



CREATING CULTURE

KOLKATA CENTRE FOR CREATIVITY, KCC

- RAJESH PUNJ

For all the rewarding rhetoric around a new institution cutting sway over a city, it is as if history explains it best when the sentiment and solution of so many of its distinguished elder statesmen appear better able to explain the endeavour to build on an idea. Kolkata, resting on the Hooghly River in West Bengal, with Bihar and Bangladesh on either side, is shaped as much by its remarkable cultural heritage as it is by the seasonal extremes of heat and habitual rainfall. And as much as the climatic rains are capable of reducing roads to rivers, so the ideas of Bengal's eminent intellectuals, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore among them, flood the hearts and are held in the hands of every citizen of the city - as the lifeblood for everything artistic now. Tagore calling the "highest education that which does not merely give us information, but has us in harmony with all existence." Which appears entirely in sync with the fledgling philosophy of Kolkata's Centre for Creativity.

^ Kolkata Centre for Creativity, KCC building

> Exhibition Space of Contemporary Culture, 1st Floor, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, KCC

For us the entire concept that has bought about the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, and I see it more as a concept or belief and less as a physical building, has been conceived of and created with incredible passion. Which came about as a very organic growth, and natural shift from what we were doing years earlier. Previously I had a gallery, where I was promoting younger and mid-career artists, and I realised that was not the only thing, as a family, we wished to do. We were looking at creativity in a more holistic sense.

In his own lifetime, Tagore was to conceive of Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, a place of learning that was to quickly become a cultural beacon for the arts and education in Kolkata. That still today faithfully follows the original principles of his practice. Insisting in his day 'that if a course wasn't available to a student, then a syllabus would be formally created and tutor found to provide such classes'. And by insisting on the inclusiveness of everyone to his cultural ideals, Tagore saw the intention of learning as something akin to carrying a light, that when shared amongst all of us, can illuminate a room, a house, a city and a society. And to be under the influence of such rationalism, is to understand that as individuals our time on earth has as much to do with engaging with the elasticity of all of our emotions, as it is to be industrious - so as to see the world as a playground for our own creative endeavours, as much as it is already a platform for the regulated routine of our lives; of working and worshipping daily.

From its glass-fronted facade, looking out over a mix of the agrarian and urban, bordered by preciously placed advertising hoardings, there are still persistent pockets of cultural activity in Kolkata. New among them is the Centre for Creativity, which presents itself as a place for applying oneself to all forms of



creative expression. And as much as we know of India's appetite for education, with everyone being encouraged to master English and engineering, Tagore's influence is in evidence, when he claimed that "learning is manufactory and a mere method of discipline." That to educate others is not necessarily about control, but remarkably the lack of it. Power as Tagore saw it, was not solely in the procession of an authority figure, educating an audience of laymen, but power was about the empowerment of the minds of the innocent, shaping their minds with as much freedom as our social structures allow. Inventing his own society of learning with Visva-Bharati, Tagore wanted we all decide our fate.

As well we might celebrate Tagore's idealism, such is the strength of his presence in the city, that a centre for creativity is beholden to his original objectives of more intuitive models of schooling, which enables the classes and curriculum to sufficiently function by means of freedom of expression; and as with all forms of creativity, it rests on the shoulders of the individual and the institution to facilitate a swell of activities that function and flourish in parallel with a city that is exhausting for its intensity.

Richa Agarwal, the centre's overall ambassador, sees herself as encouraging the arts to become an integral part of our lives, in a way that is less alienating or intrusive, and more involving - as a medium for experiencing something of the sensation of being

^ Kolkata Institute of Art Conservation on the 3rd Floor of Kolkata Centre for Creativity, KCC

> Indoor Amphitheatre - 1st Floor, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, KCC

alive. Dance, drawing, poetry and performance, are part of a programme of leading mental and physical exercises that are part of a range of classes on offer, as well as a resources library and laboratory for the well-being of modern and contemporary artworks. Thus there is the infrastructure, as she explains, for offering the arts in a way that complements our lives, rather than conditions it. It is to see that as much as religion is about faith, and industry allows us to earn a living, so the arts enable us to explore our place in the world. Language, literature, love, loathing, are all sentiments entirely evident in the works of the current master of exhibition, Jogen Chowdhury, whose drawings and prints exhort the vices and virtues of man. As scenes of adulation and interrogation impregnate the impressive wall space of the main galleries, as has been curated by poet and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote.

