

Documentation and Drama

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Facts & News, No 11, NCPA, Theatre Development Centre, Mumbai, November 1988)

The month of September, 1988 made many heads whirl! A month-long workshop on Documentation of Performing Arts was held at the N.C.P.A. The combined team of an international faculty and a score of participants drawn from the Western region battled their way through disciplines such as 'Nature and History of Ethnomusicology', 'Contextual Analysis', 'Theory of Culture and the Performing Arts', 'Indian and Staff Notation', 'Movements and Gestures', 'Indian Musicology: A Scholastic Model', 'Religious Iconography in India', 'Archiving and Computerisation', 'Indian Myths and Symbols', etc. The following break-up would bring out the dense seriousness of the entire effort:

Lectures: 39, Practical Sessions: 40, Reading Sessions: 4, Listening Sessions: 3
Screening Session: 1, Field Trips: 2 Faculty Members: 15, Subjects: 25 and Participants: 20!

Many questions were raised but one persistently voiced by students of non-music disciplines was a little unexpected. They said, 'Is not the entire effort music-heavy?' There are reasons why the question sounds intriguing.

To begin from the beginning, the entire array of subjects refers to an off-repeated position that the three performing arts are cognate entities and hence share many fundamental features. Presentation formats, the required co-ordination of psycho-physical skills, the techniques employed, the nature and extent of audience participation and the rest impress on our minds the intrinsic relationship of the three. It is common to hold that all arts are related. However some are clearly more interrelated than some others depending on the cultural enmeshing. Hence different cultures throw up different art-classifications with notable insistence. The point is that there are cultural grounds to posit a more connected and not differentiated view of the individual arts at a fundamental level.

Further, drama-documentalists should note how ethnomusicological operations strongly maintain that no investigation into any performing art could remain unilinear or uncentred even if it begins by being music-centred etc. in a narrow sense.

It is axiomatic that no music, dance or drama can be received in isolation. In other words an entirely musical/dramatic/dance-oriented music/drama/dance are merely theoretical entities, so intertwined are the performing strands in human life. Irrespective of the art at the 'centre', the fundamental frameworks retain their validity.

Finally, it is to be remembered that the traditional Indian understanding of the three arts and the associated terminological clusters hardly allow a segregated consideration of the performing triad. One may have performances devoted to either of the three arts but at fundamental levels no separation is warranted. A music-oriented performance would expectably throw up musical insights but these would offer clues to expand and extend conceptual frameworks to serve as hypotheses in action for students of dance and drama. What would be needed is an act of relating an emerged model to an emerging one. As is known natya has been described in the Indian tradition as a composite art incorporating in it the four kinds of abhinaya, while music in itself has been inclusively defined to consist of vocal and instrumental music as well as dancing. It is symptomatic that the non-musical 'prose' drama arrived on the Indian scene very late. Of equal significance is the fact that the definition of music narrowed down to mean vocal classical music is also a late occurrence in the musicological tradition. In other words, the restrictive definitions of both music and drama fly in the face of Indian art traditions. A non-traditional view of the arts might prove problematical for an important cultural exercise such as archiving and documentation.

A little discussion of the concepts of archiving and documentation is perhaps warranted at this stage.

Four terms need to be properly understood in this connection: document, documentation, archives and retrieval. What do they mean at the primary level?

Document: An original piece of written or printed matter conveying authoritative information or evidence.

To document: To supply with references and notes to authoritative material (e.g. to document a text).

Three supportive terms also require a mention.

Documentalist: A specialist in the assembling, classifying and organizing of documents; an archivist with special training in the field of documentation.

Documentarion: One who believes in the importance and value of documents.

Documentary: A motion picture film that records or exhibits a phase of regional, social or cultural life without fictionalization.

All the terms are root-connected with 'documentation' meaning 'a lesson' from *docere* 'to teach'.

Record is noted as a synonym (which incidentally is traced back to *re* = again + *cor, cordis* = mind, heart i.e. to call to mind, obviously an act of memorizing).

The Indian terminology is:

to document = *dastavej tayar karna*

documentation = *pralekhan*

Another useful term is archives. It means 'a place where public records and historical documents are kept'. Etymology reveals the core - connections as: *archeion* (GK) = a public office from *arche* = government. The relevant Indian equivalents are *daftarkhana, purabhilekh*. The third seminal term, retrieval, is from retrieve A 'to get back', 'regain'. It is traced back to *re* = again + *trouere* 'to find' The Indian equivalent is *punahprapti*.

