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***Creative attempts at justifying creativity in the regular school
curriculum***

Why art? Why is it that art needs to be a part of education? What do children gain? Why should they have free access to some form of art? What does art add that is so necessary to life? These are questions faced by anyone who has tried convincing schools, governments and even parents to incorporate art as a regular part of the curriculum.

We talk about how music helps one learn mathematics, how visual and spatial constructs are aided by dance, and how drama helps communication in daily life and so on and so forth. All this may be true, but it is sad that we try to "justify" the place of art not just in education but in society itself by extolling the ways it enhances our physical, motor and intellectual abilities. But what about emotional and spiritual capacities? [Here 'spiritual' does not refer to religion but a deeper need to understand this world.]. Art [rather than mathematics or geography] can address emotional needs and build spiritual reserves to fall back on in a world increasingly dominated by hatred.

Having stated this right at the beginning, that art should not need to justify its position in society but should be recognised for what it can bring into the lives of children and adults, it is also acknowledged that these are not arguments that convince school boards, governments and over-anxious parents. Our education systems are built to serve economic and political agendas. In this paper I have tried

to give a description of several case studies where dance has been introduced boldly, stealthily, ingratiatingly, cringingly, wearing various guises to conceal its 'frivolous' motives. These are some interesting, maybe even bizarre experiments in the increasingly desperate endeavour to incorporate the arts in the main curriculum in schools that are geared towards training students to pass highly competitive exams. In India, education is viewed as a basic tool of existence; a road to success or merely survival and art is considered too frivolous to play a part in this process.

The school system in Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, has a choice of four boards of education; SSLC [Secondary School Leaving Certificate], the state government controlled syllabus; Matriculation Higher Secondary syllabus also controlled by the State Government; CBSE [Central Board of Secondary Examinations], a Central Government controlled syllabus and ICSE [Indian Council of Secondary Examinations], an independent syllabus usually found in fairly expensive private schools. In none of these syllabi does dance or indeed art feature as a part of the regular school curriculum, although in some cases it is offered in primary school or as an extracurricular activity.

In this paper, I wish to present four case studies where dance of some indigenous origin has been incorporated in different types of schools for different purposes:

1. Where dance has been used as purely a creative art form:

The aim was to sensitise the students to practise as well as interest themselves in different forms of dance and music from local, pan-Indian as well as global cultures. The emphasis was also placed on traditional forms of dance that are slowly dying out. On a more fundamental level, priority was given to understanding and using forms of non-verbal communication, body language, signs and symbols that are growing obsolete. This project was carried out in an expensive private school where most children came from very wealthy and mostly westernised families. Most of them would not be able to spell Bharatanatyam [one of the most well-known classical dance forms of India]. It was a challenge to get them interested in what to them was very 'uncool' and unsophisticated music and dance forms [MTV being the coolest channel!!]; to get them to say 'vanakkam' or 'namaste' rather than 'Yo! 's up?'; to coax and cajole the boys saturated with the western notion that dancing is for girls or 'sissies', to dance [managed it after using various local martial art and circus forms]; to get them to understand and perhaps imbibe gestures and symbols of local Tamil and Indian culture. The workshop of course had a 'cool' name of 'Creative movement education'!

2. Where dance has been used to bolster the physical education [PE] curriculum:

Most schools in India have a very poor PE curriculum due to lack of funding and materials. Since there is not a sufficient supply of sports equipment to provide for all the students many schools use a system of Physical Training [PT], a hangover from the colonial period, which consists of a series of exercises like a drill. An interesting but controversial experiment was carried out wherein various folk dance forms were introduced into schools to replace PT, the aim being fourfold: sensitising students to these art forms, providing physical and mental stimulation, providing work for the dancers who find it difficult to survive on their art, and lastly, incorporating dance as a regular part of the curriculum. The challenge was in trying to accomplish this while guarding the artistic and creative aspect of these dance forms knowing fully well that they were not meant as mere physical exercise.

3. Where dance has been used to aid the educative process:

This was a series of workshops carried out with teachers from different disciplines discussing the possibilities of using dance as an aid in the teaching process. This was then followed by a project using Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form from Tamil Nadu as a part of a biology class: subject - the working of the heart. By physically taking on the roles of arteries, veins, auricles, ventricles, valves, blood and muscles etc, the children understood visually the working of the heart and the various problems that arise when the aorta is blocked or the valves stick to the left ventricle has a hole and so on. That was one subject in the exam that all could illustrate and answer!

