

Begam Akhtar: The Queen of Classical Singing in India



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Abstract

The works and performances of the celebrated musicians, vocalists and recitalists reveal their unflinching devotion to music. Music, the voice of God, is its own speaker, and is capable of piercing the hearts of the listeners of all the age groups. There are several musicians that contributed to the Indian classical music. One of them is a consummate artist, Begam Akhtar (1914–1974) who, as a torch-bearer, gave birth to several traditions in music and started several new chapters like the syncretic Hindustani culture of Awadh and the guru–shishya parampara.

Begam Akhtar's genius was first realized first when just at the age of seven years, she performed on the stage. The people who contributed in her making of the classical singer include in particular, Ustad Ata Mohammad Khan of the Patiala gharana, Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan of the Kirana gharana. Her thumri-dadras made her distinct from the other classical singers. Her ghazals reflect the combination of both both the Purab and the Punjab styles.

Begam Akhtar did not keep her confined only to stage performances, but also allowed herself to prove her singing and acting potential in the films, such as, Roti, Panna Dai, Dana Pani and Ehsaan, Mumtaz Begum, Ameena, Naseeb Ka Chakkar Anaar Bala and Jalsaghar. Begam Akhtar's worth as an established and celebrated classical singers can be felt through the fact that in her life she was awarded Padma Shri, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan.

The study is encompassed in review article, and aims at reflecting the specific information about the Ghazal-empress Begam Akhtar, the woman who turned herself from Bai to Begam through her genius. The findings reveal Begam Akhtar's unsurpassable status as a classical singer who through her thumri-dadra and ghazals made a permanent stamp of her genius.

Keywords: Empress, Queen, Classical Singing, Ghazals, Thumri, Kharava.

Introduction

Born on 7th October, 1914 in Faizabad, Begam Akhtar started letting others know of her singing talent too early. Her keen interest in music brought her in contact with the great lute player, Ustad Imdad Khan who trained her and taught her the minute details of classical music. Later, Ustad Ata Mohammad Khan, Ustad Abdul Waheed Khan, Ustad Jhande Khan Saheb, through their valuable lessons in vocal singing, helped her establish herself as an eminent classical singer. Ustad Jhande Khan Saheb impressed her in a way that Begam Akhtar made him her mentor and liked to be called his disciple.

Music is powerful enough to change the temperament of the people. It is absolutely right in case of Begam Akhtar who would be restless and stubborn, but extremely sensitive for memorizing songs. Beginning her life as a vocalist under the guidance and supervision of Ustad Imdad Khan of Patna with raga Kamod, she was soon attracted to simple folk songs and tunes, followed by her migration to Gaya to be trained by Ustad Ghulam Mohammed Khan. Her occasional visits to her native town Faizabad brought her close to Ustad Ata Mohammed Khan of Patiala who decided to impart her vocal training.

Ustad Ata Mohammed Khan taught her voice culture techniques and made her practice more and more the lower octave, i.e. Kharaj Bharan. The elaboration of Raga Gunkali by the Ustad transformed her life as a vocalist. The fifteenth year of the life of Begam Akhtar opened new vista of entering the scene of classical music, when through her public

performance at the Music Conference in Calcutta, she made her own identity that continued till the moment she passed away.

By singing four Ghazals and five Dadras at the conference she won applause of the audience present there. Sarojini Naidu's presence at the programme added the enthusiasm of the girl-child who was appreciated by the following words of Sarojini Naidu- "when I came to the conference I wanted to stay for just a while, but your music captivated me and forced me to stay till the end".

Begam Akhtar's Ghazal record which comprised of a melodious collection of Ghazals got a huge success, and helped in establishing her as a singer of thumris, dadras, khayals, ragas. Obviously, her singing was multi-dimensional as she was able to sing the same Thumris, Dadras and Ghazals in different ragas.

She was excelled in modifying and using Kalawati, Deshkar, Chandrakans, Kalingda, Kaunshi Des, Narayani, with a blend of the Punjab and Poorabang Thumris. These specific features of her multi-dimensional singing enabled her to touch higher and higher horizons of popularity and success.

The 1930s began another chapter of achievement in her life when she joined the cinema world and cinema acted in the Hindi films, such as, Ek Din Ki Badshahat, Ameena, Mumtaz Begum, Jawaani Ka Nasha, Naseeb Ka Chakkar. In the films like Ehsaan, Daana Pani and Jalsaghar and Roti, her sweet singing can be enjoyed.

