

URBAN CULTURE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

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Dancing has been called one of the two primary and essential arts—the other being architecture. “The art of dancing” according to Havelock Ellis, “stands at the source of all the arts that express themselves first in the human person”. Music, poetry, acting proceed from this one mighty stream. Dancing is the primitive expression of religion and of love. Dancing, to the man in the state of nature, was to work, to pray, to worship. It permeated every activity, every aspect of his life. Karl Bucher holds that work differs from the dance not in kind but only in degree since both are essentially rhythmic.

In ancient times when the communities were small and well-knit, singing and dancing and even acting were part of daily life. Festivals were celebrated collectively by singing and dancing and every one participated in these. Of course, some danced and sang better than others but as yet, there was no specialization. Every one did these as naturally as he or she ate or slept. Even now amongst the tribals, the so-called ‘primitive’ people, it is so. In the tribal areas of every State, in the hills of Himachal Pradesh and in the entire north-eastern parts of our country, people celebrate together by drinking and singing and dancing.

Urbanization broke the community harmony. Towns and cities are like magnets pulling people from different parts, collecting diverse elements together. There is no homogeneity in the city in the composition of its inhabitants. The community of the whole village was replaced by the neighbourhood of mohallas. Alongside, the joint family was superseded by the nuclear family. As the “status” of individuals improved, the ‘neighbourhood’ too was destroyed. My next door neighbour is from distant Kerala; the next one is from Maharashtra; on the other side is one from Assam and so on. Each community has its traditional new year on a different day depending upon the season and the day of inauguration of harvest in his original ancestral region. First generation celebrates it; the second remembers it as an optional holiday; the third mocks at it. Nothing replaces these symbols of

community. Each family becomes an island unto itself. It exchanges polite greetings with neighbours on their festivals but there is no collective celebration. There is no village 'common' where the beat of the drum would herald a celebration and households would pour themselves into it for festivals. The contact amongst neighbours is minimal. Its degree is inversely related to one's "prosperity".

Urbanization, because it brings about social heterogeneity, because it cramps people in matchbox houses piled one above the other, because it represses natural instincts in the interest of 'civilised' existence, because it makes people concentrate on earning a living, destroys the essence of community life and all that goes with it. People stay cooped up; there is no collective release. Dam bursts occur occasionally in riots. Have you ever noted that no riots ever originates in villages? It is an urban phenomenon, though its fall-out affects the countryside too.

And so, urbanization spells the doom of performing arts as an aspect of daily life. Man survives by adjusting to his environments. He must still have singing and dancing. So, these functions are 'delegated' to the "talented" ones. A 'specialization' develops, a profession emerges, whose members perform, the rest witness them and satisfy their urges vicariously. The community is divided into active performers and passive spectators. A wedge is driven into something which was one whole.

Not that there was no individual excellence under the older system. There were people with special talents and they tried to reach heights in their chosen art. Some were picked up by kings and feudal lords and under their patronage, won laurels and the community was proud of them. But the avenues for collective releases were not choked.

In the Western countries, urbanization has not been destructive in this regard. Firstly, the homogeneity of the urban community has not been upset to the same extent as here. Secondly, the open air harvest dances, war dances, dances of courtship and of worship, all got metamorphosed into ball room dances. In a group of fifty in the West, all will dance; not so with us. Take an average mixed party of say, twenty persons in an upper class Indian home. After dinner make a request to guests to sing. The universal reply will be: "I don't know how to sing." Some guests will be embarrassed by your insistence. What they mean is that they don't have the calibre of a singer who can perform professionally. Is there anyone who can't sing?

In a similar party in the West, you can have about every body singing. Most will join in a chorus, if there is a folk song.

It is not mere urbanization that has killed so many things. It is our attitude to things in general. Emergence of Puritanism is another reason

for the decline of the performing arts. That is also reflected in our system of education. They are all so inter-twined.

Nehru, to whose vision we owe so many basic institutions, was acutely aware of this phenomenon. He issued instructions against ruthless and unimaginative 'civilizing' of the tribals. He wanted the richness of the content of their lives preserved and enhanced. He would go and join the tribals in their community dancing. He also started youth festivals where the young people from the universities could gather and amongst other things, sing and dance in the spirit of youth. He also saw the need for replacing the old court patronage of the arts by encouragement by the state in the new India. He saw the need for promoting and encouraging pursuit of excellence by individual artists. So, the Sangeet Natak Akademi was set up at the centre followed by a chain of similar bodies in the states. India has such a vast and varied treasure and tradition of regional forms that one body at the centre alone would not have been able to cope with the task.

