

TRANSCRIPT

"WHY TRANSFORMATION IS TAKING SUCH A LONG TIME IN INDIA AND THE ROLE THAT ART CAN PLAY"

A conversation with Navneet Rama

Moderator: Sandra Coliver

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ANNOUNCER:

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SANDRA COLIVER:

Thank you all for coming. It's terrific that there's been this turnout with-- short notice. But we're very pleased that Navneet Rama is with us from Varanasi, India. He was here for the-- opening of an exhibit at Chelsea Gallery that features some of the work that-- is displayed in his gallery in Varanasi. Navneet is a conservationist and-- belongs to a family that has lived in Varanasi for more than 350 years. So he's got-- a very long-standing-- dedication to the city, its people, its natural beauty, its historical significance, its religious significance. And-- he is committed to using art to help populations envision-- what can be done-- working together-- to preserve the natural and historical beauty. Thank you very much. Navneet.

NAVNEET RAMA:

Thank you. Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Sandra, for organizing this. As the topic is "Why transformation is taking so long in India--" if someone who's been working in Banaras-- which is a very small city. In the Indian context it's called-- it

would be termed as "grade three city," and it's based on population in the city.

It's very interesting because when I first started to work in Banaras in the year 2000 we started to do a UNESCO nomination dossier for the city of Banaras to make it a world heritage city. And-- it took a two year process to do that.

We got clearances all the way up to the ministry. And one of the ministers decided he's not going to sign. He was then the education minister and he said, "If you make my city--" which is Allahabad, so 100 from Varanasi, "as part of the same nomination dossier we will-- I will sign it." The UNESCO laws in those times were more relaxed so you could nominate more than one site. And-- but we said, "We have a deadline because we have cleared from the city level, up to the state level, up to the various ministries involved. Clear this and we'll make another dossier."

There are two different categories for the two cities. He didn't agree and the whole thing fell apart. So that was my first learning step because I had gone outside to study. Then I worked outside and I came back in '99. And then was involved in this process and I realized, "Okay, things are not gonna work there so easily just because we are showing a nice carrot and it will be a UNESCO world heritage site."

And any of you who have been to the city of Varanasi will say it should be a UNESCO world heritage site. Most of the people are surprised that it is not. So then in 2002 I started to think about, "Oh, what can we do now?" Because it's a whole new process. The government changed, then you have to start all over again because different political parties have different interests in-- what has to be done and what is on priority.

And then I met someone who was actually supposed to be here, and I think she might be here, Victoria Monroe. And she ran an art gallery here and-- because I was interested in art I started to interact with her and started an art gallery. And I thought maybe an art space might help the local people, you know, try and see the city differently. Because the biggest problem that's happened is that during the whole process of the nomination dossier we realized that the youth of the city don't relate to the city.

They don't call it their city. So if you don't associate with the city it's you are not gonna be able to do anything for the city. And most of them are just there for as long as they possibly can or they have to be, and then get out of there. And that becomes a bit of a difficult situation.

So we started the art gallery with the intention that we would bring in the local people and interact with the city. And the vision then was also to create a museum for the city so that people can understand about that. Because we had made this nomination dossier we collected historical documents, images, so that it just doesn't go to waste. And so that's a process that started then. In 2007 the government of India made a program which was called the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. It was a seven-year program, and the idea of that program was urban renewal, as the name says it.

But from the very first meeting we-- they got me involved because I was part of the

nomination dossier for the UNESCO and-- five years earlier I realized it's about urban development. And it had nothing to do with urban renewal. It's not about trying to do-- it's just about putting big roads in, it's about putting large infrastructural projection, spending a lot of money, 1,000 crores in rupee terms, which would be-- I don't know, \$500 million for a city that size.

And the government wanted to spend that money. (RUSTLING) They didn't know where that money was, but they wanted to spend that kind of money on urban renewal. And the p-- and it was put in a category called a heritage city. In the first conference it was said that when it is classified as a heritage city it-- all projects have to be heritage-centric, to preserve the heritage.

If something is detrimental to preserving the heritage of the city, then that project should not be carried forward. The first reports were done and heritage became the smallest component in it, which became completely separate from all the development. There was a city sanitation plan, there was a city transport plan, there was all kinds of plans.

And heritage became out of 1,000 crores-- two crore component in that. And in that, what was decided by the policymakers sitting in Delhi was they would have a light and sound show on the riverfront of the city of Varanasi. Now, if you've been to Varanasi you know that it's a living city and there is (SIGH) continuous light and sound show happening there. (LAUGHTER) Now you don't have to create, you don't have to spend two crores on making a new light and sound show there.