Previously, as part of the programme, sculptor Ravinder Reddy's monumental heads had been planted across the gallery, not only as a celebration of his work, but also of the intention of the institution, to literally think big. To commit to the most revered artists of our generation, one attending the other's opening, demonstrates the solidarity and commonality of the arts, in a way that many more successful contemporary galleries have failed to do. Obviously with the commercial comes the commodification of art, and that appears less intrusive here. In spaces that allow art to exist on its own terms, and are intended to illuminate one's imagination. That said there is

evidence of art sales with the institution's annual art fair, which is sensibly and very sensitively done. And when asked about the ethos of this institution of the arts, Richa Agarwal sees their intention as about offering the arts to audiences as an exchange of ideas. "So for us the entire concept that has bought about the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, and I see it more as a concept or belief and less as a physical building, has been conceived of and created with incredible passion. Which came about as a very organic growth, and natural shift from what we were doing years earlier. Previously I had a gallery, where I was promoting younger and mid-career artists, and I realised that was not the only thing, as a family, we wished to do. We were looking at creativity in a more holistic sense."

Going onto say, "you need a basic infrastructure, you need a place to do something like that, and Emami as a group has grown out of Bengal. The promoters, my father-in-law, R.S. Agarwal, and his friend, R. S. Goenka, thought to make an institution that was well suited to the city, with activities here that would be promoted at an international level, qualitatively but available to everyone. Which is why we have come up with the virtues we have here. We have learning groups with a series of three-month courses, and intend to launch all our one-year courses in November. Not only in the visual arts, as in watercolours, oil paintings, pastels, but as importantly the performing art. These will be the two that we begin with, to introduce classes and courses





for other art forms in the coming years. We have extended our interests to work with health issues as well. Seeing that as part of a wider appreciation of wellbeing. And when I refer to health, I mean both physiologically and physically. So we have conducted several talks, and now we have started with specific classes, tomorrow with kettlebell, and then we intend something with tronic related exercises closer to the Indian winter. This is as far as one's wellbeing is concerned. So education in arts and cultural activities spur us on." For Agarwal, it appears the Emami way of implementing their ambition, has facilitated a very open and honest approach to how the arts are intended to be experiential, and satisfactory to one's self-worth.

Kolkata, formally the capital of India, is for its arts regarded as the subcontinent's capital of culture, with its status as capital of the country since removed with the Raj. As context the city's literature has for a century and a half led the way with polymaths Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore, dramatist Michael Madhusudan Dutta, poet and musician Kazi Nazrul Islam, and more currently Joy Goswami and Amitav Ghosh, having contributed volumes of verse about Kolkata's character, and who have for generations drawn on the city's spirit. Turning poverty into poetry, seeing conflict as cultural, and the range of climates, the heat and humidity against the heavy rain, as a mirror for the individual's full

range of emotions. Literature and language that for a particular moment in the 1960's included the 'Hungry Generation', who under the stewardship of Shakti Chattopadhyay and Malay Roy Choudhury, challenged the role of language to investigate new ideas. That was to act in a similar way to America's Beat Generation, of the same period. And while Mumbai is celebrated as the centre of the world's more flamboyant and fantastical films, Kolkata has always offered something much more rewarding, by way of its arts cinema. That can be likened to its literature, bereft of the baroque, concentrating instead on the jarring realities of its population. Among its talismans were Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, who rewarded their work with simple narratives of human suffering and success. That was to translate the world over. And as much as Tagore favoured the ordinary man, so Satyajit Ray celebrated the strength of the individual in his films.

