

**Rajab Ali Khan** (1874-1959), born in Narsingarh, Madhyam Pradesh, learnt music from his father Manglu Khan, Amritsen (Senee) and Bade Mohammad Khan (Gwalior). He was a court musician of Dewas and Kolhapur. In his day, Rajab Ali Khan was known as much for his tremendous musical acumen as for his picaresque ways. A master vocalist, he was also proficient on the Rudra Veena, Sitar and Jala-Tarang. Several musicians of high standing learnt from him, among them his nephew Aman Ali Khan of the Bhendibazar Gharana (and through Aman Ali the influence extended to Amir Khan), Nivruttibuwa Sarnaik, Ganpatrao Dewaskar and others. Lata Mangeshkar, too, briefly took tAleem from Rajab Ali during her stint under Aman Ali.

Rajab Ali Khan's capers have been recorded in Prof. B.R. Deodhar's book **Pillars of Hindustani Music** (Popular Prakashan). Some excerpts:

...Have you heard of a Court case in which a shagird (formal disciple)sues the ustad for refund of fees paid by him or her at the time of the black-thread ceremony? This is what happened in the case of Khansaheb Rajaballi Khan. The interesting feature of this case was that the Counsel for the defendant was none other than the late Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande...Khansaheb, not being well-versed in legal matters, sought Pandit Bhatkhande's advice. Panditji agreed to fight the case on Khansaheb's behalf. When the matter came up in Court, Panditji argued that the payment made at the ganda-bandhan (black-thread) ceremony being guru-dakshina, i.e. in the nature of a gift to the guru, the disciple can in no circumstances ask for its repayment. The Court, accepting this reasoning, decided in Khansaheb's favour...

...Khansaheb's concert tours used to cover several cities and he would earn a sizeable sum of rupees seven to eight thousand, before returning to Dewas. Because of his prodigal ways it was not long before this fortune was spent on his own extravagances and hospitality to intimate friends. Then the borrowings from money-lenders, grocers, other shopkeepers and confectioners would start. The shopkeepers, knowing their customer only too well, would decline to supply goods on credit when the borrowings had crossed reasonable limits...On one occasion, the money-lenders, grocers, clothiers all stopped credit but the confectioner continued to provide stuff on credit. One day a relation of Khansaheb, who lived in a distant village, came on horseback to visit Khansaheb. Khansaheb extended a cordial welcome to him and ostentatiously told him to go to a confectioner and get five or ten seers of jalebi. The guest protested that his horse ate grass and not jalebi. Khansaheb replied, "You happen to be the guest of a great artiste. Your horse, while he is under my roof, must eat jalebi." The horse was indeed fed on jalebis. Khansaheb did not have any cash even to buy fodder for the horse but since the confectioner had still not cut off credit, jalebi was still obtainable...

...Having come to know that a visit to Vazir Khan was a must before seeking audience with the ruler [of Rampur], Rajaballi Khan went to the former's mansion...The two went inside. Rajaballi Khan's companion bowed low and then squatted on the ground like a lowly dependant. Vazir Khan was seated in a silver-encrusted chair. Rajaballi Khan made a bee-line for his seat and sat on an adjoining chair. He even went so far as to take a few puffs on Vazir Khan's hookah. Vazir Khan, although really very angry at this impertinence, was outwardly calm. He politely enquired after Rajaballi Khan who replied that he was a singer, been player and a disciple of Khansaheb Bande Ali. Vazir Khan said, "Yes I know," and made some uncharitable remark about the kind of instrument Bande Ali was using. Rajaballi Khan replied "But it had a far sweeter sound than your Rampuri drum-like been." Since Rajaballi's first interview was so explosive the prospect of his being able to secure an audience with the Nawab was not very bright. But Rajaballi, ill-mannered as he was, had brought a letter from the Kolhapur ruler. Since not to grant him an interview would be discourtesy to the Maharaja, the Nawab decided to see him.

The Nawab sent for him the same night...Rajaballi used to say that the Nawab was a very skilled singer and his layakari (sense of rhythm) was very good. He knew innumerable dhrupads and dhamars by heart. However, he did not pay as much attention to swara (tonal purity) as he should have. After his rendering of a song, the Nawab turned to the assembled musicians and said, "Tell me, have you heard any singer who can equal me in layakari and tonal purity?" All the musicians instantly chorused, "No Your Highness! We have neither seen nor heard anyone of your calibre!"

Nawabsaheb turned to Rajaballi and asked, "Rajaballi, what is your opinion?" Rajaballi replied, "My opinion is identical with what the others have said." But this somehow did not carry conviction with the Nawab. He repeatedly pressed Rajaballi for his true opinion and finally asked him to swear by Allah and the Koran and give his true opinion. Thereupon Rajaballi said "Your Highness! I have visited many princely houses and palaces without coming across any Raja who knows as much music as you do or who can sing like you." Nawabsaheb countered this by saying, "I am not asking you to say where I stand with respect to the other princes. How do I rank among professional musicians? I want you to tell me that." To this Rajaballi replied, "Even the children of musicians are better than you." Nawabsaheb's face grew crimson with rage when he heard this. "I would have had you shot this instant," the Nawab barked, "but unfortunately you have come here with a letter from the Maharaja (of Kolhapur). I am helpless. But get out of my state immediately." Rajaballi was paid Rs. 500/- and expelled from Rampur without delay...