Project Report

By: Nandita Kumar

Gali Art

After completing my BFA at Auckland University in New Zealand I returned to India. I set up my studio in Hauz Khas Village which is located in the heart of New Delhi. The village has a unique setting and lies on the banks of Hauz Khas (a lake) where Queens from the Tuglaq and Mogul era used to bathe. It is full of ancient monuments and surrounded on the remaining three sides by a deer park and rose garden. The village because of its location remained obscure until one enterprising lady setup her boutique in one 'haveli' (affluent home of the rich) in the early nineties.

What followed was a stampede of art galleries, cafe's and boutiques and the village suddenly became a centre of 'haute' culture in Delhi. But poverty, dirt and ignorance resided along with these pockets of affluence. It also created social tensions due to wealth disparity. The village consists of two sections, the wealthier side is the place where the upper castes live and which finds favour with boutiques and gallery owners. I set up my studio in the downtrodden area of lower castes because of paucity of funds and survival on limited student budget.

The exotic side of the surroundings and the colours excited the artist in me. At the same time conditions were very trying and appalling as the flies flew in and out of the studio (because of the surrounding filth). The idea of the community art project grew because of several factors. Firstly a deep-seated desire to do something within the community through art. "But What?", was a question that had entered my neuron maze, however an answer was yet to grow. My association with KHOJ (an artist organisation which is situated in a different village) led me to witness a project which involved artists painting a mural for their local street. But even at that point I was looking for more direct interaction with the community than just painting a mural on the wall. I then made a trip to Anderetta for an art conference where I met a social worker who had worked with kids on a street and had managed to make massive improvements. I grew excited as we exchanged ideas and I had a strong desire to do something along similar lines.

On returning to my studio in Hauz Khas Village, I realised that I was set up in a perfect place where we could work with the community. All I needed was to create the situation. The problem was how to put my thoughts into motion? How could I bring all these varied classes to work together? The children on the street were already very inquisitive and some had also come down to the studio and painted and drawn on the walls with me. I saw children through whom I could easily work and actually make a difference. The younger they were the less programmed their view.

There were a few points that were essential to the project. Firstly, I wanted the economically richer part of the community to partake in the development of the economically deprived. I wanted to start free art classes after which it would be taken out on the streets, resulting in the community being involved. Initially the organisations in the village I approached were reluctant to help and some out right refused. Once 'KHOJ' decided to get involved others like Delhi Art Gallery and Art Konsult and some private funders joined into giving the funds.
Secondly, I wanted to reuse as much durable garbage as I could in the project and also saw it as a means to involve the community. I approached local shops and restaurants by asking them for their junk. This totally aroused their curiosity and got them involved with the project. Initially the shops and galleries who had shown reluctance warmed up to the idea and started interacting. In fact one of the student's parent was the local sweeper; she got involved and started collecting durable garbage from the streets and placed it in front of my studio every morning. Thirdly, I wanted the community to get involved in cleaning their environment and making it healthier for their children to stay. This I achieved only to an extent through verbal dialogue

Initially I was planning to start with a group of 15 students, but the project really caught on and the class grew to 40-55 students. Several young artists got involved in this project who helped and supported me. A few were a part of the student residency program from "KHOJ". A lot of ideas were thrown around and exchanged, for the project.

Problems that were not anticipated were dealt with as and when they arose. One of the major problems we faced when the classes got under way was that some of the village kids refused outright to work with the slum kids. We made partners and made them make portraits of one another and also asked them to draw next to the portrait what they liked and disliked. It was an attempt to break some ice but this problem still persisted and we decided to overcome it slowly.

Several group exercises where done which resulted in healthy interaction between the kids. In one of them we made groups of 3-4 students who had to make collages out of glaze paper on cartons picked up from various shops. Later an attempt was made to display them all on the street varying from the developed to the underdeveloped area. There were two basic ideas in this, one was to get passer-by curious and involved. Secondly, to insert a notion among the kids that the street belonged to them and they were the ones who could bring change. A lot of boutiques flatly refused to display. One of the reasons given was that the facade would be marred. Some agreed and supported us with equal enthusiasm. But sadly the next day we found a few cartons missing and one trashed in the garbage bins. The children were quite disappointed and some angry.

Later I heard they had actively stopped the trashing of one of the boxes on their own account and defended their right against a restaurant owner, to put it there. A new team spirit was growing. Apart from that, we also went out on several field trips to the local parks, zoos and historical sites, where all children were supposed to bring five objects they liked in their environment and draw them. By the time we were ready to move out on the streets and paint the mural we had a fantastic body of work to work from.

When we shifted to the streets the whole energy changed and we could definitely see a positive vibe running. The children seemed to be gushing full of energy, in fact they would continue working after the class hours. This vibe spread from the children to everyone who passed by. Through the children I was able to penetrate into the older age groups. For example: One of the parent gave us his wall to paint; a father who was an electrician was willing to drill holes in a wall where we planned to put up the children's work of the on the street; a grandfather was willing to get us junk. There was a building being constructed on the same street and when the contractor saw us doing this project, he volunteered to repair and cement the wall on which we all were planning to paint. He even provided us with all the materials himself.
It was fantastic to see so much good energy and the whole street was interacting with one another and getting involved in some form or the other. We got several interesting reactions from the people on the street. People couldn't understand why we were doing this project and one cop thought we were making a film set. Another old woman from the slum thought that we were from a political party and were trying to gain points. People would stop me on the streets and ask me to explain why we were doing this. After explaining, some of them got involved in it and a few actually came and painted a bit on the wall.

While I was out on the street I would talk about hygiene to both the parents and children. I was talking to a few kids about how dirty the street was and how flies increase the possibility of sickness. I then went to the studio to collect my belongings and on my return they had already attempted to clean a small part of the street. So some success was achieved in that direction but this has to be reinforced on a more regular bases. I also socialized with the parents quite often and kept bringing up this subject matter. Some were aware of the problems but didn't know what to do about it, but quite a few were so used to living in such an environment that they were not willing to do anything about it. I also initiated a class exercise of cleaning a portion of the street, where all the students were required to get a broom from their home. I was aware that this meant changing the entire habit of a community and would involve a longer period to work to make a lasting impact. By making the mural on the wall we got more reaction and at least created a desire among the dwellers to keep their surroundings clean. The mural would serve as a symbol and be a reminder for change once the project was over. I plan to organize this on a more regular basis, so at least the enthusiasm doesn't die out quickly.

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