

Musical Ancestries: India Script

India – a nation of contrasts – a land of exotic beauty and simplicity, of grandeur and humility...it is a place where the geography is as diverse as its people, and the inner light of each person is recognized. This is reflected India's universal greeting, "**Namaste** – I honor the divine in you."

It was in India that Chandra and Nitesh's mother was born. When she was 17, she'd come to the United States as an exchange student, went home to India to study pre-med, then returned to the US for med school and became a well-respected doctor. Her name, Deepa (meaning "Lamp"), fits her... she has touched many with her light. Chandra (her name means "moon"), is 10, loves dancing, and takes lessons. Her twin brother, Nitesh (his name means "heartbeat of earth"), plays in his school band. Deepa recently told them, "I feel that at your age, it's important you learn more about this world... sooo... we're going to India! We'll meet Uncle Nihal in Mumbai, my hometown. As you know, he's a well-respected musician, so he'll be our guide for some great performances. Open up your ears *and* your minds, because India is alive with all *sorts* of music and dance."

"Oh, Mom! How fabulous! When are we going?" "In late summer," Deepa replied. "Let's Skype Uncle Nihal right now, and then we'll check out a map of India to see where we're going!"

It seemed like no time until Deepa, Chandra, and Nitesh were on their way. Uncle Nihal met them at the airport with the biggest grin and the most joyful spirit you could ever imagine. "Welcome, welcome, my dear ones! Namaste!" he said, bowing to them. "It is so wonderful to see you again, Deepa! And Chandra and Nitesh – how grown up you are!! But of course – you're 10 now! We're going to have so much fun

and learn so much about Indian music and dance! You're staying for a year, yes? No?!? Oh, too bad. Well, we'll just have to make the most of these two weeks together." (It was no surprise to the twins to learn that Uncle Nihal's name meant "joyous and successful" – he was all of that and more! This adventure with him was going to be awesome!)

They actually started their 'musical' journey two days later – right in Uncle Nihal's studio. "The beginning of Indian classical music," he began, "is found in the oldest **Hindu** scripture called **Sama Veda**. The **Vedas** are religious texts that we believe were received directly from God, and recorded by scholars in an ancient language called **Sanskrit**. Passed down through generations by word of mouth – or **oral tradition** – the scriptures contain hymns, philosophy, and guidance on rituals of the **Vedic** religion. There are four chief collections, but the one *we'll* focus on is the **Sama Veda**, because it contains references to string and wind instruments, as well as drums and cymbals."

Uncle Nihal continued, "**Indian classical music** has a most complex and complete musical system, with **seven basic notes**, known as the **Sapta Swara**, which means 7 notes. They are: 'sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, and ni, and then sa repeats the octave.' This is very much the same scale that you've learned in **Western music**, isn't it? – with the **Solfège syllables**: "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, and do repeats. An interesting difference is that when you learn the basic Western scale on piano, you start on C, and use only white notes of the keyboard. In the Indian scale (often learned on the **harmonium**), you start on C#. You'll also hear we sometimes 'bend' notes and use semi-tones – and that might sound a little strange to you at first. Your mom knows both of these systems well, because as you know, she has a very beautiful voice."

"In Indian Classical music, there are **two main styles** – **Hindustani music** from **North India**, and **Carnatic music** from the **South**. We are now sitting here in Mumbai, which is actually in the *West* State of

India,” Uncle Nihal twinkled, “So, you see, right *here* we have the best of *all* worlds!” His laugh was infectious, and they giggled with him. “Yes, I’m being humorous, but truly, music has *always* been a most important part of Indian life. We have everything from simple melodies to one of the most well-developed systems of classical music in the world.”

“The **two main styles of music** first began separating around **1200 AD**, and by the **1500s**, were quite distinct from each other. Within these two styles, there are **13 different forms** of Indian classical music! There are also *many* instruments that may be new to you – the **veena, kanjira, tambura, sitar, and sarod**... Oh, but I’m going too fast! Too many new words and unfamiliar sounds! We’ll take them one at a time...starting in the North – with **Hindustani** music. Let’s listen to some now, and we’ll learn as we go along.” Uncle Nihal said, “This is Ustad (or teacher) Amjad Ali Khan playing **sarod**, and **tabla** player Ekla Cholo, recorded live at a concert at NRK Radio Concert Hall. Just listen to how beautifully they play, both individually and together!”

