

# WOMEN IN CARNATIC MUSIC

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TC 660H

Plan II Honors Program

The University of Texas at Austin

May 13, 2020

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Carnatic music traces its roots back to the ancient traditions of South India. This ancient art form has undergone the most musical and social transformation over the last few hundred years. Particularly in the realm of gender politics in India, South Indian classical music has seen a renaissance of emerging female artists over the last century. The interest of this paper is in the particular moment in history where the cultural constructs of India made it possible for women to break through barriers and emerge as eminent, sought-after artists in classical music. The emergence of female artists and the growing voice of women in gender politics issues in India during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is a phenomenon that must have some explanation. Thus, the main research areas of this paper are, first, to establish the political and social environment of postcolonial India in which the female voice became respected in the classical arts. Second, this paper aims to understand how the female rise to popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century impacted the state of gender dynamics in Carnatic music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially through the lens of the #MeToo movement. Finally, these research areas aim to answer one overarching question: What was the journey of the female voice in Carnatic music?

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Stephen Slawek and Dr. Cynthia Talbot. Through their classes and guidance in the thesis process, I was able to gain an academic perspective on Indian art and history that I have never before had. I would like to thank Plan II for giving me the courage and freedom to run so freely when it came to a senior thesis topic. I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me throughout and Dr. V.P for his enduring support in the research and analysis process.

Finally, but most importantly, I want to thank the women of Carnatic music that have inspired me since I started learning the art in my early childhood. Your voices, your struggles, and your stories have resonated throughout history. The art of Carnatic music has been my love and passion for nearly 21 years. This thesis is an homage to all the woman that have paved the way for other women in Carnatic music. Thank you for your voices, without which I would never have fallen in love with this beautiful art form.

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## INTRODUCTION

*In the early hours of a crisp October morning, there is a line of people cueing up outside of the Madras Music Academy in the Indian city of Chennai. The rains of the monsoon have only just receded in September, however poor drainage systems throughout the city still cause flooding issues and many people are wading through streams just to join this massive line that has flowed out of the building and into the street. The anxious excitement of the crowd is palpable. This crowd is exactly what the building managers expected; they have seen it nearly every year for decades. But something seems different this year. The line has been growing since early in the morning. Suddenly a TV turns on at a nearby street shop and flickers with a picture of one woman: Chinmayi Sripaada. The flickering picture causes a buzz in the crowd. Several onlookers start speaking in hushed tones. The humming conversations of the crowd turn quiet suddenly as people start looking at each other with uneasy expressions. By 9, the line has devolved into just a massive crowd of people all pressed up against the gates of the Academy building. At 9:05 AM, there is a massive uproar in the crowd and the mob starts pushing forward. The doors to the building open and everyone rush to the front to capture the object of their obsession for the last few weeks let alone the last few hours: tickets to the December season concerts hosted at the Music Academy.*

### **Carnatic MeToo**

The December season, also known as the Madras Music Season, or *Margazhi Season*, is a series of concerts that take place in the Indian city of Madras. The Madras Music Academy, a prominent institute for the patronage of Carnatic music in the Indian subcontinent, has presented this festival annually since 1927. The concert season typically sees thousands of fans of Carnatic music, known as *rasikas*, line up for hours just to get tickets to their favorite artists at the prime venues. However, this year is not just a celebration of the *Margazhi Festival*'s 92<sup>nd</sup> year. October 2019 marks one year since several women accused twelve prominent male musicians and dancers of sexual harassment. These accusations began when singer Chinmayi Sripaada released a series of tweets accusing lyricist Vairamuthu of sexual assault. The movement that was birthed was called #Carnatic Me Too. Chinmayi's tweets came at the time when #MeToo had been trending on twitter for months straight. This was a global movement that encouraged women and

men to support each other in the global outcry against sexual harassment and assault. After Chinamayi's tweet, a swarm of women musicians, artists, and students started adding the hashtag Carnatic Me Too to posts about the truth behind their experiences as women in Carnatic music. Several prominent musicians were accused. Of these, one denied the allegations while others remained silent about the accusations. The accusations covered a wide array of actions including "sending inappropriate messages, groping, forcibly kissing" to "molestation and demanding sex."<sup>1</sup> The movement came to a head when "200 Carnatic musicians signed a statement condemning sexual harassment and encouraged more women to come forward."<sup>2</sup> In response to these reactions, a public forum was organized in Chennai called "Ek Potlee Ret Ki" (one fist full of sand) with the aim of discussing a variety of legitimate, legal action towards the accused. Below is an example of the town hall flyers sent out to discuss the allegations and response.

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<sup>1</sup> Archana Nathan, "#MeToo: In World of Carnatic Music and Bharatanatyam, Women Say Harassment Is an Open Secret," *Scroll.In*, October 15, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

**PUBLIC HEARING & CONSULTATION  
TOWARDS CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION AROUND #METOO  
IN CHENNAI**

The #MeToo movement has finally brought the marginalised debate of sexual harassment and abuse to the mainstream. It is time to take this organically formed Internet movement onto the streets. Let us make an effort to turn this virtual solidarity space into a real and vibrant advocacy forum. காணி நிலம் (Ek Potlee Ret Ki) is putting together a public hearing to open socio-political discourse around #MeToo.

Harassment is often more than just physical repression. It is a manifestation of power and persons in power who abuse their positions should be brought to account. We need to create a safe space for survivors to now champion this cause. Join us to strengthen this platform through robust discourse. Share your stories, give your suggestions, or even just stand in solidarity. Time is ripe to strike this rotting system of violence and the silence that surrounds it.

Date: 21 October 2018, Sunday  
Time: 3 PM - 6 PM  
Venue: to be announced shortly

ek potlee ret ki  
காணி நிலம்

**Chennai says #MeToo #TimesUp**

<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 Ek Potlee Ret Ki flyer for October 21 Town Hall

<sup>3</sup> Ek Potlee Reti Ki, "Ek Potlee Ret Ki Facebook Page," Facebook, October 21, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/events/252372712142311/>.

The Music Academy, one of the only few musical organizations to formally make changes from these accusations, reacted by dropping seven of the accused artists from their December Season program including “chitra vina player N Ravikiran, vocalist OS Thyagarajan, violinist Nagai Sriram and mridangam artistes Mannargudi A Easwaran, Srimushnam V Raja Rao, Thiruvarur Vaidyanathan and R Ramesh.”<sup>4</sup> The artists were still not included in the 2019 program. However, no legal action has yet to be taken against these artists even though the public forum filed several internal complaints with the support of the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act of 2013 (SHWWA). The SHWWA requires any organization with more than 10 employees to establish an internal complaints committee. However, the challenge that remains with dealing with this issue is that many instances of harassment can take place “in the homes of teacher, where most of the instructing and training takes place.”<sup>5</sup> The buzz of the movement has largely died down since 2018. And though the artists dropped from the Academy’s program have not been re-added, they still are performing at other concert venues in the city and during the season.

The Federation of Sabhas, an organization of ten prominent concert venues other than the Academy, made the point that though many social forums and townhalls were set up with a variety of female musicians, these forums seemed generally fruitless in creating an environment where formal complaints with specific accusations would be created. The head of the Federation K. Harishankar lamented that “not a single survivor has come forward to lodge a formal complaint.”<sup>6</sup> The obvious fears of doing so are acknowledged by Harishankar. He says “people

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Archana Nathan,, “A Year after #MeToo Rocked the Carnatic Circuit, How have the Sabhas Responded,” The Hindu Business Line, August 23, 2019.



prefer to be anonymous. But the SHWWA does not allow for accusers to remain anonymous”<sup>7</sup> and the Sabhas do not have the cultural or social capital to offer any sort of protection to the women that do come forward. Still, the Federation never publicized its due process of enquiry and no third-party has verified its process of lodging formal complaints, though Harishankar stresses that “they have them in place and will be putting them up on our website soon.”<sup>8</sup>

#CarnaticMeToo has not disappeared. Though the Federation and the Academy have taken little legal action, the social pressure of the movement remains and can be attributed as the sole reason why all seven of the performers are still not added to the Academy’s list of performers a year after their accusations were released. The 2019 *Margazhi* Season is starting off with the shadow of #CarnaticMeToo hanging ominously above it. This shadow is calling into question more than just the treatment of sexual harassment in the Carnatic music community, but the overall treatment of women in the genre and the nation as a whole. #CarnaticMeToo reminds one that the female voice has had a long arduous journey to prominence in the Indian subcontinent. The problems of patriarchy and classism have been an undertone of the world of Carnatic music for centuries. In an anonymous interview with Scroll India magazine, a female survivor says: “Abuse is not just about groping or touching me. It is about power and its misuse. Especially in the field of classical music and dance, a lot of predators hide behind their caste, their bhakti and religion.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan, “#MeToo: In World of Carnatic Music and Bharatanatyam.”

## **Background**

The journey of the female voice is the story of the women of Carnatic music. Carnatic music traces its roots back to the ancient traditions of South India. This ancient art form has undergone much musical and social transformation over the last few hundred years. Particularly in the realm of gender politics in India, South Indian classical music has seen a renaissance of emerging female artists over the last century. The interest of this paper is in that particular moment in history when the cultural constructs of India made it possible for women to break through barriers and emerge as eminent, sought-after artists in classical music. This historical connection between women and the classical arts of South India is through the *devadasis*. These were hereditary female musicians and dancers from a variety of non-Brahmin castes.<sup>10</sup> These women were often found in temples and rendered ritual and artistic services within temples.<sup>11</sup> However, the social perceptions of these women were immensely distorted in history upon the colonization of the British in India. Colonial era “reforms” imposed by the British hypersexualized the social perceptions of the *devadasi* women and undermined their roles as stewards of the classical arts by lambasting their “purity” as women. These colonial campaigns were a part of the larger social movements in nineteenth-century India that subjected women to restrictions on their sexuality and autonomy. Colonial era rule in India also saw a normalization of Brahmin elitism in various social and political contexts. Through social purity movements, the female identity became coopted as tool of enacting the agendas of the Brahmin elite on a national scale. The degradation of the character of *devadasi* women was coupled with a similar

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<sup>10</sup> Amanda J. Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 20-200.

<sup>11</sup> Mytheli Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects : Devadasis and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency,” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 1 (March 2011): 63–92.

destruction of respect for women which further institutionalized gendered discrimination against women on social and political fronts.

