

Tradition and Innovation in Classical Art Forms

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THE QUESTIONS

"What are the relative roles of tradition and innovation in the evolution of classical art forms?" In seeking an answer to this question, I will focus the discussions on Karnataka Sangeetam and Bharata Natyam, the ancient traditions of music and dance of southern India.

We know that, over the years, some artistes have been praised for maintaining the purity of tradition and some others have been praised for the welcome changes they had introduced. We ask: "How are these traditions defined? Why do we need them? Why do we need change? Why do some changes endure while others die away quickly?"

THE OLD TEXTS

Old texts say that the rules of the performing arts were first revealed by the Gods to sages and that they were later incorporated into elaborate treatises like Natya Sastra and Sangeeta Ratnakara. Without entering into discussions on the authorship or the chronology of these treatises, we can admit that, for our purposes, they are truly ancient. However, we realize that these old texts, by themselves, do not have a direct or explicit role in the dynamic processes that make or modify the traditions of the performing arts today.

Treatises on aesthetics (e. g. Natya Sastra, Kuvalayananda, Rasagangadhara or Dhvanyaloka) make elaborate inquiries into the nature of beauty and its perception in the creative arts, the relative roles of the composer, the performer, the audience, the patrons, the media and so on. Instead of

attempting to describe or comment on these early works, I would like to sketch a few simple ideas that are relevant to our own experience in modern times. I will avoid the temptation of trying to cover a wide area looking for universals. I will also avoid technical terms and all citations.

ENJOYMENT OF AN ART FORM

A complex array of forces influences the creation, enjoyment and survival of works of art. Let us associate the words, 'taste' and 'appeal' with these forces. Our current tastes are influenced by our own earlier experiences, those of the community of which we are a part and what we have inherited from earlier times in a variety of ways. There are some relatively stable components in these tastes. There are some others that may be developed and they vary noticeably. Through repeated experience of an art form, we learn to recognize the details that influence the initially vague impressions like: "I cannot say why, but I like it very much; somehow it did not appeal to me." With experience, our enjoyment of a concert becomes increasingly more directed and intense. We discover that we derive much pleasure when we are able to recognize, for instance that: "This foreign note and this particular embellishment adds a special charm to this raga." "This rendering is in marked contrast to that of another famed artiste." "These gestures seem inappropriate for the dance in this context." "I expected it to be different. But the beautifully stylized expressions and restrained mime used by the dancer was so refreshingly satisfying." Accumulation of expectations and their fulfillment, sharpened responses and looking for and recognizing surprises

are factors that greatly enhance our enjoyment of a concert. The appreciation and demands of an enlightened audience, in turn, creates for the artiste a congenial atmosphere of rewards and challenges.

RULES AND CLASSICAL ARTS

In a classical art form, several broad features remain relatively unchanged over a long period of time. This is in contrast to emergent or 'lighter' art form in which the 'rules' are not yet fully developed or set and their features not yet well defined. Karnataka Sangeetam and Bharata Natyam are examples of classical music and dance. Folk music and dance may, however after refinement over years, mature into classical arts. Some of the musical and dance forms of today may have had such beginnings in the folk arts.

A stable framework of 'rules' and features is necessary for sustained enjoyment of an art form. In the classical arts, the rules are sufficiently precise to establish communication between the artistes and the audience through expectations and fulfillment. The evolution of 'rules' implies also the evolution of 'aesthetic sense' - the desire and ability to reject the 'crude and the ugly' and to seek the 'refined and the beautiful.' The broad pattern of the flow of notes in a raga or the definition of the footwork, gestures and movements in dance form the rules; they are the vocabulary and the grammar, to use the analogy of the spoken and written language and literature. The rules, however, do not spell out all the details so that the artiste will yet have the freedom to experiment and to avoid the feeling of 'sameness' in all performances. The choice of 'idioms' and the way in which the 'words' are linked (within the constraints of grammar) vary with the authors or artistes. They lead to the observed variations known as 'styles'. They also allow for 'surprises' and avoid the monotony of being totally 'predictable'.

