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Discourse Community essay

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Bonding with Music and Faith

When I was a child, my mother always played *Carnatic* music in the home. If you walked into our house, you would never hear rock, or pop, or rap, or anything else. Only *Carnatic* music was played. She would play M.D. Ramanathan to put me to sleep or M.S. Subhalakshmi to wake me up. M.S., as we call her in short, sang a collection of devotional pieces in the *Carnatic* style called *Supprabhatham*. I remember as a child I used to wake up late on weekends to the sound of the pressure cooker sounding loudly as my mother, having already completed breakfast earlier that morning, would be boiling some *toor daal* for that day’s lunch. My sister and I would trudge slowly across our room—for in those days we used to share a bedroom—to freshen up. Then, I would hear *Supprabhatham* playing downstairs, and something about its calming, repetitive nature put me in a better mood as I readied myself for whatever the day would bring. In those days, my weekends consisted of piano practice, dance practice, western classical voice practice, and *Carnatic* vocal practice.

My music, faith, and family are central to every other community I belong to. All the values I learned from these three aspects of my life lead me toward these various communities. In technical terminology, these communities are referred to as discourse communities. Discourse communities practice their literacies by participating in various literacy events associated with it (Barton and Hamilton). My parents strove to teach me about my faith by exposing me to others who could lead me in the path my heritage and culture set for me.

I have participated in our Hindu *bhajan* group from a very young age. Every month, all the Indians in the suburban Akron area meet at one place to sing *bhajans*—Hindu prayer songs—together before socializing amidst some delicious Indian food, courtesy of the host of that particular month. We compiled a binder full of all the *bhajans* we would sing, and as the years went by, we kept adding to the binder as people in our *bhajan* group made suggestions for new prayer songs we could include. This *bhajan* group was originally started so that all of the Indian children in our area could learn our prayers and the various facets of Hinduism. Well, as this was in the 90s, obviously most of those children are not exactly children anymore, but somehow the group never dissolved. Nowadays, some of the older children I grew up with in 90s and early 2000s bring their own children to the *bhajans*. We, too, host a *bhajan* every September or October depending on which month *Navrathri*, the festival of the nine nights, arrives. My parents took every step possible to ensure that I was able to grow up in America without losing my religion or heritage.

Music is very much an integral part of my family. My mother’s oldest brother runs an audiobook company called *Karadi Tales*, focused on teaching young grade-school children how to read. These books are filled with a combination of Indian culture and music, depicting many famous Hindu sacred stories in an entertaining way that young children would be able to understand and identify with. Most importantly, the books also contain songs, a few of which I have been fortunate enough to sing, over the years. My mother’s youngest brother is a music director for both *Karadi Tales* and for other Indian movies. A couple years ago, he gave me the opportunity to sing a small piece of vocal score in one of the Hindi movies he was music directing. My mother’s middle brother is a *Carnatic* classical vocal musician and violinist full-time. He tours the country with his wife performing hundreds of concerts every year, and has been an invaluable mentor to me in my *Carnatic* vocal studies.

My mother began teaching me *Carnatic* vocal music when I was three years old. Though it may be hard to believe, I actually do have vague recollections of those days. I remember learning *varishais*, rhythmic scale patterns intended to train and culture a beginner’s voice, then moving on to *geethams* and *swarajathis*, both of which make up a beginner student’s first songs. I remember my mother teaching me my first ever *varnam*, in the *ragam*, *Mohanam*, which, incidentally is her name and thus her favorite *ragam*. Every summer, my instruction was supplemented by my grandmother in India, when I traveled there every year, to visit my family. As I advanced in *Carnatic* music I was fortunate enough to learn from some of the best teachers both in India and the US, and even today I am still actively studying this musical art form.

At this point one might ask, what is *Carnatic* music? It is an oral and instrumental tradition for South Indian Hindus that spans over two millennia. The composers of the old days wrote in the language *Sanskrit*, which is the mother of all the Indian languages, but as time passed, composers began switching to their own mother-tongues, veering away from the pure traditional into a more personal realm. It is this realm I identify with most.

