

Persuasive Tones, Compulsive Rhythms: Tuning in to Adivasi Music

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Adivasi Music is often considered unsophisticated and crude. When a musician trained in classical music begins to study tribal music, there are fascinating discoveries to be made, fundamental notions to be questioned. It is a journey that transcends boundaries, writes Mallika Iyer

"How can this be called music?!" Prachi Dublay winced, when her guru Sri Ganesh Devy, who headed the People's Linguistic Survey of India, exposed her to the music of the Rathwa Adivasi tribe of central India a decade ago. Trained in the classical Indian tradition of music, Dublay found tribal music not quite fitting into that fold. The sounds were jarring, the notes repetitive.

"Alright," Devy smiled, noticing her discomfort. "But before you go, tell me why this is not music."

Dublay was left speechless. While her inner sense revolted against those sounds being labelled as music, her mind could not provide any reasons why the sounds did not qualify for that label. She was hooked. And thus began, her fascinating journey.



Realigning Notions

Adivasi music is often seen to be primitive or unsophisticated. But Dublay's journey in search of the essence of music led her to challenging fundamental assumptions and making subtle discoveries. Currently a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Dublay is studying the theoretical framework of Adivasi Music and she believes it is often the point of view which makes the difference. "It is said that pentatonic is the scale of humanity," explains Prachi. "But those of us trained in the elite classical tradition with the saptak or the 8-note scale, cannot identify with the tri-tonic quadra-tonic and pentatonic scales found in Adivasi music."

Diversity is said to be India's stronghold and Dublay's work helps us in discovering that strength. "Prachi's work acquaints us with the regional prototypes of the multifaceted culture of the subcontinent. She makes us aware of the multiple heterogeneous and contradictory narratives that exist," says Hemath Rajadhyaksha, Head of the Centre for Research and Observation that works on the study of Indian knowledge systems and traditions.

Dublay's early training in classical music drives her to disassemble the lyrics, tear them down by assigning notes to analyse the base. And more often than not, she discovers hidden in them, the structure of a raga. The classical inclination also takes her repeatedly in the direction of questioning the differences between the two forms. "Another stark contrast you will find with classical music is the absence of a base note," Dublay explains. "But when you try to understand, you will see why this is so. Many of these people are nomadic. The idea of a fixed base is absent from their lives. Their lives are fluid and so is their music," she notes, drawing an anthropological connection between the people and their music. "And besides," she continues, "it begs the question – Why must you have a base note? Why is it necessary at all?"



Fundamental questions such as this, have led her further on the quest of discovering the highs of this music form. "The content of Adivasi music is also very interesting," she explains, as she begins to play a song sung by Sarla Devi of the Kumbi tribe from Kulu. "It draws heavily from nature and mythology but it is far from being simplistic. You will also find deep philosophical reflections in them. Dismissing them as primitive and considering classical music as sophisticated is a judgemental approach. Once you take a closer look, those notions will vanish."

“Must our ashes alone meet the Ganga after we are dead?” go the lyrics of a Kunmbi song which is meant to be a conversation between two friends. “Why don’t we travel yonder and go see the Ganga when we are still alive?” The music is uplifting, the words thought-provoking, pointing towards a trend of deep ideas embedded in strikingly simple metaphors. The beat also reveals a complex sense of rhythm. Clearly not deserving of the unsophisticated tag.

Transcending Boundaries

It has been eight years since Dublay has worked in the realm of Adivasi music. From Gonds in central India to Santhals in the east, from Kunbis in the west to the Mising in the northeast, Prachi’s journey has taken her across India. But the journey of music, she points out, is no respecter of political boundaries. “Culture and music do not adhere to national and political borders. You will notice that the entire region from Iran to Burma has common elements. Music in the north of India bears the imprint of elements from Central Asia and the Afghan region. While the music of the Northeast is strikingly similar to that of Burma and Tibet. Music is very powerful. Man-made boundaries can’t stop its flow.”

Music also appears to have transcended other boundaries. Which becomes apparent when Dublya plays the next piece. This time the tune is very familiar. It is a tribal song but bears a strong resemblance to the famous number Genda Phool from Dilli 6. “Bollywood is slowly waking up to the beauty of tribal music,” she says. “And while it’s nice that this music is reaching the mainstream,” she says, stressing on the word mainstream, “it’s important that the tribals are given credit and their due for the songs taken from them.”

This process of hybridization is a two-way street. While Bollywood taps into this vast reserve of music, tribal culture is also changing by imbibing trends from the popular mainstream. “That is bound to happen,” says Dublay. “Many of the tribal myths, songs and music are slowly changing to reflect modern values and trends,” she says and demonstrates by singing an Adivasi song from Gujarat that speaks of women’s safety.



“Prachi’s musical renditions point to the inherent pluralism of the tradition and also inform us about cultural conflicts and ways of reconciliation with the mainstream,” says Rajadhyaksha, even as Dublay, who has also lent her voice to the Oscar-nominated Marathi film Shwaas amongst others, implores urban listeners to adopt a non-judgmental and open approach.

What is Music and what is not? Often our ears can tell. But is that a conditioned response? Perhaps rising above these notions might open up the scope to appreciate and enjoy genres of music that were hitherto considered lowly or unsophisticated. Tearing away the judgemental lens would be a good start to begin the journey!

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