

## CHAPTER 6

## Play It Again, Saraswathi

*Gramophone, Religion, and Devotional Music in Colonial South India*

STEPHEN PUTNAM HUGHES

This chapter considers the relationship between Hinduism and the history of music recording in South India.<sup>1</sup> I argue that over the first decades of the 20th century, the introduction and commercial success of the gramophone business was built around a series of constitutive relations with Hinduism. Record companies in South India not only drew upon Hindu musical traditions and performers, but they also used Hindu iconography to market their records and represent their business practices. Moreover, these companies produced records according to the Hindu ritual calendar, turned the studio recording sessions into a place of worship, and sought to locate gramophone technology within a Hindu theology of sound.

In his landmark book on popular music and recording technology in North India, Peter Manuel made the claim that Hindu religious/devotional music had, before the arrival of audiocassettes in the 1970s, played a marginal role in the output of the commercial recording industry (1993, 109). While acknowledging the importance of long-established traditions of devotional music in India, Manuel was primarily concerned with highlighting how, during the 1980s, a new crop of regionally located music recording businesses used the introduction of the then-new media technology of audiocassettes for Hindu devotional music. Manuel argued that this

combination of new recording media along with the popularity of religious music contributed significantly to expand the market for audiocassettes. Thus, the emergence of a new mass medium was, he argued, causally linked to an unprecedented commercial popularity of Hindu devotional music that began in the 1980s. Given the dominant position of commercial film songs in the market for popular music and the state-run monopoly of radio broadcasting in India, Manuel was certainly correct in recognizing that the convergence among the introduction of new technology, a new class of entrepreneurs, and a consuming audience for religious music dramatically altered popular music across the Hindi belt of north India in the 1970s. However, in making this argument, Manuel has underestimated the larger significance of Hinduism in a longer 20th-century history of the music recording industry in India.

Going beyond Manuel's focus on devotional music, this chapter focuses on the earlier historical conjunction of recording technology, business interests, and religion in South India to show that there was a more expansive and constitutive relationship between music recording and Hinduism. The argument in this chapter is structured around a comparison between the early years of the gramophone in South India at the beginning of the 20th century and the 1930s when the music recording business was taken over by local entrepreneurs. I track the changes of how the music business in South India forged a series of constitutive relationships with a variety of Hindu religious practices. I am particularly concerned with examining how in the early 1930s the South Indian gramophone industry explicitly drew upon Hindu traditions as a way of defining a distinctively new public address for a rapidly expanding South Indian market for commercial recordings. Far from being marginal in the years before audiocassettes as Manuel has suggested for North India, religious music and references were of central importance to the development of the music recording industry in South India. For at least a decade from the late 1920s into the 1930s, the local gramophone trade enacted a conspicuous articulation of media technology as religious practice through their choice of music recordings, advertising, record catalogues, and business practices. I argue that before the emergence of film songs as the most popular recordings from the late 1930s, the initial success of the South Indian gramophone trade was predicated upon a religious address.

Both Manuel's argument about the newfound importance of religious music for the audiocassette business, as well as my interrogation in this chapter of the relationship between the South Indian gramophone trade and Hindu practice, can usefully be understood in relationship within a wider context of encounters between religion and media in South Asia.

Babb and Wadley (1995) have called our attention to the longstanding, widespread, complex, and transformative relationship between the mass media and the religious traditions of South Asia. Drawing upon a broad range of scholarship covering printed images, audio recordings, and audio-visual media relating to Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh religious practices, they argue that media have dramatically increased the spatial and social mobility of South Asian religious traditions. Media technology have done this by socially “disembedding” religious practice from its contexts within the family, lineage, clan, caste, village, and neighborhood, making it possible for people to share social, national, and spiritual identities in new ways. However, if Babb and Wadley have only focused on one side of the equation where modern media have transformed religion, Manuel’s example has emphasized the other side where religious music has transformed the commercial music industry. In what follows, I explore a more complex encounter whereby new media and traditional religious music were reciprocally implicated and co-constitutive.

#### EARLY RECORDINGS OF SOUTH INDIAN “NATIVE RECORDS”

Commercial music recording companies catering to South Indian markets have always relied heavily upon religious music. Though this chapter is primarily concerned with the 1930s and does not set out to provide a comprehensive treatment of the earliest years of music recording in South India, my argument starts with the recording of religious music at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> There is a strong case for arguing that it was only through the exploitation of religiously oriented music that international music recording companies were able to create a foothold in the emerging market for gramophone recordings in South India during the first decade of the 20th century. Yet these same record companies never fully embraced the religious content of their recordings as part of their public address, in marked contrast to how South Indian companies reshaped the market in the 1930s.

During the formative years of the recording business ranging roughly between 1900 and 1911, Euro-American companies sent “expeditions” around the world (including India) in a competitive effort to capture the emerging markets (Gronow 1981; Parthasarathi 2005, 4). Starting in 1902, the most famous of these early expeditions was led by Fred Gaisberg of Gramophone and Typewriter Limited, which eventually became better known as the Gramophone Company with its “His Master’s Voice” (HMV) line of products (Kinnear 1994). But thereafter, a series of other major

[116] *Studies in Indian Popular Music*

companies, including Nicole Frères from London, Pathé from France, the American Talking Machine Company, the International Talking Machine Company with its Odeon label, and Beka from Berlin all joined in the bid for taking their share of the Indian market. These companies sent a series of expeditionary tours out to record Indian music (sometimes in collaboration with small Indian firms), which they brought back to their factories in Europe for pressing and then sent back to India as “native records” for sale. In this manner, they materially inscribed music as a commodity like cotton or jute in the triangular trade of empire.

