

FESTIVALS

The diversity of patterns in the social life and in the religious traditions of India is reflected in her festivals. It may not be wrong to say that a festival is celebrated in some part of India every week! No one has tried to count how many festivals are celebrated all over the country, and perhaps it is not possible, because there are so many. It would be easy to think that peoples of different religions have their own different festivals, but that is a mistaken idea in the Indian context. Many festivals indeed grew out of religions, but almost as many -- if not more -- emerged out of a harmony between nature and community life. The festivals that have religious origin did not remain confined to the religion. With the steady blending of races, religions, cultures and languages, festivals too were percolated in the population of the entire subcontinent. Perhaps one can say that festivals have contributed to the hidden homogeneity which characterizes India as a nation today.

Three broad divisions can be set to acquire an overview of prominent Indian festivals. First, there are festivals related to the annual cycle of nature and agriculture. Secondly

there are festivals identified with specific religions. Thirdly, a few festivals commemorate recent events of national significance. A number of festivals in the first two divisions overlap since many religious and mythological symbols coincide with the seasons and stages of agriculture.

Among festivals associated with the annual cycle of nature are Holi, Baisakhi, Onam, Pongal, Makar Sankranti and Jamshed Navaroz. Holi is India's All Fools Day, but it also signifies the maturity of spring. People smear each other with colours and children make huge bonfires. Holi might well be the only festival in the world on which people wear their old, dispensable clothes. Holi usually falls in March. In April comes Baisakhi, the harvest festival celebrated most vigorously by the Sikhs whose homeland, Punjab, is the wheat-basket of India. Baisakhi has a religious significance for the Sikhs and a lot of Sikhs visit the Golden Temple in Amritsar on the Baisakhi day. In villages, it is the day of the energetic folk-dance, Bhangra.

Another harvest festival is Onam. It falls in August or September, the time when the autumn harvest is gathered in the rice-growing province of the south, Kerala, to which the festival mainly belongs. Onam is celebrated for ten days with feasting, dances and games. The winter harvest of rice is celebrated in another festival of the south, Pongal, which is associated mainly with Tamilnadu. People cook the rice freshly

gathered from the fields. Pongal is celebrated over three days: at home on the first day, visiting friends on the second, and on the third day cattle are given a good time with painting of horns and feasting.

A few days before Pongal is celebrated by the Tamils in the south, Makar Sankranti (or the winter solstice) is celebrated in different parts of the north. Sweets made with sesame and jaggery (solidified sugar-cane juice) are the big thing on Makar Sankranti. People go to fairs and bathe in the cold water of a local river. On the vernal equinox in March, Parasis celebrate their New Year, Jamshed Navaroz, named after a legendary king of Persia who, according to the legend, invented wine and introduced the solar calendar.

Among the festivals that are primarily religious, Durgapuja, Diwali, Muharram, Id and Christmas are the most popular. Durgapuja falls in September or October and is celebrated in different styles throughout India. It is related to Durga, the most influential goddess in the Hindu mythology who has many manifestations and varied powers. It is a 10-day festival in which the first 9 nights are for worship and the tenth for celebrations. The most spectacular celebrations of Durgapuja take place in Bengal. The festival is associated with Rama too, who is the hero of the Sanskrit epic, Ramayana. In those parts of India where Rama is honoured, the festival is commonly known as Dussehra or Vijayadashami, referring to the victory

narrated in the epic Ramayana. In those parts of India where Rama is honoured, the festival is commonly known as Dussehra or Vijayadashami, referring to the victory of Rama over Ravana, the powerful demon king. A highlight of Dussehra is Ramlila, a folk-drama in which the entire life-story of Rama is staged in a simple style. Ramlila offers a lot of fun to the local script writers and actors as well as ticket-free drama to the audience.

Twenty days after Dussehra comes Diwali. In the legend, Diwali commemorates the return of Rama to his state capital after his victory over Ravana. But Diwali has many other stories behind it as well as this one and the celebrations of Diwali direct a lot of energy to the pleasure of Lakshami, the goddess of money. Every house is lit with rows of oil lamps made of clay or electric bulbs. The idea is to help Lakshami find her way in the darkness of a moonless night. Fireworks start flooding the market many days before Diwali and the night of Diwali is full of noise as well as light.

