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The Importance of Being Art-Literate

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 25th July 2015 10:00 PM | Last Updated: 23rd July 2015 11:19 PM

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Ananda Shankar Jayant

India 2015: A pulsating energy of the can-do spirit, a synergy of an ancient civilisation walking hand in hand with a young nation. Ready to lead the world.

Our globalised era is dominated by the rationalism of science and technology, economics and commerce paradigm, often at the expense of humanities and arts. Yet can there be science-technology without the human? Technology in its broadest sense is about tools and their usage. But who uses them?

Today's lifestyles demand a fresh redefinition of the perimeters of science-technology vs arts-humanities; intersecting as they do, in so many ways.

Designs that aim at making the user interface of technology more pleasant; visual aesthetics of our everyday necessities of laptop, tablet and phone; language interfaces; etc., all areas of function, but caressing the world of arts. Some of the world's greatest innovations, as Steve Jobs succinctly said "intersect at the crossroads of technology and art".

Outside the worlds of academia, arts are often regarded as ephemeral and of no practical use. The reluctance of generations to engage with art in its broadest sense is to me a colossal waste of human potential.

An engagement with arts takes the soliloquy out and forces you to have a dialogue across disciplines and perspectives. Humanities recognise the dynamics of differences in human thought and life, revelling in the unsettling crevices of difficult dialogue, even while they negotiate the paradoxes of learning and living.

In today's education system, arts have been booted out. Over the last few decades, we have reinforced public perception that arts are lovely but not essential, and have been trivialised as mere entertainment. Most of our academic institutions do a wonderful job in preparing the students for successful careers. But they fail in preparing them for life as good human beings.

We are training our youth in skills, not in thinking; millions of engineers, no innovators, a cry voiced by none other than Mr Narayanamurthy himself. We regurgitate outside innovations and are proud to be babus of a new imperialism.

In our single-pointed trajectory of profit, return on investment and bank balances, we have obviated art. What price tag can we put on the Taj Mahal, the Ellora temple, Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam, Patachitra, to name a few? If this collective unconscious memory is systematically erased, what does that leave us with?

When any country showcases its strength on the global stage, it is always with a dazzling display of its culture. Our Republic Day parade is a stellar example, and yet the infusion of arts in education is barely there. If economy and business make the spine of a country, then culture is its face and soul. If this very culture is not nurtured, would that not make us faceless?

Access then becomes the key word. We need to figure out multiple ways of continued access of as many varieties of culture, to as many people. Because if the young are not ever exposed to arts, what will they spend their bank balances on later?

But more than that an engagement with arts, creates value, not in terms of money, or even a career, but in terms of a deep landscape of personal resource, a core strength to be drawn on at key points of one's life.

To me the nation is like a 32-wheeled truck, trudging along the highways. Culture and arts comprise one wheel. Ignore this wheel and you are dead.

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