

MY IDENTITY, MY MUSIC

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses my journey unpacking my relationships between my diverse identities and how this process helped shape my resistance to intersecting discriminations. Growing up in Canada, I've always felt a huge cultural disconnect. I was never fond of sports or most things typical for a Canadian-raised boy, and my affinity toward learning more about my Indian heritage put me in the spotlight as a target for bullying, racism, and mental health issues. Since then, I have experienced a constant struggle of identities, and with that comes a struggle to understand who I want to be versus who people want me to become. Indian classical music is largely abstract and requires self-insight to bring out its aesthetic value. Coming to terms with my diverse and conflicting identities, and providing space for all of them to thrive, has allowed me to positively shape my insights into my musical thought process, and to better understand myself. My work establishing the Indian Classical Music Society of Vancouver has been done in the hopes to create a shared space for people with common interests to find a sense of belonging.

My journey of identity is one of “becoming [a] hybrid Canadian” (Bose, 2017, p. 87), a conglomeration of identities that exist in various cultural spaces that are distinct from each other, but that come together to shape a whole and unique sense of being. This journey has, however, presented challenges in coming to terms with intersections between the various cultural spaces in which I have found myself engaging. Understanding how to reach a point of equilibrium and comfort with these sometimes conflicting intersections is a constant process that I will continue to undergo throughout my life. A major part of my identity has been my music, which has influenced every single aspect of my life. My music has become my life, and even though I may not pursue a career as a performing artist or music teacher, music insightfully shapes my relationships and various other parts of my life. The form of Indian classical music I sing is known as *khayal*; the style is well known for its improvisational and aesthetic elements which deeply rely on a sense of self-exploration and self-intimacy. Learning this genre of music has provoked me to look into my sense of being and understand who I am at a profound, creative, and meditative level. My school and religion have been other cultural spaces or institutions that have shaped me over the years, but have often found themselves dominated by my natural affinity toward my music. This paper takes a look at the past 21 years of my life and unpacks my relationships between my diverse identities to show how these have influenced my insight into my music as an Indian classical vocalist.

As a young kid born and raised in Canada, I was oddly active in engaging with South Asian religious and socio-cultural spaces. Most kids would want to play sports on weekends, but I wanted to go to the temple and sing *bhajans*.¹ I started learning Indian classical vocals at the age of three, and despite my class being filled with 30 or so other kids, nobody seemed to be as entrenched in learning this music as I was. It would sometimes be hard for me to find a space of acceptance within the South Asian community, because while other kids my age would “prefer performances of Bollywood and sometimes Punjabi music and dance styles” (Bose, 2017, p. 86), I would prefer performances of devotional or classical music. This would even be considered an oddity for senior communities, who admired my affinity towards heritage traditions but still viewed me as a somewhat odd “other.” I found refuge for myself at the time in going to the temple weekly or sometimes even daily, because “the temple was... a place where ethnicity, religion, and culture converged” (Amarasingam, 2008, p. 162) and where I found solace in exploring my beliefs and my music. I was also exposed to religious practices, but my idea of Hinduism at the time was a blind one, something that I was fed as a child but never really looked at twice to understand. The ritual was that of going to the temple but not really understanding what purpose that serves or how to internalize my beliefs personally. At the same time, I would express my “Indianness” through finding ways I could share my music or share more about my culture and religion. I’d often eat Indian food for lunch and would sometimes even show up to school wearing *kurta pajama*. It didn’t seem strange to me to do so because there were constant reminders everywhere of Canada’s pride in being a “cultural mosaic” (Goitom, 2017, p. 181), and I felt that it was only apt for me to share my heritage with others because we would learn about Hanukkah, the Lunar New Year, and other traditions at my school. There was nothing regarding Diwali or any other Indic custom that would give me space to talk about my culture, so I took it upon myself to share whatever I could with others. Because I was so heavily engaged with creative pursuits, I never felt any necessity to play sports, as most boys at the time were expected to do. My mother tried her best to enroll me in sports activities, but I didn’t enjoy these, even at school, and because of that I started to get picked on. Other boys would call me effeminate and gay among other things because I occupied myself with my music. The bullying intensified, and the fact that my music was linked to my heritage became another point of scrutiny; I wasn’t only doing something “effeminate,” such as music—I was also doing something that was unfamiliar. I started to find myself in an “in-between space... [which created] a fragmented, confusing and ultimately diminishing structure” (Bose, 2017, p. 87) in my childhood and kindled a sense of isolation that was never there before. I started to understand that I was different, and the childlike innocence and open-mindedness that once used to surround me started to disappear. I felt a need to assimilate into “the norm,” sensing that I had to “contend with the dominant construct (White, Christian)” (Amarasingam, 2008, p. 155). At one point during my time in elementary school, a close friend of mine told me that because I wasn’t Christian, I would be going to hell. None of this made sense to me. Slowly, rejection became my biggest fear and acceptance my biggest goal.

