

The Reader Answered :
S.K. Saxena to Gajendra Narayan Singh

In response to Shri Gajendra Narayan Singh's comment published in Sangeet Natak No. 2, 2005, on Shri S.K. Saxena's article 'To Kathak Anew', published in Sangeet Natak No. 1, 2005, the latter writes:

My first impulse is to thank Mr Singh sincerely for his remark that *Sangeet Natak* should encourage *academic debate*. Such debate, however, is nothing if it does not proceed in the way of argument. Yet, at the very outset of his critical reaction to my article in question, Mr Singh says:

- a. that I have tried to refute (खंडन करना) the time-honoured view that (classical) vocal music is superior to both dance and instrumental music by means of logical analysis;
- b. that the (comparative) eminence of an art cannot be determined by *tarka* (or argument);
- c. and that therefore he disagrees with my view.

Mr Singh's final sentence read thus: "Therefore dance can never be said to be (artistically) superior to (classical) vocal music."

Now, focusing on the points listed above, I have to say the following:

'a' says that I have tried to refute (खंडन करना) the traditional view. The truth, however, is that I have done nothing of the kind. My exact words in the essay objected to are: "Now this is a view which I *challenge* straightaway." To *challenge* is simply 'to cast doubt on'. To *refute* is to *prove* that a statement, theory, or view is *wrong*. I have only tried to protest against a glib acceptance of the view in question by advancing some arguments, the basic one of them being the following: "If by vocal music we mean the singing of religious souls like Swami Haridas and Saint Tyagaraja, the main purpose of which was growing closeness to God, it may well be said to be superior to *any* human activity in general, and not to the art of dance alone. But *the kind of classical singing that is heard today* aims directly at performing well and eliciting listeners' applause, and ultimately at monetary gain" which results from growing popularity. How *such* singing can be ranked higher than dance is not clear to me. Nowhere in my essay has any attempt been made to prove that dance is superior to vocal music. My point, I repeat, only is that if we look at our *sangeet* as it is today, it appears questionable to hold, as our traditional view requires us to, that vocal music is superior to our dances. Therefore, Mr Singh's final contention: "Therefore (अतः) dance can never be rated higher than vocal music" tries to demolish a stand which I have just not taken.

'b' contends that the eminence of an art cannot be based on *tarka* (or argument). But, *arguing* for his view, does not Mr Singh himself point to a good deal of evidence such as

1. the inability of the blind to enjoy dancing, though the relish of singing is open to them (May I here point out that those who are only deaf cannot enjoy singing,

though the relish of graceful bodily postures, in which good dancing abounds, is in its visual aspect surely accessible to them);

2. the ability of listeners to *visualize* the raga-form, though as a collection of musical sounds, its immediate appeal is to the ear, not to the eye;
3. the (singular) ability of vocal musical (as *alapa* of the *Dhrupada* genre) to work its magic with the help of only two elements (that is, *svara* and *laya*), whereas dancing has to lean on many other elements (such as rhythmic accompaniment, specific kinds of dresses, and vocal/instrumental music);
4. the ability of the legendary *alapiyas*, *Ustads Allabande Khan* and *Zakiruddin Khan*, to project the quintessential finenesses of *svara*;
5. The widely accepted (?) truth that the more subtle (सूक्ष्म) the constituent elements of an art, the greater will be its claim to eminence as art (the material of dance, obviously the human body, is comparatively *gross*);
6. the fact that the singing of some specific ragas has been found to bring about relief from some ailments, as also to promote the growth of plants, and of milk-giving capacity in cows;
7. the fact that (it is because of its aesthetic potential to stimulate imagination that) vocal music has given rise to *Ragamala* paintings;
8. the fact that the expression of emotion through singing is more difficult than through bodily gestures in which dancing abounds;
9. the unavoidable necessity of every recital of instrumental music to begin from a careful tuning of the instrument, which bespeaks the surpassing value of *svara*, the basic material of vocal music.

In view of all this evidence, Mr Singh concludes his critical reaction as follows: "Therefore dance can never be said to be superior to singing."

