

“Brahmamokate” [“The Oneness of Existence”] –

**The Feeling of Cultural Oneness: Establishing my sense of personal identity**

“అన్ని మంత్రములు నిందే ఆవహించెను |  
వెన్నతో నాకు గలిగె వేంకటేశు మంత్రము ||”

“Anni mantramulu inde aavahinchenu |  
Vennatho naaku galige venkateshu mantramu ||”

“All the mantras, [with]in this [Venkateshwara] mantra, are possessed. |  
At a very young age, I have learned about such Venkateshwara mantras. ||”

-Tallapaka Annamacharya, *Anni Mantramulu*, Annamayya Keerthanas

...

“Naa tarvaata cheppu [Repeat after me...]...Shuklaambaradharam”

“ShuklaAm...baraDharam,” I attempted to rhythmically sing.

“Not baraDharam, name. Shuklam, Ambaradharam. ShuklaAmbaradharam”

“Ohhh...ShuklaAmbaradharam...okay, okay.”

...

Three- or four-year-old me definitely struggled with correctly pronouncing Telugu words on the first try when echoing my parents’ singing and chanting. Fast forward to today:

Thankfully, I can correctly pronounce the words of this particular stotram. However, correct

Telugu pronunciation has remained a struggle for me over the years, occasionally leading me to

not quite feel a complete sense of belonging to my Indian culture. At the same time, my close

Indian cultural ties have occasionally left me feeling not quite American enough.

Born and raised in the U.S. to parents from South India, my brother and I have been raised with the understanding that we will preserve and continue many traditions of our ancestors and relatives still living in India.

One tradition? The music: south Indian classical Carnatic music (something we also refer to as sangeetham), that ties in with our religion, Hinduism.

My earliest and fondest memories are of when we lived in Westmont, on the outskirts of Chicago. Most Carnatic songs are devotional, praising various deities from Hindu mythology, and telling their tales. In the evenings and on weekends, my dad queued up and played devotional songs from online jukeboxes, humming or singing along, tapping out a beat on the table. Hearing the distinct instrumental melodies from the kitchen or elsewhere in the apartment, my mom would start to sing along. All these rich, upbeat sounds, singing voices and instruments, embraced each other as they filled my ears. When certain songs, like Hanuman Chalisa, Brahmamokate, and Anni Mantramulu stood out for reasons that weren't very clear to me at that time beyond 'I like how this sounds,' I would hum along. These particular songs remain some of my favorites today and always take me back in time to life as I was growing up.

Devotional songs were what really connected me to my culture and to my religion when I was younger, especially at a time when I was not at all aware of more complex and specific prayers. As I grew older and started to learn and remember the meanings behind the songs I'd enjoyed since childhood, these songs more or less *became* my prayers. They sustained my connection to Hinduism, especially in the years leading up to college.

In Westmont, the nearby Hindu temple would hold Sunday classes on different subjects. This was where I first started singing and learning the theory behind Carnatic (vocal) music in first grade, culminating in an end-of-the-year group performance. Unfortunately, my initial

sangeetham lessons stopped in the middle of second grade, and after that time, my deepest Indian cultural connection (established through my singing) nearly dissipated.

While I fleetingly connected the sa/ri/ga/ma/pa/da/ni swaras of Carnatic music and the do/re/mi/fa/sol/la/ti notes of Western music in a third-grade school music class, it wasn't until I played violin in my middle school's orchestra and started using sheet music that I had a bit of an 'aha' moment.

I played the Carnatic swaralu I had learned years prior using a Western classically tuned violin, playing the S/R/G/M/P/D/N/S notes on my Carnatic music vocals page as D/E/F/G/A/B/C/D on the violin. Hearing the result, I could see how at their core, the two musical traditions were similar, with notes lining up enough for the sound to be recognizable as Carnatic music. This discovery left me more appreciative of my ability to experience two cultures (and two musical traditions) simultaneously, something that has managed to so frequently leave me insecure of my place in both cultures.

