

ICWA LETTERS

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The Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

PJ-20 1997
SOUTH ASIA

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Music: Ether of the Soul

VARANASI, India

January 1997

By Pramila Jayapal

We wake up every morning at 5:00 a.m. to music. It is taped music that is transmitted to loudspeakers tied to telephone poles around the neighborhood. It sounds cacophonous, because it is not just one song but many songs that mix and clash together, each one drowning out the melody of the other. The music continues until 7 a.m., and then the neighborhood goes back to its normal relative quiet when we can hear the creaking of the cart that belongs to the man who distributes gas cylinders, the twittering of the crows outside and the sharp giggles of the young girls on their way to school.

We asked Sheila, our landlady, about it one day when we had just moved in. "The music...where is it from?"

Her face lit up. "Isn't it wonderful?" Her beady eyes sparkled under her glasses. "This is a very special place we are in. We are surrounded by temples. Each one plays its own devotional songs, *bhajans* and *kirtans*. I love it. Very good for meditation. Don't you think?"

"Er, yes," we stuttered, unable to tell her that our meditation practice had all but closed down, thanks in part to the wonderful music.

We didn't appreciate Indian music — in any of its many forms — back then. I was raised on a decade of classical piano lessons, glee clubs where I dressed up in satiny pink flowing costumes and sang English madrigals, and musicals where I pranced about to choreographed Cole Porter numbers.

It's no surprise, then, that at the beginning classical Indian music just didn't make me want to join in, bellow out the tune and clap my hands. Plain and simple, I didn't understand it. The singers seemed to sing the same lines over and over again, throwing in a few vibrato-type scales in the middle. The words may have been beautiful, but they were in Hindi or Sanskrit, sometimes even Urdu. The instruments sounded either raspy or tinny, but not particularly melodious. And the songs went on forever — sometimes half an hour, sometimes longer.

The Hindi film songs that are so popular were no better; the women's voices were too high for me to appreciate, and the scenes that I knew went with the music — where women in flowing chiffon *salvaar* suits stood behind trees and beckoned alluringly to their heroes — made them seem trite. When I walked past shopkeepers blasting the latest new film songs out over boom boxes cranked to their highest volume, I would cringe.

More fun was wedding season. In Varanasi, during the winters, streets are filled with the music of marching bands. Hired for relatively nominal amounts and dressed in uniforms that look a little like those of the guards at Buckingham



At a wedding, the Mahila Sangeet (Women's Music session) is one of the favorite events. Single unmarried girls sing and dance — sometimes classical or village renderings in traditional dress (left), and sometimes much bolder, westernized songs and dances (below).

Palace, they surround the bridegroom on horseback as the wedding party takes its act to the streets. Male guests throw their hands up and gyrate wildly to popular Hindi film songs — and if they catch sight of my husband Alan on the roadside enjoying the show, they immediately drag him into the center to be the token white-male wedding guest on their video.

We had two Indian friends in their twenties who came over a few evenings. Shankar was a Michael Jackson-cum-John Travolta himself. He worked in a business, but also ran his own hair salon. He was a walking advertisement for the "hip" hair styles given at his salon. One long curl hung down artistically from the middle of his forehead. The rest of his hair was permed and clung tightly to his scalp, terminating at his neck in longer, looser curls. His friend, Kannack, was the exact opposite. As trim as Shankar was, Kannack was rather plump, with straight hair that fell down his neck like spiked paintbrush bristles. Shankar was the showman, Kannack his quiet assistant. Or so we thought, until they started making music. One evening after dinner, Shankar started singing. He stood up, adopted a film star pose, and began singing a popular Hindi song. He acted it out as if he were on screen, moving his arms and legs, widening his eyes at the appropriate moments, moving around on our thin floor mattress as if it were a slick stage. As soon as Shankar started singing, Kannack grabbed a few thick dictionaries and a couple of steel vessels that were nearby, and launched into an astoundingly rhythmic drum session. It was a wonderful evening.

At the other extreme of popular *filmi* songs, as they are called, is Indian classical music. Although a wide range of people listen to and enjoy Hindustani classical music (from the North; Carnatic music is from the South), this type of music is more popular in urban areas. Hindustani classical music was made popular in the West mainly by Pandit Ravi Shankar, when he taught the



Beatles how to play and the sitar's sound was incorporated into some of the most successful of their songs.

In between Hindi film songs and Indian classical music lies the range of folk music and devotional music. Each area, each village, has its own style of singing and its own folk songs. Devotional songs — *bhajans* and *kirtans* — are also extremely popular. In fact, our appreciation for Indian music probably began during our early morning sittings at the ghats of the Ganges, watching the sun rise over the river. Every morning, after the Brahmin priests chanted their Sanskrit prayers, they sang these devotional

The Ram Lila, a massive 40-day rendering of the epic Ramayana, takes place every year. Throughout the performance, a troupe of musicians sing the entire story of the Ramayana. Dancers, such as these Hanuman, costumed children, sing along with the musicians, as does the audience.



songs. Some of the great *bhajans* are poetry set to verse, written by famous poets like Kabir Das. Many contain stories about the gods, particularly the mischievous Lord Krishna, when he stole butter and denied to his mother that he did, or when he teased his adoring flock of milkmaids by throwing stones at their water pitchers by the river.

