

Commercialization and Corporatization of Indian Classical Music

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Abstract

This article is based on the premise that Indian classical music has been commercialized in every age since the time of its inception. And, it therefore traces its evolution and corresponding devolution in every age. The article also analyzes the impact of Islamic and Western influence on the growth and development of Hindustani music (the system of classical music prevalent in Northern India), and the simultaneous impact of religious and political movements such as the Independence movement on Carnatic music (the system of classical music prevalent in Southern India). The article proceeds to explain how music was reduced to merely a tool for propagation of political agenda, or the creation of a political image at international fora. The effects of the implementation of notation system on the traditional guru-shishya parampara have also been discussed in detail. The role of technology whether it be the All India Radio or fusion music, or more recent developments of online music has been highlighted, with arguments from the modernist and the purist approach. The conclusion focuses on understanding whether such corporatization can be regarded as harmful, keeping in mind the purpose it seeks to achieve.

Origin of Indian Classical Music

The origin of Indian music can be traced to the Vedic period, nearly two thousand years ago. It is believed that the seven notes or the seven *swaras*, which form the basis for the several permutations and combinations that create the basic melodies or the ragas, originated from the divine sound 'Om'. Several treatises containing references to musical theory such as the works of the renowned grammarian Panini (500 BC), and the *Natya Shastra* by Bharata.

Music was assigned a very pristine and sacred status in the ancient times. There were a select few, who were allowed to sing and recite, and there were a select few who could be the audience. While it may seem that music was worshipped, as the nectarine blessing of the Gods and Goddesses, even in those times, the crude reality was that music constituted the recreational background or the mystic background, and never took centre-stage as a fine art. Commercialization is nothing but debasement of something's value or quality for making profit, and in this era, commercialization can be understood since the glories of the king took precedence over the nuances of the art.

Medieval Era

From the 7th to 13th century AD, music played an important role as a tool of religious and philosophical propaganda. In the 7th century AD, Indian music was used in popularizing traditional and orthodox Hindu philosophies. For instance, in *Gita Gobind* by *Jayadev*, through the incorporation of musical pieces, the author familiarizes the audience with the fundamental basis of the classical music form, and in many instances, even the nuances. The work is well-scripted amalgamation of music and dance, as it narrates the tales of Lord Krishna, over stages.

The period between the 9th to the 12th century AD, saw the emergence of Sangam music in the south of the subcontinent, drawing a precursor to the concrete musical form of Sangam music. It was in this period that the Bhakti movement, representing the ideology of salvation being accessible by all and rejecting all notions of caste – preferences, started to gain stronghold in the Southern regions. It was also in this era that Indian music qualitatively improved, with a gradual transition from abstractness to structure, form and certainty.

Islamic Influence

From the 11th century onwards, Indian music was influenced by the Muslim dynasties, and their Middle-Eastern roots. It is in this era that commercialization of music began. Moreover, the differences between the two models or systems of Indian music, namely, Hindustani and Carnatic, became more marked. When the Muslim dynasties came to India, the cultural fabric of the country dramatically changed. Food, clothing, architecture were all influenced and of course, music as well. Alongside these changes, came the commercialization of music. Until that point, classical music was found only in the temples. Music and dance were for the Divine. To hear it, the king went to the temple, the musicians did not come to the court. It is under Muslim rule, that music made its way into the courts, both Hindu and Muslim courts, and the objectives of the musician began to shift.

During the reign of Alauddin Khilji (1296-1316), the great musical genius Amir Khusro's works were patronized far and wide. Khusro's ghazals, remarking on the absurdities of everyday life, and the follies of human nature, became authoritative musical styles in themselves. Khusro is also credited for the introducing percussion instruments like the tabla and the sitar into traditional vocal fora. He is generally regarded as the creator of tarana, and qawwali styles of singing, and several melodies or ragas, as known in musical parlance, such as Raga Yaman, Zeelaf and Sazgiri. Many beautiful forms of classical music emerged from the confluence of Hindu and Muslim cultures, including the khayal style of singing (prior to this dhrupad was the mainstay of vocal music) and the introduction of tabla.

