

## Ethnomusicology in the Indian Context

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There is no single widely-accepted definition of ethnomusicology, although the term has been in use for more than thirty years. Perhaps, the principal reason for this has been that scholars generally provide prescriptive definitions based on their perceptions of what the field should involve, rather than attempt to produce a single definition which would encompass all the areas studied under the rubric of ethnomusicology.<sup>1</sup> The closest to a descriptive approach has been the sometimes-used adage, "ethnomusicology is what the ethnomusicologists do", which, of course, defeats the intent of definition.

Of the prescriptive definitions, several are current. One, which is perhaps the most popular, defines ethnomusicology as "music in culture",<sup>2</sup> or its variant, "music as culture"<sup>3</sup>. Both of these assert the importance of the cultural context in ethnomusicology; they tend, however, to minimize the importance of the study of musical sonorities, musical theory, as well as the history of music, all of which have been examined by ethnomusicologists, particularly with reference to the non-Western art traditions. Another definition, "The study of orally transmitted traditional musics",<sup>4</sup> tends to exclude the traditional art music of cultures such as China and Japan (and, of course, Western art music) simply because they employ written materials. It also ignores recently devised musical forms, because no tradition has yet been established from one generation to the next. A third definition, "The study of living musics",<sup>5</sup> tends to exclude historical studies which have always been a part of ethnomusicology, especially in connection with the art musics of Asia. A fourth, "The study of non-Western and folk music",<sup>6</sup> excludes not only Western classical music, but the modern non-classical forms (e.g., pop, jazz, rock, etc.) which have been recognized, at least by some, as constituting a legitimate area for ethnomusicological research.

While each of these definitions reflects trends in ethnomusicology, none of them does justice to the whole field. It seems to me that the study of ethnomusicology must include the study of sonorities as they exist today, as well as their historical backgrounds, which undoubtedly provide an important clue to the evolutionary processes involved; but ethnomusicology attempts to go beyond mere sound, towards an elucidation of our understanding of humanity through music. It attempts to throw light on individual and community traits not only through an examination of musical structures, but also through social interactions as manifest in musical behaviour. While the objectives of a particular research project in ethnomusicology may be "to enumerate, describe, classify or compare musical performance forms",<sup>7</sup> the eventual aim must be directed to a study of the nature of man and the search for explanations to account for the particular patterns of music and musical behaviour which he adopts.

Thus, I would like to propose the following definition of the field:

"The study of humanity through music, musical behaviour and all phenomena related to music making."

Such a definition is necessarily broad in order to encompass the vast range of studies in ethnomusicology. It does not exclude studies focussed entirely on music sonorities, since these provide an insight into aesthetic proclivities of particular musicians and the musical community at large; nor does it limit the studies to the contemporary period, to particular cultural areas or specific forms of music.

Ethnomusicology, under this definition, would naturally subsume the term "musicology", as suggested by Charles Seeger many years ago.<sup>8</sup> While this is rationally defensible, it does not take into account the historical factors which led to the need for a term such as *ethnomusicology* in the first place. The general acceptance of the term by the Western community of scholars indicates, not so much its appropriateness, but the need for recognition to be accorded to certain types of music studies for which there was previously no academic slot. In the Western world, the terms "music" and "musicology" have been appropriated for Western art music and its study, much the same as in India, where they refer primarily to the indigenous classical traditions. In this regard, Nettl writes:<sup>9</sup>

So in the Western world, we developed books called "The History of Music" and courses called "Introduction to the Art of Music", which dealt with only one kind of music (i.e., Western art music). The assumption seemed to be that the basic principles of this kind of music were universally valid, either because it was the only "true" music or because all other kinds of music simply represented its generative stages, or perhaps degenerations.

