

The Song of My Life

Enclosed within the shell of my mind,
I keep on at my music, my meditation eternally;
the struggles of a calcite inside an oyster;
till I sublimate that note into a dazzling pearl!

THE concert is over. Those who had come to meet me personally have also gradually dispersed. There is at the moment no one in the auditorium – the experience of a harmonious state of being with oneself. The body is craving for rest but the mind is still entangled in the *mehfil*. An indefinable pleasure starts sprouting all over in the mind side by side with a strange feeling of restlessness.

All around it is still, very still. There is really no energy left to converse with those who are accompanying me on our way back. However, for some unknown reason, there is an irrepressible desire to sing. At such times, I hum to myself. The people who are with me keep quiet. The sound of the car no more reaches me. My singing continues even after I have laid myself into bed. When I sense the stirring of the dawn I close my eyes and lie peacefully. Like the fragrance of incense the appreciative response experienced during the *mehfil* envelopes the whole body and mind, and resting there, I fall asleep. Two small feet appear before me in my dream, the two feet going to school.

There is a poem titled '*kutir ka pushpa*' (the flower belonging to the cottage) by Jainendra Kumar. There is a crazy flower. The old man in the cottage had planted it. The flower cherishes only one desire. '*ise sajaaoon, ise rijhaaon; kewal yahi kaamanaa hai*' – 'to adorn it, to make it happy; this is the only wish.' The flower neither aspires to lie as an offering on the path of a revolutionary hero, nor does it want to embellish the tresses of a beautiful woman. It had just this little dream: to bring joy to the cottage which sheltered it – where it was born, grew and bloomed, and feels fulfilled thereby. I have a relationship with that flower.

I was born in Pune. My parents were teachers. Financially we were not very well off. However, though living simply, we lacked nothing. My parents were both enthusiastic and interested in artistic pursuits. The school, a high school run by The Rasta Peth Education Society – was located in the eastern part of Pune which was considered backward. There were very few girls in the school. In my class, I was the only girl. My mother – Aai, would have liked to send both her daughters to a good school and Aabaa – my father, would say, "If I send my daughters to another school, how would others send their daughters to my school?"

Not only did our school have good teachers, it also had a whole lot of extra-curricular activities like sports, cultural programmes, crafts and other things. Aabaa used to make us take part in everything. All kinds of examinations – Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, drawing, dance, drama, music – nothing was spared. Not even the cane. Aabaa used to stand with a cane in his hand to see whether the children came to school in time or not.

Satatamoordhawam – 'Always upward!' a big board with this motto used to welcome everyone at the school. Even today, I walk several times in my thought on the road to the

school, stand at the gate and read the motto again and again. I scan the path that has brought me this far. There is still so far to go! Aabaa used to say, "The top position is always vacant. It is easy to reach the top but difficult to continue to be there."

Aabaa loved the school very much. He used to say, "I have three daughters. This school is my eldest." Right from sweeping the floors to collecting the children personally by going to each one's home, Aabaa did every kind of job. Aai too used to be by his side. Aabaa had shifted his entire household to the school. To our share came only the time that could be spared thereafter. Even at 85, Aabaa's heart was still in the school. He was after new plans and new projects. We feel pride when we think of the running around that he did.

I studied in our school till matriculation i.e., 10th. The next step was going to College. Should I now go in for Arts or for Science? Although I was learning music, there was no intention whatsoever at that time to take up music as a profession. My parents had wanted me to be a doctor. I was enrolled in Fergusson College. Our house was at one end of the city and the college, at the other end. I used to ride daily on my bicycle. My mother used to be unwell frequently. Doing the household chores, studying, going to the college, learning music – I was always on the run. I did Inter Science but could not get admission into the medical college at Pune. As to going outside Pune, I had never been away from home. While I was doing Inter Science, Aabaa had wanted to keep me in the college hostel so that I could get time for studies. I started crying like a small child. I could not bear the idea of leaving home and staying somewhere else. Basically I was shy and timid by nature. When visitors came, I used to run to the kitchen. At school, being the only girl in my class, there was no question of my talking to the boys. Moreover, I think, the real reason was that I liked to be alone.

From childhood, I was on the whole disciplined, responsible, serious, introvert, quiet, critical and crazy about beauty of any kind. Whenever I saw, heard of or read about anything nice, I felt that I should master it. I was very particular that my surroundings and the people around me were clean. That is why I did not mix with people. I remember that I used to go to play only with those children who were clean and tidy. No one had to tell me to do my home work. When I returned home from school, I would sit at the door, do my home work for the following day and only then go inside. Every one of my examinations, I have passed with flying colours. Once, while in school, I completed the course of two years in one and passed the examination. That is how I completed my matriculation early. Sports, however was one thing that I was not particularly fond of.

Usha, my younger sister, on the other hand, was a total contrast to me; bold and playful. As a child, she always shunned work. She would collect children and keep on playing with them. But she would promptly turn up when it was meal time. She used to take away my things even till the time when she went to Nagpur to study in the medical college there. She too was unable to get admission at Pune. But she did not mind going to Nagpur. She too sang well. Usha had not learnt music, but she had a good voice, was intelligent and also had exposure to music because of my learning to sing at home. Whenever Usha said to Sureshbabu – my *guru*, "Please teach me also to sing." He would say, "There is no need for you to learn. You will be able to get it just like that."

Exposure is no doubt very important. Usha sang light music. She has several gramophone records. She gave playback for Marathi films. She sang now and then for radio and TV as well, though she never gave solo performances in public. She also acted in Marathi plays for some time. Had she decided to go in only for music and acting, she would have earned a good reputation. Due to her medical profession, she did not get time for anything else.

