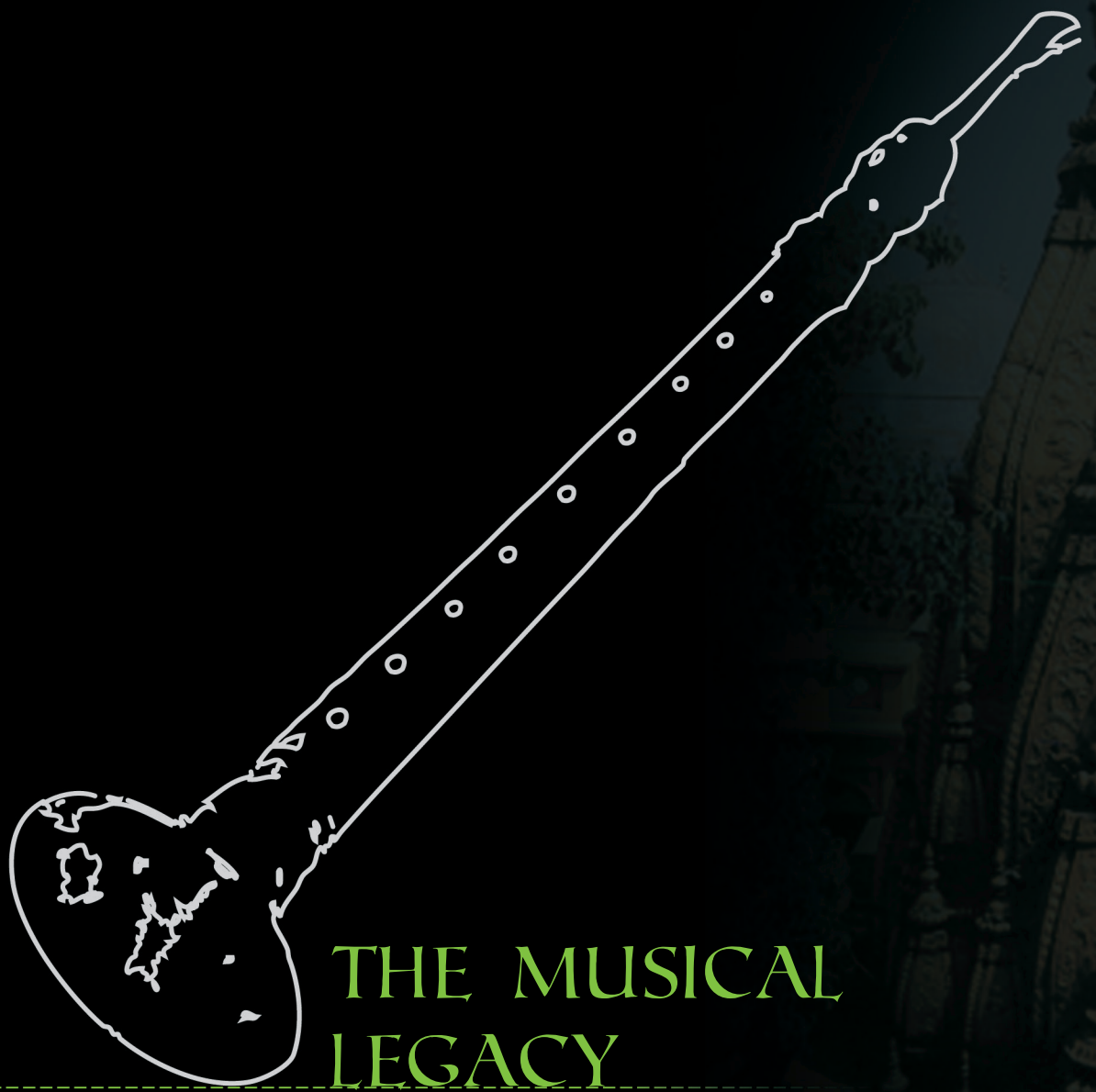


THE MUSICAL LEGACY

3



Dal Mandi singers who made thumri *a popular musical genre in Benaras.*

Benaras has the Ganga and Lord Shiva as its guardian deity. He is not only Vishwanath, Lord of the Universe, but also Nataraj, Lord of Music and Dance, and his permanent abode is Benaras.

