Relevance of Sociology of Hindustani Classical Music

Vaishali Joshi
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology St. Mira's College for Girls, Pune
Email: vaishalisjoshi@gmail.com

Hindustani classical music is largely seen as a domain of musicology. This article examines it as a field of sociological scrutiny. From a sociological perspective, music is intrinsically linked to society. It is produced and consumed in a social context that assigns specific meanings to it and its practitioners. Music not only represents social order but it also makes and nurtures social hierarchies. The present article looks into three areas that reveal the link between music and society: the social context in which Hindustani music becomes meaningful, the social history that this music is a product of and its link with the social hierarchy.

[Key wards: Sociology of music, music as social construct, social hierarchy.]

From earliest times music has been created, appreciated, and used by people in a wide range of social circumstances. Attempts to understand it as a social phenomenon and to investigate its 'sociality' however are very recent. The sociality of music is to be conceived in terms of the processes at work in the production and consumption of music within particular social and historical circumstances. The link between society and music therefore becomes the subject of interdisciplinary research and is not merely limited to musicology or ethnomusicology.

In past three decades, music has become a subject of serious sociological scrutiny. This has enlarged the possibility of looking at music as a mode of social interaction governed by socio-cultural context. The study of music in turn has offered important insights into a range of general sociological concerns such as social

interaction, social organization and social stratification. The seminal works of scholars as diverse as Max Weber (1921), Simmel (1882), Adorno (1962, 1984), Becker (1982), Bourdieu (1984) and Tia DeNora (2000, 2003) reveal the important vantage that sociology has offered to understand what music is. Sociology of music has offered important insights into a range of sociological concerns from how precognitive interactions shape the way we relate to each other to how social distinctions are constituted and reinforced (Roy and Dowd, 2010).

Max Weber's pioneering work set the tone of sociology of music by emphasizing that meanings are socially constructed. The early scholars such as Weber, Simmel, and Eisler were participants in a debate about the origins of music. They are marked by their preoccupation with the 'classical' tradition, and are concerned overwhelmingly with European 'art' music. They limit their scope to what is in fact 'one' of the traditions of music making in the western world. As pointed out by Peter Martin (1995), the early sociological study of music presupposed the validity of the conventional hierarchy of musical taste. The notions of 'art' and 'popular', 'serious' and 'light', 'elite' and 'mass' are virtually unquestioned as the vast majority of scholars have investigated the 'great' music of classical tradition.

The works of scholars such as Howard Becker (1984), Bourdieu (1984) and Tia De,Nora (2000) stress the need to incorporate questions of power and stratification while analyzing music. These works have helped to examine both, the institutional arrangements and networks within which music is created and also the subjective perceptions and meanings shared by individual actors producing and consuming music. The early sociological thinking on music which concentrated largely on Western classical tradition has changed significantly through inputs from interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, film studies and feminist analysis. The work of scholars such as Manuel (1993), Frith (1996) has brought to attention the importance of understanding how notions of serious and popular are created. In present day Sociology of music, there is increasing awareness on the social processes through which the 'classical' tradition was established as dominant in hierarchy of musical styles.

Where does the Hindustani classical music[1], which is one of world's oldest musical traditions, stand in the sociological discourse? How far has it become an area of interest of the sociologists? And what is its relevance as a sociological category? These are the questions that the present article aims to address. The focus on classical music, which is only one of the musical forms, is purely a result of my personal interest and my current research. This is just an effort to talk to the broad sociological audience in India about a vibrant field of the discipline- sociology of music. The author is fully aware that the three facets referred to in this paper, namely, music as social construct, as product of a social history and as linked to social hierarchy, are just few of the entry points into the vast sociological inquiry of the field of music and need elaborate analytical treatment.

