

Bimla Poddar & Jnana Pravaha
present

Pranaam Appa

Conceptualized, Curated and Authored by
Supriya Newar



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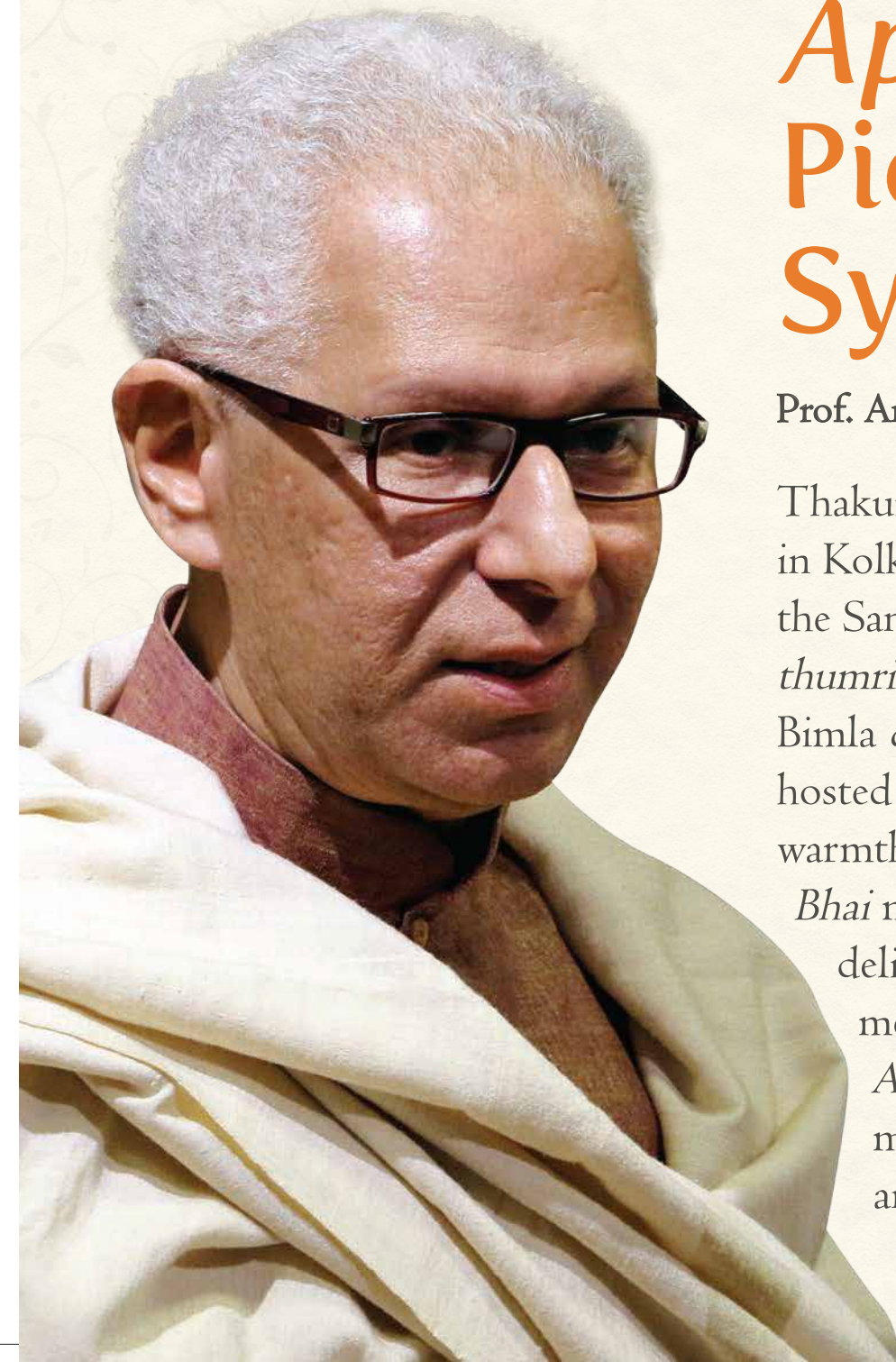
श्री गणेश गिरिजा सुवन, मंगल मूल सुजान।
कहत अयोध्यादास तुम, देहु अभय वरदान ॥

FOREWORD

Banaras, *Appa* and her Pictorial Symphonies

Prof. Anjan Chakraverty

Thakur Jaideva Singh, the eminent musicologist was in Kolkata to deliver a keynote address in one of the Sangeet Research Academy's annual seminars on *thumri*. In between the proceedings, *Appa* introduced *Bimla di* to Thakur *Sahib* and the next evening she hosted a dinner in his honour at her residence. The warmth and cordiality of *Kaka ji*, *Bimla di* and Suresh *Bhai* made the great scholar in his nineties immensely delighted and he almost instantly became a member of the family. Thakur *Sahib*, for whom *Appa* had the greatest regard, was in a lighter mood that evening as he recounted numerous anecdotes of the musicians and *Appa*, with her



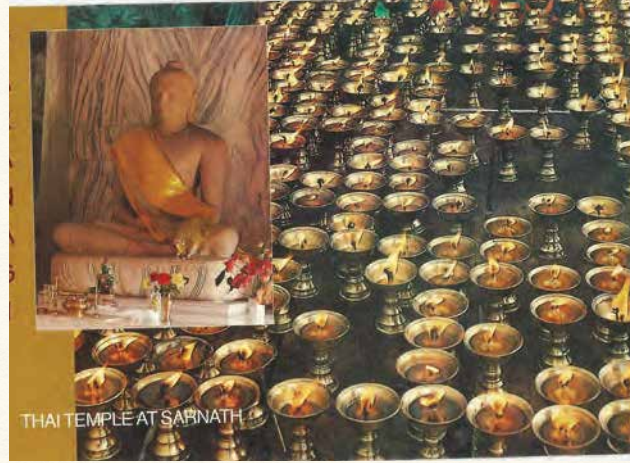
characteristic witty detailing, fleshed them out in sub-narratives. It is always nostalgic to recall that memorable winter evening of 1985 and *Appa's* loving gesture to get me connected with *Bimla di* and *Suresh Bhai*. Nearly two decades ago, once in the course of an informal conversation, *Appa* regretted, "Alas! If only I knew a bit of painting. Perhaps I could've wielded the brush and created a world of painted delights, rich in chromatic splendour." My forthright response was: "But *Appa* what's the urgent need to master the craft of painting at this stage? Don't you realize that your pictorial symphonies make us paint a world unseen?" She roared with laughter, and we found ourselves under an incredibly mesmerizing spell. Virtually, there was no opening left to continue the dialogue any further. Plumbing the depths of her musical oeuvre is certainly beyond the scope of this note. Evidently, *Appa* greatly expanded the expressive range and the musical contour of the forms, collectively referred to as *Banarasi Poorab Ang*, she inherited. It was a musical tradition with a distinctive appeal that developed in the prime pilgrimage city. And, a multi-layered artist-patron dynamic served as its sustaining bedrock. One crucial political event with a far-reaching impact on the cultural scenario was the secret treaty between Raja Balvant Singh (r.1738-70) of Banaras and the British in 1764. Such an alliance, undoubtedly, provided social security to the warring and trading aristocracy. While the colonial presence and the Indo-Persian courtly culture were functioning in mutual exclusion in a multi-ethnic urban space, by and large, the aristocratic patronage was generously extended towards





migrant musicians, both kalavants and courtesans. Some of the *dhrupad* singers and *binkars*, once at the Mughal and Avadh courts, were heading the band of musicians at the Ramnagar durbar. On the other hand, Ustad Mian Gammu Qavval and his disciple Shade Khan acted conjointly as an enlivening counterpoise. Towards the late-nineteenth century, Mian Gammu, a direct disciple of the legendary *tappa* maestro Ustad Gulam Nabi alias Shori Mian, trained some of the gifted vocalists in the awfully harmonic improvisations with lilting micro notes, the cardinal aspect of the *tappa gayaki*.

Incidentally, it was the phase when *Banarasi Poorab Ang ki Thumri* started crystallizing bit by bit. The two sub-genres, *bol bant ki thumri* or *bandish ki thumri* of Lucknow origin and *bol banao ki thumri* of Banaras ancestry, had varying stylistic implications. The former was “expressly adapted for dance” and the rhythmic effect, the forte of this style, “made time audible” and its continuity “sensible”. Drawing upon *tappa* - derived tonal modulations and verbal phrasing, a performer has to improvise with precise expressive candour, keeping the *laya* (tempo) unruffled all along. *Appa's* sound grounding in this form and her personalized musico-poetic evocation of every symbolic implication of *bandish* (lyric) made her peerless. The very inception of the reposeful rendition (*chhindari*) of *bol banao ki thumri* is attributed to the masters who chose to communicate the inherent potentiality of *bhava*, emotional content, without any *abhinaya*, acting, or dancing even. The archetype of the emergent trend of *bol banao ki thumri* from 1930's onwards may be traced in the style of Siddheshwari Devi, known for her imaginative daring and



terse *taans*. Sympathizing strongly with the restlessness of the musical patterns of the previous generation, *Appa* discovered afresh the profound possibilities of a communicative dialogue rich in romantic exuberance befitting the norms of chamber music. The melodic patterning of her *bol banao ki thumri* developed in clear progressions; virtuoso touches of ornamentation enhancing the melting lyricism of the *bandish* never spoiled the singing line.

A captivating conversationalist, *Appa* used to be a narrator par excellence. Her gift to 'paint' vivid images in a symphony of notes characterized by melting lyricism was rooted in her continued effort to decode the textual allusions of the *bandish* before she sought a befitting melodic pattern to encase the subtleties of *nayika-bheda* components. Never did she step into any melodramatic excess and her use of *kaku*, tonal modulations, bore the unmistakable classical restraint.

She was truly an essential point of departure for the generation to follow. With the passage of time, *Appa's* enduring image will remain transfigured into

an everlasting enigma, beyond every biographical writing and anecdotal chronicling. Ironically, for those who wish to dissect the breathtakingly sensuous cadence of her music, she left almost no clues whatsoever!





A - Z of Girija Devi

Instead of S for Sa, R for Re and G for Ga,
in this chapter, every letter is used to spell
out the key facets that went into the making
of the maestro.

A: Appa

Whether with the suffix *ji* or without it, almost everyone who came close to the legend addressed her as *Appa*, a nickname that became synonymous with her. So much so that even her daughter Sudha Dutta would address her both as *Maa* and as *Appa*!



B: Baba Vishwanath

For someone who was born in Kashi, the Vishwanath Temple obviously held a very significant place in her life. Such was her faith that every compliment or accolade that ever came her way would immediately be credited to *Baba Vishwanath* and his blessings.

C: Chaiti

Generally sung in the month of March, *Girija Devi's Chaitis* carried the effervescence of spring and fresh blossoms. '*Chait mase chunari rangaipe ho Rama...*' was a signature *Chaiti* of hers.

D: Dolls

Such was her fascination with dolls that as a child she would get them married off whilst singing songs for them. Over the years, she amassed a huge collection and had cabinets full of dolls from all over the world!

E: Eeshwar ki Aaradhana

For the artiste, music was not just about a performance. It was her prayer, her life breath, her offering and her finest worship. It was truly *Eeshwar ki aaradhana*.

F: Fraternity

She would often go out of her way to look after her musical fraternity whether they were junior to her or senior. Based on her recommendations, many junior artistes would get programs or a chance to perform. "After being awarded the Padma Vibhushan, she went and touched Ustad Abdul Rashid Khan's feet as he was perhaps the only artiste at ITC SRA who was older to her," remembers her daughter, Sudha. Such was her sense of responsibility towards fellow artistes and the music fraternity.

G: Gulab Bari

Gulab Bari, the annual classical music evening held at the Neotia residence since 1982 was an initiative undertaken by Late Suresh Neotia and Bimla Poddar under the benign guidance of *Girija Devi*. "She helped us re-create the magic of *Banarasi Gulab Baris* in Calcutta," states Poddar.

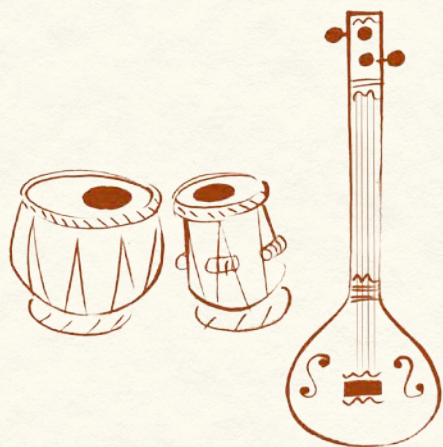


H: Hori

Whether in Kashi or in Kolkata, she anchored the Holi or *Hori* celebrations with great merriment and music by engaging her students as well as other musicians. "Every year *Appa* would involve all the scholars of Sangeet Research Academy and have them put up a special show," remembers Vocalist Shubhra Guha.

I: ITC Sangeet Research Academy

Girija Devi joined ITC SRA in 1978 as a *Guru* and remained one of the most sought after and beloved *Gurus* of the Academy. “She was the pride of SRA,” says Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar who was also her neighbour at the Academy.



J: Jugalbandi

The magic of *Jugalbandi* or the spontaneous dialogue that emerged between Pt. Birju Maharaj's bhav or expressions and Girija Devi *ji's* *gayaki* or vocal accompaniment, would leave their audiences mesmerised and asking for more. “They had deep respect and understanding of each other's art and would get completely immersed in their artistry, forgetting everything else and in the process creating magic,” says *Kathak* exponent Saswati Sen.

K: Krishna

Most of the compositions she rendered were inspired by Lord Krishna, The Divine Lover and would paint a lyrical image of Krishna with Radha Rani and the gopis. ‘*Kahanwa mano o Radha Rani...*’ was one of her many compositions that invariably came up as a request from her audiences.

L: Love

For someone who went through so many trials and tribulations, Girija Devi was anything but bitter. In fact, anybody who met her was instantly touched by her affection. “*Pyaar sabse badi baat hae beti,*” she had once said to the author. Almost unequivocally, everyone spoke about the love that she showered on one and all. “She had a unique quality of making you feel her most favourite, her most loved,” shares Prabha her beloved niece.

M: Madhusudan Jain and *Munni*

When she was only fifteen, Girija Devi was married to Late Shri Madhusudan Jain, a businessman who supported her in her musical pursuits. Right after the first year of their marriage, the couple was blessed with a baby girl whom they fondly called *Munni*. Till today Girija Devi's only daughter Sudha Dutta is fondly called *Munni* by most people.

N: Nature

Girija Devi observed nature very keenly and that reflected abundantly in her music. “She would make me feel a light shower on my hand and then explain that that was ‘*phuhaar*’ and not ‘*moosladhar*’ or heavy rain so that I could bring out the corresponding expressions in my singing,” recalls her student Sunanda Sharma. Girija Devi would make it a point to offer the freshest blossoms fetched from her own garden in her *puja* every morning.



O: One Phone Call Away

One phone call from *Appa ji* was all it ever took for even the senior most musicians to happily agree to a performance. Greats like Late Pt. Bismillah Khan, Pt. Bhimsein Joshi and Ustad Vilayat Khan have all graced the *Gulab Bari* stage in Calcutta on receiving just one phone call from Girija Devi. “*Tumko anna hae aur aake gaana-bajaana hae,*” was all she had to say!

P: Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan

Recognized as a Doctorate of Letters or a D. Litt. by seven universities across the world, Girija Devi was awarded the second highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan in 2016. Earlier, in the years 1989 and 1972, she was also awarded the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Shri respectively.



P: Paan

“Bus ek hi buri aadat hae hamari, ham paan bahut khaate hain;” I have but one bad habit; I consume a lot of *paan*; she had laughingly said to the author. Girija Devi greatly relished *paan* and was quite a connoisseur of it. She had a *paan daan* or a special *paan* container and was very particular about the quality of betel leaves or the condiments that went into it. Even on her overseas tours, her *paan daan* was sure to accompany her!

