



Copyright, capitalism, and a postcolonial critique of Karnatic music

by Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan

Karnatic music, or South Indian classical music, is understood as “religious” music, deemed to be “divinely inspired,” and performers are seen as embodying the divine. Because of its association with “religion,” Karnatic music is generally considered a shared traditional knowledge that has historically been bequeathed from one generation to another through oral teaching. However, at the same time, Karnatic music also has a complex history with capitalism, having been constructed by bourgeois-nationalist elites in the early twentieth century from traditions that formed an inseparable part of the operation of temples and courts. This history has recently become further complicated. Some contemporary Karnatic musicians, while adhering to the beliefs of the “religious” and “divine” nature of the tradition and indeed the creativity of musicians therein, now raise concerns about protecting individual creativity and performances—specifically against unauthorized recordings of performances in concert halls and the availability of such recordings on the Internet (Pitandya 2011).

This essay explores the contradictions of this new level of interaction of Karnatic music with capitalism via copyright. Invoking Polanyian conceptions of (dis)embeddedness, I show how music was part of an embedded economy before the twentieth century and outline how Karnatic music itself is an ideological construct dating from the early twentieth-century nationalist movements in South India. I then explore how the contemporary market economy represents new forms of disembedding and, indeed, re-embedding of labor, and, using Chakrabarty’s work on histories and capitalism, I look at the paradoxes and problems this produces.

Music patronage within an embedded economy

The fundamental aspect of the pre-twentieth-century embedded economy was how (what we now distinguish as) religious and secular (encompassing the political and the economic) domains were intertwined. From the fourteenth century, temples in South India served as the space where kingship was initiated, legitimized, and functioned through invocation of the divine. As a representation of the legitimacy provided by the divine to the king and his throne (Dirks 1993: 37), kings (and chieftains) performed rituals with the aid of priests, who were mostly Brahmans. Accordingly, the kings took on tutelary deities’ names as titles that reiterated their position as an embodiment and representative of the divine (Sastri 1955: 266; Stein 1989: 56). The temples contributed toward their revenue system through agriculture and irrigation using land gifts received from the state. The patronage toward temple development was a strategy to cater to the agrarian economy and to transform dry zones into mixed agricultural lands (Stein 1989: 21, 25). Moreover, the food offered to the deity, called *prasadam*, was either given or sold, thus contributing to the larger revenue system (ibid: 96). While the selling of *prasadam* contributed directly to the temple revenues, a gift of *prasadam* and the right to receive it was seen as a form of honoring royal temple patrons. As Polanyi has argued, the economic activities of such an economy were based on reciprocity and redistribution (2001: 49).

Performance arts and patronage of these arts were integral to this setup and were thus deeply embedded practices that were seen to keep the sovereignty and consequently the kingdoms (or empires) intact. As a space for performance and in many cases residence for performers, patronage to the temples was patronage to the performance arts. Performances by music bands and dancing girls, known as *devadasis*, were part of daily ritual food offerings to the deity. Because the performance of the bands was part of daily worship at the temple, patronage to the temples also supported the bands. In the kingly court, *devadasis* were a part of regular performances, and *melam* (literally, orchestra) performed during special occasions and festivals. The king patronized musicians and dancers by awarding titles and giving gifts; the performers in turn exhibited their talents through performances praising the king (Radhika 1996: 211–213). The king's cordial relationships with the temples and the performers in part ensured their sovereignty. Together these three spheres represented a synergy through which each of the spheres derived power from the other.

Now, contemporary theoretical (and mundane) distinctions of the “religious” and the “political” would not allow us to identify such synergies, leading to an incomplete understanding in the nature of sovereignty in these South Indian kingdoms, where, also, kings performed the functions of the “political” but derived legitimacy from the “religious” domain in order to perform those functions. Thus, the two categories literally did not exist in such societies because their embeddedness in other social relations.

