

From: **Rajan P. Parrikar** (parrikar@ferrari.colorado.edu)

Subject: Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and "Babul Moraa"

Newsgroups: rec.music.indian.classical View: Complete Thread (7 articles) | Original Format Date: 1998/10/16

Namashkar.

"BABul morA, naihar chchooTo jAy" - a permanent fixture in the national consciousness thanks to K.L. Saigal, is known to every Indian to whom it is synonymous with Raga Bhairavi. The origins of this composition and its composer - the epicure Wajid Ali Shah - are not as well known. The following sketch by **Susheela Mishra** throws light on the unexpected turn of events that inspired the composition.

Warm regards,

r

From: *Great Masters of Hindustani Music* by **Susheela Mishra**
Hem Publishers, 1981

**Nawab Wajid Ali
Shah**
by
Susheela Mishra

Some years ago I saw the film 'Aavishkar' and was impressed by the subtle and soothing manner in which the famous Lucknow Thumri "Babul mora Naihar chchooto jaay" in Bhairavi had been used as a haunting and recurring background refrain throughout this good film. After the picture was over and as we were returning home, I asked some of my Lucknow friends if they knew who was

the composer of this very popular song. I was disappointed when they confessed that none of them knew, although they had heard this Thumri many times and liked it very much. If even Lucknowwallas are not aware of this song, one cannot expect others from other parts of the country to know anything about it.

This Bhairavi Thumri has been one of the favourites of famous light classical and classical musicians from Moizuddin, Malkajan, Gauharjan, and Ustad Faiyaz Khan, to Siddheswari Devi, Begum Akhtar and Girja Devi of more recent times. But it was the late K.L. Saigal's simple, yet poignant rendering of it in the New Theatres Film "Street Singer" that made it an all India favourite. Even in the farthest South, I remember young people travelling miles by train or bus in order to see a New Theatres film and hear their soulful songs. Saigal did not need an orchestra "of a hundred instruments" or a cacophony of Western and Eastern instruments to support his voice and boost its volume. The barest minimum of a Harmonium and Tabla were all that he needed to render this Thumri with an expressiveness and emotion that brought tears into every eye. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, music-lovers tried to hum and copy it the way Saigal sang. Even in some of the South Indian AIR stations, there was no ban on casual artistes having a go at this song at the end of a Karnatic recital !

Since those days, more than three decades ago, I have heard 'Babul Mora' rendered in an infinite variety of styles by many reputed maestros of the North, and learnt about the poignant circumstances that gave birth to this sweet Thumri. It is a well-known fact that "Lucknow is the mother, and Benares the sweetheart of the thumri style." A large number of composers who thrived under the lavish patronage of the Nawab rulers of Lucknow enriched this light classical form whose popularity is mounting day by day. Among these, the name of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (the last Nawab-ruler of Lucknow) stands out in golden letters. He was not only a munificent patron of music, dance, drama, and poetry, but was

himself a gifted composer, and a proficient Kathak dancer. He had received vocal training under great Ustads like Basit Khan, Pyar Khan and Jaffar Khan and Kathak training under Thakur Prasadji and Bindadin Maharaj. Although his pen-name was Qaisar, he used the pseudonym "Akhtarpiya" for his numerous compositions. Under this pen-name, he wrote over 40 works, poems, prose and Thumris. "Diwani-Akhtar", "Husn-i-Akhtar" contain his Ghazals. He is said to have composed many new ragas and named them Jogi, Juhi, Shah-Pasand, etc.

Wajid Ali Shah was most unfortunate to have ascended the throne of Awadh at a time when the East India Company was determined to grab the coveted throne of prosperous Awadh (Oudh), which was "the garden, granary, and queen-province of India." In different circumstances perhaps, he might have succeeded as a ruler because he had many qualities that make a good administrator. He was generous, kind and compassionate towards his subjects, besides being one of the most magnanimous and passionate patrons of the Fine Arts. But the British Agent, and some of the treacherous elements in the court of Awadh availed of his lavish and luxurious style of living, branded him as "a monster of debauchery, profligacy and vice", and succeeded in banishing him from his beloved Lucknow. In recent times, one finds a turn of the tide in his favour. Attempts are being made to remove Wajid Ali Shah's tarnished image and to repaint him as a benevolent and gifted monarch who was more sinned against than sinning. Valuable books have been published recently giving a full and just assessment of his virtues as well as his vices. When he ascended the throne, he took keen interest in the administration of justice, introduced reforms, and reorganised the military department. But gradually, he sank into a life of pleasures surrounded by courtesans, singers, dancers, and eunuchs. In his book "Awadh Under Wajid Ali Shah", Dr. G.D. Bhatnagar gives the following assessment of this ill-starred prince:- "Cast by providence for the role of an accomplished dilettante, he found

himself a misfit for the high office to which he was elevated by chance. Wajid Ali Shah's character was complex. Though he was a man of pleasure, he was neither an unscrupulous knave nor a brainless libertine. He was a lovable and generous gentleman, he was a voluptuary, still he never touched wine, and though sunk in pleasure, he never missed his 5 daily prayers. It was the literary and artistic attainments of Wajid Ali Shah which distinguished him from his contemporaries."

