



Asghari Begum

Asghariji, could you tell us about your early life and how you came to be trained by Ustad Zahoor Khan?

I belong to a family of musicians attached to the court of the Maharaja of Tikamgarh. There were about 1,000 musicians attached to his court. My mother Nazeer Begum used to sing at the temple of Beeja war court..

Son: One day while she was singing at the temple, she developed labour pains and after a while, my monther was born. People say that is why Saraswati dwells in my mother's throat!

When I was about seven years old, one day, Ustad Zahoor Khan came to my mother and said : “Nazeer, give me this child.” My mother said : “Does anyone give away a child like that ?” He said ; “I don’t have a child, so I will teach this girl and fulfil my duty of passing on my knowledge. Of course whether she makes a name for me or not depends on God’s will.”

Ustad Saheb was a great singer and composer, and he also played many instruments like algoza, flute, tabla, pakhawaj, sarangi and violin. He was a man of principles, a *darvesh*, a mystic. But he was very quick tempered and was notorious for the way he used to beat up his pupils so no one was willing to let their children be trained by him. My mother asked: “What if you beat her up too?” He answered: “Well, that can’t be helped. The

A Grand Old Lady Of Music

—An interview With Asghari Begum Sagarwali

These, translated from Hindustani, are extracts from an interview with Asghari Begum, disciple of Ustad Zahoor Khar, and singer of dhrupad , dhamar, dhayal, and thumri. Her son, who works in a factory at Kanpur, was also present.

flesh is mine, if a bone is left it’s yours.” So my mother said : “I give her to you,” Hearing this, he was overjoyed, caught hold of my hand, and took me straight to his house.

Well, after that it was continuous labour, day and night. Sleeping and waking, there was nothing but music. The singing stopped only for meals and for *namaz*. Sometimes, out of sheer exhaustion, I would doze off while singing. He would exclaim, “Hunh !” Up I would get up with a start and off I would go with a completely different tune. There was so much to be learnt and kept in mind simultaneously — keeping time, playing the harmonium, singing, keeping the tune — I was always slipping up somewhere or the other and getting beaten. I was so severely beaten in those days that even now the skin on my arms and legs is totally dead in places, and a nerve in my ear is damaged.

Of course, Ustad took care of all my needs and treated me like a daughter. He fed me, clothed me. He used to give me specially nourishing foods like almonds, pista, ghee. When he was dying he gave me some property and cash also

The discipline of music was so great that for seven and a half years I continued to learn the *matras* and didn’t go any further. When I was a young girl, one day I put *kaajal* in my eyes. While I was applying it, I heard his voice: “Sagarwali !” I immediately sat down to practise. I couldn’t look at his face — his eyes were red with anger, one couldn’t meet his eyes. He asked “Have you memorized what I taught you?” Then he suddenly asked : “What is this?” I said: “What?” and looked at my clothes to find out what he was referring to, I didn’t even remember that I had put on *kaajal*. He said: “Never mind,

we’ll see to it tomorrow,” The next morning he called a barber and told him: “Shave Sagarwali’s head.” The barber said: “She has such long hair, it must have taken so long to grow, don’t get it cut,” But he insisted :“No, cut it, cut it. What will she learn if she is so busy dressing herself up?” So my head was shaved. I was quite a big girl at the time. When I stepped out, one fellow would say: “*Murmur gadhaiya*” (shaven she-donkey) and I would rush back home out of sheer embarrassment, or when someone would say “*Ujri galgal*” (barren nut) and in i would come. It all started with that *kaajal* and resulted in confining me to the house. I didn’t step out of the house till my hair grew to a respectable length.

How did it happen that he taught you dhrupad ?

Dhrupad is the song of the gods. It enunciates the words “*Narayan*” and “*Om*” so while singing one is as though remembering god, which spontaneously infuses one with strength. My ustad said: “I don’t want you to feel deprived of anything or inferior to anyone, so I will teach you this also. This has not yet reached womankind, but I am giving you this also. Here, take it”, and he taught me *dhrupad*.

I used to sing at court. The maharaja wrote letters praising my singing so I was invited to sing at other courts and at weddings. At another court, I heard the singing of Rasoolanbai. My mother, my aunts and I used to regularly sing at different temples. We had duties assigned to us to sing in temples. That is how we maintained ourselves.

After your marriage, how did you manage to continue singing ?

