

# A Cup of Music

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It was about 6:30 in the evening. I somehow managed to take my car out of the mad high-speed and unforgiving traffic of *Baner Road*<sup>3</sup> and turn into a small lane where my parents lived in a small one-bedroom apartment.

*Baner Road* is really a four-lane divided street: two lanes to go up and two to go down. But the traffic every day at this time appears as if there were 10 lanes. There are numerous two-wheelers – scooters and motorcycles – driven by men and women with their heads completely wrapped in colorful scarfs which leave just a narrow slit for the eyes. The scarfs provide protection from the pollution. Then, there are hundreds and hundreds of Indian and foreign-made cars in which the bosses sit in the backseat reading newspaper or ogling videos on their gadgets and their low-paid drivers sit in the front seat wearing dirty clothes and staring blankly ahead. There are the 3-wheelers – the auto-rickshaws – cranking along, overflowing with people. All these vehicles make up the bulk of the flood-like fast-moving turbulent traffic of *Baner Road*. Everything appears as if it is being carried through the street by a powerful blowing wind.

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<sup>3</sup> Baner Road is a major street in the city of Pune, India.

Everyone just moves into the next available spot in front of them. That is the only algorithm they follow.

There are even vegetable sellers with their push-carts and a few last-remaining hardy bicyclists pushing their way undaunted on this perilous journey. In this mad traffic, there is no chance for pedestrians to get to the other side even at designated crosswalks. When they see the slightest opportunity, they run helter-skelter like chicken chased by rabid dogs. It's a miracle no one ever gets killed!

I had left my office in a delirious and distraught state of mind. In the conference call with our overseas customer, the customer contact (a young Dev Manager) had taken my team (and consequently me too) to task when he had delivered his devastating critique of our work.

"This feature does not work!"

"Who asked you to work on this module?"

"Don't you guys have a project plan?"

And so on.

He had read out a long list of 20 complaints. He had provided detailed proof and examples for each. (I couldn't help but admire his attention to detail and wished my team showed some of it!) Indeed, all the complaints were quite true and justified. But what could I do? I was asked to scale Mount Everest and the company had given me climbers who barely had the experience of climbing *Parvati*<sup>4</sup>! They had neither the technical skills to do the work nor the maturity to ask for help when needed. These team-mates of mine were so shameless and audacious that many of them had sat through the conference call yawning and playing games on their gadgets! As the project

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<sup>4</sup> Parvati is a small hill in the city of Pune.

manager I was left alone to enjoy the music on the speakerphone.

After the call with the customer, I had to deal with our own sales people, who were obviously very concerned.

"We must not lose this customer!"

"You must fix these issues promptly and properly, otherwise we will all be on the street tomorrow."

"Our livelihood depends on him."

They kept chanting in my ears. (It's funny how the sales guys always refer to every customer as a man – someone powerful and frightening).

The whole afternoon passed as if I was trapped in a long, dark tunnel.

Problems never come alone. They believe in teamwork. And they love to work in large teams! Aside from this bombardment of office problems, I kept getting calls from home about a variety of complaints:

"The plumber did not turn up. There is no water in the kitchen!"

"The school has sent a letter about the notebooks – they are not the right size!"

"The car insurance has expired, can you inform the agent?"

As the day wore on, I became extremely agitated, dazed, angry. Finally, at about 5:30 I decided to drop everything and go to my parents' house for a little while. I must go there and have that magical cup of tea that my mother makes. That might help me calm down, I said to myself.

My parents lived on the second floor of a five-story building that stood tall among a collection of surrounding bungalows. As I started climbing the stairs, I heard sounds of someone singing. I felt a twinge of irritation. Apparently, my father was teaching music to one of his many students.

My father was addicted to music. He had spent his entire working life first as an engineer and then as a manager at a local automobile company. But his heart was not in his work. He spent all available time listening to music and learning to sing. By the time he retired from his job, he had become quite a well-known vocalist in the local community. People invited him to give private performances, and lots of students flocked to his place to learn from him.

But this interest in music had remained confined to my dad. My mom listened to his music, she accompanied him to musical concerts; she even watched him sing at his performances without batting an eyelid. But, it never appeared as if she was genuinely interested in music. She just played her role of a dedicated wife to support her husband's passion.

