



Challenging Tradition and Redefining Identity in Indian Classical Music



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Abstract

Indian classical music has long been framed as an art rooted in continuity, purity, and devotion. Yet, its history reveals a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, where artists constantly negotiate the tension between preserving gharana orthodoxy and embracing creative autonomy. This paper examines how key musicians challenged the rigidities of convention to redefine musical, social, and gendered identities within Hindustani classical music. By examining individual trajectories such as: Sumathi Murthy, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ustad Abdul Halim Jaffer Khan, Vidushi Kishori Amonkar, Vidushi Gangubai Hangal, Begum Akhtar this article interrogates strategies of negotiation across aesthetic, structural, and sociocultural dimensions. The study argues that Indian classical music thrives not as a static relic but as an adaptive, contested, and deeply human practice that continues to evolve in response to shifting paradigms of modernity, gender politics, and global cultural flows.

Keywords: Indian Classical Music, Gender, Caste, Tradition, Innovation, LGBTQ+ Expression.

Research Paper

Introduction

Indian Classical Music is an extremely long and one of the major transformations of the musical traditions of South Asia. It is generally recognized for its great aesthetic complexity, deep involvement with cultural and social changes, and it has been the main source of inspiration in these evolutions. After demarcating the characteristics of the past, it built a dialog with the present questioning the issues of faithfulness, self, and artistic creativity, which it has thoroughly solved. Indian classical music has changed according to different social norms that it got from religious, regional, and philosophical spheres, however, the music itself has been instrumental in the preservation of the values as well as in their transformation.

The current research, therefore, focuses on the artist case studies background that is based on their public confrontation with different types of resistance that might be related to gender, caste, lineage, and tradition,

hence by these actions, they have been able to extend the limits of their and common people's identity in the field of classical music. This work through the creative involvements of artists such as Sumathi Murthy, Vidushi Gangubai Hangal, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan, Vidushi Kishori Amonkar, Begum Akhtar, and Ustad Zakir Hussain, aims to find out how the pioneering artistic agency and innovation reflects not only the change of Indian classical music musical-history but also how they facilitate Indian classical music outreach for modern audiences. There is a lot in these artistic interventions to uncover how the survival and flourishing of tradition is deeply connected with negotiation, advocacy, and creative transformation.

Research Problem

This research is about Indian interventions of artist in the classical music. The specific question posed is to figure out how such artist challenged gender, caste,

sexuality, lineage identity frameworks and changed the ideas of authenticity, authority, and artistic innovation in the present contexts?

Objective

- To examine the methods used by musicians to deal with and change socio-cultural milieus in Indian classical music through their negotiation.
- To follow the effects of such breakthroughs on the spoken and written accounts of the identity, the tradition, the authenticity.
- To point out the case studies as representative of the big changes in the turn of a regressive art form towards openness and creativity.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis: One of the main drivers behind the evolution of the identity and authenticity of the Indian classical music genre is the artistic agency that has been exercised by the artist through the contestation of tradition in a non-destructive manner to its aesthetic core.

Possible Result: This research is likely to provide evidence that, through tradition being challenged (also gender roles, caste hierarchies, authenticity codes), a more inclusive community is developed, and at the same time, it becomes possible for the very old musical and aesthetic tradition to stay alive.

Relevance of the Study

This study is essential in grasping the concept of how classical music not only mirrors but also influences cultural debates concerning modernity, gender rights, globalization, and social inclusion. It is instrumental in setting a pattern for dissecting such changes occurrence in the age of different traditional arts, particularly in places having unyielding historical limits.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in ethnomusicological inquiry. It integrates historical analysis with contemporary cultural critique, using the following approaches:

- **Textual Analysis:** Examination of autobiographies, memoirs, and interviews of selected artists.
- **Media Review:** Analysis of newspaper archives, music journals, and online interviews to trace public discourse around identity and performance.

- **Archival Research:** Consultation of institutional records from music academies, All India Radio archives, and festival programming notes to identify patterns of inclusion and exclusion.
- **Case Study Approach:** Selection of performers whose identities span multiple marginalized categories, ensuring diversity of tradition (Hindustani/Carnatic), genre (vocal/instrumental), and social background (gender, caste, religion, sexuality).
- **Analytical Framework:** Application of intersectionality theory to evaluate the compounded nature of challenges faced by each performer, as well as the strategies they employ to resist and transform stereotypes.

