



CULTURAL HUBS - SAFE PLACES FOR UNSAFE IDEAS?

PROF. DR. AMARESWAR GALLA

a.galla@yahoo.com.au

Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian, was an invited speaker at the IFACCA Summit



HERITAGE MATTERS



Photo credit: International Institute for the Inclusive Museum

The 8th World Summit on Arts and Culture of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies (IFACCA) was hosted this week by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture in Kuala Lumpur. Eighty countries participated. About 70 National Arts Councils engaged on the Theme - Mobile Minds: Culture, Knowledge and Change. India was absent. Does India have a National Arts Council? Does India have a National Arts Policy? Does India have a National Heritage Policy? These are questions I was confronted with, while I was there as an invited speaker on Continuity and Tension with a focus on wellbeing and sustainable development.

There are many lessons shared with multiple takeaways from an intense gathering of minds that rigorously discussed, debated and re-envisioned the cultural ecology of creativity. The echo-chambers are not in isolation but seamless. Solidarity is the call from the Executive Director of IFACCA, Magdalena Moreno Mujica. Artists are swimming in the precarity of the legacies of neoliberal economics and profit driven piranha markets. The mantra of outsourcing is benefitting vendor agencies, private sector corporates and aggressive consultancies. The demise of local infrastructure has diminished sustainability of the diversity of creative content. Well-fed are the hegemonic producers and event managers.

Whoever bothers about the survival and wellbeing of artists? No wages, no pensions, only liability to the idiosyncrasies of bureaucracies and vicissitudes of the arts markets least in the hands of the creative genius in the society. Does sound familiar to the readers, especially in India and many other countries? The dangers of focusing on planning and marketing tourism without fostering creative content that is at arm's length could only result in the gradual withering of the legacies of the creative genius of a succession of civilisations. It is self-evident. If nurturing is the keyword, then it needs frameworks that are peer reviewed and driven, grounded in the criticality of integrated environments of cultural industries and creative economies. Are we throwing the baby out with the bath water through tourism? Is it time to wake up from the lulling sounds of growth and economic success? How will we ever know our location without applied

research, cultural statistics and most importantly policy driven development, replacing adhocery, to plan for a responsible intergenerational ethics of guardianship for our cultural systems? In Australia, during the transformative processes and work towards a culture of deeply embedded cultural policy in the 1990s, we challenged the establishment through a host of national alliances, networks of artists and interlocutors, electoral platforms - asking decision makers before they were elected to up-front position themselves as to how they would promote creativity, artists and hence human value of our society. We progressed. The basics of educational and cultural economics were understood. They were recognised as an integral part of the national and regional growth, measured quantitatively and qualitatively. In the global markets, Australia emerged as one of the most competitive and successful in demonstrating cultural and educational exports. The former provided the quint essence of growth in tourism.

For example, the national indigenous culture, tourism and rural industry strategies focussed on and driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders inhabiting in all their diversity the length and breadth of Australia as one of the oldest civilisations in the world. A third of the continent three times the size of India is driven through these inspirational indigenous people promoting culture in development. Most importantly it worked on the transformation of a multitude of cultural landscapes with the strong conviction, not opinion, that cultures are not frozen in time and that they are living and dynamic as the wellsprings of artistic and creative expressions. It required open engagements in policy formulation, inclusive participation, responsive educational spaces and appropriate habitats for creativity and productions. Almost 8% of Indian population of Aboriginal people and their creativity could benefit if an empowering post-colonial environment is facilitated. I could not help wondering as I heard this week at the IFACCA Summit about the incremental steps taken by the arts agencies of so many countries to participate in the local, regional, national and global economies - whether India has leapfrogged into a quagmire by outsourcing its arts, culture and heritage potential without building strong and vibrant echochambers; whether the demise of arts and humanities in the corridors

of learning has resulted in a poverty of intellectual and critical engagement; whether the ministerial and bureaucratic disaggregation of education and arts domains has created more than a generation of young people alienated from their rich inheritances. For they are not given an opportunity to learn. Highly techno savvy. But the educator and parents rarely understanding that the digital is only a means and not an end in itself. Focus on consumption rather than balancing with culture and creativity has become a malady that will take generations to heal.

A robust cultural infrastructure; accountable and transparent policy driven process; along with mixed public and private sector funding that is governed by ethical underpinnings are much needed as otherwise there is no culture, health and well-being as an equation. The search for happiness will be in vain, a thirst wastelands devoid of artists and culture. Only Dallas and Disneyland beckon where entertainment predominates, and creativity become servitude. Decentralised cultural hubs - as safe havens for artists to work and produce; incubators for the next generation of creativity; confluences of the rehabilitated hegemonic and empowered subaltern. These are possible across India. I challenge the intelligentsia to ask questions and propose as to how well policy driven governance structures will emerge from the outcomes of the imminent elections so that the identity and sense of place of posterity is in safe hands. In other words, since we have to challenge and transform the establishment, are we prepared to work towards developing cultural hubs as safe places for unsafe ideas?

- 1 Contemporary performance that brought together Malaysian and US artists to perform Vertical Dancing in the spiraling atrium of the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur
- 2 Cook Islander artists from New Zealand at the IFACCA Summit
- 3 An inclusive welcome from the Malaysian tapestry of performers
- 4 Art education and performance accessible to children is critical in schools
- 5 Installation art by Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman entitled 'Hopeless Image Awards'

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will take you to the musical landscapes of the film *The Sound of Music* in Salzburg, where 30 people from around the world gather to reflect on the future of museums and heritage

Past columns of *Heritage Matters* can be downloaded at <http://inclusivemuseum.org/heritage-matters/>