

Kurdikar Mogubai (1904 - 2001)

Ashok Da Ranade

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My adya-guru Pt. Gajananrao Joshi was a unique guru - in the sense he always enjoyed talking about his gurus-actual and potential! When in that vein, he would also explain why a certain musician would be considered worthy of being a guru proper. He used to stay with us in Girgaum and I remember a phase in his life when he was craving to have some insight into the Jaipur- Atrauli gharana. He unhesitatingly approached Mogubai Kurdikar with a request to guide him. Mogubai refused-politely, firmly and with profound apologies, maintaining he was already a veteran gharana-trained musician and perhaps did not need actual training. Gajananraoji was not however satisfied and finally went to Kolhapur to learn from Ustad Bhurjikhan - son of Ustad Alladiya Khan . The point is: accomplished musicians rated Mogubai highly for some rare and specific musical qualities. What were they? How could Mogubai achieve this status? One needs to go back a little.

When the moment comes...

Sometime in 1920. This happened to a lissome girl hailing from a small village in Goa. Born in the family of professional musicians, music came easily to her. What was more - she loved it! Yet her mother was in two minds. Should this 'pearl' be wasted on some moneyed mediocre man! She repeatedly told her daughter 'sing high music and sing for those who know'. But they were poor. Society expected and tolerated only 'entertaining' music from 'women'! In those times 'from whom' mattered more than 'what'!

The girl found an escape route by joining a music-drama company. She began by playing 'sympathy-backed' roles - such as Dhruva and Prahlad. She ensured that spectators wept during the performance due to her 'moving acting'! Predictably, very soon her skilled music was making waves. A more professional drama troupe was quick to recruit her. Professionally run drama-companies of that vintage period specialized in giving rigorous in-service training to budding performers. Thus she began getting some purposeful training in serious, 'classical' music- which her mother

was all along insisting on. She also began learning Kathak dance. Her looks were sharp and captivating. Her voice had swiftness, enjoyed high range and easy tunefulness. She also had natural grace in her movement, enhanced by initiation in dance. She could flash a smile (when she so wished!), which was nothing but enigmatic. In other words, she was inviting and distancing – at the same time!

Slowly but inevitably she graduated to coveted roles of 'singing heroines'. Subhadra (in *Saubhadra*), Kinkini (in *Punyaprabhava*), Vasantsena (in *Mrichhakatika*) and such other singing parts had bestowed fame, wealth and - more significantly - prestige on many singers. They were now hers. She was hopeful of fulfilling her mother Jayashreebai's dream, - 'Sing and enjoy – but with dignity'.

They were in Sangli. She practiced assiduously! Every new role was to be so perfected as to appeal to all - uninitiated music-lovers as well as knowledgeable performers. Sangli, a small princely state in south of Maharashtra was a recognized seat of serious music. The main patron was an Ayurveda practitioner called Vaidyaraj Sambhare famous for diagnostic powers. He could 'read' a patient by looking at him and nearly cured suffering by mere touch! Equally known was his generosity- he treated artists 'free'. Ustad Alladiya Khan, Ustad Rahimat Khan, Ustad Abdul Karim Khan or Pt. Balkrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar- all were epoch making artists of different gharana-s, but they all competed to belong to the Sambhare 'gharana'.

One evening, while our heroine was rehearsing raga-based, intricately phrased and seemingly simple songs from Saubhadra, a majestic person- apparently a musician came up. Requesting her to continue, he appreciatively listened to, and looked at this unassuming girl. He intently and patiently waited till the session was over. The girl knew her protocol well. One always respects and welcomes knowledgeable gentlemen. The gentleman authoritatively began, "You are young, you are talented and you have a future-if you get proper grooming!" The girl mused silently. "What you were singing had no proper base, no raga or its controlled shadow. It had no meaningful relationship with rhythm and you have no sense of design – yours was a shapeless meandering in music!" He sighed. She looked out. At some distance she could see River Krishna flowing majestically. She could also hear melancholy yet reassuring temple-bells. Sunlight was fading out-as if somebody has strummed the last string of a tanpura! "Who could teach me-a poor struggling stage-actress?" She almost whispered. Moments ticked off. Silence was gathering response. The gentleman -musician abruptly got up, "I will teach you- from tomorrow, but not a word to anybody".

