

PADMASRI USTAD YUSUF ALI KAHN

(1887 – 1962)

Ustad Yusuf Ali Khan was born at a time when classical music was in its springtime glory in Lucknow. In his younger days, he saw the last flashing brilliance of the flame of musical genius in Lucknow. He lived long enough (1887 to 1962) to witness the last chapters of the glory that was of Lucknow, and the gradual decadence of the old culture and art, and aesthetic values. When one talks of Lucknow's past musical glory and of the refined old culture of a bygone era, it is personalities like those of the Kalka-Binda brothers, Khurshid Ali Khan, Faiyaz Khan, Sakhawat and Yusuf 'Ustads', and a host of others who come floating into one's vision. Those were perhaps not days of materialistic affluence and progress; but those were times when artistes and their coteries of disciples and admirers had all the time in the world to enjoy music to their hearts' content.

Yusuf Ali Khan with his handsome personality, sartorial elegance, his skill in the art of delightful conversation, his gift for repartee, his unfailing sense of fun and puckish humour, and his all-round good nature-- was a typical "Lucknawi" and a concise "Lucknow dictionary of music and musicians".

I had the good fortune of knowing and hearing him, although only during the last 18 years of his life. Yusuf Ali was born to be a teacher because he had endless patience and a temperament that rejoiced in imparting his precious *ilm* to all eager students. Although the Bhatkhande College acquired him as a Sitar teacher only in his old age, lucky were the batches of students who got chances to learn from this accomplished and most sincere teacher. "Yusuf Ustad" remained a regular and popular broadcaster until his last brief illness. I had the privilege of producing an interview with this veteran and also of recording and listening to numerous programmes of his.

A few months prior to his death, Ustad Yusuf Ali said to me while recalling the years of his early music training :- "It is my firm belief that a person born with artistic talents can unfold into a full-fledged artiste, only by hard, long years of devoted service to one's Guru and of deep dedication to the art. This is true of all arts, especially, music (*Agar shagrad khidmat se Ustad ka dil haath me lega, tho ustad dilse ilm denge*). An Ustad would prefer to pass on his *ilm* to a devoted disciple, rather than to his own son who does not serve the Guru! My own life is an example of this truth. Let me tell you something about those great Ustads who moulded a plain Yusuf into Ustad Yusuf Ali Khan Sitariya."---

Yusuf Ali's own musical career illustrates an important fact that music need not be the monopoly of a family of musicians. Musical genius can sometimes blossom out of a family that has no musical traditions. Yusuf was born in Lucknow in the year 1887. His father Bahadur Ali Khan who owned a musical instruments' shop in La Touche Road (Lucknow) was not only an excellent Sitar-manufacturer, but had also acquired considerable proficiency in the art of Sitar-playing. Because of his utterly simple nature, people nicknamed him as "Bhondhu Khan" (meaning "simpleton"). He had received sound training in vocal and instrumental music from Ustad Azam Khan Kalpiwale who belonged to the Seniya gharana. Azam Khan was descended from the lineage of Nirmol Shah, a famous Vainik of Jaipur. His chief disciple Bhadah Khan (19th century) had migrated from Jaipur, and after years of wandering, ultimately settled down in Kalpi under the protection of the Rana of Kalpi who was himself a fine Dhruvpad singer and Vainik, and a patron of music. As Bhadah Khan's son Azam was born in Kalpi, their musical lineage began to be known as "Kalpiwala gharana". Actually this was an off-shoot of the "Seniya Gharana" which laid stress on Beenkari and Dhruvpad training.

Azim Khan's son Abdul Gani Khan and Murawwat Khan were born in Khajurgaon after Azim Khan had become a Court musician under the patronage, the music-loving Rana of Khajurgaon. Both of them achieved popularity as instrumentalists and as Dhruvadiyas.

Bahadur Khan's shop in Lucknow was really the meeting and halting place of some of the most well-known Ustads of the times. They came to get their Tanpuras, Sitar, Surbahars, Veenas, and Sarods repaired, but they stayed on as welcome guests enjoying the kind host's warm hospitality. In winter, the tea-pot was constantly full of boiling tea, and in the hot months, the jugs were always overflowing with delicious *sharbats*. During the evenings, the host used to accompany these ustad's to *mehfils* in the opulent residences of Nawabs and Rajas. Yusuf Ali once told me :-

"I used to go along with my father to these *mehfils*. How can I describe the wonderful atmosphere of those *mehfils*! The artistes used to be so immaculately dressed, and the refined flowery language they used was such that each word was like a blossom..."

Yusuf Ali had imbibed this culture; therefore, we could get a fair idea of what he meant. He was always

immaculately dressed in his typically embroidered (Lucknow Chikkan) 'angarakha', *choodidaar pyjamas*, 'dupalli' topi, and a black 'sherwani' in winter. A big turquoise ring adorned his finger, and he was always armed with either a Sitar, or with a silver-capped walking-stick. Till the end, he continued to be a gifted conversationalist.