Q: Queen of Thumri

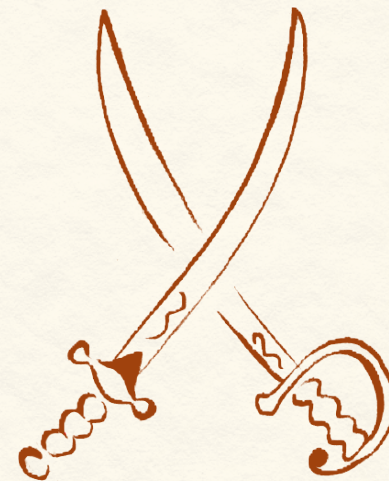
She was synonymous with *thumri*, a common genre of semi classical music. Girija Devi’s *thumris* received such appreciation and popularity that though she was well adept in various forms of classical music, including *Dhrupad* and *Dhamaar*, she came to be known as the Queen of *Thumri*.

R: Ramdas Rai

Late Shri Ramdas Rai, a *zamindar* of Kashi would wake up early morning everyday and sing. A young four year old girl would listen to her father in rapt attention. Sensing his daughter’s interest in music, he ensured that she received vocal training. Who knew that that young, attentive four year old girl would later grow up to be Girija Devi?

S: Sarju Prasad Mishra and Shrichand Mishra

Late Shri Sarju Prasad *ji* Mishra inducted Girija Devi when she was only four years old into the world of classical vocal. He helped her get a firm understanding and command of the notes and built a strong foundation for her. After his demise, she carried on rigorous training under her second *Guru*, Shrichand Mishra *ji*.

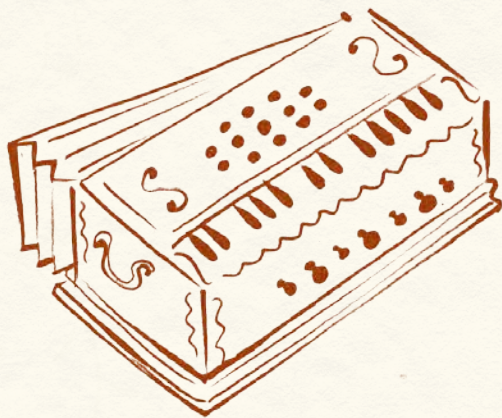


T: Tomboy

Who can believe that this ever dignified artiste was made to learn swimming, horse riding and even sword fighting and archery by her father in her childhood days? In her own words, she had said to the author candidly that her father had made a tomboy out of her!

U: Ucchaaran

“Daana daana dikhna chahiye; bol spasht hone chahiye;” every note, every grain of music must be clear and well enunciated,” insisted the legend. As someone who deeply appreciated the *sahitya* or the literature of the compositions, *Appa ji* was very strict about correct *uccharan* or enunciations and trained her disciples accordingly.



V: Vidushi

Literally meaning learned or wise, Girija Devi was truly a *Vidushi*. Analysing her music, Vocalist Pt. Rajan Mishra explains that it was her wisdom that gave a spiritual flavour to *thumris* that were originally meant to be more romantic or *shringar-pradhan* in nature. Pt. Vijay Kichlu seconds the judgement, adding that her music moved the listener, leaving a certain *asar* or an impact on him.

W: Worship

A few years after her marriage, Girija Devi sought a sabbatical from her worldly life to immerse herself completely in music. She left Kashi to be in Sarnath, a place that she had been drawn to since her childhood days. That one year proved to be monumental for her art and gave her the opportunity to be in deep worship of the divine. “*Tapasya akele mein hi hoti hae beti;*” – one needs solitude to worship the divine deeply; she had gently explained.

X: X-Factor

Bimla Poddar shares an intriguing incident. A performance of Girija Devi was once scheduled at her residence in Banaras on a sweltering afternoon. Her guests were sweating in the heat. “But no sooner did *Appa* begin her rendition of *Raag Megh*, did dark clouds begin to gather and believe it or not, soon it even began raining!” she exclaims. It was one of the many incidents that displayed a certain X-Factor her music possessed.



Y: Yin-Yang

After the demise of Shri Madhusudan Jain, Girija Devi was absolutely distraught. She gave up her adornments including her most precious source of sustenance - her music. But besides having to cope with her loss, she also had worldly matters to grapple with. Instead of moping about her loss, she decided to brace herself and take charge of her life. “I was born during *Narsingh Chaturdashi* in the month of *Baisakh* in May. I thought to myself that if God could take on two avtaars, two forms, so could I.” Strengthening herself, she strove to fulfil both Yin and Yang in her life, herself.

Z: Zest for life

If there was one defining quality about Girija Devi it was her sheer zest for life. Her childlike sense of wonder and enthusiasm could crack open even the hardest nut and her infectious laughter could enliven an entire gathering. Perhaps this was why even at 88 her voice had remained so ageless!



A life in music

*Music was the phenomena that touched her
when she was all of four;
She is the phenomenon who will live on, even
though she is no more.
Her's was indeed a life in music; a bada khayal.*



In the holy city of Kashi, in May 1929,
A daughter was born to Babu Ramdas Rai's bloodline.
She was named Girija after the Goddess Parvati,
Her mother, whom she called Mai was Suryamukhi Devi.

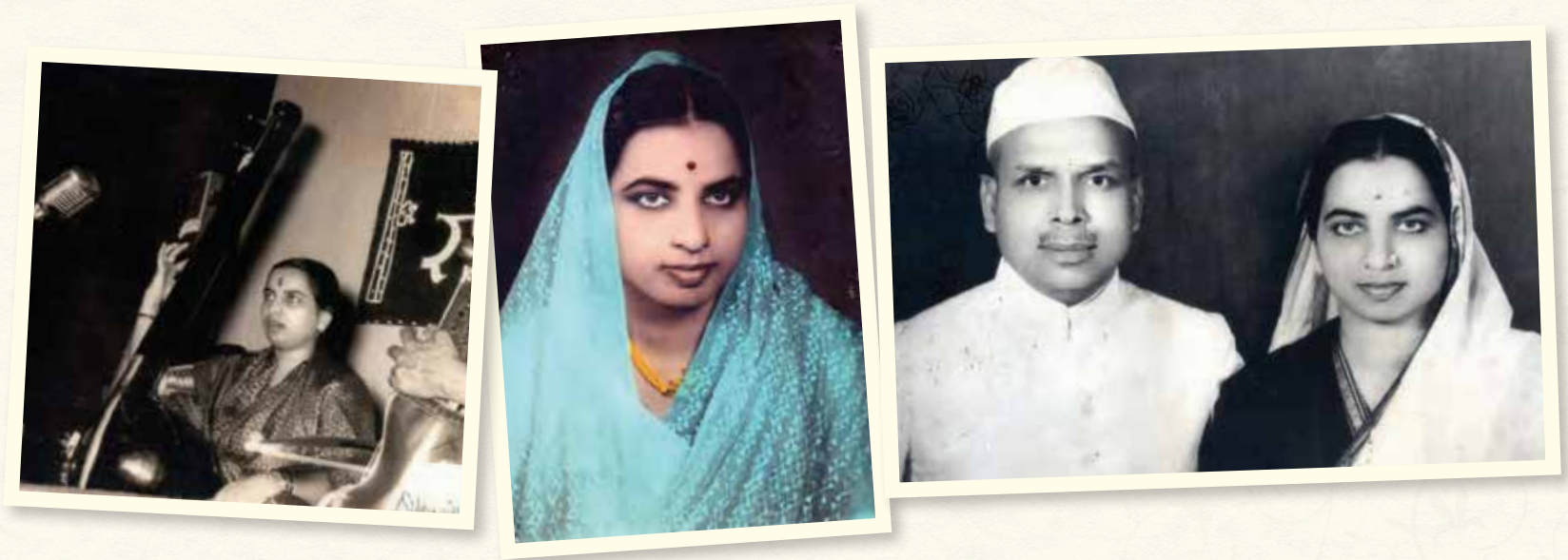
Girija came to spend a lot of time with her dear father, Babu,
Who taught her swimming and archery and took her horse riding too.
But it was the hour of 4am, when he sat down to sing,
Oh, what immense joy to her that would bring!

Noticing her flair for music to be natural,
He requested Pt. Sarju Prasad Mishra to give her tutorials.
Thus began little Girija's music lessons,
She eagerly looked forward to these daily sessions.

Though young of age, music had her totally smitten,
Of all her activities, it gave her the most satisfaction.
Seeing her commitment and her devotion,
Pt. Sarju Mishra helped her build a solid foundation.

But as was the trend in those days,
Girls were married off even before they came of age.
So at 13, Madhusudan Jain came into her life,
Girija Devi was now duty bound as a wife.

The couple were soon blessed with a daughter,
Still in her teens, Girija Devi was now a mother.
As was expected, several roles she learnt to juggle,
Smiling through it all; the challenges, the struggle.



Fortunately though, he was an admirer of her art,
He appreciated the place music held in her heart.
So Devi worked hard on perfecting it all,
From dhrupad and dhamar, to thumri, dadra and khayal.

She nurtured every swar with all her being,
Maa Saraswati too, began to shower her choicest blessings.
In 1949, she was invited by All India Radio to perform,
Her refreshing and bold voice took the world of music by storm!
By then she was learning under Pt. Shrichand Mishra,
and had vowed only for concerts and conferences to tour.

In 1952, she sang in front of an audience august,
Singing a thumri and a tappa in the allotted 20 minutes.
But then the Vice President, Dr. Radhakrishnan requested her to continue her recital,
The audience was so deeply moved by her performance so delightful.
Later in Bihar, as she sang Ahir Bhairav near a Shiv temple,
She moved a sadhu to tears; he came forward and offered her his lota and kamandal!

Girija Devi's reputation as an artiste was now on an upswing,
Halls remained packed wherever she would sing.
In 1972, the prestigious Padma Shri was bestowed upon her,
As a mark of distinction and to honour her calibre.



Three years later though, life dealt her a mean blow,
She lost her husband, her anchor; she hit an all time low.
She gave up her music and resigned from worldly ties,
Until her friends and relatives convinced her otherwise.
In the meantime, Pt. Kichlu who was starting an academy,
Asked her to come on board as a Guru, as faculty.

Thus Girija Devi moved from Kashi to Calcutta,
Where a whole new world of fan following was awaiting her.
It was in this city that she was virtually reborn,
It was here that she was freed from her mourn.



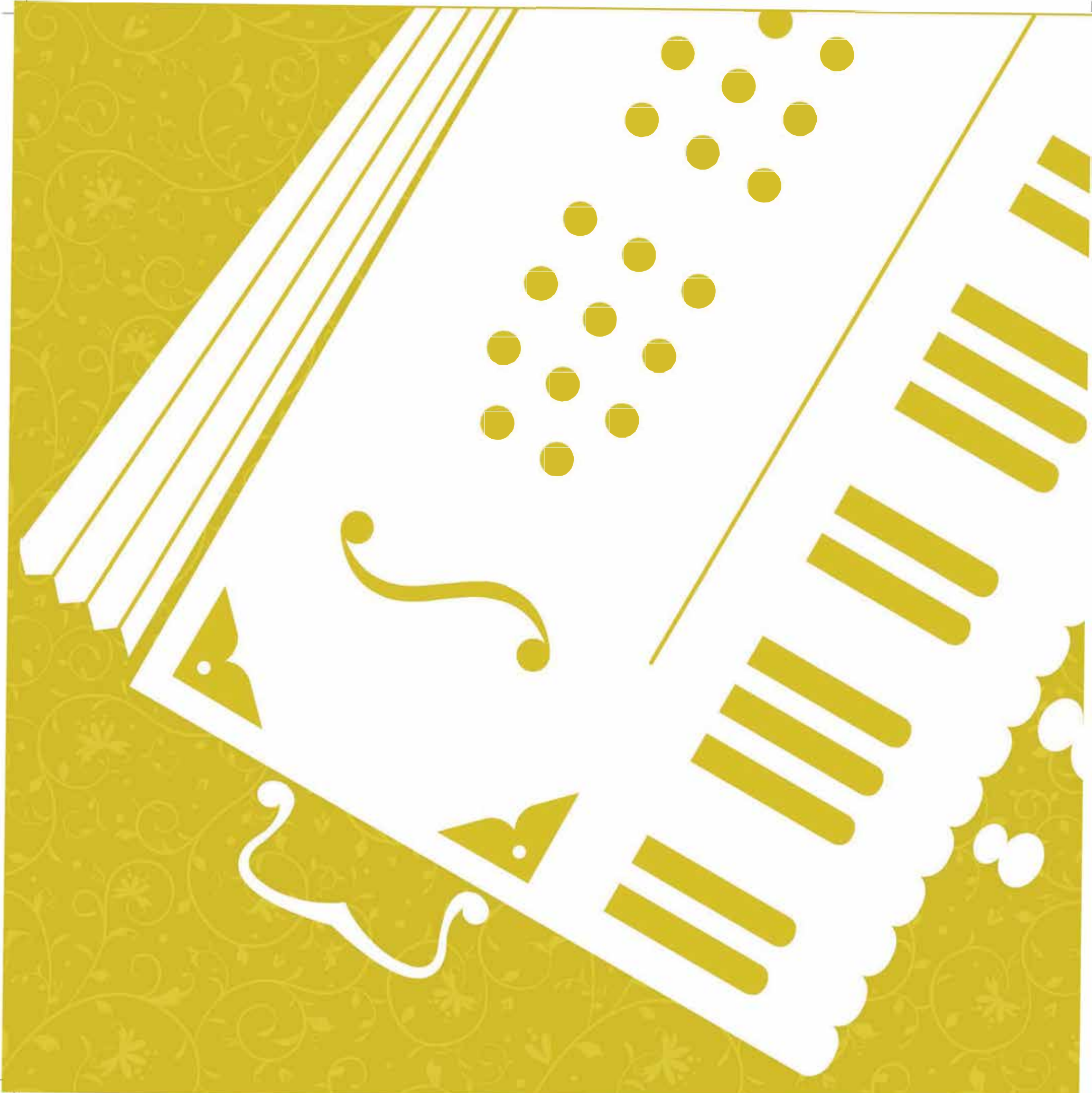
She became a much loved Guru, an artiste of exceptional acclaim,
Sangeet Research Academy helped her acquire renewed fame.
Here she became a beacon of joy, good cheer and laughter,
Around her disciples, fellow musicians and artistes would gather.

Touching one and all by her warmth, her affection,
She opened up her ocean of knowledge, her repertoire and collection.
Setting new standards in Purab Ang ki Gayaki,
She came to be regarded by one and all as Vidushi.

Of thumris, she remained an unmatched Queen,
Of tappas, the finest Alim (Master)!
Even after the tallest distinctions, her music remained sublime,
After all for her, sangeet was an offering to the Divine.

Childlike but worldly wise, she showed the way by example,
Despite being so revered, she had remained so affable.
Even at 88, her voice had remained young,
She was an indeed an embodiment of Shakti; feminine and strong.

Girija Devi you may have physically left us to join your Creator,
But in countless hearts across the world, you will continue to live forever!