I was at the other extreme – I just could not stand my father's music. My father tried so often to make me learn music from him or from anybody; he asked me to go to musical programs with him. But I never succumbed to his wishes and kept myself at a safe distance from his music fad.

So, when I heard the sounds of music coming from upstairs, I thought of turning around, but, I had no energy left even to do that. While I was still considering my options, I had reached the door of my parents' apartment.

The door was slightly open. In spite of my repeated admonitions to lock their apartment door, my parents always kept the door unlocked and ajar. This was thanks to their previous experience of living in a small-town culture, where everyone left their doors unlocked and allowed visitors free entry. Random people could walk in, read the newspaper, even enjoy a cup of tea and then leave. My parents felt that keeping the door locked was equivalent to being anti-social.

And my argument was: "Yeah, keep the door open and invite the robbers with a red carpet!"

I pushed the door and entered the apartment. As soon as my father saw me enter he gave his usual ear-to-ear smile and informed my mother of my arrival by calling her out loudly. He then added, "And yes, I will have some tea as well."

I did not return his smile and just slumped in the chair near the door.

The undeniable truth was that there was hardly any expression of love or affection left in my interaction with my parents in recent times. All that I offered to them was biting criticism and loads of advice. I couldn't really hold anyone else responsible for my behavior. My wife spoke very little but she was certainly not anti-social. By herself, she had never complained to me about my parents nor had she ever manufactured reasons to pick petty fights with them.

It was really me who held this firm belief that "*mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were like fuel and lighter and must be kept apart*" and had pushed my parents away after my marriage. My parents had quietly accepted my decision and moved away into this small apartment, while I continued to live in a bungalow. My father didn't really care as long as he could pursue his

passion for music. And my mother was too proud to say anything openly to me. They both listened to me dutifully and did whatever I asked them to do. As a result, I had become arrogant like a sheep-dog becomes with a bunch of meek sheep. All I did was bark, criticize, and complain.

I squirmed in the chair a little with this uncomfortable thought which occasionally rose to bite me but did not really change anything.

Despite my horrific behavior, my parents had not changed at all in how they treated me. They always inquired about my well-being, about small things, as if I was still a school-going boy:

“Do you eat well and regularly?”

“Do you get enough sleep?”

“Why don’t you buy a new shirt? This one looks all worn out.”

Such were their persistent concerns. Of course, even such questions were enough to tick me off. “Oh come on, I am not a child anymore! Leave me alone!” was my angry retort to their caring questions.

But, today, I was in no mood for a confrontation or argument or criticism. I hadn't the energy left for that. I just sat in that sofa chair panting like an asthmatic. After a few minutes, I somehow unlaced my office shoes and pushed them towards the door.

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My father sat on a bed near the opposite wall of the long living room. There were electronic gadgets like a *tabla*<sup>5</sup> and *tanpura*<sup>6</sup> lying next to him. There were two students sitting on chairs near the bed. One was a boy of about 12 or 13 years, and the other was a girl of about 8 or 9 years of age. The boy was thin and wore a yellow t-shirt, and the girl had bright eyes and wore a pink head-band. They must have been siblings. I just sat there and closed my eyes. "I will just have my tea and then slip away," I thought.

My father said to his students, "Ok, which *raga*<sup>7</sup> should we practice now?"

The kids rummaged through their notebooks and it was decided that they would sing *Raga Kalyan*. I had no love lost for all these hundreds of *ragas*. These musicians just change a note here and there, change the sequence a bit and call it a different *raga*! Then they say: this *raga* is for the morning, this *raga* is for the noon hour, and this one is to be sung in the late hour of the night! I could never understand how *ragas* could relate to the times of the day. In my opinion, there was no right time for classical music! It was always sung at wrong times of the day! It all seemed like a gross waste of precious time, that's all!

The girl sang the *aaroha*<sup>8</sup> and *avaroha*<sup>9</sup> of the *raga* and I was a little startled to hear her. There was some magic in the little girl's voice. It was melodious but it also had an unusual sad tinge – like that of an older woman. One of the notes in the *avaroha* was slightly off, but, fortunately the teacher, i.e. my

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<sup>5</sup> *Tabla* is an Indian percussion (rhythm) instrument.

<sup>6</sup> *Tanpura* is a string instrument that provides a soft background symphony in a classical music performance.

<sup>7</sup> *Raga* is a format in Indian classical music. There are hundreds of *ragas*, each with its own distinct quality.

