

The Powada

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The *Powada* of Maharashtra is not really a full-fledged form as with certain other forms of folk music. It has its own musical characteristics; but its *raison d'être* is not exclusively musical. It resembles the ballad and shares with it certain features like a strong narrative element, a certain length, a particular tradition of performance and vocal expression. Like other forms of folk music (for instance the *lavani*, *ovi*, *abhangas* of Maharashtra) the *Powada* has been studied and analysed quite extensively as a literary form. Its metrical peculiarities, its imagery, its social and political content and its other features have also been carefully noted, classified and interpreted.

But there is a yawning gap in these studies. The *Powada* has not yet been examined as a form of musical expression. The *Powada* is always sung and performed and the fact of its being written happens to be a matter of secondary importance. That is why it gives cause for surprise. In fact, it was originally conceived and later preserved as a form to be sung and performed under certain conditions. Therefore, its literary features were determined by its performance-orientation. If we go by the metre employed in the *Powada* the division of time or distribution does not give us an adequate idea of its actual nature. It is the intonation and the consequent contours in the pitch-line which must be taken into account.

There is another reason which prompts an immediate musical examination of the *Powada*. The *Powada* belongs to the category of those fast-vanishing folk musical forms, which have been till now quite well-established. There are many factors that contribute to its gradual disappearance. Every musical form fulfils certain musical needs and when these needs are satisfied, the form tends to fall into disuse and ultimately becomes extinct. This especially applies to musical forms that are functional in nature. When functional music starts moving out of the need-based structure of a society, it has either to enter into the art music of a culture or it has to discover a function similar to the one it originally had. If it fails in either of these attempts the form inevitably slides down the memory-scale of people. The *Powada* is about to do just this. Perhaps this is inevitable in the cultural dynamics of Maharashtra, so why should one

be nostalgic or romanticise the Powada through artificial stimulation by scholastic and musicological interest if the form itself is doomed to extinction by the inexorable laws of the interaction of social forces? However, the pro-Powada argument is not a plea for the preservation or propagation of the Powada as a musical form. What is suggested is an analysis of its music. Secondly, no science of music can hope to build up a sound conceptual system unless a musical analysis of folk forms is carried out. The interaction of art music and folk music ultimately determines their respective identities. Musical studies of art music tend to be thorough while folk music forms are, comparatively speaking, neglected.

Whenever a form establishes itself musically, it does so because it successfully answers certain needs important in the field of performance. How are the tempi and articulation related to each other? Does variety in melody reduce the effect or does repetition make for a concentrated impact? Does a limited melody range channelise the attention of the audience more successfully than a wider range? Under the circumstances, can we allow an important musical form to disappear without it being analysed? At least in the field of art, tradition is a bulwark against pointless duplication and against the disadvantages of working in isolation. On this account the Powada calls for a deeper study.

The Powada belongs to the category of outdoor music. It is sung in the open, so the voice must necessarily be projected vigorously. Open-throated or constricted singing but always with a high basic pitch is the rule. The tune ranges mostly in the middle octave and occasionally touches the *Taar Shadj*. On the whole, the tune includes many points (repeatedly used) where the consonants of the words can be conveniently stressed. Throughout the performance voice-production is stressed by the fricative, voiceless H. In view of the greater amount of breath-energy involved in its production and the consequent increase in the 'carrying power' of the word permeated with it, this seems logical. The Powada as a form of outdoor music needs a longer reach.

Certain aspects of the tune of a Powada are also the result of its outdoor nature. The tune has to be straight and simple. It does not permit decorative effect or tonal nuance. The typical voice-production of Powada cannot execute subtleties and ornate designs with ease. In addition, the Powada seeks to 'hammer home' a point. In terms of simple content, the praise, that is sung of an individual or event demands the repetition of a name or a theme. The contours caused by an intricate tune tend to distract the attention of the audience from the main theme. Hence the simplicity of the tune.

In addition to this simplicity, the tune has to be more unified. This practically amounts to lack of variety. As the Powada has to reach many listeners, and that too, quickly; it tends to prefer a single or at most a limited number of melodic structures and it goes on repeating them. The 'mould' is easily recognised and "known" by audiences. It does not demand any independent attention or special focusing on itself every time it appears. Where a melody or a tune is 'used' it is better to have an easily recognisable tune appearing again and again. But what is noteworthy is that the tune does not become 'dead' despite the repetition. It goes on consistently to suggest a definite tonal pattern in which all auditory content automatically fall in place. The sounds are neatly and quickly organised. What is significant is that when we read the text of a Powada, we find the words grammatically and phonetically distorted, they seem to deviate from the familiar norms of linguistic usage. The tune guarantees that we will not feel disturbed by such elements when a Powada is actually being sung. It is then that linguistic deviation is successfully received as phonetic rearrangement.

