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**Meenal Agnihotri: Vocalist's Experience in the Transmission of Hindustani
Classical Music in a Transnational Context**

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Under the supervision of Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.

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Statement

This thesis is the result of my independent work, and all sources and literature utilised in its development have been appropriately cited. I agree for this thesis to be stored in the electronic database of the Charles University repository and to be used for study purposes in accordance with copyright. This thesis was not used to receive any other degree from another institution in the Czech Republic or abroad.

Prague, 23. 06. 2023

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signature

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis written from the perspective of ethnomusicology is to describe, analyse and interpret the experiences of Indian vocalist Meenal Agnihotri and to portray her life journey of pursuing Classical Hindustani music based on her reflections. Through narrative biographical and semi-structured interviews with Agnihotri, the thesis provides insights into the world of current Hindustani Classical music performing and (online) teaching in a transnational context. The thesis explores Agnihotri's reflections on her own music practice, which reaches as far as the USA and the Czech Republic due to her online teaching and culminates in her music performances in Prague and other Czech cities in 2023. As an upper-caste Hindu female musician, Agnihotri's experiences offer a perspective on the privileges as well as challenges faced by her in the context of the classical master-disciple tradition. Through her story, the thesis also looks into reasons why some of the proponents of the master-disciple tradition have incorporated online teaching already before the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis thus uncovers a more complex interplay of social concepts such as transnationalism, gender, religion, and class.

Keywords

Ethnomusicology; Digital; Indian; Classical; Music

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Introduction

This thesis has been written from an ethnomusicological perspective. It focuses on the experience of an individual musician and music teacher in the transmission of classical Hindustani music tradition in a transnational context. This research topic of my thesis was motivated by my experiences and interest in online music education, mainly in singing, as I attended online singing lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic. This mode of teaching and learning music was not the norm in the Czech Republic but became more present in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, such as in India, online music education was occurring already a few years before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Indian music gurus taught via Skype service (launched in 2003) because of the needs of Indians in diaspora, as mentioned e.g. by ethnomusicologists Manuel and Fludd (2020, p. 89). However, Indian migrant families were not the only ones who benefited from the new way Indian music has been transmitted in transnational context. My thesis supervisor Dr. Veronika Seidlová was learning music online from Meenal Agnihotri, an accomplished Classical Hindustani vocalist from Maharashtra, India, and she recommended her to me, as I was interested in exploring online music learning and teaching in the first place. Veronika Seidlová suggested that I should also look into other reasons why music has been taught online already before the pandemics, thereby uncovering more complex interplay of social concepts such as transnationalism, gender, religion and class.

Meenal Agnihotri was born on the 4th of April in 1974 in Nagpur, Maharashtra. Meenal is presented in her bio on the website of NESOM (New England School of Music) in Boston, for which she teaches online, as a Hindustani classical music vocalist who has been “pursuing her passion” for the last two decades. She experienced Hindustani music guidance in a traditional way from renowned music gurus, including Kishori Amonkar, Vijaya Jadhav Gathlewar, and Usha Parkhi. Her repertoire includes classical, semi-classical, and devotional compositions. Meenal's music practice has not only been limited to her performances but also “to the development and nurturing of new talents” in the diverse field of Indian classical vocal music through teaching. Apart from her traditional music training, she has studied music at Indian music institutions and she holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in music (Hindustani Classical Vocals). She also holds a bachelor's degree in science (Microbiology).

Meenal has also composed music, e.g., she composed music for a Marathi drama called 'Jadu Teri Nazar' and worked as an assistant director for a Marathi movie named 'Pani Bani'. Her diverse experiences have allowed her to collaborate internationally on various music fusion projects. "Her multifaceted career in music is a testament to her commitment to the arts". (NESOM, 2023).

This thesis aims to describe, analyse, and interpret the experiences of an individual female Classical Hindustani vocalist Meenal Agnihotri and to portray her life journey in relation to Hindustani music as she herself reflected on it. My research focuses on a common professional musician, as ethnomusicologists Rice and Ruskin (2017) categorised it in their chapter on the role of individual music informants in music ethnography. The aim of this thesis is to broaden our knowledge of the current trends in transmission of non-European music cultures and to gain a deeper understanding of the struggles and advantages surrounding it.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Ethnomusicology

The foundation of my work is in the field of musical anthropology / ethnomusicology. As stated by ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice, “*Ethnomusicology is the study of why, and how, human beings are musical*” (Rice, 2014, p. 1). “Musical”, in this sense, doesn't refer to any musical talent or skill. Instead, it is the ability of humans to create, perform, organise cognitively, react physically and emotionally, and interpret the meaning of human-made sounds. Everyone, not just those referred to as musicians, are musical to some degree, and understanding music and making sense of it is a key part of human experience. Thinking and acting musically is just as important to our humanity as being able to speak and ethnomusicologists would even suggest that we need music to be fully human (Rice, 2014, p. 1).

Zuzana Jurková in *Pražské hudební světy* describes ethnomusicology as an academic discipline that seeks to understand the musical practices of human society and their cultural, social, and behavioural significance. Ethnomusicologists listen to understand the significance of music in human society, seeking answers in behaviour, values, and relationships. It should be noted that ethnomusicology does not have a universal theory or concept that can fully explain the nature of music. Instead, it emphasises the importance of studying not only the sounds of music but also the individuals who produce and listen to the music. In other words, ethnomusicology aims to examine the world around sound (Jurková et al., 2013, p. 8).

Zuzana Jurková et al. refers to Alan Merriam's (1964) three-component analytical model of music anthropology. According to Merriam, ethnomusicology is the study of music *in* culture and *as* culture (Merriam, 1960 in Merriam, 1964). It is a combination of musicology and ethnology; music is produced by human behaviour shaped by cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. Music cannot be produced apart from people for people (Merriam, 1964, p. 6). Merriam proposed that in order to effectively analyse the music of any given people, a research model is needed that takes into account both folk and analytical evaluations, along with the broader cultural and social background. This model should incorporate social sciences, humanities, and the symbolic, aesthetic, formal, psychological, physical, and other

facets of music. It proposes three analytic perspectives: music sound itself, behaviour and cultural insiders' (emic) conceptualization of music (Merriam, 1964, p. 32).

As Merriam (1964, p. 32) argues: *"It is through behavior, then, that music sound is produced; without it, there can be no sound"*. Music as a product of behaviour can be divided into three main types: physical (involving production, tension and posture, and response to sound), social (roles of musicians and non-musicians) and verbal (expressions about the music system). When it comes to the concept of music Merriam explains that at first the individual must conceptualise the proper behaviour that will produce the desired music sound that will act effectively within a music system (Merriam, 1964, p. 32-33). That includes social and verbal behaviour, as well as developing a concept of what music should be. As Merriam (1964, p. 33) claims: *"Without concepts about music, behavior cannot occur; and without behavior, music sound cannot be produced"*. These concepts explore various aspects of music, including the variation between music and noise, the origins of music, the factors of individual musical ability, the appropriate level of participation in a singing group, and so on (Merriam, 1964, p. 33).

However, as Jurková (Jurková et al., 2013) as well as Seidlová (2016) remark, Merriam's model envisaged a simple world of more or less isolated, homogeneous, and static groups. Therefore, they draw on the concept of soundscape by Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2006). Jurková claims that in content, Shelemay has drawn on the classic ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam and his famous three-component analytical model of music. In it, Merriam proposed that music should be examined as a product of human activity and behaviour. Kay Shelemay emphasises the dynamic similarity with the seascape, which allows us to capture the changes in the world of sound as well as in the world of people. Shelemay associates the concept of soundscape primarily with people, those who make the music and those who listen and appreciate it (Shelemay, 2006, cited in Jurková et al., 2013, p. 9-10).

I was inspired by an article by Mgr. Veronika Seidlová PhD. as she connects to Marcus's multi-sited ethnography. This is the approach of an American anthropologist George Marcus in the context of ethnomusicological research. The design of multi-sited research is formed around chains, pathways, threads, connections or juxtapositions of locations in which the

ethnographer builds some form of real, physical presence, while explicitly assuming a logic of association or connection between places that defines the argument of this ethnography (Marcus 1995: 105). The aim, then, is not to describe situations in places holistically, but to trace what moves between them. Multi-sited ethnographic research defines its objects of study in different ways or techniques. These techniques can be understood as practices of construction through movement (pre-planned or taking advantage of the opportunity). Marcus proposes seven practices of construction for multi-sited ethnography, including what he calls the strategically situated (single-site) ethnography (Marcus, 1995, cited in Seidlová, 2016 p. 113). I could not utilise this approach directly in my thesis. My research focused on the reflections of the transnational musical transmission of classical Indian music taught by Meenal Agnihotri from India to other parts of the world, including the Czech Republic. It explored the transmission of classical Hindustani music through not only online space that connects otherwise geographically and culturally distant places but by in person interaction in the Czech Republic as well. And as a research method I mainly used narrative biographical interviews, semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography as well as in situ ethnography.¹

My thesis is also theoretically grounded in the concept of transnationalism² that has been defined by Michael Kearney (1995, p. 548), transnationalism refers to social, economic, and cultural processes that involve more than one nation-state. This is different from globalisation, which refers to processes that take place in a global space and are largely decentred from specific national territories. Transnationalism is used to describe things like migration across national borders (Kearney, 1995, p. 548). As anthropologists Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (2013, p. 2) point out, transnationalism and diaspora are essential to comprehending the nation, identity, and globalisation in today's world. They (2013, p. 4) continue by saying: “*Transnationalism encompasses not only the movement of people, but also of notions of citizenship, technology, forms of multinational governance, and the mechanisms of global markets*”. And so transnationalism focuses on the movement of different elements and the complex relationships these elements create (Quayson & Daswani, 2013, p. 4).

¹ Explained in the *Methodology* chapter.

² Eri Maeda's bachelor thesis (2022), whose format and way of writing inspired my bachelor thesis, also works with the concept of *transnationalism*.

1.2. Hindustani music

I gained a deeper understanding of the region and its music through referring to authors who contributed to the The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, which covers South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent (Arnold et al. 2000). Taking into consideration that “*Within the Indian subcontinent two classical music traditions prevail, Karnatak in the south and Hindustani in the north,*” (Arnold in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 2) my thesis focuses on Hindustani classical vocal music.

Music scholar Jim Sykes, writes about a theory of Hindustani classical vocal music that is crucial for helping me understand Meenal Agnihotri, whether it is when she is just talking to me, or when she teaches or performs. He writes that Hindustani music has two core elements: *rāga*³ and *tala*. A *rāga* is a precise sequence of tones that comes with a set of regulations for its execution. A *rāga* may vary when ascending/descending and prioritise certain notes in the scale. Specific *rāgas* contain recurring melodic phrases, indicating more than just a scale. Each *rāga* is a modal framework consisting of a scale and rules for performance, allowing for improvisation (Sykes, 2017, p. 83).

Sykes claims that In Hindustani music, *rāgas* are categorised based on non-musical criteria, particularly their *rasa*, the mood, emotion, and flavour produced by a specific combination of pitches. Traditionally, these classifications consider specific times of the day for *rāga* to be performed. Vocalist and music teacher, George Ruckert describes the concept of Hindustani *rāga* as lying on a continuum between a scale and a mode, combining both emotionally neutral lines and fixed, emotionally charged melodies. Most musicians explore the tonal possibilities of a *rāga* in the midground, working with the scale's ascending and descending patterns of notes. They focus on microtonal tuning, emotional effect, range, and melodic ornaments that are traditionally associated with the *rāga* (Sykes, 2017, p. 84).

³ Indian terms like these have been transcribed as they appear in the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, which covers South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent (Arnold et al., 2000).

According to Ruckert (2000, p. 64) “...a North Indian classical *rāga* is a musical complex with a great history and significant spiritual implications, with extramusical associations regarding time, personality, and mood, and which, as it is iterated again and again, runs the gamut of tonal structure from simple scale to fully formed composition”. Performing a *rāga* showcases its balance of pitch and mood, requiring years of guidance with a teacher - traditionally a *guru* - and dedicated practice for insight and understanding. Some believed that *rāgas* possess supernatural powers, and it can evoke narratives about imagery related to colours, flowers, and animals (Sykes, 2017, p. 84; Ruckert, 2000, p. 64-66).

The term *tālā* has according to ethnomusicologist James R. Kippen two meanings. The first is the systems of rhythm in the North and South Indian, and the second is a specific metric cycle. The origin of the word *tālā* is closely related to clapping. In ancient times, clapping was used to show a repeating time cycle, which is known as a metric cycle and it served as an indication of each section of this cycle. In South India's Karnatak system, segmentation of the cycle has been the primary way of describing a *tala*. However, the performance of the North Indian Hindustani system has departed significantly. Kippen (2000, p. 111) adds: “Over the past few centuries, individual *talas* in the North gradually became associated with configurative patterns of drumming, to the point that a specific pattern - and not the clapping structure itself - is the primary description of a *tala*”. The concept of *tālā* underpins the rhythm and meter of folk, popular, and classical music with drums. Drums are critical components of Indian music, and they come in varied shapes, sizes and styles. They can be played with sticks, hands and fingers, while sitting, standing or dancing. In North India, drums are used both as accompaniment and for solo performances. Drummers interact in various ways, from passivity to soloistic moments and musical competitions. There are two traditional drums: the *pakhāvaj* and *tabla* (Kippen in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 110-111).

1.2.3. Hindustani vocal music

The two concepts, *rāga* and *tālā*, are crucial in Hindustani music, in which the vocal music plays an important role. According to ethnomusicologist Bonnie C. Wade, vocal music has been the most important type of music in India since ancient times. According to her, Hindustani vocal music has eight general characteristics, which are:

1. Vocal genres have been performed for centuries, dating back to the 1500s or earlier.
2. Over time, local musical traditions have infused classical repertoires, resulting in the

emergence of new genres. As these genres evolved, they became increasingly classical and the terms "classical" and "light classical" are used to describe the genres that exist today, a reflection of their evolution.

3. Of the many vocal genres of North India, *dhrupad*, *khyāl*, *ṭhumrī*, and *ghazal* are the four most prominent ones.

4. Since the 1700s, these four main genres of music have coexisted without one replacing the other. Khyal has been the main genre of Indian classical music.

5. These four main genres of Hindustani music are each based on a brief composition and improvisation. Although the compositions themselves are similar across genres, they are often associated with a particular genre. Compositions are not "fixed" entities; rather, they should be interpreted and improvised upon. Even the most widely known songs by highly revered composers only provide a *rāga*, *tālā*, and text as the basis for improvisation.

6. The two main factors that delineate one genre of singing from another are the manner in which the singer interprets the composition, and the level of improvisation involved.

7. An important distinction between musical genres is the performing ensemble and individual roles of its members.

8. Hindustani vocal music can be better understood when we consider the context of its development, as well as the socio-musical identity of the singers (Wade in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 162-163).

1.2.4. Social dynamics of Hindustani vocal music

According to Arnold (2000, p. 8): “...in the Indian subcontinent social class and caste play a major role in defining the limits of an artist's expectations and opportunities, with the possible exception of the popular music industry.” Today this reflects a hierarchical social order in Hinduism; there is a distinct hierarchy of social value placed upon music and the social status of performers. Musicians, patrons, and society at large have complex relationships. Lower-caste musicians, for example, can achieve a high level of artistry while playing for upper-caste patrons, yet their caste keeps them in a subordinate role (Arnold in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 8).

Indian society has had a hierarchical structure since c. 1500 B.C. with four social groups known as classes (*varna*). The Brahmin caste is one of the oldest and most influential castes

in India. Historically, Brahmins were teachers and they were the highest caste and were seen as the most educated and privileged members of society. Today, Brahmins are still seen as privileged because of their access to education and resources (Arthur, 2017). Kshatriyas were rulers and fighters, and Vaishyas were merchants and traders. The fourth group, the Shudras, included a range of professions that should serve the upper class, and those at the lowest level, the untouchables, were excluded from society and subjected to discrimination. They could do tasks like sweeping, tanning leather, and cremating corpses. After independence, untouchability was abolished to combat discrimination. The government set up educational and employment programs specifically for those castes. People born into a lower social level were considered unclean. They could theoretically rise higher if they conducted themselves properly in their current life, leading to rebirth at a higher level (Stern 1993:74-83 in Arnold in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 9).

The relationship between Varna and Jati is fluid and difficult to trace historically. *Jati*, referred to as caste, is used in South Asia to refer to hereditary social groups distinguished by occupation, race, region, and religion. It has been an essential characteristic of Hinduism for centuries, affecting non-Hindus such as Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians. In the twenty-first century, the caste system is being challenged by foreign ideas, technology and education, but it still plays a role in South Asian music (Arnold in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 9-10).

Meenal herself and other female artists both have experienced disadvantages regarding social status. This social construct has permeated all facets of life, including music. There is a distinction between Brahmin and non-Brahmin musicians, especially in the South Indian region, where separate traditions and interactions between the two socio-musical communities are documented in their music history. India is predominantly Hindu, while Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Bangladesh have different religious majorities, including Islamic, Buddhist and Muslim. Castes play a less significant role in these countries than in India (Arnold in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 10).

As Robert Ollikkala (2000, p. 372) notes: “*Sound and social structures in North India are inextricably related, and an appreciation of Indian music is incomplete without a knowledge of the social environment that nurtures and molds it*”. Music and musicians in the northern regions of South Asia are organised through certain patterns of behaviour, practice methods,

performance expectations, educational systems, and the student and teacher / performer and patron dynamic. In India, classical music is part of a long-standing tradition, supported by philosophical texts like Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and supported financially by wealthy patrons. This form of music is complex and requires intense training and mental and emotional investment. It is often associated with spirituality. Until the mid-twentieth century, men largely dominated training, teaching and performance of classical music, and it was usually only men who were aficionados (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 372-373).

