

A Luna(r)tic's view of Art

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Preliminary Remarks:

I studied to be an engineer; my master's was in visual communication and my doctoral study is on art education. In a sense, I am an outsider to the daily matters that shape art education in art colleges in India. However, over the years I have been closely associated with artists and with the arts. In this sense I am very much an insider. In this talk I shall play the role of a "double-agent" who looks at the world of arts and issues in art education brought up by speakers at this conference. The talk is in two parts; in the first, I shall attempt to describe a view of the world of arts from a distant perspective - a long-shot view; in the second I shall attempt to throw some light on issues faced by art educators in India today. In particular, I shall respond to Sadanand Menon's suggestion about envisaging a new imaginary for education (and not just art education) and to Indrapramit Roy's concerns about research and PhD requirements for art teachers. In conclusion I shall also dwell on his suggestion of the importance "play" in the learning and practice of art.

The 21st Century Zeitgeist

A view of the earth from high above would reveal an envelope of some 7000 satellites that hover around it. These are the eyes that we have launched to look upon us to enable a new-mapping of the earth's resources; enable navigation for planes and forecast the weather. The ability to look upon the earth (and ourselves) from such a perspective does also change who we are.

Several thousand years ago, human beings looked at stars and clouds; at rain and thunder, mountains and oceans and sometimes worshipped the powerful natural forces. Such an animistic reverence for nature slowly changed to a mythological imagination, when poets wrote the epics - Ramayana and Mahabharat and Illiad. Instead of natural forces human beings begin to ascribe divinity to mythical heros. Centuries later we notice another shift when the belief systems of human beings turns to religions that are more organized - Hinduism, Christianity, Islalm.

Several centuries later, during the European Rennaissance, science takes large strides, revealing to us through the microscope and the telescope, universes hitherto unknown; the human imagination shifts to something that is far more rational and scientific.

A Long-Shot View of Art

Our times are particularly turbulent. We witness much turmoil in all spheres of life - the political, the socio-cultural, the economic, the religious. Even our personal and intimate spheres such as our living rooms and bedrooms are rendered turbulent by aggressive television debates in which the anxieties of the participants suggest an inability to listen. In a recent talk that I attended, about the association between Gandhi and Tagore, the speaker mentioned that they held diametrically opposed views at times, but had the highest regard for one another. In times when patience is scarce, it is perhaps better to hold one's tongue.

Instead of attempting to provide suggestions for improving the state of art education in any immediate sense, I shall attempt to withdraw in a manner that allows us to look upon our times from afar. As Siva-da suggested in his talk - new ideas to improve art education are much needed, but even as one embarks on such a journey, it is useful to draw upon lessons that history has to offer.

In my attempt to engage with history, instead of digging deep to unearth new historical insights (such as perhaps the excavations at Muziris), I shall withdraw metaphorically outwards, to the moon. Hence the view is a Luna(r)tic one! This withdrawal in space is also at the same time intended as an inward movement that allows us a philosophical gaze.

The Rational-Objective-Democratic Imagination

One characteristic of the mindset that typifies our century, is its inclination to measure, quantify and systematize. The rational age that we live in therefore wants to count how many people think in a certain way and privilege that through a democratic process. Such an approach is certainly more desirable than the dictatorial bent of a feudal era. While we are often proud of India as the world's largest democracy, our feudal instincts persist in what has also been called a "democracy". The decline of public-and-community spaces; public-and-community health services; public-and-community-education, suggests that our democracy has an underbelly of the feudal way of doing things. However, it would not be incorrect to observe that the world over there has been a movement towards transparency and a desire amongst people for good governance.

With a greater degree of understanding about our material world and its biological-chemical-physical-laws that govern us, it is natural that human-beings turn to matter and materiality to shape their lives. The spurt of creative activity that has come to be associated with the European enlightenment and Rennaissance, fuelled the process of industrialization and the age of machines. In the 21st century we inherit all the benefits that accrue from the application of a rational-objective-scientific mindset. Art-practices also expanded in their material possibilities - photography, video, digital-media are used by artists in addition to conventional materials. It would be interesting to decipher the implications of an era that dwells in a heightened

association with materiality. While artists still continue to engage with the human condition, is art still a universal language? Or is the imagination of people today, captivated by all that science and technology have to offer?

