

# ENCOUNTER OF THE PERFORMING ARTS AND MODERN MASS MEDIA

---

J.C. Mathur

The performing arts have matured over a period of centuries. Modern mass media are an altogether new phenomenon and continue to grow from decade to decade and sometimes from year to year. Over the ages the performing arts have been using the chamber, the arena and the auditorium as the principal means of their communication with their audience and as the forum for their expression. Now suddenly during the last fifty years this new genie has appeared as an additional and alternative vehicle of communication. Unlike the chamber, the arena and the auditorium the mass media have separated the locale of performance from the receiving end. This is a revolutionary change. Though the locale of artistic expression and the locale of receiving the fruits of that expression have been separated, the interesting thing is that the technology of modern media manages to produce an illusion of non-separation. This is because of the speed and simultaneous reception of the 'message' (the programme-content) that the electronics media carry. Even the non-electronic medium of the film usually succeeds in creating the illusion of non-separation because though its reception is not simultaneous, its display-technique creates an environment of immediacy.

Another revolutionary aspect of the modern mass media is that generally they transcend the normal process of the mental interpretation of the message. Normally a performing artist leads the audience or the *rasika* through a number of intermediary stages towards the fulfilment of aesthetic enjoyment. The artistic devices employed by the performer, the director, the composer and the writer stimulates the necessary receptivity in the mind of the spectator. Gradually he is able to interpret the message and adjust it to his own personal sensitivity.

But the modern mass media exercise a direct emotive influence because they assail and awaken the sensations through almost a plastic impact. In fact the T.V. affects the whole nervous system. There is not much chance for gradual mental interpretation. You are subjected to the message; your own receptive faculties are not stimulated; they are overwhelmed and held



captive. Even more significant is the fact that the artistic devices of the performer, the poet, the director, etc. become subsidiary. Much of the stimulating function is taken over by the techniques of the mass media. Close-ups, reaction shots, zooms, pans, freeze shots, solarization, dissolves—these are examples of the tools of the film and T.V. producers by which they can communicate with the audience and overpower them in no time. The artistry of the programme-content and performance is only a subsidiary factor.

These two revolutionary changes—the separation of the place of performance from the place of reception and the direct impact on the spectators' emotive and nervous systems by the technology of mass media have produced some benign results as well as some alarming situations. Let us consider first the benign results and positive gains so far as they relate to music and dance. Drama will be discussed separately from music and dancing because drama's place in mass media has been dubious and unhappy in countries like India.

### Benificent Effects

An obvious effect of the rapid, simultaneous and widespread transfer of the image and sound by mass media is that musical and dance forms of countries and regions far and near are influencing each other not imperceptibly as in the past but pointedly and sometimes with a bang. Popular film music of the commercial film of Bombay borrows sometimes rather crudely, the refrains from the hits in Hollywood. But one notices a subtler and more welcome effect too. In classical music of societies with traditional culture like India, innovation of a creative kind is appearing, and because it is often initiated by some reputed musicians, it is not dismissed unceremoniously by even conservatives. New compositions, in which not only foreign instruments but also notes belonging to diverse musical systems coordinate, are being attempted and the kind of blending that in the past took centuries to come about has emerged on the horizon within years. The experiments of Kumar Gandharva and Ravi Shankar for example, are significant and the controversy over them is itself symptomatic of the new musical ethos. The walls between Hindustani and Karnataka systems and between *margi* and *desi* styles are no longer impregnable.

Between radio and music there has been a constructive relationship. Indian classical music artists willingly accepted the radio discipline of performance duration. This discipline has improved the communicability of the classical style despite a little curb on creative inspiration. Instrumental ensembles and orchestral compositions based on classical *ragas* and *raginis* as also choral renderings have come into the repertoire of Indian music largely under the influence of the radio and often at its initiative. The film and the radio have been responsible for extending and deepening the popularity of the *ghazal* within the last two decades. To radio (and now T.V.) can be



attributed much of the recent widespread stimulus to folk music of different regions. A new sense of identity and even pride has come to rural and tribal singers who are now beginning to refine their modes of presentation.

In classical dances, the impact of mass media has been not so much towards blending as towards distinctiveness of styles. Each major style—*Bharata Natyam*, *Kathakali*, *Orissi*, *Manipuri* and *Kathak*—is keen to emphasise its distinctive features. Documentary films and the T.V., in their endeavour to recognise and give pride of place to the contributions of different regions to the composite tradition of Indian culture, have promoted the regional excellences of classical forms, overlooking the common source and shared features. But the effect has on the whole been wholesome in as much as precision in exposition and attention to details in presentation have been encouraged.