During this early expedition period, the majority of the “native records” that were produced for the South Indian market were drawn from a well-established religious repertoire. It is, perhaps, not surprising that gramophone companies initially found the connection between music and religion to be a commercially promising direction, because most musical traditions in South India had strong religious associations. When the first recording expeditions arrived in South India, they drew upon four distinct but overlapping musical traditions that had emerged out of the 19th century. The first and probably most prominent was the tradition of devotional songs, now known as Karnatik music, which had been adopted as the court music in the 18th and 19th centuries (Subramanian 2006; Weidman 2006). The second was the instrumental accompaniment associated with temple rituals and festivals (Ries 1967; L’Armand and L’Armand 1983). The third was the music that accompanied dance performances (Soneji 2012). The fourth was the songs from popular musical dramas (Baskaran 1981). Although each of these traditions had its own recognized musical forms, community of performers, appropriate settings, and patrons that sustained it, international record companies brought these altogether in the same catalogues and labeled as them “native recordings.”

International record companies used this early emphasis on religious music as part of the promotional pitch for advertising their recordings. For example, as seen in figure 6.1, during 1911, the International Talking Machine Company advertised the intended religious appeal of their South Indian records: “Their subjects comprise of religious songs of Sivites [*sic*], Vishnuvits [*sic*] and Christians, Thevarams, Keerthanams, Theatrical songs from Harischandra Vilasanam, Ramayanam and other well-known Dramas, etc.” (*The Hindu*, May 5, 1911, p. 11). This advertisement avoided using a unitary category of Hinduism, but instead chose to recognize the main two South Indian variants associated with the worship of Siva and Vishnu. By naming the Thevarams and Keerthanams, the advertisement referred to the respective traditions of devotional poetic hymns initiated by the Saivite Nāyanārs and the Vaisnavite Ālvārs, which as living traditions, date

1 MAY 5 1911

# ODEON Talking Machine Records!!



Try our new Tamil and Telugu records taken in India recently by our own European Expert. The subjects comprise of religious songs of Sivites, Vishnuvits and Christians, Thevarams, Keerthanams, Theatrical songs from Harichandra Vilasam, Ramayanam and other well-known Dramas, etc.

New lists of Odeon records sent free on application.

Easy payment system can be arranged for on application.

**THE TALKING MACHINE CO., OF CEYLON,**

(SOLE AGENTS R ODEON GOODS)

**Nos. 3 & 4, Mount Road, Madras.**

Figure 6.1

Advertisement from *The Hindu*, May 5, 1911, p. 4.

back to the seventh and ninth centuries. Within this advertisement's list of well-known Hindu musical referents, the theatrical songs represented a relatively more recent musical genre that had been popularized by Parsi-style drama companies in South India during the late 19th century (Baskaran 1981; Hansen 1992). And the listing of the Christian songs appears to have been little more than a token inclusion within a record catalogue that was dominated by musical traditions associated with Hinduism.

Nevertheless, international record companies' explicit categorization of music as "religious" in early advertisements was relatively rare. Instead, the market-leading Gramophone Company advertised their South Indian recordings in terms of their star performers and their aesthetic and expressive excellence without categorizing them as religious. Yet we know from their catalogue of recordings in South India between 1908 and 1910 (Kinnear 2000) that their output was overwhelmingly Hindu in orientation. Of the roughly 400 recordings in the South Indian languages of "Tamil, Telugu, Canarese, Malayalam, and Sanskrit" during this two-year period, over 380 titles were drawn from the four main traditions of Hindu music. Given this high degree of prominence, the religious content of their recordings was a conspicuously unmarked category for the Gramophone Company. So even if the earliest international music recording companies were quick to recognize the commercial value of religious records, these companies had something of an ambivalent relationship with the religious implications of their recordings.



**Figure 6.2**

Front cover, Record Catalogue, Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd., 1906.

While the Gramophone Company happily embraced a broad range of traditional Hindu musical genres with their choice of recordings, it was not marketed as “Hindu” music per se, and the company did not identify their business as a kind of Hindu practice. Perhaps the closest that the Gramophone Company came during the early years to marking their product as Hindu was by using the 1906 painting (figure 6.2) by G. N. Mukherji of Saraswati sitting on her lotus playing a record on a gramophone machine (Farrell 1993, 42–44).

This image originally appeared on the front of their 1906 catalogue, and thereafter the original was said to have hung on the wall of their Calcutta office. It represented a brief but striking departure from what had already become their iconic logo: Nipper the dog listening to “His Master’s Voice” through the gramophone; this had at the time only recently taken precedence over the earlier “recording angel” logo. With this image of Saraswati playing her gramophone, the mechanical technology for reproducing music was relocated into “the aural universe of Indian mythology” (Farrell 1993, 44). It is as if the Hindu goddess of the arts and learning was simultaneously acting as the divine creator/patron of this new musical technology, promoting its use among her followers and joining in the pleasurable consumption of its music.

Farrell read this image and a similar example featuring the goddess Durga as a “mixing of ancient and modern,” which depicted the new

technology in terms of a “bridge between two cultural domains, the West and India” (1993, 42). Farrell was certainly correct in drawing our attention to the way that the introduction of music recording posed new questions about the articulation of modern technology and Indian cultural forms. As such, we should consider the gramophone alongside other contemporary and parallel new media, such as proscenium stagecraft (Hansen 1992), chromolithography (Pinney 2004), photography, and film (Rajadhyaksha 1993; Hughes 2005), in offering a particularly ambiguous enunciation of modernity. At the beginning of the 20th century, the image of Saraswati playing the gramophone brought into play an unstable and unsettling set of cultural and political dichotomies—spiritual and material, indigenous and foreign, past and present, and sacred and profane.

