

The Historical Impact of Caste on Instrumental Music in Carnatic and Hindustani Traditions

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Abstract- *The historical impact of caste on instrumental music in Carnatic and Hindustani traditions reveals deep-seated social hierarchies that have significantly influenced the development, performance, and pedagogy of these musical forms. This study explores the historical impact of caste on instrumental music within the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions of India. The introduction establishes the significance of music as a cultural expression shaped by socio-political dynamics, particularly the caste system, which has stratified Indian society for centuries. This paper provides an overview of the caste system in India, highlighting its hierarchical structure and implications for various art forms, the distinct characteristics of Carnatic and Hindustani music traditions are examined, focusing on their origins, evolution, and stylistic differences. The historical context of caste and music in India reveals how caste has influenced the development of musical practices and the status of musicians over time. The relationship between caste and patronage in both traditions, illustrating how social hierarchies have affected access to resources and opportunities for musicians. Finally, we analyze the impact of caste on the choice of instruments, showing that certain instruments are often associated with specific castes, thereby influencing their acceptance, training, and performance contexts. This research underscores the intricate interplay between caste and music, revealing how deeply ingrained social structures have shaped the artistic landscape of India.*

Keywords: Caste System, Instrumental Music, Carnatic Hindustani Tradition, Patronage, Musical Instruments.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rich and diverse musical traditions of India, particularly Carnatic and Hindustani music, are deeply intertwined with the country's socio-cultural history. For centuries, the caste system has played a significant role in shaping the accessibility, practice, and propagation of these classical music forms, especially in the domain of instrumental music. Caste, a rigid

social stratification system, has influenced not only who could perform and teach music but also the type of instruments associated with particular social groups, the availability of patronage, and the transmission of musical knowledge across generations.

In Carnatic music, historically concentrated in South India, Brahmins, or the priestly caste, have dominated both vocal and instrumental performance. Non-Brahmin communities, despite their significant contributions to music and dance, were often marginalized or excluded from formal platforms of music education and performance. Instruments like the veena and mridangam, which are iconic in Carnatic tradition, were traditionally associated with Brahmin musicians, while lower-caste individuals faced severe barriers in accessing training for these prestigious instruments. In Hindustani music, which evolved in the northern part of India, the gharana system, which is largely family-based, also perpetuated caste-based restrictions. Though there were exceptions, many gharanas upheld hierarchical structures that limited access to learning for lower-caste musicians.

The impact of caste on instrumental music goes beyond who performs or teaches; it also extends to the instruments themselves. Some instruments were deemed more 'respectable' or 'pure' and were reserved for upper-caste musicians, while others, such as the tabla and dhol, were often associated with folk traditions and lower-caste musicians. The discrimination and exclusion faced by lower-caste musicians, though diminished today, have left an indelible mark on the historical development of both Carnatic and Hindustani instrumental music.

Despite these social barriers, lower-caste musicians made significant contributions to Indian classical music, often working behind the scenes as instrument makers, accompanists, or performers in informal

settings. In more recent times, the advent of social reform movements and the democratization of music through technology have begun to break down caste-based restrictions, allowing for more inclusive participation in these prestigious musical traditions. "Nevertheless, the legacy of caste in Indian music remains a complex and sensitive issue that continues to influence perceptions of music, musicians, and their social standing."

This paper explores the historical impact of caste on the accessibility and practice of instrumental music within the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions, tracing the evolution of caste-based discrimination in classical music, its effects on the transmission of musical knowledge, and the challenges faced by musicians from lower-caste backgrounds. By examining these intersections, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the caste system shaped the classical music landscape and to consider the ongoing efforts to democratize Indian classical music in the contemporary era.

II. CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

The Indian Caste System has traditionally been a principal framework for social differentiation in India, including class, religion, geography, tribe, gender, and language. While several types of differentiation are present in all human communities, issues arise when these aspects intersect and serve as the only foundation for systematic ranking and uneven access to valued resources such as money, income, power, and prestige (Sekhon, 39). The Indian Caste System is seen as a closed stratification system, signifying that an individual's social rank is determined by their birth caste. Interactions and behaviours with individuals of differing social standing are constrained (Sekhon, 39). Its history is significantly intertwined with Hinduism, one of the major faiths in India, and has seen several transformations throughout the Buddhist movement and British colonial administration. This article will examine the several facets of the Indian caste system including its hierarchy, historical context, and contemporary implications for India.

Caste has three components: repulsion, hierarchy, and inherited specialisation. Velassery posits that a society is defined by a system characterised by several hereditarily specialised groups that are hierarchically arranged and mutually antagonistic. It does not accept

the notion of ascending in status via the amalgamation of groups and the change of employment. The Indian caste system imposes several regulations that members must follow to prevent ostracism from their caste or, according to Hindu beliefs, to avoid being reborn into a less favourable condition in the next life. The two primary features of the Indian caste system are to endogamy and vocational limitations. Each individual belonging to a caste or sub-caste is mandated to marry within their own caste. Any infraction of this leads to expulsion from one's family and caste. Each caste is linked to a certain vocation that its members are obligated to pursue. Another aspect is that each caste enforces dietary restrictions on its members and has its own regulations governing their eating habits. There are two categories of food: Pacca, which is cooked with ghee (clarified butter), and Kachcha, which is produced with water (Pyakurel). Food exchange is restricted to certain types among designated castes. A Brahman may take only Pacca food from a Shudra, but Kachcha food may only be accepted from an individual of the same caste or a higher caste (Pyakurel). Another aspect is the social connection among castes. There are stringent prohibitions about the intermingling of a superior caste with a lower caste. Consequently, within the caste system, each caste adheres to established practices and well defined standards of interaction.

III. CARNATIC AND HINDUSTANI TRADITIONS OF MUSIC

Carnatic and Hindustani music represent two of the most prominent and deeply rooted classical music traditions of India, each with its own distinct styles, histories, and cultural influences. Both traditions are intricately linked to the broader cultural, religious, and social fabric of the country, yet they have developed unique identities over centuries.

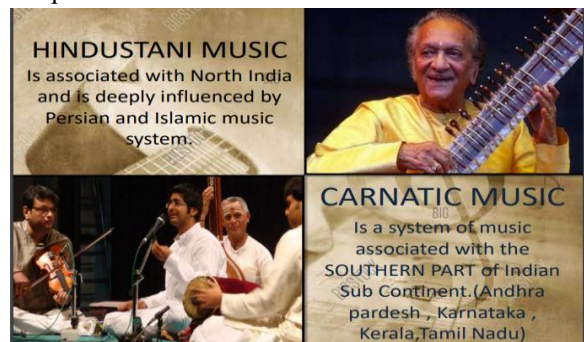


Figure 1: Concept of Hindustani and Carnatic Music
Carnatic music, primarily practiced in the southern states of India, is characterized by its emphasis on composition, rhythm, and vocal performance. It places a strong focus on krithis (composed songs), which are often devotional in nature, dedicated to Hindu deities. This tradition is known for its intricate rhythmic structures (tala) and precise adherence to a rich system of melodic modes (ragas). The compositions of legendary figures such as Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri, also known as the ‘Trinity of Carnatic Music,’ form the backbone of this system. Carnatic music places a heavy emphasis on vocal music, though instrumental music, using instruments like the veena, mridangam, violin, and flute, plays a significant role as well. "The tradition's performances often take place in intimate settings such as temples or cultural festivals, where the audience shares a close connection with the music and musicians."

