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COIMBATORE • MONDAY, MARCH 7, 2011

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## Wings of fire

**ART** A paper plane becomes the manifestation of dreams and goals of children, when artist Baptist Coelho works with them. NITHYA SIVASHANKAR speaks to the artist who has made it his business to encourage children to chase their dreams

A nine to five kind of a person would definitely be jealous of this man's job profile. He makes paper planes for a living! Meet Baptist Coelho, a young artist from Mumbai, and the man behind the 'Paper Airplane Project'. He is smitten with flight. "As a child, I never played with factory-made toys. I used to make paper planes. These simple, hand-made objects define the experience of my childhood," he says. Coelho's experience with childhood continues as he teaches children to make paper planes and encourages them to chase their dreams.

Says the artist, "I had explored the fundamental element of air in one of my installations, 'RE(WIND)' in 2006. I had used air as a medium to create contemporary art." Baptist initially felt that the idea of incorporating air in art was an "exaggerated, impractical aim." But, he says that he understands more about his art, only after he is done working with it. "After I finished RE(WIND), I felt that it showed me more directions. I wanted to share the process of creating art and the experience of making paper planes with children."

Baptist works only with pre-teens, especially those between 10 and 12 years of age. On asking him why this narrow frame, he says, "When I wanted to interact with kids for the first time, in 2008, I spoke to an art teacher from a school. She scanned the project and suggested that 10-12 year-old children would be the right target. These children have some idea of what they would like to become when they grow up. At the same time, they don't have a fixed idea either."

Ecole Mondiale World School, Mumbai, was where Baptist first held this project. On receiving a good re-

sponse from the children there, he went on to work with 35 children from five NGOs in Mumbai. "I began collaborating with a lot of schools in India, after that. It became an effective tool for children to express themselves and visualize their dreams," says the artist, who has taken this project to places like South Korea, Switzerland and Thailand too.

The Paper Airplane Project is a very simple one. Baptist explains it. "First, the children are taught to make airplanes. This is followed by an interaction with parents. The children are asked to write what they want to be when they grow up on three separate paper planes and asked to bring two objects related to their dreams. They are taught to create art work with one plane and one of the objects." The second plane and object are handed over to Baptist.

"After exhibiting their art works, the children gather around to fly their third plane. Each child picks up one plane after it lands and pastes it on the 'Tower of Dreams', which may be a pillar or a wall," says Baptist.

Baptist fondly recollects the time spent with the children in Leh, Ladakh. "These children from the mountain ranges have an interesting perspective of life," he says. He finds every school in every region, very interesting. "Even though the project is not a survey or an experiment to be quantified, it feels nice to observe a certain pattern in the ambitions of kids," remarks Baptist, who enjoys experiencing a place, through a child's dream.

"In Ladakh, a lot of kids wanted to be tour guides or adventure sports persons. In South Korea, they wanted to be baseball stars! I did not know baseball was popular there. A kid from



**FLYING HIGH** Participants of the Paper Airplane Project PHOTOS COURTESY: POORNIMA

Coimbatore wanted to be a music director, because his dad made music. Two boys from the outskirts of Bangalore gave me saplings, because they wanted to be farmers. It was a humbling experience."

On working with physically chal-

lenged children in Bangalore, he says, "It was a nervous experience for me, initially. I was wondering if these children would be able to experience the process fully, like the others. But, I found out that these kids are blessed with even more feelings for art." "They



took more time, yes, but they were determined enough to go ahead and complete the project. Some hearing-impaired kids understood the project through sign language," adds Baptist, who did not tweak the project even a bit, to suit the needs of these children.

One wonders what he intends on doing with those planes and objects that have been given to him. Baptist answers, "I have not thought about it yet. I am waiting for a thought that would challenge the ideal of why I collect them."