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## **Mogubai Kurdikar - The Doyen of Jaipur Atrauli**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The music world before nineteen hundreds was predominantly male oriented, when the female performers were either court singers or entertainers. Though in the changing times there were several talented women who were making new identities as concert singers. The two ladies to make this major transition were Alladiya Khan's students Mogubai Kurdikar and Kesar Bai Kelkar who marked a shift from chamber singing and Marathi stage drama to concert stage of classical Hindustani music. Their success attributed enormously towards the phenomenal fame of their guru, Ustad Alladiya Khan whose extraordinary style gained prominence and reigned the music world in north India years after him. It came to be known as the Jaipur Atrauli Gayaki which made considerable impact particularly in Maharashtra.

This article is a life sketch of the musical journey of Mogu Bai Kurdikar, her undeterred resolve ensuing her deep commitment through the many social struggles.

The old phonograph records of Mogubai Kurdikar in Raags Sohni, Basanti Kedar, Yaman, Swani Kalyan exquisitely demonstrate the gayaki of Jaipur Atrauli. The listener is awestruck by the concluding *taan* which traverses four *avartanas* in *rupak taal* in the Raag Nayaki Kanada, without a break for breath. This aspect is the hallmark of this *gayaki* and is rarely found in other styles. Without doubt, it requires highly developed breath control and demands strict adherence to this rule, which Mogu Bai had completely mastered

Under Mogubai's line of talented women disciples were Kausalya Manjeshwar, Kamal Tambe, Padma Talwalkar and her own daughter Padma Vibhushan Smt. Kishori Amonkar,

### **Key Words:**

1. Jaipur- Atrauli
2. Gayaki – Form & Content
3. Riyaz- Sadhana, Purist
4. Social norms-Struggles
5. Ideology- Concept.



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Born on July 14, 1907 in Kurdi, a small village in Goa, Mogubai where spent her childhood there. She was fondly named 'Mogu' (inferred from the Konkani word 'Mog' meaning love), a name which became synonymous, later, with her persona.

Goa, during this period, was undergoing a radical alteration vis-à-vis classical music, particularly with the Kalavant (artiste) community when the fame of goan musicians had made their presence known far and wide. Almost every goan home was nurturing a dream of having a musician in their family. Such was the dream of Mogubai's mother, Jayashreebai, that she tugged the seven year old Mogu and trudged on foot from Kurdi to Zambavli, just to have her daughter tutored by Haridas Bua. But since Haridas Bua was always travelling he could teach Mogubai only intermittently. Nevertheless, since Jayashreebai had pledged to make her daughter a great singer, she did not give up her pursuit to find a music environment for Mogubai.

She took an available alternative and made her daughter join the 'Chandreshwar Bhootnath Sangeet Mandali', a touring drama company which staged shows practically all days of the month. Taking cognizance of Mogu's musical talent, the owner of the company assigned her roles of 'Prahlad', 'Dhruv' which were much applauded by the audience. This was a trying time for both, mother and daughter as the strain of the exhausting rehearsals took a toll on Jayashreebai's health who before passing away left her daughter under the care of Balkrishna Parvatkar, an acquaintance from her village Kurdi and who also worked in the same drama company and requested him to help make her daughter an eminent singer. At that moment she held Mogu's hand and said to her "Mogu, my soul will be around you at all times and only when you carve out a name for yourself as a great singer will it find salvation." These words were permanently inscribed in Mogubai's memory and kept echoing in her ears till she grew up and understanding their magnitude vowed - "I shall withstand boundless suffering, endure physical pain, even disregard humiliation to learn music and fulfil your desire!"

This was a tormenting time for Mogubai, both emotionally and financially as the Natak Mandali closed down due to internal complications which compelled her to return to Kurdi. Later, Balkrishna Parvatkar who wanted to restore Mogubai's livelihood urged her to join the 'Satarkar Stree Sangeet Mandali' from whom she had received an invitation. Here she played the roles of 'Subhadra' in Saubhadra and 'Kinkini' in Punyaprabhav with great versatility.