Earlier works on Indian classical Music[2]

Hindustani music has been an exclusive field of musicologists and a subject of study for the practitioners, students and critiques of music (Deshpande, 1972; Ranade, 2008, 2009 Amonkar, 2009; Atre 2011). The focus has been on explaining what constitutes music and how the music has its own inherent meaning. Scholars like Vamanrao Deshpande (1972) and Ashok Ranade (2008, 2009) have tried to locate Hindustani music in the context of its social history. Socio-cultural and economic changes are seen as shaping music, but a clear link between music and social organization and social order is not established. This is an area of sociological scrutiny. It is interesting to note that not much sociological perspective is being used to study the Hindustani music and the link between music and society is an under-researched area in sociology itself.

A few sociological studies of scholars like D. P. Mukherjee (1947), Radhakamal Mukherjee (1954), and O. P. Joshi (1985) have analysed music in terms of the role and social functions of art in general in society. D.P. Mukerjee has looked into the changing relationship of Hindustani music and the Indian social order. According to him, Indian classical music revealed both the tendencies of the creative and revivalist as a result of the impact of economic forces upon Indian traditions. Radhakamal Mukerjee (1954) emphasised the social functions of art and asserted a definite relationship between art forms such as music and society. The

changing role of art and artist is highlighted. The focus of these early sociological studies is on developing the empirical sociology of music, 'showing how things came to be as they are and hence what changes have taken or are taking place' (Silberman, 2004)

These studies analyse art mainly using the binaries of tradition-modernity. The transformation in music is spelt in frozen terms of how it was practised in traditional society and what is its role in modern society. This neglects the historical continuity in the process of making of music. This also fails to explain the transgression into one another of musical practices labeled as traditional or modern.

The Reader on 'Sociology of Oriental Music' edited by O. P. Joshi (2004), is an attempt to compile various studies analyzing set of relations, institutional networks and relation between musicians, their music and music consumers. Here too, the focus largely remains on studying the impact of modern changes on music.

Ethno musicological works of scholars like Daniel Newman (1980), Bonnie Wade (1984), Peter Manuel (1988), and Gerry Farrell (1993) brilliantly explore into classical music as a cultural phenomenon studying its changing social context and the complex relationship between music and its practitioners.

Richard Leppert (1987) has examined the mediating role played by two of the arts, music and painting, in the racial estrangement in India between the native and conquerors by early nineteenth century. Leppert's work is an important contribution to our understanding of colonialism as a process of hegemonic use of art to mask the colonial exploitation.

C. S. Laxmi's (2000) biographical sketch of legendary women artists has focused on how these artists functioned in a patriarchal society that fixed them in a particular way.

The remarkable works by Banerjee (1989), Rao (1990), Oldenberg (1991), Rege (1996) and Srivastav (2004) locate and examine the historical transformation of Indian classical music on the grid of colonialism. Indian classical music is seen as a case of changing gendered public sphere. These studies focus on how the woman question was used to define the upcoming modern Indian nation. It is pointed out that in this musical transformation, new code of cultural morality was imposed on women while at the same

time pushing some women from lower strata out of their cultural space.

The classicization of music in the context of colonialism and nationalism has been a major thread in works of Janaki Bakhale (2006), Weidman (2005, 2006) and Laxmi Subramanian (2009). These studies in social history have reviewed the transformation of Indian classical music as part of the newly emerging modern, public cultural sphere. These works point out to how the music practices were framed within the categories of classicism and textuality in the nationalist discourse. The studies draw on the central role played by music in defining what it meant to be modern while safely retaining the realm of tradition.

Scholars like Srivastav, Subramanian and Weidman draw attention to the fact that through the first three decades of the 20th century, a substantive discourse developed around voice, specifically a female voice which became symptomatic of innocence, a sublime and evanescent quality that fascinated the consuming middle class. These studies point out to the fact the reception and consumption of music was informed as much by social values as by technological interventions such as microphone.

Tejaswini Niranjana (2006) brought out the centrality of Caribbean popular music in Trinidad in the process of identity formation of people of Indian origin. She argues that music is related to the structure of social aspiration and issues of social mobility and that it is one of the central processes of nation-making in which modern subjects are produced.

She has, in her recent work (2013), focussed on understanding how Hindustani music played a role both as cultural practice and aspirational horizon in the north Karnataka region between 1890s and the 1940s. She looks at Hindustani music as part of the cultural labour undertaken in the region during the rise of Kannada 'nationalism'.

