





## NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

### CONTENTS

Teaching and transmission of Indian Performing Art .....	3
Sustaining Traditional Training in Kutiyattam .....	5
Transmission and Transformation: Yakshagana of Coastal Karnataka .....	7
Creativity and Tradition: Two Different Worlds? An Outsider's View on Education in the Performing Arts in India .....	11
Road with No End .....	14
Anadinath: the unknown Percussion Maestro .....	16
Less is More and More is More: Why Indian Music should find its way into General Education .....	19
Speaking the Right Language .....	21

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## "TEACHING AND TRANSMISSION OF INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS"

~~~~~ Hanne M. de Bruin ~~~~~

*Hanne M. de Bruin* is an independent researcher who has written about popular performance traditions in North Tamilnadu (vide De Bruin 1999, 2000 and 2001). She works as a facilitator for the Kattaikkuttu Sangam and the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School in Kanchipuram.

This issue of *Indian Folklife* offers a collection of short essays on Indian performing arts focusing on transmission. The contributors approach this theme from different perspectives shaped by their own cultural background and role as (young) academics and/or practitioners, seasoned insiders and interested (non-Indian) outsiders. The passing down of knowledge, skills and experience relating to a performing art form from one person to the other, across generations and nowadays also across geographical divides, is pivotal to the life and survival of the arts. The way(s) and context(s) in which transmission takes place greatly determine the form, content and status these performing art forms assume.

One of the most well-known Indian ways of transmission is the *gurukula(m)* where the student is tutored by her/his teacher in all the aspects of an art form, or one particular style within a form, over a long period of time. Several contributions in this issue point to the ambiguous status of the *gurukulam* system today. The long duration of the training, the fact that most knowledge is transmitted orally and not through 'text books' (and, hence, remains inaccessible to outsiders and unrecognized by art institutions), the difficulty of combining this kind of intensive training with regular school education, the implication of child labour in the case of young trainees, the absence of official recognition of the *gurukulam* training by government art institutions, and the falling apart of traditional systems of patronage of some of the performing art forms relying on this method of transmission, appear to predict the end of the *gurukulam* system. Yet, G. Venu, Katrin Binder and Evelien Pullens in their discussions of the Kutiyattam, Yakshagana and Kattaikkuttu theatre traditions signal what seems to be the *renaissance of the gurukulam* system in new and/or transitory forms taking on greater or lesser degrees of institutionalization out of necessity or desire.

These new *gurukulams* try to retain those elements of the old system deemed essential to the transmission of the form. But they are also tuned in to the demands of modern society and novel audiences and may use additional teaching methods gleaned from other traditions, including Western ones. A characteristic of these new *gurukulams* is that all of them have opened-up to students who previously were not involved in, or excluded from, the acquisition and the practice of these forms of theatre. With the transcendence of caste and gender barriers these new *gurukulams* appear to have truly absorbed the credo of *parampara*, 'proceeding from one to another'. They contribute to a new, and probably different, generation of successors in these important performing art forms.

Evelien Pullens looks at the delicate balance these newly developing *gurukulams* have to negotiate in using the old and the contemporary, in particular also where teaching methods and objectives are concerned. What is creativity and what does it mean within the *gurukulam* system, where teaching is often based on 'copying' the guru without much verbal explanation? According to her, creativity comes in only after the student has mastered the basics of the form. In contrast, contemporary Western drama training emphasizes a creative and intuitive process of learning with the teacher as coach rather than model. Pullens' discussion raises important questions, such as: Is creativity inherent or can it be developed/taught? Is the creativity found in the *gurukulam* system different from the individual creativity propagated in the West as the essence of art and the artist?

Elaborating on the theme of creativity, Pritham Chakravarthy reflects on how her own style of performance evolved and continues to evolve—outside the contexts of official art institutions—resulting in a number of different plays about womanhood. She describes the difficulty of casting off prejudices ingrained within us from a young age so as to be open to new realities. Throughout her own development as an actress her perceptions of gender, sexuality, culture and identity have shifted constantly to the extent that they may even contradict each other and/or elicit opposing loyalties. It is this state of *split condition* that interests her in particular and that she wants to use as a theme for her future performances.

Pulak Dutta, in a tribute to his father, percussion maestro Anadinath Dutta, reminds us of the fact that the training and practice of professional performers cannot be confined by labels and boundaries between genres, which are more often than not 'establishment-made' and serve other than artistic goals. Mutual exchange between performance traditions and their inherent flexibility to absorb new elements determines their liveliness—a quality essential to our enjoyment of these forms. The transmission of the arts depends on the generosity of the guru and her/his ability to offer all (s)he knows in performance and in the training of her/his students without reserve. Honest, personal transmission becomes critical in particular when a practitioner has no access to the tools of reading and writing. As one of the women

performers of a Tamilnadu-based Natakam (Drama) company said in an interview: "I cannot read and write. Therefore, I depend on the willingness of others to teach me." (De Bruin and Rajagopal 2001) Yet, in spite of their pivotal role in protecting the life and quality of different performing art forms, the contribution of many master teachers and master performers remains often unacknowledged—not by their students and audiences, but by the official arts establishment which has become the principal patron of the arts.

Citing the illustrious example of Maria Montessori, Ludwig Pesch pleads for the inclusion of Indian music making into the regular educational system as a pedagogical method to stimulate the intellectual and artistic development of young children and enhance their feeling of general well-being. He stresses the importance of *active participation* in the processes of listening to and making music—a remark that reverberates in other contributions, too. The implementation of music classes as part of the regular curriculum of schools can be realised with simple means. Text books and (expensive) instruments or an official *arangetram* are not prerequisites to successful music making; sensitive and well-trained teachers are.

Transmission is not only about the ways the performing arts are being taught and handed down. It involves also the ways in which we reflect on the arts and represent them through various media in the public debate. This kind of transmission implies conceptual and attitudinal issues, which play an important role in establishing hierarchies within and between art forms and their practitioners. Our representation of the arts, as practitioners, scholars, government officials, teachers, authors of text books and coffee table books about the arts and representatives of the mass media gives rise to

a whole range of subjective labels to describe and classify forms and their exponents. To name a few, authenticity, tradition, folk, classical, legitimacy, modernity and/or contemporaneity, innovation, creativity, stylization and orality are frequently applied descriptions to place forms and exponents within the cultural debate. The classifications of art forms are not always based on critical judgement of live performances and may involve open or cleverly hidden disrespect for the exponents of these forms, their background and the conditions and context within which they practice their art. Yet, they are influential. The resilience of "accepted", not so nuanced or simply wrong popular opinions, for instance with regard to the vitality of traditions, may grossly misrepresent the ground-reality and cause damage to the exponents of these traditions. As Maitri Gopalakrishna points out in the last contribution to this issue, the debate about the representation of the performing arts has come to include also the ways in which practitioners talk (or do not talk) about their form and how they place themselves in the wider field of cultural production. By talking about one's art the practitioner provides her or his (potential) audiences with a set of de-codifiers, which help individual spectators and sponsors to recognize, place and enjoy the form better. The ability to objectify one's art—what one is doing and why—appears to have become an essential tool to attract sponsorship and survive with dignity and earn a reasonable income in today's competitive performance market.

As a committed outsider I hope that you will enjoy reading this issue focusing on the transmission of performing arts in India. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to elicit self-reflexiveness and further debate on the lives of the arts and the lives of practitioners of the arts. \*

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## SUSTAINING TRADITIONAL TRAINING IN KUTIYATTAM

~~~~~ G. Venu ~~~~~

*G. Venu* is a performer, teacher and scholar of Kutiyattam and a senior disciple of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar. He is also the founder of Natanakairali (Research and Performing Centre for Traditional Arts) and Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam (Training Centre for Kutiyattam). His major contributions are his adaptations of Mahakavi Kalidasa's plays *Abhijana Sakuntalam* and *Vikramorvasheeyam* for Kutiyattam.

In our Kutiyattam *gurukula* tradition there is a saying: "One master: two students in the beginning period of training; one master: one student in the final stage." It reveals that proper training in Kutiyattam is only possible when the master concentrates on one individual's performance at a time. Hence, the most distinguishing aspect in the training of students for art forms like Kutiyattam is the very personal attention of the master, which is essential to them for their growth as artists. In the acting style of Kutiyattam, very subtle and minute

movements of the eyes and concentration of the mind must be observed and scrutinized by the guru, whereupon s/he gives guidelines to the disciple for further development.

The complex and vast spectrum of the performing arts of India, handed down from generation to generation from teacher to student, is preserved mainly through the *gurukula* system of education within the family or community. From



Kutiyattam - G. Venu as Surpanaka

her/his early years, the student can glean a great deal of insight from observing the guru's stage performance, as well as everyday demeanour. Then systematic training is imparted by the guru to the student. After a certain stage, the student also performs with fellow actors. All of this happens over a period of at least a decade, with the student and guru in very close relationship.



Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar in 1984

The system of the preservation of what UNESCO has termed "the oral and intangible heritage of humanity," through family tradition has almost come to an end. With that, the *gurukula* system has nearly vanished. In the second half of the twentieth century, public and private institutions have taken over the task of giving training in various arts such as Kutiyattam. An unfortunate outcome of this trend is that several vital aspects of training intrinsic to the *gurukula* tradition have disappeared, one example being the considerable shortening of the training period itself. Consequently, many traditional art forms are suffering from the decline in skill and potency of their artists and in the meanwhile, patronage and public interest in these art forms continue to diminish. As the basic spiritual values and aesthetic language of the forms become fractured, there is little scope for creative advancement which is necessary to sustain these traditions. Some of them have become obsolete, while others are on the verge of extinction within the time span of a generation. We need to think realistically of a practical but decisively radical way to arrest this loss of quality and traditions.

With our present experience, we now totally believe that a training system similar to the ancient *gurukula* system, while still meeting the requirements of the present societal and economic climate, is possible; *only* through such intimate relationship between teacher and disciple, such knowledge can be transmitted.

We were convinced that the loss of Kutiyattam, being the oldest surviving Sanskrit theatre tradition in India, would be an incurable loss for our Malayali culture as well as for the humanity as a whole. In 1979 Natanakairali began working with the Ammannur tradition of Kutiyattam artists whose family troupe was about to die out without a new generation of aspiring artists to continue their legacy.

Traditionally, only members of the Chakyar caste could become actors in Kutiyattam and Chakyar Koothu, while Nangiar women of the Nambiar caste could perform female roles in Kutiyattam and in the female solo theatre, Nangiar Koothu (which itself was nearly extinct two decades ago) and only men of the Nambiar caste could play the *mizhavu* (drum) in these performances. There



Kapila Nangiar as Urvashi in the Kutiyattam play *Vikramorvasseeyam* of Kalidasa

were about eighteen families, with different clan names like Ammannur, Kuttancheri, and Koipa, who were the custodians of Kutiyattam in Kerala. Each of the families was allotted a certain number of temples, the responsibility of the Chakyars of that family was to conduct Kutiyattam performances in those temples. As remuneration for this service, the

Chakyar families were given paddy fields by the temple, the income from which was quite sufficient to keep them in reasonable comfort. However, the system came to an abrupt end in 1970 as agricultural land was redistributed, stripping such families as the Chakyars of land, and thus, drastically affecting their lives and arts. Unable to live from the meagre income from their arts, young members of the family had to give up their traditional profession and seek other means of livelihood.