Pandit Chhannu Lal Mishra of the Benaras gharana is a vocalist of great repute, and an artist who continues to make Benaras his home. Explaining the cosmic connection between Lord Vishwanath, music and Benaras, he once observed in an interview with the author in 2007, 'Indian classical music is spiritual; the singer always invokes God first.' According to Pandit Chhannu Lal, the word 'Aa…' as the first *sur* invites God, while all the different rhythmic patterns in our music—the talas—emerge from Shiva's *damru* – whose beat orchestrates the dance of the cosmos and the universe. Chhannu Lal believes that spirituality in Indian music is especially enhanced when it is born in Kashi, a centre of literature, learning and music, which is also the domain of Shiva, the Lord of Music, Melody and Rhythm. The belief that music is more than an artistic expression, a means of achieving divine communion with God Himself, is deeply ingrained in the artistic psyche. Music has been described

as *kalyankari*—a path that leads to moksha. In an interview with the author in 2007, Pandit Chhannu Lal Mishra narrates the following anecdote:

'Once Narad questioned God, "Where do you live?"

'God replied, "I live not in Baikunth, nor in the heart of ascetics. Wherever my devotee invokes me in *sur* and tala, there, O Narad, I dwell!"'

In Benaras, music is considered both sacred and inspirational, as well as a reflection of divinity. In this context, Pandit Channu Lal Mishra had commented, '*Sakar Brahma* temples may be seen all over India; but in Kashi it is possible to see, hear and experience *Nirankar Brahma* – in music. With such a strong connection between Benaras and music, it was only fitting that the first college in India, solely devoted to music, should be in Benaras. The Benaras Hindu University (BHU) has long been seen as the intellectual face of Benaras. Set up in 1917 by Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, BHU attracted students from all over the world, especially for the study of Sanskrit, philosophy and theology. In 1950, the faculty of music was established, chiefly owing to the efforts of Pandit Omkar Nath Thakur. Thus, the Shrikala Bhartiya College of Music of Benaras became the first college in India devoted to the study and promotion of arts, music and dance.

The Benaras gharana has a vast repertoire of musical genres—from pure classical, semi-classical to folk. But perhaps it is *thumri* that represents the Benarasi style of music the most. It is a style of light classical music that originated in the northern states of India, namely, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. The Benaras *thumri* is characterised by its play on words, and is often called *bol banav thumri*, where the words and lines of a song are sung in a variety of ways. The language is usually *khadiboli*, *bhojpuri* and *braj*. *Thumri* combines

