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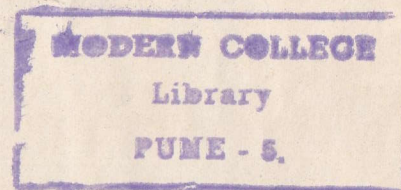
gandharva

the man and his art

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BAL GANDHARVA

the Man and his Art

BAL GANDHARVA is accepted everywhere as the greatest of Maharashtrian actors. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the golden age of the Marathi stage was created by him in collaboration with the playwright Khadilkar. True, some of the plays he immortalized by his roles came from the hands of other masters like, Deval or Gadkari but the actor-playwright combination between him and Khadilkar lasted for nearly two decades and the two men mutually influenced the art of each other. Khadilkar's plays written after 1910, were primarily written as vehicles for Balgandharva's exceptional gifts.

The Marathi stage, which developed in the closing decades of the last century was the creation of a single man, Annasaheb Kirloskar. There were troupes of actors before him who catered to the demand for a kind of dramatic entertainment but there was no fixed form of the drama, nor were there any professional playwrights. The actors depended upon the inspiration of the moment for their dialogue and managed among themselves to present a well-known story from the national Epics or the Puranas. Kirloskar changed all this. He adapted Kalidasa's Shakuntala in Marathi, with the prose dialogue heavily interspersed with songs and thus created a form of play which may well be described as musical-mythological. His next play Saubhadra, perfected this form and gave to the Marathi Stage its first classic. Saubhadra is an ever-green play and draws full houses even to-day.

No other play on the Marathi stage has broken its record in popularity. It was in this tradition rich with mythological overtones and music that Balgandharva had his training as an actor.

Balgandharva, alias Narayanrao Rajhans was born at Poona, on June 26th, 1888, in a lower middle-class Brahmin family. His father was a draftsman in the irrigation department and was a good player on the sitar. It is to him that Narayanrao owes his early initiation to classical music. The boy possessed a golden voice though he showed little progress in the school and only somehow managed to make the grade in the English Second Standard of the Secondary School. He was sent to Kolhapur where his training in classical music seriously began. He soon attracted attention of the late H. H. Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, noted patron of arts, who saw the possibilities of the boy and made arrangements for his further education in music. Lokmanya Tilak, was so charmed by the sweet voice of this handsome looking young boy that he described him as a 'Balgandharva'. The epithet stuck to Narayan and to millions of his admirers, even to-day, he is better known as Balgandharva.

The kind of drama that had become popular in the first decade of this century in Maharashtra through the efforts of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali required its principal actors to be good singers. It contained to our sophisticated tastes, a distressingly large number of songs, which formed an integral part of the prose dialogue. Some of them were merely declaimed in a musical voice, but still quite a few were fully sung and the actor's success was measured by the ovation and encores, he received for his songs. Bhaurao Kolhatkar, who impressed the contemporary audiences by his good looks in feminine roles, was a man with

a powerful voice which could reach any note in the top-octave with effortless ease and surprising rapidity. To hear him sing was like watching flashes of lightning. With his death in 1902, a vacuum was created in the world of art and the managers of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali were looking for a talented young man to fill it. Two years earlier they had rejected Balgandharva, whose voice was then maturing into a man's voice from its juvenile tenderness. During the two years, that followed he had trained and achieved a marvelous command over his voice and was eagerly welcomed. Lokmanya Tilak, a well-wisher of the company, pledged himself to pay Rs. 20,000 to his guardians to allay their justified fears about the hazards of an actor's career—professional and otherwise.

