

The 'Modern', the 'Traditional', and Criticism in the Indian Musical Tradition

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THE WORD 'MODERN' and, by implication, the word 'traditional' are used in two very distinct senses today, old and new. This dual use creates a basic confusion concerning modernity and tradition in the Indian context. I will attempt to show how it does so in the field of the arts, causing a strange mixing of categories. I shall then move on to how the notion of *paramparā*, the Indian word for tradition, is articulated in India and the role assigned to criticism in it before outlining a brief history of criticism in the *paramparā* of music.

The old, original sense of the word modern is a relative sense. The new meaning attached to it may, by contrast, be termed absolute. In both senses modern is opposed to the traditional, that is, the old and established which it replaces. In the relative sense of modern, a living and dynamic continuity is maintained between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. The modern, in this sense, is but a phase of an unbroken tradition which it transforms and, with the coming of a newer phase, a newer modern, it can itself become old and traditional. And so today we have the phenomenon called post-modernism in the West where tradition does flow into the modern. The Sanskrit analogue of such usage is the relative opposition between the *purātana* or *praciṇa* and the *navya* or *nūṭana*.

The other, the absolute use of the term, is a new Western coinage. It is based on a new world-view and imparts a heavily meaning-loaded sense to what was, traditionally, a simple, innocuous word. It has no analogue in Sanskrit. The word *ādhunika* has been coined for it in many Indian languages. The world-view it is rooted in is an all-embracing vision about man, his destiny, and the nature of history and change. There are differing strands within the world-view, but that does not disturb the overall picture. The spread of westernization over the globe has made this world-view a near dogma, turning modern in its new sense into a global cultural catchword.

There is, according to this view, a clear axial break in history between the old, the traditional, and the modern. With the modern, history has moved into a new, higher, gear arriving at a new categorically advanced civilization which is no less than a quantum leap forward from the old and traditional. The spirit of the new modern is

not limited to a particular discipline or pursuit, but constitutes a total cultural quality that pervades every aspect of man: his institutions as well as his consciousness. The roots of the modern may lie in the phenomenal advances in science and technology, but it pervades human life in all its aspects, encompassing social, political and economic institutions as well as art and thought and the very stuff of our experience.

There are certain deep-rooted historical reasons due to which the new modern was born in the West where, to use a metaphor from ancient Indian cosmogony, a womb was ready and waiting for it. Historical forces are complex things but if one were to look for a single cause for the emergence of the modern in the West, it would not be difficult to point at it: the new modern is the fruition of the rational, critical spirit, a unique gift of the Greeks to the West.

But though born in the West, the modern is universal in essence and intent. It is, as it should only be, an evangelical civilization. Like the 'universal' Roman empire, or a true messianic religion, it spread beyond its boundaries first through violence and conquest, but now its violent phase is over. The seed has spread over the world and every country must nurture it on its own. The 'modern' has become a truly 'international' civilization, the first in history; though, being a product of the West, the leadership, inspiration, the very form of this 'international' civilization naturally remains Western. The international is, in other words, equivalent to the modern, though of course the word international could be more acceptable to those self-respecting non-Western people who find 'modern' too Western and alien.

The rootedness of the modern in the West results in what might seem a paradoxical situation: for though the modern is a categorical break from tradition, it is yet a vital part of the Western tradition; the continuity between the modern and the traditional remains intact in the West. But this is not possible anywhere else. Given the historical circumstances, the situation is only natural, though it might seem strange and parochial. The modern is, after all, a break from the Western past out of which it has emerged and with which it has dynamic links.

As a result the modern, though an absolutely new civilization for the rest of the world, is only relatively new to the West itself, since the West has a continuity of tradition. This continuity perhaps appears more evident in certain areas like art and thought, but it is in truth all-pervasive. Indeed, one major task of history is to reveal the vital links between the old and the new in the West, showing how the modern is a *parināma*, a transformation of tradition itself.

Other civilizations may also have had a development of their own; that is to say, they may have their own traditions but, however rich these traditions may be, they could not have produced the modern; they were not impregnated with it. Such civilizations, such as that of India, are therefore essentially traditional. Except of course in areas where the new modern from the West has replaced tradition. The modern, for this

reason, in essentially traditional civilizations means a categorical break with the past, the giving up of tradition.

Like all historical processes, modernity takes time to set in. The old takes time to die and be entirely replaced by the new. As a result, traditional civilizations are condemned to harbour two disparate streams of development for some time—one their own, the traditional, and the other the modern—till they become entirely 'modernized'.