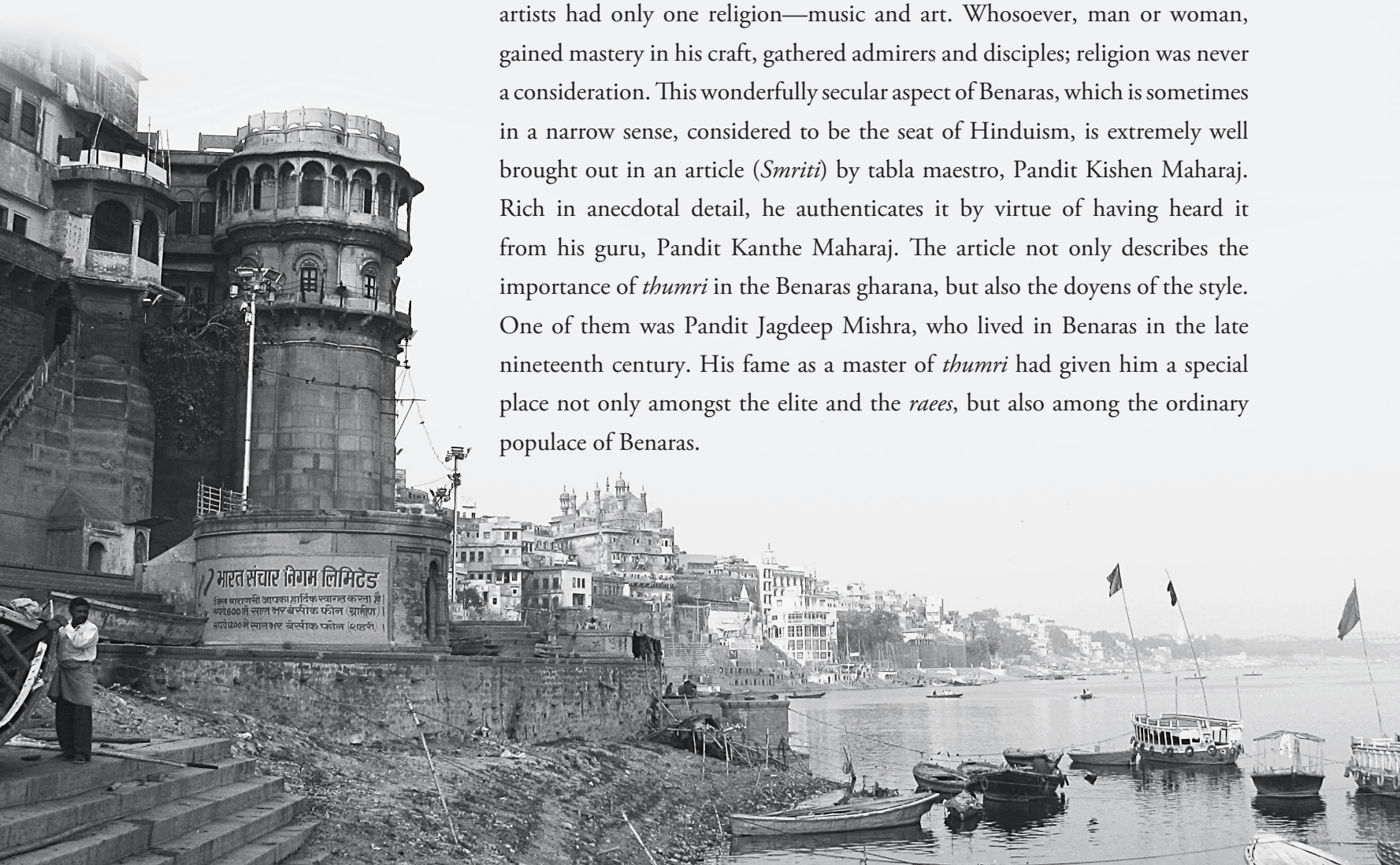


Padma Bhushan Chhannulal Mishra, a noted vocalist who is best known for his rendition of the Ramayana and the many folk songs of Uttar Pradesh.

The raees *of Benaras were patrons of music and held* mehfils *or soirees that were attended by the elite of the city.*

in itself elements of music, dance and *abhinaya* and is especially suited to songs of love and romance, often celebrating the dalliance of Radha and Krishna. Some scholars believe that the word '*thumri*' is derived from *thuma* or *thumka*—a dance step. Whatever be the origin of *thumri*, its light playful compositions and its many delightful variations, with shifting emphases on music, words, drama and dance, have helped to retain its popularity even today.

A significant aspect of the Benaras musical tradition was that Benaras artists had only one religion—music and art. Whosoever, man or woman, gained mastery in his craft, gathered admirers and disciples; religion was never a consideration. This wonderfully secular aspect of Benaras, which is sometimes in a narrow sense, considered to be the seat of Hinduism, is extremely well brought out in an article (*Smriti*) by tabla maestro, Pandit Kishen Maharaj. Rich in anecdotal detail, he authenticates it by virtue of having heard it from his guru, Pandit Kanthe Maharaj. The article not only describes the importance of *thumri* in the Benaras gharana, but also the doyens of the style. One of them was Pandit Jagdeep Mishra, who lived in Benaras in the late nineteenth century. His fame as a master of *thumri* had given him a special place not only amongst the elite and the *raees*, but also among the ordinary populace of Benaras.



On one occasion, when Pandit Jagdeep returned home late after a concert, he found the door to his house locked and his wife fast asleep inside. When knocking on the door with the *sankal* or chain produced no results, Pandit Jagdeep settled himself at the doorstep and improvising the words to suit the occasion, began to sing a *thumri*—'*Kewadia khol mere raja ras ki boondein pade*' (Open the door my beloved, the sweetness of melody beckons). Jagdeep's song, along with the percussion provided by the humble *sankal*, had awakened all the neighbours who came out to enjoy this impromptu performance. This incident speaks volumes of the Benarasi temperament that could lose itself in the *thumri*; grateful for an opportunity of hearing the master, albeit in the middle of the night. Of course, the person for whom this composition was intended slept through it all, awaking only with the first light of the new day. When she then opened the door to her husband (who was apparently of an amazingly equable temperament, and of course, a true Benarasi!), he went inside smiling, leaving the neighbours wishing for other such nights when music held sway without the interruption of day break.