^ Bengal Pat of Gold - An exhibition on Pattachitra with the artisans

> Dance Bridges Festival

Every region of Kolkata has so much happening, and a lot of it is taught at home, that here possibly unlike the rest of India, the arts and crafts were so easily available to us, that we take it for granted as integral to our lives. And then at a certain moment, we demonised art as an entirely commercial exercise. But art is more emotional in my option.

Explaining "Somehow I feel that an ordinary person – the man on the street if you like is a more challenging subject for exploration than people in the heroic mould", crucially going onto to say "it is the half-shades, the hardly audible notes that I want to capture and explore." Elevating the minutest of details to become his film's central drama, was to see that our lives as an evolution of physical and emotional endeavours, that in and of themselves, become the facts of life. Such elemental honesty is as much in evidence in artist Jogen Chowdhury's paper-thin works. Of men and women together and alone, dealing with and enduring the lives they live. As disciplines, Kolkata's cinematic and the artistic are further complimented by the traditions of dance and theatre, in a city that still observes Jatra, or the procession, with extravagant re-enactments of passages from the life of Krishna. Performance complemented by longstanding Rabindra and Nazrul Geeti's, that revel in the lyrics of Kolkata's laureates. That as historical and cultural influences are likely to inspire the evolution and intention of its newest institution dedicated to the arts.

As an infrastructure for the arts, Kolkata Centre for Creativity provides a promising blend of the emerging with the more established, as its audiences are able to see the work of significant Indian artists, at the ground floor of the building, before being invited to rise to the upper floors, for more immersive



opportunities to apply one's own ability to the arts; with workshops in dance, drawings, painting, printmaking, performance and pantomime. Enabling its citizens to see culture as a living organism, that is as much about what exists historically in this former capital, as it is of the potential of making one's own contribution to the sensation of belonging in the city. Standing still and seeing what is on offer, is to acknowledge that an interactive institution of this kind in Kolkata is rewarding for so many reasons. The ease of its inclusive programme, across its galleries, auditorium and dining area, sends out a signal to the surrounding areas, the city and the wider country, that art has a greater responsibility, than mere commercial enterprise, of satisfying its audiences with the sensation of feeling part of something - across cultures, creeds, and religions.

When asked of the evolution of the new arts institute, Agarwal explains the energy of the building as being about its ambition. Citing how "it hasn't been a year yet since we opened, on the 21st November 2018, and in the last year we had four activities a month, and we have since pushed on to twenty-five activities a month. And at any given time we have two exhibitions going on. One would be a large format exhibition, which is hosted by Emami Art, and the second a slightly smaller exhibition, which is hosted by Kolkata Centre for Creativity. Classes are happening over the weekend, at least five or six different sections, and then there are recreational

^ 14 ft. Ravana made out of Shola panels by Shola and Chhau artisans showcased at the 5th floor of KCC

> Japanese Expression - An Exhibition of Japanese Artists

classes, for people who don't wish to commit to a great deal, but are inclined to something creative. We have Grace, the restaurant, which we encourage our audiences to book the use of the kitchenette, and come and cook here." Which I explain is something that Subodh Gupta had previously talked about, that of the importance of food to his practice.

Which as an idea is based for Agarwal "on the days we cook together as a family, without the distraction of the television, when we can sometimes be together for a good five hours, which is about quality time. When we go away as an extended family, we always take one cook with us, and that is a day that everyone looks forward to. So the institute and the way we go about deciding on what is on offer is about what matters to us, and what we have tried to introduce to the centre."

