Sustainability in Designing of Plastic Arts

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Abstract: In United States, Sustainable design is called environmentally sustainable design in Art education. It is also referred to as environmentally conscious Art Design. In Europe, it is mentioned as eco-design. It is a modern philosophy of Visual Arts, where emphasis is on design-theory and relevant aesthetics. Socio-economical development and proliferation of waste has generated a new awareness. For pliable atmosphere, various stakeholders are requested to search solutions for these complex issues. Even children in preparatory schools are made aware of their locale and through new ethics, are trained to become more responsible and watchful. For invigorating their locale, environmentally conscious thinkers are engaging artists to contextualize aesthetically, with new art designs, various human issues. The ultimate goal is to create a man friendly environment by making Sustainable Arts from cheap materials in the light of principles of economic development, ecological support and social sustenance. This research paper is evaluating the contribution of Indian artists engaged to address these issues.

Index Terms: Environmental Issues, Design Theory, Sustainable Arts, Contemporary Indian Art.

I. SUSTAINABILITY IN DESIGNING OF PLASTIC ARTS

What is sustainability? It’s meaning changes with people and their varying taste, cultural beliefs and attitudes. The Oxford Dictionary gives us a tentative definition. It deals with natural products, resources and energy which do not harm our environment and with the development, it continues for a long time without causing any harmful impact on the ecological balance. In the beginning, sustainable as a concept was used for the environmental conservation but was found quite difficult to apprehend in simple language. As we know a language carries deep cultural overtones and lacks potentials to regulate such human related terms, from mid 19th century, sustainability and societal change as two most significant concepts became hot issues for public debates in the west. Charles Baudelaire, French art historian, soon after Industrial Revolution, started guiding and inspiring young artists by questioning the academic and old fashioned norms in front of new possibilities thrown open by new scientific inventions and industrial boom. George Parkins Marsh an American Diplomat in France, against Baudelaire’s declaration, articulated destructive changes appearing in the surrounding of the mankind. His research work was the earliest testimony in which environment was directly brought in relation with the human being[1]-[5].

With his book, Marsh wanted to bring to our notice the changes produced by the human actions in the physical conditions of our planet by pointing dangers caused by imprudence in planning and execution of development projects. He wanted to caution his readers as he found greed and selfishness forcing industrialists in western nations to go for new industries in new areas. He knew that the depletion of natural sources at alarming stage in all operations was interfering with the spontaneous arrangements in Nature. As a result, he wanted to exhort and recommend strongly certain remedial steps to restore the disturbed harmonies and material improvements of exhausted regions. Perhaps he had seen the resultant changes in the surrounding and their impact on the local climate, he vociferously attacked Baudelaire who welcomed these changes without realizing their dangerous repercussions[6]-[9].A group of scientists led by Dennis and Donella Meadows of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was the first to use this term in the present sense. In their classical report in 1972, they submitted that they were searching for model output representing the world system for being sustainable and capable to withstand sudden and uncontrolled collapse. They wanted their model output to satisfy the basic material requirements of all of its people and nations.

At United Nations, the Commission on Environment and Development released its Report after many developed nations realized the strong impact of global warming after long deliberations which is named as the Brundtland Report. This Report has dealt with almost all issues pertaining to sustainable development in detail. To this date, this report is the most balanced definition of sustainability. Under sustainable development, it wants to assure all nations that the needs of present human beings must be reciprocated to the requirements of the future generations of mankind. (Conroy, C. 1988)
After the submission of this report, the concept of sustainable development has expanded its reach from its earlier inter generational framework to focus on the goal of social inclusiveness of all people while planning for sustainable economic growth cutting across region and religious divide. To give more substance, another report was released by the Conference on Environment and Development under the flag of the UN outlining the roadmap for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global human society for 21st century. This report under the title of Earth Charter with its well documented Part called Action Plan 21 identifies information, integration and participation as the three main blocks to help countries to achieve progress by concentrating on socioeconomic development as well as work out a mechanism for the environment protection (Fig. 2). In short, these days sustainable development incorporates all minor issues which are related with nations and all major issues of human development concerning education, general health and better living standards[10]-[15].


