

# Democratizing Art: Examining T.M. Krishna's Engagement with Marginalized Communities

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## Abstract

Art has always been a powerful means for communities to share their stories and address challenges they face. Creative traditions are used to question inequality, break barriers, and bring people together. Art helps reimagine what communities can be and do— that embrace diversity, inclusivity, and shared purpose while inspiring change and fostering understanding. One such endeavour in this direction that this research explores is T.M. Krishna's groundbreaking work with marginalized communities, specifically his engagement with the Jogappas, a transgender folk tradition, and the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha, a festival that promotes inclusivity.

T.M. Krishna is a renowned Carnatic vocalist, writer, and activist. This research offers a critical lens on T.M. Krishna's philosophy of cultural inclusivity and its broader implications for decolonizing art and promoting social equity embedded in India's cultural practices. The study employs Discourse Analysis to unpack Krishna's rhetoric, media narratives, and performances, highlighting the transformative power of his artistic interventions. His initiatives showcase a dual strategy: collaborative co-creation with communities, such as the Jogappas, and building platforms for traditionally marginalized groups. This approach aims to democratize art forms, broadening access and representation in spaces historically reserved for elites.

Framing the study within the lenses of Intersectionality and Postcolonial Theory, it critically examines the entangled influences of caste, class, and gender in maintaining cultural hierarchies. The focus lies on Krishna's efforts to challenge and disrupt these structures through art. By engaging with marginalized communities as equal collaborators rather than mere subjects of representation, he redefines the relationship between art and social justice. Krishna's work not only enriches the artistic realm but also advances the discourse on social equity, pushing boundaries in both cultural and societal spheres.

**Key words:** Inclusivity, diversity, collaboration, engagement, hierarchies

## Introduction

Art, at its core, should transcend social and hierarchical barriers, becoming a space where all communities have the agency to create, participate, and redefine traditions. However, in the Indian context, historical intersections of caste, class, and colonial legacies have often restricted access to certain forms of artistic expression, particularly in the labelled classical traditions like Carnatic music. These structural inequalities have reinforced exclusivity rather than inclusivity, making it difficult for marginalized voices—Dalit, Adivasi, working-class, and non-Brahmin artists—to gain recognition and representation within mainstream cultural discourse.

To truly democratize the arts, these restrictions must be dismantled, creating opportunities for historically excluded communities to participate as equal contributors, rather than as passive audiences. Carnatic music is a classical tradition of South India, rooted in a highly codified system, characterized by intricate compositional structures, improvisational

depth, and a strong connection to devotional and artistic expressions. The form, in particular, has long been associated with Brahminical traditions, shaping the narratives of who is allowed to learn, perform, and innovate within the art form. This exclusivity has led to cultural gatekeeping, making the space less accessible to those outside dominant caste structures.

At the center of contemporary efforts to challenge these norms is T.M. Krishna, a musician who has been vocal about the need for equity in classical arts. Through his activism and artistic collaborations, Krishna has advocated for the participation of underrepresented artists, reimagining the role of Carnatic music in modern society. He has sought to remove barriers by performing outside traditional *sabha* structures. A *sabha* is a formal concert organization in the Carnatic music tradition, often associated with select patronage and exclusiveness. Krishna has actively challenged these structures by performing outside traditional *sabhas*, collaborating with artists from diverse caste and transgender communities. Through these efforts, he questions rigid social hierarchies that restrict creative expression, advocating for a democratic artistic space.

### **The driving force**

TM Krishna is a Carnatic vocalist, writer, and activist whose work fundamentally challenges the conventions of classical art. His influence extends far beyond music, delving into social and political discourse, where he frequently engages with debates on caste, privilege, and inclusivity in artistic spaces. Through both musical experimentation and intellectual critique, Krishna seeks to dismantle the exclusivity embedded within Carnatic traditions, reimagining them within a broader, more democratic cultural landscape. From questioning the purity of Carnatic music to reconfiguring the Carnatic *katcheri* format to shunning the renowned December Chennai music season, Krishna has always challenged the existing norms that have been followed without requisite rationale.

