

Prof. RR Tilwalli and a magical year at Walchand College

After passing my 12th grade I had the option to join medical school or engineering. Like most kids of that age, my decision heavily depended on what my friends were doing. Most of them took up engineering, and so did I. But I had the good sense to at least forego my ambition to join some supposedly top-rated but remote "regional engineering college" such as Suratkal or Vellore, where I am sure I would have been utterly homesick and miserable most of the time. Instead, I joined Walchand College of Engineering which was just a 2-hour-bus-ride away from my hometown Warananagar.

Walchand College was in Sangli – a midsize city with all the urban amenities and a rural, laid-back culture. The college had a proper, independent, beautiful campus, and was located about midway between Sangli downtown and another city called Miraj. Although students from nearby villages and towns formed the primary pool of the student populace, there were also a lot of students from Pune and Mumbai and even from distant cities outside of Maharashtra. I felt completely at home in this homely and yet diverse environment. Making new friends was not very difficult since most of us faced similar academic and emotional challenges.

I met Shreekant Patwardhan while facing one such "academic" challenge. We had this "Workshop" class in which we were supposed to build our manual skills at various tasks such as woodworking, metalwork, etc. At one of the woodworking sessions, we were put to actual work of cutting and polishing wood to create some geometric object. Having never handled such skilled work, I struggled at my equipment. My piece of wood kept splintering and taking on strange shapes. I looked around helplessly and noticed a student actually enjoying his task. He was manipulating his wood quite effortlessly and, if I was not mistaken, was even humming a song while doing the work. I approached him and in an embarrassed voice admitted my lack of skill and asked him if he could help. He was glad to help and my wood metamorphosed into a beautiful and intended shape, and, in no time, so did our friendship. That was Shreekant, one of my first lifelong friends whom I met at Walchand.

In no time, I discovered the "Walchand College Art Circle" which consisted primarily of musicians. Since I purportedly played the violin, I had a legitimate cause to join them, and happily discovered that there was no other violinist to compete against. That's where I first met Prof. R.R. Tilwalli, who was the faculty advisor of the Art Circle. The group consisted of quite a few talented musicians – Nitin Amin who was a wonderful flutist, Pramod Kulkarni who played the harmonium, a talented tabla player whose name I now cannot recall, and several vocalists such as Rana Ganguly, Seema Bagul, etc. Several first-year students like myself also joined the art circle. Our first target was to prepare for the annual college gathering.

Prof. Tilwalli taught at the department of Business Management and had an impressive and pleasant personality. He had a square jaw and sharp-featured face with gentle but piercing eyes. He reminded me of Atticus Finch in the famous movie "To Kill a Mockingbird". Prof. Tilwalli himself was a thorough-bred musician, as I discovered soon. He took some of us to his house once where we discovered that he had a special sound-proof music room with high quality audio equipment and a great collection of music. I had never before listened to Indian classical music in such a high-quality

sound-proof environment. It just blew my mind when he played Prabha Atre's Raag Kalawati and then Amir Khan's Raag Marwa. That music room then became our favorite destination to move to after grueling Art Circle music practices.

Luckily for me, Prof. Tilwalli had a weakness for the violin. He had an amazing collection of music of such maestros as Lalgudi Jayaraman and MS Gopalakrishnan. I had never even heard those names before! For me, the South Indian classical musical genre was a whole new discovery. I instantly fell in love with the Carnatic style of playing the violin. Despite my rudimentary skills, Prof. Tilwalli went so far as to offer to teach me some of the easier compositions of those violin maestros. I remember he helped me learn a beautiful Bhairavi composition of MS Gopalakrishnan by actually telling me the notation on the fly. I daresay we became friends soon. Fortunately, I had no academic association with him because there was no business management course for the first-year students, so our connection remained entirely musical and personal.

My first year at Walchand College turned out to be an eventful and also a magical year. Eventful because I had to undergo an appendectomy surgery to get rid of a long-festering but heretofore undiscovered appendicitis that had troubled me since my 10th grade. The surgery meant that I missed two final exams of my first semester. But somehow, I was able to catch up in the second semester and get a good-enough overall grade to get a transfer to the Instrumentation department at COEP (College of Engineering) in Pune for my second year.

But, more importantly, it was a magical year, because of the wonderful friendships I built during this time and in a big part because of my Art Circle association.