Pandit Jagdeep's fame had spread to other parts of North India, such as Lucknow and the Punjab. However, the Punjab had its own master of *thumri* in the person of Maujuddin Khan. One of his musical tours had brought him to Benaras and a programme was arranged for his performance. The *raees* and artists of Benaras came together to hear him perform. He sang for over two hours to an enthusiastic audience, winding up the evening with a *thumri*. When the applause died down, Khan Sahib thanked his audience and asked if there was any artist amongst them who could sing for him, so that he could rest for a while. The artists were loath to sing; however, some of the senior members in the audience suggested Pandit Jagdeep's name, and after



Padma Vibhushan Kishen Maharaj—one of India's most accomplished tabla players, who helped to get the tabla its rightful place as an accompaniment at concerts. He, like Bismillah Khan, continued to stay in Benaras all his life.

With an overwhelming love for music and art and a zest for life, the people of Benaras have given this secular city an amazing vibrancy.

some persuasion, the latter agreed. He began a *thumri* about a maiden gazing longingly at the clouds – '*Thaari gori chitve badara ki ore*' – and within a few minutes, the audience was spellbound. He sang for two hours; at the end of the performance, Maujuddin Khan fell at his feet and pleaded with Pandit Jagdeep, 'Make me your *shagird* now, this minute. You are no ordinary artist, you are the *paighambar* of music.'

Jagdeep embraced Khan Sahib and said, 'You are too accomplished a singer to be my *shagird* – but I shall be happy to have you with me whenever you want and for as long as you wish!'

Khan Sahib, from all accounts, became like a family member, a shadow of Pandit Jagdeep, and soon thereafter, he moved to Benaras, bag and baggage. His attachment to Benaras grew daily, and when one day, he sang before Baba Jainarayan Ram, the latter exclaimed in delight commenting, 'Your music is so sublime! What wish can I grant you?'

Khan Sahib replied, 'I only ask that I may live all my days in Kashi.' The seer, however, told Maujuddin that his days in Kashi were numbered, that he



would leave Benaras within a week's time, but would return towards the end of his life and attain moksha.

The very next day, Maujuddin received an invitation from the famous courtesan of Calcutta—Gauhar Jaan. It was a request for him to come to Calcutta as her guest and provide her guidance in classical music. It was a tempting offer. Maujuddin's stay in Calcutta would be well funded, his needs would be taken care of; moreover, his family in Benaras would receive five hundred rupees a month, a princely sum in those days. As Pandit Jagdeep had moved to the court of Nepal a few months ago, it was easier for Maujuddin Khan to take a decision on the proposal. Shortly afterwards, he moved to Calcutta.

Calcutta and Gauhar Jaan welcomed Khan Shahib into the *raees* circle and artists, and soon, he was as well known there as in Punjab and Benaras. In the meantime, Pandit Jagdeep, weary of the endless court formalities of the Nepal court, moved back to Benaras. This gave Maujuddin Khan, the opportunity to invite him to Calcutta. Pandit Jagdeep readily agreed and duly arrived in Calcutta.

Recalling the incident, Pandit Kishen Maharaj describes in delightful detail the manners and etiquette prevalent at the time amongst artists.

Maujuddin Khan personally went (in a phaeton) to receive Jagdeep*ji* at the Howrah Station. From there, he escorted him to the home of a welcoming *raees* where he would be well looked after. Thereafter, Maujuddin went to Gauhar Jaan and announced simply, 'My *paighambar* has arrived!' Gauhar Jaan was surprised at Khan Shahib's deep veneration of Jagdeep*ji* and suggested that he should bring him to her home that evening. 'You are out of your mind!' exclaimed Khan Sahib. 'Do you think he is a musician like any other? He is the Shah of Shahs!'





Many of the singers of Dal Mandi were highly skilled performers and the word tawaif *(courtesan) does not do them justice. They were regarded as repositories of etiquette and musical talent, and young men from* raees *families were often sent to them to learn both music and etiquette*–tehzeeb.

