

Art for the city

As a student I interned with the Bureau of State Architect of the Netherlands. This bureau is in charge of all the states buildings, those to be built and those that have been built. They also had a regulation, known as the 1% regulation. This meant that 1% of a building cost was to be spent on beautifying the building. This could be with paintings, installations or imbedded work in its floors, walls or ceilings.

Work was tendered, and a group of 4 -5 prominent artists from the country were empanelled for a period of 4-5 years for creating the tender and selecting the final works. In this way over a period of time all public buildings have something or the other which is approved by this committee.

My task as the student was to create one database for the artists who wished to be permanently in the collection of the bureau and a second one of the implemented projects. Mind you many of these projects ran into millions of guilders, the then currency of The Netherlands, but were infact just 1% of the buildings actual cost.

Back in my hometown, I find that art is completely neglected by the city. Nothing in its hospitals to amuse the patients, nothing in its police stations to make them friendlier to the public, nothing in the corporation to show off the cities talent. Infact our spaces indoors and outdoors are so drab that they are depressing; they do not induce a habit of cleanliness or orderliness. They do work as inspiration to those using the space. The little that we have is no reflection of the real talent this city is latent with.

Many years ago a group tried to enliven things up and created an aesthetic committee. They brought those lovely metal jars and pots to Paldi cross roads. Ask any Ahmedabadi over the age of 35 years and they will fondly remember this one circle. Then there were the many fountains which sprinkled cold sprays as one cycled past. Sometimes these had a very typical sculpture within them of a Shakuntala like figure with a pot of water over one shoulder and a spotted deer. Even then, though these were garishly painted in primary colours and very Amar Chitra Katha like yet they were not ridiculous like many of our present "works of art". Many an article has been written about the lack of aesthetics and sense of these works, yet there has not been any move to rid us of them. A second group came up not so long ago, except for a lot of publicity, not much improvement for our cultural barbarianism.

One only needs to drive around the city to realise that we are indeed devoid of any taste as far as public art is concerned, though we boast of several institutions capable of delivering much quality. Where is our sense of aesthetics and why can't we have a say in what our city looks like? Who decides? What is the process of selection? Is the Traffic Police consulted? What are the criteria from their point of view? Many a question comes to mind, especially in this day and age when words like transparency are applicable to any process carried out.

I am surprised at the complacency of the art fraternity young, old, budding and established, especially those from this city who are not even once raising an alarm and crying out enough is enough.

AMC and AUDA win awards for their administration and are now ISO certified. What does this mean? The city gets spruced up only for some occasion or the other which is dictated upon us by the state government. Why is this not a regular routine kind of a thing? Garbage collection, road management, stray animals, well managed dump sites and well behaved citizens? Why can we not be proud of our city and treat it with respect? Why must we behave only on foreign shores when we pay taxes here?

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