The beginning of a career

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BAL GANDHARVA

The beginning of a career

Who discovered Bal Gandharva? And where? What was the secret of his divine tunes and melodies? What was the first drama in which he shone as a great female actor?

Though born in Poona, Narayan Rajhans was brought up in Hari- veri in Dharwar district, where he learned singing and acting in amateur, open-air plays that were the rage in the Karnatak of those days. It was at this stage of his development that Mr. Kirloskar and his friend at Dharwar Teachers Training College, Mr. Turamari discovered the golden voice of the Rajhans lad who later became the immortal Bal Gandharva.

Mr. Kirloskar was a bilingual genius, who knew Marathi and Kannada with equal felicity. His friend Turamari had adapted Kali- dasa's "Shakuntala" for the Kannada stage. He had composed songs with popular tunes and melodies based on Kannada folk songs and Karnataka music.

Mr. Kirloskar became so enamoured of Turamari's adaptation and songs that he translated them into Marathi, and with that he set up the first commercial Marathi stage at Kolhapur under the name of Kirloskar Sangeet Natak Mandal.

Kannadigas who were then in an overwhelming majority in the Kol- hapur-Sangli-Miraj area, as well as the Marathi public flocked to see young Rajhans act the part of Shakuntala and sing gloriously. So the first Marathi drama became an instant success.

It is worth noting that the Marathi stage was born at Kolhapur, and not at Poona. The reason is interesting. For decades before the rise of Mr. Kirloskar's dramatic company, Kannadigas from Dharwar and as far south as Mangalore, used to bring their troupes to the Miraj-Sangli-Kolhapur area after harvest time and stage open-air plays variously known as Bailata or Doddatta or Yakshagana. They were immensely popular not only among the overwhelming Kannada population but also among the Marathi population. The Marathi-speaking audiences had no other entertainment in those days.

So when young Rajhans sang Kirloskar's songs with Kannada melodies and Karnataka music, and at times also the original Kannada songs of Turamari, the audiences would go wild with joy, asking for encores.

As at Kolhapur, so also at Sangli and Miraj, audiences understood and appreciated the songs in Shakuntala and their melodies. Later Marathi dramatists, who followed in the footsteps of Mr. Kirloskar, also imitated the Turamari melodies. Khadilkar invariably mentions the chal of his songs by quoting the first original Kannada line of Turamari's songs. I distinctly remember it in his Manapamana.

Thus the secret of the haunting quality of Bal Gandharva's singing arose from the original Kannada melodies. As Marathi song writers, composers, and dramatists divorced themselves from the origin of their dramatic art at Kolhapur-Sangli-Miraj and cut themselves off from the springs of inspiration that Kannada melodies provided, by moving to Poona and Bombay, the quality of Marathi songs deteriorated.

The last great composer, song writer and singer was Mr. Mangeshkar who had his moorings in Kannada musical traditions as well as Hindustani traditions. What he did and what he taught his two talented daughters, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosale, have still kept up the high quality of Marathi singing. It seems that music in Marathi can maintain its excellence only in concert and consonance with Karnataka music and Kannada folk melodies.

Another little known fact is that Bal Gandharva had read a fine Sanskrit poem written by a Sanskrit scholar and teacher at Dharwar, entitled Kaka Dutta in the style of Kalidasa's Meghaduta. It deals with a drunkard's remorse, who sends a message to his wife through a crow from the Central Jail at Dharwar. The poem so interested Bal Gandharva that he persuaded the talented Gadkari, himself a distinguished imbibers, to pen his famous Ekocha Pyala, based on Kaka Dutta.

If only Marathi writers, dramatists, composers and singers were to maintain unsullied the camaraderie of Marathi and Kannada, the arts and literature in both languages will prosper, politicians notwithstanding.

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