

The Berkshire Conference – Tradition and the Arts

Issues Around the Use of Tradition And Receptivity of Work Within and Outside the Country

1. First, I would like to temporalize the field of culture and art. While culture constitutes old knowldges acquired through history, art anticipates the future. It is *avant garde*.
2. The need for the artist or contemporary creator of expressions or of new knowldges to address these old knowldges comes from an atavistic need for continuity.
3. Cultural continuity in India has expressed itself syncretically—through hybrid layering of existing expressions, by new elements getting assimilated into them.
4. The Ganapati birth story is such a metaphor for hybridity and the accommodation by the tradition of the new.
5. Most creators of new expressions therefore do feel the need to connect with the heritage. {Even if it is to reject it. And the rejection then becomes part of the continuity in the tradition. For example Buddhism, current feminist interpretations of the Ramayana. }
6. The choice lies between incorporating the visible elements of traditional expression and culture or between seeking out the foundational principles, which inform its expression. There are problems with the first, which I will point out later.
7. The invisible principles can inform both theoretical paradigms and also give formal directions.
8. An example of such a principle informing theoretical paradigms is the value that the tradition puts on a particular way of knowing. Although there are teachers and rules and processes ---the tradition puts a premium on self discovery. It says it has no definitive answers and leaves the individual practitioner alone to make her own discoveries. Or it actively says we refuse to tell you our secrets, find your own way. And after providing the practitioner with some broad guidelines, whether it is in the field of spiritual practice or of art practice the tradition encourages the practitioner to make out her own path through self knowledge and self experience. A story from the MB –Eklavya and his knowledge not acquired through an external agent. Inspiration and Intuition.
9. Such principles informing art practice help its *avant garde* aspect.
10. The tradition can also provide stimulating formal inputs, when they emerge out of those elements which are hidden from view. For example it inspires an enhanced use of energy in live performance as distinct from the functional use of energy. And many of the traditional forms then becoming means for training the body, voice and psychological expressions of the performer. Which the performer then uses imaginatively to recreate a new language from these to express her contemporary ideas.{ This kind of performance in theatre is important today as it makes it different from cinema. }
11. The problem with incorporating the visible aspect of the traditional arts into ‘new work’ gives it at least within its home spectator community a kind of

secondariness. { *I would rather see a traditional performance of Kathakkali by a performer steeped in it physically and philosophically over years, than a performer slightly acquainted with it and using it superficially in a non KK performance for visual effect.* }

12. Also the focus then tends to be on the spectacular rather than on the interpretative and therefore more 'creative' aspect of the work.
13. Traditional arts themselves are afflicted by the malady of purism ---and thus out of touch with their own foundational logic. This purism is a result of history-- due, in the first place, to the urgencies/imperatives of cultural nationalism in the face of European colonialism; in the second as a reaction to the threat of homogenization that attends globalization.
14. In endlessly addressing a putative 'West' (reactively or otherwise) the Traditional arts have lost out/given up a search for the practice of local hybridity, that is to say of dialogue and admixture between adjacent and overlapping cultures. They are fast losing their constituencies in India. When the West venerates them it is an artificial life that they acquire. They need to evolve on home ground before they can project themselves outside.
15. The West has also to be careful in its misunderstanding of cultural expressions from Asia. Elements which mean one thing to home audiences do not have that meaning to the West and this can lead to loss of essential meaning of the form. Theyyam..
16. To generate such local hybridity within Indian Traditional practice you need synergy between different genres. The tradition speaks about that. You should be an architect, maths, chemistry etc to be a performer.
17. The work of contemporary artists is to dialogue.
18. Till recently contemporary work had no takers in the west. E.g what contemporary work can emerge out of India? What informs your perf of dog and tiger? Is it kathakkali ? no tom and jerry. Puzzlement in Munich that the music we performed that had European elements in it. A craving for the 'exotic and the different' But perhaps we want to use all the tools made available to us due to the globalization of ideas and crafts and tools. We might want to use your tools to talk about our view of reality? Are you willing to accept our view of reality? Are you willing to accept the way we use your tools? We use language in a way that no one else does? We use may be a mixture of two or three languages even in the same sentence. This is our reality. We use English in a way that expresses a reality and rhythm very different from the reality expressed by other English speaking people. Why should this not be heard? This is an expression of the contemporary Indian. Very valuable because it is the very expression of the contemporary= multiple-sided view of reality. See same thing from different sides and angles. India is the world's real laboratory of cultural diversity, you must listen to its voice to really understand cultural diversity.
19. India work received well. Festivals. Not gate. As international. Because rural India. No resources human or financial to go commercial. In Mumbai 1980's we took the root of gate. But now we do through festivals. Perform locally, nationally, internationally. So work can grow.
19. Work received well and understood. The understanding of it outside the country is debatable. I wonder if we can say that culture can be universal. The specificity is

what makes it what it is. There are layers of course---universal and specific. The universal is about communication and the specific about meaning.

19. Support. Donars, Grants, Government support. Self support: business, performances, food self sufficiency, endowment. Strong case for corpus fund through endowments.