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[Swarn Lata, Teacher and founder of Sitar Darpan School of Music, is no quitter](#)

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“Our *Sanskriti*, our culture, maybe Pakistan or India, has the same values..they don’t allow their children to have sex or dating..change is the name of life, but there should be beautiful changes and valued changes. Not that when you switch on your TV, vulgar things are coming and children who are alone at home, they will learn all those things..When my daughters were young, I used to teach them..it was a Sanskrit teaching. They were told how to do the *havans*..vedic culture..We have to teach our children some values, respect for elders.”

“I applied to Calgary University, Saskatoon University, UofT, York University but I received letters ‘there is no vacancy for ‘sitar’ position available here. I followed up for few years but only got disappointed..‘If you play guitar or violin then you can have a position,’ I was told. It was very stressful for me as any other immigrant to a new country trying to make the two ends meet but I tried my best to take any job so that I can survive with pride.”

“I couldn’t take it anymore... because they wanted a son from me. I had two daughters and it was not in my hands,” she goes on all the other physical and emotional abuse she had to go through day in and day out. Her extraordinary education and career could not overcome the cultural barriers most South Asian women face.

“In 2001 there weren’t a lot of such programs and also as a new immigrant you don’t get to know ‘everything’ right on day one or even first two years! One is just busy doing tons of other things! finding home, jobs – your dream job or survival job in the meantime, catching up with new environment, people, culture, reading the city map, volunteering at the right places, finding them first – to get the famous ‘Canadian Experience’!” she says.

With the growth of the South Asian community in the Greater Toronto Area and its desire to stay in touch with its roots, the music schools have spawned in the GTA. However there are very few of these music schools that are run by highly professional people who really have academic knowledge and understanding of the *swaras*. Their music is not about notes only but also about spirituality that is instrumental in any good music.

One such school is ‘Sitar Darpan School of Music’. The School is in a small Toronto condominium that puts you in the mood to slow down from busy election campaign like life, and to breathe and take in all there is to good music and spirituality that inspires it.

In just few weeks, the school has gained the reputation of having a teacher who takes her skills and profession very seriously. The students of the school are equally committed to learning sitar and *sa re ga ma pa*.

With M.A., B.Ed. and Ph.D. in Instrumental Music Sitar from Punjab University, Chandigarh, India and recognition from Canadian universities such as University of Saskatoon and University of Toronto, Dr. Swarn Lata, the founder/owner of the school, has years of experience in teaching sitar as lecturer in different government schools in her hometown, Chandigarh. Her years of experience in teaching in Indian schools also make her a strict disciplinarian. “In India, students are very respectful of teachers and teachers are believed to be the shadows of God”, says Dr. Lata. No wonder Dr. Lata believes that Indian education system is better than Canadian in many ways.

And she had credentials to support her claim. With more than 4,000 students and 110 teachers working under Dr. Lata , Principal of a Government Senior Secondary School from 2000-2001, she also remained

the State Coordinator of the Population and Development Education Project at the State Institute of Education, Chandigarh in 1997-2000. At the institution, she was the Chairperson of the Advisory Committee responsible for the development of education and quality life in Chandigarh. "The Governor of Chandigarh was one of the five highly qualified committee members", says Dr. Lata.

Single mom of two daughters, Dr. Lata has had her share of hardships in life. "Yes, of course," she responds promptly, when we asked her if sadness of her life has indeed had an impact on her life. She was in an abusive relationship in marriage for fifteen years in spite of being a very well respected teacher and Principal in various schools in Chandigarh, India. "No one had ever heard a word like 'divorce' in my own parent's family or any of our ancestors," she says. The situation was even more difficult as she is the mother of two daughters in a still very conservative Indian society in most parts of India.

"I couldn't take it anymore... because they wanted a son from me. I had two daughters and it was not in my hands," she goes on all the other physical and emotional abuse she had to go through day in and day out. Her extraordinary education and career could not overcome the cultural barriers most South Asian women face.

While Dr. Lata avoids delving too much into her past life, overwhelming emotions of pain take over.

What's remarkable though is that she has taken her sorrow with typical Indian patience and devotion, something lacking in young South Asian women of 21st century.

During sour moments of life, music was a relief for her as it is for many of us.

And she is no 'quitter'. She decided to leave the city along with daughters, after her ex-husband got remarried in the same town and she applied for Canadian immigration to come closer to her parents and brothers, then settled in Saskatoon, Canada. "The immigration process took years and by then my parents and brother had moved to New York. So once I got a call from the immigration office and got selected in the independent category, Toronto was my pick to go and start a new life".

But once she was in Canada, she had her share of typical immigrant experience where her qualifications and professional experience as sitar player, sitar teacher or state coordinator for state-wide education projects couldn't get her the new start in a 'strangers land – Toronto'. "I applied to Calgary University, Saskatoon University, UofT, York University but I received letters "there is no vacancy for 'sitar' position available here. I followed up for few years but only got disappointed.. 'If you play guitar or violin then you can have a position,' I was told. It was very stressful for me as any other immigrant to a new country trying to make the two ends meet but I tried my best to take any job so that I can survive with pride," she tells us.

