

The Arts and the People: A Conversation with Rukmini Devi Arundale

P. C. JOSHI

INTRODUCTION

I first met Rukmini Devi some time in the early 1950s at 3, East Park Road, New Delhi, the residence of Miss Nirmala Joshi, the first Secretary of Sangeet Natak Akademi. Nirmaladi's home at that time was a place vibrating with life, and attracted musicians and dancers from various parts of the country. I met Rukmini Devi then primarily as a student of social sciences who was interested in questions relating to the changing interface of the arts and society in post-colonial India. Some thirty years later, I met her again in Madras, this time as Chairman of a Working Group for Software Planning for Doordarshan (1983-84). The business of this group of experts was to help the Union Government formulate a national policy for mass communication and a software (or programme) plan for Doordarshan, to pre-empt the impact of television as a force of cultural disorientation. (This was before television had invaded Indian homes in a big way and much before national boundaries were rendered irrelevant by globalization and the communications revolution.) Our group—which included Sai Paranjpye, Alyque Padamsee, G.N.S. Raghavan, Bhupen Hazarika, Mohan Upreti, and some others—had decided to have wide-ranging consultations with specialists in various fields before making any recommendations; it was thus that I found myself in Kalakshetra for a meeting with Rukmini Devi.

This meeting, however, had not been easy to set up. Upon arrival in Madras, we were informed by the Director of the Doordarshan Kendra there that Rukmini Devi had rejected the very idea of a meeting with our group; she doubted the usefulness of any discussion with government-appointed committees, which she thought were set up to formalize decisions already taken by politicians and bureaucrats. We too, she believed, would be acting as carriers of the government's point of view to artists and not vice versa. This prior rejection had us all worried, because if Rukmini Devi turned down our request for a meeting, it would also discourage other dancers and musicians in Madras from meeting us. Our difficulties were further compounded by the fact that Rukmini Devi was then largely confined to her home; a fracture in her right arm was causing her much pain and discomfort, and a reconsideration of her decision therefore seemed unlikely.

In the circumstances, I decided to make an appeal to Rukmini Devi by writing to her personally. In my letter I tried to explain that we were not representatives of the government, but independent people working in the arts, education, science and mass communication, and that we had agreed to serve on this committee only in the hope of harnessing the potential of television to create a healthier social environment. Our basic position was that the electronic media, especially television, were much too important to be left only to commercial interests, seekers of political power, and vendors of entertainment, which was the case then (and remains so). I informed her that we as a group were committed to explore a new approach to mass communication suited to India's needs and cultural genius, and this we proposed to do by involving artists as well as specialists in other fields in a free exchange of opinion on communication policy. I must confess that I also used two personal connections to soften Rukmini Devi's resistance to the meeting. In my letter, I mentioned that I had been a student of Professor Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji of Lucknow University, a pioneer in the field of cultural studies in India, and that I had accepted the present assignment in the same spirit as Professor Mukerji had



Photographs: courtesy P.C. Joshi

agreed to be the Director of Information in the Government of United Provinces during the rule of the first Congress ministry (formed in 1937) under Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant. (Professor Mukerji had in that position developed an original approach to mass communication in India, much before India's independence.) My second personal credential was my relationship with Miss Nirmala Joshi, for whom Rukmini Devi had much affection and regard.

My letter produced the desired result and we were soon received at Rukmini Devi's home by a completely changed Rukmini Devi—full of courtesy for her visitors and curiosity about our project. She allowed the conversation to be taped and notes to be taken, though she was not willing to be photographed with her bandaged arm. We had no questionnaire, and allowed the conversation to follow its own course.

