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Subject: Great Master 29: Govindrao Tembe - musician, composer, aesthete
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Namashkar. In the 29th installment of Great Masters we feature the bel esprit extraordinaire - Govind Tembe. The following account is taken from Vamanrao Deshpande's anthology "Between Two Tanpuras," which is a (poor) English representation of the Marathi pastiche entitled "Alapini." Rendering idiomatic Marathi into a Western language and retaining the accuracy and beauty of the original is not a trivial enterprise.

Vamanrao's deep love and affection for music and the aprateem musicians that intersected his fortunate life are amply reflected in his writings. Despite the exalted company he kept he was not given to abandoning his critical mien nor did he display any penchant for unbridled laudation. Here, in this sketch, however, Vamanrao finds himself drawn into panegyric while describing this phenomenally gifted preceptor, the one man who had the cheek - and the talent - to successfully reproduce Alladiya Khansaheb's epoch-ushering gAyaki on the harmonium! For Govindrao Tembe was an original, a swayambhu (self-realised). Read on.

Warm regards,

Rajan Parrikar

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Translation by Ram Deshmukh and B.R. Dekhney

Govindrao Tembe

by

Vaman Hari Deshpande

Govindrao is dead and with him is gone the majesty of the mehfil. His arrival at a concert or at a theatre-gathering was indeed an event. The audience would whisper "Govindrao is here ... Govindrao is here," and when he left the mehfil would appear deserted. The only person whose mere arrival could light up a mehfil and who could almost extinguish it when he departed has now left us permanently!

I had seen Govindrao at music recitals on several occasions before I was formally introduced to him. To watch him hear and appreciate classical music at a concert was itself an aesthetic experience. I can recollect an entrancing recital by Manji Khan with Govindrao in the forefront of the select audience. On such an occasion it used to be difficult to decide whether one should listen to Manji Khan's singing or watch Govindrao's appreciative gestures and the charming responses reflected on his face. I began to feel an irresistible desire to be introduced to this person and get to know him well. This happened twenty-six years ago though its memory is still as fresh in my mind as if it had happened yesterday. Govindrao is no longer amidst us and his death has created a void which is not likely to be filled in future.

Govindrao's death was unexpected. Of late, he had taken considerable interest in the work of the Central Audition Board of All India Radio. He had gone to Delhi in connection with the work of this Board and suffered a heart attack on 29th September, 1955. Dr. Sumati Mutatkar conveyed the news to the Minister in charge of Information and Broadcasting Dr. B.V. Keskar and Shri P.M. Lad, I.C.S., who took keen personal interest and had Govindrao removed to Wellington Nursing Home. They also arranged for a thorough medical check-up and treatment by expert doctors. It was felt that somebody from Govindrao's family should go over to Delhi and stay with him. Shri P.M. Lad, Secretary to Government in the Department of Information and Broadcasting, wrote to Govindrao's eldest son, Pilunana and called him to Delhi. For the first few days Govindrao was unable to move his hands and feet. But soon he rallied round and was well enough to send a telegram home saying - "I am feeling better. The A.I.R. officers have made excellent arrangements for my treatment. There is, therefore, no need for anybody from the family to come here. There is absolutely no cause for anxiety." In the meantime his youngest son, Bhaurao and his eldest daughter-in-law, Indirabai, had left Kolhapur for Delhi; but having seen (at Pune) the reassuring telegram from Govindrao they returned home. Fearing that the telegram might not have reached Kolhapur and that Bhaurao might have started for Delhi, Govindrao pressed Pilunana to go to the Delhi Railway Station to fetch him. Pilunana left the Nursing Home for the station. At 5.35 p.m. Govindrao suffered a heart attack apparently caused by a coughing fit which brought his life to an end in a matter of seconds. When Pilunana returned from the station at 7 p.m. he found that his father had passed away. Officers of the All India Radio rushed to the hospital on hearing the news. Dr. Keskar too came to pay his respects to the departed soul. He gave instructions to his officers in regard to the funeral. During this terminal illness of Govindrao, Dr. Keskar, Shri P.M. Lad and Dr. Sumati Mutatkar had paid personal attention to Govindrao's treatment and made every effort to make his stay at the hospital as comfortable as possible. They all felt a sense of guilt for the tragedy since it was in response to their invitation that Govindrao had gone to Delhi.

