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Sustainability in Himmat Shah's Art: A Modern Phenomenon

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Abstract

Sustainability is a modern phenomenon. It is associated with environmental science. With the rise of depletion of natural sources and global warming, UN was made to expand the domain of sustainability by including cultural factors in it. The need to modernise education, along with several other options, is also felt to make the environment more pliable. Through this paper, an attempt is made to look at Fine Arts as a mean to modernise our education system as well as to counter the side-effects of climate change. Modern Indian art, out from the clutches of colonial hegemony, has expanded its ground by emphasising the individual thinking process in search of new subject matter and material/medium. Himmat Shah as a modernist has witnessed both the sides of the development. His methodology creates a bridge between modernism to post-modernism, by diluting both physical and psychological space through his art. His artistic output demonstrates his love for sustainability in choosing his medium as well as his themes. To achieve the physicality along with the plastic value of the material he has preferred clay, paper and discarded objects. His innovation in terracotta 'Head Series' and 'Found Object Series' sculptures initiate a new discourse in Sustainable education as well as Fine Arts contemporary practices.

Keywords: sustainability; design and envision education; recyclable materials



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Sustainability is a modern discourse which enables human being to start thinking about present and future generations of mankind. Sustainability and societal change were topics of serious public debates in the west. In 1863, when Charles Baudelaire defined modern life for artists, George Perkins Marsh, an American diplomat and modern historian on environmental change, articulated destructive changes appearing in the life of mankind in the backdrop of scientific discoveries and industrial boom. Sustainable and sustainability as a concept is associated with environmental science and targets multiplayer changes caused by human actions and increase in pollution and population. In 1987, for the first time, international community realised the need to address the issue of ecological imbalance on our planet. Resultantly, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development released the report 'Our Common Future' commonly called the Brundtland Report to meet the requirement of mankind. As the most relevant definition of sustainable development it says, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹." For a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century various stakeholders were asked to come and work together to short list damages caused and suggest some solutions for their control. Later, it was felt that Sustainable Economy and Sustainable Society cannot be achieved with the help of science and technology, alone. To empowering the issue of sustainability, culture was a powerful driver to influence masses and guide development in every sphere with social, economic and environmental impact. As a counter force it was decided to modernise education. Sustainable education, sustainable ecological education and eco design education are analogous and interchangeable. Through them new means are tried to create awareness of damages done and solutions are sought to counter them. Children at the grass root are taught to learn new ethics through fresh ideas to rejuvenate ecology. Re-Envision and sustainable arts are two such concepts which are introduced to empower new education system. Since fine arts have the potential to attract, influence and educate people, more stress is given to create new visuals, find raw materials and evolve fresh



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aesthetic sensibility to reach to the wider audience. Himmat Shah like several other artists is working tirelessly to make people aware of their responsibilities towards nature and society by choosing his themes and medium of expression.

Objective

The objective of the present paper is to find the ways and means to facilitate exchange and interaction between scientists, sociologists, economists, politicians and policymakers in the backdrop of environmental disturbance and arrive at viable solutions through blended education and Mass media. The second objective is to find new interventions through re-envision, innovative methods and reform efforts to cultivate new skills for sustainable future through visual arts.

Sustainable arts

It is a new concept in modern art education. Here artists are required to use raw, in-toxic and locally available material as a medium for making their composition. The themes are selected from the socio-economic and environmental issues from the present situation of our habitat. The goal is to generate and arouse awareness among public for their safety and their health issues through plastic and performing arts. In this light the researchers want to see Himmat Shah how intuitively, painstakingly and strenuously he is selecting his medium and themes to counter the side effects of environmental destructive changes.

Himmat Shah is one among those modern Indian artists who are aware of their social responsibilities and are focusing on environment and social issues. UN sponsored Agenda 21 report, perplexed by the latest environmental situation, has clubbed social inclusiveness, nonviolence and grassroots democracy along with culture in the domain of sustainability. Modern artists are engaged to pick subject matters from these issues. On the social sector, labour problem, child abuse, gender bias, social unrest, social inequality and social injustice are some



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issues for the artists where he/ she must put their emotional chords, through quite minimal use of elements and detail, into a tangible form. Beside conventional mediums painting, sculpture and graphics, modern artists are freely using photography, drawings, installation and computer for inspiration and release of their expression. As it is very difficult to survive without our passions and feelings, in dealing with sustainability, it is again at the centre of all activities, not just a foolish sentimentality.

