

Elephant House Project @ Macquarie University

“The Transmission of Music & Dance in Indian Modernity: A conversation between Artistic & Scholarly Perspectives”

Afternoon session on Past and Present, Tradition and Innovation.

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Diasporic experience, Indian modernity/Nationalism, Historical time, Embodied Time

I have worked for the last decade with the tensions between two poles, a tension which I find productive as well as irritating. On the one hand, the embodied aesthetics of Indian dance and music, and on the other hand, political debates on gender, postcolonialism and class in India. There are other dimensions to this brew, other tensions, which we might loosely describe as tensions of class as I move between childhood background and the new social milieus I explore in south India as an anthropologist. My childhood I spent watching classical Bharata Natyam and classical south Indian music concerts in Delhi many of them organized by the Sabha of which my grandfather was a leading patron, a paternal family whose many members with deep involvement in the famous dance institution called Kalakshetra. But the work I do as an anthropologist is primarily among Dalit women in rural Tamil nadu, where dance is framed not as the Sanskrit tradition of natyam but as the south Indian tradition of *attam*. As a result of exposure to both, I am constantly struck by the invisibility of attam in the construction of ‘tradition’ in India. Yet this tradition of *Attam* is very old in Tamil nadu, and appears in the Cankam poetry of the first 3 centuries AD. *Attam* is ambiguous in this rural world I speak of, just as the nature of divinity is also ambiguous – attam may be a means by which demonic spirits are exorcised, as when a superior power such as that of the goddess is summoned to make the demonic spirit declare its true identity. Equally, *attam* may be the climax of a lengthy performance of an epic concerning the Amman goddess, who merges imperceptibly with dead local heroes and heroines. At the end of superbly crafted professional performances

in genres such as *villu pattu* and *terukuttu*, the Amman goddess possesses not only the performers but many of the spectators. I cannot think of a greater tribute to the power of performance or of spectatorship than this.

But this tradition entailing possession is largely elided in the narratives of art, the nation and tradition except in the category of the ‘folk’, which tells us nothing of its power. Indeed, the category of folk renders all that falls within its purview, inert – as inert as the performance slot reserved for it on regional TV.

In Indian scholarship over the last twenty years the way has been prepared for asking searching questions that help us re-frame the discourse of dance which I grew up with. That discourse, still repeated at most dance performances, sees a certain degeneracy as having occurred by the nineteenth century both in the forms of dance and in the morality of practitioners. The dance called now called Bharata Natyam, performed by Valli and her dancers this morning, was called *sadir attam* until the 1930s – a term that at least reflects a continuity with the *attam* of possession and healing. Its *re-christening* as Bharata Natyam, and I use the term advisedly, since Christian morality comes into the story, goes with a discourse of the sullyng of the pure spirituality of the arts by politics and by sexuality. Instead of being dance out of pure devotion to the gods, the dances were being performed for kings and nobles. The dancers, who were part of a tightly knit and highly professionalised artistic community consisting of musicians and dancers, were redefined as prostitutes, and their practice and mode of transmission banned by an Act in 1930. The banning of the practice was the culmination of a campaign that involved Indian social reformers, mostly middle class professionals including many prominent women, who saw the profession as a degradation of womankind. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a medical doctor, member of the Women's India Association, and supporter of the Madras Congress Party, introduced the Devadasi Abolition Bill to the Madras Legislative Council in 1930 in the language of social reform and rescue:

Having had personal knowledge of this unfortunate community and having in the capacity of a medical woman come in contact with all the horrors of a prostitute's life,..[I consider it more important than *swaraj* to save the honour of innocent girls].

She writes in a letter to Gandhi, that these women would otherwise turn out to be legal and chaste wives and loving mothers and useful citizens.

The values were a mix of missionary Christianity, with its division of women into legal and chaste wives and mothers versus whores, the values of western medicine, bringing modern science to the backward superstitious Indians, Orientalist constructions of India as a repository of pure spirituality untainted by material values of politics or sexuality. We also have in this mix the specific influence of *Theosophy*, which encouraged a universalist brotherhood of man, but at the expense of rendering particular cultural traditions in India almost un-recognisable.

Equally, Reddy speaks the language of nationalist modernity and feminist values, viewing women as citizens of a modern state. Such values entered into Indian nationalism quite deeply, and allowed upper caste women, to play an active part in reforming tradition and to allow the entry of other middle class women such as themselves. The great re-choreographer of *sadir attam* into *Bharata Natyam*, Rukmini Devi Arundale, speaks in an interview shortly before her death about the instability of pure devotion when it is expressed through the medium of the physical body:

Because it is a physical expression, it is both a dangerous and a magnificent instrument. The weakness of the physical body is its coarseness and vulgarity. For those who in their minds and emotions are unable to transcend the physical, the dance can become an instrument of sensuality and coarseness. (Rukmini, quoted in the performing arts journal *Sruti* 1984, interview by Ramnarayan 1984a:22)

Mind you, I don't say that the ladies who danced such things were vulgar. They were probably taught that way and were probably ignorant of some the meanings. I too did not know the meaning of some of the things I had been taught. But my guru.. used to make me eliminate the lewd element, saying: 'This is not for you. You should not do it.' .. A devadasi is inured to certain things from childhood. She has seen her mother and her grandmother dance to certain things. So, even if a *mudra* is vulgar in meaning she may not be conscious of it. But I was not brought up that way.. (quoted in Ramnarayan 1984a:23)

We can read this as ‘history’. But that is to lock these events into a past – much as Howard govt. has spent many years convincing us to look at Aboriginal dispossession. Something that occurs in the past, in this view, stays in the past and carries no onerous burdens or responsibilities for those in the present.

