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TRADITION, MODERNITY AND OTHER DISABLING DUALITIES  
IN INDIAN MUSICAL PRACTICE

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**ABSTRACT**

In India, music is a very vibrant social experience. Its reach goes beyond its aesthetic and emotional affect and reaches far beyond into the realms of knowledge and theory building on the one hand and history and politics of representation on the other. It is an art practice that exhibits a continuous historical contiguity while simultaneously occupying contemporary market spaces. This paper looks at how inadequate theoretical categories in History hamper our understanding of art practices such as music in India, turning such practices from being contemporaneous or seamlessly straddling the past and present to becoming merely contemporary satisfying our need for 'heritage' in the present<sup>1</sup>.



**KEYWORDS:** vibrant social experience , aesthetic and emotional affect.

**INTRODUCTION**

The three problems that we consider here in this paper

1. The idea that there is a definite duality called tradition and modernity and that these are loosely correlated with time periods that art practices are located and sometimes with regional practices
2. The idea that each of these ideas engender a set of characteristics that are increasingly divergent, in cases, even indicating that somewhere in the future they will completely dissociate from one another, such as classical and folk, conservative and innovative, tradition as socially restrictive and exclusionary as against modern and innovative being socially liberating etc.
3. And that the former two aspects get valuated on a measure of regression and progression, where *modernity* and innovation are words that come to necessarily denote progression from an earlier under developed state that is carried on by *tradition*.

The problem, of the duality of practices as traditional and modern, is theoretically well entrenched in the practice of History and hence cannot be argued only with historical data. The later two problems really only further qualify the first one. These terms have become defining ideas in modern commentaries on

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett, "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production", *Museum International*, ISSN 1350-0775, no. 221-222 (vol. 56. No. 1-2, 2004), pg. 56

music as well, except that traditional musicians who are well entrenched in musical practice find such terminologies counter productive to practice, but for most parts they just ignore them or then use them in social articulation. Hence I would like to bring to this discussion the current circumstances under which these problems are being examined.

Eric Hobsbawm eloquently problematises the “social uses of the past”<sup>2</sup> as requiring an analysis with regards to history being genealogy and chronology. In the introduction to this book he repeatedly returns to the question of how the idea of history as progression has not been understood critically and inevitably this section centres around the ideas of tradition, innovation and modernity. Later, as part of the same argument where he wonders sardonically at use of history for Marxists he asks “What precisely did or do modern Marxists gain from the knowledge that there were slave rebellions in ancient Rome which, even supposing their aims to have been communist, were by their own analysis doomed to failure or to produce results which could have little bearing on the aspirations of modern communists? Clearly the sense of belonging to an age-old tradition of rebellion provides emotional satisfaction”<sup>3</sup> His entire thesis being that whether one agrees or disagrees with the business of seeking the past, the very act of how we connect with the past needs a philosophical examination.

This discussion is a useful prelude to understanding the dilemma of practitioners traditional music, as we look precisely at how practitioners use the past, both to develop techniques for the present and to develop an enduring social identity. I look at both aspects of technique and identity in an attempt to problematize the engagement of the musician communities with practice and change. I use the word ‘tradition’ to mean technique, practice and agency and not just a temporal location or art practice from the past.

### Reconciling past framework and current practice in Indian music

In India today we have musical practices that have continued for many centuries as remembered by the practitioners and as documented in literature. Both chronological and genealogical their memory not only represents information that helps reconstruct the form of the music, but also chronicles events of transitions and change both in musical techniques as well as the social environment. For instance, in musical practices which are today called “classical” or even more recently as “art” music, great emphasis is laid on maintaining form and grammar and the legacy of a label of authenticity is highly coveted. These forms of music trace back to authoritative texts on Indian Music such as the Sangita Ratnakara. The curious fact is that this text authored by the perceptive Sarngadeva, is, according to several commentators, something of a bridge between earlier grammatical texts and evolving practice,<sup>4</sup> indicating that even as far back as 1200 AD the question of dealing with change, of alignment between practice and text, imaginations and grammar was an active one. Commentators and scholars regard this text as a highly valuable one and a modern text of its times and it is for this precise reason, that it attempts to articulate change and mark the transition of practice between two periods<sup>5</sup>.