The interactive that leads one from the invitation to eat on-site, in its newly furnished restaurant, to the offer of cooking one's cuisine, in the café come canteen. By sharing one's favourite dishes likely as they see it to encourage an audience to express more of themselves, in shared situations, including dance and discussions. As Richa Agarwal goes onto explain of the building's layout, "we have the resources room and library with international reference books, which is not a concept that is familiar to India, but we have tried to introduce it as a work in progress. Which encourages a younger audience to come to us,

and that brings with it a lot of energy; which is what works." And as a homage to the influence of so many others, Agarwal cites the city as alive to the sounds and sensation of music and movement. "Every region of Kolkata has so much happening, and a lot of it is taught at home, that here possibly unlike the rest of India, the arts and crafts were so easily available to us, that we take it for granted as integral to our lives. And then at a certain moment, we demonised art as an entirely commercial exercise. But art is more emotional in my option." Which leads one to consider the institute's endeavour to exhibit the likes of Ravinder Reddy and Jogen Chowdhury, alongside a resources room of art books, on such luminaries as French impressionists (Paul) Gauguin and (Claude) Monet, as well as seventeenth-century painters (Peter Paul) Rubens and Rembrandt (Hermenszoon van Rijn), with classes in cooking and traditional Indian dance, is to offer their audiences the world by artistic means. Which Agarwal explains is not only about referencing "the historical but of making one's experience of culture now holistic".

Providing literature that is more standard in libraries across Europe, the institute is rightly lauded by itself for making available catalogues and monographs of artists who are likely unknown in India; with books with reproductions of paintings by Pablo Picasso or the coloured canvases of (Vincent) van Gogh. And to encounter such art is to become aware of a larger world, in which art acts as the expression for

many different cultures and continents. And such connectivity between cultures is what appears at the heart of this institution, as it borrows from a western model, whilst very cleverly managing to mould its own identity - of offering art as a multi-disciplinary experience.

As Agarwal sees it “KCC is not about fashion, is it entirely about a very humble and honest effort to arrive at what we all believe in.” Going onto explain the highlights of the collaborative organisation's programme to date. “Emami Art is the commercial part of the building, for which we have four shows per year, each of which is curated independently and in their own way. Beginning in November of last year with an exhibition of the work of Dashrath Patel curated by Pinakin Patel, followed by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which was a group show of thirty-five international artists, again curated by Pinakin Patel. Leading to Ravinder Reddy, curated by Anupa Mehta, which takes us to yesterday's public opening of Jogen Chowdhury's work, curated by Ranjit Hoskoté. Which will then take us to December 2019 to Bose Krishnamachari, curated by the artist himself. And beyond that in 2020 is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam Part 2, which is a joint effort between Emami Art and the Kolkata Centre for Creativity. Emami Art hosts the exhibitions, and KCC takes care of the symposiums. Last year was edition one, we had nineteen speakers, discussing design, architecture, film and fashion.”

And in a country carried by the cult of celebrity, Agarwal assuredly enthuses over the ordinariness of the artist. “We had S. G. Vasudev with us for a class, and one of the children having navigated his way around his works, said to him ‘you are not bad for an artist’. In our heads we are guilty of demonising the artist, we have made them into demi-gods, and we have become too afraid to ask them anything. And what we are trying to do is to ease that path for all of us.”

Which deservedly brings us back to the influence of Rabindranath Tagore. As a future sister institution for Tagore's Santiniketan site, it becomes exciting to see future generations at the cusp of a new wave of cultural activities. And as an institution to evolve, to influence and to understand the past with what becomes possible in the present makes their task as monumental as it is likely to be magical. Which Agarwal enthuses that they are “energised by”, adding “Santiniketan has always been the cultural mecca if you like for art and ideas. With modernisation, there has been a shift and a surge for new ideas, but now we appear to be holding back, and are holding onto Tagore's original ideals.” Which is entirely evident in her approach. Emphasising “obviously being a newer, much younger centre the scope for change, in terms of our mission statement, is likely to be a little easier. Because quite obviously people work with a plan, and the world is moving at such an incredible pace, and do a lot, and still be part of the system and stand-

alone.” At its heart, this is an institution based on simple ideas that are likely to resonate across the city like a light originally held out by Rabindranath Tagore.

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> Gold Dust of Begum Sultan - An exhibition on the culture of Nawabs in Rampur

