

Traditional Performing Forms and Contemporary Theatre

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One of the features of the contemporary urban theatre is its frequent use of traditional performing forms (which usually means folk and primitive presentations).

The practice (recourse to which has become quite noticeable) arouses two kinds of responses. It is felt that putting the non-urban into an urban setting in this manner effects a greater cultural circulation between different strata of the modern society which otherwise suffers from a cultural schism or multiple fragmentation. On the other hand it is also held that such uses merely reflect an urban and (therefore) a middle-class nostalgia for the lost roots etc.! The nostalgic efforts naturally remain content with approximations to the 'original' performances (despite sincere attempts to be authentic!). In addition, use of the traditional forms may also indicate abnegation of the directorial responsibility because such forms are tightly combined packages of varied performing stimuli of remarkable self-sufficiency. In other words, once a slot is allotted to them in a play, they direct themselves!

It would perhaps be helpful to try to pose and answer some basic questions in this respect. For the sake of convenience the questions may be listed as where, why, who and how in relation to using traditional forms in contemporary theatre. (I am further limiting the scope of the inquiry to the use of music.)

It must be admitted that in the present context the term 'traditional' is virtually confined to only two of the five categories of music prevailing in India. (In most cases primitive and folk musics are used.) As the other three Indian musical categories i.e. art (classical), devotional and popular also enjoy a long tradition, the point needs to be made. If traditional means folk and primitive, contemporary theatre means the 'urban' theatre mostly practiced by urbanized people who may or may not be natives of rural India. From the explanation of the two terms it would also become clear that the theatric employment of traditional forms is mainly an activity for audiences with urban bases. The groups may perform in the moffusil but they do so usually with a sense of adventure, a sure sign that their target audience is confined to non-rural areas.

Why is this recourse to the unused, unfamiliar sources?

Firstly, because folk or primitive musics seem more organic. On account of their close connections with the well-known three cycles, namely day-night, seasonal and birth-death, the two categories appeal to (even) urban crowds as natural and relevant (as opposed to artificial and superfluous). Folk-primitive musics make recognizable reference to occurrences in human life in such a way that they escape the fate of becoming dehumanized or mechanical and yet they are far from personal. In this context it is necessary to remember that modern drama, with its acceptance of the philosophy of individualism, has often become so personalized and private that a wider appeal is nearly ruled out. To use the folk-primitive in the contemporary setting can therefore be construed as an attempt to replace the exaggerated personal and idiosyncratic with the more general and human.

Secondly, the matter or rather the manner of presentation also needs consideration. Folk-primitive musics score over other musical categories in respects of tonal colour, compulsive rhythms and a pervasive collectivity.

Indian music is largely melodic and one of the consequences has been the restrictions on the use of tonal material. Folk-primitive musics do not leave the melodic fold entirely but they certainly allow more polyphony than the other categories. More importantly they use abrasive, percussive and shrill timbers which hit the listeners by unfamiliarity and sheer power. The rhythms employed are often described as ardhatalas (lit. half-talas) on account of their inherent structural restrictions on elaboration of rhythmic ideas. However, their cycles, being shorter in duration, prove conducive to quicker movements. Their repetitive character also creates a hypnotic effect. Further the logic of folk-primitive rhythms demands instruments producing bold sounds registered quickly and well. Consequently, the rhythms prove noticeably compulsive. Finally the ruling motivation of the folk-primitive music is to give expression to the collective mind and the fact creates special bonds between performers and audiences. The items are easily comprehensible (at least they succeed in creating that impression!) and seem to encourage participation. Many of them have built-in spaces for collective rendering. It is therefore not surprising that the folk-primitive forms of music find favour with the contemporary theatre-workers keen on moving away from the proscenium arch theatre and processes associated with it.

The next important question is 'how' traditional musics are pressed into service. Briefly it could be stated that three strategies seem to be operative:

- a) Fragmentation or disintegration of the original musical package.
- b) Accentuation of the ritualistic aspects.
- c) A greater general reliance on the non-verbal (especially on the non-sensical element in language).

For example, folk rhythms, melodic patterns, accompanying instruments, movements as well as gestures may be isolated and employed in new contexts. Such dissociations create dissonances which however can be made significant theatrically. In a similar manner, elements conducive to creating a ritualistic ambiance would also be identified and exploited. Use of repetition as a hypnotizing formula; the charged way of carrying out apparently insignificant actions; recourse to gestures, movements having an accepted symbolic potential and such other features can be mentioned in the present discussion. Finally all components (including language) would essentially be regarded as powers of secondary intensity because they convey meanings and fail to communicate content which for all purposes is more concerned with communication of the irrational and the ineffable.
