

Dance and music of the Sinhalese by M. B. Dassanayake

Our historical record, the 'Mahavamsa', tells us that the Aryan Prince Vijaya heard music on the day he landed on the shores of Lanka. According to Pali scriptures the 'Yakkas' (one of the tribes inhabiting the Island at the time) were fond of songs and dances. It may be that some of the devil dances that have remained with us to the present day owe their origin to the 'Yakka' dances.

That a well developed system of Sinhalese music existed in ancient Lanka seems probable. Numerous references in Sinhalese literature, stone carvings and frescoes support this assumption.

But to trace exactly what the system was from the imperfect fragments performed today by professional Sinhala musicians, is no easy task.

The art of music, like most of the other arts in the East has been handed down the centuries orally from teacher to pupil. It was not written down in notation as in the West.

Bands of hereditary professional musicians and dancers kept the tradition alive.

Their patrons the kings, princes and nilames, freed them from want by rich presents and gifts of land and kept them at their palaces and mansions, so that they could devote time to perfect their art.

When as a result of foreign occupation, this royal patronage was withdrawn, the professional musicians had to turn to cultivation to eke out a living, and the standard of musical performance as well as the art of music naturally declined.

In the face of these drawbacks, it speaks well for the virility of Sinhala poetry, music and dance that these arts have been kept alive.

It is in the Kandyan Kingdom, that last stronghold to fall into the foreign hands, that the remnants of the art of music have been best preserve.

The Kandyan dances are world famous

The curious part about these dances is that singing as well as the playing of musical instruments such as the 'udekki' or 'Geta-bera' and 'Talampata' (hand cymbals) accompany the dance. In the 'udekki' dance, the dancers sing, play and dance.

This shows that from ancient times the Sinhalese 'sangita-sastra', the art of Sinhala music, had three component parts — dancing, singing and the playing of musical instruments. The art of music was considered incomplete without all three elements.

Incidentally the form of Buddhism that came into Sri Lanka about the third century B.C., forbade monks from indulging in these three arts — 'nacca, gita and vadita' on the ground that they roused the passions.

Most of the remarkable 'Vannams' sung by the Kandyan dancers during the Kandy Esala Perahera as a prelude to their dance are named after animals and are based on their movements.

Thus the 'gajaga vannama' moves to the slow majestic tread of the elephant. The 'kudiradi' or 'thuranga vannama' follows the trot and gallop of the horse.

A vivid portrayal of the leisurely gliding flight of the hawk and its sudden swoop to the earth to seize its prey, is characterized in the 'ukussa vannama'.

These colourful dances are magnificently executed; but the descriptive song has hardly any definition of melody, though the rhythm supplied by the 'udakki' is rigidly observed.

The singing, too is usually unrefined, crude and nasal. One cannot imagine our cultured Sinhalese kings countenancing such poor voice production in any of their royal musicians.

This again goes to support my contention that there has been decadence owing to lack of patronage, especially from 1815 onwards when the last king ceased to rule the Kandyan Kingdom.

When Emperor Dharmasoka sent his daughter Sanghamitta with a branch of the sacred bo-tree to Sri Lanka, she was accompanied by bands of musicians and dancers who performed on the five kinds of musical instruments 'panca turya nada' thrice a day in honour of the sacred bodhi tree.

These five sorts of instruments were:

* Atata (one faced drum), * Vitata (two faced drum), * Vitata-taya (three faced drum), * Ghana (metal percussion), * sisiraya (wind instrument)

Seventy-five musical instruments used in ancient Sri Lanka comprise — twenty-six varieties of drums (one and two faced); eight kinds of 'Vinas' (three, five, seven, twelve, thirteen, twenty-one stringed etc.). Twenty-six varieties of wind instruments (bamboo and wooden flutes etc) and fifteen kinds of metal percussion (hand cymbals, metal bells, tinkling anklets etc).

Of these seventy-five instruments those in common use today are drums 'magul-bera', 'geta-bera', 'mihingu-bera', 'maddala', 'udekki', 'pana-bera', 'davula', 'tammattama', 'hewisi' and 'rabana'.

The wind instruments used are 'horana' (large and small), 'naga', 'sinnan', 'rak-sinnan', 'vas-dandu and sak' (conch-shell).

The imposing 'maha-kombu' is some what like a tuba in appearance. Unfortunately, it is little used.

The revival of Sinhala music has been very marked during the past two decades. In our schools, Sinhala nursery rhymes and patriotic songs are replacing foreign rhymes.

Let us hope that Sri Lanka will find her soul through her culture and music. Sinhalese musicians will regain their lost foundations and build on them an edifice of Sinhalese music that will make its own contribution to the world.