The part chosen for his debut was that of Shakuntala in Kirloskar's adaptation in Marathi of the masterpiece of Kalidas. It was a good and tactful choice, for it gave to the young actor-singer a clear chance to show his talent and shine in this star-role. Balgandharva's first appearance on the stage was at Miraj in 1905, in a new-built double-storied theatre with Maharaja of Miraj watching from the wings. It was earlier announced for days that Narayanrao, whom the great Lokmanya had honoured with the title of Balgandharva would appear in the leading role and this had created an atmosphere of great interest and excitement. The theatre was packed to its capacity an hour before the curtain was raised. Balgandharva's entry as Shakuntala with her companions was met with wild cheers and spontaneous ovation. He did not suffer any attack of stage-fright though he might have felt a trifle nervous, but as the play progressed his confidence grew. He moved gracefully imitating the fear of a bee, expressed the growth of passion from

maidenly bashfulness to torments of love at first sight, and acquitted himself superbly in his songs. The managers were relieved. A great chapter in the history of his career began on that night which reached its climax, in 1921, in a joint performance of the play Manapman, which gave a full scope to his double talent as a singer and actor of women's roles. Keshavarao Bhosle, his erstwhile rival played the hero. It was a charity performance in the cause of Tilak Swarajya Fund and the total collections reached the handsome amount of Rs. 16,000, an unheard of sum for a single performance in those days. Balgandharva was at the zenith of his career.

From Miraj to Poona and from Poona to Bombay, Balgandharva marched from success to success and never looked back. His reputation grew from day to day. He conquered Poona, the citadel of cultured taste and won the hearts of Bombay theatre-goers. His songs became as popular as film tunes are in our day. The Managers looking for a talent had stumbled upon a genius.

The future career of Balgandharva on the stage was determined both by the tradition of the drama he inherited as well as by the nature of his genius. There have been great singers, on and outside the stage who could rightly boast of a sweeter voice and better knowledge of the technical side of music. But they never made more than a transitory impression upon the public mind. Their success lasted only for a while and then they passed into oblivion. Balgandharva continued to rule the hearts of men for more than three decades and that too by playing the most unnatural roles of young handsome maidens. What was the secret of his success? It is not explained either by his qualities as a singer or even as an actor; but the

explanation must be sought in his supreme ability to live the characters he impersonated. He lent to each role he played an individual existence of its own. His representations became 'more living than the living men' or rather the 'living women' as he seldom played men's roles and they are not remembered at all. But his Sindhu, his Rukmini, his Bhamini (Manapman) were creations which haunted the imagination of his audience. He possessed the ability to absorb the part he played so completely within his self that it radiated through his personality. His appearance as a young lady, it is said, was quite infatuating. True, but physical eye is soon satiated and the permanent appeal, can only be to the imagination. He made real what was only vaguely felt and conceived. He instinctively fastened upon the core of a character's personality and the details of manner, gesture, bearing or carriage followed naturally from it. He revealed a character from the very centre of its being.

In 1913, eight years after his first appearance, Balgandharva broke away from Kirloskar Natak Mandali and started a company of his own. He was encouraged in this step by the playwright Khadilkar, who was personally responsible for planting the seed of ambition in Balgandharva's mind, nurturing his love for beauty and developing his taste without which Balgandharva though undoubtedly a great actor, could not have achieved what he did. In the old company, he was just one among the many actors, though its main asset. As an owner of the new company, he could experiment as he wished, spend as he liked and indulge fully his taste for pageant and magnificence. Under his direction, the stage assumed new dimensions of glory and bright spectacle. His company became the

home of the great musicians and instrumentalists of the time. Though not a great master of Indian classical music yet Balgandharva's artistic sense and spontaneous creation of classical melody was praised and listened with rapt attention by great masters like Alldiya Kha. He was a born artist and dispensed with barren technicalities.

Whether you talk about 'old' or 'new' school of acting, there is as the great Italian tragedian Salvini said—only one school "the school of truth". Both in music as well as in acting, Balgandharva instinctively searched after truth of nature, which perhaps holds the key to his success as an actor of female roles.

If it is possible to define the great actor, it is only as the actor who can reach the summits of his art. These Balgandharva never failed to attend and reached new heights of dramatic expression in such parts as Sindhu, Devayani or Rewati. By his feeling of respect for his art, he ennobled not only the actor's art but also his profession.