The studies of music after 1980s have enlarged the perspective both methodologically and thematically. These seminal works have looked at music as related to social structure and social order, as a field of construction of social identities and as a domain that sustains social hierarchies. These works have contested the canonization of 'classical' music. They point out to the need to

develop analytical and conceptual framework within sociology to capture fully the field of Indian music.

The brilliant musicological works on Carnatic music (Sambamoorthy 1960, 1962, Rangaramanuja Ayyangar 1977) have expanded the scholarship on Indian classical music and contributions of scholars like, Subramanian, Weidman and Niranjana as mentioned earlier, have stressed the importance of working within an interdisciplinary framework.

The present article limits its focus to Hindustani music and attempts to present it as a social category, as a category that needs more in-depth sociological attention.

Looking at Hindustani Music from sociological perspective

Music is an integral part of Indian life. It is interwoven with every-day life in such a way that religious ceremonies, festivals, changing seasons or even events such as birth and death are incomplete without music. India's music is a culmination of multiple musical cultures such as primitive, folk, religious and art music. It is interesting to note that the musical forces from different musical contexts have come together from ancient period to now on. And yet, the classical or art music has acquired the dominant position.

The boundaries demarcating different categories of music are not very strict and intra-category exchanges are happening throughout history. But, when placed vertically, classical music stands at the top.

Hindustani music enjoys the prestige and pride as India's cultural heritage. Though it is listened and appreciated by a small number of people, it enjoys the state of being 'art' and 'serious' music. The claim of its practitioners of doing 'serious' music is also legitimized by the same logic that distinguishes classical music from other forms of music. What is sociological about this music is not about its sonic qualities or so much about its inherent structure but the social context that attributes a specific meaning to it and its practitioners.

Hindustani music as a social construct

Sociologically speaking, Hindustani music is a social construct as it distinguishes itself from what it is not in a context governed by social and cultural assumptions. The musical meaning is arrived at not only between the organized sounds but also

between the people who participate in producing and consuming that music.

It would be helpful here to note what makes music classical or *shastriya*. This music is more abstract as it is expressed largely through sound. It is also based on a complex, written grammatical codification.

As stated by an eminent musicologist Dr. Ashok Ranade,

'the art music flows in two concurrent streams known as *vidvatparampara* (scholastic) and *prayogparampara* (performing). The former stream formulates, systematises, and records rules designed and expected to govern musical operations in this category. The second stream is directly related to actual presentation of music'. (Ranade 2008: 199)

As an institutionalized system of tonality Hindustani music is based on the inter-linked system of *swaras* (notes), *shrutis* (half notes) and a *saptak* (octave). The particular melodic arrangement of *swaras* is what constitutes a *Raga*. The rules regarding what notes make a particular *Raga* and what notes are to be excluded in that *Raga* or how a *Raga* melody is elaborated etc. are strictly laid down within the musical tradition. But one finds a unique combination of tradition and creativity in this music. Unlike Western classical music, which is based on strict written notation, Hindustani music has wider scope for individual creativity and elaborations. The *Raga* or the melody is intrinsically linked to *Rasa* or emotions and the presentation of the *Raga* in its highest form is attained by the musician who is successful in creating the *Rasa*. There is a clear scope for individual and solo mode of performance. The individual artist can improvise according to his/her aesthetic view and has a freedom to play with the *swaras*. The basic musical structures are improvised by the artist according to individual aesthetic view. The ultimate aim is 'aesthetic'. Nonetheless this freedom of movement is bound by the basic melodic frame. It is like the flying kite moving freely in the sky only as long as it is tied to the spool. The moment this tie is broken, there is a risk of straying away. So, the possibility of musical creativity and experimentation operates within the bounds of a musical tradition which is socio-historically evolved.