Krishna's critique of Carnatic music frames it as a tradition deeply shaped by caste-based exclusivity and elite patronage. Through numerous essays, articles, and much-debated public discourses, he advocates for a radical shift in how art is created, performed, and experienced, urging a departure from rigid traditions. His literary works examine the structural inequalities embedded within the art form.

In his first book, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story*, Krishna interrogates the very framework of Carnatic music, questioning its rigid systems of pedagogy, performance, and reception. He challenges the idea of "purity" in the classical tradition, arguing that music should not be confined to a singular caste, community, or geographic identity. He examines how exclusivity has been perpetuated through institutional barriers, including *sabhas* (concert organizations), patronage networks, and aesthetic standards, all of which limit participation.

His work on the south Indian percussion instrument Mridangam, *Sebastian & Sons: A brief history of Mridangam Makers*, is a classic example of his nature of inquiry. While the mridangam is central to the classical stage, its makers, many of whom come from Dalit Christian communities, remain marginalized within the Carnatic music ecosystem. Despite their expertise, these artisans are rarely acknowledged, with credit typically going to the musicians who play the instrument. The book also examines the intersections of caste and privilege in Carnatic music, questioning why the contributions of these makers are dismissed as mere labor rather than artistry.

*Reshaping Art* by Krishna critiques the existing artistic practices, the dissemination of Carnatic music, and advocates for a more democratic, socially engaged approach to creativity. His *The Spirit of Enquiry: Notes of Dissent* is a collection of essays that critically explore the relationships between art, politics, secularism, and social inequalities. He challenges dominant narratives surrounding Carnatic music, caste structures, and national

identity, questioning who holds authority over cultural traditions. Through his critique, Krishna underscores the transformative potential of art in shaping public discourse.

His writings encourage readers to reconsider the ownership and accessibility of artistic spaces, advocating for their reclamation as tools for social change. Through interviews and historical analysis, Krishna brings their stories to the forefront, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for a more complete recognition of their role in shaping the music we hear today. He examines how caste, class, and gender influence access to artistic spaces, urging a redefinition of tradition that prioritizes inclusivity and transformation.

Beyond theoretical critique, Krishna actively disrupts Carnatic norms by bringing his music to unconventional spaces and initiating unique projects that challenge the boundaries of classical performance. His renditions of Periyar-inspired songs and Perumal Murugan's literary works that convey present-day social issues stand in stark contrast to the traditional devotional repertoire, reinforcing his artistic rebellion. Each of these interventions sparks critical conversations on accessibility, representation, and status in the arts, questioning who gets to define artistic legitimacy. His efforts have earned him recognition, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award, underscoring his contributions to social change through art.

Through his Sumanasa Foundation, Krishna has created platforms for artists from marginalized backgrounds, fostering culturally vibrant avenues that encourage artistic dialogue beyond caste constraints. Yet, his approach is not without contradictions, raising questions about whether his disruptions unaffectedly dismantle artistic hierarchies or inadvertently reinscribe the authority of the reformer. This paper critically examines these tensions, exploring how Krishna engages with caste and tradition while redefining the role of art in shaping societal discourse.

### **Case study 1: Engagement with the Jogappas**

The first case study is Krishna's work with the Jogappas, a transsexual musical community from the border regions of Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Telangana (TM Krishna, n.d.). The Jogappas are intensely devoted to Goddess Yellamma, usually from backward classes of the caste-based obstacles and express their devotion and their daily rituals, social structures through intense, rhythmic singing, primarily in Marathi and Kannada (The Times of India, 2021). Despite the richness of their musical tradition, the Jogappas remain at the periphery of mainstream cultural spaces due to entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. Krishna's engagement with them is not merely a musical collaboration; it is a deliberate challenge to societal norms and the rigid classifications of art, identity, and belonging. Instead of a predictable fusion, medley, or even a jugalbandi, Krishna's approach allows both musical traditions to retain their distinct identities while existing in dialogue—an artistic negotiation that resists homogenization (First Edition Arts Channel, 2017).

