

ART EDUCATION IN NEPAL: PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

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Background | Introduction

While looking for a topic to write on our 'Art Education', a chance encounter with a young artist holding a 'Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts' offered an important eye-opener often ignored by all – the quality of 'the qualified artists' we produce. It's true the said artist proved to be an unpleasant example but he reminded us all – mentors, planners, educationists and all the stakeholders all alike that we have failed. Then and there, I concluded we need to make immediate soul-searching 'where did we go wrong and what proved us inept in our delivery.'

It was during one of my casual walks around the old part of Kathmandu I spotted the familiar face - 'the artist' - a graduate, sitting in a corner of a busy street, painting a landscape scene. The central content in his canvas was a pagoda temple flanked by rows of medieval houses on both sides of the composition. The composition – rows of houses converging to more than one vanishing point, asked for a fair amount of skills and knowledge of architectural drawing: and a reasonable familiarity to capture the moment and the mood of the spot in colors within a limited time.

As the common wisdom dictated, it was but natural to expect from him – a graduate artist, to be fully in verse with all the fundamentals needed in this work. As I watched him work

however, to my great dismay, I found none of the qualities described above in his work. He failed utterly to display even the rudimentary principles. He seemed totally unaware of how perspectives worked or the basic tenets of light and shades so very essential in the art of painting. He literally shocked my conscience to the core as an art teacher. I found myself even ashamed, albeit I never have had occasions to mentor him.

So initially I consoled myself with a thought that he may be an exception. His failings, maybe, only reflected his individual incompetence. In a second thought however, it occurred to me no: rather he reflected the entire teaching system we make. He made us visible the failings of the educational system we've had chosen to ignore. He, it seemed, is a living example of our collective failure and negligence. His failings openly questioned the very essence of awarding the academic degrees in such a situation. Thus he not only provided us reasons but also to forced to re-assess what really went wrong and what ails the system?

Constraints

First and foremost, the structure and the system of 'Art Education' we've had been following, for sure, remained static in view with the changing times. Many of the earlier practices and the efforts – regular or pro-active, made so far has proven



BFA 2 nd year painting class, 2016

to be grossly inadequate in multiple fronts; and is long overdue for a total re-evaluation.

A modern education as we see it is an activity evolved with a play of multiple factors like – timely up-dated teaching methods, teaching materials and the curricula in par with any modern art education elsewhere. The other primary requisites of course, remain the availability of minimum physical facilities as needed in a multifaceted art institute – that is creation of a right ambience for proper teaching and learning of Fine Arts. Also, equally important is the proper staffing - a pool of faculty members manned based on merit alone – not entered through back doors as a perk; and is of proven track record and ability to teach or impart the assigned lessons with an honest attitude.

Unfortunately for sure, if one is to give a running look at the present state our facilities, one would note in all the counts stated above it's not up to the desired mark or level.

Attitude

Honestly speaking, always perceived as a non-productive segment of national economy, 'Art education' has never been a priority in the state planning and this attitude has obediently filtered or handed down to university planners. A recent government decision that students with lowest grades are to be assigned to the Studies of Fine Art has come as a stark reminder of continued antiquated attitude towards Art. No need to add that here lays the basic roots of all the woes which reflect in every segment of running an Art education in Nepal.

A psychological embodiment and the dilapidated condition of the present Fine Art Campus building – is the visible reflection of state apathy; and it speaks volumes about Art education here. Historically too, from the very beginning, art education here remained too confined to a narrow based single institution in Kathmandu – thus making it a least known institution for higher

education. The authorities and the concerned professionals alike failed to propagate the merits and values of 'Art Education' nationally. For a long time, only a small segment of whole population knew about the possibility art education in Nepal. It meant we failed miserably to popularize the Art Education.

As a result, aspiring artists from the nooks and corners of the country were deprived of opportunities to acquire art education. This is precisely the reason while the higher education in other social and technical fields like Engineering and Medicine reached to new levels with multiple educational facilities, Art education confined and languished in a single campus with rudimentary physical infrastructures and faculty with inadequate academic credentials and needed experience to deliver effective modern art education.

Secondly, for a long time the education planners and the authorities alike remained unaware of the needs to expand the scope of Art Education. It remained myopic in their views to remain stuck in long held notion of art education. While in neighboring countries, many new facets of Art Education appeared and prospered to international heights, Nepal on the other hand, chose to either ignore or failed to take note of changing times. It never occurred to them a need to introduce other important facets of art in our art education system. And it is only recently that Studies on Applied Art and Traditional Art have been featured in curriculum.

Emergence of Sirjana College of Fine Arts

However, it was in this not so happy background and the setting, a group of concerned artists and art-lovers began to take note of it and began mulling of an alternative institution of learning Art. Today, it has remained a matter of great pride and satisfaction that at such a critical juncture and setting, Sirjana College of Fine Arts appeared in Nepal as a timely alternative in 2001 AD. Undoubtedly, history has proven it was a timely initiative made at a very right moment.

