"Exploring new directions in Indian Art education"

Thanks for inviting me to be part of this dialogue. Art Education is close to my heart, and I'm happy to share some of my ideas about how we can shape art education in our country.

Need for a survey:

As you are aware art education in India is in a deplorable condition and I will not go deeper into that topic as it is common knowledge. The effort is to find some answers which are actionable. The only question is - 'where we can go from here'? What directions, broad ideas, policy matters and actual workable steps can be generated from this platform.

Some of the points I have raised here were raised by me in a paper I presented in a seminar on art education in Trivandrum nearly a decade ago. Sad to say, that most of those issues are still present and possibly have worsened.

First of all no full scale survey has been done to gather information about the status of art schools in the country. There is no data available as to the number of art colleges existing in India in one place / platform. Naturally we don't have details like - under which body they are functioning/ awarding the certificates, their course structure, syllabi, equivalence in grading with other institutions, number of teaching staff and their qualification and capabilities, fee structure, number of students, their future - nothing is documented. This is the first thing that has to be done to understand Indian art education in a broad perspective. I'm happy that FIAE- Foundation has taken it up.

Once the survey is complete it will reiterate questions like do we need these many art schools? Are we giving them the right kind of skills during the course? Will these skills get them jobs/make them artists? What do the students who pass out of these schools do for their living ? Is anybody thinking about the bigger picture at all? The survey will confirm our fears that these institutions are not

regulated well enough to deliver quality art education, and that their existence has other reasons as well.

Regulatory mechanisms:

My observations and suggestions come from an outsider's perspective and my teaching experience in architecture. In architectural education, Council of Architecture (COA) a statutory body which regulates architectural education in India is at the helm. No new college of architecture can be opened without the permission of the COA. It has prescribed a matrix for staff capacity, their qualification, infrastructure, availability of funds to smoothly run the school etc which has to be complied by the institutions. I'm not saying COA is a perfect system, but something along those lines will bring in a sense of order in art education. COA tends to be very bureaucratic and depends too much on 'paper qualifications'. And experts within architectural community are not really happy with the existing condition in COA. But there is no doubt that COA has streamlined architectural education. Once this model is studied for its positive and negative aspects, some of the pitfalls can be avoided and alternatives can be worked out. The question is which government department has to take the initiative. Can there be a special body that will be floated by the government for this purpose? Unlike architecture, art cannot be standardized so easily. A lot more flexibility has to be given in day to day operations, shaping the syllabus and local character to emerge.

If this idea / expectation that government will take the initiative to create a governing body sounds too farfetched and even if it happens it may take decades then another model can be explored. This model comes from industry side. All industries go through regular auditing and certification process. Certificates like ISO 9001 are awarded by private agencies, but these certification auditing is so rigorous that they carry a seal of quality and approval. In many cases it is mandatory to have these certification to become a supplier for big companies. Can we try something along this line in art education? Let's say an expert committee and its subsidiaries are formulated which will audit the art institutions and gives them grading. This can be used to identify best institutes. If this

certification can also be used to control or direct grants or becomes a system where government grant in aids are decided by this then things will fall in place.

Perhaps a web site of this certification committee / agency can keep updating its info, so that students will be able to make an informed choice. Many people feel NAAC which is supposed to do this has failed largely. What I'm suggesting is largely on the lines of NABET but tailored to our requirements.

A further simple solution would be to create a common website where art institutions will fill up questionnaire about all the aspects of their institution. This becomes a transparent process. The data available there can be accessed by all the stake holders. If one realizes that it is the hundreds of students who get cheated in the present day set up, this kind of transparent information availability at the click of a button about the status of each school of art will enable the students to make an informed choice.

