

# Reimagining *Rāmāyaṇa*

A podcast going behind the scenes of 'Laṭitam Varṇṇam Asuram' – Nakul Krishnamurthy and Nrithya Pillai's collaboration for Counterflows At Home.

Featuring:

**NAKUL KRISHNAMURTHY** – composer and musician

**NRITHYA PILLAI** – dancer and activist

**DAVESH SONEJI** – Associate Professor of South Asian Studies, University of Pennsylvania

**PUSHPAVATHY** – musician, singer, teacher

**MRUDULA DEVI S.** – Dalit activist, poet, journalist, Editorial Board member of Patabhedam magazine

Podcast producer: **STEVE URQUHART** (<https://www.listentosteve.com>)

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## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

0'00"

**MUSIC: 'Laṭitam Varṇṇam Asuram'**

NAKUL: I guess, it starts with this question of – how do I do this? I am really scared about this piece in a way, but that is what makes it so exciting and interesting to me. How do I...? It's very challenging!

NRITHYA: This is certainly something that's very challenging for me. And, I am scared, and I am nervous about it...

DAVESH: Why are you doing this? To what end are you doing this? And ultimately, to whose benefit are you doing this?

DAVESH: It's important in a project like this, that we're all very clear on what exactly the politics are here.

NAKUL: I have to be really aware of my privilege. I have to be really aware of my position here, I have to be really careful about what kind of politics I am talking about.

NRITHYA: I started questioning the institutional casteist exclusion and class-based exclusion in these so-called Classical art forms.

NAKUL: Me coming from a Brahmanical background, and she comes from the marginalised community, so how do we work those politics out? It is me setting the tune to which she is dancing, which is very problematic! (laughs)

DAVESH: This is clearly a project of dissent.

NRITHYA: Protest is very important. To protest and to question authority, and to create art that questions authority – there can be no art without politics.

NAKUL: Please, speak up, attack me and challenge me, and make sure that I am corrected when I do something wrong. There's a lot to learn, for me.

2'25"

### **MUSIC: Nakul Krishnamurthy – Anudhatthamudhatthassvaritham**

NAKUL: Uh – yeah, I should start with my name – my name is Nakul Krishnamurthy. I am a musician who works primarily with Indian Classical music, especially South Indian Classical music, that's Carnatic music and, uh, explore new ways of performing them and presenting them, by drawing from other musical traditions, like the North Indian Classical music, quite a lot from Western Classical music in terms of my approach to composition. I also draw a lot from electronic music tradition, uh, use a bit of electronic music making techniques in the way I make my music. That's – yeah, that's what I am.

**MUSIC UP**

NAKUL: I'm also interested in – not just in the music, but the politics surrounding it. So that becomes very important part of my music. And when it comes to Carnatic music, there is quite a lot of issues to talk about. And that is something that I'm planning to explore through this project for Counterflows.

**MUSIC:**

**Best Of Dr.M. Balamuralikrishna vol 1 – Classical Ragaas**

**NANNU BROVA / Ragam: Abhogi / Thalam: Adi / 2015 Aditya Music India Pvt. Ltd.**

4'00"

NAKUL: Carnatic music is – India has like two main Classical forms of music, one is the North Indian Classical music, which is called Hindustani, which is probably more popular because of Ravi Shankar here, but Carnatic is the Classical music of the South of India. Both have the same roots, but Hindustani is more influenced by Persian music due to our history of movement from Persia to India. So we have two forms now – one is the Hindustani North, and, the Carnatic South. I come from the Carnatic, the South tradition, I've studied that quite a lot. And then from there I learned a bit of the North Indian music tradition. So I come from the South, use a bit of the North.

