Traditions of Dance and Music

Posted on



The distinctive idiom of traditional Sri I.ankan culture is dance and music. In their various configurations, dance and music are organically woven into the colourful folk-ways, rites, rituals. formal productive activities and play of an agranian society. Within this age-old culture, dance and m have no independent life as art forms They are functionally inseparable from
the larger cultural fabric.

Yet the majority of Sri Lankan dance and musical forms survive the journey from the traditional context. Despite certain inevitable losses recorded on the way, Sri Lankan dance and music (especially the former) have the capacity to impress and entertain contemporary audiences.

Sri Lanka’s traditional arts clearly reflect the historical fact if the strong cultural influence exercised by her neighbour India. This is most apparent today in the dance and music traditionally practiced by the Tamil-speaking population of Sri Lanka who are linked by close bonds of language and religion with the people of South India. Their arts, especially their dance and music, are often unmodulated extensions of South Indian modes. The relationship with India appears to have worked differently in the case of the Sinhala majority. Professing Buddhism and speaking their own language, the Sinhala people have, over a period of centuries, evolved their distinctive styles and genres of dance and music. While these do betray pronounced Indian affinities, there is no dearth of identifying marks in their constitution. Sinhala dance and music cannot be confused with those of India.



Masked dancers in traditional costumes.

Dances

The oral tradition, which as everywhere is liberally sprinkled with myth and legend, traces the genesis of the Sinhala dances to pre-Buddhist□□c times. Whether this is true or not, the dances are undeniably of some antiquity. The very fact that the dances inhabit the domain of the sacred is sufficient evidence of their early origins. The dances are traditionally located within ceremonies, rites and rituals performed to propitiate evil spirits that cause harm to human beings, to heal the sick and to procure the well-being of the community. In this cultural context, the dances are mimetic articulations containing meanings and significations embodying man's relationship to the unseen forces that may impinge upon him in diverse ways. Considered as dance forms per se, they are vigorous, graceful, acrobatic, and representational in tum, but rhythmically exciting and visually captivating all the time. The major dance forms practised in the Sinhala tradition are conventionally divided into two basic styles or groups. Of these the Kandyan dance form, or "Uda rata natum" (the dances of the up-country as labelled in Sinhala), has won international fame. Somewhat less well known is the 'low-country' style ('Pahata rata natum' or 'Ruhunu natum'). Within the Kandyan, there is a sub-group known as the 'Sabaragamuwa' dance. 'Uda rata' and 'Pahata rata' are essentially two

separate dance forms while ‘Sabaragamuwa’ partakes of the qualities of both. In relative terms, the Kandyan dance displays the most advanced stage of evolution towards a “free-standing” art form de-linked from the ritual framework. In its aesthetic features, the Kandyan dance bespeaks the court patronage accorded co it by Sinhala kings. Low country dance, by comparison is raw, visceral and closer to the soil.

Besides these principal dance forms which occupy the middle ground between the sacred and the profane, the Sri Lankan repertoire boasts of a variety of folk dances. Less formal in character these dances emanate from the seasonal activities of the agricultural cycle and from communal diversions. A number of these folk-dances that have survived to the present day suggest a charming fusion of stylized simplicity and gracefulness of movement with rhythm and pattern.

Music

For most ears, the indigenous music of Sri Lanka means the vibrant, masculine and submerging sounds of the drum. Creating intricate arabesques of tone and tempo, the Sri Lankan drum speaks a language that no ear can resist. Dominant and insistent as it is, the drum is not the sole instrument known to Sri Lankan music; it is however the basic instrument.

Tradition refers to a full assemblage of musical instruments including string and wind instruments of the kind used in India. Indeed, according to legend a richly varied and highly sophisticated musical culture flourished in Sri Lanka during the age of the Ramayana, the great Indian epic. Residual evidence however fails to support this claim.

String instruments are not found in traditional Sinhala music as played today. Even the wind instruments are limited to two or at most three. Drums on the other hand are present in impressive range and number. They are heard often and nearly everywhere.

Drum is the necessary accompaniment for all Sri Lankan dances: low country, Kandyan, or Sabaragamuwa. The drum-beat controls and directs the dancers feet. As one observer once put it: The dancing is done, as it were to the intention of the drums. At certain points in the course of dancing, an exciting interchange or dialogue takes place between the drummer and dancer. The drummer tells a rhythm to the dancer who after interpreting it will in his turn instruct the drummer

by playing the rhythmic pattern with his feet.

In the Sri Lankan tradition, the drum has other functions besides supporting dance. The drum is a self-sufficient instrument on its own, capable of a vocabulary that can give voice to a range of “messages”. On occasions of religious worship, for example, the drum serves to mark or to announce the different stages of the ceremony. In Sri l.ankan traditional culture, the drum is, so to speak, a medium of communication, a message bearer, in addition to being the habitual accompanist.

In the field of vocal music, the Sri Lankan tradition is a meagre one. Although there is a large and diverse body of folk-song and chant, the tradition does not seem to have been hospitable to the evolution of a complex and erudite musical culture. Juxtaposed to that of India, Sri Lanka’s indigenous musical system lacks refinement and sophistication. The styles of song and chant are firmly embedded in folk culture and ecclesiastical observances. It is, however, not meaningful to consider Sri l.ankan music separately, in isolation from its ‘other half which is dance. Music and dance together constitute the Sri I.ankan tradition. The drummer and the dancer have to be perceived as a single unit. the one complementing the other. When they meet Sinhala music attains its full being, gains its soul.

Traditional Sri Lankan dance and music are today subject to two opposing pulls. History, myth and imperatives of cultural identity take dance and music towards conservation and the highlighting of unique qualities. Modernity, on the other hand, beckons dance and music towards the shedding of roots. The outcome of this dynamism will prove most interesting, for dance as much as for music.



A Kandyan dancer