T.V., is indeed an excellent medium for bringing out the finer beauties of classical dances, the nuances of the *abhinaya*, the supreme skill of the *parans* and the sophistication of the traditional make-up and costumes. An innovation disliked by traditionalists but likely to be an asset eventually is songs which classical dance artists interpret which are beginning to be rendered in regional languages and in Hindi. The demand of communication may thus lead to wider appreciation of classical forms.

Indeed the most important positive contribution of the radio and T.V. seems to be that they provided to the classical arts a larger appreciative patronage just when the patronage of landlords and feudal princes began to decline.

The *sahridayas*, men of good taste, need no longer be confined to the chamber of the aristocrat. The image of the old *darbari* musician or the *mehfil* dancer has faded out over the years. The profession is becoming modern and has acquired a high social status. The distinction between 'professional' and 'amateur' performers has practically disappeared and an environment of equality is growing.

These positive gains notwithstanding, modern mass media have an infinite capacity for creating illusions not only for the audience but also for performing artists and others who are responsible for the contents of the programmes. The illusion is created by the image of the artists—actors, singers, instrumentalists, dancers—created by the mass media. It is a highly flattering image.

To be heard, seen and admired by thousands who are invisible gives a sense of having a vast domain over the hearts of people. Is this a true domain? One view held among several sociologists in the West is that "most films, TV and radio stars are merely figureheads of a giant entertainment apparatus,



spokesman of a culture-industry that will abandon them as soon as viewer response declines.”

In India the above description certainly applies to film stars. The fortunes of stars rise and decline according to popular response. But who determines “popular response”?

In pre-media times a minority of aesthetically sensitive people used also to be the major “financiers”. In their presence the performances were given either in the chambers, or temples or on occasions of domestic and community festivity. Their appreciation, judgement and guidance provided the norms to artists and the general audience alike, because they were the patrons as well as the financiers.

The separation of the place of performance from the place of reception by modern mass media has created a new situation for the performing arts. The patrons and the financiers are now different people. Listeners and viewers in thousands of homes, and the vast film audience are the patrons. Distributors, cinema-owners, bankers, political decision-makers and bureaucrats are the “financiers”. The patrons pay for their admission tickets to see films and their licence fees for radio and T.V. sets. People with refined taste, aesthetic responses and well developed understanding lie scattered among them. Not being major patrons nor being physically present at the places of performance, they no longer carry weight as assessors of quality. They are a minority whose voice does not really count.

### **Quality-Control**

It is the financier and the bureaucrat on whom falls the burden of deciding what fare the performing arts should provide on mass media. As a class neither of them is qualified to assess quality and to guide taste. And so they generally ignore the issue of the aesthetic quality. The box-office, the number of licences and in the case of advertisers, the amount of community turn-over, influence their choice. They interpret and also subconsciously guide what is known as popular appeal; subconsciously, because though they disclaim all responsibility for aesthetic judgment, their own untrained taste and limited understanding subconsciously influences their selection of media content.

Moreover, “programme-production” in mass-media has tended to become more technical. The quality of the programme-content is only one of the factors in building up an attractive image of the programme. Sometimes it is not even the predominant factor. ‘Effects’ have become a major enrichment-device. Over the years effects that began as a subsidiary, have tended to occupy the centre of the stage. Media techniques have led to new exciting programmes like electronic music, and dances in which the shadow and the figure intermingle.



These developments have not caused serious setback to classical music and dance in India, because, in the ultimate, the skill, artistry and depth of musical and dance expression is the major determinant of the quality of a musical programme. Besides the radio (and even T.V.) has a thing called “minority” programme. In old times the BBC had the Third Programme for quality pieces. India has had the National Programme which began as a prestigious national event but is now reduced to the status of a minority-interest programme.

Of all the performing arts it is drama that has benefitted the least from modern mass media. In fact one gets the impression that drama as it has grown over centuries—its blend of literature, poetry, action and expression—may perhaps in the future have no place in the media world. We have already radio-drama, T.V. drama and film scenerio—each a genre in its own right.

Each of these is an interesting form. But with a few exceptions, the scripts written for these categories and the productions do not qualify for recognition as dramatic literature and theatre. It is not that they are inferior. It is that they are an ancillary to a joint enterprise in which the technology of the medium is the central operational force. That technology seeks to make a quick and direct emotive impact upon the human systems. Its tools are the manipulation of voice, sounds and image. Words may or may not be important. The microphone and the camera aided by various complex and sophisticated contraptions and artificial lights take over some of the communicative and expressive functions of dialogue, poetry, gestures, facial expression and human movements.

