



Carnatic Music and Caste: The Impact of the Brahmin Nationalist Movement on the Devadasi Community

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Around four years ago, I sat in my group's Carnatic Music singing class, listening to my previous teacher with a master's degree with distinction in Sanskrit and Music talk about the history of Carnatic Music. Most of my teachers did not have degrees associated with their music careers, and their Carnatic Music education consisted of teacher-student learning for most of their lives (my current singing teacher, S. Aishwarya, told me I would need at least 20 years of this training to become a teacher myself). Carnatic Music, a South Indian classical art form, has been practiced for thousands of years. We were told about the Carnatic Music Trinity: Sri Tyagaraja Swami, Sri Muthuswami Dhikshitar, and Sri Syama Sastri, the most regarded in a singer's repertoire. For years, I had grown up thinking that these composers, along with many other Brahmin male composers, were the original and best practitioners of this art form. When I checked out a book on Bharatanatyam from my school's library, called *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, edited by Davesh Soneji, I did not know of the Brahmin community's efforts to obscure the role of Devadasis in this art form. This book was one of a few of its kind in the library. I learned for the first time that Devadasis, the original practitioners of Bharatanatyam and a matrilineal caste that practiced their arts in temples, were deprived of them by Brahmin "revivalists" who forced Bharatanatyam out of the temple and into the concert hall (Soneji, 2010, p. xii-xiv).

When I decided to write this paper, I never thought to associate Devadasis with Carnatic Music. This project was originally meant to figure out why most of the songs I had sung were in Sanskrit and to connect that with the art's history.¹ The Brahminization of Carnatic Music shifted its focus from temple to sabha, exclusive to upper-caste individuals and preventing the Devadasi caste from gaining patronage in their art. Carnatic Music's "ideal femininity" associated with high-caste women and Aryan tradition forced those who were not Brahmin to assimilate. Carnatic Music's "purification" during the 20th century is, by definition, cultural appropriation due to the exclusivity of its original patrons.

Abstract

My paper examines how Brahmins came to dominate Carnatic music over time, from the pre-colonial period until today. I show how Brahmins had better access to formal education and held positions of power in the British government, while Devadasis were sponsored for performances during festivals by elite members of society, many of whom were also Brahmin. Brahmins gained their privileged status due to their associations with Aryan tradition, which was favored by the British caste system.

Though Devadasis flourished during the 19th century, Brahmins eventually led the nationalist movement, seeking to "purify" and "revive" Indian culture. They replaced Devadasis

¹ When I began researching, my mentor, Aditya Kumar, a current Ph.D. candidate in History at Yale University, recommended the article, "Emergence of an Ecumene: Transnational Encounters in South Indian Carnatic Music" by Rajeswari Ranganathan. In it, I read that most Carnatic Musicians in the American Diaspora were Brahmin, while in the UK, they constituted a mixture of castes (Ranganathan, 2021, p. 60).

with upper-caste women, whom they saw as more “respectable,” and Devadasis were forced into roles defined for them by these nationalist Brahmins. The ostracism of Devadasis from Carnatic Music was an act of anti-Devadasi violence that was all-consuming across different societal areas. Brahmins in Carnatic Music set standards for musicians, predominantly female and/or of lower castes, to assimilate into their culture of exclusivity. Devadasis often had to conform to these standards to continue pursuing art, often losing the ability to publicly show their identities in the name of career advancement.

The dominance of Brahmins in historically non-Brahmin arts led to the alienation of other castes and the ostracism of Devadasis from Carnatic Music and other arts, which pushed many into religiously sanctioned prostitution. Today, a stark contrast exists between the Devadasi community, struggling with sexually transmitted diseases, and the Brahmin community, thriving economically and artistically in the mainstream through their exclusive culture, remaining segregated from other castes.

