

# Raag Darshan

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Raag Darshan: A connoisseur's personal account of Hindustani Classical music over the last five decades.

It was 1947 and I was ten years old. In that year I was seriously inducted into music. My first Guru was Pandit Gajananrao Joshi, a pioneering violinist and an assimilative vocalist who skillfully combined colourful musical strands of Gwalior, Jaipur and Agra gharanas of Hindustani khayal music. In that year India commenced its journey towards a new politico-cultural identity and I embarked on a musical quest. Of course, many other things also happened! In a manner of speaking, all such events together cast a secular horoscope of India. For example, a Documentary Division was established (with a German genius in charge); Satyajit Ray began the Film Society movement in Calcutta; Sangeet Kala Vihar - a magazine dedicated to music, began publication through concerted efforts of disciples of Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar; Fermi achieved the first atomic fusion and Pandit Omkarnath Thakur's rendering of Vande Mataram was simultaneously broadcast from 30-odd stations of All India Radio. (In later years this trend-setting vocalist was to give evidence of his political consciousness in another, much narrower context. In the Maharashtra-Gujrat dispute about Dang area, he had dramatically declared, "I will break my Tanpura if Dang is given to Maharashtra!" Obviously and fortunately, he was not serious!) Both India and my music-pursuit appear to have continued happily!

Vanity is to talk about oneself- somebody said, and rightly so! But I am not as vain as to compare my little travel with the march and travails of a great culture! I only wish to suggest that to some notable extent I grew up with the musical growth of Independent India - indeed a proud privilege!

With many, I believe that culture comes naturally to the middle class-not because it can afford it but because temperamentally the middle class cares for ideas! What was my father? He was from the interior Maharashtra, orphaned early and struggled to find a foothold in Mumbai. In his childhood he had learnt some wrestling and swimming. He taught this to boys free of charge. Goodwill thus earned helped him

secure a shelter on a landing of a staircase in a chawl in which one of his relatives used to stay. He also sold incense sticks at Bhuleshwar etc. till he was finally appointed in his first, and permanent job in Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank. My father remained a bank-clerk throughout his employed career—but he was a close associate of Vaikunthlal Mehta and other idealists in the early phases of the Co-operative banking movement in Maharashtra. It was, however, sometime before he could get the job because he had failed in the Matriculation examination—which was the minimum qualification required. Later, I learnt that he could not clear the hurdle at the first attempt because he was too busy pursuing one of his loves – The art of Poesy! His father, that is, my grandfather, was an ayurvedic practitioner as well as a Shastri. He dispensed both medicine and Keertana freely in a village in the interior Maharashtra. The point is that, love for Indian traditions, especially literature and music, were priorities in our family—they were not considered as avenues for making a career etc. My father was fond of music and reading -and never hesitated to spend whatever he could on these

I am a Mumbai product; I love the city and it certainly tolerates me! I grew up in Girgaum when that locality was full of people and music of every kind. Beginning from near home, I could haunt Laxmi Baug, Wagle Hall, Marwari Vidyalaya, Sahitya Sangh, School of Indian Music, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Talamaki Wadi, Cawasji Jehangir Hall, Rangbhavan, All India Radio, Chabildas High School, Dadar, Suburban Music Circle, Santacruz and Vile Parle Music Circle in search of music. All these were easy to reach. In fact, quite a few offered opportunities for sneaking in without an invitation or a ticket to many like me. And there was always some music or the other reverberating in these venues. Whom did I hear? Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan, Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Master Krishnarao, Balgandharva, Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, Smt. Kesarbai Kerkar, Smt. Siddheshvari Devi, Pandit Krishnarao Shankar Pandit, Pandit Mallikarjun Mansoor, Pandit Kumar Gandharva, Ustad Allaiddin Khan, Pandit Ravishankar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Ustad Vilayat Hussein Khan, Ustad Khadim Hussein, Ustad Azmat Hussein Khan, Ustad Latafat Hussein, Pandit S N Ratanjankar, Ustad Ahemadjan Thirkawa, Ustad Alla Rakkha, Pandit Samta Prasad, Pandit Kishanmaharaj, Ustad Amir Hussein, Ustad Shamsuddin Khan, Pandit Kamurao Magenshkar, Pandit Khaprumama, Shri Panditrao Nagarkar and literally scores of others who made their name, or did not, but could make music!

