

Siddheshwari Devi – The Queen of Thumri¹

by

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Kashi, Benares or Varanasi; the ancient spiritual centre of Hindustan, famous for its Ganga, its temples and *ghats*, *pandits* and *pandas*, had another more sensual side in its graceful yet throbbing sub-culture of music and dance. There was a time when for every devotee going to a temple to propitiate the gods there was another who, chewing his delicately flavoured *paan*,

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would be strolling towards some singer's or dancer's house. In the Benares sunset, the sound of temple bells intermingled with the soul stirring sounds of a *bhajan*, a *thumri*, a *kajri*, a *chaiti*, a *hori*. And accompanying these were the melodious sounds of the sarangi or flute and the ghunghroos on the beat of the tabla that quickened the heartbeat. So great was the city's preoccupation with music, that a distinctive style of classical music, rooted in the local folk culture, emerged and was embodied in the ***Benaras Gharana*** (school or a distinctive style of music originating in a family tradition or lineage that can be traced to an instructor or region).

A few miles from Benares, there is a village called Torvan, which appears to be like any other Thakur Brahmin village of that region. But there is a difference. This village had a few families belonging to the *Gandharva Jati*, a group whose traditional occupation was music and its allied arts. Amongst *Gandharvas*, it was the men who went out to perform while the women stayed behind. However, there came a time when the talented women in the group also wanted to come out and perform. Some of the brave ones did, but only at the cost of their reputation. One of the first women to leave the village was Maina Devi. It was her granddaughter who became the leading exponent of the rich musical tradition of the *Benaras Gharana*. This was Siddheshwari Devi, the queen of *thumri* who reigned supreme in the realm of light classical music from late 1920s onwards.

Siddheshwari was born in 1908 in Benares in a Brahmin family. Her father Shyam was married to Chanda alias Shyama, one of Maina Devi's three daughters. She died 18 months after giving birth to Siddheshwari, who was brought up by her *Masi* (mother's sister) Rajeshwari who had inherited Maina Devi's mantle and was a leading singer of Benares. She wanted to pass on her musical heritage (*gaddi*) to her own daughter Kamaleshwari or Kamala and did not intend to give any sort of musical training to Siddhi, as Siddheshwari was popularly referred to. The renowned sarangi player, Pandit Siyaji Maharaj Mishra, was engaged to tutor Kamala. Though Siddheshwari was kept busy with domestic chores, music was pulsating in her blood and she ached to learn. She was willing to put up with any sort of indignity for the sake of music. She did not resent the cooking, cleaning or washing, so long as she could listen in to Siyaji Maharaj's lessons to Kamala, and she made deliberate efforts to hang around in areas of the house where she could listen in.

One day Siyaji Maharaj was punishing Kamala who just could not reproduce a musical piece the way he wanted it. Rajeshwari Devi, who was present, was angered, and joined in the caning of the ten yearold. Siddhi came running in from the kitchen to her cousin's rescue and sang the piece to show her how she could sing it without difficulty. Siyaji Maharaj was stunned by the excellence of her demonstration. He had heard Siddhi humming tunes, but he had not grasped the quality of her talent till that fateful day. Despite her best efforts the aunt had not been able to keep Siddhi away from music, her destiny. Siyaji Maharaj could see the makings of a great artiste and he was determined to teach her at any cost, which meant at no cost since Rajeshwari Devi was not prepared to pay for Siddhi's lessons.

Siddhi was informally adopted and started training under Siyaji Maharaj at his house free of cost. He became not just her musical mentor but also a father figure, a counsellor and later, her impresario. Siddhi would save up the money given to her, as was given to the other children, to buy their morning *nashta* (snacks) from the *halwai* (sweet shop). With this she would buy *ganja* (marijuana) for him, which further strengthened their bond of affection. So strong was this bond, that later when Siyaji Maharaj was on his death-bed, he entrusted the

care of his wife to Siddhi. He considered her no less than a son and Siddhi fulfilled her responsibility by looking after his wife till the latter breathed her last.

