

K.J.Yesudas: The Discursive Formation of the Cult of a Playback Singer in the Kerala Public Sphere

Navya. V.K, The English and Foreign Languages University, India

The European Conference on Cultural Studies 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Kattassery Joseph Yesudas, the popular playback singer¹, has been a central figure in the realm of popular culture constituted by Malayalam film music industry for more than half a century. Yesudas has entered the field of playback singing in 1961 and in the preceding four decades, the singer has virtually monopolized the field of Malayalam film singing and he could become a hegemonic presence in the realm of popular music. The singer's voice is accorded the status of 'the representative modern voice of Kerala' by the journalistic and critical discourses in the Kerala Public Sphere. The voice that has been occupying a central place in the site of the popular music for nearly half a century and the representative status of modernity accorded to this voice owes to different socio cultural and historical factors apart from the musical talents of the singer. This paper will focus on one of the specific elements in the making of the figure of the modern singer that is the singer's unique balancing of the classical and popular music in his career. To understand how and why this factor helps the discursive construction of the modern singer, this study will look into ideological concepts and discourses that are constructed and employed in the field of music by the forces of cultural nationalists in India in the late 19th and early 20th century.

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

¹ He predominantly sings for South Indian films and he has sung over 50,000 film songs in his five-decade long career. He has won 7 National Award and several award from the Kerala State Government.

The ideological underpinnings of nationalist music cannon formations are studied and critiqued by scholars like Janaki Bhakle (2005), Amanda.J.Weidman (2006),Lakshmi Subramanian (2011) etc. In the nationalist phase and later in the post-colonial context, India as a nation was in need of its own cultural and aesthetic forms to represent its modernity. Reinventing and reconstructing existing art forms as modern nationalist art forms that has evolved to represent the modern nation was a part of the project of Indian cultural nationalism. The project of cultural nationalism was largely a brahminical one in nature, hence in the process of creating the modern musical culture, music was imagined as a forte of upper caste Hindu practices and ideologies and other musical traditions and voice cultures were gradually excluded from the modern nationalist musical culture. That is to say, the realm of aesthetics was not deprived of the play of cultural politics and the ‘nationalist music’ culture was selectively formed by excluding other traditions of music and voice cultures and the ‘purist’ policies largely disinherited non-Hindu practitioners of music. However, as a part of these cultural discourses, the category of ‘the classical’ has placed as representing the nation and is imagined as very distinct from ‘the popular music’. The classical/popular binary, is ideologically constructed by culturally disadvantaging ‘the popular’ including film music, which is at one point of time even banned from the national broadcasting by minister B.V.Keskar (1957).This paper would like to locate how this classical / popular binary operates in the culmination of Yesudas as a cult figure in the Kerala Public Sphere. I would like to argue that the classically trained Latin Catholic singer, who ventures into the field of popular music, becomes a representative modern singer of Kerala by closely associating himself with the Carnatic music tradition and by bringing in the practices and ideologies of Carnatic music to the field of film singing. Though the singer’s affinity to the popular Hindu religious centres (Guruvayoor, Mookambika) and the popularity of the Hindu devotional songs he sings are some of the supplementary factors that help the Latin Catholic singer to negotiate his lower caste status in the Kerala Public sphere, this paper chooses to focus on the musical factor.

One of the unique features of the singer is that unlike many of the other popular playback singer’s in India, the singer could excel in the dual spheres of the Carnatic (classical) and the film music (popular) traditions. These two traditions of music differ from each other in terms of composition, training, performance, appreciation etc. When the Carnatic tradition remains close to the upper caste elite Hindu tradition and is often performed for a specialized audience, film music in India is a hybrid musical form that is widely enjoyed by the public. In this paper, I would like to argue that the unique balancing of these apparently different musical traditions is one of the key cultural factors that have constituted the cult of the modern singer in Kerala. The analysis will focus on the figure of the Modern Singer in Kerala as a discursive site of the ‘popular’ and the ‘classical’ musical traditions and attempt to understand how the popular singer’s affiliation with the Carnatic tradition works to make him the voice of the Modern Singer in Kerala. How do the singer places himself in relation with the seemingly opposite musical traditions? The first part of this paper will look at the construction of the singer’s connection with the classical tradition by closely looking at the selection of photographs and literary texts in order to make sense of how this ‘belongingness’ to the Carnatic tradition operates in the construction of the cult of the Modern Singer. The second part of the paper problematizes the singer’s relationship with other popular music traditions in Kerala.

