

A Post Modern Analysis of Music with Special Reference to the Tradition of Hindustani Classical Music

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Abstract

This paper is an effort to analyze North Indian Classical music under the lens of a post modern condition. The North Indian Classical music is also known by the name Hindustani Music which is highly renowned owning a dedicated listenership worldwide. The study taken up in this paper is interdisciplinary and attempts to analyze Hindustani music with the help of certain Post Modernist tenets. Post Modernism as a movement is colossal. It is an umbrella term for many movements and theories whereas, in this paper, there is no direct use of any particular theory. Rather , it makes use of the basic tenet of post modernism ; questioning and subverting the established schools of thought so as to show that there are hitherto unrevealed meanings deep inside. This paper takes up post modernist thinking as a method to show the other side of established notions and how such notions are subverted. In this study, the subject that is brought under close scrutiny is the ancient 'gharana' system of Hindustani Classical Music, the sanctity and sublimity attached to it and also music in general. It also subverts the artist/ audience pair to show that it is not actually the artist alone who is instrumental in making music but the audience too play an important role in it, a role that is sometimes more influential regarding the making of music.

Keywords: Music, culture, discourse

Introduction

Music and language have much in common. Both can be conceived from a scientific and humanistic point of view. Scientifically, man is a linguistic being which indicates his capacity for communication through language and similarly, man is a musical being too, which caters to his capacity for producing music which is unique to human beings. From a humanistic point of view, both are culture specific. Both are born out of man's interaction with the society.

The objective of this paper is to analyze how music becomes a means of cultural discourse. For the same, music is analyzed in the post modern condition. Post modern condition here indicates a state which has come forth as the result of a movement which came like an earthquake, which toppled down all fundamental and traditional norms and beliefs which existed in arts, music, architecture and almost every field of thought in the 20th century. The after effects of this movement were strong and pervasive and later resulted in the formation of a post modern condition. In this condition, every aspect of knowledge in the universe was questioned; it gave birth to new meanings, meanings till then concealed, hiding behind the veil of complacency.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;”

Yeats, *The Second Coming*

The most fundamental premise of post modernism is that it questioned the entire established ethos and the line quoted above encapsulates the spirit of post modernism with brevity. It saw the world from an entirely new vantage point. Another fundamental notion it shattered was the notion of centre; of unity, stability and well defined roles. It reinstates that there are no epics, noble heroes or grand narratives. When modernism encountered fragmentation with apprehension, post modernism celebrated it.

By the development of culture studies, questions about culture, its role in the society and its evolution have all at once become heated topics of debate. It examines how culture is constructed. It dismantled the earlier notion that culture is given; supplied through various means like arts or literature. The post modern condition is signaled by its emphasis on the polyphonic nature of things. Established notions which prevailed earlier are uprooted and new ideas take their place. For instance, Shylock was once simply a villain in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* but today his status is different. He is not considered evil and is seen more with sympathy for what his

race (including him) suffered at the hands of the so called high/ noble community. His maliciousness thus becomes a natural manifestation of his despair, helplessness and thirst for asserting himself among his unkind fellowmen, which is thus, at least to an extent, pardonable. This aspect of addressing texts in a new light and deriving new meanings with the help of meticulous re-reading is typical of post modernism.

This paper attempts to do the same as encountering the text in a new light whereas in this case, the text becomes Hindustani Classical Music. We try to analyze how certain old notions in music have to be changed and how they must be encountered in a new light. In this post modern condition, music is brought under close scrutiny. The cultural aspect of music is explored; of how it emerged through culture, of how music was constructed politically, economically and socially. In this paper, the music under scrutiny is Indian Classical Music and to be more precise, North Indian Classical Music which is also known by the name Hindustani Music. It is one of its kind in the world music scenario and is particularly known for its impetus on improvisation. No Hindustani classical music piece is premeditated. A rendition by a concert musician is not planned before and whatever the artist sings is bound to be spontaneous and is based on many factors, like the artist's mood, time, culture etc. If it is true that the validity of an art form is entirely contextual, it is true of Hindustani art music more than any other major classical music tradition because Hindustani Music is an improvisation dominant art form. A piece of raga rendition once rendered can never be recreated, even by the musician.