No matter how suggestive this Hindu iconography of the gramophone may have been to the artist or potential Indian customers, the Gramophone Company never developed this into an explicit business strategy for promoting their products. The Saraswati image was not widely featured in advertisements beyond a very limited use in their earliest catalogues. Moreover, it does not seem to have ever been used in relation to any subsequent South Indian recording catalogues or advertisements. Although the Gramophone Company produced large numbers of traditional South Indian Hindu musical recordings over the first three decades of the 20th century, the company showed little interest in using Hinduism either as a generic category or as an iconography to promote their records. Whatever the reason for this may have been, it is clear that there was a large gap between the Gramophone Company’s business plan and the traditional modes of performance of religious music and its forms of patronage, institutionalization, and circulation. This gap was readily apparent among many contemporary South Indian musicians and became a prime target for one of the earliest critics of gramophone music in India.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1909), a prominent scholar and art critic (cf. Mohan 1977), comprehensively denounced the use of gramophone technology to record South Indian music, warning that the machine would eventually lead to the destruction of this music. Though gramophone ownership was still relatively new and quite limited in South India at the time Coomaraswamy wrote, he clearly understood its potential to transform music into a new kind of commodity that would reorganize the performance, patronage, appreciation, education, and circulation of Indian music. In publishing one of the first critical responses to the gramophone in South Asia, Coomaraswamy voiced concerns widely shared among many leading musicians during the first decades of the 20th century on the detrimental relationship between gramophone recordings and South Indian

classical Karnatik music. For Coomaraswamy, the gramophone was part of a wider vulgarization of culture under British rule in India, which posed new foreign, commercial, and mechanical threats to Indian music. He felt that gramophone recordings of European music were spoiling the refined musical tastes of South Indians and causing them to lose their love for Indian music. Worse still were the recordings of Karnatik music, which he argued ruined the embodied spirituality of South Indian music in favor of commerce and mechanical industry.<sup>3</sup>

Coomaraswamy closely followed the established discourse on South Indian music in that he started with the premise of the human voice as the original, authentic, and most perfect musical instrument.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Indian music was to be learned through oral transmission from guru to *sisyan* (teacher to disciple), from parent to child, and from priest to novice. Indian music traditions did not use any system of written notation, but were taught and learned through the performative and embodied encounter between hearing and singing. Coomaraswamy argued that the excellence of Indian vocal music depended on the peculiar manner and skill with which the singer dwells on certain notes, which are varied or trilled, “vibrating like a bird above the water before it pounces on its prey” (1909, 172). This is known as the *gamakam* and is produced in stringed instruments by varying the tension of the string by deflection. For Coomaraswamy, this meant that Indian music was always a matter of personal interpretation. It depended on the singer’s mood, which no record or any other form of material inscription could adequately interpret. Coomaraswamy reasoned that the uniqueness of a performance was just that and could never be repeated. In every performance, a musician adapted to different conditions and found new subjective expressions through the old form. Thus Coomaraswamy maintained that “[t]he intervention of mechanism between the musician and sound is always, per se, disadvantageous” (205). Coomaraswamy equated the mechanical reproduction of music with the destructive intrusion of modernity under colonial rule, which could only destroy the spirituality and authenticity of South Indian music.

With Coomaraswamy’s critical response to the introduction of gramophone technology for the recording of South Indian music, we are again faced with a set of cultural and political dichotomies posing the spiritual against the material, the authentic indigenous against the foreign colonial, and the artistic performance against the mechanical industrial. Coomaraswamy’s solution was to argue against the intrusion of modern gramophone technology in order to preserve the possibility of a culture of Indian authenticity in the face of British rule, a plea that was to gain so much importance within the discourses of Indian nationalism

during the 20th century (cf. Chatterjee 1993, 3–13). However, contrary to Coomaraswamy's warnings, the presumed oppositions between music recording technology and South Indian music traditions were not insurmountable, but over time collapsed into a productive encounter of collaboration and dependency. Almost as if in response to Coomaraswamy's concerns, the emergent South Indian gramophone industry struggled over the first decades of the 20th century to suture the gaps between the spiritual and material, between live performance and mechanical reproduction, between art and commerce. In this respect it is useful to return to the Gramophone Company's image of Saraswati playing the gramophone. For the purposes of this chapter, what makes this image particularly important is that it articulated the potential for the gramophone to be rendered in a Hindu vernacular in a manner that went beyond the dichotomous logic of contradiction. This image represented the gramophone as being *continuous* with Hindu religious practice. And even if the Gramophone Company did not pursue this possibility, it may well have set an important precedent that South Indian entrepreneurs were able to develop more fully during the 1930s.

## THE RELIGIOUS CONVERSION OF THE GRAMOPHONE

Up to this point, I have argued that prior to 1930, international gramophone companies were heavily reliant upon the South Indian Hindu music traditions, but they did not develop the religious aspects of their product as part of their commercial strategies. Retrospectively, this reluctance stands out all the more when compared to how quickly and comprehensively this situation changed in the 1930s. In what remains of this chapter, I outline how gramophone companies in South India started to rebrand their businesses and musical recordings as part of a Hindu vernacular. In this sense, the mechanical reproduction and commercial exploitation of religious songs were represented as continuous with other forms of popular religion. South Indian record companies rooted the gramophone within both a religious repertoire, as well as a Hindu theology of sound. In this way, these companies sought to embrace, domesticate, and harness recording technology, business practice, and recorded music as a kind of Hinduism. Yet the material inscription and commercial circulation of Hindu devotional records also helped reorganize both public and private access and availability of religious music performance. The gramophone not only built upon and extended the vernacular experience of Hinduism, it also enabled a new set of constraints and possibilities for addressing a new media public. Thus,

[122] *Studies in Indian Popular Music*

after setting up this earlier period as a point of comparison, the main questions I pose in this section are: Why and how after 30 years of being in South India did the gramophone suddenly become a vehicle for Hinduism?

The first part of the answer has to do with the reorganization of the gramophone business in South India and what I have written about elsewhere as the “music boom,” which took place during the early 1930s (Hughes 2002). The Gramophone Company began to face increasing competition from other international recording companies, after more than 20 years of enjoying a largely uncontested dominance in the Indian market. Columbia Records with their “Magic Notes” trademark and the then-German-owned Odeon Records began to make new moves into the Indian market. The extension of international companies into South India during the early 1930s was achieved through a series of franchise agreements that, for the first time, enabled South Indians to take a leading role in the recording business. Local South Indian companies supplied the capital, management, and music expertise, and the international record companies provided the brand label and pressed the records at their factories. In less than one decade, the gramophone business went from an HMV monopoly to a new proliferation of gramophone labels (nine by 1935) offering a vastly expanded range of South Indian records and transforming the music recording business in South India into an industry of mass proportions (Hughes 2007). This business development is in some ways comparable to Manuel’s example of how audiocassettes in the 1980s enabled a new class of “grassroots” entrepreneurs to restructure the market for popular music (1993, 116). The franchise agreements allowed new business interests with a better understanding of their own regional musical traditions to reshape the market for recorded music.

