



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XII, Issue-IV, July 2024, Page No.299-304

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Life & Contributions of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman: Tripura's Musical Genius on a Musical Mission

Dr. Tripti Watwe

Assistant Professor, Department of Music, Women's College, Agartala, Kunjaban, Agartala, India.

Abstract:

“There is a proverbial saying that in Tripura everybody has a gifted voice of music right from the King, Queen, Prince and Princess down to the servants in the royal household, the farmers joyfully sing while tilling the land, the boatmen sing the Bhatiyali rowing down the course of the river, the fishermen cannot go about their vocation without singing, the weavers sing to the rhythm of the fly shuttle. Similarly the melodious music brings relief to the toilers in the field”, in his autobiographical essay published in the famous Calcutta literary journal ‘Desh’, the legendary music composer Sachin Debbarman made these remarkable comments on the inseparable relationship of music and Tripura.

One such contemporary of Kumar Sachin Debbarman was Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman about whom unfortunately not much is known beyond the boundaries of Tripura. Both belonged to the Royal family of Tripura inheriting their musical talent from the family lineage and both have left a deep impression on the culture and music of Tripura.

Keywords: Royal family, Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman, Sachin Debbarman, music composer, Tripura.

Historical evidences prove that among other factors and parameters, the cultural flora and fauna of a region is also preserved, nourished and developed by the litterateurs, poets, musicians, artists and the likes who through the practice of their craft have time to time refreshed the social, cultural and ethnic components of the region.

Music is undoubtedly one of the indivisible portion of the culture of a region. However Indian classical music or Bharatiya Shastriya Sangit is an inseparable part of the heritage of the entire country. The maestros and scholars through their constant research and practice in every part of the country have continuously endeavored to preserve its sanctity and dignity. One such name needs to be lovingly and respectfully preserved and cherished and that name is of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman. One can find all attributes of a Scholar, artist, musician, sculptor, philanthropist and researcher in one personality.

The following article tries to give a glimpse of the versatility and contributions of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman.

Birth and Family Lineage: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman was born on the 2nd September 1801 in the highly illustrious family of Ujir Durgamani Deb Thakur, great grandfather of Anil Krishna Debbarman who was the contemporary of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833 A.D.) and who served as the Prime minister and Commander-in-chief in the regime of three kings of Tripura namely Maharaja Rajdhar Manikya (1785-1804 A.D.), Maharaja Durga Manikya (1804-1813 A.D) and Maharaja Ramganga Manikya (1813- 1826 A.D.). Ujir Gopikrishna Deb Thakur (Deb Thakur was used as a title then as Debbarman was still not in use.) who was the son of Ujir Durgamani Thakur was married to Anangamohini Devi, the daughter of Maharaja Birchandra Manikya of Tripura. Maharaja Birchandra Manikya today is well-known as the founder of modern day Tripura and as a well-versed poet and musician whereas his daughter Anangamohini Devi had successfully established herself as the first female poetess of Tripura.¹

Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman imbibed the cultural, literary and musical values of his family. Mother Labanglata Devi was the sister of well-known artist Maharaj Birendra Kishore Manikya. His father Radhakrishna although didn't have proper training in music but loved to play the 'Behala' (Violin) and was a religious person. Besides he was an expert sculpture. Everyone had a reverential fear towards him as he was perfectionist, reserved and temperamental. A narrative in this regard maybe quoted here which exemplifies his eye for perfection. Every year during Krishna Janmashtami, the idol making process of Ma Durga started in the family of Anil Krishna Debbarman. The duty of sculpting the idol out of pure, unadulterated mud was assigned to 2-3 senior artists. But Gopikrishna arrived on shashthi, i.e. the sixth day of Durga Puja to inspect the idol and would sometimes order the artisans to remake the idol as it would not be up to the mark. The remaking was a very tedious process and so the artisans were very afraid of his scrutiny and waited with bated breath for his feedback. Actually Gopikrishna Deb Thakur wanted the folds of Ma Durga's palm and fingers holding the Trishul while killing the demon- Mahishasur only to look a certain way. These meticulous expectations had to be met by the artisans every year.

All the above instances and narratives give us a small background picture of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman and his upbringing. The family lineage and social circumstances play a vital role in forming the character of a person. The personality of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman was also primarily influenced by his family especially his forefather Ujir Durgamani Deb Thakur.

