



MUSIC AND SOCIETY: EXPLORING THE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MUSICAL EXPRESSION

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Abstract

Music has been in existence since human civilisation. Transiting and transforming from vedic period to ancient to rituals to folk songs to classical to contemporary digital music, different societies have been persistently using music for communication of experiences that cannot otherwise be completely conveyed through using simple language. Sound and rhythm exists since pre-birth and continues through life whether in the form of birth, marriage, anniversaries, parties, mourning, worship, protest and varied other occasions. It is not just a mode of beautifying but a pertinent element of social and cultural life. There is a reciprocal relationship between music and society. Society impacts the forms, instruments and styles through which music is generated and cultivated, while at the same time music too fosters the creation and conveying of social identities and values. A folk song indicates and also at the same time acts as a preserver of the history of a particular community; a devotional piece may regenerate religious traditions; a protest song has the potential to express resistance etc. The cultural importance of music is specifically evident through multiple and varied societies in India. The tradition of Indian music has developed through centuries of interplay and reciprocities amongst multiple societies, cultures, languages, religions and regions etc. Classical music like Hindustani and Carnatic exist parallel to various folk and tribal traditions and emerging music genres. This plurality reflects that music is substantially related with cultural memory and social identity. The present music framework is passing through significant transformation. Globalisation and social-media platforms have changed creation, distribution and consumption of music. Musical expressions once confined to specific geographical and cultural boundaries have now reached the people beyond borders. This further provided opportunities for cultural exchange. The same has also raised concerns regarding commercialisation and the marginalisation of traditional forms. This article examines these domains and argues that music should to be comprehended as an evolving and transformative social phenomenon that also preserves tradition and strengthens cultural change.

Keywords: Culture, Expression, Heritage, Music, Society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Music has been in existence since human civilisation. The enthusiasm for music is not a recent development. Recognizably musical activities appear to have been present in every known culture on earth with ancient roots extending back 250000 years or more.¹ Transiting

¹ Schäfer, T., Sedlmeier, P., Städtler, C., & Huron, D. (2013). The psychological functions of music listening. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, Article 511. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00511>

and transforming from vedic period to ancient to rituals to folk songs to classical to contemporary digital music, different societies have been persistently using music for communication of experiences that cannot otherwise be completely conveyed through using simple language. Sound and rhythm exists since pre-birth and continues through life whether in the form of birth, marriage, anniversaries, parties, mourning, worship, protest and varied other occasions. Music is a crucial element of everyday life. People spend hours listening to it and billions of dollars buying it².

It is not just a mode of beautifying but a pertinent element of social and cultural life. There is a reciprocal relationship between music and society. Society impacts the forms, instruments and styles through which music is generated and cultivated, while at the same time music too fosters the creation and conveying of social identities and values. A folk song indicates and also at the same time acts as a preserver of the history of a particular community; a devotional piece may regenerate religious traditions; a protest song has the potential to express resistance etc. The cultural importance of music is specifically evident through multiple and varied societies in India. The tradition of Indian music has developed through centuries of interplay and reciprocities amongst multiple societies, cultures, languages, religions and regions etc. Classical music like Hindustani and Carnatic exist parallel to various folk and tribal traditions and emerging music genres. This plurality reflects that music is substantially related with cultural memory and social identity. The present music framework is passing through significant transformation. Globalisation and social-media platforms have changed creation, distribution and consumption of music. Musical expressions once confined to specific geographical and cultural boundaries have now reached the people beyond borders. This further provided opportunities for cultural exchange. The same has also raised concerns regarding commercialisation and the marginalisation of traditional forms. This article examines these domains and argues that music should to be comprehended as an evolving and transformative social phenomenon that also preserves tradition and strengthens cultural change.

2. MUSIC AS A FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION

The ubiquity of music in cultural life, the myriad ways in which it delights and moves people, and its rich scope for cultural significance at many levels, make it an important object of inquiry for an anthropologist.³ Culture integrates the values, practices, beliefs and modes of expression vide which societies comprehend themselves and also their surroundings. Music is a significant part of this cultural structure because it articulates meanings through melody, rhythm, lyrics, performance and collective participation.