The art music rests on a clear distinction between the artist and the audience. As a performing art music is inherently a social

activity. Though classical music is distinguished from other musical forms by the nature of its solo performance and individual endeavor, the very necessity of performance makes it a social phenomenon. Music is seen as a medium of self-expression. But individual inspiration itself is nurtured within a certain social context and to find acceptance, must be channelled in ways, which reflect existing conventions. It is also important to note that the ability of the artist to improvisation is largely shaped by what could be termed as the relations of performance.

Musical performance is governed by social conventions. As the Art Worlds approach of Becker (1982) suggests, the creation and dissemination of music depends on all people including support personnel who may have little involvement in the musical performance itself. Music is produced within 'art worlds' – a network of various groups ranging from audiences, promoters, educators instrument makers and technicians. There are numerous taken for granted musical conventions to which both musicians and listeners are oriented. We can take the simple example of what could be called as the concert architecture. The ambience, the stage arrangement, the arrangement of sitting for the audience etc. are all very crucial factors that shape the performance. Or for instance, though musical performance is largely facilitated by the accompaniment, the vocal artist enjoys the central position.

Hindustani music as a product of a social history

The history of Hindustani music is not just a musical history but a social history. It narrates not only about taking over of one musical form by another in specific cultural contexts, but also about taking over of musical authority from one group by another. If one looks at the social history of classical music, one sees a clear transition in predominance of musical forms according to changing socio-cultural values and transforming political economy. The textual tradition from Vedas to *Sangeet Ratnakar* which looks at music as a scholarly activity was the result of a close association of music with the sacred. Even when music separated from its ritualistic context, it was anchored in the Sanskritic knowledge thus creating a distinct identity for itself and its practitioners. As argued by Daniel Neuman, the classical music culture in India until about the 16th century was an essentially Brahmanical activity. Music performance in this culture was ideally not to be considered as a

profession, but rather an avocation. One practiced music for its qualities of illumination not remuneration. (Neuman, 1985: 100).

The brahmanical tradition of music is thought to be practised through the *Prabandha* (gave rise to meter) and *Chhanda* (gave rise to verse) modes which have their roots in the Sama Veda chants. From this *prabandha* style originated the Dhrupad, which is considered to be the oldest surviving musical forms of the Hindustani classical music. Dhrupad reached a height of glory during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and existed as the predominant classical form until the eighteenth century. It is believed that it was during the reigns of Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior[3] and the great Mughal emperor Akbar[4] that Dhrupad flowered as a form and gained highest popularity.

The transition from Dhrupad to Khayal is to be seen as a way in which the musicians of the time complied with the cultural and aesthetic demands of their new patrons.

This transition is not only about one musical form replacing the other, but also about creation of 'authentic' and 'authoritative' definition of what constitutes music. Dhrupad itself found its way from temples in the imperial court as a marker of the Mughal cultural taste. Its slow decline and the steady rise of Khayal represented the changing cultural standards of a period characterised by political instability caused by continuous wars and the nobility strengthening their own position challenging the imperial authority. This period was also marked by the resurgence of Sufism and music associated with it. So, when Mohammed Shah's reign is seen as a period when Khayal definitely replaced Dhrupad, it was in this context of changing socio-political fabric.

Musical patronage was central to Mughal India and music was a court prerogative. The Mughal Emperors before Aurangzeb, being less strict in their application of Islamic tradition and law, were also enthusiastic about the courtesan music. Nevertheless, the Mughal imperial court and its landed nobility on a whole mainly patronized the dhrupad and then the khayal. These two musical forms represented the Muslim aesthetic taste.

The understanding of music in the post-Mughal era was significantly shaped by the increasing power of the British and the establishment of the colonial rule in India.

The concept of 'classical' as understood today is directly linked to the western conception evolved during 18th and 19th centuries and internalized by other cultures often through the colonial interface. The image of Indian classical music and the modes of learning it have dramatically changed during the colonial period. The colonial period is a remarkable stage in the history of Hidustani music because it is in this period that the music got its identity as 'classical'. This period is marked by the systematic efforts to ground the music in theory, to combine the theory with practice. In this process music was marked as 'modern' and 'national', and as a 'respectable' art form.