The conversation was tape-recorded by the Member-Secretary of the working group, Manzurul Amin, who was then Additional Director-General of Doordarshan. He later prepared a summary of the conversation, which was to be published in the third volume of the report of the working group. (This volume was eventually not published, but was mimeographed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.) I had taken notes of the conversation, and later prepared a transcript for publication. (Again, this was not published.) The text of the conversation that follows is thus based on (i) the summary prepared by Manzurul Amin, available in mimeographed form; (ii) the notes prepared by me and my transcript from those notes; and, lastly, (iii) my memory of the meeting, which has helped me add a few points which were missing in the summary and my first transcript. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to gain access to the tapes of the conversation with Doordarshan. Despite this limitation, the present text can claim to be a substantially accurate record of my meeting with Rukmini Devi on 14 July 1983. Rukmini Devi passed away in February 1986.

Even though the conversation contains no specific suggestion from Rukmini Devi regarding programmes for television in India, it helps one appreciate her view of Indian arts and culture in a changing world. There is a sense of loss in her responses, but Rukmini Devi is also alive to possibilities of cultural revival and regeneration. Coming from a modernizer of the Bharatanatyam dance theatre, to whom in part we owe its thriving practice today, these responses should be of some value to students of India's evolving culture.

A few photographs of the Kalakshetra campus and students, one of which features Rukmini Devi at morning assembly, are published together with the transcription. These were presented to us by Rukmini Devi in lieu of the photographs of herself she did not permit us to take.—P.C.J.

P. C. Joshi: It is so refreshing here. The very atmosphere makes one reflect on the contrast between our traditional culture, which Kalakshetra is trying to preserve, and the consumerist approach to culture today. How have you been able to maintain this connection with the past together with creativity in response to new times?

Rukmini Devi Arundale: To try to recreate and sustain cultural traditions is in a way very difficult, because one has to struggle against certain aspects of modernity which are not at all Indian in the best sense of the term. After independence, we have changed for the worse, and, if I may say so, become more un-Indian than we were even under foreign rule. In another way, I have had no difficulty doing this because I have never lost this sense of continuity, the sense of rootedness in a great tradition. I have never been torn from my roots.

In spite of India's modernization, a large number of people are still attracted to our ancient culture. Many parents are very happy that their children can grow up in this

atmosphere [at Kalakshetra], which tries to blend the best of tradition and modernity in the realm of arts. They want their children to imbibe the best of our traditional culture; they come to me and tell me so.

If we have lost our roots in traditional culture, it is because our present system of education is wrong. We say our secular state has nothing to do with religion and religious education. This is as it should be, from one point of view. But it is an oversimplified approach to a complex reality; our religious classics are also our cultural classics, and our arts and culture are intimately interwoven with religion in its widest ramifications. Religion encompasses art and art encompasses religion in our pre-modern way of life. Our cultural traditions are enmeshed with the messages of our saints and sages. Once this was forgotten, everything went wrong, even in the arts.

When I founded Kalakshetra, I began with one tree, one pupil, and one teacher. It was very difficult to find young students to come and learn here. I had to find my own way to educate young people, I had to prepare a new syllabus to introduce what I thought students should know. Languages, particularly Sanskrit, were compulsory, and language teaching was connected with the main subjects of instruction, dance and music . . . Now, if you are a dancer, you should also know music. You must also have some knowledge of our religious-cultural background, both in its depth and breadth. It is more than thirty years since I started. I have built up this model of instruction bit by bit. But it is one thing to initiate a process, and quite another to ensure that the process is sustained. Some of my colleagues and students have carried on with this work, using the basic approach I have tried to promote. Of course, some of them have used it as a kind of passport to publicity. My attitude is, if you sow a thousand seeds, at least one of them may sprout and bloom. One great person can give a lot to the world.

P.C.J.: You have put it very well.

I have a feeling that those who learn music and dance today begin equating the process of learning with learning new techniques, and acquiring technical refinement. How do you ensure that this doesn't happen—that students also understand the values or philosophy underlying these arts, without which our arts would be lifeless?

