

Chennai Season: Celebration or Inundation of Dance?

A look at the deluge of performances during the season

By Vidhya Subramanian

Then: “Unlike earlier years, three organizers hosted concerts in 1935. In addition to the usual players - the Music Academy and the Indian Fine Arts Society, the Congress Party which turned 50 that year, held programmes under the auspices of the Khadi and Swadeshi Exhibition, an annual feature since 1934. With concertgoers spoilt for choice, the organizers feared a poor audience turnout at each of the venues.” (Sruti - December 2010)

Now: “The season, which involves crores of rupees, is arguably the largest music and dance festival in the world. There are over 2,500 performances, involving hundreds of artists, held across nearly 50 venues in a span of a month.” - (The Hindu, Dec 23, 2010)

Spot the six differences between the two scenarios. With the dubious honor of being the world’s largest cultural event, the Margazhi season, the Chennai Music and Dance Festival, or simply, the season is a veritable deluge of dance and music. However, unlike the Noah’s flood, this torrent doesn’t necessarily ensure the survival of excellence that then regenerates more of its kind. To think that we have come from a time when three organizations conducting performances could mean depletion in the audience turnout, to a time when dancers are happy with an audience of 50!

I am a dancer who grew up in Madras moved to the US and have been returning for the past few years to perform regularly in the Chennai season. To say that things have changed would be an understatement, the least of which includes getting used to Chennai instead of Madras. Performances are churned out in staggering numbers, there is a proliferation of dancers, the approach to dance has changed, marketable and marketing skills required of a dancer are mind-bogglingly multifarious, a legion of awards greets us in every sabha’s invitation, supply has long overtaken demand resulting in quality becoming a poor cousin to quantity, and traffic is a vortex that somehow spits people out alive in singara Chennai.

A Federation? What is it?

I recently learnt that there is actually a federation of sabhas in Chennai and that there are only 15 sabhas registered as part of this federation. The other 35

or so organizations many of which are called 'mushroom' sabhas have gradually infiltrated the system, some with the genuine goal of furthering the arts and others as business opportunities. It is interesting however, that I could not find a website for the federation that tells me which the 15 are or give me any other information. What does the federation of sabhas do? Do they have a mission? What criteria does an organization require to become a member? Is there a way for the federation to enable the reduction of organizations that present performances during the season? To me it seems to make sense that if there are fewer organizations, there will be fewer performances, which in turn should increase the audience turnout for the remaining performances, turnout that is abysmal for most dancers now. When I raised these questions on the last day of the Natya Kala Conference, I didn't really get a concrete response from the panel. However, dancer Rathna Kumar had a suggestion that if funders used more discretion in their choice of organizations to fund, they could ensure funding only to the ones doing good work in the field. If the organizations that are in it to win it (as in make quick money Las Vegas style) are not funded, over time they will be forced to shut down. The onus is then on the funding organizations and individual sponsors to establish regulation among organizations/sabhas. Perhaps a federation of funders?

Even if the number of sabhas is miraculously reduced, among the existing organizations presenting dance, there is an outpouring of sensory onslaught with morning, afternoon, and evening concerts or performances. This year, my teenage daughter who learns music and dance accompanied me on my trip to Chennai and in order to expose her to the season experience, I took her to as many concerts and performances as possible and she has come away feeling that high school and her crazy schedule in the US is less tiring! When does one get the time to savor and soak in what one has heard or seen? My brain and senses are under siege with varnam sancharis colliding with jugal bandis, and thought-provoking dance-theatre fighting for space with RTPs. Why do we need so many performances in order to enjoy the arts? Even if the 15 organizations (I'm going to hold on to my hope that it will pare down to that) hold two dance performances and one music concert a day, that should add up to 30 dance performances and 15 concerts a day which will amount to 930 dance performances and 465 music concerts in the month of December! That's a grand total of 1395 opportunities for sensory pleasure as opposed to the 2500 or so we have now. My senses sigh for the time when we had just one concert and one performance a day to go to. Not to mention the conferences that offer appealing opportunities to learn - when does one go to them? Forget eating and sleeping!

Idealistic, but possible

In all this high tide of art, who is the individual performer? After a lifetime of training, preparation, expenditure and toil, the prestige of dancing in the Chennai season is high on the priority list of every dancer, from the recent

arangetramee to the established diva. The honest artist presents her/his work in earnest after carefully choosing and choreographing content, and practicing for hours to hone it to perfection. Then there are the not-so-honest ones that simply want to get on stage before the next best thing happens to them. I have often heard the statement, “the test of time will take care of such artists and make the true ones sustain.” But I have also seen the same test of the same time annihilate some very talented dancers simply because they couldn’t or wouldn’t do what was required to sustain other than just dance. Isn’t that why we’re here - to dance?

