

*Fragrance of music
over the last 35 years
at Gulab Bari*

Gulab Bari

In Banaras

The quintessential *Banarasi* was known to celebrate any cultural occasion with merriment or as they say, *mauj-masti*. The carefree nature of the *Banarasi babu* is almost legendary. Music occupied a major portion of Banaras's social life. And the *Gulab Bari*, held in the month of *Chait* immediately after the festival of *Holi*, became synonymous with the city's social calendar

The origin

There are many versions of the origin of *Gulab Bari*. But according to most scholars, the tradition maybe almost 270 years old, initially hosted by Mir Rustam Ali, the *subedar* of the *Nawab* of Oudh, way back in 1735.

However, Mir Rustam Ali's reign came to a rather ignoble end with his treasurer, Mansa Ram, proving a traitor. And even as Mansa Ram's son, Balwant Singh, came to power, the ritual of *Gulab Bari* perished for a while. Balwant Singh was more a conqueror than a man of culture, whose marriage to the beautiful Panna ruined him, with Panna seeking the help of Warren Hastings to sort out matters of ascendance. Panna's descendents revived the tradition of *Gulab Bari*. The tradition got a new fillip once more in the late Mughal period.

The bloom of Ghazipur

As the name suggests, roses of a special variety became the focal point of this festivity. The palest pink and fragrant Ghazipur blossoms with their broad petals were brought by bullock cart loads.

Hosted immediately after the riotous festival of *Holi*, the nature of *Gulab Bari* parties was more soigné and graceful. Some well known *Gulab Baris* were personally graced by the presence of *Maharaja* of Banaras. The mood at *Gulab Bari* recitals was always mellow, with the yellow moon clinging to a clear sky and the *chait* breeze evoking the languor of the *snacharee bhav...chait ki nindiya ho jiyara alsaney ho Rama (In my state of utter sleepiness, I am laden with languor...)* that summed up the essence of the celebrations.

Mostly held in the open precincts of garden homes, the invitation cards for the occasion were sent out a month earlier.

The heart of the show

Initially, there was no elaborate stage for performers. The audience was expected to sit on mattresses spread all around with bolsters provided for comfort. Elaborate Mughal patters came to be used to braid the area that was cordoned off for performers. Some performances would continue through the night.

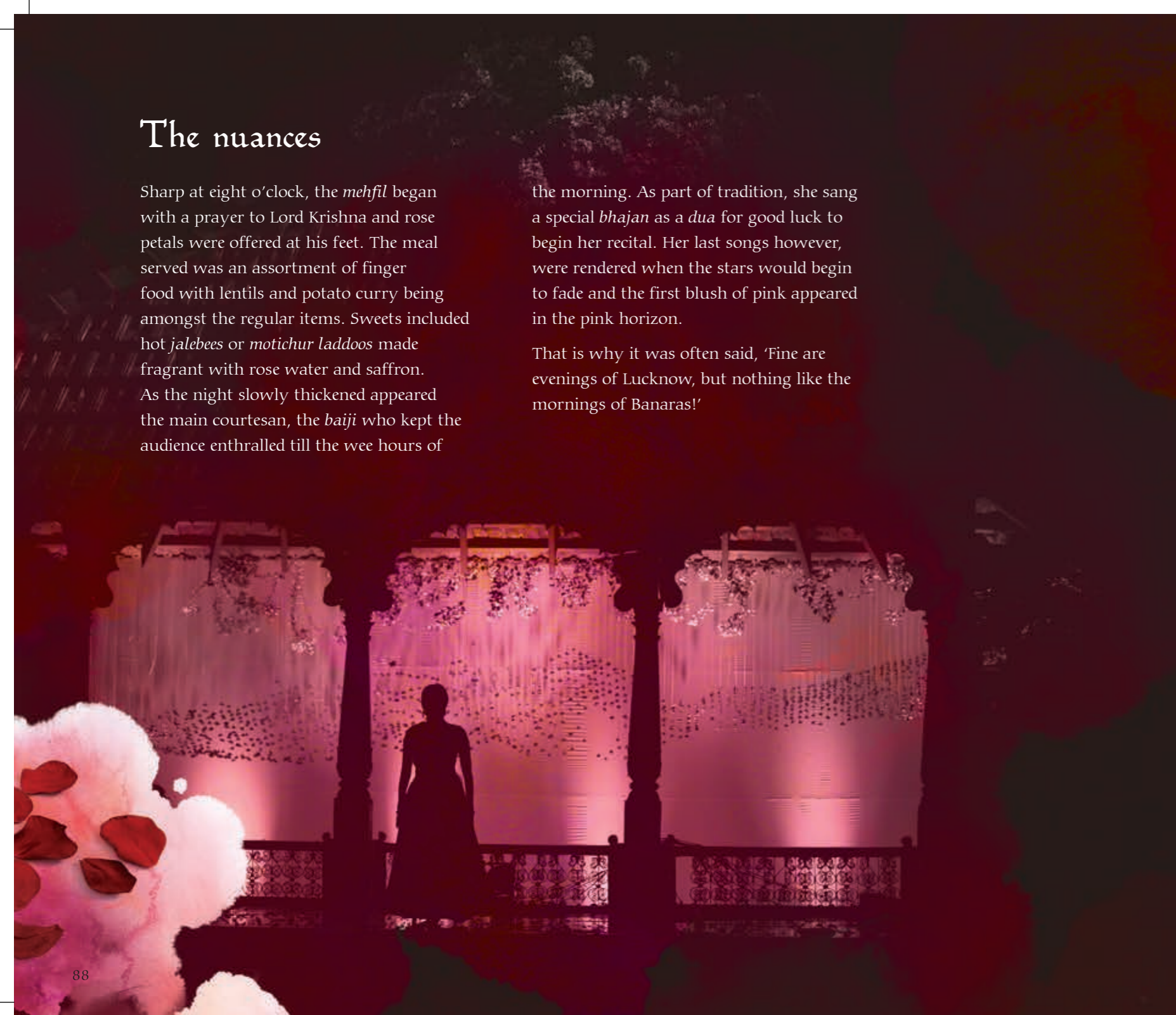
At first, women were never invited for *Gulab Bari* shows. The lucky few would watch the proceedings from first floor verandas covered with *chik* curtains. *Gulab Bari* was an epitome of sophistication where the rules of the *mehfil* were strictly observed.

The nuances

Sharp at eight o'clock, the *mehfil* began with a prayer to Lord Krishna and rose petals were offered at his feet. The meal served was an assortment of finger food with lentils and potato curry being amongst the regular items. Sweets included hot *jalebees* or *motichur laddoos* made fragrant with rose water and saffron. As the night slowly thickened appeared the main courtesan, the *baiji* who kept the audience enthralled till the wee hours of

the morning. As part of tradition, she sang a special *bhajan* as a *dua* for good luck to begin her recital. Her last songs however, were rendered when the stars would begin to fade and the first blush of pink appeared in the pink horizon.

That is why it was often said, 'Fine are evenings of Lucknow, but nothing like the mornings of Banaras!'



The musical extravaganza

The order in which the music unfolded held its own enchantment. A *khayal bandish* usually marked the beginning of a performance. Then came a few *thumris* that gave way to *dadras*, *kajris* and *horis* and finally a variety of *chaitis* to commemorate the occasion.

Fading away

With the end of the Second World War and the abolition of the *Zamindari* system, *Gulab Bari* recitals began to fade into the pages of history. Though some stray soirees, tried to keep the institution alive, the spirit of the show had faded. Several veterans in Varanasi still recall *Gulab Baris* held. They talk of Bismillah Khan's *shehnai* and Girija Devi's unforgettable performances. But the grandeur and the glory were alas over.

By the time India became independent, the *Gulab Baris* of Banaras had irrevocably lost their brilliance and sparkle

(Extracted from Jayabrato Chatterjee's, Roses all the way.)





Jeevan Dor
- the thread of life

Girija Devi

Early life and younger days

The dazzle of her diamond nose pin is only second to the radiance in her eyes; her gaze. A delicate *chandan tika* adorns her forehead. And her voice which completely belies her age is made of a rare compassionate texture that carries with it, the aroma of a million tales. Sitting across Girija Devi, I savour every breath of her being, as she takes me through the contours of her extraordinary life.