After Maujuddin Khan had left, Gauhar Jaan debated on her course of action. Finally, she summoned her *durwan* – a six-feet six inches-tall Pathan called Sher Khan, whose appearance alone was enough to deter the minor *raees* from coming into the *kotha* of Gauhar Jaan, and sent him with a velvet bag containing a hundred silver rupees and a request to Jagdeep*ji* to visit her *daulat khana* in the evening. Jagdeep*ji* smiled and replied saying, 'Sher Khan, please tell the Queen of Melody that merely to see Jagdeep*ji*, the fees is a thousand and one rupees!'

A shocked Sher Khan returned to Gauhar Jaan and his description of Jagdeep*ji*'s personality was enough for her to realise her mistake. She placed a hundred and one *guinea*s in a bag of silver and sent Sher Khan again to Jagdeep*ji*. Mollified by the persistence and the respect shown by Gauhar Jaan, Jagdeep*ji* agreed to present himself at her residence at seven that evening.

Gauhar Jaan had prepared well for the evening soiree. She had invited all the top artistes and their patrons, the rich and eminent members of aristocratic families. Jagdeep*ji* was accorded a welcome befitting his stature, and then, he began his performance. As he sang, the audience fell silent and many were moved to tears. In an adjoining room, Maujuddin sobbed like a child. At the end of the performance, he went to Jagdeep*ji* and placed his head on his lap and said, 'Pandit*ji* you have quenched a thirst of many long years!'

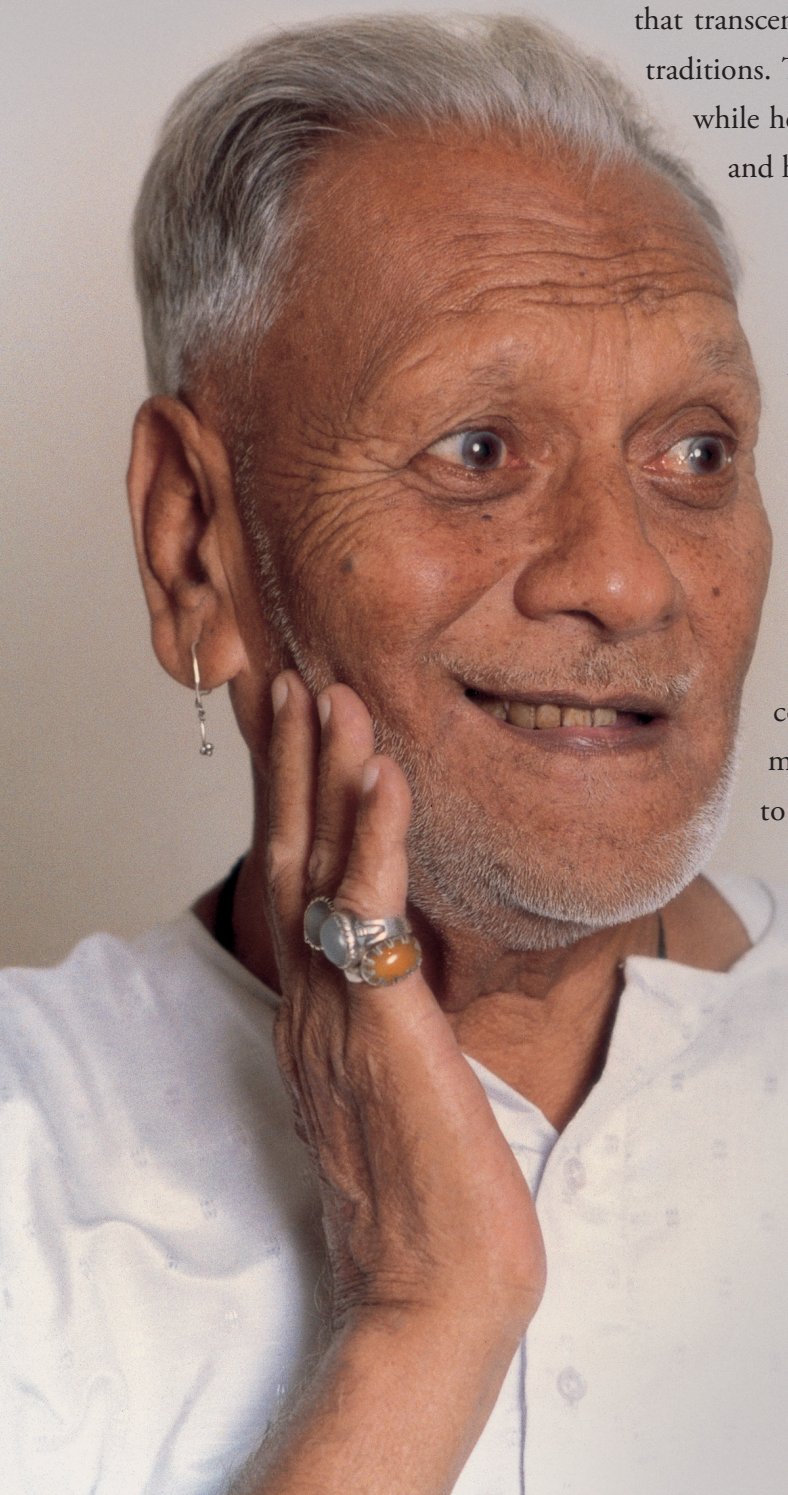
After staying in Calcutta for a few more days, Jagdeep*ji* returned to Benaras. Soon thereafter, he passed away. His death left a void in Benaras and in the world of *thumri* and classical music, but it completely shattered Maujuddin Khan. On hearing of it, he fell ill; a worried Gauhar Jaan personally brought him to Benaras, but within a fortnight Khan Sahib was