Among Muslims, Muharram and Id-ul-Fitr are the most important festivals. Muharram is a festival of ceremonial mourning for the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad's son, Hussein. It usually falls in December or January and is marked by a procession of huge replicas of Hussein's tomb known as Taziahs. They are specially made for this day, only to be ceremonially sunk in the water of a river or lake after a parade through the

town. Id marks the end of Ramzan which is a month-long period of regular praying and day-time fasting. On the evening of Id, the new moon's appearance is eagerly awaited and also the feasting that follows. Like Holi, it is a day for remembering friends. People assemble in fairs where toys and inexpensive jewellery are the major items of sale. Premchand, a great Hindi novelist, has described an Id fair in his short story, "Idgah".

India's Christmas is no different from the Christmas celebrated elsewhere in the world. Among the Syrian Christians, the earliest Christians of the south, Christmas feasts have rice-flour cakes and plantains. Catholics prepare beautiful displays of Christian myths.

Two national festivals are celebrated throughout India: Independence Day on the 15th of August and Republic Day on the 26th of January. The first marks the freedom of India from the British in 1947 and the second marks the forming of a constitutional republic in 1950. Parades, children's processions and stage activities are held on both the days. Sweetmeats are distributed in schools. In New Delhi, the Republic Day parade is performed with spectacular pageantry and watched with great enthusiasm.

A CRITIQUE OF INDIAN MUSIC

THE INFLUENCE OF INDIA ON WESTERN MUSIC

Indian music fostered its consciousness on the West during the psychedelic chapter of the sixties. The sitar, as the only known Indian instrument apart from 'tabla' (percussion instrument), was brought to light as a rhythm instrument when the Beatles first recorded "Norwegian Wood". It was more effectively used in "Within You, Without You" -- the opening cut of the second side of their album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band". Ravi Shankar, the sitar maestro, acted as mentor and teacher to the Beatle George Harrison. George, however, interpreted the sitar as he would the guitar. But this incongruent approach was eliminated in his following albums such as "Living in a Materialistic World", "Dark Horse", and finally "33 1/3", where the sitar was exploited to its maximum potential as a vehicle for spiritual music.

The Rolling Stones, too, included the sitar in their lineup, when Brian Jones on sitar along with the other Stones recorded "Paint it Black". Here, the sitar was used as a lead instrument with a resonating bass, unlike its nomenclature as a rhythm instrument in "Norwegian Wood".

Indian music and philosophy have gone hand in hand in

influencing the rock sphere of the West. The Beatles underwent a serious flirtation with the doctrines of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who along with Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Jack Kerouac et. al., became a strong force in shaping the sixties. His appearance in the film "Woodstock" confirmed this status.

In the seventies, the sitar has beaten a retreat. Groups like Taj Mahal, however, thrive upon Indian 'ragas' and other influences. The influence of Indian music has disappeared though Indian philosophy is still preserved in rock circles. Carlos Santana, of the Latin-rock group "Santana", has a framed photograph of Sri Chinmoy near him whenever he plays. In fact, he has a sticker on his guitar depicting his mentor.

However, one of the most persistent and significant efforts is the one by Peter Townshend, the rhythm/lead guitarist, songwriter, and vocalist of the English rock group "The Who". This devotee of Mehr Baba has turned out songs with the Baba mystique and philosophy deeply rooted in them. His aborted rock-opera "Lifehouse" is centred around such a messianic figure. He has dedicated the rock opera "Tommy" to the "avatar" Baba. His solo albums have been dedicated to Baba as well. In fact, his solo L.P. "Who Came First" is a compilation of songs that reproduce the philosophy of Baba. He is currently working on an album with another Baba-dedicate, Ronnie Lane (formerly of "Faces") in England. In his song "Baba O'Riley"

(an overt reference to the "avatar") he lyrically writes:

"...I don't have to fight
to prove I'm right".

