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A Non-Linear History of the Sitar: Applied Philosophy and the Ethnographic Gaze

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Abstract

The rise of the sitar from a limited accompaniment instrument used in the regional courts of Northern India to an internationally recognized cultural icon underscores its importance both as an instrument and a cultural symbol—the sitar mirrors India's social complexity. This story encapsulates the social, political and economic trauma resulting from the dismantling of Mughal empire to the partition of Pakistan, reflecting contesting social narratives and Hindu/Muslim cultural heritages through the distinctive musical styles modern India. A musical instrument and material object of contested origins, the sitar extends from wood, gourd, wire, and ivory into complex social and cultural networks. I argue that the sitar, as object, cannot be reduced to either an empirical or phenomenological entity; it is a space of potentiality, the actualization of a virtual object. I examine the sitar as both byproduct and narrative, demonstrating how it defies attempts to limit its constantly rupturing borders with imposed cognitive frames, and how materiality and philosophical systems can inform ethnographic practice.

Keywords: Philosophy, Harman, Zizek, Deleuze, India, Musicology

A musical instrument and material object of contested origins, the sitar extends from wood, gourd, wire, and ivory into complex social and cultural networks. The sitar cannot be reduced to either an empirical or phenomenological entity—it is a space of potentiality, the actualization of a virtual object, and a concrete entity influenced and transformed by an array of forces. The rise of the sitar from a limited accompaniment instrument used in the regional courts of Northern India to an internationally recognized cultural icon underscores its importance both as an instrument and a cultural symbol—the sitar mirrors India’s social complexity. This story encapsulates the social, political and economic trauma resulting from the dismantling of Mughal empire to the partition of Pakistan, reflecting contesting social narratives and Hindu/Muslim cultural heritages through the distinctive musical styles modern India.

PHILOSOPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

The underpinnings of several millennia were over-turned by post-modernism in the late-twentieth century, but like the morning after a wild party, the situation is not as pleasant as it appeared to be during the evening revels. In considering the practical application of philosophical systems to Ethnographic research¹, it is fair to say that the philosophical underpinnings of research are often accessed uncritically, and often several (or more years) after their development. Even more troubling and pernicious is the *unconscious* influence of deeply rooted ideational systems that can have a drastic effect on the research, even so far as influencing public policy in less the efficacious ways. The dualities of man/nature, subject/object, so prevalent in the modern era, and deftly critiqued by Bruno Latour (1993) and others, instead of being liberated in the deconstructed and post-modern universe, have become resituated, or replaced by ethnographic work that has little if nothing to do with the subjects, revolving around layered meta-dialogues and often reinstating a colonial subjection of the “other,” through

well-meaning but thoroughly misguided projections. At the same time, I believe that several strands of contemporary philosophy offer a range of practical applications, and perhaps some expansion and intersection with philosophy itself. Endless cultural critiques and excessive reflexivity is not a new phenomena—in the early 19th century the musicologist Alice Fletcher added Western harmony and tempered scales to Sioux American chants, and then set out to “teach” them the correct way to perform their own music (Green 1997: 251).

In the coming pages, I will present a multi-perspectival philosophical exploration of the sitar, a prominent North Indian instrument, and demonstrating how deep of an impact ontological and epistemological assumptions can have on research, and explore and critique the possibilities offered by Slavov Zizek, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Giles Deleuze. There are deep contradictions as well as occasional points of congruity between these but I believe that the new acceptance of realist and materialist stances require a through assessing of pathways out of the dislocated and disembodied post-modern ideologies. This non-linear history of the sitar will foreground issues of causality, ontological categories, the nature of agency, history, temporality, and be applied to historical, cultural, linguistic, and musical issues. The sitar, as object, is situated in a body of cultural practices that must be understood on their own terms, which, according to Turner “[Practices,] it would appear, are the vanishing point of twentieth-century philosophy” (1994: 1). While “practice” per se does not form the substance of this discourse, it points to a pernicious problem in some contemporary philosophies, stemming from the denial of essence and Being.

In this exploration of materiality and how philosophical systems can inform ethnographic practice I will employ an analog of Zizek’s concept of the parallax, allowing the mirror-play of multiple ontological and epistemological frames, ranging from Giles Deleuze, Zizek, to Graham Harman and Bruno Latour. In the case of ethnographic practice, I believe that the complexity of the phenomena at hand should never be subordinated to a particular ideological or philosophical

agenda—rather these systems should be employed where they serve to illuminate the object at hand. This object, following Harman, is fundamentally “weird,” that is to say, never fully knowable or reducible:

In this sense, an object is a sort of invisible railway junction between its own pieces and its outer effects. An object is *weird*-it is never replaced by any sum total of qualities or effects. It is a real thing apart from all foreign relations with the world, and apart from all domestic relations with its own pieces. Stated in more traditional terms, both the foreign and domestic relations of an object are external relations rather than internal ones. Neither of them makes direct contact with the object, though both are capable of destroying it in different ways (Harman 2002: 188).

The development of the sitar cannot be separated from parallel economic, social, and temporal systems, and as an “object” in Harman’s framework of Object Oriented ontology it is infused, and at the same time standing above these diverse fields of expression. In this paper, I argue that the complexity of phenomena of the sitar requires a juxtaposition of multiple frames of inquiry, and that these parallel and sometimes contradictory theoretical systems can help illuminate the object. I hope that this process, certainly qualifying as “buggery” in Deleuze’s terms, will permit each voice to blend, if not harmoniously, into a field of resonances that will illuminate the subject, and present the possibilities of new directions in ethnographic and musicological research.²

The Sitar as Jug

A sitar becomes the focus of a whole set of interconnections with its environment. Within the sitar’s capacity of being an instrument it can produce and signify music, convey aesthetic and/or symbolic significance, and physically transform the bodies of musicians. It gathers together elements of the earth, of nature, the soil, and retains imprint of the material culture and traditions of instrument making that allow it to come into being. The best gourds come from

Pandharpur, a small town along the banks of the Bhima River on the Maharashtra plateau. As a vessel, the sitar holds music, enacted through a performative relationally of bodies, equipmentality, networks, standing forth in the “event.” The emptiness (void) within the neck and gourd allows the resonance of the string’s vibrations to come forth as music.



