

30. Some Languishing Arts of India

(a) KATHAKALAKSHEPAM

The essential basis of Indian Culture is Religion in the widest and most general sense of the word. An intuitive conviction that the Divine is immanent in everything permeated every phase of our life. Religion in some form or other played a part in every activity. In olden times temples were not only places of worship but were also centres of various human activities—artistic, social, political and so on. Temples inspired sculpture, architecture, music and poetry;

panchayat courts usually met in temples; even shops were usually situated in and around the temples. Therefore our leaders founded many institutions to keep alive the religious spirit in the minds of the people. Among these the *Bhajanas* and the *Kathakalakshepams* (in their earlier form as *Puranapatanam*) were prominent. There was practically no village without a *Bhajanamatham*; and day in and day out there were *Bhajanas* and *Kalakshepams* reminding the people all the time about the higher and more lasting things in life.

The modern *Kathakalakshepam* was an evolution of the old *Puranapatanam* as a result of the impact of the *Sankirtan* from the Maharashtra country. It was shaped as a definite art form by Tanjore Krishna Bhagavatar of hallowed memory. Tiruppayanam Panchapagesa Sastriar gave his own distinctive touch to it and made it a synthesis of *Wisdom* and *Art*. We are supposed to follow this pattern since.

It became very popular and thousands used to gather to listen to *Kathas*. They kept alive the religio-moral as well as the aesthetic instincts in the people. It was more in demand than even music, so much so that prominent concert musicians like Palghat Anantarama Bhagavatar, Hari-kesanallur Muthia Bhagavatar and Kallidaikurichi Vedanta Bhagavatar took to performing *kathas* in preference to giving concerts. During the last two decades or so, however, a change—subtle and therefore more dangerous—seems to have come in the general outlook, taste and sense of values of our people. I do not propose to stress this point further. We find the effect of this subtle change in almost every phase of our national life. The old instinctive sense of right and wrong, of good and bad, based on our basic culture, is slowly deteriorating. In reality this is the greatest danger to our national life. The late Dr. J. H. Cousins once remarked that a nation without its own distinctive culture awaits its transport to the burning ghat. I feel that his is

not an overstatement; it is literally true. The soul of a nation finds expression in her culture which in turn seeks expression in her arts.

Now where is the old status enjoyed by the *Katha* and why is it languishing now? There are perhaps one or two persons who still keep to the old style and purpose of the *katha*. But generally a modern *katha* is a parrot-like repetition of a hotch-potch of indifferent music and low-class humour. Why this unfortunate situation? It may be argued that the right type of people competent to give a really good and effective *katha* performance is not available. This may be true. But the real cause is that the situation is working in a vicious circle. In every human activity there is the inevitable relation between the supply and the demand. If people really demand a good *katha* then good *katha* performances will be in the supply. The general vitiation in the taste and the religio-moral sense is the root cause. The effect of this vitiation can be seen in several other phases of national life too.

The position to which this noble institution has been relegated can be realized from the place accorded to it in our Radio programmes. To a music concert they allot 90 minutes while only 60 minutes are given for a *katha*. A concert can be adjusted to any duration by adding or omitting a few songs. But a *katha* is a theme developed as an organic whole; situations have to be dramatically worked up and it requires time to accomplish this with the aid of narration and appropriate music. It stands to reason that generally more time should be given for *kathas* than for mere concerts. But most of the *Katha* items in the Radio programme are tending to become a matter of formality and they are rarely well balanced and effective. *Kathakalakshepam* is a composite art, combining as it does the elements of the drama, the dance, music and story-telling. In the interests of the preservation of our distinctive national tradi-

tional culture this institution has to be restored to its rightful place.

I do not wish to go further into details in the matter of this restoration. I shall simply mention one point. The music for the *katha* has its own special features; it should not become a concert; the tunes of songs, the way in which *talam* (cymbals) is handled—*yezhadī* and *usi talams* as they are called—and the short *moharas* (winding up) on *mridangam*, all these give to the *katha* a distinctive atmosphere.

