

# Vinoba's father

Ashok Da Ranade

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Who does not know Acharya Vinoba Bhave? He was Mahatma Gandhi's disciple, whom the Mahatma himself described as 'one who was better than his own Guru!' These two did such credit to guru-shishya relationship that even musicians would like to emulate.

Vinoba ji, and also his Guru for that matter - were not exactly well known for their personal understanding and love of music. At the most, they recognised music as a cultural force! That's all the more reason to admire Vinoba's father's amazing work in documentation of musical traditions such as thumri and pakhawaj-music.

Born on 19th March 1875 in Wai, Narhar, Vinoba's father was brought up in a conservative, middle class family. He was married even before completing his education in Pune. In fact, Narhar had to discontinue education in 1898 for lack of financial resources. He then tried earning his livelihood as a teacher in Pune, Pen and Wai before finally landing up in Baroda. In Baroda he completed a Certificate course in Colouring and Dyeing at the famous Kalabhavan. The technical aspect of this craft fascinated him. In order to learn the technical know-how from the horse's mouth, he served in textile mills - spending his own money. This practice he continued even when he was an employee of the princely state of Baroda. As there were no facilities such as study leave, he would obtain leave to go to places such as Mumbai and Kanpur to work with craftsmen actually engaged in making, mixing and applying dyes. Later, he began experimenting with natural dyes, researching indigenous herbs and materials - thus revealing the nationalistic aspect of his hobby. In addition, there was an educational spirit in his ventures. He would cut cloth, sew pieces and dye handkerchiefs for children, with alphabets dyed on them. Vinoba would sell them at fairs! Preparing colours, mixing them, testing them for their durability etc.- he would carry out research at his residence, without lab-facilities, with his own money and sacrificing leisure time for years. Once Vinoba asked him, "Why do you not do this work in your office?" Narharpant's answer reflected his extraordinary honesty, "I would be spending their money and their time for my work - is it not?" Gandhiji later sought Narharpant's

advice and guidance to decide on colours to be used for the homespun khadi. (He would also advise Gandhiji on how to use soyabean for a nutritious and simple diet.) Vinobaji and many others aptly characterised Narharpant as a 'colourful' silent yogi and an ardent reformist!

But the most surprising turn in his life was his taking to music in 1917, when he was in his 40s. The studies continued for nearly 30 years. Wife's death, his own illness, all three sons leaving home to serve the nation – nothing could stop Narharpant's devoted study of music. He learnt thumri from Nartak Rahatali and published three meticulously prepared volumes of traditional compositions with notation, annotation and a preface (in 1942 – the third coming out posthumously). He also learnt pakhawaj from Ustad Nassar Khan and proceeded to publish a volume (1942) on this ancient, rich, rhythm music that still suffers from a lack of intelligent following. He published with his own money. His records showed that the books were purchased by a number of practising musicians.

This is an interesting phenomenon. Many liked thumri, but it was hardly recognised as a worthy genre of music. In fact, in the 1920s, the All India Music Conference in Lucknow had passed a resolution to give a place to thumri and dance in the forthcoming conference because the forms lacked social prestige! Association of the form with nautch girls was damaging, especially when its music was so expressive and replete with aesthetic content. For Bhave to take up the work of documenting thumri with his usual thoroughness and seriousness was at once a cultural, national and a reformist act. His taking up the cause of pakhawaj-music was not less significant. Those who care for culture in a wider sense can never remain happy merely by their own singing and playing. Those who try to create social space for their hobbies actually contribute more than they imagine!

Three days after Narharpant died on 29th October 1947, Vinoba said in a public address, "My father was not a well-known person, but he was one of the greatest unknown!"

Fortunately, Indian musical tradition can boast of many such non-performing greats, from the most unexpected walks of life, stepping forward to enrich music! One other such person was, for example, Swami Vivekananda! More on him some other time.