Born to Ramdas Rai and Suryamukhi Devi in Kashi, in 1930, Girija Devi was the seventh of nine children. As a young girl, she was brought up by her father almost like a boy and made to learn all kinds of sports and outdoor activities, including fishing, swimming, horse-riding and even archery. But the one activity that left most smitten was when she would wake up every day at 4am and listen to her father sing. "I fell in love with music as I learned how to listen to it from the young age of four," she begins.

Such was her devotion to music that her father felt she must obtain tutelage. Pt. Sarju Prasad Mishra became her first *Guru*, introducing her to the world of classical music in its various forms: *khayal*, *thumri* and even *tappa*. In those days, it wasn't considered very noble for young daughters to be singing outside their homes, so a young Girija Devi made music her constant companion, humming along as she carried out various household chores and duties.

When she was only fifteen, she was married to Madhusudan Jain, a businessman who supported her greatly in her artistic pursuits and right after the first year of marriage, the couple was blessed with a baby girl, whom they fondly called *Munni*. But Girija Devi's calling for music, remained so strong, that she sought solitude and the opportunity to completely immerse herself in music. She left Kashi for Sarnath and carried on rigorous lessons under her second *Guru*, Pt. Shrichand Mishra.

The one year sabbatical, as it were, proved to be monumental for her art. Girija Devi would wake up at 3:30am everyday and begin her *riyaz*. "I felt I was in an ocean of music; I got a tremendous opportunity to reflect; to understand.

"*Tapasya akele mein hi hoti hae,*" she states quietly.



picture courtesy: www.girijadevi.com

Once back in Kashi, it was only a matter of time, before she was invited by All India Radio for her first broadcast in Allahabad. The year was 1949 and she was just 20 but it was a superlative rendition. After the success of Allahabad, Girija Devi began touring and performing extensively at prestigious music festivals with leading musicians of that time and continued to receive the support of her husband. But in 1975 fate dealt her a mean blow. She lost her husband and was so woeful that she decided to give up music. "I took off all my adornments and stopped wearing colour. I was miserable and was suddenly left with the burden of managing domestic life all by myself," she recalls painfully.

It was only after a difficult year of grieving and a tremendous amount of encouragement from fellow musicians and friends that she dared to hold a

program again in Calcutta to a thundering applause. From then on, she decided to continue. "Besides, I also wanted my daughter properly educated and settled. So I decided to take on the challenge. I also thought that if God can take up both the male and female form when necessary, I should not be scared either!"

In the late 1970's, Pt. Vijay Kichlu who had been entrusted by ITC with the task of setting up a music school based on the *Guru-Shisya parampara*, approached Girija Devi who agreed to become a *Guru* in 1978 and found an address at ITC, Sangeet Research Academy in Calcutta.

Bimla Poddar: Early life and younger days

Such has been her abiding fondness for music, that she calls it a *beemari*! Even as a young girl, who spent her early years in the small town of Chirawa in Rajasthan and later grew up in Bombay, Bimla's calling for music was recognized by her family and a harmonium was made available to her using which, she picked up traditional, folk as well as devotional songs. She also remembers chanting *mantras* in the morning with her father and grandfather and revelling in the many mythological stories they often narrated. She recalls watering the household *tulsi* and the echoes of *Inquilab Zindabad*, the cry for freedom piercing the air of a colonized India. "The seed of Indian tradition and way of life was well sown in me imperceptibly," she explains.

Of course, just as most girls of that time, Bimla too found her nuptial knot tied at a tender age of 13 to Bimal Poddar and life brought her to Calcutta in 1949 as a young bride.

As a young daughter-in-law, Bimla happily absorbed the energy and atmosphere of her new liberal home. Her father-in-law, Late Janki Prasad Poddar, besides showering love and affection upon her, was also a deeply spiritual man who recited *The Gita* and *the Ramayan* regularly.

In an air redolent with culture, Bimla's fondness for music found opportunity and gained further momentum. "My husband Bimal was really fond of *ghazals* with a weakness for Begum Akhtar. We would sit and listen to her for hours," she recalls. By then, Bimla had also started learning to play the *sitar* from none other than the celebrated Kalyani Roy, who was a disciple of Vilayat Khan. Simultaneously, her brother-in-law, Late Suresh Neotia, opened up the world of art, miniatures, and paintings and deepened her sense of aesthetics. As a family, they would regularly attend and sometimes even host cosy musical soirees, listening to prominent artists and mixing with an eclectic lot of people.

Fate tested Bimla too, by robbing her of her husband when she was only 32. But so entrenched and content was she in her family that she even turned down her father-in-law's offer of finding a new match for her.



Serendipity and Sanjog Banaras comes to Ballygunje!

On one of his many tours to Banaras, Suresh Neotia was escorted to a typical *Banarasi* musical evening, titled *Gulab Bari* by his close friend, Late Murari Lal Kedia who was a noted figure in the cultural circuit. The artist performing that evening was none other than the Shehnai Nawaz, Bismillah Khan. Other than the magnificence of the artistry, Suresh immediately fell in love with the beautiful atmosphere that had been created for music to enchant one and all. Upon slightly deeper research, he found that *Gulab Bari* was an age-old tradition of presenting music in Banaras, but over the years, had fallen upon hard times.

He narrated the episode to his sister-in-law, Bimla, and expressed a great desire to host a similar session at their residence in Calcutta with the help of a few artists. After hearing him out, Bimla Poddar had only one reply. "If we have to host *Gulab Bari* at our residence, there is only one person who can do it: Girija Devi." Interestingly enough, though Bimla had heard Girija Devi several times and was besotted with her music, she did not know her personally. The duo decided they must make an acquaintance.

There is a Buddhist saying, that goes, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will come.'

One fine day, during Durga Puja, Bimla Poddar had a visitor. The noted musicologist Sunil Satpati had come to meet her and during the course of their conversation, casually remarked, "*Guru ji* is in the car." Whose *Guru ji*?" enquired Bimla. "*Girija Devi*," he replied!

Almost in disbelief, Bimla ran out and warmly invited Girija Devi inside. The two got talking and Bimla Poddar expressed her ardent desire to host *Gulab Bari* under Girija Devi's guidance. The artist declined, explaining that she performed only at music festivals or in temples and could not participate in private functions at anybody's home. Bimla looked crestfallen. Until Girija Devi, who had attended a couple of recitals by Pt. Jasraj and a performance by Pt. Birju Maharaj at their residence, offered, "There is one solution though. I don't mind singing for my disciples. If you become my disciple, I can sing for you."



"Overjoyed, I obviously agreed instantly! It was as though all of it was pre-scripted. Girija Devi wanted to conduct a small *puja* and just when I was wondering what to offer to the Gods, I realised that an untouched pot of fresh sweets had just arrived! I found a perfect brand new *sari* for her; one that I'd purchased for myself but not used. What's even more unbelievable is that when she entered our home, it was her music record that was playing! It was a beautiful and utter *sanjog*," shares Bimla Poddar.

The first *Gulab Bari* that thus came to the Poddar-Neotia residence in Ballygunje, Calcutta, all the way from Banaras, was held in 1981 under the stewardship of Girija Devi. Her disciple, Bimla Poddar opened the evening with a *Ganesh Vandana* while the *Guru* with her students, re-created the magic of Banaras. Though only a few years apart in age, both women had come together in a *Guru-Shisya* relationship, thanks to their deep love and passion for classical music and Indian traditions.

The gathering of close family friends and music lovers were left spellbound. *Gulab Bari* had received an overwhelming response and was here to stay.

The Mentor and her disciple a sublime partnership



The first *Gulab Bari* that was created out of passion is now three and a half decades old. Right from the beginning, it was the stage for stalwarts to deliver their absolute best. The audience that has only grown year after year has been happily lapping it all up.

Somewhat frail of health but indomitable of spirit, Padma Shri Bimla Poddar rewinds and reflects on the phenomena, ascribing much of it to her beloved *Appa* (Girija Devi), her family's love and support and God's doing.

"Girija Devi's relationship with our family has glided over three generations as easily as her voice moves across three octaves. *Gulab Bari* would have never blossomed the way it has, had it not been for her. It only took a phone call from her to even the reigning artist of the time for him/her to readily agree to perform at *Gulab Bari*. Never in so many years, have we ever discussed the artist's fee or other such modalities. We simply went by *Appa's* advice," she reveals.



