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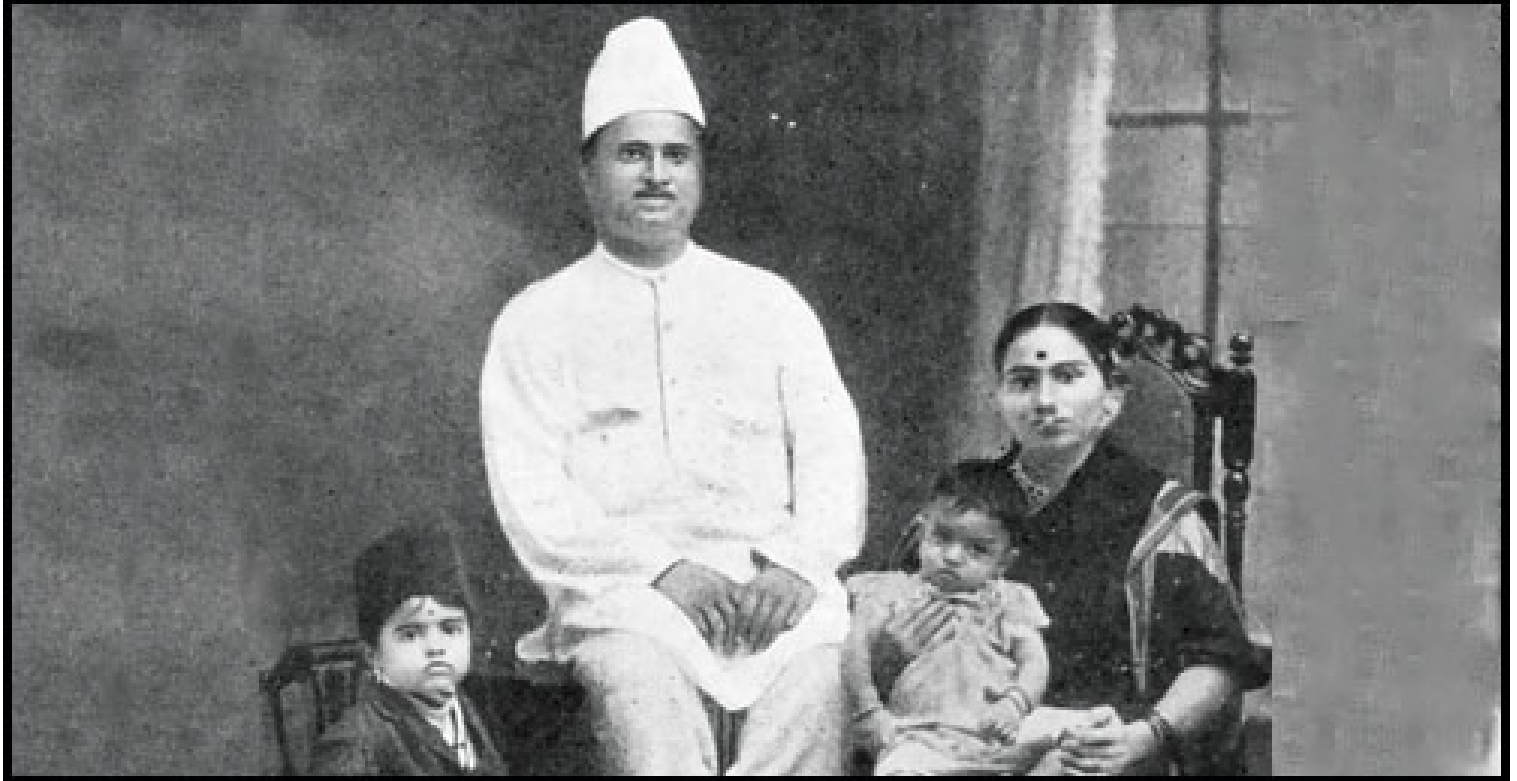
