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Traditional Performing Arts in Education

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The deliverance of knowledge from servitude to will, this forgetting of the individual self and its material interest, this elevation of mind to the will less contemplation of truth, is the function of art.¹

- Will Durant: The Story of Philosophy: Washington Square Press: 1961 p. 336

I always begin my class with a story. One can make a story out of anything depending upon the age of the class. A tiny one about a little spider in the window sill on the way to the class who asked me what I was going to do in the class brings in a lot of answers. There is always a story.

Story, says ancient Indian dramaturgy, was created as a way of instruction. One among the 64 arts to be mastered, storytelling creates the mood for the message. Natyashastra too begins with a story. When the world was steeped in greed and misery, the wise ones went to Brahma and asked him to create something that would bring the essence of all learning to all levels of people. Brahma meditated for awhile and created Natyaveda or the Panchama veda and gave the creative arts to mankind. He literally created visual aids to learning.

Activity: Can we list the arts?

The arts, says Brahma, in the Natyashastra, were made to “to create wisdom in the ignorant, learning in scholars, affording sport to kings and endurance to the sorrow-stricken, replete with diverse moods, informed with the varying passions of the soul, linked to the deeds of all mankind, the best, the average and the low, affording excellent counsel, pastime and all else”. This could be one of the definitions for education. Education as understood by many in its broadest, general sense is the means through which the aims and habits of a group of people lives on

from one generation to the other, generally occurring through any experience that has a formative effect on the way one thinks, feels, or acts. In its narrow, technical sense, education is the formal process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge from one generation to another through instruction in schools. It was exactly for this purpose that the arts were created.

I argue that a teacher is an actor too. Just like an actor, the teacher is bringing the text prescribed alive through teaching in the classroom and needs to use aids like charts and activities to bring home the point. (take the message across.)

To take the message across, a teacher needs to learn different modes of communication. Traditional performing arts use four modes of communication (Abhinaya) to carry the message to the audience.

1. Angika Abhinaya is the abhinaya expressed through the limbs. A teacher needs to look at how the body is being used in expressing an idea. Do we stand erect, do we use our hands to reinforce an idea? Do we show our children that we are hands on teachers through our postures and our movements in the classroom?
Activity: Can an idea be expressed non verbally? Small groups can discuss this. Take one point from a lesson done and express it non verbally as a group.

2. Aharya abhinaya is related to the costumes and make-up of the actor in his various roles. This is depicted through the costumes and other decorations of the body. I would look at this as external aids that we bring into the classroom to illustrate an idea. **Activity:** How would you express an idea through the visual medium of drawing or using a property? Small group activity
3. Vachika abhinaya is the use of language, regulation of the tone of voice, accent and rhythm which can bring out the lyrical qualities of the play. Most teachers know they need the voice. Do we learn to speak clearly without swallowing words? Do we try to make our accent as easily understood as possible? Do we look at our pronunciation? **Activity:** Can we say the same sentence in different ways? Small groups can come up with ideas of stressing on different parts of the sentence, saying it with different emotions etc. Can we create a rap from the points in the lesson?
4. Satwika abhinaya or abhinaya of the mind denotes the inner understanding of the artist and the living of the mood of the moment. Do we teachers really feel the satwa or the essence of our role as teachers? Do we put that into action? Don't we need to train ourselves to look at what we are radiating as teachers? **Activity:** Mindfulness is the key to learning. Why is technological solution or scientific model preferred for any problem? Why some ideas need to be rediscovered before they are integrated with the cultural fabric. Is it not important to think about science, art and technology as expressions of desire and imagination, as well as the progressive accretion of knowledge? Imagination is more important than knowledge said Albert Einstein.

The performing arts seek understanding and enjoyment which is explained as Rasa as their goal. To try and achieve this, arts became pure communication using the body, facial expressions, music, rhythm, dialogue, storytelling and whatever else works. Rasa

(sanskrit, lit. 'taste'), a concept first introduced in the Natyasastra, the oldest existing Indian treatise on dramaturgy (200 BC–AD 200) can be translated as aesthetic appreciation, but this is a superficial definition that does not do justice to the spiritual and philosophical implications of this term. It is perceived as an experience ranging from simple enjoyment to complete absorption.

