

BOOK REVIEW

Eminent Musicians of Yesteryears: Short Biographies of 766 Hindustani Musicians

Edited by Prof. R.C. Mehta

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This is a pioneering work, in terms of putting together biographical details of such a large number of musicians, from the 18th to the 20th centuries (and a few even from the 13th to 16th centuries). One Sri Ranade of Pune, who had inherited an enormous amount of biographical details pertaining to musicians from his grandfather, had handed over a draft of the material to Professor Mehta, more than 40 years ago, for revising and updating, but the latter was unable to undertake the task till he reached his 89th year last year. Deciding that he "owed it to posterity" to get the material published in spite of some lacunae, Professor Mehta has got this collection published now despite the limitations of age, leaving the jottings and format largely unchanged, to forestall further delays. Indeed there is much valuable information herein that is of great sociological, cultural and historical importance.

Consider these nuggets—Ustad Bahadur Hussain Khan was paid Rs 3 lakhs (equivalent to several crores today) as guru dakshina in the 19th century! Bade Mohammed Khan used to go round the city riding on an elephant like a prince, with a large retinue. On the other hand, many eminent artists (including the legendary Balakrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar) were reduced to joining groups of

wandering musicians, or theatre units, in order to eke out a living, because of economic compulsions. Unable to find a proper teacher, Balakrishnabuwa even decided to fast unto death, changed his mind and ended up walking all the way from Kashi to Gwalior, because he had no money for railway fare. When the maharaja at Gwalior subsequently paid him Rs 500, he kept Rs 50 for himself and handed over the rest to his guru! (Which disciple does that today, and does this describe the dedication that musicians brought to their art, in a bygone era?) Even the late Lakshman Prasad Jaipurwale was obliged to join a drama company for livelihood after his father died. Ustad Allaaddin Khan of Maihar slept on the veranda outside a charitable dispensary before he became a legend. There is touching pathos, but also occasional humour—two eminent vocalists were known as Shakkhar and Makkhar (sugar and butter) because of the sweetness and smoothness of their voices. Sarangi player Badal Khan was sentenced to life imprisonment on a charge of participating in the freedom movement of 1857. Sarod player Karamatulla Khan was taken to Paris by Motilal Nehru in 1916 for an international musical event where he was declared "one of the best instrumentalists of the world", but we have no samples of this artist's playing, because he refused to let gramophone companies record his recitals! During the early 20th century, one Krishnabai played the north Indian Been (Veena), making her the only woman to have taken to the Been (although, as the book comments, women in south India learn the Veena in large numbers). Such details make this book valuable as a historical record.

Two Muslim youths were refused recognition as ustads despite their competence, because they were trained by a female teacher! And Alladiya Khan, another stalwart of the early 20th century,

came from a family that was originally Goud Brahmins. Nissar Hussain Khan of Gwalior not only preferred Hindu rituals but even wore the sacred thread like an orthodox Brahmin! Renowned singer Chandrabhaga of Gwalior was born a Muslim but lived according to Hindu customs. A music-related sociological detail is about a class of artists known as Dhadis, whose job was to teach music to the females of royal households. (They were considered "inferior" to other ustads, because they taught females!) The class of Dhadis has now disappeared. So has the class of professional songstresses, known as sani-s. in the Maharashtra-Karnataka region.

Faiyyaz Khan's father-in-law, himself a musician of note, once heard a beggar woman produce a lilt that fascinated him so much that he invited her several times, and fed her, in order to learn the technique! Gopal Naik, the famed vocalist, was taken away to Delhi "as part of political ransom" from the state of Devgiri in the 13th century by Emperor Allauddin. There are details of how and why Miraj became a centre known for instrument manufacture, and also mention of a 'surti harmonium', a new invention (about which no further details are available). When Gulam Rasool sang, it is said, bulbul birds used to flock to hear him, and when he stopped the birds would quietly fly away

(whether true or not, such anecdotes add to our understanding of the eminence of artists of yesteryear whose records we cannot hear.) Sakharam Buwa was among those who would pawn their favourite raga or composition to get money for expenses. If listeners wished to hear these 'pawned ragas', they would pay the debt to the pawnbroker and redeem the raga, so that they could have the pleasure of listening to the raga by that eminent performer! Such was the following that some of the old stalwarts commanded.

In addition, there are references to south Indian connections also—Bidaram Krishnappa taught a north Indian artiste named Dattopant Phadke, the Mysore maharaja awarded a lifetime annuity to Gulab, a singer of Jaipur (who also died at Mysore later) and Abdul Aziz Khan who was a court musician at Patiala durbar, played the Gottuvadyam. When a branch of the Poona Gayan Samaj was opened in Madras (as it was known then) in 1883, it became the first such institution in the province. Here is a rich corpus of information pertaining to music and musicians. An errata insert is planned, which should take care of proof reading errors.

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