

Art, Democracy and Dialogue

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History

Art existed even before Democracy. The cave paintings at Bhimbetka Caves in Madhya Pradesh and Chauvet cave in Southern France [1] are testimonies of historic art, some 30,000 years old. These are powerful display of nature, culture, society and lives of the times. Though there is no concrete evidence, it may be assumed that there may have been some dialogue in creating them.

Fast forward thousands of years, the definition of art has changed, especially post 20th century. In a democratic world, there have been beautiful content creations involving feminism, gender equality and environmental conservation. There have been censorships, criticisms, banishing, arrests and curtailing rights all in the name of protecting democracy when it was the other way around. Dialogues were missing when these drastic things happened.

In ancient, medieval and early modern period, arts flourished due to the patronage of the rulers, who provided the resources (money, materials and human resources collected from across their empires). The rulers themselves were connoisseurs of art. **At present**, very few state governments or national governments have the foresight or the aesthetics sensibilities to patronise and promote artistic endeavours. **Creative expression is best left to the individual.**

Religious institutions such as monasteries (medieval Europe) and churches, temples (India), Buddhist monasteries, Islamic institutions also supported art in various forms of artistic expressions. These involved dialogue in some instances. E.g., the idea of the Qutab Minar may have come from Central Asia, but it was Indian artisans and craftsmen who use their indigenous techniques to realise the idea in stone. These would also serve an educational and learning experience for local artists and artisans to learn about new building techniques e.g. learning the technique of creating true arches. This kind of dialogues between different styles is present throughout the medieval Indo-Islamic architecture. This implies that art can be a big connector between two cultures even in monarchies. On the other hand, it should be noted that these may not have had involved individual freedom of artistic expression, which is only possible when there is a democracy.

In recent times, the **Encyclical “Laudato Si” by Pope Francis** can be considered a beautiful piece of creative expression which was received globally for its dedication on Mother Earth and her conservation. The book through several verses, poems and examples urge people to take care of the Earth and its resources for a better life and future. Though an encyclical is considered as a guide for “Christians”, it was celebrated by people across faiths globally, through the medium of arts and dialogues for bringing together the message of **“Una Terra, Una Familia”, which translates in English to “One Earth, One Family”**.

Interconnections

Art express life. It originates from life, conveys a story, brings out fantasies and enables people to earn from it. Democracy is participatory, just, shared and inclusive. These apply to anything in life. Dialogue imbibe conversations within principles of humanity. Art is non-discriminating by itself. It is us the people, who classify a piece according to our social norms, beliefs, traditions, values, fashion and environment.

Art is like any other communicative languages which everyone can appreciate and understand. One finds Art in several forms including painting, sculpture, installation, symbols, graphs, motifs, human forms, etc. It can also be a way of talking, or acting or even making food, etc. Using some infographic like pictogram or symbol or human representations (dance/drama), we can address an individual or a group of audience efficiently for communicating a subject. These can become an identity for a group. For example, when we go in a marketplace the symbol namely **logo makes us understand that a certain range of product belongs to a particular organization**. In an election campaign symbols marked in the flag or any surface help us to distinguish between the parties. These all co-exist together in the real world, symbolising democracy. Art is always with us through different forms. Due to a democratic thought process, it is also possible for millions to acquire reproductions and copies of original artworks at **affordable prices of renowned and famous artists** such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Jamini Roy, Amrita Shergil and the likes

The Journey

The journey called “art” is open for everyone. **Art is considered as “Liberating” to many**. In recent times, democracy and arts complement each other while dialogue is often utilised as a catalyst. The former is essential for the later to flourish as Jonathan Jones explains in an article “the best art is born out of democracy”, published in The Guardian, 2010 [7]. Democracy is expressed through arts in different canvasses. It is a visual medium for activists, artists and ordinary people for voicing their opinion on social justice issues. The freedom of expression can be considered a large set for accommodating democracy and arts. Modern classification of art also includes pre-digital and post-digital; pre-internet and post-internet works, etc.

Art has been extensively used for portraying democracy and liberty. E.g., the statue of liberty in New York. It was a gift to the US from the people of France in 1886. The interesting fact that some researchers have come out is that the statue was inspired by an Arab woman, who guarded the Suez Canal [2]. The statue of Liberty, as we all know signifies the guiding light to millions of immigrants who arrived in America with some having the conviction of better chances of survival and some better lives. Today, there are challenging times for refugees globally. Democracy and dialogues, both elude them.

Similarly, **the artwork “Goddess of Democracy”** [3] with the message “Democracy is Dialogue” at Old Johannesburg city hall, South Africa symbolise the struggle for democracy and is considered to be as a symbol of women being leaders and in the forefront in bringing in social and political changes for the good of people. One can consider the India Gate in Delhi as one of the symbols of democracy of free India.