The glut of information and enhanced visuality of cultures the world over - that includes television and print, advertising and social-platforms for exchanging images and text, unwittingly shake some axioms with which artists work. One such axiom, is the sacredness attributed to a uniquely crafted work of art. In the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin argues that the much-reproduced altar-painting loses its aura. Films and advertisements capture the imagination of many, making these the universal language of our times.

While artists try to resist commodification by new forms such as site-specific art, performance and installation, it appears that the world at large has been co-opted by magically new technologies such as digital cameras and mobile phones. Images, that were earlier largely associated with artists, are created in thousands, daily, shared and exchanged. Texts, earlier associated with writers and poets are created by school-children and adolescents texting away during class-hours and dinner time. Painters and writers with an inclination for a gentler-movement of brush over canvas or of the pen over paper, continue valiantly; it is not that these "old" media have lost any of their potency, for the essence of art is not-entirely-in-the-media - whether old or new, but in something that is "outside" the art-object.

In this sense, it is perhaps important that we re-visit the sites at which the spirit of art breathes and lives. Just as one might ask if conventional media such as painting, sculpture and printmaking are relevant any longer, one may also ask, whether all performances, video-art and installations are art? As we re-visit ideas about the art-spirit and where it is to be found, it may be useful to observe that a key aspect of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has been to involve the local as well as the international community. In this sense would it be useful to observe that one place where the art-spirit lies, is not just in the art-object, but in re-imagining communities.

The Human Self, the Individual and the Community

What has been the nature of the evolution of the human self over the last 2000 years? We often associate modernity (or post-modernity) with our times and label the earlier eras as medieval and ancient. Implicit in the definition of such a modernity is the notion of a self that is more rational and scientific; a self- that shall subject the faith that an earlier era had, to the scrutiny of rational questions. It is not that the human self in the ancient and medieval times was without such a rational faculty. Yet the last five hundred years have witnessed a change in the human self, with the growth of our understanding of the physical and material world through the tools of science. The rational capability that once gave us the plough and the axe, got immensely amplified with the industrial production of the tractor and earth-moving machinery. Further scrutiny into the inner-world of matter led to chemical fertilizers for food-production and later to genetically modified seeds. Current technologies seek to push our understanding of the physical universe but even scientists seemed to have arrived at frontiers that suggest that further knowledge is cultural and non-material. Leading bio-chemical research leads to a very different construction of the self, than the notion put-forth by Cartesian thought. From notions of individual liberty and individual freedom (notions that are central to current capitalist ideologies and also to notions of what "liberal" means) there is a discernible shift to community-oriented algorithms that enable the individual, far-more than any unfettered-individualism can.

Interestingly, we find an echo of this in ideas expressed by poets such as Tagore who saw the individual as a microcosm of the universe. Contemporary thinkers such as Krishnamurti, speak of the individual as an entity that is indivisible - and not so much as the misconstrued notion of the individual as a free-thinking-unfettered-self. It would be interesting to understand how contemporary artists and art-educators understand the human self.

Can a Developing Nation Afford a "Liberal Arts" Education?

It is thus an era in which science and technology; economics and other objective and measurable approaches, shall have great credibility and shall receive the maximum support. It is therefore not surprising, that world over, the lion's share of funding, goes towards development that is measurable and quantifiable. The value of "finer" stuff - whether it is art or science or philosophy, is difficult to measure. It is therefore not surprising that "liberal" arts education does not have the support it "deserves".

What are the roots of the word "liberal"? What are associations that it triggers off, in the imagination of policy-makers and planners? Are the liberal-arts regarded as too self-indulgent, by planners and policy makers? Who is responsible for such an interpretation of the "liberal" arts? Can artists and art-educators change this perception? I would like to believe that this is possible, and that artists and art-educators do share this responsibility with all others. But this requires us to understand our selves, better than we do today. How do we understand individuality? How do we understand communities?

