

HERITAGE MATTERS

The cry world over is the demise of humanities and liberal arts. Disappearance of funding. Reactive governments. Inertia of bureaucracies. Class mobility of the subaltern into compromising and aspiring middle class establishments. Replacement of creativity by show and tell presentations. Frozen in time festival performances. Proliferation of conferences for ticking the boxes in academic scoring and hierarchy. In this circus of contemporary India who are the puppeteers? Who are the performers?

Does orthodoxy stand in the way of creative freedom? How do we interrogate propaganda and press? Has individualism become dominant in the digital domain? How well can we interrogate, evidence based and informed by deep research, all the things that add value to creativity and freedom in a country like India? Where are the safe places for unsafe ideas? Whatever has happened to the creative and intellectually engaging spaces – the Adda - the Rachhabanda - of the humanities. Festivals and extravaganzas consume most funding. Often flash in the pan events. Provide photo ops. No outcome analyses and statistical profiles based on scientific methods are provided.

A much needed two-day international thinktank addressed some of these concerns in Delhi in early February. It was co-venued by like-minded knowledge partners - Ashoka University led by its President Dr Rudrangshu Mukherjee, CIMA Art Gallery Director Rakhi Sarkar and the indomitable Curator Dr Alka Pande. Host Indian International Centre. It is a brave, inspirational and much needed engagement worth every minute of the two days, a rare gathering of deep-thinking minds in 21st Century India focusing on creativity and freedom.

IIT Kharagpur and cultural animators from Banaras joined providing leading edge dialogue grounded in the very dynamism that was once quintessential to Indian culture and its ability to propose, present and further the discourse of creativity. Leadership from the IIT demonstrated commitment to humanities and creativity for softening the hard edges of technology, engineering, architecture and design. A similar trend is evident at the School of Planning and Architecture, Vijayawada.

In this context, museums are not just about valorizing the past argues Curator Dr Alka Pande. Museums are of all kinds. The typology of museums is extensive. It is also porous. The more market driven or interdisciplinary they become, the more permeable they become. Relevance is the key word – to collections, audiences, multiplicity of stakeholders, indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse populations. My interventions and presentation focussed on museums drawing on my plenary reflections from both the closing conference in Vienna of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage and the International Research Conference on the Inclusive Museum in Granada (<https://onmuseums.com/about/history/2018-conference>).

Transformations is the touted mantra. How change is driven and by whom has become critical. Introvertedness results in more of the same. Spaces that are enviable have been left to decay and oblivion. They are often tarted up with show and tell activities. Space are becoming venues rather than museums. Resistance to change and relevance could see new museums take birth. Sooner or later governments force the change. That is reality and no audience will support a dead organization. The future is mission driven change. Clarity of mission is critical for any museum to aspire to become better.

International Council of Museums defines: A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

The intersectionality between museums and communities is dynamic and evolving. Council has decided that it is time to re-think and revise the existing museum definition. It seeks a new delineation that reflects and expresses 'adequately the complexities of the 21st century and the current responsibilities and commitments of museums' bringing forth 'their challenges and visions for the future'.

It was telling that the Secretary of Culture Arun Goel made it crystal clear that we need strategic and collaborative vision and policy making to move forward. India works ad hoc in the cultural sector without reliable cultural statistics. These are different from the product driven cultural industries. Manufacturing of data has become common. Pilgrims are cast as tourists. NRIs and OCIs coming back to see families are counted as tourists and not as VFR – Visiting Friends and Relatives. Such distortions skew up any potential planning that could genuinely contribute to India's GDP

REIMAGING OR REIMAGINING CREATIVITY

Photos: International Institute for the Inclusive Museum



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(Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian was an invited speaker at the Delhi thinktank on Creativity and Freedom)

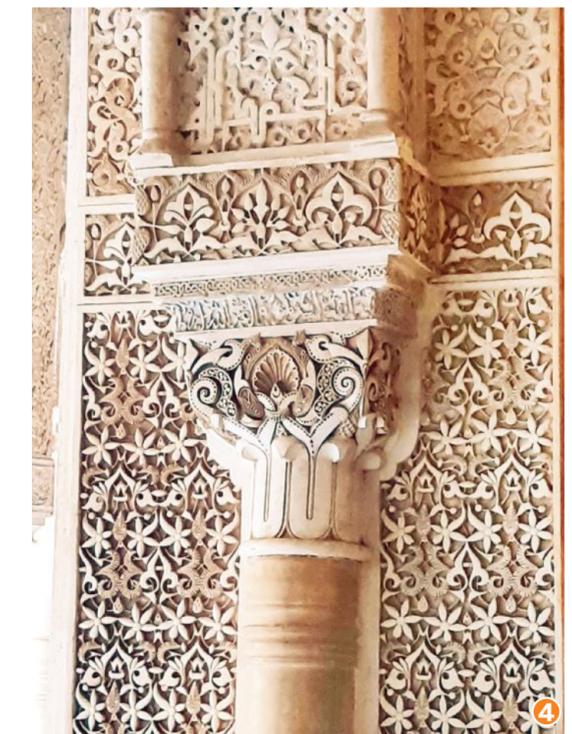


based on creativity. A take away for me from the think tank is a dilemma that Australia and Canada faced two decades ago. Resourcing cultural maintenance often assumes that culture is frozen in time and static. We often freeze performers in an anthropological past. Both the countries opted for Cultural Development policy approaches. It was resourced as a priority in both the countries underlying the importance of creativity and freedom contributing to new forms of energy through the arts and humanities.

One of the missed opportunities tells all, last year's Australian exhibition of outstanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the NGMA. A thinktank could have been catalytic to reflect on how we could shift paradigm of Art and Aboriginality in India. Unfortunately, it is still perceived through a colonial past and framed in 'primitivity', a legacy of racist past that permeates museums, cultural projects, heritage and academies in India. The dynamic nature and potential of contemporary art, culture and heritage of Aboriginal people in India in all its diversity and richness is sadly neglected.

As an Australian I am proud to have served on several national and regional arts and culture funding bodies with the imperative to consider resourcing based on peer assessments and without compromising creative freedom. Australia Council for the Arts has four fundamental principals guiding its strategic directions: to support and provide access to creative excellence; to promote and enable participation in the arts for all; to develop audiences both in Australia and overseas; and to invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts and Culture. Inclusion in all possibilities is the preferred future. Something that we could consider in India. Indeed, we need to ReImage and ReImagine arts, culture and heritage to become inclusive.

NEXT WEEK Heritage Matters will take you to Vienna, World Music Capital and Urbanism of Excellence



- 1 Recent installation of ethnographic collections in the Welt Museum in Vienna
- 2 Professor A.L. Basham, author of *The Wonder That was India*, was recalled at the thinktank. Prof. Galla paying respects to his main PhD supervisor along with the author's daughter Savitri and grandchildren in the All Saints Cemetery, Shillong
- 3 Creativity and Freedom must be grounded in the criticality of our sense of place and identity
- 4 Reflections from Europe