

# BALLAD OF AN ART SCHOOL EDUCATOR: RANT AS FORMAT

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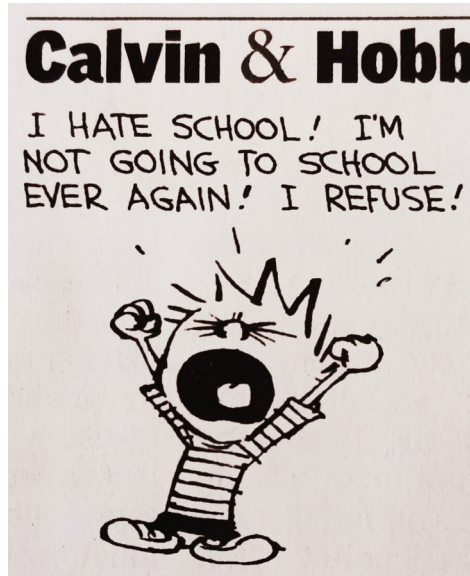


Image 1. Watterson, Bill, "Calvin & Hobbes." Comic Strip, 12 March 1992.

*[Visual Description: A young boy expresses an objection against going to school. He exclaims, "I HATE SCHOOL! I'M NOT GOING TO SCHOOL EVER AGAIN! I REFUSE!"]*

As young kids, we've all been there. Being forcibly made to go to school every harrowing morning; the hatred at times making it feel akin to ghastly prisons. I too have felt it. Just like Calvin's vehement protestations here, I too have had my share of rebellions. But what I never anticipated was that this feeling of disdain would someday shadow me into adulthood! Now an art educator, sharing the very same institutional space as I once did as a student, I stand witness to a variety of prejudices, expectations, stereotypes, and other problematic concerns; Not confined to just any one institution, but reflecting upon

a broader systemic problem, affecting all art educators across Indian schools. Which in turn unfolds a barrage of queries;

*Why is Visual Arts synonymous with 'Craft' or Decoration / 'Beautification' in Schools? How did the state of Creative Expression become like this, or has it always been like this to begin with? Why are non-art 'subject teachers' treated with more respect (not just by management but even our society), Credited with superior pay grades, but art facilitators are relegated to the lowly status of mere "activity teachers"? Why is there no space for research-oriented Art pedagogy? And is it just my Subcontinent or a similar tale of woe is witnessed all across the world?*

Firstly, let's begin with how school administration readily equates 'Visual Art' with *visually-appealing 'craft'*, expects G-R-A-N-D decoration of its corridor walkways, auditorium stage-beautification (as if one's developing art-sets / backdrop scenography for SLB's film-shooting) and ornamentation of pin-up boards in classrooms, every two-seconds (yes, cause India is a mighty hub of festivals!). It seems they urgently require *'tent-waale'* (party caterers) and event management professionals, but apparently are too *kanjoos* (miser) to spend for it. It all appears as if administrators come factory-fitted with a keen aim for creating parent-tailored *Majestic-Yet-Superficial experiences with Chump Change!* Thus, these private-sectors instead make-do with underpaying freshers, enticing them with minimum wage and exploiting them in a pressure-filled environment, bereft of basic worker-rights.

While some might dismiss the issue by simply suggesting not to take such jobs, the reality is far more nuanced. Factors such as surging 'unemployment rate', combined with a scarcity of jobs for freshers (persistent with an already 'uneven' ratio of the vacant posts against contesting applicants), is further compounded by an even scarcer availability of creative or 'artistic' roles, thus compelling artists into accepting such jobs and thereby making the situation even more daunting! Moreover, there's a certain dissonance between the artistic framework nurtured (and dreams sold) within art colleges, versus the contrasting ground-realities of a commodity-based, market-driven 'art industry', awaiting art graduates as they exit the protective boundaries of

an institute of higher education.

The pressure from family and society only adds to the frustration experienced by these newly minted artists, where the discontentment stems not solely from inadequate monetary compensation or task-related expectations, but the harsh necessity of just 'being able' to earn enough to afford & maintain a 'basic standard-of-living', to sustain oneself, and to provide & support one's family. As a result, artists often find themselves reluctantly accepting such jobs, leaving them vulnerable for easy exploitation; where they have to endure '*lower-pay for longer work-hours*', and tolerate the likes of *insensitive, unsupportive, & unprofessional employers and alike work-conditions!*



"Trick-or-treat!"

