

The Problematics of Tradition and Talent in Indian Classical Dance – an artist's view

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'Tradition' and 'talent' are terms that we come across very frequently in India. They have been used and overused until they have started to sound like empty clichés. It is therefore worth examining both the terms more closely. Where art forms are concerned, in India there are generally two diametrically opposite approaches – one, where tradition becomes more of an imposition and talent a burden, the other, where the hunt for something different in the name of creativity leads one to flout tradition altogether and aesthetic norms become something that is more honoured in the breach than in the following.

I have used the term 'problematic' rather than 'problem' because there are several facets to this issue. It is not just one simple problem or a series of problems to which a solution can or cannot be found, as the case may be. It is far more complex than that. Besides the term 'problematic' implies a possibility of dialoguing, not merely solving.

The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (online 2009) defines *tradition* (origin Latin, from *tradere* 'deliver, betray') as a noun which has three meanings:

1. the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation; 2. a long-established custom or belief passed on in this way; 3. an artistic or literary method or style established by an artist, writer, or movement, and subsequently followed by others.

More often than not we see a conglomeration of all three. And our sense of tradition becomes *traditionalism*, which is literally defined as a noun meaning, 'the upholding of tradition, especially so as to resist change.' As we tread the path of conservatism, not only do we resist change, we slowly become averse to it. Any art form is a living form because it is integrally entwined with culture, region, religion, language and politics of a particular country until it becomes a custom (defined as a particular way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place, or time.) Thus it has both a spatial and temporal existence, a fact that we tend to overlook when we talk loosely of a

tradition. It necessarily follows that without change the art form will not evolve further and survival becomes a question.

The Indian Classical art form has always followed the master-disciple relationship or the *guru-shishya parampara*. Because the fine arts are a spiritually uplifting experience, the *guru* comes second only to god. I repeat a section of the famous Sanskrit *stotram* or verse which every child learns as part of initiation into the fine arts:

- i. Ajyana timirandhsya jnanajana shalakaya
Chakshurunmilitang jena tasmayee shri gurave namaha
- ii. Akhandalamandala karam vyaptang jena characharam
Tatpadang darshitang jena tasmayee shri gurave namaha
- iii. Guru Bramha, Guru Visnu, Guru deva Maheshwara
Guru sakshat Parabramha tasmayee shri gurave namaha

(Baidyanathan, 1996)

In essence the verse likens the knowledge given by the *guru* to a beacon of light that dispels the gloom of ignorance. It also tells of how the sight of a guru's feet has the same impact as experiencing the whole world, thereby implying total submission and surrender on the part of the disciple. The last two lines liken the *guru* to *Parabramha* or the greatest undivided power or energy that forms the base of creation itself and combines the forces of the Creator, the Destroyer and the Preserver according to the *vedic*¹ beliefs. Thus it was not for the disciple to question why, he/she would have to accept unconditionally the dictum handed down by the *guru*. The *guru* was omniscient and his word was never to be doubted. Even until fifty years ago this tradition worked successfully. But it had its pros and cons. On one hand it maintained a certain authenticity of the art form as far as stylistic ground rules were observed and followed down through generations. Considering the rigorous training over a large number of years and a meticulous technique of codified movements that are required to be a good Indian classical dancer, it seemed necessary for this kind of unquestioning submission to be employed. On the other hand it created an insular mentality in the artists. Considering the number of years that the artist spent under the tutelage of the *guru*, the comfort zone of one's own art form was so great that no need was felt to venture out of it. The richness and completeness of the Indian classical art forms nurtured this feeling even further. This psyche is very strong in the South Indian Classical dance forms, particularly *Bharatanatyam* in which I am a practicing artist as well as a teacher.

Purity and authenticity are two other controversial terms, which come up the moment tradition is being discussed. The concept of 'tradition' and 'purity' is so deeply etched in the Indian psyche that it has affected the very outlook of dancers. Even two decades ago it was rare for a dancer belonging to a particular form, to watch another style. In the commonly practised way of teaching a classical dance style, the practice time eats into the spare time of the dancer. Here it is necessary to state that in our country it is rather difficult to make dancing one's full time profession so most dancers have to work to earn their living. Thus rigorous practice schedules leaves one with very little time to watch as many outside programs as one ideally should. Secondly,

gurus would only encourage viewing of recitals by a select few experts belonging to the same style. The *guru-shishya parampara* do not make space for any questions. The favoured argument is the imminent dilution of a style, if exposed to another style. I personally believe it to be true that during the years of initial training physical exposure to other classical dance or music forms affects the stylistic honing of the body needed to be proficient in a particular form. But it is equally true that watching or listening to other styles and genres of performing arts only serves to enhance one's understanding of one's own art form. In fact, in my view, it should be a necessary part of one's training process, if not for anything else, at least to teach by differentiation. It also helps in proper identification of distinguishing stylistic aspects. But the thing called 'tradition' in the world of dance eventually and ultimately boils down to an effort by the dance practitioner to preserve the style handed down by the guru, as audiences in India are for the most part very well informed and adept at spotting discrepancies.

