



Neeraja Raghavan

Unlike most schools, the Valley School (Krishnamurthi Foundation India), Bangalore has adopted the practice of bringing the artisan to the school, so that traditional art is taught to the children (and even the parents of the children as well as anyone who is interested) by practicing craftsmen and artisans from various parts of the country, along with the art teachers. Many artisans are hired as instructors and are faculty in the school, while some are invited from their rural pockets - every two months - as part of the ongoing OUTREACH programme. The intent is to learn by observing them work, and to work along with them - in spite of the differences in language and culture – and this school has found that the sheer pictorial language which their hands speak makes interaction between learners possible. The Learning Curve spoke to some of the faculty to understand this unique practice.

What sort of Art Education programme does Valley School offer?

Dr. Satish Inamdar, Director, Valley School says: “In our school, everything is compulsory for the child from age 5 to age 14. A boy has to learn to dance, a girl has to learn drama...everything everyone has to do, because afterwards a boy or girl may take to something, but to me, a school is a place where the only thing we can do is to provide exposure. Beyond that, we cannot do anything. Ultimately, it is left to the child to develop a relationship with Nature and all the fineness of art will emerge. From Junior School to Middle School (class I to VIII), our children spend one-fifth of their time in the Art Village. Senior children do Art for the examination also, quite a few of them do painting, music, etc. They get half

a day. We call it ‘participatory art’ and ‘examination art’. Senior students get to do both. Krishnamurthi has talked about participatory consciousness. We are more interested in this sort of art, whether it is folk singing or dancing together. My experience is that it is very difficult to get people to intellectually come together in dialogue, but people can come together in dance and singing, etc. So considering all these factors, we kept on enriching the Art Village. It is a very rare kind of institution which has got created. We have fifteen people working here, and we have created pavilions and open spaces, and we also have an amphitheatre.”

Where does all this fit into the very purpose of education?

“Creating the foundation for sensitivity is - to me - the basic purpose of every school. We are really attempting all that. We see to it that outside artisans come. Their art is so varied. India fortunately has this diversity: so much diversity is not seen everywhere in the world. With minimal things, people work. There is a holistic perspective which is left to children to pick up.”

Is it expensive for a school to set up such an engagement of artist and artisan?

“It is quite a big set up for a school. We have been lucky that many people have taken interest in this. It takes time for anything to become a culture. It is not as expensive as people feel: but our priorities are so stiff, linked to Math, computers, science, etc. Why can't we give the same amount of time to Art and Nature and Sports? Because only then do children



learn in a better way. If we put children in four walls, schools become hatcheries. The chaos in today’s world is because education has taken the wrong turn. If we really decide to do this, we can, but our priorities are wrong. They are for nuclear weapons, not for nutrition. It is not that we don’t have the resources in the world, we spend it wrongly.”

Nalini Jayaram, teacher and coordinator of many outreach programmes in the Art Village, says their Art Programme is also one way of bridging the urban-rural divide. Art builds bridges beyond cultural barriers, says Nalini, and learning happens by observing one another, and by self discovery. A creative mind is always open. “You don’t need big infrastructure, but you do need an attitude, perspective and a way of seeing things deeply. Prakriya, Bangalore has also started this process with weavers. Eighty kids weave every day. They have identified a local potter; their teachers came and learnt some basic carpentry, now they have even hired a carpenter...so the process is ongoing there now.”

“Right from a pre-school, instead of having too much of the other forms of learning - the three R’s - if they are amongst land and Nature and crafts persons, that kind of learning will go a long way in feeding intuitive learning.”

“Everything is so fed, so teacher-centred, that the urge to learn and explore, make things is missing. We are very product-driven, we may appreciate and buy these things in a mall, but we don’t know where these things come from, what are the materials involved. I feel at least new schools should look into these things.”

“Music, dance, art, theatre - all are under the same umbrella here. Over time, these have become the strong face of the school. People identify the Art Village with the school. Our OUTREACH programmes in the Art Village are open to anyone anywhere in the world; we charge a nominal fee for materials etc.,

so that those who don’t have facilities and structures can participate in these programmes.”

Nalini goes on to highlight the benefits that can be derived from a sound Art education, by specially-abled children: “We had some dyslexic and hearing impaired students as part of this Art Programme, and today each one of them has found a vocation. One student has secured admission in a Fine Arts College. Another student - who was very dyslexic - has become a teacher in a special school, and she is taking Art and craft in that place, and she is taking care of two Down’s syndrome children.

A student who was hearing impaired was keenly interested in art and craft. Her own determination and understanding has found her a place in an art college. She was extremely observant when the weaver from Assam was showing pattern-making on the loom. Such are the abilities of someone who has this urge to create, to learn, irrespective of whether they are “normal” or with “learning difficulties”. Even the weaver who was here would look out for that girl: she would ask: Where is she today? She picks up so well!

Another boy who changed eight schools in ten years and was branded ‘highly dyslexic’ - “can’t read more than three-four letters” - was here for three years and





has now joined Mysore Art College. These children gained self esteem, when parents/society said they were ‘good for nothing’, they found a space which made them feel they too were unique and good at something. With a little training, they grew.”

Do artisans also learn from each other here?