When Natanakairali began researching various performing arts and their future, what came as a shocking truth was that many renowned artists had no opportunities to teach, because they had no affiliation with institutions and organizations. Thus, most of them could not get regular work, while others desired to work as freelancers. Whatever the case might have been, many outstanding masters were idling away their inheritance as they had no chance to shape a younger generation. With these predicaments in mind, we started training programmes for some of the rare art forms under the auspices of Natanakairali. It was against this backdrop that a Kutiyattam training programme was launched at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, based in Ammannur Chakyar Madhom at Irinjalakuda.

Ammannur Madhava Chakyar was performing Koothu as part of *adiyantiram* (annual routine performances) (in temples and spent all his time in Irinjalakuda. At the age of fifty-eight, he had neither disciples, nor a *Kalari* (training centre) to teach in. He was very healthy, practicing more than one-hundred Surya Namaskarams (Yogic Prostrations to the Sun God) every morning. It was obvious that if he trained no one, it would be an irremediable loss for Kutiyattam. However, the Chakyar living in orthodoxy was not inclined to bring Kutiyattam outside of the temple, or to teach those who were not of the same community. Thus, it took some years of

persuasion to make him come around, and I became his first pupil from outside the traditional family at the age of thirty-four. During this period, the art-enthusiast, D. Appukuttan Nair also arranged stages for Ammannur's performance at Margi in Thiruvananthapuram and started a Kutiyattam section there.

We were keen to develop a *gurukula* training system along the lines of Ammannur Chachu Chakyar's training system, but adapted to today's modern environment. Chachu Chakyar established his *Kalari* in the beginning of the twentieth century when the Ammannur tradition itself was coming to a standstill. It was clear that the Chakyar's *Kalari* was able to impart a high-level performance training utilizing all possibilities of teaching and ways of knowing, because of his three principle disciples. The first was Painkulam Rama Chakyar who went on to establish the Kutiyattam department at Kerala Kala Mandalam, and was a pathfinder in introducing Kutiyattam to modern audiences. The second was Ammannur Parameswaran Chakyar who was responsible for preserving certain rare ritualistic performances in the temple. And the third was Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, one of the greatest performers of the twentieth century, who taught both at Margi, Thiruvananthapuram, and at Irinjalakuda. It is a known fact that the present legacy of Kutiyattam was developed by none other than these three disciples.

We were thinking of rejuvenating Kutiyattam at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam, with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar as the chief master, after a gap of about three decades. Details were collected from the aforementioned three Chakyars about the *gurukula* system in order to prepare the lesson plan for training. We conducted several discussions on the how to adapt the *gurukula* system to meet the requirements of the modern and changing atmosphere. We decided that the training period should be under fifteen years, and that

entering students should be no older than thirteen. We resolved that each batch would consist of no more than seven students and that each batch would have a full training period before a new batch could begin training. We accepted children of any community who displayed a flair for performance



Kutiyattam

and a readiness to learn and be committed to their study. We agreed that disciples should be able to carry out a standard school education so they could be engaged in the wider society and receive all the necessary certifications. We decided that the best times of day to conduct training were the early morning and evening; these times should be utilized to the maximum. Furthermore, apart from Kutiyattam training, we wanted the students to undergo training in other disciplines whenever possible and at suitable times of the year, including Kerala's martial art of Kalaripayattu, yoga and meditation, and Sanskrit classes; in addition they also would receive an extensive oil massage once a year. The Guru himself or herself should be supervising the training program as a whole and the training of each individual student, along with the other staff.

The challenge of artists trained in the *gurukula* system today is that they have no recognized certificate or degree which gives them access to job opportunities in formal, educational institutions. It is, therefore, imperative that universities which conduct examinations and impart degrees recognize the informal cultural centres of learning that the *gurukulams* are. They should allow students trained in *gurukulams* to appear for exams so they can prove their ability, and get the needed qualifications. We also keep the number of students trained in each batch so low because we only want to release so many artists into the world that there will be adequate employment for them. Making Kutiyattam a viable career is a significant challenge—one that we have been working to address all along.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi gave a total grant of Rs.2395750/- for the period 1991 to 2004 for the Kutiyattam training programme at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam. That is to say, on average Rs.184288/- for one year, Rs.15357/- for one month—this is only equal to what a government teacher earns in a month. This was the financial assistance that we received for thirteen years, which included the teachers' salaries, the students' stipends, and a twelve-day Kutiyattam Festival each year at Natanakairali. All these figures are cited here to draw attention to the simple fact that even a small financial assistance can go a long way to yield rich results for such *gurukula* training programmes.

Very recently, Kutiyattam was recognized by the UNESCO as "A Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity". Another key aspect of the *gurukula* system is the degree to which sacred, intangible knowledge can be preserved, passed on, and honoured from generation to generation. Secrets kept by the masters from a lifetime of experience and association with other performers, are revealed only to the most sincere and devout of students, and only when s/he reaches a mature level of strength and porousness to receive it. Today Ammannur Madhava Chakyar is 88, has bid farewell to the stage, and can no longer remember the vast score of Kutiyattam knowledge he has imparted to his disciples over the past twenty five years, nor can he recognize his own disciples. It was only because the Ammannur Gurukulam,

Natanakairali, and Margi had overcome all hurdles and conserved their *Kalaris* that Ammannur's art and wisdom are now in the hands of a younger generation. We now proudly have a number of young artists who can perform almost the entire repertoire of Kutiyattam, who have a sound base of knowledge about the tradition and its values, and are the cream of Kutiyattam. This new generation of artists who are making a place for themselves in Kerala and the world over include Usha Nangiar, Kapila Nangiar, Sooraj Nambiar, Ammannur Rajaneesh, Ranjit Ramachandran Chakyar, Saritha Krishnakumar, Aparna Nangiar from the Ammannur Gurukulam, Natanakairali, and Margi Madhu Narayanan and Raman from Margi.

Thus, the most fruitful and sustainable means to conserve and nourish traditional art forms is to give all kinds of encouragement to institutions that work in the *gurukula* tradition and to those who aspire to learn directly under eminent artists. This is the only way to truly save and nourish our art forms. \*