So then the government decided when I was putting a lot of opposition in the heritage plans in the CDPs as they are called, city development plans for different components. They decided they would put in me in the city as an advisor to the mayor on heritage. They could not take me out of there but they would put me in the city sanitation plan. I really had no idea, city sanitation plan. (LAUGHTER)

I am not an expert on city sanitation plan. And as an advisor on a mayor's board-- I just felt helpless when they nominated me to that. But when I sat in the meetings they decided that they are going to make public toilets, they are going to look at how-- because we don't have a full-fledge sewage system. And through the little common sense that I had I started to intervene in these projects. So they interviewed-- firstly, the way the whole nomination process was done as to who will do the city sanitation plan I felt was not right.

Because they gave it to students of a university called CEPT University. Now, how can students who are still studying make a city sanitation plan for a city that's living and has at least 400 years of active construction and complexities in it? Now, the CEPT University was making the plans, they did a survey, they made a nice presentation with the World Bank and all these big names involved in it because it was a huge amount of money involved.

And when they made the presentation I realized they were talking about public toilets and everything. But they had not interviewed-- because they gave a data as to who they interviewed. Most of the people they interviewed were tourists or pilgrims.

They didn't interview the local residents and they didn't interview women at all. In 1,000 people that they interviewed there were five women that they interviewed.

So I said-- "I think as non-expert but as the advisor to the mayor, 50% of this population is women. And what are you going to do about the biomedical waste?" Because in their whole plan I see nothing about biomedical waste. So the students were like, "Biomedical waste? What is that?"

And I was like-- "Of course you wouldn't know what biomedical waste is because you have not interviewed the women. You have not interviewed the people in the hospitals so you don't understand biomedical waste." So the transformation is not possible because it's something driven from the top by someone who has an idea sitting in Delhi, and it's pushed because they think now the educational institutions in India should have an importance.

So they give these plans out to the educational int-- institutions. Most of them are undergrad and grad students who come in in 20 days into the city and make a plan. It's not possible anywhere else in the world. So they come up with plans that's irrelevant and then the plans have to get reviewed because s-- people will start to object to it.

And then in the implementation, because they have not seen the city there are hurdles. Because they propose a toilet 50 steps up from the (UNINTEL). No one's going to climb those 50 steps these women and-- or elderly people who come to the riverfront can barely come down and go up once. So you plan something that's 50 steps up, no one's gonna use it. So that happened because the local people are not involved and the local people don't feel a sense of ownership to the plans that are being pushed their way.

And it's the same case with the-- the issue of the River Ganga, because if there would be no Ganga there would be no Varanasi. The river is very centric to the to the existence of the city and the culture aspect of the city. And that makes life very difficult because (SIGH) I was like, "How do you address this to these young students that there are women here?" And I'm just taking some case studies, you know, of the city sanitation plan and I was like, "I'm not even an expert.

"If you are an expert sitting on a panel you would have dissected this plan." But that plan was cleared. The mayor after that decided that these are all concer-- advisors and we will take their advice when we want to, when we feel it's convenient. So since 2009 there has been not a single meeting of the advisors to the mayor. (NOISE)

Because the project (UNINTEL PHRASE) required that you have to have local people as advisors. We were made advisors. (THUMP) And all the committees—generally it was outside your field of expertise. So then I s-- decided, "Okay fine, let's do something about bringing in awareness that women have equal participation in the city." So we would do women-centric exhibitions in the gallery.

All exhibitions that we do in the gallery, it's not like a gallery in New York. I am more a foundation and a museum than a gallery because it's not sales-oriented. We are happy if there are any sales but the artists have supported it. And the idea is to

interact with the people in the city. So whenever we have a show which is minimum one month, maximum two months or three months even, we-- get children who are seventh and eighth graders in different schools to come and interact with the exhibition.

That's-- very important. They have to interact with the artist, they have to interact with the exhibition. Then they write essays, they go back, we do little workshops-- and talks in their schools. So hopefully they start to come-- you know-- understand. Because I feel being in India-- there are only two vocations that are sort of recognized, first one being engineering and the second one being medicine. All others are-- you know, you have to survive so you have to do something.

And-- because of this aggressive approach to become an engineer or a doctor there's a lot of competition. And in that competition the sensitivity of the children is lost. And-- I think that through art we can at least make them soft again. So that's why I'm using this trigger of art. One interesting project that we had was-- (NOISE) actually funded by the Open Society Foundation. It's a photography exhibition by-- Fazal Sheikh and it's about-- women and-- and girl child in India. It's called *Beloved Daughters*. And they produce posters. That was a photography-- he did two books, first one was called *Moksha*, the second one was called *Ladli*, the third one was called *Circle*, which was like a completion of the whole thing, which was produced into a poster set so it could be distributed.

And Open Society Foundations supported that. But in the whole of India it was not exhibited anywhere. It was about Indian women. Fortunately or unfortunately, I was involved in the photographing of that project by Fazal Sheikh so I wanted to show it. He told me, "Navneet, they'll burn down your gallery."