Regarding historical background Ollikkala states that South Asia's musicians have a long and well-documented history, evidenced by the ruins of two major cities: Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. The region has been shaped by three major cultural invasions, Aryans, Muslims, and British, all of which have left their mark (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 373).

2000-600 BC Aryans invaded and assumed a higher rank than locals. Ollikkala (2000, p. 374) points out that: *“Many scholars believe that the caste system, a complex method of social organization that has dominated the region for two millennia, resulted from these invaders' establishing their dominance over all aspects of life”*. Birth decides social and occupational status in Hindu society, unchangeable in this life but promised in the next through liberation. Caste remains a significant obstacle to social progress, persisting even in today's world. Music is influenced by lineage and inherited roles through the *gharānā* system.

The Muslim wave of invasions, which first occurred from the 7th-9th century, resulted in the formation of the Mughal empire from 1526-1818, which primarily ruled the north of the subcontinent. The Mughals were the main patrons of Hindustani music, which developed from the 16th-19th century and included major musical genres and instruments. *“From the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, many major Hindustani musicians have been Muslims, often from Hindu families long converted to Islam”*(Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 375).

British colonial rule in the 19th century brought a new set of cultural norms to India and an attempt to take control over many aspects of Indian life. Although the British had less influence on musical developments than other sectors, they abolished Hindu and Muslim courts, impacting the life and sound of Indian music. Their moral values also caused the devaluing of women's artistic contributions (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 375).

In 1947, India's independence brought about a number of significant sociocultural changes, largely due to the influence of the British-educated Hindu middle class. This had a lasting impact on music, resulting e.g. in the establishment of conservatories, an influx of non-hereditary Hindu families into the *gharānā* system, and the replacement of *tawāif* (Wikipedia, 2004) entertainers with middle-class female performers (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 375-376).

1.2.5. Women and Hindustani music

Jennifer C. Post's chapter on women and music in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* goes further into this topic. Both men and women are known to have participated in diverse musical traditions, including vocal and instrumental. Post (2000, p. 407) states: “*Women have played key roles in classical and non-classical music traditions, beginning with that of the courtesan performing for private patrons, and journeying toward that of the highly respected public performer of today.*” Throughout history, women have actively participated in the traditions of religious and secular music of South Asia. They contributed with light classical and classical performances, such as singing and dancing in temples, private clubs, and royal courts, before the 20th century. By the 1950s, they were performing as solo musicians in concerts, recordings, radio, and movies. According to Jennifer C. Post, *devadāsī* were women who danced and sang at Hindu temples beginning as early as the third century B.C. They were considered servants of the gods and married to the temple or an object in the temple. Since they could never become inauspicious widows, they represented the auspiciousness of a married woman. They were responsible for keeping the temple clean and performing at the temple and in public celebrations. They regularly performed at religious festivals and domestic celebrations of the local elite, such as weddings and dedications of household gods (Post in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 407-408).

In the secular sphere, the earliest reference to *ganikā* (dancing girl) is found in the Rgveda (c. 1400 B.C.), and is discussed further in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ramayana and Mahabharata epics (400 B.C. to 200 C.E.), *Kāmasūtra* of Vatsyayana, and writings of authors such as Kalidasa (2nd century C.E.). These texts suggest that women in society were expected to cultivate skills in the arts, especially vocal and instrumental music and dance. The Mahabharata and *Kāmasūtra* contain references to courtesans who played musical instruments and danced

during victory celebrations as well. Bharata, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, characterises courtesans as women who were skilled singers, dancers, and actresses (Chandra 1973:70 in Post in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 408).

Before the 4th century, non-professional women had more freedom to be involved in music. However, due to the increasing prevalence of child marriage and the decreased status of women under Muslim rule, women's opportunities to learn and perform music declined. Non-professional women's performances were separate from those of professional women, and their participation moved into the private (court and temple) sphere. Courtesans and temple dancers ended up being the sole carriers of most women's music and dance traditions. During the Muslim invasion to India (1200s-1700s), both male and female elite organised music events, resulting in a variety of performing roles for women. Courtesans performed music and dance at these events, as well as accompanying the ruler's entrance and performing at imperial households and nobles' homes. During the 19th-century British colonial rule in India, Victorian moralistic attitudes impacted women's involvement in music. A social reform movement in Madras in 1892 wanted to prohibit professional music and dance performances, and by the early 20th century, laws banning temple dancing had been passed in Mysore, Travancore, and Madras, further limiting women's participation in music (Marglin1989). At the beginning of the 20th century, professional women began to challenge their socially-stigmatised role by changing their performance dress, dance movements and repertoires. Post (2000, p. 409) adds: "*As the century progressed, women from professional backgrounds were thus able to move into the once exclusively male realm of high classical music.*" Since the 1950s, women have had more chances to perform, learn vocal and instrumental music, specialise in a single type of performance, and be part of popular music. However: "*The position of women in music is still not equal to that of men, but women have gained status and respect as music and dance performers in many contexts*" (Post in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 409).

Professional women performers in India before the mid-twentieth century had different names depending on the region, such as *devadāsī*, *tawāif*, *kanchani* and so on. They mainly worked in Hindu temples, courts, and private clubs, and often had to play dual roles as performers and courtesans or prostitutes. This was seen to adversely affect the social status of women performers and even male musicians who accompanied them. Before the 20th Century, North India's classical and light classical music was dominated by men. Women usually learned

music from their female relatives. Women later became disciples of recognised male master musicians and names of female artists are now found in the teaching lines of Jaipur gharana, Kirana gharana and Patiala gharana (Post in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 409).

Women musicians have become more prevalent in the mainstream since the mid-20th century, due to better music education and family encouragement. Most female performers combine music and dance in their performances, which is especially common in South India. Women now have opportunities to perform music in similar contexts as men and often perform traditional songs such as thumri and ghazal, but rarely dhrupad. Women musicians are represented in recordings and festivals, but remain fewer in number than men, and play mainly stringed instruments (Post in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 410)."

Meenal Agnihotri, a female Hindustani classical vocalist, has a connection to this part of history surrounding women and music, not only because she is a woman but also because her second guru was the renowned Hindustani classical vocalist Kishori Amonkar. More in-depth information about Amonkar and her influence on Meenal Agnihotri's music is in the subchapter *Kishori Amonkar, the 2nd guru*.

1.2.6. Cultural transmission of Hindustani music

My focus is on the transmission of an aspect of culture, in this case Hindustani music. Alter believes that children learn music through observation, practise, and listening rather than written instruction. Established musical lineages pass on their skills orally from master to student. Although music schools and institutions began to emerge in the late 19th century, introducing standardised curricula and written texts for teaching music, notational systems have only recently been adopted to help preserve and teach indigenous musical traditions. How musical knowledge is passed on reveals much about the value placed on learning and passing on in society, as well as the relationships between teachers and students. (Alter, 2000, p. 441)

Sykes (2017, p. 79) categorised Hindustani music as one that “...*developed as an orally transmitted tradition whose musical knowledge was owned and guarded mainly by Muslim families of professional musicians*”. It was developed by the nineteenth century into distinct gharānās (musical lineages) associated with particular places across northern India. According

to Sykes a “gharānā” is: “*A school of professional musicians who originally traced their heritage to a family tradition, but which now includes non-biological descendants as well*” (Sykes, 2017, p. 78). Training was conducted through apprenticeship to a master, with students spending years doing chores for their guru before being allowed to learn on their instrument. The most esteemed musical knowledge was heavily guarded and could take decades to obtain (Sykes, 2017, p. 78).

In the 19th century, musical knowledge and style were primarily determined by Muslim family lineages (*khandan*). These lineages developed into a small number of distinct stylistic schools (*gharana*), each representing a distinct bloodline that traced back at least three generations, and they were associated with a particular musical style (Neuman 1980). To be a successful musician, approval from a gharana was necessary throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Contemporary *khandan* musicians may not limit their disciples to male bloodline members, but they are known to only reveal their musical secrets to a favoured son or nephew. And even now this system forms the foundation of classical music's norms and values (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 373).

gharānā has been defined by Ollikkala as a direct family lineage of at least three generations, a notable founding figure in the past, and at least one respected living member that contributes to an identifiable musical style. “*The identification with a well-respected family tradition gave a musician entering the new labor force a competitive edge and a stamp of authority and accomplishment that preceded his own work,*” (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 377) as a lineage was particularly revered in Indian society. He continues saying that gharānā institutions enabled musicians to protect their inherited performance secrets by training mostly family members. However, during the early twentieth century, masters began accepting students outside of the family for financial need. To this day, lineage is still deemed as important as a performer's skill, or even more so (Ollikkala in Arnold et al., 2000, p. 377).

The master-student tradition is still an important part of Indian classical music training, where students demonstrate their dedication and devotion to the art form under the guidance of a master. Ollikkala claims that despite the emergence of modern music schools and university music departments, the most successful professional classical performers still rely on the concept of musical heritage. The traditional Indian student is an unusually dedicated devotee who lives with their teacher, absorbing the entire musical atmosphere and way of life.

Stephen Slawek points out that Guru is usually defined as a spiritual teacher who guided disciples to an understanding of the true nature of existence through the transmission of knowledge of the Vedic tradition. A guru's house became a common place where disciples lived and practised with the guru. Today, the concept of guru has evolved, and the term is now generalised. (Ollikkala, 2000, p. 376-377; Slawek, 2000, p. 457) *“In India today, a guru is a special kind of teacher, but is not necessarily a religious teacher.”* (Slawek, 2000, p. 457)

In addition, Farrell emphasises that Indian music is changing thanks to internationalisation that has led to collaborations between Indian and Western musicians in various genres, thereby establishing South Asian music as an influential element of Western musical culture. The internationalisation of Indian music through Western technology has not only impacted musicians' lives, but also affected musical performance practices and social dynamics in India. Farrell (2000, p. 560) claims that: *“The gramophone brought certain forms of music, notably the music of courtesans, out of the obscurity of their traditional milieus and into the mass market, first in India and then abroad.”* The introduction of microphones and amplification systems has changed the way Indian musicians perform, leading to criticisms about weakening of their vocal delivery. Musicians who have performed in the West could have been given high status in Indian societies, and experience of performing and teaching abroad tends to be culturally valued. (Farrell, 2000, p. 560-562)

The case study of the Internet Guru by Nasir Syed, who is a first-generation American from an Indian/Pakistani background, claims that the traditional position of the Guru and the master's education could have been changing when we look at it from an online perspective. The emergence of online learning platforms has disrupted the conventional classroom model by challenging the concept of responsibility and a lower level of commitment from learners. A digitalized "Internet guru" represents the resulting virtual mentoring offered by platforms. This is an alternative to traditional face-to-face interaction between learners and teachers (Syed, 2008, p. 102-107).

Syed's journey with the sitar embodies traditional modes of learning within Hindustani music while also challenging the conventions as he is taking advantage of the opportunities

presented by the Internet. Syed (Syed, 2008) said: *“As a student of Hindustani music, I find the availability of online educational information to be an especially powerful new site for my pedagogical development.”* Syed also uses the internet to look for audio and video clips, biographical data, reviews and photographs of the musicians to research them before and after their performances. He states that other people, who are learning aspects of Indian music, often view the same video clips online to learn the technique of a sitar player. He (Syed, 2008) claims that: *“Expanding on a tradition that prioritizes face-to-face learning from one specific guru at a time, we may learn virtually, and simultaneously, from any number of masters—online.”* According to him, online masters do not require to show loyalty and dedication as much as traditional educators would (Syed, 2008, p. 102-103).

Syed expresses that the Internet and its resources do not take away from learning with his guru in person. He (Syed, 2008) added: *“In fact, I have furthered my learning from Khan Sahab [his guru] immensely by watching online videos...”* The Internet is challenging the way Hindustani music is taught and learned. The master-student relationship, which has traditionally characterised Hindustani music learning, is now adapting to the digital age as Internet users explore new methods of teaching and learning. There are many sites that provide space for classical Indian music learning online. These sites demonstrate how technology impacts cultural traditions. These websites, when assessed collectively, are acting as a vast source of knowledge as a computer allowing students of Hindustani music to access a wide range of data, similar to the experiences of sitting at the feet of a guru (Syed, 2008, p. 104-105).

Similarly, Meenal Agnihotri's online teaching experience also challenges traditional modes of teaching and learning. They both recognized the potential of online teaching and learning that can serve to supplement traditional teaching or, in some cases, replace it entirely, for example in the case of students living in the diaspora.

Ethnomusicologists Peter Manuel and Andre Fludd, in the chapter *Indian Music and Transnationalism* (in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Transnationalism*, 2020), describe that in North America, the teaching system has been established, as competent performers, both male and female, professional or amateur, teach privately, in temples, or small institutions. Many of

these students become professionals and receive the same quality of training as they would in India or elsewhere (Manule; Fludd in Sahoo et al., 2020, p. 81). They (Manule; Fludd in Sahoo et al., 2020) add: *“Some occasionally visit India for grooming with a master, or—increasingly—they take lessons from an Indian guru via Skype.”*

Music plays an important role in the formation of identity for recent immigrants. Despite people gravitating towards regional music, there is also a broader transnational socio-musical field. That field goes beyond nation-state boundaries. An American-born Tamil teen can receive the same classical music training locally as she would in India, perhaps supplemented with Skype lessons. As Peter Manuel and Andre Fludd (Manule; Fludd in Sahoo et al., 2020) argue: *“Music—even more than language and religion—may often constitute the single most important entity in representing and actively forming such transnational social identities.”*

2. Methodology and research questions

The nature of online research has the potential to influence my perspective in approaching a given subject. However, it is worth noting that Timothy Rice in *Virtual Fieldwork: Three Case Studies in Shadows in the Field New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* has emphasised the concept of the "field" as a metaphorical construct. Rice recognises that there is no literal place to which the researcher must travel to do his or her work. It is plausible that certain aspects of research can be effectively conducted from the comfort of one's own home, using technological resources. (Barz, Cooley and Rice, 2008, p. 90-92) *“Fieldwork should happen where music happens. As the apparatuses of music making change, we must continuously re-imagine the “field,” and redefine how we work there. If the performance and transmission of cultural practices are taking place in an Internet community, a website will make a rewarding research site.”* (Syed, 2008, p. 106)

This thesis focuses on experiences surrounding classical Hindustani music from the ethnomusicological perspective and my research focuses on an individual Meenal Agnihotri. I wanted to explore the individual in musical ethnography.

Timothy Rice's book, with the contribution of Jesse D. Ruskin, examines the contradictory role of musicians in ethnomusicology in its chapter entitled "The Individual in Musical

Ethnography". Rice and Ruskin emphasise that ethnomusicologists study music in social groups, but also individual musicians. They stated that the importance of individuals in musical ethnographies should not be underestimated, as they play a central role in shaping narrative structures and giving cultural treatments specificity. Although studies that completely ignored the individual were more remarkable in the early years, the trend towards studies centred on the individual has increased over the past two decades and continues to be a widespread and invariable feature of musical ethnographies published since the mid-1980s. (Rice, Ruskin, 2017, p. 201-204)

The study of individuals in musical ethnographies is an important part of ethnomusicology and ethnomusicologists were discussing whether to focus on exceptional or typical musicians. However, analysis shows that ethnomusicologists are primarily interested in innovators, key figures, ordinary people, and anonymous audiences who play key roles in the production, distribution, and reception of music. (Rice, Ruskin, 2017, p. 206-207)

My research focuses on a typical individual, a common musician as Rice and Ruskin categorised it. According to Rice and Ruskin, this category of regular musicians is crucial to every musical tradition. They are selected for their contribution to the narrative. It focuses on individual musical experiences, on musicians who may not have wider artistic or historical significance. (Rice, Ruskin, 2017, p. 208-209)

Rice and Ruskin also discuss the narrative strategies used by ethnomusicologists to write about individuals in their musical ethnography. This will be very useful for me when I try to do the same in my thesis. They argue that biography is only one of the strategies used to position people in musical ethnography. Other strategies include assisted autobiography, dialogue, polyvocal, and analysis of musical texts and performances. The chapter provides examples of each strategy and describes its rhetorical aspects and implications for the theory of individual position in ethnomusicology. (Rice, Ruskin, 2017, p. 209-222)

2.1. Research issue and research questions

My thesis aims to explore Meenal Agnihotri's world by focussing on her life of experiencing Hindustani classical music through teaching and performing. The aim of this work is to

broaden our knowledge of the transmission of traditional non-European musical cultures by ordinary people and to gain a deeper understanding of the struggles and advantages surrounding it by Meenal Agnihotri's experience. In this regard, the research attempted to understand Meenal Agnihotri's position as a female musician in the transmission of Indian classical music tradition in the globalised context and her life in relation to music education, gender norms, social structure and transnational migration.

The research problem of this thesis is to describe, analyse and interpret the experiences of the Hindustani vocalist Meenal Agnihotri. This thesis aims to portray the life journey of Meenal Agnihotri in relation to Hindustani music as she herself reflected on it.

Through the biographical, narrative and semi-structured interviews, I was able to look beneath the surface and learn more about what it is like to be a female Hindustani vocalist in the 21st century. In the context of the research following research questions emerged.

What cultural and social conditions influenced her in her journey towards music performance and education and how she reflects on them?

What are her perceptions of Hindustani classical music tradition and what it is like to perform, teach, and pursue Hindustani music in today's globalised world ?

How is Indian classical music taught online and why from Meenal Agnihotri's perspective?