We in India have certainly become modernized in the primary sense that we have accepted the new absolute meaning of modern as the true meaning of the word. This implies the ingestion of the historical picture too, in which the meaning is embedded. The proofs of this lie in every field of our life. We make a distinction, which we consider very significant, between traditional and modern in what we do, traditional being Indian and modern Western or West-inspired. In fact, we live in two civilizations, modern and traditional, as we march bravely towards complete 'modernization'.

But meanwhile we must bear with the traditional along with the modern in almost everything. This is only to be expected. Let us take the arts. The traditional exists with the modern in most of the arts: painting, sculpture and architecture, for example. We have a well-entrenched, West-inspired modern in these arts, though the traditional also persists. But the traditional has been put in its place. It is on the way out. We are preserving it as a relic of the past, even sometimes as a living relic, but its value is that of something in a museum. And this is how it should be.

What is perturbing, however, is the fact that we have no modern in music and dance. All we have is traditional. And what is more, there seems to be no real prospect of having a modern in these arts. Our sensibilities fail to respond to modern, that is, Western music, except perhaps in forms that cannot be called the deepest expression of the musical sensibilities of the West. How then can we have a modern in music?

The question does bother us moderns sometimes and leaves us perplexed. We can of course dismiss the question saying that a taste in music, like a taste in food, is quite contingent or peripheral to civilization, and though our taste in music, like our taste in food, is traditional, it need not cause us much concern as long as we are modern in what really matters. This, plainly, is too facile to satisfy anyone of any sensibility. And if the modern, moreover, is a total civilization, on what ground can we exclude music from it, especially since we do have modern in other arts? We cannot but be worried for our failure to have a modern in music, and blame this perhaps on our love for traditional music, a stubborn hangover from a past which still clouds our consciousness.

But let us reflect. Is not our perplexity a result of a confusion of categories, a verbal *moha*? We are prepared to grant that within its own tradition, our music has been growing as vitally as Western music within its own tradition, yet we never even consider calling it modern.

necessarily good. For tradition, truly, is a hurdle in India's path to modernity which would have been straighter without such a complex, cumbersome tradition.

One major reason why India's tradition—indeed all that is traditional—is a hurdle to modernity is its lack of the critical spirit. Tradition is accepted and perpetuated largely through faith or unthinking convention. This is tradition as modernity sees it. But let us see how the tradition understands itself. For tradition, thus understood, is *not* synonymous with the Indian notion of *paramparā*, the Indian equivalent of tradition. Accepted uncritically, preserved only through blind faith or only as mere convention, *paramparā* is known by another name: it is called *rūḍhi*. True, *paramparā* also seeks continuance, as all meaningful human activity must, but what it seeks to preserve and continue is the essence and spirit of an activity, not every detail of its content. Criticism is an essential part of *paramparā*, in the light of which it can be changed and transformed. *Paramparā* is even willing to ask deeper questions about the essence and spirit of an activity, implying, in principle, the acceptance of far-reaching modifications and transformation.

Really foundational thinking in India regarding the nature of a *paramparā* in the arts was carried out in the field of literature and theatre, though it has a universality which makes it relevant to music or any other creative, conscious human activity—a relevance which did not go unrecognized. Thinking in literature influenced thinking in general. Some of India's most profound literary theorists and critics have reflected on the requisites of a *paramparā* and their analysis is worth a look. There seems nothing quite as articulate in the West.

A parampara, according to these thinkers, consists of three elements:

- i. the *kavi*, that is the poet, playwright or, in other words, the artist.
- ii. *kavikarma*, what the poet or artist does and the product of his activity, the poem or the work of art.
- iii. the *sahṛdaya*, the sensitive recipient, the critic.

These elements constantly interact, the one moulding, modifying and transforming the other. The artist works with the forms that he or she inherits, continuing or transforming it in the light of *vyutpatti* and *pratibhā*, two notions central to the Indian understanding of the manner in which the artist works upon the forms he receives. *Vyutpatti* means an understanding and grasp of inherited material and recreating this material with the little amount of formal modification any true recreation necessarily calls for. *Vyutpatti*, plainly, is the key to the preservation and continuity of any tradition. *Pratibhā* is parallel to genius and, a similarly hallowed word, is understood as that faculty of the mind (*buddhi*) which introduces innovations, opening new vistas¹. *Pratibhā* is not limited to the artist. The *sahṛdaya*, the sensitive critic, can also have it, though of course *vyutpatti* is as important for him, or perhaps even more so, than it is to the artist. The *sahṛdaya's* *pratibhā* is naturally different from that of the *kavi*. The *sahṛdaya's* role is to

comprehend, compare and evaluate. It is he who, among other things, judges whether a creation is a product of *vyutpatti* or of *pratibhā* and assigns it a place in the *paramparā*. The *kavi's* *pratibhā* is appropriately called the *kārayitrī-pratibhā*, the capacity to create something new. The *sahṛdaya's* *pratibhā* is the *bhāvayitrī*, the reflective, the cogitative *pratibhā*.