However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Carnatic music, underwent a series of major shifts in context and practice.”<sup>12</sup> These shifts drastically transformed the social perceptions of *devadasis* and created new opportunities for women to emerge onto the classical arts stage. Geographically, the social hub for Carnatic music moved to Madras (Chennai). Socially, the performing arts became a pinnacle of Brahmin and upper-caste families. Economically, the growth of the upper-middle class in India created the space for more investment into the arts in regard to larger venues, All-India Radio entertainment, and the broad popularization of performing the classical arts. The most intriguing shift of this time period was the politics of gender. This paper is interested in understanding how the female voice became heard in India, both in music and politics. The emergence of female artists and the growing voice of women in gender politics issues in India during the early twentieth century is a coincidence that must have some explanation. Thus, the two main research areas of this paper are first, to establish the political and social environment of postcolonial India in which the female voice became respected in the classical arts and second, to understand how the female rise to popularity in the twentieth century impacted the state of gender dynamics in Carnatic music in the twenty-first century, especially through the lens of the #MeToo movement. Finally, these research areas aim to answer one overarching question: What was the journey of the female voice in Carnatic music?

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<sup>12</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 23.

## **Thesis Question**

In order to tell the story of the female voice, this paper will chronologically construct the events of India through the lens of gender, politics, and the arts. Research begins with a historical analysis of the *devadasis*. This research will examine their origins as well as the impact of the colonial movement on the social perceptions of these women. Through this research, I will then be able to set the stage for the twentieth-century resurgence of Indian classical music and the female performers of the time. This moment in history will need to be deeply analyzed through many lenses. The research will focus on identifying the specific political, social, and economic factors that broke barriers preventing women to rise in popularity. After creating this timeline for the rise of the female voice, it will be necessary to conduct an analysis of the modern-day relationship between women and the Carnatic music scene. This analysis will primarily be conducted through the lens of the #MeToo movement that gained attention from the broader community in the last few years. News articles and interviews with female artists who have raised warnings signs about the treatment of women in professional music settings will serve as the main sources of analysis. This research will aim to rate the treatment of women by the Indian music industry and hopefully give some recommendations based on the historical lessons learned. The basic question I will try to answer is this: How did the emergence of upper-caste women as performers of classical music on the concert stage in early-20th-century South India impact female musicians and musical practice in the present?

## CHAPTER 1: CLASSICAL ART AND GENDER

Music and religion have gone hand-in-hand for centuries in almost every major world religion. However, in Hinduism, the line between music and religion is nearly unrecognizable. In this religion, the term “secular music” seems almost an oxymoron. Carnatic music is the traditional music of South India and is one prime example of this unbreakable bond between Hinduism and music. The roots of this musical genre are based in the ancient texts of Hinduism and these roots carry several implications for the way in which the genre is expressed. Carnatic music not only carries immense religious meaning, it also has evolved to take on various prescriptive forms in defining social and cultural norms based on this religious backing. To understand what Carnatic music is, one must first understand the importance of religious music in Hinduism. This section will first explore the religious underpinnings of Carnatic music, then explore the context of cultural and social norms in the genre and the impact of these norms on gender expression, before finally drawing some implications of this religious and cultural background on the modern classical tradition.

The pinnacles of Hindu scripture are the Vedas and Upanishads. These ancient texts create the backbone of what values and principles define the religion. These scriptures were passed on both textually and orally. The oral recitation of these scriptures serves as the basis for Carnatic music, beginning with the syllable “OM.” According to Guy L. Beck, in the *Natya-Sastra*, a Sanskrit text on the performing arts written by sage Bharata Muni, “ancient music or Sangita was a vehicle of liberation founded in the worship of deities such as Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Goddess Sarasvati.”<sup>13</sup> The syllable “OM” was orally chanted in many fire sacrifices

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<sup>13</sup> Guy L. Beck, “Sacred Music and Hindu Religious Experience: From Ancient Roots to the Modern Classical Tradition,” *Religions* 10, no.2 (January 2019): 2.

and was used as a conduit for a variety of religious experiences, including meditation and ritual performances. Beck continues that “vedic fire sacrifice always included chant and meditation on sound, such that ritual chanting was viewed as an effective means to interact with the cosmos and to obtain unseen spiritual merit towards a heavenly afterlife.”<sup>14</sup> These chants were said to be mystical, spiritual, and entirely engrossing by any and all audiences not just because of the text being chanted, but also because of the musical ways in which the scriptures were represented.

The melodic expansion of the Vedas came about near the 1000 BCE mark. Verses from the Rig Veda, which were originally sung using only three unique tones (the tonic, a tone a major second below, and another a minor second above the tonic), were then expanded to encompass a series of seven distinct notes in the singing of hymns from the Sama Veda. Eventually, a musical practice emerged called “Gandharva Sangita,” claimed by some to be the earliest classical music of the area.<sup>15</sup> Sangita here means “music” and Gandharva describes the religious connections of the music. Essentially, this music was considered to be devotional music. What was unique about Gandharva Sangita is that it was the “ancient non-sacrificial counterpart to the sacrificial Sama Veda hymns” and therefore started a further expansion of the melodic representation of religion. In *Natya Sastra*, Bharata Muni writes that Gandharva Sangita came to be linked to the rituals of Hinduism such as “puja” (worship of images) and more public ceremonies such as “sacred dramas, festivals, courtly ceremonies, and temple rituals.”<sup>16</sup> This was the beginning of giving larger public access to music in general throughout the subcontinent.

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<sup>14</sup> Beck, “Sacred Music,” 3.

<sup>15</sup> Beck, “Sacred Music,” 4.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, “Sacred Music,” 12.

## **Courtly Patronage + Musical Expansion**

The evolution of Sangita, from the devotional music attached to Hindu scripture to the way classical music is presented today, happened over a millennium. This evolution was particularly interesting because as the methods of performing music changed in India and became a public spectacle, the religious significance of the music became intertwined with social and cultural contexts. One major movement that helped throw devotional music into the hands of the public was the *Bhakti Movement* that began in southern India during the sixth century CE. This movement created groups of people that composed devotion-centered song-texts that were in vernacular languages such as Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. However, this music was still mostly confined to religious settings. Music did not become more publicly available till the courtly patronage that came during the 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The evolution of this devotional music to a performance-based music started in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. During the thirteenth century, classical traditions separated into northern Hindustani and southern Carnatic. It was during this time that the modern structure of Carnatic music was created. A further musical expansion of Gandharva Sangita added “lyric to a beat and a word.”<sup>17</sup> Carnatic music was popularized in southern India, while musical expansion in North India was primarily called Hindustani music. After the Islamic interventions of the fifteenth century, the rise of courtly patronage also contributed greatly to the larger democratization of the art form. The Tanjore court that was located near modern day Madras, under the Nayaka and Maratha clans became a cornerstone of performing arts. Lakshmi Subramaniam writes in her analysis of the history of Carnatic music in Madras that the Tanjore

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<sup>17</sup> Beck, “Sacred Music,” 7.

court “engaged in extensive musical research” through the Rajas from Tulaja (1728-1736) to Sarbhoji II (1798-1832), who “authored a number of musical tracts besides composing pieces themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

Courtly patronage in Southern India led to the development of the skill of composers and the complexity of compositions. This also contributed to the creation of the modern form of Carnatic music. The Carnatic repertoire for concert performances slowly became centered around two main concepts: the interpretative and the reproductive. The interpretative sections included the delineation of a particular melody or *raga* and the reproductive sections included the rendering of set compositions called *kritis* or *kirtanas*.<sup>19</sup> Carnatic music also went through many forms of standardization throughout this time as well. Particularly, composers set out to formalize the “attributes and properties of melodic structures or *ragas*.”<sup>20</sup> The trinity of Carnatic music is a group of three composers who are considered to have made the most contribution to the repertoire of *kirtanas* sung in the genre. Though none of these three composers received courtly patronage, their creativity was primarily influenced by the social and cultural norms established by aristocratic and commercial context of the time that was influenced by the courts. This was the time of the development of the musical trinity of Tyagaraja (1767-1847), Muthuswami Dikshitar (1725-1834), and Shyama Sastri (1762-1827). This time was one defined by immense creativity and expansion of Carnatic music as it is known today. It is noteworthy that the compositions of the trinity are distinguished by the unique *mudras* (stylistic signatures) of each composer. The compositions of each were written in a variety of different languages.

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<sup>18</sup> Subramanian, Lakshmi, “The Reinvention of a Tradition: Nationalism, Carnatic Music and the Madras Music Academy, 1900-1947,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 36, no.2 (November 1999): 136.

<sup>19</sup> Subramaniam, "Reinvention of a Tradition," 132.

<sup>20</sup> Subramaniam, "Reinvention of a Tradition," 133.



Tyagaraja mainly wrote compositions in Telugu while Dikshitar is remembered for his wide range of *kirtanas* in Sanskrit (the sacred language). Shyama Sastri, who received patronage from the Maratha court, is legendary for his complex rhythmic structures. The tradition was mostly passed on through oral instruction and dissemination. A majority of performances took place in courtly and temple settings. As Carnatic music grew in popularity, temples became homes to both music and dance performances. For example, the *Peria Melam* temple orchestra was a male troupe of instrument players who would be attached to a specific deity or temple and perform during the ritual worship conducted at the temple. Their choice of *ragas* to perform was in no way random and usually “specific melodies regarded [as] traditional [and] auspicious were chosen.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, the inextricable link between Carnatic music and its religious underpinnings was carried through its evolution and expansion. No matter how public and performative the art became, Carnatic music has always maintained its relationship with the rituals and values of the temple.

In order to truly understand the spread of Carnatic music, it is immensely important to first understand the social and political context in which the art first began to spread. What is clear from previous research is that there was a distinct hierarchy in the performance of music. This hierarchy was influenced by two social constructs that are also linked to Hinduism: caste and gender. Those who pursued a musical profession outside of the temple were called “*bhagvatars*” and were usually Brahmin men attached to a court or other individual patrons. These men were touted for their classical education in the complex skills passed down by the trinity of saint composers themselves. *Bhagvatars* were considered high class performers and maintained a high level of social respectability. Meanwhile, temple performers of all kind were

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<sup>21</sup> Subramaniam, "Reinvention of a Tradition," 122.

usually relegated to performing less technically complex pieces, though these pieces were usually more devotional in nature. Even though the *Peria Melam* mentioned before was played exclusively by male members of a particular caste, they were still not as well respected as the *bhagvatars*. Furthermore, the *bhagvatars* carried a lot of sociopolitical capital, whereas its counterpart, the *Chinna Melam* (a name that literally means smaller band), comprised of “dancing girls and their male musician instructors,” was distinguished by a very clear social division from the higher proficiency of the *Peria Melam*. The female dancers were called *devadasis*, women who were temple performers of dance and accompanied in other ritual performances. The history of the *devadasis* is long and complex, one that this paper will discuss at greater length later on. However, what is important to recognize right now is the obvious differences between temple performers and professional performers. Some of the most popular rituals of the Hindu religion were linked to widespread performance of song and dance. These occasions were not just seen as religious events, they were also opportunities for musicians and dancers to showcase their skills to the public.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, India saw the rise of smaller courtly centers in modern day Mysore, Ramnad, and Travancore. These centers rose as British occupation of the subcontinent led to the decline of places like Tanjore. The governing elites of these new courtly centers also strictly adhered to the traditional politics and values of the courts of the previous centuries. In the case of Ramnad “preoccupation with honor involved extensive participation in palace and temple rituals.”<sup>22</sup> One of the largest festivals to date in the South is the celebration of *Navaratri*, a celebration of female goddesses that lasts nine nights. The *Navaratri* celebrations were not just comprised of temple rituals, they also demanded performances by artists,

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<sup>22</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 138.

musicians, and the female devadasi dancers. The most famous court that patronized the arts in these new cities was the court of Krishan Rao Wodeyar in Mysore. This court was especially prominent because the Wodeyar was also extremely well versed in the arts and created many compositions himself.

