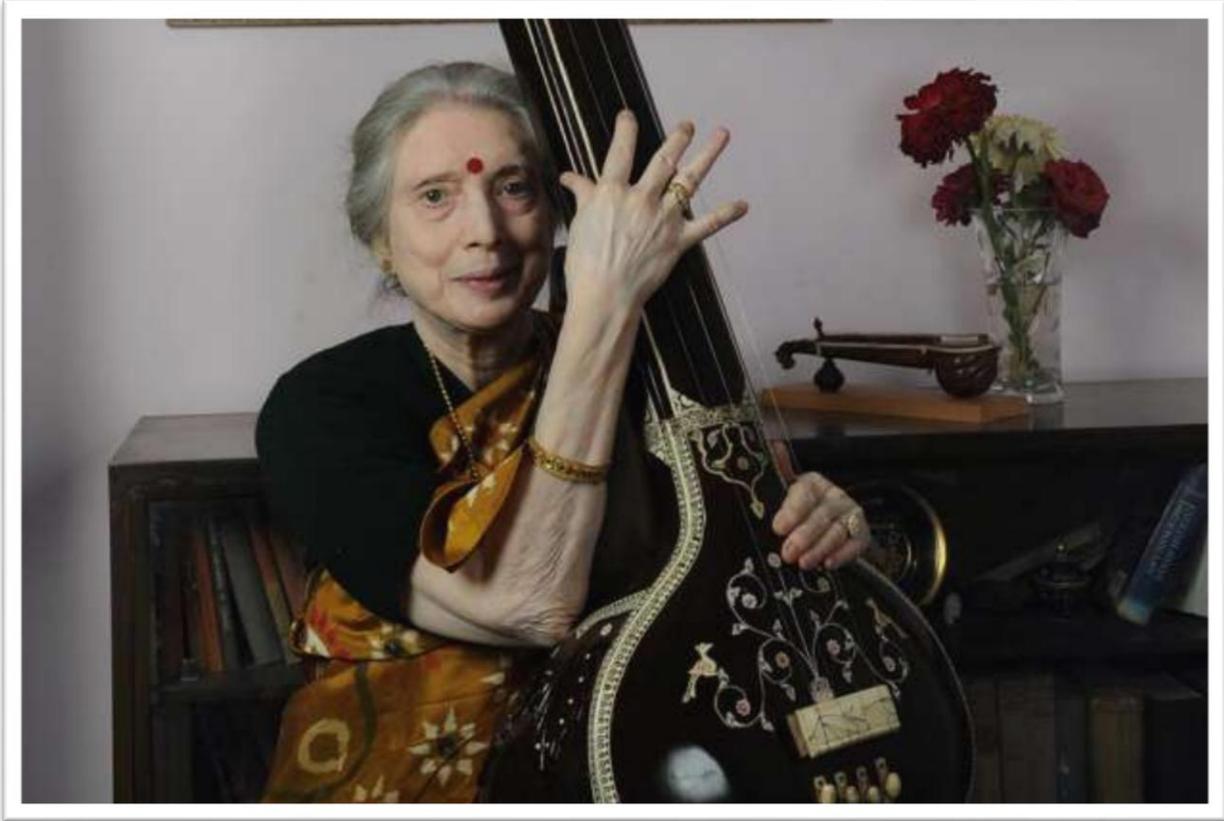


In Raag Dehlavi

The Dilli gharana of *Tanras* and Chand Khan has a gentle prima donna,

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Photograph by Jitender Gupta

Professor of Music DU 1965 – 2008 *alpix* 0755
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MAUSIQI MANZIL

The alleyways were too narrow for even a rickshaw to enter; so the two girls would walk down to **Mausiqi Manzil**, their master's Mughal-vintage haveli, a particularly storied one among the many in **Delhi-6**. Animated by the genteel spirit of Ustad Chand Khan (1899-1980), the paterfamilias of Dilli gharana, it was a hub of soirees back in the day. Ustads of all timbres would drop in, from **Bade Ghulam Ali Khan**, Amjad Ali Khan's father **Hafiz Ali** and Amir Khan. So would *Begum Akhtar*, **Siddheshwari Devi** and a certain **KL Saigal**, as transiting disciples.

