

Abstract

All over the world, the performing arts constitute a means of communal and individual identity expression, and serve as a platform for societies to exhibit their perceived triumphs, as well as explicitly or implicitly challenge different forms of oppression and address socio-political instability. In this paper, I explore two specific communities – nationalist musicians and music connoisseurs of 20th century Madras, South India, and the Tamil-speaking diasporic community in today's Massachusetts – to argue that each of these groups uses Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, the classical performing arts of South India, to challenge different forms of socio-political displacement.

By analyzing archival materials from Tamil Nadu's archives, I demonstrate how the nationalists of 20th century India strove to 'historicize,' standardize, and adapt elements of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam in order to present these art forms, and resultantly, themselves, as products of a 'civilized,' and modern Indian state. By doing so, they challenged psychological displacement arising from a patronizing colonial regime whose debilitating discourses consistently devalued and criticized Indian culture as being 'inferior.' Critically, in attempting to transcend displacement and find a sense of belonging within their own home, South India's nationalists facilitated the marginalization of the region's hereditary performing communities. These artists, whose sustained involvement in these arts had, for the centuries preceding nationalist activity, contributed to the dynamic fluidity and vibrancy of Karnatic music's and Bharatanatyam's pre-nationalist predecessors, were themselves displaced from the modern stage.

In the Boston area's Tamil diasporic community, displacement takes on a slightly different form; people's notions of being 'out of place' come from physical migration from India, the homeland, to the United States, the host society. What follows for many people is perhaps psychological displacement, wherein they find themselves struggling to answer the question, "where is home?" My ethnographic field work in this community reveals that these diasporic members engage with Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam in order to constitute themselves as individuals who can withstand the displacement of diasporic liminality; through music and dance, they are able to incorporate elements from both their homeland and their host society, and thereby find a sense of belonging between and within their two cultural and geographical contexts.

Ultimately, this project explores communities' attempts to challenge, overcome, and even accommodate displacement in their lives, through their engagement with music and dance. It serves to showcase the creative and powerful ways that people choose to address the ever-relevant human need to belong, to find their place in space and time, and exist in relation to a larger community of similar individuals.

Performed Belongings:

Challenging Displacement Through South India's
Classical Performing Arts

Divya Chandramouli
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Professor Holly Hanson

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Introduction

Growing up, I often heard family friends remark how unique our Indian community in the Boston¹ area was, and how lucky we all were to have each other so “far away from home.” While religious festivals at the local temple and holiday gatherings at community members’ homes were just as likely to elicit such comments, it was almost always against the backdrop of a musical event that I heard aunties and uncles² express their gratitude for this community and the “wonderful teachers of Massachusetts” most fervently and vocally. At a public level, there were the ‘arangetram³ seasons’ that came along every summer - dozens of recitals where debutantes in classical South Indian music and dance presented to an eager, fully bejeweled and silk-draped gathering of families; the classical concerts hosted by KHMC⁴, featuring junior and senior artists from our very own community; and the concerts and lecture demonstrations given by renowned artists from India, often in one of MIT’s⁵ fully-packed auditoriums.

At an individual level, almost every South Indian child I knew attended weekly Karnatic⁶ vocal, instrumental, or Bharatanatyam⁷ lessons, from one of the many seasoned teachers in the area; many of these children prepared intensively for annual, now world-renowned competitions in Ohio, and New Jersey; and finally, even at the local temple’s religious festivals and holiday gatherings in community members’ homes, parents called on children to exhibit their hard-acquired skills in music and dance. Above all, the music teachers and parents of our community consistently emphasized the “rich history and heritage” of the Karnatic musical tradition, and of

¹ The ‘Boston’ community was used to refer to the Indian families that lived throughout Massachusetts, especially the suburbs close to Boston.

² It is a common practice in many South Asian communities to address the elders of the community, whether they are biologically related to one or not, as “Aunty” (the women), and “Uncle” (the men).

³ Debut recital in Bharatanatyam, South Indian classical dance, or Karnatic music, South Indian classical music.

⁴ Karnatic and Hindustani Music Circle, a non-profit organization that promotes Karnatic and Hindustani musicians of the New England Area.

⁵ Massachusetts Institute of Technology

⁶ Classical South Indian music

⁷ A classical South Indian dance form.

Bharatanatyam. Brochures handed out at arangetrams, or introductory remarks offered preceding a concert would inevitably include the words ‘ancient’ and ‘culture’; these were the connotations that arose immediately in our minds therefore, as we sat before concerts, performed on various stages, and shuttled weekly from school to music lessons. We, musicians of this community, prided ourselves with a sense of achievement on being so dutiful in engaging with and remembering our South Indian ‘Culture’. During those summers when we traveled back to India for vacations, I remember obediently assenting to “paattu paadu” (“*sing a song*”), seated in front of the family elders, producing one song after another from my repertoire, while my cousins were busy watching cricket in the next room, or hurriedly finishing problem sets before their math tutor arrived. While Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam seemed to hold the same weight of ‘tradition’ in India as it did in Massachusetts’s South Indian diasporic community, it was in the latter that community members often enthusiastically described their relationship with the performing arts in a language of communal gratitude. I became aware therefore, from a very young age, that the community I grew up in was perhaps invested in the performing arts in a very different way from its counterparts in India.

In the spring of my junior year of college, my advisor had sent me a link to an interview⁸, suggesting I listen to it, given my interest in and involvement with Karnatic music. The interview segment spotlighted Amanda Weidman, the author of *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*, who elaborated on her research and described the development of Karnatic music as a result of nationalist India’s encounter with colonization. This interview toppled many of the assumptions and understandings I had held of Karnatic music’s ‘history’, from everything I had heard while learning Karnatic music and

⁸ Field, Amanda. Interview with Garrett Field. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*.: New Books in World Music
<http://newbooksinworldmusic.com/2013/04/30/amanda-weidman-singing-the-classical-voicing-the-modern-the-postcolonial-politics-of-music-in-south-india-duke-up-2006/>

attending concerts or community events. A historical trajectory that started in the Vedic period, passed through the era of the ‘Trinity’⁹ in the 18th century, and culminated with the current, vibrant performing arts climate in Chennai, suddenly became more complicated and nuanced. Most shockingly, the ancient Karnatic tradition we had all so proudly championed as our ‘roots’ was demonstrated by scholars’ meticulous research to be largely constructed and produced¹⁰ in the 19th and 20th century of the Indian nationalist era. My piqued curiosity, and perhaps disrupted perceptions of history, brought me to the Tamil Nadu Archives, located in Chennai, the current hub of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, that summer.

I was mainly curious to find documents that would contextualize Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam historically and socio-politically, as well as help to complicate the history I had so far been familiar with, changing the representation of the art form from static to vibrant and constantly evolving. In the dusty stacks of the archive’s library, I discovered my primary resources: journals published by leading music academies like the Madras Music Academy, Gopala Sangeetha Sabha, and Sri Parthasarathi Swami Sabha, the renowned dance institution Kalakshetra Academy, and *Stri Dharma*, a women’s publication. It was while poring over these journals that I began to see notable similarities between the nationalist musicians and dancers of the twentieth century, who were living, practicing, and performing in South India, and our diasporic community of South Indian families, living, practicing, and performing in New

⁹ The “Trinity” of Karnatic music refers to the extraordinary trio of composer-musicians, Tyagaraja (1767 – 1847), Muthuswami Dikshitar (1775 – 1835), and Syama Sastri (172 – 1827), who were all contemporaries of one another in 18th century South India. As Amanda Weidman elaborates, “In the 1930s a new word appeared in writing on Karnatic music: the trinity. It referred to the three 19th century singer saints who were becoming canonized as the great composers of Karnatic music, and who were considered to have caused a great revolution in Karnatic music.” Weidman, Amanda. *Singing the classical, voicing the modern: the postcolonial politics of music in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 104.

¹⁰ While Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam have been historicized by nationalists to reflect a past stemming from the Vedic period, I do not mean to discredit the sacred or spiritual significance the performing arts may have for many of these artists and enthusiasts. Music undoubtedly has the power to touch and transform lives. Here, by ‘construction’ I am referring to the constructed pasts attached to the art forms that people usually project as absolute.

England. The sense of urgency with which the 20th century leaders of these music academies called for the ‘purification’ of South Indian classical arts, and their insistence on the arts’ spiritual essence as being representative of Indian culture in general, reminded me of the ways people’s participation in Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam encouraged a similar spiritual transcendence in the diasporic community, and helped performers and listeners “feel connected to Indian culture.” Basically, the discourses embedded in the articles, propagated by the upper-caste, male musicians and music scholars writing in the twentieth century, were clearly recurrent in the ways diasporic South Indians imagined Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, and their relationship with these art forms. The one main difference was that in the 20th century, people were engaging with these discourses in order to produce a ‘modern’ art form and identity, while in today’s South Indian diasporic community, people are using the same to create a ‘traditional’ art form and identity. After I returned to Mount Holyoke, I began to more critically explore these common themes, which seemed to weave through a century of music practice, and across thousands of miles of transnational migration. What was integral to this exploration however, was an understanding of the socio-political contexts of these two very different yet strikingly similar performing environments – twentieth century Madras (now known as Chennai), and twenty-first century Boston.

The works of scholars like Indira Peterson, Davesh Soneji, Lakshmi Subramanian, and Amanda Weidman were greatly helpful in contextualizing the materials I had collected from the archives. In *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South Asia*, an anthology edited by Indira Peterson and Davesh Soneji, the brilliantly comprehensive introduction argues primarily that “twentieth century nationalist projects in the visual arts were, essentially drives to create a *fully modern art*, only an art that would be *different* from European art, by being rooted

in ‘traditional’ and ‘Indian’ essences recuperated by new cultural nationalism¹¹.” Peterson and Soneji offer that there was no ‘classical’ music or dance in South India prior to the twentieth century; upper-caste musicians and scholars suspended the involvement of various hereditary performing artists, and erased or appropriated the latter’s contributions to create this modern, Indian art form.

Lakshmi Subramanian further illustrates the nuances of the performing arts milieu in 19th and 20th century South India in her book, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy*. This source was primarily helpful in obtaining a holistic understanding of the socio-political and cultural factors that fuelled music and dance performance. The author carefully details shifting political and economic trends, whereby power transferred gradually but definitely from the domain of South India’s native rulers, into the hands of the emerging British colonial administration. The significance of the regional kingdoms’ courts and temples - vibrant, collaborative spaces for performance – faded, while growing nationalist sentiments gave birth to the music academies and dance institutions of Madras.

Davesh Soneji’s work in *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South Asia* is crucial to the field of South Asian ethnomusicology, as he offers a much-needed discussion on the hereditary performing communities, and their appalling marginalization by nationalist groups in the 20th century. He not only disentangles popular assumptions and beliefs about devadasis (female hereditary performing artists who danced and sang in a variety of settings, often in collaboration with other groups of performers) from what historic and ethnographic evidence reveals, but he incorporates discussions of how commonly ‘invisible’

¹¹ Peterson, Indira Viswanathan, and Davesh Soneji. *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2008, 5.

devadasi communities exist in South Asia today. From Soneji's research, one understands the very real and dangerous implications of nationalist discourses.

Amanda Weidman's *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* describes how South India's performing arts came to be 'classical.' According to Weidman, "the institution of classical music in South India – not only discourse about it but the very sound and practice of the music – has been produced in and through the colonial encounter¹²." Weidman offers the important suggestion that Karnatic music, and even more so the 'Karnatic voice' became and continues to be emblematic of a modern 'Indian' identity, and representative of a 'rich cultural heritage.'

My own contribution to these complex historiographies and ethnographies on Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam is not just to trace the commonalities in rhetoric from 20th century South India to the Tamil diasporic community in Massachusetts. Such an analysis would simply reveal that music, constructed in opposition to a colonial 'other,' still carries evidence of its history in the various ways people imagine and represent the art today, long after the official colonial regime has been dismantled. Instead, my aim in this project is to place these two contexts, nationalist South India, and South Indian diasporic Massachusetts, alongside one another for the sake of identifying larger themes that connect the two across time and space. A few months after I returned to the United States from Tamil Nadu's archives, I conducted ethnographic field work in my home community, interviewing Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam teachers, students, and parents whose children were currently training in either or both of these art forms. I wondered, how are the South Indian classical performing arts we nurture here, in New England, similar to and different from the classical performing arts that were and are performed and practiced in South India? What specifically about the spatial and

¹² Weidman, Amanda . *Singing the classical, voicing the modern: the postcolonial politics of music in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 9.

temporal contexts these people live or lived in, impacts how they produce, practice, and perform music and dance? In other words, how do people produce Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam in order to be able to engage with their environments in a certain way?

I argue that in these two contexts, people produce Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam in ways that enable them to challenge displacement, or an undermined sense of self. First, they tailor a familiar art form to suit the contexts they live in and the socio-political agendas important to their community. Second, by engaging with these art forms, Indians in these different contexts construct themselves as individuals who can overcome the nature of their displacement. In 20th century South India, displacement was primarily psychological. While there were of course physical migrations from villages to the city of Madras, or of performers from courts to academies, the displacement I focus on arose from a colonial regime that both subtly and explicitly insisted, “you are inferior.” Colonists continuously used this rhetoric to unsettle Indian identities, undermining the ways in which people related to their communities, pasts, and practices. Nationalist-musicians, therefore, delved deeply into the project of ‘purifying’ their traditional performing art forms, eager to produce music and dance genres that would defy Western influence and defend Indian culture from accusations of backwardness. Through performance, these artists hoped to become and represent themselves as ‘modern Indian citizens,’ equipped with the necessary characteristics and knowledge to argue that they and their culture were not inferior, but in fact superior to the West.

In the Tamil diasporic community, displacement takes on a slightly different form; people’s notions of being ‘out of place’ come from physical migration from India, the ‘homeland,’ to the United States, the host society. What follows for many people is perhaps psychological displacement, wherein they find themselves struggling to answer the question, “where is home?” In this case, performing artists of Massachusetts’ Tamil diasporic community

adapt Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam to suit the needs of their diasporic contexts; as you will see, community members' lives in the United States, particularly the children's, facilitate different ways of training, remembering and performing music. Through their engagement with South India's classical performing arts, the diasporic members of this community constitute themselves as individuals who can withstand the displacement resulting from straddling two cultures and two identities; through music and dance, they are able to incorporate elements from both their homeland and their host society, and thereby find a sense of belonging between and within their two cultural and geographical contexts.

In chapter one of this paper, I provide a detailed survey of the various performing spaces and actors that operated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in South India. Supported by secondary scholarship, this section is not meant to solely offer historical background; rather, it is my hope that the reader obtains an idea of the complex networks of artistic patronage and collaboration that were gradually displaced by colonization and nationalism, so that it is clear how drastically different the classical performing arts of the twentieth century seem in comparison. In other words, this chapter is meant to illustrate the 'way it was' before nationalists' sentiments of displacement arose more visibly in the next century.

In chapter two, I argue that the upper-caste male members of Madras's music academies and the revivalist Bharatanatyam dancers of the same period constructed the classical arts to reflect both India's inner, spiritual qualities, as well as the nation's new modern and democratic character. Through historicization, standardization, and erasure, these nationalist-musicians tailored the previous centuries' performing arts and artists to suit their cultural and political agendas. They positioned Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam not only against the colonial 'other,' but against an 'other' that constituted performing artists and communities that did not fit the prototype of modernity and civilization that the nationalists envisioned. In chapter three, I

demonstrate how by engaging with these newly-produced classical arts, musicians and dancers from a particular community could attempt to overcome the psychological displacement colonization had facilitated, and counter the attacks on their cultural integrity.

Similarly, chapter three and chapter four collectively illustrate the diasporic context of challenging displacement. In the former, I describe the various ways practice and performance of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam is tailored to suit the needs of Indians living in the West. Whether it is by acknowledging the impact U.S academic and cultural milieus have on Karnatic musical training, or by reflecting on the different ways community members use modern technology to train and perform, and the different implications these technological innovations have for artistic innovation, my informants presented their beloved art forms as arising from an encounter between India and the United States, between the past and present. In the fourth chapter, I explain that the ways community members situate themselves in relation to music and dance suggest that their musical abilities allow them to serve as particular kinds of diasporic subjects. They become individuals who can effectively straddle the two worlds they claim, and can even partially assimilate into both the homeland and the host society; they have the potential to overcome the liminal nature of their displacement.

Ultimately, this is a project about the ever-relevant human need of finding belonging, not only in a space, but also in time. In the face of threats to their understandings of self and culture, people engage with music in surprising and creative ways to reveal everything from the possibility of feeling displaced ‘at home,’ to people’s capacity to find that ‘home’ can characterize multiple spaces. This paper also reveals that it can be people’s engagement with music and dance that shapes how entire communities recognize and represent themselves to the world.

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

While my focus on Karnatic music in the following couple of chapters lies in the consciously-demonstrated preservation efforts of South Indian nationalists in 20th century Madras, we must first explore the notable ways in which a variety of actors – from different communities and backgrounds – over a period of several centuries and in different cultural and political spaces, set the stage. By this I do not mean that their engagement with the performing arts should be perceived solely as preparatory for a more significant future; I am arguing, rather, that 18th and 19th century artists’ and patrons’ participation in and practice of music and dance were crucial platforms on which the nationalists staged their exploration and performance of “Indian-ness.” The spaces these earlier performers presented their talents in were arguably more fluid and invited different kinds of collaboration and innovation, including even the blending of Western classical music with Indian musical genres. I provide this survey, supported by the scholarship of Indira Peterson, Davesh Sonaji, Lakshmi Subramanian, and Amanda Weidman, among others, in the hope that the reader can better recognize the slowly shifting cultural, political, and economic dynamics of 19th century South India.

Prior to the 20th century, musicians performed in royal courts, temples, and the homes of wealthy patrons, or what scholars have referred to as *salons*¹³. The artists of these spaces can be imagined, very generally, as having belonged to three categories: performers from hereditary communities, who performed in both ritual and non-ritual contexts, upper-caste professional court musicians dependent on royal patronage, who were well-versed in musical grammar, and individual, “peripatetic singer-composers who were engrossed in the poetics of devotion.”¹⁴ Each

¹³ Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012, 5.

¹⁴ Weidman, Amanda J. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006, 9.

site of performance, be it the court, the temple, or the private home, catered to and accommodated different yet overlapping communities of artists.

Temples and monastic establishments called *mathas* served as the primary ritual settings for hereditary performers. These performers constituted two types of music ensembles, or guilds (*melams*¹⁵): the *periya melam* consisted of male musicians who played instruments such as the “nagaswaram (double-reed aerophone), tavil (drum), ottu (drone), and talam (cymbals) for temple rituals¹⁶” and who were distinguished from upper-caste court musicians due to caste affiliations and their own ritual functions. The second type of ensemble, the *chinna melam*, consisted of the male instructor-conductor, vocal and instrumental accompanists, and importantly, the devadasi¹⁷ dancer. As Davesh Soneji explains in *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, “from the late 16th century onwards, devadasis have functioned as courtesans, secular dance artists organized in *melams*, and temple workers, some of whom performed in the public spaces of certain Hindu temples.¹⁸” Generally, as dancers who served in ritual performative roles in temples, many devadasis went through a ritual of dedication, in which they were “symbolically married to the god of the temple.¹⁹” However, there were many dancers from the devadasi community who were not dedicated to the temple, and therefore performed in other settings as well, such as courts and salons. They did all largely exist outside traditional kinship structures, not marrying in the

¹⁵ These particular terms (*melam*, *periya melam*, and *chinna melam*), are Tamil terms specific to groups of hereditary performers living in the Tamil-speaking parts of South India.

¹⁶ Peterson, Indira Viswanathan, and Davesh Soneji, eds. *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2008, 9.

¹⁷ As Soneji pointedly discusses, the nature of the term ‘devadasi’ is a problematic one; firstly, “it is used to index a vast number of communities of women who were generally glossed by English phrases such as ‘sacred prostitute’ or ‘temple dancer.’ It collapses a number of regional practices under a singular sign, and the literal translation of the word (‘slave of god’) is all too often taken as a closed definition of the category.” Secondly, the term very rarely appears in Indian literary or transcriptional material prior to the 20th century; it is essentially a product of the colonial encounter, arising from “colonial ethnography, legal surveillance of sexual morality, and the disciplining of sexualized bodies” (Soneji 2012: 6).

¹⁸ (Soneji 2012: 6)

¹⁹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 11)

traditional manner or following patrilocal kinship arrangements; some women maintained relationships with upper caste men, and raised their children in matrifocal households²⁰. The experiences and roles of Devadasis are critical to the history and narrative of Karnatic music, especially because their voices and performances were muted under the discourses of cultural and musical purity perpetuated by twentieth century South Indian nationalists, as we shall see later.

Salons, as non-ritual sites of performance, accommodated a variety of musicians and dancers. The *Sarvadevavilasa*, a Sanskrit text from the early 19th century, illustrates to scholars the lavish gatherings of Brahmin scholars and men of other elite groups in the mansions of the Vellala and Telugu Chettiar communities, whose members “made their fortunes brokering for the British East India Company.” The source is valuable in highlighting the various musical agents in these gatherings – patrons, connoisseurs, devadasi singers and dancers, and male musicians hailing from all over South India²¹. Interestingly, there are participants in this gathering who clearly have associations with colonial institutions and administration; the channeling of their wealth, created through their financial involvement with the British East India Company, to fund these private musical gatherings helped facilitate collaboration among the gathered musicians, and diversify the music scene. As Peterson and Soneji emphasize, it is these salon performances, and “*not* performances inside temples, that ignite the vociferous anti-nautch movement in South India toward the end of the 19th century,²²” which criminalizes and seeks to abolish the livelihood of devadasis and transform them into ‘respectable family women.’ Paradoxically then, it is the non-ritual site of performance that becomes the focus in nationalist movements advocating for spiritual and ritual purity.

²⁰ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 11)

²¹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 11)

²² (Soneji 2012: 5)

The final site of performance, the royal court, appears to be the most musically vibrant of the three during the 18th and 19th centuries, perhaps because court records allow scholars a more comprehensive understanding of rulers' roles in providing patronage for and encouraging musical performances, and the factors that facilitated the articulation of a distinct regional musical form²³. The court then, nurtured the livelihoods and musical contributions of scholars, musicians, and devadasi dancers. As Lakshmi Subramanian describes in *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy*, the royal courts of this period accommodated musicologists who synthesized, commented on and wrote musical treatises, and Brahmin court musicians, trained formally, who performed in court and who advocated a more canonical version of the tradition.²⁴ Rulers also provided patronage to individual singer-composers, the most renowned of whom produced an “artistic conception that transcended the more conventional and ornate forms of music.²⁵” One must realize here, that the spaces of the temple, salon, and court, as well as these categories of hereditary performers, upper-caste non-ritual musicians, and singer-composers, were very fluid. While there are important distinctions between ritual and non-ritual music, Brahmin court musicians and devadasis collaborated often, with composers producing songs especially for the devadasis' performances,, and musicians from different contexts all contributing greatly to the development of Karnatic music. Peterson adds here that “Brahmins were by no means the sole custodians and transmitters of canonical and public musical traditions in the 19th century,” and that they in fact collectively innovated along with hereditary performers from diverse communities.²⁶

²³ Subramanian, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006, 10.