The performances are not merely shows of displays of musical styles, but they also educate viewers and listeners about the art forms, artists, and the social history (Viswesh, 2016). The concerts convey a powerful message of musical equality, seamlessly blending the original compositions of the Jogappas from Nipani and Vijayapura—devotional praises of Goddess Yellamma—with the intricate expressions of Carnatic music (The Better India, n.d.). His approach maintains the aesthetic integrity of both forms while questioning the inequalities in how they are perceived in terms of caste, gender, and the very notions of classical and folk (TM Krishna, n.d.). His performances with the Jogappas have demonstrated that musical excellence is not limited to formalised training but can emerge from deeply rooted oral traditions.

“The Jogappas are apprehensive about performing before an urban audience, but feel reassured when they get applauded.” (George, 2019)

This statement brings a lot to the forefront. In addition, the Jogappas who face a range of stigma from the various people they encounter, feel confident in their profession, which is performance. From the temple and rural settings to performing at a mainstream concert space, it is their art that comes to the forefront rather than their status. By bringing the Jogappas' devotional singing into mainstream spaces, Krishna challenges rigid notions of gender and caste within the arts. This partnership disrupts the historical marginalization of transgender communities, offering them visibility and recognition beyond their traditional roles.

The collaboration fosters a dialogue about inclusion, questioning societal discomfort with gender fluidity. It highlights the Jogappas' artistry not as an exoticized spectacle but as a legitimate and deeply rooted musical tradition. By juxtaposing Carnatic music with Jogappa singing, Krishna underscores the artificial hierarchies that often separate classical and folk forms, mirroring the broader societal divisions between privileged and marginalized identities. The Jogappas, through these performances, reclaim their space as artists rather than merely devotees, reinforcing the idea that gender identity and the nature of their art do not dictate legitimacy.

Additionally, this initiative has encouraged broader conversations about the intersection of gender, caste, and cultural heritage. It inspires the audiences to reconsider their biases and engage with transgender identities beyond token visibility. It brings in a familiarity with the various practices hitherto relegated.

### **Case study 2: Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha**

Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha is a unique community festival that celebrates art, non-discrimination, and cultural exchange. Conceived by TM Krishna and environmental activist Nityanand Jayaraman, with its first edition in 2015, the festival aims to break barriers in artistic spaces by bringing diverse performances to unconventional settings, such as fishing villages. The inaugural edition, hosted in Urur and Olcott near Besant Nagar, Chennai, postulated the idea to create an inclusive space where Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam, Parai Attam, Villu Paatu, and other art forms could coexist without rigid classifications.

Over the years, the festival has grown beyond performance to become a catalyst for social dialogue, environmental awareness, and cultural exchange. It has been an entirely crowd-funded model that underscores its grassroots essence, ensuring accessibility while maintaining a strong community-driven ethos. After a hiatus, the 2024 edition returned celebrating the resilience and vibrancy of the fishing community through performances that honored their traditions and struggles. The latest edition, for instance had performances centered on the sea reflect themes of livelihood, survival, and identity—especially for fishing communities who depend on it daily (Adyar Times, 2024).

Performances like TM Krishna's *Poromboke Paadal* that came up as part of the venture, highlight important themes such as land rights, shared spaces, and protecting the environment. *Chennai Poromboke Paadal* is an artistic and environmental campaign reclaiming the word *Poromboke*, which originally referred to shared community resources but now carries a negative connotation. The song challenges traditional notions of high art, proving that classical music can engage with contemporary social issues in a language accessible to all.

Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha, now renamed as the Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha has made a meaningful difference in the local fishing community by strengthening cultural pride, sparking conversations about social issues, and raising awareness about conservation concerns. The festival has brought attention to fishing villages that are struggling with urban expansion and pollution. The festival connects to Chennai's coastal conservation efforts, showing how art can be a powerful tool for activism (Srinivasan & Turner, 2022).

