

WHAT AILS THE ARTS IN INDIA

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Inaugural Jamshed Bhabha Memorial Lecture

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I thank this prestigious institution, the National Centre for the Performing Arts of Mumbai for giving me this unique honour of delivering the first Jamshed Bhabha Memorial Lecture. Had it not been for the great visionary, this very ground that houses our auditorium and the extraordinary Centre, would still be many feet under the sea. His perseverance and leadership is best exemplified in the amazing reconstruction of his dream theatre, after it was destroyed by fire. I salute both the Bhabha brothers and the Tata family for their interest and munificence — a remarkable quality that distinguishes the Parsee community of India. Succeeding generations of Indians would learn to appreciate their pioneering contribution more and more. I thank Mr Suntook, the worthy successor of Dr Jamshed Bhabha, for executing his vision, will and dream.

I shall attempt to present just an overview of the world of the arts in India, for a century or more. This is when completely diverse strands were finally woven together into a grand tapestry — that we now call Indian culture. To understand the present, we need to look at the past. Interestingly, most of our arts of today were completely re-shaped from the early twentieth century, when our national consciousness was fully manifest. We can only imagine how difficult it was in 1947, to forge a nation from the 17 British Indian Provinces and 565 Princely States that existed then. Today, we can say that very term ‘India’ expresses the successful realisation of an impossible idea — of uniting so many languages and ethnicities into one astonishing reality called a nation.

The subject of the arts is ,indeed, so wide and unmanageably big, that I have to seek your indulgence — because constraints of time constrict me from doing justice to important components of the arts. I will not dwell, for instance, on cinema and the folk traditions, or even the visual arts, that ails much less than others.

The first ailment that I would draw your attention to is the absence of the historical temper in India. This led to the deliberate or inadvertent amnesia about our own past. Our very glorious ancient history, that is now drilled into us repeatedly, was, in fact, gifted to us by British imperial archeology. Even 70 years ago, we really had no idea that our ancient civilisation stretched back beyond the Vedic period, to the Indus Valley — some 5500 years ago. Though Mohenjodaro was discovered in 1921 and Harappa was excavated in 1946, our text books first mentioned the existence of this

superior civilisation, only in the 1950s. The Ajanta caves were stumbled upon by accident in 1819, exactly 200 years ago, by a British captain who was chasing a deer. But, we had to wait till 1897, to get a glimpse of its unique art and sculpture, as all earlier attempts had been jinxed by accidents. John Griffiths, Principal of the JJ School of Arts, Bombay, presented the earliest visuals of Ajanta's art.

In fact, all the wondrous creations of Buddhism, from the 3rd century B.C., had all been wiped off our memory — by default or by design. It is only in the second decade of the 19th century, that we heard that the first major stupa was discovered, at Amaravati in Andhra. The ancient town of Taxila was rediscovered in 1830. Frankly, had it not been for the untiring efforts of Alexander Cunningham, for half a century from the 1830s, we would never get to see the grand architecture of Buddhist India. The magnificent Buddhist stupas at Sarnath, Sanchi or even the Bodh Gaya temple were completely forgotten, until they were excavated by British archaeologists. Before James Prinsep deciphered the hitherto-forgotten Old Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, on the Ashokan inscriptions in 1837, we did not have any conclusive evidence that an emperor called Ashoka had actually ruled India. The greatest Mauryan ruler, who spread to the world India's major and everlasting soft power — Buddhism — was lost in amnesia.

This ahistorical culture explains how extremely difficult it is for archaeologists, historians, museologists, antiquarians and museum lovers to bring their message to the masses. The consequences of such a world view, where myth is preferred over history, are becoming increasingly clear to us. The ahistorical tradition influences mass level consciousness so severely, that it is almost impossible to explain modern, evidence-driven, linear history. The prevailing concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution' and of 'touch' and 'defilement' meant that every object, animate or inanimate, had its own life span — after which it was consigned to the waters or to flames. Thus, a dead person's belongings, except perhaps jewellery and valuables, were treated as 'impure' and their preservation was not culturally permitted. Museums or collections could, obviously, not come up in India for centuries and millennia. Even now, they are still referred to as jadu-ghar or ajaib ghar, meaning literally the 'house of wonders' or the 'strange house'.

