

# ■ **Research Report** ■

## *Politicising a musical tradition: Religious fundamentalism and musicians in North India*

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The destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992, and the subsequent hasty erection of a temple in its place, were clear signs of the chauvinism which has risen within the Hindu fundamentalist movement in India recently. This overt and violent display in the name of religion, is causally related to an equally disturbing rise in Hindu nationalism, a situation encouraged and capitalised on by one of the country's most powerful political parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its affiliated militarised wing, the Rashtriya Shiv Sena (RSS). With the BJP forming a federal government, albeit a short-lived one, after the national elections in April 1996, the potential for alienation and violence nevertheless appears set to escalate further.

The tension and subsequent instability incited by the growing voice of extremism is also being played out in many spheres across North India under the spectre of communalism. Communal tension between Hindu (700 million) and Muslim (110 million) inhabitants of India is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Enmity between the two groups has, to a varying extent, been evident in India since the first Muslim rulerships appeared around eight centuries ago. As colonialists, the British also recognised the political mileage that could be achieved for their own agenda by exploiting communal sentiments, with the final fruits of their labours leading to the partition of the country into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India in 1947.

It is important to note that such extreme acts are not unique to India but are rapidly on the rise around the world. It has often been argued that the enactment of such strategies constitutes a reaction to the pounding effects of globalising economic forces accompanying the assertion of a new imperialist hegemony. However, my current research, funded by an ARC post-doctoral fellowship, is not concerned with documenting the origins of communalism and religious fundamentalism in India; there are many forums which address such issues. During the course of the project, I hope to document and analyse the impact of this disturbing environment on music culture in India.

For many centuries, Hindu and Muslim musicians have participated jointly in the custodianship and development of Hindustani (North Indian) classical mu-

sic. Consequently it has not been unusual for Hindu musicians in the past to learn from Muslim *ustads* (maestros) and vice versa. Some biographies even describe how famous musicians, such as Hafiz Ali Khan (1888-1972), studied music under Brahmin priests in the Hindu temples of Mathura. Other histories show that ancestors of some of the principal lineages of Muslim musicians were originally Hindu, who converted within the last four or five generations in order to gain patronage for their art from Muslim courts. Attempts to activate newly constructed notions of rigid religious identities within the various musician communities have long been tempered by the more prevalent practice of religious, social and cultural fluidity within and between these two groups. For this reason, religious tension amongst musician communities has historically been low compared to the cooperation that has long endured amongst and between Hindu and Muslim classical musicians.

However, the web of complex social relationships that has evolved in this climate of tolerance within the music culture has been steadily subjected to the polarising effect of the fundamentalist polemic. Over the last couple of years this process has become more evident now that a few young Hindu artists (inevitably upper middle-class) have started to refuse to perform with, or be accompanied by, Muslim musicians. Reacting to such a provocative stance, a number of musicians and artists established the group Artists Against Communalism, whose aim is to counter the perceived threat of the segregation of the social organisation of classical musicians in North India.

The inevitable resentment and hostility generated by such actions have caused an understandable degree of genuine consternation within the broader musical community. These feelings have been further exasperated by the publication of articles in the daily newspapers which promote re-interpreted musical histories, some of which are just plainly inflammatory. Whereas the combined Hindu-Muslim participation in the musical heritage of North India has never seriously been questioned in the past, nowadays Hindu fundamentalists say that "their" music had been appropriated over the centuries by the Muslims, with the tacit implication that it was also "defiled" in the process. From this position, supporters of Hindu fundamentalism then

assert their desire to recover what is rightfully "theirs" after centuries of Muslim occupation of India by attempting to alienate Muslim musicians from Hindustani music culture.

As a result of this process, music histories which previously documented the joint effort of Hindus and Muslims in the development of Hindustani music are now being challenged and rewritten to invariably promote or exclude one of these groups from the historical process. At the heart of what amounts to a supreme case of anti-intellectualism is a bitter fight over the right to ownership of the past. My research will attempt to address this issue in light of recent endeavours to re-invent the history of one of India's most important traditions of stringed instruments, namely the sarod and its practitioners, sarodiyās.

Prior research conducted during the course of my Ph.D. attempted to validate and interpret the various Muslim, Hindu and syncretised Muslim-Hindu accounts of the history of the sarod and its practitioners and weave these threads into a type of narrative on music history in North India. The information contained in these accounts was then analysed in light of general developments in Hindustani music brought about by changes in political-economy from feudalism to colonisation to market-economy. A principle contention of my thesis is that major paradigm shifts in political hegemony tend to define the ways musical and social status is conferred on musicians and consequently also influence the course and scope of subsequent musical innovations. It was argued that such shifts directly and profoundly affect the type of patronage available to musicians. Changes in the social and musical organisation of sarod players, the sarod and sarod music were analysed in light of this perspective. The musical material examined was selected from a representative corpus of rare commercial and archival recordings dating to 1906.

My own research to date suggests that two major streams have converged to shape the contemporary sarod tradition. The first of these can be traced to the music culture of Muslim Pathan musicians who migrated from Afghanistan to North India in the early eighteenth century. The second is derived from the eclectic court music culture of North India, Hindu in origin but which has been practised equally by Hindus and Muslims over the last 400 years. The five major sarod lineages as they exist today all share a mix of both of these influences. In fact the lineages can be differentiated according to the proportion of this mix, with some claiming a greater affinity with the court tradition and also to the "Hinduness" of their lineage,

whilst others identify more with the Pathan heritage and thus claim a greater Muslim orientation for their lineage.