Now on display, the instrument has joined the conceptual, possibly ontological category of musical instruments, more specifically musical instruments for sale. One could assume that “Now the object is known, it is fully realized,” waiting as the “jug” its “outpouring” through the hands of a musician.

The bridge causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. (Heidegger 1971: 152)

As Heidegger’s bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream the sitar gathers the changing landscape and musical traditions of modern India. The ontological structure of equipment, in this case the sitar presupposes a

context formed by other pieces of equipment. The sitar is intimately linked with a body of culturally transmitted and individually enacted practices. Can the sitar be separated from music or musicians? The sitar also acts on the bodies of musicians, cutting lines in the fingers of the left hand that allow fluid motion, and potentially transforming their self-identification in the world. According to Harman, “genuine progress in Heidegger studies requires nothing so much as a *detailed geographic atlas of the simulacrum*, replacing his bare formal duality (tool/broken tool) with a catalog of those fault lines along which being is articulated into specific elements” (Harman 2002:69). An engagement with Deleuze’s taxonomy of becoming offers one possibility.

Sitar as Assemblage

Clarifying the sitar’s evolution and new roles requires the inclusion and analysis of multiple networks, including those of energy and power relations (economic and political), socio-cultural networks (class, religion, and the *gharana*)³, and aesthetic/perceptual (performance). Understanding each of the categories as inhabiting a particular space, or a relational plane, facilitates the clarification of their interconnections and protean recombination into new assemblages.

Assemblages, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1981), are networks of heterogeneous elements, characterized by relations of exteriority that allow for the autonomy of separate elements, and “guarantee that assemblages may be taken apart while at the same time allowing that the interactions between parts may result in a true synthesis” (De Landa 2006: 11). Assemblages allow for the inclusion of diverse points of reference, multiple planes of manifestation, and the explication of linkages between the virtual and actual. In Deleuze’s philosophy, the assemblage is a concept linked with his broader philosophical system, the application of which can offer new directions within ethnomusicology. The anthropologists Joao Biehl and Peter Locke (2009) discuss the implications of Deleuze’s philosophy to ethnographic research, including the merging of microanalysis of the “immanent field” of daily life with that of institutional structures and power configurations:

In emphasizing the powers and potentials of desire (both creative and destructive), the ways in which social fields ceaselessly leak and transform (power and knowledge notwithstanding), and the in-between, plastic, and ever-unfinished nature of a life, Deleuze lends himself to inspiring ethnographic efforts to illuminate the dynamism of the everyday and the literality and singularity of human becomings. (Biehl and Locke: 318) Applying their work to ethnomusicology, the focus shifts to human becomings, through which the linkage between music, individuals, and the social is viewed as a process in constant transformation. This counteracts the tendency to subsume the complexity of ethnographic data into a theoretical straitjacket:

In their relentless drive to theorize, anthropologists run the danger of caricaturing complex realities, neglecting key realms of experience, and missing lived ironies and singularities that might complicate and enrich analytics. People are missing, in multiple senses; Deleuze, we want to suggest, opens up paths to allowing them their due value and force within the core of anthropological work (ibid.: 319).

It is suggested in the current work that by moving away from the limitations of theoretical impositions on lived experience, the ethnomusicologist can also combine multiple vantage points into what George Marcus calls “multi-sited ethnography” to “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse space-time,” (Marcus: 96) that both acknowledges “macrotheoretical concepts and narratives of the world system,” but does impose them arbitrarily as “the contextual architecture framing the set of subject” (96). Thus, established models of ethnographic research and musical analysis are not rejected, but enter into a dialogic relationship with the researcher and the field of lived experience. The complexity of Hindustani music and its long historical evolution present particular ethnographic problems of location, post-colonial power configurations, and a multiplicity of contradictory narratives, which can be addressed by application of a Deleuzian approach that merges micro- and

macro-analytic frames: “acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems of channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined by their *state* at a given moment- such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency” (Deleuze and Guattari:17). Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of acentered networks, assemblages, and rhizomes do not require grand narratives, central hegemonic powers, or dichotomies of local/global and authentic/hybrid. Yet, these concepts are not precluded either and can be components of unique assemblages, which in turn can generate a myriad of new assemblages. However, their assertion that “all individuals are interchangeable” is problematic.

NON-LINEAR HISTORY

India’s history is largely mapped as continuity and rupture—the post-Islamic destruction of Vedic culture; the social, political and economic trauma resulting from the dismantling of Mughal empire; the imposition of colonial rule and internalization of Victorian mores; and the partition of Pakistan. In this paper I explore how the interplay of these binaries and their concomitant material/conceptual networks are not merely abstract conceptual categories, but have reshaped Hindustani (North Indian) music, Indian culture identity, and impacted counterculture movements. Overtime, these binaries form a ‘problematic’ that does not offer a single ‘solution’, but are reconfigured over time to construct divergent assemblages—constituent of diverse ideologies, machineries of production and distribution, and refraction of virtual potentialities into specific actualities. The modeling of this non-linear history will encompass the Colonial era, pre- and post-Independence India, to the current impact of globalization.