Discussion: Case Studies

Case Study 1: Sumathi Murthy – Queering Tradition through Music and Identifying as LGBTQ+

A Hindustani classical vocalist of the Agra-Atrauli gharana, Sumathi Murthy, is an excellent example of how the LGBTQ+ identity can profoundly change the artistic interpretation of Indian classical music. Murthy has enriched the lyrical scope of Khayal and Thumri as a queer artist, by creatively constructing the traditional nāyikā–nāyaka bhāvas (the gendered emotional roles central to performance) from the perspective of the same-sex and gender-fluid. Her redefinition of terms like devotion and desire is not only fascinating but also destabilizes the heteronormative basis that structures classical performance spaces which are otherwise silent about it.

Negotiating Identity and Social Space

The story of Murthy as a performer with a queered identity in the quite stiff musical culture is a really complex negotiation between her own truth and the expectations of society. Indian classical music has been a highly conservative genre in terms of the kind of characters involved emotionally in the performance, hence it has been silent about the existence of characters like queer ones. In a bid to challenge their exclusion, Murthy has intervened both her musical and activist works throw. In a place like Bengaluru, she as the founder of LesBiT and 100% involved in the public communications of LesBiT has been promoting queer visibility and dialogue through arts by using music and digital media (The Established, 2023).



Artistic Innovation and Emotional Interpretation

Her creative reinterpretations of classical devotional and romantic compositions are a big part of her performance repertoire, which she infuses with her own personal authenticity. She sometimes makes a female character the beloved of Lord Krishna turning the emotional heart of her renditions on its head instead of just adhering to the conventional view of Krishna as the male beloved. This revolutionary method does not only save the aesthetic profundity of Hindustani music but also its openness to interpretation in the future, which will be in line with queer emotionality. Murthy's work is an example to the effect that queerness can be a source of artistic creativity and not a deviation.

Case Study 2: Gangubai Hangal – Breaking Caste and Gender Barriers in Khayāl

Vidushi Gangubai Hangal is remembered as one of the most iconic exponents of the Kirana gharana, yet her journey to the apex of Hindustani classical music was marked by a double marginalization—caste prejudice and patriarchal exclusion. Born into a family of boatmen (classified as a low caste) in Dharwad, Hangal confronted a society where high art was closely linked to elite social status, and khayāl was largely reserved for men or women from hereditary courtesan lineages (Manuel 142). Her entry into this male-dominated sphere thus disrupted entrenched hierarchies of caste and gender.

Caste and Respectability Politics

In early 20th-century Karnataka, caste purity was intertwined with notions of musical respectability. Hangal's lower-caste background became a source of discrimination, with critics and patrons questioning her legitimacy as a khayāl vocalist. She once remarked:

“I was told music is not for people like us. But I believed music belongs to everyone who loves it.”

This assertion redefined musical authority as meritocratic rather than hereditary, challenging the exclusivity of the gharana system (Bakhle 216).

Gendered Aesthetics and Vocal Identity

The Kirana gharana aesthetic prized sweetness (*madhurya*) and delicate tonal ornamentation, traits historically coded as feminine. Hangal subverted these gendered expectations with a deep, powerful voice, embracing the lower registers and emphasizing *gambhīr bhāva* (serious mood) in her interpretations. Her preference for serious *rāgas* like *Todi*, *Puriya*, and

Marwa traditionally associated with *gravitas* further dismantled the stereotype of women as entertainers confined to *thumrī* or lighter genres.

Institutional Recognition and Legacy

Despite structural resistance, Hangal earned national recognition, receiving the Padma Bhushan (1971) and Padma Vibhushan (2002). Her success paved the way for future generations of women from non-elite backgrounds to pursue careers in classical music. Today, her legacy is institutionalized in the Gangubai Hangal Music Foundation, dedicated to nurturing talent beyond caste and gender constraints.

Key Dimensions of Hangal's Challenge

- **Caste:** Redefined cultural legitimacy beyond elite hierarchies.
- **Gender:** Asserted female agency in khayāl's male-dominated sphere.
- **Aesthetics:** Introduced *gravitas* into a style feminized by sweetness.