But then, we have also lived with the imported idea of museums for almost two centuries. We now have an enlightened class that values our past, and tries to ensure that our heritage is restored, preserved and protected. At the same time, we also have another mass, that just cannot make sense of the ruins or sculptures that they come across, as there are no proper explanatory boards at the sites. There is an even bigger number that simply could not care less for history or historical objects. Except those that qualify as World Heritage sites, most of our archeological sites appear to be rather dry, boring or even uncared for. I would like to draw your attention here, to a fact that we could explain to the Prime Minister, when he was also the Culture Minister — between May 2009 and January 2011. We calculated and told him that the Cul-

ture Ministry and its fifty plus major organisations, like the Archaeological Survey, the Central Museums, the National Akademis and many others — all put together — received just eleven paise out of every hundred rupees of the Central Budget. That is 0.11 percent. Out of this, we could give only 0.04 or 0.05 percent of the Central budget to the ASI. This is/was hardly enough to look after more than 3500 officially ‘Protected’ National Monuments of India. Most of them are, thus, left unguarded and uncared for.

Some of us have been advocating that we need to revisit this large number and reduce it. We could drop, say, Nicholson’s grave in Delhi as it commemorates the man who killed hundreds of Indians after the 1857 Mutiny. We may also hand over to local communities, hundreds of protected sites, like so many Kos Minars (milestones), and other unimportant structures. They could look after these uncared-for places and we could instil a sense of pride and ownership of these monuments. As expected, even as the Secretary of that huge ministry, I could not pilot this scheme through — because de-listing of ‘National Monuments’ is a highly sensitive subject. It leads to a lot of heat in Parliament and in the media. The same hue and cry is stoked when the management of a ‘National Monument’ is privatised —even though this often leads to more visitor-friendly facilities. Incidentally, the Culture Ministry’s annual budget has gone down even further, over the years, as several bureaucrats were simply not interested in the subject. Others heaped precious funds on environment-damaging religious sessions on prohibited river beds, or in glorifying our ancient traditions. Consequently, archaeology, museums and the performing arts were deprived of funds.

To upgrade our government museums, so that they are able to engage in meaningful conversations with the public, we took up a comprehensive action plan from 2009. We called it the ‘Fourteen Point Programme of Museum Reforms’. This continues to be the Government of India’s road map, even now, though regimes have changed so much. Some action points have worked, others need a booster dose now. Much depends on how much autonomy the Boards of the museums enjoy and how involved they are. But the real motivation has to come from the Director and his senior team. I have no hesitation in saying that the Chhatrapati Shivaji Museum is way ahead of all others, where initiative, leadership and innovations are concerned. In government museums, the selection of Directors passes through quasi-political processes. Quite often, we just do not have qualified and eligible museologists, and thus make do with other specialists. When the western world regularly appoints foreigners as the heads of their national museums, we cannot even broach this topic. Pandit Nehru had invited an American, Grace Morley, to set up the National Museum in Delhi, in the 1950s — but then, Nehru is suddenly so controversial. Another hard fact is that most central museums are forced to do with just half their sanctioned strength of curatorial and other staff. Then, their prolonged lack of promotion has resulted in demoralisation and demotivation. To add insult to injury, the Central government has recently ‘abolished’, just vanished, almost 100 posts in Delhi’s National Museum.

State-run museums are not any better, but despite all the talk, very few from the private sector are prepared to walk — and set up museums.

