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# Music as the Sound of the Secular

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## THE PRESENT

Few debates have maintained as persistent and passionate a level of interest and international scope—whether in the United States, France, or Turkey—as that around secularism. A cursory glance at the titles alone of books and articles on the subject tells us that this is a debate in which serious personal and political stakes are invested.[1] At the very least the debate has been generated by the recognition that a new language of politics is needed to understand the role of religious self-expression in the public sphere. The received wisdom about distinctions between the putatively mutually exclusive domains of public and private, or sacred and secular, simply does not hold water any more. The secularism debate also raises issues of fundamental significance to the very "personality of the state," as Talal Asad has characterized it.[2] In France, the laicite debate has highlighted how the claim of a minority population to don items of clothing (a right denied by the secular government in Turkey with a majority Muslim population), which it sees as fundamental to its religious self-expression, has challenged the state's own image as a secular republic. In the United States, controversy has been ignited by challenges to the boundary line between private religious practice and the public domain of the state, whether it relates to school prayer or the ongoing battles between evolutionists and anti-evolutionists.

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[1] William Connolly's book title, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, is just one example (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[2] See Talal Asad, "Trying to Understand French Secularism," in, Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions In A Post-Secular World*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).



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On the other side of the world, the debate in India and the issues occasioning concern around secularism have been equally passionate but somewhat different. While secularism in India has some features of other secular states, some of the issues that animate the debate in France, for instance, are of minor importance. In many Indian schools, marks of religious difference, such as the Sikh turban, for example, have been incorporated into school uniforms. The constitutional definition of secularism in India, at least in theory, perforce takes into account the difficulty in enacting a strict privatization of religion, and guarantees the legal rights of all religious communities to self-expression.

Equal tolerance of all religions was central to how key anti-colonial nationalists in the twentieth century imagined an India free from British rule. The modern Indian state, unsurprisingly, has not always behaved in accordance with this ideal. Instead, the links between religion, violence, and state power have been manipulated and deployed in the late twentieth century with much success by the Hindu fundamentalist political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In December 1992, the BJP government was complicit in the demolition of a sixteenth-century mosque on the grounds that it was the original site of an ancient Hindu temple, in effect putting minority populations on notice that their rights were subordinate to those of the Hindu majority population. A decade later, in 2002, in the Western Indian state of Gujarat, a BJP-led state government spearheaded the carnage of Muslims, a horror that remains emblematic of Indian national shame. Both events were linked to the question of secularism and citizenship.

On the ideological subject of secularism, the BJP has been instrumentally schizophrenic. When it concerns the so-called rights of the Hindu majority population it propounds a strongly anti-secularist ideology of Hindu exclusivity, and party sympathizers let loose diatribes against Western-influenced Marxist and secular academics. On the question of social reform, the BJP insists that secular—not Hindu—law should apply to all. This complex schizophrenia on the subject of secularism, the law, and the rights of minority populations in the context of the failure of the Indian state to stem anti-Muslim violence has occasioned robust academic and non-academic debates. The central issue for critics of secularism in India has been and continues to be the role of the state in matters relating to the regulation and protection of religious and cultural difference. Two recent legal cases brought these questions to public scrutiny: the Shah Bano case (1978) and the Ameena case (1991).

In 1978 Shah Bano, a sixty-two-year-old Muslim woman, petitioned the courts to grant her maintenance after her husband divorced her. Her request was granted seven years later, but the legal decision was seen as an affront to the minority religious community, and ultimately Shah Bano was persuaded by the elders of her community to retract her

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demand.[3] In 1991 Ameena, a girl of eleven, was sold in marriage to a Saudi businessman. The distressed young girl was discovered by an airline stewardess and returned, by the Indian state, to the destitute parents who had sold her in the first place, occasioning outrage against both the state and her parents. In both cases, women were caught in the crossfire between state, culture, and community. The overt debate about secularism in India deals with political and legal matters, but underneath the surface nagging issues remain unresolved, pertaining to the politics of gender hierarchy, cultural tradition, and the kind of future women might reasonably expect when the so-called "community" is entrusted with the task of social reform.

Secularism, in India and elsewhere, is complicated in part because of its multiple meanings. It is at once a state doctrine (secularism), historical process (secularization), and political/ethical ideal (the secular). To take any position on the subject is to invite the charge of bad politics from some quarter or another. A left-progressive or radical anti-secular argument in one historical and local context becomes its exact opposite in another.[4] A number of its critics in the Euro-American academy have argued that secularism as implemented by the state is the coercive dominance of Protestant Christian philosophical and intellectual values, which disallows any other expression of any other different non-individual, community-based religious belief. This is uncannily similar to the argument made by Hindu fundamentalists who complain that secularism in India is a Western, and colonial, ideological import inadequate to the task of comprehending the complex and fundamentally Hindu-religious realities of Indian cultural life. While the ideological imperatives underlying the two positions are obviously very different, and the latter clearly privileges a majoritarian position, the eerie similarity in argument cautions us against making blanket declarations about secularism one way or another.

How, then, might one negotiate this political morass? Neither a wholesale condemnation nor a dogmatic embrace of secularism seems feasible, and yet, as Akeel Bilgrami puts it, "there remains no more urgent intellectual and political task in the West than to frame the possibilities of such alternative, less confused, and more secular forms. . . ."[5] What Bilgrami specifically advocates

[3] For discussion about the legal decision, see *Shah Bano and the Muslim Women Act a Decade On: The Right of the Divorced Muslim Women to Mataa*, Lucy Carroll, ed. (Bombay: WLUML, co-published by WRAG-WLUML, 1998). See also Zakia Pathak and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan "Shah Bano" *Signs* 14, 3 (1989): 558–82; and Kavita R. Khory, "The Shah Bano Case: Some Political Implications," in, Indra Deva, ed., *Sociology of Law* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005). For the Ameena case, see Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

[4] This similarity of argument between leftwing and rightwing critiques of secularism was noted by Tanika Sarkar in introductory remarks to, Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, eds., *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995), 2.

[5] Akeel Bilgrami, "Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Critical Inquiry* 32, 3 (Spring 2006): 411.

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is a form of "secular reenchantment," referring to alternative models of enlightenment that, as Margaret Jacobs has argued, emerged in the eighteenth century along with modern notions of secularism and rationalism.[6] One approach to such a task might be to delineate different historical contexts for the emergence of locally elaborated secularism in parts of the world such as India. In that context, to defend secularism invokes a history in which religion is not entirely separated from either public life or modern forms of cultural expression. The term "secularism" as I defend it in this essay stands for the combination of substantive religious pluralism with critical inquiry. While it is undoubtedly the case that the term "secularism" is inextricable from the state, in this essay I use it as a means by which to write about the imagining of a secular public sphere in which quotidian forms of religiosity are not expunged but have a complicated political surround that requires close examination. For all its failures, and without denying the colonial history and origins of secularism as a tool of state ideology, I will suggest that there is much in the concept of the secular that militates against its being altogether jettisoned.[7]

One especially apt case of what Bilgrami has called "secular reenchantment" might be found in the modern history and development of North Indian classical music in the nineteenth century. This is itself ironic because the popular view of Indian classical music is that of a transcendent and sacred art form that has existed from the ancient world right into the present without being touched by the stain of history. Indian classical music (both North and South) occupies a singular pride of place in the national cultural imagination as (mistakenly) the one form of traditional art that has survived unscathed through the years of colonial occupation. Indeed, the contemporary world of music shows us a complex combination of ritual religiosity with secular pedagogy, a domain that is both semi-sacred and secular, as I will show later. At the same time, the history of music's development poses some unavoidable, and often uncomfortable, political questions. By way of setting the stage for my argument, which brings together the question of music's history with the political question of substantive secularism, I begin with an ethnographic anecdote.

[6] See Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

[7] Talal Asad distinguishes between secularism as the ideology that enables a modern capitalist nation state to transcend the particular differences of its population in order to turn them into exemplary secular citizens, and the concept of the "secular," which he finds available as an object of inquiry about which a complex and complicated historical genealogy is possible. While one cannot think of secularism without engaging the question of the state, and I will unavoidably invite the charge that I am sliding between the "secular" as concept and "secularism" as state ideology, I am interested in the history of an alternative Indian understanding of the "secular" as it was imagined in the context of music. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STAGE

In the autumn of 1999, while conducting research for a book on the history of North Indian music in nineteenth-century India, I visited a senior and famous musician in Bombay at his home.[8] Two key modernizers, V. N. Bhatkhande (1860–1936) and V. D. Paluskar (1872–1931), had been vitally important to my research and the musician I went to meet had been a student of one of them. I paid him a visit in the hope of borrowing a book I knew he had. Knowing that I would meet a traditional and patriarchal figure, I dressed conventionally (in a sari), spoke only in Marathi, took my slippers off at the door, and kept my sari wrapped around both shoulders, my head bowed, and my hands folded. None of this was of any use.