When Wajid Ali Shah was a young boy, some astrologers warned his parents that he would become a Yogi, and advised them that the boy should be dressed up as a Yogi on each birthday of his so as to counteract the effect of the evil stars. When he ascended the throne in 1847 at the age of 24, he had a fabulous annual income of more than fifteen lakhs of rupees, most of which he squandered on music, dance and drama. First of all, he established his famous Parikhaana (abode of fairies) in which hundreds of beautiful and talented girls were taught music and dancing by expert-teachers engaged by the royal patron. These girls were known as Parees or fairies with fancy- names such as Sultan pari, Mahrukh pari and so on. On each birthday of his, the Nawab would dress up as a Yogi with saffron robes, ash of pearls smeared on his face and body, necklaces of pearls around his neck, and a rosary in his hand, and walk pompously into the court with two of his Parees dressed up as Jogans. Gradually he made it into a spectacular pageant or Mela known as Jogia Jashan, in which all citizens of Lucknow could participate, dressed as Yogis, irrespective of caste and creed. In the opinion of Mr. Ranbir Singh it was this Jogia Jashan on his birthdays that "took the curtain up on the Hindustani Theatre". Later on, when his favourite venue, the Kaisarbagh Baradari was built, he began to stage his magnificent Rahas, obviously a Persianised name for Rasleela, full of sensuous poetry, his own lyrical compositions under the pen-name "Akhtarpiya" and glamorous Kathak dances. Ranbir Singh gives details of Wajid Ali Shah's book entitled "Bani" in which the author mentions 36 types

of Rahas all set in Kathak style (with colourful names like "Mor-Chchatri", "Ghunghat", "Salami", "Mor Pankhi" and "Mujra"), and gives exhaustive notes about the costumes, jewellery, and stage-craft. Rahas, prepared at a fabulous cost of several lakhs of rupees, became very popular, and was performed at the Kaisarbagh-Rahas Manzil, most probably, "the first Hindustani Theatre Hall". Many have regarded Wajid Ali Shah as "the first playwright of the Hindustani theatre", because his "Radha Kanhaiya Ka Kissa" staged in the Rahas Manzil was the first play of its kind. It featured Radha, Krishna, several sakhis, and a vidushaka-like character called "Ramchera". Songs, dances, mime, and drama were all delightfully synthesised in these Rahas performances. He dramatised many other poems such as Darya-i-Tashsq, Afsane-i-Isbaq, and Bhahar-i-Ulfat. It is said that Amanat's "Inder Sabha" was inspired by these dance-dramas, written, produced and staged by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

Today, however, his pioneer contributions in this field are seldom remembered. Kathak dance attained new heights of popularity and glory under his expert guidance and lavish patronage. Thakur Prasadji was his Kathak guru, and the unforgettable Kalka-Binda brothers performed in his court. What with the grand pageantry of the Rahas, Jogiya Jashan, Dance dramas, and Kathak performances, Lucknow became the magnetic cultural centre where the most reputed musicians, dancers and poets of the time flourished. The greatest musicians, dancers and instrumentalists of the time enjoyed his munificent patronage and hospitality.

But all this pomp and splendour were wiped out in less than eight years. In February 1854, Wajid Ali Shah was deposed by the British Resident and exiled into far-off Matiaburj near Calcutta. Even when the shocking ultimatum was given to him, Wajid Ali Shah appealed to his beloved subjects not to offer any resistance, and to maintain peace. The touching description of the bewailing citizens of Lucknow given in the Urdu "Asrar-i-Wajid" has been

translated into English by Dr. G.D. Bhatnagar in his book as follows.

"The condition of this town, without exaggeration, was such that on the departure of Jan-i-Alam, the life became extinct and the body of the town was left soulless. Grief rained down from every door and wall. There was no lane, bazar, or dwelling which did not wail out in full agony of separation from Jan-i-Alam. All sorts of agonies were produced in the Hindi musical tunes and notes."