It was while studying at Nagpur that Usha decided to get married. Both she and her husband-to-be were studying in the same class. Dr. Suresh Wagh was a highly likeable man. Although Aai and Aabaa were not unhappy that they had no son, that void was filled when Suresh appeared on the scene. Suresh and Usha settled in Mumbai. Usha worked as an Anesthetist in Jaslok Hospital and Suresh as a Neurosurgeon in Bombay Hospital. Both of them were well known in their fields.

Usha had left her two daughters behind in India when she went to London. The elder, Kalpana, was with the mother-in-law and the younger, Manisha, was with me since she was four months old. Although her parents came back to Mumbai, she was not prepared to go to them. Usha always said, "*Maavashi*¹ has turned her into a spoilt brat."

That was, indeed, true to some extent. Manisha has a lot of talent in her. She, too, is a doctor like her parents but I have a strong desire that she should also sing well. She has a good voice. She is intelligent and she has had exposure. She, with her family, has now settled in the USA and has little time for music. I hope her talented daughters Nitya and Naina take music seriously.

Aai was always with Aabaa in every way. He always told us, "What we are today is entirely due to Indu." Aai, too, had to work because of the family's finances. Still, the house was always spick and span. She liked to sew, embroider and do similar creative crafts. When she did the cooking, Aabaa would eat more. Aai had flair for writing. Her books of stories and songs for children in Marathi have been published. Myself and Usha got Aai's first book 'Mittucha dukaan' published on her sixty-first birthday. Later 'Shiva Geetanjali', 'Chotyā herāachi mothee kaamagiri', 'vinodaache bol khare jhaale', 'Raajaache lekh', 'Airavat' and on Aai's ninety-first birth year, her seventh book 'Chupaa Chupi', a compilation of her poems got published.

I joined the Law College when I completed my Bachelors in Science. Everyone was surprised that I went in for law instead of doing a Masters degree. I even acquired a license for practicing law. But I did not have the temperament that was needed for practising law. In the meanwhile, I got a Central Government Scholarship for music. I had already started giving concerts. I acted on the stage for some time. I got a job in the All India Radio. All this happened in quick succession and I never got down to becoming a lawyer. However, I did have to go to the court with Aabaa for almost 25 years on account of the School matters and our house in tenants' possession. This is how, I have had a long association with the court even though I did not practise law. That was a great mental harassment. It is impossible to calculate how much time, money and energy were wasted. Once one steps into a court, one is totally trapped and cannot get out at all; and even then, there is no guarantee that one would get justice at the end.

Even after his retirement, Aabaa kept on fighting for the School just as a matter of

principle. Those who worked against him were people close to him, even his relatives. The outsiders were, of course, not concerned. Aai had to suffer a lot during this period due to the litigations. Usha was in London. Thus, I alone had to shoulder this responsibility in every way.

The second law suit was about our house. In the first case it took almost 25 years for the case to reach the Supreme Court. There too, justice was denied to us. Aai and Aabaa had constructed the house full of hope and excitement. They had decided to move in only after they retired since they had to repay the loan they had borrowed for building the house. The tenant promised, "I will vacate the house whenever you ask me to do so." Aabaa trusted him but when the time came, the man plainly said, "No!" My parents' desire to spend the last days of their life in that house remained unfulfilled. Ultimately I had to come to a com-promise with the tenant – it was actually buying your own house again. I had to go to the court for the second tenant also and undergo a lot of mental agony. It took eight years to get possession. How I wish my parents and sister were alive to see this.

No one in our family was particularly interested in music. None in the older generations of either Aabaa or Aai had made a special effort to listen to classical music. Music came into our family as a sheer accident. We were all at a point of desperation due to Aai's illness. One just did not know what to do. Somebody suggested a therapy. "Let her learn to play the *haarmonium*. Just try and see whether she can forget her ailment while paying attention to the notes of music." A teacher was engaged to teach her *haarmonium*. I used to sit by her side while she learnt to play. After a while, she stopped learning and I started learning to sing. It was then that people around realised that I had a good voice and a keen mind for music. I do not know what made me learn classical music. The strings of *taanpuraa* started playing in our house, something that had never happened before.

All this was new to me. I had started learning but I did not know how to do *riyaaaz*¹. There was no one to tell me whether whatever I was doing was right or not. Such matters are quite important in the initial stages. There was no musical environment in the house. My parents were enthusiastic, but they knew nothing about classical music. While taking tuition from Shri Vijay Karandikar, I got familiar with the musical notes, became acquainted with the *raags* and *taals*. I picked up all varieties of music like *khyaal*, *thumri*, *naatya sangeet*, *bhaav geet*, *bhajan*, etc. I started singing in *mehfils*² – some small, some big. There would constantly be occasions (to sing) like prize distribution ceremonies in schools, competitions, children's programmes on the Radio, Ganesha festivals and so on. My music started taking shape, thanks to Aabaa's encouragement.

I think adolescence is the best phase in life. One imbibes all good influences at this age and leads the rest of one's life on the strength of this accumulated treasure. Fortunately, I have received all this in my childhood – love, guidance, encouragement, blessings of my parents, elders and *gurus*. I have received so much of this wealth that it will last for my lifetime. It is on the strength of this wealth that I am standing erect on my own feet. This wealth is not to be weighed on the scales of popular reputation. However, there too, the Almighty has in no way given me less.