## Transmission and Transformation: YAKSHAGANA OF COASTAL KARNATAKA

~~~~~ Katrin Binder ~~~~~

*Katrin Binder* studied Indology at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. Her M.A. thesis on Yakshagana was published recently (Fisher, *Katrin*, 2004). Since 2001 she trains at the Yakshagana Kendra, Udupi, and performs regularly.

Yakshagana is a popular dance-drama prevalent in the coastal belt of Karnataka. The word 'yakshagana' appears first to have been used to refer to manuscripts of *prasangas* ('episodes') written in the 'yakshagana style', which seems to designate a literary genre rather than a performing tradition. We do not know when these episodes from the epics and Puranas became the basis for theatrical performances of the kind seen today. It also seems possible that Yakshagana once was a musical system.

The term Yakshagana now refers to all-night performances characterized by colourful costumes and make-up,



Bhagavata training

imposing head-dresses, vigorous dancing, a distinct style of music and witty dialogues. Today there are about thirty troupes of professional all-male performers performing every night during the season from October to April. They cover an area from Kasaragod District in North Kerala to Uttara Kannada District in Karnataka. Two distinct styles remain, Northern and Southern.<sup>1</sup> They differ in costume and make-up, dance technique and musical rendering, while they share the same basic performance style and textual base. Changing patterns of patronage gave rise to the emergence of two types of troupes, temple troupes and commercial troupes, both of which are very successful. Temple troupes give performances in fulfilment of a vow sponsored by an individual or a group. Commercial, ticket-selling troupes exist since the 1950s. They perform in large public spaces where they draw good audiences.

Patronage has always been crucial for the organization of troupes and their repertoires. Of late the spread of literacy and the popular media, in particular television, have influenced both *what* is being performed and *how* it is performed. While the new patterns of patronage and Yakshagana's soaring popularity show that the survival of this art form is not at stake, its face is changing under the impact of the overall cultural and social developments. Thus, transmission remains a core issue concerning the continuity of the tradition.

As far as we know, Yakshagana has always been a hereditary art and a mixed caste affair only in part. Unlike other South Indian performing traditions, there were no exclusive castes of performers or communities whose duties included performing. However, there is evidence that certain Brahmin communities were involved in the theatre as musicians; yet other Brahmins refrained from even watching a performance. Most other performers came from agricultural groups at the lower and middle level of the social hierarchy. There was no compulsion for a son to follow in his father's footsteps, yet to this day many performers have a father or uncle who was also a performer and there are several families with a long history of famous performers. Dalits and other castes held in low esteem continue to be excluded from participation in certain temple troupes.<sup>2</sup>

Below I will look at the transmission and mastering of the 'performance' (including all practical aspects of music, dance, make-up and performance techniques) and the 'text' as two separate issues, even though they do often overlap.

Informal ways of transmission prevail even today. Interested boys join a troupe at a fairly early age. There are no classes for the newcomers. Learning relies upon watching, copying and trying out. Sometimes one of the troupe members shows some steps or teaches a *tala* or song. I prefer to call this mode of learning *practical*

because it involves more than just visual and verbal elements; it is very much a 'learning by doing' approach. In contrast to aspiring actors, aspiring singers or drummers receive more conventional instruction that continues in the guru's house during the rainy season.

The practical mode of learning is organic in the sense that it allows 'growing up with' and 'growing into' the art form. It is systematic to some extent and moves through the preliminary dances and characters of *purvaranga* to minor characters before specializing in particular roles and character types. The dances of *purvaranga* comprise *talas* and a large variety of important steps, in addition to characters ranging from the comic (*kodangi*) and heroic (*kedage mundale*) to female roles, thus exposing the youngsters to the basics of Yakshagana. Today *purvaranga* has been shortened to the extreme. Its components are no longer convenient 'training dances' and the knowledge about their performance and meaning are lost.

Before India's independence in 1947, village schools (*aigala mathas*) provided a kind of basic education. The texts of Yakshagana *prasangas* were used as reading and writing exercises and memorized in their entirety. This contributed to the survival of this genre of poetic literature, in particular because stage performances used only parts of the texts. Today the village schools are defunct and the texts are not transmitted in this non-performance context any longer. However, they may be studied at the college level as part of classes on the history of Kannada literature.

For centuries, texts in the 'yakshagana style' were recorded on palm-leaf manuscripts. We know little about the popularity and distribution of these texts, but there must have been a rather large number of them and they appear to have been widely known. Starting in the 1920s, a large number of *prasangas* have been printed and sold as inexpensive booklets to the literate public. The first decades saw the printing of the traditional episodes, usually without any reference to authors, sources or editing processes. Most of these early editions are now unfortunately out of print. Similar books and booklets of new *prasangas* written in the 1960s to 1980s are available today.



Music lesson

Furthermore, 'performance scores' complete with verses and dialogues exist as hand-written notebooks in the possession of performers. They serve as memory-aids and as resources for young performers who sometimes copy them partially or in their entirety. Copies of commissioned works for commercial troupes (every troupe will have one or two new plays per season) exist only in the form of photo-copies.

*Tala Maddale* is a text-centred variant of Yakshagana. It has no stage-action, dance and make-up, but focuses instead on the sung verses and spoken dialogues. *Tala Maddale* exhibits the trend towards intellectualization: while it used to be the pastime of performers and villagers during the rainy season, it has now become the playground for the educated, urbanized, upper-middle class. *Tala Maddale* provides a way for young performers to pick up the conventions of dialogue-building and to sharpen their rhetoric skills. Contrary to the common notion, the dialogues are not improvised in the narrow sense of the word. Conventions for dialogue-building include common interpretations of characters and scenes, interpolated stories and jokes, fixed formulae for recurring situations, such as forms of address, taking leave, and arguments.

Yakshagana schools or centres founded after the 1970s aim to establish a formal basis of transmission. The centre for the Southern style is located in Dharmasthala, where renowned performers provide classes during the rainy season. In addition to the school run by the Hegde family in Idagunji, the institution for the Northern style is the Yakshagana Kendra in Udupi. As I have been a casual student there myself since 2001, I will use it as an example here.

The Udupi institution was founded in 1968 by Kota Shivarama Karanth, a Kannada writer, thinker and artist, who himself taught at the school. Karanth started the school because he disapproved of the direction the art was taking. With his scholarly work on Yakshagana and the training centre he brought the tradition to the attention of local and international scholars at a crucial moment. Not only the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi recognised Yakshagana as an art form, but so did the local urban educated population. Dr. Karanth made Yakshagana acceptable for the emerging middle class. His experiments with a Yakshagana 'ballet' form were controversial, but plays in this style are still successful abroad.

The boys joining the one year course are from all kinds of homes. When interested, a student can apply with a letter, stating his background and motivation. Around fifteen students are selected on the basis of an interview and preliminary exercises testing their rhythmic and physical abilities. Teachers, senior and junior students live together under one roof sharing chores and meals in a kind of *gurukula* mode. The classes start in June and close with the Annual Festival in April. The earlier directors, Karanth and K. S. Haridas Bhat, laid down plans for systematic training. The morning session starts

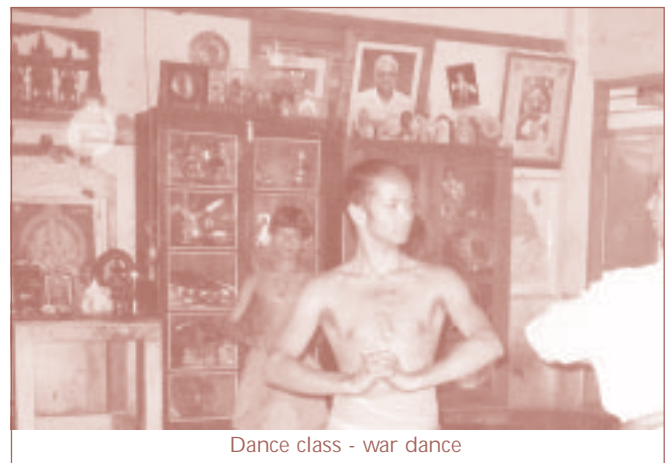
at 8.45 A.M. with a short prayer before the Gods in the main class room. It culminates in the *Ganapati stuti* and *arati*, resembling the ceremony in the green-room before a performance. The morning session from 9 to 11.30 A.M. and the afternoon session from 2 to 4.30 P.M. are divided into music and dance classes. After class there are a number of other activities, such as lessons in bhajan singing, Kannada epics, rehearsals and practice. During the one-year course, the students are exposed to all the aspects of the art, the tradition of versatile artists being thus continued.

From learning the *tala* syllables and the concept of *laya*, they move to clapping the seven *talas* in the two 'times' (*kala* or speed). Under the tutelage of Principal N. Lakshminarayana Rao or one of the junior teachers they are introduced to the first *ragas*. Singing of songs is learned in a very practical manner. For the common combinations of *raga* and *tala* there are 'model songs'. These are from various episodes and poets. Once the student has learned these, he can adapt new verses to the appropriate pattern of these songs. A profound knowledge of the rising and descending scales of particular *ragas* is not imparted.

An important difference between learning at the Yakshagana Kendra and the informal way of learning in a troupe is that the students of the school have to write down the *talas* and songs. This is done in a notation designed by the early Gurus of the Kendra. While practising their first plays, they will also write down dialogue lines and learn them by heart. At the end of the one year's course, they will possess one or more notebooks. Renowned Bhagavata N. Ramakrishnayya has authored a primer of Yakshagana, *Yakshagana Svabodhini* ('Yakshagana self-taught'), which serves as a reference book.

The hardest part for all students seems to be the rendering of dialogues. It requires skill and experience to get the right pitch and the appropriate melody, acquire a repertoire of conventional formulae, master the Sanskritized vocabulary and maintain a suitable body posture.

Some students continue training for a second year, usually to become drummers or Bhagavatas. The latter practice under the tutelage of Bhagavata Gorpadi Vitthal



Dance class - war dance



Dance class - basic steps practiced in a row

Pateel, now more than 80 years old. They go through a large number of the old and popular *prasangas* to acquire a basic repertoire and experience in rendering. The Guru, who knows an incredible number of *prasangas* by heart, also explains the 'way' (*nade*) of the episodes, i.e. the stage-conventions, which is important since the Bhagavata is a kind of on-stage director. In addition to the 'oral resource' represented by the Gurus, the small library of traditional *prasangas* is sought after, making the Kendra a meeting point for young and experienced artistes alike.

The traditionally oriented curriculum contributes to the survival of aspects such as the *purvaranga*, which are rarely performed outside. Apart from that, the Kendra has successfully established standards of teaching and performance that ensure a basic quality of both. Troupe managers count on this and recruit a good share of the students trained there every year. The formalization into a 'certificate course' under the roof of an established Pre-University College has also contributed to the rise in prestige both of the art and of the graduates.

Assessing the overall developments within Yakshagana, one can state that the status of the theatre and the social esteem for the performers has increased. New ways of transmission and learning have played a major role here. Yakshagana was brought to the attention of the regional intelligentsia by the right persons and at the right time. Karanth's name, and his 'interference', established it as an art form. Yakshagana has become an 'icon' of local identity and regional culture and has successfully attracted new patrons who also take an interest in the training. Perhaps as an offshoot of the intellectual attention, the performers have started to refer to themselves and are referred to as *kalavidaru*, 'artist'. Earlier designations were *atadavaru* (players) or *meladavaru* (those belonging to a *mela* or troupe), or more specifically *veshadhari* (one who puts on/wears *vesha* or costume and makeup), which, for different reasons, are considered somewhat derogatory terms. But irrespective of the name by which they are called, for those directly involved in the theatre Yakshagana is foremost a job: a family cannot live off fame only.

Yakshagana has its share of problems: for example, there are caste problems among performers and rivalries among troupes and schools. The recent trend of intellectual-

ization of Yakshagana gives rise to debates that are dominated by others than the 'common' performers. However, it is in these circles that the authority is claimed for defining what Yakshagana 'really' is, its history, what is 'right' and 'wrong'. One must realize that too much definition will limit the art's expressive possibilities and creative development. The same danger is inherent in the institutionalization that started with the Yakshagana schools. As it is, the art is very flexible, a flexibility which is at the core of its potential to survive. Yet this flexibility has also fostered developments leading to the loss of certain aspects. Because Yakshagana opened the stage for new stories, the characteristics of the 'traditional' ones lost importance or simply became obsolete. The preference has shifted to stories like local epics (*mahatmyas*) or stories of local heroes and deities. And at the commercial extreme you find Yakshaganas based on popular film plots.

The need to survive makes Yakshagana dependent on audience tastes. These seem not to favour lengthy devotional dances before the story starts; therefore, *purvaranga* and curtain entrances have been curtailed or done away with. The new stories have new heroes. Villains are no longer necessarily demons, so the impressing demon apparel and this character's characteristic movements and speech have become obsolete. Most striking is the vanishing of the characteristically shaped head-dresses of the Northern style (*mundasus*) from the commercial stage. Although they are heavy and complicated to tie, their disappearance is not totally under-

standable, as it is precisely the shape of these head-dresses that has become the popular symbol of Yakshagana. Lastly, the Yakshagana Kendra teaches 'tradition', but its present dance teacher and artistic director, Sanjeeva Suvarna, also works to improve Yakshagana's aesthetic appeal and expression. The



Demon character

divide between 'tradition' and the stage of the commercial groups has become so large that it appears at times somewhat arbitrary to teach students 'traditional things', which they have to unlearn again once they join a professional troupe.

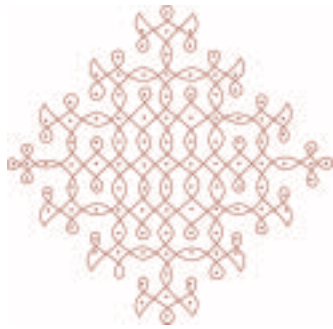
In addition to the world of professional troupes the existence of innumerable Yakshagana laymen's (and women's!) clubs and the fact that schools include brief Yakshagana shows as part of their Annual Day Celebrations, add much to the liveliness of the 'scene'.

The Yakshagana Kendra has been holding regular weekend and holiday classes for children, teenagers and adults with overwhelming response. This amateur scene generates a broad interest and an engaged community of *aficionados*, thus securing future patronage and sponsorship for the professional troupes and a public interest in the survival and transmission of the Yakshagana tradition of coastal Karnataka.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following text mostly refers to the Northern style, although much of it is true for the Southern style as well.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, performers from the *billava* community (classified as backward class/caste) protested against their discrimination to perform in the famous Mandarti (and Maranakatte) troupes. They obtained a partial success. An initially all-Dalit troupe now employs performers from all caste backgrounds. □



## Creativity and Tradition: Two Different Worlds?

### AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW ON EDUCATION IN THE PERFORMING ARTS IN INDIA

~~~~~ Evelien Pullens ~~~~~

*Evelien Pullens* is a theatre maker, puppeteer and author of children's books from the Netherlands. She taught puppetry at the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School (Kanchipuram) and gave workshops at Ninasam (Heggodu) and Rangayana (Mysore).

The musicians are playing a strong melody. A student comes in and sings loud, clearly a complicated song. He dances in a circle with fast steps. The teacher corrects him. He shows how he should do the steps and the student does it again.

It is fascinating to join the Kattaikkuttu rehearsals with thirty enthusiastic children of the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School. Kattaikkuttu, or Kuttu, is a traditional music theatre from Tamil Nadu. Though I don't

understand the Tamil language I never get bored of the strong emotional way of singing of Kuttu. I enjoy the energy of the steps and the acting that goes along with the music. Good Kuttu performances have a high energy level and have different layers, ranging from profound religious songs to light, humorous and at times banal jokes. As a foreigner educated in a country without many traditional roots, I am attracted by this colourful, meaningful theatre. In Kuttu I find elements that most theatre makers in the West have lost. What are those? Is it the connection with religion and rituals? The unity and duration of a Kuttu play? The beautiful costumes?

To observe a Ninasam voice training is another experience. Also fascinating. Ninasam is a modern Drama School in Karnataka. A group of students stand in a circle. The sound they produce is loud. All have a different pitch so the cacophony is terrible. But the energy is fantastic. It reminds me of my own voice training at my Drama School where we had to search for an open voice. At first I had no idea how to find it. The Ninasam students try to listen and to find the tremble of the sound in their bodies. Students hold each other's belly to help. They are concentrated and caring. I feel the joy of expression. The same kind of joy that I experienced in the Kuttu class, but with a slightly different colour. Another focus.

I had my theatre education at the Art and Drama School in Utrecht in Holland. My training concentrated basically on creativity and improvisation. 'Learning by experience' has a high value in modern European drama training. The underlying idea is that everything you can possibly express exists in yourself. In modern theatre we are not looking for a repetition of what has already been done, but we are looking for new creative ideas. Though we had a lot of fun at the Drama School and made enriching experiences and playful discoveries, the artistic work felt sometimes meaningless, without any base.