Sarngadeva a Kashmiri by origin worked as an accountant at the court of the Yadava king Singhana in the year 1200 in Devagiri (present day Daulatabad, Maharashtra). He was an expert in both music and medicine and his seminal work the Sangita Ratnakara has remained one of the guiding texts for Indian musical practices that consciously engage with sastra or grammar. As commentaries often record, King

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, Abacus, London, 1998, .pg 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg 27.

<sup>4</sup> R.K. Shringy, Prem Lata Sharma, *Sangitaratnakara of Sarngadeva:Text and English Translation*, Vol 1, Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2007, pg xix

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pg xxxviii

Bhillama of the Yadava dynasty invited Sarngadeva's grandfather Bhaskara to Devagiri in appreciation of his scholarship in Ayurveda<sup>6</sup>.

I discuss the role of sastra or grammar in transitioning practices, a little later however I would like to draw attention to the fact that there has always been a cosmopolitanism in knowledge production in India and Sarngadeva's own history stands as proof to this. Were there fundamental differences in the music and theoretical tools that this family practiced or used. as Kashmiris living in Marathi land? It is extremely interesting that in fields such as music, perhaps dance, literature, sculpture and even medicine, regional and linguistic differences were reconciled deftly under larger philosophical, technical and grammatical frameworks. Over the centuries, for successive generations of musicians and musicologists, Sarngadeva through this text on practice, became a reconciliator of time and space and of regionality and realm.

In its time and soon after it was written the Sangita Ratnakar seems to have also been read and used by scholars in other fields such as literature and rhetoric. However, the question remains as to how such a text, rich in both history and historicity did not become a study in mainstream History in India. Perhaps because of the oft lamented reason that History remained restricted, with its predominant emphasis on politics and state. Alternate readings of social and biographical narratives do not arrive until the subaltern wave of Feminist and the Dalit movements unearthed 'oral narratives' as a valid source of framing histories of communities and later on,.

Outside of musicology, musical practices in India are studied as art or aesthetics, never as composite memory practices. As such, in popular musical parlance they are categorised under very perfunctory categories such as classical, folk, contemporary, devotional, cinema etc. While the later ones indicate the location of the music, the former three become fuzzy in definition. Contemporary too is not yet fully problematic as it is yet to fully develop into a genre, however the terms classical and folk are such well entrenched categories that they have now come to represent political positions within Indian music. The origin of these categories remains rooted in a rather lazy understanding of what constitutes music. Even practicing and thinking musicians both of the 'classical' and 'folk' genre often hold on to these existing categories that seem to be based more on their social locations than their musical structures. Even when arguing for a better understanding of folk, we still seem to think of folk and classical in terms of the economic and social capital they each enjoy or are divested of<sup>7</sup>. But to begin to argue for them as knowledge bases or knowledge locations we have to first argue for music as

### Vocabularies of practice and writing better historical theories for arts and crafts

Within Indian music, categories could be built based on other considerations and if these are seriously considered then they might lend a much better understanding to the evolution of practice across fields and locations. One such paired category is that of *desi* and *marga* Sangita that appears in early texts such as the Ratnakara<sup>8</sup>. A contemporary commentary on Kallinatha's interpretation of the original text, brings in a very lucid interpretation of Marga and Desi. "The term Marga is etymologically explained by 'K' as derived from the Skt. root *mrg* to seek. Thus marga is the way, the technique or practice based on the findings and the investigation carried out by Brahma, the creator in the subject matter of the four Vedas..... So, by implication marga means classical, while desi means regional practice". Desi is defined by Sarngadeva as music "that entertains people according to their taste in the different regions."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> pg xiii, ibid

<sup>7</sup> T.M.Krishna, The Southern Music, *The Karnatik Story*, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2013, pg 21,22

<sup>8</sup> R.K. Shringy, Prem Lata Sharma, *Sangitaratnakara of Sarngadeva:Text and English Translation*, Vol 1, Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2007, pg 10