"*Pratham aur akhiri, yeh ek hi ghar ka rahega*" (first and last; it can only happen here) adds Girija Devi, resolutely stating that she would not do this for anybody else, no matter what the rewards or returns. But what is so special about the Poddar-Neotia household for her to feel so?

"Because both art and the artist are genuinely respected here. That is what gives me the confidence to tell an artist, '*tumko aana hae aur gaana hae. (Just come and sing).*' Right from *Kakoji* (Janki Prasad Poddar) to *Harsh babu* and now his son, one feels respected and a part of the family," she elaborates.

Girija Devi refers to every member by their nick name. Despite Bimla Poddar's striking white mane, Girija Devi lovingly calls her *beti*. She has taught music to everyone from the matriarch to the youngest child; has ordained that the womenfolk must wear yellow for a wedding in the family and has even fixed up a *Banarasi* menu on one of the occasions. "Her word was the last. Not out of fear, but out of trust and respect," emphasizes her disciple.

Suddenly in the course of the conversation, *Appa ji* inquires, "*Beti, yeh mentor kya hota hae?*" Padma Vibhushan Girija Devi has been anointed as Mentor for the birth centenary celebrations of Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya in Banaras in 2017. Both Bimla *ji* and I burst out laughing. "It is who you have been to me and so many others," smiles her disciple.

Alap Gat Jod Jhala

Inspired by a
Jugalbandi at
Gulab Bari

Supriya Newar

Alap



Strangers. Veiled.
Guarded. Off-limits,
until a gentle spring breeze cajoles,
forming a crevice, an ice break.
A cordial acknowledgement.

A half-smile; a polite hand shake.
Measured introductions
between meandering pauses.

A few syllables, an opening line.
The first strum.
An imperceptible nod.

The beginning of a conversation.
Sans structure. Sans confines.
Purely for its scope, its traverse;
Not for its milestone.

An eye contact.
A struck chord.
Relaxed veins.
Idle banter.
The sense of a possibility.

Gat



The pleasure of a common strain,
embarked upon with refrain.
An uncomfortable yearning.
A loosened grip over oneself.
The closing in on a chasm.

A disquieting bond.
An odd rush.

A palpable chord.
The creeping in of companionship.
The birth of trust.
The desire to go farther, to spend oneself.

Jod



A cascade of notes, unbridled, crashing in.
Free from the constraints of the known.
Free from the fear of the unknown.
Breaking down barriers.
Tearing open floodgates,
in sublime breathlessness.

A keen onlooker by now smitten.
Rushes in to join the rhythm.
Making space for himself.
Oddly enough bringing the two only closer.
The two who were till the other moment, rank
strangers.
Who lay cold, veiled.
Who no longer are, what they were.

Their strangeness shattered to bits
into a million notes, that lie scattered around them.
Bringing them closer to their own selves.
A heightened, animated yet effortless dialogue.
Gushing energy.
Precipitous urgency.

The fresh entrant, rallying them on
to the strike of a lightning, a crescendo.

Jhala



And then a bend,
moving closer towards a circle.
In absolute submission.
In jubilant exhaustion.

The sinking realization of an entire single being,
born out of the demolition of two full ones.

A bare pause.
An engulfing nude stillness.
A spell that lasts a moment
and carries within it, a lifetime.

The divinity of silence,
now broken
by the murmur of a string.
The very string upon which the journey had commenced,
having broken the stupor, stands guilty.
Heralding tighter strings, guards to be pulled back on.

The circle of life stands erect again.
In its completion, it has come undone.



“Music is the highest art
and to those who understand,
is the highest worship.”

Swami Vivekananda





"Gulab Bari came to the Neotia household, thanks to Girija masi's (Devi) inspiration and Bimla bhabiji's perspiration! I have the fondest memories attached with it. The very first year, started in the most homely way, devoid of any grandeur. I remember dancing that year in a pink lehenga, which I'd borrowed from my neighbour! I was all of 28 then! More than anybody else, I remember how excited *Kakoji* (Late J P Poddar) was. Despite his age and health, he was completely involved and beaming with happiness.



Another personal and treasured memory I have is how Bimla bhabiji would coax us to wear pink saris for *Gulab Bari* and for many years, even gifted us one.

And the music was simply divine. The *tribandi* (trio) of Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girijia Devi ji is unforgettable. The spontaneity and the dignity with which they performed left us with life-long lessons in humility and sheer artistry.



The other performance that I'll always cherish was one of the last performances of *Kelu babu* (Pt. Kelucharan Mohapatra).

He had undergone a by-pass surgery that year but his performance was absolutely stunning. He passed away only a few months after that show. *Gulab Bari* was an initiative that came straight from the heart!"

Chetna Jalan: Danseuse and family friend



“Gulab Bari is paradise on earth. It presents a wonderful opportunity for artists to meet, deliberate and discuss various aspects of music and culture. It is an event to cherish and look forward to.”

Dr. Balamuralikrishna



“I have enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Bimla ji who is a great lover and patron of arts. The ambience as well as the audience at Gulab Bari was lovely too.”

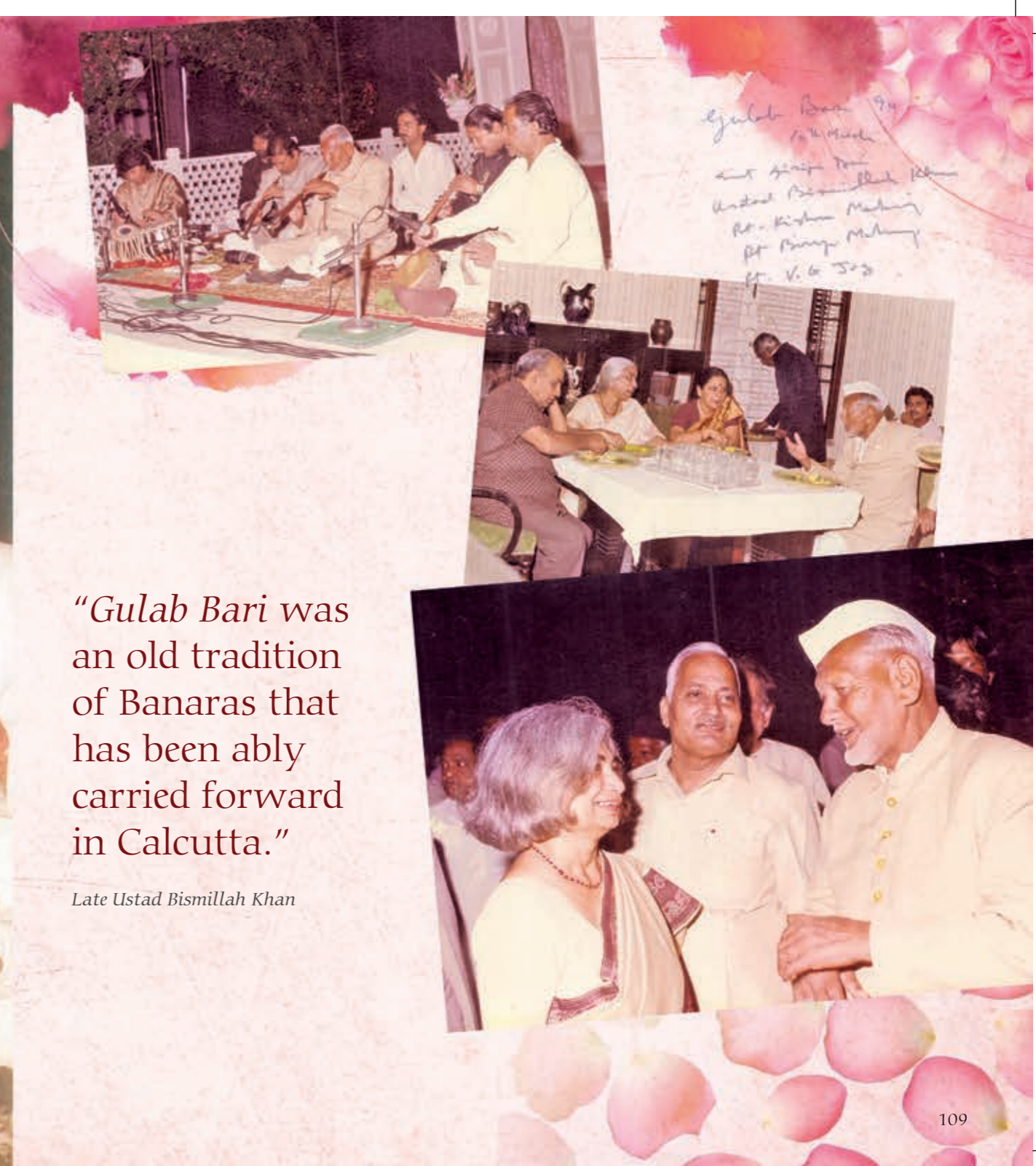
Late Pt. Bhimsein Joshi





"Gulab Bari was an old tradition of Banaras that has been ably carried forward in Calcutta."