The Birth of *Gharana* – Beyond the music

The *Gharana* system of the North Indian classical music is much esteemed. The word *gharana* is derived from *ghara* (house, from Sanskrit word *grha*). In Hindi and Urdu *gharana* is a collective noun denoting those who live under the same roof, therefore a family, lineage or clan. The term *Gharana* denotes a distinctive style of rendering raga based music, a stylistic diversity in musical expression. They are mostly named after their places of origin and almost always have names of one or two towering personalities associated with it like the *Kirana Gharana* which is associated with Abdul Kareem Khan, who spearheaded a distinctive style.

The *Gharana* claims made by individual musicians are verifiable in each case. The issue is whether these claims carry any substance in terms of musical value or is there anything beyond its musical value? An analysis of *Gharana* linkages in the contemporary context leads us to certain hitherto unnoticed historical, political and cultural factors at play about the birth of a *Gharana*.

Gharana is a system of patronage which is not as innocent as a sponsorship of some talented musicians. For instance, the royal court of that time supported *Gharanas* primarily as a matter of pride. It is an extension of their grandeur in wealth and politics. It is an 'asset' to the king like his army, elephants and palaces. Moreover, for an aspirant to be a part of a *Gharana*, it was not always a matter of pure talent but heredity too. The son of an Ustad/Pandit (either of these words is commonly used to address an eminent artist in the field) always has an easy entry irrespective of his or her interest or talent. During those times, there weren't many career options too and this prompted a musician to make his son a musician too, mostly a copy of himself. Hence, they made it a point that a close member in their family followed the tradition because above all, it ensured economic security. Though the best artists of those times were wooed immediately by *nawabs, maharajas and zamindars*, the rest of the lot had a tough time. Hence, in the post modern condition, any sanctity and sublimity attached to the *Gharana* system is replaced by our knowledge of the politics and economics behind it. This notion is, of course, deconstructive in character.

The Politics beyond Aesthetics

The notion of the state as all seeing and all powerful stems from the Post Structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault. He elaborates the pervasive image of the state as that of panoptic surveillance. He says that power is ingrained in the interstices of society. Foucault's notion can also be used to analyze how power emerges as a system to control and manipulate music.

As we analyzed before, the musical value of *Gharana* was held in great reverence but the problem is that it is not always the musician's creativity that manifests into a particular *Gharana* but the kings' / patron's likes or dislikes which rules over everything. Some ragas were preferred by the patrons and they were sung repeatedly by certain *Gharanas* completely ignoring the predilections of the musician. This could be one of the reasons why only a common set of ragas are performed in the concert circles even today. If in the olden days, it was the king or patron who controlled music, in contemporary era, it is the economy, rather, the commercial viability which determines the popularity of music. The music industry and media would promote only that kind of music which brings them economic profit. No private channels broadcast classical music today which is again purely

commercial. Today's music is thus highly reductive to certain flimsy popular numbers. Hence we understand that the music culture we have today isn't something which emerged naturally out a musical evolution.

In the aspect of power controlling music, internal colonization must also be taken into account, which is a wrong convention that can be seen even in South Indian classical music too where the monopoly seems to be in the hands of the Hindu or the elite Brahminic society. Since it is a more literature oriented stream (importance of 'kriti' or the lyrics) which deals with Gods and Goddesses of Hindu religion, certain pseudo religiousness is attached with it which makes it difficult for people belonging to other religions to pursue it easily. Though such tendencies are significantly low today, we have not yet arrived at a state to say that, it is purely obsolete.

Who creates music – *Rasika* or Artist?