**NANNU BROVA fades out here**

4'50"

NAKUL: It is very difficult to say what this project is because I myself do not know what shape it is going to take at the end of it, but this project is gonna involve a piece, borrowed from – I've not decided which Epic or which story it's going to come from, but I'm going to take an excerpt from a piece in this art form called *Kathakali*, a temple art form in Kerala, and work with it and create a musical interpretation from a Carnatic music perspective. But – it's rooted in Carnatic, but it's at the intersection of ... there's gonna be a lot of Hindustani influences there. I'm gonna be using a lot of electronic music making techniques and, just gonna see what comes out of it. And, this lyric I'm going to take, it's going to be choreographed by a dancer. I do not know how they want to do it – I want to see what the dancer thinks and probably have the dancer dictate how it goes. Er... I should have approached the dancer last week,

ideally! (laughs) Uh, but I should be doing it very, very soon. Uh, and I will be doing it very soon, hopefully! (laughs)

6'00"

### **MUSIC: Nrithya Pillai teaching**

NRITHYA: My name is Nrithya – I go by the full name Nrithya Pillai. That also involves politics, my using my surname, which is a caste surname! Uh, so I come from a marginalised, courtesan caste community that initially was the original practitioners of what today we call, is the Classical dance form called *Bharathanaṭyam*.

### **MUSIC UP**

I perform this art form, through this continuous process that has happened through in my family, where it's been passed on from generation to generation.

### **MUSIC: Nrithya dancing to her grandfather singing Padari varugudhu -Kambodhi -Aadhi Thalam**

NRITHYA: My grandfather was a teacher to present day *Bharathanaṭyam* dancers, many of whom are famous and many of whom are acknowledged as Classical dancers. But I clearly knew and felt how I was treated differently. Right from when I was younger. So, I knew that I couldn't be them. And that's where the questioning began. And there was quite a lot of oppression, both from within the family and from outside, where I could never be them. I could never do what they could. I could never dance. I could never have a traditional debut performance like everyone else did. While my grandfather was conducting these debut performances for others, I wasn't allowed to have the same. I wasn't allowed to get new costumes or jewellery, or these were not affordable to me. Whereas people learning from my own family members were able to afford it and were able to access it. And my access was denied, to a certain extent. And this was the reason that I started questioning within the family as to why this was happening, why they were treating me differently. And it slowly has become a questioning of the institutional way that there is casteist exclusion and class-based exclusion in these so-called Classical art forms, where some people are never allowed access.

8'42"

**MUSIC: Palinchu Kamakashi - T M Krishna (Full Verson)**

NAKUL: I think music comes to me as a part of the privileges that I have enjoyed as a Brahmin, being born into a Brahmin family. Brahmin families are traditionally associated with art and a lot of things, but art is a major part of the culture, of the Tamil Brahmin culture. And because of that, it was not even my choice to learn Carnatic music. My parents and my grandparents wanted me to learn Carnatic music. Kind of, like, not very usual for the place that I come from, where men, boys sing, or men sing – it was mainly a woman's domain to sing. It was kind of weird for me, in that sense... I didn't really enjoy it as much when I was growing up, but at some point I realised, after I stopped studying Carnatic music – I stopped for a while, I took a break. And that's when I realised that I kind of like it, in certain ways. So I went back to it much later.

**Palinchu Kamakashi – fades**

9'58"

NAKUL: For me, when I was commissioned to do this project, it was important for me to have a voice that was much stronger than mine, much more deserving than mine, to be on the same platform. Nrithya is from Chennai, this is very interesting because when I lived in Chennai, we actually have lived probably a 10-minute walk from each other, but we never knew about each other! And, she is a wonderful dancer, she runs a dance school there.

**PHONE CALL ATMOS fades in**

NAKUL: I spoke to Nrithya, and I told her briefly, for the first 20 minutes, I was trying to explain, somehow convince her that – I'm trying to do something here. And I really hope that there is something in it, and you also see that. Initially, for the first 20 minutes I was talking to her, I did not know which way it was going to go, but, around 20 minutes after that, I realised she was interested in my politics and interested in the way I was dealing with it.

**PHONE CALL ATMOS fades out**

NRITHYA: We had a conversation on the phone, and we hit it off. Right after the initial conversation, I asked him, don't you think that we are talking like we are friends from a very long time?! So I felt an instant sense of connection. And I was also amazed that he understood a lot of the things that I was talking about – which is not very common, especially with people who are from upper class. The common notion is to ignore what I'm saying, so I found it amazing that Nakul could understand what I was saying. And when he proposed this project to me, I was instantly hooked and I really wanted to be part of it.