“The girl sings quite well,” people had started saying. It was necessary now to move further. But one day, this dream suddenly shattered – vanished. I had gone to sing at a place called Savda in Khandesh. The *mehfil* at night went very well but when I got up in the morning the next day, the notes could not emerge properly from my throat. Some said that my voice had cracked; some said that something in the food had caused it. Whatever it was, I had lost my voice. Voice is all that a singer has. Although at that time I had not decided to make singing as my profession, I had experienced/realised the pleasure that music was and had started understanding the beauty of the *swaras*. Maybe, that understanding was something inborn in me. I was nurturing my music under the influence of Roshanara Begum, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Begum Akhthar and also of the film star Noorjahan. But now everything was over. A year and a half was spent in this anxious state. My loneliness increased. But it is this brooding that has given me quite a lot. On somebody’s suggestion, I had my tonsils operation too around the same time. Even today, I will not be able to say whether the operation had a positive or negative effect on my voice. The effect of the mental shock that I suffered in my tender years on account of my voice has still not gone. My voice gradually came back under my control, but it was not the same. Then I took heart and became determined. I started my journey again.

Then Sureshbabu Mane came into my life. He enriched my musical existence in every sense of the term. I learnt from him for nearly six years. There would be long breaks but there was plenty to work during *riyaaz*. When Sureshbabu suddenly passed away due to heart attack I was doing my first year of law. My hopes and aspirations came crashing down. Between us had developed a bond of a *guru* and *shishyaa*, highly cherished in Indian tradition. The loss of Sureshbabu as my *guru* in music and as a human being has inflicted a deep wound on my mind, a never healing wound.

Sureshbabu passed away and I was awarded a Central Government Scholarship for music. I was praised everywhere in Maharashtra being the first scholar-ship holder. But whom was I to learn from? I did not know what to do. In this situation Hirabai, Sureshbabu’s younger sister, took me under her wings and showed me the path ahead, the path to *mehfil* singing.

Fergusson College where I did my Inter Science was somewhat conservative. Girls and boys did not mingle with each other during those days. I did not even have female friends. Everything, however, changed in Law College. For the first time, I started mingling with the boys. Aabaa contributed to that said: “Stand for elections.” I answered: “I do not know anyone and I will not canvas for myself.” Aabaa: “Don’t canvas. Just contest.”

To my surprise, I was elected. Principal Pandit specially called me and congratulated me. He was fond of music. He always inquired after me. Not only was he an excellent teacher, his charming manners too used to win one’s heart. There are a few resting places in my life. Amongst them is Law College and Pandit Sir. Three or four of us students had come closer as a group on account of the elections. That close bond is still there. I feel that friendships forged at schools and colleges are touched by something innocent and sacred. Here outer masks get dropped. There may be petty quarrels and some displeasures but the bonds never break.

Law College was over and belonged to the past. The two years of scholarship were spent with Hirabai. And, like music, theatre too entered my life by accident. Zonal representations were going to be held in Delhi. The Pune Social Club had started preparations for staging musical play 'Sharada'. Famous theatre personalities like Chintubua Divekar, Ganapatrao Bodas, Bhalchandra Pendharkar were taking part in this show. That was my first performance on the stage. After that I had offers for many other plays – 'Vidyaharan', 'Samshay kollo', 'Mrichhakatika', 'Lilao of Rangnekar' and 'Mandarmala'. During these days I acted with all the front ranking actors – Bhalchandra Pendharkar, Chota Gandharva, Master Damle, Ram Marathe, Sambaprasad Savarkar, Prabhakar Panshikar, and others. During those three years, it was theatre and more theatre. Around the same time, I took part in several radio-plays with well-known personalities like P.L. Deshpande. 'Tulsidas' and 'Chandanaachi Utee' as special presentation, an opera presented on stage during Radio-week by the Pune Radio Station, the play 'Biraaj Bahu' in Hindi by the Nagpur AIR Station etc., are still recalled by people.

I had never given a thought to what I should be doing to ensure security in life. For Indian women, this problem is solved through marriage. I was at a marriageable age at that time. Aai and Aabaa probably felt that the girl should get married, but I did not marry. It was not that I had decided not to marry, but I also did not feel a special urge that I have to get married. My fastidious nature came in the way. Aabaa would occasionally broach the subject, but he did not put any pressure. *Mehfils* continued on the other hand and my time was spent very pleasantly in related activities.

Once, I casually read an advertisement in the newspaper and, on an impulse, sent an application for the job. I got an appointment as an Assistant Producer in the Music Department of the All India Radio. The very first posting was at Ranchi in Bihar. For me, this was an end. Leaving Pune, to stay away from Aai and Aabaa! Aai and Aabaa had come to see me off at the station. When they turned to leave, I broke into tears. The people in the train started to inquire, "Is the girl going to her in-laws?" Within three months I got myself transferred to Nagpur. Usha was studying there in the Medical College and Pune, too, was near.

A new life began in Nagpur – an independent life. Not being used to living alone, it was very hard at the beginning. But gradually I got used to it. I stayed in Nagpur for four and a half years. I started liking Nagpur. The people were nice and there was a lot to learn in the radio. I was getting a chance to try out new ideas and new experiments. There was technical equipment and the help of knowledgeable people at hand. The medium of radio was at my disposal. It was in the radio that I discovered my potential as a composer.