Yesudas is a classically trained popular singer; he has received academic training from institutions like RLV Academy and Swathi Thirunal Academy in Kerala. Apart from these modern institutional spaces, he was also trained under famous teachers like Chembai Vaidyanatha Bahagavatar (Carnatic maestro) and Semmangudi Sreenivasa Iyer. This paper analyses how the connections with the classical guru works out to make Yesudas the representative modern voice in Kerala in the realm of popular music. Does this connection and its projection of association with the classical guru's a component of his iconic status? Does this help him to get more acceptances in the public sphere by generating consensus from certain sections of society? Amanda.J.Weidman (2006) in her ethnographic work on Carnatic music analyses the logic of cultural nationalism in India that has redefined the practices of Carnatic music in the late 19th and early 20th century. She proposes that the discourses of modernity have instituted a new singing subject with the logic of interiorized aural modernity, where voice became a metaphor of self and authenticity. The study critiques the ideological underpinnings of nationalist discourses that have simultaneously excluded the subaltern singing subject from the norms of musical behaviour. In the case of K.J.Yesudas, the dominant male singing voice of Kerala, his aurality represents a similar modernity at the realm of the popular that simultaneously excludes the subaltern singing subject/styles by placing the interiorized singing subject at the centre stage.

Connection with guruparambara is generally a cultural mark as far as classical singers are concerned. This connection can largely determine the kind of exposure and the future of the classical performer whereas popular singing tradition may not work in the same fashion. Yesudas's wider acceptance and popularity rests on his fame as a film singer and what is unique about his career is that he equally maintains his association with Carnatic music too. I would like to argue that this connection with the Hindu upper caste gurus and its public projection and representations through Media is culturally operating in a way to give the singer's persona a wider acceptance in the Kerala Public Sphere. Amanda Weidman discusses how the nationalist project of modernity started discussing authentic Indian music by adding new meanings to the already existing traditional terms like guru-shishya relation:

At the turn of 21st century, the term has acquired a certain semantic destiny; not only does it refer to a specific sense of fidelity, that of a disciple to guru, but the enactment of gurukulavasam signifies, at a broader level, a fidelity to "tradition" an adherence to the element that makes this music truly Indian. Gurukulavasam is imagined as the mode through which the essentially oral tradition of Indian classical music is passed on. This is in distinct opposition to the modes of teaching western music, which, as the common stereotype goes "can be played out from looking at the written score". (p 84)

Therefore, when the concept of guruparambara is brought into the discourse of popular music in Kerala, it operates to generate a public consensus on the cult of the singer, who is a Latin Catholic Christian. This ensures his affiliation with the hinduised, nationalist concept of music and makes his presence more acceptable for a certain section among the listeners. It can also be argued that this affiliation with 'gurus' is a way through which the Christian singer negotiates his 'otherness' from the dominant upper caste Hindu classical singing tradition in the cultural sphere/public sphere. Yesudas in his early phase of his learning faced difficulties as a Christian and

he was advised by his well-wishers to not to pursue Carnatic music as a profession as the venues of performances like temples are not open to non-Hindus. These initial responses and his problems in entering the Guruvayoor temple premises show the nature of secularism in Kerala that still cannot accept a Christian Carnatic singer. The singer is a self-proclaimed devotee of the Hindu god Guruvayoorappan and he has sung many devotional Hindu songs that is played in many famous Hindu temples including Guruvayoor. When the voice of the singer is allowed inside the temple, his body is still not allowed inside the temple either for worshipping or for giving concerts. In the context of such public discourses that throws light to the cracks behind the seemingly smooth surface of the modern secular public sphere of Kerala, the association of the singer with the Carnatic gurus can be seen as a discourse that generates certain sort of acceptability.

The public display of his affiliation with gurus and its media representations gives us specific instances of discourses that can be used to problematize the way in which the popular has to get itself associated with the classical singing tradition to construct the figure of the modern singer. Below given images 1 & 2 that shows the relation between the Christian singer and the Hindu guru. When image 1 depicts the guru honouring the disciple by gifting a golden cloth as a token of appreciation, the second image depicts a concert where the guru and his disciple perform together with the instrumental accompaniment. Both these images convey how his 'belongingness' to the classical tradition is publicly acknowledged by the guru.