Late Ustad Bismillah Khan



*Gulab Bari 94
1st March
Late Ustad Bismillah Khan
Rt. Kishan Mahari
Pt. Manoj Mahari
Pt. V. G. Singh*



“I have enjoyed family like relations with the Neotias and Bimla ji and have wonderful memories of performing for *Gulab Bari* along with India’s most eminent artists. I sincerely hope that the atmosphere of future *Gulab Baris* remains just as magical and continues to enthrall the audience.”

Pt. Birju Maharaj



"I remember walking in with my husband, Cushrow Irani, year after year into the Neotia residence for *Gulab Bari*, only to be warmly greeted by both Vinod and Suresh. One could tell what a close-knit family they were, by the way every single guest was welcomed warmly and personally. And though every year, the food would be the same, my husband would ask Madhu with a twinkle in his eye, "What's for dinner?" He loved the sumptuous fare that was laid out!"

Threety Irani: Family friend and ex-columnist



"I was very young when I attended my first *Gulab Bari* and I'd never heard or known of this concept before. So what I experienced was the fragrance of Banaras without leaving Calcutta. I was truly wilfully transported to a land of magical realism. It was the most enchanting and uplifting experience! Over the years the event has progressed and evolved yet retained its charm. For me the most abiding image has been of Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girija Devi performing in a manner that was like Krishna seeping into our souls!"

Prof. Anuradha Lohia: Family friend and academician



"As music lovers, right after the culmination of Dover Lane Music Conference, we awaited the *Gulab Bari* evening. I think what set apart this evening was how traditionally it was organised and conducted. Right from the way the artists and audiences were taken care of to the marvellous feast...Bimla *di* kept it very traditional. I have wonderful memories of *Abba* (Vilayat Khan) performing there."

Purnima Mookerjee: Family friend and Ustad Vilayat Khan's disciple





“It has been my pleasure to be associated with Gulab Bari from the beginning. My deepest appreciation and applause on keeping the tradition alive!”

Pt. Jasraj



“We used to live abroad and returned to Calcutta only in 1998. Our apartment overlooked the ample Neotia garden and we had heard about a gala musical soiree that the family held. However, one fine evening the strangest thing happened.

Our apartment somehow has fabulous acoustics. It maybe because it is well ventilated. One evening, my entire apartment was echoing with the voice of Girija Devi! I could hardly believe it. Her music was coming out of every wall! Obviously our apartment had caught on to the wonderful music being rendered next door and I sat and listened in rapt attention.

The next day, I sent a note to them, narrating the incident and thanking them for the treat. Immediately, I got a call from Bimla Poddar, inviting me over for a cup of tea.

We became friends and over the years, I have attended several *Gulab Bari* evenings where I've enjoyed listening to and watching great maestros like Pt. Jasraj, Bhimsein Joshi and Kelucharan Mohapatra perform.”

Amrita Mukherjee: neighbour and friend



"I can't forget my performance at *Gulab Bari*. The evening had started with Kishori *ji* singing. After her performance, I danced and after me, Girija Devi *ji* sang. And the concluding piece was when all three of us came together: two legendary vocalists with whom I was doing my *sanchari abhinaya* or expressing the song. The song spoke of how a *gopi* wanted to run away from her sister-in-law and mother-in-law, to meet Krishna, the stealer of hearts. So, in my performance, I behaved as though Kishori *ji* was the former and Girija *ji* was the latter and actually ran away!

The audience loved it! All of us stood united by Krishna!

It has been an absolute honour to know Bimla *ji* as well as Suresh *bhai* who was ready to lay down his life for Indian heritage!

May we see Bimla *ji*'s birth centenary celebrations in her presence!"

Padma Subrahmanyam





“As a music lover, I have been fortunate to attend *Gulab Bari* since its inception. The audience soaks up the rich cultural fare and the superb ambience, where every guest is made to feel special. Originating in Varanasi, *Gulab Bari* is now a much sought after evening hosted by Bimla ji and the Neotias.”

Ramesh Tapuriah: Friend and music enthusiast



“I’ve had the pleasure of sharing the stage with the legendary Girija Devi at this wondrous venue. The credit of the beautiful atmosphere goes to the family and is one that music lovers will continue to cherish for many years to come.”

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan





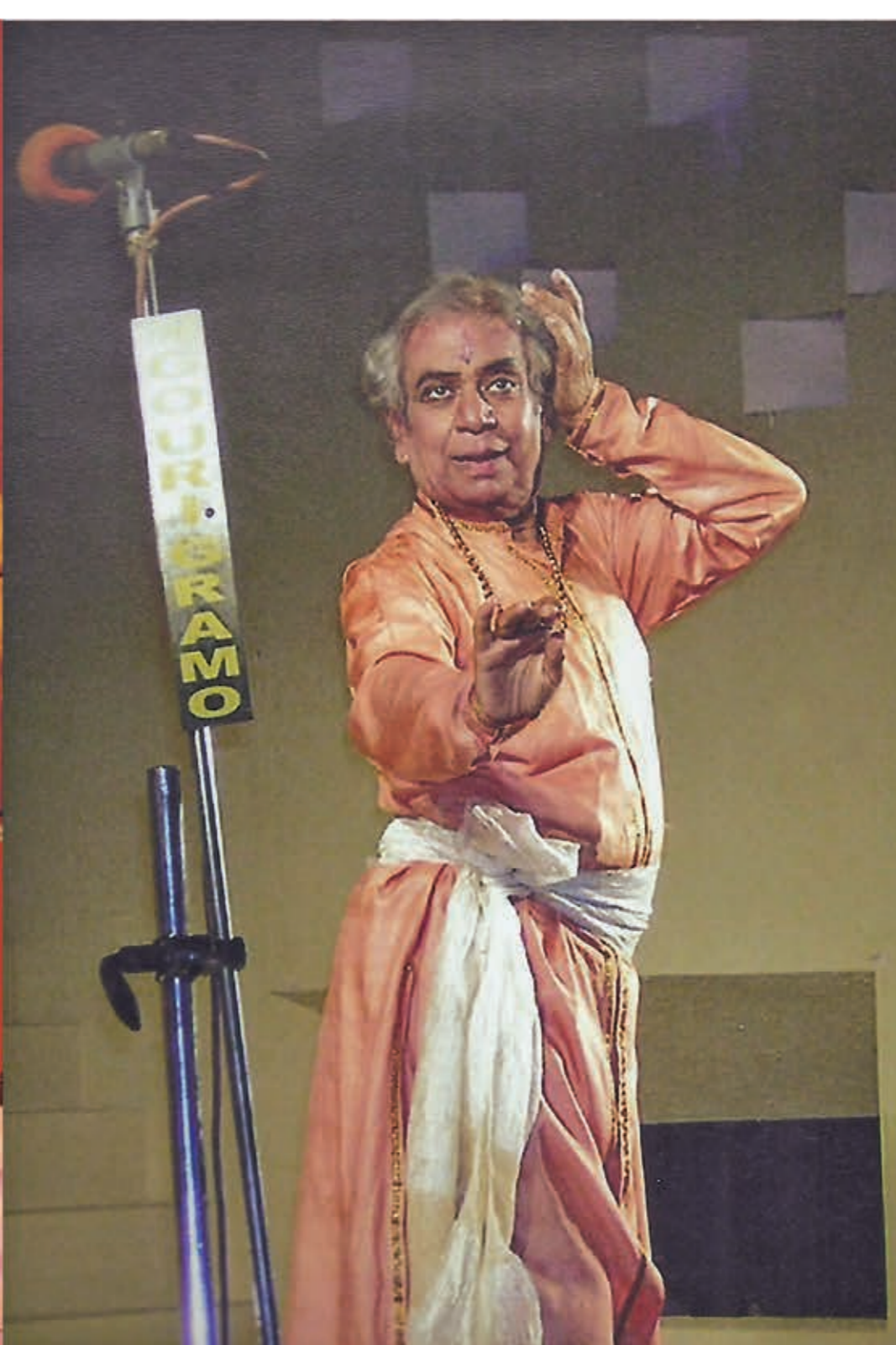
"I am 90 years old now. But back in our time, we were so fond of classical music, that we would stay parked in our cars, listening to the concerts held at 'Mahajati Sadan' through the speakers that were placed on the streets! Needless to say then, that the musical evenings at *Gulab Bari* were something we eagerly looked forward to.