The two *pratibhās* complement each other and, ideally, the most creative persons have them both. Together they form a single whole. "The single truth of imagination expresses itself in the dual roles of the poet and the critic", said Abhinavagupta (10th-11th centuries), one of the most *pratibhāvān* and influential critics India has produced. Uttuṅgodaya, a later Kerala critic, commenting on these remarks from Abhinava—who was from Kashmir—was in favour of granting a greater role to the critic than the poet; it is the judgement of a critic, he says, which, in the first place, makes the distinction between what is a poem and what is not². Given this ideal one would expect a large body of critical literature. This one does find. Its tenor is not the same as what we know as literary criticism from the West. It is more theoretical and philosophical. It does not cognize what the West knows as history of literature, a central concern of the Western critic, though it is sure in its own way of its own *paramparā*. The processes by which a poet transforms the works of older poets to create something new is spoken of, but is not strung together into a history. Moreover, the historical context of an artist, his individual personality has not been considered too important in India, though his individual *kavikarma* and his *pratibhā* have been.

What we know as criticism from the West consists largely of impressionistic, imaginative reactions of an individual *sahṛdaya* to works of art seen in their context. Such criticism is not unknown in India and there have been some great exponents of it such as Kuntaka (11th century) and Mahimabhaṭṭa (also 11th century), but this was the exception rather than the rule. Generally, critics in India were interested in larger aesthetic questions and matters of theory. They spoke of their subject matter from a distance, as it were. Their great discussions, continuing over centuries into our own times, are stimulatingly rich and varied, but they only occasionally provide personal reactions to specific artists or their works. Yet they do give us a powerful vocabulary for criticism of a more 'modern' kind. There is, moreover, evidence to believe that such individual criticism was not only potentially present, but was practised to a greater extent than the more respectable, mainstream, critical literature testifies. The practice of it was oral. Its pronouncements, being considered more ephemeral, relevant to individual works of art rather than art in general, were not written down. Still, vestiges of this oral tradition consisting of pithy judgements by individual critics concerning individual poets and their merits were sometimes encapsulated into striking verses and are to be found in the numerous anthologies of Sanskrit poetry compiled between the 12th and the 20th centuries.

Theoretical literature on music, too, has a long history going back to Vedic times. Moreover, there is no break here between the modern and the traditional as in most contemporary thinking concerning literature and the other arts. However, the principal focus of the literature on music has been musical structure. Aesthetics was a comparatively minor consideration. It never acquired the vigour and depth that it did in literature. Keeping largely aloof from the philosophical mainstream of Indian thought, it never raised probing questions that could have given it the intellectual spine which literary aesthetics had. But this is not to deny its strength and presence. Musical texts speak of desirable and undesirable musical qualities (*guṇas* and *doṣas*), much in the manner of early literary critics. They also speak of styles, though not very discursively; greater detail, however, is found in their delineation of kinds of musicians and what makes one more creative and greater than the other. They also speak of the importance of critics and the knowledge a good critic should possess. Besides, they speak of a host of things that can be identified as part of the complex scheme of ideas which we call the aesthetic aspect of a musical culture, even though they do not make musical aesthetics a major theoretical concern of their discourse.

Criticism of actual music, of individual musicians, is even more rare in musical texts than criticism of poems and poets in works of literary criticism. In search for examples, we must look to non-musical writings where, needless to say, their occurrence is quite incidental. These provide us, however, with glimpses of an activity which, like literary criticism of a similar kind, remained largely oral. We might quote here an interesting example from a famous play, the *Mṛcchakaṭikam* of Sūdraka (between 2nd and 5th centuries). Cārūdata, the cultured protagonist, praises the singing of a friend, a professional musician, in the following words, after listening to him for a whole night till the early hours of the dawn:

He is not singing any more, but I can still hear his music. His soft voice, clinging harmoniously to the accompanying strings, while it moved over a succession of notes, still rings in my ears. His control was effortless; his music delicate, with phrases repeated out of passionate intensity. When the movement of the melody called for a high note, the effect was still gentle.