Image 1 :Chembai honouring Yesudas by gifting him Ponnada²

² Ponnada is a piece of cloth with a golden colour boarder, which is presented to eminent artists as a token of honour



Image 2 :Chembai performing with Yesudas

Malayali writer Subhash Chandran in his work *Das Capital* describes a scene where Yesudas performs a concert with his guru Chembai in 1973 January. He gives a literary representation of an instance where the interaction between the singer and his guru Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar takes place. The guru mediates the relation between the singer and the audience. Chembai speaks to the audience:

Today is our Das's 33rd birthday... (Claps from the audience) and particularly this is why today's concert has been organized. Especially, I present him this Tamburu (claps)...I am asking him to sing more Carnatic music while presenting the Thamburu (the audience are silent and Chembai gives the Tamburu to Das)...Accept this (claps)...this Thamburu is sponsored by our T.V.Gopalakrishnan. (as sounds and claps raises, Chembai turns his head away from the microphone and asks the organizers) should I ask my boy to sing? Should I? (he turns to the orchestra and asks) Ready? Please don't ask (Das) to sing any film songs (sighs from the audience)..Towards the ends of the programme, I will ask him to sing a few film songs as per your demand. Till then please listen patiently (Long claps)! (p 13)

This is quite an interesting scene as it brings in a complex situation where a Carnatic maestro and his disciple who excels in both popular film songs and classical singing appear and interacts. The public discourses about the 'popular' and the 'classical' are present in Chembai's talk. Chembai calls him 'our Das' and 'my boy' and thus publically display his relationship with the singer. By calling him 'my boy', the guru-shishya relation is made visible and consequently the guru shows his willingness to share his possession, that is his shishya with the audience who are closer to the singer both through his films and through concerts. So a strange equation of the pop and the classical emerges here. Chembai presents Das with a Tambura (musical instrument) wishing that his disciple would sing more Carnatic songs in future. Clearly, his preference is for the classical and by publically announcing it in the concert venue; he implies that Yesudas has the potential to continue in the field of classical singing. This instance, as well as the previously discussed images gives a statement on the singer's 'belongness' to the classical singing tradition.

The relation between film songs and the nationalist imagination of modern classical music was never a smooth one from the beginning itself and the formulation of the national broadcasting policies in the post independent period formulated by the minister of Broadcasting B.V.Keskar. The ideals of cultural nationalisms at work behind the policy formulation can throw light on the nature of relation between these two musical traditions in relation to the formation of a 'national music culture'. Dominant nationalist project has appropriated the traditional art forms including music and selective classical music traditions in India are modernized to create new nationalist music culture. Scholars like Amanda Weidman and Janaki Bhakle theorize the nuanced cultural politics behind the formulation of the classical traditions in India (North India and South India). These works reveal the ideological underpinnings of the nationalist project of modernity that has gone into the 'purification' of existing musical practices that has cultivated a modern music culture which was a more hinduised and upper caste one by nature. The juxtaposing of the popular and the classical as extremely opposing musical traditions was a part of creating a 'national culture' of music by the nationalists from the preceding decades of independence onwards.

Dr. B.V.Keskar, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting (1950-62), has formulated national broadcasting policies of music that has initiated the processes to modernize the musical practices in India by categorizing them as classical and light song sections. Film songs were seen as not fitting into the scheme of national music culture at that point of policy making by Keskar. He ideologically preferred hinduised classical tradition of music over a diverse set of musical practices arising from different social locales. This policy making of national music can be seen as one of the earliest debates on the classical/ the popular hierarchizing. Lelyveld (1995) in analysing the broadcasting policies comments on the tension between the popular music and the national culture and states how the film song was perceived in the process of broadcasting the national music -"the great enemy to construct a new music by administrative decree was increasingly popular new style of film song" (Lelyveld,1995). But it is also to be noted that how he fails to make an 'alternative light music tradition' which can replace the "cheap and vulgar" film songs with its high literary and moral quality as people have chosen Radio Ceylon for consuming film songs. This failure in understanding the potential of the popular medium of film songs has reduced AIR's popularity among the listeners and the national policies on music were forced to respond to the needs of the time by opening Vividh Bharathi that have broadcasted film music in 1957.

Therefore, while placing Chembai's speech at the track of these nationalist debates, it can be seen that the classical-popular relationship has changed over time and now these practices can happen in the same stage but the power relation operates in such a way that the classical is still considered as having a higher status than that of the popular. The classical maestro's disapproval of the popular and the preference given to the classical shows the primary status accorded to classical music. This discourse hierarchically places the film song category as secondary to the Carnatic tradition. Finally when the Guru has to accommodate film songs into the schedule and the consequent positive responses from the audience shows how far 'popular' K.J. Yesudas as a film playback singer than as a classical singer. K.J.Yesudas has become a site where the discourses of 'the popular' and 'the classical' take place and this

scene shows how these discourses complement mutually to establish him as an iconic figure in the Kerala public sphere.

Problem with the Modern Voice: Can the Subaltern Sing?

