

PETITION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF KARNATAKA

26<sup>th</sup> February 2016

Bengaluru

## **A VISION FOR VENKATAPPA ART GALLERY**

The decision of the Government of Karnataka in signing a MoU with a Private enterprise called Tasveer Foundation, which would mean a handing over of Venkatappa Art Gallery - to alter, build additional spaces, to administer and use the premises to mainly suit the Foundation's agenda, has created uproar in the artist community.

**We categorically object to and reject the idea of Venkatappa Art Gallery being handed over to any private enterprise or Individual.** It is the responsibility of the Government to create a congenial atmosphere for the growth of the arts. The present act and attitude of the Government is in reality a clumsy attempt to shirk its expected responsibility.

**We demand that the government repeal the MoU and initiate a dialogue with us to realize a vision for Venkatappa Art Gallery that is for and by the artists.**

Here is why:

In 1966 the Government of Karnataka decided to build a space to house the works of K. Venkatappa bequeathed by his family and to be executed by the State Public Works Department. The building work did not progress beyond the foundation for many years. In 1971 G.S. Shenoy, along with other artists protested the lack of a gallery space in Bangalore for contemporary art exhibitions and art events. They did so by exhibiting their works on the pavement not very far from the present Venkatappa gallery. The Government taking note of this demand, for a space solely dedicated to the artist community built the Venkatappa Art Gallery (VAG) to accommodate this need as well. The artist community feels a sense of special proprietorship and belonging for this reason. The VAG also now houses the works of Sri K.K. Hebbar that have been bequeathed to the Government by the family. The gallery was projected to have 5 floors of which 3 have been in existence. Since its inception, not only the inner galleries but the entire environs of VAG has been a meeting ground and a site for various events, State and All India exhibitions, Kala Melas, Individual and group shows, especially of artists from other districts of Karnataka and of Bangalore. Venkatappa Art Gallery is central, neutral and affordable. It has been a mental and physical space that holds a promise for precisely these reasons.

Located adjacent to the Government Museum housing art historical objects, and the Visveshvarayya Industrial Museum, VAG is already on the tourist route - but these are mainly 'bus tourists' - tourists that the Government does not seem to consider important enough. Instead they wish to make it 'classy' for foreign and the rich class of Indian tourists only and not as a place for showing of our culture and creativity to all citizens. A cultural institution, like an

educational institution, is a lab of ideas and practices and cannot be run as a profit making enterprise. It is offensive when a government lists culture under tourism only.

Karnataka has a history of at least one hundred years of effective and able arts management by those from within the art community, running private and public institutions of art: art schools, Lalitkala academy, artist-initiatives, arranging art events, establishing and running museums, holding art workshops and publishing. On the contrary, when bureaucrats, in inevitable circumstances, have handled such responsibilities artists have been embarrassed, treated undemocratically and sometimes led to humorous situations even. Look at the history of the following art related institutions and events managed by the arts community: Kala Mandira, Chitrakala Parishat, Ken School of Art, College of Art in Mysore and Gulbarga, numerous other art schools throughout Karnataka, Manjusha (Dharmastala), Folklore museum at Mysore University (both set up by P.R.Thippeswamy), the Art exhibition at the Mysore Dasaa, Chitrasanthe, 7 Kala Melas, Khoj workshops at Mysore and Bangalore, Rangoli, etc. Artist initiatives from the 60s onwards have earned Karnataka the reputation of being a pioneer in Avant-garde movement and experimentation.

Does the Karnataka government feel that there is a shortcoming in the way VAG museum is being run and hence is outsourcing it? If so, doesn't it become a decision made from a defeatist position? Decision based on one's weakness is obviously not a decision but submission; in this case at the cost of the art community. Does the community deserve such an insult? What is the ideal parameter against which the Government feels we are inferior? Isn't it common sense that problems of a specific field be placed before the practitioners of the same field?

Have we been lax in our attention to Venkatappa Art Gallery lately? In recent years there have been numerous problems plaguing the gallery. Being administered by the Department of Archaeology and Museums it has had no dedicated Director or Curator to address the special needs of the artists. Its upkeep has been rather dismal. An attempt to administer it better by a government appointed advisory committee left the committee disheartened due to the apathy of the government and by an administrative structure that does not allow artists to function with creative freedom. Ironically, these shortcomings on the part of the Government have become the very reason for the Government to give it into the hands and mechanisms of private individuals.

