

## Context of Tradition in the Information Age\*

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It is reasonable to assume that anyone reading or listening to this paper shares an interest and probably a deep connection to the classical traditions in the performing arts of India. Therefore, the assumption that these traditions are valued by those engaged in this discourse is a given, leaving us only the questions of how these traditions are growing and should grow during our present age as we approach the end of a millennium. Yet this regard is not a shared given with all those outside the parameters of this discourse that comprise our potential audiences living within the wider community of this information age. This lack of thoughtful awareness and informed involvement certainly affects the thrust of the modern day contextualization of both form and content. In other words, audiences have changed and we must address this both as artists and as part of today's world.

After World War II, an escalating restlessness is reflected in changing values, the stress of social injustices and disparity of social levels, globalization and materialism. Art is not an isolated creative activity. It reflects the society in which we live and serves the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of society. As people, including artists, become increasingly restless, the arts help us respond to, understand and integrate our external and internal realities. It is my thesis that there is a restlessness of audiences and artists and loss

of a meditative quality that needs to be preserved in the present time, preserved because it speaks to a need that is eternal, neither archaic or superficial.

The classical dance traditions of India are ideally suited to continue offering an art that speaks to the inner world that we all share. Every form of creative expression communicates certain concepts and ideas best from within its own particular framework and structure. Just as a painting may convey what a poem may not, and vice-versa, different genres of dance lend themselves to certain creative content. A performance about the World War II holocaust could be brilliant in modern dance, but not in Bharata Natyam or Odissi. This does not in anyway make one form less adequate than another, but simply means that the content of creative expression should be suited to its genre.

The transition from temple to concert stage is matched by today's movement to new live performance contexts and television. Artists are challenged to adjust and develop tradition without losing the core of the art. This core offers an inner strength for coping through such elements in cultural life as dance, poetry and music. There is pressure on the arts to respond to what are today called market forces.

In the past, under a stronger guru-shisya parampara, a dancer was well

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prepared before performing first for connoisseurs. They would establish the dancer's reputation based on ability before public concerts began. This kind of "test marketing" insured a "quality control". Today, young artists are frequently on stage and tour before they are ready, accompanied with a great public relations fanfare of glossy brochures and press meets. Credentials from connoisseurs are optional. Audiences then assume that it is the dance itself, rather the dance artist, that does not engage their interest for a complete evening of dance. The impatience of audiences for abbreviated performances is as much a function of less than transformational performances as it is of a fast paced life. It is easier to go for the technique and skip the involvement, yet what holds and has meaning for audiences is the involvement of the artist that speaks to the inner self of each audience member. It is interesting to note that audiences abroad that have not been as exposed to the dance traditions of India will respond to the metaphysical and spiritual experience. Audiences that come to performances in the West are perhaps more open to receiving this predispose one to see the perfect ardha mandala, yet miss the whole. One can be critical and yet also receptive to what is being given.

The fact that audiences are at different levels of learning and receptivity need not be a justification to aim one's performance at the lowest common denominator of a fragmented society, but rather to offer an aesthetic experience that communicates at many levels. Artists have a responsibility to offer an experience that will both reach audiences at their current state of mind and understanding and take them a notch higher.

Of course, this is easier to do if one starts at an early age. I would venture to say that the vast majority of you who hear or read these words were fortunate enough to be introduced to classical traditions in the arts from an early age. If there is a cultural vacuum, it will be filled with trash. Alternatives must be provided from a young age through families, communities, schools and the efforts of artists themselves, to contribute their time and effort. With so many choices of information input, it is essential to keep in focus the non-commercial, intrinsic value of the arts. An upwardly mobile, affluent society may value a performance more for the "designer label", meaning the celebrity name, than for a great moment in art. The recent Sangeeth Natak Akademi's 50th Anniversary Fortnight of performances in Delhi had full to overflowing houses for the great names of the dance world which was very gratifying, yet the excellent unticketed performances at other venues had thin crowds. People have many choices before them for using their unstructured time. It is understandable in the context that attending concerts has historically been one of the measures of higher social status, but efforts to build audiences who will come for the art and not simply the artist, are important. This is a challenge to us all to reach these new audiences of the information age and provide something significant or greater value than the options bombarding them.

