

Elephant House Project @ Macquarie University

***“The Transmission of Music & Dance in Indian Modernity:  
A conversation between Artistic & Scholarly Perspectives”***

Morning theme: The Guru-Shishya Parampara.

Dr. Ram, Head of Anthropology Department, on ‘Perspectives from apprentices of skilled practices: performing arts and scholarship’

How does the experience of apprenticeship in Indian dance and music help to throw a new light on academic knowledge?

The two can very easily be presented in a polarised form. Indeed, this polarity is itself a time honoured tradition all its own: the polarised East versus West typical of Orientalism as a political discourse associated with colonial systems of knowledge.

There are ready grounds that can be found for such a polarised representation. Apprenticeship in Indian dance and musical apprenticeship *seems* to value the exact opposite of what is valued by academic knowledge. The two forms I have been apprenticed in are Carnatic music from the south of India and a small amount of training in Kuchipudi, also from the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. I would also include a lifetime of spectatorship of dance

and music, since *spectatorship is a practice which is credited, in the Indian traditions, as an active form of apprenticeship and learning in its own right*. The *knowing* audience is highly valued and integral to performance, and is addressed by performers as *rasikas*, ie. as those who can savour and appreciate the *rasa* or essence of the performance.

All of these forms of knowing value the importance of practice over time, lengthy periods of time, in coming to understand something about the art form. Apprenticeship is in one sense regarded as life long, but it takes several years of rigorous practice before a student can be said to have acquired *gnanam* - a Sanskrit term that shares its etymology with the term knowledge and the Latin term *gnosis* – and which entails far more than a theoretical understanding, although is usually a part of the training. They entail the training of the body, its sensory capacities, its kinetic capacities. These are more in evidence in dance, but musical training whether of the voice or of instrument entails training the body to sit in certain postures, to hold the spine erect, to practice one's breathing.

They also entail an understanding of the tradition. If we attend closely, the understanding of tradition we can glean from this apprenticeship based transmission of skills is quite different from the rigid understanding of tradition as frozen in time. Tradition is not a rigid set of rules, but a set of schemas, underlying patterns

that can be put together in new ways once one has 'understood', or rather, once the body has understood. These underlying patterns are quite clearly understood in the apprenticeship program itself since they form the smaller units of skill one is first apprenticed into – the *varicais* or sequences of notes one first learns in south Indian music, or the sequences of steps one learns in dance. By the time one has mastered these and the various complex forms in which they have been put together in the past, one is no longer talking about having acquired 'rules' – rather they are intangible *aptitudes*.

I will suggest that the shared meanings between 'gnanam' and 'knowledge' have been eclipsed by the way knowledge has come to be re-defined in western traditions, especially as they relate to formal schooling and learning at universities. The formal self representations of knowledge in the western tradition is that we promote individual questioning, individual exploration and expressions of individual self. This emphasis on the individual itself stands in the way of seeing where there might be continuities between university learning and the learning of dance and music in India. Representations have their own effects on practitioners. First year students at the university feel they can respond to essay questions at university largely on the basis of their own opinions, with little effort at doing the reading set for them. The ideology of

knowledge as *individual* experience and opinions makes it very difficult to say to such students: you are a novice, and you need to learn what has gone before you in the discipline before your individual opinions can be brought to bear usefully on topic at hand.

The notion of apprenticeship has not altogether vanished in western knowledge traditions. But it has been sidelined, marginalised, removed from the more highly valued versions of knowledge represented at the university, which are meant to be dedicated to thought, and instead, reserved to describe what is regarded as the learning of *techniques*, appropriate for what goes on in TAFES but not for what is taught at universities. Teaching music and dance at a university therefore runs the risk of being isolated and downgraded as a less than serious academic pursuit, something that I am sure Pauline Manley and Adrian McNeil at the Music Dept. of Macquarie University can describe from their experience as scholars and teachers of music and dance.

In anthropology, my discipline, the division is enacted all over again. We are equipped to teach the academic mastery over a corpus of texts and debates which delineate and construct what matters to the discipline. But what is remaindered as mysterious and ineffable is the component that is called 'field work', which entails participant observation. A time honoured tradition which

has not evaporated, simply sent students off to live in radically different cultures, for as long as possible, and to survive the best they could. Part of the reason for this seeming inability to guide students in field work is that academic notions of knowledge struggle to cope with the acquisition of knowledge entailed in learning a new set of bodily practices - learning to walk differently, wear clothes differently, eat food differently – all of which go on in anthropological field work and are as important in learning as anything that might be gleaned through interviews and surveys.

We can use Indian performing arts notions of apprenticeship to remind us of the dual meanings of discipline: each discipline involves not only ways of thinking, but also bodily forms of apprenticeship, a disciplining of the body. Equally, there are meanings here of discipleship, of learning and attunement to what has gone before. While the bodily dimensions of apprenticeship is perhaps very clear in anthropology, where so much of what one learns in the 'field' cannot be obtained from books alone, it is also true of the so-called textually based disciplines. Reading, learning how to read texts, writing, learning how to read effectively and in evocative, imaginative ways, takes years of practice. And these practices entail intense periods of bodily re-apprenticeship – in how to sit for hours at a computer, reading books, writing,

coordinating the senses and the imagination, listening for what my novelist husband calls the melody in a well written sentence.

Reflection on learning and knowledge in Indian performing arts can help uncover some aspects of university learning which are otherwise eclipsed, and which actually bring the so-called East and West nearer together than would otherwise seem to be the case.

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