

Sanjoy Roy The man behind global Lit Fest JLF 2017

Managing Director of *Teamwork Arts* since 1989, which organizes the Jaipur Literature Festival JLF on the importance of the arts



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JLF has had 846,000 unique visitors delegates, participants...

Teamwork Arts is all about the arts and the artists, Roy says. “Our collective belief is that the arts create **tangible wealth**. If you look at the Edinburgh Festival, last year it **contributed £275 million (around Rs2,300 crore) of additional spending to the city’s economy**.”

Even with the JLF, we did a dipstick survey with shopkeepers, hotels, etc. about five years ago and found that the event’s contribution to the (Jaipur) city’s economy was in the range of Rs20 crore,” he says.

Roy believes that about 400 million Indians derive an income from creative pursuits, whether it is the raagi at the gurdwara or the artisans making pandals for Durga Puja, or the weavers in textile clusters across the country.

“We look at making the arts a paying proposition and, at the same time, building brand India through it,” Roy says. “And we try to make it a mainstream event, curating around it experiences in food and drinks, retail and festivities.”

He says many of India’s traditional art forms still have enough of a market to thrive. “If you look at the West or the East, most of the traditional symphonies and operas are co-funded by the government,” he says. “But in India, the Ramleelas around the corner are done of one’s own volition and funded by one’s own pocket.” Teamwork Arts organizes 26 festivals in about 40 cities across the world. “The way we work is that we have different verticals such as dance, literature, music, international festivals, and each of them functions independently,” says Roy. “And we also have a local partner in the city we work in. That’s the only way to expand.”

Roy has been associated with theatre since his (**DPS – St Stephen’s**) student days. After graduating from Delhi’s St Stephen’s College in philosophy and dropping out of Law school, he became an active member of the Delhi-based (**Barry John’s**) Theatre Action Group. It was around this time that he met Puneeta, who would become his wife. In 1989 he co-founded Teamwork as a film production company with Mohit Satyanand. These were novel times for TV; cable television was slowly making inroads into people’s homes. By the mid-1990s, with a team of about 20 members, Teamwork was **producing 14 TV shows**, including programmes such as *Newsline* and *Tol Mol Ke Bol*.

“By 1995, we had become like a content factory. If you remember, the concept of seasons wasn’t there those days,” says Roy. “So if a certain programme was generating TRPs, they used to run like forever.” And then they had a burn-out. “One Saturday, during one of our weekly meetings, two of my colleagues pointed out the fatigue,” he remembers. “‘We are brain dead,’ one of them said. ‘We can’t do this any more. We don’t have a life.’”

“And I agreed, foolishly I must add, looking back,” he says. The company stopped TV production. “We burnt a lot of bridges and soured many relationships and went almost bankrupt in the process,” he says.

Around the same time, Satyanand and Van Shipley, a colleague of Roy’s, started organizing **Friends of Music** concerts. “People would buy subscriptions and be invited to listen to the drawing-room concerts by groups like **Indian Ocean** and **Mrigya**. Those bands have emerged from such shows,” Roy says. “Simultaneously, we started commissioning new writing in theatre.”

Teamwork Arts was gradually moving from producing TV to producing live performances. “We started doing festivals like the **Millennium Festival at Khajuraho** and people started taking notice of our work,” Roy says. “We also did the same in dance with dancers like Aditi Mangaldas and **Astad Deboo**.”

Roy also used to lecture at universities in England. This led to an invitation to attend the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1999. Two years later, he showcased some of his productions at the event. That, he says, “opened the world for us”.

Teamwork began to organize festivals globally, including projects such as *India by the Nile* in Egypt, *Shared History* in South Africa and *Eye on India* in the US.

In 2001, the late John Singh (Jitendra Pal Singh) of *Anokhi*, a craft-apparel store, and his wife Faith attended the Edinburgh Festival and saw the work of Roy and his team. Singh had been working on the conservation and preservation of built heritage in the old city of Amer in Jaipur. He wanted to hold a similar city festival and approached Teamwork.

The Jaipur Heritage International Festival was founded in the early 2000s by the Jaipur Virasat Foundation. Teamwork “participated and produced a few individual events as part of the festival”. Meanwhile, Namita Gokhale and **William Dalrymple**, writers and now festival directors at JLF, created a literature programme for the event.

“A couple of years later, the festival went belly up due to the complex structure. It is then that we split the literature programme from the main event, and the Jaipur Literature Festival began in 2008,” says Roy. More than 100 literary festivals have started since the JLF began, says Roy. How then does it stay ahead of the pack?

“Let me go back one step here,” Roy says. “Every city can’t be a festival city. London will never be a festival city, but Edinburgh is. Paris can never be a festival city, Avignon is. Similarly, Delhi can never be a festival experiential city in the way Jaipur is. So the choice of city is the first important thing” .

Over the years, the authors and other participants too have emerged as global brand ambassadors for the festival. “So for us to attract the best talent in the world is easier than it is for most of the others,” says Roy. “And we support many other such festivals because we believe that the more such festivals (there are), especially in a place like India, the better it is.”

But what if the festivals lose their charm like the TV shows did?

“We will find a solution when we reach there,” says Roy. “For us every festival, no matter how old it is, provides new experiences each time. It is not as formulaic as TV. The challenges and controversies differ every time.”

Roy’s other passion is the **Salaam Baalak** Trust, which he co-founded in 1988 with film-maker **Mira Nair** (BA Socio Hons LSR) and her mother Praveen Nair. “*We primarily use arts to bring to the mainstream the kids who were abused.* All of them have come of age because of the arts, like **Vicky Roy** (a street kid who went on to become a famous photographer). Some of my colleagues come from the Trust and are earning six-figure salaries here,” says Roy. “Arts act as a pressure valve. (They) **give you the platform to release your angst.**”