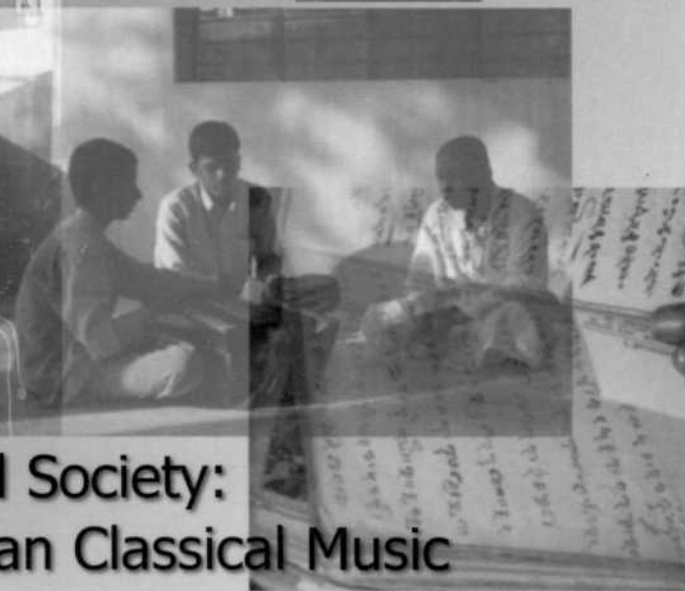


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**Aesthetics, History and Society:
the Case of North Indian Classical Music**

Transported by Song: Music and Cultural Labour in Dharwad

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I

This essay is an exercise in thinking through the issues involved in putting together a new project. It will aim to set out some of the problems I am encountering as I try to formulate my research questions—the dilemmas over directions to take or avoid; the anxiety about how to interpret diverse sorts of materials; about what methods to adopt; about how to constitute my archive.

My last project took me deep into the analysis of Caribbean popular music in terms of the social grids that sustain it. The book, *Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration between India and Trinidad* (2006), was followed by a documentary film called *Jahaji Music* (dir. Surabhi Sharma, 2007). The film engaged with the musical culture of the Caribbean through the journey and collaborations of an Indian musician, Remo Fernandes. The Remo project—which tried to pursue the possibility of connection in another sphere, that of actual musical practice—seemed to be a logical if somewhat unexpected outcome of the earlier scholarly endeavour. Perhaps the most predictable direction I could have taken next would have been to pursue the story of the Indian diaspora and its musical negotiations in the United Kingdom for example, where once again the Indian and the African come together to form different sorts of cultural equations. However, the insights I gained from thinking about music, nationalism and race in Trinidad took me in another direction altogether. The point of the comparative frame I proposed in my book was not simply to look at two different contexts, but to see how the questions I was asking could be brought back ‘home’ to India.

What did I gain from thinking about popular music in Trinidad? That consolidation and displacement occur together and form part of a continuing process. [Here the consolidation and displacement had to do with notions of racial identity and citizenship.] That this complicated process is often manifested most visibly as cultural practice, and as music production in particular. That in our modernity—fashioned as it is through and in the wake of colonialism—thinking about the music might help us see one of the important ways by which ideas of who we are/who we want to be are put together, circulated, and gain purchase. That music is related to the structure of social aspiration and issues of social mobility. That female sexuality is central to processes of nation-making and the production of modern subjects, and that music is one such process. Thinking about these issues has brought me to my own cultural context, which is that of southern India.

II

My project is inspired by the questions outlined above, but its goal will not be to explain the constructedness of Hindustani music in Dharwad or India more generally. Neither will I want to pursue a line of inquiry that focusses on questions like 'what *is* Hindustani music in the region'? My interest lies more specifically in asking what Hindustani music – both as cultural practice and aspirational horizon – came to mean in Dharwad. The period I am studying is approximately the 1890s to the 1940s, and the region is Hubli-Dharwad in particular and North Karnataka (or the Southern Maratha Country as it was called in the Bombay Presidency) more broadly speaking.