In the process of examining this “object,” the sitar, the impact of what must be termed “history” is a central component. In constructing this non-linear history of sitar, we are confronted by a complex of metaphysical issues. While this paper is not concerned with ontological questions as such, granting ontological status

to human and non-human entities enables an interpenetration of chains of causation and manifestation of within given spatial-temporal-social-historical frames. The creation and translation of these structures are forces for the mobilizations of various actors and networks which in turn redefine particular objects, in this case the sitar, and allow for new arrays of potentialities, some of which are actualized, other of which can dissolve over time.

Latour's conception of these two temporal dimensions describes the extension of the present into the past, the continuous process of reconfiguring of what has gone before in the present, a fundamentally relational view which layers the constant dialogue of self, memory, and culture against the irreversible arrow of time. The sedimentary dimension of time intersects with the literal and phenomenological experience of place, creating, in Eric Sheppard's terms "positionality" (Sheppard 2002).

Just as ruptures and traumas reconfigure the past and the future for individuals and societies, the layers of sedimentary time are constantly reinterpreted in the present to form new continuities. This mediation between continuity and change inform the subjective time of music, "there is indeed a sense in which text and art engender a time particular to themselves [...] empower a multitudinous range of "times" (Steiner: 72), which can be experienced as "*parallel temporal structures*" (De Landa 2002: 115).

These structures are not abstractions, but are in fact embedded into places (temples, mosques, and forts), language (Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, and Persian), embodied cultural practices (religious rituals, music, modes of livelihood –subsistence farming and computer programming), political discourse (Hindu/Muslim communalism), and educational structures (*madrassa*, modern universities, and *guru/shisya parampara*). At the same time, alignments of social groups or individuals with particular definitions of history are important components of identity formation. In certain Hindu and Muslim sects, historical figures are accessible through direct experience, in dreams, religious experiences, or even in physical encounters. The underpinnings of the belief in reincarnation and the illusory nature of time undergird belief systems that are

radically different from Western conceptions of time and space. When I walk from the Delhi metro into Nizamudin's shrine in Delhi, I have an immediate sense of temporal/spatial dislocation from the "modern world" and I think that to ascribe this to the merely phenomenological or affective dimensions of experience is to neglect the resonance of this location with the past and the a-temporal aspect of the *dargah*, wherein both Amir Khusrau and Hazrat Nizamudin are felt by the believers to manifest as *immanent* presence (in the religious sense of indwelling, informing material reality, not simply a subjective state of consciousness) In India, the past forms a virtual plane with the present, impacting the actualization of sound and self in complex and subtle ways. Therefore, to neglect this dimension of experience is to neglect a fundamental stratum of lived experience, which I believe should inform ethnographic practice in India.



Fig. 1

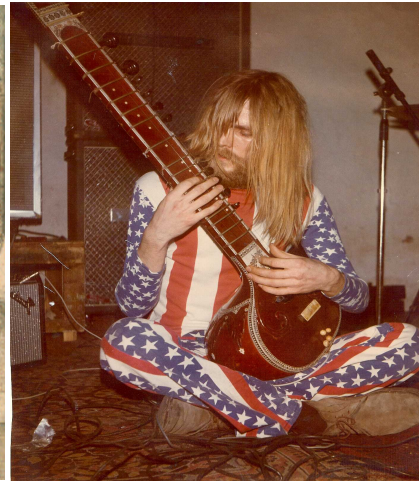


Fig. 2

In Figure 1 and 2 the transition of the sitar from outsider status to outsider status is clearly evident. This strange accident of history certainly aligns with a post-modernist reading, and allowing for both of these opposite, yet mutually resonant poles to exist in simultaneity will form the frame for a non-linear history of the sitar. Figure one is the 1799 work of Belgian artist, F. Balthazar Solvyns.

His text describing his illustration indicates his bias towards the instrument and its performers:

The *Sittar* is now seldom used in India; Perhaps the better sort of Hindoos have taken it in aversion since the *Loutchias*, or people of dissolute manners, have taken to playing it for money, and have chosen this music to accompany their obscene songs and other immoral practices. At their feasts, the *Nautch*, a dance ... is sometimes performed to the sound of the *Sittar*, and some tolerable musicians, or rather mere players upon it, may be heard. (Solvyns 1808-II: 2)

Figure 2 is the guitarist for the rock group America experimenting with the sitar, ironically mirroring the 1799 illustration. Ravi Shankar, the legendary musician who was instrumental in bringing an appreciation of Indian music to the West, had deep seated reservations with his new fans, "I found it even more difficult to bring them [hippies] to an understanding and appreciation of our music for the correct viewpoint. The reason for this was, I felt, that many of them were involved with various kinds of hallucinogenic drugs and were using our music as part of their drug experience" (Shankar 1969: 27).

Capital Flows, Colonialism, and Representation

Philosophy and economics created a momentum that justified the subjugation of India by an assumption of European cultural superiority. For Hegel, it was India's world-historical destiny to be plundered, and the Raj represented natural heirs of this legacy, as well as the embodiment of the "world-spirit's" evolutionary dialectic, "the English, or rather the East India Company, are the lords of the land; for it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans" (Hegel: 142-143). Hegel espoused the view of India as an essentially supplicant culture, which had not contributed to the world, but was an easy mark for conquest and needed the guiding hand of European rulers,

On the whole, the diffusion of Indian culture is only a dumb, deedless expansion; that is, it presents no political action. The people of India have achieved no foreign conquests, but have been on every occasion vanquished themselves. And as in this silent way, Northern India has been a centre of emigration, productive of merely physical diffusion, India as a *Land of Desire* forms an essential element in General History (Hegel: 141-142).

