

## Another sun, eclipsed: Gangubai Hangal

In the hours before the celestial sun got completely eclipsed by the moon on the dawn of twenty second July, we lost yet another sun - eclipsed forever by the power of death. I refer to classical music genius Gangubai Hangal's passing away.

Twenty-one years ago almost to the date, I had the opportunity to meet and interact with the great singer. This was as member of a team commissioned to create a film on the occasion of the maestro's Amrit Mahotsav - the commemoration of her 75th birthday, planned by India's classical music fraternity.

Meeting her had left me profoundly moved for many reasons, most of all by the self-effacing nature with which she handled her towering talent and achievements in classical music and everything else rightfully accompanying these, viz., attention, adulation, adoration, affection.

While there are paeans sung to the gift of talent of such individuals, we are seldom privy to stories that could reveal their humaneness. Perhaps Gangubai had seen modesty and humility to be her private leash to keep her from getting intoxicated by runaway fame.

And I hasten to add that this did not include fame's companion, fortune. Till the end of her life, Gangubai shunned fortune to remain wedded to a life of astonishing simplicity, refusing to give up the gritty quality of the rustic to which she was born - into rural India's one of several impoverished, backward castes - in favor of any newly found urbaneness. She had continued living in her modest home in Hubli, infallible in the certainty that a life of material luxury could only interfere with the larger calling that had been divined for her, viz., the legacy of music.

My very first recollections of Gangubai Hangal was the ease with which she had wiped away the gaping chasm between us - she, the prodigious musician known to the world at large; me, a student known only to my own world of family, friends and academia.

Her embrace of affection was genuine and heartening, and most of all reassuringly welcome since that would help me accomplish the task I was set out to do.

As a student, recently married and away from home, this embrace had meant a lot.

While I leave the music mavens to recount the tales of her music genius, eminently suited as they are to do this, mine is the story of a brief moment of humaneness I had encountered with Gangubai along with an immeasurably rare gift I had received from her, viz., of being offered to be taken under her wings to be personally trained by her, in residence, in the best spirit of the guru-shishya tradition.

The potentially life changing moment for me had come when Gangubai, in utter earnest, had looked at my young spouse who

was directing the film, and asked him if she could take me under her folds (which means taking me away to Hubli) and groom me to be a classical musician, to sing and accompany her and share with her, her fame. For she was convinced that she could make for me a name in music. Of course she knew she needed to ask my husband, ever aware that in a patriarchal society, this was necessary protocol. It had signaled how serious she was about making this offer.

Can you imagine the singular honor of such a request, something most budding classical musicians would give a right hand for. What had astounded me was that Gangubai Hangal had made the request without even the knowledge that I had already undergone ten years of classical music, being groomed since my school days and being told by accomplished musicians that mine was a 'god gifted' voice. And then onwards, largely propelled by my mother's personal efforts to help nurture this talent, I had received training from a phenomenal classical musician from Kolkata. My late mother had left no stone unturned to see that the family did justice to this gift - bankrolling all the private hours of lessons from a hard to get eminent teacher, and being available to take me wherever and whenever I was required to be present to perform and complete the two undergraduate degrees in classical music I had undertaken to carry out simultaneously. Today, on Gangubai's demise, I feel the loss of my mother who was roughly the age of Gangubai's daughter Krishna Hangal, with a new sense of searing pain.

But how did Gangubai know to identify me as her protégé of all the new people that she met on a daily basis? Was it Indian classical music's insistence on the 'pehchaan' - a tool that invokes one's audio sensory to strain an understanding of the last sinew of the music one hears before one even ventures to 'sing? Whereby, one's hearing becomes part of one's voice? With Gangubai's innate ability, she could have spotted a talent from a thousand miles away.

I remember being subject to an hour of 'pehchaan' by my own guru every time he sat down to train me - an hour-long dedicated session though which I was required to tell him from a minimal number of notes, what raga he sang before I was allowed to even begin to sing for that session of 'taleem' (training). And the only way one could accomplish any success with 'pehchaan' was with at least two hours of 'riwaaz' (practice) on a daily basis. This could not have been very easy for a child not yet touching her teens, and loaded with school studies.

It gives me the goose pimples to think that I might have been a household name transformed through music under her direct gaze, and through her graces.

Why had I not ventured to accept such an honor? Because, I had already gone through this conundrum, with well wishers suggesting earlier that I continue to pursue classical music through a Masters in classical music at the Club House of Bombay University. That means being trained by doyennes of the likes of Kishori Amonkar and others invited as artists by the University.

Or, pursue where my heart was - academia and research. So, I gave up one for another, viz., a doctorate at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IITB). Hard choice, wasn't it?

Only to go through the same conundrum yet again, after Gangubai's offer while at IITB, close on heels of her 75th birthday.

I am convinced ever so that life divines certain activities upon us. For me, it was research. Why else would I have foregone the rare opportunity to be with a musician of Gangubai's stature at her own beckoning? But music continues to be my love. Today I see Gangubai's phenomenal talent in Ella Fitzgerald, Tania Maria, Diane Krall, and such, whose voices remind me of Gangubai's - firm, masculine, earth shattering and mellifluous. I listen to music when I work, when I write, when I read, if possible, when I travel. This devotion to music - this alone - remains my tribute today to Gangubai's beautiful request. Perhaps in my next birth, I will be her 'shishya.' I will not say no to this ultimate diva.