²⁴ (Subramanian 2006: 35)

²⁵ (Subramanian 2006: 37)

²⁶ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 10)

South Indian music developed in several notable kingdoms in the centuries leading up to the rise of Indian nationalism. The Vijayanagar kingdom, which spanned the Deccan plateau from 1336 CE to 1646 CE, was one of the earlier kingdoms noted for particularly active “patrons, poets, and cultural engineers.”²⁷ Its successors, the Nayaka²⁸ rulers, patronized cultural intellectuals who conducted a “major project of classification of melodic structures and a system of theoretical compilation of musical texts and knowledge.”²⁹ The Nayaka kings of Tanjore especially invested significant energy and resources to ‘standardize’ musical performances, encouraging ‘canon formation’ and pursuing a “detailed template to work out melodic combinations with a degree of precision, and a standard of reference for performance.”³⁰ In other words, the Nayaka rulers of Tanjore, especially Raghunatha Nayaka (1600-34) and Vijayaraghava Nayaka (1633-73), eagerly promoted “musical scholarship and literary productions.” It is under their reign, for example, that Venkatamahin, a music scholar, produced a Sanskrit treatise titled *Caturdandiprakasika* (1660), wherein he outlined a scheme of 72 melodic scales, or *melakartas*. Such canons, as valued and appreciated as they were in this period by rulers and musicians alike, would come to be elevated to a separate level by nationalists seeking to emphasize the literary nature of South India’s ‘classical’ arts.

The following two centuries, from 1676 to 1856, witnessed the consolidation of Maratha rule in Tanjore, and the city reached its peak as a hub of artistic creativity. One might wonder what was special about Tanjore, among the number of contemporary courts in South India, that would allow it to serve as such an ideal stage for the practice, performance, and pursuit of music. Scholars have argued that Tanjore’s “location at the crossroads of cultural and religious

²⁷ (Subramanian 2006: 10)

²⁸ ‘Nayakas’ constitute several South Indian dynasties that emerged after the downfall of the Vijayanagar Empire. These rulers were originally military governors under the supervision of the Vijayanagar administrators. Wikimedia Foundation. "Nayaks of Tanjore." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nayaks_of_Tanjore

²⁹ (Subramanian 2006: 10)

³⁰ (Subramanian 2006: 10)

influences, [enabled it to] respond to a more inclusive and diverse musical conception that accommodated diverse genres, styles, and compositions in several languages.³¹” Music flourished and experienced an explosion of creativity in Tanjore primarily because different language and locational sites were in constant dialogue with one another. The cultural milieu of Tanjore under Maratha rule facilitated the simultaneous engagement of Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi with one another. The city offered, therefore, a “rich poly-lingual and multi-layered culture” that incorporated the “Brahmanical temple establishment,” the Telugu-speaking court, and the larger pool of composer-saints and poets who composed in a variety of the available languages, especially Telugu, Tamil, and Kannada³².

Alongside Tanjore’s geographical and political contexts, the rule of Maharaja Serfoji (1798 – 1832) further propelled musical creativity in the city. Like the Nayakas of Tanjore but to a greater extent, Serfoji sought the creation of a definite canonical standard for “*sampradaya* or traditional music...that would cover the critical areas of composition, and melody and rhythm structures.³³” It was during his rule that Tanjore gave birth to a new normative model for the devout performer-musician; this framework for music was ‘new’ because “it definitely marked a departure from the existing conventions of love poetry and devotional music or even art music that had been patronized by the court³⁴” and established foundations for the emphasis of ‘bhakthi’, or devotion, in music. The three most commemorated and revered singer-composers of this period were Tyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri, who are collectively labeled ‘The Trinity.’ Each of the composers embodied different streams of artistic improvisation and personas; while Tyagaraja refused royal patronage and pursued music as the supreme vehicle of devotion, Dikshitar’s creativity was more reflective of Tanjore’s diversity, as

³¹ (Subramanian 2006: 2)

³² (Subramanian 2006: 9)

³³ (Subramanian 2006: 36)

³⁴ (Subramanian 2006: 37)

his musical endeavors, supported by the royal court, incorporated both a solid grounding in ‘traditional’ musical grammar and also an experimentation with Western forms of music and notation³⁵. Through the contributions of court musicians and singer-composers, the Tanjore court played a seminal role in the project of standardization, encouraging the formulation of conventions and guidelines for the training, practice, and presentation of music.

Maharaja Serfoji not only sought canonical formation in his courts, but also attempted to develop a new etiquette for musical performance; audience members were strictly discouraged from shaking their heads during performances, for example, and orders were issued regulating the “sartorial equipment and social status of court dancers.³⁶” Interestingly, the task of developing music entailed incorporating and understanding concepts of Western musical grammar as well, such as the concept of notation (until then foreign to South Indian music). Maharaja Serfoji studied Western music himself, and proceeded to found the “Tanjavur palace band, with 42 musicians playing both Indian and Western instruments, as well as a separate dance orchestra.³⁷” There is also evidence that Serfoji was invested in adapting staff notation to Indian music, a project adopted and sustained by musicians and scholars well into the 20th century.

Serfoji’s successor, Maharaja Shivaji II, also provided extensive patronage for the arts; when his death left the throne bereft of an heir however, the colonial government of Madras consolidated the kingdom of Tanjore into its jurisdiction. Perceiving the “Tanjore kings’ expenditures on music and dance to be extravagant, the British discontinued the traditions of patronage that had existed in the city.³⁸” With this, Tanjore’s role as the most important hub of

³⁵ (Subramanian 2006: 39)

³⁶ (Subramanian 2006: 4)

³⁷ (Weidman 2006: 61)

³⁸ (Weidman 2006: 63)

music during the 18th century faded, as musicians migrated to other princely states like Trivandrum, Mysore, Pudukottai, and Ramanathapuram³⁹.

Musical developments occurring in the courts of Travancore and Mysore are also noteworthy; Travancore's sovereign, Swathi Tirunal, invited musicians from all over the subcontinent to perform at his court; in this way, as Amanda Weidman perceptively argues, Swathi Tirunal presented his court as a "showpiece of culture, and as a collection of the best musicians from around the world."⁴⁰ From 1850 to 1950 however, the largest and most renowned court for music was that of Mysore, which was also contemporaneous with the "rise of Madras as the center of the Karnatic world."⁴¹ Mysore's rulers⁴² founded the Palace Orchestra, the Reed Band, and the Palace Karnatic Band, which "gave performances for visiting Maharajas, and British officials, and for opening ceremonies and other significant occasions."⁴³ Mysore's maharajas also founded institutions to teach music, maintained connections with European music publishers, and concerned themselves with the musical education of Mysore's public⁴⁴. Their efforts to standardize musical performances and consumption clearly included the transmission of skills to other musicians, and the sharing of music with lay people.

The discourse of standardization became critical, in a very different way, for nationalists a century later, when musicians of the 20th and 21st centuries imagined a historical break, constructed both temporally (the 19th century versus the 20th century) and spatially (royal courts and villages versus the city of Madras); the imagination of such a break "provided the rationale for the 'revival' of Karnatic music in the 20th century."⁴⁵ Nationalists' modes of listening and

³⁹ (Weidman 2006: 63)

⁴⁰ (Weidman 2006: 64)

⁴¹ (Weidman 2006: 65)

⁴² Particularly Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, Chamaraja Wodeyar IX, Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, and Jayachamaraja Wodeyar.

⁴³ (Weidman 2006: 65)

⁴⁴ (Weidman 2006: 65)

⁴⁵ (Weidman 2006: 60)

evaluating musical performances were mediated through the colonial encounter more than those of rulers and musicians from the previous century⁴⁶. As many of them were also educated in institutions established by the colonial administration, they were more acutely aware of the various ‘degeneracies’ the British associated with Indian culture, and therefore were more conscious of distancing themselves and their culture from such accusations. These men (and less often, women), “constructed a new ‘classical’ repertoire by submitting older forms of music [produced in courts, temples, and salons] to a process of selection, sanitization, and scientific standardization.⁴⁷” Essentially, while the 19th century maharajas of South India generally concentrated on the future of Karnatic music, “which for them involved the successful wedding of Karnatic music with Western music and technology,⁴⁸” 20th century nationalists were occupied, instead, with dwelling on a golden past of South Indian music. As you will soon see, nationalists’ encounter with colonialism, within the city of Madras and consequently in close proximity to the British colonial administration, prompted their efforts to challenge colonization’s attempts to displace and devalue native identities, by proving and emphasizing that which set South Indian classical music apart from its counterpart in the West.⁴⁹ It ultimately propelled their intensifying desires to produce and exhibit a truly ‘Indian’ art form, and thereby define what it meant to be Indian.

⁴⁶ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 19)

⁴⁷ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 4)

⁴⁸ (Weidman 2006: 67)

⁴⁹ (Weidman 2006: 5)

Chapter 2: Producing Karnatic Music and Bharatanatyam in 20th South India

The project of producing ‘revived’ editions of South India’s performing arts required many decades of conscientious debate and dialogue. The small circles of Madras’s Brahmin elite transformed Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam from their ‘degraded’, 19th century forms to the polished, neat, and exhibit-worthy art forms of the post-independence period. In this chapter, I offer a closer analysis of many of the articles and speeches I found while poring over the quarterly journals published by the Madras Music Academy, Kalakshetra, and other academies, as well as publications like *Stri Dharma*. While scholars who have focused their research on very similar primary sources, like Peterson or Weidman, have largely directed their academic attentions towards nationalists’ efforts to create a “fully modern art form⁵⁰,” I am more interested in exploring the elements of their arguments that revealed both their insecurities and their ambitions. I am aware that the opinions and ideas expressed in all of these archival sources come more or less from a singular, hegemonic community with a common upper caste and class identity. There are many gaps in the histories these musicians and activists present, and their ideas were instrumental in erasing non-dominant voices from the art form’s history, and in facilitating the marginalization of certain performing communities. I, however, aim to contextualize their arguments and offer a more nuanced narrative using the elaborate and comprehensive secondary scholarship available on the topic. In this chapter, I first discuss the discourses of nationalist theory that supported nationalists’ efforts to revive Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. After providing a description of the socio-historical trajectories that carried South India’s performing arts from the courts to Madras, I demonstrate how Academy members and supporting actors strove to adapt the pre-existing musical traditions and *sadir* to their own nationalist agenda by adjusting or discarding elements of these art forms. They constructed a

⁵⁰ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 5)

musical and kinesthetic tool, and, as the next chapter will argue, used this tool to construct themselves as individuals who could rediscover and proudly claim belonging in their own home.

Supporting Discourses

The performing arts ultimately functioned as a platform for nationalism through the specific arguments and ideologies of Indian nationalist discourse. Indian nationalists of the 20th century, in an effort to find a nationalist framework suited to their struggle for independence, ideologically divided Indian society into two domains: the material domain, and the spiritual domain. As political scientist Partha Chatterjee theorizes, “claims of western civilization’s superiority were the most powerful in the material sphere,” because it was in this domain, through technological advancements, that the West had subjugated the East⁵¹. Indian nationalists therefore, conceded the superiority of Western science and technology, but argued vehemently for India’s cultural and religious superiority. Achieving independence, then, required two steps: the first step was to emulate the West in their material accomplishments and techniques. The second was to “retain and strengthen the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture,” preventing any encroachments by the colonizer from entering this latter domain. In reality, the material-spiritual domains translated into the public and private spheres of society. As women were predominantly responsible for overseeing the private sphere, it became their primary responsibility to protect and nurture India’s spiritual essence, and to serve as keepers for its religious and cultural traditions. This framework explains the urgent desire of professional and amateur artists heading Madras’s music and dance academies to return to the root values of Indian ‘tradition’ and culture – protecting the perceived sacred, spiritual nature of South Indian performing arts would signal victory over the colonizer, their displacer.

⁵¹ Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India." JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645113>, 623

Scholars Peterson, Soneji, Weidman, and Subramanian have all eloquently explained how the ‘classical’ performing arts of South India, or the process of constructing such art forms, absolutely captured and reflected the nationalist ambition of rising to meet the West in its technological superiority, while ultimately retaining the essential, spiritual core of Indian society and culture. In Peterson’s words, “20th century nationalist projects in the performing arts, were driven to create a *fully modern art*, only an art that would be *different* from European art, by being rooted in ‘traditional’ and ‘Indian’ essences recuperated by the new cultural nationalism⁵².” South Indian performing arts, therefore, had to meet the approval of the West, in the sense that they had to be considered legitimate on the international platform, but also had to successfully capture the essence of India. In the “The Science of Art and Dance,” written by Menaka Leela Sokhey, and published in the 1933 volume of *Stri Dharma*⁵³, the author insists that “we do not want our dance to be an exotic, erotic presentation for the delectation of the West, we want it to be something more than a mere *tamasha*⁵⁴. It must have a solid basis. In fact it must be dance and must be judged as such and not as something peculiar to be passed because it is India, however childish and idiotic it may be⁵⁵.” The project of creating Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as they are performed today, therefore, was grounded in the aim of creating art forms that *would be judged* as ‘civilized’ and ‘cultured.’

The ways in which people came to define Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as the ‘classical’ arts of South India exemplified the nationalists’ quest for a modern art form. There was no ‘classical music’ or ‘classical dance’ in South India before the twentieth century, and the development of nationalist discourses during this time. In fact, nationalists evoking the ‘classical

⁵² (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 5)

⁵³ “A widely known journal started in India in 1918 by British feminists.”

Tusan, Michelle Elizabeth. "Writing *stri dharmā*: international feminism, nationalist politics, and women's press advocacy in late colonial India." *Women's History Review*: 623-650.

⁵⁴ Entertainment

⁵⁵ Sokhey, Menaka L.. "The Science of Art and Dance." *Stri Dharma* 16: 577.

pasts' in literature, science, and history, were greatly influenced by Oriental perceptions of South India's arts – perceptions that expressed “admiration for ancient India,” but also those that reflected “colonial critiques of Indian culture and civilization as barbaric, or in a state of decline, and vastly inferior to their western counterparts.⁵⁶” Consequently, the nationalist agenda, in many ways, continuously revealed a dialogue between East and West, and this is no less evident in the appropriation of the term ‘classical,’ where elements of European literary and artistic history, with its respective model of “notation, composers, compositions, conservatories, and concerts⁵⁷,” were adapted by nationalists to define the performing arts of South India. In Lakshmi Subramanian's words, these nationalist musicians took orientalist discourse to be implicitly true and “the cumulative effect of their pronouncements was the emergence of a self-conscious agenda for redefining the tradition of music and laboriously situating it within the parameters of textual authenticity and a new moral sensibility that was deemed properly Hindu and adequately spiritual⁵⁸.” As a vessel for spiritual progress that reflected Indian culture in its purity, yet was also equipped with ‘classical’ elements comparable to that of the West – origins in antiquity, structured and developed in ancient scientific treatises, and emphasizing individual composers who could be revered for their genius and their musical contributions – it seems the performing arts had the potential to enable the nationalist agenda in a way that not much else could have. This is clear in Sir S. Radhakrishnan's article, “Man and Music,” published in the 1931 Journal of the Madras Music Academy, where, in praising the restorative and reformative power of music, he concernedly asked,

If we are completely free tomorrow, how are we going to express our freedom? In what way are we going to embody our freedom? There is so much attention paid now to building up adequate political machinery, and constructing an economic prosperity for this land. That is of course

⁵⁶ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 6)

⁵⁷ (Weidman 2006: 5)

⁵⁸ (Subramanian 2006: 13)

necessary. But when we gain freedom, are we going to subject ourselves to the forces of civilization which are now invading this land? ...Should [we not] touch that something which is vital and deeper in our being, that which is called the soul of man?⁵⁹

And the performing arts, for this and succeeding generations of upper-caste musicians, provided an opportunity to do exactly that.

The City Beckons

The array of political and social networks brought forth by the British colonial administration of the Madras Presidency played a heavy role in Madras's development into a cultural hub for Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. While the Nayaka courts of the 17th and early 18th centuries flourished as vibrant platforms for musical performance and collaboration, the city of Madras, originally a small fishing hamlet, emerged as a crucial trading center for Europeans and Indians, where commercial and political power coalesced under the East India Company. The structures of musical patronage that had survived outside of the city in the earlier decades of the 18th century⁶⁰ gradually changed when temples and former princely states were brought under the jurisdiction of British authority. Musicians who had formerly been supported by the courts migrated in large numbers to Madras, seeking newer forms of patronage, which, as we shall see, was offered by the musical organizations and institutions established by upper-caste and upper-class men. I will now discuss how music and musicians fit into the social and political climate of the city.

⁵⁹ Radhakrishnan, S.. "Man and Music." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy* 2 (1931)

⁶⁰ "The formation of the Board of Revenue in 1789 marked the increasing bureaucratic centralization of the colonial state and the change of the East India Company from a trading power to a political regime. With this came the decision that the collection and distribution of all temple revenues should be centralized. Whereas kings and temple trustees (dharmakartas) had once administered the affairs of individual temples as they saw fit, the colonial government, by the early 19th century, was auditing the use of temple funds" (Weidman 2006: 5)

As Lakshmi Subramanian argues in *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy*, early colonial Madras was constituted primarily by three general components: first, there was the village cluster existing from the area's precolonial agrarian societies; second, there were "Indian commercial cum artisan agglomerates" responding to the needs of the European trade networks; and finally, there was colonial society, "reflecting British colonial interests and policies"⁶¹. To elaborate, as the East India Company began to consolidate economic and political power in the city, the *dubashes* arose as an important class of native Indian men, who served as "go-betweens, translators, personal servants, and brokers"⁶² for the colonial officials who employed them. The *dubashes* came from a plethora of castes, and included "Brahmins, Pillais and Vellalas"⁶³. Many Vellala community members owned substantial land holdings and participated in the revenue administration of local rulers, but importantly, maintained ties to their agrarian, ancestral communities outside the city; these men regularly visited their villages and participated in customary festivities as patrons and donors, while simultaneously trying to replicate the traditional order of the village in their new city of residence⁶⁴. They did this by providing funds for temple building, the management of religious institutions, charity endowments, and by providing patronage for the performing arts. As the colonial government became increasingly centralized in the mid-19th century, however, the Vellala *dubashes* lost their positions and Brahmins were recruited to take up positions in the Civil Service, as clerks, lawyers, and publicists⁶⁵. It was during this time that musicians were migrating from the princely states, particularly Tanjore, to the city of Madras, in search of employment and patronage.

⁶¹ (Subramanian 2006: 24)

⁶² (Weidman 2006: 16)

⁶³ (Subramanian 2006: 25)

⁶⁴ (Subramanian 2006: 25)

⁶⁵ (Weidman 2006: 16)

The early twentieth witnessed the establishment of numerous sabhas⁶⁶, or music organizations and institutions in Madras, the most renowned of which is the Madras Music Academy, founded in 1928. Explicitly, these sabhas ultimately focused on an agenda of revival, reform, and transmission; the Brahmin men heading these organizations sought to ‘purify’ Karnatic music and what later came to be called Bharatanatyam, in the hopes of rescuing these arts from supposed degradation, and returning them to their rightful, ‘traditional’ forms. The Madras Music Academy, for example, organized annual conferences and lectures, working to “standardize the attributes and features of Karnatic ragams and song texts⁶⁷” through scientific and treatise-based research and analysis. It collaborated closely with musicians, all hailing from similar caste and class backgrounds, placing a great emphasis on notation and technological reproduction for the preservation of music, and on establishing a “definitive delineation of melodies, and pruning a number of compositions that were deemed either unsuitable or insufficiently classical⁶⁸.”

The active process of knowledge production completely ignored women and members of hereditary performing communities. The discussions of the committees and groups of scholars that debated the structure of various ragams, or the concert format, took place almost entirely without women, as well as most hereditary performers. In fact, the Academy speeches and Journal articles I found in the Archives revealed that the nationalist agenda insisted on rescuing the performing arts *from* these other communities of performers. Indira Peterson and Davesh Soneji suggest that many of these hereditary performers “decided to stay away from what they regarded as irrelevant talk, or at worst, an attempt by a particular social community to control the

⁶⁶ “Sabha: congregation, company, society, assembly of literati, select society of believers” (Weidman 2006: 21)

⁶⁷ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 62)

⁶⁸ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 62)

practice through control of discourse about the practice⁶⁹.” The early 20th century’s anti-nautch movement⁷⁰ criminalized devadasis and rendered them destitute. At best, some devadasis were incorporated into other spheres of performance, by becoming actresses, singers, and dancers in India’s growing film industries or serving as ‘examples of reform’ on the Karnatic stage itself⁷¹.

The Academy’s, and other music organizations’ exclusive discussions, over the course of the twentieth century, created a classical concert repertoire that continues to serve as a model both in India and abroad today. While the invention of the gramophone, improving recording technology, and broadcasting organizations like the All India Radio⁷² were hugely successful in disseminating Karnatic music to larger and larger audiences, the ability to decide *what* constituted as belonging to the Karnatic genre, and *how* it was to be presented, was and still is restricted to one hegemonic community of performers and participants. As Amanda Weidman notes, the music these artists and connoisseurs presented continues to operate “in the larger public sphere as a sign of culture, tradition, and conservative values⁷³.”

Just as the music academies took up the task of reviving and reforming Karnatic music, institutions like Kalakshetra Academy, located in one of Chennai’s suburbs, were the premier forces in ‘purifying’ and standardizing the art of Bharatanatyam. The term ‘Bharatanatyam’ itself, referring to dance forms that were previously termed ‘sadir,’ is itself proof of these 20th century ‘revival’ efforts; ‘Bharatanatyam’ was coined to explicitly connect the art form with

⁶⁹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 101)

⁷⁰ Launched in 1882, the anti-nautch and anti-dedication movement sought to criminalize the dedication of devadasis to temples, and their livelihoods as dancers and prostitutes. The movement was initially spearheaded by missionaries, doctors and social workers in Indian and colonial society, but was later championed also by the era’s Hindu nationalists.

Wikimedia Foundation. "Devadasi." Wikipedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi#Reformists_and_abolitionists

⁷¹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 19)

⁷² It was in fact at the AIR’s conference in 1927 that the idea for the Madras Music Academy was conceived.

⁷³ (Weidman 2006: 21)

Bharata's *Natya Shastra*⁷⁴, placing the dance's origins in the authority of a Sanskrit, scientific treatise from the 3rd century. The term was also efficient in "disconnecting the 'tradition' of dance from hereditary performers and their repertoire and practice⁷⁵." Rukmini Devi, a South Indian theosophist and dancer⁷⁶ as well as the founder of Kalakshetra Academy, led the revivalist efforts in Bharatanatyam; she eliminated the suggestively erotic content, gestures, and movements of *sadir* pieces, and ultimately placed the dance form in an entirely spiritual framework, through her own performances and teaching endeavors. She facilitated important aesthetic reforms to the presentation of Bharatanatyam as well, seating musicians on the left of the stage, where before they had accompanied dancers by moving with or behind them⁷⁷, and ascribing importance to Lord Shiva, or Nataraja, as the cosmic lord of dance, by incorporating a statue of him onto the modern Bharatanatyam stage layout. Rukmini Devi is also accredited with elevating the status of Bharatanatyam, from being an 'indecent art form' performed by lower-caste women, to a 'respectable' art and profession performed by women and men of the upper castes and classes.

Devi's 'reforms' did not go uncontested; through the 1960s, Tanjavur Bala Saraswathi, a renowned Devadasi dancer who became the spokesperson for devadasis during the anti-nautch movement, "argued for an untainted erotic-aesthetic-sacred continuum as the heritage of the devadasi dance, and not one to be confused with vulgar eroticism⁷⁸." Protests were voiced loudly within devadasi communities, with these women criticizing reformists like Rukmini Devi for

⁷⁴ Ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts attributed to Sage Bharata, and believed to have been written between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

Wikimedia Foundation. "Natya Sastra." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natya_Sastra

⁷⁵ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 20)

⁷⁶ "To establish visual similarities between devadasis and herself, Rukmini Devi transformed herself from an intercultural dancer, who had studied Ballet and Greek dancing, into a proxy devadasi, and adorned her own intercultural/Brahmin body with all the jewelry and ornaments associated with the temple dancer, including bangle, hair and ear ornaments, pendants, waist belts, and ankle bells"

(ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 138)

⁷⁷ (Weidman 2006: 130)

⁷⁸ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 21)

“depicting them as blots on Hindu civilization” and implying that the art form, and to a lesser extent, they themselves, needed to be rescued from a fall from the ‘Hindu golden age’⁷⁹. It was these revivalist and purification efforts that embodied the nationalist discourses characteristic of India’s movement for independence.

