



Gangubai Hangal : A Tribute—II

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Nearly two years went by but there was still no guru in sight. In this interregnum Gangubai learnt Kathak from two dancers of Rajasthan in Dharwad, Shyamlal and Prataplal. She also learnt from them some *thumris*, *ghazals*, and *dadras*. Gangubai's mother Ambabai taught Gangubai a few more *kirtanams* of Tyagaraja. Ambabai also made her practice the scales. Gangubai soon gave up dance lessons as she was told it would affect her *dam sans*—on which depended the ability to sing a scale in ascent and descent several times in one breath. Her *riaz* continued, but a guru was needed for systematic training in Hindustani music, *khayal* in particular. Failing to find a guru in Dharwad, Ambabai moved back to Hubli with her daughter. The intervention of a *rasika* of Hubli, Dattopant Desai, providentially brought to Gangubai a guru of renown.

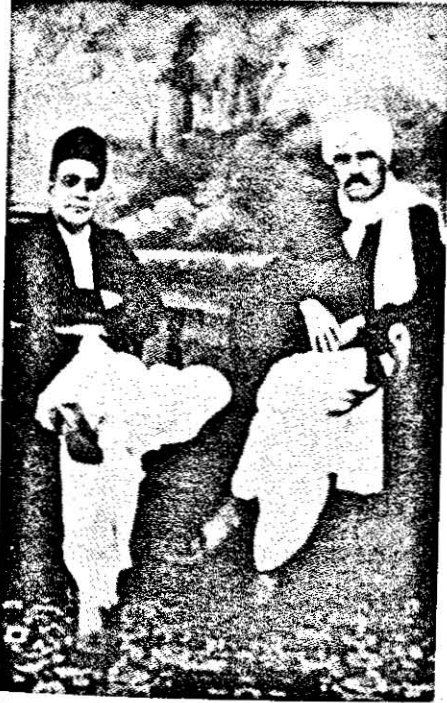
Dattopant Desai was a friend of Ramabhau Kundgolkar—better known by his title Sawai Gandharva—a notable student of Ustad Abdul Karim Khan, founder of the Kirana *gharana*. A busy professional musician, Sawai

Gandharva had left his native Kundgol, in the vicinity of Hubli, and divided his time chiefly between Bombay and Pune which offered larger patronage. Invitations for recitals took him all over India, besides the tours of the theatre company in which he was employed as a singer-actor, run by Hirabai Barodekar. Off and on, for a week or ten days at a stretch, Sawai Gandharva was at Hubli with Dattopant Desai.

Dattopant Desai had heard Gangubai when she was learning from Hudgur Krishtacharya during the year earlier spent in Hubli. He knew she had promise, and had been moved by Ambabai's efforts to prepare her daughter for a career in music. He arranged a meeting between Sawai Gandharva and Ambabai, hoping the former would accept Gangubai as a student. At first Sawai Gandharva turned down his friend's request: "When I don't stay in Hubli, how could I teach the child properly?" But Dattopant Desai persisted, and it was agreed that Sawai Gandharva would teach Gangubai whenever he came to Hubli and would suggest the *riaz* to be done in his absence. Dattopant Desai and Ambabai would see to it that his instructions were followed.

Finally the guru accepted the disciple; the first *cheez* he taught her was 'Guru bin kaise gun gave'. He also gave instructions about *kharaj* practice and *dam sans*. Every morning, at least for half an hour, Gangubai was to practice the notes from *shadja* to *mandra madhyama* expending one full deep breath on each note; this *kharaj* exercise was to be repeated using *akar* instead of notation. The *dam sans* exercise was to sing some given scales or *paltas* up and down in one breath. When Gangubai practised, her youngest uncle Ramachandra — Ramanna would playfully compete with her to see how many times each one could sing these scales in one breath. In addition to the *paltas* Sawai Gandharva prescribed, Dattopant Desai would suggest notations from books for practice. Besides Ambabai, who was note-perfect and adept in *tala* by virtue of her Carnatic training, would devise small *tans* and teach them to her daughter. Gangubai often asked her mother why she did not teach her compositions from her Carnatic repertoire. Ambabai always replied that whatever was available at home Gangubai could learn any time; the first priority was to learn what a guru like Sawai Gandharva had to offer.