Image 2. Tomlinson, Vaughan. Digital Illustration, 2023.

[Visual Description: A kid draped in white-bedsheet costume, with text 'COST OF LIVING' written over it. Kid is trick-or-treating on a Halloween night.]

Gradually, one starts doubting the learnings of their postgraduate degree in visual arts, as if it all was completely futile. The true essence and value of the subject that you worked so hard to acquire all those years, developing those research-led critical inquiries through your art-practise, fostering that inclination towards an intellectual engagement with the

subject's core- '*maano sabki dhajjiya si udd jaati hai!*' (starts feeling like an utter waste!)

Meanwhile, I am cognizant of the power held by 'External' (*the extrinsic factors or lived-experiences we acquire*) over the 'Personal', and how it could significantly shape up *individual perspectives*. For me, perhaps it was the pursuit of a certain impulse of the 'Contemporary', or maybe it was the academic-setting within my university, the pedagogical methodology it employed, *the critical discourse on Art & Media* within my college, or the creative ambiance and experimental-practises i encountered on the outside. Perhaps it all informed my 'sense' or understanding of art, facilitating the development of this need of *critical framework for creative expression or an artistic-practice*; thus at times differing from the widely held beliefs & notions of 'essence of art' others might hold, in markets and society at large.



Image 3. Screenshot from "Mera Teaching Career." Stand-Up Comedy Video, YouTube. Uploaded by Solanki, Aashish. 2023.

[Translation: "After going to school, I realized that I only like the subject, not the children."] ]

Secondly, in our society as well as within the premises of a school, theory or '*subject teachers*' seem to command this *unspoken* 'respect', and are imbued with a certain *prestige*, credited with association of what are deemed as 'important' fields of study or essential subjects in the academia. As a result, they are frequently offered higher pay-grades. On the contrary, art teachers, whether specializing in visual or performing arts, are merely seen as '*activity teachers*' or craft instructors, being relegated to the status of someone merely overseeing '*light-hearted recreational pursuits*' or leisurely activities! Thus, lacking the obvious recognition and 'seriousness' commensurate with our discipline at the same time. *Why does this dichotomy exist, I wonder?*

This pervasive stereotype of a '*drawing master*' or a 'wall-painter' in our society is relentless, putting visual artists akin to party-clowns! Is it that hard for us to envision or comprehend art beyond the confines of vahi *ghisa-pita* (repetitive) realistic '*Sceneries*' or life-like 2-minute 'portraits'? What is this prevalent ease of assumption, whereby art is reduced to the simplistic query of *whether you can decorate their new house's walls with attractive images?* Is the notion of creative expression as something revolutionary or a consequential endeavor so beyond the conventional understanding or acknowledgment?!

Thirdly, the situation in schools reminds me of Patna Kalam (a style of Indian Painting and an antecedent to Company School) under the patronage of British Raj and Indophile Europeans. Where, the intervention of said patronage led to a dismantling of aesthetics, a shift in thematics and stylisation of art. Indian artists were trained in specific mediums & materials to churn-out 'likable' characteristics and representations, all in accordance to the '*taste*' of patrons; thereby reducing them to mere *artistic-labours* or 'natural imitators', *stripping them of their autonomy*, their intellect agency! Indian artists were simply a tool as per the company's discretion, or as they say 'a means to an end'. Funnily enough, a similar set-of-events often happen in relation to an *indian school's principal / coordinator & its visual arts teacher*, where the latter is simply an *aesthetic majdoor* (labour) to carry out the head's wishes, strictly without the use of 'brains' or any cognitive ability whatsoever! Sometimes I feel this must be the only job profile that truly does 'deserve' AI-based automation, providing instantly generating 'decorative craft' upon command!





Image 4. @duckorpenguin. Instagram, Accessed Aug. 2023.

[Visual Description: Image reads, “Dream Job? Sorry, I don’t dream of labor.” Text sits next to a duck’s face morphed upon a seated human-female.]