“Our Music is a Precious Inheritance”⁸⁰

The desire to prove their culture, under the threat of colonization and ‘Western’ disapproval, as legitimate and even superior, and thereby regain their sense of self, completely drove nationalist musicians’ interactions with the performing arts. The resultant project of reshaping the arts in this way was an extensive and consuming one; as Vidwan T.K Jayarama Iyer declared in his presidential address at the Madras Music Academy’s 1961 annual conference, “classical music is serious music, and it must be taken seriously⁸¹.” South India’s upper-caste musicians and music lovers did indeed take their preservation efforts seriously, since the process of purifying and reviving Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam would reflect and propel the larger nationalist agenda of purifying and reviving Hinduism and Indian culture in general.

An article titled “Ending the Devadasi System,” published in a 1927 volume of *Stri Dharma*, addressing the deterioration of Bharatanatyam, and the need for abolishing the devadasi system, exemplifies nationalists’ efforts to present a reformed Hinduism by reviving its musical counterparts – the classical arts. The anonymous author explains, “...Hinduism admittedly needs to be purged of many degeneracies, which have crept into it during the passing of centuries, and this cloak of religious custom for what is commonly known as a method of recruiting and

⁷⁹ (Soneji 2012: 24)

⁸⁰ Aiyar, Natesha. "The Importance of Music." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy* , 1 (1930).

⁸¹ Jayarama Iyer, T.K. "Presidential Address." *Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 32 (1961).

upholding prostitution is now regarded with shame by those who love their religion and their fellow beings⁸².” Two objectives are evident here: first, the author made an attempt to distinguish ‘true’ culture, stemming from antiquity, from a degraded version of the same, arising “during the passing of centuries.” This objective is absolutely crucial to South Indian nationalists’ revival efforts of the performing arts; time and again, their rhetoric was shaped by a yearning to return to a golden age of Indian culture, and specifically, of the performing arts. Second, the writer distinguished those who had tainted culture, by “recruiting and upholding prostitution,” from those who were striving to rescue culture from such deterioration, because of their love for “their religion and fellow beings.” This demarcation is common in the speeches and articles advocating for musical revival, and helped nationalists marginalize those communities and people whom they imagined as having ‘tainted’ Indian culture.

Ultimately, nationalist musicians used the performing arts to challenge imperialist criticism of Indian culture, and its resultant displacement, in three ways. First, the Academy members and speakers tried to historicize Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam by providing various correlating ‘histories’ of the art forms, from their origins in ancient Indian society to their present in 20th century Academy auditoriums. In historicizing the performing arts, these nationalists also had to argue and prove that India’s performing arts were uniquely suited to the Indian context; no other nation, therefore, could have produced such music and dance, and therefore, these performing arts were *distinctively* Indian. Second, these scholars became deeply invested in standardizing Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam by holding the notation-system and composer-cult of Western classical music as a template. These were ways to highlight the scientific and literary nature of their own arts’ origins, and focus on fine-tuning and standardizing the grammar of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. This enabled musicians to

⁸² "Ending the Devadasi System." *Stri Dharma* 10: (1927).

present and discuss their music in comparable terms to Western music; for some scholars, the fact that India's art forms could meet the standards of Western approval even signaled an opportunity for better understanding and collaboration between East and West. Third, artists adapted or erased various aspects of music and dance – including their previous proponents from hereditary communities – to fit a new image of what the performing arts, and consequently India, should look like. Many of these adaptations and concerns over what must be preserved or changed, were directly related to the new recording technologies that were appearing on the music scene of South India; technology fueled the need to decide between preserving music quality, and therefore, advocating exclusivity, and disseminating music knowledge among the public, and therefore cultivating inclusivity in the sphere of the performing arts. Ultimately, while upper-caste musicians encouraged the cautious and filtered⁸³ broadcasting of music to the lay public, the decisions over what constituted 'classical' music or dance were reserved to this exclusive group of musicians and scholars. The product was the "new classical arts," based "on 'ancient' yet suitably reformed modernized textual and theoretical canons, [where] the performers were modern professionals, untainted by caste associations and non-scientific methods...these arts would on the one hand be celebrated as heritage, and on the other, be "dissimilable to the citizens of the nation through modern, scientific modes and processes"⁸⁴." Performing art forms that were so uniquely dynamic could only be championed and respected, these nationalists imagined, and any country that possessed and claimed such treasures should only ever be held by the world in high regard.

⁸³ As we will see later, Academy members were very particular that 'strictly classical' music was played during the slots reserved for Karnatic music in the All India Radio broadcasts. The playing of film or fusion music alongside Karnatic music was vehemently opposed.

⁸⁴ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 7)

Remembering a 'Golden Age'

Nationalists responded to a colonial discourse which consistently derided and scorned Indian culture and civilization as barbaric, by striving to demonstrate that India did indeed hail from a proud and honorable history of scientific, intellectual, artistic, and musical achievement. In terms of the performing arts therefore, the members of the Madras Music Academy and other similar institutions, turned to offering rich and vibrant histories of these art forms, tracing their development from their origins in ancient Sanskrit literature and civilization. Importantly, this 'historicization' included recognizing and attaching strongly religious connotations to Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. Writers highlighted the relationship various Hindu deities or at least the Vedic culture in general, had with the performing arts by attaching these art forms to a vaguely distant yet undeniably legitimate⁸⁵ past in India's history. By rooting the arts in such a history, as well as assigning Hindu gods and goddesses as its keepers, they also presented Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as uniquely Indian – no other historical trajectory could have produced the very same performing arts. In "Man and Music" Sir Radhakrishnan explained,

Music is ingrained in our very religion. We make our very gods sing. We have no Saraswathi without her veena, no Krishna without his venu (flute), and no Shiva without his drum...Music had been thriving under the patronage of princes and the most outstanding exponents of music could only be found there under...the science of music was greatly expounded in the South under the patronage of the Tanjore princes⁸⁶.

This passage emphasizes both the religious and scientific nature of South Indian music, attributing the glory of the art form both to its connection with well-known and widely-worshipped Hindu deities, and its support by rulers of princely states, who, crucially, were *native* Indians and not colonial rulers. An article titled "South Indian Music Past and Present" written

⁸⁵ What made this past legitimate was largely orientalist admiration for the Vedic period in India – a lens through which Indian nationalists perceived their own culture and history as well.

⁸⁶ Radhakrishnan, S.. "Man and Music." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy* 2: (1931)

by Mr. G.V Narayanaswami Aiyar, offered a meticulous ‘history’ of Karnatic music within a familiar framework hinging on Vedic, Sanskrit, and scientific bases:

There are distinct stages in the progress of Karnatic music. First: Gandharva Veda had its birth in the Vedic Age in its Sama chants...In the 6th century, Bharata’s Natya shastra gave a detailed exposition of swaras, gramas, murchanas, and jatis...During the next two centuries, the progress of music was closely bound up with that of Sanskrit, which then flourished in the royal courts. Musicians, who were patronized by kings, began to compose Sanskrit verses on various subjects and set them to music. There were also efforts made to classify the ragas and place them on a scientific basis⁸⁷.

The author embedded in this history elements that define, especially in Western standards, what is appropriate for a ‘civilized’ art form; the author placed such a strong emphasis on Karnatic music’s literary origins, as opposed to origins in oral culture, referring repeatedly to Sanskrit treatises and scholarship that were supposedly instrumental in defining and shaping the performing arts. The literature is not just any literature either – it is closely linked with religion, forming the basis of Hindu chants and ritual procedures. With this, Aiyar made the argument that music was an integral aspect of the early Hindus’ lives – that the performing arts are an inheritance, an important part of “where we come from” and “who we are.” Mentioning that “efforts were made to *classify* the ragas and place them on a *scientific* basis” is akin to insisting that there was a comprehensive, complex structure to the system of performing arts; they were not an ad-hoc assemblage of notes and rhythms, embodying the non-canonical, hybrid, vernacular, and ‘backward’ tradition that the British perceived in India. Finally, it is interesting to note the agents of musical development that the author recognized; ancient sages and scholars like Bharata, lay people, and “musicians patronized by kings” are included in this narrative as important actors. But an explicit reference to hereditary performing artists, like devadasis, is missing, and the nuances of the many different caste communities participating in the performing

⁸⁷ Narayanaswami Aiyar, G.V. "South Indian Music Past and Present." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy* 1: (1930).

arts are obscured – Aiyar provided a narrative where the performing arts seem “untainted by caste associations⁸⁸.”

While the declaration “we hail from a glorious past” is itself striking, Alain Danielou⁸⁹, a French intellectual and Indologist, commented in the Madras Music Academy’s 29th annual conference, in 1956:

We are faced in South India with a most ancient and original system, which has probable links with some of the oldest branches of European music and definite affinities with some musical elements still found in north Africa, particularly in Tunisia, where it may be that something has remained of an ancient, should we say Carthagian, culture, which once flourished there⁹⁰.

It is not only that India hails from an ancient past, but that Europe and India possibly share aspects of this past, and resultantly, stem from the same, Greco-influenced culture. George Arundale, British theosophist and husband of the celebrated Bharatanatyam dancer and ‘reformist’ Rukmini Devi, staked a similar claim, writing in 1939, “Hindu music, I feel perfectly convinced, is the root music of the Aryan race. Until the West assimilates this root spirit of music, the West will not draw near to the East, the East will not draw near to the West, and the result will be a continuance of the cleavage which brings about so much hatred, suspicion, and distrust...⁹¹” Arundale goes to the extent of racializing the connection between East and West, advocating the theory that Indian and European civilizations both share ‘Aryan’ roots; music, being the product of this shared heritage, would be the key to bridging both civilizations in the contemporary period of colonization and subjugation. In *The Music of the Orient and Occident*, Margaret Cousins, an Irish-born suffragette and theosophist who settled in South India, made a fascinating claim:

⁸⁸ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 7)

⁸⁹ Danielou (1907 – 1994)

⁹⁰ Danielou, Alain. "Ethnomusicology." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy - Conference Souvenir* (1947).

⁹¹ Arundale, George S. “Kalakshetra.” *Kalakshetra News*: (1939).

The West needs a new stock of musical material. Who but the East is the store-keeping Mother? Will she not nourish her child? When she gives she will also receive. A new vitality will appear in her own art⁹²...One thrills to think of what the future holds for the world when Orpheus and Saraswathi, the Occidental god and Oriental goddess of music, give a combined recital with an understanding world for audience⁹³.

Cousins joined Arundale in advocating for collaboration between East and West, speaking of the mutually beneficial outcomes that the world can expect from such efforts. In positioning the East as ‘mother’ and the West as its ‘child,’ Cousins also implied shared roots and cultural if not ancestral commonalities. In reflecting on Danielou, Arundale and Cousins’s arguments, it is interesting to note that all three are of European origin, and hence their suggestions have different implications and significances than would the same suggestions if offered by native Indians. One must also note that the presence of Danielou and Arundale’s writings in the journals of the Madras Music Academy and Kalakshetra Foundation itself is revealing; if not agreement with these sentiments, the editors or listeners might have at least felt that their European friends’ arguments further highlight the greatness of Indian art forms.

With that said, an alternative, nationalist argument proposed vastly different opinions, insisting that the performing arts of South India are a product solely of Indian geography, history, and genius. Musicologist P. Sambamurthy, in “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation” published in 1931, wrote:

The builders of the system of Indian music knew the laws of harmony and could have anticipated Western music, if they had so desired, centuries ago. Two thousand years ago, the builders of the Indian system hit upon the raga system and saw its musical potentialities. Avoiding all the ideas of harmony, they deliberately chose to develop Indian music along the lines of ragas, and with very good results...A composer gives vent to his musical thoughts through the system of music in his country. Beethoven, if born in India, would have composed krithis, bhajans, etc. in Indian ragas. Tyagaraja, if born in Europe, would have composed symphonies and sonatas⁹⁴.

⁹² Cousins, Margaret E.. *The Music of Orient and Occident; essays towards mutual understandings*, Madras: B.G. Paul & Co., 1935, 29.

⁹³ (Cousins 1935: 7)

Alongside attributing a great amount of foresight to the musical ‘builders’ of yore, Sambamurthy drew attention to the striking notion of context – geographical, and perhaps more influentially, cultural context facilitates the musical systems evident in each society. Unlike his European counterparts, he did not hint at a shared ancestry or heritage, and asserted, to the contrary, that the very different environments in India and Europe propelled the respective artists in each to produce music in a certain way. Perhaps paradoxically however, with the effect of elevating Indian music and its earlier proponents, Sambamurthy also argued that there was a deliberate and conscious decision on the part of Indian musicians to choose the laws that would structure their system of music.

The larger nationalist discourses evident in these articles advocate the protection of India’s inner, spiritual sphere from colonial influence in order for victory in the struggle for true independence. In offering historical explanations of the art forms’ developments, as well as in arguing, in most cases, for these performing arts to be distinguished as especially and solely Indian, nationalist-musicians produced Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as art forms that could be properly and wholly attached to the nation, and resultantly can be proudly claimed by the inheritors of this ‘ancient and glorious’ heritage.

Rescuing Dance from Degradation

Nationalists’ project of historicizing Bharatanatyam was a revivalist one, focusing primarily on removing connotations of immorality from the art form, and explaining why it had deteriorated to begin with. Again, as in Karnatic music, the ‘original’ spiritual elements and religiosity of the dance was emphasized, as were the aspects of the art form that proved that it

⁹⁴ Sambamurthy, P. “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation.” *Perambur Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1961).

could only belong to India. In almost all of the ‘historical’ accounts provided by the Academy’s and Kalakshetra’s twentieth century music enthusiasts, the writers did at least one of the following: they ignored the contributions of devadasis and other non-Brahmin performing artists, they blamed these men and women for the spiritual decline Bharatanatyam was supposedly experiencing, or, they misrepresented the roles of devadasis, illustrating their livelihoods as originally being solely spiritual and ritual endeavors. Of course, their narratives also ignored the roles upper-caste musicians and ‘reformists’ played in erasing the voices, and ignoring the contributions of hereditary performing communities to the development of Bharatanatyam. These scholars were more interested in recalling a history for the dance form than they were in recounting the historical socio-political contexts of devadasis. Challenging colonial displacement through Bharatanatyam apparently required concurring with colonial missionizing discourses of purity and chastity, and appropriating devadasis’ performing arts to produce a ‘cleaned-up’ version of the dance that more ‘civilized’ citizens could relate to and participate in.

Far more than Karnatic music, writers presented Bharatanatyam, in these sources, to have suffered a great fall from a golden age in India’s history when the performing arts had supposedly flourished. A “Brief Report” published in Kalakshetra’s 1961 quarterly provided a rather stinging account of the dance form’s deterioration and then its ‘rescue’ by Rukmini Devi in the twentieth century:

During the 1920s and 30s, while there were still dances whose standards in technique were impeccable, the art itself had acquired a bad repute. It had become associated with bad ways of life and had begun to hide from public gaze in the byways of society...In December of 1935, Rukmini Devi gave a dance recital for the Theosophical Society. This recital was historic. It was the first time a lady of good birth had ever learned this dance...the dance form was beautifully pure, and devoid of sensuality of any sort⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ “A Brief Report on Kalakshetra.” *Kalakshetra News*, 2: (1961).

It is important to note that the anonymous writer perceived ‘sensuality’ to characterize the deterioration of this performing art; it is the so-called absence of such a trait from the original, pure dance form that distinguished Indian culture in general from that of the ‘promiscuous West’. The writer cast all hereditary performers in opposition to people of ‘good birth,’ and the only characteristics he or she attributed to their performances are immorality and eroticism. Critically, in these accounts that illustrate devadasis as living unrighteous lives, connoting prostitution and non-conjugal relationships, not one author admitted or even recognized that it was mostly upper-caste men, Brahmins, who supplied the demand for many devadasis’ sex work. Unsurprisingly, nationalists blamed these women for society’s ills, while they relegated themselves to the task of rescuing first, not even these ‘fallen women,’ but the ‘fallen, once-sacred’ dance form they had propagated.

In 1961, Rukmini Devi’s own thoughts on her work reveal the underlying objectives of these rescuing efforts. In one speech, she declared,

One great thing that has come as a result of these difficulties is the complete separation of our work from the traditional dance teachers. It is a well-known fact that they are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance but themselves... Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers⁹⁶.

Ironically, Devi assigned the exclusivity that so greatly characterized the nationalists’ own mission to the work of performing artists from hereditary communities. What is even more apparent here, is the reformists’ efforts to distinguish themselves from the ‘other,’ or the “traditional dance teachers,” who were responsible for Bharatanatyam’s deterioration. In having seemingly expanded the restricted limits of who was allowed to learn dance, Devi presented her

⁹⁶ “A Brief Report on Kalakshetra.” *Kalakshetra News*, 2: (1961).

work almost as service to the nation, and to ‘respectable’ women everywhere! In another paper, she exclaimed,

...the art has deteriorated for a lack of qualified and genuine students to learn it. How I wish the devadasis had pursued it without ever breaking the tradition and allowing persons of utter bankruptcy of talents to take it for the sake of fashion, if not for the baser motive of exhibitionism⁹⁷!

It is here that Devi accused the devadasis of the ultimate blunder – that of ‘breaking tradition.’ An art form that had developed and flourished previously under the enthusiastic patronage of kings suddenly fell into disrepute when devadasis had apparently deliberately chosen to diverge from ‘tradition’ and invite unqualified women to practice the art form. The self-righteous tone of this discourse, incorporating the language of rights to describe what must and must not be done, served to further separate those who rescue from those who taint. It completely obscured the fact that even in its ‘original’ form, sadir represented various emotional and kinesthetic elements, including the erotic. Because such movements and their supposed implications did not smoothly fit into the notions of the ancient, honorable, respectable culture that the nationalists were attempting to revive and exhibit, nationalists illustrated the sensual elements of the art form as unnatural, arising from the art form’s engagement with lower-minded proponents.

Some revivalists held perspectives that painted devadasis in a more favorable light, but only by misrepresenting the socio-cultural roles devadasis played, and obscuring the complex, religious and non-religious social settings they participated in. At Perambur Sangeetha Sabha⁹⁸’s annual lecture series, Nirmala Ramachandran, presenting on “The Art of Bharatanatyam” explained that “originally, Bharatanatyam was strictly confined to temples and royal courts. Devadasis danced in a spirit of worship and service in front of the deity. The deity was her lover (Nayaka) and herself the loved one (Nayaki). The dance was an expression of a spiritual

⁹⁷ Chandrasekharan, K. “Revival of Bharatanatyam – Smt. Rukmini Devi’s Contribution.” *Kalakshetra News*, 1: (1960).

⁹⁸ One of Chennai’s music academies, affiliated with the Sangeetha Natak Academy.

reality⁹⁹.” This description slightly misconstrues the performances of the devadasis; while there was indeed a religious component to their art, these women also performed in non-religious spaces, such as courts and salons, and collaborated with musicians from hereditary performing communities, as well as Brahmin musicians and composers. To claim that the dance was only a spiritual endeavor essentializes its various elements and oversimplifies the complexity and dynamism of these artists’ performances, and their interactions with one another.

In the diamond jubilee celebrations of the Sri Parthasarathi Swami Sabha in 1960, A.N Parasuram provided another account of Bharatanatyam’s history, tracing, again, the art form’s roots to the Vedic period and ascribing it with mythological importance:

Victorian prudery of our British rulers and the ignorant zeal of their missionaries made a combined attack on dance in the 19th century, resistance almost failed. The coup de grace seems to have been delivered with the anti-nautch movement and the laws passed to ban dancing in temples... For the last 30 years or so, a new life has begun for the art with girls from respectable families taking to it and no social stigma attaching to the art, the artist, or the spectator¹⁰⁰.

While the speaker was sensitive to the socio-cultural nuances in history, by recognizing the role colonization had played in tampering with the devadasis’ art form and influencing peoples’ perceptions of it, he still placed more importance on the ‘survival’ of Bharatanatyam and the participation of girls from ‘respectable families’ as having lifted the dance form in social estimation.

In all the archival materials I surveyed, only one paper actually explicitly credited devadasis with having contributed to the survival of sadir, now Bharatanatyam. In “The Nuances of Bharatanatyam,” K.V Ramachandran drew out the art form’s nuances:

In olden days there were the Rajadasis who performed before royalty, the alankaradasis who danced at social functions like marriages, and the

⁹⁹ Ramachandran, Nirmala. “The Art of Bharatanatyam.” *Perambur Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1961).

¹⁰⁰ Parasuram, A.N. “The Art of Dance.” *Sri Parthasarathi Swami Sabha Souvenir*: (1960).

devadasis, who danced exclusively at temples...The anti-nautch movement directed at the art, killed all the three varieties; and legislation deprived thousands of teachers and pupils of their only means of livelihood. Yet, the art carried the secrets of its own reanimation, like the phoenix arose from its own ashes to live again... Devadasis were an accomplished lot – some of them were poetesses, in Sanskrit, and all of them had considerable literary knowledge in addition to their very special knowledge of music and dance. If the arts of our music and dance have survived at all, it is in a very large measure due to them¹⁰¹.

Ramachandran relatively accurately captured the complex functions devadasis performed, in the various spaces they occupied. Rather than presenting the anti-nautch movement as having rescued the art form from degradation, this author was the only one who focused on the plight of devadasis, in the aftermath of the anti-nautch legislation. He was even successful in underlining the agency of these performing artists, noting their resilience in retaining their knowledge of the arts even under social and political duress. Unlike other scholars who relegated devadasis to the realm of immorality, Ramachandran described the talented nature of the community, highlighting the “special” and perhaps inherent knowledge of music and dance that they possessed. Ultimately, this is the only account which did not portray the devadasis and other hereditary performers as the ‘other’ or that appropriated their art form for the sake of producing an art form suited for modern, urban elites. Instead, the author included the efforts of these women as valuable contributions to the survival of South India’s performing arts. The fact that such suggestions were published only as late as 1992, in the Academy’s Journal reveal the hold purifying discourses have had on scholars, artists, and audience members all these decades.

For some scholars, Westerners were positioned as the ‘other’; just as Karnatic music was imagined to be suited uniquely to the Indian context, Bharatanatyam was also attached to the nation. Menaka Leela Sokhey provided an extensive list of suggestions for the revival of dance

¹⁰¹ Ramachandran, KV. “The Nuances of Bharatanatyam.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1992).

in “The Art and Science of Dance¹⁰²” (1933) commenting that “It is my firm conviction that the development of different types of dancing in different countries has something to do with the differences in the physical build of different nations¹⁰³.” Bharatanatyam, therefore, is especially suited not only to the Indian context but to the Indian body. With an emphasis (hinging on racialized explanation) on biology and geography, Sokhey’s argument helped to produce an art form that could only ever belong to India. Its respectable proponents, therefore, were the true ‘Indians’.

Systematizing Creativity

For nationalists, Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam needed to be legitimate and scientific from an objective standpoint. This implied that they be easily transferrable to students, and that the structure and grammar of these art forms be adequately systematized and categorized in writing, so that a canon existed for each. To accomplish this, they selected elements of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, sometimes even creating these elements, and honing them so that they reflected the characteristics that made Western classical music, ‘classical’ – for example, giving importance to individual composers, and categorizing the ragas into a comprehensive system and thereby forming a grammar for South Indian music.