Caste and the Aryan/Dravidian Split

The origins of the caste system in the Indian popular imagination can be traced back to the Aryan civilization. The Aryans, an Indo-European ethnolinguistic group that began migrating into the Indus Valley around 1800 BCE, founded the basis of Hinduism (Shankar, 2019; Bill, n.d.). They wrote the Vedas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata; overall, they had a tradition of Sanskrit. They were among the first Indian civilizations to separate people into *varnas* based on occupation: these *varnas* consisted of Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. Initially, people could change their *varnas*, but as society grew more complex from around BCE 500–1500 CE, *varnas* were often considered family occupations and turned into *jatis*, which people were born into (“Jati,” n.d.). The division between castes grew so transparent that two people of different castes could not talk to each other (Bill, n.d.). Some individuals want to preserve the unique characteristics of the Aryan population by avoiding intermixing with other groups, which may come across as extreme to some (Sharma, 2005, p. 844).

The Dravidians, an ethnolinguistic group that spoke Dravidian Languages, also existed on the Indian Subcontinent (Shankar, 2019). Many believers in the “Aryan Invasion Theory” argue that the Aryans invaded the Indus Valley, pushing the Dravidians down South, while other people believe that the Dravidians expanded South. Either way, the Aryans and the Dravidians intermixed and continued to interact. Populations of Aryans and Dravidians were distinct due to their linguistic and ethnic differences, but the idea of the two being two distinct “races” is ideological; in other words, the categories of Aryan and Dravidian have historically been leveraged for socio-political power (Shankar, 2019). Historians continue to debate this binary split, but there is no doubt that its ideological component looms large in Indian society.

The idea of a coherent “Aryan race” appeared around the mid-19th century, which the British used to classify Indians based on their skin color and facial features. According to them, those who were “Aryan” were more “European,” meaning they had lighter skin. As a result of this stratified economic benefit system, Aryans and Dravidians, or groups considered Aryan or Dravidian, became further removed culturally and socially from each other. Those classified as “Aryan” primarily came from the upper three castes. Still, due to the Aryans’ association with Sanskrit and the social reality that only Brahmins had access to Sanskrit learning, Brahmins strategically labeled themselves as Aryan to receive privileges in the colonial era (Shankar, 2019; Laxman. K., 2016, 697-698; Subramaniam, 1969, p. 1133-1134; “Brahman”, n.d.).

The British also cast those of lower castes as Dravidians, whom they felt were inferior to Aryans due to their darker skin tones. Due to the association of Dravidians with lower castes, the Aryan Invasion Theory constructs the narrative that the Aryans conquered the Dravidians, though there is little evidence to suggest this (Prasanna, 2015, p. 1882). Those who believed in the Aryan Invasion Theory classified Dravidians as low-caste due to their “similar” features to the indigenous Africans. This division of Aryans and Dravidians legitimated the “caste system” as we know it. Sir Herbert Hope Risley, a British colonial administrator and ethnographer, described the invasion as “[t]he constitutive event for Indian civilisation ... was the clash between invading, fair-skinned, civilised Sanskrit-speaking Aryans and dark-skinned, barbarous aborigines.” He conducted the Ethnographic Survey of Bengal, using the width-to-height ratios of noses to separate the populations into Aryans, Dravidians, and seven castes, unlike the four present in the *varna* system (Shankar, 2019; “Herbert Hope Risley”, 2023).

Associations of Devadasis with Prostitution

Historically, Devadasis also practiced art in the Nayaka court, a Telugu-speaking court in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, during the late 16th and 17th centuries. Devadasis, originally dedicated to the temple for service, also performed in court and were associated with prostitutes and professional dancing women. They were encouraged to write and perform various compositions through Bharatanatyam and Carnatic Music. The culture of the Nayaka court was described as erotic, and the theme of *bhoga*, or erotic longing, often emerged in works from this time. Devadasis were linked to this theme as *bhoga-stri*, or courtesans, through their performances in the court (Soneji, 2010, p. xii-xiv). These performances and compositions led to the association of Devadasis with this erotic culture and roles as courtesans and prostitutes. The poems of Kshetrayya, a Telugu Brahmin poet who composed *keertanas* (also known as *kritis* and a vital song form of Carnatic Music) and *padams* (or poems, a format which he perfected) often depicted Devadasis’ female desires, as well as the sexual relationship between a woman and a man to convey a metaphor for devotion to the supreme. These further led to Devadasis’ association with sexual themes, and Kshetrayya’s compositions are highly regarded in the Telugu Devadasi community today (Soneji, 2010, p. xiv; “Kshetrayya,” 2023).