“A weaver had come...she stays in an island in Brahmaputra: Maajhuli, an island, a Heritage site. She is a Master, a National Award winner. She met our resident weaver from Karur (Tamil Nadu) and the idea was to enrich an already existing weaving unit. They learnt from each other...they explored the commonness in both weaving traditions.”

How do the artisans from different parts of the country communicate with each other?



“Language of the hands is another language of communication. One weaver spoke Tamil and the other spoke Hindi/Assamese! But they understood each other perfectly. The moment she said: You have to pull like that, he knew what she was saying. There was no problem. This is the way I do it, we do it here, was the response.”

Have you ever found the artisan who comes here missing his/her old world? Once they join here as faculty, do they express a need to go back to their old way of life?

“The artisans who we have here are already semi-urban, they had already moved out of their villages even before they came to our school. For instance, the carpenter was working in one of the villages in Tamil Nadu and he had relocated to Karnataka to make furniture. We were told about him and we felt he could join us as a wood craft person and we would not just ask him to make furniture but to work on wood as a medium for expression. So he has slowly moved out of making shapes and structures and functional pieces of wood, now he works with various mediums of wood. His whole approach has changed. They move away from the utilitarian view and then: art and craft mix. And he now grumbles when he has to do maintenance work, he no longer enjoys working on it just for utilitarian purposes! Give me a log, he says, can I carve? The moment you say let’s work on the log, he will make time for it. There is a personal dialogue with the medium, the wood that now becomes alive, whether someone buys it or not becomes immaterial. The very making of it is very intense.

“You see it as an evolving journey; I am moving in an unknown direction...I don’t know where it will lead. Real creativity happens in uncharted territory. This space has even allowed an artisan to move along this journey. That’s what our attempt is also. Not just to keep them as instructors, rather, can there be growth



for everyone? Everyone who is entering this space... not only the student. Everyone who steps into this space, can they feel like making something, a self-discovery happening silently- while remaining open and tentative.

Children touch things and feel they ‘know’, ‘Ah, I know, I can make it.’ But only once they try and make it do they realize that it is tough, and this brings a certain humility. But it has become a habit to say ‘I know’ even if you know just two or three things. This has become like a disease in urban communities today, just because you can Google search and get information. But you can’t Google search and make Art.” Art is not created that way, without the actual experience of expression from within, with a certain silence deep down.



On the subject of weaving and the story behind the looms in the Art Village, Nalini has this to say: “We can create a simple loom, see, like the one alongside, which is from Santiniketan. The making of a loom is in itself an art form. Working on this loom demands a certain precision. When a weaver from Assam came, she set up an indigenous looms made of bamboo. It was a way of preserving traditional knowledge indirectly. How to preserve ancient wisdom is one of our concerns - that was the reason we called in a weaver from Assam. We wanted to have such a loom, and so we invited her here despite the huge expense involved.

“Just the presence of such people does something



to the children...no books, nothing, you just see something is happening here, something is happening there...the other day, students were working eight to nine hours at a stretch on weaving, and not once did they say they were bored. So the mind which is so restless with books - has such a short attention span - can be disciplined in this art form. Everything is not entertaining here, everything is not stimulation...until he makes those 100 metres of yarn, the whole process cannot begin. So it is so different from the present scenario of instant gratification, ‘I am so bored, what else can I do?’”

Don’t you face a language problem when you interact with the artisans?

Chandan, the Pottery Teacher, responds thus: “No, there is no need for language when the hand is working and the mind is working. The Orissa craftsmen know Hindi. Our children enjoy working with them: there is no need for talking. While working, the Dogra artisans are singing, on one side a fire is burning, and on another side, they are melting wax, and work is going on, children enjoy...the craftsmen explain...”

What do you think of Art being taught in most mainstream schools: with no contact at all with the artisans?



Metal casting - Dokra

Says Shwetal, the Art Teacher: “I think it is a huge loss. In some ways, art cannot be taught by Art experts. It cannot be taught, for one. It has to be experienced. This is my belief. I cannot validate this. And, in some sense, art which comes from within: what they do is not to produce something. It has been home grown, they were doing it to embellish their own clothes, so there would be no affectedness in the way they present their work. They do it to the best of their ability and that cannot be taught. It has to be felt. And when these people come and work, and when they interact, it is something that I - who have learnt from a book - cannot teach. As a professional, now, after many years, I feel that when I learn from an expert craftsman, is when I really even begin to understand something.”

During one of their regional painters’ camp, an art student from an Art College came and asked if he could also do something. Seeing extra stones, just lying around, he worked on some and evolved this out of it. “An artist’s brain can figure out, infuse the idea, you see, and build on it from things that are just lying around. It won’t get caught with I need this and I need that. So one such example is this. He was just walking around, he was not even

a participant of the camp, and he saw these stones stacked here after some construction work... he has used acrylic paint on the stones. It won’t last long, but what does that matter?” asks Nalini. “He put things together and made this story: now see here, people from the village side are going to build cities, migrating to the concrete jungle in search of jobs, and people from the city move towards Nature. See? Rural folk sitting on sacks, in hordes, going in search of employment, and building structures.”

I came away thinking that it was precisely a story such as this (See pictures on next page) that such an initiative - where the artist and artisan join hands - is transforming!



Phad Chitrakar from Rajasthan



Pata Chitrakar



A story in stone



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