One great advantage of working in the All India Radio was the opportunity of listening to many great artists at close quarters in a live performance. I was able to study their *gaayaki*¹. That was unconsciously influencing even my own style of singing – especially Amir Khan's *gaayaki*. This resulted in the introduction of *sargam*¹ in my singing. In later years, my *gaayaki* slightly moved away from the Kirana mould. Although the major influence is that of Amir Khan's *gaayaki*, my musical personality has also been enriched by many other artists – well-known and upcoming. These include artists specialised in classical music as well as those singing for the films, *ghazal* singers, pop

singers and fusion artists. I enjoy all forms of singing. They are flowers blooming in the garden of music. Each has a different colour, a different fragrance. It is wrong to compare one with the other. One should stroll in this garden like a *rasika*. Our habits, conventions, our know-ledge, our experience set limits on us when we set out to meet beauty of any kind. It takes time to realise this. In this context, I am always reminded of a *sher*² which says: When the eyes were not open,

even the sea seemed to be a drop;
But as the eyes opened,
even a drop looked like a sea.

- this is the importance of knowledge. When one criticises anything, one should first consider whether one has the competence to do so.

When Usha completed her studies at Nagpur, I opted for a transfer to Mumbai. The number of *mehfils* increased. I was being noticed more and more in Mumbai. This success of mine became, however, a sore point for some people. I started facing harassment at my job. What I did beyond my working hours was my business, but for every public programme I had to seek permission from Delhi. My superiors reacted to it as if I was committing a crime. Those working against my interests created obstacles in every possible way. Attempts were made twice or thrice to get me transferred. When it became too much, I left the job. I realised that my life was meant for something better. It was a waste, both of time and energy, to carry on a fight through official correspondence. It was desirable that I should spend that time in something constructive, in concentrating on an intense pursuit of music. I wasted two years for nothing, getting entangled in bureaucratic hurdles.

It was after I gave up the job that I started to live like an artist in the true sense of the term. I became fully convinced that one is able to soar on the wings of one's creativity only when one is free.

In the next ten years, I made several trips abroad, saw the whole world, listened to the music of those places and let the people there listen to my music. I also taught music in educational institutions there. The more experience one gains, the more one becomes aware of one's own shortcomings. One learns to notice and appreciate things that lie beyond one's horizon. As Bhartruhari has said:

How many great men are there
who undergo an inner growth,
whose hearts leap with joy,
as they glorify
the smallest good of others
to the size of a mountain?

Even to seek the good in others is a virtue to be acquired by training oneself.

It was during my stay abroad that I realised that one must add to one's knowledge in every possible way. I saw that there, the artists do not just stop at acquiring skills in effective performance, but also talk and write with authority on their creations. That led me to take up research on '*sargam*' for a doctorate. I made this effort not merely to get a degree since *sargam* was an important aspect of my singing.

The music critics and some senior musicians in Maharashtra had objections to the use of *sargam* in vocal music. I realised that it is only when one sets up a goal before oneself that one studies regularly and with determination, and thinks over issues that one would have otherwise not noticed. I worked on different aspects of *sargam* – its origin, its development, its utility in training, its potential in bringing variety in musical material and enriching the overall expression of stage performance, its various styles of rendering, its ability to get adapted to various genres from classical to popular music including film music, fusion, etc.

There were hardly any universities offering Ph.D.s in the 1970s. As such, I had to go in for the 'Praveen' (D. Music) examination of the Akhila Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal. The syllabus had many uncommon *raags*. I had to take guidance from the well-known vocalist Pt. Nivruttibua Sarnaik for these *raags*. Bua taught me with great affection.

It is on account of the same point of view that I accepted in 1979 the post of the Professor and the Head of the Department of Post-Graduate Studies & Research in Music at the SNTD Women's University. The work that I had done in All India Radio was of a different kind – organising programmes, selecting artists, recording, editing, planning of music programmes and, in addition, doing administrative work needed for these. Education was a new field for me. To train students privately at home and to teach collectively in an educational institution are two different things altogether. In an institution, one has to study side by side both the aspects – the theory and performance. There are other branches affiliated to music. These, too, have to be handled. The experience with the radio had enriched my music; likewise, the work at the university sharpened my ideas and my thinking about music.

The network of my private students is extensive. It also includes students from abroad whom I find very dedicated and hardworking. Since 1970s, I have had many students to stay with me at my home. When I refuse to accept a new student, it is misinterpreted by people. When one accepts someone as a *shishya*, one also has to accept the responsibility that the person would at least become a competent listener, that his enjoyment of music would be enhanced, that he would know the difference between what is good and what is bad, and that he will acquire an understanding of everything related to music. Even to achieve this much requires a long time. Only a competent listener can become a competent singer. He can check his own performance and improve upon it. I always have only one thing to say to my students, "Do not learn blindly, you may sing little but sing with understanding. Unless you are not satisfied with yourself, you will not be able to satisfy your listeners. My job is to lead you up on the right path; the rest of the journey has to be done by you." There are no shortcuts in music.

The *saadhanaa*¹ of *sur*²
is like a line drawn
on water
disappearing even
while being drawn.

That is what makes *riyaaz* so important in music. This *riyaaz* has to be done in the full

sense of the term. Side by side with actual practice, other things like listening, writing, reading, thinking, deliberating and discussing are also important. Just as the crop belongs to him who does the ploughing, similarly, music belongs to him who practices it. Once would never be enough; one has to do it again and again and again.

Not every student who is learning from a competent *guru* would necessarily become a performer because many factors have to come together in the making of a good artist such as a voice suited for singing (for a vocalist), all-rounded intellect, a sensitive mind, good health, regular practice (*riyaaz*), determination and sacrifice. That is not all. Luck is also badly needed. Besides, one has to master the art of public relations which has become absolutely necessary in this age of publicity and information media. This has become something inevitable in order to get recognition and to continue to remain recognised.

