



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Kesarbai Kerkar - Conviction and Poise- A formidable Blend

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VIDHYAYANA



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Abstract:

Kesarbai Kerkar, a Hindustani classical vocalist of Jaipur-Atrauli gharana was a protégé of Ustad Alladiya Khan (1855-1946), founder of this gharana. She went on to become one of the most phenomenal khayal singers of the second half of the 20th century and was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1953, followed by a Padma Bhushan in 1969.

This article deals with Kesarbai's strong resolve to pursue her passion in Hindustani music despite the many anomalies. It also deals with her relentless practice regime spanning over several hours a day and years. Her discerning eye for perfection and about the selective audience she chose to perform for. This is about her gaining mastery on technique, form and content, her unreserved devotion towards her guru, and about several interactive anecdotes.

It is a well-known study that centuries before the golden era of Hindustani music in the 19th century and early 20th century, social acceptance of women artistes was a big question mark. Yet through the societal discriminations of caste norms, Kesarbai Kerkar emerged as one of the greatest singers of Hindustani music. She enjoyed enormous prestige in her later years: but as a youth she had to perform standing. Like Saraswati Bandodkar and Heerabai Barodkar, she came from the community of Kalavants of Goa, a section of temple women who were not allowed to marry and were treated virtually as slaves of the men.

Key Words:

1. Jaipur-Atrauli
2. Alladiya Khan
3. Kesarbai Kerkar
4. Taalim- Tutelege
5. Gayaki



VIDHYAYANA

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Born on July 10, 1890¹ in a small village, Keri, some twelve kilometres from Panaji in Goa, Kesarbai Kerkar was drawn to music from her childhood and the atmosphere of devotional music at the local temples intensified her innate interest in music. She would listen to the *bhajans*, *kirtans* and *abhangs* intently and would try to reproduce them back home.

Recognising her aptitude for music, her maternal uncle, a lover of classical music accompanied young Kesarbai to the nearby Mangueshi temple where she learnt to sing *bhajans* and *kirtans* from the temple pundits. Coming from a family of music professionals it was evident that the family would search for a qualified *guru* to teach and groom her.

Kesarbai's formal training in music started at the age of eight under *Ustad* Abdul Karim Khan at Kolhapur during which time she was made to do scales (It was the training in the scales which helped her understand the basic placement of the *swaras*) and learnt two *bandishes*: '*bana sari rean*' and *sudhar bana*'. This training lasted ten months as she moved back with her family to Goa, occasioning in a break in her music *taalim* for almost a year. It was then decided that she should resume her music *taalim* from Vazebua, who lived in Lomgaon. But Vazebua, himself was rarely available for lessons as he was busy travelling on concert tours. This kind of intermittent training lasted three years, by which time, Kesarbai was about thirteen.

Soon, Vazebua was invited to Bandod to teach Dattibai, daughter of Kudaikar Zamindar. Even though Vazebua maintained a demanding concert schedule he managed to visit Bandod now and then. And it was during this time that Kesarbai managed to get Bua to teach her. This routine lasted for another three years. It

¹ There is controversy regarding Kesarbai's exact date of birth. Different records

indicate different dates: Great Masters of Hindustani Music by Susheela Misra (July

10, 1890), HMV long play records (July 13, 1893), NCPA, Quarterly Journal, 1977

(between 1890-1895)



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

was probably that good luck eluded her in finding a suitable *guru* from who she could have an uninterrupted *taalim*.

When Kesarbai was sixteen, she moved with her family to Bombay, and after a futile search for a *guru* for more than six months, Seth Vithaldas Dwarkadas, a family friend, prompted the celebrated *sitar* player, Barkatullah Khan to take Kesarbai under his wings. The training lasted a year as Barkatullah left Bombay to take up an assignment at the Patiala *darbar*. Yet Khansaheb would teach her regularly on his periodic visits to Bombay. The training lasted two years and once again Kesarbai's music training came to a standstill.