Apart from *Carnatic* vocal music, I also learned many other musical art forms, beginning with classical piano at age five, an Indian classical dance form called *Bharathnatyam* at age seven, western classical voice at age twelve, and classical violin at age thirteen. My parents encouraged my sister and myself to pursue these many varieties of musical education at a young age, so that when we reached a level of maturity, we could decide for ourselves, which skills we wanted to hone to an even greater level. The goal was not to be a musician as a profession; the goal was to develop diverse skills that we could use to keep our minds fresh and active as we endeavored to study whatever subject it was that would become our profession. I never wanted to pursue music as a profession. Musical studies, particularly the two forms of classical voice I have studied, both Indian and Western, hold a very special place in my heart. I feel as though if I had attempted to use those skills to make money, it would have tarnished the value those skills hold for me. Music is not something that should be associated with any kind of worry; for me it is, in fact, just the opposite. I use music as my mode of temporarily escaping from the stresses of life, as I spend an hour at home, by myself, letting go of all the worries about tests and homework, to sing my favorite songs or play a few pieces on the piano. In addition to personal enjoyment, music has given me a versatile education that has been invaluable to me. *Carnatic* music is so deeply interconnected with my faith, that every time I learn a new *krithi* I try to understand its meaning and the divine inspiration behind it. My favorite composer is Thyagaraja, an 18th century composer who wrote devotional songs in praise of Lord Rama, one of the incarnations of the Hindu god, Vishnu, lead me to one particular text that remains my favorite Hindu text to this day.

The *Ramayana* is one of the most important sacred texts in Hinduism, yet is the least well-known by non-Hindus. This, in my opinion, is the most pitiful ignorance as the *Ramayana* expresses such great magnificence, while teaching so many lessons on character, good and evil, and the tenets of being as pure a person as possible in this world. It is an epic poem, composed originally in the *Sanskrit* language by the legendary sage, Valmiki, and narrates the story of one of Vishnu’s incarnations, Rama, and his noble travels through the forest with his wife and loyal brother, as a result of being exiled from the kingdom he was to inherit, by his own jealous step-mother. Rama embodies all that is good. I have read the *Ramayana*, in English, from cover to cover several times, and each time I learn something new about life. The scope of the epic is such that one will never truly understand everything it teaches. The hope is that with each reading, one will gain a little extra knowledge that will guide him through life. A lesson my parents always repeated again and again is presented so beautifully in Book VI of the *Ramayana*, when Lakshmana, Sita’s devoted brother-in-law, cautions her against pursuing the beautiful wild deer she wants to raise as a pet: “Trust me, not in jewelled lustre forest creatures haunt the green, / 'Tis some *maya* and illusion, trust not what thy eyes have seen!" (Dutt, 6.3.17-18) I remember my parents teaching me of the importance of caution and self-reliance. Many things in the world are beautiful at sight, but they are a *maya*, an illusion. Only in family can we trust outright, she used to say, and that was the bond I shared between my parents and my sister.

My familial ties make up the majority of who I am. We are connected by every other community I belong to. I come from a relatively small immediate family; I grew up with my parents and my one older sister. These three people were the grounding for everything I pursued in life. I joined the Science Olympiad team in high school because of the interest in science and math that I derived from my father. I am pursuing medicine as a career because I saw how much joy my mother received from practicing in that field. While, these scientific endeavors might seem lacking in my story, I wanted to use these few pages to relate a story of my innermost passion, something I will turn to at the most desperate times in my life. My music, faith, and family are the reasons for all of my goals, endeavors, and my achievements. Lastly, I know that at the end of the day, my family is the only community out of which I will never be rejected. This certainty gives me a sense of confidence in myself as I strive to contribute to society through all the stages of my life.

Works Cited

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