On examination, the terminological cluster leads to some observations on the nature and aim of the processes of documentation related to arts.

1) Cultural documentation and archiving seem to be concepts of modern times and emergence. Till recent years their origin restricted them to purposes of administration and government by the concerned ruling authorities.

2) In their modern context the terminological cluster parallels a conceptual structure which strives to place every phenomenon in a wider cultural framework. Literature on documentation invariably refers to the contextual nature of the activity.

3) A simultaneous movement indicates inclusiveness also in case of the media pressed into service. The original connotation was restricted to the written or the printed. The contemporary use is wider and phrases such as audio-documentation or video-documentation are instances to remember.

4) The Indian terminological cluster suggests that the Indian terms have been deliberately coined to match the activity under discussion. It would be of course unkind to hint at the possible 'foreignness' of the entire concept of cultural documentation. However, it is possible to argue that Indian culture appears to have

sidetracked the concept on account of the intrinsic accent on writing and the written. In India the primary channels of documenting or recording culture exist in the multiple oral traditions prevailing in various life areas. Therefore, it would be logical to search for the relevant concepts, terminology and methods in the operations of the oral traditions (which when properly understood will not be found to totally exclude a recourse to writing and the written). Significantly, music is perhaps the strongest and a less interrupted of the oral traditions in India.

5) A refrain of the present 'Song of Documentation' is the need (and an attempt) to authenticate, to prove authoritatively, an expression, tradition or a procedure. Obviously, the inference is that there is a felt need to do so against the rising tide of something too different or new to have a tradition or something spurious laying claim to authenticity etc.

6) Finally an oft-voiced concern is to preserve (by documenting) for posterity. The assumption is that the present age and generation stands at the end of a developmental line and hence it is not likely to function as a link (unlike the earlier generations or periods etc.).

This is the background on which rests the case of a music-centred thinking on documentation of the performing trinity. It is not of course argued that strategies and techniques based on investigations in music be applied to drama in toto. However it is strongly recommended that documentation of drama need not be treated as an activity to be begun ab initio! Ethnomusicological studies offer a ready model of culture-centred studies in performing arts. Some features (obviously in need of further explanations) are listed below:

a) Drama-documentalists should be cautious enough to desist from assuming a pan-Indian stance, at least for the time being. Regional dramatic traditions should be accorded a priority.

b) Analysts of the Indian musical reality have arrived at a useful fivefold categorization in primitive, folk, popular, devotion, and art expressions. In the present context categories are understood as the fundamental moulds of a total cultural expression. Attempts need to be made to crystallize a similar categorization of dramatic expression in India. Categories are of course not to be confused with forms, styles etc.

c) Music-traditions in India have struck a happy balance between things to be noted down and those to be passed on orally. Those noted are the foundational or the skeletal aspects and therefore represent the more constant of the musical elements.

On the other hand, the latter constitute the elaborational and detailed aspects which represent the more variable of the musical elements. In other words, not everything is reduced to writing or otherwise recorded. Some selection is effected and a value-decision is made. Drama-documentalists need to do that or they may fall into the trap of assuming that everything that happens is worth-recording! That would only mean shirking the responsibility to make a judgment now and here. Refusal to make such a judgment merely means passing on the buck to others who would be compelled to clear the cluttered cultural desks! The multifarious disciplines yoked together in the workshop mentioned earlier would, if used alertly, provide adequate insights into the process of taking value-decisions. Drama-documentation would be saved the fate of becoming an unexciting campaign to collect indiscriminately if the lesson offered is learnt!

d) As a corollary it follows that an important defense against indiscriminate collection (and of trivia at that) is to follow the strategy of performance-orientation as against the bookishness customarily associated with any research and documentation. The evanescence of performance as well as the innate performance-orientation of drama necessitates placement of the performance at the centre of the whole enterprise.

e) Finally it must be grasped that performance means a continuous present tense. Even if one is referring to Bharata, Bhasa or some projected performance in future, the performing reality converts all of them into a contemplated contemporary fact. A documentalist's concern in this sense is with a process. A qualitative duration is what rivets his attention. Here too music comes to his help if he allows himself to be helped!