Balgandharva's most popular role was that of Rukmini in 'Swayamvara' by Khadilkar and the most heart-rending one was as Sindhu in 'Ekach Pyala' by Gadkari. Sindhu embodies in her the immortal ideal of the Hindu wife, the husband-worshipping, patient, silent, suffering womanhood. He acted it with such dignity and devotion that even the hardest male heart melted at the tragic fate that befalls the heroine. He lifted the play to the sublime plane of a tragedy from the maudlin melodramatic sentimentality into which it is always in danger of degenerating.

The part of Rukmini in Khadilkar's 'Swayamvara' fitted him like a glove. The play is a kind of pageant with tremendous scope for gorgeous display of

dazzling decor and drapery. The story of Rukmini's secret passion for Krishna, the opposition she encountered in her brother who has promised her hand to Duryodhana and her final elopement with her lover, is too well-known to be recounted. This romantic tale providing plenty of opportunities for brilliant spectacle and soulful songs, fulfilled Kalidasa's definition of a good play as 'one satisfying a variety of tastes'. It never failed to pack the theatres with spectators and was his company's best money-spinner. The songs of the play were on everyone's lips, though closely following the classical style.

And yet these two ends of the spectrum of his histrionic genius, with a number of shades in-between had something in common. Even plays with contemporary social themes, tended to become mythological in spirit. 'Ekach Pyala', though socially realistic is poetically and in spirit an extension of the past into the present. Its middle class lawyer hero is like a prince, a noble elevated character, and his wife Sindhu, like a nymph living out a period of curse. In fact it was good for the art of Balgandharva that no new-fangled ideas of realism forced it to lie on the Procrustean bed of matter of fact truth. His genius had a scope to blossom in the open air of the truth of imagination.

Balgandharva has nothing dictatorial in his mental make-up; he is gentle-mannered, indulgent almost to a fault, with a surprising hard-core to his tolerant personality which almost exudes charm. The first impression one forms is that of a likeable, loving, sympathetic, open-hearted person to whom his art is not second but the very first nature. One is struck by his single-minded devotion to his art and respect for it. Regarding himself as the servant of his patrons

he exerted his utmost to please and satisfy them sometimes acquiescing in their unreasonable demand for singing the same song repeatedly for three or even four times. If he incurred heavy debts in the process of making his court scenes of the royal Pandava princess look like a real court, dazzling to the eye and exciting to the imagination, it was all for the sake of his art, and he was never sorry for it. Nothing was too expensive to maintain the high standard of his art. Even his worst enemies, if he has any, cannot accuse him of selfishness or spendthriftness in pursuance of a private vice.

The photographs of the female roles, he played, do not seem to do justice to the great actor. Only one or two of them can give a glimpse and that too a very pale one of the charming appearance of Balgandharva on the stage in those early youthful years. Our ideal of feminine beauty has also changed from that of noble dignity of appearance, to slick efficiency of form. His picture as plain Shri Rajhans shows his handsome features with slightly round face, long high nose, large bright eyes, and a well proportioned medium built of the body. At his best, he looked in his roles like those Goddesses and semi-goddesses of Raja Ravi Varma, also when at his best.

Balgandharva in all his roles created that aura of dignity and noble lineage that one instinctively associates with epic princesses and ladies like Subhadra, Rukmini or Draupadi. He looked like a denizen of that vanished past or a relic of mythological magnificence and majesty. He was cut like a diamond to sparkle and coruscate in the ray of light shed from the glory of a bygone age, the 'light that never was on sea or land'. His slightly plump figure, full hips which stood out prominently in the Maharashtrian

manner of wearing a sari, round face, broad, but not too manly forehead with a vermilion mark at its centre and large bright eyes, conveying with proper maidenly bashfulness the tender anxious passion of love of Rukmini (Swayamvara), stead-fast devotion of Sindhu (Ekach Pyala) or high disdain of a mistress like Rewati (Sanshayakallol)—all combined to create an unforgettable experience of life at its intense highly exciting moment. His eyes generally spoke more eloquently than his face and the pregnant emphasis of voice with a delectable rhythm of utterance of a significant phrase made the scene memorable as in Swayamvara, when Rukmini announces to her brother the arrival of Krishna in four monosyllabic words 'Dada, Te Alen Na' which expressed the joy, the anxiety and secret passion of love with a dignity and charm becoming in a high born noble princess.