This was also the period when the Sufism and Bhakti movement, came to the fore, both emphasizing on personal expression and means of attaining oneness with the Almighty. The key proponents of the Bhakti movement, as it spread from the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to the

northern parts of the country , were Kabir(1405AD) , Rahim, Mirabai (1500 AD)., Tukaram, Surdas and all of them composed couplets or bhajans or abhangs (the form of devotional music popular in Maharashtra) , and set the lyrics to music. So, music became the tool of dissemination of these philosophies of formless God.

The Islamic impact on classical music only deepened with the coming of the Mughals. Culture flourished the most in the reigns of Akbar and Shah Jahan.

Emperor Akbar, is accredited for bringing out the musical genius in Tansen, who was one of his nine gems, popularly known as navaratnas. He also patronized and projected the talents of several court –poets like Abul Fazl, other musicians Nayak Bakshu and Tantarang Gopal. During Akbar’s reign , the implicit shift of the purpose of music, from music for music’s sake to music to appease the mighty and the powerful, started surfacing. This was probably the first time , that music came to be commercialized , the first attempt to make it more saleable and presentable than its initial design. When the musician shifted his stage to the court, the King became the focus. If a particularly type of harkat or musical pattern invoked appreciation (which was often in the form of a gold coin), then more were added to the next performance. The King was to be pleased for he was the lifeline for the artist. The goal became materialistic and coinciding with this change, the power of the music diminished. But, such sightings of commercialization could not be observed in equal measure everywhere.

Colonial Rule and Commercialization

The modern era of classical music began in the 18th century, by which time the foundation-stone had been laid, and all the intricacies and nuances had to be codified and inculcated. The Muslim rulers were overthrown , and colonial rulers replaced them , and this was accompanied with the decline of court musicians. Consequently, the musicians kept their knowledge and practice to themselves confining it within their own family members.

Music became a vehicle of entertainment and was looked down upon in society. This trend continued till the middle of the 19th century.

But these trends of commercialization were lopsided, since the development of classical music in the Southern regions, sky-rocketed because of the Trinity of Carnatic music, who emphasized on the classicism and spirituality aspects of music. Music was treated as a means of liberation from worldly shackles to achieve divergence from orthodox practices and conservatism. “It is a universal fact that without commercialization no one gets a meal, and what is true for music is true for everything else,” in the words of Pandit Jasraj, maintaining that the absence of recording companies and satellite television channels in earlier centuries should not make oneself assume that music was free from money, in the past.

Music as a Tool for Nationalism

The 19th century saw a transition of sentiments, from feelings of self-actualization to nationalism, as the country put its resources together to liberate the Golden Bird. Exponents like Tamil poet Bharathi, and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar and Pandit Bhatkhande, who proactively expressed their disaffection towards the colonial regime, rescinding from imperialist culture

The construction of a discourse for Indian classical music in the twentieth century is seen as a nationalist cultural project .At a time when most British administrative organs were manned by Indian officials, patriotic songs served a surrogate for overt actions by officials. Such songs played an important role in shaping the mentality of people at the time and age of Independence. Here again music was commercialized, as a tool for political sovereignty, so as to project an image of India as a self-empowered, self-sufficient and confident nation, competent to challenge and overthrow its mighty oppressors.

Some significant contributions to the musical nationalist movement came from Bengal, with poets like Rabindranath Tagore , and DL Roy whose compositions set to music kindled patriotic sentiments among listeners. The music used in the Swadeshi movement also had elements of communalism in it, with Hindu proselytizing lyrics, and it is indisputable that mass mobilization could only be successful if such measures were adopted.

Pandit Bhatkhande and Pandit Paluskar emphasized on socializing music, openly and publicly commercializing it, by inducting earnest students into the fine art without any restrictions by banning the gharana tradition and implementing an institution system. By this means, the caste preferences would be eliminated and the long oppressed factions like women, Dalits could get opportunities to pursue music. But this was an open invitation to commercialize music, by making it marketable and profit-earning, and several musicologists and scholars alike opposed their proposition and criticized them severely.

