

Gert-Matthias Wegner:

A Personal Encounter with India, its Music and its Food

Though utterly personal, based on my own experience, this contribution describes the naive but open-minded approach symptomatic of young people of my generation. Sorry, I am not so young any longer...

During my twenty-first year, I interrupted my chemistry and biology studies at the university of Kiel to travel from Europe to India in what was then the fashionable way overland. With very little money and equipped with chloroquine pills, information based on Kipling's 'Jungle Book', a booklet on yoga and two long playing records: 'Ravi Shankar at Woodstock' and 'Raga Mangeyabhushan' by the Rudra vina-player Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. (The latter virtuoso's music conveyed a feeling of universal peace, a tranquil flow entirely different from any musical experience available in Western music.) I travelled in the company of my American friend Dallas who played the clarinet. We wanted to discover the country where such inspiring music originated.

After three months and countless adventures and encounters, I found myself one of the last individual travellers to cross the border to India near Lahore, before India and Pakistan went into one of their Kashmir crises. My friend had returned to Afghanistan to study local flute traditions. A fellow traveller, a Gujarati returning from studies in Britain to inherit his father's chemical factory in Bombay, had invited me to stay with his family. On our bumpy bus ride from Istanbul to Teheran he had described his mother's cuisine in detail and with intense emotion. This is what had brought me to Bombay in March 1971.

The cuisine in the Patel home was indeed memorable. Three generations of Gujarati ladies combined their skills to prepare food for us and make up for those years of exile from their table which their son had to endure whilst in Birmingham. One evening I perceived musical sounds floating into the hall together with the overpowering scent of ratrani blossom. These sounds seemed familiar from Ravi Shankar's LP recording: A tabla class had started in a garage located in the same courtyard. The teacher and his students sat on straw mats, each facing a pair of drums. A harmonium-player accompanied. I listened for a while, standing at the gate before asking permission to join them. In those days it was still uncommon for foreigners to take music classes in India. Taking the help of a student, the Marathi-speaking teacher offered to introduce me to his own teacher who, as he said, was a much better musician, knew English very well and would know how to handle this special case.

His teacher turned out to be the tabla virtuoso Pandit Nikhil Ghosh who lived with his family in a small apartment cum music school where every single room served some musical purpose. He immediately struck me as having a commanding personality with intellectual capacity, traditional Bengali upbringing, a healthy sense of humour and absolute dedication to music. I was invited to attend his concert the following day and then decide if I really wanted to learn from him. The concert, a recital by the singer Latafat Hussein Khan with Nikhil Ghosh's tabla accompaniment, was a spontaneous musical dialogue of astonishing technical perfection and emotional range. Overwhelmed, I asked for a trial lesson.

Lessons took place in a classroom decorated with historical photos and paintings of great Indian musicians. Instruments were kept neatly along the walls: tanpuras, sitars, tablas and harmoniums -

each protected by its own navy blue cotton cover. Ants of different sizes paraded the floor, entering from the open door leading into a small garden. Occasional calls of passing beggars and banana sellers from the street alternated with taxi horns and temple bells. Suddenly the apartment was filled with an unusually attractive smell of roses blended with tobacco. Mr. Ghosh arrived, holding a beautiful hookah with freshly lit charcoal and a special blend of flavoured tobacco imported from Calcutta. Nikhil Ghosh loved his hookah. It left his hands only when he sat down to play music or eat. The servant had unrolled two thin straw mats for us and arranged two pairs of tabla drums facing each other. We sat down and the initial lesson began.

Before starting to teach, Mr. Ghosh addressed three of the musicians' photographs with a brief prayer, asking for their blessing. I came to know that these musicians were his own teachers, Pandit Jnan Prakash Ghosh, Ustad Amir Hussain Khan and Ustad Ahmedjan Thirakwa. The lesson included instruction in posture and a drumming exercise called /terekete/taketake/. These meaningless syllables imitate the sounds of the drum. Compositions are transmitted with the help of these and similar syllables allowing musicians to recite and remember everything. Only at the end of each lesson was I encouraged to write down what I had learned and my notes were corrected, if necessary. My training as a piano player enabled me to control the movements of each finger, and my hands were supple enough to copy, albeit imperfectly, the intricate strokes demonstrated by my teacher who seemed to be satisfied with the trial lesson. I asked the correct way an Indian music student would address and greet his teacher and was instructed to call him 'Guruji' and briefly touch his feet as the customary gesture of reverence whenever we met and parted. From that day onwards, my Guruji taught me not only once but often twice a day. A tabla-maker delivered a beautiful pair of instruments which became my best friends.

