Preamble:

There are an incredible number of talented artists in India who are not well-known and who are not able to make a living on their primary skill. There is also an appalling ignorance of Indian traditional arts globally, which is terrible injustice to the knowledge and sophistication of Indian arts and artists. What if a social entrepreneurship model can identify these artists, give them a truly deserved livelihood that rivals well-paying jobs, provide work-life balance especially to women artists and simultaneously take the flagship of India’s artistic traditions to every corner of the globe? Vidya Subramanian has been doing just that and has scaled this model successfully. She can scale to even greater heights with support and encouragement from institutions like Ashoka that recognize such passion and talent. Vidya is a CA gold medallist from India and an MBA from the USA. She had a lucrative job in America that she left to work on this noble cause and she returned to India, surrendered her green card and grew the effort. What better than a patriotic Indian with a business degree and the confidence and passion to take her country’s classical traditions to a global platform.

**Introduction**

The classical arts space is a niche one world over. Particularly in India, the learning and performance of traditional art forms has happened over centuries using the traditional system known as “**Guru-Sishya Parampara**”. The key aspect of this pedagogy is that the student (Sishya) trains under the master (Guru) over an extended period of time and truly imbibes the artistic traditions and values of her Guru. This tradition has helped Indian classical art forms pass through centuries in a relatively unbroken thread. Often, the learning is passed on within families, from one generation to the next thereby creating musician families with long lineages. Occasionally, a non-family entrant gets an opportunity to train under the Guru. This approach has resulted in several unique and distinct classical musical styles (known as “bani” in South Indian Carnatic and “gharana” in North Indian Hindustani music). **While the traditional methods have helped art forms like Carnatic (South Indian Classical) music survive, grow and evolve over more than 2000 years, the system has its limitations.** The biggest limitation is that a prospective student is often judged in terms of skill, aptitude, talent, and more importantly, prior exposure to the artform, before being considered as fit for training**.**

**Classical music learning and performance circles therefore tend to be closed loops**, and artists often form cliques thereby keeping new entrants without connections out of the loop.  It is therefore very difficult for a completely untrained and uninitiated student to get access to high quality training under a top Guru in the traditional set up. Even if an extremely talented student were to get trained, it is next to impossible to make it big as a classical performer without money or people connections. Also, there is no clearly specified graduation route and the student is often entirely at the mercy of the Guru’s whim or support from sabhas / performing arts organizations when it comes to a career in classical arts.

On the other hand, **institutional learning of traditional art forms has severe limitations** in the Indian context. For instance, Carnatic music has a unique aspect known as “gamakam” which is how the music is embellished and “sangati” which is how a line of song is embellished. Both these integral features are typically lost in a standardized, one-to-many setting when learning Carnatic music in an institution, such as a school or college. Teaching in such settings is typically mediocre and done merely with an intent to provide students with a degree or certification within a fixed duration that will help make them employable. There is **little to no emphasis on going deep into the artistic tradition** here.

Therefore, there is a gigantic gap between talented teachers and eager students throughout the world. Teachers who are not from the inner circle, are yet a repository of knowledge and skill but are unfortunately employed today in jobs that largely do not interest them. Students who yearn for a simple, direct and customized set of lessons at their level, pace and interest often don’t have access to such teachers in their geographical location. Vidya Subramanian Academy (VSA) was created to identify all aspects of this market, educate and train all stakeholders, connect the right teacher to the right student and in the process, spread knowledge of Indian arts throughout the world.