One factor that is inhibiting the growth of museums and collections in India is the retrograde Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972. It was brought in to prevent the Nizam from selling his treasures abroad. It failed in this task, and the Central Government was ultimately compelled to purchase these from him. We paid 65 million dollars — about 450 crore rupees today — only to lock them up in a vault. Under this law, “antiquity” means “any coin, sculpture, painting, epigraph or other work of art or craftsmanship”, which obviously covers many of our heirlooms. The term “art treasure” is defined as “any human work of art.....that the Central Government notifies” as such. These sweeping provisions affect all of us, because most of us did not even know that we are supposed to queue up before the single Registering Officers that the ASI usually has in each state or ASI Circle. We have to fill up complicated forms and then answer so many probing questions. We may all, therefore, technically offenders under the Act and would hardly ever get permission to sell these objects, even to a fellow Indian, within India. If you recall, the immediate impact of the Act was that in the 1970s and 1980s, Hindi movies just had to have a foreign smuggler in their plots. He was usually blonde haired; he spoke in broken Hindi and he brought an attache full of cash — to take out our idols and sculptures. Obviously, Bollywood films knew that smuggling had become a profitable racket, while the government struggled to appoint Registering and Licensing Officers — from a terribly understaffed Archaeological Survey.

Many art lovers have been campaigning for a decade and more, to scrap or amend the provisions of this Act, that constrict the free sale and movement of our treasures — within our own country. If we succeed, it would open up the art and antiquities market and ex-aristocrats or collectors would finally get value for the countless items that they have kept hidden — for fear of a dreadful bureaucracy. The art economy would gain, bringing in considerable employment, and Indians would be able to savour their long lost antiquities. Only then, can we expect private museums be set up, with some encouraging tax breaks, of course. Private collectors and collections would go up substantially — bringing into the public domain many historical items.

We started with how our deep rooted amnesia was cured by epoch-making historical discoveries, from the 1830s to the 1950s. This revised and ‘retro-fitted Indian history’ gave an unprecedented fillip to the nascent idea of nationalism. In the closing decades of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century, the new English-educated middle class and enlightened regional leaders seized this rediscovered history of India, to strengthen the nationalist cause. Archeological finds were flaunted by Indians to counter the overt British racialism, that was so evident in these very decades. But we must also be alive to the pitfalls of exercises in self-glorification, as this narrative may lead to the over romanticisation of India’s history. We have seen recently, how many claim that ancient India was far, far ahead of the rest of the world,

in every discipline. The obverse side of this coin insists that India fell, because foreign conquerors and their descendants destroyed our rich culture and legacy.

The unique pride that archeological discoveries instilled in us also provoked national and cultural leaders to demonstrate that India's living cultural traditions were equally ancient. We quote Bharata Muni's *Natya Shastra* all the time, to demonstrate the ancient roots of the performing arts, but, frankly, we are not even sure when it was composed. While the origin and development of the classical performing arts do go back several centuries, we must remember that we have departed from traditions. After the 1930s and '40s, and after Independence, classical dance had practically to be re-invented — to suit the front-facing proscenium stage. The stigma attached to these dances performed by the Devadasis, was broken only when dancers from the upper castes and classes dared to perform them. In December 1935, Rukmini Devi Arundale shocked her Tamil Brahman community in Madras — that walked out of the hall in disgust — as soon as she got up on stage, to dance like a “low class Sadir”. Coming to the North, we find Kathak had to extricate itself from being branded as the sleazy dance of nautch girls — thanks to the efforts of pioneers like Kalkaprasad Maharaj. This was also in the early part of the 20th century and Birju Maharaj belongs to the third generation of this — so recent was the revival. Odishi is definitely ancient, but for centuries, the Mahari dancers and little boys, Gotipuas, had to gasp for survival. It was only in the late 1940s and the '50s, that four Gurus led by Kelucharan Mohapatra, could rescue it. In fact, Laxmipriya Mohapatra's dance in Cuttack in 1948 is regarded as the first performance of classical Odishi, after its revival. In the last 70 years, these arts were appropriated by the upper classes, and cleansed or sanitised. But most traditional dancers have disappeared.