Nearly eight years after having to drop my sangeetham lessons, I entertained the thought of picking them up once again. When my grandma told my mom about the sangeetham classes two of my cousins in India had started taking, they asked me if I wanted to start learning again, taking lessons online. I jumped at the chance to expand my skill, with renewed excitement for Carnatic music after the discoveries I had made while playing the violin.

Since my teacher was in India, twice a week for four years of high school, I committed to waking up at 4:30-5am to be able to attend that one-on-one music class via Skype before heading to school. I continued into college, dropping down to having a class once a week throughout my freshman year. At the moment, I am taking a little break, but I hope to continue with it sooner rather than later.

With my renewed interest in Carnatic music, as well as my younger brother's blossoming interest, our parents started more frequently playing devotional songs at home. I was more intrigued by the specific details of music at this time. What kinds of flourishes were being added to pronunciations of words as they were sung? Could I work up to replicating the more interesting yet doable flourishes consistently and on par?

More so than the songs themselves, it is the singers who stand out in my memory of this time, from legends such as M.S. Subbulakshmi, S.P. Balasubrahmanyam, and Garimella Balakrishna Prasad to younger stars such as Sooryagayathri and Rahul Vellal. Their talent shone through their expressive vocal performances, and I could only hope to attempt to match their beautifully presented, almost blissful vocals when I practiced songs they had performed before.

Although we listened to several audio recordings and watched video performances at home, I haven't gone to festivals and performances in person. Since leaving Westmont, they have always been some distance away from where I've lived.

However, I did go to India for the second time with my family in the middle of 10th grade, and we went to a couple of family gatherings during that time. On a few occasions, my cousins and I were asked to sing, in front of relatives I'd rarely interacted with and had only established a connection to through introductions like "Hi! I'm your mom's cousin, or your grandmother's second brother's third son" or "We're your grandparents, or your grandfather's first sister's daughter in law's parents!"

I tend to doubt elements of my singing ability, feeling like I barely avoid stumbling along when singing.

But in those few occasions, I was surprised at how raptly focused, pin-drop silent everyone got when I was singing. For better or for worse, I felt right at the center of attention –

not just for my outsider status, having grown up in the US. For that little chunk of time, singing songs that *I* knew that *they* knew the meanings of, I truly felt connected with my heritage, and I felt a strong sense of belonging.

Generally, Carnatic music is enjoyed for three aspects – the music itself, the sense of devotion through its roots in Hinduism, and for the feeling of community and coming together (Lieberman 154). Far from a normal traditional performance given by seasoned Carnatic vocalists, our singing was more informal, short in duration, and embellished with minimal to no improvisatory changes. This was partially due to the context of our impromptu performance, as well as our implicit “beginner” student status at the time, as we were taught to exactly mimic our teachers’ ways of singing and to not stray from it.

Looking back on this memory, I’m left with some interesting thoughts when it comes to implicit gender roles and values within my extended family and in the culture of South India and India as a whole. At the family gatherings where we were asked to sing, nearly all of us were girls. Within my extended family, it is mostly the women and girls who were learning or had learned sangeetham, and for some, it was in addition to dance. This was notable to me, as my family generally listened to an even mix of male and female singers during my childhood. However, in the distant past, Carnatic music had been performed by mainly male singers. In the more recent past, male and female singers have performed in concerts in near equal numbers despite some lingering feelings of “ambivalence” towards female singers’ skills; it is also only a more recent phenomenon that “women students far outnumber men in the numerous music colleges” in India (Viswanathan and Allen).

Other performance aspects and behaviors that my cousins and I follow include keeping track of the talam (beat) by slapping the thigh. This action has also been a source of contention

within the broader culture due to gender expectations. “Respectable middle-class” women were just starting to publicly perform in the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when keeping the tala with the hand “was considered improper” as knowledge of rhythm and talam were associated with lower-caste ‘devadasi’ women “branded as ‘prostitutes’” (Weidman 228). T. Sankaran, a contemporary of M.S. Subbulakshmi, said his grandmother thought it more womanly to strum the tampura while singing than to “beat your thigh like that” (Viswanathan and Allen). From my experience with Carnatic training, rigidly adhering to slapping the thigh has been expected at the beginner level regardless of gender; however, renowned female vocalists tend to soften this action or not do it at all; rather, they wave their hand or make other gestures in the air in time with backing music. This is possibly a relic of the past continuing into the present.