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While at the 'Satarkar Stree Sangeet Mandali', she took comprehensive training in *Natyasangeet* from the late Chintoba Gurav and early lessons in dance from well known *gurus* like Kamal Kathak and Ramlal Kathak. She also took advanced training in dance from two adroit masters, Majel Khan and Chunnilal. Though she later decided to give up the stage and took wholly to classical music and the *khayal gayaki*, it goes without saying that, stage acting and the dance training gave her graceful gait and posture. It was this element of drama and her training in dance that got reflected in her delicate play with the *layakari* (rhythm) and the *boltaans*. Her name alone always drew a houseful. At the same time her success attracted jealousy and rivalry due to which she left the company and returned once again to Kurdi.

The enormous stress caused due to leaving the 'Satarkar Stree Sangeet Mandali' played heavily upon her health and on the recommendation of the doctor she moved to Sangli where on the suggestion of some well-wishers she began learning from Inayat Khan. But the whimsical Khansaheb soon stopped teaching her due to unknown reasons; thereby causing another setback in her training. Yet Mogubai absorbed herself in her *riyaaz*, thus forgetting her very existence.

It is amazing how destiny assigns inexorable pursuits to a chosen few and engineer's events thus creating situations for them to eventuate. Thus the histrionic meeting between Alladiya Khan and Mogubai Kurdikar cannot just be credited to a mere coincidence.

It seems that Sangli was the preferred locale for the medical treatment it offered during those days. Alladiya Khan had moved from Bombay to Sangli in (August-Sept, 1921) to undergo treatment from Vaidya Abbasaheb Sambare and Mogubai was already in Sangli undergoing treatment on the advice of her own doctor. Mogubai who had a strong commitment to her *riyaaz* practised zealously every day.

Mogubai lived en route Abbasaheb Sambare's house and Alladiya Khan would hear her practise diligently every day the famous *Natyasangeet madiwari chal ga gade'* from the famous play 'Mricchakatika' the role which she had learnt from Chintoba Gurav for 'Vasantsena'

Alladiya Khan was straightaway drawn by her mellifluous and captivating voice and on one of the occasions, desirous to know the face behind the voice he climbed the stairs and entered the room in which she was practising. Seeing Mogubai completely absorbed and engrossed in her *sadhana* he quietly sat down not wanting to disturb her. Mogubai on opening her eyes was startled to see a stranger and immediately stopped singing. Urging her to continue he said that he had been hearing her *riyaaz* every day and that he had come only to meet her in person. Alladiya Khan by now had already marked her intensity and fervour



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and decided to teach her. “I will teach you music” he said and began the very first lesson that very minute in *raag Multani*.

Mogubai was a simple and unassuming young girl and had no clue of Alladiya Khan’s stature as the reigning monarch of classical music. It was only during one of the concerts of Alladiya Khan at Vaidya Abbasaheb Sambare’s house where she saw the adulation which Khansaheb received and it is only then that she realized that he was none other than the all-time great *Ustad Alladiya Khan*. This was one of the most jubilant moments of her life and a turning point.

During the one and a half years training, Mogubai mastered *Multani & Dhanashree* and *Todi & Poorvi*. Soon after, Alladiya Khan decided to move to Bombay. But such was the dedication of Mogubai that she followed him to Bombay where she took up a place in Khetwadi and resumed her lessons with Khansaheb. Mogubai’s smooth training was however interrupted once again due to professional rivalries and Khansaheb was compelled by his intimidating hosts to stop teaching her since they did not wish anyone (other than Kesarbai) to become the torch bearer of Alladiya Khan’s *gayaki*. Mogubai was completely devastated and had to turn to *Ustad Bashir Khan*, the son of *Bade Mohammad Khan* and *Ustad Vilayat Hussain Khan* of the *Agra gharana* who agreed to teach her only if she performed the ‘*Ganda Bandhan*’ which she fulfilled with all the rituals.

