

September 2014

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Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Aaron (2014) "Rama, Raga and Rava: A study on the implicit cultural connections and complementary nature of music and culinary arts in India," *e-Research: A Journal of Undergraduate Work*: Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/e-Research/vol3/iss2/5>

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Aaron Schwartz

Abstract: The relation between food and music is strong and readily apparent in the cultural traditions of India. The importance of the relation goes so far that relevance falls on what song the chef listens to while they prepare a meal, and what is being played while the meal is eaten. The musical pitch is intricately connected to the taste of the food, with bitter flavor represented by lower pitch and sweeter flavor represented by higher pitch. People will report experiencing different sensations upon reacting to identical food products, based on the music that accompanies that meal. The effect of this correlation is a more complete and enhanced dining or concert experience, as the two are rarely separated in Indian culture. This paper explores the auditory and gustatory South Indian traditions, expanding on Dr. Adrian McNeil's auditory/gustatory hypothesis in North Indian traditions, to observe the possibility of a subconscious influence, encouraging a complimentary factor in South Indian music and culinary arts.

Keywords: Raga, culinary arts, music, culture, tradition, pitch, tempo, flavor, , auditory, gustatory, intangible cultural heritage, Ram Navami, Indian

Introduction

Both music and food are deeply ingrained in Indian culture, both having rich traditions that have remained over centuries. But how are they related? In their development, these traditions may be more closely linked than expected. Recent studies have revealed a correlation between auditory and gustatory senses and a direct influence upon each other. In this light, how do these customs in India relate to each other, and how have they come to do so? Dr. Adrian McNeil put forth the auditory/gustatory hypothesis in regards to Northern Indian traditions in his work entitled, "Why Hindustani Musicians Are Good Cooks: Analogies Between Music And Food In North India," acting as an inspiration for this study. This study observes the possibility of a subconscious influence, encouraging a complimentary factor in South Indian music and culinary arts through the examination of the choices in food and music in the Indian festival of Ram Navami, and the composition and history of said music and culinary arts, as well as modern use of these facets of intangible cultural heritage.

Ram Navami at the Chinmaya Mission

The festival of Ram Navami is the celebration of birthday of the Hindu God, Shri Rama, the seventh incarnation (Avatar) of Lord Vishnu. Ram Navami is celebrated on the ninth day of the Hindu month of Chaitra (April). Ram Navami marks the end of nine-day long festival called Chaitra Navratri or Vasanta Navratri. On the day of Ram Navami, devotees observe fasting, visit temples, takes religious processions, and hold readings of the Ramayana. The Ramayana is an ancient Sanskrit epic, telling the story of Shri Rama; most often noted for his slaying of the demon king Ravana, stringing and breaking the bow of Shiva, and marriage to princess Sita, the embodiment of the goddess Lakshmi. Shri Rama is revered in Hinduism as the embodiment of truth, morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband and most of all, the ideal king.

The Chinmaya mission is located in Tustin, in Orange County, California. From the outside the mission doesn't seem like anything special, a white industrial building surrounded by eucalyptus trees. The temple inside is far

A. Schwartz

more encouraging. Prior to entering the Chinmaya mission, attendees remove their shoes and leave them outside. Once inside they are greeted by members and other attendees alike, meandering the hall and entrance to the main room. While the main room holds both the stage and several hundred chairs, it is common for many to be moving, talking, or to even leave and return during the performances. The first day was a cultural exhibition given by the children of the Chinmaya Early Education Program. This exhibition ran from 1 pm to 6 pm, with a dinner/reception following, and consisted of music, dance, theatre/skits, art, and an essay contest, presented similarly to an Easter pageant in the theatricality and presentations by young children.

Music at the Chinmaya Mission

The music presented on the first day did not necessarily have to do with the Ram Navami festival, but reflected what the children had learned in school and from their gurus. Each performer, aged two years old to teens, entered the stage dressed in traditional attire, sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the microphone, switched on the drone box, and sang their piece, keeping time with their right hand on their right knee, alternating with the palm and the back of the hand. They began each piece by outlining the tonic, dominant, and tonic again at the octave, using the vocables "sa, pa, sa," (swaras referring to the tonic, dominant and tonic at the octave in the key) and back down to the preceding dominant and tonic notes. This practice is used in the elementary instruction of classical Indian vocal technique. An interesting fact to consider is that each piece was announced immediately before the performance, allowing for, and receiving audience acknowledgement thus showing how these pieces are standard repertoire, integral in the musical education of the youth, similar to how western classical vocalists learn Italian art songs. Though the audience might not have seemed attentive, after each piece, the performers were greeted with hearty applause, and rushed offstage, into the audience for pictures while the next performer set up.