Of renowned female Carnatic vocalists from the last century, M.S. Subbulakshmi is one of the most beloved and prominent, both as a symbol of national pride through the time of Indian independence as well as the “embodiment of grace” and “Indian womanhood” (Ramnarayan). That such a beloved figure is equally commended for her skill as her femininity, even in more recent times, is something that I find interesting, as it is in a slightly different way than Western culture perhaps more implicitly commends female singers for their femininity; likewise, both are far from what male singers are commended for primarily. At the same time, M.S. Subbulakshmi was the first musician to receive the Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian honor, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (“Subbulakshmi, M.S..”).

What is interesting about Carnatic music is the role that the Indian caste system has played in determining knowledge of and access to learning about it. The renowned Carnatic singer T.M. Krishna has indicated several times that the highest caste, Brahmin, dominates the Carnatic music realm (Mitul). Considering the highest caste is the one associated with spiritual

and intellectual leaders – people who had a great deal of power in Hindu society in the past and still do today – it makes sense that they dominate the religious music scene, so to speak. As for renowned singers from outside the upper caste like M.S. Subbulakshmi (who is at least partially from a lower caste), many of them have, as opposed to challenging the “ideological ground” of the music, have “synchronized with the system” by justifying and affirming the system’s “purity structure” (Mythri 22). It is important to note that casteism is still prominent in India (as well as among Indian diaspora around the world) today, although to varying degrees.

Given the past ideas of traditional gender and caste norms when it comes to Carnatic music, it is no surprise that most renowned and often celebrated Carnatic composers whose compositions remain cherished century after century are male and of the upper caste. This may be partially or wholly due to Hindu priests, at least publicly, having always been nearly, if not all men. Two such composers are Annamacharya (also known as Annamayya) and Thyagaraja, from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively. Thyagaraja is the more well-known and celebrated of the two, as it is only from his time that “a vast body of musical compositions has been preserved and cultivated in a systematic manner”; he is considered one of the trinity of Carnatic music and there have been annual commemorations in his name since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least (Pesch 325). Through some of his lyrics, Thyagaraja criticized certain superstitions and elaborate rituals of his time (Pesch 324). On the other hand, there is not nearly as much known about Annamacharya and his compositions. His grandson estimated that Annamacharya composed nearly 32,000 poems to Venkateshwara (a form of the god Vishnu) in a simple, conversational, everyday style of the Telugu language; however, it is estimated that less than half of these poems have survived to the present day (Annamayya 99-100). Annamayya is also known for being one of the first people to speak out against casteism through his lyrics, famously directly though

‘Brahmam Okate’, where he says caste and socioeconomic status do not and should not have an impact on one’s relationship with God.

Although transnationalism has changed “dissemination and consumption patterns of Carnatic music,” characteristics such as techniques and repertoire associated with its performance by “diasporic musicians” have not been influenced much by Western culture (Ranganathan 59). My brother and I have learned many Thyagaraja and Annamacharya keerthanas over the years, but although Annamayya’s poems are less discussed in literature, we have primarily learned more of his keerthanas than Thyagaraja’s, seemingly by a combination of our parents’, our gurus’ and our own preferences based on songs we’ve heard time and time again since childhood.

As a first generation American [US-born to immigrant parents who have since become naturalized citizens], it’s been too easy at times to feel the strain of having each foot in a distinct culture with slightly different values. My discomfort with certain gender- and caste-based elements of the past carrying into the present in the form of cultural values has been the source of internal tension with Indian culture many times. Different events have brought out the unsettling feeling that I am not fully embraced by either culture. It has taken many years of reflection to start to even try to overcome this; building friendships with other US-born classmates with immigrant parents has helped me feel a little more comfortable about my place in American culture. On the other hand, it is my direct relationship with Carnatic music that helps me feel a sense of belonging when it comes to relatives and Indian culture.



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