In producing a historical narrative of Karnatic music in which individual Indian composers played an important role, scholars presented these musicians of yore as not only having contributed to the music canon, but also to the upliftment of the people around them. As American ethnomusicologist Barbara Benary explains in “Composers and Tradition in Karnatic Music,” “the earliest remembered composers of Karnatic music were the poet-saints of the bhakti movement for whom devotional texts were the means of salvation and music was the vehicle for

¹⁰² Stri Dharma, 1933 (15).

¹⁰³ Sokhey, Menaka L. “The Science of Art and Dance.” *Stri Dharma*, 16: (1933).

the texts¹⁰⁴.” Apparently, the bhakthi movements of the seventh through ninth centuries gave rise to a number of composers whose compositions laid the foundations for the later forms of classical music, and helped to form “certain beliefs about the role of music in religious and secular life.” The composers of the 14th through 18th produced works embodied notions of saintliness and scholars and lay music enthusiasts connect their compositions to divine inspiration. Finally, the late eighteenth century witnessed the rise of Karnatic music’s most popularly remembered and revered composers, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri¹⁰⁵. Lay people definitely attribute these composers with saintly status, and through the popular narratives of their lives, believe that these saint-composers acquired special powers through their ishta devatas, or cherished deities; “by the power of their music, some [of these composers] are believed to have been able to perform miracles.” While attaching connotations of divinity both to these composers as well as to their music is not unique to the twentieth century, the Madras Music Academy and its various counterparts throughout the city played a definite role in elevating, even deifying, and individualizing these composers in the minds of the public. Their efforts were an attempt to further ground their ‘ancient’ classical art form in a spiritually rich past.

During this period, Music Academies in Madras began to sponsor “composer days” or festivals dedicated solely to the celebration of one or more of these saint-composers. These festive events were attended by numerous musicians who would perform concerts and scholars who would give speeches in remembrance and honor of the spot-lighted composer. Such festivals ingrained these saint-composers into the narrative of Karnatic music that twentieth century musician-nationalists wanted to project to their listeners. While such a display proved

¹⁰⁴ Benary, Barbara. "Composers and Tradition in Karnatic Music." *Asian Music* 3: 42 - 51

¹⁰⁵ More than half of the current Karnatic repertoire comes from these composers.

Benary, Barbara. "Composers and Tradition in Karnatic Music." *Asian Music* 3: 42 - 51

that South Indian music had not just genius composers, but divinely-inspired ones, the speeches and articles presented on the occasion of these festivals also highlighted the inherent spiritual nature of the composers, and resultantly, Karnatic music in general.

The Madras Music Academy celebrated “Purandara Das Day” on July 27, 1931; one of the many speeches given that day was by Mr. M. Dasa Rao, who, after singing some of Sri Purandara Dasa’s songs, presented the following comparisons between Purandara Dasa and the 18th century saint-composer, Tyagaraja: “Sri Purandara Dasa has enriched both Karnataka literature and music...The essential difference between him and Saint Tyagaraja, who visualized God as music incarnate, was that Purandara Dasa regarded music as only a door to religion, as a powerful aid in his mass education, whereas Tyagaraja regarded music as the very form of God himself¹⁰⁶.” The author underlined the extent to which these composers’ works contributed greatly to their own and other people’s spiritual upliftment. Such an emphasis on spiritual progress and religious involvement serves as a template for the musicians of the twentieth century - the saint-composers’ spiritually-minded engagement with music was to be admired and emulated by contemporary artists. Mr. Dasa Rao concluded his speech emphatically, insisting that “the Madras Music Academy has inaugurated an era of renaissance in the history of Karnatic music and devotional literature, by instituting the studies of the lives of such great men and by honoring their memory¹⁰⁷.” Importantly, it was the Academy’s efforts to *study* and thereby standardize a history of Karnatic music that was the celebrated objective. Hosting “composer days” ensured that a large number of people would receive, consume, and internalize this narrative.

¹⁰⁶ Narasimha Rao, K. “The Life and Teachings of Sri Purandara Das.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 2: (1931).

¹⁰⁷ Narasimha Rao, K. “The Life and Teachings of Sri Purandara Das.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 2: (1931).

The Academy standardized Karnatic music by demarcating who was authorized to decide what did and did not belong in the art form. Within a few years of its founding, the Academy established “the Experts Committee¹⁰⁸,” comprised of leading musicians and scholars who would gather periodically to debate and discuss the grammatical elements of Karnatic music. Their discussions ranged from deciding concert arrangement, categorizing ragas and talas, and offering suggestions for teaching methods. One of their primary goals was to classify “all the ragas considered into one of the 72 melakarthis¹⁰⁹, scale types in an elegant and symmetrical system first propounded by theorist Venkatamahin in 1620¹¹⁰.” Peterson notes how, to support their contentions, speakers referred to scriptural sources that could serve as authoritative precedent. Some members invoked excerpts from ancient treatises to support their contentions...¹¹¹” For example, in a lecture titled “Srutis and Suddha Svara Mela,” delivered in 1930, Mr. Hulgur Krishnacharya recounted that “It was decided by the All India music conference in 1927¹¹² that only the system of srutis is practical and consistent with the 12 swarasthanas of our veena. We find even in ancient literature a lengthy discussion about the number of srutis admissible in the music scale¹¹³.” This passage is typical of the standardization process; musicians sought to create an organized system of the various elements of Karnatic music. These scholars looked to musicological treatises written centuries ago, and to the works of the saint-composers we

¹⁰⁸ As Peterson and Soneji explain, “one of the very first acts of the founders of the Academy was to circulate a questionnaire to its members requesting their written feedback on a list of issues grouped under two broad headings, sruti (pitch) and raga lakshana (broadly, the science, grammar, or theory of raga). An apparent near-total lack of response from the membership led to the formation of the Experts Committee to discuss these and other questions of import in open conference sessions”

(ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 95)

¹⁰⁹ The melakarta system classifies the fundamental ragas, also known as ‘parent ragas’ of the Karnatic tradition. “The system of melakarthis was especially important for the process of creating the ‘classical’; as Amanda Weidman brilliantly notes in *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, the melakarta scale “it gestured toward the kind of universality that classical music needed, by showing how scales or modes similar to the idea of scale in Western classical music were operative in Karnatic music.”

(Weidman 2006: 234)

¹¹⁰ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 108)

¹¹¹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 108)

¹¹² This is the conference that established the Madras Music Academy.

¹¹³ Krishnacharya, Hulgur. “Srutis and Suddha Svara Mela.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1930).

discussed above. An analysis of the Official Report of the 1932 Annual Madras Music Academy Conference reveals yet other topics of discussion that pervaded these gatherings. In the Presidential Address, given by renowned Karnatic vocalist Tiger Varadachariar, he began by saying, “The Academy should not rest satisfied until it has described all the well-known ragas in terms of srutis instead of the 12 semi-tones. Musicians must be brought to appreciate the reality of the subtle tonal difference which forms the very basis of Aryan music¹¹⁴.” The urgency of the standardizing project was apparent in the President’s speech, but what is more striking is the suggestion that a proper grasp of this system of Karnatic music was essential to understanding how the art form is inherently, structurally, ‘Aryan,’ or Indian, in this case. Varadachariar continued on to say, “...the raga system of Karnatic music, with all its richness and variety, with its undefinable grace and fine emotional appeal, is at once the despair and envy of every other nation,” implying that the structure these musicians were striving to create and clarify for themselves had always inherently been characteristic of the art form. Because India possessed such a magnificent musical treasure, it was essential for musicians like Tiger Varadachariar that they “take good care to maintain the purity and integrity of those exquisite modes of melody which are the pride and glory of our civilization¹¹⁵.”

The decisions that facilitated the project to systematize Karnatic music depended on the opinions of a relatively small circle of upper-caste men, and hence, this group produced an art form that catered especially to people with similar class and caste backgrounds. Even when the Experts Committee members desired to corroborate their opinions or decisions with other members of the music community, one can be sure that this ‘community’ was an exclusive one; performing artists from devadasi or nattuvanar backgrounds were not consulted in the process of

¹¹⁴ Varadachariar, Tiger. “Presidential Address.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1932).

¹¹⁵ Varadachariar, Tiger. “Presidential Address.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1932).

shaping a renewed, modern, yet ancient and respectable performing arts genre. An article published in the 1931 Journal of the Madras Music Academy exemplified this exclusivity, recalling that “the committee drew up a questionnaire on the various aspects of music performances and the means of improving the methods of imparting them, and sent them to a large number of musicians in and outside of Travancore¹¹⁶.” These musicians had to have been teachers and connoisseurs in the area who were recognized by the Academy particularly as being Karnatic musicians. The result of all of these discussions and collaborations between the Academy and surrounding musicians was, as Peterson and Soneji describe, the emergence of a “unitary notion of raga,...the compilation of anthologies and guidelines for notation, and the articulation of a definitive classical canon¹¹⁷,” which continues to define and inform performances and discussions of Karnatic music today.

Enthusiasts and artists of Bharatanatyam, in its nationalistically reinvented form, also sought to standardize the art form like their musical counterparts. They emphasized Bharatanatyam’s links to the Natya Shastra, a written, musicological treatise from between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Many, like Professor P. Sambamurthy, in “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation” published through Perambur Sangeetha Sabha in 1931, advocated that a “standard notation for dance should be evolved¹¹⁸.” This would enable an easier method for “communicating knowledge to the masses...and thereby make them lead good lives.” In reference to both music and dance, Sankal T.V Subba Rao insisted in 1947 at the Madras Music Academy’s annual conference that “research must form an equally urgent item in your program. It should relate to the Shastra. Unknown works should be brought to light and edited.

¹¹⁶ “Reviews on the Academy of Music.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1931).

¹¹⁷ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 4)

¹¹⁸ Sambamurthy, P. “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation.” *Perambur Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1961).

On the side of art it should rescue compositions of the masters and have them recorded for the benefit of posterity¹¹⁹.” The project of standardization and systemization, therefore, was constituted by efforts to record, compile, and transmit knowledge of the performing arts, with nationalists placing a strong emphasis on scientific research of the ancient treatises in order to reproduce the ‘original’ art form. Even in the various ways that Rukmini Devi, the founder of Kalakshetra Academy, transformed the aesthetics and mechanics of the sadir dance in order to present a purified and rekindled form of dance called Bharatanatyam, she never “claimed originality for her modern innovations, but inscribed her work within the history of received traditions, maintaining that her recreations and innovations were continuous with the spirit of the *Natya Shastra*¹²⁰.” This obsession with ‘scientific research’ and ‘standardized notation’ is ultimately representative of nationalists’ desire to present their classical art forms in a way that met Western standards for legitimacy; it also demonstrated that Indian performing arts, and therefore India, could claim a legitimate cultural heritage worthy of exhibition and transmission.

Adaptation and Erasure

The final component of the ‘revival’ and therefore production of South India’s classical performing arts was a blend of selective erasure and adaptation. Positioning themselves and their art form against an ‘other,’ whether this other was hereditary performing communities, the burgeoning film industries of India, or the ‘West’, nationalist musicians of the twentieth century disregarded and actively expunged the impact or involvement these ‘others’ might have or had had on Karnatic music. Also, ever-improving recording and broadcasting technologies fuelled many discussions on preservation and adaptation, as members of the Music Academy and dance institutions struggled with balancing the new, which they so desperately needed to cater to a

¹¹⁹ Rao, Subba TV. “Ideals of an Academy of Music.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1947).

¹²⁰ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 139)

vastly changing audience, with the old, which they insisted formed the very basis of their ‘traditional and sacred’ art form. Basically, in the act of erasing, Academy members decided what to get rid of; in the act of adapting, they cautiously engaged with the rapidly technologizing world around them. Both these strands of action together helped to produce Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam anew in the sense that they facilitated a demarcation between what was ‘real, traditional’ music and dance, and what was meant solely for cheap, baser entertainment.

Brahmin musicians of the twentieth century perceived their carefully polished and beloved Karnatic music as highly vulnerable and threatened by the various degeneracies that saturated Indian society. While the production of this ‘classical’ art form had largely entailed situating it outside the reaches of colonial influence (all the while borrowing an orientalist framework to facilitate such a production), musicians soon felt the urgent need to protect the art form from contaminating influences existent within native Indian society, and even within the art form as it had conventionally been performed, itself. For example, the Journals of the Madras Music Academy reveal high tensions around the question of instrumental purity. In “South Indian Music Past and Present,” published in 1930, the author G.V Narayanaswami Aiyar wrote, “I shall now proceed to draw your attention to some of the excrescences now discernible in the music of South India. In the first place, the harmonium is displacing the time-honored Tambura for the drone, drowning out the vocalist’s voice¹²¹.” The ‘time-honored’ Tambura insinuates an element of originality stemming from antiquity, whereas the author presented the harmonium as a recently-acquired addition, even fatal or disease-like to the art form.

G.V Narayanaswami was not the only advocate for forever banishing the harmonium from the Karnatic stage. In 1935, Margaret Cousins, a British-born theosophist, suffragette, and music connoisseur, said in *The Music of Orient and Occident*, “The harmonium is the most

¹²¹ Narayanaswami Aiyar, G.V. "South Indian Music Past and Present." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 1: (1930).

sinister influence in Eastern music today. It is tuned falsely and contrary to the natural tuning employed for countless centuries in India...Its harsh, over-loud tone is quite unsuitable for accompanying the human voice which is strained in trying to hold its own¹²².” Clearly, Academy musicians and affiliated scholars viewed the harmonium’s influence on Karnatic music with alarm, perceiving the instrument as un-Indian and definitely unsuitable for classical music. Later in her book, Cousins insists that,

Those who are true nationalists will foster the practice and development of the noble Indian instruments and discourage the use of the Austrian harmonium even as a sruti (drone) accompaniment, as its presence offers too great a temptation to frail humanity to take a short cut to learning an accompanying instrument which forces the singer to omit all the microtones which are the precious distinguishing features of Indian music¹²³.

The nationalist agenda is clear from this passage; it was musicians’ responsibility to create a truly *Indian* art form, by removing those aspects of it that failed to reflect the inherent structure and character of Indian music, and distinguish Indian classical music from the performing arts of other communities and nations. Such sentiments, about the harmonium in this case, fuelled the Academy’s resolutions on deciding what constituted properly classical music. In the Vote of Thanks for the 1932 Madras Music Academy’s Annual Conference, Dr. U. Rama Rao, one of the Academy’s founders, reminded his scholarly audience that “...One of the many resolutions we have passed until now is that the harmonium should not be used during performances but yet I see only a few musicians [have] discarded it. I request you all to see that the resolutions which you yourself pass, are given effect by your colleagues in the line¹²⁴.” As a result of such resolution, over the next several decades, the harmonium faded from the South Indian classical

¹²² Cousins, Margaret E.. *The Music of Orient and Occident; essays towards mutual understandings*, Madras: B.G. Paul & Co., 1935, 40.

¹²³ Cousins, Margaret E.. *The Music of Orient and Occident; essays towards mutual understandings*, Madras: B.G. Paul & Co., 1935, 52.

¹²⁴ Rao, Rama U. “Vote of Thanks.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1932).

stage; today, the instrument's presence in Karnatic music would serve as a very obvious abnormality.

Aside from the harmonium, there were other aspects of Karnatic music that needed to be purged. For example, vocalists and melodic instrumentalists, as the Archives revealed, continuously worried about the increasing popularity of percussion instruments in concert. To address this grievance, authors wrote arguing against the “tyranny of the mechanical drum¹²⁵.” The anonymous author of “The Decline of Taste,” published in a 1933 volume of the Academy, states “...raga has been dethroned and tala has usurped the supremacy. The practice of mathematical svara presentations has frozen up the fountain of creative joy of the emotional spirit...the age of the melody is gone; that of the drum has succeeded!¹²⁶” Again, any divergence from the narrow conceptualization of what entailed classical music, in this case the increase of percussion instruments on stage, was a threat to the purity of Karnatic music, as well as to its survival as a carefully, nationalistically molded art form. The title of the article above itself reveals the ‘fall from a golden age’ that nationalist musicians embedded in their discourse of preservation, presenting themselves as saviors rescuing an inherently Indian art form from degradation and disrepute.

The theme of purifying by erasing is evident in the production of Bharatanatyam as well. As we have discussed before, the twentieth century witnessed Rukmini Devi's attempts to present Bharatanatyam as a ‘respectable’ art form worthy of participants who hailed from “good families¹²⁷” and ‘cultured backgrounds.’ Indira Peterson elaborates on Devi's revival project, wherein she facilitated the “elimination of suggestively erotic content, gestures, movements, and

¹²⁵“The Decline of Taste.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1933).

¹²⁶“The Decline of Taste.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1933).

¹²⁷ “A Brief Report on Kalakshetra.” *Kalakshetra News*, 2: (1961).

by interpreting the dance on exclusive ‘spiritual’ terms¹²⁸.” Her efforts were lauded by the members of Madras’s music academies and related Brahmin performing artists. Kalakshetra’s journal from 1961 features “A Brief Report,” where the anonymous author provided an overview of Devi’s involvement with the revival of Bharatanatyam: “in December of 1935, Rukmini Devi gave a dance recital for the Theosophical Society. This recital was historic. It was the first time a lady of good birth had ever learned this dance...the dance was beautifully pure, and devoid of sensuality of any sort. Before, the dance had been called sadir, and it later became Bharatanatyam¹²⁹.” The author validated Rukmini Devi’s revival efforts because of her upper caste and class background, and second, because the resultant template for Bharatanatyam performances reflected the fixation with spiritual purity that was so integral to Indian nationalism. Distinguishing the revived, purified art form as “Bharatanatyam” in opposition to the previously existent, tainted “sadir” only served to reinforce the divide between ‘original’ and ‘degraded.’

Of course, the erasure of certain kinesthetic elements of Sadir was a reflection of the larger erasure of social and human elements of the art form, namely the marginalization of hereditary performing communities. Heightened by colonization’s missionary rhetoric, which was in fact the first to label devadasis and their performing arts as immoral, nationalists adopted this banner and fuelled the anti-nautch movement through the first half of the twentieth century; it culminated in the Madras Devadasi Act of 1947¹³⁰, which criminalized the dedication of devadasis to temples, and allowed them to marry. Devadasis were largely erased from both the

¹²⁸ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 21)

¹²⁹ “A Brief Report on Kalakshetra.” *Kalakshetra News*, 2: (1961).

¹³⁰ In Soneji’s words, “the original Devadasi Act of 1947 only banned temple dedication rituals in temple-oriented performances by devadasis, and so in most parts of South India, especially coastal Andhra Pradesh, salon performances by courtesan troupes continued well into the 1950s. A 1956 amendment criminalized performances by women from hereditary courtesan communities at marriages and other private social events” (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 110)

history and the reality of the performing arts, with upper-caste musicians¹³¹ and anti-nautch activists insisting that the only option for them was “to become ‘respectable’ through marriage¹³².” If they were incorporated into the performing arts scene at all, it was as actors in the Indian film industries, some of whom, like M.S Subbulakshmi¹³³, “went on to gain iconic status because they *left* cinema to pursue more ‘respectable’ professions, as Karnatic musicians for example, serving as models of ‘reformed’ devadasi women.

Recording Changes

The changes brought forth by technological improvements and innovations were a noteworthy site in which nationalists voiced their concerns of preservation most vocally and urgently. The gradual deconstruction of the gurukulavasam system¹³⁴, the increasing popularity of the film industry, and the urbanization of Madras, all pointed to changing, “fast-paced” lifestyles. In this milieu, elements of Karnatic music, already the focus of the Academy’s reformative efforts, had to further meet the changing expectations of audience members. Academy members, on the one hand, strove to preserve the ‘purity’ of the art form, while on the other hand, searched for ways to make the performances relatable and interesting for the public. In this way, their systematization and preservation projects facilitated a certain exclusivity,

¹³¹ Interestingly, there were a notable number of Brahmin men who argued against the abolition of devadasi dedication in the late 1920s; as Soneji explains, “devadasis were by and large the mistresses of upper-caste elites...thus it was no surprise at all that Brahmin men would defend their own rights to this institutionalized form of concubinage by adopting an anti-abolition stance.

¹³² (Soneji 2012: 110)

¹³³ Perhaps the most celebrated Karnatic vocalist of all time, referred to as the “Nightingale of India.” She Embodied the bhakthi, or devotional, component of Karnatic music.

¹³⁴ The traditional method of transmitting and acquiring musical knowledge, where a student would live for many years with his teacher, serving him as a son and learning constantly from his guru’s practice and teaching. In the Madras Music Academy’s report, this method of instruction is described by a speaker as one in which “each savant attracted around himself a body of earnest students, infused into them a passion for music after his method, made them masters of his method, by careful pruning and weeding, giving at the same time, full scope for their originality and thus secured the continuity and development of his distinct contribution to the subject” (1932, Notes 5).

reinforcing only upper-caste musicians as the hegemonic ‘authenticators of tradition,’ while the rising popularity of gramophones and improving broadcasting technologies made Karnatic music more available to listeners and concert-goers. The following discourses from Academy speeches and articles refer to the ‘mechanization’ and ‘commercialization’ of Karnatic music, with musicians and scholars cautioning their colleagues to retain the superior quality of the art form and not fall victim to the “craze for speed thrills¹³⁵.” Music, therefore, in competition with the film industry’s catchy tunes, must be “good entertainment, but should also educate the listener,” as the renowned vocalist G.N Balasubramaniam warned in a speech at the Gopalapuram Sangeetha Sabha in 1950.

In an article titled “Indian Dance” (1932), the author Ragini Devi quite severely delivered that “the music we now hear is as mechanical as the life we lead, characterized by a shattering of time-honored traditions, a craze for thrills and amusement rather than enjoyment. The great creative art has lost its sacredness, and has become an article for trade... these performances are now as attractive as the gladiatorial shows in ancient Rome¹³⁶.” Devi inferred that by catering more to audience members’ requests and expectations for ‘what music should be,’ the art form became a spectacle, rather than a source of peaceful enjoyment. In a way, Devi distinguished the musicians on stage, the ‘authenticators of musical tradition,’ from the audience, which, though hungrily appreciative of music, did not necessary facilitate high standards for the art form. Devi concluded her article by touching upon the subject of recording technology; “...the craze for light music and folk songs, for which the gramophone is more responsible than anything else, will gradually die away. I am glad to observe that gramophone companies have already begun to record the classical music of good artists.” Again, the author placed Karnatic music in opposition

¹³⁵ Narayanaswami Aiyar, G.V. “The Mechanization of South Indian Music.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1933).

¹³⁶ Devi, Ragini. “Indian Dance.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1933).

to ‘inferior’ art forms, which, expectedly, were perceived as ephemeral trends that would fade quickly in comparison to the everlasting popularity of good-quality, classical music.

There were of course musicians and renowned connoisseurs who truly appreciated the greater dissemination the art form was slowly achieving. G.N Balasubramaniam, wrote emphatically in a the Gopalapuram Sangeetha Sabha’s 1952 souvenir that,

Music six decades ago was a luxury which few could have enjoyed...with the advent of greater public patronage, what was the private privilege of a few became the public enjoyment of many...Sabhas and like institutions sprang up all over the land. Gramophone records, the radio, the cinema, public lectures on music, books, demonstrations and reviews of musical performances in dailies and magazines opened up what was once a closed book to the lay man¹³⁷.