<sup>9</sup> ibid, pg 10

Although the current authors Shringy and Premlata Sharma, whose translations of Kallinatha's commentary on Sangita Ratnakara I have used here, do make a parallel with the terms classical and folk, nowhere in these definitions does the musical form come to represent a people. The key-words to follow are *investigation* and *taste*. While one mode of music develops through *investigation* the other mode moves along what people *like*. This idea creates a very fecund possibility of mobility in music as both investigation and taste are necessarily things that change the form and presentation of a practice. For what we previously considered as folk, a form that is representative of a location and a regional boundedness can possibly become a stream of gathering musical complexity and consciousness. This is the point where the development of such a historical perspective hits a road block, as even within societies like India we find very little appreciation of this dynamic mobility of musical practice. Much of musical scholarship still goes with categories like classical and folk, modern and traditional and continues of box musical forms and styles within them. This has a very restrictive effect on our understanding of reality and worse it may actually interfere with the natural evolution of these forms, by transferring this restricted mode of thinking to the practitioners.

Seen in this context even valuable arguments that question the relevance of existing categories, such as the one against decontextualizing folk repertoire, that Krishna makes, when speaking of folk appearing in non ritualistic modern performances, begin to sound like a political call for self determination of the 'folk genre' in an ongoing battle of representation between opposing social camps, rather than a call for better theory.<sup>10</sup> And there are numerous musical forms in India that fall right between these two definitions, for instance, the music of the Manganiyar and the Langa in Rajasthan that I use as my case study in this research.

### Validating practice, knowledge, transgression and transition

What we now require in order to support the development of an intrinsic perspective on the history of Indian music is elaborate historical work that can cull out historicity from within musical techniques, repertoire and social practices surrounding musical traditions and employ this information to create theories that are more well integrated into practice of Indian music. Other wise commonly held conceptions about "traditional" music in India as that which has managed to sustain itself in some unchanging form and hence upheld as being either sacred or as a rare heritage, can never be challenged.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The evidence to the fact that change and progression have been inbuilt in the system of practice, may be found not merely in the themes of musical repertoire but also in the techniques of the musical forms. The problem for practitioners in the present times comes from the existing categories of tradition and modern and the associated validation from engagements like conservation and innovation, which have been borrowed from historical constructions of society. Innovation has come to refer to a rejection of the past or a certain vanquishing of status quo. Hobsbawm says "the problem of systematically rejecting the past arises only when innovation is recognized both as inescapable and socially desirable : when it represents progress". He further raises the issue of a general fuzziness how innovation is validated and how words like "new and revolutionary" being to connote "better and more desirable"<sup>11</sup>.

In the past century we see that these categories have entered the text and temper of musicians to the extent that they have now begun to see their own practice in these terms. It is common to find artists calling themselves 'traditional artists' and as receivers of 'authentic musical legacies'. And at other times one finds artists who claim the skill of inn

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<sup>10</sup> T.M.Krishna, *The Southern Music, The Karnatik Story*, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2013, pg 21,22

<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, Abacus, London, 1998, pg.22

ovating to suit the aesthetic demands of the time, separating themselves out from the lot that are mired in tradition. So we find Manganiyar singers, who are ritual musicians attached to patron communities whose life cycle rites are incomplete and devalued without the presence of their musicians, today servicing the modern entertainment industry, calling themselves '*traditional folk musicians*', singing *sufi* music under group names such as *Manganiyar seduction*. This is an important instance of a historicity playing out in redefining technique and repertoire, identity and genre in order to stay relevant. *Traditional* Manganiyar repertoire, strictly speaking is not *sufi*, although it does include poets like Bulleshah and Kabir sometimes. They assume a legacy to this genre, *traditional sufi*, because this has become a well known genre among cosmopolitan urban audiences who are their new source of livelihood. These new audiences find band names such as Manganiyar Seduction attractive but if one looks closely, in the strictest form of its definition, *folk* is supposed to be spontaneous and un-audenced. So many contradictions and yet this practice of music thrives. This community is an very interesting study in the present times because as Sarngadeva did they are writing their own theories of reconciliation and constructing their practices in order to stay relevant.

