

# URBAN CULTURE AND PERFORMING ARTS

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Where the performance is ritualistic or pertaining to a particular spiritual phenomenon the audience would gather at the site of the ritualistic performance, regardless of whether it occurred in a rural or an urban environment. The traditional arts of any country, perhaps none more so than in India, are immensely aesthetic, but they are conventionalised. Folk art, be it music, dance or drama, fits precisely into that ritualistic mould which emanates from folk art of peasant society which Robert Redfield, the anthropologist, characterises as "...small, isolated, non-literate and homogenous.... The ways of living are conventionalised into that coherent system which we call a *culture*....The sacred prevails over the secular...."

The ritualistic, by definition, would be bound by ritual and, therefore, not amenable to innovation. Not that folk music, dance or drama does not have exuberance or individual interpretation of traditional themes, but probably these nuances of difference, these breakaways from tradition, are manifestations of the individual performer's view of a traditional art form—whether they amount to a breaking of the mould or true innovation is doubtful.

Regional variety there is in plenty in this country because, perhaps, even from village to village there are regional differences. The music, dance and drama of the Mizo is not that of the Nagas nor that of the Gonds, and the Ram Lila of Braj is certainly not the same as that of rural Maharashtra. But within the region, folk art still probably conforms to the traditional or ritualistic mould.

It could not have been otherwise. Rural society is largely uni-functional, centering on agriculture. In cluster the village size is small. Leisure time is strictly seasonal and strongly influenced by the crop cycle. Under these circumstances the truly professional theatre or dance could hardly develop because neither would there be an audience nor would the audience relate to complex innovation. This does not mean that the rural folk are in any way less intelligent than the urban people, but their social and economic

organisation necessarily moulds their thinking into traditional lines, including in the matter of the arts.

Equally important is the question of patronage. The feudal lord, who in any case lived in a manor surrounded by a court which, in some ways, had urban characteristics, the king, the leaders of commerce, great universities, the State itself could extend the patronage which could permit art and artists to develop and grow. Obviously such patronage had to be centred in settlements larger than villages. Opulence seems to have encouraged more great theatre, dance and music than a rude village environment, be it in the court of German Princes, the magnificence of Versailles, the grandeur of the court of Akbar, the princely state of Maihar or the splendour of Hampi. Could Moliere have written his comedies in some remote Provencale village ?

An audience and the availability of patronage, therefore, seem to be two essential ingredient for the development of the performing arts. Individual audiences need not be very discerning, but there has to be a turn over so that more and more people come and see a particular performance, which is repeated from day to day. If the audience universe is small every one would have seen the performance in a day or two and repeat performances would become impossible. In so far as an urban cluster has a certain size and provides a larger audience universe, a city naturally provides a more fertile setting for the performing arts than does a truly rural environment.

The difference between rural and urban in the context of the performing arts is certainly not one of culture. What really distinguishes a city from a village is economic organisation, demographic structure, social organisation, values, attitudes and subjective preceptions. Culture in the sense of a hierarchical system of human development, however, is certainly not the distinguishing feature, as a more simple society, the rural, is not necessarily less cultured than a complex society, the urban. In fact one anonymous poem of 1916 entitled "While The City Sleeps", reads in part as under:—

"Stand in your window and scan the sights,  
On Broad-way with its bright white lights,  
Its dashing cabs and cabarets,  
Its painted women and fast cafes,

That's when you really see New York,

Vulgar of manner, over fed,  
Overdressed and under bred,  
Heartless and Godless, Hell's delight,  
Rude by day and lewd by night".

Another view of the city is that of Kenneth R. Schneider :

"Since our cities in the recent past were designed quite singularly to obtain a more productive society, they now speak to us beautifully only in the arts of industrial output."

Where, however, an urban environment scores in the matter of encouraging the performing arts is in its hybrid environment which necessarily brings a hybrid vigour to traditional art form. Sociologist Louis Wirth, writing as early as July, 1938 stated:

"The city has been the melting pot of races, peoples, and cultures, and a most favourable breeding ground of new biological and cultural hybrids. It has not only tolerated but rewarded individual differences."

Artistic expression, other than the purely ritualistic, has to be born out of hybridisation and individual differences. Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest dramatist produced by the English language, but the English theatre would be very poor indeed if all its playwrights were to be imitation Shakespeares. A truly rural environment perhaps lacks this hybrid vigour in which constant change and innovation in all fields are the norm.

Artistic expression is one of the features of the urban revolution through which a fast urbanising world is passing. Not that rural folk are less amenable to artistic expression. But for any form of artistic expression, including the performing arts, there has to be an appropriate setting so that people can collect, mutually interact and sing, play, dance, perform, demonstrate, parade, draw, theorise, write, research and design. An urban habitat has this advantage over a purely rural one - there is a substantially greater freedom to interact and create. The theatre in Calcutta and Bombay are good examples of this. Both cities have a vigorous vernacular theatre. Many of the themes are rural, but it is the urban elite consisting of people like the Tagores, the Alkasis and the Tendulkars who have given new direction and life to theatre. This is true of all the performing arts, including the music of the great Gharanas and the continuous evolution of traditional Indian dance form. Sonal Mansingh or Yamini Krishnamurty can perform before huge rural audiences during the annual Khajuraho Temple festival only because they are subjected to the rigorous discipline of performing before urban audiences which insist on technical perfection and individualistic interpretations even of traditional dance form.

The availability of an audience and patronage ultimately are issues which lead to the financing of the performing arts. Size alone precludes a truly village environment from affording a professional theatre or ballet or music group on a continuing basis. Even the physical infrastructure in the shape

of a place of performance is quite beyond the means of rural folk. Clearly a town has an advantage in this behalf on account of size. But what is painful is the way in which infrastructural development is being done in India. A closed hall, which necessarily has to be air-conditioned, acoustically treated and comfortably furnished, seem to be the sine-qua-non of development of the art. Taking into account the climatic conditions in India a great deal should be possible to be performed in the open air. What is needed here is the proper planning of open air stages which facilitate performance without involving excessive cost in construction and maintenance. The magnificent Theatre of the Rocks near Denver, Colorado, is an example of how a natural, open air setting can be exploited without involving too much cost. In any case in most theatres the air-conditioning plants either do not function for want of power or are shut down on account of the expense of running them. In many cities, which are otherwise inclined towards the performing arts, the cost of putting up modern theatres discourages them in their support of the arts. In this behalf Bhopal has proved that even without an adequate physical infrastructure, imaginative planning can support a vigorous theatre, dance and music. Unfortunately there seems to be a lack of proper understanding about theatre architecture in the country. This is an area in which there is a considerable scope for innovative design by physical planners and architects. A real breakthrough in theatre design should be of great encouragement to the performing arts.

One encouraging development in India is that there is a greater emphasis on the vernacular theatre, in Delhi, for example, the quality of theatre has markedly improved since Hindi replaced English as the language of drama. There is decidedly a growing strain of professionalism as a result thereof.

In a country such as India the richness of our culture lies in the synthesis of the traditional and the ritualistic with the innovative and the modern. The focus, the catalyst, of such synthesis is the India of the towns.

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