

The Knowledge Dialogues Conference

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Kuvempu University, Shivamogga, Karnataka

Panel on Arts and the Knowledge Question

Opening Note by Sushruti Santhanam

Namaste, I am Sushruti, a co convenor of this session - Art and the Knowledge Question. This session is the result of a need felt among some members of PPST and the conference organisers, to extend their deliberation on Knowledge and Society to include the domain of Arts. As part of such a deliberation with specific reference to the Indian experience, this session is a fledgling effort.

There are many directions that such a discussion could take, but this panel has been put together keeping in mind the position that any enquiry into the nature of knowledge construction, is essentially an enquiry into its consequences as human experience - of power, relationship, identity or an experience of beauty and beauty here, seen as what is real, what is true, what is proportionate, what is just and what is universal. This panel hence turns the light on art making and its many traditions found in India as having persistently established the primacy of human experience, as the foremost purpose of knowing and doing.

With AI on the one hand set to develop predictive and creative intelligence and climate change on the other, throwing up nature's challenge to self obsessive anthropocentric human existence, a kind of imperative has emerged to have a better understanding of the relationship between human knowledge and the ethical framework it acts from within. This requires us to cultivate an intuitively human experience and approach the core of what defines us as human. The Indian experience of producing and appreciating art as community bound endeavours, includes an essential quality of consensus, an act of extending of the self to include the community and this is worth our focus.

In the practices of traditional art, knowledge is embodied in the artist but its language is deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the audience or the community. Community here is

to be understood in terms of a co-viewing, as cognates bound umbilically by ethics. And ethics here can be considered as an ethico-artistic view of the world, not necessarily the ethics as a mode of judging the quality of the art production.

The successful persistence of so many diverse traditions of loka kala, shastriya kala, devotional art and secular arts etc is deeply dependent on how society receives and patronises art within this co viewing and co knowing framework. This establishes one fact that generally, there can be no dichotomy of common people and knowledgeable people in art appreciation, there are only those who are affected (or not) by an experience of beauty, sometimes as individuals but mostly as a collective. Historically speaking therefore and contrary to a common perception, patronage was not exclusively an exclusive royal affair, it was the community that was largely responsible for the nurturing of aesthetic sensibility in society.

The Knowledge component in art is often visibilised as shastra, an adherence to stringent grammar that allows the artists to be able to create such experiences over and over again. But what is often not noted is a deep knowledge of how to use the syntax, the iconography and the elements of artistry to experience beauty, found diffused in customary habits and conversations of communities. Art could be understood as a structured mode of knowing the world through emotions.

Ananda Coomaraswamy's exposition on the role of rasa and rasavant, experiential objects as evoking emotions by a community of rasikas, builds up to a deliberation on how art is used to elevate the consciousness. Which is why again knowledgeable people in art are those who have the capacity to be affected by the experience and who can convert that experience into a larger framework of meaning.

Every important idea in this society, a collective visioning of life, reflection and contemplations of people, even struggles and wars, have thus been given expression through artistic intelligence in painting, sculpture, dance, music, poetry. Its occurrence and appreciation in a society continues to be largely part of social custom, and not some exclusive higher education.

Perhaps then, a deeper look into Arts as a domain of knowledge practice, will offer something more fundamental in terms of a social theory of Indian art, allowing the methods and modes of diverse art practices, to be considered as part of a formal epistemic.

Two aspects of Art practice that are universally considered, preconditions to creating an experience of beauty are, one, an imperative of collective knowledge as against particularised knowledge like Science or Jurisprudence and two the recognition of emotional intelligence or a capability to be affected by the other, or a larger human condition like love or sorrow, as a legitimate methodology for practice.

This knowledge is similar to the knowledge of Samvada - conversation, engagement, consensus and a co-viewing of a shared world. And consensus cannot be beaten out of any community, it can only be worked towards gradually and painfully with empathy and an ultimate aim to become one with the other. It is not for nothing that some of the most inspired instances of Bhakti one of the most successful social movements of this land that set purpose of all thought and action as the union of the self and the other, of the self with that which is held to be true, divine and beautiful, has been successfully communicated not in treatises but through poetry, song, abhinaya and stories.

A social convergence of a view on what is beautiful (and what is dissonant) can only be produced by a long and deep conversation in society on the principles of beauty, but also between the grammar that is crafted over the ages and changing social contexts and its ethics, between the urge to creatively transgress and a consciousness of the purpose of a performance or a production.

A beautiful illustration of how thinkers in India have imagined such a samvada around beauty comes from the life of the preceptor of the Visishtha Advaita Siddhanta from Tamilnadu, Ramanuja.

Ramanuja , born over a millennium ago, was a staunch adherent to the path of surrender or sharanāgati. Moved by the human condition of ignorance, as did so many great teachers of this land, he set out to share with all what he knew as a mārḡa or path for resolution, regardless of their social position. A lesser known story about him was his relationship with Urangā Villi, an affluent wrestler and an incurable lover.

