

Adivasi music and the public stage

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These days, no festival or *utsav* is considered complete without some sort of folk music or dance. The idea of presenting the music and dance traditions of the Adivasis in a public forum is generally well-meaning—to create general awareness among the urban/rural public about Adivasi lives and to generate a sustainable development of Adivasi art forms. Unfortunately, these good intentions are far removed from reality, as I found in the course of a two-year study I conducted in the Burdwan and Birbhum districts of West Bengal.¹

This article examines the impact of public presentations of Adivasi (in this case *Santal*) music and dance upon the distinctive traits of such traditions. Public presentation here refers to the presentation of the music and dance traditions of the Adivasi communities outside their everyday lives and natural performance contexts; that is, outside the context of their *parav* (festivals), rites and rituals.

Presenting music and dance outside community contexts radically changes the norms and inner dynamics of their performance. It is by now common knowledge that Adivasi artistic-creative traditions have been organically interwoven into a total way of life, which has, over generations, been developed on the basis of an eco-centric world view that considers the human world and nature as parts of the same continuum. Such traditions, whether wall/floor decorations, iconography, fine and/or performing arts, are deeply related to one another, and all of them are related to the everyday Adivasi way of life. This means the displacement of one form—say music and dance— from its everyday association with others seriously disturbs the very physical location of their culture.

Of course, change in location is inevitable with changing times. But the popularity of Indian ‘classical’ music, another of our oral-aural musical traditions, clearly shows that relocation need not destroy a tradition completely, provided its core competence and characteristics are not interfered with. The political exigencies of nineteenth century India needed the investiture of our *raga sangeet* with the epithet ‘classical’, which insulated it against mindless intervention. But ‘marginal music’ of people such as the Adivasis of Jungle Mahal, has not enjoyed the same status. So, this music is victim of the ‘dominant’ culture, including the state, which seeks to ‘civilise’ by imposing ‘regimented change’² on these traditions.

Such ‘regimented change’ occurs in the core area of Adivasi musical tradition in the process of negotiation with urban/semi-urban audiences. The major change is in the perception of audience. In Adivasi culture, there is no distinction between performer and audience—the entire community takes part in the music and dance. This distinction is created in public presentations, and seriously disturbs the very ethos of Adivasi culture. By

imposing alien ideas of excellence, it willy-nilly transforms part of the community into a passive audience.

What’s worse is that public performances interfere with the traditional spatial arrangements of the performers. In their traditional group dances, the Adivasi women dance in a semi-circle holding each other’s hand or waist, and the men face the dancers while playing their musical instruments. But in most public presentations, instead of facing the musicians in a performative dialogue, as is customary, they face the audience; the women stand in a row (or two) in front of microphones on the stage. The instrument players stand in the wings and are relegated to providing ‘background’ to the dancers.

Possibly the greatest damage has been done to performer and performance alike by confused ‘experiments’ with Adivasi music. The result of blundering experimentation with instruments has resulted in the use of musical instruments entirely unsuited to Adivasi music—harmoniums and synthesisers are predominant, with the *madal* being used very rarely. Using keyboards restricts the musical notes to standard frequencies or pitch points, totally destroying the finer nuances of intonation patterns and displacing musical notes from their original positions in the Adivasi musical scale. Using a harmonium or similar instrument also means that the musical movement is a sharp jump from one note to another, instead of the distinctive gradual undulation or traversal across the finer intervals between two notes. This also inscribes musical elaboration onto the keyboard, and, in a way, externalises musical notes and distances this specific knowledge from the knower.³

One other issue I have with the public presentation of Adivasi art forms concerns the use of such musical traditions as medium to spread developmental messages. For instance, during the initial ‘environment building’ phase of the Total Literacy Programme, Adivasi musical forms and melodies were indiscriminately used to popularise educational programmes. In the course of my study, I found a large corpus of songs on literacy and family planning, which were first written in Bengali and then grafted on to Adivasi, mainly Santal, melodic and metrical moulds of different musical genres. This distorts the formal structure of different genres of Santal songs, since melody and language are integrally related in Santal music. Multiple song texts are seen to be set in limited, genre-specific melodic moulds. Since, in Santali tradition, tune/melody “provides structural values to its text”⁴, the imposition of Bengali linguistic tendencies is deeply disturbing. This not only changes the formal structure of Santal music, singing and dance, it affects the instrumental accompaniment, which closely follows the melodic and metric moulds of the Santal songs.

Whatever may be the reasons underlying such ‘publicisation’ and re-presentation of Adivasi art forms, it is possible to identify certain trends resulting from

them, which must be negotiated as soon as possible. Public presentations of Adivasi music and dance traditions are gradually changing them into context-free art forms. This process, I think, began when the Adivasi performing arts in general, and Adivasi musical traditions in particular, started being used for instrumentalist and functionalist purposes. The problem is compounded by the reluctance of urban audiences to negotiate aesthetics that are different from what they are used to. The result is that Adivasi musical traditions are not appreciated on their own terms; they are either made to echo popular film music or they are 'preserved' as quaint elements of times past.

At the same time, this process has led to the Adivasis professionalising their art forms. Now, Adivasis are

NOTES

1. The project, "Adivasi Musical Instruments of Jungle Mahal—Study of a Tradition in Transition" [1998-2000] was funded by Bangalore's India Foundation for the Arts, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, sanctioned a supporting grant for related documentation. The target area of this project was the forest region [called Jungle Mahal] in four administrative blocs of two districts—Burdwan and Birbhum—in West Bengal. Though reference has been made to this geographical specificity, one can safely say that the general scenario of Adivasi artistic-creative culture in our country in general does not present a very different picture.

2. Jain, Jyotindra, 1993, "Commercialising Tribal Art" in *Seminar*, No 412, December, Pp 43-44. I use the term



negotiating public presentations in order to dictate fees and organise regular earnings. A few of them are even daring urban audiences to appreciate their specific aesthetics rather than 'adjusting' to the dominant taste.

This emerging professionalism could be the only hope for this musical culture. It is high time the public accepts the fact that the Adivasi way of life and culture has changed radically. As things stand, romanticising the Adivasis' pure, holistic, eco-centric way of life will only lead to treating this entire culture as museum pieces. To conserve Adivasi music and dance traditions as living traditions, it is time we treated these as context-free art forms and welcome professionalism in these traditions. It is even likely that the Adivasi musical tradition, like 'classical' music today, will be able to save itself by setting its own terms and dictating its own aesthetic norms.

"regimented change" in music to mean artificially grafted change from above by ignoring the inner logic of a musical tradition merely for catering urban middle class taste and market.

3. The use of harmoniums in classical music has been a highly contested issue historically. The debate has not even been initiated in case of Adivasi music.

4. Prasad, Omkar, 1993, "Text-Tune and Tone-Tune Relations in Santal Music : Some Preliminary Observations" in Bonnie C Wade (Ed) *Text, Tone And Tune : Parameters of Music in Multicultural Perspective*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, pp. 235 – 241