While recalling a supposed exclusivity in previous generations of music performance and practice, G.N.B accredited recording technologies and the burgeoning film industries for expanding the realm of performing arts to include those who were previously excluded from musical practice and performance. Interestingly, historical scholarship, like those of Peterson, Soneji and Weidman, narrate an alternate history, where the dual forces of colonization and nationalism gradually suppressed the vibrant and complexly-linked performing arts circles of the 18th and 19th centuries. The resultant academies and sabhas that apparently sprang up were products of a specific hegemonic group’s context and interests; they helped to produce an illusion of inclusivity through technological adaptation and appreciation while the reins of musical performance still lay very strongly in the hands of this dominant group. This always becomes evident when the musicians who applauded technology’s influence revealed their underlying discomfort with truly sharing their classical arts with the masses; for example, G.N.B adds near the end of the article, “...however, democratization of any great art brings inevitably in

¹³⁷ Balasubramaniam, G.N. “Give and Take.” *The Gopalapuram Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1950).

its wake the lowering of high standards of achievement¹³⁸.” The fact that such sentiments were often framed in a rhetoric of threat versus protection, of succumbing to popular pressure versus remaining cautious about retaining musical quality, reveals these musicians’ discomfort with losing a platform to express power and superiority over groups perceived as the inferior ‘other.’ As Peterson argues, “for the Brahmin community, consumption of classical music became an integral element in their cultural self-definition, a marker of status and taste, and a cementing agent of a collective identity and presence¹³⁹...” So while some nationalists appreciated sabhas, cinema, and broadcasting entities for serving as “popularizing agents of music and [for] contributing directly to the growth and advancement of music in middle class families and in ordinary common life¹⁴⁰,” the ultimate goal was to always allow such dissemination only as long as it did not disturb the power dynamics of a system that supported Brahmin musicians’ hegemony over the performing arts of South India. By staging such a veiled balancing act, the upper-caste musicians and scholars of the Madras Music Academy, surrounding sabhas, and dance academies produced Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as art forms that reflected their own need for security and the repeated reinforcement of cultural superiority. Their challenge to displacement, therefore, was not only countering the various notions of Indian culture propagated by the colonial regime that rendered Indians and their culture inferior; nationalists’ efforts also served to challenge a perceived displacement¹³⁹ from hegemonic power, propelled by the fear that the authority that allowed them to adapt the performing arts to their own narrow standards, could be seized from under them.

¹³⁸ Balasubramanian, G.N. “Give and Take.” *The Gopalapuram Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1950).

¹³⁹ (ed. Peterson, Soneji 2008: 67)

¹⁴⁰

Varadachariar, Tiger. “Presidential Address.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1932).

Chapter 3: Becoming Modern Indian Citizens

“The Singer is a Magician”¹⁴¹”

The writings and speeches of South Indian musicians and music connoisseurs that I explored in the Tamil Nadu Archives demonstrate that from the 1920s onward, when various performing arts academies and organizations were established throughout Madras, the performing artist was to play a critical and unique role in strengthening the discourse of Indian nationalism. The late 19th century and early 20th century had witnessed feverish attempts on the part of upper-caste musicians to ‘reform’ and purify the performing arts; this project eventually proved to be successful, in the sense that very different notions of reputability and respectability were attached to Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, transforming these art forms, particularly the latter, into admirable professions pursued by ‘cultured’ people. Nationalists blamed entire communities of hereditary performing artists for having ‘tainted’ the art forms they had performed for generations, while they appropriated those very art forms from them and used them to construct an upper-caste, urban, ‘modern’ identity. Only those people who could claim this upper-caste, urban, modern identity were the ones who were also put forth by the Journal’s contributors as being worthy enough to ‘defend the nation’, and thereby topple Western perceptions of India as uncultured, the source of nationalists’ psychological displacement.

Against a backdrop of nationalism, artists and scholars used Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam to not only produce a specific kind of respectable musical subject, but also a specific kind of Indian citizen. First, a man or woman who actively participated in and fostered the performing arts was perceived to embody the inner “spiritual essence” of India, which supposedly distinguished the country from all other nations, especially those of the West. Additionally, one’s practice in music or dance equipped one with several other characteristics

¹⁴¹ Rajamannar, P.V. “Standards in Music.” *Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha Souvenir*: (1953)

nationalists perceived as valuable in ‘the modern Indian’; supplemented by a specific caste and class background, these characteristics helped construct a responsible and respectable citizen. Second, a well-trained musician or a well-trained dancer could also be instrumental in helping others imbibe this ‘spiritual essence of India’. The performing artist had the capacity to transfer, if at least temporarily, this spiritual essence and an inclination towards higher values and purposes, to the members of the audience that sat before her. In some sense, Academy members imagined the musician to be a reformative agent, who, through her music, would be able to reform and revive Indian society from the spiritual, moral, and physical degradation facilitated by colonization. Finally, one can easily identify the construction of a musician-as-citizen as a nationalist project, in the various voices that advocated for Karnatic music to be taught in primary and secondary schools throughout South India. To build a nation, it was important that its future was secure in the hands of its youth, who, through a properly-cultivated grounding in the performing arts, would be “ambassadors of culture” as well as respectable and refined citizens of the nation. Alongside serving as leaders of India’s bright future, these refined citizens were ultimately and uniquely equipped to battle colonization’s displacing rhetoric. By embodying India’s spiritual essence, and transmitting this essence to others, these individuals carried the very best elements of Indian culture – elements that, importantly, the West did not possess – within them. In institutionalizing musical training in schools, nationalists could demonstrate that Indians were educated, capable and eager to serve their country as spiritually-minded agents of change. This was their most powerful challenge to the resultant psychological displacement of colonization; their efforts were a demonstration of culture combined with modernity, a bold statement, in the face of derisive colonial rhetoric, that not only vied for equality, but insisted on India’s superiority.

As my archival research illustrated, nationalists portrayed the performing artist as uniquely being able to carry this capacity, as she simultaneously preserved and transmitted the ‘essence of India’ like few other professionals or lay people were able to. In “Man and Music,” Sir S. Radhakrishnan, the Vice-Chancellor of Anna University, elaborated on the nuances that set musicians apart from other professionals in the public sphere: “doctors, lawyers, aristocrats, and landed proprietors have been given entrance into the close preserve of social aristocracy. But musicians of repute¹⁴² who are embodiments of the sublime recklessness of the spirit in its revolt against the drudgery of the work-a-day world, and the manifestations of a creative genius that makes the world of sticks and stones into a sublime house of real life, are not given a proper place in that social aristocracy¹⁴³.” Here, Radhakrishnan described the musician’s role as straddling both the material and spiritual spheres of society. While performing artists obviously made a living from their arts, they were, more importantly, invested in the higher business of discovering and strengthening their spiritual roots; this itself necessitated a higher respect for such members of society. The author, in advocating that performing artists must be held in higher esteem by society, claimed that “the grace of music is the renewal and revival of that submerged reality which stirs in us even when we appear spiritually dead...Great exponents of the Divine Art of music are thus the real aristocrats of nature, before whom the artificial aristocrats of convention pale into insignificance.” Because musicians dealt so closely and

¹⁴² Interestingly, in the articles and speeches published during the first several decades of the twentieth century, some authors voice their concerns over the *disrepute* the performing arts and artists seem to carry. An anonymous speaker declares at Madras Music Academy’s conference in 1930, “A society of professional musicians must play its part in bringing about a more exalted view of music not only in the minds of the public, but also in the minds of the musicians themselves...we all have a feeling that when a young man decides to be a doctor or a parson, there is a certain nobility of motive behind his decision. At present I suspect that we musicians are denied that virtue in the eyes of the public. We are suspected of a love of limelight and applause and of a certain lack of appreciation of each other...” The fact that the prevalence of such concerns fades in the Journals as the ‘50s and 60s approach, signals that the project of “resuscitating the Music of India to its primitive glory and elevating the social rank of musicians” was a success. (“Pandit Vishnu Digambar: A Life Sketch”, by R.S.M, 1931 MMA Journal).

¹⁴³ Radhakrishnan, S.. "Man and Music." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 2: (1931)

intimately with the Divine Art of music, the “root and fruit of which was *bhakthi* (devotion),”¹⁴⁴ nationalists perceived them as responsible for and successful in preserving this “spiritual and emotional essence in Indian music¹⁴⁵.” People’s engagement with Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, therefore, helped to construct individuals who efficiently safe-guarded India’s innermost, sacred quality – that of spiritual expertise and knowledge.

According to nationalist writers, musicians’ unique capacity also lay in their ability to disseminate these sacred qualities and perceivably noble characteristics to the members of society who consumed the music they produced. The musician-as-citizen could partake in the project of molding “national character” by safeguarding the nation’s sacred quality, as well as in encouraging certain qualities in listeners and viewers. Margaret Cousins, an Irish suffragette who settled in India in the early 20th century, proclaimed in “Music of Orient and Occident” that “In the arts a nation expresses its soul. Because by the training of its citizens in the practice of the arts, the soul of the people is discipline and learns how adequately and harmoniously to balance all other activities of the national being in their manifestations¹⁴⁶.” Aside from encouraging a spiritual mindset, then, a musician’s work fostered discipline both in the artist, and in the members of the audience. For the artist, on the one hand, the demanding task of musical practice enabled her to aspire to other challenging endeavors as well, and made her capable of balancing all such endeavors seamlessly in her life. An ideal listener, on the other hand, “picked up the ABCs of music,” but also slowly cultivated the concentration and patience required for a 3-hour concert, without “talking with friends seated nearby about day’s problems, political changes, or

¹⁴⁴M.S, Subbulakshmi. “Conference Inauguration.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1988).

¹⁴⁵ Shankar, Ravi. “Address.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy – Conference Souvenir*: (1988).

¹⁴⁶ Cousins, Margaret E.. *The Music of Orient and Occident; essays towards mutual understandings*,. Madras: B.G. Paul & Co., 1935, 40.

domestic worries¹⁴⁷.” The persistent and open-minded listener of Karnatic music, therefore, had to emulate unwavering focus and an appreciation for the fine arts.

Writers argued that the musician’s “magic” was reformative. As one speaker offered in the MMA Journal of 1931, “I have always felt that it is not much use carrying on an intensive propaganda, urging people to give up drugs and drink. Should we not consider it necessary to give those fallen folk some other substitute? And what else can we give them that is more enjoyable than soul-stirring music?¹⁴⁸” The revivalist project insisted that the musician had the potential to transform the various ills that plagued society. The communicative ability of the performing arts was also unique; as Annie Besant declared in “Definition of Art,” “art is the international language in which mind can speak to mind, heart to heart, where lips are dumb¹⁴⁹.” The musician’s message could transcend boundaries that other forms of communication failed to transcend. The importance of certain values could supposedly be communicated across barriers and different backgrounds. In “The Importance of Music,” written by Mr. P.R Natesha Aiyar, the author attempted to historicize the role of the musician, aiming to attach a historical significance to the necessity of musicians in society; “It is in the Puranas that we find the first reference to professional musicians, in the coronations of kings, summoned and asked to sing praises for the king. Musicians were rewarded with slices of territories, and their descendants became the state musicians of the kings. Part of their duty was to awaken the kings from their sleep¹⁵⁰.” The writer portrayed musicians as always having been important to the efficient functioning of society; the colonial period, with its dethroning of native rulers, obscured the role of the performing artist, and resultantly, her importance as well. The nationalism of the twentieth

¹⁴⁷ “Musical Wealth in South Indian Temples” by P. Sambamurthy, pg. 10 notes.

¹⁴⁸ Radhakrishnan, S.. "Man and Music." *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*, 2: (1931)

¹⁴⁹ Besant, Annie. “Definition of Art.” *Kalakshetra News*: (1961).

¹⁵⁰ Aiyar, Natesha. “The Importance of Music.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1930).

century supposedly rescued the ‘respectable musician’ from the woes of degradation and re-assigned her with duties important to the nation.

Music, according to South India’s nationalists, had civic value. Aside from serving as vessels for spirituality, nationalists believed that individuals engaging in the performing arts could obtain other esteemed characteristics, exhibiting patience and dignity, for example, that were important for any member of the new, modern, India to possess. This is clear from the extent to which musicians, scholars, and activists stressed the need for music to be taught in the primary schools of India. It was with the help of these institutions, which were accessible to larger numbers of students from various different backgrounds, that proper Indian citizens could be molded. Scholars and music connoisseurs started speaking of a ‘musical literacy,’ expecting a “day not too far when music will be taught compulsorily in all our boys’ and girls’ schools, at least up to the third form...¹⁵¹” Fearing a deterioration in ‘public taste,’ where the “average concert goer has not the inclination to understand and appreciate high class music and high class dance¹⁵²” academy speakers advocated that “educational authorities should insist on the teaching of music and dance in all girls’ schools. Authorities of public halls should allow educational institutions to give concerts, operas, and dance dramas by their pupils free of rent or at a nominal rent...¹⁵³” The objective was to expand learning and performing opportunities to a larger number of students, and therefore instill in more people the cultural values that were perceived to be so

¹⁵¹ Sambamurthy, P. “The Teaching of Indian Music in Schools.” *The Journal of the Madras Music Academy*: (1930).

¹⁵² Sambamurthy, P. “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation.” *Perambur Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1961).

¹⁵³ Sambamurthy, P. “The Arts of Music and Dance: Suggestions for their Preservation.” *Perambur Sangeetha Sabha Souvenir*: (1961).

crucial to an Indian identity¹⁵⁴. In the 1960 volume of *Kalakshetra News*, the Governor of Mysore makes a striking comment, saying,

...it is gratifying to see that young men and young women are brought up in the schools of Kalakshetra in an atmosphere of freedom and spontaneity in such a way that they are presented to the nation as sturdy and strong, graceful and tender citizens with the mark of culture stamped on them, the true culture connoted by the old Sanskrit word *Samskara*. They become thus *Susamskritas*, the truly refined citizens of our realm which is no mean republic¹⁵⁵.

These young musicians, equipped with an unshakable understanding of their culture, as well as an educational and entertaining means by which to demonstrate this understanding, could serve as perfect models for the Citizen that the new, modern India has to offer.

The Governor's emphasis on 'freedom' as ideal for a learning environment, and his concluding remarks describing India as a republic, highlight India's newly-acquired democracy, while his focus on *Samskara* reveals nationalists' fascination with India's 'ancient culture.' The country's young musicians, then, could grasp both old and new; they could protect India's spirituality and her cultural heritage, while projecting the nation as democratic and modern – ready to take its place on the international stage. They could prove that India, along with her children, had overcome the colonial regime's crippling discourse, and could stand tall with her head, and culture, held high.

¹⁵⁴ A separate set of musicians and scholars argued that expanding learning opportunities would dilute the art form, transforming it into cheap entertainment for the masses, rather than preserving it as a sacred art form worthy of a specific class and caste of performers equipped with a certain cultural capital.

¹⁵⁵ Governor of Mysore, "India's Cultural Heritage." *Kalakshetra News*, (1960).

Chapter 4: Producing the Performing Arts in the diaspora

Members of the South Indian diasporic community in Massachusetts strive to transmit and imbibe knowledge of the performing arts so that those arts are still recognizable and relatable to relatives and musicians in India. The objective of their serious investments in the performing arts is not to produce fusion music and dance per se, or cater specifically to Western audiences of the larger American host society. It is still essential to ultimately be producing Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, as they would be understood and taught in the homeland, largely because of the cultural and ‘traditional’ significance these art forms continue to hold. However, different lifestyles, technological resources, and shifting learning trajectories particular to this diasporic context have transformed both the experience of training and the arts themselves. In other words, I argue that the network of Karnatic and Bharatanatyam teachers, their students, and parents of students in this South Indian diasporic community alter the ways they teach, learn, or encourage the classical performing arts to accommodate the liminal context of their diasporic lifestyles and identities. While I draw upon literature published by scholars specializing in diasporic studies and ethnomusicology, such as Sunil Bhatia and Ravindra Jain, I primarily focus on my conversations with my informants to demonstrate how the structure of formal schooling in the U.S, improving recording technologies, and various opportunities for collaboration allows community members to produce specifically and recognizably diasporic forms of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam.

In my conversations with my informants, especially the music, instrumental, and dance teachers, I focused on two sets of related questions: first, how has the art form, and the ways that students currently train changed from when their teachers learned music or dance growing up? Are there ways in which instructors teach differently now from how they were taught in their childhoods? Essentially, what are the differences between the classical performing arts in India

“back then,” in India now, and in the United States now? Second, what aspects of Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam do teachers think should be preserved, or sustained, by musicians and participants, and what aspects should be adapted from other regional genres, styles, or art forms? In arguing that members of this diasporic community produce the arts in a different way, tailored to reflect and meet the needs of living in a diaspora, I do not mean to problematically imply that one must choose between “invention and authority, between fiction and reality, between discourse and history, forcing one to separate what is traditional from what is imported.”¹⁵⁶ Rather, I am suggesting that these forms of ‘South Indian’ performing arts are produced through an encounter between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’¹⁵⁷, not simply as Indian art forms adapted to a purely Western context. The unique context of the diaspora, a result of different cultural encounters, changes the way community members produce, practice, and remember the classical performing arts of South India.

As I was introducing my project to Ranjani Saigal, a charismatic Bharatanatyam teacher from Burlington, MA, my defining our performing arts community as a ‘South Indian’ one prompted her to wonder, “Why exactly are you defining your project in terms of a South Indian community? Because I think music and dance have really gone beyond the south Indian community – dance especially is no longer just a Tamil art form here. I have students who don’t come from a Tamil background who insist that Bharatanatyam helps them connect to their culture”¹⁵⁸.” At another point, when I was interviewing Geetha Murali, a sought-after vocal Karnatic teacher hailing from a Tamil family in Mumbai, I mused, “Why do you think so many of the children in our community learn music or dance?” Her answer, “well, those are the only

¹⁵⁶ (Weidman 2006: 9)

¹⁵⁷ “In fact, the institution of classical music in South India – not only discourse about it but the very sound and practice of the music – has been produced in and through the colonial encounter. Thus the sounds, practices, and categories discuss in this book are neither properly Western nor Indian, but specifically colonial in the sense that they position the West and India in relation to each other”

(Weidman 2006: 9)

¹⁵⁸ Saigal, Ranjani. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Burlington, January 7, 2014.

children we really see. I'm sure there are many who haven't learned either of these art forms¹⁵⁹," along with Ranjani Aunty's question, allowed me to contextualize the diasporic scholarship I had been surveying. As Sunil Bhatia suggests in *American Karma*, "what the descriptive framework of a diaspora does not explain is the fact that various members of the diaspora may have different collective representations of the diasporic community and may use different cultural symbols to organize the cultural practices of their homeland.¹⁶⁰" Evidently, it is important to remember the complexities of diasporic experiences existent even within one individual, let alone an entire 'community'. The observations I present here are not made under the assumption that the performing arts hold the same meaning for all of my informants, or even that all the members of this 'South Indian community' are invested in the performing arts. There are many who are not. This is my attempt to string together a few apparent patterns in the ways in which community members who do indeed have connections to the performing arts envision their participation, and their roles as teachers, parents, or students, within the larger community.

In academia, the term 'Diaspora' originally referred to the "exile of Jews from the Holy Land, and their dispersal throughout several part of the globe¹⁶¹." Over the course of the twentieth century however, the world witnessed the voluntary and involuntary migrations of numerous communities who were seeking better employment opportunities, refuge from war, or migrating within the colonial and postcolonial networks of labor demands. Resultantly, 'diaspora' has now come to refer to many other populations of people, whose experiences of migration, including "expatriation, institution-building, cultural continuity, and refusal to relinquish their collective identities have demarcated them from mere immigrants¹⁶²." In "The

¹⁵⁹ Murali, Geetha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood, January 8, 2014.

¹⁶⁰ Bhatia, Sunil. *American karma race, culture, and identity in the Indian diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2007, 78.

¹⁶¹ Sarfan, William. "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective." *Israel Studies*, 36.

¹⁶² Sarfan, William. "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective." *Israel Studies*, 36.

Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective,” William Sarfan offers a list of criteria which most communities defined as ‘diasporas’ generally meet; some of these include, having been dispersed from a “specific original center” to two or more other regions, wishing to survive as a distinct community in the host society, and regarding their ancestral home as their “true, ideal home¹⁶³.” Scholars have debated diasporic definitions, and the characteristics of so-called diasporas, but like Sunil Bhatia, most generally agree that diasporas consciously strive to maintain connections and commitments to their homeland, and attempt to recognize themselves and act as a unified community; “in other words, people who simply live outside their ancestral homeland cannot automatically be considered members of the diaspora¹⁶⁴.”

The ‘modern Indian diaspora’ shares many of the characteristics mentioned above. Although it began to emerge in the early 19th century, fuelled by colonial economic systems in “Mauritius, South Africa, Malaya, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and the Caribbean,” the ‘new’ diaspora can be traced to the 1950s and 60s, when Indians began to immigrate to the United States, England, Canada, and Australia¹⁶⁵. The post-1960s period initially gave way for the Punjabi Sikh diaspora, “comprising of economic migrants of working-class and white collar occupations¹⁶⁶,” which was followed soon after by a wave of highly-skilled professionals, trained as “medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, doctoral and post-doctoral students in mostly science-related disciplines like chemistry, biochemistry, math, physics, biology, and medicine¹⁶⁷.” All of my adult informants fall into the latter description, having immigrated to the United States in the late 80s and early 90s, holding positions in software engineering, accounting, or university professorships in mathematics.

¹⁶³ (Sarfan 2005: 37)

¹⁶⁴ Bhatia, Sunil. *American karma race, culture, and identity in the Indian diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2007, 31.

¹⁶⁵ Jain, Ravindra K.. *Nation, diaspora, trans-nation: Reflections from India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2010, 46.

¹⁶⁶ (Jain 2010: 46)

¹⁶⁷ (Bhatia 2007: 14)

What seems to distinguish the Indian diaspora from other diasporas, however, is a relatively fluid relationship with the homeland, wherein there is more consistent physical movement back and forth between India and the host society. For many of my adult informants, weekends consisted of multiple-hour long phone calls with parents and relatives back in India, while summers were constituted by vacations to India, filled with family reunions and pilgrimages to sacred sites. Resultantly, remembering India is a very different act for these diasporic Indians; “nostalgia in the Indian community now does not build up as a collection of memories that were left behind decades ago. Instead, for contemporary Indian migrants, the concept of home is present in their lives through routine visits to India, Indian films, the Internet...and the existence of little Indias all across the cities of the United States¹⁶⁸.” The apparent fluidity of many Indians’ diasporic experiences has important implications for research that attempts to delineate an Indian experience, which is perhaps seen as more ‘authentic,’ from an Indian-American experience seen as modeled after the former. This is an age where young musicians from the U.S are travelling back to India annually to attend and participate in Chennai’s famed Music Season¹⁶⁹, where professional musicians from India are travelling to cities all over North America to give concerts and judge competitions, and where millions of music and dance recordings are available on the World Wide Web for all to see and benefit from. One must recognize, therefore, that the lines between India and the U.S, and between what is ‘Indian’ and what is ‘American’ are being increasingly blurred¹⁷⁰. This is happening to an extent

¹⁶⁸ (Bhatia 2007: 221)

¹⁶⁹ “Madras Music Season is an event hosted every December–January in the present-day south Indian metropolis of Chennai. Spanning some six weeks, a number of large and small kutchcheris (Karnatic music concerts) are performed by highly competent musicians. The traditional role of the Music Season is to allow aficionados of Karnatic music to appreciate performances by renowned artists, and to allow promising young artists to display their talent and skill. Audiences and artists come from across India and from the international Indian diaspora to be part of the event.”

Wikimedia Foundation. "Madras Music Season." Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madras_Music_Season

¹⁷⁰ Professor Richard Wolf, professor of ethnomusicology at Harvard University, in a conversation I had with him in November 2013, encouraged me to think of the perforated boundaries of communities in the modern age of

that Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam are being produced and consumed in a theoretical third space¹⁷¹ between India and America, an entirely new context constructed by diasporic Indians attempting to bridge their origins and residences, and find a sense of ‘home.’