Besides direct instruction from Sawai Gandharva, Gangubai learnt from him indirectly by her mother's ingenious methods. When the theatre company in which Sawai Gandharva was employed performed in Hubli, he and other actors would rehearse the songs, at Dattopant Desai's instance, in Ambabai's home. While the guru practised Ambabai quietly notated the songs behind the scenes and taught them later to her daughter. Whenever possible, Ambabai also notated his classical recitals in part also those of



Sawai Gandharva (left) with Dattopant Desai.



Sawai Gandharva

Ustad Abdul Karim Khan. Gangubai's knowledge of *tala* was meagre in those days. Whenever Gangubai sang in a gathering Ambabai would sit with her, with her hand on Gangubai's back, partly to give her confidence and partly to indicate the *tala*. Ambabai was anxious that Gangubai's training in Hindustani music should not be influenced by her own Carnatic style. So she gave up singing altogether—a great sacrifice as she was passionately devoted to music. Ambabai transmitted this passion to her daughter, instilled in her the discipline music demanded, and laid the foundations of her career as truly as a dedicated guru. Thus with occasional lessons from Sawai Gandharva and supervision by Dattopant Desai, Ambabai, and her brother Ramanna, Gangubai's systematic musical education began.

In 1929, when she was only 16, Gangubai was married to Gurunath Kowlagi—a Brahmin by birth, a lawyer by education, and by disposition a *rasika*. Gurunath was already married by the time he met Gangubai—he had married early according to the custom of the time. There was no law then against a second marriage, but the social norms did not permit a Brahmin to marry beneath his caste. Gangubai's grandmother too had her

own objections to the marriage. These difficulties were finally overcome, but the marriage ceremony was performed with only Gangubai's family present. In accordance with the *Kulachar*, a Tabla and Tanpura were kept on the marriage *vedi*, perhaps to remind Gangubai that she had to keep faith not only with her husband but with the musical profession as well. Gangubai continued to keep her name and live with Ambabai even after the marriage. It took some years for the relationship to be accepted by her husband's family.

Three years later, catastrophe struck. Ambabai died, in 1932, untimely, at the age of 35. She died of a stomach tumour which not removed for fear of surgery till terminal stage. When Ambabai did permit an operation, it was too late to be successful. Gangubai was then 18 and was carrying her first child. She was shattered by her mother's death and was unable to sing for some time. Ambabai's husband Chikkurao Nadgir was so grieved that he left home after immersing his wife's ashes and died within a year.

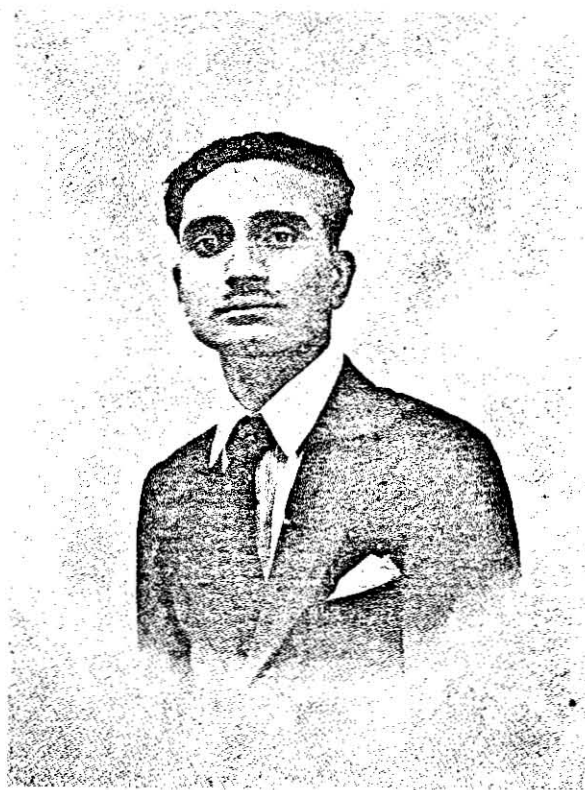
Two persons reawakened Gangubai to music—Dattopant Desai and her uncle Ramanna. For hours every morning and evening they would play the Tanpura and Tabla, giving Gangubai the cue to sing. The thoughtfulness



Gurunath Kowlagi



Gangubai



Ramanna

and persistence of two music-loving lawyers of Hubli also helped. These *rasikas* would invite Gangubai to perform every Saturday and, though she often broke down and was unable to sing, they would always send on her fees. Slowly Gangubai recovered and returned to her *riaz*, urged on by the memory of her mother's long effort to prepare her as a musician.

