

## Delhi – Art & Culture

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### *Abstract*

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Cultural interactions within a city affect the day-to-day working and functioning of the city, in addition to shaping the design and architecture of the city. Cultural activities have linkages with economic activities of a city. This paper attempts to examine the ways and means that can be employed by the government to make Delhi a city of cultural importance.

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## I. Introduction

A complex combination of economic, social, and cultural interactions defines the working of a city as a major centre of human activity. Each feeds into the other; the strengths (weaknesses) in one area further strengthen (weaken) the other. Of these economics has received much emphasis in policy debates in recent times, less so with social interactions. Cultural interactions however have been left out.

Historians have found how the socio-cultural character of a city has shaped the design of homes, neighborhood, and whole cities. (See for instance *Ethics and Urban Design: Culture, Form, and Environment* by Gideon S. Golany, July 1995) These relationships have been found in civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Indus Valley, etc, and helped them in surviving, prospering and growing for many centuries.

Why is art so important? And how does this work? Three points are discussed below:

First, unlike technology and economics, art is an area of human endeavor that is *purely* creative. This creativity initially manifests itself in the various modes or major forms of art such as music, sculpture etc. But it does not stop at that. It goes on to affect architecture, urban planning and so on. As historians have found, this in turn affect the day-to-day working and functioning of a city.

Second, the economic and cultural character of a city is enhanced by its artistic endeavors. If current trends are any indication, this impact is bound to grow in coming years. Take the area of art and economics. There are many areas of art such as music, commercial art, design, etc. that are increasingly becoming important economic sectors in their own right. In manufacturing for instance design of products is not merely a matter of technology and ergonomics but also of art and aesthetics. Similarly the entertainment industry today is one of the fastest growing sectors in the Indian economy.

Third, a city can come into being initially as a centre of economic activity. However it only sustains if it meets all the requirements of its citizens and is able to attract others from different parts. Paris, London, New York, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Shanghai and Hong Kong, are all important centers of cultural activities. Even in India, Kolkata was known as the cultural capital of India, but the fall in its economic and cultural importance has gone hand in hand. Delhi, despite its rapid economic growth and central government support has not been able to have the same character.

In a manner not understood very well, artistic and cultural activities gradually permeate a city and start to have a beneficial impact on its economy, society, and life in general. This is a fact known to many, and that is perhaps one reason why all major ruling dynasties of the past have devoted a large part of their effort to attracting and supporting such activities.

Take the case of France. Artists and art organizations came under the protection of the royal house and aristocracy during the age of *royalism*. The public sector took over these functions following the French revolution. The government's role of subsidizing arts came about in this period. Through the nineteenth century ministries dealing with education also became responsible for such activities. After 1959, the education and heritage and arts functions were separated and, the French government implemented cultural policies not from an educational point of view, but with the goal of connecting the general public with heritage, art and culture.

The policies of the French government were called *action culturelle*, or cultural action, were based on the following three prongs:

- (a) Renovation and preservation of historic buildings and artifacts
- (b) Support to artists
- (c) Improving the general public's access

Since then the French government has poured in large amounts of funds and is directly involved in many art and culture support activities.

However, Indian conditions in general and conditions in Delhi in particular are very different from those in a country such as France; and these activities cannot and should not be replicated here. At the same time, the importance placed by another culturally rich society does point towards the directions that government should be thinking towards, and these are:

- Providing the right conditions for the artist community to thrive
- Creating an environment where the general public has access to their output

These have to be achieved in a manner that the art is not placed in the hands of a few; in other words the government has to *democratize artistic and cultural activities* in Delhi.

## **2. The Democratization of Art and Culture Activities in Delhi**

Current efforts towards government support to art and cultural activities tend to be associated with a few people or organizations that have the 'ear' of the government and also its financial support. This creates the wrong incentives. The government's efforts towards improving the demand and supply of art activities should not be done through direct support. These would be costly, create the wrong incentives for the artist community (networking vs. creating) and will lead to an overall stagnation. A better system would be where the public itself decides which activities and artists are worth their support.