The economist James Mill described the inability of India to fend off conquest in 1818:

Of all the results of civilization, that of forming a combination of different states, and directing their powers to one common object, seems to be one of the least consistent with the mental habits and attainments of the Hindus. It is the want of this power of combination which had rendered India so easy a conquest to all invaders; and enables us to retain, so easily that dominion over it which we have acquired. Where is there any vestige in India of that deliberative assembly of princes, which in Germany was known by the diet? (Mill 1818: 141)

Both caste and language were linked as determinate factors for India's inability for self-determination. For the colonialists, Indians were essentially socially determined through caste, and caste permeated all aspects of Indian life. Inden describes the colonial construction of India:

Caste, then, is assumed to be the 'essence' of Indian civilization. People in India are not even partially autonomous agents; they do not shape and reshape the world. Rather, they are the patients of that which makes them Indians- the social, material reality of caste. The people of India are not the makers of their own history. A hidden, substantialized Agent, Caste, is the Maker of it (Inden: 428).

According to Inden, the discovery of the Indo-Persian language families was used to reverse cause and effect “by making the Indian’s essential conquerability the *cause* of the arrival of the speakers of that language and not the *effect* of their presence (Inden: 424).

In 1786, one of the first encounters of the West with the Hindustani musical system occurred in Benares. In this seminal meeting, Jiwan Shah compared the notes of his *bin* with the notes produced on a harpsichord by Francis Fowke. At this time, no framework of comparison existed in which to verify or correlate the results; nevertheless the meeting was symbolic of the relationship between eastern music and the West over the next 150 years (Farrell: 15).

Concurrent with the discovery of Indian music was the encounter with the Sanskrit language. The discovery of this ancient language became an important intellectual pursuit for the British. They sought to “rediscover, preserve and interpret the greatness of this past, and on numerous occasions contrast it with the muddy rivulets of Muslim thought” (Farrell: 19). In 1792, William Jones produced the first treatise on the music of Northern India, entitled “On the Musical Modes of the Hindus.” This book was influential in a number of ways. It relied solely on archaic texts, and denied the strong Islamic influence on Hindustani music (ibid.: 23). The book contained short passages of *raga* in staff notation, taken from source texts in Sanskrit. For Jones, the contemporary Hindustani music was a completely corrupt version of the original described in the texts. This line of thinking continues to the present. Bishan Swarup stated in 1933, “The number of tunes in Hindustani music at present in use is near about 200. We could not expect anything better after centuries of neglect of the art by the intelligentsia, which art, since the later Mohammedan period till very recently, has been entirely in the hands of illiterate professionals” (Swarup: 25).

In 1789, the first collection of transcribed music was published, entitled *The Oriental Miscellany*. This collection of ‘Hindustani Airs’ was considered a benchmark of authentic music, and was still referred to 100 years later (Farrell:

32). The “Hindustani Air” became a novelty genre, perfect for novice piano players in a parlor setting. The author of the text, Bird, apologizes for the lack of variety and the “insipid” simplicity of the melodies. By notating the compositions, the author asserted the Western ability to understand and recreate the music of the Other, thus demonstrating the cultural superiority of the colonizers. Indian music became an exotic souvenir from the Orient, to be enjoyed in the parlors of Europe. In this period we see musical essentialism and exoticism in full swing. Hindustani music was reduced to a few exotic tropes such as an ostinato bass line imitating the *tambora*, and use of a few melodic devices that symbolized the exotic nature of the Orient.

During the 1850’s, the balance of power within colonized India began shifting. The function and importance of musical notation also changed during the period. In this ‘century of the collector’, the “hand of Western scientism sought to reveal the order and structure of human diversity in India” (Farrell: 45). A more exacting method of mapping Indian music was called for, in order to display it in the vast “commodity spectacle”, to “bring the non-European world into representations, the better to be able to see it and, above all, to hold it” (Said: 119). The domination and dissemination of native culture was the goal, “for the enterprise of empire depends upon the *idea of having an empire* [...] and all kinds of preparation are made for it within a culture; then in turn imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences, and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture” (Said: 11).

Concurrently with this, the English-educated native elite began to work from within to reform Indian music and save it from the corrupting influences of the Islamic invaders. It is apparent that the native elite internalized the orientalist notions of the colonizers, both in the goal of returning to a “pure” form of music, and the project of notating the music. In the late nineteenth century, various organizations were formed to collect, analyze, notate, disseminate, and “save” Hindustani music. Organizations such as the Philharmonic Society of Western India (a British group) and the Gayan Samaj (an Indian group) worked from much the same premises. Encoded within these organizations were the beginnings of

the nationalist struggle, wherein music could be seen as a “pure product of Hindu culture, and hence a vehicle for modernizing, progressive nationalists” (Farrell: 54). It was a race, sifting through the wreckage of a once-great culture, to see who would hold the reins of cultural and political power. The hereditary musicians were viewed as low-caste (which many were) and illiterate. The upper-caste elite identified themselves with the idealized form of music represented in ancient texts. The dichotomy between the spiritual aspects of raga (*moksha*) and the sensual (*bhoga*) took on a new coloration of caste conflict.

As the British consolidated control over the subcontinent, understanding indigenous cultural forms gained importance. The British project to remodel the educational system in their own image required detailed knowledge of the culture that they were trying to shape. In 1874, S. W. Fallon, a school administrator, proposed a vast compendium of all the existing musical forms in order to sift through them and create a comprehensive system of education for the Indian youth. The decadent or corrupt forms could be discarded, and only the “pure” and “traditional” elements passed on (Farrell: 60-64). This fit with the larger rubric of the British as cultural arbitrators. Coinciding with this project was the discussion of which system of notation to use. Both sides were involved in this heated discussion, but many Hindus took the side of Western staff notation. Mudaliayar, an Indian musicologist, set before himself the project of creating a “complete record in staff notation of the whole of the musical projects of the East”(ibid.: 74). Both colonizer and colonized were in agreement about the degraded state of current musical production and the urgency of reform.

