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Sanctuary for the Arts

Experts from three cultural organisations reveal the importance and challenges of management and finance in the arts sector.

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Trishla Talera; Padmapriya; Rashmi Dhanwani

By Taraana Madhok

How do we help people find meaning and beauty in their lives? The meaning-making is what we're looking for," said theatre actor Ashish Mehta at Arts & Cultural Management 101, an event to mark the opening of the Pune chapter of Arts Culture Resources India (ACRI), a platform for professional opportunities in the cultural and creative sector. Organised with TIFA, the event was held at British Council Library recently. The hall was packed with people who had braved torrential rain and bumper-to-bumper traffic. Addressing them, besides Mehta, were Rashmi Dhanwani, founder of Art X and ACRI and Padmapriya Janakiraman of Sahapedia.

"Nobody is building the culture sector for you, you have to build it for yourself," said Dhanwani. She traced the beginning of ACRI as a [Facebook](#) group in 2013 to disseminate information on grants in the arts and culture sector. It now has 5,00,00 subscribers from more than 15 countries and is a platform for arts and cultural managers to interact. With daily posts on jobs, internships, and grants, the group is now run by volunteers. ACRI soon realised the limitations of virtual interaction and the need to take the initiative offline, resulting in city-specific 'chapters'. The second Pune chapter will be held on October 9.

Dhanwani's experience in setting up Art X as an art consulting firm in 2015, drew attention to the link between "two universes of people" — those who create art and those who provide services for the artists. "We're in the game of building value for the cultural sector," she said. She traced the change in the definition of "art" from "beauty and human achievement" in the pre 1800s to the post World War II "aesthetic relationship between the viewer and the object". She tracked the funding approach in India, from royal and religious patronage, to the government, formal institutions, organisations and entrepreneurs. Currently, the art sector is divided into founder, funder, staff and collective dominant organisations. "This sector is resource starved," she said.

For Mehta, who is also a mechanical engineer, art managers serve as "meaning makers". Aasakta Kalamanch, a theatre group he is a member of, was founded in 2003 and has produced 30 plays casting over 1000 artists. It is currently self-funded and the members work gratis. Mehta said Aasakta, possibly, grows faster by "identifying what we don't want" including repetitive plays and a lack of intimacy with the audience. Aasakta began performing for smaller audiences, expanded and has now gone back to the basics, "pushing content overproduction," said Mehta. "Theatre is about a precise moment," he explained, emphasising the challenge of relevance. He is also a member of SMART India and holds capacity building workshops for theatre groups across India.

Most people who want to research an element of Indian culture and heritage, click on Sahapedia. A digital resource with free and open data on the "arts, cultures and histories of India", Sahapedia maps heritage in forms including articles, photo

essays, and site walkthroughs. It has prepared a documentary on the Rashtrapati Bhavan and also organises free walks across 60 states at their ‘Walk Festival’ in February. After mapping Chattisgarh and Fort Kochi, Sahapedia is working on a culture mapping project for Pune. Padmapriya, who is a dance and film artist, stressed on the importance of defining communities, citing the example of Pune, which happens to be the “largest producer and consumer of digital cultural knowledge”. Themes include food, films, and literature. “Fifty percent of Pune’s population includes migrants so it is a challenge to define communities,” she said.

During the interaction, the speakers talked about the change in corporate social responsibility, where the laws have benefited the arts sector to an extent and the advantages of core funding over project funding and crowd-funding. “Your family and friends won’t give you money twice or three times,” said Dhanwani, emphasising that crowd-funding cannot be repeated often.



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