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

1. 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.


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 Kattakkuttu 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 2005¹ 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.
Bangalore asserts, though, that—cumbersome. Jayachandran Palazhy of Attakkalari, of applying and receiving funding time consuming and less proactive than it could be, making the whole process
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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
proactiveness. 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 discourse 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 well
originally as a play, didn't work on stage anymore. It
sounded too English. Which is why M aheesh 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...

Arundathiraja, 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

1 The Kuttu Festival 2005 was organised by the Tamil Nadu Kattaiikkutu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in Punjaraasankantak Village, Tamil Nadu from 1 to 6 March 2005.

References