Bhondu Khan put all his three sons, Yusuf, Khurshid, and Gurwat in school, but while the other two were interested in studies, Yusuf was drawn to music, and only music. In later years, he used to repent and blame his 'foolish-self' for missing this chance to get educated. Pleased by the boy's rare aptitude for music, Ustad Azam Khan took him to Khajurgaon and started giving him systematic training in Veena and Dhruvpad. The *taleem*, was later on, continued under Azam Khan son Abdul Ghani Khan, A Sitar expert and an excellent teacher, Ghani Khan became so fond of the handsome and hard-working 13 year-old boy that he adopted young Yusuf as his son with Bhondu Khan's permission.

Describing this period of his life, Yusuf Ali said :-

"Right from the start, Ustad Abdul Ghani Khan had a special soft corner for me. With my father's permission, he adopted me as his son. Thus at the tender age of 13, I had to give up my father's home for my Ustad's which became my second home. I served my Guru so devotedly that he began to love me more than he loved his own sons. Both he and his brother Murawwat Khan were of simple and saintly disposition. Religion and music were their passions in life. In the 13 and odd years that I spent with my Ustad my art was polished and my life disciplined properly. My life was completely devoted to serving my Guru and practising my music. *Apne ko mil-taaye, thabhi riyaz hota hai*".

Describing the gruelling years of training (taleem) Yusuf Ali continued :-

"Every night at 10.30 p.m. I had to start my *riyaz* and continue till 4 A.M. under the vigilant eyes of my Ustad. Lest I nod off to sleep, a tuft of my hair was firmly tied to the *khaprel*. After 4 A.M. came *numaaz*, breakfast, then sleep till 2.30 or 3 p.m.

The Ustad was also very particular that his pupil should develop a robust athletic physique. For this, Yusuf Ali had to draw out 50 or 60 bucketfuls of water from the well everyday and learn wrestling from professionals in the *akhaada* (gymnasium) every evening. In spite of all this heavy work and strenuous training, he used to be quite happy because of his Ustad's love and blessings. The tragic death of a son of Ghani Khan by drowning in an accident in the Ganges completely broke his heart.

52 Thereafter, Murawwat Khan continued his training. When Yusuf's father Bhondu Khan died, Murawwat Khan sent Yusuf with all his blessings to Lucknow so that the latter could look after his father's musical instruments shop. Here he was lucky enough to come into close contact with the great Kathak maestros- the Kalka-Binda brothers of Lucknow. Their house in Jhaulal ka pul (Lucknow) used to be the magnetic centre that attracted all the musical celebrities who lived in, or visited Lucknow. The Kalka-Binda brothers became very fond of Yusuf Ali and they gave him many opportunities to play in the distinguished musical gatherings at their residence, and to hear the greatest artistes of those times. Moreover, Yusuf Ali's shop in La Touche Road continued to be the rendezvous of his numerous gifted friends among whom Sakhawat Hussain Khan, Babban Saheb (pupil of the reputed Moizuddin Khan), Achchan Maharaj and Shambhu Maharaj were the closest. They would not only exchange musical ideas but also enjoy the gentle art of witty conversation, and exchange of repartees in the leisurely mood of the times. Although Yusuf Ali had been trained thoroughly on the Veena and in Dhruvpad singing, he was ordered by his Guru to change over to the Sitar because the Guru suddenly developed a superstitious belief that all gifted 'vairinis' died young! However, the early training in Veena and Dhruvpad actually enriched his *baaj*. While in his twenties, Yusuf Ali gave a successful Sitar recital in Delhi in the presence of a large number of professionals who had been invited to the grand wedding of a Nawab. After this, he began to get regular bookings in conference and concerts and radio-broadcasts, especially from his 'parent station'. One of his brothers became a drawing-master while the other (Gurbat Ali) became a good Tabla-player.

One of the memories that the Ustad treasured and frequently described to us with pride was the fact that he along with his Tabla-playing brother Gurbat Ali, were sent to London to perform at the Coronation Festival Exhibition in 1910. Tall, young, handsome with an athletic physique, and attired in his elegant Lucknow outfit, it is said that Yusuf Ali cut a dashing figure in London. No wonder, the ladies in the Hall cooed with delightful cries of "How sweet!" when he drew the meends of Darbari on his Sitar. How amusingly the Ustad used to imitate these scenes for us! He impressed not only by his Sitar-recitals but also by giving demonstrations in Sitar-making. He used to say that a beautifully carved Sitar that he made, is still kept in a collection in London.