The nicest thing about the *Gulab Bari* evenings was the fact that they were not time bound and were held in the open air. Auditorium functions can never have that appeal. We would allow a

lot of time to every artist to warm up. If we started feeling a bit sleepy in the later hours of the evening, we would check our reverie with a cup of hot tea.

The atmosphere was wonderfully homely and warm and the audience used to be packed with music lovers."

Ravi Prabha Burman: Music lover and family friend



"It was when we were travelling to Andaman for a holiday that we bumped into the Neotias, who were also there with their close friends. A friendship was struck between us, particularly with Late Suresh Neotia and the very amiable Bimla ji and we kept in touch. It so happened, that our family was also very fond of music and we had close relations with some celebrated musicians of that time. So, we received an invitation when *Gulab Bari* began in 1981 and we have attended many *Gulab Baris* since then.

All we can say is that some of those evenings have acquired immortality.

We especially cherish the spontaneous bonhomie that was expressed through the finest musical artistry between Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girija Devi ji. May the tradition continue for many more years to come."

Tapati and Malay Banerjee: Friends



“It is a matter of great joy that the tradition of *Gulab Bari* has been kept alive in Calcutta for so many years by Bimla Poddar and Shri Suresh Neotia. May Goddess Sharada shower her blessings so that it continues for many more years.”

Pt. Kishan Maharaj





“Three and a half factors make for the fullness of a musical experience.

Three and a half? That sounds odd.

Let me explain the three and a half.

The first is the music itself. The second is the mood of the musician.

Third, the attunement of the listeners. And the last ‘half’, the arrangements that are made for the first three.

Why should those constitute ‘half’, and not a ‘full fourth?’

Because the arranger, or the host, is a self-effacing factor who does what is necessary with his or her ego only partly visible, like the half-moon on a winter’s night.

The host cannot be completely invisible for he or she has to be doing what is necessary, but has to do that without self-consciousness and

certainly with no sense of self-importance.

This is where *Gulab Bari* has been such a fulfilling platform for a concert. Music is in the air, the musician is at ease, the listener is completely wrapt in it. And the host is both there and not there, ‘*hazir bhi aur ghayab bhi*’.

Handling things but not holding on to things. Being attached and yet detached.

The half in ‘Three and a half’ also brings to mind the *svara* that follows the *Shadja*, *Rishabh*, *Gandhara*, namely the *Madhyama*. Now, *Madhyama* has two variants – *shuddha* and *tivra*. A good host of music is like the *shuddha madhyama*, that is, she or he is a pure medium, an unsullied mode, a lucid vestibule which disappears even as it is felt.

At *Gulab Bari*, I had the opportunity to hear Pandit Jasraj and Vidushi Girija Devi. They were in their elements, enjoying every note

they sang, with the gathering savouring it like grass which takes in the dew. Rose petals were everywhere but not suffocatingly so. They softened the scene, without stifling it.

I wish *Gulab Bari* the lasting fragrance of music that is offered and shared, without a trace of patronage.”

Gopalkrishna Gandhi:
Former Governor of West Bengal

“I do hope that this rich musical tradition will carry on for many more years.”

Vidushi Kishori Amonkar



“Ah, *Gulab Bari!* So many memories, such varied aromas...and the fragrance still lingers!

Each occasion has been a musical feast, with the best artistes of Indian classical music and dance adorning the stage.

One outstanding performance which immediately comes to my mind is Kishori Amonkar's. She began her performance, nervously plucking at her *surmandal* until her voice rose and fell in melodic waves. The listeners sat in pin-drop silence, lost in some enchanted ocean of pure magic. The recital finally came to an end just before dawn, accompanied by a light spring drizzle. It seemed like the ultimate benediction showered from heaven!

The tradition of *Gula Bari* will carry on...music will warm the gentle spring evenings at Queen's Park for years to come. But I will sorely miss Vinod Uncle's smile greeting the guests and the twinkle in Suresh Uncle's eyes, reprimanding me affectionately for turning up late... 'Janey kahaan gaye woh din, kehtey thhey teri raah mein nazron ko hum bichhaayengey/ Chahey kahin bhi tum raho, chaahengey tumko umrbhar, tumko na bhool paayengey...'

Jayabrato Chatterjee: Author and family friend





“I enjoyed the beautiful ambience that was created for this occasion. The audience and *rasiks* who attended the program were inspiring.”

Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma



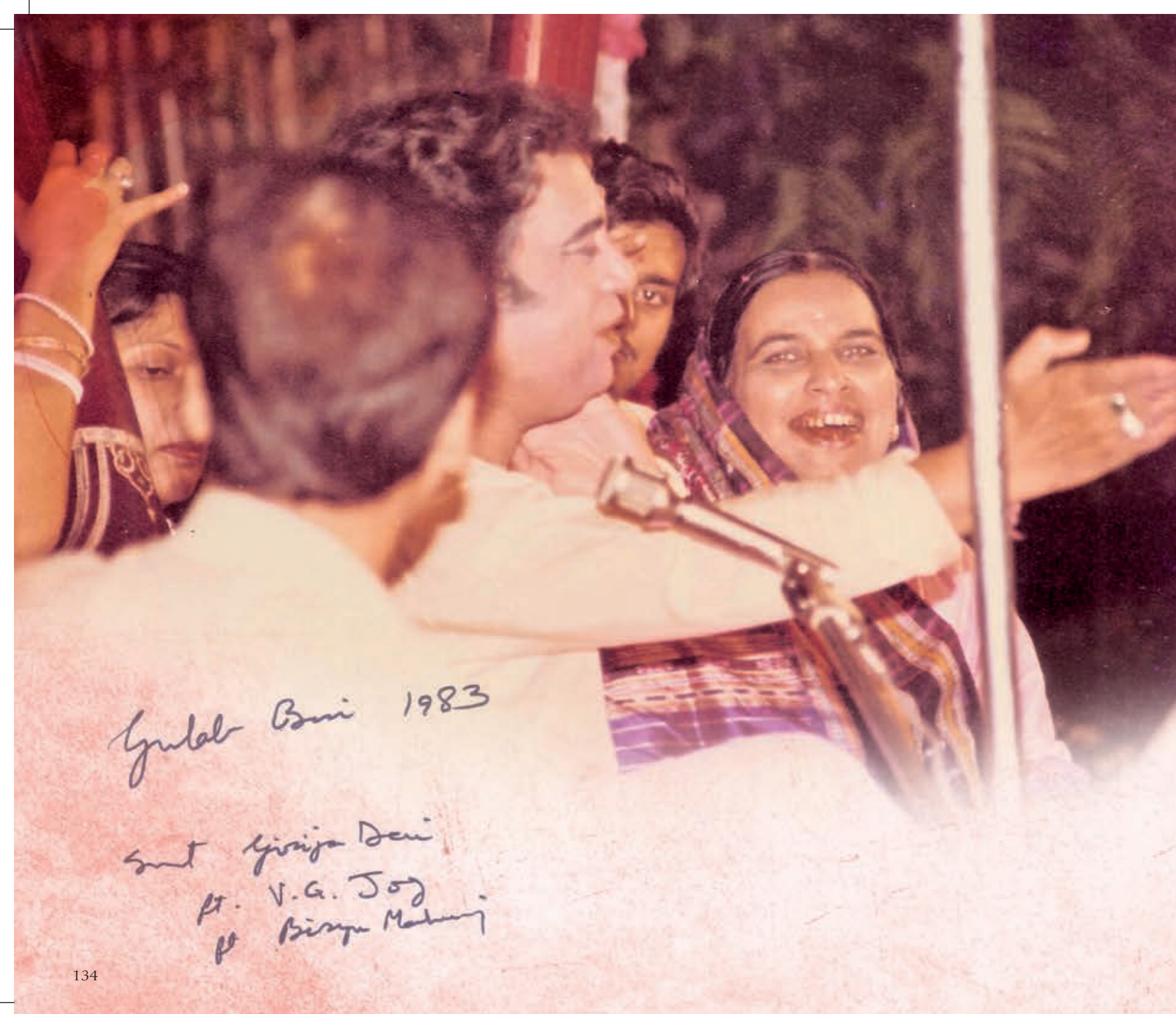
“I’ve had a wonderful association with this family that has a deep passion for music and our heritage. It is thanks to their efforts that a festival like *Gulab Bari* continues to be alive in Calcutta, even today.”