INDIAN MUSIC

Nevertheless, the exposure of Indian music has been very limited. The sitar is (mistakenly) the Indian instrument, and this has been mainlined only into the rock scene. This fact was resented by Ravi Shankar. Other instruments often used in Indian music are 'tablas' which are bowl-shaped percussion instruments; 'veena', an instrument with metal strings and movable frets; 'rhabāb', which has catgut strings and is fretless; 'dholak', a spindle-shaped percussive instrument played on the two faces of its extreme points. There are several other instruments such as the 'sarod', 'sarangi', 'harmonium', 'tanpura', to name a few.

It is felt that Indian music is uninteresting. In truth, it is contemplative, but its subtleties and nuances are often unnoticed. This may be due to the fact that the Western ear has grown accustomed to a genre of music which is quite dissimilar to Indian music. Indian music is purely melodic, with the continuity of notes forming this melody. Melody must not be confused with harmony; in Indian music, melody often gives rise to harmony. Such a form of music has no exact tones or absolute pitch. In the tone section, quarter-notes (ṣ'rutis) are employed, but as these are brittle, they are usually bunched

together, and as they cannot exist independently, due to their fragile nature, they have to be supported by a consistent rhythm. In the case of the sitar, this is achieved by the vibrations of the Indian sympathetic strings which add resonance to the notes played).

Some of the 'ragas' sharps and flats are sharper and flatter than the diatonic scale's sharps and flats. The 'raga' is the plinth of melody which persists in utilizing certain notes at the expense of excluding others and is usually constructed as to arouse types of emotions (bhavas). There are numbered 72 fully septatonic 'ragas' and several derivative ones, 400 of which are in actual use (Raga Bhairavi, Chitra and Raga Bodhi, for example). Percussion is always used. The rhythm pattern is either symmetrical or assymetrical. Apart from stylistic differences and differences in scales and nomenclature of 'talas' and 'ragas', North and South India agree on all other musical fundamentals. 'Ragas' and compositions have usually a subject matter.

The present forms of music are threefold: classical, (deshi) folk lores, and songs from films ('filmi'). There are subdivisions and 'schisms' in all these categories. There are also regional differences. For instance in classical music, North India (Hindustani) has discarded its old musical scale, and has adopted the Bilawal scale. The scale is comprised of all white keys of a piano beginning with C. Meanwhile, South

India (Karnatic) still persists in using the old scale as its standard. This scale is where the C sharp and D of the white keys of a piano are the second and third notes, while G sharp and A are the sixth and seventh, respectively. Differences in nomenclature heighten the differences.

Film music is the most popular form of music in India at present. Its cheap aesthetic nature panders to heavy sentimentalism, bordering on the near erotic, and is offensive in its overdose of romanticism. This is, of course, a generalization. Several films make good use of songs that are not flawed in this manner. The nature of the song relies heavily on the type of film from which it is extrapolated, and the situation from which it arose. The use of Western instruments is blatantly encouraged. Several instances of plagiarised Western 'tunes' are nonchalantly accepted.

The folk-lore is usually popular in villages where they are rendered into rural music, which is without much musical sophistication. 'Deshi' songs are often narrative or ditties, populated with themes of emotions and feelings and group activities.

The classical form of Indian music bifurcates into two distinct segments -- 'marga' (religious) and 'deshi' (folk songs). Though these are two distinct spheres, they are causally related. The former is a highly stylized form, often performed at rituals. It stresses care of voice -- production, accuracy

of pronunciation, and is distinguished by its chant-like movement. These two forms date to pre-Muslim times. But, it was at the junction of the Pathan Mughal era, when the most significant musical revolution came about. The 'Bhakti' cult was born. Encouraged at the royal courts, this musical form consisted of penning odes to Hindu divinities, especially Krishna, Shiva, and the other legendary cycles. Both Hindu and Muslim composers wrote odes to Hindu gods and goddesses. The 'Bhakti cult' was marked by salient features of non-conformity, humanism, religious fervour, and was strongly encouraged by royalty. From this movement, Islamic songs also originated. The Islamic composers adopted the same musical mode but substituted the names of Islamic saints and religious places for Hindu religious figures. Such forms still exist as 'qawwali', 'soz', 'nat', 'mercia'. Some of these now do not necessarily follow their ancient function. The general assumption that Indian music is spiritual is linked to the above movement.

