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From: parrikar@mimicad.Colorado.EDU (Rajan P. Parrikar)
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Kundan Lal Saigal

By

G.N. Joshi

**From: Down Melody Lane (1984, Orient
Longman)**

pp. 42-46

The year was 1935 and Kundanlal Saigal was singing at the Allahabad Music Conference. His voice held the huge gathering spellbound. I too came under the spell. Being at the peak of my musical career, I had been invited to perform along with several other noted artists from all over India. Saigal came from Calcutta. He was at that time the uncrowned king of the screen. His unforgettable role in Devdas and his poignant rendering of Piya bin nahee aavat chain had captured millions of hearts.

At the end of his performance, Saigal received a standing ovation which lasted several minutes. It was impossible for any other artist to perform that evening after Saigal's tremendous success. As I came out of the hall, I was greeted by my old friend from Nagpur, Mr. D. N. Hosali who later introduced me to Saigal. They were close friends and had travelled together from Calcutta.

Saigal and Hosali were guests of a rich young zamindar and they insisted that I too should go and stay with them. During dinner, someone suggested that we should go and have a taste of the gay

musical nightlife of the city. The young zamindar was, of course, familiar with the most reputed joints, and so off we all drove. In those days, in decent society, music was taboo - it was considered immoral to learn or listen to music - much more so for girls. I had heard a lot about the 'mujra mehfil' (song and dance performances at the client's request) of the dancing girls and my curiosity was aroused; I was soon slowly following the other three up the steps of the singing girls' house.

At the entrance we were greeted by a middle aged lady with a broad smile and the traditional salutation 'Adabaraz'. We walked into an elegantly furnished chamber, brilliantly lit. The entire floor was covered with soft, rich coloured woollen carpets and mattresses.

Moments later two young girls, just out of their teens, entered from a side room. Having seen the film Devdas, they found Saigal's presence in person both awe-inspiring and highly pleasing. Saigal's friendly approach and unassuming manner soon dispelled their awe. An exuberant and intelligent conversation ensued. It was full of wity and spontaneous repartee in which these girls are specially trained, and with which Saigal appeared to be quite familiar. For me, this was a new and revealing experience, and I watched the scene with interest. One of the girls approached us with a tray of paanpattis and when my turn came, I was so confused and nervous that the girl gave a mischievous smile as my trembling fingers lifted the paan. I muttered my thanks, 'Shukriya', and pocketed the offering. I dared not eat it.

Of the two young girls, one was an accomplished singer with a rich, sonorous voice, and the other was an expert dancer. Thumri, the most captivating style in Hindustani music, has its home in U.P. The Banarasi or Purab form of presenting it has no parallel in light classical music. The dancer used her feet, hands, fingers, neck, eyes and eyebrows most expressively to illustrate the song.

After another item - a Kathak dance - Saigal and the zamindar paid the girls and we rose to go. It was about 2.30 a.m. when we got back to the zamindar's kothee. It was situated on the river bank, not far from the confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna. Cool breezes brought fragrance from the garden below, while the full moon turned the river milky white. Saigal was in a happy mood and started humming. The zamindar produced a harmonium which I started playing. Saigal requested me to join him in singing. Taking the cue from the notes he hummed, I began a thumri in Mishra Khamaj - Mane Nahee Samiya. Instantly Saigal took up the refrain and then there followed a musical duet. Saigal then started Babul Mora, his piece de resistance in Bhairavi. The first rays of the sun heralding the dawn brought us down to earth.

I kept in touch with Saigal, and in the month of December, the same year, we met again - this time in Calcutta where I had gone for the Calcutta musical conference. My wife had accompanied me. Saigal took us home for dinner one evening. We had the privilege of meeting his old parents. Hailing from the beautiful valley of Kashmir, they were tall and fair and had a very impressive presence.

It was at the dinner table that night that I learnt more about Saigal. Before he made music and acting his vocation, Saigal had been a time-keeper in the Punjab railways. After that he had worked for a while as a typewriter salesman. He used to sing only within his circle of friends. Singing was his hobby. The credit for discovering Saigal goes to a representative of the Hindustan Recording Company. He correctly estimated the sales potential of the young man and bound him down to a life-long contract. This is why all his non-film songs were invariably issued during his lifetime under the Hindustan label, although in later years his records of film songs appeared under H.M.V. label. (Hindustan was a sister concern to H.M.V.)