<sup>8</sup> *Aaroha* is the ascending order of notes for a *Raga*.

<sup>9</sup> *Avaroha* is the descending order of notes for a *Raga*.

father, did not interrupt her. Since her voice flowed so naturally, that off-note was whisked away just like a small branch gets carried off on flowing water. Afterwards, the boy – her brother – sang the *lakshangeet*<sup>10</sup> of the *raga*. Although I had never officially learnt music from my father, I knew lots of things about classical music – I suppose by unconsciously hearing them. But, of course, I made sure no one suspected that I knew anything about music. I kept my knowledge tucked away like a dark secret – just like one protects his vocabulary of bad words!

I still had my eyes closed as I lay in the chair. Various disturbing images were spinning vigorously in my head: some related to the crises at work, some to the complaints from home, some related to real and some to imagined problems. The dry, stern voice of Pete – my conference call customer – provided background music to this dance of images. The whole thing was becoming a sort of scary movie. But, now, I could sense a few errant notes of *Kalyan* seeping into the movie. I tried to disregard the disturbing images and sounds and tried to hold on to the musical notes. I felt there was something special, something soothing, comforting in those notes.

After some time, the two kids started singing the main composition of the *raga*. They first tackled the *aalaap*<sup>11</sup>. My father had taught them how to create their own *aalaap* and sing spontaneously, instead of memorizing a fixed composition. This is usually the scariest part to sit through in a music class. I was fully expecting some horrific out-of-tune notes from them. But, instead, to my surprise, the boy sang a very creative *aalaap* that covered all the notes of *Kalyan* in a beautiful way.

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<sup>10</sup> Lakshangeet is a short composition that tries to bring out the essence of the Raga.

<sup>11</sup> Aalaap is the slow initial part of the composition in which the most improvisation happens.



"That's nice! Very good!" my father immediately exclaimed at this.

This was my father's hallmark as a teacher: he always praised and encouraged his students. In this case, even I was quite impressed when I heard this *aalaap*. The boy certainly had a creative mind.

Then it was the girl's turn: she also tried to sing her own *aalaap*. Understandably, for her young age, she was a bit diffident and sang a simple *aalaap* keeping strictly close to the rules of the *raga*. It almost sounded like the *aaroha* and *avaroha* of the *raga*. And yet, her sweet, musical voice was heart-breaking. I opened my eyes just slightly and watched her. She was completely engrossed in her music: she sang with her eyes closed and, like a learned artist, her left hand moved gently in the air along with her notes. I was quite surprised. Nowadays you hardly see kids taking any interest in classical music. Even if they did, it is purely out of deference to the wishes of their parents, or for the sake of building their resume. Such kids rarely got engrossed in their music.

But, this girl sang as if she were in a different world. She opened her eyes only to look steadfastly at her teacher and eagerly absorb his reactions and facial feedback. She called my father *Grandpa*; indeed, he taught his students like a loving grandfather. I closed my eyes again.

It was clear that my mother was yet to know of my arrival, because there was no sign of tea. Normally, I would have got pissed and gone inside barking. But, today I was in no hurry. I did not feel the need to get up from my comfortable seat and go inside to inform my mom and ask her to make tea. I just sat there quietly. The shrill voice of the customer was getting fainter now. The various troubling images spinning in my head were also

slowing down; they were panting heavily, as if tired. Outside, *Raga Kalyan* was now over, and *Raga Asavari* had just begun.

My father always said to his students, "Get mastery on *Kalyan*, *Asavari*, *Bhairav*, and *Kafi*. And then you can learn any *raga* on your own!"

Unaware, I was now getting involved in the music the children were singing. *Asavari* is a heart-wrenching *raga* to begin with; and the girl was snaring me into its enchanting web with her melodious voice. I was getting mesmerized. My heart started to undulate along with the waves of her *aalaap*. I started trying to guess the notes coming out of the innovative brain of the boy. The intermittent, prose comments of my father did not obstruct the music; indeed they got easily folded into the music, like the little pebbles and rocks in the path of a stream. The children had probably been learning *Asavari* for a long time, because after *aalaap*, they started singing *taanas*<sup>12</sup> quite effortlessly. Clearly, the *taanas* were given verbatim by their teacher, which is why they were spinning them out one by one at ease.

