

I can hear the drums

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Goreti Venkanna: a subaltern voice for those excluded from the mainstream.

The sheer music and drama of Goret Venkanna's protest songs hold audiences in thrall

Even the pea-soup fog that gagged Delhi after Diwali couldn't keep away Goret Venkanna's admirers from his performance at the India Habitat Centre. It did push his performance indoors but the Telugu poet-singer's voice was so strong that it leaked out of the auditorium doors and showed you the way in.

Venkanna's voice and his sung poetry are not really meant for the tame proscenium stage. They are meant for streets, maidans and village squares. About a hundred years ago, he would have been a burrakatha (sung poetry) minstrel for a troupe protesting the rule of Nizams or raging against the British.

In fact, till two years ago, when Telangana was formed, Venkanna had written and sung some of the best-known anthems for its statehood. Today, his music is still about resistance but the focus has shifted to several other causes — globalisation, urbanisation, environment, social inequality, Dalit politics, consumerism, rural distress and so on. His best-loved songs like 'Palle Kanneeru Peduthundo' and 'Galli Chinnadi Garibola Kadha' are about the destitute and the marginalised. "I trace this tradition to Kabir, Ravidas, Thyagaraja, Annamacharya, the great Vaggeyakaras (composer-singers). They wrote and sang about love and oppression, devotion and revolution," says the 53-year-old.

The burrakatha tradition of sung Bhakti poetry was first co-opted by Praja Natya Mandali, the leftist cultural troupe in Andhra, in the mid-1940s. It poured new, revolutionary content into the style to create songs of protest against the Nizam. Shaikh Nazar was a leading name in this tradition.

The other political poet-singer, even better known than Venkanna, is Gaddar who has a cult following among the more militant cadres of the left movement. But Dalit activist Paul Divakar says Venkanna's music and poetry is far more accessible because he is not a political ideologue. "He is a subaltern voice for those who are excluded from mainstream cultures," says Divakar.

Onstage at Samanvay, the annual Indian languages festival, Venkanna has the audience, many of who don't know a word of Telugu, in the palm of his hand. It isn't just the lyrics, the music, it is the sheer theatrics of his performance, which transcends language. And who doesn't love a rebel troubadour?

Venkanna is singing about the world's obsession with appearance and power: 'The crane leads a bare, clean life, falling asleep where it stands on one leg, it eats every morsel of fish it hunts, nests among thorns, but no one sings its praise. Why is the eagle given a place close to the gods but not the hard-working donkey? Why does the snake get to be the 'adishesha' while the buffalo is condemned to the margins? What is this culture we worship?'

His songs talk of the hardships of rural India, the poor, and the corrupt babus, but also of Johnny Walker for the rich, the Doon School clique, medical college scams, the beef festival, Ambedkar and the sleek highways of new India. Divakar traces his themes to the works of Jashuva and Sheikh Nazar. They move skillfully between folk themes, nature, Sita's grief, and modern politics without missing a beat. And the rhythm keeps you engaged at all times.

"That is the 'daruvu sampradaya' (rhythm-centric tradition) of my land. I learnt my music and poetry the way all folk artistes do, in the fields of my village in Gowaram in Mahbubnagar, listening to my father and other singers. We heard this music at festivals, rituals, everyday events, as they ploughed, harvested. Every movement in life in the village had its rhythm and poetry. It is my **warsa** (heritage)," he recalls.

He may be totally untrained, but Venkanna's stage presence is magical — he stands with one leg forward, like he is about to take flight, and sings in a resounding full-throated voice. The rhythm is infectious and is helped along by the dholak and of course the dhapu or the dafli that is a staple of subaltern folk music of the region. Every once in a while, when the beat turns extra exuberant, Venkanna starts to dance — nothing choreographed or planned, but wildly infectious nevertheless — using the stole around his neck as a prop.

On his fingers, ringed copper cymbals play the role of the anklet that burrakatha singers once wore. "I don't know all this *thari kitta thaka dhimi*," he says scornfully of classical dance and music. "And I don't know *saregama* either. But I am never off-beat and I am never off-key. That is the greatness of folk arts." Venkanna's art has moved to television and films as well. He even anchors a popular folk song show on television 'Rela Re Rela' and his most popular songs have been incorporated into films. But for him the real thrill is in taking the stage to the roar of audience approval.

Many of the themes Venkanna touches on repeatedly are those that you would think don't appeal to the young — materialism, ostentation, multinationals and so on. But he doesn't think so and scholars agree with him. "The young and the rich have a heart too. They eat rice and dal like us, not diamonds right? Modernity has left us all unsettled because while the outer world around us has changed, we haven't changed much inside. Those conflicts are a part of my poetry," he says. If you ask him about inspirational creative moments, he is dismissive. "It comes to me naturally like breathing. I don't sit down and 'create' and don't strive for 'greatness' in my music. It is unfabricated and organic. I truly cannot explain it," he says. "It comes from the world around me, the subconscious treasure of memories."

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