

Bhimsen Joshi—an Era is Gone

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With the death of Bhimsen Joshi an era of North Indian classical music has come to an end. This era dominated the last four decades of the 20th century. It had luminaries like Kumar Gandharva, Amir Khan, Gangu Bai Hangal, Hirabai Barodekar, Begum Akhtar, Pannalal Ghosh, Bismillah Khan, Vilayat Khan, Ali Akbar and Ravi Shankar.

He had a large following and a large number of tribute articles are likely to appear. For this writer he had a wonderful voice and he will be remembered more for his bhajans in Kannada and Marathi than his renderings in the more 'classical' mode.

This article instead offers a few critical comments on the North Indian classical music and its place in Indian culture. In the late sixties P C Chatterjee (the then director of All India Radio, Calcutta) asked this writer, 'how does the Indian classical music reflect contemporary sensibilities?' He added that when he asked this question to the musicians themselves, it made no sense to them. Surprisingly this question has not been raised at all? Hereafter, the word Indian music refers to north Indian music only. Indian classical music does not reflect contemporary sensibilities as does art or writing. Why so? Classical music in the West reflected the triumph of the bourgeoisie, Napoleonic wars and so on. Can the Indian classical music be actually called classical?

Indians like to trace everything back to the Vedas. However, the living and continuous tradition of this music dates to the post-Mutiny (The Indian War of Independence) of 1857. At the time, many Indian princely states, having their wings clipped patronised musicians. In as much as the Mutiny was mainly a north Indian affair, it is not surprising that six of these music *gharanas* (schools/traditions) found patronage in the small kingdoms in the Deccan, in the border districts of today's north Karnataka and Maharashtra. Bhimsen Joshi also belonged to this region. These musicians rendered a refined version of the folk music. Later with the increase in competition they developed styles (*some quite unmusical*) to distinguish themselves. With the advent of railways they began to travel and participate in musical conferences in various Indian cities. These were patronised by 'patriotic' gentry.

It was Bhatkhande who systemised the knowledge in the early decades of the 20th century. First he published two volumes of dialogues discussing aspects of each raga and the way they were rendered by different schools and tried to fix a standard. Later he published six volumes of 'Kramik Pustakmala' which was a proper course in Indian music and was taught in Benaras by Ratanjankar and others.

Bhatkhande and others by this time were part of the 'nationalist' discourse, taking pride in the 'great Indian traditions'. In Bengal, the Brhamo Samaj used music in their assemblies and was probably the first to publish Indian notations in the Devnagari script by the 1880s. Rabindranath himself took keen interest and a school of aesthetics and divinity through music (one can reach God through great music!) came into being with Dilip Kumar Roy as its chief exponent.

In spite of the styles these *gharanas* developed it was still very musical and pleasing even to ordinary people, unlike the post-independence, particularly the post-60s period to which Joshi belongs. In the 50s and even up to middle of sixties the musical conference tradition of the pre-independence continued. 1967 changed all that. It was the end of the Nehru era, or the euphoria of independence. Now Indian people knew that a new ruling class had entrenched itself and they had to fight it.

In music, classical music was driven to the drawing rooms of the rich and of course it went abroad. An affected sense of appreciation came into being and musicians also began to perform to cater to this class and moved away from the larger middle class audience, although individually they nostalgically craved for it. Kiran Seth in Delhi tried to revive interest in the children of these rich people in the universities by starting SPICMACY (Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music among Children and Youth). It was patronised by these classes but is more or less dead.

Coming back to the questions that were raised about its relevance to contemporary sensibilities, the answer is that largely it does not reflect. The reason being, it was always mainly a performing art for the patrons and with increasing alienation of the ruling classes from the people it too distanced itself from its folk origins and got into musical gymnastics. For example: the 'great' jugalbandis between the percussion and the instrument/voice that were totally meaningless, unmusical and unmelodious. As one musician put it, music without M(melody) is 'sic(k)'. Well, Bhimsen Joshi was no exception along with Ravi Shankar and almost all the others.

So the era to which Bhimsen Joshi belonged is gone. And it will be quickly forgotten, except for what it did to popular music particularly in the Hindi cinema and also in Bengali and other north Indian cinema. It gave great lyrics sung in a melodious and meaningful style that appealed to everyone during those decades. Even today they still live in the albums and are heard everywhere. As an aside, classical music also rendered itself very nicely to humorous music. The great Manna Dey singing play back for Mahmood exploited it fully. Between him, Mahamood and Kishore Kumar they immortalised the caricature of the teaching of the north Indian classical music in the film 'Padosan' and in a perverse way, it is the best tribute to it.

Among the classical musicians, Bhimsen Joshi himself will be remembered for his 'lighter' renderings of devotional songs. Probably the lone survivor among the greats from this era will be Begum Akthar and Bismillah Khan, who never gave in to the gymnastics that these greats went into to please the new class. They remained melodious and meaningful. □□□