

Beginning of a Musical Journey¹

Satvick Dass

When I became conscious about myself at the age of four or five, I remember I used to follow women from Qeleloa village, including my mother, to the nearby Vuniyasi River on the western side of my family farm. The village women would bring big bundles of soiled clothes for washing, especially on Sundays. These women sometimes would seek help from the bigger children of the village to carry the bundles to the river. I was always happy to join them. I would wait to carry their washed clothes back to the village. While the women washed their clothes, beating the pants, shirts and sheets on smooth stones, I would follow the rhythm of their movements. Sitting on the river bank, I would watch the water flowing calmly, flashing and gently hitting the rocks. The fish in it would shake their fins and tails, leaping and diving in the water. The sun above would make the water sparkle. I would also watch the clouds moving in the sky, the birds flying. The mango and guava trees and the sugarcane would provide some shade in the scorching heat. Even at this tender age, I realized how the nature and its elements affect our feelings and emotions, in fact our entire being.

Although I was generally of a calm and introspective nature, my family knew I could be quite mischievous and would do things which would irritate them and make them very angry. One story I would like to narrate here concerns my aunt, Venkat Lakshamma. Every Friday she would clean her prayer place and prepare for evening pooja. She would collect hibiscus and marigolds and make offerings to her favorite deities - Ram, Krishna and Shakti Mata. She was a very devoted and upright woman, strict as well as kind-hearted.

Being naughty and playful, I would sneak up to her prayer place and disturb her pooja arrangement. When she caught me, she would scold me

¹ From Satvick Dass's forthcoming autobiography *A Musical Journey*

in strong terms and explain what pooja was all about. I think she managed to instill a sense of sacredness of life into me.

The Vuniyasi River played a vital role in the life of the village. This river had been a strong part of my childhood experience. The river starts from the tiny hills of Vuniyasi. The entire length of this river would be no more than 10 kilometers, joining the Nawaka river near the Navo Bridge on the Queen's Road, close to Nadi town, towards Sigatoka. This river has been the source of all our water needs - washing, cooking, drinking, bathing and swimming. Because there was no tap or well water available, everyone was dependant on this river. The river also provided a good source of protein for the villagers, as fish was plentiful - freshwater tarpons (ebula), red snapper (lalki), cords, shrimps, eels, saqa, nuqa and mullets.

I was born on the Boxing Day of 1941, at about 1pm, in Qeleoa, Nadi. Qeleloa is in the southern side of Nadi town, covering roughly 3sq km. In fact, Qeleloa is a part of Nadi town itself. The word qeleloa means 'black soil' in the iTaukei language. This part of Nadi has very rich and fertile soil, ideal for sugarcane farming. After 1920, South Indian girmityas settled here and became sugarcane farmers. The land was leased to these farmers in 10 acre lots, controlled by the Australian-owned CSR Company. Our own farm was a 12 acre lot, one and a half kilometers from Nadi town.

My grandfather, Sundooru Narsa Dasu, left Nellore in Andhra Pradesh in 1912, as an indentured labourer. He served gimit in Naitata, Navua. After indenture system was abolished, he moved with his family to Tavarau, Ba. And then to Dreketi, Lautoka and Solovi, Nadi. Finally the family settled in Qeleloa, Nadi.

My father Ram Krishnaiya Dass was married to Adiamma in Solovi. My mother, Adiamma, was the eldest daughter of my maternal grandfather, Ram Sami, who also served gimit in Navua. My grandfather, Ram Sami, was very well-known and a famous *Terra-Kuttu* dancer. *Terra-Kuttu* is a folk dance of South India. Girmityas performed this dance in villages and towns from the early days. Ram Sami acquired the art of dancing skills from his family. He sang well in Telegu, developed his dancing skills and became a well-known name throughout Fiji.

My paternal grandfather and grandmother, Narsa Dasu and Dasari Lakshamma, and my mother and father, with a few other relatives, came and settled in Qeleloa in the 1930's. Most settlers in Qeleloa were of South Indian origin and Telegu-speaking, the main language of Andhra Pradesh, India.