Himmat Shah has focused these issues in different manner. He started to execute his systematic proposition in 1980's. In Indian art in this decade, different subject matter and viewpoints were experimented. Artists started thinking against existing and academic norms. The members of Radical Movement group from Kerala referenced with the Marxist ideology started propagating that this movement was an extension of anti-caste, anti-feudal and anti-establishment movement². Himmat Shah at the same time also took initiation and went on to search and creates a new vocabulary. Through this discourse, he adopted three-dimensional mode for his artistic expression though he was a trained painter. It was a big leap for his career and he became one of the important modern sculptors of India.

Concept of Found Objects in the Work of Himmat Shah

In the search of self, the echo of time and for personal artistic vocabulary Himmat Shah has created a series of sculpture called 'Found Object Series Sculptures'. In modern art, "found object" is a translation of the French phrase "objet trouvé" is used to describe an object, found by an artist, who - with minimal modification - is then presented as a work of art. The idea is that the artist believes that the discovered object possesses a certain aesthetic as well as animistic presence, stemming from its appearance, social or personal history - and therefore displays it for the appreciation for others³. Despite the fact that the terms "found object" was coined in the 20th century, there is some evidence to suggest that such objects were used in prehistoric art during



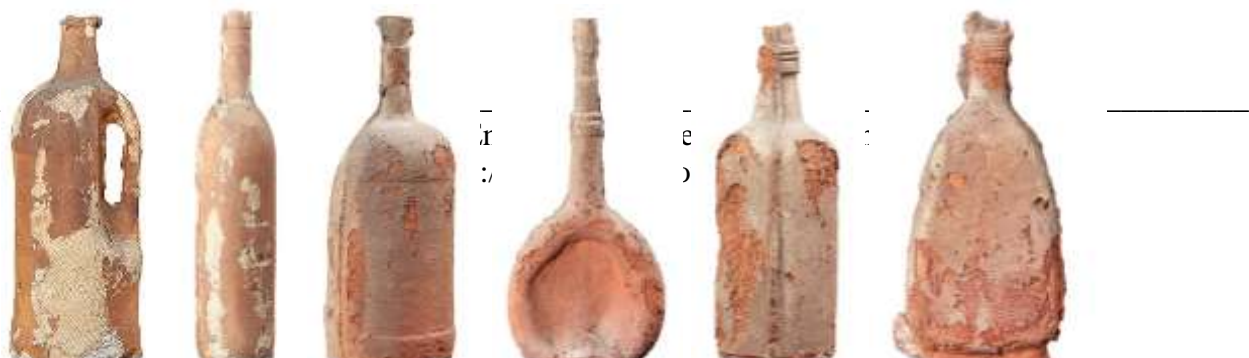
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the era of Palaeolithic culture. According to the zoologist Desmond Morris (b.1928) the Makapansgat pebble (University of Witwatersrand, South Africa), a famous skull-shaped stone which has been dated to 3 million BCE, was in fact a "found object", since it did not belong to the cave in which it was unearthed. Instead, it appears to have been discovered by Stone Age 'artists' (Australopithecines). Three million years later, "found objects" were popularized by Duchamp and the Dada movement, and then cultivated by Andre Breton and the Surrealist movement. Indeed, by the mid-30s, Surrealist artists had identified a whole new set of categories, including: "natural objects", "interpreted natural objects", "incorporated natural objects", "mathematical objects", "perturbed objects" and "American objects". The sculptor Henry Moore for example collected bones and flints which he seems to have treated as natural sculptures as well as sources for his own work⁴.

Himmat Shah likes to collect objects from his surroundings. The initiation and adaptation of this series of sculptures propagate his sensibility with bygone obsolete and antiquated civilisations. (fig.1) Himmat Shah was born in the beautiful surrounding of 'Saurashtra' and Lothal; a Harappan Port City. He has seen archaeologists excavating the site with a specific view-points and concerns. At this level these sculptures are the reflection of his long artistic journey where relation with different identical objects gets different context, - meaning and relevance. They reciprocate huge echoes of surroundings, ethnic concerns and personal encounter with day to day life. So, found object series of Himmat Shah open-up an arena of human experience when juxtaposition of several objects can create a form each time different animated with distinct significant meaning. It also narrates Himmat Shah's social consciousness and his engagement with surrounding when he successfully creates a dialogue with his physical and psychological world for the sake of society, economy and environment.





