

ON Stage

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INDIAN
COMPOSERS

SUROKAR

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The Versatile Gurus

Exploring the vibrant cultural heritage of two doyens of Hindustani classical music – Gajananrao Joshi and Jagannathbuwa Purohit – through odes, memories and anecdotes.

BY SAMIRA BOSE

The trajectory of music and its oral history is replete with stories of teachers passing on their legacy to their pupils through intense and cherished interactions, ones which carry into the popular imagination along with the musical notes. Indian classical music is characterised by the *guru-shishya* or teacher-student relationship, which requires years of rigorous engagement. The tradition is both continued and reconstructed by those involved in the learning process, and requires a conversation with all the different dimensions of the genre. This is exemplified by stalwart musicians, Gajananrao Joshi and Jagannathbuwa Purohit, who have made deep impressions through their creative compositions and live on in memory as individuals that excelled as vocalists, instrumentalists, and most importantly, as gurus and composers.





Gajananrao Joshi

Gajananrao Joshi (1911-1987)

A love for music often echoes within families, and children learn the reverberation of rhythm at an early age. Gajananrao Joshi (affectionately known as Gajananbuwa) was born into a family of musicians. His father, Anant Manohar Joshi, was a *khayal* vocalist from the Gwalior *gharana*, under whom Gajananbuwa learnt, while his grandfather, Manohar, had studied *dhrupad* and *dhamar*. And yet, Gajananbuwa's training did not remain limited to that of his family, but extended to teachers from other *gharanas* as well. Broad training was an inherent part of Gajananbuwa's assimilative styles and rendering, and it is precisely such exposure that made him a renowned vocalist, violinist, composer and guru.

As a vocalist, Gajananbuwa began his journey at home but was clearly attracted to the complex knowledge that Ramakrishnabuwa Vaze (popularly known as Vazebuwa) had of the Gwalior *gharana*. One of the key lessons Gajananbuwa learnt from Vazebuwa was how to unfold a raga in a concert. As a result, during Gajananbuwa's performances, listeners would often experience complex *taans* in a blissfully simple way. He started composing out of necessity; to have a wider repertoire in slow and medium tempo, both in common as well as uncommon ragas such as Malkauns, Gaud Malhar, Pat Bihag, Nat Kamod, Purva etc. He was driven by a desire to constantly grow, and his choices came as much out of intellectual curiosity as a need to create novel avenues in the musical realm. He, thus, started studying the structured precision

During Gajananbuwa's performances, listeners would often experience the complex *taans* in a blissfully simple way

of the Jaipur *gharana* under Bhurji Khan, and later the rapid, rhythm-based *nom tom gayaki* of Agra *gharana* under Vilayat Hussain Khan. It is said that true genius lies in being open to new knowledge even as one ages, and Gajananbuwa was in his late forties when he tutored under Vilayat Hussain. Audiences and reviewers have vouched for his discernment, and stated that not even a hint of his mixed training could be sought in the clarity with which he sang compositions from each *gharana*. He even learnt tabla from Vinayakrao Ghangrekar. His music, therefore, be it vocal or instrumental, reflected a beautiful amalgamation of the simplicity of the Gwalior *gharana*, the complexity of the Jaipur *gharana* and the robustness of the Agra *gharana*.

It is clear that Gajananbuwa was prodigious from a young age, since learning the techniques of just one *gharana* can expend an entire lifetime, and he mastered three. He started working on translating the musical phrases

into a musical notation (*sargam*) at an early age, and this fostered a sharpness and keen memory that his students praise far and wide. Padma Talwalkar, renowned Indian classical vocalist and recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 2016, studied under him for seven years. She reminisces about the strength of his recollection, amusingly mentioning how possessive musicians would not invite him to hear their new *bandishes* because he could remember them almost instantaneously. He was driven by a "pure devotion", Talwalkar emphasises, and constantly wished to push the boundaries of his vocals as well as instruments. She owes her skills in *khayal* composition to Gajananbuwa, and still remembers every word he said to her in their sessions, even after 30 years. "For him, the most important thing was the *anand* [pleasure] of passing on the *vidya* [knowledge]. He worked for the sake of the art itself." She highlights how he was a "*khayali kalaakar*" or creative artiste and would welcome interpolations.