11'40"

**MUSIC: 'Lalitam Varṇam Asuram'**

NAKUL: What I want to do through this project is to challenge certain notions of caste, as being an integral part of Carnatic music and the dance form. Through this piece, I want to explore how such hierarchies that are such an inherent part of these art forms, how can they be challenged? The politics that's going to be very difficult for me to address is my own privileges that I have drawn as, since I was born into a Brahmin family. And that is going to be a very sensitive issue for me to handle. How do I talk about a subaltern voice being heard through this project, when I am in certain senses, speaking for them? So it is my voice that's being heard. How do I..... I have to ask myself if I have the right to do it. And I don't know the answer, and it's a very very important question. At the end of the piece, probably I know if I have the right to do it or not. And maybe I don't have the right to do it. I want to find out the answer, not just me – I want an answer to be out there, about who has the right to do it. Why would they have a right to do it and who doesn't have a right to do it? And it's that answer that is more important than the piece itself.

13'08"

NAKUL: I really want this project to be criticised – ME, more specifically, to be criticised. And, uh, I am, I have asked Nrithya, if she can be very critical of me and she has kindly agreed to do that, so, yeah! (laughs)

NRITHYA: I'm always critical! So, no need to worry about that!

**NRITHYA SINGS AND CLAPS...**

*NRITHYA: So – this is the kind of – I'm just giving you some ideas...*

*NAKUL: ...ok – yeah, it's just, it won't be very, I don't know how danceable it will be, but let's see. Let's see how it works out...*

NRITHYA: I absolutely believe that he's going to challenge me, because you know, this is a challenging project for me. I've been somebody who has restricted myself to performing this dance form in a manner that's very comfortable for me, in the sense that, in a way, since I've been fighting these notions of what *Bharathanatyam* is today, I have mostly been representing it from what comes naturally out of my body, what I naturally feel inclined to do with it, in terms of, I dance with music that is completely comfortable to me, that comes from my family. So, I'm open to this new notion of how I'm going to do this. And I certainly think it's a challenge.

NAKUL: Hopefully we don't end up fighting!

NRITHYA: I don't think we will...

NAKUL: ...actually that might end up making a good podcast, you know! (laughs)

3" PAUSE

14'40"

**NAKUL: How do I do this? I'm going to need quite a lot of help here. And that is, I hope to speak to a lot of, uh, people who have been working in this area, Dalit scholars, post-colonial theorists, people from Carnatic industry, and people who have actually had these lived experiences of it. There's a lot to learn from people who have actually had such experiences of, uh, having to fight against such prejudices and hierarchies within the system.**

**MUSIC: Pushpavathy**

15'15"

NAKUL: Pushpavathy is a playback singer from Kerala who has sung in various movies... and she has been associated with Carnatic music for the past 34 years. She spoke to me in Malayalam, so I am going to paraphrase her, with her permission.

*(We hear Nakul translate over Pushpavathy's voice)*

So here, Pushpavathy is sharing an experience she had when she was a young student of Carnatic music. Her music teacher belonged to an upper caste family, and most of her other students were relatives of the teacher, so by extension, upper-caste. But as a talented student, she was one of favourite students of the teacher.

At her teacher's house, she and the other students used to be served a big meal on occasions like *Ōṇam* and *Viṣu*, important festivals in Kerala. But every time they were served such a meal on festive occasions, Pushpavathy was not allowed to sit among the other students; she was asked to sit separately and served her meal there. This because of the practice that people of upper-caste do not dine with those of a lower caste.

But when the other students, of a similar age asked why she was sitting separately, the teacher used to tell them it is because she is their team leader and deserved a special spot. But Pushpavathy knew, and she was only student to know that too, that it was because she shouldn't sit with the others because of her caste. Similarly, she was not allowed inside to drink water, she had to wash her plates separately and keep them outside to not "pollute" them or the house.

She finds a strange irony here. She claims the caste did not affect the teacher-student relationship at all. But the teacher was also a part of much bigger society, where she was supposed to follow certain norms, and there was no way Pushpavathy could escape such forms of discrimination.

### **MUSIC: Pushpavathy**

Pushpavathy goes on to share with me a few more experiences of discrimination that she faced when she was teaching other students Carnatic music.