The visit was hostile. He was uncooperative, uncomprehending of my project, and dismissive of my credentials as a historian and non-musician, and our conversation began and ended badly. He asked if I had read the *Natyashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise dating back to the second century. I responded that I had read it in translation and asked, in return, if he had read it. He perceived my counter-question as impertinent and advised me to attend a conference on the *Natyashastra*. After trading a few desultory remarks, I asked if I might borrow the book from him. His response was negative. I pleaded, and suggested I would come and read it in his home if he did not want the book to leave his house. Radiating disapproval, he told me he had to leave; he had no more time to talk to me since he was about to go into a music lesson, and could not help me at all.

While this conversation was taking place the young woman student for whom he was waiting entered the room and prostrated herself at his feet.[9] Her teacher raised his palms and whispered a blessing under his breath without taking his gaze off me. Indeed, he did not so much as lower his eyes to look at his student while she lay on the floor with her head on his feet. She righted herself, and with her head bowed and her hands still folded, backed out of the room. In a few minutes, the sound of the drone came through the adjoining room. Her lesson was due to begin. I expressed my thanks and left.

This encounter was by no means unique. I had several such meetings in my years of conducting research. The point is not that musicians are difficult, it is that my intention to write a history of music as an outsider to the field, as a non-performer, generated at best an indifferent, and at worst a hostile response. My engagement in a political and critical conversation about Indian classical music

[8] See Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

[9] This ritual prostration is called a *saashtang namaskar* and is usually done as a gesture of extreme reverence.

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and its pedagogical milieu (as described above) inevitably did two things: it ran afoul of deeply held convictions that political questions posed in terms of gender, caste, or religion were both irrelevant to the subject of music and quite beside the point; and it constantly required me to address the question of my credentials to take on the subject in the first place.[10]

In anticipation of similar issues arising in the context of this essay, firstly, I would refer readers to recent work in which I have documented and discussed the transformation of North Indian music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Western India, using a variety of primary sources in three languages, Marathi, Hindi, and Gujarati (unpublished diaries and letters, national, regional and the Baroda state archives, didactic texts, student bonds, biographies and autobiographies, and financial records of music appreciation societies, to mention a few). I have traced and discussed music's complex transformation through its systematization in Indian princely courts, the writings on music by colonial officials and native reformers, the installation of a new and improved pedagogy for music in both "traditional" and "modern" schools and colleges, and music's use as a nationalist and modernizing instrument by two key reformers. In this paper I will present a telescoped version of my larger argument.

Secondly, I should note that no musician would have talked to me without several preliminary conversations about my uncle (a well known classical musician), my aunt (a well known classical dancer), and where, for how many years (eleven), and with whom I had studied classical music. Music students, male and female, routinely genuflect in front of their teachers and for all the years I studied music and dance I was no exception. The sticking point in my encounters with musicians several decades later was not that I did not have a foot in the world of classical music; it was that I had the rest of my body in an "objective" and "critical" academy far away. That I was a woman might not have been the main issue, but it was hardly irrelevant. It complicated matters not least because much of the domain of modern music is governed by notions of "traditional" behavior.

In this essay, my objective is twofold: to defend the concept of the secular by using the history of North Indian classical music, and by the same token to show that it is only within a capacious conception of the secular that one can see the coexistence of (at least) two conflictual agendas. One of these agendas has been more successful than the other, but neither accomplishes the strict separation of the sacred from the non-sacred. To say this is to reverse the proposition that all modern conceptions of the secular are opposed to the role of religion in everyday life. It is to assert, instead, that in

[10] Michael Steinberg has raised this question in the context of Western classical music. See his *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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some contexts, such as the normative public cultural sphere in India, and in particular in the domain of North Indian classical music, one can see a test case of what Bilgrami refers to as "secular enchantment." This is not to say that the world of music is *prima facie* enchanted, or that multiple gods, ghosts, and spirits occupy it. It is rather to say that it is a matter of routine to witness within the world of music (and dance, and theater) actions and gestures that are not easily categorized as either secular or religious; ritual obeisance to one's teacher or chanting mantras and saying prayers before a performance are examples. These practices, gestures, and actions are complex and so are the politics they represent, as will be shown later. However, it is only the capaciousness of the secular that allows for a musical space in which a young woman may genuflect at her teacher's feet, while at the same time an unromantic and feminist historian of music not always hailed by "traditional ritual" can examine in a political light a number of concepts that are quickly subsumed by the term "religion," such as the sacred, ritualistic, pious, devotional, and traditional.

## INDIAN MUSIC: IS IT SACRED, SECULAR, BOTH, OR NEITHER?

Classical music in India is taught in a variety of places. It is taught in secular venues such as private homes, in small schools, through private tuitions, in little classes where the teacher is affiliated to a larger institution, and on occasion, in colleges of music. It is also taught in sacred or semi-sacred venues such as the halls that adjoin temples or in buildings owned by the temple trust. Music teachers are musicians, not priests. North Indian classical music is also secular music, in that it is not generally categorized as Hindu or Muslim religious music, and one does not have to be Hindu or Muslim to perform it. All musicians, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, perform music that is both Hindu and Muslim, and is sometimes difficult to categorize even in those terms. Lastly, the evaluative criteria for music are secular. They are musical and musicological, not scriptural.

But this is not the whole story. Music has a history that cannot be easily disaggregated from religion. Music was modernized and secularized in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but despite the fact that these were the centuries of British colonial rule in India it remained stubbornly recalcitrant to colonial forms of discipline. While modernizers rationalized music—in many instances as a response to colonial denigration—giving it a typology, a musicology, and a rational empirical history, Indian classical music retained its sub-continental character, never being taken over by Western classical chords, orchestration, or harmony. Music also retained its connection to its otherworldly roots. For instance, several compositional forms that are considered part of the larger repertoire of classical music have mystical, spiritual, and devotional content such as *qawwali*s, *kirtan*s, or *bhajan*s. There is no strict separation, based on content, between religious music and secular music.

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This is true as well for the domain of musical pedagogy and performance, which as the opening anecdote describes incorporates devotional rituals. This might sound analogous to the pedagogical world of Western classical music where acquiescence in a master class to one's teacher (also a maestro) is routine as well. But in the field of the performing arts in India dancers routinely pay their respects to the dance floor, as well as to the instruments that accompany a performance before its commencement.[11] Music teachers are treated not simply as secular practitioners of a national heritage, but as *guru*s to be treated with reverence.

Consequently, Indian music can be termed both religious and secular, if one takes the content of vocal music as the yardstick for the former and the location of music's pedagogy and performance as that for the latter. On the other hand, if one insists that the very categories of the religious and the secular are too rooted in the history of Protestant Christianity—and in the Indian case the history of colonial occupation—to be of any help in this context, then one would have to find a different language to describe what is nevertheless a major point of difference, and in any event, Indian music would by definition be neither secular nor religious.

What then may we make of Indian music if it is such a slippery object of inquiry? Does the case of Indian music advance, challenge, or qualify the received Weberian notion of secularization and rationalization? For Weber the exemplary form of rationalized music was Western harmonious, contrapuntal, chord music because its aesthetic beauty was also perfectly mathematical.[12] Furthermore, the rationalization of music "commences with the evolution of music into a professional art, be it of sacerdotal or aoidic nature; that is reaching beyond the limited use of tone formulae, thus awakening purely aesthetic needs."[13] Following Weber, Indian music could be seen as a case of qualified rationalization: its modernization enabled music's pedagogy to become more efficient but it was not completely disenchanted. Weber was quite clear (and clearly boastful) that Indian music (as also politics and art) lacked a coherent system and rational concepts.[14] Yet, around the same time that Weber penned these observations in the early part of the twentieth century, modernizers in India were working hard to prove that Indian music, too, was mathematically advanced, scientific in basis, and quite easy to rationalize.[15]

[11] For a similar argument about Indian dance, see Janet O'shea's "Rukmini Devi: Rethinking the Classical," in, Avanti Meduri, ed., *Rukmini Devi Arundale: A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2005). See also "Traditional Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretive Communities," *Asian Theatre Journal* 15, 1 (1998): 45–63.