It is in this context that the use of short, four-beat tales like *Dhumali Kerwa* for Powada-singing becomes significant. Firstly, all patterns of even beats are easier to comprehend. Secondly, the tempo used for Powada-singing is so fast that intervening duration between two *Sams* is not long. This means that even if one whole *avartana* (completed *tala*, means cycle) is left unsung or even if one note is prolonged for the duration of a whole *avartana*, the performance does not suffer a break in music. The pauses accentuate the sustained notes. In fact, the literary and musical content of an extended note percolate better due to the unfilled musical spaces. Continuity and significant pauses are so perfectly and effectively balanced in Powada-singing that practitioners of art music can learn much from this technique.

On account of this forward moving tempo and refrain, the Powada, as a musical form, remains singularly free from emotional associations. It is not bound to those established conventions in art music which seek to build a relation of meaning and music. The *raga-rasa* relationship is not adhered to in the Powada. The theme could be Sawai Madhavrao Peshwa's festival, or the Battle of Kharda or the heroic Death of Tanaji, the Powada assumes a neutral position in so far as the tune is concerned. Everywhere it is fast, equally monotonous, repetitious and bent on achieving a specific purpose with single-minded attention and economy of effort. This is the reason why its 'tunes' are not set in any of the *ragas*. A Powada composer like Shahir Haibati shows close acquaintance with the musicological classification of Hindustani ragas and he mentions thirty-six raginis. Honaji composes *lavanis* to be sung in regular concerts and he is indirectly responsible for the singing-girls substituting these for musical *khayals*

and *tappas*, those established forms of art music. But the Powada never strays from its chosen track. A *raga* involves much processing and intricate pattern-weaving which in turn, means a different kind of voice-production and the consequent denial of the open-air, out-door character of the form. With *raga*, the audience-level has to reach a certain degree of sophistication. This militates against the large number and the qualitative homogeneity of the Powada audience. The Powada with its mass appeal cannot afford this.

All these peculiarities are reflected in the accompaniment provided to Powada singers. The *tuntune*, *daph*, *zanz* (in reality the *manjiri*) are, in fact, rhythm-instruments. The *daph* and the *zanz* are atonal. They do not have a definite pitch; they do not need any special kind of careful and sensitive tuning, and yet they are capable of reaching a wide range. They do so without dissipating the original sound-energy in any significant degree. The *tuntune*, which on the face of it, appears to be a string instrument is peculiarly uncomplicated. It provides a drone to and around the *tuntune*-player himself and what is even more important, is that it creates rhythmic pulses that have a sharp, metallic quality. So, for all purposes, it is a rhythm instrument.

The vocal accompaniment is equally purposeful. These accompanists pick up the burden of the song with the main singer. The syllables *Ji Ji* are used at convenient and required intervals to show a completion of a song-division. These syllables are sung at *Taar Shadja* by the accompanists. This use of the *Ji Ji* line gives a respite to the main singer, allows the earlier stanza to 'sink in' and yet does not relax the tension already reached. Even the listeners are repeatedly shocked into consciousness by the comparatively sudden use of high-pitched rendering. In addition to this, the repetition and rendering is of syllables which are in themselves meaningless. Thus they do not affect what has already been received as meaningful. They only deepen its significance. The lack of tonal colour and of variety in tune, increases in considerable measure the value of these *Ji Ji*'s.

It is also noteworthy that Powada-singers perform in a standing position. A schematic presentation of voice-qualities in relation to the demands made on the voice by prose is possible. It will be: Conversation - natural voice; Discourse - official or processed voice; Speech - effective voice. We can have a parallel presentation in the case of a singing voice. It can be: Practice - private voice; Concert - efficient voice; Outdoors - effective voice; the standing position is obviously ideal for throwing the voice. Voice culturists vouch for the scientific value of the standing position. Not too long ago some forms of art music (like the *thumri*) were also rendered in this position.

Any form with outdoor musical content can follow the Powada with benefit in matters of rendering, voice-production and rhythmic organisation. For a general audience, listening to a story well told, and briefly commented upon, nothing can be more entertaining than a Powada. Musically, it has answered certain problems with definiteness and efficiency. It's traditional association with historical tales should not blind us to its specific musical merits. It is one of those forms which students of art music ought to study with greater attention, and more seriously.
