

Parminder

COMMUNITY ARTS AND THE NAAY

A DISCUSSION PAPER

There is no doubt that the phrase 'Ethnic Minority Arts' has been deliberately contrived to relegate the arts of the minorities, especially the Afro-Caribbean and the Asian, to a position which ensures the sacrosanctity of the indigenous arts in particular, and the Western arts in general. Initially some token advantages might have been derived from this Artistic Apartheid, mainly due to the guilt felt by the liberal establishment, perennially on the look out for exotic! But in the long run there is nothing, all things considered, for us in this label.

Because this subtle but dishonest play-of-words has created a situation in which the practice of our art-forms in this country is in danger unless appropriate steps are taken to ensure their survival.

Many people earn a comfortable living by posing as 'experts' in the field of Ethnic Arts, but we all know that their knowledge of such arts is not even rudimentary. What is more galling is that their presence on all kinds of panels and committees has given them de facto right to speak for us; their suggestions and recommendations are accepted blindly by the grant-giving bodies without taking into consideration the realistic needs of the recipients. Still worse is the presence of Asians who have been either hand-picked because of their position in various organisations, or co-opted. Whatever may be the case, with one very impressive exception, are far removed from the reality of our arts. Their appreciation is limited to the visiting artists from the sub-continent because that is in keeping with the fashion - called high culture. (They may have administrative skills but that does not entitle them to be the spokespersons for the Asian arts). Their embarrassing politeness before the establishment is pathetic. It might be an asset from the cultural point of view but when one is confronted with blatant racism, hypocrisy, double-think and double-standards there is no need to be polite. People like these are riding

high to further their careers on the backs of the community, which they are supposedly representing. Even the well-meaning members of the Asian community have discredited themselves by their fire-brand polemics without advancing any durable alternatives. Therefore, if we are to realize our goal, and mean what we are saying a radical change in our approach, in our attitudes and in our policy is badly needed to make our presence felt in no uncertain terms. And here I believe that N.A.A.Y. can play a major role in determining the future of the Asian Arts. Failing that we might as well let the show be in the hands of those who have been doing all the talking on our behalf, with the guilt-ridden, tormented liberal souls whose olympian paternalism has inflicted more damage than the naked racism of the National Front.

The funds made available by the Manpower Services Commission, under the temporary employment scheme, has enabled the National Association for Asian Youth to employ individuals of various artistic pursuits. As a result an "arts team" has come into being, whose collective responsibility is not only to develop the existing structure into something concrete and lasting but to enrich it with new ideas and schemes. Whatever is achieved, and it is hoped that a great deal can be achieved in the next ten months, we feel that similar developments are possible in the regions, where the need of such structures is important to create interest in the arts. Moreover, our experiences - the demands made on us regularly - have helped us to come to this conclusion.

THE ROLE OF N.A.A.Y. IN DEVELOPING THE WORK IN THE REGIONS

OR

THE REGIONAL ROLE OF N.A.A.Y.

NAAY, being a well-established organisation which can take a firm stand on issues that affect the arts, should consider playing a leading role in the regional development of Asian Arts.

The following proposals may be worth considering before a comprehensive policy paper is written:

- i To create a net-work of contacts in addition to the existing ones.
- ii To communicate directly or indirectly with the existing contacts in order to update the available information.
- iii To help to create schemes such as the M.S.C. ones.
- iv To provide know-how, information and expertise where needed.

If a local group or a project needs funds to finance it, the Regional Arts Association should be approached as to what they can offer. For example if the project needs musical instruments, we ought to help them to raise the funds by submitting the application to R.A.A. If the R.A.A. refuses to co-operate or provide facilities, then we should be willing to co-operate with the groups to pursue the issue directly with bodies such as the Arts Council.

Our Newsletter can be tremendously helpful in bringing the issues before the wider public.

v Arts in Education Indian Music

a) The existing project in Mountview School can be further developed, because the musicologist and musician within the building can now work together to prepare the long-awaited curriculum. Since music has been topical in 'Arts in Education' from this we understand that the school curriculum will be tailored to the needs of the students taking into consideration their cultural background.

