

NFSC Folk Festival, March 2002: oral narratives, folk paintings, musical instruments and puppetry of India

M.D. Muthukumaraswamy

This festival subscribes to the poetics of invisible connections. Operating between the twin poles of totality and plethora NFSC's festival intends to show how different performances, folk paintings, oral narratives, musical instruments and puppetry traditions refer to one another, organise themselves into a single discourse, converge with institutions and practices and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period. Inter-textuality, as it is known in the parlance of literary criticism, is the measure, practice and enunciating principle behind the organisation of this festival that cuts across genres, traditions and languages of Indian subcontinent. The intention is to create interpretative events that provide cultural encounters for the urban audiences in the city of Chennai to revisit their memories, selves, concepts of modernity and global culture.

The feasibility of such interpretative transfer depends ineluctably on our context. The dawn of twenty-first century appears to be a harbinger of an age of forgetfulness for the Indian subcontinent where the proliferation of information has strangely quelled the possibilities of meanings. Spread of information devoid of significance and signification characterise contemporary Indian city life with junk mails, short message services on mobile phones, empty advertisements, mutilated language of the internet chat and television mediated realities of human experience. We seem to have forgotten the rich reservoir of oral expressions. The tangible erosion is immediately felt on the loss of vocabulary in the language of everyday use. Our capacity to capture, articulate and elaborate human experience in words seems to be continuously dwindling. If information is power, power seems to be absolutely meaningless and as a corollary, powerlessness is where meaning is.

Artistic folk traditions have been viewed as totally powerless in our society stratified by class, caste and cultural strands. While the knowledge on the caste and class stratification of our society is commonplace, the politics of cultural stands is not. Commercial mainstream, hegemonic classical, insensitive popular, invisible avant-garde and suppressed folklore are the five strands of Indian culture. The inter-relationships between these five strands vary from state to state and language to language. What remains constant is the tendency of the commercial and popular mainstream to misrepresent folklore as things of the underdeveloped past. What follows is a condescending urban patronage towards 'unchanging', 'traditional' and 'authentic' folklore and materials and mechanisms associated with it. NFSC's attempts have always been to challenge these notions and to present folklore as they are found. In other words, our attempts have been to present folklore as changing contemporary phenomenon and to encourage the view of the tradition as evolving and dynamic process. We have found allies in the practitioners of avant-garde art, be it, drama, painting, literature, music, cinema, dance or design. This festival is no exception to our consistent efforts and it further strives towards consolidation of our allies.

In that sense, in our modern contemporary times, the task of the true folklorist (and hence the festival) is to

restore his specialised idiom to the communal, collective structures, which underlie speech, language and artistic expressions. Public presentation of folklore in a context other than where it originates from would first of all mean that our discursive world is never on its first day. Its prospects precede us, saturated with use, with reference, with connotations more or less buried but recuperable sediments of recall and meaning. This alone enables all communicative, semiotic notions to designate and to signify. It is these informing planes that generate metaphor, metonymy and the symbolic. In the festival situation, the sources of such semantic planes emerge in comparison as genres, as systems with differences and as expressions having relations of resemblance.

Semiotic creatures we are, we are born to retell tales to participate, to traverse through, to alter, to interpret and to make sense of the discursive world that precedes us. Retelling is an existential instance of all linguistic and



cultural resources rushing to one's rescue at the crucial juncture of communicative act. The philosophical proposition of memory aiding narrative confrontation of the world has endless fascination for anyone who strives to see the existential drama of retelling beyond the insights of oral formulae theory. It may also be seen as an effort to view the vast corpus of Indian oral epics as a kind of Saussurean 'langue' for Indian civilisation and culture.

While the ideas and concepts behind why we chose to do a festival on oral epics were clear from the beginning the practical aspects of presenting them underwent several changes from the original conception. Most of the oral epics are very slow to develop and they do not hold the attention of the audiences who do not belong to the communities. In the original contexts the admiration with which the oral epics are held is mainly due to their functions such as construction of community's identity, its values and models of human conduct. In several cases, oral epics serve as referential points for symbolic structure of the community's history and mythology. So the insider's identification with the characters and events in the epics is one of ritual awe and community obligation that go beyond the interests in the narrative texts. These processes of mediation are common not only to epics that are intensely community specific but also to performances of pan Indian nature such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Initially I thought we should avoid bringing performances of pan Indian nature and we should focus only on community specific epics. I abandoned this view as we progressed with our research and I realised that even performances of particular episodes from the pan Indian epics have *specific contemporary meanings* for communities as it is in the case of *Chitrakathi* performances of Maharashtra. How do I communicate this to urban audience who think these are stories of the past?