Eventually Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman and his younger brother were given the responsibility of sculpting the divine eyes of Ma Durga's idol every year during Durga Puja worship.

The Seeds are Sown: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman received his initial training in music from the famous Sitarist, Ramkanai Shil and learnt painting from Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya. Interestingly Anil Krishna's initial sketches received 'good', 'very good' etc remarks from the Maharaja himself which are still preserved by the Royal family of Tripura. Additionally Anil Krishna Debbarman also learnt portrait painting from the very

famous Agnikumar Bhattacharjee. Some of his significant portraits are that of his father Radhakrishna Thakur, Maharaja Birchandra Mankiya and the legendary Ustad Alauddin Khan of Maihar.

This journey of training in music and fine arts had a large impact on young Anil Krishna Debbarman which led him to contribute his talent for the development of Indian Classical Music in Tripura. His keen eye for art and melody led Anil Krishna Debbarman to explore the richness of Hindustani classical music not only by creating his own compositions but also by chiseling out his own set of customized musical instruments in the bygone days when this was only a dream for many.

Contributions & Accomplishments: His contributions may be categorized majorly in 3 sections. They are as follows:

1. Establishment of music school
2. Musical & artistic contribution
3. Patronizing musicians

1. Establishment of music school: It won't be an exaggeration to say that Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman came forward as the emancipator of Indian Classical Music, the heritage of *Bharatvarsha*, in the history of Tripura. The Indian classical music which was extremely revered and practiced in the regime of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya until the period of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur, slowly started losing its value because the Court musicians and others singers who were patronized by the kings started relocating elsewhere in search of patrons and moreover these musicians were disinterested to share their knowledge of music with the common man of Tripura as they rigidly believed that the music of their '*gharana*' must only be shared with their own disciples.

As a matter of fact, Tripura was undergoing the high-society syndrome regarding music alike other regions of the country in the then existing society and therefore, only the elite and upper classes were able to enjoy the Indian Classical music as concerts were mainly patronized by zamindars, kings and other aristocrats of the then contemporary society which barred the common man from the privilege of enjoying the Classical music or receiving a training in it. At this point Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman established his first school of Bharatiya Shastriya Sangit named 'Tripura Oiktan Vadan Samiti' which was later renamed as 'Anil Sangit Vidyalaya' in the year 1926 just 4 years before Bhatkhande ji's Lucknow Merris College.²

The family of Anil Krishna Debbarman was committed in the practice of music, literature and fine arts which led him to appreciate the art forms, understand its significance and also bring music closer to the common man of Tripura, the access to which was impossible in the past.

2. Musical and Artistic Contribution: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman's contributions to music are exemplary. His knowledge of 'shastriya paksha' of Bharatiya Shastriya Sangit

was impeccable. The following may be enlisted as part of his contributions to Indian classical music.

- I) Innovating Raga: He discovered two Ragas namely: a) Raga Tripisarang b) Raga Tripuravati. Both these Ragas were formed taking inspiration from the melody, emotions and meter of the Folk music of Tripura where the native language is Kokborok. Raga Tripisarang is based on the Raga Sarang whereas Raga Tripuravati gives the glimpses of Raga Malkausa and Raga Bhimpalasi of Hindustani Shastriya Sangeet. Later on these Ragas were broadcasted from All India Radio and Doordarshan, Agartala as well to propagate the beautiful compositions among the local people of Tripura.
- II) Creating his own Notation system: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarmar discovered his own unique notation system where he referred to the three octaves namely mandra, madhya and taar saptakas as udara, mudara and tara. Udara is denoted by a small dot below the notes, mudara does not have any symbol, whereas tara is denoted by a small dot above the notes. Flat notes (komal swaras) are signified by a small triangle on top of the notes, teevra swaras will be denoted by a small flag on top of the note.³
- III) Publishing books on music: *Sangit vidya* was a medium of 'Naadsadhana' for Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarmar. He wanted to provide the shabdik form to his naadsadhana therefore to serve this purpose he wrote some exemplary books on music named 'Naad Lipi' and 'Holi' which are remarkable evidences of the author's scholarship in music.
- IV) Creation of 'Asther': Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarmar showcasing his craftsmanship created a musical instrument named 'Asther' by merging the qualities of musical instruments 'Sitar' and 'Esraj'.⁴ Apart from these innovations, he encouraged every member of his family to get associated with the divine world of Indian classical music and gifted them his own hand made musical instruments. He encouraged the women of his family to play the musical instruments and for this purpose he himself designed two numbers of quality sitar for his wife and sister-in-law keeping in mind the convenience and comfort essential for women.