I said, "Over my dead body. So no one's gonna burn down my gallery and we'll do an exhibition." So we actually exhibited the original print. And then-- when the publication of the posters happened we got the posters, we got them framed and we are taking it to more than 15 exhibitions we have done till now in different schools and colleges. So it's-- it's an image of a girl child or a woman, and with their story in their own words below.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

NAVNEET RAMA:

Oh, I'm only doing it in Varanasi. I've have all-- already enough work in Varanasi. It's suppo-- supposed to be-- they are printed, 1,000 sets of it. And the idea was to show it all over India. But-- I think it's still sitting in the Delhi office and some of it has been distributed--

SANDRA COLIVER:

And the lack of distribution is because institutions don't want to showcase--?

NAVNEET RAMA:

No one-- yeah, or-- or someone is not taking it up, you know? Th-- because also the process in India is that you have to have an established institution to get any funding. And if you are individuals just interested it's very difficult for you to get access to these. Fortunately I knew the artist so I had access to it very easily.

So I could just call him and say, "I love your project." And he knew I had done the actual show of the prints. He said, "If you want to show it in the schools and colleges I'll send you four sets." So he asked I think your office or someone who was distributing it in Delhi and they sent me four sets. So we got them framed, it's doing the rounds.

And that's-- it's very interesting, when we first did that exhibition in a school we had a reporter from *Hindustan Times* who was a lady and we had a reporter from another newspaper-- I don't want to say which one (UNINTEL) I am not sure, who was a gentleman. And they had a fight in the press conference because he said this doesn't happen, this doesn't exist in India. And she said, "Oh, I face it in my own family."

And we have here 50 posters of their stories (RUSTLING) and we know the names of the people. So because-- he found it too forthcoming, you know? So this is just a small example of how-- what to (UNINTEL) of as a nonexistence of women in our process where we were trying to do a city sanitation plan, and we find a solution (RUSTLING) through another art project, and make people sensitive that they also exist in the society.

So it's a bit of-- but you have to play a very subtle game because otherwise you will lose your audience. People will sto-- stop coming to the gallery. (NOISE) Then I will only have foreign visitors who visit Varanasi, because the only art gallery in Varanasi, so they will come and visit it. And fortunately we have good artists who support the cause. And they exhibit in Varanasi because they have either done the work there, which you will see from the book-- they have either worked there-- photographing or we have a residency program where we have five studios. So they have come and experienced India there so they contribute back to the society through the exhibitions there.

So this is-- you know, this is one example. Then we can take other examples like what we decided was because of heritage-- we found that-- there was no sense of ownership of-- the city. So over time we said, "Okay, why don't we go to the schools and do heritage walks for them?" So we take the s-- children from the schools and we do walks in the city so they understand and learn about their own city. And it's actually-- one of these walks that's responsible for me being here today.
(LAUGHTER)

SANDRA COLIVER:

That's right. Navneet took me on this fantastic walk-- (LAUGH) and not just of the

city, but also of-- a special t-- th-- celebration outside the city-- that when we-- I w-- was the only-- non-Indian present-- with one other person. I think you had a Guggenheim fellowship to-- to tape it which was k-- quite extraordinary.

NAVNEET RAMA:

So-- so that-- you know, so we-- we try and find ways. And a lot of the exhibitions, basically the idea is-- like I said earlier-- to soften the people there, to tell them that there's an option. When they start to write about-- art as an essay-- so when the students come we d-- we tell them, "Okay, choose a image that you like here and write an essay, one page."

One of the artists who is quite well-known in India, Dayanita Singh, her exhibition-- when the students came from the seventh grade and wrote an essay she actually took it to the next exhibition in Bombay and read out the essays of these students because she was so moved by them and the images that they chose, and the relation they had. So then these students start to, you know, learn to articulate themselves.

Then we-- there's a organization in Delhi called the Center for Science and Environment. And they have a students' newspaper called *The Gobar Times*. "Gobar" is cow shit, and *Gobar Times* because there is wealth in that waste. Half of India is still cooking from cow patties. So-- we got an edition there in Varanasi which was funded by the-- gallery where we've gotten-- writers, photographers, people who knew how to lay out the newspaper.

We got 30 children from different schools, got them onto a boat, gave them different jobs. So some went out writing and interviewing, some went out photographing. And then they were ready with the material. But the school said, "We don't want to pay any money to print this magazine." Which was not gonna be much, I think each school had to contribute, like, \$100. So they said, "We don't want to give it." So then we said, "Okay fine, but I can't let these students be discouraged that their magazine is not published. They have done all the hard work."

So we said, "Okay fine, we'll print it." So we printed it, we sent it to the schools. The schools liked it. Some of these students are now teachers in schools. And so that helps now, which is like, seven, eight, ten years later they are asking us to participate in school programs. They are bringing their children to our galleries because they enjoyed that experience when they were students.