Case Study 3: Pandit Ravi Shankar – Globalization and the Politics of Authenticity

Pandit Ravi Shankar played a pivotal role in introducing Hindustani classical music to global audiences, transforming its reception and social positioning. While his early career centred on traditional performances in India, Shankar's collaborations with Western musicians—most notably George Harrison of The Beatles and violinist Yehudi Menuhin—positioned Indian classical music within the world music sphere. These collaborations, however, sparked debates over authenticity and cultural dilution (Bakhle 220).

Globalization of Indian Music

Shankar adapted presentation formats for Western audiences without altering the core grammar of *rāga* and *tāla*. Concert durations were shortened, improvisational complexity was selectively presented, and cross-cultural collaborations were framed to highlight Hindustani aesthetics while ensuring accessibility. Albums such as *West Meets East* (1967) exemplify this approach, demonstrating a sensitive negotiation between tradition and global reach.

Politics of Authenticity

Shankar's efforts raised questions among purists: Did global collaborations compromise the sanctity of the gharana system? Critics argued that adapting



performances for non-Indian audiences risked commodifying a sacred art form. Shankar countered that authenticity is maintained through adherence to rāga structure, improvisational integrity, and the guru-śiṣya paramparā, even in cross-cultural contexts (Neuman 142).

Impact on Identity and Tradition

Shankar's global success redefined the identity of Indian classical musicians, illustrating that tradition could coexist with innovation and global engagement. His career not only popularized the sitar but also paved the way for his disciples and family members, including Anoushka Shankar, to navigate the balance between classical rigor and international appeal.

Significance:

Pandit Ravi Shankar exemplifies how globalization can expand the horizons of classical music without necessarily eroding its authenticity, challenging the notion that tradition and innovation are mutually exclusive.

Case Study 4: Ustad Vilayat Khan – Gayakī Āṅg and the Sitar's Vocal Turn

Ustad Vilayat Khan transformed the sitar from a primarily instrumental showcase to a medium that emulated vocal expression, a style known as *gayakī āṅg*. Traditionally, sitar performance emphasized technical virtuosity rapid taans, intricate fingering, and rhythmic elaboration often prioritizing speed over melodic nuance. Vilayat Khan challenged this paradigm by incorporating elements of *khayāl* singing into his instrumental technique, creating a seamless dialogue between melody and ornamentation (Wade 285).

His innovations included:

- Meend (glissando) and andolan (microtonal oscillation) to emulate the subtleties of the human voice.
- Slow, expressive alaaps to develop the emotional essence (*bhāva*) of a rāga, rather than focusing solely on rhythmic dexterity.
- Selective incorporation of vocal-inspired gamaks and ornamentations, enabling the sitar to 'sing' the rāga.

By adopting the *gayakī āṅg*, Vilayat Khan redefined the aesthetic priorities of sitar music, prioritizing emotional depth and melodic phrasing over technical display. His approach influenced subsequent generations of sitarists,

who continue to explore the balance between vocal lyricism and instrumental virtuosity.

Significance

Vilayat Khan's style exemplifies how instrumental music can challenge traditional hierarchies of aesthetic value, aligning the sitar's expressive potential with vocal ideals. In doing so, he redefined the identity of the sitar in 20th-century Hindustani classical music, positioning it as a medium capable of conveying the subtleties of human emotion.

Case Study 5: Begum Akhtar – From Courtesan Tradition to Cultural Icon

Begum Akhtar, known as the "Queen of Ghazal", exemplifies the transformation of female performers in Indian classical music from marginalized courtesan traditions to nationally celebrated cultural icons. Born in Faizabad and trained in ghazal, dadra, and thumri, Akhtar inherited the aesthetic and performative sensibilities of *tawaif* culture, which emphasized nuance, emotional depth, and expressive subtlety (Qureshi 112).

Negotiating Social Marginality

Historically, courtesans occupied a marginalized social space, often celebrated for artistic skill but stigmatized morally. Akhtar navigated these social constraints, transcending the stigma of her roots while retaining the expressive richness of her lineage. By performing in national forums, All India Radio broadcasts, and film music, she became a bridge between classical traditions and mainstream cultural recognition, redefining the public perception of women performers.

