T M Krishna’s duet with transgender Jogappas

Carnatic vocalist collaborates with a group of transgender folk musicians and describes the music as a baby step towards changing caste and gender perceptions.

A concert titled ‘Performing the Periphery’ by Carnatic singer T M Krishna and the transgender Jogappas was an eye opener of sorts.

As Krishna put it, it was a conversation of multiple sexualities and multiple cultures through multiple music. Part of a National Institute of Advanced Studies and Exeter...
University initiative, the event was held in Bengaluru on April 11 in collaboration with Solidarity Foundation.

The Jogappas comprised Siddappa and Dawal Saheb (Bibi Saheb) of Bijapur district and Laxman Bhonsle, Sagar Bhaskar and Rakhi (Satish) Pasare from Belgaum district (Marathi).

The evening began with Siddappa and team rendering ‘Eshtu vodurali amba ninaga, eshtu koogaaali Renuka nimaga’ meaning ‘How much do I call out for you, dear mother! How loudly do I beseech you to come Renuka mother.’ This song was then sung in Marathi.

To this, Krishna responded with a classical composition titled, ‘O Jagadamba’, composed by Shyama Shastri. The evening had nine performances, all of them structured as conversations.

Other highlights were a duet on god Vittala, sung by Siddappa and T M Krishna, and ‘Baara tangi’, urging people to come along to the temple to sing the praises of Yellama.

The Jogappas are apprehensive about performing before an urban audience, but feel reassured when they get applauded. Siddappa from Bijapur, leader of the group, picked up the art from her forefathers.

“This is the only occupation we know. We make a living by performing at temples and seeking alms. This is our only means of livelihood,” she says. Families accept them because they bring home some money, but Dawal Saheb, another Jogappa, says they are sometimes humiliated in public. “People call us all kinds of names and tease us. But the more educated and knowledgeable give us alms and sometimes food as well. We meet all kinds of people,” Dawal says.

Public performances such as this are helping. “They give us the confidence to come out and face people. The public has begun to understand who we are and why we are in this profession,” observes Sagar Bhaskar from Belgaum.

The performance drew huge applause from the audience.

Accompanying Krishna was Akkarai Subhalakshmi on the violin, Chandrasekar Sharma on the ghatam and B S Purushotham on the khanjira.
Who are the Jogappas?

Jogappas are a transgender community who identify themselves as people who have been ‘touched’, cursed, or possessed by goddess Yellamma. They are specific to regions of north Karnataka, south Maharashtra, and west Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. They become associated with the goddess Yellamma through the act of ‘dedication’, a ceremony that marks their official transition by the tying of the ‘muthu’. The muthu (a string of red and white beads) is a signifier of their marital status. Yellamma is central to their lives and everything they do is linked to the goddess in some way. Their performances usually include at least three instruments: chowdiki, suttagi, and tala.

(From left) Laxman, Siddappa, Dawal Saheb, Rakhi and Sagar are from the Jogappa community.

‘The notion of purity is a notion of power’

Maverick classical vocalist T M Krishna says he is collaborating with the Jogappas to shatter the exclusivity and elitism attached to his own art.

What inspired you to collaborate with the Jogappas?
It comes from a deep feeling that we all need to have conversations and have complicated conversations. We need to find ways to build bridges and listen to each other. The fact is that there are people in the margins and people with privilege. But that reality is not always an accident because social structures marginalise people and keep them in the corner. Therefore, it is important to find ways to communicate and communicate with equality and not communicate with condescension. If anything, by
this, we are helping ourselves become more sensitive as human beings. Whatever I have done comes from that little feeling that we have to change.

**What do you wish for the Jogappas?**

I have been interacting with them for three or four years. It has been a great learning process for me because I came with my own preconceived notions and my own baggage. I wish we didn’t have to talk about their sexuality. I wish their sexuality is as normal as mine and yours. It is irrelevant. We have to get there and that’s not a short conversation. It is a long, generational conversation and we are taking baby steps in that direction.

**Is this concert an attempt in that direction?**

Yes. We are very conscious about how we have curated the concert, how we have the discussions, what we sing and how we are seated -- everything is completely conscious of the inherent inequality that exists in us. Can people who come to our concert go back feeling emotionally different? The fact is that we all have judgements and preconceived notions. Intellectually, it sounds fine but emotionally we all have our discomforts. So therefore change is in feeling and experience. Change is not in understanding and that’s why art plays such an important role. It can really enable not just the Jogappas but the whole transgender conversation to a larger discourse.

**How do you handle criticism and allegations that you are diluting Carnatic music?**

I have drawn criticism for a lot of things. I have, in the past, been criticised for diluting Carnatic music, not specifically with this collaboration, but in general. These criticisms are silly. People who talk about pure Carnatic music don’t realise that it never really existed. Pure is something that people who have control like to call it, because if you have control over something then you own it and you can judge somebody. The notion of purity is a notion of power.

**How did your collaboration with the Jogappas change your perception?**

The collaboration has dramatically changed my perception of art, culture, identity, ownership. I am a far more fluid human being than what I was a couple of decades ago.

**What did you wish to convey through your performance with the Jogappas?**
Our performance was not fusion. We attempted to keep the distinctiveness and keep conversations going. Therefore, either through context, content, melody and rhythm, we seeped into each other’s sounds and went away from each other’s sounds. And sometimes we are independent. Through compositions you will see similarities, similar things being said and tunes being played. We also improvise from a tune that they (Jogappas) sing.