

Guru and Shishya

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Gentleman magazine, Edi. Rajib Sarkar, Express Publications Ltd. Mumbai, April 2001)

Pray and sing. Sing and pray.

This is a story of a lissom girl hailing from a small village in Goa, circa 1920. Born into a 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 told her daughter repeatedly, "sing quality 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 sought an escape route by joining a music-drama company. She began by playing sympathy-evoking roles - like Dhruva and Prahlad - she ensured that spectators cried during performances! But soon her skilled music-making began making waves. A more professional drama troupe recruited her. Professionally run drama companies of those vintage years nearly specialised in giving rigorous in-service training to budding performers. She began getting some purposeful training in serious 'classical' music her mother was insisting on. She also began learning Kathak dance. Her looks were sharp, but captivating. Her voice had swiftness, high range and tunefulness. She had natural grace in her movement enhanced by dance training. She could flash a smile (when she wished!), which was nothing if not enigmatic. At once, inviting and distancing! Now her roles were those of 'singing heroines'. Subhadra, Vasantsena and such other singing parts from acclaimed musicals. She was hopeful of fulfilling her mother, Jayashreebai's dream - "Sing and enjoy - but with dignity".

They were in Sangli. She practised assiduously! Every new role was to be so perfected that it would appeal to all - uninitiated music-lovers as well as knowledgeable performers. Sangli, a small princely state in south Maharashtra was a recognised seat of serious music. The main patron was an Ayurvedic practitioner called Vaidyaraj Sambhare. His diagnostic powers were legendary. He could 'read' a patient by looking at him and nearly cured the suffering by mere touch! Equally known was his generosity. He used to treat artists 'free'. Ustad Alladiya Khan, Ustad Rahimat Khan.

Ustad Abdul Karim Khan or Pt. Balkrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar - all epoch-making artists of different gharanas - but they all belonged 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 only if you get proper grooming!" The girl went on listening silently. "What you were singing had no proper base, no raga or its shadow. It had no meaningful relationship with rhythm and you have no sense of design - all was shapeless!" He sighed. She looked out. At some distance, she could see river Krishna flowing. She could also hear melancholy yet reassuring temple-bells. Sunlight was fading - as if somebody has strummed the last string of a Tanpura! "Who would 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 training and talim. She was dying to know who he was, why was he teaching her free and how long would this dream last. But she could not muster up 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 a music soiree at the Sambhare's. Artists from the drama-company were invited. The doors of Sambhare's palatial house were always open to artists of all castes, religions and gharanas. She went to the Wada, offered worship to the giant Ganesh idol and sat down with curiosity on the side reserved for women. Some great musician, she learnt, was leaving, probably for Mumbai and he was to be felicitated.

The musician came, everybody offered respects to him. She was shocked into consciousness - he was her unknown guru! She hurriedly got up and reverently bowed down to him. A mischievous smile lit the musician's otherwise grave face!

He was Ustad Alladiya Khan.

She was Mogubai Kurdikar!

Mogu in archaic Marathi means 'a pearl'!