Remembering *Appa*

- The Artiste
- The Guru
- The Pillar

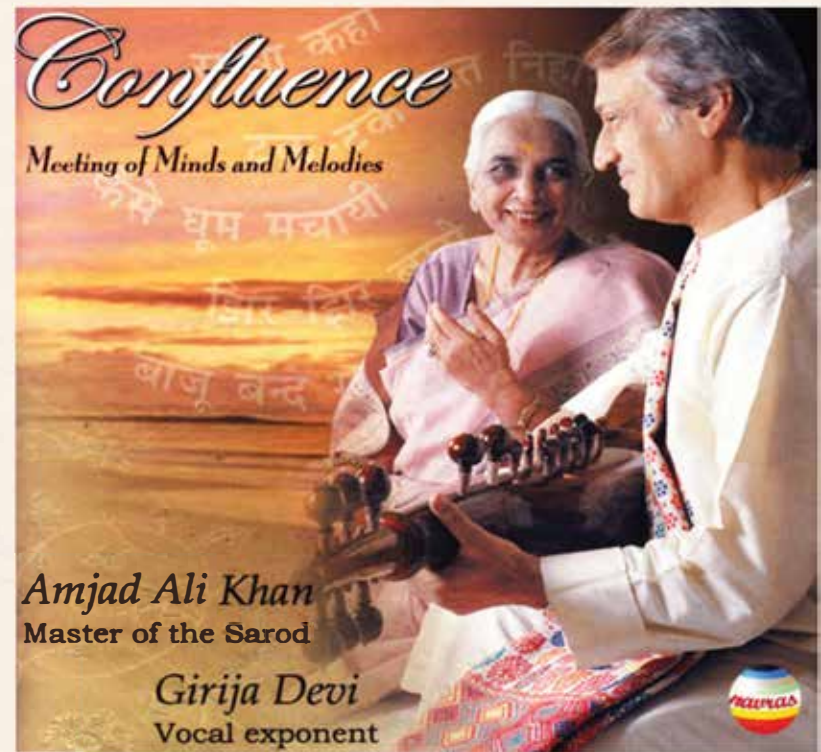
Musicians, students, well wishers, friends and family recount their choicest memories and share their sentiments.



Ustad Amjad Ali Khan

Padma Vibhushan, Sarod Virtuoso

“I was deeply saddened by the passing away of the legendary singing queen of *thumri*, Girija Devi of Varanasi. This truly marks the end of an era for Indian Classical Music. Girija Devi used to tie me a *Rakhi*. She had very gracefully performed many times at my father, Ustad Haafiz Ali Khan’s Memorial Festivals. We had also performed together in Kolkata and Brussels and recorded an album called ‘Confluence’ in 2005. *Thumri* demands a very delicate touch. Almost like reading in between the lines of aesthetics and poetry. Artistic liberty is highly welcomed and Girija Devi was the last of the greats who carried that era and legacy with her. Her husband Mr. Madhusudan Jain used to invite me to Varanasi for a music festival which was called *Lalit*. I cannot forget how Madhu Babu, as he was known, once organized a seven day long Music Festival in 1967 and gave me the honour of concluding the Festival. Her contribution has been immense and she was the last of the singers of the timeless legacy of *thumri* singing. I had in fact made a request to the Honourable Prime Minister of India to bestow upon her the Highest Civilian Award, the Bharat Ratna for her contribution. I pray to almighty that her soul rests in peace and that her music lives on timelessly and eternally!”





Aruna Raman

Music aficionado

Aruna Raman was socially well acquainted with Girija Devi from an early age. After all she is the daughter of Late Jyoti Bhushan Gupta who was the Founder Member of Sangeet Parishad, a vibrant cultural organisation of Kashi and was later married into the aristocratic Raman family of Banaras. She speaks haltingly, almost going back in time, pulling out threads from a golden yarn.

“My father was known to be a man of very few words. He happened to meet *Appa* at Banaras Hindu University after she had been awarded Padma Shri and encouragingly said to her, ‘*Bahut acha kiya. Aise hi naam roshan karte rehna;*’ Well done! Continue to shine this way.” Aruna goes on to recall how she had invited Girija Devi for a program called ‘*Dharohar Vyakhyaan Mala*’ organised by *Mahila Mandal Kashi* in 1994. “Initially, *Appa* was slightly hesitant but I assured her that we will be felicitating her with a citation in the presence of our women members. She was quite touched by that. Ever since that time, my equations with her changed a great deal and our social bond transformed into a personal one,” says Aruna with a smile.

The aficionado whose home, Raman Niwas has played host to greats like Late Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, notes how immaculately dressed Girija Devi would always be and how particular she was of maintaining *kayda* or etiquette. “Despite so much appreciation, *Appa* was very careful of never overstepping her boundaries. She was also someone who had remarkable presence of mind and could handle tricky situations deftly,” she says.

Did she ever learn music from her I enquire? “Never! Though *Appa* did offer, I just did not have the voice,” she confesses with a smile.





Pt. Birju Maharaj

Padma Vibhushan, *Kathak* Virtuoso

“*Woh hamari saali thi aur hum unke jeeja*; She was my sister-in-law and I was her brother-in-law,” begins the *kathak* virtuoso whose nimble feet and evocative expressions have regaled audiences across the world for decades. While I try to wrap my head around what he’s just said, his foremost disciple Saswati Sen comes to my aid.

She explains that Pt. Birju Maharaj was married to Shrichand Mishra’s daughter; since Girija Devi was Shrichand *ji’s* disciple, she was like an older sister to his daughter, making Pt. Birju Maharaj her younger brother in law!

“All arrangements of my marriage too were made under her strict supervision as I was quite young and she was about eight years older to me and was already married to Madhu *babu* by then,” he continues. This somewhat explains the exquisite chemistry the duo displayed on stage when performing with each other. Their *nok-jhonk* and *ched-chaad* or playfulness with each other, whether it was the showering of rose petals or any other antic, gave their performances a unique innocence and colour.

Pt. Maharaj also marvels at the fact that even in her advanced years, Girija Devi’s voice could touch the lowest as well as the highest notes. He is convinced that music gave her a divine power, a *shakti* to overcome all kinds of challenges that life had thrown at her and still remain joyous.

The danseur who turned 80 in February would love to see Girija Devi’s home in



Banaras turned into a museum which music lovers from all over the world can visit and thereby pay their respects to the great artiste. He concludes by saying that the finest tribute

to her would be if her disciples carry on the tradition of *Purab ang ki Gayaki* and keep the Banaras tradition alive.



Pt. Brij Bhushan Kabra

National Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee, Slide Guitar Virtuoso

“I was introduced to *Appa ji* in 1957 at a music conference in Ahmedabad. She was accompanied by Pt. Kishan Maharaj on the tabla and Pt. Gopal Mishra on the sarangi. Pt. Kishan Maharaj *ji* introduced me to her as his younger brother and though Girija Devi *ji* did not know me then, she immediately remarked, ‘*Tera chota bhai hae to mera bhi hae*; if he’s your younger brother so is he mine!’” begins the slide guitar virtuoso who is now over 80 and has been responsible for adapting the guitar to Indian Classical Music.

Though Pt. Kabra has toured nationally and even internationally with Girija Devi and other leading greats of their time, he recalls three days which stand out in his memory as being absolutely special. “We had a concert in Kota and after the concert decided to drive 50 km further away to my father in law’s farm house for a picnic. Our group consisted of Shiv Kumar Sharma, Zakir Hussain, Pt. Jog, Protima Bedi, Vijay Kichlu and *Appa ji*. Rashid Khan was there too but at that time he used to be on the tanpura,” he shares.

The maestro recalls how over those three days, there were unending hours of laughter, *gupshup* or chitchat over bonfires, informal singing and overall a great deal of camaraderie, making those days truly memorable. “The most striking memory I have of *Appa ji* in those three days is how she would rise early morning to join my mother in law in her *puja* and sing *bhajans*. It touched us all very much,” he says.



A great admirer of the clarity in Girija Devi's voice as well as her courteous personality, he also reveals that anytime they travelled to USA, Girija Devi would make it a point to carry *paan* with her. "But despite her limited stock, she would

always save one for me!" closes Kabra.

[The sad news of Pt. Brij Bhushan Kabra's demise came one month after this interview was conducted.]



Chetna Jalan

Kathak exponent, Director, Padatik

“My mother and Girija Devi *ji* were friends. Hence right from the beginning, I affectionately called her *Girija Masi* or aunt” begins Chetna *ji*, the danseuse whose family has enjoyed long and close ties with the maestro. She credits Girija Devi for literally luring her back to dance, at a time when she had started feeling that she may have perhaps become too old for it. Remembering her own heydays, she recalls, “Though I was trained classically, it was her invaluable guidance which helped me learn how to see a *kajri* or a *chaiti* and respond to it; ‘*aise karo*’... she would say, explaining the nuances patiently.”

Girija Devi also enjoyed a special rapport with the thespian Late Shymanand Jalan. “*Girija Masi* would lovingly address him as *Jamai Raja* or *Jamai Babu*. I remember once how he had wanted *Masi* to present the *vidayi* or the departure scene in the classic play, *Shakuntala*, only in *alaap*, sans words, a challenge she readily took up. They had great respect for each other. She would make it a point to come and watch all his plays,” shares the danseuse.

Other than her artistic side, Jalan has also witnessed the maestro’s lighter side several times. “Once, I remember how Nikhil *da* (Banerjee), the sitar player, had just finished performing. *Masi* quietly went up to him and tucked something in his pocket and then walked away laughing like a child. It turned out to be *paan!* She was like a child; full of life.”

Chetna Jalan also illustrates how her dear *Girija Masi* would also often go out of her way for things. “During the rehearsals for *Shakuntala* when all of us would be practising for hours, sometimes going without nourishments, she would come in with packets of goodies from Annapoorna and say, ‘*Ab bandh karo...bache bhooke baithe hain*; take a break now, all the children must be so hungry!’

Fondly recalling how she had danced for the maiden *Gulab Bari* musical evening held at the Neotia residence, she sentimentally says “Those were different times; a different era.”



Late Pt. A. Kanan

Hindustani Classical Vocal

“Girija Devi does not require any accolade from her fellow musicians. She is a rare, versatile musical talent of our time who has continued to enthrall music lovers of this country and abroad with her amazing repertoire of *khayal*, *thumri*, *dadra*, *tappa*, *kajri*, *chaiti*, and so on. Her mellifluous voice has never failed to create magic of nuances and textures in all these varied forms.

One of the ablest exponents of Banaras *Gharana*, she has consistently performed true to the tradition of her *Gharana*, yet blending pulsating innovative patterns in her style. Her sombre evocation of *Raags* coupled with intricacies of *taans* and *sargam*, her melancholic immersion in the sadness of *thumris* or ecstatic heights in the flights of *kajris* have always been a source of inspiration for my musical pursuits.

Apart from being an outstanding singer, she has contributed significantly to Indian music by training a number of good musicians who are shaping really well.”

[Excerpt taken from 'Abhinandan Granth' compiled by Shivshankar Rai in 1998.]



Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia

Padma Vibhushan, Hindustani Classical Flute Virtuoso

“She was a true queen; not just the Queen of *Thumri*, but also the Queen of Hearts,” says the master flautist. Recalling her fondly, Pt. Chaurasia says that Girija Devi *ji* was someone who could shower love and affection upon people and reach out to everyone around her with warmth and affection. As someone who knew her closely and has performed with her on numerous occasions,

Pt. Chaurasia continues to remain floored by her humility and persona. Though he deeply laments her demise, on a more optimistic note, he says, “Though we have lost this gem on earth, she will continue to shine amongst the stars and shower her blessings upon us from wherever she is.”





Pt. Jasraj

Padma Vibhushan, Hindustani Classical Vocal

“*Hamra chota bhaiya!* That’s how she addressed me always,” says Pt. Jasraj who is only about six months younger to Girija Devi. The two leading maestros were due to share a stage in Jaipur last October, when Girija Devi’s sudden demise shocked the music world. His eyes twinkling, he remembers how Girija Devi had once intervened and stood her ground on a railway platform until she had ensured that both Pt. Jasraj and his wife were seated comfortably in the train. “She had stood on the platform and cheekily proclaimed, ‘*Hum gunda hae,*’ he recalls.

“She was a *dabang gayika*; a bold artist. She had managed to make her mark at a time when Banaras boasted of highly acclaimed *thumri* singers such as Badi Motibai, Rasoolan Bai, Siddheshwari Devi and so on. At a certain point of time, no one was bigger than her in Banaras,” he states. Pt. Jasraj goes on to share that he had first heard her on the radio in 1957-58 and was quite enchanted when he saw her photo for the first time. “I wondered who this beautiful lady was,” he says. Later, by the 60’s they had become quite friendly with each other. “We would fight with each other a lot too....over music of course. It is very difficult to explain the vastness of her scope and repertoire of music,” concludes Pt. Jasraj.





Vidushi Manju Mehta

Trustee, Saptak & Sitar Virtuoso

Every year, hundreds of Indian Classical music lovers from all over the country look forward to thirteen days of Saptak, a noted music festival held in Ahmedabad that has been going strong for the last 39 years.

“Besides one or two years here or there, Girija Devi has attended and performed at Saptak for nearly 30 years now,” shares the Trustee who has been a disciple of Pt. Ravi Shankar and later Pt. Damodar Lal Kabra.

“Every year *Appa ji* would come and stay with us. She had great regard for our Founder Trustee, Late Nandan Mehta and affectionately called me *Manju Rani*,” says the sitar exponent with a smile.

“There was something ageless about her singing and her voice. Even despite her advanced years and the fact that she had to use a wheel chair to come up to the stage in her later years, the minute *Appa ji* took the stage something would transform. There was no sense of tension on her face; she sang with infectious joy,” reflects the sitarist.





Meena Banerjee

Music Critic

“The first time that I met Girija Devi *ji* was way back in the late 1970’s, at a wedding in Delhi. She had jet black hair then. I was quite awestruck by her aura,” says the poised critic. Over the years, Meena *di* forged a close bond with the maestro and regarded her no less than her mother. “What was very special about *Appa ji* was her simplicity, her *sanskar*, her connect with nature...She was a keen observer and a deep thinker. Her sense of discipline was so strong that even after all the adulation she received, she had not changed from the inside. Can you believe that she had continued the practice of washing her clothes herself,” she states in unabashed awe.

“The other extremely important quality in her singing was her understanding of literature which was enhanced by her husband, Mr. Jain, who was very fond of poetry. One day, I was at her home and she was teaching a *thumri* whose words were ‘*Thaade rahiyo baanke shyam.*’ *Appa ji* was vividly explaining how the words ‘*Thaade rahiyo*’ must be expressed firmly so that they came out straight whereas ‘*Baanke shyam*’ could have multiple meanderings to evoke a variety of sentiments. Her music was an offering to God,” asserts Banerjee.





Dr. Padma Subhramanyam

Bharata Natyam Exponent, Choreographer and Scholar

“I was introduced to *Vidushi* Girija Devi at a *Gulab Bari* evening, organised by *Bimla ji*. My dance recital was sandwiched between two musical geniuses, namely *Smt. Girija Devi* and *Smt. Kishori Amonkar*. The idea was that both *Amma ji* and *Kishori behen* would sing a song together and I would do *abhinaya* on that. It was meant to be a surprise for the *rasikas*. We chose the song ‘*Chalo gyyan aaj khele holi*’, as it gave scope for *abhinaya*.

This unexpected *sangama* of the three of us on the stage became an event to be ever remembered. I was sitting in the middle doing *abhinaya*, with both the musical geniuses on either side. The last line in that song says that the *Gopi* has escaped from the mother-in-law and sister-in-law and has deceitfully slipped from her home to meet Krishna. For this I pointed at *Amma ji* to denote mother-in-law and *Kishori behen* to denote sister-in-law and got up and moved out of the stage towards the audience, strewing rose petals on my way.

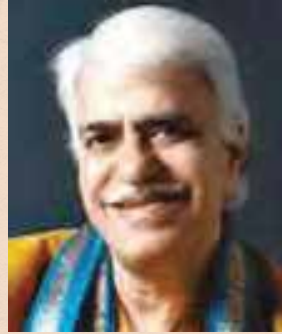
The *rasikas* thought it was an audio-visual treat. We artistes were in raptures too. Unfortunately humanity has lost both these great *gayikas*.