My grandmother was a very competent singer. She was noticed by

the people of the village as a talented singer. She sang mostly Telegu wedding songs, Tyagaraja Krititis, and Namavali bhajans with a lot of sincerity. Tyagaraja is a Telegu Saint and musician famous for his Krititis (Bhajans) throughout India. Namavali is a compilation of kirtans, or repetitions of the Lord's name. Thus music was there in my family from my childhood, with our sisters, Kantamma and Ranjamma, and brothers, Bal Sundaram Dass, Sita Ram Dass, Hari Krishna Dass, Parshuram all had lovely voices, like out mama Ramaiya who made his mark in singing kirtans. His renderings during the Then India Sanmarg Ikya Sangam Tirunaals and festivals at the Subramaniam Swami Temple are still remembered by our family members.

Shiva Subramaniam Temple, a labour of devotion and love, was built by the South Indians near the banks of the Nadi River, where the present Nadi Bridge is situated. This temple served the religious needs of our people. It had an ideal setting, beautiful surroundings, wild flowers with fruit-bearing mango, jackfruit, coconuts, banana trees and various kinds of shrubs near the riverbeds, adding immense charm and glory to the temple.

Once a year, in January, the Annual Tirunaal was held. I used to wait anxiously and dream about all the things that attracted me: the neatly arranged sweet-meats — jalebi, gulaab jamun, barfi, peda, lakdi mithai, murku, vade — in the stalls giving such delicious aroma. For a child, this was the most exciting time of the year. The crowd, music, noise, food and sweets— this was very different from the dreary life in the village.

I used to look forward to the *shehnai* recitals. The shehnai is a wind instrument used on auspicious occasions. The catchy melodies and rhythm of the *tavil* in Karnatak style would excite and inspire the musical longing in me. Karnatak music is slightly different from North Indian music. I learnt later that the scales and ragas are more or less the same, but the singing is different. I was fortunate to have been introduced to this music so early in my life.

One of the main attractions of the festival was the Rath Yatra. During the ten days Tirunaal, the Rath (cart) was decorated with ornaments and Murtis of Kartike and his consorts, Valli and Devyani, majestically placed on the cart with enough room for the Pujari to receive puja thalis from devotees who lined up the main street of Nadi Town.

The Rath or Chariot was pulled by the devotees and sometimes I would join them. The inspired crowd chanting 'Hara Hara Govinda Govinda', and singing devotional songs, moving to different parts of Nadi Town, to Narewa, Qeleloa and nearby places, created a festival atmosphere in the whole region. What a spectacular scene this ritual created.

The Rrath would eventually be taken back to the temple.

Devotees in yellow garbs, smeared with chandan, haldi, pierced with needles called *soolams*, half circle like bamboo bows tied with citrus fruits, go to the Nadi River, dip in the river, in order to get rid of their sins and pray for the fulfillment of their wishes. The Tirunaal fever was such that I never wanted to miss it, whether there was rain, storm or flood. I remember once, there was flood everywhere. Qeleloa Bridge was 6–7 feet under water. My parents and brothers and I braved the floods, crossed the river in a boat, and slept in Nadi Sangam School during the night. Next morning we attended the Tirunaal. Such was the passion the Tirunaal festival created.

My parents told me that Swami Avinasha Lingam, a devout, spiritual, loving and scholarly saint of South India, appeared in Fiji, in 1936, ten years after the establishment of Sangam. His visit created great enthusiasm, hope and strength to the South Indian communities throughout Fiji. On his advice, temples and schools were built in many parts of Fiji by the TISI Sangam organization.

A new phase in my life began when I was enrolled at the Nadi Sangam Primary School and put in-charge of Mr. Perumal Naidu of Nawaka, and Mr. Ramaiya Iyer of India, who lived with our family in Qeleloa. Mr. Perumal Naidu was my class teacher. Mr. Naidu has become a part of Indian diaspora and lives in Los Angeles, U.S.A. Mr. Iyer, who taught me Telegu, died many years ago.

During the seven years at Nadi Sangam Primary School, I was taught by a number of teachers whose names I still remember: Muniamma Govind Sami, Padmanaabha Pillay, Mangamma Naidu, Venkatachallam, S.M. Naicker, Hanuman Aisappa, Subramani Basuwaiya, Durga Prasad, Venkat Sami Naidu, N. Ramanna, Annamale Mudliar and U. Gopalan, the Head Teacher. All these teachers are no more except Perumal Naidu, Hanuman Aisappa, Venkatachallam. Hanuman Aisappa now is a resident of Sydney, Australia while Venkatachallam is residing in Auckland, New Zealand. I recall their faces vividly; they were all a strong part of my school experience.