The young Chakravarty sisters—from a Bengali family that had migrated to Delhi at the turn of the century—didn't have to cover much of a physical distance from their house in the new city to this jumble of civilisational shards nestled in the banyan-like shade of Jama Masjid. But their sorties to the Walled City in the early 1960s were to make a different kind of inflection in the journey of Hindustani music. Specifically, in the 'gender' of music.

Krishna's biggest challenge was to adapt the gharana's essence to her female voice. There was no model; its repertoire was oriented towards a male voice.

Of the two siblings, the younger went on to be an illustrious legatee of a school with a long footprint in history—but there’s more to it than that. Gharana lore traces the lineage back to vocalist brothers Hassan Sawant and Bula Kalawant, contemporaries of **mystic Sufi poet Amir Khusro (1253-1325)**. The more recent, less hazy lines on the family tree go back to exponents from the early 19th century—Miyān Achpal and his iconic disciple Tanras Khan (so named by the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar), the key personages around whom the gharana coalesced. For generations thereafter, through all the disruptions it faced, khayal gayaki was a male bastion in Dilli gharana. The privilege of being the first-ever female khayal vocalist of the Delhi family falls on Dr Krishna Bisht who, at 74, wears it with all the grace befitting her music.

AT ALL INDIA RADIO

Krishna was only six when she first met the maestro who was to become her guru a decade later. Chand Khan had come to All India Radio for a recording when her father, Manik Chakravarty, a master of the mridangam-like khol, ran into him in a corridor. With Manik were his daughters Bharati and Krishna—they’d just performed at a children’s programme in the studio. “It was peak winter, and he was a diminutive man, all draped in woollens,” Krishna recalls. “My father introduced us to him and Khan saheb joked: ‘I’ll put your kids in each of my pockets’.”

That proved to be a metaphor. By their teens, they were disciples of this pivotal figure who **re-established khayal singing in the Delhi style** after a slide the gharana faced post-1857, when the anti-British rebellion upcountry led to its dismemberment. Banishment awaited its practitioners in those years. As Zafar was exiled to Burma, Chand Khan’s grandfather Abdul Ghani (1825-1909), related by marriage to the Achpal line, spent time in Ballabgarh (in present-day Haryana), where his forebears were court musicians.

Ghani eventually returned to Delhi, but not as a singer. This part of the story has a bearing on why the Dilli gharana stumbles along as a ‘minor’, near-unknown constellation among its more luminous

counterparts in khayal. At the crucial transition time when the recording industry was reinforcing the pantheon of gharana greats from all over, the **musical progeny of Tanras** were keeping a medieval-style vow: they would not sing! Apparently, slighted as a sarangi player while at Ballabgarh, Ghani focused maniacally on the instrument, elevating it to a status it never enjoyed in classical circuits. On the flip side, while adept at vocals, he came to be ridiculed as ‘Sarangi Khan’. Ghani’s son Ghulam Mohammed, popular as Mamman Khan (1860-1940), carried on with the bowed instrument. That wasn’t to be the case with his eldest son Chand—**Safiqul Rahman Khan** was called so due to his birth on the first lunar night of the auspicious Moharram Sharif. He was drawn more towards the resonance of the human voice. “He put Dilli gharana again on the map,” says Krishna, touching her earlobes in customary reverence. “He was one of those rare ustads who trained talents outside the family.” This, while losing relatives to Pakistan during Partition. (For instance, Mamman’s famous sarangiya son-in-law Bundu Khan, who died in Karachi in 1955, his son Umrao Khan and Chand Khan’s younger brother Jahan Khan.)

DOORDARSHAN 1959

SAPRU HOUSE 1962

A wave of poignancy washes over Krishna as she narrates how fate checked her sister, who passed away in 2009, from rising to her full potential. Krishna herself gave her first public concert at Delhi’s **Sapru House** in 1962, but Bharati suffered a heart problem just as the duo was gaining fame as the Chakravarty sisters in the 1960s and ’70s (after they sang live in 1959 at Doordarshan’s inauguration). The elder sibling did recover and make a comeback but, by then, Krishna had already made a name as a soloist.