The whirling storm of images and sounds in my head had simmered down completely. I was enjoying the music peacefully and wholeheartedly. I had lost track of time. I had forgotten my sworn animosity towards classical music. I had forgotten my own rule of not sitting at my parents' place longer than 15 minutes. After *Asavari* the kids sang *Raga Yaman*. As I listened to them intently, my heart also joined them in their music. Tears streamed down my cheeks freely. After *Raga Yaman* the kids stopped.

My father saw me still sitting in the chair without moving and he exclaimed, "Oh, looks like he has fallen asleep!"

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<sup>12</sup> Taan is a quick and short part of a composition. There are multiple such taanas sung one after the other.

and then to no one particular he said, "What happened to the tea?"

I opened my eyes and looked around. The children were looking at me and smiling. They knew me quite well, because they must have seen me coming and going quite often before. But, I was looking at them properly for the first time. Not just the kids, even my father appeared as though I was seeing him properly for the first time.

"Very nice!" I said to the children.

My father must have been surprised to hear this compliment coming from me. Rarely had I sat and listened to anyone sing, let alone praise his music. But then, he happily took it as a natural consequence of his son surely liking classical music.

He said, "Oh yes, these two kids sing very well. They both have a good ear for music."

"They definitely have a musical ear, no doubt. But even their understanding of *ragas* is so good." I started speaking freely foregoing my usual reticence.

"It was wonderful! What are your names?" I asked the kids.

They must have told me their names many times before, and they told me once again, "*Kedar*<sup>13</sup> and *Shruti*<sup>14</sup>".

"Wow! Even your names are musical!" I exclaimed.

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<sup>13</sup> Kedar is the name of a raga.

<sup>14</sup> Shruti is a term that describes finer notes that lie between the normal notes and are occasionally used in Indian classical music.

"Oh yes, my sister's notes often sound like *Shrutis*," Kedar said with a twinkle in his eyes.

The lesson was over. The kids got up, bowed in front of my father and touched his feet as per the usual custom, and left. But I lay there frozen in my seat thinking to myself, "How lucky these kids are! They have a loving and expert teacher like my father, and they are certainly taking full advantage of the opportunity. And me? ..."

For the last 30-40 years this beautiful river of music had flown over my body and head, and I had trudged along like a camel in a desert. I had never bothered to appreciate this amazing gift of music before. And now, I felt refreshed and liberated – not just from the day's debacle and torment but from the misery of all the past few months and years. I felt alive and rejuvenated. My mind was all perked up once again.

"Are you not feeling well?" said my mother, who entered the living room just then and saw me sitting in the sofa chair.

In response, I gave her a most genuine and pleasant smile. She must have been quite startled to see my smile; it had been so long since the last time I had smiled at her.

"Mom, please make some awesome tea. With ginger and all your spices. And sugar too. Make for Dad also," I sprang from the chair and said to her.

"Sugar? For me? Please don't!" my father cried in protest. He was a long-time diabetic.

I cut him off and said, "Come on dad, a little sugar won't make your voice go bad!"

"Ok, ok, go ahead then!" my father gave in, smiling.

My parents had always listened to me and yielded to my instructions. But, thus far I had only taken unfair advantage of their obedience. I had forced my wishes, my plans, on them, without consulting them, without even checking their body language. Today, after a very long time, I was looking at them properly. My dad sat in the corner of the bed smiling happily, and my frail mother stood there, shaking slightly, looking up at me. They were both in their late seventies. God knew how many more years they had left. I had been so careless about them for such a long time! I had been so scornful of their helpless love for me! I could have done so much for them!

A powerful blow of remorse and regret hit me.

With terrific effort, I pushed away this incriminating thought from my mind. Past was past. Thankfully my parents were still there and they still loved me. All was not lost. Tomorrow would be a new day! The picture will definitely change from tomorrow!

When I had arrived here at my parents' house, I had planned to stay just for 10 minutes, have my tea and leave. Instead, I ended up staying for 3 long hours. I enquired about my parents' health, their well-being. I enquired about their medications and what treatments they were taking. I even urged my father to sing a tune for me – a composition in *Ahir Bhairav* which was my favorite. He sang it for me without hesitation in his old, tired, but earnest voice. Finally, I rose, hugged my mother, touched the feet of my father, and left their house with a heavy but fulfilled heart.