

Contemporary Musical Practices in Mizoram

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Abstract

This objective of this study is to research the musical influences on Mizo youngsters and establish the relation of the same to the absence of Mizo Folk and Indian Classical influence in popular musical practices amongst the youth music culture and the misses on account of the same – musically, professionally and academically. The study revealed a clear absence of traditional influences on popular music in contrast with other regional cultures in India.

Keywords: Mizo Folk, Mizoram, Indian Classical Music, Congregational Music, Musical Identity

Music and Mizo People:

Like every other part of the Indian subcontinent, Mizoram has a unique history of music. The folk music tradition of Mizo people goes back at least 700 yearsⁱ. Folk songs of the tradition explore a wide variety of themes such as war cries, hunting chants, patriotism, love, nature and lullaby. There is even a traditional system of classification of folk songs into categories some of which are reserved for individual singing, while some are for group singing and some are reserved for musical instrumentation. There are also a variety of indigenous instruments that are unique to the tribes – these are percussion as well as stringed and wind instruments. Music is eternal to the Mizo way of life. Major events and celebrations such as weddings are compulsorily assisted by music.

A brief look at Music Curriculum at IMF:

A look at the curriculumⁱⁱ of The Institute of Music and Fine Arts (IMFA) (which functions under the Art and Culture department of the Government of Mizoram) tells us that the government focus at institutional and higher education level is purely on Western Music. The involvement with Mizo Folk Music is limited to teaching of 20 folk songs and demonstration on usage of traditional instruments. The major focus of the curriculum is majorly on Western Music staff notation, voice training, conducting and acoustic guitar. Indian Classical Music is not seen anywhere in the curriculum.

Objectives of the study:

1. To establish the superior musicality of Mizo people, explore popular music culture and practices among young Mizo population
2. Explore the absence of traditional – Mizo Folk and Indian Classical musical influences as compared to popular music in other regional/linguistic (sub)cultures of India

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3. Explore congregational singing and contrasting the same with other regions in India
4. Explore missed opportunities for the Mizo Youth in absence of a more diverse musical practice

Objective 1: Explore the superior musicality of Mizo people; explore popular music culture and practices and influences among young Mizo population.

Musicality of the average teenager in the North Eastern Indian state of Mizoram is undoubtedly quite highⁱⁱⁱ. This talent is not just a local a locally recognized act either. When YouTube hits on a Hit Mizo pop-country song are more than 1.5 times the number of people who speak the Mizo language (~1.3 Mn), the phenomenon is clearly indicating about the potential and musical value that goes way beyond the local or state borders.^{iv}

Today the exploding music landscape and popular music culture among teenagers is testimony to the spoils of globalization. While the youth can make their music heard across the world and have the world appreciate it back, the influence and rootedness to Mizo folk and Indian classical tradition is under stress. The current popular musical practices are hugely influenced by Western Rock and Pop^v. A look at the top music bands from Mizoram^{vi} tells us the homogeneity of genre – Rock, Punk, Hip-Hop. K-Pop also has made impactful inroads^{vii} as it has in the rest of the country. Globalization of Korean media in North East India^{viii} has aided the newfound K pop affection.

Objective 2: Explore the absence of traditional – Mizo Folk and Indian Classical musical influences as compared to popular music in other regional/linguistic (sub) cultures of India.

Contemporary musical productions and performances that derive from and build upon Mizo Folk/Indian Classical traditions seem to be absent amongst the popular Mizo music scene. This has resulted in exclusion of “local” melodies in popular representation that is in contrasted to the popular regional music of other Indian states. Here it must be made clear that this observation is made not with respect to practice of traditional forms in their purest form (with traditional rules and ‘formalities’) but with respect to their influence on the contemporary music. We can understand this contrast through these scenarios:

- i. Popular music in (linguistic) regional (sub) cultures that have a strong film industry: in such scenarios the popular music is the one which appears as a part of films and musicals. (India has 10 major film Industries that produce more than 50 films annually and atleast 15 other small film industries). A look at the popular music from the popular film industries shows a fair exploration of variety of genres but what stands out is that a majority of influence comes from folk and classical music. Such music is produced and arranged in highly contemporary fashion (using all modern/western instruments, modern music arrangements and even symphony orchestras and other contemporary techniques) but are melodically deeply rooted in

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traditions (that in turn draw majorly from Indian Classical Music). Let us look at it through certain examples:-