Devadasi Migration to Chennai

During the mid-19th century, artists moved from Thanjavur, where the Nayaka kingdom’s rule had ended, to Chennai, then called Madras. Soon, Chennai became the central hub of cultural and artistic performance. Devadasis now gained patronage through festivals and professional dance performances, a competitive system that did not guarantee opportunities. Elite members of society, such as the Smarta Brahmin community and Isai Vellalars (a caste that Devadasis were often from), sponsored performances of vocal music and poetry in homes, and Devadasis and their upper-caste patrons composed new poems and songs that further developed the Devadasis’ art forms. Devadasis soon relied on this patronage and focused their careers on the new Chennai system, which meant that they could be harmed significantly if their performing opportunities were limited (Soneji, 2010, p. xvi-xvii; Irschick, 1994; “Isai Vellalar,” 2023).

The “Revivalist” Movements and the Establishment of Sabhas and Music Academies

During the early 20th century, significant shifts in Carnatic Music from the colonial patronage system of Madras occurred, with new music halls, organizations, academies, and *sabhas* (Sanskrit for “assemblies”, often used to describe music performance associations) founded by the Brahmin elite with the intention of a “revival” of Carnatic Music. As they were in charge of these *sabhas*, Brahmins could control who performed, gradually diminishing the number of Devadasis showcased. They aimed to reinvent the music of South India to a more “classical” form, one where chaste, upper-caste, “family women” could perform (Weidman, 2003, p. 194). This was uncalled for, as it enforced stereotypes about Devadasis and other lower-caste women, further separating them from the Brahmin community.

Devadasis, who historically had sexual relationships with upper-caste men outside of marriage and were associated with the erotic Nayaka court, did not fit nationalists’ definition of a “family woman.” As movements to force out Devadasis grew, they became regarded as prostitutes and were turned away from performing (Soneji, 2010, p. xiii; Mythri, 2015, p. 23; Weidman, 2003, p. 194). This led to the dominance of Brahmins in Carnatic Music, specifically women. As Brahmins formed the new middle class of South India, it was mostly the male Brahmins who established the *sabhas* that wanted “ideal women” who came from “respectable” backgrounds to perform their arts. Upper-caste women were now regarded as the most valued voices in South Indian classical music, and this norm became what was known as “authentic Carnatic Music” (Weidman, 2003, p. 194-195).

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act

Eventually, the Devadasi system, where young girls are dedicated to temples and “married” to Gods, was outlawed through the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 but is still practiced illegally today. As members of the Devadasi community were now regarded as prostitutes, the Act gave them the right to marry. Although it prevented them from being dedicated to Hindu temples, it also banned their ritual, social, and aesthetic practices. Many Devadasis believed that their roles in society were more than those of prostitutes due to their sophisticated artistic contributions to South India. The bill, however, was proposed by the daughter of a Devadasi and a Smarta Brahmin, Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, an advocate for female physical and social health. Due to her father’s marriage to a Devadasi, her family was ostracized by his side, causing her to become more connected to her mother’s family. She saw firsthand the issues that the Devadasi community faced and used her education as a way to fight against gender restrictions in South India (“Devadasi,” n.d.; Soneji, 2010, p. xiii-xxi; “Devadasi,” 2023; “Muthulakshmi Reddy,” 2023). In her essay, “Why Should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples be Abolished?” she argues that the Devadasi system would increase sexually transmitted diseases amongst the Devadasi Community. Many reformers believed that *pottukkattutal*, the practice of tying a *pottu* (ritual emblem) around the neck of a young girl to dedicate her to a temple would increase the sexual abuse and prostitution amongst the Devadasi community; in addition, they saw the Devadasi system as a restrictive practice that didn’t resemble the matriarchal structure that Devadasis had in earlier times.

