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SAMAKALIKA SANGEETHAM
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We tread in your foot prints....



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FRONT COVER

MA ANNAPURNA DEVI

Painting by Artist Kodankandath Antony Francis.

BACK COVER

PANDIT RAVI SHANKAR

Oil painting by *Pandit* Sujan Rane.

Learning with *Guru-Ma Annapurna Devi*.... A Journey of Self Discovery

S R G M

M G R S



Suresh Vyas

A disciple of *Guru-ma Annapurna Devi* who plays the *Sarod*, he carries forward the tradition of the *Maihar Gharana* through his performances, lectures and teaching. Began learning the *Sarod* from *Ustad Dhyanesht Khan* in 1982 and since 1985 became a pupil of *Annapurna Devi*. Has performed and lectured all over the country. Involved in teaching students in India and abroad in the traditional one-on-one, *Guru-Shishya* system or on-line. Conducts lec-dems and master-classes in English and Hindi. Has a BSc Degree in Physics. Earlier studied vocal music with *Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale* and *Pandita Neela Nagpurkar*. Has also been trained in *Tabla* with *Pandit Taranath Rao* and *Pandit Jagdamba Prasad*.

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Just imagine a bunch of young friends in their 20's in this beautiful apartment by the sea in Mumbai, listening to some live music being played on the *Sitar*; then having an intellectual conversation with a Professor of Psychology. Eating some great cuisine shared by the same Professor who is also a foodie; followed by some exotic Swiss Chocolate. Then aimlessly lying down well fed and generally having a great time.



Suddenly this average looking Indian woman in a sari soundlessly enters the room, and everybody sits up immediately or stands in attention with their heads bowed in reverence. I believe somewhere along the way even the furniture would realign! Who is this woman and what is it about her that changes things from chaos to order.

Now imagine every morning, just around dawn, I walk alongside a river in a beautiful garden created by the local municipality. While walking I notice dewdrops precariously hanging at the edge of every leaf, just in a matter of minutes the sun will come up and it will end the life of each dewdrop, but even then, in its last moments it emits a beautiful glow. There is this person I knew who like the dewdrop, even in the last days of her life, would glow and emit her inner radiance; making everyone who came in contact with her feel secure and safe from the worries of life.

But why am I saying this and what has this got to do with the topic of this article. Well, because both these people are actually the same person, my *Guru-Ma* Annapurna Devi. The first is the one I met in my 20's and the second is when she was battling old age.

From her perspective, the span is only about 35 of her 92 years. But for me it's been a long association. This association started when my father took me to her to learn the *Sarod*. I was 23yrs old, fresh out of college, with dreams in my eyes and a romantic outlook towards becoming a musician. The journey has been so unlike the one my 23yr old self had envisaged.

The first question that people, who either wanted to meet or learn from her, asked me was "How did you enter a house that carried a board that read?"

A request

Please ring the bell only three times.

If nobody answers, please leave your card/letter

Thank you for being considerate

The only reason I managed to enter this house was because my father, who was a musicologist and a music critic for



the Times of India Group in Mumbai, was very closely associated with her family. He was a close friend of Annapurna Devi's brother *Ustad Ali Akbar Khan* and had also written the biography of *Acharya* (Baba) Alauddin Khan which was commissioned by the magazine *Sangeet*, published by *Sangeet Karyalaya Hathras*.

On the day we went to Ma's south Mumbai apartment, I was in a state of awe, fear, apprehension, hope and myriad other emotions. In spite of the board outside we rang the doorbell, just once and were ushered in. After a while Ma appeared. She exchanged a few pleasantries with my father and then turning to me said "You have to give me 25 years of your life; I do not guarantee anything at the end of it and only if you're willing to do that can you come. Besides I am only accepting you because you are *Bhaiya's* (she addressed my father as *Bhaiya*) son. This made it clear to me that I was not being accepted on the basis of some talent or capability but purely because of my father's goodwill and probably because she saw some honesty in my intent. Later I understood that for her the qualities of being a good human and the tenaciousness to work were far more important than just talent. She would even prefer a person with little or no background of music, who she could mould from the very beginning. She was willing to put in all the effort required to transform and help a person evolve through the medium of music, rather than just making some cosmetic changes in an already formed artiste. Once she accepted the student, her commitment towards every need of the student saw no limits. Whether the need was musical, emotional, and financial or even an immediate need of just feeding a hungry student!

Now after accepting me, a new problem appeared. I wanted to learn the *Sarod*, and she said she didn't know how to play or teach the techniques of the *Sarod* playing. I jumped and said I was willing to learn the *Sitar*, thinking she was going to reject me. But she said, "Follow your inner calling and for that you must go and learn from a person who actually plays the instrument. Acquire the technique and come back to me and I will teach you the music" Today as I teach, I realise that this is such an important insight into



the pedagogy.

