

Interventions



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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In Conversation with Srijan Chatterjee



Caesurae: Whether it is a theatrical presentation or a musical one or your sculpting of the goddess, or a painting, they are all narratives of aesthetics. As an artiste who delves into all of these arts how do you connect all together?

Srijan: Any form of artistic expression has a language of its own. An artiste is generally identified with one form of art which could be music, painting, dance, sculpture or theatre. But I believe sometimes an artiste may delve into more than one form of art, as classical art forms are never linear and always connect with each other. So it might be that an artiste excels in one, but he is

proficient in other forms too. We may not know much about his other talents. These may not be sharply etched out but contribute to his main form of art, one he is identified with. In my case too, there has been a similar story. Though I am known as a musician (singer), I grew up in a family which dabbled in theatre. My father is an actor; he is proficient in singing and dancing too. He has been my first Guru. It is he who sent me to various practitioners of Śastriya Sangeet for *talim*. I grew up under his influence, and though I always dreamt of being an actor, I ended up somehow as a singer. Theatre is a composite art form; it includes painting, crafting, language skills, knowledge of literature, music etc. My knack for theatre connected me to these. To add further, I picked up the skill of idol sculpting from my *Jethu* in my teens. The creative environment in which I grew up helped me to imbibe all of these simultaneously. Acting, painting, sculpting idols are all parts of my artistic self, and I am passionate about all of them.

Caesurae: How would you define your creative process while working on any art form?

Srijan: Creative instinct is sudden. Any idea, music or image is first conceived in the mind which is inexplicably connected with the sensations of the body as the creative process is initiated. Creative *jouissance* flows in rhythmic waves till it is consecrated with further meditation. Whether it's a musical composition or a theatre, the source of inspiration would be from within, but there would be layers of after thoughts or meditations and technicalities involved for the aesthetics of presentation.

Caesurae: There is a mingling of the high and low in the theatre productions, where you have been the music director, where tribal music has been punched with *shlokas*. Speak more about it. What was the intention?

Srijan: Interesting question! Any creative music for any theatre whether musical or a dance theatre, could use different sources of music which will harmonize together. Sometimes this is done to create a sense of surprise and sometimes it is a necessity. You are possibly referring to *Murcchana*, a theatrical production on the creation of music by Guru Sharmila Biswas, a well known Odissi dancer, where I was the music director. Here I have used the shloka chants along with an Oriya tribal music. There is a common factor between the two. Soundscape is more important in the case of chants and tribal music. And there is a sense of liberation here, as this

does not need so much of voice training as in the case of Indian classical music, whether in the case of chants or tribal music. So how sound can suggest the primordial, that was the idea; how creation itself is associated with *Naad dhwani*. So I was not thinking of classes here, or of the high and low at all. My intention was to harmonize the two kinds of musicality to create the soundscape which would convey the idea of creation.

Caesurae: How did you conceptualize “Galion se ghat tak”? Would you call it a narrative of Love?

Srijan: My love for Benares! Rhythms of Benares have sparked several epiphanies within me. May be this theatrical production is an ensemble of these “spandans” or rhythms of love woven together. And coincidentally a producer too came my way who was looking for this kind of a musical theatre production. To me the gullies of Benares have always seemed to be love-niches. Love in different shades could be enjoyed in these lanes and by lanes of Benares. These lanes and by lanes with their twists and turns connect with each other strangely and each of them lead to different ghats of the Ganges, the sacred river. And all these lanes have characters of their own. Some lanes would have a mandir round its corner, some have a house, and some sometimes a garbage heap; again, there would be someone bathing in the roadside water tap... it’s life in its flow, disorganized but so natural. It’s life in its various shades, in different colours, in different rasas. These lanes are reminiscent of the different shades of human desires leading to the sacred river. If on one hand Benares is a place for fulfilling one’s desires, a place for glutting oneself in heart’s content with what one so craves for, this is also a place for *moksha*, a liberation through life’s exit point, which the funeral pyres in the Manikarnika ghat by the banks of the river would remind one of. Benares for me is suggestive of this reality of life itself- the binaries - fullness of enjoyment and the nullity of death. If you were on a boat on the river, it would seem that maya encircles the city, - the rippling waters themselves are like the rhythm of maya itself. Yet away from the banks the city, ghats from the distance seem like an ascetic, untouched by these maya ripples. The ghats appear to be lost in deep meditation like a yogi. Such is the paradox of life itself!