When she was teaching a student of an upper caste family, in their ancestral home, she wanted to use the toilet in their house, and she did. But the next time when she went to teach the student, it was written on the door of the toilet that it shouldn't be used by her.

Another family, when Pushpavathy came home for the first time to teach their child, she was asked to sit on a mat on the floor even when they had couches and chairs in the living room. She refused and sat on the couch instead, and started singing Carnatic. After that, they never discriminated against her based on her caste. But Pushpavathy also says if this was another person, who was not bold enough to sit on the couch, and did not sing Carnatic, he would still be sitting on their floor.

### **MUSIC: Pushpavathy**

*3" PAUSE*

**19'00"**

NAKUL: I think, er, to start with the project I think the first thing we need to do is to decide what text we are setting to music and dancing to. And Nrithya has a much more important role in deciding the text than I do. If I pick the text, it will inevitably end up being a situation where Nrithya is being cast as a specific character, uh, by my choice of text, which is very problematic. And I wouldn't want to do that. This is what has been happening all of these centuries! (laughs) So I guess, it needs to be a collaborative process.

NRITHYA: Actually I want to give you the full freedom – once we decide the theme of it, I want you to have the full freedom of deciding the lines. And I can assure you that I can react to the music...

NAKUL: At the same time, I don't want to make it too difficult – if I go on to have like, uh, like four characters, it might make it very difficult from a dancer's perspective to perform them? (FADES OUT)

### **MUSIC: Nakul Krishnamurthy – Ten Thousand Dancing Shivas**

**20'08"**

NAKUL: We decided to take, um, some poetry or text from some art forms in, uh, in India, in Kerala specifically. We spoke about what kind of stories we can take and, Nrithya had a suggestion to take a story of this woman called *Śoorpaṇakha*...

NRITHYA: So, it's a story of a woman from a dark-skinned race, indigenous Tamil speaking race, who proposes to a man from upper caste. This man who she proposes to is supposedly the brother of a King, from up North in India, and she gets violated for proposing to him. So that is the story that we are talking about. But in popular culture, this violation of this woman is celebrated as a victory of the good over the evil. But it also kind of shows the history of how in mythology we have always in Hindu culture, somehow promoted upper-caste patriarchal notions of how lower caste women need to behave or lower caste people need to behave. So that is the story that I wanted to take up. I also felt that, you know, it comes from a very feminist perspective also, where a woman, in mythology, takes the agency to propose to a man. Which is not the normative way of how a woman should be, an ideal woman should be. So, you know, that I thought would be a feminist perspective, and also something from the perspective of caste, and how caste marginalises people, and how violation of people from lower caste, or lower down in hierarchies, is somehow accepted in our normative way of thinking in Indian culture itself.

**MUSIC: 'Lajitam Varṇam Asuram' (remixed by Steve Urquhart)**

22'05"

**NAKUL: *Śoorpaṇakha*'s story comes from the Indian epic called *Rāmāyaṇa*. And, now that we've settled on this story, Nrithya and I need to work out what lines we're going to use for this project.**

*NAKUL: ...so what I'll do is I'll select some of these lines, and then I'll get the meanings properly understood and translated from, for me, for myself...*

*NRITHYA: Yeah, for me also – once you do it also, when you send it, I would need all of the meanings...*

*NAKUL: Yeah, I definitely do that, but this is like over the next two or three days, I'll do this, I'll get these lyrics sorted and see in which way can they come together and like, you know...*

NRITHYA: Yeah – all that I leave to you...

**NAKUL: We'll talk through the politics of the text, how do we deal with the politics of the character of the story, and, how will it work in the context of my music. There's a lot to talk about!**

**MUSIC: 'Lajitam Varṇam Asuram' (remixed by Steve Urquhart)**

NAKUL: ...there's this two lines, which I thought made a lot of sense to start this whole thing with. And, it's from the *Śoorpaṇakha* story, where she's proposing to *Lakṣmaṇa*. And, uh, this is the line. It says:

*“Kāmāturā Madhura Kōmaḷa Vākināle  
Kāmam Stuticcu Tarasā Tamuvāca Dhīram”*

And I'm just going to translate that for you. It says that “in lustfully sweet words, she praised lust itself, and spoke, bravely”. That's those two lines. So, “in words that were so lustful and so beautiful, she praised lust itself, and bravely said, thus”.