2.2. Qualitative approach

The methodology of this ethnomusicological study was a qualitative empirical research approach that incorporates various data collection methods. About qualitative research approach writes Hedvika Novotná in *Kvalitativní strategie výzkumu in Metody výzkumu ve společenských vědách*. Qualitative research strategies aim to explore social reality at a deeper level, including the diverse experiences and understandings of individuals and communities. Various approaches exist within qualitative research, each with its unique focus and not always easy to summarise. The goal of qualitative research is to understand the world and communicate that understanding, often through text, by examining the actions of individuals, social structures, and the impact of the environment on meanings and practices. Qualitative research emphasises specificity and uniqueness, identifying small details and variations in the phenomenon under study and comparing them to draw conclusions. Researchers must remain open to all contextual factors that contribute to the issue under study and approach their work

from the emic perspective of the actors involved. The data used in qualitative research are not pre-existing; instead, the researcher actively creates it through observation, interviews, document analysis, and other research methods. (Novotná, 2019, p. 259-261, 286-287)

2.3. Strategy of data collection and the sample

In this chapter, I will discuss the history of my research and my methodological decisions. At the beginning of my qualitative research, I started with autoethnography⁴ and I was a student of Meenal Agnihotri, who was teaching me the basics of Hindustani music. This is evident in Timothy Rice's *Ethnomusicology a Very Short Introduction*, where he says ethnomusicologists routinely practise singing, playing instruments, and dancing in the traditions they study, because we learn about the structure of music and how it is done by practising it. Most of the time, this detailed study can reveal the meaning behind it. (Rice, 2020, p. 21)

It was important for me to know the context, to know Meenal and also to know how Meenal teaches. After we got to know each other more, I started doing interviews with her, especially narrative interviews⁵, which take different forms. I mainly used biographical narrative interviews in my data collection. Later I used semi-structured interviews, to clarify some of the statements she made. The narrative and semi-structured interviews with Meenal Agnihotri, aimed to explore her experiences, perceptions, and understanding what it means to be a performer and a teacher of Hindu classical music, even online. With a particular focus on her musical background, life, and relationship to music education.

⁴ Autoethnography is a unique form of ethnographic research that involves using the researcher's personal experiences as both the research instrument and the object of study. The founder of this method, American sociologist Carolyn Ellis, defines it as the analysis of personal experiences to gain a deeper understanding of cultural phenomena. This involves a thorough examination of one's own subjective experiences through introspection and recollection of lived events and their meanings. The goal of autoethnography is to gain insight into the studied phenomenon. (Heřmanský, 2019, p. 384-385)

⁵ According to Markéta Zandlová, in a narrative interview, the interviewer creates an environment where the narrator feels comfortable. The interviewer then listens carefully as the narrator tells their story. The interviewer helps start the interview and encourages the narrator to speak. Narrative Interviews rely on **narrativity**, a concept which suggests meaning is created and revealed in a story. It's not the same as lived reality. Instead, narrators choose what to remember and share, creating meaningful interpretations of their experiences. Individual narratives usually have the structure of a story which narrative analysis does not understand as meaning that human life has this structure, but rather that we create a sequence of different, even unrelated, things in the narrative, thus giving meaning to the whole of the narrative and their life. Narrators build their identities by connecting events, assigning causality, and forming an understanding of their world. Biographical narrative interviews typically provide an overview of the narrator's life but can also be used to focus on specific periods or events (Zandlová, 2019, p. 328).

In the end, I chose not to present the data collected by autoethnography, digital ethnography and in situ ethnography in this text because of the breadth and richness of the data generated by the narrative and semi-structured interviews, which seemed more compact to be presented in the scope and aim of this text.

2.4. Data analysis

I collected the data; recordings of the interviews, examined the data in a qualitative manner. According to Heřmanský qualitative analysis involves prioritising the meanings of phenomena or actions over their frequency. During analysis, researchers identify recurring themes, describe them in detail, and seek to find relationships between them, leading to situated generalisations, conceptual models, or new theories (Heřmanský, 2019, p. 419-421).

The research sample consisted of Meenal Agnihotri, representing her experiences with Indian classical music. I transcribed the interviews and categorised them by coding into several groups, being Meenal Agnihotri childhood, education, family dynamics, performing, teaching, and visiting Prague. Based on these categories, I made the chapters and subchapters of this thesis.

2.5. Ethics

Regarding ethical considerations, verbal and written informed consent was obtained from Meenal Agnihotri, informing her about the research objectives, the process, and the handling of the collected data. Research was conducted in an open manner. The participant's time was honoured and respected, and sensitive topics were not explored when the participant preferred not to address them. I respected the time of the participants and planned meetings in advance to accommodate time differences. During the writing of this thesis, I remained in contact with Meenal Agnihotri and consulted with her continuously on the texts as well as this final thesis.

2.6. Limits of research

This thesis was limited by a language barrier, as Meenal Agnihotri and I do not have English as a first language. As a result, we have encountered difficulties finding appropriate words

and expressing ideas accurately. To counter this, we asked each other additional questions to ensure we understood each other.

In addition, my background is based on courses at Charles University about Jewish and non-European musical cultures. These courses gave me my first exposure to Indian classical music. As an outsider, I tried to bring an individual perspective to the study, having no experience with Indian culture, which I saw as both an advantage and a disadvantage, as I did not bring my preexisted biases into the research as much as if I was an insider but it required effort to deepen my understanding of the subject matter.

3. Empirical Part

3.1. Meenal Agnihotri' life story

3.1.1. Childhood

This part showcases how Meenal's exposure to music at an early age, the support of her family, and her own determination to improve her skills have all shaped her journey. At first, I wanted to know how Meenal Agnihotri started singing. After talking to her, I found out that her journey began when she was just a child.

Gucká: *"(...) if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood and how you started singing, who introduced that idea?"*

Agnihotri: *"Yes, I started... I will tell you the story of my first performance first, ok? (...) When I was a little girl my father was a bank manager here in India and here a bank manager is a very important person in our society and in that community in that area. This is about 47 years back or 43 years back that story that I'm telling you. So, the bank manager was a very important person. So there were so many cultural programs happening. So, my father asked: Do you want to sing? (...) I was very fond of him. We were very close. (...) So, then I said I will sing, and I sang. It was my first performance, and everybody liked it. Then my father even realised that I have a singing voice. So, he told me to listen to the music. (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)."*

In the statement above Meenal shares the beginning of her musical journey, as her father's question led her to discover her singing voice and eventually pursue a career in music and it illustrates how Meenal Agnihotri's musical journey began within the context of her cultural and social environment. She comes from Nagpur, the third-largest city and the winter capital of the Indian state of Maharashtra. Her father, a bank manager in Nagpur, held a prominent position in their community of Deshastha Brahmins (upper-caste Hindus). His social position has allowed her access to various cultural programs and events of Classical Hindustani music as well as its studies.

Furthermore this illustrates the close relationship between Meenal, her father and music which highlights the importance of family member support in the development of her relationship to

music and ultimately her career as a musician. And later when she was remembering the first performance she noted:

Agnihotri: “(...) *The very first stage experience or the very first stage performance of mine was when I was maybe 4 years old so that was the start and my father encouraged me to learn music and listen to the music rather than learning because at that time, we had gramophone at home (...) (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).*”

Meenal's father not only introduced her to different genres of music, but her father's encouragement and guidance played a significant part in her early musical experiences.

Agnihotri continued: “*We had a gramophone at home and old LP records, and I used to listen to the gramophone. Even today we have it at my mother's home. So, my father used to tell me to listen to music. (...) So, there was the start and after that, I started learning. My father took me to the music class where I learned. So, I started learning music when I was maybe 5 or 6 years old. (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)*”

For Meenal Agnihotri, having a gramophone at home meant that she had access to a wide range of Indian music. This has allowed her to develop her musical taste and knowledge from an early age, and it could have played a crucial role in shaping Meenal's musical knowledge and taste. In addition, the gramophone also serves as a symbol of cultural exchange and transmission of musical knowledge. Meenal Agnihotri does not come from a family of musicians, but she benefited from the support for classical music in the Deshastha Brahmins community.

3.1.2. Navigating Adversity

Despite her privileged background, Meenal Agnihotri faced many challenges during her childhood and into adulthood. The reason behind why she stopped singing for a period of time is a significant aspect of Meenal Agnihotri's musical journey. The statement below highlights the challenges and obstacles that arose in her pursuit of music:

Agnihotri: “(...) *there was a huge gap after that because when I was just 10 years old, I lost my father. My father died due to a heart attack. (...) There was a lot of responsibility for my mother when he left.*”

Gucká: *“I would like to know how many sisters you have?”*

Agnihotri: *“I have three sisters, so including me we are four. My elder sister is two and a half years older than me and then I am the second one and then my younger sisters...one is five years younger and the other one is ten years younger than me (online interview, Google Meet platform, 15. 6. 2023).”*

These statements indicate that the loss of her father at a young age and the resulting responsibilities placed on her mother may have impacted Meenal's upbringing and shaped her perspective on life and music. Additionally, the loss of her father at a young age and the resulting responsibilities placed on her mother had a significant impact on the family's financial situation. Meenal's family had to face financial difficulties and challenges.

Agnihotri continued: *She [her mother] had to take care of me and my sisters and our home which was for a loan. So, it was a huge responsibility for my mother to do a job. She started to go to the job after that in the same bank but then I stopped learning music after that. (...) I might have studied for three or four years continuously then I stopped. So, it was very difficult for my mother to drop me off and pick me up because we are four sisters and being a single lady in an Indian family is not easy. I told you before, there is always one festival in one month, and the responsibility and making money and loan for the house and looking and taking care of us, making us ready for school. So that was rather a huge shock for her so that's why I stopped learning after that (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”*

As seen in the statement above, Meenal is reflecting that after her father's death, her family faced financial difficulties as their home was under a loan and her mother had to take care of her and her sisters. This brought significant changes in her family's dynamics and financial situation and it brought attention to the challenges faced by widowed women in Indian society, with her mother solely responsible for the well-being of the entire family. This statement suggests that her family's financial situation and her mother's responsibilities were the primary reasons for her to discontinue her music education.

Gucká: *“You mentioned when your father passed away that your mother had to take care of all of you. Did your mother need to make sure that you will all marry?”*

Agnihotri: *Yes, it was like that. In this system you don't have freedom to choose your own man. 30 years ago it was a little more backwards than today, you know, it is more globalised*

nowadays. I would say this social system was not allowing us to make our own decisions, you know (online interview, Google Meet platform, 15. 6. 2023). ”

Meenal Agnihotri noted that in the traditional Indian social system, it was common for parents to arrange marriages for their children, especially for girls. Meenal's mother had to focus on providing for the family, paying off the loan for their home, and fulfilling her cultural obligations as a Hindu widow. After her father's death, Meenal's mother had to make sure all her daughters got married. Meenal notes that women had little choice in this system 30 years ago. With globalisation and modernization, it has become more open and accepting. This highlights the cultural and social norms concerning marriage and relationships.

Meenal Agnihotri reflects on how she was still interested in music, despite a gap in her music education. Agnihotri notes that her father introduced her to the gramophone and LPs, which allowed her to continue listening to music at home and feel connected to her father through the sound.

Agnihotri: “But after this gap, my interest never faded away. My interest was always there with the music. I used to listen to music at home because we had that [gramophone and] LPs and I used to listen to it because he [her father] had introduced me to the gramophone. So, the gramophone is also very close to my heart. I felt connected somehow to my father [through] sound. When I listen to it there is a kind of emotion (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021). ”

The gramophone, which was introduced to Meenal by her father, serves as a symbol of her emotional connection to him. By listening to the music on the gramophone, Meenal was able to maintain a sense of connection to her father and his influence on her musical development. This highlights the emotional and personal aspects of music, in addition to the cultural aspects.

In conclusion, Meenal Agnihotri, a woman from the Brahmin caste in Indian society, experiences navigating personal loss, financial struggles, and societal expectations, revealing the interplay of cultural, social, gender, and economic factors that influence an individual's musical journey. These factors, along with the challenges faced by her mother as a Hindu widow, taking care of four daughters, highlight these pressures and obstacles that she encountered.

The cultural context of Meenal's upbringing, which included the expectations placed on her as a member of the Brahmin caste and as a woman in a patriarchal society, played a significant role in shaping her music experiences.

3.1.3. Finding opportunities in celebrations, competitions, and connections

In the statements below, Meenal Agnihotri reflects on her early exposure to music through family celebrations and gatherings, as well as her interest in devotional music and her participation in competitions and performances on stage.

Gucká: (...) *when you mention that whatever was the opportunity that you were happy to sing for example where did you sing at some celebrations parties?*

Agnihotri: *“Yes, on some celebrations plus I started in the family celebrations and family gatherings (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”*

Gucká: *“Were you singing on a stage?”*

Agnihotri: *“Yes. And I used to sing all that devotional music [including Bhajans] on stage as well. I started singing devotional music when I was in the 11th standard. Privately I used to learn music from the tapes, you know the cassette tape recorder. I used to listen to that music and copy it and perform it on stage. I used to take part in the competitions as well. (...) I went to my sister's college for a competition (online interview, Google Meet platform, 15. 6. 2023).”*

Meenal's statements reflect her early exposure to music through family celebrations and gatherings. She also mentions that she started singing devotional music, including Bhajans, when she was in the 11th class. Her participation in competitions and performances on stage highlights her interest in pursuing music as a career and her willingness to showcase her talent to an audience. Meenal's mention of learning music from cassette tapes also reflects the changing technological landscape of music education she faced when she was young.

Agnihotri: *I went to my sister's college because I wanted to know what the college looked like, what was the feeling there because I did have time. I was at school and my sister was in college, so I went to her, and I went with her. There was a competition going on, so my sister*

asked me: Do you want to sing in this competition? And I said: Yes. Then I sang there, and I won. And after that, somebody came to me and asked me if I am interested in performing on stage. Then I told him to come to my home and talk to my mother, my uncle and whatever they will say I am ready to do (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021). ”

Meenal Agnihotri's statement highlights the role of chance and opportunity in her musical journey. She mentions that she went to her sister's college out of curiosity and ended up participating in a singing competition, which led to her winning and being offered a chance to perform on stage. This highlights the importance of informal music education and the role of chance encounters in shaping her career. Additionally, Meenal's willingness to take advantage of the opportunity to perform on stage suggests her passion and dedication to music.

Meenal Agnihotri's last sentence in her statement, *“Then I told him to come to my home and talk to my mother, my uncle and whatever they will say I am ready to do,”* highlights the societal and familial pressures that may have influenced her decision-making process. The fact that Meenal deferred to her mother and uncle suggests that she did not have complete autonomy in her decision-making, particularly in matters concerning her career and personal life.

Furthermore, the mention of her uncle's involvement in the decision-making process may reflect the cultural and social norms surrounding decision-making in a widow's family. In Indian society, a widow's husband's brother often assumes the role of the patriarch and makes important decisions on behalf of the family. This may have limited Meenal's agency in her own life, including her musical journey and career choices.

Overall, Meenal's statement highlights the complex interplay between societal norms, familial expectations, and personal agency in shaping a musician's career and life journey. It also highlights the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies, particularly those who have lost their male family members and may have limited agency in decision making.

3.1.4. Meenal Agnihotri's Education Background

Meenal Agnihotri is a highly educated female vocalist with an academic background in both scientific and musical domains. Her educational background lies in Microbiology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, and Hindustani Classical Vocal (Agnihotri, 2022).

BSc. Microbiology, Chemistry, and Environmental Science (Jul, 1992–Jul, 1995)

Nagpur University, Nagpur

Meenal Agnihotri completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Microbiology, Chemistry, and Environmental Science at Nagpur University in Nagpur, India. This three-year program provided her with a strong foundation in the sciences, particularly in the fields of microbiology, chemistry, and environmental science (Agnihotri, 2022).

BA (Additional) - Hindustani Classical Vocal (Jul, 1995–Jul, 1996)

Nagpur University, Nagpur

Following her BSc. degree, Meenal Agnihotri pursued her passion for music by enrolling in a one-year Bachelor of Arts (Additional) program in Hindustani Classical Vocal at Nagpur University. This program provided her with a comprehensive understanding of the theory and practice of Hindustani classical music (Agnihotri, 2022).

MA - Hindustani Classical Vocal (Jul, 1996–Jul, 1998)

Nagpur University, Nagpur

Building upon her BA (Additional) degree, Meenal Agnihotri continued her studies in Hindustani Classical Vocal by enrolling in a two-year Master of Arts program at Nagpur University. This program further expanded her knowledge of Hindustani classical music (Agnihotri, 2022).

Meenal Agnihotri has experience with both formal education and traditional, Guru-based learning—*guru-shishya-paramparā*. According to Ollikkala (2000, p. 376): “*Virtually all successful professional classical performers still receive training in the traditional manner, through the master-student tradition...*” The master-student tradition is still an important part of Indian classical music training, where students demonstrate their dedication and devotion to the art form under the guidance of a master. Ollikkala claims that despite the emergence of modern music schools and university music departments, the most successful professional classical performers still rely on the concept of musical heritage. The traditional Indian student is an unusually dedicated devotee who lives with their guru, absorbing the entire musical atmosphere and way of life. Stephen Slawek points out that a guru is usually defined as a spiritual teacher who guides disciples to an understanding of the true nature of existence through the transmission of knowledge of the Vedic tradition. Today, the concept of guru has

evolved, and the term is now generalised (Ollikkala, 2000, p. 376-377; Slawek, 2000, p. 457). Slawek (2000, p. 457) adds: *“In India today, a guru is a special kind of teacher, but is not necessarily a religious teacher.”*

Meenal Agnihotri shared what was happening when she was studying science in microbiology, chemistry, and environmental science at Nagpur University. At this time, two significant encounters with legendary personalities influenced Meenal to pursue music again.