It so happened that Alladiya Khan, in the year 1912, accompanied Sardar Balasaheb Gaekwad and Bapusaheb Kagalkar of Kolhapur to Bombay, and during one of their many visits, stayed in Bali house for nearly eight months. It is here that Kesarbai urged Alladiya Khan to teach her which he conceded to after a lot of persuasion by her. However, Kesarbai found difficulty in imbibing Alladiya Khan's abstruse style. She would invariably forget her lessons which would infuriate Alladiya Khan. This training also lasted only three months as Khansaheb returned to Kolhapur due to health constraints.

In the meantime, Barkatullah who was a guest with Sirdar Natu at Pune, agreed to come to Bombay on weekends and on Kesarbai's insistence resumed her training. This kind of weekend training lasted a few months only as Barkatullah took up a job at Mysore, thus commuting between Bombay Mysore and Patiala *darbars*. He would spend just three or four months in Bombay during which he would teach Kesarbai regularly. This continued till 1915. Kesarbai, whose very existence was by now, music, felt exasperated with the irregularity in her training and decided to train under Bhaskarbua who was in Bombay at that time.

But her training under him stopped exactly after four and a half months when Bhaskarbua moved to Pune to look after his organisation, Bharat Gayan Samaj. Thus, till 1917, Kesarbai could not receive any continuous and systematic training under one *guru*. Disappointed with the manner in which her music career was shaping up, in 1918, Kesarbai firmly resolved to learn from none other than Alladiya Khan for the rest of her life.

It was in 1918 when a farewell banquet and a concert of Tarabai Shirodkar and other upcoming artistes was organised at a house at Goregaon for Seth Dunichand who was returning to Calcutta after one of his visits to Bombay. It was like a three day music festival in which Tarabai Shirodkar sang morning, evening and night leaving the audience awe-struck. One of the days when several upcoming artistes were asked to sing, Kesarbai was also asked to perform. Knowing her limitations she was unwilling to perform but



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

eventually yielded to the persuasive audience. She reluctantly commenced her recital with *raag Miyan Ki Malhaar* which had been taught to her by Khansaheb Barkatullah. Kesarbai who had begun the concert on reduced confidence failed to make a mark and was chastised by a friend of Barkatullah for her inept performance. Immensely humiliated and dejected she resolved that if she was to continue to live, it would be only as a renowned singer, and that this dream could only be realised if Alladiya Khan accepted her as his disciple. Kesarbai by now was well aware of the depth and sweep of Alladiya Khan's *gayaki* and the exceptional attributes which held even the renowned musicians of that time spell bound.

But now to convince Alladiya Khan to resume her *taalim* once again was anything but easy. Thus from 1918 onwards, Kesarbai earnestly tried to influence Alladiya Khan through numerous intermediaries. But he was unrelenting. He said: "Kesarbai is not capable of learning my brand of music. So, I shall not teach her."² Since all efforts to convince Alladiya Khan proved futile, Kesarbai's confidantes suggested that Khansaheb should be approached through Seth Dunichand of Calcutta with whom Alladiya Khan had earlier served and for whom he had exceptional regard. Sethji sent a number of telegrams and letters to Khansaheb requesting him to visit Bombay. But Alladiya Khan, having guessed what was on Sethji's mind replied saying that he was undergoing medical treatment from Vaidya Sambare at Sangli and therefore pleaded his inability to come to Bombay.

Eventually, when all efforts were in vain, this multi-millionaire, Seth Dunichand, went all the way to Sangli to Khansaheb. Though Alladiya Khan had tremendous respect for Sethji, he did not relent and vehemently refused to teach Kesarbai. For two years they moved heaven and earth to get him to teach me but Khansaheb refused to be persuaded. Kesar bai, on her side was determined to learn to sing only from Khansaheb

Seth Vithaldas Dwarkadas, a family friend of Kesarbai and who had earlier persuaded Barkatullah to teach her was much concerned over the state of Kesarbai's health, reassured her and decided to approach Alladiya Khan. "I shall make one final attempt and I hope to bring him round to give you tuition" he said.³ In December 1920, he sent a telegram to Alladiya Khan: "I am seriously ill and not expected to live, come

² Deodhar B.R. 1993, 'Pillars of Hindustani Music', Popular Prakashan, Bombay M.H. Pg. - 224



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

immediately if you wish to see me.”⁴ This scheme proved successful as Khan Saheb rushed to Bombay only to see Sethji in perfect health and mood. This upset Alladiya Khan.

