of organising art education inadequate.

The shift in technology does not stand alone but is confluent with changes in the organisation of the world. Art practice in the past had much to do with identity formation based on regions and nationalities. The world is no more neatly divided into independent geographical and social entities. There is more movement of people across the globe than ever before, and this is a challenge to the old overlap of geography and culture. Similarly, the new communicational technologies and global economic order is a challenge to the older political and economic order of things. The art world through its museum, gallery and exhibition circuits has acknowledged these changes and has become more globally integrated. This has also impacted art practices across the globe. Art education cannot remain indifferent to this. Art education needs to respond to this changing scenario that brings the world closer and makes it easier for students to learn what happens in other parts of the world almost instantaneously and appropriate from other periods and cultures very easily. However, the world has not come into a common agreement about the benefits of this arrangement. Therefore it does not mean that every art college has to settle for an unquestioning and seamless integration with new global order.

What the emergence of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities and the subsequent eraser of cultural boundaries and the immense economic powers that underpin the new global order calls for is an unavoidable engagement and a reasoned acceptance or resistance. This picture of a unified world that some aspects of globalisation presents has not made the world uniformly even, at least not yet. Therefore no one programme will suit all art colleges. Just to cite one variable while many first world art colleges attract students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds most Indian art colleges cater to a racially and linguistically more homogeneous community of students who are divided by social hierarchies and would often include first generation learners. The nature of the students who enrol must be a major consideration while framing the educational programmes as much as the world and the technology we now have access to. Therefore in a country like India the educational planning cannot be centralised, it has to be varied and left to the intelligence of the teachers and students that constitute the context for each college. Every educational programme is meant to empower the learner and has to be judged not by the syllabus it frames but by the empowerment of the students it achieves.

Yet to achieve this we need to ensure that each art school is provided for to a certain level. Some of these can be classed under what we may call infrastructure and this ranges from studios and studio furniture to equipments, workshops, technical expertise, library facilities, access to digital technology, online resources and well trained and motivated teachers. Whatever direction the programme may take in individual colleges these are necessary to make an informed choice.

A second group of requirements can be called administrative. A part of the administrative structure is put in place through external dictates by the concerned governments, their educational departments or by such funding and regulatory bodies as the UGC. Some of the problems that art education faces today are certainly based on the unimaginative approach they adopt, and would include such things as the policies for the recruitment of teachers, their qualifications, practice incentives, promotional avenues, syllabus, etc. Often these are not devised keeping in mind the needs of different disciplines. What is appropriate for the teaching and evaluation of science, which is man's instrument for the knowing of the world objectively may not be suitable for education in arts, which is society's instrument for self-knowledge. The bodies that fund and frame rules are not adequately informed about the special needs of art education; and the problems this causes can be rectified only by articulating these issues collectively and loudly, and by engaging with policy makers in the government. But there are others that can be set aright through small internal changes or reorganisation of certain administrative arrangements locally. For instance while most art colleges today are organised into departments based on the modernist idea of media based art forms and its attendant aesthetics, a number new practices are based on combining several mediums and run counter to the existing departmental arrangement. If only the departments founded on discrete art forms, such as painting or sculpture, are willing to dissolve their separate identities and create a common pool of material and intellectual resources it might help in solving the infrastructural problems to an extent.

Further, in the Indian context considering that we do not have a strong museum culture and that most art colleges are located in places far away from museums and galleries the teaching of art history should be considered a necessary part of art educational programme. And considering that art practice is becoming more socially interactive, art training should include exposure to the intellectual mind-scape of the society.

The third and final element that influences the quality of education are the people who staff the colleges. The infrastructure and syllabus are only as good as the men and women who run these institutions and the students who come to study there. The students and teachers are the driving force behind all academic and creative programmes. The teachers have to be informed and inspired, the students motivated and committed to learning and together they should be able to develop an open ended pursuit of knowledge. Traditionally the teachers were conduits of skills and knowledge but today taking advantage of communicational technology much of this can be learned by the students themselves. The teacher's now need to move beyond skill training and become partners in the intellectual growth of their students. They have to help the students recognise the building blocks of art works in different

mediums, help them refine their sensibilities and broaden their mental horizons. This means that the teacher's role is not to offer solutions but to help students to find solutions. This cannot be done by merely offering a plethora of facilities and an elaborate training in skills. The students also need to be encouraged to acquire the habit of reflection and to discover who they are, and what they wish to do and accordingly determine what they wish to learn.

It would be instructive to remember that the past success of Santiniketan, Baroda and the Ken School was powered by the human resources they enjoyed and not by the quantum of infrastructure they commanded. An art college is primarily an environment in which learning takes place through interactions between fellow travellers; an environment energised by the varied experiences they bring to it. Creating such a space can be achieved only if the teachers set their mind to it and are willing to see teaching as an extended process of learning.

While we discuss making art education effective we also need to remember that the arts cannot be effective without a society that considers engagement with the arts more than an elitist luxury. Artists and art colleges have a role to play in the creation of such a society. On the one hand they should be able to infuse a training of the senses into school education through well designed books, art classes that allow children to give expression to their creative urges unhindered by adult values, and exposure to varied traditions of art and so on. This will certainly improve the quality of the students who enter art schools, but it will also hopefully have a larger social impact because the arts train people to look beyond immediate needs and narrow pragmatic solutions, and to empathise with larger issues without being curtailed by self-interest. Furthermore, emotional empathy combined with intellectual understanding is the foundation for ethical action. On the other hand the art schools should also undertake outreach programmes that allow the community to come into contact with the arts not merely as spectators but as amateur practitioners who can respond to arts with an insider's understanding of its language. Without such contact points effective communication between artists and viewers, which alone makes the arts a living force in a society's life, does not take place.

I hope these issues will be discussed in greater depth by my experienced colleagues over the next two days, and we would see some practical solutions emerge that can help us to re-plan art education in this country better.

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