

“ Kya daal banti thi...” Ustad Asad Ali Khan



Ustad Asad Ali Khan

The inward, brooding notes of the **rudra veena** on raag Gaud Sarang resonate in 97 Asiad Village, Delhi. A thin, small-framed man sits on his knees with a gigantic veena “riding on the body” and moves his hands over 24 wooden frets to put forth a winding melodic structure. The piece moves in a number of directions while leaning on the resting notes— pancham and gandhar at regular intervals. With sweat dripping down his face and neck, he shuts his eyes, and touches a combination of notes in his trademark **beenkari** style, which surprisingly invokes hope. Strange for a raga that is known to be serious. More so, strange for a raga being played on an instrument such as the rudra veena, known for its contemplative mood. The musician merges everything together and the result is a hypnotic drone, and then he does that one thing, which musicians strive to achieve their entire life—He makes the raga stand in front of you; as if it was a person. “This is the effect of pure music,” says a choked **Asad Ali Khan**, as he puts down the veena, and looks away from the camera in *Renuka George’s documentary, Asad Ali Khan – A Portrait*, which was screened at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi on 26 Friday 2014.

Tears never roll down Khan’s eyes, but it isn’t hard to see through his soul in that moment, where years of learning merge into minutes of Gaud Sarang. George’s documentary is a fascinating peep into the world of rudra veena and Khan, whose life was never documented until George decided to tell this legendary musician’s story. “I always wanted to know what goes on behind the scenes: What runs through an artiste’s mind before he performs, that dedication to one’s art form and the journey to the stage fascinated me. In Khan sahab’s case, the lack of any document on him further determined me. His dedication to a difficult art form was extremely moving,” says George, who was funded by Edward and Benjamin **de Rothschild Foundation** and the LODH Bank to create this film.

A graduate from London School of Economics, George spent her childhood all over the world, before spending almost 25 years in France, a country where dhrupad found a lot of attention. She met Khan through Dagar Brothers, names synonymous with *dhrupad*. Dhrupad is also a genre that is played on the rudra veena and originated from the Vedas. The film’s narrative begins in Alwar where Khan goes back to his ancestral house, talks about his childhood, one of the oldest Indian instruments, learning from his exacting

father *Sadiq Ali Khan*, a court musician. “*Earlier people played for one Nawab. Aaj kal toh sabhi Nawab hain,*” says *Khan*, laughing in the film .

With its complex grammar and aesthetics, it is primarily a form of worship. “You have to live the life of an ascetic to master an art form as pure as this,” explains *Khan* in the film. He never married and *passed away in 2011*, exactly a year after *George* shot the film .

George also wants to work on other projects, one of them being a film on **TM Krishna** (also a Professor of Music at DU) but is bogged down by lack of funds .

A beautiful scene from the film comes after a private concert by *Khan* in his house. *Ustad Fahimuddin Dagar*, vocalist (DU's) **LK Pandit** and *Khan* are seen discussing the **friendship** their fathers and grandfathers shared, and how they were lucky to be born in the times of such legends. “**Kya daal banti thi inke ghar,**” says *Khan* looking at *Pandit* at which the three laugh out loudly with real smiles which fade into the melodies of the *rudra veena* .

1937 – born *Asad's* family roots in music are traced to seven generations into the 18th century when his ancestors were royal musicians in the court of Jaipur. His great grandfather the great *Ustad Rajab Ali Khan* and his grandfather *Ustad Musharraf Khan* were renowned been players in the court of Alwar. his father shifted to the court at Rampur.

His son *Zaki Haider* is assiduously mastering the instrument and hopes to carry on the tradition .

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Asadbhai passed away 14.03.2011 and his Music lives on .