To be very clear, I am not concerned about the validity of the claims to legacy or innovation that these musicians make in order to be in the business of singing, but I am pointing out to the very requirement to include these ideas in characterising their music because they engender the discussion on tradition. They tease out core questions like: are not continued practices naturally traditional, and if they have survived and continued have they not changed in which case what would be the need to highlight innovation as a departure from tradition? For practices such as music, history is a tool of constructing form hence a periodized history of events is criminally insufficient and the lack of validation of the artists' consciousness of history in terms of a memory of crafting practice, is also disabling to the evolution of the practice.

These questions that point out to the validation of practice and knowledge by terminologies that have entered the society, through an extrinsic imagination of form and value become axial to our investigation into what is tradition. These categories need critical examination because they are not merely harmlessly descriptive, they gradually come to determine the very techniques of a musical practice and the resultant *forms* of musical practice, pitching one technique against another, one repertoire against another in a race for validation, and a war to occupy the realm of relevance, in the market.

An intrinsic view on the history of musical practice in india, cannot be merely based on historical events. It must be based on a home grown philosophy of music and art that each society holds. Questions about the construction of form and the rules of such construction, the creative as well as social processes of such construction and finally the shared experiences of the society with regards to the given musical form, all go into forming the basis of historicity in practice. As such, an external critique on where a musical practice is located in terms of a progression from tradition to modern, both in the techniques that engender it and the representational identities that it creates in society, will surely be wanting in a more fuller understanding, if the fundamental philosophy and engineering of art and form-creation in that society is not considered.

### An introduction to the Case Studies

To illustrate this point, I would like to take two examples from two different musical practices in India. The opera in Carnatic music and the the Bandhej or Jhangda repertoire of the Manganiyar. Both these examples fall between categories and taunt us to expand existing definitions.

Musical operas and plays are as much part of the Karnatik repertoire as complex and more technically sophisticated compositional forms such as the varnam and kriti. One such opera that was

composed by the Maratha king of Tanjavur, Shahji Bhonsle ( r.1684-1712), is the Pallaki Seva Prabandham<sup>12</sup> is unique because it is the only one that seems to have come down with a well preserved musical score. This entire work today represents the Karnatik genre for want of better categorization. The story it says is of Siva and Parvati and their conjugal confluence. It is composed for most part, as a conversation between common women, who are hand-maidens of Parvati and is perhaps meant to be sung also to a non scholarly but royal audience and nobility. Its language, a lucid and a period Telugu that has attracted much attention among contemporary Telugu scholars, is couched in simple but grammatically sound tunes, in a collection of Ragas that repeat themselves through the opera but unfold into very diverse evocations, in each version. The social milieu of Tanjavur, at the time of this opera is a multilingual one, where under the rule of the Maratha who succeeded the Nayaka rulers, several musical forms from Andhra desa and Maharashtra thrived well. Besides the Sastra Sangita of Carnatic music that was about to enter its glorious centuries, there were influences of Devadasi music, the Srngara padas and javalis, the theatrical Yakshagana, the Marathi Lavani, gondhal and Kirtan ( Harikatha ) were all jostling for space and it was in this space that a confluence of influences produced some of the most interesting musical works prior to the trinity of Carnatic music entered the picture<sup>13</sup>.

The Trinity, Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Tyagaraja have shaped Karnatik music as we know it today but in in early 1700s when Shahji Bhonsale was composing and presiding over diverse compositional forms, all these genre seem to have enjoyed social validity regardless of their themes and musical style and complexity. Further through this fluidity Karnatik music as we see today gained many more layers. Infact we hear about the Pallaki Seva Prabandha for the first time in modern India, through one of the texts of Subbaram Dikshita the great conserver of *Sangita Sastra*, the Grand nephew of Muttuswami Dikshita, the epitome of all that was mystical-semantic in music. This opera and its genre thus comes to represents a point of prolific evolution of music in Southern India, where performing arts and literature came together in myriad forms to create musical experiences that seamlessly occupied the whole range between Desi and Marga in a most illustrative fashion and yet, 300 years later, the opera is well placed under the rubric of Karnatik *classical* divesting a whole range of compositional experiences of so many different communities of people.