A few months before Ambabai's death, a talent scout from a gramophone company had come to Hubli and 'booked' Gangubai and Ambabai for discs to be issued later that year. Ambabai had passed away before the recording, so Gangubai went to Bombay with Ramanna for the cutting of her first disc. Recording of songs for commercial discs, she recalls, was then an annual event presided over by a British engineer who came with his equipment from London. He stayed in Bombay for about two months to record the musicians contracted by the company, who gathered *en masse* before his arrival. Four to six discs of each singer were cut—eight or 12 songs. Gangubai was not then a singer of much experience, but was adept at short recitals—and the discs were only of three-and-half minutes. The company paid her no fees for the first set of her records. They only paid the travel, boarding and lodging expenses of Gangubai and her escort Ramanna. For her second set of records she was paid Rs 400 for 12 songs. Gangubai recalls that musicians in those days were so pleased that

their records were being issued that they never worried about fees.

In subsequent years the company issued several discs of Gangubai. Besides classical compositions, these were of Marathi songs, mostly by Mama Warerkar, and *ghazals* and *thumris* she had learnt from her dance teachers. The rehearsals were a kind of community exercise where many musicians participated. There was a sense of camaraderie and cooperation. If a singer fell short of songs to make up the total of six or 12 contracted for, some other singer present would come to his aid and teach him a song he himself was not going to record. Gangubai's '*Dar dar bole*' in *raga* Sughray was gifted to her in this manner. Further, the music director of the company, Anna Mainkar, would invite suggestions on songs and tunes from the artistes gathered. Thus at a rehearsal Gangubai cast two songs in *ragas* Natakuranji and Madhyamavati from her mother's Carnatic repertoire for discs by other singers.

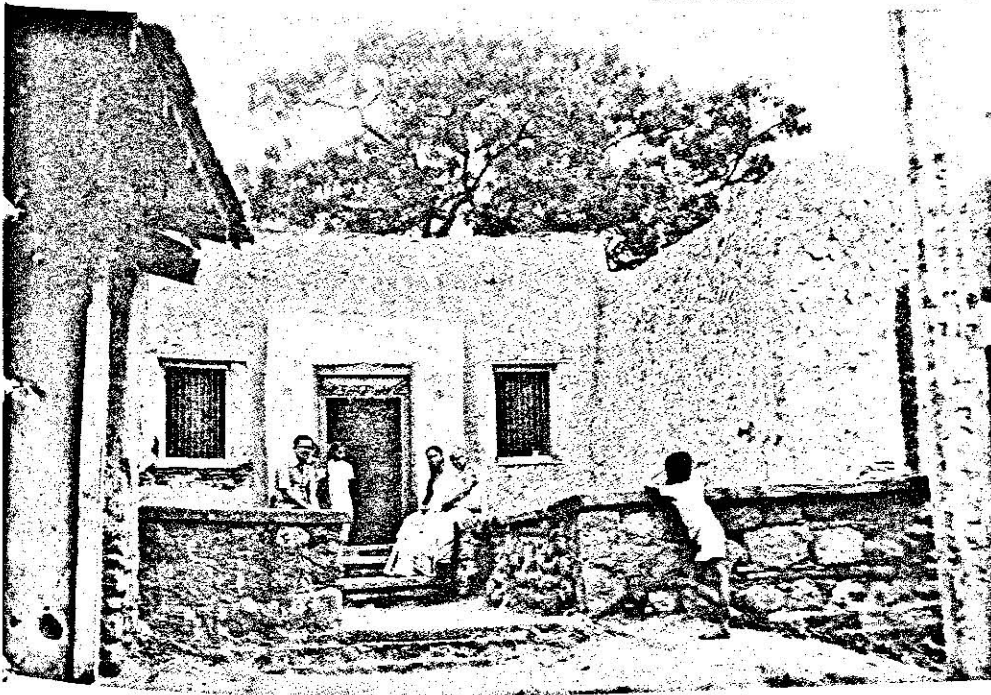
When I was researching for my film on Gangubai G.N. Joshi, a popular Marathi singer of yesteryear, recounted a studio experience evidencing Gangubai's facility with any song. Joshi was to record a duet with a lady singer: '*Chakake kor chandrachi*' ('How beautifully the crescent moon shines'). The song opened with a *madhyama* at 'black five' pitch which the lady could not produce however hard she tried. Gangubai was there at the rehearsal, and Joshi requested her to sing the opening line to help the lady artiste. After several refusals for reasons of professional propriety Gangubai relented, and as she sang out the opening line the recording engineer shouted bravo! His instruments had registered just the right note. Joshi and he pressed Gangubai to record the duet with Joshi. Gangubai refused repeatedly, but eventually agreed to sing at the request of the lady artiste herself. After a few rehearsals the song was recorded. It must have become popular because when I met P.L. Deshpande during preparations for my film on Gangubai he immediately started singing the song and asked me if I was going to use it in my film.