The festival serves as a vibrant representation of Tamil culture, moving beyond the conventional music season and its sabha-centric traditions. Rather than offering a singular

narrative, events like this embrace a more nuanced outlook (Jayaraman, 2018). It went beyond the Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam branding for Chennai, showcasing the rich diversity and authenticity of the region's cultural landscape.

"We came up with the idea of creating a space where people from different walks of life, from different sections of the society and with different cultural backgrounds can come to a fishing village in Chennai, where they can witness various art forms in an equalising space" – TM Krishna (Gowtham, 2018).

The notion of expanding performance spaces and embracing diverse art forms challenges traditional ideas of where and how art is experienced. What makes this approach particularly compelling is the way Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha redefines the village—not as a passive venue but as an active curator, shaping the artistic engagement rather than merely hosting it. This shift ensures that the community is not just a backdrop for elite-driven comprehensiveness but a key participant in reshaping narratives around art and accessibility.

The initial years had their share of struggles with the insider-outsider and status issues and also as to what was represented on stage. It is an ever-evolving festival with big names pitching in and the Vizha itself expanding its horizons (Krishna, 2018). The festival's extension beyond its original site—bringing Carnatic music to buses, Bharatanatyam to railway stations, and rap to public spaces—disrupts rigid cultural expectations. These unconventional performance sites strip away the exclusivity often associated with classical arts, creating spontaneous, unscripted interactions between artists and audiences. Without formal seating arrangements, designated stages, or predetermined audience demographics, the performances become part of everyday life, blurring the boundaries between artist and spectator.

This model not only democratizes creative platforms but also emphasizes how art thrives in fluid, interactive settings rather than rigid institutional frameworks. By embedding performances within the rhythm of daily movement—whether on a train platform or a city bus—it fosters a deeper, more organic engagement with artistic expression, allowing people to experience art beyond curated cultural events and institutionalized festivals.

### **Contributions, Challenges and Criticisms**

Both the case studies here disrupt traditional notions of "high" and "low" art, bringing disenfranchised voices into mainstream artistic spaces. There is an engagement with the community in partnership be it the fishing community or the Jogappas. While the Jogappa collaboration addresses gender and caste-based exclusion, the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha focuses on geographical marginalization (fishing communities facing urbanization).

While these large-scale events are significant, Krishna's close involvement with other initiatives also actively supports art for all and inclusion of sidelined artists who have been long ignored of sorts, ensuring their voices and traditions find broader recognition. Be it *Kalaikoodam*, a cross-community environment where art is accessible to all, the *Grants Project* (with faith, trust, rejection, embrace and belonging as its key operative words) that offers funding and support to artists from varied backgrounds to work in a safe space, provides artistic freedom and equivalent weightage to all (Sumanasa Foundation, n.d.). The attempts through *Swanubhava*, promote arts appreciation and student engagement in performing traditions. It fosters direct interaction between young learners and established artists, breaking institutional barriers. The festival encourages respect for diverse art forms while cultivating future generations (from all walks of life) of performers and enthusiasts.

Nevertheless, his work is not devoid of disapproval. The criticism surrounding Krishna stems from the intersection of his personal beliefs, artistic choices, public statements, and the initiatives he leads. The debate surrounding his receipt of the prestigious 'Sangita Kalanidhi' award from the Madras Music Academy underscores both the impact of his work and the spectrum of critique and support it has generated. The Sangita Kalanidhi Award is one of the

most prestigious honors in Carnatic music, conferred annually by the Madras Music Academy, an august body. The recipients also receive the MS Subbulakshmi Award, instituted by yet another prestigious newspaper, The Hindu. When Krishna was announced as its recipient in 2024, it was challenged due to his outspoken critiques of caste hierarchies in Carnatic music and his past remarks on MS Subbulakshmi, which some viewed as contentious. (Meduri, 2025a). The controversy surrounding the award named after MS Subbulakshmi involves a legal challenge, objections from Subbulakshmi's grandson, and backlash from parts of the Carnatic music community. Krishna got labelled as anti-Hindu, linking their opposition to his vocal stance on caste and social reform. This storm underscores deeper tensions within Carnatic music, particularly regarding caste, tradition, and the role of activism in shaping its evolving identity. His advocacy and reformist efforts are deeply intertwined with his individual ideology, making it difficult to separate his personal stance from the broader cultural interventions he is involved with.

