

A (/An Evolving) Note on the Arts and Lokavidya

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Summary

All studies of art in our times tend to become encyclopedic, framed in terms of completeness of detail and objectivity of observation. Simultaneously, a study also imposes the need to summarize, compare and contrast one type of art with another. Summarization is another word for reduction. Reduction is made more acceptable by requiring an art to possess an essential structure, form or function, which then are either proposed or “discovered” and justified through rigorous scientific or philosophical inquiry, and acquire the status of “principles” that define the art. One may set up such inquiries even without insisting that essence precedes existence.

As the study of art proceeds from the better known to the less known, the need to summarize is also driven by the need to compare and contrast. In line with this, the well-studied arts begin influencing the less-studied, because the structure, form or function ascribed to the former slowly becomes a template applied to describe the latter. This creates the likelihood of describing the less-studied art in terms of the “principles” of the well-studied when they are somewhat similar, or in terms of their lack of the “principles”.

Meta-knowledge, subjective interpretation, objective meanings, mental states in experiencing art, etc. are further aspects that need to be critically examined to achieve or rule out a unified understanding of arts; or to discover whether distinctions such as “regional vs. national or transnational”, “folks vs. classical”, “formalized vs. non formal”, “elite vs. people” are meaningful or not.

Preface

I am not conversant with the theory of arts. Even so, whenever I have made feeble attempts to understand it in the past, several questions remained unanswered. I recognize that what I say below may be elementary for those well-versed with its theory or practice. I invite responses to these puzzles, prefaced by a background that describes my rudimentary understanding of arts. Note that, although the title refers to Lokavidya, there are no direct references to it here. Yet.

Background

- i. The problem of art is that it is easy at one level to understand and explain, while being difficult to grasp at another. All we know at a basic level is that it is a human expression and that even its creator may not often know or be able to explain what it articulates. We do know that ordinary people have a need for expressing themselves through art. Some of their work may be deemed to be excellent without being so considered by the artist herself.
- ii. One reason for the difficulty in understanding art generally is because it is an ocean of millions of instances and thousands of types. This means that we need to know a bit about a specific art in order to appreciate it: e.g., Indian painting styles, Yakshagana, Cubism or Burra Katha etc. It seems to us therefore that making an overarching statement about it is not only difficult, but fraught with peril.

- iii. Additionally, art is capable of being understood differently from the outside as compared to from the inside. For example, when the performance of an art form like dance, music or drama is in a setting where its *inter-subjective* context is the place of its origin or in a proximal culture, it yields one set of meanings. However, when it is not (e.g., when it is experienced by a different culture), it acquires another. Which of these is correct and which not is a question that cannot be answered. Moreover, we are not even clear as to what “a wrong understanding” means in this context.
- iv. Meanwhile, it is observed that a person’s faith, beliefs, emotions like Bhakti or conviction play a part in appreciating art. For example, if I believe that a simple life is the best life, I am likely to be inclined towards appreciating tribal art, art depicting village life, art that deprecates urban life, etc. Or, a believer in Advaita siddhanta may be visibly moved while hearing a song based on a composition of Shankara, while leaving cold a person who is not.
- v. Furthermore, the impact and interpretation of art is unlikely to be the same for the audience and the creator. For example, why does a song, painting or mural move some people to tears and leave others untouched? And why do some communities or people consider Ravana and Karna as heroes whilst others don’t? A movie considered his best by a director flops in the box office, whereas something made casually may win the hearts of the people!
- vi. What is more, an appreciation of arts seems to be a cultivated response. Cultivation appears to condition us to look for specific things in it in order to appreciate it! Can this explain why art affects some people in certain ways and not others? vii. Is it possible that although we describe art as having multiple layers of meaning, a search for specific meanings in art might be a futile exercise?
- vii. Every age has a theory of art and one is not sure which is right. A consensus about art in a given age seems to guide people’s assessment of it rather than its actual “worth”, and we have no knowledge of how such a consensus is arrived at.