Mr. U. Gopalan, the Head Teacher, was a well-respected person in the community. He was brilliant of mind and very disciplined. He controlled his staff and students very efficiently. No student would go unpunished when a mistake was committed. Overall, his management of the school was praised by everyone. It is leaders like Mr. Gopalan who have set high standards for education in the Sangam schools.

There were many additional activities carried out at school in which I participated, these included sports, gardening and scouting. Although mu-

sic was also in the curriculum, unfortunately it was given a low priority. I used to look forward to music classes. These classes were either taken by the Head Teacher himself, or Mr. Annamale Mudliar. Mr. Mudliar had a very distinctive voice and sang film songs and bhajans with equal ease. I still remember the songs he taught us: *Roti na kisi ko kisi ko motiyon ka dher*, *Bhagwan tere raaj mein andher hi andher* and *Ab tere siwa kaun mera Krishna Kanhaiya*, *Bhagwan kinare se laga de meri naiya*. The famous Mohammed Rafi sung song, *Suno suno yeh duniya waalon*, *Baapu ki yeh amar kahaani*, based on Mahatma Gandhi's death, always touched us deeply. The popular song, *Raghupati Raaghav Raaja Ram*, *Pati tapaawan sita ram*, became part of our regular singing. These music classes, though brief, were very important for my later development. When I look back, if we had more trained teachers in music and received formal instruction in music, my career would have been significantly different.

In 1954, circumstances forced me to leave school. My parents needed me to work in the sugarcane farm and to look after the cattle — three milking cows, two pairs of bullocks, two horses and few calves. I was twelve years old. My eldest brother, Balasundaram Dass, brother Balram Dass and younger brother, Harikrishna Dass, also had to leave school. They too became farm workers. We were still primary school children. There was so much work in the farm and labourers were hard to find, so the family members were recruited for planting, weeding, harvesting sugarcane, growing rice and other mixed crops. I was assigned to find grazing areas for the cattle and look for para grass and cane-tops to feed them during night-time. Even in these hard times, there was music in my life that sustained me and gave me hope and inspiration while tending the cattle, grazing near the riverside with boys and some older people of the village. We sang songs while we looked forward to adventures of different kinds like stealing watermelons, rock melons, cucumbers, maize, mandarins and coconuts, digging mussels in shallow waters, fishing, swimming, playing hide and seek in the river. Our farms near the river gave us enough to eat and remain healthy and energetic.

Many times when we were caught by the owners we received hidings. Generally we were lucky and went unnoticed. In the meanwhile we hummed popular songs that we had heard as we continued with these adventures in the farms, grazing fields and river-sides.

January, February and March were hurricane times. Heavy rains brought unceasing floods in the entire area. Qeleloa's CSR bridge would be under six to seven feet of water. Dried wood, pieces of bamboo, broken branches and other debris floated above the bridge and made their way into the Pacific Ocean. Nature, at its worst, was very frightening to

us children. At the same time the rushing water, thunder and lightning were fearful music to my ears and I cherished these sounds of nature.

Leaving school and staying home, working on the farm, tending the cattle, was burdensome to me. I longed to go back to school and join my friends and continue my education. My father was opposed to this. He was a hard taskmaster. Even for small mistakes, he would punish us severely. We feared even to talk to him. There was no solution to the problem of my going back to school. It seemed that it was end of my studies. Being orthodox in many ways, my father argued with us when we mentioned school and came out with statements like, 'You had enough studies. Who will look after the cattle, and who will milk the cows and carry all the farm duties?' Deep inside me I became rebellious. I didn't know what to do. One day I left the cattle grazing, gathered enough courage and walked up to Mr. Gopalan, the Head Teacher of Nadi Sangam School, for help. He knew I was a bright pupil and would do extremely well in studies. My father was summoned to his office. Things were explained to him but my father stubbornly refused, saying that he was unable to support me with five shillings term fees. I was helpless. Mr. Gopalan acted like a savior to me during those depressing and gloomy times. He agreed to pay my fees for one year. It came like god-sent. I was greatly relieved and was naturally overjoyed and happy to go back to school.

