Antarnaad: Sur aur Saaz

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Kanishka Publishers, Delhi, 2004

471 pages, Rs 900

This is doubtless a work of singular value. As a record of interviews—generally pointed—with thirty-nine leading musicians, four fascinating essays on Bharat Ratna awardees, and seventeen honorific, yet truthful ones on those musicians who are no longer with us but whose memories we surely cherish, it is to my mind *the only book of its kind so far*, and hence its review too has to take a somewhat unusual form. I have gone through it more than once; I had to, because it is packed with very interesting material and is, at places, instructive and quite informative as well. It has not been easy for me to pick all its salient features, but here I have been helped, in part, by a close reading of two (of the three) prefatory notes, one by Professor (Mrs.) Krishna Bisht, a former Head of Delhi University's Faculty of Music and Fine Arts and herself a very competent musician and musicologist; and the other by Shri Anil Sinha which has given me such information as the author himself could not provide in his own autobiographical preface (pp.XIII-XVIII) which is, however, not only readable, but also revelatory of the author's innate humility. Luckily, some of the book's key features have been well chosen by Mrs. Bisht; my own reading of the work has confirmed them; and I may list them as follows:

a. It provides truthful accounts of the artistes' own experience, reflections on music, personal struggles and familial environment, and thus fills a lacuna in our concern with the world of music as it presently is.
b. It also presents some controversial views, such as the one relating to the origin of sarod, in such a balanced way that the reader is able to decide on his own as to which of them really makes sense.
c. It highlights our musicians' widely shared emphasis that the world of sangeet is utterly free from the taint of communalism.
d. Care has also been taken to determine the duty and responsibility of the media, the society and the government towards our music.
e. Finally, besides being very well written, the book is distinguished by the author's ability to put questions to the artistes in such a way that is sensible, penetrating and determined, but never impolite.

As for the author's *preface* (titled अंतर्नाद की अंतर्यात्रा) I find it, very likeable. It convinces me of his eligibility for writing a book of this kind. What is more, in acknowledeging the author's own indebtedness to those who have assisted and encouraged him, his preface not only reveals his innate humility but his uncanny eye for detail which is perhaps due to a basic demand of tabla-rhythm in which he specializes, namely, scrupulous attention to the proper execution and ordering of the bols which the art builds upon, so as to project their individual sonant uniqueness. What, however, lends exceptional value to the book is its potential to provoke the readers' own thinking, in addition to providing them with a good deal of interesting information and a far better idea of our musician's ability to think and of their sense of values. This many-sided utility of the work should be clearly borne out as I now proceed to deal with its actual content.

However, in so far as this content is very diverse, I propose to divide my reflections into separate segments as follows:

A. *Informative Passages*

Here, I will refer to those pages which provide such details about the lives and work of our musicians as deserve to be better known. Some of these pages recount incidents that are very likely to make the reader chuckle with delight; and some other would make him feel a little edified because of the nobility (or at least gentility) exuding from

the musicians' exemplary attitude or attempts to make sense of some present state of affairs in a very balanced way.

B. *Questions and Answers*

Under this head I will list mainly those pages where the more penetrating questions and satisfying answers occur, with occasional comments from my side to help the reader to react more readily to the verbal exchanges. The questioner, in each case, is the author himself; so, to refer to him, the latter Q should suffice; but in the case of respondents—the artistes interviewed—who are so many, individual names will have to be given . Where the QA duels are specially striking, some extracts may have to be cited. This should make us realize that quite a few of our better known musicians are not only good performers but watchful and balanced thinkers as well.

C. *Accord and Dissent*

This segment will draw the readers' attention to those pages which show two musicians giving utterance either to different views on the same subject or to common grievances or problems. Generally, however, most of the chapters call for thorough reading, just because they teem with interesting material.

