

# Documentation – A Less Romantic View?

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Facts and News, No. 24, July 1992)

In India cultural archiving and documentation has a history shorter than that enjoyed by the other kind - describable as 'official'. To put it differently, socioeconomic, politico administrative as well as historico-religious archiving and documentation exists while cultural items are scattered here and there! In the process performing arts have suffered the most and they lack systematic archiving and documentation. Admittedly, the essential evanescence of performance itself has merely added to the difficulties! This is one of the reasons why documentarians of performing arts continue to display a somewhat tentative attitude in their approach and execution. Their output is found to raise, for example, the following fundamental questions:

What is worth documenting and why?

Which documentation mode (audio, video, printed, written, spoken, photographic, diagrammatic etc.) is to be employed and for what kind of performances?

How to determine the helpfulness or otherwise of a selected mode?

In the final analysis, what should be the chief concern of a documenter: recreation of performing experiences or detailed mapping of the process leading to them?

To what extent is a documenter justified in making 'judgements' - aesthetic, moral, logical etc. - at different stages of his work?

These and such other questions raised their heads again when work on the second full-length production of the T.D.C., *Kala Vazir Pandhara Raja* began.

Dr. Shubhada Shelke and other colleagues depended a great deal on recording interviews of and discussions with individuals connected with the production. The phases covered (more or less extensively) could be described as the pre-rehearsal, rehearsal, pre-performance, performance and post-performance. The author, director, designers in sets, make-up and lights, music-composer, backstage workers and audiences were the main agencies involved in this documentation. The

abundant oral and written responses, however, compel a restatement of some of the cardinal principles in cultural documentation:

1. Documentation is essentially aimed at spelling out processes preparatory to creating a particular qualitative experience. As stated earlier, recreation of the original creative experience is not sought for because It is inherently impossible. Documentation strives towards a comprehensive mapping of a resultant qualitative effect traceable to presence/absence of certain structural features etc. Performance cannot be documented through another performance just as a poem cannot be documented by writing another poem inspired by the former! This way of looking at documentation obviously lessens the romantic aura foisted on it - but that is unavoidable!

2. Documentation as a complete process inevitably involves placing the qualitative experience in quantitative and contextual frameworks which, for all practical purposes, may be peripheral (though not unrelated) to the creative experience. Data thus collected would, of course, be in need of subsequent interpretation but without the quantitative and contextual facts the danger is to have speculation instead of interpretation!

The major use of all quantification is to provide insights into the sustaining capacity of the original creative impulse unaltered in import and undiminished in strength over a period. Momentary inspiration can never be the essence of any performance. A beam of light and not a flush is expected from performances of enduring quality! Durability is a function of structural features operating as a totality. Performances can pass the test of time depending on the strengths of the individual components and their relative importance. The point is quantification often proves to be a pointer to judge the existing/potential strength of individual components in a performing structure.

The relative importance of the components can be determined better with the help of contextual factors. The role of music in a play and its contribution, or otherwise, to the success of the play, for example, would often depend on the number and variety of contexts considered legitimate by the culture concerned for using music. In spite of all the heartfelt cries of many critics of the Indian films for instance, songs hold their sway because Indian culture agrees to the use of music on a very wide basis. An ordinary looking production continues to attract because it succeeds in evoking dominant contexts (e.g., nationalism, sanctity of motherhood etc.) and such examples

can be multiplied easily. What is important to remember is that documentation being an analytical process succeeds, in isolating and weighing contribution of contextual factors.

3. Though generally it is not noticed, documentation emerges as a process of an inevitable and dimensional transformation of material from verbal to non-verbal, audio to video, temporal to spatial and vice versa. Further, the transformation is not designed to establish correspondence of arts in the sense of giving the same experience in two or more different medias. The transformation entails in reality a breaking up of complete patterns into formative blocks, of the realized and largely intangible aesthetic goals into identifiable artistic strategies or techniques with which aesthetic achievements are causally connected. Documentation, therefore, is a post facto analysis carried out with great sympathy!

4. An easy generalization seems to prevail about a documentarian's supposedly objective attitude! He is often cautioned against the danger of making value judgements. In addition, he is also advised to have an accommodative conceptual model to ensure an undistorted presentation of the original experience. Though this is largely true it must be noted that personal inputs, non-aesthetic value judgements and theoretical frameworks are not far away from a documentarian in action.

For example, the personal warmth of the interviewer towards the interviewee affects the proceedings significantly in interviews. Similarly, the documentarian's views about the placement of the documented performances in the total cultural framework are bound to influence his work. Finally, there are very few, if any, theory-neutral facts. It may not be an exaggeration to say that documentarian's theorization begins the moment he decides to document, whatever may be the immediate provocation!

5. On examination it becomes clear that the vaunted neutrality of the employed technology per se is also a myth! Cultural responses to various technologies are not uniform. For example, oral cultures may turn out to be more camera-shy! In other words, in such cultures tape-recorders etc. may be resented less as they are not regarded to be intrusive forces and consequently may succeed in creating a pro-attitude in the documented culture. Consequently, technology itself may/may not generate responses in need of documentation.

6. A factor that assumes great importance (especially in these days of modern wide-ranging, cross-cultural researches) is the ultimate utility of contrasting/complementary perceptions from outsiders and/or insiders. Outsiders and insiders are so identifiable mainly because of the assumptions they hold and questions they ask. The more the number of outsiders and insiders involved in documenting the

same phenomenon, the more rewarding is the likely coverage. Documentation demands more decision-making at the conceptual level than one realizes and, therefore, perspectives offered by insiders/outsideers are bound to display fascinating spectrum of cultural insights.

To document is thus to analyze post facto. This analysis differs from review, criticism, aesthetic appreciation and similar activities in that it includes no attempt to evaluate the art-experience. At the same time, it automatically bespeaks of a decision taken as to the worthiness of the performance documented. Perhaps it is comparable to the lower criticism, so necessary for its higher avatara. Documentation should be rightly expected to prepare ground for cultural criticism!

---