Conventions & Traditions

T. SANKARAN

Years ago, Kamala was entertaining a packed house to a scintillating dance number. The audience included several habitual rasikas both knowledgeable and also the uninitiated. To the latter category belonged a sizeable number of foreigners, completely alien to traditions of Indian life, culture, and particularly traditions and conventions of the Terpsichorean Art of Dance and Music. One European lady in the front row was thoroughly intrigued by the dancer throwing up one of her dancing feet too often. Obviously she could not follow the text or the significance of Gopalakrishna Bharati's 'Natanam Adinar' which Kamala was interpreting in her movements and mimetic expression. The more the lady watched silently, her confusion was worse confounded. She was hesitant to break the solemnity of the occasion even with her loud thinking but finally she took courage into her hands to address a polite query to her neighbour whose dignified silence struck terror into her. Helplessly she accosted the neighbour: 'Execuse me, Sir, why is the dancer lifting one foot'? The European rasika was fortunate in being seated next to Mr. Justice A. S. P. Iyer. A less sophisticated critic and rasika would have practically snubbed her with a cryptic explanation that the dancer was portraying the Cosmic Dance of Nataraja. Such a matter of fact and cryptic answer, however correct, would have only resulted in a barrage of supplementaries as: What is Nataraja or who is Nataraja? Why the lopsided oscillation of only one leg excluding the other etc, etc. The result would entail practically a Harikatha, expounding the origin, significance and divinity of the Lord of the Cosmic Dance. The judicial mind of Iyer hit the nail on the head with a matter of fact elucidation but not without a sympathetic sneer at the unimaginative western mind that seemed to bargain for a dancing pose with both the feet aloft in the air. 'Madam', said he, the dancer lifts only one foot aloft because she can't flourish both the feet in the air and continue to stand on her dancing feet! The western rasika was left speechless but whether out of conviction or confusion, it is anybody's guess!

Several of us rasikas who are ubiquitous patrons of music and dancing and as sons of the Indian soil are in no better position than our European counterpart at Kamala's recital. Indian life is complicated with conventions, traditions, restrictions evolved through centuries by caste, creed, religion, history, geography, art and literature, that most of us are strangers in our own land. The fields of music and dance are riddled with a host of conventions which even if they are slowly fading out behind the mists of time and progress are still alive with several that are springing up in response to growing interest, local and foreign, as an unprecedented explosion. Losion.

The conventions on the Terpsichorean art are as ancient as the art itself and have the validity of statute law itself. Even habitual offenders of law have never dared to transgress these conventions which pertain to costumes, ornaments, the sharing of remuneration, the pattern of music, garlanding and the division of labour between male and female artistes.

It will be an endeavour to consider a few of those that have not eluded our memory, if not observance and practice. The dancing world has a right of precedence because this branch of art has witnessed an explosion in almost uncontrollable proportions during the

past half a century. It may not be strictly within our province to delve deep into its causes but still merits at least a cursory glance to the extent that the relevant conventions are vitiated.

South India for centuries now had preserved that art with a monopolistic stranglehold of music and dancing by a traditional, professional class now recognised by the State Government as the Isai Velalars or literally the Farmers of music (and dancing as its intergral part). The dancers have been only women all along and they were attached to temples where dancing and music were considered as part of worship in like manner as floral or food offering to deities. The gents of this professional class were mostly conductors or members of the dance orchestra and the entire troupe consisting both of dancers and musicians was called the Chinna Melam or the Smaller Band. This is in contrast with the Bigger Band which in musical parlance was named the Peria Melam, evidently because this Nagaswaram Band consisted exclusively of males. Only during the past two decades these two bands have been branded respectively with sophisticated labels as Bharata Natyam and Nagaswaram Bands.

