

## Folk and Classical Music: A Dichotomy That Does Not Quite Work in India\*

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WE HAVE BORROWED many concepts and categories of understanding ourselves and our culture from the West. Many of these do not quite work in our case, creating an artificial distinction that only confuses. One pair of categories in common use among us today is 'folk' and 'classical', used for classifying art forms including music.

2. Classical is usually understood to mean an old, cherished body of forms handed down in a cultivated, self-conscious tradition of art. It is a body of forms created by people belonging to what has been called the learned tradition. Folk is its opposite. It is uncultivated, unsophisticated, without a conscious artistic tradition behind it. It is created by people outside the learned tradition. Some major distinctions are supposed to follow from this. The classical is a body of old forms handed down in a written tradition, the works marked as products of individual genius. The folk is, on the contrary, oral and anonymous.

3. There is also a presupposition that the classical tradition is single and unique. It is the ideal, unique tradition forming the mainstream of culture. The folk lies outside it and cultural progress lies in assimilating the folk into the mainstream. So strong is the feeling in the West of a single dominant mainstream classical tradition that there is a tendency to categorize all music that does not fall within that tradition as folk. If you walk into a record shop in Europe, you might find that what we distinguish as classical and folk are dumped together indiscriminately in slots marked folk. Such a classification, it may be argued, reflects a kind of folk categorization not quite acceptable to the *shastric* Western tradition of categorization; but is not 'ethnic', which the Western *shastric* tradition uses for the purpose, related to folk?

4. Many of us in India realize that such a classification of forms as classical and folk is not quite appropriate in demarcating the plurality of interrelated traditions and forms that we have. *All our*

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musical tradition is in a strong sense oral, whether we otherwise class it as folk or classical. Individual genius plays a role not only in the classical but also in certain so-called folk forms. And the role of individual genius in them is similar. If we do not know of individual artists in a folk tradition, it is because we have not cared to know.

5. We have moreover not one but a multiplicity of classical traditions in music. The Hindustani and Carnatic are well known; but there is also another claimant, the Eastern tradition, which claims as old a *shastriya* base as the other two. *Shastriya* is our word for classical. Folk traditions are, of course, even more multiple.

6. But there is great family resemblance, a great unity underlying this diversity, a network of interrelationships embedded in a long tradition. The diversity of forms from the simple and radical dichotomy such as classical and folk imply.

7. Further it is plain that of the forms that we dub as folk, many have an approach quite similar to what we know as classical. Do we, we might ask, have concepts in the Indian tradition that might serve us better? Let me here put before you the concepts of *marga* and *deśi*. These concepts provide a basis for demarcation which might help us in arriving at a better, more appropriate classification.

8. The use of *marga* and *deśi* to demarcate musical forms first occurs in a text called *Bṛhaddeśi*, the Great Treatise on *Deśi* Music. It was written some time around the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Matanga, the author of this book, intended it to be a methodical treatment of *deśi* music which by his time was extremely rich in terms, as opposed to an older body of music which was a sacred form called *gāndharva*.

9. Matanga's characterization of *deśi* is worth a look:

That which women, children, cowherds and kings sing on their own out of love and pleasure in their own regions is called *deśi*. *Deśi* has a two-fold path. It can be more or less methodical or structured [that is, it can be either *nibaddha* or *anibaddha*]. The *deśi* is called *marga* when it is structured through *ālāpa*, etc. This is how the knowledgeable who know music understand the term *deśi*.

We notice that *deśi* as such can be partly translated as folk. But that this can only be partly done is clear from the fact that *deśi* was the music not only of peasants but also of kings. Any one familiar with Indian musical forms can at once see that *deśi* includes both what we today know as folk and classical music. They are included as

part of the same category and not opposed to each other as folk and classical are. One important distinction between folk and classical today is on the basis of *who* makes the music. Thus music made by peasants, cowherds and people in villages is automatically termed folk music. Matanga's classification, on the contrary, hinges upon not who makes the music but *how* it is made. This is certainly a more adequate approach, being more music-oriented in classifying musical forms. Following Matanga we can see that the music made by certain village groups in Rajasthan is, properly speaking, a *marga* form—for it contains elements of *ālāpa*—though the people who make it would be classified as folk. I am referring, as many of you would have understood, to the sophisticated music of the Langas and Manganiyars. □