Even today, major American universities continue to list courses such as "Music History" and "Music Theory" which refer only to Western art music, as though no other musical tradition has either history or theory of any significance. Looking back to the beginnings of ethnomusicology, there were several Western scholars who were drawn to other forms of music, regarding them neither as generative stages of Western art music nor as degenerations, but rather as viable alternatives to Western art music. These scholars, however, found little or no recognition in academic circles of the time as all music, other than Western art music, was regarded as a "subfield of musicology that dealt, by implication, with 'sub-musics' worthy only of being compared with the great art music of Europe".<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the term which preceded ethnomusicology, *vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*, or comparative musicology, tended to reinforce the view of 'sub-musics' whose principal value lay in that their study might contribute to a better understanding of the history of Western art music. In India, too, an equivalent attitude tends to prevail, that the non-classical forms are either generative or degenerative forms of classical music. I do not mean to suggest that such a view is totally without value, but that it is an extremely limited and demeaning view of individual music cultures.

The term *ethnomusicology* (originally, with a hyphen, ethno-musicology) was coined by Jaap Kunst in the early fifties and, although there is some discontent with it, the area of inquiry which it symbolizes has gained academic recognition as a field of study in its own right. As evidence of this, in 1976, the International Music Society with the American Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology co-hosted a conference in Berkeley, California, which was devoted mostly to ethnomusicological content.

There is little doubt in my mind that the adoption of a disciplinary name has had much to do with the acceptance of the field. Furthermore, the term *ethnomusicology* is not as inappropriate as some scholars tend to feel. It is derived from the Greek "ethnos", meaning nation, race, people, etc., and when one takes into consideration that one of the main early motivations was the desire to study the musics of different nations, races and peoples, this prefix seems quite reasonable. However, some tend to associate "ethno" with "ethnic", which originally referred to "Gentiles, non-Christians, heathens and pagans"<sup>11</sup> and now tends to refer, in a somewhat derogatory or condescending way, to minority groups on the basis of race, social status or custom. But ethnicity is not limited just to minority groups nor to racial interpretations. People who share specific customs or conventions also share a measure of ethnicity, whether or not they belong to a single nation, community or race. The classical music traditions (both Western and Indian), for instance, go far beyond a single nation, race or community; yet, the heterogeneous followers of these traditions exhibit a measure of common ethnicity merely because they share a particular music convention. The prefix *ethno* in ethnomusicology draws attention to the fact that music is a product of people, not just an isolated abstract entity, and that the final purpose of the study is to enhance our understanding of humanity, not merely of musical sonorities.

It is interesting to note that some of the strongest criticisms of the term *ethnomusicology* have come from ethnomusicologists themselves who feel that the term *musicology* should have the same broad perspective and not be limited to the history and sonorities of Western art music. Thus, they argue, the term *ethnomusicology* is redundant. The fact remains, however, that in the West, the field of musicology is firmly entrenched in European-based art music and other music traditions are given little consideration. Perhaps, in course of time, the two fields will merge, but not until musicologists are convinced that musical traditions other than their own are equally deserving of study in their own rights.

If we were discussing the languages of the world, this kind of problem would not exist since it has long been accepted that language is an important key to the understanding of culture and the way that people think. Music is, however, not regarded in this light. There is a widespread unconscious assumption that all forms of music are motivated by the need for artistic expression and abide by universal aesthetic principles. What is not often recognized is that music is basically functional; it is created and employed by peoples to express and satisfy individual and community needs, whether these be artistic or practical. Because music is much more abstract than language, it embodies many kinds of meanings and even simultaneous levels of meaning which are determined as much by the conditioning of the listener and the cultural context as by the content of the music and the intent of the performer. To the best of our understanding today, music does not follow any single set of universal principles, nor does it function like language, except on rare occasions. Nevertheless, it is no less important than language for the understanding of culture and ethnicity.

