

60 YEARS OF AN ICONIC FESTIVAL: AKASHVANI SANGEET SAMMELAN

Jawhar Sircar

“The Hindu” 18th October 2014

B V Keskar was Pandit Nehru’s Information Minister for a decade, from 1952 to 1962. For him, Hindi film songs were a strict ‘no-no’ where Akashvani was concerned, as in his opinion, it should be the mission of the public broadcaster, to encourage only classical music. He had to face a lot of pressure and ridicule for this rather obdurate stand, but there is no doubt that had it not been for him, Indian classical music may have never reached and enthralled the common man, because classical music by its very nature was meant primarily for the elite.

One of the several methods that Keskar introduced was the *Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan* that started with a three-day concert on the 23rd of October, 1954, at Sapru House, New Delhi. This October marks the 60th year of this festival that has helped so much in popularizing *Shastriya Sangeet* and made it an integral part of India’s composite culture. Keskar’s intervention was timely because *Pandits* and *Ustads* had just lost the support of some six hundred princes and nawabs of British India, and were indeed, a very very worried lot. In the 1950s and 1960s, very few cities and institutions had public funding for organizing music annual concerts. Though the Presidency towns of Madras, Calcutta and Mumbai had their

own version of the "All India Music Conference" in the early decades of the last century, like Ramaswami Iyer's AIMC and Music Academy of 1927-28 in Madras, support to classical music remained rather sporadic and uncertain.

Keskar's message was simple: the State would take over the role of princely patrons and ensure fair play, through a system of 'grading' artistes to ensure that the best received their just dues. It was not absolutely perfect, but at least there was now a transparent system in position. Keskar had started first with the National Music Programme and then branded the *Akashvani Sangeet Sammlan* into a reliable and steadfast patron of the arts.

Initially, only music experts of international renown were invited and these concerts were broadcast live, but as the *Sammelan* spread to other important cities of India, AIR decentralized its broadcast and dissemination, to its regional networks and Akashvani reached the common man in his home, as classical music never had, hitherto before. Regional classical artistes vied with each other to participate in this grand exercise. But what was more important was the preservation of these invaluable recordings and Akashvani archives thus served as the repository of the nation's cultural wealth. Just as Vividh Bharati played a sterling role in 'democratizing' popular music among the masses, Akashvani's *Sangeet Sammelan* did wonders for classical music.

Old timers recall how the legendary Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was unable to participate as his health was failing fast, but almost every famous

vocalist or musician was indeed honoured to be chosen to perform for this *Sammelan*. Top-Grade and A-Grade artistes made it a point to perform in as many festivals as possible, and even now many look back and still complain that they had not been invited as many times as they deserved.

India's musical legends are available to us today though recordings of their performances at the *Sammelans*. I mention a few who are with us no more: M S Subbulakshmi, D V Paluskar, Amir Khan, Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, Bismillah Khan, Pannalal Ghosh, Kumar Gandharva, Mallikarjun Mansoor, Gangubai Hangal, Acharya Brahaspathi, Bhimsen Joshi, V G Jog, S Balachander, Shemangudi Srinivas, G N Balasubramanyam et al.

The best renditions of living legends like Pandit Jasraj, Bala Muralikrishna, Kishori Amonkar, Rajan and Sajan Mishra, Debu Choudhary, Amjad Ali Khan, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, T N Krishna, Hari Prasad Chaurasi and Shiv Kumar Sharma, are now part of AIR's archival masterpieces.

Those were the golden days of Akashvani before television captured the imagination of the nation. But artistes continued to perform even after Doordarshan splashed with colour in 1982 and came up with memorable programmes. It became an accepted practice to begin this *Sammelan* on the same day, in mid-October each year though a few were held as late as December because sarkari funds were not available. The number of days was, however, reduced in the late 1980s from three to just one as it was becoming increasingly unmanageable and costly.

While some events have a mixture of Hindustani and Carnatic classicals, there are eight events meant only for Hindustani classical music and there are four concerts reserved for Carnatic in the south. A judicious mix between the seniors and the relatively junior artistes is another practice of these *Sammelans*. Those who are senior artistes of today recall with pride how they had performed on the same stage as veritable legends. Flipping through the brochure of 1987, one sees veterans like Sharan Rani, , Ali Ahmad Hussian, C R Vyas, Bimal Mukherjee, Basavraj Rajguru, T.V.Soundararajan, Ghulam Mustafa Khan rubbing shoulders with un-recognisable young faces like Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Buddhaditya Mukherjee, Parveen Sultana as well as the child-like face of L Subhramanyam.

Anecdotes are in plenty. When Savita Devi, the renowned vocalist, ended her performance at Vadodara in the late hours of the night, the audience simply refused to get up, even after repeated requests that the evening had ended. Savita Devi had no option but to continue playing for about an hour more, until, the crowd was satisfied.

Arvind Parikh still remembers how he was signalled desperately by Gajanand Rao Joshi at the Indore *Sammelan* to literally race through the last part of his recital, as he was to make space for Ustad Bismillah Khan's shehnai. Joshi's watch was running much too fast and it was only when the audience greeted Gajanandji's announcement with laughter, that he looked at his watch and went red in the face.

Shanno Khurana recalls how she was hijacked overnight to perform in Lucknow in the mid 80s, because Madhuri Mattoo could not appear, and after a very satisfying performance she went home. It was then that she received a panic call from the Programme Officer that the recording equipment had failed and they would lose their jobs if she did not come to the studio once again and re-do the entire performance, from memory. How official records were fudged and the sound of the audiences' claps brought in at the right intervals remain, however, a matter of mystery.

After the digitization and the complete commodification of music, it does reach listeners in millions and total democracy rules over the sound waves. But, good 'content' still remains the 'king'. One such perennial 'fountain of great content' that renews the cultural vigour of the nation each year, is still alive and kicking: at sixty!

...