Now, for the sake of academic fairness, we may mark the following at once: The final 'therefore' in Mr Singh's criticism comes at the end of the abounding evidence (1 to 9) cited by him in favour of singing. So it signifies the conclusion of an *argument*. Is it not therefore patently self-inconsistent on the part of Mr Singh to say that the question of an art's pre-eminence cannot be decided by mere argument? His meaning perhaps is that the question of an art's pre-eminence cannot be decided by that vacuous kind of arguing which does not take into account the concrete evidence of art creation, as also of the impact or general influence of the art in question. This indeed is why he cites the different kinds of evidence which, following Mr Singh, I have listed above (1-9). So I may now turn to reflect on these evidential details in the same order in which I have listed them, for the sake of easy understanding:

- (1a) The blind can surely enjoy, if they have been trained in the art of rhythm, our (rhythmic) patterns of dance by just contemplating them, or as recited (in the way of *parhant*) by some good dancer. On the other hand, it is doubtful if the deaf can be made to relish anything of singing more easily.
- (2a) Dancing too is not merely a matter of seeing and listening. It enables us to visualize (that is, to make a mental image of) a good deal that is not actually shown and seen. I have actually seen Kathak maestros like the late *Lacchu Maharaj* *effectively*

suggesting *dagar* (as a winding way) simply through a deft sideway rolling of the eyeballs, and the whole verdant setting of a peacock dancing in the rainy season through a deft presentation of stepping alone (as *mor ki chaal*). Representation in our dances is rarely mere imitation. It leaves a good deal to the *rasika's* imagination. Where the pattern being danced is *Indrakop ki gat*, no solid object is shown on the stage; and surely one does not see any actual plunging into a river and the hood of a snake when a Kathak presents a *Kaliya-daman ki gat*.

- (3a) True, *alapa* builds on only two elements, *svara* and *laya*. But can the mere scantiness of an art's material be taken as proof of its superiority over other arts? What about literature, the verbal material of which is virtually exhaustless? Has not our scholarly tradition concerning the arts given very great value to drama which builds on four kinds of *abhinaya* and freely incorporates music and dance as well? And to turn to our dances, is the material of the criss-cross of mere rhythm as *tatkar* in Kathak dance any less scanty than that of *alapa*? Finally, is the art of architecture to be ranked as lower than the other arts just because its material is patently gross?
- (4a) Has Mr Singh actually heard the *alapa*-singing of the maestros he speaks of, or has he only heard about it? However, I hasten to add that I have no desire to undervalue the maestros in question. I just cannot think of doing so because in the last fifty years I have heard such consummate *alapa* from some members of the Dagar family, to which I have been very close, that I find it very difficult to imagine anything better in the field of music. But, on the other hand, I give surpassing value also to the *abhinaya* of the Bharatanatyam exponent Balasaraswati and the Odissi maestro Kelucharan Mohapatra; and I just do not find ground for saying that such dancing is aesthetically inferior to the *alapa* I have heard.
- (5a) The subtle-gross question has already been dealt with (in part) by me in 3a. So here I may make just one remark. The body of a dancer is certainly gross, that is, clearly perceivable; but his (or her) gestures are often very subtle, and they can be registered only by those *rasikas* whose percipience is highly refined. Not any one can relish the gay abandon (or the toying with *laya*) which distinguishes the brief patterns that open a Birju Maharaj recital. What here delights an authentic *rasika* is the rhythm of abandon and resilience which is yet to be visualized by Western writers on rhythm in poetry and music.
- (6a) What Mr Singh here says (in 6) may well be true. But dancing too, because of the agility it demands and its dalliance with rhythm, makes for bodily health in a happy way, maybe even without taking too much milk.
- (7a) The conduciveness of vocal music to Ragamala painting is surely not more impressive than the abundance and variety lent by dances to our sculpture in terms of beautifully carved postures in temples and palaces.
- (8a) Nothing could be farther from truth than what is said (by Mr Singh) in point 8. What is easy is the everyday bodily expression of emotions. In our dances, on the other hand, the right kind of expressiveness (which is neither feeble nor obtrusive) calls for long and meticulous practice. Our classical dancers have to spend

long hours in relating varying positions of eyeballs to expression of different emotions.

- (9a) True, instrumental music has to begin with careful attunement with the chosen tonic, but it also provides quite a good deal which vocal music does not, say, *jhala* and interesting rhythmic exchanges with the drummer. It is not for nothing that Pandit Ravi Shankar is commonly regarded as having done more to make our music known all over the world than any other musician of India.

Before I close this rejoinder, I may point out that Mr Singh has not paid any attention to two points that I have made in my essay about how, in some respects, dancing seems to be a little more difficult art than singing. First, the vocalist's lapsing back to the *sama* is not so (physically) difficult as a dancer's bringing his or her whole figure to the focal beat on completing a pattern. Secondly, whereas many *bols* of a Kathak pattern call for a different bodily configuration and varying *padachaap*, most of a Khayal-singer's *tanās* are not subject to this constraint in respect of their constituent *svaras*. This of course requires us to remember that *alapa-Dhrupada* are not the whole of Hindustani music.