On the other hand we have the progressives who believe that any tradition has to be broken or stepped upon in order to create a 'modern' or 'contemporary' style of dance. I have marked the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' within quotations as the very terms themselves are often confused. What we tend to overlook is that what we label 'tradition' started off as contemporary at one point of time. It is the enduring qualities along with the underlying principles of structure and discipline that enable something to become a 'tradition', not the outward trappings. Tradition has a timeless quality, which is thought to be due to the fact that it encompasses and fuses the past and the present. Novelty is possible only through tapping into the core of tradition, understanding it, studying it, and then readjusting it in keeping with general aesthetic principles. A new work of art can initially disrupt the workings of tradition, but should eventually be successfully accommodated within the framework of tradition. What is contemporary today will be thought of as tradition a few decades down the line; tradition is handed down through generations only because it has certain enduring qualities, which survive the test of time. Therefore, it is necessary to examine those qualities that make a work timeless when attempting to modify or break with tradition.

The legendary Uday Shankar created a whole new style based on the various Indian classical dance forms (Sarkar Munshi, 2008). Let us also take for example the well-known history of *Bharatanatyam*. This dance form was also given the name *Dasiattam*, which was very popular during the Chera reign from 9th to 12th century (*Our Keralam*, 2009).

Bharatanatyam is one of the seven classical dance forms of India, chiefly associated with the South of India ie Tamil Nadu. The name of sage Bharatha or form its origin in the *Bharatha Desha* or the country of Bharata as India was called. Bharatanatyam is also interpreted as *Bhaaram Tharayithi Bharatham* - the true dispeller of grief and anguish; as that which encompasses Bhaavam (emotional content), Raga (melody) and Thaalam (rhythm).

For long this dance was also referred to as *Sadir* or *Dasiattam*, drawing from an ancient tradition of girls who chose to be wedded to God and spend their lifetime in his servitude. Such ladies were called *Devadasis* (servants of God) or *Nitya Sumangalis* (one who would remain auspicious and happily wedded forever). Such dasis performed music and dance dedicated to the temple during all auspicious festivals, also fanned the deity with chamara and held the lamp or the *kumbharthi* in sacred processions. They initially held esteemed place in society and were well cared for by the temple and the local ruler.

The literary content of Bharatanatyam was initially inspired by the devoted outpourings of *Nayanmars* (Shaivaite saints) and *Alwars* (Vaishnavite saints), whose influence grew around the tenth century. The saint poets of later medieval period and early modern period of Indian history, further enhanced the literary content of *Bharatanatyam* repertoire.

The earliest task of redefining and formalising the repertoire of *Dasiattam* was carried out by four brothers from Tanjore, popularly referred to as the Tanjore quartet (Chinnaiyah, Ponnaiyah, Vadivelu and Sivanandan), to whom we owe the modern day repertoire. Due to the circumstantial deterioration of the *Devadasi* system around the beginning of the twentieth century, this practice was banned by Government legislation. It was at this time in 1931, that the Madras Music Academy took up the losing cause of this tradition along with Shri E. Krishnaier. The first momentous stem was the rechristening of *Sadirattam* as Bharatanatyam, to present the art in new light.

Enlightened members of society such as Shri E. Krishnaier and Smt. Rukmani Devi took to reforming the status of the dance form by introducing further stylization and logical technique in its practice. Smt Rukmani Devi's sojourn in this dance form blossomed only in her thirties making her the first *Brahmin* woman to pursue dance in the latter twentieth century. She was instrumental in later forming the Mecca of Bharatanatyam in Madras – *Kalakshetra*. She was also one whose aesthetics greatly enhanced the costume and overall representation as dance as we see it today.

So *Bharatanatyam*, as we know of it today, was actually formatted by Rukmini Devi Arundale in an effort to contemporarise a socially ostracised style of dance. She raised it from a stigmatised dance form performed by women of questionable repute to a status of international acceptance. But this was not how the original dance form commenced. Having been totally dependent on the patronage of the temples, and therefore the kings, these *devadasis* suddenly found themselves homeless, stripped of the only identity they had ever known, and bereft of the art form that gave them this very identity. Many had to modify their art form to earn their living and thus turned from talented artists to little better than learned prostitutes (Surya Narayana Murthy, 2005).