So you know, there is-- it's a long, drawn process. But I think the transformation will only happen if individuals in that society want it. You can't force it from a policies from a federal level, especially in a country like India which is democratic (majority of it)-- which has such a parity in the levels of education and understanding of what is public space, private space.

What's the basic common denominator? So I feel that through an art initiative like this you can at least address issues like quality of life. Because when you start to show them things-- and so we started another program where-- you know the garbage

dump sites in India are the dirtiest because firstly it's all spread everywhere, there is no proper collection.

So we said, "Okay fine, why don't we get--" there was an artist from Switzerland who was doing a residency with her, and she liked to paint walls. And her wall painting in Switzerland were being commissioned for 10,000 Swiss francs or something. But she-- because she was in Varanasi she said, "I am happy to give back to the city." So then I requested the municipality, we got a garbage dump site wall and we made an artwork there. And people started to see it so then the place had-- it got attention.

Then they started to clean it up. Unfortunately, the government decided that the dump site has to be moved from there so they broke down the wall and it's moved. But at least for the three years that it was there it was an interesting, you know, way of doing that. And you have public wall space so now, last year the government had decided that from the airport to the center of the city all public walls, they will be a wall mural.

That's, like, 28 kilometers. So you see, the government takes an idea and then just distorts it completely. And what do they want to paint on it? Nobody knows. So people are doing all kinds of stuff with random-- it has nothing to do with the city or any social message. They just-- they said, "Okay, this is a good way to spend money because--" and they can say it's heritage preservation. So you know, they find these little things and that's the disheartening fact of doing some interesting work, that they pick it up and then they twist it and turn it, and do something else.

But the local people don't like it because they-- they have not been involved in it. You know, there is no sense of ownership. And that becomes the biggest problem in making any transformation in a country like in India. So-- through the gallery we are hoping that maybe not this year and not 2020, but 2025 we will have a more sensitive and educated audience. And it's a long, drawn process but at least it helps.

You know, suddenly we have people who've gone through the program who are decision-makers in schools and places. One's become a principal of a school. So he-- really is in favor of all these programs. He tries to support it. We did another program where we gave cameras to the street children within the small street children school where-- they are being taught. So we did an art project and we said, "Here is a camera. Why don't you go out and photograph the life of your family and write-- and give your story?"

And we got them iPads, we got them professionals who would help. And they started to give their own story. And then we exhibited it in the gallery. So suddenly they felt good about that their story was also important. It was not only the story of-- the president of India, or this maharaja or king or that king, but it was also the person who is on the street. And their-- some of their parents are actually the ones building the streets, or the bricks or collecting the garbage.

And their life is important. So that's a process that started. We had the opening. These kids were of course the special guests because it was their work. But we brought in schoolchildren-- 300 schoolchildren from the privileged schools. And

suddenly they realized, "Oh, the stories of these children are important. What about my s-- story?"

So then one of the schools picked it up where the principal was from this program, so he gave a program for the seventh graders to go home and find out stories about their families. So suddenly we have all these stories. And then of course they didn't know what to do with it, so they passed on this pile of stories to us. And we were like, "Oh God, (LAUGHTER) we didn't think about this."

So-- from that came the idea that, "Why don't we start to document stories-- and lives of people?" And we do like it's being done right now, is do an audio file. So we spend one hour with someone, we take a few still images so we can put a (CLAP) face to the story. And we just ask them to talk about their lives and their experience in one hour. And then make a weblog, which someone just taught me two months ago-- and just drop the stories there with a photo then-- two sentences of background information, and drop the story there to start with.

At least people can listen to their stories. So, you know, use the public internet networking platform to do this. Because some of these papers that we got were very difficult to-- you know, to scan and it was a lot of work. So post-production (UNINTEL PHRASE) and because we are a private organization we don't get funding from the Indian government.

And that we are happy not to get because they will give you 1% of the funding but take 99% of the control of how things are done. (LAUGHTER) So we are completely dependent on ancillary activities like heritage walks for visiting guests to Varanasi to raise money, or for people (RUSTLING) who like this idea and can support it, and then give a donation or-- because we have a foundation so they can give a donation. And it works through that. And whatever revenues we generate from the gallery we use for this. So-- you know, there's-- that's why I think that that's the biggest problem of any transformation, because unless-- you have a sense of ownership it's not going to happen. And--

SANDRA COLIVER:

Well that's a good f-- that's-- (LAUGH) that's a good place to sort of jump off-- with some questions. I-- (RUSTLING) terrific presentation and-- and very thought-provoking about h-- how art can be used to engage the community, engage youth, document stories, and the notion that transformation has to happen at the local and individual level.