There is also a widespread feeling that non-classical musics are unsophisticated and rather simple and therefore not deserving of study. Even if we were to accept this notion that individual forms are sometimes musically simple,<sup>12</sup>

the fact remains that virtually every community in a country like India, has its individual form and style of music, in sum, probably far exceeding the variety one finds even in classical music. But it is not just the musical analysis which concerns the ethnomusicologist, whose primary concern is to determine why these individual traditions differ from each other, how they came into being, and how they satisfy individual and community needs. Unfortunately, in the Indian scholarly world, studies of non-classical music are held in rather low regard. Folklorists and literary scholars have published books on various types of folk and devotional songs, without a single word of music description, even though the texts of those songs were designed to be sung and would never be recited by members of the performing community. Even the appellation, poet-saint, given to Mirabai, Surdas, and so many others, reflects this prejudice, for all of them were in reality singers and composers of devotional songs, not just poets. If they considered melody and rhythm to be essential to their purposes and we are unable to understand why, surely the fault lies with us and should spur us on to greater efforts to understand the meaning and function of music. This is just the kind of research with which ethnomusicology is basically concerned.

To illustrate in more concrete terms the differences between a traditional musicological approach and an ethnomusicological approach, let us first consider attitudes and approaches to folk music. For instance, if a particular folk song employed only three or four notes, a musicologist would probably be inclined to regard this as "primitive" music and would very likely infer that the society producing that music was backward, not just from the musical point of view. This is like judging Western society by the tune of *Happy Birthday to You*. An ethnomusicologist would, however, look at it in a very different light, one in which the abilities or capabilities of the community would not be in question. A fundamental premise for the ethnomusicologist is to accept the fact that the music accomplishes satisfactorily the purpose for which it is intended. Thus, *Happy Birthday* is eminently suited to the group expression of joy on birthdays, or else it would not continue to be sung and would be replaced by some other song. The addition of melodic or rhythmic sophistications might improve the musical qualities of the music, but would not necessarily improve its effectiveness in its intended purpose. Rituals have evolved gradually over centuries and continue to exist because they are successful. In order to understand how a simple repetitive tune might be effective, terminology used in Information Theory can be instructive, especially the concept of redundancy. While all communication involves some measure of redundancy, in terms of the arts, especially music, redundancy plays a very special role. It is the principal element in setting and sustaining a hypnotic mood. An extreme instance of this is in the creation of trance to a repeated drum rhythm, a drone, or a continuously repeated phrase. An example of the last would be the *zikr* where Sufi novices repeat *La illaha illaha* over and over again in order to achieve a state of ecstasy. Repetitive movements including clapping, swaying, and shaking of the head are all part of this mood-creating redundancy. Even in classical music, one can say it is the redundant element, i.e., the characteristic shapes of the *raga* and the *tala*, already known to many members of the audience, which creates the basic mood, while the rendering of the performer serves mainly to modify or refine this basic mood. The village lady who sits at the grinding wheel and repeats a simple tune with only slight variation of words is indeed creating a special mood, a form of self-hypnosis which not only alleviates the tediousness of her labours,

but enables her to express feelings and ideas which would otherwise either not occur to her or would cause her great embarrassment if she were obliged to utter them in common speech.

What is not commonly recognized by folklorists is that under the "spell" of song, words have different meanings both to the singer and to the listener. Texts and translations when divorced from the musical context are not only incomplete, but may actually be deceptive. Thus oral myths and fantasies are usually rendered musically—the structure being strophic, with the melody repeating over and over again to create a mood for the reception of the events of the imaginary world.

Each community has its own musical genres and styles of performance which achieve a particular balance between new information and redundancy according to the needs and purposes of the community. Obviously, it is essential to know the purpose for which the music is being employed, but even if two groups use music for the same purpose, there is no guarantee that the musical elements employed will be identical. Nevertheless, certain patterns tend to be similar in such cases. For instance, many styles of scriptural chanting are similar in that they employ a tonal centre around which the "melody" pivots. On this kind of general level, some musical affinities based on function have been noted cross-culturally. The specific melodic and rhythmic patterns will, however, probably differ from one group to another. The fundamental question is whether or not the use of specific patterns by individual groups is purely arbitrary or has some rationale underlying it. Ethnomusicologists tend to believe the latter and have occasionally produced evidence to support this view. To give but one example, it has been suggested by more than one scholar<sup>13</sup> that the musical intervals used by certain African peoples (e.g., Zulu, Bushmen and Nguni) in their songs have been derived from the harmonics which are produced on one of their prominent instruments, the musical bow. This is by no means the only example which could be quoted to illustrate the kinds of rationale ethnomusicologists have proposed in explanation of specific musical phenomena. Obviously, the explanation is not always related to the influence of musical instruments—in fact this was rather an exceptional case. Linguistic, socio-cultural, historical, psycho-acoustic and other considerations are also involved.