[12] Weber demonstrates Western classical music's mathematical perfection at some length, in *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, Don Martindate and Johannes Riedel, eds. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).

[13] Ibid., 41–42.

[14] See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xxix.

[15] See Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*, ch. 2.

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Bringing the case of music closer to contemporary debates about secularization, and given the overwhelming presence of religiosity in the sphere of music, we could follow Partha Chatterjee in claiming that a formulaic secularization in at least this domain of Indian culture has failed.[16] Or, we could agree with Jose Casanova who argues "the story of secularization is primarily a story of the tensions, conflicts, and patterns of differentiation between religious and worldly regimes."[17] Furthermore, where the question of participation in ritual religiosity is concerned, recent feminist arguments have asserted that a scholarly discourse that is indebted to the Enlightenment fails to appreciate other ways of thinking about identity and ways of life that are self-consciously opposed to the dominance of the liberal secular ideal.

Feminists who are locked in such a discourse are seen as making a tautological assumption, namely that the only free choice a woman can make is to be free: free of community, culture, tradition, and religion. In response it has been argued that the opposite decision, to live, not free of, but well within, the domain of religious community is equally an agentive decision. Where music is concerned, the ritual prostration before one's teacher could be treated as a political statement in that it stakes out a different way of living (and being) in the modern world, one that is not only misunderstood by Western(ized) liberal feminists, but is also often at odds with state secularist discourse. We as feminists, the argument proceeds, need to not only reformulate our epistemological worlds to de-privilege the ideal of the rights-bearing individual subject; we need to accept, acknowledge, and respect the agency of such women who make choices outside the box of Enlightenment-based liberal secularism. Genuflection in the domain of Indian music could well be emblematic of female agency rather than a lack of resistance to patriarchal dominance, and as has been argued, we might need to de-link the concepts of agency and resistance when looking at a non-Western milieu.[18] This is politics, it is argued, but a politics not about elections and the state but about understanding the body as a political instrument. To such an end, a new political language is developed that assumes that comportment, behavior, modesty, the desire to lead a simple and good life, to name a few, are all part of a political activity that needs to be understood without recourse to the conventional language of liberal individualism.[19]

[16] Partha Chatterjee, "Fasting for Bin Laden," in, David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 57–74.

[17] Jose Casanova, "A Reply to Talal Asad," in, David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 18.

[18] See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[19] Ibid.

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While these are moving and compelling arguments, the recalcitrant question of the precise connection of worldly politics and gender remains unanswered. Even as we recognize the difficulty with easy categorization and the pervasiveness of religiosity as a constitutive feature of the culture of Indian classical music, a secular criticism must stand at some *necessarily enforced* uncomfortable distance from this familiar milieu in order not to cement a dominant cultural pact between elites and their celebrated zones of familiarity. What does classical Indian music look like from the perspective of secular and oppositional criticism?

If a secular and secularized pedagogical and performative space is suffused with rituals of religious devotion, we can still ask some political questions about their meaning. Is ritual prostration simply the remnant of an older traditional mode of pedagogy about which a contemporary Indian feminism should have nothing to add? Can one assume that rituals signify the same thing to men and women, or to Hindus and non-Hindus? Could one not argue that a purely sentimental relationship to rituals is more available to men than women because for men the question of power and hierarchy is differently calibrated than it is for women? Easy answers are obviously difficult to give, but this essay will keep such political and ideological questions central as it links the historical development of Indian classical music to the pressing contemporary debate about secularism. A brief historical detour will make our case easier to examine.

## MUSIC AND SECULARIZATION: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As I have shown elsewhere, music was transformed from an undifferentiated performative practice in the eighteenth century to classical music in the twentieth. From performing for small audiences in princely courts, musicians moved into the larger cultural public sphere to give ticketed entry performances in modern auditoriums for a new kind of public audience. Music's content, which previously ranged from the raucous and the ribald to the devotional, was rewritten into respectable fare. Music was viewed as one type of entertainment among many others in princely courts, but in the twentieth century it became a high art form that occupied a critical position in the national imagination as a cultural marker of an ancient and accomplished civilization. While its upper-level pedagogy remained dominated by hereditary musicians, it became possible even for respectable middle-class Hindu housewives to imagine themselves as performers. Finally, a modern history was authored for music.

Despite these changes to the larger surround of music, however, the precise nature and character of the early musical public sphere were still undetermined: it was not identified with a particular ideology or religious group or an ethnic identity. Music was yet to be fully 'classicized,' and this last transformation happened when two men, V. N. Bhatkhande and V. D. Paluskar, representative

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of two larger visions for music, stepped into the fray. In their hands, music's transformation proceeded along two simultaneous secular axes, complementary but conflictual.

Paluskar's agenda was voiced in the name of the Hindu community and in terms of India's heritage; it initially excluded Muslims, but not women who were central to the whole project. Bhatkhande's agenda was voiced in a thornier engagement with India's history. One main difference between these two visions concerned the place of religion and religiosity in the teaching of music. Neither Bhatkhande nor Paluskar wanted to banish religiosity altogether from the domain of modern music, and both were secular in their understanding of modern music in that they wished it to be taught by music teachers in schools and colleges, and performed in a variety of venues both religious and non-religious. The removal of religiosity was a non-issue, in other words. What is relevant for our purposes is the difference between them in their approach to the political role for religiosity in the new public cultural sphere in their efforts to transform music.

Bhatkhande and Paluskar rationalized a scattered and unsystematized domain of music pedagogy and performance into what we now know and recognize as Hindustani classical music. Both were Hindu Brahmins from what is today the Western Indian state of Maharashtra, and both took seriously their self-given charge to reform music and to reclaim it for the nation. Both men believed that music itself was on the verge of extinction, in a state of crisis either because it had lapsed into degeneracy or because it had failed to become adequately modern. Both saw their own intervention in the process of its recovery as vitally necessary. Beyond these large similarities they had little in common. They were not friends but antagonists and there were marked differences between their visions for music's national future.

Bhatkhande wrote in the elite language of rational musicology while Paluskar championed the populist rhetoric of *bhakti* (devotional) nationalism. Bhatkhande tried to classify, categorize, and classicize music, whereas Paluskar worked to cleanse it of its previous association with degeneracy, and also sought to sacralize it. Bhatkhande believed one should endorse a secular separation between music and religion but wryly conceded the difficulty of doing so. Paluskar was equally emphatic about his agenda that only by yoking music to devotion (*bhakti*) could it be salvaged, and that women were central to this task. One was a clear Hindu nationalist, the other a troubled, secular nationalist.

Largely because of their efforts there is a vast network of small training schools that allows for the dissemination of a base-level knowledge about music within the middle class that keeps music "traditional" and national. A whole social class of courtesans (*baijis*) was replaced by upper-caste women performers. Lastly, in response to a musicological challenge, hereditary musicians refashioned themselves and their pedagogy to accommodate a new set of

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demands, making music much more accessible than it had been. The peculiarity of music's transformation into "classical" music was that even though it was turned into national high art, it was simultaneously made more accessible in terms of both its pedagogy and its audience. Both Bhatkhande and Paluskar were successful "modernizers" of music, but the particular success of Paluskar's vision—Hindu, gendered, religious, and secular—set the stage for the encounter with which I began this essay.

The changes the two men represent affected one group in particular: the hereditary *khayal* musicians.[20] Dominant in North India, *khayal* had been introduced to Central and Western India in the late nineteenth century by visiting musicians.[21] Before it became "classical," *khayal* was performed and taught in the nineteenth century mostly by hereditary musician families known as *gharanas* that operated as semi-professional guilds. Successful maestros handed down musical learning to their sons, nephews, grandsons, and grandnephews, and, on occasion, to a talented male apprentice from outside.[22] Both *gharanas* and *khayal* found hospitable ground in Maharashtra, and were key vehicles in the modernization of music.[23] Most major practitioners of *khayal* were Sunni Muslim men. This is not to say that the music itself was Muslim or that non-Muslims did not perform it, or that religion was the primary social marker of either the families or the musicians. But it is to say that the performance and pedagogy of *khayal* was dominated by *gharanas*, at least for a time. The *gharana* system was quite marked in relation to

[20] Etymologically, *khayal* is claimed as deriving both from the Sanskrit *khelapad* (the lighter counterpart to the more serious and austere *dhruvapad*) as well as from Persian textual sources. For an alternative analysis of *khayal* as unrelated to *khelapad*, see Katherine Butler Brown, "The Origins of Khyal," in, J. Bor, F. Delvoye, and E. Te Nijenhuis, eds., *The History of North Indian Music* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003). For a musicological description of the genre, see Bonnie Wade, *Khyal: Creativity within North India's Classical Music Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), ch. 1.