Okay, how do organizations choose who performs in the season every year? Applications pour in from all directions and then there are the established artists who have to be invited. What criteria if any do organizers apply to select performers? Could the process be more streamlined? An online system with a standardized application form included with submission of recent video clips can level the playing field. Next, a panel of at least 20 senior dance gurus and scholars could conduct the selection process based on discussion that is moderated. An egalitarian system could be applied in the selection process with Gurus exempted from voting on their own students. The number of performances per dancer could also be limited to provide opportunities to every competent dancer that applies. Serving as a central body for the season, this panel could work in conjunction with the federation of sabhas to assign slots to performers through a system of rotation. The dancer shouldn’t have to do anything more than apply and could be notified within a certain time period if they are selected or not. This audition process must be repeated every year to safeguard quality. With 930 slots to fill, not too many dancers will return discouraged, not to mention the possibility that this process will offer a way to root out the less-than-serious.

Senior artists whose performances are learning experiences in themselves, could lead the festival for the first week or so with solo or ensemble presentations. If just one such performance is offered each day, these could be followed by an interactive session to understand the nature and process of the particular work presented. Young dancers can greatly benefit from such an exchange and absorb what they see before moving on to the next one the following day. The following two weeks, the established performers and upcoming dancers of merit could offer their work. This would help audiences in choosing which ones to go to as opposed to confused excel sheets of gridlocked choices and frustration accompanying those choices that one experiences now.

Not one more dancer applying sandalwood paste!

The next step would be mediation of content. The same panel could work through applications that include a choice of pieces to avoid redundancy. No spectator wants to see the nayika applying sandalwood paste in one performance after another of mohamaginen or more than 3 or 4 dancers

futilely calling the sakhi in Sami Nee Rammanave. These are no doubt extremely meaningful to each dancer that performs the same varnam but just think of the poor *sahrudaya* whose *hrudayam* is wrung dry of emotion from watching the same piece being performed in recital after recital. The dancer when applying could offer a choice of pieces he/she wants to perform listing them in order of preference and the panel could allot as close as possible to the requests while avoiding repetition.

If the number of performances is limited, the length of each performance could potentially be increased to allow *rasotpatti* and let the dancer and the spectator enjoy the luxury of gradually submerging into the performance with some time left to ponder afterwards. With the number of performances each day, now there is time only to hurriedly pick up one's things and rush out of the auditorium while being shooed out of there unceremoniously to make way for the next 'star'. God help anyone who wants to give the artist feedback. Well, there's always Facebook!

And I don't have the space here to address the plight of the accompanying artists who sometimes sing/play for 2 rehearsals and 3 performances a day!

That 'mani', this 'mani', or just money?

The financial aspect of the season is a whole new Pandora's box. As dancers, we just don't get paid enough to cover expenses for each performance during the season and this is a situation that has seen no change over several years. It behooves organizations to be more transparent regarding finances when they claim to have a plethora of expenses and not enough money left for the artists and their promotion. How are the sponsorship money and ticket collections being spent? Many young dancers pay sabhas / organizations to perform during the season thus adding to the income of the organizations. Recently a senior guru suggested that this money could be re-routed to the professionals! This kind of expenditure is touted as 'investment' towards one's career. Then what is the training one undertakes to get to the performance level, and what of the money spent for costumes and jewelry? Isn't that investment as well? ROI is extremely long-term it seems, maybe more akin to an IRA or provident fund that one sees only at retirement. Yet another excess during the season is the awards ranging from one to ten given by each organization. While awards are excellent ways to recognize and encourage artists, their abundance is overwhelming.

In spite of the inundation of art and the problems plaguing it, the Chennai season is a unique celebration of our arts that needs to be preserved and applauded for standing the test of time since its inception in 1927. I love the opportunities it offers to present one's work to be embraced or spit out. I love the chance to see new work from every kind of thinking artist. I love the occasion it provides to meet gurus, dancers, musicians and scholars, all within

a month. I love choosing what to wear each day and looking out for similar stunning creations among others. I love eating hot vadais and guzzling tumblers of filter kapi while gossiping with peers in the canteen.

Oh, and I danced as well this season!