NRITHYA: Okay...

NAKUL: She's actually proposing to him. But interestingly, what I found, I found a different line in this text where she is actually proposing to *Rāma* instead of *Lakṣmaṇa* now. She has gone to *Rāma* now, and she says about *Sīta*: “am I not better than her?” Which I found very powerful in a lot of different ways, um, *Sīta* is considered to be the epitome of womanliness...

NRITHYA: ...yeah – feminine – epitome of feminine...

NAKUL: ...yeah. And that is something that she challenges here. She's saying, “why am I not better than her?” But interestingly, when that line comes right after this thing that she talks about lust, it kind of subverts this idea of a purity – *Sīta*'s love versus *Śoorpaṇakha*'s lust. And saying, how *Śoorpaṇakha*'s is bad and *Sīta*'s is good is a kind of idea that we have. But when she says so “bravely”, that “am I not better than her”, it is such a powerful question.

NRITHYA: Yes! Indeed. You know, for me, more than anything, I think it is a manner to represent this woman in a manner that she hasn't been represented before – *Śoorpaṇakha*. She's always been spoken about in a certain fashion, and the narrative

has always been a certain narrative, but to look at her as, perhaps, uh, iconic woman, somebody who broke patriarchal norms, um, somebody who did not submit to how she was expected to live, and how she was expected to love. So I think that is what I want to focus on. And, I relate to her in that fashion because I believe I'm one such woman too. So I've been fighting all kinds of stereotypes. So, I just want to be able to emote my feelings towards *Śoorpaṇakha*, and also the *Śoorpaṇakha* in me.

**MUSIC: 'Laṭitam Varṇam Asuram' (remixed by Steve Urquhart)**

25'30"

**NAKUL: I guess it is – this piece is a learning process. The politics of it – it specifically discusses the politics of caste and the sustained prejudices within this cultural industry in India. So, I would like it to reach some people back there in India, maybe start a conversation – but this issue is not restricted to India. There are people everywhere in the world, as Indians who have travelled to a lot of different parts of the world, right?**

26'00"

DAVESH: My name is Daves Soneji, and I'm Associate Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. My work focuses on the history of the interface between religion, performance and cultural nationalism that developed from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I focus on the histories of music and of dance in modern south India, and also I do a little bit of work on the Tamil theatre. I think, the question of why stage something that is based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in today's world, is something we're all struggling with. And to understand that, we need to think about the history of these kinds of interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as forms of public spectacle in modern India, especially in South India, in the period after the reinvention of India's arts as "Classical". But I also think we need to think of *Rāmāyaṇa* in the wider political landscape, particularly in South India. So, there is something really important about thinking about the fact that it has been a very long and interesting tradition of protest that ties the *Rāma* narrative to contemporary politics. The point is that, the linkages between the practice of these so called Classical elite arts, and the majoritarian politics of today's Indian government, is plain to see. To argue otherwise is to turn a blind eye to something that's very much there, and present in our faces, so to speak. And so, I think it's important that in a project

like this, where this narrative is being invoked, that we're all very clear on what exactly the politics are here. So that this too can't, in some weird, twisted way, be put to the service of Indian nationalism. That this is clearly a project of dissent. It's always a bit of a question – should we, by embodying and restaging and reiterating the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are we simply reifying its hegemonic status? Or, by staging it in a way that questions it, and that foregrounds dissent, are we actually enabling people to question its very relevance? Now I think, hopefully in this project, we're doing that latter! And I hope that is really clear to viewers and to listeners as well.

28'43"

NAKUL: I think, for me, choosing a mythological story, even when I understand it has got a hegemonic status in society right now, is to try to mount a challenge to its status itself, by trying to see how we can reinterpret the story itself to show that it is not consistent with the dominant narrative. There has always been an operation that has been a part of the people who have always appropriated these Hindu epics for their purpose – so for me it's about subverting, or at least mounting a challenge, to that claim that this is something that is to be respected or revered, and rather question that status of it itself.