Another key aspect of Carnatic music that developed and continues to play an important identifier of the art is the nature of knowledge transmission which is widely known as the *guru/shishya parampara*. Essentially, this is the relationship between teachers and students. The development of new urban cities in the South provided a catalyst for the development of Carnatic music education. Through the proliferation of the arts and commerce, cities began growing as cosmopolitan centers. One such example of a city that grew during this time is Madras. Unlike the cities discussed earlier, Madras developed a center commerce rather than as princely court. This was interesting because one could assume that such development would cause an abandonment of the hierarchical nature of patronage that centered around caste and gender as seen before. However, this was not directly the case because as Carnatic music grew, so did the system of transmission or the development of “teacher/student” relationships and schools of music that unfortunately continued to uphold the restrictions of courtly centers. Subramanian writes that “male musicians tended to keep their interaction with women artists as a closely guarded secret.”<sup>23</sup>

Finally, a community that was integral to the rise of female performers in the Indian fine arts is the devadasi community. As far back as the sixteenth century Nayaka period, devadasi

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<sup>23</sup> Subramaniam, “The Reinvention of a Tradition,” 142.

women functioned as “courtesans, secular dance artists in organized guilds called *melams*.”<sup>24</sup> This community has known many names. From courtesans or *tawa'ifs* “the singing and dancing women” employed by courts and the nobility of the state were “significant participants in politics and society.”<sup>25</sup> Much of the research on devadasi communities focuses upon their singing and dancing for Mughal or British nobles. However, Soneji’s work rejects the claim that devadasis performed only temple work. He prefers to term the group as courtesans that performed in their *melams* across households and salons. Soneji stresses the control “of courtesans by court authorities in Tanjore and Baroda” as well as challenging the notion that there was a division between the histories of North Indian and South Indian devadasis.<sup>26</sup> Another piece of critical work on the rise and fall of devadasis is the work of Veena Oldenburg who proposes a new way of looking at devadasi communities. She writes that these communities, while propped up as sexual, dancing figures in western pedagogy, were in fact resisting patriarchal values. She writes that devadasis “struggled for material needs against patriarchal values” while outwardly they conformed to behaviors “in harmony with male power and sexuality.”<sup>27</sup> Ethnomusicology pedagogy on devadasi heritage as well as the decline of these communities will be an important part of this thesis because of the gender politics associated with these communities.

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<sup>24</sup> Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Leonard, “Political Players: Courtesans of Hyderabad,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 4 (October 2013): 423–448.

<sup>26</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 36-37, 50-52, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Veena T. Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (May 1990): 259–287.

## CHAPTER 2: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Carnatic music was restricted to temples and courts. However, by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, technological innovations, cultural movements, and the end of British colonization paved a new pathway for the ancient art. This pathway was highly public. The arts were no longer a coveted courtly experience, rather they were made accessible to the common man. As these developments changed music, worldly developments changed the politics of the nation. After gaining independence from its colonizers in 1947, the postcolonial period of India was a time of cultural identification and definition. This was period that aimed to define the identity of the “India man.” Through definition, the identity of India was now differentiated from its colonizer and the west in general. The building blocks of the identity in post-colonial India were thus based on what India “was not” instead of what it was.

This period of change, especially in South India, had some profound impacts on the gender balance of vocalists in Carnatic music. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of the most prominent artists in the genre were female artists. More specifically, these artists were upper class Brahmin women. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of concert halls, paid performance venues, and academies that were established largely by elite Brahmin men. This period is what many have called the “revival” of Carnatic music.<sup>28</sup> Weidman calls this notion of a revival the result of a socially constructed “temporal and social” break that has been “foundational to the politics of classical music in South India.”<sup>29</sup> The shifts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be ignored. It is true that the spatial center of Carnatic music shifted from royal courts to city streets and that a new nationalistic fervor started in the establishment of institutions of musical education. The end of

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<sup>28</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 60, 115.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the entrance of a new archetype of the female musician. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were traditionally tied to Devadasi heritage. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prominent female musicians were seen part of an emerging, Brahmin, middle-class modernity. As the decades passed, devadasis and their communities of hereditary musicians were regarded as prostitutes. They were denied opportunities to perform and even basic rights as citizens. The new female musician was strikingly different from the devadasi image. Women of upper-caste background were pushed to learn the classic arts, such as a Carnatic music and dance. The learning, perfecting, and performance of the arts became what Weidman argues to be the hallmark of a “respectable woman” and a means to define the nation.

Yet, nationalism is not the only actor in the postcolonial world of Indian culture building. It is important here to acknowledge, that the idea of a nationalist cultural reconstruction is not one without critique. Kalpana Ram argues that the preserving of tradition is “more dynamic and agential than that put forward by nationalist understandings of tradition.”<sup>30</sup> Ram claims that *rasikas* or the fans of Carnatic music carry with them a sense of agency in supporting and praising the types of art they perceive to be great. From the perspective of Carnatic music as solely a performative art, Ram’s argument proves that it was the *rasikas* who would support the styles of male and female performance as they were and continue to be. However, from the perspective of other elements of Carnatic music, such as the standardization, training, and dissemination of the art through educative institutes, it can be argued that the hand of nationalism is not to be discounted.

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<sup>30</sup> Kalpana Ram, “Being ‘Rasikas’: The Affective Pleasures of Music and Dance Spectatorship and Nationhood in Indian Middle-Class Modernity,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 no. 2 (January 2011): 159–175.

This chapter looks at the rise of popular Carnatic music through the lens of the voice of female musicians. How were women treated and what options were afforded to female musicians to take part in the commercialization of Carnatic music that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Furthermore, if this analysis of the revival of Carnatic music from the lens of gender politics leads to a conclusion of institutional inequality, then what are the implications to modern day gender equity in Carnatic music?

The conclusory aim of this chapter is to understand how the playing field for female musicians was set and if that field were tilted in any way that could explain how the #CarnaticMeToo movement could have come about. This chapter will first analyze the decline of princely court system in India and the impact this had on the popularization of Carnatic music. This chapter will look at the growth of nationalism in the realm of the commercialization of Carnatic music to see what, if any, political agendas were at play in this cultural revival. Finally, this chapter will dive into the story of devadasi communities from the post-colonial perspective.

## **2.1 Decline of Courtly Patronage**

### **Shift in Performance Venues**

In order to understand how Carnatic music started to become a agent of nationalism and gender politics, it is important to first analyze its shift from the private to the public. Specifically, this section will look at the ways in which Carnatic music went from being a courtly secret to the commercial, public enterprise that it is today and determine the impacts this had on the performers themselves.

The music tradition of the South in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was largely dependent on the success of royal and aristocratic patronage. Specifically, this success came from the

patronage from rulers such as the Nayakas of the Tanjore Court (1532-1673) and later the Maratha court (1676-1855). The Tanjore court's involvement in music was not only in its performance, but also in extensive musical research. Tanjore kings from Tulaja (1728-36) to Sarbhoji (1798-1832) not only authored numerous works on musical treatises but also penned several compositions themselves. The interest in music also bled into the aim to standardize the learning and attributes of the melodic properties of the music. Raja Sahaji II (1686-1712) recorded the *ragalaskshanas* or melodic attributes of more than 100 melodic structures in his lifetime. However, the most significant role played by courtly figures in the South was the facilitation of artists themselves. The courts provided a platform for the development of the Carnatic musical trinity – Tyagaraja (1767-1847), Muthuswami Dikshitar (1725-1834), and Shayama Sastri (1762-1827). While none of these three were direct beneficiaries of court patronage, their compositional structure and context was the specific result of courtly engagement with artistic interpretation and output. Specific musicians patronized through the courts would also gain significant monetary support from the city's commercial elite. As merchants and shop owners would become patrons of art and religion, these pockets of elite citizens would donate heavily to temple building, artists, and endowments to the arts. This courtly patronage spilled out into other southern centers of kingship as well such as Mysore, Ramnad, Travancore, and Ettiyapuram. The rise of Tanjore was paralleled by the rise of Madras, a small city that eventually used the power of its trading elite in the ending half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to rival Tanjore as a seat for musical and artistic expression. Concerts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were most commonly held in courts or temples attached to palaces. Most of the transmission of music was strictly controlled by courts through the arbitration of musical standards, appointment of music teachers, and



strictures on court musicians to only perform in that specific court with no outside obligations. Instruction in courts remained restricted to a few disciples within the elite circle of the king and his family.<sup>31</sup>

This all began to change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Weidman writes that the “staging of Carnatic music” from private courts to public concerts was not just a shift in performance venue, but rather profound change in the ways in which “Carnatic music came to be performed and heard.”<sup>32</sup> Weidman argues that there were several entry points that led to the shift of performance venues in Carnatic music. One anecdote that serves to showcase how music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century quite literally began being accessible to the public is the story of Mysore King Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar who, in 1930, installed microphones and loudspeakers to the *darbar* (the venue of court assembly) that occurred in the court. Weidman explores the metaphorical importance of this very tangible change in musical access. The loudspeaker physically took the centralized power and authority of the kingly courts and put it on the electric grid, a move that “wired” music to exist outside of the palace.

### **The Rise of Sabhas**

A major change in Carnatic music was the establishment of musical institutions such as *sangita sabhas* (musical associations)<sup>33</sup> and the Madras Music Academy. While courtly cities were the epicenter for music transmission in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Madras was the poster child for the art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most concerts in Madras were sponsored by music sabhas. The term sabha or sangita sabha was used to describe any “voluntary association.” The

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<sup>31</sup> Subramanian, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 99.