The joy of passing the 8th year examination, and securing a place at Shri Vivekananda High School, gave me a great sense of achievement. Just to think I would get a chance to further my education and reach greater success in life was enough to lift my spirit to a new height. This was a rare chance for a poor farmer's son.

Finally the day came for enrolment at Shri Vivekananda High School in 1956. I saw that the school was open corrugated iron sheds built in the Shiva Subramaniam Temple grounds by the Rama Krishna Mission of Fiji in Nadi town. Swami Rudranandji Maharaj was as its Head. For my parents a lot of money was required to pay the building fund and fees for enrolment. This was not possible because of our poor financial background. My hope of joining SVHS was fading. Once again I had to stay home and help my brothers in farming. I decided to approach Swami Rudranandji for help.

Right from my childhood days, I used to take part in the Ashram bhajan and religious functions, and at times I used to bring Swamiji the first bottle of ghee (clarified butter) from cows' milk after the birth of a new calf. Swamiji was very kind and gentle towards me. I had a feeling that he would definitely help me. I humbly requested him to get me enrolled at the school. I was surprised how readily he agreed. In return, he asked me

to do some work at the Sangam office, attached to the Rama Krishna Mission Ashram. The work involved preparing labels for 'Jagruti' (a by-weekly Hindi newspaper) and 'Pacific Review' (a weekly in English and Fijian) and dispatching papers. I also collected mail from the Nadi post office. I was overjoyed that I will be a student here; these errands were like additional pleasures for me.

We regarded Swamiji Maharaj as a family friend and guide. He was a frequent visitor to our home. Our home was a big bure house and a small corrugated iron shed which was used as a kitchen. My family was very much devoted to Swamiji and relied on him for his help and guidance. Eventually he became like a family member to us. He shared meals with us and talked to us on many subjects, especially on religion and successful farming. My brothers and I were very close to him, he valued us for our musical talents.

Swamiji was sent by the Rama Krishna Mission in India to manage Sangam affairs in Fiji. He loved music and was eager to help people to cultivate their musical talents. He bought musical instruments from India such as taanpura, bamboo flutes, mridangh, harmonium and cymbals and distributed them to music loving people who needed them to develop their talents. This was a great service for music. Swamiji's interest in music had a positive effect on my own devotion to music. I remember: Swamiji donated a clarinet to my brother Balram Dass, and a pair of tabla to my cousin N. S. Dass, who was the only tabla player at that time in our village, indeed the entire Nadi District. Playing clarinet was quite unusual in those times. Swamiji encouraged Balram Dass to get efficient with the clarinet. My brother gradually gained reputation as a musician and contributed a lot towards promoting Indian music in Fiji. I was proud to be part of this music-loving family.

I was at school once again. I enjoyed my lessons in various subjects taken by some of the most devoted teachers like P.N.D Musad, Bhaskaran Ayer, B.G. Pillai, and others, who were brought by Swami Rudranandji Maharaj from the R.K Mission in Madras. Mr. Musad was the Principal of the school. He was very disciplined and controlled his staff and pupils in a strict manner. He was so strict that students feared him and no student would voluntarily go near him when he was talking or sharing a conversation with someone. If a student failed to produce homework, he/she would be severely punished.

His expectations of me were high. He wanted me to be an exceptional student. His presence in the class generated a lot of fear in the students. Because of my shy nature, I could not often present correct answers as expected. For this reason, I lost considerable interest in his subject, which

was Algebra.

There were other local teachers like Ram Harak Mahaveer, VD Sharma, Dhiraj Lal, Salik Ram, Lakshman Ayer, who were more friendly and helpful to the students. Overall, the entire staff and pupils benefited from the congenial atmosphere which prevailed in the Subramaniam Swami Temple grounds.

Shri Vivekananda High was a popular school and students from all over Fiji attended the school because of its reputation. There were hostels for boys and girls who came from far away places. The boys hostel was attached to the temple and had wide corridors, also used as lecture rooms during day time. During festivals, the corridors were used as dining hall for the devotees. The girl's hostel was further away near Nadi Sangam school at the back of Nadi Town, where the present Sangam College is situated.

Some of the students were fine singers. I used to envy Mahen Singh from Tavua, who had an attractive voice and sang all kinds of songs. Navneeta Goundar of Nadi liked singing KC Dey, Pankaj Malik, and songs by K.L Saigal. I could hardly match their singing. But I was exceptionally good in providing rhythm to their songs.