Well, maybe while people are thinking (NOISE) about their questions-- could you talk more (RUSTLING) about the first exhibit that you talked about? About the-- women and children. What-- what kind of transformations did you see? And what was-- d-- did you find that s-- students were coming forward with their own stories of perhaps-- being victims perhaps--?

NAVNEET RAMA:

Of course. It was quite moving actually, because some of the children started to talk about their grandmothers, you know, facing that (UNINTEL)-- they-- 'cause they said, "Suddenly our grandmother was send off to (UNINTEL)," or sent off somewhere and they didn't get to see their grandmothers. It was actually what the story was about. And then they started to question whether that was right or wrong.

And some of them actually became very emotional. So it was-- you know, I don't know whether they were d-- now better than 2008-- 2009, so it's now nearly six-- six, seven years-- whether they have changed in their behavior or not. But at least for the moment that they were interacting with that exhibition and-- writing these essays they become emotional, they become soft again. And for me that's a sign of hope. You know, maybe at some point when-- when they need to make that decision 20 years later in their lives it will come as a flash and they will think about it before acting the other way. Maybe they won't. But at least this is-- gives us an opportunity to give them that flash.

SANDRA COLIVER:

And with that exhibit-- how did the boy students react? Or--

NAVNEET RAMA:

It was the boys who was talking about--

SANDRA COLIVER:

I see.

NAVNEET RAMA:

Yeah. The girls were actually surprised at the plight because these were more-- the girls from the more affluent schools. They were, like, surprised at it. The school that I was telling you about from the street children, these were the stories. I mean, I'm on the board of that school. We have fathers who sell their daughters. And then we have to-- because we don't know the father, because we have no legal right to keep the daughters, they take their daughters for a vacation and they are in Allahabad in a brickmaking factory, and they sell their daughter. And t-- four days later she gets access to a phone and calls us up, and we rush there, we get her back.

The doctors refuse to treat her. Government doctors refuse to treat her in the (UNINTEL)-- in the university hospital or in the-- the strict hospital. They say, "That's no our job to treat them." And I was like, "Well, of course it's your job."

And then these children in the end wrote their stories, which I extremely moving because these are the girls who were writing the story and we ask them. We gave them a camera, they were photographing their parents or making animation stories. And so it's-- (SIGH) you know, it's-- it's quite emotional even as someone who is sort of trying to orchestra (SIC) this whole thing. But you just realize, (SIGH) "Unless we take charge of it-- I mean, we-- somehow we have to get the people to understand."

I mean, another exhibition which is in this book is we got a very nice Indian h-- painter who paints watercolors to paint 28 moons in Banaras, the moon having a cycle of 28. We brought the students in. Most students in affluent schools did not know that the moon has a cycle of 28. And for a small student going to a small government school to put his hand up and say, "Oh, I know why there are only 28 and not 30. Because moon has a cycle of 28, and my mother is on a fast in these dates of the cycling. And-- and I knew this."

And you could see his body language changed after that. You know, and the body language of these affluent children changed. So it's-- you know, it's these small changes. I don't know what will happen, how these will-- but these are at least small ripples that will happen. And hopefully it adds up. I mean, I see another project that we are doing is tree plantation, which is mentioned in the article that you (RUSTLING) sent out.

SANDRA COLIVER:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM), in *The New Yorker*.

NAVNEET RAMA:

So we are trying to do Varanasi, the city, where people come to cremate their dead and remember their dead. So we said, "Why don't we do a f-- forest of remembrance?" So we start to plant trees to remember the dead. Because it only has three-person green (?) cover that comes from my sitting on the board in the municipality, finding out how much (LAUGH)-- (UNINTEL) is dead in the city.

So we said, "Let's-- this way at least the government will have to give us their land and we can plant trees." So the government doesn't want to do it so we just said, "Okay, we'll do guerilla warfare," which is we just go out there and plant trees. "We know it's the Forest Department land, so we will throw seeds in it every monsoon and we will go out there and plant trees.

"And if we do that for 10,000 seeds maybe ten will grow, but at least ten will grow." So in the last ten years we've been doing this. Some of the children who have been in this program and they see us going on a boat, sometimes across the river with plants, they have come and joined us. And they have actually dug little pits for the-- so there is no way to measure how some program here affects something else.

But my encouragement comes from this one individual who comes-- there was one

who came, he said, "I have heard about your gallery and what you do," and I was planting trees in his neighborhood. He decided to look after the five trees that we planted and now they are 20 feet tall. So for me it's-- when I see him or when I see the people sitting under those trees and you s-- when he sees me he's, like, so happy.

"See, we did this together." And I'm like, "Of course. It's our city. We have to do something together." So it's not a direct-- you can't sort of directly correlate things. But there is all these-- it's an organic web. You know, that some spider is (LAUGHTER) weaving somewhere and--

SANDRA COLIVER:

Lemme start with Sanjay, and introduce yourself please.