The history of the performing arts tells us that the authority of the ancient texts, even if relevant, will not bar changes. All that matters is that if the change has an intrinsic appeal, it will endure whether or not sanctioned by the texts.

THE NECESSITY FOR CHANGE

The question can now be modified: "Why does one want a change? What makes some changes to endure and some others to disappear quickly?" We can recognize numerous processes that trigger the need for change. All of us seem to possess two conflicting impulses. We long for the familiar and we long for the new; but how much of the one we want and how much of the other, varies with the person, the subject and time. Excessive longing for the familiar is often held in check by the onset of boredom. Too much longing for the new may be inhibited by the fear of the unknown. The changes in art forms are also triggered by the advent of new tools and new media. Again, exposure to new environments and conditions often inspire changes and experimentation.

Let us consider some examples from Karnataka Sangeetam. We often here these comments: "The existing major ragas are pleasing enough; where, then, is the need or scope for creating new ragas?" "The compositions of the musical trinity are so beautiful and satisfying; so where is the need for new compositions?" We quickly recognize a contradiction that lurks under these questions. What led the musical trinity in the first place to compose their kritis when the songs of their predecessors like Purandara Dasa, Bhadrachala Ramadas and Jayadeva had delighted many in their times and still continue to delight many of us centuries later? It was, evidently, the creative urge of the musical trinity that found expression in their compositions. In addition, they initiated changes that have endured and added new dimensions to our music. They also

created new ragas and shaped many others. Tyagaraja and Dikshitar must have been influenced by the 'western music' played by the 'military band' of their times. This is evidenced, for example' by Tyagaraja's 'Raminchuvarevarura' and Dikshitar's 'English Notes'.

Dancing for a new song or a new story, in itself, cannot be taken as an innovation in a substantial sense. In the context of dance, innovation implies a significant change in the technique of representation, the way the theme is presented: it should be noticeably different from the practices of other contemporary artistes. The changes may be totally new or they may be novel adaptations of earlier techniques that have faded from the effective memory span of the community at any given time period.

THE FORCES BEHIND CHANGE

Many of us know that singers and dancers get tired when they are asked to sing the same song or perform the same dance number in concert after concert - though the audiences may be different. Similarly, many of us long for a change when the same item is repeated by a succession of artistes in a series of concerts. We recognize, too, that the effective memory span of a community at any one time is relatively short. All these factors explain why even among the popular, old compositions, there is a cyclic pattern of fading and revival.

It has also been pointed out that the Bharata Natyam recitals of today include welcome changes made possible by technical advances within the last fifty years. For instance, the sophisticated sound and lighting systems of today have made possible the convenient seating of the orchestra on a side of the stage.

The Natya Sastra does describe certain conventions that should be followed in allocating space in the stage and for the entry

and exit of participants. However, in the modern dance programs consisting of group dances, there is a much greater awareness of symmetry and of the need for coordinating the movements of the dancers in the group. This kind of spatial thinking bears the influence of western dance like the ballet. Strategies for complex positioning having the greatest visual impact can now be derived by computer simulation using specially designed software. These technical advances instead of belittling creativity in the fine arts, widen their horizons and enhance the challenges and the rewards.

BHARATA AND TODAY'S BHARATA NATYAM

Looking from the perspective of the principles formulated so far, we will now analyze some specific examples.

Several scholars (among them, Dr. Padma Subrahmaniam, the dancer-scholar) assert that much of what is known to day as Bharata Natyam is not all that ancient and that it took shape only some two hundred years ago in the court of the Tanjavur Kings. According to Padma, Bharata Natyam, has retained only some aspects of the ancient art form expounded by Bharata in his Natya Sastra. Specifically, she asserts, the Bharata Natyam of today has lost much of the earlier aspects of 'drama' and some of the intricacies of pure dance as well. She would like to restore these 'lost' items to this dance form so that it would truly conform to the concepts laid down by the great sage. The interesting point is that, notwithstanding these 'omissions', the Bharata Natyam of today has achieved the 'classical' status, with its current set of rules. These rules have been 'relatively stable' within the effective memory span of the present generation (say fifty years). In the stabilization of these 'rules', we recognize the influence of social changes and the efforts of pioneers like, for instance, Rukmani Devi, E. Krishna Iyer and Balasaraswati.

