

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



The Kala Academy Controversy: Unravelling the Various Nuances
The controversy over the demolition or strengthening or repairs of Kala Academy – whatever it be called – brings to the fore the interplay within architecture, public spaces and governance culture.

I begin by speaking to Goa's Art and Culture Minister, Govind Gawde, who is an engineer and also a performing artist himself. Gawde is weary about speaking given that the issue at hand is subjudice as the High Court of Bombay at Goa has taken suo motu cognizance of newspaper reports on the same. But I assure him that there are Supreme Court Judgements that the doctrine of sub-judice cannot atrophy freedom of speech and expression, to the point that one cannot comment on a burning social issue where governance regarding architecture is involved. Where did the idea of demolition or strengthening or repairs of Kala Academy originate?, I ask him. "It all began when each time that I went to the Kala Academy, I noticed leakages, seepages, that made me concerned, I am an engineer myself", says Gawde

Gawde then shares his worry for the safety of those who come to Kala Academy and that he asked a three member committee constituted by the Goa Engineering College (GEC) to give him a health assessment of Kala Academy Building. "The GEC Committee did give a report which alerted me to how serious the issue was, in terms of the imminent danger for those who frequented Kala Academy". The affidavit filed by the Director, Directorate of Art and Culture, holding additional charge as Member Secretary, Kala Academy, Gurudas Pilarnekar, before the Bombay High Court, also affirms that there was a complaint received from one Mr. Umesh Kholkar on 8th June, 2018 that a part of the slab had collapsed.

As it stands the Kala Academy structure houses an open air auditorium, the Dinanath Kala Mandir AC auditorium, rehearsal hall, art gallery, a mini open air amphitheatre, black box, jury room, meeting room, canteen, academic and administrative block, the Department of Western Music, Faculty of Indian Music and Dance, School of Drama, Repertory Company, Library and College of Performing Arts, and, as architectural historian Amita Kanekar points out, "a vast variety of independent seating, from the clusters in the thoroughfare, to the amphitheatre steps, the lawn and shady groves, the benches along the riverside promenade, and the movable chairs at the canteen tables", which get missed out in techno-bureaucratic notes about the architecture of Kala Academy. Gawde expresses anxiety as to what will be the fate of all the people who frequent these various spaces, if an untoward incident were to take place with respect to the structure.

This concern is also echoed by Kaustubh Naik, Ph. D. scholar and theatre director, who says that as an artist who has worked in these premises, he thinks it is also important to ensure safety of all artists and workers who operate in that space and I guess, to that effect, the



proposal to rebuild some of its part is a welcome step.” Naik continues, “KA underwent a major renovation during the first International Film Festival of India held in Goa and there was no such uproar then. Beyond being an architectural heritage, KA is also a functional space where a lot of artists work and operate day in and out, and thus, its functionality and the safety of its community cannot be compromised for its architectural value alone”.

The uproar was absent in 2004, because, *admittedly*, Kala Academy needed repairs, or at least, it needed water-proofing. Any structure would need repairs after a certain period of time. What is kept under wraps by the Government is the Comptroller and Auditor General’s observation that, while it had been proposed to suitably restore and upgrade the existing facilities in the Kala Academy at a contract cost of Rs. 24.18 crore, which estimate was prepared by Uttam C Jain, a consultant for project planning and preparation, it was actually completed to the extent of 95 per cent before the festival at a cost of Rs. 24.91 crore. The Government claimed in December 2005 that the exact quantities could be ascertained only after dismantling and, therefore, the estimates could not be accurately worked out, but the CAG Report did not accept this claim “because the deviations of such a magnitude should not have occurred in a work where a consultant was engaged by the Company at a huge fee of Rs.1.67 crore.” The question that naturally follows, given the way Government projects are generally motivated, is: will the ‘strengthening’ of Kala Academy go the same way? And will it ultimately result in the demise of the ‘Kala Academy’ as we know it and for which it is renowned?

I asked Govind Gawde what he thought were the reasons for the poor state of the structure. Did he think it was Charles Correa’s design or poor quality of materials and lack of maintenance? Gawde responded that the report is just a structural audit of the state of the structure at that time, and hence it does not offer any back story as to who could have been responsible for it. Gawde however wondered if considering that Goa is a monsoon state, it would not have been a better idea to have a sloping roof, rather than a flat roof, so that water would not accumulate and cause leakages and seepages. No doubt, Goa’s climate requires sloping roofs. But the cultural ambience requires open air theatres too! So where does one draw the line on appropriate physical architecture and cultural requirements of architecture, and marry the two, is always the challenge. And one that must be met!

Even the affidavit of Pilarnekar is explicit that the State Government is dealing with the issue being fully conscious of the fact that Kala Academy Goa and the open air auditorium is a prestigious institution and structure. In respect of the state of the structure, the affidavit also affirms that before taking any final decision in the matter, the Government will involve the stakeholders in the process and explore all the available options.



I spoke to Tahir Noronha, architect at the Charles Correa Foundation (CCF), a technical institution having a knowledge pool of many architects and structural engineers who have worked in the past with Charles Correa, a part of whose mandate is to conserve Charles Correa's work. That is why, Noronha clarifies, CCF filed the intervention application in the petition wherein *suo motu* cognizance was taken by the High Court of Bombay at Goa. The CCF has offered its services to conduct another structural audit report *pro bono*, to develop a repair and rehabilitation strategy for Kala Academy, and provide the same to the Government and the High Court, but the High Court first awaits the second report at the next hearing which is scheduled on 30th September, 2019.