When South Indians first entered into the business of producing records, it was in part based on their dissatisfaction about how the international companies were providing recorded music for the local market. Record dealers throughout South India had been complaining that there were not enough of the most popular titles to meet demand, and far too many of records they could not sell. The South India record distributors felt that foreign companies did not know how to market South Indian music, did not understand the social settings in which their customers would listen to records, and did not know which artists should sing what songs or how many records to produce (Carati 1983).

Within the short span of 1931 to 1932, local music businesses in Madras started to arrange exclusive distribution rights that made them the agents for the retailing of machines and records throughout the South and for the recruitment of regional recording artists. In 1931, Columbia affiliated with

P. Orr & Sons, the luxury goods manufacturer and dealer, to create Orr's Columbia House. During the following year, two other major international gramophone companies entered into new partnerships with South Indian entrepreneurs. In 1932, Odeon went into business with the music dealer Saraswathi Stores (Carati 1983; Meiyappan 1974), and the Gramophone Company collaborated with Hutchins and Company in the production of Hutchins Gramophone Records. Also in 1932, these new gramophone ventures each launched their own local sound recording studios in Madras with great fanfare and publicity. At first these were temporary studios constructed within large bungalows where foreign sound crews and equipment visited Madras for periods of one or two months. Within a few years, however, these companies went further to establish the first permanent sound studios in Madras. This was the moment, coinciding with the creation of a new and more local music industry, when the gramophone trade made conspicuous efforts to embrace Hindu practice as part of its public address.

In order to elaborate on this point, I focus on the case of the highly successful Saraswathi Stores record company.<sup>5</sup> Started during 1932 in partnership with Odeon Records, the management of Saraswathi Stores went to considerable effort to promote their Hindu credentials. The very choice of the name "Saraswathi" worked to merge the technological and commercial aspects of the gramophone with Hindu religious practice. The name itself ritually invoked the presence of the divine patron of music for blessing the new venture and worked as well to dedicate the venture to the goddess. The record company was in effect announcing itself as a permanent habitation for the goddess Saraswati, where she would imbue their music with a true spirit of devotion. Even though their record releases were not entirely religious in orientation and a significant portion of their intended market was not Hindu, the company had no hesitation in identifying so closely with the Hindu goddess and adopting her image as their logo (figure 6.3). This was in itself enough to immediately distinguish Saraswathi Stores from all other previous recording companies operating in South India.

In a gesture that worshipfully acknowledged music as a gift of the gods, the timing of Saraswathi Stores' first record release was appropriately coordinated with the Hindu ritual calendar, falling on the annual day celebrating the goddess known as the Saraswati Puja. In India, the worship of Saraswati is a very important annual event for Hindus. In the South, it is part of the Navaratri (nine nights) festival, which falls according to the Hindu lunar calendar at some point during the autumn. The climax of this event is conventionally marked by the ritual presentation of books and musical instruments at dawn along with special prayers. In return, the goddess then confers her blessings on to the material objects of learning



**Figure 6.3**  
Front cover, Saraswathi Stores Record Catalogue, May 1933.

and music. The period of time immediately after this event is considered to be the most auspicious moment possible to begin learning, to start music lessons, or, in this case, to launch a record business.

The timing of their first record launch effectively positioned a business event as part of an important Hindu festival. Moreover, for the occasion, Saraswathi Stores recruited one of the most senior, respected, and orthodox of all contemporary Karnatik musicians, Sangeetha Vidwan Ariyakudi T. Ramanuja Iyengar, for his debut recording (figure 6.4). “Ariyakudi,” as he was affectionately known to his fans, had up to this point refused to make any recordings.<sup>6</sup> The framing of the recording event as part of a devotional event worshipping Saraswati was an especially auspicious occasion to finally win the consent of a reluctant artist. Contemporary newspaper reviews of this first release were quick with their praise:

The first issue of gramophone records at the first session of the Saraswathi Stores forms a welcome addition to the stock of preserved music. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Srimathi Saraswathi Bai are among the very few living



**Figure 6.4**  
Advertisement from *The Hindu*, October 3, 1932, p. 5.

exponents of Carnatic music of the classic type, who still maintain with distinction the traditions of what might be called the Golden Age of Carnatic Music. The enterprise of the Sarawathi Stores in persuading these front rank artistes (and our South Indian artistes of first class need a lot of persuading in this matter) is commendable (*The Hindu*, December 5, 1932, p. 5).

This was the beginning of a new wave of high-profile Karnatik recordings that continued through the decade.

These new South Indian record companies were much better placed than the earlier European representatives from the international recording companies for understanding how to stage the performative part of the recording session. The new South Indian businesses were able to draw on and build upon the already well-established institutions and forms of patronage for South Indian music. In so doing, they reshaped recording sessions as part of Hindu practice. Though far removed from the royal courts, temples, and salons that had sustained South Indian music throughout the 19th century, the South Indian gramophone companies knew how to serve like traditional patrons of the arts. They would have already had personal links to the leading musicians through their previous involvement with