Indian constitution, broadly speaking, ensures social equality, in principle, among its citizens. Every member has equal right to use and share all natural resources. There is a common law for all at every place to provide protection and safeguard individual interests. Equal chances for education, public health and economic growth are assured. To deal with social and economic disparities, special arrangements have been placed in order to help underprivileged sections. Sustainable atmosphere for growth of all is enshrined and promised.

In India, Design education is a novel concept and is evolving rapidly. There were very few schools for Industrial Arts under the patron-ship of the Britshers but no college of Design teaching was commissioned. After Independence, with the support of market economy, the political class felt the need of new art colleges for upcoming art students. Several Fine Arts colleges stated propping up across the length and breadth of the nation as the concept of design was seldom taught in these art colleges. Local artists even during the reign of Colonial masters, were unfamiliar with the design thinking for their art works. (Wylant, B. 2000)

In this paper, the researcher will use the acquired knowledge from other disciplines while conceptualizing design factor in Fine Arts. The resultant insights should help us in our understanding of design thinking in the field of creative works. A scholar has argued that design is impacted and shaped by essentially three domains of knowledge.

a) The need to make things work properly (engineering type of knowledge)

b) The need for the form and appearance of designed artifacts to meet appropriate aesthetic requirements (knowledge pertaining to arts and aesthetics)

c) Knowledge from the human sciences i.e. how people communicate and relate with these artifacts in different contexts. Buchanan’s three domains of knowledge are shown in the following fig no 3.


His literature moves us from the dead objective interests to more specific interpretation of physical, psychological, social and cultural relationships between product and holders. Earlier approach to Design in western Arts was based on locally supported and generated ancient tradition of ‘Arts and Crafts’. With the market economy and it’s constrains, new ideas were evolved by the students after clearing their formative schools. There was a wide gap between education provided and market needs which resulted in quite uneasy relationship between both. Resultantly, a new design format ‘Form and Function’ was evolved which highlighted relationship between object form and its various explicit characteristics that were to strike masses and spectators. The impact of this design was predominantly seen in the art works of artists soon after Industrial Revolution of 1850. With the time, it also lost its charm and art works became dull, repetitive and listless. Thereafter, western art moved to science, as artists started using new design where more stress was on bringing both these disciplines together. Under this conglomeration, several artists produced art works fully complying with the basic issue behind. The Art appeared following the dictates of time but some artists could make their points more successfully and effectively. This new design model ‘Arts and Science’ certainly helped several artists to evolve a style where two distinct disciplines were brought closer by thinking a form where design reciprocated the new aesthetics. In tune with the local standards of life styles, art teachers and freelance artists started employing modern practices in design education in art schools. Paul Fayerabend however, who participated in the Seminar while hosting the Biennial Exhibition of Modern Arts in Venice, warned us against making superficial and generalized statements on this amalgamation of two distinct disciplines. The outcome of this can be seen in the works of artists in the closing decades of 20th century. Incidentally, this design
model, produced works which had no aesthetic feeling at all. ‘Make something New’ according to Buchanan is a direct product of this Art and Science Design Model. The art work of post Impression is testimony to this development.

With the Industrial revolution in the west, Fine Arts became free from all academic interests and teachings while Asian arts remained glued to traditional bondage. Thinking so, for an Oriental onlooker, western art of post industrial revolution era was artificial, absurd and alien. May be because oriental art is the product of our dialectic thinking while western art and its creator has detached himself from the heritage and aesthetics and distinct individualism has got ascendancy.

The gradual rise of design element in Fine Arts in the latter half of 20th century was guided by the values and cultivated ethics of the art institutes. The development of design in this period reflects a struggle to discover something tangible, new and independent of all attachments. The general obsession with every individual was to remain idealistic, self-critique and individualistic. The critical thinking of every individual had constitutional validity and social acceptance. This is where our Oriental thinking differs and our judgement diverges from the western design art education.

In the historiography of Modern Indian Art of post Independence Era, we find very little impact of deliberately worked out design pattern. In the beginning, the students from art schools and colleges wanted to remain faithful to their teachers, their techniques, teaching methodology and working style. The emphasis was on preserving the academic training if not imitation of the past directly. In contrast, western art education saw special stress being laid to the design education and making professional training of art students keeping the market economy in the mind; a factor which was absent in Indian art education and its approach to modern art.