The modern male singing voice of Kerala as represented through Yesudas is situated in a popular film song tradition. As the hegemonic singing voice that occupies the site of 'the popular', its relation with the classical tradition has been examined in the previous session. It is evident that Yesudas as a popular playback singer holds a very close relation to the classical tradition and this section will look into his relation with other popular singing traditions. Here, Yesudas's comments on 'work out music' is analysed in order to understand his position vis a vis another popular singing tradition. The video documentary 3D-Stereo Caste by A.S.Ajith Kumar focuses on the caste discriminations prevalent in the musical arena of Kerala offers an advanced form of resistance against the mainstream mediated stereotyping of lower caste music. The documentary addresses the politics of classification of music in relation to the sound and body movements in the lower caste art forms. Yesudas's response to the culture of 'work out music' is incorporated to the documentary.

What I have understood is that now there is a tendency of 'work out music'. For instance, great film songs like 'parijatham', such a great composition by Devarajan master or 'thamasamenthe varuvan' are not good for work out. Can one exercise playing these songs? (audience laughs) Before you take single step you will fall down. (he makes a comic sound and laughs). If that is the other songs 'tak it konki konki' (he makes some absurd sounds and actions to mock and the audience laughs). In the work out music, one does not need any musical note, pitch or rhythm. We can just manipulate it in the computer. (17.56-18.45)

The laughs and mockery Yesudas and the audience share clearly can be located within the elitist nationalist discourses of non-democratized, casteist classic art paradigm. The singer's comment unconsciously follows the 'purist argument' in the nationalist discussions of classical art forms and smoothly covers up the casteist, savarna attitude of the art practitioners. 'Work out' doesn't refer to any particular genre of popular music but a trend in film music that is more fast paced songs that uses heavy western orchestration and involves vigorous dance movements. Unlike the melodies, these songs enable the mixing of voice and body both onscreen and when the singer performs on stage. When the singer rejects the 'work out music' which involves sounds and body movements, he is arguing in favour of interiorizing the art form and shares the fear for 'body' and 'movements'. Amanda Weidman in her seminal work *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern* maps out how the nationalist project 'sanitized' classical music from body by separating it from dances and 'movements', which she argues, was not an innocent separation but a move biased towards the subaltern performers whose art forms often mixes dancing with singing. The ideal form of rendering became 'a kind of performance of non-performance', the voice is interiorized in the singing subject, and the body movements are totally wiped out of the performer. She argues that the shift of performance venues from temple to more public concert venues are made in favour of the urban, largely Brahmin middle class and the singing subject was never imagined as the subaltern one. The singer/artist in the modern classical musical paradigm is imagined as a non-subaltern subject as the

capacity of interiorized music production is not a quality that is attributed to the subaltern subject by the formulators of the nationalist classical singing tradition.

At this point, It is interesting to incorporate Sanjay Srivastava's(2004) observation on the veteran Hindi playback singer Lata Mangeshkar's physical posture while giving public performances - 'she would stand rigidly on stage and sing with her head buried in a note book' (p 2022). The posture of the singer foregrounds her voice and subdues her body and the adherence to the 'notebook' make her more committed to the mode of singing the classical that is bound to the literary part of the music. In other words, Lata the film singer internalizes the discourses of 'interiority' of performance and unconsciously follows the logic of the classical performance even while performing film song that falls into the category of the light/popular music tradition. Similarly, Yesudas in his performance of songs on stage keeps a relatively stiff position and his body movements are restricted to the movement of his hand that hold the mike.

Coming back to Yesudas's contempt/mockery to the music that makes possible movements which is placed in contrast with the 'great music' composed by G.Devarajan and V.Dakshinamoorthy, who were Malayalam music composers with a very strong classical foundations is a problematic disposal. He sees some fundamental problems in the 'work out music' or he points at some absences or lacks in the structure of the 'work out music':

1. Unlike those 'great' film songs, these songs are good for work out.
2. These songs are composed without musical note, pitch or rhythm.
3. These songs can be simply manipulated by using a machine like computer.

The statement and these three propositions give hints about the singer's concept of the film music. The songs that are hailed as 'great' are melodies and composed by people who has strong classical foundation in music and by labelling them as 'great', he stands close to the form of melodies. The second problem he finds is the absence of 'musical note', 'pitch' etc., these technical terms are also closely related to the modern notion of classical music and it gives a 'literary' notion of music, both these are generally absent in subaltern musical forms that work out entirely different notions of musical practices. The third comment he passes with sarcasm is that these forms of 'work out' music can be simply manipulated by using computer. Of course, the context in which he makes the comment may be referring to the increasing trend of digital plagiarism in the field of film music and new trends of sound mixing but the totality of the statement made in association with the term of 'work out music' enable us to read the third preposition in a different way. The 'work out music', as he terms it, stands close to the subaltern/ folk tradition, in his opinion lacks 'originality'. When the 'great music' needs originality and other authorial qualities, work out music is just a machine manipulation or the people producing this music have no capacity to create so called 'original' and 'great' music.