This interesting example is quite general in its judgement—one notes its relevance to certain contemporary styles of singing too—but it is perhaps deliberately so. It is an example from a work where speaking in greater detail about a work of art would itself have been an aesthetic fault, distracting the audience from the play itself. But criticism as practised within musical circles of the kind assumed in the play must have been much richer in detail. Yet, however thin it might be, it does give us a glimpse of the kind of music criticism practised in urbane circles during the Gupta age.

After the 12th—13th centuries, musical culture came to harbour certain ideas which looked at music not so much as an art as a species of

magic. The roots of the ideas were perhaps old, but their preponderance was new. They found entrance in formal musical texts. This is a development which has no parallel in literature as an art.

One of these ideas was the association of a *rāga* with a time of the day or night or with a season. The idea began with the notion that certain musical forms were more auspicious when performed at a certain period of the daily or yearly cycle. Later, around the 16th century, the association was raised to an aesthetic principle: it was believed that a *rāga* was more beautiful, more effective as a piece of music, only in association with a certain time. The belief became part of musical practice, the repertoire of *rāgas* was more and more strictly distributed over the major periods of the day and night. In more recent times, this principle was quietly given up in the South. But in the North, it found a strong 'modern' champion. Pandit Bhatkhande, a major influence in contemporary Hindustani music, defended the practice on the basis of what he thought was a scientific ground. He argued that there was a psychophysical connection between the tonal structure of a *rāga* and specific periods of the day and night. He never really demonstrated this connection, but his assertion gave life to a curious practice which might otherwise have died a natural death as it did in the South.

Another, a more magically oriented idea, was the notion of the miraculous effect of a *rāga* when correctly sung by a master—indeed, the proof of his being a master lay in the miracle he could work. *Rāga Malhar*, it was believed, could cause rain, *rāga Dipak* could cause fire, *rāga Śrī* could bring a dead tree to life and *Gujari* could attract deer from far-off forests. True, not all *rāgas* were to be judged by such effects, nor did the idea find room in texts of music except marginally. Yet it had a great hold over musical culture. It still continues to haunt us, though in a milder, more 'rational' form. I remember friends remarking that when they heard Allauddin Khan play *Malhar*, on his Sarod, they could hear the patter of rain outside the hall if they shut their eyes.

The miraculous legends of *Gujari* attracting deer is perhaps connected with another idea which took deep roots in the musical culture of the post-12th centuries. This was the idea of *rāga-dhyāna*, resulting in thousands of *rāga* paintings, very popular among painters and their patrons till the 19th century and still much admired. One recurring motif in these paintings is the association of *rāga* *Gujari* with deer: the *rāga* is shown as a beautiful woman playing a *viṇā* in a forest with deer flocking around her.

The notion of *rāga-dhyāna* seems to have come into vogue around the 13th century. It began with conceiving and painting a *rāga* as deity, a kind of minor god or goddess. Later, in the 16th century, the gods and goddesses were mostly secularized and transformed into men and women. They were painted in more dramatic and attractively human contexts and *rāga* paintings became a very popular genre. *Rāgas* as deities could never become quite as popular. We must add, however, that the idea of a *rāga* as a man or woman in a dramatic situation was

taken more seriously by painters and their patrons rather than musicians and their audiences, despite the fact that music theorists were quite taken with the idea and almost every text written between the 14th and the 19th centuries includes a section on *rāga-dhyāna*; besides, there were numerous little treatises called *Rāga-mālas* in Sanskrit and the vernaculars devoted exclusively to *rāga-dhyāna*.

There is nothing particularly odd in such ideas having found vogue in musical circles. Reacting to a formal, abstract art such as music, we seem naturally to seek a more visible and corporeal basis for our judgements. That is what the *rāga* time notions do or what the *rāga-dhyāna* ideas seek. They try to assimilate music to something we can see. Giving miraculous powers to *rāgas* makes them even more visible in their effects, if not in themselves. Earlier critical vocabulary, though it was not assimilated to ambitious aesthetic theories regarding the musical art, as critical vocabulary in literature was, yet by and large avoided giving it a representative nature, content as well as form. We may take Cārūdata's criticism of his musician friend as a typical example. Yet earlier musical aesthetics, too, was not able to avoid the enticement of the *rasa* theory, which had become almost the universal aesthetic theory in India. A fertile notion, propounded for understanding the aesthetics of theatre, it was taken over by literary theorists; and such was their influence on aesthetic thinking in general that it became synonymous with the experience of any art. The notion became a dominant cultural ideal rather than just an idea, and writers on music too adopted it. But they did so quite unthinkingly, without *adapting* it to the special needs of music where a distinction cannot be made between form and content as it can be in theatre and literature.