As an art teacher, we are of the view that there are some students who are born with God gifted talent while for other less privileged students, creativity is cultivated through design models. In India, in the first stage, students either follow traditional method of imitating great works or some Masters of yesteryears. In the second phase soon after independence i.e. 1950 onwards, our teachers started telling their students to think about certain object as a model for special attention before rendering it creatively in two or three dimensional mode. The students were expected to highlight basic, explicit as well as implicit qualities and characteristics that were to function as a catalyst in the minds of the spectators. Creativity without a full-fledged discipline of design skills often resulted in monotonous, decadent and repetitive art output, due to that creative urge of hard-working students failed to impress their onlookers.

The third stage appeared as the situation warranted a change in the attitude and nature of art teaching in the later parts of the past century. The students were intentionally brought in direct confrontation with a certain problem to find a relevant solution with direct contact with the object and acquired knowledge from different sources. Self expression started gaining strength along with strong individual taste. Earlier traditional flavor and aesthetics lost their edge in the design pattern, in later models developed by Indian artists by adopting western norms without getting behind its aesthetics. A painting of Bengal School represents 1st stage (traditional arts and crafts) second stage is Amrita Shergill’s painting of Camels and merchants (Form and Function) and third stage a sculpture representing (Art and Science model) done by Amarnath Sehgal’s ‘The Cries Unheard’. The tension between these three stages continued in India and resuitantly we encountered a plethora of lethargic and macabre art works having no sense of art design.

It is collective argument of these researchers that technology centre design education should be clubbed with human centre design education to weld and advance human knowledge and understanding of design in Art Education. There are different approaches towards design thinking these days. Despite this study, these researchers find it quite difficult to analyze the total art output of modern India. To give a more balanced and comprehensive picture of design pattern evolved by modern artists, it was a challenging task in absence of proper design based art education. It was our serious attempt to satisfy our present predicament when we selected art works randomly which suited the framework of western education that we borrowed. Our design thinking in the light of present circumstances will definitely bring many stakeholders together to devise a new educational methodology for plastic arts, teaching and training besides setting new system of evaluation and appreciation.

This study deals with the contemporary Indian arts and the main focus is on the question of sustainability in creative arts. The researchers found that the collected visual material requires analysis in descriptive form. The researchers are to deal with creative output done by Indian artists in the vast length and breadth of the country which reflects the present social, economic and political condition of the nation. The emphatic conclusion is made from the visual material and the ground reality of the country and the resultant interpretations of the situation have been realized by the researcher empirically. Hence, the research methodology adopted by the researchers for this research problem comprises Descriptive, Qualitative, Self-Observational and Empirical methods. With the help of these methods collectively, investigators have dealt the creative arts of the contemporary period reflecting the human reaction to the natural imbalance and evaluating the response of creative minds to sustain it with a design that reciprocates the intent of the responsible human being.

II. SUSTAINABLE ARTS

For a modern artist, in the west, climate change, environmental disturbances and steps to counter for its protection are amongst the most urgent and paramount issues for consideration. Being an artist, we have to assume what is going on in the mind of artist when he finds himself confronting environmental issues. How as a human being

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he takes his responsibilities to tackle his disturbed surrounding as it is getting hostile and unfavorable with the time? How is he addressing human related issues through his creative and philosophical outlook? How his acquired artistic vocabulary and latent sensibility help him to arrive at a point where creatively he treats his subject more effectively and potently?

For the present research paper, the researchers find, at International level, developed nations approached UN to build a consensus on sustainable existence and development in the light of global warming and environmental disasters. It was decided in 2002 after long deliberation at UN that such issues can be sorted if the sustainable development carried out keeping the cultural background of the concerned nations. These two central concepts 'Culture and Sustainability' are interconnected. Culture can represent our visual art, performing arts and literature. Forests and rivers and protected landscapes along with historical sites all come under the purview of culture as our ethics, values and behaviors are fashioned by them. Here we have to use culture in its social context. Our survey responses and desk-based research phase has covered the entire spectrum of its meanings.