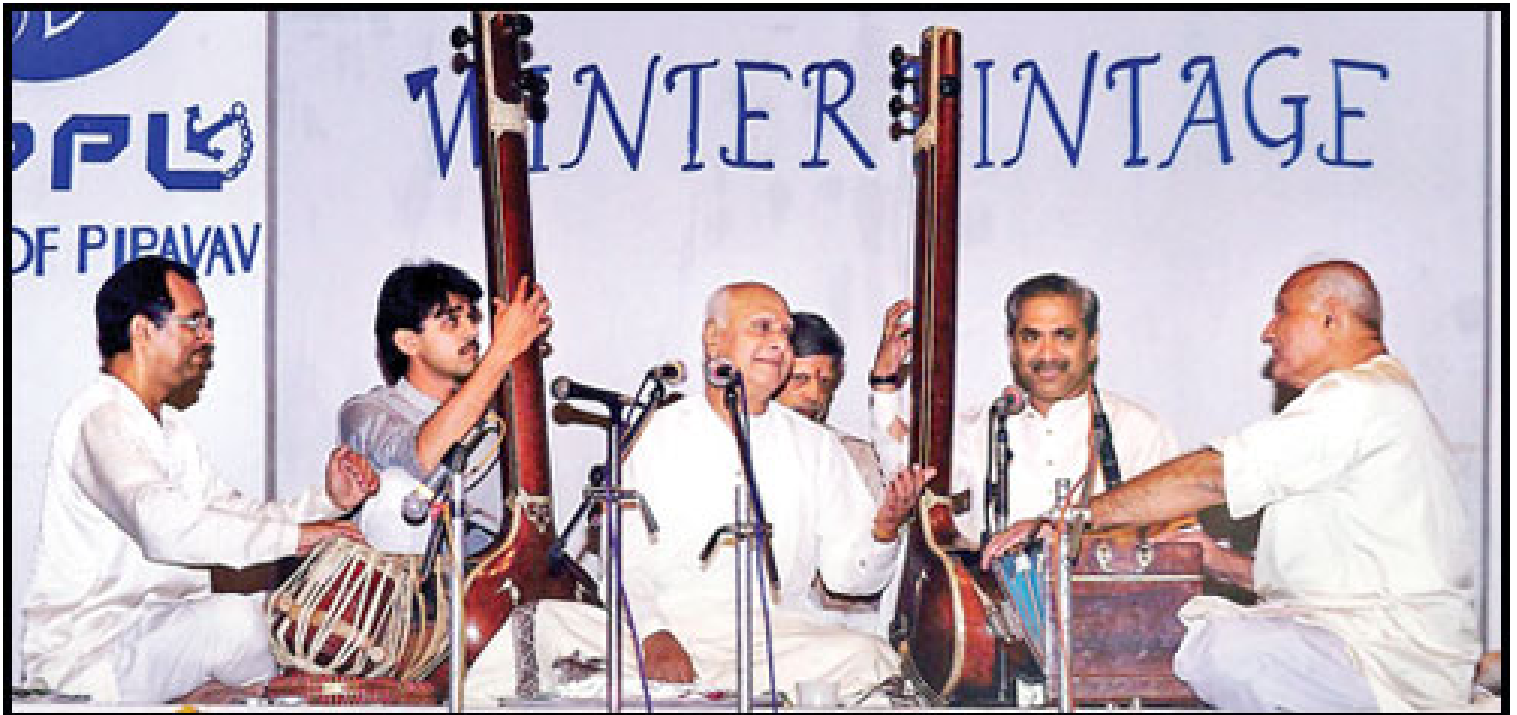
Purshottam Walawalkar: The guru who played with the legends