“India has a very rich and diverse history, due to many cultures that have called this land home over many centuries,” Uncle Nihal explained. “For instance, among others, there are **Persian** and **Islamic** historical influences. Back in the days of the **Muslim rulers** and noblemen, music was known to have flourished in the courts, and perhaps their most noted *musician* was **Tansen**, who was known as ‘*one of the nine jewels of Akbar’s court.*’

Today, however, the main influence in Northern India is **Hindu**, and **Hindustani music** centers around **Lord Krishna** and the **beauty of nature.**”

In **Hindustani** music, there are various styles, called **Gharanas**, which are similar to lineages (or family lines) that come from individual

teachers. **Gharanas** include **musicians AND dancers**. Tell me, do you know the word ‘**Guru**’?” “Yes sir,” answered Nitesh, “That’s somebody who’s a master teacher.” “Excellent! Well, each of the **Gharanas** – or schools – was begun by a guru...follow? Then, through either the students’ family lines or apprenticeship, the students continued in that teacher’s style.” The twins nodded. “As a result, with many different teachers, the **Hindustani** school has flexibility in its music.”

Uncle Nihal continued, “As early as the 1400s, India was an important **trading partner** and a **colony** of the **European countries: Portugal, Holland, Denmark, France, and Britain**, which created many changes in India. But it’s interesting to note that right here in Mumbai, there has always been a great dedication to **Hindustani** music. It thrived, even during the Colonial times when this city’s name was Bombay and the British lived here. An Indian scholar recently uncovered an amusing story in her research about Mumbai. In the early 1900s, Hindustani music was so popular here, that if two concerts happened to be going on at the same time, people called ‘runners’ would hurry to the other venue and let people know that the musicians were really “getting hot.” The audience would leave – and go to the other concert! I’m happy they don’t do that anymore! I don’t think I’d want my audience walking out! How about you?!” “No sir!” the twins shook their heads.

“Before tonight’s concert, there are some important things you need to know... *What?* I didn’t tell you?! Oh my, yes! Tonight we have tickets to a concert that features several musicians, including the one you just heard, Amjad Ali Khan!” “Wow – really??” Even Mom was surprised! Uncle Nihal smiled. “So let’s learn a little more before we go...like about **raga**... a key feature of Indian classical music. **Raga** means, ‘coloring, tingeing, or dyeing’, and through a pattern of notes, a **raga** colors the music. It contains intervals, rhythms, and embellishments, and is a basis for improvisation. There are about 300 **ragas** – and each one is a different framework for improvising!

Our tradition says that **ragas** can “color the mind” and affect the emotions of the audience.”

“Now, let’s learn about a few **Hindustani instruments**, because you’ll hear them tonight. Some are used in both **Hindustani AND Carnatic music.**”

Uncle Nihal began, “First of all, there is the **veena**, one of the oldest Indian instruments. It’s mentioned in the **Vedic writings**, and ancient temple sculptures show **veenas** being played, there are pictures of the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge sitting on a lotus playing one. In **Hindustani** music, you hear the ‘**rudra**’ **veena** most often.

The **violin** looks like a Western one, and it’s used as a solo instrument in both Indian styles, but the **Hindustani** tuning is slightly different. Even though it’s played the same, the musician sits cross-legged on the floor with the scroll of the violin resting on the right foot!” “That sounds really awkward,” said Chandra. “You’d think so, but actually, it isn’t,” he reassured her. “Do people always sit on the floor to play Indian music?” “Yes, almost always, but it is surprisingly comfortable!”

“Indian classical music is based on each singer or instrument centering on a comfortable pitch. That’s where the **tanpura** comes in – to play the **drone**. The **tanpura** has a long neck, no frets, and metal strings. The several styles of **tanpura**, are between 3 to 5 feet tall.”

“The most common *percussion* instrument in north Indian classical music is the **tabla**. It is a set of two drums, named for the hand that plays them – **bayan** (left) and **dayan** (right). Goatskin is stretched over metal or clay vessels, and the right one is narrower and higher. The tone of the **tabla** is very musical. An old legend tells of a 13th-century musician who broke one, and when it broke he exclaimed, ‘It broke but still spoke!’”

The **sitar** is probably the best-known Indian instrument, having become popular in India and the West over the past few decades. Made from a dried, hollow gourd and a long frame of wood with wooden pegs and frets, it's played by plucking the strings. Musicians all around the world play the **sitar**, including The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and The Doors.”