Despite such popular success, Gangubai was still not established as a classical musician. She had utilized all instruction that came her way but was denied the benefit of sustained *talim* from her guru, with whom her contact remained irregular and sporadic for years. It was only when Sawai Gandharva retired and settled down in Kundgol in 1937 that Gangubai began learning from him regularly. For about four years from then, she commuted daily from Hubli to Kundgol, escorted by Ramanna, and returned home late at night. Such was the position of a woman musician then, Gangubai recalls, that she was often pointed at and jeered during her mile-long walk from Kundgol station to Sawai Gandharva's home. This did



Gangubai with her daughter Krishna.

Sawai Gandharva's home in Kundgol.



not upset her unduly.

Around the same time Bhimsen Joshi and Nanasahib Nadgir of Kundgol became students of Sawai Gandharva. But he taught all three separately, because he believed that teaching of vocal music had to be in accordance with an individual student's voice and musical ability. There could be no teaching *en masse*.

Two chance happenings brought Gangubai to the notice of classical music circles in Bombay and All India Radio. One of these was at major annual music festival sponsored by His Masters Voice at Goregaon, now a suburb of Bombay. The last recital of the evening, by Menakabai Shirodkar, had concluded by two in the morning, but there was no train for Bombay till dawn. Some more music was in order to fill the empty hours and Gangubai, the youngest musician present, was asked to sing. Among senior musicians at the gathering were Hirabai Barodekar and her sisters, Ustads Manji Khan and Vilayat Hussain Khan, Shreemati Narvekar and Saraswati Fatarapekar. Gangubai was initially reluctant to perform without preparation before such a distinguished gathering after a noted musician like Menakabai. Eventually, on persuasion from the organizers, she took the stage and sang *Miyan ki Malhar* and *Jogia*, making a profound impression on the audience. There was still some time for the train when she had finished, but nobody wanted to sing or hear other musicians.

Soon after this Gangubai started receiving invitations for classical recitals in Bombay. The first programme brought her Rs 125. After paying her Sarangi and Tabla players ten rupees each and five rupees to her harmonium accompanist, Gangubai carried home a whole hundred rupees—a bonanza for a singer who got Rs 15 or 20, including accompanists' fees, for a performance in Hubli.

Gangubai's first radio programme also came by chance. Hirabai Barodekar was unable to come for a programme and Gangubai, who happened to be in Bombay, was given the contract. Even as she sang—all broadcasts were live then—the Bombay radio station started getting telephone calls about the singer. She has been singing on radio down the years since then, except for a break in 1953 when many noted musicians boycotted AIR to protest against the alleged excesses of the audition committee appointed by Dr B.V. Keskar, Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting. Gangubai was active in mobilizing musicians for the boycott and picketed with others at the Dharwad station of AIR.

When Gangubai started singing for the radio a musician, by contract, gave three programmes a day. Sawai Gandharva's slow and thorough instruction was not devised for such ready output and Gangubai often fell

short of *ragas* for the programmes that came her way. So, without telling her guru, she learnt new *ragas* from books like Bhatkhande's and used them in her programmes—she needed the money. Gangubai was sure that Sawai Gandharva would never find out about her 'unauthorized' renderings on radio as Kundgol had no electricity and therefore no radio. But as her luck would have it, he often managed to hear her. One day, when they met by chance on the train from Bombay to Hubli, he asked her: "What did you sing the other day on the radio? It was Vibhas, wasn't it? You sang it quite improperly. Don't you know that in our *gharana* we sing Vibhas with a sharp *dhaivat*? You sang with a soft *dhaivat*. Your Megh-Malhar was also wrong. Why don't you ask me to coach you when you have to sing on radio? People are apt to blame me for such mistakes." And right there in the train he started teaching her Megh-Malhar. Other passengers and hawkers started laughing at the spectacle of a guru teaching his student aboard a train, but he was completely oblivious to all impediments.