patronage activities and were able to recruit a new class of respected musical figures, who had until then stayed clear of the medium. In general, for Hindu community leaders, the support of musicians was a matter of religious duty and honor within the context of traditional religious practice and obligation (Ries 1967, 18). Moreover, these entrepreneurs understood how to stage a live performance. Each recording session was begun by making a ritual invocation to a presiding deity whose image or statue was installed within the studio. Brahmin ritual specialists were brought into the studio to perform the relevant *puja* ceremonies. The recording sessions themselves would have been performed worshipfully in front of the deity. And after the session was complete, there would be a presentation of gifts and honorary regalia to the performer.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to reorganizing recording sessions on the model of Hindu worship, South Indian recording companies introduced new ways of publicizing their relationships with recording artists. For example, the advertisements printed in the local press in advance of Saraswathi Stores' widely publicized first release included a photograph of Ariyakudi sitting on a platform stage facing into a microphone (figure 6.4 above). These kinds of photographs were for a time during the 1930s a very common feature in South Indian newspapers and gramophone catalogues. They constituted a visual trope for representing the convergence of recording technology and live musical performance. The photographic shot depicting artists in front of the microphone became part of the ritualized practices of the recording sessions and were used to authenticate each recording session as an enactment of the human-machine interface. The photos dramatized the encounter by foregrounding the recording apparatus and freezing the moment of authenticity when the live performance was captured in the very act of its inscription as a mechanical form of reproduction on its way to being transformed into a mass-produced commodity. Thus, Ariyakudi beckons us to take part in his performance through the surrogate of the microphone.

Saraswathi Stores produced a wealth of newspaper advertising and catalogue illustrations, which made use of popular religious iconography of divine figures to represent both gramophone technology and their own commercial activities. In figure 6.5, we see that the company's logo worked into the design of a record dust jacket closely resembled the well-known Ravi Varma painting that had been widely circulated as a chromolithograph for "god posters" and calendar art (cf. Smith 1995). The goddess along with her peacock vehicle and *veena* on her knee routinely adorned the cover of their record catalogues or was decoratively worked into border designs.

For the purposes of my argument, one of the most striking images used for advertising their records depicted the goddess Saraswati giving out the



Figure 6.5  
Record dust sleeve, Saraswathi Stores.



Figure 6.6  
Advertisement from *The Hindu*, June 8, 1933, p. 9

gift of music in the form of records (figure 6.6). This image recalls the earlier catalogue image discussed previously in this chapter, but this time the goddess is no longer playing a gramophone. Instead, Saraswati was shown doing the work of the recording company sales agents in handing out records to a representative assortment of readily identifiable South Indian social types, including a Muslim, Brahmin, non-Brahmin, and Christian. The Hindu goddess was represented as ecumenically distributing records to a socially inclusive public of gramophone consumers. The visual link between the goddess and commercial activity was made all the more obvious by the inclusion of the list of approved Odeon dealers throughout Tamil South India that appears at the bottom of the advertisement. There were other South Indian gramophone companies that also made frequent use of similar images depicting Saraswati “giving” (selling?) records to the South Indian public. Figure 6.7 is a particularly good demonstration of how the Hindu goddess was explicitly linked with modern science, electricity, and the business of record distribution to the widest possible demographic of South Indian consumers.

These kinds of images constituted one of the main visual advertising tropes, where both gramophone technology and trade were represented as working in harmony with Hindu deities. In addition to the goddess Saraswati, the South India gramophone companies also used other Hindu



Figure 6.7  
Advertisement from *The Hindu*, July 21, 1934, p. 9.



Figure 6.8

Cover *Kiraamapone Kiirttanaamrutham*, P.R.C. Series 22, second edition, Sree Vani Vilas Book Depot, Tirupuliyur, no date.

gods as part of their advertising. For example, in figure 6.8, a private publisher, disregarding copyright, mobilized a musical pantheon as part of a popular series of small booklets of gramophone song lyrics.

This image was from the cover of a Tamil booklet entitled *Kiraamapone Kiirttanaamrutham*, which translates as the “musical ambrosia of the gramophone.” The title conveys the common belief that music was both a gift of the gods, as well as a form of communion with them. For my purposes, this image usefully illustrates the range of divine patrons of music, with Krishna and his flute in the center flanked by Saraswati with her *veena* on the right and Naradar with his *tambura* on the left. As the music comes down to earth at the bottom of the page, we see what appear to be two *devadasi* women playing the harmonium and the violin.<sup>8</sup>

Another good example of this trope of gramophone as divine intervention is a series of Saraswathi Stores ads featuring Krishna. In figure 6.9, the young Krishna playing his flute is depicted on top of a gramophone record. Similar to the image of Saraswati handing out records, the material inscription of recorded music was equated with the agency of

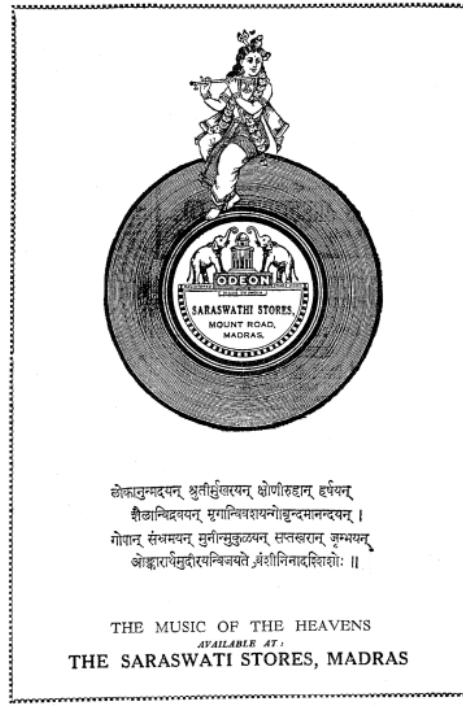


Figure 6.9

Advertisement from *The Hindu*, December 1, 1932, p. 9.