Moving away from result oriented teaching to process oriented learning:

In art schools 'skill' is a misunderstood word. For them skill is only academic skill, Majority of art schools in India give undue emphasis on developing observation and rendering skills, especially the 'academic' study. Hardly any analytical or articulation skill is given to the students let alone aligning the teaching to contemporary thinking. This results in an imbalanced student development where they can 'draw well' etc but cannot think, analyse or understand visual language in a nuanced mode. So we need to discuss as to what kind of skills a student should learn at what stage during the course. How does a student make sense of the different skills learnt separately and integrate them? How does he place his practice in a historical context and make sense of it? Once this is clear various approaches to arrive at those points can be worked out.

I would say an art educational institution has to be not only updated in its outlook but I would go one step further and say art education institutions should become idea labs and trend setters.

Instead of setting emphasis on the number of works to be completed in a semester can the focus go more on how did the work or idea come about? What were the stages of development of work? How was it different each time? What's the awareness about the process? When a certain amount of self awareness / self reflective capacity is nurtured / inculcated in the student it starts yielding result in different ways. Lessons learnt from this process-oriented learning can be applied to many other situations because student has learnt how to navigate. This is very different from the word 'self expression' which is often used by the students to 'explain' their works.

Learning art in a holistic way:

The present practice of dividing the learning into 'subjects' like still life, life, landscape, creative composition etc has a limitation. It may make valuation easier but students cannot appreciate the interlinks between subjects or look at them in an entirely new way. Theme based / project based learning in art schools will help us to come out of this strait-jackets. In this mode of learning there will be no separate 'subjects' such as portrait or still life or landscape. For an entire semester the whole class will explore response to land - visually, textually, aurally. The emphasis will be on land / nature without losing the links to people or objects. For another semester it may be manmade objects, or how to respond to human figures, human presence or life style. Not just drawing or painting them but really trying to understand them, make a connection with them at various levels. Smaller exercises can be designed by the teacher to make this happen. In this process medium becomes secondary and themes / ideas / observations being developed take front stage and lot more integration is possible.

Reorienting the department system and CBCS:

The practice of dividing the art school into various departments started as an effort to adopt university system in art education in 1950s. Department system has become outdated. Instead of being an enabler it has become a hindrance and there is no doubt it needs to be dismantled. But it is entrenched too deeply and, removing or re-orienting it will be a herculean task. Its base lies in the modernist ethos and doesn't suit our times and it doesn't reflect the contemporary art

practice. Most of us agree on this point. What started as a benign effort in specialization became rigid and lost all its flexibility. This rigidity gets reflected all the way up to the scholarships given by the human resource ministry, application provided by the Lalit Kala Akademi and the awards given also follow similar divisions. The Akademi annual exhibition application recognises only painting, sculpture, print or mixed media work, nothing else.

One may give sweeping statements about removing department system and opening up the course. But it is easier said than done. When such ideas are floated there is huge resistance, as there are strongly held ideas, jobs, livelihoods and egos involved. Unless a via media is figured out it will become impossible to change as there will be hindrance at every step of the way. So my suggestion is to let the departments remain where they are, and with them, the teachers as well. Instead, make the student mobile and the course flexible, allowing the students to design their own courses. Departments can then become facilitators, and function like workshops or studios. Students will make their own choices and acquire the credits required.

This is where Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) which has been mandated by UGC in its January 8th, 2015 letter to all Universities comes into play. The letter says: "The University Grants Commission (UGC) has stressed on speedy and substantive academic and administrative reforms in higher education for promotion of quality and excellence. The Action Plan proposed by UGC outlines the need to consider and adopt Semester System, Choice Based Credit System (CBCS), and Flexibility in Curriculum Development and Examination Reforms in terms of adopting Continuous Evaluation Pattern by reducing the weightage on the semester end examination so that students enjoy a de-stressed learning environment. Further, UGC expects that institutions of higher learning draw a roadmap in time bound manner to accomplish the above. "

I have to stress again that I come from a background of architectural teaching where it is already being implemented in stages. Though the name CBCS throws up 'free for all' kind of image in reality that is not how it works. At least in the architecture schools it is still working like a glorified electives programme. The

autonomous institution or the university decides what kind of choices will be offered for that particular semester depending upon the human resource they can muster. We already have a system of electives in fine art schools. In this students from painting choose one subject in sculpture or printmaking as elective. This has limited scope. At an initial level this can be expanded and made to accommodate more choices but what I'm proposing is much more radical. Here we can follow only the spirit of the UGC directive and ignore rest of the details and adopt the CBCS to suit our needs.

