BOOK REVIEWS

Women's Role in Kudiyattam

L.S. Rajagopalan
The Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute
Chennai, 1997
224 pages, Rs 250

In the recent past there has been considerable interest in Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit theatre-form of Kerala, with some valuable research and the publication of some informative books on the subject. L.S. Rajagopalan's book narrows down the inquiry into the subject to attempt an in-depth study of the relatively unexplored area of the role of women in Kutiyattam.

The women performers in Kutiyattam are the Nangiars, and they belong to the Nambiar community. While they are said to have actively participated in Kutiyattam in ancient Kerala, taking female roles against the male actors, the Chakyars, today they are only the singers, who also recite passages from the texts and keep rhythm on the cymbals. But apart from this, the Nangiar has the stage to herself in Nangiar Kuttu, a solo performance which may be regarded as a sequel to a Kutiyattam performance. Nangiar Kuttu is an elaborate enactment of *Srikrishnacharitam*, episodes from the life of Krishna, rendered in the form of a long digression from the opening scene of the second act of Kulasekhara's *Subhadradhananjayam*.

In its opening chapter, the book attempts a history of women as performers in ancient times, but does not present any evidence that women actually performed on the stage along with men. The author does say, though, that from existing records it appears that in ancient India, women performers were not looked upon with respect. And, further, " . . . in the course of time many changes took place and we find men taking the role of women in many of the regional forms like Yakshagana, Terukkuttu . . . ", etc. (3). There is also a reference to Damodaragupta's *Kuttanimata* which mentions an all-woman troupe in which the performers also took the roles of men.

While dealing with the history of the Nangiars, the book is more focused, presenting useful information (to the lay reader) on the social situation of the Nangiars in the context of the matriarchal system of Kerala. However, even in this context it needs to be stated that while matriarchy appears to offer women an independent identity and space for expression, in actual practice, in Kerala, it was only a case of traditional hegemonies asserting themselves in a different garb. Despite holding the property rights within the family, the domestic norms for the average woman in Kerala were no different from other societies.

The high status of the Nangiars in ancient Kerala is ascribed to the fact that they enjoyed more freedom in society than the average woman. They were esteemed in society for their beauty, histrionic talent, and scholarship, and were even accepted by the rulers of Kerala as spouses. They had sufficient influence to procure performance rights in specific temples, and were entitled to special privileges in their capacity as artists. The book clearly mentions that the privileges enjoyed by the Nangiars were "independent of the Chakyars" (7).

Now, how did this freedom and privilege get reflected in their art? Did Nangiar Kuttu have an existence independent of Kutiyattam, or was it only a ritualistic dance confined to a few temples? One looks for answers to such questions in this book, but they are not dealt with here. The status of these traditional artists has deteriorated, and we have a dwindling

number of performers in the present century who have somehow managed to keep their art alive in spite of financial and artistic constraints. The reasons for this deterioration of status in society and in art and the (putative) replacement of female actors by males in other theatrical forms like Krishnattam and Kathakali need to be investigated.

The book gives the details of the performance of Nangiar Kuttu and other plays in which the Nangiar plays a major part. There is also mention of some performances which are no longer presented, for example Chutala Kuttu, and some specific scenes like the 'floating scene' in *Tapati Samvarana*.

The resuscitation of Nangiar Kuttu is also dealt with in some detail. While discussing the efforts to revive the art, the author mentions the pioneering efforts made by Kerala Kalamandalam under Painkulam Rama Chakyar. However, he has overlooked the painstaking efforts made by Kochukuttan Chakyar—both to train female artists and to enrich the repertoire of the Nangiar's art—in the Margi school for Kutiyattam in Thiruvananthapuram.

The book takes up three plays—*Surpanakhankam* (the second act of Saktibhadra's *Ashcharyachudamani*), and the first and second acts of *Subhadradhananjayam* (each act being a separate play in Kutiyattam)—and gives us an elaborate description of the role of the Nangiar in these plays.

In *Surpanakhankam*, the dual role of Surpanakha as Lalita in disguise and as the demoness is discussed in detail. In the first act of *Subhadradhananjayam*, the role of the Nangiar is subordinate to the hero's; however, according to the description given in the book, she has a major role to play in the fifth act. There is an elaborate description of the role of Subhadra in this act, where she holds the stage single-handed for several days, employing the device of *nirvahana* (flashback). This role has so far not been discussed even in the Kutiyattam literature in Malayalam, and appears in this book for the first time. The rest of the book is devoted to a translation of *Srikrishnacharitam*, which contains the entire corpus of Nangiar Kuttu.