4. Where dance was substituted in a 'Moral Science' program:

Called in to replace a Moral Science teacher who had died, a project was set up whereby a situation from the *Ramayana* [a popular Indian epic] was explored and later performed. It was not treated as a religious text but as means of exploring notions of gender, social roles, equality and justice. The scene was chosen where *Sita*, the model wife of *Rama*, chooses to enter the fire to prove her chastity which *Rama* doubts since she was captured and held prisoner by the demon *Ravana*. It was amazing what a group of ten to fifteen year olds had to say about *Sita's* plight, *Rama's* dilemma and the justice meted out! In the performance, each child chose to be a flame and decide for herself whether *Sita* should be burnt or not. The audience was also involved in the performance creating an amazing experience where social practices blindly followed were questioned; girls growing into women

asked, felt and expressed the needs, desires and frustrations of this maturing process; their perceptions of themselves as soon-to-be-women, of society and of society's perceptions and expectations were debated. There were no solutions, there never are but what was created was an atmosphere of sharing and bonding whereby everyone learnt from one and another.

Method of Evaluation:

While debating on why children have need of some form of artistic expression, the answer could be very simple, just one word - *rasa* .

Rasa [lit. 'taste'], a concept first introduced in the *Natyasastra* an Indian treatise on dramaturgy [200BC-200AD] can be loosely translated as aesthetic appreciation, but that is a superficial definition that does not do justice to the spiritual and philosophical implications of this term. It can range from simple enjoyment, to complete absorption, to trance, to so-called out-of-body experiences. While these terms might alarm people, it is essential to understand that *rasa* refers to a ***complete state of empathy*** when one is in complete union with another, or oneself, or a state of being or situation. At its peak, when at a given moment no other reality exists but that created by the art; when the artist ceases 'to be' and lives completely this virtual reality; when the spectator and the artist and the art are one in spirit that is the experience of *rasa*. Of course, *rasa* need not be experienced only through art. The inexplicable, joyful, 'expanding' feeling one sometimes experiences watching a beautiful sunset maybe or achieving a much-desired goal; a feeling of upliftment, of 'flying', of being 'supremely alive', that is *rasa*. But these are random experiences. Art [in India and Southeast Asia] is the only area which claims *rasa* to be its goal. It tries to actively generate this experience believing it to be indeed the goal of life.

Since I was trying to develop a project in Asia on Asian performing art forms, I chose not to use just the physical form but the philosophy behind as well, the goal for me being the creation of *rasa*. I also have begun to adapt a system of evaluation based on this two thousand year old concept of *rasa*, discussed in the *Natyasastra* [the oldest book on Indian dramaturgy [200BC-200AD] in existence today]. It extensively describing this state, a 'formula' one could follow to attain it and a method of evaluating the experience. It discusses its various qualities, the different ways of realizing *rasa*, as each culture has developed it, and above all the need for it in society. One of the founding precepts of the *Natyasastra* was that

Theatre is meant to educate the illiterate

enlighten the literate and

entertain the enlightened.

The threefold objective of education, enlightenment and lastly entertainment of art was not a new concept 2,000 years ago. Fascinated by this view of art, several scholars over the centuries further expanded on this concept. It was carried overseas to different parts of Asia and one can see different manifestations of this concept in various traditional literatures, as well as physical proof in several artistic traditions of Asia. I believe that this theory has a lot to offer in re-evaluating the role of art in human life and the need for it in education systems. There are very practical guidelines given in these ancient traditions on how *rasa* may be achieved, the physical manifestations in the body and what are the qualities and skills [both physical and emotional] that are developed. I find this approach harmonious with holistic learning. We have yet to comprehend the psychological benefits of accessing these 'peak experiences' called *rasa*. Let us not make the mistake of underestimating it.

Benefits observed:

These projects were never evaluated fully, it was hard enough work pushing them through and maintaining a record of the proceedings. Moreover the duration of these projects was two to three months which is too short to record any lasting effects on the participants apart from recording their obvious energy and comments about the programme. Some of the positive outcomes of these programmes could be summarised in the following observations culled from interviews with teachers and students. The various projects could help