R.D.A.: What we try to do is to give our pupils the spiritual background [to music and dance]; the technique is an instrument you use to express something within you. It is by reciting shlokas with understanding, by meditation, that they begin to get a sense of the spiritual—and they like it very much. As you suggested, it is the spiritual meaning behind an art form that is fundamental to the pedagogy of our arts. It is this deeper meaning and significance that we try to convey to our students. Technique is not an end in itself; it is [only] a necessary part of learning an art. Also, pedagogic communication has to be sustained by a whole atmosphere and not just by words. Many people who come here notice the atmosphere first.

P.C.J.: There is also another major problem to reckon with—the debasing power of money, and the craze for glamour and the limelight. Today everything is getting commercialized, including the arts and artists. The idea of *svantah sukhaya* is today undermined by the idea of art for self-enrichment and self-exhibition. In the new metropolitan



milieu, artists have prospered but not art! What do you think could protect us against this onslaught? Would art interpreted as public service be a guarantee against debasing commercialization?

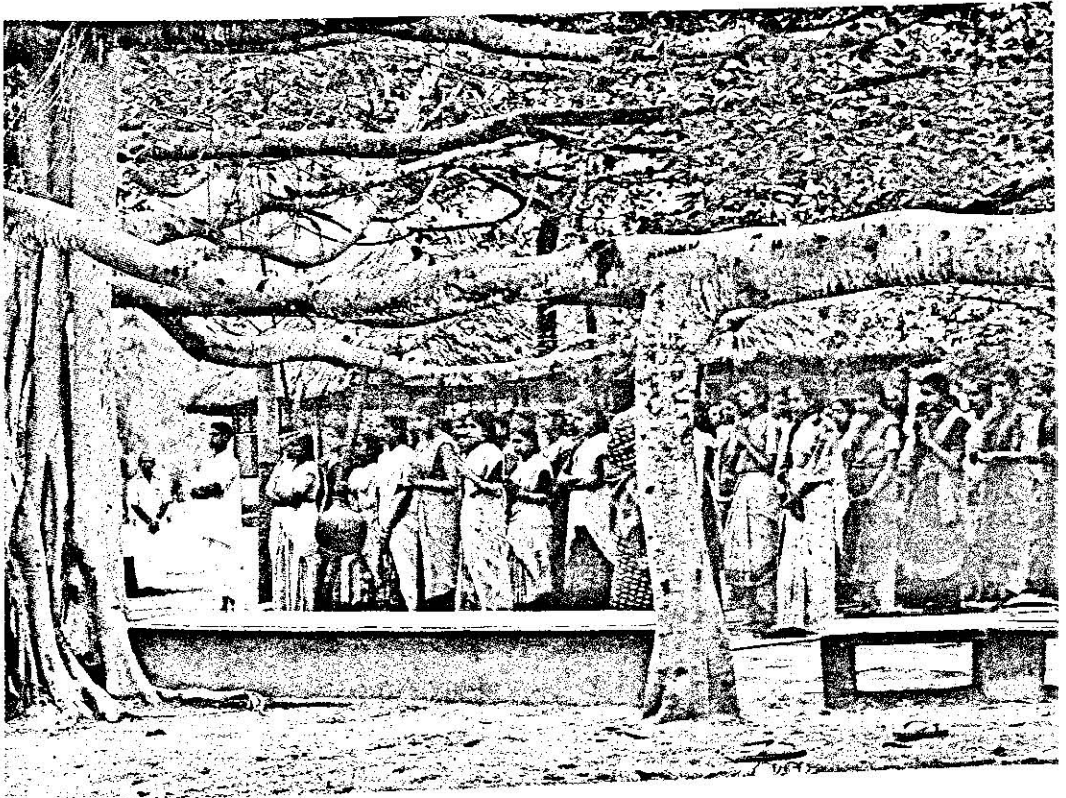
R.D.A.: It is a matter of slow education. I know too well that a commercial mentality has now come into the picture. But if you really understand the meaning of an art, you become dedicated to it; and if you are really dedicated to something, you don't want anything in lieu of it. Therefore the right spirit has to be instilled in students by the right kind of teacher, and sustained by the right kind of atmosphere . . . There are certain things for which in the past we never charged a fee. One was healing the sick, another was astrology, and another was teaching and performance of dance and music . . . Some rich man in the village would arrange a dance, and everybody would come and enjoy the performance. But now everybody has to pay at the box office.