A. As I said, I have in mind the many incidents described in the book but the most delightful of these, involving Sharan Rani (sarod) and the tabla maestro Ustad Ahmad Jan Thirakwa, occurs on p. 252; and the most gripping one, because of its sheer bizarreness, relates to a detail of Ustad Bismillah Khan's riyaz (p. 318-319). However, these are not the only incidents that make the work fascinating, and even a quick look at the following pages /paragraphs should keep the reader glued to the book.

The big, middle para on p.55 which speaks of a very queer challenge faced and met with 'devastating' effect by the tabla maestro, Pandit Kishan Maharaj; first para on p.77 in the chapter on Jairam Potdar, presently director of Kathak Kendra (New Delhi) who is widely known not only as a superlative harmonium accompanist, but for his painstaking researches in the field of Marathi Natya Sangeet; the first para on p.98 which recounts Tarun Bhattacharya's santoor recital as an invocation of peace for the souls of those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center cataclysm; very touching accounts of the impact of some memorable Odissi performances by Sanchita Bhattacharya (pp.104-105); p.161 which tells us how Buddhaditya Mukerji, one of our top sitarists, heaved a sigh of relief on being told that the rhythmic clapping which once greeted the end of his 5-minute recital in Yugoslavia was an expression of hearty applause, and not of disapproval as it generally is in the West; a similar rarity on p.180 where Manilal Nag, another sitar maestro, gratefully recalls how in his up-and-coming years, and at absolute variance with the practice today, he was open-heartedly acclaimed—and so encouraged—by such a senior artist as Pandit Omkarnath Thakur; and, on p.191, a quite heart-warming account of how our musicians, like Pandit Mohinder Sarin, are sensitive to our armed forces' sacrifices.

It would however be wrong to believe that the work being reviewed is good only at narrating incidents. It also projects our musicians' tendency to respond, sometimes a little waywardly, but mostly quite sensibly to searching questions, and generally with the requisite measure of poise. Good or bad, the answers are almost always provocative, the very first interview (with Ustad Abdul Halim Jaffer Khan, pp.3-11) being a fine example.

B. Q. Why is your Ālāpa so brief?

A.H.Jaffer: Ālāpa is really meant to preface dhrupad singing, not for sitar playing. Further, a vilambit gat provides ample ground for playing reposeful tonal phrases. Hence, a long and leisurely ālapa before *tāla*-bound playing is relatively unnecessary (p. 4).

Q. In the light of the fact that our

instrumentalists today vie with each other in relating their gharānā to the legendary Tansen, would you like to say something about your own gharānā?

A. Gharānā! Tansen! I openly declare that I and my baaj have nothing to do with Tansen. As for the word gharānā, it is to me quite vacuous. Nor do I attach any value to the gharānās as such. How are they necessary? Is not Carnatic music flourishing without being hemmed in by gharānās? It is really very painful that people have succeeded in dividing (the world of) sur and laya on the basis of gharānās.(5)

Now, such unusual answers are bound to provoke any thoughtful reader into many questions. Personally, I regard this maestro as a superlative virtuoso, but here, to be sure, his thinking is awry. In innovating his distinctive Jafferkhāni baaj, I ask, is he dividing the art of sitar playing (on the basis of *sur*, tāla and formal graces) or just diversifying it? If the different gharānās specialize in different rāgas, or if, without any damage to its grammatical schema, they (the gharānās) present the same rāga differently (yet winsomely) by availing of varyingly designed compositions and utilizing formal graces and texts of dissimilar look, meaning and emotive hue, do they not make us aware of the exhaustless aesthetic potential of one and the same rāga? Diversifying, I repeat, is not the something as dividing. (It was well after expressing myself thus that I came across Pandit Bhim Sen Joshi's supportive views, on p.171). And, finally, does this sitar maestro propose a re-shaping of Hindustani music on the model of its Carnatic colleague? Should our very way of singing the individual swara become similar to that of our south Indian vidwans? Above all, is it not a hard, unmistakable fact that it is essentially our gharānās that have preserved and brought out the limitless creative reaches of our music. If the art of painting has thrown up such diverse styles (or schools) in the West as Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Minimalism, is this to be taken as a disruption of this visual art or as a proof of the infinite scope it provides for creativity? The desire to be innovative is perfectly fair; but a glib condemnation of an established tradition which has given us maestros of diverse, yet comparable excellence is quite as improper.