Agnihotri: “So, I started learning [music again] when I was in my BSc. second year. I graduated in science studies. (...) I graduated when I was 21. The year was 1995. Then I got my additional bachelor's degree in music. The year was 1996. Then I got my master's degree [in music] in 1998. I got my post-graduation in classical vocal music (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”

Meenal shared her journey of learning and pursuing her passion for music while studying for her bachelor's degree in science. She began learning music during her second year of her bachelor's degree and continued to explore her interest in music while studying science. She described the Indian educational system and a big moment in her musical journey.

3.1.5. Bhimsen Joshi

After that, Meenal was describing another big moment in her musical journey while studying:

Agnihotri: “School education is finished up to 12 standard and after that you need to go to university. (...) So, after this, university came into play, and I started my education. I started going through university after 12 years. It was my 13th class so after this, in my family we had a spiritual guru, so I used to go to their ashram in Ganeshpuri. (...) So, by the time I was in second year, that means that I was in my 14 class (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).” “So, I started learning [music again] when I was in my BSc. second year (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”

Meenal Agnihotri's statements highlight her academic journey, which began with completing her school education up to the 12th class. After that, she pursued higher education at a university, starting with her 13th class. This is a common educational trajectory for many students in India, where completing the 12th standard marks the end of secondary education.

In the statement above, from 15. 12. 2021, Meenal marked the beginning of learning music again. It was her second year studying for a BSc degree, making her 20 years old.

Agnihotri: “So after attending all the exams for this 14th class, I went to the ashram. I used to go to an ashram alone, and I used to do some meditation courses in music. So in that year, when I was [doing] a bachelor in science, In the second year, a very legendary person, Pt. Bhimsen Joshi, was there (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021). ”

Meenal's experience of attending an ashram and participating in meditation courses in music could reflect the deep connection between spirituality and music for her. Her encounter with the legendary musician, vocalist Bhimsen Joshi can be seen as a significant moment in her musical journey.

Pandit Bhimsen Gururaj Joshi, was a highly respected Indian vocalist from Karnataka, known for his mastery of the Hindustani classical tradition. He specialised in the *khayal* genre of singing, as well as devotional music. He was a proud member of the Kirana *gharānā* tradition, and his concerts took him around the world, making him the first Indian musician to be advertised through posters in New York. He was instrumental in organising the annual Sawai Gandharva Music Festival in honour of his guru, Sawai Gandharva. Joshi received numerous awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1998 and India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, in 2009 (Wikipedia, 2023).

Meenal performed songs from the Gnyaneshwari, a book written by St. Dnyaneshwar that contains extracts of the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu text. Unknown to her, a legendary musician Pt. Bhimsen Joshi was present in the audience, listening to her singing.

Agnihotri: “So I was singing some parts of this book. (...) This book is called Gnyaneshwari written by St. Dnyaneshwar and it is all the extract of Bhagavad Gita. So I was singing this song and this legendary person was sitting in the audience and I was totally unaware of that and after finishing my singing he called me and asked questions. Are you learning music? Are you doing anything regarding the music? then I said no no. I'm not doing anything. I have been singing on my own since childhood but for some reason I stopped learning music. Then he asked me to come to Pune because he was there from Pune and he asked our [spiritual] guru: “Give this girl to me. I will train her. She has a beautiful singing voice (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021). ”

In an online interview, Meenal Agnihotri shared a pivotal moment of her life when she sang parts of the book Gnyaneshwari, written by St. Dnyaneshwar. She did not know that a legendary musician was in the audience—Bhimsen Joshi. He approached her after her performance and offered to train her in Pune, recognizing her talent and beautiful singing voice. Then, however, Agnihotri declined the offer. Now, Meenal Agnihotri perceives this incident as a moment of immaturity when she declined the opportunity to learn from a legendary musician.

Agnihotri continued: “At this time I was so immature and I said no I need to finish my bachelor degree and I am not going anywhere so I was so immature, that legendary personality was telling me to come with him that he will teach me but I declined due to all my immaturity (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021). ”

This statement illustrates a missed opportunity for Meenal Agnihotri to learn from a legendary personality in the field of music as she puts it due to her own immaturity at the time. Other factors shaped her decision to decline Bhimsen Joshi's offer. These include financial, geographical, and gender reasons.

Geographical distance played a role in her decision because Nagpur is approximately 11 hours or 760.6 km away from Pune. The distance would have posed a challenge for Agnihotri to travel or move to Pune and learn from the musician.

Another reason is that Agnihotri had responsibilities towards her family and widowed mother, who had to take care of and pay for the school fees of Meenal and her sisters. This financial burden would have made it difficult for Meenal to pursue music training in Pune.

Additionally, as a woman, Agnihotri sang in a different vocal register than a man, which may have also limited the benefits of learning from him. Moreover, for a 20-year-old unmarried woman, it may have posed additional challenges to study from a male guru. Meenal Agnihotri eventually found her path and continued her musical education.

Agnihotri: “He told me if you want to finish your education you can continue this but start learning and so I started learning after this. If I told you I started learning in my second year after finishing the exams so this was the main incident which made me start taking singing

again. I knew that I needed to start to learn and I looked for some teachers in Nagpur (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021). ”

Nevertheless, despite her turning down his offer, Bhimsen Joshi urged her to pursue further education and recommended her to Usha Parhi in Nagpur.

3.1.6. Usha Parkhi the 1st guru of Meenal Agnihotri

In 1994, Meenal Agnihotri decided to start learning from Dr Usha Parkhi. She wanted a female guru within a reachable geographical distance who could provide her with the guidance and support she needed to excel in her musical journey. This may highlight the importance of having a female mentor who could help navigate the complex world of Hindustani music and help Meenal with her skills as a vocalist.

Agnihotri: “I decided on the lady teacher. The year was 1994, and her name was Dr. Ushatai Parkhi in Nagpur. She lived close by, and she was female. (...) She was my first guru, Dr. Ushatai Parkhi. When I met Dr. Ushatai Parkhi, she wasn't living so far from my home. She was educated in music, and she was teaching it in college, so that was the start. (...) I would say it was the restart coming back into classical music (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”

In Indian classical music, the relationship between the guru and the student is a crucial aspect of the learning process, as it can provide a deep connection to the art form and facilitate the transmission of knowledge and skills.

Usha Parkhi, born in 1933, was a renowned Hindustani vocalist from Nagpur in India. Dr Parkhi began her musical journey under the teaching of Bhayyaji Vazalwar. Usha Parkhi holds a doctorate in music from the prestigious Gandharva Mahavidyalaya institution.

Usha Parkhi was also a music teacher in Nagpur, nurturing and shaping the careers of many budding musicians. Her commitment to art made her a sought-after guru of Hindustani classical music. She performed in India and abroad until the age of 88 years when she passed away (The Live Nagpur, 2022).

Parkhi being a female teacher has provided a sense of comfort and relatability for Meenal as well as the fact that they both came from the community of Deshastha Brahmins in Nagpur

(Wikipedia, 2023). Meenal's choice of Usha Parkhi as her guru was influenced by their shared educational background in music as well as their geographical and social proximity.

3.1.7. Kishori Amonkar, the 2nd guru

However, in the year 1995, Meenal stopped studying under Usha Parkhi as she started learning with her second guru, the renowned Kishori Amonkar. Kishori Amonkar was born in 1932, in Bombay (now Mumbai) in Maharashtra, India. She was born into a family of musicians and began her musical training at an early age. Despite her obvious talent, she faced many obstacles in her journey to becoming a successful classical vocalist. She was celebrated for her expertise in the Hindustani tradition and her innovative approach to the Jaipur *gharānā*. Amonkar was the daughter of the respected vocalist Mogubai Kurdikar (Britannica, 2023).

Although she was the daughter of renowned vocalist Mogubai Kurdikar, from the legendary Hindustani music tradition, she was born to the Kalavant caste of Goa (now classified by the Indian State as an Other Backward Class). Kalavants were a caste of temple attendants in Goa and South West Maharashtra. Their duties included entertaining the upper-caste society (Arthur, 2017).

Today, there are successful musicians, business people and politicians from the community, education and financial stability have made a big difference. Despite their success, caste still plays an important role in many aspects of life. The Kalavants were obligated to provide entertainment through music and dance, yet their modest success in the industry was a challenge due to their low-caste status (Arthur, 2017).

Kishori Amonkar was raised by her single mother in an environment that challenged the existing caste system, and she was surrounded by artists. Her mother Mogubai Kurdikar had to face many struggles to get her music education. Eventually, a breakthrough came when she was noticed for her vocal abilities by a famous teacher. However, her tuition was ended due to jealous sons of aristocrats and she had to continue the struggle. Mogu eventually achieved fame but was still discriminated against due to both her caste identity and gender (Arthur, 2017).

Her daughter Kishori Amonkar also faced similar obstacles in her journey to becoming a successful classical vocalist. Despite these challenges, she persevered and eventually achieved success as a classical vocalist. Her struggles serve as an inspiration to many and demonstrate the power of determination and perseverance (Arthur, 2017).

Kishori Amonkar was often presented as strict and temperamental, due to instances of her rebuking audience members and refusing performances or interviews if she thought the audience was badly behaved. Nevertheless, some anti-caste activists interpreted Amonkar's behaviour as resilience and fight against upper-caste discrimination. The death of Kishori Amonkar has prompted a discussion about historical erasure of the caste discrimination from the narrative about the history of Indian classical music and the role of Brahmanical society in usurping the field as well as the narrative of what has become classical Hindustani music tradition at the cost of lower-caste as well as muslim artists (see also Bakhle, 2005) (Arthur, 2017).

Meenal Agnihotri shares her experience with her 2nd guru Kishori Amonkar. At this time, Meenal was studying at Nagpur University with an additional bachelor in Hindustani Classical Vocal. Kishori Amonkar had a concert in Nagpur, and Meenal Agnihotri got to attend this concert. She recalls being deeply moved by Amonkar's performance, particularly her rendition of the rāga Yaman.

Agnihotri: "In Nagpur there were so many organisations who organised classical music programmes. In the organisation Saptak, they used to give students compensation in the form of tickets, and for students, it was an opportunity to sit in the front row to listen to whomever was coming to perform. So I was a member of that society, and once Gaan Saraswati Kishori Tai Amonkar came, That was my second guru. (...) So she sang. I remember she sang there, and I remember because I was a student of classical music. I was in my first year; it was winter, and it was after the Diwali concert, so I started to take a little interest in music because up to that point I had done that. I was so frustrated, so when I started to have a little interest, I started to attend the concert as well, and one day I was listening to her and I was sitting in the front row. (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021)."

Agnihotri: *“I was just face-to-face with the artist, so I was this close. She was on stage. I was in the audience, and we were sitting on the floor. The first students are on the floor, and then the other students are on the chairs on the back row, so I was sitting in the front row, first in line, just in front of her, and I was sitting there, and all of a sudden I started to cry because it was so intense the rāga Yaman she was singing. I started to cry when I was listening to her. I cannot explain the experience, but I started crying, and I did not realise what was happening to me. Why am I crying? I wanted to stop myself, but all the emotions were coming so fast it was uncontrollable for me, so then I realised there is something magical in her singing. There is something. (...)...and then I decided that I would practise, and if I wanted to pursue classical music, I would definitely learn from her alone. So my passion was taking me to that level that I started practising from 6 to 8 hours after listening to her (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”*

Meenal's experience of listening to Kishori Amonkar's performance and being deeply moved by her singing highlights the emotional nature of Indian classical music. The intensity of the *rāga Yaman*, as performed by Kishori Tai Amonkar, evoked a strong emotional response in Meenal, causing her to cry and feel a profound connection to the music.

In Indian classical music, the concept of *rasa* refers to the emotional essence of a performance, which can bring a wide range of feelings and responses. Rowell (2000, p. 29-30) adds to the concept of *rasa* by stating: *“The literal meaning of rasa is 'juice', as in the sap of a tree. It signifies a continuous current of emotion—emotion that composers imagine, that actors and dancers represent, and that arises spontaneously in the awareness of spectators as a play unfolds. (...) The idea of rasa is still valid today. It is taken for granted in Indian musical thought that each raga has its own distinctive emotional flavour and is therefore assigned to one of the traditional sentiments, in much the same way that each raga signifies a particular time of day. What these conventional associations rest on is not clear. (...) But the concept is self-ful-filling: if we assume that a given musical construction represents and communicates a particular emotion, awareness of that emotion will automatically inform the intent of the poet and composer, the actions of the performer, and the perceptions and reactions of the empathetic listener. We do not need to search for meaning in Indian music; it is there.”*

Meenal Agnihotri's experience of listening to her second guru, Kishori Amonkar, and the strong emotional response she had can be understood as a profound connection to the music and its cultural significance. Indian classical music has the power to evoke deep emotions in

listeners, as demonstrated by Meenal's reaction to the rāga Yaman when performed by Kishori Tai Amonkar.

The concept of rasa, as mentioned above, refers to the emotional essence of a performance and plays a crucial role in Indian classical music. In Meenal's case, the rasa of the rāga Yaman was so powerful that it brought her to tears and led her to realise the magic in Kishori Tai Amonkar's singing.

Meenal's experience also highlights the importance of the guru-student relationship in Indian classical music. This experience not only strengthened her connection to the music but also reinforced her commitment to learning from Kishori Tai Amonkar as her guru, reflecting the importance of mentorship and the transmission of knowledge in the Indian classical music tradition.

Gucká: *“It must have been quite a strong experience for you.”*

Agnihotri: *“Yes it was very strong and I experienced the same thing when I started learning from her it was in our room we were all sitting and all the other students and she was singing rāga Yaman I remember and I'm again it was so emotional so I start singing whenever she asked me to sing but I was not able to do anything I was not able to sing so she has that magnetic aura, I would say that level of her singing was that spiritual and that she has the ability to connect or to touch your soul so she was divine singer and I am blessed in many ways that I got to experience how she guided and yes that about the divine experience and I am fortunate that that was the time of the show so that's it so this is the thing that I was thinking that it has to be mentioned before before we start to do do the story after university so I was learning and singing in small group groups not on big stages after my university so I started singing and suddenly what happened there was some need for money so I started doing the job in the school (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”*

The magnetic aura and the level of Kishori Amonkar's singing, as described by Meenal, suggest that Amonkar possesses a unique ability to connect with her students.

The late Kishori Amonkar transcended many boundaries to create space for herself in the world largely dominated by men. She challenged the conventions of the *gharānā* system and she was the recipient of the prestigious Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan for reshaping the contours of Hindustani Music and popularising it at the global level. Amonkar's unique

style and approach to music likely had a profound impact on Agnihotri's own development as a musician. By blending elements from various *gharānās* and emphasising the emotional aspects of music, Amonkar provided Agnihotri with a rich and diverse foundation upon which to build her own musical identity (Jha, 2022).

Amonkar's status as a pioneering feminist in the world of Hindustani classical music may have also influenced Agnihotri's own path as a female musician. Amonkar demanded the title of 'Vidushi' for successful female classical vocalists and fought for recognition and respect for women in the male-dominated field (Jha, 2022).

This part expresses the importance of the role of inspiring figures in shaping a musician's aspirations. It also highlights the challenges faced by young musicians in balancing their artistic pursuits with practical concerns, such as the need for financial stability.

Agnihotri: "I was teaching maths and science. (...) I was pursuing my music after my BSc., you see. I was attending my BA. college and I was doing my job too and it was getting too hectic so then I left my job and I started pursuing music again. (...) Some musical organisation provided me with her number. After my first year I came here to Bombay and I met her and then I told her that I want to learn from her. First she asked me where you had learnt before and to whom you learnt and she knew my first guru because even my first guru was quite a known person. She used to perform on the stage so she was quite a known person. So then she asked me to sing when I was there in her room and I came alone on my own from Nagpur to Bombay. I went to her home alone. She asked me if I'm with anybody then I told her I came alone, I came alone (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021)."

This part showcases the dedication and commitment of Meenal and her decision to leave her job teaching maths and science to focus on music demonstrates her passion and determination to grow as a musician. The mention of a musical organisation providing Meenal with her desired teacher's contact emphasises the role of networking and community support in the world of music.

The guru's investigation into Meenal's previous learning experiences and her first guru reflects the importance of understanding a student's background and previous education. Meenal's decision to travel alone from Nagpur to Bombay to meet and learn from Kishori Tai Amonkar shows her dedication and commitment.

Agnihotri continued: *“So she told me if you want to learn you have to practise very hard and you will have to devote a lot of time and a lot of money. She asked me this but she knew that I was from a lower than middle class family because of my mother...so she initially took fees from me then after she stopped taking fees from me so she was like a mother to me. I was so thin when I started learning from her. So thin, So thin. So she used to say this is not life if you only eat green vegetables you need to also eat fish and I never eat fish so she used to say to me eat fish it will be powerful for singing this is not very easy singing without a fish or without eating only herbs to say that just making fun of me it was nice once I sang very nice she was very happy with my singing she started teaching me even but my breath so weak and my strength was not so powerful so what she did once she made me a drink she took a glass and put a raw egg in it. (...) Yes, this was so kind of her for taking care of me herself. She made me a drink for me and it was really difficult for me to drink it because I have been a pure vegetarian since my childhood so it was very difficult it was coming back to me but somehow I made it. I respected her. So she was really that caring so I am glad she was a very kind hearted person. Very kind-hearted person and I started learning from her (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”*

This part stresses the importance of the personal, social, and cultural aspects of musical learning and practice. Amonkar's advice to Meenal about the need for hard work, devotion, and investment in her musical education reflects the commitment and dedication traditionally expected of the students of gurus.

Amonkar's understanding of Meenal's financial background and her decision to stop taking fees from Meenal highlight the supportive and nurturing role that gurus can play in a student's musical journey. This gesture of kindness and care demonstrates the deep bond that can form between a guru and a student.