A surprise awaited me after the initial lesson. Mrs. Ghosh had prepared an omelette for me, stuffed with green chillies, looking beautiful and inviting. The first bite revealed their hidden capacity. Flames emerged from my mouth and nostrils. Tears filled my eyes. The eyeballs left their sockets, bouncing against the opposite wall. Hairs stood on end and perspiration covered my head. I suffered the most violent attack of hiccups. Mrs. Ghosh observed my reaction with sheer terror. After the initial disaster, she always took particular care in diverting her lethal green chillies from my plate. I was allowed to address her as 'Mataji'. This was my welcome into the Ghosh household. My journey was over and my life had taken a new course.

This new life meant 'riyaz' or practising in seclusion, and 'talim' or individual lessons. Tabla is one of those instruments where however many hours you put in you never feel you have practised enough. The repertory of compositions is immense. Every single piece must be learned by heart and played in its appropriate style, created and represented by a number of exclusive family traditions of tabla playing. I was informed that the process of learning and becoming a musician was a lifelong task. As it turned out, my apprenticeship with Nikhil Ghosh would continue for altogether twenty-four years.

In fact my Guruji, as an accomplished master, was still receiving talim from his ancient teacher Ustad Ahmedjan Thirakwa. 'Khansahab' spent long periods in Nikhil Ghosh's home cum music school in Khar -then a quiet and charming residential suburb -enjoying the musical atmosphere of this crowded apartment. He took a keen interest in all matters of the school. During his afternoon nap he used to lie on his back in the classroom. Even during his sleep, his fingers continued to play on his chest. His personality was really soaked in music. Once I observed him responding to a beggar's call. Attired in his regal high-collared silk coat and silver cane, he went straight to the garden gate where he gracefully emptied his entire money-pouch, showering coins and bank notes

on the amazed cripple. Khansahab was in his early nineties and still capable of giving the most stunning tabla solo performances. At any speed his playing was without perceivable effort. Each stroke resembled a ripe fruit falling from a tree at just the perfect moment.

During my initial stay in Bombay I met a young German couple fond of pets. They had a fully-grown male leopard with his claws regularly clipped, as well as a big, lethargic python who resided in a basket with a lid. In addition there was a floating squirrel, which they forgot in a taxi. When the couple went downtown from their residence at Juhu Beach, the man and the leopard took the first taxi, the girl and the squirrel the next. The leopard enjoyed the view from the rear seat, sticking his head with its ferocious fangs out through one of the windows and its beautiful tail through the other, causing quite a sensation. The python was not considered fit for excursions and left in the kitchen to digest its weekly prey, a chicken. During parties, it was presented to the guests. When the man wanted to show his muscles, he picked up the python, held it in his hands and pulled until the python pulled back. Invariably, the python won and the guests applauded. The couple left Bombay for a fortnight and asked me to stay in their apartment, to mind the python. Fortunately, they had found another home for the leopard. I agreed to look after the slithering serpent and entertain it with my tabla practice.

Early on the morning following my arrival I went to the bathroom in the sort of daze, which persists until the first cup of tea. As soon as I sat down, I perceived about one foot of python tail sticking out from the water outlet in the bathroom floor. My housemate had tried to investigate the water pipe and got stuck. Its tail moved only just a little, signalling 'Help!' This was too serious a problem to be dealt with alone. I went outside to muster two assistants from a near-by construction site. Those fellows took a brief look and rapidly vanished. It took a lot of pleading before they dared enter the bathroom again to help me extricate the python. We worked very hard, pulling hand over hand and thinking even harder what to do when the head emerged. Suddenly the python was among us, making it clear immediately that, far from being amused, it had not come to say 'Thank you!' for our assistance. We ran for our lives slamming the bathroom door tightly shut.

