

The natural and unnatural in Art

Here I am, at a cyber cafe in Bombay, typing this article out in a computer, which would be sent to the Boss Lady of the Music Department of Kerala University at the mere press of a button. The said Professor called me on my mobile phone three days ago when I was walking around marveling at the Christmas decorations put up at various places in Amsterdam and enjoying the freezing climatic conditions of the Netherlands..

A few decades ago the very idea would have seemed impossible to most of us. But now technology has invaded our lives in a big way. The benefits that come with this are innumerable, especially in the field of communication. But sadly there is a down side too to most good things (And vice versa).....a truth expressed by the great Annamacharya in his song Maya Mohamu Maanadidi around five centuries ago where he laid out a whole range of contrasts to illustrate his point. "Entha velugunaku, anthey cheekati...That which brings light casts shadows too, Entha Sampadaku Antha Aapadaa.....The more wealth one has, the more problems one has, Anthata Aushadamapadhyamunaku Sari....For a medicine to be more effective, one may have to follow more restrictions." and so on and so forth. And one of the saddest results of the advancement in technology is how dangerously people are getting distanced from nature....be it in art or in life.

Talking about life can be a daunting task and in any case there are many gurus, Godmen, philosophers and so called enlightened beings around who talk about life as their profession/vocation/means of earning a living and satisfy their love of power by speaking about the power of love. So let us stick to the role of nature in art for now. The seven basic notes used in Indian Classical Music themselves are said to be the sounds made by different animals and birds.

Shadja - The scream of a peacock.
Rishabha - The bellow of a bull.
Gandhara - The bleat of a goat.
Madhyama - The warble of a krauncha bird.
Panchama - The call of a koel.
Dhaivatha - The neigh of a horse and
Nishaada - The trumpet of an elephant.

While one may hear musicians sounding like goats or some other animals a tad too often, few of us seem to remember or care much about the animalistic origins of the seven notes themselves that we bandy about in gay abandon. One of the most ancient of our musical instruments is the Veena, which, like a traditional Hindu temple, is designed to represent a human body. Being a veena player

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myself, I find the urge to share the following Sanskrit Shloka with you irresistible.

Veenaavaadana tatwajna:
Swarajnaana Vishaarada:
Talajnachaaprayatnena
Param Brahmaadhigacchati.

Which means "One who plays the Veena with full knowledge of the basic principles of sound, the science of tune evolution and the beat of music can attain Parabrahman without much effort."

The same goes for most other art forms, be it poetry, dance, painting or martial arts. From the spectacular descriptions of nature in all its glory by poets like Kalidasa and Jayadeva from our part of the world to works by poets from the West like Emerson, Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, Shelly and others one finds that various aspects of nature like the moon, the stars, flowers, clouds and so on have perpetually remained (And continue to remain) a prime source of inspiration to poets from all parts of the world. Even a humourous poet like Ogden Nash had the following to say about the heat in summer.

SUMMER SERENADE

When the thunder stalks the sky,
When tickle-footed walks the fly,
When shirt is wet and throat is dry,
Look, my darling, that's July.

Though the grassy lawn be leather,
And prickly temper tug the tether,
Shall we postpone our love for weather?
If we must melt, lets melt together!

Lines from children's songs like "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to more poignant works like "The Daffodils" by Wordsworth remain like little pearls in the memory of most of us who've learnt them as children. One finds a profusion of natural imagery in poems ranging from love songs like "Chaudvin Ka Chand Ho" to lullabies like "Omana Thingal Kidaavo."

In dance one finds that people from a barren place like Rajasthan flaunt brightly

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coloured costumes to compensate for the bare landscape while Mohini Aattam artists from Kerala sport garments of simple white and gold to provide a graceful contrast to the colourful Kerala landscape. And the list of great works depicting nature in its various forms by great painters is endless. Much is derived from the fighting stances taken by birds and animals in many forms of martial arts.

Thus we find that nature is all around us...and within us. Art reaches the most sublime levels when the nature inside us and outside us strikes a perfect harmony. For this reason many of the great masters of various art forms spent much of their time in close communion with nature. Thyagaraja spent most of his lifetime on the banks of the Kavery river, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal spent a lot of time on the banks of the Karamana river, Beethoven, Van Gogh, Wordsworth and others spent a lot of time walking in the woods in search of peace and inspiration.

I recently watched a documentary on Glenn Gould, one of the most brilliant pianists the world has ever seen. While many of his contemporaries moved to cities like London, Moscow, Paris, Vienna and New York where most of the action was taking place, Gould remained in his beautiful house by the waterside in Canada, completely at one with nature and made only short and infrequent trips to the big cities for his concerts and later, recordings.