Art and Specialization

- i. It seems reasonable to assume that art initially develops in a small scope through informal actions, expressions and rules that lie within approved boundaries in a face-to-face community and represents agreed (variations of) meanings that are common to performers and their (non-specialist) audience. This may be called an elementary art where shared meanings of words and gestures in the community is essential to its performance and appreciation. Over time, via the “outsider” or the critical insider perspective of the reviewer/ theoretician, an elementary art may acquire systemic characteristics and become a specialized art.
- ii. The degree of specialization appears to be dependent on factors that are not easy to understand, although in the past, royal patronage, caste/ community, cross-community and village celebrations, social unrest, etc. are known to have driven it. Specialization of the art seems to accrue in cycles over time as in, e.g., Carnatic Music (respectively over the times of Shangradeva, Purandara, Ramamatya, Venkatamakhi, Govinda, etc.) or folk dance traditions that evolved over centuries.

iii. Two major processes for specialization may be recognized in the history of arts.

a. One is where an elementary art develops in the royal court or the temple – where they undergo a transformation through a deep integration with the stories, belief systems and practices of the Sanskrit traditions involving ascription of specific meanings to various elements of the art covering its (re-)creation and experience. Almost inevitably, its requirement of the knowledge of the Shruti-Sastra-Purana triad to fully experience its various facets makes it exclusive, even when it acquires wide popularity. A good example of it can be found in the reconstruction of the essence of the Madras music festival over the last century and more.

i. The Sanskrit traditions further enhance the royal and temple arts by embedding them into a framework built around the divide of para (पर, ಪರ, பரம்) and iha (इह, ಇಹ, யஹம்).

ii. Accordingly, this framework subordinates the contemporaneity of the art through the time transcendent concepts of karma, paapa, punya, and social division. This results in an art form that has a timeless quality in which the here and now only makes a weak appearance.

iii. What do we name these arts as? The term **Marga** is a bit troublesome and we may therefore choose to call them **Imperial arts**.

b. In the second process, the elementary art develops amongst the ordinary people for whom the here and now is central, and its connection with the past is largely through myths, Jati-Puranas, folk beliefs, rituals and the like; the traditions it borrows from are all of what have existed over millennia – Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Muslim, Tribal, etc. and from all sorts of local and non-local locales. While elements of the Shruti-Sastra-Purana triad may be incorporated into these arts, authority is not derived from them. Because these arts are strongly rooted in the ideas of Desha, Kaala, Guna and Sampradaya, they exude an earthiness and richness that is different from that of the Imperial art. These arts therefore become capable of producing a rich variety of outputs that address contemporary socio-political, economic, philosophical and religious trends as evidenced by the hundreds of Ramayana's or styles of painting, writing and dance that have developed in India. It is possible that this aspect of contemporaneity lends it a vibrancy where conformance to rules, traditions and formal expressions is secondary to energy, spontaneity and the celebration of the moment. We may call this the **People's arts**. iv.

iv. However, the above distinctions are not strictly observed on the ground. Both types of arts influence each other in practice while remaining separate. Their paths often intersect and overlap, and mutual exchanges continue even as they serve different audiences, purposes and interests over time. They live differently, grow differently and are extinguished differently – both spatially and temporally.

v. Specialization or systematization of art involves first the separation of symbols and meanings, referents and sense, structure and content, etc. followed by their re-synthesis using a set of principles. When this process is repeated, art acquires multiple layers and meanings. The performance of a specialized art is understood at two levels, the *immediate*

and the *reflective*. In the immediate, “direct” and “obvious” meanings are attributed to the performance which are usually aligned with those ascribed to elementary art (“See how bold the colors are in the painting!”, “Chandramati’s sorrow on hearing of Lohitaswa’s death breaks your heart!”, “This Yakshagana will remain fresh in my mind forever!” etc.). A reflective inference offers greater symbolism and assigns wider meanings to it. Over time, it feeds back into the art to enable its continuous refinement through additional symbols and meanings. In the process, the art become more rigorous, rule-bound and somewhat inflexible.

- vi. Systematization also provides a robust structure to art that allows it to distinguish itself from other types of arts, non-art, etc., eventually leading to a hierarchy of art, which is considered “natural” over time. Thus we have specialized styles of painting, drama and dance in India, in both the imperial and people’s arts.

My Questions

- (1) When we speak about frameworks of understanding arts, we must recognize that their systematization poses a peculiar problem: through centuries of development, imperial art has come to dominate the imagination of what an art form must be. Due to this, normative criteria to compare or contrast “other” arts naturally are derived from it. In other words, imperial art can understand any other art, including the people’s art, **only** through its own categories. Or at best through its own classification of what other arts are, which is primarily what it is not. How then are we to evaluate people’s arts?
- (2) When we speak about the wider notion of **arts of India**, what do we mean?
 - a. Do we mean the small number of refined, specialized and well-studied systems of imperial arts that have evolved through centuries? Or,
 - b. Do we mean the people’s arts that are more numerous, evolve and refined differently from the specialized, and are sometimes patronizingly valorized and cheered on, based on a general principle that although relatively unrefined, they must be celebrated because it is the “people’s” expression?
- (3) Regarding the question above, if we agree that we refer to the systems of imperial art, how are we sure that the symbolism and meanings associated with its presentation, gestures, acts and flow etc. are also shared by either its sub-systems or the people’s art forms that they are said to be an abstraction of (e.g., Hindustani music is said to be a refined version of many people’s musical forms prevalent across India for millennia)? In other words, how do we know whether Bharatanatyam or Kathak is capable of **representing anything but itself**?

