

## Culture Shock?

*K. S. Mahadevan*

During this month, two new sabhas have been ushered into existence and not without some pomp ! Yet at the same time, Sri R. Krishnaswami, Secretary of Narada Gana Sabha, has been bemoaning the very thin attendances (even of his own nearly 1,000 members) at concerts. If the apathy continued, he has even threatened to cancel their memberships. It is common knowledge that, except when the artists in the top rungs of the public esteem ladder perform (Mandolin Srinivas or Sudha Ragunathan or others), rasikas' response has been poor - and what is worse, declining.

Dance impresarios have not failed to realise that attendance at dance recitals is much less than before. And even that light evening entertainment called 'dramas' has no longer the same pulling power. All this a clear manifestation of mounting public apathy - even, mark you, when in most cases, admission is free, thanks to that institution called 'sponsors', so ready with financial assistance at the drop of a hat!

On the Telly, violence is the order of the day. There is no film without an orgy of fights and display of glory, broken heads or limbs. The latest trend - one wonders if the Beijing conference of women discussed it - is women being treated brutally in hot scenarios, rendered hotter by unabashed displays of near nakedness, sensation, more sensation and more exhibitions of brutality, is the formula for widest coverage.

In this country known for its ancient heritage and a civilisation of softness, courtesy, decorum and respect for fine arts - in short - one of the most elevated cultures in the world, these new and disturbing trends are daily gathering momentum. We seem to have lost the will to protest effectively at outrages perpetrated on man, woman, child, beasts, monuments etc.

Of course, there are a few brave but lonely travellers footing through this Amazonian forest of uncivilised upheavals. But their voice is not heard, nor indeed can it ever be in the face of the tank regiments of concerted social misbehaviour, crushing every civilised voice, in its brutal march.

In an article, Alvin Toffler has said that "Men behave irrationally acting against their own clear interest, when thrown into conditions of high range and novelty". Faced with the recent eruptions of abnormality in every sphere of social life, social psychologists attribute it to fatigue which expedites mental deterioration to such an extent that a soldier will remain passive or will go to sleep, even when bullets are whizzing all around him. Even the most stable and normal people, reduced to confusion and a state of mindlessness in which their judgements are completely warped and non-functional.

In the field of the Arts, especially of classical Carnatic music, the fatigue phenomenon has come into play and true rasikas are bothered by a subjective feeling of loss and deprivation. The unpredictability arising from the two frequent recourse to novelty, totally new ideas of raga alapana, permissive krithi singing, the over-extended swara exercises, and what is more relevant, the 'adventurism' that permeates our concert halls today, has undermined the sense of reality and thrust the rasika in a dazed condition, into a surrealistic environment. No wonder, he is apathetic and is only a passive consumer of music.

As Prof. Lundstat puts it: "He longs for an environment in which the gratification of important psychological needs is predictable and less uncertain". Mr. Toffler is of the view that "Over-stimulation has led to bizarre and anti-adaptive behaviour".

A true revival of sustained interest in Carnatic music cannot be brought about, unless the excessive 'Novelty scenario' described above is changed and performing musicians forsake their sensational approaches to gain public attention at any cost. We cannot revive the gurukula system for obvious reasons. But, fortunately there are still, amongst us, great teachers who have behind them decades of learning, teaching and performing experience, such as Sangita Kalanidhi's D. K. Pattammal, Prof. T. M. Thiyagarajan, the Pithamaha Dr. Semman-gudi Srinivasa Iyer himself and others.

A fundamental change can be effected only when 'TRADITION' is respected. A beautiful definition of 'TRADITION' has been given by Lord Acton in one of his famous judgements, viz:

- (a) It persists over several generations
- (b) If it changes at all, it changes only slightly or partially
- (c) It is not questioned by his adherents nor thought by them to need justification.

"More briefly still, we may say that traditions are chronic, continuous and authoritative".

When these criteria are applied to Carnatic music, a curious corollary would be that musicians should first absorb the entire music of the great Trinity of Shyama Sastry, Thyagaraja and Muthuswamy Diskshithar, if only because their creations satisfy the above conditions (a), (b), (c) as no others

can. These three geniuses succeeded in infusing their music not only with the best of lyrics, ragam and thalam but impregnating them with intense devotion for which music was devised as a vehicle.

Even in these days of indifferent listening, a careful observer cannot fail to observe the wave of brightness that spreads over the faces of rasikas when a great composition of the Trinity is rendered, especially that of Sri Thyagaraja. The musical sustenance they provide is unmatched by those of all other composers. The 'culture shock' that has overtaken listeners can be overcome only by going back to the Trinity. The need of the hour is not novelty or change for the sake of change, as over-enthusiastic young musicians believe, but a truly classical spirit which would induce sincere efforts to seek the divine nectar that lies embedded in their kritis.

Whatever its aesthetic trappings, our music must still relate to god in any of His forms like Rama, Krishna, Govinda, Siva, Ganesh, Muruga, Iyappan and Devi. Music is "Moksha Sadhanam" as our forefathers always maintained. It cannot be acquired through make-believe but only through steady, sincere and soulful '*Sadhana*' and in a humble spirit. As Walter Lippmann stated:

"To have Humility is to have, in the last reaches of Reason, a saving doubt". That humility was the factor underlying the immortal music of our past giants. 'No hungry generations can tread thee down', as Wordsworth put it.