

Silencing of a Woman Artist: A Journey through the life of Annapurna Devi



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To be honest, I have never thought that there is anything special about me to write on; I see myself only as a humble student of music who learned from Baba Allaiddin Khan, my father and a great Guru to many besides myself.... I will be most happy, if your book (to her biographer) marks the sharing of his divine musical gift with the disciples.'

This is how Annapurna Devi, the legend of Surbahar (bass Sitar) talks about her calling in life. Following Annapurna Devi and her musical talent is following the great tradition of her Senia Maihar Gharâna. Gharâna derived from the word Ghar – house – typically refers to the place where the musical ideology originated. Gharânas are well known for singing Khayâls. Maihar Gharâna is a Gharâna or school for Hindustani classical music from North India. The school was opened by Baba Allaiddin Khan in the Princely State of Maihar, presently a small town near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. Baba studied under Wazir Khan, a direct descendent of Miyan Tansen who hailed from Rampur. Baba came from the now Bangladesh and stayed in Calcutta to



establish himself as a classical musician. He was a percussionist par excellence and was a court musician of Maharaja of Maihar. Blending his tradition and contributions, *Ustâd* Allauddin Khan founded the Hindustani Classical Music of *Senia Maihar Gharâna*. This *Gharâna* was traditionally passed on to Ali Akbar Khan and Annapurna Devi, the son and the daughter respectively of Baba Allauddin Khan. It was also shared with Ravi Shankar, his favourite disciple.



The pathway of Maihar *Gharâna* runs through the lives of Baba Allauddin Khan and his family. *Ustâd* Allauddin Khan and Madina Begum had four children – Jahanara Khan, Ali Akbar Khan, Roshanara Khan and Sharija Khan. Roshanara was given the name ‘Annapurna’ by Maharaja Brijnath Singh of Maihar State, as she was born on Chaiti Purnima (a full moon day). The youngest child Sharija had died in her childhood. Jahanara, the eldest, from her childhood was trained in music. As a married woman, her talent alienated her in-laws (the mother of the groom burnt her *Tanpura*) and she returned to Maihar to die in her own mother’s arms.

Baba had seen the bitterness music had brought for his elder daughter. Hence he was reluctant to teach Roshanara, but she was drawn inexorably to the *Tanpura* that her father kept away from her: ‘He was in a dilemma whether to teach me or not. But I used to listen to and remember what he taught Dada (brother – Ali Akbar Khan). One day when Baba went to the market, Dada was



practising his lessons on the Sarod. Dada suddenly made a mistake and I started correcting him (he was five years elder to her). I was so involved that I did not notice that Baba had returned. When I was aware of his presence, he was standing right behind me. I was scared. But instead of scolding me, Baba called me to his room and gave me a Tanpura. This was the beginning of my Tâleem.'



Baba Allauddin Khan was *exacting, a purist and a perfectionist*. Annapurna recalls the years of Tâleem: While I was a student, I never dared ask Baba what his favourite ragas were, never did he ever speak about his performances, all my time was spent in learning and practising.

Annapurna began by learning the *Sitar* but her father had chosen a different path for her – one that was strikingly opposite to the trajectory of his other famous student, Ravi Shankar. He asked Annapurna to play the *Surbahar*, the bass Sitar: 'He told me, I feel that you can preserve my Guru's gift because you love music. However, you will have to give up playing the sitar, an instrument liked by connoisseurs as well as the commoners. The *Surbahar* on the other hand will be appreciated only by discerning listeners who understand the depth of music.'

Surbahar literally means *Springtime Notes*. It is bass *Sitar* which is closely related to *Sitar* but has a lower tone. Depending



on the instrument size, it is usually pitched two to five whole steps below the standard Sitar: 'I always remember Baba with respect, awe and love. I had Shraddha in him from my very childhood. He used to say that every note you play should touch one's soul. I practice what he taught me as a form of meditation or prayer. And now, whenever I play the instrument I experience a feeling of surrender, compassion and peace.'

As Annapurna Devi recollects how she enters into the realm of *Surbahar*, it's true that as being a girl child artist, she was guided by her father, who has been keen on designing her future. She could only surrender to the way shown to her as the will of God and she committed herself to what her Baba wanted her to do. Women in the field of music, found it hard to make their destiny. Baba had defined how she should take her life along with the hard and lengthy hours of training and wished she do concentrate on to music deeply. After four years of strict *Tâleem*, she started performing. Of the three pupils, Annapurna was the most devoted. Within a few years, it was reported, she mastered the *Surbahar*. She says that all three were equally talented and that she, Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan wept openly as they studied, immersed in the *Sangeeth*.

Annapurna is described as the very embodiment of Baba Allauddin Khan's pure and deep devotion to his music. She is rightly hailed as the ultimate reference point to the musical ideology of Baba. It is within her that unique Maihar *Parampara* is preserved. Through a rigorous process of internalising, she liberated the 'courtly music', she moved back to the source of the music and forward to a realm beyond time. She concentrated on her father's instructions. Instead of hiding behind the curtain and secretly memorising the lessons, she sat with her brother and later with Ravi Shankar, for more than a decade, in getting the right training.

