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Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur- The Singer's quest for Excellence

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Abstract:

The musical life of Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur spanned over sixty years. His music cast a magnetic influence over his audience especially with his astonishing breath control. The unconditional purity of his swara's and the vivid way in which he engaged the many embellishments revealed the earnestness in the Ragas he chose to sing.

He was born on December 31, 1910 in a village in Dharwad district of Karnataka. At the tender age of nine, Mallikarjun developed a fascination for theatre. Comprehending this, his father Bheemaraayappa enabled his desire to join a touring theatrical company, *Yakshagana*.

This article is about his transition from the make believe world of theatre to the sublime but challenging realm of classical music.

Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur's primary tuelage in Carnatic music was initiated under Ayyappaswami and later in Hindustani music from Pandit Neelkantbuwa Jangam, a disciple of Pandit Balakrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar, renowned exponent of the Gwalior gharana, and, his final stop-point at the Jaipur-Atrauli gayaki; earlier as a disciple of Manji Khan and subsequently Bhurji Khan the two sons of Alladiya Khan. It was no surprise therefore, that his music had an amalgam of all three.

The article refers to his simplistic persona, his realizations, his gurus, the legacy and his candid approach to life with commitment to music.

This write-up also has some impressions of my invaluable personal interactions with Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur in Delhi and Bombay.

Pandit Mallikarjuna Mansur has had the rare honour of receiving all the three Padma Awards in 1970, 1976, 1992 respectively, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1982.

Key Words:

- 1. Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur**
- 2. Alladiya Khan-Jaipur-Atrauli**
- 3. Ayyappaswami, Neelkantbua Jhangam**
- 4. Manji Khan-Bhurji Khan**
- 5. Rajshekhar Mansur.**



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Pt. Mallikarjun Mansur the veteran of the Jaipur-Atrauli tradition was truly one of the greatest maestros of *khayal gayaki*. His music cast a magnetic influence over his audience especially with his astonishing breath control. The unconditional purity of his swara's and the vivid way in which he engaged the many embellishments, revealed the earnestness in the Ragas he chose to sing. He brought about vibrant passion and unparalleled sincerity of expression in his music. Born in 1910, his clearly discernible talent for music was evident from his childhood.

His father Bheemaraayappa, the village headman and a farmer by occupation, recognised Mallikarjun's immensely high musical acumen, and engaged him with a touring theatre troupe Yakshagana, Here he was encouraged to sing compositions in varied genres during the drama performances. Subsequent to one such scintillating performance he was handpicked by Appaya Swamy who trained him in the rudiments of Carnatic music.

Later he received training in Hindustani Music from Nilkanthbua Alurmah of Miraj and the disciple of Pt. Balkishanbuwa Ichalkranjekar who belonged to the Gwalior Gharana.

He brought him to Alladiya Khan in 1920, the prevailing Patriarch of Jaipur-Atrauli tradition, but, Alladiya Khan who had advanced in age referred Mallikarjun to his elder son Manji Khan. Following Manji Khan's untimely demise he finally came under the tutelage of Manji Khan's younger brother Bhurji Khan. This grooming under Bhurji Khan had the most significant influence on his style of singing.

Mallikarjun's music is an amalgam of the Carnatic, Gwalior and the Jaipur-Atrauli traditions. His rise to pinnacle of fame in his later years was phenomenal. Most other performers at that age make a retreat from the concert scenario.

I have personally had the good fortune of listening to some remarkable vocal recitals by Pt. Mallikarjuna Mansur at Bombay and a grand concert at the residence of Dr. Hassan, the Ambassador of Qatar in New Delhi. I was blessed to have met Pundit ji there. I requested him to grant me some time to enlighten me about his life, and his musical journey.