Music as a Tool for Propagation of Political Agenda

Not only this, music started to go hand in hand with political agenda, while singers started implicitly alleging loyalty to certain political parties in return for public exposure. Classical musicians began to perform at the United Nations, only further explicitly proving how inextricably linked politics and music are, with the notable performances being those of Pandit Ravi Shankar and MS Subbulakshmi. Artists started realizing that for an upsurge in the level of mass interest that classical music generates, it had to be advertised and commercialized. And, therefore, soon enough classicism was replaced with gimmicks, soulfulness with fast-paced lyrics.

This was the time when audiences understood the meanings of couplets in ghazals, lauded the lyrical beauty in musical usages. This was the time when the audiences appreciated soulful

music, relishing every display of musical genius, however minute or miniscule it maybe, at the same time appreciating the beauty of subtlety.

This was the time when the guru-shishya parampara which is universally regarded as the best training ground that any student can ever hope to receive, one of the best methods of imparting musical knowledge, was widely in practice. In the past, when a person chose to be a student of music, he consequently made music his livelihood. He trained and practiced under the watchful eye of his Guru to fulfil his aspirations of becoming a professional musician. The complexity and intricacies of the Hindustani system made it a very difficult and demanding field of study. A disciple had to surrender himself completely to the music. The disciple made music his life, and inevitably his life became music.

Western Influence on Classical Music

While several changes could be observed on home ground, there was simultaneous uproars across the seas too. Western influences ran far and wide, with bands like Beatles or pop stars like Michael Jackson whose popularity knew no bounds. Classical musicians had another responsibility to undertake – that of making classical music impervious to such invasions. While the idea was not to isolate classical music, and make it more niche, but to make it equally popular and adaptable so that Western music does not endanger it. And therefore, there was a change to a rapidly evolving, materialistic, money-oriented profession. Concert halls and large outdoor spaces replaced the small chambers.

These concert halls, as they are today, were invariably furnished with chairs and modern Public Address (PA) systems. These technological developments however eliminated the performer-audience communication and focused more on the performance aspect, whether the artist's posture, or looks or camaraderie with co-artists.

The Role of Radio and Media in Commercialization

It was towards the end of the 20th century that the entire concept of music tours, with artists performing at different locations consecutively emerged, as artists felt the acute need to amass more listeners and thereby tried their best to open more and more avenues for public exposure in and around the world. The advent of globalization initiated drastic changes into the classical music arena. This new globalized environment with liberalized economy made strong impacts on different practicing cultures including the Indian Music. This change worked as a catalyst for high increase in musical exchanges, brought in fresh artistic expressions and possibly made some impact on the efforts for retaining classicality and traditionalists of Indian Music presentations. It also widened the geographical limits of the Music culture. This huge change opens up some interesting areas for brain churning to understand the impacts of globalization on Indian music.

And this was followed by the menace of the album trends, where artists sold the rights to record and produce their music to music producing companies, who started to manage the musical endeavors of classical musicians. Discographical releases of several musicians have been marketed like never before. Be it the stormy voice of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan that interpreted the hypnotic litanies of Pakistan's "qawwali" (Sufi devotional music). While the music they created was still their own, their image off-stage was worked on by these musical companies, as they strived to amass more space in people's minds, losing track of how they were themselves partaking of the act of diminishing quality, and standard and devotionality of Indian classical music. This wave of commercialization saw the radio and the record labels go hand in hand. The All India Radio, which was India's most respectable and apex radio broadcasting authority, itself projected and marketed some artists much more than others, keeping in mind the audience preferences. In India, radio is shifting from being a government monopoly to a highly-commercialized broadcasting service.

Fusion Music

Around this time, fusion music also surfaced. Although the trend started with jugalbandi, which can be described as performances by two artists belonging to different classical music systems, or sometimes even the same. Jugalbandis of Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, the Sarod exponent and Lalgudi Jayaraman, the violin virtuoso, still stand unparalleled purely on the basis of their cumulative brilliance and innate talents. This later devolved to fusion music. Classical music was not presented in isolation, but as an amalgamation, along with elements of other musical forms. The direct consequence of this was a stark deterioration in classicism of music itself, as it devolved from its original pristine form to a spiked, perverted form. While several people viewed this as a welcome endeavor that facilitated musical ideas and helped create more enriched, more diverse forms of music, with bands like Shakti, the epitome of East meets West, comprising Guitarist John McLaughlin, Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, Mandolin exponent U Shrinivas, Drummer Sivamani, and several others.