Let us now look at Indian classical music in order to illustrate the difference between a traditional musicologist's approach and that of an ethnomusicologist, bearing in mind that the ethnomusicologist is concerned not just with the description of a musical event, but with *why* the event takes a particular shape, *how* it functions musically and *how* this satisfies and fulfils individual and community needs.

We tend to take for granted many of the fundamental elements of our music; for instance, the fact that both our Hindustani and Karnatic systems are basically structured around solo performers. Why did we not develop concerted forms of music, or harmony and counterpoint? A Western musicologist, who tends to think of monophonic music as a generative stage of polyphony, would inescapably be led to the conclusion that we have not evolved as far as has the Western musical world. Whether or not this is true, can only be determined by the course of time. As far as we are concerned, however, we clearly prefer our music

to that of the West and do not feel that it is inferior in any way, nor that it belongs to an earlier evolutionary stage leading to polyphony. To an ethnomusicologist, however, this would mean that the monophonic/heterophonic form of Indian classical music is a reflection of a way of life and a collective aesthetic. Perhaps a partial explanation for our not having developed orchestral music may lie in the structure of traditional Indian society which has been highly stratified in terms of occupational groups—not the easiest conditions for the development of orchestral music which requires a fairly large number of performers functioning in synchrony. As this stratification breaks down in contemporary times, we see increasing evidence of orchestral music in India. In any case, the *hows*, and *whys* of these types of questions are among the principal concerns of ethnomusicology; although, to the best of my knowledge, no ethnomusicologist has applied himself directly to these particular issues.

Perhaps we should consider a more specific example from classical music to illustrate further the difference in approach between the musicologist and the ethnomusicologist. Most of the teachings of musicians and musicologists in India are primarily historical or descriptive. For instance, treatises describe (and prescribe) how a *raga* is (or should be) performed through abstractions such as *aroha-avroha*, *vadi-samvadi*, *jati*, *chalan*, *sangati-s*, etc. This would satisfy one of the 'how' questions with which an ethnomusicologist would be concerned, but these treatises give no explanation as to *why* a *raga* has to be performed in a particular manner, e.g., why certain *sangati-s*, *gamaka-s* or *tans* are necessary on certain notes in particular *raga-s* and not others. The usual answers to these kinds of questions are, "That's the way the *raga* is performed" or "That's the way my guru taught me". These responses are undoubtedly valid in their own context, but surely the structural patterns of *raga-s* are not purely arbitrary; they must have been created in response to stimuli, whether musical, social, psychological or historical. For example, a psychological or psycho-acoustic explanation to account for particular *raga* features might address them in terms of devices which enhance tension and resolution through the manipulation of consonances and dissonances in relation to the drone, melodic symmetries and asymmetries, and time delays and accelerations.<sup>14</sup> It may be that some explanations will be beyond discovery, but so far, very few scholars have been concerned with such issues. Yet, it is the answer to questions such as the one posed here—why a particular *raga* has to be performed in a particular way in order to satisfy musicians and listeners—that will further our understanding of humanity.

From the foregoing discussion it should be evident that the field of ethnomusicology differs in many ways from that of musicology. Special training programmes in ethnomusicology at the M.A. and Ph.D. level are offered in a number of universities particularly in Europe and the USA, but, as yet, there is no such academic programme in India. The approaches at the different institutions vary, some emphasising music, others anthropology, folklore, area studies or other interdisciplinary perspectives. One of the most prominent of these is expressed by the term bi-musicality.<sup>15</sup> This term, intended to parallel bilingualism in concept, implies fluency in two music traditions, the first one being that of Western art music since it was designed to be implemented within the structure of the American academic world. Participation in music performance of both traditions is thought to be an essential requisite for the achievement of bi-musicality. If such a concept

were to be adopted in India, one would presume that Indian classical music would constitute the student's first area of study and any other music tradition (including Western art music!), the second.