Hindustani music, on the other hand, is primarily associated with northern, western, and central parts of India. It has been shaped by centuries of interaction with Persian, Mughal, and other Islamic cultural influences, which is evident in its style and instrumentation. Unlike Carnatic music, Hindustani music gives significant emphasis to improvisation and exploration within a raga. Performers often develop a raga for extended periods, weaving intricate variations and emotional depth into their renditions. Key forms in Hindustani classical music include khayal, dhrupad, thumri, and tarana. Hindustani music also has a strong tradition of instrumental music, with renowned instruments such as the sitar, tabla, sarod, sarangi, and shehnai being central to performances. While vocal music holds an important place in Hindustani music, instrumental music has developed its own equally prominent status, with artists such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan gaining international recognition. Both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions share common foundational elements, such as the use of ragas (melodic modes) and talas (rhythmic cycles). However, they differ significantly in the way these elements are approached and executed. Carnatic music is more rigid in its structure and form, while Hindustani music allows for greater improvisation and freedom within its framework. The two systems also differ in the cultural and linguistic contexts in which they are practiced. Carnatic music is largely tied to the

Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam speaking regions of South India, while Hindustani music is prevalent in Hindi, Urdu, and other northern Indian languages.

Areas of differences	Hindustani music	Carnatic music
Origin	North Vedic Tradition	South Bhakti tradition
Raga	6 principal ragas 10 thaats	Scales of 7 notes containing semi notes and 72 modes
Style	More than one singing style known as Gharana singing style .	More vocal style even when played by instrument.
Compositions or kriti forms	Khayal, dhrupad ,tarana, Thumri, Dhamar,	Varnam, Kriti divided into two parts like- Pallavi , Anupallavi & Charnam
Composers	Stalwarts from many "Gharana" or schools in diff regions of northern India	Saint Purnadardas , tyag Raja , Dikshitar & Shyama shastri
Instruments	Tabla, Sarangi , Sitar & Santoor	Veena , Mridangam & Mandolin
Rendition	Improvisation given more importance.	Composition given more importance

Figure 2: Difference between Hindustani and Carnatic Music

Despite these differences, both traditions have made significant contributions to Indian culture and continue to influence modern music, both within India and abroad. Today, musicians and scholars are exploring ways to bridge the gap between the two classical systems, creating new opportunities for collaboration and cross-pollination. The evolution of these traditions has also raised important questions about access and exclusivity, particularly when viewed through the lens of caste, religion, and socio-economic barriers, making the historical and cultural study of both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions a fascinating and vital area of inquiry.

IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CASTE AND MUSIC IN INDIA

The intersection of caste and music in India dates back centuries and is deeply rooted in the social, religious, and cultural fabric of the subcontinent. The caste system, an intricate social hierarchy, has been a powerful force in shaping not only individuals' occupations and social status but also their access to art, education, and cultural expression, including music. Music in India, particularly classical forms like Carnatic and Hindustani, has been historically linked with religious and royal patronage, with access to these traditions being heavily mediated by caste.

In the context of classical music, caste played a dual role: on the one hand, it facilitated the development of musical traditions within certain caste groups, while on the other, it marginalized or excluded others from fully participating in the musical landscape. The Brahminical dominance in both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions is particularly noteworthy. In Carnatic music, which primarily developed in South India, Brahmins held a near-monopoly over the formal teaching, performance, and dissemination of music, especially in the early 19th and 20th centuries. This influence was deeply tied to their role in temple rituals and religious ceremonies, where music was considered a sacred act reserved for the upper castes.

However, despite this dominance, many lower-caste groups, particularly the devadasis (temple dancers) and nattuvanars (dance teachers), played an indispensable role in preserving and transmitting Carnatic music and dance forms. The isai vellalar community, traditionally non-Brahmin, were pivotal in the development of both vocal and instrumental forms of Carnatic music, although they faced social discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream music institutions dominated by Brahmins. In North India, Hindustani classical music developed under the patronage of Mughal courts, which created a slightly more flexible environment in terms of caste and religion. Muslim musicians, many of whom were not bound by the Hindu caste hierarchy, contributed significantly to the tradition. However, caste-based distinctions persisted, with many instrumentalists belonging to specific communities such as the Mirasis and Doms. Moreover, the gharana system, a family-based tradition of music transmission, while ensuring the preservation of musical knowledge, often reinforced caste and class boundaries, restricting access to those outside established musical families or lower social strata.