The Bibbi became Begam Akhtar after her marriage with Barrister Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi in 1945. After her marriage, there was a break in her career as a singer for about five years. However, her husband's sensibility revived it soon, and he allowed to continue to perform and pursue singing. Having an endless reservoir of Ghazals, she was deeply influenced by the Urdu poets like Ghalib, Jigar, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Kaifi Azmi, Shakel Badauni and Hasrat Jaipuri. Her husband made a great role in bringing her closer to these poets.

The Lucknow Radio station, cultured Mehfil and Mushayaras enabled her to make exposure to her talent of ghazal singing and shayaris. The titles with which she was conferred from time to time, like Mallika-e-Ghazal, confirm her envied status of a vocalist and ghazal singer. Her speciality lies in her inimitable style, self-composed masterpieces that include particularly the following-

1. Woh Jo Humme Tumme Quarar Tha
2. Hamri Atarya Pe Aao Sanwarya Deikha Deikhi Balam Hui Jaey
3. Cha Rahi Kari Ghata, Jiya Mora Laharaye Hai

Her international fame and repute later won her the honors like Padma Sri and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for her unmatched contribution to Indian music. She passed away on 30 October 1974 as a result of her raising her pitch during her live performance on the All India Radio Sangeet Sammelan Concert in Ahmedabad on October 22, 1974.

Review of Literature

Mohan Nadkarni (1981), in the research paper entitled Begum Akhtar, informs that death came to Begum Akhtar on the performing stage on the night of October 30, 1974. The place was Ahmedabad, far from her home-town, Lucknow. The concert literally proved to be her swan-song. The euphorious delight she had shared with her packed audience for three hours was overtaken by a pall of gloom in a matter of moments.

Not only Ahmedabad but India as a whole mourned her loss deeply. True enough, the name of Begum Akhtar had a special significance and meaning for connoisseurs of thumri, ghazal and dadra. Each of these song-forms express a vital species of poetry with a charm and appeal of their own. Flexible in form and lyrical in content, they offer ample scope for expressing the subtlest nuances of emotion. In other words, sensuous romanticism is the very essence of these singing forms and their renditions call for a great deal of talent and imagination on the part of the singer to depict their lyrical fineries and musical subtleties.

The likes of Begum Akhtar are born but rarely. Timbre and tone coursed through her veins. The Faizabad-born Akhtaribai was barely 7 when she was captivated by the music of Chandabai, an artiste of a moving theatrical company. Soon she embarked on her musical career, receiving initial training from Imdad Khan, a sarangi-player from Patna, and then from Ata Mohammad Khan of Patiala and Abdul Wahid Khan of the Kirana gharana, then based in Lahore. They were all classical maestros - and it might surprise many of Begum's votaries to know that her supreme artistry in thumri, ghazal and dadra had its moorings in the tradition of pure classicism. This also, incidentally, explains her penchant for setting her light classical repertoire to essentially classical tunes.

Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (2001), in *In Search of Begum Akhtar: Patriarchy, Poetry, and Twentieth-Century Indian Music*, explores that Begum Akhtar is best known for her sophisticated mastery of Urdu poetry and light classical music in the ghazal of North India and Pakistan. Her musical legacy emerges from a set of relationships defined by the elasticity and rigidity of gendered identities in patriarchal, post-colonial Indian society. Situating her artistry in relation to the backdrop of historical forces that framed the course of her career, this paper foregrounds the dynamic changes that confronted a hereditary musical tradition in a fading system of feudal patronage. It also reflexively engages the myriad voices and encounters that have contributed to the evolving discourse that continues to mold Begum Akhtar's remarkable life history.

Alaghband-Zadeh, Chloe (2013), in *PhD Thesis on the title Analysing thumri*, analyzes and considers thumris gendered associations and the role musical performance plays in the social construction of gender. The study is a good exercise in doing analysis "in context". The author suggests that the musical style of thumri best makes sense when considered in relation to issues of transmission, prestige, respectability, connoisseurship, spirituality

and gender. Ultimately I argue that the musical features of *thumri* are not merely abstract phenomena, but are thoroughly embedded in particular historical, social and cultural circumstances.

