

“Rashtriya Sanskriti Mahotsav”, India’s national cultural festival, concluded last week at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Contemporary Arts (IGNCA) in New Delhi. This annual festival is organized by the Government of India’s Ministry of Culture in collaboration with its zonal cultural centers and various autonomous cultural institutions patronized by the state. The Ministry of Culture’s objective in organizing this cultural festival, as state on their website, is to ‘*celebrate spirit of Tradition, Culture, Heritage and Diversity of our incredible country*’.



(Image courtesy NCF2015 website)

The weeklong festival was host to performances from various parts of the country. In addition to these performances, each zonal center had set up stalls wherein handlooms and handicrafts from their respective zones were available for display and sale. Artists from various states took turns in showcasing their art forms and skills outside these stalls, while the metropolitan Delhi audience clicked selfies with these artists in background. These cultural festivals have become routine in the annual calendar of cultural events throughout the Indian metros. Supported by the State and Central Government’s Departments of Culture,

these festivals invite troupes from various states to perform their 'indigenous' art forms for the pleasure of an urban audience. The aim of such festivals might be to provide exposure to various cultures of the country, but a closer reading allows us to unravel the curious relationship of the Indian nation with its subaltern cultures.

Most of the art forms that are performed at such festivals fall under the category of folk arts and are practiced by the subaltern communities of the land. Unlike the classical art forms such as the Bharatnatyam or Kathakali in India, the folk arts do not claim their origins in Sanskrit texts such as the Natyashastra or Rigvedas. Instead, the folk art forms are inherently linked with the livelihoods of the communities practicing these arts. The cultural policies in India have rather successfully attempted to establish a hierarchy between classical and folk art forms, wherein folk art forms are ranked lower than the classical art forms. What this hierarchy suggests is that art forms which do not celebrate Sanskrit pasts are not worthy of being considered high art. The claims of these so called 'classical' art forms and their alleged origins in the golden age of Sanskrit is questionable and deserves an independent discussion.

This hierarchy between classical and folk arts implies different standards of remuneration and treatment to folk & classical artists, with classical artists being the pampered ones. The exclusionary attitude of the Indian state towards the subaltern art practices is further visible in the way in which the state promotes the folk and classical arts. To understand the biased attitude towards the folk arts, one could look at the festivals of classical arts organized by the state, such as the Khajuraho Dance festival or the Surashri Kesarbai Kerkar Classical Music Festival in Goa. These festivals of classical arts are organized as independent events and the name of each classical performer is individually publicized. On the other hand, the festivals of folk arts are organized along with handloom exhibitions, handicrafts sale and food courts, rendering them more on the lines of a chaotic bazaar instead of a cultural performance. Needless to say, the names of the artists performing these forms are never publicized, thereby reducing the folk artists to nameless & ahistorical bodies that merely perform a regional culture.

Most of these folk performances are associated with local rituals which are performed at specific times of the year and in specific spaces. By making the communities perform these art forms at these festivals that happen throughout the year, the organizers strip these art forms of their local context and convert them into cultural commodities that can be circulated

for the consumption of an urban elite across Indian metros. The implications of this commoditization demands serious attention as it systematically alters the aesthetic structure of these forms in terms of costumes, duration of performance etc. It is not to say that the folk forms shouldn't undergo changes in response to the times in which they are being practiced. In fact, changes in the art forms is what keeps them relevant in contemporary times. But these changes should occur organically within the community and not as a result of trying to fit them into a frame imposed by the cultural policies of the nation-state or because of global capital.

Taking cognizance of the aforementioned issues associated with cultural festivals that claim to celebrate folk cultures, one cannot help but see a strained relationship between the Indian nation and the subaltern communities. The subaltern communities are brought into mainstream spaces to exhibit their art and skills only when the nation seeks to celebrate its so called heritage and tired claims of unity in diversity. It is the same 'Indian' tradition, guided by casteist and communal doctrines, that otherwise ensures that these subalterns never become part of the mainstream. The benefits of the nation-state are not uniformly available to these communities on whose labor the nation validates its cultural existence. On the contrary, it appears that the Indian nation wants the subaltern communities to remain trapped in the bubble of their traditions, so that India's post-colonial desperation of establishing a pre-colonial cultural identity can be fulfilled.

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