

BEGUM AKHTAR

Random Thoughts and Personal Reminiscences

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When I first accepted the assignment to write about Begum Akhtar it was quite obviously the result of a flash of thought that it should not be difficult because after all I had known her very closely for twentyseven years. But when I actually sat down to write I realised how difficult it was because her personality was so varied and rich, even like the life which she had lived, that one did not know where to start. That Begum Akhtar sang marvellously is something which everyone knows. For nearly four decades except for a gap of about five years, she enthralled her audiences wherever she went and to my knowledge there never was a performance without several encores. That in itself was no mean achievement but I often wondered, because it would have been too facile a question to ask her, what she must have felt when she heard such repeated and thunderous applause. I imagine it brought intense joy and a sense of fulfilment and quite apart from the money it must have been quite a heady, intoxicating reward. During the last few years of her life when she was unsparing of herself, often unwell as a result of frequent and intense tours all over the country, I used to advise her to take a little time off and rest but she always replied that she would welcome nothing better than to die singing. And that is what actually happened. I suppose it is a marvellous end to one's life in this world if one can just fade away in the midst of doing what is dearest to one's heart.

When I arrived in Lucknow way back in 1946 to take up an appointment in AIR I was already familiar with her music on records. She was living in Lucknow and although I knew several persons who knew her, including Saeeda Ahmed (then Raza) who was a very close friend of Akhtar's, I never had the opportunity or occasion to meet her. I used to wonder why such a great artiste as her had given up music and the cryptic comment from all her acquaintances was: she has got married and is a mere housewife now. But one evening, sometime in the summer of 1948, I met Mr. Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi who used to attend *mushairas* organised by AIR and he invited me to dinner at his house. I went and that was the beginning of my long friendship with her. It was an informal evening with the Abbasis and

two other guests, Justice Walford and Ghulam Sabir Khan of Kanpur. Ghulam Sabir was an exquisite *Sarangi* player and an equally good light-classical singer. In fact some of the compositions of *ghazals* which Begum Akhtar used to sing were to his tunes. He sang for over an hour and before dinner was served I asked Begum Akhtar to sing at least one *ghazal*. Her husband answered for her : she has given up singing. Naturally, I was disappointed, but for several days after that evening it was difficult to forget her as she sat listening to Ghulam Sabir. It was the image of a glamorous but sad woman with a dazzling career in the past but at that time like a mere memory. She was still very young. She was 34 when I met her and it is difficult to imagine anyone more attractive, although she was not beautiful in the narrow accepted sense. She used to wear *Kurta-gharara*, large diamond rings and invariably carried a huge bag. She wore *itr* for perfume and ate a lot of *paan* with *zarda*. She had a deep husky voice and her inimitable sense of humour was always accompanied by a smile of bewitching attraction.

I was incharge of the music section at AIR, Lucknow in those days and used to comper the Wednesday night request programme of film music. Very often Begum Akhtar would telephone and ask me to play some of her favourites with a classical base but each time I asked her when she would resume singing, she would reply : "one of these days, I will." I suggested that I could record her in order to save her the embarrassment of a live performance but she kept avoiding the offer.

One morning in September the telephone on my desk rang and it was her. I thought it would be yet another request for a film song but she said: "send me your staff car a little after eleven o'clock and I shall come over and record for you. But please ensure that no one gets to know about it or else I shall come away." I was naturally very excited about this breakthrough but realised immediately what a tall order she had given me. The radio station used to be teeming with artistes, producers and others at that hour of the morning. So how could I possibly ensure that no one would know that the great "Akhtari" was in the studio, recording after five years? I confidentially whispered this to some of the accompanists who spontaneously agreed to stay back for the special occasion. I literally bribed the studio commissionaire, Pandey, to keep guard and not let anyone in to the studio. And dear old Sinha who was one of the most outstanding recording engineers that AIR has ever had on its staff promised to assist by not putting out the recording on any loudspeaker in the building but by monitoring it on the headphones.

So the stage was set on that historic morning of the 25th September 1948. Akhtari came and I whisked her away into the studio, fortunately unnoticed. She sang for an hour-and-a-half and when the recording was played back to her she wept at the marvel of her own performance. Even a

great artiste must lose confidence in one's ability after a gap of five years. But those were tears of joy, because it was still all there, the magic and nuance of her voice and if anything could reassure her, it was that recording. I had known all along that if she could but hear herself once, she would return to the world of music. The hunch had been proved right. She gathered her large bag and the *paandan* of engine-turned-silver and wiping the tears with her *dopatta* she asked me to have her dropped home immediately because it was time for her *Mian* to return from the court.