Artistic Innovation and Emotional Expression

Akhtar was celebrated for her subtle ornamentation, delicate microtonal inflections (*shruti*), and emotive phrasing, which infused traditional compositions with personal interpretive depth. She balanced strict classical discipline with the emotive freedom of semi-classical genres, making her performances widely appealing while preserving musical integrity. Her ghazals and thumris exemplify the feminine voice as an expressive and autonomous artistic agent (Qureshi 115).

Legacy and Cultural Iconography

Begum Akhtar's career demonstrates how female musicians could claim cultural authority, moving beyond both gharana restrictions and social marginalization. Her legacy endures in the form of national awards, including



the Padma Bhushan (1968), and through her recordings, which continue to influence contemporary vocalists.

Significance

Akhtar's life reflects the intersection of gender, social status, and musical agency, illustrating how women artists negotiated tradition, innovation, and public perception to emerge as enduring cultural icons.

Case Study 6: Ustad Zakir Hussain – Rhythmic Innovation and Global Artistry

Ustad Zakir Hussain occupies a pivotal place in the contemporary history of Indian classical music as a percussionist who reimagined the role of the tabla within and beyond the concert stage. Traditionally, the tabla functioned as an accompaniment instrument, tasked with maintaining rhythmic integrity and supporting the melodic soloist. While the solo tabla repertoire (tabla lehrā performance) existed, its performance context remained limited and secondary to melodic instruments or vocalists.

Hussain challenged this hierarchical framework, asserting tabla as an autonomous solo voice capable of expressive depth and intellectual complexity. His innovations included:

- **Extended solo repertoire:** Expanding the scope of peshkār, qāida, and rela sections with intricate layakari (metrical play) while maintaining aesthetic coherence.
- **Hybrid rhythmic concepts:** Introducing unconventional tihais and exploring non-traditional time cycles influenced by jazz and world rhythms (Neuman 144).
- **Dynamic performance persona:** Transforming the tabla solo into a theatrical and communicative experience, breaking the stereotype of the accompanist as a passive role.

Beyond technical mastery, Zakir Hussain redefined identity through globalization. His collaborations with John McLaughlin in Shakti, Mickey Hart in Planet Drum, and numerous world music projects positioned the tabla at the intersection of East-West dialogue. While such fusions sparked debates about authenticity, scholars argue that Hussain's approach "retains core Hindustani rhythmic principles while exploring polyphonic possibilities" (Qureshi 211).

Importantly, Hussain also democratized rhythm pedagogy through workshops, recordings, and digital

platforms, making layakari accessible to global audiences. His career underscores how percussion can transcend its supporting role to become a central creative voice, aligning rhythmic artistry with innovation and cosmopolitanism.

Key Aspects of Contribution

- Elevated tabla from accompaniment to independent concert identity.
- Introduced cross-genre rhythmic dialogues without abandoning Hindustani idioms.
- Globalized tabla pedagogy via recordings, workshops, and digital media.
- Reframed rhythmic innovation as aesthetic, not merely technical, evolution.

Conclusion

Significance of Results and Findings

It was found that one of the most important changes in Indian classical music is the questioning and challenging of the social aspect of music and the structures, which led to more access and expressive freedom. Musicians whose work is extraordinarily innovative have broadened both the audience and the community of the artists, which is a new trend that the musicians' have been preserving the tradition's aesthetic and emotional aspect. Their art is a clear indication of the cultural change which is happening and this change opens up and includes the formerly excluded voices that are now able to be heard and have their presence in the classical music world.

Explanation of Findings

The examples of Sumathi Murthy and Vidushi Gangubai Hangal artists contributed breaking down the gender and caste-based hierarchies and the significant impact of which is the representation of the underprivileged groups in the arts. Another case is Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Zakir Hussain who are perfect examples of how the traditional authentic and worldwide mixed can work together and that the cross-cultural interaction will not weaken but rather strengthen the traditional forms. The case of Ustad Vilayat Khan is a perfect demonstration of how breaking the gharana orthodoxy and technical strictness can eventually lead to the fresh concepts of emotional expression and the artist's new and creative ideas. These changes alone which have been carried out in the creative field of Indian classical music have triggered not only the cultural change but also the change of the institutions and the system and



that way they have created models which will be sources of future ideas and changes not only in the domain of arts but also in its field of inclusivity, advocacy, and performing arts.

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