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THE SPEAKING TREE: Meera Lives On in Voice of Bhakti

Sudhamahi Regunathan, , Dec 16, 2004, 12.00am IST

Indian art has one overriding purpose: to achieve communion with the Divine for salvation. Whatever the art form, it is an offering to the Almighty. The artist takes great pains to practise and make perfect her offering.

M S Subbulakshmi's musical renditions, however, came straight from the heart, transporting the listener to sublime levels of consciousness. So the entire aesthetic experience is considered to be no different from that of experiencing Brahm. That's why the aesthetic experience is called Brahmananda sahodara — the brother of the bliss that is experienced on attaining Brahm. So the artform is a training in spirituality. This training is given rigour by the grammar of the arts. All treatises on art beginning with Bharata's Natyashastra are, in effect, trying to delineate and deliberate upon the various techniques that can be employed by the artist to reach that state of pure joy. As Wordsworth said, poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity.

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A similar concept is found in Indian classical treatises, which says that an artist should have hridayavisranti, enabling her to communicate tranquillity. She needs to have experienced all the emotions — of love, hate, fear, sorrow — to be able to portray it with a sense of detachment, to evoke the rasa. At one level, both the artist and rasika or audience are led towards the spiritual goal; at another level is the perfecting of the technique to do so. In any true work of art, the two go together, the latter enhancing the former.

Symbolism is used in art to evoke the dominant emotion. In a simple rangoli the lotus flower represented the seat of Lakshmi, symbolising prosperity and auspiciousness. The same lotus when visited by the bee came to symbolise the lover and the nayika or the lovelorn maiden. Sringara bhava lent itself beautifully to the purpose of the final goal of art, for both amorous love and art yearned for union: in the arts, God became the Supreme lover and every devotee a nayika seeking union with Him.

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Art then took the form of the human body and every aspect of it became reference points in art. In music for example, sa or sadja represents the soul, ri or rishabha the head, gandhara, the arms, madhyama, the chest, panchama, the throat, dhaivata, the lips and nishada, the feet. Each of the notes emanated from the seven charkas in the body. Each note is associated with a colour according to the vibrations they create. Their permutations and combinations create ragas which have the capacity to evoke different emotions. And then the spaces between the notes, the cycle of repetition of the notes, are measured in tala — the same term used for measurement of the human body in sculpture.

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These are all techniques for the practitioner for identification of the artform with the human form to make this divine offering complete. The sahridaya or the rasika — the one who is able to understand and appreciate the symbolism and experience the rasa that the artist is trying to transmit and participate in it as an offering to the gods — has also to be sensitised. What was unique about M S Subbulakshmi was that her music came soaked in spirituality. So listeners didn't have to get sensitised first in order to receive her music. MS's notes were transparent with emotion; yet, she was so humble that her body language conveyed that all this was the Grace of God; not of her making. The magic she exuded endeared her to all; a true hridayavisranti whose music appealed to both the initiated and the uninitiated, leading them gently on to the path of aesthetic spirituality.

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