When I began to follow Bharata Natyam lessons in Holland I was confronted with a completely different system of teaching. First I had to learn the basic steps before we could even start learning a dance. To add some creative input became only possible after the *arangetram*.



Puppetry workshop with Evelien Pullens for the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam December 2003.



Workshop with Maya Krishna Rao for the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam  
December 2003

As I learned, this was not only because of the system of teaching; it had also religious reasons and was based on the idea that you have to respect not only your teacher but also the whole heritage of

knowledge that is involved in the art form.

The religious and cultural impact of the Bharata Natyam training fascinated me. It made me feel I was learning something really special and gave the dance a more profound meaning. On the other hand I became restless, because I couldn't use my individual creative ideas in this dance style. My fascination and restlessness made me curious. Is it possible to combine creativity and tradition? Or are these two different worlds? Is it meaningful to use exercises meant to express creativity in traditional training? And is it useful to teach traditional art forms in a modern drama school?

In Ninasam, where most teachers come from the National School of Drama, I found an educational system that is based on the contemporary Western method. The Ninasam Theatre Art School exists for twenty years. It gives formal theatre arts training to young enthusiasts to develop the contemporary performing arts in Karnataka. Students are trained in voice, movement and acting basically to make their body and mind a flexible and open instrument. They learn to improvise and to become creative through drama exercises. They also gain experience as actors by playing in modern theatre plays.

Students of Ninasam get a limited training in Yakshagana, the traditional folk theatre of Karnataka and in traditional arts of Kerala. As far as I could see, the training is given to empower the body and to build some knowledge about the past. Sometimes the steps, costumes and other elements from Yakshagana and Kathakali are used in modern plays dissociated from the original setting. I think it is useful to confront the modern students with their past, but for a real understanding and use, longer training is required. The lessons they get at Ninasam are not enough to understand the deeper meaning and power of traditional arts.

I gave a sixteen days workshop at the Ninasam School. During my lessons in contemporary creative puppetry I noticed a few times that students used some of their village folk culture background in the task I gave them. For instance, they made a big puppet like they had seen in village ceremonies. In this case the creativity training brings elements of traditional theatre and rituals in a new way on stage. What does it show? Only the shape

or also the power behind it? Is this a mix of creativity and tradition, or is it too superficial to make it meaningful?

I didn't stay long enough in other *gurukulams* to find out if they use any creativity training in their education. Only at the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School (KYTS) I had the chance to observe and join the classes. In this School I found many mixtures of both worlds.

The main drama education at the KYTS is Kattaikkuttu. This traditional theatre form consists of singing, learning stories and text, steps and acting. The Kuttu education itself is more or less taught by the 'copy system'. Teacher Rajagopal shows his students how they should act, students try to copy. I noticed more freedom here than in the Bharata Natyam lessons I followed. In Kuttu it is normal that a junior-actor just goes on stage without much rehearsal. He joins the other actors and tries to learn his role by doing it.

Also in the structure of traditional Kuttu we find space for new ideas. The role of the Buffoon (Kattiyakkaran) is mainly based on improvisation. A Buffoon is free in his acting. He can experiment with creative and playful acts. The Buffoon can make jokes during long Kuttu performances and can mingle with the main actors and the audience. The other actors can improvise, too. They have to. If you perform for eight hours it needs creativity to go through the night. Because you can't expect everything to be rehearsed and fixed. Though there is space for improvisation, the system itself is based on copying.

Can I say that copying a teacher or senior actor is not creative? That's not true. Nobody is the same. You need creativity to copy your teacher within your own possibilities. For instance, your teacher is tall and has furious eyes. If the student is small and has small eyes how can he produce the same effect as the teacher? He needs creativity to find his own way to act 'impressive'. So in both the ways of education creativity is needed. And for creativity we need self-confidence and fantasy. Some actors are talented and free in mind, others need some training and stimulation to use their freedom and open mind.



Doctor, aliens, monkey and school children in 'The Magic Horse' performed by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam



'Veriyattam' by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurkulam

Kuttu teacher Rajagopal has been abroad. He is inspired by modern theatre. I see the influence in some of his lessons. He uses exercises like running, sudden stops and freezes. He lets the whole class support in developing a difficult part of a role. They have to try it all together. These are bits and pieces extracted from Western drama-exercises. He also invites contemporary artists to give workshops to the students to introduce them to other theatre styles and bring them new inspiration. Students learn and develop themselves through the workshops, and their teachers, too.

Rajagopal tries to make his students aware of their progress and abilities. I guess this is part of the Western influence as well. As far as I have seen, most Indian education does not encourage individual thinking. Rajagopal does, also with the youngest student of the KYTS—a girl of six. He organises regular meetings with all of them to discuss their views of the plays they are working on, the workshops and the classes. He tries to develop critical thinking through these meetings. He wants the students to judge their own practice. Experiencing all these new influences, students will improve their creative abilities. They get ideas about the possibilities in the world and in theatre. Their mind gets bigger.

As far as I could see, the blend of teaching methods at the KYTS provided a range of opportunities to the students and a lot of power. Teaching is an ongoing process of balancing and finding out the right way of education within the practical options given by a teacher's possibilities.

There is one more feature that attracted my attention. Talks and lectures are important, not only at the KYTS, but also in other Indian teaching settings.

Rajagopal stands for his class and holds a speech. I don't know Tamil, but I get the meaning of his talk. It is about finding your own way in life, acting with confidence. The talk is about being alert and creative. Many Indian teachers try to stimulate creativity by small lectures as I noticed in lessons I followed. They give their ideas and

knowledge to the students in the form of talks in the hope that it will bring their students further. They try to improve acting by mental knowledge.

In Western creativity training, the focus seems to be more on exploring than on lecturing. Knowledge seems of less importance. Students explore several ways of acting. The teachers ask them questions about their experiences and make them aware of their discoveries. We can say that contemporary training tries to open the mind and intuition. It pays more attention to the process than traditional training, because there is no fixed goal to reach. In creative processes, we don't know where we end. There is no teacher to copy. The teacher is the coach of the process instead of the model. So, not the goal, but the process is most important and within that process the individual steps a student takes. As I mentioned before, every human being is different. Every human being has a different background. So, every student will take different steps.

The values transmitted in most contemporary art training are about being yourself, being individual and being open to intuition and new inspiration. In most traditional art training the values that are transmitted are about being good in the skills, being open to the knowledge of the tradition and to the attainment of spiritual power.

Again I would like to mention Kuttu teacher Rajagopal to give an example of development and mixture of traditional and modern. Rajagopal tries to reach new audience and to transmit a message through the plays he makes. Traditionally Kattaikkuttu tells the *Mahabharata* epic. Village audiences know the stories well and they get relief by listening to the old narratives again and again. But city audiences need fresh, catchy characters, new costumes and actual themes. Rajagopal feels it is necessary to make Kuttu for the city-people, too. He wants to explore his own artistic borders and to reach a broader audience.

In *The Magic Horse*, a play written for children, he introduces two aliens. These two are fantasy characters that come to Earth in search of *sakti*. By using these



'Veriyattam' by the students of the Kattaikkuttu Gurkulam

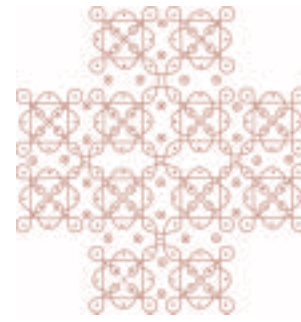
innocent characters he makes it very clear what *sakti* is and also that we need it to achieve something in life. The aliens meet a lot of different characters in their search for help. They don't speak Tamil, but they express themselves in a fantasy language. The creative lines of the songs are put to Kuttu music. The strength of Kuttu songs is maintained, even when the words are humorous jibberish language. The combination of tradition and fantasy works strongly and meaningfully well together. Not only the music and the text, also the costume design has a mixture of both styles. It makes the play attractive and understandable for children from different backgrounds.

Rajagopal's play *Veriyattam* or *Possession* uses another creative way to express a message to an audience through Kattaikkuttu. Costumes and characters in *Veriyattam* are close to traditional Kuttu costumes and Kuttu heroes, but the story is new. What is interesting about *Veriyattam* is the inclusion within the play of different aspects of Tamil village culture, such as a religious procession in which a traditional Terukkuttu is being performed and possession occurs. The play also contains 'Tiger dance' or Puliattam and vigorous drumming. In addition to a novel story, city audiences have the chance to witness cultural elements they don't know anymore. In a creative and artistic way the audience is educated about its heritage.

I felt and experienced that different methods of education can inspire each other in many ways: knowledge and experience, disciplined skill training and chaotic brainstorming, copying the teacher and following your own inspiration in mind and body, ritual power and creativity. But why should we mix methods of education and look beyond our own way of teaching? What is there in creativity without knowledge? It's an empty shell. Acting without skill-training, stories without meaning and appearance without inner power are boring to watch. What do we find in traditional plays without creativity? They fail to connect to our actual life. We experience them as old fashioned. We don't understand them.

The world today is a mixed world. All kinds of global influences become part of the society. We cannot speak anymore of a traditional society where the religious power is the only truth. Modernity has taken over. But awareness of religion and heritage still exists. And in those parts of the cities where it has been lost, there exists a desire for these ancient values.

Art tries to reflect on the actual situation. It has to! People are changing and searching. So art has to change and search, too. It has to be meaningful for the artist and for the audience. So, art needs to look for a blend of expressions, traditional ways of acting and contemporary forms. Old stories with actual influence. All around India you find interesting and beautiful performances where creative and traditional aspects are mixed in several ways. An artistic quest is going on in learning, in searching, in discovering, exploring and balancing. With different outcomes. I believe that knowledge of both worlds will enrich students of the arts. \*