**The Entrepreneur’s Journey**

Vidya Subramanian hails from Chennai, a city often called the Carnatic music capital of India. Her music loving accountant parents saw a flair for singing in Vidya and her initiation into Carnatic singing started at age 3 under Mrs. Rukmini Rajagopalan, a well known Guru. As a child, Vidya won numerous awards and prizes at music competitions conducted by Chennai’s prestigious music “sabhas”. **At age 12, Vidya had the good fortune of coming under the tutelage of Padmabhushan and Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellow, Maestro Lalgudi Jayaraman.** This was followed by 9 years of rigorous music training under Guru Lalgudi Jayaraman during which **Vidya also completed the challenging Chartered Accountancy (CA) course with national rank 2 while starting to make a mark as a performing Carnatic vocalist.**

What struck Vidya during these initial years was that the **entire Classical arts scene was an unorganized sector**, with plenty of talent, limited income potential, lack of transparent procedures in terms of selection for concert opportunities and a complete skew towards artists with connections or financially privileged backgrounds.

Vidya chose to exit the scene in 2000 to pursue an MBA in Boston College, USA and worked in corporate America for a number of years. She also started dabbling with online teaching of Carnatic music and soon realized that there was **virtually unlimited potential in using internet as a medium to broaden the base of students** who could learn traditional Indian art forms in a professional way at affordable fees **while providing an income stream to highly skilled artists**. This idea led to what is today known as Vidya Subramanian Academy (VSA, URL: [www.vidyasubramanian.com](http://www.vidyasubramanian.com/)), a classical arts portal founded by Vidya that brings together students from across the world and places them with trained teachers for online learning in customized, one-on-one setting.

Vidya Subramanian has **worked for 15+ years in the online teaching of traditional Indian arts and empowerment of women artists & teachers by helping create a regular income stream through work-from-home opportunities. Vidya Subramanian (**[**www.vidyasubramanian.com**](http://www.vidyasubramanian.com/)**)** is an experienced Carnatic vocalist and senior disciple of Padmabhushan Lalgudi Sri Jayaraman. She is currently under the guidance of eminent vocalist and musicologist, Dr. Vijayalakshmy Subramaniam. She has performed at reputed organizations such as University of Utah, Cornell University, Singapore Indian Fine Arts, Swaralaya-Florida, Fine Arts Association of Arizona, Cleveland Aradhana, Sangati Center-California, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha-Mysore, Powai and Chembur Fine Arts-Mumbai, Sree Rama Seva Mandali and Indiranagar Sangeetha Sabha –Bangalore, Nadabrahma Sabha – Mysore, Neelakanta Sivan Sabha – Trivandum, Delhi Tamil Sangam as well as in all major sabhas in Chennai including the prestigious Music Academy, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Bharat Kalachar, Nadopasana, Narada Gana Sabha, Mylapore Fine Arts and Kartik Fine Arts. Through her portal [www.vidyasubramanian.com](http://www.vidyasubramanian.com/), Vidya brings together students from across the globe who are interested in learning **Carnatic & Hindustani classical vocal music, Bharatanatyam dance, Sanskrit, Tamil & Telugu languages, slokas, konnakkol (Indian scat singing tradition), instrumental music - veena/mrudangam/kanjira/flute/violin, Yoga and other traditional Indian art forms**, and places them under highly skilled teachers in a completely online environment. As a trained musician with an MBA, Vidya realized that there was tremendous potential to take Indian classical art forms to all corners of the world using the online medium. There are numerous highly talented artists who struggle economically and are unable to find avenues to share their knowledge and monetize their talent. VSA has **provided a platform to such artists** through a rigorous teacher selection and training set up.

**Awards and recognition**

BBC World featured Vidya’s work in a documentary. Vidya was conferred the national level **Women Transforming India award (WTI) 2021** by NITI Aayog’s Women Entrepreneurship Platform and United Nations India (as part of India’s 75th independence celebrations), the **Kalaimamani Award**by Govt of Tamil Nadu in 2018 (highest award given by the State for contribution to the arts), **CA Entrepreneur Award** 2019 (National level award given by Institute of Chartered Accountants of India received from Union Minister Shri. Piyush Goyal), Homepreneur Award 2018, Nightingale Award 2021 by Society of Auditors and Vocational Excellence award by Rotary Club of Chennai Spotlight 2016 for work in online music teaching and women empowerment. She was also recognized as an **inspiring woman entrepreneur in the technology / social impact space by NITI Aayog and FICCI in their Road to GES 2017** event. Saratoga Arts and NY State Council for the Arts gave her their prestigious artist grant in 2010.

