

COMMUNICATING THROUGH MUSIC IN A NON-TECH WORLD: TRACING THE PUBLIC PERFORMANCES OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

Classical performing art forms of India have always been the most ancient communication forms and have nourished under the shelter of either the religious centers or the court of the rulers. The aesthetic pleasure of enjoying a classical performance was not accessible to common people. The situation changed around 19th Century when some classical music connoisseurs started organizing classical music programmes outside the vicinity of princely courts and temples. There may have been many reasons to do so. Some of them had the motto of reviving and upholding heritage of Indian art forms and through it propagating and holding to Indianness among the British ruled Indian people. Some did so simply out of love for these art forms. Whatsoever were the mottoes of these people, their efforts resulted in wide propagation of Indian Classical Music and Dance. This paper has tried to document some of the prominent and popular mass scale Music festivals that have not only been efficient tools of communicating with the masses but have also kept our country vibrant with the sound of music, and thus uphold the age-old heritage of intangible art form – the Indian Classical Music.

Key words – Communication through music, Indian Classical Music, Performance, Sammelan, Music Festival, Music Conference, concert

Introduction

The 19th century in India became the reformatory period for all kinds of performing arts. Some of the connoisseurs started institutionalizing music and dance in the line of music and dance institutions in Britain; whereas some others started organizing Music conferences and concerts open to general public. This created a renewed interest among the general people in these art forms. Not only the Rajas and Nawabs took interest in organizing the concerts but others viz. political leaders, dewans, religious leaders, and distinguished citizens from different walks of life along with the common people came hand in hand to hold small soirees or big conferences of Classical Music in the north as well as in South. Such shows and concerts played an integral role in communicating important messages to the masses to create awareness, as a call for action or to educate them on important matters of national and political concern.

One such pioneer, popularizing classical music in the south was the Mysuru king Shri Chamaraja Wadiyar (1868 – 1894). He started placing loudspeakers on the palace grounds to

allow the general public to enjoy Carnatic music, which used to be performed inside the court, through its broadcast via public address systems.

Apart from the rulers of the states some of the nobilities and wealthy people started organizing musical soirées in their homes. This way the common householders started coming closer to the court music or classical music. Among many other people Pt. Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar in Mumbai and Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore in Bengal took huge steps in this regard. Bhatkhandeji with the help of court of Baroda started organizing All India Music Conferences, the first of its kind, where musicians from different 'riyasats' came to participate in the performances. These conferences have special standing in the history of Indian classical music, as musicologists across the country were invited too to discuss various principles of Indian Music which formed the foundation of our music system. Distinguished Rajas, Nawabs and Dewans sent their court musicians to flaunt the caliber of these prized possessions. The artistes also took pride in flaunting various medals and ornaments which they won as a token of recognition of their talent and caliber. The first All India Music conference took place in 1916 at Baroda under the patronage of the ruler of Baroda. It was a huge effort to put the artistes of different gharanas on one stage that too in the purview of general public. It was almost a revolution that took place in the arena of Indian Classical Music. A permanent body by the name "All India Music Conference Working Committee" was established with Pandit Bhatkhande as its General Secretary during the conference. Under his guidance a list of action plan was prepared in view for the development and upliftment of Indian Classical music. It was also decided to hold similar Music conferences once in every year. Among many other eminent musicians and musicologists Rabindranath Tagore also attended this conference.

Though it was decided that henceforth the conference would be organized every year but due to financial constraints it could not be executed. So, the second All India Music Conference was held at Delhi in December 1918, under the presidentship of the Nawab of Rampur. Consecutively third All India Music Conference was held in December 1919 at Benares and fourth All India Music Conference was held in January 1925 at Lucknow. In this conference a decision was taken to open an Institute of Indian Classical Music at Lucknow, originally named "All India College of Hindustani Classical Music". Later the name was changed named after the name of Sir William Marris. Thus, a new form of festival was added to the yearly calendar of those Indian citizens who were connoisseur of Indian Classical Music.

India, though being a vast country, was going through a period of cultural renaissance across its length and breadth around the latter half of 19th century. Similar ideology floated among the citizens of all over India. Like Pt. Bhatkhande many other music loving people came forward to propagate Indian Music and music concerts seemed to be the most befitting way to do so. Later in the early 20th century, Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar started giving

ticketed public performances in open air pavilions. Following in his footsteps, the other contemporary musicians like Abdul Karim Khan also started singing in ticketed concerts. Among the female performers, Hirabai Barodekar was the first to give public performances and she made it very popular. Due to the popularity of Hirabai Barodekar, the other female singers also started getting noticed and earning respect in the society. This encouraged common people to let the women of their family to learn and perform music on stage.