The commercial form that the art and the profession of music has acquired (on account of technological advances) is probably responsible for the gradual change that is taking place in the relationship between the *guru* and *shishya*. At one time this relationship used to have an emotional basis. Now one notices only business considerations in it. It seems that the primary consideration (in choosing a *guru*) is which *guru* would be useful, to what extent for attaining success, instead of to what extent one's knowledge would be enhanced. After having reached a specific level of competence through training, one has to take the next flight forward on one's own. If one has to seek a *guru* for every innovation, one should realise how handicapped one is.

The phenomenon that someone makes the tree grow by constant care through watering and manuring and another reaps the harvest when the tree bears fruit, is being witnessed in the field of music also. The *guru-shishya* relationship has become so commercial that a *guru* might transfer to the *shishya* all the knowledge that he has acquired throughout a life time of hard work and study, and then the latter could just turn his back and take no further notice of the *guru*. And as if that were not enough, the student may not even bother to make a mention of him as a *guru*. Like the *shishyas*, the *gurus* have also changed. They, too, want 'successful' *shishyas*. A pupil who has risen up after being trained by another *guru* and has got recognition is suddenly given the status of a *shishya* by teaching him just a *bandish* or two. Devotion, faith, bonding are things that are no more experienced. This is a great loss for the traditional culture of Indian classical music.

For me, as an artist, the listener has a special place in my life. The listener plays an important part in the making of an artist. A *mehfil* artist must, by all means, think of his listeners. Every listener has a different liking, different understanding and different expectation. The artist has to shoulder the responsibility of carrying all his listeners along on his journey of joy. Every concert in India and abroad, I have sung with total dedication. One has to face many problems in striking a balance between business and the pursuit of art. I strongly believe that it is mainly because of the support of the listeners that one enjoys the position of an 'artist'. Without listeners support one remains only 'saadhak'. If one is honest to oneself, one always carries within oneself a kind of moral courage while facing the ups and downs of success and failure.

An artist has to learn to have faith in himself and in his art. It is only then that he is able to stand erect with self respect, he is able to face every situation as it arises, he is able

to get inner satisfaction and be in peace with himself.

A new avenue opened up for me in 1981. I worked as Chief Producer-Director in a recording company called 'Swarashree'. In the field of performing arts, the spectators or the listeners are very important. An attempt was made to find out whether one could find new ways to create them in larger numbers and to make them better informed. If one wants to raise the standard of the art, one has to raise the level of the audience or listeners as well.

There are several avenues of knowledge and of creativity. I am lured by every one of them. When I see a good painting, I feel like picking up a brush; when I see a dancer's performance, I feel like trying the anklets on my feet; whenever I read something nice, I feel like taking a pen. I know that I would not be able to manage everything, but for me the experience is important. The little amount of writing that I had started with was done only because I had to do it. One is more cautious when one writes than when one speaks. One tries to put into measured phrases only that which one exactly wants to convey. In doing so, one's own thoughts become more clear. All my writing is a result of such thinking. I am not a writer. I am not as familiar with the medium, as music, in all its aspects. I do enjoy literature. However, I do not dream of getting recognition either as a poet or a writer. Through the medium of language, I only wish to convey my ideas and experiences about music to the people. I think that they can then come closer to what I create when they are listening to me. They will be able to understand the thought that underlies my doing or not doing something.

Mehfil singing has filled my entire life. I like *mehfil* from the very depth of my heart. During a *mehfil*, I feel as if I am at home among friends and family. In a music festival, I feel like a stranger. Artists come to the stage and go one by one making place for others like players in the game of kho-kho. They keep on waiting till their turn comes, sometimes at day break at 4.00 or at 7.00 in the morning. I always admire the patience of the listeners. How much can a person take in, even if it is good music? Isn't there some limit to that? At such times, 'listening' also becomes a pretence. The bonding that one expects to take place between the artist and the listeners never gets established. That is why, when there is a choice between a *mehfil* and a music festival, I choose the former.

The business-like attitude that has entered the field of classical music today is there mainly because of these music festivals. It is here that the recent trends like newspaper publicity, huge fees, souvenirs, favours for the artists are nurtured. The poor *mehfil* has been buried under it. Music circles cannot afford such publicity and pour out so much money. But it is *mehfils* that are really sustaining Indian classical music. One should take care that music festivals do not kill *mehfils*.

With the exception of *mehfil*, I have distanced myself away for a considerable time, from other means of public recognition and outreach like radio, TV, CDs — important for any artist. I know that in doing so, I am doing harm to myself. I also admit that once one enters a profession, one has to make compromises. But, this never becomes an actual reality. Many years passed after my first record was released. That record sold very well. I got a lot of publicity. It is still being played in homes where people are not particularly interested in classical music. Many have completely memorised the *raags*

Maarubihaaag and *Kalaawati* contained in that record. Many have written to me. Particularly surprising is the fact that the record is a favourite among children. Many mothers invite me to their home after *mehfil*. I do not know how they come to know that I like to eat *puranpoli*, mango, *bhaji* (*pakoraa*) or *thalipith*. One of these items is always there in my plate. My throat gets choked with emotion. I feel extremely gratified by the thought that I have been able to bring some joy into their life. It is nearly after 25 years since the first recording that, new recordings of my concerts were commercially released. Though somewhat late I am gradually correcting my mistake.

While I was working for the radio, my programmes have been broadcast from almost all the stations. During my period of service in the All India Radio, I performed several times in the national programmes of classical music, programmes by invitation and other special programmes. When I left the job, I also gave up singing for the regular programmes of music on the radio.