The Informants

Conducting ethnographic research for this component of my project was an interesting and stimulating experience; the community members I interviewed were adults and young adults that I had grown up with, learned music from, or had at least interacted with multiple times before. I was essentially carrying out what Kamala Visweswaran calls “homework,”¹⁷² where the researcher is studying her own ‘home community.’ This type of research allowed me to think critically and deeply about the practices, values, and ideas that I had internalized since my childhood, and required that I distance myself from, or de-familiarize the ‘home’ to an extent. As Manalansan posits in *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*, homework ethnographies “destabilize notions of ‘home’ and ‘field,’ ‘East’ and ‘West,’ ‘other’ and ‘self’...[They also] document ‘third time-spaces’ that refuse closure and are fluid, constantly shifting practices¹⁷³.”

I conversed first with Mangai, an accountant who teaches Bharatanatyam during her free time, and who is the mother of a budding young Karnatic vocalist, Sriva, whom I also had the chance to speak to. A few days later, I found myself in True North Café, interviewing Ranjani

globalization. It is no longer, or perhaps never was, easy to claim that an artist could perform purely in an “Indian” or an “American” space.

¹⁷¹ In Bhabha’s use of the term, the “unhomed” subject lives somewhere in the purely physical sense, yet figuratively occupies an intermediary space which makes it difficult for her to know where she belongs, socially and culturally. The “unhomed” subject dwells in a border zone, “as though in parenthesis”

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge: 1994.11-15

¹⁷²Visweswaran, Kamala. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994.

http://books.google.com/books?id=XY1c2CkymeAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹⁷³ Manalansan, Martin F. *Cultural compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, 4.

about her career in Bharatanatyam, as a dancer and teacher, and her experiences raising two children as musicians. I spoke with Geetha, my own Karnatic vocal teacher, and her daughter, Rasika, an accomplished young violinist. I also was able to converse with Mali, a mridangam teacher, and Varun, his college-going student. Next, I turned to interviewing parents who were not music teachers in the area; some had had training in Karnatic music as children, and a few had not. The parents were: Subha, Bhuvana, Chandramouli, Ramanan, and Viji. All of my informants come from Tamil-speaking families, and belong to the upper-caste of Indian society, and the economic upper-middle class in the U.S; clearly, they all had access to a certain cultural and economic capital, enabling them to associate with music in a certain way. I conducted my interviews in both Tamil and English, focusing on each individual's journey in music, or his/her child's journey in music; the differences and similarities between music as performed and practiced in India and music as performed and practiced in New England; and their insight on the preservation-adaptation conundrum – essentially, what should stay, and what must change? In the following paper, I will draw from these conversations as well as secondary scholarship and ethnographies on performing arts in diasporas. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate that my informants, as well as many other members of this community, envision music as a way of transforming themselves, as well as their children, into diasporic subjects who exhibit a cross-cultural competence, and who function as agents who bridge the cultural, generational, and physical distances that lay before them.

Musical Trajectories

Comparing diasporic youths' performing arts training today with the way teachers themselves had been taught in their childhoods, revealed some stark differences. Such an analysis highlighted the factors of performing arts training and practice that are particularly

diasporic. Essentially, there are several noticeable patterns; first, the lifestyles children of this diasporic community lead, packed with various extra-curriculars, culminating in a college acceptance that draws them away from the community, and resultantly its “exposure” and resources, has drastically changed the way children learn and practice Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam. Second, students’ increasing reliance on recording technologies has transformed the way they remember the art forms they learn, and creates a greater focus on performance than on technical understanding. Third, living in a diaspora facilitates opportunities of collaboration, and even innovation, that are different from the venues of collaboration that are popular in India. As a result of each of these factors, community members are able to, and sometimes forced to, tailor their art to their diasporic contexts.

My informants, as well as many relatives in India, relate life in the United States with the need to divide one’s time among many different tasks and activities. Geetha Aunty, Mali Uncle, and Mangai Aunty all stressed the extent to which a shortage of time in today’s musical community greatly impacts the extent to which a student is able to properly learn and sustain the performing arts. In other words, the “fast-paced” lifestyles, and instant-gratification-seeking mentalities associated with contemporary Western societies, that characterize even cities “in India nowadays,” are perceived by teachers and several parents as restrictive factors in a child’s training in the performing arts. As Mangai Aunty exclaimed, “people just want to learn for five years, and then have an arangetram¹⁷⁴!”

Geetha Aunty elaborated, recounting,

Back in India, when I was learning paattu, our teachers lived very close by, and we went to class thrice a week. If a child learned music, that was the only thing she did apart from school, and in very rare cases, she learned music and dance. But not like it is here – music, dance, karate, Tai kwon do, robotics, Russian math – none of that! (*laughter*). So three days a week, we

¹⁷⁴ Arangetram: debut recital in the classical arts. It is a Tamil word which translates to “ascending the stage.” Raghavan, Mangai. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon, January 3, 2014.

had class for two hours. We walked about 20 minutes to class on our own, so our parents did not have to worry about dropping us off and picking us up¹⁷⁵.

Geetha Aunty underlines two key differences here, between practice then and practice now; on one hand, living in an environment where there were a multitude of teachers, and resultantly, great “exposure” to music, one did not have to travel far to find a suitable learning environment for Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam. Subha Aunty reiterated this idea of greater musical exposure being at a closer proximity, saying, “Music was a part of my life. It didn’t take any extra effort, it was like putting a kolam in the morning. We were constantly exposed to it. But for children here, it’s not part of their lives, it takes extra effort, because they’re not surrounded by music¹⁷⁶.” On the other hand, children were also not pressured by their parents or by society at large to get involved in numerous extra-curricular activities, “for the sake of college applications¹⁷⁷,” as Ramanan Uncle described. Of course, such a concept was foreign in India at that time, since many of the extra-curriculars that students are engaged with today in the U.S and abroad, were not available or accessible in India back then. Ultimately, students saved time because they were able to walk from home to class so quickly, but they also attended many more music lessons, and thereby invested many more hours in training and practice, than students learning Karnatic music currently do in the United States.

Mali Uncle recalled similar experiences in his childhood, learning how to play the mridangam: “The number of class hours I had was high, and the hours of practice I put in was high. The rate of progress was faster. Here, typically we have thirty-minute classes, or one hour group classes. Children leaving for summer vacations, teachers cancelling for other reasons, and cancellations due to bad weather, result in a situation where we have at most 30 to 45 classes in a

¹⁷⁵ Murali, Geetha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood, January 8, 2014.

¹⁷⁶ Kumar, Subha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Walpole, January 10, 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Ramanathan, Ramanan. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon, January 11, 2014.

year. So you get about 20 to 30 hours of training in a year – that’s so little!¹⁷⁸” From Mali Uncle’s observations, a paradox seems clear; on one hand there are parents and children striving to learn Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam within a specific period of time, whether it is “seven years¹⁷⁹” or “ten years,” and perform an arangetram at the culmination of that period. On the other hand, children, enrolled in other classes and activities as well, have less time to dedicate to the performing arts, and therefore do not master songs or dance pieces to the same extent members of the previous generation were required to in India.

On reflecting on her own teaching experiences, Geetha Aunty highlighted the pressure that sustains this paradox, of balancing less time with a desire for ‘progress’; “Since we only meet once a week, parents and children want to learn new things every week in class. In India, there was nothing like that – the teacher would teach us a few sangathis¹⁸⁰, and whatever we retained from class, we would practice at home...If here, children are learning a new song every three weeks, there, despite having three classes a week, it would take months to finish a song¹⁸¹.” Evidently, there is a shifting conception of what ‘progress’ entails – where now, there is an emphasis on learning a greater number of songs in a shorter amount of time, the focus before rested on being able to perfect what one learns, regardless of time. In the context of the diaspora, physically distanced from their own learning environments in India, teachers must have the capacity to tailor their teaching methods to the needs of their students. In other words, the process of learning and practicing either Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam is consciously and perhaps forcefully adapted by the community’s musicians to the lifestyles of children of this diaspora. It is especially obvious, as Geetha Aunty noted, that the “educational pattern” in the

¹⁷⁸ Santhanakrishnan, Mahalingam. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood, January 14, 2014.

¹⁷⁹ Ramanathan, Ramanan. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon, January 11, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Sangathi: different variations of a particular line in a song or piece.

¹⁸¹ Murali, Geetha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 8, 2014.

U.S also plays a critical role in hampering a child’s progress in learning music or dance; “there’s a huge road block in one’s music career after high school. If you have to transcend that barrier, college, it’s very difficult. Going to college here stops so many extracurricular activities¹⁸².”

Shifting teaching methodologies are also closely related to the changing image of the ‘Guru,’ or teacher, as well as the consequent teacher-student dynamics. All the teachers I spoke to, as well as all of the parents who had learned music in their youth, recalled their own mentors being more “strict,” that is, having higher expectations for ‘progress’ in order for a student to move onto the next song or technique. In Geetha Aunty’s words, “...Our teacher wouldn’t feel guilty at all for taking so long to teach us a song. We also didn’t feel bad that we weren’t learning anything new – ‘we didn’t get this right, that’s why we haven’t learned anything new.’” This is contrasted with learning in the diasporic community, where a teacher almost feels obligated to “teach students something new every week” because of the limited number of classes, and because parents and children expect to see quantifiable progress in return for the “large amounts of energy and effort they are putting in to come to class and learn¹⁸³.”

Ramanan Uncle’ experiences learning Karnatic vocal music from Embar Varadachariar reflected a similar envisioning of “strictness.” He recalled how his teacher would teach him a varnam¹⁸⁴ and review it until his student “got it perfectly, without regard for whether the student was bored or not¹⁸⁵.” Interestingly, Ramanan Uncle also suggested that teachers of that period, “in vicinities outside of Chennai,” faced similar pressures to retain students; they “tried to be strict and follow in the traditional way, but they still had to dilute to an extent, otherwise they would lose their rapport with students.” Clearly, different teachers and musical environments

¹⁸² Murali, Geetha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 8, 2014.

¹⁸³ (Murali, interview).

¹⁸⁴ Varnam: a type of song in the Karnatic repertoire. It is usually one of the opening pieces in Karnatic concert, and is also taught to students before they can begin learning more complex songs.

¹⁸⁵ (Ramanathan, interview).

produced teachers facing their own economic needs, and different pressures from their students. Noticeably, Mali Uncle's experiences teaching mridangam now were reminiscent of Ramanan Uncle's description referring to teachers 'back then,' demonstrating that these patterns must, after all, be discursively contextualized. Mali Uncle explained,

In India, we didn't have a choice, we didn't have anything else to go to [extra-curriculars]. If the teacher scolded, we were back there the next day. Here, because of fewer hours, and less practice time... If I'm as strict as my teacher used to be, I would lose the children – they'll become disenfranchised with the whole thing, saying 'I have so many other things to do, why deal with this?' As much as I would love to say, 'only if this is perfect, I'll teach you the next thing,' I just don't have that time¹⁸⁶.

With this statement, Mali Uncle succinctly summarized the different factors that are changing teaching methodologies and learning processes in the diaspora; primarily because of time restrictions in their schedules, students have "more power" in their relationship with their teachers, expecting a certain amount of measurable progress within the time frame available to them. This is not to imply that teachers exist somehow outside of these busy schedules; they are often engaged in their own balancing act, finding time to pursue other professional interests and careers while sustaining their own practice and teaching of music or dance. The context of diaspora, then, not only influences the ways community members learn and practice music, but also results in shifting relationships with their teachers, and a different imagining of what the ideal 'Guru' entails. Bhuvana and Chandramouli recalled a student-teacher relationship that diverged from the usual description of "strictness" and respect-bordering-on-fear that other adults, who contrarily had studied the performing arts, had provided. They explained,

In our mothers' generation, the teacher would come and teach you in your house. Usually, teachers were...respected, but they get more respect here, I think. In India, the teacher is just another person who does the job, who makes a living. People don't care about his time, and he's not kept on a high pedestal. Here, teachers get more respect because people are getting something they didn't get in India. Also, teachers are more dedicated here, and

¹⁸⁶ (Santhanakrishnan, interview).

they start on time¹⁸⁷.

It is interesting how the concept of time is imagined so differently in the minds of my informants; here, students ‘back then’ are described as not being mindful of their teachers’ time, while my musically-trained informants had recalled differently.

Aside from highlighting differences in the number of hours students used to and currently do invest in musical practice, the adults I spoke to immediately emphasized that “electronic media” and “technology” has vastly changed the ways the performing arts are learned and remembered. While some informants regarded recording technologies as primarily a positive change, or a factor enabling students to learn more, most were skeptical, saying that it had “the potential to be a positive factor, but was in reality detrimental sometimes to one’s learning process.” In the very least, recording technologies have helped facilitate a different form of learning – it now means something very different to have “learned a song” or a Bharatanatyam piece, than it did a generation ago. Essentially, I noticed two outcomes: first, the act of remembering a song is not as spatially-specific, but relies rather on the more ambiguous space of technology or the cyber world. Second, because recording devices and the internet make such a vast array of songs easily accessible, it seems that there is now more of a focus directed towards perfection in performance than towards perfection in technical understanding. I do not mean that teachers and students consciously aim for one over the other; indeed, an accomplished musician or dancer is still imagined as excelling in both skillsets. However, the practice methods that emphasized the need to attain complete technical understanding *before* performing are not necessarily used the same way anymore.

Geetha Aunty insisted that “electronic interventions” have changed students’ learning methods, elaborating, “children nowadays only have 50% attention in class, because they know

¹⁸⁷ Subbaraman, Chandramouli and Bhuvana Chandramouli. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon. October 10, 2013.

they have the recording to rely on when they get home¹⁸⁸.” She recounted how in her childhood, there was no electronic recording technology, so that when her teachers taught, students learned by “taking down notation¹⁸⁹”; she added, “teachers would either dictate, or they would give us their copy of the song, and we would have to write it down at home and bring it back for them.” Resultantly, students of Karnatic music were much more adept at writing down notation on their own, and were actually learning how to notate and read notation. Now, on the other hand, students think “it is their right to receive an electronic version of the song. In the beginning, they would photocopy my notation and bring it back; now, they receive a scanned copy of the song, which they have to print out and bring to class.” Because of their heavy dependence on recording technology, students cannot seem to imagine alternate ways of learning, and those methods of rote learning, as we saw earlier, are not necessarily possible in today’s “fast-paced society.”

I realized that the very memories of learning a song had transformed from one generation to another, when Geetha Aunty said,

If I take my old notebook, I remember my teacher sitting in her particular chair, and my spot in the corner, and I can retain how she used to sing. So how I sang depended on what I heard from her and what I retained. Nowadays, children can only connect the song to what I’ve recorded for them, not to what I was actually singing at that moment. For us, songs were retained in our brains like radiation – I can remember songs I learned thirty years ago. We learn so quickly here, but we don’t retain what we learn¹⁹⁰.

Importantly, Geetha Aunty made a distinction between a song as it exists in a recording, and a song as it is “actually sung.” Also, we see here that recording technologies suit students’ busy schedules; the process of learning becomes much quicker, though clearly, the retention rate is visibly affected. When Geetha Aunty spoke of being able to remember her teacher and the learning of a song in a particular environmental context, it became clear that the memories of

¹⁸⁸ Murali, Geetha. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 8, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Refers to the process of transcribing lyrical components of a song into notes.

¹⁹⁰ Murali, interview.

students today are not spatially associated in the same way. Recording technologies almost serve as an alternate memory, supposedly releasing children from the responsibility of singing purely from one's own memory; in other words, students contextualize the learning of a song within their recordings, or the internet, but not immediately to the setting in which it was taught, or the teacher's voice "as she was *actually* singing."

Mali Uncle explored the impact of modern technology on learning processes within a framework of media and other "distractions," focusing on advantages and disadvantages from a "listening and learning standpoint." Like Geetha Aunty, Mali Uncle recalled a childhood where "when we learned, you had to listen, write it down, and use that to start practicing and retain whatever we practiced before the next class. Our attention in class was much higher¹⁹¹." In comparison, Mali Uncle mused, "if you ask children now, 'what did you learn in class today?' they say 'I'll look at my recording and tell you.' Recordings are great as a reference, to correct mistakes in what you're singing. But I really feel that recording is taking away from the classics of music." In this way, Mali Uncle associates the traditional methods of rote learning, as essential to the art form itself. It is also important, as he noted, to differentiate between using recordings as simply a reference, and relying on them completely for performance. In describing the many hours and days that musicians of the previous generation used to invest in their practice, Mali Uncle exclaimed, "they practiced to such an extent that they could never get it wrong. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer¹⁹² for example, would practice one song from one month to the next. Today, we learn one day, practice the next day, and perform the third day. It's a great disadvantage." Clearly, the emphasis is placed on the ability to perform nowadays, where

¹⁹¹ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

¹⁹² A renowned stalwart of Karnatic music, and teacher to many of the leading musicians of the 20th and early 21st century.

previously, it was necessary that performance be sustained and supported by intensive practice resulting in a solid grounding in the “technicalities.”

In terms of listening, Mali Uncle expressed how media, the internet and our various communicative devices have shifted the experience of listening often into an experience of hearing. He emphasized the difference between listening to a live concert, where back then, “you didn’t have a phone or a laptop in front of you to be texting and tweeting.” Contrastingly, now, even at a live concert, people are inundated with so many distractions on their devices; when listening to a recorded concert, the music almost serves simply as background music, since there are so many other activities occupying the listener’s attention at the same time. Mali Uncle concluded by suggesting, “it’s a great advantage to have a treasure trove of recorded music, since you have unlimited access to music, and you can learn so much from it. But we just hear things, we don’t listen. There’s a huge difference between the two – you will only understand music if you listen¹⁹³.” Basically, when used the right way, recording technologies can greatly enhance one’s learning experience and provide a different kind of “exposure,” that substitutes the role live concerts played back in the day. However, because recording technologies make access to music seem more ‘permanent,’ one is less likely to truly immerse oneself in the listening experience and absorb the music or dance one participates in, knowing that ultimately the recordings can always be returned to.

Ramanan Uncle offered very similar experiences of learning music by “paying full attention in class,” and noting how in today’s generation, students “have to listen so many times to learn one song, whereas in our case, it was a do-or-die situation¹⁹⁴.” Importantly, he also touched upon the effects of performing technologies, and the extent to which they have altered the skillsets musicians are required to have: “In those days, the sound system wouldn’t be good,

¹⁹³ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

¹⁹⁴ Ramanathan, interview.

so you had to sing really loudly to reach the back of the audience. Now, you can even murmur and still reach the audience [because you have an effective microphone and speakers]. Technology has overtaken the capabilities that one should be able to present on one's own..." While full-throated singing and vocal projection were qualities that were necessary for a performing artist then, those skills are no longer as desperately required, since musicians now have the support of sound systems that perform those same tasks the human voice was required to before.

Subha Aunty was one of my only informants who ascribed a completely positive role to technology's impact on learning Karnatic music. In her view, recording devices and the internet were simply substituting the vast "exposure" that a vibrant climate of performing artists had provided back then for students in India. She insisted, "If you take Semmangudi, or M.S Subbulakshmi, or Tiger Varadachariar, they were all people who were constantly listening to music, and constantly singing. All we have done is replace that with gadgets. In your iPhone, you can always listen to music, and that's good, because when you're learning a song, you should listen to many different versions of that song, so you know the variations. And all of that is possible only when you have YouTube videos and all this technology."

Finally, in contrast, Mangai Aunty saw a great loss that accompanied the advent of recording technology; she insisted vehemently that such dependence had negatively impacted *manodharma*, or the element of improvisation that is so crucial to Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. Mangai Aunty remembered how her own teacher, after ensuring that his students were well-versed in the foundational movements in Bharatanatyam, has allowed them space to improvise on stage, all the while making sure they were equipped with the skills to do so. She said, "our teachers would tell us the story and then free-flow-a vittuduva [leave us to do what we wished]. Resultantly, we learned how to coordinate with the accompanying artists, and

dance on stage. These things are more difficult for children today¹⁹⁵.” Technology plays a role here, because teachers are borrowing their pieces from “someone else, or from a CD...Many teachers here do not know how to compose their own pieces, or they don’t want to plunge into it [it takes so much dedication!] since the world is so fast, they just want to get it over with.” The point here is that students, and some teachers even, no longer have a solid understanding of exactly *what* they are performing, grammatically speaking. While a lack of time restricts the extent to which musicians are able to “plunge into” understanding the art form, technology enables them to rather easily learn and produce music within a short span of time. The consequence of this is that a student’s ability to improvise, or explore a creative space, is drastically hampered. Memorizing aspects of Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam (that are traditionally improvised) from recorded concerts and classes prevents students from being able to internalize, understand, and produce anew their own *manodharma*. In conclusion, it is not necessarily that recording technologies or “fast-paced” lifestyles are unique to this diasporic community – these are in fact elements most people associate largely with modernity. However, the existence of these factors, and the extent to which they characterize this Tamil diasporic community, means that they manifest themselves in the performing arts a certain way, and help produce what can be labelled a more ‘mechanized’ form of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam.

The diasporic context has facilitated different kinds of collaboration, and provided other venues for innovation than the venues for collaboration that exist in India. In India, “fusion” most popularly implies a merging of classical elements with film music. While other collaborative efforts are possible and evident in India, an exposure to a larger variety of genres and cultures in the U.S allows for “fusion,” both at professional and amateur levels, between

¹⁹⁵ Raghavan, interview.

many dissimilar art forms. The next section of this chapter, where I focus on conceptions of ‘preservation’ and ‘adaptation,’ will further elaborate on some of these diverse collaborative efforts, and highlight the very fluid nature of South Indian classical performing arts in the United States today.

As a Bharatanatyam teacher as well as a professor of Science at MIT, Ranjani Aunty’s perspectives on unique collaborative efforts were especially insightful and interesting. In describing herself as an artist, she said enthusiastically, “I like to create new things...anytime there’s an interesting, new idea, I like to jump in on that.” This aspect of her personality served as an advantage in being able to encourage and create new forms and productions of dance as well; she elaborated on an exciting production she had arranged years ago, saying,

I read the Natya Shastra and I found out the reason they [the gods] created music and dance was that there was no good way to teach. People were turning away from the Vedas, and they went to Brahma, who said ‘I’ll give you a fifth tool, dance and music, make sure it’s not used for entertainment alone, but mainly for the transmission of knowledge...so along the lines of spreading knowledge, my daughter Amritha asked me once, ‘can we tell the story of DNA? So we did a multiple-dance ballet, and we taught kids about DNA and dance – even I learned things about chemistry that I will never forget now! A kid asked, ‘do nucleotides smile? And we decided, they’re at the stable energy state, so they must be happy – yes, they smile! So I definitely think dance can do a lot of teaching¹⁹⁶.

Grounding the kinesthetics of the art form in the authoritative Natya Sastra, and using her own training as a template, Ranjani Aunty was able to adapt these movements and their abilities to tell certain stories to very different narrative contexts. While conventionally, especially in light of twentieth century Indian nationalism, Bharatanatyam has been projected as a platform to demonstrate and share spiritual-religious stories and sequences, in this case, Ranjani Aunty extends the art form’s function to transmitting any knowledge in general. Aunty offered another

¹⁹⁶ Saigal, Ranjani. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Burlington, January 7, 2014.

example, describing the inter-collegiate Bharatanatyam competitions that are now being organized in the U.S, saying that it was at these venues that she witnessed the most innovation she had ever seen in her life, including a winning Bharatanatyam piece on the Pirates of the Caribbean¹⁹⁷! In all these instances, Bharatanatyam was being produced anew, as an art form that had the capacity to bridge the communities in which it originated, with the vastly different communities that sat in the audience. It becomes an art form in which its participants, college students in this particular case, are able to relate the experience of being in western academia or professional environments, with the experience of growing up in a largely Indian community.

