

## **MARGINAL FEMININE MUSICIANSHIP IN KERALA, SOUTH INDIA:**

### **Telling Stories of Singing from Subaltern Locations**

My paper today explores how women's musical agency has contributed to the social mobility aspirations of a disadvantaged caste in the southwestern state of Kerala, South India. (2-3-4) In the search for alternative models for economic and social wellbeing, Kerala has become well known for remarkable development achievements, including high literacy rates for men and women, low birth rates, and grassroots participatory democracy. Entangled in this narrative of progress is the unique matrilineal system previously followed by many communities and the state's distinction of having democratically installed the first communist government. Fewer people will know, however, that the social world of the princely states that inhabited the region now called Kerala also witnessed some of the worst forms of caste oppression and violence on the Indian Subcontinent. It is against this background of dramatic contrasts, that I consider how women from a disadvantaged caste have used their hereditary musicality as a strategic resource for improving their families' reputations.

Throughout the historical hilly region of Malabar along the tropical west coast of India, the Hindu Malayan caste has for centuries maintained the hereditary right and responsibility to mediate between people and local Goddesses, Gods, and ancestors called *teyyamar*. Elders remember how only a couple of generations ago Malayan women were actively involved in these rituals while also performing their hereditary occupation as village midwives. Although women have almost never been trained to be spirit-mediums, their singing was considered vital for the overall efficacy of the ritualizing process, particularly when the spirit inhabiting a body-medium was a Goddess. When asked why

younger women no longer sing at these events, Malayan men claim that women's bodies are too unpredictable these days; in their view, the decline in the practice of menstrual seclusion has precluded knowing whether a woman's body is compromising the purity of the body-medium before the spirit comes down. Indeed, feminine bodies are powerful. Ambivalently so, it seems, as they can both awaken deities or obstruct their transmigration. Ethnographic attention to what people actually do, however, suggests another reason why young women are not encouraged to participate—one that I believe is linked to the way class discourses are frequently displaced onto gender discourses (Ortner 2006). As Malayan women adapt their hereditary knowledge of musical performance to gain access to higher status music venues, they have become important agents for transforming the socio-economic position of their families.

Formerly labeled “untouchable” in the pan-Indian hierarchical caste system and colonial censuses, Malayan were stigmatized as a result of their role as removers of pollution from higher caste family homes. The pollution could be tangible in the form of bodily substances like blood, for example in the case of midwifery, or it could be intangible in the form of the evil eye or other afflictions. To think through the ways Malayan women struggle against these stigmas by negotiating new roles in previously inaccessible gendered performance settings, I turn to the work of three influential feminist theorists. First, as a point of departure, bell hook's critique of white middle-class feminist movement provides a model for accounting for variable experiences of modern women in Kerala. Secondly, Sandra Harding's recent argument for the epistemological strengths of standpoint theory invites reflection on how identity narratives can become resources in wider struggles for social change. And finally, J. Devika's critique of the

notion of women's liberation under Kerala's distinctive model of development situates my research in relation to debates in Kerala. But before I draw links between these theorists and the salient events in one woman's life history, a little more background is necessary to appreciate the socio-musical origins of Malayan musical sensibilities and subalternity.

Every year, family and communal shrines in Malabar become powerful sites for encountering the divine through male Malayan body-mediums. (5) Many people continue to believe that the fertility and prosperity of land and families depend on Malayan mediating annual visits from local deities incarnate. The embodied deities are treated like royalty, praised for their individual qualities, and consulted over wide-ranging matters of personal and collective concern. The performers are crowned with elaborate headdresses and their bodies are meticulously decorated in preparation to serve as vehicles for divine presence on earth. (6) While stunning visual effects are a necessary part of the ritual, the agency that awakens the feminine energy, or *shakti*, is sonic. First, the performer calls the spirit through a formal chant. Then, when the time is right, Malayan sing powerful praise hymns to awaken the spiritual energy until the performer's sense of self dissolves into the identity of the specific deity invited. Finally, the beating of cylindrical drums called *chendas* by boys and men, boosts the presence of the God in the body-medium. (7)

In the past, Malayan women would join the men in awakening the presence of divine spirits, but their musical agency has shifted in recent decades from ritual arenas to modern music venues, including schools, festival stages, studios, and political rallies. (8-9) Malayan women now study Indian classical music, perform popular music in public concerts accompanied by Indian orchestras, record songs that support political parties or

nationalist causes at local studios, and teach classical music out of their homes, at public schools, and private music schools. What have Malayan women lost and gained in this process? How are their lived experiences different from those of higher caste women?

When bell hooks drew attention to significant gaps separating economically privileged white women from disadvantaged minority women in struggles against sexist oppression (1982), her critique could have been adapted for the Indian context to underscore discrepancies between the experiences of privileged high-caste women and those of women formerly labeled “untouchable”. Prior to Kerala’s formation as an Indian state, low caste women served land-owning high-caste families in a complex feudal set of hierarchical relations. Oral narratives tell how women faced frequent caste and sexist oppression from upper-castes. Yet even as their labor made them more vulnerable to some forms of caste sexist violence, it also gave them a greater scope for mobility across public and private spaces. Hence Malayan women were already accustomed to performing in public as part of their musical roles in spirit mediumship and midwifery when they began to form new identities in the wake of Indian nation-building. The musicality they inherited from elders provided another resource for mobility in modern Kerala society. By musicality I mean the bundle of practical capabilities and knowledge that informs embodied Malayan dispositions to use sound tactfully in different ways according to a highly developed sonic sensibility.

At this point I turn to introduce Rija, a young Malayan woman of my generation who is steadily building a career as a musician and music teacher. **(10)** Her-story of women’s agency and familial socio-musical aspirations, combined with others like hers

from different generations, provides a significant counter-narrative to the dominant discourse on women and music in Kerala.