In radio-drama the word is not denigrated; it is magnified and acquires new dimensions—under the control of manipulated sound. The radio certainly promoted poetic drama. But in the absence of the visual, and uncorrected by the reactions of an audience in its physical proximity, it tended to become monotonous.

The film has had little use for drama. It looks for a dramatic story, a plot, a theme. Thereafter it parts company with drama. The preparation of a film does not follow the sequence of the story. Shots which are the core of the film production technique, are taken at different places, and the order in which they are taken depends upon considerations of technique and convenience. There is no such thing as a continuous performance as in the theatre. Continuity is provided by the technical skill of the editing staff and the syncretic vision of the director. The film is a manufactured cultural presentation. Drama is a creative stage-presentation.

Unfortunately for drama, the first result of the introduction of the cinema in India was that as popular entertainment, it lost its hold on audiences, particularly in the vast Hindi-speaking region—in towns and later



even in several rural areas. Several factors accounted for this situation. These are the exotic appeal of the film, the low tariff and its unlimited capacity to show any place or situations, realistic to the most convincing detail and as fantastic as the wildest imagination. That is why the first to go down was the spectacular drama of the Parsi theatre, because its revolving stage and its trick scenes were no match for the marvels of trick-photography.

That in itself was not much of a loss. But with it also seemed to go the core of the theatre—the power of speech, the beauty of the turn of phrase, the dialogue that illumines a situation in a flash, and brings out the clangors of the human soul in conflict. Gone was the gradual build-up of climax and the cathartic effect of passion in the throes of struggle. For some time it seemed that the theatre would not survive in the Indian situation where, unlike in the West, there had been a long break in the availability of state-patronage to the theatre during British rule.

### **Crisis of Identity**

However, soon after independence, the theatre has had a revival. But it bears the impact of the modern mass media — not altogether in tune with its character. Several effects of the modern mass-media particularly the film can be seen. First, we see a far more pervasive and sophisticated use of the techniques of stage-production based on electrical and mechanical devices. Sometimes the manipulation of these devices is not an aid but the principal motivating force. Secondly, and in a different direction, is the preference for abstract in the form, speech and production of drama, the search for non-dependence on words in drama, and the discarding of coherence, symmetry, episodic build-up and other common practices of the dramatic art. Thirdly, we see the fancy for the superficial film-type of drama, unabashedly copying the style and tricks that appeal to entertainment-seekers whose preference have been shaped by the cinema. Finally, the structure of plays is being influenced by the film-scenario. For example a recent vogue is to have numerous short scenes each with a rather narrow focus and without a marked integral relationship with others.

It may seem that a crisis of identity has seized the theatre superficially, similar to the crisis that came to painting when photography was discovered and from which it has not yet recovered completely. The similarity is superficial because the photographic technique replaced and improved upon the functions of realistic art. It was a better mirror to external form and therefore the painters sought different ways of interpreting form. Dramatic technique of interpreting life has not been replaced by the film or T.V. It cannot, because the skills of the playwright and the actor require the span of the performance-duration and the communicative environment of the theatre-hall or arena, for its adequate expression. One should therefore be cautious about the common contemporary assumption that the emergence of film-drama justifies



deliberate indifference to the basic character of drama as a direct and interpersonal sharing of the literary experience between the playwright, the actor and the audience.

Without the sharing of literary experience, without the artistry, poetry, vision and intensity that are the warp and woof of literature, drama will lose its identity. Cinema provides a more impressive mirror to life; it certainly gives infinitely varied and complete entertainment; it produces overpowering audio-visual miracles and reproduces reality and fantasy with unsurpassable thoroughness and accuracy. T.V. reinforces the needs and coverage of the film not only by its capacity for instantaneous and simultaneous communications, but even more by providing a near-substitution for three-dimensional reality by enveloping the sensations and the nervous system of viewers. But the theatre alone enables the individual to have access to the heights and variety of literature through the communicative process of *rasa* or aesthetic enjoyment.