Music has the potential to verbally transcend cultural knowledge through generations. For example; folk songs, through repeated performances integrate knowledge in collective memories as folk songs include references to local histories, social practices, relationships, religion, beliefs and day-to-day experiences. Music also possesses a symbolic domain. Certain musical instruments, rhythms or forms become associated with particular communities or regions. Music thus, can act as a cultural marker permitting people to express belongingness without specifically exposing their identities as in the case of regional music traditions like folk songs incorporating regional dialects, traditions, culture etc. Their importance is beyond artistic value and forms storehouse of cultural memory and provides

² Rentfrow, P. J. (2012). The role of music in everyday life: Current directions in the social psychology of music. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(5), 402–416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00434.x>

³ Curran, G., & Radhakrishnan, M. (2021). The value of ethnographic research on music: An introduction. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 22(2–3), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2021.1913511>

means of preserving distinctiveness. Music is therefore both a projection of culture and an operative mechanism for reproduction of culture.

3. MUSIC AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Collective identity is developed and nurtured within free spaces through the use of music.⁴ Identity is not only formed through individual characteristics but also through collective cultural practices. Music plays a key role in this process and helps in identification of societies. National anthems, National songs, religious music, geographical songs and community-specific musical traditions can create a sense of belongingness. Gen Z uses contemporary musical genres to create identities that discern them from former generations. Music can also contribute in formation of subcultures. Specific genres may become associated with specific lifestyles or social movements. Rock, hip-hop and other genres have been providing different forms of expression and social identity to the communities. The relationship and nexus between music and identity is particularly significant in multicultural societies like India. Music can generate areas where diverse cultural identities are expressed and recognised. Therefore, preservation of musical diversity is mutually linked to the preservation of cultural diversity.

4. MUSIC, COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Societies usually remember historical experiences through songs and performances. Music therefore has the potential to preserve this collective memory. Songs can express experiences of hardship, migration, conflict, celebration and social transformation etc. Since music constitutes words with rhythm and repetition, it has the capacity to remain memorable across generations. Ceremonial and ritual music is another example. Weddings, festivals, funerals, religious ceremonies etc, create perpetuation between generations. Participation in such practices enables people to experience themselves as part of a historical society. Music therefore is a cultural archive that not only preserves facts but also emotions, values and interpretations of collective experience.

This helps communities whose histories may have been represented in a limited manner in historical narratives. Oral musical traditions therefore function as alternatives of social experience contributing to an inclusive society.

5. MUSIC AS A MEDIUM OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND RESISTANCE

Music can also function as a mode to communicate social malaise. Since ages music has been used as a strong medium to address and redress inequalities, injustices, war, discrimination and political oppressions.

A message projected through songs can effectively reach audiences that may not otherwise be effective through academic or political discourse. Music can thus transform abstract social concerns into emotionally meaningful experiences. For example protest music enables individuals to convey collective grievances and solidarity. Music can therefore transform dissatisfaction into a shared cultural projection. Music may not necessarily create social change by itself but its importance is inherited in its ability to create narratives and emotions surrounding social malaise. It can impact public discourse through alternative perspectives and by making marginalised experiences visible. Music may simultaneously operate as a cultural expression and social commentary.

⁴ Danaher, W. F. (2010). Music and social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 4(9), 811–823.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00310.x>

6. MUSIC AND GENDER/CASTE

The cultural domain of music can also be analysed through the lenses of social inequalities like gender, caste, class and social status. Musical institutions have tried to historically reflect broader hierarchies relating to these dimensions. For example, women have consistently faced embargo concerning public performance, professional participation and the social acceptability of specific forms of musical expressions. Despite that women's participation in music has augmented substantially, questions dealing with their representation, remuneration, objectification and access to professional opportunities remain relevant. Similarly, caste has also impacted the history of Indian musical traditions. For example, a study of Tathagata Buddha songs and *Bhimgeet* can provide an insight into how music has departed from being just an aesthetic sensibility to a language of resistance against the oppressive caste order.⁵ Certain musical practices are still restricted to particular communities and based on heredity. The acceptance of such traditions needs attention and comprehend under which musical knowledge has been produced and transmitted. Understanding music from the perspective of romanticism of cultural traditions without examining the inequalities embedded within them remains incomplete. Music can encounter such inequalities. Performers from marginalised communities use music as a medium to narrate their experiences rather than enabling dominant social groups to describe those experiences for them. Music therefore offers a space for both the reproduction and protesting against social hierarchies.

7. GLOBALISATION AND MUSIC CULTURE

Globalisation has prominently changed the spread of music. Digital technologies have enabled music listeners to access various forms of music from across different parts of the world almost on the click of the button. This development has led to enhancement of cultural reciprocity. Musical genres combine components from multiple traditions. An Indian composition may include western instruments, a famous global song may include regional words and phrases, traditional songs may be recreated through electronic mediums. Such kind of cultural interplay can establish creative possibilities and wider audiences for local traditions. Globalisation can also enhance homogenisation of musical culture. Commercial platforms usually give priority to music that appeal to large audiences. Another complication is cultural appropriation. When components of a community's cultural tradition are embraced by others without requisite recognition and credit for their cultural significance, issues of power, ownership and representation arise. The challenge is not to contradict cultural exchange but to ensure that cultural exchange occurs with recognition, contextual understanding and due respect.

8. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHANGING MUSIC INDUSTRY

The digital enhancement has been transforming the relationship between music and society. Social media and streaming platforms, production technologies etc have mitigated traditional barriers to musical production and distribution. Independent musicians can now have audiences without relying completely upon traditional record companies. Social-media platforms enable new comer artists to form audiences for their music. At the same time, listeners too have access beyond boundaries to diverse musical catalogues. However, technological democratisation may not necessarily eradicate social disparity. Digital platforms depend upon algorithms, marketing resources, audience engagement and commercial arrangements. Hence, new forms of regulations may emerge even if conventional barriers reduce. Artificial intelligence adds another domain to this transformation. AI-assisted compositions, voice synthesis and automated music production raise questions concerning

⁵ Kalyani, K. (2020). Tathagata Buddha songs: Buddhism as religion and cultural-resistance among Dalit women singers of Uttar Pradesh. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 1(2), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v1i2.184>

creativity, piracy, authorship, originality and the economic position of human musicians. The technological transformation of music requires innovative, cultural and social consideration.

9. MUSIC AS CONCEPTUAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

Musical traditions form a significant element of intangible abstract cultural heritage. Musical traditions do not exist as physical monuments but fundamentally through knowledge, practice and performance. Their perpetuation is largely based upon transmission from one generation to another. Modernisation may keep traditional music under constant pressure. Younger generations may deviate from traditional practices and commercial music may receive greater visibility and economic support. Preservation, however, does not mean freezing musical traditions in an unchanging form. Cultural traditions have always remained dynamic. Impactful preservation can incorporate documentation, institutional support and opportunities for traditional musicians to adapt their practices while retaining cultural foundations. Educational institutions can introduce students to diverse musical traditions. Cultural organisations and governments can support musicians through grants and performance opportunities. Digital platforms can also assist in documenting and disseminating traditional music. The preservation of music is cannot be segregated from the preservation of cultural diversity.

10. MUSIC AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Music to be a genuine resource for a social movement it must avoid being overtly “preachy” and prioritize creativity over artificialness.⁶ Social importance of music lies in its ability to participate and contribute in processes of change. Music can challenge stereotypes, create dialogue amongst communities and provide recognition to the marginalised. Music can recreate contemporary social norms. Lyrics may reform gender stereotypes, discriminatory behaviours and social prejudices. Therefore, music should not automatically be presumed to be progressive merely because it is a form of cultural expression. Its social impact depends upon context, i.e., who creates it, who performs it, who consumes it and how audiences interpret it. Music therefore occupies an abstract but powerful position. It can preserve tradition while challenging tradition at the same time, create community while differentiating one from the other and facilitate cultural exchange while contributing to cultural commodification. This complexity further creates opportunities to make music an important subject for interdisciplinary research.

11. CONCLUSION

Music is much more than just being an aesthetic source of entertainment. It is a cultural institution in itself through which societies preserve and are able to remember their history, express their identities, convey social concerns and negotiate changing values. Its importance can be viewed in everyday practices as well as in major cultural and political events. The relationship between music and society is reciprocal. Social dimensions influence musical production, while musical expression can influence how individuals comprehend themselves and their communities. Music can preserve cultural heritage, strengthen collective identity and provide a platform for marginalised voices. It may reproduce social disparities, become commercially commodified or contribute to cultural homogenisation. The modern digital environment has enlarged these possibilities and challenges. Technology has democratised access to musical production and distribution but has also raised new questions concerning algorithms, economic disparities, authorship and cultural ownership.

In the Indian context, where cultural and linguistic diversity is clearly visible, music offers a pertinent means of understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity. The preservation of musical diversity should therefore form part of broader endeavours to

⁶ Ealham, C. (2014). Playing for change: Music and musicians in the service of social movements. *Rock Music Studies*, 1(1), 100–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2013.846641>

preserve cultural heritage while allowing traditions to evolve naturally. Music is a living cultural practice. It does not only mirror society but participates in the creation of social meanings, identities and relationships. Studying music from this perspective enables a deeper understanding of how culture is produced, transmitted, contested and transformed. Music thus remains not merely the sound of society but one of the ways through which society understands and continually reimagines itself.

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