For this to be possible, first the artists require auditoriums, theatres, galleries, halls, museums, etc. to bring their creation to the public. Such modes do exist in Delhi, perhaps more than most cities in India. But they remain inadequate. Furthermore, though the larger auditoriums, theatres exist, there is a dearth of smaller and cheaper ones for amateur artists and artist groups to access.

More importantly, many if not most, are located far away for most residents to access. Public transport being what it is, Delhi's citizens do not use even those that do exist at

optimum levels. The democratization of art and cultural activities in Delhi therefore requires the Delhi government to work on multiple fronts.

### **A. Facilitating innovation and creativity**

The government's role as a facilitator of innovation and creativity in the arts has traditionally been thought of as one where it directly spends or subsidizes artistic activity. However, given the heterogeneity of Delhi's artistic and cultural activities, the limited abilities of the government functionaries would not be adequate for the job. As a result direct subsidization should be avoided at all costs. Instead, the government's role as a facilitator should be one where it creates the right conditions for the spontaneous growth of such activities. Some of the key conditions for such 'spontaneous growth' are mentioned below.

1. Greater artist-to-artist interface
2. Concentration of artists
3. Education in performing arts
4. Intermingling of local, national, and international artists

Artistic creativity is most enhanced when there is a high level of interaction between artists. The objective therefore should be to maximize this interaction in the right settings. This can be done by ensuring that the artist community has multiple forums where it can come together. In cities such as Paris and New York this has evolved both spontaneously, and as a direct result of conscious policies. Art education institutions are accompanied by theatres, auditoriums etc. that are located in the vicinity. Artists themselves over a period of time have come to reside in neighborhoods that have a high concentration of artists.

The Delhi government's role therefore should be to allow the setting up of private art and commercial art educational institutions that are located *physically close* to each other and located in areas that already have high levels of such activities. This will ensure utilizing the economies of scale and scope inherent in these activities. In this respect, if the urban plan currently in place has not allocated land for these purposes, the Delhi government's role should be limited to re-classifying land for such activities, but not undertaking such activities itself. Private non-profit or for-profit institutions should be allocated that task.

### **B. Bringing artistic and cultural creations to Delhi's citizens**

The art and culture 'market' has not as yet fully evolved in Delhi. This is only to some extent due to government inaction. But mostly due to the fact that markets take some time to evolve and work efficiently. The government can catalyze this process by certain actions; some of which are mentioned below.

1. Concentration of locations
2. Public Transport
3. Facilities in Local Areas
4. Heritage, Education, Art and Culture Interface

As has been mentioned, many theatres and auditoriums located in the city are inaccessible for a large part of Delhi's citizens. Take the case of the many auditoriums located in the Bengali Market area. These are located in the centre of the city and theoretically should be most easily accessible. But the current situation in Delhi is such that this is not the case. The traffic jams in this area during evening peak hours are not going to go away in the near future (despite the entry of the Metro). The evening peak traffic time also coincides with the peak time for art and cultural shows. Moreover public transport is currently planned to move people away from the centre of Delhi during the evening hours rapidly, not to bring them to the centre. The end result is that residents living in far-flung areas find it extremely difficult to enjoy these activities. A re-appraisal of public transport to cultural facilities needs to be conducted. Public transport has to be ensured from office and residential areas to these centres.

As Delhi is growing the requirements are also growing, apart from the Bengali market area, there are no such concentration of art facilities; the educational institutions are also spread between south, east and north Delhi. A well-connected area in some part of Delhi needs to come up as another, more democratic, centre of art and culture. The government can aid this by allocating an appropriate area for such institutions.

Professional artists or groups of artists mostly use formal art and culture institutions. But amateurs also require such facilities. The community centre neatly blends with these requirements. Many large residential areas in Delhi have community centers that typically have a collection of shops and stores. Most such centers also have adequate space near or over (rooftops) them that can very cheaply be converted for the purpose at hand. Involving the residential or neighborhood associations in this task would further increase the chances of their success; the objective being the creation of *small* theatres, auditoriums, halls etc. Small theatres allow many performing arts to be 'displayed' at low costs. Moreover, they have the advantage of a potential audience that does not have to travel large distances.

