

Towards a New (Art) Education in India in the 21st Century

Raja Mohanty

Abstract

Typically, while speaking of art education in India, it is often implied that one is speaking of the art education offered in the formal education set-ups in the country. These may be the arts and crafts periods in schools; higher education in the arts offered in public and private art colleges; initiatives by individuals and organizations such as museums, akademis, trusts and philanthropic organizations that promote the arts. Such a definition of art and arts education, makes it just another domain of human activity. Just as we study science, engineering, medicine, finance, management or law, some of us with an artistic inclination, choose to study arts.

We also live in an era of visuality, in which still and streamed images play an important role; possibly because of the ubiquity of the image, when we speak of art colleges or art museums, we implicitly refer to the visual arts. Literature and language; music, theatre and dance are also included in the arts, but avenues for an institutional education in these areas is relatively less prevalent (than the visual arts). The teaching of literature in schools, or at departments of humanities and languages in colleges does attempt to foster a love for languages, but relatively fewer opportunities of employment, tilts the choice of learners towards science, commerce, design and management.

The zeitgeist of the 21st century, appears to emphasize the utilitarian, the economic and the material aspects of living. In the age of rational materialism, religions that once supplied us with meanings to our lives, also begin to fail us. Religious sentiments do persist, but more often as prejudices and seldom with the sense of unity and compassion that they once stood for. The educated 21st century human being stands informed but alienated. Our rationality makes it difficult to accept our gods as we once did and our limited understanding of our own selves and the imperfect understanding of our relationship with other-selves that are different from us, places us at a new frontier. It is a frontier when we need to create our own meaning, in what now appears like a meaningless universe. The search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, as well as the search for a new basis to human societies, reflects our attempts to colour the emptiness we now encounter – both in outer space and in our inner selves.

The paper emerges from a preoccupation with arts education. It appears that human kind, specially we Indians, ought to formulate an integral approach to education that synthesizes our forays into specialized modes of knowledge gathering. It has been pointed out that despite several colonial critiques, we are yet to emerge from the long shadow cast by the neglect of indigenous knowledge in the colonial times. As a consequence, much of our education, whether in the sciences or in the arts, or in management, design or economics, continues to seek affirmation and accreditation from external authority – typically still Western. It is not the intent of this paper to propose some isolated resurgence; there is much to learn from some of the stellar achievements of other cultures. Yet, it is evident that unless we emphasize a new normal that responds sensitively to knowledge bases that still exist in many of our artisanal communities, it would be the loss of yet another opportunity lost. The paper attempts to envisage a new approach to (art) education in India in the 21st century.