It appears that Govindrao's death was destined to take place in Delhi, the

Capital of India. In a sense it was both natural and inevitable. He had lived like a prince; so it was proper and fitting that he should breath his last in the Capital of India. Born in a middle class family and pursuing a career in music, theatre and literature, Govindrao went through events and experiences which even a prince would have envied. He was on the most intimate and cordial terms with Rajas and Maharajas. These latter at least had or seemed to have the responsibility of running the affairs of their States. Govindrao did not have any. He was fortunate enough to enjoy the beauty and fragrance of a rose without suffering the pricks of the thorns. He did not have to worry about running the affairs of his family or perhaps he was not habituated to bear the burden of family anxieties. As he was always surrounded by artists, the affluent and the powerful, his personal needs were automatically taken care of. He was, therefore, in a position to give undivided attention to the pursuit of beauty in all its forms. He did not hanker after the impossible and did not, therefore, suffer the pangs of unfulfilled desires. It should also be said that he was extraordinarily adept at drawing the curtain over tragic happenings.

In this connection an incident in his life is worth recording. Some sixteen years ago, while Govindrao was staying with me in Bombay, he lost his most intimate friend and patron, the Yuvaraj of Mysore. He returned from the funeral with a very heavy heart. I had never seen him so stricken with grief. I said to him, "Your life has been a shock-absorber. You have the capacity to neutralize the impact of any grief or calamity. Why are you so distressed today?" He immediately put a rein on his grief. It was not a surprise that he was so grief-stricken that day; the surprise was that he collected himself so quickly.

This trait is probably shared by many great artists. Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale lost a dearly loved daughter. When he found that friends and relations around him showed no sign of coming out of their gloom, he asked them, "Why are you all so quiet? Why don't you ask me to sing?" Govindrao had a similar quality of aloofness in things, which he maintained throughout his life; and it was because of this detachment and restraint that he was able to become such a faithful worshipper of beauty and enrich it in so many different ways.

This statement of mine may surprise many, but I am making it with a full sense of responsibility. I have reached this conclusion after observing him at close quarters as his disciple over a long period of twenty-five years. Govindrao, however, always treated me as a close friend and allowed me privilege of observing the innermost workings of his mind. Govindrao enjoyed the good things in life becoming their captive. He did not allow himself to be carried away.

The purest among the classical artists used to take particular delight in singing light Marathi compositions of Govindrao. By now there have been numerous successful Marathi sound-films but it was Govindrao who brought

'sound' to Marathi cinema by his dialogues and songs in the film Ayodhyecha Raja (The king of Ayodhya). It was he who set the style of writing on music in Marathi. In his celebrated book Maza Sangeet Vyasang Govindrai has adopted a model for later writers on music.

He traversed different spheres of life and thereby enriched his own life. He also established several high water-marks in his art career. Both these things are very important. Leaving aside his brief spells as a clerk, as a pleader, and as a manager of a circus troupe, his playing diverse roles as a stage actor, as a playwright, as owner of drama company, director, composer and director of stage and cinema music, shows the extensiveness of his life and versatility of his interests. Similarly his extraordinarily high reputation and popularity as a musicologist, song-writer and composer show the depth of his interests.

Although Govindrao pursued various interests and vocations in his life, his main preoccupation for nearly half a century was harmonium playing. If he was famous in Maharashtra and outside, it was because of his uncommon skill as a harmonium-player. He revolutionized the art of playing on the harmonium. Harmonium is an instrument basically suited to Western music. Govindrao brought Indian classical music within the ambit of this instrument and for nearly forty years he identified himself with it so completely that Govindrao and harmonium became almost synonymous terms.

There had been harmonium players before Govindrao, many of his contemporaries played harmonium, and there is no dearth of such players even today; but none could cast his spell on the audience as Govindrao did. He made the knowledgeable give their nod of approval and appreciation, mesmerized the ignorant and the uninitiated, and induced the serious-minded to store the music in their memory. His technique of fingering was so perfect and entrancing that it was not observed in any other player except those few who were fortunate enough to have received training from him. Govindrao in his prime displayed extraordinary virtuosity but he never allowed sheer skill to mar the aesthetic charm of his performance. The compositions he played on harmonium were rhythmic and of a caressing quality and utterly free from acrobatics. This needs to be emphasized because acrobatic exercises dominate present day musical performances!