Educational institutions in Delhi are spread across the city; many of these already have auditoriums. Many that do not, have the space for such infrastructure but have not built them due to financial constraints. Enabling third party (non-government, non-educational) initiative in this direction would prove very helpful. Allowing schools to partner with non-government bodies to create and maintain such facilities can facilitate this. The educational institution can use such facilities during regular hours; the same facilities can then be used for other cultural activities (not necessarily related to the school) during evening hours.

The experiment of SPIC-MACAY within India has shown how taking senior artists directly to educational institutions has helped the resurgence of many traditional classical art forms. A Delhi focused action that brings together the many accomplished artists residing in Delhi with the students specifically in government schools is another way by which democratization of art and culture can succeed.

### **C. Involving Delhi-ites**

Even if artistic endeavors are given a boost by some government actions it is not necessary that such activities will take off. This is because certain bottlenecks are present in this market. The Delhi government can assist in removing these bottlenecks so as to let cultural activities grow unhindered. Public transport and accessibility have already been discussed. Other examples are:

1. Cultural Information Network
2. Neighborhood Cultural Associations
3. Support by private organizations/corporates
4. Items of popular culture
5. Delhi Cultural Festival

Information is one of the key elements for the success of any activity. Today many cultural activities are not reported in newspapers, and even if they are, are mostly only after they have already been performed. An example is reviews of the many plays screened in Delhi. Creating an information network is not necessarily the government's job, however, the government has the ability to work with the many organizations involved and come up with a system where information flows are smooth. This same role of the Delhi government can be utilized to bring in greater private initiative in the area.

Recognition to Neighborhood Cultural Associations that are associated with, or a part of, residential associations is another way by which greater involvement can be ensured. The government need not subsidize such associations, just recognize their existence. Such associations can do a better job of accelerating cultural activities in their locality.

Delhi already has many localities that undertake varied cultural activities. *Ramlila*, *Diwali Mela* and more recently the *Durga Pooja* are an integral part of Delhi's cultural landscape. Residents therefore already have come together for such religio-cultural activities. With some simple catalyzing measures there is no reason why citizens themselves cannot be in charge of non-religious cultural activities as well. This will however be possible only when the items of culture are more popular in nature. More importantly, the private initiative in this direction will have to evolve from single, one-time, activities to those that are ongoing in nature. One way by which these can be catalyzed is to have periodical Delhi cultural festivals where amateurs and students from different associations and clubs present, display or perform to the city-wide public. A system of awards would help this process take root.

### **D. Heritage, Art & Culture**

Most activities associated with heritage tend to be independent of government intervention in India. Except for one – historical monuments. This is one area where the government has not allowed any private interface and inputs. Consequently, apart from a select few, conditions in most historical buildings/monuments/locations are deteriorating sharply. The Archaeological Survey of India has under its control only

about 3606 centrally protected monuments and sites across the country. That is, the ASI does not currently protect many historical monuments even on paper. Moreover, of those, which are formally under ASIs control, few are actually protected.

In other words a large part of our heritage is going to waste because of governments inability to protect and maintain important heritage sites. These sites include religious, residential, forts, tombs, temples, mosques, etc. There is no reason why the upkeep of these monuments cannot be subcontracted to private or non-profit entities. In turn these entities can conduct different types of activities. Some could open informal education centers, others could run them as cultural facilities, still others can turn them into places of tourist attraction.

The many locations not as yet identified by the ASI as monuments under its controls, can be taken over by the Delhi government for protection. However these should not be 'protected' through an ASI type mechanism. Rather, a strong public-private interface should be built for their protection, maintenance, and use. (see box on Delhi Urban Arts Commission). The public-private interface should have the following characteristics.

