

Kumar Gandharva and the vegetable Bhindi

One may be wondering as to what is it that I am talking about but the connection will be evident after I have narrated the incident that occurred during my visit to Kumarji's residence in Devas.

It was during the early 90's while I was working at R&D E (Engrs) Dighi Pune, that this incident occurred. Shri M. R. Joshi was the then Director of our establishment. He is a connoisseur of art and music and is himself a bit of a sitar player. He also happens to be the son-in-law of Pt. Lalji Gokhale, a renowned Tabla player and a famous disciple of the tabla wizard Ustad Ahmed jaan Tirakhwah. Pt. Lalji had performed on the tabla for almost all renowned musicians of India. He shared a special bond with Pt. Bhimseen Joshi and Pt. Kumar Gandharva. It was during early 1990 that Kumarji visited Pune for one of his concert performances. During the visit he wished to meet Pt. Lalji, who was then residing with his son-in-law Shri M.R. Joshi at R&D Engrs Colony. During this period, an auditorium named after the famous Italian visionary, engineer, cum painter, cum musician, "Leonardo da Vinci" was under construction at R&D Engrs. This was a special project costing one crore, to be equipped with the most modern facilities. The hall had excellent acoustics and was well suited for music concerts. This prompted Shri Joshi to take Kumarji for a visit to the 'da Vinci' hall. I too happened to be with Shri Joshi at that time. It may be pertinent to mention here that my brother-in-law Pt. Narayan Pandit is a well known violinist and was not only a favourite disciple of Kumarji, but also a very close family friend of his. Because of him I too had become Kumarji's family friend. Having known this, Shri Joshi had taken me along with him during the visit. As he was leaving Kumarji said, "there seems to be a lot of work still pending; when are you likely to complete them?" Shri Joshi replied "We expect to complete the work within three months but Panditji, I have a request and I hope that you will not disappoint me. We would like this hall to be inaugurated by you with your music concert."

Kumarji promptly replied, "Joshiji, you are the son-in-law of Pt. Lalji. How can I say no to you? I will love to perform in such a wonderful hall. But you must inform the date well in advance". We should note here the large heartedness of Kumarji that without even batting an eyelid, he had said "yes" for the sake of his dear friend.

It took almost six months after this to get the hall ready. By then 1991 July was approaching. It was at this juncture that I had to visit the Infantry School at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh in connection with some project. At that time Shri. Joshi said to me – “This is a proper time for us to invite Kumarji to perform at the ‘da-Vinci’ hall. Since you are going to Mhow which close to Kumarji’s place Devas, and being a family friend of his, you are best suited to extend our invitation for his music concert and also fix an appropriate remuneration for the same”. Accordingly I informed Kumarji about my impending arrival. On the scheduled date of departure, I travelled from Mhow to Devas by bus and reached there by noon. Devas being a small town, everyone seemed to know Kumarji. Hence the auto driver had no problem taking me to Kumarji’s residence ‘Bhanukul’ located on ‘Mataji Ka Rasta’. Kumarji himself came out to receive me.

Bhanukul is a spacious house named after his late wife Bhanumathi. It had a fairly large front garden sporting a swing, surrounded by varieties of flower plants and potted crotons as well as large trees of different varieties. The interior of the house seemed to be specially designed for the musicians. It had a big central hall mainly used for ‘riyaz’. The hall had large low windows almost touching the floor for the cool breeze to pass through while the musician sat and performed. Sets of four to five tablas and tanpuras were neatly placed in the hall. Carpets were spread for the performer to sit and perform. It appeared as if Kumarji had gotten the house designed to perfectly suit his music temperament and needs.

He seemed to have known my inclination towards ‘Adhyatma’. Hence in the evening he arranged for our visit to a holy place. The place was about five to six kilometers from Devas. A specially designed ‘Victoria’ type horse driven tanga arrived. It seemed that the tanga was specially meant for Kumarji. The driver had a special uniform. He was seated in a front lower seat, behind him was a raised platform on which the two of us sat. While the ‘Victoria’ proceeded on the roads of Devas, it seemed as if a royal procession was in progress. At most of the places people raised their hands showing their respect to Kumarji. As we passed through, Kumarji kept briefing me about various important places enroute.

By the time we reached the place it was evening and sun was about to set. The place is called ‘Dhuni-Sansthan’. ‘Dhuni’ means smoldering fire, giving out smoke. When we reached there, a huge log was smoldering in the fire pit (Agni-kunda). It is believed that the fire is burning there continuously for the

last five hundred years. There was a small Shiva temple behind the ‘Agnikunda’. When we entered the temple the evening pooja had just gotten over. We prayed at the temple, came out and entered the garden in the front yard. There were a couple of stone benches and the area was surrounded by huge trees. With the setting sun and the cool evening breeze blowing, it presented a somber and serene feeling. Kumarji sat on a stone bench and closed his eyes. He seemed to be immersed in meditation. I followed suit. We sat thus for almost half an hour and then returned home. Being a connoisseur of food, Kumarji had arranged for special meals for me that night. There were only five people in the house, Kumarji, his wife Vasundhara (normally called ‘Tai’), his daughter Kalapini, and grandson Bhuvan (son of Kumarji’s eldest son Mukul) and Kumarji’s inhouse young disciple Mishra.

