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Namashkar.

Great Masters Part 23 is here and it features Smt. Mogubai Kurdikar.

Last month, during the runs on Kesarbai Kerkar, I had solicited help for the translation of a piece I had with me in Marathi, on Mogubai. One of our prominent netters, Ajay Nerurkar, stepped up to the plate right away and volunteered to do the needful. He was the ideal candidate for this work - one who is very knowledgeable about Indian Classical music and who combines fluency in both Marathi and English. Despite his busy schedule, he quickly put his mind to work and pencil to paper. Given the inherent difficulties that translation presents, of capturing and retaining the essence of the ideas in the original, of finding the most judicious English equivalents for idiomatic Marathi, of maintaining the flow, and above all, of presenting an enjoyable and readable document, this was no trivial exercise. Ajay has been very successful in all these aspects and it is a superb effort.

The original essay in Marathi was written by Shri Gopalkrishna Bhobe for his book "Kalaatm Gomantak" ("Talented Goa" - Gomantak is one of the 'original' names for Goa). Gopal-bab was from the village of Nerul in Goa, a very erudite individual, known for his insightful commentaries on music, dance, drama and Marathi literature and poetry. He was also a long-time music and drama critic for the Maharashtra Times daily in Bombay.

I must also thank Shri Arun Parvatkar, Chief Librarian of Kala Academy, Panjim, Goa, for ferreting out the original article.

Rajan Parrikar

From: "Kalaatm Gomantak" by Gopalkrishna Bhobe

MOGUBAI KURDIKAR

by

Gopalkrishna Bhobe

(Translated from Marathi by Ajay Nerurkar)

The extremely difficult gayaki of the Atrauli Gharana has been studied by many in Maharashtra, but the honour of being the foremost vocalists in this tradition goes to Goans Surshri Kesarbai Kerkar and Gaantapasvini Mogubai Kurdikar. These humble devotees of music crowned the musical edifice erected by previous generations and lent an estimable character to Goan musical tradition.

The anguish Mogubai experienced in her pursuit of music made her unique. Balancing the cares of tomorrow on one hand and her tanpura in the other, Mogubai battled on a Yogic scale. She acquired the learning, but that wasn't enough. She was ever unsatisfied - - suffering from a sense of incompleteness. But it is this sense of incompleteness that also bestows a rare talent -- a talent that constantly accompanies one like a shadow.

The previous generation of musicians had devotedly pursued music, studied it and become famous, but destiny was on their side. In spite of an extraordinary intellect, however, luck was not in Mogubai's favour. At the time, Goa's Kalavant community was undergoing a revolution. The fame of musicians had spread everywhere. Every mother wanted her child to become a musician and bring honour to the family name. It was no surprise then that Mogubai's mother Jayshreebai had the same ambition. With a seven year old Mogu in tow she walked the distance from Kurdi to Zambavli. She requested a Haridas who had settled here to teach her daughter music.

The buwa responded, "Bai, I wander from place to place and have no fixed abode. My stay here is of limited duration." But Jayshreebai was insistent. "Teach her as long as you are here", she said. He taught her as best he could during the remaining part of his stay. This interruption at the outset of her musical education was to haunt Mogubai all her life. Jayshreebai's desire, however, did not dim till the end. She had vowed, as it were, to make her daughter a singer worthy of standing alongside the greats. Someone suggested she approach the songsters that toured with drama companies. Full of hope, Jayshreebai took Mogubai to a company called "Chandreshwar Bhootnath Sangeet Mandali". They made this company their home. And this touring company took their destiny for a ride too.

This was a somewhat small drama company of that time. The bustle of their shows spanned twenty and sometimes all thirty days in a month. Jayshreebai had been sucked into a maelstrom. The owner of the company was shrewd. He gauged Jayshreebai's needs, noted her daughter's sweet voice and then lost no time in roping in Mogu for roles like that of 'Prahlad' or 'Dhruv'. This premature burden on her daughter's shoulders pierced the mother's heart, but to hear her confident, melodious singing, her playful bantering with rhythm to applause was elysian. She would dream of seeing Mogu become a great singer in the future. She was not destined, however, to have this happen in her lifetime. Physical labour took its toll, she fell ill and then passed away leaving her only daughter, an orphan. While on her deathbed, she handed over the charge of her daughter to Balkrishna Parvatkar, a person from her own village who also worked for the company, and told him, "Please help my daughter become an eminent singer."

On the point of death she had held Mogu's hand in hers and said, "Mogu, my soul will be around you at all times and only when you carve out a name for yourself as a great singer will it find salvation !" Mogu's childish mind may not have made any sense of this, but the words themselves remained etched in her memory to the end. And when she understood what those words meant she vowed -- " I shall withstand boundless suffering, endure physical pain, even disregard humiliation to learn music and fulfil your desire !" Vows torment the sincere. They load the dice against them. Success comes in sight only when the verve has gone and only after a lot of sorrows have been digested. Such is the story of Mogubai's life too. After Jayshreebai's death, the drama troupe that supported Mogubai, 'Chandreshwar Bhootnath' was racked by internal fissures. Soon differences cropped up between the owners, and the company folded. Mogubai had to return to her

village and somehow pass the time. Unexpectedly, one day, she received an invitation from another company, 'Satarkar Streesangeet Mandali'. Balkrishna Parvatkar did not let this means of livelihood slip. He immediately had Mogubai join the company.

