

Lessons in Perseverance

We all know that India is a land of surprises. One may come across such treasures as original Raja Ravi Varma paintings hidden away in the lofts of ancient family homes in Kerala or Stradivarius violins made in the 1790s lying in an antique shop somewhere. One meets all kinds of amazing and unexpected people too.

Many such treasures, be they people, places or things, sadly cannot be always shared with the public. However, there are some treasures which fortunately can be shared and here is one that I'd like to share with you. One of the most pristine, unspoilt and serene parts of India is North Karnataka or North Canara... places like Hubli and Dharwad.

Rich tradition

Despite being in South India, this belt has had a very rich tradition of North Indian classical music for several years and has produced some of the greatest maestros that our country has seen, like the Late Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur, Gangubai Hangal and others.

One of the treasures hidden away in this part of the country is a little village called Hasanagi. To reach Hasanagi, one first has to take an overnight train to Hubli from Bengaluru [Bangalore]. Then an hour's journey by car would bring one to a little town called Yellapura. And Hasanagi is a short drive away from Yellapura.

What makes Hasanagi, a little village that's hidden away in the hills and forests of North Karnataka, so special? This is where a miracle worker named Pandit Ganapathi Bhatt lives and works his miracles. Despite having had little musical background himself, Panditji became obsessed with North Indian classical music from a very young age and went on to study it from two of the doyens of the art namely the late Basavaraja Rajaguru and Pandit C.R.Vyas.

The usual story with most aspiring musicians is to uproot themselves from their villages and move to the big cities where things happen, culturally speaking.

But Pandit Ganapathi Bhatt asked himself: "Why should there be good music only in the big cities like Pune, Kolkata, or Mysore? Why not bring music to Hasanagi?" This seemed to be an impossible dream since the entire village was involved in agriculture and little else. But Panditji persisted and persevered... for years and years... by giving music lessons to children of the village, holding chamber music concerts, giving lectures and so on till the entire village gradually got educated in the finer nuances of North Indian classical music. Most gurus of music (or any other form of fine art for that matter) would agree that it is something of a miracle to create even one worthy successor since the combination of a proper guru

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meeting a *shishya* who has the talent and the commitment to the art itself is extremely rare. The idea of educating an entire village in music would seem to be in the realms of fantasy. But Pandit Ganapathi Bhatt did accomplish the seemingly impossible.

He runs a music school in his home where visiting students and musicians can stay and learn and perform music and he conducts a two-day music festival every year, normally during the third weekend in November.

This festival features hour-long concerts by various musicians, normally from the Kirana Gharana. The concerts start at around 6 p.m. and go on till long past midnight. And the entire village turns out in full strength to attend these concerts. Unlike the undisciplined audiences one finds in many parts of the country, the Hasanagi audience not only sits quietly but also listens attentively and never fails to appreciate even the tiniest of tasty phrases rendered by the musicians.

I had the pleasure of being the first ever South Indian musician to be invited to perform at Panditji's festival in Hasanagi. The journey, the breathtakingly beautiful landscape, the peace and silence and above all the unimaginably appreciative and competent audience created by Panditji all remain preserved in my memory in the most special way possible.

Exquisite compositions

I invited Panditji for the Swathi Sangeethotsavam that I organise, where he gave a beautiful concert with some of Maharaja Swati Tirunal's exquisite Hindustani compositions. His simple, no-frills rendition and crystal-clear enunciation of the lyrics charmed the audience completely. Songs like 'Jai jai Devi,' 'Aaj Aaye Shaam Mohan,' 'Devan Ke Pathi Indra,' 'Krishna Chandra Radha Mohan,' 'Sees Ganga Bhasma Anga' and 'Bansiwale' glowed like jewels in Panditji's hands.

As Panditji was enjoying a post-concert chat with his newly acquired fans in Thiruvananthapuram, most of whom had never heard of him before, one *rasika* commented "I heard it is very difficult and complicated to get to Hasanagi."

Before Panditji could reply, Bhaskara Rao, the gentleman who introduced Panditji and me to each other quipped, "It is never easy to get to heaven."

I couldn't have put it better myself and am already waiting for November to treat myself to a few days of peace, quiet and music at Hasanagi. It could easily turn out to be an annual pilgrimage.