**How is VSA different?**

1. While there are other online platforms that train students, VSA is the **first and only one of its kind that is run entirely in a sustainable and social entrepreneurship** model.
2. VSA growth over the past 15 years has been **entirely organic**and Vidya’s work has resulted in the **empowerment of nearly 100 teachers and artists across India (mostly women) and a rapidly growing student body of 1500+.**
3. Most online music learning academies typically have one of two models – a stand alone Guru (usually a famous artist) offering to teach students in his/her style and terms or an institutional set up where literally scores of students sit over a Zoom call with almost no focus on the individual’s learning aptitude or teacher’s caliber where certificates are periodically doled out after a period of time. Most such Academies offer multiple genres ranging from Carnatic to Bollywood to Jazz (albeit all at a superficial level) which merely provides a platform for students to dabble at a basic level.  **VSA avoids the pitfalls of both these models** and brings together the best of India’s traditional Guru-Sishya tradition while harnessing professional teaching methods by continuing to rely on a **one-on-one learning setting** in the online environment and with a focus on traditional Indian art forms.
4. **VSA teachers are trained exhaustively in pedagogical adaptations** needed to make online teaching of classical arts effective in addition to areas such as soft skills, computer skills and cultural sensitization given the global student body.
5. Vidya has deliberately **chosen to work with under-recognized but talented artists** and teachers (over “brand name artists”) to provide them with a livelihood opportunity. This has increased the marketing burden as these teachers, while being extremely well qualified, are not household names among the student community.
6. Vidya Subramanian Academy (VSA) is run in a sustainable, social entrepreneurship model. Vidya identifies skilled teachers from across India, especially women, who are under-recognized and looking for employment opportunities (including from Tier 2 and 3 cities). Extensive training is imparted to enable them to teach in the online environment. **Every VSA teacher is a home-based freelancer with complete marketing support from VSA**.  Teachers are given excellent remuneration, encouragement and support. Vidya has so far empowered nearly 100 women artists and teachers. Equipped with confidence, training and technology, teachers work with assigned students located worldwide.

**Creativity**

1. With a **differential fee structure**, Vidya has ensured that students in India, especially from small towns, are able to afford the classes. **Free YouTube music lessons and podcasts** are available for all to help those who cannot afford to pay.
2. Vidya also has pre-recorded lessons available on her website as well as platforms like Amazon and Spotify.
3. VSA has a **lean organizational structure**. The beauty is that Vidya is able to provide livelihood and flexible work environment to teachers irrespective of their location.
4. VSA’s business model offers **scope for infinite scalability** as each artist / teacher is a home-based freelancer who teaches online in a flexible work environment. Vidya has built **a strong core support team** that helps scale up by providing assistance in teacher training, accounting and administration. With a decade-old **early mover advantage**, **social entrepreneurship and strong work ethic**, attrition rate among teachers is nearly 0. This is a unique business model of dispersed teachers teaching students one-on-one in a custom manner. Replicability is difficult as Vidya has built her organization with a strong student focus and teacher friendly business model.
5. Growth has been entirely organic, through website and word-of-mouth referrals. VSA has started new initiatives such as **VSA Exams and VSA Workshops** (on topics like Indian artforms like drawing / painting; konnakkol; Yoga & Meditation; Carnatic classical) over the past year. Vidya plans to increase VSA’s footprint through expansion into other traditional arts and languages including folk arts, Kannada and Malayalam languages. Also, plan are afoot **to offer courses at international level** through platforms like Coursera, Swayam and in collaboration with Indian and international universities to take Indian arts to the international community (over and beyond those of Indian heritage).
6. VSA has also been offering online performance opportunities to its students through **livestreamed student concerts as well as student showcase videos**. This enables VSA to continue to motivate students who may be located anywhere in the world while keeping running costs low.
7. **Highlight of the innovation**
8. **Women empowerment** : creation of regular income stream through online, work-from-home opportunities.
9. **Enabler for students**: Students with special needs have found lessons therapeutic. Students have a diverse religious as well as cultural background. Vidya has reached several 1000s through free video lessons. A significant number of students are first generation art learners, including of non Indian background.
10. The world’s first online platform to offer **customized lessons in a social entrepreneurship entity**to create terrific social impact.
11. A **non judgmental and non discriminatory** approach.

