

## WHAT IS INNOVATIVE IN CLASSICAL DANCE?

On March 29 at India Habitat Centre in New Delhi, three of us dancers performed a Kuchipudi piece called 'Amma Anandadayini', choreographed by Kishore Mosalikanti. It is a varnam (a musical format typically used as part of the Bharatanatyam repertoire). Kishore has choreographed the varnam, which is usually not seen in Kuchipudi repertoire, and also made the dance sections of the charana swaras on the brass plate (a trademark technique of Kuchipudi).

On April 10 Anjana Rajan wrote the following review in the Hindu here, in which she described the idea of the varnam using the brass plate as 'innovative'. In response, on April 24, Swapnasundari wrote an article also published in the Hindu here in which she questions the definition of 'innovation' in classical Indian dance, bringing up questions of creativity and plagiarism.

Swapnasundari tells us that the devadasis of the Nellore and Chittoor districts used to dance charanaswaras of the varnam on the brass plate in their repertoire, and hence the varnam presented by Kishore cannot be claimed to be 'innovative'. She mentions that a lack of information has led to incorrect perceptions in Indian classical dance of what is innovative, what is new, and not acknowledging the original artists who came up with these ideas. She implies that the artists and organisers of the festival have been irresponsible in making claims of 'innovativeness' of the works.

No such claim was made by the artist, who himself did not know of the devadasis' use of the plate in the varnam. Categories of 'innovative' 'traditional' 'creative' 'new' are of little interest to artists who create the work. They are more useful to those who judge or classify artwork for whatever purpose- educational, historical, commercial. Artistic work is created for communication and enjoyment, not for classifying or judging.

Further, if the choreographer has created the piece without knowledge that the idea existed 100 years ago, then can it be considered 'borrowed' or 'plagiarism'? One could

accuse someone of plagiarism if the person intentionally copies another person's idea and claims it as his/her own. But in this case, the choreographer made no such claims of innovation. The reviewer rather, perceived the piece as innovative.

Does borrowing from tradition make something less 'original' or 'creative'? If so, then how can we say anything in classical Indian dance is original or creative? A piece can be considered a part of Kuchipudi only if it adheres in some part to the vocabulary and grammar of the dance form as it has been passed down over generations, as an oral tradition. A choreographer must constantly maintain continuity with tradition and simultaneously reach out for unexplored ideas. If we stop borrowing from tradition, then it can no longer be called 'classical'. Rather, most contemporary dance is marked by this rupture- this break from tradition- a rejection of all that came before.

Originality in classical dance then is a matter of degree, and a matter of context- time and place. In India we are fortunate that artists have maintained a continuity with tradition, by constantly rethinking, reorganising, reinventing, much like Swapnasundari's revival of a dance form now called 'Vilasini Natyam'. The history of any art form, particularly those that are passed down orally, is not a straight line. It is the history of innumerable artists who embody the art form, and their particular stories.

Stating that a particular item is inspired by another item from the days of yore does not take away from the 'creativity' of the choreography, as long as you cannot prove that it is an exact reproduction, the question will be how much creativity does the item display? The reverse is even more dangerous- claiming that one's own interpretation or innovation actually has ancient antecedents in order to justify or validate its existence as 'classical' 'historical' or 'traditional'. This is what fundamentalist religious groups do in reinterpreting texts, reinstating harmful practices proclaiming them as 'tradition'! It is a dangerous word!

As Swapnasundari mentions in her article, a lack of information has led to incorrect perceptions of Indian classical dance. Most people cannot find anything new, nor

communicative, nor entertaining in this so called 'ancient' dance form. Foreign embassies and funders of the arts in India often cannot fit Kuchipudi or other classical dance forms into their cultural agendas because of this lack of information- Indian classical forms cannot be easily put into either box- 'traditional' nor 'contemporary'- which is quite easily done for most other countries' art forms. Classical Indian dance, and many other elements of culture in India, are simultaneously traditional and contemporary- connected to and borrowing from the past, contemporary in practise and aesthetic, and stretching towards new horizons.

It is often difficult to explain, for example, that although what I am performing is classical dance, it is not what was performed hundreds of years ago. Each time a piece is performed, it is renewed, revived, and constantly changes, even while maintaining continuity with the past. Is this dance religious or is it entertainment? Is it traditional or contemporary? old or new? Is it composed or improvised? It is all of these and more! These dualities are simplistic and incapable of encompassing the complexities of an art form like Kuchipudi, or any other classical Indian dance form.

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