A similar long list could be drawn of Keertankars performing in and out of temples, as also of political leaders, learned authors etc. who used to give public lectures at various festivals. (In those days one could actually get something out of

public lectures!) What was more important, I heard most of these performers sitting at hand-shaking distance from them! I could actually see what vocalists/actors/keertanakars (or their trusted disciples) would deftly take out, sometimes surreptitiously, from their batwas /silver boxes or even small bottles to clear their voice.

Frequently, I could also be a privy to artists' frank/uncensored, ironical/satirical/mockng and or abusive comments and asides! Who says Indian artists are uneducated and therefore inarticulate? They could be brief, direct, witty and lethal! This too was an education! They talked on, about as well as through music and I could fill my ears with all this auditory wealth! Smt. Kesarbai Kerkar, for example, would ban certain persons from attending her concerts and accordingly issue instructions to that effect to organizers! On ascending the stage, the first task she would carry out was to peer around (and ask her accompanists to do the same)- to spot if any 'undesirable' listeners were around! She would refer to these 'chosen souls' with her own inventive nicknames - and I could hear her asides! Pandit Krishnarao Shankar Pandit, a very senior and respected Acharya of the Gwalior gharana of music was not averse to sip a little bhang from a bottle of Peps! For years I used to wonder about this special brand of Peps he used! Panditrao Nagarkar, who shot to fame after his role in V. Shantaram's famous film *Amar Bhupali*, used to eat cloves -keeping them in a small heap in front while giving a concert! Artists would often praise or abuse disciples accompanying them - with choice expressions - all this was a part of the performing culture I was soaking in! Loud requests were made to exhort vocalists to sing antaras and thus prove authenticity of their knowledge! Things were often lively! Was it because music was regarded more important than musicians who presented it?

Whatever the gharana, it was khayal, which was in the air. Dagar brothers sang dhrupad, Mullicks from Darbhanga contributed, some Agra musicians also gave glimpses of dhrupad-dhamar music and there were beenkars around. But this was not the mainstream music. Khayal and thumri ruled (ghazal was not on the horizon yet). This was reflected in the composition of the audience. Listeners would have their preferences and certain listeners, in their specific attire and paraphernalia (such as box of snuff or betel-leaves) would be occupying specific spaces. (Indian baithak was favored by the knowledgeable and artists favorites). Once Satyendra Dwivedi, a gentleman known for his deep knowledge of thumri compositions, came late for Smt. Kesarbai's concert. The moment he entered, Kesarbai jestingly admonished him! After apologizing to her, Mr. Dwivedi explained sotto voce to those sitting nearby, "I was listening to the National Program of a new thumri talent - Girija Devi". Even while a

mehfil was in progress, sometimes Dwivedi would be asked about exact wordings of a 'forgotten' antara of a composition!

The world of music was certainly more intimate. Pandit Ravi Shankar and the likes, though on the International circuit, also obviously missed this knowledgeable intimacy. I remember a concert Panditji gave in the 'acoustically testing' Geeta Mandir Hall because he wanted to play in the old mode! He presented vilambit alap of the tender raga, Bilaskhani Todi, for more than 90 minutes, and every nuance was picked up and admired by the packed hall-though everybody was sweating and squirming! Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan used to be a different artist on certain occasions and in certain places. He would render unheard and rare ragas, and would not resort to a single tan for full 60 minutes when singing in the small hall of the School of Indian Music at Opera House because the audience would mostly consist of musicians who would be too alert to please with routine music! Musicians' greatness was not taken for granted -there were places where they would have to prove themselves again and again! It was not competitive music they were after, they were keen on a continued musical competence!