“Inventing” Karnatic music against the colonial state

By the early twentieth century, the colonial government had prohibited all court performances along with abolishing patronage in Tanjavur (Weidman 2006: 63).¹ Consequently, performers moved to the newly emerging urbanized colonial city of Madras and changed their performances to suit new audiences and performance spaces. The Madras intelligentsia, educated Brahmins and upper-class non-Brahmins, “invented” the term Karnatic music as part of early nationalist identity construction. “Karnatic music,” as “Hindu” and as a “religious” art form, now emphasized distinctiveness and superiority over that of the colonizers (Subramanian 1999, 2006), having its supposed roots in the Vijayanagara Empire (historically constructed so and until today often seen as the “true” origin of Karnatic music by music historians and musicians—perhaps due to the extensive patronage music received from those kings).

More importantly for my argument, early nationalism built on a hierarchy of a superior Indian “religious” realm and an inferior Western materialistic and “secular” realm. Music belonged to the “religious” sphere, which represented “Hinduism.” Reconstructing the history of Karnatic music in the early twentieth century was then a venture of local colonial elites creating a mysticized and “sacralized” view of Karnatic music, superior to European classical music. The process also involved a decisive exclusion of the *devadasis* (who performed in temples and as courtesans in wider society) as such practice conflicted with bourgeois-nationalist notions of traditional and religious “purity.”

The premise of the elites’ nationalist movement that constructed the musical traditions of the temples and courts in their new form was that of “protecting Indian culture.” Recently, contemporary Karnatic musicians have been raising new concerns over protecting their performances in the public sphere. Albeit these now revolve around individual ownership, wishing to copyright specific renditions of particular pieces of music (composed and improvised). The emergence of mechanical reproduction and the Internet have played a significant role in this, as well as an intensifying awareness of copyright issues in India more generally in recent decades (*The Hindu* 2011). For example, in 2011, a prominent musician, T.M. Krishna, argued that recording by audience members at concerts should not be carried out without the permission of the musicians, saying a “ticket does not entitle a person to bring in his recording device” (Paitandy 2011).

This presents a paradox: the same musicians maintain that Karnatic music is traditional knowledge. So notions of individual creativity that are separate from the divine have little salience. This can be seen clearly in *guruparampara*—the tradition of oral transmission by a teacher. While music is seen as the divine, teachers are equally deified. A musician’s authenticity of “devotion” displayed during concerts is dependent upon their teacher. Thus, the teacher imparts not only the art but also the spirituality; this is the same with North

Indian classical music, as Neuman has explored (1990: 43–60). Indeed, the payment of a fee to a teacher is not seen as a “wage” but rather as an appreciation for sharing his or her knowledge. Hence, a performance is a display of dialectic relationships between the musician and the divine, the musician and the teacher, the musician and the audience, and finally, the audience and the divine through the musician.

Thus, to treat a performance as an “individualized” (Foucault 1979: 153) expression of creativity (as assumed by ideas to copyright) is problematic, an ideological contradiction. To understand these issues more deeply, they must be contextualized within the broader ideological shift from an embedded economy (described above) to a market economy.

Copyrighting: Disembedding Karnatic music for a market economy

According to Polanyi, through the belief in and institutionalization of “free” market mechanisms, modern formal economics (as opposed to substantive economics) undermines the traditional forms of local social relations and transforms them into relations of production and consumption mediated by capital in global markets. This is the case with copyright laws, which treat artistic expression as an individual’s creativity and as owned by the artist. Therefore, any consumption of such creativity must be compensated monetarily. Polanyi has argued that such a shift disembeds labor from its contexts and renders it individualistic (2001: 171). Such a move, he argues, came from the European Enlightenment ideas of individual freedom (141–170) and was established in other regions of the world through colonization (171). However, Karnatic music, which emerged in the latter colonial period, is performed and experienced as a collective social experience.