[21] M. V. Dhond disputes such a claim, arguing that it was popular in Maharashtra in less elite circles than princely courts for well over a century before Balkrishnabua Ichalkaranjikar made it popular among the upper castes. Dhond argues that both Hindu and Muslim musicians nourished it as a form of music as early as the thirteenth century against opposition from their respective orthodoxies. Dhond also suggests that Muslim musicians who were more secular about their music addressed their singing to the audience, as opposed to Hindu musicians who sought constantly to propitiate the divine through their music. He wrote that "[t]he music of the Muslim musician is free and exuberant, while that of the Hindu is rigid and inhibited.... Most of the Hindu classical singers are Brahmins brought up in the traditions of Haridasas and hence their performance smells of camphor and aloe. The Hindu musician usually concludes his performance with a devotional song, while the Muslim does it with a *thumri* or a *gazal*" (p. 20). Dhond also concedes that though it is likely that *Khayal* is as old a form as is *Dhrupad*, and thereby "Hindu" in origin, he makes very little of origins per se. See his *The Evolution of Khyal* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1982).

[22] For an important work that views *Gharanas* as artisanal guilds, see Tirthankar Roy's "Music as Artisan Tradition," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, 1 (1998): 21–42.

[23] Other areas were different. In Bengal, for instance, social reformers from Ram Mohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore wrote songs based on *dhrupad*. I am grateful to Partho Datta for pointing this out to me.

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*khayal* musicians, in contrast to the situation of hereditary musicians who were experts in other compositional forms such as *hori* or *dhrupad.* Although other compositional forms such as *dhrupad* and *thumri* are still performed and sung in contemporary India, *khayal*—a music dominated by Muslim musician families—became known as the exemplary form of North Indian classical music.

The history of *khayal*'s rise to prominence in the twentieth century is significant for several reasons. Unlike older forms of art that were transformed into systematic fields of inquiry by the forces of nationalism, such as art history or architectural history, *khayal's* practitioners were alive and well in the late nineteenth century and many of them would resist the changes music's modernizers had in mind. Modernizers saw *gharana* musicians as performers of an already existing music, not as its authors. They would, furthermore, attempt to write a musicological, theoretical, and religious nationalism over the persons, practices, and histories of music's practitioners. Inevitably, this desire on the part of the modernizers to classicize *khayal* would run afoul of *gharana* musicians for whom it was simply their family music.[24]

*Gharana* maestros (*ustads*) had erratic, self-protective, and sometimes capricious pedagogical habits. They tended, as well, to be secretive about their art, tradition, and history. As a result, the modernizers held them responsible for impeding music's progress. This interaction produced its share of hostility and *gharana* musicians had to accommodate themselves to a new notion of pedagogy and performance without rendering themselves obsolete. The parameters within which hereditary *gharana* musicians made adjustments, or contested the manner in which music was disciplined by musicologists and turned devotional by *bhakti* nationalists, were set by Bhatkhande and Paluskar. Both men, for significantly different reasons, attempted to bypass the authorial role played by the *ustad*s, and together they both posed a serious challenge to *gharana* musicians. The legacies of these two men, along with those of the older *gharana* musicians, have survived to the present day: in the elementary musicology used to train students and expand the horizons of musical understanding well beyond courts and performers, in the hold *bhakti* nationalism continues to have on larger institutions of music pedagogy through the sacralization of the space of performance, and in the fact that modern *ustad*s (perhaps fewer in number than before) still continue to train the extraordinary students who go on to perform on the national stage.

[24] Donald Lopez has commented on this problem from the perspective of Buddhist studies. As he writes "the problem that distinguishes Buddhist Studies flows from other, apparently parallel disciplines (such as Classics of Egyptology) which has been present from the outset, namely: how to deal with the native, who also lays claim to the text." See *Curators of the Buddha*, Donald S. Lopez, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

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In many ways, Bhatkhande was one of Indian music's first modern historians. His professional training was in law, not music, and unlike Paluskar he was not a performing musician. He came to music as a scholar and theorist and this difference was to garner him a fair bit of contempt from practicing musicians. Yet, he tried to write for Indian music what it had not had before, namely, a connected and written history. As preparation for writing this history he embarked on a monumental endeavor, that of creating a systematic typology for all the ragas then being sung or played in India. He toured the country, talked to musicians, and compiled all the compositions he was able to acquire into volumes of pedagogical guides. He wanted to create a national academy for music that in theory would be open to all—transparent and scholarly at the same time. His achievement was to create for India a bona fide national classical music, with historical pedigree, theoretical complexity, and a system of notation in which questions of devotion were left far behind. Though many performing musicians scorned him as pedantic, Bhatkhande changed the terms of music's conversation for good. In so doing he ushered in a new discourse and forced musicians into accepting at least some of its new terms.[25]

Paluskar's contribution to music was of a different order. He encouraged women's education, spurned elite theory, and championed the grassroots takeover of the public sphere. He wished to return music to what, in an idealized past, he assumed it had been: bound by a notion of the ancient student-preceptor pedagogy (*guru shishya parampara*). In 1902, Paluskar started a school for Indian music in which he instituted his *guru shishya parampara*, and sent his students around the country to found their own schools of music. In every one of them daily worship was part of everyday pedagogy. Classes began and ended with group prayers and students were repeatedly told that they were learning an ancient art.

Paluskar also believed musicians were more than entertainers; they were now to take their place in the new nation as spiritual leaders. This was to be a loftier role for them than that of simply teaching music. In his view, music needed to be the instrument of Hindu ideology with devotional music (*bhajan*s) supplanting all other forms. A large part of his popularity had to do with his own singing of *bhajan*s and *kirtan*s, and he believed that musicians had an obligation to use music to promote the "authentic" faith and culture of India. Lastly, the musician-teacher in modern India was to step into a role that been far too long vacant: that of the revered *guru.*

For its time, Paluskar's efforts made a radical intervention in the status of music at large. His triumph was to sweep the stage clean of what he saw as its previous association with princely court debauchery, to elevate the role

[25] See, in particular, Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*, ch. 6.

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not just of music but also of women as teachers of music. His particular version of nationalist *bhakti* made music respectable and many more women than before were able to claim it as a professional performance space. Music teachers did indeed become modern incarnations of ancient *gurus*, as can be seen from the hagiographies written by their students.[26]

In 1999, when I visited the musician whose student prostrated herself before him, Paluskar's ghost, not Bhatkhande's, hovered over the encounter. The sacralization of the musical milieu was simply taken for granted. Paradoxically, the musician claimed allegiance to Bhatkhande but in his demeanor and pedagogical attitude, he exemplified Paluskar's vision for music. This is not at all to suggest that Bhatkhande failed in some simplistic sense of the word; far from it. His success permeates the field of music pedagogy, but Paluskar's success is a qualitatively different one, that of worship over skepticism. In parts of India (Bombay, Pune) one can see posters announcing the annual celebration honoring one's music or dance teacher (*guru purnima*).[27] Students arrive at the celebration to present gifts (*gurudakshina*) to their *guru* and to make extravagant speeches about his or her musical *and* spiritual otherworldliness. Had Bhatkhande been alive to witness any of this, his jaw might have dropped.

Elsewhere, I have subjected Bhatkhande's work and vision to critical scrutiny, arguing against his elitism and arrogance, as also his manifest prejudices.[28] For the purposes of my argument here, I wish to focus on the question of religious ritualism and piety in the Indian cultural public sphere using Bhatkhande as the foil to Paluskar. For all that Bhatkhande was a devout Hindu, his understanding of Indian music was more skeptical than Paluskar of such routinized worship and sacralization. Early in his career he had written that neither the *Veda*s nor the *Natyashastra* was useful in writing a history of Indian music. He had condemned what he termed useless pedantry (*nirupyogi panditya*) and eschewed Hindu ritual sentimentalism.

The central Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in New Delhi boasts a number of music teachers and students who are Muslim. Nevertheless, many teachers are considered *gurus* in a clearly signified Brahmanic Hindu tradition. The *guru* is still rarely to be challenged, and only very particular interpretations of what are considered "religious" or "devotional" texts are allowed, and within the space of music and dance pedagogy the musician teacher expects unconditional acquiescence. Music (and dance) students will confess that

[26] There is, of course, a longer tradition in India in which the idea of a teacher as a *guru* can be found, but Paluskar's modern interpretation of this tradition removes the possibility of a critical, interrogative, pedagogical relationship while privileging only the devotional aspect.