Feeling of *‘dihaadi-majdoori’* (daily wage labor) occasionally creeps upon the said artist, sans his/her/their creative vision. Such comparison, although troublesome, comes easily to the mind of an artist stuck in a school-setting. However, the rationale here is rooted on grounds of ‘skill’ and ‘monetary compensation’. Much of society tends to evaluate ‘daily-wage labor-work’ (and it’s worth) on the basis of ‘hours’ worked or time-spent as a scale; where they innately assume to have a ‘right’ to be dictatorial, to being owed ‘any’ and ‘all kinds’ of work(s) in the said time-frame, amidst the presence of employed laborer. This skewed perception of entitlement is then justified and appropriated by the logic of *“hum paise de to rahe hai!”* (equivalent to the notion of throwing money at them); thus resulting in a perpetual cycle of continuous and immense exploitation by the hands of the master.

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A pattern emerges, as this frequent approach of biased perception, insensitive treatment, inadequate payment, and disrespect further expands and gets translated, to the circumstances facing an art school-teacher.

The latter, a 'skilled professional' (with a formal education) is often paid equivalent to, and sometimes even less than, the 'unskilled' labor-for-hire! Further blurring the distinction between skilled artists and unskilled laborers, undervaluing and blatantly ignoring an artist's specialized skills and contributions.





Image 5. "Corporate Satire." Sad And Useless Humor. Web-site, 2009, <https://www.sadanduseless.com/>.

[Visual Description: An ongoing Interview in a Corporate-setting, with text-bubbles articulating the conversation between two parties.]

Moreover, with the primary aim of refining your pedagogical methodology, inculcating a research-based art learning, or increasing the curve of your personal-growth, with which you *initially* entered into this job sector- all of it gets brutally crushed against the constant woe of the fulfillment of 'decoration' and nonsensical 'clerical tasks', seated within your frontal lobe at all times! This divides your brain in a constant pull-and-push between your individual goals and the *institutional expectations*, leaving you high and dry in this 'tug of war'!

Throughout a working day filled with continuous classes, the minutes you so carefully save up for personal aspirations (be it learning more about the Board policies, or understanding Curriculums better, participating in interesting events, developing your teaching skills, inculcating your interest areas of study with pedagogical practice, or climbing up the professional ladder et al.) all get consumed in this



constant conflict within your already ‘under-pressure’ and baffled mind.

One gradually starts losing their identity, losing themselves in the due process of this existential crisis. Slowly, you start despising the institution, the job profile, and even ‘Art’ itself, which once brought you joy now ceases to evoke any sense of happiness! The contemplation of anything art or related-to-art, every school on-the-goddamn-planet-earth, everything under the sun just triggers an angered, resentful, and hateful response!



Image 6. Popular Meme (Edited Version) based off “Fast & Furious 7.” Hollywood Movie, 2015.

*[Visual Description: Aerial view of two cars parting ways as a divider approaches. White texts reading, ‘Art’ and ‘Me’ are inscribed adjacent to respective cars.]*

Fourth, and finally, this perpetual cycle of brutal adversity intensifies to a point of such overwhelming magnitude that it plunges you into deep misery. You find yourself compelled to wake up and ***drag yourself day after day*** to endure a bad work environment and worse job profile, solely to sustain yourself. Given the strenuous and taxing nature of such a gig, I really demand to be paid ‘***Therapy Reimbursement***’ in order to afford an expensive psychologist, so as to now counter the lovely

trauma(s)/ mental-health violations inflicted! It's the least to expect, don't you think?! (*Please do add CBT allowance along with the PF and HRA allowance within my CTC lol*). The irony lies in the necessity of earning money through employment to afford therapy, only to find that the very institutions become responsible for deteriorating our already strained mental health, for which we required therapy in the first place! *Lamentable paradox, isn't it?*

यदि आप जानना चाहते हैं, कि ये “आर्ट-टीचर” कि सप्लाई आ कहां से रही है? तो [यहां क्लिक करें।](#)

For those, who want to know what happens when your (intrinsically-motivated) interests gets entangled within the reality of worldly-matters, [click here.](#)

Disclaimer of Consequential Damage; **Open at your own Risk.**

*\*The Author shall not be liable for any emotional or mental distress / anguish sustained by the Reader.*



Image 7. Still from “Pilot.” Brooklyn Nine Nine, Season 1, Episode 1, Fox, Fremulon Productions, 2013.