## ROAD WITH NO END

~~~ Pritham K. Chakravarthy ~~~

*Pritham Chakravarthy* is a contemporary theatre actress and playwright. She performs in Tamil and English.

Growing up in a Brahmin ghetto, studying in a high-walled convent school, with no men but my own kith and kin, I began in cloistered surroundings. Though training in dance and music was a part of it, performance was never thought of as an option. So when I faltered into Sabha drama at the behest of my maternal uncle, it was only seen as a child's play. For some time, they thought, and then she would let it go. But I did not. Never thought of it.

Though I have been involved with Tamil theatre for over twenty years, developing my performing style into a specific form came about in 1996 by default when Gnani, a senior amongst Chennai theatre activists, was making a television serial on fifty years of India's independence. The script involved a dramatic performance of about four minutes. Gnani had done the script based on the recordings of Rathnabai, set in the early part of the last century and revolving around the stigma faced by middle class widows. When he called me to do it, time was limited and I had no clue about how I was going to do it. It evolved during the shooting, as a kind of 'sit-down-and-I-shall-tell-you-my-story.' Even then it did not have a definite form and was still in its maiden stage.

In 1998, my involvement with Voicing Silence (gender wing of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation) took this form to yet another level of maturity. A. Mangai, a theatre director based in Chennai, had returned full of ideas after her Fulbright scholarship. She had three interviews with women, which fascinated the two of us from the word 'go'. But reading out one of the scripts to friends did pall our energy to take it up as a performance script initially. 'The narration is linear; there is nothing dramatic or dynamic. What is fascinating about an old Dhobi woman talking about her life and donkeys? How do you term this theatre?'

The doubts raised were so loud that Mangai decided at the last moment to add a song, a chorus and possession dance, for the premier at Dalit Kalai Vizha (Dalit Arts Festival). I went on stage at 11.30. The piece was preceded by an Oppari (traditional lamentation) performance and to be followed with a Thappattam (a folk drum dance).

We had no idea how our piece would be received. What followed was a surprise to all of us. The piece, planned for about 30 minutes, had lasted for 45 minutes when I got off stage. The women in the audience were right on line with me, adding to my performance with loud nods and crackling their knuckles. When they actually followed me out into the rain to give me a hug and demand when I would act the piece in front of the real Marudhayi (the name of the Dhobi woman), I felt several inches taller. Truly, Marudhayi makes me feel like a giant even today every time I speak her words. The play has now travelled to a variety of audiences including feminist groups and hard-core theatrophiles.

That led to a long search to read more than what my own femininity limited me with. It was a chance viewing of an, 'Oh! Feel sorry for us'-type of a film on the *aravanis* (transsexuals), which prompted me to explore this community, which I had selectively forgotten. But hesitancy of experimenting with my body for a subject like this deterred me for a while.

In mid-2000, I interviewed six *aravanis* and came up with a 45 minutes story about a generic *aravani*, called *Nirvanam*, which was then shaped by members of the Thamizhnadu Aravani Association. Once I had met my *aravani* sister in a church and started talking to her over a cup of coffee in a roadside

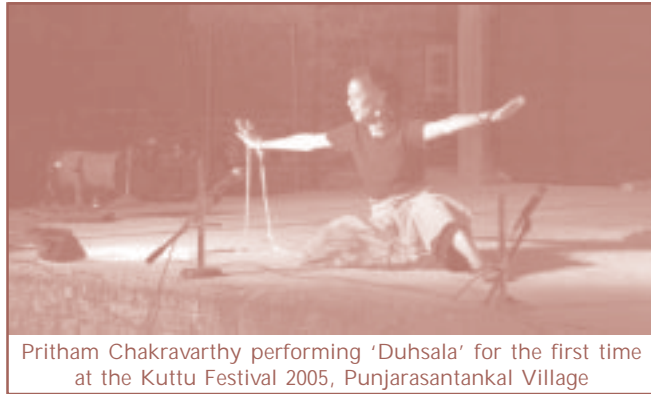
stall, things fell gradually into place. It then took five months of meetings with different *aravanis*, in my own house, often in the presence of my daughters, sometimes by appointment, sometimes by-chance, in suburban trains, on the beach, at tea stalls, sometimes recorded on tapes, sometimes recorded in memory, but always documented with mutual trust that gave shape to what *Nirvanam* is today. The promise to retain their dignity, portray not just their pain, but their determination and sturdiness in withstanding it, their pleasure in coming into their womanhood, finding solidarity with fellow travellers, and daring to exist against all odds, moulded both the form and content of my performance.

On my return from the US after my Fulbright scholarship, I have been following a similar interview-tell-a-story pattern to address two major issues along with two NGOs working on those: Domestic Violence for an NGO called Prevention of Crime and Victim Care, and Child Sexual Abuse for Ashreya. In both cases I conducted extensive interviews with victims, psychologists and legal experts before putting my story together. The stories were then test-run amongst experts and in the case of domestic violence, amongst victims too. *Hands Off* and *Hit Me Not* today circulate amongst factory workers, school parents and corporate agencies to create awareness on these issues, both in English and Tamil.

In December 2003, Venkatesh Chakravarthy, the person I am married to, was invited to script a play for me based

on the behind-the-scene scenario of film actresses in the Tamil Cinema for the 'Amman and Avenging Women in Tamil Cinema' seminar. The script of *Kannadi*, as the piece came to be called, travels from the early 1930s when the Devadasi women, after the drafting of the Abolishment of Devadasi Act in 1934, moved to the city to find employment in the Tamil cinema—a process that went on well into the 1980s when middle-class anxieties and pressures started acting on them. After its premier at the seminar itself, in English, the play has travelled widely within the city both in English and Tamil and has recently been invited to be performed at the 'Conference on Post-colonialism and Popular Culture' at Stella Maris College, Chennai.

The decision to tell only stories, stories about womanhood, was a conscious one. In 1996 I thought it was simply a natural progression to my own evolution. But then the stories I started saying were not mine, though the way I said them were mine. Immaterial to



Pritham Chakravarthy performing 'Duhsala' for the first time at the Kuttu Festival 2005, Punjarasantankal Village

who got the story, from where, I had to find my own comfort zone in putting forth the story, which did not have classic Greek literary structures, which were linear, but real, to make the characters true, dignified, and not caricatures. I made false steps. Fell on my face, got up, dusted it and started all over again.

With five full-length one-woman acts, three scripted and performed by me, it seemed that, perhaps, there was little new to say on gender. That was when Maitri Gopalakrishna called asking for an appointment. I had not yet heard of the Kuttu Festival 2005. I had been briefly acquainted with Hanne M. de Bruin and P. Rajagopal, but knew not much of their working style. 'We, as the curators of the festival would like you to come up with a one-woman piece exploring the *Mahabharata* from a contemporary, feminist point of view.' The call was huge and daunting.

I had just two months in which to cover at least five versions of the epic and at least two different commentaries and then zero in on what I would like my piece to cover. Many of the themes had already been taken up for performance by other traditional and modern South Indian theatre, puppetry and dance groups. This was my sixth venture in preparing a text for myself. I had the onus of keeping the piece in line with my agenda of preference, that of 'performing gender'. When stumbling on to Irawathi Karve's *Mahabharata* text, *Yuganta*, helped. Then watching the way Veenapani Chawla had spring-boarded from the same text, *Yuganta*, for her script on Bhima helped me to arrive at a convincing script based on the life of Dushala.

The emergence of *Dushala* as a play is embedded into a long Indian history of the treatment of the girl child. In fact, it was the absence of Dushala that made my script. To be born as the only sister of the Kauravas, growing

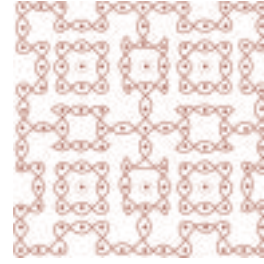
up in the beautiful city of Hastinapur, having watched the entire epic unfold under her eyes, being a victim of the circumstances, but remaining a passive agent to all, fascinated me. In all the versions I read during my preparation, I could find her mentioned just four times and in all cases only her name. I decided to watch all the other women through the eyes of this silent spectator. Girl child neglect weaved itself into the text with ease. Next came working out the performance itself.

In all my scripts I have given particular attention to clothing and props. While *Nirvanam* is consciously performed with the clothes I am in on that day and keeping all else to a stark, bare minimum, and keeping in mind to erase my sexuality, *Kannadi* works on real excess. For *Vellavi*, the script about the old Dhobi woman, it was colours spread across the performance area. For *Dushala* I had the choice of recreating the regal costumes normally used for *Mahabharata* performances or come up with something more contemporary. Though I had the floor plan of the performance area, I decided to wait until the day of the show itself to work out my style. Two saffron screens already available with the organizers were decisive. I used black as my beginning and end colours adding a green scarf. The sackcloth skirt, which the Festival's costumer Margot van Dam designed, became my own stage costume to which I added a mud pot and a long cycle chain. I tried not to impersonate the character, but keep both the teller and told separate from each other. That way it avoids the traditional identification with the character and allows her to unfold in the performance:

*If gender everywhere is a social construct, then do I choose my gender to be performed for the day like I choose my costume for the day from my wardrobe? If its other— the masculine— [only] defines the idea of feminine how do I understand 'feminism'—as a transgressive way of life? If culture is not limited to geographical or linguistic distinctions, how do I come to terms with my own past, and thereby function in the present and future? Is my past my own or does the community I emerge from have a claim to it also? Is it then limited by how other communities view this past? Is every deed of mine defined by some dark secret from my past? If all identity is already assigned as something unchangeable, then when do I begin to question the 'I' itself and the way my body is circumscribed by this culturally constructed identity? What if, if I let my body break the shackles of these knots; no matter how badly it is hurt in the process and to recognize that I am not alone?*

Definitions of how I see gender, sexuality, culture and identity have shifted greatly in this last decade. I have come to understand that all these are fluid and that each one of us operates under *split conditions*. Ideally it is this split condition that I would like to explore in future. I began to expand the idea of the split condition to all avenues from where we gather our conditionings. My own studies, my history, my chauvinism of holding my first thirty years with a pride of being Tamil, then

understanding that my upper caste identity splinters it no matter how much I de-brahminise myself, my first academic step into learning about gender then spreading into more organic expressions of the same in everyday life, my comfort zone of *story-telling* as opposed to more traditional *acting*, and my activism is what I would like to marry into my forthcoming performances. Thus, they can become not a mere personal journey, but a human journey that can be taken up to study any situation by anybody in the future. \*



## ANADINATH: THE UNKNOWN PERCUSSION MAESTRO

~~~~~ Pulak Dutta ~~~~~

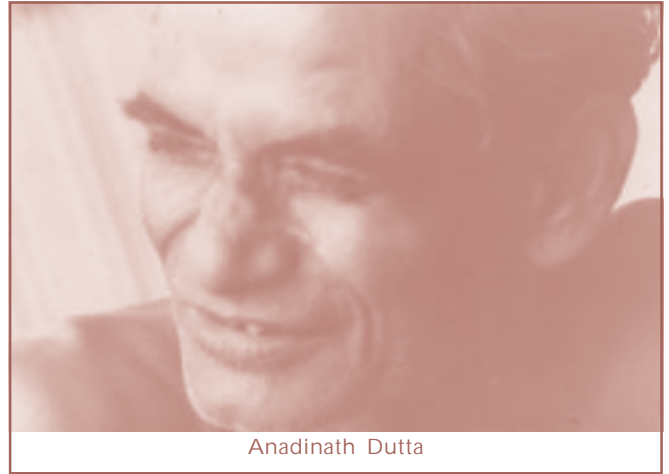
*Pulak Dutta* is a practicing artist, musician and music director. He teaches at the Department of Graphic Art, Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan.

On December 18, 2002, Supriyo Tagore described Anadinath Dutta as a 'distinguished ashramite' in the weekly prayer at the Upasana Griha in Santiniketan. 'I consider him a distinguished ashramite because he was one of the very few talented people who quietly served the ashram without expecting anything in return.'