The second day of the festival featured a concert by one vocalist, Mayuri Vasani, practitioner and student of Indian Classical music for over 15 years. She has given concerts both in the United States and India, and also studies Western Classical Vocal Performance at Chapman University. The concert began at 4:30 pm, and ran until 6:30 pm, with a very similar setting to the previous day, with many milling about in the halls and entrance, though the talking during the performance decreased somewhat. In this concert, she sang eight pieces (some having to do with Rama and others not), seated cross-legged on a small landing covered with colorful cloth, accompanied by a violin, mridanga, and of course a drone box. One of these pieces, "Rama, Ni Samana mevaru," we will examine later. Unlike the children singing the previous day, no piece began with the outlining of the tonic and dominant, and none of the pieces were announced. These changes suggest more of a professional setting, and also reveal the outlining aspect to be one related to the early education process. Students usually abandon the outlining for humming, or drop it altogether in their teenage years (Vasani). The first five pieces performed were in a style with a little more freedom in the way in which they were performed. They had no specific *talam*, or meter, and occasionally a vaguely definable raga. While they all had a beat, these first five had no specific meter, giving that sense of freedom. This difference in use of meter exemplifies the difference between the Carnatic tradition (first five pieces), and the Hindustani tradition, or South vs. North, respectively.

Food at the Chinmaya Mission

The food on the first day was catered from a local restaurant, consisting of curried chickpeas, naan bread, strawberry ice cream for the children, and a rather out-of-place east Asian dish of rice noodles. A couple of attendees interviewed remarked on the nature of the menu, one of them noting, "There is nothing special for today, Indian food is Indian food ... except that [referring to the rice noodles], that's just here because it's good."

The second day the food was prepared by members of the congregation, lending a more traditional tone. The menu consisted of Keerai Kootu (spinach and lentil soup), Puliodarai (tamarind rice), steamed plain rice, Sambar (another type of lentil soup), Rasam (a flavored broth with yellow lentils, served as a beverage or a soup with rice), curried chickpeas, and a fruit salad. The fruit salad was served as a "sweet dish" typically enjoyed at a festival, however a more common dish for such a festival would be Gulab Jamun (deep fried dough balls in a sweet syrup with almonds and pistachios).

Some of the attendees remarked on the concert and the food after. One attendee stated, "In India, everything is connected to food. You have food at every gathering. And if you want someone to come to something, you say 'free food!'" This amusing quip turned out to be far more significant upon interview of two of the cooks of the evening. In an interview with Vidya Venkatesh, practitioner of holistic medicines, she suggested that food and music are connected more than just socially: "When you cook and when you enjoy food, you should have calm, spiritual music, giving positive energy. Cooking transfers energy from the environment to the food, and if you cook in an environment of calm, positive energy, it will reflect in the food, allowing the food to give the most [efficiency], and when enjoyed in a similar positive environment [of music], the body can do its job and transform the food into energy better." Venkatesh is also compiling a series of recipes and cooking practices similar to that previously described as a study/book on food in holistic medicine. In an interview with Brinda Vasani, the head cook and coordinator for the reception, these ideals were reflected again, and she added, "After listening to good music, you're always hungry for good food. Food is a sign of appreciation for an audience, and you want them to feel that appreciation." Both stated that when cooking they listened to Carnatic music and/or chants to be in the right mind and state of being for cooking. Additionally, this practice, as well as the recipes and cooking practices themselves were passed down in the family from their mothers, and their mothers before them, suggesting a sense of longevity to the practice and necessity of Carnatic music in the cooking method (Vasani).