\$20,000 she had brought from India after selling her property and assets were "just gone within months." Stressed out, Dr. Lata utilized her knowledge of English, Punjabi and Hindi at the interpreter and translation services agency. Although she never got a positive response for all her letters requesting for a position, part-time or full-time, as a sitar teacher in any Universities in and around Toronto, she took on this new gig in life as a translator and interpreter – going and helping new immigrants/elderly who don't know the language, tell their health issues in clinics/hospitals, explain themselves to lawyers in courts or explain their financially sad situations to social service workers visiting them at their homes etc.

But an educationist at heart, how long could she stay away from students!

So she tried for schools, if not her 'dream workplace – College/University' and wore another hat, this

time as an emergency supply teacher for Toronto District School Board. after completing her Teaching of English as Second Language (TESL) course in 2004.

Qualified immigrant's face the biggest challenge – foreign credential recognition. Dr. Lata's story is the live example.

“I applied to Ontario College of Teachers. As soon as I arrived in Canada in 2001, I paid \$416 for the registration only. But they said we need all your certificates directly mailed to us from Punjab University, Chandigarh. The documents came but one of the documents was not stamped by the assigned/required authority in Chandigarh, and they [Ontario College of Teachers] said we won't accept it like that,” said Dr. Lata. The mailing of the documents etc. took about 6 months and the rules changed in those 6 months! So now they also needed another document. So by the time I get that documents mailed from India, I thought the rules could again change and I was spending money every time on new documents here, filling in the new application. It's not easy to get the documents mailed directly from India when you are not there!...it was just frustrating,” she explains.

There are a number of programs introduced by the federal, provincial and municipal governments to help new immigrants and new Canadians, but unfortunately very few people are aware of these programs or know what steps to take. Dr. Lata was one of those individuals.

“In 2001 there weren't a lot of such programs and also as a new immigrant you don't get to know 'everything' right on day one or even first two years! One is just busy doing tons of other things! finding home, jobs – your dream job or survival job in the meantime, catching up with new environment, people, culture, reading the city map, volunteering at the right places, finding them first – to get the famous 'Canadian Experience'!” she says.

Swarn Lata ji took a job as a Project Coordinator and then Settlement Counselor at a Social Service Organization in Toronto. However her superior wanted her to share 'confidential information of a client' with a publication. Dr. Lata refused to do so. Following the Canadian law that asks her NOT to share the confidential information of clients who come to her for services/help at the social service organization, put her job in a jeopardy, whereby her superior started mistreating and insulting her in front of clients/staff on daily basis.

Eventually, it started taking toll on her health and she resigned from the organization in 2009. But why didn't she complain to authorities?

Dr. Lata puts it very simply “I don't like confrontations...so moved on...and having gone through a rough divorce proceeding in the courts for years...I don't think I ever wanted to visit a court again to fight a case for 'myself'.” Traditionally women from South Asia are shielded from visits to police stations or the courts.

When Canada was about to lose this amazing talent, courses offered by Toronto Business Development Centre came to rescue.

“They were telling us all the strategies, how to run the business, who to contact, how to make your clients, market yourself and connect with media, and all that stuff. I learned so many things from them; I got graduated on Feb 10, 2011! She proudly displays her certificate in her sitar room. Dr. Lata has performed at various venues in India during her college and University life (state level youth festivals etc.), besides giving lecture concert series in New York, Saskatoon, Calgary, Vancouver, Hamilton -McMaster and York University in Toronto; given performance on television shows, such as TV Asia, provided

background music to television programs in India and has been interviewed on various other radio stations including Hamilton and Toronto.

Employment Resource Centre had referred her to check this program and fill the appropriate forms and present the selection committee with a viable business idea/proposal. If they approve, the candidate is selected for the training/course. The course helped her to launch her business plan, that was obviously, her dream! – sitar school. That's how Sitar Darpan School of Music was born. She wrote the business plan on her own using 'computer skills' which she thinks were the 'least' in the class.

"I think new generation is so advanced in technology that I rated myself in kindergarten in front of them! It was a big challenge for me, and every time my computer was just having a virus or something. I was freaking out writing my assignments sometimes till 2a.m..but it was worth the time and effort when I got good remarks from my panelists on the final day of our presentations," she says.

Her daughters could have helped her write a business plan. They would have been happy to do it for their mother, "but I wanted to do it myself."

To her, South Asian culture is "Our *Sanskriti*, Pakistan and India, have the same cultural values... we were one country. Although change is the name of life, but there should be beautiful changes and valuable changes. Not that when you switch on your TV, vulgar things are coming or when children who are alone at home, you are afraid they may switch on television/go internet and get into trouble because there is no limit to information of all sorts, streaming on these gadgets all the time... When my daughters were young, their morning school prayers used to be vedic, Sanskrit shlokas...they learned how to do *havans*...appreciate their vedic traditions and culture..."

When a teacher has these values, it's hard for her not to pass them on to her students. One of her students was certainly appreciative of the fact that she takes time to teach her notes "so patiently" and "always weaves her sitar lessons into some interesting stories/examples to make it easier for a student to understand both the language and the Indian culture at the same time!"

Dr. Lata is also second level Reiki master so no wonder her music is 'healing' to anyone learning or listening to it.

To find more about school, request workshops, lecture series, classes log on to www.sitardarpan.com.

Dr. Swarn Lata can also be reached at 416-857-4061. Her email is latasitar@yahoo.ca.



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