My father used to arrange many music performances, but he never used to talk of terms. If he had asked an artist 'how much money do you want', the artist would have been shocked. These attitudes towards the arts have vanished, and I am sorry to say so. Now everything has to be sponsored. In earlier times, the livelihood of artists was assured; today, unfortunately, artists have to fend for themselves, and this has commercialized the arts. Values have changed. That is the real problem, and the solution to it lies in the right kind of education . . . Formal education and the arts must go together. Culture has been thoroughly neglected in our educational system. Now memorizing, passing examinations and acquiring degrees are more important than the quality of an individual.

P.C.J.: What you say, alas, is true. We now find talented artists going away from their villages. This happens because they no longer enjoy economic security within the village, and village life thus suffers a qualitative impoverishment. An art can be sustained only if its organic link with the community remains intact. Today, with the passing of feudal patrons, the government has to step in, but the government's intervention has its own unfortunate consequences. The fact is, the government has no idea what its role as promoter and protector of arts and artists ought to be.

R.D.A.: I think we should simply give a chance to our artists to express themselves, and not let all these modern, educated people, who have no background in any art, control and guide artists. Let us consider such a thing as handicrafts. Remember, our handicrafts have all come from the villages; they have not come from cities. But today what is happening is that we form a committee, and tell the village craftsman what he should be doing. We start teaching villagers what they should do! This is an assertion of superiority. Such patronizing has no place in the sphere of creative arts. Take your hands off and let the villagers create something for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. It is the craftsman who should be the ultimate decision-maker and judge. But we have not given a chance at all to our village craftsmen. Many village craftsmen are dead and gone because the demand for their art is gone. I myself have seen great artists starving and living in misery with nobody to care for them. It is in such circumstances that they grow dependent on the state—for their very survival—and that gives great power to officials and administrators and politicians.

With the decline of village institutions and feudal patrons, the state came into the picture



in a big way. This has given rise to a cultural bureaucracy. Bureaucrats have started deciding who is a great artist and who is not, even in the field of music or dance. In the changed circumstances, some artists too are willing to sacrifice their art for the sake of praise and awards from the powers that be, or for the sake of cheap popularity. Take for instance the cultural missions and delegations that are sent to foreign countries, over which bureaucrats and politicians exercise great influence. I know very well that artists on these missions are told what and how they should perform, and the performances are supervised by people who know nothing about dance or music. Artists are told how they should try to please the public! While I am not opposed to state support of arts, the form it has taken makes me very unhappy.

P.C.J.: We should take our arts back to our people, and win back respect for our arts and culture. Artists like you, before you were recognized by the outside world, were recognized by your own people, and that was perhaps a more genuine reward than the highest awards you later won. If your own people hadn't acknowledged you as an artist, you wouldn't have a sense of self-realization or inner fulfilment.

R.D.A.: That is absolutely correct. You have said something very important . . . I think after we became independent, there was a desire to show off our culture to the rest of the world. The result is that our culture is hardly known in our own country.

P.C.J.: Coming now to the folk arts, I think there should be some interaction between the folk and classical arts, between folk artists and classical artists. Folk arts give a certain strength to the classical arts, which otherwise tend to grow more and more refined in form but anaemic in content. On the other hand, classical arts impart some refinement to the folk arts, which otherwise suffer from a certain crudity in my view. Would you like to say something about this?