The following day, as I walked up the stairs to his apartment, the magical notes of *Shuddh Nat* of the previous evening echoed in my ears. Sitting on a small couch, he welcomed me with his bright affectionate and earnest and unpretentious smile. All trepidations I had, of meeting such a stalwart were immediately put at ease. He struck a convivial, intense chord at the very first instance, and made me comfortable. I have yet



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to come across an eminent person in my life like Pt. Mallikarjun – who was the personification of knowledge and humility. He was generous to the core and even years later, when I met him again on several occasions at the residence of Shri. Prem Shankar Jha, where he often stayed during his many visits to Delhi, he would whole-heartedly part with his treasure of many *bandishes* from the Jaipur tradition. He had a knack of reaching out with the most difficult compositions in a manner, simplifying them such, that they would become easy to learn. He taught me compositions of *Sawani Nat*, *Nayaki Kanada* and the *antara* of *Sampoorna Malkauns*. He also warmly invited me to stay at his house in Dharwad which remains a dream unfulfilled as he soon passed away due to a distressing illness.

At the time of my first meeting with him he talked about the intangible and sublime aspects of music; of *bhava*, *swaras* and *laya*. “Music and life are inseparable for me”, he said at the outset. “For it is a way of life and not just a profession. For the last fifty years, my mind has never strayed from my music.”

A simple, down-to-earth and an unassuming man of deep faith, Pt. Mallikarjun accepted my felicitations, on his being awarded the range of Padma awards with modesty, saying, “Whatever I have achieved, I owe to the favours of Shiva Yogis of Athni, Swami Siddharoodh and Shiva Basava of Haveri. They have heard me and blessed me.”

As a stage-actor, Pt. Mallikarjun came to be noticed while quite young. “For a while I found myself straying on the Kannada stage as a young boy following in the footsteps of my elder brother and I enacted roles of Prahlad, Dhruv and Narada which brought me immense popularity. But I gave up stage acting while I was still in my teens as I was soon attracted to serious music through my father’s patronage to Ayyappaswami, a renowned Carnatic violinist of the day, who used to teach music to my elder brother.” Mallikarjun Mansur lost interest in other pursuits and music was, thereafter, to engulf his life completely and irrevocably. This dedication was further strengthened by his brother’s determination to find him an apt teacher.

“It was Nilkanthbua Alurmath, a great singer of the Gwalior tradition, then touring Karnataka who initiated my first serious steps in learning”, he said. Nilkanthbua Bua said to my brother: “Give this lad to me. I shall make him a musician. His genius should not be wasted in theatre companies.” According to Pt. Mallikarjun his association with Bua was both, spiritual and musical.



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At twenty, Pt. Mallikarjun had made a name and had been extensively recorded by His Masters Voice. “But somehow, this did not bring contentment. I felt that there was so much more to accomplish and this kept me awake nights, exploring the boundless realm of sound.” As he visited Bombay frequently to appear at concerts, he came into contact with Vishnupant Pagnis who developed great affection for the simple, serious-minded youngster.

“His shop in Girgaon was a daily beat for me whenever I was in Bombay. I spoke to him about the gnawing discontent within me and my desire to realise truly great music through a *guru*. My wish was conveyed to Manji Khansaheb, the middle son of *Ustad* Alladiya Khan, who too visited Vishnupant’s shop occasionally and since he had heard some of my records and was particularly impressed with the *Gaud Malhaar* and *Adana* which I had sung for His Masters Voice, he agreed to take me as his disciple and tied the sacred thread around my wrist. It was a dream come true and that too so easily. Thus, at barely twenty-three, I was privileged to come under his tutelage.”

“I plunged into my training, knowing that the next few years were to be a period of intense concentration and hard work and was soon completely possessed by music.”

Practise began at eight every morning and went on till one in the noon. Manji Khan taught me how to visualise the entire lineament of a *raag* within the time cycle. Each *raag* was taught for several days yet each time it gained a new dimension. “Whether it was a straight line *raag* like *Yaman* or a twin *raag* like *Basanti Kedar* or a complex *raag* like *Khat* his (my *guru*’s) singing flowed with astounding power and beauty and since I began learning from him my entire personality underwent a change. I felt there was nothing other than music for me.”

“But it was too good to last. Manji Khan died suddenly, leaving me groping in the dark once again. I was despondent that there was none who could teach me the kind of music I was yearning for.”

“After two rudderless years, I went to Alladiya Khan himself and begged of him to let me sit at his feet in the pursuit of music. Khansaheb was already of advanced age and told me that he did not have the energy to devote five hours every day to teach me the kind of music I was yearning for and therefore at his suggestion, I started learning from Bhurji Khan, who was then living in Kolhapur.”

