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Local Videshis: Westerners performing the role of music students in Varanasi, India

I am sitting behind a Western man in a concert of classical Indian music in Varanasi. He is constantly counting the beats and emphasising the patterns of music with his hand in a similar way to what one often sees Indian musicians and music lovers doing. I think the man must have been studying Indian music for a long time in order to have adopted such gestures. After the concert, I find out that he has been taking lessons only for a few weeks! (Field diary, March 2003)

In the anecdote above, the man clearly knew how to act out, that is, to play the role of a musician. Why did he do that?

A few hundred Westerners repeatedly spend their winters in Varanasi in northern India. Most of the Westerners study Indian classical music there. In this paper, I discuss how they perform their role as music students and I argue that being a Western music student in Varanasi requires constant performative acts. I define performance as acts of everyday life; one expresses and constructs one's identity by doing. Performing means doing, behaving and showing of a doing (Schechner 2002, 33); people 'not only do things, they try to show others what they are doing' (Turner 1987, 74). Moreover, man is a self-performing animal...in performing he reveals himself to himself (Turner 1987, 81). Another starting point for my paper is that the (performed) identity is closely connected to the location where the performances take place, and as an ancient Indian city, Varanasi is a very peculiar place for the Westerners to perform their identities.

This paper is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Varanasi for thirteen months in 2002-2003 (see Korpela 2009). During the fieldwork, I participated intensively in the everyday activities of the Westerners and kept a detailed field diary of my participant observation there. I also interviewed 44 Westerners who were staying in Varanasi for at least two months (most for longer) and who had been there for long periods before as well¹.

Who, Where and When?

Varanasi is a holy city of Hinduism with over a million inhabitants, situated on the banks of the river Ganges. It is a popular tourist destination but attracts also more permanent Western sojourners: there are Westerners who spend several months in Varanasi year after year. They come from Europe, Israel, Canada and Australia² amounting to 200-300 during the popular season that starts in October and ends in May³. Most of the Westerners in Varanasi are twenty to thirty-five years old but some are forty to fifty, with men forming the majority. Most of the Westerners are of middle class origin. In Varanasi, they live in the same houses year after year and have all the necessary household utensils there. Typically, the Westerners work for a few months in menial jobs or sell Indian textiles and handicrafts in markets and festivals in their countries of origin and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. For many, the lifestyle has lasted for years, even decades.

¹ In addition to the Westerners, I interviewed ten Indian people who were in close contact with the Westerners (landlords and music teachers).

² I refer to these people as 'Westerners' due to the fact that in Varanasi differences between various Western nationalities seem to disappear when opposed with the 'Indian other'.

³ The summer months are extremely hot and wet.

Most Westerners in Varanasi study classical Indian music⁴ and to a large extent, their daily life revolves around music. The music students usually take lessons several times a week and (try to) practice many hours a day. They all take lessons from private teachers, that is, they do not study in formal institutions. The Western men typically play instruments (*tabla*, *sitar*, *pakhavaj*, *santoor*, *shahnai*⁵, flute) whereas women usually sing or dance. On almost a daily basis, many men gather together to play music with friends, especially in the evenings. Usually, it means that drum players accompany those playing other instruments⁶. In addition to being useful practice for the music students, the occasions are important entertainment since other Westerners often listen to those who play. Music is therefore a central activity among the Westerners in Varanasi and many Westerners there are genuinely interested and enthusiastic about it. Music is, however, much more than that: performing the role of a music student is connected to one's identity, to one's role among the other Westerners in Varanasi as well as to the location where the performances take place.

Playing the Role of a Music Student

Visible Signs

When the Westerners play together, their music studies obviously become audible but being a music student often becomes also visible.

First of all, those playing small instruments, such as the flute or *shahnai*, often carry them along at all times. The *sitar* is one of the most common instruments among the Western male music students in Varanasi but one can obviously not carry around such a large and fragile instrument; instead, at least one sitar student occasionally wears a *mizrab*⁷ on his fingertip. When carrying one's instrument along, one is noticeably ready to play with friends at any time. However, by such actions, one's role as a music student becomes visible as well. Music is visible also in the rooms of many music students where there are many cassettes, discs and instruments. Obviously music students have such things because they are interested in the music, but at the same time the goods convey a certain message to others: one is a music student. Some Westerners also have self-painted posters of different versions of musical scales on their walls. The primary purpose of such posters is to help them to memorise the scales but at the same time, they present an image of a committed music student to whoever visits the room.

Attending concerts is also important. Obviously, most of the time the music students genuinely want to go to concerts but sometimes attending concerts becomes a duty, and one has to have a good excuse for not attending a particular concert; otherwise his/her interest in music is questioned. Many also record concerts for their private use. The Western music students also use Hindi expressions that are popular among the Varanasi musicians even if their knowledge of Hindi may otherwise be limited to a few simple sentences. Many Western men also dress like local musicians do, that is, in cotton *kurta* pyjama suits⁸, although the majority of local men dress in regular pants and shirts.

