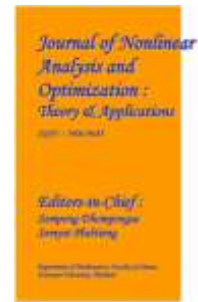


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CASTE AND CLASSICAL MUSIC: EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL IMPACT OF CASTEISM, UNTOUCHABILITY, AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES ON INDIAN INSTRUMENTAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article unravels the subtleties between casteism and untouchability in relation with Indian classical instrumental music, both from the points of view of Carnatic and Hindustani traditions. Traditionally, casteism has dictated access to education and performance opportunities in musical performance. It has kept marginalized communities largely excluded from classical music. Using historical research, this article discusses how hierarchies of caste have influenced not only who might be musicking but also what kinds of instruments the musicians play. The work explores the direct effects of the practice of untouchability on the choice and use of musical instruments by the marginalized communities to thereby bring forth deep socio-cultural fragmentation within Indian classical music. Much of this paper focuses on the endeavors of the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities who helped to ensure the successful sustenance and evolution of classical music despite the social challenges thrown up by the rigours of caste-based discrimination. Their influence, particularly in instrumental performance, are given attention to underlie their legacy. This piece also handles the exclusionary practices of the gharana-based institutions of classical music, that further entrenched caste practices, with features of contribution being the concerns that VD Paluskar fought for – democratizing the structure of musical training. In a nutshell, what the article does for its readers is to point out how some marginalized communities in classical music never find a place in history, but rescue these communities as gatekeepers in the preservation and change of classical music. The article calls for reviewing and challenging the caste ideologies governing entry into music education and performance to bring about a more inclusive nature in the world of classical music.

Keywords: Casteism, Untouchability, Indian Classical Music, Carnatic Music, Hindustani Music, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian classical music, which fuses aspects of both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions, represents a very rich heritage basically used for cultural and religious purposes. Though it

possesses paramount value as far as minute composition and emotional expression are concerned, socio-cultural factors, such as the caste system, have considerably affected practical and vocal exposure towards this art. Historically, the hierarchy of the castes determined who could participate in musical traditions, how one would learn music, and what one could play. This exclusionary system succeeded not only to bar the peripherals from full participation in what was defined as classical music but also in perpetuating deep-seated inequalities, resonating even in modern times.

For instance, the inclusion of artists and types of instruments used, as well as the education systems in which one undergoes training, is clear manifestations of casteism in Indian classical music. Whereas higher castes have always been identified with instruments such as the veena and mridangam, socially inferior instruments are relegated to lower-caste people or these ones are not allowed into musical schools. These were further exacerbated by the institution of untouchability, which kept communities away from what can be labelled as traditional institutions of music and relegated contributions to the periphery of history.

This paper aims to consider the historical and contemporary impact of casteism and untouchability on Indian classical music in particular to instrumental traditions. It analyzes how caste-based exclusions shaped musical practices, explores the role of marginalized communities - specifically the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities - in preserving and transforming instrumental music, and deconstructs how caste ideologies were instrumental in projecting music education within Gharana-based institutions. Through this exercise in retelling historical narratives, it attempts to engage with the contributions of marginalized groups, as well as the necessity of fostering a more inclusive and equitable classical music tradition in India.

II. HISTORICAL IMPACT OF CASTEISM ON CLASSICAL MUSIC

Indian casteism has profoundly influenced the development, practice, and accessibility of Indian classical music for centuries. Both the Hindustani and Carnatic classical traditions, prized for their richness of artistic and spiritual depth, are constructed on strict caste hierarchies. As a matter of fact, this social system determined who could learn, play, and perform music and which instruments could be used by one particular caste group. In this chapter, I critically look at how casteism historically steered Indian classical music through marginalized lower-caste musicians, selective policy on the use of musical instruments, and excluding entire communities from formal music training.

1. **Caste Segregation in Music Education and Performance:** In the ancient and medieval periods, the study and practice of classical music were more or less confined to the upper castes of which the Brahmins occupied a most seminal place. A preserver of knowledge-the company of learned Brahmins did contain the seat of knowledge associated with music and art-music was considered an adjunct of the religious heritage itself. The Brahmin, as a priest and scholar, was the greatest transmitter of sacred knowledge, and classical music found a place within that knowledge tradition. Thus, they were conferred the right to music education only for their own benefit, and

their concerts were often patronized by royal courts and religious institutions. This ensured that education in classic music and its public performance and dissemination came within the domain of upper castes only, relegating the others to the periphery. The rigidity of the caste system debarred the marginalized communities, such as Dalits and low caste, to join formal institution of music education. These communities were barred from taking initiation in orthodox Guru-Shishya (teacher-student) fraternity, which remained the basis of classical music training. Barred from these regards' music teachers, most of the lower caste people were excluded from learning and practicing the ancient art of classical music in its formal settings. The outcome was an exclusion from the world of music that dovetailed with their social and artistic exclusion due to caste, nothing less than a total sidelining of their musical input and no representation whatsoever within classical music traditions.

