

# Portrait of Tansen

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There is a genuine desire among music lovers to discover the personality of a great artist. Stray details of his life, lively anecdotes, stirring or evocative moments during a performance go to build a picture of the man. And the externals of his personality are indicated by portraits, which, for all their limitations, afford a glimpse of the maestro.

The first six Moghul rulers prized learning and culture, and, above all, the art of miniature painting. While Humayun took the initial steps to develop this branch, it was Akbar who laid the actual foundations of a proper school of this art form.

The city built by Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri was the ideal locale for a community of craftsmen and aesthetes devoted to the pursuit of the arts. That remarkable chronicler of the times, Abul Fazl, has in his two works, the *Akbar Namah* and the *Aini Akbari*, left us a faithful account of the varied interests of Akbar's court. Akbar attracted a wealth of talent towards himself. The *Aini Akbari* has a special chapter on the art of painting and mentions Akbar's personal interest in the atelier at his court. The master painters were the two Persians, Abdus Samad and Mir Sayyid Ali; the rest of the artists were mainly Hindus. The painters concentrated on two branches of the art of miniature: book illustration and portraiture. In drawing a portrait, the artist's primary concern was to seize a likeness. Thus we have a pictorial record of the Nine Jewels who added lustre to Akbar's court. The most renowned among these was the musician Tansen. In the *Aini Akbari* there is an entire chapter on Imperial Musicians.

"I cannot sufficiently describe the wonderful power of this talisman of knowledge (music). It sometimes causes the beautiful creatures of the harem of the heart to shine forth on the tongue, and sometimes appears in solemn strains by means of the hand and the chord. The melodies then enter through the window of the ear and return to their former seat, the heart, bringing with them thousands of presents. The hearers, according to their insight, are moved to sorrow or to joy. Music is thus of use to those who have renounced the world and to such as still cling to it.

"His Majesty pays much attention to music, and is the patron of all who practise this enchanting art. There are numerous musicians at court, Hindus, Iranis, Turanis, Kashmiris, both men and women. The court musicians are arranged in seven divisions, one for each day in the week. When His Majesty gives the order, they let the wine of harmony flow, and thus increase intoxication in some, and sobriety in others".

Abul Fazl goes on to describe the principal musicians of the court and pays a tribute to Tansen: "Miyan Tansen, of Gwalyar. A singer like him has not been in India for the last thousand years."

The date of Tansen's birth is not certain. But there is a legend that he died before Akbar, for a *doha* supposed to have been composed by the Emperor himself says:

*Pithala so majlis gai, Tansen so rag  
Hasibo ramibo bolibo, gayo Birabara satha.*

(Social life disappeared with Pithala; music disappeared with Tansen, and laughter, repartee and conversation with Birbal.)

It is difficult to reconstruct Tansen's early life and career because the biographical material which is available to us is so meagre. Badaoni in his *Muntakhabu't Tawarikh* mentions Tansen's apprenticeship to Muhamed Adil (popularly known as Adali), who was an accomplished dancer. He also says that Tansen was in the service of Raja Ramchand of Bandhogarh (Rewa) who appreciated his musical gifts and showered gold on him.

The background of Tansen's departure from the service of Raja Ramchand to join Akbar's court is recounted by Abul Fazl in the *Akbar Namah*.

"As the fame of Tansen, who was the foremost of the age among the Kalawants of Gwalior, came to the royal hearing and it was reported that he meditated going into retirement and that he was spending his days in attendance on Ramchand, the Raja of Pannah, His Majesty ordered that he should be enrolled among the court musicians. Jalal Khan Qurchi, who was a favourite servant, was sent with a gracious order for the purpose of bringing Tansen. The Raja received the royal message and recognised the sending of the envoy as an honour, and sent back with him suitable presents of elephants of fame and valuable jewels, and he also gave Tansen suitable instruments and made him the cheekmole of his gifts. In this year Tansen did homage and received exaltation. His Majesty was pleased and poured gifts of money into the lap of his hopes. His cap of honour was exalted above all others. As he had an upright nature and an acceptable disposition he was cherished by a long service and association with His Majesty and great developments were made by him in music and compositions."

There are also incidental references in the records of the time to the musical contests in which Tansen participated and to the hostility which he had to face from orthodox circles.

In his memoirs Jehangir writes warmly of 'Tansen Kalawant'. He says:

". . . there has been no singer like him in any time or age. In one of his compositions he has likened the face of a young man to the sun and the opening of his eyes to the expanding of the Kanwal and the exit of the bee. In another place he has compared the side-glance of the beloved one to the motion of the Kanwal when the bee alighted on it."

Jehangir observes that when the saint, Shaik Salim Chishti, was on his death bed, he requested Akbar to send Tansen to him. After Tansen had sung for him, the holy man died.

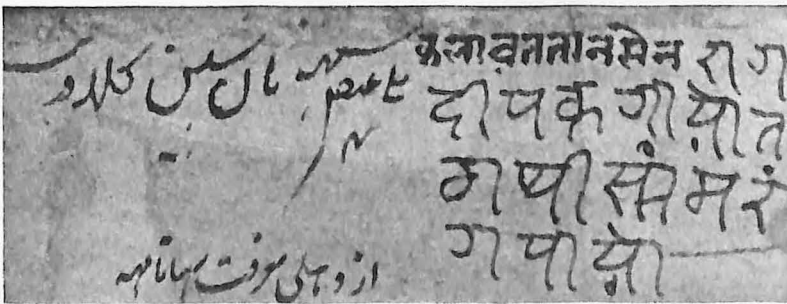
There is also the legend surrounding the meeting of Swami Haridas, Akbar and Tansen. It is believed that Akbar disguised himself as a *sadhu* and accompanied by Tansen, he went to Brindavan hoping to hear the sweet strains of Swami Haridas' music. When Tansen sang, he committed a mistake with the deliberate aim of prompting the Swami to correct him. The Swami then sang to demonstrate the right style to Tansen and Akbar's wish was fulfilled. When Akbar sought to find out why Tansen himself could not sing as beautifully as Swami Haridas did, Tansen's reply was:

"Your Majesty, I sing in the court of a mighty ruler, while my teacher sings in the court of God".

People came to regard this meeting as a historical fact and the dramatic episode even formed the subject of a Kishangarh miniature of the second half of the eighteenth century. The painting is in the National Museum, New Delhi.

When such legends surround the personality of a musician, it is only natural that art lovers and musicians should seek at least a glimmer of what the man was like.

There is a portrait of Tansen in the National Museum at New Delhi. He is shown as a tall, dark man, with a sharp nose and a pointed chin. His hands are small; his fingers, sensitive. He seems to be clapping his hands, perhaps in the act of singing. The same attitude and features are reproduced in another portrait in the possession of the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay. Tansen wears a similar kind of costume as in the first portrait: an *atpati pagri*, a *jamah* reaching to the ankles, a *dupatta* crossed over the chest and a *kamarband* to which a dagger is fastened. His lips are open; he seems to be singing. There are inscriptions in Persian and Hindi at the back of the portrait. The Persian inscription reads: *Shabih Tansen Kalawant Az Delhi marfat Mahanath*. This means that it is a portrait of Tansen Kalawant and that Mahanath brought it from Delhi. The Hindi inscription is even more interesting. It mentions the name of Kalawant Tansen and adds a couplet: *Raga Dipaka gayo, tethi marana payo* Tansen sang the *raga* Dipaka and the fire ignited by his wonderful music consumed his body.



Facsimile of Hindi and Persian inscriptions on the reverse of the Tansen portrait in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.