



Gangubai Hangal: The Svaras Of Ultimate Devotion

Abstract :This research paper is dedicated to Dr. Gangubai Hangal who became one of the finest vocalists of Kirana Gharana in Hindustani Music. Though she hailed from Karnataka, the place which is home to Carnatik Music, and moreover from the family of Carnatik musicians, but inspite of all odds and hindrances in her life, she didn't quit the journey of divine svaras. A disciple of Sawai Gandharva, Gangubai's sadhna has been recognized by the Karnataka Government and apart from the numerous awards, a Gurukul, University and a Museum has been established after her name.



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As she writes in her biography- *The Song of My Life*, her birth name was Gandhari Hangal and she was born on 5th march 1913 at Shukravarpeth in Dharwad. Privileged to be the daughter of a musician, she heard the sweet lullabies, bhajans, and kritis sang by her mother Ambabai who was a Carnatik vocalist. Ustad Abdul Karim Khan was very much fond of her notation style and appreciated it a lot. At a tender age, one day when Gandhari was practicing the lesson given by her mother, Ustadji patted on her back and blessed, 'gala achha hai beti, khoob khana or khoob gana'. Khan Saheb had guessed Gangubai's bright future perhaps!

Gandhari started going to school and on the way to school, she got to listen to the gramophone records of the eminent artists of the times. The first opportunity to sing publically came as early as during her primary education. In 1924, the Indian National Congress held its annual convention at Belgaum. One batch of girls from her school was assigned to sing welcome song and Gangubai sang a Kannada song "Udayavagali Namm Cheluva Kannada Nadu" composed for the occasion. Mahatma Gandhi, who was the chief guest of the function, was pleased with her sweet voice and wonderful singing at such a tender age and appreciated her. On that very occasion, she earned the appreciation from her 'Future Guru' Shri Rambhau Kundagolkar alias Sawai Gandharva.

Gandhari's mother wanted to initiate her daughter into Hindustani music which was not much popular in the region those days. Therefore she used to be a little

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'A lady, sitting with tanpura in one hand and the other hand on her ear.'

The above drawn word-sketch itself is enough to gesture towards this name-Gangubai Hangal. Because, perhaps no other way can better define Gangubai as she is indeed the synonym to music. She remembers profoundly that in her entire life, she did nothing else, but music. The truth of this statement can be verified by her saying- "All the pains and sorrows have mingled in my life just like various instruments in an orchestra"

It is true that those who are the beloved children of God get to face more grieves, obstacles and ups and downs. Such was the case with Gangubai also. She is remembered not only for her gayaki, but also for the unmatched devotion that she had towards music. Loss matters most when it strikes on a wrong time. Gangubai lost her mother when there was no one else with her to take care; she lost her Guru when she had just begun her professional career; she lost her husband when she was on the peak of her career's flight. All these setbacks left her in total inner chaos, but each time, she could stand only because of her music. Let's have a glance over the journey of her life:-

Childhood and Early Life:-

concerned about her musical training as well as education. In the beginning she made some arrangement in Hubli and Gandhari had to make a daily up-down from Dharwad to Hubli to learn music. This session lasted from 1924 to 1932 and then finally they settled down at Hubli. Right from her childhood she listened to the Hindustani artists with great interest and these names included- Bhaskarba Bakhle Shri Pitre, Master Krishnarao, Hirabai Barodekar, and Abdül Karim Khan. For her mother being an exponent of Carnatik music and an admirer of Hindustani music, the musicians of both the genres used to come to her house every now and then. Thus Gangubai got a very good environment of music at home.

The Beginning of Initial Training:-

Ambabai was more concerned for Gandhari's musical training than the academic section. So the primary education came to a halt when she was in fifth standard. Ambabai gave up the Carnatik music practices in order her daughter should not be influenced by this genre. Gandhari started learning thumri, dadra, ghazals and kathak dance from Shri Shamlal and Pratap Lal of Rajasthan. After some days, a family friend and well wisher of the family, Shri Dattopant Desai started giving lessons to her. Meanwhile she also learnt some compositions from Shri Krishnacharya Hulgur, a kinnari veena maestro. One day, Ambabai requested him that Gangu is little weak at taal portion so please give special attention over this aspect. Annoyed at this kind of demand, he stopped her training and insisted to pay Rs.120, a huge sum in those days, for the tuition given till then. Ambabai sold her gold bangles to meet the cash but it was worth Rs.100 only. She offered the same to Shri Hulgur but he refused to accept and insulted her. Gangubai also felt extremely insulted on this incident. She recalls in her biography- "my mother vowed that she would not die without paying him the balance of Rs.20. Till today, this incident has left an indelible impression of sadness in my mind."