Amonkar's concern for Meenal's health and well-being, as well as her suggestions about dietary changes to improve her singing, underscores the holistic approach of musical learning. However, her act of making a drink with eggs for Meenal could be seen as a culturally insensitive gesture, considering Meenal's Brahmin caste background and their strict vegetarian diet restrictions lifestyle. Despite this potential conflict, Meenal's decision to consume the drink out of respect for her guru not only highlights the power hierarchy of the guru-student relationship which in this case challenges or transgresses the established social hierarchy based on the caste system, but also shows the importance of trust and devotion of the student to her mutual respect in the guru-student relationship.

Amonkar's unique style and approach to Hindustani classical music provided Agnihotri with a diverse and innovative foundation upon which to build her own musical identity. This likely contributed to Agnihotri's versatility as a vocalist and teacher, as well as her deep appreciation for the emotional and intellectual dimensions of music.

Amonkar's pioneering efforts as a feminist in the world of Hindustani classical music likely influenced Agnihotri's own understanding of gender dynamics within the field. By challenging gender norms and advocating for recognition and respect for female musicians, Amonkar demonstrated the importance of fighting for equality and representation in the arts. This may have inspired Agnihotri to challenge gender norms in her own career and to advocate for the recognition and respect of female musicians.

Kishori Amonkar's impact on Meenal Agnihotri's education can be seen in the musical, social and gender aspects of Agnihotri's development as a musician. Amonkar's unique style and approach to Hindustani classical music provided Agnihotri with a diverse and innovative foundation upon which to build her own musical identity, while her pioneering efforts as a feminist in the field likely influenced Agnihotri's own understanding of gender dynamics within the world of music. As a result, Agnihotri's education under Amonkar likely contributed to her versatility as a vocalist and teacher, as well as her deep appreciation for the emotional and intellectual dimensions of music, and her commitment to challenging gender norms and advocating for the recognition and respect of female musicians.

Meenal Agnihotri, another female classical vocalist, could have been privileged in her Brahmin caste background and was able to pursue her musical ambitions without facing the same struggles as Kishori Amonkar or other Kalavant artists.

In summary, this chapter shows the significance of personal experiences, relationships, and cultural context in the learning and practice of music. It demonstrates the transformative power of mentorship and the role of legendary figures in shaping Meenal and her commitment to Indian classical music.

3.1.8. Formal education and traditional Guru Shishya Parampara

Meenal shares her experience with both formal education and traditional, Guru-based learning- Guru Shishya Parampara.

Agnihotri: *“And with guru it is very different because there is syllabus in university on school level or college that you visit and that has to be completed with them. That year and within that month it was composed for universities, but I was learning with a guru. She was not like that if my guru is teaching me something I need to be perfect in doing that then and only then after she will teach me something different. So, I came from this background and in this second background [university], there were around 30 rāgas to be completed in 1 month because everyone was learning from 11 standards so imagine their experiences of 5 years and I had the experience of just one at that point one practical year so it was very depressing to me that I was always thinking that I will never make it (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)”*.

According to Meenal Agnihotri, the learning process with a guru differs significantly from the formal education system found in universities. In the case of Meenal, she found the requirement of the formal education system to complete around 30 *rāgas* in a year overwhelming, as she had only one year of practical experience compared to her peers' five years. This disparity in experience led to feelings of depression and self-doubt. The guru-based learning approach, on the other hand, provided a more supportive and nurturing environment that allowed her to progress at her own pace, ultimately fostering a deeper connection to music.

In the following statement, Meenal Agnihotri recalls the story of her return to college to pursue music classes. She remembered that her teacher, Sujata, was a great singer and that she changed Meenal's perspective on Indian classical music and ultimately inspired her to study it further.

Agnihotri: *“I remember that I went back to college because I wanted to sign. If I'm going to attend college, I will attend regularly and finish the syllabus. So, on that day, I attended all the classes. And since that day I have attended all the classes there. There were classes all day then I attended four classes and suddenly one thing clicked for me. I don't know what it was, but I already realised that I am doing practice and that I am looking forward to the music classes. I remember I did my classes... I think my teacher's name was Sujata. She was a good singer, and she was the teacher of the classes and so thanks to her, my perspective of Indian classical music towards Indian classical music changed. That was when I realised that I wanted to study it (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”*

Meenal's experience stresses the challenges faced by her attempts to learn Indian classical music within a formal educational system. The extensive syllabus, which included 38 *rāgas*,

presented a significant challenge for her, considering that she had started learning classical music relatively late compared to her peers.

The struggle to adapt to the requirements of the formal educational program, such as singing with the tabla and capturing the sound, demonstrates the importance of a strong foundation in Hindustani music techniques.

This experience that Meenal had in college / university highlights the impact of the role of inspiring teachers in shaping a student's perspective on music. The turning point for Meenal came when she encountered her teacher, Sujata Vyas, whose teaching style and her own passion for Indian classical music resonated with Meenal, causing a shift in her perspective and awakening a desire to study Hindustani classical music more seriously.

Meenal was deeply affected by her teacher's elaborate and clear singing style, which exhibited *rasa*, the emotional essence of the music. She was reflecting on her teacher singing:

Agnihotri: "It was the way that she was singing. It was so elaborative it was not confusing for me. And she was so distinct with every word which is exhibiting rasa. It was really crystal clear that was when I realised that I am trying to do everything at once and it is not possible and that I need to go step by step. That realisation made me feel that I can do this, but I need a lot of time and a lot of devotion towards Indian classical music. Also, a lot of listening to a lot of practice and a lot of studies regarding things like reading the musical books, reading articles about rāga and knowing well from where the rāga came. So, I started doing that and I started to really practise. I used to practise all in the morning from 3:30 I used to wake up at 3:15 then up to 5:30 I used to practise then I used to sleep and then my college timing started at 10:30 so I woke up at 8:30 and then I used to practise and then I go to college and learn there. I used to come to my teacher to teach me private classes and that was for 2-hours, so all this completed the day I used to be surrounded by music (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)."

Meenal's reflection on her teacher's singing and the impact it had on her own musical journey highlights the significance of the transmission of knowledge, technique, and passion in the learning process. This experience led Meenal to realise the importance of a step-by-step approach, dedication, and devotion to Indian classical music.

Agnihotri continued: "So, there I developed some sense and some actual understanding of music, because even today I don't think that I would understand anything about music because

it is still after every practice and every performance that I realise something new. So that is such a huge journey that I need to finish. But there is no finish line, of course. Of course, I know that, but even today I don't think that I have realised it all, and I understand just a little bit of music. (...) But that's the point where I started, and I needed to change my perspective on the music. And I started practising then. At first, you knew my performance was not good. It was ok but in the final year or the second year, I was the topper in the college. In writing papers and in performance in all aspects, I was the topper (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)."

At that time, Meenal's situation at home was affecting her studying. To help her widowed mother, she began teaching science classes.

Agnihotri: "(...) Our daily life was very difficult so I started teaching classes. I used to teach science. It was rather very difficult I would say because after college I used to [give] private classes twice in a week. It was very hectic for me those days and those days were struggling. I was always thinking why this is happening to me, why I only lost my father, why it is very difficult for me to get everything. I even was struggling to get my first electronic tampura, so I was always like I need this, and I am not able to take this so there was always some kind of feeling like I'm lacking, but the music changed me a lot because music is giving me satisfaction. When I started practising in the morning it changed my perspective of life (...) (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)."

These challenges seen above reveal the socio-economic factors that impacted Meenal access to resources and opportunities in their journey. Electronic *tānpūrā* being around eight times cheaper further shows their financial struggle. Meenal believes that music allowed her to explore emotions and helped her to navigate life situations.

The shift in Meenal's perspective on music, shown by her commitment to practise and her eventual success in college, demonstrates the transformative power of dedication and hard work. As she progressed in her studies and performances, she began to recognise the depth and complexity of Hindustani classical music, which fuelled her desire to continue learning and improving.

Agnihotri: "(...) it was not just the music; it was the way that I started practising for 6 hours and sometimes 8 hours, and so it changed me inside out, even when I used to think that I remember when it was my final year and we had a gathering. I used to take all my books in a

plastic bag, so I never had a proper bag to take my books in the first place, and so my colleagues titled me with the name that means always carrying the books in a plastic bag, and so I cried when I came home that my colleagues were teasing me like that. But after coming into classical music, I thought what a silly experience it was. Why cry for that? It is not important. That was not important. What I was carrying was the important thing. I needed my books, and they were with me, so it started changing me even though my past experiences were making me sad. They started making me happy and giving me some different perspectives. So these years were really magical because it was passionate and it went really deep into the music. And your question's answer is that in my last performance in the second year, it gave me confidence that I could do it, so I started taking it very seriously. I used to sing a lot of devotional songs on the stage, then I decided to pursue this music artist. I started to see myself as a performing artist of classical music, then I started taking lessons. I was happy with myself, and I decided that I would only pursue classical music (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021)."

Meenal's dedication to practise, which involved spending 6 to 8 hours a day on music, led to a shift in her mindset. This change in perspective allowed her to reevaluate her previous experiences and emotions, such as the incident in which she was teased for carrying her books in a plastic bag. Through her engagement with classical music, she came to realise that the importance lay in the knowledge she was carrying, rather than what kind of bag she was carrying the books in.

Her successful performance in her second year of college boosted her confidence and solidified her decision to pursue a career as a classical music performer. This commitment to her passion led her to seek further instruction and devote herself fully to the classical hindustani art form.

3.1.9. Music vs. marriage

Balancing educational opportunities with personal and professional commitments is a common theme in the life of Meenal Agnihotri, and this aspect of her story provides further insight into the complex dynamics of pursuing a career in music. In this part, Meenal Agnihotri shares her experiences and the role of family, mentorship, and opportunities in shaping her musical journey. From staying with her aunt to receiving a scholarship offer to a need for marriage.

Agnihotri: *“Sometimes I used to travel because I used to stay with my aunt. She and I used to stay together so I used to travel at least 40 to 45 km to reach her home. (...) I finished my second year and then I started learning again and I wanted to go away after that. I started performing on a small small stage. I started performing so I was there. (...) So I talked about singing there so they heard I got the scholarship for my master degree second year so someone offered me some scholarship but they said that I would have to sign a contract for 3 years (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”*

This part emphasises the impact a family and community could have had in the development of Meenal Agnihotri's musical career. It also emphasises the significance of the learning process, as Meenal mentions starting to perform on small stages.

Meenal received the opportunity from an individual who recognised her talent. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the musical community and the importance of networking and support from established musicians in fostering the growth of emerging artists.

She shares her experience of being offered a scholarship for her master's degree in singing. This opportunity came with a requirement to sign a three-year contract. Meenal opens up about the cultural expectations and family pressures she faced regarding this offer as her career in general. Despite the opportunities that came her way, Meenal had to navigate the challenges of gender norms and traditional values within her culture.

Agnihotri shared: *“...my family was not ready for that. They said you are a girl and we cannot leave you alone, do music and go that far, because there are far away cities and my family was not ready to send me. So I lost that opportunity and my scholarship after that and after that I was with my guru. Only after that happened my uncle told me wherever you want to go you can go whichever music you want to do you can go perform anywhere but get married first. It can be this typical thing in our community and Indian mind so they wanted me to get married and then I can go anywhere. So I finished my master degree. After finishing my master degree I was done with my school and I was able to do jobs. I did a job for free for 4 months then my uncle started searching for a boy to get married to. Then I got married and I came to Bombay and I continued learning from her (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021).”*

This passage above points out the intersection of cultural expectations, gender norms, and family pressure. Her family's reluctance to let her pursue music independently due to her gender and the requirement for Meenal to get married before pursuing her musical career demonstrates the influence of traditional values and societal norms and expectations within her community and Indian culture. It seems that by getting married, Meenal found a way to balance her personal life and her passion for music.

Agnihotri: "...of course, there is the social pressure to get married as early as possible. If anybody is getting married a little late, that is considered to be very bad. They think she must be somehow bad or even have some faults. This happens with the males as well (online interview, Google Meet platform, 15. 6. 2023)."

According to Meenal Agnihotri, there was another reason why she got married. In Indian society, there is social pressure to get married as early as possible. She is suggesting that this pressure is not just limited to women but also affects men. Meenal indicates that if someone gets married late, they are often viewed negatively and may be seen as having some kind of fault or issue. This societal pressure to get married early may have influenced Meenal's decision to get married as well besides her need to be able to perform and travel. She may have felt that it was expected of her and that she needed to conform to societal norms.

Gucká: "How old were you when you finished your studies?"

Agnihotri: "Actually I finished my school when I was 25 years old and I got married when I was 26. (...) So by the time I used to go with my guru used to take all her students with her because I was sitting behind her I was not performing solely but I used to go with her then I got married and I came to Mumbai but my home was too far from her home it was like 85 km up and 85 km down so I used to travel that twice in a week it was very hectic there were no buses available I used to take 4 vehicles at a time. (...) I started my journey with the first bus I used to go to and it used to drop me at some stop then after that I took the second bus then after that I took the third bus and after that I took a rickshaw and then three kilometres to walk (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021)."

Here Meenal describes the challenges she faced in maintaining her relationship with her guru Kishori Amonkar after getting married and moving to Mumbai. The long and exhausting

journey she made twice a week, involving multiple modes of transportation and a considerable walking distance, demonstrates her perseverance and passion for her music.

The guru-student relationship is a significant aspect of Indian classical music tradition, and Meenal's efforts to maintain this connection despite the physical distance and personal life changes reflect the importance of this relationship in her musical development.

Agnihotri: "As I said it was very hectic but there I had a little pressure for my family and responsibilities like when the guest started coming at my home so my family wanted me to stay at home not to attend classes so I started skipping classes due to the pressure (...) I skipped my classes but my guru got angry with me because of skipping classes and I'm not attending them properly so many times when she asked me to be with her for vocal support and I was not there. So she got so so so angry and she stopped talking to me (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021)."

These statements above illustrate cultural expectations as well as family responsibilities and the pursuit of a musical career. Meenal discusses the pressure she faced from her family to prioritise their needs and social obligations over her musical education, leading her to skip classes with her guru Kishori Tai Amonkar.

This situation offers insight into the role of gender norms and cultural values in shaping Meenal's musical journey, as well as the potential consequences of navigating these competing demands. The tension between Meenal's personal life and her relationship with her guru ultimately led to an absence in their communication. Meenal Agnihotri found herself facing the difficult decision of prioritising her family's expectations over her passion for music. As a result, Meenal chose to focus on her family responsibilities, putting her musical aspirations on hold.

Gucká: "(...) That must have been so hard for you."

Agnihotri: "Yes and it was a lot of pressure from her side too. And from my family side as well because my family thought that I should be there if any guests start coming. I should be there for every Festival ever and one day it was so hectic that I just stopped. After that I started practising at home but it was so depressing then if anybody asked me to perform I said no I don't want to. So I was totally devoted to my family for next 10 years then my daughter came and also next 12 years totally family person I was just cooking I was practising I was

practising definitely I was learning the little bit after when my daughter was 1 and half years old I started going to Vijaya Jadhav so she was my third guru Vijaya Jadhav so I started learning. (online interview, ZOOM platform, 16. 12. 2021). After that I started learning from Vijaya Jadhav (Gatlewar), just to escape the responsibilities and as a hobby (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021)."

Meenal describes the immense pressure she faced from both her guru and her family, which ultimately led her to stop attending classes and focus solely on her family responsibilities.

During this period, Meenal continued to practise at home but experienced a sense of depression and a decrease in her motivation to perform. This demonstrates the emotional and psychological demand that such pressures can have on an individual's artistic pursuits. For over a decade, Meenal's life revolved around her family and her daughter, with her musical aspirations taking a backseat. However, when her daughter turned one and a half years old, Meenal yearned for a new guru and found Vijaya Jadhav Gatlewar and resumed her musical education. Vijaya Jadhav Gatlewar born in 1955 specialises in 'behelawa' and a variety of uncommon ragas, and excels in the lighter genres like *thumrī*. She is continuing the Jaipur tradition both by performing and training students, and is currently a guru at the Gangubai Hangal Music Academy (Vijaya Jadhav Gatlewar, 2023). Learning from Vijaya Tai Jadhav allowed Meenal to escape her familial responsibilities for a while and pursue music as a hobby.

As Meenal began to learn from her new guru, Vijaya Jadhav, she found a renewed sense of purpose and balance in her life. She shares the experience:

Agnihotri: "After my daughter's birth, maybe she was 1 1/2-year-old, I started learning from her because it was a reachable distance. So it took a little time to travel and I was a little bit frustrated sitting at home continuously. I wanted to learn, But it was not possible and suddenly everything changed. So that one hour learning with my Guru was a blessing for me. (...) So I decided to go nearby to learn and I started learning again. So she had the same singing style but it was still a little bit different. So everyone has their own style when they learn from Guru so it goes a little bit differently every time. (...) It took me a little time to understand that style but I got so many good things from her and that's how my journey started again. So this was only learning and I never did any performances in that time period (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021)."

In this part, Meenal resumed her musical education with a new guru, Vijava Jadhav. The close proximity of her new guru's home allowed her to balance her family life with her passion for music, providing her with a much-needed sense of relief and personal fulfilment.

The passage again emphasises the importance of the guru-student relationship in Indian classical music and the unique learning experiences that each guru provides. Although Meenal's new guru had a similar singing style to her previous one, there were subtle differences that required her to adapt. This illustrates the diversity of teaching styles within the Indian classical music tradition and the importance of continuous learning and adaptation for musicians. Furthermore, the paragraph demonstrates that Meenal's primary focus during this period was on her family duties, learning and personal growth, rather than public performances.

