

ELECTRONIC MASS MEDIA – A CHALLENGE TO FREEDOM

About ten years ago, I met a Pop-musician, who was keen to explore folk forms, which could be used in stage acts.

The need to indigenise and create something original pointed to a creative dialogue. However, I was weary of plagiarism of folk art by Bollywood. I knew a pop diva who lifted complete acts and repackaged traditional lyrics, dress and movement, without a hint of a credit line, leave alone the issue of sharing profit.

I voiced these concerns while sounding enthusiastic about a real interaction and emphasized that such a dialogue would only work between equals. Assured of the right motivation, I went ahead and got a media company to sponsor the event at a university. We called it “JIYO!” a street smart word used to express our faith in life.

I invited ethnomusicologist, folk performers and pop groups to come together for a workshop for a few days before ‘jamming’ for the young students who were not interested in Indian sounds. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled because the University could not handle the experimental events and the presence of big media required by the sponsors frightened every one. Today the problem is not whether we should take the bull by the horn but how to catch it and be able to dance with it.

Many questions come up like birds taking wings! who knows where they take rest ?

Today the need to sing is replaced by the pressing of a button or turning of a knob, TV boxed in a room is becoming our family, replacing community. The warmth of participative human interface is becoming rare and often a copy of western forms. How would India’s new infatuation with Mass media and the discovery of its awesome flexibility alter the values society ascribes to its own local forms?

Time-tested methods of inter-personal transmission of skill, insight, knowledge are challenged to fly as never before. The context and need, the space and scale, the timing and packaging, the economics and recognition are issues that require agile handling. How will our traditional artists train themselves to get a grip on all this?

White collared producers, art establishments and even urban artists do not feel comfortable with traditional artists – their language, sense of timing, and lifestyle creates adjustments problems of communication and class – so often easy ways are found...machine made duplicates that look ethnic to satiate a nostalgia or urban actors hired for rural programmes, have marginilised the brilliant traditional artists who are forced to become a copy of a copy. In 1982 I wrote to you a story which I shall repeat again. I remember an old Bhawai dancer from Gujarat who inspite of his hairy legs and gold teeth used to dance the role of a beautiful woman. With a mere sweep of ‘choona’ (lime) on his face and bells on his feet, his transformation would be complete. He would then proceed to have the audience eat out of his hands. I recall his pathetic face however, when I saw him watching his role being hacked by a smart urban actress on television, complete with coloured lights, make up, costumes and the ‘discipline’ required by impatient TV producers in a hurry to can a

programme. While in Sweden many years later I met the artist again. He was now blushing with rouge on his cheeks, a lace hanky in hand looking more like a transvestite, sublimated and reduced to a mere cutout of the original by inconsequential frills. Why was respect for art in his heart replaced by fear and insecurity?

There are powerful attempts to manufacture a common culture which is global even as many people are increasingly becoming conscious of their own cultural heritage. They are asserting themselves and also are resisting the onslaught of dull, soulless common global metaphors. The spread and reach of satellite communication media is a particular epitome of this emerging common culture. Need less to say, the celebration of the indigenous forms of art have not found as powerful an ally, in this age of electronic media.

So this year let us try and attempt a small interface... for example with a few traditional Indian musicians and one or two contemporary pop groups from Delhi. We admit that we are taking the bull by the horn, with a format we know little about. Maybe the pop groups we are able to find in the next two weeks for this experiment, are unable to offer the innovative vehicle we need to understand mass culture. ...but a lot of work is already being done.

When we talk of creating performances without compromising the intrinsic quality of each form, are we actually providing pop groups a mere exotic background using traditional artists? Or will the different voices and instruments we could use today help us to create a fresh idiom.....a soundscape for a new horizon.

An idiom where the lyrics of a mendicant bowl are translated by a poet enabling pop diva's high octave to accompany him. Will the Maganiyar's be able to punctuate, a percussionist's multiple beats with their agile desert rhythms? How would a jugalbandi of a new violin offset the plaintive voice of a Bhopa? Will the sensuous movements of Kalbaliya's create poetry of a jazz saxophonist? Will the rap match the Tal Vadhya Kachari.

Let us not attempt to answer these questions with more labyrinths of words let us try and create an unprecedented confluence of traditions and modernity at our next function to celebrate the ___ anniversary of India's independence. So bring along your instruments, your voices, your imagination and free spirit.

See you on the 14th August to celebrate the challenge of real freedom.

Very truly yours

(Rajeev Sethi)