

# Indian Classical Music at Yale-NUS College

Traditional and the individual talent in the classical vocal music of North India

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## Interview Transcript 3: Venkatesh Kumar

*Interviewed by Urmila Bhirdikar in Kannada, at the Joysna Bhole Auditorium, Pune (July 9, 2018)*

UB: Panditji, greetings. The title of the project is "Tradition and Individual Talent in Hindustani Classical Music." I would like to ask some questions about it. *Guru* (teacher), *gharana* (music-lineage), and *gayaki* (style) are three important concepts in our music. We do not know much about your *Guru* and his tradition. Would you tell us, in some detail, about your *guru*?

VK: Sure. My *guru* is Padmabhushan Dr Puttaraj Gawai. His *guru* was Gana-yogi Panchakshari Gawai. His *guru* was Pandit Nilkkanth-bua (Jangam) of Miraj. Panchakshari Gawai belonged to the Gwalior Gharana and he also learnt from Ustad Wahid Khan of Kirana Gharana. Dr Puttaraj Gawai was his disciple and my *Guru*. Both were blind from birth. A sage called Kumara Mahaswami of Hanagal facilitated training in music for Panchakshari Gawai, in the Shivayoga temple, by raising money from people. In his youth, Panchakshari Gawai desired to marry. At that time, Swamiji said to him, "You are blind, I have raised money from society to train you in music. It would be like cheating society. You do not have eyes, you should dedicate your life to society". Panchakshari Gawai followed this advice and abandoned the thought of getting married. He became an ascetic from that day. He was trained in two Gharanas, Gwalior and Kirana. He had also studied Carnatic music. He came away from the temple and established an Ashrama called Vireshwar Punyashrama in Gadag. The reason the Ashram has this name is because a gentleman called Virappa was very generous. He donated two or three acres of land. It is in his name that the Ashrama was started. He established the rule that blind and physically disabled children would be trained in the Ashrama. Along with them, other children could also learn, but what kind of children? Those who were from poor families, those who had talent, but no money to learn music. That is how it all started. It was a *guru-kula* system. What were its rules? You had to get up at four in the morning. Then attendance was taken. After that there were lessons from four to seven. After that cleaning and other chores of the Ashram had to be done. Lunch was between twelve and two. Then again there were lessons from four to six. After that, there was prayer from six to eight. Then dinner. One had to be in bed by nine. One would have to get up again at four. In this way, there was a strict timetable without any freedom. This was the system of the *guru-kula*.

UB: For how many years would one have to learn?

VK: You had to stay there for twelve years. Guruji would tell the parents, that the children would have to stay for twelve years. If that was not possible, you would have to stay for at least six years. Children could go home only once a year, and not too many times. My Guruji continued this system of *guru-kula*.

UB: Did he himself train everyone?

VK: What he did was, in those days, in the beginning, there were five or six senior disciples with him. He would allot students according to their level, to these. When the students got knowledge and capacity to learn from Guruji, then they would be transferred to him.

UB: Were there tabla players and other accompanists?

VK: Yes, they were all there: harmonium, tabla, violin, flute, shehnai, sitar everything was taught there.

UB: Was it like a big family?

VK: No, it was a big Ashram. Very big. In my time, the number of students was less. There was no other education then. There was only training in music and in *Vaidika* and *Kirtana*. There was also a theatre. What happened was, it became very difficult to run the Ashram. How much money can society give? How much can be asked for? Seeing this, my Guru-ji wrote plays, and established a theatre-troupe. At that time, my Guruji's *guru* told him, "It's a good thing that you have started theatre, but boys should perform the female roles in it." That rule is followed to this day.

UB: What was your Guruji's *gayaki* (style) like?

