
Delhi Raga

BY DANIEL HUDON

The sixty-three-year-old sarod player sits cross-legged on the stage between the tabla and tambura players. He says he is humbled before his seniors in the audience but will play despite the fact that most lose their talent after fifty. Murmurs of appreciation come from the other musicians and the audience. He tells us the name of the raga and spends the first part of the recital just playing notes.

A raga is a series of notes upon which a melody is based. The word comes from the Sanskrit and is loosely translated as something that “colors the hearts of men.” Though there are strict rules of ascent and descent, marked resting places and characteristic phrases, they are meant to assist in exploring the raga—the musician is free to improvise within the rules. A raga is like a map of a mountain where each note reveals a different area until the map is no longer contours and coordinates but becomes something made out of stone and decorated with

trees, with ravines and crevices where water collects and runs, evoking awe, anxiety and views to a wide horizon.

I checked into a hotel in the Main Bazaar last night. The Main Bazaar was exactly as I had left it: a miasmic sea of motorcycles buzzing, rickshaws rubbing your ankles off, cars honking and beggars pleading. As I waded through, I laughed—I was ready for it.

“Delhi is nice to come back to,” Tupuna had told me on the terrace of Hotel Vivek a month ago. Three times I checked back there today for her but she was not there.

The tabla player looks half the age of the sarod player and is wearing a flashy yellow shirt like a kid showing off, in contrast to his elder’s pale brown. He nods every time another note is played, waiting for his chance to jump in. The elder has a worried look on his face, as if his talent could fail at any moment. He coaxes out another note, carves, shapes and embellishes it, but what about the next? He refuses to show any progress on his face and sighs at the difficulty. Will the raga



“Brooklyn Bridge” by Andrew Bisdale

reveal itself?

At nine in the morning it was so hot the sweat was dripping off my body. At the hotel, I met a German man sitting in the doorway of his room, soaking some clothes in a bucket. I was tempted to do the same—have a lazy day with laundry, novels and cold showers—but I had too much energy, there was too much I wanted to see. Back in the big city, no time to meditate. Gotta hurry, gotta go.

Ragas, said to originate from Siva’s mouth, are grouped according to the time of day or night for which they are

most appropriate. There are sombre, devotional morning ragas, restless afternoon ragas, introspective evening ragas and late-night ragas that are profound and mysterious. There are also ragas for different seasons and each has the power to evoke various emotions: awe and fear, joy and laughter, love, peace and calm.

I arranged a train ticket to Rajasthan, spent an hour waiting to cash a traveller’s cheque (they were out of cash) and went to the post office, then slipped into my old habits and wandered through the bookstores and

art galleries of Connaught Place.

The Kid finally comes in on the tabla, rambunctious and barely contained as if he's been waiting for a bus to get going and is now slapping the side of the bus saying, *chalo! chalo! chalo!* ("let's go! let's go! let's go!"). He quickly develops an elaborate pulsing pattern *dha takita dha dha takita takita dha takita tirakita takita tirakita dha* like his own map that frames the Elder's melody with minor landmarks of percussive energy.

The auto-rickshaw driver this afternoon had an entire map of Old Delhi and New Delhi in his head and wanted to take me to Feroz Shah Kotla—the ruins of Ferozabad, Raj Ghat where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated ("Mahatma is for 'great soul'—there are many Gandhi's but only one Mahatma"), India Gate and the tombs of ancient rulers and saints. He filled up the space in the road that was waiting for us by driving right through it, buzzing the horn as we went.

I phoned home and told my parents I was thinking of extending my trip beyond the original plan of six months. "Well, there's a real world out there," they said. Meaning, *Don't you think you should come back and get a job?*

The Kid follows the Elder for awhile, slower and faster, answering questions and posing new ones, imitating and exploring before taking off on his own again. Meanwhile, the tambu-

ra winds through the background like the broad, slow Yamuna River that drones through Old Delhi and New Delhi.

And so they go on, generating flurries of sound—Elder and Kid, knowledge and action, like verses from the Upanishads that have their own rhythm and metre but come together in meaning. They build a new myth over a wide, expansive silence; like a god waking from an ageless sleep, coming to a life of movement and change.

In a bookshop in Connaught Place I read that a raga is like a divine being whose true nature is unknown. He can only be summoned with a sincere and patient heart and even then he'll come only under the right circumstances. The performers often don't know the raga has come till after he's gone. ■

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Delhi Raga" comes from a series of vignettes written during a six-month trip I took to Southeast Asia and India immediately following the completion of my Ph.D., two dozen of which have been published in literary magazines. This piece originally appeared in the magazine *Grain*, and was as well read, with music, at this year's Core Talent Review.