2. **Instrumental Music and Caste Restrictions:** Instruments also emerged where specific communities were allowed to play some of the instruments but were excluded from others. Even in Carnatic and Hindustani music, distinct instruments were tuned with distinct higher castes. The veena string instrument in Carnatic music is said to have been played only by the Brahmin caste while considered holy, and the tabla, which happens to be the most critical percussion instrument of Hindustani music, was played by considerably greater percentages of the higher-caste musicians. The lowest castes were given instruments belonging to less prestigious and even non-sacred genres. For example, the nadaswaram and thavil, which are generally played at temple festivals and community events but not part of the classical repertoire, were donated. These instruments were perceived as having a lower status and were, thus, marginalized within the echelons of classical music. This stratification of instruments according to caste also heightened social hierarchies and further diminished the scope of representation of those at the bottom rung of the social ladder within musical culture.
3. **Impact of Casteism on Music Patronage and Performance Spaces:** Music patronage played a long way in shaping the careers of classical musicians, and caste-based preferences can be read from the grants of patronage; royal courts, religious institutions, and powerful patrons from higher castes comprised the support apparatus for Brahmin and upper-caste musicians and offered patronization under which these classes were funded. Important cultural music centers in ancient India were the temples. Religious functions and festivals took musicians from the higher classes, while those from lower castes were relegated to informal performances in community gatherings, festivals, or weddings. Performance spaces, too, were separated. Caste exclusions were no strange phenomenon in institutions with classical music institutions, and lower-caste musicians were forbidden to enter certain spaces. The gharanas of Hindustani music, within which these transpositions were most in practice, usually followed the caste divisions, making it difficult for the lower castes to gain acceptance and success within such institutions. This only further cemented the connotation of classical music with higher castes, thus instamping casteism into it.

4. **The Cultural Marginalization of Lower-Caste Music:** This exclusion led to their cultural marginalization of their music. Music of the marginalized communities was very rich and elaborate, even though they declared it inferior or less sophisticated than the classical music. The folk music and devotional music performed by the lower-caste communities were often classified as "low culture" in contrast to "high culture," which classical music served-which was felt to belong only to the higher castes. This placed the lower-caste communities, though profoundly and irrevocably involved in shaping the landscape of Indian music, in a position of minimal recognition. Then, this division between classical and non-classical music became a product of caste inequality. Indian classical music, formalized structures, and classified with high patronage, managed to symbolize the cultural exemplification of India's musical heritage whereas the voicings of marginalized communities became anathema. The resulting cultural gap had existed for centuries and continues to decide which musical forms are approved in India today.
5. **Casteism in Contemporary Classical Music:** In spite of the significant democratization initiatives it has faced in recent times, casteism exists at the admission gates of classical music education and performance. Sensitive musicians and reformers like VD Paluskar have successfully stormed the supposed caste barriers in accessing music education but that cannot erase the historical taint of casteism related to the domain of classical music. The connection between classical music and upper castes remains very strong, so even today many marginalized communities are still marginalized from formal music training as well as elite circles of Indian classical music.

Casteism has left an intense mark and a very long history on the activities of Indian classical music in basic ways of knowledge acquisition, instrumental use, and structural legitimacy. This exclusion by classical music of marginalized communities has thereby solidified social hierarchies, placed limits on their contributions toward the art form, and formed the very trajectory of Indian classical music in ways that are still being reckoned with today. Acknowledging and attempting to redress such historical inequalities is central to the process of creating a future for Indian classical music that is even more inclusive and equitable.

III. ROLE OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN SHAPING INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

The untouchability caste system has impacted Indian society profoundly and, in particular, classical music. In short, the majority of communities-primarily Dalits and others-were referred to as "impure" and, therefore, were excluded from mainstream social, cultural, and religious activities. The stigma was far more than a social exclusion, since it denied the inclusion of people into many ways of art, instrumental music alike. Untouchability directly affected who could play certain instruments, which instruments were permissible for which caste, and which castes had opportunities for formal music education. Such divisions

informed the development of instrumental music in both classical traditions-Carnatic and Hindustani-and even further, underpin their caste system.