By the time I reached high school, the cultural spaces with which I engaged were increasingly in conflict with each other, and I felt like more of an outcast in school and

¹ This is a type of devotional song typically from Hindu religious traditions.

mainstream societal environments. There were also more expectations coming at me from all directions. There were (implied) expectations from my peers to lose my “Indianness” to be more accepted. There were expectations from my family to become more engaged with my Gujarati heritage and to achieve certain academic standards. There were also expectations from my *Gurus* to represent their lineage and their music and to follow their prescribed protocols. There were expectations set forward by religious teachings prescribed at temples I would visit and by my family, which didn’t always sit right with me. I was in a cycle of finding myself and becoming lost again, and “the binary of belonging and not belonging” (Bose, 2017, p. 88) became familiar; I would feel a need to prove myself constantly—in school, religion, and music. “Identity is an interplay between ethnicity and culture” (Goitom, 2017, p. 184), and I found that my ethnicity and my culture started to define me, and became an obstacle in everything from getting picked for a group project to being invited to house parties to finding people who would talk to me and respect me. I started to feel “torn between loyalty to [my heritage] culture and attraction to [mainstream] culture” (Bose, 2017, p. 87) in cases where they clashed, and my overriding need to feel accepted and not be rejected by my peers weighed heavily on me mentally, spiritually, and even physically. At recess, I’d sit in a corner in the library, as I’d have anxiety when I went outside because I didn’t want to be bullied or not have any friends to hang out with. This led me to throw myself more deeply into my music community and trust my *Gurus*² to give me a sense of belonging, which was becoming harder and harder to find elsewhere even as I tried to fit into my school environment.

Throwing myself into my music also resulted in a stronger association with my religion. However, as I grew older, I learned about the diversity within the Hindu belief system, which ranges from the *Aghoris*, who seek to challenge societal norms by adopting taboo practices, to the reserved *Swaminarayans*, who follow a strict religious doctrine. I came to understand that there was a bigger narrative at play within Hinduism than the homogenized narrative I was exposed to as a child. I stopped relating to the temple environments as my Hindu beliefs shaped themselves into in what are often deemed “non-traditional forms of interacting with [the Divine]” (Amarasingam, 2008, p. 161) but are actually quite traditional, as personalized relationships with the Divine exist across various sects of Hindu thought. I felt that the real capability of my belief system was shrouded by biases, and I often experienced a colonized perspective of Hinduism as a monolith of god-fearing devotees, weekly Sunday temple visits, and a congregational vs. personal relationship with the Divine.

This journey in my identity sphere of religion led me to better understand the dynamics of relationships in my musical community. The *guru-shishya parampara* is a very important traditional bond between the *Guru* and their disciple, and is symbiotic in nature. I’ve had a variety of *Gurus* over the years, from local teachers who helped groom me and provide me with the tools I needed to take advanced training to accomplished professionals who frequently tour around the world performing and teaching. The most notable of my teachers is Pandit Jasraj of the *Mewati Gharana*.³ As I grew older, and my music also grew, I found myself understanding

² *Guru* is often translated as “teacher” in English. However, a *Guru* serves as more than a teacher. The term is an amalgam of teacher, mentor, confidante, and parental figure.

³ A *Gharana* is a school or branch of a specific stylistic representation—in this case, *khayal* music. They often represent a geographic area of a court where the style was first patronized.

the complexities of the music world. Being around big personalities in Indian classical music was to me (and to a lot of people) like being around a god. In most cases, we were conditioned never to question, only to obey. This was the framework of the *guru-shishya* relationship I was introduced to. As I grew more immersed in the world of music and tried to find acceptance and community, I was exposed to the politics of that world. The term “politics” is “used in India to describe musicians’ manoeuvres to enhance their own status and degrade that of their rivals” (Clayton & Leante, 2015, p. 415) and of other people situated around them who may challenge their authority or pedagogy. I found myself involved in many conflicts, though I was rarely their perpetrator. Even though I was older, I was still a kid, and I started feeling discriminated against in a cultural space in which I had sought refuge. When I found myself in situations that I couldn’t bear to witness any longer and that deep down I didn’t agree with ethically or spiritually, I was told that it was because of my “Westernness.” People took advantage of me, especially when I was younger, and no matter how much *seva*⁴ I did, some of those to whom I looked up found ways to ensure I remained subjugated and underappreciated. These “[conflicts] can be attenuated by the influence of the ideology of teamwork or by a strategic acceptance of subordination, but nonetheless can be a source of great bitterness and resentment” (Clayton & Leante, 2015, p. 437), and my relationship with music was thus tainted by people to whom I looked up using this beautiful art form to attain power, money, and cult-like followings. A theme which reoccurred in many conflicts was that of seniority, which concerned me “both [as] a source of anxiety and as a strategy [which was] consciously exploited” (Clayton & Leante, 2015, p. 438) around me by people who were in positions of power over me and my peers. Seniority is to be respected, but it isn’t the be-all and end-all to decide if one deserves to be in a position of power and allow those who are senior to treat others in certain ways. With “absolute deference [being expected] from student towards teacher” (Clayton & Leante, 2015, p. 426), I found myself in an increasingly hostile musical community where I could no longer respect some of my seniors because of their actions. It became very hard for me to separate my personal connection to music and the connection others wanted to build for me, and this really pulled me and my music down. With *khayal* music being so heavily entrenched within the principles of self-exploration, insightful creativity, and expressionism, it was important for me to rebuild my musical environment so that it became conducive to the music I wanted to see myself exploring and sharing. I started to draw upon non-traditional styles of learning, such as online lessons, so that I could have access to *Gurus* who would allow me to recreate my musical environment. Online lessons are often regarded as an unproductive means of *guru-shishya* tutelage; “however, many traditional values and pedagogical practices remain intact, thereby retaining the integrity of the overall learning experience for many students involved” (Roy, 2016, p. 128). I had also never really had the chance to choose my *Gurus* before this. For the longest time, my choice of teacher was geographically constrained to Vancouver, and when it was time for advanced lessons, my options were constrained to my *gharana*, which I also didn’t get to choose because it was the only option readily available to me. With this new opportunity to learn and to grow, it was important to build a strong “rapport between [my] teacher and [myself, as this] has the power