Taking into consideration his underlying, ingenious impulse, it is no surprise that he is credited as a pioneer in the use of violin in Hindustani classical music. As an instrument, the violin provided him with sufficient scope to display his aggressive rhythmic work and a visceral, wild fervour that was palpable to the audience. As an exceptional teacher, Gajananbuwa ensured that his disciples continued the traditions of the musical styles he taught them. While he won a number of awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi, his achievements shine through his long list of erudite students. Apart from Talwalkar, he taught notable musicians such as vocalists Ashok Ranade, Shubhada Paradkar, Kaushalya Manjeshwar and violinists Shreedhar Parsekar and Datarji (to name a few). His versatility manifested itself in his personality as a guru, and all those who studied under him worked to spreading the musical passion that ran through his veins.

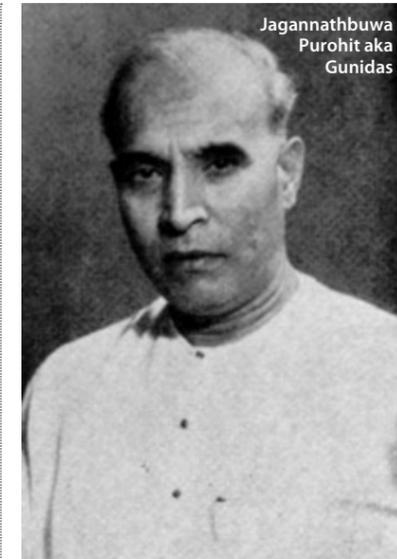
Jagannathbuwa Purohit (1904-1968)

At a time when teachers were strict, whimsical and demanding,

Jagannathbuwa Purohit ensured that he would dedicate himself entirely to being a steadfast student. It was this precocious perseverance that earned him the title of 'Gunidas' or 'worshipper of virtue' from his gurus. Perhaps it was such a background that led to Gunidas being known for his precise focus on the unadulterated passage of musical knowledge, along with a simultaneous openness to innovation. By emphasising on authenticity as well as individuality, he strove to imbibe and imbue a meticulous desire for detail. With trained roots in Indian percussion, Gunidas is an iconic figure as a Hindustani classical vocalist. He, too, is predominantly celebrated for the manner in which he instilled a musical ardour into all those who studied under him.

Gunidas was trained in the Agra *gharana*. The *gayaki* of the Agra *gharana* is a combination of *khayal* and *dhrupad-dhamar*, and that is why Gunidas chose to work with a variety of teachers. Born in Hyderabad, he learned the tabla under Ahmed Jan Thirkawa. He learnt initially from Mohammad Ali Khan, and then later from Shaboo Khan. His musical meanderings found him in the house of Agra dynasty's illustrious singer, Vilayat Husain Khan. Their connection is said to have been instantaneous, and a profound atmosphere of symbiotic learning blossomed between the two. In fact, the connection that existed between them surpassed the traditional guru-*shishya* bonds and fostered an environment in which both were publicly beholden to one another when it came to their musical compositions, as opposed to only the *shishya* being beholden to the guru. Thus, despite his beliefs in maintaining traditions, Gunidas was flexible, and is remembered by his students for his eclectic personality.

Singer and composer G. N. Joshi studied under Gunidas for ten years. He has written that "he was equally liberal in imparting knowledge. He was prepared to offer his entire treasure of knowledge to his disciples - they only had to have the capacity to receive and imbibe what he gave". Apart from discussing his teacher's humour and obsession with cooking, Joshi accentuates



Jagannathbuwa Purohit aka Gunidas

By emphasising on authenticity as well as individuality, Gunidas strove to imbibe and imbue a meticulous desire for detail

how "Guruji always liked to be surrounded by his disciples, fellow artists or admirers". Gregarious and encouraging, Gunidas ensured that his students participated independently in *mehfils*. An exceptional element of the Agra *gharana* is its captivating *layakari*. Gunidas himself worked tirelessly to develop newer renderings of traditional ragas. Having a penchant for rare ragas with highly evocative melodic configuration, he composed several of them, Jogkauns and Jaun Bhairav to name a few, and followers across *gharanas* have been influenced by his outstanding compositions.