With its lucid translation and detailed treatment of even minor details of the action of Nangiar Kuttu, this book will be a help to the non-Malayali theatregoer interested in understanding the complicated grammar of Nangiar Kuttu and Kutiyattam. The glossary and bibliography add value to the publication.

SUDHA GOPALAKRISHNAN

Music in India : The Classical Traditions

Bonnie C. Wade

Manohar, Delhi, 1997 (reprint)

252 pages, Rs 350

Bonnie C. Wade's *Music in India: The Classical Traditions* was first published in 1979 in the Prentice-Hall History of Music series as an "introductory" text on the two 'classical' musical traditions of India, the north Indian (Hindustani) and the south Indian (Carnatic), for the "uninitiated Westerner" who, according to the author, was "at the threshold of understanding non-western musics". The book has nine chapters with a total of twenty-six plates and fourteen charts as well as a map of India. The Appendix refers to the source materials: Bibliography, Discography and Filmography. The Glossary explains the meanings of various musical terms and concepts used in the above two music systems.

Chapter One consists of three subsections—"The Setting", "The Relationship Between Listener and Performer", and "Diversity: A Characteristic of Indian Cultures". In the first subsection the author, after briefly mentioning the geographical specificities of India, gives a

very simplistic overview of India's socio-political scenario. Her generalization about the changed attitude of the West towards India which, she thinks, has become "more than a distant exotic land", as well as her remark about the acceptance of Indian music in the West as an art-form which "must be listened to in terms of itself—not as exotic, meandering sound, but as exquisite, expressive art" (8), go as far as generalizations go. Her analysis of the performer-listener relationship based on the colourful story of Kenaram, does not, as we shall see later, help her target group understand this relationship as it exists today. The third subsection, "Diversity: A Characteristic of Indian Cultures", has not done justice to its caption. Her analysis of the place of music in Indian life beginning with "Aryan India (1500–500 B.C.)" suffers from lack of historical continuity and is based on disparate source materials. Her statement "the 'classical' is the 'folk' and the 'folk' is the 'classical' ", made in the context of her reference to the closeness of the "courts, the centres of education and the residences of the pandits" to the "villages, the cities, and the towns" (14) requires clarifications.

The second chapter intends, as the author says, to introduce "the shared traditions" of both the north and the south Indian 'classical' music, such as the "ensemble", pitch, notation systems and melodic drone, to her readers. The chapter begins with a brief description of the "ensemble", that is, the sitting positions/arrangements of the musicians in Indian 'classical' music concerts. Discussions continue with a brief mention of "improvization" in Indian 'classical' music. "Improvization" or "extemporization" (cf. Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, *The Rags of North Indian Music*, Weslyan University Press, 31), which is a very significant aspect of our 'classical' music, should have been dealt with more elaborately with particular reference to its props and principles, because "improvization" in our 'classical' musical traditions is done not randomly but within the set boundaries of ragas, talas and typological forms chosen by the musicians in their performances and/or during practice.

The notation systems used in the north/south Indian 'classical' music have been dealt with in fair detail. In the course of her discussion, the author tries to explain why, compared to the south, the practice of using notation either in transmission or in performance has not gained popularity in the realm of 'classical' music in the north. The reasons for this given by her are to some extent true. But what is also true is the fact that this tradition, being basically an oral-aural one, needs development/retention of the psychodynamics of orality. And only through this it can preserve its distinctive traits. This has been realized by our traditional musicians. That is why, in the north Indian 'classical' music, using notations is not preferred by the gurus/ustads either in the transmission of knowledge or in performance.

Chapter Three, "Melody", concentrates on the melodic concepts of the two 'classical' traditions of India. The author discusses the concept of raga and the Western melodic concept in a comparative framework with the help of two songs—'Sajana Aye' in raga Malkauns and 'Till the End of Time', a popular song of the 1940s. She next deals with the basic elements of the raga theories of north and south Indian 'classical' music systems. Her discussion continues with a brief note on the origin of ragas, moods represented by different ragas, seasonal ragas, and the time theory of ragas. While examining the method of raga-classification the author analyses the *that* system of the north and the *mela* system of the south. She also draws the attention of her readers to the growing insufficiency of the ten-*that* system in bringing all the current ragas within its fold, and refers to the alternative system of 32 *thats* suggested by Nazir Jairazbhoy (82). Her discussion of the mela system as well as that of the *katapayadi* formula are quite elaborate.