Fusion music was not well received by many purists who argued that the traditions and 'authenticity' of the music are lost when the classical form of the music is fused with others. Many purists dismissed the idea of fusion, claiming that the genre of music is not 'pure' and that the original characteristics of the music are lost. Tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain, says in an interview that though classical music is not static, it is important to 'preserve our original roots' This points to a curious tension that seems to exist within classical music where there is a pressure to continue to constantly be seen as adhering to a 'tradition' which clearly cannot be done away with for purposes of lending 'authenticity' to it while at the same time having to be seen to tread a 'new path'. Several purists have for long criticized and condemned the musical experimentations of Pt Ravi Shankar, his trysts with Western musicians like George Harrison. However, this process is constantly imagined as a continuum with a traditional form of classical music at one end and 'new path' on the other while a contemporary classical musician

is placed on this spectrum. If the musician seeks to be accepted, he or she has to strive to belong to the both ends of this spectrum, at the same time, ensuring that no end is out of sight.

Maintain the Balance between Purism and Modernism

While purists fear 'Raags' losing their original characteristics when they are incorporated in a fusion composition, fusion musicians argue that evolution in music is not necessarily a bad thing. However, respect and knowledge of traditional styles and forms must be preserved, because one cannot progress without a history. In fusion music, a certain compromise needs to be made between all the different musical elements and forms that are being fused: No one instrument or musical element can shine throughout the performance as the role of each instrumentalist in the ensemble is to support the other.

But, the other implication of fusion music, and tours, and album releases is how through these means, music has been rescued from the restricted echelons of a certain few, and made accessible to all. Moreover, the youth which are the future of any legacy, as a result, have been sufficiently inducted into the classical fora, most of them magnetized by the electric charm and unleashed creativity that accompanies any concert. And, hence, classical music has achieved to secure its place in posterity, although the means used may have been skewed and diluted the essence of classical music itself, this degradation was necessary.

Classical music has had to maintain the delicate balance between appeasing the purists and attracting the youngsters. In the words of Pt. Purbayan Chatterjee, Sitar maestro, "The idea is to make Indian classical music accessible to today's mobile-toting youngsters. It will be an alternative to all-consuming Bollywood music." He further clarifies that the need of the hour 'in an age when cross-cultural music is the buzzword, these classical instrumentalists are expanding their sound scape by making Indian classical music more contemporary. The idea is to reach out to youngsters in nightclubs and independent music festivals so that they are aware of the possibilities of Indian classical music'.

The Role of Technology in Commercialization and Commodification

With the coming of the 21st century, these menaces have only grown larger and more diabolic, as now they have an added impetus of technological advancement. A new musical fabric is being created by mixing Indian classical music with Western apparatus. Classical music has been reduced to a mere commodity. Many purists are of the opinion that music has been commercialized in every age, and its effects are most marked and pronounced now, with the advent of technology.

There have been several path-breaking endeavors to sell classical music, just as unassumingly as any other product. One of them- the concept of online classes. Similar to how products can be bought online on Amazon or e-bay, several musicians have started teaching music lessons

online, thereby completely negating the purposes of a gurukul where the student would stay with the Guru, trying to imbibe the very essence of the wealth of his or her musical knowledge, and their life philosophies itself.

While, there are variants of such online classical music, there are more crude methods people use wherein they put gradated music lessons on sale, reducing classical music from to a pristine fine art to merely a saleable commodity, a product. For instance, renowned vocalist Shankar Mahadevan has his own online music academy, wherein music lessons are put on sale and students can learn these online from teachers, and they are later tested on how much they have managed to learn. This form of distance education, has been severely condemned by several purists , who believe that it can be considered a worthy replacement of face to face teaching, and also additionally helps in eroding classical music from its roots.