Anadinath was born in 1923 at Bishnupur into a family of traditional craftsman. Bishnupur is well known for its rich cultural heritage. It is also the only Hindustani Classical Music Gharana of Bengal. Situated in the district of Bankura of West Bengal it was the capital of Mallabhum, a Vaishnava kingdom. The whole of Eastern India was flooded with the spirit of creativity in every sphere of cultural activity during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A new worldview, a new consciousness—the wave of Vaishnavism was felt everywhere from the king's palace to the hut of the poor. Vaishnavism was not only a religion; it was a religious, social and cultural movement at the same time—an 'aesthetic religion'. The borderline between high and low art, classical and popular art, between terracotta temple, Baluchari silk, conch shell craft as well as between Kirtan and Dhrupad was either very thin or did not exist at all. It is still quite vibrant with its festivals, music, traditional craft and a simple way of life. Anadinath spent the first twenty-six years of his life here. His personality and his music developed in this cultural ambience. Amelia Maciszewski, a former music student of Santiniketan and an ethnomusicologist from Austin, video-interviewed him in 1996:

*'I used to play a small Dhulki when I was about three years old. My father, Ramgati Dutta, used to sing as he worked on his craft and I used to play with him. When I was a bit older, around four, he bought me a bigger Dhol. I have heard from him that Ramprasanna Bandyopadhyay used to pass by our house. He would stand behind the wall and listen to me playing for at least five minutes on his way. He told my father, "I will teach him if I am alive when he is old enough". Of course I did not get the opportunity—he died before I was ready. My father used to play Khol and I started playing that Khol. Since it was too big for me he bought me a smaller one. During the Puja I heard Dhol players drumming and dancing in Malleshwar. As I came back home I put the Khol on my shoulder and started jumping around as I played on the Khol, copying the drummers I saw. The handle broke and the fired mud Khol fell on the ground, broken into pieces. It was repaired with tin and I used to play on that. When I was about five years old, Subodh Nandi and I used to play Dhol and dance around with a group of children from five to eight years old who sang Nam Kirtan. The group was very popular. Then a little later my elder brother, Jagannath Dutta started learning Khol from a guru. He used to practice on the terrace and I used to listen to him. When he finished and left the Khol there, I would go and start playing. Observing that, my father bought me another big Khol and started training me personally—he would wake me up at three o'clock in the morning. In cold winter morning the training—right from hatuti sadhan—would continue at least till six o'clock. When a Kirtan singer called Bhushan Babaji went out for begging in the afternoon he would sit with me and teach me. He sang and asked me to play with him. I used to play all the tals of Kirtan with him. I started playing Tabla along with Dhol and Khol with Krishna Jatra. It was called Balak Sangit as it was a Jatra group of children.*

*...Then an offer came to me from Bishnupur Music College to join the college as a Tabla teacher. I was reluctant and said, "I don't know anything, how can I work there?" Pashupatibabu, the Tabla teacher of the college used to come from another place and could not be regular since his wife was seriously ill. Surendranath Bandyopadhyay [Principal of the college] asked me to come twice a week and I agreed to join the college as Tabla teacher [in 1946]. My attention shifted from Khol to Tabla. I had played Khol with all the great Kirtan singers of those days, played in Ramayan Gan, Jatra etc. I had participated in all the major Kirtan festivals and played solo Khol. In the college Surenbabu asked me to attend Pashupatibabu's Tabla class and learn from him. But when I sat in his class he stopped teaching his students because I was quick to pick things up and he did not want me to learn. I told Surenbabu about it and decided not to attend the class any more. I was teaching Tabla and was accompanying with Sitar, Esraj and Song—I was teaching and learning at the same time. Surenbabu used to sit with me after the classes were over. He played Banjo and I accompanied him on the Tabla. He would explain things to me—sam, phank, tal etc. He taught me the fingering of playing theka in high speed with ease. I used to play Pakhawaj with Gopeshwar*



Anadinath Dutta

*Bandhyopadhyay's Dhrupad. Since I played Khol it was easy for me to pick it up. Gopeshwarbabu showed me a few things about Pakhawaj.'*

With this background Anadinath joined Santiniketan as an "Instructor Accompanist in the Music and Dancing Section of the Vinaya-Bhavana, in the Visva-Bharati" in 1949. As Visva Bharati turned into a central university in 1951 his services were transferred to "Sangit-Bhavana with effect from July 1, 1951". Rabindranath Tagore, then Vice Chancellor of Visva Bharati, concluded his appointment letter with the following words. "...may I offer you my sincere thanks for your meritorious and loyal services to the Visva Bharati in the past and also express the hope that I shall enjoy the same from you in the future in our common endeavour to make the Visva Bharati an ideal centre of learning and culture, as contemplated by our Pratishtatacharya?"

There were three major musical fields in Santiniketan where he operated. First of all there was a whole world of Rabindranath's song, dance-drama and festival; secondly, the Indian Classical Music and the third, folk and popular music. He was the only person around to be able to perform in all three categories effortlessly and musically. He was neither playing Khol on Pakhawaj, nor playing Tabla on Khol. When visiting Kirtan or Tappa singers came to teach at the institution he was the only person who knew and could play those difficult and rare tals with them. It was Anadinath who was asked to accompany the classical musicians who performed in Santiniketan—with Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri as well as with instrumental music. Rabindranath incorporated elements from classical, folk and popular traditions in his songs. "He [Anadinath] was therefore," Biswajit Roy writes in 'A Khol Maestro', (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 01, 1986), "an ideal percussionist for Gurudev Rabindranath's songs, both of the classical genre and folk types, as also for his dance dramas and operas. ...all the official programmes of Visva Bharati had to rely on the virtuosity of Anadinath. Whether it was the movement of the cards in Tasher Desh, or the Manipuri or Kathakali steps in Chitrangada, he could effortlessly give them an artistic form on his instruments. ...While giving solo recitals in Khol, he could make his instrument speak and render verses through it."

Rabindranath's musical training was insignificant by any standard of musical training, yet he was one of the greatest

composers of all time. He also had peculiar and vague ideas about *tal*. His discussion on *tal*, *lay* and *chanda*, especially in his essay 'Sangiter Mukti' expresses the confusion quite clearly. In some of his songs, although the melodic structure is fundamentally cyclical, it does not complete the cycle a few times within the song. Thus, some new *tals* were born like *Ardha Jhap* (2+3=5 beats) or *Jhampak* (3+2=5 beats). They are known as 'Rabindra *srishta tal*'. To the best of our knowledge we know that he himself never called them *tal* nor did he compose the *thekas* for them. Anybody playing with a Rabindra Sangit singer had to go through the painful experience of constantly negotiating with time and metre. What was Anadinath's device to negotiate this? I have noticed that most of the time he would not play the *theka* but follow the rhythm of words and moods. As we know, this is a common practice in Dhrupad but with time and metre being perfect. There are other songs based on new *tals* where the time structure reached completeness and achieved a character of *tal* like *Nabatal*. The published version of the division of the time structure is 3+2+2+2 and the *theka* is *dha den ta l tete kata l gadi ghene l dhage tete*. *Dhage tete* creates an expectation of something else to follow to return to the first beat or the *sam*; as the last phrase it gives a feeling of incompleteness. Anadinath's *theka* was far more complete and musical: *dha den ta l tete dha l tete kata gadi ghene* with the structure being 3+2+4.

Anadinath never treated *sanchari* and *abhog* as separate units of the song, just as in Dhrupad, and therefore never played a *tehai* at the end of *sanchari* which finishes at the beginning of *abhog*. This happened not only because he was taught to treat them as a single unit but because of his deeper understanding of the musical logic behind it. Talking about *tehai* brings us to the most fascinating part of his music. He was a master of *tehai*s. He hardly played short *tehai*s, most often they were long. With his remarkable ability to 'see' the song, he would start the *tehai* from a beat no one could ever think of and finish it on the first beat of the song, not necessarily the *sam*, with amazing mastery. Another distinguishing feature of his music was his application of polyrhythmic pattern—3 over 4 or 4 over 3. He would not do it with every song or sustain it for a long time. But with his measured and most musical application, the song as well as the singer/s used to come alive. There was always an element of unexpectedness in his music although his music was unmistakably always his own.

The most distinguishing qualities of his music were a result of his ability to remain open minded and constantly grow and experiment as a musician. Otherwise how can a traditionally trained musician remain so creative in facing new forms of music such as Rabindra Sangit or Tagore's dance-drama? Or playing Khol, Dhol, Tabla and Pakhawaj with traditional dance forms like Kathakali and Manipuri? It is certainly not just learning to play the instruments but more importantly the musical atmosphere he was brought up in, that of Bishnupur, which made this possible. It is the ability to live meaningfully which is central in any process of transmission.

Basically, the act of giving was what kept his life enjoyable and worth living. Although it came naturally, it was the only way to live happily within the power structure he operated in. A few examples should make my point clear. The final performance of Tagore's dance-drama was not the only thing the Santiniketan community looked forward to. Everybody was allowed to be a part of the month-long rehearsals as spectators. It was interesting to notice the concentration and distribution of power within the performing community in these sessions. Hierarchically ordered as, 1. The director 2. The singers 3. The choreographers 4. The accompanists (Esraj-Tanpura) and then, at the end, 5. The percussion players. In one of those rehearsal sessions the director looked hard on the singer for not singing the song in the right tempo, the singer looked back to the Esraj player, who gave her the lead, and to prove his location within the power structure, the Esraj player looked at Anadinath irritatingly, saying, "Can't you play properly?" For a simple change in the tempo of a song within the whole dance-drama, another drama had to be performed! Anadinath, who had nothing to do with the tempo, was only following the tempo that was already there, took it with a smiling face.

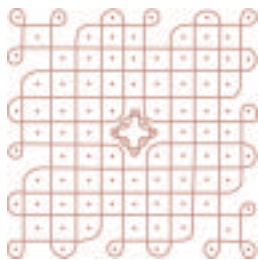
A cassette of Rabindra Sangit by Shantidev Ghosh was published in Kolkata in 1990 ('Ami Tarei Khuje Berai', Sound Wing, SWC 2080). All the songs, except two, were taken from a live performance held in Santiniketan and accompanied by Anadinath Dutta. Some time later, a letter was published in the Letter to the Editor section of two Bangla newspapers regarding the cassette. It states, "Sound Wing has published this recording (presumably with Sri Ghosh's consent) and has started marketing it without asking for permission from the instrumentalists. They didn't even think it important to mention this particular programme or the names of the other artists." To which Shantidev reacted with a nasty letter written to Anadinath on January 6, 1991 accusing him and his son to be behind this 'false' allegation. Anadinath's response was exceptional. He wrote him back on January 18, 1991, "I have heard the cassette and have no doubt about the fact that I played the Khol and Tabla with those songs but I don't need to prove them. There may be people urgently in need to prove that they were not mine." Years later in 2002, after Shantidev died, Visva Bharati and Saregama India Ltd. published a CD of Shantidev's songs (CD NF 142473). This time Anadinath's permission was sought and the names of the instrumentalists were mentioned in the CD. But a casual hearing of the CD by a person with minimum sense of music tells us that not all the songs were accompanied by Anadinath and that there were at least three different Mandira players involved—yet we see one name for Khol-Tabla and one for Mandira!

In relation to the on-going debate on Intellectual Property Act, it is important to look at the ground level reality. As Biswajit Roy quite rightly points out in the above mentioned article, "...it will not be within the foreseeable future that a percussionist is to receive his due from his listeners and society in general. ...One recalls all that because a percussion expert of the level of Anadinath Dutta still now remains in comparative obscurity despite

making a distinguished and many-sided contribution to the classical and folk music of Bengal as well as to Rabindra Sangeet, for well over four decades." The same concern echoes in Supriyo Tagore's speech at the weekly prayer, "Perhaps we have failed to give him his due. ...he has left the ashram as quietly as he served it."

On November 25, 2002, I was giving a shave to my father, Anadinath Dutta, at around ten in the morning. He was recovering from a critical illness—could not recognise people, could not speak, could not eat for about a week. I was talking to him as I was shaving; every now and then he would touch his face with his hands to feel if the shave was proper. He was also talking to me but could not produce sound. His passionate eyes full of love and affection figuring out where he was, his voice desperately trying to communicate, whispered, "I can understand everything but I can't produce sound".