Despite Sawai Gandharva's offer of help for radio programmes, Gangubai could not muster the courage to seek it. The difficulty was compounded as Sawai Gandharva did not disclose the name of a *raga* when he introduced it, or what its *vadi* and *samvadi* were. At the point Gangubai received her next radio contract she was learning Suha, without being told it was Suha. She had learnt the *cheez* quickly, liked it very much, and wanted to sing it on the radio. But to do that, she had first to know the name of the *raga*—which had to be put down on the contract form—and did not dare to ask her guru what it was. So an indirect strategy was devised. When Gangubai and Ramanna saw Sawai Gandharva as usual for her lessons, Ramanna resorted to a trick to draw the guru's attention: from time to time he fished out the contract form from his pocket, looked at it quizzically, and put it back. Sawai Gandharva used to sit with his shoulders hunched and head bent, but his eyes missed nothing. He asked Ramanna what the paper was. On learning it was a contract form, he asked Gangubai what *raga* she was going to sing. Gangubai ventured to say that she would like to sing what she had just learnt. Sawai Gandharva was annoyed: "You want to sing it so soon?" After a silence, he relented: "All right, write Suha".

Hudgur Krishtacharya had taught Gangubai 50 songs in various *ragas* within a year. In four years, by comparison, Sawai Gandharva taught her a much smaller number of *ragas*. What he gave her was insight into music, and the assurance to advance on her own. He also established her technical proficiency, by gruelling exercise. For example he would give her a *palta* and ask her to practise it till she was asked to stop. Gangubai found it trying to sing the same *palta* for hours—such as *ga ga re sa ni sa ni ni dha pa ma ga*



Sawai Gandharva (centre) with his disciples at Ustad Abdul Karim Khan's death anniversary. Bhimsen Joshi, Krishnabai Ramdurgkar, and Gangubai are first, fifth, and sixth from left.

re sa for Bhairav—but her guru would not proceed till he was satisfied. (This rigorous training has given Gangubai complete command over notes. She can jump from any note in any scale to another note in another scale with ease and exactness.)

Sawai Gandharva used to say that the form of a *raga* in *alap* should emerge not from a hasty delineation of the scale but by easy, gradual progression from note to ascending note: "Begin with only four notes—*ni, sa, re, ga*. But the *gandhar* should just be touched in ascent; you should not stop there but come back down the scale note by note". He would demonstrate this ascent and descent besides other pleasing combinations of the four notes. He would also show, on the other hand, how *gandhar* could be sung fully and used as a springboard for the next higher note. He did not allow his students to slur over notes. He would say that one must learn to enjoy the beauty of each note and make it go as far as possible, much as a thrifty man counts his pennies. He was also meticulous about voice culture, and taught his students where and how a soft or full-throated voice should

be used. *Alapkari* on such principles, he said, revealed the *rupa* of a *raga*. Once this was established, the embellishments of *tan*, *bol-tan*, *gamak*, *murki*, *bhlava*, and *laykari* were in order.

Sawai Gandharva often made Gangubai analyze the performances of other musicians critically. Once, when she returned from a recital by Ustad Faiyyaz Khan and made a negative remark about his performance, he retorted: "How can you declare he is no good by hearing him just once? He is a great singer. Listen to him more and you will see the unique features of his music." Similarly, when the once praised Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, he demanded: "You say his music was good; what was good about it? Think and tell me."

Gangubai says that her guru never praised the performance of any of his students even if he liked it. But he showed his pleasure in other ways. Sometimes, after a programme by Gangubai, he would take her and Ramanna to a shop in Kalbadevi where a *kheer*-like dish with saffron and almonds was available. Whenever the victoria-cab driver was asked to go via kalbadevi, they knew that he was pleased with her recital.

Towards the end, Sawai Gandharva and his wife stayed for a few years in Gangubai's home. He used to say: "I have still a great deal to teach you". Gangubai is deeply grateful to him for having shown her the right path to music. It is high praise for her when a *rasika* remarks after a performance: "You reminded me today of your guru". She is blissful when she knows she has sung a phrase exactly after her master.

Gangubai's rise to national prominence from the '40s is not detailed in this essay. Suffice it to say that it has been against all odds—disadvantages of circumstance and sex. Gangubai has not enjoyed the benefits of connection to a known musical family or the profits of strategic promotion in the field. As a woman—and the breadwinner of a family—she has had to manage both her career and home. Now as before, she has had no airs about her, and thus has borne slights and faced difficulties that would subdue one of smaller heart.

