

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The trouble with our biographies of performing artists

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THE LIFE STORIES OF POLITICIANS are considered integral to modern Indian historical narratives, but rarely are artists' lives accorded the same importance, in spite of the fact that classical forms of music and dance have made remarkable transitions into modern India. In recent years, however, a growing body of English-language biographies of Indian perform-



COURTESY T BALASARASWATHI ARCHIVE

Bharatanatyam dancer T Balasaraswathi (left) and Carnatic vocalist MS Subbulakshmi were born into devadasi houses.

ing artists—including the violinist Lalgudi Jayaraman (by Lakshmi Devnath, 2013), the dancer VP Dhananjayan, (by Tulsi Badrinath, 2013), the veena player S Balachander (by Vikram Sampath, 2012), the dancer T Balasaraswathi (by Douglas M Knight Jr, 2012), and a collection of 20 musicians' biographies called *Carnatic Summers* (by V Sriram, 2005) just to name a few—indicates that we have begun to pay attention to the experiences of individuals whose importance goes beyond statecraft, political history, and even popular culture.

These recent efforts, laudable in several respects, have some limitations in common. The Indian biography has tended to cling to the traditionalist, "great man" method of writing history, and artistic history is no exception. This, taken together with the vagaries of the market, limits the ground the genre can cover. If a biography of Zakir Husain were to arrive on the market next month, another tabla player's life story would be unlikely to find space on publishers' lists for the next several years. A calculation like this would reduce the history of tabla playing in modern India to the experience of a single great tabalchi. Great man biographies, particularly in the arts, also frequently cause their authors to venerate their subjects, which serves the writing of complicated historical and cultural processes

very poorly. These new biographies are no exception to this rule; platitudes about the greatness of their subjects are strewn over them, in some cases right from the first page. Early in Lakshmi Devnath's biography of Lalgudi Jayaraman, we are told in no uncertain terms that "this is the story of a genius." In a similar vein, the first chapter of Vikram Sampath's biography of S Balachander is titled "A Genius is Born." This sort of recourse to Victorian historiography, coupled with the tendency to deification, which Salman Rushdie called an "Indian disease," present us with no new ways to think about biographical subjects and their context at all.

The way artists make their way through the world can tell us as much about their times as their work itself can do. Given how little history is written about the arts in India, it is a rare pleasure to find artist biographies that situate the artist and their art within the social and economic contexts of their time. Take, for example, artists' responses to the more or less simultaneous breakdown, across India, of a previously stable system of court patronage in the early twentieth century. This opened the doors to a consumption economy of music driven by socio-religious institutions and secular *sabhas*. To survive in these new environs, artists had to adopt new manners, ways of performance, and thinking about their work. We learn in Janaki Bakhle's excellent book, *Two Men and Music*, that because the new institutions of patronage had a distinctly Hindu flavour, in the early twentieth century, non-Hindu singers like Abdul Karim Khan adopted the habit of intoning the Gayatri Mantra during shows. These dramatic transitions speak, in their turn, to an older Indian history of tangled and intertwining aesthetics and identity.

In a 2006 essay for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the scholar Lakshmi Subramanian wrote of how, during the apogee of the Mughal era in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many musical castes—"dhadhis, gandharps, gunkars, qawwals, doms, nats"—lost social prominence owing to the new dominance of the dhrupad singers. Many of these new books, well-suited to the discussion of this sort of large-scale upheaval of cultural politics in the twentieth century, avoid engaging with it at all. Biographies of south Indian artists almost never tell readers about the role of caste, class and gender in the distribution and control of performing opportunities, networks and resources. (The biography of MS Subbulakshmi by TJS George published in 2004 is an exception in this regard, tracing as it does the arc of the devadasi movement along wider changes taking place in their society at the time.)

Even with the individualist focus on the personal, artistic journey, most biographies are more or less a detached stringing together of pieces of information. The absence of psychological insight stands out particularly in Sampath's biography of the veena maestro S Balachander. In the late 1970s, one of Balachander's peers, the vocalist M Balamura-

likrishna, claimed he had invented new ragas. In response, an apoplectic Balachander, who had long maintained that ragas belonged to ancient treatises, launched a campaign of indecorous attacks against Balamuralikrishna. Writing letters to the Music Academy in Madras, which were later made public, Balachander's resorted to alliterative invective, calling Balamuralikrishna's claims, in English, "the cool, cunning, calculated maneuvers of a crook!" Through Sampath's exhaustive detailing of events and excerpts from letters, we learn who said what to whom, who participated in a conspiracy of silence and so on. But we are left with little idea of why Balachander and Balamuralikrishna, practitioners of a classical form steeped in the values of devotion and forbearance, had little compunction about dealing in such vitriol in full view of their public.