Years rolled by and Saigal continued to reach new heights of fame and popularity. Entering New Theatres in 1931, he became the national matinee idol. Chandidas, Devdas, Street Singer and Dushman were all huge box office successes. He soon migrated to Bombay to win new laurels.

I, in the meantime, had joined H.M.V. as recording executive. We met in 1943, in the recording studios. He embraced me and there were tears of joy in our eyes. Suddenly he asked me question, 'Do you drink or not?'

I was puzzled and asked, 'Why?'

He said, 'He who does not drink is not a gentleman.'

To this I replied that in that case I was only half a gentleman. Thereupon I told him about an incident involving the late poet Mirza Ghalib. An English soldier once asked him, 'Are you a true Muslim?' Ghalib pondered for a few moments and then said, 'No, I am only half a Muslim.' He explained that the Muslim religion forbids the eating of pork and the consumption of alcoholic drinks. 'I do not eat pork, but I do drink liquor.'

The point of the story was that while I refrained from strong drinks like whisky and rum, I did enjoy an occasional glass of beer. Saigal gave a hearty laugh. After that, whenever we were together I always had a beer while he nursed his scotch. While working in the Ranjit film company, he frequently came to our studio to record his songs, always in the afternoon. On arrival he would come straight to my cabin and put his bottle of scotch in my table drawer. He knew very well that it was safe with me!

Normally, there would be about half a dozen rehearsals before the actual recording. He would have half a peg between rehearsals. His voice became mellower with each rehearsal, and then would come

a stage that was the ultimate in beauty. It was my job to catch him on disc at this stage, when every word, every note bore the stamp of rare and rich artistry. All the songs he recorded for Tansen, Surdas and Shahjahan became immortal.

One day we ended the session a little early. Saigal came to my room and said, 'Bhaiyaa, I haven't heard you sing for a long time, I am not in the mood to go away so soon. Also I have sufficient scotch left in my flask.'

I used to compose tunes in those days. Pandit Indra, a top poet of the time, was a great friend of mine. Often he would drop in and we would sit together - I with the harmonium and Panditji with pad and pencil. Between the two of us we composed a number of devotional and love songs. That night I sang a few of them to Saigal.

He was soon to play the role of Surdas in the forthcoming film. Some of the songs took his fancy. He spoke to Sardar Chandulal Shah about them. Sardar Chandulal came to our Manager, with a request to requisition my services. He made a very tempting offer. However my previous experience in films had not been at all favourable and I had resolved never to enter films again. So after a couple of days I thanked them but declined the offer. Saigal came to me furious and thundering, 'Why are you being so foolish?' I explained my position to him. To this day I haven't regretted my decision nor did it affect my relations with Saigal.

I have very vivid memories of the evenings, when we recorded Madhukar shyam hamare chor, Main nahee makhan khayo (from Surdas), Diya jalao (from Tansen). Listening to these discs I recall the scenes. Saigal in the centre, flanked by the accompanists, with music director Khemchand Prakash and myself standing in front listening with interest.

Saigal used to lose himself completely under the influence of liquor but he never, even in that state, misbehaved or did anything not befitting a gentleman. He would be very restless if the alcohol did not have a quick effect on him. One night, after a late recording session, we were driving home from the studio. As we neared Parel, he asked if I knew of any place nearby, where he could have some more booze. He had been drinking the whole evening, so I tried to dissuade him and suggested that we proceed straight home. He said, 'Arre Bhai, what's the use of my drinking the whole day, if I return home sober - all that drink will go waste.' I dropped him at a hotel at Dadar where, I learnt later, he stayed the whole night with a bottle of 'Black and White'.

Saigal's devotion to his work was far above any other artist's. He had a heart of gold and was a faithful friend. He never turned away a needy fellow artist. On several occasions, I saw him dig into his pocket and give away all he had to some unfortunate person.

At night, if I am alone, I sometimes listen to his songs Balam aavo baso mere man me, Karu kya aasa niras bhayee, So ja Rajkumari so ja and Piya bin nahee aavat chain. I cannot hear without a pang his immortal melody Dukha ke din aba bita nahee.