Krishna. But in this instance, the record disc appears as Krishna's vehicle. This emphasis on the divine source of music was further underlined in the English caption at the bottom of the advertisement that portrays Saraswathi Stores as the worldly supplier of "the music of the heavens." With no mention of any vocalist or musician, Saraswathi Stores appears to have claimed Krishna as one of their recording artists and equated their records with the divine power of music. This reference was reinforced in the advertisement through the use of a Sanskrit *śloka* (verse). Even if the vast majority of English daily newspaper readers could not have made sense of the specialist and technical language of this passage, the Sanskrit would have immediately conveyed Brahminical religious authority. The text read:

Victory to the sound of the child's flute, which delights people, makes musical intervals (*rutis*) resound, makes trees bristle, melts mountains, subdues beasts, gladdens droves of cows, bewilders cowherds, closes the eyes of ascetics, spreads musical notes (*svaras*), and expresses the meaning of the sound Om.<sup>9</sup>

This passage depicts Krishna's flute as both a medium for musical sound and a transcendental subject, while simultaneously elevating the gramophone record to a kind of divine status. In this respect, the gramophone was identified as a central component within a Hindu theology of sound.

There are numerous other examples of this kind, each creatively expressing the divine powers of musical sound, including Krishna at the bathing *ghat* (embankment). In figure 6.10, Krishna in the role of a playful child teases the *gopikas* (cowherds) by stealing their clothes and throwing them in the tree. This image would have been immediately recognizable throughout India as being based on the widely reproduced chromolithograph of a Ravi Varma painting. The text made explicit reference to the power of sound to bring the picture to life through the force of its sonic vibration. The recording not only animated this well-known scene, but offered its audience a firsthand experience of being in the scene. The advertising appeal of this image would have gone something like this: "you all know the story and have seen the pictorial version, now you can live it for yourself for the first time through sound."



SRI KRISHNA AT THE BATHING GHAT.

This scene which Ravi Varma with his painting has immortalised now vibrates with life when you hear record No. C.A. 747 over your machine.

A GREAT RECORD — DO NOT MISS IT.



**SARASWATHI  
STORES, Madras.**



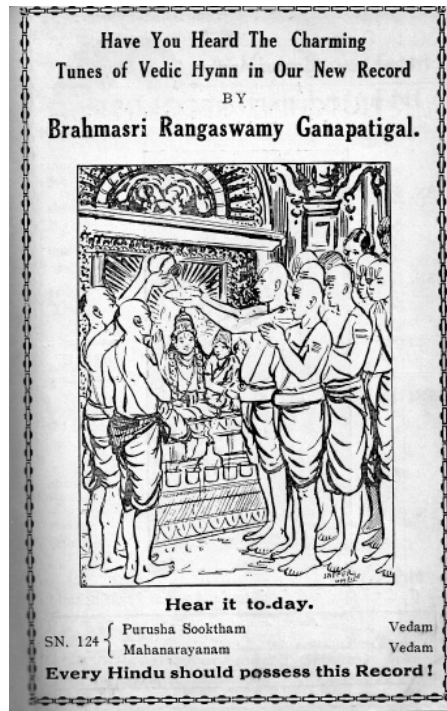
Figure 6.10

Advertisement from *The Hindu*, July 9, 1934, p. 13.

So far I have given examples about how the new South Indian recording companies reorganized their business, recording, and advertising practices as part of a Hindu vernacular. In addition to this, these companies developed a new range of recorded content that explored ways to represent, reproduce, and extend Hindu religious practice via records. All of the South Indian record companies experimented in the early 1930s with recordings that in various ways sought to recreate the experience of Hindu ritual, worship, festivals, recitations, and pilgrimage through sound enactments. The range of such recordings was comprehensive, almost approximating a full catalogue of Hindu practices appropriate for both festive and everyday situations in both public and domestic settings. These were aural representations of common Hindu devotional practices that offered the chance to re-experience and vicariously participate in these events via sound recordings. These sound representations took on and combined many different representational modes including a kind of realist documentary, humorous parody, nostalgic recollection, and serious devotional styles. These recordings were too numerous and varied to cover in any great detail in this chapter, but in what follows I outline a representative range of examples based on a series of advertisements.

During the first half of the 1930s, South Indian record companies produced a commercial recording for almost every conceivable form of Hindu worship in what was a concerted effort to match their products with the everyday religious lives of their intended audiences. For example, there were numerous recordings of the Vedic chanting associated with the inner sanctum of a Hindu Vaisnavite temple. This chanting would have accompanied the performance of a *puja* in front of the main sculpture of the presiding deity as pictured in the advertisement in figure 6.11. This ritual is a kind of focal point and emotional climax for temple worship that expresses reverence to a god and establishes a spiritual connection with the divine for the worshiper. A particular attraction of such a recording was that it rendered a ritual that would otherwise have been limited to a closed group of Brahmin priests into a public recording that could be played and repeated at will in drastically new settings.

Outside the inner sanctum, other familiar forms of more public worship were recorded. For example, this recording of a Rama *bhajana* (devotional song) party depicted in figure 6.12 would have been a familiar kind of informal group singing of hymns, either as part of pilgrimage or temple processions or in private homes and halls. The image depicted in the advertisement represents what would have been an immediately recognizable everyday street scene around many urban temple precincts (such as Mylapore or Triplicane in Madras), where *bhajana* groups would go on

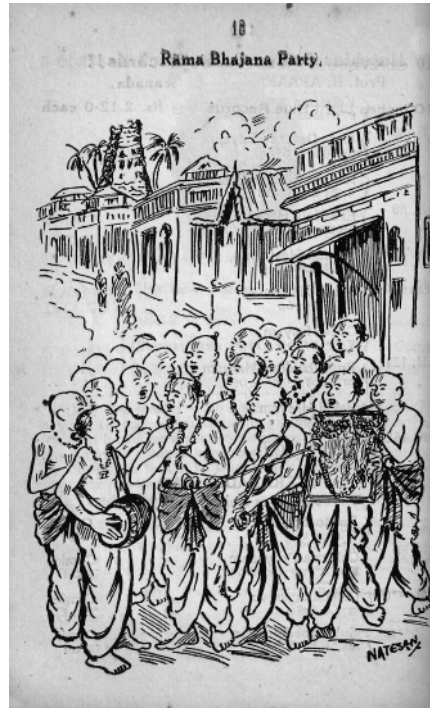


**Figure 6.11**

Record Catalogue, Recording Department, Hutchins & Co., August 1934, p. 19.

processions chanting the names of God, singing praises, and offering service and devotion or a form of ballad-like story drawing upon the *puranas* (epic poems), such as the Ramayana with repeated chanting of “Ram-Sita, Sita-Ram” (cf. Cousins 1935, 117; Singer 1972, 199–241). In both of these examples, the record companies were trying to tap into the popular repertoire of everyday Hindu practice of worship with records standing in as both surrogate and vicarious aural experience.

