

The Dagers: At Home And Abroad

by QURRATULAIN HYDER

The Dhrupad mode of singing has survived mainly because of the Dagers and their patrons, the former rulers of Udaipur, Jaipur and Indore. The late Nasir Moinuddin Khan Dagar revived it in all its pristine severity and also popularised it. His younger brother, Nasir Aminuddin, continues the tradition. He has recently returned from an extensive tour of Europe and the United States, where he sang before packed houses.

MASSIVE tanpuras are tuned; tabla drums toned up. A smiling man in an elegant kurta and shawl joins his palms and bows his head to the fascinated audience. The concert begins. The scene is repeated from Alma Ata to Edinburgh to Boston.

The phenomena would have baffled—and vastly pleased—the venerable Maulana Abdul Halim "Sharar", Urdu novelist and social historian. In 1896 the Maulana visited the Empire Exhibition at Earl's Court, London, and was distressed by what he saw. With deep anger he reported: "In the Indian Section of the Exhibition, a jet-black man dressed in a filthy *langoti* (loin-cloth) ferociously beats the tom-tom (*dhol-tasha*) and shakes his head in a frenzy. This is supposed to represent Indian or 'native' music."

RAJA CHHATRAPATI SINGHJI OF BIJNA accompanied Ustad Nasir Moinuddin on the *pakhawaj* during their trips abroad. The Raja learned *pakhawaj* from Swami Ramdas of Ayodhya. He has also played for Rahimuddin and Fahimuddin Dagar. He is the examiner for *pakhawaj* and *tabla* at Banaras Hindu University.



NASIR MOINUDDIN (d. 1966) AND **NASIR AMINUDDIN** always sang together. On their foreign tours Ustad Nasir Moinuddin Dagar's wife, Suraiya, accompanied them on the *tanpura*. The late Ustad was an outstanding exponent of *Alap*, *Dhrupad* and *Dhamar*.

Till recent times Oriental music was dismissed as exotic nasal wailing of the bazaar and the jungle. Today Indian dancers and musicians have become, like the swamis, almost a cliché of the international culture scene.

The Dagers are among the more eminent of our musicians who have been lionised in the West. In India they have suffered from neglect born of familiarity. *Dhrupad* and the Dagers have been synonymous. When *Khayal* (Persian: "idea") became popular under Mughal patronage, the Dagers are said to have been the only family to keep *Dhrupad* alive. After the Fall of Delhi, innumerable *ustads* found refuge and patronage in the princely states, where their *gharanas* flourished right down to 1947.

At Indore, during the 18th century, there flourished the *Dhrupad* singer Pandit Gopal Das Dagar. His remote ancestor, Mangal Pandey, was probably a contemporary of medieval kings.

Baba Gopal Das lived at the time of King Mohammed Shah Rangile. He became a

Muslim and was renamed Ustad Imam Khan. His son, Ustad Behram Khan, founded the musical "dynasty" of the Dagers at Udaipur and Jaipur. Their descendants became *ustads* of great repute. The last of the old masters, Ustad Nasiruddin Khan, died in 1936. Of his four sons, Ustad Nasir Moinuddin Khan achieved fame as the greatest living exponent of *Dhrupad*. *Dagarbani* is a style of *Dhrupad* singing.

Ustad Moinuddin was an unassuming and well-bred man—too modest to let people know that his name could be inscribed on the pages of musical history. His ancestors were of the stuff that legends are made of. Although he is close to us, little is known about him except to his family.

With the modesty of a true artist, Nasir Moinuddin moved on from the era of *durbars* and bejewelled patrons to the post-Independence, middle-class milieu of music conferences, state awards and foreign invitations. The new set-up also meant frequent shortage of money and lack of patronage at home, compensated by glamorous (though momentary) recognition abroad.





USTAD BEHRAM KHAN was the son of Indore Durbar's Ustad Imam Khan (formerly Pandit Gopal Das Dagar).



BANDE ALI KHAN was the nephew of Behram Khan. He was the renowned Binkar and Dhrupad singer of Kairana.



USTAD ZAKIRUDDIN KHAN was the grandson of Ustad Behram Khan. The family has produced 26 great ustad.



ALLAHBANDE KHAN (d. 1926), grandson of Behram Khan, was court musician at Awar.

As with other hereditary musicians, so for the Dagers, music was all their life. The musicians often had no formal education and, if they fell on bad times, there was nothing else they could fall back on. This is the situation in which many an ustad finds himself today.