To be fair, however, not every great dance form was degraded in public esteem — as some had continued for centuries, on their own strong traditions, like those in many parts of the South. Sri Vallathol's campaign to extend Mohiniyattam from small pockets in Kerala, led to the establishment of Kala-mandalam and to the spread of this dance form. In the 1930s, an American lady, re-born as Ragini Devi, revived the skills of Kathakali through ingenious re-packaging. She performed before Indian audiences and also introduced the dance form in the West. Around the same time, Tagore patronised the obscure dance of tiny Manipur, and gave it nation-wide publicity and recognition.

Dance recitals had to be restructured to suit a front-facing proscenium stage, modifying performing protocols that were meant for audiences seated all around — as in the dance halls of temples and palaces. Lack of audiences and patronage are said to be the biggest ailments in this arena. But even in the past, the *Natya-mandapams* or dance halls were usually quite small — as after all, the term ‘classical’ means that it was restricted to connoisseurs. Some feel that the phenomenal expansion in the size of audiences today, and the democratisation of classical forms in post-Independence era, has led to the ‘poly-packing culture’. Modern audiences just do not have so much

time. The success of the top artistes in the revived classical forms meant that the number of practitioners has gone up substantially. The Ministry of Culture's annual salary grants and production grants can hardly meet these expectations. However, despite losing the patronage of earlier maharajas and nawabs, it was possible to sustain the Guru Shishya tradition in the performing arts. I feel pained to hear that these government grants have now been reduced and delayed, for years. Well known artistes and dance troupes earn enough, but nobody really looks at the vast army of low-paid technicians, without whose support the performing arts would have collapsed. In post-Liberalisation India, philanthropists need to step in and imbibe from western capitalist societies, the great virtue of 'giving back'.

Before moving naturally to classical music, we will take a little detour through theatre. India does not have any single recognised national theatre form as such, traditional or modern. We have, however, thriving regional theatre traditions in many languages, like Bengali, Kannada, Malayali, Marathi and even Manipuri. Each one revolves around its own cultural ethos — like contemporary issues, political protest, existentialist problems, mythological tales, sheer laughter, regional historical memory, and so on. Any attempt to foist one language over others will be retrograde, and instead of thinking of cultural homogenisation, we must tackle the real ailments. These are finance and audiences that are moving away to the cinema and television. Many of us are aware of how so many dedicated directors, playwrights, actors and supporting staff work for a pittance — for the love of theatre. Yet, several regional theatre traditions need immediate help, before they die out.

Finding theatrical spaces, at reasonable costs, is the biggest problem for most groups, as commercial auditoria are beyond their reach. This is where the Ministry of Culture and many State governments stepped in, right from 1961, the centenary year of Tagore's birth. Numerous Rabindra theatres were set up all over India, that offered performing spaces — at affordable costs, in towns, big and small. By the 1980s, however, this scheme petered out, but we managed to revive it again in 2011, with good funding as it marked the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath. Though India could get a second round of auditoria, that could cater to medium and larger audiences, what most experimental plays required were smaller or more intimate spaces. These 'Studio Theatres' or 'Black Boxes' facilitate close interaction between actors and the audience and the Ministry made a special scheme to assist this concept. But where we completely failed was to set up world-class multiplexes for the performing arts, like the Lincoln Center in Washington DC or the Getty Complex in Los Angeles. Mumbai is lucky to have such an NCPA, while Kolkata has a reasonable large but unplanned complex, in its Rabindra Sadan-Nandan Cinema precincts, where good cinema and vibrant performing arts jostle for space. It is sad to note that Delhi, the national capital of India, has nothing comparable. There is not one theatre hall with the size, acoustics or depth of the stage to host an international symphony or ballet group. We pleaded with everyone for years together, but then we had no Jamshed Bhabha with a big vision or his successor.