Not all sound representations of worship were strictly oriented toward devotional ends. There were numerous recordings that represented various religious activities in a humorous manner. These lightly poked fun at easily recognizable stereotypical characters. These records were different from the examples discussed above in that they were not so much offering a devotional experience as a kind of observational detachment via a sonic reenactment of familiar religious scenes. These aural representations were composed of a variable mix of social realism, parody, and nostalgic recuperation of public religious events. For example, the record depicted in figure 6.13 on the Vaikunta Ekadesi festival at the famous Sri



**Figure 6.12**

Record Catalogue, Recording Department, Hutchins & Co., November 1934, p. 18.

Ranganathaswamy Temple promised that “[a] simple, humorous, true-to-life picture of the scene at the temple is portrayed by Record.” In this advertisement, which tellingly described the record in visual terms as a picture, also used a visual image of four cartoon-character Brahmins to suggest the humorous quality of the record. This image and the recording it represents asked its viewers/listeners to join along in making fun of these parodied Brahmin characters. We might be tempted to associate this kind of recording with the well-developed tradition of comically insulting Brahmins that was widely shared by non-Brahmins (Pandian 2007). However, the humor here was not entirely derogatory. Rather, this recording seems to have been more aimed at Brahmin Srivaisnavite listeners in inviting them to happily “revive the memory” for those who may previously have attended what was one of the most important annual festivals for the community.

Another example of an explicitly comic representation of another popular form of religious worship, pilgrimage, was performed by the Columbia Comic Party in Tamil. As seen in figure 6.14, the record was described as “a trip to the HOLY TIRUPATHI (from the scene inside the railway carriage to



Figure 6.13

Back cover, Columbia Record Catalogue, Orr's Columbia House, November 1934.

the hills).” Here again, the publicity for this recording stakes a strong claim for its realism in advertising it as a “True to Life Comical Hit.” We are told that “the Comic Party have established a reputation for their capacity to depict real life with its comical aspects through Gramophone” (*Columbia Records Catalogue*, 1934, p. 2). Here again, the recording assumes a common and prior firsthand experience of this pilgrimage by its audiences who would be able to recognize and identify the reenacted scenes.

The last example I cite for demonstrating the ways that the South Indian recording industry sought to identify with Hindu practice highlights how the mechanical technology of the gramophone was itself portrayed as a form of Hindu worship. The convergence of the gramophone technology and Hindu worship is particularly well demonstrated by a recording of a Sri Rama Mantram. Figure 6.15 depicts this recording of a song by the eminent artist Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata about the beneficial power of a well-established South Indian religious practice, referred to as *Nāmasiddhānta*. This doctrine was based upon the belief in the magical power inherent in the recitation of sacred names and in the mantric force

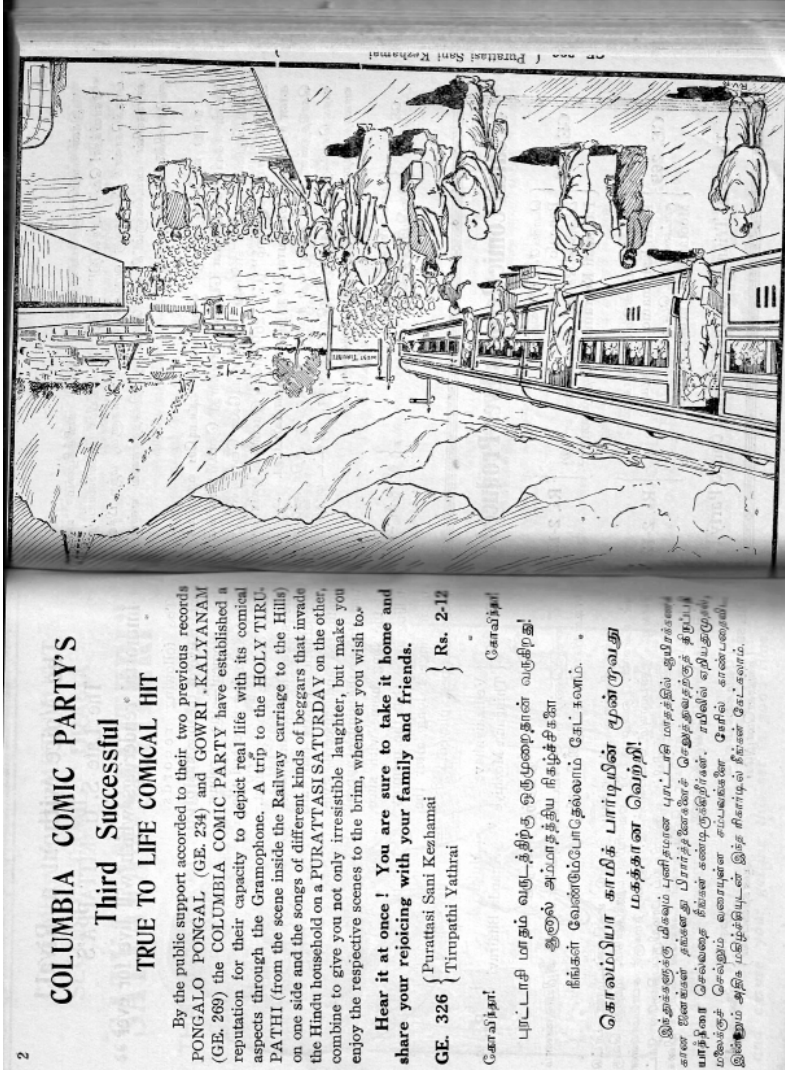
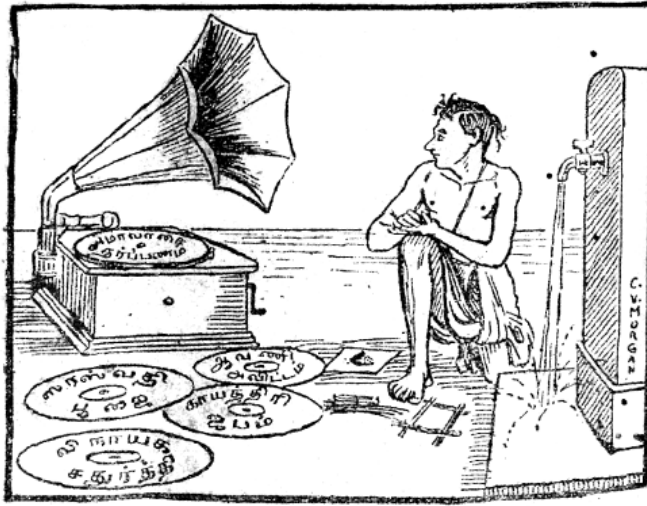