VK: My Guruji was a teacher. Had he gone out and sung in public, his name would have been big. But he did not go out, because he was an ascetic. He used only the water from a well. He would need certain plants, he would need four or five disciples for serving him. His routine was very difficult. What he did was, he stuck to his goal of teaching students. He was a great *guru*. He trained some major singers. Have you heard of Basavraj Rajguru? Apart from him, he trained Arjuna Nakod, Siddharam Jambaldini and such great singers. He was a *guru* who trained students. As for his *gayaki*, he sang in the style of *Gwalior* and *Kirana*. His was a traditional style. It was systematic. He taught us things like what should be the *laya* (tempo) for a composition from the *Gwalior gharana* repertoire, or what should be the *laya* for one from the *Kirana gharana*. He was the one who would get people to learn.

UB: I have been listening to your music from my childhood, in Dharwad. I remember now, that earlier your singing was quite forceful. It had very beautiful complex *taans*. That aspect of your singing is quite reduced these days. So what were the changes you made to your style? What were the factors that caused these changes?

VK: Let me tell you the reasons. In my youth my singing indeed was forceful. It is natural when one is young. Everyone experiences it. But as the singer studies more, he begins to understand what is forceful and what is smooth, and a transformation takes place in his life. It should take place. It is not good to have force in everything you sing. A singer should understand this himself. Take for example, Abdul Karim Khan's method of singing the notes. Also, take the woman-singer from *Jaipur gharana* – I forget her name –

UB: Kesarbai...

VK: Yes. Kesarbai. Look at her *taan*. It is straight. When she sings it in one *avartan* (rhythmic cycle) one feels satisfied. It is so smooth, it is not hard, it is not forceful. It is as it should be. Thus a singer understands, as he grows up. Also, your style should not be just the singing of *taans*.

UB: Yes, that we see. Your *alap* is so soft and beautiful...

VK: It is the same with me. It is natural that in one's youth one sings with a lot of force, but as time passes, your style must acquire a shining glow. It should improve. One has to keep trying for that.

UB: Would you say that now you pay more attention to the *bhava* of the *raga*?

VK: Yes. *Raga* is very important. It should not be spoiled. Also, we have to look at everything: *raga* should not be spoiled, the *bhava* must be there, the composition must be there. We need to sing according to the tempo. People should recognize the *gharana* of the singer from his singing. People who know music can recognize if a singer is from *Gwalior* or *Kirana gharana*. They should. This *gharana* is a rule, a method. While you are learning, you should learn in the style of a *gharana*. Everyone who learns music must have a *gharana*. But as time passes, your singing must go beyond the *gharana*. That is music. The mere calculations of a *gharana* should be left behind. Calculation is calculation. Music must go beyond calculation.

UB: This means the singer must bring forward his own thought.

VK: Yes. Independent thought must be there. But it should be there after establishing all the *shastra* (technical know-how).

UB: People who don't know this music might wonder... is there freedom in our music or not? There are so many sets of rules, for ascending and descending notes, for dominant and subdominant notes etc., a *raga* itself is a rule. While singing one must take care not to let one *raga* sound like another, its identity must be established. So where is the freedom?

VK: Freedom is certainly there. It is there in how you sing the notes [*svara laavane*]. We have freedom in the *alap*. Again, what happens is, there is freedom in *sampoorna* ragas. There we can show all features of our style. But in the case of the mixed ragas, you cannot sing them for hours. There is that limitation. Such ragas should be sung for a limited time. Otherwise there is only repetition. If there is too much repetition, then the *raga* is spoilt. So the mixed or the obscure [*anavat*] ragas must be sung in their proportion. In the case of the *sampoorna ragas*... Take the ten *thaats* ... (he leaves this sentence unfinished). If we think about it my Guruji used to say one must know at least ten ragas in each *thaat*. That makes it a hundred *ragas*. How is that possible? That is why one must learn to sing the *sampoorna ragas*. You can sing mixed *ragas* after that.

UB: So, we come to know what is freedom?