Chapter Four deals with musical instruments. Beginning with a short note on the ancient system of classification of musical instruments mentioned in the *Natyashastra* and

Sangita Ratnakara, the author discusses the history and structural details of various melodic instruments of India with reference to the leading instrumentalists. The instruments discussed are the Vina, Sitar, Sarod, violin, Sarangi, flute, Nagasvaram and Shehnai. However, in order to highlight the importance of vocal music in our 'classical' musical culture, she concludes the chapter by repeating the oft-told story of the king who, wanting to learn the art of image-making from a sage, ultimately ended up learning vocal music.

Chapter Five concentrates on "Meter" and begins with the "Hindustani Metric Concepts". The author discusses the Western concepts of metre and the concept of metre prevalent in the domain of north Indian 'classical' music in a "parallel fashion" with the help of two songs—'Till the End of Time' for the former, and 'Payaliya Jhankar', a Chhota Khyal set to raga Puriya Dhanashri in Tintal, for the latter. She also discusses, though briefly, other talas like Rupak, Ektal and Dhamar, as well as the system of deciding the *laya* (speed) of a composition in performance. While discussing the Carnatic metric concepts she analyses the three subdivisions of the major Carnatic talas and the system of specifying their number of counts. She also highlights the differences in this area between the two 'classical' musical traditions of India. The chapter ends with a discussion of some Carnatic talas.

The next chapter, on "Rhythm Instruments and Drumming", begins with a brief reference to the mythological origin of the Mridanga, followed by a description of the structural details of this instrument. Other instruments discussed in this chapter are the Pakhawaj, Kanjira, Ghatam, Talam (an ideophone), Tavil, Tabla, and Nagara. References are also made to many of our leading percussionists. The systems of drumming followed in both our 'classical' traditions are treated quite elaborately with the support of necessary examples.

Chapter Seven is devoted to the performance genres of north Indian 'classical' music. Following the "Indian order of priority and also historical succession", she begins her discussion with the three vocal genres—Dhrupad, Khyal, and Thumri, and explains the system of "improvization" within these genres. In her discussion on the "instrumental genres", she begins with the sequence of instrumental performance—"alap-jor-jhala-gat"—and then analyses the two basic types of *gats*, Masitkhani and Razakhani.

The following chapter deals with the performance genres of Carnatic music. The author points out that since "dance concerts are frequent in South Indian cultural life" and several genres have developed "variant forms appropriate for a dance or a musical concert" (189), she deals with both the concert and the dance versions putting more emphasis on the former. With examples, she explains the Varnam and Kriti in detail. In the context of the latter, she briefly discusses the contributions of Tyagaraja, Syama Sastri, and Muttuswami Dikshitar. She separately deals with Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi, "another major form" cultivated by some performers. Under a small section on the "light classical genres", the author briefly discusses the Tillana and Javali.

The final chapter is on "Musicians and Musicianship: the Performance and the Audience Contexts", which begins once again with a reference to the concert stage arrangement. With the help of a chart on the "Performance Ensembles" of the two traditions of our 'classical' music, the author explains the roles of the soloist and the accompanist (in melodic instruments and in percussion) in performances. In this context she once again goes back to the performer-listener relationship.

The Appendix, which gives a glimpse of the source materials on Indian culture in general and Indian 'classical' music in particular, would no doubt be helpful for her target group of readers.

This book would be able to provide an

overview of the two 'classical' musical traditions of India to her target group. One has to admit that the author has done her job efficiently and systematically. However, I feel that a few things should be mentioned here. First, I wish the author had gone beyond the "shimmering" Taj-in-moonlight, the exotic maharajas, and the rather simplistic handling of India's complex socio-historical scenario, and shown a deeper understanding of the "setting" (Chapter One) of the Indian 'classical' musical traditions.

Secondly, her two attempts (in Chapter One and Nine) to analyse the performer-listener relationship, as I have already mentioned, have failed to explain this complex issue in today's context. In Chapter One the discussion begins with the story of one Kenaram, a dacoit who became a great devotee of the goddess Manasa after listening to the devotional songs of Banshi Das, a poet and a devotee of Manasa. After a brief mention of the *rasa* theory, the author concludes the subsection on the performer-listener relationship by observing :

> Thus, in the ballad we have recounted, the making of music is an act of devotion and the path of self-realization for the wandering ascetic Bangshi Das and his band. And for Kenaram, a murderer and a thief who turns into a rasika, the expression of devotion through song is so effective that he too chooses that path to God: "He sang and danced, lost in reveries". [13]

The story, though colourful, fails to analyse such a relationship in the changed context of the present times when Indian 'classical' music has largely become an art of the virtuosos. A reference to the observations of a scholar from a different musical culture (Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations*) may be of some help in understanding the changed present-day dimension of the performer-listener relationship in the context of virtuosity. In the case of Western classical music, Said has shown how the lay involvement in music was systematically destroyed as music-making became synonymous with virtuosity, which can only be gaped at, never shared, into which nothing but technical wizardry can be read. In our case, 'classical' music has also been going through this historical process of being mystified and withdrawn from public interpretation in a different way. Though Wade mentions the changed nature of the performer-listener relationship in recent times (19), no attempt has been made in the book to analyse this changed relationship.