...At around ten at night the same day, I saw the same pair of eyes, come alive in a flash—not figuring out where he was but deep in his ability to be one with others. Moments later I watched his soundless, visual death—blood flowed out of his mouth where his music flowed. Isn't it this deep urge to be one with others, or the realisation of relational existence, which make creativity possible? Then, the question remains: how does this get transmitted? ❖



## Less is More and More is More: WHY INDIAN MUSIC SHOULD FIND ITS WAY INTO GENERAL EDUCATION

~~~~~ Ludwig Pesch ~~~~~

*Ludwig Pesch* (1955) is a musician, musicologist and teacher specialized in Carnatic music. He studied music at Freiburg University Hochschule für Musik and at Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts in Chennai. He is the author of *The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and received the 6th Rabindranath Tagore Cultural Award of the Indo-German the Cross of the Order of Merit by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany for his work. At present he is involved in a research

project of the Bern College of Arts and Natanakairali in Irinjalakuda, which focuses on music education in India.

All children hitherto deprived from opportunities to make music as part of their "normal" education are bound to benefit from being exposed to music from an early age.<sup>1</sup> Participation of children and young people, in and outside India, in Indian music has a positive effect on their intellectual development and well-being, in addition to providing scope for celebration, sharing and light-hearted abandonment. To attain this little is needed in terms of money and/or (costly) instruments. In fact, the absence of big money and costly instruments may be a boon in disguise to enhance the students' participation in music. The scarce funds available should be invested in training and rewarding good teachers and artists who can make a difference in the day-to-day realities of regular schools, rather than in the acquisition of instruments. Musical instruments may be expensive to acquire and maintenance intensive. They can stand in the way of having a good time of making music together, because they are too difficult to handle to be useful in general education. Unless a musical ensemble is the aim of a class, their absence can have a liberating effect. It is more fruitful to sensitize pupils to auditory perception, good posture and proper breathing and the diverse manners by which collective music making can increase their concentration and self-confidence.

At the same time, *more* music is called for in order to enhance the very quality of daily (school) life. Children should be encouraged to make music themselves rather than enjoy it in a passive mode. The importance of music as a school subject is not so much the study of music for its own sake, but its effects on the whole mental and spiritual world of children, above all on their morals.<sup>2</sup> All this can happen naturally when administrators are convinced of the significance of music for the development of the child and willing to undertake efforts to make joint music experiences part of the school routine.

The importance of music in general education was perceived already by Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), herself an ardent admirer of Indian culture. Until the revolutionary concepts of Montessori education percolate down sufficiently in order to enable average school children to make good use of their innate talents, their teachers should be encouraged to explore avenues that are both affordable and pleasing so as to stimulate their pupils to develop themselves artistically and intellectually. In actual practice this means doing *more with less* in order to ensure that music classes will also reach school children at the grassroots level. While doing so Indian educators can draw inspiration as well as expertise from a range of initiatives started with great success in other fields such as ecology, adult literacy programmes and information technology (Seashore 938 (1967)). Even the most basic music experience a child enjoys at school helps her to cope with situations encountered at home, in public spaces, such as places

of worship, where individual feelings tend to be subject to restrictions that may stifle the very talents civil society needs to cultivate in order to flourish and prosper as a whole. Montessori was the first (Western) educationist to realize that several considerations need to be taken into account when one wants to give priority to the quality of a school career rather than to the status of a learner's parents:

- all healthy children are (musically) talented, but much needs to be done to bring out their latent talents;
- disadvantaged and handicapped children (the first group she worked with as a young medical doctor in a poor Italian neighbourhood) have special talents that can be cultivated with some insight into child-psychology and patience among parents and teachers alike;
- peer-teaching among children of different age groups needs to be harnessed by way of eliminating age-based segregation at the pre-school level and possibly even beyond;
- good education always relies on a continuous trust building effort mirrored by an atmosphere in which children feel safe, are motivated to maintain some order on their own, and stimulated to learn by way of playful activity (play being the "work" of young children—work that deserves to be taken seriously in Montessori's qualified opinion).

Educators need not necessarily be trained in the Montessori system to realize that they stand much to benefit themselves, just as their pupils, by looking at the potential offered by including music activities in their classrooms on a routine basis rather than on special occasions, such as festivities. The key in doing so successfully lies, no doubt, in the enormous variety of experiences inherent in all activities relating to Indian music—*it need never be the same thing twice!* A majority of South India's leading performers has benefited from the old *gurukula* personal education system before obtaining degrees in syllabus-based training available in government recognized institutions in order to qualify for employment. Yet in daily school life, most children in "normal" schools rarely get an opportunity to learn and practice music, leave alone reflecting on the need for endowing it with the values we would like to associate with it: joy, beauty, serenity, mental peace, and even transcendental experiences in tune with our religious background. Who has access to music education? Access is almost exclusively reserved for children belonging to the educated middle and upper class although some notable exceptions are, naturally, found in the poorer families of hereditary musicians for whom the artistic pursuit is endowed with prestige and the promise of economic benefit. Among the hurdles faced by many teachers, some are relevant in our present context: the use of jargon, a wrong perception that text books hold the key to good music education, and a lack of proper understanding how musical and non-musical memory works. There is also the misunderstanding that

elementary music classes need to emulate the conventional training of a performer with the customary (and costly) *arangetram* debut appearance looming on the horizon. In situations where textbooks are widely used, as in the case of the teaching of "classical" Carnatic music, these books do not include detailed indications of tempo, intonation or dynamics as in a Western music score as all these parameters are regarded as impossible to notate in Indian music and therefore supplied by means of oral transmission. Several solutions to fill this "void" have been attempted with varying success but have never met with widespread approval among teachers and performers. Those involved in the training emphasize the importance of memorizing rather than encouraging sight-reading even in the form of syllabic notation that is commonly used as an aid to memory. In short, in a culture that has never relied on detailed notation scores in the past, the musical strength to harness also lies in a multitude of non-musical factors. Musical experience is acquired in close contact with other forms of arts. Text books can (and do) supplement music classes designed to train professional or competent amateur performers. But in general education, they are either dispensable altogether or new ones need to be written from scratch to be interesting and useful. The key to success is therefore motivation at every level, not achievement. The sense of achievement is its own reward as music education follows its natural course in the awareness of a child's need for developing her own faculties in several, seemingly unrelated fields. For these reasons, it matters little whether teachers apply time-saving teaching methods supported by text books and multimedia technology, as long as children have the opportunity to actively participate on a regular basis. Many school children are deprived of such active participation in music making, denying them the chance to fulfil their innate potential in a manner that directly influences the quality of their lives and of society as a whole. Even at the risk of being dismissed as being too idealistic, I believe that this has all to do with peace (not just the absence of violence), tolerance (not mere co-existence) and prosperity (the general conditions in which life becomes meaningful and enjoyable). It is not unlikely, though hard to prove, that the recent decline in music education in Western societies, is part of a crisis wherein the lack of access to music education goes hand in hand with the lack of self-esteem which, if combined with socio-economical deprivation and cultural alienation, leads to an alarming rise in youth delinquency. It is therefore heartening to see how initiatives such as the recent production of a music film *U-Carmen* in South Africa's black townships, wherein the participation of local talent stands central, and inner city music projects in Germany, have brought a fresh sense of direction and justified pride to countless young people. In these and similar instances, the professional aspect has been secondary while active participation is what music making is really all about.

What can be said about music education that is of practical relevance in our present context? A Montessori music

teacher described musicality and music teaching as follows: “[t]here is no such thing as a non-musical child; there are just non-musical adults who did not get this practice as children. Songs give children a way of expressing emotions, and the very act of singing is a physical release. I have always watched for the casual, unintentional singing in class, knowing that it is a positive sign. (...) We do not need beautiful voices to model singing for children. (...) In a class, where children work individually instead of having group lessons, the teacher will sing a song, make music, dance, at any time during the day with two or three children who aren’t busy. Others may join in as they please. Any child can make music whenever she feels like it.” (Olaf 2004)

### The Suzuki Approach

*What does not exist in the cultural environment will not develop in the child.*—Dr. Shinichi Suzuki

The “Suzuki Approach” (<http://www.europeansuzuki.org/approach.htm>) is “based on the principle that all children possess ability and that this ability can be developed and enhanced through a nurturing environment. All children learn to speak their own language with relative ease and if the same natural learning process is applied in teaching other skills, these can be acquired as successfully.” Suzuki referred to the process as the Mother Tongue Method and to the whole system of pedagogy as Talent Education.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel that keeps organized music education going, Indian educators should check out for themselves which of the following Suzuki criteria are most relevant to the children entrusted to them before identifying the actual contents that are desirable in their own environment, including the language(s) spoken and the familiarity with some local artistic idiom or other:

- an early start (aged 3-4 is normal in Europe)
- the importance of listening to music
- learning to play before learning to read
- the involvement of the parent
- a nurturing and positive learning environment
- a high standard of teaching by trained teachers
- the importance of producing a good sound in a balanced and natural way
- core repertoire, used by Suzuki students across the world
- social interaction with other children: Suzuki students from all over the world can communicate through the language of music

Among the above points, “listening to music”, preferably to competent musicians, and “learning to play before learning to read” touches upon the very essence of Indian music training. The Indian perception that everybody sings—in one’s natural voice or otherwise—creates favourable conditions for the rest to follow in a playful

manner without worry of failure or ridicule from one’s peers. This is in fact the main point as regards the title of this article, *less is more*, as the voice is a free gift we all share, and one’s voice need not be refined to become an active participant in Indian music, whatever one’s age may be.

At the core of children’s artistic experience lies the opportunity to repeatedly probe the depths of their own imagination and expressing their findings through a type of music that is appropriate for the very moment this happens. This calls for a situation where there is no room for fear, such as appearing to be incompetent while handling an instrument or even damaging it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the following the word “music” may be substituted by “performing arts” in the widest sense: “classical” as well as “semi-classical” or “folk”. The idea of the confluence or interconnectedness of several art forms is expressed in the word *sangita* or *sangeet*, found in many Indian languages. The use of the term *sangita* to refer to any particular genre of vocal or instrumental music is a fairly recent phenomenon.

<sup>2</sup> Dmitri Kabalevsky quoted in *International Journal of Music Education: Showcase* 2004:155.\*



## SPEAKING THE RIGHT LANGUAGE

~~~~~ Maitri Gopalakrishna ~~~~~

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All arts, including the performing arts, today are as much about labelling, categorisation and other semantic choices used to “sell” oneself, as about the “art” itself. Categorizations such as “folk”, “classical” or “contemporary” are such widely used labels that we have begun to give them presupposed meaning; the actual defining of these terms is extremely challenging. What is more, no two bodies ever agree on what it really means to be “folk” or “classical” or “contemporary”. Take for example some of these points of distinction—

*"A classical art form has pan-Indian recognition."*

Meera Mahapathra, *Principal*,  
Sri Ram Bharathiya Kala Kendra, New Delhi

*"We work with contemporary choreography, which means we are not necessarily talking about gods and goddesses. We are more interested in "us" and about how we have developed. Our lives."*

Jayachandran Palazhy,  
Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts, Bangalore

*"Folk art is community specific and its reach is specific and rather limited."*

Jagdish Raja,  
Artists' Repertory Theatre, Bangalore

*"Classical art forms require much more training over longer periods of time."*

Mr. K. Phanindra Reddy, *Director*,  
South Zone Cultural Centre, Thanjavur

These statements were not complete definitions but rather distinctions offered by these eminent cultural practitioners. Each of these distinctions can be negated by several examples that prove the contrary like, for example, the fact that Bhangra, though a "folk" form has pan-Indian and even international recognition, or the years of rigorous training that Kattaikkuttu or Yakshagana performers have to undergo in order to be professional. This serves to show that these categorisations are arbitrary and an artist or art form can be placed and place himself/itself in any of these categories for a variety of reasons. Yet, where you are placed has very real consequences for the status and recognition of the form, the income of performers and their access to other resources. In fact, the very survival of a form and its exponents has to do with where this form is placed. The question on where, how and why a form is placed where it is, therefore, becomes important.