Historians describe how much the people of Lucknow lamented the exile of their kind and popular ruler. Many of the poets of the time have depicted their grief in touching verses like the following :

Lucknow bekas huwa Hazrat jo-gaye, Fazle gul kab ayegi, kab honge aakar naghma sanjh, Ek muddat ho gayi murgaane gulshan ko gaye

The royal caravan "of about 1000 persons started from Lucknow on March 13, 1854 towards Calcutta via Kanpur. The parting scenes were pathetic, the whole city being thrown into gloom. Everybody wept and bewailed while bidding farewell to the unfortunate king. Everywhere there was sorrow. Poor and rich, young and old, all were bewailing for the King. The citizens looked helpless and recited mournful nauha (dirges) in bewilderment".

As for Wajid Ali Shah, nothing caused him more agony than being forcibly parted forever from his beloved Lucknow. It was at this tragic moment of being torn away from the city and people he loved that the following lines burst out from his sorrow-laden heart:-

"Babul mora naihar chchooto jaay- Chaar kahaar mil, mori doliya uthaye Mora apna begaana chchooto Jaay"-

"Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts." One can very well visualise that sad moment of parting through these touching lines. In fact this song has now come to be associated with the inevitable bidaayi of every bride from her parental home - that poignant moment when she is seated in a doli and is about to be wrenched away from her dear "babul" into the distant land of her groom. As in the case of a similar composition of Hazrat Amir Khusrau, perhaps this song also contains the allegorical meaning of a human being's last journey on this earth when the body is carried on the shoulders of 4 pall-bearers. So intense was Wajid Ali Shah's grief at that moment! Well-versed in Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, and Braj Bhasha, he composed in a mixed dialect that is easily followed by the people of Uttar Pradesh.

Even in his exile in Matiaburj, he survived for many long years, all the while trying to keep the sweet memories of his Lucknow-era alive by recreating the musical environments of his Kaisarbagh Baradari. The banished king had been given a number of fine houses with vast grounds stretching along the banks of the River Hooghly 3 or 4 miles south of Calcutta. Because of an Earthen Dome (raised platform), people called it "Matiya Burj". The king spent lavishly out of his income of twelve lakhs of rupees per annum and before long a Second Lucknow arose in this area. "There was the same bustle and activity, same language, art, poetry, style of conversation - the same pomp and splendour, the same opulent style of living. Taking advantage of the Shia Law of Muta, he contracted temporary legal marriages with as many good-looking and talented girls as he fancied. Troupes of artistes congregated in his court, the best singers were enlisted into his service and there was a larger concourse of musicians in Matiyaburj than could be found anywhere else in India". ("Lucknow : The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture").

We come across descriptions of great musical assemblies in the Darbar Hall of Matiyaburj where the great musicians and music-

lovers of Calcutta gathered to hear Wajid Ali Shah sing his favourite Lucknow-Thumris, and to marvel at his dance-performances. The Durbar Hall was lavishly and opulently decorated just as the Lucknow Baradari used to be.

Among the invitees used to be great personalities from Calcutta's music world such as Jadu-Bhatta (Dhrupad), Aghorenath Chakravarty (Dhrupad), Sajjad Mohammad (Sitar), Dhirendranath Bose (Sarod), Shyamlal Goswami (Esraj), Rai Chand Boral, and several others. In the words of D.C. Bhattacharya, "Rich and flexible voices filled the air. Thumri had the pride of place, particularly Wajid Ali Shah's own compositions that once held Lucknow in thrill - Babul mora naihar chchootojaay; Jab chchor chali Lucknow nagari; Neer bharan kaise jaun. The songs rose to great heights of expressiveness and created a spell".

When it ceased, Wajid Ali Shah sat in mute silence for a long while, and then expressed his feelings: "All this time I was in a dreamland as though transported by unknown hands to my Kaisarbagh Baradari. Ah, what I have left behind! Now, only the sweet memories linger."

The loyal citizens as well as their beloved ruler hoped for a long time that the latter would regain the throne of Awadh and "return to bestow a fresh spirit to the lifeless people"; but their dreams were never fulfilled. Wajid Ali Shah died on September 1, 1887 and was buried in Imambara Sibtenabad, in Matiyaburj.

Wajid Ali Shah's most popular Thumri really turned out to be one of the saddest and sweetest of parting songs. Such are the poignant associations of this ever-popular Lucknow Thumri composed by Akhtarpiya.

"Babul mora naihar chchooto jaay".