Narayanrao Bal Gandharva's music, naturally sweet and velvety in its smoothness, clothed with the discipline of conventional classical music, is, broadly speaking, how one can describe Govindrao's art. I was often intrigued to find that Narayanrao often referred to Govindrao as Guruwarya and Govindrao rated Narayanrao very highly. The mystery was cleared when I heard Govindrao playing on the harmonium one day and attended Narayanrao's vocal recital on the following day. It became quite clear to me that these two artists had an identical aesthetic conception. When I met Narayanrao at Nagpur on one occasion, he told me, "I have immensely benefited from

Govindrao's help and guidance. You also should take full advantage of his knowledge and direction." Although Narayanrao developed his aesthetic ideology quite independently, there is no doubt that its origin and inspiration is traceable to Govindrao.

It cannot be said that Govindrao received training in harmonium-playing from any particular teacher. His career in harmonium playing actually started with Marathi stage-songs and it was further developed under the influence of celebrated stage artists like Bhaurao Kolhatkar, Dattoba Halyalkar and others whose company he sought and enjoyed. Later his harmonium-playing became more brilliant and sophisticated through listening constantly to famous Vocalists like Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale, Mojuddin Khan, Miyajan and Alladiya Khan. It acquired both a rare charm and a structural integrity. He had heard all the well-known vocalists and instrumentalists of his period and had on occasion provided them accompaniment on the harmonium. He took immense pains to reproduce in his playing every nuance and improvisation employed by these artists with the same unerring grace and neatness. He would not rest content with mere precision of the notation unless he also reproduced the grace of the singer; and even if he got the bandish right he was not happy if he did not reproduce it with the special caressing quality of his playing. Today the situation is precisely the reverse. Present day artists think they have not established their expertise unless they eschew all feelings and emotions from their performance. How I wish Govindrao were here to show them the way in this distressing situation! It is indeed unfortunate that performers who are now lost in their acrobatics did not hear Govindrao when he was at the zenith of his career.

One special feature of Govindrao's art was the restraint he exercised while performing. He always prepared an appropriate background for exhibiting the pure beauty of a certain note (swara) or a group of notes. In doing so, he never did anything which would mar the beauty of what he meant to present. He appeared to adopt a certain plan or strategy in the presentation and development of his art of playing. He made each rhythmic cycle (avartan) serve as the background for the succeeding cycles and each succeeding series appeared to enhance the melodic quality of what he had played earlier, till the whole pattern of notes reached a crescendo almost like a logical sequence. His tana patterns were also organized with the same objective in view and the internal structure of tana patterns was aimed to achieve similar artistic culmination. Uncommon success is achieved in the field of music only if there is an integrated design in expression.

Govindrao devoted himself whole-heartedly to the study and practice of harmonium-playing and vocal music and without allowing his art to become sterile and dull he made beauty its sole aim. His entire life was full of grace and charm. The creator had showered on him all the choicest gifts. He was a good listener and appreciator of art, be it

vocal or instrumental music, dance or literature and his face would glow with pleasure whenever he could discern even a fragment of beauty in the presentation of art. Mogubai Kurdikar only recently said to me, "Govindrao alone could appreciate good music; he alone knew when, where and how much appreciation to bestow on a performer." Govindrao's heart appeared to have a number of chords, each reserved for a separate performer. If an artist could strike the proper chord he would get immediate response from Govindrao and his face never failed to, register this appreciative response. This was the main reason why both artists and listeners cared so much and longed for his presence at concerts. One who aspires to become an eminent artist must have very sharp and sensitive ears and an exceedingly receptive heart. To lose this sensitivity is to block the road to eminence.

Although Govindrao had derived much knowledge in music from Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale and although he always remained beholden to him, his ultimate loyalty, so far as music was concerned, was to Khansaheb Alladiya Khan. His devotion, his love for Khansaheb was boundless. He once said to a friend in my presence, "I regard even a dog at Khansaheb's house as sacred." By way of self-defence he immediately added, "Khansaheb's dog also would be such as would possess a dignity no other dog can have." Since his devotion and loyalty to Khansaheb was so completely unadulterated it was only natural that the influence of Khansaheb should have been discernible in his aesthetic ideology, harmonium-playing, temperament and even his gestures. His harmonium playing was entirely based on Khansaheb's gayaki (style). He had not only searched for Khansaheb's aesthetic principle but had actually found and mastered it. The only difference (and this was inevitable) was due to the technical changes made necessary by the different media through which it was expressed - human voice and the harmonium.

Perhaps because the harmonium could not fully absorb Govindrao's musical virtuosity, the overflow was diverted to theatre. His achievements in music had their origin in Marathi stage music; and now he dedicated to the same stage music what was not fully absorbed by the harmonium. The music compositions which he contributed to the Marathi plays - Manapaman and Vidyaharan - brought about a two-fold revolution in Marathi stage music. The tunes he gave to the stage music were based on pure classical Hindustani music. But along with it he also provided semi-classical music of the Purab (Eastern) variety. Since then, Marathi stage music has represented a very happy combination of highly classical and Purab style music and the credit for blending these two variants of Hindustani music must go to Govindrao.

