

## The Changing Colour of Patronage

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### I

**A** Sanskrit aphorism reads in translation : 'Creepers, women and the learned cannot survive without patronage.' An aphorist of contemporary awareness would not have hesitated to include artists in, and exclude women from, the list of beneficiaries of support! Patronage has always figured in discussions as a factor greatly conducive to art.

Today, one witnesses an interesting paradox. There is a general lament about lack of patronage to art and artists and yet there exist an impressive number and variety of individuals, institutions, autonomous bodies and government agencies extending support to artists and arts. Additionally, the international interest in promotion of arts in different regions has also become considerable. It should therefore be instructive to take a close look at patronage as a phenomenon. Though all arts enjoy patronage, the present discussion will concentrate on the performing arts. Dance, drama and music create singular situations because of the essential evanescence of performance. In my opinion, the fleeting nature of performance affects the entire operation of patronage in the performing arts. Probably a very special kind of pressure builds up on patrons of the performing arts.

### II

How can we define patronage? In the present context it obviously reaches beyond implying protection or support. Barbara Stoler Miller has rightly pointed out that patronage emerges today as a "multidimensional, sometimes loosely codified, network of exchanges involving not only the production of art and literature, but also its performance, transmission, interpretation and preservation". Patronage is a kind of protective, fatherly support extended to/by individuals as well as institutions in furtherance of a cause, movement, ideology, tradition or some similar aspect of culture. It connotes a process and is not an isolated act. Acts of patronage, when viewed in isolation, fail to make us aware that they are cumulative results of cultural processes. India has a long history of

patronage of arts and other cultural expressions. Over the centuries, patronage in the country has changed in modality, quality as well as direction. The post-independence scene deserves scrutiny firstly because of the multiplicity of patron-agencies and secondly because of the changed philosophy of philanthropy.

It has been suggested that patronage is a process of exchange in which givers and takers change roles in turn. In other words it is not a tri-terminal process involving giver, taker and the given but a four-phased action. This becomes obvious when Indian terms pertaining to givers, takers and the gains to both are examined. Three illustrative listings of Sanskrit/Hindustani terms are placed below for consideration :

A			
<i>Giver</i>	<i>What Received</i>	<i>Taker</i>	<i>What Received</i>
Ashrayadātā (one giving refuge)	Punya (spiritual merit)	āshrita (dependent refugee)	āshraya (refuge)
Dātā (giver)	Punya (spiritual merit)	Yāchak (one who asks for)	Dāna (offering, charity-gift)
Yajamāna (host)	Punya (spiritual merit)	Brahmin (officiating priest)	Dakshinā (sacrificial fee)
King, public	Shreya (credit)	Kalākār (artist)	Bidāgi (money etc. received in appreciation of performance)
Elder, superior	Shreya, Santosh (credit, satisfaction)	Subordinate, younger	Bakshish (one-time reward)
B			
<i>Giver</i>	<i>What Received</i>	<i>Taker</i>	<i>What Received</i>
One seeking favour	Blessings, assurance	King	Nazar (gift)
"	Goodwill	Superior	Nazrānā (ceremonial gift)
Shishya (disciple)	Blessings	Guru (preceptor)	Gurudakshinā (offerings)
C			
<i>Giver</i>	<i>What Received</i>	<i>Taker</i>	<i>What Received</i>
Employer	Services	Employee	Mehnatānā
Student	Services	Teacher	Shulka (fees)

The three lists can be considerably enlarged if various Indian languages are explored and also by examining a wide range of exchanges in society. However,

the lists suffice to bring home the essential circularity of patronage. The features that distinguish the list-categories can be noted :

1. Exchanges in lists A and C are initiated by givers who enjoy ad hoc or continued superiority either due to social or operational status.
2. Activities in list B are initiated by parties in subordinate positions either in a temporary context or because of a stabilized socio-cultural reality.
3. Givers in lists A and B enjoy intangible gains for the patronage given. On the other hand, exchanges in list C have the character of a commodity-transaction.
4. It is necessary to note that the gains of the givers in the first list are not only intangible but are also considerably uncertain and distanced from the actual act of giving.