The artist community consists today of capable, motivated artist-organizers who have proved in varied instances that they can take risks- very like in start-up business thinking- the future success of which is not in terms of 'money currency', but in terms of 'cultural importance and awareness' currency. Recent initiatives such as 1,Shanthi Road, BAR 1, Jaaga, Samuha, Ananya Drishya, Maraa, Somberikatte, have all had tremendous success in doing that.

With a space like VAG and an open-minded set of rules on the part of the Government to run it – VAG can be a cultural player as it has never been – through a 3-year plan of action and programming to begin with.

1. The government should call a general body meeting with the artists community to understand

their needs, after which, a committee comprising of representative of artists selected/elected by the artists themselves should be appointed to run the VAG with the active participation and funding by the Government.

2. A review of the administrative structure of the VAG should be made by this committee, especially to study its status at present, as being part of Archaeological and Museums department, and investigate the changes, even radical ones, that can be brought about to in its structure and responsibilities.

3. A Director, Curator, an assistant Curator, along with 1 or 2 other personnel, who are suggested by the Advisory Board should be appointed for a fixed duration of time to coordinate the activities at VAG-to conceptualize and help realize exhibitions, talks, walks, performances and public art awareness programmes. Such appointments worked very well with Rangoli, at Metro center, M.G. Road for example.

4. The VAG is in a bad state of disrepair. Roofs are leaking due to which artworks are exposed to humid conditions. The hanging policy and infrastructure is outdated. VAG needs a review of its premises and changes need to be made to its interiors and the exterior as well to suit our present needs. Cutting trees and cordoning off spaces around the building, making 'off limit' lawns, is not our idea of improvement. Artists conceptualize space differently and VAG should reflect our vision of it. Funds towards these changes should be allotted.

5. An annual budget for VAG should be allotted by the government for art activities that will be programmed by the artists themselves. We wish to propose a 3-year duration plan- as a pilot project. Detailed ideas and execution of such a programme would be chalked out and presented with the entire artist community's involvement.

For  
Venkatappa Art Gallery Forum

P.S. Kumar  
A.M. Prakash  
M.S. Murthy  
Balan Nambiar  
C.S. Krishna Shetty  
Rekha Hebbar  
Pushpamala N  
Gurudas Shenoy  
Sheela Gowda  
Umesh Maddanahalli  
Suresh Kumar  
Suresh Jayaram  
Surekha K.B  
H. A. Anil Kumar  
Alaka Rao  
John C.F  
Milind Nayak

Prabhavati Meppayil  
Abhishek Hazra  
Aiswhwaryan  
Ayisha Abraham  
Christoph Storz  
Krisharaj Chonat  
Naveen Mahantesh  
Mohan Kumar E  
Mohan Kumar T  
Sham Sunder  
Ranjana Nagaraj  
Shivaprasad S  
Raghu Kondur  
Sunitha Ramachandra  
Umesh Kumar P.N  
Nandesh Shantiprakash  
Anup Mathew Thomas  
Rajani Prasanna  
Dimple Shah  
Smitha Cariappa  
Vinod Madishetty  
Sameer Rao  
S.Gopinath  
Sridhar Gangolli  
Dr Lakshmipathy  
Manjegowda  
Shirley Mathew  
Udaya Vir Singh  
Naveen Kumar  
Kalamaramamu  
Varsha Bhide  
Ayush C. Joy  
K.G. Lingadevaru  
Kanthraj. N  
Ashok. U  
Paramesh D.Jolad  
Arogya Swamy  
Shyamala Ramanand  
Anu Kalikal  
Anil Chandran  
Gururaj H.S  
Bharath V  
Indumathi Swamy  
Prakash L  
Mangala Anebermath  
Vijaya Kumar S  
Darshan Kumar Y.U  
Amrutha R  
Dhanush Kiran  
Ullas

This detailed petition accompanies the letter addressed to the Minister of Industries and Tourism, Government of Karnataka

Clippings in regard to the art activities at Venkatappa Art Gallery over the years are also attached