Initially, it was a modest beginning in 2000 AD., as stated in lines above a group of committed artists and the art teachers' collective idea to create an alternative platform for higher learning at the private level. Sirjana College of Fine Arts thus came into existence and was formally established in 2001 AD beginning with offering IFA initially then to Bachelors Degree (BFA). It indeed has proven and remained a pioneering vision in the annals of art history in Nepal. As is natural, since its very inception the College sought to remain a premium college of learning and accordingly striven every effort to achieve the stated lofty goals.

As time passed by, regardless of the initial hardships the College faced however, the hard work began to bear fruits. The graduate students emerged with flying colors and succeeded in achieving highest score amongst the entire Humanities and Social Science category. The success story continued to repeat year after years and continues to do so till this date.



A BFA 3rd year student of Graphic Communications explaining about his class works to the jury during the final display, 2015

Time for Self-Assessment

Sirjana College of Fine Arts did remain proud of its achievement but at the same time, also remained well aware of that the success achieved because many factors worked in our favor during the period. The factors include:

The Initial Advantages

- The College has had a privilege of a pool of small but highly dedicated faculty who were also the eminent artists of the country then. Their esteem and reputation also worked as the motivating additional attraction of the College then.

-The faculty and the staff then fully understood the missionary zeal of the founders. The teachers in particular, have had a sound experience in imparting the needed lessons in

consonance with the curriculum and thus worked in full earnest.

-But the most important factor was the limited small number of students enrolled then for a long time – thus making it easier to tutor individually to each student and administer the entire college management. And it resulted in excelling the overall results.

Changing Times and the Recent Developments

Many factors including recent political, social and economic changes in the country led many drastic changes in the existing education sector at the national level – including the phasing out of Intermediate Studies within University curricula. As is natural, it also affected the regular academic programs of Sirjana College as well. To meet the new

developments, some of the major changes and additions the College introduced are listed below:

- Introduction of 11 and 12 classes in Fine arts which offer Painting, Sculpture and Graphic
- Introduction of Graphic Communications (Applied Arts) as a specialized BFA program in addition to existing Painting Studies.

Significant growth of number of students enrolled in the College as a result of additions stated above.

New Challenges

- Need of additional faculty - with needed academic qualifications and teaching experiences in respective specialized subjects.
- Need to understand and update teaching methods so as to impart lessons more effectively as per the newly introduced subjects and the curriculum.

Constraints

The changed situation and the new challenges have also prompted Sirjana College of Fines Arts to make an immediate self - assessment of its strength and weaknesses. And while making a quick and a short assessment, in a nutshell the College found the present constraints as follows and are listed below:

- Absence of needed physical space so as to run /conduct all the classes - including the newly introduced academic programs.
- Non-availability of qualified and experienced faculty.
- Lack of enthusiasm to make timely adjustments/improvements in the teaching methods in the part of faculty.

-Visible lack of understanding of the core spirit of curriculum - resulting in deviating from the texts as described in the curricula or often going beyond or totally out of the given guidelines.

- A constant need to remind the faculty to strictly adhere and lay strict emphasis in the basic fundamentals of every respective subject. This tendency is mostly found in the faculty more fascinated or exposed to modern trends. They are found to opt more on experimentations e.g. courses on photography or creative compositions. In short a general tendency is to ignore the fundamentals and has become a common malaise.

- Last but not the least, the present set of new students in general, is found out to be less punctual, less disciplined and less interested serious manual exercise or practices. They are found more inclined to digital references and experimentations

Solution | Suggestion

First and foremost, the College's first need and prerequisite is its own spacious physical space. No need to add that the envisioned space is a well equipped building with all the needed amenities and the physical facilities as suitable to a modern space for higher learning in - Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Communications (Applied Art) and Music & Dance. Only in such an ambience where all the prescribed courses and classes could be conducted smoothly.

- The code of conduct - with specific mention of discipline and decorum of the College should be formulated with a strict mandate to the management to enforce it.

- A special attention should be paid to maintain a pool of faculty with needed academic qualifications and experiences.
- It must be ensured that the faculty pays special emphasis on the respective fundamentals of the subject than what the teacher know or like it most.
- While imparting the lessons, the teachers should be made aware that experimentations can wait till the Master's program.
- There is a constant need to allocate a sizeable amount of budget to make needed promotion and publicity of the College.
- As there is a visible absence of updated teaching materials, the College makes timely initiatives to create such. Or it may encourage the potential authors to develop the materials- remaining within the prescribed curriculum.
- The College must have an information outlet as a medium to ventilate the timely news and views of the College.

Conclusions

In view with the present situation and the present man power and the current financial health of the College, it may not be possible to implement all at a time or within a near foreseeable future. Therefore as a long term strategy, there should be a grand master plan where all the tasks are categorized as urgent or immediate, tasks which can be done sometime in near future and finally, a carried over long term tasks like a building of its own etc. Such a grand master plan would serve as the guiding principle so as to move to further success.



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Madan Chitrakar is a senior artist and an art writer based in Kathmandu. As a leading art writer of the country, on many occasions he has taken Nepali art beyond the borders - through his writings in many prestigious publications abroad - notably Japan, India and Bangladesh.

Two well acclaimed books "Tej Bahadur Chitrakar - Icon of Transition" 2004 and "Nepali Art - Issues Miscellany" 2012 remain to his credit.

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