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Article

Our heritage, our identity

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May 20, 2015

(This article first appeared in *The Times of India's edition of Essence called Vijayibhava, Vijayawada, May 4, 2015*)

Have you ever noticed? Whenever any country showcases its strength, presence and intent, it does so with its culture! From the Olympics to our own Republic Day Parade; it is culture in its entirety that gets encapsulated and presented. Culture, creativity, entertainment; all these are slippery concepts. Culture in its broadest terms, demands an engagement of the actor and the viewer, the performer and the audience: engagement being the key word here.

Our world, today, celebrates the genius of scientists and technology pioneers, and uses their discoveries and inventions with panache. Yet, this still is the outside world. There is another world - the internal that stays alive with the creativity of centuries, a world that is the collective unconscious of a society, which sometimes precludes even formal learning, distilled as it is over eons of transmitted knowledge. A world, that is being snatched away from the young generation.

Stop any young iPod holding, jeans clinging, sneaker scuffing, young lad or girl, and ask any of these three questions :

- Who is Annamacharya?
- What language did Thyagaraja sing in?
- What are the two major styles of Indian classical music?
- Which place does *Kalamkari* painting come from?

What do we get? A perplexed look, mumbled and unsure answers, something on the lines of, "I am not interested in this old stuff". Replace the questions with all things related to western culture, and you will have your answers pat!

So what's happening?

Our own personal and social unwritten laws state that culture is something we engage with after the more important tasks of life are dealt with: after work, after tax, after spouse, after children, after ... after.. and then some culture. For we have come to believe that culture is not important and is at best entertainment. We as a society have come to believe that while the learning and understanding of the external world is within range of people, an appreciation of our received legacy of culture is beyond the pale of the average student.

And hence we facilitate in paring down centuries of wisdom, and great art, into the lowest common denominator, of little canapés of dumbed-down culture. The reluctance of generations to engage with culture in its entirety is to me an enormous waste of human potential and loss of human realisation. Are we as a nation, driving our young to have a malnourished core - a dwarfed inner space?

Are we as a society directing the young to seek nourishment from a predetermined paradigm of market economics? Sure, markets have their place and are important, and yet what is the price tag that we could put, on the spiritual experience at the Kanakadurga temple, admiring *Kalamkari* paintings, praying at the Lepakshi temple, watching Kuchipudi, designing *moggus* and so on? They are all part of the collective life experience, the memory of centuries of time over the geographical definition of India, and define us in more ways than we can imagine. And by wilfully not acknowledging, leave alone engaging with our precious legacy, we are wiping and erasing this collective memory.

While economy, commerce and business are the spine of a nation, it is culture that is always the face. And when we erase the cultural memory that forms the face, what does that make us - well, faceless!!

In our single pointed trajectory of economic well being, growth, profit, bank balances, return on investment and so on, we have fed our outer world, and the results are beginning to show. Alas in this race, I see a huge neglect in the nourishing of our inner worlds. In this neglect, I see the changing attitude towards culture.

What can we do?

A broad definition of a nation's wealth should include personal happiness and fulfillment.

In this broader view of wealth, culture fits right in. For this we need to look at culture beyond the pale of markets and saleability.

To me, 'access' is the key word here. We as a society and government, need to figure out ways and means to provide access of as many varieties of culture to as many people. Box office and markets cannot determine what to support and what to ignore. We cannot allow the vicious cycle of poor funding, and poor box office returns, to let art forms die.

The transmitting of culture, is key to its renaissance. If music, dance, sculpture, painting, and so on, are never taught in schools, how will the young engage with it? If they are not even exposed, to it, what will they spend their bank balances on when they grow up?

Many of us as parents, introduce our children to some art, seeking not to be the next Vempati Chinna Satyam or Padma Subrahmanyam, but because we think that there is value in that exposure that they will carry for the rest of their lives. Value - not in terms of money, or return on investment, not

in terms of even a career, but in terms of nurturing a deep landscape or personal resource, that the child can draw on, at key points of their lives, a set of superfine tools to deal with life and its challenges. If we as parents, and society, do not help the child nourish and nurture this personal resource then we are indeed leaving them very impoverished. By not giving the child that exposure and choice, we are snatching away a child's right to the means to a better life. For this inner landscape of culture, is the magic set of keys that will unlock a child's curiosity and creativity, and strengthen self-esteem, enforce diversity, ensure lateral thinking, upgrade IQ and EQ, build values and aid in riding out life's challenges. As a state, as civil society, it is imperative to invest in the arts, and in culture. It is culture that defines who we are as individuals and as a nation, and every child must have the right to this access to culture. We are but stewards and retainers of a received memory of culture that has come from across millennia. We are but caretakers, who are we to mess with it and assign new values?

Today with India at an inflection point, what we can do is to nurture culture and creativity. It is our prerogative to nourish every art, popular or otherwise, and create a mechanism to support this cultural understanding and education in schools and colleges.

Every civilization had its cutting edge technology, relevant for that period, but when we look back, what we see is their art and culture. Can we take the onus of bringing back into the consciousness of the nation, that culture is a prime mover, and a civilization marker?

Can we commit to Cultural Social Responsibility?



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