The outside of our lives is loud, classical traditions of Indian dance reach the silent scapes of the self. There is a quality of stillness in movement like the silence in the music. Music decorates the silence and in dance, the stillness goes to the core. The

resonance communicates the inner self of the artist and reaches out. This direct communion of the inner self of the artist offers audiences the distilled essence of the collective inheritance of the age old heritage of centuries. Yet each artist and performance offers a new vessel so that the same performance piece can be done repeatedly and yet hold interest.

In an age where everything goes for a price, art is given free. The Yanni concert at the Taj Palace was so expensive that attending was valued as a status symbol even though no one had heard of him six months earlier. Yet artists mustn't attempt to compete with this since it takes a kind of volume to compete. Music today is getting louder to be heard. The beauty and gift of the classical arts traditions of India is the looking in, calming the restlessness and refreshing the audience. The present tense communication of a solo classical performance has the potential of an intensity impossible to achieve with a spectacular group performance. The impact of the group can be magnificent, but it rarely touch the audience as can an involved soloist.

Pundit Ravi Shankar had the opportunity to travel and perform around the world as a young man with his uncle Uday Shankar's Troupe. He became sophisticated early on in the world of professional showmanship and public relations. Yet precisely because of knowing all this, he understood that he had to return to India for years of study in isolation within a strict guru-shisya parampara if he was to be truly able to interpret his tradition.

Traditions change organically with time and the contributions of new generations of

artists. Changed circumstances of our lives require us to responsibly "push the envelope" of tradition, being sensitive to humbly add to that collective heritage without distortion. Just as dance adjusted to the proscenium stage when it moved from the Natya Mandap of the temple, so too we must educate ourselves in the technical and aesthetic requirements of the small and large screen, and probably soon, the internet. As we shorten the duration of performances of today's attention deficient audiences, we must still maintain the power and intensity of the experience. Creating from new poetry, languages, themes, and personal experience is exciting if it evolves from thoughtfulness. Novelty for its own sake and crowd pleasing spectacles can be wonderfully entertaining, but they will not offer the magical renewal that audiences and artists both need to experience when traditions of depth provide a metaphysical journey into the heart and mind.

I have chosen to accompany these reflections with some dance compositions that reflect a few of the directions I have taken to develop the Odissi repertoire within its traditional context. My Padma Patra invocation was choreographed to respond to a regional imperative, simply to offer the invocation to the patron deity in the location of the performance. As regional traditions of Indian dance travel farther and farther afield it becomes increasingly appropriate to choreography to poetry and language of that place. Hence, using Kashi Khanda in Varanasi and Hanuman Shlokas at the Sankat Mochan temple festival, Swati Tirunal in Kerala and Surdas in Delhi. This invocation sets a tone that informs the audience that the energy of the performance

will be internalized. I have found that audiences abroad are extremely receptive to performances that have spiritual, not necessarily religious or entertainment, content - what they call "sacred dance".

The Kumaara Sambhavam piece was created for a Doordharshan National Program of Dance incorporating five heroines of Kalidas. Choreography was planned along with camera close-up, mid and long shots so that what was actually seen was choreographed. It was later re-choreographed for the stage. The television format made it possible to attempt the range of Kalidas in the short time format of television.

Sakhi He from *Geeta Govinda* is one of my favourite ashtapadis, and the one that was recorded for K. Viswanath's Swarna Kamalam. Pandit Bhubaneswar Misra, the music composer of much of this century's Odissi dance repertoire, was thrilled with the opportunity to fully orchestrate this ashta-

padi for a film and my guru, Padmabhushan Kelucharan Mohapatra successfully re-choreographed the abridged version for the film. The sancharis reflect the Oriya perspective that give prominence to Radha as a Parikhya heroine. While not specifically mentioned in *Geeta Govinda*, it is highlighted in other medieval Oriya poetry. The difference of this perspective from the Tamil view of Radha in the Radha Kalyanam was brought to my attention some years ago by V. A. K. Ranga Rao after a Delhi performance when he objected to the emphasis in the abhisarika sancharis of Radha leaving her sleeping mother-in-law and sister-in-law to go out of the house.

The conclusion to my traditional Odissi Mokshya, Balamurali's *Omkarakarini*, takes an internalized view of Shakti. The music and poetry of this composition immediately internalizes the expression and it has become a permanent part of my repertoire since I have not yet found any composition to equal it.