[27] In addition to *guru purnima* events, there are *satkar*s, held yearly, in which students of the *guru* get together for an evening where the *guru* is honored.

[28] See Bakhle, *Two Men and Music* (Ital), ch. 3.

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rivalries between teachers are so intense that students of rival teachers will not speak to each other even if they are fellow undergraduate students in the same college.[29] Students still accept this because otherwise they cannot expect to be taught music or dance.[30] This is the unwritten, unspoken, and publicly unchallenged grammar of music pedagogy that is recognized by most students and acknowledged as the fundamental mode that obtains in all "traditional" forms of learning. But because this modern version of the idealized *guru-shishya parampara* borrows from older tropes it ought not therefore to be shielded from criticism.

In invoking Paluskar's use of *bhakti*, I mean neither to question the sincerity of his devotion or its significance as a general feature of modern Indian life. The rhetoric of *bhakti* was available to nationalists ranging from Phalke to Gandhi, all of whom used it in different ways. Ira Bhaskar has demonstrated through a reading of early Marathi cinema that Phalke's use of the progressive rhetoric of *bhakti* was explicit in its challenge to caste domination and patriarchal oppressiveness.[31] Paluskar's use of *bhakti*, by contrast, had a nationalist, gendered, and generalized populism without any specific social reform agenda. It did not challenge caste hierarchy nor did it advocate Hindu-Muslim amity, for instance. It implicitly challenged elite Hindu textual and scriptural understanding of religion, but produced as an alternative a populist version of fairly conventional Brahminized Hinduism, which has been easily joined with music.

What began in Paluskar as a pro-religious agenda aimed at elevating the status of the musician has unfortunate parallels with the elaboration of a state-sponsored Brahminized culture industry that uses the language of *bhakti*. There is no straight line between Paluskar's use of *bhakti* and the last twenty years of Hindu extremism in India, and it is not the intention of this article to argue for one, but it cannot escape notice that the figure of a transcendentalized musician/teacher/guru has been used to develop a new version of Hindu, Brahmanized, bourgeois, patriarchal, and resolutely modern form of public religiosity, as I will suggest in the next section.

[29] Conversations with Meena Chauhan and Somika Karve (dance and music students) in Nov. 2005, New Delhi. I have changed the names of the music and dance students I talked to because they remain nervous about their identities being disclosed for fear that their teachers will no longer teach them.

[30] Ibid. The student in question told me she could not even challenge the manner in which her music teacher spoke to her for fear that he would dismiss her as a student.

[31] See Ira Bhaskar, "Allegory, Nationalism and Cultural Change in Indian Cinema: Sant Tukaram, "*Literature and Theology* 12, 1 (Mar. 1998): 50–69. See also Purushottam Agrawal, "Kan Kan Mein Vyape Hein Ram: The Slogan as a Metaphor of Cultural Interrogation," in, Ania Loomba and Suvir Kaul, eds., "On India: Writing History, Culture, Post-Coloniality," special issue of *Oxford Literary Review* 16, 1–2 (1994): 245–64.

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THE SECULAR-RELIGIOUS PUBLIC SPHERE

By way of another contemporary illustration of the numerous contradictions that are produced by the invocation of a secular cultural public sphere let me offer the following. In Brahmin and upper-caste Hindu religious ideology, the Vedic chant known as the *gayatri mantra* is whispered in the ear of a twice-born (*dwija*) or high-caste male at his initiation ceremony. In some regional interpretations the assumption is that unless the *gayatri mantra* is chanted by a Brahmin or *dwija* boy the sun will not rise in the morning. In theory, women do not hear, let alone recite, the *gayatri mantra*. The chant is reserved solely for upper-caste Hindu males. Needless to say, this leaves out a vast section of the population of the country: all women, all members of religious minority groups, and members of the "backward" castes, including of course the "untouchable" community, today known as Dalits. The *gayatri mantra*, in other words, has been the preserve of a conservative, Brahmin, Hindu, male, patriarchal elite. In recent years, the dominance of this group has been challenged in some parts of the country and the *gayatri mantra* has been transcribed into lockets, recorded on cassettes in urban or semi-urban North India, played as the opening music of television serials in Maharashtra, even played as background music while one receives a massage. Everyone now has potential access to this most hallowed of chants.

On the one hand, this has broken down the hierarchical boundaries that exist between Brahmin men and others. Indologists have long argued that in response to the caste challenge of Buddhist/Jain thinking, Vedic ritual, as early as 500 C.E., was both rationalized and routinized.[32] When modern anti-caste reformers, from Jotiba Phule to B. R. Ambedkar, wrote about Brahmin dominance and the historical roots of contemporary prejudice they asserted that it was precisely this rationalization of Vedic ritual that one had to address. For Phule and Ambedkar, caste was always a rationalized and systemic form of exclusion.[33] In fact, both Phule and Ambedkar in the early stages of their political lives argued for the investiture of non-Brahmins and Dalits in particular with the sacred threat and the mantra. This conceptualization of a top-down Brahminic rationality and rationalization of Vedic ritual might explain why a sector of non-Brahmin sanskritizing castes have also

[32] See Alexis Sanderson, "Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir," in Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *Category of the Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190–216.

[33] For the Dalit critique in Marathi, see the essays by the Marathi Indologist 'Tarakateertha' Lakshmanshastri Joshi, "Mahatma Phule" and "Jotinibandh," in *Tarkateertha Lakshmanshastri Joshi: Lekhasangraha: Khanda Pahila* (Pune: Srividya Prakashan, 1994), 386–404, 405–14.

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enthusiastically appreciated the breaking down of boundaries by the populist dissemination of the Gayatri Mantra.[34]

It could be argued that the pervasiveness of the *gayatri mantra* in contemporary Indian society is merely an illustration of both its quotidian religiosity and the reason why the notion of the secular is simply inappropriate for it. It could even be argued that the *gayatri mantra* is now available, as it had never been, for precisely the community that was disallowed any access to it, namely the Dalit community who can use it without restraint. Yet, seen from Ambedkar's vantage point toward the close of his life—when he would reject Hinduism altogether and publicly convert with 50,000 followers to Buddhism—the ubiquity of the *gayatri mantra* in Indian society could hardly be a change for the better, but was instead an illustration of the power of Brahminic rationality to co-opt all resistance to it. Furthermore, and here the similarity with Paluskar's programmatic agenda becomes clearer, it could also be seen as part of a very particular religious-secular agenda, which even as it pulls women into the fold, and utilizes a populist language, does so through the maintenance of an exclusionary ideology.

In addressing the theoretical critique of secularism through music, a figure like Bhatkhande makes clear that secular ideals could exist in the domain of music without disaggregating them from religion. Secondly, while the anthropological point can be made that "religion" is everywhere, this cannot alone be the predicate for a successful critique of secularism. The history of Paluskar's music(ology) shows that the public cultural sphere has been pervaded by a strongly religious Hindu ideology—of which the *gayatri mantra* is simply one late component—which insisted from the early twentieth century onward that the public space of music should be suffused with spirituality, piety, and sanctity. By itself, the suffusion of religiosity is not the issue. The problem is that Paluskar's music could only be Hindu, pious, religious, and uncritical. In other words, Paluskar's religious-secular vision is a limiting political and social proposition.

For these reasons I offer what I will call, after Clifford Geertz, an anti anti-secular argument. In addressing the question of cultural relativism, Geertz made clear that he was hardly advocating radical forms of relativism—his commitment to comparative social science bespoke otherwise—so much as he was reacting against the easy arguments against relativism.[35] For Geertz, relativism

[34] For B. R. Ambedkar's discussion of the "Upanayana" ceremony and Vedic rationality, see his *Who Were the Shudras?*, ch. 10, "The Degradation of the Sudras," (1st ed. Bombay, 1946, repr., Bombay: Thackers, 1947, 1970), 177–213. For a discussion of Ambedkar on Brahminical rationality, see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Untouchable Struggles for Rights and Recognition*, ch. 3, "Enfranchisement and Emancipation: Dalits as a Political Minority" (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming 2008).

[35] See Clifford Geertz, "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86, 2 (June 1984): 263–78.