Examining his works discussed as case studies, Krishna's collaboration with the Jogappas, a marginalized transgender community, aims to bring their voices into well-known artistic spaces. Drawing from Intersectionality, which examines overlapping systems of oppression, raises the concern whether this actually empowers them or just makes them part of someone else's idea of inclusion (Al-Faham, Davis, & Ernst, 2019). While Krishna's efforts help them gain visibility, it still places him in a position of control. In the narrative, the agency of the Jogappas remains secondary to the intervention of an established artist rather than them being completely independent.

The key argument is whether this collaboration lets the Jogappas empower, shape their own artistic and social futures, or if they still follow existing power structures where they are included in the elitist spaces but not fully in charge. A broader concern is whether this initiative is just a temporary showcase and a shot at visibility or if it will bring lasting social and economic improvements to the Jogappas, making it crucial to assess the long-term impact. Additionally, a deeper study of the Jogappas' traditions and customs is necessary to understand whether their engagement with Carnatic musicians alters the context of their music and its cultural significance.

Similarly, the second case study- Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha challenges caste and class barriers by bringing Carnatic music into a fishing village. Condemnation surrounding the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha has often centered on how it is framed in media narratives for instance, it's portrayal as an effort to bring exclusive classical music to the masses, reinforcing the idea that Carnatic music is inherently superior and must be introduced to minoritised publics (Jayaraman, 2018). This perspective risks perpetuating hierarchical notions of cultural legitimacy rather than recognizing the intrinsic value of diverse artistic traditions.

While the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha encourages cultural exchange, it has been criticized for its curatorial choices as to who gets to perform and whose voices are highlighted. These critiques highlight broader tensions in artistic inclusivity and representation, questioning whether such initiatives truly redistribute artistic power or simply repackage inclusivity within existing frameworks. The challenge lies in ensuring that underprivileged communities are not just included but are central to defining and leading the artistic conversation.

Krishna's emphasis on non-Brahmin musical histories aligns with postcolonial critiques of cultural elitism. From a postcolonial lens, with decentralizing authority as a chief prerogative, Krishna's work aims to break Brahminical dominance in Carnatic music, but it is still tied to the very systems it challenges. While his rejection of sabhas and push for all-encompassing disrupt the traditional chain of command, his advantaged position itself raises questions about who truly leads the movement for change.

Intersectionality prompts critical inquiries into how overlapping systems of power and oppression shape individual and collective experiences. Does Krishna's work redistribute

artistic agency, or does it still operate within existing power structures? Are marginalized artists given autonomy, or are they framed within narratives shaped by elite reformers? How does caste entitlement influence the reception of his activism?

Krishna has openly acknowledged his privilege in many discussions, expressing a deep awareness of how it shapes both his role and the reception of his activism. This self-awareness gives him the ability to critically navigate power structures, but it also highlights the paradox of reform—whether his presence unintentionally reaffirms existing frameworks rather than dismantling them. While his interventions have undeniably created space for marginalized artists, the extent to which these efforts redistribute artistic agency remains a subject of debate. Without meaningful redistribution of artistic and institutional power, the movement toward inclusivity risks becoming an extension of existing paradigms rather than a fundamental departure from them.

It is important to recognize that Krishna does not reject conventional works. Rather, he engages with a traditional Carnatic music composition on Ganesha as passionately as he does with contemporary works addressing social issues, such as Perumal Murugan's piece on manual scavenging. His approach does not exclude or diminish any form of art or community but instead seeks to elevate them all to a shared, equitable platform through his unique vision. One of the most compelling aspects of his approach is that he never asserts his ideas as infallible nor presents his ideologies as absolute truths. He is intrinsically a questioner, a seeker who is working in his unique way.