Numerous minor changes have also taken place imperceptibly during this period. Some of them have been incorporated in the 'rules' and others forgotten. Padma's suggestions, though presented as revival of ancient features lost during the past few centuries, will, in effect, be treated only as innovation by the present generation. The survival of these features will, ultimately, depend not so much upon the endorsement of a few scholars but upon their acceptance by the larger community of art lovers, patrons and other artistes, over a period of time.

REALISM versus STYLIZED REPRESENTATION

Let us consider, in particular, the question of 'drama' which, according to Padma, has been lost in today's Bharata Natyam and needs to be restored. Padma's attempts to reintroduce 'drama' in Bharata Natyam should not be taken as attempts to discard conventional or stylized representations in favour of 'realist' ones. It is not a question of choosing one or the other but how little or how much of the one or the other. Even in pure drama, without song or dance, the best acting is what makes a situation 'appear to be convincingly real' and not 'be just real'. Except for some proponents of 'method acting', all seasoned actors will admit this point. A good actor selects, out of a real life situation, crucial features and sharpens them in the presentation, discarding unnecessary details. It is this effective, selective representation that marks a good actor from the mediocre ones.

Again, we cannot stretch the importance of 'realism' in dance too much. After all, in real life, we seldom communicate through verses, songs or dance. The fine arts are the result of the creative urge in us, our longing to make images and our search for beauty by recognizing and creating patterns out of seemingly humdrum real experiences. It is thus not an explicit portrayal that we enjoy

most but what is merely suggested with just enough amount of realism for us to 'make the connection'.

Reintroducing drama in Bharata Natyam thus means that, without too much violation of the 'rules', just enough realism is cleverly introduced in facial expressions, gestures and movements of body and limbs so that the right sentiment is evoked in the audience. A discerning audience will then mentally fill in the details and complete the picture. The pleasure that follows is also a pleasure of discovery for the audience. In fact, Padma herself underscores this point when she says that the 'realistic' feature in dance, though informal, demands from the artiste consummate skill, understanding, mental involvement and imagination. I have seen some of the most beautifully stylized representations in Padma's own dances - when she simulates a ride in the swing or in a chariot or in the Pushpaka Vimanam. Restraint in mime, clever stylization and an innate sense of beauty are key elements in the use of realism in Bharata Natyam.

CONCLUSIONS

Defining the traditional features of an art form precisely and observing how these features change over the years become increasingly more complex as one proceeds from literature through music to elaborate dance drama - as the 'dimensionality' increases. However, we recognize that the classical art forms are characterized by a framework of fairly precise rules which remain relatively stable over a long period of time, embedded in tradition. This stability is also complemented by the flexibility that allows freedom for the creative artiste and spares the audience from boredom. Total or unlimited freedom in an art form may lead to confusion just as conversation becomes impossible when words change their meaning from day to day, from place to place and from person to person. The development of 'rules' implies

the development of 'taste', which rejects the 'crude and the ugly' in favor of the 'refined and the beautiful.'

Changes do occur in the classical arts as artistes experiment. Some of the changes die away and others get incorporated into the 'rules' and tradition. In general, the changes are incremental and seldom catastrophic. When the rules become too many and too rigid and there is no scope for innovation, the art form begins to wither and may fade into history.

The Karnataka Sangeetam and Bharata Natyam of today may not be exactly what they were a hundred years ago. Neither are they likely to remain exactly the same a hundred years from now. But they are sure to retain some of the great features that distinguished them a thousand years ago, features that have survived till now. These art forms have a great tradition and are still vigorous and they will endure for a long time to come. ●



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