The musicians of the Dance orchestra consisted of the Nattuvanar or the conductor-Teacher, assisted by another Nattuvanar to play second fiddle playing the metallic cymbals, the drone bagpipe called the Tutti (துத்தி) (until it was ousted by the Tampura or the Sruti Box), the Mukhavina, i.e. the diminutive nagaswaram with a limited range and the Drummer. The Mukhavina today has yielded room to the clarionet and or the flute. The entire party of musicians will stand behind the dancer and move forward and backward with her. The lead on the cymbals and the mridangam or the voices of the two nattuvanars ensured clear audibility and cue to the dancer's steps and mime. The orchestra today is seated to the right of the dancer at the edge of the dais. The loudspeakers deafen the ears of the audience but the music does not reach the dancer's ears with the result that she is all the time ignoring the audience and glues her attention on the musicians for effective dancing. In the interest of audibility to the dancer and alternate resting of the two voices, the pitch was kept quite high thereby fecilitating the dancing ladies to sing on the sruti convenient to them.

The accompanists who were as a rule males were obliged by courtly tradition to wear turbans and coats in Darbar Halls. Their uttiriyam (உத்தரியம்) or upper cloth was tied round the waist and never across the shoulders; this was a mark of respect to the deity or the royal patron.

The dancers were specifically forbidden to adorn their hair styles with ribbons of particular hues. Noise pollution has always been a menace vitiating the solemn atmosphere of concerts. Noise is not merely a modern phenomenon and the ancients who were rasikas over and above their eminence as artistes and performers had devised adequate remedies to control noise in the dance auditorium; it was music that controlled noise pollution.

Behind the curtains, the drummer used to herald the dancer's arrival by beats on the Khanda Nadai with the Nattuvanar's clang of cymbals leading the drummer by the nose. This was the *Mela Prapti* (மேளபிராப்தி). It had a magic spell on the audience for it worked up a suspended animation and silent expectation. This technique does not exist today even to kindle academic interest for evidently the musicians have thrown up their helpless hands against the VIP's chatter, in the front line. In a way the Mela Prapti was also a preliminary test of the acoustics of the hall and a polite gag on the VIP menace.

The Nageswaram music is a ubiquitous feature of our social and religious life from

womb to tomb. The music asserts its presence announcing incidentally individual occasions as marriage, or betrothal or a temple festival spread over several days; it has its local colour and sound appropriate to the occasion as Dwajarohanam (flag hoisting), the commencement of a religious procession round the four main roads or return to the temple precincts. The fanfare of the Gettimelam proclaims the solemnisation of a Hindu sacramental wedding; the text of the song is immediately identified as 'Anandam Anandam' even by those who do not claim an iota of music in their blood. There are separate strains for Oonjal (The swing), the Nalangu, the Lali, etc. The nagaswaram music is shared alternately with the vocal music of a lady/ladies on the gathering and there used to be professional ministrels to sing the wedding songs, particularly such songs which had a dig at the in-laws of the bride or the groom. The rejoicings from music sometimes used to climax a wordy dual. Tyagaraja's compositions provide an immense variety from the repertoire of Utsara Sampradaya. Sita Kalyana Vaiboogame is very familiar today on the concert platform. Uyyala Ugavarya Sri Rama in Nilambari is also well-known as a lullaby.

Odam (The boat song) used to be a conspicuous piece of music in punnagavarali packed with materials of historical value too. The Kirtanas of Saint Tyagaraja present a wonderful repertoire of emotional music from dawn to dusk.

The Mallari played only on Nagaswaram in the Nattai ragam is entirely ritualistic in character. Modern trends have given it a novel flavour when played on the violin with conventional Tavil accompaniment. The Mallari is only a tune coupled with rhythmical tuttukarams literally spit into the instrument without any song text (sahityam). Any Hindu devotee lost in deep slumber at midnight far away from the temple precincts will be alerted to get ready for worship of the deity on its perpatietic rounds. Force of habit rather than formal initiation in music does the trick incidentally instilling an aesthetic refreshment on the devotee. This is musical and religious instruction without tears for the laity.