“Finally, let's talk about the **sarod**,” Uncle Nihan concluded. “We KNOW we'll hear one of those tonight, with Amjad Ali Khan! It's a **lute-like** instrument made from a single block of wood, with a resonator and a neck that tapers. Five main strings play the melody, and other 'sympathetic' strings vibrate to add resonance for a deep, rich sound. Because the **sarod** is fretless, it can produce continuous slides between notes, but the style and the instrument are very difficult to master.” “I'd say Mr. Khan's done a pretty good job of mastering it,” said Nitesh. They all laughed.

That evening, the family went to the concert, which was electric... and crowded... and *fabulous!* Uncle Nihad had arranged for seats very close to the performers, and the entire program featured the **Hindustani music of Northern India**. Most exciting, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and his two sons played their **Raga for Peace**, which they had first performed at the Nobel Peace Prize Concert in 2014.

A few days later, there was a special concert featuring **Carnatic music, from the south of India**, being held in Mumbai. Once again, Uncle Nihal was a fountain of information in preparing Nitesh and Chandra for the concert.

“**Carnatic** music was influenced by a **religious movement** called **bhakti**. Written to be sung, it usually uses **religious themes**. Even when played on instruments, music is performed in a **singing style**. You'll hear many references to the God **Vishnu** – and his incarnations as **Rama** or **Krishna** – and to the God **Shiva**.”

“**Carnatic music** uses the ‘**saraswati**’ **veena**, which is said to be the only instrument that can play all the **gamakas** (the wavering notes or oscillations) in **Carnatic music**. That’s usually something that only the most skilled vocalists can achieve.”

“Nitesh, you play clarinet, don’t you?” “Yes, in our school band.” “Then I think you’ll like this instrument...the **nadaswaram**. Literally meaning ‘pleasing note’, it’s a wind instrument made of wood and metal, and it’s used in both classical and folk traditions in South India. The **nadaswaram** has a long tube with seven finger holes, but it really needs tremendous breath control. Some notes can only be played with immense force.”

“Along with the **nadaswaram** is an accompanying percussion instrument called the **thavil**. It’s a barrel-shaped drum carved out of wood, with animal membrane stretched out on either side. The **thavil** is played with the fingers of right hand, and a short, thick stick on the left. The right-hand fingertips are covered with caps made of hardened wheat flour and water.”

“We already know about the **tanpura** from Hindustani music – the **drone**, remember? There are several styles of **tanpuras**, but the **tanjore-style** is the one most used in **Carnatic** music.”

“And that brings us to a fascinating drum called the **mridangam**. In ancient Indian mythology, it was believed that its sound represented the dances of the Gods! Its name in **Sanskrit** means “Clay Body”, which is probably how the original ones were made. A double-sided drum, it’s now made of wood, with the two sides attached by leather straps. Each side is a different size – for bass and treble. The **Mridangam** is the **main percussion instrument of Carnatic music**. Used to accompany vocalists and South Indian melodic instruments, it’s also used in **Bharatanatyam** and other **dance forms**. Complex rhythm patterns give the **mridangam** a language all its own.

A secondary percussion instrument is the **Kanjira**, a small handheld drum similar to a tambourine. Usually held in the left hand, it's played by striking the leather face with the fingers of the right. **Carnatic musicians** often use **multiple percussion instruments** as accompaniment in a concert.

That night, the four of them went to a fabulous concert at the Fine Arts Society in Mumbai. It featured a celebrated Classical Carnatic vocalist, Rama Ravi, and several instrumentalists as well.

The day after the concert, the twins asked their Mom and Uncle about the vocal traditions in classical Indian music. Chandra began, "I really liked how Rama Ravi expressed her feelings so well...and how she was able to do all those ornaments? Is it hard to learn to sing semitones and things like that?" Deepa answered, "Yes, just like any discipline – no matter what you're studying, there's *always* something new to learn. And you will find that the more you know, the more you realize you don't know! Take her singing, for instance. If someone wants to be truly good – a master – they need three things: the ability (or talent), the passion to achieve excellence, and the discipline to do it. If any one of those three things is missing, it is unlikely they will ever truly master that craft."

As Chandra was thinking about her mother's answer, her uncle remarked, "Well-said, Deepa. Let's explore another kind of vocal music so the twins can learn a little more... **Dhrupad** singing...and I have a most exciting example of it for them, too." He continued, "**Dhrupad** is a type of **Hindustani** classical music from the Indian subcontinent. It is the **oldest style** of vocal styles associated with **Hindustani classical music**, called **Haveli Sangeet** and *also related* to the **South Indian Carnatic tradition**. Listen to this recording of "Shiva Shiva Shiva Shankara" I with the Gundecha Brothers!