<sup>32</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical Voicing the Modern*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Kathleen L’Armand and Adrian L’Armand, “One Hundred Years of Music in Madras: A Case Study in Secondary Urbanization,” *Ethnomusicology* 27, no.3 (September 1983): 411.

first written record of a sabha comes from the founding of Gayan Samaj in Poona in 1874 that then started its Madras branch in 1884. In a speech from the sabha chairman published by the Bombay Gazette Steam Press in 1887 on November 17, the purpose of the association was of “cultivating the national music of India and of making it, as in other countries a source of amusement and a thing with which everyone *should* acquainted.”<sup>34</sup> The patrons of the Gayan Samaj, P. Rangaya Naidu, P. Tyagaraja Chetty, and A. Dhanakoti Mudalier also “enjoyed a measure of official British patronage” as well. One of the first aims of the sabha, as outlined by the speech of its founder, was to produce “standard work on the subject of Indian music” that had not yet been published and presented to the public. Subramaniam argues that these efforts were directly influenced by the colonial spirit. Through a thorough research of archival reports from European observers such as William Jones and Augustus Willard, Subramaniam finds that much of the commentary on Indian music was regarding the lack of harmony and notation.<sup>35</sup>

The patrons of Gayan Samaj also stressed the need for better notation for the purpose of restructuring the *guru-shishya parampara* or the “system of oral transmission from an individual teacher to a disciple.” The Samaj used close relations with the remaining courtly centers, such as Travancore, to persuade the courtly patrons of the art to “get the more popular airs reduced to English notation.” In 1879, the Gayan Samaj opened a school for Indian music. Its agenda, as described by the Chairman in his speech, was the impetus to incorporate classical music as part of a glorious national heritage and “cultivating the national music of India.”<sup>36</sup> The Madras wing of the Gayan Samaj began heavily investing in knowledge transmission by promoting the

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<sup>34</sup> Bulwant Trimbak Sahasrabudhe, *Hindu Music and The Gayan Samaj* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Steam Press, 1887), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 143.

<sup>36</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 144.

establishment of schools of music. The Samaj was involved in hosting multiple musical exhibitions that it touted as a way to enable amateurs to exhibit their talent. In reality, these exhibitions were yet another way for the elite leaders of music associations to set appropriate aesthetic and purity standards in their cause of retaining the classical tradition. Through the advent of music associations, the agency of patronage in Carnatic music strongly shifted from the court to the professional literati and left the latter to determine the contours of the tradition, the values and tastes relating to performance, and the manner of instruction. L'Armand's 1983 study on the growth of Madras over a hundred years, based on archival research, notes that in 1898 the total active and inactive sabhas numbered 15 in the city of Madras. By 1938, this number had ballooned to nearly 49 with a slight drop off to 36 in 1976. Inactive sabhas were defined as those that only sponsored 2 or fewer concerts in year.<sup>37</sup> The growth and popularity of sabhas not only increased the number of concerts being made available to the public, but also increased efforts to structure and standardize Carnatic music in a way that made it easier for people to learn and teach.

NUMBER OF MUSIC SABHAS IN MADRAS FOR NINE TIME PERIODS, 1898-1977

Sabhas	1898-99		1908-09		1915		1928-29		1938-39		1948-49		1955		1967-68		1976-77	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Active	8	(53)	9	(75)	14	(74)	24	(49)	6	(100)	--	--	--	--	26	(75)	27	(75)
Inactive <sup>1</sup>	7	(47)	3	(25)	5	(26)	25	(51)	0	0	--	--	--	--	8	(25)	9	(25)
Total	15	(100)	12	(100)	19	(100)	49	(100)	6	(100)	19	(100)	20 <sup>2</sup>	(100)	34	(100)	36	(100)

<sup>1</sup>Sponsoring two or fewer performances in the year.

<sup>2</sup>From Singer 1972-171

Figure 2 L'Armand, "Number of Music Sabhas in Madras for Nine Time Periods 1898-1977" in "One Hundred Years," table, *Ethnomusicology* 27 no.3 (September 1983), 421.

<sup>37</sup> L'Armand, "One Hundred Years," 400.

The Madras Music Academy was another stalwart of music education. Established at the fourth All Indian Music Conference in 1927, the Academy was motivated to take up the “cause” of Carnatic music and its dissemination. Subramaniam notes that the aims of the Academy were to encourage new talent, provide facilities for widespread instruction and performance standards, and serve as a patron for the preservation and organization of compositions.<sup>38</sup> The cultivation of talent, particularly when it came to the female voice, was an interesting approach. The Academy was strict in its adherence to what they argued was a distinctively Carnatic style that rested on notions of orthodoxy and purity. The style of intricate, fast paced singing became codified through the Academy's use of annual lecture demonstrations. By 1943, the Academy was had sponsored a multitude of concerts and in one self-congratulatory moments, V. S. Rao, a senior patron at the Academy journal, wrote “the radio performances by woman of good families are fast coming into vogue”<sup>39</sup>

The Academy praised itself for giving devadasi artists such as Veena Dhanammal a stage, as long as the songs chosen were “devotional and on orthodox topics,” unlike the All-India Music Conference that banned all devadasis.<sup>40</sup> The academy, founded by the Brahmin elite, was using its perch to establish a national standard of Carnatic music. This meant that not only did the Academy control what was “good” music, but also who were “good artists.” The method of including women into the Academy took the unsurprisingly patriarchal approach of defining

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<sup>38</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 153.

<sup>39</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 158.

<sup>40</sup> Subramaniam, “Reinvention of a Tradition,” 156.

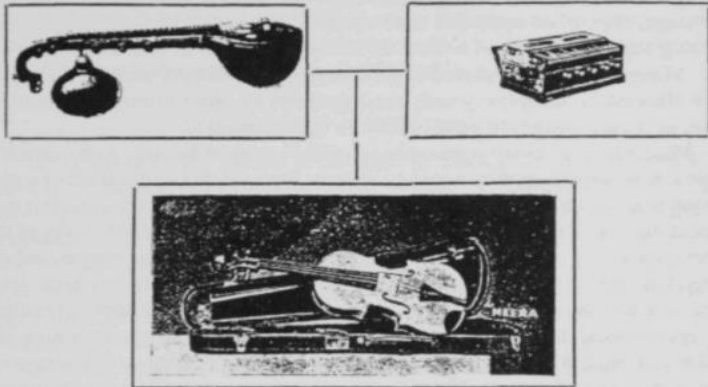
what women should and should not sing. Particularly targeting the middle class, the Academy was adding itself as an important figure in shaping in the national identity of the woman.

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A modern wife has tons of unemployed leisure and a wise husband must provide hobbies for her leisure being usefully employed. \* \* \*

What better and more Sole-satisfying hobby can there be than VIOLIN playing. \* \* \*

Give your wife a VIOLIN to-day and ensure eternal happiness at home. \* \* \*



1. Genuine German & French Violins.
2. Calcutta "Mohan Flute" Harmoniums.
3. Tanjore Veenas, Thambooras.
4. Hohner's Accordeons & Mouth Organs, the best in the world.
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6. Every Make of Gramophone and all kinds of Records.

**NOTE:—Our Violins and Harmoniums are Unbeatable in Quality and we make the proud claim that we possess the greatest number of satisfied Customers.**

**Violin Strings, Spool Wires (Silver-plated) for Veenas a speciality.**

**THE SOUTH INDIA MUSIC EMPORIUM,  
3, BROADWAY, MADRAS.**

Figure 3 Advertisement in the Madras Music Academy Souvenir, c.1938. Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 211.

## Public Performances

With the initial work of early sabhas such as the Gayan Samaj the number of concert halls and sheer number of concerts being held both in the city of Madras as well as cities all around the South was growing. The L'Armand study of concerts in Madras starts with the year 1898 and presents its data in eight-year increments. The number of concerts in Madras saw a steady increase from 1898 to 1928, decreased between 1928-1938, and then started increasing again until the study ended in 1967.

A lot of the concerts performed during this time were *Harikatha* performances. This was a performance style developed in the Tanjore court by the musician Krishna Bhagavatar. The style was known for its religious themes and musical narrative forms using classical musical accompaniment such as the violin. What is interesting in this research is that after 1928, the percentage of Harikatha performances recorded in Madras dropped significantly, going from 192 or 65% of all concerts in 1929 to only 16 or 15% of all concerts in 1938. This drop can be due to multiple reasons.

Early films, also known as “talking pictures” were introduced to Madras in the early 1930s. Many of these films incorporated Harikatha themes and thus became more popular. More broadly, as the religious and social themes explored in Harikatha performances became commoditized on film, they lost their unique charm as live performances. This is the beginning of a growing detachment of music from the musician that occurred through the increasing growth of concerts in metropolitan Madras. The business model of sabhas stood to profit from the growing demand for Carnatic musicians more than ever before. The musicians themselves, lacking the courtly patronage of the previous century that would give them shelter and food in

support of their music, would now be privy to a system of supply and demand determining their pay instead. Weidman calls this the Madras system of “fair pay,” where all musicians had to be deemed equally qualified to receive that pay to perform and audiences were now the ones paying to hear musicians of certain standards.<sup>42</sup>

As courtly patronage died and colonial modernity grew, the conflict between the secular and the religious also grew. Janaki Bakhle writes that one key aspect of musical nationalism was the need for music to be “nationalized...institutionalized, centralized, and standardized.”<sup>43</sup> In her historical analysis, the agent of this action was Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande. Bakhle describes the contribution of Bhatkande to music as one that was years ahead of his time. Bhatkande supported a secular approach to both the teaching and performance of classical music. He rejected the Vedic origins of the art as he believed that “music’s history could do as well with a foundational text from the sixteenth century.”<sup>44</sup> Bakhle contrasts the views of Bhatkande with the views of another man that was extremely influential, Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who she characterizes as someone opposite to Bhatkande, holding reverence to Hindu ideology. Bakhle purports that in the end, it was the religious veneration of Paluskar that won over music educators and permeated music education, leading to Brahmin domination of music institutions in South India. Bakhle’s main argument is that bureaucracy in India became a product of the British empire, but Carnatic music retained its religious roots and was unaffected by this modernity. However, if religious undertones remain prevalent in Carnatic music, it is assumptive to suggest that the division

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<sup>42</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical Voicing the Modern*, 219.

<sup>43</sup> Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 98.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

between a secular and religious musical context is black and white.<sup>45</sup> I argue here that the subtle forces of colonial bureaucracy actually played a big part in defining gender roles in music. In fact, these impacts may actually have been more influential than the gender roles from Hinduism itself. In the next section, this thesis will analyze the way in which nationalism on the political stage influenced women's gender roles in the social and musical context.

## **2.2 Postcolonial Gender Politics: Redefining the Woman, in the Home and on the Stage**

### **Redefining the Postcolonial Woman**

The colonization of India by the British was most obviously a political and economic event. But, in deeper study, it can also be viewed as a catalyst for redefining gender in the subcontinent. Sinha argues that “the voice of the colonized subject is not only always gendered – that is, marked as male or female – but also is always mediated through the discourses of empires and nations.”<sup>46</sup> What is central to this gendering of the nation is the characterization of the state. British characterization of the Indian social and political status prior to colonization was one of lawlessness, barbaric, and the need of instituting order. Mrinalini Sinha views this characterization through literature and the publication of the book *Mother India* by Katherine Mayo in 1927. In the book, Mayo addresses themes such as child marriage, early sexuality, and mothers themselves in India in an attempt to causally connect these themes to ideas of India's moral ineptitude and barbarism. The book was routinely used as imperialist propaganda and subsequently decried by nationalists. While some blame Mayo herself for being misguided, some

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Slawek, “Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition by Janaki Bakhle Review,” *Ethnomusicology* 51 no. 3 (Fall 2007): 506–512.

