

USTAD ALLAUDDIN KHAN

Rajendar Shankar

Ustad Allauddin Khan was born in a middle-class peasant family in the village of Shivpur, near Brahmanbaria, now in Bangladesh. He was lovingly called Alam. His father, Sadhu Khan, played the *sitar*, while his elder brother, Aftaaddin, had a natural gift for music, playing the *tabla*, *pakhawaj*, *do-tara* and the flute.

Alam was born with music in and around him, and evinced a craze for it right from his childhood. To save him from becoming a waster later on he was packed off to the village school at a tender age. But haunted by music Alam would stop at the Shankar temple on the way and spend the time listening to *kirtans* and *sitar* with great joy. Caught in his truancy he got a good hiding. Instead of reforming him this propelled him into the unknown world, for Alam ran away from home to Dacca. Thus started the exciting quest of a music-crazed lad on a protracted pilgrimage.

In Dacca he learnt *shenai* from Munne Khan and the Bengal *dhol* from another expert. It was hard work but he loved it. Stories of great musicians in Calcutta began to haunt his imagination. Joining a *Jatra* party he finally reached the city. The mighty atom, lost in the great metropolis, slaked his thirst from a public tap and lay down to sleep on the pavement to dream of becoming a great musician. When he woke in the morning the small packet which served as the pillow and contained all his worldly possessions was gone! Shocked and stunned, but undaunted, he started walking, in search of food for the body and music for the soul.

Eating one meal at a charitable kitchen and going through a hard time which would have made any other child run back home crying, he

finally heard of the great teacher, Gopal Chandra Bhattacharjee, popularly known as Nulo Gopal. Allauddin took up the Hindu name of Prasanna Biswas and approached the great teacher.

Nulo Gopal maintained the traditional way of teaching which involved rigorous *swara sadhana*, the practice of notes in special groupings like *sargam*, *palta*, *alankar*, *murchhana* etc., for 12 years, before taking up a *raga* in its full and expansive form. Allauddin accepted the terms and started intensive and prolonged practice. His insatiable zeal for instruments led him to learn the violin from Mr. Lobo. Being ambidextrous, he used to bow with the left, while he played the *tabla* with the right hand. Thus passed seven years. In the meantime he took up service in the Star Theatre orchestra at a salary of Rs 12, which ended his days of semi-starvation.

His brother Aftaaddin came to him in Calcutta and with the permission of the *guru* persuaded him to come home for a short while. Unknown to him they had planned to get him married so that he would stay home. But on the very night after his wedding he ran away once more from home to his only love, music.

On reaching Calcutta he learnt that his *guru* had suddenly died. Stunned and heart-broken he gave up vocal music. But the training proved invaluable because he could now take down in simple notation any music he heard or composed.

The extreme ease with which young Allauddin could master vocal and instrumental music gave him a lot of confidence and no little sense of pride. He went to the court of Raja Jagat Kishore of Muktagachha, in Bengal, to prove his mettle among other musicians who had gathered there. Here he heard the famous *sarod* player, Ustad Ahmed Ali, whose music overpowered Allauddin. He shed his pride and fell at the feet of the *ustad* and begged to be accepted as a pupil. This meeting proved a turning point in his life in as much as it convinced him that *sarod* was the instrument meant for him.

Allauddin considered his new teacher as one of the most handsome persons and the best *sarod* player. He served him with love, devotion and loyalty.

Having heard of his new pupil's spontaneous knack to master anything taught, the Ustad was calculatedly chary in his teaching. But the pupil accompanied him all over India and soon began to make notations of whatever he heard, sitting behind the teacher, during public recitals, and practised them later on.

Ustad Ahmed Ali was a spendthrift, specially when under the influence of drink. So, Allauddin put away and saved whatever he could. And

when after four years they reached Rampur, the home of the *ustad*, he presented the teacher with the substantial amount he had saved. The *ustad* was very happy; but this was short lived. When he found out that Allauddin had learnt all the music specialities of the family on the sly, he was furious and rudely turned him out.

Rampur was an acclaimed seat of music under the Nawab and now Allauddin openly declared himself a Muslim. But as a Bengali Muslim he was rather looked down upon by his co-religionists in Western India. The shock and depression at being summarily dropped by his teacher were, however, soon replaced by the coveted dream of learning from Wazir Khan, the greatest living *veena* player, and the *ustad* of Nawab Hamid Ali Khan of Rampur.