Noronha claims that the waterproofing and other works, undertaken in 2004, were a major contributory factor for the state of the Kala Academy today. "The contractor applied a water proofing membrane on top of the terraces with perhaps little concern for the waterproofing already present". He further states that for the sum finally awarded for the contract, the contractor could have used a more sophisticated and scientific water proofing material. The cumulative waterproofing (3 layers presently) is double the thickness of the original slab, which in turn resulted in overloading the slab and structure. He points to a contract awarding system, that goes merely for the lowest bidder, without taking specialised technical skills into account. Indeed the best scientific services are required for restoring a heritage structure, even if it be a modern heritage structure such as Kala Academy.

Noronha notes that Charles Correa accepted the project because he was excited by the idea of a centre like this – he believed that Goa, with its history of syncretism and trade, and rich culture of Goan musicians particularly, both eastern and western classical musicians like Dinanath Mangeshkar and Maestro Antonio Figueiredo deserved a space like Kala Academy. "The Society envisioned a space for the citizens of Goa to immerse themselves in this very confluence of music, art, theatre, and performance. It does not block the riverscape, the way other structures along the river do," Noronha remarks. Noronha also draws attention to the fact that Kala Academy qualifies to be noted in architecture text books, as a structure of repute and approximately 900 students visit every year to study the architectural design.

As architectural historian Amita Kanekar points out, "Despite being around 40 years old, Kala Academy remains probably Goa's best contemporary building. This breezy, low-slung, and very popular arts centre and hang-out space is remarkable not just for a subtle historicism – the laterite-clad and sharp-angled frontage harking to Goa's old seaforts, the inner walls enlivened by dreamy images of Goan stairways, balustrades, and windows – but also because it is that rarity in India: a genuinely public space." This forms part of the repertoire of memories of many an artist or frequent visitor of the Kala Academy.



Naik has been visiting Kala Academy ever since he was a toddler. He says, “As someone who comes from a family of artists, Kala Academy has had a very central role in our life and going there every year to open our new play is an experience I hold very dear to my heart. And I guess this bond is cemented majorly due to the formal aspects of KA’s architecture which is welcoming and non-alienating.” Govind Gawde himself has fond memories as an artist performing at Kala Academy, of the ambience it provided.

In terms of form, light and breeze are characteristic of Charles Correa’s architecture where “form follows climate”. Again, Tahir Noronha draws attention to the indoor auditorium saying, “Newman (of Bolt Baranek & Newman), trying to understand the acoustical requirements of Indian classical music, got intrigued by the idea of an auditorium that could work for both western and Indian classical music. Indian classical music needed reverberations that a typical acoustic setup for western classical music aims to remove. He worked with Correa to come up with two innovations, the first were the ‘galleries’ with the Mario Miranda murals. They would serve as pockets to reflect some vibrations. Correa developed a system of an acoustically opaque curtain which would close the galley off whenever a play or western music was being performed. Mario Miranda sketched people to fill up the galleries. They remain one of the best-maintained Miranda murals till date.”

“Designing a scientific, inviting and, equitable centre for the arts is hard... Rajiv Kala Mandir in Ponda and Ravindra Bhavan Margao have all the necessary amenities but if you ask any Goan, they prefer to attend concerts or events at Kala Academy. That can only be a testament to good architecture. Which goes back to my point, if something works... Let’s keep it working”, says Noronha. Kanekar points out that these cultural centres boast a different kind of ambience: forbidding, closed, air-conditioned, and free of loiterers. Kanekar stresses that it is not just the architectural ambience of Kala Academy that sticks out, but also the powerful message about the common heritage of Goa and Goans, the natural landscape and resources, and the Portuguese-inflected culture, a culture that seems – like a hope, or a dream – to have overcome the barriers of caste, that resonates in Correa’s Kala Academy. That is why the relaxed confidence of the built form, surface imagery and public welcome of Kala Academy is one of a kind, a mirage of what might be if the best of our heritage could meet a socially inclusive present.”

It seems that there has been no emulation of Kala Academy despite the extensive use of it, because of a State that has not recognized a syncretic culture reflecting architecture. The central concern now is, whether, in the garb of requirements of repairs and strengthening, the Kala Academy will be built out of existence, that too by the same not-held accountable people who are seen as being responsible for the deterioration of Kala Academy.

On another note, Vishwesh Kandholkar, who teaches at the Goa College of Architecture, opines that the far-sighted vision of Goa's Chief Minister, Dayanand Bandodkar, that made the very building of Kala Academy possible, is often forgotten. Khandolkar observes "The debate around Kala Academy as a part of 'modern built heritage' has only centred around the architectural design of Charles Correa and has not considered that this building also epitomises the vision of Goa's then Chief Minister, Dayanand Bandodkar, a Bahujan leader, who laid the foundation to build 'modern' Goa."

"The idea of the architect of modern Goa, Bandodkar, and the architect of Kala Academy, Correa, was to create an open institution, where people from various walks of life could simply stroll inside, without feeling the inhibition that design of many other institutions have. While there is a debate on the legacy of the buildings as an important part of the modern heritage of Goa, it would also help to identify various other structures that are also important to Goa, both as a building and also as an institution. The period from the 1960s to 1980s needs special attention today, as Goans should be considering how buildings in that period reflected the political ambition of a region's visionary leader, Bahusaheb Bandodkar. Perhaps, we need to set up an arts commission to unearth buildings built in the aforementioned period to document the common modern heritage of Goa. I am glad that the debate on Kala Academy has created a buzz on Goa's modern architecture, but we need to widen the conversation to all the names that contributed to the buildings of modern structures in Goa; names such as architect Ramachondra Maguesh Adwalpalkar, the first architect of the Public Works Department of Portuguese India in the 1920s, and later documenting the works of architects such as Bruno Souza's and Sarto Almeida's projects in the 1970s-80s would also be useful".

That is the call of the moment - documenting and maintaining signature people-friendly architecture, with transparent accountable people-sensitive syncretic culture respecting governance.

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