Siddhi's initial music training was under renowned teachers like Rajab Ali Khan of Dewas and Ustad Inayat Khan of Lahore. But the one she considered her main *guru* was Bade Ramdasji of Benares. But Siyaji Maharaj was the man who initiated her into the world of professional music. Under his expert tutelage and because of her own single-minded devotion, Siddheshwari, became an accomplished singer by the time she was sixteen.

For the first couple of years of her career, Siddheshwari's performances were mostly at household functions, where she was instructed to sing by her aunt – where traditionally *Gandharvas* performed. Siddhi made up her mind to leave her *Masi's* house and with the assistance of her *Mama* (maternal uncle), rented her own house and decided to become a professional artiste. Soon her fame spread through Benares and she started receiving invitations from princely states.



The young Siddheshwari when she starts performing

The musical scene in the twenties and thirties was dominated by the princely states. The *rajās* and *nawabs* were often accomplished musicians or at least knowledgeable connoisseurs. They provided patronage to a large number of eminent musicians who were invited to perform at their courts and palaces. She first performed at the wedding of the Prince of Sarguja. It is said that she did not have any nice clothes to wear. Vidyadhari Bai, a legendary singer and court musician of the King of Kashi, gave her fine clothes and jewelry to wear. Though separated in age by 27 years, these 2 kindred loving souls became close to one another. They were invincible when they performed together. The princely states showered lavish hospitality and substantive financial rewards on the musicians. Radio and public concerts had not made their appearance and princely patronage and recognition was the only passport to eminence.

Siddheshwari's first big break in the field of court music came at the age of eighteen when she was invited to the princely state of Rewa in Madhya Pradesh. The concert was organized

in two different parts of the palace, one in the *Diwan-e-Khas* for the Maharaja and a small select audience and the other in the *Diwan-e-Aam* for the local public. The invitees included several musicians. Siddheshwari, mainly because of her plain looks, was consigned to the Diwan-e-Aam, despite protestations from Siyaji Maharaj.

Unconcerned about the snobbery of the distinction and caring only for music, Siddheshwari sang with all her heart. Gradually, as the quality of her performance became obvious, the crowds swelled and heard her in rapt attention. She had a sonorous full-bodied voice and her singing could be heard in the inner precincts of the palace. Rewa Maharaj, regretting his decision, sent a messenger to ask Siddheshwari to come and perform in the Diwan-e-Khas. But she continued to sing with abandon for the mesmerised public for three hours and complied with his wishes only later, after resting for a few hours. Finally, she appeared before him and his special guests, and sang a composition in Raag Bhairavi: “*Arre mori bari re umariya*” and held the audience spellbound. At the end of her performance, the Maharaja apologised to Siyaji Maharaj and literally showered Siddheshwari with silver coins.

Siddhi never looked back after this and invitations from other princely states poured in. Over the next fifteen years, there was hardly a prominent princely state where the listeners were not captivated by her music. Courts like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bhopal, Mysore, Kashmir, Dacca and many others came under her spell. She even performed in the *zenana* at Rampur State supported entirely by female accompanists! She was often invited to sing through the night on the overnight boating expeditions of Raj Darbhanga, great philanthropists and patrons of classical music who had palaces across India, including in Benares. Ustad Bismillah Khan, the flute maestro, was the court musician of Raj Darbhanga for several years. One of the few *gharanas* of *Dhrupad* was Darbhanga *Gharana*.

It has to be borne in mind that life for her and her peers, commonly referred to as *Bais* or courtesans was rough. The battle to be recognized for their excellence in music, to be treated with dignity was a relentless one. Areas of luminosity played an endless hide and seek with areas of impenetrable darkness and despair. Yet they did not give up nor become bitter. The wellknown author Amrit Lal Nagar, in his book, Yeh Kothewaliyan, brings this out through detailed interviews with several famous singers of pre independence era. Writing 50 years later, Prabhat Ranjan, in Kothagoi (story of kothas, as in dastaangoi) describes how the puritanical zeal of the then Information and Broadcasting Minister, B.V. Keskar turned all the *Bais* into Devis and Begums. Baba had told me of the man Siddheshwari had fallen madly in love with, a handsome officer, and had married him in the *Gandharva* tradition and had given birth to her beautiful love child she had named Savita. One morning he had departed never to return, leaving behind a wounded and bleeding heart.

