

Sarangi & on The Verge of Extinction

The Sarangi is revered for its uncanny capacity to imitate the timbre and inflections of human voice. It is an Indian bowed string instrument, which plays an important role not only in our Hindustani Classical tradition but also in our very own folk tradition. Among all the Indian Instruments, it is the hardest to master and said to most resemble the sound of human voice, which is able to imitate all sorts of musical ornaments such as gamakas, meends, jamjama, ghaseet, murki, etc. This Sarangi or "Saurangi" is also known characteristically as 'the voice of hundred colors'. In the words of Sir Yehudi Menuhin: "The sarangi remains not only the authentic and original Indian bowed stringed instrument but the one which expresses the very soul of Indian feeling and thought".

This traditional instrument was popular in the mid- 17th and 18th century to accompany Vocal music. Coming from a large family of folk fiddles, the sarangi entered the world of Hindustani art music as the preferred melodic accompaniment for songstress - courtesans. During the nineteenth century, it appears to have been the most popular North Indian instrument, when Sitar and Sarod were relatively rare as well as primitive. Emergence of many great sarangi artists like Ustad Bundu Khan, Mamman Khan, Pandit Gopal Mishra, Zahoori Khan, Nathoo Khan, Hamid Hussain Khan, Nazim Hussain, and Pandit Ram Narayan took during that time. Some historical paintings and photos of singing and dancing girls usually depict a sarangi player on each side of the singer which shows the importance of sarangi in past. It retains this vital role today but now harmonium has supplanted Sarangi.

Folk music known as the purest form of music but the onslaught of modern entertainment has pushed this innocent form of music to the brink of extinction. Folk instruments like Sarangi, Israj, and Kamaicha are becoming extinct since the instrument makers had died out and there is no wood available too. Moreover, the musicians are moving into non-musical fields. Many artists leave playing of sarangi. For example- "Mian Kalu Khan was a renowned sarangi player of Punjab. He used to play sarangi in the kirtans performed at Gurudwaras. That was the time, when singers were honored as musicians but players were not getting any recognition. So, Mian Kalu Khan made up his mind to leave playing of sarangi and learn vocal music. In this way, he evolved new

styles, which later on, become famous as Patiala Gharana." The nineteenth century sarangi was a smaller and less standardized instrument. On the modern concert stage; the solo sarangi's were having a relatively low profile. However, the Social influences were the main cause of the decline of this instrument. Although sarangi players and tabla players were both equally important in the ensembles of singing and dancing girls, the tabla have largely outgrown the stigma of association with prostitution because of its enhanced role and more glamorous status in the accompaniment of sitar and sarod. However, the sarangi remain linked to the world of courtesans. In addition, that world ceased to exist. Furthermore, during the British rule, Tawaifs still exist in the cities of North India, but usually they perform film songs for their clients. With the end of what was once a profitable market for sarangi playing, the bleak scenario of sarangi players came into existence, except for those who were talented and lucky enough to get employment in All India Radio. Thus, sarangi players had less and less reason to devote their lives to practice the way that their ancestors had and as appears to be necessary for anyone who wants to attain and maintain control over sarangi.

Many Vocalists did not get much space between the alapchari and swars. As the sarangi player, continue to repeat the same Harkat presented by the vocalist, at the same time, the vocalist starts the next swars or Harkat but at that time, the sarangi player is unable to complete the previous one. In this way, there occurs a swar over another swar which leads to disturbance. Thus, the inoffensive harmonium has largely replaced the sarangi as the preferred accompaniment to vocal music. Although sometimes the tempered tunes of Harmonium becomes out of tune for the Indian music, which is not possible with sarangi. Generally, vocalists shy away to compete with sarangi players. In addition, sarangi players sometimes overplay or steal the limelight that is sometimes justified. They are substantial musical pedigree than the singers they accompany. Particularly, musical superfluities such as meend (slide) and gamakas are inherently impossible to coax out of the harmonium. However, many felt that the purpose of an accompanying instrument is to complement and support the main vocal line and not to cross swords



with it. To that end, they prefer an instrument that can form the soft, secondary melodic line with as little time-delay as possible and used to fill the gaps between the vocal pauses and help to enhance the musical vibes within the audiences. That is how harmonium's rise in popularity seen as a natural evolution and assimilation into the vocal performance.

There is one more question occurs that is why sarangi is not being taught in any of the music institutions? As we know that it is not being taught in any of the colleges or institutions, it may very well become extinct in coming generations and all the classical vocal performance and practices will then have to accommodate either by harmonium or by violin or we can say without any of these melodic accompaniment.

Many excellent players who, become depressed because of their poor economic prospects, have become unmotivated with regard to the tuning and maintenance of their instruments. "Much of the Manganiar and the Langa traditions were encouraged and supported and we might even say saved through the efforts of Komal Kothari and his institute of folklore (the Rupayan Sansthan)." Since, Kamaicha and Sarangi are becoming extinct due to the death of instrument makers and unavailability of woods, Komal is working with these groups by building and providing instruments for them, by instituted musical training camps for their children and by touring them throughout the world. In this way, she has somehow saved the tradition of our folk instrument. Now his son Kuldeep is extending the same.