Many caste groups, including men from the Isai Vellalar communities that sponsored Devadasis earlier, joined the movement to stop temple dedication. Most of the conversations on Devadasi dedication prevention excluded Devadasis, leading to the abolition of the practice without direct input from the affected community members (Soneji, 2010, p. xxii). Reddi herself

mentions how the word “*dasi*,” which means “servant,” came to be regarded as the word “prostitute,” arguing that through dedication, the system enforced religiously sanctioned prostitution (Reddi & Soneji, 2010, p. 116-117). This may have been true due to the lack of performance opportunities available to Devadasis because of the Brahmin Takeover and nationalist movements, along with the preconceived notions that Devadasis were courtesans. Many Devadasis countered Reddi’s arguments, such as in the Madras Devadasis Association’s “The Humble Memorial of the Devadasis of the Madras Presidency,” wanting to preserve Devadasi culture to its original glory and responding to the Brahmin and upper-caste nationalism with Tamil *Saiva* religious nationalism. They make points that Devadasis are not prostitutes, contrary to popular belief, and that their main focus is on their service to God (Soneji, 2010, p. xxii-xxiii; Madras Devadasis Association & Soneji, 2010, p. 128-138). However, instead of redefining society’s definition of “Devadasi,” the system was outlawed altogether.

M.S. Subbulakshmi’s Successful Career Through Devadasi Assimilation

As the decline of Devadasis emerged, a few became well-known for acting in films (Soneji, 2010, p. xvii). M.S. Subbulakshmi, called the “Queen of Music” from around the Carnatic Music community, originally starred in films while growing her Carnatic Music career. Subbulakshmi was the daughter of a Devadasi and an Iyer Brahmin who began learning and performing Carnatic Music at an early age. Subbulakshmi was exposed to music early on through her mother’s regular stage performances and family music background.

In 1940, M.S. Subbulakshmi married Thiagaraja “Kalki” Sadasivam, an Iyer Brahmin (“M.S. Subbulakshmi,” 2023; “Kalki Sadasivam,” 2023; Weidman, 2003, p. 198-200). Sadasivam further introduced her to the Brahmin music community in Chennai. Many believe her husband often distrusted her in their marriage and accused her of infidelity, possibly due to her Devadasi background and the caste power dynamic between the two. Devadasis were often considered “characterless ladies” by the Brahmin community, and it was noted that M.S. Subbulakshmi went to great lengths to distance herself from them. Her husband, also her manager, idealized the female vocalist in Carnatic Music and was responsible for her image and fame as a Devadasi Carnatic Music singer. Through her marriage to Sadasivam, M.S. Subbulakshmi could publicly appear as a “traditional” Brahmin wife, assimilating into the Brahmin-dominated Carnatic Music Industry (Weidman, 2003, p. 198-200). The physical appearance of M.S. Subbulakshmi also contributed to this “ideal womanhood”; M.S. Subbulakshmi was often seen wearing silk saris, decadent jewelry, and a bindi on her forehead during her performances. She was expected to look, act, and sing like a traditional Brahmin woman, which is one of the major reasons she rose to great power in the Carnatic Music Industry (Mythri, 2015, p. 23-24).

However, my singing teacher, S. Aishwarya, M.S. Subbulakshmi’s great-granddaughter and renowned singer, denies that Sadasivam enforced these standards on Subbulakshmi, arguing that:

“[e]specially in the days where women were suppressed, and women didn’t have their own rights and weren’t encouraged to perform, he made her the most popular musician of that time. She’s still one of the most popular musicians. None of [these accusations are] true. He did not control [her]. I know my grandmother and great-grandmother personally went to shop for saris. Multiple sources will say [otherwise], but we as [her] family know [the truth].”

Both sides agree that Kalki Sadasivam boosted M.S. Subbulakshmi's career by further introducing her to the music industry, making her a household name to this day. Her fame and appearance could have enforced the standard set on other women to look, act, and sing a certain way, using her fame as an example of which type of person succeeds in Carnatic Music. The next section considers my personal experience with Sanskrit in a Brahmin community, before arguing that Carnatic Music's revival is, by definition, cultural appropriation.