An interesting example of Siddheshwari’s high reputation among the princely patrons is provided by an incident involving the Maharajas of Kashmir and Khairpur (Mir Ali Nawaz Khan of Sindh). The two connoisseur rulers disputed the relative musical abilities of Siddheshwari and the famous Jaddan Bai (who was Siddhi’s senior and mother of the film star Nargis) and took a bet on it. Great patrons of Kafi music from Sindh (of Baba Farid and Bulleh Shah fame), Khairpur had not heard Siddheshwari before and Kashmir Maharaj invited both to perform. Siddheshwari had just recovered from an illness but could not refuse the Maharaj. She was unaware of the bet and lost to Jaddan Bai, who knew there was a wager on the contest. When Kashmir Maharaj told Siddheshwari about it she suggested a second

contest and promised that she would not let him down. He proposed a fresh contest at double the wager the next day which the Khairpur ruler eagerly accepted. This time Siddheshwari gave her best and won not just the bet for Kashmir Maharaj but also the lifelong esteem of Khairpur.

By the forties, the music scene in India had started to change dramatically. Radio stations and public concerts in towns and cities were making their appearance. Artistes of stature who, a few decades earlier, may have remained unknown outside the ambit of their own *Gharana* or a few princely states, became well known across India. Siddheshwari's career reflected this change in the pattern of her musical performances and she blossomed into a great radio (Akashwani and Doordarshan) and concert artiste. She particularly enjoyed singing through the night at the oldest (since 1875) annual Harballabh music festival held every year in Jalandhar, Punjab, in end December at the *samadhi* of Baba Harballabh. She also sang at the Tansen festival in Gwalior (since 1950s) and Swami Haridas Sangeet Sammelan in Mumbai (since 1952). At these fairs and festivals, people would gather from all over India and the world to listen to their favourite singers and instrumentalists as well as to new talent.



Siddheshwari singing at the All India Radio studios

Siddheshwari reached one of the highest points of her public performance at a National Congress Session in Bombay. This Session was complemented by a week-long *Sangeet Sammelan* (Music Festival) at which the leading musicians of India performed. When Siddheshwari's turn came, she sang a *hori* in *Raag Pilu*, "*Kahe ko daare gulaal*" (why have you drenched me in colour..). She sang the composition with such emotion and abandon, that Ustad Faiyyaz Khan, the doyen of Indian classical vocal music, who was to perform after her refused to do so that day. He ended the session with the announcement, "*Baad Gauhar Jaan aur Mallika Jaan key, yeh sehra tere hee sir hai – tu Thumri Rani hai*" (After Gauhar jaan and Mallika Jaan, this crown is yours – you are the Queen of Thumri). This accolade from the greatest singer of the time, gave Siddheshwari a special status from which she was never

dethroned in her lifetime. At the same festival, when Kesarbai Kerkar was asked to sing a thumri, she said, “how can I sing a thumri when Siddheshwari , the Queen of Thumri is present.” She was not just a popular singer, she was a musicians’ musician and several eminent singers were taught by her. Even M.S. Subbalakshmi, the famous exponent of Carnatic music, had invited her to Madras in 1961 to learn from her.



Siddheshwari Devi with M.S. Subbulakshmi in Chennai in 1961

Though light classical music forms were Siddheshwari’s forte, she was equally proficient in the pure classical forms like *dhrupad* and *khayal*. The special quality of her music came from her deep spiritualism for she sang not for the audience but for her beloved, her God, the one she worshipped! This mystic quality in her singing is what marked her out from most other musical exponents of the day. Listening to her sing with abandon was a memorable experience!

In 1965, Siddheshwari shifted from Benares to Delhi, a shift that reflected her status as a national artiste. She was invited to teach at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra and later the Kathak Kendra, associated with another illustrious performer from Benares, Ustad Birju Maharaj whom she adored like a mother. Here she taught many student, including several reputed musicians of a later vintage. As a radio artiste and concert performer, she continued to electrify, delight and win the hearts of music lovers all over the country.



