

From sabhas to fishing villages

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"The Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha has spurred many debates beyond art — about people, spaces, livelihoods, environment, security, sharing and ownership." Picture shows a performance at the Vizha in 2015.
Photo: Bijoy Ghosh An art festival in Chennai presents classical art and the art forms of the fisherfolk on an equal footing in order to make all art accessible to everyone.

No two people are truly equal within society's multi-layered segmentations. Once we move into the realm of communities, these differentiations only become more complex. Within this reality, it is utopian to expect the world of the arts to remain untouched. We often use the cliché "art transcends all boundaries" with aplomb, oblivious to the fact that it really does not. For art to be a cultural and social enabler, it has to be redesigned as an artistic conversation that is equal and mutually inspiring. This has to be done by artists and by the larger hinterland of their creativity.

A socio-cultural conversation

It is from this position that I began thinking about an art festival that explores spaces alien to my own privileged, elitist, classical world; one that questions my sense of artistic superiority and respectfully celebrates the people and the art that inhabit these spaces. I took this idea to Nityanand Jayaraman, a social activist. He saw in this a completely different angle, an opportunity to highlight the hidden urban fishing village of Urur Olcott Kuppam, invite Chennai to visit and enjoy the village, and use that experience to challenge stereotypes about fisherfolk. Soon, many others joined us with their own stories of why this was important, all of us converging at the need for a socio-cultural conversation. Thus was born in 2014 the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha.

But we have been asked difficult questions by the people from our side of the fence. Why are you forcing the classical on people? They have their own art; do they really want or need this?

First, there is an inherent cosmology underlying this line of questioning, namely, that the 'classical' and other art worlds are not meant to share an orbit. Next, there is a tone of condescension: the art forms of the two groups and indeed the groups themselves are not socially equal, so just 'let them be'. In this reaction is a resistance to allowing 'others' unbridled access to the classical on their own terms. It has to be accepted that the spaces that these art forms occupy right now are intimidating private clubs. There is no "you are not welcome" board hanging outside; yet the insider defends the 'pure' with his mere glance. But the kuppam too is not an easy environment. Many feel distinctly uncomfortable and threatened entering those quarters. The Urur engagement pushes for the overcoming of these feelings by its open environment where people share aesthetic experiences that overcome the sharp boundaries of 'us' and 'them'.

This is most certainly not a conversion project. The festival features diverse art forms that belong to varied spaces and societies. And a crucial aspect of this experiment is that the art forms that belong to the fisherfolk's spaces are presented on an equal footing. Due to this levelling, the nature of our reception changes. 'Higher' art becomes informal, natural and accessible, while the 'lower' become serious, valuable and respected. This inversion demolishes artistic walls and creates uninterrupted access for all sides. And inbuilt in this openness is the right to enjoy, celebrate, reject and mock any art, be it

Villu Pattu

(musical storytelling) or Indie blues. But we cannot get here unless we break open the existing frameworks. Another question that some people who did not come for the festival ask is: "So now do 'they' want to learn classical music and dance?" I am never asked whether "we" want to learn

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(art forms associated with subaltern communities). The 'lower' may or may not aspire for the 'higher', never the other way round!

Discovering differences

But there has also been another kind of criticism, this time from the world of social activists. They have challenged our initiative as being one that only reiterates socio-cultural separations. Why is

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music not being featured at the highbrow classical stages? Why are you not gheraoing those spaces, demanding for the presence of subaltern art forms? This criticism cannot be wished away. But to get there with respect and not be recipients of tokenism, we need more people from the powerful communities to come and experience art beyond their own contexts. This will hopefully spur a change. And therefore such experiments do not reiterate hierarchies; instead, they force those who own these hierarchies to understand people and their lives with a different set of eyes. And this is only a beginning and does not negate the possibility of another kind of experiment emerging in the higher echelons of art.

Through 2015, this initiative spurred many debates beyond art — about people, spaces, livelihoods, environment, security, sharing and ownership. The engagement itself continues to be a learning process where we constantly discover differences. This has taught us to understand participation with greater nuance. While the children of the village are enthusiastic performers in the festival, the adults come as onlookers: laughing, smiling and enjoying the art. But then one wonders, is there not an inequality that exists in the way 'they' perceive 'us', the upper class? Yet, in their own way, they have been more than supportive of the festival and are happy being the hosts once again this year. How do we use this embracing to overcome perceived barriers, while accepting inherent limitations?

This socio-cultural experiment has led to numerous questions and few answers; that is what keeps it alive. We continue to seek direction. On the way, we stumble, fall, dust ourselves and keep trying. This is only an attempt, a sincere one which continues. We need many more, each charting a different path, evolving a new vocabulary for human interaction.

[\(T.M. Krishna is a Carnatic vocalist and writer. The Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha will be held on February 27 and 28 at the Urur Olcott Kuppam, Chennai.\)](#)

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