

UTS guest speaker Samir Chatterjee founder Chhandayan Center for Indian Music

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UTS resumed its guest speaker series this semester on a musical note, featuring a performance by Samir Chatterjee, founder and director of the [Chhandayan Center for Indian Music](#), on February 22, 2017.

Samir began his studies of the tabla, a traditional Indian instrument consisting of two drums covered in goat hide and bearing a distinctive black circle, as a young boy, prompted by a piece of wisdom frequently expressed to him growing up: “There is no better knowledge than music.” Determined to understand and explore the truth of this statement, Samir’s journey led him deep into the traditions of Indian music, in which he has continually found personal confirmation of music’s spiritual and social value as well as its transformative power.

Now a virtuoso tabla player and a master of many facets of the Indian musical tradition, Samir seeks out and creates opportunities to share music’s benefits as a spiritual path with others. In addition to being an instructor at the New York branch of the Chhandayan Center, located just a few floors above the UTS Manhattan extension center, Samir has been a longtime supporter of the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM), a school where orphaned children and others can come to study music and experience the transformation it brings.

Describing his work with ANIM, Samir commented, “I personally worked in Afghanistan right after the Taliban left. In 2008...[when] I went there, I saw the devastations that they were facing, the conditions in which the orphans were left, and many of them came from musicians’ families, with musical talent...[We] were able to establish a school called ANIM, the Afghan National Institute of Music. They came and performed in our upstairs center—45 of those boys and girls. Now, you can’t stop them from smiling, but when I went there for the first time, music, love, life—nothing made any sense. They had seen the lowest point of humanity.

“That’s how music can transform. It’s a living example of that. Where is that happiness, where is that confidence, where is that trust, faith—all that helps us in living? It’s all coming out of music.”

We in the audience had an opportunity to witness this power of music for ourselves during Samir’s performance that evening. After sitting down to his instrument, Samir proceeded to play without stopping for over 15 minutes. It was amazing to see how quickly his hands moved over the dual surfaces of the tabla, measuring out rhythms so captivating that I, for one, felt compelled either to stare in awe at his hands or else avert my eyes altogether in order to let the music sink in. Samir, himself, often played for long stretches with his eyes closed or near-closed, and I couldn’t help but wonder at the degree of physical aptitude and spiritual depth and clarity demanded by his art.

Upon concluding his performance, Samir offered a few preliminary comments about the nature of music and the traditions of music in India before taking questions from the audience of UTS staff, faculty, students, and other attendees. Questions from the audience dealt with the themes of music as a language and a transformative agent, as well as the technicalities of traditional Indian music and the tabla, itself.

Samir’s performance proved to be a testament to his insights about music, ultimately demonstrating, as he described, that music is a poetry through which we can express and offer gratitude for the privilege of being alive and for all that we’ve been given.

The [Chhandayan Center for Indian Music](#) will hold a one-day seminar and all-night concert celebrating the lives of two preeminent Indian musicians of the 20th century, Ustad Bismillah Khan and M. S. Shubhalakshmi, on May 5 and 6, at 4W43 and the New York Society for Ethical Culture, respectively. Samir extended an invitation to all to attend these annual events as an opportunity to celebrate and to share Indian music and culture among friends.