

A Musical Legacy: The Life and Work of Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and musical journey of Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary, a distinguished artist from the Banaras Gharana, whose contributions to Hindustani classical music, particularly in the field of shehnai, earned him national and international acclaim. Born into a family of renowned musicians, Pandit Choudhary's early training under his father, Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary, and his grandfather, as well as his mentorship under Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra, laid the foundation for his musical expertise. The paper examines Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary's artistic growth, from his formative years in Varanasi to his rise as a prominent figure in the classical music scene, highlighting his collaborations with luminaries from various musical traditions and his performances at prestigious music festivals worldwide. The paper also delves into the recognition and awards he has received, including the Padma Shri, acknowledging his exceptional contributions to Indian classical music. In conclusion, the paper reflects on Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary's lasting impact on the shehnai tradition and his role in preserving and evolving India's classical music heritage.

1) Introduction

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary, born on January 1, 1942 in Varanasi, hails from a distinguished lineage that is deeply embedded in the rich classical music traditions of the Banaras Gharana. The Banaras Gharana, renowned for its distinctive approach to Hindustani classical music, has shaped the musical careers of many great artists, and Pt. Choudhary's life and work are a testament to the enduring legacy of this tradition. His musical journey, marked by rigorous training, unwavering discipline, and a deep connection to his familial roots, played a crucial role in the enrichment and perpetuation of Indian classical music, particularly in the realm of shehnai performance.

From an early age, Pt. Choudhary was immersed in a musical environment, receiving training from his father, Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary, a respected shehnai artist, and his grandfather, who was a disciple of Pandit Shiv Sahay. This immersion in a family of musicians laid the foundation for Pt. Choudhary's lifelong devotion to music. His studies were further nurtured under the tutelage of Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra, a distinguished disciple of Pandit Bade Ramdasji, a key figure in the vocal traditions of the Banaras Gharana.

This study aims to explore Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary's life, work, and musical contributions, drawing on a series of interviews conducted with his family members, close associates. To get information some websites were also referred to. These firsthand accounts offer a unique insight into Pt. Choudhary's early influences, his training, and his artistic evolution, providing a deeper understanding of how his musical heritage shaped his career. By examining these personal narratives alongside a detailed analysis of his musical achievements, this study seeks to highlight the significance of Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary's contributions to the continued legacy of the Banaras Gharana and the broader landscape of Indian classical music.

Musical Lineage and Early Influence

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary's musical journey began within a family of renowned musicians. His grandfather, a disciple of Pandit Shiv Sahay, was known as a *Ramayani*, performing the *Ramayana* in classical ragas. His early introduction to music was through the teachings of his grandfather, who laid the foundation for his vocal training.

Subsequently, Pt.Choudhary was mentored by his father, Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary, a prominent shehnai player and disciple of the illustrious Pandit Bade Ramdasji. Pandit Bade Ramdasji, often referred to as the *Gyanacharya of Banaras*, played a central role in shaping the vocal traditions of the Banaras Gharana. As both a revered vocalist and a prolific composer, Pandit Ramdasji's compositions, characterized by their lyrical depth and intricate *raaga-tala* structures, continue to be a cornerstone of classical music. His disciples, including the legendary Siddheshwari Devi (referred to as 'Maa'), Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra, and Pandit Umadatta Sharma (father of Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma, the famous santoor player) ensured the continuity of his musical legacy.

Craftsmanship and Early Training

In addition to his proficiency as a shehnai artist, Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary was a skilled craftsman, particularly in the making of shehnai reeds (*pattur*). At a young age of five, Pt.Krishna Ram Choudhary was given a miniature shehnai, smaller than the *sundari*, which marked the beginning of his formal musical training. Alongside shehnai, his father also taught him to play the flute, thereby broadening his musical skills.ⁱ

Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary's expertise extended beyond performance to the intricate process of crafting reeds for shehnai. His practice involved sourcing reeds from Dumraon, a village in Bihar renowned for its shehnai reeds and also the birthplace of popular shehnai maestro, Ustad Bismillah Khan. The reeds were carefully measured, chiselled, and sun-dried before being perfected, underscoring the family's deep connection to both the creation and performance of music.

Influence of Family and the Film Industry

Shri Ram Lal Choudhary, Pt.Krishna Ram Choudhary's uncle, was another significant figure in his musical upbringing. A talented musician, Shri Ram Lal moved to Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1944, where he became closely associated with the Prithvi Theatre and collaborated with cinematic luminaries such as Prithviraj Kapoor, Raj Kapoor, V. Shantaram, P. L. Santoshi and many others. His musical contributions to iconic films, such as *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Mother India*, *Navrang*, and *Parineeta* (1953), along with his role as music director for films like *Sehra* and *Geet Gaya Patharon Ne*, placed him at the forefront of Hindi cinema's Golden Era. His shehnai performance in *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* alongside Ustad Bismillah Khan further solidified his legacy.