3.1.10. Re-emergence onto the public music scene

After Meenal's break of 11 to 12 years, during which Meenal focused on her family and practised only in private, she re-emerged onto the public performance scene in 2012. Her first significant performance after this long break took place in Varanasi, a culturally significant town in India:

"So I completely stopped for 11 to 12 years. Then I got my first performance, I mean I used to get small performances in a group gathering but on the big stages I got the first program in 2012. After 1999...in 2000 I had my last performance, August 2000 and after that I got my first big stage performance after 12 years... I remember the date was 6 of May in Varanasi. (...) ... tabla player which I used to practise with and he had a big community and so he suggested to that community that he is practising with Meenal Agnihotri and she is a good singer and I just want you to invite her for this performance. So after he recommended my name to them I went there (Agnihotri, online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021). "

The opportunity for this performance arose through the recommendation of a tabla player with whom Meenal had practised. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the musical community and the importance of networking and support from fellow musicians. This played a crucial role in her return to the public stage. Meenal's return to performing after more than a decade signifies her determination and passion for Hindustani classical vocal music. Meenal describes what it was like to return to performing on stage after such a long time:

Agnihotri: *“I was so fearful during that performance my voice was shaking. My confidence was very low...(…)...there were so many people it was like shivering every time and continuously I was shaking. (...) So the program did not go so well but it was a good start (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021).”*

This passage highlights the emotional and psychological challenges faced by Meenal Agnihotri. Her fear and low confidence during her performance could have revealed the vulnerability and pressure experienced by artists in the public eye after an extended break.

She continued: *“I think there were big personalities present, like Sajan Mishra and Pooran Maharaj. These are the legendary people and so they appreciate my singing and somehow they got to know that I am singing after 12 years so after finishing my singing they came to me and they told me: you are a good singer you did well just keep practising and keep singing on the stage so that your fear would go away. (...) It was a very big thing to get that from the legendary personalities. I got a tap on my back from them. Yes, it was a very proud moment for me (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021).”*

The presence of legendary musicians, such as Sajan Mishra and Pooran Maharaj, and their encouragement and support, again showcase the importance of mentorship and community within Indian classical music. Their recognition of Meenal's talent and their advice to her demonstrate the meaning of the guidance from experienced musicians in helping artists, in this case Meenal Agnihotri. The following passage touches upon cultural aspects, such as the respectful seating arrangement in relation to a guru:

Agnihotri: *“...you see we Indians we just don't sit on the level with Guru we always sit below. So I was just sitting below him and then he tapped on me saying you are a really good singer, you just need to get out of your fears and get your confidence back. (...) (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021).”*

Further, she also expresses how it was to face the difficulties in returning to her previous performance flow.

“So yes after that I used to practise daily I started taking programs but it was very difficult to go back to the flow. (...) And so after I started to take very small programs in Mumbai,

because my daughter was small so I used to sing in this region only (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021)."

Moreover, this newly gained flow was interrupted again in a few years, this time due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

"It was very difficult and it is still difficult after corona to get back to the flow. It is like that because no gatherings are happening, even just a few days ago I had a program where I sang so there were only 50 people invited. 50 people were allowed to come and there were some staff and so it included those people, there were 50 people. And so I think there were only 28 people there. (online interview, ZOOM platform, 21. 12. 2021)."

Previous passages not only emphasise deep-rooted traditions within Indian classical music such as respectful seating arrangement in relation to a guru. Furthermore, it exposes the challenges faced by Meenal in adapting to changing circumstances and maintaining her programmes / performances, first due to personal reasons deeply rooted in specific social and cultural conditions later particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meenal touches upon the influence of personal factors playing into her musical endeavours, such as her responsibilities as a mother and a choice of performance locations. By focussing on smaller programmes within her region, she was able to balance her family life with her passion for music. Later, the impact of the pandemic on gatherings and live performances, with restrictions on audience numbers affected musicians like Meenal to adapt, such as accepting a very small-scale performance under strict hygienic conditions, though still perceived as better than the period when no performances were possible at all.

Overall, Meenal Agnihotri's experience of balancing her musical ambitions with personal and professional commitments provides insight into the dynamics of pursuing a musical career. Meenal experienced pressure from both family and cultural expectations about gender roles and traditional values. Despite the opportunities she received, she focused on family responsibilities for over a decade. After her daughter turned one and a half years old, she found a new guru and renewed her passion for music, but solely in private. When she returned to perform after a long break, she faced emotional challenges but was encouraged and supported by legendary Indian musicians. Despite the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic,

she balanced her family responsibilities with her passion for music by focusing on smaller programs in her region.

3.2. Meenal Agnihotri, the performing artist

This chapter looks at Meenal Agnihotri, as a performing artist who has been trained in various Indian classical music traditions known as gharānās. It also provides an understanding of the challenges that she faces in her artistic journey.

3.2.1. Blending three gharanas

Meenal Agnihotri shared her experience with her rebellious Guru and her journey through the distinct characteristics of Kirana and Jaipur gharānās. She highlighted the importance of emotion and self-reflection when performing.

Agnihotri: "...in my case my Guru was a rebellious person regarding gharānā, because gharānā started emerging I think in the 90s because every guru and every person who came from that tradition is the gharānā tradition. I have started my learning with Kirana gharānā. Then my first guru was from Kirana gharānā. So every gharānā has its own specialities, for example Kirana people want a very precise note and a very correct note. But then there is the Jaipur gharānā and they can go off a note for a little bit but they like to focus more on what the rāga is trying to say. They are interested in what is the emotion that is coming from that rāga and how is it coming from the rāga or what is inside of you and what you yourself is reflecting in the style of singing... This is true for any type of gharānā of course, because you cannot change yourself and you cannot lie with your own self. So when you are singing when you are putting emphasis on any subject it reflects into what is inside out. This is a better natural way of putting rāga in Jaipur style of singing (...) Kirana is very picky about notes and is very precise and wants better polished notes. And the same way the Jaipur people are trying to put the emotion, the rāga and the importance on the particular note. They try to put the emotion out more (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021)."

The gharānā system, which according to Meenal Agnihotri gained prominence in the 1990s, represents a lineage of musical knowledge passed down through generations of gurus and their disciples. Each gharānā has its unique stylistic elements and priorities, such as the Kirana gharānā's emphasis on precise and correct notes, and the Jaipur gharānā's focus on the emotional content of the rāga.

Agnihotri: *“And then I learned a little bit of Patiala gharānā too. So Patiala gharānā is about... you are putting all the notes together in one alap like... she starts singing it to demonstrate her point. So even though it is alap... it is that you are showing how much you are able to sing this fast... she is again singing to show what she means... so it is like that so Patiala gharānā is blend of emotion and your vocal abilities and it shows everything it includes the speed it includes the emotion and it also includes tālā, means the cycle (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).”*

Meenal Agnihotri's experience learning the Patiala gharānā as well provides a valuable insight into the approaches found within Indian classical music. She shared her position regarding gharānā and her guru.

Agnihotri: *“So what I sing is this blend of three gharānās. And my guru never insisted on sticking to one gharānā. She said you sing like you whatever it is that you want to present like yourself do that (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).”*

Meenal Agnihotri's approach to blending three gharānās in her singing reflects in her case the fluidity and adaptability of musical traditions within Indian classical music. Her guru's encouragement to not strictly adhere to a single gharānā and instead, focus on personal expression and individuality, demonstrates the dynamic nature of musical transmission and maybe even the potential for innovation within traditional frameworks. This highlights the role of the individual artist in shaping and reinterpreting musical traditions, and the continuous dialogue between tradition and innovation.

3.2.2. Seeking improvement

Gucká: *“And do you listen to yourself? (...) ”*

Agnihotri: *“Yes, I mostly... this is my own experience. I don't know if this is true for everyone else but when I play so many times, I find my own mistakes or that I would have done it differently. So, I always think that... Oh, this is not going well. My analysis of myself is that I always wished that I could improve a little more next time. But sometimes I make mistakes and sometimes I improve.”*

Gucká: “Good so you can practise more and get a little bit better every time.”

Agnihotri: “Yes, sometimes I record my concerts too. When I listen to it then sometimes, I find that people are very happy with my singing but sometimes I feel like I am not singing that well on high-level singing sometimes it happens.”

Gucká: “Is it something that you just feel for yourself or is there somebody in your surroundings that tells you that you should improve?”

Agnihotri: “Yes, sometimes I have got comments that: You should improve your singing and your voice... But I cannot change my voice. My voice is a little husky so I have heard these kinds of comments: You should improve yourself and your voice. So many times, people like my singing but so many times I don't like it. But sometimes I do like it very much and I think to myself today I'm singing very well but people don't like it. (...) I always think that I am blessed with whatever voice with whatever brain with whatever God has given me. It is a gift, so I never criticised my voice. But I always say that there is space for improvement (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”

The statements above highlight the importance of self-reflection and continuous improvement in the practice of a performing artist. Meenal Agnihotri, the artist, discusses her process of self-evaluation and the role of feedback from her audience. She acknowledges that her perception of her performance may not always align with the audience's perception, illustrating the subjective nature of evaluating one's performance. Meenal Agnihotri's acceptance of her unique voice and her belief in its inherent value as a gift demonstrate the importance of individuality in musical expression.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the artistic journey of Meenal Agnihotri, as a performer trained in various gharānās. Meenal gave insight into the challenges she faces, her self-reflection process, and her commitment to continuous improvement. It has highlighted the importance of individuality in musical expression.

3.3. Meenal Agnihotri, the teacher

This chapter explores Meenal Agnihotri's life as a Hindustani classical music teacher. Meenal's journey as a teacher has been shaped by her understanding of the purpose and

philosophy behind Indian classical music. Using stories and a focus on the philosophy behind Indian classical music, Meenal has been able to teach her students not only the technical aspects of the art form but also the emotional aspects.

As an online teacher, she has overcome obstacles and embraced opportunities to teach Hindustani classical music over the Internet. Balancing her personal and professional life, Meenal has managed to maintain strong relationships with her students, even as they are spread across the globe. In this chapter, we will delve into Meenal's teaching methods, her experiences with online teaching, and the challenges and opportunities she has encountered in her journey as a teacher of Indian classical music.

3.3.1. Hindustani Classical Music and Its Purpose

At first, we started talking about the purpose of Hindustani classical music and how its purpose is to facilitate the attainment of enlightenment, which is deeply rooted in the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Indian culture.

According to Agnihotri: "...there are 2 purposes of Indian classical music. One of them is reaching enlightenment as I told you previously. (...) Because there is no corner in the world where somebody would not want to learn Indian classical music. Everybody wants you to learn because of the purpose of this music and because it is something different than entertainment (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021)."

Indian classical music serves the purpose to facilitate the Enlightenment, which is deeply rooted in the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Indian culture. This goal of enlightenment goes beyond mere entertainment and reflects the rich cultural heritage and spiritual practices of India and Meenal Agnihotri says that because of this purpose Indian classical music has garnered interest from people across the world. Perhaps also because of the concept of creative freedom within the disciplined framework of Indian classical music, as explained by her. It may also reflect the influence of her guru Kishori Amonkar, who strongly felt that music was not for entertainment but a medium for her dialogue with the divine (Jha, 2022).

Agnihotri: "Yes, more creative freedom as I told you the last time. Indian classical music is very disciplined. So, it is discipline, it is freedom and discipline. I would say you need to be

in-depth of it, like ascending 5 notes and descending 7 notes. You have to be in that frame, but you have freedom of creating everything within that frame and everybody's mind is different and everybody's experience is different. Life is different so everybody's expression is different, so it goes differently every time with every moment and with every day. Even I would say if you were in a sad mood and you are singing something, some rāga that has a happy feeling that said feeling comes into that. So, they do this again a different creation and new creation and you are expressing your habit and your feeling when you are sad and when you are exhibiting this kind of feeling it is a different creation it is a different mood that you are giving to that rāga right (online interview, ZOOM platform, 15. 12. 2021).”

The balance between discipline and creative freedom in Indian classical music reflects the cultural values and artistic traditions of India. The structured framework of ascending and descending notes within a rāga provides a foundation for performers to explore their creativity and individuality. This disciplined approach is deeply rooted in the cultural aspects of Indian classical music, emphasising the importance of adhering to established rules and practises.

However, the freedom to create within this framework allows performers to express their unique experiences, emotions, and perspectives, resulting in a diverse range of interpretations. This interplay between discipline and freedom in Indian classical music demonstrates its adaptability and versatility, as it embraces a wide range of moods and emotions. This showcases the diverse nature of Indian classical music, where cultural practices and personal expression join to form a constantly evolving and multifaceted art form.

3.3.2. Teaching Hindustani classical music

The following statements showcase the approaches employed by Meenal Agnihotri to transmit the knowledge and wisdom of Indian classical music to her students. Additionally, the role of performances in a student's musical journey will be discussed, as well as the challenges and opportunities that arise from teaching Hindustani classical music. At first, Meenal Agnihotri was sharing how she approaches her students.

Agnihotri: “... first I think about how old they are. How much they will be able to understand The philosophy behind Indian classical music. And only then will I speak about it most of the time and will try to tell it in a form of stories. Like Maria and ... (her students) They are just 13 and 8, so mostly with them I tell them it is not just music that we are learning. And we are enhancing our total personality with music. So it is not just about your singing It is vibrating

your whole body, it is vibrating the chakras inside you. So mostly I tried to explain that there are two sounds. I give them basic knowledge but I am not explaining the total philosophy behind it because it would be very difficult. So sometimes I tell them this is going to change your personality. Just with your practise. I did this experiment once when I was in an Ashram and I asked them if they were feeling any different, and they said yes. So this is the magical thing. The sound Which you are creating resonates inside your body too. So it creates some kind of energy inside you too (online interview, ZOOM platform, 30. 12. 2021)."

Meenal Agnihotri's teaching methods reflect the cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Indian classical music. She adapts her teaching approach based on her students' age and understanding, using storytelling to convey the philosophy behind the music. This approach emphasises the holistic nature of Indian classical music, highlighting its potential to enhance one's overall personality and resonate with the body's energy.

This could mean that by providing her students with basic knowledge while not overwhelming them with the entire philosophy, Meenal allows them to gradually develop a deeper understanding of the art form as they progress in their musical journey. Since Meenal is also a performing artist, I was interested in her students and their experience with performances.

Gucká: *"(...) do your students have concerts as well?"*

Agnihotri: *"Yes. So after a few years of learning, if they are ready I would like them to go for a concert, but right now I don't have the kind of students that are ready, because most of my students learn for 5-6 years. Then they go for medical studies or they go for engineering studies. When it comes to taking music as a profession, there are very few people even though they are talented. Of course it is also due to the population of India that it is very difficult because being in the medical field or an engineer makes more money and therefore it is really certain that they will get some good money from this kind of job. But being an artist requires a lot of practice and a lot of devotion and a lot of time. And on top of that it is not confirmed that you will get money or not. And it is due to the population of India. That is the reason behind it. Even if you count all the Americans and Europeans the number will be a little lower than Indians. That has nothing to do with the people who are trying to pursue the musical profession. It is not due to music, it is due to the population (online interview, ZOOM platform, 30. 12. 2021)."*

This brings up the challenges faced by Meenal Agnihotri's students in pursuing Indian classical music as a profession. It can be attributed to the sociocultural context of India. The high population and competitive job market in the country make it difficult for aspiring musicians to prioritise their artistic passions over more financially stable career paths. The decision to pursue music as a profession requires significant dedication, practise, and time, with no guarantee of financial success.

3.3.3. The teacher and the Guru

Then the conversation revolved around the distinction between being a teacher and a guru in the context of Indian classical music. Meenal Agnihotri also opened up about her experience of teaching music both virtually and in-person.

Agnihotri: "...I don't consider myself as a guru because I need to reach that level I am still here."

Gucká: "I'm really curious how do you become a guru?"

Agnihotri: "I don't think that I will be a guru in this lifetime at least. (...) You need to have that knowledge. And then you can guide somebody and you can teach them. I am just a teacher, I am not a guru. I would need to require a lot of knowledge. (...) I am teaching but I am teaching as a teacher not as a guru. I need to have a lot of knowledge to do that so at least not in this lifetime I don't think that I will be a guru. And there are a lot of things that I need to learn for myself. (...) It is very difficult to learn all those things just in one lifetime (online interview, ZOOM platform, 30. 12. 2021)."

Meenal Agnihotri's statement that she does not consider herself a guru in this life reflects her humility and recognition of the immense knowledge and wisdom required to attain the status of a guru. According to Meenal Agnihotri, the journey towards becoming a guru is a lifelong process of learning, practice, and self-discovery. It involves not only mastering the technical aspects of the art form but also developing a profound understanding of its cultural, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions.

This highlights the importance of continuous learning and personal growth in the field of Indian classical music. The journey to becoming a Guru is not a linear path or an easily achievable goal, as indicated by Agnihotri. She continued with the distinction between a teacher and a guru.

Agnihotri: "...a guru is the person who gives wisdom. It is like the internet. See there is a lot of knowledge on Google but it cannot provide you with wisdom on how to use that knowledge. Where to use it and when is the right time. (...) So this wisdom is given by the guru. A Guru is not just a teacher. (...) You see, when we say about any person that she is my guru. It is so that they have the knowledge and mastery and wisdom to that particular discipline. So they are masters, they have knowledge and wisdom too. If I am using the word guru for my master is when she is teaching me music So she is not just teaching me the notes and the rāgas, but she will tell me how to sing this rāga. When to sing this rāga. How is it going to impact the psychology of the people? How Is it going to impact the psychology of my own self? And how is it changing my own physical body? How is it enhancing my physical body and my spirit? What are the philosophical aspects of singing this rāga? She will be telling me all those things and not just the notes. Like I said the meaning of nada It is not just a sound the meaning of guru is not just a teacher (online interview, ZOOM platform, 30. 12. 2021)."

