

KAPILA VATSYAYAN: A TRIBUTE

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It may not be an exaggeration to term Dr Kapila Vatsyayan as legendary, for she had all the elements that qualify for this status, which incidentally, very few cultural analysts and promoters could ever reach. In the performing and the visual arts, there are larger numbers who achieved iconic positions but in the domain of cultural popularisation, theorisation and management, we can recall only very few. She is the last in the unforgettable trio, with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Pupul Jayakar as her predecessors. Of course, none was a clone and each of them embarked upon separate missions within the vast space of culture.

Every time one asked her about age, she would promptly reply “110 — are you happy?” She died at 92, but despite quite a few age-related ailments, she was unbelievably active and hands on till the end. She went about her task quite enthusiastically and attended her Asia Project Office located in the India International Centre quite regularly. It was, after all, her real home. She was a Life Trustee of the Centre and pretty possessive about it and nothing could hold her back. At the same time, she had no issues about sitting quite so unobtrusively and unpretentiously in the back rows of the audience in several events in the auditoriums. She made it up, however, with her emphatic interjections in the seminar rooms.

She had begun her involvement in the arts with classical dance and though she moved on well beyond it, she could always tuck in her sari a bit and demonstrate *mudras* to women who could well be her granddaughters. She supported the Kathak Maharajs from Lucknow and treated Birju as her dear young sibling and the maestro always blushed as she said so on stage.

Kapila Vatsyayan had been inducted into the ministry of education that had subsumed ‘culture’ in the early decades after Independence. In fact, she was in this ministry for a long period to contribute her domain knowledge and expertise, before the bureaucracy took over totally. In this ministry, Kapila Vatsyayan had seen it all — from Maulana Azad to Manmohan Singh, as the latter had also held the culture portfolio from mid 2009 to early 2011. She had worked in almost every position in the ministry and in many of its organisations. As she put it, she was “Under Secretary to Special Secretary” and was thus an encyclopaedia of knowledge that no dry files could ever substitute. She taught me more of culture in the last fifteen years than I had learnt in the preceding part of my life. As one fated to serve the longest tenure in the culture ministry, I often fell back on her memory that was uncannily sharp despite advancing years, whenever I needed to understand some past experience of the ministry.

She was a totally involved institution-builder who had the rare skill of persuading powers that be to make the investment, and once she received their approval and funding, she went after the *babus* quite relentlessly until the project materialised. Her crowning glory was the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

(IGNCA) but then she had her fingers in many other pies. Tibetan and other scholars are especially grateful to her for assistance in establishing centres for Tibetan scholarship in Sarnath, Ladakh and Dharamshala. Though she was not directly connected with them when I had to be their man in Delhi, for absolutely no fault of mine, she heaped me with a lot of advice. There was no escape from this venerable lady who could be affectionate to some and quite exasperated with others. She did not mind disagreements, but if she ever felt that someone was out to harm her dream children, she could be quite severe. Those who have been at the receiving end nurse their bruises even now. But, I guess that if she was not so intense and emotionally involved, she would never be able to set up or help establish the largest number of autonomous bodies supported by a rule-driven ministry.

I have personally witnessed how passionately she espoused causes that few could even think of taking up. With her top-view of the cultural sector, she realised that epigraphy had lost out badly at the university stage when competing disciplines attracted students from this laborious task of deciphering inscriptions on leaf, paper, stone and metal. She kept haranguing us until we obtained the required data from teaching institutes that are anyway difficult to coordinate. She pursued this subject, but we made little headway. As she had predicted, India now faces an acute shortage of experts who can read the countless inscriptions on different media that are languishing in our holdings. She was equally worried about dying languages and tried her best to resuscitate at least some. Then, when Indian cultural institutions acted rather lethargic about documenting the treasure trove of our 'intangible cultural heritage' she pressurised the prime minister's office to summon several inter-ministerial meetings. Thanks largely to such overwhelming insistence, we have a reasonably large numbers of detailed dossiers available.

Other than classical dance, her expertise also covered music, art, sculpture, cultural theory and comparative cultural studies. The innumerable books and tracts that she has left authored or edited on different aspects of culture will keep providing guidance to scholars and those interested for many years to come. Among them are *The Square and the Circle of Indian Arts* (1997), *Bharata: The Natya Sastra* (1996), and *Matralaksanam* (1988) and *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts* (2007). Her *Plural Cultures and Monolithic Structures* (2013) revealed her anguish quite clearly and we often debated on her postulates quite passionately.

Dr Vatsyayan was perhaps the only person who had received the top award or fellowship from all the three national akademis— Sangeet Natak, Lalit Kala and Sahitya. She was conferred the second highest civilian award, the Padma Vibhushan and also served as Member of the Rajya Sabha. She was also given the rare honour of being appointed as a member of the executive board of UNESCO, Paris, the highest body in the field of culture in the world.

With her passing, an unfortunate void is bound to be visible in the scholarship and promotion of the arts in India.