(b) BOMMALATTAM (PUPPET-DRAMA)

I remember how in my younger days I used to sit out whole nights witnessing *Bommalattam*, thoroughly lost in the aesthetic enjoyment of the show, at times weeping with the characters and at other times bursting into boisterous laughter at some of the humorous situations. The stage set-up was quite simple, a small cadjan roofed shed right in the middle of a street or lane; a platform about 5 feet high, partitioned across by a black curtain about four feet in height. The puppets will do their parts in front of this curtain handled suitably by persons from behind it. It requires great skill and experience to manipulate the puppets with the aid of black strings and in some cases thin iron rods. As a lad, I have seen these puppets, their dresses and the manipulating strings during day time; a troupe of players were camping next to my house in Srirangam and they were kind enough to explain the secrets of their job to my great surprise and admiration. It is a wonderful art. But we rarely hear of such shows now. Pity of pities.

(c) TALA DISPLAY

Here I would also like to refer to another art (a very minor art) which has almost disappeared. We have now for a music concert *tala* accompaniments like *Mridangam*, *Kanjira*, *Ghatam*, *Moorsing* (Jews harp) and so on. These

are given independent chances for display. We used to have small cymbals as an accompaniment, specially in *Bhajanas*; and they were given independent chance for display like *mridangam* and *kanjira*. I have seen experts handling the cymbals with striking dexterity and working out complicated rhythm patterns with them to the wonder and delight of the audience. This has disappeared almost completely. This is a lamentable loss.

(d) KOLAM (RANGOLI)

Another minor art which is languishing is the minor domestic art called *kolam* in the south, *alpona* in Bengal. *Rangoli* in other parts of north India and referred to in ancient books as *Rangavalli* or *Shaktichitra* or *Dhoolichitra*. Though a minor matter, it was a potent factor in keeping alive the artistic instinct and sensibility in our girls and ladies. I have seen young girls competing with one another in making new designs. I may confess that in my younger days I was much fascinated with this art, and I used to work out designs and actually draw the Kolam in my house. On the days of temple festivals when the Deity Sri Ranganatha used to be taken in procession along the streets ladies used to draw kolam designs in the streets in front of their houses. And I used to monopolise all the available spaces in front of my house and fill the whole space with designs including the figure of the vahana (lion or horse or elephant or swan as the case may be) of the Deity on that particular day, much to the surprise, tingled perhaps with touches of admiration and envy, of the ladies and girls in the neighbouring houses. Unfortunately this seems to be going out of fashion. Even in villages this tends to become a mere formality. I know there are books on sale professedly giving various designs for kolam; but they are in the first place many of them not artistic and secondly they only add to the already increasing tendency to laziness and mere imita-

tion at the expense of creative art impulse inherent in every Indian woman.

(e) NAVARATRI KOLU

Before concluding I wish to refer to another institution which is gradually receding from the original artistic motive which played an important idea in the festivities. I mean the *Navaratri* festival. In our country, in all our festivals festival. In our country, in all our festivals and other institutions art, like religion, played an important part. This is but natural, as in our culture religion and art went hand in hand. In a sense we may say that religion turned outwards is art and art turned inwards is religion; religion leads us to the God within and art reveals God in Nature. I have felt always that Navaratri is an occasion when the art instinct in our ladies may be given full play. There may be dolls and pictures; but arranging things with a view to beauty, planning ways to accentuate the beauty of line, form, colour and so on was the real purpose, at least one of the purposes of a Navaratri show. I had always advocated that as far as possible the things arranged in the *Kolumandapam* should be things made by ourselves or made under our direction and according to designs supplied by us. In my house I used to lay great insistence on this and gradually the *Koluman-lapam* developed into some sort of art exhibition. In course of time most of the articles exhibited turned out to be home-made things. Somehow to me the *Kolu* suggested primarily an art exhibition and Navaratri was a great occasion for the display of natural artistic talents in our ladies. Unfortunately, of late, while the festival has become a big show there is very little to give the right tone to it and remind us of our great national culture. All kinds of dolls and other things which are un-Indian in both form and idea are arranged under the glare of multi-coloured electric lights; the whole show is lurid.

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