After Trinidad, I began to look more carefully for the music question in discourses of modernity in India. Often this question seemed to be part of a larger effort in colonial society that gathered momentum in the early twentieth century to work towards the re-codification of musical texts (texts authorizing certain kinds of musical practice as well as the actual text or *bandish/sahitya* of a composition) and the recasting of performative traditions. If I had come directly to Hindustani music, either as a student or a lay analyst, solely from within an Indian context, I suspect it would have appeared before me as a 'tradition' with its own strict and inviolable rules. This would have had more to do with received notions with maybe just a hundred year history, the emergence of which coincides with the codification and assertion of 'national' cultural practices in India. Historians have pointed to other contexts especially those involving women where notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' take shape and acquire solidity as part of a colonial contestation (Chatterjee 1993 and Sarkar 2001), leading to the *fixing* of certain elements of cultural practice as 'authentic' and 'traditional'. What I am referencing here is not music alone, but a range of other social and cultural practices which went through a process by which they came to be named as traditional.

Coming via Trinidad and its volatile musical public sphere, where the debates pass through and are shaped by music but are not just about music, I have begun to look for similarities in terms of what is being negotiated around the practice of what comes to be called classical music in India. There is however a major difference between music in Trinidad, which sings explicitly about racial difference or the experience of slavery or indentureship or the making of the Trinidadian nation, and music in the Southern Maratha Country. It would be difficult to read off from the text of the latter any sense of how social space was being negotiated, since the textual material of Hindustani music did not change greatly in Dharwad, except when certain singers were importuned by the Karnataka unification movement's leaders to include Kannada songs in their repertoire. More about this below.

While a few scholars have tried to give us historical insights into the formation of what is today called Hindustani music and the social background of its practitioners and patrons (Delvoye, 2000, Manuel 1996, Trivedi 2000), the general disposition of audiences and singers today is to eternalize that music, seeing it as part of that which in the twentieth century came to be called "Indian culture". Although the musical strands that today form the Hindustani

archive go back many centuries, the consolidation and emergence of a recognizable and distinct body of music took place over the last four hundred years or so (Trivedi 2000). Around the mid-17th century, when the Mughal capital shifted from Agra to present-day Delhi, the “classical traditions of the Mughal court” incorporated the “regional musical patterns of Delhi” (Trivedi, 281). When Muhammad Shah (1719-48) came to the throne, court traditions of music were strongly influenced by folk traditions. During Mohammad Shah’s reign, the *khayal* became the most prominent musical form, as also the *qawwali*. In a third phase, Lucknow, the seat of the Awadh court, became the artistic and cultural centre when it provided refuge to those leaving Delhi as the Mughal empire fell apart; this phase ended when Awadh was annexed by the British in 1856.

This was also the time (mid-18th century) that courtesans and dancing girls came to be the significant practitioners of both music and dance, challenging the pre-eminence of professional communities of musicians. Nearly a century later, the establishment of the British empire and the dwindling power of the princely states (these states, which were under the Indirect Rule system, and were nominally headed by Indian kings and princes, constituted over 30% of the area in British India), led to the dismantling of the elaborate establishments that had provided patronage to musicians and other cultural practitioners. (Sundar 1995). These performers, including *tawaifs* and courtesans, began to move out of the northern regions and travel westwards and southwards, looking for new patrons - which they found in the rising Gujarati merchant class of Bombay and the heads of the small princely states that dotted the region below the Vindhya mountains. New performative genres took shape, including the *sangeet natak* or musical play, which brought trained musicians, both Muslim and Hindu, to a wider audience.

In the late nineteenth century, efforts were made by members of the professional classes in the cities to engage in discussions about music pedagogy and to start modern music schools as opposed to the traditional *gharanalgurukul* system, where the student lived with the teacher’s family. The performance which Muslim men and courtesan women dominated was sought to be purified, and returned to the Sanskrit texts which were supposed to have authorized the musical practice (Farrell 1997, Qureshi 1991). Similar processes were undertaken with other kinds of performance, as for example with the South Indian dance form, *sadir*, which became transformed through nationalist intervention into *Bharatanatyam* (Natarajan 1997).