Kumarji seemed to be an ardent practitioner of discipline. Everything everywhere seemed very orderly and in proper place. In the guest house where I stayed, even the minutest details were attended to and were in proper place. Even in his talk and dealings he appeared to be very straight forward without any ambiguity, even if at the risk of being termed rude.

There was a small incident which, I believe, illustrates the above point. If I remember correctly, it was the next day at 6 pm. We were chatting in the garden outside his house. He was sitting on the swing, while I was sitting on the chair nearby. Phone rang in the house and I could hear Mishra’s voice responding to the phone. Later Mishra came running and said, “Baba, there is a call from the president”.

Kumarji replied “Ask them to call back tomorrow, now I am busy.”

I came to know later that the call was from Delhi and the President of India was calling. He had then remarked that these days people have no respect for an artist.

Kumarji’s residence ‘Bhanukul’ is located on the way to Kali temple. The temple is on a hillock. Whenever Kumarji was in station he made it a point to visit the temple during his daily morning walk along with his disciple Mishra.

During my stay also, we walked to the temple in the morning. During the entire walk Kumarji was constantly humming a ‘raga’ and giving tips to the disciple. Even in the house while Mishra was doing ‘riyaaz’ in the morning, he used to attentively listen and suggest suitable corrections. Thus he kept a close watch on the performance of his disciple constantly.

Now coming to the Bhindi part of the story, it aptly displays Kumarji’s

dedication, discipline and methodical approach to any task he undertook. Probably it was about eleven o'clock next day morning. I came down to meet Kumarji in the dinning room. He normally sat near the dinning table in his chair during his free time. He was then holding a knife and chopping some vegetable. Seeing me, he pushed a chair towards me and said, "come, come, sit down". I sat down and started observing carefully what he was doing. He first picked up each Bhindi one by one from a vessel, cleaned and dried them thoroughly. Then he started chopping each one of them separately. He cut them across in slices and ensured that each slice was almost the same size in thickness. I was amazed to see the concentration and attention to the details he was paying. It was as if he was paying attention to the 'taan' and 'taal' of the raga he sang. After seeing his work I uttered in amazement "Even a great musician like you cut Bhindi". He replied, "yes, taste of the dish depends on how you cut the vegetable".

Later we continued the conversation and finalised 27th September as the date for his concert at our auditorium. Next, I wanted to discuss the remuneration for the performance. But somehow I could not summon enough courage to broach the topic. However, during the same evening I managed to bring it up and asked about payment. After listening to me he flared up and said angrily, "you want to make payment! Is it? How much would you pay? Will you pay whatever I ask? Don't be silly. I am not performing at your place for money. It is only for the sake of my friend Lalji. I will not take a single rupee from you."

Later, one of his close disciples told me that "You look after him and take care of his accompanists. Otherwise he himself may pay their fees. Honour him on the stage, put a sealed cover containing whatever amount you feel appropriate". Kumarji had hardly attended school. His formal education was next to nothing. But his knowledge was very vast. He had a wide ranging interest. He had a good library and a good collection of books on a variety of topics. So I did not know how the time flew reading books and discussing various subjects with Kumarji. I left the place after three days with a heavy heart and sweet memories.

After reaching Pune, I gave a detailed account of my discussion with Kumarji to Shri M. R. Joshi. I did not forget to add a very important aspect which Kumarji had specifically mentioned. He had insisted that the date once fixed should not be changed at any cost.

The month of September was approaching and it turned out that Shri

Joshi had to rush to Russia on an important assignment on 25th September. Now the situation for changing the date was inevitable. But it was gracious on the part of Director Shri Joshi that he stuck to the date given to Kumarji despite his absence and the situation was saved.

Finally, on the 27th of September 'da Vinci' hall was inaugurated with Pt. Kumar Gandharva's sonorous music concert. He had arrived in Pune a day earlier and had organized a small musical evening of his ardent Pune disciple Pt. Vijay Sardeshmukh in the same hall. The program was recorded and audio quality was checked.

On the day of the concert, Kumarji arrived at the hall an hour earlier and checked all arrangements like audio video coverage as well as the air-conditioning. Ten minutes before the start of the program he called me and said: "Please ensure that the air-conditioning is not disturbed. Whatever temperature you have set now, keep it unchanged throughout the program. If you change the temperature during the program, it affects our music instruments and will adversely affect my singing. You must follow this strictly". I assured him about this and gave instructions accordingly to the AC operator. Not only that, I even visited the AC room during the program to ensure the temperature was not altered.

However, unfortunately during the program someone may have walked to the AC control room and altered the temperature and lowered it by a degree. This was immediately sensed by Kumarji on the stage. He stopped singing and looked at me glaringly as I was sitting nearby on the stage. I immediately felt that the temperature must have changed. I then rushed to AC control room but the operator was not in his seat. Perhaps he may have gone to enjoy the music himself. I immediately reset the temperature and installed an additional person to monitor the same. Kumarji then continued the concert unhampered. It was the most memorable music concert I ever heard.

That night while enjoying dinner of 'Bhakari' and stuffed brinjal at my house Kumarji was laughing to glory narrating this incident. I then heaved a sigh of relief.