Each step in the history of *Bharatanatyam* was a process of evolution aimed at the survival of the art form itself; each form evolved from the previous as a necessary effect of the contemporary social, political, economic and religious changes that breeze through any society. So much so that the costumes and

the teaching techniques were also formalised by Rukmini Devi. There is no evidence of any *adavu* system that we are familiar with in *Bharata's Natyashastra*.

Natyashastra (circa 4000 B.C) is the most detail and elaborate of all treatises on dramatic criticism and acting ever written in any language and is regarded as the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world. Written by the great dramatist of ancient India, *Bharata*, *Natyashastra* is reckoned as the poetics of Indian drama. Bharata muni in his *Natyashastra* demonstrates every aspect of Indian drama whilst covering areas like covers music, stage-design, make-up, dance and virtually every aspect of stagecraft. With its kaleidoscopic approach, with its wider scope *Natyashastra* has offered a remarkable dimension to growth and development of Indian classical music, dance, drama and art. Hence it is certainly not an overstatement to say that *Natyashastra* indeed laid the cornerstone of the fine arts in India.

The commentaries on the *Natyashastra* are known, dating from the sixth or seventh centuries. The earliest surviving one is the *Abhinavabharati* by Abhinava Gupta. It was followed by works of writers such as *Saradatanaya* of twelfth-thirteenth century, *Sarngadeva* of thirteenth century, and *Kallinatha* of sixteenth century. However the *abhinavabharati* is regarded as the most authoritative commentary on *Natyashastra* as Abhinavagupta provides not only his own illuminating interpretation of the *Natyashastra*, but wide information about pre-Bharata traditions as well as varied interpretations of the text offered by his predecessors.

Written in Sanskrit, the vast treatise consists 6,000 sutras. The *Natyashastra* has been divided into 36 chapters, sometimes into 37 or 38 due to further bifurcation of a chapter or chapters. The title can be loosely translated as *A compendium of Theatre* or a *Manual of Dramatic Arts*. The background of *Natyashastra* is framed in a situation where a number of munis approach Bharata to know about the secrets of *Natyaveda* or kinds of fine arts. The answer to this question comprises the rest of the book. Quite ideally therefore narratives, symbols and dialogues are used in the methodology of *Natyashastra* (*Indiazone*, 2009).

Adavus are the basic steps, which form the units on which *Bharatanatyam* items are structured. They form the building blocks of the dance style. The fact that Rukmini Devi belonged to the upper caste Brahmin community who were the effectual keepers of the contemporary South Indian society and was married to a European, had an important role to play in making *Bharatanatyam* the dance form we know today. Add to that the advantage that her exposure to western ballet gave to her understanding and contextualising of her own culture.

Natyashastra itself claims to be a modern text, despite its ancient origins?, a very contemporary treatise arising out of the then existing social and artistic trends. The author himself says that 'dress and speech should conform to the regional usage of spectators; the actors and producers should observe the local modes of speech and manners and conform to them and not necessarily

to what I have described' (in Rangacharya, 1996, p. xx). Paradoxically and more often than not, critics and dancers alike violate this very instruction.

This is where the question of 'talent' steps in. This word is usually defined as natural aptitude or skill. The *nattuvannars*, who were mostly men, could create items and combinations with their imagination and talent that brought out the intricacies of *Bharatanatyam* and strongly encouraged the dancer to explore the potential offered by her body. Every generation saw great *gurus* who became a legend through sheer dint of talent. This talent is not just one that makes for a skilled performance, (the phrase – a talented artist – is often used), but also the talent that makes for a holistic understanding and assimilation of the art form. It is this aspect of inherent talent which enables one to see how one is placed in the context of tradition' and how being creative within one's own tradition does not necessarily hamper the 'purity' and authenticity' of the art form. Talent is inherent and combines with skill to give 'flavour' to a performance.

Our classical forms, having derived from various aspects of the *Natyashastra*, enable enough flexibility within each proclaimed style without breaking the definitive principles that rule each distinctive style. Thus in order to be creative neither do we need to disown Indian classical dance and music altogether and look only to the west for innovations, nor do we need to trample on the ground rules that govern that particular style. Unfortunately a rising trend towards breaking of traditions seems to be the fashion among new choreographers, most of who neither have the necessary know-how or body training required for international standards of western dances.

Our *gurus* were extremely creative but because they were too conscious of consolidating their individual styles they tended to fall into a creative rut that induced a certain sameness. Though this identified and differentiated one school from another, it also worked to isolate the form, not share it. It was left to the disciples training under the *gurus* to carry on their work. Curiously, independence is not looked upon kindly in the Indian culture, be it within the social structure of the family or a unit of the artistic community. The ensuing friction between a *guru* and the disciple who wants to strike out on his/her own creative journey is a common occurrence.