Financial, social and environmental factors at a given place collectively enhance the sustainability and living standard of the inhabitants. Most developed western nations have evolved powerful narratives around their social and financial sustainability. Diverse arguments regarding inclusion, diversity, participation, equity, social and value system have been encouraged and strenuously put across the table for discussion in order to arrive at a broader understanding level. Common assumptions and metrics underpinning a common platform which is used as leverage for public investment and cross accountability are pressed in. This level of understanding has strengthened the role of modern arts and enabled culture to stand and work compatibly with social and economical dimensions of sustainable development. Though we have noted that there is no overreaching complacency framework to regulate art and culture at the international level but there are certain national and private plects, voluntary protocols, awards and certifications which have been placed in use. We have found that arts and cultural policies which face environmental sustainability are not fully developed and implemented properly in the Third World countries like India. No practical and focused guidance from government and private sector is seen working in the favor of fund raiser for the Arts, art workers, promoters and dealers.

In short, formal definition of sustainability, by placing environmental sustainability as the anchor principle, acknowledges that the air we breathe, the water we drink and the ecosystems that keep the planet pliable and healthy are some conditions which make our social, sustainability financial and cultural health in better shape (fig. 4).


We have concluded that cultural sector has well-articulated social values and norms which promote equality, inclusion, diversity and community. These values arise from the sector’s sense of responsibility towards public, artists, artworks and cultural heritage. It is for the artists to take the leadership and move beyond individual well-being by creating or working out their narratives to shape new values against the unresolved problems of pollution and climate change. Art must be created for the well-being of our planet as well as its life supporting systems.

Sustainable art as a concept and expression is a recently proposed art term. It is distinguishable from environmental arts and its principles encompass ecology, social justice, non-violence, social welfare and grassroots democratic values. Some Art Historians are of the view that Conceptual Arts of 1960-70’s also helped to inspire this form of art, artists started dematerializing and questioned the functioning of the art system. There are some artists who feel that the end of Cold World-War also helped the rise of sustainability in Arts in 1989. Majority of German artists started a campaign showing awareness of the global character of ecological and social problems. Some artists of this phase also questioned the polemical division between autonomous and instrumental art originating with modernism, arguing that it is ‘autonomy’ that gives art as well as artists the potential to be free.

Since 2005, Sustainable arts are being practiced and regularly exhibited in Europe. Especially in Germany, extensive literature on sustainable art and theory is available with interdisciplinary analysis of arts and practices.

III. SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

Sustainable design which artists of Sustainable arts use denotes philosophy of making or creating physical objects through simple and direct contact with the built environment. The certain objects in large bulk and services comply with the principles of social, economic and ecological sustainability. The intention is to eliminate negative impact through skillful designs. This manifestation requires renewal resources easily available for the artists, impact on the environment quite minimally and relation with people in large number and that too in the natural
Here more stress is on taking art towards a new design model ‘Form follows Environment’. Here meaningful innovations are encouraged to shift and change human behavior. A dynamic balance between economy and society is intended to generate a long term relationship between users and object/service. Modern artists who use intentionally non-toxic, cheap, local made and other sustainable material in their art practice are conscious of their duty towards making their art more sustainable and meaningful for the present generation who is facing environmental issues. They are deliberately engaging themselves by evolving and integrating conceptual ideas of sustainability into their works.

IV. INDIAN SUSTAINABLE ART: NEW DESIGN AND MODERN THEORY

As said above, Indian Government is slow in creating an atmosphere for relevant policies for the environmental safety. No initiative has been taken except a private function which was held in Bombay last year. (Methews, N. 2016) The nation is making progress but the speed to counter the damages of industrial growth, is too slow. Before we start selecting artists and their works, we have to ascertain what exactly we want to see in the art works of our country and how to identify sustainable elements before raising our questions before the concerned artists. To our mind, there are certain issues which have been suggested by the UN declarations as well as Indian constitution regarding living standards in the country. So in the Environment field, we find Indian artist facing ‘pollution’ and ‘industrial waste’ as two subjects and areas amongst several others which have drawn the attention of the artists. On the social sector, labor problem, child abuse, gender bias, social unrest, social inequality and social injustice are some issues for the artists where he/ she has to put their emotional chords, through quite minimal use of visual elements, in a tangible form. The side effects of war have also attracted some artists. Different media for their expression is being tried leaving aside conventional painting, sculpture and graphics. We are certainly aware that without our passions it is very difficult to survive. It is the key to many accomplishments. In dealing with sustainability, passion is again at the center of all activities as it is not foolish sentimentality. In today’s world, science is not enough in providing tangible solutions to human problems. Art pieces are vehicles human feelings and passions.