Years later *Girija ji* had come to perform in Chennai at the residence of a common friend. She had taken her seat and was ready to start. Not wanting to disturb her, my niece *Dr. Gayatri Kannan* and I glided into the hall quietly. But I did not escape her attention. She called out with open arms and spontaneously gave me an affectionate hug before she started singing. That was my last meeting



with her and that gesture of hers seems to be a blessing for me before she parted forever. She was not only a

great artiste but was an angelic human being, as graceful as her singing.”



Pt. Rajan Mishra

Padma Bhushan, Hindustani Classical Vocal

On a balmy winter afternoon, I knock on the door of a room in Bengal Club. The door is opened by a gentleman dressed in a *kurta-pajama*. I've heard the maestro live numerous times but his white mane looks even more shocking from an arm's length. His demeanour though is as gentle as the quiet of a falling leaf. We get seated in the ample balcony and just like a faint faraway cuckoo's call he begins to reminisce about olden days.

"My father, Late Hanuman Prasad Mishra and my uncle, Gopal Prasad Mishra, treated her like a daughter. She would frequently visit our home in Banaras. In the last few decades, I've been fortunate to have performed with her several times. We've had very close relations and would speak to each other in *Banarasi*. She would fondly address us as *Babu*.

Appa ji had a few qualities that set her apart from everyone. She was always hungry for knowledge; hungry to learn and was willing to learn from everyone. She had the ability to see the good in people and reach out affectionately. Success could not alter her as a person. Whoever and whatever she was inwardly was what she was outwardly too. '*Jaisi andar thi, waisi hi bahar thi.*' That is a rare quality in a person who has seen such a lot of fame. Her simplicity was reflected in her singing. She was also a terrific hostess and would take the trouble of cooking for her guests. I can only offer my heartfelt *pranaam*," says Pt. Mishra reverentially.



Ramesh Tapuriah

Music lover

This septuagenarian confesses that classical music has been his only hobby for the last forty odd years. Many years ago, he also had the privilege of learning vocal music under no less than Pt. Maniram for three to four years, until worldly demands took over.

“I haven’t watched a single film in the last four decades barring four that were forced to me by my sisters because they had a wager going amongst themselves,” he says wryly. He got his first opportunity to listen to Girija Devi way back in the 1970’s when he was involved with *Kala Sangam*, a cultural organisation in Calcutta. “I was instantly smitten. Later, quite accidentally I happened to attend the first *Gulab Bari* that was organised by Bimla ji and there I heard her again.” Since then, he has been a regular at *Gulab Bari* and an admirer of Girija Devi’s *chaitis*, *horis*, *kajris* and *thumris*.

Vinod Agnihotri

General Secretary, Sangeet Parishad Kashi

Vinod Agnihotri was exposed to music right from his childhood days, thanks to his father, Late Shitla Prasad Agnihotri who was the Founder Secretary of *Sangeet Parishad*, an organisation based in Varanasi, serving the cause of classical and semi classical music. Vinod, who is now in his late 60’s, learnt sitar for a good ten to fifteen years when he was younger.

“I was very fond of *thumri* and would go to Mahadev Mishra ji to learn how to play *thumri* on sitar. Though we were acquainted with Girija Devi ji and I would even attend her concerts, I did not know her personally till then,” he says. But one incident changed that. Vinod came to know that Girija Devi was scheduled to leave for Soviet Russia where she had a performance scheduled. Hearing this, Vinod was filled with so much pride and happiness that he mustered up courage, purchased a beautiful rose garland and went to meet and honour Girija Devi at her residence in

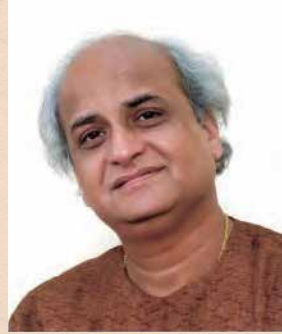


Banaras. “She was very touched by my gesture and since then became very fond of me,” he recalls shyly.

Vinod’s family has been in the business of perfumeries, specializing in *attar* or fragrances. “Though I would not visit her very often, anytime that I went to meet *Appa ji*, I would never go empty handed. I would always carry *attar*

for her. Her favourite was *khus* or the vetiver fragrance. We would get chatting and in the midst of the conversation, very quietly, she would prepare a small paan for herself and also offer one to me saying, ‘*Vinod, paan khaiba?*’ he recalls.

Some episodes may come to an end, but their fragrance tends to linger on.



Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar

Padma Shri, Hindustani Classical Vocal

Ulhas *ji* and Girija Devi *ji* who were both *Gurus* at ITC Sangeet Research Academy also happened to be neighbours. “*Humara ek doosre ke ghar barabar aana jaana tha; woh SRA ki shaan thi*-we would often visit each other’s homes; she was the pride of SRA,” recalls the vocalist who describes her as a very *dharmik* or a pious person. He shares that *Appa ji* would not consume anything before conducting her *puja* in the morning. Interestingly, Ulhas *ji* would send many of his students to Girija Devi to be trained in lighter musical forms such as *thumri*, *kajri* and so on. “Though they learnt *khayal* from me, I used to send my son Sameehan, along with many of my students such as Omkar, Chirag, Ranjini, Shashank and others to her. She would explain the nuances and give them invaluable tips on expression, on *bhav*.”

Expounding on her repertoire, Kashalkar shares that other than compositions in more common *Raags* such as *Pilu*, *Khammaj*, *Bhairavi* and others, *Appa ji* even had a collection of *tappas* in uncommon *Raags* such as *Yaman* and *Behaag*. “But despite all her accomplishments, she had a childlike nature. When she came to visit us in Pune, she had requested for her favourite *chakli*, a special savoury of Pune. She’d also bought a beautiful *saree* for my wife insisting that she could not have come empty handed to our home the first time,” says Ulhas Kashalkar with a smile.





Veena Jalan

Music lover

“My mother, Late Kamala Devi Somany was very close to Girija Devi *ji*. Though I was not a formal, *Ganda Bandh* disciple of hers, I did learn lighter forms of compositions such as *thumri*, *chaiti*, *kajri* etc. from *Appa ji* for a good 8-10 years at her residence in ITC SRA,” says the music lover who has had ample opportunity to hear some of the most celebrated musicians of our country from very close quarters.

For her, the most appealing part of *Appa ji*'s music was that it came straight from the heart and struck a chord. “She had the ability to make even the very complicated notes look very easy; she really sang for the Lord,” she reflects.

Now a grandmother herself, Jalan's family has enjoyed such close ties with the legend, that even her children fondly addressed Girija Devi as *Nani ji* or grandmother.





Pt. Vijay Kichlu

Padma Shri, Founder ITC Sangeet Research Academy

“*Purab ang ki gayaki thehri hui hae, gambheer hae, chanchal nahi hae.* The ‘*Purab ang*’ style of singing is a bit serious, a bit contemplative; it is not particularly playful. I am scared that with *Girija behen’s* demise, the soul of the ‘*Purab Ang Gayaki*’ maybe lost,” says Pt. Kichlu in a slightly hoarse voice that harbours concern as we sit on a cold, foggy winter morning in his airy apartment.

He takes a moment and continues. “Any good *bandish* has compositional beauty; but only if its essence can be conveyed, only if its every *bol* can be expressed, does it evoke an impact on the listener. *Girija behen* could do that. My personal understanding is that the source of this *gayaki*, this style of singing lies in Krishna’s *Raas-Leela* which is brought out and expressed exceptionally well by Pt. Birju Maharaj. Since *Girija behen* stayed in close proximity to Pt. Birju Maharaj, that quality of hers got enhanced.”

After a while, the sun begins to break through the grey clouds and faint rays come streaming in. We sip on cups of hot tea and I enquire about some of the photos hanging on the walls, each one depicting an era gone by. A faint smile begins to appear on Pt. Kichlu’s face too.

“*Girija behen* was a remarkable hostess. She would take pains to rustle up a full *Banarasi* fare for her guests. Her home at SRA used to be a perpetual *adda* point amongst most artistes. Her amiable and social nature would make the atmosphere absolutely delightful, filled with non-stop chatter and bonhomie,” recalls Pt. Kichlu fondly.



“For years together, the *bhav* or the expressions with which Pt. Birju Maharaj and Kelu *babu* (Kelucharan Mohapatra) came together with Girija *behen* singing and Jog *Sahib*

(V G Jog) playing the violin amidst a showering of rose petals became the penultimate legendary conclusion to every *Gulab Bari* evening hosted at the Neotia household by Bimla *jiji*,” he concludes.



Debapriya Adhikary and Samanwaya Sarkar

Disciples; Vocalist and Sitarist

Besides being a musical duo and disciples of Girija Devi, Debapriya and Samanwaya have another unique feather in their cap. They have co-conceived and directed, 'Girija, A Lifetime in Music,' a documentary on Girija Devi that explores her personal journey, her life in Banaras, and her contribution to *Hindustani Shastriya Sangeet*. The two were already her disciples when they began shooting the documentary and have a treasure trove of memories of their beloved *Guru*.

"We used to get scolded quite often during the filming of the documentary but even that was special," says Samanwaya with a smile. The maestro was even somewhat reluctant at first to narrate her story and have it filmed, but gradually relented and began to participate.

Interestingly, when the duo became her students, they were already well trained and skilled as artists. "But *Appa ji* gave us the very crucial perspective; the insight that is needed to bring a higher dimension to art. A *Guru* is not just about *vidya* or knowledge; she is a transmitter of energy and that can only happen when you do *Guru Seva* from your heart," explains Debapriya who has done everything from cooking her favourite *paneer pulao* to organising her *puja ghar*. Samanwaya on the other hand has the unique distinction of perhaps being the only sitar



player who has learnt *tappas* from her and is rendering them on the sitar. “She would explain every grain, every nuance, every intricacy,” he says.

Debapriya and Samanvaya have returned from their maiden concert in Lucerne, Switzerland. “How did it go,” I ask them. “Very well. We can feel her blessings when we perform,” they smile in unison.



Kameshwar Nath Mishra

Veteran Tabla player of Banaras

Dressed in a simple cotton *kurta-pajama*, a *jhola* hanging from his shoulders, his lips dark red with the stain of *paan* and his voice carrying an aroma of simpler times, the heavily bespectacled elderly gentleman sitting opposite me could easily pass off as an everyday *Banarasi babu*. Except that Kameshwar *ji*, happens to be someone who has had the distinction of accompanying Girija Devi *ji* on the tabla, not just in concerts but also for her daily *riyaz* or practise, nearly for fifteen years.

“*Appa didi*, as I called her, started learning singing from my grandfather, Late Shri Sarju Prasad Mishra *ji* when she was very young. Thus, both *didi* and I hail from the same *Guru Gharana* or lineage,” he begins. Later, Girija Devi *ji* came under the tutelage of Shrichand Mishra *ji*. “I came into the picture as her tabla accompanist, after her regular tabla accompanist passed away. I was also quite young, only in my teens and would go to her house every day,” he recalls.

Besides giving *sangat* during her practise sessions, Kameshwar *ji* has had the opportunity of touring extensively with her and witnessing her journey first hand from a rising star to achieving the status of a legend. He has many tales to tell; quite the recipe for a perfect languid afternoon in Banaras.

He recalls how once Girija Devi was due to sing for a special program at Basant College in Banaras where the Chief Guest was the noted philosopher J. Krishnamurthy. “But unfortunately just before the program, *Appa didi* came to know about the fact that her *Guru*, Shrichand Mishra *ji* had been diagnosed with



throat cancer. Can there be any worse news for a singer and his disciple? But such was her strength and resilience, that though she was deeply saddened by the news, she went and honoured the recital, singing Raag Puriya Dhanashree in the beginning and closing with a Meera *bhajan*. Krishnamurthy *ji* was so moved by her singing, that he went into a *Samadhi*, a trance and recovered only a few minutes after her recital,” he shares.

“There was a meditative quality about her singing. And I cannot praise her *saralta*, her simplicity enough. Though I was much junior to her in every respect, she made it a point to call me on every *Guru Purnima* to honour the fact that we both hailed from the same *Guru Gharana*,” he says, wiping his eyes that have welled up.



Malini Awasthi

Padma Shri, Vocalist and disciple

Her Hindi is rich and is peppered with the loveliest phrases in *Awadhi* and *Bhojpuri* giving her dialogue an earthy touch. Though she was trained in the Rampur and the *Patiala Gharana*, Malini also wanted to learn the *Purab Ang ki gayaki* and became a *Ganda Bandh* or a formal disciple of Girija Devi in 1998 after completing her *Visharad* or her Masters in music from the Bhatkhande University in Lucknow.

Malini *ji* digs into her own experiences to throw light on the kind of person her *Guru* was besides being a superlative artiste. “In this age of cellular technology, *Appa* was someone who could reach out to people and forge enduring relationships. In all these years, I hardly ever recall her sitting alone. She used to be perpetually surrounded by students or her family members or even her distant relatives. She just had to get seated somewhere and instantly the atmosphere of that place would transform; *Jahan beth jaati thi, wahin utsav shuru! Appa ji* possessed the rarest strengths of knowing how to be joyous,” shares the Padma Shri student.

Awasthi recalls how fond her *Guru* was of old traditional *sarees*, shawls and jewellery. Though she never went out to the market herself, merchants would come to her place and she would browse through their wares. “Once, during Holi, *Appa* decided to come and stay with us in Noida. I was more than happy to have her with us but I also had a scheduled program in Lucknow at the same time. Somewhat apprehensively, when I mentioned to her that I may have to be



away for a day, instead of taking it amiss, she asked me to get a pink coloured *chikan* work *saree* from Lucknow for her so that she could wear it for Holi! She had a large heart and rejoiced in the success of her students,” she explains.

Describing her as a Giver and a *Vinodini*, Malini Awasthi states that it may now be virtually impossible to have a *Guru* such as Girija Devi.



Dr. Manasi Majumdar

Disciple and Vocalist

“Don’t wear glasses! Have you become old?’ That’s how Girija Devi would fondly reprimand her dear student who shares vintage vignettes from her diaries.

“In the last twenty years of being her formal, *Ganda Bandh* student, I found that she could wonderfully balance both her outer world and the world of music; *duniyadaari* and *gayaki*. Despite touching the pinnacles of success, she was never complacent and continued to do her *riyaz* in the morning. For her, there was no such thing as ‘*budhapa*’ or old age; her spirit was remarkably ageless. She had a razor sharp memory and would sometimes disapprovingly ask her students, ‘Why do you need a computer?’”

Dr. Majumdar also recalls a small but significant incident when Girija Deviji was due to sing at a concert at ITC Sangeet Research Academy. The weather was oppressively hot and all the artistes including listeners were feeling uncomfortable. “But *Appa* stayed calm throughout, as if the heat was not able to touch her. She sat through the entire concert, patiently listening to every singer’s performance and silently encouraging each one. Only a few days before her demise, she’d told me that she would teach me a rare *thumri* set to *ada chautal*, a fourteen beat cycle...alas, I will now never get to learn it,” laments Dr. Majumdar.





Manju Sundaram

Senior Disciple and Vocalist

A Graduate in English Literature and a Post Graduate in Sanskrit, Manju Sundaram has been one of Girija Devi's earliest disciples. Starting from 1964, she learnt vocal music from her nearly for fifteen years. To my delight, she demonstrates the finer nuances of myriad compositions in a variety of *Raags* such as *Bhairavi*, *Majh Khammaj*, *Pilu* and *Desh* in detail, as if they were taught to her only yesterday. "I was fortunate to imbibe the rarest of her teachings, she says with unabashed pride. *Appa* always felt that I was absorbing her teachings well and she allowed my faculties to blossom," says the formal *Ganda Bandh* disciple.