In this context, Chakrabarty’s well-known “Two Histories of Capital” (2007: 47) is helpful to understand how copyright law decontextualizes Karnatic music from its histories by treating performances as individualistic human labor. Chakrabarty, invoking Marx, discusses the abstraction of labor brought about by modern capitalism. Accordingly, “History 1” is “a past posited by capital itself as its precondition,” and the second, “Histor(ies) 2(s),” is “the past that does not belong to the capital’s life process” (ibid: 63). Chakrabarty defines History 1 as the “universal history of capital” (2008: 92)—or rather, the history of capital that has been rendered universal through historicism—that abstracts labor as a function that is removed from its contexts. Thus, in accordance with Polanyi, History 1 can be seen as a definitively “modern” process of disembedding “economy” and “markets” from local traditional practices (Histor(ies) 2(s)). Accordingly, Chakrabarty argues that labor in India “often entails, through rituals big and small, the invocation of divine or superhuman presence” and that “secular histories are usually produced by ignoring the signs of these [‘enchanted’] presences” (2007: 72). He thus theorizes Histor(ies) 2(s) as “numerous other tendencies in history that did not necessarily look forward to the telos of capital but could nevertheless be intimately intertwined with History 1 in such a way as to arrest the thrust of capital’s universal history and help it find a local ground” (2008: 92). Thus, copyright laws are very good examples of History 1, pushing toward the disembedding of those religious and other practices and contexts of Karnatic music that have shaped its meaning as a performance art and a tradition, which can be seen as what Chakrabarty calls Histor(ies) 2(s).

Chakrabarty theorizes History 1 and Histor(ies) 2(s) not as polar opposites, because the latter constantly attempts to subvert the complete takeover of the former (2007: 66). However, the distinction between local traditions and global instrumental rationality is itself ideologically constructed, especially insofar as “local traditions” or “indigenous practices” tend to be classified as “religious” in contrast to the “secular” nature of politics and economy (Fitzgerald 2011: 9–10). The religion/secular binary is itself an integral feature of modern ideology and thus makes Chakrabarty’s analytical distinction possible.

If the distinction between History 1 and Histor(ies) 2(s) is to do more than merely “map onto” the globalizing ideology of market rationality progressively replacing local superstitions, then it must come to terms with the religion/secular binary as an ideological operator (ibid: 80–81). That the possibility of the ideological contradiction between copyright laws and the traditions of Karnatic music even exists is because of, as Chakrabarty argues, the idea that economics is a secular and rational science, and therefore laws of production and consumption should disregard what is deemed to be religious practices (such as in the case of Karnatic

music). While Chakrabarty argues that there are multiple versions of History 2 that cannot be homogenized, we need to consider that even within History 1, there is a possibility for multiple secularities. It certainly is so within the context of Karnatic music. Chakrabarty refers to only one type of History 1, which is the “secular” history, to indicate the “non-religious” history. However, the latest attempts of capitalism and the labor market to monetize Karnatic music through copyright of live performances is but one of many “secularities” that Karnatic musicians negotiate.

Chakrabarty’s argument on the problem of universalizing narratives of “secular” history is right, in that, as Fitzgerald points out, these narratives have created ideological contradictions among, in this case, Karnatic musicians in India. On the one hand, they understand what Karnatic music represents as a performing art, as representing their traditional cultural identity, but on the other, the laws of the market (and needs of livelihood) compel them to break with this tradition and profit from their performances. In order to make sense of how a total takeover by History 1 would transform Karnatic music, musicians must confront this disconnect. Thus, applying copyright laws to Karnatic music is problematic not (only) because Karnatic music is understood as a form of prayer but (also) because when we deconstruct the categories—Karnatic music, “religion,” and “secular”—copyright laws decontextualize the expression of creativity through Karnatic music from all of these histories.