KRISHNA ’n RAVINDRA 1970

With good reason. “Her taans bore a kaleidoscopic quality typical of Dilli gharana. It lent her immense respectability,” says **Ravindra Singh Bisht, Krishna’s husband**, who **taught English at DU**. A musician himself, he had learnt under Ustad

Amir Khan. “We married in 1970. My sister fixed the alliance,” adds Krishna.

While finding space as a soloist, Krishna encountered her biggest challenge: adapting the gharana’s essence to her female voice. There was no model, no precedence—all its repertoire was oriented towards a default male voice. “It posed a daunting task to sing with my natural mellowness and still sound Dilli gharana. The female voice is associated with madhurya (sweetness), while ojas (power) is the conventional attribute to males,” says Krishna, who simultaneously earned a **PhD from DU**, where she was groomed by Sanskrit scholar/dhrupadiya Chandra Shekhar Pant and **RL Roy, a direct disciple of Bhatkande**, the first modern theorist of Hindustani. Now, having retired from DU in 2008 after 43 years of service, she and her husband live a quiet life, sparring good-humouredly with each other and fussing over guests.

The flourishes of Dilli gharana—with 50-odd types of taans—have typically been subtle. The qualities of *lachaav* (flexibility) and *ghulaav* (spreading, dissolving) are oft-cited as key features, says Krishna, who has authored two books on music. “The notes shouldn’t sound staccato.” Indeed, scholar Chetan Karnani has spoken of Krishna’s “**scintillating taans** that are as impressive as her staid alaap”. Particularly difficult, she adds with a smile, because females are conventionally expected not to make wild physical movements or contorted faces. On this, she refers to Chand Khan’s sitting posture, steeped in stillness even while negotiating the toughest of passages. “The generations after him seemed to slowly lose that quality.”

INITIATION INTO THE DILLI GHARANA

Chand Khan tested the ‘seriousness’ of the sisters by delaying for two years the gandabandhi (thread-tying) ceremony that marks adoption into a

gharana. “Khan saheb would sometimes call us on summer afternoons to practise.... He’d make us repeat passages a hundred times for a wrong note,” Krishna reminisces. “A whole year would be spent training just one raga. In his first-floor room, we used to be taught under a DC fan that rotated in slow motion! Sometimes when we replicated a pause, Khan saheb’s wife (Ramzano Begum), would **lower a one-rupee note tied to a saree down the railings**. The spirit was that of a mehfil. My guru too would jot his appreciation, in beautifully scripted Urdu, on notes he’d gift us.” The tutelage lasted two gruelling decades.

Dilli gharana’s current khalifa (head), **Iqbal Ahmed Khan**, talks of Krishna as a “samundar (ocean)” of music. “I used to sit with her as a boy when she took classes under my grandfather. Her three-octave taans used to bowl me over,” says the sexagenarian, whose daughter Vusat Khan is a Dastangoi practitioner. Krishna’s disciple Mallika Banerjee talks of her guru’s compositions and how they encapsulate the gharana philosophy. “Just sample her bandishes in Abhogi, Chandrakauns, Lalit, Madhumad Sarang or the rarer Nat Malhar, Shobhawari or Bhairav Bahar. They are subdued, sublime.” Banerjee, who teaches in IGNOU, says Krishna’s taans stands on par with Chand Khan’s famed nephew Naseer Ahmed, who died three decades ago at age 56. The gharana places fresh hopes on Naseer’s young grandson Fareed Hasan. Naseer’s sons Tanveer and Imran Ahmed too perform together.

Guruvayur T.V. Manikantan, who teaches Carnatic at DU, offers a parallel line of praise: “Krishnaji is adept in both theory and practice, a rarity. It’s admirable she represents a gharana even after having taught in a public institution, where a mixing of styles is natural.” Krishna smiles at the comment. “My music was already fully baked before DU. It’s Khan saheb who first taught me how to hold sur. Its effect won’t vanish!”

We recall with heartwarming pleasure the immense grace, commitment, professional integrity, sublime artistry and humility the Krishna’n Ravindra creative – academic duo have brought to huge and expansive halls, assemblies, corridors and lawns of The University of Delhi from the 1960s ...