1. Exclusion from Formal Music Education and Instrumental Training: One of the most literal ways untouchability affected instrumental music is with their restriction to formal education in classical music. The institution of classical music in India, be it Carnatic or Hindustani, has always been Guru-Shishya Parampara or the teacher-disciple tradition, where one trains under a concerned teacher for many years. But the enforced untouchability would in most cases bar Dalit and Scheduled communities from being accepted as a disciple by upper-caste Gurus. Educational institutions and schools of music, which mostly consisted of higher caste people, did not alter the social stratification. As a result, Dalits were not adequately trained in performance arts and instrumental technique under classical traditions. That is, they were left out in mastering the instrumentation that defined the art. Added to this, the fact that untouchability made the lower-castes socially impure meant that even their existence in the same space as higher-caste musicians was unacceptable. Access to temples, courtyards for performances, and cultural festivals in general, where music was played and taught, was further curtailed. This segregation extended even to the musical field, and their exclusion from interaction with upper-caste people further entrenched caste-based exclusions in the performance as well as transmission of instrumental music.

2. Restrictions on Instrument Usage: Untouchability not only determined who could play music but also stipulated which instruments different castes were permitted to play. Instruments were socially stratified, with some instruments being higher caste and others lower caste. The veena, for instance, is a long hollow-necked string instrument of great dignity in Carnatic music and is traditionally played only by Brahmins and upper-caste musicians. It was a "sacred" instrument and would only play spiritual or religious music and therefore too pure to be touched or played by the low castes.

The instruments used by the subaltern communities were tagged "low" or "impure." For instance, thavil and nadaswaram are vital parts of the temple festival and ritual performance. These instruments performed with less respect to the people belonging to the marginalized community while making more respect around the people from upper castes. Additionally, such instruments also got restricted to a limitation of roles in the classical music canon. For instance, although the nadaswaram is a revered instrument in Tamil Nadu and is frequently used in temple ceremonies, it is often an afterthought for formal Carnatic concert settings. In general, the marginalization of certain instruments reflects the larger societal exclusion of the communities that played them.

Also, most of the percussion instruments used by the marginalized groups were inferior status instruments in comparison to melodic instruments like the veena or the sitar. For instance, the dholak and mridangam are often reduced to the lower-caste musician and, in doing so, reinforce certain social hierarchies within the music community. This hierarchy of instruments tied to caste kept a system where the most revered instruments were reserved for the upper castes and lower casts were confined to less prestigious ones or less central instruments to the classical music tradition.

3. Performance Restrictions and Social Segregation: It also dictated which places and circumstances lower-caste musicians were allowed to perform in. In Indian music, performance venues were often segregated by caste, and historically, temples, as central structures of communal entertainment, for the most part excluded lower-caste musicians as audience members and performers. Upper-caste musicians played in front of the gods or in temple sanctums. Lowercaste musicians could be allowed to play outside temple premises or during public processions but were not accorded equal respect and status. This reduction in the spaces of cultural and religious importance severely limited the visibility of the lower-caste musicians and their contribution to instrumental music.

Even at non-sacred sites such as royal courts or patron-sponsored performances, untouchables and lower-caste musicians were often excluded or relegated to less prestigious roles. Where the elite cultural network emphasized the performances of elite musicians, the music produced by marginalized communities was represented as folk or devotional music and not "classical." This has not only perpetuated the subordinating impact of caste distinctions but also subordinated the recognition of musical innovations and contributions of the lower caste to India's instrumental music heritage.

4 Subversion and Survival: Marginalized Communities in Instrumental Music: Even though they were considerably restrained, the marginalized societies could violate the norms followed by castes. Many Devadasis and Isai Vellalar groups of South India helped in keeping the tradition of passing down and preserving classical music and instrumental forms. Though these societies were socially ostracised and still used to be outcastes, they are skilled players of mridangam, nadaswaram as well as violin in Carnatic music. Their contribution to temple music, particularly instrumental performance, helped preserve these traditions, although they were excluded from the institutions managing elite music across caste boundaries.

Further, many of the poor musicians had themselves created their own styles and repertoires through syncretic fusions with folk: classical techniques and forms were here combined with folk styles and repertoires. This creation of new forms of musical expression, though not always acknowledged in the traditional classical canon, proved key to Indian music's establishment. The fact that these musical traditions survived the untouchability agenda speaks for itself in the resilience and capacity of the communities to considerably contribute to the best-known Indian music, despite operational and institutionalized discriminations.

5. Modern Legacy of Untouchability in Music: Although India made untouchability a legal impossibility when it ratified the Constitution in 1950, the practice's residue continues to affect the world of classical music today: most institutions and performance venues remain caste exclusions, making it difficult for musicians from lower castes or Dalits to gain acceptance or even recognition in elitist music circles. A number of elitist musicians have made it their duty to deny the very possibility of democratizing musical education, but of course, the deep roots of untouchability remain an integral part of Indian socio-cultural scenery of classical music.