"I feel that *Appa* saw life through music. She accorded the highest place to the literature of the composition as well and was very careful of its presentation. I can recall a very popular *kajri* whose original words were '*Kehenwa maano o dil jaani...*' but *Appa* changed it to '*Kehenwa maano o radha rani...*' That one subtle change altered the entire approach," explains Sundaram.



Pt. Shubhen Chatterjee

Tabla Maestro

Shubhen Chatterjee has the rare distinction of having accompanied Girija Devi for more than 300 concerts over the last 30 years. But he had to undergo an acid test before his glorious innings could begin. He recounts the story.

“*Appa ji* heard me playing for the first time at a concert held at Ice Skating Rink in Calcutta. She enquired who I was and asked me to come and meet her. However, when I reached her residence at the appointed date she kept me waiting for almost the entire day but did not meet me. I came back home and the next day, paid her a second visit. On the second occasion too, her daughter apologised that *Appa ji* was busy and could not meet me. This way, I had to sit out for two days before I finally got a chance to meet her. This was *Appa ji's* way of testing my sincerity and love for music; only skill was not enough for her.” Shubhen Chatterjee finally debuted with her at a SAARC festival in Bangalore where both Girija Devi and Pt. Jog were on stage.

Having accompanied her extensively both in India and abroad, Shubhen Chatterjee has a rich repository of anecdotes. He recalls a particular tour of England where Girija Devi and the *thumri* stalwart, Late Smt. Shobha Gurtu happened to be together. “We had a longish drive of about 4-5 hours from the Heathrow airport and were travelling by coach. *Appa ji* decided that we should all play *Antakshari*. We formed teams and sang film songs. *Appa ji* sang compositions by Madan Mohan, including ‘*Mera Saaya*’ and Shobha *ji* sang Khayyam songs like ‘*Dil cheez kya hae*’ from *Umrao Jaan*.”

Shubhen Chatterjee emphasises that though Girija Devi belonged to the Banaras *Gharana*, she had absorbed so much from other *Gharanas* and made it all a part of her own *gayaki* and style that she had become a *Gharana* unto herself. “I call it the Girija Devi *Gharana*; the Girija Devi school of music” he concludes.



Ustad Sabir Khan

Tabla Maestro, Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee

“I was used to hearing her name from my childhood as my father, (Late Karamatullah Khan) used to play the tabla with her, but I first met her when I was about ten years old in the Green Room of Rabindra Sadan after the conclusion of a very good programme,” recalls Sabir *bhai*. A great raconteur, he then goes on to tell a wonderful tale that straddles across generations. “My father introduced me to her and said she was Girija *bhua* or aunt. I touched her feet. She gave me ten rupees as *ashirwad* and said, *‘Is paise ka doodh pee lena; Buy milk from this money and have it. I replied to her that I already had 50 naya paisa in my pocket and could I instead use her money to buy marbles? She laughed at my reply and said I could.’*”

This episode dates back nearly forty years. Much later, Sabir accompanied Girija Devi for the first time in 1978 at the Park Circus Music Conference held in Calcutta. The concert went off exceedingly well after which Sabir thanked his Girija *bhua* and credited the concert to her *ashirwad* of ten rupees which she had given to him several decades ago.

“Girija *bhua* would affectionately pamper my wife Farida and call her *Bahu*. I also know that she went out of her way to help out many



artistes by getting programs for them or even getting them to accompany her,” he reveals. Sabir *bhai's* son, Asif, who is now 28 years old, has also had the good fortune of accompanying Girija Devi several times at home and would fondly address her as *Dadi* or grandmother.



Vidushi Subhra Guha

Hindustani Classical Vocal

An exponent of the Agra *Gharana*, Subhra Guha joined ITC Sangeet Research Academy in 1982 and learnt under Pt. Sunil Bose. Though she was never a direct disciple of Girija Devi's, she describes her as a '*batabriksh*' or a banyan tree that protected everyone from the sun and the rain. "*Appa ji's* home was a major *adda* zone for us. Every other evening many of us would gather there. *Appa ji* had a great sense of humour and loved laughing! But in case there was any serious discussion some day, she would also be equally attentive and sensitive," shares Subhra *di*.

One of her fondest memories is the way Holi was celebrated at Sangeet Research Academy with *Appa ji* and her daughter taking charge. "Every year there would be something special and *Appa ji* would involve all the SRA scholars. Some years we would put up a drama; sometimes we just got together and sang. One year, she decided to give everyone titles from films and our much revered director, Pt. Kichlu, was given the title of '*Kashmir ki Kali!*'" she shares with a smile.





Sunanda Sharma

Disciple and Vocalist

Though she had started learning classical vocal from her father Pt. Sudarshan Sharma, Sunanda who hailed from Kangra in Himachal, always wanted to go to Banaras for her advanced tutelage. Opportunity came her way quite unexpectedly in Jalandhar, when she was asked to accompany Girija Devi on the *tanpura*. Since they did not know each other, Girija Devi called her to her hotel room for an introduction. “The door was opened by her. She had probably just finished doing her *puja* and was holding burning incense sticks in her hands. Her long, white hair was undone and she had a divine aura about her. I was so struck by her that it did not even occur to me to touch her feet!” says Sunanda, recalling the first moment when she met Girija Devi who later became her *Guru*.

After chatting with Sunanda for a while, Girija Devi asked her to sing. “I was nervous but sang *Raag Ahir Bhairav*. After I finished, she looked at me and said ‘*Mujhse seekhogi?* Will you learn from me?’ Thereafter Girija Devi met my father who was a learned man and simply said, ‘*Bhaiya, apni beti mujhe de dijiye*; please hand over your daughter to me.’ I don’t know what went through my father’s heart but he replied equally simply, ‘*Aaj se yeh aapki beti hae*; she’s your daughter from today,’ and thus I became *Appa ji’s* disciple,” shares Sunanda.

Sunanda then moved from Kangra to Kashi where she stayed with Girija Devi for ten years. “She was not just someone who taught me only music. She made me understand and absorb the culture and ethos of Banaras. I learnt how to cook *Banarasi* dishes, how to wear a *saree* in the *Banarasi* style, the intricacies of the language and so on. There are many good artistes but *Appa ji* was a saintly artiste,” says Sharma earnestly.





Prabha Devi

Girija Devi's niece

Only eight years younger to Girija Devi, at first glance, the silver haired, soft spoken Prabha Devi bears a distinct resemblance to her aunt. But she is quick to dismiss my suggestion. “*Unki baat aur thi; I cannot be compared to her,*” she begins, pointing to a large picture of Girija Devi hung in her drawing room. Prabha remembers her *masi* with great fondness, though she too addresses her as *Appa*. “I spent most of my childhood with her. She was my mother, my aunt, and my closest friend,” says the niece.

From playing with dolls together to seeing her get married and later become a much revered *Guru* at ITC Sangeet Research Academy, Prabha has a lifetime of memories with her. “She was truly a pillar for each of us at every stage of our lives. From braiding my hair and sending me to school, to allowing me to accompany her on the *tanpura* at hundreds of concerts, to coming forward and participating in every family function with full vigour, *Appa* was a rare human being,” she gushes.

Prabha *ji* remembers moving from Banaras to Kolkata with *Appa* when she joined ITC SRA. “She never made me feel that she was doing a favour or anything; instead I was made to feel like the *malik*; the one in charge. By then, keeping track of her dates and program schedules had become part of my responsibility. I was entrusted with preparing her *paan* for years; it was much later that she started preparing it on her own,” shares Prabha.

Recalling her legendary culinary skills, her niece shares that Girija Devi *ji*



loved making dishes like *Malai Palak*, *Chura Matar*, *Gobi Mussalam* and other *Banarasi* specialities. “I was her taster; if I approved, the dish was taken to be okay,” she says with a smile as she offers me home made *jalebis*.

Prabha Devi fondly talks about the grand party that had been thrown by her *mausa ji* or uncle, Late Madhusudan *babu* after Girija Devi was awarded the Padma Shri. “A lot of our family members were still around in those days. *Mausa ji*

had got ice sheets laid out to cool the hall since there was no air conditioning then. The Governor had also come for the celebration.”

Taking a moment to clear her throat which by now stands choked with emotion, she adds, “I was always introduced by her as her eldest daughter; never as her niece; she would say ‘*yeh meri sabse badi beti hae*’....such was *Appa’s* ability to shower love upon each one of us,” she signs off.



Prakash Singh

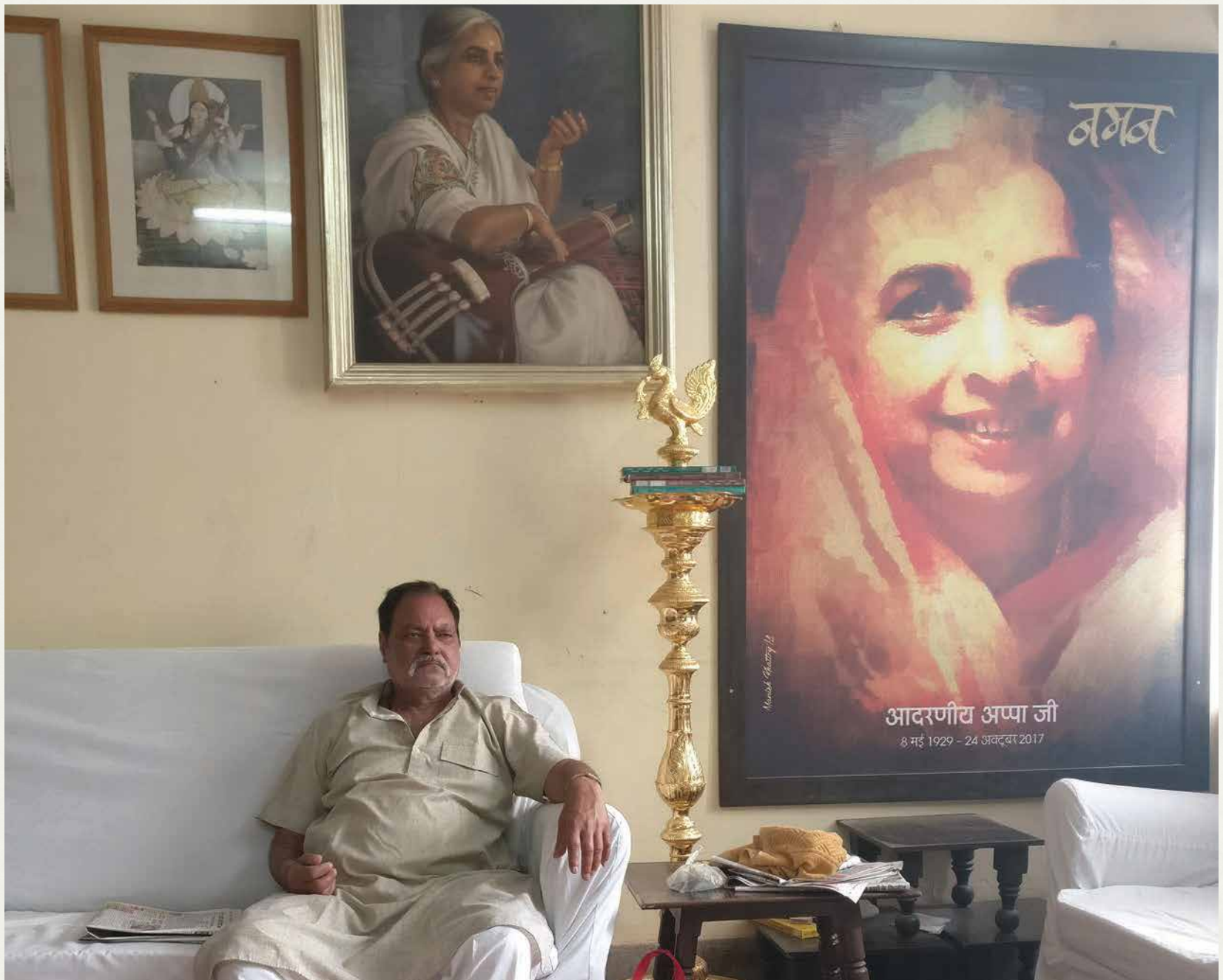
Girija Devi's nephew

I meet Prakash Singh and his wife Usha Singh at Girija Devi's residence in Benaras in a relatively quiet neighbourhood of Banaras called Sanjay Gandhi Nagar in the afternoon. After a sumptuous lunch, we get seated in the drawing room of *Appa ji's* home. I cannot but feel overwhelmed. Some of the highest civilian honours that can be bestowed upon any Indian hang casually on one wall. Around us are shelves and cabinets crammed with awards. There's an ample, neat and green park opposite her residence quite appropriately named '*Devi Vatika*' after the legend.

Prakash takes his time in opening up. I'm in no rush. I allow him to warm up and express himself as he feels comfortable. He is the son of Girija Devi's elder brother, Late Kedar Singh. Usha, his wife, is more forthcoming. "Our marriage was arranged by *Appa*," she opens with a smile and adds, "I was very young when I got married but *Appa ji* encouraged me to continue with my studies."

"She was like my mother and father both; she was somebody who would openly give to all, but would pamper me the most," begins Prakash on an emotional note. He shares that he was sent to the same school as *Munni di* (Girija Devi's daughter) and there were three private tutors who came to teach him in those days. "Later on when I grew older, she came to rely on me and trusted me a great deal as well. She could hardly ever say no to me," he beams.

Both husband and wife elaborate on Girija Devi's love for cooking. "I used to



prepare a *katahal* or jackfruit curry which she liked very much. She also loved having ice creams and *malai* and would often ask for it, says Prakash. He reveals that *Appa ji* loved preparing Guchhi mushrooms which he would procure for her. His wife adds that she was a small eater and had a “bird’s appetite.”

There is a small, beautiful patch of green in the patio area of the house and we step out onto it. “She would often walk here. She’d be delighted each time a flower blossomed and she’d promptly offer it to her Gods. Nobody dared to disturb her during her one hour *puja* in the morning,” they share. Quite the way she offered her music to the Gods, I muse.



Sudha Dutta

Girija Devi's only daughter

Large, life size photographs of *Appa ji* continue to adorn her walls. Some of her belongings though look packed and ready to find another home. But perhaps what will be the hardest for Sudha Dutta or *Munni di* as everyone affectionately calls her, will be to gather and pack the repository of lifetime memories as she prepares to leave ITC Sangeet Research Academy that has been their home for many years now.

“Very early in my life, I had understood that I maybe her only daughter but she's not mother to me alone. Her sense of giving was so infinite, that students, artistes, friends and other family members, all looked up to her as a mother,” says *Munni di* somewhat wistfully.

We are sitting with photo albums scattered around us and her memory floodgates come open. “Even as a young girl, I remember how dutiful and punctual my mother was. She would be up at 3:30am for her *riyaz*. She would prepare lunch for her *Guru* herself. I think it was her sense of devotion to music that allowed her to express *thumri*, which is primarily scented with '*shringar ras*' in a way that it exuded '*bhakti ras*.' Even after touching the heights of glory, she would often ask us for our feedback after a concert. She would carefully select her *saree* according to the season, wearing pink during *chait* or spring and green in *saawan* during the rainy season. She had an off white coloured *Banarasi saree* which she thought was lucky for her! I also remember how fond she was of Pt. Kishan Maharaj,



Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and tied a *rakhi* to all three of them. When she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, *Appa* went and met the senior most

vocalist of Sangeet Research Acedemy, Ustad Abdul Rashid Khan and touched his feet,” shares the daughter.



Vinay Jain

Late Madhusudan Jain's grandson and Music lover

*'Naam mein heera, muhn mein paan
Deepak jaise har ek taan
Baal mein chandi, dil tha sona
Hansi se goonje kona kona
Sahaj thi aisi jaise bachcha
Sur saadhe to bilkul sachcha
Thumri, Hori, Chaiti, Tappa
Eeshwar ka Alaap thi Appa!'*

(Penned by Vinay Jain)

Though his eyes remain dry throughout our conversation, his voice bears a subtle quiver. Vinay steadies it in order to share some of his experiences and memories.

