

Indian Classical Music: Problems and Solutions

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Indian Classical Music is one of the most beautiful art forms that have existed. We all know of the great heights that music stalwarts have achieved and how they have spread this old art form throughout the world. For hundreds of years till 20th century end, Indian Classical music has progressed hugely in different phases of history. In this process, it has also gathered a lot problems entangled within the complex fabric of this community and the very being of this art form.

Sadly, there are many reasons and malpractices due to which Indian Classical Music might have fewer scholars and fewer listeners in future. I'm going to delve into those factors and throw light on them. I hope this contributes in some way or the other towards conservation and evolution of Indian Classical Music.

If I were to answer a question- 'Has Indian Classical Music evolved enough according to the changing times?' I would say 'Not at all'. By evolution, I mean a progressive natural evolution in order to conserve the original art form in all its beauty and glory; to break from the shell of a regressively puritan art form and sensibility. I do not suggest that the art form must lose its soul or lose its basic pillars, the ragas, the forms, the unique techniques or the essential sound, but what needs to evolve are the methods of both teaching and performing, certain regressive norms, certain limitations that have come of age as well as introducing new perspectives and exploring this art form in its original nature yet in the light of the current 21st century context and it's unique audience, etc. etc.

Before I delve deeper into the areas in which Indian Classical Music stands paralyzed currently, I'd like to thank and acknowledge all those few responsible musicians who have had the grit to paddle against the flow and contributed towards evolving this music form. Nonetheless, since there have been only few like them, the need of the hour is very intense and a lot more like them need to wake up and have the courage to experiment more with music and speak up. I hope I succeed in my attempt!

I'd like to begin my critique from the education of Indian Classical Music as that is what forms the foundation of the reception and the treatment of any art form. One can easily spot stark differences between most teachers/gurus of Indian Classical Music and any other subject/skill/art form. At least I can say that safely for most Hindustani Classical Musicians/gurus. Of course, they inspire certain awe; no doubt they are extremely skilled and learned. However, the sad part lies in the rigidities of the gharana parampara which they represent. Apart from genuine reverence and professional fee from their shishyas there is a whole series of malpractices that have been institutionalized to the extent that it's become pretty normal in the world of Hindustani Classical Music. For instance, the disciple must toil for years doing personal favors and domestic chores for the gurur before s/he is taught the basics of the art form. By then, probably the disciple has lost all his passionate love for the beauty of music and only remembers certain targets. Well, today, we have the internet and other electronic products that can aid teaching methods if teachers use them correctly. I myself encourage my students to audio record important lessons and practice till the next class so that we can progress faster.

Another huge ill that pervades the education system of this art form is that the disciple must be ready and willing to offer gifts, random favors, and more money in exchange for more 'shiksha' from the guru (even then true knowledge is not an assurance). One can wonder that such problems occur only in case of education like the traditional guru shishya parampara or privately organized coaching classes and not in organized institutions/centers and colleges of music learning. I would say, that the emergence of institutions has come with its own fallacies. Do you know of enough successful or deserving Indian Classical Musician who has learnt throughout in the organized education sector? These institutions do produce 'musicians' qualified on paper but not really by skill. The skillful ones always receive training through private classes.

The reason of the failure of such institutions and colleges is the quality of their teaching staff, the methods of teaching and the curriculum. If one spends 2 working days at each of these institutions, one will know that the teaching is only examination and syllabus oriented and not skill based as it ought to be. The Gharana system has its remarkable qualities but that too has some grave fallacies. For instance, one is forbidden to get inspired from a gharana that she/he doesn't belong too. However I ask, how can music be divided into such rigid appreciation patterns? And I will ask a lot more such

questions. I appreciate a musician like Shubha Mudgal who honestly admits to have learnt from not just one or two gurus but from 'bahattar gurus' i.e. she did not block herself into just one gharana.

There is a reason why fewer children today want to attend Indian music classes in schools or opt for it in middle and senior school. They are eager to try western/contemporary/Indian pop music and dance as these are constantly open to change which is missing in Indian Classical Music and its upholders. There is an intrinsic element of fun that underlies in the above mentioned art forms which is again missing in Indian Classical Music. So, Indian Classical music is what we have made of it and the result is scary; it is an 'endangered species' of music.

The grass root level i.e. the child's home and his/her primary school need to give the right flavor of Indian Music to a child. We can't expect an average child to hook on to Indian Classical Music because that is an evolved taste but we can expose him to lighter forms, instrumental music, songs with lyrics that the child can relate, rhythm that is foot tapping, sounds that are exciting.

If teachers really want they can really experiment and introduce basics of Indian Classical in play-way methods. That needs a lot of intelligence, creativity and hard work on the teacher's part. The teacher must not introduce the subject as a very serious heavy art form and use technical terms or the child is bound to lose interest. It is very important to use a child's imagination, apply it on basic techniques of Indian Classical music and interact with children.

Indian Classical Music has so many unique and unparalleled features that intelligent musicians world over are recognizing it, learning it and applying in their performances and music. So, the art form is very rich. The problem lies in its presentations and teaching. Today, we need a teaching methodology that relates to students of today. Students of today are exposed to music and influences from world over. Their exposure is very unique, modern and so are ambitions, expectations and tastes. They deserve teachers that are equally informed, exposed and open in their approach.

Now I would like to talk about the stage presentations of Indian Classical Music. A very worrying thing about most of these stage shows is that the majority of the audience is above the age of 50 years. Out of the handful of youth among the audience, one will see very few of the 'English-medium' modern Indian youth, youth from the educated middle and upper

classes. Yet, it is not surprising to me. The informed youth of today have been exposed to the 'heavy and hard core' side of Indian Classical Music and not its enjoyable melodious side since their education started at their home or schools. Of course, they got attracted to other music genres and art forms because they constantly evolved and related to their emotions unlike Indian Classical Music. Can you imagine the average youth of today, when there is so much other music that they can understand and relate to, listening to Indian classical music with endless repetitions of a single line of a 4 line bandish of a khyal which is written in a language they don't understand? Not really! This is a bitter truth which we must face and not shy away from it, if we want to save this art form.

I wonder why the bandishes performed on the 21st century stage are still from the remote past sung without making any relation with the youth of today. It's great to know a traditional bandish that goes 'mohamadshah piya sadarangee', but is that enough? Why we are still stuck with a 4 line bandish format with endless repetitions that result in boredom among the audience of today? Why can't we sing bandishes with more than one antras? Why can't we also sing bandishes that talk about things of today? Why can't we, as performers, sing the words clearly instead of eating them up or modifying them to an extent that one doesn't remember what we sang by the end of the concert? Why can't we make our singing more concise and relatable instead of flaunting our taal gyan and taan gyan most of the times? Why can't we concentrate lesser on showing off the complexities and technicalities of Indian Classical music and concentrate more on the beauty of our music piece while performing? Why can't we concentrate on improving our voice tonality and texture rather than showing off musical gimmicks? Why can't we engage and involve the audience and make him a part of our concert? Why can't we think and perform out of the box? These are some very important questions that we must answer as members of the Indian Classical musicians' community.

All in all, there are various factors mainly pertaining to performing and teaching of Indian Classical Music that are making it less popular among the audience. If we want this art form to flourish, we must really pause and think about these issues that might come in its way of progress. We must initiate change and encourage and recognize people like Pt. Ravi Shankar and such experimentalists who have initiated change. They did what was apt in those times. We must do, what is required now.