Whilst rivalries between schools of sarodiyās have always existed, they were not often voiced in public. If criticism by one performer was directed towards another it was more often based on differences in musical interpretation than on religious or communal grounds. However, disputes between sarod lineages have of late also been dragged into a wider and more hostile environment of competing nationalist and communal politics, an arena itself spiced with religious fundamentalism. Located in such an environment, and fuelled by the perniciousness of these broader agendas, disputes over who has the right to the cultural ownership of the whole tradition are increasing in fervour.

The impact of fundamentalism and nationalism in this instance is evident in the way such an historically complex and fluid artistic, social, intellectual and spiritual tradition can be forcefully recast into a myopic mode which rewards intolerance, eschews diversity and polarises social interaction. Such an observation can probably be made of all nationalistic or fundamentalist movements, in that such a rationale seeks to impose a state of binary opposition in which there can ultimately be only two mutually exclusive positions: for or against. As a result, any view that may exist between or that may seek to integrate these diametrically opposed stances is not readily entertained.

This action has tended to polarise ideas and performers within what was, until recently, commonly regarded as an ethnically diverse and regionally complex musical heritage. The re-interpretation of music history according to the dynamics of recently defined political and religious polemics is ultimately harmful to a full understanding of the multi-faceted influences which have framed the development of the sarod over the last two hundred years. In an exasperated attempt to counter a disturbing rise in the bitterness and proclivity for historical re-invention in the exchanges between the adherents of the various sarod traditions and interested onlookers, a prominent Bengali musicologist Nilaksha Gupta went to the extent of publishing an article in a major English newspaper from Calcutta entitled "Do we deserve the sarod?"

It is not the intention of this project to directly engage fundamentalist and communalist discourse in North India. Rather, the aim is to make as much information available as possible to inform the current debate on the sarod and rights to cultural ownership. Therefore, the methodological challenge of this project

is in devising a means by which seemingly conflicting historical perspectives of the sarod and sarodiyās are situated clearly within the cultural and political dynamics which precipitated the development of the instrument, as opposed to the prevailing trend in which the history of the instrument is retrieved, appropriated and reinvented according to communalist and fundamentalist agendas.

To achieve this aim, such a methodology needs to consider and synthesise three levels of research activity. First, information on the complex social, ethnic, communal and regional dynamics which historically have surrounded this instrument and its players must be made accessible. By highlighting this information, it is intended to counter attempts by any one lineage to claim cultural ownership, and to voice the legitimate interpretation, of the entire sarod tradition. Second, consultation with contemporary sarodiyās, and other members of the various source communities, will ground the research within the concerns of the current musical environment and the issues of most relevance and concern. This work will include the collection of further empirical data, both written and orally trans-

mitted, in order to construct both a detailed ethnography and an analysis of musical style across the tradition. The outcome of this work will then be returned to numerous personal contacts active within the music culture for comments and criticism. Finally, I will weave together into a narrative the competing voices of sarodiyās and their followers and combine these with commentaries and arguments raised by scholars dealing with the wider cultural and social ramifications of fundamentalism in India, along with the concerns of patron groups, other musicians, artists and audience groups. In doing so I hope to argue that the entire tradition can perhaps be best thought of as the sum total of all these voices.

The sarod tradition is not the end result of the development of an ethnically homogenous environment, as portrayed in fundamentalist polemics. Rather, it is precisely the historical amalgam of diverse influences and personnel interacting musically, socially and politically that have enabled the sarod and sarodiyās to gain a pre-eminent place in Hindustani music. Without this interaction, it seems certain that there would not be a sarod tradition in India.

*Adrian McNeil*

## ■ **Research Report** ■

*Playing Ad Lib:*

*Improvisatory Music in Australia 1936–1970, a Melbourne Perspective*

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*Playing Ad Lib* will be published early next year as part of the Currency Press/National Library, Cultural History series. It is based on the 1993 Ph.D. thesis, 'Improvisatory Musical Practice in Australia, 1836–1970: a Melbourne Perspective' (La Trobe University, Melbourne). The following is a preview by the author.

The main objective of this book is to reveal the threads of improvisatory musical practice that are woven through the fabric of colonial and twentieth century Melbourne musical history. It also demonstrates how the importation of imitation African-American performance culture played a key role in preserving a tradition of improvisatory music in Australia. The whole one hundred and thirty year period examined here is viewed as historically self-contained, with the late 1960s representing the culmination of a long process of musical liberation or 'breaking out' from the

notion of musical performance as slavish musical reproduction.

As such, it presents an argument about freedom and structure in Australian performance culture that clearly has significance for broader cultural and social considerations. But, perhaps more important than emphasising this dichotomy, it also hints at how 'improvisatory musics' functioned as, to borrow a term from popular music studies, a complex 'field of negotiation' for what was to become socially and artistically permissible in Australian music.

A twofold approach is taken to teasing out and defining the various strands of improvisatory practice. Foremost is the identification of the most relevant genres of music-making and the presentation of available evidence regarding the types of improvisatory practice associated with them. This evidence is also