

ANNAPURNA DEVI (1927–2018)

Reclusive master of a rare instrument

The world of Hindustani music venerated her as Maa Annapurna Devi. She was a sadhika who abhorred the arc-lights of the concert stage, shunned publicity and refused to face the public eye even when invited to accept prestigious awards. Ironically, her life had enough heartbreaks and controversies, as eager scholars of music followed her footprints and prestigious awards like the Padma Bhushan (1977), the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1991), Desikottama (1999) and SNA Ratna (2004) lay strewn on her path. On the fourth day of Navaratri—on 13 October 2018—Annapurna Devi left for her eternal abode at the age of 91, to be with her father-guru Baba Allaiddin Khan and her eldest sibling Ali Akbar, both of whom left an indelible mark on her personality. Like her Baba, she was an inextinguishable flame that safeguarded the purity of raga music of the Maihar gharana; and like her brother—the sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan—she exemplified guru bhakti.

The musical journey of Roshanara, the youngest child of Baba Allaiddin Khan, is said to have started on the auspicious day of Chaitra Poornima, whereby she was christened as ‘Annapoorna’ by the Maharaja of Maihar. It is amazing in many ways because very little has been said, written or discussed about her life. She remained an enigma. In the foreword of a book on Allaiddin Khan, she described how her taleem commenced on a fateful day when Baba was away on an errand after giving some musical instructions to his son-disciple Ali Akbar, who was not able



to get it right. “I was telling Dada the actual process when Baba entered the room stealthily. He did not say anything, but gave me the tanpura and began teaching me vocal and sitar.” Gauging her introspective approach and dedication to raga-music, he soon advised her to take to the surbahar, a vanishing and demanding instrument. Much later she proved his intuition right. “Personally I did not enjoy performing. For me music has always been my offering to God. I never felt comfortable recording it,” she said.

There are hardly any witnesses of her live recitals. “I was present in one of her rare appearances on stage in a duet with Pandit Ravi Shankar at Bombay,” says sitar maestro Arvind Parikh. “I vividly remember, Panditji was his flamboyant self and his sitar was very impressive, while Annapurna Devi and her surbahar were rather withdrawn. And after some time, in the middle of the concert, she stopped playing and put down her instrument. ‘I am tired’, was her simple reason!”

There are, however, stray incidents that reveal some facets of her personality. She enjoyed teaching even as a little sister, a 15-year old newly wedded bride of Pandit Ravi Shankar and a young mother of their

only child Shubhendra, when she stayed back with her parents at Maihar while her husband, then in his early twenties, was struggling in Bombay to make a mark as a sitar exponent. In the absence of Baba, it was she who taught his younger disciples. Sarod maestro Aashish Khan, her nephew-disciple, describes this in an article, “We, Dhyanes, Baby (Ameena) and Shubho used to learn from Dadu. Shubho had picked up the sarod pretty well. When Dadu would go away on concert tours, Pishima taught us and supervised our riyaz. It was she who taught me alap.... Even otherwise Pishima was my guru. She would pamper us. Maihar was a malaria infested place, and Pishima used to nurse us when we fell ill.”

These sentiments were echoed by flautist Nityananda Haldipur, one of the several celebrated disciples of Annapurna Devi keeping the Maihar gharana’s flag flying. He confessed, “She was a difficult taskmaster, no doubt; but once she accepted you as a disciple, she looked after you like a mother. She always fed us before beginning a lesson session which used to continue for hours— sometimes from dusk to dawn! There was no such thing as holding back any ‘secret’. She tried to give her best to students below average; but not without displaying her strong displeasure. She would pray to her gurus first: ‘Please bless me so that I can convey what you taught me’; and then she would sit on a moorha facing us like a glowing flame—pure and honest. Lesser mortals find it difficult to face such a phenomenon, because this demands similar honesty of purpose. Earlier, I was trained in a different style belonging to Pandit



With her father and guru

Pannalal Ghosh's baaj. She never asked me to change, but very patiently instilled the values of her father-guru's musical style. After about three years, I felt the difference."