Avantika Bhuyan (2013), in *Remembering Ammi*, shares that throughout the performance she kept hinting for me to start singing but I tried to avoid all eye contact with her. So she tried another route. President Zakir Hussain was also in attendance at the concert. So she told him, "Hussain sahab, I am going to present my dukhtaar (daughter) for the first time and I am sure you would like to listen to her."

Manjari Sinha (2015), in *Begum Beckons*, informs that the birth centenary celebration of the legendary Begum Akhtar, organised by the National Centre of Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai, and supported by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, was held recently at NCPA's Experimental Theatre. Thoughtfully conceived, curated and conducted by the well-known vocalist Shubha Mudgal and the tabla exponent and composer Aneesh Pradhan, the event brought out some significant aspects of Begum Akhtar's musical personality and versatility.

Introductory background of the daylong programme by Shubha Mudgal made it clear that there would be no performances because there was no voice that could match Begum Akhtar. There were learned panellists invited instead, to analyse the nuances of her *gayaki*, to deliberate upon the tradition of *Marsiakhwani*, *Soz* and *Naat* supported by some rare recordings of Begum Akhtar and to discuss the present status of *ghazal gayaki* and its content. The celebration also treated the audience to some rare video clippings, interviews and archival recordings of her mesmerising music.

Peter Manuel (2013), in the study entitled *The Intermediate Sphere in North Indian Music Culture: Between and Beyond "Folk" and "Classical"*, posits the existence of an "intermediate sphere," comprising a heterogeneous set of traditional music genres that, in different ways, shares features with both folk and classical realms. The author suggests five categories in this socio-musical stratum and provides brief glimpses of some of their constituents and distinguishing features, including the distinctive sorts of theory they embody and elite patronage that sustains them. The study is concluded with observations about historical changes in the status of this sphere in general.

Objectives of The Study

1. To produce the scenario of classical music in India
2. To bring forth the references of the people and music-related personalities that made a tremendous contribution to the classical music in India
3. To reflect the trend of *ghazal-singing* in classical music
4. To study and mirror the personality of Begum Akhtar
5. To produce Begum Akhtar's biography in brief
6. To point out and reflect the specific features of the singing of Begum Akhtar

7. To interpret Begum Akhtar's contribution to the classical music
8. To interpret Begum Akhtar's status as an Indian classical singer

Hypothesis

1. Classical music is the sole basis of music
2. Classical music requires regular practice
3. The Indian classical music is a landmark in itself
4. The world of Indian classical music is constituted by several persons that include vocalists, recitalists, and all those that accompany them
5. Concerts and musical shows are great platform to perform classical music
6. There are several trends in the field of classical music
7. Begum Akhtar is a celebrated artist in the Indian classical music
8. Begum Akhtar is one of the pioneers of *ghazal-singing* in India
9. Begum Akhtar's biography reveals her making of a singer and artist through the circumstances and regular practice
10. Begum Akhtar's singing is characterized by certain specific features
11. Begum Akhtar enjoys an unsurpassable status as an Indian classical singer.

Methodology

The paper falls in the category of qualitative research and review article. The published research studies and research papers in the national and international journals in India and abroad paved the path for the writing of the paper. The author's own passion and curiosity to know and explore the unknown facts, his own interest in classical music and especially in *ghazals*, impression of Begum Akhtar's classical singing on him reflected through the hypothesis, helped in the creation of this paper. Started with certain specific objectives, the study underwent all the steps involved in the process of writing review-articles. Collection of the data from the secondary sources, classification of the collected secondary data in accordance with their nature, content-analysis of the selected studies, and finally conclusion etc. are some of the steps that were adopted for the purpose.

Findings

1. The scenario of classical music in all the decades was rich enough to prove that classical music is the soul of music, and that it is only through the whole-hearted devotion that a person can raise to the status of being a classical singer
2. The world of the Indian classical singing is made up of vocalists, recitalists, guitarists, flute-players, table-players etc. who are seen together performing together at the time of performance
3. *Ghazal-singing* is one of the major trends in the Indian classical music that changed the direction of the classical music
4. Begum Akhtar is one of the eminent classical singers who started a new chapter in the Indian classical music through *ghazals* and other specific features of her singing

5. Through her devotion to music, Begam Akhtar proved her eminence as a classical singer and vocalist
6. Begam Akhtar is an immortal figure as a ghazal empress in Indian classical music
7. Begam Akhtar's kaharvas and Thumris make her immortal and unforgettable
8. Begam Akhtar's status as one of the best classical singers remains unchallenged and uncontroversial.

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