Yet, to be fair to the totality of this maestro's answers in this opening interview, I must add that his other utterances (in this chapter) make admirable sense, and that the way he emphasizes, with the help of an actual example, the absolute absence of communalism in the world of music (p. 9, 4th regular para) or the pointed way he bemoans the state of music in Pakistan (in the immediately following lines) are refreshing eye-openers.

However, not merely its opening chapter but the entire book is replete not just with provocative, and (at places) questionable answers, but also with quite a few spirited yet well argued and (at places) even illuminating rejoinders which bespeak of our musicians'—even tabla players'—ability to think and argue competently. Here, at once, I feel impelled to refer to Chapter 27 which records the interview with Prof. Rangnath Mishra who not only poses the sensible question why some reputed gharanas of tabla do not make use of the inky circle when it is so visibly a part of 'the right one' (215), but even questions the propriety of pronouncing yoga as yogā(214); and, what is more, even hints at the possibility that rhythm may be given a place of pre-eminence in sangeet because it is able to charm us without the aid of words and tones graded in a scale (218). But in so far as limitations of space prevent me from dwelling on all the questions and answers at length, I may dilate on just one or two 'interviews' more, and then quickly list those pages, may be even paragraphs, which contain some striking verbal interactions. See for example the very next chapter which records the interview with the sarod maestro,

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan:

Some pointed (at places, even caustic) questions (p. 21, 2nd para), and some very satisfying answers, without even a semblance of getting irked; expression of fine sentiments in respect of the ideal nature of music as also of sensible views on (a) creation of new rāgas (20,21), (b) right tabla accompaniment (21,22), (c) introduction of intervals in the course of a single recital (22,23), (c) fusion in the realm of music (though a much better view on this specific form of creativity has been put forth by Vishwa Mohan Bhatt on p. 233) and (d) on Ustad Bismillah Khan's own and other music lovers' attitude to his need for financial help (28-29).

However, the crowning touches here are provided, first, by the maestro's amazingly balanced remark that though houses of worship are not absolutely essential (because the locus of true religiousness is the human heart), it is yet very wrong to destroy them (29, last para); secondly, by due emphasis on communal amity (30); and, thirdly, by the singular but by no means insignificant remark that, even like the elements, music is not tied down to any particular religion, and that though it cannot satisfy hunger, music can certainly nourish the soul (31).

The next 'interview' projects some very sensible 'answers' by Ustad Asad Ali Khan, our only Rudra Veena expert (33-37). What the maestro says about the future of veena-playing in our country (34-35) should make us all sit up apprehensively. Luckily, however, some relief is provided by what we are told about adherence to the *guru-shishya paramparā* of teaching at I.T.C., Kolkata. The next interviewee, Ustad Aasheesh Khan, is likely to surprise the reader by his preferring not only Buddhadev Dasgupta, but Sharan Rani as well to the far better known, Amjad Ali (41). But what I have found difficult to digest is what Aasheesh Khan has said about A.R. Rahman (42). Luckily, however, satisfying views expressed during the course of interviews far outnumber the questionable ones.

