

# The Singing Swami

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Pandit Gajananrao Joshi was my first guru. Pt Ramkrishnabuwa Vaze (1872-1943) was his guru. His second guru, to be precise. Vazebuwa was a versatile, witty and a widely travelled vocalist. In his autobiographical account, Vazebuwa mentions his interesting encounter with a swami whose singing of dhrupad impressed him. That was Swami Vivekananda!

Swamiji's father - Vishwanath Dutt was a polyglot lawyer, steeped in Urdu and Farsi literature and immersed in the world of tappa, thumri, and ghazal. Swamiji's mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi could, and would reel off songs from the *Krishna Jatra*. Therefore it is hardly surprising that Narendra (Swamiji's worldly name), at the tender age of five impressed everybody by singing songs/hymns in the praise of the river Ganga on the auspicious Makarsankranti day. On another occasion, Narendra when barely 10 attended a jatra performance by Govind Adhikari, the legendary actor-singer. The next day the Dutt family witnessed an astounding, full scale performance of what Narendra had seen and heard - songs, dialogues and all as if he had learnt everything by heart! Once read/heard and it was sculpted in Narendra's mind! This prompted Vishwanath to initiate Narendra in serious music when they were based in Raipur. However, Vishwanath was an amateur. It was around 1879, when Narendra was a collegian, that his music training assumed a professional character.

His gurus were many and varied. The first two (after his father) were: Benimadhava Adhikari and Ustad Ahemad Khan. In addition, he was also exposed to Kanailal Tendi, Bade and Chote Dunni Khan. His relations - Amritlal and Surendranath - experts in playing many instruments, also influenced Narendra. A feature common to his gurus was their close connection with the lively and rich music theatre of Bengal. Consequently, Narendra's musical profile featured the highly emotive singing of *Geet Govinda*, keertana, shyamsangit, ramprasadi, agamani gana, dhrupad, Bengali compositions based on Hindustani art music, bhajan and also an occasional ghazal. To this was added his skill in playing the pakhawaj and khol. Ecstatic dancing and finally, his extreme solicitude for tuneful, self-absorbed and sonorous music-making in general

completed the picture. His voice in speech as well as in singing could make a distinct impact – on Indians and foreigners alike.

It was not long before the word spread about his singing prowess. Brahma Samaj gatherings could hardly take place without his soulful singing. In college, his classmates would press him to sing if the professor was a little late and the angrez professor would not mind waiting outside the class to savour the collective rapture! Swami Ramakrishna was also initially attracted towards Narendra because of his intensely self-effacing music – music that could transport the Paramhansa to a samadhi-state. This must be somewhat unnerving to others for whom the state of altered consciousness would most likely be a near-myth! In fact during Ramakrishna's illness, a few of his devotees thought that the effect of Narendra's music on Ramakrishna was rather 'dangerous'. Ramakrishna would recommend certain compositions to Narendra – including one by the last Mogul emperor-poet Bahadurshah Zafar. When Ramakrishna was the listener Narendra's music was an act of overwhelming devotion.

Narendra also sang some of Rabindranath Tagore's songs – even before they were printed. When these two (for whom Indian culture was both a premise and a promise) came to know each other, both were in their bare 20s. The common link between them was the Brahma Samaj and deeply-felt regard for each-other's easily discernible qualities.

When Narendra's father died, the family was in dire circumstances. Narendra worked for a while with a lawyer, accepted translating jobs – but acted (yes he did!) and sang for love. It was as if to fulfil an inner need. He composed, taught and wrote on music because for him religious temper and music were two sides of the same act of self-realisation.

His understanding of music was technical and yet his comprehension of music was not limited by his technical knowledge. Therefore he would insist on the emotive quality of music and shunned the way of dry grammatical correctness or dazzling but external virtuosity. He would mark that he famed keertan music of Bengal has only a loose relationship with tala, and would not hesitate to say so. But that did not prevent him from singing it in the authentic tradition, realising that it is the natural rhythm that works over consciousness and not the artificially created tala! He insisted on having as well as tuning a tanpura if he was to sing and yet he does not appear to have rendered khayal music. Why? Was it because he considered khayal not conducive to spirituality? I would have loved to ask him!

During his trip to America he reportedly sent a gramophone machine to the king Khetari - as he sensed the value of this modern invention to Indian music and patrons of music. Was he not a rare example of a modern traditionalist! Next time I would like to examine his understanding and view of Indian music as reflected in his writings.

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