**Entrepreneurial Quality**

1. Online teaching of arts has significant growth potential especially in the post-COVID situation. The internet has an unmatchable ability to empower people who have the right mix of skills, motivation and education. Her academic cum artistic background gives Vidya a unique skills set.
2. Starting off with Carnatic vocal classes, Vidya soon realized the tremendous potential in diversification. VSA has over time expanded its offerings to include Carnatic instrumental (veena, violin, flute, kanjira and mrudangam), konnakkol (Indian scat singing tradition), Bharatanatyam dance, Yoga & Meditation, Slokas and chants as well as Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu language lessons.
3. VSA Exams offer students an optional add-on testing opportunity where customized feedback is offered through one-on-one tests that have a broad syllabus while retaining the essential flexibility inherent in VSA’s training methods. Six levels of music exams are offered and students are graded for their performance in practical, theory and aural aspects. The goal is to benchmark oneself and be the best that one can be rather than to compare with others’ performances.
4. VSA Workshops offer students a quick peek into a topic through a short term online module.
5. An interviewer once called VSA “**The Uber of Indian Classical Arts**” thereby referring to its virtually unlimited upward growth potential. Equipped with confidence, continual training and marketing support, Vidya enables VSA teachers each earn between Rs 10000 to Rs 2 lakh p.m. while working entirely from home.
6. Today, **Vidya Subramanian Academy (VSA) is a top ranked school** for online learning of Carnatic music and other traditional arts with growing body of over 1500 spread across India and 30+ countries  (top rank in Google Search). It is the only online school operating at this scale with a social entrepreneurship working model, zero paid marketing and with 100% organic growth.

