

8. Stories and Anecdotes concerning Indian Music and Musicians

The history of Indian Music is brimming with stories and anecdotes. Why, the very origin of music and other fine arts is in itself a story. The Creator, Brahma, made this universes. He created a variety of wonderfully beautiful and enchanting things; He created the majestic mountain ranges, the thundering water-falls and the giant forest trees, as also the nimble deer, the colourful peacock and the exquisite flowers. He filled His creation with beauty, charm and splendour. But He was sad! His Consort *Saraswati* found Him in that mood and asked Him the reason for it.

Brahma said, "It is true I have created all this wonder and charm and showered beauty everywhere. But what is the use? My children, the human souls, simply pass them by; they do not seem to be sensitive to all the beauty around. All this seems to have been wasted on them; their creation seems to be purposeless!"

Saraswati took the hint and told Him, "Well, let me do my share in the great work. You have created all this beauty and splendour; I shall create in our children the

power to respond to, appreciate and get uplifted by them. I shall give them music and other arts which will draw out of them the capacity which lies deep in them to respond to the majestic splendour and exquisite charm and wondrous beauty of all creation."

So saying, the great Muse gave us the fine arts, in the hope that through the love of music and other fine arts man would understand something of the Divine in His manifestation. A funny story? Yes, but it has a great moral.

One of the basic truths on which all Indian art is developed is that true art is never made to order; it comes as a result of an irresistible inner urge. We hear a song of Tyagaraja and are enthralled; we see a majestic temple tower and gaze on it with wonder; we see some of our ancient sculptures and feel thrilled. Why? Behind all such works of art is a great spiritual urge. The artists who gave them poured their devotion in the shape of such exquisite works of art; it was an act of self-effacing dedication.

A story is told of Tansen, the great bard of Akbar's court, which illustrates this point vividly. Tansen was a great musician and Akbar was very fond of his music. One day when Tansen was in particularly good form Akbar was all in ecstasy and asked Tansen, "What is the secret of this sweet concord of notes which takes me as if it were out of this world and transports me to Divine regions? I have not heard anyone else do it. You are unique and unrivalled. Is there anyone else who can thus cast a spell of magic and make a slave of our hearts? You are really wonderful, Tansen."

The great bard replied, "Sire, I am only a humble pupil of my master, Swami Hari Das; I have not mastered even a fraction of the master's technique and grace and

charm. What am I beside him whose music is a rhythmic flow of Divine harmony, beauty and charm in sound ? ”

“What !” the emperor cried, “is there one who could sing better than you ? Is your master such a great expert ?”

“I am but a pigmy by my master’s side,” said Tansen.

Akbar was greatly intrigued ; he wanted to hear Hari Das, but, emperor though he be, he could not get Hari Das to his court. So he and Tansen went to the Himalayas where in his own ashrama dwelt the swami. Tansen had already warned Akbar that the swami would not sing except at his own leisure. Several days they stayed at the ashrama ; yet the swami did not sing. Then one day Tansen sang one of the songs taught by the swami and deliberately introduced a false note. It had almost an electric effect on the saint ; his aesthetic nature received a rude shock. He turned to Tansen and rebuked him, saying. “What has happened to you, Tansen, that you, a pupil of mine, should commit such a gross blunder ?”

He then started singing the piece correctly ; the mood came to him and, as it were, enveloped him, and he forgot himself in the music which filled the earth and heaven. Akbar and Tansen forgot themselves in the sheer melody and charm of the music.

It was a unique experience. When the music stopped Akbar turned to Tansen and said, “You say you learnt music from this saint and yet you seem to have missed the living charm of it all. Yours seems to be but chaff beside this soul-stirring music.”

“T’s true, Sire,” said Tansen, “it is only true that my music is wooden and lifeless by the side of the living harmony and melody of the master. But then there is this difference, I sing to the emperor’s bidding, but my master sings to no man’s bidding but only when the prompting

comes from his innermost self. That makes all the difference."

Raga is the basis of Indian music; we may say that it is the soul of our musical system. Each *raga* has its own essential, unique, aesthetic quality, called *bhava*; each *raga* has an individuality of its own, it is as it were a unique entity. No one may dare to do anything which will impair a *raga's* uniqueness. Each *raga* is associated with a *devata* (presiding deity), which is the enduring principle which gives life and unique structure to the *raga*.