Gradually, the parts Mogubai played became popular and she got roles like that of Subhadra in Saubhadra and Kinkini in Punyaprabhav. Her name was enough to sell tickets. All said and done, however, it was a drama troupe and one of women, to boot! Any drama company is born with the baggage of jealousy, rivalry and resentment. Things came to a head one day. Mogubai had to leave the company as a consequence of a severe quarrel with her mistress. One can only imagine what bitter disappointment and anguish Mogubai's artistic soul must have felt as she made her way back to her village. What did the future hold for her except a return to the hard life of a drama company ? Had she fulfilled the promise she had made to her mother ? No ! Her life, however, was slipping away.

Mogubai's studious mind had achieved two things while she was with the 'Satarkar Stree Sangeet Mandali' -- a compact training in Natyasangeet from the late Chintubuwa Gurav and primary lessons in dance from the company's resident dancer Ramlal. Later, out of sheer interest, she had taken advanced training in dance from two proficient dance masters -- Chunilal and Majelkhan. But this was just as a hobby. All this helped her imbibe the rhythmic aspects of music so thoroughly, that they now ran in her blood. Mogubai fell ill because of the heartache that leaving the drama company had caused her. A doctor recommended a change of climate. Acting on this advice, she set up residence in the nearby province of Sangli. There, on the suggestion of some well-wishers, she started learning from Khansaheb Inayatkhan. But, soon for some trivial reason, the whimsical Khansaheb stopped teaching her. This was the second setback her musical education had received in its infancy. Although her training had stopped, she continued to rehearse whatever little Khansaheb had taught her. She got so wrapped in this riyaz that she forgot herself.

One evening she sat rehearsing an ornamental swara pattern she had learnt from Inayatkhan, completely absorbed in her own musical world, when her spell was broken by a noise that appeared to come from the doorway. She opened her eyes and there stood before her an elderly person with the looks of a yogi, a huge white moustache and wearing a pink turban. Her fingers lay still on the tanpura and her face took on a quizzical expression. Before she could speak, he said, taking a step forward, "Please continue your riyaz. I listen to your singing everyday. Today, I came to see you in person."

This was the first Mogubai had seen of Gaansamrat Alladiya Khansaheb.

Khansaheb was in Sangli getting treatment from the reputed doctor, Abasaheb Saambaare. His daily route took him by Mogubai's house and each day he would quietly appreciate her mellifluous and cadenced voice. But today he couldn't restrain himself. He saw who this voice belonged to, grasped her yearning for musical education and perhaps made up his mind about something, for there he was the next day, sitting before Mogubai and tutoring her in Raag Multani.

To Mogubai, his overall personality suggested only that he was probably a famous singer. Little did she know that he was a reigning monarch in the world of music. She comprehended just how great he was, when she attended a function at the residence of Abasaheb Saambaare. He was on the dais, ready to sing, and she observed how some very eminent people bowed to him in respect. She was astounded.

She swelled with pride. Scarcely could anyone be more fortunate, she thought. She was overcome with emotion, and her whole being trembled with happiness. However, the good fortune did not last long.

Her training with Khansaheb had completed 1 1/2 years. During this time she mastered raags Multani, Todi, Dhanashree and Poorvi. Khansaheb was delighted with his pupil's intensely receptive nature. But it was a very restless Khansaheb that came to teach her one day. He said,

"I have to leave Sangli for Bombay. That will now be my permanent home. I am abandoning you, I have to."

Tears flowed from Khansaheb's eyes. He continued,

"If you come to Bombay, I will somehow find the time to teach you. You have understood my gayaki. Now it is only a matter of adding to your store of knowledge."

Khansaheb left for Bombay. Mogubai was distraught. Her training had been interrupted. What would she do now ? She was getting increasingly desperate. "What are you doing here ? Go to Bombay !", she kept telling herself. But this was easier said than done.

However, when one truly yearns for something one automatically acquires the strength to achieve it. During her stay in Sangli she had been inspired by the music of the late Rahimat Khan and of Pt. Balkrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar. Their lives were also intensely inspiring. Mogubai decided to take a leap into the unknown. She journeyed to Bombay where she found a small place for herself in Khetwadi. Also, she met Khansaheb and requested him to resume his tutelage.

Khansaheb was delighted. He started guiding her once more.

Now one would have expected things to go smoothly for a while. Alas ! Only a few days had passed when Khansaheb stopped coming for his regular lessons. Inquiries revealed that Khansaheb's hosts in Bombay had forbidden him to train anyone else. They did not wish anybody else to carry the stamp of the Alladiya Khan gharana. Khansaheb was helpless. He had been fenced in by someone's fear of being bested by a talented woman like Mogubai quickly absorbing his teaching. Unwittingly, Mogubai had created hidden enemies. Her training had been interrupted and it was as if the sky had fallen upon her. The very thing for which she had left all to come to Bombay was now nowhere in sight. Everything now seemed futile to her.

