

REFLECTIONS OF AN ARTIST ON EDUCATION

It would be wrong to consider art as a separate entity. "It is very much part and parcel of your life and existence. A casual glance at our tradition and culture stands as proof. Our folk arts and festivals speak volumes about the celebration of life," says Tarit Bhattacharjee, a senior artist with roots in Shillong, Meghalaya and Shantiniketan, now based in Chennai as a teacher who has been working with children for the past eighteen years in The School, K.F.I. (Krishnamurthy Foundation of India). He has travelled widely to understand the folk traditions in our country, has many published works (including books and journals) to his credit and is currently engaged in bringing out an exclusive scroll designed for children on the environment, "Since I feel," he explains, "aesthetics plays a major role in creating awareness."

"For me art and teaching art go together. They are not different. They form an experience complementing each other or emerging together. The only major concern is about the space given to art in our educational system. It has only the place of an activity, very narrowly perceived. And this, I strongly feel, should change." The reasons are many. Today art and design seem to occupy a lot of space in our developing world. "From simple things such as designing your house or interiors, or a sari, Design has progressed to highly technical products - machinery, toys, industrial equipments, products for daily use, packaging. the list can go on. In other words art or aesthetics in relation to the environment has so much of potential in our economy as well."

"In spite of this," laments Tarit, "our mainstream education neglects art. It does not consider art as an important subject to be learnt in a focussed manner. The entire focus is only on academic learning based on practice and memorizing. As a result children who are good with their hands are completely ignored. Intelligence is wrongly judged. Co-ordination of hands forms the basis of learning. Hands have to be occupied even in the case of adults, as they form the extension of your thoughts. This can be emphasized creatively only through art education. Aesthetics is an inherent quality of human existence. It is something within us. Our educational system should include it, explore it and allow it to grow. Not resist it, leading to rejection of the individual, which in turn leads to separation and violence in our society. We need space for spontaneous expression---learning together. Creative education could perhaps create this space, a space that invites; not reject an innovative mind or original thinking. Unfortunately our system does not listen. Instead, it imposes restrictions. This should change.

"Art teaches a child to view nature and environment in a healthy manner. This leads to understanding of aesthetics (most important in a child's upbringing), creating a healthy society where beauty and harmony converge, where aesthetics and peace merge with life. Our festivals are an excellent reflection of an artistic culture that once existed. Be it Durga pooja or a rangoli at the door-steps of traditional houses, they are remnants of our glorious past where art was very much part of one's life. The entire society partook in building it. From folk artists, musicians, potters, craftsmen and toy-makers art made its presence felt in homes and families. We should not forget our past. Whatever we have lost should be revived and whatever is available should be preserved and enriched."

As a teacher, Tarit Bhattacharjee is full of ideas with dreams of bringing art into our educational system. "For, I feel, an artist does not necessarily exist in isolation, away from the society. He does not work in an alienated space, for art's sake alone. His work is an extension of his experience which is life itself. When this reaches the society, one lives in harmony with the society. Besides, only a creative mind can take care of or be responsible for our people and environment around us."

Truly an optimistic view full of hope for the future.