VK: Yes. There is freedom everywhere. It is in the way you sing the notes, there is bliss in it. There is peacefulness. You may sing whatever *raga*, but the first thing is to see the *abhyas* (intensive study) of the singer. For that you need to get a good *guru*. He should be knowledgeable, and the disciple should be one who understands him, and be able to receive the training after serving the *guru*. If both the *guru* and disciple are like this, then the tradition has a future.

UB: We were just listening to your *Marwa*. It was beautiful. All of us think about *Marwa* all the time. We wonder what is its disposition/nature [*prakriti/svabhav*]. There are some artists who sing it forcefully, as if the *Vira Rasa* is dominant. There are others who sing it very peacefully, and bring out the *Karuna Rasa*. In which way do you think about *Marwa*?

VK: I think about it as a peaceful *raga*, full of *Karuna Rasa*. It is according to my disposition. *Marwa* is a difficult *raga*. If you hurry it, it gets spoilt. One has to learn how to sing *Marwa* from your *guru*. There is *Marwa*, there is *Puriya*, and there is *Sohoni*. All of them have the same notes. How should you decipher the differences? One misplaced note, and the *raga* gets spoiled. The disposition of *Marwa* is difficult. Not everyone can sing it. Another thing that happens is, some singers sing *Marwa*

according to the quality of their voice. Some singers' voices do not reach the upper notes right away. In such cases, they keep the *sam* of the composition on the lower *dhaivat* instead of the upper *dhaivat*. There is nothing wrong in this. They are singing according to their voices. Many singers have sung it like that. But just because they have sung it like that others must not imitate them. They are singing according to their voice. We must sing according to our own voice.

UB: Yes. Earlier you sang *baje jhanana* (first line of the song-text) in *Jaunpuri*. I have read in Master Krishnarao's book that the *sam* of this composition was on the lower *Shadja*. But Bhaskarbua Bakhale changed to the upper *Shadja*, because Master Krishnarao's voice was supple. Do you also make such changes?

VK: Yes. And many people do. It has been like this from before. Another thing is, it is said in the shastra that when you are singing a *bandish* in a *raga*, you can place the *sam* on the note that sounds good. What is wrong with it? *Raga* should not be spoilt. In *Jaunpuri*, it will not work if you keep singing in the lower part of the octave. It gets spoiled. So there is nothing wrong. You can place the *sam* on the upper *Shadja*, it looks bright. Also *raga Jaunpuri* cannot be sung for a long time. It gets repetitious, and the *raga* gets spoilt.

UB: Which musicians do you consider as important? We have many recordings, but some experts should indicate whom to listen to. So who are the musicians in your thoughts?

VK: First of all I respect my *Guru*, because he was a great scholar. He did not pay attention to the entertainment value. He focused on scholarship. He paid a lot of attention to how a *gharana* style should be presented, on its purity and such other aspects. I respect him first. Secondly it is important to note why some singers' music is liked by all. Take Bhimsen Joshi's singing. Everyone, from old to young, listens to it. In which way do people listen to Mallikarjun Mansur? There are reasons for it. A person who is learning music sees this and listens to them. Personally speaking, I listen to all the greats. I listen to Mansur, I have heard Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal, Kumar Gandharva, as also Pandit Jasraj. The reason is, each singer has his own style and his own distinction, variety, and intelligence. Look at all of them. They did not sing like each other. Mansur's style is different, so is Bhimsen Joshi's. So Mansur is Mansur, Jasraj is Jasraj, Bhimsen Joshi is Bhimsen Joshi and Kishori Amonkar is Kishori Amonkar. That is how it should be. There should be a stamp of one's own. It is very difficult. All these singers did it. But it is very difficult to do so.

UB: Each voice is also different...

VK: Yes. And they have their own style [*gayaki*]. Take Sawai Gandharva. I have heard a few recordings. Gangubai sings in that style, and Bhimsen Joshi is also his disciple. But there is a difference. That is how it is. We should learn from our *Guru* and listen to everyone. One should recognize one's own strength. We should not press it or force it. God has given me some strength. Take for example, let us think that our *Guru* sings only one kind of *taan*. Whereas God has given me the gift of singing all varieties of *taans*. Why should I not use it? Why should I sing only that which is taught? Why should I lose the gift? God has given you a gift, why not use it? That is how all these singers became great.