Both the conditions of 'tradition' and 'talent' are also subject to another major factor – the economic viability of an institutionalised art form and the recent spurt of commercialisation accompanying aggressive consumerism. Now it has become a necessity for the artist to market himself. More importantly, with package deals being in vogue, the artist is often forced to opt for shallow superficial additions to add 'glamour' to the art form; in the process failing to impose the stringent training schedule, which acts as a quality control factor. Add to this the rush of the parents who are so eager to keep ahead in the competition for the 'most talented child' that they are more concerned about the number of public performances the children have to their credit rather than whether their children have learnt to appreciate the art form at all. The plethora of half-baked reality shows in turn is leading to more and more schools mushrooming, which piggy-back on so-called 'contemporary' or

'western' styles (both used as blanket terms) to retain students. For example, Indian audiences, especially in the eastern regions, have had no exposure to a Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan or Merce Cunningham and so in no way are we qualified to judge concepts of 'free movement' or the principles of 'core stability'. The incomplete information that reaches us is considered good enough?

This is happening more and more because of the isolated 'ivory tower' quality that Indian classical dance perpetuates. We do not feel it to be directly related to our lifestyles anymore as it was even two decades ago. The onus now lies squarely on the shoulders of teachers and performers to reintegrate art with life. The principles underlying a classical dance form are both scientific and artistic, encompassing a total education and not just relegated to a physical level. The Indian classical forms comprise a whole philosophy of living. Mercifully the time for reawakening has come and there are a number of individuals who are redefining parameters by re-establishing a link between the arts and daily life. There are people who are doing the uphill task of demonstrating how tradition, like a phoenix, is capable of reinventing itself with the help of talent, which does not stop at individual performances but has the spirit to accept and learn from other art forms.

The first name that springs to my mind is Chandralekha who harnessed the sheer power of *Bharatanatyam*, later on yoking it with the pliancy of *Kalaripayattu*. But as in any process of learning, the most important investment is that of time, particularly in terms of exposure and training. We cannot afford to be caught in an artistic warp, undecided which way to move, drifting along with the ever changing demands of a branded, short lived consumerist existence. This is where we need the help of art critics who to serve the cause of the arts and go beyond personal definitions of what a style is and what it should be. This is exactly what a body like the *World Dance Alliance* is endeavouring to do. Educating the general audience is as much a critic's task as that of a teacher or performer and a critic should also share his/her experience and insights

In India more than many other places, we need to re-examine the exact role of tradition. Teachers and critics alike should help young aspirants to free their minds of individualist baggage, encouraging them to relocate themselves within the evolving role of art, which forms the fluid framework of tradition. In order to do this we will have to first shed our own inhibitions and equip ourselves with more than rudimentary knowledge outside our own purview of expertise. In my view, compartmentalisation is out. The fine arts will have to be viewed in its totality of the physical, mental, spiritual and of course, social aspects. The most important curriculum is to renegotiate the function of the arts with everyday society in a collective spirit.

Art is a living thing, and the performing arts in particular are alive and breathing. Art needs to change and evolve but retain its attachment to its roots. It forms an essential part of the cultural identity of a person. Whilst each individual makes a contribution, no individual can claim it as his or her sole property. The performing arts – both the performer and the audience – are

part of a collective that has as much a role to play as much as does the individual. The way to enrich the arts is to continually be in the sharing mode. The process of reintegration of art and life has already begun. Let us not lock up our art form for the fear of it being stolen. Let us heal ourselves along with it.

Notes

¹ 'In a triadic approach based on the Vedas, existence of life can be described through God (Ishwara), Universe (Jagat) and an individual soul (Jeeva). Any individual could see the universe as an entity that consists of all beings including other individuals and nature. The GOD as Supreme Being and One Source (Bramhan) is seen as a free and independent entity responsible for the Generation, Operation and Dissolution of everything in the universe and all beings. The multi-faceted knowledge emanating from this One Source is referred as Vedas also called Shruti, that are mantras "heard" by rishis in their deepest meditative states and then orally transmitted as mantras to their disciples. The Vedas originating from Supreme Being is infinite and eternal.

The Vedas and Vedic literature deal with all aspects of knowledge on Supreme Being, various Gods, life, arts, nature, society and Cosmos etc through principles and applications... the *Vedas or Shruti* emanating from Supreme Being into the main *four Vedas* namely Rigveda (metrical mantras on various Gods), YajurVeda (prose-type mantras for rituals and yajnas), Samaveda (musical and metrical chants) and AtharvaVeda (mantras on society and welfare) through rishis Paila, Vaishampayana, Jaimini and Sumantu respectively.'

<http://www.salagram.net/sstp-mgpuja3.html> (accessed 23 August 2009)

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Biographical statement

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