SANJAY:

Sure. My name is Sanjay, I work here at Open Society Foundations. And your-- talk provoked me to think sort of at the macro level actually-- and thinking about the role of art in Indian society. And you know, I'm struck by the seeming contradiction of, like, historic art showcasing what some might even say would be obscene, right? Like the Kama Sutra depictions around Khajuraho, and not just Khajuraho, like, other temples around India. Like, that was not unusual actually.

And yet, now even, like, the depictions of the girl child are considered controversial, M.F. Husain and his work. Like, it's interesting to sort of compare what we might view as relatively liberal conceptions of art and its role in society husband of years ago versus sort of the norms, you know, you've described partially in your talk, but just generally also.

So I'm just wondering if you have some sense of, like, how and why this seeming contradiction has played out in the way that it's played out? And whether there's-- maybe I'm wrong about there being a contradiction. So I'm-- I'm just curious to know what your thoughts are.

NAVNEET RAMA:

No, I think you are-- I think you are right, that there is a contradiction. But if we go back to the period when the Temples of Khajuraho were built it was the head of the pyramid (?) that decided to build the Temples of Khajuraho. And Temples of Khajuraho-- a lot of people look at it from the point of view of erotic images, but there was a social need. Because before that North India was completely Buddhist.

And with the first invasions of Ghori and Ghazni they took away all the women and children. So the population was going down. Plus in their religious and philosophical belief they were Buddhist, so a lot of them were monks and nuns. So to put erotic

images on the temple made them feel it was all right to have a family life. So there was a political statement that was being made by the kings at that point of time. Now, the same thing is happening now actually. There is-- there are various political statements being made by various modern kings, as in the chief ministers, or the prime ministers or the people in power. And they are making various political statements by burning down something or stopping something.

And I think a lot of it-- actually after doing that exhibition of Fazal Sheikh whose grandfather was from India-- his mother is American, his father-- had moved to Afghanistan and from there to Kenya. He had got the MacArthur Fellowship, he's got the Cartier-Bresson Award. He's sort of one of the big celebrated photographers who's an activist.

During his exhibition I realized that actually it was the people around him who were conditioning that India cannot see his work. The second problem being that to exhibit a work like this in India we don't have the physical spaces because the government is not creating a physical space. Government has this body called the Lalit Kala Akademi, which is the National Academy for Arts. They have s-- a state department. They-- you have to be politically connected to have an exhibition there.

The exhibition is for three days. I am shocked at the w-- buildings that are built because there is not one straight wall in the Lalit Kala Akademi. It's curved like this. So how do you exhibit work? It-- it's a space that's being designed to exhibit. But the architect decided that he's going to make a statement about his design and forget the functionality of the building. (LAUGHTER)

Then the organization decides that-- 60 years ago that we will put a track on top and put the cables down to hang the work, and these cables must be 60 years old. So I did one exhibition there four years ago, it was a nightmare. They will not let you touch the wall, they don't even paint the wall. They paint the wall once in four years. So you don't have these spaces-- smaller spaces that are-- I'm not an exception.

There are a few other people like th-- like me in Bana-- in India who are trying to create these small spaces-- for exhibiting social projects like this. But they get no support because it's very difficult to get international support. They don't want government support. Local community support is also very difficult because they don't have spare money, because they are strapped for cash.

So it doesn't work. I am fortunate that I have actually one of the people sitting in this room who has been-- through our various collaborations and exhibitions that she has done in America-- the-- the support has come to continue the work. And then I was fortunate that I could articulate myself in English and I had access to all these international artists who are very happy to exhibit, and have financially or in some other way supported it. And then because of my work with UNESCO and the World Heritage, and developing these heritage walks we-- we find ways to keep the organization alive.

But in the ten years that we have stayed afloat-- I can tell you (UNINTEL PHRASE) 15 similar initiatives that have died out. And I think it's something for-- because I see

there are some people from art exchange programs here. It's something for them to think of, whether there is some other way to support rather than the bureaucratic government approach to how they can find a way to support smaller initiatives in smaller cities.

In India everything happens in Delhi and Bombay because all the governments want to do exhibitions and events there. They don't bring any event to smaller cities. We have the second largest visitor for the French people in India, they come to Varanasi. After the Taj Mahal it's the next (LAUGH) place that the French want to visit.

The French language school exists in Delhi but does not exist in Varanasi. So how do the tour guides, the people that they want to address-- once they open a language school they also bring the cultural exchange program. They also put a little space for exhibitions where interactions have-- it becomes a social, cultural thing. Five years I try to work on the French one.

We got the clearance last year, the diplomat has been appointed. He has not got the clearance to come to India. So we have a diplomat who is being paid, he's sitting in Paris, he hasn't got to India. So how can he start the cultural institute?

SANDRA COLIVER:

Those are great stories. More questions?