Another role of the theatre is that of involving the community in its ethos. In folk and traditional theatre, a performance is more than a show. It is a community festival. Performers are able to elicit a ready response; the idiom and the wave-length are the same. This does not mean that conscious and prepared artistry and the professional skills of stage (or arena) are lacking. Performances are not merely improvised and ad hoc presentations. They have a high degree of professional excellence and, unlike in the west, folk drama in India carries some conventions, imaginery and stylistic variations inherited from ancient classical drama. What enables folk and traditional theatre to involve the community is that it is local-specific or can be so with a little adjustment. This is something difficult and generally impracticable for film scenario and radio-drama to achieve. By their very nature mass-media try to appeal to large masses. But the more critical factor is the separation between the place of performance and the spectators.

The 'crisis of identity' is, therefore, spurious. Its unreality becomes apparent once it is realized that neither the imitation of the film style nor the fabrication of new structures based on a creative use of electronic devices and audio-visual effects can be a substitute for drama proper. These developments have their own importance but they do not replace the role of drama because the strength of drama is in its being literature, written or oral, and in its capacity to involve the community actively.

### **Role of T.V.**

Of all the mass media, only T.V. can and should be used for the re-assertion of drama as a literary genre and its role in giving the experience of community-involvement. The other two, film with its scenario, and radio with its recitative and non-visual drama cannot use drama in its true character and convey its full experience. Unfortunately hitherto, in India T.V. has been rather



pathetically imitating the film with the result that its potential as a medium for drama has not received attention. Chains of shots rather than scenic sequences, effects rather than dialogue, clever angles and even long distance views rather than close-ups of speaking and expressive faces—these are only some of the things that hinder rather than help in providing an intimate face-to-face and concrete experience of dramatic literature and community involvement. There seems to be an exaggerated emphasis upon the technical production aspect. One gets the impression as if all those connected with the production of T.V.-drama item were keen to establish their bonafides as future technicians, directors, actors, producers of films. It would not be surprising if, career-wise that is the path they wish to take. But, in the bargain, the true character of drama is not brought out.

Actually T.V.'s power to make the spoken word acceptable even to an indifferent audiences is tremendous. A person speaking on T.V. becomes part of the intimate circle inside one's drawing room and whatever he says is heard. That is why dialogue in drama can follow its natural course and not be subjected to the scissor-and-glue process of the kind unavoidable in making a film. Between stage-drama and T.V. drama, therefore, there need not exist the kind of dichotomy that is inevitable between the film and theatre. If a 2½ hour film can be shown on T.V. I do not see why complete plays cannot be telecast. Brutus's speech in Shakespeare's Julius Ceaser, the long but challenging dialogues of Shaw's satirical plays, the complex beauty of Jaya Shankar Prasad's dramatic prose, can have abundant scope and need not normally be trimmed and edited. T.V. is an ideal medium to bring out the magic of dramatic language; the enlarged, intimate, expressive face can whisper to you elevating thoughts, intricate imagery, stirring exhortation, internal and external conflict. Clear enunciation on T.V. means much more than on the radio. It is a tool of aesthetic comprehension, and not just a mark of excellence. The Regional TV can stimulate the warmth of intimacy in the presentation of folk plays and thus capture, to some extent its local-specific character and sense of participation. This may not be possible as a national network, but only in local programmes. T.V. should, therefore, be an ally of drama proper rather than the seeker of a different form that may in effect be only a pale imitation of film-drama. Let it help in the re-assertion of the literary personality of drama.

To sum up, I see the performing arts being able to retain their identity in the midst of the vast and powerful tide of modern mass-media in the following manner:

—Classical and folk music have in the radio an effective vehicle because it can create an auditory concentration of the wide and varied spectrum of rhythm, melody and harmony.

—Classical and folk dances have a useful forum both in the film and T.V. The film catches the tripping rhythm, the lyrical flow and the



subtle and detailed beauty of *abhinaya*, and T.V. makes these an intimate experience. Both will facilitate wider comprehension of dance forms without distorting them.

- Drama is in serious danger of being distorting unless it adheres to its literary and poetic base and admits folk and traditional forms in its mainstream. In today's theatre resurgence, several experiments are going on. Those that endeavour to blend the urban peoples' drama and the folk and traditional forms (for example *Hayavadan* of Girish Karnad and some recent productions of Habib Tanveer and B.V. Karanth), have the potential to create an environment of community-involvement. Significant experiments should likewise be attempted to strengthen and highlight the literary core of drama. In all such experiments that re-assert the identity of theatre proper, T.V. can be an ally because its technology does not compel the dilution or distortion of drama as does that of the film or radio.

---

J.C. Mathur, author, playwright, was formerly Director-General, All India Radio; closely connected with the development of the Hindi theatre movement and Vice-Chairman of National School of Drama, New Delhi.