And the difference shines forth from his music even now, several decades after the recordings were made. Such is the power of nature.

These days however, many of us sadly don't even have the time to "Stop and smell a rose" to use a cliché, leave alone admire sunsets, take walks in the woods, lie down on the grass and gaze at the stars, admire fascinating cloud formations, revel in the fragrance of the wet earth after the first rains, sit on the banks of a river for hours and hours and so on. One is woken up more often than not by the "Message Received" tone of one's mobile phone or by the dreadful sound of one's neighbour's car reversing to the electronic versions of lovely songs such as "Silent Night" and "Aum Jai Jagdish Harey" rendered ridiculous and trivial both by the (Lack of) quality of the sound itself and by their prosaic function being to shout "Get out of my way if you don't wish to be run over!" Sad really!

The progress made in the recording industry is mind boggling. Many albums are assembled bit by bit in more than one country or even continent. The sounds of many instruments are recreated by synthesizers and computers. A singer can record a song one line, one word or even one syllable at a time and computers can assemble the whole thing into a song, with the result that many singers who sound good on their CDs sound considerably less so singing Live on stage. I have often

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wondered why songs from 1940s for instance, sound so much more Innocent compared to the songs from the present though in fact the world was being ravaged by the Second World War at the time. I conclude that this must be to a great extent because of the simple and natural sounds in them as opposed to the electronically deformed sounds that bombard us now. Which is why many songs from the 40s to 80s remain perennial hits while many of our present day super hits come with a lifetime of six months or less.

I quote from the book *Secret Lives of Plants* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird. "Mrs. Rattallack ran a series of trials with sweet corn, squash, petunias, zinnias and marigolds. Under controlled experiments. Playing of rock music caused some of the plants at first to grow either abnormally tall and put out excessively small leaves, or remain stunted. Within a fortnight all the marigolds had died, but only six feet away identical marigolds, enjoying the classical strains by Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert etc. were flowering. More interestingly, Mrs Rattallack found that, even during the first week, the rock music-stimulated plants were using much more water than classically entertained vegetation. Despite this an examination of the roots on the eighteenth day revealed that soil growth was sparse in the well watered group, averaging only about an inch, whereas in the second, it was thick, tangled and about four times as long.

Further experiments in which Mrs. Rattallack submitted her plants to Acid Rock Music, a particularly raucous and percussive type of music that subordinates harmony to volume and tempo, revealed that all the plants leaned away from this cacophony. When she rotated all the pots 180 degrees, the plants leaned decidedly in the opposite direction. The plants were definitely reacting to the sounds of rock music. Mrs. Rattallack guessed that it might be the percussive component in the music that so jarred her plants and she therefore started yet another experiment. Selecting the familiar Spanish tune, 'La Paloma' she played one version of it played on steel drums to one chamber of plants and another version played on strings to a second.

The percussion caused a lean of ten degrees away from the vertical, which was very little in comparison with the rock; but the plants listening to the fiddles leaned fifteen degrees towards the source of the music.

CLASSICAL INDIAN MUSIC

Now she wondered how the plants would be affected by more sophisticated music of both East and West. She chose some Bach organ preludes and some classical

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Indian music played on the sitar. The plants gave positive evidence of liking Bach since they leaned an unprecedented thirty-five degrees towards the preludes. But even this affirmation was far exceeded by their reaction to Indian Classical Music. In their straining to reach the source of the classical Indian music they bent more than half way to the horizontal, at angles of more than sixty degrees, the nearest one almost embracing the loudspeaker.

The alarming effect which acid rock music had been shown to have on plants made Mrs. Rettallack wonder whether the nationwide craze for it among the younger generation might be extremely deleterious to their development. One longhaired musician, peering into the rock-suffused biotronic chamber, said to her; "Man, if rock is doing that to plants, I wonder what it is doing to me?"

Such is the power, both constructive as well as destructive of good sounds as well as the opposite. Indian Classical music in particular has been blessed with a singular power over and harmony with nature. We have Ragas that can make it rain, Ragas that can attract snakes and so on. When we take a look at some of the greatest artists of our country we see that Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore who was a poet, painter, philosopher and musician par excellence built Shanthi Nikethan completely in tune with nature, Rukmini Devi Arundale built Kalakshethra in harmony with nature, as did the Sarabhai family, Protima Bedi and others.

It is up to the teachers and practitioners of our great art forms that have been passed on to us through generations, to enlighten and inspire the next generation about the importance of being at one with nature and not to see music and other arts as just things one studies in an institution to get a degree followed by a doctorate followed by a job, missing the entire soul and splendour of these divine art forms.