

## HINDUSTANI MUSIC

# From secrecy to openness

**How raags were transformed from exclusivity to easy accessibility.**

By Priya Purushothaman

The khayal, the underpinning of contemporary Hindustani music, was the focus of our discussion last week. This musical and poetic form, a short composition of four to eight lines, is the centrepiece around which the artist improvises. It gives considerable flexibility for the artist to express individuality through various means of improvisation, within the parameters of the raag and the taal (the rhythmic cycle). The style in which a khayal was rendered was often influenced by the musician's gharana, another concept that was introduced. The gharana is the familial musical system by which various styles of Hindustani music were protected and passed down through generations. The diversity of expression in Hindustani music, both within a gharana and between gharanas, posed a challenge to systematise and codify the vast amount of knowledge. The gharanas were very secretive and closed about their tradition and history – compositions were safeguarded and only passed down orally within the lineage. In some styles, even the treatment of a raag varied – one Ustad may have taken creative liberty to use a note that was normally not prescribed in a given raag, and when passed down, this was taken as the norm.

Such variations resulted in the colossal undertaking to standardise the rules governing Hin-



Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande

dustani music, and make available the corpus of compositions and raags to those who were not privy to the knowledge of the gharana families. Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande became a pioneer in this effort. Originally a lawyer by training and profession,



Bhatkhande abandoned his career and personally took on the responsibility of travelling around the nation to gather information from various gharanas. It required tenacity on his part to convince the Ustads of the various gharanas to part with their carefully guarded compositions. The gharana Ustads were forced to reconcile with this "modernisation" of Hindustani music in order to remain part of the evolving tradition. With all of this first-hand research, Pandit

Bhatkhande documented the characteristics of the hundreds of raags being performed at the time, and the compositions in these respective raags. To categorise this information, he devised what is known as the "Thaat" system. This system essentially divides all existing raags into ten major groups, or thaats, under which all can be classified.

The classification is based on the notes that comprise the raag and the characteristic phrases of these raags.

The classification and documentation efforts spearheaded by Bhatkhande marked a turning-point in the methods of practice and dissemination of Hindustani music. With the written descriptions of rules governing each raag, as well as the text and notation of the compositions, Hindustani music was transformed from exclusivity to easy accessibility. It was no longer for those fortunate to be born into the musical families of gharanas. Formal pedagogy and a basic curricula developed, giving rise to music institutions.

Music was now taught to anyone who was interested in learning, in a public forum. Women, especially, could now enter an arena that was previously entirely male dominated.

Performances gradually shifted out of courts, and into public performance venues or mehfil in residences of individual patrons of music. Hindustani music became a unified national cultural symbol, and garnered respect as high art, rather than the entertainment status it held in courts.