On his return from London, Yusuf Ali became a Staff Artiste of AIR, Lucknow, but he resigned a few months later, as he wanted to be free and independent. Wherever Abdul Ghani Khan and Murawwat Khan were invited,

to give performances, they used to send Yusuf Ali saying that he was their musical heir. The "Padmasri" in 1958, and the Presidential Award were the two great honours that really thrilled him in his old age. He used to say :- "The Sangeet Natak Akademy" has inspired me to serve my country as long as I can. The Bhatkhande College has given me a wonderful chance to do this by appointing me as a Professor on the staff. It is a pleasure to be on this staff which has so many distinguished artistes and gurus like Pdt. Ratanjankar, Pdt. Natu, Pdt. Sakharamji, Prof. V. G. Jog, Ustad Sakhawat and others".

During the years that he remained on the staff of the Bhatkhande College, Yusuf Ali gave many recitals, and taught numerous students. Among his prominent disciples may be mentioned the names of Ilyas Khan and Mohamad Ismail (his own son). Ustad Sakhawat Khan not only loved Yusuf Ali Khan as a friend, but also admired him immensely as an artiste and as a teacher. Therefore, he entrusted the training of his own sons, Umar Khan and Ilyas Khan, to the generous Yusuf Ali. Ilyas Khan who sat at the feet of this Guru for many years, has unbounded admiration and respect for him. He has a large stock of anecdotes to prove his Ustad's greatness. One of them deserves repetition to prove the Ustad's deep attachment to Lucknow. In 1933/34 a big All India Competition on Sitar and Sarod-artistes had been organised in Gidhoreriyasat to which the best instrumental virtuosi of the day had been invited. The winner was to be honoured with a costly brocade "saafa" (headgear or turban) and shawl and a purse, and the coveted appointment as Court-musician in the riyasat. The selection was done by the Raja's reputed Ustad Mohammad Ali Khan (son of Basat Khan Rababiya), eighth descendant from Miyan Tansen's lineage. Yusuf Ali was declared winner. He accepted the brocade saafa, shawl, and purse, but politely turned down the honoured court-musicianship saying :-

Ham par jida Lucknow, ham fida-e Lucknow - I cannot live away from my Lucknow.'

Ilyas Khan, who served as Professor of Sitar in the Bhatkhande College for many decades, retired from service in September 1982. The other prominent disciple of Yusuf Ali is his son Mohamad Ismail Khan, who is a Sitar staff artiste of AIR, Lucknow. Ismail has inherited his father's art, but he is a reserved young man, devoted to his work, and a regular broadcaster. Yusuf Ali's younger son Rahat Ali also has received some Sitar training. Another 'shagird' Jaffar Khan migrated to Pakistan. Yusuf 'Ustad' composed hundreds of *gats* for the Sitar in traditional ragas. He never took to new ragas, because, (in his own words) "*Puraani baaton se hi fursat nahi hai*" (I have not yet found time to master all the old ragas)". He considered training in Dhruvpad as indispensable to Sitar-students. His own style was characterised by purity of ragas and shaped by his excellent training in Veena and Dhruvpad. He used to play Maseetkhani and Razakhani and was considered an expert in the "Poorab baaj". His three-point advice to his disciples was :-

1. find an eminent and sincere guru.
 2. serve him with all your heart and earn his blessings and love.
 3. forget yourself in the practice of your art.
- "riyaz me apne aapko milta dena".*

During the years when he was on the staff of the Bhatkhande College he is said to have been a very loving teacher with a generous heart. But like all sincere Gurus, he too was a hard task-master if the pupil did not come up to his expectations on any day. Km. Abha Awasthy, a shishya of the Ustad's disciple Ustad Ilyas Khan narrated some interesting episodes in the class of the Bhatkhande College. In an article she mentions that often when Ilyas Khan was teaching in his class, "the bade Ustad saheb" (as the students of Ilyas Khan used to call their guru's guru) would walk in, immaculately dressed and armed with a silver-topped walking-stick. At once, Ilyas Khan would get up, respectfully leaving the "gaddi" (teacher's seat) for the revered Ustad. The latter would pick up the Sitar, start tuning the strings, and then he would gently start playing some raga that haunted his mind at that particular hour. As he went on playing, he forgot the rest of the class and asked Ilyas Khan to repeat some difficult piece that he was demonstrating. When Ilyas tried and failed in the first two or three attempts the Ustad gave him a slap in front of the students who sat "pertified" according to Abhaji. But when Ilyas Khan succeeded in copying him correctly the Ustad was all smiles and praise as he remarked :- "See how the doors and windows of his brain-box have been opened wide now, and how well he has now repeated the piece!"

If the Ustad praised Ilyas Khan after any good recital of the latter, Ilyas Khan would say in the typical Lucknow style :- "Sir, the Sitar was well-tuned and therefore, was in good form". Abha says that sometime Ustad Yusuf Ali Khan used to teach the students of Ilyas Khan's class, and one piece of advice that he gave strongly has stuck to the minds of the students indelibly:-

"You must acquire the art by sheer hard *riyaz*, nothing else. The art of music is not the condensed essence of some "*sharbat*" that can be dissolved and swallowed by you to make you an artiste instantaneously".

Yusuf Ali figured regularly in Radio Programmes. Even after he fell seriously ill towards the fag end of his life