Figure 6.14  
Columbia Record Catalogue, Orr's Columbia House, September 1934, pp. 3–4.

[138] *Studies in Indian Popular Music*



**Figure 6.16**  
Cartoon, *Ananda Vikatan*, December 3, 1933, p. 944.

this case, the recording of a song that promotes aural repetition as a form of worship also worked particularly well to co-opt technological reproduction of gramophone playback as a religious practice. The repetitive nature of playing records coincided neatly with the sacred power of repeatedly chanting the name of the deity Rama.

The examples that I have cited above were only a small part of what was a large and varied range of Hindu-themed recordings produced by the new South Indian record companies, all within a few short years at the beginning of the 1930s. These few limited examples help demonstrate how these new companies sought not only to build upon but also extend the vernacular experience of Hinduism. The success of this new alliance between the gramophone and religious practice was such that it became a matter of public comment and even parody. *Ananda Vikatan*, the most popular weekly general-interest Tamil magazine of the day, carried a cartoon (figure 6.16) depicting a poor Brahmin using a gramophone machine and a collection of religious recordings to transform a street water tap into his own temple worship scene. Spread around the machine along the street is a collection of clearly labeled recordings corresponding to major religious events of the Hindu ritual calendar, such as the Saraswati Puja and the Vinayakar (Ganesh) Chaturti. The implication here is that, with the aid of ritual recordings, even the most unlikely of people, the least appropriate of places, and everyday objects can be remade for the purposes of worship. The humor and parody here lie in the recognition that the gramophone

machine and recordings have created their own times, places, and occasions for the performance of religious ritual—the technological reproduction has refigured traditional conventions of worship.

I started this chapter by citing Manuel's (1993) example of how new regionally based record companies reshaped the commercial market for popular music with their output of religiously oriented audiocassettes. Using other examples drawn from the history of music recording in South India, I have tried to show that what Manuel has described for North India in the 1980s was not an unprecedented event. At an earlier point in history and at another place in India, South Indian record companies successfully used Hinduism to rebrand their own business practices and record content. In a marked contrast to the globally dominant international record companies that preceded them, the local entrepreneurs used a range of Hindu references, practices, and musical content to reclaim and recast what was once considered to be an imported and foreign gramophone technology. In so doing, the gramophone companies of South India reciprocally implicated the modern and scientific aspects of recording technology with the spiritual devotion of Hindu music traditions.

There was, of course, nothing inherently Hindu about gramophone technology. Instead, I argue that recording businesses articulated the convergence of recording technology and Hinduism as part of a discursive practice that signaled a major transformation in the production of popular music in South India. This transformation may have started as a kind of religious conversion at the beginning of the 1930s. By the end of the decade, however, the public face of the music recording industry in South India had turned to film songs (c.f. Hughes 2007). It was not that these companies stopped recording religiously oriented music, but that they became a much smaller part of a market that was increasingly dominated by film songs.

## NOTES

1. I am using the term Hinduism and its cognates to refer to a plurality of distinct religious traditions, rather than a coherent, stable, or unchanging religious system. Though the term is commonly used to refer to one of the major world religions, we must be careful not to essentialize it as a unitary practice. It is a radically decentralized set of changing religious traditions that have coexisted geographically over a long period in South Asia (von Stietencron 2005).
2. Elsewhere I have written about this earlier period in more detail (Hughes 2003). However, Kinnear (1994, 2000) has without a doubt written the most definitive accounts on the early history of music recording in India. I am indebted to his work along with that of several other more recent contributors (Parthasarathi 2005; Das Gupta 2007).

3. Explicitly inspired by the work of John Ruskin and William Morris in England, Coomaraswamy's criticism of the gramophone also shared a similar nostalgia for the lost "aura" of traditional art that Walter Benjamin famously wrote about 20 years later in Weimar Germany. Coomaraswamy's criticism, however, crucially differed in that it was inflected by a struggle for the autonomy and survival of Indian art against its erosion under colonial rule.
4. On this point regarding Coomaraswamy and the primacy of voice, see Weidman 2006, 256–260.
5. When referring to the record company, I use their own transliterated spelling "Saraswathi" that was used on all of their products. In all other instances, I use the now more common spelling "Saraswati."
6. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar (1890–1967) was a very influential figure who was instrumental in establishing what has become the now standard format for Karnatik music concerts (Subramanian 2008, 47–56).
7. The technical aspects of an early recording session are described in great detail by a newspaper correspondent after having made a visit to an Orr's Columbia House temporary studio (*The Hindu*, Sept. 27, 1932, p. 7).
8. For more discussion of this booklet and the image, see Weidman (2006, 264–266). It is, however, important to note that Weidman has mistakenly identified Naradar as the classical Karnatik composer Tyagaraja and the *devadasis* as housewives.
9. I am indebted to James Benson for his translation from Sanskrit.