Full of hope and confidence he went forth to meet the great maestro who lived like a prince in a palace with sentries at the gate. They scowled suspiciously at the ill clad, short, unimpressive man, unable even to talk properly in Urdu, and barred his entrance. But Allauddin, right from his childhood had been adamant in following his dynamic impulses when in pursuit of music. As a young man now he made up his mind that he would either learn from the great Wazir Khan or give up his life in the attempt. Baffled in his attempts to meet the maestro he decided on the tragic alternative. He went and bought two *tolas* of opium for the purpose.

Fate having decreed otherwise, he met his savior in the person of a Mulla who was greatly stirred by his story and suggested a way out. He wrote an application on behalf of Allauddin and advised him to present it personally to the Nawab. This proved a greater problem than meeting Wazir Khan!

All attempts to meet the Nawab proving abortive, he began to toy with the idea of ending his life when he heard that the Nawab was to attend a musical play by Wazir Khan. Allauddin quickly decided on the strategy to catch the Nawab on the way. He positioned himself at a suitable place hours before the Nawab was due. Trembling with excitement he at last espied the Nawab's car approaching. The music-mad youngster recklessly threw himself before the car. With screeching brakes the car stopped. The guards swooped on him and dragged him mercilessly out of the way, while he was mumbling incoherently, waving the application. The Nawab read the application and found out how this lad had come all the way from Bengal to learn from the great *ustad*. At the last para of the application he smiled and ordered him to be searched. The lethal lump of opium was found on his person!

The unorthodox but risky way of seeking royal audience, however, succeeded. Allauddin was permitted to give a command performance

on the *sarod*. The Nawab was pleased and asked if he could handle any other instruments. Allauddin meekly submitted that he could handle any instrument available in the place. The Nawab was amused and decided to have a little fun at the cost of this meek looking rustic braggart from Bengal, and ordered all the instruments in the palace to be brought out. Allauddin was now in his element, and with a great amount of zeal gave demonstrations on the violin, flute, *dilruba*, trumpet, clarinet, harmonium, drums and other instruments. The Nawab, himself a musician and a connoisseur, was amazed. In fun he asked if he could do anything else. Pat came the reply that he could make notations of anything sung or played. The Nawab then sang a piece. Allauddin wrote it down and sang it back. The Nawab found it too much and sang a '*gamak taan*'. Allauddin suddenly realised that the Nawab was getting piqued and irritated and so curbed his enthusiasm and apologetically submitted that such a difficult *taan* would be impossible to write down! The Nawab gave a winning smile at having at last stumped this amazing young aspirant. In his benign mood he recommended Allauddin to be accepted as a disciple by the great *veena* maestro.

For two-and-a-half years he remained a disciple in name only, though he spent his days waiting on the maestro and looking after him like a servant. Living alone in the city, near the music club where all the state musicians gathered at evenings, Allauddin availed of all possible opportunities to hear them. Thus he heard the great Inayat Hussain Khan, *Guru* and father-in-law of the late Mustaq Hussain Khan, and his brother, a *veenkar*, Mohammad Hussain Khan, and the two brothers, Kallu and Hafeez, famous *sitar* players of the *Senia Gharana*. Allauddin also joined the group of musicians for the orchestra.

Wazir Khan one day summoned Allauddin and asked him if he were married and had relatives. As before he denied having any one. Suddenly Wazir Khan held out a telegram sent by Allauddin's brother, mentioning that his wife had tried to commit suicide! Stunned and paralysed with fear he hung his head. But instead of getting angry, the maestro felt touched at the intense love and devotion for music that had driven the young man to renounce his home, wife and family and come all the way to learn from him. So, after the neglect of years, his training started and his devotion and patience were rewarded.

Having the uncanny gift of mastering the most difficult musical compositions in the shortest time, he was nicknamed the 'Djin'. Thus he quickly made up for the lost time and learnt the rare compositions of the *Gharana*: *dhrupad*, *dhamar*, *hori*, *tarana*, *tappa* and other traditional styles. He was taught the form and style followed in playing *veena*, *sur sringar* and the *rabab*, but was never to play the *veena*. Thus passed two decades in intensive studies.

After leaving Rampur he first performed at a music club in Bhawani-pur, Calcutta. His submissive and meek manners and unobtrusive personality hardly attracted attention. But the sparkling performance on the *sarod* for over four hours created a great stir among musicians. And it was here that he attracted the attention of a rich music lover, Shamlal Khetri, who recommended him to the Maharaja of Maihar, then on the look out for two outstanding musicians, one to teach him and the other to look after the Maihar Band.