Conclusion

Attempting to situate Karnatic music in a particular, specifically capitalistic, contemporary context is problematic in many ways. The art has been transforming over decades according to historical developments and yet carries with it certain “histories” or contexts without which it loses its meaning. Arguably, it would acquire a new meaning; yet, that meaning would be within the framework of a “secular” capitalist economy that, even if it does not give a new meaning to Karnatic music, would ignore the contexts within which Karnatic music emerged. Thus, while historically music was embedded in collective social relations (even after reform in the late colonial period under a society transformed considerably by capitalism), copyright law is attempting to decontextualize music from its histories and to render it a creative expression of art that can be owned by individuals, as in the case of the right to private property. Paradoxically, within this market economy, Karnatic music is embedded with a newer social context in which commodification of music as a property and as a form of human labor takes precedence.

In describing these ideological shifts, I want to draw attention to certain patterns in the historical developments surrounding Karnatic music: a) while constructing Karnatic music from the temple and court nexus, music was disembedded from its then traditions and histories resulting in caste-based and class-based ownership of music; b) contemporary musicians are engaging in a different kind of disembedding and disembodiment by attempting to copyright Karnatic music; c) while doing so, musicians are themselves becoming new ideological agents or operators much like the Indian nationalists; d) while musicians want to copyright Karnatic music, they also want to adhere to the traditions that were put in place during the early twentieth century, signaling a paradox; e) finally, this shift, from one type of economy to a market economy, is wrought with complexities and contradictions, which if not addressed by the musicians, will only problematize how performance arts are learned, performed, and experienced.

Dr Rajalakshmi Nadadur Kannan graduated from the University of Stirling with a PhD in Religious Studies in 2014 and is currently on the Critical Religion Association staff. Her forthcoming publication is an article on gender violence and religion in India in *Sikh Formations*.

Footnote

1. The postcolonial state abolished princely states in 1952 (Qureshi 2006: 312).

References

- The Hindu*, special correspondent. 2011. [Artists and musicians told to come together to safeguard their work](#), *The Hindu*, February 2.
- Breckenridge, Carol Appadurai. 1977. From protector to litigant—Changing relations between Hindu temples and the Raja of Ramnad. *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 14(75): 75–106.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2007. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2008. In defense of *Provincializing Europe*: A response to Carola Dietze. *History and Theory* 47(1): 85–96.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 1993. *The hollow crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian kingdom*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2011. *Religion and politics in international relations: The modern myth*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. What is an author? In Josue V. Harari, ed., *Textual strategies: Perspectives in post-structuralist criticism*, pp. 141–160. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Marten, Michael. 2013. On knowing, knowing well and knowing differently: Historicising Scottish missions in 19th and early twentieth century Palestine. In Ellen Fleischmann, Sonya Grypma, Michael Marten, and Inger Marie Okkenhaug, eds., *Transnational and historical perspectives on global health, welfare and humanitarianism*, pp. 210–238. Kristiansand: Portal Books.
- Neuman, Daniel M. 1990. *The life of music in North India: The organization of an artistic tradition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Paitandy, Priyadarshini. 2011. [The virtual Sabha](#), *The Hindu* (accessed 25 February 2015).
- Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. 3rd ed. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. 2006. Female agency and patrilineal constraints: Situating courtesans in twentieth-century India. In Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds., *The courtesan's arts: Cross-cultural perspectives*, pp. 312–331. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Radhika, V.S. 1996. Development of Sadir in the court of Raja Serfoji-II (1798–1832) of Tanjore. PhD diss., University of Hyderabad.
- Saletore, Bhasker Anand. 1934. *Social and political life in the Vijayanagara Empire (A.D. 1346–A.D. 1646)*. Madras: B.G. Paul & Co.
- Sastri, Nilakanta. 1955. *A history of South India: From prehistoric times to the fall of Vijayanagar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stein, Burton. 1989. *The new Cambridge history of India: Vijayanagara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weidman, Amanda. 2006. *Singing the classical, voicing the modern: The postcolonial politics of music in South India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- See more at: <http://www.focaaalblog.com/2015/04/16/rajalakshmi-nadadur-kannan-copyright-capitalism-and-a-postcolonial-critique-of-karnatic-music/#sthash.RuvQKQtQ.dpuf>