The 'talim' began. The girl could feel the difference between performance, training and talim. She was dying to know who he was, why was he teaching her 'free' and what was the guarantee that this dream would last and would not get sour! But she could not muster up enough courage. After all, one does not ask questions to one's guru! She prayed and she learnt - she learnt and she prayed.

Days passed quickly. On that day there was to be a music soiree at the Sambhare's. Artists from drama-company were invited. Doors of Sambhare's palatial house were always open to artists of all castes, religions and gharana-s. She went to the Wada, offered worship to the giant Ganesh idol and sat down with curiosity on a side reserved for women. Some great musician, she learnt, was leaving, probably for Mumbai and he was to be felicitated.

The musician entered grave face!

He was Ustad Alladiya Khan,

She was Mogubai Kurdikar!

Mogu in archaic Marathi means 'a pearl'!

She was born in village Kurdi (dist. Sange) in Goa in a family of professional musicians. Her mother Jayashribai was keen on Mogu becoming a "classical" musician. The intense desire for the rather abstract, purified and obviously less "paying" kind of music - became an overriding aim of both mother and daughter in their tortuous progress in life. While in Goa, Mogubai received some preliminary training from a visiting Haridas keertankar and from Balkrishna Parvatkar. In later years, Mogubai also benefited from the guidance Layabhaskar Khaprumama gave her especially in matters of talakriya. It is symptomatic that Mogubai could master this particular feature of music-making, which even today would be considered highly intellectual, abstract and perhaps less accessible. In 1913, at the tender age of nine, she joined Chandreshwar Bhootnath Sangit Mandali - a music-drama company in Goa, then moved to another company, the Satarkar Sangeet Mandali in which Chintoba Gurav (Divekar) could offer some systematic training in art music. It could easily be surmised that the chance of 'seriously learning serious music' was the main attraction for Mogubai. Some training in Kathak dance from Ramlal Katthak was expected to help her in her stage career. Graduation to major heroines' roles was inevitable. It meant that she had arrived. She had intense and sharp looks; good, pliable voice; trained stage movements and youth -

if she wanted to pursue a fruitful career in music-drama. The genre was readily and sometimes gainfully favoured in Maharashtra at that time!

However, she continued to be in quest of 'classical music'. In fact she became more and more disenchanted with the atmosphere prevailing in professional theatre. While in Sangli, she reportedly received some training from Inayatkhan Pathan which could be around 1919. In that same music-filled, small but cultured urban centre, she met, in 1920, Ustad Alladiya Khan - the doyen of Jaipur-Atrauli gharana. The event described earlier took place. But this talim barely lasted for a year. After the death of his patron Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, the Ustad shifted to Mumbai.

Mogubai followed him to Mumbai but Ustad Alladiya Khan proved inaccessible. In due course Mogubai was married to Mr. Madhavdas Bhatia in 1923 (and led a happy married life for 16 years - till 1939 when Madhavdas expired). Continuing with her single-minded pursuit of art music, Mogubai learned from Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan of Agra gharana and his nephew Bashir Khan. This phase lasted from about 1924 to 1926 when she became a gandaband shagird of Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan. However, this Ustad too soon had to leave Mumbai! Once again Mogubai was adrift! After a while, Ustad Haider Khan (Ustad Alladiya Khan's brother) trained her for five years (from 1926). It was at the end of this period that Ustad Alladiya Khan agreed to resume training her - which he did. She finally became his gandaband shagird in 1934.

Maybe her mother was a prominent shaping force in Mogubai's life and music but it is clear that Mogubai herself opted for music that was well etched, firm, rather abstract, and also somewhat austere. For her music was not for recreation. It was to be a real creation of patterns in raga, ideas in compositions and undemonstrative devotion. Her music was not directed at ears which hear for pleasure but for those inner ears which can listen! Her music and the process of making it meant introversion. To me she seemed to oscillate between the somewhat aggressive Agra way of music making and the intellectually intriguing Jaipur mode of charting the musical universe. She was in search of thoughtfulness which sought permeating music with voices from eternity! This made her music honest, apparently less opulent but quietly disturbing! It was a rare fare for audiences endowed with rare powers of concentration.