

Transcript of Sadanand Menons talk by Raja Mohanty:

Why Art Education is not about Art Education?
Sadanand Menon

Every 3 or 4 years we wake up saying - "What's Going On?"
In an email conversation with T.M.Krishna, I mentioned that I was attending a conference on art education and he said "I think it is going to be a sad conference with a lot of lamenting and breast beating."

Should we be lamenting? Are things so bad?

Heartening to see Sivakumar defending institutions. C.V. Sheshadri once said "Shut down the IIT's and NIT's for 10 years and the state of engineering colleges in India would automatically improve."

In a similar vein one could say that shut down the art colleges for 10 years and automatically art levels will rise - but this is facetious. Hormes K. remembered 26/11 as the day of the Mumbai attack. He said that the barbaric attacks pointed to the need for a different sensibility that art can offer. I would like to remember 26/11 very differently - as the Constitution Day.

The data (about Southern Zone art colleges) presented today morning suggests cultural deficiencies. This leads me to ask "Are we inherently incapable?" Are we disinterested? What is the source of this anguish?

It is important to know who we are speaking to. Here we are speaking to artists, critics, curators - a peer group. But is our lament directed at each other? I think we are speaking to the State.

There is no State policy for the arts. It is completely ad-hoc. Runs sometimes on kerosene, sometimes on petrol. It stutters and splutters. Rukmini Arundals started Kalakshetra in 1936. When she grew older, somebody suggested to her "Why don't you apply for a UGC grant?" A team of 8 with Kapila Vatsyayana came and said "Yes, this institution deserves a grant. But the committee suggested that

- i. Students should be introduced from a school level.
- ii. Teachers should have a B.Ed Degree
- iii. There should be a retirement age for teachers.

Rukmini felt that her best dance teacher becomes the best dance teacher at the age of 60. "I'd be a fool to send them off". So she said no to the grant.

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

Same issues as those faced in art education would come across in any other education (say, chemistry education). Hence the analysis and survey should be more holistic and the data has to be integrated into the larger data on education.

What is art education all about? I love my Zen stories.

There was a Zen master and a student who came to him to learn art. The Zen master did not even look up and said "Go draw a cat." When the student finished the Zen master repeated the instruction "Go draw a cat". After having drawn many cats the student came back and was given the same instruction. After a few days, the same instruction was repeated. So it went on for weeks and months. After a year, the Zen master asked the

student "So, have you drawn the cat?" The student replied " I have become the cat."

(The story does not tell us what the cat was doing the entire year! - but that is another story)

Immersion is the way to learn art. Modernity wants vocational training / time-based training. Do you want a short-term thing?

Transmission becomes a process - it is not called teaching anymore. It becomes an osmotic process.

In certain tribal communities everybody sings / paints / dances. That is their way of life. Their being. It is not called art. And at times tribal children learn much faster than classical training approaches.

The third issue I would like to mention is that institutional systems are collapsing. The plaster is falling. It appears that we here at this conference are telling the State in our belief that you believe. In the last 18 months, is there any evidence that the state has any inclination for furthering arts education?"

We here, say, "O State. I want to critique you." Why should the state do it? The State has slapped sedition charges on members of the Kabir Kala Manch. Someone in Jaipur was flying a plastic cow. The cow is safe. The artists are in jail.

Hence, it is important to know who we are asking and what are we asking.

In Gwangju, South Korea, there is a space where 1000's of children can come and learn whatever interest them. Facilities are provided but there are no instructors. Clay. Crayons. Everything is there and the children are free to learn. Fearlessness and a sense of freedom - these are perhaps the best for arts education. E.B. Havell had proposed the idea of artistic nationalism in the early 1900's. Debi Prasad, spoke of art as the basis of education (and not education as the basis of art). K.G. Subramanyan; Ghulam Sheikh - they have spoken at length about the arts, but what has happened? Here are we repeating the same thing. "Capture the young". Instead of capturing them, there has to be an open space where they feel a natural attraction.

Our art institutions are malnourished. Art-discourses full of pettiness; bristling at the smallest things. Camp-isms. There is lack of healthiness in art education itself. There is a problem with modern art education as started in India. Government Art College, Chennai is in total doldrums. Its principal is no longer from the art world.

None of the people present had the guts to oppose MGR, when he lectured artists on what is good art, by pointing to portraits of himself. The same gutlessness continues. The FTII students had the guts, but other than that? Completely convinced that two years later, we shall have a similar seminar.