For the artist in every child...

Art workshops in the Capital throw open a whole new world for children, where they are allowed to explore forms and colours without inhibition

Bharati Chaturvedi

AN 11-year-old in U.P. or Rajasthan participates actively and enthusiastically in decorating the house, painting decorative motifs on the walls and creating alpanas on special occasions. All of this is imbibed from within a family tradition, where art and craft is almost inseparable from other aspects of a child's life: no special schools exist to teach a child all this.

Their urban counterparts, on the other hand, almost uniformly, produce houses with slanting roofs, brown rick-rack mountains and a round, yellow sun, all usually confined to a sketch book. This, in fact, is a symptom of a problem serious enough to command active thought and worry. Art, increasingly, is not a way of living, a spontaneous form of expression anymore, a phenomenon permeating over rural areas. Instead, it is being subject to a set of rigid dos and don'ts as against giving the creative mind of a child a free reign.

It may seem that a great deal of this erosion has taken place with exposure to new forms of entertainment like TV and now, Star TV. While this remains largely so, the roots go much deeper with the introduction of a systematisation & class-room system brought in by the British. Indigenous education of all varieties, already decaying, was side-lined, as Western education became the key to a good job and its fate was finally sealed in 1854 when all government support to 'Oriental' learning was withdrawn. This, along with the deindustrialisation that intensified later on, saw a dramatic fall in the number of children who learned traditional skills from parents. Sometimes, old methods of teaching were peacefully buried as a new culture was being ushered in. Very gradually, art converted from its omnipresent form to one that was given a special quota and function in a new system.

This method was questioned in the West, where pioneers like Victor Lowenfield sought to create a new environment for art education. In India, the Bal Bhawans, inspired by this trend, were an attempt at rectification but they didn't acquire enough spread. The idea here was to unshackle the mind of the child and let it explore painting on his/her own terms. In this context a school or course which aspires to teach art to children itself appears problematic.

The unravelling begins with what such a course is hoping to teach a child. And if such teaching serves the purpose of art at all.

A Ramachandran, a highly regarded artist and art educationist denounces this spcialisation within art that children are subject to. "If younger children are not forced to specialise in physics or chemistry, then why in art? In fact, till adolescence a child should be left alone."

Seyna Baig, a young artist who runs art classes for children, sees the problem not as one of learning, but unlearning. Again and again, she points to the conical roofed houses and flowers with teardrop-shaped petals which figure in almost all her pupils' first works—where she gives them a free hand.

Baig's emphasis is in helping the children observe and giving them the confidence to paint what they see, rather than what they are expected to see. The results of this exercise are refreshing and exciting, for no two children view the same objects in an identical way. A young girl associates bright yellow with a 'cold feeling'. She carries on unreprimanded and uninterrupted. "I don't want to tell them how to paint—there are no rights or wrongs," the teacher explains.

In the Sahitya Kala Parishad workshops, this leaving the children to themselves through their 15-day course has uncertain results. R.S. Akela, a painter who is also teaching at one of the workshops, talks of the damage done at schools, evident from the *'jhopri* syndrome,' a reference to the main theme of a majority of his pupils' paintings. But even near the end of the workshop, there seems to have been no solution found to this, as the images persist and the paintings, most of which are landscapes or portraits, remain more or less unchanged. There is little thinking aloud as children plunge headlong onto their paper and paints. Literally, for there are no tables or boards, and children have to bend over their work, spread on *dhurries*.

What is really alarming, however, are the beautifully executed American cartoon strip characters—a pointer to the usage of someone else's language and fixed symbols that express emotions which didn't originate from the children themselves.

The combination of letting them on their own and omitting observation from learning is partly responsible for the kind of work which finds a parallel in answers crammed from texts. The handling of art as a subject in school also contributes to this. A typical school syllabus usually leaves little room for art, which is as homogenised as a factual subject. This uniformity is often obtained at the cost of

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Seyna Baig in her art workshop: "There are no rights or wrongs"

ences and backgrounds. Ramachandran, while explaining the need for art that is close to the child's own reality, suggests teaching be done by, say, Worli or Madhubani painters in the case of older children, thus keeping both a tradition and an interest in it alive. "The biggest menace," he feels "is the art competition." An activity that has inaugurated the era of non-spontaneous, planned works, often based on the adult's idea of a child's mind and creativity. Painting here is reduced to a series of well-prepared answers for an exam, rather an outlet for expression.

Helping out with technique, however, must begin some time, and in both Baig's classes and the SKP workshops, older children are encouraged to experiment with shading and playing around with light and shade effects. Nevertheless, as Akela points out, even the youngest children are taught to wash their brushes, dilute and mix paints—all crucial to good care of the material. Here, a class 7 student displays the trees he has painted using shades of yellow and deep purple brown. "This is the best thing I've learnt till now," he says. The younger ones carry on churning out images they have produced several times earlier. The problem is in the lack of interesting sources to observe from. If ideas and interests are not forthcoming, it has something to do with the bombardment of the modern urban child with TV and dry, unstimulating studies. The mind

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