In fact in this journey, from being an unmarked practice, it became marked as being classical. The classical music milieu was an explicit target for the reform project (Srivastava, 2004). The notions such as 'pure', 'art', 'modern' and 'traditional' were the outcome of the ideological work of the nationalist movement that associated free and independent India with its rich cultural heritage. The Hindu brand of nationalism used religion as a symbol of spiritual identity of the Indian Nation. The post-colonial nationalist discourse and the construction of 'modern' India involved a process of revivalism of Indian arts, specially the purification of Indian music to match its ancient Hindu lineage.

As a new public sphere of music was being formed in the 20th century, it changed drastically in terms of pedagogy and content. From small audiences in princely courts, as music performances shifted to larger public spheres, it acquired the status of a respectable art form. The urban middle class and the new rich bourgeoisie class patronized the classical music, the 'high' art form which was to become the national heritage of a newly aspiring nation. High art music ascribed to the Great Tradition as an expression of indigenous cultural attainment in the newly independent nation ensured the transmission of this gloriously complex art (Powers, 1980).

The increasing public patronage and development of formal music education system involved comprehensible buying and selling of music as an object. Commodification of music intensified with increased use of technology starting from gramophone, radio to today's digital technology.

The content and practice of Hindustani music, its notions of aesthetics, have all changed according to the changing patterns of patronage and modes of listening. The social history of music thus illuminates Hindustani music as a social category.

Hindustani music and the social hierarchy

As a social product, music is produced and received in a context shaped by the social hierarchies. It is not free from the inequalities imposed by class, caste and gender. The field of music is not free from the differences and inequalities created by the society. This field consists not only of the artists and the students of the music, but also of the audience, the institutions engaged in music promotion and those who legitimise 'high' or 'art' and 'low' or 'popular' music.

The field of Art in India has been closely related to religion. Most of the folk arts formed an integral part of the religious rituals and festivals. People engaged in these art forms belonged to the lower ranks of society and their art in turn was pushed to a lower position. The social and religious inequalities divided the art forms into the categories of dominant and subordinate. The caste endogamy restricted the art forms to the respective community with the art being transmitted hereditarily.

The musical system is marked by another peculiar hierarchy in which instrument players are ranked inferior because they handle instruments using animal body parts such as skin or hair. The shehnai players, who belonged to the lower castes and then in most of the regions converted to Islam, were always kept outside the temples. Their music was the integral part of the temple routine, but they were prohibited from entering the temple (Chandavarkar, 2010: 187).

That the hierarchy of sound, both vocal and instrumental corresponds to the social hierarchy is well explained by the case of Nagaswaram. The low-brow associations of Nagaswaram on account of its folk origin and its inherent loudness as well as its open-air, public performance context gave it a distinctive non-brahmin musical identity.

Playing of Nagaswaram is an integral part of the temple routine in the South. But, paradoxically, the instrument itself is considered as low and impure within the notions of ritual pollution

because of contact with lips. The *Nagaswaram* player belonged to the lower caste and practiced it as a hereditary vocation.

The case of *Nagaswaram* throws light on how the temple and royal court music enclaves were limited to the elite sections and how this music secured a dignified status as 'art' music. It also shows how the musical aesthetics are closely related to cultural conditioning. More than the objective sound per se; it is the cultural standards evolved by the elite that assign the instrument and its players a particular high or low status.

'At a time when the rigidities of caste prevented large sections of people from entering the temple, leave alone listening to music, it was through *Nagaswaram* by virtue of its inherent loudness and the outdoor and open-air conditions of its performance that common people could get to listen to art music. Outside the elitist enclaves of the chamber music tradition, it was the *Nagaswaram* players who preserved the rich heritage of music through their temple service (Nandakumar, 1993: 25).

In context of colonialism, music was being purified and new standards of morality entered in the musical field. Music had to be projected as modern and respectable. In purification of music, as its anchorage in Hindu religion was triumphantly trumpeted, Indian music's purity was also linked to wiping out the 'illicit', 'decadent' elements from it. Music's reformation was directly linked with women, with the entry of 'respectable' women and the exile of 'immoral' women. This is well explained by the case of *Thumri*.

