

Squirrel across a bridge

Tulsi Badrinath

At the age of eight, when I began to learn dance, I did not know that I was actually learning to inhabit myths, epics, in a different way -- interpreting them through my body, living the truth of those stories, becoming Krishna or Radha while dancing. Thirty years later, I can see how that shaped my response to the world.

In a particular dance-drama depicting the story of Rama, there is a scene where the bridge to Lanka is made.

The monkeys make a game of it, seeing who can throw the most stones into the sea. Together, they heave and roll and push heavy stones. Sometimes they fling one up with a collective grunt and scamper away before the falling stone splashes salty water over them. Amazingly the bridge does get made by the army of monkeys and it stretches far into the distance. The little squirrel, helping in its own way by shaking sand between the stones, is stroked lovingly by Rama. It bounds away, the first to test the bridge.

This scene was translated into movement, brought alive by the body. The crouched rolling gait of the monkeys, their laughable attempt at graceful co-ordination, their uncontrolled scratching, eyes –

alert, wise – peering everywhere for stones. We had to keep our cheeks puffed, difficult indeed for teenage girls who wanted to look pretty on stage! Far easier to portray the mischievous glee with which one monkey tried to distract the other.

An imaginary world of myth and legend was being rendered visually through the reality of the body. As I grew, it meant that I could no longer be the squirrel; the part required a small child for the costume

left the torso bare. This changing adolescent body was the instrument of navigation between that timeless place and the here and the now.

Dancing, the body sweated, tired, cried for rest. Motivated by the mind, the fear of shaming oneself in front of an audience, it re-energised itself and learnt to keep the pounding heart and aching muscles secret. For, the image projected by the flying arms and feet circling a small stage was of a virile Shiva dancing majestically across space, creating effortlessly the universe, keeping in whirling motion the sun the moon the stars.

The dance of Shiva can only be imagined, if at all. No dancer is under any illusion that the tandava she dances is like Shiva's dance. The idea is to create in the viewer a feeling that they might have seen Shiva dance, lead them to their own hearts where he dances.

Yet, Shiva was very real at that moment, the mind intent on those qualities of Shiva that would invoke his presence. It could only be done with the utmost certainty of his existence, the firm conviction that it was He who danced with supreme bliss in the golden hall at Chidambaram. Just as: sculptors must first visualize Shiva before they can cast him in bronze or stone, as did those master artisans when they cast the unmatched Chola bronzes of Shiva as Nataraja in the 11th century.

It is a unique characteristic of Indian art that we do not know the names of the artists who created our most exquisite frescos or sculptures or bronzes. The connection between a work of art and the person looking at it was in the response evoked. This connection was made through bhava, the emotion expressed in the particular painting or song.

So, dancing Shiva was not an exercise in narcissistic self-expression but an act of giving where you took all the myriad influences of music and song and dance and painting and iconography, synthesized them and expressed them in a way that the rasika watching would forget the

place, the time, herself, and become one with the underlying feeling of wonder, *adbhuta*.

But as soon as the music ended and the dancer retired off-stage, what had been very real and apparent was now non-existent, vanished. So, when Shiva exited into the wings and the dancer was free to relax, no one backstage mistook for Shiva that only too human dancer doubled over, gasping for breath.

It helped that my childhood coincided with a time when there was no television at home, and my parents rarely visited the cinema. In the thatch-roofed dance class-room there were no images readily accessible. There was just the guru and the students. Every new story we learnt about Krishna was fascinating, every new piece had many stories that had to be narrated, heard, imagined. Myths were thus internalized, then expressed through the limbs, the eyes, the face.

There was the text of the song, the words that one listened to, the music one absorbed, the guru one watched and through it all the myth was transmitted to the present, rendered alive through the artistic imagination.

Outside the classroom, wounded by Ganesha's tusk, the moon waxed and waned. Ganesha, presiding in the many street-corner shrines that define Madras, was glimpsed everywhere in passing, trunk curved above a rotund belly, and always offered a mental salute. When mangoes swelled into ripeness on trees, one recalled the golden one Ganesha claimed for himself by quick-wittedly circumambulating his parents as the universe. Scientists found it particularly difficult not to worship Ganesha before beginning a new project.

Myth is ever-present in our surroundings. Two streams of life run simultaneously. The mundane and that sacred eternal world merge continually in the cycle of festivals and fasts and ritual offerings. We are

perhaps the only civilization where ancient myths are integrated to this degree in the daily lives of the people.

Nothing epitomizes this better than the Ramlila enacted in Benaras when parts of the city become places associated with the Ramayana and the actors move from one place to another during Dussehra. This ability of the Indian mind to mingle both the eternal with the perishable, the transcendent with the mundane keeps alive the sense of wonder in daily life.