Basic introduction to Indian Music

The concept of pitches, notes, and scales can be translated and broken down into the concepts of *Shruti*, *Swara*, and *Raga*. *Shruti* is a microtonal interval of sound, deriving from the root "Shru," to hear, referring to "any sound that is capable of being distinctly heard by the ear (Bandyopadhyaya 34). The term *Swara* has evolved to mean the 12 pitches found in an octave. So while *Shruti* are microtones, *Swara* are essentially comprised of whole steps and half steps, with the "standard" measurements of frequency, i.e. A = 440 Hz. However, this does not mean that they are standardized in their naming. For example, *swara* solfège does not refer to specific frequencies, but rather an idea of a scale position; similar to the concept of "moveable 'do,'" in western art music (Wade 29). A *Raga* is a combination of *Swaras* and *Shruti*, as a series in an octave, somewhere between a melody and a scale. A *Raga* is taken from a parent scale or *Thata*, using at least five notes from the scale, and is comprised of smaller subsections of melodic content, called *Varnas*. However, the *Varnas* comprising the *Raga* are not exactly constant, but rather have fixed variations in their ascending and descending fashion. Because of this, a *Raga* does not sound the same ascending as it does descending, similar to how a harmonic minor scale functions in western classical music. Because of the rules governing the construction of *Raga*, and the combinations of *Shruti* and *Swaras*, there are hundreds of different *Raga*, each with its own distinctive character or mood with which it may be associated (Bandyopadhyaya 34-54). Also, each *Raga* may only be used at certain times of the day. The human voice is given precedence over all other instruments in Indian music, as it has the ability to express multiple forms of emotion (Gosvami 101).

Basic introduction to Indian Cuisine and Cooking

Indian cuisine is an interesting variation in reference to world cooking practices. Compared to other world cuisines, Indian cooking is fairly simple, with very basic techniques and utensils. It relies instead upon the composition and building of flavor. Instead of an emphasis of "how," as in most gastronomical practices, the emphasis is on "what," particularly referring to arrangement and configuration of spice palates. Each dish uses these spices as individual elements functioning as flavoring, aromatics, coloring, and occasionally textural components such as natural tenderizers for meat or thickeners and binders to give body to sauces (Sahni 2-5). These elements create an extremely complex overall temperament, disposition, or mood to the dish through these components of texture, aroma and flavor, giving the dish far more prominence than simply serving as a necessary source of gastronomical sustenance. Food is an experience. Therefore, not only do recipes require an extensive knowledge of each spice and herb, but also a historical and broader culinary knowledge of how each spice has been used in other dishes to create different experiences.

A. Schwartz

In the early nomadic Aryan culture, food had a great significance in the cosmic moral cycle. In this tradition, food, the consumer of the food, and the universe are all connected, and require balance and unity with each other. In this belief, when food is consumed it produces three components. First is that which is left over and used, which is expelled, and has the greatest "density." Second is the middle "density," which is converted into the body. Third is the most important, with the lightest "density," and the finest and rarest quality, called *manas* or mind. Here we find the sense of spirituality connected to consuming what most consider entirely tangible (Achaya 61). Thus it is necessary, or rather fitting, that Indian cooking contains somewhat intangible qualities.

"Rama Nee Samana Mevaru" and Gulab Jamoon

How, then, can we explain the relationship between music and food? Both have a spiritual component in the case of this festival, and both enhance the mood of the event. By pairing a specific example of music and food, we can explore their shared meaning.

Though not written specifically for the Ram Navami festival, this piece describes the glory of Rama, making it particularly relevant. The text translates to, "Rama, who is your equal, glory of Raghu's race? Sita is a tendril of marvampu flowers; a parrot in the cage of devotion. You have brothers who speak words dripping with honey," (Subba 170). The text itself lends an implication of word painting, employing bright and colorful imagery, such as flowers and the parrot, accompanied by "... words dripping with honey," suggesting a bright, happy, sweet texture. The composer, Sri Tyagaraja, is a classical master, attributed often with encouraging the continuation of the South Indian Classical style. His works are characterized by their notably emotive quality in melody and variety in rhythm; he is also known for his work as a poet (Subba 113). Here, Tyagaraja seeks not to exemplify Rama in this piece for his mighty deeds, but rather for that which makes him in Tyagaraja's opinion the peerless king: the aforementioned sweetness and brilliance of the love of his wife, Sita, and his brothers. To exemplify this love, he chose to compose this piece with the raga Karaharapriya. Karaharapriya is an older raga, often used as a parent scale for others. Frequently associated with the connotation of passion, or occasionally even rage, this raga is used here to create a sense of dramatic, passionate, glorious love for Shri Rama, felt by his wife, his brothers, and the composer. Additionally, while some ragas can only be used at certain times of the day, Karaharapriya can be used at all times, giving a sense of eternity and perpetuity to this love. This exaltation of Rama through the somewhat modern use of an ancient raga seems to create an overall affect of love, but furthermore as a zealous celebration of that love, arguably the main objective of Tyagaraja in this piece.