The advent of the British power in India since the end of the eighteenth century altered the socio-economic structure in the North. The land reforms introduced by the British (land itself became a saleable commodity) uprooted thousands of zamindars the landlords and gave rise to a new class of landowners consisting mostly of newly rich urban speculators and investors. This new class developed a new cultural taste popularizing the light and livelier *thumri*.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a major transformation in musical life in North India. The spread of literacy and English education also caused the spread of Victorian moral standards. The newly emerging urban middle class and the bourgeoisie class disapproved of Thumri especially because most Thumri singers were courtesans and as a form Thumri was also

associated with the decadent vestiges of feudalism (Manuel, 1986, 477).

Veena Oldenberg (1991) has shown in her work on the Courtesans of Lucknow, how the British political propaganda deliberately projected them as dissolute and immoral. This not only dehumanized the profession, stripping it off its cultural functions, but conveniently reduced them to prostitution.

Sumanta Banerjee has pointed out how by the end of the 19th century, with education, industrialization and new cultural tastes and values imbibed by the Bhadralok from Victorian England, forced the popular culture consisting of doggerels and poems, songs and theatrical performances mostly fashioned by women, to retreat from Calcutta to the Bengal countryside. She has shown the way in which the Bhadralok campaign against women artistes and their performances systematically drove them away from the precincts of 'respectable' urban society pushing them either to distant villages or down into the underworld of prostitution (Banerjee : 1989).

As centers of musical life in North India remained largely with the increasingly stigmatized courtesans, it is important to note that several male accompanists and teachers sustained and survived on this 'illicit' profession.

The new cultural renaissance shifted the patronage of fine arts to the new urban middle class developing new standards of culture and art. This led to a process of relocation of thumri from the courtesan halls to public concerts. As the genre lost its occasionally seductive function and became more abstract and purely aesthetic in goals, it attracted the attention of most major classical singers and began to achieve classical sophistication (Manuel,1986). As thumri acquired the status of 'semi-classical' concert musical form in 20th century, the hereditary courtesan class slowly lost their monopoly over this genre.

Vidya Rao (1990) shows how women who were traditional singers were pushed out of singing as the notion of what music and the mode of listening changed drastically. With the decline in princely power and privileges, and with the role of patron passing to state, the industrialist and increasingly to the entity called public, the traditional forms of women's singing such as Thumri were

overtaken by the more systematic forms such as khayal which is more male dominated.

The field of Hindustani music is thus not free from the social hierarchies of caste, community and gender. The social hierarchies are nurtured by musical distinctions through creation of musical genres (e.g. classical) and association of these genres with social distinctions such as class, caste or gender.

Conclusion

The production and consumption of Hindustani music is shaped by a socio-cultural context in which a specific meaning is rendered to it and its practitioners. More than its sonic qualities, it is due to the cultural notions around it that it enjoys prestige and honour as a national art. When put under a sociological lens, Hindustani music reveals an intrinsic link with the society in which it draws a specific meaning. Sociological scrutiny of Hindustani music not only develops an understanding of social dynamics of music but also contributes to the general sociological knowledge about cultural relations. As the methodological and conceptual tools to understand music sociologically are still being evolved, the study of Hindustani classical music will facilitate a better understanding of society not only as a harmonious entity but as a power structure.

If music creates joy and happiness, and harnesses aesthetic energy, why is the musical life organized around power and why music making involves creation and nurturing of social hierarchies? To answer such questions, the sociological community will have to take music more seriously. We will have to go beyond treating music as an autonomous art all above the society and treat it accountable for aesthetic and pleasure as well as for distinctions and hierarchies.

Notes

1. It is referred to as Hindustani music through the paper here on.
2. The term Indian classical music is used to denote study of both, Hindustani and Carnatic classical music.
3. Raja Man Singh (1496-1525) was a musician and theorist and a great patron of the arts.
4. Although musicians from Iran, Afghanistan and Kashmir were at the court of Akbar, it is Dhrupad that captured imagination of the Mughal court since Akbar's time till seventeenth century.

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