We will now have a look at some of the important music festivals of India which have helped to uphold the Indian Classical Music and the musicians.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of the paper is to look at the progress of Hindustani classical music through a lens assessing its proliferation in the common masses and meeting all sections of the society without staying gripped as an extraordinary medium of communication for the top echelons of the society.

The specific objective was to document the efforts made by these traditional schools of music in reaching out to the masses to become a medium of initiation of discussion in the public sphere while creating awareness, and igniting the need for self-expression.

Methodology

Since this is a historical study, it demanded the administration of documentation and descriptive method over any other methodology used for primary and secondary data collection. The researcher who is also a practitioner of Hindustani classical music has made an effort to bring the gist of culmination and progress of the important schools of music in India, their propagation and spread as a communication medium among masses. This paper has attempted to document all efforts in the past two centuries and beaded them together in the realm of a paper by making it more descriptive in nature so that the history of such an important and ancient art form is not lost to the younger generations of researchers in India and abroad.

Discussion and Findings

The study analysed how festivals of music in different parts of the country became a prolific means of propagating it. The following is a discussion of the important seminars and festivals that made this effort possible in the past two centuries:

1. Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan

This Festival came into being much before Bhatkhande's systematic approach to propagate Indian Classical Music. Baba Harballabh was born in the later part of 18th Century in village Bajwara, District Hoshiarpur (Punjab). His maternal grandfather brought him to Jullundur when he was in his teens. There in a temple at Devi Talab Swami Tulajagiri used

to sing Bhajans in Dhrupad style in his daily prayers. Harballabh's grandfather would attend these prayers regularly taking young Hari Vallabh along with him. This left a deep impact on the mind of sensitive Harballabh. Instead of playing with other children of his age he would sit for hours on the steps of Devi Talab singing Bhajans. Seeing his interest in singing Pandit Duni Chand was engaged to give formal lessons in music to the young Hari Vallabh.

Later Baba Tulajagiri, a great saint, Sanskrit scholar, an exponent of Dhrupad style of classical music and the 'mahant' of Baba Hemgiri's 'Gaddi', took Harballabh under his wings and started imparting him training of classical music along with the holy scriptures and Sanskrit. It is said that soon Hari Vallabh grew to become a great singer of Bhajans in Dhrupad style. His music mesmerized people. Recognizing the extra ordinary qualities in his disciple, Baba Tulajagiri named Baba Harballabh as his successor to the 'Gaddi'. After the death of Baba Tulajagiri in 1874 Harballabh thought of holding a memorial ceremony to pay homage to his guru on his first death anniversary. He invited the Sadhus and saints to sing devotional compositions at the Samadhi of his guru. This congregation of two days was held in the month of December. Gradually this congregation became a yearly affair. After the death of Baba Harballabh, Baba Tola Ram, a disciple of Baba Harballabh succeeded to his Gaddi. He took significant efforts to continue this congregation and named it Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan. He also started inviting eminent Classical Musicians along with the sadhus and saints. In due course because of this Sangeet Sammelan Jullandhar gained the status of an important seat of Indian Classical Music. This Sammelan is now 147 years old. A regular committee was set up to look after the matters for organizing this sammelan in the year 1922. It is interesting to note that despite the biting cold in the month of December listeners continue to flock around with their warmers and bedding to experience the feast of music throughout the days and the nights for those three days till date.

2. Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival

This festival is celebrated in Thiruvaiyaru every year on the death anniversary of Thyagaraja under the auspices of Sri Thyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha at the saint composer's samadhi at [Thiruvaiyaru](#) in Tamil Nadu.

The first music congregation at the Samadhi of Thyagaraja took place almost after 58 years of his death. After the death of Thyagaraja in 1847, his mortal remains were buried on the banks of river Kaveri. After constructing a small memorial on the particular spot all his disciples went back to their native places. Due to neglect the memorial soon got dilapidated. Around 1903 two of his last surviving students Umayalpuram Krishna Bhagavatar and Sundara Bhagavatar returned to Tiruvaiyaru and had it renovated.

From the next year onwards, efforts were made by musical stalwarts to observe the anniversary at Tiruvayyaru. In 1905 a ceremony was conducted with feeding of the poor and worship at the memorial as per Vedic tenets. But the following year, the relation between the two Tillaisthanam brothers turned sour and each began conducting a parallel Aradhana Utsav. Musicians associated themselves with one or the other brother and soon two rival factions came into being. The younger brother started celebrating five days before the Aradhana and concluded on the Aradhana day, whereas the elder brother began on Aradhana day and continued for four days after that. Both groups organized music performances and feeding of the poor and so the public was the real beneficiary during the nine days. But both the groups had one thing in common. They never allowed women to perform during the Aradhana. They also did not permit 'Nadaswaram, performances.