He did not limit his Omkar sadhana to practicing merely the subtle art of music but also gave it a shape. The upper portion of his musical instrument i.e Surbahar was made in the shape of 'Omkar' which was one of the rarest instances because generally the upper body of string instruments like sitar, subahar etc generally carried the symbol of the head of Swan.

- V) The Pioneer of Orchestra: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarmar established his 'Oiktan Vadan Samiti' in the year 1926. Oiktan signifies orchestration in music which is basically perceived as a western concept in music. This institution of Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarmar maybe recognized as an endeavor to bring music in the circle of common man breaking free from the shackles of elitism which was keeping music away from the public. Besides serving this purpose of making music affordable and available for the general public, this institution also fulfilled another purpose and that was of propagation of the concept of 'orchestration'.⁴

The well-known music critic Narayan Chaudhury in his book 'Sangit Parikrama' has termed Ustad Alauddin Khan as the founder of orchestra. But here it will be worthwhile to mention that Ustad Alauddin Khan relocated to Maihar state after 1930. Here under the patronage of King of Maihar Ustad Alauddin Khan set-up his own school where he trained his students in the art of orchestration which was later well-known as the Maihar Band. But it is evident that Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman founded his school in the year 1926 which was primarily based on the concept of teaching orchestration in the genre of instrumental music. Therefore, Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman is justifiably the first person to establish orchestration in the Indian music even before Ustad Alauddin Khan did in Maihar. Moreover, evidence has it that Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman eternally recorded his valuable contribution especially to the land of Tripura by including 'Chompreng', the musical instrument of Tripura's Tribal folk Culture in his orchestra which was recorded by Tajmahal Gramophone Company during the same period. The specialty of this recording was that this orchestra was purely based on Indian instruments like sitar, sarod, bansuri, esraj, tabla, mridang and manjira. The compositions were based on Raga 'Tilang Mishra' and 'Kafi'.⁵

4. Patronizing Musicians: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman very well understood his social responsibilities. His close ties with the royal family made him enjoy easy access to the king and his family members because Anil Krishna was well revered in the innermost circle of the royal family of Tripura but he always used it for the benefit of musicians and needy.

There are several instances of Anil Krishna Debbarman's magnanimity where he helped many aspiring musicians with financial assistance from Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya because he was not only a dear friend of the Maharaja, but was also the King's Sitar mentor and royal court's musician. Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya on the recommendation of Thakur Anil Krishna sponsored Pulin Debbarma, who was a very promising young talent, to have his musical training at Lucknow Merris College from where later on he returned as a national level maestro and also served as the Principal of Govt. Music College of Tripura.⁶

Awards and Recognitions: Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman's genius was widely acknowledged by maestros and legendary musicians of those times. In the year 1932, at the age of 31, he was conferred the award of 'Professor' at the All India Classical Music Conference organized in Allahabad. Here legends like Ustad Karim Khan, Inayat Hussein Khan, Pt. Ratanjhanakar, Kumar Gandharva etc. performed on the same stage as did Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman and due to his outstanding talent and musical genius Thakur Anil Krishna received overwhelming applause and recognition.

Later on the Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman was invited at the All Bengal Music Conference in the year 1934 which was chaired by the Maharaja Jogindranath Roy of Natore. Herein Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman played Raga 'Desh' on Sitar accompanied by Ustad Alauddin Khan on the Tabla. The breathtaking performance of Thakur Anil

Krishna Debbarman left everybody spellbound. The title of 'Sangitacharya' was conferred on Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman in this conference.⁷

Conclusion: This versatile genius and *Sangeet Sadhaka* breathed his last on 9th January 1944 leaving behind numerous disciples and followers. Thakur Anil Krishna Debbarman selflessly devoted his entire life for the pious cause of art and music. He revived Indian classical music especially the Instrumental genre in an era when the dignity of music was declining in the society. In addition, his unconditional love for music and his tireless efforts to rediscover *Bharatiya Shastriya Sangit* made him enthrone the hearts of his several admirers.

Today in the present times, Sangitacharya Anil Krishna Debbarman stands as an epitome of inspiration to numerous seekers, maestros, researchers and scholars of music.

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