Music, for the last few centuries in India, has had no lack of *kārayitrī pratibhā*, but the *bhāvayitrī pratibhā*, of the *sahridayas* has lagged behind, even more so in matters of aesthetics than in musical theory. The art was willing to change, experiment and grow without losing the spirit of its *paramparā*, but musical theory was incapable of keeping pace: more so, it appears, in the North than in the South; for these were the centuries when the *paramparā* bifurcated into Hindustani and Carnatic.

In the North, the situation in musical theory is now much livelier. Ever since Pandit Bhātkhande, whose career spanned the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there has been a growing interest in musical theory and musical textual history. Bhātkhande was also, to a great extent, responsible in introducing a more modern, institutionalized tradition of transmission and patronage in music, without losing the strength of the old and a continuity with it, something which happened in the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture.

But an analogous renewal in music criticism and aesthetics has yet to take place. It had potentialities and still has them. The oral tradition of music criticism as carried on among artists and sensitive listeners has a rich vocabulary based on tradition though it lacks a systematics. The systematics can come only if the oral becomes written. That is not to say

that there is no written tradition of criticism. Newspapers have necessitated one. But it has all the weakness of something nurtured purely by journalism. It has no touch with the oral vocabulary of the tradition, though there are some critics who are beginning to dabble in one. Using English, and a modern vocabulary, it is like a lost soul unable to find itself, though growing in power. The written tradition which is now, acknowledgedly, a must, can only acquire strength and spine from an intellectual effort that must not be limited to newspaper writings and becomes rooted in more serious reflection, not limited to effervescent musings, to be forgotten the next day. For this it must look to the rich aesthetic thought of the past, albeit with a critical eye, for Indian aesthetics is not always directly concerned with music though it bears seeds of possibilities. It must also learn from the Western experience. Greater caution, though, must be exercised here, for Indian music is not Western music.

What a modern music critic in India can learn from the West is an approach, forging a history of the art. History of art, indeed history itself, is a new way of looking at things in India. Many of the other arts, especially literature, have good histories now. But not music. Old music does not survive unchanged, so central is the role of improvisation and individual genius in India. The little notation that does survive gives only a skeletal idea of the music and still has problems of decoding. But while a history of music in concrete terms is elusive at present—though interesting attempts are being made at a reconstruction—a history-of-arts approach to the music of our own century is possible. A great deal is present in recordings as well as notations. An in-depth study in palpable formal terms of various musicians, their individual styles and development, the currents and cross-currents influencing the art, its changes and its continuities, is possible today. And it would be extremely interesting for both the artist and the listener, and the critic, to become aware of these. But the intellectual effort needed to make such studies still remains largely a mere possibility, though one feels that the musical community as a whole would welcome it and be enriched by it. □

NOTES

1. *navanavonmeṣaṣālinī buddhiḥ pratibhā* is an almost universally accepted definition of *pratibhā*. The word *unmeṣa* in this pithy definition literally means opening of the eyes, suggesting new horizons.
2. The words we have quoted from Abhinava are from the verse with which he opens his renowned commentary, the *Locana* on the *Dhvanyāloka*: “*kramātpṛakhyopāhhyā-prasasubhagam bhāsayati tat/sarasvatyāstattvāni kavisaḥ dayakhyāni vijayate*”. Utuṅgodaya, in his *Kaumudī* on the *Locana*, comments: “*sah dayakartr kavīsīta-vicāra-kriyā-gocari bhūtasyaiva kāvyasya mukhyatayā kāvyarūpatvāditi brūmah*”. See *Dhvanyāloka* with *Locana* and *Kaumudī*, ed. Kuppaswami Sastri, Ramacandra Diksitar and T.R. Chintamani, Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, Madras, 1944, pp. 3-4.

3. *lām tasya svarasankramantī mṛdugirah śliṣṭām ca tantrīsvanantī
 varṇānamāpi mūrchanāntaragatantī tāram virāme mṛdum |
 helāsamiyamitām punaśca lalitām rāgadviruccāritām
 yatsatyamī viratē'pi gītasamaye gacchamī śṛṅgannivā ||*
Mṛcchakaṭīkam, Act 3, verse 5; p. 70 of the Nirṇayasāgara Press edition, third printing, Bombay, 1909.