Certain instruments were also historically associated with specific castes. For example, the mridangam in Carnatic music and the tabla in Hindustani music, while today considered prestigious, were once regarded as instruments for lower castes or accompanists, limiting their performers' social mobility. In contrast, the veena in Carnatic music and the sitar in Hindustani music were viewed as instruments of higher caste musicians, especially Brahmins in the case of the former. This caste-based segregation extended beyond performance to the very

structure of music education and patronage. Lower-caste musicians often lacked access to formal training and patronage from royal courts or wealthy patrons, which were crucial for building a musical career in pre-colonial and colonial India. As a result, while some lower-caste musicians achieved prominence, many others were relegated to the margins of society, often performing in informal settings or as accompanists to more celebrated upper-caste musicians.

The colonial period introduced new complexities to this dynamic. British policies, particularly in South India, further entrenched caste hierarchies in music by favoring Brahmin musicians as the true custodians of classical traditions. However, the social reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alongside the rise of nationalist sentiment, began to challenge these entrenched hierarchies. Figures like E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale advocated for the elevation of Carnatic music as a national cultural symbol, while simultaneously sidelining the contributions of non-Brahmin and devadasi communities. In contemporary times, there have been concerted efforts to address and dismantle the caste-based barriers in music. The growing influence of mass media, the democratization of music education, and the resurgence of interest in folk and non-classical traditions have helped bring musicians from diverse caste backgrounds into the spotlight. Nonetheless, the historical context of caste and music in India continues to cast a long shadow over the practice and perception of both Carnatic and Hindustani music, particularly in terms of access, recognition, and social mobility for lower-caste musicians.

This complex and nuanced history highlights the profound impact of caste on the development, dissemination, and accessibility of Indian classical music, and serves as a crucial backdrop for understanding the challenges and transformations that continue to shape these traditions today.

V. CASTE AND PATRONAGE IN CARNATIC AND HINDUSTANI MUSIC

Caste has played a pivotal role in shaping the patronage systems of Carnatic and Hindustani music, influencing who had access to musical education, performance opportunities, and recognition within

these classical traditions. Patronage in Indian music, historically, was primarily provided by royal courts, temples, and religious institutions, and later by colonial authorities and urban elites. This patronage system was closely intertwined with caste hierarchies, often reinforcing the dominance of specific castes while marginalizing others.

In the Carnatic tradition, which developed in South India, the influence of the Brahmin caste on musical culture was profound. Temples, which were significant centers of cultural activity, were dominated by Brahmins, and their control extended to the sacred music performed within these spaces. As custodians of religious rituals, Brahmins gained privileged access to the performance of certain forms of music, which they came to dominate over time. This resulted in the elevation of Brahmin musicians as the primary representatives of Carnatic music, particularly in the early 20th century during the nationalist period, when there was a concerted effort to position Carnatic music as a symbol of Indian cultural heritage.

However, non-Brahmin communities, such as the isai vellalars and devadasis, were crucial contributors to the development of Carnatic music. These communities were traditionally involved in music and dance in temples and courts, and their expertise in both vocal and instrumental music was significant. The devadasis, in particular, played a central role in preserving and transmitting the dance and music traditions of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, though their social status was undermined by caste-based prejudices. Despite their contributions, these communities were gradually marginalized, particularly as the nationalist reform movements sought to 'purify' and elevate Carnatic music by dissociating it from its non-Brahmin origins. This shift further entrenched caste-based divisions in the patronage and practice of Carnatic music.