Why do such visible signs become so important? First of all, they help to evoke and manifest one's identity as a music student. I argue that this is particularly significant among the Westerners

⁴ Some do yoga, meditation or charity work but the majority studies music.

⁵ *Tabla*: a pair of drums, *sitar*: a string instrument, *pakhavaj*: a drum, *santoor*: a hammered dulcimer; *shahnai*: a double-reeded flute (similar to an oboe).

⁶ Usually, they play in pairs, which is a customary practice in Indian music.

⁷ *Mizrab*: a wire plectrum.

⁸ *Kurta pyjama suit*: loose cotton pants and loose long cotton shirt.

in Varanasi because they do not study in formal institutions and because many of them do not have much official education after secondary school. By claiming to be music students, they are able to defend themselves against the view that they are uneducated lazy drop-outs, and they gain a positive self-identification and a purpose for their long stays in Varanasi. Music studies also distinguish the Westerners in Varanasi from short-term tourists. Among the Westerners, it is extremely important to have a 'legitimate' reason to stay in Varanasi, and usually this reason is studying classical Indian music. Having such a 'legitimate' reason and the performative acts of music students are significant tools to express one's identity as a Westerner who is a 'local *videshi*', that is, a person who has spent much time in Varanasi and is accustomed to the place instead of being merely a visiting tourist. Music studies also affect one's status among the Westerners in Varanasi: the more devoted and talented a music student one is considered to be, the more respected he (rarely she) is.

Proving Talent and Devotion

Establishing one's status as a devoted music student does not only depend on the aspects of appearance and image. The music students are rather judgmental towards each other and they gossip about each others' talents a lot, as a consequence of which certain distinctions become evoked. Therefore, playing with friends in parties not only provides entertainment but also becomes an occasion for manifesting (and judging) one's talent, which in turn affects one's status within the community. The judgemental mentality in fact results in it being very stressful to be a music student in Varanasi. I know a few music students there who have faced severe emotional stress because they have not progressed with their studies as they were hoping to and as other music students expected them to progress.

In January, the temperature drops below 10°C. On such a cold day, I sit at the tea stall with a few Westerners. A Western sitar student is explaining how the sitar strings get cold and it takes an hour to warm them up with the fingers. Celine, who has been listening to him, asks in a surprised voice: 'Do you play only for one hour a day?' (Field diary, January 2003)

Celine's comment reflects an important norm among the Western music students in Varanasi: one should practice for several hours a day. Devotion and seriousness are indeed crucial factors in defining one's status as a music student. The length, intensity and content of their practice are common discussion topics among the Western music students. When the temperature rises above 40°C in May, most Westerners leave Varanasi, claiming it to be too hot to practice. In other words, they use their leaving as a way to communicate their devotion to their music studies. On the other hand, those who stay in the heat claim to be more devoted students than the others since they stay with their *gurus* even in unpleasant weather. In this case, opposite actions are used to demonstrate the same characteristic, that is, one's commitment to music studies. In reality, of course, leaving or staying is not necessarily a matter of choice as one may run out of money and/or a visa but in one's talk, one may explain one's actions as if they were voluntary.

In addition to one's appearance and talent in music, one's knowledge of music is crucial too. First of all, music is often discussed among the Westerners in Varanasi, and everyone knows the most popular *ragas*⁹ and *bajans*¹⁰. It is common to ask one another which *raga* s/he is practicing at the time. After hearing the reply, the one posing the question often demonstrates that s/he is familiar with that particular *raga* by humming the particular tune or by mentioning the specific notes that belong to the *raga*. Criticising someone's performance is another common way to demonstrate one's knowledge of music.

⁹ *Raga*: a melodic scale or a set of notes used according to certain rules of musical grammar.

¹⁰ *Bajan*: a hymn with easy, catchy tunes.

One is also expected to know local musicians. Once I had heard that a famous *dhrupad*¹¹ singer was to perform that evening but I had not caught the name. I mentioned this to a Western music student and his immediate comment was that it should not be difficult to guess who the person is. Implicitly, he claimed to know all the famous *dhrupad* singers of Varanasi. In fact, it is considered to show great ignorance if one fails to know a musician whom the other Westerners regard as central. By such knowledge, one proves one's knowledge of music, a test that I failed on numerous occasions.