**Social Impact of the Idea**

1. Students are in India and abroad. Current strength is 1500+ and growing. As students learn in a one-on-one online setting from home, VSA has been able to customize lessons to suit their goals. **Students come from diverse backgrounds** – ages 4 to 80; geographical spread across continents; varied religious, linguistic, cultural backgrounds and nationalities. VSA welcomes **differently abled and special needs students**. VSA’s student body includes foreigners, trans-women, students with special challenges including autism, cerebral palsy and blindness.
2. BBC World featured Vidya’s work in a documentary. Vidya was conferred the national level Women Transforming India award 2021 by NITI Aayog and United Nations India (as part of India’s 75th independence celebrations), the Kalaimamani Award by Govt of Tamil Nadu in 2018 (highest award given by the State for contribution to the arts), CA Entrepreneur Award 2019 (National level award given by ICAI received from Union Minister Shri. Piyush Goyal), Homepreneur Award 2018, Nightingale Award 2021 by Society of Auditors and Vocational Excellence award by Rotary Club of Chennai Spotlight 2016 for work in online music teaching and women empowerment. She was also recognized as an inspiring woman entrepreneur in the technology / social impact space by NITI Aayog and FICCI in their Road to GES 2017 event. Saratoga Arts and NY State Council for the Arts gave her their prestigious artist grant in 2010.
3. **Student Testimonials:**
   1. *“ first stumbled upon Vidya's school of music in October 2012 when my daughter and I were searching for the right teacher… We sought out a teacher who would be able to find balance between my daughter's busy academic high school life and her love for music. Under Vidya's tutelage, we accomplished what we originally planned smoothly. Every class with Vidya was immensely productive and it was gratifying to learn that no time or energy was lost after each session. What I found most impressive though, was Vidya's detailed preview and review of each lesson. As a concerned parent, it was fulfilling to see such detailed information about each session. Of course, it was evermore the effect that Vidya's background and experience had on everyone. Nearly all other acquaintances were astonished to find how convenient the schedules were given her busy concert schedules in India. Throughout our journey, I have found that there has been significant change in my daughter's perspective of music. While the same respect and honor are there, her understanding of this art form has allowed her to grow out her roots and realize her true potential. We are so fortunate to have Vidya and there is so much more for my daughter to learn from her. It makes me feel proud that my daughter's passion for music is in safe professional hands that will most certainly take her to new heights in her musical career.”*
   2. *"The ...knowledge ...I have gained since has helped me to connect more powerfully with the emotional content of Carnatic music. A year ago, I would not have thought this could be possible. I thank you once again for giving me to such a gift."*
   3. *“You have provided a great threshold for my children and for many who are living miles apart from the home country. A humble thanks to you dear.”*
   4. *“Thank you very much first of all for giving my (special needs) child the opportunity to learn and present even though, I am sure, he is not as good as some other kids. The teacher is very patient … he has made a lot of progress in terms of focusing in her classes.”*
   5. *“Wanted to give you feedback about my learning journey so far :-) Initially, I had thoughts about how this Skype will work , internet connection etc. but I should say it has been a truly enjoyable experience so far with no technical issues or any other issues! I feel I have really got a talented teacher, who is not only so good at singing but also ensures that it is delivered to the student effectively in the right manner. Learning experience has been very inspiring, engaging, interesting and of outstanding quality and am sure I will definitely benefit a lot from all this down the line. May God's grace shower on you (and your team) so that you can continue spreading this great art form amidst this modern world. I am so thankful to have found you…”*
4. **Teacher testimonials:**
5. *“My husband’s business has been in trouble. I have so many other commitments also. I will really work hard and do my best in this field mam. You are a god sent angel in my life. I am very grateful to you for having selected me to work under you mam. And of course teaching music is my passion from a very young age. And today it has become my necessity too.” – teacher in Mangalore, Karnataka*
6. *“I am sincerely thankful to you for all the support you are extending towards me (after the unexpected demise of my husband.  I feel fortunate to be associated with you.”*

*– teacher in Hyderabad, Telangana*

1. *“I once again express my sincere thanks to you for having introduced me to this (online teaching) system. I could buy my dad a silver plate on his birthday (with the additional income). It is not only money but also the opportunity of brushing my fundamentals up in order to attain perfection.” – teacher in Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh*
2. *“8 months ago when my husband lot his job, it was really a tough phase for us. We were so panicky as what to do next. Today, I am earning a reasonable amount only because of you and able to run my family, for which I would like to thank you once again. I couldn't even imagine if you wouldn't have taken me in your academy.“ - teacher in Bangalore, Karnataka*
3. *“You are an inspiration for every woman … Musically, I have improved a lot as teaching is one of the best ways to gain more knowledge and learn! Financially, it was a great happiest moment when I purchased my own flat.” - teacher in Trichy, Tamil Nadu*
4. *“I have also had the opportunity to teach some special needs children..their progress and achievement gives me immense joy and satisfaction.” – teacher in Mumbai, Maharashtra*
5. *“After having quit my teaching job to take care of my young kids, I was confined to household chores and taking care of family. When overcome with the feeling of not being amongst students, the opportunity from VSA came as a blessing.  It gave me an opportunity to earn. Teaching shlokas and Sanskrit to young kids is challenging but very satisfying as I am able to play a small role in their lives in imparting our rich culture.” -teacher in Mysore, Karnataka*
6. *“Unlike many jobs which got impacted due to COVID situation, you offered many women like me, a secure job, along with complete choice making with respect to shaping of students’ learning, based on their interests.” – teacher in Chennai, Tamil Nadu*

**Ethical Fiber**

VSA has a lean organizational structure. While Vidya lives in Chennai, her team is spread across India. She has been able to generate income for teachers all across India. The beauty of the VSA method is that she has been able to empower nearly 100 artists and teachers, provide livelihood and flexible work environment irrespective of their location and economic status.