“The years under Bhurji Khan at last gave me the sense of satisfaction that my soul was hankering for and also the confidence to go on my own in the domain of music.”



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Speaking of Bhurji Khan, Pt. Mallikarjun reminisced that he was a true teacher who understood the disciple's strengths and shortcomings and also taught him how to refrain from slackness and achieve creativity within the parameters of the style. "He was a complete musician; there was sublime integrity of *swara*, *tala* and *raag* in his singing. And while practicing with him, I could soar into limitless space on the wings of his expanded imagination. From him I learnt how to make elaborations on a musical theme to its full within the technical parameters of each *raag*."

Pt. Mallikarjun added a sentimental note, "Bhurji Khansaheb taught me with the affection which is generally reserved for one's own son. He was also anxious that the heritage left by Alladiya Khan should continue to live and grow." It was evident, Bhurji Khan found in Mallikarjun a capable pupil.

In the course of our conversation, his veneration for his *gurus* specially, Nilkanthbua and for Manji Khan and Bhurji Khan came through intensely. They were deep treasure troves of knowledge from whom he could keep drawing endlessly. "In fact, when I was nearing forty I kept going from Dharwad to Kolhapur for my lessons from Bhurji Khan. Even after thirty five years after Bhurji Khan's death my *gurus* continued to guide me in spirit and inspire me. In fact, the fame and respect that I have earned today is all due to the blessings of my *gurus*."

Paying reverence to his *gurus*, Pt. Mallikarjun said: "My first *guru* – Ayappa Swami opened to me the vast expanse of the intricacies of tone and rhythm of Carnatic music, my *guru* Nilkanthbua imparted to me mystical intricacies of *swara*, *alankaars*, *alaap* and *bandishes* in popular *raags*. My *gurus* Manji Khan and Bhurji Khan gave me in-depth and comprehensive insights into the *laya*-oriented *gayaki* of Alladiya Khan as also the abounding repertoire of rare and complex *raags*."

"Even many years later I kept in touch with Azizuddin Khan, Bhurji Khan's son (also known as Baba Khan), and occasionally received compositions from him."

To my question "how close did he find the music of Bhurji Khan to that of his illustrious father", Pt. Mallikarjun replied: "I have not heard Alladiya Khan sing as I met him when he was already of considerable age. But I think there was not any great difference of style. Bhurji Khan followed the tradition of his father, specialising in the same *raags*, the same *taals*, the same compositions, and yet every true artiste has his individual approach, his own voice and imagination and hence two musicians can never be identical."



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About Alladiya Khan, Pt. Mallikarjun said: “He was a great master and carved out outstanding singers like Kesarbai and Mogubai who carried the mark of his greatness to spangled new heights while keeping his tradition alive.”

“My relationship with music is that of a child with his mother. It is only a bare sustenance that I have derived from her grace. I have never sold this grace for money and in life-long struggle to keep art above commercialism, I have had the good fortune of having an understanding family – my mother, wife and children who have cheerfully curtailed their worldly wants and lived in harmony with my musical life.”

To my question on the future of Hindustani music, he expressed both satisfaction and apprehension. “Hindustani music and its appreciation are growing fast these days but the growth is not as healthy as it ought to be. I feel that the world of music today lacks capable teachers who could communicate the essence of music to their disciples and not merely the notation of *raags*.”

“Our masters were closer to art”, he continued. “They taught art with reverence in their hearts and thus were able to urge greater discipline. They transmitted the intrinsic, distinctive nature of their learning and in the process, created quality. Today, it is money – things are commercialised.”

“Even today, a student can achieve true learning provided their teacher is also dedicated and puts in untiring efforts. Alladiya Khan, Manji Khan and Bhurji Khan were uncompromising trainers and guides. While teaching Kesarbai, Alladiya Khan made her practice a single *taan* for eight days and yet wanted her to carry it on for still more brilliance. These days, a *taan* pattern is practised hardly eight times.”