Well-accustomed to a rhetoric of ‘preservation’ whenever the subject of Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam came up, I was fascinated and impressed with Ranjani Aunty’s commitment to producing Bharatanatyam in a refreshing, engaging way. How, I wondered, did she perceive a balance between innovation and collaboration with other genres, and retaining elements of the art form that would enable it to still be recognized as some form of Bharatanatyam? To this, she responded, “when we say ‘we should preserve,’ what needs to be preserved at a fundamental level are the movements of Bharatanatyam – whether you’re enacting DNA replication or Pirates of the Caribbean. In other words, abaswaram [grammatically incorrect music] is not innovation. The structure needs to be preserved¹⁹⁸.” Essentially, an artist should not facilitate collaboration at the expense of misrepresenting the art form’s basic structure (as systematized and finalized by the twentieth century nationalists of South India). What produces innovation in some ways, Ranjani Aunty elaborated, is the pure beauty of one’s art – “It’s like running; some people do it in three minutes, other people in one and a half, and you say ‘wow, look at that!’ It’s the same running, but it’s innovation. It’s the innovation of people who are doing well.” According to Ranjani Aunty, musicians and artists must embrace innovation in order to create and present art

¹⁹⁷ Saigal, interview.

¹⁹⁸ Saigal, interview.

forms that are still relevant to the people who attend these performances. But they can only innovate after they have “understood their fundamentals very clearly, and have learned the framework for their dance and music well¹⁹⁹.”

Speaking from the perspective of a Karnatic musician, Geetha Aunty emphasized the need to “tailor your music to your own needs and to the audience’s, all the while highlighting what you’re good at.” She continued later, “how can we offer the best possible music to the audience while retaining grammar, bhakthi, and entertainment? Adjusting the language diversity, type of song, composer, and incorporate different types so I can reach people’s hearts is what is important²⁰⁰.” Just as Ranjani Aunty highlighted the dancer’s responsibility to educate, Geetha Aunty focused on the musician’s responsibility to communicate ‘heart to heart.’ While protecting the grammatical integrity of one’s music is integral to a successful performance, equally valuable is one’s ability to cater that very same music to the audience’s expectations.

Mali Uncle and Ramanan Uncle echoed similar efforts to balance, on one hand, the structure of the art forms as they had learned them, with, on the other hand, the need to cater to the interests of audience members. In Ramanan Uncle’s words, “The length of a concert back in the day used to be 4 or 5 hours, because the public had the patience to listen. Now, it doesn’t, so concert time has been trimmed down to 2 or 3 hours. So the public drives concert evolution, and influences what artists do or don’t do²⁰¹.” Mali Uncle offered further insight on the ‘preservation’ component of producing music. Reiterating Ranjani Aunty’s thoughts, he explained, “Fundamentally, one thing should not be changed. You shouldn’t play [mridangam] without knowing what you’re playing. Whatever stroke you play, you should know what you’re

¹⁹⁹ Saigal, interview.

²⁰⁰ Murali, interview.

²⁰¹ Ramanathan, interview.

doing. Within the given framework of the existent 7 or 8 fingerings, you can introduce new ideas²⁰².”

As a college student heavily involved with her university’s South Asian Acapella group, Rasika was able to speak to the opportunities of collaboration that a college environment provides for musicians trained in South India’s classical arts. Her acapella group, like many other South Asian music groups around the U.S, blends Indian classical and film music with American hip hop, producing a unique fusion of music that has become unique to and characteristic of performing arts at the undergraduate level, presented largely by South Indian diasporic musicians. Aside from exposing one another to the actual art forms they specialize in, Indian-Americans and their collaborators can also adapt performance and training techniques from each other. As Rasika elaborated,

“the biggest thing Karnatic musicians should give more attention to is how to take care of their voices. As a genre, Karnatic music is very taxing on the voice, and as a speech therapist, I know scientifically that when you sing certain ragams, they really rub the voice the wrong way. What we can learn from the western industry is the incorporation of voice warm-ups before we sing, like breathing and voice control exercises. On the other hand, I think western musicians can really learn from the Karnatic training method and spend more time focusing on sruthi and talam [pitch and beat], since those are important foundations that every musician must have²⁰³.”

While the supposed balancing act between ‘preserving’ and ‘adapting,’ between learning from and teaching to, is not particularly unique to this diasporic community, the extent to which these musicians and dancers, living in an American host society, have access to different forms of collaboration is definitely quite specific. In engaging with different genres, performing artists and performing contexts, Karnatic musicians and Bharatanatyam dancers think closely about what aspects of their art form they choose to represent to their non-Indian audiences. On the one

²⁰² Santhanakrishnan, interview.

²⁰³ Murali, Rasika. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 10, 2014.

hand, members of this diasporic community perceive some sort of threat to their musical culture in the form of complete assimilation into the ‘West’; this facilitates the need, as threats-to-culture do almost anywhere, to consciously maintain or attempt to maintain the grammatical structure of the art forms they learn and perform. On the other hand, the desire to make music relevant, relatable and interesting not only for Indian audiences but also American ones, enables these Indian-Americans to produce music and dance in new and interesting ways. Because this community is physically situated within the culture it is collaborating with, such efforts at innovation produce different forms of fusion than we would see in India. Ultimately, community members produce Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam as legitimately Indian art forms, grounded in scientific and transmittable grammar, that simultaneously, have the ability to connect performer with audience and culture with culture.

Chapter 5: Constructing Diasporic Individuals through Music and Dance

Just as the nationalists of the twentieth century had used South India's performing arts to create specific kinds of 'modern' Indian subjects capable of challenging displacement facilitated by colonization, this transnational community of the twenty-first century uses the 'same' performing arts to create a specific kind of diasporic subject capable of challenging the displacement facilitated by migration. Through the ways that these community members imagine their relationship with the performing arts, and engage with practice and performance, they represent themselves as diasporic individuals who can effectively bridge the multiple cultures and worlds they inhabit, as well as serve as a marker for having physically and figuratively carried and retained an 'Indian essence' from India to the United States. In some cases, their participation and involvement in South Indian classical performing arts validate their parents' and music teachers' efforts at cultural sustenance, while in other cases, this participation highlighted individuals' own quest for a sense of belonging. For a community constituted by such diasporic subjects, music serves as a platform for seeking and expressing unity; having training in Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam proves to be a marker that one belongs to specific community, in this case with certain caste and class connotations. The following conversations reveal that informants are consistently incorporate and aspire to balance elements of the two cultures they inhabit. They are able to challenge the displacement of voluntary migration, and answer the question "where do I belong?" with the answer, "to more than one place."

The Discourse of Karma

The experience of producing music and dance in a home away from home has encouraged people to understand their relation to the performing arts using notions native to Hindu spiritual philosophy, as well as to modern Western science. This blending of rhetoric is

indicative of community members' capacity to not only straddle both India and the United States, but put experiences and perceptions from these two spaces in dialogue with one another. I noticed quickly that most of my informants relied on a similar framework to remember, understand, and express the trajectory of their lives that had led them or their children to Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. In other words, all the teachers and some of the parents I interviewed used a spiritual framework, or the philosophy of karma, and 'God's grace' to explain first, the series of incidents that had enabled them to become musicians, and second, the efforts they had invested to provide training in music or dance for their children. Interestingly, those informants who received their training in music or dance outside of Tamil Nadu, envisioned as the 'hub of south Indian classical arts,' were more likely to credit a greater spiritual energy for having brought them into the fold of the classical arts. The adults who grew up in Chennai, however, attributed their exposure to Karnatic music to the apparently vibrant musical environment around them. The Chennaite informants adopted a more spiritual rhetoric once they began to describe the various ways in which they sustained their musical practice after having immigrated to the United States. Evidently, receiving training in the classical arts anywhere outside the normative hub of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, specifically Chennai, is perceived as unexpected, and even requiring divine intervention. A musical upbringing in Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, is portrayed by community members as an expected and natural phenomenon for members of these upper-caste, Tamil families. These localized notions of 'foreign' and 'familiar' reveal a continuing sense of affiliation with the homeland; claiming and remembering one's space of origin is the first step to finding ways to belong within a displaced context. The second step, which I will illustrate in the following pages, is to claim affinity to the host society, which, in this case, is the United States. This is ultimately a way of asserting, "We come from there, but we're here now."

Ranjani Aunty began her Bharatanatyam training in Bombay, while at the Indian Institute of Technology. She began our conversation by stating,

I'm not a typical Chennai person. I learned Bharatanatyam in IIT Bombay, by the grace of God. I came from an Iyer family where dance and music were really valued. We were Tamil migrants in Bombay, it was by God's grace that there was a teacher at IIT, a Bengali master named Manu Chaudhry who ran away from Bangladesh during partition. I was very grateful that he was willing to come to IIT, since I couldn't go to Matunga²⁰⁴ to learn because it was so difficult to get there²⁰⁵.

In an environment where “attending a concert was very difficult,” and the only performances she gave and attended were at IIT, exposure to and training in Bharatanatyam would not have been a likely occurrence if Manu Chaudhry had not come to teach at IIT. Even in terms of her teacher, Ranjani Aunty recalled certain characteristics of her guru that defied the normative Brahmin ideas of a teacher's behavior; “my master would smoke and drink [he was absolutely brilliant but...] it didn't quite match the idea, since we don't do things like that! (*laughter*).” Clearly, notions of ‘proper’ behavior for teachers of the classical arts, as well as training itself, were reflected in the behaviors and attitudes of upper-caste communities in Chennai.

Ranjani Aunty's journey, from IIT Bombay, to the United States in pursuit of a Master's degree, was also studded with many “Cosmic/karmic coincidences,” enabling her to sustain her Bharatanatyam training along the way. She described ‘randomly’ meeting other musicians in the Boston area: “I was just walking along the road, and I saw this lady wearing golusu (anklets) and it turned out she was Lalitha Swaminathan – it was a great find, because she's a great singer, and her husband plays the mridangam very well. So we used to do shows together, and for nattuvangam²⁰⁶, I remember we used to use knives, since we didn't have any equipment! But yes, it was all a cosmic/karmic coincidence.” Even during her time in Georgia Tech, Ranjani

²⁰⁴ A district of Mumbai (Bombay) known for its large population of Tamil families.

²⁰⁵ Saigal, interview.

²⁰⁶ Nattuvangam: a “form of South Indian rhythmic recitation used to accompany Bharatanatyam dance.”
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Shields

Aunty described, “The people I’ve met in my life, I tell you! I met this American woman who was a phenomenal Odissi dancer – she was so, so good! We used to collaborate, so again, that was a great find.” By using a rhetoric of coincidence, or ‘finding’ these other artists, rather than simply meeting them, Ranjani Aunty is highlighting the supposed unexpectedness of these encounters, in a land that is so far away from home, and that is the origin of Bharatanatyam and Karnatic music. This rhetoric, of course, also speaks to the immensely spiritual nature of community members like Ranjani Aunty, as well as their passion for the classical arts, which prompted them to seek out musical companions wherever their lives took them.

Geetha Aunty, having been born and raised in Matunga, Mumbai, also recalled her musical journey, and the trajectory that led her to claim music as her profession, within a framework of ‘accidents’ and ‘God’s grace.’ Hailing from a family with few musicians or music connoisseurs before her, Geetha Aunty’s ascendance in Karnatic vocal music was propelled by the right mentors, role models, and opportunities entering her life at the right time, as well as her and her mother’s intense drive, determination, and conscientiousness. But as Aunty described, this was not necessarily effort invested with the objective of becoming a classical musician in mind; rather, Geetha Aunty’s mother “was a strict disciplinarian in whatever she does, she’s never done anything casually in her life...we just put in effort, we didn’t even know whether that effort was enough. If people advised me to practice for a couple of hours every day, I did. We never questioned anything, and I think blindly, we ended up putting in much more effort than was necessary, and resultantly, I did really well²⁰⁷.”

Geetha Aunty’s upbringing in Matunga provided her with greater exposure and access to the various Music sabhas, renowned teachers in the area, and a vibrant music scene with budding young musicians around her, than Ranjani Aunty had had. Whether it was the neighbor upstairs

²⁰⁷ Murali, interview.

whose children, accomplished in music, served as role models, or her friends' parents who took her along to concerts, or mentors and gurus, such as Vamanan Sir, T.R Balamani, and Kamala Krishnamurthy, who nurtured her aptitude for music and encouraged her to perform and become a critical listener of music, these influences all played an essential role in molding Geetha Aunty as a performing artist. When asked what motivated her to continue music despite as absence of musicians in her family, Geetha Aunty replied, "It was the success. By God's grace, I don't know how, but I had a lot of success growing up. We didn't know anything about music. My parents had so many siblings, none of whom were singers, and we didn't have any grand ambitions for music²⁰⁸." So while there were many avenues for musical training in Mumbai, it was still a carefully-engineered success by God, in Geetha Aunty's mind, which supplemented the fact that she did not come from a musical background.

In comparison, Mali Uncle grew up in a district of Chennai called West Mambalam, close to the concentration of sabhas that existed in Mylapore. His training in the art of mridangam-playing was not supported by specific goals and objectives either, and it progressed in an "unplanned" way. However, formal training from a sought-after mridangist (a close family friend), and his grandfather, father and father's brothers' guidance and reputations as exceptional bhajan²⁰⁹ artists, constituted a rich musical environment where music was very much a part of Mali Uncle's daily family life. In his words,

My paternal grandfather would perform a Radha Kalyanam²¹⁰ every year, and for ten days, there would be a concert at home each day, where renowned artists would come and sing, so I had that exposure... I didn't get much of an opportunity to accompany my father at home, since the Bhajans were very high-tempo and high-volume musical events, and I didn't have as much experience yet as other professional musicians did. So I am forever grateful to [a man named] Ramani Mama, who would give me the opportunity to

²⁰⁸ Murali, interview.

²⁰⁹ Bhajan: a type of Hindu devotional song, performed in a setting of communal worship.

²¹⁰ A festive, ritual event in which God, in the form of Krishna, is married off to his beloved, Radha, amid prayer, song, and dance.

accompany him in the temple²¹¹.

While Mali Uncle expressed a deep gratitude for the mentors and well-wishers in his life who had introduced him to the classical arts, and had guided him in his training, he did not seem to attribute the presence of these mentors in his life to coincidence or divine grace in the same way Ranjani Aunty and Geetha Aunty had; having been born into a family with strongly-rooted connections to bhajan-singing, and having grown up in Chennai, surrounded by an atmosphere of musical appreciation, his interest in and pursuit of music was expressed as natural, even if the journey itself was not planned.

As a young adult, Mali Uncle migrated first to Bombay, and then to the U.S. Because of his family background, Mali Uncle sought out bhajans even in Bombay, which he described as the “U.S of that era,” in the foreign-ness of its culture, and its distance from home. On arriving in the U.S, he again sought out local musicians, eager to be introduced to the music scene in order to sustain his own practice and develop as an artist. Through a series of contacts, Mali Uncle finally came in touch with the musicians of the Boston area; “a man I met in D.C gave me the names of a few people who used to live in Boston, and told me to contact them. So the first thing I did was call them, because I was seeking it out, not waiting for it to come to me. These musicians then invited me to their jam sessions, and that led me to KHMC (Karnatic and Hindustani Music Circle). The moment I stepped into that scene, I was basically introduced to all the serious musicians in the area²¹².” Again, the process of sustaining musical practice and performance is deeply interwoven with the process of ‘finding’ the right musicians and artists in the area to collaborate and grow with. These successful efforts at networking and collaboration by the musicians who migrated from India to the United States in the 1990s were what paved the way for the vibrant performing community that exists in New England today.

²¹¹ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

²¹² Santhanakrishnan, interview.

Similar to Mali Uncle, Ramanan Uncle also exhibited a deep interest in music since his childhood. He grew up in Tamil Nadu, in a city called Chidambaram, a four-hour drive from Chennai. Ramanan Uncle explained how “there would be music at my grandparents’ house, though none of my relatives took formal classes or anything. A neighbor took formal music lessons, and I remember I used to listen from my home and catch songs.” In terms of describing his “inherent interest for music,” Ramanan Uncle said,

I would certainly attribute that interest to my surroundings, my parents knew how to recognize ragams, and there would also be music playing in the house. When Karnatic music was broadcasted every afternoon around 2:30, there was no mix-up with film music (since the Vidwans were very particular about that), and my father would always listen to the radio then. So that’s how I became very serious about music²¹³.

At the age of 11, Ramanan Uncle started formally learning Karnatic vocal music from a renowned teacher from the Annamalai Music College, and continued his training for five years. He had the opportunity to attend the word-famous Tyagaraja Aradhana²¹⁴ in Tiruvaiyaru for six years continuously, and resultantly listen to thousands of both live concerts and cassettes of concerts. Migration to Delhi for higher studies, however, placed Ramanan Uncle in a very different environment where pursuit of music led to an interest in bhajans. Further, when he migrated to the United States, he “found out that his roommate was a Karnatic flutist. We found a common base, and could connect over music. I sustained music during my early years in the U.S because we both would sit at home and practice with each other, while our friends went hiking or something.” Evidently, as demonstrated by Ranjani Aunty, Geetha Aunty, and Mali Uncle as well, there are well-established notions of certain socio-geographical spaces, like cities in Tamil Nadu, where pursuit of music is imagined as natural and relatively expected, because of the surrounding environment; even if one’s family members were not music connoisseurs, it was

²¹³ Ramanathan, interview.

²¹⁴ Aradhana: literally means ‘to glorify god’ but also used to refer to the celebrations and festivals honoring composers of the Karnatic genre.

at least expected that accessibility to the Aradhanas, concerts, and performances in the area would provide one with sufficient exposure to Karnatic music. On the other hand, travelling to Mumbai, Delhi, or even farther to the United States, required that one seek out, and consequently “find” musicians and music enthusiasts. Recalling these encounters, in my informants’ cases, meant presenting their musical trajectories in a narration of coincidences, divine grace, and discoveries.

Music Genes

My informants also used the discourse of karma to explain either their own interests in music, or the capacities of their children for the classical arts. In this way, the musician’s *atma*, or soul, is believed to have been seeking music for many births, and its pursuit is finally fruitful when born into a musical family, or a musically-knowledgeable and appreciative environment that can nurture that “inherent capacity” lying within the soul. Interestingly, while my informants once again used a spiritual framework as a method of understanding and explaining their thoughts, this framework was often accompanied by yet another one – that of modern science. A child who exhibited a talent for music at a young age, or who held an apparent interest for it, *and* who belonged to a family where elder relatives were music connoisseurs or performing musicians, was perceived by some of my adult informants as having a “genetic disposition” for the performing arts. In other words, people believed that “genes” were responsible for passing on parents’ interest in and talent for music. Clearly, the fusing together of these two very different frameworks, that of Hindu spirituality and genetics, represents yet another way that the musicians of the Boston area, these diasporic subjects, bridge and conjoin different mentalities, allowing these different ideas to be in dialogue in their minds. Importantly, the teachers as well as the parents I interviewed, acknowledged the necessity of hard work in order for anyone to

truly shine in Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam; inherent capacity could not sustain itself. My younger informants – the now college-going musicians who immigrated to the United States with their parents while they were still infants – were more likely to explain musical ability and capacity with “passion” and attribute that passion to the child’s environment, rather than karma or genetics. Perhaps this shift in rhetoric can be imagined as a byproduct of an American education that also encourages students to “pursue their dreams” and “find their passions”; the older informants would not have been exposed to such individualistic ideas, and resultantly adopt spiritual and scientific frameworks that are more dependent on the existence of other people. Members of different generations, therefore, adopted ideologies from Indian or American culture in varying proportions, so to speak, in an effort to situate themselves in relation to the art forms they practiced.

In describing her very early teaching career, Ranjani Aunty recalled how she met one of her most talented and senior Bharatanatyam students:

I was very determined to teach my daughter Amritha [and again, that was a Lord Shiva decision], but teaching her by herself wasn’t going to go anywhere, so I put up advertisements in the local Indian grocery store, and who walks in but Amudha Pazhanisamy! And the first thing her father told me was that she’s Balasaraswathi’s²¹⁵ grandniece! Amudha is so very talented, so there’s something to genes – I’m beginning to believe that now²¹⁶.

The fact that Amudha is related to one of the greatest and most well-renowned Bharatanatyam artists of the 20th century is offered as an explanation for Amudha’s own excellence as an artist. A little later in our conversation, when I asked Ranjani Aunty why she felt it would be important for her children to learn south Indian classical arts, she responded: “I think your soul must have wanted music, for it to have chosen to be born into this family, put in a spiritual way. I don’t know if my children would have done dance and music if they had been born to someone else. In

²¹⁵ Tanjore Balasaraswathi (1918 – 1984) was a celebrated Bharatanatyam dancer hailing from a devadasi community.

²¹⁶ Saigal, interview.

the end, it's all the grace of God.” Here, a cosmic network of sorts is imagined, in which children born into a family familiar with Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, were propelled by an ‘atmic’ desire for musical nurturance. Of course, Ranjani Aunty placed great importance on hard work as well, exclaiming, “There are the Mozarts and Bachs of the world, but 90% of the others is hard work! You parents say, ‘look, this is important to me,’ and you work hard.” Here, inherent, prodigious talent is distinguished from the talent that arises from diligence, and is nurtured and fuelled by motivated parents.

Mali Uncle’s insight on karmic philosophies and genetics playing a role in a child’s interest in music was comparable. When I asked him, “why did you think it was important for your children to learn Karnatic music?” He replied,

Only if you’ve done punyam [performed good deeds] for many janmams, you’ll be born in an environment where you can learn music. Also there’s a genetic disposition; if there is music in your family, you have a better chance of getting it, right? I mean, even if you don’t, music can come, but the chances are better in the former... Whether it comes or not is in God’s hands; you can’t change anyone’s fate. But to put that seed is our duty²¹⁷.

His use of the word “seed” implied to me a fusion of “inherent” talent, as well as a nurturing environment, as factors that propel one to musical success.

Geetha Aunty echoed similar sentiments when discussing her efforts at raising her daughter Rasika as a Karnatic vocalist and violinist. While the latter’s aptitude for music might not have been immediately apparent during her early years in India, it started to reveal itself through Rasika’s spirit of determination, once Geetha Aunty started teaching music in the U.S. In Geetha Aunty’s words,

After we came here, Rasika would join my other students in my beginning classes... whatever she is, it’s because of her competitive spirit, that ‘I’m a teacher’s daughter, and everyone comes here to learn, so I have to be good too.’ And so she used to practice a lot. We also started violin classes for her, and people started saying, ‘oh, she’s good!’ So once I knew she had a spark, yes, we

²¹⁷ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

put in a lot of effort²¹⁸.

In this case, a ‘spark,’ or an inherent capacity for understanding and producing music, is something that was consciously and diligently nurtured by Geetha Aunty and her daughter.

It is also clear that an environment saturated with music, with “classes going on all the time, from morning to evening,” as Rasika mentioned, was helpful in developing Rasika’s capacity as a Karnatic musician. My first question to Rasika was, “when someone mentions Karnatic music, what are some words that come to mind?” to which she immediately replied, “home.” She elaborated, “ever since I was young, my house has always had music playing. Not just because my mom’s a teacher, but we wake up to the suprabatham²¹⁹, which is musical, we sing bhajans every day as a form of prayer...Music is so much a part of my life, and I think that’s the reason it has come so easily to me, because I’ve always been surrounded by it²²⁰.” In a nature versus nurture dichotomy then, when nature implies a natural tendency, and nurture refers to an environment that produces certain capabilities, Rasika’s response suggests that a again, a combination of both facilitated her musical endeavors. She also offered,

I think in the learning stages, it’s faster if you have someone who knows music. For me, my mom would sit with me every single day, so I learned a lot faster. But her being a musician doesn’t account for the fact that I had skill in me, or that at some point, I started loving it...I think it’s in my karma to be born into this family, but I don’t think it’s necessarily in my karma to be a good musician²²¹.

