

## CROSSROADS AND BYROADS:

### Consonance in Indian Classical Writings and Performing Arts

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The dynamic human mind has been creative in expressing its thoughts through verbal, oral and visual avenues since time immemorial. These expressions are depicted through speech, music, painting, sculpture, dance, drama, literature and so on. Classical Indian literature is noted for the skilful and aesthetic combining of literature, music and drama (Tamil: *iyal-icai-nāṭakam* or Sanskrit: *campu*). A famous instance of the combining of the three genres is seen in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* by Iṭaṅkō Aṭikaḷ. Various musical compositions like ‘sea-song’ (kanal-vari), ‘hill-song’ (vēṭṭva-vari), ‘river-song’ (ārru-vari), ‘swing-song’ (ūsai-vari), ‘ball-song’ (kantuka-vari) and so on are found all over the text.

The artistic and aesthetic interpretations through creativity have given rise to ‘crossroads’ and ‘byroads’ in the interceptions between classical writings and art forms. Thus, we find, that what is found in a text may be enacted either *verbatim* on stage, or the creative artist may show a novelty unseen by the common eye. For instance, the purāṇa-s emerged through oral tradition dating back to the times of Kṛṣṇa (1500 B.C.). The (*āycciyar kuravai*) ‘vaṭavaraiyai mattākki’ (‘making the Northern mountain Meru as the churning rod, the serpent Vāsuki as the rope to churn ...’) of the ‘Maturai-kāṇṭam’ in *Cilappatikāram* (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.) is drawn from several episodes in the Vaiṣṇava purāṇa-s, particularly the *Bhāgavata*-purāṇa. And, the *āycciyar kuravai* ‘vaṭavaraiyai mattākki vācukiyai nāṇākki ...’ has become immortal in the twentieth century, thanks to the soulful rendering by the great and incomparable Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi. So much so, that most people think that ‘vaṭavaraiyai mattākki vācukiyai nāṇākki ...’ is a Carnatic song in Tamil and are not aware of its occurrence in the ‘Maturai-kāṇṭam’ in *Cilappatikāram*, with origins in the purāṇa-s. Similar is the case of ‘Invocation to Mother Tamil’ (*tamiḷ-ṭ tāy vāḷttu*) from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai’s invocation to his drama *Manōṇmanīyam* (19<sup>th</sup> century) and set to tune by M.S. Viswanathan (20<sup>th</sup> century) and regularly sung after the National anthem at the beginning of official functions in Tamilnadu. Not many know that it is but an excerpt and not the whole poem by Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai.

Generally, a good story or plot in writing gets portrayed as a musical rendering or is performed on stage or screen. As a result, each medium of expression has evolved its own grammar and rules. Extending further, every school and sub-school of literature, music, drama,

painting or sculpture adhere to specific themes, forms and methods. So, a lay person senses the broad difference between the South Indian Carnatic music and the North Indian Hindustani music, while a person learned in music discerns the nuances which mark the two forms. If the Southern Carnatic music and Bharatanāṭya has various sub-schools termed as ‘bāṇi-s,’ the North Indian Hindustani music and dance forms like Kathak branched into sub-schools called ‘gharāna-s.’ So too with the classical forms of drama and folk-theatre, classical dance and folk-dance, classical painting or folk forms of painting, each of which is marked by geographical and linguistic flavours.

Scenes or themes from a text can be re-created on stage without any modifications, or a creative artist may choose to make slight modifications or complete changes to the original script. For instance, themes from the Indian Vaiṣṇavite mythology find distinct regional expressions in the cloth-based scroll paintings called *Paṭṭacitra* of the eastern states like Odisha and West Bengal, while the tribal art of the Gōṇḍ of Madhya Pradesh depicts motifs from their culture and love for nature. These instances can be seen as faithful ‘transportations’ of the original themes. M.S. Subbulakshmi’s rendering of *āycciyar kuravai* from *Cilappatikāram* is a classic case of ‘transportation.’

On the other hand, Kalidāsa’s play *Abhijñāna-śākuntala* can be seen as a ‘transformation’ of the Śākuntala-episode in *Mahabhārata*. And, Kalidāsa’s *Śākuntala* enjoys greater popularity than the Śākuntala-episode featuring in the original text of the *Mahabhārata*. The reason could be that the common man enjoys a ‘feel-good’-‘justice done’-experience on seeing Śākuntala’s and her son Bharata’s uniting with her long-lost husband Duṣyanta in Kalidāsa’s play, in comparison to the Śākuntala’s story in the *Mahabhārata* which does not mention if there was a reunion or not at all.

Against this, poet Dinakar’s Hindi poem *Konārka* is an imaginary tragic story inspired by the architectural marvel of the Konārka temple in Orissa. A reader may choose to look upon this poem either as a ‘transformation’ or ‘transgression.’

The two-day seminar to be held by the Adyar Library and Research Centre on ‘Crossroads and Byroads...’ aims to explore such consonances between Indian classical literature and their portrayal through the various art forms. In doing so, the seminar intends to focus on ‘Transportations, Transformations and Transgressions between Text and Stage.’

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