

Obituaries

Ustad Ahmad Jan Thirakwa



With the death of the near-centenarian Ustad Ahmad Jan Thirakwa has snapped what is possibly the last vital link between two memorable periods in the annals of Hindustani music. The Ustad was truly a giant among contemporary Indian percussionists and enjoyed the rare distinction of having accompanied four generations of performers from the nineteenth century to the present day. The distinguished line-up included celebrities like Imdad Khan, Allabande Khan, Rajab Ali Khan, Mushtaq Hussain Khan, Bhaskar

Buva Bakhale, Allauddin Khan, Hafiz Ali Khan, Abdul Karim Khan and present-day artists like Rais Khan.

The Ustad was born at a time when princely patronage still continued to nurse a budding genius to flower into full bloom—and he lived and died, amid changing conditions which witnessed a transition to public patronage. But it was characteristic of the man that he moved with the times with uncompromising dignity, kept his tradition alive and, without re-aligning his art to the tastes of his motley audiences, ruled supreme as the greatest percussion maestro of our times.

Nor did the maestro believe that it was below his dignity to accompany even an artiste one-third his age. His style of accompaniment was so sympathetic that he helped many a young musician to gain confidence and perform in true form.

Born at Moradabad, in Uttar Pradesh, Thirakwa belonged to a family in which melody ruled and rhythm had a shrine. His father, Hussein Baksh, was a noted sarangi-player, while three of his uncles were excellent percussionists. Strangely enough, vocal music was his first love. But when he was only twelve, he came under the influence of the tabla maestro, Ustad Munir Khan. He forsook singing for playing, and pursued his practice relentlessly for many years under the guidance of his mentor. The result was that he learnt all the subtleties and refinements of his master's art and came to be regarded as a percussion prodigy while he was still in his twenties.

Soon he mastered all the various styles of percussion in vogue in North India. While he played the Farrukabad and Ajrada styles distinctively and with uncanny verve and grace, he also excelled in the Delhi style as few could.

Thirakwa was equally versatile as a soloist and as an accompanist. His was, indeed, a personality-bound style; its eloquence was perfectly matched by moving delicacy and amazing precision even in the super-fast play. Added to this was the kaleidoscopic variety of stylisations in which each *qaida* and *tukda* appeared new, each *peshkara* and *paran* came as a vivid pledge and each *mohra* and *gat-toda* sprang a surprise. The repertoire of complex rhythms and cross-rhythms he thus built up and the virtuosity he displayed in their presentation was equalled by few and surpassed by none.

This mastery in the art of improvisation in every manner of aesthetic design also brought him acclaim as an accompanist. He had the rare faculty of bringing out the best from the principal performers—whether they were vocalists or instrumentalists or dancers. Maharashtra has special reason to remember him because of his historic association with Bal Gandharva. The Gandharva-Thirakwa partnership during the heyday of the Marathi drama is still remembered with nostalgia by those who were witness to Thirakwa's artistry in reproducing intonations as beautifully as Bal Gandharva rendered them in song.

Honours, awards and titles came naturally to Thirakwa in earlier times from the durbars and in more recent decades from the government and from cultural bodies. Seldom did he care to use them with his name. He toured all over the country to give performances in concert halls and at marathon festivals. He was associated with the Bhatkhande College of Music and, in the twilight of his years, he was in charge of the master classes at the National Centre for the Performing Arts. At heart, he was a simple and unassuming man, deeply devoted to his Muse.

Thirakwa's magic fingers were silenced on January 13, 1976. But the art of this maestro is not lost to the world. For this era of tapes and long play records has enshrined many of the inspiring moments which the maestro always strove to create.

—MOHAN NADKARNI