Gandhari got married to Shri Gururao Koulagi, a lawyer in 1929 when she was just sixteen. But with the permission of her in laws and husband, she continued to stay at her mother's house for keeping the practices going on.

During this session, she continued to practice with her maternal uncle Ramanna. In 1930, HMV was in search of new talents to select for their upcoming projects. Ramanna asked Gangubai to try for the audition. She went, however without any formal preparation. But to the surprise of all, she got selected and HMV brought out 12 discs of her under the names Gangubai Hublikar and Gandhari Hangal. The Carving of 'Gangubai' out of Gandhari, A Period of Rigorous Training:-

Gangubai became a disciple of Sawai Gandharva in 1932 with formal ganda bandhan* but the training went on by fits and starts. Sawai Gandharva was busy with his Natak troupe or concert invitations, so whenever he used to come to Kundgol or Hubli, Gangubai would go and take the lesson. This opportunity may come once in a year or twice!

In 1936, her training under Sawai Gandharva became permanent after a jolly incident. Gangubai once sang Vibhas and Miya Malhar from AIR thinking that guruji based in Kundgol won't be listening to the concert. Coincidentally, as she boarded the train from Mumbai to return to Hubli, she met guruji travelling in the train sitting on the seat next to her. And 'unfortunately', he had listened to Gangubai's rendering from AIR yesterday. He was a little dissatisfied with the Vibhas she sang and the training started in the train itself. That day onwards, Sawai Gandharva started her regular training with a Ganda Bandhan ceremony at Mumbai. Guruji started telling each and every minute aspect of the raag and its structure to her. He thoroughly taught Gangubai about how to use swaras while alaap, how to elaborate the raag, how to begin the taans and gave her the rich variety of Alankars/Palta to practise. "He would give her one phrase or palta* and won't go to the next until she had mastered it. There were times when she would sit in a corner for hours, quite alone just practicing. Sometimes she would start crying out of frustration but Guruji never gave up, such was his Bhakti." The same year, AIR finalized her name as Gangubai Hangal. This wonderful grooming that lasted from 1937 to 1942 lent her gayaki an unmatched brilliancy. She came to be invited for the most prestigious music concerts from all over the country as well as abroad where she would cast a spell on her audience every time with her gayaki.

She recalls a number of memorable incidents about her training under Sawai Gandharva. He was an alert teacher but a strict Guru. Guruji's furious nature during the lessons created a few unforgettable events, one such in the words of Gangubai, was:-

"Once I was learning a new raag. I had practiced it for some time and grasped the concept of the raag. Just then, I received a contract from AIR and I was keen to present the new raag but I didn't know its name. I prompted Ramanna to do so. On seeing the papers, guruji asked, 'why such haste for performances?' But he took the tanpura and started singing that raga. Finally Ramanna asked 'what raga is this' Guruji angrily replied, Suha, Suha, Suha..... And put down the tanpura, got up and walked away. However, I entered raga Suha in the contract form".

This rigorous training brought her compliments from some of the legendary musicians of the times. Bhimsen

Joshi used to call her Akka (meaning elder sister in Kannada). He would jocularly say 'yours is Kirana Gharana, mine is kirani angadi* (grocery shop).'

Gayaki at a Glance:-

Gangubai was a vocalist par excellence. Her rendering had never smelt mechanical or material. Rather, listening to her music was like floating on an ocean of bliss. It was just like a sadhvi singing for her Krishna. The greatest specialty of her gayaki was- simplicity and devotion which she had obviously borrowed from her own nature. Whatever be kind of audience there, she would only sing pure classical. No bhajan, Bhakti geet, Dasarpada*, vachan*, gazal, thumri etc. Once, on the demand of a Bhakti geet, she folded her hands and said-"whatever I sing, I sing with bhakti only. Then there is no need for Bhakti geet separately." Such was her love for her genre. She used to sing ragas miya malhar, chandrakauns, bhairav, jogiya, khambavati, durga, bageshree, malkauns, shuddha kalyan, shankara etc. with great proficiency. The slow unfolding of raga and the intricate taan patterns reflected the authentic Kirana style, the gharana she belonged to. After the minor tonsillitis surgery, her voice changed completely and became like masculine types. But she adopted such a style that could suit her timbre and continued her riyaz.