In 1921, Bangalore Nagarathnammal, a rich temple dancer, residing in Madras, decided to dedicate her life's earnings to the cause of immortalizing Tyagaraja's memory. Seeing the rampant factionalism and discrimination against women, she decided to take action. In 1925, she bought the land on which the memorial stood and constructed a temple over the memorial. She also installed an idol of Tyagaraja in front of the memorial and finally dedicated the temple in early 1926. However, both the rival groups did not let her perform Harikatha in front of the idol of Thyagaraja she had installed. Not flinching Nagarathnammal began a third front which conducted its own music programs at the rear of the shrine. This third front featured many women artistes and thus soon became very popular. Its popularity affected the viewership of the other two Aradhanas Utsav-s. Finally in 1940 on the requests of Mr. S Y Krishnaswami all three parties convinced to be united and from 1941 onwards the Tyagaraja Aradhana Festival started to be celebrated the way it is known to be celebrated. Muthiah Bhagavatar selected five pancharatnas which were considered the best to be rendered in a group so that a common homage by all became possible and thus this became an integral feature of the Aradhana.

3. Chembai Sangeetolsavam

As a part of the Ekadasi festival, an eleven-day Chembai music festival is organised, at Guruvayur Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala in the month of September every year. An incredible array of some two thousand Carnatic musicians take part in this festival to show their respect to the veteran Carnatic Music artiste Late Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar who was a great devotee of Lord Guruvayurappan. This festival is celebrated almost similar to the Thyagraja Aradhana Festival held at Thiruvaiyaru, where amateur as well as the established artistes both pay homage to the doyen of Carnatic music through their music.

A group concert marks the end of the festival on the night of Ekadasi which includes five of Chembai's most favorite songs. The chorus is led by several leading artists on the Dashami Day and the entire audience also joins the chorus.

4. Chennai Music Festival

'Margazhi Sangeet Utsavam' or Chennai music festival is celebrated in the city of Chennai every year from December to January. The festival is organized to commemorate the foundation day of Music Academy in Chennai. The academy came into being as a result of a resolution passed in an All India Music conference that took place in Chennai or the then Madras, way back in 1927. This festival was organized by a political body 'Indian National Congress' with a motto to popularize Carnatic Music and Dance among the common people and thus inducing pride for their cultural heritage. This festival gained a lot of popularity from its inception and gradually several other organizers started holding concerts and music conferences around the same time. What used to be a seven day's affair has now extended upto two months long festival. According to the Journal of The Music Academy 2014, Volume 85 in a period of 30 days as many as 80 Music Concerts were scheduled by the Music Academy Madras alone. And there are more than 50 such organizations who hold chain of concerts during this period. No place in world holds so many music concerts in one city for so many days and involving so many organizations.

5. Music Conferences in Kolkata

In British India Kolkata was one of the most important cities from the point of social and cultural reforms. In 1932-33, Dakshinaranjan Bhattacharjee held a music conference at Allahabad. This inspired Bhupendra Nath Ghosh of Pathuria Ghata at Kolkata to organize the 'All Bengal Music Conference' in 1934.ⁱ The conference was aided and supported by royalties, music lovers, film-music directors Raichand Baral and Damodardas Khannah which was held till 1953. The first All Bengal Music conference was held in the Calcutta University Senate Hall in 1934 which was inaugurated by none other than Rabindranath Tagore. Later the theatres viz. Shri, Roxy, Star and Minerva were used to be the venues for this conference. It was a ticketed conference and those who could not buy tickets would sit all night on the pavement outside the theatres to listen to their favourite musicians. The last session was held at Rangmahal theatre in 1953.

Apart from this Sarba Bharatiya Sangeet Sammelan was also a big attraction for listeners of Classical music.

6. Dover Lane music festival or The Dover Lane Music Conference is an annual Hindustani classical music festival in the months of December and January in Dover Lane, Ballygunge area of Kolkata. The festival was started being held in 1952. Many stalwarts of

Indian classical music have performed in the festival. Throughout the years, the festival has undergone many changes. Instead of the original venue of Dover Lane, this annual event is now organized at the Nazrul Mancha and lasts for 6 days

Besides the performance of the established singers, the youngsters are also encouraged to participate and show their talents.

The performances were originally scheduled at night, however, now it has changed to day-time and evening-time. The Dover Lane Music Festival has become culturally one of the most important events of the year with the presence of a number of eminent music maestros from all over the country.