The programs to categorize, compartmentalize, and modernize Indian music and its performance struck at the foundations of traditional Indian society. One of the central features of the *gharana* system is the possession of specialized knowledge. In the post-1857 social engineering project of the British, the control of culture became extremely important. The Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 resulted in the final destruction of the Mughals; the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was deposed and exiled to Burma. In one of the great tragedies of history, the culmination of over eleven hundred years of Indo-Islamic cultural

fusion was decimated by the systematic efforts of the British Raj. Yet, the legacy of this era survives in various forms until the present day. Both Bahadur Shah Zafar and Wajid Ali Shah were accomplished patrons of the arts, Sufis and poets. Bahadur Shah Zafar's poetry is still recited on the sub-continent, and Wajid Ali Shah's influence on both *kathak* dance and *thumri* is still felt today. Lucknow became the site of Bhatkhande's first music college, indicating that the city was still considered important by the reformers (Misra: xiii).

In the minds of reformers, notation provided permanence for this most ephemeral of the arts, thus elevating it to the level of Western art music. Music was moved from the hegemonic control of the guru, who would often demand years of service to learn the rudiments of musical performance. With the use of notation and Western style music schools, music could be disseminated through the Westernized systems of the university and music schools following a specified curriculum. Music could be plucked from the unseemly world of brothels, salons, and the decaying Mughal courts into the bright and sunny world of the middle class and "modern" society.

The great irony is that the project of modernization relied on ancient Sanskrit texts with hardly any discernible relationship to current musical practice. The lines of class conflict were clearly drawn here, for music as a profession was decidedly low caste. The thought of a Brahmin male, much less a high-caste female, becoming a professional musician was unthinkable. The use of a purely Western model for music notation and pedagogy never found great success, but two high-caste men were able to successfully transform the music from within: V. N. Bhatkhande and D. V. Paluskar. They both set to work on the problem of creating a national music.

The British were able to produce a new "class consciousness" which exploited existing prejudices inherent within the caste system (M. Hasan: 184-208). By employing a rigorous system of indoctrination in Western ideology, combined with a meticulous structure of punishment and reward, serious divisions arose between Hindu and Muslim factions. The political strategy of

“divide and conquer” denied the high culture of the Mughals and Islamic influence, a rewriting of history that still causes controversy.

Individual Actants

The sitar became an object of desire in post-Colonial India, consecrating a glorious past and projecting an idealized future in this case Žižek’s words, “*L’objet petit a* can thus be defined as a pure parallax object: it is not only that its contours change with the shift of the subject; it only exists - its presence can only be discerned - when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective” (Žižek 2009: 18). The two primary protagonists in the process, Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar, had distinct and opposed visions of this, forging varied alliances, as each one physically reconstructing the instrument in resonance with religious/historical/political ideologies and cosmologies.



Fig. 3 Vilayat Khan



Fig. 4 Ravi Shankar

Shankar and Khan’s lives embody two distinct cultural heritages. Ravi Shankar’s association with the Beatles made him synonymous with Indian music in the West. Born into a wealthy elite Hindu family, Shankar began as a dancer in Europe and only switched to sitar in 1938. Vilayat Khan’s family, the Imdad Khan gharana, was an unbroken six-generation line of hereditary Muslim musicians. His early years, beset with poverty and struggle, fueled a burning ambition to be counted among the immortals of music. For Shankar the sitar reflected ancient Hindu tradition; for Khan it evoked the heritage of Mughal India.

The construction of a unified historical narrative around a nationalist Hindu ideology was as central to the position of the Congress party, as a pan-Islamic narrative was to the Muslim League. The consolidation of a reconstructed history into a compelling narrative of national identity was built on the simplification and obfuscation of numerous ambiguities and previous communal harmony, using a reinvented past to justify a present ideology. Nehru's term 'unity and diversity' was a template for a new nationalist culture. This facade could not obscure the fact that the multiple constructions of India's history and the complexity of Indian society were incompatible with an artificially constructed nationalist narrative. The formulation of Independent India in the nationalist movement required a unified narrative of India's past.

Cultural production was important for the nationalist narrative, and seen as a viable method to construct, or at least simulate, "unity in diversity" both within and outside of India. Subhas Chandra Bose described this policy in a 1938 speech before the Indian National Congress:

We should therefore aim at developing a nucleus of men and women in every country who feel sympathetic to India. To create such a nucleus, propaganda through the foreign press, through Indian-made films, and through art exhibitions should be helpful. If we could send out cultural and educational films made in India, I am sure India and her culture would become known and appreciated by people abroad. (Bose: 317)

The State would not intervene in the arts until 1957, which created a difficult economic period for musicians, support reappeared on the agenda shortly after independence. The project of a unified national culture became a high priority, and fostered the development of a state support system and a concomitant bureaucratization of the arts from 1957 until 1986. This period was a high point in the development of Indian classical music which peaked during the late 1970s.

Both Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar are individual actants that created alliances with multiple networks, ranging from social, political, economic, and artistic circles. At the same time, they were each products of distinct cultural grounds. For both Shankar and Khan, music was a performative act of identification of one's self, and one's vision of Indian history. Their construction and design of their instruments was a physical representation of two alternate, yet intertwined histories. Both were central figures in the rise of instrumental music from a socially stigmatized and aesthetically limited position. Shankar certainly had more influence internationally, and remains the most recognizable name in Hindustani music today. Khan's marginalization from the widespread support and acclaim accorded Shankar made his art and life a narrative of resistance. The articulation of these narratives contradicts the widely held opinion that Hindustani music today is a force for unity; while it certainly has this potential, an accurate portrayal of contemporary Hindustani music must come to grips with deeply ingrained biases that have troubled India since the 1857 mutiny.