Half an hour later we returned from the meat shop with a freshly killed and feathered chicken. Hoping to bargain for peaceful access, I very gently pulled the bathroom door open. Inside, the shower was running and had turned the floor into a pool. The python sat coiled on the window grill, looking somewhat grim and determined. Quickly we tied the chicken to a rod and extended it towards the python's mouth. Its black tongue tested the chicken. A furious hiss signalled rejection. Now it was my turn to look grim and determined. I went out to the construction site, returning with an iron rod bent at one end like a big hook. Applying this tool, we started to pull the snake from the window grill. It became very angry. All of a sudden it let go, jumped down into the pool and swam towards us like lightning. We ran for our lives again but the python did not go after us. It spotted its basket in the kitchen and slithered inside. I closed the lid, not without a sigh of relief.

Early next morning, when I went into the kitchen to put the kettle on I noticed that something was wrong. The kitchen window was ajar and so was the lid of the snake basket. The python had escaped. On their return, the pet lovers did not seem to mind very much.

One year later, I went to Bombay for further tabla lessons. I picked up the Indian Express daily and on the local news page read an alarming note by the police informing citizens that a huge python snake had been sighted in the backwaters of Juhu. Parents were alerted so that they could safeguard their children from being squeezed and eaten.

My Guruji recommended me to be ‘in contact with the Indian soil’, as he said. Experience of rural India, of the people, the seasons and the vastness of the subcontinent, was to be the means of revealing the essence of Indian music. His first choice was Bengal, which he knew so well from his own childhood in Barisal district (now Bangladesh). I was allowed to accompany him during one of his concert tours to Calcutta. One of his disciples had organized a night long concert with many musicians, in a remote village called Chanditala. The hall was packed with music lovers chatting away, playing with their children, walking in and out, or simply having a nap in their chairs. Without exception, every Indian concert needs to be amplified to drown the noise created by the audience, the total result being even more noise. I was asked to play a tabla solo. When the performance was over, I found myself surrounded by a crowd of fans offering tea in disposable clay cups and warm rasgullas on leaf plates. These typical Bengali milk sweets are little white sponges containing a brown core soaking in a sugar syrup. Villagers used to gather for rasgulla eating contests. During that night I achieved my personal record of twenty-four rasgullas.

Invitations for dinner parties followed. I was put up in a small village ashram in Dankuni where my host was a sitar-playing Babaji, Shri Ganpat Muni Shastri. Besides his spiritual exercises and daily music practice, this kind man ran a dispensary offering free homeopathic treatment to the villagers. Among six million refugees from the painfully emerging state of Bangladesh, this ashram had given shelter to twelve young men who did not hesitate to demonstrate their newly acquired yoga skills. We walked down to the ashram pond where they all went floating on the surface, effortlessly folding their legs into the lotus posture. The pond was inhabited by ancient carp, which immediately appeared on the surface when they sensed someone approaching. Used to being fed with muri, puffed rice, they would gently suck at my knees, begging for more. The dormitory’s windows were meticulously barred by recently installed chicken-wire. When I asked for the reason, I was informed about the cobra plague. Before the windows had been protected, one of the young men called Kartik had woken up in the morning to find a cobra coiled on his stomach. Cobras like to sleep in warm places. He screamed but did not dare make any sudden movement. Fortunately his neighbour came to the rescue with a heavy stick, killing the cobra on Kartik’s resilient stomach.

In order to answer those dinner invitations, we had to travel deep into the countryside by cycle-rickshaw. Rickshaws were equipped with beautiful brass horns announcing their course and a torch for spotting snakes on the way. Many rickshaw drivers die owing to cobra bites in their ankles. Cobras do not like being run over by a rickshaw. On our arrival we were offered a warm bath, then clad in informal lungis we were led to the fishpond surrounded by dark coconut trees. The black water reflected the stars. Green fireflies meandered above the surface to the insistent chorus of nocturnal creatures. Whilst dinner was under preparation, we enjoyed lively conversation with our hosts who made us feel like old friends. Whenever spices were fried in mustard oil, the most enticing flavours wafted through the house. Words do not suffice to describe the culinary delights that followed. There is nothing on earth like Indian hospitality.