Maharaj Brijnarain Singh of Maihar found Ustad Allauddin Khan capable of filling both the assignments. The Maharaja became his first disciple in 1918. He learnt *dhrupad*, *hori*, *khyal chaturanga*, *thumri*, *tappa* and other styles.

It was for the first time that the *ustad* settled down at one place, and it was in Maihar that he made his final home. Here his son, Ali Akbar, was born in 1922 and later his daughter, Annapurna.

The Maihar Band was composed of boys orphaned in the epidemic of influenza that raged after the First World War. It goes to show the teaching capacity and patience of the *ustad* to weld them into a first class band which soon made a name. Many of these boys have grown into old men and still play in the Band.

Unassuming, hospitable, jovial, frank and childlike, he became a different person when he began to teach. Called affectionately "Baba", he soon began to attract students and Maihar, in Madhya Pradesh, began to be well known. Timir Baran became his second disciple and inspired by his *guru* he started his own orchestra in Calcutta.

Uday Shankar, returning after a decade from the West, wanted Indian dancers and musicians to take back to Europe, and his choice as a director of his new orchestra and a soloist fell on Timir Baran. To take the permission and blessings of his *guru*, Uday Shankar met Baba with Timir Baran. At the very first meeting he was so fascinated by the character, vitality and virtuosity of Baba that he wanted to take him abroad to give an adequate idea of the height Indian music had attained. His dreams were finally realised when Baba accompanied Uday Shankar and his troupe as an outstanding soloist in 1935. It was perhaps the first occasion when an Indian musician of such a calibre and accomplishment performed so extensively in Europe. Apart from his *sarod* solos, his demonstration on the drums amazed and thrilled western audiences.

This association created an undying respect and affection between the *sarod* wizard and the creative pioneer of modern Indian ballet. It did more. It brought young Ravi Shankar under the dynamic spell of the maestro. To quote Ravi Shankar: "My first impression was in startling contrast

to all that I had heard about him. In him I found a sweet, humble, gentle person—a man with true Vaisnava spirit that one seldom meets. Only when involved in music does he become the hard task-master, the strict disciplinarian. As far as music is concerned he has no patience with mediocrity. To him music has been sacred and completely religious. . . . In the spirit of the *rishis* he has never allowed himself to waver from the goal of eternal music-perfection. And, of course, he has always felt that all musicians should have the same goal. . . .”

Ravi Shankar became his disciple in 1938 and remained at Maihar for seven years. And it was while practising together that he and Ali Akbar developed the *sitar-sarod jugalbandi* (duet) that has become so famous.

In the same year Uday Shankar started the Culture Centre at Almora. With the permission of the Maharaja, Baba became the guest teacher during summer, in charge of music. It was a great sight to see Guru Shankaran Namboodri (*Kathakali*), Guru Amubi Singh (*Manipuri*), Guru Kandappan Pillai (*Bharat Natyam*) and Baba, together, chatting and discussing matters like intimate friends. Their respect for one another and a feeling of kinship based on the same fundamental approach through faith and devotion to their art, broke down all barriers of provincialism, language, caste and creed. This is amply proved by one of the many incidents at the Centre.

Guru Shankaran Namboodri, an exalted Brahmin from Malabar, was a great devotee of Nataraj. Morning and evening he worshipped the huge image installed in his front room. One morning he came up to Baba all excited, and said how in his dream Nataraja had wanted to hear music. So Baba must come and play before the diety that afternoon.

Baba was equally excited. Great men, Maharajas and Zamindars had heard him, but never before had he been summoned to play before Shiva, the Lord of the Dance! Uday Shankar and several members of the Centre were already gathered in the room when Baba, dressed in freshly washed clothes, climbed up the stairs to the verandah, bare foot, hugging his *sarod*. Instead of entering the room he began to squat at the thres hold to the surprise of everyone. But Guru Shankaran Namboodri rushed out, caught hold of him and dragged him inside.

When God Himself wanted to hear music, how could the maker of the music be treated as an outcaste! The Guru made Baba sit right in front of the huge image in glistening black stone, specially decked for the occasion, with oil lamps lit around.