Alistair Dick at Dartington College of Art could be of significant help to us because of his experience of teaching Indian music in the college.

b) To further the interest in Asian arts the libraries in the regions can play a crucial part. We should communicate with all the librarians, particularly Asian, and inform them about the materials available, on all aspects of art which they can obtain from us.

c) Touring Circuit.

The touring circuit we envisage should fall under three categories:

Music

Dance and Drama

The purpose of creating a touring circuit is two fold:-

- i Educational - aimed at schools in the form of workshops
- ii An evening of entertainment for adults at a suitable venue which could be arranged through a local contact.

For touring circuit printed material, photographs and posters will be helpful. At the same time informative materials for teachers ought to be made available to which they can refer to in classroom situations.

Apart from the participation of local artists N.A.A.Y. can supply artists and publicity material.

vi The Role of the Bookshop

Lack of Capital precludes us from stocking a wide range of books on arts. However, that does not mean that the Bookshop hasn't got the potential of becoming a reasonable resource centre. A thorough research has to be conducted

to ensure that nothing important is missing, which calls for co-operation, knowledge and taking into consideration the interest shown by the people who visit us.

Books from India and Pakistan have to be bought from the local Asian dealers who charge astronomical prices and make it impossible for people interested to buy books. It would help, if we manage to by-pass these middle-agents, and so-called sole-distributors and import books directly, which will allow us to sell books at a reasonable price without feeling embarrassed. First and foremost the book-shop is a community based structure and it must have community spirit.

The only way it can operate is by being dependent on direct imports.

N.A.A.Y. and ASIAN THEATRE

Apart from few small groups, Asian Theatre is non-existent. It is amazing that a people who have thousands of years of theatrical tradition behind them have not made any positive dent in the closed-shop of British theatre. However, N.A.A.Y. has taken the initiative to aid the launch of an Asian Professional Theatrical Company which we hope to see within this year. The aim of this Company will be to provide a platform to those artists whose talent is wasted and the established machinery and stereotyping them.

N.A.A.Y. and ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY ARTISTS

The role of the A.C.A. with regard to the ethnic arts is not clear. In fact, I should say from my personal experience, when I attended the one and only meeting in January 1980, in Birmingham, it was one of indifference. (It might as well be called A. of White Community Artists).

questioned their attitudes, observations and impressions - from the chair we heard that the 'ethnic art' is a 'sensitive issue'. If these so called community artists have the nerve to refuse the discussion on ethnic arts under the pretext of sensitivity, then we have no reason to join them. I cannot see any advantage in being a member of an Association which hasn't made an effort to come and learn about our needs apart from asking for the membership fee and support for their campaign which I am tempted to say is not ours. However, I still believe that a letter ought to be written to the Association to inquire into their policy on ethnic arts. If the results are the same then we would be advised to come into the open and dissociate from them.

THE ROLE OF ART WITHIN THE ASIAN COMMUNITY

All Cultures develop out of human situation; art is an integral part of culture. And the role of art in any given community can neither be exaggerated nor oversimplified, but without some sort of art, artistic activity and artistic creativity a people might as well resign to oblivion.

If it is possible for the women of Crossroads-Capetown to form a drama group and give voice to their suffering and if it is possible for many other groups in South Africa to emerge and perform before the audience, despite the official censorship, brutality and sadism, then it is possible for us to do more than that. If we believe that tension existing prompts artistic creativity, history bears witness to this contention, then there is more than just tension and the ground is fertile for creativity.

There may not be oppression here on the same level as it is in South Africa. But, then the oppression is not confined or limited to physical domination alone; indifference, paternalism, racial discrimination and the promulgation of racist laws are equally oppressive because they contribute to mass depersonalisation. At the same time, I would like to

*Do also tell
Black dogs*

say that the Asian community is not helpless nor do we have to be obedient to the arrogance of the powers-that-be. Moreover the individuals at the head of Asian community affairs have managed to alienate themselves from the community to strengthen their own image. Here the artists can step in and create a basis for frank communication. Then and only then Art will have any meaning for the community, then and only then can the community response be positive; and then and only then will the Asian arts flourish inspite of the stereotyping, inspite of the divisions in art created on racial lines rather than geography. At the end of the day we can give permanence to our ideas (artistic) and in turn can create a secure atmosphere for the artist to work and function.

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