In the statements above Meenal Agnihotri is explaining the concept of a guru in Indian classical music and that it goes beyond the role of a traditional teacher. A guru imparts wisdom, guiding their students in a holistic manner that encompasses not only the technical aspects of the art form but also its philosophical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

She uses the analogy of the Internet and Google in this text to highlight the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Although the Internet provides access to vast amounts of information, it cannot provide guidance and understanding. In the context of Indian classical music, a guru not only teaches the notes of rāgas but also instructs students on how to sing a rāga, when to sing it, and its impact on the psychology of both the performer and the audience.

Agnihotri: "I would say it is very important to listen to the style of Indian classical music Listening to too many classical Indian musical singers, even when you are listening on YouTube or record, there are different frequencies always. And frequencies transmitted through the microphone or speaker. When you are listening to the records of legendary people

it feels like there is something lacking. When you are listening face-to-face it is different (online interview, ZOOM platform, 30. 12. 2021)."

Indian classical music is deeply rooted in oral tradition, with knowledge and techniques passed down through generations of teachers and students. This emphasises the importance of active listening and immersion in music, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the nuances, emotions, and cultural expressions embedded within the performances.

The mention of different frequencies in recorded and live performances highlights the role of acoustics and auditory perception in shaping the listener's experience of Indian classical music. While recordings can provide access to many performances, they may not fully capture the subtle nuances, energy, and atmosphere of a live performance.

3.3.4. Meenal Agnihotri as an online music tutor

In this chapter, Meenal Agnihotri shared her reasons for and experiences with teaching Hindustani classical music online.

Agnihotri: "...I started teaching online before COVID-19 because of the difference in our distances. Because some students were in Boston some of them were in Florida... There is one student from Boston and one from Florida that they wanted to learn from me only. So few or my colleagues that are situated in America, they insisted that I will teach and that's why I started to teach online before COVID (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021)."

Meenal Agnihotri's decision to teach online long before COVID-19 was influenced by the geographical distance between her and her students, either non-resident Indians living in the diaspora or others being from the Czech Republic. This shows how technology has facilitated the transmission of cultural knowledge and music, allowing students to learn from teachers who might not be geographically accessible otherwise. Therefore, the first reason was the situation of transnationalism. Nevertheless, Meenal Agnihotri teaches online even some of those students who reside in Mumbai and who could actually study in person with her. Therefore, there was yet another equally important reason for teaching online.

Gucká:... but was there something about your family that they weren't excited about the male students?

Agnihotri: *“Yes, that was a problem and is a problem for every female singer. I just want to add to that that being a convention of family it is not very much appreciated that male students are accepted. Right it is not appreciated in an Indian conventional family. Even if there are so many conventional Indian families who accept all because most of the accompanists are male. So yes these kinds of difficulties are there (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).”*

The discussion about the challenges female singers face in accepting male tabla accompanists and male students due to conventional family norms showcases the influence of cultural and social factors. These expectations within Indian families can create barriers for female teachers and limit their opportunities to teach all students. But online teaching may offer an antidote to the challenges, as seen in the following, where Meenal Agnihotri shares her experiences and joy in teaching Indian classical music in this way.

Agnihotri: *“The process that I am experiencing with them in the last two years, even the teaching, makes me so happy. (...) Sometimes my students ask me about some theoretical parts of music. I love to talk about the topic. I have done the master degree so fortunately I have the answers to their questions. But sometimes it happens that I don't have an answer and in that case I have so many books that I can refer to help them like that and explain them something sometimes.*

These statements could display the role of a music teacher in transmitting cultural knowledge and fostering a passion for the art form in their students. In this text, Meenal's experiences as a teacher reveal the importance of continuous learning and the exchange of knowledge in the field of Indian classical music. Her use of books to supplement her knowledge demonstrates the value of diverse resources in the learning process.

Furthermore, this could illustrate how technology has impacted the way musical knowledge and practice are transmitted, making it more adaptable to modern needs and circumstances. It allowed Meenal to maintain a balance between her personal and professional life without friction or arguments at home. She then shared in depth the beginnings of her online teaching journey, which started in 2017.

Agnihotri: “...it was 2017 and few people like my Guru knew about it, about my conditions only a few people and my friends knew about all those things and so they started providing me with the students. This and whatever I'm doing is due to my friends only. All these musical friends and all this musical circle. So many people started to help me, because few of my close friends knew the conditions of my family and they knew that the support of my family was not there, and so they started giving me students so I could at least teach... They say if you are not able to go outside of Mumbai or outside of Maharashtra you can at least teach and so at least people will get to know you (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).“

She continued: “And one of my friends Aditya Kalyanpur at NESOM (New England School of Music in Boston, USA) started providing me with American students. I teach at that school as well. So, he gave me the first student and his partner Amit Kavthekar, we used to practise so many times when I used to learn from Kishori Tai. And so then he gave me another student from America and this is the way that it started. Then I went to perform in Bilaspur in India. So one Punjabi person was there who came for my concern and he gave me another student from Ireland. So yeah, that's how it started in 2017. At that time I used only Skype for teaching. I was only skyping, there was no Zoom and Google meet. Even if it was there I didn't know that something like that existed. I knew only Skype so I used to do skyping and I was teaching it on Skype (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021).“

Meenal Agnihotri's beginnings with online teaching in 2017 highlight the role of social networks and cultural support systems in the transmission of music. Despite facing personal challenges and limited opportunities for teaching in her local area, her friends and colleagues within the musical community played a crucial role in providing her with students and enabling her to start teaching online.

The use of Skype as the primary teaching platform in 2017 reflects the early stages of technology adoption in the teaching of Indian classical music. Although limited in comparison to later platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, Skype enabled Meenal to connect with students from various locations, including the United States and Ireland. This highlights the role of technology in facilitating the transmission of cultural knowledge and practises across borders, allowing for a more inclusive and diverse learning experience.

She adds: “(...) ...it was the start of teaching online and after COVID-19 even local students who were coming to my home started learning online. I was very fortunate that my students

never went anywhere they loved to learn from me. Since then students have been learning from me for 5 or 6 years already... (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021). ”

The shift to online teaching, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the adaptability and resilience of Meenal Agnihotri and the use of online platforms. The transition to online learning allowed local students, who initially attended in-person lessons at Meenal Agnihotri's home, to continue their musical education without disruption.

The fact that Meenal's students remained loyal to her as a teacher, even after transitioning to online learning and the dedication of her students, who have been learning from her for 5 or 6 years, speaks to the strength of the Guru-Student relationship in Indian classical music.

Agnihotri: “I think it is the happiest phase of my life because nobody [the students] needs to come home, therefore nobody is angry and I'm doing all my work and I am earning money. (...) I just wanted to say that this is a very happy time because no one is coming home and I'm still earning money so there is no friction or having arguments (online interview, ZOOM platform, 8. 12. 2021). “

In the statement above, Meenal stated that since her students are not coming to her house, her family is not angry with her. Despite the challenges of technological obstacles as well as time difference obstacles and physical distance, Meenal reflected on the benefits of such a type of music education for herself.

In conclusion, this chapter explored Meenal Agnihotri's life as a Hindustani classical music teacher, her teaching methods, her experiences with online teaching, and the challenges and opportunities encountered throughout her journey. The experience of Meenal Agnihotri in adapting to online teaching offers valuable insight into Indian classical music education. It emphasises the importance of social networks and technology in the transmission of Hindustani classical music, as well as social networks and support systems. In the context of Indian classical music education, it becomes clear that the art form is constantly adapting and that it can also illustrate the expression of human emotion and creativity.

3.4. Performing and teaching Classical Hindustani Music in the Czech Republic

This chapter presents reflections by Meenal Agnihotri, on her visit to the Czech Republic in April and May 2023. During her stay, she performed and gave lectures at various venues, including Charles University, the Academy of Performing Arts, and Punctum. In the interview, she shared her experiences and insights on Indian classical music, her interactions with Czech musicians and audiences, and the challenges she faced during her performances.

3.4.1. Coming to the Czech Republic

From the 29th of March till the 10th of May 2023, Meenal Agnihotri visited the Czech Republic, being invited by her friends and online students. It was her first trip to Europe. She formed new relationships with other musicians and artists and also gained insight into the Czech society and culture. During her visit, I observed her perform and teach. Afterwards, we conducted an interview, where she reflected on her journey, explaining how it had broadened her understanding of Indian classical music transmission in a transnational context.

Meenal Agnihotri's reflection on her stay in the Czech Republic highlights the cultural exchange that took place during her visit:

Gucká: *“What was the process behind your arrival here in the Czech Republic? Why did you come?”*

Agnihotri: *“Why I decided to come here is Veronika, (Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.) because she was learning from me as well as Zdeněk[1] Then I met Ajay[2] and talking to him was like talking to family, because we both have a Brahmin background. We can share similar things. And he suggested: If you are teaching Veronika...why are you not teaching the girls from the ashram? I said yes, I can teach them and so I started. So, all these people wanted me to come and meet me in person. And then we decided that if I am going there, let us find some people who would want me to hold lectures or concerts (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri notes that her decision to come to the Czech Republic was influenced by her relationships with ethnomusicologist Veronika Seidlová and others who were learning online from her. This reflects the importance of personal connections and relationships in

shaping cultural exchange and musical traditions. Additionally, her decision to teach Czech women related to a yoga ashram in the Czech Republic without any previous knowledge or experience in music highlights her inclusivity concerning her choice of students .

She added: “And so I had students here. The ashram is in the village of Hrobičany. It should be close to Hradec, I think. And so I was teaching these girls at an Ashram here in the Czech Republic when the lockdown started. And so I was teaching them online. And all of them wanted to meet me personally and invited me personally. So I decided to come and then we decided to organise some concerts if possible. If anyone is interested in that. Because by the time I didn't know that there was, there are some classical Indian music lovers here. So I got to know them while I was here (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”

Meenal notes that she had Czech students in an ashram in the Czech Republic and was teaching them online when the lockdown started. All of them wanted to meet her personally and invited her to come to Prague as well. However, the main responsibility of the invitation to the Czech Republic was taken by their Indian yoga teacher Ajay who comes from the same Indian state (Maharashtra) as well as caste as her, which she considered important in order to establish mutual trust. This further reflects the importance of personal connections and relationships, when it comes to cultural exchange.

3.4.2. Performing in the Czech Republic

Meenal Agnihotri's decision to organise concerts was influenced by her desire to share her music with others and connect with classical Indian music lovers in Prague, Hradec Králové, Liberec and Hrobičany. Finally, she performed in these three cities and one village as her students organised four concerts and three lectures. There were also other concerts and lectures planned in Prague and in Nitra, Slovakia, but those were cancelled at the last moment due to the local organisers' difficulties.

During her stay in Prague, Meenal Agnihotri performed in the Punctum club and gave two lectures at the Charles University and the School of Performing Arts. She also collaborated with musicians from Hradec Králové and Liberec and performed concerts with them. Additionally, she performed a concert at a yoga ashram in Hrobičany, where she was able to connect with the students she was teaching online.

Agnihotri: *“When I was here, I was performing at Charles University. I had a concert at Punctum. And I did a lecture at the Academy of Performing Arts. I met some people from Liberec in Hradec and I did concerts with them as well while I stayed here in the Czech Republic. (...) And also the concert at the ashram. So many people were there. All the students from the ashram were there, the ayurveda students, the yoga students (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

In the statement above Meenal described her short engagement on the local cultural scene, as she performed at different locations, and collaborated with local musicians from Liberec. Additionally, her performance at the ashram allowed her to connect with Czech students of ayurveda and yoga. She had the chance to share her music with a wider audience.

3.4.2. Concert in Punctum

Meenal Agnihotri had a concert at Punctum on Sunday, 23rd of April, 2023. She accompanied herself on *tānpūrā* and she was accompanied on tabla by ethnomusicologist and performer Tomáš Reindl. Punctum is a community open creative space project in Prague's Žižkov district that brings together people from various subcultures and backgrounds. In its public presentation, it is said that they collaborate with non-profit organisations, students, and individuals who promote the local alternative scene. Through their activities like concerts, workshops, discussions, theatre performances, author's readings, and yoga classes, they create new opportunities for collaboration and communication (Punctum, 2023). They also host regular music sessions of an informal group of mostly musicians interested in modal music, the ‘Monthly Modal Music Jams in Prague’, whose organisers Mikuláš Mrva and Silva Morasten took the responsibility of organising Meenal’s concert here (Meenal being recommended by ethnomusicologists Tomáš Reindl and Veronika Seidlová):

Gucká: *“How was it for you in the Punctum concert? I saw you talking to the people after the concert. How was it?”*

Agnihotri: *“So, there were so many questions from those people because they were mostly musicians. So they were constantly asking for something about maqam, about Iranian music. Because the last thing that I sang in Punctum was a kind of maqam. Rāga bhairavi, which is a similar style like in the Makam Iranian music. The music composition in them is kind of a similar thing. So he was asking about that (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

In this exchange, Meenal Agnihotri is reflecting on her experience performing at Punctum and the interactions between her and the audience after the concert. She notes that there were many musicians in the audience who were interested in her music and had questions about the relationship of the rāga to the maqam modal system and Persian music. Meenal's performance of Rāga bhairavi, which has structural similarities with one maqam in Persian music, sparked the audience's interest and led to a discussion about the similarities and differences between the two musical traditions. This shows that Meenal's performance could promote cross-cultural understanding and interest, as well as the importance of engaging with audiences and fostering dialogue about different traditions in music.

3.4.2.1. Tabla player Tomáš Reindl

Tabla is an integral part of Hindustani classical music, providing rhythmic accompaniment to vocal or instrumental performance. According to Kippen (2000, p. 118), *“The drummer's role is to mirror the soloist's rhythms with appropriately improvised patterns. A good accompanist will enhance the overall sensation of continuity and growth; an overzealous accompanist may dominate and distract.”*

Meenal Agnihotri recognises the importance of tabla in improving her singing and overall performance. During her visit to Prague in April 2023, Meenal had the opportunity to collaborate with Tomáš Reindl, who accompanied her during the concert in Punctum. He impressed her with his ability to maintain the tempo with the 16-beat cycle, which is a difficult task. Meenal acknowledged that the experience of singing tabla is unique to each player, with different players producing different sounds.

Agnihotri: *“Tomáš was playing so nice he was really perfect with the tabla. He is very good with maintaining the tempo with the 16 beat cycle, which is truly very difficult (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal believes that Tabla enhances her singing and overall performance and that the experience is unique to each tabla player.

Agnihotri: *“Yeah, so Tomáš was really good because playing that 16 beat cycle for 45 minutes is a big task. It is not easy and he is very good. But the singing is different, it produces a different sound w. With a different [tabla] player (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Tomáš Reindl is a Czech composer, multi-instrumentalist, tabla player, pedagogue and musicologist. He likes to cross genre barriers in his music, taking inspiration from old European and non-European musical traditions, in which music often has an ecstatic, trance-like dimension. He uses the possibilities of contemporary music technologies and also deals with micro-interval systems of natural tuning. He has a long-standing interest in Indian classical music and tabla playing. He teaches Ethnomusicology and other subjects at the Faculty of Music of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and is also a lecturer at various music workshops and seminars. He studied Applied Electronics at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen and pursued music from childhood: playing the clarinet, piano, and drums. He completed his Bachelor's and Master's studies in Composition at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts and in 2020 defended his dissertation on the topic of the Microtonality of Indian Classical Music (Wikipedia, 2022).

Since 1998, he has studied classical Indian music and played the tabla intensively. Through two study tours to India to Varanasi in 2001 and Kolkata in 2005, he had private lessons in music and tabla with Mata Prasad Mishra and Sandip Mallick. Since 2004, he has taken private tabla lessons even in London (Wikipedia, 2022).

If Meenal was very happy with Tomáš Reindl's accompaniment, then being accompanied by another Czech tabla player in Liberec, Meenal reflected on the difference between that man and her usual tabla accompanists from India. She then plays me a video of an Indian tabla player with whom she usually plays:

“With a different [tabla] player, the singing is different, it produces a different sound. The way that they are hitting it is different. The rhythm of their playing is also different. (...) And I don't mean it as a complaint about people. It is just that they [less experienced players] don't know the real sound (Agnihotri, in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”

In the statement above, Meenal Agnihotri reflected on the different ways that tabla players may approach playing the instrument. She noted that the way that each player hits the tabla and the rhythm of their playing can be different. Meenal points out that some players may not be fully aware of the "real sound" that the tabla is capable of producing. This reflection highlights her notion of the importance of understanding the nuances and complexities of

Hindustani classical music, including the role of rhythm and accompaniment in enhancing overall performance.

3.4.2.2. Tānpūrā

Gucká: *“I am also curious about the moment when the string broke during your performance. How did you feel?”*

Agnihotri: *“I felt so low, it is considered to be a bad omen for a musician, it could be breaking my singing. Some people say that it is a good omen. For example, when you are practising and during it the string breaks, then it can be good luck, but when it is happening during a performance, then it is bad luck. So, it was a very disturbing thing for me, maybe the heating there was the problem (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri reflected on a moment during her performance when a string broke on her tampura, (an accompanying string instrument traditionally used in Hindustani classical music), on which she accompanied herself. Although she immediately switched to the electronic tampura app on her ipad, she later reflected on her being stressed in this situation. She notes that this is considered to be a bad omen for a musician and could have potentially affected her singing. She also mentions that some people believe that a broken string during practice can be a good omen, but during a performance, it is seen as bad luck. Meenal speculates that the heating in the room may have been a factor in the string breaking, as the temperature increased when more people entered the room.

Additionally, she notes that feedback from the speaker could have also contributed to the string breaking. Overall, Meenal's reflection highlights the challenges and unexpected moments that arose during the performance and the importance of being prepared to adapt and overcome such challenges. Additionally, her reflection highlights the significance of cultural beliefs that have been present in musical performance practice.

