

A HERITAGE AT THE CROSS ROADS

by SVK

Occasional exuberance is noticeable in talks, media and special exhibitions to preserve the country's heritage. It implies two vital things! one the heritage is going into ruins and the other a feeble concern for its preservation. Carnatic music to-day has slowly declined to this status. In every function connected with carnatic music, it's great past and that it will not disappear, is the common refrain. If it will not die, why the necessity to talk about it on and off? It points to a perceived fear that the way the Fine art is developing there is every possibility of its rapid decline to share the fate of some of the temples with shrubs in the crevices, fallen stones from the spire, the idols in the Garbha Graha with hands missing and the whole complex a habitat for reptiles and enveloped in darkness as symbols of heritage calling for attention.

'How carnatic music was and is to-day' is a fascinating exercise. In Chennai upto the sixties of the last century each suburb had one Sabha arranging concerts once a week or fortnight - Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha in Triplicane, Rasika Ranjani Sabha in Mylapore, Krishna Gana Sabha and Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha in Mambalam and Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha in Egmore, to mention a few. Nearly a dozen reputed Vidwans were given programmes in these Sabhas and the number of performances being at best four in a month, the next chance in a Sabha for a musician was roughly after four or five months. Like the flat culture that has become the order of the day, a palatial building converted into complex of match box flats, each suburb to day has atleast a dozen Sabhas. It is also a notable feature of metropolitan life, once a bus route is started in a locality, passenger numbers grow in thousands in a matter of a month. Likewise, once a dozen sabhas crop up in a locality, the musicians offering themselves grow in hundreds. Like youngsters clinging to the steps in buses so too young musicians cling to Sabha secretary's for a chance. Listening pleasure in such concerts is like a bus ride.

What is wrong in having more Sabhas? Absolutely an undisputed view. In the same manner, a musician to-day can ask what does it matter if only ten or fifteen listeners are there in a hall with a capacity varying from 800 to 2000? Here is the first signal of carnatic music's downward course, going towards a ruined status calling for preservative efforts - proliferation of Sabhas and apathy of musicians to audience numbers.

For the Sabhas like the metropolitan Transport corporation, the problem is how to satisfy the growing tribe of musicians, some with backed - up influence,

some promenading as child prodigies with willing lobbyists, some with labels of disciples of reputed musicians, some on the strength of regional representation, some as innovators of fusion music, some languishing without any of these props to speak on their behalf and in many cases with very little merit to stand on their own legs.

On deep thought, one has to recognise the farsightedness of our ancestors in allotting a festival in each month - Pongal, Rama Navami, Gokulashtami, Skanda Sashti and the like. If such categorisation had not been there how can the Sabhas organise festivals to throw open the flood gates to musicians from the range of six to sixty.

Are the Sabhas really in a comfortable position? Proliferation means aggressive salesmanship to stay afloat. Each new Sabha in a locality strives to smother others or to pull down their reputation of giving concert only to the deserving. So we have a festival running to a month of prodigies in the age group of six to ten: We have a festival purely dedicated to compositions of an industrialist, a doctor, a lawyer or a software engineer. We have a festival exclusively for mothers who have taught the first lessons to the son or daughter. We have a festival of artistes who ride the two horses of an instrument and vocal music, a festival with songs of the Trinity reset to film tunes, every kind of festival, except the one for real carnatic music.

It boils down to one inference - money the arbiter of carnatic music's future. Sabhas have to somehow continue to exist. Musicians have to keep the pot boiling in a sky - rocketing living standards environment a family concern that was pointedly put to a Sabha secretary by a popular musician in these words, when offered a low remuneration: "Do you want us to do unchavritti like Thyagaraja"? That in a nutshell places the role of money in the music scene. If software engineers, doctors conducting operations, lawyers arguing the case for a VIP can demand fabulus sums, what the musicians ask for is most reasonable. It is often deridingly commented that musicians are nine months abroad and three months in the city. If brain drain in other fields is hailed, what is wrong in musicians seeking fortune abroad?

This is one of the reasons for the emergence of many youngsters in the music field. Many of them are highly qualified academically, and why then preference for music? With proper public relations at the other end a three - month trip is ensured every year. In that span they can earn what, if they are employed in a firm here, can earn in two years. This is another factor regarding the future of carnatic music.

At home nobody bothers about quality. Abroad knowledge of Carnatic music is not so much the pulling force as the concern of South Indian settlers abroad to initiate their children born and bred up there in the cultural wealth of India. So the quality of music does not matter much as long as it carries the label of carnatic music.

Popularity here is the passport to visits abroad. So musicians try to tap many sources-films, TV, teaming with pop singers or composing music for dancers because dance abroad is more popular than music.

Thus money is pulling the strings of Sabhas and musicians and the whole music field is like a puppet theatre. The situation boils down to this. Musicians are not at all averse to high standards but if it means a long period of many years, there is every chance of their going unnoticed and finally neglected in the rat race for quick recognition to make quick money. So what is the preference - money or music.

The Sabhas too are in the same position. Depending on Masikas to a concert means that Sabhas too have to go on unchavritti! They have only two sources: enlist a uninterrupted flow of sponsors, donors and seek financial aid from families abroad who are keen on carnatic music. Expectations from local listeners are next to nothing. Secondly to arrange exotic and innovative programmes to cater to the less sophisticated section of society through film-linked music or encourage new ensembles of western drum as a percussive accompaniment to a vocalist instead of Mridangam or a sort of Jugalbandhi or a pop Music score in Karakarapriya or Kiravami mode. The whole effort of Sabhas and musicians are to keep their heads above water no matter what the quality is. Who cares!