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was complex, contradictory, and, at best, a reminder of the ethnocentric character of most universal claims. So, for example, he gave the analogy of positions around abortion: He was more comfortable arguing against the easy assurances of the anti-abortionists—whose positions about life seemed absolutist and draconian—than he was suggesting that abortion was an unqualified good. Following from Geertz, I am attempting to open up the category of secularism with full recognition of its troubled history of the category and its abuses by various secular governments (many of which have been despotic, intolerant, and even genocidal). I am, however, concerned that the easy dismissal of secularism in non-Western contexts loses both the specificity of the histories that gave the idea local power, and uses an historically untenable set of assumptions that assert the traditional and anti-modern character of religion in response to secularism.[36]

By advancing an anti anti-secular position, I do not mean to advocate secularism in any form. Indian society would not immediately head in a better direction if more people stayed as far away from religion as possible or if women simply stopped wearing veils and *bindi*s, stopped going to temples, churches, and mosques, and began raising their children to be atheists. It is possible to be a critic of the anti-secular position without inviting the charge that one is hostile to religion.

Furthermore, even if the origin of *bindi*s and veils was strictly "religious" they are markers today of much more than religion in the contemporary world. At particular moments in India's history they have been political statements, or forms of community self-identification, and at others they have simply been a matter of style and personal choice. It seems rather obvious that it is neither advisable nor feasible to banish all forms of religiosity from public life in India not least because easy distinctions between the sacred and secular are difficult to make. Millions of Indians go to the temple every evening, stop on Fridays at one or another Roman Catholic Church of Mother Mary (Hindus included), or periodically frequent the Ajmer Mosque (*Ajmer Sharif*) in the hope of acquiring a talisman (*taaveez*) to ward off ill omens; they can consult astrologers who can be startlingly accurate about one's past without any prior knowledge of it, maintain a sentimental relationship to all forms of ritual, and allow a host of quotidian gods and spirits—Hindu, Muslim, and Christian—to guide their lives. These millions may or may not be devout. Devotion is not by itself the issue. A sterile secularism that would advocate the strict privatization of all forms of religiosity would be both inappropriate as well as impracticable since it would be near impossible to demarcate the religious from the secular in everyday life. That being said, the political, and gendered, issues within the secularism debate still need to be addressed.

[36] Ibid. See also Clifford Geertz's Erasmus Lecture, "Reason, Religion and Professor Gellner," in, anonymous, ed., *The Limits of Pluralism: Neoabsolutisms and Relativism; Erasmus Ascension Symposium* (Amsterdam: Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, 1994), 162–72.

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### THE SECULARISM DEBATE IN INDIA

The secularism debate in India rests on three notions: the idea of community, the notion of irreducible difference, and lastly, the authenticity of the concept as it relates to India. To recap, the argument is as follows: State secularism has not succeeded in accommodating pluralistic difference in India, and in order to find a way out of the morass the community needs to be privileged over the secular state. Put another way, the community has to define the state. On the question of difference, the argument is that liberal discourse cannot adequately address irreducible difference. On the question of authenticity, the argument—a complicated one—is that secularism cannot work in India not simply or merely because it is conceptually alien but because it brings with it an ideological history that other borrowed concepts perhaps do not.[37]

Even more damning, critics of secularism argue that secularism as state ideology has failed, in large part, to protect the rights of minority cultural communities against the belligerent hostility of the forces of Hindu proto-fascism, and indeed has been responsible for generating violence such as the BJP-sponsored massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. Critics of secularism argue that there is a fundamental incommensurability between the conceptual history of secularism and Indian life (Hindu or Muslim) and that the only option is to turn power (back) to the community.

In this section, as representative of the larger debate, I will address three particularly important positions on secularism from the range of arguments on the subject in India. On the culturalist-anthropological side, critics such as Ashis Nandy have been most persuasive.[38] Nandy diagnoses secularism as the incurable disease that afflicts India's body politic because it cannot comprehend the overwhelming religiosity of everyday life in India. Seeing secularism as part of what he terms an "imperialism of categories," he argues instead for a distinction between religion-as-ideology (modern fundamentalism, in his terms) and religion-as-faith (pre-modern India's tolerant way of life). Nandy has urged Indian academics to shed their Western-educated elitism and reconsider, as a solution to the ills of modern India and a potential model for social behavior, the predominantly religious and *therefore* tolerant communities of pre-modern India. Judging by the acrimonious exchanges in which Nandy has been attacked, it seems clear that he has struck a particularly sensitive nerve in

[37] Sanjay Subrahmanyam has noted that Indian secularism is not mimetic but *sui generis* given that the Indian model of secularism does not fit either the United Kingdom or the United States, or most of Europe. The French Republican ideal of *laicite* is also not secular, according to him. See Ashis Nandy's, "A Billion Gandhis," *Outlook* (21 June 2004): 14; and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's response, "Our Only Colonial Thinker," *Outlook* (5 July 2004): 16.

[38] See Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration," in, Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 321–44.

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both his descriptions of quotidian Indian life and the remarkable failures of secularism.[39]

Nandy's fine ethnographic sensibility notwithstanding, and even if one might sympathize with the desire to turn to an idealized (though historically faulty) notion of the religious community as fundamentally tolerant, his argument reproduces an eighteenth-century colonial understanding of Indians as completely subservient in their daily lives to religion, however the term is understood.[40] Even more importantly, the very modern distinction that Nandy makes between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology in the public cultural sphere is difficult to sustain if one replaces the anthropological lens with a historical one. Bhatkhande and Paluskar as individuals, for instance, might conform to Nandy's categorical separation such that the former would fit the description of religion-as-ideology and the latter as religion-as-faith. But Nandy believes that within the domain of religion-as-faith lies tolerance. Where music is concerned, the question of religion-as-faith, exemplified by Paluskar as a programmatic agenda for his schools, is far from tolerant and reveals, instead, a deeply recidivist politics.[41] Furthermore, religion-as-faith, as we see from Paluskar, is hardly unlinked to the modern, but is as modern as Bhatkhande's secular ideas. Recourse to the idea that *bhakti* (religion-as-faith) speaks to the everyday Indian and embodies a non-modern tolerance cannot be sustained historically in this case.

Unlike Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, another major contributor to the debate, has no nostalgia for pre-modern community.[42] If one is to find a romance with anything in Chatterjee's writings, it is with the modern, understood in specifically Indian terms that are neither mimetic nor nostalgic. But he, too, sees a fundamental problem with a universalizing liberal discourse that cannot, by the terms of its own logic, reconcile the demands of the rights-bearing individual *and* the rights of minority communities to claim irreducible difference. So he turns the

[39] Aijaz Ahmad, Radhika Desai, Sunil Khilnani, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, among others, have accused him variously of being rightwing indigenist, socially reactionary, historically inaccurate, and uncritically nostalgic. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Our Only Colonial Thinker," *Outlook* (5 July 2004): 16; Radhika Desai, *Slouching Towards Ayodhya* (Delhi: Three Essays, 2002), 56–136; Aijaz Ahmad, *On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right* (Delhi: Three Essays, 2004): 59, n. 17; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997). For Nandy's response see, "Unclaimed Baggage: Closing the Debate on Secularism," *The Little Magazine* 3, 2 (2002): 14–19.

[40] See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[41] Aamir Mufti has criticized Nandy's distinction between religion-as-ideology and religion-as-faith for rather different reasons than mine. See "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 95–125, and especially 114–17 for his disagreement with Nandy.

[42] In Chatterjee's work on secularism one can read not the abandonment of secularism as much as a deep sense of disappointment with the manner in which it has been implemented and the turn to community as a last resort.

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argument around. If liberal discourse is unable to accommodate irreducible difference, then we need to begin with irreducible difference and move from there. It will not do to begin with a universal civil legal code and hope that minority communities will come to see its value. The struggle, therefore, for reform of social practices within religiously defined communities must come from the communities themselves, long and tortuous as that process may be. Minority cultural rights, then, have to be fundamentally reconsidered in such a manner that minority cultural groups would have the right to refuse the state any role in their reform agenda, refuse indeed to participate in the logic of the state, and refuse to do so by simply asserting difference without giving any reasons. Difficult as Chatterjee recognizes this is, he still calls for a "strategic politics of toleration" and suggests that the community must be the site where a new conversation about its reform has to be hammered out. To quote him: "there are no historical shortcuts."[43] Chatterjee is not particularly optimistic about the future and he arrives at his conclusion through a different route, via a pessimistic, non-ameliorative view of the future, but the conclusion and the solution to the ills of modern secularism is similar to that advocated by Nandy, namely, the need to turn to community.