Caesurae: As you also practise tantra, how would you connect this with your musical self and your creativity?

Srijan: As I mentioned earlier, for my creative impetus I drew much from my family environment. In a similar way, my growing up in a very orthodox Brahmin family helped me to be acquainted with the Sastras and shaped my spiritual self. No matter what I delve in, ultimately it all leads to spirituality. We are Śáktas, so tantric darshan has influenced rather enriched my musical personality or added a different flavour to my singing. As a matter of fact, tell me which Indian music is not spiritual? Love songs too ultimately transcend the sense of mortality. To a beloved, a lover is divine in essence, just as to a lover a beloved too is celestial.

It all leads to that bindu. Any kind of art form that I delve in ultimately leads to the spiritual. Bharatiya Sangeet is spiritual. Most of my paintings are on devas and devis. I do not paint sceneries or human forms. Also, I sculpt only the devas and devis. That's a part of my satvik self, which flows into art. My sense of Truth, my understanding of Truth is through my Tantric practice, which flows into my art. Tantra is about Tanu and mon. Tantra helps to transcend the body, by not negating the body, but understanding every spandan or rhythm of the body and that everything in life is sacred. The path to liberation is through the various stages of the Tantra, where there is a bodily sacred. We have different selves within ourselves. Each of these selves are trying to fulfil themselves through the rich experiences of life. We have different worlds of existence within one life itself. There could be a main strand according to our chosen profession, but someone who is close to me would know the other strands too. We talk about multiverses. That's so true. Parts of the same self can live in different universes, rejoicing differently in the variant experiences of these worlds.

My current research is on *Naad tattva*. Naad Tattva is the very essence of music; it is the quintessence of the Mantra sadhana in Tantric practice too. This is how I wish to connect my musical self with spirituality. We don't understand this always, but that's how it is! Just as we attempt to observe purity in our ritualistic worship, in a similar way a musician would want to render the purity of the notes. Music is not just singing, it is puja or worship in its own way. We believe that we are performers, but we are Radha like in our aspiration for reaching that frequency or that moment of ecstasy of perfection as it is explained in *Bhagavad MahaPuran*. When an instrument produces music, whether it is a tanpura or a keyboard, as a singer I would follow the musical notes. These notes in their perfect frequencies are like Krishna. A musician like Radha

pursues these notes, drunk with the ecstasy of love or desire. Isn't this Ras(h) too? Just as an ascetic is doing his sadhana in a remote forest, as a sursadhak I am doing the same thing in my own room. This is something I would want to address in my research on Tantra and Naad Tattva.

Caesurae: When you are doing your riyaz in your own room it is different from your performance on stage. In the former case you are the performer and your audience too. But when you perform for others a vibration cycle is created. How does this connect with Naad Tattva.

Srijan: Naad is a very subtle, and all creation owes its existence to the Naad or Sound. There are different kinds of Naad. Naad is the essence of music. Every spandan, every vibration is a Naad. Any thought vibration is Naad.

Caesurae: What plans do you have for future productions?

Srijan: "Manasha Darshan" or "Kundalini Darshan". Don't want to say much about this now.

Caesurae: Oh please, tell us a little more!

Srijan: Manasha is from "Manas". To a Sadhak Manasha is the Kundalini herself. People in rural areas are scared of snakes which come out during the rains. But Manasha worship during the rainy season is not just from the fear of snakes. There's a symbolic significance attached to it. Monsoon time is not a good time for sadhana. Depression clouds the soul. That's the time to go to Gurugriha. So, we have Jagannath Yatra during the monsoon season. It's the Guru who awakens your kundalini. Unboiled milk and banana offering to the serpent deity is actually a symbolic gesture. It's the food that enhances the sadhak's body during his sadhana. What I wish to show here is that Manasha is the deity of our mind. When our mind is disturbed, we turn bitter. In a similar way Manasha needs to be appeased. She got angry because she was not worshipped by Chand Sadagar, if we go to the myth. What makes her a deity? She never harmed anybody despite her anger. That's her greatness. That's all I can tell you about this dream project now.