Cultural Immersion and Musical Growth in Kabir Chaura

The Choudhary family resided in Kabir Chaura, a culturally rich neighborhood in Banaras historically associated with classical music. Growing up in such an environment, Pt.Krishna Ram Choudhary was constantly immersed in music, which deeply shaped his artistic identity. By the age of 12 or 13, as his uncle's reputation in the film industry grew, Pt.Krishna Ram Choudhary's musical pursuits became more focused, drawing from both his uncle's compositions and the

shehnai renditions of Ustad Bismillah Khan. He frequently performed at local community events such as *pujas*, weddings, and other ceremonial occasions, gaining exposure and honing his skills.

Formal Training and National Recognition

Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary's formal training began under his father's tutelage, with an emphasis on vocal music. He learned to master Raga Bhairav in the morning and Raga Yaman in the evening. His practice routine involved performing *sargams* and *paltas*, which were then transferred onto the shehnai. His disciplined schedule consisted of individual practice from 6 a.m. to 12 noon, followed by evening sessions with his father.

Recognizing his son's admiration for Ustad Bismillah Khan, Shri Buddha Lal Choudhary enrolled young Krishna Ram Choudhary in a school situated near the maestro's residence. That was because Ustad ji was known to seldom accept students as he felt there was little that he could teach his disciples.ⁱⁱ He was encouraged to listen to Ustad Bismillah Khan's daily recitals and learn from them. Additionally, his father taught him a *bandish* in Raga Todi, inspired by Ustad Bismillah Khan's recent LP release.

During this period of intense practice, the young Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary began experiencing a deeper understanding of music. He described this phase as one where "bajaane mein soojh aane laga" (clarity in playing began to emerge). This period of growth was further enhanced by his studies under Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra, a disciple of Pandit Bade Ramdasji. Under Pandit Mishra's guidance, his musical imagination flourished, and Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary remarked that "dimaag khul gaya" (my mind opened up)ⁱⁱⁱ.

At the age of sixteen, Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary achieved national recognition when he won the All-India Radio (AIR) shehnai competition, earning a gold medal from the then President of India, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. This achievement granted him a special performance grade, allowing him to perform on AIR stations across India. Over time, his consistent excellence led to his promotion to 'A' grade, and he eventually attained the coveted 'Top Grade' status as an artist of All India Radio and Doordarshan. Vividha Bharti of All India Radio made a documentary of eight episodes on him under the Sangeet Sarita programme named "Shehnai ke Rang Shehnai ke Sang" He also gave several programmes including National Music from Akashvani and Doordarshan.

Performances

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary performed at numerous esteemed music conferences and cultural events, both in India and abroad. His performances at several prestigious platforms solidified his reputation as a virtuoso of the shehnai. Notable among those were:

- Sangeet Parishad Music Conference, Varanasi
- Ustad Allaaddin Khan Music Conference, Maihar (M.P) and Gwalior
- Swami Haridas Music Conference, Bombay
- Tansen Sangeet Sammelan, Gwalior and Bhopal
- ITC Sangeet Sammelan, Calcutta, New Delhi, and Agra
- Shankar Lal Music Festival, New Delhi

- RIMPA Music Conference, Varanasi (Organized by Bharat Ratna Pt. Ravishankar)
- Chitragupta Sangeet Sammelan, Dhanbad (Bihar)
- Barkha Bahar Music Conference, Delhi
- Sangeet Conference, Patna
- All India Music Conference, Madras
- Sruti Mandal Music Conference, Jaipur (Rajasthan)
- Amir Khan Sangeet Samaroh, Gwalior
- Nalanda Sangeet Samaroh, Champaran Sangeet Mahotsava (Bihar)
- Ganga Mahotsava, Varanasi
- Chalukya Music Festival, Karnataka
- Tansen Samaroh, Gwalior
- Dhrawar Music Festival
- Guruvayur Temple Music Concert, Thrissur (Kerala)
- Mrityunjai Mahadev Samaroh concert, Varanasi
- Champaran Sanskritik Mahotsava, Bihar
- The Art and Culture Trust of India Music Festival, Delhi
- HCL Music Concert, Delhi
- Saptak Music Conference, Ahmedabad
- Gharana Music Festival, Chennai
- Harballabh Das Sangeet Sammelan, Jalandhar
- Music Concert of Ramkrishan Mission, Kolkata
- Central Sangeet Natak Akademi's Music Concerts
- Sanskriti Mahotsava, Sur Banaras, Varanasi
- Simhasth at Ujjain, Varanasi
- Subah Savere, Varanasi

In addition to his solo performances, Pt.Krishna Ram Choudhary also participated in duet performances with renowned artists. These collaborations include duets with:

- Violin maestros such as Padma Bhushan Pt. V.G. Jog, accompanied by internationally known tabla player Padma Vibhushan Pt. Kishan Maharaj; Shri Ramoo Prasad Shastri, and Shri Santosh Nahar.
- Sitar artists like Ustad Sujat Khan, Nishat Khan, and Sri Mani Lal Nag, accompanied by renowned tabla maestros Padmabhushan Pandit Samta Prasad Mishra (Gudai Maharaj) and Sri Somitra Lahari.

