

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
West Tambaram-600045

A dissonant chord in the world of Carnatic music

TM. Krishna, the stormy petrel of Carnatic music, and this year's winner of The Music Academy, Madras's prestigious Sangita Kalamidhi award, is an ardent artist and an avid activist.

As an artist he is rooted in tradition but his vision is new, seeking boundless horizons. He is nourished by the past but not circumscribed by it. Like a gushing mountain stream ever refreshing but bound by its banks. As an activist, both in the domain of music and on societal and civic issues, he espouses causes, amplifying the voice of the voiceless. He ruffles the feathers of the conservatives on the concert stage and those in power on civic platforms. Some would say he delights in poking the bull in the eyes.

The artiste's stage

Any concert of Mr. Krishna is always teasingly enchanting. It is also provoking, disturbing, awakening. It is a feast for the purists of the art form, delightful for the avant-garde and is full of surprises to the devout believers who are pantheistic in their outlook. But the religious fanatics bristle at his irreverence toward long-held beliefs and feel outraged. The atheists and agnostics celebrate his audacity when he cocks a snook at the conservatives. The old, who are true connoisseurs of classical music, grudgingly admire him, even though he is unconventional. Modern youth who are drawn to classical music and students of that art adore him.

He has a huge fan base. He is gifted, charismatic and daring. He is an iconoclast but his music and his views have evolved and are shaped by eclectic interests and deep research. He is an author of books on classical music, art and the artisms of classical musical instruments and their loving devotion to their age-old craft and their discrimination, alienation, neglect and obscurity. He is a prolific writer, tireless speaker on art and contemporary issues, and an intrepid activist. His works have drawn critical acclaim as well as ire.

His music and his repertoire of actions always baffle you. He is an unbeliever who mesmerises you when he sings devotional songs in temple festivals. He is an innovator and a disruptor who does not subvert. It is when he challenges and questions our cultural and social spaces in the realm of art and its orthodoxies, gender bias and casteism, its hypocrisies and its undercurrent of politics that are often exclusive, divisive and discriminatory and holds a mirror to us that we are offended.

He may be a non-conformist. He may at times be abrasive and arrogant. He may not draw universal praise but he sparks lively debate and enriches art by celebrating various genres – folk, puranic, classical, *Dasa* and *Vichana sahitya*,



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The polarisation over the conferment of a title is unfortunate as music can become a many-splendoured offering only through a cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures

ancient and navodaya and Dalit poetry, Tamil songs, Sanskrit hymns and *shlokas* from epics, even Sufi, drawn from various languages and regions of India.

For instance, in one concert, in Bengaluru, after singing classical *ragas* and compositions of the Trinity (of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastr) and Purandara Dasa and a bouquet of Tamil songs including one by Perumal Murugan, he sang a composition of saint reformer Narayana Guru from Kerala and a lilting, melodious Urdu bhajan on Kanhaiya (Krishna) by Pakistani poet Hafiez Jalandhari who has also penned the national anthem of Pakistan. This may have seemed sacrilegious to the orthodox. Mr. Krishna says music is universal.

He is a serious student of the art, a purist when he sings the major *ragas* and compositions, and one who is constantly experimenting and transcending himself in every concert by seeking to explore new frontiers. His mastery and rendition of *kritis*, *ragas*, *alapanas*, *tanam*, *pallavis*, *kalpanaswaras* and *neravals* are refreshing and cast a spell on the audience.

A polarisation

The most coveted Sangita Kalamidhi title conferred on him has stirred up a hornet's nest among musicians and music enthusiasts. In fact social media seems to be driving the polarisation among musicians along abominable lines: right-wing politics and religiosity pitted against the ideological left and liberals; zealots of Brahminical ways and 'Hindutva' persuasion versus the followers of Periyar. With the citadel of action being Chennai, even the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is ranged against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In the reactions in the world of music, the sisters, Ranjani and Gayatri, who are popular classical singers, were first off the block in going public about withdrawing from the annual conference later in the year, which is hosted by the Music Academy. Among the points they raised were that they could not overlook Mr. Krishna's glorification of an anti-Brahmin persona such as EVR (Periyar). Vidwan N. Ravikiran, recipient of the Sangita Kalamidhi in 2017 announced that he would return the award as Mr. Krishna was 'trying to polarise and destabilise Indian classical music'. A few authors with leanings toward the ideologies and politics of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh rallied behind these artistes and attacked the Music Academy for dishonouring itself by honouring a 'Brahmin hater' and rabble-rouser.

In a letter addressed to Ms. Ranjani and Ms. Gayatri, the President, The Music Academy, Madras, N. Murali, firmly stated that, "The choice of Sangita Kalamidhi made year after year is a prerogative of The Music Academy and has

always been made after careful deliberation, with the sole criterion being musical excellence demonstrated over a significant and sustained career. This year the Executive Committee of the Academy chose T.M. Krishna for this accolade based on his excellence in music over a long career, with no extraneous factors influencing our choice."

We will be smothering the creativity of future generations if, in the name of tradition, we cultivate a certain bigotry imprisoned by the habit of a past generation. True art is not a magnificent tomb brooding over the immemorial past. Music, like art, belongs to the procession of life, and is as different as a tree is from a seed. It is like the river, ever old and ever new. It has a wealth of inheritance. It must constantly evolve and burst forth with new blossoms and continually be nourished by the past.

Mr. Krishna may have erred in boycotting the Music Academy and the various sabbas during the December festival held every year just as those who are now withdrawing from the festival and returning their awards are likely to be making a similar mistake.