I shall not recount these here—Gangubai herself makes light of her troubles—but fill in some facts of her personal life, concluding with her observations on music today. Despite initial aloofness, it did not take too long for the Kowalgi family to accept Gangubai on her own terms. Her marriage to Gurunath Kowalgi was singularly happy, blessed with two sons and a daughter—Krishna, Babu, Narayan; the latter two now have children of their own. Gurunath, a gentle, generous man—and deeply devoted to Gangubai—died some 20 years ago. Gangubai had taken over the reins of the family even before his long terminal illness. She is now

matriarch to a large extended family. In contrast to her own early deprivations, Gangubai's children have enjoyed all social and educational advantages. Babu, the eldest, holds a master's degree from Dharwad University, while Narayan is an engineer.

Several members of the family practise or enjoy music. Sheshgiri Hangal, Gangubai's cousin, and his son Ajay play the Tabla. Sheshgiri, whose father Krishtappa used to accompany Ambabai and her guru Imamsahib on the Tabla, has been accompanying Gangubai for a long time. Sheshgiri's daughter Nanda and Gangubai's granddaughter Anita have learnt classical music at school. But Gangubai's daughter Krishna, who has been providing vocal support to Gangubai for many years, is her musical successor. (A woman musician, however, is never the equal of a man, Gangubai observes with a twinkle in her eyes: "If a male musician is a Muslim he becomes an Ustad; if a Hindu he is a Pandit. But women like Kesarbai and Mogubai remain just Bais.")

Gangubai regrets that some good practices have now disappeared from the field of music. Today, by and large, a musician invited to a festival performs and leaves immediately. Earlier all musicians invited to music conferences heard the others. She recalls that even the maestros stayed to hear junior artistes, which was very encouraging for the latter. Even for senior musicians, influences from other *gharanas* proved to be healthy.

Gangubai's present home in Hubli.





K. Sivarama Karanth (at the mike), Gangubai, Bhimsen Joshi, and Feroze Dastur at the felicitation ceremony for Gangubai in Hubli on the occasion of her 75th birthday.

Gangubai avers that she herself has profited by hearing singers of *gharanas* other than her own.

At musical gatherings today Gangubai misses the old rapport and intimacy between artiste and audience. An earlier audience would respond spontaneously, and an artiste would likewise give of his best. She recalls a recital in Goa where she was accompanied on the Tabla by Kamurao Mangeshkar, a player of local prominence. Kamurao, wanting to make the most of the occasion, had an urge to display the rhythmic feats he could perform. So when Gangubai started singing Malhar in Ada Chautal, he chose a difficult *toda* but missed the *sam* by a split second. "No Kamurao, you missed it", the audience shouted. Kamurao knew his mistake and asked Gangubai to repeat the phrase. He missed again, with similar friendly rebuke from the audience. Only at the fourth repeat did he get it right, and the timing was so beautiful that the audience brought the house down with applause.. By comparison, Gangubai observes, the audience today is rather aloof and formal.

About music teaching and the profession she comments: "It is good that schools and colleges are teaching music and students are getting to learn many *ragas* and their *lakshanas*. Classroom instruction surely enhances

appreciation but cannot substitute teaching by a good guru... The aspiring artiste must have a passion for music and the capacity for hard work. He or she must spend hours in daily *riaz*. But young people today do not have or do not want to find so much time for practice. There are attractions like television and cinema; the school-work is heavy... Even if the young aspirant overcomes all obstacles, the prospects for a professional musician are not rosy. The government no doubt has good intentions but even routine functions are carried out tardily. For example AIR takes ages to promote an artiste from B to A grade or from A to eminent level. Many good musicians have been waiting for years to get a better grade and now their ability has declined because of old age. Their plight would discourage any youngster... My mother and I looked for a guru for years. Let not the gurus now be required to look for pupils."

Despite the attractions of larger fees and more engagements in Bombay, Gangubai has preferred to stay on in Hubli. Hubli has thus been put on the musical map of India. Last year the town celebrated Gangubai's 75th birthday in grand style. There were performances by Bhimsen Joshi, Feroze Dastur, Pandit Jasraj, and other musicians. Besides, there was an exhibition of photographs of singers of the Kirana *gharana* explaining the *parampara* of each. A set of cassettes of Gangubai's music from 1934 to 1987 was released on the occasion. Besides *khayals*, the cassettes include Gangubai's *ghazals*, *thumris* and many unusual *ragas*.

Over the years, Gangubai has received many national and State awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1973. For several decades now, she has been much in demand all over India. Popularity and appreciation please her but finally she is her own artistic arbiter: "Naturally I am happy when I hear people praising my music or when I hear my tapes. But I always feel it could have been better, much better. There is so much to learn that one lifetime is not enough." Let us wish Gangubai a long life and hope she delights us with her music for many years to come. □