The eminent teacher first encounters Villidāsa on the streets of Srirangam amidst a comical entourage. Walking backwards in front of his wife, shading her with an umbrella, lost in the

beauty of her eyes, Villidāsa seemed oblivious to the world. Upon asking his disciples, he learns of how the community thought of Villi as a fool for being so explicitly in love with his Ponnachee. The disciples are even shocked that the teacher would be interested in so base a human being who is so steeped in kāma, lust.

But Ramanuja sees in Uranga Villi an extraordinary capacity to be moved by beauty and decides that this was the example he required to establish the primacy of this quality of rasānubhūti, over a pure intellectual path.

He recognises, that in Kaliyuga (where eventually time will dissolve materiality) the violence of ignorance that he saw around him, could perhaps be assuaged better by a deep capacity to melt in the beauty of an experience, any experience and Uranga Villi was going to be the messenger. But he would not dare project the intense gaze of society on worldly objects of beauty, especially a woman. He needed to turn society's gaze towards something that would be impervious yet responsive to such an unwavering gaze. What better than an iconic piece of sculpture representing the epitome of human creativity, an idol, made by idol makers according to the canons of shipashāstra and invested with divinity through millennia of rituals and every form of creative outpouring, song, dance, poetry and painting, by people of all antecedents.

He makes a pact with the idol of Ranganātha, that if he brought Villidāsa to see him, he would enamour him with the beauty of his eyes. After much persuasion Villidāsa agrees to shift his gaze away from the face of beautiful Ponnachee and on to the idol of Ranganātha at Srirangam. He enters a lifelong relationship of joyous surrender to the experience of beauty all over again, this time with Ranganātha. Along with Ponnachee, Villidāsa enters the gurukula of Ramanuja to be cherished as one of his closest disciples.

I would like to draw your attention to the samvada between three aspects in this story. One, to the act of viewing or the act of witnessing, as the context of human experience. Second, to the idol not just as an object but as an act of 'creating' beauty as well as the actor (the sculptor, dancer, singer, poet and painter) and third Villidāsa as the samāja, the community.

Rāmānuja, by choosing to extoll the human capability to surrender the self to an experience of beauty, did not just turn our gaze away from the primacy of the intellect, but towards an important relationship in society, the one between creators and communities.

To diverge a bit, this is also a powerful argument for reinstating the knowledge base in communities to strengthen the character of the society. Something that links to the debate on Swaraj.

When Villidāsa, personified as the samāja, gazes at the eyes of the idol of Ranganātha, what gazes back at him is the knowing eye of the sculptor, and all the creators who have invested in its character of divinity. They all combine as the divine perceptor. And Villidāsa on his part, by his surrender (staying analysis and resting the criticism), allows himself to be overcome by rasānubhūti, the savouring of the experience.

This process is neither tied to the object nor the particular viewer, but to a framework accepted in a community, of proportionality, propriety and ethics within which that community may *know* a standard of beauty. With this standard it can view the world afresh, hearing the conversation once again, like it were the first time.

This is most vividly seen in the still existing traditions of the *grāma nātakas* where regular tellings of old stories, puranas are watched afresh, enacted with a different twist to the same bhava. People are entertained no doubt, but they also judge characters and ruminate on the happenings of the imaginary world and reflect on who is right and who is wrong, what is just and what is unjust. This *play* between the art form and community, as a kind of resilience of narrative which is reborn every time, is an exercise in creative sovereignty that affords the community an imagination to push forward towards the future. And in a world that is defined increasingly by the logic of a few, it may help to turn our attention towards a way of knowing that is essentially a conversation about beauty.

We begin the session with some talks and tributes to late Prof. Navjyoti Singh who continues to inspire such conversation through his ideas. Prof. Navjyoti Singh, inspiring many and provoking many but he himself made a persistent effort to develop an essentially Indian language in which to construct a theory on the ontology of arts. We are fortunate to have several of his students and collaborators in session.

Two papers presented at the very beginning by Banatanwi Dasamahapatra and S. Jayachandran illuminate very contemporary concerns, the first on the role of aesthetics and the sensitivity to

artistic traditions in creating modern institutional spaces. The second is an overview of a methodology to populate a universal pedagogical framework for traditional dance. Udayan Vajpeyi and Sashikanth Ananthachari through their expositions on folk art and theatre, bring to fore the extraordinary element of artistic resilience. The art traditions they each talk about are deeply embedded in the memory and bodies of communities, and are discussed here as responses to vulnerability caused by change and loss of context.

Shri. Dakshinamoorthy Sthapathi as the practitioner-voice of shilpa shastra illuminates the strong link between grammar, imagery and social imagination, while Ustad Bahauddin Dagar as the ubiquitous performer speaks of the embodiment of tradition and *play* in the practice of the ancient tradition of Dhrupad. He also performs Dhrupad on the rudraveena to close the session on Art and the Knowledge Question.