In spite of being an acknowledged concert artist, Kalpana Komkali's very right emphasis on the value of a mother's role in the family (42-46); the courageous and quite proper rebuttal of Kumar Gandharva's view that tabla-playing cannot claim to be an independent art by Kishan Maharaj, the first ever tabla-maestro to be honoured with the Padma Vibhooshan award (50), and his quite warranted opposition to excessively slow and quick paces of laya in music, as also to over emphasis on the *shāstriya paksha* of this art (51); Prof. G.C. Srivastava's very sensible disagreement with the view that institutional teaching in music is not producing any worthwhile results (58)—a reaction which issues, if a little more spiritedly, also from Principal Madhup Mudgal (183-184); Gundecha Brothers' correct definition of the right way to sing jungalbandi (62)—a view which is not only echoed by the Rajan-Sajan duo, but quite properly highlighted by them in the context of interpersonal relations taken quite generally (198); the many inconveniences of everyday living to which our topmost musicians are subject to, as listed not only by Fahimuddin Dagar (p.148), but by the famed Varanasi duo of vocalists, though the latter alone highlight the matter against the rampant craze for the game of cricket (204); Gopal Chandra Panda's revelation of the three rāgas and the three specific gamakas which distinguish Odissi classical music as rooted in the compositions of Jaideva (67) (and of which I have no knowledge at all); Sanchitā Bhattacharya's sensible explanation of why an Odissi recital generally begins with *bhoomi praṇām* (101), and her moving appeal to our political rulers (106); Principal Madhup Mudgal's balanced remarks on the differring value of words in classical and *sugam* sangeet (184, 186); Pdt. Mohinder Sareen's explanation of why exactly such sangeet should be regarded as *sugam* (188) and his mention of a little known, but important detail which the composer of *sugam* sangeet has to bear in mind,

that is, the precise moment where the singer may have to breathe restfully (190), and (in *my* view) a rightful protest against the continuing tendency to overrate K.L. Saigal as a singer (195).

It would however be wrong to believe that what I have said so far, on the basis of my first reading of the book, is all that makes the work fascinating and richly informative. The truth rather is that subsequent readings of the book have struck me with a number of other facts and arguments which I just cannot help but referring to.

Ustad Ahmad Jan Thirakwa's 25-year long stint as a tabla accompanist with Bal Gandharva in various plays, and his noteworthy open-hearted admission that he had not seen any other vocalist adapting variations of laya to expression of different rasas as effectively as Bal Gandharva could (80); admission of the intrinsically untuneful tone of *ga* and *dha* as they sound on a harmonium, along with an expert player's device to cover the defect, by such an admittedly competent harmonium accompanist as Jairam Potdar (90); an account of the main reason why vocalists have often preferred the harmonium to sarangi as an accompanying instrument (91-92); the non-aesthetic worries of today's professional musicians who no longer enjoy any royal patronage (95); a C.D. for de-stressing (produced by Tarun Bhattacharya) which is selling well even in foreign countries (97); Buddhaditya Mukerji (the sitarist) as the first Indian musician to perform in the British House of Commons (153); very interesting information (provided by Bhajan Sopori) about the musical ancestry of santoor, as also about the artist's own innovations in re-structuring the instrument and his distinctive playing of some taans (and use of *chikāri*) which is possible only on a santoor (167-168); Pandit Bhim Sen Joshi's inability to characterize any of his recitals as memorable, because he still sees some lacunae in his singing (174); a somewhat similar expression of the same inability by the famous violinist Dr. N. Rajan (133); and Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar's contribution to the propagation of dhrupad, and his emphasis on three such formal graces as I had never heard of earlier, namely, *padchedan, patjhad,* and *patākā* (136).

C. Be it noted that, on one point at least, this dhrupad maestro entirely disagrees with another very senior member of the Dagar family. According to Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar, the word *bāni* (and its 4/5 forms) are just the product of some individual's whims (138, last line). On the other hand, Ustad Fahimuddin Dagar insists that the Dagar *bāni* alone is that pure *bāni* which incorporates and builds upon all the essentials of sangeet. Both, however, agree in maintaining that it is better to regard dhrupad as an epitome of ancient Indian cultural values than as a mere genre of classical vocal music (136, 146).

All this should be enough to sustain the readers' interest in the book . Yet I cannot close this review without inviting their attention to what I regard as a superlative instance of how one's commitment to music can surpass every other interest. Once, when Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan, father of Amjad Ali, met the then President of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, and when the First Citizen anxiously enquired if the ageing maestro needed any help, the latter's ready answer was: 'Sir! Just protect rāga darbāri, please; it is facing mutilation; and now, Sir, I beg leave to go—to be on time for namāz (17).

The book abounds in such fascinating material, and its multifarious richness make us feel beholden to the author.

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