Mallikarjun graciously sang a *sthai* in *Kafi-Kanada* for me. There was no percussion but his internal *laya* was consistent. “*Swara* and *Laya*”, he explained, trying to make his meaning clear beyond doubt, “are like the father and mother of music. The entire universe, including our bodily functions, is rhythmical. Music has a great claim on rhythm than any other pursuit in life.”

As he spoke, I saw that Pt. Mallikarjun was receding into some deep contemplation, almost a reverie, and I realised that I could not bother him anymore. Moreover, this brief but intimate exposure to a great mind was truly enriching, it gave me enough food for thought and study.

Always unstinting in permitting recording of his concerts, he liberally allowed organisers to record his music. Therefore a large repertoire of both commercial and private recording Pandit Mallikarjuna Mansur’s



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performances is available.

A discerning listener, who has understood this gayaki well, will soon decode the allegiance of his singing with the characteristics of the Jaipur–Atrauli style; one can also notice significant similarities to that of Kesarbai Kerkar. His music is marked with attractive *alaap* and breath control permitting long passages and attractive *taans* when taken at a fast pace. There was no hint of affectedness in his voice in any of the registers, including the higher octave. His *taans* too were sung in a natural voice. It has been pointed out by Shri Chetan Karnani that his voice was “highly controlled and the shift from *taan* to composition goes almost unperceived. His voice remains steady throughout, and in the process he shows remarkable breath control. There is a remarkable continuity in his *taans* which are often in the sixteen beats of the *teentaal*.”¹ Because of his earlier training in the Gwalior *gharana*, it has been contended by some that his singing had a blend of both the Gwalior and the Jaipur style.

However, his *raag badhat* clearly shows the characteristics of the Jaipur *gayaki*, particularly in the manner in which the elaborations of variations having different structures are commenced at the beginning of the new *taal* cycle and brought to the *sam* for resolution. Moreover, he showed skill, keen musical insight and intellectual ability in identifying potential points of departure in the *bandish* from where such elaborations can be commenced and merged with the composition at the *sam*. “Even though the *bandish-es* sung were, at times, not from the traditional Jaipur repertoire but from the Gwalior collection, these too were sung in the Jaipur style.”²

At the same time Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur’s singing showed his own identity through its innovativeness and creativity. This can be seen from the fact that, in his presentations, he combined the *bandish* with the *laya* in the course of the performance in a wholly new manner. He did not use pre-composed sections, but maintained the rhythmic swing to reach the *sam* in an unexpected manner, without disturbing the *mukhda* of the *bandish*, thus adhering to the *gharana* principles.

Karni goes on to say : “Mansur’s favourite *taals* are *teentaal*, *jhaptaal* and *rupak* because they have an even, regular flow and use simple syllables like ‘dha’ and ‘dhin’. The Jaipur (or Atrauli) school

¹ Karni Chetan, 1976, ‘Listening to Hindustani Classical Music’ Orient Longman, Bombay M.H.

² Bagchee Sandeep, 2005, ‘Nad: Understanding Raga Music’,



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distinguishes itself by its intricate sub-division of the time cycle. In each of the four different sub-divisions of *teentaal*, a new melodic phrase is fitted in varying tempo.

"The pleasure in this case is occasionally more mathematical than musical. The uninitiated listeners often find this school rather repetitive. But what is mistaken for repetition is in fact an intricate patterning of rhythm and melody. Mansur provides this complex parallelism with rare brilliance."³

Pt. Mallikarjuna Mansur has had the rare privilege and honour of receiving all the three Padma Awards. He received the Padma Vibhushan in 1992, Padma Bhushan in 1976, Padma Shri in 1970, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1982.

On his passing away on September 12, 1992 the President of India Shri Shanker Dyal Sharma, expressing grief in a condolence message said "Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur's voice had a contemplative composure that was unmatched in the annals of Hindustani Classical Music. Long years of *sadhana* had blessed him with the technical mastery which equaled only by the mellifluous sweetness of his voice." Dr. Sharma said adding "The luminosity of his performance will never be forgotten by those who had the privilege to witness them.