All arts in India being inter-connected, myths are a language common to them. The broad, deceptively calm Ganga at Varanasi offers no clue that it fell in fierce torrents from the heavens only to be caught and tamed in Shiva's hair. Far south from Varanasi the magnificent rock-cut sculpture at Mamallapuram, dating to the 7th century A.D, beautifully captures the descent of the Ganga. Sita herself paid obeisance to the Ganga. To visit the Manikarnika Ghat at Varanasi is to remember that Sri Ramakrishna saw Shiva there giving the taraka mantra to every soul, atman, making the great transition of death.

Reality is supposedly the antithesis of myth, but what is reality? It is experienced differently by different temperaments, differently evolved souls clothed, we believe, in the similar garment of the human body. Sri Ramakrishna saw Shiva at the Manikarnika Ghat. I did not. That does not make the reality of what Sri Ramakrishna saw suspect; in fact it gives me an awareness of an added dimension that I lack.

There is the amusing incident of a young Narendra informing Sri Ramakrishna that "the forms of God that you see are the fiction of your mind." Sri Ramakrishna was amazed for the 'fiction' spoke to him as well! He immediately went to the temple and wept before Ma Kali "what is this? Then is this all false? How could Narendra say that?" He had a revelation right then, a divine form shaped of Indivisible Consciousness

appeared before him and said “If your words are untrue, how is it that they tally with the facts?” Much relieved, Sri Ramakrishna scolded Narendra saying, “You rogue! You created disbelief in my mind. Don’t come here anymore.”

To my mind this incident illustrates the fact that it is pointless to argue, as happened in a recent controversy, whether Rama is historical or not, whether the satellite pictures of the faint structure under the sea confirm that it was manmade, not an accretion of sandbanks over time. To disprove that the bridge was man-made will not in any way dissolve the bridge that Rama built in my mind or affect those millions whose Ramayana exists within them.

More importantly, it is what we derive from the Ramayana that is of value in our daily lives. The story of the Ramayana reveals that despite being loved, one could be deprived of one’s rightful place in the home. Born a prince, the eldest, one could suddenly have to wear bark and live in the forest. One’s wife, used to the palace her entire life, follows one into the forest devotedly like a shadow and then is abducted. How does one behave in the throes of such adversity?

If all those reversals could happen to the most exalted of men, might not his response to demanding situations tell us how to understand the inexplicable, often devastating, things that happen in all our lives? Even a response such as sending a pregnant Sita away serves as a tipping point, if nothing else, while deciding whether one admires Rama or not.

Myths are an expression of wonder at the unknowable vastness of the universe, the tremendous mystery of birth and the certainty of death that marks all human beings despite apparent inequalities of wealth, health and intelligence. They contain the philosophical key to every civilization, the particular understanding they have of man’s relationship with nature.

That sense of wonder, *adbhuta*, is what we are losing. Urban life in its monotonous routine independent of the seasons, its assumption of a perennial supply of food, the availability of light through the night, and hermetically sealed workplaces, has no place for a sense of wonder. That is where the distortion of myth occurs.

It is only a step further to see that beamed back to us through the television where the voracious appetite for newness and something different creates, oftentimes unthinkingly, gross distortions.

A recent winner of a reality dance show performed a segment where little children were all dressed up in blue paint and golden crowns as Krishna. The gyrations those unfortunate children were made to execute were vulgar, ugly. There was nothing of Krishna in the dance not even as caricature, only the bizarre inversion of an idea -- one gopi surrounded by many dwarfish Krishna. Luckily one could choose not to watch this assault on the sensibilities.

Why is it that innovation often expends with sensitivity to the context and environment in which myths are located? To distort a myth, a legend, a belief is to distort our own memory, our lives. Worse, it is to disrespect something that still carries meaning for others.

It has becoming an annoying recurrence: the discovery of images of Indian deities on slippers, toilet seats, clothes and fashion accessories made in the west, and protests against the offence. It reveals at once how easy it is to devalue something just because it has no special meaning for a particular society even though another society may venerate it.

In the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, what the Danish cartoonist did not realize was that he was willfully disregarding something others held to be sacrosanct. In the pursuit of free speech, sacred to the Danish republic, he had needlessly trampled upon a belief sacred to millions of people. One did not have to be Muslim to be troubled by the cartoons.

Mythological figures are continually evolving and changes are now widespread in our rituals, the time spent in celebrations. An immensely popular sweet-shop near my home has taken to selling kozhukattai, the coconut and jaggery filled modak, as a snack. It bothers me. The sweet that Ganesha loves was made only once a year when Ganesh Chaturthi was celebrated. It was the high point of the festival, and one ate as many as one could. To have it so easily available all year round is like cheating Ganesha, for he can eat it only when he comes to stay.

On the other hand, there is a version of Ganesha that did not exist earlier but has come into being recently. In Madras, there is a temple to Cricket Ganesha, where fans of the game can direct their fervent pleas knowing it is going to the right Person-in-Charge!

I have not seen the Cricket Ganesha, but whenever I look out of the window I see a squirrel racing up the coconut tree, vivid stripes on its back. And simultaneously, though the evident visual reality is of green fronds atop a long sloping trunk, on it a small quivering body with a bushy tail, I see Rama's fingers leave an indelible trail as he strokes the little animal.