Speaking of competitive spirit-it was there in abundance! My Guru, Gajananrao Joshi's violin recitals were veritable jugalbandis when Ustad Ahemadjan Thirakhwa accompanied him on the Tabla. Their concert would continue till the early morning hours. Unlike in many instrumental 'recitals' today, their concert was studded with no pre-composed tihais and sawal-jababs! Their music was a bit disorderly, but it was real improvisation! One essential item in their concert was rendering of a stage-song from Marathi Sangeet Natak tradition-especially in the Balgandharva style! Thirakwa had accompanied Balgandharva in the heydays of Gandharva Natak Mandali and hence, he had mastered the Gandharva idiom. It was therefore a sheer delight to hear his soft, flowing and evocative accompaniment to Gajananraoji's lyrical treatment of songs set in Mand, Sindhura and Kafi etc.! Yet another memorable jugalbandi I remember distinctly was when Pandit Ravi Shankar and Pandit Gajananraoji played to the twin accompaniment of Ustad Alla Rakha and Pandit Kishan Maharaj at Marwari Vidyalaya hall. That whole night affair, which began with raga Hameer was an example of aggressive music-making which was, however, free from ill-will and rancour! Many musicians were in the audience and involvement of the audience in the entire process of music-making was to be seen to be believed!

By 1954, the Annual Radio Sangeet Sammelans, National Programs, National Orchestra of All India Radio were institutionalized. Pandit Ravi Shankar, Emani Shankar Shastri, T K Jayram Ayyar et al were combining Indian instruments in a new

way. The tussle was between a desire to stick to the Indian, melodic way of musical thinking and employ the Western concept of program music or descriptive music, which relied on harmonization, part writing, and a largely pre-composed score. Listening to Indian orchestral works was indeed, constructively disturbing. Equally intriguing was the music one heard from Pandit Kumar Gandharva who staged a musical comeback around 1954. He did not fit in the accepted framework and yet communicated music full of impact! On the other, that is, the popular front, playback-technique and Lata combined to change the entire musical ambience! Film music was borrowing freely from non-Indian musical sources and it was nearly going berserk to introduce new timbre and more and more musical instruments in the orchestra! Due to all these factors, the appeal of film music was proving so strong that both State and Central governments seriously "frowned" on film music! It is symptomatic that K. A. Abbas's *Munna* was a film, which prided itself for having no song in it! Record libraries were springing up and we used to collect pocket money to listen to film music as well as to instrumental music. The chief attractions were - Sitar by Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Vilayat Khan, and Sarod by Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. The 78 rpm discs, and a little later the long-playing records, opened our ears to exotic ragas, new instruments and novel contexts of music. To listen to the Bhiaravi thumri dhun by Ustad Vilayat Khan, Ahiri Lalat by Pandit Ravi Shankar and Chandranandan by Ustad Ali Akbar Khan was an experience. Equally instructive and intriguing was to listen to a record of recitation of Baudelaire's poems with Ustad Ali Akbar Khan's Sarod responding to it! Pandit Ravi Shankar's combining with Yehudi Menuhin was also an experience of the same order.

The '60s saw some important music-related ventures. At the age of 59 or so, Prof. B R Deodhar (who was to be my fourth guru) - a disciple of Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar- began study and propagation of Voice Culture for Indian music! There were protests, mocking comments as well as curious whispers around. He used to practice his new techniques etc. in front of a huge mirror to the amusement of many 'traditional' musicians - but he went on undeterred! Fortunately, all were not so dismissive. He used to tell me with pride how Ustad Amir Khan and Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan listened to his first post-voice-culture broadcast and immediately complimented him on the improved tonal quality etc. Stereo recording had also been coming into vogue and listening habits as well as preferences were changing. Listeners wanted more polished music, no 'on stage' warming up was easily tolerated, music conferences with a no-man's corridor between performer and audience was becoming a regular feature. One major effect was a gain in the overall musical efficiency of performers. They began to plan their concert menus with greater consciousness. They also became conscious of how they 'looked'. Gradually, distributing/flaunting one's

bio-data at the first opportunity assumed great importance! (Multi-colored, glossy hand outs etc. were to become a fashion soon!) Quite a few also began fiddling with public address systems, recording equipment etc. in an effort to increase effectiveness of their music. Foreign tours acquired prestige. In the early post-Independence years, members of Indian Cultural Delegations considered themselves (really!) cultural ambassadors. However, one felt that music was slowly being listed as one saleable item, a commodity. All India Radio launched its commercial service with music as its major component in this decade. The processes of commercialization and globalization, one feels, are not perhaps too recent!