The role of the artiste

There are many artistes who are content and totally immersed only in their art and innovate within its confines. There are also others who are bold activist reformers who challenge their traditional art forms, fight the inequities and prejudices that prevail in communities and cultural spaces, and also speak out against injustices in society in the wider context of politics and government. History has many examples of great poets, artistes and philosophers who were all rebels who went beyond their chosen calling.

What is the role of an artiste when he becomes an activist and when those roles overlap? As Camus said eloquently, "Considered as artists, we perhaps have no role to play in the world. But considered as men, yes... We must simultaneously serve both suffering and beauty."

All those invested in music and the arts, and the Academy, the various vibrant sabbas that patronise artistes, and the artistes themselves must rise above their differences and come together with humility in a spiritual quest to enrich music through dialogue, debate and assimilation. We must leave our inheritance richer for future generations. Art can become a many-splendoured offering only through a cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures or it will languish because of 'intellectual incest'.

Boycotting and responding with misplaced chauvinism is churlish on both sides of the divide. To recall Tagore's words, "The role of an artist is to take a creative part in the festival of life, to give expression to the infinite in man."

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China, a 'want-to-be' superpower

The first anniversary of the China-brokered détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 passed without much fanfare. The war in Gaza has enveloped almost all regional political and diplomatic capacities across the Persian Gulf, while also highlighting international actors and their core interests amidst this fallout. Beijing has taken a position that is clearly pro-Palestine, in line with its historical standing on the issue, alienating its relations with Israel.

However, in China's state-controlled media, Chinese President Xi Jinping's success in bringing together Riyadh and Tehran was highlighted as an institutional Chinese position to promote peace. In a glowing piece on the anniversary which quoted regional analysts who underscored a sense of fatigue with the West's 'conditional' relations, the Chinese media outlet Xinhua said, "Today, China's advocacy for peace still resonates with Middle East countries."

Beijing's aims

A push towards 'mediation diplomacy' has been an aspirational design for China on two major fronts. First, it is to position itself as an antithesis to what Beijing sees as decades worth of western interventionist policies, specifically in a region such as West Asia, where conflict has direct correlation with colonial history. Second, it is to increase its own geopolitical weight as a responsible international actor and power. However, both these aims have been confronted by realities around the war in Gaza as China has taken a clear stance towards the Arab side and has not condemned Hamas by name. Much of the reasoning behind this is to counter long-standing American influence and to take advantage of crevasses in regional diplomacy, specifically by the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are looking to chart their own paths of strategic autonomy and willing to partner with Beijing despite having close security ties with Washington DC.

In early 2023, Wang Yi (director of the Office of



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Other than dangling a cheque book, Beijing seems risk averse and has few answers to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints

the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee) gave his endorsement to a plan to set up a new China-backed international mediation organisation headquartered in Hong Kong.

According to reports, Algeria, Belarus, Cambodia, Djibouti, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Serbia and Sudan were signatories to the initial statement as a preparatory office was launched. The Chinese establishment hopes to link the mediation initiative to its expansive economic corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has extensive membership in West Asia as well, with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE among others being part of China's economic highways. Israel, being heavily reliant on the United States for its security, is not a signatory. However, Israel's embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aired the fact last year that China had invited him for a state visit.

China's absence in the Red Sea crisis

The war in Gaza has drawn strong red lines between China and Israel. This raises interesting questions on the exact role Beijing played in the Saudi-Iran détente. The probability of China being pulled into the process by Riyadh and Tehran, rather than actively brokering a deal, remains high. China has also been absent through the crisis in the Red Sea, where predominantly western naval forces have attempted to maintain the free flow of trade in this critical waterway. Contrarily, reports have suggested that Yemen-based Houthis were not targeting Chinese and Russian ships, suggesting a bypass potentially using leverages that Beijing has with its close partner Iran despite Tehran's calls for the Yemeni militia to cease attacks. If so, it shows China's crafty diplomacy was to predominantly protect its own interests and not wade into the crisis as an influential power looking to use its position to broker peace or even a ceasefire. Much of this kind of actual heavy lifting remains at the doorsteps of the White House.

This then begs the question. What is China's

actual role in the more challenging geopolitical regions such as West Asia? Beijing's support for the Palestinian cause without criticising Hamas practically aligns with the larger Arab posture. This stands against U.S. support for Israel, which is increasingly being criticised for its absolutist nature as the body count in Gaza continues to grow. China's intent for 'mediation' is non-existent in high-stake conflicts and is un-aspirational beyond the strategic aim of showcasing western, and, more specifically, American power and influence, as detrimental to both international stability and security.

In perspective

China seems content with predominantly displacing American hegemony without replacing it. Even a perception of being a 'soft hegemon' in the region will stand starkly against Chinese grandstanding against western policies. This is despite the fact that Beijing utilised the 'war on terror'-era to build closer ties with the U.S. and benefit its own security concerns regarding radicalisation and terrorism narratives around its restive Xinjiang region. But once again, these were all narrow geostrategic aims. Scholars Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac Kardon have highlighted in their work on how China, for its partner states, is more about their internal security rather than external – that is, prioritising political security of regimes rather than states. Arguably, this could appropriately explain what formalised Chinese mediation would aim for.

The war in Gaza colours Beijing as still being a 'want-to-be' superpower. Being risk averse and having a lack of alternatives to the historical West-centric policies (which it chides as being detrimental to global security and prosperity) makes Beijing stand out as hollow. Other than offering a sizeable cheque book, China still has few answers as substitutes to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints. For now, despite its size, it remains a utilitarian superpower for others to hedge against rather than being an upcoming traditional superpower.