However, the underlying implication of bi-musicality, at least in the Western context, tends to reinforce the notion that ethnomusicology deals only with non-Western music (especially non-Western art music), a limiting view which has pervaded the field since its inception. Although the concept of bi-musicality is taken for granted by many scholars, its ramifications do not appear to have been discussed in print. In my opinion, there are two important considerations involved: the issue of the 'insider' versus the 'outsider', and the matter of specific culture bias which is probably an inevitable consequence to bi-musicality.

With regard to the 'insider'-'outsider' issue, it is presumed that a bi-musical person will have a foot in both camps; i.e., that he will be capable of understanding the point of view represented by performers of his second area of study, while retaining the ability to project himself into his first area of expertise in order to view his second area 'objectively', or at least as an 'outsider'. However, no ethnomusicologist would seriously argue that an 'outsider' could possibly have a deeper intuitive grasp of his second musical area of study than would an 'insider' of his own tradition. Nor would they seriously argue that a foreign scholar has a greater knowledge of the history, culture and music of Indian culture than an indigenous scholar, particularly in an erudite and scholarly environment such as India. Why then should foreigners study Indian music? The fact is that an 'outsider' can bring to bear a different perspective and approach which might help to illumine certain musical phenomena, at least for a particular type of reader. I could give many examples of the ingenious ideas and approaches suggested by Western students of Indian musicologists, merely because the Western students had not been conditioned by the traditions and conventions of Indian musicology. By the same token, I would fully expect bi-musical scholars from India, someday to offer new perspectives for the study of Western music. Yet, some Indian musicologists tend to be offended by the mere fact that Westerners publish on Indian music, as though this represented a form of cultural/scholarly imperialism. I do not believe this is a matter of West versus East, but that of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders'. It is all too easy to forget that an Indian of one community studying the music of another community in India is also an outsider. I am sure that he, too, can offer a perspective which might help to elucidate a particular musical phenomenon, especially for the community he represents. His views may have little relevance to the carriers of the tradition, but, on occasion, may also be meaningful to some of them. Perhaps the strongest argument for bi-musicality is that the bi-musical scholar has the training to be able to translate and communicate musical ideas from his second area of study to his first, only exceeding the original on very rare occasions, as in the often-quoted example of the Fitzgerald translations of Omar Khayyam's poems.

With regard to the second issue, the problem with bi-musicality and, to some extent, with all 'outsiders' is that they cannot avoid the specific biases of their own backgrounds, which, in the case of Western bi-musically trained scholars, is hardened by the culture-specific training in Western music demanded by some institutions in the USA and Europe. A student with a basic training in Western art music history and theory is not necessarily in a better position

to understand the music of any other tradition than a person with musical ability and no formal training. As a matter of fact, the former may be at a disadvantage since his ears will be attuned to tempered intervals and vertical perception of music. I have even encountered students with "perfect pitch" who have difficulty equating different performances of a *raga* simply because the *Sa* was at different pitches.

While there is no absolute solution to the problem of cultural bias, it seems to me that it could be diminished somewhat by broad-based training in ethnomusicology which treats both Western and Indian classical music as just two of the many ways discovered by mankind in response to particular physical, historical, social and cultural conditions. This is not to diminish them in importance, but to place them in universal perspective. With this objective in mind, a curriculum in ethnomusicology for the Indian context could include the following:

#### GENERAL COURSES

1. Introduction to Ethnomusicology
2. Music Cultures of the World
3. Musical Instruments of the World and their Classification
4. Music in Dance, Theatre and Ritual
5. Principal Music Notation Systems of the World
6. Comparative Music Theory
7. Acoustics of Musical Instruments

#### PRACTICAL COURSES

1. Oral Transcription of Music
2. Laboratory Techniques in Transcription and Analysis
3. Field Methods in Ethnomusicology
4. Audio and Video Equipment for Fieldwork
5. Documentation, Archiving and Retrieval Methods

