



The Genius of Annapurna Devi

It is possible that she was one of the greatest Indian classical musicians of our times, yet the last time she performed for an audience was over 60 years ago.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

Inveterate guru, player of the surbahar, doyenne of the Maihar *gharana* and one-time conductor of masterclasses on music at the NCPA, Annapurna Devi was sui generis. In modern times, there has been no one else quite like her. It is possible that she was the greatest Indian classical musician of modern times, but you will be hard-pressed to find her music anywhere. She was that rare kind of artiste – a self-effacing, vow-keeping, privacy-loving kind with a very low threshold for nonsense.

So we are left with very little. We have a handful of succinct interviews, and a couple of poor-quality, bootlegged recordings of some of her very few public performances. We have a few stories in the medium of print. Some tabloidesque, like those of her marital woes with her eventual ex-husband, sitar maestro Ravi Shankar. Some tragic, like those of her vow to never perform in public to save her marriage to Shankar or of her turbulent relationship with her only child, Shubhendra Shankar. Surpassing them all, however, we thankfully have that small but magnificent roster of her most devoted students who are, perhaps because of her, the most accomplished musicians of our times.

A selective guru

One of the first things I ask her most adored student,

bansuri virtuoso Nityanand Haldipur, who is carrying forward the work of the Annapurna Devi Foundation, is to describe her in one word. Without thought or explanation, he says: Mother. A strange response from someone who waited for over 13 years for her to agree to teach him. But as we talk about her music and life, the strangeness is replaced by conviction. “I have not seen a more committed teacher,” he says. “When Hariprasad was struggling, he had to go for a lot of recordings during the day. She told him to come for *taalim* at night after he was done with his work. He would come around 2-2.30 at night. She would wait for him, feed him, and then teach him.” Bansuri maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia, one of her more famous *shishyas*, has said it took him three years of convincing until she agreed to teach him. Vocalist Vinay Bharat-Ram was similarly rejected several times before being taken on as a *shishya*, that too, only when he promised he would forget everything he had learned so far.

From these anecdotes, we realise she was following her guru and father, the great instrumentalist, composer and teacher, Allaudin Khan, who counted among his disciples musical stalwarts like Shankar, Nikhil Banerjee, Pannalal Ghosh, among others. In a rare interview for the Sangeet Natak Akademi, she said her father taught her that it is a sin to not teach someone who wants to learn.

And if your own child is not worthy and you force him to learn, that is also a sin. When she rejected those who wanted to learn from her, she was perhaps conducting a sort of entrance test, letting in only the ones who were really serious. Once you became her *shishya* though, there was discipline, but there was also unlimited love and respect.

“I have never seen anybody respect people the way she did,” says Haldipur. “She told me an incident from when she was a child. Her father had built a house, which was a thing of novelty in those times. One day she noticed a low-caste woman peeping from the window. She made a face that showed her displeasure on seeing this woman. When Baba observed this, he went outside, took the woman’s hand, very respectfully brought her inside and made her sit on the cot. He gave her something to eat, asked her what she thought about the house and made his daughter touch the woman’s feet.” After the woman left, he told her how, irrespective of caste, all human beings must be respected, a lesson she remembered for life.

A mutual love

Born on a full moon night in 1927, in the princely state of Maihar in Madhya Pradesh, where her father was the royal court musician, she was named Roshanara Khan at birth. Given the name ‘Annapurna’ by the then Maharaja of Maihar, she would go on to live a life devoted to everything her father asked of her and stood for. Interestingly, back in the day, Khan initially chose to only teach his son, Ali Akbar Khan, who would go on to become an acclaimed composer and sarod player. When he once overheard his young daughter correct Ali Akbar’s error after a lesson, he realised his daughter was imbibing music without even being taught, and doing it better than his son. From that moment onwards, he started her *taalim*.

“For her, Baba was everything.

He was God,” says Haldipur. On her father’s suggestion, she married his *shishya* Shankar at the age of 14 and subsequently converted to Hinduism. On his suggestion too, she switched from the sitar, an instrument popular with audiences, to the surbahar, an instrument rare in stature, elephantine in size. According to Khan, only those who truly understood music could appreciate the surbahar and this was his way of honouring his daughter’s almost ascetic love for music. Of her father’s tutelage, she has said, ‘We were not allowed to stray from the purity of the raga. For him, *raagdari* was everything.’ She would always remain her father’s greatest disciple, insisting on robust fundamentals and purity of raga with her own students. Khan, on his part, knew she was inviolable. “He was probably in awe of her,” says Haldipur. “At every opportunity, he would praise her more than anybody else.”

This emphasis on pitch-perfect fundamentals was possibly why she was such a great guru. After a few

months of rigorous *taalim*, Bharat-Ram has said the timbre of his voice had changed. She also remained, forever, the great corrector. Whenever Bharat-Ram met her, she would always ask, ‘What has Panditji (Shankar) taught you? Let me listen.’ Upon listening, she would invariably fine-tune the odd erroneous note. Haldipur, who had learnt Yaman from other gurus and thought he knew the raga well has said, ‘When she taught me Yaman, I was dumbfounded. When I heard her, I cannot express in words what I heard.’ That day, Haldipur decided to quit his job, stop teaching and performing to devote himself to learning music. For someone who functioned on a higher plane, Annapurna Devi was also remarkably practical. She asked him to continue working, something she did with her other students as well. She encouraged her students to perform at concerts, telling them it was important to capture the audience in the first 90 seconds of any performance. “She taught me the aesthetics of notes,” says Haldipur. “Each note has a feeling. Played together, the notes evoke a specific feeling, depending on how they are generated. So for that to come from a human being requires a spiritual approach. She taught me how to do that.”

Quotidian life

A question I have stopped myself from asking a few times, tumbles out. Was she happy? Haldipur answers in the affirmative. Annapurna Devi did not live life like the victim she is often portrayed to be. She suffered, but she also had a full life. I am told her second marriage

to her student Rooshikumar Pandya was a happy one. Haldipur says, ‘It was the greatness of Rooshikumar that he said, we’ll get married but I will always remain your student.’ Till he passed away in 2013, he gave her the respect of a guru. “Whenever she entered the room,” says Haldipur, “he stood up out of respect. He also handled her finances so well that she never had to worry about money again.”

On 13th October, 2018, she passed away, aged 91, leaving behind a sparkling

legacy as a *shishya*, as a guru, and as a human being. Annapurna Devi did not trust electronics, but she enjoyed watching movies. She read *War and Peace*. She did *riyaaz* every night, while the world around her slept. Since her infamous vow, nobody, not even Haldipur, has ever heard her play the surbahar. George Harrison of The Beatles was the only person who, on Indira Gandhi’s request, was once allowed to listen to her *riyaaz*. However, not an ounce of the art monster could be found in her, the kind so frequently found in so many of the great men of all times. Instead, she kept her house, washed her own clothes and was independent in every sense. “Whenever I was here at odd times,” says Haldipur, “I would see her only working, sweeping and cooking. She fed everyone who came by, but in all these years, I have never seen her eat.”

GURU MAA: A Documentary on Annapurna Devi *will be screened on 14th October at the Godrej Dance Theatre.*