Pt. Hari Prasad Chaurasia

*Gulab Bari
1989*

*Smt. Girija Devi
Ms. Malavika Sen
Pt. Anis Prasad Chaurasi
Ustad Zahir Hussain*





Gulab Bari 1983

Smt. Girija Devi
 Pt. V.G. Jog
 Pt. Birju Maharaj



"Our families go back three generations, when my husband's grandfather, Toolsidas Jewraj, was friends with Late Shri Janki Prasad Poddar. So we have had the good fortune of being associated with *Gulab Bari*, right from its very first year.

It was a simple, homely affair in those days with some unforgettable music. Glorious images of Pt. Birju Maharaj, Saswati Sen and Girija Devi remain mint fresh even today. Of the vocal concerts, the evening when Pt. Balamuralikrishna sang remains strongly etched in my heart. When Vilayat Khan played, the sheer joy on his face would seep into our hearts.

If the music was not ambrosial enough, there was piping hot, delicious food that we greatly looked forward to.

It is remarkable how Bimla ji, not only experienced the joy of classical music herself, but also used her resources to nourish it and spread it amongst others. I would call it *Sampatti ka sadupayog!*" (Correct use of wealth)

Purnima Toolsidass: Family friend

Gulab Bari

2006

ft. Rajan Sanyal Mishra
Malvika Sarukkai



"It is amazing that *Gulab Bari* completes 35 years! I remember performing even for the 25th year when I was presented with a silver flower.

Hosted on the lush lawns of Queen's Park, it brings to mind a celebration: a celebration of 35 years of validating the classical arts, a celebration of spring, a celebration of dance and music, a celebration of colour and of the artistic spirit.

Memories flood me: of how I was invited with the utmost elegance and grace for the first time by Suresh Neotia ji and Bimla Poddar ji; how Girija Devi ji would be busy with her preparations amidst the fragrance of roses, of how numerous glasses of *thandai* would be served non-stop with *laddus* and of how Zakir Hussain landed straight from the airport to deliver a superlative performance!

Gulab Bari is Kolkata's oasis in spring time!"

Malvika Sarukkai



"*Gulab Bari* kept eluding me. The timing of my visits to Kolkata somehow, never matched with the evening. Until in 2016 it finally did.

Those years of anticipation heightened my walk into the magical rose-tinted ambience created by Madhu. And then I immersed myself in the notes of Tejendra Narayan Majumdar's *sarod* and Kushal Das's *sitar*.

I was left even more enthralled by the exquisite *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* of Malvika Sarukkai whom I knew as a schoolgirl.

She and her sister would come in their striped Cathedral uniform to pick up their mother, Saroj, who would later play such a definitive role in Malvika's trajectory. We both worked on the same 4th floor of the heritage Times of India building in what was then still Bombay.

I'm hoping I won't have to wait as long for my second *Gulab Bari*."

Bachi Karkaria:
Writer and columnist



"I clearly remember the very first year of *Gulab Bari*, way back in 1981 and I've not missed a single year since then. The fact is that it was such an aesthetic presentation right from the word go that Calcutta was simply bowled over. Absolute stalwarts descended upon us and one could enjoy listening to them in such an intimate way. *Bilkul ru-ba-ru hoke*. Every year had its own flavour but what remained a constant was the lovely camaraderie between the artists, the goodwill shared amongst them as colleagues. Over the years, it has become a calendar event that everyone greatly looks forward to."

Veena Kichlu: Thespian and family friend

"I still remember my first experience of *Gulab Bari* when my sister Madhu, had come into the Neotia family as a bride and had conducted the welcome ritual for all the artists. The whole experience of artists together was mesmerizing."

Sadhana Agarwal: Madhu Neotia's sister



"Gulab Bari at the Queen's Park residence of the Neotia family was always an extraordinary experience. The family displayed total sensitivity to the performers, extending an open-hearted welcome to music lovers who attended the evening, giving painstaking care to aesthetics and blending informality with all the observances that traditional courtesy demanded most graciously.

The very mention of *Gulab Bari* evokes nostalgia for what used to be in Banares in days long bygone. Re-invented and restored by Bimla ji and her family in Kolkata, it preserved and shared the fragrance of *Banarsi desi gulab* (roses) over many years.

Gulab Bari has given both artists as well as the audience, a chance to be transported to world of magic and miracles for a few unforgettable hours."

Subhashini Ali: Politician, actor and family friend



"Once upon a time, Bimla ji and I learnt *sitar* from the great Kalyani Roy together. It is because of this, that I received an invitation to attend the first *Gulab Bari*, which in those days would be a most intimate gathering of music lovers. Gradually, I got to know the family and came particularly close to Suresh bhai. I don't recall missing even a single *Gulab Bari* over the last 35 years. I hope this treat and tradition and the respect bestowed upon the artist at *Gulab Bari* continues for many, many long years!"

Dinesh Trivedi: Family friend and politician



"The *Gulab Bari* evening for me was like a painting; an oil on canvas.

As if a river with petals of *Gulab* is suddenly flowing out into the ocean and we were fortunate enough to witness its *sangam* at the height of the *Jugalbandi*!"

Jibak & Chumi Mukherjee: Family friends



*“At Gulab Bari,
one knows one is
wanted; one’s art
is looked forward
to and the night
is fragrant with
the expectations
of art lovers!”*

