

## Modernity vs Tradition

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IT is unfortunate that today in the name of modernisation artists keep aping the West with the tragic result that they always remain out of date. It is important for them to realise that modernisation need not necessarily mean Westernisation. In fact the more traditional a particular idiom, the more modern it is. For genuine creativity lies in experimentation within the format of tradition. This has been conclusively proved by creative artists the world over. Not only by painters and sculptors but by musicians, composers and dancers too. For example, who can be more acceptable to modern sensibility than such purists as Bala-sarasvati and MS?

Modernity vs Tradition: This has been the familiar theme of art debates. But actually the two are not opposites, modernity and tradition being the two sides of the same coin: Classicism. If modernism is classicism on the go, tradition is classicism in reverse gear. There is movement in either case. The two will ultimately converge at a particular point just for a handshake and move on in different directions. Thus tradition and modernity are not competitive. They are complementary. The distinction may be convenient. But basically it is wrong. Modernity is indistinguishable from tradition and vice versa. By interacting on each other they establish their rationale and relevance. Yesterday's modernity is today's tradition and today's modernity is tomorrow's tradition. No Giotto, no Picasso.

Modernity in essence is nothing but tradition redefined and restyled and in the process it is also restructured on the strength of what one assimilates from one's own exposure to the latest trends and techniques. In this note I wish to confine myself to plastic arts though, I feel, what is true of them is equally true of the

performing arts where sadly one notices a tendency towards glamorisation under the impact of the East-West inter-action.

Frankly there is no such thing as modern art. There is only art which in order to stay alive goes on renewing itself constantly. At the same time the term *modern* has a relevance to a limited extent. For whatever is contemporary is not modern though whatever modern is contemporary. Modernity has inbuilt tradition and tradition inbuilt modernity. In one's artistic development one phase leads to another and another to yet another and so on. So the tradition that the modernist opposes and the modernity that the traditionalist opposes are the result of confusion and prejudice. What deserves to be opposed is, not modernity or tradition, but bad art which is not the monopoly of the traditionalist or the modernist. In fact there is more bad art in modernity than in tradition which has stood the test of time. Tradition means conformity and conformity means discipline, restraint and anonymity which the modernist in India totally rejects. So what deserves to be discarded is not modernity or tradition but bad art and what deserves to be preserved is good art.

However the phrase modern art is functional. It is useful as a label. It is handy for purposes of identification. But modern art in the Indian context has yet to be recognised even as an identification mark, because there is no Indianness in one's approach. Recently *ARTNews*, New York, carried an interview-based feature on the Italian avant-garde. Twenty-four artists figured in it. Most of them felt that what sustained them spiritually and artistically was the umbilical cord that connected them to Italy — in other words the *Italianness* of their inspiration.

Tradition in theory is all right. But how does it work in practice? For example how does a Muslim or a Catholic interpret it? The answer is simple. If a Muslim or a Catholic feels genuinely that he is more Indian than Muslim or Catholic, he intuitively knows what to say and how. Have not Hindu artists painted Islamic and Christian themes and Muslim and Christian artists Hindu motifs? In fact some of the finer features of the Indian heritage, our architecture and miniature painting in particular, bear eloquent testimony to their Islamic inspiration.

Religion is no doubt tradition. But tradition is not religion alone. It includes a number of other binding forces, such as a sharing of common attitudes, methods and techniques, a sense of belonging, an insight into the intimations of the past, a keen perception of the living reality and a burning passion for that magnificent abstraction called nation. So tradition should not be confused with religion. A Crucifixion by a Spanish Catholic is bound to be different from a Crucifixion by a French or an Italian Catholic.

Tradition does not mean imitation, that is, routine repetition of familiar forms, mindless manipulation of lines and spaces. Even if it does, what does it matter? Imitation, perception, affirmation, innovation, communication: These are the different stages of the creative process to which there are no shortcuts. One's complaint against the Indian avant-garde is not that it is avant-garde but that it is not avant-garde enough. Our younger artists can prove by their performance that they can not only keep pace with the West but go beyond, the moment they reestablish their links with their rich past.

When does the Indian painter or musician or dancer feel Indian enough? When tradition has intimations for him. When it communicates with him whispering a secret in his ear. At once the two establish a rapport with each other and from now on

his art becomes not only profoundly Indian but a basically personal and intimate statement which will gradually impart permanence to his work. Tradition is never static or obsolete. It has immense power of renewal and reintegration. One goes back to the art of the past only to produce the art of the future.

Modernity in India has a relevance only when it becomes thoroughly Indian in its feel thrust and élan. The concept of Indianness in the context of art is happily all inclusive: There is room for every modern theory and technique. One need not equate Indian tradition with religion or even spirituality. It has in it everything that stimulates one's creative vision. One is free to select such aspects of it as to suit one's temperament and sensibility. But what is important is that one should develop an awareness of its presence.

Fortunately our musicians and dancers are not victims of pseudo Westernisation yet, though they do often trim their programme formats to suit their modern audiences who apparently have no use for the graces and refinements of the old world of leisure and spaciousness. Patronage of the arts has always been a highly sensitive area. It is more so when its source is an institution than when it is identified with an individual. In the past it reflected the knowledge, sensibility and judgment of princes who accepted full responsibility for their positive as well as negative decisions. Naturally fewer eyebrows were raised then than now. With the disappearance of the old order and with the emergence of the sabhas, patronage of the arts has become the responsibility of democratically constituted public organisations. So the various sabhas which provide the necessary stimulus for the preservation of the classical arts have to proceed very cautiously. They have to keep performing a balancing act all the time because they are required to reconcile

their basic artistic commitments to the economic compulsions of the cultural milieu of today. Also they have to cater for a public that has had little exposure to classicism in any field. So one cannot but admire the courage and dedication of men behind the various music and dance festivals that continue to be annual features in every city big or small. Apparently they have evolved a formula by which they not only sustain themselves but sustain the quality and tempo of the creative arts within their respective orbits.

There is bound to be rivalry between one sabha and another. But so long as all the sabhas have the same lofty ideal of preserving the vitality and continuity of tradition not only by providing a forum for the senior

vidwans but by projecting the younger ones, I would say, the more, the merrier. There are a number of organisations which, through comparatively recent, have acquired authority and even glamour through their fearless dedication to the cause of the classical arts. They are in fact status symbols and no artiste who performs under their auspices ventures to play to the gallery. Such sabhas exist almost in every big city and they were established only in the '50s and '60s. They even run their own music schools and organise their own research projects.

Purity of creative arts in any country is best preserved only by fiercely uncompromising organisations comprising artistes and aesthetes with shared ideals and interests. ●

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