I performed at the inaugural function of the Mumbai Doordarshan - Sahyadri. Later various TV channels also kept inviting me for various occasions but I made excuses because I felt uncomfortable with the format. I am aware that unfounded rumours spread for not accepting the programmes. It has done a great harm to me as an artist.

Is it that I have no ambition or I am too much of an idealist? I do not know for sure. This, however, is true that I am not willing to make a compromise with my principles. It is in my nature to study in depth and in detail and execute perfectly whenever I get involved in any project. New experiments fascinate me. I get involved, accomplish what I want to, get satisfied and then withdraw. Later, it does not attract me much. Being active in different aspects of music making and also involved in socio-cultural and educational issues naturally demand too much time. From the point of view of worldly success, to get associated with such causes and in such activities may not be profitable, but I do not ponder over the amount of time spent, profit-loss, success-failure when I commit myself to causes close to my heart.

I am, by nature, quiet, inhibited and self-respecting. This leads very often to the perception, "Madam is haughty, does not mix with anyone, does not talk much." Consequently, I have not been able to form any group of admirers and followers of my own, something which seems to have become necessary from the professional point of view. The professional culture of today is 'group-lobby culture' where an individual has no place. I am seeing this and 'am also affected by it.

Like other professions, the profession of classical singing too has gone under the control of publicity management. To establish contact with persons holding an office of authority in different fields, with sponsors and with writers of critical reviews, to plan a systematic strategy so that there is continuous mention in the media for one reason or other, to make conscious use of publicity means, to take part in important official and semi-official functions and to take care that one's image is constantly projected afresh before the public. All these matters have become an essential part of the profession.

For this kind of work, namely, for taking care of the public image of the artist along with his business engagements, there are agents in foreign countries. Here, however, the artist himself does these things or friends and relatives come to his help. Now there are

event managers, agencies who are also working for the artists. Apart from competence in artistic performance, it has now become necessary to learn business management. The artists who cannot manage to learn any of these things, cannot get into the limelight in spite of their artistic excellence. It also means that their names are not put forward for things like awards and honours.

It should be the responsibility of organisations and experts working in the field and also of the government to locate deserving artists and to evaluate their contributions, rate them by laying down well-defined principles for setting up standards for selection, judging their merit on the basis of these standards and to honour them in a befitting manner. But one does not see this happening. Only those names are considered again and again which are visible all the time for one reason or another. Once a name goes into the circuit, it keeps on circulating automatically. No other name is considered. Just as money goes where money is, one award follows where another has already gone and the cycle goes on.

Many of my admirers think that I have obtained much less than what I actually deserve. They are also surprised that I do not say anything. They express their anger in letters or during their personal visits. What can I say to them? Do they know that many deserving artists have not even got what I have received!

I was awarded 'Padmashri' by the Government of India in 1990. At first I had decided not to accept it. But relatives and close friends said, "It is an honour of national level. Your parents have now become old. Let them have a chance to witness their daughter's glory." Finally I decided to accept the award for the sake of my parents and admirers. However, my real happiness came when my book 'Swaramayee' got the Maharashtra State Government Award. My ecstasy was like that of a person who while watching the sky on a starry night suddenly finds that one of the stars has gently dropped itself into his open palms without his knowledge. 'Swaramayee' brought a lot of joy into my life. The readers, too, praised it a lot.

Surprisingly, I did a lot of writing after Swaramayee and all of it was also published. The fourth revised edition of Swaramayee is already in the market. The collection of articles written after Swaramayee's publication came out in the form of 'Suswaralee'. The third revised edition of Suswaralee with an illustrative audio CD also has received accolades.

My books of compositions – 'Swarangee's third revised edition contains *bandishs* of morning, afternoon and evening *raags*. The second revised edition of 'Swaranjanee' contains *bandishs* of night *raags*. The third composition book 'Swararangee' contains *bandishs* in light classical music – *thumri*, *daadraa*, *bhajan* and Marathi *ghazals* and *bhakti geet*. The Hindi text of these compositions is also penned by me. These books contain notations as well as CDs to help in learning the compositions directly. During my tours abroad, music lovers and students had made suggestions to publish the compositions in English. The English version of these books along with the meaning of the *bandish* will be in the market shortly.

My personal musings shaped nearly in the form of free verse have been published as 'Antahswar', in Marathi.

I have also written a book in English 'Enlightening the Listener' on the technical aspects of music. I wanted my ideas, my thoughts and my experiences in the context of music making to reach the non-Marathi speaking music lovers. The first edition of this book was released by the then Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri. Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2000. The first edition of this book – 'Along the Path of Music' was released in 2005 by the then President of India, Bharat Ratna Dr. Abdul Kalam.

'Swaramayee' and 'Suswaraalee' have been translated into Hindi with the same titles and into Kannada as 'Swara Yaatre' and 'Shrotruvige Arivu' respectively. 'Antahswar' has been translated into English and titled 'Antahswar : Inner Music'.

In 1991, I became a recipient of one more award of national level, the one from the Sangeet Natak Akademi. I sometimes wonder whether one's capacity to feel happy and experience joy goes on decreasing. For me this time, there was a reason for this. My father had been in coma for three months. Watching his suffering, we had almost lost our senses. Even then he was the first one in whose ear I whispered the news. Could he have comprehended? However, that was for my satisfaction.

After a long gap some more national honours 'Padmabhushan' in 2002, 'Kalidas Samman' in 2004 and 'Tagore Akademi Fellow' (from Sangeet Natak Akademi – to commemorate 150th birth anniversary of *guruvarya* Rabindranath Tagore, a one-time award given to a few personalities of eminence for their contribution; equivalent to the 'Fellow' of the Akademi) in 2011 came my way.