Several other forms of music, such as 'dhrupad' and 'thumri' are sub-divisions not to be tackled here. One must bear in mind that nearly all these forms of music have been causally inter-related. to their mutual benefit.

To conclude on a more familiar basis, with the advance of rock and roll in the Western world, India has produced a few sympathetic responses. Indian artists like Biddu Appayya,

and groups like The Great Garuda are modestly popular in Europe.

We have, so far, described Indian music without taking into full account the changes it has undergone. Several forms and subdivisions of Indian music are too complex to be dealt with in the context of this capsulization, and have thus been ignored. However, as a final note, the stress on instruments over vocals and the absence of keyboards must be noted, although there have been illustrious singers like Sehgal.

LITERATURE

There is no single literary scene in India. The fifteen different languages recognized by the constitution have their different literary traditions. The contemporary literature written in these languages reflects the life and concerns of the people who speak these languages and also the common concerns of all Indians.

Within the diversity of languages and life styles, one can cite two traditions which characterize the literary scene in all parts of the country. One is the oral tradition which goes back to more than a thousand years in several modern languages. The second is the tradition which started with the spread of mass education and publishing.

The oral tradition is essentially poetic. In this tradition, the poet was not regarded as an individual artist, an important name. Rather, he was the singer of a social mode. We find a number of poets who simply followed the social mode as they found it and sang its glory. But there were others who criticised it and sang the glory of an alternative way, thus using poetry to alter the social situation. Quite often, the latter kind of poets were social reformers too, with ardent religious zeal.

The religion they propagated sometimes signified a radical transformation of prevalent religions, as in the case of Kabir¹ or simply a reinterpretation of an old myth, as in the case of Tulasidas.²

The tradition of literature written for the literate started at the same time as India's Westernization through a systematic educational strategy adopted by the British during the 19th century. This tradition carries an influence of Western thought and literary forms. At the same time, it was influenced by the oral tradition, especially in poetry and drama. In fiction, the literary tradition looked back to folklore as it does even now sometimes when a novelist decides to use a folk motif.

The tradition of printed literature is the dominant one today if one is considering literature in terms of significant authors and books. This is an interesting fact for a country where the literacy level is not high. The oral tradition of literature has not died. It lives in popular film music, folk songs, religious folk-drama like Ramlila³, huge assemblies of people such as Kavi Sammelanas and Mushairas⁴ where poetry is

¹Kabir (1440-1518) was brought up by a Muslim weaver and became a severe critic of both Hindus and Muslims. His songs and couplets show mastery of simple, popular language and highly allegorical imagery.

²Tulsidas (1532-1623), a contemporary of Akbar and the writer of Ramacharita Manas, a famous epic.

³Ramlila is a dramatic representation of the story of Rama, usually enacted with music and a mixture of prose and verse.

⁴Public recitals of poetry in Hindi and Urdu respectively.

recited by the poet himself. Through film and radio, the oral tradition of literature has found technological means of expression. Obviously, the content of literature which these media use differs very significantly from the content of traditional oral literature. The latter reflects the state of life in community and the relationship between people and their environment, sometimes through religious rituals. Films and radio, on the other hand, usually reflect the life style and attitudes of a class of people who dominate the socio-political scene. It must be remembered, however, that several film makers of India, such as Mrinal Sen¹ and Ritvik Ghatak², have used the film medium to show the life of people who are dominated.

Journalism holds an important place in the literary scene today. While the market for books is not very large in most languages, popular magazines find a huge clientele. Malayalam Manorama, Desh and Dharmayug sell over 100,000 copies. While it is true that several popular magazines publish the latest in literature, it cannot be said they represent the literary scene. Today, one can hardly think of a magazine like Saraswati which remained strongly non-commercial in its mission to serve as a link between the author and the Hindi reader in the first half of this century. As in the West, commercial interests delimit

¹The Bengali director of many artistic and highly political films such as "Ek Adhoori Kahani" and "Bhuvan Shome".