If people wanted to see him in this type of role, he was not one to ask them to see him different. His experimenting lay in the direction of more realistic representation of the essentially romantic atmosphere of his plays. He tried to make his kings look like real kings with gold-plated crowns and coronets and dazzling drapery; his queens wore real jewelry and their costumes cost a fortune. He decorated the stage with gorgeous decor but kept essentially to the orthodox technique in representation.

Balgandharva's art was determined and strongly influenced by his early success to have sought any departure from the traditional norms. He always drew full houses and even in the worst of the years during his heyday the average income for his performance never fell below Rs. 1,000, a good amount realizing that the rupee has considerably depreciated since then. Though primarily a singer, Gandharva

was much more than a man with a sweet voice on the stage. He possessed the magic to transport his audiences to the times of glory that his plays depicted, the court of the Pandavas, or of the Kaurava princes was not only a delight to the eye and a dazzling display of pomp and power but it also revived in the minds of the audience the beautiful past, dipped in dreams of majestic mystery and stretched like a many-splendoured rainbow over the horizon of their imagination. The first quarter of this century was essentially revivalist in mood. The whole nation was in search of its historical moorings, the people were looking into the past for spiritual sustenance. The art also could not but be revivalist. The greatest triumphs of the stage of this period with a few exceptions are either in the field of presenting episodes from the great epics or from history. Balgandharva somehow never appeared in a historical play, or if he did, he does not seem to have left any permanent mark of his genius on it.

Balgandharva's contribution to the Marathi stage has been of a varied kind. He revolutionized the entire concept of good drama, shaped it to suit his musical-cum-histrionic genius and left it in so exalted a form of artistic excellence that men of lesser talent who came after him found it beyond their reach. The golden age of Marathi drama came to an end with his retirement from the stage leaving behind him a golden memory and a legend.

Among the galaxy of immortal actors Balgandharva's place is unique in that he succeeded in the parts of heroines, in playing female roles. No woman who has appeared in the same part after him has ever approached his excellence. This quite baffles one. But great art is beyond any distinction of sex

and Balgandharva's entire career has been a living proof of it. It is beyond the scope of this small meed of praise to probe deep into the mystery of art but it must be said that a genius can reconcile seeming contradictions and achieve unity of experience circumventing the greatest hurdles. Had he been simply a singer, he could not have attracted such large audience of common men and women who have little taste for music of the classical variety. They came to see him act, to enjoy the living experience of meeting those wonderful characters from a vanished past of racial imagination which he so convincingly created, to lose themselves in the magic world of art. He satisfied their innermost craving for love and beauty. The world that Balgandharva created was the world of epic dimensions ; even in a comedy like ' Sanshayakallol ' it radiated romantic aura of love, adventure and charm. With Balgandharva ends a tradition which he both enriched and in part created.

It is true that his greatest triumphs were directly related to his musical talent, but a mere singer, however, sweet and charming could not have worn the crown of the emperor of the stage for more than thirty years. His histrionic ability mingled so well with the music he made, each helping the other in building up the proper mood, and together casting a magic spell upon the audience.

He not only enriched it by adding grace and glory but expanded the range and scope of the pure actor's art. A great artist is seldom a rebel against tradition, rather he makes it his own, leaving on it an indelible mark of his genius. Balgandharva made the Marathi stage so Balgandharvian, that to-day, it is difficult to imagine its original form though it may be possible to

trace it. It went under before the onslaught of the talking films, but when it was revived in 1945, by the Marathi Literary Conference it was Balgandharva, who presided over its deliberations and in a way guided its development by creating a new interest in the old Drama. Even so late as 1955 he continued to appear on the stage, though declined in strength and health but his drawing power remained equally great. People flocked in to see him act and hear him sing. He had become a legend in his own life time.