Later in the evening, when matters were in better control, Sethji took Alladiya Khan to Chowpatty for a walk and said: “Khansaheb do me a favour. You must teach Kesarbai. If you still refuse - our friendship is over. In that sense this is going to be our last meeting.” Khansaheb replied, “In 1912, I taught Kesarbai for three months. She would not be able to pick up my brand of music. Besides, I understand she has been saying I am a poor teacher. That is why I am not going to teach her.”⁵

Sethji laughed at this and said, “Kesarbai would never say that you cannot teach. Someone has been telling lies. She has obstinately refused to learn from anyone else and that is why everybody has been imploring you for two years. So please listen to me and take her on as a pupil.”⁶

Consequently, Khansaheb agreed to ponder over the matter for three days and finally announced his decision saying: “I agree to teach her but on certain conditions.” Sethji promptly sat down with a paper and pencil and made a note of all the conditions which were:

- i) Kesarbai was to pay a sum of Rs.5000/- as *Guru-Dakshina* to become a ‘black-thread’ pupil
- ii) A monthly remuneration of Rs.200/-
- iii) A minimum period of ten years of apprenticeship
- iv) He should be allowed leave with pay if he had to leave town for medical reasons or on business
- v) In case the Bombay climate did not agree with Alladiya Khan he may have to go elsewhere for extended stay for health reasons and Kesar bai would have to accompany him for tuitions and for concert tours.

Alladiya Khan, deliberately stipulated such exacting conditions hoping for a refusal but Kesarbai most willingly accepted all these. Thereafter, on July 1st, 1921, the historical ‘black-thread’ ceremony took place in Bombay and the *taalim* began. A month later, Alladiya Khan faced health problems and decided to go to Sangli for treatment. Kesarbai and her family also decided to set up their house at Sangli. Her training went smoothly from February to the end of April but since Kesarbai could not take the Sangli heat she decided to return to Bombay along with Khansaheb. The next seven months were blissful for Kesarbai as Alladiya Khan taught her with utmost life-force and sincerity.

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⁶ Deodhar B.R. 1993, ‘Pillars of Hindustani Music’, Popular Prakashan, Bombay M.H. Pg. - 225



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

The lessons would start at eight and go on till one. The evening session ran from four to eight. Other than this, Kesarbai was expected to practise from five thirty to seven thirty in the morning in the lower octave.

Later Alladiya Khan took two months leave and went to Uniyara for his daughter's wedding.

Kesarbai's *taalim* under Khansaheb is exemplary of true devotion and commitment of the *guru* and the *shishya* towards the art. Khansaheb would teach Kesarbai for nine hours every day and Kesarbai in turn displayed pertinacity to faithfully endure a stringent regime sitting with the *tanpura* for such long and trying hours without a break.

Kesarbai was well aware of the efforts that were made in convincing Alladiya Khan to accept her as a disciple. She was determined never to let Alladiya Khan find any indolence on her part. During the first fortnight Kesarbai's voice turned hoarse and she was unable to speak. Even during such taxing times Kesarbai was allowed to rest for not more than two to three days after which her training would resume. Khan Saheb believed that once the training commenced it should be ceaseless, perhaps a learning from his very own experience. Alladiya Khan had turned around the misfortune of losing his own voice to a remarkable advantage and who would know better. He reassured Kesarbai saying: "Don't worry; you are not going to lose your voice. Sing to the extent you comfortably can. But there must be no break in the tuition. That is what is going to make your voice strong and supple."⁷

Alladiya Khan was right in his assessment and six months later Kesarbai's voice gradually recovered and a couple of months later it gained total normalcy.