Our other example pertains to the Bandhej repertoire of the manganiyar and the Langa musicians. But before we analyses the example a little interlude on the idea of folk music. What ever its definitions may be in current scholarship there is a new movement to hoist folk music as the original and the native expression. This may rejuvenate the self respect and status of the 'folk' in the music and this move to making folk music representational of rights movements among economically impoverished and culturally devalued communities, especially tribal communities has been employed all across the world. For music is an inarguably effective medium of evocation and has delivered success to political revolutions time and again. But the question is how does that music evolve and change? If the folk change then why do musics that represent them not change? Here too we encounter the great conundrum of representation and identity and the utter neglect of technical and performative aspects of the practice. My concern though, is, really how music becomes representative of the evolution of a community rather than becoming the tag of static regional, political identities.

The Manganiyar and Langa are muslim communities in Rajasthan whose community occupation is music. They are vocalist and instrumentalists and also genealogist to particular communities such as the Jats, Sindhi Sipahi and the Bishnoi. The Lang were discovered for the rest of the world only as late as 1953 and Manganiyars were not recorded until 1962. Infact Komal Kothari the famous folklorist of Rajasthan claims in

<sup>12</sup> Davesh Soneji, *The Sankar Pallaki Seva Prabandham :An Essay, Pallaki Seva Prabandhamu: An opera by Sahaji Maharaja*, The C.P. Ramaswami Iyer Foundation, Chennai, 2012, pg. 138

<sup>13</sup> Ibid pg. 141

his published interview that he did not know about the existence of manganiyar musicians in Rajasthan until 1960<sup>14</sup>. 40 years later, they are the face of Rajasthan not just in India but around the world. The unique tones and hues of Manganiyar music at once became global and folk. Today among the Manganiyar there are three trends. One is the old way, singing for patrons and eking out a living out of land and as labor. The second is to use the tremendous advantage of a wonderful vocal ability honed over generations to perform to contemporary audiences and in movies. And the third and a handful of musicians who while engaging with both spaces the patronage and the audiences, ask questions about relevance and continuity. Conversations with such older musicians among the Manganiyar and Langa like Lakha Khan, the Late Channan Khan, Hakam Khan, Nek Muhammad, Asghar Khan and Anwar Khan, invariably brings us to repertoire and techniques of melody and rhythm. There are such grammatical particularities that inform their understanding of music, that their system although largely falling under the Aalapa Sangita that the Ratnakara would call it, does exhibit all characteristics of shastriya or *classical* music. While they have no nomenclature for the 7 notes, they use them in order as other systems of classical Indian music, although their system is classified on the basis of musical occasions rather than structural aspects, the two seem integrally connected. The musicians are proud of the technical complexity they achieve and yet when they speak of it they will themselves call it folk. As one musician put it when asked about the term folk, "it is the name under which we have traveled abroad and performed, what does it matter to us".

Jangda or music of serious and glorious occasions such as the return of a victorious patron from war or of a wedding, is also a complex musical entity. These match the compositional complexity that, say, Karnatik compositions reach, although they are different in structure. Since their patrons are increasingly impoverished and the possibility of audiences for *folk* and sufi music outside of their patronage framework increases, the Jangda or Bandhej repertoire is disappearing. It has ceased to represent any category, aesthetic, ideological or livelihood. The death of the sophisticated Bandhej repertoire for want of categories to list it under, truly brings Manganiyar and Langa music closer to the prevalent definition of folk, a music that merely represents a region and belongs to the common people who are native to a place.

In conclusion I would like to pre-empt the argument that, building theories upwards from practices specific to cultures is somehow denying the universality of the historical method, by arguing that this is the only possible way other than archival research to link historical research to objective analysis. Beginning with repertoire analysis one may further explore for a better, more universal method of understanding time, change, place, space and identity. Such analysis could be derived by starting from ideas that musicians know familiarly, through their practice. This is not another sub-genre of social history along the lines of feminist history or subaltern history, this is an attempt to reclaim vocabulary that is rooted in practice, in order to extend its use in analysis and description of the practice, after it is valued by the measures and standards of the practice not by remote theoretical constructs developed on the basis of distant experiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan an oral history*, Penguin Books India, 2003, pg. 237