But there are other ways of thinking about history, and if we pay attention to the techniques of pedagogy in dance they are highly suggestive of how else we might think of the relation between past and present.

Dance forms rely heavily for their transmission on certain specific interlinkages between the body and memory. They rely in particular on the body's capacity to develop habituated forms of knowing, which can enable it to perform highly skilled actions without conscious reflection being involved. The kinesthetic link between an inner being and the felt movements which are reinstated allows memory to take the form of re-enacting rather re-presenting the past.

This is suggestive of a different way of looking at the re-shaping of Indian culture that occurred in the confluence of nationalism and colonialism, and the way it enters into our present. This ‘history’ is vitally present in the bodies of actors in the present - in performers, spectators, writers on dance and arts, in popular discourse. The complex social history of the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s or even of the social reform movements of the nineteenth centuries is vitally present today in the form of tastes, preferences, and affinities as well as in the language we have at our disposal to talk about ‘classical’ dance. That history lives on in our convenient forgetting of the integral links between ‘natyam’, the high Sanskritic traditions and ‘attam’, the local, regional and non-elite traditions that have been left out of the construction of ‘India’. It lives on also in the particular embrace between the bodies of middle class girls and the classical dance forms, a ‘fit’ between the two which travels with the professional middle classes to its new diasporic locations in Australia, UK, Canada, the US. The earlier confluence

between nationalism, spirituality and middle class women comes to life all over again in the immigrant context where the training of girls becomes an essential conduit of national culture.

A language that speaks only of bodily experience is not complete in itself.. The dominant discourses available to us, for the most part, only naturalises and justifies the 'fit' between certain kinds of bodies and certain styles of national culture in terms of the narrative of decadence and cleansing of culture. To acquire knowledge of how this 'fit' was achieved requires, therefore, a *specific labour* of investigation and critical enquiry that goes against the grain of the dominant discourse and the naturalized affinities of bodies and cultural practices. We therefore need the kind of analysis that social science, history, and political projects such as postcolonial critique and feminist theory can give us. But such analyses have also been notoriously indifferent to the magic of performance – and I will give just one example of an experience that woke me to this.

A young girl trained in Kuchipudi appears on stage in Canberra. She is dressed in the full ritual splendor of a dancer who once performed for courts and temples, and she is accompanied by highly expressive music, by guru and musicians. The stage is ritualistically transformed by the presence of a shrine and offerings to the gods on one corner of the stage, and by the performance of the opening item, usually referred to in programs as 'an invocatory item'. Along with this invocation are addressed the gurus, noble patrons and the rasikas or the aesthetically knowledgeable members among the audience. For parents and an older generation anxious about the stability of 'tradition' and 'Indian womanhood', the effect of this spectacle, simultaneously a form of interpellation, never loses its magical ability to allow the audience to temporarily forget the counter-socialisation that girl is receiving from the dominant culture, its educational institutions, or from her peer group. *Despite all my intellectual training, I experienced the same magical assuaging of immigrant anxieties when I saw my own daughter performing on stage at the age of seven.*

How are we to understand these effects? Historical forms of knowing leave untouched the magic of performance; indeed, they seem untroubled by the fact that we have left the

performance and its specific qualities entirely to one side. At the very least, we may ask of this knowledge: what is left of *dance* once we treat it as an active site of nationalist constructions? Is there nothing to distinguish it from, say, the textual representations of the nation in novels and political tracts which discourse analyses of Indian nationalism seem more comfortable with? Minimally, we should be able to recognise that there is not just one live force at work on stage, namely, the modern political project, but at least two forces coming together. Performative traditions which come down to us from the pre-colonial past have brought their own sophisticated techniques of representation to bear on the needs of the present. Unless we grapple with that level, we have no way of explaining the fact that despite knowing the political and intellectual facts about dance, they do not touch the level at which I see my daughter on stage as if I had never left India, as if she had been born and brought up there and not in Australia.

The appreciation by the immigrant audience is easily characterized as one based on an appreciation of tradition as a series of rigid representations. Immigrant nostalgia and classical dance are both easily censured for nurturing rigid representations of tradition. But there is far more going on in both immigrant sensory experience and in dance itself. In fact performances bring together immigrant audiences and performers in a heightened awareness of sharing patterns of *embodied apperception*. As any artist, poet, musician or dancer from the 'home country' touring a diaspora is well aware, to dance, but also to sing or recite poetry to such an audience is to possess the capacity to give presence to an entire set of emotions that are somehow inhering in the patterns of performance. This capacity for the patterns to burst forth into life even in a concert while listening to songs or watching a dance performance testifies to an aliveness that attends even the most seemingly static of representations of tradition. The more transportable cultural practices such as music and dance provide a kind of housing, of being in place. In them, first generation immigrants do not simply remember but *re-live* the patterning and coherence provided by the earliest 'passionate liaisons' with which our bodies intertwine with their world. Spectatorship is sufficient to enact this effect, provided we rid spectatorship of its ocular-centred connotations, and expand it to include the listening, the keeping of time with hands with the variable rhythms of

the *tala*, the appreciative shaking of the head and verbal noises of encouragement with which audiences of Indian concerts engage with the performance. At a performance of Malavika Sarukkai in 2006, the family behind me was actively guessing the raga from the first overture of the flute, humming the raga and singing a few songs in that raga even before the formal announcement. Special emotions flowed at the exploration of Yashoda and Krishna, and there was a standing ovation at the end. By contrast, the audience in Chennai, south India, at which I also watched Malavika perform only a few months earlier, was enthusiastic but controlled in its appreciation.

The past does not simply disappear in the immigrant body. The past of the immigrant leads a half-life. Theatre, with its rich confluence of music, dance, rhythm allows, for the period of performance at least, an environment in which that half life can come out of its shadows.