UGC has suggested dividing the credits into three areas - Hard Core, Soft core and open electives. While hard and soft core is related to the core subject open electives can be from any other subjects; largely emphasis is on man-making subjects. What UGC is prescribing is offering electives not only in the vertical alignment of the subject the student is learning abut also in horizontal alignment. Basically UGC wants to introduce humanities as a counter weight to professional courses. But since fine arts falls well within the bracket of humanities may be an art student can opt for choices from other disciplines like business management, or limited exposure to other disciplines. An art history student doing some modules in business management or administration will be a good combination for a job in a gallery or a museum administration. A visual arts student can also take limited elective in say poetry or philosophy or sound engineering or Nano technology. This kind of cross training will have long term impact on the kind of art that will come out of art schools.

 Let us say for example a student needs to acquire 25 credits in a semester for successful completion of the semester, she can acquire 5 credits from painting, 5 credits from sculpture, 4 credits from printmaking, 3 credits from photography and 3 credits from art history. It will become a course without any core subjects. Now this is a wonderful opportunity, where student is completely deciding her course, but it may not be possible in every situation. So, variations of this can be worked out. At different stages of the semester different levels of freedom can be offered to the students. In the initial semester there may be no choice at all, as they are supposed to acquire some basic skills across the board. As they proceed to higher semesters the choices that can be exercised can be enlarged. At the

beginning of each semester the institution can put up a list of choices the students can avail depending upon the human resources available for that semester. When this system is fully in place the nomenclature of the course itself has to be altered. It can be called just BFA /BVA and MFA/MVA without mentioning any specialization.

It is not mandatory to give complete freedom to students. The institution can decide the amount of choices that a student can avail. So there is no need for panic.

Just imagine when process oriented / project based learning and choice based credit system coming together in art schools. Students will have a field day. It truly becomes a student centric learning. You start believing in their vision and give them the freedom. Give them more responsibility to decide their path instead of cloning them; especially in the higher semesters. If the students makes the right choices he will succeed in making the best use of the proposed system. The underside is that not every student can make good choices and they may not have the required exposure for such students a standard module needs to be in place and an equivalence chart for grading credits is agreed upon.

When this system is in place the students can go to other departments and take up other subjects. On an extended argument the students can also migrate to other institutions say from Shantiniketan to Baroda for a semester and come back to the mother institution. If a student wishes to go to a traditional crafts person, become an apprentice and work with her and get credits for the work done there it should be possible.

What are the negative aspects of CBCS? Even though the student can make choices he may not be able to integrate them. The syllabus itself has to be converted into modular system and credit assigned to each module. The students who comes for a semester from other disciplines may not know even the basic technical requirement / skills and may need lot more inputs. In each department proper instructor has to be introduced who will train / facilitate the student in the technical aspects and the teacher will guide the student about image making

process. This will be more so in sculpture, printmaking, photography, video and animation studios.

<u>Common platform to share</u>

This online platform will be a place to share interesting works by students as well as projects run by teachers. So it becomes a large knowledge base of exercises for running the new kind of programme. It should not be just about final works but the process. then it will have an impact on a larger scale. It will really help the not so gifted students and teachers to get inspired.

In conclusion, I agree that some of these ideas might seem radical and impractical. But this is the general direction we need to go to make art education dynamic and oriented to reality. I am confident that the time is ripe to implement these and am optimistic of seeing them become realities very soon.

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