The Vice President Mr. K R Narayanan in his message said "Mansur was one of those who put Indian music on a high pedestal and made significant contribution to the world of music". The Prime Minister P.V.Narasimha Rao said in a condolence message, that in the death of Pandit Mallikarjun the "world of music has lost one of its towering exponents."⁴

Pandit Mallikarjuna Mansur's, musical legacy was unsurprisingly inherited by his son Shri Rajshekhar Mansur, who was born in Dharwad in 1942.

He was initiated early into music and groomed meticulously for nearly twenty five years. The rich legacy of the Jaipur Atrauli *gharana* and the rigor of *sadhana* were part of his childhood and youth. Even though Rajshekhar pursued a career in English Literature and Language, music remained an essential part of his life. He was trained by his father in the most rigorous and disciplined *guru-shishya parampara*. Hence, he has imbibed the intricate nuances and complexities of the *gharana*, first as a *shishya* of his father and later as a leading exponent of the Jaipur *gharana*.

³ Karni Chetan, 1976, 'Listening to Hindustani Classical Music', Orient Longman, Bombay, M.H.

⁴ The Indian Express- September! 2-1992.



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Rajshekhar's performances are distinguished for his astute mastery of the idiom of Jaipur *gharana*, encircling the vast repertoire of *raags* and *layakari*. Rajshekhar has been fittingly hailed for maintaining the pristine beauty and form of the tradition of his *gharana* without making any compromises. He has performed at various prestigious music festivals all over the country. Some of his performances have been preserved for archives at the Indira Gandhi Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal. He has also given extensive lecture – demonstrations on music at various places.

In recognition of his contribution to music the Karnataka State Govt. has awarded him the Rajyotsava Award in 1997.

He won the Gold Medal in Sangeet Visharad from the Akhil Bharatiya Sangeet Mahavidyalaya in 1963 and also stood first in All India Radio competition for young artistes during the same year. He is a "A" Grade vocalist of Akashvani since 1985 and has performed in National Programmes of the All India Radio.

A professor in English literature at the Karnataka University, Dharwad his academic qualifications include a Diploma in English teaching from CIEFL, Hyderabad and a British students for Ph.D. in Literature.

He has published a number of research articles on Literature and has participated in a number of seminars and workshops.

Rajshekhar Mansur, translated "Nanna Rasayatre" Pt.Mallikarjun's Kannada autobiographical book in english titled "My Journey in Music."

"Mritunjaya" the ancestral home of Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur, which resounded (for just short of a century) with years of swar sadhana, a house which was blooming with the hubbub of artistes, fell silent after the passing away of Pandit ji. It now stands as a museum and a mute observer to Mallikarjun's glorious musical past. The museum is taken care of by Dr. Mallikarjun Mansur National Memorial Trust functioning under the Department of Kannada Culture.

At Hubli and Dharwad, to Commemorate the death anniversary of Pandit ji, the Trust organizes a two day National sammelan at the museum, on the 12th and 13th of September every year and another on the 31st December at the Kariyamma Devi temple, to venerate his birth anniversary. This is followed by an announcement of three awards for classical music.

In 2013, a five audio CD collection, "Akashvani Sangeet" of his music including rare "Vachana



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Gayana”: renditions, was released by All India Radio Archives in a ceremony held at Srijana Rangamandir at the Karnatak College Dharwar.

Several recordings of Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur’s live concerts are accessible, though, never a substitute to his live performances. For each time he sang with a new creative yen, and in each rendering there were several novel revelations. His Sukhiya Bilawal, Patdeep or Shivmat Bhairav of today would be a completely renewed experience from his Sukhiya, Patdeep and Shivmat Bhairav of the previous day.

Liberal allowing his music to be recorded, there is a range of his rare soundtracks available with the All India Radio Archives, the you tube as well as in private collections of music connoisseurs.

Puriya, Pat Bihag ,Lajwanti, Darbari Kanada, Jogia Asawari, Sarpada Bilawal, Sukhiya Bilawal, Bilawali, Jaij Bilawal, Dagori, Todi, Lachari Todi, Multani, Ramkali, Gouri, Hindol, Shudh Sarang, Ahir Bhairav, Nand, ,Nayaki Kanada, Meera Bai Ki Mallhar, Ek Ni Bihagada,



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