Krishna's work extends beyond music into broader political resistance. His critique of Hindutva nationalism, caste-based orthodoxy, and elitist cultural institutions situates him within a tradition of dissenting artists. His engagement with Periyarist thought reflects his ideological alignment with anti-caste movements, reinforcing the intersection between artistic practice and social justice.

His engagement with the subaltern and his critique of established class systems have led to accusations that he instrumentalizes art for activism rather than preserving its traditional purity, which itself is a debatable notion. However, his approach challenges the belief that classical arts exist in isolation from political and social structures. By openly addressing caste, advantageous position, and accessibility, Krishna positions Carnatic music as a medium for reflection and reform rather than mere aesthetic pursuit. A compelling example of this is a composition he performed during the highly debated award controversy at the Madras Music Academy. Through this piece, he seemingly responded to his critics by invoking the theme of freedom of speech by Perumal Murugan, the very issue at the heart of the dispute. His rendition was criticized as "performative wokeism," with some arguing that he strategically used the song to influence public sentiment in his favor, framing his approach as an amplified exercise in identity politics (Meduri, 2025b).

In due course, the tension lies in whether his interventions expand the scope of Carnatic music or whether they shift focus from the musical traditions to ideological advocacy. His self-awareness and explicit engagement with these debates reflect his commitment to questioning existing frameworks while navigating the delicate balance between tradition and transformation.

### **Unfinished debates**

TM Krishna's work is a critical intervention in the democratization of art within the Indian milieu. His efforts challenge the elitism of Carnatic music, a tradition historically monopolized by upper-caste practitioners, and open spaces for underrepresented groups to participate in shaping cultural narratives. His advocacy aligns with the broader need to decentralize artistic knowledge, ensuring that classical forms are accessible not just to privileged groups but to all people, including those who have been historically excluded.

At the core of Krishna's interventions is the belief that art must evolve beyond rigid traditions to reflect contemporary social realities. His critiques do not seek to erase classical traditions but rather recontextualize them within a broader, more inclusive framework. By questioning rooted hierarchies and promoting alternative histories, he probes for a transformation in how music is taught, performed, and experienced—one that values participation over gatekeeping and equity over elitism.

Krishna's initiatives, including his collaborations with fisherfolk musicians and Dalit artists, reimagine classical traditions by integrating subaltern musical knowledge. This disrupts the engrained belief that artistic purity is preserved through exclusivity. Instead, his approach reflects the intersectional realities of Indian society, where caste, class, and geography shape artistic access. By challenging Brahminical control over Carnatic music, Krishna proposes a postcolonial deconstruction of artistic hierarchy, reclaiming space for those silenced or sidelined.

Moreover, Krishna's work extends beyond performance—his writings, speeches, and activism foreground the politics of access in creative spaces. His engagement with Periyarist thought and critiques of Hindutva nationalism further situate him within a tradition of cultural resistance. His work offers an alternative blueprint for an inclusive artistic future, where the democratization of art is not just symbolic but structurally embedded within performance, pedagogy, and institutional frameworks.

Krishna's influence on Indian classical music is undeniable. However, the paradox of his activism remains: can a figure entrenched in the very system he critiques ever truly dismantle it? His journey is one of constant negotiation between radical disruption and embedded entitlement, between cultural democratization and artistic hierarchy. His impact, though contentious, forces critical reflection on the role of art in shaping a more equitable society. The unresolved tensions within his work make him one of the most compelling—and polarizing—figures in contemporary Indian classical music. Krishna's approach is undeniably radical within the classical music world, but the long-term impact of his interventions depends on whether they lead to structural shifts rather than symbolic inclusion. Ultimately, Krishna's efforts remind us that art should be public, participatory, and collectively shaped, rather than dictated by historical privilege. A future where artistic spaces are open to all, not just the elite, can lead to a more vibrant, dynamic, and truly inclusive cultural landscape.

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