

In The Name Of God

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Diwali is approaching. It is undoubtedly a major religious celebration in India. So let me turn to religious music.

In a way it sounds absurd to suggest that any form of music could be religious. Religious, or for that matter any kind of music, is known not after the attitude of the composer or the singer but because of certain features of the said music. This is the reason why agnostics can make religious music, and atheists can make devotional music! Of course, intentions or attitudes of performers count, but not as much as we tend to believe. If debauched priests can deliver intense sermons on chastity, why cannot we have soulful bhajans from performers whose only God seems to be the Mammon?

Religious music is a major category of Indian music. It has three subtypes in liturgical, devotional and mystic. Abundance of religious music in India is not surprising because at least eight major world religions are well-entrenched in India and that too for centuries. Religious music is performed in rituals and ceremonies and worship. Sometimes it shows musical flourish, but more often it is just a device to move away from 'prose' (which, in other words, is to move away from realities of day-to-day life). On many occasions, it seeks collective expression. Those who perform it have no musical ambitions (thank God for that!) but feel a personal/cultural compulsion to perform. Religious music is, obviously, an essential component of religious efforts. One of my theories is that, no religion can survive without developing religious music of its own. Perhaps, that is one of the reasons why Marxism had got close but not quite made it as a religion. Truly speaking, many pieces of religious music are such that only Gods can tolerate these. But religion cannot do without music. Thus, once again one norm is proved. Music is culturally so important that it operates even if it ceases to be music. Religious music binds people. It also diverts their attention. It enables people to merge in a crowd and allows them to forget themselves at least for a while. It generates a feeling of anonymous security, which is as effective as anonymous fear. It tends to rely on noise, because noise numbs and makes minds easily succumb to a collective, non-thinking, momentarily comforting entity that all celebrations are likely to be. We can't ever overestimate the cultural power of religious music.

Devotional music is, chiefly, a product of saint-poet composers who worked all over the subcontinental expanse of this country for centuries and in all language-areas. In the process they created a body of thousands of 'songs' passed on mainly through the comprehensive Indian oral tradition. These songs were meant for everybody, and yet allowed the more musically minded to add more 'songness' in them. Saint-poet-composers chose to employ very few talas, ragas and flexible singing genres because they wanted their songs to be accessible to all those who were interested. Look at the meters used, they point to talas of eight beats, and its multiples. This is the tempo/rhythm pattern, which we can easily follow. Check ragas noted in the traditional records. These ragas are mostly dhun ragas/seasonal or regional ragas. Examine names of the genres utilised - they are padas or similar equally flexible forms. The saint-poet-composers could have used more complex talas, 'arty' ragas and forms, and more imposing languages. They did not do so out of choice, out of a communicational concern. They chose not to commit raga-tala strength they were aware of. Like Zen-masters, their strength lay in not using the strength. There is a sub-stream of devotional music, which is highly shastrokta, that is raga-tala-based and codified, but of that later. Devotional music I am talking of is really for the 'musically common' man.

It is somewhat ironical that the high level of Indian musical literacy today is due to devotional music and Hindi film music! But of that some other time. The point is that when people claim all Indian music is devotional, they are actually belittling it! Such people need to be told that music couldn't be that monochromatic! On the other hand, it is also true that music cannot become 'devotional' merely because saint-poet-composer's compositions are pressed into service. In the final analysis, musical devotionism is an attitude of self-surrender to musical material. This makes Kesarbai Kerkar's rendering of Nand more devotional than many bhajans floating around! Due to a similar alchemy, Ustad Ali Akbar's early performance of Raga Chandranandan on Sarod (on a 78 r.p.m. disc) is devotional!

Celebrations such as Diwali are occasions for purposeful religious music. Once I asked a veteran keertana performer: What is your daily prayer? He looked closely at me and around and said: Aakhir tak mile kam (work), nam (fame) aur dam (money)!