When she was 15, Ravi Shankar's brother, dancer Uday Shankar proposed the marriage between Ravi Shankar and Annapurna. And a year later, on 30th March, 1942 she gave birth to her only son, Subhendra Shankar, whom she fondly called



Shubho. Meanwhile their marriage was facing tides. Earlier, both husband and wife performed together on the stages, but gradually they started moving apart. In 1956 Annapurna left to her Baba's house with Shubho and eventually in 1962 they parted ways for good: 'Whenever I performed, people appreciated my playing and I sensed that Panditji was not too happy about their response. I was not that fond of performing anyway. So, I stopped it and continued my Sâdhana.'

Her Biographer, Swapan Kumar Bandyopadhyay (Annapurna Devi: An Unheard Melody) states: 'Annapurna, however, told me that something worse had happened than Ravi attempting to make her take this Oath (never to perform in Public). But she added that she would divulge it to none...'

Later Annapurna revealed: 'It was during my year of studentship that my father would repeatedly tell me that my music should not be treated as a product for public display. It was a means of achieving one's own fulfilment, which should lead to one's own development as a human being...'

Annapurna then retreated to her Mumbai Flat (sixth floor of an apartment on Warden Road, S. Mumbai) to teach a handful of students. She was reluctant to play competitively: 'Baba had told me, that if even the need arose, I would be able to earn my living through music and be economically independent. Personally I did not enjoy performing. For me music has always been my offering to God. I never felt comfortable recording it. Why should I play for those fighters?'

Even on *Surbahar*, her technique was astonishing – one can still hear fragments of this early music in a duet with Ravi Shankar – the only recording that exists of the two of them. Ravi Shankar turned towards the public and what he perceived to be its needs. Annapurna, a classicist, strictly adheres to her father's *Tâlêem* and applies herself to the spiritual discipline inherent in it. *Ustâd* Amir Khan, one of the great vocalists of our time reportedly told one of his close friends: 'Annapurna is 80 per cent of Ustâd Alluddin Khan, Ali Akbar is 70 per cent and Ravi Shankar is about 40 per cent.'



Annapurna, through her music had turned to a world of pure music from where she reminded us of the early women poets and singers like Meera, Aandaal, Lal De, Akka Mahadevi etc. who had renounced themselves from fame or reward.

The music which follows her isolation in Maihar and her first separation from her husband, followed by many more painful events, seals her youth with an extraordinary sign, extending her loss but also transforming it. The loss is transmitted, and other worldly gift manifests. It is our loss, for the music was inaccessible. She lived the life of a woman with dignity.

She was the introverted traditionalist keeping her father's legacy alive. So she completely turned away from concerts and recordings, indeed all audience. The one recording that exists of her playing Raag Maand Kamaj was surreptitiously made.

Ravi Shankar celebrated the showmanship of modern performance; bending rules and improvising music for being audience-friendly and would go on to become an international superstar. She puts the differences as such: 'Emotional and aesthetic expressions have more to do with the artist's personality. An introspective artiste might go for Sur and Âlaap while an extrovert might opt for Leyakâri.'

Annapurna wanted Maihar Gharâna to be taken to the next generations. She trained Shubho for six years and he was able to absorb almost all that he could from her illustrious heritage. She wanted him to be with her and continue his *Tâleem* for two more years so that he could master the music. But Shubho wanted to go with his father to US for a new life there with all its hues. Many dramatic events unfolded and allegations arose against Annapurana with regard to Shubho's plight. He has never been able to fulfil or develop his *Tâleem*, even though he was with his father. Many times he shared the stage with his father, but he couldn't commit himself wholly to music as a *Sâdhana*. Later in 1992 without leaving any remarkable history, Shubho died from reasons unknown, in the US with neither of his parents by his side. Shubho's death was a great shock to her and she strongly believed that it could have been prevented. Later, in



the interview with Man's World (May 2000), Annapurna did respond on how she felt then: 'I am aware of the false and fabricated stories about me regarding what happened in my married life. I have been quiet about it because I thought of Baba, while he was alive. I didn't want to hurt him in anyway. So I put up with the injustice and suffering. However, now I feel that the world should know my side of at least the Shubho part of the story.'

In the above mentioned interview, she has spoken on Ravi Shankar too: 'I think Panditji is losing his sense of propriety or his mental balance or that he has turned into a pathological liar. He has exemplified the English proverb: 'No fool like an old fool'. It would be nice if he would devote all his time to teaching his Shishyas, instead of wasting his time and energy in such frivolous pursuits.'

