

Dakshayagnam -- who was the honoree anyway?

By Narayan

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. This is a fairly general statement: “beauty” here refers to an aspect of that which is beholden, which appeals to the beholder. When people attend a performance like “Dakshayagnam” we can be sure that each person would interpret/enjoy/critique the aspect of the program suited to that person’s mood, knowledge and disposition. For example, I was talking to someone who had carefully noted the ragas sung that night, and was complimentary about the choices made. Others, particularly those from Kerala, and therefore perhaps more knowledgeable about this art form, would have focused on the dance rendition more closely than others. A few yoga -oriented people would have admired the effort it takes to stand unmoving in one place for two hours to play an instrument, as did the maddalam vidwan. I appreciated the whole performance more as an everyman, than as an expert. But as I watched the program my mind started to make connections, and started to speculate about what was being enacted before us. In Tamil Nadu, when a girl gets married, she goes from the “pirandaveedu” (the home of birth) to pugundaveedu (“the home that she enters”). Culturally, the presumption is that once married, the daughter’s interests and loyalties are completely aligned with that of her husband, and not much is expected of her from her home of birth. It is thus safe to conclude in Ramayana, that Sita never reverts to Janaka or Mithila. In Mahabharatha, the story of Sikandi reinforces the same principles.

Perhaps it was not considered appropriate for Dakshayani to have those residual loyalties to her father, and thus a lesson for her? Or was it that the father’s attachment to his child was so much that he could not accept a son-in-law to come into the relationship? Maybethis a variation of the Oedipus complex applied to girls? Or could it be that Dakshayani wanted to see the rest of her family, especially her sisters, and this was the reason she wanted to go? Finally, is this story of Dakshayagnam more popular in Kerala, which happens to be matriarchal, because the birth a daughter is a great cause for celebration (in India, even today, a male child is the preferred off spring in most places)?

When I read the Dakshyagnam as a child, I remember being filled with awe about the majesty of Shiva who without moving from his place, caused the death of Daksha and his cronies (although in the version I know, there was no Badhrakali; Veerabhadhra alone was able to get the job done). This story also reinforced the importance of respecting the proper protocols in social and religious affairs. After all, isn’t it true that at the time of marriage, the father-in-law literally washes the feet of the bridegroom, who is likened to Mahavishnu himself until he ties the knot? As I was thinking about Dakshayani’s expectations from her father my mind darted to a recent book review on George Washington (1776, David McCullough, Simon & Schuster) in the New Yorker. It appears that when Lord Richard Howe, George Washington’s British counterpart in the revolutionary war, dispatched a letter addressed to “George Washington, Esq.” through a young lieutenant, he was rebuffed by Washington’s trusted officers declaring that “there is no person in our army with that address”. When he returned three days later with a new letter, this time addressed to “George Washington, Esq., etc. etc.”, he was rebuffed again. Finally Howe sent to inquire whether General Washington would agree to receive a new emissary, who was more senior, but carried the same letter. George Washington met him but refused to acknowledge it. When the officer pointed out the “etc. etc.” implied everything, Washington replied, “and anything”. Such is the importance of proper protocol in the affairs of men, and as it turns out, even in the affairs of Gods.

Returning to Dakshyagnam, I was struck by the attention to detail with regard to the costumes. They were all authentic and wonderful, except for Veerabhadhra. The bulb on his nose made him a bit like a clown. The chenda and the maddalam were excellent, as was the singing. I especially liked the humor (e.g. the golden aired Dakshayani relieves herself on Daksha) and the gusto with which the battle was fought between the good guys (actually guys and girls) and the bad guys. The kids who were present that night probably could not believe that they were being treated to an exciting and full-bodied battle in what they probably assumed would be a boring dance program.

Dakshayagnam was a wonderful cultural and artistic performance.

[Narayan is a long time life member of Sruti.]