Akeel Bilgrami takes issue both with Nandy's romantic nostalgia for the past as well as Chatterjee's critical attitude toward the state.[44] Bilgrami is reluctant to give up on both the state and secularism and he has a cool and unmoved response to the idea of community. Bilgrami is forthright about calling the Hinduism that Nandy finds so appealing by its real name, Brahminism, and equally clear that the desire to bring religion back into politics cannot be argued on the grounds that the desire is innocent while its contamination into something virulent can be laid at the feet of modernity.[45] As an ineradicable condition of our time, modernity (or the modern) cannot be presented as a naïve choice, where we can opt out of it on the grounds that it has let us down, or that it is inauthentic, as Nandy seems to suggest. Bilgrami suggests, in place of a *sui generis* and un-substantive theoretical secularism, a substantive, emergent secularism as the alternative to the impasse in which we find ourselves, a secularism that is necessarily a product of bringing into conversation disparate voices of all cultural minority communities.

## GENDER, COMMUNITY, MUSIC AND SECULARISM

If the role of the community is central to the secularism debate, it is equally so when we return the discussion to music. Paluskar was quite clear that the

[43] Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," in, Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 377.
[44] Bilgrami, "Secularism, Nationalism, and Modernity," in, Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385–91.
[45] Ibid.

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(Hindu) community was the main repository of "traditional" sensibilities and changes to music could happen only within its boundaries. The overt categories common to both the secularism debate and music's secularization are community, authenticity, tradition, culture, and fundamental difference. But there is one category that has inexplicably been completely missed in these (and other) critical re-examinations of the problem of secularism. This is the category of gender.

Let me now return to the anecdote with which I began because it has some instructive potential germane to the categories in question: authenticity, tradition, community, and culture. The reform of Indian classical music in the nineteenth century hinged around the question of how to modernize "traditional" forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and forms of respect. These "traditional" forms are now the hegemonic forms of knowledge about music such that ritual genuflection is now seen as unexceptional. But as we have seen in the earlier sections, this battle for the maintenance of a particular, neo-conformist, "tradition" was waged and won in the early part of the twentieth century, in large part by Paluskar. Paluskar brought women into his agenda not simply as music performers, but as concealed ideologues, who were encouraged to teach their children faith through music. What was at stake, historically, was not simply musical education for women or turning music respectable. At stake for someone like Paluskar was the constitution of a very particular Indian female subjectivity: chaste, asexual, spiritual, docile, religious, and Hindu.[46] In other words there seems to have been a minimal checklist for being the ideal and authentic Hindu woman, who now had to be both religiously and culturally Hindu, but also trained in the arts (music and dance).[47] All excess was un-Hindu and therefore un-Indian. The curious aspect of this opening of the public cultural sphere for women is that it simultaneously re-confined them to a very particular space and a narrowly defined role.

One could object that far too many conclusions are being drawn from one episode and that *all* pedagogical relationships concerning music in India are not as have just been described. The second set of objections—derived from contemporary feminist scholarship alluded to earlier—would question the description of a resurrected *guru shishya* relationship as "hierarchical" or "patriarchal." I could be reminded that the young woman student's acquiescence in the pedagogical relationship can be seen as her agentive decision to use her body for a different politics and that it could also be a simple and

[46] Jose Casanova has addressed precisely the issue of the hegemony of a very particular kind of understanding of religion in the public space. See "What is a Public Religion," in, Hugh Heclo and Wilfred McClay, eds., *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[47] See note 5.

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uncomplicated gesture of respect.[48] Insofar as the student's agency and choice in the matter is concerned, it is a choice we should respect.

This new feminist argument has much in common with the anti-secular position about the need to pay attention to the voice of a "traditional" community sensibility. Indeed, we should do just that. Paluskar was clear that women were integral to the new community of the nation, one that was by definition Hindu; it is precisely this agenda that made it possible for a large number of Hindu middle-class women to enter the field of music. But it would hardly be accurate therefore to suggest that Paluskar's politics were emblematic of an authentically anti-modern Indian traditionalism. For one thing, Paluskar was overtly competitive with the West and wanted to demonstrate to the world at large that whatever a Western classical orchestra could do, Indian music could do better. Ironically, it was Bhatkhande who had almost no interest in Western classical orchestras, or Western classical music for that matter.

Paluskar's response was reactive to colonial and Western perceptions of India as stagnant and his solution was to activate a formulaic and regressive nostalgia. The modern component of this regressive nostalgia was that women were actively involved. In order to bring women into the picture, he did not really need an argument, historical or otherwise. All he needed to do was idealize an imagined past, install a version of it in the present, and insist that India is the home where past and present are seamlessly connected even when the past in question was the period of antiquity and the present in question was that of colonial occupation.[49] Paluskar favored this history without asking if it could hold up to scrutiny. A Hindu formula was in place, and a Hindu community was all that was needed to implement the formula. Bhatkhande, on the other hand, found little solace in the idea of "community," finding himself at the receiving end of criticism both from his own community, for being critical of ancient texts, and from musicians.

Received from the vantage point of music's past and India's political present, the idea of community does not inspire confidence. For an enormous number of women across class, caste, and religion boundaries, it brings to mind a stringent patriarchy at its worst, all manifested in a host of neo-traditional dictums. Indeed, Paluskar seems to have anticipated the most recent feminist argument about agency by making it possible through his appeal for women to stay at home, sing devotional songs to their children, and engage in the traditional and cultural business of ensuring that the true faith of India was upheld.[50] This was the voice of the community, softened in tone because it was

[48] See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[49] See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1983]).

[50] Ibid.

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welcoming of women so long as they accepted the very role that Paluskar scripted for them. From that point in history to the self-professedly "traditional" women of today, who might choose to prostrate themselves at the feet of their *gurus*, is a journey that one must credit to Paluskar.

It is certainly easy to concede that Paluskar's many women students might well have been strong women who made self-conscious choices. Perhaps from their point of view they were both conservative and devout, and their conformity was a source of strength and even pleasure. Indeed, devout, neo-traditional women need not be victims of patriarchal and conservative brainwashing but active agents of their own, indigenous, elaborated, and fundamentally different understanding of the modern. But a different "modern" also brings with it a different and difficult politics that have to be acknowledged.

When it was founded in 1925, the Hindu right wing party the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had no overt interest in taking over the state. It was concerned with reformulating society in conformity with "true Hindu" ideals, and women were central to that project as well.[51] To push the point further, it would not be historically accurate to suggest that because its overt agenda did not include parliamentary politics, questions of representative government, or elections, the RSS was somehow located outside the domain of the state, even if that was its own rhetoric. When one turns to the question of women, agency, and feminism, the Hindu right can provide many examples of powerful and fully agentive women.[52] Because an association such as the RSS or a project such as Paluskar's has nothing overtly to do with the state does not imply that the question of larger politics has not already entered the debate.

What makes matters even more difficult is when "tradition" gets tied to the feminist anti-secularist argument. With the cache that this argument currently holds, the question devolves into issues of authenticity and agency. It has been suggested that feminists might wish to reconsider trying to impose "Western" notions on women who choose to negotiate a different relationship with the modern that privileges community and traditional values over that of the rights of the individual subject. In response, let us recall some of the arguments made by Indian feminists on the question of community and tradition.

[51] See *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, Tapan Basu et al., eds. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993). See also Mukul Kesavan, *Secular Commonsense* (Delhi: Penguin, 2001), 32.

[52] Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia write, "We need to understand what we are faced with. For we do have before us a large-scale movement among women of the right who bring with them an informed consent and agency, a militant activism. If they are imbued with false consciousness then that is something that includes their men as well and if they are complicit with a movement that will ultimately constrain themselves as women, then history is replete with examples of women's movements that foreground issues other than or even antithetical to women's interests. Feminist convictions are not given or inherent in women, after all." See their *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995), 2–5.

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Lata Mani has shown us how women were the ground on which tradition was constituted by the voice of both the religious community and colonial administrators.[53] Tanika Sarkar has argued that the physical/sexual/social death of an individual woman (in the cases of Sati, Widow Remarriage, and Age of Consent) was considered a small price to pay by a male-dominated community interested in its own regeneration.[54] Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan has argued that when women's agency becomes the focus of a case (such as the Ameena case) or an event (such as the Shahbano case) that pits the secular versus the anti-secular, or the community versus the state, it becomes structurally unavailable.[55] For Rajan it is irrelevant whether this is agency as capitulation or as consent. By her argument, Paluskar's agenda would make women's agency irretrievable precisely because women had become for him an instrument of nationalism. The point is that the idea of the religious, and traditional, community could only be invoked as the possible solution to secularism's failure if one studiously left aside the question of gender and paid scant attention to Indian feminists. The affirmative stance towards community that otherwise persuasive critics of secularism have advanced and spoken of with some degree of optimism has to be tempered with the recognition that it has not always been a solace for most women, whether Hindu or Muslim.[56] Community in these forms depends on the docility of its women.