[We may have seen pictorial representations of some of our *ragas*, especially from the Bengal school of painting. Some of them are remarkable and convey the characteristics of the *ragas* they present.]

Coming to recent times a number of anecdotes are told about the musical luminaries. Several miracles are believed to have happened in the lives of the great musical trinity — Thyagaraja, Dixitar and Shyama Sastri. By a song addressed to the Deity at Tiruppati, Thyagaraja had the screen covering the shrine drawn back by supernatural means so as to allow him to have *darshan* of the Deity. Similarly through his music he effected a great psychological metamorphosis in the character of some robbers who waylaid him, with the result that those who came to rob remained to pray. Dixitar also is said to have brought rain on a parched land by singing a piece in the *raga Amritavarshani*.

Abnormal powers have been ascribed to music. *Megharanjini* *raga* is believed to cause rain, *Dipak* to kindle fire, *Nagavarali* to subdue and sway cobras, and so on. Authenticated occurrences are on record in support of these beliefs.

There is an old saying that beasts, infants and even cobras are sensitive to the influence of music. I still vividly remember the occasion when as a child I came under the

influence of soul-stirring music. I had gone with a party to Kumbakonam for a marriage there. I was then very young—under ten. In the place where we were staying I heard some one saying that there was to be a flute performance by a great expert in the next street that evening. I wandered to the next street and found a large crowd gathered in a huge pandal to listen to the flute played by a strikingly handsome (but blind) person. I went, I heard and I stayed for how long I do not know. My people who had planned to leave the place that evening found me missing when they were about to start, and so they started searching for me. Anyway it was late for them to get the train and so they postponed the journey. One search party came to the place where I was and they also stayed and listened to the flute. I had no idea of ragas then; but I understood from what others were saying that the raga the artist was so exquisitely elaborating was *Natakurinji*. It produced such a deep impression on me that when later on I began to sing ragas, it was not *Todi* or *Bhairavi* or *Sankarabharanam*, but *Natakurinji* that I first started elaborating. Similarly on another occasion the raga *Yadukulakambhoji* played on the nagaswaram by Sivakolundu produced an indelible impression on me.

In those spacious days when vidwans were patronised by rulers and zamindars and had not to play to the tune of anyone who came in with a four anna ticket, the vidwans enjoyed great liberty; they sang as they liked without having to keep to a programme which provided only twenty minutes for *ragalapana*, *tana* and *pallavi* all together. Some of them used to sing a raga for hours, and for even days without any repetition; they were capable of such originality and creative expression. Some specialised in some ragas so much so that they came to have the names of some ragas attached to their own names, such as Todi Sitaramiah,

Begada Subramania Iyer, Kedaragowla Narasimha Iyengar, and so on.

An interesting story has been told of Todi Sitaramiah who was a court musician at Tanjore. He was a great favourite of the Raja; his rendering the raga *Todi* was considered to be unrivalled. Sitaramiah was a spendthrift and in spite of all the favour showered on him by the Raja he was always in want. Once he was badly in need of money. He had pledged all his belongings for various debts incurred by him and so he could not again approach his creditors for money.

There was a money-lender at Tanjore who was somewhat of a Shylock, and so people went to him only as the last resource. Sitaramiah had to go to him for a loan. The money-lender offered to give the loan on some suitable security. Sitaramiah pleaded that he had already pledged all his properties and that there was nothing left over to pledge as security. The shrewd money-lender had a brain-wave. He said, "Surely that cannot be. You must be having still something with you which you can pledge. Yes, I know you have something which you can offer as pledge. If you are prepared to pledge it, I shall let you have the loan at the usual rate of interest."

Sitaramiah was surprised, but his need was so great that he said to the money-lender, "Well, as far as I am aware, I have nothing of my own to pledge. If you mention something which is really my own, I am prepared to leave it with you as security for the loan."

The money-lender's eyes twinkled and he said, "Your *Todi* raga is still yours; you may pledge it and take the loan, and when you return the loan you can have it back."