**MUSIC: 'Lajitam Varṇam Asuram' (remixed by Steve Urquhart)**

29'38"

**NAKUL: Next step is that we need to have a conversation about how Nrithya wants the music to be. Most of my recent releases – rhythm isn't usually a big part of my music, but as a dancer, she might prefer rhythm, which is something we have to talk about... so, how do we start incorporating rhythm in it, do we get a sense of the rhythm, a sense of a pulse? And the pacing, how are we gonna interpret the music for the dance? So, all these issues come together to give us an idea of the sound we're going for. And Nrithya already has an idea of the kind of music that I make, because I sent her my work.**

**MUSIC: Nakul Krishnamurthy – Anudhatthamudhatthassvaritham**

NRITHYA: The first time that I listened to Nakul's music, I did find it very different from the kind of music that I'm used to. So, I knew that it was going to be a challenge to be dancing to this kind of music.

**MUSIC: Nakul Krishnamurthy – Anudhatthamudhatthassvaritham**

NRITHYA: I'm a little bit worried of course, because it's a little hard to dance to it. So I'm just going to request him to have some rhythm to it so I can – a proper rhythmic cycle, so I can just stick to that! (laughs) Something that I can dance to, yes.

NAKUL: A rhythm – yes I'll definitely try to bring that in. A rhythmic cycle? I'll def – I'll have to try to do that! Yeah. (laughs nervously)

**MUSIC: Nakul Krishnamurthy – Anudhatthamudhatthassvaritham – STOPS  
SUDDENLY**

3" PAUSE

31'30"

NRITHYA: What do you think of doing an extremely fast something in between?

NAKUL: I – yeah, I'll try! I'll think about it...

NRITHYA: I mean, you know, if you want to break the norms of a speed of a *Kālapramāṇam*, you could have something extremely slow and something extremely fast – if that notion excites you perhaps?!

NAKUL: Maybe that's something that we can think about, we can have, it can be there. And there's so many layers in this, at least in my head when I'm in this composition. So, some of these layers can be at a different speed or something that can basically, um, overlay, uh, or lie behind all these other layers, something that is like, you know, pushing the motion forward. I can, yeah, I'll figure something out. Maybe we can work something into it. (FADES UNDER)

32'47"

**MUSIC: 'Lajitam Varṇṇam Asuram' (first draft)**

NAKUL: So now I have sent Nrithya a rough version of the first half of the piece, with just the voice in it. And I really don't know how she feels about it! So, I sent it to her. She texted me back saying that it is interesting, but “interesting” is a very difficult word to unpack! (laughs) So I don't know.

33'17"

**NAKUL: Of course, the music is only one part of this – politics, caste and oppression are central to our project. To better understand the whole context, I got in touch with Mrudula, an activist from Kerala who has been tackling these issues for many years.**

33'32"

*(We hear English translation over Mrudula's own words)*

MRUDULA: I am Mrudula Devi S, from Kannadivayal in Kottayam.

I was a teacher by profession, but I retired to focus on and to engage with Dalit-Adivasi- Bahunjan issues. I raise my voice for communities which are not adequately represented socially and politically in the Indian democratic system.

There is a 'chemistry' at work within Indian politics to strategically invisibilise, exclude, and discard sections of society by emphasising caste as the currency of Indian cultural capital.

I come from a marginalised community. The purpose of my activism is to inspire society to mount acts of resistance, to examine the privileges of being born in an upper-caste community through the lack of it for those who do not possess them, and to dismantle and uproot the thinking that being born upper-caste is a quality or a virtue in itself.

When we examine books that qualify as Indian “Classics”, we see them promoting casteist attitudes. We realise such oppression is not just on the basis of 'blackness', but 'blackness' refracted through the lens of caste and ethnicity.

If we examine the political and social conditions of India today, similar to how our mythology portrayed certain characters as disgusting and deformed, how black and ethnic bodies were ousted, how violence was inflicted upon them, and how they were slaughtered, we can see such violence being committed even today.

Take the story of *Śoorpaṇakha*. A person portrayed as ugly, whose beauty doesn't conform to the standards laid down by society, who is violently dismembered, and her love is ruthlessly obliterated by chopping off her nose and breasts. But we as a society agree with these principles laid down by the story. And this is exactly what is happening in India today.