A deeply respectful feminist project might seek to follow on the heels of these critiques to comprehend the complicated historical subjectivity of women whose imaginative horizons included the possibility of lifelong ostracism and celibacy as Brahmin widows, or Sati (widow immolation). This is very different, however, from wanting to reinstate the voice of the community that supported this kind of Brahmin widowhood and Sati in the first place. It is possible to be cognizant of the colonial construction of tradition, recognize that as recently as three generations ago what today's Indian feminists might

[53] See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[54] See Tanika Sarkar, "The Prehistory of Rights: The Age of Consent in Colonial Bengal," *Feminist Studies* 26, 3: 601–22.

[55] See Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, "Ameena: Gender, Crisis, and National Identity," in, Ania Loomba and Suvir Kaul, eds., "On India: Writing History, Culture, Post-Coloniality," special issue of *The Oxford Literary Review* 16, 1–2 (1994): 147–76.

[56] Urvashi Butalia writes, "families, or indeed communities, have never been particularly supportive of women, nor are they going to begin now ... there are many lessons to be learnt here from women's movements the world over: for centuries women have faced oppression at the hands of men, but they have not taken to the streets and picked up any and every available weapon to start killing men (even though sometimes they may well have felt like doing so!). Instead, they have fought for change in every possible way within a legal and constitutional framework. They have spoken the language of law and struggle, rights and democracy, not of violence and community, not of hatred and intolerance." While Butalia wrote this in the context of the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, I am using her comments here to emphasize that feminists have not viewed the turn to community with equanimity. "The Culture of Violence," *The Little Magazine* 3, 2 (2002): 35.

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consider an anathema (Sati) was well within range of a woman's everyday life, and at the same time champion neither nostalgia nor cultural relativism.[57] It is possible, in other words, to be anti anti-secularist, historicist, and feminist at the same time. One should also be mindful of how the voice of the community can serve as the alibi for an unchecked religious dominance to reassert itself, or for an elite Brahminism to claim that, once diluted, it is now liberating and democratic, since both positions can draw from the arguments anti-secularists have made for them. Anti-secularists have provided the necessary camouflage for it to now be acceptable to be neo-Brahman, patriarchal, and conservative—all in the name of a critique of the state and of Western-derived secularism.

## CONCLUSION

Secularists are often accused of having lost sight of the things that matter to people—simple questions of faith, ritual, tradition, habit. They are reminded that for most people around the world, morality is determined not by the state but by a holy book and religion. Secularists are assumed to be atheists themselves who are hostile to religion. This was not the case with Bhatkhande. He was deeply devout and his dearest wish was to die in one of the two cities considered holy by upper-caste Hindus. I do not wish to exonerate Bhatkhande: he too had many flaws. His attitudes toward women performers left much to be desired; he was arrogant, elite, and elitist, and he was probably no less prejudiced against Muslims than Paluskar. But it is important to note that to be modern, nationalist, and secular did not mean the abnegation of one's Indianness for Bhatkhande any more than it meant giving up historical inquiry. All texts—Sanskrit, Bengali, Tamil, Persian, and Urdu—had a place in his curriculum, as treatises to be critically pondered, not sacred books to be worshipped. Students were encouraged to ask critical questions, and his major pedagogical texts were remarkably dialogic for their time. Even though his prejudices against performers were manifest, his belief that Indian music did not necessarily need a sacred antiquarian genealogy provides an especially important lesson for India's present.

To invoke my anecdote yet again, it is difficult to imagine that Bhatkhande would have approved of a musician, yet again and across a century, refusing a scholar access to a vital text in his possession. Nor would he likely have been sanguine about the fact that in the contemporary world of Indian classical music some musicians bless their audience before their performance, and students routinely start their lessons in music (and dance) with prayers. Performances still privilege Puranic mythology, selections from the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* Contemporary dancers will testify that the

[57] I am indebted to Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak for her conversation with me about this topic. My argument draws directly from her insight.

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state supports a "traditional" performance much more than a "modern" or "experimental" one.

Given the now thoroughly modern character of Indian classical music and dance, there is surely more to be said about its politics than to merely repeat in slightly modified form the colonial canard that everything in India is so suffused with religion that it defies easy comprehension. "Criticism" as Edward Said noted, "is always situated; it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings.... To stand between culture and system is therefore to stand close to ... a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgments have to be made, and if not only made, then exposed and demystified."[58] No such demystification is accomplished by simply noting that Indian classical music was secularized in a manner that resists easy "Western" categorization. The relative success of Paluskar's agenda offers an important opportunity to take a further step and ask critical questions. To do so, it requires setting aside the worry about the undue influence of "Western feminism" to question the political implications of "traditional" genuflection, subordination, and conformity that are part of the hegemonic world of Indian classical music.

To that end, it must be noted that Bhatkhande's cantankerous skepticism was as much a part of the secular cultural public sphere of music as Paluskar's modernized Hindu tradition. Both were competing visions of the secular, both have different political implications, and both are equally Indian. While it is easy to dismiss Bhatkhande, as did many musicians in his time, as a colonized Western elite secularist who had no connection of his own to either Indian music or an authentically Indian cultural or political milieu, the case for colonial complicity could just as easily be laid at Paluskar's feet. When colonial complicity is set aside, what is clear is that Paluskar's aggressively Hindu secular vision comes close to the community-centered agenda advocated by anti-secularists. Were it not tempered by the corrective of Bhatkhande's critical secularism, the substantive pluralism of the secularism defended in this article would be in serious jeopardy. The domain of the secular public cultural sphere in India is multifarious, messy, and internally conflictual. This is the strength of the imagination of the secular, not a demerit.

That the cultural milieu of South Asia is different from that from which secularism as a concept emerged is self-evident. But the axiomatic claim about the foreignness, inadequacy, and inapplicability of ideology has not stopped Indians from adopting and reformulating concepts such as nationalism (which Partha Chatterjee has shown struck a distinctly non-mimetic path), feminism (conceptualized in a variety of Indian contexts), or the game of cricket, to give a few random examples. The recent defeat of the Hindu right wing government by a largely illiterate but politically alert electorate gives the lie to the idea

[58] Edward W. Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 26.

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that a liberal notion of universal adult suffrage would not work in India. The point is not that India is welcoming to all foreign influences, some of which are "Indianized" and others are rejected. The so-called authenticity of a concept is irrelevant in the case of secularism not because origins are unimportant per se but because no matter how it turns out, the question of Indian identity is not and ought not to be so fragile as to be constantly on guard against non-native borrowings or in need of constant invocations of the "authentic" or the "traditional."

Where, then, can one stand on the question of the secular? As Akeel Bilgrami puts it, "it is not that politics must replace religiosity, but rather that an appreciation of the underlying political ground that prompts the religiosity requires that other more secular sources of enchantment than religion will have to emerge out of an alternative configuration of the political ground." Only then, argues Bilgrami, can one look forward to a "less confused and more secular form[s] of re-enchantment that might make for a genuinely substantial notion of democracy. . .."[59] A historical consideration of music as the sound of the secular, with all its dissonances, allows for a twofold examination: of the populist politics of Paluskar's *bhakti* nationalism, on the one hand; and the possible politics of Bhatkhande's critical secularism, on the other. This is not the same as attacking a subaltern position to advocate a liberal elite agenda. It is to assert that beleaguered as secularism may seem right now, its conflictual and ongoing evolution and pluralism should be at least one reason we should be reluctant to abandon it.

The history of Indian music shows us that there can be secular enchantment in the cultural public sphere that is neither exclusively religious nor dogmatically secular. Yet, the contemporary debate on secularism has moved us into an untenable corner where the only option is to make declarations about whether one is or is not a secularist, only to find oneself then accused of ideological betrayal from some quarter or another. To move beyond this impasse, one could start by recognizing, as the history of Bhatkhande's engagement with the formation of Indian classical music shows us, that the sacred and the secular, and in this case music and religion, can coexist in far more complex, critical, conflictual, and accommodative ways than we have been led to believe. Conflict is central to the strength of the concept of the secular. Indian secularism has in fact moved far beyond its own debate. It is time to wake up and listen to the music.

[59] Akeel Bilgrami, "Occidentalism," 411.

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