Gunidas's legacy carries on through his students, who are full of praise for him. These include Jitendra Abhisheki, Ram Marathe, C. R. Vyas, Bhai Gaitonde etc. He fostered inspiration, imagination and innovation, especially in the manner in which he reconfigured dynastic principles to produce a

style that is unique. For Gunidas, it was the '*rang*' or colour of the music that transcended all other considerations, and he definitely added livelier hues to the genre of Hindustani classical music.

Padma Talwalkar will present compositions of Gajananrao Joshi and Gunidas on 7th July at the Tata Theatre, under the festival of Bandish, which will run from 7th to 9th July.

A WORD FROM OUR SUPPORTER

As a bank that deeply connects with the heritage of the country, having been in India since 1853, it is indeed a matter of great pride for us to be associated with *Bandish*, the festival that celebrates the best of Indian classical music. This festival seeks to ensure that Indian classical music is not only accessible to a large audience, but is also passed on to the next generation. With the changing socio-economic and cultural context, the rich and diverse traditional repertoires of Indian classical music are not getting the attention they deserve. To preserve this legacy for the future, HSBC has supported the NCPA's project to train disciples by masters of different *gharanas*, where selected masters mentor students in the traditional style, providing them with unparalleled learning and the opportunity to showcase their talent. HSBC believes heritage and culture are the very essence of the values of a society and therefore need to be nurtured. In keeping with this, HSBC has been closely associated with the NCPA since 2015 to support Indian classical music. I would like to thank the NCPA team for their deep commitment and efforts in the preservation of Indian culture. We are proud to be a part of *Bandish*, and I hope you will enjoy the festival.

- Stuart P. Milne, CEO & Group General Chairman, HSBC India

The Saliyamangalam plays

ON Stage brings you excerpts from the *NCPA Quarterly Journal*, an unsurpassed literary archive that ran from 1972 to 1988 and featured authoritative and wide-ranging articles. **Mohan Khokar** describes the Bhagavata Mela plays as performed in Saliyamangalam, Tamil Nadu

From the time it attained common recognition some 30 years ago, it has generally been held that the tradition of staging the sacred Bhagavata Mela plays, which are structured in the strict classical Bharatanatyam mould, is confined to only one place – the village of Melattur in the Thanjavur district. So much so that in some quarters, the tradition itself is known as that of the Melattur plays. That is because the foremost authorities and scholars in the field have continually harped on the Melattur theme, and others have found no reason to contest it. Also the leading master in the style, Balu Bhagavata, now over 90 years of age, belongs to Melattur, and that has certainly lent an added lustre and stature to the place. The correct picture, however, has emerged only during the last five years or so, which discloses that the Bhagavata Mela practice survives in two other villages as well – Saliyamangalam and Teperumanallur. This article pertains to the tradition as it is in Saliyamangalam.

It may be recalled that the art of Bhagavata Mela *nataka* came into being about 400 years ago, under the patronage of the Nayak rulers of Thanjavur. The tradition took root in six villages, all in the district of Thanjavur – Melattur, Soolamangalam, Saliyamangalam, Oothakadu, Nallur and Teperumanallur, and at each of these places the plays, written especially for the art, were staged once every year, on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti, which is observed in May or June. None of the villages has maintained an unbroken tradition of presenting the plays – there having been both sporadic spurts of activity as well as long years of neglect. In recent times, the villages of Melattur, Saliyamangalam and Teperumanallur are known to have regularly offered the *natakas* as part of ordained worship, for around 40 years.



Prahlada with his mother Lilavati in *Prahlada Charitram*

A CASE OF CONFUSING NAMES

It is generally believed that the Bhagavata Mela tradition was initiated by Achyutappa Nayak (1572-1614), who gifted a village to certain Brahmin families for the avowed purpose of promoting art and learning in general and the dance-drama tradition of the Bhagavatas in particular, and that this village, then named after its benefactor, Achyutapuram, later came to be called Melattur. However, the people of Saliyamangalam maintain that Melattur was originally known as Unnatapuram and that it is their village that constitutes the endowment made by Achyutappa and that originally enjoyed the appellation, Achyutapuram. To substantiate the claim, they refer to the invocatory song, handed down to them through several generations and sung even today at the local temple at the commencement of any event of marked religious significance.