<sup>46</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, “Reading Mother India: Empire, Nation, and the Female Voice,” *Journal of Women's History* 6 no. 2 (Summer 1994): 6–44.



historians suggest that Mayo was guided by the British government themselves.<sup>47</sup> The “civilizing mission” of the British, and of any colonizer, was the project and marketing tactic of colonial power. The tools of this mission are not just military might or economic oppression. The less obvious methods of control are social “reform” agendas, assertion of religious doctrines, and standardization of culture. These tools were most oppressive when used on women in India.

Partha Chatterjee gives a brief framework for understanding the contradictory pulls on nationalism against the dominance of colonialism. The resolution was mainly “build around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual.”<sup>48</sup> The material world was dominated by Western civilization. This primarily dealt with the power in science, technology, and economic state power as demonstrated by the East India Company among others. Colonized people had to learn how to organize their nations to overcome that material domination. This meant an economic and political reordering in colonized nations to allow the formation of government and modern legislative policies that would eventually need to be incorporated into existing culture. The nationalist project was then based on reordering society to allow for this material power development, while still not simply imitating Western culture and threatening self-identity of the national culture. Indian nationalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was tasked with cultivating material techniques that would retain the spiritual domain of the East that the nationalists argued were already superior to the West. In characterizing the nationalist project, it then becomes not just a question of a political struggle for power, but the

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<sup>47</sup> Sinha, “Reading Mother India,” 8.

<sup>48</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women : The Contest in India,” *American Ethnologist* 16 no. 4 (November 1989): 622–633.

independence of the nation in every material and spiritual aspect of the lives of the nation's people.

It is important here to recognize that the interaction between the Western and Eastern woman first started from a place of fear. This type of interaction was seen in Bengali women through the novels, skits, and music of Iswarchandra Gupta (1812-1859), Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873), Amritalal Bose (1853-1929), and Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925). The purpose of these great authors was to parody what Chatterjee calls the idea of "Bengali women trying to imitate the ways of a *memsahib*"<sup>49</sup> who was an upper-class English woman. Criticism ranged from condemnation of clothing choice such as the blouse and petticoat to the use of Western jewelry, and patterns of art and sewing. The theme was that the Western woman was careless in her use of wealth and luxury, leading to a recklessness in maintaining the well-being of the home. From an objective perspective, some of the writing is a little jealous and obvious in its reproach. But the reason for this ridicule stems from a feeling of the material and spiritual aspect of life being threatened by colonizers. Would this new external ruler redefine the Bengali home? How would the norms of life continue if this external power redefined the principles of culture? A good example of this trend is from Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's work *Parabarik Prabandha* (Essays about Family) that was published in 1882:

"Those who laid down our religious codes discovered the inner spirituality which resides within even the most animal pursuits which humans must perform, and thus removed the animal qualities from those actions. This has not happened in Europe. Religion there is completely divorced from [material] life. Europeans do not feel inclined to regulate all aspects of their life by the norms of religion; they condemn it as clericalism.... In the Arya system, the wife is a goddess. In the European system, she is a partner and companion."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism," 625.

<sup>50</sup> Sreyajana Mukherjee, "Revisiting the Traditional Mind: Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya (1827-1894) on Women," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (Fall 2012): 941-45.

The important takeaway from this paragraph is the inherent responsibility placed on women not only to recognize the loss of spiritual tradition due to the external powers, but also to be a warrior in protecting these traditions. The line that sticks out is the division between the “Arya” system and the “European” system, where women are goddesses in the former and simply partners in the latter. Indian women in post-colonial India were now given a strict gender role in establishing and preserving the national identity as the political struggle for independence continued. Women became the beacons of self-identity in the rapidly changing colonial situation and their everyday life became a tool to define the nation. Women’s dress, choice of food, education status, skill in the home, and life outside the home became the object of those struggling to define what the material and spiritual identity of postcolonial India would be.<sup>51</sup> This became the “new” woman. Furthermore, the difference that was placed between the “new woman” and the “common woman” only supported the oppressive system of patriarchy in the old India.<sup>52</sup> The common woman was from a low caste, low class, had little political emancipation, and behaved lawlessly and recklessly. Common women were characterized by all the personas of “the vulgar indigenous population” the colonizers had come to “save.” The new woman was not only liberated by her modernity, but also grounded in the spiritual principles that gave the East its cultural domination.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India*. Routledge (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 15-50.

<sup>52</sup> Sinha, “Reading Mother India,” 10.

<sup>53</sup> Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making*.

## The Social Reform Movement

The re-imagination of the role of gender was a popular motivating factor in nationalist movements. This nationalism was borne out of new social morality and attitudes of reform that would essentially throw out ritual practices in Indian women that were identified as archaic or morally backwards. This agenda, however, needed “agents of change,” or communities that could be used as the vehicles of this reformist movement. The interventions of social reformers therefore found their way into the world of performing arts, particularly dance, in the devadasi communities. As early as the 1870s, social reformers had identified the devadasi community as one in need of reform. A defining aspect of devadasi women was their marriage to the Hindu temple deity as a part of their ritual service within temples. This rendered their role as “wives” of the god that was represented the most in that temple. Though in practice they were married to the deity, many devadasi women had mortal, upper-caste male patrons and maintained sexual relationships outside of the temple.

It is difficult to lay the blame on the decline of the devadasi communities on a singular set of events. Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan writes that simultaneous events such as the colonial dismantling of royal patronage and the rise of Madras as an urban center can be seen as the catalysts for changing social policies in colonial government.<sup>54</sup> Soneji contends that in the aftermath of the 1857 Uprising, the British presence strengthened in India and, therefore, also led to important changes in the urban landscape. Particularly in urban centers, where there were new mass gatherings of artists who had been cast from the foreclosed royal patronage system,

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<sup>54</sup> Nadadur R. Kannan, “Gendered Violence and Displacement of Devadasis in the Early Twentieth-century South India,” *Sikh Formations* 12 no. 2-3 (January 2016): 245.

devadasis had changed their repertoire to cater to the urban/European audiences.<sup>55</sup> These artists were mainly dancers who had adapted to salon performances that were more common in Western Europe and thus managed to decontextualize devadasis from their social role to mostly a performative, entertainment role. This urban change can be one catalyst for the ways that the sexual practices of devadasi communities came to define them.

Social reform efforts sought to abolish the practice of devadasi communities as temple performers and banned all interaction with these communities. The communities thus became smaller and virtually extinct by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This complex history made the devadasi community a ripe area of scholarly research regarding their frameworks of conjugality and sexuality. One strand of scholarship focuses on how the impact of colonial-era reforms on Devadasi communities narrowed the range of options available to them in terms of performance by ending the practice of dedicating them to temples. However, there are scholars that question the notion of these nationalist movements only targeting devadasi women. Geraldine Forbes and Mrinalini Sinha say that these restrictions were nothing but the same types of stringent policies that limited all women's sexual autonomy in post-colonial India, and that some efforts actually emancipated many of these women.<sup>56</sup> These divergent viewpoints show that the history of devadasi woman is complex, and their interaction with the colonial government of India was multifaceted and layered. Mytheli Sreenivas responds to these arguments by focusing on how these social reforms influenced "heteronormative, monogamous conjugality in the negotiations between colonialism, nationalism, and the Indian women's movement" and suggests that these

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<sup>55</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> Vasudha Narayanan, "Performing Arts, Re-forming Rituals: Women and Social Change in South India," in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 177-195.

social reforms primarily impacted the sexual normativity of women.<sup>57</sup> This thesis most closely follows Sreenivas and Sinha in its understanding of how these new ideas of sexual normativity influenced the rise of the female vocal performer.

One of the main ways that the colonial government of India was able to influence the devadasi population was to redefine their rights as a class of women in terms of marriage laws, property ownerships, and control. A project of the colonial regime was to create a bureaucratic state that was focused on bringing all the far-reaching portions of the Indian populace into the revenue generating economic system. This meant that the “temple economy” of the devadasi community would also be rendered ineffective. The colonial interpretations of the social roles of devadasis were strikingly ambivalent. Some officers seesawed over terms such as “wives of the deity” and “prostitutes.” Sreenivas notes that in several civil law cases of the early colonial period, the devadasi women were often treated as a separate class of women from regular Hindu women. Particularly in terms of their ownership and inheritance of property, devadasi’s female children were preferred over male children for inheritance of personal property (unlike the dominance of sons in most colonial property law). However, this recognition of a devadasi class in civil law was in sharp contrast to the treatment of devadasis in criminal law where they were assigned the status of “prostitutes.”<sup>58</sup> Colonial courts often defined prostitution as a “vast residual category of...sexual activity outside marriage,”<sup>59</sup> and then determined that devadasi

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<sup>57</sup> Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects,” 86.

<sup>58</sup> Kunal M. Parker, “A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes’ Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800-1914,” *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no.3 (January 1998): 559–633.

<sup>59</sup> Parker, “A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes,” 600.

women who were nonmarrying but carried on sexual relations with upper-class men were, by their definition, “prostitutes.”

The cause for this sexualization is difficult to place. Nadadur writes that these civil laws came from “Anglo-Indian laws...based on religion/secular dichotomy.”<sup>60</sup> In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the increased British military presence, as well as social presence, in urban cities led to an increase in the numbers of brothels and sex workers. The British response to this was to pass legislation such as the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864 and 1868 out of concern for the “spread of venereal diseases among the soldiers.”<sup>61</sup> However, as Soneji argues, these laws worked to force sex workers to register and undergo compulsory medical exams. While the law was eventually abolished, Soneji remarks that this forced registration was an irrevocable mark on the perception of devadasi women as prostitutes.<sup>62</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century was also the time of Purity Campaigns that were used to shape perceptions of the moral right and wrong way of life. These movements started to couple restrained female sexuality with self-hygiene and purity of race with classical Hindu values.<sup>63</sup>

The story of the devadasi community is integral to the story of the female performer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, the treatment of devadasi women brings us a much broader understanding of gender politics in India. In analyzing these “reformist” policies, one can gain an understanding of the national identity of a woman in India during this time period, or, at the very least, what the government wanted the Indian woman to be. This can lead to a greater discussion of the impact that devadasi reformist policies had on Indian feminism. Finally, hereditary artists like those in

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<sup>60</sup> Nadadur, “Gendered Violence and Displacement of Devadasis,” 244.

<sup>61</sup> Nadadur, “Gendered Violence and Displacement of Devadasis,” 245.

<sup>62</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 115.