In 2014 the Gujarat Sangeet Natak Academy conferred 'Tanariri Sangeet Samman' and in 2015 the Government of Maharashtra conferred 'Bharat Ratna Pt. Bhimsen Joshi *shaastreya sangeet jeevan gaurav puraskar*'.

In honour of my contribution to Indian music Hridayesh Arts - a renowned cultural organisation in Mumbai has been organising an annual music festival 'Gaan Prabha' since 1993 and Basari Foundation, Pune has started 'Swar Prabha Sangeet Samaroh' from 2015. Another well-known cultural organisation in Pune 'Gaanvardhan' in association with 'Tatyasaheb Natu Foundation' has instituted a national award 'Swarayoginee Dr. Prabha Atre *shaastreya sangeet puraskar*' in 2010 to encourage, recognise talented artists. How I wish Aai, Aabaa, Usha and Suresh were alive to share my joy!

Aabaa passed away in 1992. He was bed-ridden for 3-4 years. Usha and Suresh were doctors of the family. Therefore, we had no cause for worry. Aabaa got the best treatment and medical attention on account of these two. I was reassured that in my old age too, Usha and Suresh would be there to look after me. But Suresh had a paralytic stroke even as Aabaa was sick and bedridden. Everything changed. To make matters worse, the domestic servant seeing that there was no one around in the house strangled Suresh and murdered him for the sake of money. Shocked as she was with the tragic event, Usha committed suicide with an injection. All these blows followed one after the other. One just did not know what was happening. My brain refused to function and the mind had become numb. But I had to push aside all my sorrow and stand up brave and resolute. Aai was 84 years old. Both of Usha's daughters though grown up, were suddenly orphaned. I had to shoulder every responsibility.

After Aabaa, Suresh and Usha passed away Aai was with me. In 2005, Aai had a fall

and was operated for a hip bone fracture. The operation was successful but because of lack of proper and timely post-operative medical care and treatment she ultimately succumbed to a slow, torturous death. Whenever I remember her last days, I am unable to sleep for days.

Medical care/hospital has become a big money making business. Inexperienced doctors don't even know how to inject properly in the veins. Senior doctors stand at the door, inquire "How is the patient?," glance at the papers prepared by the juniors and go. Their visiting fee gets added to the bill. In between the patient is moved to ICU (intensive care unit). ICU means inviting death after paying a fat bill. One is not permitted even to peep through a glass window. The duty doctor fills the register in the morning after a good night sleep. Even other staff would sleep. Whom to complain?

Lodging a complaint regarding post-operative care means inviting trouble. All the documents are with the hospital authorities. On what basis can one file a case? However, I had made all preparations to fight for Aai. It was the near ones who stopped me from going ahead by saying, "The hospital authorities can manipulate the records. You will be wasting time, money, inviting more trouble for yourself and will not get justice." I have some status in the society. People know me. Still it would have been difficult for me to fight. How much more difficult would it be for others?

To whom could have I narrated my tale of woes? And what was there to tell? As I describe in my poems what my mental condition was like:

The darkness,
packed densely in every cell
has now settled in the mind
up to the brim.
There is no room,
not even for a ray of hope;
if at all, it takes pity
and wants to come in.

I had hoped that some day
I would break
away from this
circle.

At some point
the circle only became
a square and then
even a triangle.

But, the cycle of
my silent sobs
continued.

How well the same sentiment has been expressed by the venerable *guru* of *gurus*,

Rabindranath Tagore:

Sorrow is hushed into peace in my heart
like the evening among the silent trees.

I packed all my sorrow in my mind and hiding my tears behind the *taanpuraa*, kept on singing. What a big support music has been to me. During this difficult period, my nephew Sudhanwa Bodas, and a close associate Dr. Bharathi M.D. who became a family member after listening to me at a concert, took very good care of me. It is because of people like them that one draws strength to walk ahead and fulfill one's commitments in life. I wish to ask for only one thing from God, "Let my feet keep on moving forward on this path. Let me keep singing till my last breath."

As regards honours and awards, I am aware that they have lot of significance from the career and business point of view. But the real satisfaction for an artist, I feel, lies in walking on an unending path of *saadhanaa*.

The temple of music
stands on great skill
and above all on
saadhanaa.

On this journey, my listeners have given me lot of love and encouragement. Their affectionate and appreciative words give me strength and bring life and freshness to my music. The blessings of my parents and *gurus* are always there to support me. My faith in God becomes strong and my feet begin to walk again.

I am aware that whatever I have received in life is by no means small. In my capacity as a singer, thinker, academician, author, composer and *guru*, I have received appreciation several times. I had the privilege of working as Special Executive Magistrate; as a Member for the Maharashtra State Cultural Committee, Maharashtra Public Service Commission, national level committees of Ministry of Culture, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Indian Council for Cultural Relations and selection committees for national awards, scholarships, competitions, etc.

I have been working for many years as the Chairperson in my school – The Rasta Peth Education Society at Pune.

I have been organising programmes related to music on and off since 1965. I had established 'Sur Bahar' music circle and had organised bi-monthly music programmes and music festivals at Rang Bhawan (open air theatre at Mumbai) between 1965 - 1970. Later, in association with 'Hridayesh Arts', between 1991 - 2006, I organised a national level music festival 'Sureshbabu Hirabai Smruti Sangeet Samaroh' in memory of my *gurus*, the doyens of the Kirana *gharaanaa*. Three to four thousand music lovers used to attend this festival to listen to senior as well as young artists. This festival became the major music festival in Mumbai like the Sawai Gandharva Festival in Pune. I realised that having an institution would help organise such festivals and other activities related to performing arts. Thus 'Dr. Prabha Atre Foundation' took its inception in May 2000 to promote the cause of Indian classical music in particular and other performing arts in general.