I got married quite late. My mother arranged my marriage. My husband was

a military contractor belonging to a propertied family in Agra. I stayed at Agra with my in-laws for 14 years. But I used to keep coming and going between Agra and Tikamgarh. In fact, I spent quite a lot of time at Tikamgarh. My husband and children used to also come and stay there for months or even a couple of years. I could not disobey my guru. After all, my guru came first, and my husband came later!

As soon as I came home, my guru would come to teach me. He would anxiously ask me: "You haven't forgotten anything, have you? Stay pure, and sing only when you are in a state of purity." I would tell my husband: "Look, my guru has come so I am going to sing. If the children feel hungry, feed them and you also eat. But don't call out to me. If you call me and I don't come or if you enter the room where I am sitting and I don't speak to you, you will be insulted. So it is best that you neither come to the room nor call out to me."

My husband didn't object to my singing, but one day he said: "You idiot, are you going to be beaten like this till you are an old woman? You are no longer a child now. Not that you had much of a childhood. You never got a chance to play as a child. What kind of a strange brain do you have? Here you are with children of your own, yet you keep getting yourself beaten up!" My guru used to beat me in front of my children, who were quite big. Once, I was standing with my baby in my arms when my guru came into the room. The minute I saw him, I just let go of the baby and down it went to the ground! In our area, it is considered disrespectful for a girl to hold her child in her arms in the presence of elders.

What happened after Ustad Saheb's death?

After his death, I continued to sing at the court. When India became independent, the Maharaja of Tikamgarh handed over power to the Congress government. The court and its system of patronage came to an end. My income from singing was completely cut off. I didn't go out of Tikamgarh to look for patrons. If someone had invited me, it would have been a different matter. But if

I had gone on my own, people would have asked, "Where have you come from?" and when they came to know I was from Tikamgarh, they would say: "Why, whatever has happened to the people of Tikamgarh? She used to be the court singer of Tikamgarh and now she is wandering here and there." I was determined to keep my dignity so I didn't go anywhere.

Those were very hard times. We suffered a lot. My husband fell ill and was an invalid for three years. I had five sons and three daughters. Somehow I supported the family by making and selling pickles and by doing other odd jobs. I used to help a *bidi* worker to make *bidis* and she used to give me half her wage. In those days, if we got one meal a day, we were

They said my loud singing disturbed their sleep. I had a lot of trouble. I normally practised early in the morning. As my eyes opened, while still lying down, I would start off: "Aa...aa.....aa" My voice carried very far. I didn't need a mike in those days. So I could not practise at all for 30 years. All those years, I was lying useless in the house. It is only two years since I have come out of the house and started singing again.

Of course, I didn't stop singing altogether. I used to sing to myself, while working, while bathing. It kept me happy — I didn't worry much about the future. I couldn't sing aloud so it was not full throated practice. If I sang loudly, the neighbours would shout. Poor things,



Asghari Begum with Shobha Kudesia on tabla and Vasanta Mhapsekar on harmonium

thankful to God. Somehow I managed to educate my sons and to get the girls married. After some time, one of my sons who was giving tuitions while studying, began to contribute Rs 150 but I still had to supplement this income. After my husband died, I never went to my in-laws nor did they give us any share in the family property. They did not approve of my singing so we never got on well.

In those years, did you practise by yourself?

No. I did not practise at all. After the court patronage came to an end, my practice also came to an end. The neighbours didn't allow me to practise.

they are householders, they sleep even in the afternoon whereas I feel sick if I sleep in the afternoon.

How did you resume singing?

About two and a half years ago, it so happened that a *brahmachari maharaj* visited Kundeshwar which is a pilgrimage spot near our house. People advised to go and hear him play and sing. I went and at night, I too began to sing. There is a poet called Gunsagar Satyarthi who lives in a hostel about two miles away from there. My voice carried through the night silences. He heard me and came to meet me.

He heard my rendering of *dhrupad* and

dhamar. It was he who introduced me to All India Radio. There was a *dhrupad* festival being held at Bhopal. Satyarthi told Chaurasiya : “There is an old lady our side who sings *dhrupad*.” Chaurasiya was surprised and said : “Really? Then we’ll put her name down first, since she belongs to our Madhya Pradesh.” That is how I came to give public performances, I have participated in four festivals so far.

Even now, I do not practise at all at home. The neighbours are householders, they don’t like it, but I can’t digest my food without singing. I can live without food more easily than without song.