I would like to quickly narrate a funny episode. I lived in the college hostel (dormitory) and for some time Shreekant did too. During the winter months, it was impossible to have our baths in the hostel bathrooms because they only supplied cold water. Instead, there was a separate row of bathrooms where students would line up with their buckets and were each given half-a-bucket of hot water. Shreekant and I used to walk together to these rooms usually when there was no one waiting. It so happened that Shreekant always finished his bath before me and waited outside until I came out. Noticing this, I decided to speed up my bath so that I came out first. To my consternation, no matter how quickly I finished my bath, there he would be, waiting outside with the empty bucket, fresh and humming. I got so exasperated that one day I went in and came out without even taking my bath. And still, there he was ...

At the Art Circle, life was pure magic. Prof. Tilwalli was an inspiring and skilled steward of the Art Circle and he helped us produce a truly magnificent show at the Annual Gathering. I played a solo piece and also accompanied several vocalists in their performances. Prof. Tilwalli was expert in figuring out the notation of any musical piece, which made our life so easy. They say music provides an ideal brew for romantic endeavors. Indeed, during our practices, I saw several romances flourish. There was a first-year girl who was as stunning in her looks as in her voice, who had to pick from a bevy of talented suitors. Unfortunately, no one had the stomach for a violinist, so I was forced to remain faithful to my music. All my colleagues were such wonderful people. In spite of being in

different departments and having different levels of seniority in the college, we were all just artists in the Art Circle, and became close friends. I had the most wonderful time listening to their music and practicing some of my own with them.

I kept in touch with Prof. Tilwalli even after leaving Sangli after my first year of engineering. He always reminded me to practice my violin and kept me informed about the whereabouts of the great violin maestros. Indeed, it was he who told me that MSG (MS Gopalakrishnan) was going to perform at the Sawai Gandharva music festival in Pune, and I remember spending a most enchanted evening listening to the maestro. Those days (unlike today when all programs must finish by 10 pm), music programs could go on as long as the musicians and their audiences wanted, and I remember that particular mehfil went on till 4 in the morning! It was an extremely cold night too, and I rode my bicycle back to my place of dwelling feeling the warmth of my thick green sweater and MSG's music.

After going to the US, I wrote to Prof. Tilwalli frequently. A couple of his replies still survive which I am pasting below. Music was our primary connection, although I guess we also met at various other levels of human interests and developed a natural affection.

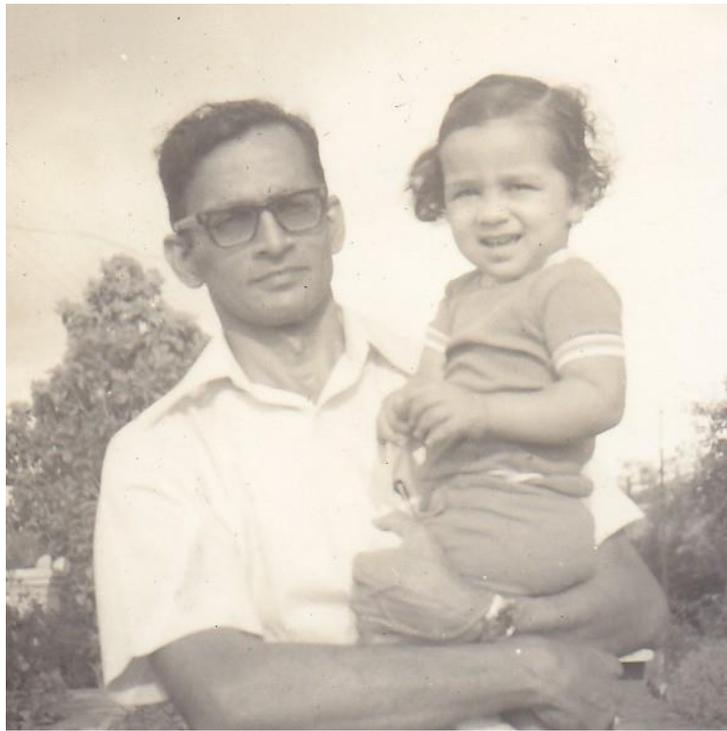
Much later, I began to pay visits to Sangli to meet friends and relatives, and I made it a point to also drop by Prof. Tilwalli's house accompanied by Shreekant who lived in the nearby Madhavanagar. Once I had the audacity to carry my violin and play a Hindi song for Prof. Tilwalli. I am sure he was disappointed to observe my decay from classical music into pop, but he politely applauded my effort. Audio technology was changing fast then, and it seemed to us that Prof. Tilwalli's great collection of gramophone records might go obsolete soon. So, we offered to convert some of his music to MP3. Fortunately, he declined our offer and likely prevented the destruction of a most valuable treasure.