In Kesarbai's own words: "I was myself amazed at the way I could use my voice. I could hit the desired key without the least difficulty and whenever I wanted to. My voice became powerful, resonant and I was able to turn it as I liked."⁸

This nature of training inflicted considerable strain on Kesarbai's health and she suffered regular morning colds, sore throats and hoarseness and went anaemic. A change of scene to Bangalore was not of much help, thus she returned to Bombay where medical treatment for her various ailments continued. It is an index of Kesarbai's forbearance that she withstood the stringent *taalim* regime which continued for eight

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⁸ Deodhar B.R. 1993, 'Pillars of Hindustani Music', Popular Prakashan, Bombay M.H. Pg. - 226



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

years. The only respite Kesar bai had was when Khan saheb would take two or three months off every year and leave town.

Later, Alladiya Khan taught Kesarbai only in the morning as he was also committed to training Mogubai Kurdikar and Chandabai. The morning training sessions went on till 1935.

Kesarbai's training under Khansaheb began with *raag Todi* in which he taught her numerous *paltas* and *alankaars* and also simply the *aroha* and *avaroha* which she was made to repeat hundreds and thousands of times, for several hours in a slow tempo which were closely monitored by Alladiya Khan. Once these were perfected he would give her yet another set of scales which had to be practised for at least ten to fifteen days and thus was the sequence that was followed during her *taalim*. A feature to be particularly noted regarding Alladiya Khan's method of training was the intelligence with which he chose the *raag*s for teaching Kesarbai.

If he chose a *raag Todi* for morning *riyaaz* he would complement it with *raag Multani* for the evening session. And if he chose to teach a *raag Deshkaar* in the morning, he would take up *raag Bhoop*, *raag Shuddh Kalyan* or *raag Jait Kalyan* in the evening. *Raag Bibhas* in the morning was accorded with *raag Jait* in the evening.

It is evident that Khansaheb was teaching both *auday* and *sampoorna raags* and also *raag*s with *komal* and *shuddh swaras*. These were apparently the *raag*s for obtaining vocal proficiency. It was a holistic method of training scaling the entire gamut of both the *shuddh* and the *vikrat swaras* while teaching new *raag*s. Alladiya Khan was ever willing to teach new *raag*s for performances and there was no rigidity in teaching them. But Kesarbai had a fair sense of how much she was capable of assimilating. Also, being a perfectionist and well-focussed she chose not to take up any new *raag* unless she had convincingly learnt the previous *raag* to the standards she had set for herself.

Alladiya Khan was very particular about the method of voice production. He made sure that Kesarbai's voice production was full throated with full volume and the vowel sound 'aaa' was produced clearly. To achieve clarity and flawlessness in the *taans* the scales were to be consistently repeated in slow tempo. Every *bandish* was sung in a slow speed where the breath controls was strictly enforced. Breathing was allowed only after completing the entire cycle and after arriving at the *sam*. This exercise automatically helped regulate the expanse of her breath control.



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Kesarbai's personal relationship with Alladiya Khan was one of mutual faith and respect. He would not trust the banks and would leave all his money in safe custody with her

She was sensitive to his comforts and took care that mundane matters should come in his way or hamper their common pursuit. It was her single minded devotion to her *guru* and music and also her intelligence to recognize her own calibre that she focussed her learning and practise to achieve perfection. It was these attributes that made her a concert performer of such high calibre.

Kesarbai reached the zenith of her career in the year 1930. She was invited to perform at all the leading music conferences throughout the country and each concert was marked with outstanding success. The reasons that can be attributed to the success of her concerts were mainly that unlike other musicians she was selective and never took a hasty decision in accepting an invitation..

She would make sure that she had adequate time for preparation and practise and was also in the right frame of mind. It was vital for her that the image which she had achieved should in any way be tarnished and thus remuneration was less of a consideration. Once the details were finalised Kesarbai would call for her regular *sarangi* and *tabla* accompanists. She would contemplate and select the *raags* and the *bandishes* and plan every minute detail for the performance. She would practise and rehearse every chosen piece to perfection and then perform with utmost confidence. Needless to say, the secret formula of her exceedingly successful concerts lay in her meticulous and well-structured preparation.

Her striking aura, captivating personality along with her high class scintillating music, left phenomenal impact on the listeners. Once on stage, she would scan the audience with her wide eyes and assure the presence of her aficionados. Her sharp gaze would immediately notice the absence of any of her regular admirers and she always made it a point later, to enquire about their inability to attend.