“She used to affectionately call me *Pappu bhaiya*. She used to keep a picture of my grandfather in her wooden almirah in her room. She had even sung for my son's wedding,” he begins.

Vinay had organised and celebrated Girija Devi *ji's* 85th birthday in a grand way over a five day musical festival titled 'Naman' that featured some of the most celebrated musicians including Late *Vidushi* Kishori Amonkar, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Hariharan. She had also complimented him on

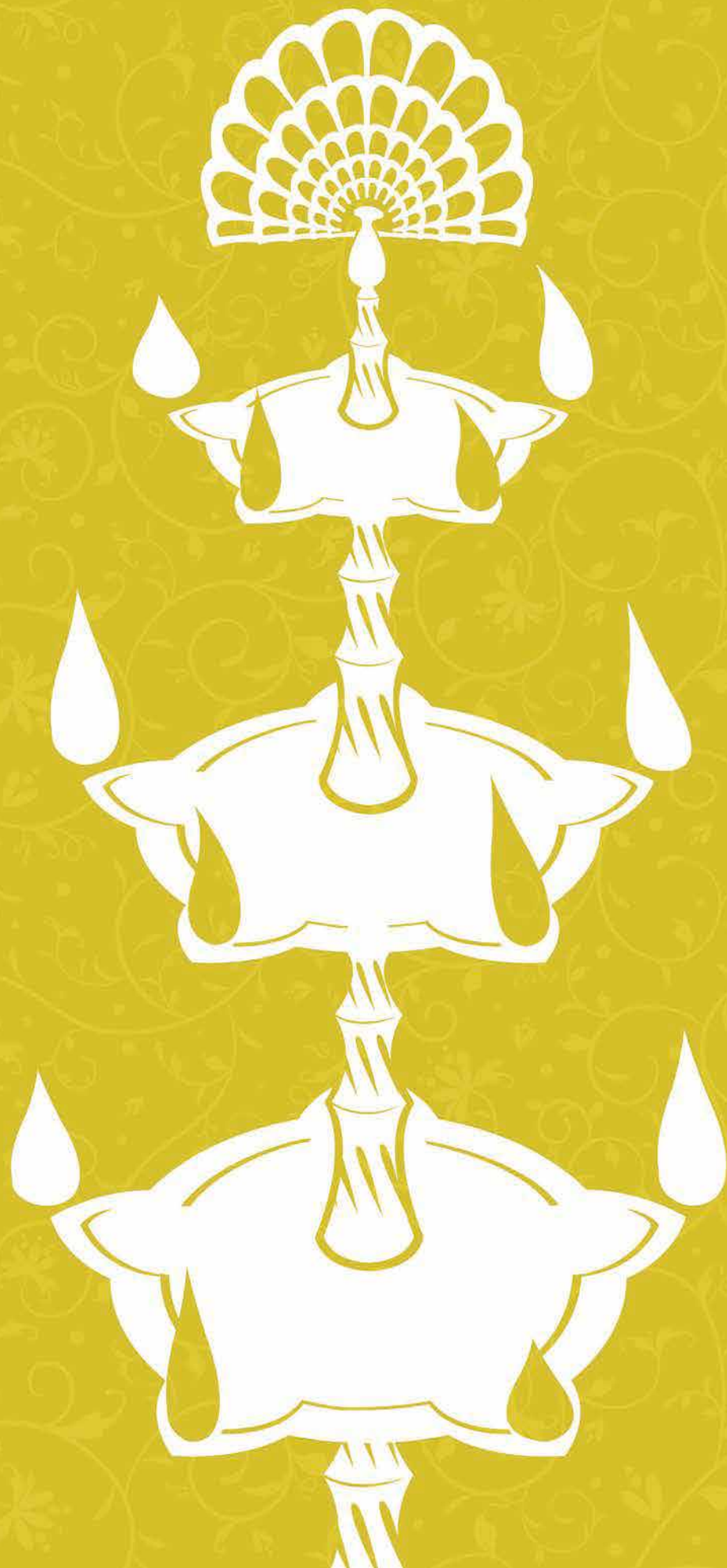


his compere, saying, *'Bachwa, bahut badhiya bolela. Ekdum barabar bolela....Son, you spoke very well; it was very apt;'* words that he holds very dear.

"I can vividly recall how painstakingly she would teach a composition like *'barsan laagi badariya'* to her students, explaining to them the many ways in which rain drops fell so that they could express the same better. Her voice was the

soul of Banaras. I think she had every quality that a woman can ever possess....she was unbelievably simple and courteous in her ways. I remember how meticulously she maintained her *'bahi khaata'*; her expenses," he shares.

"Na bhooto, Na bhavishyati; there just can't ever be another Appa," he closes emphatically.



Awards and Accolades

With some of the highest awards bestowed upon her, Girija Devi's list of accolades is both long and luminous.



Some of the prominent awards bestowed upon her

- Conferred Doctorate of Letters or D. Litt by seven universities including Rabindra Bharati University, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith and Sampurnanand Sanskrit University.
- GiMA Awards 2012 (Lifetime Achievement)
- Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan Award
- ITC Samman (2003)
- Maha Sangeet Samman Award (2012)
- Padma Shri (1972)
- Padma Bhushan (1989)

- Padma Vibhushan (2016)
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1977)
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Ratna Sadasya - Fellowship (2010)
- Sangeet Samman Award by Dover Lane Music Conference
- TanaRiri Puraskar by Gujarat Government (2011)
- Tansen Samman by Madhya Pradesh Government



PURAB ANG GAYAKI UTSAV and GIRIJA DEVI PURUSKAR



VINOD KAPUR

Vinod Kapur confesses to have been left bewitched the first time he accidentally heard Girija Devi singing in Rai Bareilly at a fair way back in 1967. He then heard her soon again at the Bareilly Officers Club of Wimco and later in the early 80's at the Shankar Lal Festival in Delhi where over dinner, he mustered up courage to invite her to sing at his residence in Panchsheel Park; a request that she honoured. The recital turned out to be a most fulfilling one and by then Girija Devi had secured a special place in the heart of the once uninitiated listener. As time passed, Vinod Kapur continued to be smitten by her gayaki and her ability to make everyone in the audience feel that she was singing for him or her alone. The seed of affection that had been sown on the first day in Bareilly had organically found expression, a warm regard and a bond of affection. By 2005, Girija Devi had begun to stay at his residence in Gurgaon anytime she was visiting Delhi. Kapur recalls how her presence would bring alive the otherwise quiet home and how it would start buzzing with joy, laughter and music. These visits helped him to get to know her as an individual, a mother and a Guru. But despite their closeness, they never transcended the line of formality: He continued to call her Girija ji and she referred to him all along as Kapur Sahib.

Later, Vinod Kapur initiated the prestigious Girija Devi Puruskar for upcoming vocalists. He shares a brief account:

“Over the decades I had the opportunity to listen to vast volumes of Hindustani Classical Music, both vocal and instrumental. The music scenario was completely dominated by khayal and its derivatives. Thumris and dadras and music of that ilk were hardly heard and only occasionally offered as a bit of a dessert at the end of the recital. This form of music was deprecated nationally, across the board. To the extent that it was commonly referred to as Upshastriya Sangeet or Light Classical Music – which in many ways has a derisive connotation.

*I raised this topic with Girija ji. Even she demurred and tried to explain the matter away by saying that she primarily sang *Khayals* at the concerts because its exposition represented deeper knowledge and understanding of traditions of Hindustani Classical Music.*

*But for me *Thumri, Dadra, Chaiti, Kajri* and other such forms represented the music and traditions of the Hindi heartland. Each of them in its own manner was an embodiment of our culture, roots and values. There was total shyness of virtually one and all with regard to assuming ownership of this form of music or identifying with it. Though nobody would overtly say so, there were in fact historical and social reasons for the hesitancy relating to this form of music. I regarded this attitude not only as hypocritical but also bizarre. In the bargain a vital part of our heartland heritage was being allowed to waste away into oblivion. This used to bother me incessantly.*



It is thus that I conjured up a seemingly foolhardy initiative to resurrect this music from shadows of darkness into which it had receded. The concept involved - in simplistic terms - getting in touch with as many young artistes who sang this form of music; motivating as many of these virtually unknown artistes to sing at *baithaks* dedicated to this music in Calcutta, Banaras and Delhi; having their renditions musically assessed by more evolved exponents or patrons of this form of music and then finally bestowing the best of these unknown artistes with 'Girija Devi ji Puruskars'.

In 2010 I shared this concept with Girija ji, during one of her visits to our home and I sought her approval both for naming the *Puruskars* as Girija Devi *Puruskars* as well as for her moral support for this festival. She was not only delighted by the concept but assured me that she would be present at as many of these *baithaks* as possible and would eventually also handover the Girija Devi *Puruskars* personally. I named the festival - *Purab Ang Gayaki Utsav – A Yagna*.

Then started my search and reaching out to as many young artistes who sang this form of music as possible as well. The unreserved support and encouragement that I received for this seemingly impossible mission from a cavalcade of Gurus, exponents, various music organizations of Calcutta and Banaras and a large number of individuals associated with music was overwhelming.

I selected 36 young, virtually unknown exponents of this music to sing at 12 *baithaks* held in Calcutta, Banaras and Delhi, and eventually 8 of them, as assessed by senior music exponents were

conferred Girija Devi *Puruskars* by Girija ji personally. Most heartening was the huge response to this *utsav* from *rasiks*, who at all locations came in large numbers to listen to unknown young artistes.

Not only was the *utsav* an unprecedented success but vitally the *gayaki* gained a new momentum.

This first *Utsav* of 2010-2011 was followed up with a series of *Purab Ang Gayaki Baithaks* in 2011 and then two *Utsavs* in 2012-2013 and 2016-2017.

The last time I had the opportunity to meet and spend time with Girija ji, was when she came to preside over the *Puruskar Baithaks* of the 3rd *Purab Ang Gayaki Utsav* in August 2017 and to confer the Girija Devi *Puruskars* on those young artistes who had won over the hearts of *rasiks*. Ashwini Bhide, Shubra Guha, and Shruti Sadolikar sang two pieces each of 'Purab' as a tribute to Girija ji. And finally as 'Pooran Ahuti' for the *Purab Ang Gayaki Yagna* and as her blessings for all those who had made this 'Yagna' a success, Girija ji sang two numbers - The last being 'Babul mora nehar chooto hi jai'.

Following the *Baithak* we had a small thanksgiving gathering at India Habitat Centre which was attended by the many individuals who had played a vital role in making the *Purab Ang Gayaki Utsav* a rewarding success. I thanked them all for their support. Finally, I turned to Girija ji to thank her for the inspiration that she was – for her presence at most of the *baithaks* wherever they were held; for her graciously blessing all the young artistes and for her blessings to the *rasiks* through her concluding songs. The truth is that but for Girija ji, the inspiration she provided, and what she stood for, there could have been no *Purab Ang Gayaki Utsav*.

It never occurred to me even for a moment that this could be the last time I would be so interacting with her. Most unexpectedly, only a few weeks later, Girija ji passed away. She left this world in the most blessed manner as she may indeed have prayed for. Suddenly and without being subjected to indignities that comes through extended periods of illness. This was God's ultimate blessing for Girija ji. A life so richly and fully lived. Blessed by God for the happiness and for the joy she brought to so many. So rightly had she earned the sobriquet 'A living legend!'



Her Master's Voice

Bold, strident and inimitable, the legend's voice touched innumerable listeners. From her first public debut on All India Radio in 1949, her discography is virtually an almanac of the Banaras *Gharana*.



Girija Devi recorded numerous solo albums as well as some with leading musical stalwarts such as Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Late Ustad Bismillah Khan and others.

Girija Devi

Confluence
Meeting of Minds and Melodies

BHAJAN

Classical Encounter
A Live Experience With

Amjad Ali Khan
Master of the Sarod
Girija Devi
Vocal exponent

Her discography will continue to delight listeners as well as remain an important point of reference for students of music.

GIRIJA DEVI

MASTERWORKS
Smt. Girija Devi

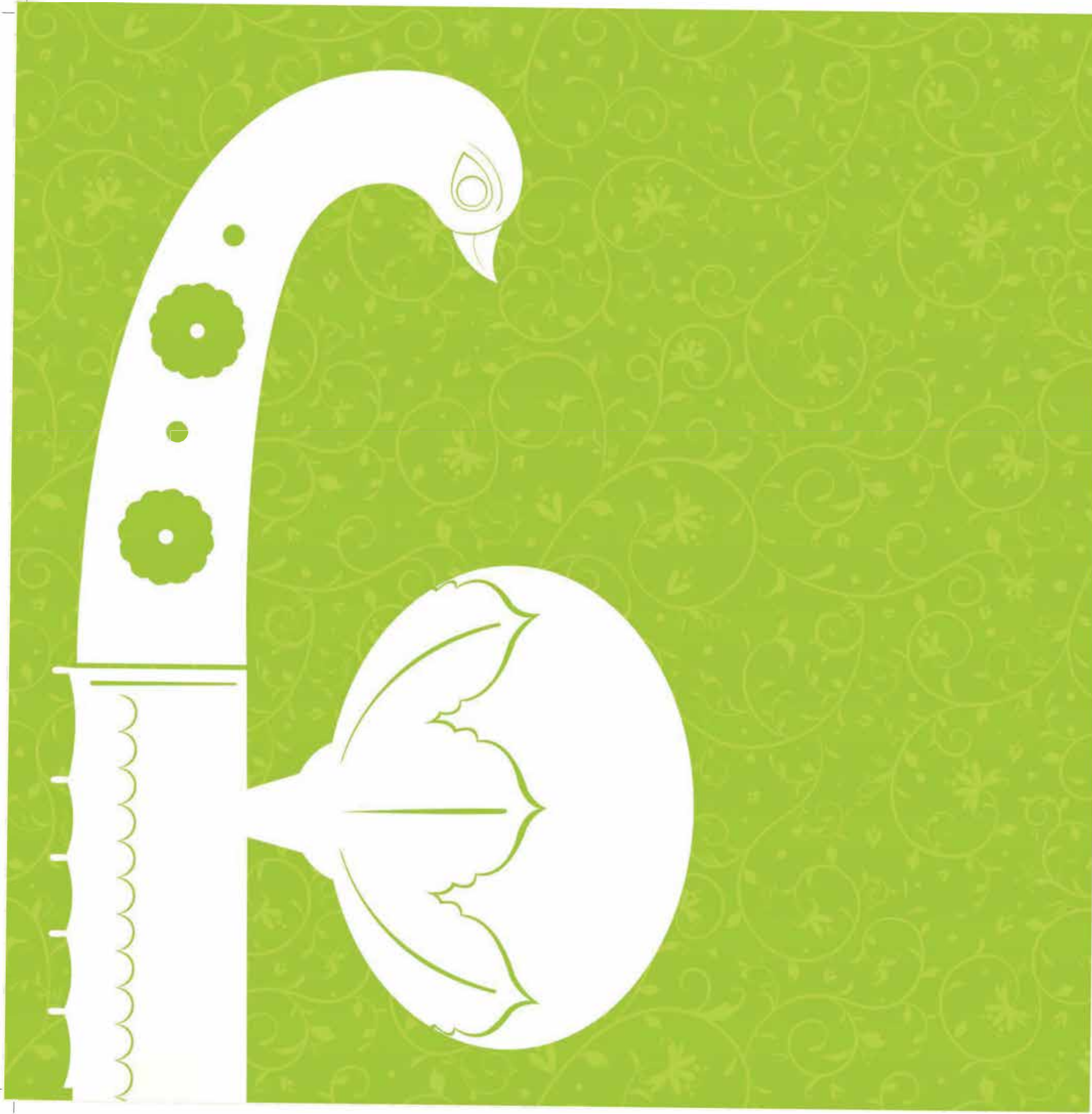
GIRIJA DEVI

CELEBRATING THE LEGEND
GIRIJA DEVI

Pureb Anand
The Spirit of Rhythms

Amjad Ali Khan
Master of the Sarod
Girija Devi
Vocal exponent

11-01	Bago Mau Bhag (Hindi)	21:03
02	Bago Dash (Hindi)	0:02
03	Bago Poo (Hindi)	10:47
04	Godra	17:18
Total playing time 49:50		
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Our *Guru*, Philosopher & Guide

Three generations of the family gets together to fondly remember 'Appa' who was at once their *Guru*, philosopher and guide.