India's democratic system adamantly believes in violently eliminating those bodies that dare to fall in love with those belonging to a higher caste, race, or tribe... to wipe out any possibilities of a new generation borne from their love, a possibility it believes is in itself disgusting. Therefore, it's important that there should be a feminist reading, a humane reading, a reading from the perspective of the marginalised, disenfranchised communities of stories like *Śoorpaṇakha*.

36'28"

DAVESH: Those points around class and caste are certainly extremely important. Especially when we consume Indian Classical music. And I think, the invention of the "Classical" as a category is accompanied by the kind of global "boom" in the interest in the performing arts of India. And so, the mass levels of global consumption of Indian music are often blind to the fact that these taste hierarchies that they're consuming, are deeply, deeply implicated in class, and caste, and even gendered politics. And I wish there was a way to get some of those ideas to the global community that consumes this "Indian Classical music", that there are certain kinds of hierarchies at work. I mean it would kind of be like talking about American music, jazz, without reference to race. I think that's a very relevant parallel, in fact. Because ultimately the creation of the forms are tied up to particular kinds of politics. The same is true with the invention of the canon of the "Classical", in modern South Asia. But it's something that – unlike jazz – we're blind to, for the most part, as global consumers of Indian Classical music.

37'52"



## **MUSIC: Pushpavathy**

*(We hear Nakul translate over Pushpavathy's voice)*

Here I am again talking to Pushpavathy, the playback singer from Kerala who has been working in the Carnatic music industry and film music industry.

I asked her about her activism, how she communicates her ideas.

She spoke about how she uses the poetry of Poykayil Appachan, a Dalit activist from the early 20th century, and sets his poetry to music. Poykayil Appachan's poetry is extremely heart-wrenching. In one of his poems, that Pushpavathy is currently working on, he talks about the plight of the children orphaned because their parents were sold and traded as slaves by people of the upper caste, just like the slave trade in Europe and the US.

### **(Pushpavathy sings for us)**

She sang another song that she composed where she set to music another poem by Poykayil Appachan.

She says one of the musical inspirations for this song is BB King and his concerts she has heard online. This was a poetry that had already been set to music by Poykayil Appachan himself, but she finds the emotion of the song to be sorrowful, and a kind of grievance. But Pushpavathy strongly believes that the time for grievance has passed. It is time to be brave and question these unjust practices through political means. So these songs should not be a grievance anymore, but should instil confidence in people to raise their voices. And that's why she decided to compose her own music for the poem. She believes, by using such musical influences of the likes of BB King, she can bring about a renewed confidence, and encourage the youth to take up these issues of caste-based oppression.

I asked her what the significance of using black popular music in her own work is?

She told me, oppression based on race exists everywhere in the world. George Floyd was killed because of his race. The sorrow that the black population feels is the same that the marginalised communities in India also face. The only difference is that the

hierarchical organisation of castes makes it a bit more complex in the context of India.

But the sorrow that the oppressed feel is the same everywhere in the world. The predicament of the African American population in the US, is the same as that of Dalits and other marginalised communities in India. So, any music that talks about such a predicament, irrespective of where it comes from, should be without borders, without any boundaries, it should be celebrated and taken up everywhere. There are no borders when it comes to sorrow, or happiness, and hence there should no borders at all! The world is, and should be, our family. The only classes are the ones who oppress, and the ones who are oppressed.

### **MUSIC: Pushpavathy – ENDS / FADES**

41'22"

NRITHYA: I'm definitely scared! I'm scared, but I believe that, you know, art is something that you do that comes out naturally. So, Nakul seems like somebody who wants to plan everything and he is very clear with his agenda. So I'm somebody who's going to be like quickly react to music. So, I still believe that once he gives me the music, I'm just going to go there and dance and, you know, I'll be fine! (laughs)

42'00"

### **MUSIC: 'Lalitam Varṇṇam Asuram'**

NRITHYA: It's so – it's deep and guttural, like, from the gut, and, beautiful in that way... breaking all normative ideas of how Classical Carnatic music would sound...

NAKUL: ...I don't know, how I imagined the piece was – how do I get the lyric across, make it clear, but at the same time have textures going on? So sometimes it was important for me to take a break, and let that word come through, and have nothing else – so, create spaces in between....

NRITHYA: ...the words and the placement of words, and how he's done it, musically, is quite moving...

## MUSIC UP

NAKUL: It almost felt like a breathing exercise... slowly it starts swelling, and going down, and swelling... focus on specific words, the language is beautiful... it forced me to do that, I think...

NRITHYA: ...there are times in the music I have this stirring, from deep within, I cannot explain it in words, but it's quite stirring, for me...

## MUSIC UP

44'00"

NAKUL: It is easy to think about this music as something that is relaxing, or meditative. It is very easy to fall into that kind of a mode of thinking – and it's not anyone's fault! But, this music itself is political, there's all this politics going on...

NRITHYA: I usually never do mythological pieces, but... clearly this project is a matter of subversion of gaze. I have constantly thought of the Hinduness of it...

NAKUL... Nrithya is drawing a lot from her history of exclusion and marginalisation, and her bodily presence itself, and the kind of dance that she embodies – it's a very political act...

NRITHYA: ...even while I chose costumes... I don't wear a *bindi*... I mean, a woman's identity within her state is identified by the dot on her head, and I didn't wanna wear that – I think that clearly puts my stance out there.

## MUSIC UP

45'19"

NAKUL: This "*Dhīram*" – *Dhīram* means bravery. *Kāmam* means lust... Conflicting emotions intersecting with each other.

## MUSIC UP

NAKUL: This is where *Vallabha* starts taking precedence from *Vallabhayil*... which changes the meaning from “am I not better than her”... it becomes “am I not her?”... words colliding, new meanings emerging... challenges the way we see the character of *Śoorpaṇakha*... confusing...

## MUSIC UP

46'20"

*(We hear English translation over Mrudula's own words)*

MRUDULA: I view new projects based on the stories of the likes of *Śoorpaṇakha* with lots of hope and expectations. Because there should always exist a counter-reading of these stories.

Only if we investigate and understand how communities have been constructed as "lower" and "othered" in our art and culture, and only if we undertake a feminist reading of such stories, will people read characters like *Śoorpaṇakha* in a different light.

Only then will these communities be seen with love and affection.  
Only then will democracy be complete for the disenfranchised.

It is because of this that I wish to join hands with such projects and initiatives, and it is because of this that I'm taking part in this podcast. Thank you.

## MUSIC + SOUND OF NRITHYA DANCING

47'25"

NRITHYA: Since I've started questioning the institutional caste exclusion and oppression, my opportunities have visibly reduced, but I also seem to get opportunities from alternate circles where people want to listen to my voice, people want to understand what I'm trying to say. It's also been over 100, 150 years since a woman from these kind of courtesan communities has spoken about these things. So, people think it's important to listen to a voice like mine. So I mostly talk about

the, the history of *Bharathanatyam*, of where it comes from, of who it comes from, of the erasure of the names and the contributions of people, who are my people, so that's what I do.

## MUSIC + SOUND OF NRITHYA DANCING

48'20"

NAKUL: At the beginning of this project, I was worried about whether I have the right to do this project. I have started to realise that this question is probably not as relevant any more. The focus rather, has shifted towards exploring the future directions for the art form itself, rather than what individual artists should be worried about... it's about how the future of the art form can be sensitive to the past, and still find new ways in which it can challenge such hegemonic structures within.

49'13"

DAVESH: This kind of a project, for me – we have an upper caste musician and a Bahujan dancer coming together. And I think that should be the future! Frankly, I think we need more diverse representation in the practice and production of art. The fact of this collaboration is not rare... but what's different here is the foregrounding of the caste politics, of the history, thinking about equity, reimagining or questioning religious narratives – I think THAT level is what's new here, in this project. There is a self-reflexivity, a consciousness that's at play here. And to me, that's a step in the right direction.

50'20"

## MUSIC: 'Lalitam Varṇam Asuram'

NRITHYA: I certainly think that – I was very comfortable working with Nakul. He treated me like an equal, and he respects me, and he allows me to have my own opinions and make my own decisions, yeah.

## MUSIC STOPS

NAKUL: Thanks Nrithya... but I should point out it's nothing great that I'm doing, it's something that everyone should be doing!

NRITHYA: Yes!

(laughter)

**50'54" ENDS**