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Yogesh Pawar

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Purshottam Walawalkar, the harmonium accompanist to legends and guru to many, will not just be remembered for his commitment to music but also his zest for life, writes Yogesh Pawar.



Purshottam Walawalkar (far right) was a regular accompanist with the late Pandit C R Vyas (centre), who he is seen with at a concert from the early 80s; (below) Little Purshottam (in lap) with father Madhavrao Walawalkar in a family photograph.

India's senior-most harmonium maestro, nonagenarian Purshottam Walawalkar breathed his last in his Vile Parle home in the late hours of Monday, leaving the music world in mourning. This accompanist to some of the tallest legends from the world of Hindustani classical music was cremated on Tuesday

morning. Many of his students and musicians joined the funeral at the Oshiwara crematorium. He is survived by three sons and a daughter.

A royal from the former princely state of Rajpipla, Manvendra Singh Gohil, Walawalkar's student since 2000 said, "He was suffering from a lung infection but none of us expected him to go like this. He would've turned 91 in June." Gohil recounted his teacher's contribution to starting the Rajpipla Festival of Music. "I listened to him since I was young and was hoping to be taught by him for many more years. He ensured that he gave you the best without being overbearing. His gentle mentoring will always remain a fond memory."

Santoor exponent Satish Vyas expressed sorrow at the passing away of what he called an era. "He'd accompany both Pandit Jitendra Abhisheki and my late father Pandit C R Vyas. In fact it was at the 5th Gunidas Sammelan in 1981 organised by father, that he first met Buwa (Pandit Bhimsen Joshi)," he remembers.

The late Joshi, a Bharat Ratna awardee, was tense since his regular accompanist on the harmonium Bal Mate had fallen ill suddenly. When he voiced his concern to a young Satish he didn't even bat an eyelid before suggesting Walawalkar's name. "Both Walawalkar and Nana Muley (tabla) would be hired for the entire duration of the festival so I immediately suggested he take along the former."

Not too convinced, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi dashed off to the green room. When Satish Vyas realised this was a bigger crisis than he could manage, he alerted his father. It took a lot of cajoling from the senior Vyas before Joshi agreed. "Within five minutes of being on stage he took a beautiful but very complex *taan* in the *vilambit*. To his surprise, Walawalkar was able to mirror him on the harmonium so perfectly that not only did the audience applaud but Buwa himself broke into a *wah-wah*."

That concert cemented a decades-long partnership. "Buwa would rarely step out for any concert without Walawalkar on the harmonium. Since his diary would be choc-a-bloc with concert commitments through the year, Walawalkar got so busy that my father would jokingly say that he had been hijacked since he was never available for concerts with him," laughs Vyas.

Vocalist Shubha Mudgal says she finds it hard to come to terms with the fact that he's no more. "His zest for life could give a complex to 20-year-olds," she remembers adding, "Given his long innings of accompanying the who's who of stalwarts and his irrepressible humour, one could be regaled listening to anecdotes and memories laughing heartily for hours."

She fondly recalls going to Goa with him for a concert where he suddenly offered to take her to meet Meenakshi Shirodkar, the late Thumri exponent Shobha Gurtu's mother. "Though she was bed-ridden, the moment she heard him talk about her beauty and the way people went 'myaad (mad)' after her, she sat upright and broke into a *dadra*, *Kahan Baaji Kisan Tori Baasuriya*."

Walawalkar's partner on the tabla for several years, Aneesh Pradhan, too remembers his lively nature. "He

would never allow anything to affect his mood. In fact, he would use humour to create such a positive vibe that artistes who were performing would get charged and give their best. Long tours, poor sound arrangements, bad accommodation or food, everything would be forgotten with him around," he points out and adds, "Even if he played with a complete novice, he'd make them feel like they were on top of the world. This would boost their confidence and take away the fright of the first concert."

Raised in a musical environment, Walawalkar was exposed to his father Madhavrao's performances with renowned artistes like Bal Gandharva's musical theatre troupe. Seeing his talent, his father began his training in harmonium under Govindrao Tembe.

He would later polish his skills further with stalwarts like Vitthalrao Korgaonkar and Hanmantrao Walvekar. His regular accompaniment of Pandit Shivrambuwa Vaze and Pandit Kagalkar Buwa helped him imbibe the subtleties of vocal music. This skill not only came handy in his long innings but also kept getting better from all the leading exponents of vocal music he accompanied.

The bond of music

On the occasion of Walawalkar's demise, culture historian Mukund Joshi lamented how accompanists rarely get their due. "The limelight stays on the artiste but how can one ever discount the contribution of those who accompany him on the harmonium, tanpura and tabla, completing the musical experience."

He added, "Some of these associations lead to bonds stronger than those of family. After all, they cover up for each other's shortcomings on stage, showcasing the best. Many of them are repositories of secrets that no one knows about."

Without naming a late legend, Joshi recounted how he would want a large swig of single malt before taking to the stage. Since he'd be surrounded by his conservative family members, fans and organisers, the accompanist would take care of arranging the drink. They would shut the door for a supposed puja ritual of the instruments and the drink would then be stealthily gulped.



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