I decided to present *Pata* painting and narratives from West Bengal in comparison to *Chitrakathi* because *Pata* painting narratives deal with explicit contemporary themes. Whoever sees both the forms would soon learn that both are contemporary artistic engagements although one is an interpretation of an old myth and another is thematic representation of our times. The trouble is *Pata* narratives are not epic length stories but I decided to ignore it for the obvious reasons. As we proceeded to include tale of *Pabuji* from Rajasthan and *Padam Katha* performances of caste myths of Andhra Pradesh purely on the basis that these are forms that use paintings as aids for oral narrations it became clear to me that 'genre' is an outside construct imposed on forms that do not inherently pledge to interpretative categories.

The opportunity to test the limits of genre as an interpretative category came our way as we started putting together events of 'folk theatre' from different parts of the country. While *Therukkoothu*, *Chindu Yakshagana* and *Yakshagana* share several features of South Indian folk theatre tradition, *Chavittunatakam* as Christian folk theatre historically grew with new generic qualities and established itself as a tradition in its own right. Is *Tamasha* folk theatre or popular theatre? Is *Mayurbhanj Chhau* folk theatre or classical dance? The sequencing of folk theatre events in the festival is bound to raise these questions and we hope that such an enquiry would allow us to go beyond the limits of the genre in order to see continuity between cultural strands. The puppetry festival organised at Dakshinachitra intends to show the connections beyond the cultural strands and into the spheres of technology such as digital animation.

4

Once you transgress the limits of genre, what you might like to see is free variety of expressions. That exactly is what we intend to provide under the category of events called 'epic singing and dancing'. While *Villuppattu*, *Khamba Thoibi*, *Chandaini* and *Ponung* offer excellent representative samples of epic singing and dancing available through out the country, we have included two evenings of folk singing by child musicians of Rajasthan. They are not epic singers and their performances have nothing to do with 'epic singing and dancing'. What they intend to perform is songs connected with life cycle ceremonies. The idea is to convey how folk singing per se is intimately connected to contexts. Please do see the calendar of events in this issue (pp.12-3).

However much we try we cannot convey the contexts of oral narratives through performances alone. We hope the exhibitions of folk musical instruments; photography and folk paintings together would communicate the contexts of oral narratives through their iconic presence as artefacts, images and representations.

Through this festival we convey the knowledge of folk forms; we convey the knowledge on folk genres; we convey the knowledge of contexts; we convey the knowledge of cultural strands and we convey the knowledge of changes in expressive traditions. We do that through variety of participatory events through out the city of Chennai in all available cultural spaces from March 4, 2002 to March 13, 2002. If this can be called reconstitution of the public sphere in favour of folk culture, well yes, that exactly is the intention.

Can we succeed in this experimental exercise? That is the challenge of public sector folklore.

.....
Announcement

ifj Indian Folklore Research Journal

Inaugural Issue Volume One Number One May 2001



FOR KING'S SAKE: NARRATIVES AS DESIGNER TEXTS - Soumen Sen / **POPULAR CULTURE AND THE NORTH INDIAN ORAL EPIC DHOLA** - Susan S. Wadley / **ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS IN FOLKLORE STUDIES: THE INDIAN CHAPTER** - Nita Mathur / **AFRO-BRAZILIAN AVATĀRAS: GANDHI'S SONS SAMBA IN SOUTH AMERICA** - Pravina Shukla / **THE FIVE ELEMENTS IN THE DAṆḌA RITUALS OF ORISSA** - Ileana Citaristi / **WHEN THE STONE CRUMBLES** - Desmond L. Kharmawphlang / **PATTERNS OF MYTHICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN OODGEROO NUNUKUL'S DREAMTIME** - V. Bharathi Harishankar / **NORTH AMERICAN FOLKLORISTS FACING THE MILLENNIUM** - Lee Haring / **MYTH AND IDENTITY - THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF VADĀR COMMUNITIES** - Guy Poitevin / **Book Reviews: LIVES OF INDIAN IMAGES** Richard H. Davis - *Review by Aarti Kawlra* / **EXPLORING INDIA'S SACRED ART** Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch. Edited with a biographical essay by Barbara Stoler Miller - *Review by Aarti Kawlra* / **THE ORIGINS OF MUSIC** Edited by Nils L. Wallin, Björn Merker, and Steven Brown - *Review by Ludwig Pesch*

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Single Issue India Rs.150/- Overseas \$ 10

Demand Draft or IMO in favour of
National Folklore Support Centre