Thirdly, the role and significance of *riyaz* in "improvizations"/"extemporizations" in Indian 'classical' musical traditions should also have been analysed to understand how far such "improvizations" actually get pre-inscribed in the memory of the musicians through rigorous riyaz/practice. It is true that our 'classical' music is not composed in the way Western art music is. Yet there is a very intricate mental pre-planning implied in its performance. Indian 'classical' music's "improvizations" and elaborations are largely pre-inscribed in the memory and demand a very intricate mental pre-planning. Such pre-planning signifies a certain kind of distancing of the knowledge from the self—a trait customarily believed to characterize knowledge within the textual form. The interaction between this mental pre-planning and its musical execution, that is, performance, is mediated by rigorous practice, riyaz in musical parlance, and listening, in this case, mainly to the musical performance of the guru/ustad either during *talim* or in concerts.

Finally, it seems two things of our 'classical' musical traditions look rather extraordinary to the author: one, the constant attempt to relate modern theory and practice to "the hoary past", which "seems like only yesterday"; and two, "the love of naming things, which results in an abundance of terminology" (53–54). All this would not look extraordinary if we remembered that this is a tradition which has been able to retain a substantial residue of its oral past even in the

high-technology ambience of present times. That retaining residual orality within a high-technology ambience is not impossible has been shown by recent researches in the field of orality/literacy.

In understanding the Indian habit of referring to "the hoary past" as "yesterday", one has to remember that the concept of time in an oral society is completely different from a literate one. Mark the following observation by Walter J. Ong (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, 1993) :

> In high technology cultures today, everyone lives each day in a frame of abstract computed time enforced by millions of printed calendars, clocks, and watches.
>
> Before writing was deeply interiorized by print, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract computed time of any sort . . . Persons whose world view has been formed by high literacy need to remind themselves that in functionally oral cultures the past is not felt as an itemized terrain, peppered with verifiable and disputed 'facts' or bits of information. It is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source of renewing awareness of present existence, which itself is not an itemized terrain either. Orality knows no lists, charts or figures. [97-98]

Also, the practice of naming things is very common in oral cultures, since in such cultures, where words do not exist in outer surfaces and "[s]ound cannot be sounding without power", people "commonly think of names . . . as conveying power over things". Such cultures consider that

> . . . names do give human beings power over what they name: without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand all [forms] of intellectual knowledge.

Moreover, in oral cultures names are not considered as a tag/label of an object as they are to peoples of literate cultures (ibid. 32–33). Hence, whether it is the practice of "reciting of names of the deities" or that of "reciting of chains of names of many things", or that of the "Indian musicologist" who, in his discussion of the degrees of speed in Carnatic music, "presents each term for such degrees in three forms" (34), all stand perfectly in tune with the distinctive traits of a culture which still retains its oral mind-set to a considerable extent.

This book is indeed a commendable effort on the part of the author to make the uninitiated Westerners "literate" about the 'classical' musical heritage of India, particularly at a time when, as Wade says, a section of Westerners have started changing their view that "there [is] but one sophisticated system of music in the world, and that it [is] theirs" (1), and other musical systems, including Indian 'classical' music, are "exotic". But the way the book has been dedicated seems to clash with the above view. I am rather confused, I must confess, by the term "Indian Music Wallahs", to whom Bonnie C. Wade has dedicated this book. Who are these people? Are they the "uninitiated Westerner[s]" for whom, as she says in the Preface, the book has been written? Maybe not, because 'walla' usually relates to occupation, e.g., 'taxiwalla', and Indian classical music, as common sense tells us, cannot be the occupation of the "uninitiated Westerner". Are they then those distinguished Indian musicians "partially" on whose behalf, Wade says, she has written this book (211)? I do hope she has not meant them. Are they then the Westerners who took up Indian classical music as their profession when this book was written, that is, in the 1970s? If these are the people to whom this book has been dedicated, I must say that they deserve a more dignified nomenclature than this, since some of them were, and still are, as seriously involved in the field as their Indian counterparts.

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