On a question that why does she only sing pure classical and not other lighter genres, she replied-"My mother taught all forms of light classical music including lessons in kathak style dance... Now-a-days, I don't find sufficient time even for classical ragas; hence I don't sing light classical music."

Back-Stage Scenario:- Soul-Stirring Music v/s the Cruel Laws of Nature

Besides the name-fame and glamorous 'on screen' life, her personal life was full of sorrows and grieves. But nothing could override her musical passion and she handled all the responsibilities with courage as well as intelligence. She brought up her three children Krishna, Babanna and Narayan in a musical environment. She lost her mother at the age of 19. Grief stricken Gangubai faced this cruelty of the Nature's law bravely. She felt equally broken when she lost her Guru Sawai Gandharva in 1952. A few years later she lost her life partner Sh. Gururao Koulagi, the haunting memories of which made her mind to leave music profession. But with the warm affection of her well wishers she could regain her confidence and the wheels of Gangubai's music started rolling again on the track. After some time, Dr. GV Joshi diagnosed the tonsillitis problem in her throat. Although it was a minor surgery but in Gangubai's case, it damaged the vocal chords and changed her voice permanently to a masculine timbre. It was her brilliancy that after this operation, she

adopted a style that suited her voice. The premature death of her beloved daughter Krishna also left a gloomy impact on her mind.

Awards and Honors:-

Gangubai's dedication, sincerity and penance which she paid to the music repaid her back in the form of countless awards, honors and titles. It's a long list, but to Academy Award, Swar Shiromani Award, Kanak Purandar Award, Godawari Award, T. Chowdiah Award, Ganayagi Panchakshari Gawai Award, Manik Ratna Prashasti, ITC SRA Award, Tansen Award, Doctorate Honoris Causa from Delhi University, Gulbarga Uni., Hampi Uni., Karnataka University etc.

The Accomplishment of Gangubai's Dream Project:-

Gangubai has learnt in a Gurukul tradition; she had realized the importance of Guru for the aspirants of Indian classical music. With every single query, confusion or question, it becomes mandatory to ask none other than Guru. On the other hand, during the Riyaz, the Guru must be indirectly attentive to take care of the minute mistakes of voice technique, grace notes or the raga structure etc. Thus she had always wished a Gurukul to be there for the scholars of music; where the students and gurus must live together and the 'Sangeet Sadhana' to be done there.

Such a Gurukul has been established by the Government of Karnataka in Hubli that is named- Dr. Gangubai Hangal Gurukul Trust- A centre for excellence in the Performing Arts. Started in 2011, this Gurukul gives the facility of free boarding-lodging and Taleem* to young aspirants who come here after passing an audition. Eminent artists like Pt. Mani Prasadji, Pt. Ganpati Bhatt, Pt. Kaivalya Kumar Gurav, Vidushi Vijaya Jadhav Gatlewar and Pt. Kedar Bodas have been appointed as the reverend Gurus in the Gurukul. This Gurukul is doing a fabulous job of offering quality education of practical music to those who are worshipping the divine Indian Classical Music. The students can stay here for a maximum of 4 years and learn under a specific Gharana or Guru. A certificate of successful completion of the training and no degree is provided at the end.

Hence, to fulfill this part also, a university for performing arts has been established in Mysore under the name- 'Karnataka State Dr. Gangubai Hangal University of Performing Arts', Mysore. Bachelor, Masters, Mphil and PhD programs are there in this university in Vocal (Hindustani & Carnatik), Bharatnatyam, Veena, Mridangam etc.

Apart from this, Gangubai's house at Deshpande Nagar Hubli has been established as a museum and Gangubai Hangal Chair has been started at Karnataka University,

Dharwad.

All these rewards are just a small effort to honor her incomparable devotion towards Music. Her brilliance was outstanding, her devotion was matchless and her Music was simply soul stirring which verifies the saying- Music expresses what can't be expressed by words. Let's offer a humble tribute through our words to the Vidushi who rests in Heaven today!

Keywords:-

1. *Akka* - Elder sister (Kannada)
2. *Angadi* - Shop
3. *Dasarpada* - A genre of devotional music prevalent in Karnataka
4. *Palta* - A systematic permutation of swaras

5. *Taleem* - Tuition class or grooming
6. *Vachan* - Devotional literature comprising of moral values

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