

The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival – Prominent Cultural Hub

In the general absence of parks and open spaces, the street is the nucleus of communal life in India. In Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay), it is where meals are sold and eaten, where groceries are purchased on the commute home and where neighbors gather for a chat.



Until recently, art and culture remained off the city's streets, strictly confined to galleries and theaters frequented by the elite. From its inception in 1999, the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival (KGAF) has changed this by being spread over several streets in South Mumbai's tiny but beautiful colonial-era art district at whose center once stood a statue of King Edward VIII astride a black horse (kala ghoda in Hindi, the national language).

A relic of a colonial past, the statue has long been moved, the road renamed to Mahatma Gandhi Road (from Esplanade Road), but still remembered fondly by the citizens as Kala Ghoda. The crescent-shaped area with its concentration of museums, art galleries, exhibition space, educational institutions, designer boutiques, restaurants pavements, covered arcades, and most importantly, what is arguably the finest array of heritage buildings in Mumbai renders it a distinct identity. The area has emerged as an arts precinct and prominent cultural hub making it a living and breathing urban museum.

Culture is the common language of the world with music, dance and art having no boundaries, binding all in oneness and transcending hatred, strife and divisions. In this regard, the KGAF has grown in stature and popularity, attracting visitors and participants from other parts of India and the world over.

Its range in terms of diversity in events and free programmes for all (restricted by the size of the venues) help it in qualifying as one of Mumbai's most important annual cultural events. The street area of Rampart Row which is closed off to vehicular traffic for the nine days of the festival (late January or early February) and becomes temporarily pedestrianized is the main axis of this action from where the other venues spin off – the Jehangir Art Gallery, Asiatic Library, The National Gallery of Modern Art, the David Sassoon Library, Max Mueller Bhavan, Elphinstone College, the K R Cama Institute, the M C Ghia Hall and the Coomaraswamy Hall. Support infrastructure like lecture halls, convocation halls and conference facilities in the Mumbai University is practically next door.



Organized by the Kala Ghoda Association, a non-profit organization with its objective as "physically upgrading the Kala Ghoda sub-precinct and making it the Art District of Mumbai" with support from corporate sponsors, the KGAF is curated by teams handling each of the sub-festivals. These sub-festivals covering an entire cultural gamut offer multitudinous experiences – visual arts, dance, music, theatre, cinema, literature, seminars and workshops, guided heritage walk, children's events, local cuisines, shopping, etc.

The entire area becomes a vibrant street mela (fair) and magnet for creative talent with food stalls, art installations, sale by artisans, artists sketching instant portraits, amazing sculptors at work, potters, tattoo, mehendi artists – you name it. Food connoisseurs, fashion designers and architecture buffs flick here adding diversity – an expression of the inclusiveness of art where all irrespective of economic or social status gather in the joyous spirit of celebration of the finest talents and masters producing momentous and uplifting work. After all, where else can the common man amble in, listen to Sufi strains, classical, jazz or Bollywood numbers, watch contemporary dancers in graceful spin, attend poetry reading sessions, watch alternative and mainstream award winning films, gaze at simple but poignant photographs about the space he occupies?

In this essence, the KGAF truly embodies the concept of 'one soul, one sound, one taste, one color, one step, one beat and one world' and is the perfect opportunity to enjoy, de-stress, learn, interact and soak in the myriad colors that is India.

In recent years, the festival has expanded beyond the Kala Ghoda crescent, with events held in the Azad Maidan and Horniman Circle. The success of the KGAF has also encouraged several other arts and cultural festivals as the Mumbai Festival, the Celebrate Bandra Festival, the Kitab Festival, etc., at times when the weather in Mumbai is pleasant.



The Kala Ghoda area has also been physically improved by restoring buildings and facades, building people-friendly street furniture and improving local amenities. However, many residents have complained about the noise generated by the festival and the garbage left behind. As such, some music

and dance events have been asked to take place without microphones while others shifted to indoor locations, leaving the Row for shoppers and artisans.

The 'something for everyone' factor (as the only urban Indian arts festival aiming on taking art to the public) has taken over what was initially an arts festival aimed in fostering pride and rejuvenating an area by generating awareness through citizens' involvement in the arts. Presently, the KGAF has turned into an out and out mela in terms of impersonal numbers (from school kids to art connoisseurs) although its increasing popularity has not necessarily meant it growing as an arts festival.

The organizers have sadly lost their focus, personal touch and compromised on quality. In the initial years, galleries around the area would do relevant programmes on the locale as manifested in art – a strong visual image, a great film, an exhibition or an insightful talk. Sadly, it is all a crowded blur now with truly horrific “public art” passing off in the visual art section and many surrounding galleries ceasing to participate.

Perhaps it is time to ask if we really need an abundance of stalls selling merchandise, nothing to do with the arts and crowding public spaces. If, as organizers feel the stalls are needed to raise funds for the festival then a possible solution could be to have a Kala Ghoda Mela like a feeder for the KGAF. This could help the KGAF return to its roots setting the bar high for quality.



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