

An eclectic vision of music

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Sangeetkalpadruma by Swami Vivekananda nee Narendra Nath Dutta is a remarkable book for various reasons. For an accomplished performer to write on music was a very rare event in 1887. In those days performers rarely tested theoretical waters. They were reluctant to do so mostly on account of their ignorance. But sometimes they firmly, though ignorantly, believed that their art would suffer if they indulged in intellectual activity. Narendra was only 23 when he published that book. And what is more thought-provoking is that he probably wrote it during the days of mental turmoil preceding his donning the ochre robe of a sanyasi.

He thus was among those few who felt a dual responsibility. For them, to theorise was to rescue the art from a sure decline. They believed that the knowledge of music would surely add to the quality of performance. Secondly, to theorise and write on Indian music was also a nationalistic act. To theorise and write on music was to prove to Indian products of the newly instituted British system and also to white sahibs, that the Indian tradition of music included art as well as science. Significantly, he wrote the book in Bengali.

The book is a neat package. It consists of 90 pages of theory, followed by an extensive compilation of notated pakhawaj compositions and texts of songs classified in 13 thematically oriented sections.

In the theoretical section, the author touches upon topics such as: absence of absolute pitch in Indian music, names of notes, tuning of instruments, male and female vocal ranges, elaboration of notes, tala, raga-ragini, study procedures for singing, notation, genres of music and finally laya, before moving to compositions of pakhawaj music.

Obviously, this can in no way be described as a systematic exposition of the theory/science of Indian music. However, some features attract attention. Firstly, he writes with ease and non-technical simplicity indicating thereby that the layman was his target reader. Secondly, knowledgeable reviewers point out that he can also be counted among the pioneering writers employing Bengali as it was spoken. Thirdly, his

intention to help performers is apparent. The book is almost a manual. It is an eager response to questions which begin, "How to ...?"

One comment is significant. He noted the relative unpopularity of dhrupad (in which he was proficient), and attributed the lack of audience interest in dhrupad to the slow tempo of the genre. Then he writes a sentence of a prophetic resonance: "Mental restraint is very difficult."

I feel that the anthology and notation components are more impressive. He groups nearly 1000 song-texts (of which many are in Bengali), by more than 100 composers/ poets under 13 broad headings. The headings point to two things. Firstly, they bring home Narendra's catholic taste in music in spite of his specialised training in dhrupad. Secondly, as many songs were published much later, the anthology also underscores Narendra's clear reliance on a performing tradition. His grouping is often overlapping as he was obviously documenting a very heterogeneous tradition. To put it in contemporary language, he gives a context of at least four of the five musical traditions in India, namely, religious, folk, art and popular - which indeed is a step ahead of his times. Even today, how many realise that art music i.e. music of raga and tala etc does not adequately reflect Indian music? Narendra was far from a highbrow musicologist who is content to equate personal preference with the reality.

It is symptomatic that the first section in the song-anthology is of nationalist songs. It includes *Vande Mataram* and many others sung in the famous Hindu Mela which was a strong manifestation of the nationalism of the times. The section of religious songs follows - perhaps an indication of Narendra's priorities! Inclusion of Kali Mirza and Nidhu Babu. The famous tappa composers in the Bengali tradition. Nanak, Kabir, Wajid Ali, Tansen, Christian Sangeet or the Islamic songs - everything points to Narendra's musically alert and accommodative attitude.

Indeed musical inclusiveness - an eclectic vision was the foundation of his musicianship. In April 1891, before proceeding on his American tour and after taking sanyas, he was in the Khetri court near Jaipur (Rajasthan). During the court ceremonies, a female dancer was invited to perform and the young monk felt insulted. He was about to get up and leave when the dancer bowing to him sang the famous bhajan, *Prabhu mere avagun chit na dharo*, pleading and arguing, 'O God. you should not look at my demerits alone'. The dancer taught him a lesson in humility through a bhajan, which he sang in the latter years of his life. For a person who would sing both Nanak and Bahadur Shah Zafar, the musical spectrum was very wide and rich.