In contrast, Hindustani classical music, which flourished in North India, was shaped by a more diverse patronage system under the Mughal courts. Here, the caste dynamics were less rigid, with Muslim musicians, many of whom were not bound by the Hindu caste system, playing a significant role in the development of Hindustani music. The gharana system, which emerged in the Mughal era, allowed for the transmission of musical knowledge within families, creating a network of hereditary musicians. While this system fostered the preservation of distinct

musical styles, it also reinforced caste and class boundaries, as access to training and patronage was often limited to those within established musical families.

Despite the relative openness of Hindustani music compared to Carnatic music, caste still influenced the status of certain musicians and their instruments. For example, the tabla and sarangi, both indispensable to Hindustani music, were historically associated with lower-caste musicians or accompanists. In contrast, instruments like the sitar and sarod, played by upper-caste musicians, were seen as more prestigious. This hierarchy extended to performance opportunities, with upper-caste musicians often receiving greater recognition and more prestigious patronage.

The British colonial period further complicated the relationship between caste and music. In both North and South India, colonial authorities often favored upper-caste musicians, particularly Brahmins in the Carnatic tradition, as the rightful custodians of classical music. This further marginalized lower-caste and non-Brahmin musicians, who found themselves excluded from formal music institutions that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Despite these historical divisions, there have been significant changes in the modern era. The democratization of education and the rise of mass media have provided new platforms for musicians from marginalized castes. However, the legacy of caste-based patronage continues to influence the Indian classical music landscape, particularly in terms of access to formal training, performance spaces, and institutional recognition. This ongoing challenge highlights the need to critically examine and address the caste-based barriers that continue to shape the practice of Carnatic and Hindustani music today.

VI. IMPACT OF CASTE ON CHOICE OF INSTRUMENTS IN CARNATIC AND HINDUSTANI TRADITIONS

The influence of caste stratification on the choice of musical instruments in Carnatic and Hindustani traditions is a complex phenomenon shaped by socio-religious contexts, historical patronage, and cultural associations. Each tradition reflects its own unique socio-cultural makeup, but both have historically linked certain instruments to particular castes or social

groups, either elevating or marginalizing them in the classical music landscape.

1. Hindustani Tradition

In the Hindustani classical tradition, caste-based roles in music became more flexible after the influence of Islamic rule in North India, particularly during the Mughal era. However, social hierarchies remained influential, especially in rural areas and pre-Mughal times.

a. Sitar and Sarod (Elite Instruments)

The sitar and sarod are considered elite instruments in Hindustani classical music, often associated with upper-caste Hindus or high-status Muslim musicians (like Ustads) who enjoyed royal patronage. These instruments were prominent in court music, which had a higher status compared to folk or lower-caste musical forms. Sitar players, particularly those from Brahmin or Kayastha communities, often had privileged access to the instrument, as it was seen as refined and sophisticated, fitting for upper-caste musicians performing in aristocratic settings. The sarod, often connected with the Afghan rabab, became a symbol of Hindustani instrumental prowess, and while it was adopted by both Muslims and Hindus, its association with professional musicians of higher social standing persisted.

b. Sarangi (Stigmatized Instrument)

The sarangi has a complicated history. Although it is a highly expressive instrument capable of closely mimicking the human voice, it has long been stigmatized due to its historical association with lower-caste musicians and courtesan culture. It was primarily used as an accompanying instrument for singers, especially tawaifs (courtesans), which tarnished its reputation in high-society classical music circles. Traditionally, sarangi players came from lower castes or marginalized groups who worked as accompanists rather than soloists, and the instrument was often looked down upon by higher-caste musicians who preferred the sitar or sarod.

c. Tabla (Mixed Social Standing)

The tabla, though a central instrument in Hindustani classical music today, was initially associated with lower-caste drummers. However, over time, the tabla gained respectability through its association with Muslim ustads and high-caste Hindu musicians, achieving greater acceptance. Tabla players, particularly from Muslim families, often had to navigate caste and religious biases but eventually

carved out a prestigious place for the instrument in classical and semi-classical genres like khayal and thumri.

d. Shehnai (Marginalized but Celebrated)

The shehnai was traditionally considered a lower-status instrument used in weddings and processions, and players were often from lower castes. However, Ustad Bismillah Khan, a shehnai virtuoso, elevated the status of the instrument, pushing it into the realm of classical concert music. Despite Khan's success, the shehnai remains somewhat marginalized in the Hindustani tradition, partly due to its continued association with ceremonial and folk contexts.