Democracy and Dialogue ensure and provides for every human being to be part of cultural exchanges and be expressive in their way while providing intellectual protection of one’s creations. In the 21st century, the internet and digital platforms are creating a social change in people for displaying their creations, thoughts, expressions, often linking with democracy and social justice. Creative freedom is a necessity for artistic works. Democracy provides an equal opportunity for not just expressing oneself but warrants listening too during dialogues.

Relationship

The relationship between arts, democracy and dialogue is full of intercultural and interdisciplinary elements. It involves dissent, resistance, revolution, revolt, struggle on one hand and love, compassion, empathy, understanding, bonding on the other. Ideally, **it is a harbinger of love, purity, honesty and unselfishness**. It is based on individual thoughts of anger, frustration, dejection, failure, success, happiness and peace among numerous others. Some may involve dialogue (common theme, collective work, team creations), while some

occur in isolation. However, in every situation, it provides peace and content to the creator while urging for more challenges. **Hence, the title could have been Arts, Dialogue and Democracy in the order they were established in society.**

Democracy should be a medium through which art can flow liberally. Dialogue can add so many flavours to it. At the same time, it is crucial that the original essence is not lost during the process. Art and its references have been at the forefront in India's democratic struggle. They also promoted dialogue and provided a spark for revolutions to take place. They brought communities together for actions. The national song, national anthem and several inspiring poems all promote a culture of unity, democracy and dialogue.

Art and the SDGs

The Earth is just Eh without the Art

Democracy is among the core value and principle of the United Nations. **Article 27 of the UN declaration on human rights underlines two points**

1. Everyone has the right freely **to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts** and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits
2. Everyone has the right to the **protection of the moral and material interests** resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a set of 17 Goals and 169 targets agreed upon by countries in 2015 as a successor to Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) for ensuring global sustainable development till 2030. Arts and culture do not figure directly in any of the 17 Goals.

However, **the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)**, a global organisation, representing and defending the interests of local governments at world stage has published a document titled "Culture in the SDGs" which strongly advocates the representation of culture within the SDGs and outlines how culture can serve each SDGs. E.g. for SDG 1: End poverty in all forms, it suggests the following two points:

1. That the cultural services are basic services and equal access to them should be guaranteed for all men and women, including the poor and the vulnerable
2. Cultural expressions, services, goods and heritage sites can contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic development

Arts has also brought out the Sustainable Development Goals nearer to those who are uninitiated with the jargon of climate change communications. A company has creatively remodelled all 17 SDGs through animation with their theme "**good life goals**" [3]

Another example of utilising art for communicating the state of the environment was the "artificial lungs" put in November 2018 in Delhi for making the public aware of the pollution levels [4].

Case Study- a Democratic expression of art through dialogue

One of the best examples of democratic local community bonding, participation in creative and temporary installation arts, is the Durga Puja celebrated in West Bengal, parts of India and elsewhere globally. Durga Puja has seen a transition across the times from Mughals and colonial rules. It has seen a shift for being celebrated in individual households of *zamindars*, *banedi bari* (autocratic household) and wealthy to a community approach (*sharbojanin*, which means for and by the community) [5]. **It is more of a festival than a religious concept.** The puja pandals with the decoration and the idols are recognized for their aesthetics, social relevance, awareness of local and international causes, environmental conservation including recycling. The work involves diverse participation from the priest, students, artisans, artists, designers, architects, engineers, sound and lights experts, safety personnel along with the management team. Most of these services are voluntary. The money is collected through

subscription and advertisements. The West Bengal state government organises a procession of the best 70 idols in Kolkata after the completion of the Puja and before the immersion. In most places, everyone is welcomed in these pandals irrespective of caste, creed, gender and economic background. At the same time, there are environmental concerns to be addressed.

Our role

Shristi was founded by an accomplished and enterprising chemical engineer, Sudipto Mukherjee who left this world when he was only 35. His vision was to motivate engineers, scientists, management personnel, educated and intellectuals to work for the society especially the bottom of the pyramid people as a moral obligation and responsibility.

Shristi has always supported art as its medium for engaging communities, which has enabled it to work in 15 states. The two pillars of dialogue and participatory approach for all interventions at local level strengthens our motto of “**building communities through science and arts**”.

At *Shristi*, we promote this fundamental right among the beneficiaries and artisans’ community especially women. We believe that arts and creativity are cornerstones of democracy, which must be upheld. Hence, we encourage participants and beneficiaries to express their thought process transparently and openly. However, compassion and respect towards each other is the only condition.

Shristi has so far supported more than 200 artisans in various crafts for providing them design and marketing support at various national and international forums. It actively works with the All India Pottery Manufacturers Association and other relevant stakeholders for bringing change for an improved livelihood through social security and access to medical facilities. The two major facilities, which the organisation is a part of, for promotion of crafts are

1. Multi craft common facility centre at Moina, Barasat
2. Resource centre for terracotta and ceramics craft, Barasat

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