Let us now move to classical Hindustani and Carnatic music where traditions run as deep, but be honest enough to admit that the real boost came mainly in the 18th century. The major breakthrough in Hindustani classical was made only in the early decades of the 20th century — when stalwarts like Paluskar and Bhatkhande tried to bring this traditional but elitist music closer to the common man. Organisers of music conferences or soirées in the 1930s and 1940s also played their role — to take it out of temples, palaces and baithaks. The real quantum leap took place, however, in 1952, when BV Keskar assumed charge as the first Information Minister of India, for one long decade. He was obsessed with the idea that the new nation needed only classical Indian music, Hindustani and Carnatic. He banned Hindi film music from All India Radio altogether, and may have shut down Western music as well, had Pandit Nehru not been around. On the plus side, he organised massive Akashvani Sangeet Sammelans in major cities. It was really Keskar who was instrumental in reaching classical music to the masses, over the State Radio.

From the early part of the twentieth century, classical and semi classical Indian music had to adapt to new inventions, like the gramophone — which brought in drastic reduction in the time per song, until the LP arrived. Microphones were not allowed or required by connoisseurs in their baithaks, but it was mandated by both the radio and music conferences. Vocalists and musicians had now to be careful, as every drop would be magnified in the whole hall. The gramophone, and then the radio, sliced up performances into time-clocked bits and pieces, and classical music was hardly its former self — when pandits and ustads had enthralled audiences through the night, well past dawn. But there was a persistent demand for bringing popular Hindi film music back on radio. As Keskar refused to oblige, lovers of popular film music turned to Radio Ceylon, where our own Ameen Sayani captivated millions, right from 1952 with 'Binaca Geetmala'. Then Parliament took up this issue, and finally the government capitulated after five years. It began its own programme of Hindi film and popular music, on Akashvani, called Vividh Bharati. With the rapid expansion of the radio network connecting remote corners of India, like Jhumritalaiya, popular Hindi music gained the most. Then, during the three wars of 1962, 1965 and 1971, the entire nation turned to the radio, which also soared to unprecedented heights, by organising programmes like Jaimala where patriotic songs were broadcast, with film personalities.

In the 1970s, the transistor replaced the old clumsy radio valves, and instantly, the radio became portable and cheaper. Within a decade, every roadside pan shop in India was blaring out Hindi film music. This brought colloquial Hindi to most Indian homes, even in the deep South, where opposition to the imposition of Hindi was most acute. The short point is that popular Hindi songs managed to unite all categories of Indians, who spoke different languages, especially the generations born after Independence — through a musical lingua franca. Many of us have objections to several ludicrous or garish film songs, but we can hardly deny that many old Hindi film

songs have reached iconic status among the common people. Their unforgettable lyrics, haunting voices and exciting music are now part of modern India's popular culture. We must also remember that while a limited number of Indians could actually pay to see a movie in a hall, the masses could always hear these film songs, as our public spaces reverberated with them. But we also need to address separately, whether this is destroying our linguistic plurality or public tastes.

We must remember that culture is a powerful tool, that needs to be handled with care, or else it may stir emotions that run out of control. The state television, Doordarshan, also played a big role in bringing Indians together in a shared memory, especially in the last quarter of the 20th century, when it had a monopoly. Academics have, however, started drawing a nexus between the two DD epic serials, that were so immensely popular, between 1987 and 1990, and the sudden upsurge of one community pride that followed. Without more serious work, we cannot be sure whether these serials actually led to the unprecedented aggression and riots of the 1990s. We bring this proposition only to highlight the inherent dangers that lurk in influencing the human mind. One must also compliment DD and AIR for seriously catering to different sectoral, regional and ethnic demands — and for bringing the nation together, as also maintaining a cultural equilibrium. With the opening up of the radio and television market to the private sector, which was inevitable and necessary, market forces started dominating tastes — often catering to the lowest common denominator.