UB: Does our *Guru* himself tell us to do so?

VK: Yes, indeed. My *Guruji* told me everything, he explained everything. "Listen to this singer, listen to that singer. See how he sings the notes, see how his breath-control is. There should be no *cut* in the singing. Your *alap* should be in *laya*." If one is given a *bandish* then the *alap* should be in the *laya*. For example, (sings). It has divisions of four beats, so the *alap* should also be in four beats.

Suppose we give the *sam* correctly, but then if you let *alap* wander about and then give the *sam*, it has not meaning. The *akaar* should be along with the *laya*, whatever the *laya*, slow, mid-paced, or fast. This is what my *Guru* told me. What is the point in singing if it is not in the *laya*?

UB: And one also gets a lot of freedom if one stays within the *laya* and the rhythmic cycle.

VK: Take for example Bhimsen Joshi. Listen to his *taan*. It is not outside the *laya*. So are his *alap* and notation. Take Amir Khan, he keeps the *laya* very slow but his breath pervades the *laya* and his *alap* moves as slow as the *laya*. We need to observe these things. My *Guru* used to say the same thing. There should be a relation between your *laya* and *alap*, otherwise what is the point? It is as if I don't understand my own singing.

UB: You used another word, *mood*. Singing becomes good if the artist's *mood* is good. How does this *mood* come about?

VK: See, an artist too is a human being. He is not a machine. He is not the same today as he was yesterday. Yesterday's ambience was good, so the singing was good too. One cannot predict that it will good today. There are many reasons for this. There are personal reasons, there is one's state of mind, one's co-artists, and the people sitting in front. All these are factors. Some people sit in front but they don't smile or say "wah, wah!" [shows how some people sit]. What should one sing in front of someone who sits like that? I accept that many people do not understand classical music. Then what should be done? There are one or two people who understand it, right?

UB: Yes, people should show that they understand.

VK: What did older artists do? If they saw someone who understands music sitting at the back, they would invite him to sit in the front and then sing. That is the reason. Because he understands what I am singing.

UB: It's a kind of dialogue.

VK: Yes. He understands and if it is good, he says "wah, wah!" This inspires a new thought in the singer's head. This is now artists are. Also, it is true that no one singer's singing can be of the same quality, as far as I understand. Yesterday it was good, today, not so good. It is all ambience.

UB: One last question. We have the *samaya-raga* theory in our Hindustani system. What do you think about it? Today, while recording, it seemed alright to sing *Marwa* and *Malkauns* in the morning. But will you sing them in the morning in a concert?

VK: What has happened is, we have been following the tradition. It's not possible to change it suddenly. Our elders have told us that it is our culture and tradition. That is what *raga-samaya* is. It is not possible to sing *Puriya-Dhanashree* at four in the morning, or *Bhairav* at four in the evening, because it has remained so in our head. And the reason why it has remained in our heads is, because the *ragas* too are made of notes that are suitable to the time of the day. The flat and the sharp notes that go with dawn and dusk are different. It is a scientific system. Earlier, the concert used to be day-long or night-long. It was possible to sing all *ragas* then. Now what happens is, the concerts get over by eleven in the night. What I personally feel is, let us not sing the night *ragas* during the day, but we can sing late night *ragas* between seven and eleven at night.

UB: Like *Sohoni*...

VK: Yes, one can sing *Basant*, *Sohoni*, *Darbari* and *Malkauns*. There's nothing wrong in it. Many singers do sing them. Otherwise these *ragas* will vanish. Nobody would know them. The next generation will not know them. But we should not sing morning *ragas* in the night. That's what I think.

UB: Thank you very much.

VK: Thanks, *Namaskar*.