Through this research paper, our attempt is to show that combination of art with science can do a lot of wonders. In fact, it represents human emotional intelligence when artist confronts a problem challenging him and his society. Artist is a reflector, a dedicated social scientist whose statement is deliberated and full of intentional judgment.

Fig. 5. Left to Right Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore, Amrita Sher-Gil and Sculpture of Amarnath Sehgal

Art as cultivation and aesthetic inquiry is useful for scientists of environment to defuse the damage of man made mistakes. Arts reflect human creativity and during these times of economic uncertainty and global financial crisis, we need creative solutions to human scale problems such as sustainability.

Fig. 6. A Chandigarh Based Artist Nek Chand at His Rock Garden Chandigarh, India

V. MODERN ISSUES AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF INDIAN ARTISTS

Nek Chand creates a kingdom of folkish figurines. You have sculptures and dancing women fashioned from found objects like motorcycle spare parts as well as glass bangles. His sculptures stand in stark contrast to the lifeless government buildings like High Courts and Punjab Assembly. We saw beauty impregnated in dead objects in what people said was junk. Early phase has originality and rich expressive quality. They are made of construction waste. They depict his frustration for ordinary people. They are not local people whom he created but masses with minor differences totally anglicized. Their hopes have been crushed. Realizing government’s lack of empathy towards English educated masses they are appearing as protesters. They are motionless, hypnotized and awestruck. Nek Chand uses human expression to make his point through folkish artistic language as he knows that folk art has potential to move and motivate.