On hearing this, Alladiya Khan feared that a new *guru* from a different *gharana* would change the entire culture of her voice which he had painstakingly moulded to suit the *Jaipur gayaki*. He was also aware of Mogubai Kurdikar’s highly receptive musical faculty and was anxious of losing a disciple worthy of carrying the banner. Khansaheb thus urged Mogubai to stop her training with Bashir Khan and instead arranged for her to learn from his brother Haider Khan so as to maintain continuity in her *Jaipur gayaki*. But Mogubai who had by now suffered the trauma of repeatedly suspended *taalim* was not willing to give in to Alladiya Khan’s suggestion as also did not wish to antagonise Bashir Khan and Vilayat Hussain Khan unless she was assured that in the event, Haider Khan was unable to teach her, Alladiya Khan would take upon him the responsibility of unreservedly training her. Khansaheb acceded to Mogubai’s condition and soon, Haider Khan started imparting a very systematic training to her. Mogubai’s astute and incisive approach and Haider Khan’s skill at imparting training made an ideal combination and Mogubai made rapid progress. Soon she began to feel close to fulfilling her mother’s dream.



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Such fast paced progress further aggravated professional rivalries. But Mogubai had in her mind ascertained that she would not let such external factors deter her from her single-minded aim of wanting to be the leading exponent of the Jaipur *gharana*.

This incident really reads like fiction, for a few years later during one of Mogubai's intense evening *riyaaz* sessions when she was concentrating on a difficult phrase taught by Haider Khan, she was suddenly distracted by the squirming of the fifteen month old Kishori sleeping in her lap, and coming to reality she saw Alladiya Khan himself sitting before her in person and teaching her the pattern. This was an unbelievable moment with Khansaheb returning to teach Mogubai, and without any further ado, she performed the *ganda bandhan* ceremony with Alladiya Khan in which she tried to compensate him for all the knowledge and efforts he had made in the past.

Rumours from the rival camp that Mogubai was not Alladiya Khan's authentic disciple continued to infiltrate music circles. As these canards reached Alladiya Khan he made it known publicly, at a concert, that Mogubai was his *ganda bandh shagird* and that there should be no misconception on that score. This was truly a momentous event of her life.

Thereafter, Mogubai had an uninterrupted *taalim* from Khansaheb and all in all her *taalim* amounted to more than a quarter of a century from the year 1920 to 1946 (the year up to which Alladiya Khan lived) Mogubai's *riyaaz* under Alladiya Khan was rigorous and continued through day and night. *Bandishes* were repeated to perfection, *fikras* had to be iterated to infinity, voice had to be structured and carved into imbibing difficult rhythmic patterns and movements. It was thus natural that Mogubai should assimilate Alladiya Khan's *gayaki* to the last detail.

Mogubai remained undeterred from the popular trends and persistently adhered to the *khayal gayaki*. She remained wedded to *khayal* singing and never sang a *thumri*. With this uncompromising attitude to the changing times she remained a dedicated seeker and reaped the fruit of this devotion.

She did not seek popularity but much respect and recognition came her way. Her concerts were for the cognoscente and not for the public looking for a package deal of *khayal*, *thumri* and *Natyasangeet*. According to Vamanrao Deshpande: "Mogubai's music is pure and unalloyed. She avoids the *thumri* or *Natyasangeet*; she rejects an unnecessary *taan*, a straining for effect in the voice, *tiyye* made to order merely for the sake of response, or futile gestures of the hands. Her music is not tailored for applause. It is chaste,





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genuine”<sup>1</sup>

Mogubai imbibed the distinctive qualities of the Jaipur *gayaki* in her *music*. A distinctive feature is in the way in which the *cheez* or the *bandish* is unfurled. This singular aspect in itself can be researched in great depth. The essence of a *bandish* lies in evoking the response of the audience to the very first *sam* “The *aakaar-ukara*; the exact delineation of the *swaras* and their design, the careful positioning of the words, their diffusion within a musical phrase; the conscious placing of each part of the *cheez* at various points in its onward flow of time – sometimes right on the beat but sometimes before and after; the different kinds of lilt of each *swara*, each letter of the *cheez* and each beat of the *laya*; their divergent pulls; the tension built through all these and then the final release and culmination on the *sam* - this is the real concept underlying a *bandish*”<sup>2</sup>

And Mogubai’s music is an astute example of this aspect, particularly in the *vilambit* delineation of the *raag*.