In other words, a familial connection to music, karmic forces, or even genetics, cannot account for the role passion and hard work play in helping someone become an exceptional musician; the latter two must come from within the individual.

²¹⁸ Murali, interview.

²¹⁹ Suprabatham: literally meaning ‘auspicious dawn,’ this is a Sanskrit poem of the Suprabhātakāvya genre. It is a collection of hymns or verses recited early morning to awaken the deity in Hinduism.

²²⁰ Murali, Rasika. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 10, 2014.

²²¹ Murali, Rasika. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 10, 2014.

Mangai Aunty, a Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher, spoke emphatically about her son Sriva's talents in Karnatic music. Her descriptions suggested a musical capacity nurtured by the right family due to karmic forces, and passed from family to child physically and metaphysically. Both Mangai Aunty and her husband, Raghavan, were born to families very invested in Karnatic music, with elder relatives who were trained singers, flutists, veena players, and sitar players. According to Mangai Aunty, when Sriva was really young, "whatever song you played, he wouldn't get the words, but he would sing the tune exactly. Any song – Karnatic, English, film – he would sing it correctly²²²." Retrospectively, Mangai Aunty remembered that "when I was pregnant, I would listen only to Karnatic music. I maybe saw one movie, *endha kedudhalum paakkala* (I wouldn't watch anything detrimental). I would say prayers, and listen to a lot of music." This implies that the environment surrounding a child during his or her formative years (even as early as its mother's pregnancy) can cultivate the child's capacity in becoming a successful or even brilliant musician. Mangai Aunty also added,

I know he's my child and all, but in the spiritual path, you just think, 'he's a soul born to me.' But *avan vaangindu vandha varam adhu* (music is a blessing he brought with him). God has placed the seed correctly; Sriva's placed in the right family, which also has interest in music, which wants him to learn. If I didn't have any interest in music, would I have taken him for paattu class? It's his own karma, he probably wanted to learn...he would practice so dedicatedly as a child, and he has kept up with it.

With that statement, Mangai Aunty combines a karmic framework, a nurturing environment, and hard work to explain Sriva's talent and interest in Karnatic music. Speaking to Sriva in light of this conversation with his mother was interesting, as he simply ascribed his comfort in Karnatic music to his "passion and desire to keep improving." Evidently, no single explanation can be provided or imagined for why someone is an outstanding musician; people imagine a myriad of reasons to be working together.

²²² Raghavan, interview.

Producing a Community

While community members understand and articulate their own, individual relationships with Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, they are equally invested in collectively defining the whole community's engagement with the performing arts. This act of cultivating a collective consciousness of performance is integral to maintaining their unity and homogeneity as one group of people who were all creating homes out of the liminal 'third spaces' they occupy. Their imagined solidarity strengthens their challenge to displacement, enabling them to believe that they are not alone in seeking belonging in multiple spaces. My informants' responses to the question, "What roles do Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam play for our community?" can generally be categorized into two sections; some people described the performing arts as cultivating inclusivity, and strengthening the community, while others implied that these art forms generate exclusivity.

Ranjani Aunty, Geetha Aunty, and Mali Uncle – Bharatanatyam, Karnatic vocal, and Karnatic mridangam teachers, respectively – perceived the performing arts as serving primarily positive roles in the community. A widely agreed-upon facet of the arts that most of my informants expressed, was the fact that increasing numbers of students were now learning these art forms; Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam were becoming accessible to a much larger group of people. Along those lines, for Ranjani Aunty, an increasingly vibrant performing arts atmosphere enabled greater collaboration between teachers, students, and parents. Importantly, she also felt that the arts served as a vehicle for community service, both in that teaching itself is service, and that dance programs were an efficient way to fundraise for charities. Over our cups of coffee and hot chocolate, Ranjani Aunty smiled warmly and said, "It's been such an honor working with the other teachers of the Boston area...I really enjoy bringing people together, and

people are so nice to work with here in New England²²³.” Bharatanatyam, then, has served as a platform for collaboration and unity-building – it has brought different teachers in contact with one another, allowing them to work as a team for productions, and also learn varying styles and techniques from one another. Ranjani Aunty’s Bharatanatyam also provided her with an avenue for “giving back”: “dance has definitely allowed me to do community service...In the beginning, I used to go to the food pantry every Wednesday to donate food. But now, after being involved in dance, I don’t have to do that anymore, because dance itself has become a vehicle for fundraising for charities. It’s also very satisfying when my students donate the proceedings after one of their own programs.”

Mangai Aunty, who teaches Bharatanatyam in a suburb south of Boston, agreed that Bharatanatyam enables her to “donate to charity, do some service.” Training other children in the art form is also a form of giving: “If you are trained in some art,” Mangai Aunty explained, “it needs to be imparted. You learned with such difficulty, so you should make sure it gets passed on²²⁴.” The performing arts then, propel action, and facilitate a charitable spirit within the community.

In Geetha Aunty’s perspective, Karnatic music is a “unifying factor,” to the extent that participation in the performing arts has become definitive our entire community. She said, “take out music from the community, and it’ll be so dull! There’s nothing else.” The nature of the performing arts themselves facilitate community-building, in the sense that “dance and music can very easily bring people together in a community setting, while other art forms, like painting, clay modeling, or knitting, might not be able to. Music and dance are so instantly communicative.” In other words, Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam are unifying, because they are art forms that encourage and even require interaction between different individuals. Not only

²²³ Saigal, interview.

²²⁴ Raghavan, interview.

do members of diasporic communities help bridge cultural and physical distances between India and the United States, but musically-minded diasporic community members can help bridge the intangible distances within the diasporic community itself.

Mali Uncle's reflections highlighted the ways in which Karnatic music spiritually and even religiously binds the community together; "In my mind, music is the glue that holds the community together, like a temple would. It also imparts the values, since knowingly or unknowingly, we're saying Krishna Rama [chanting God's name]. Our music is the only music where 99% of it is divine-oriented²²⁵." Where in India, religious institutions like temples and musical institutions like sabhas would provide reason and space for like-minded people to assemble and collectively engage in either worship or musical appreciation, Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam themselves provide people with opportunities to meet in the diasporic community. As Subha Aunty mentioned, "it's a nice way to socially gather with like-minded people²²⁶." Additionally, the art forms are believed to help propagate common values important to Indian culture, among the community members and especially to the children. Immersed in an art form that apparently stresses *bhakti*, or devotion to God, children may come to identify that form of devotion as important to their communal identity as well.

What essentially propagates certain 'values' to community children is pervasive exposure to particular religious and cultural ideas and institutions. In India, "exposure" could refer to a range of institutions and social settings that are conducive to the practice and performance of Karnatic music; in other words, "exposure" means a pervasive religious and cultural environment. In the United States however, members of the Tamil diasporic community emulate aspects of that religious and cultural environment, primarily by forming a large, peer-based musical learning community, where members rely on each other for exposure. Varun, one of

²²⁵ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

²²⁶ Kumar, interview.

Mali Uncle's senior mridangam students, expressed this idea of a "constructed exposure" well, saying "Karnatic music provides an avenue for younger children to grow up musically-minded – there are so many concerts, where they'll see their friends performing, and they themselves get opportunities to perform once in a while." Varun also stated matter-of-factly, "Everyone in our community is engaged in the performing arts in some way – if someone isn't, he's seen as an outsider to an extent²²⁷." The performing arts then, serve as a marker for communal identity, not just in propagating "shared values" like devotion, but by also serving as entities that "everyone" in the community can lay claim to and can participate in. By engaging with the performing arts in this way, community members stake a claim to their cultural heritage while simultaneously establishing and reinforcing their shared experience of living in the United States.

While the teachers focused on inclusivity and community-building, many of the parents I interviewed spoke more of the ways in which South Indian classical arts promote exclusivity and competition within the community, as Varun's last comment begins to suggest. Importantly, such views demonstrate that people are not challenging displacement by always sharing the same sentiments on their relationship with the performing arts. These varying opinions make the project of resisting or even accommodating displacement a nuanced and multi-faceted one. Mangai Aunty, for example, was insistent that "politics is polluting the music industry both here and in India; there is no truth in appreciation! People are more particular about who the kid who's singing is, whose student he is, whose child..."²²⁸ In other words, a competitive spirit has pervaded the musical community, and learning music is seen by some as an obligation, "because everyone else does it." Ramanan Uncle expressed a problematic aspect of this competitive spirit, where the performing arts are being taken up by families because "people want to prove that their children are capable of doing certain things, and they want to showcase that. It's sometimes

²²⁷ Chandramouli, Varun. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. October, 19, 2013.

²²⁸ Raghavan, interview.

another extracurricular to put on a college application – but securing admission is just the tip of the ice berg. You’re trapped if you stop with music there.” Rasika elaborated on the same question, “what does music mean for our community?” with the response, “I think it’s become kind of a mob mentality; everybody else goes to music and dance lessons, so my kid should go too. But beyond that, I think music and dance are just an easy way for children to think about our culture.” A pervasive musical environment, therefore, serves multiple purposes. It provides a competitive spirit that nudges many parents and children in the direction of classical arts training, and it also provides an accessible venue through which many community members can share in a common language of music or dance.

Producing Diasporic Individuals

Massachusetts’s Tamil performing arts community is constituted by a number of individual musicians and their family members. Just as performing and practicing Karnatic music has enabled this community to characterize itself in a certain way, people’s individual engagement with the performing arts has also helped transform them into particular kinds of diasporic subjects. Essentially, music and dance enable these diasporic subjects to act as connecting factors between the two different cultures and environments they inhabit; rather than allowing themselves to be displaced between these two contexts, community members use the performing arts as tools to ‘place’ themselves in both. First, for the parents and teachers of the community, an engagement with the performing arts symbolizes that they have successfully transferred what they deem to be the essence of Indian culture from their own childhoods to their children. Second, children who learn Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam are tangible proof of a connection between India and the United States; they are able to relate to cultural references and relatives in India, as well as contribute their artistic skills to professional and academic settings

here in the United States. Finally, for many of my informants, the performing arts served as a way to cultivate spirituality in their own lives; in perceiving a spiritual mindset and lifestyle to be the primary asset of musical training, community members are again involved in recreating an exposure that would be emphasized by other religious and cultural institutions in India.

I could clearly identify a sense of urgency in the generational dynamics of music performance in the diaspora. My adult informants believed that their act of emigrating from India to the United States ultimately carried the responsibility to “remember their roots” and ensure that their children did the same. In Mali Uncle’s words,

For the first generation [immigrant] parents here, there’s a fear factor, a guilt factor. As much as they want their children to learn music and dance, the flip side is that they don’t want to be the ones who broke the chain. The farther you go from your homeland, the more afraid you are that you’ll be the one who breaks the chain – you want to try your best to impart whatever you can to your children²²⁹.

Music, then, is almost a tangible “essence of Indian culture” that must be carried from homeland to host society. Failing to maintain the “chain,” whether through the performing arts or in some other way, implies failing in one’s responsibilities as a diasporic individual. Encouraging one’s children to train in the South Indian classical arts validates one’s efforts at cultural sustenance, and one’s efforts to equip children with their cultural identity. Bhuvana, rather than passing on a connection with music she experienced herself, ensured that her children participate in the performing arts, in order to renew the arts elder relatives in her family had been invested; “My mother learned paattu (music) for 8 years, so it was something I was already familiar with. I wanted to renew what had existed in my family, here in the U.S.” Again, the performing arts function almost as an inheritance being passed from adult to child. This inheritance is valuable in that it binds parent and child together, and provides a common language in which they can both

²²⁹ Santhanakrishnan, interview.

converse in, as Ramanan Uncle and Geetha Aunty both elucidated. The former, in pondering his son's relationship with music, suggested, "Music is a language that binds me with him; when kids are young, you can play with them and all, but after they grow up, it's important for you to have something to be able to discuss with them...This is one thing I'm good at, and I can help him reach the next level. It's a common language²³⁰." Geetha Aunty's relationship with her daughter, Rasika, is also greatly enriched by their common interest in the Karnatic performing arts; "If Rasika had not become a musician, my personal loss would have been that the two of us wouldn't have had much in common. Now we're much closer because we have music – it's another language we can speak together²³¹." Later in our conversation, Ramanan Uncle added, "I think because we're from a different country, this is something he can be proud of and inherit; if people ask, 'what did you inherit from India? Music is one thing he could mention²³².'" Challenging the displacement of migration, therefore, is impingent on community members' success in maintaining ties with their children in an environment where parents' and children's world views and interests might not reflect as many commonalities anymore.

Pondering why she enrolled her own children in music lessons, Subha Aunty posited, "it makes parents feel they're bringing up their kids in a cultural way...music and dance make the child complete, and highlight the fact that it belongs to this family." Musical training, therefore, emphasizes the child's belonging in the community, and serves as a marker for this particular diasporic identity. Aside from providing one's children with an aspect of their identity, or passing on an aspect of your own identity to them, equipping children with skills in music or dance "adds another tool to their kit, to help anchor them." As Subha Aunty elaborated, "music is a great stress reliever at any age...People, family, friends are not always going to be with you

²³⁰ Ramananathan, interview.

²³¹ Murali, interview.

²³² Ramanathan, interview.

all the time, there will be moments when the child is alone somewhere. And music will have a calming, soothing, effect then. So like you give them studies, this is another tool you put in their kit, so they have it when they grow up²³³.” The task of equipping children with the skills to thrive and be comfortable both within the diasporic community and outside of it is seen as an important responsibility for these parents, and the performing arts ultimately help parents fulfill this responsibility. For example, one imagines the performing arts as facilitating a portable sense of belonging, where, as Viji Aunty²³⁴ explained, “music will act as a companion for the child²³⁵.”

The act of connecting to one’s culture can be constituted by smaller acts of making connections between the experience of learning music, and the various facets of one’s musical education, and the visible signs, symbols, and histories present in India. At so many recitals, I would listen to debutants claim, “this art form helps me connect to my culture.” After a while, the phrase became so trite that I found myself wondering what significance it still held for the speakers and their audiences. My conversations with my informants finally helped me understand that the performing arts enable participants to connect in very tangible, visible ways to the people and environments around them. For example, Ranjani Aunty’s daughter, a Bharatanatyam dancer, was able to travel to India and connect the dance postures she had learned to the sculptures and reliefs that graced the walls of South Indian temples, and even the deities standing inside. Dance provides a connection between physical movement and the aesthetic environment around oneself; “when my daughter Amritha went to India, she saw a Krishna image and thought, ‘Oh I know how to do that!’ and there was an immediate connection, because you know how to enact the stories²³⁶,” Ranjani Aunty recalled. Geetha Aunty agreed completely, and was able to recount examples from her own students’ experiences, saying, “If a child learns

²³³ Kumar, interview.

²³⁴ Ramanan Uncle’s wife

²³⁵ Ramanan, Viji. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon. January 11, 2014.

²³⁶ Saigal, interview.

the song ‘Vinayaka,’ in praise of elephant-headed Lord Ganesha, she will go to India, and when she sees a Ganesha in a temple, or attend a wedding or a festival, she’s able to connect what she learned in music class with what she’s seeing there...The song lyrics are all stories of what existed in India²³⁷.”

The performing arts are also perceived to be an incredibly efficient way of connecting to relatives living in India, with whom not much else besides knowledge in Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam might exist in common. Geetha Aunty raised a valid concern;

For children growing up here, if they don’t have music or dance, or any Indian cultural education like Sishu Bharathi, and they only take SATs, go to school, Russian math, karate, robotics, etc., in what way will they be able to connect to their grandparents and relatives in India? Going to temples, attending family functions, meeting relatives – these are the things that constitute a trip to India. What can you talk about with people there, or exhibit to people there if you don’t know music or dance?²³⁸

Viji Aunty expressed almost the exact sentiments, explaining, “I think music serves as a link back to India, it’s one way to keep in touch. You have something in common to talk about with your cousins and relatives. You can speak Tamil to a certain extent, but you won’t have much else to do²³⁹.” Karnatic music or Bharatanatyam, again, is imagined to be a language in itself. Being able to participate in the performing arts enables one to participate in familial and social life in India as well; this is seen as a crucial skill for diasporic children, as it allows them to still “belong” despite the various distances. Interestingly, from Geetha Aunty’s perspective, it was more essential for children to have this skill, as adults were envisioned as still essentially “belonging” to Indian culture and society. She mentioned, “Personally, there’s no need to feel connected to Indian culture for me, because this is my India. It’s no different than if I were living in India – I wear Indian clothes, eat Indian food, and interact with Indian people...” Therefore,

²³⁷ Murali, interview.

²³⁸ Murali, interview.

²³⁹ Ramanan, Viji. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon. January 11, 2014.

the question of “connecting” only comes into being when one demarcates ‘Indian’ from ‘American.’ Transplanting one onto the other, or vice versa, calls for an interesting sense of belonging, where one is “home” wherever one is. It is perhaps this stage that parents and teachers ultimately want their children and students to reach.

Finally, a specifically diasporic engagement with the performing arts implies connecting one’s training to the motherland, as well as contributing those skills to academic, professional, and social circles in the host society. The focus here, then, is on finding ways to belong in and contribute to the host society. Having the capacity to contribute in this way is key to being ‘diasporically competent,’ so to speak. It ultimately allows one to blend in with relatives in India, while partially assimilating into American host society. Ranjani Aunty spoke passionately about her daughter’s involvement with collegiate Bharatanatyam competitions, and the ways in which Bharatanatyam facilitates collaboration with other professionals in the area, and enables charity and humanitarian work within and outside of the community. Geetha Aunty emphasized the importance of being able to perform in a variety of settings because of one’s training in Karnatic music. She offered,

A trained ear helps in any situation. People usually start learning by seeing someone else perform, and wanting to perform like that. But over time, they realize the other advantages that come with learning music. You’re able to sing in college shows now because you’re trained in music. Even dancing – before it used to be just on stage. But now, at any event, people know how dancing brings joy to so many people, and if you have training and are able to dance gracefully, even better!²⁴⁰

Being a Karnatic musician or a Bharatanatyam dancer, then enables one to carry one’s skills to any social setting, and enhance the nature of that gathering.

²⁴⁰ Murali, interview.

Rasika, Varun, and Sriva, the three young adults I interviewed, definitely saw their training in the performing arts as giving them an identity outside of the diasporic community. In Rasika's words:

I've been learning music since I was five, and going to competitions and performing was a huge part of my life growing up. So that's really shaped my personality, and given me a lot of confidence, and helped me believe that I have something to bring to the community. If someone thinks 'Rasika,' they think 'music,' in many ways, which is a boost for my confidence. Even when I came to college, everyone had their 'thing' – music was mine.²⁴¹

Aside from helping to shape one's personality itself, the performing arts helps one distinguish oneself from others in a crowd, particularly in the college environment. Varun was able to relate to these sentiments, adding, "The art of mridangam gives me an avenue to showcase my talents, besides the usual academics or sports...Not everyone has this skill set, so that serves as an ego-booster for me." Sriva also saw his training in Karnatic vocal music as adding to his identity: "I think music allows me to express my personality in a way that you can't with words²⁴²." Evidently, one's diasporic identity is enhanced, if at least complicated, through one's engagement with the performing arts; it equips participants with the capacity to serve as connecting agents wherever they are, whether it is in conversation with relatives in India, or on stage in an American college program. Ultimately, South Indian classical arts produce individuals who are assets to their communities, exhibiting their skills in the host society, and demonstrating the "cultured" nature of their upbringing to relatives in India. By being able to exist comfortably and contribute to different social and cultural environments, members of this diasporic community are equipped to overcome a form of displacement that otherwise would have forced them to choose one 'home' over another, or would have rendered them alien in either place of belonging.

²⁴¹ Murali, Rasika. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Norwood. January 10, 2014.

²⁴² Raghavan, Sriva. Interview by Divya Chandramouli. Personal Interview. Sharon. October 14, 2013.

Conclusion

Displacement, whether by colonization, migration, or any number of factors, is a familiar reality for most human beings in this world. People's and communities' attempts to challenge, overcome, understand, or even accommodate displacement in their lives inevitably produce narratives of resistance and empowerment. There are creative and powerful ways that people choose to address the ever-relevant human need to belong, to find their place in space and time, and exist in relation to a larger community of like-minded individuals. In twentieth century South India, we have seen nationalist-musicians fervently produce and engage with the performing arts in order to challenge the very debilitating discourses propagated by a patronizing colonial regime. Their efforts to represent Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam, and through these arts, their own selves, as worthy of respect has had longstanding effects on the ways South Indians, and Indians in general, imagine these performing art forms to this day. In the twenty-first century South Indian diasporic community of Massachusetts, I have demonstrated how individuals collectively tailor Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam to their diasporic contexts, and through their performances, assert their capabilities to find belonging in the very different places they might claim as 'home.' People's engagement with South India's classical art forms, from the previous century to the current one, enables them to construct their identities in an especially performative way, all in an effort to discover, reinforce, and exhibit a renewed sense of self and community.

What is important to remember here, however, is that even within these apparently empowering narratives of resistance and identity-construction in the face of physical or psychological displacement, these actors are facilitating the marginalization of and rendering invisible other human beings in their social surroundings. Chennai's upper-caste Academy members, for the sake of creating a modern identity that catered specifically to them,

appropriated the performing arts from hereditary performing communities, like devadasis, whose sustained involvement in these arts had, for the centuries preceding nationalist activity, contributed to the dynamic fluidity and vibrancy of Karnatic music's and Bharatanatyam's pre-nationalist predecessors. While these art forms today are claimed collectively by so many Indians as their own 'tradition' and 'culture,' they rest atop a troubled and misunderstood history of subtle and blatant forms of violence.

This exemplifies what is perhaps most dangerous about nationalism; in reinforcing caste and class boundaries, positioning one group as worthy of saving the infantilized other from degradation, nationalism adopts the colonial savior rhetoric, and even succeeds in situating the colonial project more locally within Indian society. In perceiving not only the colonial 'other,' but also Indian cinema and radio as threats to music, and imagining that musicians must be cautioned against succumbing and turning art into a commercial enterprise, the Academy's nationalists produced an art form that had to be constantly be protected. So vulnerable was the art to external genres and influences that nationalists had to police those very influences to ensure retention of Karnatic music's 'purity.'

As for the diaspora, I am definitely not arguing that comparable forms of marginalization or invisibility have been actively facilitated by community members here in Massachusetts. But we musicians and music lovers of the community perhaps claim the privilege of a 'cultured' identity without necessarily understanding the sacrifices other communities have involuntarily made, especially so that diasporic individuals like us and performing artists in India can perform on stage and be applauded and respected by the audience. Furthermore, even among the various South Indian families that have migrated to the Boston area, I discussed how the performing arts render certain people, particularly artists and those invested in the arts, visible, while those who

choose not to engage with the performing arts, or might not have the means of doing so, are certainly rendered comparatively invisible. Ultimately, I suggest that in whatever forms we choose to protect ourselves from or challenge the displacement we may face in our lives, it is absolutely crucial that we are conscious of the implications our actions and agendas have. While communities are by nature exclusive to an extent, in the sense that they construct themselves in opposition to an 'other,' we must always remember that refusing to acknowledge the histories and discourses that facilitate our exclusivities, fuels forms of sustained violence for the people who are displaced because of the boundaries we draw. And that often becomes too high of a price to pay for community solidarity.

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