Though music was Govindrao's first love, his literary life was equally rich. In him music and literature went hand in hand and his artistic life would not be fully revealed or understood unless we take into consideration this happy and rare blending of two

kinds of talents. His published literary output would amount to nearly 2000 to 2500 printed pages (without counting his other scattered published material numbering about 500-1000 pages of articles on Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale, the famous singer Goharjan, etc.). These include Maza Sangeet Vyasang, his autobiography; a work on scientific analysis of music, his biography of Alladiya Khansaheb, his several plays, his music compositions as well as operas. His literary contribution is thus variegated and rich, taking into consideration the variety of topics dealt with and the excellence of expression and style.

His famous book Maza Sangeet Vyasang will remain an immortal achievement not only in the field of fine arts but also as a priceless piece of Marathi literature. This publication has given a new turn to literature on music. It has also opened a new vista in Marathi literature while giving an appreciative account of the contribution of famous musicians he had heard. The book, while drawing attention also to the abiding values in music, in a sense, established a new tradition of appreciative writing on musical performances. Govindrao must be considered the high priest of this literary genre. His recent book Kalpana Sangeet has again made a new and valuable contribution to scientific literature on music. His novel interpretation of the evolution and development of the various notes of the octave, his novel method of written notation based on western staff notation, his new classification of ragas (Jati vyavastha) which is essentially akin to that of Bharata and which is distinctly different from Pandit Bhatkhande's Thaata system and his selection of about a hundred ragas to portray their structural beauty are some of the main features of this work. This book is indeed a fine blending of science and artistic experience.

One more important facet of Govindrao's career is his contribution to musical compositions, an activity in which he concentrated the quintessence of his musical career. He also wrote and staged his plays, e.g., Tulasidas, Patwardhan, Varavanchana etc. He himself wrote the lyrics for these plays and set them to music. These songs soon attained the status of highly classical khayal compositions. It is indeed rare to come across a person who combines in himself the qualities of a musicologist, first-rate music composer and a man of letters. In ancient Sanskrit lore such a gifted person was designated - Vaggeyakar. Govindrao was the Vaggeyakar of modern times.

Yet one more outstanding achievement of his career as musician, actor and playwright were the operas which he composed, directed and staged. Jayadev and Mahashveta, which were only recently broadcast on All India Radio, are two examples of the operas he wrote. Mahashveta was also put on the stage. Swaranatikas (operas) were an entirely new addition to Marathi literature and Marathi stage critics have expressed many different views on them. Are these operas essentially a form of music or a form of literature? Do they lend themselves easily and appropriately

to the employment of high class music or, alternatively, folk music? Does classical music obstruct the natural flow of an opera ? Would the staging of operas necessitate changes in stage-craft ? These are some of the technical issues which have arisen in this context. To employ high classical music so as to make a play fully musical and to run it on the stage for two hours and a half, smoothly and in a manner which would sustain public interest, needs considerable imagination, tremendous effort and skill of a very high order. These operas are the culmination or end-product of Govindrao's experience as an actor (the principal roles played by him were Dhairyadhar, Kach, Dushyant, Arjun, Pundarik, Charudatta etc),

as a playwright and as a music composer. They also provide irrefutable evidence that Govindrao, even at the ripe age of seventy-four, still retained his freshness of outlook, his zest for novelty and his readiness to experiment.

I went to Pune towards the end of August 1954 and I found Govindrao preparing to stage an abridged version of Soubhadra for the All India Radio. When I called on him he was asking the man who played the role of Narad to sing the song Radhadhar Madhu Milind. I had previously heard the man sing but on this occasion his performance was absolutely entrancing. It was a clear demonstration of how an ordinary artiste's performance could be transformed into great art under Govindrao's magic touch.

How can one do full justice to Govindrao's artistry ? I have learned from him many cheejs during the last twenty-five years. I had yet to learn from him many more. I had to discuss with him innumerable subjects and I had to explore the mainsprings of his artistic life. I used to find my discussions with him completely absorbing. We had spent long hours together and I was looking forward to spending even more time in his company. But it proved to be a dream. He went away without a word of farewell. He has departed leaving the art of music orphaned!

When he left for Delhi he had promised to return in about a month. But he was to go to that place from which no traveller returns!