Though the singer is prominent in popular film music which is often conceived as very different from the classical music, his comments further marginalizes the other popular singing traditions including the folk songs or the so called 'work out' or 'adipoli music' which is more faithful to the lower caste traditional art forms. His preference as illustrated by the examples are more close to the more 'interiorized',

melodies and semi classical film songs. This classification themselves bears some caste biases in it. The director of the documentary Ajith says:

The 'classical' music discourses asks you to control your body and voice, it tries to separate the voice from the body, it prevents you from shaking your body while singing; but in Dalit music, body and voice are not separated. They dance while they sing; they are loud and full of energy. So my documentary is about the politics of sound as well. (<http://utharakalam.com/?p=811>)

There is another observation by music critic Ramesh Gopala Krishnan that can further help one to locate singer's position vis a vis the two different musical traditions. The comment point to one of the limitations of the singer's singing style: "Yesudas cannot effectively render voice to the raw musical forms of the subalterns that express in full vigour the basic expressions of their life. Musical genres such as the Panan Pattu, Pulluvan Pattu, Sarppa Pattu, Nadodi songs etc., are not very suitable to the refined voice and singing style of Yesudas." (p 51)

His voice has been the dominant singing voice of the heroes in Malayalam films and in most of the Malayalam films, the hero's songs are melodies and the folk or the other kinds of songs are distributed to comedians or lesser characters. The singer's seminality was determined by his ability to render 'interiorized' singing voice to the individual modern hero in Malayalam cinema and the subaltern voices largely never constituted the hero's voice. It can be argued that the voice that has become a hegemonic influence in the film singing for almost fifty years and constituted the site of the popular by representing the modern subject was not the subaltern's voice and further the singing style was never close to the other traditions of the lower caste. So, the singer's response to the 'work out' music and the limitations of his style trained by the Carnatic tradition together shows how the modern voice is an 'interiorized' one and how by means of its limitations it excludes the subaltern music traditions from its interiority.

To sum up the arguments in the above sections, it can be said the figure of the modern singer in the Kerala public sphere may not be able to negotiate his modernity in public unless he could establish a close relation with the classical tradition of music. The visibility of association with the classical singing tradition is established by the demonstration of his affiliation with classical maestro like Chembai. The Christian singer, performing in the film music manages to negotiate his identity as a Christian and as a popular singer by enhancing a sense of 'belongingness' to the classical hinduised music tradition. Hence, I would argue that the balancing of the classical along with the popular is a vital factor in the construction of the figure of the modern singer in Kerala. The nature of modernity he represents through his voice in the realm of the popular stands close to the classical tradition than to the other regional/folk tradition and to see how far classical oriented is the modern popular male singing voice, the singer's attitude to one strand of other popular music is analysed. The second argument is that this modern representative voice works out the logic of the nationalist construction of 'interiorized' voice as a norm and hence excludes subaltern music styles and voice cultures in that process. The realm of 'eclectic' film music culture again enables internal divisions of genres in accordance with their closeness to the classical and regional traditions. The hegemonic singing voice speaks in the language of the nationalist arguments and disapprove the 'work out music' that is

closer to the subaltern musical traditions as it is not 'interiorized' sort of musical practice.

References

A.S.Ajith (Director). (2011). *3D Stereo Caste* [Motion Picture].

A.S.Ajithkumar. (2011, December 20). Kazhchayude Charivukal. India.

Chandran, S. (2011). *Das Capital*. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books.

Elayidom, S. P. (2006). Melodies of Modernity. *Thapasam*, 27-36.

Gopalakrishnan, R. (2012). K.J.Yesudas : Aksharangale Pavizhangalakkunna Sabdamadhuri. In R. Gopalakrishnan, *Janapriyasangeetham* (pp. 30-56). Kottayam: DC Books.

Lelyveld, D. (1994). Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All India Radio. *Social Text*, 111-127.

Manuel, P. (1988). Popular Music in India: 1901-86. *Popular Music*.

Srivasthava, S. (2004). Voice, Gender and Space in Time of Five-Year Plans: The Idea of Lata Mangeshkar. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15-21.

Weidman, A. (2006). *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Contact Email : vk.nisagandhi@gmail.com