In 1981/82 I spent an entire year in Bombay, which offered unexpected chances to be ‘in contact with the soil’. Fed up with living in the noisy and polluted metropolis, I discovered the beautiful island Manori with its three villages inhabited by Koli fishermen. I took residence in a shack located in a coconut wadi facing the ocean. The shack was a simple bamboo structure covered with targola palm leaves and the floor was made of white sand from the near-by beach. Water was pulled up from an old well. Here, there was complete peace to practice tabla and swim in the sea but there was no food. I had to learn to cook, and fast. My neighbour Ramkumar, a Jat farmer from Haryana, volunteered to teach me the secrets of Indian cookery. We pooled our resources and

my apprenticeship began. It turned out that he knew only two basic recipes, one vegetable curry and dal, a lentil dish flavoured with fried spices and tomatoes. He never ever prepared rice but freshly baked chapati, flat round bread in two thin layers, made even tastier with a dab of ghee. Below his bed, Ramkumar kept a huge tin full of ghee prepared by his mother. This helped him to overcome his homesickness.

During Shivaratri day my American friend Dallas and I played a concert at the Samudreshvar Shiva temple where Manori creek meets the sea. A saintly Maharaj of the mediaeval Nathpantha yoga order lived here, meditating in the seclusion of his 'kuti', a small leaf hut facing the beach. He invited me to stay and practise tabla in his small ashram. There were only three permanent residents, Maharaj, the caretaker and their German musician. During the day, people from the fishing village came to water the coconut trees. After evening service they gathered for group singing of devotional bhajan songs, which I used to accompany. We immediately became friends and they invited me to their homes in the village and to go fishing on their ocean-braving boats. The freshest possible seafood is served on these fishing-boats. The fish is picked from the catch, cleaned, grilled on charcoal and served with flat rice bread. After the onset of monsoon, the ocean is too rough to go fishing with nets. This is the time for suspending baited hooks in the sheltered mouth of the creek and hope for the best. Only during extreme high-and low tide is it possible to paddle the instable dugouts towards the hooks and collect the catch, no matter how much the rain pours or how violent the current is.

One evening it was decided to undertake a pilgrimage to Gaganbaudha, a mountain wilderness South of Kolhapur, to pay respects and offer pranam to Gagangiri Maharaj, a senior saint and guru of our Maharaj. Gagangiri Maharaj had taken residence in a spacious cave below the mountaintop. The cave contains water tanks constructed by the ambitious warrior king Shivaji who used to resist the Mughal armies with his hit-and-run strategy. Gagangiri Mahaj had perfected his mastery of pranayama breathing control to such an extent that he was not only capable of meditating below water but made it his habit to remain there without oxygen for hours. Those ancient tanks were ideally suited for his meditation.

When we arrived at the cave, the saint sat on a bed decorated with flower garlands. An assistant tended the obligatory slow log fire in front of him. We squatted down to sing our bhajans. The moment we had finished, a professional singer, Jitendra Abhisheki from Bombay arrived with his entourage to sing for the saint. As soon as the accompanists started tuning their instruments, a huge yellow butterfly sailed into the cave to perch on a flower garland in front of the saint's forehead. The butterfly kept its wings spread, giving the effect of a light source and remaining there throughout the performance. Gagangiri Maharaj kept his eyes shut, his erect body swaying with the flow of the music. Finally the singer stopped. Only the eternal drone of nocturnal insects remained. The butterfly left its perch and sailed down to alight on the floor, between where I was sitting and the log fire. It kept vibrating its wings in an odd manner and the saint explained that this was its way of asking for blessing. He instructed his assistant to carefully sprinkle sacred red powder on its wings. When this was done, the butterfly left the cave, sailing straight into the moonless night outside.