Kesarbai was also very particular about having her usual accompanists, Majid Khan on the *sarangi* and Vishnupant Shirodkar or Yashwant Kerkar on the *tabla*. She was such a stickler for perfection that she would go to the extent of calling off her concert in the event of any of them falling ill. She had regard for her accompanists and shared closeness with their families as well. She was compassionate and took care of their financial difficulties and livelihood and would keep their salaries going even in the event of long leave.

Kesarbai replicated Alladiya Khan's *gayaki* in its purity. She sang in a note lower than most female singers, and used this unusual pitch to her advantage and turned it into a key asset. Her voice ranged from



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

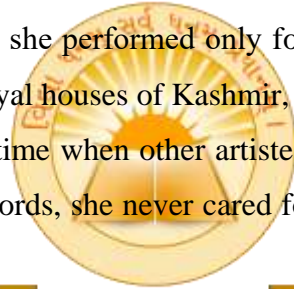
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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

the *mandra saptak* to the *taar saptak* in a full throated *aakaar* of uniform volume and perfect clarity. A precisionist by nature she toiled hard to achieve that perfect intonation and sweetness in her voice thereby setting a paradigm of voice culture. The real magic of Kesarbai's music was not as much in emoting the *bhava* of the *bandish* but in the accuracy of the *swara*, *taal* and the phrases of the *bols*.

Her *alaaps*, *taans* and *boltaans* were systematic, structured and well timed to arrive with pinpoint accuracy on *sam*, so much to the ecstasy of the audience. The *khayals* she presented were always in a leisurely tempo, in a *madhya laya* and she never sang a *druk khayal*. The *alaaps* were sung in a playful rhythm and there was no *bol ang* in her *gayaki* and her ingeniously woven *taans* gave an impression of great speed. She would present her *raag* within twenty or twenty five minutes. *Bihagada*, *Nand*, *Pat Bihag*, *Sawani Nat*, *Sawani kalyan*, *Nat Bilawal*, *Basanti Kedar* and varieties of *Kanada* and *Malhaar* were some of her favourite *raags*. It was Kesarbai's intellect and single-minded concerted *riyaaz* and the discerning application of her *taalim* during her performances which made her every concert a phenomenal success.

It was Kesarbai's selective nature that she performed only for a class audience, for the elite and for the Maharajas.⁹ She was patronised by the royal houses of Kashmir, Baroda, Kolhapur, Jaipur and Jodhpur. She never sang for the ordinary public. At a time when other artistes hankered after publicity and were always willing to perform on the radio, or cut records, she never cared for the media. Money and fame came to her without any effort.



VIDHYAYANA

⁹ It is a well-known study that centuries before the golden era of Hindustani music in the 19th century and early 20th century, social acceptance of women artistes was a big question mark. Yet through the societal discriminations of caste norms, Kesarbai Kerkar emerged as one of the greatest singers of Hindustani music. She enjoyed enormous prestige in her later years: but as a youth she had to perform standing. Like Saraswati Bandodkar and Heerabai Barodkar, she came from the community of Kalavants of Goa, a section of temple women who were not allowed to marry and were treated virtually as slaves of the men.



VIDHYAYANA

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Being well aware of her assets and abilities she always performed with self-confidence. Perhaps a reason that she was sometimes misunderstood to be conceited. Moreover she was always particular that she got the honour and reverence due to her, which she fully deserved as an artiste par excellence.

After a few commercial records she decided to stay away from the recording companies and All India Radio. The following excerpt by G.N. Joshi (a senior executive with HMV) gives an insight into Kesarbai's uncompromising attitude for quality and excellence.

“When we began making LP recordings I naturally wanted her to sing for an LP, but she refused to do so. There was an interesting reason for this refusal. Around 1954-55 she had recorded some 78 r.p.m. discs. In those days we used to get sample copies for approval and out of respect we always consulted the artiste. Accordingly, I sent Kesarbai the sample copies for her approval. Out of the ten sides she had recorded, she desired to re-record four because, in her opinion, they were not up to her standard. In deference to her wishes we held back the issue of the four sides and requested her to re-record them. When, for over 8 months, she did not do so on grounds of ill-health, my boss became very restive and speculated that, Kesarbai, a mere artiste, should have the audacity to disregard the wishes of the world-famous gramophone company (HMV).

