

## **Tradition and 21<sup>st</sup> century! A glass roof**

Many artists languish suffocating in India's numerous slums, bylanes and street corners. With dreams of being discovered one day, these venerable repository of our heritage seek patrons and discerning audiences, in times when art like a commodity is merely consumed.

As lakhs of skilled people face wretched unemployment it is not surprising that the young want little to do with what has been handed down for so many generations.

No one wants to hear the ballads of Dhola Maru and Amar Singh Rathore like hundreds of tales of valour and value, lost in the din of new sounds. The machine has replaced countless time honoured metiers. And today's sensibilities prefer an access to electronic substitutes.

No one has the time or occasion to touch base with the wise old artists themselves, nor are the so-called museums concerned about becoming dynamic centres of reference for a community in action.

Women who sang the most telling songs on the way to the well, sharing the day's happenings with each other, have now merely to open a faucet in their homes. Good! No doubt the water pot, however superbly designed to be carried on the waist and on the head, would now require to be changed. The songs, invented by the women to lessen their drudgery, will fade away. The loss of a custom or ritual from memory as objects that enshrine their usage become obsolete is not the most important concern. What should concern us more, is how the need and energy-so delicately expressed and enshrined in the eloquent language of symbols and in the communication of the women, now finds a new vehicle for expression?

Today the need to sing is replaced by the pressing of a button or turning a knob, TV boxed in a room is becoming our family, replacing the community. The warmth of participative human interface is becoming rare and is often a copy of a copy. Settlements are designed to isolate people in the name of privacy and convenience. The concept of neighbourhood shifts from local to Global in a vicarious sort of way.

What is replacing that which must go? Can we relate creatively to the pace of development and absorb its consequences with any sense of quality. The concern then, is to constantly and persistently ask, from here to where? What do we want to preserve and how do we proceed to preserve? And for whom?

While we point a finger at society for its negligence towards the artist let's not ignore that several fingers point back to us as artists and our endeavour to save our own inheritance. Are the members of Sarthi really doing what they can to nurture their creative side? Isn't there an ennui and passive inertia that shrink our sensibilities even as we shirk our responsibility. The blood does not quicken nor do the eyes shine with the thought of something traditional. The past has little future, as the present is sunk deep in the mere act of survival and obsessive net working for "approach" etc.

Yet – there are so many brave and noble efforts! Kesaria Ram, whose entire village broke stones in a ‘food-for-work’ programme, sculpted a stone bench with the help of the Italian architect Mario Bellini. This bench is today in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Gopi Lal Lohar making antique daggers worked with the Master Engineer Frei Otto to create a range of forks and knives in damascene.

Teji Ben, well versed in making embroidery for her daughters, trousseau now employs scores of women to meet a growing demand for new home furnishings – including tents!

Raju Mistri worked with Bernard Rudoufski to create a new Earth shoe, derived from the simple Jooti.

Behind all these efforts is strenuous work, dogged pursuit and the capacity to dream...

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is visible like a clear sky but in between there is a glass roof and an illusion that a creative person can not break through.

The question however is not merely of accepting change. Often change for modernity is confused with the pursuance of western metaphors. We need innovative thinking and original action as apposed to imitative reaction – which mires us in a quicksand of mediocrity.

There is a fragrance in the air for a new paradigm of artistic experimentation rooted in the confidence of knowing where we come from. It is still tentative but could be tenacious. Shubha Mudgal, Maya Krishnan Rao, Zakir Hussain and Nursat Fateh Ali Khan are all examples of this new movement.

Today, the traditional artist has to become acutely aware of new market trends and emerging technologies. The craftspeople and the weavers have to capture new designs yet not conceived by machine and possible only with the versatility of human hands. The folk artist may have to go beyond the spontaniety of intuition to controlled improvisation. The classic has to reinvent itself to remain classic and artists have to stop living off genealogy of pedigree. If your forefathers ate food cooked in good ghee, the fragrance won't stick to your fingers.

Very truly yours

(Rajeev Sethi)