Siddheshwari Devi in concert at the Royal Albert Hall, London

Siddheshwari was not an international jet-setter like many present day musicians but her status as an artiste was such that she was invited to and performed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal and several European countries. She narrated a funny incident to us one day. She was invited to sing at the Royal Albert Hall and arrived in London with her accompanists. They were put up in a fancy hotel. Once in her room, she looked everywhere for a mug in the bathroom to wash herself but could not find one. They managed to obtain one for her. Then she enquired from an Indian assisting them how the English people cleaned themselves in the after relieving themselves and was told that they wiped their backsides with tissue paper. She got into a state of great agitation and had to be persuaded not to cancel her performance. Later she recounted how terrible she had felt, singing such heavenly compositions for an audience that indulged daily in the dirty habit of wiping their dirty bottoms with paper!



Seated from left to right: (second from left) Bade Ghulam Ali, Amir Khan, Ahmad Jan Thirakwa, Siddheshwari and Bal Gandharwa at His Master's Voice Studios in Bombay

Soon she was being counted among the great Maestros and legends of Hindustani Classical music. Many honours came her way, and in 1966 she was awarded the Padma Shri by the President of India. In the same year, she received the Sangeet Natak Academy Award for Hindustani Classical Music, the highest Indian recognition given every year to a performing artiste. In 1973, in a rare honour, the Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta conferred an honorary D.Lit. on her. She was also awarded with the prestigious 'Desikottama' from the Vishwa Bharati University in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. The Indian Government also gave her a large apartment to live in at 12, Bhartiya Nagar, in Lutyen's New Delhi.

I met Siddheshwari Devi after she came to Delhi through my mother who herself was deeply into classical music and knew most musicians. Her guru, Narayan Swami, a truly evolved soul and a *Mahatma*, asked one day if she could reconnect him to his old friend Siddhi of Benares, which she did with great pleasure. It was a long and memorable meeting at our home between Baba and Siddhi and the following story of their friendship emerged. Many

decades earlier, when both were around sixteen, Baba had stayed as a tenant in one of the ground floor rooms of Siddheshwari's Benares house. Siddheshwari's *munshi* had informed her that a *Mahatma* had rented one of her apartments. Deeply spiritual by nature, she had decided to meet him and pay her respects. When she had gone to the house, a man was washing clothes in the bathroom next to the staircase. She had asked him the whereabouts of this *Mahatma*. The man who was Baba himself, said that he did not know of any *Mahatma* but that he was the one living there. Very innocently she had enquired if by chance he was the said Mahatma. Understanding but not admitting, the two teenagers had laughed and become close friends. Like her, he too was drawn to musicians and proficient in vocal and instrumental music himself.



Baba - Narayan Swami in his fifties

When time had come for Baba to leave Benares, he had asked Siddhi what she wanted most in life. With unmistakable candour she had replied, "If you really can do something, then do something like, when I sing, my music should hit like a bolt of lightning in the sky; like biting into the flesh". Her exact words had been, "*agar tum kuch kar sakte ho tou kuch aisa karo, ki jab ham gaayen, tou jaise bijli chamak jaaye, jaise ham kaat khaayen!*" Baba had assured her that it would be as she desired. Right till the end of her life, she attributed her success to this *aashirwaad* (blessing) of Baba's. What this anecdote brings out is that even in her late fifties, she was not willing to take credit for her musical achievements. She was humble to the core and so in tune with her music and her God that it was difficult to separate Siddheshwari from her music and the fire within. To her nothing mattered more in life than to give her all in every music performance.

She epitomized simplicity and an inner beauty that was reflected in her warm expression and twinkling eyes. A loving and caring soul with a generous heart of gold. She loved feeding people and almost every other day she cooked a feast in the house. She was an outstanding

cook and loved to eat good and rich food. It was a common sight to see her sitting for hours on the floor outside her kitchen, singing and cooking mouth-watering delicacies on the *angeethi* (fire stove).