### III

At this point it may help to go back a little in the historical past, even though no survey of patronage in India is intended. This step is necessary because contemporary patronage is the cumulative outcome of a long process in which many problems related to the act/activity appear to have been squarely faced. Some decisions taken in the course of history may turn out to be relevant even today. A specialist in the subject, Vijay Nath, has pointed out that "a renewed interest in the institution of *dāna* as practiced in ancient times may be, in fact, attributed to anthropological field-researches conducted in the wake of Darwin's famous theory of mutual aid"<sup>2</sup>. Further, the same writer also notes how Marcel Mauss and other sociologists have concluded *dāna* to be an important mode of redistribution and exchange. It is not a coincidence that most religions in India have produced an extensive literature on *dāna*. Kinds of *dāna*, the possible motivations and the results expected to accrue in each case, find detailed treatment in this literature. I suggest that changes that have taken place in *dāna*-philosophy need to be linked to the phenomenon of patronage and its role in the modern period of Indian culture<sup>3</sup>.

According to the Vedic vision, *dāna* has notably religious as well as mundane orientations. The *Rigveda* describes religiously motivated *dāna* as *ishṭa* and the mundane as *poorta*. In the post-Vedic period, the religious focus on *dāna* became a little diffused. This is borne out, for example, by the multiplicity of terms and meanings of *dāna* noted by Panini (c. 500 B.C.). Distribution of material resources in excess, reallocation of wealth to remedy social imbalance, *dāna* made in expiation of sin or as ritualistic performance are some of the shades that Panini

has brought out with his usual penetrative insight into language-use.

The heterodox religious movement (from the sixth century B.C.) introduced in *dāna* perceptibly strong tones of compassion and charity. Giving alms (*bhiksha*) therefore received an unambiguous legitimacy. Closer to the Christian era, the legal format of *dāna*-procedures and such other matters get explicit authorization. *Dāna* is then precisely defined as transference of one's ownership in favour of another. Kautilya is probably to be credited for introducing the concept of *tyāga*, indicating thereby a *dāna* mode useful for offsetting concentration of wealth as private property. Religious *dāna* also receives weightage through impressively designed rituals. The Dharmashāstras therefore evolved an elaborate conceptual framework to legitimize and sanctify *dāna* by making it obligatory or mandatory for all responsible citizens. Thus who, when, to whom, how, why and what should be involved in *dāna-vyavahāra* (*dāna*-behaviour) is specified. The result is that a considerably complex *dāna*-typology emerged by the time the *Amarakosha* was compiled. In order to bring out the apparent as well as the implied aspects of *dāna*, the *kosha* lists nine variant meanings. The receiver's formal acceptance of *dāna* and the giver's ritualistic declaration of *dāna*-intent (for example with an oblation of water, etc.) were laid down. Lawgivers in ancient India obviously wanted to enshrine *dāna* as a means of social cohesion. This is the reason why Manu and others connected the concept of *dāna* to that of the three inherent debts (i.e., the *ṛinas* to *pitr*, *deva* and *rishi*).

It is beyond doubt that in ancient India, *dāna* developed from an amelioratory idea into a full-scale ideology. The *dāna*-process continued to grow with the times, reflecting socio-economic conditions. It responded to the cultural concerns of the society in its evolving, developing or comparatively stabilized phases. Even a casual glance at objects considered worthy of being included in the *dāna*-process would prove its dynamism. For instance, the Vedic *dāna*-objects included cattle, horses, camels as well as cooked food. With the increasing role of agriculture, grain, sesame seeds, garlic, dairy-products, precious metals and forest products acquired importance. Expectably, with greater urbanization, metalware, stone artifacts, finished goods, coins, luxury items, etc., entered the list of *dāna*-objects. Notably, from very early times, the tendency to make secular *dānas*, i.e., of the *poorta* category, appeared and in fact it moved from strength to strength as almost all religious sects and cults approved of it. Hence digging wells or lakes, maintaining public gardens, constructing public halls to distribute alms or supplying drinking water were specifically mentioned as *dānas*. Of a similar kind was the *dāna* made by running hospitals, or by giving medicines free. Equally important was the *dāna* of manuscripts of the epics, Dharmashāstras and

Purāṇas. Against such a background, it is not surprising that even a declared intention to make a *dāna* by a person breathing his last was considered binding on his heirs!