In other words, although it's clear that untouchability has played a strategic role in shaping the process of development of instrumental music in India through the medium of limited access to music education, the instrumentality of which instruments could be played by which marginalized communities, and the creation of barriers to involvement in organized performance spaces. In this perspective, these hindrances didn't only exclude the fruits of contribution from the music world of the lower-caste musician but also aggravated social discrimination within the sound expressions of India. On the contrary, although these barriers are present, the marginalized communities seem to have successfully managed to preserve their musical heritage; sometimes less is more and influences the development of classical music quietly and boldly.

IV. CONTRIBUTIONS OF DEVADASI AND ISAI VELLALAR COMMUNITIES

The Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities contributed importantly to forming the traditions of Indian classical music, primarily instrumental music. Although marginalized in many social and religious contexts, they were made custodians and propagators of South Indian classical music-Carnatic music-and dance-Bharatanatyam. Their contribution to the development, preservation, and evolution of Indian classical music, especially through instrumental performance, is quite significant and forms an important part of India's rich musical heritage.

1. The Devadasi Tradition and Its Role in Preserving Classical Music: The Devadasis were traditionally women who had been dedicated to the service of temples and deities and constituted an integral part of the cultural and religious life of South India. These women, trained in music and dance right from a very young age, have offered some of the finest Carnatic music compositions, including the instrumentally rendered pieces. Though affiliation with temples offered these artists an exclusive background for their renditions, they have handed down the noble musical and dance traditions from generation to generation and formed a significant component in carrying on these classical art forms.

Characteristic to the Devadasis was expertise in playing various instruments, such as the veena, mridangam, and nagaswaram-all of which were integral to the temple and devotional performances. The performances of the Devadasis, especially those undertaken for religious purposes, did not just spice up the religiosity within temples but also played a role in the development of the Carnatic music tradition. Moreover, most of the vast body of compositions finds its custodians in these Devadasis, where most of it is performed in present-day classical concerts. When there were social and political changes, in fact especially under colonization like the British era, to classical music, one highly important group kept the tradition flowing-the Devadasis. What is more, the Devadasi's understanding of instrumental music was not necessarily played in itself. Many Devadasis were also capable composers, adding their part to the musical canon. While socially excluded from other sections of society by virtue of their condition and their association with temple ritual, their

artistic skill had a place of esteem in particular artistic milieus, a paradox that placed them somewhere in tension within the cultural landscape of South Indian classical music.

2. Isai Vellalar Community: Custodians of Instrumental Music: Transformation and Continuity-Instrumental Music, particularly in South India, was brought about through the Isai Vellalar community, which is socially connected to temple worship and traditional performing arts. The Isai Vellalar belonged to a caste group that consisted of performers, making music and dance presentations, often working closely together with the Devadasis and the musicians attached to temples. Their contributions to the instrumental tradition in Carnatic music are something notable, as they were masters and innovators of many a variety of instruments that form an integral part of the classical repertoire. Isai Vellalars specialize in playing the mridangam, nadaswaram, and violin, which significantly contribute to Carnatic music performances. For instance, the nadaswaram is one of the wind instruments typically used during temple ceremonies and public processions. The nadaswaram was considered an auspicious instrument, and it was played by Isai Vellalar musicians. The excellence and expertise of Isai Vellalars at playing such instruments consolidated the wealth of the temple music so that it became a vibrant and dynamic tradition.

Besides instrumental dexterity, the Isai Vellalars had the role of carrying on this tradition further through the Guru-Shishya parampara by passing on this knowledge to the next generation. Many of the community members themselves became authoritative music teachers and scholars in their own right, thus mainstreaming music education. Although the Devadasis were socially marginalized in society, their profession as musicians and instructors placed them into a position of respect in the artistic fields, thus giving them the impact necessary to leave lasting impressions on the future of Carnatic instrumental music.

3. Impact and Change in Contemporary Classical Music: Both the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities have had a lasting impact on the performance and teaching of the music itself today. An attempt to "cleanse" and "revamp" classical music and dance, cultural reforms in the early 20th century acted out by progressively excluding these communities from the mainstream cultural institutions which were once at the center of temple ritual performances. This was the time of formalization and institutionalization of classical music in ways that often occluded the contributions of these communities, now particularly and disappointingly, the Devadasis. However, their impact stays in the actual music.