Training began early. Their womenfolk were not allowed to sing and lived in strict purdah. Nasir Moinuddin was first taught by his famous grandfather, Allahbande Khan, then by his father. After Ustad Nasiruddin's death, Nasir Moinuddin was trained at Jaipur by his maternal uncle, Ustad Riazuddin Khan. The brothers learned the *Merukhand* pattern of *raga alap*, based on the sound technique of the veena. The guru was another uncle, the master veena player Ustad Ziauddin Khan of Udaipur.

The brothers began to sing together and attracted notice. The younger one, Nasir Aminuddin Khan, hero-worshipped his brother Moinuddin who, during his short life, was to become one of the greatest singers of modern India.

The hangover of the Raj continues. We require our artistes to display certificates given by the Sahibs before we recognise their merit. We continue to quote Goethe on "Shakuntala" and Yehudi Menuhin on Indian music. HMV did not record Nasir Moinuddin

till he returned from Paris, where he had been recorded by UNESCO.

Jacques Longchamp wrote in *Le Monde*: "The voice of Nasir Moinuddin gave at times the impression that one was listening to distant echoes of the Gregorian plainsong and of a certain kind of reading of the Scriptures during the Holy Week." According to other European newspapers, "a more aristocratic and proud art than the singing of the Dagers was hard to imagine." "The precisely proportionated melodies... the musical filigree work... the meditative attitude reminding one of the cultic rituals... the deep emotional submersion... the fascinating volubility and agility, the astonishing versatility, the ornamental efflorescence, the individualistic lyricism..." etc., etc. All this would be overwhelming enough for any native P.R.O. or copy-writer.

Moinuddin Dagar had arrived. From ustad he became a *maestro*.

HMV asked him to record a disc for them. The Ustad refused. "Has my status improved now that I have had a triumphant tour abroad?" he asked. He was a mild, good-natured, gentle sort of man. But he also had a temper. He was humble but it was not the cultivated humility of the celebrated. However, shortly before he died in 1966, his wife Suraiya Begum persuaded him to make a few records.

In 1964 the Dagers were invited by the Institute of Comparative Music, Rome. They toured Europe and gave lecture demonstrations. A two-and-a-half hour film was made by the Filmothèque Française and released by the research organisation of French TV for musicologists, musicians and teachers.

During the shooting of the film, Nasiruddin had a paralytic stroke. A few days later he was to sing at a festival organised by UNESCO. He was the first Indian artiste to have been so invited. Against doctor's orders he sang at the concert—"in order to uphold India's prestige", he said. He had tremendous will-power.

Nasir Moinuddin was a diabetic. At Rome the International Institute of Comparative Music offered him free medical treatment, a job and a house. He refused the offer. "We are the only Dhrupad family in India. How would my students travel all the way to Europe to learn from me? Besides, I would rather starve at home than become affluent here," he replied.

Noble, patriotic sentiments! So, on May 24, 1966, when he died in Bombay at the age of 46, he left very little money for his family.

His Achievements

During his 46 years, Nasir Moinuddin had revived and popularised the lost art of Dhrupad. He opened a few schools, composed music for a number of ballets, worked as principal of a music college at Banaras and taught at the college of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi.

During their tours of Russia, Japan and Europe, the Dagers were accompanied on the pakhawaj by Raja Chhatrapati Singhji, a former ruling prince of Bijna, Bundelkhand (UP). Which was another thing that would have intrigued the social historian, Maulana Abdul Halim "Sharar"! Princes have proudly become pakhawajis. But then the Maulana would have understood: he had belonged to Wajid Ali Shah's Lucknow!

Moinuddin's devoted younger brother, Nasir Aminuddin, now sings alone. He recently toured Europe and the USA. As usual he was accompanied on the pakhawaj by the Raja. Nasir Aminuddin keeps indifferent health but continues to work hard, singing and teaching at the school for Dhrupad he runs in Calcutta.



NASIRUDDIN KHAN (d. 1936), son of Allahbande Khan. Moinuddin and Aminuddin are his sons.



ZIAUDDIN KHAN is the son of Zakiruddin Khan. He taught the younger Dagers. His son, Zia Moinuddin Dagar, is a famous Binkar.



RIAZUDDIN KHAN was the maternal uncle of the younger Dagers. On the maternal side the Dagers are related to the Gwalior Gharana.