These academies have made some contribution in many ways. One line, which they could pursue is the encouragement of community dancing and singing. These could be sponsored in towns, in schools, in universities. Such a measure will enrich the lives of the people and make them more wholesome and fulfilled persons.

In the case of acting too there has been a similar transformation. Theatre in India has fallen on evil days thanks to the advent of the film. Over the years, it has only decayed. There is hardly any non-formal theatre in India today. Our schools and universities put up one or two dramas a year to celebrate their annual days. There is need for more dramas, in every class of every school and college. But where are the scripts and where is the repertoire? And most important, where is the attitude? Here we enter the sphere of education. Plato in his 'Laws' declared that "a good education consists in knowing how to sing and dance well". But what place is given to these arts in our curricula. Separate subjects, specialised courses, yes, they exist. But as part of daily education—no they are not covered by the three R's and so are a waste of time! However, everything is not lost. We see every year many organisations in different localities putting up their own 'Ram Lila' shows. It is a fortunate thing that even in urban areas this art form has survived. Amateur actors enliven the evenings of the community. Every one makes a contribution to meet the expenses more or less on the basis of capacity to pay. A tradition is kept alive, a common memory is revived every year. The community bond strengthens. You may have noticed, incidentally, that these shows are organised generally by groups who hail from a common village or town before they emigrated into the cities.

In the beginning, art was life and the living of it. Every body lived it—some did better than others. They were the artists. There was no argument

about art for life's sake and art for arts' sake. These questions are meaningless. Art is both; it is life; it is escape from life so that one can come back to it and live it. The performing arts are no abstraction or translation of life; they are life itself. They are the art of which we are the stuff.

Man would like to dive deep into the sea, scale the mountains, fly up to high heavens and in certain moods, singe the beard of God, if there is one. Since he can't do these physically, he does so in imagination. He sings, he dances. To use Huxley's expression, he 'Bovarizes' himself, that is, sees himself as he is not. He lives in the make-believe, he plays roles. Communities and cities, should be so organised that people can do all these things, naturally and without inhibition. They came into existence, observed Aristotle, to make life possible, they continue in order to make it better. In the present urban situation, where can the citizens do such things assuming that some of them are still 'alive' about these needs? Take any colony like Patel Nagar, or Green Park, or Greater Kailash—good 'posh' colonies, all. There are shopping malls, open spaces, some schools here and there and of course cinema houses. But are there community halls and theatres (closed or open-air)? The urban planner, under pressure from citizens who want to leave as little open space as possible, feels that the recreational needs of the people are met by providing a cinema hall. Where is the need for a theatre? Who will use it? And in any case is he to blame for not providing it? He is himself the product of a system of education according to which the performing arts are not part of life or education but lie at their periphery—in the 'drop-out' land. It may sound paradoxical, but in this respect, slums have a richer community life. They mock not only the town planners, but also the sociologist.

So, where does the solution lie? With the educationist or the town planner, or the Sangeet Natak Academies? Life is one whole; departments are created to make the handling of problems easy by breaking them down into manageable components. Problems also don't squarely fall into slots, into departments. So, these have to be tackled on a holistic basis by the community as a whole and not to be left to be bandied about from one department to another. Our urban agglomerates stint on play grounds, gyms, stadia and theatres while they never miss out on cinema houses. It reflects a value-system, a system of priorities which produces human beings whose human content is declining while the 'computer' content is increasing progressively.

The urban civilizations of the West have been through some of these phases and they have latterly also taken some corrective action. We can learn from their experience. Our latest Census figures confirm the trend revealed in the earlier figures that urbanization is on the increase. Cities in their number and content are growing faster than villages. That is a universal pattern of development and there seems to be no escape from this. Cities

should cater to all human needs—physical, social, emotional. They should take care of man in his wholeness, providing for, to use Coleridge's words, "all thoughts, all passions, all delights, whatever stirs this mortal frame"

Our cities do not meet these needs because our town-planning models are imitations of imitations and are far removed from reality. Town planning is too crucial to be left to experts. The community must tell them what it wants and they should then devise ways of providing it. The layman must lay down the framework. Culture is what we are; civilisation is what we use. Culture affects civilisation because necessity is the mother of invention; but civilization too affects culture because the invention limits what we can do with it. We must guard against this danger always. Environment should be nourishing, supportive and ennobling, not thwarting and constrictive; and amongst those things which we should be enabled to do are the innocent and the entirely natural indulgence in the performing arts because that constitutes the living of life.

And that brings us—as always—to the need for a change. Perhaps smaller, self-sufficient, townships are an answer.

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