It is clear that the concept of *dāna*, as a consequence of cumulative cultural processes, became in India a full-fledged policy-making instrument employed to effect socio-cultural changes in operations of tangible and intangible forces shaping society. In its evolved form, *dāna* has moved much beyond what patronage suggests. *Dāna* could emanate from and end in both individuals and institutions. Kings, chieftains, merchants, *sanghas*, temples, guilds, farmers, artisans could participate in the *dāna*-process the way they chose. (In fact, beggars would appear to be the only group expected to be mere receivers!) It is on record that performers participated in the *dāna*-process both as givers and takers. In the centuries to follow, *dāna*-modalities or formats did not change radically. There are reasons to believe that successive dynasties (and the Islamic ones in particular) chose to continue or slightly modify the existing *dāna*-mechanism, though the recipients changed oftener.

#### IV

The period named after the Islamic dynasties created a situation in which people of an entirely different cultural background and temperament came to India—not to invade but to settle. They developed increasingly greater stakes in the land and consequently their interest in the performing arts became intense as well as more fundamental—in the sense that they felt an inner compulsion to introduce substantial changes in them. (As I have said earlier, drama, on account of its representational capacities, is frequently the first of the performing arts to *display* deep cultural changes while music may suggest them earlier though it will be the last to accept them!) The medieval period therefore stands for an important phase in the development of patronage in India. In this period, patronage moved simultaneously to accommodate the religious and the worldly (if not the profane) in art. The royal or political patronage encouraged the worldly in art while temples, etc., placed a premium on the religious aspect. It is a known fact that temple-cultures never hesitated to assimilate elements, themes, techniques from the worldly sphere to hold their own against the attractions of the worldly—but that is a different story. India, in the medieval age, offered patronage with many faces and bases. It was, for example, offered for the following causes or reasons:

1. Patrons appreciated arts and artists.

2. Artists receiving patronage ensured lasting fame for the patrons.
3. Patronage of arts was an integral part of accepted social behaviour.
4. To support arts was often a revered family tradition.
5. Conferring patronage helped to legitimize a patron's political position.
6. Artists, it was realized, rendered an important and useful service not obtained through other agencies.
7. Competitive upscaling in patronage was directly linked to a patron's upward movement in the social hierarchy.
8. Patronage enabled the patron to maintain close ties with the traditions of a society. Thus a clash between new political loyalties and inherited cultural identities could be avoided. At least the intensity of the friction could be diminished.
9. Arts and artists made no demands without, at the same time, bestowing a sense of power on the patron.
10. Arts and artists offered their patrons recreation and relief.

## V

It is true that the Portuguese, French and Dutch preceded the British in India. However, because of better documentation as also their control of wider territories and more durable reign, the British contributed to Indian culture more noticeably as well as significantly.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the British were largely and initially responsible for a movement away from the orientalism of other occidentals during the seventeenth and succeeding centuries. They were also responsible for founding the discipline of indology (though the Oxford English Dictionary refuses to recognize and accept the term!). However, the early British indologists realized that the discipline as structured by linguistic, religious, historical and philosophical studies was inadequate for an understanding of the genius of the Indian people without adding on the performing arts to the study-gamut. The result was the welcome British beginning of ethnomusicological pursuits. Their lead was to be followed and, in fact, bettered by the Germans and Americans in later years. What is to be marked is the quality of British patronage compared to that already in vogue.

The British motivation to support the performing arts was marked by the following features:

1. The British patrons, oblivious of the inevitable time-lag between India's

performing and scholastic traditions, attempted to study and patronize performing continuities keeping books at the centre!

2. There were a few who regarded supporting Indian performing arts as using a social lubricant! Performances enabled the conquerors and the conquered to come together under circumstances of minimal social and political tension.
3. Expectably, a minority wanted to develop knowledge of Indian performing arts in order to rule the native populace better. Knowledge of performing arts and practitioners was thought to help in ensuring ascendancy over unknown subjects—great in numbers, diverse in the extreme, and spread over vast expanses.
4. A few British students of culture were genuinely attracted by Indian performing expression on account of its inherent richness and aesthetic appeal.
5. The modern period was generally characterized by interest in the sciences of man. The comparative method was in full sway. The issue of 'origins' of language, religion, music, etc., exercised many minds. Music of the non-occidental world was considered good evidence/data to help solving the origin problems.