One day he called me to his room and virtually ordered me to carry a message to her. ‘Make it clear to her’, he said, ‘that if she does not come for re-recording within a fortnight we will publish the records as they are. We cannot afford to wait any longer.’

“I tried to make him realize that this was not the right way to deal with an artiste of her stature. But the boss refused to see the wisdom of my reasoning, and in a fit of temper, told me to convey his exact words to her. This boss was the one Begum Akhtar had described as ‘Kudhon ke Badhshah’. The next day I went to Kesarbai's residence and requested her to come and re-record but she again declined to do so on grounds of ill-health.

“I had no other alternative now but to give her the message in so many words. I said to her. ‘I am directed by my boss to carry a message to you. Before I do so I must make one thing very clear. When I give this message I am speaking in “My Master's Voice”. I hated myself for doing it but as I was working with HMV I had to give her the message.



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

“It naturally made her furious and she went red in the face. For a minute or so she was quiet; then she said to me in a hard tone, ‘Go and tell that fellow that Kesarbai will never again enter the precincts of your studio’. And true to her word, she severed all relations with the company. Luckily she was magnanimous enough to understand my position and did not blame me. My only fault was that I had been indiscreet enough to convey the fatal message to her. My relations with her remained very cordial till the end but the company suffered the irreparable loss of an artiste of rare quality.

In retaliation she wrote a letter to our company withdrawing from us the right to play her gramophone records from any station of All India Radio. Accordingly, AIR had to suspend the playing of her records. Her records, however, continued to be broadcast by Goa Radio. Goa was then Portuguese territory and she, having originally come from Goa had innumerable admirers there. After independence, the people of Goa, who now came under Indian jurisdiction, were deprived of the privilege of hearing her on the radio.

“I have always regretted that we could not make even one LP with her. We tried to make up for this by issuing an LP of the 78 r.p.m. recordings of her which we had issued previously.

“Soon after this, while I was away on a visit to America, Kesarbai breathed her last, at Bombay on September 16, 1977 and Indian Classical Music was left poor and forlorn. While extolling Kesarbai’s artistic genius, I have just one regret. She kept her exemplary talents to herself alone. In her long life of nearly ninety years she did not have a single disciple other than Dhondutai Kulkarni who would carry further her *gayaki* and tradition of the Jaipur *gharana*.¹⁰

As soon as Kesarbai began to feel that she could no longer give of her best in music, she quietly withdrew from the musical scene and became a recluse in her elegant home. In one of her last interviews when she had become an aged and ailing figure in her eighty-second year, Kesarbai told the interviewing music critic: “I am ready for the final journey. But I have no regrets. I have the satisfaction of a good job well done. For seventy years I have sung for the gods, and if, incidentally, I have also delighted people, I am doubly happy.”¹¹

¹⁰ Joshi G.N., 1984, *Down Melody Lane*, Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd

¹¹ Misra Susheela, 1981, *Great Masters of Hindustani Music*, Hem Publishers, The University of Michigan.

Article



VIDHYAYANA

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Her first concert was in Bombay in 1929 and her last concert was also in Bombay itself in 1965 in which she sang Jaijivanti, Khokar, Basanti Kedar and Kausi Kanada.

During the long span of thirty years (1935-1965) of active concert performances, the admiration, applause, recognition, respect and acceptance which Kesarbai received from her audiences was her highest honour and award. She brought inestimable prestige and élan to the classical music scenario. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister remarked about Kesarbai “Through the purity of her music and the dignity of her performance, she has moulded our standards of appreciation and has profoundly impressed other musicians.”

Some of the notable awards and titles conferred upon her were the ‘Surashree’ given by the Sangeet Pravin Sangeetanuragi Sajjan Samman Samiti (Calcutta-1948), Pramukh Acharya - Sangeet Natak Academy (Bharat Sarkar-1953), Pratham Rajya Gayika - Maharashtra Shasan (1969), Padmabhushan - Bharat Sarkar (1969)



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