Baba seemed to be transformed. The barriers that segregate humans from humanity just disappeared. In a trance, he began to play; the atmosphere became surcharged with a strange mystic aura. No one had

heard such music from Baba. It seemed to well out of the very depths of his being—out of the lush rice fields and the rivers in spate, forests and mountains, sunshine and storms, hunger and travail, grim struggle and success, sorrow and joy, devotion and surrender, a veritable blend of stark grimness and enveloping sublimity. One could realise life in its totality, a fullness replete in itself.

How time passed no one knew. When the last note died away a throbbing stillness filled the room. The lights flickered and a kind of suppressed sob brought all back to reality. It was Guru Namboodri sobbing with joy. He picked Baba up and clasped him to his bosom, whispering in a voice choked with emotion: "How fortunate you are! Within an hour you have reached Nataraj, while with all my prayers these years, I am no nearer!" It was a heart-warming sight. It made one realise how the great masters have regarded their art as a means of self realisation, an instrument of faith, a potent votive offering.

Baba made no distinction between communities nor did he believe in untouchability. In his house hung pictures of deities and saints of all religions along with the picture of Mecca and Medina where he had gone on pilgrimage. A devout Muslim, who had done the 'Haj' and never missed his Namaz, he went for *darshan* of Sharda Mai on the hill, and composed hymns to Saraswati the Goddess of music and learning. Behind his rough and rustic exterior was a very tender and kind heart.

Baba's new house at Maihar, Madina Bhavan, became a talk of the town. One day while he was working in the garden, he saw an infirm old woman slowly open the gate and peep around with myopic eyes. He recognised the old sweeper woman and guessed that she was curious to see the new house. Baba caught her by the arm and led her into the house. As he showed her around, he noticed the mark of annoyance on the face of his wife and a feeling of shock and disgust clear on the face of his daughter. He said nothing but took the woman upstairs to his sanctum and made her sit and rest on the bed. Then he shouted to his daughter to bring sweets and tea for the guest. Baba forced the embarrassed woman to eat everything and drink the tea, and then called his daughter to take away the plate and the glass and wash them herself. After seeing the woman off, who was almost in tears at the extraordinary treatment, Baba returned, caught hold of his daughter and said: "Never look down on anybody. She too has a soul!"

After Independence the classical arts were given national recognition. Baba was honoured by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1952, was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1958 and the Padma Vibhushan in 1971. He was the recipient of many medals, titles and honours, including the honorary doctorate from Visvabharati University, Shanti Niketan.

A man of regular and austere habits, Baba never gave himself airs. He did his own marketing, carried his own instrument and was active and punctual in teaching students at home and attending the Maihar College of Music of which he was the Principal. In between he found time to look after the garden, supervise the cows and feed the family of dogs that had freely bred in the compound of the garden. Despite two severe paralytic strokes in 1961 and a risky operation in 1962, he pulled through by dint of sheer will. Despite prosperity, honour and distinction, he maintained his humility and utter simplicity. Any one visiting him at Maihar can never forget his joyous welcome and warm hospitality.

In October 1962, Madhya Pradesh celebrated the birth centenary of Ustad Allauddin Khan. There is some controversy about the date of his birth. He passed away at Maihar on September 6, 1972.

In the final analysis it is not the exact age that matters, but the achievements. The ragas he created will live on, the important ones being: *Hemant, Prabhakali, Hem-Bihag, Muhammad, Manj-Khamaj, Sobhavati, Madanmanjari, Madhasri, Hemanta-Bhairav, Sursati, Bhagvati, Madhavgiri.*

Baba has left behind his brilliant disciples: Timir Baran, Ali Akbar, Ravi Shankar, Annapurna, Saran Rani, Nikhil Banerji, Indranil and others. Two of his disciples, the Maharaja of Maihar (whose death in the autumn of 1970 was a great blow for Baba), and Pannalal Ghosh are no more. Baba will live on through his disciples and their disciples.

Art may be immortal, but artistes, alas, are mortal. Nonetheless, they gain immortality through the valuable contributions that form a rich tributary to the main stream of culture. Though Ustad Allauddin Khan is no more, he has gained immortality and will always live through his disciples whose innate latent talents he brought out and lit through the magic of his own insatiable love, zeal, dedication and total surrender to music.

Baba never accepted anything from his disciples. The music he taught was a gift of love and joy. Hence if there is anything that all can learn from this humble, devout and kind man of the soil, it is to learn how to give. When we give, the world is enriched. When we take, we alone possess it.

RAJENDAR SHANKAR, brother of Uday and Ravi, is the writer-journalist in the family. He is Director of "Sancharini", Bombay, an Institute for the promotion of music and dance.