Following early training with Malayan teachers, Rija began a seven-year period of study under a prominent local classical teacher. Under his guidance she developed into a confident performer with a solid Karnatak or classical music education. After completing an exam in vocal music she began teaching lessons out of her home. Eventually, she took a job in the public school system as a music teacher after completing a college arts education. At the same time as she pursued teaching, she accepted recording contracts with local political parties, devotional projects, and even a nationalist recording initiative produced in support of the Indian troupes in 1999. Rija also passed an All India Radio exam with a high B+ rating in the category of light music. When offered the opportunity to go to Delhi, she turned it down to pursue a career in music education.

When I began to make regular visits to a Malayan home to learn about ritual musicality in the summer of 2003, I noticed that Rija, the daughter of the house, was also giving lessons out of the same room in which I studied *chenda*. Sometimes I would arrive and she would be finishing a lesson or my session would end and the kids would file into the small second-storey music room that also doubled as a bedroom. During one visit, I asked if we could observe her lessons and she immediately agreed. Elegantly dressed in a turquoise *churidar* (salwar kameez) with gold bangles dangling from her wrist, she sat on the edge of the bed and led the standard prayer to Sarasvati, intoning the first (*sa*), fifth (*pa*) and eighth (*sa* octave higher) degrees. She then moved on to the lesson, using a small electronic keyboard to help the students tune their voices as they sat cross-legged with little notebooks in front of them. The class included both boys and girls with a range

in age from about seven to twelve. In what seemed like a remarkable case of role reversal, here was a Malayan woman teaching the high-caste South Indian art music tradition to children of mixed caste background, including higher castes. As I met more Malayan families who were sending their children to classical music lessons, I became more interested in how musical practices were creating new identity possibilities. When my partner, Laure, heard through kitchen talk among the women in the household that a marriage was in the process of being arranged between Rija and another successful Malayan classical singer and music educator, I began to ask more questions about Rija's public musical persona. Sure enough, Rija and Ananth were married in between fieldwork stints and she began to teach with him at his family's Tyagaraja School of Music. Their marriage alliance—encouraged by complementary careers in music education—raised interesting questions about how musical assets can be consolidated to enter into artistic fields dominated by higher castes. (11) So what does Rija's story tell us about marginal feminine musicianship? For guidance I invoke Sandra Harding and J. Devika's recent work.

Harding's use of standpoint theory works from the premise that social change really depends on going beyond resistance towards transformation (2006). She advocates using life experiences of marginalized women as a strategic resource for "studying up" to expose oppressive conceptual frameworks that disguise unequal power relations. To accomplish this she identifies four important steps: (12) 1) treat all knowledge as socially situated, 2) recognize that knowledge created through the lived experience of oppressed groups is resourceful, 3) work from individual lives to identify conceptual frameworks

that maintain unequal power relations, and finally 4) become politically engaged, or in other words, support the formation of transformative subjectivities.

An example of an approach in the way of Harding's strategy is J. Devika's recent article questioning gendered notions of development in Kerala society (2006). Using the logic of standpoint theory, though not as thoroughly grounded in lived experience, she examines how Kerala's celebrated development success really depended on women entering modern domains of domestic and public life with "gentle power" in order to support male public roles in politics, law, and business. Her article calls into question the whole notion that Kerala women's agency has resulted in expanded life choices, as opposed to carefully prescribed modern gender roles instituted by patriarchal power relations. She argues that the "Kerala model" woman is less the undoing of patriarchy than the redoing of it. The weakness in Devika's argument is its lack of any discussion on how lower caste women position themselves differently from high-caste middle-class women in relation to Kerala modernity.

Thinking through Rija's life story using Harding's logic of standpoint theory and Devika's critique of the Kerala "model" woman, we can gather some preliminary ideas about Malayan women and music in Kerala. While on one hand, Rija's generation seems to have lost the sacred power attributed to feminine voices in ritual contexts, their hereditary musicality has become a resource for raising the socio-musical profile of their families and the wider Malayan community. Music as sacred power becomes music as social power. Given that low-caste ritual musical practices are socially incompatible with new musical roles, Malayan women have left a part of their hereditary occupational past behind. In the process, they inevitably lose some of the freedom lower caste women

exercised as more active participants with Malayan men in ritual arenas. Meanwhile, they now navigate the limited spaces for respectable feminine music making established by patriarchy. And yet they navigate modern sites of professional music making with a different set of tools, strategies and historical experiences, which include a predisposition to performing music in public due to hereditary performance backgrounds. Moreover, as Rija and her husband Ananth demonstrate, Malayan women appear to more easily take on the role of partner with their menfolk in these new musical settings.

Clearly if we group all Kerala women together under a universal category modeled after middle-class lived experience, variable musical engagements with modernity will be glossed over. Malayan women with flexible, portable distinct musical sensibilities are equipped differently in the struggle to find a place to sing. On this note, I close with two musical performances by Nani, an elder Malayan woman who continues to sing where women's voices are rarely heard these days. In the first video clip she joins men from her extended family to awaken the spiritual energy of the fertility Goddess, Uchitta Bhagavati. Then, time permitting, I'll play an audio clip in which she sings a revolutionary Marxist song with her two sons, thus offering another example of how Malayan women have exercised musical agency in diverse settings. **(13, 14, 15)**

While Devika points to the fallout for middle-class women as they became increasingly alienated from the decision-making centers of political power, the musical agency of Malayan women from Kerala's margins emphasizes the need to resist unilinear narratives. If standpoint theory is correct in assuming that stories about difference are strategic resources for progressive social movement, than surely Malayan life histories count as such a resource in India's wider class, caste, and gender struggles.



## References

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