Additionally, Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary participated in several group dance compositions with the famous Kathak dancer Pt. Birju Maharaj. His versatility also extended to shehnai performances in various documentary films.

International Recognition

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary's musical talents took him beyond the Indian subcontinent. He was invited by the Music Ensemble of Banaras to tour various European countries, including Germany, Geneva, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Sweden, and Norway, where he performed in prestigious concerts. He also featured in the audio CD "Musical Ensemble of Banaras," further solidifying his international reputation.

Awards and Honours

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary became the recipient of numerous prestigious awards in recognition of his exceptional contributions to Indian classical music, particularly in the field of shehnai:

- Special President's Award in All India Music Competitions, presented by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the President of India, in 1961.
- Surmani Award (1976) by the Sur Singar Samsad, one of India's leading cultural organizations.
- Gold Medal (1978) by the Bihar Sangeet Conference, Patna, for excellence in shehnai playing.
- Sensational Shehnai Player Award (1982) by the Indian Social Lovers Organisation (ISCLO), acknowledging his contributions to Indian classical music.
- C.C.I. (Critic Circle of India) Award (1981) for his outstanding contributions in enriching India's cultural and social tradition through shehnai.
- Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1991).
- Bharat Ke Sangeet Ratna Award (October 23, 2008) by The Art and Culture Trust of India, New Delhi.
- Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2008), presented by the President of India, Smt. Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, for contributions to Hindustani Instrumental Music (Shehnai) in 2009.

- Padma Shri (2017) for his exceptional contributions to Indian classical music, conferred by the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee.

However, renowned for weaving magic through the soulful tones of his shehnai, the maestro who won the hearts of millions across generations with his evocative performances, finally laid down his instrument after a prolonged battle with a gastroenterological illness. On January 16, 2019^{iv}, the world bid farewell to a musical legend whose artistry transcended borders and whose melodies became an inseparable part of India's cultural and emotional landscape. His passing marked the end of an era, but his music continues to echo in the hearts of all who were touched by its profound beauty.

Conclusion

Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary's life and work stand as a profound testament to the enduring legacy of the Banaras Gharana and the broader traditions of Hindustani classical music. His exceptional prowess as a shehnai player earned him widespread acclaim, with his performances representing the pure essence of Hindustani classical and semi-classical music. His renditions of genres such as Thumri, Chaiti, Kazari, Holi, Dadra, and Purvi became revered for their melodic depth and emotional expressiveness, further establishing his reputation as a master of the shehnai.

Despite the immense recognition and accolades he received throughout his career, Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary remained humble and down-to-earth. He consistently expressed that he never aspired for awards or fame, emphasizing that for him, music was a form of puja (worship). In his own words, any success or recognition he received was not of his own making but the result of God's grace and the blessings of his gurus and elders. This humility, coupled with his exceptional musical achievements, made him a revered figure not only within the classical music community but also as a role model for aspiring musicians.

In conclusion, Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary's legacy is one of dedication, humility, and exceptional artistry. His contribution to Hindustani classical music, particularly in the field of shehnai, will continue to inspire generations of musicians and music lovers alike, ensuring that his influence resonates for years to come. His life reflects not just technical mastery, but also a deep spiritual connection to his craft, maintaining the true essence of Indian classical music throughout his career.

Endnotes:

ⁱ In conversation with Manjari Sinha published in The Hindu on 3 February 2017

I. ⁱⁱ "A DYING FALL: IS THE SHEHNAI ON ITS WAY OUT? WRITTEN BY SUANSHU KHURANA, PUBLISHED IN *THE INDIAN EXPRESS*, FEBRUARY 12, 2017 [HTTPS://INDIANEXPRESS.COM/ARTICLE/LIFESTYLE/ART-AND-CULTURE/A-DYING-FALL-4519457/](https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/a-dying-fall-4519457/) LAST ACCESSED ON JANUARY 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ In conversation with Manjari Sinha published in The Hindu on 3 February 2017

^{iv} Shehnai maestro Krishna Ram Chaudhury passes away at 83 in Lucknow by Shailvee Sharda, published in The Times of India, January 16, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/shehnai-maestro-krishna-ram-chaudhury-passes-away-at-83-in-lucknow/articleshow/67562249.cms> last accessed on March 2021.