Vidya gave up a lucrative corporate career in USA to return to India with family to pursue her vision of taking Carnatic music and other traditional arts to all via online medium and contributing to India’s nation building & women empowerment. Using a social entrepreneurship model (and not a Corporate structure), she **consciously opted for lower profits for herself and better livelihood for teachers**. Vidya initially faced discouragement from powerful artists who have been dismissive about the effectiveness of teaching arts online. She **took this criticism as a challenge to develop effective online teaching methods** using technological aids. By deliberately choosing to work with under-recognized teachers (over “brand name artists”), she faces increased marketing burden as these teachers are not household names among the student community. VSA **welcomes every student with a keen desire to learn**, irrespective of age, religion, gender, nationality and economic status.

The Covid-19 outbreak created an unprecedented boom for online ed-tech platforms like VSA. The demographic profile of students became more diverse as more from metros, Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities in India and from across the world expressed interest in online learning of traditional art forms. VSA teachers and student families lost several loved ones to Covid and this created a tough situation in terms of resource availability and management. VSA responded by stepping up its teacher recruitment and training while providing an informal support system. Several online initiatives such as VSA exams with customized feedback, group workshops and online art camps were launched.

VSA’s flexible, work from home and online model which has been used for 10+ years proved to be a boon during the pandemic as teachers / students could engage with minimal disruption.

VSA also has a core team that caters to the mental and physical wellbeing and supports its teachers and students who have been personally affected by the pandemic.

Free video lessons were uploaded on YouTube which benefits 1000s of students facing financial hardships.

**VSA continues its growth keeping in mind its core philosophies such as scalability without compromise of quality, social entrepreneurship and women empowerment.**

**Some relevant links:**

* **VSA Website** – [www.vidyasubramanian.com](http://www.vidyasubramanian.com)
* **VSA YouTube Channel -** <https://www.youtube.com/user/VidyaSubramanian/videos>
* **Women Transforming India Award 2021 highlights and press interviews :** [**http://vidyasubramanian.com/wtiawards.html**](http://vidyasubramanian.com/wtiawards.html)
* **The Logical Indian –** April 2022 - <https://thelogicalindian.com/smb-stories/vidya-subramanian-carnatic-music-34967>
* **Kalaimamani Award 2018 highlights and press interviews :** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/kalaimamani.html>
* **CA Entrepreneur Award 2019 highlights and press interviews :** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/icaiaward.html>
* **Nightingale Award 2021 :** <https://youtu.be/xz_e4bN8jPI>
* **Homepreneur 2018 award highlights:** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/homepreneur.html>
* **Speech at Road to Global Entrepreneurship Summit, Nov 7 2017 at IIT-Madras -** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/roadtoges.html>
* **Vocational Excellence Award by Rotary Club of Chennai Spotlight**, Nov 2016   
  <http://vidyasubramanian.com/rotaryaward.html>
* **“Music beyond Boundaries” : The Hindu Feature (Mar 2019) :** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/Documents/TheHinduMetroplusInterviewMar5.pdf>
* **“Perfecting the pitch online” : Times of India Feature (Mar 2019):** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/Documents/TOIMar19.pdf>
* **“Checks and Balances between Carnatic and Kalaimamani” : The New Indian Express Feature (Mar 2019):** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/Documents/IndianExpressMar13.pdf>
* **“Chartered Accountants as business leaders”, Economic Times feature (Feb 2020):** <http://vidyasubramanian.com/Documents/Economic%20Times%20Feb%202020%20small.pdf>
* BBC World News interview, May 2013 - <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-22516037>
* Story in the Albany Times Union, NY on Vidya’s Artist Award from Saratoga Arts and NYSCA - <http://www.timesunion.com/living/article/The-art-of-sharing-551273.php#photo-2>