I offered several contracts for broadcasting to Begum Akhtar after that memorable day. She signed them assuring me that she would come but for almost another three months she did not fulfil them. Mr. Abbasi and I had become friends but I was mortally afraid for having let him down with this clandestine recording which I had put on the air when she failed to appear for the broadcasts. But then we managed to make yet another recording and ultimately Mr. Abbasi agreed to let her broadcast, though not before an invited audience. And so it was for some two or three years. Begum Akhtar had returned to the world of music which she adored. Gradually she began to perform in public, though never in Lucknow.

It would seem as if Mr. Abbasi was the stumbling block in her way to resume singing. But Saeda Ahmed who was instrumental in the finalisation of their marriage affirms that Begum Akhtar had agreed to give up singing in public. Mr. Abbasi himself asserts that he married her, not because she was a great singer but because of what she was as a person. I have no reason to disbelieve him. I was responsible for that clandestine recording which made her return and to this day Mr. Abbasi had never once reprimanded me for it. On the contrary he has been very understanding and we remain the best of friends. In any case her return to music was everybody's gain and the world of Indian music would have been the poorer, if it was not for that morning of the 25th September, 1948. Mr. Abbasi was aware that once she resumed singing there would be no end to requests from all over the country and her frequent absence, for long periods, would deprive him of her company. Not insignificantly, therefore, when I called on him in Lucknow after Begum Akhtar's death he read a couplet which is so poignant :

*Badi khushi thi ek aashiyā banāne ki
Ban chuka to lag gayi nazar zamāne ki.*

It is not difficult to understand such sentiment. I imagine when two individuals in love pursue different vocations and are kept apart because of the built-in requirements of such totally different calls, the absence from one another can be unbearable.

Yet Begum Akhtar was constantly in touch with her home and her husband, no matter where she was. She loved her home, which very few

people knew. If the desire to sing was inexorable, the longing for her home was equally strong. When she was at home it was difficult for anyone to imagine that she could be anything but a devoted housewife. She would sweep the floors because she was impatient with recalcitrant, lazy domestic servants. She would buy gadgets and decorative pieces for the house wherever she went. She would buy presents for everyone among the large family of her sister, and cook the most exquisite meals for the family and her guests and was one of the finest hostesses I have ever come across. Begum Akhtar's hospitality was not confined to her home alone. She earned millions by singing and she spent millions because of her generosity and her magnanimity. Food in hotels is expensive but whenever people visited her during her stay in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad and scores of other places to which she went, it was always 'open house.' "Have you eaten?", was invariably the first question. Any hesitation in answer produced the most fabulous food and delicacies and of course music by her, to boot.

Begum Akhtar loved people. She was gregarious, no doubt, but she cared even for strangers. Many unknown poets came into prominence because she sang their compositions, some of which were of indifferent value. She had no use for money because she gave it away as easily and readily as it came to her. She loved all the good things in life, like all of us, but these were not an end in themselves. Everything else was subservient to MUSIC which was her very life blood. She encouraged young aspiring musicians to sing and she would often accompany them on the harmonium to help them overcome their diffidence.

It is difficult to list all the facets of Begum Akhtar's many-sided personality, her traits of character, in one single piece of writing. But I would like to narrate one instance of her affection and friendship for people whom she cared for. It must have been the experience of many whose friendship she valued. I had not met her for some months last year because I was away in Europe. When we did talk over the telephone after my return she asked my wife and me over to dinner. I replied that I was already bespoken for that evening and I would meet her the next day. She, of course, would hear none of it and said that we should eat very little wherever we were going and she would wait for us for dinner in her hotel room. I suggested that the appointment should be left open. When we returned from the other dinner it was well past midnight. The telephone rang as I went into my flat but I ignored it little realising it could be her. I went to sleep. The telephone rang again but I thought someone must have dialled a wrong number. At about 4.30 in the morning there was a persistent ring of the doorbell. Muttering abuse at whoever could have been a caller at that unearthly hour I got up and walked to the door. Angrily, I asked who it was. It was Begum Akhtar who said : "*Ham hain. Darwaza kholo.*" She said she had sat up waiting the whole night and telephoned and that the only punishment she could think of was to order me to accompany her back, as I was, to her hotel. I quickly

changed and went along with her in a taxi to her hotel. The moment she reached her room she plonked on to the bed, turned towards the wall and went off to sleep. When I was about to leave after a while she awoke and said that the punishment was not over and I should keep sitting. I slept in my chair till seven and after breakfast I was "let off" for my misdemeanour. I can think of several such instances of affection for myself, my wife and my daughters. There will, perhaps, never be a person like her again.

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