## VI

What is of greater relevance is of course non-British Indian patronage to performing arts in the British period. British rule brought about radical changes in many areas of Indian life including the one under discussion. The main features were as follows:

1. Traditional sources of patronage such as temples, noblemen's houses, wealthy families, etc., continued. However, the educated upper class emerged as a new source—often because of their changed motivation, if not for the modes employed.
2. A very major change was to place performances in a framework designated as art. The traditional contextuality of performances in India kept them close to day-to-day life. In brief, performance in India took place in response to three cycles (and the phases included therein), namely, day-night, birth-death, and the seasons. In these responses the performing tradition sought its validation. Arranging performances as art-events struck a new note in Indian culture.
3. Indian patrons came to be polarized—the anglophiles and the indophiles. The first group largely favoured Western orientations in art while the second was

keen on Indian manifestations. Sometimes, entire communities displayed such preferences to a perceivable extent (though overlaps also occurred).

4. The ebb and flow of nationalism worked as an overwhelming force to shape patronage in a remarkable manner. While language, dress, education, food habits, etc., were allowed to undergo sweeping changes the performing arts were rightly viewed as the main, authentic and undiluted expression of Indian ethos. Supporting them was therefore construed as nationalistic. Affirming Indianness through the performing arts became a natural and recognizable political statement.
5. As a corollary to the nationalistic view of the performing arts, patronage became participatory. Patrons studied to perform and often became expert performers. This close identification with the performing reality reduced the distance between performers and patrons.
6. The new patronage, in its zeal to accord a revised and higher status to the performing arts, attempted to bracket them with studies in history, social sciences, religion, etc. The introduction of music-studies on a syllabus-curricular axis, the acceptance of the proscenium arch for dramatic performances, arguments put forward against the traditional suppression of dance as an inferior activity are examples symptomatic of the desire to elevate the performing arts through patronage. These and similar other attempts finally led to the introduction of performing arts in institutions of higher learning, especially in colleges and universities.
7. The new patronage was often engaged in balancing the forces of modernism and traditionalism. On the one hand, patrons would strive to argue the uniqueness of Indian arts and, consequently, the impossibility of accepting or applying Western methods, criteria and standards: on the other hand, the protagonists of the new world-view were equally keen to prove that everything possible for Western artists and in Western art could be shown to have a comparable counterpart or an answer in India. The slogans were 'We already have it', or 'Ours is better', or 'We don't need it'! The conceptual tight-rope dancing frequently resulted in contradictory positions. The use of notation and harmony in music, the acceptance of realism in drama and the insistence on having essentially symbolic Sanskrit plays performed realistically on the proscenium stage, the conventional low view of dance and the desire to give more freedom to Indian women are some instances of the contradictory stances of the new patrons.
8. Sometimes Indian patronage seemed to crave pathetically or ridiculously for recognition from the rulers. In other words, the patrons wished to be appreciated by 'superior' patrons! It was as if they were proving their worth



as patrons to somebody and an acknowledgment of the success of their efforts as patrons was deemed necessary. Patronage was thus used for enhancement of social prestige and recognition from an alien political authority.

9. To their credit, the new patrons also gave instances of transcultural support or catholicity of taste by shifting the boundaries of culture, clime and language. The number of Indians who earned recognizable expertise in Western performing arts was not negligible. A few of them could perhaps be accused of harbouring a slavish mentality or of being active sycophants, but the level of proficiency attained by a considerable number of Indians in Western performing arts cannot be brushed aside as insignificant.

## VII

It is in this wide perspective that post-independence patronage in India ought to be viewed. The main features can be summarized thus:

1. The scene is exciting. Many autonomous bodies, voluntary agencies, academies and foundations are offering patronage apart from government departments. Temples, religious associations, industrial houses and private trusts continue to function as patrons.
2. The performing arts are today examined from many new angles thanks to the tremendous strides taken in the humanities and social sciences. Interdisciplinary approaches have rightly attracted funding agencies. In practical terms, this means a considerable increase in the sources that provide resources. It also means that aspects of arts other than those that were usually explored are selected for support.
3. To a certain extent, culture is unfortunately equated with arts in many quarters. Thus a number of agencies with vaguely formulated aims focus on the arts. In other words, patronage has become more generous but disconcertingly generalized or indiscriminate.
4. In keeping with the overall trend, a kind of specialization is taking place in patronage activities. Performance, preservation, training, documentation, appreciation, etc., are recognized as self-sufficient goals worthy of independent support. Institutions concentrating on a few or many of these functions have been set up.
5. The British, as also the post-independence patrons, sought to establish government agencies, bodies of learning and higher education ('temples of art and education'). Industrial houses have also continued to be sources of

directed and diverse patronage. Consequently, different philosophies or guidelines have become necessary. As explained earlier, the traditional dāna-philosophy had also developed a complete ideology, methodology, and a system to govern the dāna-process. The new patrons have not apparently thought fit to consider continuing the operation of the dāna-mechanism *vis-à-vis* the performing arts. Even at the risk of sounding 'sloganish', I would like to submit that perhaps it is desirable as well as feasible to indianize the patronage model by reverting to the dāna-philosophy.