Most present-day influential Carnatic musicians come from the tradition of learning that belongs to the heritage of the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar traditions. This is the bedrock of the repertoire and the performance practice among the modern classical-revival/neo-carnatic musicianship. Besides, innovation through their instruments like veena, mridangam, nadaswaram forms part of Carnatic music performance both in concert settings and during religious ceremonies. The shift of classical music from the temple to the concert hall is not an insignificant one thanks to innovations and steadfastness on the part of the Isai Vellalar and Devadasi communities. They adapted their musical practice to suit new venues and audiences yet continued to maintain the devotional and aesthetic qualities of the tradition. These

communities have also made their imprint through the folk-classical syncretism where use of specific instruments, for instance, or adaptation of local musical forms into the classical canon finds expression.

4. Hurdles and Esteem in Modern Days: The Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities contributed so much to Indian classical music that these two communities did not receive fair notice in mainstream accounts about Indian classical music. Much of modern history has relegated these two communities to the roles of preservers and innovators of instrumental music while upper-caste musicians and scholars brazenly avowed their traditions as their own. Early 20th-century Brahminization further secured their status on the periphery.

The recent scholarship and renewed interest in the social history of Indian classical music has started shedding new light onto critical roles that these communities played. There is growing sentiment that historical and cultural narratives about Indian classical music need to be re-evaluated in order to include the voices and inputs of the hitherto marginalized communities. In this process, instrumental music traditions preserved by the Devadasis and Isai Vellalars are gaining renewed appreciation for complexity and innovation, hence influencing the broader tradition of Carnatic music.

The contributions of the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities to Indian classical music, especially instrumental music, are undeniable. These communities are socially segregated and ostracized, yet they have played a crucial role in the development of Carnatic music, with one masterly playing instruments, supporting temple music, and transferring knowledge across generations. Their end flows through the veins of today's music, reminding us how Indian classical is defined by its rich tapestry of multiple cultures. It is important to acknowledge and pay tribute to the role of these communities in a way that enables one to grasp the full depth of India's musical traditions.

V. CASTE AND IDEOLOGY IN CLASSICAL MUSIC INSTITUTIONS

The ideologies of caste have shaped the foundations and workings of India's classical music institutions—from how entry into musical education has historically been controlled to the opportunities of musical practice. For many years, the Gharana systems of Hindustani classical music and the parampara of Carnatic music were dominated by the upper castes. These systems, which were based on familial and caste-based hierarchies, restricted knowledge, instruments, and performance spaces for the marginalized communities and thus created barriers for the aspiring musician from the lower castes.

Caste also exercised its influence in the way that particular instruments were associated with specific communities. In this regard, veena and tabla served as perfect examples, where instruments were confined to upper-caste musicians, and another set of much-persecuted groups, nagaswaram and mridangam, were allowed only to marginalized groups, further plunging down the social stratification through musical practice. This was, therefore crucial to decide who can play which instrument, and more importantly, who can claim a valid existence within the classical music space.

As an example, the figure of VD Paluskar-cast in the role of a significant reformer in the world of Hindustani classical music-illuminates' aspects of caste and ideology. Paluskar targeted democratizing access to music education with institutions he founded that recruited students of any background. Reforms were limited, though, since exclusions along axes of caste continued unabated, broadly speaking, in the musical culture around, defining who could gain access to musical knowledge and participate in the institutionally supported, high-status versions of classical music.

VI. CONCLUSION

This kind of investigation with caste and untouchability, especially about downtrodden communities, reveals a rich tapestry of resilience amidst cultural preservation under societally induced challenges, particularly within the Indian classical music zone. Inasmuch as the historical effects of casteism have shaped the accessibility and practice of both Hindustani and Carnatic music, more than being barriers, they have resorted to restrictions of participation by communities generally. The role of untouchability framed the choice and employment of musical instruments but also fed into social hierarchies, which disregarded many talented musicians by excluding musicians from lower castes. Apart from the communities like Devadasis and Isai Vellalars, who preserved and evolved Indian instrumental traditions, the integrity and richness of this heritage were also maintained by such challenged groups. They were often custodians of large repertoires and innovative practices. Their influence resonates even today in performances as well as education methods in various institutions of classical music. The real issue that comes to the fore is the ideology that underpins institutions of classical music: the legacy of caste continues to strike through to contemporary practice. It is because of efforts taken to make music education as democratized as possible and to encourage greater inclusivity that elements of those earlier hierarchies continue to come in the way. It requires an understanding and valuing of the contribution of those who have been marginalized to foster a greater sense of inclusiveness in the narrative of Indian classical music. This appreciation, therefore, does not only revitalize their place in history but also enhances the cultural heritage of India to pave a smoother road toward equity in arts.

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