Alfred Korzybski wrote: “If...we limit ourselves to verbal “thinking”...we are unable or unfit to see the outside or world anew...we handicap scientific and other creative work...If we think verbally, we act as biased observers and project onto the silent levels the structure of the language we use...which make keen, unbiased observations (‘perceptions?’) and creative work well-nigh impossible.” (1)

Language often leaves me stumped by how limiting it can be. However, when I sing during music lessons or on other occasions, I find the experience quite liberating. The music connects tenuously, quite mysteriously with the time, the state of mind and spirit, and the occasion.

We know this about music — it is primarily the magic of the seven suras (notes) Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni (or in English Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti). In Indian classical music, one may arrange these seven notes in endless permutations and combinations called ragas. Every raga has a unique personality, whereby it lends itself to a certain time of the day and/or to a certain mood or emotion. While most musical traditions in India are primarily oral, teachers today do allow their students to consult some notations. However, any student who desires to attain proficiency in classical music must listen to the teacher far more attentively than she must follow the notations.

Any training in Indian classical music begins with lessons in fluency — learning how to render the notes just so. Then, the student graduates to the next level; she learns how to sing the ragas and to discern how the same notes sound different in different ragas. Every musician brings to her rendition of a raga a uniqueness that is at once the function of the nature of raga-music and the musician’s personal understanding of a raga. This in turn makes every performance very special — literally, like no other.

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The raga system is well structured. Every music student is bound by the rules of the structure. Yet, the system is so flexible that though one teacher may teach a certain composition in one way and another teacher quite another, both compositions would be faithful to the raga. The compositions simply borrow different subsets of characteristic combinations from the basic design of the raga – the aroha-avaroha (the ascendant – descendant notes).

The teacher intervenes during any music lesson to help the student grasp the nuances of the classical style. For example, it is the master’s voice that tells the student that the Ga (Mi) in a particular raga must sound spent or exhausted (in Raga Darbari Kanada for instance), while the same note in another raga must be robust, energetic (as in Raga Malkauns). This nuanced rendition allows a raga to emerge and fully convey a desired mood or emotion. A misplaced emphasis on a single note or the lack of it can completely alter the raga. In fact, the musician might end up approximating another, quite different raga.

The language of music is therefore both rule-bound and open-ended. Any music lesson or musical performance aims to discover the multi-layered nature of every raga. The musician and listener alike pursue not perfection or correctness but new expression each time.

Born as we are in human communities where language serves as our most powerful tool of abstraction, evaluation, expression and communication, we must live with language, and the limitations of language. But it’s possible to find more creative, more efficient, more competent means to express ourselves and to understand others.

When I want to compliment a person’s cooking, I kiss her hand. The gesture conveys my emotions far more strongly than my words ever could. Nevertheless, sometimes a dish comes home and its maker does not. I have to call her, and I have to use language to tell her how good it was. Therefore, I say, “Dear So-and-So, Thank you, it was ‘hand-kissably’ good.” You will agree that this happens too often in our experience to ignore. The emotions, however strong or overwhelming, must finally find expression in language.

Can we seek inspiration from the language of music, which celebrates the tentative, the intangible, and which inspires the student to explore the possibilities rather than proclaim the finalities? Any expression or phrase, however appropriate to our needs today, might summarily change tomorrow when it no longer suits the purpose of evaluation or expression. What we can change is our attitude to language. It may help to recognize that at best, language operates in a frame of arbitrariness and tentativeness, and yet, we can rarely do without it.
Note


Chaitali Vaishnav sings her presentation during the Baroda workshop.