#### DISCIPLINARY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSES

1. Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology
2. The Anthropology of Music
3. Interdisciplinary Approaches in Ethnomusicology
4. Advanced Research Seminars in Ethnomusicology

With such a broad-based course of study in ethnomusicology, it would not be inappropriate to include courses specific to the Indian context. These might introduce ethnomusicological approaches to classical, folk, tribal and other forms of Indian music. The courses in ethnomusicology are envisaged for the post-graduate student, whose initial degree need not necessarily be in music, but could be in one of the disciplines related to ethnomusicology, such as anthropology, sociology, folklore, dance, theatre, and the like, provided the applicant can demonstrate knowledge of music or performing ability, whether vocal or instrumental. The proposed course of studies should have at least University affiliation so that appropriate higher degrees can be awarded to deserving students.

I have long felt that India, which probably has the largest variety of musical traditions of any country in the world, has not given them due recognition, at least in terms of the scholarly world. It is particularly disappointing, for instance, that we are not represented by a National Committee in the prestigious International Council for Traditional Music.

But, I am happy to note that there are signs of change. Academic institutions in India have recently become aware of the urgent need to document the performing arts and other oral traditions before they change drastically. Thanks to grants from the Ford Foundation, a number of Indian institutions have now acquired the technical facilities to carry out such projects, which have, heretofore, not generally been available in India; and proficiency in the handling of technical equipment is rapidly increasing. It is unfortunate, however, that there is, as yet, no established training programme available anywhere in India to produce the kind of scholars under whose direction technicians must operate in order to document these traditions effectively for future research. Further, little consideration has yet been given to the stages which must follow such documentation i.e., preservation, archiving and retrieval. This last involves the organisation and cataloguing of the documented materials in archives in such a manner as to facilitate the recovery of specific items.

The courses outlined above are designed to produce professional scholars who would be able to carry out effective fieldwork in ethnomusicology and the performing arts, prepare written documentation with knowledge of the appropriate methods for indexing, archiving, and retrieval of materials collected, as well as being able to conduct meaningful research based upon these documents which could be of immense educational value for all levels of society.

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#### *Notes and References*

1. The range of studies carried out by ethnomusicologists can be seen in the issues of the quarterly journal, *ETHNOMUSICOLOGY*.
2. Merriam, A., *The Anthropology of Music*: Evanston, Illinois, 1964, p. 7.
3. Title of a book by Herndon, Marcia and McLeod, Norma; Darby, Pennsylvania, 1981.
4. The article on Ethnomusicology in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London, 1980, by Barbara Krader discusses this definition by George List, as well as others.
5. *ibid.*
6. Nettl, B., *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, Urbana, Illinois, 1983, p. 4.
7. Ranade, A., gives these as the aims of a "complete investigation of a particular folk culture" in "Researches in Folk Performing Arts", *NCPA Quarterly Journal*, vol. XII, no. 4., Dec. 1983. p. 36.
8. In, "Toward a Unitary Field Theory for Musicology", *Selected Reports* vol. 1 no. 3, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1970.
9. *op. cit.* p. 37.
10. *ibid.* p. 8.
11. *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd Ed., 1947.
12. Nettl, *op. cit.*, p. 10 would evidently be reluctant to accept this: "They (ethnomusicologists) consider all musics worthy of study, recognizing that all, no matter how simple, are in themselves inordinately complex phenomena".
13. e.g., Kirby, P., in "The Changing Face of African Music South of the Zambezi", p. 244, and Rycroft, D., in "Stylistic Evidence in Nguni Song", p. 221; both published in *Essays on Music and History in Africa*, Ed. Wachsmann, K. P., Evanston, Illinois, 1971.
14. This is the kind of approach I have used in my book, *The Rags of North Indian Music*, London, 1971.
15. The leading proponent of the bi-musicality concept was Mantle Hood of UCLA. He has discussed his ideas in, "The challenge of bi-musicality", *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 4, 1960, pp. 55-59.