MALE VOICE:

Thanks. This is very interesting, thanks so much. So I was wondering and when you talked about these kind of results that you're seeing many years on, like you know, people growing up and now they're implementing this as leaders, or trees are growing up. What sustained you during a period where you're doing these things and you envision this long-term impact, but you don't know what's happening? And then what kept you going in this kinda difficult environment?

NAVNEET RAMA:

Quite easy: my ownership of the city. I look at it as my city and I'm doing all this because I want to live in a city that has all this. If I was doing it for someone else by now I would have thrown my towel in and said, "I'm out of it." And I am one of the fortunate few who could sort of travel to most parts of the world and find a job. But because I feel it's my city and I want to do it because I want to live in a city that's looking after its heritage, at the same time is-- culturally interesting. 'Cause when I was in Delhi for six years I used to visit all the cultural events-- music concerts, whether it's Indian music concerts or the Western music concert or, you know, just to understand the world.

And that was stimulating for me. In a city that's pushing you to become commercial, and I was in the field of banking, this was where I got my energy from, by going and interacting th-- and then eventually I quit because the pressure of the banking was too much.

So it's-- the reason why I keep going is because I want to do it for myself. And-- that's the sense of ownership, because if you don't have that it's not-- most people will throw-- so if it's professional you will throw a towel. If I-- (LAUGH) if you want to qualify my gallery on a professional front I don't stand a ground. But if you look at it from the quality of the artists who have exhibited there I have names and exhibitions of shows that happened in New York, in a city like Varanasi. And we premiered the show in New York, hap-- had the show afterwards.

So that's also the support of these artists that we interact with. And they say, "Okay, it's very important for us to show in that city. So let's just show it in that city." And then they contribute. You know, they-- and that is what is encouraging. Because one is my own love for the city but-- there is also this little supports I get from people who sort of-- and when you feel lower they'd-- give you that little push. So when the government decided they are not going to give it there's (?) a campus of the-- the land for the Garden of Remembrance, after seeing our work there's an organization there called the Theosophical Society of India.

And they have large grounds there, so they gave us-- 10,000 square feet of land. And they said, "Here is the land." So as we are speaking here, people are planting trees there because this is monsoon. So we-- then we had to make a system. We decided it's \$5 roughly-- converted into dollar terms that one can sponsor one tree. And-- it's looked after for two years.

So it's-- there's no profit initiative. And everyone when I speak to them they were like, "Are you joking, \$5?" I was like, "Yeah, because we don't want to make profits from it. We want maximum participation." Because then if someone pulls out then we are not stuck. "Okay, one person's pulled out." Because now there's 500,000 people who are going to put \$5. And in India also which translates into 250 rupees, 300 rupees, is very easy for someone to say, "Okay fine, in the name of my father I want to plant a tree."

Thanks to technology we now try and get a GPS reading of the plant, we get the name of the plant and we send it to that person. (LAUGHTER) Which in the long run I think is a great idea for a city like Varanasi because most people go to Varanasi to remember their dead. It's an industry. If I plant a tree there he will bring his son or daughter to say, "Hey look, that's a tree planted in the name of your grandfather." So at least they will spend two nights there. (LAUGHTER)

Tha-- that will bring tourism. You know, there are various implications that can happen from one small thing because there's an association, there's a sense of ownership. "It's my tree. I am planting it," whether they have-- if they can come physically we invite them to come. Or we send them the image and the coordinates for their plant so they know. We don't-- we don't put a label on the plant, but on our map we know whose tree is which one. So--

FEMALE VOICE:

I just wanted to ask a question, because I was thinking before you started speakin' about the sustainable model, and thinking about how to soften people and young people-- who did not choose engineering or medicine. Are there young people (DOOR) who have, like you said, you know, gone to teach other young people who've become artists, like, as a result of doing this work with you?

And do you feel like there're artists-- 'cause I know you talked about a lot of big famous-- famous artists that come to your gallery. But are there artists now locally that have, you know, been mentored (DOOR) through this process or learned their techniques through working with the gallery that are-- are working in the (UNINTEL)--?

NAVNEET RAMA:

There was is one initiative we have at the gallery, it's called First Light. So we have a university there called the Banaras Hindu University, which has an art faculty. So we go to the university every year, we talk to all the students, we make a presentation. We say, "If any of you want to show your exhibition in the gallery--" we called it First Light because it'd be their first exhibition. And we will take care of everything, we'll do a nice exhibition. If you sell the work-- we have had four artists in ten years who have come through the program.

Now, the problem with that-- I wish we had one every year, and I would keep a slot f- - every year-- eventually I dropped the slot-- is that in Banaras Hindu University, when you apply for the university you give a common entrance exam. So those who get the highest marks gets to study science. Those who get the next highest will study geography, botany, things-- you know, accounts.

