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The Sticky Issue of Administering Art

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 22nd August 2015 10:00 PM | Last Updated: 21st August 2015 12:31 AM

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It amuses me a great deal, when I see extraordinary and senior artists believe they have reached the apogee of their lives only with an opportunity to administer a government-run arts institution. Is it the perceived power of an administrator that the artiste now lays claim to ?

Power: a much misused word. To be fair, every artist appointed administrator comes with the good intention to serve their chosen field. Alongside, however, they carry, a not-so-healthy contempt for procedures of administration, deeming it a speed breaker in their path; as well as the baggage of the arts world—lobbies, favourites and personal preferences—that now find resonance in official decisions.



An artist stepping into the world of administration, effortlessly eases into the perks and trappings of the seat and loves it too, but finds him/herself stymied in accepting the systems-driven and hierarchical world of bureaucracy. The very nature of an artist is one of impulsive creativity, but impulsive decisions, however well intended, amid the folios of administrative files are a sure invitation to vigilance and audit inspections.

As the leader of their small group of co-artists or students, the senior artist very rarely faces a naysayer. Now hearing, "This is against rules, can't be done," he/she feels restricted. Suddenly, the artist remembers

his seniority and the many awards received. And the chip on the shoulder becomes a boulder as the artist persona is carried to the administrator's desk.

The situation is compounded by ignorance or wilful overlooking of procedures of governance. Side-stepping rules of establishment and recruitment, deriding constitutional requirements of reservation, subverting contractual obligations, etc., become the norm.

At the end of the artist-administrator's tenure, the organisation is left in utter mayhem and disorder, with court and audit cases aplenty, to be addressed by the next incumbent even as the artist walks away without any responsibility being fixed. This prompts senior bureaucrats to say any posting under a non-bureaucrat is a punishment posting.

Contrast this with most career bureaucrats, who find a posting in the world of arts a bit of a come down in their career trajectory. Most often, the culture departments are headed by officers with no interest or understanding of the arts and that indifference seeps into the system. Erring on the side of being safe and not wanting to tangle with fragile artist egos, they settle for the lowest common denominator and mediocrity.

Most of these arts administrator posts in government institutions are at senior levels, which a career bureaucrat enters after at least a decade of experience. Compare this with artists entering laterally with only their artistic achievements and without the required administrative training or experience, hoping to learn on the job; wasting government resources.

While we do need the aesthetics and knowledge of artists in arts administration, we must empower artists to navigate the world of administration. The short-term way out is training. Intensive training in relevant procedures of governance, followed by a test should precede the selection of an artist as an administrator.

The long-term solution is creation of an Arts Administrative Service as part of the civil services. But until this idea is accepted, a trained administrator must head these cultural institutions while an artist could take care of the creative side as the second in command. Similarly, the bureaucrat posted to culture must be given adequate exposure to artistic sensibilities.

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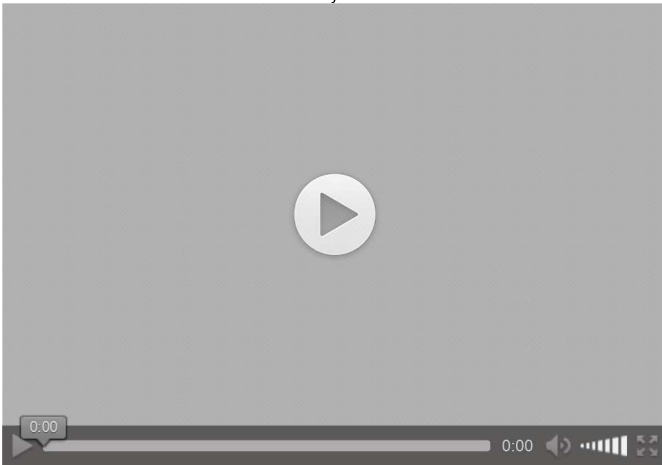
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Very well written as only one who is both an artist and bureaucrat could envisage. Artist Administrative Service? It would suffer from inadequate number of posts, poor avenue of promotion et al. Incumbents would end up worrying more about their career than about art or administration. Your idea of training the artist is a better. If done properly the artist will soon learn to do maximum good while in charge.

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