Anyway, I don’t need to practise. I have practiced night and day for 30 years. It is those 30 years of intensive training which have stood me in good stead. My voice should be quaking and quivering at this age. I am nearly 70 years old. See, I have hardly any teeth but my voice still has power. People are amazed when they hear my voice. For 30 years I did nothing but sing, and then for the next 30 years I just did housework. I still do housework — see, my hand got burnt the other day while I was cooking!

Did you teach any of your children ?

No, I didn’t teach any of them. They were not interested. Also, their father forbade them to learn. He said he didn’t want any of his children to learn singing.

Son : I don’t like my mother’s classical singing. I prefer light music—film tunes. I like one song which my mother sings — it is about Radha’s delicacy. Radha says - “My forehead is unable to bear the weight of the bindi, my eyes droop under the weight of the kaajal.” I always request her to sing that song. But before Satyarthiji met my mother, I had never heard her perform.

Would you like to teach a child now, Asgharibai?

Where will I find a child ? The children are all going to school, they don’t have the time. Well, if I had also gone to school and learnt English, that would have been fine ! But what could I do, music captured me! I had a primer but I kept it in a corner and had no time for it. Finally, the mice nibbled it to bits!

Those days, it was different. Music

was a way of life. How upset my guru used to get if I could not pick up a nuance. But now every child screams away imitating film singers ! Today people become singers just by listening to records ! There are two parties who have really made it good—one, the band *wallas* who play film tunes, and two the *quawwals*. They just pick up film tunes. Ask them what they used to play in front of their fathers, they’ll have nothing to say for themselves. Even the *kirtans* are gradually being sung in film tunes, I don’t know a single film tune. When they are in tune, they are all right, when they are out of tune, they hurt the ear. Well, in their way they are good enough.

How would you explain the fact that more women take to singing than to playing musical instruments ?

Earlier, there were plenty of women instrumentalists. You should have heard Mushtarbai playing the tabla—it was splendid ! In the days of court patronage, women of musicians’ families used to play as well as sing. Of course, housewives did not play or sing because female musicians were looked down upon. Male musicians were not looked down upon—the Maharaja and his brothers used to sing and play.

Son : Now housewives have also taken to music. There is no stigma attached to it. Anyone who is interested can learn.

But the teachers are no longer there. In those days, teachers used to teach with the aim of carrying on the tradition of their *gharana*, to enhance their reputation. They kept the pupil in their home, like their own child. Today, it is the pupil who has to pay the teacher! Those days, the teacher was supported by the patron. Now the teacher has to earn money from the pupils, so the teacher is more interested in the wage than in the art.

In those days, music was a way of life. People who come and see how I live at Tikamgarh are amazed, and exclaim: “Asgharibai, how can you live like this ?” I tell them plainly: “One’s honour is not diminished by living among ruins. My guru was a *fakir*, he was not interested in money or jewels. What am I then ? I don’t want a bungalow. I can sit and sing just as well under a tree.”

Does it feel very different to sing in an

auditorium and to sing in court ?

That was also a big hall and so is this. We have to sing. We don’t pay attention to who is listening and who is not listening. We are singing to the One we want to sing to (God, the one spirit). If that One is happy everyone is happy.

Do you know what happened to the other women court musicians of your acquaintance ?

No, I don’t know what happened to them. I lost touch. Their daughters have not made a name for themselves or carried on the tradition.

How did it happen that a few women like Begum Akhtar did make a name while so many others sank into oblivion?

That is a matter of fate. What a beautiful voice she had - *wah!* But even she got fame and recognition only after years of being in oblivion.

How do you like this all-women festival?

I like it very much, India is a mine of diamonds and this is one way of discovering them.

Son : My mother says that if people in our country learn to appreciate dhrupad, dhamar and other forms of classical music then musicians need not go out of the country; the tradition can develop here and enrich our own country.

Men have unions. We women should also have unions, so that other women may get inspired to learn and practise music. Let us not be left with the feeling: “*Vritha gavai re umariya sari*” (Alas life has passed by and we have wasted it). Why spend life cooking food? Cooking of food has to be done in any case, but women do nothing else. Little girls play games making believe to cook, in youth that game becomes their life, and in old age they play the same game for their grandchildren! Why not play this game of music, which is so valuable?

This festival for women will help women to come forward. Other women will hear the music and WILL think : “She plays the tabla! Why shouldn’t I also learn to play.” In this way music will continue to live, will remain immortal in our Hindustan.

—Madhu, Ruth