<sup>63</sup> Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism,” 9.

the devadasi community carried an immense amount of musical knowledge with them. In understanding what happened to these communities, one can start to understand where this knowledge went and how the oral heritage of Carnatic music was altered due to the decline of the devadasi communities. Kalpana Kannabiran poses that the laws enacted on devadasi communities came in two distinct waves. First was the wave of ‘Social Purity,’ which aimed to redefine the moral center of the Indian judicial system. The second wave was through the feminist voices of the social reform movement that was present in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Madras Presidency and Colonial Indian Feminism**

The Madras Presidency was an administrative subdivision of the British colonial regime that was largely run by upper class Brahmin elite men and was routinely influenced by the political ideologies of Tamil speakers and the emerging Dravidian movement. The key motive of these social reform movements was to redefine the sexual lives of devadasi women as ones that needed saving. This section will focus on the actions taken by the colonial governments in the 1920s, and specifically the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929. It is fitting to focus on the devadasi communities of Madras as this city soon became the epicenter of Carnatic music education and performance in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. One key aspect of the devadasi reform movement in Madras was its linkage with larger Dravidian politics. Founded in 1925, the Self Respect Movement advocated for “social, political, and economic changes in the Tamil community, directing particular attention to challenging caste hierarchies.”<sup>65</sup> These activists focused on opposing boundaries of caste, child marriage, supporting widow remarriage, and,

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<sup>64</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, “Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate on ‘Religious Prostitution’ in Colonial India,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 30, no. 43(January 1995): 59–70.

<sup>65</sup> Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects,” 69.



importantly, the “mortal marriage” of devadasi women. An unquestionable goal of the movement in regard to the devadasi communities was to make heterosexual monogamy a standard of society in Tamil culture.

A key player in the Madras Presidency was Muthulakshmi Reddi, a female physician, legislator, and founding member of Women’s Indian Association (WIA). The WIA and the Madras Presidency were political advocates for the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929. The Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act transformed “the terms of devadasis’ access to *inam* grants” or revenue-free property grants.<sup>66</sup> The 1929 Act effectively proclaimed that “saved” women were those who were what Reddi described as “good and pure” women who had abandoned their temple service, their sexually autonomous relationships with men, and entered into monogamous conjugal marriages with mortal men. Reddi and other feminists aimed to end women’s sexual exploitation by helping devadasi women out of their temple dedication. Reddi was ruthless in her condemnation of devadasis who tried to keep their temple service.

What is problematic about the Madras Presidency and the reformist approach to Indian feminism in the colonial era was that the WIA claimed to speak for all Indian women under a reformist banner. However, as Sreenivas points out, the WIA and other organizations “drew from a largely upper-class membership.”<sup>67</sup> The women in these organizations did not resemble the communities they were representing. That is why the arguments of Sinha and others posit that these “feminist movements” were actually just a “consolidation of the bourgeoisie” under the banner of patriotism and morality.<sup>68</sup> Because Reddi and the WIA would frame the new marriage

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<sup>66</sup> Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects,” 65.

<sup>67</sup> Sreenivas, “Creating Conjugal Subjects,” 71.

<sup>68</sup> Sinha, “Reading Mother India,” 125.

laws of devadasi women as their salvation, emancipation, and step into free womanhood, any devadasi who spoke out against them was largely unheard in the women's movement of colonial India.

### **2.3 Female Musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

#### **Barriers to Hereditary Musicians**

In the world of growing public performance arenas and the legal actions taken to abolish devadasi practices, the performance opportunities offered to the musicians in devadasi communities, referenced by many as “hereditary musicians,” began to dwindle away. Despite the matrilineal control within devadasi communities, performance in the context of an urban society where production of the classical arts was patrilineally controlled became unavailable to devadasi communities.<sup>69</sup> The performance career of female performers was controlled by the wealth, network, and the literary surplus of male poets and scholars. It would be improper to simply pose that hereditary female singers had no avenue for popularity in the colonial era. In fact, Qureshi writes that records indicate that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a number of Lucknow courtesans owned property, attained artistic success, and drew income from it. In Lucknow, many courtesan artists found patronage as long as the traditional nobility of British colonialism had remained in place. In fact, the years after World War II saw additional patronage from the commercial elites that rose to the feudal patronage style themselves. Still, it would also be too rash to say that there were no threats to hereditary female musicians. The nationalist movements mentioned previously in this chapter led to laws and tightened scrutiny of devadasi

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<sup>69</sup> Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “In Search of Begum Akhtar : Patriarchy, Poetry, and Twentieth-Century Indian Music,” *The World of Music* 43, no.1 (January 2001): 97–137.

establishments. Social movements also did not work in their favor. Quereshi notes how All India Radio under B.V Keskar, the Minister of Broadcasting, would advertise for middle-class female performers just as long as their private life was not “a public scandal.”<sup>70</sup> The ban at All India Radio essentially shut out this major avenue of government patronage to hereditary female singers, but interestingly enough not their male accompanists

Another major barrier to hereditary musicians was the musical content itself. Once introduced to the urban world, hereditary female musicians performed in salons and private halls throughout the city to predominantly male audiences. To please these audiences, devadasi musicians would sing a “light-classical repertoire” that was expressive and emotional in style. Some of these songs were also erotic and sexual in nature, though that is not the predominant subject of the music. The light repertoire was comprised of songs that were soothing, simple, and animated. However, with the advent of the classical art reform movement and the rise of musical education through Sabha and the Madras Music Academy, the way to become a “classical” performer was foreclosed to light-music artists. The reason behind this was the lack of access given to hereditary female musicians to gurus that would train, legitimize, and give performance opportunities to their pupils. This was primarily because the education of Carnatic music was heavily dominated by elite Brahmin men. This meant that the standards for the “classicized aesthetic” were also set by male master musicians. These were the same men involved in the social reform movements that essentially decimated the devadasi communities to begin with.

Without the respect of this patriarchy, hereditary female musicians found it very hard to gain the acceptance of the public and other masters. Without gurus that would teach them,

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<sup>70</sup> Qureshi, “In Search of Begum Akhtar,” 67.

devadasis did not, as Banerji writes “belong to a noted artistic lineage or community,” and thus were not given a classical identity.<sup>71</sup> Light music defined and constrained the devadasi musical ability in the eyes of the public. The perception that devadasis could only sing light music was furthered by the recording medium in Bombay of the late 1930s. Recording, in totality, was a useful outlet for devadasis. Though few were given spots on popular stations like All India Radio, many were able to continue their role as entertainers through the world of film music. But, as Qureshi writes, film music and these subgenres of classical music deprived devadasi singers of the “very interpretive flexibility that characterized their art in live performance.”<sup>72</sup> The devadasi singer lost her performance character to a film star who was the face of her voice. This disembodied and decontextualized the female voice into the largely domesticized roles that were played by actresses during the time.

### **Breakthrough Female Artists**

Though devadasi abolition legislation was not officially passed until 1947, the movements of social reform, redefining of the “classical” arts at the hands of brahmin elite, and the politics of gender in colonial India made the future of female performance a difficult road. This next section will analyze some early movers of the female world and understand where and how these artists gained prominence in the context of post-colonial India. It is important to recognize that despite the barriers and the social context mentioned above, many women did gain popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These singers were not only just popular in the female artist community, they were also household names in both India and its diaspora. The “female voice”

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<sup>71</sup> Anurima Banerji, Anusha Kedhar, Royona Mitra, Janet O’Shea, and Shanti Pillai, “Postcolonial Pedagogies: Recasting the Guru–Shishya Parampara,” *Theatre Topics* 27, no. 3 (November, 2017): 222.

<sup>72</sup> Qureshi, “In Search of Begum Akhtar,” 40.

became a public favorite. The prominent Madras music critic Krishna Iyer wrote in 1933 that “Women vocalists are found to possess certain desirable advantages over men. They have pleasant voices to begin with and none of the contortions of the struggling male musicians. They do not fight with their accompanists, who usually follow them closely. They are free from the acrobatics of any kind and seldom overdo anything.”<sup>73</sup>

One of the first female performers on the concert stage was Saraswati Bai (1894-1974). She was the first Brahmin woman to sing in a public performance setting. In the span of just a few years, she saw the changing scene of female performance. At the onset of her career, her performances at sabhas were boycotted by her male accompanists. But a few years later, when she was slated to sing at a wedding, her reception by the audience was a complete opposite to her initial sabha experience. At the wedding, Bai’s performance was surrounded by interest in the “sweet sounds.” Iyer describes her music as “natural” and a welcome difference from the “excess of dry acrobatics of the musical experts.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Krishna Iyer, *The Travancore Tribes and Castes* (Trivandrum: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1937), 49-62.

<sup>74</sup> Iyer, *The Travancore Tribes*, 49.



*Figure 4 Saraswathi Bai (1892-1974) Ganesh, Deepa. 2015. "She Paved the Way." The Hindu, February 12, 2015.*

One reason for the excitement about the female musician during this time was the advent of gramophone recordings. In fact, in the south, the early years of gramophone recordings were dominated by more females than males. These recordings, which were intended to be played in the home, had a different appeal from concerts. Essentially, the display of technical skill that

wowed audiences in live performances was lost on the gramophone record.<sup>75</sup> The gramophone was a breakthrough for women musicians in the devadasi and Brahmin communities. Unlike All India Radio, which was started in 1930 by those motivated by a nationalist ideology, gramophone companies were initially run by Americans and Europeans that were motivated by capitalism. Instead of denying recording opportunities to devadasi women, gramophone companies such as HMV and Columbia Records exclusively sought out the novelty of these musicians. These records sold because of their uniqueness and their lack of mainstream stage presence, that made them more exclusive for listeners. Between 1910 and 1930, the records of these two companies that sold the most in South India were of Dhanakoti Ammal, Bangalore Nagaratnammal, Bangalore Thayi, Coimbatore Thayi, M. Shanmughavadhivē, Veena Dhanammal, and Madras Lalithangi—all women of devadasi heritage.<sup>76</sup> Soneji, however, cautions that though some devadasi woman were able to take advantage of post social reform trends and achieve an iconic status with both bourgeoisie and state support, this story was not the case for a majority of devadasi women who never had the opportunity to release gramophone records or have professional careers.<sup>77</sup> Still, one of the most famous voices discovered during this time period was that of M. S. Subbulakshmi (M.S.) (1916 – 2004). Indira Menon, a disciple of Veena Dhanammal’s granddaughter T. Brinda, who was a stalwart of Carnatic music herself, is an author and historian whose book, *The Madras Quartet*, provides a closer look at the contribution of women to the world of Carnatic music. Her profiles of M.S. Subbulakshmi and D. K. Pattamal., as well as other female stalwarts of Carnatic music, are extremely detailed and

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<sup>75</sup> Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, 204.

<sup>76</sup> Indira Menon, *The Madras Quartet: Women in Karnatak Music* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1999), 25-60.

<sup>77</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 23.

offer a unique perspective on the social attitudes towards these women as they rose to fame. Even as female artists gained prominence, the work of disembodied the female voice was already happening. Disembodiment, in the musical world, was the separation of the voice of a woman from the social, economic, and cultural background of that woman.