²Another famous Bengali director known for his Marxist films such as "Ajantrik", "Megha Dhaka Tara" and "Jukti, Takko aur Gappo". Ghatak died recently.

the literary value of popular Indian magazines. Small magazines, run by individual authors or groups of authors, try to provide an alternative to the literary reader. They constantly face financial problems and often die in a few years time.

Unlike any Western country, it is a rare achievement for an author of an Indian language to be read by people all over India. Since the beginning of this century, several authors and poets have achieved a national status. It is understandable that by the time they came to be nationally known, they had also achieved an international reputation. Premchand¹, Tagore², Sarat Chandra³ and Thakazhi⁴ are among such names. Several works of these authors are now available in English.

A general survey of literatures in Indian languages today will reveal that there is a marked rise in socio-political realism. The rise may be more visible in languages like Bengali and Malayalam (perhaps because Bengal and Kerala--the provinces

¹Known as the greatest short story writer of Hindi, Premchand (1880-1937) wrote several successful novels such as Godan (available in English), Gaban, Nirmala and Seva Sadan.

²Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He wrote successfully in all forms of literature, but is best known now for his songs, popularly known as "Rabindra Sangeet" (Rabindra music).

³Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938), one of the greatest Indian novelists, wrote in Bengali. His most famous novels are Devdas, Srikant, Biraj Bahu and Charitraheen.

⁴Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, known as a pioneer of social realism in Malayalam, is famous for his novel Chemmeen (available in English).

where these languages are spoken--are two highly politically conscious provinces) than, say, in Oriya and Tamil. Regional varieties are characteristic of literature in India as much as any other aspect of Indian life. There is a diversity of generic experimentation too. The use of a particular genre in any language is influenced by the oral traditions of that language. Different genres have achieved popular success in different languages. For instance, the drama has achieved far greater success in Bengali and Marathi than in Hindi while the Hindi short story and novel offer a greater variety of themes and formal experimentation. Utpal Datt¹ in Bengali and Vijay Tendulkar² in Marathi are nationally known dramatists. Renu³ and Yashpal⁴ are among the most popular authors of prose fiction in Hindi.

It is interesting to note that although English is spoken by less than two per cent of India's population, several Indian

¹Perhaps the best known dramatist in Bengal today, Utpal Datt is also a successful actor, director and producer of films. Some of his plays are Angar, Ferari Fauz and Tiner Talwar.

²Tendulkar is the writer of Shantata Court Chaloo Aahe, Ghasiram Kotwal and many other satirical plays all of which have been directed by him with great popular success.

³Phanishwar Nath Renu was a novelist and political activist all his life. He is best known for his Maila Aanchal and Parati Parikatha. He died recently.

⁴Yashpal (1903-1977) took active part in anti-British movements and wrote perhaps the most graphic account of Indo-Pak partition in his Jhootha Sach. He wrote several other novels.

writers of English have achieved eminence both on the national and the international scene. R.K. Narayan¹, Nayantara Sahgal² and Kamala Markandeya³ are among them. These authors have given to a world wide audience an easy access to the way of life and social vision that India represents.

Children's literature remains an area where it is difficult to offer a broad view of works written in different languages. Translations and countrywide sale are a rarity in children's literature. In some languages, writers of adult literature have also written for children. Tagore is the most well known of such authors. A collection of his writings for children is now available in English. Dhan Gopal Mukherjee wrote several books for children in English. He was awarded the Newbery Medal for his book, Gay-Neck: the Story of a Pigeon, in 1928.

¹R.K. Narayan's famous novels are Swami and Friends, The Guide and The Man Eater of Malgudi.

²Nayantara Sahgal is the author of This Time of Morning, Storm in Chandigarh and Prison and Chocolate Cake.

³Kamala Markandeya's novels include A Handful of Rice and Nectar in a Sieve.