The song includes the telling words: *Achyutapuramuna Saliyamangala agraharamuna sutinampunanu.*

Saliyamangalam lies 15 km to the east of Thanjavur on the Nagore line. It is commonly held that the plays enacted in Bhagavata Mela, in all the six villages, are by Venkatarama Sastri of Melattur. But this theory has now been discarded. In Saliyamangalam, for example, the plays are by Bharatam Panchanatha Bhagavata, who lived long before Venkatarama Sastri, and there are other authors to whom the plays are ascribed in the other villages. Five dance-dramas are attributed to Panchanatha Bhagavata: *Prahlada Charitram*, *Rukmini Kalyanam*, *Sita Kalyanam*, *Rukmangda* and *Vipranarayana*. These are in Telugu – as indeed all Bhagavata Mela are – and they were composed at the time of Vijayaraghava of Thanjavur's Nayak dynasty. It is claimed that for a long time all the five plays were performed annually. However, while the other five villages followed the custom of staging the Bhagavata

Mela plays only at the time of Narasimha Jayanti; in Saliyamangalam they were also staged on Rama Navami. For many years now, for want of a sufficient number of participants as well as of funds, only two plays, *Prahlada Charitram* and *Rukmini Kalyanam*, are presented at the time of Narasimha Jayanti.

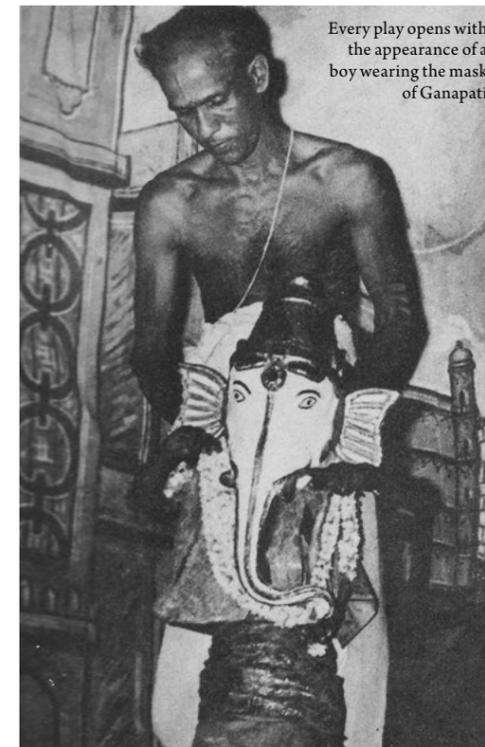
THE OPENING ACT

The festival being in honour of Narasimha, it is understandable that the leading play in the tradition, in all the villages, is *Prahlada Charitram*, and it is with this that the festival opens. In the climactic sequence of the play, a performer wearing a mask of Narasimha makes his appearance, and after confronting the atheist father of Prahlada, Hiranyakashipu, delivers an impassioned harangue during the course of which he works himself up to a pitch of uncontrollable frenzy and invariably

collapses. He is then accorded a lot of importance, with song and *arati*, after which the play comes to a close. The mask of Narasimha in each village is a special one, and regular worship is offered to it by devotees. It is kept in the temple, where it is displayed prominently, except in the case of Saliyamangalam where it is part of the household shrine of a Bhagavata and is offered adoration along with the idols of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana.