So off I went to Kolkata to learn the rudimentary of *Sarod* playing from her nephew *Ustad* Dhyanesh Khan. After spending some time there, I came back to Ma. On the first day of my learning from her, she asked me to play. I played to the best of my ability. She sat through that entire 'performance' completely poker-faced. When I finished, she said "That was very good, now will you please tune your instrument". Try as I may, after many attempts and a lot of cold sweat still, I could not tune the *Sarod*.

Being overwhelmed by her presence and knowing full well her sense of perfection, I realised and accepted that I really didn't know how to tune the instrument to precision. For the first time, I had realised the importance of a perfectly tuned instrument. This may sound very simplistic and basic but I wish it was so. On seeing my state, she helped me tune the instrument. When I strummed it that day, the sound it generated was unbelievable. This magical sound I still search, every time I sit to play my *Sarod*. I understood how we have a tendency to hurry up the tuning and to get on with the playing. This is a recipe for disaster. Besides, assuming that once the instrument is tuned perfectly, it will remain tuned throughout the session is also perilous. Our classical instruments are by design very sensitive to the slightest change in the surroundings. Even our body temperature changes as we work, and that too affects the tuning. I've heard that *Ustad* Abdul Karim Khansaheb, who was considered to be the most *surila* singer, used to sit with the *Tanpura* for hours before a concert, so that it would adjust to his body temperature and settle down and stay steady and unvaried during a concert.

That very day she taught me a *Vilambit Gat* (slow composition) in *Raga Yaman*. With this one *Gat* she changed my perceptions of the *Sarod* and music, and helped me form and comprehend an independent style, a style akin to my nature.

It is often difficult to understand how she managed to teach so many students and each one with a distinct style of his. Be it a Flautist, Sitarist or Sarodiya, all of them have their independent styles. The reason for this, as I understand it, is



because as a true *Guru*, Ma helped the disciple find his/her true self, which is unique. This makes his/her musical expression also unique, independent of influences. Ma always taught by singing, irrespective of whether you were learning vocal or instrumental music. This method meant that the student wouldn't blindly copy the *Guru* but would interpret the music as per his/her personality. She would correct the student only if he/she went totally off the mark, but would allow for a different interpretation if it was within the rules of the *Raga*, the *Gharana* and the continuity of the presentation.

Later when asked about her method of choosing the *Ragas* to be taught to the students, she had revealed a method so different, but so correct. I wish this method was used more often in transfer of knowledge. She said that whoever comes to her, no matter what his/her level was, all are first taught *Raga Yaman*. While teaching *Yaman* she would be able to understand the personality of the student. Then she would decide what needs to be taught next. *Yaman* was the first *Raga* taught because being a *Sampoorna Raga* all the various *Angas* (parts) of *Ragdari* could be taught. Now while this process is going on, she would intuit the various facets of a student's personality. Understand if he/she is gentle, extroverted, introspective or impatient. She would then choose a *Raga* that would help the student grow as a musician and as a person. This pedagogy of course requires the *Guru* to be a psychoanalyst, vastly knowledgeable in music and very intuitive and much more. All of which she was, almost naturally. But taking such keen interest in the students' growth, with all their impediments and mental blocks can take a lot out of the *Guru*. This she was committed to do, if only the student had the right intent.

I remember of a person from Europe who wanted to learn from her. He wrote to her, but mentioned that he was not financially sound. Ma instructed one of her senior students who would travel to that part of the world often, to teach this person. Many years later this senior student suddenly passed away. Ma remembered, even after so many years, to write to him to come



and learn from her in Mumbai.

Her approach to music or life, was no different, it was all encompassing. From music being a means of spiritual development, to even being a good professional musician, she would prepare you for all of that. For her, being a performer was just one of the things you could do with music, not an end goal. For her, music was a lot more. I remember when one of her students asked her to teach him a couple of *Ragas* after he had been taught just one *Raga* for several years. She turned to him and asked "When you went to your spiritual *Guru*, did you get a *Gurumantra*? With the help of that one *Gurumantra* if you can get *Moksha*, then why do you want more *Ragas* in your music? One *Raga*, if done correctly and totally, is no less than a *Gurumantra*" Ma did eventually teach him many more *Ragas*, but the desire and tendency to gather a repertoire of *Ragas* instead of going deep into the essence of what was taught had been checked.

It would make her a bit upset if we said we played this *Raga* or that *Raga* and sound proud. She would always say that a *Raga* is like a deity, to be worshiped, and who were we to play it? We should feel blessed that the *Devi / Devata* of that *Raga* had allowed us to be in their presence. In fact, before beginning to play, remember to pray with all humility to the *Raga* and meditate on the deity of that *Raga* and request the ability to play. She had the same to say about *Riyaaz*. She would say simply "Did you eat today? If so, then there can be no excuse for not doing your *Riyaaz*. It is like your breath that mustn't stop till you are alive." That is probably why, Pablo Casals one of the greatest Cellists, at the age of ninety said "I am still practicing the exercises I learned when I was eight years old"

Even how you maintained your instrument was very important to her. I remember once seeing her *Surbahar*, it was made in the 1950's but it looked as good as new. She believed that one should treat the instrument like a *Pujari* treats the idol of the deity in the temple.