- a. Influence of traditional music on Bollywood songs is highly evident. This ranges from classical music to folk music of northern India
 - b. Influence of classical music on major music composers of South India like A.R. Rahman and Ilayaraja.
 - c. Influence of folk music of south India on the music of A.R. Rahman. Many Hindi songs are even inspired from south Indian folk melodies (e.g. Ramayya Vataavayya)
 - d. Influence of Rabindra Sangeet (which is mostly based on a balance of Hindustani classical music, Carnatic Classical Music, Western tunes and the inherent Folk music of Bengal) has been huge on the Bengali film music as well as Bollywood film music.
- ii. Popular Music in (linguistic) regional (sub) cultures that come from independent musicians: Here we shall look at those sub cultures that do not have an adequate film industry to represent popular music. In these cultures, the popular music comes mainly from independent musicians. These musicians hold as cult status and huge fan following, often extending outside their language of practice. A look at the music of these artists reveals that their music is also produced and arranged in highly contemporary fashion (using all modern/western instruments, modern music arrangements other contemporary techniques) but are melodically deeply rooted in traditions (folk/regional music, that in turn may or may not draw from Indian Classical Music). Let us look at it through certain examples
- a. Popular Punjabi music – one of the highest money-making thriving on independent artists’ music industry. This influence extends to Haryanvi popular music.
 - b. Bhojpuri Mainstream music in U.P./Bihar is highly derived from regional melodies.
 - c. Popular music in Rajasthan is deeply influenced by regional music.
 - d. Popular fusion music of Goa derives from both western and Konkani styles.
- iii. Fusion bands are a phenomenon that has taken the live performance scenario by storm. Live concerts today sell more tickets than most of the films on cinema screens. A look at latest most popular line-up from different regions in India also presents a contrast to the contemporary scene with respect to music bands from Mizoram. Bands are witness to the new phenomenon of fusion which has taken the listeners by storm. It is often due to the ‘musical fusion’ approach that the fanhood of these bands extends way beyond the regional border, even in cases when more than 50% compositions in a given album are in the regional language. The catch here is the strong musical identity of each of these bands which is either rooted in folk or some or the other form of traditional music

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- a. Kashmir – ‘Alif’ and ‘Parvaaz’ are Sufi Fusion Rock bands.
- b. Karnataka – ‘Swarathama’, ‘Raghu Dixit Project’, have Kannada folk melodies, often sing in Kannada, enriched in often a contemporary rock treatment
- c. Kerala – ‘Thaikuddam Bridge’, builds on classical music, Rock arrangement, Malayalam lyrics
- d. Similar movements are in upswing in Telugu^{ix}, Bengali^x Marathi language^{xi}. All these are movements that aim at fusion music – blending regional melodies into the western band format
- e. A look at the top bands from Mizoram (‘Boomerang’, ‘Magdelene’, ‘The Chosen’, ‘Frisky Pints’) reveals that the genre is limited to rock, punk, hip-hop and experimentation with regional/folk/classical music is absent

Objective 3: Explore congregational singing and contrasting the same with other regions in India.

Congregational music and other varieties of the choral tradition are the foundation of the Musical awakening of the Mizo youth of today^{xii}. The discipline and devotion aroused during Church congregational music are the stepping stones for an individual to discover the musicality inside. The choral traditions are uncovering for the potentials the various layers and complexities of music. Here there are three observations with respect to contrast from congregational singing in other regions of India,

- i. The medium of congregational singing is mostly English (contrast this to congregational singing in Churches of South India - Kerala where the medium is Malayalam, or Andhra where it is in Telugu)
- ii. The melodies of the congregational songs are mostly western (contrast this to congregational singing in Churches of South India where the melodies are more derived from traditional music, set to modern instruments such as guitar, keyboard)
- iii. The singing style is choral and is based on harmonies. This complex practice is mostly absent in congregational singing anywhere else in India except north east India and some churches in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore

The Western Classical Music capital of India is still Chennai in the South [case in point: initiation into a serious musical tradition (in this case western classical music) seems to be correlated to commitment to local tradition (in case of Church congregational singing)]. Close home, Shillong and Kohima have a stronger culture of Western Classical Music

Objective 4: Explore the missed representation for the Mizo Youth in absence of a more diverse musical practice.