1. ***bring alive visually a subject*** like biology or mathematics and help transform a boring classroom into a lively one with no added cost or expensive materials required.
2. create ***the ability to 'live' an emotion, situation or completely different dimension of reality*** with the comforting notion that one can step out of it at any time. We underestimate the psychological benefits of experiencing *rasa* [the term "peak experience" has been coined for this concept]. *Rasa implies total empathy* where one is in union with one's own self or with another.
3. ***build bonds***, people who experience *rasa* together, who have lived an intense or simply enjoyable experience together have a bond to fall back on;
4. obviously ***build abilities of concentration and discipline***;
5. build ***capacities of empathy and sympathy*** as one can 'live' another's experience more easily;
6. build ***tolerance, acceptance*** by celebrating the differences between people and states of being;

7. create *self-confidence, a sense of a universal state of being*, a calm centre that many an adolescent would welcome to combat the confusion of growing up;
8. create *reservoirs of energy* that one can draw on in a world of high-stress;
9. combat *the allure of hard drugs*. With *rasa* one can get a "high" and generate it at any time. Why take drugs?
10. teach children *the ability of going to the core of any activity or concept*, teaching the need for deeper involvement, to feel it completely, holding nothing back;
11. develop *emotional control*, since the energies generated could also be negative and have to be contained;
12. build *bonds with the natural environment*;
13. celebrate *cultural heritage* and reinforce the *beauty of a multicultural society*.
14. help *support traditional art and artists*.
15. build *a dialogue between the teacher and student*. Usually teaching seems to be a one-way process with the teacher sending out messages and students receiving them. By bringing art into the classroom, there is more room for bilateral discussion and exchange of opinions on different issues and building a bond with the students. Can help bridge the gap between the teacher and the taught, and ease 'growing pains'.
16. *develop creativity* which is necessary not just in art but to handle situations and problems in work and outside.

[Re: All these points and more will be illustrated with practical examples and techniques drawn from various performing art traditions from all over the world].

Possible negative outcomes, issues and questions:

There could also be several harmful consequences if the art program is not well thought out before being implemented. Here are a few problems that came up and a few questions that still remain unanswered.

1. *Taking an art form out of its traditional milieu, introducing it in a completely different context has many implications, not all of them good*. While many art forms make the transition successfully from say a ritual context or village context to a school education system, others could lose their essence. So each individual case has to be assessed carefully to see that it is introduced in a way that is beneficial to and sensitive to the needs of the art form, the artists, the children

and the school system. For eg., the Cambodian coconut dance: the Royal University of Fine Arts has 'standardised' a version of the coconut dance [which is danced by clapping together halves of coconut shells] that is choreographed with a strict sequence of movements set to a set music composition. As a result, a vibrant social form that was improvised by groups of people as they danced has been reduced to a strict pattern of movement that is now taught all over Cambodia as part of the curriculum of dance. This is essential if the dance has to be performed on a proscenium stage and if the children must perform 'in harmony' and their performance be 'evaluated'. This happens in India also, in schools of dance that teach folk and social forms. In order to 'standardise' the dance so that 'all the children perform in the same way', it is set in strict patterns completely obliterating the purpose of the form as social interaction, where improvisation and interaction between people is more important than perfect movement techniques. Instead of art bringing some spontaneity into the school, the school reduces the art to the same level of rote learning prevalent in all the other subjects.

2. Some negative consequences was the reinforcement of peer pressure, competitive instincts, racial prejudices and gender, cultural stereotypes. Some of these can be prevented if it is emphasised over and over again that the object of the art programme is *not to create artists, dancers, musicians*. If the children are inspired and decide to make it their career, that is different but *the emphasis of the programme is not on performance*. This cannot be stressed enough. And above all, the evaluation process *must not depend on practical performance* but rather what they have learnt about the art and how they apply it creatively.

3. To emphasize the problem of evaluation, *how does one set exams in art subjects without engendering a unhealthy competitive instinct*. Dance is not about who has the most stamina, who moves the fastest, who has the highest leaps, the best technique. Examinations or other evaluation procedures have to be developed that respect and encourage individuality, that assess the internal perception of the art as much as the external practice of it. This is a problem that has yet to be solved. There are a few suggestions given later in this paper which might help.

4. Similarly, patterns of education vary drastically from traditional modes of teaching to the westernised model of the school system practised in India. *The mode of transmission of artistic knowledge is as vital as the piece of art produced*. While many worry that traditions of art are being lost, one should also worry about the loss of traditional modes of teaching, of teacher-student relationships, of transmission of not just techniques but ways of being.