Sitaramiah was non-plussed, but he had no choice and so he pledged his *Todi* and got the loan. From that day he could not sing his favourite raga. Days passed and the

Raja began to miss the *Todi* raga very much; he wondered why Sitaramiah did not sing *Todi* at all; it was a great surprise.

When he came to the court one day the Raja asked Sitaramiah to sing *Todi* for which he was hungering. Sitaramiah was in a fix; he was gulping in his throat and wringing his hands. On the Raja's demanding an explanation the truth came out. The Raja appreciated the shrewdness of the money-lender, cleared the loan taken by Sitaramiah and redeemed his favourite *Todi* raga.

Certain ragas are considered appropriate to certain hours of the day; for example, *Bhupalam* in the early morning, *Saveri* and *Dhanyasi* in the early forenoon, *Poorvakallyani* in the evening, *Kamboji* and *Nilambari* at night are considered suitable.

Pachampetta Nataraja Iyer was a great patron of music in Trichy District. Whenever musicians passed that way they used to stay with him for a while and spend some musically fruitful time in his company. Once the famous Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer happened to stay for a night with Nataraja Iyer. After supper Maha Vidyanatha Iyer, as was usual on such occasions, started singing. Nataraja Iyer wanted him to sing the raga *Bhupala*, which ought to be sung only in the early morning hours and not in the first half of the night. For a moment Vaidyanatha Iyer hesitated, and then said, "Certainly, I shall sing a shloka as raga-malika and include *Bhupala* also in the string of ragas."

He then started singing the shloka and kept the listeners spell-bound so that they lost count of time. Then he sang *Bhupala* raga also. It was so exquisitely rendered that it looked as if the dawn had come at midnight. As a matter of fact it was just dawn then. People were in such rapt attention that they did not know that many hours had passed and the next day was dawning.

Our musicians are very interesting people; they are intensely human and will do anything for the sake of friendship. They have a very lively sense of humour too. At a performance by one of our top-ranking musicians two friends, sitting in front of him, were counting the number of times the artist was using snuff. The musician noticed this and bided his time. When he was about to use snuff again he turned to the gentlemen in front and said (in a loud voice so that all could hear), "Sirs, this is the ninth time I am using snuff; take note and check this with your previous countings and verify." The whole house burst into boisterous laughter.

At a concert in which, by a strange turn of circumstances, a senior violin vidwan of high rank had to accompany a beginner, the late Tiger Varadachariar was asked to say a few words at the end. "Tiger" never uttered a word of disparagement about anyone. He complimented all the party in general terms. About the violinist he said: "What shall we say of our senior vidwan? His experience and knowledge are deep like an ocean. He is verily a mighty sea which receives into its wide bosom such pure and holy rivers like the Ganges as also the gutter water of Coovam." The implications are obvious.

There was a Zamorin at Calicut who was fond of music and had also a good knowledge of the art. He used to patronise deserving musicians and give them rich presents. Once a great pallavi vidwan happened to go to Calicut; the Private Secretary to the Zamorin, himself a rasika, arranged for a concert by the vidwan at the palace.

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The vidwan got wild; he shouted. "Which fool would care about the sahitya of a pallavi?" and went away from the palace.

The Zamorin also got angry. The Private Secretary was a tactful man; he pacified the two and arranged for a recital the next day: he had managed to get the Zamorin to agree to waive his stipulation regarding the wording of the pallavi. The vidwan started the pallavi and elaborated it with such mastery and skill and charm that the Zamorin was highly pleased and made extra presents to the vidwan.

When, however, the artist was about to leave the palace, the Zamorin asked him to give the wording of the pallavi at least then. The vidwan faced the Zamorin and said, "I am prepared to give you the sahitya on condition that you will not get angry."

The Zamorin agreed to the condition, and the vidwan gave him the sahitya, and immediately ran away. The Zamorin was taken aback and got into a rage, but he could not do anything as the vidwan had in the meantime run away. The sahitya was *Samoodiri thavidu thinnu* meaning that the Zamorin ate the chaff, the implication being that instead of enjoying the pure art of music, the Zamorin was after the words which especially in a pallavi was as insignificant as the chaff as compared to the grain.