M.S. was born in 1916 in the south Indian city of Madurai to Madurai Shanmughavadivu, who was a veena player. By the time she turned thirteen, her mother had convinced HMV records to sign M.S. to record songs. These records ended up selling so well that by 1930, M.S. and her mother had moved to Madras, as M.S. had received opportunities to sing at sabhas and concert halls in the cities. Her concerts were attended by a host of elite Brahmin men, one of whom, T. Sadasivam, a freedom fighter, would not only become M.S.'s husband but also her career manager. He not only oversaw which projects she took on, but as Menon mentions "would sit in the front row of the audience during her concerts and plan every detail of her programs."<sup>78</sup> Weidman furthers this analysis by noting how Sadasivam introduced M.S. to national leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru to paint her as the "voice of the nation." In addition to the gramophone, another essential technological breakthrough that changed the path of female performers was the microphone. Menon even writes that "the greatest gift to the world of this little instrument of the technological revolution is M. S. Subbalakshmi. The innumerable nuances of her multi-faceted voice can be captured by it."<sup>79</sup> The overwhelming attribute of M.S. concerts was her ability to convey emotion on stage in a way unmatched by other artists, both female and male, of her time. However, what is largely left out in the many biographies, anthologies, and descriptions of M.S. is her devadasi heritage. Though M. S. herself was not a devadasi, her

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<sup>78</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Menon, *The Madras Quartet*, 89.



mother and her ancestors were. Her rise to popularity was, however, not as a devadasi artist, but as a child prodigy, and her later cultivation as a pan-Indian and internationally appealing voice. It was, therefore, not her roots that propelled her. It was her diverging away from those roots that let her be in the limelight. This is an example of disembodiment. M.S's life was not her own. Her voice, through the microphone and gramophone, was used to represent the nation, while her heritage and her background were suppressed to make way.



Figure 5 Picture of M.S.S.

Ghosh, Ruchira. 2018. "M . S . Subbulakshmi And The Voice That Mesmerized Millions." *Feminism India*. 2018. <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/06/18/ms-subbulakshmi-essay/>.

Brahmin virtuosity has not been lost in the neoliberal economy of Madras. Soneji points out that, even though 21<sup>st</sup> century Madras commemorates a handful of devadasi dancers and singers as “demonstrating exceptional qualities for women of their background,” this so clearly represents the façade of cultural acceptance from the Brahmin elite of the devadasi communities. In fact, Soneji shows how only a few devadasi artists are selected, the primary criterion of selection being their contribution to cultural modernity. The only mode of remembering these artists is through not their devadasi lives, but their “cultural modern” contributions to the enterprise of Carnatic music that was run by the elite in Madras. Soneji notes how Bangalore Nagarathnam is remembered mostly for her memorial for the composer Tyagaraja and her pious devotion for him. Mylapore Gauri Ammal (1892-1971) is known as Rukmini Arundale’s first teacher and is seemingly “attached” to the Brahmin cultural center at the Mylapore Kapalisvara temple. These carefully curated narratives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century only reify the “middle-class Brahmin claims to the retrieval and stewardship of devadasi dance and music,”<sup>80</sup> and continues to shutout these hereditary musicians from the conversation the same way that the classist devadasi abolitionist policies (that are no longer legal) shutout devadasis from their own art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Film Music**

A discussion of female performance in female music is useful here because, first, many female playback singers are also part of the Carnatic music community, and second, the world of women in Indian playback singing can lead to an understanding of gender politics in a field other than Carnatic music. Furthermore, playback music was a ripe area for crafting a new kind of

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<sup>80</sup> Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures* 225.

ideal female voice. This idealization was impactful to woman not only in playback music or Carnatic music, but to woman all over the country in various careers and life paths.

Weidman argues that this was a “voice linked to the larger sociopolitical project of defining a specifically Indian modernity and women’s place within it.”<sup>81</sup> The particular time period in which this occurred is the 1950s and 60s, a few decades after the rise of female Carnatic musicians through the gramophone and Madras Music Academy patronage. The timbre of the female voice in playback music was high pitched, produced with a closely held microphone. The smooth, constant tone of female playback singers was lauded for its purity and precision. Two artists that exemplified this style are Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle. The sonic significance of this tonal quality has carried through the ages.

Mangeshkar was lauded for her “strong grounding in Hindustani classical,” which allowed her to portray vocal precision in her music. This translated to a public imagination of “purity of character.”<sup>82</sup> This purity was diffused into the way female characters were portrayed in film. When the heroine fell in love with the male protagonist, she would give him “her heart and soul,” but not engage in sex before marriage. The singing voice also carried with it the charm of an adolescent girl but retained its purity and devotion. The rise of the high-pitched female voice, devoid of the husky, breathiness of its predecessors who did not have access to mics (singers such as Noorjehan and Shamshad Begum), led to what Srivatsava calls a “purifying, Hinduising, and gentrifying of the figure of the ideal Indian woman of poscoloniality.”<sup>83</sup> In and out of the recording studio, Lata Mangeshkar was lauded as the voice of the Indian woman. She carried a

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<sup>81</sup> Amanda Weidman, “Voices of Meenakumari: Sound, Meaning, and Self-Fashioning in Performances of an Item Number,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 10, no. 3 (January 2012): 309.

<sup>82</sup> Pavitra Sundar, “Meri Awaaz Suno: Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (January 2007): 144–79.

<sup>83</sup> Sundar, “Meri Awaaz Suno,” 149.

carefully cultivated public persona as a middle-class, respectable woman who led a simple, family-oriented lifestyle despite her stardom. This was seen through the modest white and off-white saris she wore and the absence of erotic songs in her singing repertoire. Mangeshkar's persona was passed on as an industry expectation for women singers, with newer singers like Alka Yagnik and Kavita Krishnamurthy emulating her “high pitched, austere vocal style.”<sup>84</sup>

Through this chapter, it has become clear that the journey of Carnatic music carried with it a prescription for the voice and life of a female musician. By the 1950s, as India entered its first years of independence, the devadasi community's practices had been rooted out to near extinction. The rise of Carnatic music had come through the urbanization of the city of Madras, and with this rise came the power of the Brahmin middle class to effectively control and systemize the teaching, performance, and dissemination of Carnatic music. The identity of the woman had been coopted by these musical institutions as well as by the national government to serve as a symbol or cultural reconstruction in a grand attempt to define the cultural heritage of Indian. The voice of the female was used to construct a discourse about the moral center, the family values, and the virtues of the nation. Through both governmental policy, such as the devadasi abolition acts, as well as technological developments such as the gramophone and microphone, the construction of the female identity of India had been completed. The “voice” of the female, both in music and in the social realm, was disembodied from the singer herself and became, rather, a medium of nationalism and cultural reconstruction. This background is the essential key to understanding how the female voice is interpreted and treated in the modern day. By understanding the cultural and historical object that is the female voice, one can see the stage

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<sup>84</sup> Sundar, “Meri Awaaz Suno,” 150.

on which the female singers of both the modern Indian populace in Madras as well as the mass diaspora of Carnatic musicians are expected to perform.

## **CHAPTER 3: THE FUTURE OF FEMALE PERFORMANCE**

### **3.1 The Staging of Abuse**

What makes the gender politics at play in this Carnatic world so interesting is not their impact on this one city, but their cross-temporal and cross-spatial reach into the diaspora and the world of modern day Carnatic music, both teaching and performance. The following section of this thesis comprises an analysis of the multiple allegations of sexual assault facing prominent, male, Brahmin Carnatic musicians and the emergency of the #CarnaticMeToo movement and recommendations for dealing with the root cause of such behaviors.

The assault described by the allegations in Chinamayee Sripada's initial recount are not limited to the relationships between teachers and students. It also implicated several sabha leaders and officials at the Madras Music Academy.<sup>85</sup> Assault itself is something largely considered taboo by Carnatic music goers. The Academy, prior to the allegations sent by Sripada, had limited rules and stipulations to handle such instances. Dancer-actor Swarnamalya Ganesh writes that even performing artists themselves have maintained "radio silence" on such issues that the Times of India notes "have been rampant in the world of performing arts" and "reverberating in the South."<sup>86</sup> Ganesh attests that it is the "gender, power, status, [and] age" that sets the background for how these attacks could happen, and how they could go unnoticed.<sup>87</sup> The

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<sup>85</sup> Jythis Prabhakar, "#MeTooIndia : Sexual Harassment Allegations in the Carnatic Music World," *Times of India*, October 26, 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

principal issue here is not the legal events that surrounded the particular case of Sripada. Rather, it is how the context of Carnatic Music could be altered to ensure that such allegations and actions never happen again. The politics of assault are complex, both in India and around the world. The policies for criminalizing and responding to these attacks are even more complex, and India has just gone through in March 2020 one unprecedented case of hanging the 2012 gang rape attackers.<sup>88</sup> However, this thesis is not aiming to outline a legal framework for dealing with assault in the Carnatic community. Instead, after outlining the social and historical context of female performance, this thesis will now set forth some recommendations for dealing with the inherent gender imbalances of Carnatic music in the future.

There are two main ways changes can be made to bring more awareness and transparency to gender imbalance issues in Carnatic music. First, the Carnatic world could see a correction of the imbalanced teacher-student relationships through new, innovative forms of education. Second, there are now examples of female gender nonconformity among modern-day performers that can be used as models to demolish the gender binary that has long been a foothold of Carnatic music and instead expand the inclusivity of the art.

### **Twisted Traditions**

The arena in which the #CarnaticMeToo movement was first started was regarding inappropriate *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) relationships. The process by which training in Carnatic music was traditionally carried out is through the *gurukulavasa*, or a process that was totally immersive in the music and lifestyle of the teacher. Traditionally, lessons were done at the guru's house and at the discretion of the guru. The shishya would live with the guru for that

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<sup>88</sup> Akshay Thakur, Vinay Sharma, Pawan Gupta, and Ram Singh, "Nirbhaya Case: Four Indian Men Executed for 2012 Delhi Bus Rape and Murder," *BBC News*, March 20, 2020.

period of time and, instead of paying the teacher, students would simply support the teacher's life in a variety of ways in exchange for both musical and general mentorship.

Much research has been done on the tradition of the guru-shishya *parampara* or tradition. The politics of the guru-shishya encounter begin with the almost absolute power the guru exerts on the student. Banerji writes that the guru serves as the “disciple's aesthetic and moral mentor.”<sup>89</sup> The guru-shishya *parampara* does not confine itself to the instruction of music. The eminent dancer Kapila Vatsyayan notes that the *parampara* was once the format for almost all types of educational instruction. What is important to remember about the guru-shishya *parampara* is the implicit social contract that one enters into with their guru. Banerji argues that this sets up a system of rewards and punishment. Normative performance, comprising loyalty to the guru and good performance in accordance with what has been taught, is rewarded. The moral behavior of the student is also weighed on this scale. The student is seen not just as a continuation of the artistic lineage of the teacher, but also as their moral and aesthetic extension. Thus, any student engaging in activities that are perceived transgressions of that moral boundary is punished. This reward and punishment structure, when coupled with the manipulation of the female voice through cultural nationalism and Brahmin-centric ideals that are already present in the Carnatic world, set the stage for a dangerous abuse of power by male gurus on their female students.