What is more, today technology has eve eliminated the entire concert experience. There was an era where people yearned to listen to Ustad Bismillah Khan play in an open amphitheater, so as to submerge themselves in the vastness of his music and the divinity that it exuded. But this has been replaced by the new trend of podcasts of concerts. People can avail of the concert experience sitting at home, merely by buying online passes. Students of music are gradually being deprived of key skills, of experiences of the electric atmosphere created on stage, the camaraderie between artists, how artists gauge audience response so as to decide what to present next.

Corporatization of Classical Music

And, the film industry is one of the major reasons for the menace of corporatization and commercialization. The past decade, has seen film music devolved from soulful lyrical pieces, to item songs. While most of these songs might make use of traditional classical and folk instruments, there is no publicity given to those artists. Because of the commercialization now, the traditional music is basically dying. They could be singing the latest Hindi Bollywood song with all the folk instruments and 8 out of 10 people wouldn't even know.

The new tide of reality shows has trickled to the classical music industry also, where budding classical musicians are adjudged based on reality show standards. What is most disheartening is the largely positive response such shows seem to be receiving. Students overlook the classicism and intrinsic traditional heritage that classical music forms carry within them, and superficial aspects like confidence, public appeal, stage presence start taking precedence.

Moreover, classical musicians have entered the film music arena also, sometimes, even for advertisements. Classical music has degraded to the status of jingles; it no longer holds authority over anything. The Madras Music Season is probably one of the best possible examples to illustrate the expanding folds of corporatization. As soon as December arrives, the city of Chennai is buzzing with around 300 Sabhas, or music halls, preparing to host nearly 3000

musicians, from all around the world, ranging from vocalists to instrumentalists to Harikatha exponents.

This is where corporate bodies plunge in to contribute their bit. Major corporate houses advertise these concerts, sponsor artistic and creative endeavors. For instance, InKo (short for Indian, Korean) Centre in Chennai that was a collaborative effort of TVS Motor Company and the Hyundai Motor India Ltd to promote an “inter-cultural dialogue by facilitating a consistent programme that draws on the rich traditions of the two countries” Many even promote classical music as their corporate social responsibility. This corporatization seeps to such an extent, artists have to begin to patent their sarees , the most popular such claims being the MS Subbulakshmi blue silk saree. Many become Brand Ambassadors , proactively pledging allegiance to their products. Youth endeavors like Svanubhava and SPICMACAY, leave no qualms in admitting corporate sponsorship and asking for professional support. Many defend such corporate collaboration calling it the culturization of corporate rather than the corporatization of culture, saying it facilitates the democratization of Indian culture. They project themselves not as sponsors, but partners who share such visions.

The press has started to project classical music as a dying art, which needs to be preserved and rescued. The binding of the notion of duty towards preservation of the classical fine arts that was rife in the contents of the discussion this conference on music actually runs through from early 20th century writing on South Indian classical music for instance , an excerpt from an article of the 1920’s which read “Is it not the duty of every lover of Karnataki (Carnatic) music to strive to rescue it from its present neglected state and to develop it on the right lines so as to preserve ancient Indian music and preserve it for all posterity?”

Conclusion

Classical music is indeed, today, a dying fine art. And, while commercialization and corporatization cannot be exactly classified as bad and harmful, the need for generation of interest in the fine art cannot be ignored. At the same time, when we compare and contrast the developments in the field of classical music to those in the film industry, one can clearly differentiate between the intention behind both these attempts, while one was commercialized to make it more accessible and so as to inculcate the youth into upholding its beauty and legacy, the other was commercialized purely for money’s sake. And, therefore, the efforts of classical musicians to secure its place in posterity should not and cannot be called commercialization in the truest sense of the word.

While that may be the reasoning behind not branding commercialization and corporatization in Indian classical music as bad, it is undeniable that these developments need to be checked, so as not to destroy the intrinsic classicism and authenticity of Indian classical music. Its assets cannot be sidestepped merely for the sake of creating public exposure. It is in the best interests of classical music and its future, that classical music focus back on its spirituality , and not on

materialistic, money-oriented purposes, this demeans the centuries of contributions and efforts of yesteryear musicians which cannot be allowed.

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