If on the other hand, we say that we are referring to the people’s art, how do we understand their meanings and symbolism **outside** the framework created by imperial art structures? Usually, when describing folk arts of India, we have two choices: either borrow terms from the formal theories (that describe them in terms of what the imperial arts are **not**) or assert that there are no greater meanings or symbolism associated with them. For example, we may borrow imperial systemic terms to describe a folk art:

“The song is an instance of a ragamalika”,

“This style is Madhubani, known for its realist representation of the bliss that is in the form of Krishna, displaying the tatva of oneness of Prakriti with Purusha, achieved through bold strokes of red, blue and ochre painting”,

“The dance is set to Bhairavi Raag and this Taal is usually used to indicate the cosmic effect of Shiva’s dance”, etc.

On the other hand, we may choose to go “off” the framework by praising their raw energy, exuberance and simplicity, or describing them as expressions of ritual – all of which essentially defines them in terms of what they are not: systematized, formally describable and with very few layers of meaning.

- (4) A legitimate question that may arise here is: Do you mean to say that there are no common elements between different art systems in India? How do you explain the common theories that various music, dance, drama etc. systems of India are said to share, the similar semantics they seem

to possess, etc.? Don’t they all have a common base by which it is easy to see that they are of this land, and different from say, that of Europe or China?

I have no clear answer to this, and we can debate this point in another note. A small indication of the difficulty in answering this question arises when we ask ourselves, “How would a typical man or woman in a village react to a sequence of Kabir Sangeet, Yakshagana, a Kalidasa drama in Samskrita, and a tribal dance? Would he see a pattern that ties the stories together through a degree of essential similarity at a real and abstract level, or would he see an arrangement of pieces that a Kaleidoscope presents – attractive but disjoint?

- (5) How do we understand spontaneity in arts? In the imperial art, it is either frowned upon or allowed to exist in defined ways as an accepted violation of the rule (e.g., Manodharma in Carnatic music). However, it is common knowledge that people’s arts are centered on expression which means that spontaneity overrides rules. Spontaneity is in fact an important aspect of the informality and participative breadth of folk arts, while the opposite is true of the imperial arts where adherence to rules and specifications are seen as their distinguishing property.

Further Thoughts

The following thoughts summarize the foregoing:

- i. The relationship between the Palace and the arts in history has contributed significantly to the systematization of Indian arts with the result that some forms have come to be highly systematized and therefore considered specialized and classical. The acceptance of the notion that systematized high arts are the most evolved form of Indian arts has accelerated in the last century as a by-product of nationalism, centralization and modernization.
- ii. Meanwhile, although the less systematized people’s arts have received a fillip since the middle 1900’s, they no longer dominate the society either in spread or in perception of

quality. This could be the result of a cultural shift that modernization and communication have created through the introduction of new forms of pan-regional art, such as films, which in turn have progressively weakened sub-regional arts.

- iii. When it comes to **aesthetics**, there are two serious problems that we encounter in understanding arts. The first is that the tools through which we comprehend arts, largely derived from imperial art, cannot assess the intent, purport and emotions of other art forms in a given discipline? For example, can a harvest dance be classified as Nritya (pure dance), Nritya (expressive dance), or Natya (drama)? If yes, we acknowledge that we are reducing the art form based on non-internal categories. If not, we may have to accept that such art forms are incommensurate with the imperial and that the idea of a common aesthetics for Indian art is not only ill formed, but is incapable of application on arts except those derived from its basic type!
- iv. A further problem is in distinguishing arts from rituals.
- a. How do you distinguish between art and ritual? Is it possible that what appears as dance to you is merely a ritual rote performance by the dancers in an ensemble?
 - b. What is the relationship between rituals, symbolism and meaning? Do rituals need to represent something “out there” or mean something? How do we distinguish the meanings of rituals from ex-post-facto confabulations?
 - c. Is the meaning ascribed from the “outside” to an art the same as what is intended in the “inside”? How do we know if they are, or if they aren’t?

- iv. v. **Is it meaningful to infer that arts are essentially about something? Is it not a teleological search to so assert?**

Conclusion

While I have a deep distrust of the idea of aesthetics of art, I admit that the arguments above sound a bit like an appeal for cultural relativism, which again is an idea I am uncomfortable with. However, I am unable to resolve that problem at this time.