The ruptures and continuities of India's history form assemblages of conceptual content, embodied practices, and the core of diverging historical narratives. The resonance between these polarities forms the unresolvable questions, the repetition of which produces endless becomings. Khan positioned himself between vocal/instrumental divide, and transformed sitar and twentieth century Hindustani music. Shankar links his music to ancient India, while Khan's relationship to music and the world is deeply informed by the 1857 Munity and the final demise of the feudal world.

Globalization and Cultural Transformation

The destabilization and re-imagining of the local is reflected through musical change, which is then further modified by the process of translation into multiple fields of representation and transmission. Location and place are no longer geographically definable in a globalized world, wherein the boundaries between the actual and virtual are blurred. By analyzing globalization as a

multidimensional and complex process, however, it is possible find a model that can take into account the uneven and varied transformations that are occurring in Hindustani music today. In India, the multiplicity of identities, both local and translocal that intersect and are negotiated both between and within individuals, societies, and economic structures are important components in the negotiation of identity through music. These many identities are constantly in play in the multiple interacting fields inhabited by the individual and collective social, cultural, economic, and imagined spaces, a constant process of creating, defining, and dissolving boundaries. The following case study is more than an inversion of the previous examples, a photographic negative: it is more than an alteration, mutation, or rhizome, but is a system-wide translation, a divergent interconnected assemblage that is tied umbilically to the same network of roots.

The current time, however, is distinguished by the sheer scale and rapidity of cultural change. Charles Taylor uses the term “the great disembedding” to describe the dislocation and disembodiment of cultural practice (Taylor 1995). This disembedding is clearly reflected in contemporary performances of Hindustani music, apparent the music itself and the locus of meaning defined in a cultural context. The process of becoming part of a globalized world has affected Hindustani music on multiple levels, ranging from specific musical practices to the social configuration of performance settings, patronage, and reception of Indian classical music.

Rock music and Hindustani classical music are radically distinct aurally, culturally, and performatively. Concepts of “authenticity” and “tradition” are directly confronted by the indigenous evolution of the electric sitar. Its late development in the twenty-first century, decades after the sitar’s immense popularity with rock audiences in the 1960’s, indicates that the process is more complicated than it appears on the surface.

The sitar has been a prominent aural signifier in rock music since the mid-1960s, when the Beatles brought India to the West. Yet, the reconfiguration of the instrument into the sonic terrain of rock in the hands of Indian musicians has occurred only in past few years. The two primary factors in this process are

technological and the cultural shifts. In this case, the technological dimension is a product of *transcoding* more than an evolutionary process.

The amplification of the electric sitar is only secondary to this phenomenon; the distinguishing feature is the use of distortion and other electronic effects on the tone production of the sitar. Ravi Shankar was an early pioneer in fusion music; however, he maintained traditional compositional, *raga* (melodic), and timbral conventions, even in combinations with Western art music or South Indian music. While Hindustani musicians often performed on the same programs as rock musicians during the 1960s and 70s, the most famous being Ravi Shankar's performance at Monterey Pop in 1967, the demarcations between the musical genres were an impassable edifice because of differences in status accorded Indian classical music to that of rock. Shankar often expressed his disdain at the profligate life style of his hippie fans (Shankar 1969), and other musicians generally maintained a distance from rock's distorted and highly amplified sonic domain. While scores of Indian rock musicians happily strummed out-of-tune sitars throughout the 1960s and 1970s, most classical musicians of any stature refused to cross the sonic divide between Hindustani music and rock, even with the increased market share that this larger audience provided. It was not until the twenty-first century that a *khandani* musician would cross this threshold.

A foreshadowing of this development was boldly announced in the May 1999 issue of *Raga to Rock* magazine, with the provocative title "Welcome to the World of Capitalist Music." Under the headline, its main thesis is provocatively presented:

It doesn't take a wizard to see that the Indian music scene is, technologically, a highly backward one, characterized by antiquated equipment. Is there a reason for this? And are we poised for an electrification of our instruments, leading to a new, 'electric' Indian music form? (Author unknown, *Raga to Rock*, May 1999: 28)

The anonymous writer portrays Indian classical music as a product of slow economic development:

Ever wonder why you can't walk into a shop and buy an Electric Sitar or for that matter...Electric Tablas? It's because vast parts of our country are still without electricity, the basic ingredient for the playing of electric instruments. Since there is no electricity, acoustic instruments have become a way of life for our musicians, merging into that nebulous entity called "Indian traditional music" (ibid.: 28).

In *Raga to Rock*, economic, cultural, and technological backwardness are directly reflected in "Indian traditional music" (the author's term for Indian classical music); the West's superior development stems from economic prosperity:

The economic prosperity of the European countries and the US had a ripple effect on the entire cultures of those countries. The most important were ideas of 'Liberalism' and 'Democracy'. Everybody was allowed to think and do anything they wanted, so long as they didn't harm other citizens. And their new-found prosperity [...] enabled them to buy the best of goods. Consequently, even musicians- and the makers of music instruments- were emboldened to innovate and offer new instruments which had features that made them better than the older instruments. (ibid.: 29)

The author contends that the backwardness of traditional performers and instrument manufacturers will have to face the inevitable electric revolution: "Change, however, is inevitable and is always powered by economic development. Money talks. Traditionalists fail to realize that their traditions are the way they are because of simple economic circumstances" (ibid.: 29). Finally, the audience itself will demand new music, and the author concludes with the alternatively chilling or liberating ultimatum: "Welcome to the world of capitalist music!" (ibid.: 29).