Sitar maestro Nikhil Banerjee and guitarist Basant Kabra are also her disciples. According to musician-scholar Vijay Kichlu, a close friend of maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia who also went to Annapurna Devi at a stage when he was already established as a popular flautist, "Hariji had to give up playing by his right hand and relearn the art with his left hand. And he did it." On several occasions Chaurasia also reiterated, "She is a living Mother Goddess."

The national award winning singer Chhaya Ganguly, who considers herself 'blessed' for getting several opportunities to visit 'Maa' as an Akashvani official and later as an associate of Shekhar Sen, the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, who recorded Annapurna Devi for their archival collection, said, "Her motherly demeanour drew me to her again and again; and she always embraced me like my own mother."

But there is a discordant note like a 'vivadi swara' in the raga of Annapurna Devi's life. In his autobiography *Raag Anuraag*, Pandit

Ravi Shankar cited several incidents related to her foul temper. This

An unforgettable concert

Reading about the passing away of Annapurna Devi, I was instantly transported to the night of 31 December 1955, when I was present at her duet concert with her (then) husband sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar, at the annual conference of the Madras Music Academy. I later realised that it was a historic occasion, for it was the last time Annapurna and Ravi Shankar shared a platform. The two, it is said, never played together again.

I was then a teenager and since I was learning music, my mother took me along to attend all the concerts during that December season. On new year's eve, when Ravi Shankar and Annapurna took the dais at 9 pm, the pandal was full (there was no hall at that time). The recital went on well beyond the billed duration. As soon as midnight approached, I remember Ravi Shankar stopped playing, lowered his sitar, leaned towards the mike and wished the audience a "Happy New Year". None of us knew at that time that the two were playing together for the last time.

What I remember very clearly, six decades later, is that during the recital,

view is supported by Robin Paul, his close associate, who was a witness to their divorce. Life was not easy for Annapurna Devi after separation from her husband. To tide over the financial crunch she started teaching at NCPA. She married her disciple Rooshi Pandya, thirteen years younger than her. He too died in 2013, months after Pandit Ravi Shankar's demise in 2012. Added to it all was the unfortunate death of her only son Shubho who succumbed to pneumonia in 1992. Annapurna Devi lived till her last in a flat at Akash Ganga in Mumbai. The reclusive master of the surbahar was a puritan and a perfectionist.

MEENA BANERJEE

Ravi Shankar (who was the better known of the two, as a professional artist) played a phrase and paused for Annapurna to do her bit, and each time, she outdid him, to the delight of the audience. Especially during the jhala and fast improvisations, he threw her several challenges but each time she went one better and out-performed him in terms of speed and breathtaking flights of fancy. He tried playing faster, and unfazed she responded in equal measure. It was an unforgettable treat. I remember the moment when he, almost in desperation, played a super-fast phrase, and she coolly took up the challenge and outdid him. He then threw up his hands dramatically, almost as if saying "I give up", and the audience burst into ecstatic applause.

Ravi Shankar clearly meant to lead although it was a duet concert, but again and again she outshone him, without fanfare, flamboyance or theatrics. I can clearly recall Annapurna seated on the stage, on his left, dignity personified, taking the musical presentation to great heights. She was not dressed in a flashy 'pattu' sari like all the other women who performed at the conference. Whether

it was alap, gat or a tihai to arrive at the sam, it was she who carried the day.

Annapurna's father Ustad Allauddin Khan, and her brother Ali Akbar Khan, have both gone on record that between Ravi Shankar and Annapurna, she was undoubtedly the better artist, and that probably rankled with Ravi Shankar. The Music Academy concert was reportedly the last time they played together. A few months later, in 1956, Ravi Shankar left her. That was the end of her public appearances and concerts. The couple went on to secure a divorce much later.

Fame and accolades do not always come automatically and commensurately, to those with talent. She became a recluse, as every obituary has noted, restricting herself to teaching a very small number of disciples. What a loss to the world



Playing with Ravi Shankar (file photo)

of music, to the Maihar gharana that she belonged to, and to our cultural heritage! She cut no records, won no global accolades and had no social or public life, despite her talent as a musician, and especially as an exponent of the difficult surbahar. The number of surbahar players today can be counted on one's fingers.

Her death was not the real tragedy. Her life over six decades as a recluse seems to me the greater tragedy, when I recall the fantastic recital I was witness to in 1955.

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