The placement of an artist or art form involves two mechanisms. The first is how the artists place themselves and their art form and if they actively do this at all. Second is where other players, such as the government, independent funding bodies and the media, place the form.

While co-organising the Kuttu Festival 2005<sup>1</sup> I discovered that there was one obvious dividing line between performing groups. This line was "the need and ability of self-definition and analysis". There were those groups that were conscious about this question of placement, definition and why they did what they did. These groups had no dearth of information about themselves and were happy to talk about who they were. On the other side of that line were those performers and groups that could or would not talk about their art. It seemed like I was being told that talking about their art was unnecessary and it was just what they did. While I would be inclined to look at the latter sort of group as the one to whom their art was more fundamental and therefore somehow more "authentic", I cannot ignore that as a society, we place much importance on talking about one's art. In fact, modern society expects artists to be conscious of

their creation and the choices they make in creating, and more importantly, be able to verbalize this. This is of course completely contradictory to the way traditional art functions. As expected, it is the groups we label as "folk" that fell into the latter group. So before we even examine the question of how artists define and categorize themselves, there is the even more fundamental issue of whether they define themselves at all.

In talking to funding bodies, I realised that this ability to define, justify and analyse one's art and one's place as a proponent is pivotal in determining one's chances of access to such bodies and the amount of funding. Basically, artists who could not talk about their art were eligible to receive less monetary appreciation and were low status. Their art was deemed "limited". The ability to talk about and explain your art is important when it comes to taking your art outside, to an unfamiliar audience. As Mr. Jayachandran Palazhy (Attakkalari, Bangalore) said in his very opening remark to me,

*"Our work is to facilitate new work for other artists, younger artists and to create a context for their work. Creating a context is not an easy thing. In most of the work [art] (folk/classical), there is an element of codification from the larger reality of life, experience or memory. That information comes in a coded format and the ability to de-code varies depending on the audience. It depends on how much of discourse there has been in a verbal medium or written medium and how much this person is educated or informed about this work by their own experience or actual effort."*

So some artists, by talking about their work, present their potential audience with a series of decoders. By doing this, they ensure that the audience looks at a form as more than just an exotic spectacle. Other art forms, by virtue of the fact that they have been researched, written about and institutionalised in the past, have already equipped society with decoders. Bharata Natyam, for example, is such an art form. The inability to talk about your un-institutionalised, un-familiar art form in a language familiar to an audience will result in the audience's reluctance to go beyond simply looking at the form as an exotic spectacle. As a result of this, cultural law makers in all goodwill will assume that such a form must be "preserved" only because of the fact that it is "our heritage". The powerful social role that such uninstitutionalized, unfamiliar art forms may play becomes lost because of our inability to de-code. By extension, the kind of patronage reserved for something that is simply a spectacle to be "preserved" because it is our "tradition" is far less than what is warranted by something that serves a strong, vibrant function in society.

What this fundamentally translates to, is this simple fact: Laws and policies are made in cities by law makers who speak and understand a language that has more in common with modern western societies than traditional Indian society. It therefore becomes imperative to be able to present your form in that language and using those tools to avoid verdicts such as "dead", "marginalized", "exotic" or more politically accepted, less obvious labels to the same effect.

Let me give you a concrete example of where there is this language problem. Many representatives of government funding or training institutions have told me that remuneration differences for different categories of art forms are based on the length, rigour and kind of training required to become a master in that art form. Again, our western notion of what artistic training might entail, is quite specific. Even though we have come to understand the *gurukulam* system, we still look for codified step-by-step, institutionalised training that is done in separation from the daily life of the student. However, this is not always how training is imparted. One of the quotations in the opening section of this paper is that of the Director of the South Zone Cultural Centre who asserted that “folk” art forms had less and easier training than “classical” art forms. From seeing the training that goes into Kattaikkuttu, I can quite safely say that even though the approach to training is different, there is no doubt that there is tough, rigorous initiation and practice that goes into the making of a Kuttu performer. Again, I see this disparity as a language problem. Being able to define specific, codified training seems to be an essential step to gaining status and recognition as an art form.

Those artists that do define themselves have a variety of reasons for defining themselves in a certain way. Besides actual belief, theory or medium that shapes their art, a large determinant of definition is what the funding bodies are looking for. Funding bodies come in the form of government and private cultural institutions as well as corporate houses and the general public. Artists look to be unique yet be eligible for funding from a variety of sources. For practical reasons, funding bodies have categories and earmarked areas for funding. The government, for example, seems to have a definite hierarchy of art forms that makes a certain form more supportable than another. I have noticed that dance is often more easily supported than theatre; “classical” forms are more easily supported than “folk” forms and forms that have formalized training centres are seen as more credible. Corporates, as expected, most often, look to support art forms that have the same audience as their target customer group.

Looking for funding for artists in India is a full-time occupation. Even though it is difficult in any country, the government of India has a system that is somehow less proactive than it could be, making the whole process of applying and receiving funding time consuming and cumbersome. Jayachandran Palazhy of Attakkalari, Bangalore asserts, though, that—

*“More than an evil design, it is lethargy and lack of proactivity. It is a missed opportunity... I wish structures were easier so artists could simply concentrate on delivering quality instead of having to spend so much time on fund raising”. He then goes on to say, “The government must have consultations with artists and the artists also have to realize that it is not in our interest to put the government down but actually facilitate them in developing of our self-expression. If we have 101 things happening in a city, the cultural vitality of the city will improve. And if you have training and discourses then young people will have the structures and nobody will be desperate to go abroad because*

*there will be as much training here. For this the government must initiate a dialogue with the artists and the artists have to be prepared to go beyond their narrow selves and not just little funding for one small project and realize that there is a larger issue.”*

The rapid pace at which Indian societies are changing provides great scope for the creation and propagation of new forms or the re-definition of older existing art forms to fit the mould of today. Both urban artists that I interviewed spoke about the role that the changing society and the resulted search for identity had played in the defining or re-defining of their art.

*I think what is exciting is that there is a greater demand within ourselves for a way of being, the way each one of us are. We are not like our grandfathers were.... Our interests are not only in rituals or are not time/space bound like maybe in a village....But we are not necessarily falling flat on all things western either. We are developing a separate identity and that is a very exciting time. That is a process where information is gravitating to an Indian identity. There is little effort being put into processing these things in a contemporary manner. We [Attakkalari] believe in giving tools and devices for people to process their own experiences, their own memories and their own imagination.*

Jayachandran Palazhy, Attakkalari, Bangalore

*I think urban audiences have changed. They want more things that are instant, fun..... Bangalore had always been an audience that preferred comedy. So with all these changes we, as performers found that something we liked originally as a play, didn't work on stage anymore. It sounded too English. Which is why Mahesh Duttani's plays, for example, are so popular. They are urban plays, they are about families that speak in English but are still very Indian. Issues about India. So everyone jumps on them...*

Arundathi Raja,  
Artists' Repertory Theatre, Bangalore

Changing tastes and needs of the audience call for not only a look at what and how you perform but also how you advertise or sell yourself. There are a few trends emerging in the words urban artists are using to describe work these days. I have noticed a frequent use of words like “polarity”, “post-colonial”, “reality”, “dialectic”, “commentary” and others in the same family. The growing trend among these groups is rather than describing their art form as a form that stands alone, use its social basis or purpose behind its existence as a defining factor of the form. Cultural bodies and training institutions often speak in terms of “revival” or “revitalization” in relation to more traditional typically rural forms of performance. Despite what the words suggest this often doesn't mean that the form is actually dying. It simply means that people in cities or around the centres of cultural policy making are unaware of the form. I have heard many (Government) officials refer to Kattaikkuttu as a “dying” art form while only 80 kilometres away a Kuttu performance draws in crowds in thousands. Deeming a form as “dying” gives the cultural world the privilege of “reviving” it. Nevertheless,

many practitioners have also started referring to their form as a "revival" or "revitalization" of some traditional form.

In reality, the big change in audiences in areas which used to have strong community performing art traditions was heralded by the boom of commercial cinema. The religious and deeply ritualistic nature of many traditional performing art forms have managed to keep it alive despite the general public turning to cinema for entertainment. Some practitioners have reacted to this shift in taste by incorporating film songs as fillers in a traditional performance while others feel that this destroys the "authenticity" of the form. Either stand is taken obviously and is well publicized and asserted. While the former definitely works on drawing in larger crowds and by extension, more sponsorship from commercial establishments, the latter enjoys patronage from government bodies and other cultural institutions that are concerned about "authenticity".

The good news is that none of these categorizations or placements is static. Mobility between categories albeit slow, is entirely possible. Historically, we can see this by the shift of forms such as Bharata Natyam from a "folk" to a "classical" form. More recently, Kathakali has undergone the same change. "Classicalization" is a much sought after endeavour. I asked Ms. Meera Mahapathra, Principal, Sri Ram Bharathiya Kala Kendra, New Delhi, what this actually meant—

*"All forms have rural and folk roots. When a form is refined, it becomes classical. A classical form has pan Indian recognition and has much research done on it. It is set in a written form and is more fixed."*

The Sri Ram Bharathiya Kala Kendra has recently started teaching Chau, a folk dance form from Orissa, and is working on building the form up to a point that it can have classical status. Similarly, there has been the "contemporization" of many forms. Often, this shift doesn't warrant a big change in the form but rather, just a shift in the way the form is brought across to the world.

I began this paper by saying that there were two mechanisms involved in "placing" an art form. Namely, how an artist places himself/herself or their art and how it gets placed by outside bodies. It is now clear, however, that both mechanisms are strongly inter-related and influence each other greatly. As we have just seen, a choice made by the artist can determine how he/she places his/her art, which can then determine how a funding body places it. The important point is not "how" artists choose to place themselves but "if" they consciously place and verbalize their art. It is the will and ability to talk about your art that really is the dividing line between arts that have high patronage and status and those that don't. Even though, we, as a society believe in some intrinsic value of all artistic forms, unless we are provided with some decoders, an art form will be

just an exotic spectacle and therefore receive less respect. As an example of the importance of speaking the right language, I again quote Mr. Jayachandran Palazhy, this time on the role of the arts in society put in purely commercial terms.

*I would really welcome a vision that would change the society through art and enable dancers and artists to do that. Investment in the society need not reflect immediately in a commercial manner. Also the business community should know this. What it will do is improve the general fitness of the society so that the society can create better products.*

Once you go beyond this fundamental dividing line of speaking the right language, there are a score of choices that an artist has to make. Similarly, there are also very different rules and norms that regulate government, private cultural institution and corporate patronage. I have, in these last few paragraphs, outlined just a few.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> The Kuttu Festival 2005 was organised by the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in Punjarasantankal Village, Tamil Nadu from 1 to 6 March 2005. ❁

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