5. While one talks of school education systems and governments being resistant to the introduction of art, the reverse has also to be admitted. *Art practitioners also*

decry the idea of teaching their art en masse in schools. For instance, many traditional 'gurus' of dance do not wish to teach in schools. They dislike being bound by time schedules [traditionally dance teaching is not meant to be limited by time], by curricula which emphasise a set number of items to be taught over a set period of time, irrespective of the needs of each child [some learn slowly and some faster], and above all by the examination mode of evaluation demanded by the school which they claim, quite rightly, engenders a spirit of competition detrimental to the whole philosophy of art. So while implementing an art course in a school the needs of the practitioners-turned -teachers have to be taken into account and also, more importantly, they too have to understand that perhaps they must make some compromises for the benefit of the children.

6. What happens when the visiting artist leaves? In one instance, after the project was over, we evaluated the results and found the impact of the project wonderful. When we came back after a month it was just the opposite. The children missed the programme, finding the regular teacher inadequate; wanting her to replace the artist. But the teacher is not meant to be an artist and *the artist who works in the class must work in tandem with the teacher in charge* and ease out of the program as gently as it was eased into the lives of the children.

7. The art program must be *monitored against misuse for local, political propaganda.* It is common knowledge that art can be used for subversive purposes as well and that children are very susceptible to visual persuasion. It would be very dangerous and very easy for unscrupulous authorities to deliberately sanction projects for political and religious propaganda.

8. How will the *needs of schools in rural areas be addressed?* Children from urban and middleclass backgrounds have access to some form of art outside the school if their parents so wish. But children from groups below poverty level have no access. And moreover, children living on the streets, juvenile delinquents, orphans and so on live outside regular social structures. So even the local temple or social gatherings which can give them access to some form of art, is denied to them. Is art meant only for those who can afford it?

9. There are always problems, of course, in every local community regarding class distinctions, religious beliefs, status of art, gender distinctions, local customs, social taboos and so on. So *the implementation of a policy cannot be made only by the Central Government* in a huge country like India. The local authorities will have to take action too.

Conclusion:

The problems seem immense and the questions almost impossible to answer, but by pooling our knowledge and keeping ourselves aware and sensitive to the needs of the various groups involved, a successful programme can be launched that could benefit thousands of children. Then maybe, art can be acknowledged as a life skill.

From all that I have observed, the ability to feel *rasa* is a universal one, as is the need to feel it, needing no special IQ levels or physical abilities. One can find it at any stage in life. But it would be wonderful if one starts learning to access it from childhood. Like any ability, once this is learnt, one can apply it to any activity. One can feel *rasa* working on a computer program or building marketing strategies.

Anom Amengkunagara III, the crown prince of the *Kraton* of *Surakarta*, afraid that many aspects of Javanese culture were disappearing rapidly with the advent of the Dutch, commissioned three poets to write the *Serat Centhini*, in Javanese, in 1809. In it, *rasa* [which is a legacy of a Hindu tradition] is defined as follows:

"If you look for *rasa* in the skies you will never find it. Above the earth and below the firmament it is peerless. *Rasa* is the taste on your tongue, the sensation on your skin, the sound in your ear, the essence of your marrow, the scent in your nose, the thought/understanding in your brain, the feeling surging in your heart, the perception through your eyes... *Rasa* is Allah's secret that is concealed in your heart. It is by that that we know."

Rasa for better or for worse, makes colours brighter, sounds clearer, smells and tastes stronger, emotions deeper, the power of understanding sharper, empathy more natural. All art forms seek to create reinterpret 'reality'. When one submerges oneself in that reality, deepening one's understanding, that is *rasa*. It is, I think, a part of the human condition to seek an experience that goes beyond the physical and the intellectual. *Rasa* is beyond religion, culture, language, and economic status, *rasa* teaches one to experience the meanings of the words 'love', 'compassion', 'justice' - all human concepts that need to be lived, not mimed or manipulated. Should not our children learn to access this energy buried deep inside that would help them to grow into healthy, happy, well balanced individuals, supporting them in a world that is increasingly cruel, intolerant and filled with conflict?

Sangeeta Isvaran

Sangeeta Isvaran has studied the classical dance form, Bharatanatyam for the past 23 years, performing across Asia, Europe and North America. With grants from various agencies, she has travelled across Southeast Asia studying and writing about various forms of dance. She has recently begun studies on several forms of dance from Africa. A firm believer in the need for and celebration of art in the childhood years, and aware of the acute lack of interest by government and other infrastructures, Sangeeta has worked with children both within the regular school framework as well as in orphanages, homes for juvenile delinquents, drug addicts, NGOs working with street children, child prostitution and so on.