There comes a point in the passage of every penmanship when the writer begins to feel slightly stunted; slightly diminutive. After all, her very *raison d'être* is to state. But how can she state the unstated, the unsaid; especially without robbing it of its innocence, its tenderness?

The role, position and bonding that Late Padmavibhushan Girija Devi enjoyed with the entire Neotia-Poddar family was so rare, ran so deep and remained so real that it is hard to describe it in mere words.

It all began way back in the late 70's when Late Suresh Neotia was escorted to a colourful *Gulab Bari* evening in Banaras by the Late Murari Lal Kedia who was a noted figure of that cultural milieu. With a penchant for fine expressions, Neotia was immediately struck by the evening's ambience, gaiety and of course its music. *Gulab Bari* was an age-old tradition, a seasonal celebration of Banaras that was held after Holi to bring in the month of Chait. It had started in temples but was later passed on to the aristocracy of the city who would spare no effort in creating a magical atmosphere, sometimes even celebrating on big boats or *bajras* on the Ganges and presenting the most reputed musicians of the city who sang genres like *hori*, *khayal*, *thumri*, *dadra* and *chaiti* all night long. A mesmerized Suresh Neotia came back and said to his sister-in-law, Bimla Poddar, that they must do something similar in Calcutta. He even suggested a few singers from Mirzapur and other places who could be approached for the same, but Bimla Poddar had only one reply for him: "If we have to host *Gulab Bari* in Calcutta, there is only one person who can do it; she is one-in all." A resolute Bimla Poddar was referring to none other than Girija Devi. Being a lover of music, Poddar had heard Girija Devi live on several occasions. Besotted by her music, she would also try and meet the maestro backstage after her live performances. "Though I was convinced, I had no introduction to her, despite having tried approaching her several times, until one fine serendipitous day when the tables turned in my favour. The noted musicologist, Dr.

Sunil Satpati had come to meet me. Suddenly, in the midst of our conversation, he said that *Guru ji* was waiting in the car. When I asked him whose *Guru ji*, he replied Girija Devi!" shares Bimla Poddar.

Hardly believing her ears, she ran out to meet her and invited her inside. Girija Devi came in and the three of them sat around chit-chatting. "It was an important ice breaker of a meeting since it allowed us to exchange telephone numbers and have a one-on-one chat," explains Poddar.

A perseverant Poddar kept up correspondence with her, would go to meet her and also invited Girija Devi to their residence to attend an informal *baithak* or a soiree of Pt. Birju Maharaj at their residence on the occasion of Suresh Neotia's birthday. "I did not know it then, but Girija Devi was keenly observing our behaviour, our family and my father-in-law, Late Janki Prasad Poddar and our behaviour; She had also taken note of the fact that senior artistes such as Pt. V.G.Jog and Pt. Ravi and Vijay Kichlu were present for the soiree," she says.

By that time, an *alaap* or an introduction was well in place. In October 1980, during Durga Puja, Poddar invited Girija Devi for lunch. "At that time, I would call her *Didi* and not *Appa*. I clearly remember that she was accompanied by her elder sister, *Amma* and her daughter, Prabha. After lunch, we settled down in the veranda as the weather was quite pleasant and the subject of *Gulab Bari* came up again. Girija Devi enquired about my musical background and I explained that I had learnt *bhajans* and





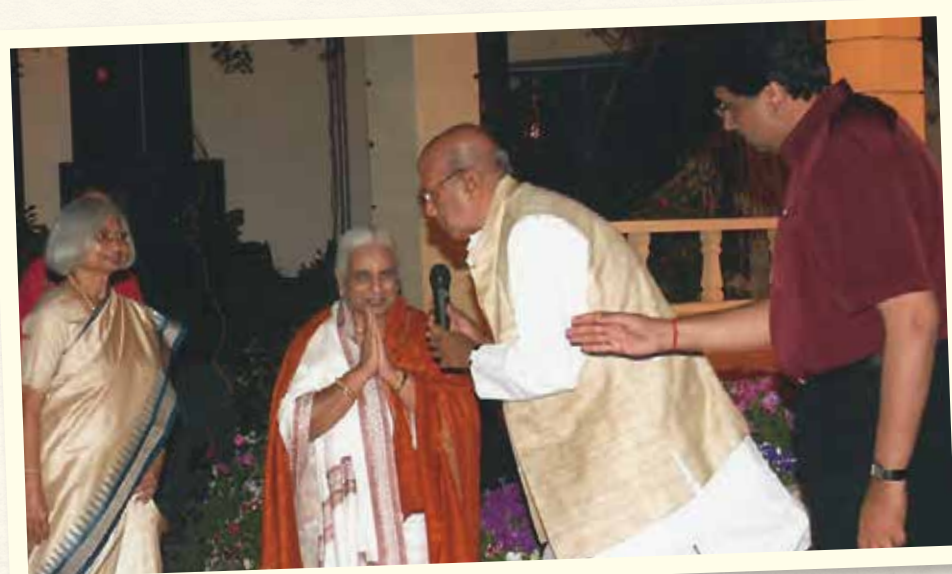
Rabindra Sangeet and had also learnt sitar for a few years under Kalyani Roy,” she recalls.

Mulling over everything she had heard and observed, Girija Devi made an offer to Poddar; one that she could not refuse: “*Tum hamari shisya ban jao; shishya ke ghar mein gaane mein koi burayi nahi kyon ki woh beti samaan hoti hae*; if you become my disciple, then I can perform at your residence,” the maestro had offered since by principle, she did not sing at private residences. “*Aap mujhe sikhayengi?* You will teach me? I had asked her in astonishment and her reply was an affirmative one,” recalls Poddar.

Not wanting to waste a single moment, Poddar busied herself immediately in procuring all that Girija Devi needed to solemnize the beginning. Flowers were brought in from the ample garden, a new saree along with its accoutrements that Poddar had purchased for herself was procured from her almirah and when it came to offering sweets to the Lord, it was found that a pot of sweets had just arrived and was literally waiting for that very purpose. “It was sheer *sanjog* or destiny,” smiles Poddar, recalling the afternoon.

“Girija Devi made me sing *sargam* with her, instructing me not to pause anywhere in between. Once the ritual was properly conducted, I touched her feet and from that moment, she became *Appa* for me and I became her ‘*beti*’. I was overjoyed and later shared the news with Suresh who was thrilled as well. Finally his desire of hosting *Gulab Bari* at Queen’s Park would come true!” rewinds Poddar.

The first *Gulab Bari* thus came to the Neotia household in 1981, under the benign guidance of Girija Devi. Since then, every member of the household has been touched by her affection, her aura and her magnanimity and has fragrant memories to share.





From the very first year of *Gulab Bari*, Girija Devi ensured that all women of the family wear new, pink *sarees*. The menu for the evening was traditional *Banarasi* fare as decided by the Guru and has remained the same over the last three decades. “*Appa ji* made my daughter Shradha who was only nine or ten years old then, begin the evening by making her offer *puja* to our household Radha-Krishna deities, who were also made to wear new, pink *poshak* or clothes,” says Krishna Neotia, opening up her vast memoirs. Shradha with her friends would also bring the evening to a close by showering rose petals on the artistes and audience, a practise that carried on for nearly ten years and became a hallmark feature. “Just three days before the program, she told me that I have to be on stage and open the program by singing an ode to Lord Ganesh – ‘*Gaiyiye Ganpati Jag Vandan.*’ With friends like Chetna Jalan dancing, *Appa ji* with her disciples like Veenapani Mishra singing and showering rose petals on the audience, the *Gulab Bari* evening instantly touched a chord in the hearts of the music loving audience,” smiles Poddar.

पुस्तक विमला को
शुभाशुभकाल सुचित
गिरिजादेव
२०००



In 2016, when *Gulab Bari* completed 35 years, recalling its very first edition, Girija Devi remarked, “*Kakoji ko bahut pasand aaya tha...*the patriarch was very appreciative of the evening.” Interestingly, despite her wide social circle and her large fan following, she was very clear that she would not conduct *Gulab Bari* anywhere else. “*Yeh ek hi ghar ka rahega*; it can only be held here,” the maestro had ordained unwaveringly.

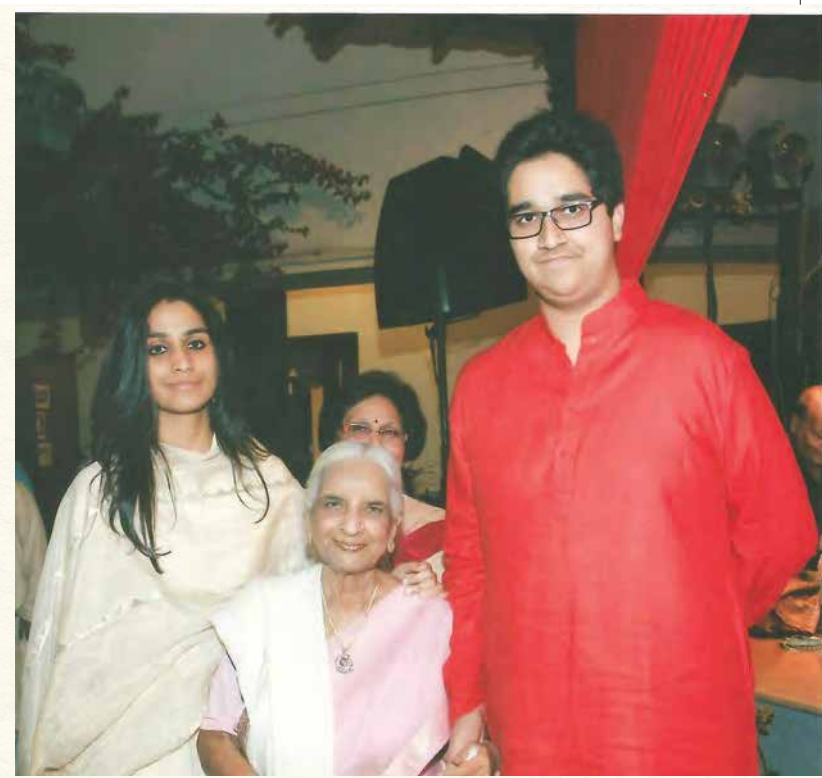
It was the ease and simplicity with which she had mingled with the family, despite being such a senior artiste that gradually strengthened their bonding. Smriti Murarka, Bimla Poddar’s daughter narrates a delightful incident. “I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, and though I was amply exposed to Indian art and music, I was leaning more towards the then contemporary western music such as Abba and Harry Belafonte. However, *Appa ji*’s performance and the music of the first *Gulab Bari* evening had hit me and left us all quite mesmerized. The next morning, I woke up and told my mother that if Girija Devi were to teach me music, then I was ready to learn Indian Classical. My mother was so overjoyed by my change of heart, that without wasting a moment, she took my hand and together we marched off to Sangeet Research Academy, where she handed me over to Girija Devi and said, “*Is angrez bandar ko sambhaliye* – Now please take over this girl!” laughs Smriti. She goes on to explain how indulgent and patient *Appa ji* had been with her and credits her for having bestowed her with a certain musical compass; a certain grounding which later went on to infect her daughter Priyanka, who has been learning *kathak* from the age of three.

“But you needn’t have been crazy about music to be influenced and touched by her,” emphasizes Harsh Neotia, the scion of the family. “*Appa ji* was someone who was filled with childlike wonder and enthusiasm and showered affection upon each one of us. Despite being such a legend, she was most approachable and humble,” he states. His 22 year old twins Parthiv and Paroma who have been seeing *Gulab Bari* and Girija Devi since their birth readily agree with their father and register their fond regard for the maestro as well.

Madhu, the youngest daughter-in-law of the Neotia family chips in. “*Appa ji* loved receiving gifts. The gifts did not have to be significant ones, but she received them with great joy nonetheless. I remember how enthused she was when I gifted her a Diwali hamper last year,” she shares.

Krishna Neotia on the other hand made it a point to add Yardley soap and a doll to her shopping list which she would get for *Appa ji* from her overseas holidays.

On a more serious note, Harsh adds that despite having grappled with all



kinds of blows that life had dealt her, she had not become bitter. “She could laugh at adversity and was someone who was great fun to be with,” he says. Madhu says that till today, she marvels at how deftly *Appa ji* would deal with leading artistes and sometimes even their tantrums. “She was awfully quick witted and knew how to diffuse a situation in no time,” she adds. Seconding her, Smriti adds that *Appa ji* led by example and her conduct was absolutely stellar, making her much revered even in the music fraternity. “She taught one the difference between having a spine and having an ego,” she reflects.

Not wanting to be left out, Bimla Poddar’s domestic help Sunita who has been listening all along, quietly adds, “*Appa ji bahut pyar karti thi. Humko dekhne se hi poochti thi kaun sa achar dale hain*; She was very loving and when she saw me she would enquire about which pickle I was preparing, since she was fond of the pickles I made!”

Taking a cue from her, Krishna adds that Girija Devi would mischievously enquire what was being cooked at the Neotia household kitchens and then sometimes make her own *farmaish*, her own request. “She liked the vegetable gratin and the eggless cakes that were baked in our kitchen,” she smiles.

Hearing so many fun *qissas*, so many anecdotes and having seen the legend interacting with the members of the family, I say to them that it hardly sounds that are speaking of such a senior artistic personality; they all make her sound more like their friend. “She was a part of the family. Her word was the last, not out of fear but because that was the kind of faith we willingly reposed in her,” states her disciple, Bimla Poddar. Jogging her memory back to the time when her mother-in-law, Late Bhagirathi Neotia was ailing, she recalls how Girija Devi had sat by her bedside and sung *Krishna bhajans* to her.





“*Bai* was so moved that she instantly took out the ring on her finger and gave it to *Appa*,” she shares. Every member of the family states that *Girija Devi*’s voice and spirit had remained ageless despite her advanced years. “Not just ageless, something used to transform in her when she went up on stage and sat down to sing,” says *Poddar*. Her sister-in-law *Krishna* adds that to her *Girija Devi* often looked like an incarnation of Goddess *Saraswati* herself. “Even today, when I hear a *koyal*, a *cuckoo*, I think of *Appa ji*. When I sing, I feel she is with me, quietly inspiring me. I can see her loving smile when I shut my eyes; she adds.

Krishna’s younger daughter *Shraddha* who moved to USA many moons ago after her marriage, recalls how warm and zealous the maestro was and how she had made her sing in front of a large audience, right before her marriage! “I had not practised for nearly eight years and was very out of touch. But her ability to be inclusive and take people along was marvellous,” she recalls.

The women reminisce how they would enthusiastically prepare for *Guru Purnima* every year. They would purchase *sarees* for their beloved *Appa* and go to her house with sweets. “Since she did not take anything from us otherwise, that was a day we offered her a *Pranami*, an honorarium as well. We will miss her very much this *Guru Purnima*,” they say. If the women were close, the men weren’t far behind.