6. Very early in the discussion, reference was made to the essential evanescence of performance. It is time-bound in a very special sense and the performing arts are thus truly temporal. On account of a view that all arts are similar and, secondly, because of an overwhelming anxiety to 'preserve' the arts, patronage in the performing arts is working overtime to prepare 'definitive' editions of performances, as if they were works of literature. Consequently performances are moving away from individuality, creativity and flexibility.
7. Philosophies, strategies and mechanisms of modern patronage favour terms such as input-output, accountability, annual reports, monitoring, rationalization of procedures, infrastructure, management of resources, etc. Without in any way questioning the motives of the users, it is submitted that such terms indicate a tendency to ignore the inevitably intangible elements inherent to patronage—at least in the performing arts. The market philosophy of commodity exchange has apparently possessed patrons in quest of certainties of a kind not natural to arts and culture. Patronage, like creative endeavour, must be accepted as a risky activity with no assured returns. We must be realistic enough to realize that patronage has aims which cannot be easily quantified, measured and verbalized. The dāna-philosophy fully accepted this aspect of the situation and history has proved its creative success.
8. Modern patronage also errs in its heavy reliance on a rather mechanical adherence to the procedural validity of the process irrespective of the support-worthiness of the receiver. Admittedly, even the ancient tradition was intent on procedure. However, realizing the danger of hollow procedural validity, the ancients tried to combine in dāna religious rituality as well as legal procedures. Today, patronage seems more concerned about the legality of procedure than about the sanctity of the process—a grave error that allows takers empty eligibility to replace *pātratā* which receivers in the early tradition were expected to have.
9. It is curious to note that effects of patronage on the receiver's innate capacities are hardly ever discussed. The sad truth of the matter is that modern patronage often elicits self-congratulatory/comforting behaviour

from the receiver. The post-patronage work of the receiver needs to be assessed with stricter and more refined criteria. This does not happen because, unlike the *dāna*-mechanism, the modern mechanism is not flexible. The situation cannot be remedied by framing more detailed rules or regulations. That would probably result in more paperwork, given the predominance of the culture of putting everything down in writing. Paradoxically, the solution may lie in a more conscious acceptance of the principle of mutual trust. Chance, contingency, must be recognized as natural and justified elements of human behaviour.

10. Finally, patronage is obviously a part of a larger phenomenon which has proved to be a poser. The issue is the morality of cultural finance—if one may use such a phrase. The mechanism of permissible tax-rebates, laundering of funds, and, in general, the habitual mistaking of the explainable for the justifiable have raised ethical issues! Is it desirable to use convicts' ill-gotten gains for children's welfare? Admittedly, no truthful reader of history would maintain that kings, zamindars, temples and the like never used tainted money for noble causes! The very fact that *dāna* is credited with redeeming powers shows the traditional realistic appraisal of the situation. But the tradition made insistent distinctions between *uttam/vimal dāna* on one hand and *adham/tamas dāna* on the other! In other words, the tradition accepted the responsibility to press society towards the ideal though social pragmatism never ignored human fallibility and moral turpitude. The contemporary social structure, the policy-makers exploiting it, and the codifiers seeking to control it, however, seem to entirely overlook moral imperatives. Philanthropy, altruism, disinterested actions, etc., should not be treated as mere lexical realities and abstract possibilities! Doing so reveals a cynicism demeaning to human nature.

Patronage should be elevated/sublimated to *dāna* instead of being reduced to sponsorship or other 'by courtesy' arrangements! The tradition of giving with the hope of adding to one's spiritual merit evinces the donor's self-respect as well as his trust in the receiver. The way patronage operates today is strategy while *dāna* is a philosophy. Being a philosophy, *dāna* does not advocate any *one* model—and there lies the secret of a mature and generous view of human predicament. The *dāna*-philosophy admits that human beings are weak but it also expresses a belief in their strength and willingness to move towards the ideal. □

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