Gauhar Jaan, a renowned courtesan, belonged to the Benaras gharana. She resided in Calcutta and her list of clients included names of the rich and the famous..

no more. The words of the seer, Baba Jainarain Ram, proved true. Khan Sahib had come back to Kashi to die and achieve salvation. The interaction of two such great artists is without a single jarring note; a unique relationship sans ego, rivalry or religious differences.

Bismillah Khan himself was deeply influenced by the great *thumri* singers of Benaras and the sterling traditions of the *guru-shishya parampara*. Bismillah had only one disciple, Jagdish Pratap, a young man from a humble background. His father, Deep Chand, had requested Bismillah to accept his son as his disciple. Bismillah agreed and when Jagdish was about ten years old, he came to live with Bismillah in Benia Bagh, as a member of his family. According to Bageshwari, Jagdish's daughter, initially there was considerable opposition from both families – one Muslim and the other Rajput – but both Deep Chand and Bismillah held firm and Jagdish was accepted into the household. Then, as per the *guru-shishya* tradition, the *shishya* surrendered totally to the guru. Jagdish was the student, helper, son—rolled into one; learning as and when his guru thought it fit. In the intervening periods, he did household chores, shopping, cooking and cleaning like other family members. He was loved, scolded and looked after by his guru and his wife. Subsequently, Jagdish Pratap also sent his daughter Bageshwari to Bismillah for training. Bageshwari learnt from both Bismillah and her father, and although she did not attain the stature of an eminent concert-level artist, she is today the only woman shehnai player in the country. There are many such instances between gurus and *shishya*s where religious boundaries were non-existent. Eminent sitar player, Pandit Ravi Shankar and his guru Ustad Amanullah Khan; ghazal queen, Begum Akhtar and her disciples Shanti Hira Nand and Rita Ganguly are only a few examples. This unique bond between two human beings, one



that transcends religion, caste and social differences, is one of India's finest traditions. The singer Siddheshwari Devi is reported to have once said that while her children were born of desire, a *shishya* was the fruit of *sadhna* and her teachings, and therefore, more precious.

From the time when the Vedas were first recited, the temples of Benaras became a centre for daily musical offerings to God. Later, these prayers were set to music and rhythm and set to a *bandish*. The prayers were ritualised and sung with simple accompanying instruments. In between the formal morning, noon and evening *arti*s, it soon became commonplace for prayers and musical congregations to be held in the temple courtyards and its surrounding areas. Over the centuries, the music moved out into the havelis of the wealthy and diversified to include other genres. Gradually, these get-togethers acquired refinement and formality and provided a platform even for bhajans, folk songs, *tappa*s and *thumri*s. These gatherings came to be known as *baithak*s and *mehfil*s or chamber music, and reached their zenith sometime in the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century.

The number of participants in the *baithak* was not large; perhaps, twenty-five to thirty people, but they were usually interested in and aware of the niceties of classical music. They