R.D.A.: I am absolutely in agreement with you. One of the reasons for this widening gulf between the folk and classical traditions today is the increasing concentration of all our arts in the cities; this is a mistake. I think we should go and spread out [our activities] in the villages. The trouble is, an urban artist who goes to a village thinks that he is a superior person on a mission to teach the villagers. This happens all too often. Actually, so much of our arts, classical or folk, have come from the villages. Most of our greatest musicians too have come from villages. It is the atmosphere of the village, the proximity to nature, that has inspired them, and they don't get that atmosphere here. So we should certainly go to the villages, but we should go there with a sense of humility; we shouldn't go there to teach the village folk, because it is they who have much to teach us.

Even today, in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, we have beautiful folk arts, and they have remained beautiful because there the urban world has not invaded the rural world . . . Many sophisticated people try to put up programmes of folk music and dance in the cities. But they don't capture the spirit of those arts because folk music and dance are rooted in nature; they are natural; they are unsophisticated. The villages are really our biggest centres of arts—but we have ignored them.

P.C.J.: You have observed in another context that politics, as it is practised today, panders



to the baser instincts of man, and therefore becomes a divisive force. You have also said that art unifies us. Given this standpoint, don't you think it would be a good idea to promote cultural contact and exchanges between North and South India, eastern and western India, between one region and another? We send teams of Indian artists to perform in other countries, but we don't have artists from one part of this country performing in another. Interaction between artists and cultural workers from different parts of the country would perhaps act as a force of integration.

R.D.A.: I do feel that there could have been greater unity through give-and-take in the field of arts between different regions of India, and I am really convinced that the arts are a genuine unifying force so long as they are not used as an instrument of politics. Some time ago, an inter-State cultural exchange programme, of the kind you seem to suggest, had been proposed by the government. I don't know what happened to the proposal finally.

In India, long ago, there was some sort of cultural unity. Take for instance Jayadeva's music—which was created in Orissa; people in other parts of India knew about it. Here in Madras, I myself have produced the *Geetagevindam*. How did this cultural diffusion occur, at a time when there were no modern communications, no radio, no television? All our scriptures, our poetry, our music . . . Kabir's poetry—it was appreciated all over India. This cultural unity has definitely suffered at the hands of politics, especially in the recent period. That is my own view. If post-independence politicians had not intruded into the domain of culture, the process would not have been disrupted. The arts can again, gradually, be made a means of uniting people—that is what I think.

P.C.J.: I recall another observation of yours. You had said somewhere that we have inherited a great deal from our past which we don't seem to value. And that we can move forward with this inheritance if we infuse it with a modern consciousness. Thus through a creative blending of the old and new, a new culture can emerge. We need not turn either into mindless denigrators or mindless worshippers of the past, but we can use our past achievements as a base for building a culture which would be rooted as well as forward-looking. You had said that if we started on this path, we would also be able to give and take more freely with the West. We can enter into a cultural dialogue with the West on our own terms only if we come to terms with ourselves.

R.D.A.: That is right. You see, the traditionalists must appreciate that art does not stand still. Look at our temple architecture; here you have the Pallava period, you also have other periods. Every period has its own art. Art develops of its own accord. It is constantly growing: it doesn't remain frozen in time. The only thing that does not change is the spirit of dedication, the quest for truth, goodness and beauty. As long as that spirit lives on, the forms may change, but good art will still be created in every age.

Will the new forms be as beautiful as the old ones? Yes, but creativity cannot be forced. It has to come from inner inspiration . . . Like the never-ceasing flow of a river, the creative impulse of a community is ceaselessly active. Artists great and small create new forms even today. We have new compositions in music and dance, for example. It is this creative impulse that we should try to build up through our education, and by our own example. We should not preach but teach. And while we are teaching, we should tell our students about the past,

which is like a spreading banyan tree. The future may be even greater, and richer. The history of our country shows that we have emerged stronger and more creative from every internal and external crisis confronting our civilization.