1. **Restrictions on changing the original character of the monument/site** – that is, alterations to the physical structure would not be allowed, nor should its character change under the guise of maintenance (such as plastering of walls), etc.
2. **Respecting its character.** Monuments such as mosques cannot be turned into restaurants. But there is no reason why they cannot be converted to tourist attractions. This will involve:
  - a. Proper maintenance
  - b. Proper landscaping of surrounding area
  - c. Eateries and shops *outside* the premises

Other monuments such as forts can easily be converted to culturally active zones with hotels, restaurants, open air theatres, etc. (see box on required facilities)

3. **Giving the private sub-contractor the flexibility** to decide on use provided it meets criteria outlined in point 1 and 2. This will be essential, since in the initial stages there will have to be some trial and error in finding new and commercially sustainable activities for these locations.

<b>Requirements for Tourism at Heritage/Historical Sites</b>	
<i>(Source: R Bhoothalingam "Creating Resources for the Preservation and Propagation of India's Heritage – A Public-Private Sector Partnership Model)</i>	
Availability of up-to-date and attractively packaged information on history and context	Well-illuminated monument with proper signage and information kiosks
Proper signage, directions etc.	Clean and well-landscaped area in a around the site
Availability of audio, audio-visual, print literature, souvenirs, postcards etc. at or near the site	Entertainment area with live and visual displays of arts, crafts, music and other interactive forms of information and entertainment
Reliable, well-informed, and multilingual guides	A well-appointed museum
Clean and hygienic washroom facilities	Access and facilities for the disabled and elderly
Cafeteria with clean and hygienic cooking and serving conditions	A calendar of events concerning the site and detailing festivals, fairs, and other events at the site or its vicinity

### Delhi Urban Art Commission (DUAC)

#### **Current Status**

While developing / redeveloping, maintaining and preserving various parts of the city, there has hardly been any emphasis on the quality of the physical environment and visual character of the city. The aesthetic and visual character of Delhi at least the better part of it leaves much to be desired. In fact certain beautiful areas and heritage sites have been ruined due to sheer negligence and indifference. The need for a high-powered Design Re-view Board/Commission to guide and control the aesthetic quality of urban and environmental design of the city and its cultural values has been felt for some time past.

With these objectives, the Delhi Urban Art Commission was set up under the Delhi Urban Art Commission Act, 1973 to advise the Central Government in the matter of preserving, developing and maintaining the aesthetic quality of urban and environmental design within Delhi, and to provide advice and guidance to any local body in respect of any project of building operations or engineering operations or any development proposal which affects or is likely to affect the skyline or the aesthetic quality of the surroundings or any public amenity provided therein.

#### **Future Role**

The DUAC should come under the control of the Delhi government. And its role should be changed from reporting to the central government to advising the Delhi Government

Maintenance, preservation, and utilization of historical/heritage sites should be a key activity of the DUAC.

The DUACs revenues should be part financed from these activities so that it is in its interest to ensure commercial feasibility of its actions.

### **3. Conclusion**

In sum the government can assist in the cultural revolution of Delhi by having the following pronged approach:

1. Improve accessibility and connectivity by ensuring public transport
2. Work with neighborhood associations in rejuvenating activities at the neighborhood level
3. Identify and remove specific informational bottlenecks
4. Act as a benevolent focal point where organizations/associations/citizens can come together to identify constraints and common courses of action
5. Work actively along with ASI (with an expanded role for Delhi Urban Arts Commission) to preserve, maintain, and use Delhi's great heritage site.

Unlike in many other cities, the heterogeneity of Delhi and its lack of funds, make it inadvisable for the Delhi government to allocate large amounts for cultural activities. The government is in any event ill suited to understand the specific requirements of such activities and is likely to harm their growth and prevent their democratization. Each action of the government should be seen only in this light – Does it aid the democratization of art and culture? Does it reduce interface between artists and government functionaries? Does it increase the ability of the artists to bring their output to the public? Does it make it easier for the general public to enjoy these activities?