Suresh Neotia had tremendous regard for her art and her talent and accorded her nothing but the highest respect. After all it only took one phone call from *Appa* to even the tallest reigning musical virtuosos of that time for them to agree to come and perform for *Gulab Bari* at the *Neotia* household. From *Ustad Bismillah Khan* who played the *shehnai* for *Harsh* and *Madhu*’s wedding, to performances by *Pt. Bhimsein Joshi*, *Pt. Kelucharan Mohapatra*, *Ustad Amjad Ali Khan*, *Pt. Jasraj*, *Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia*, *Ustad Zakir Hussain*, *Pt. Rajan-Sajan Mishra* and many other luminaries, *Girija Devi* steered *Gulab Bari* for 25 years till 2005 in a way that it became an iconic,



much awaited cultural evening of Calcutta.

“When she was awarded the Padma Bhushan, my younger brother-in-law, Vinod and I drove down and landed up excitedly first thing in the morning at her residence in SRA. In anticipation of the news, we had got a painting of hers done by Prakash Das. When we gifted it to her, she was overjoyed and so were we. Till today, that painting hangs in her Banaras drawing room. That morning became somewhat of a spontaneous celebration!” recalls Poddar happily.

Bimla Poddar confesses that even though she was interested in music it was entirely because of Girija Devi that her horizons expanded and she was introduced to so many stalwarts from such close quarters.

In her heydays, Poddar would also go to stay with Girija Devi at her residence in Banaras. “She would make me do *riyaz* in the morning and evening. Kameshwar Mishra *ji* would accompany us on the tabla. She was so attentive that if I went even slightly off key, she would call out even from the bathroom, ‘*Pancham dekho beti*; pay attention to the fifth note dear!’ Appa would prepare *halwa* with a lot of *ghee* for me and would make me have it, saying it would be good for my throat!”

I realise that I may spend days and unending hours with every member of the family, but such has been their bonding with the legend that their anecdotes and reminiscences will not come to an end. With her passing away, they have lost a Godmother who could dote on them, scold them, show them the way, shower them with love and affection and bring them all closer to the Divine. “Her demise leaves a void that cannot be filled; it marks the end of an era. We can only remain deeply grateful to her, cherish the golden memories and say *Pranaam Appa*,” closes Harsh Neotia.



Girija Devi

PADMASHREE
PADMA BHUSHAN
SANGEET SHIKHMANI
SANGEET ACHARYA
THUMRI SAMRAGI
UTTAR BHARAT KI KOKILA
SANGEET NATAK ACADEMY AWARD
NATIONAL SANGEET NATAK ACADEMY AWARD
BHOPALI BHASKAR
SANGEET SARASWATI
SANGEET BHARTI
YASH BHARTI
D. LIL. MAHATMA GANDHI KASHI VIDYAPITH
VARANASI
USTAD HAZIZ ALKHAM AWARD
TANSEN AWARD
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Date ४ दिम्बर २०१०

पञ्जीत वरि विवाहोत्तर
शुभ आशीर्वाद
प्रिय हर्ष सौभाग्यवती मधुको
हर्ष हर्षिता हो रहे हैं मधु के मधुमय रस धारा में।
पो पुरुष रिकले हैं बगियारुपी पटिवार में ॥
वे कि देव गुणजनों के प्रणाम करे चरणों में।
सदैव भी गते रहे शुभ लामना आशीर्वाद के वाह्यारों में ॥

सन्नेह
अप्याजी
गिरिजा देवी



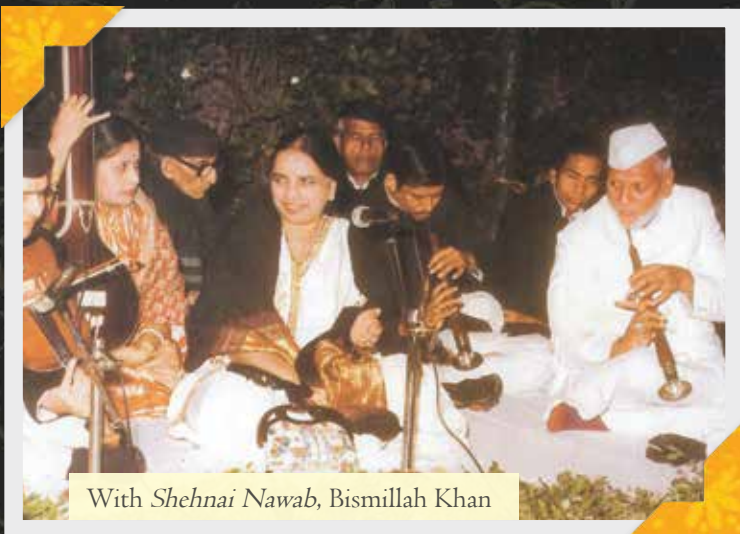


Fragrant Memories

Of performances that were power houses; of music that was magical and of memories that were pure gold. Girija Devi steered *Gulab Bari* in such a way that it acquired the stature of an iconic cultural affair.



With Pt. Bhimsein Joshi and Pt. Birju Maharaj



With Shehnai Nawab, Bismillah Khan



With Pt. V.G.Jog



In her younger days with Pt. V.G.Jog



With Ustad Bismillah Khan and disciple Dalia Raut



Felicitating Danseuse Mallika Sarabhai



With Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia and *Kathak* dancer Saswati Sen



Showering her affection on Pt. Birju Maharaj





Girja Devi with Bimla Poddar and Pt. Kishan Maharaj



With Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma



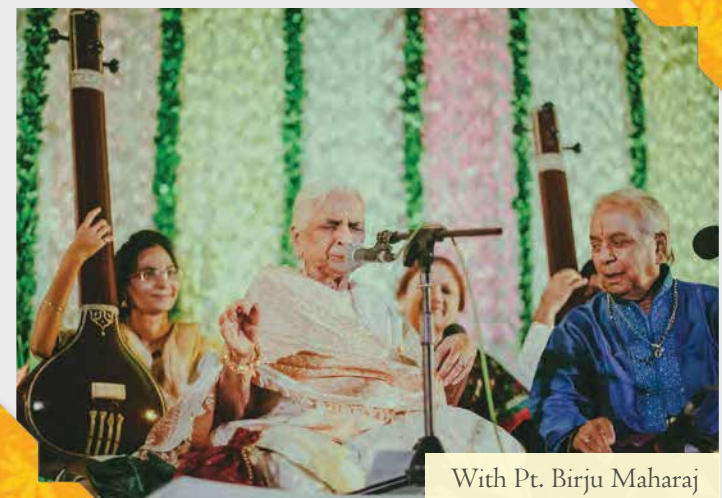
With her dear brother Ustad Ali Akbar Khan



With danseuse Smt. Amala Shankar



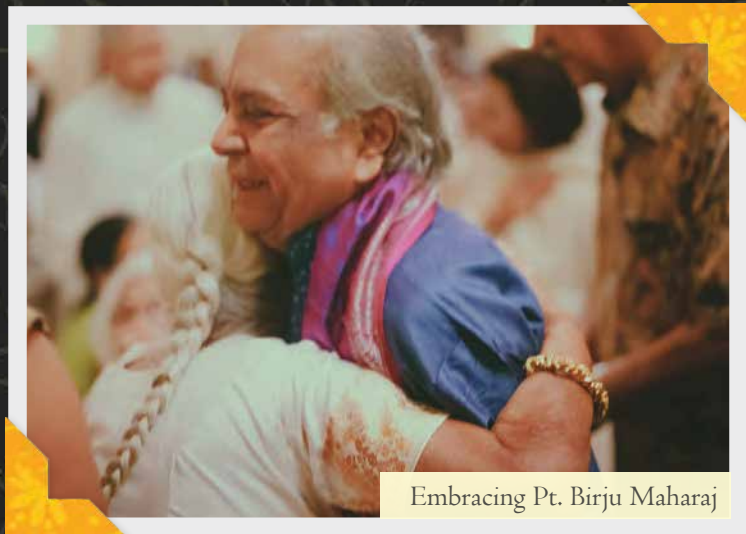
With Vidushi Kishori Amonkar and Begum Parveen Sultana



With Pt. Birju Maharaj



With Pt. Birju Maharaj and Ustad Zakir Hussain



Embracing Pt. Birju Maharaj

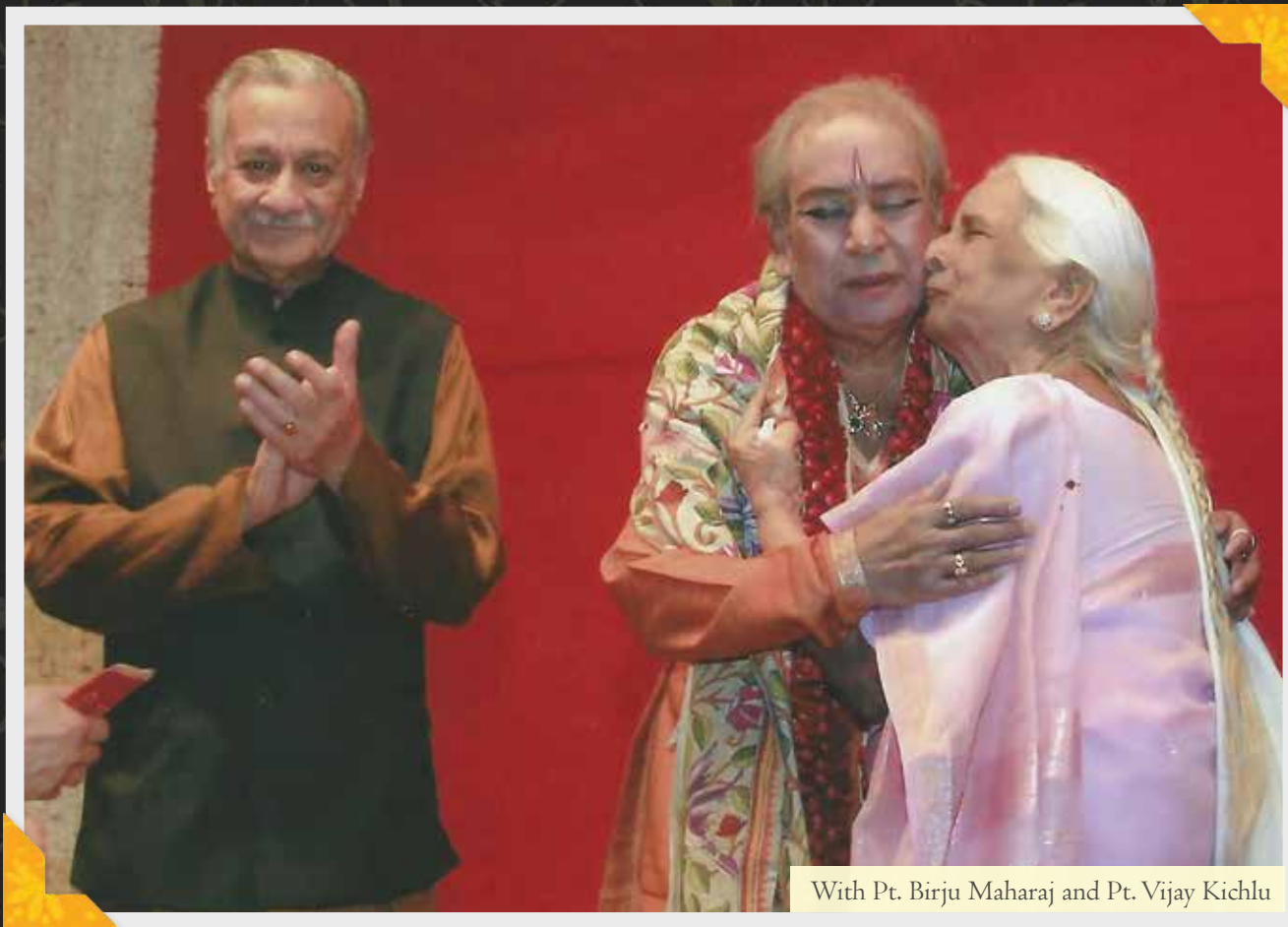


Felicitating *kathak* exponent Sitara Devi

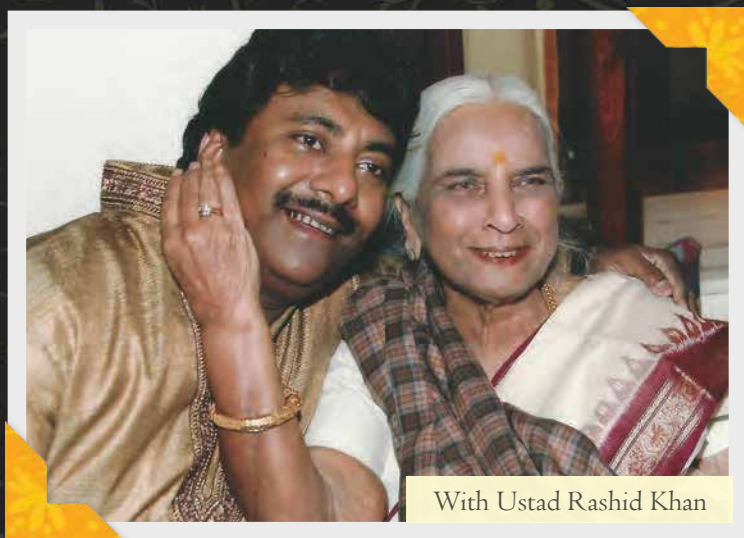


With Pt. Vijay Kichlu





With Pt. Birju Maharaj and Pt. Vijay Kichlu



With Ustad Rashid Khan



Vintage performance



With *Vidushi* Kishori Amonkar at Jnana Pravaha, Varanasi



With *thumri* exponent Shobha Gurtu



With musicians and noted scholars



Offering flowers to Radha Krishna



बाबुल मोरा नैहर छूटे ही जाए



When she left us...

Though she passed away in Kolkata, Girija Devi's last rites were performed in Banaras with full state honours. Hundreds of people including disciples, relatives, admirers and locals had gathered at her residence to bid her adieu as she embarked on her final journey.



Author's Note

Even ordinary life stories cannot be encapsulated in words, for beneath the seemingly mundane and ordinary, there are often so many layers and folds of subtexts and plots that one can never unearth.

How can one then even dare to encapsulate a life and an innings, as extraordinary as Padmavibhushan Girija Devi's! This book is therefore only a sincere attempt to offer a glimpse of what one has observed, known and gathered to the best of one's abilities and offer it as a humble tribute to a soul that has enriched and touched so many lives.

For me to comment on her music would be utterly audacious. I only speak as an ardent music lover, when I say that it was perhaps her deep and sustained connect

with nature, coupled of course with her relentless riyaz that allowed her to give bhav to the bols in a composition; that the pukar of a koyal, the phoonk of a bansuri and the abeer-gulal of holi must have all been so acutely ingrained in her that each of these emanated from her voice not as sounds but as realization; as ehsas.

In my most precious and rich interactions with her, I was left marvelling at her incredible poise and her ability to balance sense and sensibilities. To have dealt with so many hues of life but to have not allowed her core to be stained by any of them, was perhaps her finest asset, giving her entire being an aura that was elevating in its proximity, exacting in its standards but never extracting in its nature.



I would also like to thank every single music lover and artiste as well as her students, well wishers and relatives whom I had the privilege of speaking to and meeting with in the course of my research for the book. My thanks to them for opening up their personal reservoirs of memories and thoughts.

Last but certainly not the least, my sincere gratitude to the Neotia-Poddar family and to Badi Ma, Smt. Bimla Poddar in particular

for having trusted me with this Tribute. Researching, conceptualizing, writing and literally breathing it for the last few months has been a most enriching experience. Strange as it may sound, it has left me feeling somewhat closer to the Legend, though she has moved an infinite distance away...

*Pranaam Appa!
Surpreya
2018.*



दीवाना किये श्याम
क्या जादू डारा

उम गलियां में
आना जाना
हमसे करता बहाना

हमसे बैरन
सबतियाँ से एस बस,
जले को अब और जलाना



A Tribute to
Padma Vibhushan Late Sant. Gita Devi
(1929-2017)