

Abstract

KEYWORDS:

Indigenous art, art, pedagogy, art education, artist community, transfer of knowledge, teaching and learning, culturally sustainable pedagogy, Bhil art, visual ethnography, experiential ethnography, collaborative art practices

ABSTRACT:

The artificial divide created by formal institutions, such as schools make us believe that learning primarily happens within the confined walls of a classroom. This assumption, besides certifying learning of a certain kind, inadvertently disowns learning practices in other informal contexts, past or present. The study endeavours to celebrate 'learning of an art form' which is perhaps more spontaneous, natural and organic, with the intent to draw pedagogic insights which might be later adapted to informal and formal learning spaces as well. The choice of the Bhil artist community in India was deliberate and conscious as it makes for an interesting case study where their artforms, which is in transition, reflects both continuity and discontinuity in their beliefs, relationship with art and their art practices, from the past. On the one hand, their ritualistic Pithora artform is essentially traditional, confined within the community and on the other, the Bhil Art is also emerging as a commercial artform. This transition is comparatively recent, that situates the indigenous art in the present by addressing the dynamism and evolution of the art itself.

The research objective thus has two aspects to it; understanding the nature of human-art relationship and the other, the pedagogic approach to its practice. The research posed several challenges particularly in identifying a particular theoretical lens which would do justice to the above research objective. Since the artform had various dimensions to the study, I have used critical insights from the works of several thinkers and scholars working in diverse areas. I have used Durkheim's lens (Durkheim, 1912) to study the belief system of the community linked with art, Paniker's lens (Paniker, 1972) to interpret the oral narratives guiding the art and Dehejia's lens (Dehejia, 1990) to understand the visual narratives. Further, I have used the elements and principles of art to analyse the visual form of the art.

For a study of this kind, ethnography – the flesh and blood approach, which entails immersion in the field, using participant observation as a central tool, was an obvious choice. Given the complex nature of the study, its location in multiple sites, involving several artists/respondents, the methodological approach adopted in the beginning also kept evolving. The research tools were extended to involve structured/unstructured/group interviews and workshops. Visual ethnography helped in documentation through photographs, videography and sketches. Over and above this, a research methodology was designed such that the researcher herself started learning the indigenous art from a senior Bhil artist, Bhuri Bai¹ and documented the process through visual ethnography and reflective research. This ‘experiential ethnography’ along with reflective documentation later became the critical tool for data collection and analysis.

An important insight of this research is that in an artist community when art is an integral part of their lives, connected to rituals and is believed to heal, nurture and bring rain, it ceases to exist as art itself. Instead, there is an elevation of the status of art to become an inherent element to sustain life and eventually becomes a way of living. This indigenous knowledge, rooted in experiential learning is transferred through generations, within closed communities. Within the community, art is learnt not just for the sake of painting but, for a more significant cause that is often connected to their beliefs and emotional wellbeing. However, in the present time and context, the ritual painting styles have become commercialized and are being promoted as ‘cultural emblems’ representing the community. The result is that the artists have distinctly separated their beliefs related to the traditional art practices from the commercial art as explained through the sacred-profane dichotomy proposed by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1912). A conscious shift of the belief system of a community, has led to the co-existence of both the artforms and hence, affected its pedagogy.

The study of the secondary objective of interpreting the pedagogic approach to the art practices, gives rise to a structure of art education that is holistic, emotionally supportive, nature sensitive and spiritually inclined. Insights from the work of Rabindranath Tagore, KB Jinan, J. Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey and Maria Montessori have strengthened my understanding and analysis of the pedagogic processes involved in the dissemination of the artform across generations.

¹ Bhuri Bai was recently awarded the Padma Shri Award in Arts in 2020.

The entire analysis of the thesis could be concluded in a capsule of experiencing art as a way of life, being conscious of one's evolving relationship with art and accepting a holistic approach to its practice. These three findings, interconnected with one another, are strongly situated in one's belief system that is supported by narratives. These narratives are further exalted and preserved by a community. Further, this community helps in offering a natural nurturing ground for growth of the artist and forwards them towards a life-long journey of self-learning and self-discovery, towards gaining happiness or peace. The impact of such a life-long relationship that positively affects the belief system of the whole community explains their unbreakable bond with nature, art, and its intricate connection to evolution. My contribution to the research has been, to organise and structure the non-verbal pedagogic practice of indigenous art and its various components that have been an integral part of community living. As a future scope, this pedagogic approach can be proposed to formal and informal learning environments.