While ideas of a "liberal" outlook surely existed in societies from ancient times, we tend to associate these with the notions of individual freedom as put forward by the French Revolution (liberte, egalite, fraternite). The idea of liberal education in American universities may be viewed as the kind of education that was different from technical and vocational education. While the latter is useful for learning a trade or a skill and seeks to make some pragmatic contribution to society, a liberal education helps in understanding our place in this world. Questions about the self, about its relation to society and to the

world - which constitutes a philosophical enquiry about ourselves and the world; as also artistic responses - could be enabled through a liberal education.

It is unfortunate that liberal education has an association with affluence and it is widely believed that the priorities of a developing nation is to provide basic amenities; and that this is best done through a systematic application of science and technology. While developing a scientific attitude is important and while creating systems that allow large numbers to benefit from technology is required, the neglect of aesthetic education leads to an impoverished imagination that cannot see beyond immediate needs. It would not be incorrect to observe that the proliferation of unsustainable consumption is closely linked to the under-developed aesthetic intelligence in many human societies. Developing nations would benefit as much as the developed ones by creating learning approaches that nurture a harmonious and integrated human development.

Policy-makers and planners view the pursuit of arts as self-indulgence. In some measure, artists have contributed to such an incorrect perception? By excessively associating with markets that are built on speculative valuation, the world of arts have to an extent surrendered their high-ethical and moral grounds and equated themselves with any other profession. Without romanticizing the position of an artist as a starving soul, it would be necessary to ask why are artists not accorded the stature they possibly enjoyed at certain other times. If indeed, the modern state can articulate the value of arts and aesthetics in human flowering, it would provide the necessary patronage for artists to practice their pursuits and contribute to a creative society.

Part 2

A New Imaginary for Education

What would be the desirable zeitgeist of a new era? Is there a superior kind of reason that we have yet to witness in a collective sense? While our material lives are undeniably better and desirable, it falls on us to ask, if the same can be said about our non-material lives? Is it possible that we have not yet learnt to measure the finer reason that can accompany a deeply subjective inquiry?

It appears that prevalent discourses in science, social-science and the arts do not yet take cognisance of non-quantifiable realities; we come across as riding merrily on growth fuelled by oil and fossil fuels. While the threat of catastrophic climate change may lead to the search for alternate energies, it would be of interest to understand if human development is to be equated to an access to clean and equitable energy in future societies. To interpret arts and art education through its conventional or new forms is misleading. The arts are not “leisure-time-activities” but a way of life that manifests in all things that we do. Those who have had no exposure at all to an education that liberates and have devoted their lives to the pursuit of expertise in some specific vocation, are often afflicted by an impoverished imagination about the potential of their own selves and about the world at large. A nation that plans its future with such an imagination, might be a successful nation, but is possibly not a harmonious or beautiful one. We need a new imaginary not just for art education, but for an education that is founded on an integrated view of the world, that we could live in.

The Earthy Aspects of Higher Art Education in India

There are several issues facing higher art education in India. Matters related to art education fall under the purview of AICTE; norms developed for art education are 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-reviews journals, insistence on text-based PhD's, are clearly not the best parameters for grasping the knowledge-system 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. While there has been no agreement over practice-based PhD's, clearly these are a step in the right direction. There are universities that are attempting to understand practice-based PhD's that are evaluated through arts practices accompanied by an exegesis instead of an entirely text-based thesis. To encourage practice-based PhD's and evolve parameters for evaluating such practice, is a direction that regulatory bodies and art colleges could explore.

The importance of open-ended “play” and exploration is imperative to an education in the arts. While this is widely recognized, there is little evidence for this in primary, secondary and tertiary education. We persist with an exam-based approach to education. To truly be a nation of consequence, we need to implement open-learning frameworks, from an early age and encourage a flowering of the creative potential through the years. “Make-in-India” remains an empty slogan, unless we equip learners to use freedom in creative and innovative ways. Innovation and entrepreneurship, is not just manifest in the economic domain; unless nurtured by a culturally rich and sensitive understanding of our place on this planet, such innovation 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.

While a long-shot luna(r)tic view may be useful for putting in perspective, issues related to arts and art education on planet earth, one needs to understand the issues from an eye level by engaging with communities, first in an immediate and local sense.