Once, some students went to visit Ma. She was busy teaching a *Sitar* student. As she was teaching and singing



phrases the student was picking them on his *Sitar*. At one point the student could not recreate the phrase sung by Ma. She kept correcting him and he kept trying but something was always not sounding right. At a certain point out of sheer frustration Ma picked up his *Sitar*, which incidentally is not even her regular instrument. She sat on her haunches and played the phrase without even wearing the *Mizraaf* (plectrum). What emerged from the instrument that day was like celestial music. Now after recovering from initial shock, the minds of the visiting students started whirling with thoughts and questions. The first thought that came was 'I must try this at home' and before even the thought could be completed in their mind, she stopped the music and said "Please don't try this at home, this is a *Gurumukhi Vidya* and should be learnt before you play. Besides, if you do it without learning, then when you actually learn this, I may have to make you unlearn and re-learn" In spite of this reprimand, the monkey mind of the students couldn't shake off the questions. The next question was how she could have done what she did. How does she generate so much feeling in one small phrase? This was a question in the minds of the student. As if on cue, she stopped the music and said "After learning from the *Guru*, you have to practice each phrase for millions even billions of times, so that it enters your bloodstream. Then whenever you play, it will flow out as your own, with your feelings" the students were left completely bewildered on many counts... How did she do that? Who is this person? Was I thinking aloud? How did Ma hear my inner voice with so much clarity?

When she taught a *Raga*, she would not allow any compromise on the rules of the *Raga*. You should be playing the *Alap* or *Taans* or even *Jhala* without the rules of the *Raga* being tampered with. There is a tendency to allow some compromises in fast passages by musicians. They believe that after having established the *Raga* in the *Alap*, one can take some privileges with the faster *Taans*. She would not accept this. Shortcuts didn't exist in Ma's rule book.

There are so many memories about her warm hospitality. Inside the four walls of her abode she was a warm and caring



mother, a perfect teacher and a gracious host. Ma was a fantastic cook and she conjured up the most delicious dishes. She would remember the likes and dislikes of each one of us and make sure we were fed whenever we went visiting. True to her name she would feed whoever came to her door, be it humans or even birds. Every day one of my *Guru Bhais* was instructed to set out the grain for the variety of birds that flocked to meet her. On one occasion, the *Guru Bhai* inadvertently put out less than the usual quantity and set off on his daily routine. During lunch Ma was quick to ask if there was a shortage of grain as the crows had come complaining to her. This may sound like a fable to many, but to my mind it throws light on the way Ma was, someone so connected with everything around her – Very perceptive and infinitely sensitive to even the slightest variation around her, at the physical plane or at a subtler level. True to her name - Annapurna - not only guests or students even the man who carried the bird feed too was fed. If she was a stoic teacher, she was also a loving mother.

Ma had a wholesome sense of humour. Her laughter was so genuine that it would make the whole place light up. She loved listening to the radio and in this way; she stayed abreast with the music scene around. She loved tending to her plants and even loved watching comic programs on television. Ma once had an adorable Dachshund called Munna. Munna, she would say had a very good ear for music. Every time a student came to learn, Munna would go and sit in the student's lap and listen. But if the student played something out of tune, he would jump off the lap and leave the room. Once while Ma's son was practicing, the doorbell rang and Munna began to bark. Ma reprimanded Munna for disturbing the session. Munna sat looking apologetic in front of Ma and she said to him "If you learn music, only then will you know that you should not disturb someone practicing". She started teaching him, and lo and behold in some time Munna would, in his dog howl, sing a perfect scale!

Later, as her health deteriorated we *Gurubhais* shared time as her caregivers. Even as she lay in bed, age having taken its toll she continued to awe me. I could walk into the house and without



even seeing me she could sense what was wrong or right with me. Even then, old and weak, still like the dewdrops she had a glow and dispelled the darkness. Even then she wanted to give, she still would teach, and still made you feel protected and would struggle to give you life lessons to make living worthwhile.

Ma will remain in our memory for ever. Of course, for the music she stood for and the excellence that she bench marked, for the students she nurtured and the values she imparted, but I think why my *Guru-Ma* really will stand apart is because she pursued her music as a spiritual journey, unfazed by the demands of a material life. Following in the footsteps of her father *Baba Allauddin Khan*, Ma remained pure and true to the traditions of the great art of Classical Music to the very end. Hers was a personal journey, of complete surrender and submission to *Baba* and his music.

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