It is true that the recruitment of musicians from non-hereditary backgrounds extends to all specialists except as a sarangi player. There are very few instances of non-hereditary musicians becoming "Sarangiyas". In a book by Daniel M. Neuman, it is written, "The specialty alone still retains the stigma of its brothel identity. It is in part because of this lingering association that sarangiyas themselves are not teaching their sons the instrument." Due to this, their sons are learning to become Tabaliyaas, soloists, or are going entirely in different professions. Nevertheless, in the last ten years this trend has been somewhat reversed. The sarangi has received more interest. Of particular importance was the Sarangi Mela Held in Bhopal in 1989 where the sarangi players reminded the importance of their tradition. The great sarangi players like Ustad Abdul Latif Khan and Ustad Ghulam Sabir Qadri who did not teach their sons - now teaching their grandsons. One more example is of sarangi maestro Ustad Sultan Khan, who has trained his son Sabir Khan and nephew Dilshad Khan. He is the cultural ambassador of India who has done immense job in preserving the tradition of sarangi throughout the world. He has done various fusions, folks and classical

performances not only in India but also in abroad. Thus, it is heartening to see that a large number of players are now teaching their sons and have devoted them for saving this dying art.

Does the sarangi have a future? Should we philosophically accept its disappearance from the Indian music tradition as an unavoidable phenomenon? Or the other hand is it time that we accept the sarangi for what it is, one of the most expressive, communicative and versatile instruments that has evolved on the Indian soil? In fact, this is the only instrument that has a blend of both the classical and folk sounds. Some of the young artists like Sabir Khan, Dilshad Khan, Shahrukh Khan, are trying to maintain this instrument on both the grounds of classical and folk music. Our government and other agencies have taken suitable measures like conducting various music festivals and concerts to save this instrument from becoming extinct. Furthermore, The Radio Pakistan has also tried to arrest the decline of sarangi music by employing sarangi players as staff artists who gave solo broadcasts from time to time. However, they are unable to find students with an interest, time and patience for onward broadcast of this glorious tradition.

Shubha Mudgal says, "Ultimately it is up to music lovers to save and promote the art form. If nobody listens to the music, even if it is available free on YouTube, how can it be saved?" The most dreadful and outrageous is that the instrument that once decorated in royal courts - for solo performances and as an accompaniment for classical music and dance - has very few patrons or players today. AIR (All India Radio) and Doordarshan should give more time to sarangi and should prohibit classical singing accompanied by harmonium by making the use of sarangi compulsory. They should also offer scholarships that would help adopting sarangi by upcoming generation. Thus, the instrument, which Yehudi Menuhin had praised for "most poignantly and most revealingly expressing the very soul of Indian feeling and thought", today, appears a case for charity. "If the old and middle-aged artists, who still possess a considerable knowledge, die without leaving a trace of the art, the long chain of sarangi tradition will be broken. Nobody, not even a genius, will be able to fix things together again. Let's not talk and start the work now." There are some famous words of renowned artist late Pt. Ram Narayan, which could inspire us to save a dying tradition of Sarangi. Otherwise, the sarangi would get muffled and the strings would fall silent forever.

"My mission was to obliterate the blemish which the sarangi carried due to its social origins. I hope I have succeeded in this."



Endnotes:

Sharma, Manorama (2006), Tradition of Hindustani Music, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.

Rice, Timothy, Ethnomological Encounters with Music and Musicians: Essays in Honor of Robert Garfias, University of California Press, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

Neumon, M.Daniel (1990), The life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Bor, Joep (1987), The voice of the sarangi: An illustrated history of bowing in India, National centre for the performing Arts, Mumbai.

References:

• Paranjpay, Dr. Shridhar (1972), Sangeet Bodh, Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, Bhopal.

• Vratray, Dr. Suresh (1982), Sarangi, Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy, Lucknow.

• Sharma, Manorama (2006), Tradition of Hindustani Music, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.

• Rice, Timothy, Ethnomological Encounters with Music and Musicians: Essays in Honor of Robert Garfias, University of California Press, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

• Neumon, M.Daniel (1990), The life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

• Bor, Joep (1987), The voice of the sarangi: An illustrated history of bowing in India, National centre for the performing Arts, Mumbai.

• Mitra, Dr. Arun (2002), Bhartiya Kanth Sangeet or Vadya Sangeet, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi.



Scholar's Name:

Niyati Singh

SRResearch Scholar, Department of Music, Banasthali University, Tank, Rajasthan**

Guide's Name:

Dr. Santosh Pathak

Associate Professor, Department of Music, Banasthali University, Rajasthan**