This viewpoint should not be understood as a “fringe” attitude, as the magazine is primarily a trade publication. Rather, it reflects a common attitude among younger musicians and concertgoers. These practices and unspoken protocols changed radically with the advent of Niladri Kumar. Niladri’s career evolved quickly from his early acclaim as a sitar virtuoso from an illustrious lineage, to his current popularity and controversial innovations. His conversion from classical artist to musical maverick began with his seemingly innocuous modification of Rikhi Ram’s electric sitar with the inclusion of an extra string. He christened his instrument the “*zitar*.” His first album to feature this instrument was entitled *Zitar*, released in 2008, but he had utilized it in session work several years before. Niladri believes that his music is the wave of the future, stating that “the youth like my brand of fusion, which comes from a knowledge of both Indian and Western music, unlike most of fusion today,” (<http://www.screenindia.com/news/zitar-power/367847/>). He aims to “touch the soul of the listener and aspire for a fine harmony between *tradition and modernity* that is in sync with the sensibilities of a global audience” (emphasis added)(<http://www.screenindia.com/news/zitar-power/367847/>).

Besides his prominent use of techno, lounge, and rock backing tracks, Niladri has radically changed the sonic referents of the instrument.⁴ This is evident in his solo in “Bheegi Bheegi” from the film *Gangster* (2006), which is indistinguishable from the music of any number of accomplished rock guitarists, for example Joe Satriani and Carlos Santana. The heavily distorted tone and use of numerous rock phrases have removed any aural connection to Hindustani music or the sitar. While the *zitar* still retains the visual appearance of a sitar, and the traditional seated posture (*bhaithak*) remains intact, the cultural location of the music is difficult to assess.

If the *zitar* is a product of “hegemonic” Western culture, as defined by the convergence paradigm (pp.57-58), why did it not develop in the 1960’s? The technology was certainly available in the 1960s-1980s, but why the invention of an instrument like the *zitar* obviously did not interest musicians or instrument makers until the previous decade? We shall map the cultural space inhabited by

the electric sitar, and for that we should investigate the cultural topology inhabited by rock in India.

Rock music's signification in India embodies the contradictions and conciliations between a rapidly changing economy and traditional modes of life, the hallmark of modern urban India: extreme wealth juxtaposed with extreme poverty, tenacious traditions side-by-side with a wholesale rejection of anything Indian by the youth, the growing class of wealthy IT professionals along with property speculators, and investors matched by a rapidly proliferating underclass.

For Indian audiences and performers, rock represents particular values that sets them apart from traditional modes of cultural expression and connects them with a modern world. In its translation from the West to India, from global to local, rock music has undergone changes in signification in India that parallel the semiotic and class space previously inhabited by the elite musical tradition of Hindustani music. This process indicates the formation of a new substratum in Indian culture. Whether this is primarily a result of globalization is questionable: rock is not new to Asia, and completely dominates the popular music of other neighboring countries like Thailand. In fact, rock in India is notable for its lack of popularity. In contrast, rock in India has taken on a host of characteristics which parallel the Hindustani classical music tradition. The relationship of mass media to mass culture in contemporary India will help to shed light on this process.

For decades, the Indian government exerted a strong control over culture, fearing that an onslaught of Americanized culture would destroy traditional values. This control extended from the radio, to film and television. After the long-dreaded opening of Indian culture in 1990's, an onslaught of American culture never occurred in India; instead a variety of local and regional programming began to compete for advertising (Kohil-Khandekar 2006). Rock music has very limited exposure on television and film and has yet to break into mass consciousness in India, except for a limited audience in the larger metropolitan cities. Unlike other symbols of Westernized consumer culture like shopping malls, cars, and designer clothing, rock retains an underground status.

The rock audience in India, elite in both financial and educational status, could have been among the sponsors and aficionados of Hindustani music a generation ago. The exclusivity of rock in contemporary India, comprised of small, dedicated audiences who value their connoisseur reminds the exclusivity of Hindustani music in pre-Independence India. A move towards rock is visible among children of established musicians. Shubha Mudgal's son has opted away from the heaviness of *khyal* to heavy metal; the son of one of India's finest sitarists is a rock guitarist.⁵

Understanding rock music in India presents particular challenges in order to formulate the cultural vectors it intersects with, unless we see it as part of substratum which retains "the unity of composition [...] defined at the levels of materials and energy [...] bonds and reactions", with the strata, but is differentiated by "a variety of different molecules, substances, forms" (Deleuze and Guattari: 45). Such unity of composition allows distinct forms of cultural expression to share commonalities in their relational interactions with larger social assemblages, as well as parallel functions of reterritorialization. This process of *transcoding* is directly indicated by the change in nomenclature- not merely an electric sitar, but a *zitar*. At the same time, *zitar* music, while it sounds like rock, is not rock, at least as defined by the marketing, which aligns Niladri primarily with the Indipop audience, in which he is distinguished by being one of the few successful instrumentalists in a genre dominated by vocal stars.

By changing the nomenclature of an existing instrument Niladri is implying that he no longer fits established genre categories, also reflected in his marketing and image, which is similar to that of classical artist. Whether his decisions stem from artist preference or business savvy, he has demarcated his musical terrain as outside the bounds of tradition, which, seemingly ironically, he still claims to embrace.