Many of these biographies sanitise their depictions of these artistic masters, so that their behaviour is seen to remain within perceived notions of propriety for gurus, geniuses and father figures. This sort of reverential approach can hamper the biographical project from achieving any real intimacy with their subjects, and this is literally true in the case of each of these books—in omitting all details of their subjects' private lives, these books seem to present their protagonists as fundamentally asexual. None of these great masters ever longed for a woman or man; they neither contemplated love, nor struggled with desire, nor yet with the sexual mores and expectations of their worlds. George's biography of Subbulakshmi and Knight's biography of T Balasaraswathi both bucked this trend partially, since their subjects were born into devadasi houses, and the subtext of a marginal and sexualised milieu was hard to miss. But these books, too, were ginger in their treatment, and none of the books mentioned so far give us any access into the inner worlds of the artists they are about. In most cases, this prudishness can be attributed to the biographers' disproportionate reliance on the cooperation of the subjects' families, students and well-wishers, who are, understandably, keen to promote a certain image of the artist.

A brave exception to the general unwillingness to look beyond an artist's craft is *Master of Arts*, in which Tulsi Badrinath tells the story of the dancers VP Dhananjayan and his wife Shanta, while also using their lives to illuminate little-discussed aspects of the world of Indian classical dance, such as the lives of Muslim students and performers of Bharatanatyam, a dance form which is, to most intents and purposes, considered a Hindu one. Badrinath discusses male homoeroticism, although both women's sexuality and actively homosexual dancers—far from absent in Indian dance—remains outside its purview. Indians can and do write about these matters in other settings; but it seems that the burden that writers take upon themselves to present classical artists in line with their legends, and with preconceived social norms, denies them the freedom to describe them as real people.

Perhaps the hardest and most delicate labour in writing about the performing arts lies in translation—in rendering the language of one form intelligible in another. Writing about the Indian arts in English presents an additional complication in this respect. When Lalgudi Jayaraman talks about his life's desire to see the "viswaroopadarsanam" of music in his biography, titled *An Incurable Romantic*, Devnath translates this word as "cosmic vision" and moves on without exploring what the term, a reference to Krishna's inherent revelation in the Bhagavad Gita, may mean for a musician, especially one practising in the late twentieth century. In his essay on the life of Thyagaraja, William Jackson translates "harikatha" as merely "devotional tales," ignoring all the other associations the word carries, of performances, religious tropes, village fairs, and even theatrical entertainment amongst the Tamil and Telugu speakers in the Kaveri delta. These are functional translations, but simplistic, one-dimensional, and often ahistorical, attenuating the meanings of the originals, and chipping away at the larger civilisational memory within which these ideas operate.

Unlike, for instance, the life of an Indian politician or cricketer, the vocabularies that inform an Indian classical artist's life emerged in a pre-modern world with a markedly different ontology, theology and aesthetic philosophy. How does a biographer interpret the invocation of a religious concept in the service of art, as when the celebrated dancer T Balasaraswati, in her 1975 speech at the Tamil Isai Sangam in Chennai, declares "Bharatanatyam is bhakti." Does she adopt a detached attitude, or show academic curiosity? Treat it with a disdain for non-materialist claims, or show an insider's reverence? These are problems with the translatability of ideas, not just between languages, but between our present-day aesthetics and the classical world of Indian arts. In his essay 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?' AK Ramanujan writes: "No Indian text comes without a context, a frame, till the 19th century." When a Carnatic musician sings about Rama or Krishna, but doesn't hold them as divine beings, or even believe in the idea of the divine at all, a biographer who chronicles the performance merely as an artistic presentation misses deeper questions that need to be examined about the art and the artist.

These demands—of translatability, of historical context, of gaining access to the inner life of a subject—are complex and large, but every ambitious biographer of Indian artists must grapple with them. Apart from the usual skills of scholarship, journalistic instinct, and narrative craft that all biographies demand, the classical artist's biography requires that the writer delve deep into the gulf between Indian modernity and Indian traditions, into what lies beyond the here and now, and what being an artist, particularly a classical Indian artist, means in our time. ■