Like her father, it is as a *Guru* that she identifies herself: '*I don't feel I have deprived people of my music since I freely taught whatever I learnt from Baba to my disciples.*'

She trained many renowned artists in *Sitar*, *Flute*, *Sarod* and *Vocal Music* but not *Surbahar*. *Sarod* player Pradeep Kumar Barot had been learning from her for almost four decades. He says: "*I consider myself blessed. There are not many who get to have Ma as their Guru. In spite of being such a great musician, she is so simple and warm.*"

To students like Barot, she is a demanding teacher, who on rare occasions, makes Bengali-style Fish curry for them.

Hariprasad Chaurasia, the well known classic flautist, received guidance from Annapurna Devi. Chaurasia persisted for three years before Annapurna Devi agreed to teach him. She agreed to teach him if he was willing to unlearn all that he had learnt until then. He had played flute with his left hand since then: "*When I go to my Guru for my weekly lessons, she asks me to reveal a new vision from the same Raag she has taught me earlier. Sometimes she refers to a lesson given a few years back. When Guru asks for another vision, what she means is to improvise. This 'improvisation' is what makes Indian music unique. Our music does not ask us to become a copy or a replica*



of the teacher. So when my teacher says come back, what she means is to build another story around the Raag. Chaurasia has been practicing something new from one Raag – Raag Yaman – for the past 30 years!

Nithyanand Haldipur, another renowned disciple of Annapurna Devi, a versatile in *Bansuri* (Bamboo flute) has been taking lessons on *Maihar Gharâna* from her since 1986. He writes: *'In all my lifetime I have never come across any musician who is so precise, melodious, and involved, her Sur pierces the heart.'*

Pandit Nikhil Renjan Banarjee, was a Classical *Sitar*-ist of the *Maihar Gharâna*. He took *Tâlêem* from *Ustâd* Amir Khan, Baba Allaiddin Khan, Ali Akbar Khan and Annapurna Devi.

Rooshi Kumar Pandya was Annapurna Devi's second husband, but first and foremost he was her student; a devoted care-giver to the last. He was undergoing his training in US from Ali Akbar Khan in his Music College in California for six years. As he had an assignment in India, he wanted to continue his training and was sent to Annapurna by Ali Akbar Khan. They met in 1973. The first day's experience was narrated by Rooshi Kumar to his interviewer in January 2013, a few months before his sudden demise: *"After some initial enquiries about me, she gave me a Sitar and asked to play all that I learnt. I did so. Then she sang a Gat in Raag Yaman and asked me to play that. It took me about two and a half hours to pick up the Vilambit Gat in Yaman. She sat there patiently waited till I picked up the Gat. Once it is done, she tried to send me off. But I insisted on learning more. She trusted me as I was sent by her Dada. She shared all her personal matters and as I worked as a psychological counsellor, I could deal with her feelings of sufferings. Her solitude had given her a lot of strength and insight."*

In 1982 they got married. He promised not to hurt her even unintentionally and He kept his word till the end. (He departed this world in 2013). He had great respect for her.

Whether she has performed or not does not really make a big difference, because she has taught. She has passed on her music to her students. Her music is perpetuated.



Ravi Shankar and *Ustâd* Ali Akbar Khan are household words in the music community. Annapurna's name is hidden. Even in the obituaries which followed the death of her brother, her name was missing. But Khan *Sâhib* himself kept her picture directly in front before him, with the photos of his parents, when he taught his students in his music school in California. It was also on record that even, her brother Ali Akbar Khan hesitates to play his *Sarod* in her presence. He had sent his sons Ashish Khan and Dhyanesha Khan to benefit from his sister's guidance in their *Sarod Tâleem*. And his daughter too was groomed in vocal music and *Surbahar* for over 15 years.

Annapurna is an exponent of *Nâda Yoga*, that *Yoga* of sound which leads to perceptual faculty and liberates from that faculty. *When Annapurna played, it was as if nothing remained; nothing.*

Even though she has remained aloof from the world of performance, her greatness as a *Guru* had been recognized and appreciated by the Government and the society. She has been a recipient of *Padma Bhushan* (1977), *Sharangadev Fellowship* of Sur Singer Samsad (1988) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1991). She has served as Professor of music at the NCPA since its inception, till 1983 and later was the guiding spirit behind the activities of *Acharya* Allaaddin Music Circle in Mumbai. Annapurna Devi (91 years) passed away, on 13th October 2018. She who directly inherits *Haridas-Mian Tansen* lineage is a royal musician – and she is one who has lived in solitude.

Decades after the trauma, she says to her biographer: '*I have great respect for women who stand up for what they believe in and fight for the cause of women against all odds. I do not agree that for women, career and marriage do not go together. If there is mutual respect and understanding between the husband and wife, if there is an absence of jealousy, both can build their careers and still be happily married.*'

Annapurna Devi leaves the footprints of a legend. She, being a person of integrity, inspires the entire world, especially each and every woman of this globe. She never wanted to



surrender to the adversities she had to face. She showed the way, how women can hold their heads high and valiantly encounter the challenges of life. She trusted in herself and the music which was imparted to her from generations behind. With music in her soul and she ensured her own space in this competitive and patriarchal world. Her silence was the answer for all that is done to wipe her off from his-story!

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