Another important aspect of the Jaipur *gayaki* is the *layakari* and the *boltaan* and Mogubai’s *gayaki* is nourished by the rhythmic element. The notes and the *bandish* blend with the intricate *laya*. Their presence is manifest in the *alaapi*, in the unfolding of lesser known *raags* and is not obscured even in the web of *taans* and *boltaans*. Intricate play with rhythm is the hallmark of this *gayaki*.

Mogubai’s music this is further enriched by a gentle caressing of the notes and by a subtle touch of drama.<sup>3</sup> Describing her effective *boltaans* Vamanrao Deshpande says: “I have rarely encountered in musicians that dexterity with which she rounds off the *boltaan*. There is no mutilation whatsoever of the words, no jumbling of the long and short sounds, no fracturing of the natural resonance of vowels and consonants. The words, the syllables are tenderly decked with notes, and float forward like flowers to the swing of the rhythm, revealing Mogubai’s peculiar mastery of the *boltaan*. It is almost impossible to find it in anyone else and difficult to imbibe it without rigorous training and effort.”<sup>4</sup>

1-4 Deshpande Vamanrao, 1989, ‘Between Two Tanpuras’, Bombay, Maharashtra, Popular Prakasham, Pg.- 38-41



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Mogubai had a remarkable sense of rhythm which can be attributed to her training in *kathak* from Pt. Ramlal Kathak and her long association with the renowned *tabla* player Laybhaskar Khapurmama and Balkrishna Parvatkar. According to Vamanrao Deshpande: “The stately unfolding of a *raag*, implicit in the Jaipur *gayaki* demands from the *tabla* accompanist a fair degree of straight playing. But Mogubai’s mastery of *taal* places her in a position where she is able to raise to the challenge of complicated percussion techniques.”<sup>5</sup>

Vamanrao Deshpande had a long association with Mogubai as her student and because of his analytical approach towards the subject and his deep study of the various styles of Hindustani classical music; the observations made by him could be termed as the most authentic and valuable.

In his book ‘Between Two *Tanpuras*’ he holds that the distinctive qualities of the Jaipur style permeated Mogubai’s music. “She imbibed that fusion of *swara* and *laya* which was part of the style’s magic alchemy; the delineation of the *bandish*, then the presentation of one *avartana*, with that precise progression of *swaras*, where the one sets off the glow of the other, leading to an increased tension of the entire complex before the arrival at the *sam*.”<sup>6</sup>

Another unusual aspect of the Jaipur *gayaki* is that there was no *drut khayal* to be sung after the *vilambit* or the *madhya laya khayals*. But Mogubai has made a very valuable contribution in this aspect. She has composed several *drut* compositions in difficult *raags* like *Sawani Nat*, *Sampurna Malkauns*, *Jait Kalyan*, *Shuddh Nat*, *Bhoop Nat*, *Basant Bahar* and *Basanti Kedar*.

***Extract from my interaction with Mogubai Kurdikar in July 1984 giving an insight on her daily diary.***<sup>7</sup>

“Mai, as everyone affectionately addresses her, often visits the Amonkar house-hold where she is prevailed upon by her children and grand-children to stay on for more days. Her presence is held in high esteem and there is a conscious regularity in the household such as not to upset her schedule in any way.

<sup>5</sup> Deshpande Vamanrao, 1989, ‘Between Two Tanpuras’, Bombay, Maharashtra, Popular Prakasham, Pg-38-39

<sup>6</sup> Deshpande Vamanrao, 1989, ‘Between Two Tanpuras’, Bombay, Maharashtra, Popular Prakasham, Pg-38-39

<sup>7</sup> Singh Gurinder H. 2002, “The Tradition of Jaipur Gharana, with special reference to Alladiya Khan, (Excerpts from a personal documented dialouge with Mogo Bai Kurdikar) Pg-108





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Her day begins early and after her morning offering to her Deity, Lord Ravalnath, and a light vegetarian breakfast, she is engrossed in the realm of ancient scriptures. It must be a torture to her senses when she hears one of us inaccurately practicing a typical *gamak* pattern of Alladiya Khan which she taught the previous evening and she comes running in, “Stop, stop; are you in your senses? Look what you are doing to the nuances of each *gamak* pattern. Remember, each note should be treated with *gamak*, and the nuance of the *gamak* to the previous note should carry forward. Come on, sing pure and clear with a free voice.” Yet, with all our faults, she is interview patient and calm, it is never too much to learn at one time but surely there is too much to practice to perfection every single phrase Mai teaches us.