But the Nagaswaram Vidwan is in for trouble from this stage. The Nattai on the pipe is heralded by a loud flourish on the Tavil is in the Khanda Nadai and is known as Alarippu on the Tavil; this is not to be confused with the Alaripppu in the dance repertoire. This Alarippu is played as soon as the deity is mounted on the palanquin or platform and this drum music alerts the palanquin bearers to get ready for work. The Nagaswaram follows that on the heels of the alarippu. Right up to the yagasalai the Mallari is played in one talam and upto the second stage near the Eastern Tower it is another talam. This convention is inviolable. Strict protocol requires that the initial strains on the Nagaswaram are played by the Vidwan who is permanent incumbent on the temple establishment. However humble in the hierarchy of Vidwans, his right cannot be challenged by the most highly paid and prestigious visitor invited to play Nagaswaram in the temple. Then follows Raga alapana, Kirtanas, Pallavi and Rakti Melam all peculiar to the genius of the nagaswaram. The temple Vidwan chooses his own ragam and pallavi for exposition and more often than not to confound the visiting Vidwan. If history could be true, Chidambaram Vaidyanatha Pillai was a terror to the Nagaswara vidwans for he could come out victorious even at the Mallari stage confounding his competitors and also Tavil accompanists. To play this ritual music it requires a very high degree of professional competence for survival in the Nagaswaram world. In like manner Sempannarkoli Ramaswami Pillai and his forbears are the champions in the Rakti Melam (ரக்தி மேளம்). The car fastival has its own brand in varali called the Ther Mallari (தேர் மல்லாரி).

Tiruvarur is the home of ritual Nagaswaram music and Ramaswami Diskshitar is reputed to have systematised the tradition, which is still in vogue. Even the size and pattern of the instrument played on the Thiruvarur temple is standardised as the Bari and the songs to be played at specific land marks are regulated. The Thimiri or the shrill high pitched Nagaswaram was the conventional type played elsewhere, but the magnum sized Bari much longer and thicker than the Tiruvarur Bari tuned to a lower pitch is the fashion of the day. It is learnt that the Madattu Timiri (மடத்து திமிரி) is much shriller than the standard Timiri and it is conventionally played in Matam of H. H. Sankara charya Swamigal.

Evidently because the Nagaswaram music was primarily concerned with rituals in temples and ecclesiastical establishments, the performers never used to wear upper clothes or shirts. Even at social functions as at Thirunelveli, the Vidwans were induced on payment of a special fee to play with the upper cloth tied round the topless vidwan. This seems to have been very rigid out of deference to the higher social status of the patrons. In the Darbars of Mysore, Puducottah palace etiquette required that the Vidwans should wear turbans and coats.

In modern democratic set up, revolutionary changes are inescapable. Vidwans from outside the traditional class have started invading the nagaswaram profession along with ladies also who were kept out for long by requirements of feminine elegance and modesty.

The order of the Nagaswaram repertoire and the dance programmes systematised by our ancients are extant today but modernity has its own standards and the Thillana from the tail end seems to elbow its way forward to open the recital. A refresher course in the interest of the dancers, musicians and rasikas seems indicated for understanding the sequence of items from Alarippu to Thillana. No apology is necessary to respect tradition which instead on simpler movement of the limbs of the dancer before embarking on whirlwind manoewvers after due warming up.

Garlanding the performing artistes on the dais is a concession to etiquette and polite appreciation. Lady musicians and dancers are as a rule garlanded by ladies specially commissioned for the purpose. The rasikas are interested only on the dancer or the musician but unvarily can drop a brick and wreck the recital if the dance master who is also the guru is not garlanded first.

The music concerts field the principal vocalist or instrument and not less than two accompanists - one for Violin and the other for Mridangam. About 50 years back it was unusual for even the most distinguished performer from a lower strata accepting a garland before the accompanist with a higher social status was garlanded. It was not uncommon to garland the Morsing vidwan first and then garland the vocalist later because of the lower social status.

Time was when tradition frowned ladies embarking on intellectual flourishes as ragam and pallavi which was considered the inviolable domain of the aggressive and learned male. There existed an exclusive brand called Feminine Music which specialised in only compositions without raga or swara elaboration. Instruments as Nagaswaram, Tavil, Flute, Mirudangam, Ghatam were exclusively masculine in character but the set up is totally different and hard to believe. Feminine Music though scoffed at, has preserved our classical composition in true shape and tradition unlike Manodharma Sangitam which fostered competition on the concert platform, not always healthy. ●