A major fallout of these events has been a serious acceptance of Indian music as an alternative system of music in large parts of the western world. On account of its ancient lineage, accentuation (at least theoretically) on improvisation, its somewhat exotic quality, and well-developed musicology etc. Indian art music has secured a firm hold in the Western pedagogic and Pop world. Pandit Ravi Shankar and others have contributed to a notable and substantial propagation of Indian art music. This has led to many interesting consequences. Some 'mobile', adventurous but just above-average musicians have begun literally 'cashing' on whatever little knowledge of Indian music they had. But the next wave has been of more qualified persons who have been laying sounder foundations to impart education of Indian music abroad. Today the scene is fascinating! The non-Indian interest in Indian music is more enlightened and demanding and the task of India-born/brought up musicians is not easy! In my opinion, this may turn out to be a blessing. Winds of change would blow more freely. Is it not symptomatic that India issued postal stamps in honor of Beethoven, and also banned import of foreign films in the 1970s?

I did a stint in the Mantralaya. My job was to prepare and translate district-wise health bulletin for the State of Maharashtra. I was doing my MA in English and Marathi Literature and the job helped in maintaining my 'economic health'! Then I worked in AIR, Mumbai. My job was to fill in log-books of programs that were and were not broadcast. (Within a week of joining, I became sure that I would have to leave the institute though I could easily listen to all kinds of music there to great advantage!) After working as a lecturer in Siddharth College of Commerce and Economics for some time, I became the Founder-Director of the University Music Center of the University of Mumbai in 1969. The Centre was, perhaps, the first University Department of Music to have its own recording studio, library, auditorium etc. It could soon become a place for every musician interested in music per se because musicians in India certainly love to have some such *adda*! From a wandering street musician playing Ravanhattha to Pandit

Ravi Shankar - all came to the Center with open minds. They performed, lectured, discussed, taught and (sometimes fought!) with full trust and confidence. Unknown persons would come and deposit rare recordings, donate books or hand over manuscripts. Foreign journals, reference works were also made available to all. Regular listening sessions, music appreciation- courses, seminars were held and entry was not restricted. The attempt was to synthesize Guru-Shishya-Parampara and modern methods of learning and teaching music. All the five categories of Indian music, namely, Primitive, Folk, Religious, Art and Popular were welcome and work for those 15 years in the Center reflected the modern temper of Indian music. I could see that Art musicians were including folk music in their concerts, they had begun 'explaining' their music to listeners- especially when they traveled abroad. The need of the hour was (and perhaps still is) to enable musicians to negotiate from a 'position of knowledge' and hence the eclectic approach adopted in the Center. The intention was to serve as a catalyst organization.

When I became the first associate director of the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology of the American Institute of Indian Studies in 1983, it was because I was keen to pursue music-studies in the greater perspectives offered by cultural studies. Meeting a great number of non-Indian scholars with similar tendencies only convinced me that music means much more than music! Obviously, many feel the same way. Fusing forms of music, fusing gharanas, combining music with movement, gestures, visuals, graphics, fusing music-systems and what not - all these moves are enriching and intriguing at the same time. Whenever arguments about purity, authenticity etc. start raging about - I take it as a sign of a cultural state where people are experiencing a kind of fear! This is natural but hardly justifiable! Two Ford Foundation grants enabled me to carry out some work in Theatre Development and Ethnomusicology at the National Center for the Performing Arts. All the programs I conceived, planned, and presented, or the workshops I conducted only convinced me that while the world is becoming smaller, the scope of music is becoming wider! This is all to our advantage if we participate in the Manthan process instead of standing on the banks of a monsoon-flooded river and criticize its churning waters! My motto is from music to music through music! Does it not sound good?