"Teaching and Transmission of Indian Performing Arts"

Hanne M. de Bruin

Hanne M. de Bruin is an independent researcher who has written about popular performance traditions in North Tamilnadu (vide De Bruin 1999, 2000 and 2001). She works as a facilitator for the Kattaikkuttu Sangam and the Kattaikkuttu Youth Theatre School in Kanchipuram.

This issue of Indian Folklife offers a collection of short essays on Indian performing arts focusing on transmission. The contributors approach this theme from different perspectives shaped by their own cultural background and role as (young) academics and/or practitioners, seasoned insiders and interested (non-Indian) outsiders. The passing down of knowledge, skills and experience relating to a performing art form from one person to the other, across generations and nowadays also across geographical divides, is pivotal to the life and survival of the arts. The way(s) and context(s) in which transmission takes place greatly determine the form, content and status these performing art forms assume.

One of the most well-known Indian ways of transmission is the gurukula(m) where the student is tutored by her/his teacher in all the aspects of an art form, or one particular style within a form, over a long period of time. Several contributions in this issue point to the ambiguous status of the gurukulam system today. The long duration of the training, the fact that most knowledge is transmitted orally and not through ‘text books’ (and, hence, remains inaccessible to outsiders and unrecognized by art institutions), the difficulty of combining this kind of intensive training with regular school education, the implication of child labour in the case of young trainees, the absence of official recognition of the gurukulam training by government art institutions, and the falling apart of traditional systems of patronage of some of the performing art forms relying on this method of transmission, appear to predict the end of the gurukulam system. Yet, G. Venu, Katrin Binder and Evelien Pullens in their discussions of the Kutiyattam, Yakshagana and Kattaikkuttu theatre traditions signal what seems to be the renaissance of the gurukulam system in new and/or transitory forms taking on greater or lesser degrees of institutionalization out of necessity or desire.

These new gurukulams try to retain those elements of the old system deemed essential to the transmission of the form. But they are also tuned in to the demands of modern society and novel audiences and may use additional teaching methods gleaned from other traditions, including Western ones. A characteristic of these new gurukulams is that all of them have opened up to students who previously were not involved in, or excluded from, the acquisition and the practice of these forms of theatre. With the transcendence of caste and gender barriers these new gurukulams appear to have truly absorbed the credo of parampara, ‘proceeding from one to another’. They contribute to a new, and probably different, generation of successors in these important performing art forms.

Evelien Pullens looks at the delicate balance these newly developing gurukulams have to negotiate in using the old and the contemporary, in particular also where teaching methods and objectives are concerned. What is creativity and what does it mean within the gurukulam system, where teaching is often based on ‘copying’ the guru without much verbal explanation? According to her, creativity comes in only after the student has mastered the basics of the form. In contrast, contemporary Western drama training emphasizes a creative and intuitive process of learning with the teacher as coach rather than model. Pullens’ discussion raises important questions, such as: Is creativity inherent or can it be developed/taught? Is the creativity found in the gurukulam system different from the individual creativity propagated in the West as the essence of art and the artist?

Elaborating on the theme of creativity, Pritham Chakravarthy reflects on how her own style of performance evolved and continues to evolve—outside the contexts of official art institutions—resulting in a number of different plays about womanhood. She describes the difficulty of casting off prejudices ingrained within us from a young age so as to be open to new realities. Throughout her own development as an actress her perceptions of gender, sexuality, culture and identity have shifted constantly to the extent that they may even contradict each other and/or elicit opposing loyalties. It is this state of split condition that interests her in particular and that she wants to use as a theme for her future performances.

Pulak Dutta, in a tribute to his father, percussion maestro Anadinath Dutta, reminds us of the fact that the training and practice of professional performers cannot be confined by labels and boundaries between genres, which are more often than not ‘establishment-made’ and serve other than artistic goals. Mutual exchange between performance traditions and their inherent flexibility to absorb new elements determines their liveliness—a quality essential to our enjoyment of these forms. The transmission of the arts depends on the generosity of the guru and her/his ability to offer all (s)he knows in performance and in the training of her/his students without reserve. Honest, personal transmission becomes critical in particular when a practitioner has no access to the tools of reading and writing. As one of the women...
performers of a Tamilnadu-based Natakam (Drama) company said in an interview: “I cannot read and write. Therefore, I depend on the willingness of others to teach me.” (De Bruin and Rajagopal 2001) Yet, in spite of their pivotal role in protecting the life and quality of different performing art forms, the contribution of many master teachers and master performers remains often unacknowledged—not by their students and audiences, but by the official arts establishment which has become the principal patron of the arts.

Citing the illustrious example of Maria Montessori, Ludwig Pesch pleads for the inclusion of Indian music making into the regular educational system as a pedagogical method to stimulate the intellectual and artistic development of young children and enhance their feeling of general well-being. He stresses the importance of active participation in the processes of listening to and making music—a remark that reverberates in other contributions, too. The implementation of music classes as part of the regular curriculum of schools can be realised with simple means. Textbooks and (expensive) instruments or an official arangetram are not prerequisites to successful music making; sensitive and well-trained teachers are.

Transmission is not only about the ways the performing arts are being taught and handed down. It involves also the ways in which we reflect on the arts and represent them through various media in the public debate. This kind of transmission implies conceptual and attitudinal issues, which play an important role in establishing hierarchies within and between art forms and their practitioners. Our representation of the arts, as practitioners, scholars, government officials, teachers, authors of text books and coffee table books about the arts and representatives of the mass media gives rise to a whole range of subjective labels to describe and classify forms and their exponents. To name a few, authenticity, tradition, folk, classical, legitimacy, modernity and/or contemporaneity, innovation, creativity, stylization and orality are frequently applied descriptions to place forms and exponents within the cultural debate. The classifications of art forms are not always based on critical judgement of live performances and may involve open or cleverly hidden disrespect for the exponents of these forms, their background and the conditions and context within which they practice their art. Yet, they are influential. The resilience of “accepted”, not so nuanced or simply wrong popular opinions, for instance with regard to the vitality of traditions, may grossly misrepresent the ground-reality and cause damage to the exponents of these traditions. As Matri Gopalakrishna points out in the last contribution to this issue, the debate about the representation of the performing arts has come to include also the ways in which practitioners talk (or do not talk) about their form and how they place themselves in the wider field of cultural production. By talking about one’s art the practitioner provides her or his (potential) audiences with a set of de-codifiers, which help individual spectators and sponsors to recognize, place and enjoy the form better. The ability to objectify one’s art—what one is doing and why—appears to have become an essential tool to attract sponsorship and survive with dignity and earn a reasonable income in today’s competitive performance market.

As a committed outsider I hope that you will enjoy reading this issue focusing on the transmission of performing arts in India. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to elicit self-reflexiveness and further debate on the lives of the arts and the lives of practitioners of the arts.

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