Towards the end of the rainy season I was invited to join an expedition organized by a group of ayurvedic doctors and their students, to collect a luminous substance with medical properties, found only during this season on a mountaintop in the middle of a tribal area close to the border of Gujarat. In those days, approximately thirty million Indians were members of tribal groups called 'Adivasi', literally 'ancient dwellers'. These people descend from ancient times, before Indo-Aryans invaded the subcontinent. They still preserve some of their ancient ways radically different

from mainstream Hindu culture. Whenever they come into contact with the outside world, they are grossly exploited or simply told to disappear and make way for another huge dam or highway project. Anthropologists tend to be fascinated by Adivasi people, and so is the Communist Party of India.

Our expedition began with a train ride to the border of Gujarat where we met our local guides and started walking east. At sunset we reached a clearing on the mountaintop where the strangest music greeted us. Suddenly a large group of Warli bhagats appeared with their disciples. Two musicians frantically blowing into instruments constructed from two bamboo pipes and a large bell-mouth made from palm leaves. These instruments are called 'tarpa'. They are played with circular breathing allowing for an uninterrupted flow of music. Bhagats are village shamans specializing in healing and in direct communion with their gods by means of possession. They also know how to deal with dangerous witches. Some specialize in plant lore.

The Warli people scarcely seemed to take notice of our group. They were involved in a ritual exposing their bhagat apprentices to the final test. Those lads had prepared to be possessed by several gods and this was to be the big moment when it all happened. They gathered around the musicians who started to play a most stirring invocation. Everybody became possessed, their bodies trembling and swirling around the musicians. The bhagats checked the apprentices' knees to find out if anybody simulated the divine state. Every apprentice passed the test. Finally, the group squatted down for refreshments. Their cooks had prepared a hot soup made of field crabs cut in halves. We opened our sandwich boxes and joined the picnic. Darkness fell upon us.

We were led to the eastern rim of the mountain to take a look into the haunted valley. All of us saw them at the same instant: twenty to thirty orange lights kept moving near the bottom of the valley below us. Their silent progress seemed at random, sometimes slow, sometimes sudden and with an increase and decrease of intensity. This gave us food for thought. Warlis avoid this valley like hell. We kept gazing down, beholding the disturbing spectacle for several hours. Explanations were ventured and discarded. The students' professor had the final word. According to him, these moving lights were departed souls tied to this plane by some extreme longing. This struck me as a poetic way of saying "I don't really know." Gently, mist shrouded the valley.

Our Warli guide came running, holding a branch covered with a slimy substance which emitted the most stunning blue glow, like something out of Conan Doyle's 'Hound of the Baskervilles'. We followed the guide to what looked like a dry riverbed. When we extinguished our torches, we saw that the entire area was aglow with similar blue light. Clearly, this had nothing to do with ghosts but was created by rotting plant matter and a special kind of fungus. The overall effect was absolutely magic. The professor and his students assumed hectic activity, scraping off luminous slime and filling their plastic bags with scientific fervour. Rain started and forced us to huddle under the single available plastic sheet. It was far too small. We were so excited that we did not mind getting wet. Sunset was delayed by this eventful night.

Two days later I returned with my camera and a portable cassette recorder. My fieldwork with the Warli people had begun. In 1982, my work as an ethnomusicologist led me to the Himalayas where I settled in Bhaktapur, Nepal. I keep travelling to Bombay (now: Mumbai) every year, for a couple of weeks at least, to learn more about music, pick up delightful new recipes and stay in touch with my friends. They are convinced that I was born in Germany by some cosmic error. It was ordained to happen in India, of course. But I realize the advantages of being an outsider. It has made it possible for me to meet people of the most diverse ethnic and social backgrounds and in most cases establish a basis for mutual understanding and friendship.

Music is a sound way of reaching other people's hearts. It has this in common with good food. Those who are at home in more than one musical/culinary culture are the lucky ones. Musicians have a natural gift for linking our different worlds. With their assistance we cannot fail to realise that the differences between us are in fact smaller than we always presumed.