And as you go lower, the low-- the lowest marks that you get you have the option between performing arts and visual arts. (LAUGHTER) So firstly, that's not what they were trying to do. They wanted to learn accounts, maybe that is not where their skillset lied. But because they couldn't go through the common entrance exam at the higher (UNINTEL) they are there. So they don't have the skillset, they don't have the motivation.

Then in 2009, '10 there was this whole Indian art boom so they all got excited that, "Oh, we will be able to sell," but they never sold because the school, what it does is-- because of this whole process it's detrimental to the quality of the school and the teaching of art there. So they would put up a poster of Monet or Picasso and say, "Copy it."

They would bring in someone and say, "Okay fine-- okay, you do life models sketching. It's not wrong." But the Indian school is not teaching Indian miniature painting, which has a 400-year-old tradition in India, because they think it's craft. And Indian miniature painters-- and Victoria knows it better than anyone else, they

are even now treated as craftsmen. Whereas the very-- painters that she has-- shown in America have been collected by museums in America. But back home they are given an award by the Ministry of Textiles and Crafts as a craftman (PH) worthy of mention, but not as an artist.

So that's the problem with local-- not to sort of try and (UNINTEL). But I'm hoping that if they suddenly start to feel good about being an artist, you know? Like, we have had-- in the residency we've had dancers who have come. You know, contemporary, ballet dancers and-- who have come and spent two months, six months.

Then they have enter-- they have done classes every third day and young students come. So at least they feel, "Oh, maybe I could become a dancer," because they interact with a professional dancer who is not a famous one, but someone who is doing a residency and say, "Oh, this could be something. I like to express myself through dance." Because I think what art does really is that it gives you an opportunity to express yourself, whether it's through writing, through music, through dance, through painting.

And in a tough society like India you have a difficulty. You don't have the space or the opportunity to express yourself. So if they would become sensitive and encouraged to express themselves, they would suddenly start to have a voice. And once they have a voice it might become big enough for people to hear.

And I think that's where the transformation can happen. Right now most of them feel they are sheep. And someone in Delhi or-- the state capitol decides what has to be done. In a s-- city that's (UNINTEL) two million people, seven kilometers long, two-- three kilometers wide. It's like, a band like this, they just decided to build an underground metro station. So n-- you need something like this when there is a large scale movement of people. Most of it is heritage zone.

Knowing the quality of construction and the way people would build it in India, all these (UNINTEL) buildings would come crumbling down. And no one is going to travel from one end of the city to another. And if anyone knows construction, they know it's \$1 million for every-- whatever, 500 meters of an underground metro, just to build. So how will you-- how will anyone recover this in the city?

And you're not traveling from the university, which is on one end, to Salihundam, the Buddhist site on the other end. Maybe there are 50 people who do that route, unlike New York where everyone's going up and down because of work and they are living in a different area. Most people are working less than a kilometer from where they are living. So why should they use the metro? But it is called world-class city. So the planners in Delhi said, "We want to make Banaras world-class." It's the prime minister's constituency now so we have to find-- we have to build flyovers.

So they are building flyovers, so now when people are driving they are looking into people's bedroom. (UNINTEL) in the heritage zone the roads are not wide enough. And then what happens in the road? It goes into the dark because you've just elevated the road. All you've done-- there was not enough space to have a road and have the road below. We've just taken the road up.

And suddenly you are looking into people's bedrooms. So I had an artist who recorded all this and made a little set and made a video. And then we showed it in the planning meeting. I said, "See, this is an impression that the artists have of your plans." And they were quite shocked. They were like, "How come this artist had the permission?" I said, "Well, what permission does he need to roam around in the city and have an impression of the city? And he's going to show it everywhere, in Switzerland, in France, everywhere where he goes. It's a project he's going to show.

"So think about before you make a plan." But that's the sad thing, you know? Because the people who have-- who want to have a voice don't have a voice, because they are denied the tools with which they can have a voice. Because they are told you have to either be an engineer or a doctor.

And most of the engineers are working in call centers. People with-- because the private colleges have come up, there are six big government schools where you make the top engineers who happen to be working in NASA and institutions like this. But the rest of them are working in BPOs (PH) and call centers.

SANDRA COLIVER:

Well, Navneet. Thank you. (LAUGHTER) I-- I wanna-- I wanna say it's-- it's a beautiful statement of theory of change that the art can help-- people can help students, can help (NOISE) the youth that come to the gallery to start to express themselves. And when they start to find what they have to say, they have a voice, that leads to transformation and ownership in-- in a real deep sense of the possibilities for change. It's-- it really-- I think is-- is opening up f-- our minds as we-- as we sit here. And I have your contacts. I look forward to facilitating further conversations. And I wanna thank you for coming.

NAVNEET RAMA:

Thank you for this opportunity. (APPLAUSE) Thank you.

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *