

# Music Basti – a musical shelter

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## **'One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain'~ Bob Marley**

Making our way through the frantic Delhi traffic, we arrived at a government school, wondering about the unusual silence in the corridors. However, the image of highly spirited children, humming, reciting, and clapping together to the classical tune of Advaita by Mo Funk in a cluttered makeshift classroom, caught us by complete surprise. It was impossible not joining them and blending in with the melodious harmony in the room.

Started in the year 2008 as a project under the Integrated Development and Education Association by a group of artists, Music Basti endeavours to strike a musical chord among the 'at risk' children from the Delhi slums. 'At risk' children are the children who are most vulnerable to changes because of their social and economic status. The idea that music has therapeutic value, and can help children become better human beings and overcome emotional difficulties during the process of catharsis, drives Music Basti.



[Music class at a government school in Delhi: Credits: Shrishtee](#)

Music offers an effective means of sublimation and can be integrated well to enhance the learning environment for children. A study by Dr. Nina Kruas, Professor and Neuroscientist at Northwestern University[i] USA, suggests that music instruction not only improves communication skills, attention, and memory but can even decrease the academic gap between rich and poor kids. Apart from the above, music also has indirect effects on both emotion and behaviour. We often find using music to make us happier, less anxious, and more relaxed.

Faith Gonsalves, founder of the initiative and an artist herself, wished to reach out to at-risk kids through music to help them deal with the vagaries of life. These children in the age of 10-17 usually do not have access to music sessions or for that matter any art form in schools. "We do not believe in charitable models in promoting social well-being," says Ms.Gonsalves, "nor we are psychologists, music is simply our way to make a difference in the lives of these children". Starting off as a small project by a group of enthusiastic artists who wanted to share their musical experience, Music Basti, is now collaborating with government schools in Delhi trying to create space for music in a standardized academic atmosphere. Initially, focusing on communities, the project has made a transition to government schools this year, citing the following reasons i) control of the attrition rate ii) government schools have a high percentage of 'at risk' kids iii) easier to track classes and iv) basic administration in place.

The mainstream education system equips children to fit in the employment market and rarely focuses on the extra-curricular activities. Music Basti aims to provide a space where children can explore themselves beyond the academics and can find meaning in alternative jobs. Revolving around the three core components of curriculum, teacher training, and actual classes, Music Basti tries to provide a space to nurture key life skills among kids. These life skills are the '5 C's – creativity, confidence, community building, collectives, and coordination -- and are defined by the project as a 'group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, and think critically and creatively'. "The objective is to go beyond academics and there are multitude ways of helping and teaching, however, music is our way to help kids broaden their horizon and ensure their social well-being," says Pavithra Chari, program assistant of the initiative.

The social skills are not straightjackets but rather are imparted through simple games and exercises that are used during music lessons. Being from the margins of society, the perspectives, and aspirations of these children are relegated in oblivion. It is here that music offers a great opportunity and gives them voice. During the classroom sessions, children are asked to write about things that they experience around them, discuss it with other fellows, and then make an original composition out of it. "Not only do music lessons in this way improve communication skills" says Faith "but a sheltered atmosphere to express themselves without being vulnerable also increases their confidence".

The program is designed for a year, during which children learn to make sense of melody, rhythm, music appreciation, lyric writing, and get an opportunity to stage a concert at the end, called ReSound. The concert is for the children, family, and their relatives to attend and Music Basti intends to offer an experience equated with high quality musical concert that a celebrity band would perform.

The methods of Hindustani and Western music learning, theatre tools and other exercises are used to keep the classroom energy high. Children are also acquainted with basic difference between the Hindustani and Western music. To help with beat, teacher artists orient students towards the use of everyday objects to create musical instruments. Listening the components, songs, beat, melody, tempo, dynamics, harmony, rhythm, group singing sessions and creating own piece of music are some of the ways to develop respect and empathy for each other, cooperation and a wonderful ability that can help in venting out. Continuously listening helps students to make sense of different elements and how they come together to compose a piece of music. Bespoke oral musical training is accompanied by another important part of the music training – song writing, which is developed in the kids through a unique process of learning which encourages creativity through everyday language. Although different classes follow different processes to enable this learning, as a usual practice, children are divided into randomly assigned work groups and are asked to come up with lyrics, which range from a combination of random words or metaphors or simply the

creative use of similes. For example in one of the sessions children were asked to come up with a line describing their dreams and which was then clubbed together by children themselves to make a composition. Throughout this process, students are not judged or evaluated based on their performance; rather the idea is to enable young musicians to engage with the complex world in a mature way. The idea behind such an exercise is to provide an outlet to the children who rarely find such spaces to express themselves. Freedom to choose and learn, and equal opportunity to enhance one's creativity is effectively tailored to make the entire process fulfilling for children. Studies suggest that music learning also helps in concentration, build motor skills and helps with comprehension, remarked Ms. Chari while answering our question on how music and academics are related.



Source: <http://www.musicbasti.org/>

Music not only has a rejuvenating effect on children but it helps teachers to change their outlook on various aspects. "Music gives me peace and so I thought that probably it can give peace to kids as well," says Ankur Prakash, a teacher artist with Music Basti for four years. In spite of his full time corporate job, Ankur spends two days a week teaching music to children and considerable time preparing activities for the class.

Every year various artists are invited to apply through open applications. Selection is based on the musical proficiency and teaching experience of the applicant. Shortlisted candidates are then called for a group audition that examines them on teamwork, leadership, and improvisation. Currently Music Basti has 25 Teacher Assistants (TAs) working in eight government schools across Delhi reaching about 500 students. About 800 children have gone through Music Basti's sessions in the last 8 years. Post the selection, teachers also go through a training session on music skills, musical theory, community orientation, life skills, learning outcomes, teamwork, classroom presence, and communication planning for classes. Newly recruited TAs are sensitised by taking them to the communities where children belong, this helps in acquainting teachers with their student's context and in turn is helpful in designing course structure. "Being a good musician is different from a good music teacher, I have to be spontaneous and improvise to deal with spunky children," said a young new TA. These sessions are essential to make sure that teachers are able to engage every child in the classroom and simplify basic musical concepts to make learning fun.

The high numbers of children who do not have access to music education are those who attend the low-income private/government schools. In years to come, Music Basti plans to expand their classes across low income/ government schools in Delhi. With expansion, the aim is also to figure out mechanisms of qualitative assessment of the music lessons. Largely supported through grants and donations, such an assessment would require longish engagement with the same students, specific kind of research competence and resources.

However, sticking to the vision, Music Basti wants to mainstream music learning and make it an integral part of Indian education system. "One certainly hopes" Faith says "that an endeavour like ours can trigger some sort of re-evaluation of arts education in schools, and be used as a medium to fuel the generation of kids who are otherwise tossed into destitution."

<https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/faculty/NinaKraus> Contact Shrishtee Bajpai and **Radhika Mulay**