

COMMENT

Protecting artists and the arts

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This is an opportunity to create a cultural economy that helps performers move away from agriculture



The sheer diversity and excellence of fine arts, performance arts and crafts – folk, classical, and contemporary – in India is mind-boggling. But on paper the creative economy does not exist. There are neither authoritative definitions nor data on the size or shape of it. Social and economic policies are made without regard to their impact on the creative economy and those who depend on it.

Even if one wanted to try and determine the health of the sector, its complexities elude comprehensive diagnostics. A recent report, 'Taking the Temperature', by the British Council in association with FICCI and Art X, spoke of how the pandemic and its aftermath have impacted the creative economy. As per the report, MSMEs, which have taken a beating due to the lockdown, make up 88% of the creative sector. Of these businesses, 32% are facing a loss of roughly 50% of their annual income in the first quarter. Fifty-three per cent of the events and entertainment management sector saw 90% of their events cancelled, and 61% of organisations established between four and 10 years ago have stopped functioning.

While reading these statistics it is important to bear in mind that this is a sector that struggles for the most part even in the best of times. State support for arts and culture is abysmal. The scale at which the average cultural organisation is forced to operate due to infrastructural shortcomings makes it nearly impossible to ensure profit margins. Support from the private sector is unreliable and insufficient – further compromised by rigid CSR rules that make it difficult to justify donations in this area. This has stifled experimentation and innovation in the arts as well as preservation of heritage.

Furthermore, the report only presents part of the picture. A large section of artists and artisans are part of the informal economy – weavers, folk singers, tribal dancers and even classical music performers. Some of them depend on agriculture to supplement their income for part of the year. With rural wages already very low, they are fighting for mere survival.

It takes decades of building up muscle memory to gain mastery over artistic tools. Taking to hard labour to feed their families can undo this labour of a lifetime. But even opportunities for manual labour are becoming hard to come by.

A list of recommendations

FICCI has sent a list of recommendations to the Ministry of Culture that can go a long way in mitigating the damage. Amongst them are releasing grants that are pending since 2017, despite being approved; diverting the budgets already allocated for state-sponsored cultural festivals to help artists in need; ensuring health coverage to artists under Ayushman Bharat or the Central Government Health Scheme; moratoriums on GST payments; and investing in digital infrastructure that can help artists take their work online. These are achievable targets, yet the Central government and most State governments have been unresponsive. That said, often artists fail to receive whatever little is allotted to them.

In 2015, as part of voluntary work I do with folk musicians, I travelled with a group of Kalbelia performers to the Collectorate in Jaisalmer. They were seeking certificates that allow them to access meagre welfare benefits. In a Kafkaesque turn they were told that they could not be given the certificate until they prove they really are Kalbelias. We returned the next day with wind instruments and snakes to put up a performance – their musical heritage being the only proof of their identity. The officials did not relent. “How do we know they are not Nath Jogis? They also have snakes but they are OBCs, not STs,” I was told. I wondered then: What prevents these people from moving to the city to look for a better source of sustenance? However, as the pandemic has underlined, cities might not be the promised land for most migrant workers.

In these circumstances, there is a real opportunity to create a cultural economy that helps millions of performers move away from agriculture and sustain themselves without having to migrate for temporary jobs. This is but one of the innumerable ways in which nurturing the creative arts can help strengthen India’s economy. It can also simultaneously bolster our soft power. But beyond utilitarian goals lies a far more fundamental need. The very comprehension and articulation of our collective identities, aspirations, tragedies, bliss, and potential depends on the survival of the arts. If we lose our artists, a million temples and trillions worth of economic growth will fail to make us whole again.

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