3.4.2.3. Amplified Sound

Sound quality is a crucial aspect of any musical performance and Meenal Agnihotri reflected on the sound while performing at Punctum. She encountered some issues with the sound system that affected the natural sound that Meenal was aiming for.

Agnihotri: *“Because the sound is very important when you sing. For example, I also went to Liberec to have a concert during my stay here. This concert in Liberec was in church. So, the acoustics of the church were so good that I did not require any amplifier. (...) I felt very good singing there. And I got this inner satisfaction when I was singing there, which I did not feel when I was performing in Prague, Punctum, mainly because of the sound (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

In Agnihotri’s reflection, she notes that the sound quality can greatly affect her performance and the overall experience of the audience, thus the sound quality when she sings is important to her. She gives an example of a concert she had in Liberec, which was held in a church with excellent acoustics. Meenal did not require any amplification during this concert and felt a sense of inner satisfaction while singing. On the contrary, during her performance at Punctum in Prague, she did not feel the same level of satisfaction, mainly due to sound quality.

This reflection highlights her notion of the importance of sound quality in musical performances, particularly in Hindustani classical music where the nuances and subtleties of the music can be greatly affected by the sound. It also highlights the potential challenges that can arise when performing in different places with different acoustics and sound systems.

3.4.2.4. The audience

Meenal Agnihotri provided her reflection on the audience's behaviour during her performance in Punctum.

Gucká: *“What did you think about the audience? When you saw that some people were laying down on the floor.”*

Agnihotri: *“No, it's not normal in India. There are very strict rules regarding what is and what is not allowed during a performance of an artist. It shows respect for the artist. (...) They consider it as a meditation when they hear classical [Indian] music. Because it can be kind of slow. (...) But for the artist when he is representing those things. He is not meditating during the performance. When he is practising for himself or at home then it is a meditation in that case. But when he or she is presenting their art then it is not meditation because he always knows what he is going to sing or what he is going to present. And he is always completely aware of his surroundings (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri's reflection on the audience's behaviour during her performance emphasises the importance of understanding cultural norms and expectations in musical performance. She notes that in India there are strict rules regarding what is and what is not allowed during a performance, and that this shows respect towards the artist. The audience's behaviour of laying down on the floor during the performance was not normal in India, but it reflects their interpretation of the music as a form of meditation. Meenal notes that while the music can be slow and meditative, the artist is not meditating during the performance. Rather, the artist is fully aware of their surroundings and is presenting their art with intention and awareness. Meenal's reflection demonstrates the importance of studying music as a cultural practice, where music is seen as a reflection of the social and cultural context in which it is performed. She then again reflected on the audience and added:

“The people who are actually listening, I appreciate them a lot because even though they don't understand the language and better understand the context there, listen carefully. So I really appreciate it. I truly appreciate all of them. It's hard to perceive that thing. It is very important and I truly appreciate them. You know, if you know a little bit of language it is easier, but if you don't completely know anything, it's a completely different culture and different music. And different styles of representation (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”

Meenal Agnihotri is reflecting on the appreciation she has found for the audience that listens to her music. She notes that it can be difficult to fully perceive and appreciate a different culture and style of music, but she still appreciates the effort the audience puts into listening carefully. Additionally, she acknowledges that having some knowledge of the language and cultural context can make it easier to understand the music, but even without that knowledge, the audience's effort to listen and appreciate the music is important.

Agnihotri: “But also seeing them lying down and appreciating my concert as a meditation music was strange to say the least. I think maybe they [the audience] saw it as a meditation, but whenever an artist is performing like that, it is not the meditation for them. The artist expects to be appreciated for every new composition. Because every moment should be appreciated because it is different and unique (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”

The statements above of Meenal Agnihotri's reflection on the audience's behaviour during her concert in Punctum showcased the potential differences in the way that different cultures perceive and appreciate music. She notes that while some members of the audience were lying

down and treating her music as a form of meditation, this was not necessarily the intention behind her performance.

This reflection pointed out the importance of understanding the cultural context in which music is performed, because, in some cultures, music may be seen as a form of meditation or relaxation, while in others it may be appreciated for its artistic and creative qualities. There was potential during that concert in Punctum for misunderstandings and misinterpretations of different cultural perspectives on appreciating musical performance.

Meenal Agnihotri shared how listeners can demonstrate appreciation while attending a Hindustani classical music concert.

Gucká: *“How can the audience show the artist their appreciation?”*

Agnihotri: *“Just by being present. By having their eyes open when listening. When they're listening to a concert, they just want a peaceful experience. They just wanted to lay down and experience it and maybe that was the way to show their appreciation. Maybe they were closing their eyes and laying down and experiencing the music in their body. And we cannot say that it is wrong, but it is different. So this is how my experience went (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri is reflecting on the different ways that audiences may experience and appreciate music. She notes that some members of the audience during her concert in Punctum were lying down and closing their eyes, which may have been a way for them to experience the music in their body and have a peaceful experience. Meenal acknowledges that this is a different way of experiencing music than what she may be used to, but in the end, she does not judge it as wrong. In her reflection, she acknowledged the importance of recognizing and respecting different cultural perspectives on music and performance.

3.4.3. University Lectures

Meenal Agnihotri reflects on her experience of giving two lectures at Czech universities in addition to teaching her regular Czech students (this time *in-situ*). She had one lecture within

an ethnomusicology course by Doc. Zuzana Jurková at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University and another one in an ethnomusicology course by Dr. Tomáš Reindl at the Music and Dance Faculty of The Academy of Performing Arts.

Gucká: *“How was it to have lectures at Czech universities?”*

Agnihotri: *“Yes, it was fantastic. I was so amazed with all the students who were listening so quietly. Initially, they were looking sluggish, not really engaged. But when they started listening, their posture changed and I was aware of one of the guys who was really reluctant to listen to me but he slowly started to sit more upright when I was singing. And in the end he was the one asking the questions. So I was amazed. And I saw that they really, truly wanted to learn. I think this is the best thing about Czech people that you are really eager to know (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri shared how it was for her to give lectures at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, and at the Music and Dance Faculty of The Academy of Performing Arts. Her observations of the student's initial disengagement and eventual eagerness to learn highlighted her notion of the potential of cultural exchange like this one.

Agnihotri: *“So I enjoy teaching. I enjoyed performing at the university. It is where my passion lies. Once your passion is your work. And when your passion gives you bread and butter, it is much more satisfying, and nothing is like that. It gives me the pleasure to be appreciated. When I feel appreciated and accepted it is a universal thing to feel this way and it is perfect. It is everything when my passion is taking care of my daily duties and I feel very much accepted and loved. It was a very good experience, that people were eager to know how Classical Indian music is done. And I really appreciated them, even though they don't know the language. And even if they do not understand it. They were very interested in listening there and really wanted to listen. They want to learn. Not everybody is like that (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri's statement reflects the significance of passion and appreciation in the practice and study of music. She notes that her passion for teaching and performing Indian classical music is what drives her work and gives her a sense of satisfaction. Additionally, she highlights the observation that not everyone is eager to learn or appreciate Indian classical

music and it can reflect the challenges of promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for diverse musical traditions.

In conclusion, Meenal Agnihotri's reflections on her visit to Prague in April 2023 highlight the importance of cultural exchange and understanding in the study and practice of music. Her observations of the perception of Indian classical music in the Czech Republic hinted at the need to preserve the authenticity of musical traditions and educate people on the nuances and complexities of diverse musical traditions that Hindustani music carries. Additionally, Meenal's experiences teaching and performing at Czech universities and collaborating with local musicians demonstrated the potential for mutual understanding regarding Indian classical music.

Through her interactions with Czech musicians and audiences, Meenal gained insight into Czech culture and its impact on the perception of Indian classical music. Based on her statements, her experiences in Prague made her feel amazed and grateful for the opportunity to share her music and knowledge with others. She was impressed by the eagerness of the Czech people to learn about Indian classical music and the cultural exchange that took place during the visit. Despite facing challenges during her performances, such as the broken string on her tampura, Meenal's visit to Prague seemed to allow her to connect with others through music and promote cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

3.4.4. Perception of her journey in relation to Classical Hindustani vocal music practice

Meenal Agnihotri's reflection on her stay in the Czech Republic highlights the cultural exchange that took place during her visit:

Gucká: *“How did your stay [in the Czech Republic] go?”*

Agnihotri: *“It [the stay] was very nice. It was a lot about learning and knowing or noticing rather few facts about the classical Indian musical perception. I learned what the perception of Indian classical music is, or what the Europeans think the classical music is. So, my stay here was mostly about learning and it was a very nice experience to get along with those other musicians. With jamming sessions and concerts. It was very nice to collaborate with the other musicians here. It was, of course, nice, but I do actually have some perspectives to look up on (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

She notes that her stay was mostly about learning and understanding the perception of Indian classical music in Europe:

Agnihotri: "I learned a few things that people think about Indian classical music here or whether they are considering it Indian music. (...) They are not receiving the pure form of Indian classical music. (...) People are probably making money from it. But they are not giving the knowledge. Which they need to give to the students. Because in this way it spoils classical music (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023)."

Meenal Agnihotri's reflection on the perception of Indian classical music in Europe highlights her own understanding of music, which is based on the ideas about purity and authenticity in music. She notes that people in Europe may not be receiving the pure form of Indian classical music and that this could be due to a lack of knowledge and understanding among teachers and students. Through her observations, Meenal recognises the importance of preserving the authenticity of Indian classical music and the need to educate people about the nuances and complexities of the tradition. Her reflection also highlights the potential impact of commercialization on musical traditions and her notion of the importance of considering the social and economic factors that shape musical practices.

Meenal shared a conversation she had with her friend, discussing her current situation visiting Prague. She expressed in the chat that she doesn't want to leave Prague yet, despite the weather being less pleasant. But she missed the food and music of Mumbai, especially the high standards of music she was used to. In Mumbai, she had the pressure to be perfect and great, whereas here there was no such pressure and she actually missed it:

Agnihotri: "When there is nobody here learning like that, you are always perfect among them. But when there are so many learners and people are very competitive, you need to keep yourself very updated and very much to the point with the sound. And I was missing that here (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023)."

In this statement, Meenal Agnihotri is reflecting on the challenges of teaching and performing in a competitive environment. She notes that when there are many learners and people are very competitive, it is important to keep oneself updated and to the point with the sound.

Agnihotri: *“Everybody was saying you sing so good but I don't think so. It wasn't so good actually. I felt like my lungs were not supporting me. And so this is what I felt performing here. (...) It wasn't so much about my voice. I think my voice was good, but. I was a little cold and there were so many changes surrounding my stay here that were affecting my health (in person interview, Prague, 9. 5. 2023).”*

Meenal Agnihotri shared that despite receiving compliments on her singing, she personally did not feel that it was as good as it could have been. Meenal attributes this to her physical health, noting that she was feeling a little cold and that there were many changes surrounding her stay in Prague that were affecting her health. This statement highlights her notion of the importance of physical health and well-being for a vocal artist.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I offered an ethnomusicological perspective on the transmission of classical Indian music through the experiences of vocalist Meenal Agnihotri. I tried to describe, analyse and interpret her experiences and portray her life journey of pursuing Classical Hindustani music based on her reflections. Through biographical narrative and semi-structured interviews, I was able to learn more about what it is like to be a female Hindustani vocalist in the 21st century. In addition, I also tried to explore the role of technology in the transmission of Hindustani classical music.

The thesis is theoretically grounded in ethnomusicology (i.e. Rice, 2014; Jurková et al., 2013) and theory of transnationalism (i.e. Kearney, 1995; Quayson & Daswani, 2013). The core elements of Hindustani classical vocal music (i.e. Sykes, 2017; Wade in Arnold et al., 2000; Kippen in Arnold et al., 2000), have been explored, providing a deeper understanding of Hindustani classical music, the master-disciple tradition, the position of women in it as well as the current influences of transnationalism.

The methodology of the thesis has highlighted the importance of individual musicians in musical ethnography and their role in shaping narrative structures. The research questions have been addressed through the use of various data collection methods. However, in this text, I present data mostly from seven narrative and semi-structured interviews with Meenal Agnihotri that were conducted in the years 2021 and 2023. The interviews were held in

person and online with the use of ZOOM and Google Meet platforms. The interviews were challenging due to the time differences of EST and IST time zones and technology, as well as language barriers, and cultural differences.

In Chapter 3.1. I tried to show what cultural and social conditions influenced Meenal Agnihotri in her journey to music performance and education and how she reflected on them. In sub-chapter 3.1.1 I describe Meenal Agnihotri's beginnings of music learning as a child. Meenal Agnihotri comes from the city of Nagpur, in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Her late father was a bank manager in Nagpur and he held a prominent position in their community of Deshastha Brahmins (upper-caste Hindus). His social position and his support were crucial to her start of music learning. As an upper-caste Hindu female musician, Agnihotri's experiences offer a perspective on the privileges and challenges that she faced in pursuing her passion for music. Although she was privileged in her background, her father's sudden passing posed challenges to her widowed mother with four daughters. Such as financial challenges that were the reason for Meenal's break in learning music as seen in sub-chapter 3.1.2. and 3.1.3.

In the sub-chapter 3.1.4., it is shown that Meenal was influenced by numerous personal encounters with famous music personalities and gurus, like Bhimsen Joshi, Usha Parkhi and Kishori Amonkar, to name the most influential to her. While pursuing her university education, first in science and then in music, Meenal understood her encounter with Bhimsen Joshi in the subchapter 3.1.5. to be a significant moment in her journey, as he offered her to be her guru. I claim that Meenal's decision to decline his offer had additional reasons in financial, geographical, and gender background.

This was not the last time such reasons crossed her path in her journey of pursuing classical Hindustani music. As described in Sub-Chapter 3.1.7., that reflected on the challenges surrounding her experience of pursuing Hindustani tradition under the guidance of guru Kishori Amonkar. Their master-student relationship in master-disciple tradition revealed how Kishori Amonkar was both caring and demanding in her guidance and that Meenal Agnihotri could not continue learning from her due to non-musical reasons. As also reflected in sub-chapter 3.1.9., although Agnihotri had a marriage arranged by her family to a groom who agreed to support her in her music career and who was accepted by her also because he was thought to live in her guru's proximity, Agnihotri as a married woman couldn't handle her guru's demands and chose to dedicate herself to her family instead, and as a result lost

connection to Amonkar. In the sub-chapter 3.1.7., their caste difference is also mentioned through non-Brahmin dietary demands placed on Agnihotri by Amonkar, which Agnihotri eventually accepted in order to show commitment and trust to her guru, coming from the lower caste of Kalavants. Meenal Agnihotri did not further reflect on the caste hierarchy and the distribution of power, as she was not facing the same struggles as Kishori Amonkar or other Kalavant artists in this aspect. On the other hand, she admired Amonkar's resistance towards gender stereotypes in the music field. Sub-chapter 3.3.1. shows that they also shared the same view on the purpose of Hindustani music.

After Meenal focused solely on her family for 12 years and practised only in private, she re-emerged onto the public performance scene in 2012. She remains a strong advocate for the traditional Guru Shishya Parampara way of learning and teaching Hindustani music, but for various reasons in chapter 3.3, Meenal innovated this way of learning and teaching by incorporating such educational techniques as online learning. In other parts of the world, such as India, online music education was occurring already a few years before the COVID-19 pandemic.. A sub-chapter 3.3.4., Meenal Agnihotri shared how Hindustani classical music is taught online and why from her perspective, thereby uncovering a more complex interplay of social concepts such as transnationalism, gender, religion and class. Indian music gurus started teaching via Skype service (launched in 2003) because of the needs of Indians in the diaspora, as mentioned e.g. by ethnomusicologists Manuel and Fludd (2020, p. 89). The case study of the Internet Guru by Nasir Syed, argues that the traditional position of the Guru and the master's education is changing from an on-line perspective transmission. Meenal Agnihotri and Nasir Syed view the potential of online teaching and learning as a supplement or replacement to traditional teaching. Nevertheless, Agnihotri's story reveals an additional reason for such a form of teaching: the tension in reproducing societal norms for Meenal as an upper-caste married woman, whose family did not approve of her teaching male students in her home (the traditional venue for master-disciple relationship).

The thesis also explored Agnihotri's reflections on her music practice, which reaches as far as the USA and the Czech Republic due to her online teaching and culminated in her music performances in Prague and other Czech cities in 2023. In Chapter 3.4 Meenal Agnihotri reflected on her visit to Prague in April 2023. During her stay, she performed and gave lectures at various venues, including Charles University, the Academy of Performing Arts, and Punctum. This chapter highlighted cultural exchange and experiences of sharing

Hindustani music from different cultural backgrounds. Meenal stated that she came to visit her students in Prague, Hradec Králové and Hrobičany, whom she was teaching online. In Chapter 3.4. I showed her reflections of performances including the challenges she faced and the reasons why she came to the Czech Republic. Meenal's final reflections on the perception of Indian classical music in Europe highlight her understanding of music, which is based on the culturally relative ideas about purity and authenticity in music.

Overall, based on the data presented in this thesis, I attempted to tell a story about a complex and challenging journey of a particular individual pursuing a career in music (both performance and teaching) in a particular music culture. I tried to portray Meenal Agnihotri's life journey of pursuing Hindustani classical music based on her reflections and provide insights into the world of current Hindustani classical music performing and (online) teaching in a transnational context. I hope that this thesis uncovered a more complex interplay of social concepts such as transnationalism, gender, religion, and class. And I hope that this study will inspire further research in this area and encourage a deeper appreciation of the role of individual musicians in musical ethnography and learning about non-European musical cultures.

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