In their new and nationalized forms, these performative traditions were taken over by (Hindu) middle class women and men and relocated to a different social space. Thus relocated, it was possible to celebrate these as truly Indian, sometimes even as Hindu, with their illegitimate origins obscured in that part of the past we were urged to disown. The early twentieth century Brahmin codifiers and teachers of Hindustani music, like V.N.Bhatkhande, claimed they were democratizing the music by making it part of a seemingly transparent pedagogic process. Especially after the 1950s, the new subjects of musical training, a training that was now also done through graded national examinations and eventually also through

regular courses within the university system, were mostly middle-class women – men being always fewer. However, earlier in the century it was the women who were fewer, and those women who took to music were mainly from the caste-occupation groups involved in the performing arts.

The growing respectability of musical practice had to do with the newly urban professional classes and their fascination for the music they were now encountering in urban performative settings. Arts Circles which organized concerts and hosted visiting musicians were assembled in the early twentieth century by lawyers, accountants, government officials. As the forms of patronage were re-shaped in the twentieth century, and the class basis of that patronage shifted, women of the patron class became the new disciples of the (mostly but not all male) musicians. Predictably, the biggest patron after Independence in 1947 is the state, which provides steady employment to musicians in the public broadcasting service - All India Radio, as well as in music colleges, and in government-run schools), although the tradition of small performances or *bairhak* in the houses of the wealthy still continues. There are a variety of concert platforms besides, organized by musicians themselves to honour their teachers usually on their death anniversary or *punyathithi*, or shows for charity, or performances on occasions of state and for corporate sponsors.

Some work now exists on the establishment of the music schools in Lahore and Bombay, and later in other parts of northern and western India in the early twentieth century. Scholars have also discussed the efforts of V.N. Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar in creating a new pedagogy and a new sense of what constituted Indian classical music (Bakhle 2005 et al). Even a cursory glance at music CDs in a store today would reveal that a large number of those singers without Muslim names are Brahmins from Maharashtra in western India.

But to see this as the primary direction taken by Hindustani music today would be to miss out on what has happened in a region in northern Karnataka which has contributed at least five of the dozen most important singers of the last fifty years or more. The existing scholarship on Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music or Hindustani music suggests that the consolidation of diverse older genres into 'national' traditions was the problematic achievement of nationalist discourse. I hope to show through the project that the process was neither uni-directional nor achieved anything resembling a hegemonic set of conventions, and questions of caste, of language and region, of religious identities, continued to play a crucial role in musical negotiations.

III

Stating the Problem

What I set out to understand is the emergence and rapid growth of Hindustani music in a southern state – a phenomenon that is not explainable through reference to its origins and development in the northern Indian territories. The growth cannot be accounted for except in terms of what sorts of significance came to be invested in the music, and investigating this

will be the main objective of the project.

Some of the biggest names in Hindustani music are from the North Karnataka region—earlier known as Bombay Karnataka or the Southern Maratha Country—Sawai Gandharva, Kumar Gandharva, Mallikarjun Mansur, Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal, Basavaraj Rajguru. Unlike in Maharashtra, where musical practice and performance came to be dominated by Brahmins, in the Dharwad region Lingayats competed with Brahmins both on the popular stage and in classical music. The lone woman in the list above is from a Devadasi family, even if this tradition was disavowed in her mother's lifetime. Nowhere else in Karnataka was Hindustani music taught widely in the early to mid- twentieth century, or for that matter to this day. Before the early twentieth century there was not much evidence of such music in the region. By this I mean that the development from *dhrupad* to *khayal* that



Late Vidushi Gangubai Hangal, photo TN

happened over several centuries in northern India did not have any parallel in Karnataka. Instead, *khayal* and other genres like *thumri* erupted into visibility in the early decades of the twentieth century, gaining acceptance through the spread of the gramophone and the radio, and through the musical plays. The role of new technologies, including the railways, in the popularization of Hindustani music could be the topic of an entire research project on its own.