Over time, certain aspects of *gurukulavasa* have changed, such as the lack of use of a *gurukul* or teacher's abode. Instead, lessons are usually now done at a facility used by the instructor, especially for vocal lessons. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the relationship has

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<sup>89</sup> Banerji, “Postcolonial Pedagogies,” 220.

taken a turn toward being more transactional. The students nowadays pay set fees to the gurus for access to dance/music training, platforms for performance, and most importantly the “social respect conferred when one belongs to a noted artistic lineage or community.”<sup>90</sup> The economic and logistic changes in the guru-shishya parampara have not changed the intangible qualities of this relationship. Banerji argues that the moral and ethical value of the prior system remains, namely, the assumptions that the student must ideally perform “unquestioning obedience” to their guru. Thus, in order to rebalance the skewed relationships created by age old traditions, more innovative forms of teaching can be used to mitigate the negative effects of the power imbalance in a traditional guru shishya.

An argument can be made that the guru-shishya parampara is no longer a model that needs to be touted for its necessity in teaching the arts. Putting the guru at the moral center of a student’s world may actually be harming the student’s ability to achieve their goals as an artist. An essential question here is: Is the reproduction of Carnatic music and other art forms dependent on the traditional guru-shishya model?

The idea of living with your guru, while useful in the world of limited notation, technology, and transportation, is not necessary today. That is why the use of what some are calling “virtual gurukulavasa” has become popular among many students of Carnatic music. One of the core abilities of the virtual gurukulavasa is the freedom and flexibility offered to students and teachers regarding whom to learn from as well as when and where to learn. Furthermore, it also shifts the meaning of the guru. Students looking for online teacher can usually take these lessons as a supplement to their existing ones. These online lessons can be from gurus that the

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<sup>90</sup> Banerji, “Postcolonial Pedagogies,” 221.



students, if they are living far from their guru's home, would not have had access to in other ways. Online lessons have given students the ability to learn from famous performers whom the students would not have met otherwise. This gives students the freedom to learn from many teachers at one time, lowering their dependence on one teacher.

Additionally, many online teachers state that their primary goal in teaching is to bring their students to the performance stage.<sup>91</sup> This represents a shift from the moral mentorship that came with the guru-shishya parampara. While online mentorship is possible it is less likely that this will become an anchor of the relationship. This shift from moral mentorship to concert performance as one of the primary goals of the teacher allows students to avoid the brunt of the reward-punishment system that is present in the traditional guru-shishya parampara. In the context of assault, without this fear of punishment female students would possibly be much more willing to speak out about their assaulters if they did not feel the weight of the artistic lineage on their shoulders from their moral center: the guru. Even in the case of the allegations in 2018, prominent musicians stepped forward to say that such behavior was normalized in Carnatic music because of the "demi-god" status given to gurus in the industry. T.M. Krishna called harassment Carnatic music's "open secret," admitting that silence from himself and other artists led to this situation as well.<sup>92</sup>

Changing the nature of the guru-shishya model would also play a role in increasing the transparency of guru interactions. While a student could still be harassed virtually, it is definitely much harder and riskier to do so. Technology gives students the ability to record lessons, keep

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<sup>91</sup> Rohan Krishnamurthy, "Virtual Gurukulavasa : Tradition and Innovation in Online Carnatic Percussion Pedagogy," (PhD diss., Eastman School of Music 2013), 49.

<sup>92</sup> Nathan, "#MeToo: In World of Carnatic Music and Bharatanatyam."

track of teacher interactions, messages, and their overall relationship. Internal Complaint Committees set up at the Madras Music Academy could also use virtual gurukul tools to monitor the conduct of any teachers associated with the Academy. Through this heightened flexibility and transparency, virtual gurukulavasa could make big changes in the world of imbalanced guru-shishya relationships and give performers the tools to be vocal against gurus who abuse their power.

### **Gender Nonconformity and the Diaspora**

Gender has created obvious artistic limitations on the musical content of female performers. One particular way was the moral purity that needed to be demonstrated in eminent female musicians to perpetuate the idea of the “voice of India.” This was the propaganda used to popularize the voices of Lata Mangeshkar, Meenakumari, and Asha Bhosle. The abundance of emotion, sensual experience, or passion in music, known as *sringara rasa*, was not considered a part of female respectability. However, in recent years, this type of emotive capacity has been demonstrated by several notable singers. Ranjani and Gayatri, a vocal duo from Mumbai, part of a great lineage of musicians, are believed to have begun this trend. Through their dual educational history in both Carnatic and Hindustani music, this duo sings a variety of *abhangs* and *virttuams* (devotional pieces) that explore emotive and sometimes even erotic themes.

The rise of the Indian diaspora has also led to new understanding of gender norms. While it would be improper to suggest that Chennai is being dethroned as the cultural center for Carnatic music, the rise of the diaspora has clearly made being in the city no longer the threshold for starting a music career. Through the use of virtual lessons and the rise of diasporic singers choosing Carnatic music as a profession, the “interconnected flows [have] destabilize[d] an

artistic center and create[d] a new center or multiple centers.”<sup>93</sup> The diaspora of Carnatic music in the United States, while limited in its diversity of caste or class (most immigrants to the US in the 1960s were from Tamil Brahmin communities), has started to engage in a form of artistic re-imagination. Part of this is due to the rise of the second generation’s value system based on a high quantity of concerts before a young age and the performance of music from much earlier on than usually accepted in India.<sup>94</sup> Concerts and performance-based mindsets change views on constricting gender norms. Diasporic communities have started dabbling in what Hornabrook calls “new creativity.” Hornabrook analyzes several prominent musicians who maintain residence outside of India but still learn from their gurus in Madras through the internet. The artists he discusses, Mithila Sarma and Abi Sampa, “seek to challenge traditions and social issues through creative musical collaboration, composition, and performance.”<sup>95</sup> Challenging the creative and sonic boundaries of the female voice is just the beginning for the female Carnatic diaspora. Ethno-national identities and cultural expectations are being formed thousands of miles away from the patriarchal past of Madras, with the potential for transforming the world of feminine creativity in Indian music.

One example of gender nonconformity is through experimental music labs like Indian Raga, a digital arts and education startup based in the US. This organization, founded by rasika Sriram Emani, brings together exceptional talents from around the world to produce groundbreaking and innovative collaboration performances in South Asian art. The organization hosts yearly fellowships for artists to collaborate and have their work professional filmed and

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<sup>93</sup> Krishnamurthy, “Virtual Gurukulavasa,” 264.

<sup>94</sup> Krishnamurthy, “Virtual Gurukulavasa,” 238.

<sup>95</sup> Jasmine Hornabrook, “Gender, New Creativity and Carnatic Music in London,” *South Asian Diaspora* 11, no. 2 (January 2019): 193–208.

recorded. In 2017, the organization released a Bharatanatyam performance by one of its fellows, a dancer named Aarthy Sundar. The dancer portrayed a glimpse into the life of a transgender woman through traditional Bharatanatyam and musical explorations. Aarthy is a first-generation Indian American artist born in Texas. She is a representative of the diaspora that Hornabrook touts for its “new creativity” and innovative exploration of classical arts. The performance titled “Reflections: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories Through Bharatanatyam Dance” has reached over 26K views on YouTube and was released in honor of Transgender day of visibility.<sup>96</sup> The piece was also encompassed in political themes as the day marked the two year anniversary of transgender people being treated as a third category gender by the Supreme Court of India.<sup>97</sup> This piece used classical dance elements such as *abhinaya* or enactment to depict “ a range of emotions from the character.”<sup>98</sup>



Figure 6 Screenshot of "Reflections: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories through Bharatanatyam Dance"

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<sup>96</sup> Somak Ghoshal, “This Heartwarming Bharatanatyam Performance Gives A Glimpse into A Trans Woman’s Life,” *Huffington Post*, March 31, 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Ghosal, “This Heartwarming Bharatanatyam Performance,” 2.

<sup>98</sup> Ghoshal, “This Heartwarming Bharatanatyam Performance,” 2-3

While this example is of dance instead of music, it is a useful model when looking to explore gender issues using classical art forms. Organizations like Indian Raga are giving diasporic and younger generation communities a platform for new creativity. Already, in the world of Carnatic music, Indian Raga has experimented with fusion, Carnatic a cappella, and multiple cross genre collaborations. These artists can, as Hornabrook writes from her analysis of several such projects, “combine their Carnatic background and ‘South Indian’ sound with other everyday sounds.”<sup>99</sup> This allows them to shift the aesthetic of the performance to highlight female creativity in defying or changing the cultural expectations of woman. In fact, in many of these “new creative” projects, diasporic artists criticize the traditional boundaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century female voice as “decentered” and “restrictive.”

Gender non-conformity is not a panacea to the assault of female musicians. It would be ignorant to suggest that such a widespread issue could be solved simply by one section of the Carnatic community. However, it is a tool. If social perceptions of artist gender roles are transformed to be more accepting and open minded, it is possible that the existing belief in the patriarchal system of Carnatic music would also be questioned. Gender non-conformity can be a tool to remove the larger social expectations of the “female voice.” Rather, the female voice could be anyone’s voice. Female artists could explore areas of music that gender expectations had previously not let them explore. Such exploration could remove the social structures that let patriarchal power systems stay, even after the post-colonial politics that established them had long gone.

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<sup>99</sup> Hornabrook, “Gender, New Creativity,” 193.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding, it is important to return to the initial question of this thesis: What was the journey of the female Carnatic musician? The life of a Carnatic musician was not dependent solely on their musical ability, but was also impacted by their gender, caste, and class. The sociopolitical framework of gender politics serves as an apt lens to understand how the female Carnatic musician rose to popularity and if that popularity was of her own merit. Nationalism and social reform agendas played an important role in determining the social and musical voice of women. These agendas played a subtle force in determining the teaching, dissemination, and performance of Carnatic music in the city of Madras. Postcolonial India was a breeding ground for cultural reconstruction due to these agendas. The agents of change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century reform era were those female communities that could be manipulated to voice the policies of purity under the guise of reform. Devadasi communities unfortunately became that scapegoat. The #CarnaticMeToo movement is not just a result of the gender imbalances created in Carnatic music, it is a cry for change. Without ridding the cultural expectations and limitations of femininity in India, it will be difficult to make any real change to the safety and security of women and girls in the country. However, in specific regard to Carnatic music, one can see that globalization and the rise of the diaspora are making attempts to start challenging the age-old restrictions of the feminine voice and finally bringing a nonconforming gender polity into the mainstream. These reforms have not been brought by any party or government, but rather by the fans and singers of Carnatic music itself. Thus, the art is not just for the people, it is also by the people. It is the responsibility of all musicians, to further this cause.

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