This can be explored on two fronts,

A. Missed representation on the larger national scenario:

Study shows that regional Popular music that is more locally rooted (in folk traditions) has found more representation in Bollywood popular music (which can be considered to

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be an overarching representative on a diversified national musical identity), be it Punjabi, Rajasthani, Goan, Kashmiri, Carnatic or Bihu. This ranges from melodic influence and remakes^{xiii} to even non-Hindi lyrics in mainstream Bollywood songs^{xiv}. Let's look at a few examples:

- i. Remakes of regional songs for Bollywood movies:
 - a. 'Dilbaro' from movie 'Raazi' - The opening stanza of this song is made up of a very popular Kashmiri wedding song titled '*Khanmaej Koor*' and is sung when the bride is leaving her childhood home to move in with her in-laws.
 - b. 'Chogada Tara' from the movie 'Loveratri' - This song is inspired by a very popular Gujarati song '*Ranglo*' that is commonly sung during dandiya raas at the time of Navratri celebrations in the state.
 - c. 'Engine Ki Seeti' from the movie 'Khhobsoorat' - This hit number is an adaptation of a popular Rajasthani folk song by the same name.
 - d. 'Galti Se Mistake' from movie 'Jagga Jasoos' – This phrasing of this song is inspired from traditional Assamese Bihu style.

- ii. Regional lyrics in mainstream Hindi songs:-
 - a. 'Jiya Jale' from 'Dil Se' features Malayalam lyrics.
 - b. 'Mere Dholna' from 'Bhool Bhulaiyya' features Bengali lyrics.
 - c. 'Rind Posh Maal' from 'Mission Kashmir' is inspired from a Kashmiri folk song and used Kashmiri lyrics in parts.
 - d. 'Musu Hasi' from 'Pyaar Me Kabhi' features a Nepali language catchphrase.
 - e. 'Navrai Majhi' from 'English Vinglish' features Marathi lyrics.

Even independent non-film songs such as the latest hit 'Genda Phool' which is a song from the Rap artist and features Bengali lyrics. The deduction here is that a strong regional musical identity makes for a more visible representation in mainstream music scene of India. The Mizo music/musicians of today is missing a chance of representation in the national music scene because they are not able to present their unique music as other regions of India. The other regions are making impact basis building their unique musical identity on their folk traditions, or other traditions (such as Sufi, Rabindra Sangeet). Evidently, musical identity that is rooted/inspired from traditional regional identity is able to tell its unique story, through its unique people, weather it is the troubled political themes of the Sufi Fusion Rock songs from Kashmiri bands or carefree, life enjoying spirit of the Punjabi independent musicians. The stories are stories of the people of that region, in their language, set to their traditional tunes – contributing to a unique musical identity so strong that cannot be denied representation, indeed it is lapped up.

B. Missed professional, academic opportunities on the larger national scenario:

- i. This includes the array of professional teaching positions and academic opportunities that need a qualification or knowledge of Folk music or Classical Music for appointment. There are teaching positions across central universities and central government aided schools (Kendriya Vidyalaya). Due to lack of knowledge of

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Classical and Folk music, most of these positions are lost to people from other regions, including such positions in the state of Mizoram itself.

- ii. Most Mizo students are not able to participate in competitive events that have categories such as classical singing, classical instrument, folk orchestra etc. (e.g. in the National Youth Festival organized by the Association of Indian Universities).

Such misses are on account of lack of a general culture of learning classical and folk music both in the society as well as educational institutions (school and college both) as the majority of focus is on western music which unfortunately does not help either with strengthening a unique musical identity or promoting an academic perusal that can be of help for appointment to teaching positions within the country. The Music of the highly talented Mizo youth of today missing an influence/nudge/culture that encourages him to delve into musical traditions that are thousands of years old and enable unlocking of a deeper spiritual possibility inside.

Suggestions and Takeaways:

There is a need to reevaluate the approach to music during the ages of school education. School primary educations that follow a centralized syllabus are to be the best opportunity to inculcate more inclusivity and diversity of Music at a much younger and impressionable age. Sensitization to students during schooling age to the knowledge of indigenous as well as classical music will create an opportunity of nurturing the musical talent that is inherent in children. This may enhance their aptitude and attraction towards the richness and open avenues of even taking to it as a career option in future by taking this up as a subject of higher studies. This will create a front line of music educators in this cultural belt of Mizoram. Further, this will enable greater cohesion within the Mizo society through the medium of music by bringing together people via the cause of a shared traditional heritage as well as enable a larger national integration as a result of strengthened Unique Mizo Musical Identity that has its rootedness in the Indian Classical Music Universe.

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