She spent several days worrying. Ultimately, in frustration, she requested Bashir Khan , a son of Bade Mohammad Khan, to train her. Bashir Khan agreed on the condition that she perform the ganda-bandhan with Vilayat Khan. Desperate to start learning again, she scraped together whatever little she had and put up a grand ganda-bandhan ceremony. Bashir Khan began to teach her.

Naturally, Alladiya came to know of this. He feared that a different teacher would change the mould of her voice, something he had designed. He wanted someone as talented as Mogubai to continue in his musical lineage. One day, he went to Mogubai and said, "Mogu, stop your training with Bashir Khan. I will arrange for your tutoring with my brother Hyder Khan. The distinctive pattern I have given your singing should not be tampered with."

Mogubai was speechless. Somehow she responded, "Khansaheb, you should be aware of what might ensue. First of all you are asking me to run afoul of somebody I'd rather not offend. You know the standing Bashir Khan, Vilayat Khan and their family enjoy in

Bombay. I shall stop the training but only if you promise to take me as a student in the event of Hyder Khansaheb's being unable to teach me anytime in the future."

Khansaheb gave his assent and Mogubai began to receive systematic training from Hyder Khan. Mogubai's acuity and Hyder Khan's teaching abilities made a great combination. Every few days Hyder Khan would supply her with a new raag or a new cheez. Mogubai was busy taking in all he gave. In a short time Hyder Khan prepared her remarkably well. The future looked rosy to Mogubai, she dreamt of fulfilling the promise she had given her mother. But good fortune still refused to smile on her.

Mogubai's fast-paced progress made Alladiya's other pupils green with envy. The thought that Mogubai had shot ahead of them constantly pricked them. There was only one thing they could do. Persuade Khansaheb, warn him and get him to exert pressure. And that is what they did. Alladiya Khan compelled Hyder Khan to leave Bombay, which he did on the pretext of ill-health. But before leaving he made Mogubai aware of all that had transpired. As he took her leave, he was crying, and cursing those who would suck the vitality out of someone'. However, it was Mogubai who was deprived of all support by this incident.

Her simple mind could not fathom why she, who never wished ill of anyone, and kept to herself, should make enemies. Was it something she had done in her previous birth that was responsible for this recurring humiliation? What could she do except blame her stars for her misfortune? Now there was no hope. Everyone but everyone, Bashir Khan, Vilayat Khan had turned their backs on her.

She could have made a living, singing in concerts, on the basis of the little musical knowledge she had acquired. Even pedantic critics had granted her that much approval. But this was not enough to satisfy Mogubai. Her hunger hadn't been satiated. She wanted the complete stamp of a gharana on her. She wanted to become the primary representative of that gharana and this was still a distant goal.

Years passed. One evening Mogubai sat doing riyaz with 15 month-old Kishori on her lap, concentrating on a difficult palta as taught by Hyder KhanSaheb. She imagined Khansaheb Alladiya guiding her through the intricacies of the composition and earning his appreciation for reproducing his phrases perfectly. The fidgeting of the small child woke her from this trance. She hardly believed her eyes when she saw that it was Khansaheb Alladiya Khan in person teaching her the palta.

To her, this was an incredible turn of events; it was more like a beautiful dream. She must have pinched herself to make certain. But it wasn't a dream, it was real, Khansaheb had returned.

After this, without any further ado, she arranged to perform the ganda-bandhan ceremony with Alladiya Khansaheb. She tried her best to repay him for the knowledge he had bestowed on her of his own accord in the past, and what's more, hadn't charged her anything for. Alladiya Khansaheb now taught her till the very end and at one jalsa acclaimed her as the queen among the vocalists of his gharana. This was truly a golden day in Mogubai's life.

In yet another jalsa, Mogubai shared the platform with other disciples of Khansaheb. Connoisseurs of music commended her for her superiority and extraordinary talent. Layabhaskar Khapruji lauded her flawless sense of rhythm. Years upon years of superhuman efforts and tenacious hardwork had paid off. The promise she had made her

mother had been fulfilled. This has been the tale of an uneducated woman's zealous pursuit of music in a time that was not exactly kind to her.

Shrimati Mogubai is now known as one of India's great singers. She also teaches music and several of her students have made a name for themselves. A chance to hear her is considered a rare bonanza by music lovers. Mogubai, by her achievements, has negated the notion that only a wealthy person can pursue the musical arts. At times, she would even drink water to quell her hunger rather than interrupt her endeavour. She got what she wanted and for which she devoted her whole life. Shy of publicity, she received less popularity than she merited. After all, fate decides how successful or popular one is.

Why is one able to sell trinkets at the price of gold while another can't sell his gold even at the price of trinkets ? That's the way the cookie crumbles. However, wise men know the difference between a bauble and a ring of solid gold. And as long as there are wise people in this world, a person sincere about his business need not worry. He will always get the respect he deserves.

As Kesarbai Kerkar, so also Mogubai Kurdikar is a pillar of Goa's musical tradition. Her devotion to her pursuit, music, will inspire coming generations to fearlessly face the ups and downs in their chosen occupations.