⁴ *Seva* is work done out of devotion to another, or selfless service.

to affect the quality of a *tālīm*⁵ (Roy, 2016, p. 125), and the journey to find this rapport has led me to the *Gurus* I have now. My relationship with them aims to minimize politics and keep the focus on the music itself rather than on power dynamics.

Recreating positive and personalized relationships with my religion and music also carried over into my school life. In university, I opened myself up instead of restricting myself to my cultural spaces of religion and music. Still, I kept in mind the importance of not losing these spaces and thus losing a sense of my core being. I found a sense of rekindled interest and learning on the part of my peers, who seemed open-minded toward my heritage being an important part of my life. Being part of a globalized campus where people come from various places and spaces, I no longer felt alone in my struggle to understand the intersections of my identity. For people all across campus, I noticed that “culture, ethnicity, and identity were dependent on each other and [were] symbiotic in nature” (Goitom, 2017, p. 184); it seemed that many of them were also still figuring things out just like I was, and yet were proactively engaging with socio-cultural spaces in which they felt a sense of belonging. Having my own space in university as I reached adulthood allowed me to fully experience my hybridity and understand who I wanted to be rather than feeling that my identity was fully facilitated through my parents, musical and religious communities, and peers. I no longer needed to compromise, always “being between two worlds” (Goitom, 2017, p. 185); instead, I could explore the full extent of who I wanted to be. I started to push beyond my comfort zone to define belonging for myself, and then felt like I belonged.

My hybridity is something I feel comfortable expressing not only within my school environment but also in my newfound relationships within my music and religious communities. From having some wine with one of my *Gurus*, to talking about ethical and spiritual hardships with Hindu peers at my university, to having school friends attend my concerts, I have finally been able to express my identities as one rather than many. Coming to terms with being an Indo-Canadian, understanding the way my ethnicity, religious and heritage culture, and “Canadianness” intersect through my educational, religious, and musical spaces of influence has shaped who I am today. Unpacking your identity and creating space for yourself to thrive is a constant process, but I’ve come to understand that there’s no need to compromise when my various cultural spaces come into conflict with each other. I still encounter discrimination, bullying, and various systemic abuses at school, in music, and in religion. However, it no longer prevents me from finding a comfortable place within those spaces anymore. The process of understanding these intersections, and what you learn from them, is what largely goes into forming a hybrid identity. This process teaches you how intersections can be a good thing rather than a conflict at every turn.

REFERENCES

Amarasingam, A. (2008). Religion and ethnicity among Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Ontario. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 40(2), 149-169. doi:10.1353/ces.2010.0014

⁵ This means training.

- Bose, Sarika. (2018). "Multi-cultural": Straddling continents, straddling identities. In H. Zaman & S. Habib (Eds.), *Canada 150 conference proceedings: Migration of Bengalis* (pp. 85-96). Vancouver, BC: SFU Document Solutions. Retrieved from <http://monographs.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/sfulibrary/catalog/view/73/44/1952-2>
- Clayton, M., & Leante, L. (2015). Role, status and hierarchy in the performance of North Indian classical music. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 24(3), 414-442. doi:10.1080/17411912.2015.1091272
- Goitom, M. (2017). "Unconventional Canadians": Second-generation "Habesha" youth and belonging in Toronto, Canada. *Global Social Welfare*, 4(4), 179-190. doi:10.1007/s40609-017-0098-0
- Roy, J. (2016). The internet Guru: Online pedagogy in Indian classical music traditions. *Asian Music*, 47(1), 103-135. doi:10.1353/amu.2016.0001