I was very fortunate when I was with her last year and she taught me some very significant *gamak* patterns used in the delineation of the *raags* in Alladiya Khan’s tradition. She seemed particularly pleased with me that morning as she called me to lie down and sleep right next to her that afternoon. “Take a small nap”, she said. “But never sleep too much. You should put in all your awakening hours to the practice of music.” I nodded silently and permanently recorded her words in my memory.

I could hardly sleep that afternoon, and saw her with her eyes closed gently counting *matras* to a silent composition operating in her mind. There is hardly a moment when one would fail to find her humming a *raag* or counting beats, whether she is busy with her household chores, or be deeply engrossed in her joyous hobbies which range from embroidery to reading books on religion and mythology to daily newspapers and even to radio listening. An octogenarian, she still knows by heart scores of *raag* compositions, if you wish she would smilingly reel them off before you in a seemingly endless succession with all their aesthetic virtues and great unison. When I expressed my marvel and awe at her mastery and her computer-like memory, she gently raised her hand towards her Deity and smiled, her eyes, twinkling with fulfilment. “Come to Goa. I shall take you with me to my village Kurdi, to the beautiful temple of my Lord, Raval Nath”, and as the ‘Tithi’, according to the position of the moon fell on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, we left a week earlier to make prior arrangement for the occasion.

Kurdi lies peacefully in a small valley in the Western Ghats. Her huge twenty one room wooden mansion is very picturesquely situated on the banks of a large river and is surrounded by tall trees. The river silently flows down the back-yard. Facing the front lawns at a natural elevation is her Lord’s little temple. The chanting of the mantras on the ‘Tithi’ began early and all the disciples were busy in making garlands from the many beautiful varieties of flowers that grow in the forest of Kurdi. She showed us the fascinating art of making large firm garlands jut with banana tree fibre and flowers, without needles and thread. The



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celebrations went on through the night and on to dawn and all the disciples of Mai and Kishori Tai sang praises of the Lord.

Later on, disciples sang a *Sampoorna Malkauns* taught by Mai. I sang the famous *tarana* of Alladiya Khan in *Yaman* and Mai sang a *Shuddh Nat*. Kishori Tai supported her vocally. It was a unique experience – Mai nearing eighty and singing with supreme verve. Her notes were steady and powerful, her voice still rich and her *gamak* in-tact. She held all spell bound. Kishori Tai supported like a true disciple choosing to under-shine when her mother held the fort. “Of course, I am a real rabbit before my mother”, said Kishori Tai. “I am always under her shadow and I love to be there”

Mogubai is a true disciple of Alladiya Khan and worships him. She fasts on Thursdays, being the ‘*Guru*’ day, as a mark of respect for her ‘*Guru*’ and daily garlands the life size portrait of Alladiya Khan in her house. “

The impressive list of students whom she groomed in the Jaipur style consists of Sushila Rani Patel, her own daughter Kishori Amonkar, Kamal Tambe, Kausalya Manjeshwar, Suhasini Mulgaonkar, Padma Talwalkar and Vamanrao Deshpande.

Mogubai earned respect and recognition early in the world of music. She drew large discerning crowds wherever she performed. The Sangeet Natak Academy awarded her for classical music in 1968. In 1974 the President of India honoured her with the prestigious Padma Bhushan. She was also given the title of ‘*Gaan-Tapaswini*’, and was chosen to perform at the opening of the beautiful multi-crore auditorium of the National Centre for the Performing Arts at Bombay by the Prime Minister.

Mogu Bai Kurdikar died in 2001 at the ripe old age of 96. On her 80th birthday in 1984, Mohan Nadkarni wrote a tribute in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* referring to her as the grand old lady of Hindustani music.



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