Their time in Mumbai was flying by. They visited many historical and natural sites like the Gateway of India, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and the Kanheri Caves. Plus, in that exciting, almost chaotic city, there were other intriguing commercial places to explore – like the Colaba Causeway and Thieves' Market. The time simply flew by. But Uncle Nihal had one more Indian cultural surprise up his sleeve!

“My dears,” he began, “You’ve learned so very much during your short time here, but there is one last cultural jewel of India that you *must* experience before you leave... and that is **DANCE!**”

“There is a holy book attributed to the sage **Bharat Muni** and called the **Natya Shastra**. In 6000 poetic verses, the text describes ALL elements of the performing arts, everything from stagecraft to musical scales and instruments, to makeup, costumes, and dance movements.”

“According to **Natya Shastra**, there are two types of dance. The first, **Tandava**, is performed by **Lord Shiva**, with high power and strength. The other, **Lasya** is a gentle dance performed by **Goddess Parvati** which represents elegance and beauty. It’s important to understand that the purpose of any dance (or performance for that matter), is to create the **Ras**, the feeling or emotion in the audience that can’t be described, but that lifts the energy of the spirit to a different level. If you’ve ever gotten teary-eyed over a piece of music or a beautiful dance, that’s **Ras**.” “That’s happened to me!” said Nitesh. “Me, too,” added Chandra. “Well then, my children, you have opened up your inner selves, and you have an appreciation of what **Ras** is all about.”

“In Indian Classical Dances, there are four important techniques to raise the **Ras**: through the *body*, through the *voice*, through *costume or adornment*, and through *expression*. Indian dance uses traditional ‘**stylized poses**’ to tell its stories, where the dancer may hold a position for a moment. There are also ‘**quotes and**

expressions', which use the hands and face, and there are many meanings behind the smallest of movements or facial expressions."

Uncle continued, "There are eight Indian Classical Dance Forms, but we're just touching on three. The one that's best-known is **Bharatanatyam**. The most ancient form of classical Indian dance, it's believed to have divine origin, and its **Sanskrit** name means 'Indian dance'. **Bharatanatyam** focuses on displaying the divine or spiritual aspects through the body, and is probably the first dance that comes to mind when you think of Indian dancing."

"Another form is **Kathak** dance, from the **Sanskrit** word *Katha* (story) and *Kathakar* (one who tells a story). **Kathak's** roots are in the traveling bards of ancient northern India who communicated stories from the great epics and ancient mythology through dance, songs and music. **Kathak** dancers tell their stories through hand movements, elaborate footwork, and their facial expressions."

A third form of Indian Classical Dance is **Kathakali**. It is a 'story play', with its most noticeable features being elaborate make-up, colorful costumes, and big face masks. The actors are all traditionally male. Its roots aren't clear, but it is a **Hindu** performance art from southwestern India that developed in courts and theatres rather than in temples or schools. **Kathakali** uses music, vocalists, choreography, and hand and facial gestures, as you'd expect, but also merges in movements from ancient South Indian martial arts.

"We're attending a dance festival this evening, and I think you'll like the music as much as you enjoy the dance. This one's for you, Chandra, our lovely young dancer!"

Their last full day in Mumbai, Deepa, Nihal and the twins decided to be "typical tourists" and take in one of the studio tours at **Bollywood**.

Hindi cinema, popularly known as **Bollywood** and formerly as **Bombay cinema**, is the Indian Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Its name is the combination of Bombay + Hollywood. Ever since the 1930s, when the “Bombay Talkies” movie studio was founded in the city, India’s largest film industry has been rooted in Mumbai. Bollywood now produces as many as 1,000 movies each year!

The family took a full-day private Bollywood tour, with a behind-the-scenes look at the entire movie operation. They got to explore two Bollywood film studios and take photos with some stars. They also saw some Bollywood dancing and learned some choreography, which Chandra really loved. Then they took a drive through the posh community where the top Bollywood actors and actresses live. It was a total blast, and was the icing on the cake!

When they left the airport the next morning, it was really hard to say goodbye to Uncle Nihal. “My brother, you’ve been the best host – EVER!! You have to come visit *us* so we can treat you to *our* favorite places,” said Deepa. Nitesh added, “I don’t think it’ll be nearly as much fun as *this* has been!” “Me either!” said Chandra. “On the contrary,” said Uncle Nidal. Our time together has been about music and the joy of expression. In the words of A. R. Rahman, ‘If music wakes you up, makes you think, heals you...then, I guess the music is working.’ Well, my dears, music DID wake us up...it IS working! Safe travels, and I hope to see you soon. Namaste!” “Namaste, Uncle Nihal!”