

TIF - Hindustani Music, Patronage Problems and Patreon

K. GUPTA

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A painting of Tansen receiving a lesson in music from Swami Haridas at Vrindavan, with Akbar watching (c. 1750 AD) | Wikimedia

Can the subscription-based web platform Patreon help musicians break free of the arbitrary patronage networks that operate in Hindustani classical music?

A few days after he joined Patreon, a subscription-based web platform for artists, the Hindustani classical vocalist Samarth Nagarkar, in a playful video message on Facebook prodded viewers into comparing music and food delivery, only to emphasise their difference: that people never think that they don't need to pay for food.

The immediate trigger for this message seemed to be the deluge of requests for free performances by innumerable online 'cultural pages', to 'spread positivity' in these distressing times. Hindustani musicians are

used to doubling up as their own ambassadors and performing for discounted fees or free even during normal times, usually under the familiar trope of *sangeet seva*, 'service to the tradition'. But, as Nagarkar correctly avers in the video, with the usual concert schedules cancelled, the only music 'really' happening at the moment is what is on the internet.

The money question that undergirds these episodes adumbrates a yet larger and perennial problem, one that sits at the interstices of patronage, opportunity and the modes of socialisation and dissemination of Hindustani music. With the gradual professionalisation of music in post-independence India, musicians have to tackle the arbitrariness of a new class of intermediaries that has emerged between musicians and sources of patronage and between musicians and general listeners. After independence and the abrogation of the princely states, music patronage became less concerned with enabling and empowering *musical labour*. Instead it progressively centred on *musical output*. The idea of 'cultivating' the musician has been gradually diluted into the act of facilitating performance opportunities.

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Could Patreon and similar platforms for 'creators' and 'patrons' to meet and interact provide an answer to this problem? Drawing on both subscription and crowdfunding models of monetising intellectual and artistic labour, such platforms hold out the possibility of a sustainable and participative model of patronage for Hindustani musicians. The definitive gain of this arrangement is that it gives the musician complete entrepreneurial and creative control over their music. Extending Nagarkar's culinary metaphor, this is akin to a chef running their own restaurant rather than working for a business.

Patreon has been around for a few years but Hindustani music's late tryst seems to have been accelerated by the lockdown. Nagarkar's Patreon account is a recent development that has gone relatively unnoticed (or deliberately ignored) in the world of Hindustani music but could well prove to be transformational. After Nagarkar, at least one other Hindustani musician, the sarod exponent Arnab Chakrabarty, has also joined Patreon. These small, personal, acts are worth talking about. They represent a pioneering attempt to seek an alternative to the arbitrary patronage networks that operate in Hindustani music and to the nepotistic and idiosyncratic attitudes these networks cultivate and symbolise.

Changing meanings of patronage

Traditional patronage in pre-independent India signified an abiding and comprehensive residency offered by royal courts with the aim of 'cultivating' the musician by affording him (rarely her) physical space, creative freedom and leisure. Mughal Delhi and later princely states like Rampur and Baroda offered socio-economic sustenance for many musicians in a number of ways such as land-grants, houses, monthly stipends, royal privileges and attendants, along with handsome rewards for successful recitals. Apart from this, travel and performance opportunities were encouraged, even enabled.

This feudal model came with its peculiarities. Patrons could be capricious and whimsical, and music had to be suited to their tastes. For instance, Ustad Alladiya Khan's voice succumbed to prolonged overuse from satiating the musical appetite of his learned patron, the Maharaja of Amletta. The inherent principles of exclusivity and financial logistics anyway limited the number of musicians who could secure such sponsorships. Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan in his memoirs notes an episode when numerous musicians approached the maharaja of Mysore, of whom only a few were retained for performances and the rest turned back with travel fare. Despite its

shortcomings, this feudal system of patronage allowed traditional musicians to thrive, even flourish, as evidenced in the constitution of *gharanas* during these relatively stable and even hereditary residencies.

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The Hindu revivalism of the 19th century led to the pioneering musicologists Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar seeking, in their own ways, a sanitisation and standardisation of the traditions of Hindustani music with the express aim to propagate and popularise the music among the masses. Their reformist ventures were premised on the imagined corruptions and contamination of what the Orientalist scholar William Jones described as the “pristine streams of Hindu music” at the hands of “illiterate and vulgar Muslim *ustads*.” The mythologised ancient ‘Hindu’ provenance for Hindustani music went in hand with a new imaginary of its ownership as ‘national treasure’. This portrayal of traditional musicians as ignorant, and of their teaching methods as primitive divested them of their authority to represent or articulate their own art. Instead, the new vocabulary of nationalism thrust upon them the moral responsibility to indemnify against further depredations by parting with their traditional knowledge for the larger ‘national cause’. This burden has trailed into current musical common-sense as *sangeet seva*, where the musician is seen much more as a custodian than an ‘owner’ of their music. This changing meaning of ownership has seeped into contemporary musical common sense and refracts the way patronage operates.

