

# Performing Arts: The Challenge and the Opportunity

Eminent businesswoman, **Vinita Bali**, draws on her experience in the corporate world to examine why supporting the performing arts is not only culturally important but is also good for business.

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time”  
Thomas Merton

**T**he cultural heritage of civilisations is formed by artistes and nurtured by societies where governments, other institutions and individuals provide adequate resources and encouraging environments for great artistes to do their best work. The role of the Medici Family in the revival of the arts in 15th-Century Italy is legendary and became a catalyst for the Renaissance to spread across Europe. The universal emotions that the arts evoke connect us in an intricate tapestry of inspiration and awe.

The ongoing reality of a locked-down world has demonstrated the unique ability of art to uphold the spirit of people, even as lives and livelihoods are threatened. Access to art from across the world, made possible by the generosity of artistes and curated by art centres—from museum tours to dance and music concerts, theatre and folk art, etc.—provided a soothing palliative to anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty and even chaos and despair. Recordings of concerts, digitally available on various platforms, and mostly free for a long time, have kept the world connected and engaged, even as digital access has exponentially expanded audience reach globally. And, all this at a time when there are no live performances and therefore no income for artistes and others involved in allied services dependent on live performance (light, sound, props, cafeterias at theatres, etc.)

The performing arts continue to face uncertainty and ambiguity even as art centres and organisers are trying hard to pivot to new (hybrid) models of performance, viewership and revenue generation. The silver lining in this dark and dense cloud is the potential for greater audience reach through digital means. However, the absence of uniquely experiencing a live performance—both for artistes as well as the audience—cannot be ignored. There is little doubt that the current pandemic has centered the role and relationship of art and people



as never before.

In the context of this stark new pandemic reality, juxtaposed with the already under-funded world of the performing arts in India, both by government agencies and corporates/individuals, the future of the arts stands at a crossroads, and it will be the collective action of all of us that will determine its future trajectory.

If we allow our vibrant performing arts to atrophy because of insufficient support, exacerbated by the new challenges, we will end up destroying the rich fabric of our cultural heritage, which dates back to thousands of years when Bharata's *Natyashastra*—the most comprehensive treatise on the performing arts, comprising theatre, dance and music—was first composed.

## Philanthropy plus sponsorship

May I venture to suggest that from an individual and corporate perspective, our mindset has to add philanthropy to sponsorship. Sponsorship is about a quantified monetary return that somehow helps the sponsor rationalise and justify the money spent. However, how do we quantify the intangible value of the performing arts? How do we compute the feeling of upliftment and rejuvenation that music, dance and theatre create? How do we measure the sensibilities and sensitivities that people



develop after they have been exposed to great art and artistes? Most importantly, should there even be a need to justify the emotional and cultural refinement that develops from experiencing great art?

To illustrate, with some poetic licence, while valuing a business or brand, what cannot be explained through a formula is termed goodwill or intangible value, which oftentimes exceeds the tangible value of the asset. Well, *all* of art is intangible value and when that is delivered through a great performance there is a *lot* of intangible value. The performing arts inspire and move us because they enable us to access experiences that are profound and deep and not ordinarily attainable. They help us to interpret reality and nurture empathy and relationships—qualities our planet desperately needs in great measure. All of this requires a generosity of spirit and a conviction that the performing arts are part of the critical heritage of India and artistes who have/are dedicating their lives to this pursuit must be financially rewarded, encouraged to create and validated through programmes and recognition.

There is another compelling reason for generosity in philanthropy when it comes to the arts—excellence and mastery require decades of dedicated practice and discipline, and even after that there is no guarantee or safety net for professional artistes. “If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set artists free wherever it takes them,” said John F. Kennedy.

## What gets funded gets done

This is the time for individuals and institutions to come forward and make generous philanthropic contributions to the performing arts because of their conviction in the power of art to transform society. “A nation’s culture,” said Mahatma Gandhi, resides in the hearts and in the souls of its people.” Here, I must acknowledge the contribution of a few recently established foundations that are already shifting the paradigm in this direction. But, we need more, *many more*, to come forward.

When Section 135 of the Companies Act 2013 on CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) came into effect in 2014, there was widespread hope that contribution for the arts will increase. In reality, less than two per cent of the total CSR expenditure is allocated to heritage/art/culture, and most of that goes to repairing buildings and monuments, etc. It is the same with the Ministry of Culture, where a minuscule proportion—

approximately ₹20 crore per annum—is allocated to the performing arts. It is therefore critical for institutional and individual philanthropy to play the major role of funding the performing arts through sponsorship *and* philanthropy. This could be in the form of contributions to already established centres of repute like the NCPA, establishing Chairs of Excellence, commissioning new works and funding their performance not just across India but also in the mainstream theatres around the world.

## Unexplored business benefits

Another beneficial opportunity wide open for business is the inspiration that the arts provide—for excellence, creativity, teamwork, alignment, emotional intelligence, design thinking, lateral thinking, etc. Somehow, the arts have a diffused image amongst decision-makers in business and yet, the arts embody everything that businesses need—the capacity to envision and create, the discipline and processes to explore and improvise, a restless quest for new ideas and forms of expression,



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and a spirit of reflection, curiosity and inquiry.

I speak from personal experience when I say that just as sports have been used by business as a metaphor for teamwork, etc., the depth, range and diverse dimensions of the arts have the gravitas and potential to inspire all to transcend the ordinary, pursue excellence and sustain superior performance. ■

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