The Importance of Sanskrit in Brahmin Communities

I was named after one of my ancestors, a Sanskrit scholar, Krishnaswamy Sadasivam Subramani "Mani" Iyer. While my great-grandfather was definitely not a Brahmin nationalist and was described to me as one of the most intelligent and compassionate people in my family, the importance of knowledge, especially Sanskrit knowledge, is held to great significance in Brahmin culture, as shown in my last name (for context, I do not share a last name with my parents, whom I am biologically related to). My family was elated when I expressed the desire to take Sanskrit classes and minor (or possibly major) in South Asian Studies in college (though for being a music composer myself, I can name very few female composers). This cultural importance, rather than our features, led to the Brahmin adoption of Aryan identity. I have met many people from the Tamil Brahmin Iyer sect with the "Iyer" last name. My last name and its association with Brahminism have likely impacted my life greatly, considering that every Tamil Brahmin who encounters my last name knows that I am a part of their community. Certain assumptions are made about who I am, and there are certain standards and traditions that all Brahmins are assumed to follow.

According to the book *Ancient India* by Virginia Schomp, these high standards also existed in ancient times. When I read this book in elementary school, I was shocked by the specificity of these rules, quoted from the *Laws of Manu*, written by sages on how society should run. Schomp writes:

"forbidden was food 'touched intentionally with the foot ... pecked at by birds or touched by a dog ... food at which a cow has smelt ... that on which anybody has sneezed' and food served at a dinner 'where a guest rises prematurely and sips water'" (Schomp, 2005, p. 17).

Brahmins have been held to strict and specific rules, many of which were enforced by their own communities (due to the *Laws of Manu's* possibly Brahmin authors), for hundreds of years. The strictness of these rules is not trivial. Rather, these rules make assumptions about the unique ability of Brahmins to follow a virtuous and disciplined lifestyle—a poor reflection on those deemed to belong to lower castes. While some of these rules continue to be enforced, some are not—regardless, Brahmin supremacy continues to exist.

Carnatic Music's "Revival" as Cultural Appropriation

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of Cultural Appropriation is "[t]he unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society" ("cultural appropriation, n.", 2023). In other words, cultural appropriation is the acquisition of certain

cultural traditions from a marginalized group by one that occupies the mainstream. In “Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance” by Mathew Harp Allen, where he evaluates the role of Rukmini Devi, a key figure in the Bharatanatyam “revival” movement, he states that in addition to the:

“re-vivification...[of the art form], it was equally a repopulation (one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction..., a re-naming..., a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (... a splicing together of selected ‘strips’ of performative behaviour in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents a historical one)” (Allen & Soneji, 2010).

The Brahmin population’s adoption of Carnatic Music fits this description; the Brahmin community repopulated Carnatic Music, reconstructed its portrayals of women, and resituated it in *sabhas* after moving it out of temples and courts of Devadasis’ patrons. The replacement of influential Devadasi composers in Carnatic Music history with Brahmin male composers, some of whom wrote casteist messages into their compositions, and the placing of Brahmins at the center of the Carnatic Music narrative all correspond to the process described above (Mythri, 2015, p. 24). Brahmins inappropriately adopted Carnatic Music by labeling its original practitioners as prostitutes and restricting their performing opportunities.

Conclusion

The ostracism of the Devadasi Community and the appropriation of Carnatic Music by the Brahmin Community led to the dominance of Brahmins in traditionally non-Brahmin arts. “Ideal femininity” associated with high caste women and Aryan tradition forced assimilation on those who were not Brahmin. The exclusion of Devadasis in Carnatic Music during the 20th century defined the “revival” and “purification” of Carnatic Music as cultural appropriation.

Even though Carnatic Music’s revival was cultural appropriation, many talented and hardworking Brahmin musicians would not give up their lifelong journey of music; I would consider myself to be within this group. The importance of learning the history of Carnatic Music and acknowledging the need for diversity in South Asian arts would be an excellent first step for musicians to readdress Carnatic Music’s exclusive history and to help music prosper for generations to come.



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