

Blasphemy and faith

- [MEENA BANERJEE](#)



The Hindu
Dhruba Ghosh in performance. Photo R. Ragu.

It is time to recognise AIR's contribution in bridging the gap between classical music and the common man.

The Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan 2015 was staged in 24 cities across the country this past week. The recordings will be broadcast from 7th November to 13th December 2015. Jawahar Sarkar, CEO Prasar Bharati, came down to inaugurate the evening organised at Kolkata's Rabindra Sadan. It featured sarangi maestro Dhruba Ghosh with tabla wizard Yogesh Samsi (Hindustani stream) and Carnatic vocalist Gayathri Venkataraghavan with Neyveli S. Skandasubramaniam (mridangam), Padma Shankar (violin) and R Raman (morsing) as accompanists.

At the State level, another spectacular show was organised by Akashvani Kolkata at Nazrul Mancha to formally release three audio CDs of Bengali 'RamyaGeeti' (light music) culled out of the precious archival collections of Akashvani (formerly known as All India Radio).

Legendary singer Sandhya Mukherjee and Nirmala Mishra were the chief guests of the evening that also saw a majestic vocal/instrumental ensemble, an innovative trend started by the AIR since its inception (perhaps inspired by the Maihar Band of Baba Alauddin Khan). The leading members of this ensemble based on Monsoon melodies, titled 'Vrishti Nupur', were Debashis Bhattacharya (sarod), Sudip Chattopadhyay (flute) and Shantanu Bhattacharya (vocal). Earlier the evening began with light songs by renowned singer Shriradha Bandopadhyay, youngsters Trisha Padui and Kinjal Chatterjee and the Calcutta Youth Choir.

Such stage presentations by the Akashvani are a recent phenomenon and have succeeded in bridging the gap between this prestigious organisation and its listeners. Ironically, its history tells a different story!

AIR started its journey when the last of the Mughal States were disintegrating. Their durbars could not offer patronage to the professional musicians any longer. But while Baijis flourished, thanks to their impeccable tehzeeb soaked in music which charmed the music-loving upper crust of the modern society, they remained ostracised and stigmatised by the public. On the other hand, ustads huddled in small towns and villages for safe shelter for their music. Their cocooned life had helped crystallise the rich tradition of Gharanas in the 19 Century. Many gharanedar musicians would accompany the Baijis on the sarangi or tabla for livelihood while vocalists would frequent the Kothas in search of authentic traditional compositions.

As a result, Hindustani classical music developed a love-hate relationship with the common man who appreciated its beauty but hesitated to own it openly due to its close proximity to the Baijis. The so-called noble families maintained double standards: the men would learn and practice music as a hobby and organise sit-ins; but the 'genteel ladies' were allowed only to appreciate it from behind the purdah. The early life of the late thumri exponent Naina Devi – gorgeously beautiful granddaughter of the legendary Brahmo Samaj leader Keshav Sen who became Maharani Nilina Ripjit Singh of Kapurthala by marriage – is a burning example of this.

Music is capable of casting its spell on its own; but coupled with obstacles born out of mysterious stigmas, it churns up a deadly concoction; enough to lure a person out of his home's security and love.

The golden era of Hindustani classical music is stuffed with numerous such stories of junoon (passionate love). Monetary benefits and fame offered by the Gramophone Company and the advent of the All India Radio sparked it further.

AIR lured ustads out of their isolating holes, offered them new vistas to showcase their art and earn money. Initially, many, like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan were reluctant to "fall in the trap of wires", lest they lose their voice or music; but an intellectual like Ustad Amir Khan took to microphones like fish to water and changed the format of classical vocal and instrumental recitals forever. Under Keskar regime, AIR did a commendable job by developing the taste of the common man as it catered to classical and light classical music only.