A tripartite patronage pattern evolved in independent India, each with its own set of limitations. These multiple patronage sources operate through designated intermediaries: bureaucrats, sales-agents and organisers.

Besides, they spawned a unique class of musicophiliacs⁰¹, who begin to act with a degree of mock-suzerainty as self-appointed sentries of taste and gatekeepers of opportunity. The state, through institutions like the All India Radio, became the largest employer of musicians, offering a monthly salary against highly unilateral contracts. These rigid contracts severely curbed musicians’ creative and professional freedom, and boxed them into a clerical regimen that limited their repertoire. For instance, B.V. Keskar, a passionate Hindustani music lover who became information and broadcasting minister between 1952 and 1962, infamously banned the use of the harmonium in AIR broadcasts. He also held that AIR could not possibly broadcast musicians like Kesarbai Kerkar or Omkarnath Thakur because of their high fees.

Then, there were the cultural societies and music clubs — sometimes subscription based — that focused on organising soirees and providing an audience. Most of these clubs depend completely on an informal system of recommendations by known musicophiliacs for selecting artistes. Most media outlets too did not have any set criteria for choosing their music critics, and to be a music lover was, and is still, a sufficient qualification. The third source of patronage was the buoyant cassette culture that opened up the market for Hindustani music, but driven as it was by sales prospects, this simultaneously brought Hindustani music into an unequal competition with more digestible and popular forms of music. Corporate sponsorships began to oxygenate the musical landscape, but continue to remain largely unreliable, inadequate, and unstable. We can find crucial, rigorously collated information and analysis on all these various sources of patronage in Aneesh Pradhan’s excellent book, *Chasing the Raag Dream*.

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As intermediaries became more influential, patronage became increasingly transactional, measurable and even, in the case of high-profile musicians, negotiable. In exchange for entry into the social 'inner-circles' of musical celebrities, these intermediaries helped perpetuate hierarchies and status quos. This gatekeeping has long de-eded the general listeners of any sense of responsibility towards the tradition, by limiting their role to merely arriving for the concert. In cities like Delhi, most Hindustani music concerts are ticket-free in the hope of incentivising greater attendance. Despite benign intentions, this strategy hardly yields envisioned results. For example, Spic Macay concerts of even some well-known musicians often fail, embarrassingly, to fill even classroom-sized venues. For the intermediaries, the general audiences are no more than seat-fillers with dangerously loud mobile phones: their throngs at celebrity concerts scoffed at, their chronic absenteeism from the critically acclaimed decried.

Patreon and participative patronage

Indeed, after independence the very meaning of the word 'patronage' changed, to signify any monetary exchange: remuneration paid for tuition, artist's fee for recitals, monthly salary, even the cost of a cassette or a concert-ticket. Such bracketing conceitedly retains the moral largesse implied in the appellation, as well as laps up the concomitant cultural capital. As patronage becomes more market-driven, musical labour has become part of a transactional economy. Instead of being directly monetised, it became a subject for creating legends around the lives of musicians and an important ingredient in the packaging of the 'celebrity'.

A certain coyness always accompanies the money question when it is put to what is deemed as an ancient, spiritual and 'national' tradition. Nagarkar's call against free concerts, for instance, has been dismissed without engagement by a section of these intermediaries. In emphasising the hard practicalities of making music and making a life through making music, against the highbrow rhetoric of its greatness, there is an important recognition implied in these musicians joining Patreon: that Hindustani music, at best constitutes *a subculture*, a formidable subculture to be sure, in the musical life of the nation. The relevance and sway of the intermediaries is set to diminish if the musicians and their listeners can form a direct relationship.

How exactly does Patreon portend to be a gamechanger in the world of Hindustani music? And why should caution guide our enthusiasm? Because of its open-ended usability, it is best to look at Patreon through the examples at hand. Both Samarth Nagarkar and Arnab Chakrabarty offer five tiers of subscription on their accounts, ranging between a monthly fee of \$5 and \$95. One can pledge an altogether different one-time or recurring donation. Each progressive level offers more 'benefits', which in these two cases, seem to compound in broadly three ways: *number*, *type* and *access*.