Fig. 6. A Chandigarh Based Artist Nek Chand at His Rock Garden Chandigarh, India
roads and empty residential plots. From the practice of child labour, piles of discarded objects in local made creatives voices. Fellow members to release their pent up emotions through performance of this kind can help the artist to play a role in gathering coal along with clay, both are sustainable materials. These mediums do not carry chemicals and acidic contents. Both materials to our mind are used to show poverty. Whether artists like Gurcharan Singh and Himmat are deliberately using these materials for their creative works or are compelled to do so, we have no issue. Certainly, they are showing their deep concern towards the environmental change. Shah felt disturbed by seeing piles of discarded objects around the roads and empty residential plots. From these abandoned objects as people generally like to lay aside unwanted and used stuff without caring the damage they do to their locale, some creative adjustment is tried without thinking of inner aesthetic senses. The colours, linear and formal design is created just to please our eyes rather than our obscured human feelings. To satisfy the demand of sustainable development, their contributions cannot be ignored as they are helping to minimize the impact of proliferation and piles of discarded objects in storehouses or junk places. Singh Ranjeet, Girl child labour (painting). Here the researcher does not have any doubt what this artist is up to. He has successfully implemented sustainable development solution for the improvised people living near Coal mines fields. A girl has been shown. The challenge of poverty and economic disparity has been discussed by economists, policy makers, politicians and social workers with very little success. The passionate art based practice of ‘theatre for stimulation’ finds artists using street as platform to strike before audience rather than waiting for aid and outside support. They employ marginalized people to express their own experiences, feelings and emotions. Through ordinary people, artists reflect their needs, respond to the community needs and negotiate through them their fears in order to get empowered to arouse their audience without getting involved directly. Here this artist has used an adolescent girl helping her parents in gathering coal pieces in broad day light knowing fully she is to do a second duty in the evening as a dancer before drunkard workers. Her childhood dreams have lost meaning. Since birth she is being groomed to serve adult male workers. The pain, hatred, gloom and depression are writ large on her face. Performance of this kind can help the artist to play a catalyst for changing the social attitude towards child labour. Artist can use this performance in society activism on a larger scale than some bigger projects by helping fellow members to release their pent up emotions through local made creatives voices. Singh R. Installation of black mound, Artist has piled mound of a coal-ash. Artist here is committed to striking at numerous chords. We have so many rules and regulations but policies and decision making has fallen in the hands of corrupted hands and minds. The social oriented projects have been high jacked by vested interests. Artist here is trying to provoke Spectators by providing good conscience by maintaining honesty for the welfare of fellow members. Sometimes, art enable us to look at what normally we like to avoid. The contents like baffling, disturbing, disgusting, anxiety- provoking, politically incorrect and socially immoral message is suggested without making direct reference to objectionable signs and symbols. Art focuses our attention to those things which we want to see banned in public. This is one tool or medium which challenges the societal hypocrisy. Ranjeet Singh in this direction has succeeded in decoding several such symbols which are product of his society to support workers and underprivileged who are being victimized at every corner. Injustice done to them irrespective of the enacted law is violently exorted through his artistic sensibility. Singh Ranjeet, Girl child labour (painting). Here the researcher does not have any doubt what this artist is up to. He has successfully implemented sustainable development solution for the improvised people living near Coal mines fields. A girl has been shown. The challenge of poverty and economic disparity has been discussed by economists, policy makers, politicians and social workers with very little success. The passionate art based practice of ‘theatre for stimulation’ finds artists using street as platform to strike before audience rather than waiting for aid and outside support. They employ marginalized people to express their own experiences, feelings and emotions. 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Injustice done to them irrespective of the enacted law is violently exorted through his artistic sensibility.
placement and design making has added a beauty which pleases our eyes. To make their compositions more meaningful and interesting through these colorful fabrics and their placing these girls especially Rajwinder Kaur and Sabhya Parasher have helped to make their surrounding more sustainable, enjoyable and pliable by their unique design thinking. They have created a new design model ‘Art and Environment’, side lining the strong ‘Aesthetic’ flavor in their creations.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 21st century, mankind with new scientific discoveries and expansion of knowledge through various means is getting threats to his life. With the progress through heavy industries, new problems are presenting new challenges for our survival. Sustainability as a new concept which was initially related with environmental protection these days is connected with the human well being. All human related problems caused by man-made actions on our habitat are seriously dealt with sustainable development where society, economy and culture are clubbed together to cope with the ecological imbalance.

A work of art is always a condensation of the complex reality, as it involves many human mental and physical faculties. Through a work of art, one learns to perceive an intricate situation through a simple form containing visual elements developed by the society in which artist works and participates. It is possible to convey simple as well as intricate philosophic messages without any fear and favor. Artist from the time immemorial has been reacting to all natural and personal problems through his language and sensibility.

It takes a long time and ample effort to cultivate knowledge through music, dance painting, theatre, photography and other art based methods. However, it is largely accepted that the life of feeling is best revealed through those forms of feelings that we call the Arts. Without proper design, artist cannot arrive at a proper form. For a successful artwork, a well developed design pattern is of great value. We have also noted that with complex abstractions of signs, artist successfully communicates with his audience only if he knows how to design his formal structure.

Art as human instinct is a universal survival skill since time memorial and sustainability acts as a tool for our survival. We conclude emphatically and strongly that arts of all kinds must be parlayed to deal with modern survival threats to this planet, caused by human greed and selfishness more exhaustively, productively and effectively. Not only artist, it must be compulsory for all to work for the sustainable solution for climate and natural change.

It is the collective duty of every member to stand up and get counted to address the issues related with environmental damages around our habitat. For parents, our suggestion for their children are to use water, fuel and electricity economically and judicially. Children must be warned to keep their locale clear and clean from plastic bags and bottles. Dustbins must be used every time for garbage and food waste. More trees must be planted inside their houses. Our advice for teachers is make sure that students are purchasing locally available and cheap raw material for their artworks. Reclaimable, post-industrial and building waste is creatively used rather that costly metal or marble block. Film making and photography which are costlier media should be avoided but recyclable material like clay, paper, handmade cloth and plastic must be employed as raw material for their installations and sculptures. The last advice for the young students is to use the material and fuel minimally.

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