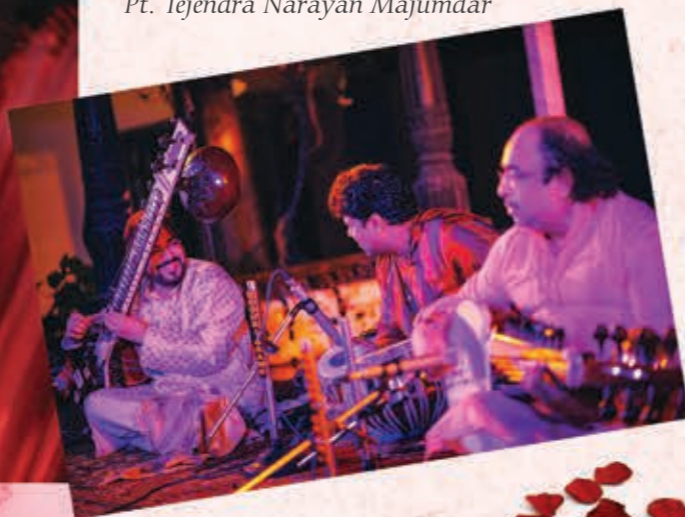
Mallika Sarabhai





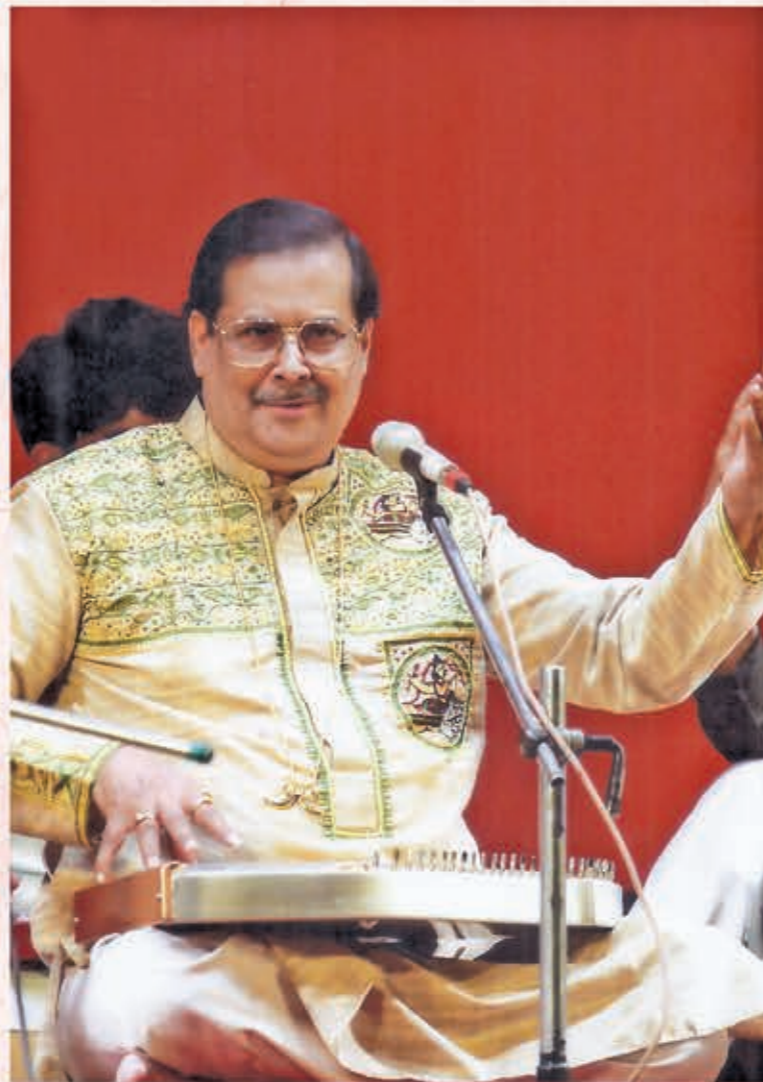
“I’ve been attending *Gulab Bari* from the time I started my career. I would sit quietly at the back and listen to legend after legend perform there. It was therefore a dream coming true for me, when I was invited to perform too. *Gulab Bari* is rare in every way: for the ambience it offers; for the wonderful mix of audience that comes from every walk of life and for the artist who enjoys performing so close to the crowd. It’s wonderful that it clocks 35 years and I hope it continues to shine for many more years to come.”

Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar



“I heartily congratulate the Neotia family for promoting the best values of our art and culture through *Gulab Bari*. I’ve had the good fortune of performing with my son Nishat Khan for a most august audience.”

Ustad Imrat Khan



“*Gulab Bari* is a stage where our most respected seniors have performed so it was an honour to occupy that stage.

Moreover, Bimla ji's love for music and the *baithak* setting, make it even more special. I still remember having chosen and rendered *Raag Behaag* for my performance, as suggested by Vijay Uncle (Pt. Vijay Kichlu), as *Behaag* has a very distinct rendition and appeal in our *Gharana*.

Ustad Rashid Khan





"I am delighted to note that *Gulab Bari* is completing 35 years. It was here that I first heard Ustad Vilayat Khan Sahab. I was fortunate to see the performance of Pandit Birju Maharaj.

Smt. Bimla Poddar began this programme which has now been ably carried on by Madhu and Harsh. I hope that this musical soiree celebrates its gold anniversary and beyond."

Tanushree Shankar: Friend and danseuse



"I've been associated with *Gulab Bari* right from the beginning, thanks to my close friendship with Late Vinod Neotia. I've seen it grow from a close knit family affair to this mammoth event that it is today. The Neotias have always been very good hosts and every *Gulab Bari* concert has been commendable. I particularly extend my regard and respect to Bimla ji, a very fine person who has been chiefly responsible for its advancement."

Kariappa: Business partner and family friend



"Ironic that the walk down memory lane to write this is as I sit listening to a 4 day long music concert (albeit music of a different kind) indulging in the momentary escape to enjoy the "raga" in its entirety. My first memory of *Gulab Bari* is of a very elegant, poised *Bari ma* on stage with a proud *Appa ji* beside her. The confidence she exuberates, the meticulous planning, cultivating traditions and values are all iconic of *Bari ma*. When Kaartikya and Ishani, attended *Gulab Bari*, *Bari ma* showed them to do *pranam* to the stage before they stepped on it. I admire her and love her not only for what she represents but who she is to me. From you *Ma* - I learnt when life gets tough, get tougher, when god gives you lemons, gracefully make lemonade."

Shraddha Gupta, daughter of Bimla Poddar





Gulab Bari
invitations
since 1981



7/2 Queen's Park
Calcutta 700 019

This year, the great masters of Indian Music—
Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pandit V G Jog, Pandit Kishan
Moharaj, Smt Girija Devi and Pandit Birju Maharaj,
would present Bonarasi 'Gulab Bari' at our residence.

We would request you to kindly be with us to share
this experience.

With regards,

(BIMLA PODDAR)

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Padma Bhushan Smt. Girija Devi

Ustad Imrat Khan
with his son Nishat Khan

Smt. Mallika Sarabhai



Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

at
Gulab Bari
on Friday the 5th March, 2004
at 7/2 Queen's Park,
Kolkata 700 019

RSVP
S. K. Menon
Dinesh Menon
2247 0818

Time
6.45 pm

please present this card at the entrance

February 15, 2000

Dear

Once again on Saturday, 4th March 2000, we present Gulab Bari from
our residence.

I am enclosing your invitation cards, which may please be presented at the
entrance. This is being done because we are unable to know the names and contact
addresses of our guests.

I look forward to your presence at this function. We shall appreciate a response
with warm regards.

Yours sincerely,
Bimla Poddar

Bimla Poddar, 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019
Phone: 4757756, Fax: 2473564

Gulab Bari

MADHU & HARSH KAPOOR & SIA
request the pleasure of the company of

at
GULAB BARI
on Friday the 2nd March 2007
at 7/2 Queens Park
Kolkata 700 019

RSVP
S. K. Menon
Dinesh Menon
2287 0818

Time
6.45 pm

Please present this card at the entrance

Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

Bimla Poddar, 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019
Phone: 4757756, Fax: 2473564

February 25, 1986

Dear

Once again we present Gulab Bari on Saturday, 2nd
March 1986, at our residence.

I am enclosing invitation cards, which may please be
presented at the entrance. This is being done because we are
unable to know the names and contact addresses of our guests.

I look forward to your presence at this function
and appreciate a response from you.

With warm regards,
Yours Sincerely,
Bimla Poddar

Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

at
Gulab Bari
on Saturday 2nd March 1998
at 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019.

RSVP
S. K. Menon
Dinesh Menon
2247 0818

Time
6.45 pm

please present this card at the entrance

Smt. Girija Devi

Padma Bhushan Mahipala

Pandit Birju Maharaj

Smt. Sanjukta Panigrahi

Smt. Basanti Sen

Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

at
Gulab Bari
on Saturday, 12th March 1998
at 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019

Smt. Girija Devi

Smt. Kishori Amambari

Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam

Srimati Girija
Pandit V.G.
Kumari Malavika
Pandit Hari Prasad
Ustad Zakir

They will be with us on Saturday,
4th March 1989 from 6.45 p.m.
especially until the early hours of the
next morning.

We look forward to having you with
us at our residence, 7/2 Queen's Park,
Calcutta 700 019, to share this
experience.

Please confirm.
With warm regards,

RSVP

RSHAVARDHAN NEOTIA

7/2, Queen's Park,
Kolkata - 700 019
Phone: 2473564
Fax: 2473564

February

Dear Friends & Music Lovers

Re: Invitation for Gulab Bari 2013

For almost three decades our family has been hosting Gulab Bari function at
our home, 7/2 Queen's Park, Kolkata 700 019. We are privileged to have had the
distinguished artists of the country grace Gulab Bari.

We are equally privileged to have many friends and music lovers grace this occasion
by their kind presence. Learning from experience, we mention ' RSVP'. However,
it does not get adequate response from our esteemed invitees.
This leads to a situation that before the event we are unable to ascertain how many
will come and who among them would stay on for the full length of the
performance.

We all know the senior artists perform later and it is a bit awkward if many people
do not come. Hence, we would be very grateful if you can please let us know of your
plans by joining us at Gulab Bari.

Year, we have always



The making of Gulab Bari

Behind the scenes



Three generations; fourth in the anvil.

Thirty five years.

One annual musical affair.

How do you recall and narrate all that has been going into the making of an annual evening, which over the last thirty five years has acquired a formidable reputation, besides having stolen several hearts, young and old!