Apart from the simple logic of numbers, it is noteworthy how the 'type' of benefits evolves with each successive level. For example, as we move from the first to the second tier, both the musicians offer a 'guided listening session' — a hot favourite with beginner and advanced listeners alike — over and above the vodcasts and playlist recommendations of the first tier.

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Yet more interesting is how successive tiers are incentivised by enabling enhanced *access* for the patrons into a 'zone of familiar contact' with the musician. A nostalgia of old-style socialisation is redolent here, when access to the music and the musician were coeval. For instance, both the musicians offer the rare opportunity for the upper-tier subscribers, to sit-in on their *riyaz* sessions, a particularly intimate space where only the most exclusive friends and students of the musician may get invited. An exciting advantage on Nagarkar's page is the opportunity for the highest-tier patrons to invite him to their homes for a private concert, after ten consecutive months of subscription. This is again reminiscent of happier instances of patron-musician relationships in post-independence India, where musicians would look forward to performing in private soirees for discerning, invited listeners and a collective, low-key patronage would keep the music and the musician going.

Yet, as a friend in a cynical moment worried: is this venture set to make Glenn Goulds out of Hindustani musicians, who abjure live 'real', music altogether? This is worth thinking about when, for instance, Chakrabarty, in a personal interview, says:

For whatever reason, the concert "circuit" has never sustained me. I am, at the very best, an outlying planet as far as that "system" is concerned. I play the concerts that I find agreeable in terms of the people and the money. This means, in real terms that teaching currently accounts for 71% of my income, and concerts only 29%.

Chakrabarty's words would ring true for many Hindustani musicians. The digital musicscape has only grown with the ever-expanding presence of the phone camera and high-speed internet, creating further opportunities for live recitals and widening their reach. YouTube channels like *First Edition Arts* have found an excellent symbiosis between live music and its digital broadcast. It is safe to assume that the aim or the effect of Patreon will not be to *replace* live music. In fact, well managed complementarity and osmosis between these various avenues seems like the most desirable and effective way forward.

There are more reasonable causes for caution. Patreon assumes a certain minimum level of socio-cultural capital in the musician's keeping, including accomplished language skills (English, if they want to attract an international pool), and familiarity with a constantly updating technological and digital ecosystem. How musicians make their Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Patreon accounts correspond may well determine the reception of their music and perception of their personality. A similar social capital is indispensable for patrons too. Such contingencies automatically eliminate a large number of musicians and listeners.

Further and more importantly, the platform is vulnerable to the same market forces that it appears to resist. The monthly package promised in lieu of the subscription fee could well become an end unto itself, rendering the musician-patron equation into something as directly transactional as any petty purchase in the market. On the other extreme, the very nature of the platform that depends on attracting — and maintaining — more patrons may very well shift the attention of the musicians from the music to gimmicky marketing strategies.

It is for the musicians and the patrons to introspect, resolve and communicate with clarity, their expectations and objectives from themselves and the other in joining such a platform. It would help if the patrons hold the relationship delicately, and not with a crude understanding of music as just another commodity. How will a patron react if, for instance, their musician misses a monthly target, or two? Will they be considerate and amiable in such a scenario or will they promptly unsubscribe?

At the musicians' end, there is cause for judicious optimism. Patreon's motto — 'Creators, Get Paid!' — is being tweaked by both Nagarkar and Chakrabarty who seem to want to maintain a horizontal and munificent relationship with their subscriber-patrons. Chakrabarty says:

I want to ensure that the lower levels should also give subscribers great substance. Patreon is, after all, a market-driven platform and that is not always such a great

thing. There are many very involved music lovers the size of whose wallets don't correspond to the depth of their immersion.

The most important aim of the musician on Patreon is finding a sustainable and dependable alternative income, which frees them from the vicissitudes of an unreliable market, arbitrary intermediaries, and assorted motivations of audiences, *without* sacrificing the seriousness or rigour of their music. How Patreon and such networks are exploited successfully depends on the inventiveness and acumen of the musicians. In Nagarkar's and Chakrabarty's examples, there is an implicit attempt to redirect the focus of patronage back onto musical labour. It is for such "outlying planets" of the Hindustani tradition for whom a Patreon-like arrangement should prove to be most effective.

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Footnotes:

1. I derive this term only in a limited sense from Tejaswini Niranjana's *Musicophilia in Mumbai, 2020*, where the term is used and delineated much more comprehensively.