



# Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India

## **Art as a Unifying and Constructive Force**

*A symposium organized by the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, India, New Delhi  
to explore the role of art in building a more united and just India.*

### ***Background Note***

Throughout history art has served as a vital force in the advancement of civilization. Through its various forms, art has enabled humanity to capture, create and give expression to beauty. Through its unique language of symbols, metaphors, rhythms, movements, allegories, images, colours and sounds, art can reach the depths of the human spirit and communicate profound meanings about the mysteries and subtleties of existence that the language of description cannot capture. Great art can thus at the same time move the soul, elevate the mind, strengthen the will and upraise an individual's moral sense. At the collective level, it enriches culture and serves a timeless embodiment of the high-mindedness, creativity, wisdom and aesthetic sensibilities of a people.

Given its immense influence on the individual and on society, art has throughout history served a profound moral purpose. Artists have used the tools of their crafts as levers with which to raise the consciousness of their societies whether it be in inspiring people to unite and love each other by rising above their differences or in strengthening the commitment to justice or by awakening the dormant aspirations of a population to achieve new heights of moral excellence. What unites a 15th century balladeer in Banaras who wandered its streets chanting couplets that taught people to overlook differences of caste and creed with a nameless graffiti artist in today's Manhattan who highlights the plight of migrants and the dispossessed is a commitment to moral principles and social purpose that finds expression in their art. Across time, peoples in all cultures and nations have found in art a means to rise out of the dispiriting conditions of injustice, disunity and spiritual degeneration and to move towards a new vision of moral excellence.

Today Indian society is going through rapid social, economic and cultural changes. The challenge facing the present generation is to ensure that the transformation of Indian society is guided by the highest moral and ethical principles. Along with other groups and institutions such as the media, the education system and the judiciary, artists have a vital contribution to make to this process. To fulfil their high social role, artists must be guided by an exalted and lofty conception of the role of artistic activity in developing the aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual endowments of human nature. In many of the world's

scriptures, the sincere and dedicated pursuit of art is equated with a form of worship. As the Bahá'í writings put it, "All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous pictures." And again, elsewhere it is mentioned, "Art is worship. ...When thy fingers grasp the paintbrush it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple." This exalted conception of art redeems it from being reduced to a mere form of economic activity or to an instrument of self-indulgence. It also demands that even as the fruits of great art be made accessible to all, everyone should have an opportunity to partake of its creative and ennobling influence by developing their artistic faculties whether as writers, dancers, dramatists, poets, potters, painters or craftsmen.

The above considerations have motivated the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs in India, New Delhi to organize a series of events on the overall theme of 'Art as a Unifying and Constructive Force' to bring together artists from various fields with other social actors to reflect on the concept of art as a unifier of peoples and the role of art as a vehicle of spiritual and social transformation for the individual and society.

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