Music is everywhere — even in situations where it might be unheard of in the West. Often music plays a part in meetings, workshops, “professional” environments. Days might start and end with a song, and from grassroot workers to academics, people join in and sway their heads from side to side displaying their enjoyment. In cars, when I was traveling to visit development organizations, my companions would break into song. I would tap my fingers on the car door uneasily, unable to sing along. I began to enjoy listening, but dreaded the inevitable moment when I was asked to sing something. I tried “Blowing in the Wind” or “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” from Jesus Christ Superstar, and “My Grandfather’s Clock” from my fifth-grade music class. My companions tried to appreciate these songs, but they were as lost my melodies as I was with theirs, as well as thrown off by the words. I finally settled for a series of catchy Indonesian songs that I had learned as a child. They liked those, and since they didn’t understand the words, I could fib and tell them that “Oh Mama/Don’t be angry/He was only only kissing me” (yes, Indonesians were progressive) actually meant “Oh Mama/A child’s role is to be/Only only in service to her parents.” Touché on the tune and the words.

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Eventually, I decided I could not ignore Indian music anymore. I did not feel much of an urge to develop an appreciation for Hindi film songs, but found a growing interest in understanding Indian classical music better. I thought — mistakenly, I found later — that

classical singing might be easier to learn, given my background in singing.

I found a teacher from Benaras Hindu University who was from Karnataka and thrilled to meet another South Indian. I would go to her house two to three times a week at 8 a.m. She would serve me a steaming cup of tea, and then we would go into her music room. There was a mat on the floor, where we would both sit. Behind her was a statue of the Goddess of Art and Learning, *Saraswati*, always depicted carrying a *tanpura*, a four-stringed instrument with a rounded pumpkin-gourd bottom that provides the constant drone sound that serves as a musical reference point for artist and listener. By the time I reached her house, she would already have put a fresh garland of flowers around the goddess’ neck, and the room would be filled with the smell of burning incense. When she sat down with me, my teacher would touch her hands to her *tanpura*, as if to thank it and the goddess for the gift of music.

There were no music scores, no notes, no words. She would sing, and I would follow, trying to repeat the tune and words as best as I could. She probably thought I knew more than I did about Indian music, because she never explained to me the basic concepts of *raags*, which are the backbone of Indian music. I did not know what scale I was using, nor what the words I sang meant, nor what constituted the song and what was merely exercises for the voice. They all blended together, and made me too confused and overwhelmed to even formulate proper questions for her.

I tried desperately to follow my teacher as she moved up and down the scale with ease. I stumbled, often forgetting what she had just sung, cursing my past training that made me dependent on music and notes. The lessons, I knew, were in the classical tradition of *guru-shisha* — teacher and disciple. Follow and ask few questions.

Replicate first, then innovate. Learn by listening, watching, but not by questioning.

I am ashamed to admit that after two weeks of lessons, I gave up. It was not until we returned to Varanasi some six months later that I started again with a different teacher. Somehow, by then, I had more of an appreciation for Indian classical music and it made a world of difference. Somehow, music had seeped into us without our knowing it, and then once inside, had begun to work on our souls. That is what Indian music does; it captures the soul and then takes it for a musical ride.

* * *

Varanasi is famous for its classical music. It is the birthplace of sitarist Ravi Shankar, vocalist Girija Devi, tablist Kishen Maharaj, and many other well-known classical artists. Even today, when many of these internationally renowned artists have left the city, they still come back during winter season to perform. Concerts remain, as in olden days, free to the public and are generally extremely well-attended. Many concerts are several-day festivals that feature various forms of Indian music, from dance to instrumental to vocal.

My favorite concerts are the ones that take place on the river ghats. The steps are covered with white sheets, and a stage is strung with lights that shine on the rippling river water. Fresh flowers hang everywhere. The Ganges glitters like diamonds, calling to the musicians and their music, inspiring divine performances.

Many of the older and younger musicians today, however, talk about how music has become corrupted. The traditions are dying, they say; little is done to preserve and further Indian classical music; audiences no longer appreciate music in its pure form; everything has become "fast" to keep up with the rest of today's fast-paced life. The *drupad* form of classical singing is one example of this. Slow-paced and reflective, *drupad* is now rarely sung.

It has been replaced almost completely by the *khayal* form of singing which is much faster.

I spoke one evening with Chote Lal Misra, a tabla guru of international repute. I asked him to tell me how music and the form of teaching music had changed from when he was young. "Completely different," he said decisively. "We had the *guru-shisha perampara* (traditional form of teacher-disciple relationship). Today it hardly exists. In this tradition, the guru is like God. A student worships his guru as God, and through that guru/God, the disciple gets inspiration. Only if you give yourself completely to your guru can your music be inspired." My eyes wandered to the enormous painting above his head of his guru. It had a fresh garland of flowers around it. He saw my eyes, and rose from the sofa. "Come, you can see my *puja* (prayer) room. See who are my Gods."

