

Unforgettable Gangubhai

I heard Gangubai Hangal ji for the first time when she sang the first time at the Kuthiramalika palace in Trivandrum for the Swathi Fest around a decade and a half ago. Despite being rather taken aback by her rough, powerful and masculine voice to start with, I was fascinated by the sheer purity of the musical edifice she was systematically building up.... passage by passage, phrase by phrase, note by note. At the time, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi ji was the only doyen from the Kirana Gharana I had heard a lot, apart from a few concerts by Pandit Mallikarjun Mansoor ji. I later became familiar with the music of legends from the Hubli-Dharwad belt in North Canara through recordings and later, had the pleasure of inviting brilliant exponents of this brand of music like Pandit Ganapathi Bhatt and Pandit Venkatesh Kumar to sing at the Swathi Sangeethotsavam myself.

With this background, I was delighted when I was invited to sing at Hubli two years ago. The organizers had kindly arranged for me to pay my respects to Gangubai ji in the morning on the day of my concert. It almost seemed to be the done thing, like having darshan at the Meenakshi temple, were one to visit Madurai. The Hangal house had been partially converted into a museum, which housed hundreds of photos of Gangubai ji with every imaginable musical luminary from the 20th century. After being shown around the museum by one of her relatives, it was time to meet the legend herself.

I wondered what language we would speak in or for that matter, whether there would be any conversation at all. I had been told that her short term memory was nearly non-existent while her recollection of things that happened long ago was crystal clear. The short term memory loss was perhaps mother nature's way of being kind to her since this helped her to forget the heart-breaking event of her daughter Krishna's demise a few years ago. Krishna Hangal, affectionately called Kittakka by those who knew her and loved her, spent her entire life as her mother's shadow, disciple, friend, source of support and constant companion. (One can hear her melodious voice give a sweet contrast to her mother's powerful contralto in most of the Gangubai Hangal recordings available in the market.) After having been so familiar with her booming voice, I was so shocked to see that she was such a tiny little woman, when viewed from up close. There are some grandmothers who exude warmth and kindness and others who command the respect due to a matriarch. Gangubai ji was one of those rare personalities who combined both naturally. I had read about the hardships she had to face in life, being born of a Brahmin father and a courtesan mother, not being legally married to her own Brahmin husband, the social stigma she had to face and so on and didn't know quite what to expect; whether she would be arrogant, bitter or philosophical. The moment I told her I was a Carnatic musician, the ice was broken and she exclaimed "My mother was also a Carnatic musician!" with the

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enthusiasm of a child. There was a huge big photo of her mother Ambabai there, which quietly exuded an ethereal kind of beauty that certain old black and white photographs do. "But" she continued "She stopped singing when I started learning Hindusthani music because she didn't want me to get both the styles mixed up." This was the perfect opening and I asked her "Do you think that learning both is a bad thing?" She said "One has to be thorough in one system after many many years of practice before exploring the other system. I am very familiar with Carnatic music now and think that both the systems are equally great. But my heart was in Hindusthani music right from the beginning." I said that these days it was a fashion for many students of Carnatic music to learn Hindusthani too. "Yes" she quipped. "But the thing is, how many of these fashions will last?"

Certainly a valid point, coming from someone who had "lasted" for more than nine decades in this world with more than seven of them as a professional musician. Drawing a parallel with my own Veena guru, the late Prof.K.S.Narayanaswamy who was from the same generation as Gangubai ji, I wondered how many of the legends from the past she had mixed and moved with and asked her "Have you met Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan?" This opened the floodgates and out came the anecdotes. She told me about how she was given a junior slot to perform when she went to Calcutta for the first time and was sulking and pouting when Khan Saab told her "Just sing and show them what you are capable of and make them regret the fact that they gave you the junior slot." She was upgraded instantly as predicted. Rather than sit star struck in the presence of a legend like her, I gently asked her about so many of my own personal favourites from the past. K.L.Saigal, Ustad Amir Khan, Kesarbai Kerkar, Gauhar Jaan, D.V.Paluskar; and the very mention of each of these names would send her into raptures. It seemed as though she was becoming younger and younger by the minute, while talking about them. What was intended to be a brief, formal visit, turned into a warm, hearty and animated conversation that lasted several hours, interspersed with little bouts of singing, to illustrate some point or the other. She remembered when and where she sang what, the music she heard, the people she met and even the amounts of money that were paid to her for concerts that happened more than six decades ago! She was one of those special persons who would leave a lasting impression on one, even if one were to have interacted with her just once, as I found out from my own experience.

The single morning (though it extended to afternoon) that I spent with her turned out to be one of the most unforgettable, vivid and delightful meetings I've ever had with anyone. When I invited her for my concert that evening, she kindly agreed to come and honoured me by offering her hundred year old Tanpura for accompaniment. The organizers had warned me that by evening, she would have

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absolutely no recollection of our meeting earlier in the day and I was prepared not to be recognized. The concert happened on the first floor of a building and the tiny little Gangubai Hangal ji was brought upstairs in a chair. She sat up straight, listened intently and didn't miss even the smallest inflections in the music. I was told that she would stay for just one song and leave. But after the first song she insisted on staying, and remained there for more than an hour, visibly enjoying herself. I have always felt sorry for musicians who, steeped in their egos and insecurities, never bother to give even a quick glance of appreciation even when their accompanists play something sublime. And here was this legendary personality who had heard everything worth hearing in the 20th century, who was in her nineties and extremely frail, listening so attentively and expressing her appreciation so tangibly during the concert of an unknown fellow who was more than 50 years younger than her. In a milieu that is so full of masks, duplicity, artifice, pettiness, jealousy and other kinds of nonsense, her entire personality was like a ray of sunshine, as I discovered in the morning itself during our marathon conversation. When she was about to be taken back home by her relatives, she blessed me, apologized for having to leave midway during the concert and was taken away in her chair. The organizers told me afterwards that along with a lot of nice comments about my singing which I will modestly edit out *Ahem*, she said "Bring that boy to me tomorrow. I want to see him." since she had absolutely no recollection of our meeting earlier in the day. I never did get to meet her afterwards, though I kept hearing about various heart warming events in her life like her meeting with our own Golden Girl, Parasala Ponnammal when She went to sing at Hubli. And now the music world which has already been in a state of sorrow with the departure of world class artistes like Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, maestro Palghat Raghu and Vidushi D.K.Pattammal in recent times, is left to cope with yet another huge loss

I could never get to come to a conclusion about what happens after death....whether the whole thing just ends here in this world or whether there is the next world, further lives and so on. If there is something after life here on this earth after all, then one can safely presume that Gangubai Hangal ji would be in very good company now, reunited with so many people whom she loved so dearly, like her mother Ambabai, her Guru Sawai Gandharva, her daughter Krishna Hangal and a host of luminaries from the music world and probably making a higher level of music than what we mere mortals get to enjoy here on this earth. I pray that her wonderful soul gets to rest in peace and I hope she has left behind.