Before the presentation of *Prahlada Charitram* on the opening night at Saliyamangalam, images of the presiding deity Srinivasa along with those of Sridevi and Bhoodevi are carried in procession around the village and then deposited on an altar, which faces the stage specially erected for the event. Songs in praise of the deity called *tattuchutru* are sung by the Bhagavatas. *Arati* is offered to the deity by the performer privileged to take the role of Narasimha in the play. The presentation begins with the Bhagavatas singing the *todayamangalam*, an invocation, as they proceed from the stage to where the deities rest, weaving a passage through the seated audience, and then return to the stage. This is followed by the dance of a small boy wearing the mask of Ganapati. As the play unfolds, each principal character is introduced after the singing of a couplet, through which the appearance, attributes, temperament and so forth of the character are spelt out. Also, each character makes their appearance dancing to a *daru*, a song descriptive of the character. Most of the female characters adopt the devadasi mode in their costumes. The male characters wear pyjamas and knee-length coats or dhotis and some of them sport turbans.

In between sequences, the Bhagavatas sing songs to provide links to the story. A *sabdam*, which gives the kernel of the story, is offered before the commencement of the play proper, and while the Bhagavatas sing the lines, the *sutradhara* renders *abhinaya* for them. Likewise, there are specially composed songs to preface key situations in the unfolding of a story. These *sabdams*, *stotrams* and the like are superb pieces, both poetically and musically, and constitute a feature exclusive to Saliyamangalam. Formerly, the main characters of the drama were portrayed by persons belonging to only certain families who had, what may be called, a hereditary right to the roles. The practice has now ceased, except in the case of Narasimha,



Every play opens with the appearance of a boy wearing the mask of Ganapati

The art of Bhagavata Mela *nataka* came into being about 400 years ago, under the patronage of the Nayak rulers of Thanjavur

whose role continues to be played only by individuals from a particular family.

On the day prior to Narasimha Jayanti, the *shakti* believed to be inherent in the mask of Narasimha is transferred temporarily, through certain ceremonies and rites, to holy water kept in a pot. The mask is then dislodged, washed and repainted. All this is done in secrecy for great sanctity is attached to the proceedings. In the evening, elaborate rituals known as *pranapratishta*, *sahasranamarchana* and *deeparadhana* are performed by a large gathering. The power of Narasimha is again transferred to the mask. No such practice is followed in any of the other villages.

The play begins at about 10 pm and Narasimha makes his appearance around 4.30 the following morning. It is ensured that the manifestation of Narasimha

coincides, as advised in religious lore, with the time when it is neither night nor day. The makeshift stage erected for the play is quickly dismantled and two wooden cut-outs representing a pillar are planted in position. The man playing Narasimha, who is already in a state of semi-trance, is brought behind the pillar. At the appointed time and, to the accompaniment of clamorous music, chanting and fireworks, the pillar splits open and Narasimha emerges in all his glory and fury. Nothing of this kind is found in any of the other villages.

Another unusual feature in Saliyamangalam is that in *Rukmini Kalyanam*, when the presentation is over in the morning, two young boys, who are in no way connected with the play, are dressed up as Krishna and Rukmini and their marriage is performed. They are then taken in a procession round the village to the accompaniment of music and song.

They are received at each house by the male members of the family who wash their feet as also those of the escorting Bhagavatas and then sprinkle the resultant water, considered holy, on themselves as well as on their family members. Women of the house offer candy, betel leaf, plantains and camphor to the two and perform *arati*.

If the tradition of Bhagavata Mela today survives at Saliyamangalam, the credit for this is due, in no small measure, to D. Sethuramayyar who died about 25 years ago. He came from the line of Panchanatha Bhagavata, the author of the Saliyamangalam plays. A keen musician and scholar, Sethuramayyar composed about 100 *kirtanams* that carry his *mudra* 'Achyutapuram' and also wrote an abridged version of the Ramayana in Telugu. After him, the responsibility is being shouldered by his sons, S. Raghavan and S. Srinivasan, who play the parts of Hiranyakashipu and his wife Lilavati respectively in *Prahlada Charitram*. S. Raghavan retired as a station superintendent in Southern Railway while S. Srinivasan is an income tax officer in Cuddalore. Which is just as well, for not even a single actor-dancer in Bhagavata Mela, in all the privileged villages, is a professional artiste, a fact which endorses the claim that the art is performed not by way of entertainment but as a moral obligation hallowed by usage.

This article first appeared in the NCPA Quarterly Journal in December 1983 (Vol. XII, No. 4).