

**Bade Ghulam Ali Khan
(1903 ? - 1968)**



**His was a name that thrilled music lovers
both in the North and the South.**

He took Chennai by storm whenever he visited.

***Sruti* remembers Bade Ghulam Ali Khan
on the occasion of the centenary of his birth.**

A Special Birth Centenary Feature

The Making Of A Legend

Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's name has often intrigued and amused people-- especially because his was, indeed, a 'bade' (massive/ huge) personality. In northern India, the prefix 'Bade' (the elder) is used for avoiding a confusion of identities when, within the same circle, there is a younger contemporary of the same name, who will have the prefix 'Chhote' (the younger). This is almost certainly how Ghulam Ali Khan acquired the prefix. It remained with him throughout his life because he also answered to the other two connotations of the word-- big-built, and great.

Ghulam Ali Khan was born in 1903 in Kasur, near Lahore, now in Pakistan. There is, indeed, some difference of opinion about his birth-date. The various accounts span a period of four years from 1901 to 1904. But, his was an era in which vagueness on such matters was common, while today, the truth is elusive as well as irrelevant. Ghulam Ali Khan's father Ali Baksh was a descendant of the Kasur gharana of dhrupad singers

(Bonnie Wade: 1984). According to another account, the maestro hailed from a lineage of 'mirasi-s', whose hereditary profession was to teach courtesans, and accompany them on the sarangi. (Peter Manuel: 1989). The two accounts are not necessarily in conflict, considering the socio-cultural milieu of 19th century north India. Ali Baksh and his brother Mir Baksh (better known as Kale Khan), had studied khayal under Fateh Ali (of the Aliya-Fattu fame) in the patronage of the princely state of Patiala. Ali Baksh, was a court musician in Kashmir. Kale Khan remained an independent musician and was the formal guru of nephew, Ghulam Ali.

Ghulam Ali's ganda-bandhan (ritual initiation) with Kale Khan took place when he was five. Some of the most eminent musicians of the era were present at the ceremony. At the age of 12, Ghulam Ali was invited to perform for the visiting Prince of Wales in Lahore. He continued his studies with Kale Khan till the age of 17, when the latter died. According to one account, Ghulam Ali also received training from his father, who was an expert singer of thumri-s, having spent a good deal of his time in the Purab region (eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, around Varanasi), where the thumri genre originated (Manuel: 1989). According to another account, in his teens Ghulam Ali was also coached by one Inayeti Bai of Bombay, a pupil of his father's (Wade: 1984). No corroboration is available of this phase of his tutelage. Reportedly, in his early 20's, he went to Bombay to study with Baba Sinda Khan of the Gwalior Gharana. (Wade: 1984, B.R. Deodhar: 1993). From these accounts, it would appear that, like several other 20th century greats, Ghulam Ali Khan had studied with several teachers, and was largely a self-taught vocalist.

When Kale Khan died, the elders of the clan lamented that the glorious era of Patiala vocalism had come to an end. This remark stung Ghulam Ali. He started practising round the clock to prove them wrong. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It is well known that Ghulam Ali was trained in vocalism as well as on the sarangi. In his early youth, he made a living as a sarangi accompanist in Bombay as well as Lahore. However, he gave it up as soon as his career as a vocalist took off. His early years as a vocalist-- sometimes supporting his father-- were limited to engagements in Punjab and Kashmir, and very few people outside the region had heard of him. His big break came when he was almost 40-- at the Vikramaditya Music Conference in Bombay (1944). He stole the show with brilliant renditions of khayal, thumri and bhajan. The news of this conquest spread all over the country. Overnight, he became Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and thereafter, for over two decades, no major music festival in non-peninsular India was conceived without his participation.

In 1953, the celebrated Carnatic vocalist G.N. Balasubramaniam (GNB), organised for him a concert tour of South Indian cities-- in those days, almost alien territory for Hindustani musicians. At first, the stark contrast between his majestic personality, and the ascetic culture of Carnatic vidwans, raised considerable scepticism. South Indian connoisseurs needed just one concert to change their mind about Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and to hail him as a 'bhagavatar' (Wade: 1984).

Bade Ghulam Ali became an important pillar of Hindustani music so speedily that, few know of his having been a Pakistani national for over a decade after independence. His home was in Lahore, while his audiences were in India, which he could visit for only limited periods each year. Neither government obstructed his movements across the border; but neither formally acknowledged his stature. During that period, even the mention of his name on All India Radio was prohibited. (Mohan Nadkarni: 1999). His application for Indian citizenship was pending when, in 1957, the Chief Minister of the erstwhile Bombay State, Morarji Desai, was charmed by his music and took up his case with Delhi. Desai not only got his nationality papers through, but also gave him a comfortable residence in Bombay, along with ancillary facilities. He remained a resident of Bombay though, in later years, he developed a substantial presence also in Calcutta.

Once India became his stable home, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (BGAK) attained a combination of popularity and stature attained only by Faiyyaz Khan before him. Several of his khayal compositions, for example, *Re naveli naar in Drut Ektaal / Kedar*, penned under the pseudonym 'Sabrang', became immensely popular amongst vocalists of all gharana-s and are still in circulation. The number of BGAK titles that has appeared on the shelves of music stores-- during his lifetime and thereafter-- could well be a 20th century record. With his speedy rise to legendary status, the honours could not have been far behind. He was honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1962), and decorated with the Padma Bhushan by the President of India.

In 1961 he suffered a paralytic attack. Governments, friends and admirers pooled resources to see him through the difficult period. Though immobilised for life, he worked hard on his music, and began to perform again, relying increasingly on the support of his son, Munawwar Ali Khan. Because of the arduous riyaz he had put in throughout life, his voice stood him in good stead till the end. The chastity of his swara remained unimpeachable though, in the last few years, his taan-s were losing their vigour. His health suffered a serious setback in December 1967, and the end came on 23 April 1968. (Deodhar: 1993).

Other than his recorded music, the BGAK legacy is negligible. He was a spendthrift, gave away a large part of his earnings to charity, and died without leaving a will. His contribution as a guru was also meagre. His elder son, who lived in Pakistan, died in 1973, and not much is known about him. His exceptionally talented younger son, Munawwar Ali Khan (1933-1989), did not have enough time to outgrow his father's towering shadow. Bade Ghulam's tutelage links with other 'disciples' were tenuous, and the result, undeserving of a place in history.

- DEEPAK S. RAJA

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