Before I end with a few comments on western classical music in India, I must point to another major affliction, i.e., the indifference with which we treat our cultural archives. This stems from the same a-historical gene in us. We have photographs that go back to over one and a half centuries, and except piecemeal efforts, taken by private individuals and trusts, like the Alkazi Foundation, we have no coordinated or comprehensive effort to digitise and preserve them. The Archeological Survey's earliest photographs of India in the second half of the 19th century, were whisked away to the British Library in London. But frankly, we could not even take care of what the Empire left behind. The same fate awaited the radio recordings, that began only in the late 1940s, on a selective basis. Some of the silver coated and acetate discs of All India Radio have survived and have been digitised —as have some music recordings on wax cylinders, that the primitive gramophone used. But many precious spools of radio archives, containing masterpieces, have simply disappeared. Many were overwritten, to meet the shortage of tapes in the 1950s and 1960s. Film preservation is in a little better stage, with the setting up of the National Film Archives, and the later, the National Film Heritage Mission. But world class professionals feel that we are still miles behind. These are not like architecture, because once music or film records are destroyed, we can hardly rediscover or excavate them later on.

It is a lasting tragedy, however, that the radio and domestic television have moved away so far from western music. For several decades after Independence, All India Radio popularised different genres of western music, from Jazz and Rock to

Pop and Country Folk. Radio carried popular programmes of Western Classical as well. It was in the radio archives, that one came across Satyajit Ray's talks on 'What Beethoven Means to Me' and 'The Music I Live By'. But then, over the years, All India Radio has deliberately been cutting down Western Music programmes, and it is really too minuscule now. I remember the uphill task we faced when Doordarshan and our Radio recorded Zubin Mehta's 'Concert for Kashmir' in September 2013. Had it not been for the public competitions of western music in Goa, Mumbai, Kolkata, etc, and the internet, our youth could hardly sustain their interest in this domain. Sadly, the western music schools or societies in Kolkata, Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai have their limitations. The north-east has also its own form of western music, especially in the choral category, and this seems to have struck deep roots into the culture of states like Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.

I have bemoaned the fact that Delhi does not have a world class size stage in any large auditorium, with the state-of-the art acoustics and lighting equipment. But frankly, neither does any other city, except Mumbai, where audiences can savour the excellence of western classical music or ballet dances. We hear that while China has countless

western orchestras, but India has only one full-fledged one, here in NCPA. Had it not been for the Symphony Orchestra of India, that fructified thanks to the inspiration of Jamshed Bhabha, and the untiring efforts of Mr Suntook, we would not have even this one. I take this occasion to congratulate Marat Bisengaliev, Zane Dalal and the whole team for their dedication. The present neglect and abandonment of western classical music in India is an ailment in our arts scene, that has to be addressed, if leaders are really serious in projecting India as a world power. It is the SOI that is keeping our flag fluttering.

What is clear from the narrative is that the arts of every generation require not only creative and extremely talented persons to rejuvenate each tradition and appreciative audiences — but also patrons, who are rather rare. Most American billionaires of the last one and a half centuries are almost all forgotten, but the names of those who made handsome grants to culture and education —like Carnegie, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Guggenheim and Getty — will never be forgotten. They remain immortalised through the institutions they helped to create. The names of the Tatas, Bhabhas and other families that contributed to education, science or the arts, are similarly engraved in public memory — and will continue to remain so, for generations to come. My forty one years in government service, both in the Central and State governments, have made one fact clear to me — that governments have severe limitations, in terms of funding, expertise and commitment to the arts. The saturation point has already been reached, and government is struggling to find several million crore rupees, required for its absolutely essential critical sectors. India has now to seriously decide on how the arts are to be sustained, so that finer instincts are honed in our countrymen. We need to combat the lure of colourful but mentally-debilitating forms of entertainment, to the extent possible. I would appeal to those, who are fortunate to

have been endowed with abundance by the Almighty, to come forward. They need to lend a helping hand to institutions like the NCPA, that require as much support as possible, to carry on their mission and enrich humankind.

I end, by complimenting this august audience for your patience, and my gracious hosts for giving me this great opportunity. My humble salutations to the memory of Jamshed Bhabha, who made a dream come true, in the arts scene of Mumbai, India and the world.