The kind of classic drama that lives in public memory is more or less the creation of Balgandharva. Even after ladies from respectable families stepped on the stage, and a female role by a man became an anathema, and an eyesore to the rising generation, the few actresses who achieved any success in the classical drama, invariably imitated the style and manner of Balgandharva. A woman with a genius alone can recreate the parts immortalized by Balgandharva and recast them in new forms of dramatic representation, more natural to a woman. Balgandharva has not only out-distanced women in this, but he set for them models of feminine behaviour. It must be confessed, a woman only because she is born a woman, does not naturally possess the tricks and gestures of coquetry, the tantalising disdain, the assumed coyness or the sweet pretence, or all that makes courting so piquant. These arts are learnt and they lend fascination to beauty. Gandharva succeeded in teaching women of his generation to be more enchantingly womanly. In love scenes, he spoke with such tenderness of tone that though lacking the pitch of a woman's voice, it possessed a seductive charm derived from the quality of its diction and accent. He used repetition of a word or phrase to arouse the least

attentive in the audience, and the accompanying gestures and looks distilled the very essence of the passion. His voice though sweet and agile did not possess the full range of expressiveness of passion. It was superbly suited to communicate variety of tenderness, sweet loving temper or occasional anger of a kindhearted noble lady. But of wild passions like black hatred or soul-rankling jealousy or blind rage, it was unable to reach the high pitch. Fortunately for him, the leading roles he had to play were all cast within a limited variety of characterization. In fact the playwrights wrote, with him before their minds, and the parts were tailored to suit him. He appeared on the stage mostly as a royal princess or a queen, as Subhadra, Rukmini, Draupadi or Devayani and even the roles outside this mythological repertoire resembled them in essential dignity of character.

Within this somewhat restricted range however, he was capable of attaining great depth and intensity. His interpretation of the character of Sindhu in 'Ekach Pyala' raised that play to the height of a tragedy. In 'Sanshayakallol', a comedy he played the part of a rich merchant's mistress with charming coquetry and intriguing wiles of a courtesan. The two parts seem to be as different from one another as chalk from cheese and yet Balgandharva played them with equal ease and felicity.

The joint performance of 'Manapman', in 1921 in Bombay with the rival troupe of Shri Keshavrao Bhosle in which Balgandharva played the heroine Bhamini against Keshavrao's hero, registered the glory of the Marathi drama at its highest zenith. Both the actors were at the top of their form, the play with its abundant music of the classical variety gave ample

scope to their talents and its romantic atmosphere evoked all that is bright and beautiful.

On the note of that great triumph, this tribute to the great actor on the day of his Amrit Mahotsava must end.

But, the grace of the Muse of the Theatre would not so, for while this article was in the press we learnt of the grant of Padma Bhushan to this great Singer-Actor of India in the awards' list published on the Republic Day (1964). Our heartiest congratulations.

2nd February 1964.

MAHARASHTRA INFORMATION CENTRE

What It Is : What It Does

The Maharashtra Information Centre, sponsored in New Delhi by the Directorate of Publicity, Government of Maharashtra, has a two-fold function : To make Maharashtra known to the cross-section of the Indian population that lives in and passes through the Capital, and on the other hand, to make other parts of India known to Maharashtra. For this purpose, the Centre has undertaken to disseminate, to all those interested, information about Maharashtra State on the one hand, and on the other, to collect information about other States that could be of interest to the people of Maharashtra.

Information on Maharashtra being supplied by the Centre covers not only Government programmes but also private activities in the fields of social welfare and culture. The former mainly relates to the developmental and nation-building activities of the Government including facilities made available for the starting of industries. The latter comprises social, cultural, artistic, academic and similar aspects that serve to give a picture of the people of the State.

To achieve these objects the Centre has launched upon a number of activities. One such activity of a basic nature is the setting up of a Reference Section within the Centre for the systematic collection of all important information on Maharashtra. Complementary to the Reference Section, the Centre is also building up a Library of selected books on Maharashtra in Marathi, English and Hindi. Attached

to the Library is a Reading Room, a facility being utilized by a growing number of Marathi speaking residents of Delhi. In addition to this, the Centre releases feature articles of topical interest in English and Hindi to the Press outside Maharashtra State. In order to provide an all-round glimpse at life and culture in Maharashtra the Centre is shortly going to bring out a series of 20 titles.

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