The artiste/audience pair acts like a binary opposite. In the world of classical music, let's call the audience '*rasika*' who is simply a serious listener of classical music; in this case, of Hindustani Classical Music. In the present day, *rasikas* are an unhappy lot because they complain that classical music produced today cannot match the standards of those which were in circulation during the period between 1940- 50, the tail end of the period often described as the Golden Age of Hindustani Music. There are many reasons for such a trend, one of that being the process of 'commoditization' of high art which is not unique to India. Technological development of storage and distribution has made it a global phenomenon but in the West, classical music is insulated from these market driven tendencies with the help of substantial government and corporate funding. At the same time, a substantial support for the cause happens there in the form of the willingness of audiences to pay exorbitant amounts for a face-to-face encounter with classical music which, unfortunately, is not happening in India. Along with all the other factors that results in depleted standards of Indian Classical Music, the ever lamenting *rasika* community must acknowledge the fact that they are also not completely blameless for the phenomenon. To put it the other way around, the earlier notion of artist making music for the *rasika* must be laid to rest. It is actually the *rasika* who holds higher power.

The days of aristocratic patronage are long gone. Today, audiences have started paying for concerts. If concerts were the only source of music in the olden times, the advent of radio and audio cassettes have revolutionized the arena. But if we consider these trends in terms of cost of music to customers, we come to the conclusion that they are getting music cheaper by every year. Let's first take the example of concert admissions.

"The highest level of concert admission was around Rs.100 per seat in 1961, Rs150 in 1971, Rs200 in 1981, Rs 250 in 1991, and has settled down at Rs 500 at the end of the last century...If we apply an inflation adjustment factor to these figures we find that a front row seat of Rs 100 in 1961 is worth Rs 2100 in current rupees. Against this, we are today paying only Rs 500 for front row seats" (P38).

This proves that the cost of concert admissions have been falling by 40/50 percent every 10 years when the average duration of concerts have not reduced at the same scale. Same is the case of recorded music too. The 78 RPM record (seven minutes of music) was sold at a present day equivalent of Rs 12.62 per minute in 1958 whereas the cost of music on CD has come down to Rs 4.92 /minute average in the year 2000-01, as low as Rs1.20 per minute at the lower end.

At the same time, the artist's remuneration has not come down, i.e., even when the consumer pays less and less, the artist gets more and more. This means that the rest of the amount is added up by two groups – record companies and concert sponsors. They both play a crucial role in the music market without either the need or desire to promote quality music. The record companies have adopted the same market strategy for classical music which they follow in the Pop music section. Hence what they have done is nothing but the quantitative expansion of the classical music market. Secondly the concert sponsors, be it corporate or government, are least concerned about the quality of music being delivered as they also look for a more quantitative reach.

Hence, the common notion that the dearth of real talent is the prime reason for the slumbering state of music industry is not entirely right. The *rasika* community also plays a huge role in creating a market for Hinduatani Classical Music and must be willing to pay for it.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to make a post modern study of certain conventions in North Indian Classical music. The use of the word 'post modern' would be very ambiguous because it can be employed to designate a wide range of phenomena that happened in the 20th century. To streamline it further, this study doesn't make use of any post

modern tools (for example, inter-textuality) but rather analyzes certain established notions in a post modern condition; i.e., conditions were age old beliefs and opinions about the world are problematized and deconstructed in a new light.

It is very common that music, as different from literature or art, is treated merely in the aesthetic context but it is now time to study it in a wider context of social , political and cultural evolution. For instance, the *Gharana* system of North Indian Classical music was identified just as a stylistic diversity for ages but in the post modern condition , we understand that it is a result of not just a musician’s creativity but a result of conditioning of various social, economic , political and cultural factors.

Foucault’s notion that “power is ingrained in the interstices of the society” is read along with music to unearth how power plays a role in determining the music of an age. Last but not the least, the paper also nullifies the notion that only the artist is instrumental in producing the music that is in circulation. After considering it in the post modern condition, we arrive at a diametrically opposite standpoint that, the audience (or ‘rasika’) is equally or perhaps more important in determining the same.

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