Before this time, there would have been, of course, Persian-Arabic intersections with local musics (folk and ritualistic), even before the time of Ibrahim Adilshah II of the Bijapur empire (1580-1627) who wrote the musical text *Kitab-i-Nāuras* in the Dakhni language. As Richard Eaton among others has pointed out, Dakhni was developed by the Muslims in South India and achieved literary status long before Urdu in northern India (Eaton 1996). The Deccan Plateau can be seen as a sort of intermediary cultural zone, including areas of present-day Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Hindu, Muslim and folk religious practices, and the merging of several musical traditions, is seen for example in the performance of *tattvapada* in Northern Karnataka (Allen and Viswanathan 2004). But while this may have been the cultural terrain on which Hindustani music made its mark, the past history of the region does not entirely explain why it was in that period, that is, in the early twentieth century, that Hindustani music became such a significant and widely-appreciated cultural form. If so many 'great names' have emerged, what does it indicate about how many are learning music, how many teachers and patrons exist, and what sort of audiences turn out for Hindustani music? From all accounts, the popularity of this kind of music is only growing, and there are people teaching vocal or instrumental music in Hindustani style in almost every town in the region.

The research problem can also sometimes emerge from the need to take a critical look at prevailing modes of explanation. To the question of why there is so much Hindustani music in the Dharwad region, some of the common (and commonsensical) answers are along the following lines:

- (a) Abdul Karim Khan, founder of the Kirana Gharana and the court singer of the Baroda State, was often invited by the Maharaja of Mysore to sing at his court or in the Dasara festival. Abdul Karim usually stopped at Dharwad for performances on his way to Mysore. He began teaching music to Sawai Gandharva and others, thus creating a wave of interest in Hindustani music in the region. They in turn taught many more. Many *ustads* came to Dharwad for long visits (and sometimes to settle) because of the pleasant weather. Indeed Dharwad used to be called Chota Mahabaleshwar in those days.
- (b) Large numbers of Maharashtrians (Marathi-speakers) lived in Dharwad. They were the patrons of Hindustani music.
- (c) Because Dharwad was in Bombay Karnataka, the influence of Marathi culture was predominant. Marathi popular plays had Hindustani music and Kannada plays were derived from these.
- (d) The chillies and spicy food of Northern Karnataka clear the throat and make for voices more suited to Hindustani music.

The answers are inadequate even on their own terms. If Abdul Karim Khan's final destination was Mysore and he went there frequently, why did he not teach disciples there? Why was the Dharwad region such fertile ground for the spread of this sort of music? What sort of musical networks were formed that allowed Belgaum, Miraj and the Hubli-Dharwad area to become the catchment area for the practice of Hindustani music? Why is Kannada cultural practice perceived as "derived" from their Marathi counterparts, when all the evidence points to the simultaneous growth of theatre in the region and experiments carried out roughly at the same time? Why have Marathi-speakers considered themselves heirs to Hindustani music? To even begin to address these questions, my investigation would need to branch out in several directions, some of which might involve engaging with the history of indirect rule and the so-called native states, the language policy of the Bombay Presidency and the linguistic history of the region, the stakes in the establishment of schools in the Dharwad area, the complicated relationship between Marathi and Kannada cultural arenas, and the changing composition of the subjects of music pedagogy. A key concern would also be to investigate why the answers to questions about the emergence of Hindustani music are usually produced along these lines, with implicit theories of cultural 'influence' and the importance of significant teachers underlying most formulations.

What will be the object of my study? One way of thinking of it might be to say I am not discussing music in itself, but the *space that music occupies*. One could think of this space as including elements of an auditory space, a physical space (*sabhe, baithak, shaale, matha,*

nationalist gathering, company theatre), and a conceptual space. All these notions of course would require much refinement. I'll have to further explain *why* music occupies these kinds of spaces and whether or not it generates the same sorts of meanings in each. What kinds of cultural meaning came to be attached to Hindustani music as it travelled into and consolidated itself in Dharwad/Karnataka? And what is the reconfigured cultural artefact of Hindustani music today? It is likely that the period I originally demarcated - 1890s to 1940s - will stretch to the contemporary, if I decide to include conversations about musical practice in the present.

Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century musical plays in Kannada mention the *raag* in the script next to the song-text. Often these plays were published but not performed, since those plays which became most popular were the ones assembled by the *natak* companies themselves. From accounts of dramatic performances in the early twentieth century it is clear that the aspiring playwrights were deriving their idea of attaching a *raag* to a lyrical interlude from the actual performative practice, and that it was not coming simply from their own desire to engage with Hindustani music [Drama companies had a master musician working with them to train the actors in singing; sometimes well-known actors would have a parallel or subsequent career as a concert musician]. Even nationalist poems published in the Kannada magazines like *Jayanti* and *Swadharma* indicated the Hindustani *raag* that would be suited to the text. Today contemporary 'bazaar texts' of Kannada saint poetry—like that of Shishunala Sharifa - mention the Hindustani *raags* in which the texts should be sung. In all these instances, the actual notation of the composition is not provided; in the plays, the dramatic instructions merely indicate the name of the *raag* or say 'this should be sung like... (followed by the first line of a *thumri* or *chhota khayal*)'. Witness the instructions in *Sri Rukmini Parinaya Natakam* by Polepalli Padmanabhayya (1908). One composition is supposed to be sung in "Hin. Bhairavi" in *aditaala* and "as though it were *Dekho chaman ka bahaa*"; another in Bihag "as though it were *mukhda dikhla jaa re*"; another not named by *raag* or *taal* but to be sung "as though it were *aayi mujhe dard de jigar ne sataaya*". Available evidence suggests that some plays had a mixture of songs sung in Hindustani as well as Carnatic style (such as Bihag and Kedar co-existing with Kambodhi and Kalyani, in *Karnataka Shakuntala Natakam* by Bellave Narahari Shastri (1928), or a Carnatic *aditaala* with something called *Raag Hindusthani*). More research would yield information about which Kannada-speaking regions the plays came from and whether that contributed to the dominance of one style over another.

Towards a Hypothesis

How do we explain the simultaneous growth of Hindustani music in the same area that first articulated a demand for the unification of the Kannada-speaking territories which at the time were spread across nineteen different administrative regions? The Kannada identity movement, like many others in India as well as in other parts of the world, was premised on the idea of a distinct and unified culture, distinct language, and common history. Did Hindustani music,

which was not sung in Kannada, pose a problem for the assertions of Kannada nationalists? The obvious answer would be that it did, and that Hindustani musicians of Northern Karnataka *must have resisted* the cultural homogenization suggested by the Karnataka Ekikarana or unification movement. But the very obviousness of the answer must make it suspect.

Was Hindustani music inconsistent with the Karnataka Ekikarana project, first articulated by Alur Venkata Rao in 1907 in *Vagbhushana* (February 1907 issue, cited in *NJS* p.231), the organ of the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, or could we say it made the project possible in the first place? If, as Alur saw it, there was no contradiction between the concept of India (nation) and Karnataka (region, Praantha), was Hindustani music simply part of 'national' culture? Then *what happens to that which was not national?* "Truly, I do not see any difference between nationalism (*rashtreeyatwa*) and *karnatakatwa*" (*NJS*, p.103). He also introduced the concept of *pradeshika rashtreeyatwa* or regional nationalism (103). As Shivarama Padikkal and other scholars have suggested, there was no contradiction in the simultaneous birth of Kannada nationalism and devotion to Bharat Mata, since these two were actually complementary, unlike in many other parts of India.

