

## SONGS: A WAY OF LIFE

Once I was in Chennai in the last week of the year to write about a crucial political meet for *Times of India*. When I had to return to Delhi, I realized I had to wait for a day for my fight back. Nothing else to do, I loafed around the city, light and free – in the week between Christmas and the New Year you can enjoy the lazy sea breeze in Chennai without woollens. Around TTK Road I saw something absolutely fabulous – the city gentry, in their spotless holiday best, were sauntering towards the many auditoria. The men in their sparkling white *veshti* and half-sleeved shirts, and the women in gorgeous saris, their long, lush hair laced with jasmine strings. From inside those buildings rolled out many a heavenly rhapsody – sonorous and layered, even a touch elemental. The instruments – both percussion and string – merged with the high-pitched, melodious voices to transport the familiar surroundings to another world, a world where birdsong and raindrops are the only reality. Criss-crossing the streets in the comforting sun, I had a strange sense of loss – of the old identity, fond attachments, everything I'd known or cared for. The city with its quaint conservatism and coconut groves existed, the subdued stone-structured temples and giant cut-outs and all, and yet, the deep resonance of the music, its unearthly waves – all took you somewhere else, an enigmatic chiaroscuro of the known and the unknown.

The month-long Chennai music festival is the renewal of a culture, a thematic structure to hold together the impulses of a society. I met the music critic of a London newspaper, here for the Margazhi season, who'd been coming down just for the music for a long time. Like him, hundreds of music lovers still descend on Chennai from all around the world to be part of the festival. The life of a people, it seems, is defined by their music.

Songs, come to think of it, have two origins – the elite environs of the court and the dusty road of the commoner. One stream represents refinement, rarefied classicism and purity; the other pulsates with the throbs of life and vivid colours of energy. And both have an aspiration to reach out to each other's constituencies. The great musicians of all ages – feted by the king and the authorities, dream of a fan-following as large as the population of a ruler's territory. That's why they go on tours – often hectic and gruelling – across the world to win over newer audiences. With an equal urgency, the singers of the mean street, who have swayed and sung for the common folk, nurture a secret dream of getting inside the grandiose court to perform before the select few. The laurels of recognition from the powers that be are the ultimate glory, their moment of apotheosis.

As in every other field, however, technology is wiping out the gap between the two sets of musicians and their ambitions. YouTube alone has flooded the ground between both ends bringing many genres and their maestros closer, presenting them to a global audience. Just one search can take you to the heart of Assamese folk music – face to face with the exhilarating songs to the accompaniment of instruments played by the tribes for thousands of years. And as instantly to electrifying rock stars.

Ustad Bismillah Khan, who had singlehandedly raised the stature of shehnai from an instrument layed at weddings to exquisite classical music, was awarded the Bharat Ratna, the country's highest honour, in 2001. Ill, weighed down by years, he came to Rashtrapati Bhavan in a wheel chair. The simple man from Banaras was moved by the solemnity of the occasion, the stylised formality of the affair, and the presence of the big and mighty. His eyes moistened in happiness by the gesture of the nation. Some prominent musicians were present to take in the big moment – one of them receiving the rare honour from the President of India – KR Narayanan. After everything was over – the citation, bestowing of the award, wholehearted clapping and congratulations, tea in an adjacent hall, after the big moment washed over him, the Ustad looked relaxed. He stopped in a hallway to talk to some of his admirers, those men and women whose life revolved around classical music. I too was part of the circle around him, for the newsman's copy I would write later in the evening.

'Great music is created on the banks of a river, at *mazars* and at places of *ibadat*,' he smiled. 'We have all that in Banaras; that's why it is such a great seat of music.' I thought of the associations, tunes floating around the serried ghat of the Ganga, the mausoleums of the dear ones and places of prayer. Away from the potentates of the republic, high officials, security and liveried staff, he was his usual self again. He hummed bits from different *ragas* to make his point about music for many moods. He had an ebullient voice which livened up, defying his illness and old age. Looking back on the scene – the diminutive old musician, afflicted by illness, his face lit up in an unearthly glow – I now know songs are, and will always be, a way of life for many among us; in fact, life itself.

Bhaskar Roy