2. Carnatic Tradition

The Carnatic tradition, more deeply rooted in South Indian Brahminical culture and temple practices, demonstrates a sharper caste stratification in the choice and acceptance of instruments. The Brahmin community, which historically controlled much of Carnatic music, had a significant role in determining which instruments were prestigious and which were considered inferior.

a. Veena (Sacred and Elite Instrument)

The veena is one of the oldest and most revered instruments in Carnatic music. Associated with the goddess Saraswati, it holds a sacred status and is predominantly played by Brahmins, especially women. The veena is symbolic of high culture and religious purity, making it a highly prestigious instrument within the Brahminical Carnatic tradition. Its association with elite, upper-caste Brahmin families, who had access to temple music and formalized teaching traditions, ensured its place as an instrument of high respectability.

b. Mridangam (Sacred but Accessible)

The mridangam, a percussion instrument integral to Carnatic music, holds an ambiguous place in the caste hierarchy. While it is a respected instrument within temple and concert settings, mridangam players traditionally came from lower-caste or non-Brahmin communities, particularly the Isai Vellalar caste. The instrument was essential for classical performances, but mridangam players often faced social stigma, as percussionists were not considered on par with vocalists or veena players, who were typically Brahmins. Despite this, mridangam players were indispensable in Carnatic music, often performing as accompanists rather than soloists.

c. Nadaswaram (Marginalized, Temple-Linked Instrument)

The nadaswaram, a wind instrument, is primarily associated with South Indian temple music and processions. It is traditionally played by musicians from the Isai Vellalar community, a lower caste historically linked to temple duties and performances at auspicious events like weddings. While the nadaswaram has deep connections to religious and ceremonial functions, its players have often been excluded from the elite world of concert music dominated by Brahmins. The instrument itself, despite its grandeur and volume, has remained marginalized in the Carnatic classical concert circuit.

d. Violin (Western Influence and Changing Caste Dynamics)

The violin, introduced to Carnatic music during the colonial period, quickly gained prominence and was adopted primarily by Brahmins, transforming its status. Due to its adaptability to Carnatic music, it became an essential accompaniment for vocal performances. The violin's rapid assimilation into the tradition allowed upper-caste musicians to incorporate a non-native instrument into the fold, often bypassing the traditional caste hierarchies that constrained the use of native instruments like the nadaswaram or mridangam.

In both traditions, gender and caste intersect in determining which instruments are considered appropriate for women. In Carnatic music, Brahmin women were more likely to play the veena or sing rather than take up the mridangam or nadaswaram, which were associated with lower castes and male performers. In the Hindustani tradition, upper-caste women were discouraged from taking up professional music performance, especially in instrumental music, which was seen as less respectable compared to vocal music.

VII. CONCLUSION

The historical impact of caste on instrumental music in both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions illustrates a complex interplay of social hierarchies, cultural values, and artistic expression. In Hindustani music, instruments like the sitar and sarod were elevated to elite status, often associated with higher castes and royal patronage, while the sarangi faced stigma due to its ties with lower-caste musicians and courtesan

culture. Similarly, in Carnatic music, the veena emerged as a symbol of Brahminical prestige, whereas instruments like the mridangam and nadaswaram, though integral to performances, were often linked to lower-caste communities. These caste dynamics shaped the training, access, and recognition of musicians, perpetuating social inequalities within the musical landscape. Despite significant changes in contemporary music, the historical legacy of caste continues to influence perceptions and opportunities in the realm of instrumental music, highlighting the need for ongoing dialogue and reform to achieve true inclusivity in these rich musical traditions.

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