I followed him from the living room into another room. The walls were filled with black-and-white pictures of his guru as a young boy, playing the tabla, teaching, posing with students. Interspersed with these pictures were a few framed pictures of some of the common divinities. "He is still my guru," Chote Lal's voice came from behind me. "I lived with him for 12 years, from the age of six to 18, until he died in 1958. I was his son in every way. I did everything for him, not just studying music. I took care of him and his family (which I treated as my own), I went to every concert with him, and learned the art of music by watching everything he did. Even after his death, I continue to do everything for his family. His wife is still alive, and I look after her, financially and otherwise. Same with his children, who are like my brothers and sisters."

We had settled back into his living room, I on the carpeted floor and he on a higher level, as is customary between teacher and student. "Today, there are few real gurus or shishas left," he said. "Most of the gurus are just interested in money, not in teaching. And most of the



These musicians were out on a festival night and serenaded us in the streets.

Pandit Jasraj, the inimitable Indian classical vocalist (face obscured), in concert. He is accompanied by a tablist (left), a few tampuras (center), and a violinist (right). His disciple sits behind him.



shishas just feel that they are paying money and deserve to get a service for that money. These people will never be able to progress properly on the path. They may learn some things, but they will not be truly great performers."

Is there a difference between Western and Indian shishas? I asked him, knowing that he has many Western students. "Many Westerners come here and just want to learn tabla for a few weeks, in between their tourist activities. They are not committed to it. They do not come to me. They go to those people who claim to be teachers but who can barely play themselves. But even among those who are serious about music, there are only a few who are truly devoted to music and understand the need to follow the *guru-shisha* tradition. But," he said, leaning forward, "if they do understand this, then these Westerners are often better disciples and progress further than the Indian students. Westerners have no tradition like this in their culture, so when they begin to understand this tradition, they are understanding with their intellect. When they believe in it and its benefits, their faith is so strong, it cannot be broken. Indian disciples often only believe in the tradition because they have heard about it, because it is part of their culture, and not because they have truly understood its implications and understood it intellectually. Unfortunately, most Indian students also are more interested in learning quickly, in becoming "top" performers. they will choose to not learn the more intricate rhythms because they fear they will not be able to. They want to just get on stage quickly. This is not how true musicians are made.

"Even the form of music performances has changed. Before, only the very top performers ever made it to the stage. In fact, people would not attend a performance unless it was a top name. There were no amateurs; people who made mistakes were not tolerated on stage. The artist was there to entertain, and perfection was required. One artist would often perform for hours at a time. Concerts would go on through the night, people would not

leave. The *alaap* (the first slow section of any *raag*, which gives an introduction to the notes of the *raag* and sets the mood) used to go on sometimes for an hour or more! Today, musicians and the audience do not have the patience for this. They want to quickly get to the *taan* (the second, faster section of a piece)."

"Don't you think it is also good that younger, up-and-coming musicians are given a chance to perform and develop their skills?" I ventured.

"Yes, it is true," he replied. "This is the good of today's system. But, the music we hear is not as pure, and people have become used to criticizing an artist, pointing out the flaws (because they do exist), not just listening and enjoying a creation that is occurring before them, as it used to be. Also, everyone's goal is now to reach the stage. This is more important than even practicing or learning, or really understanding the music, being inspired by it, expressing devotion to the gods through it. The goal in olden times was never to make it to the stage; it was to create and to express the inspiration that comes to you from the Gods."

As I got up to leave, I asked him curiously, "You are obviously sad about many of the things that have happened since you began your music training, particularly about the state of the relationship between teacher and disciple. Why, then, do you continue to teach? Most of your students are not in the original tradition, living with you and devoting their lives completely to you and to music. Do you ever feel that you should not teach anymore?"

Chote Lal thought for a few minutes, then replied, "I teach to give people joy. If I can at least do this, then my time spent has been worthwhile."

* * *

Alan and I began lessons again some three months ago when we returned to Varanasi. Alan learns tabla with

Chote Lal, and I learn classical *khayal* singing with a young man who teaches at BHU. The timbre of my teacher's voice captivates, and as he sings, his eyes half-closed, he seems to be calling to the Gods to come and hear his praise of them.

Through my teacher, I am just beginning to understand some of the complexities of Indian music, as well as its possibilities. Like music anywhere, the essence of the music is in the feeling of the piece, and the artist's ability to convey that feeling. *Raags*, depending on their spiritual and emotional qualities, are classified for particular times of the day, even seasons of the year. To hear a *raag* and know whether it is a morning or evening *raag* is the humble beginning of being able to hear and convey the qualities of that piece.

Most musicians believe, like Chote Lal, that truly inspired music comes from the gods and is dedicated back to the gods. They speak about instruments in terms of the gods — Krishna's flute, or the coming together of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati in the sound of the drum. The greatest of performers says that they perform for the gods. They draw inspiration from that sphere, and transform it into magical music for us ordinary mortals.

Those who know Indian classical music well talk of both the physical sound and the spiritual sound. Physical sound provides immediate pleasure and is audible for the simplest person to enjoy. Spiritual sound, however, is produced from ether of the soul and is more difficult to hear. Those lucky enough to hear it, it is said, are liberated by it forever. □