Still later, I met Srivani Jade in Seattle, who turned out to be a niece of Prof. Tilwalli's. That was a wonderful discovery, and the "Tilwalli connection" was sufficient to ensure Srivani and I became instant friends. She, quite unsurprisingly, was a musician as well and sang beautiful classical music. She told me how Raghu Uncle (Prof. Tilwalli) had been instrumental in encouraging her to pursue music as a child.

Prof. Tilwalli passed away in January 2019 after a long battle with Parkinson's. He will forever remain an unforgettable figure in my little musical universe. Every time I listen to MSG, I picture one of our musical getaways in Prof. Tilwalli's music room listening to crisp gramophone music while sipping the coffee made by Mrs. Tilwalli.

By: Abhay B. Joshi (abjoshi@yahoo.com)

Written: June 2021



Letter dated 9 February 1987:

4th.

Vishrambag
9th Feb., 1987

My dear Ashay.

Your delightful letter arrived here about a month ago, and a very bad coverbandent that I am, I could not reply to you earlier. Part of the delay in replying was also because of my hesitant hesitant but nagging feeling that when my letter is juxtaposed with yours mine will look very ~~stark~~ abjectly written, and, I must confess, very badly worded too: I did not know - for you never revealed it during your about stint as a student here - that you could write English so well. When I received your very first letter in English, I was very pleasantly surprised. The latest letter which I am holding in front of me now also very neatly and well written. Your observation has been very keen and perceptive too. More pleasing was your astute observation that the amount of work that everyone is loaded with is taken in one's stride and that people become fatter and healthier precisely because of work, good food and good air. So you have found a haven (or heaven)! I am indeed happy to learn from you so much about America and its people. Please keep us posted more often than you are doing now. I could hate to lose touch with you.

I was also happy to learn that you are trying to imitate something of western music - especially violin also. I expect you to make me also appreciate western music of which I am totally ignorant.

दूसरा मोड़ SECOND FOLD

भेजने वाले का नाम और पता:-
Sender's Name and Address:-

R. R. TILWALLI
SHREE-RAMA-PRASAD
VISHVA VIDYALAYA 415 415
Dist. Sangli, Maharashtra.

INDIA

इस पत्र के अन्दर कुछ न रखिये
No Enclosures Allowed

पहला मोड़ FIRST FOLD

Do you intend coming back to India after completing your study? The chances are that you will prefer to settle there. However next time when you come to Sangli, please do keep at least one whole day to spend at my place. If you can spend more, the merrier it will be.

I am thankful to you for your best wishes for a happy new year and though late would like to reciprocate.

Expecting a reply and with best wishes to you, I am

Yours sincerely
R. R. Tilwalli

Letter date 1997:

My dear Abhay and Tanuja,

Your new year greeting card arrived here about a month ago. ~~At the~~ It was very gratifying for me to note that a student of mine like you remembers me for years after he leaves me after a contact of not even one year in the Wateband College of Engg., visits me on every visit of his to India and sends me a greeting card. I am indeed really very happy to tell you that you are such an endearing person whose love and affection can be so enduring too. I heartily reciprocate, though belatedly, your good wishes and wish both of you a very very happy and prosperous New Year. May the Almighty always keep both of you happy. How about the arrival of a tiny tad? Please do let me know.

The memory of your last visit you have kept alive in my mind by your two cassette gifts. I did listen to them ~~but~~ but I believe that your training me in appreciation of Western music will be better and until then I have to wait. In your next visit I expect to learn from you some of concepts in Western music.

How are both of you? You were married in 11/18/90 and you must have had a child. I earnestly hope all of you are well. What are ^{you} doing now? Are you employed or doing any independent business or consultancy? Does Tanuja also serve? Did your parents or Tanuja's parents visit you? I would have had the pleasure of talking to you on phone if I had known your address and phone No. I could not call them because ~~and~~ my wife and my journey to Chicago was decided in tremendous

दूसरा मोड़ SECOND FOLD

भेजने वाले का नाम और पता:-
Sender's Name and Address:-

R. R. Tilwani
Shreerams Prasad
Vishrambag, Sangli
INDIA

इस पत्र के अन्दर कुछ न रखिये
No Enclosures Allowed

R. R. TILWANI
SHREERAM PRASAD
VISHRAMBAG--416 415
Dist. Sangli, Maharashtra

पहला मोड़ FIRST FOLD

very good We were at my brother's place in Oakbrook between
19th May and 31st Aug. 1995. I am really sorry I could not
contact you

The best is all right here. Please do not
compare your excellent handwriting and real letters
with mine. I stand to suffer in comparison. Please do write
to me. Let our friendship continue even from afar.

I trust this finds all of you in excellent
health. With best wishes to ~~both~~ all of you, I am

Yours sincerely,
R. R. Tilwani