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Figure1. Shah, H. Untitled [Found Series Sculptures]. Terracotta.1980-2000

Head Series Sculptures of Himmat Shah

Since 1980's, Himmat Shah was at Garhi under the protection of J. Swaminathan and Sankho Choudhary. He felt the need to experiment with new theme, sculptures as Human heads of varying colours and texture. Head as a metaphor has a long tradition behind. He was obsessed with this subject since his college days at Baroda. The researchers came to know from him that he had seen a book of Benin art in the possession of Sankho Choudhary where human heads of different colours, shapes and materials dating back to Stone Age were catalogued. As votive objects these African heads sculptures were serving social and ritualistic functions. For the researchers his works of art, physically present objects bathed with some vague and philosophic content should be studied with care. To arrive at such forms Himmat's creative, intuitive and artistic processes were too pronounced. "It must be ever borne in mind that Himmat Shah always works with the metaphorical, he introduces, through the process of his work, fragments of civilisations, the trace of the human mind and cycle of possession and dispossession of objects meant for utility and pleasure⁵."

Designed to look like human skulls these totemic objects inspired by African tribal cultures as well as French Cubist art movement follow a age old tradition where there is no categorical religious and sectarian demarcation or intent. They are representing mankind irrespective of colour, region and religion. The researchers have concluded that art practice of any artist reflects



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the emotive stage of artist whose anxieties, concerns and aspirations mould his sensibility while confronting challenges and public expectations. His response aesthetically meets sociological issues facing the society in which artist himself breathes. The output becomes a conglomeration of design, content and material of higher level. The investigators have realised that artist, while reacting formalistically to his habitat, develops his style in course of time from a known path to new unknown tracks. In his adventures he revolts and revolutionises his action and his thinking, while synthesising old and new in his creative faculty. It is the endeavour of these researchers to underpin the mechanism by which an artist picks his visuals or signs having some signified message developed by his society for his communication. Himmat Shah in this light starts from the basics taught by the nature, a talent dwelling in his consciousness. The creative process is exhilarating. 'Unreasoned act of being' the act to cherish epistemological state silently makes Himmat Shah to deliver what his environment and society beseech anxiously. His works are meant for universal brotherhood. There is no political message or overtone. He has nothing to do with any political drama or philosophy. For him religion is secondary issue to other basic amenities like home and job for all citizens. His works represent humanity, craves for its well-being while considering gender bias out of his consideration. Himmat Shah's art output belonging to five decades is devoid of socio-political prescript (fig.2). Through his art he never advocates the theory of violence and intimidation of any kind. His theme is more personal and individualistic; a straight dialogue with his audience.

He is deeply concerned when he finds human actions destroying our habitat. He picks-up used utensils, glass bottles and plastic toys thrown by the sides of roads. From the stores and junk places he purchases machine tools which are out of use at the low cost to use them in his compositions. As reported above, he loves to use clay as his main medium as it is easier to handle and mould. May be the lack of space or economical constraints he has avoided metal and costly wooden planks for his art works. Paper and plastic is preferred as they are recyclable materials and they are easily available. His act of making something new reduces the negative



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impacts on the environment he strictly abstains from using toxic substances for his creations. The consumption of non-renewal materials is deliberately evaded along with minimising waste. We can see Himmat following the principle of sustainability by adhering to ecological doctrine and social equality. Through his creations Himmat Shah arrives at healthy and productive environment. Besides he saves money by controlling transportation expenses and other costs. Himmat is also aware that education has failed to deliver for new generation of students. He advocates to fine tune the course contents for children and stick to increase their soft skills. To develop the social skills children must be trained from the nursery schools to behave carefully imperatively and sensibly.



Figure 2. Shah, H. Untitled [Sculpture].Terracotta. 1980-2002



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Conclusion

To boost environmental challenges the researcher, require strategic use of modern learning tools in modern education. The investigation finds that multiple media has a significant role as blended education has the capability to handle the modern challenges caused by human actions on the environment. It has been the contention of the researchers that Fine Arts has potentials to counter effectively and productively the menace of environmental change caused by pollution and depletion of natural sources. The contribution of Himmat Shah has been studied in detail as his works address the challenges thrown by industrial growth and excessive use of renewable materials like plastics and glass. The need to improvise education for skill development for better future is strongly advocated.

Endnotes

Figure 1. Shah, H. Untitled [Sculpture]. Terracotta. 1980-2000 Retrieved 05 May 2018

From <http://www.saffronart.com/auctions/PostWork.aspx?l=22239>

Figure 2. Shah, H. Untitled [Sculpture]. Himmat Shah, A continuing journey across

six decades at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur (JANUARY 11, 2018). Terrecotta. 1980-2000

Retrieved 05 May 2018 From <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/himmat-shah-continuing-journey-across-six-decades-jawahar-kala-kendra-jaipur/>



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