Forms of indigenous performing arts

Consider the variety of forms:

- Traditional folk theatre or rural dramatic forms, including tribal mimes and dance dramas
- Puppetry
- Oral literature cum musical forms, folk musical styles, ballads, harikatha, Kabigan, story telling etc.
- Fairs and festivals including social, ritual and ceremonial gatherings
- Folk dances
- Ritual symbols, traditional designs and miscellaneous motifs
- Sound signals and speech surrogates

The Alha of the popular ballad forms of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh has survived since ages, both in content and structure. Knowing fully the intense association of the style with the masses, several folk poets conveniently poured in new words to address people in the rural parts of the country. Even political parties and sales promotion agencies use these reciters to get across their messages. Its utilization has thus widened its impact, even across the cultural regions where it has traditionally survived. There are similar examples from other lingual areas.

The bare fact that despite the availability of modern means of communication, the traditional folk media continue to exist, makes it all the more important for educationists to test their validity.



When I viewed the classical dance and its architecture and the folk forms and their dynamism, I felt this is something we have left out of our school system but they do belong there. There is mathematical structuring in the patterns and architecture of a form like Bharathanatyam, Kathak or Odissi. They can easily be related to geometry and geography. Music too is full of mathematics.

It is essential to convey the ‘Wow!’ factor to children—the way the traditional forms are dynamic, how they solve the problems of time and space, how they constantly relate contemporary events to the epics, how elastic they are and how techniques such as using a cloth curtain in many ways are ultra-modern in their concept.

Devarattam is a non-lyrical form danced to the beat of the Devadundubhi. When I saw it in 1984, I was struck by the abstraction it had achieved and the fact of it being a non-lyrical form and a men’s dance. I was delighted to bring it to the schools for boys to be trained in. Boys feel dance is only for girls, as the only physical movement available to them at school is the dry drill. The vocal syllables of the beats of Devadundubhi serve to make a vocalization which will make pronunciation and reading easier. Rhythmic recitation gives a rhythm and grace to the body. There are abstract forms available in every nook and corner of our country. What is needed is a passionate interpretation of these for educational purposes. It is important to use local performing forms to build bridges with the local culture.



Folk theatre and some of its forms

Therukoothu is a traditional performing art form popular in the northern regions of Tamilnadu. It is a powerful form which is ballad, opera and ballet combined in one. Its origin is traced back to the sixteenth century. The content of the plays enacted in this form are mythological in nature. The treatment of the stories however is contemporary.

Therukoothu is commissioned by a village in thanksgiving for a good harvest or in prayer for rain and for temple rituals and social life cycle rituals. The epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are depicted in different stages along with rituals where the villagers who were audiences for the overnight performance become participants. Therukoothu is drama, spectacle, ritual and an essential part of the life cycle. It has high literary textual dialogues and songs and also contemporary expressions in the linking of current time to the period of the epic. There is a constant movement between periods and time in the performance of the ritual and the drama.

There are many more aspects of the Koothu like the manner in which the Koothu characters introduce themselves, the role of the Kattiakaran who links the different periods of the play and performance, drawing parallels to contemporary situations and the dramatic solutions to the problems of depicting time and space.





The first time I saw Therukoothu, I was awestruck. Innumerable ideas for classroom use came up. First of course was giving an assembly demonstration with explanations about history and context and an idea about the ambience of the village and then the use of the curtain cloth. The repeated questioning of the character who has just made the entry by the Kattiakaran gave me an idea for creating a similar dramatic moment in the classroom. I asked my students in class 7 studying cold and warm currents to take on the roles of these currents. They were made to stand behind a hand-held curtain and announce that the cold current was about to enter. The screen was removed and the current introduced itself in a

creative manner. The class asked questions—how are you formed? Where do you normally live? What are your effects? I have done this for historical characters, the subject of a poem, the right angle, a perpendicular line, etc.

The few examples I have outlined only give a flavour of the vast treasure of indigenous culture available to us. Apart from bringing new ideas and techniques into the classroom, this treasure makes possible a subtle imbibing of another way of life. It is through education, more than anything, that we can bring the young into direct contact with village life and awaken in them a respect and feeling for the traditional arts.

Reference

i Will Durant: *The Story of Philosophy*: Washington Square Press: 1961 p 336



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