The way one behaves towards one's *guru* also demonstrates one's role as a music student and not only in the eyes of the *guru* but also in the eyes of the other Westerners. Traditionally in Indian music, it has been the responsibility of a disciple to show respect towards the *guru* and to provide her/him with services that make her/his life as comfortable as possible (Neuman 1980, 46). Many Western music students act accordingly. They greet their *guru* or their friends' *gurus* by touching their feet¹², they carry the *guru's* instrument to the stage in concerts¹³, bring drinking water to the stage, adjust microphones and may even change broken strings. Moreover, some *gurus* expect their students to offer them cigarettes or *paan*¹⁴ at lessons. Some Westerners even follow certain religious rituals according to their *guru's* advice. For example, a Western man fasted for nine days in order to have an intense period of 'pure' practice. The other Westerners showed him a lot of respect because of this; he was defined as a devoted music student already earlier but the fasting strengthened this image. The above examples clearly show that performing the role of a music student means various (repeated) actions.

One's status as a serious music student is demonstrated also in concerts. If a *guru* is at a concert, his/her students follow him/her constantly and often imitate the *guru's* gestures; for example, the religious gestures when entering the temple if the concert takes place in one. Most *gurus* also allow their Western disciples to accompany them on stage when they perform in Varanasi. By being on stage, one's identity as a successful music student becomes demonstrated to the Westerners among the audience as customarily, *gurus* have invited only their most talented and most advanced disciples on stage. The other Westerners always go to see when their friends are on stage, and the Western music students often talk about their own concert performances (even if limited to only a few seconds) by exaggerating; both before and after the concert. Sometimes, being on stage does not even include any involvement in the musical performance but merely sitting behind one's *guru*. Yet, the effect on one's status is clear even in such cases, they are important acts of performance.

However, although those who have gained distinctive status regarding music are respected for that, they are also criticised a lot, that is, their talents are commonly questioned so that they need to prove themselves again and again. The status of a music student is in fact very fragile and in a constant process of redefinition and rechecking. Consequently, being a music student in Varanasi requires repeated performative acts.

Local *Videshis*: Performing Identities in Specific Places

While the Westerners in Varanasi perform their roles as music students – by following certain behavioural norms, by knowing about music and by being talented in it – they create a particular, very exclusive, way of being local *videshi* which is a question of constant repeated acts of

¹¹ *Dhrupad*: an ancient style of Indian music

¹² It is a common custom to greet a person who is one's superior, e.g. an elder or a teacher, by touching her/his feet. The gesture shows great respect.

¹³ A central duty of a disciple is to carry the *guru's* instrument (Neuman 1980, 46).

¹⁴ *Paan*: Betel leaves that are chewed as a palate cleanser and a breath freshener.

performance. From the perspective of an individual, being a music student – and consequently performing that role – is important in terms of one’s identity, status and in terms of giving a purpose for one’s long stay in India. The context of these performances is, however, very significant: they take place in the ancient, ‘authentic’ city of Varanasi. In this process, Varanasi as a space becomes told as performative stories (see Massey2005). The Western music students thus also act out the place because Varanasi has the reputation of being a centre of Indian classical music; the Westerners would not perform similar identities elsewhere in India. In fact, various places in India carry very different meanings for Westerners sojourning there: Rishikesh is a spiritual centre for meditation and yoga, Dharamsala a place to practice Tibetan Buddhism, Kolkata is place to do charity work whereas Goa is famous for its techno music parties and a wide variety of drugs. In all these places, the Westerners spending long periods of time there perform their identities in different ways; consequently, identities and places become entangled in the performative acts of individuals.

Local people are, however, not necessarily significant in these processes.

It is almost midnight. I sit on a *ghat* by the Ganges River where I am watching a jamming session of Western music students. Several Indian instruments are played but there are no Indians present. (Field diary, March 2003)

As reflected in the diary excerpt above, the Westerners create their own social space within the public space in Varanasi. In fact, they can be understood to be performing or acting out *their* ‘authentic’ Varanasi that does not require ‘authentic’ local people. It is rather ironic that the Westerners play classical Indian music by the holy river of Hinduism, yet, there are no Indians present. On that particular occasion, some Indians walked by but did not try to join in the activities of the Westerners, thus there was an invisible boundary. Moreover, local people might not necessarily agree with the Westerners’ understanding of how to be local in Varanasi; many of them seem to be eager to keep up with modernisation and they are for example much more interested in modern movie songs than classical Indian music. On the other hand, interest in the classical Indian culture is an important part of the culture of contemporary Indian middle classes; however, they combine the tradition with the modern present instead of claiming to devote themselves to the ancient heritage in the same way as the Western music students do – or at least perform to be doing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that being a Westerner in Varanasi means behaving in certain ways: it is not merely a question of *being* a Western music student but *performing* one’s role in certain ways. In this process, one’s distinguished self-identity as a local *videshi* becomes constructed, and the performative acts of that identity take place in a very particular location, in the ancient city of Varanasi. In the beginning of this paper, I was wondering why that man was acting out his role as a music student so visibly; the answer is that by his actions, he was performing his identity. He was not only doing but showing of a doing. He was expressing both to himself and to others that he was not a tourist but a local *videshi* who knew how to be a devoted music student in the ancient city of Varanasi.

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