A long awaited dream project – a modern *gurukul* came true in 2003. It was a major

step in the direction of fulfilling the objectives of the Foundation.

I renovated the part of the bungalow in my possession at Pune to suit to the requirements – a small auditorium which could house nearly 150 people, a sound system with facilities for recording and listening, library of books and recordings, a store room for instruments, rooms for *riyaaz*, etc., 'Swaramayee Gurukul' was inaugurated by the Hindustani classical music maestro Bharatratna Pt. Bhimsen Joshi. Talented students aspiring to take music as a full time professional career are trained to equip themselves to meet the challenges of the profession. This training is aided by a small auditorium, with a facility for audio-video recording. It also provides a platform for *mehfils*, seminars, workshops, discussions, press conferences etc., The institution, aims to bridge the prevailing gap between the academic institutions and the traditional *guru-shishya parampara*. The environment of *gurukul* cannot be made available at homes. It ensures *riyaaz* under the supervision of the *guru*.

To be successful today it is necessary that along with one's talent and knowledge, one also has the professional skills in marketing. Swaramayee Gurukul facilitates training even in this aspect – how to dress, how to seat on the stage, how to face microphone; how to control body movements, facial expressions; how to communicate with people; how to introduce artists and items that are going to be presented. In today's commercial world, the visual presentation of performance on the stage has become equally important to impress and reach audience.

Monthly *baithaks* and music related academic programmes at Gurukul – the entire arrangement is made by the students. Getting in touch with the artists, media, advertisements; arranging the auditorium, decorating the stage; receiving, attending the artists; preparing introductory speeches before the programmes, conducting programmes, reporting/reviewing the programmes – all these things are handled by the students.

It occurs to me when I calculate the sum total of all these, that God has given to me as my share much more than, what I think, I deserve. My mind bends down even more than before in humility. I sincerely pray to God that I prove myself worthy of all this. I do know that in life, there is confrontation just as there is harmony. Rarely does one find the harmonising notes, but one has to face confrontation even when one does not ask for it. I cannot tolerate any injustice done to me. I cannot practise flattery. That is why I gave up my job with the AIR; I have to face such situations sometimes, even in my profession. I too have my share of problems which women practicing music as a profession have to face. People get offended, rumours are spread. Such situations arise and make their way right to one's home. Time and energy are spent to no useful purpose. There is plenty of mental agony. Who knows whether an artist's mind is extra-sensitive!

As a result of my work with the All India Radio and SNTD Women's University and on account of my professional career as well, I have, by now, come into close contact with many people. My nature, too, I feel has therefore, undergone some change. I am now able to smile when people get together, boldly welcome them and engage them in conversation quite well. Still, I do not really enjoy things like parties, hotels, etc. Whenever I go for my programmes, I usually tell the organisers to arrange for my stay at somebody's residence. I have been abroad many times, but I have neither tasted alcohol nor had non-vegetarian food. Not that there is anything bad about it, but my Brahmin upbringing has penetrated

so deep that it is just not possible to bring about a change at this stage.

I am extremely fond of the colour White. I am particular about wearing white for my programmes. In doing so, I do not wish to establish myself as Meera; for I like both Meera and Radha. I think that both are reflected in my nature as well as in my singing.

I do not have any set habits, not even of drinking tea. I am willing to adjust myself anywhere. Whenever I go out, I want that I could remain unrecognised. I am in the habit of humming to myself while I am travelling. I am completely oblivious of my surroundings and when I come out of that state, I find people looking at me; people who have no familiarity with classical music, are smiling. They are probably wondering whether I am of sane mind. Those who have had a brush with classical music are eager to know who I am. I avoid telling my name. Once I tell my name, my privacy is over.

People think that I have no family, no ties; therefore, I have plenty of time and I have no worries; the only thing that I have to do is pick the *taanpuraa* and sit on the stage! What do people know? I have a family and a household just like others, except that I do not have a husband. I had to shoulder the responsibility of my parents; Usha's daughter has grown up just like my daughter. Visitors come and go; there are guests; there are ailments and illnesses; there are domestic and outside chores; court matters and office work. In other families, there is a husband, at least to bring an income and to share other responsibilities. In my household, I am doing everything single-handed. There is a home to be looked after and there are professional tensions too. My life is, in no way, different just because I am an artist and unmarried.

When I look at my life as a singer, I feel that my entire life has been a *mehfil*. To create harmonious happiness in the life of others without letting oneself go out of tune, is the foremost duty of every person. One cannot evaluate life just in the two terms – 'success' and 'failure'. To gain a holistic view of life could be considered as the successful culmination of human effort. A person is alone when he is born and alone also when he departs. But the space between these two is filled by the gathering at a *mehfil*. As poet Mir has said:

"I had started alone on my journey;
but when I turned around,
I saw that a caravan had formed behind."

One walks ahead in life all alone, one experiences moments of success and failure with equanimity, one is neither inebriated by happiness nor is enfeebled by sorrow, one is mentally detached, one starts seeing the other shore and one is inwardly astounded that one has reached up to the point all alone when one suddenly turns around and glances behind to see a crowd of well-wishers bidding good bye with tearful eyes and before one realises what is happening, the soul merges into the divine and that exhilarating moment may prove to be the last moment of the *mehfil* of life. This is what I have ever been wishing for.