

Music That Just Happens

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(Published in Gentleman magazine, Edi. Rajib Sarkar, Express Publications Ltd. Mumbai, September. 2000)

Now onwards, I will not write on music, I will talk about music. That is what folk music does - it speaks and directly reaches you. It is not merely audio. It often appeals to many senses at the same time. How does it create that magic?

Mainly, because it alertly responds to three cycles in human life. The three cycles are birth-death, day-night and, of course, seasons. Irrespective of caste, creed, religion, age, sex etc., the three cycles make us move with them, and music inseparably keeps company. As if different life-phases shaped by the three cycles will remain incomplete without music! If we only notice, even in Mumbai, the revolutions of these cycles impress as smells, tastes, touches and sounds and, of course, light and shade change! Of such changes, folk music chooses to sing. Mind you, it is not the sweetness of music offered, or the skill of musicians concerned, or the knowledge of listeners involved that make folk music 'real.' Folk music becomes real because it has innate connections with our life. Folk music appeals - not because of its high artistic content, but because of its indifference to being artistic or aesthetic! If I may say so, it is too real to be artistic!

Look at, and listen to folk musical instruments. Experts opine (experts can hardly and simply 'say' things!) that the folk music category is complete as it includes abundant expression of four major instrumental classes. For example, it has instruments which sound as the entire body of the instrument vibrates (gongs, jhanjh, rattle), or those which have vibrating membranes (drums), or others that rely on a vibrating air column (algoja), or some which consist of vibrating strings (tuntune, ektari). The point usually overlooked is: none of the folk instruments sound 'sweet, smooth and pleasing.' Harsh strokes, jagged melodies and limited tonal variety proclaim their authenticity. And yet, who can deny their appeal! The reason is obvious: folk instruments, perhaps rather deceptively, do generate a comforting feeling among listeners: "This is simple, even I can play it." I remember a folk musician telling me, "Saab, our instruments are so simple, any tin can make a drum and any pipe a flute." I must have looked

unconvinced, so he thoughtfully added, "And they need no maintenance." It is use that turns an object into an instrument and, unfortunately, the reverse is also equally true.

Folk music lives in full-blooded participation and not in cold and distant appreciation. It is the only form of music which is of, for and by the folks themselves. A lullaby becomes a lullaby when mother sings it to a child and not when a lori from a film is played back! A song becomes a work song when every working hand gives it a voice. Same it is with a game song (or a drinking song!). The urban convention is to 'organise' programmes of polished, rehearsed and 'arranged' folk music. Then, what we actually get are, of course, 'folkish' presentations. Just as 'blackish' is less than black, similarly 'folkish' is less than folk. To be true to folk music and to yourselves - sing it, play it, dance it. Do not care what others have to say. Anyway, they are going to bite, once your back is turned! For, as folk musicians have often told me, "To sing a folksong or to join in folk music, you do not need a 'voice,' you need a 'will' and, of course, some 'daring.' The abundance of recorded folk music and the increasing urban romanticism about its 'melodiousness, beauty, soulfulness and artistry' have done great harm in diverting from its main purpose of making everybody just 'do it.

Folk music is extremely self-sufficient. Birth, day-break, first crop, initiation, beginning of a learning process, death, recovery from an illness, happiness of reaching somewhere - all such events mark the three cycles. Music deepens the impact of these events on our minds. Hence, folk music. The music-maker produces folk music and in that moment it is 'made.' There is no audience in folk music - as all are makers of music. Events marked on the three cycles ask for your participation - and not judgment. These events do not need anyone's sanction, justification or legitimisation.

I once heard a Warli ghangali player. The instrument, (a vina with a gourd) is so soft that it cannot be heard at two-three feet. I asked him, "What makes you play it, if nobody can hear it?" He kept quiet for a moment, strumming the strings lightly, then said, "But I can hear it when I play!" I persisted and decided to take 'another angle.' "When do you play it?" "When I am happy." "And what if you are unhappy?" "Then I play ghangali." A paradox fit for Zeno if you agree!