P.C.J.: At Kalakshetra, everything is permeated with a sense of beauty. I am a student of economics, so I do feel that India's economic development is absolutely necessary. Without economic development, there will be no cultural development either. But, on the other hand, I also feel that in the process of development, we are perhaps not giving enough importance to the principle of beauty; we are in fact destroying the beauty we inherited—the beauty of our environment, the beauty that characterized our pre-modern way of life. I see this happening in the hills of Uttar Pradesh. The beauty of this Himalayan region, and the culture that has flourished there, shouldn't be destroyed in the name of development and modernization. That is true of other places in the country as well. Perhaps artists have a role here. If everything is left to the government—to economists, technologists, planners and others—then development will follow its own compulsive logic.

The old aesthetic principle which informed our everyday lives was—what is useful should also be beautiful, what is beautiful should also be useful. How do we ensure that this principle survives?

R.D.A.: India, pre-modern India, was the greatest example of this principle. Everything around us must be beautiful apart from being useful—that is what inspired our material culture. Our old-fashioned home combined beauty with utility in every little thing. Whether it was the home of a peasant or an artisan, or the homes of the richer members of the village community, the same principle applied. Even in the kitchen, the vessels were beautiful. This had nothing to do with money—with being rich or poor. If the rich man had his silver pot, the poor man had an earthen pot. Both were beautiful. But that is not how things are today. You will find those pots in some exhibition.

... Actually, you have said everything I lecture people on. I do think that artists have a tremendous contribution to make in this sphere—to make people aware that we should modernize without spoiling things and introducing ugliness in our lives. I agree that economics is important, money is important, and perhaps industry too is important, but development should after all fit our landscape, it should accord with the soul of our country. Artists have never really been consulted in these matters. Otherwise, they could certainly have contributed to the welfare of the people ... Why indeed should the Himalayas be spoiled and disfigured? It's a huge mistake, a Himalayan blunder in the words of Gandhi.

P.C.J.: I entirely agree with you.

What do you think of women in contemporary India? I mean, in terms of the status and well-being of women, and the contribution of women to arts and culture, their preservation and renewal? Is India today closer to your dreams?

R.D.A.: On the whole, I find that women are more rooted in our cultural traditions and are far more responsible in matters relating to our culture. They are emotional by nature, and are far more sensitive than men to the principle of combining utility with beauty. In modern life, women have not lost their cultural moorings as much as men. But they are also losing the battle, especially in the cities.

P.C.J.: In a way, what we have discussed here is really what television in India should concern itself with. Perhaps the ultimate purpose of our software policy should be to reaffirm the principle of the unity of the beautiful and the useful in a changing world.

R.D.A.: Oh, definitely. I think India is a country which is not going to lose the basic ingredients of its philosophy and culture totally, because our culture is based on some lasting human values to which even a very modern person is attracted. Look at the number of invasions we have had. Have we lost our culture? We haven't, because the philosophy underlying our cultural traditions has given us something of eternal value to hold on to. In the depths of our hearts, we still seek the eternal in the ephemeral and the ever-changing.

It is our duty as artists to contribute to the well-being of the Indian people, and I have great faith in our ability to do so. It is our duty to help our country relive the experience that has given meaning to our life through the ages, in newer and newer ways.

P.C.J.: May I say how grateful we are for the time you gave us? We feel much inspired. It will be our endeavour to bring this spirit to our present work. In that context, I would like to ask you how you have viewed the role of television as a cultural force in this country. I do feel that artists shouldn't remain indifferent to television, but anticipate its impact in the coming years. And perhaps play a positive role in shaping its character.

R.D.A.: That would require a separate session and a long discussion. I hope we will be able to meet again before you return to Delhi. But if we can't meet, I think I have given you enough clues to work out my basic approach to television. Thank you. I wish you every success, because your ideas appeal to me. I thought software meant something else. Again, I bless you and your effort.

P.C.J.: Thank you very much. We shall always cherish the memory of this meeting, and, as we go about our work, we shall think about all that you have told us today.