Kannada nationalism has had a curious relationship to the language question, as though the assertion of a Kannada (linguistic) identity can actually be done through a sleight-of-hand that both puts forward and masks Kannada simultaneously. Witness this astonishing story from Alur's memoirs, *Nanna Jeevana Smritigalu*. The year appears to be 1905. Alur and his friends from northern Karnataka were undergraduate students at Fergusson College in Pune. They were beginning to experience, along with pride in the nation, says Alur, some amount of pride in their mother tongue Kannada. One day they decided to put up a play in their college. "It was decided that the play should not be in Marathi. Then should we do it in Kannada? If we did, then we would have been both the players and the audience. After a good deal of discussion, we asked that the Kannada-speaking students should be allowed to put up their own play, in English. The Marathi speakers wanted to know why they were being excluded from acting in an English play. The debate was a heated one". Finally, the administrators ruled in favour of the Kannada students, who tossed their caps to the ceiling in joy. "This was perhaps the first of the Marathi-Kannada wars that broke out heedlessly from this time on". (Alur, *NJS*, p.69)

One of the most significant aspects of the cultural milieu of Dharwad in the early twentieth century was the production of literary texts in a variety of genres—from poetry to drama to the novel and essay—contributing substantially to the canon of modern Kannada literature. Did literature and music compete for cultural space? Or is it more likely that there was a division of cultural labour? The first reaching out to the Old Mysore regions with its insistence on building canons of Kannada literature, and helping carve out the contours of Kannada nationalism/linguistic identity; the second reaching northwards, to Maharashtra and beyond, inserting itself into the story of a national modernity with its own definitions of the classical? Perhaps it can be argued that it was the spread of Hindustani music that allowed literature (including both fiction and non-fiction) to become the key site for Kannada "sub-nationalism".

The articulation of the distinctive Kannada nation which was presented as the daughter of Mother India may have been enabled through this particular cultural configuration. The suturing of the gap or potential conflict between the social aspiration of the music and the political desire of Dharwad district for the unification of Karnataka along linguistic lines was made possible, I suggest, because of the way in which Hindustani music took hold of the cultural imaginary. This is clearly an important direction for my investigation to take: it would involve among other things a study of the Ekikarana movement and how it was able to represent Hindustani music. In the writings of Aa Naa Krishna Rao, a key leader of the movement, singers like Mallikarjun Mansur are represented as *kannadada raayabhaari* or the ambassador of Kannada in the rest of the country, even if this notion flies in the face of the fact that most listeners of Hindustani music are not always aware of the linguistic or regional background of the musician. Krishna Rao takes the credit for having urged Mansur to sing also in Kannada, suggesting that the Shaivite vachanas and the songs of the *daasas* in particular could be adapted to the Hindustani style. (Krishna Rao, 1946)

But what of the present? The unification of the state happened several decades ago, and has not resulted in better facilities for the region that spearheaded the movement. The agricultural and industrial wealth of the state is concentrated in the south and along the coast, leaving the northern regions with depleted resources and decaying institutions. However, the institutional structures for the teaching of music, informal though they might be, show remarkable robustness. Hindustani music continues to grow in strength in the Dharwad region. Now there are several generations of singers, with children learning this music in every village and small town. Often the poorest and most disadvantaged (even in terms of physical disability) turn to the music, unlike in the metros of the other parts of the country. The Veereshwara Punyashrama in Gadag, for example, has been training orphans



Veereshwar Punyashram, Gadag, photo TN

and physically challenged children for over half a century in both vocal as well as instrumental styles. Unlike elsewhere in Karnataka state, Hindustani music is one of the three courses you can choose in the 11th grade in this region. It is also one of the three courses you can select for your Bachelor's degree in the Humanities and Social Sciences. There is also a separate bachelor's degree in Music. Some of the best singers in the region teach in these colleges. For those who want to supplement the official pedagogy and the limited exposure in the

classroom, there are equally good teachers on every other street in Dharwad town, the better known among them having more than thirty students each.

This project of mine has only just begun, and what I have attempted here is to give you a glimpse of the many lines of investigation I would need to follow before I produce anything

like a viable set of arguments. Wherever the arguments might lead, I am convinced they will continue to be premised on the centrality of music and musical practice to our understanding of a host of questions to do with culture, politics, language and our modernity, whether in the Dharwad region or elsewhere.

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