On a rain soaked July evening, over steaming cups of Jasmine tea and hot *samosas*, the Neotia household gets together to share nuggets of how they have been preparing for and presenting, *Gulab Bari*, their annual musical soiree that has been going strong since March 1981.

What transpires is a free-wheeling *adda* full of reminiscence and precious tales.

The starting point

“Well, the starting point really is selecting the artist and then contacting him/her or them,” begins Bimla Poddar, the to-be octogenarian matriarch of the family who has been steering the show with her passion since the start but is quick to discount any credit. “We all get together about six months in advance and everyone throws up names of their choice. Of course, we are duly guided by *Appa ji* (Girija Devi) as well as *Vijay bhai* (Vijay Kichlu). Sometimes, we have to make considerations and give up on a chosen name if the artist is travelling or committed elsewhere,” she explains. “In all these years, we’ve been immensely fortunate to have absolute legends grace our home. Not once have we encountered an artist declining to perform for *Gulab Bari*,” reveals Krishna Neotia, her youngest sister-in-law.

The garden

By now, Madhu Neotia, the youngest daughter-in-law of the family has warmed up to the conversation. “I must tell you how the garden was prepared in the initial years,” she says. “We used to ready literally a thousand potted plants in such a way, that they would be in full bloom during *Gulab Bari*. The family favourite was the double bulb petunia which would be planted in plenty to add a burst of colour every year. Along with petunias, we would also plant carnations and several other flowers. In the initial years, the entire driveway would be filled with flowering potted plants and the air would be thick with the scent of *desi gulab* or rose,” she happily recalls. “Sometimes, we would get requests from our friends, the day after the soiree to part with some of the blossom, which we readily did. We had an excellent gardener called *Bansi*, who took care and great pride in keeping the garden bountiful and beautiful,” adds Bimla ji.



The culinary spread

If *Gulab Bari* has its loyalists for music, its loyalists for food are not too far behind. "From the very first year till today, our menu and the style of serving has remained the same," states Krishna ji. "Actually, the credit for the menu goes to *Appa*," chips in Bimla Poddar. "It was she who advised us on keeping it simple and similar to the erstwhile *Banarasi Gulab*

Bari. Right from the beginning it has been so well received by all that we haven't tampered with it since then. Of course, our official taster is Krishna," she says, looking at her sis-in-law with a smile, who adds, "There are a few ground rules though. We don't serve aerated drinks; we use only earthen ware and there is no bearer service. It operates on self service."

The invitations

"Our very first invitations were actually letters that we sent out to our friends and music lovers. Not only were there no mobile phones in those days, most of the times, even the house phone (landline) would be out of order! So, a bevy of well instructed men went criss-crossing the city, armed with addresses and letters and ensured each household received theirs, well in advance," explains Poddar.

"What's more, my younger brother-in-law, Vinod, (Late Vinod Neotia) would personally visit every home in our neighbourhood, extending a cordial invite to each household, requesting them to attend," she adds.

In fact, as hosts, they weren't strict about checking the invitation card at the gate, till a certain year when the word had gotten around so far and wide that they landed up receiving about 2500 guests for the evening! "We had a tough time! We ran out of food. There was no place to even stand, forget sit. Since then, we decided we must be stricter with the invitations and would be more careful about gatecrashers," she recalls.

Charmingly enough, in the initial years, the envelope would be stuffed with fragrant rose petals along with the invitation, a practise that alas, was discontinued as the audience grew in number and the invitation card was standardized about ten years ago.

Gulab Bari
A MUSICAL JOURNEY



Swagat

If there is one unanimous verdict on *Gulab Bari* by artists and audience alike, it is how all are personally welcomed to the evening, by some family member or the other. "I clearly remember how *tauji* (Late Suresh Neotia) would meet and welcome the artists. He was equally at home with a *namaskar* as he was with an *aadaab*. He would fondly reach out to artists even much younger to him, with a half bent *namaskar* and do a *pranaam* to those older," remembers Harsh Neotia, his nephew, who has also held the role of the emcee right from the first year.

"We applied a *chandan tika* (sandalwood mark) on the forehead of every guest and artist, gently spraying them with *gulab jal* and offering them a *desi gulab* as they entered our home," adds Madhu.

The ensemble

"For years together, all of us would wear *saris* of a common colour, as ordained by *Appa*. So much so, that though I would ordinarily wear white, she ensured that I ditched those for blushing pinks and other bright colours," recalls Poddar with a smile. That obviously meant that the family had to ensure that their wardrobe was in sync much in advance. "Even our reigning *Radha-Krishna thakur ji* (deity) would wear new and matching *poshak* (clothes) as ours as they descended every year, from my room to the garden, to bless us all!"

Collective prayers

Despite thorough preparation, if there is one thing quite out of the family's control, it is the weather. "Right up to the final day, we all silently pray for a clear day and for *Lord Indra* to be kind," say Harsh and Madhu in unison. While most of the years, *Indra* has indeed been kind to *Gulab Bari*, there was one time, when the rain Gods decided to come down in a light shower just before the performance was to begin. "Luckily, the guests had not reached by then. What we did as damage control, was to quickly get the lawn dried, mop and soak out the water and add extra sheets and spreads. Fortunately, the Gods relented after a brief shower and all went off well," shares Harsh. "There was another evening much earlier, when it got so cold, that we had to provide shawls to many members of the audience," smiles Madhu.

The X-factors

For all the pain, meticulous preparation and effort that goes into organising *Gulab Bari* year after year, the family makes it look fairly simple. From the guest list to the cavalcade of cars, from eccentric artists to celebrated guests, they explain that each family member trusts the other; mistakes are forgotten and forgiven and things are well streamlined as each member's role and responsibility is clearly laid out. What's more, each one shares the jubilation of their home resounding with the finest music and the warmest vibes.

As correct as that may be, I suspect that the strength and the vigour lies elsewhere; it lies in the blessings of the family's erstwhile patriarch, Late Janki Prasad Poddar and the good fortune of having someone like Girija Devi as a *guru*; it comes from Late Suresh Neotia's ardent love for all things cultural; it gets fuelled by Bimla Poddar's passion; it gets furtherance from devoted sisters-in law, Krishna and Gayatri and it continues to keep its mark, thanks to Harsh and Madhu who strive to uphold the glorious family tradition.





Artists

who have performed at
Gulab Bari

Sushri Aditi Mangaldas
Kathak

Pt. Ajoy Chakrovarty
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan
Padma Vibhushan
Sarod

Pt. Balamuralikrishna
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal- Carnatic

Pt. Bhimsein Joshi
Bharat Ratna
Vocal

Pt. Birju Maharaj
Padma Vibhushan
Kathak

Ustad Bismillah Khan
Bharat Ratna
Shehnai

Sushri Chetna Jalan
Kathak

Vidushi Chitra Vishwesaran
Padma Shri
Bharatnatyam

Pt. Deepak Maharaj
Kathak

Vidushi Girija Devi
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia
Padma Vibhushan
Flute

Ustad Imrat Khan
Sitar and Surbahar

Pt. Jasraj
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra
Padma Vibhushan
Odissi

Pt. Kishan Maharaj
Padma Vibhushan
Tabla

Vidushi Kishori Amonkar
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Pt. Kushal Das
Sitar and Surbahar

Vidushi Malavika Sarukkai
Padma Shri
Bharatnatyam

Vidushi Mallika Sarabhai
Padma Bhushan
Kuchipudi and Bharatnatyam

Ustad Nishat Khan
Sitar and Surbahar

Vidushi Padma Subrahmanyam
Padma Bhushan
Bharatnatyam

Pt. Rajan And Sajan Mishra
Padma Bhushan
Vocal

Pt. Rakesh Chaurasia
Flute

Ustad Rashid Khan
Padma Shri
Vocal

Sushri Saswati Sen
Kathak

Vidushi Sanjukta Panigrahi
Padma Shri
Odissi

Pt. Shamta Prasad
Padma Bhushan
Tabla

Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma
Padma Vibhushan
Santoor

Sushri Shubha Mudgal
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Shujaat Khan
Sitar

Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar
Sarod

Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar
Padma Shri
Vocal

Pt. Venkatesh Kumar
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Vilayat Khan
Padma Vibhushan
Sitar

Pt. V G Jog
Padma Bhushan
Violin

Ustad Zakir Hussain
Padma Bhushan
Tabla