7. Tansen Sangeet Sammelan

The city of Gwalior, being the hometown of the famous Indian musician Miyan Tansen, occupies a special position in history of Indian music. It is one of the places that has witnessed remarkable developments in Hindustani Classical Music.

After the death of Tansen in 1589 he was buried in Gwalior and a tomb was constructed on the site. It is said that his followers started paying homage to this legendary musician by performing on his tomb. This gained so much popularity that the ruler of Gwalior started patronizing the event. At present it is managed by the cultural Department of the government of Madhya Pradesh. This has also now grown to be a mega music festival of five days and night, where connoisseurs of Indian classical Music from all over the world gather to witness the festival.

Apart from the concerts, seminars on classical music, a heritage walk, and an exhibition of traditional instruments are also organized during the festival. The prestigious Tansen Samman award is also presented to deserving musicians in the field of classical music during the festival by the government of Madhya Pradesh.

8. Sankat Mochan Festival

The Sankat Mochan Temple dedicated to the monkey god Hanumaan is said to be founded by the famous saint poet Tulsidas in Varanasi. To commemorate the birth of Hanumaan a Music Festival is celebrated in the temple.

Artists from all over India congregate to perform music and drama. Maestros of Indian classical music often perform voluntarily in this festival, providing a rare chance for those who might not otherwise be able to afford to hear them perform.

9. Shriram Shankarlal Music Festival

Shriram Shankarlal Music Festival is one of the earliest Indian Classical music events held in Delhi for the past six decades. The Sammelan began as a small soiree with an informal gathering of musicians at the house of Sumitra Charat Ram, at Curzon Road in Delhi. Over the past sixty years it has now become a forum for the talented youth along with the most authentic traditional musicians. The concert became so popular that the venue had to be shifted to the grounds of Modern School in Barakhamba Road in Delhi and the concert continued throughout the night. But after 84's riots security reasons forced the organizers to shift the venue of the concert again to the present kamani Auditorium in Copernicus Marg at Delhi.

10. Sawai Gandharva Sangeet Mahotsav

The Sawai Gandharva Sangeet Mahotsav is one of the most prominent and sought-after Indian classical music festivals in Western India. This festival was started to commemorate the death anniversary of legendary Classical Vocalist Sawai Gandharva in the year 1953 at Pune in Maharashtra. The festival was founded by the Arya Sangeet Prasarak Mandal and was led by Pt. Bhimsen Joshi until 2002. After celebrating the golden jubilee concert in 2002 Pt. Bhimsen Joshi retired from the committee. Since then, Shrinivas Joshi, Pt. Joshi's son and disciple, and Shrikant Deshpande have been organizing this event.

The festival was initially intended to display artists of the Kirana Gharana only, later artistes of all the gharanas were included to showcase their expertise in front of the aesthete audience.

11. Gunidas Sangeet Sammelan

An internationally known music festival Gunidas Sangeet Sammelan was first presented under the patronage of Maharashtra Lalit Kala Nidhi way back in 1977 by the legendary Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit C. R. Vyas in memory of the famed classical music doyen of the Agra gharana, Pandit Jagganath Buwa Purohit.

Top classical musicians of India, both vocalists and instrumentalists perform in this festival. One of the most patronized and popular sangeeta sammelans, it started in Mumbai and now is held in Mumbai, Kolkata (in December) and Delhi (in February) every year.

12. Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan

After independence when royal patronage ceased to be there for encouraging the Indian Classical Music and other performing art forms, Government of India started patronizing these art forms from its various platforms. One of these platforms was All India Radio. The artistes and connoisseurs both were benefited through its daily broadcasts of classical music. When Dr. B. V. Keskar became the Information and Broadcasting Minister, he took the initiative to start a programme on national network, in which a particular artist could be heard at same point of time through-out India. His efforts culminated in the form of the

National Programme of Music which started in 1952. This programme is still broadcast on every Saturday from 9.30 PM to 11.00 PM. Success of this programme encouraged Kesarji to initiate another new programme in 1954 in the form of Radio Sangget Sammelan, later, known as Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan. The concerts of Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan before invited audiences are held on various venues all over the country on the same day. More than 50 prominent artistes take part in concerts held at major stations before a live audience. These recordings are later broadcast as a season of around a month through November and December. Lately, the government of India has renamed it as “Bharat Ratna Pandit Bhimsen Joshi Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan” on the occasion of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi’s Centenary Commemorative celebration on 6th February 2021. ⁱⁱ

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has focused on the ways the Hindustani classical music has proliferated and made its space in today’s world of technology aided performers and lovers of music. While technology has started having its way in this ancient art form as well, yet the flavour and uniqueness of it remains for the younger generation to relish, learn from and preserve as a legacy.

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