[Visual Description: Detective Jake Peralta, a fictional character in #B99, walks across a gridlocked NYC Street. Seemingly exhausted, he states, “I can’t breathe anymore. This job is eating me alive.”]

I've genuinely asked multiple experienced people from different sectors regarding the aforementioned situation. I do understand that different sectors and institutions have different sets of challenges. But be it a '*sarkari damaad*' (government-employed educator), or facilitators within prestigious global-schools' chains, to newly-established institutions capable of amending, the plight of art teachers persists unchanged. While some institutions may have a bigger supporting art team, or maybe possess a more 'stable' administrative framework led by empathetic professionals/coordinators, the crux inherently remains the same- that art teachers 'must' undertake the laborious responsibility of decorative work and cater to on-demand craft requests throughout the academic year; '*ki har jagah aisa hi hota hai, chaahe aap kahi bhi chale jao.*' ("That it's the same story everywhere, no matter where you go.") The intensity of the situation might vary, but it very much remains an 'unofficial' facet of the 'job-description' for visual art school teacher. Perhaps this will always be the case at senior secondary educational institutions of India.

But maybe it isn't as bad as I'm demonizing it in my narrative? maybe it simply boils down to one's personal 'choice' or preference? Maybe all that matters is if you choose to like the crafty-definition of art, if you not only enjoy but 'want' to engage with the process of *client-tailored* commercial/applied arts, and are simply okay with making it your 'bread and butter'. Maybe only then can you choose to overlook the professional hazards that come along with this job profile. And if so, maybe it is really for you! Some individuals I know even thrive in such roles. However, I've come to realize it definitely ain't for me!

Over and out. *\*writer shrugs sighfully\** ( ~ ^ ~ )~



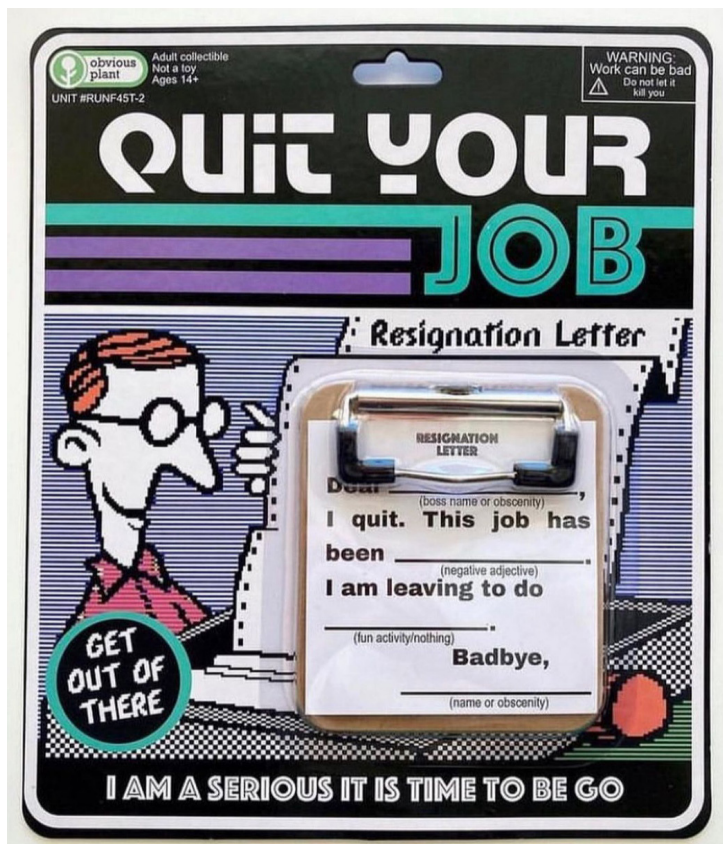


Image 8. Wysaski, Jeff. "Quit Your Job". Obvious Plant Project, 2015, <https://obviousplant.com/>.

[Visual Description: Gag toy with a 'Resignation Letter' Template inside. One of various 'Fake Products' planted in American Retail Stores by Jeff Wysaski.]