The negative reactions to Niladri's music from established Hindustani musicians illuminate that he has crossed musical boundaries far outside the accepted range of fusion; his perceived negation of tradition is revealed in his rejection by many of his fellow Hindustani musicians—he has been made an

outcaste, excommunicated from the shared cultural space of the Hindustani classical music world. Niladri still performs classical music concerts using a traditional acoustic instrument, pushing the boundaries in this area as well, but his new incarnation, both personally and through his *zitar*, appears difficult to accept within the contemporary Hindustani music world, even in its permissive climate. Fusion is common among many musicians, and it is safe to say that musicians who avoid fusion are the exception. At the same time, the musical space he articulates has incorporated his identification with a Hindustani “tradition” that extends outside the geographically defined space of India into a globally defined positionality that encompasses India and the West in a shared and mutually reflective expression.

The performance site of the electric sitar is no longer constrained by its situatedness in Hindustani music’s collective cultural narrative; through Niladri the structural and genre boundaries of “traditional referentiality” (Foley 1991) are exploded. The journey of the sitar to the West in the 1960’s has become circular; no longer is the allure of the exotic central to this music, but the sitar, as the *zitar*, has become “other” in the world of Hindustani music. The traditionally defined, linear evolution of the instrument has been ruptured, and continues to its logical conclusion in a new stratum, the outlines of which were glimpsed in *Raga to Rock* magazine. Niladri’s stated intention for his 2008 album *Priority*, which he describes as “an attempt to obliterate the boundaries between East and West,”⁶ perhaps an artistic journey towards the final stage of globalization, wherein “images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be established” (Debord 1967: 1). Niladri’s *zitar* is simultaneously Indian and not Indian; a mimesis of rock that claims not to be rock; a merging of the sitar, through a signifying rupture, into its photographic negative: alterity as identity. The quadrants of local and global, of tradition and hybridity no longer apply to this territory. This process articulates not only the deterritorialization of culture (which is obvious), but also the beginnings of a shift into new strata—new planes of immanence—that destabilize the cultural basis of Hindustani music through internalizing it.

Niladri's music is now indistinguishable from much of Western rock music, but has a much broader popular appeal than I-Rock (Indian rock); it is among youth that his music finds the greatest acceptance and reflects their identification with the global as defined and experienced locally. The *zitar's* popularity is grounded in a substratum of Hindustani music culture that "constitute[s] an *exterior milieu* for the elements and compounds of the stratum under consideration, but they are not exterior *to* the strata," that new field of potentialities (ibid.: 49). Niladri's transformation of the sitar into *zitar* is certainly a new development and, at the same time, a remapping of the Hindustani music into the immanent possibilities of the unknown.

Ontological Conflicts

Several fundamental questions must be posed, if one is to avoid accepting theory as ideology, or glossing research data with a superficial coating of exotic terminology. Can theoretical structures be employed without accepting fundamental ontological assumptions? Is it beneficial or even advisable to juxtapose multiple, conflicting conceptual frames in ethnographic or philosophical research? Do we want a body without organs? The danger of overloading material reality with cognitive edifices looms over such a conceit. A significant percentage of the literature applying Deleuze to music and ethnography ends up creating an echo chamber of insider terminology that is largely incomprehensible to outsiders, echoing Zizek's critique of political ideology as followers can "identify with the very gesture of identifying," creating a social community around an "empty Master-signifier" (Zizek 1996), which can be pernicious in ethnographically grounded disciplines, in which the development of original theoretical models is the exception, rather than the rule.⁷

Manuel De Landa's work brings his occasionally opaque terminology into the realm of science and mathematics, grounding the Deleuzian "multiplicity" in differential geometry, non-linear dynamic systems theory, and physics (DeLanda 2002, 2006, 1998). Non-linear dynamic systems are being applied to neuroscience, climatology, and crowd (swarm) analytics with some success, and

provide a way out of the computational cognitive and linguistic models that have held sway for decades. Deleuze's "ontology of the virtual" provides a framework for conceptualizing non-physical, generative structures, but replaces this with an entirely virtual universe, creating another dualism derived from destruction of all essence and the primacy of 'difference;' "We are no longer faced with an individuated world constituted by means of already fixed singularities, organized into convergent series...We are now faced with the aleatory point of singular points" (Deleuze 1990:141). Paradoxically, according to Brian Massumi, the only way to transcend the post-modern world is completely embrace it: "If there is a way out of this impasse, it will not lie in turning back. There is nothing to be gained by taking an oppositional stance to "postmodernity"... [it] covers the face of the earth and actualizes both our subjective and objective conditions...There is no getting outside of it" (Massumi 1992:140).⁸

The fact remains that Deleuze's modeling of assemblages, multiplicity, rhizomes, and lines of flight provides a language and a representational system that is able to express the complex lives of what Latour terms "hybrid objects." The open question remains if it is possible to graft this system on a different ontological frame. DeLanda's discussion of multiple nested temporal cycles is self-evident in everything from biological cycles to social organizations, and provides a modeling system for interactions of long-term historical processes and individual occurrences. The processes of cultural destabilization occur with greater rapidity every day—the embrace of a post-modern universe, rejecting the possibility of being—creating a tyranny of becoming that, rather than opening the way for social and political transformation, reifies and celebrates the technology of oppression.

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Notes

¹ Inclusive of Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, and all other disciplines that use this methodology.

² Due space limitations, I am unable to the philosophical and cultural aspects in the depth that they warrant, and humbly ask the reader's indulgence.

³ *Gharana*, derived from the Hindi word for house, designates a North Indian classical music lineage that has persisted for at least three generations.

⁴ Lounge a more relaxed and slow-tempo electronic music form, designed for listening rather than dancing.

⁵ Shubha Mudgal is a top *khyal* and *thumri* vocalist.

⁶ "Niladri Take the Sitar to the Space Age",
<http://specials.rediff.com/movies/2008/sep/15video4.htm>

⁷ Bruno Latour is a compelling example of a great exception to this principle.

⁸ Zizek critiques Deleuze, though along different lines, in *Organs Without Bodies* (2004).