Laughing like a child, without a hint of embarrassment, she would narrate stories of her foolishness. Once in Benares, she had decided to donate her savings to a temple. Her idea of saving was to dump whatever extra cash she had in a box, hidden behind her clothes in a wooden cupboard. When she tried to take out the box, all that had come in her grasp was wood and paper dust and a few half-eaten notes. Unwittingly she had provided a feast for the white ants, lest they feel left out! When she was in Delhi, whosoever came to visit her from Benares, never left her house empty-handed. There were others in the neighbourhood whom she helped whenever they needed money either for pursuing their studies or for anything else. In her last months, when she had become infirm and could not move about, she kept money under her pillow so that she could continue with her munificence. Her generosity was well-known and there were many around to exploit it.



Siddheshwari Devi (centre) with musician Sulochana Brihaspati, Lalita Gupta (on her right) and daughter Savita (in front) surrounded by her students at home

Siddheshwari's generosity extended to her ability to appreciate other musicians as well. Once, she set out with a hundred rupees to buy some material for petticoats which she desperately required. On reaching the market, she suddenly remembered the Pakistani singer Reshma's song, '*Hai o Rabba, nai o lagda dil mera*' (O my Lord, my heart finds no solace here...). She forgot about the petticoats and bought a spool of recording tape instead. On returning home she called up my mother Lalita who had a tape of Reshma's music and asked her to come over immediately. For the rest of the day, she heard Reshma's soulful songs with tears flowing freely down her face. Her love of music was so great, that matters of ego never interfered in her appreciation of it. Distinctions of age, generation, status or religion made no difference whatsoever to her.

In June of 1976, Siddheshwari Devi had a paralytic stroke. Her greatest grief was that she was unable to sing any more. She would try and when she could not, she would cry her heart out. When anybody came to meet her, all she wanted was that they should sing for her. She had two daughters, Shanta and Savita Maharaj (who married Ustad Kishan Maharaj and had two sons), both musicians. On 18th March 1977, Siddheshwari Devi, the Queen of Thumri, breathed her last. Her long musical career, which stretched over half a century, saw the transformation of classical music from a privilege of the few to the pleasure of the many. Performances at the princely courts gave way to radio and public concerts. Siddheshwari Devi, because of the immediate and mass appeal of her music, succeeded in both these worlds. She was the rarest of people who touched every person she met and captured the hearts of millions through her incomparable renditions. The magic of her music lives on.....



Dhrupad is the oldest form of classical music, and in the old days Sanskrit shlokas were sung in *dhrupad* in the worship of the gods. It is sung in four parts – *Sthayi*, beginning; *Antara*, the latter half of the composition; *Sanchari*, the development and *Abhog*, the rounding off. *Taan-kari*- fast rendition of *swar* tied in a metre, is not permitted in *dhrupad*.

Khayaal is the most popular vocal classical and serious form (like *dhrupad*) which allows the artiste flexibility to elaborate as per his thought or imagination. It is like painting a picture, and the rendition takes on an individual colour, depending on the artiste. *Vilambit* or *Bada Khayaal* is a slow rendition and *drut* or *chhota khayal* a fast one.

Tappa is a light classical form which originated in the Punjab. The pace is fast and *shringara rasa* (romance) is the dominant mood. *Tappa* is sung mainly in *Raag Kafi*, *Jhinjhoti*, *Bhairavi* and *Khamaj*.

Thumri is a semi-classical musical form where few words or a thought is expressed in different ways to expose the meaning and mood of the composition. Not much attention is paid to the purity of the *raag* in a *thumri* and often *swars* from other *raags* are included to make the composition more evocative.

Kajri is a folk form predominant in Benares and Mirzapur which conveys the mood of the monsoon, of Radha and Krishna's love as well as the pain of their separation.

Chaiti is sung in the month of *Chaitra*, just after *Phagun* or *Holi* (February-March or onset of spring). Generally, it is sung in *Poorvi* and describes *Rama's Leela* (Lord Rama's life).

Hori songs are sung in the month of *Phalgun* during *Holi*, the beginning of spring. *Shringara rasa* (playful romance and passion) is the dominant mood.

Photographs: Courtesy Siddheshwari Devi's private collection.

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