The culinary example that pairs best with this piece is Gulab Jamoon, a kind of deep fried doughnut hole in syrup, almost like a bread pudding. Gulab Jamoon is made by combining cardamom, saffron, flour, baking soda, milk, and khoya, an Indian milk product thickened by cooking in an open pot. The resulting dough is rolled into balls and deep fried at the low temperature of 300 degrees F. The dough balls are then soaked in a simple syrup of sugar, water, and rosewater (Moorjani 128). This leads to an especially creamy feature of the dough balls, with the smooth features of two kinds of milk product and the sweet silkiness of the rosewater syrup.

In a study by Anne Sylvie Crisnel and Charles Spence of Oxford University entitled "A bittersweet symphony: Systematically modulating the taste of food by changing the sonic properties of the soundtrack playing in the background," the relationship between taste and environment is examined and found to have direct correlations. In their experiment, they played a specific soundtrack (relying on past studies showing a relationship between lower pitches and bitter taste, and higher pitches and sweeter taste) that could be characterized as either bitter or sweet. The subjects listened to the soundtrack, and had taste tests of four pieces of toffee which, unbeknownst to the subjects, were identical. When the subjects began to characterize the toffee as bitter during the "bitter" soundtrack, and sweet during the "sweet" soundtrack, they found their direct correlation between listening and tasting (Crisnel, Spence 202). In a similar study by Brett T. Larsen and Bradley J. Stastny of Texas Tech University entitled, "It's a bittersweet symphony: Simultaneously Mixed Emotional Responses to Music with Conflicting Cues," it was concluded that there is also a direct correlation between major keys, fast tempo, and a musical affect of happiness.

Building on these ideas, one finds a possible connection between the flavor palate of Indian cuisine and the Karnatic musical tradition in the use of the sweet element in the Ram Navami festival. The sweet element of Gulab Jamoon is used to show the sweetness and happiness of a holiday or festival in Indian tradition. In the piece, "Rama Nee Samana Mevaru," we see the implications of happiness in the raga Karaharapriya, used to denote passion, in a somewhat brighter, altered Dorian mode. The piece was performed in a soprano range, accompanied by a violin playing often above C4 (middle C), drawing on the use of higher pitches to convey happiness.

Indian culture also has a blurring of boundaries between music and food in language, reinforcing their inherent link. In a work entitled, "Why Hindustani Musicians are Such Good Cooks," author Adrian McNeil asserts that culinary arts and music are very close in the culture, and for that reason are often tools for understanding one another, such as in an anecdote of a Hindustani musician learning a difficult passage with the use of allegorical references to food and food preparation (McNeil 76-80). The composition of a piece of music and a dish also share similarities in their primary, secondary and tertiary elements, (i.e. spices, subjects, and how they are arranged in comparison to raga, talam, and how they are performed) how exactly they are prepared, and how they are delegated to specific times of the day.

Conclusion: Music, Food, and the Mood of Sweetness

Parallels can be drawn between the cultural, practical, and spiritual elements of music and culinary arts in Indian culture. Both are integral parts of celebration, community, and communication. In the Ram Navami festival at the Chinmaya Mission in Tustin, California, both were absolutely included, emphasized, and equally enjoyed. Music and food also share practical elements as seen through the juxtaposition of the piece "Rama Nee Samana Mevaru," and the dish Gulab Jamoon. Both create an affect of happiness and celebration through the use of specific raga and culinary composition, respectively.

Through interviews and accounts of the Ram Navami festival, we find that there is both a communal and spiritual connection between these two arts as well. A vast majority of events, festivals, and celebrations incorporate and highlight musical and culinary talent. Moreover, in the preparation of food in this culture, it is common practice to listen to Karnatic or chant music. This is both to set a mood for the chef, but also to allow for the correct energy to flow into the art. To paraphrase an interviewee, a positive, calm, connected, and focused kitchen, is one from which the best dishes will emerge, and being better prepared, they better serve the one enjoying their benefits. Vocal music in the Indian tradition is also regarded as having a certain level of, and great capacity for, truth, sincerity, and transcendence. Similarly, when prepared correctly and with the right intent, food has ability and purpose to achieve a sense of enlightenment past material form.

As to the question of whether a subconscious effort has caused these similarities and conjunctions, between music and culinary arts, one may still have to look deeper. While there are several parallels, it is difficult to gauge a single formidable factor upon which all others are built. One may feel highly encouraged in this endeavor, yet still a shade unconvinced. The next step is a juxtaposition of the same concept in another culture. Perhaps by globalizing the question, one might find answers closer to home.

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A. Schwartz

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