

## 'Being accepted as a disciple by Gangubai was an achievement for me'

Editor-in-Chief **VINAYAK NAIK** talks to the multi-faceted artiste Shakuntala Bharne



Pic: Govind S Poteker

Noted vocalist Shakuntala Bharne has just come up with her maiden album of songs. Available in the form of a CD, the album incorporates a fascinating collection of ten Konkani super songs soul-stirringly sung by her. Small wonder, it is proving to be a big draw among the musicophiles in Goa.

Richly talented, Shakuntala, hailing from Comba, in Margao, is a protégée of the virtuoso singer, Gangubai Hangal, who passed away recently.

Shakuntala cottoned to music when she was a mere eight-year old child, and has been at it, ever since. Such is her penchant for music that one could befittingly describe her as a person eating, drinking and sleeping music.

Of late, her popularity as a songstress has shown a discernible rise, invited as she is to perform at different places in and out of Goa, and quite frequently too.

The major music programmes at which Shakuntala has performed to date include Surashree Kesarbai Kerkar Smriti Sangeet Sammelan, Samrat Sangeet Sammelan, Girijatai Kelekar Sangeet Sammelan, Sawai Gandharwa Sangeet Sammelan, not to forget, Miraj's Abdul Karim Khan Sammelan.

After the passing away of Gangubai Hangal, Shakuntala has been increasingly in demand, especially in Karnataka, with the lovers of Hindustani Classical Vocal Music wanting to see her continue with the Gangubai Hangal tradition.

Professionally, an All India Radio announcer in Panaji over the last 18 years, Shakuntala, through her matchless radio-jockeying, has carved a niche for herself in the heart of every FM radio listener.

Also into writing, the versatile Shakuntala has written two magnificent books on Hindustani Classical Music – *Swaranand* and *Nadbrahm*, and one more is *en route*. As a compere too she has won her spurs, as she is rated among the best such artistes in business.

Shakuntala admits to being no match for her guru, the phenomenal Gangubai Hangal. Nevertheless, she is determined to keep the Gangubai's singing legacy alive as long as she lives. Despite obtaining an M Phil in Music, she says whatever she has learnt by way of formal education pales into insignificance when compared to the knowledge of music she soaked up in the guru-shishya-parampara from the legendary Gangubai.

Shakuntala Bharne, née Arsekar, spoke to Editor-in-Chief **VINAYAK NAIK** at the *Goa Today* office a few days after the launch of her music album. Excerpts from the interview:

● After lying low for a while, you seem to have come into your own as a singer at long last. Your popularity index has certainly shot up going by the growing number of your vocal recitals these days.

▲ Thanks for the compliment. I don't know as to how popular I am, but it's true that I am now getting invited to perform a lot more than before. The other day I performed at Hubli. Today, I am just back after performing at Kozhikode and I am due to perform at a few places in Goa as well as outside Goa in the immediate future.

● How did it begin – I mean your journey in the field of singing?

▲ Actually, I have been fond of singing right from my childhood. In fact, I liked to sing so much that I would roll up a calendar and sing using it as a mike when I was small. I started winning the first prize in singing, debating, speech-making etc when I was just an eight-year-old schoolgirl.

● Did you get yourself enrolled at any music school to obtain a formal training in singing?

▲ Yes, I did. I joined a group called *Swaramanch* in Margao, where so many of us – children- were given training in vocal music.

● Who was your vocal music trainer over there?

▲ My first trainer was Ramrao Naik. I owe my success to him quite a bit because it was he who guided me on the basics of classical singing.

● Would you call Ramrao Naik your first *guru* then?

▲ Why not? He was my first *guru*. There is no doubt about it.

● How did you hone up your crooning skills further?

▲ It was fun to be at *Swaramanch*. But I could not get there the type of training in vocal music that is required to become a professional singer. So, I began my



Shakuntala with her *Guru*, Gangubai

search for a *guru* who would accept me as a disciple in the *guru-shishya parampara*.

● And your search was over when you got a *guru* – perhaps the finest of them all – in the form of Gangubai Hangal, right?

▲ Absolutely. Actually, I was doing my second year of *Sangeet Alankar*, which is equivalent to part two of MA in Music, when I got Gangubai's call. It was a dream come true. She had accepted me

as her disciple. I was so delighted that I lost no time in making a dash to her place in Hubli for studying Vocal Music in the traditional way – via the *guru-shishya parampara*.

I was working at Manovikas at that time. In fact, I worked there for two years. But giving up that job didn't mean anything to me, because I was getting the chance of learning music from a person whom I revered. It was a great thing for me to have been accepted by her as her disciple.



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Gangubai receiving the *gurudakshina* from her disciple Shakutala on the occasion of Guru Pornima

● **Your acceptance as a disciple by Gangubai was in itself an achievement for you, to my mind.**

▲ Of course, it was. Being accepted as a disciple by Gangubai was an achievement for me.

● **Yes, I am aware of your closeness to the recently departed classical music virtuoso, Gangubai. For how many years did you avail of the expert tutelage from her?**

▲ I stayed with Gangubai for about four years. When I started my stint as a disciple of Gangubai, I realised how different that training was. It was very different from what I had learnt as a student of Sangeet Alankar.

● **Tell me, what were you actually called upon to do as a disciple of Gangubai?**

▲ It was a great learning experience. The *guru-shishya parampara* is a very demanding type of training. You have got to be with your *guru* for anything between ten to twelve hours a day for learning the finer points of music - the *soor*, the *taal*, the *raag* etc.

● **But what about your accommodation in Hubli?**

▲ Actually, I am indebted to the late

Chandrakant*bab* for having made the arrangement for my accommodation very close to Gangubai's residence in Hubli. Of course, I would spend most of the day at my guru's (Gangubai's) place, but would go to my accommodation for the purpose of lunching, dining and sleeping only.

● **Talking about that legend, who passed away barely a couple of months ago, could you share with me some of your happy memories of Gangubai?**

▲ Of course, I have lots of happy memories of my stay with her. We were a group of five disciples at that time. But Gangubai was very fond of me, so much so that she would even talk to me about her experiences with other classical singing legends like Begum Akhtar, Kumar Gandharv, Fayyaz Khan and others. In fact, I have so much to write about all that I experienced by staying with Gangubai that one day I propose to come up with a book on it. Gangubai was like a mother to me. Really, she treated me with motherly affection.

● **What *gharana* did Gangaubai belong to?**

▲ She belonged to the famous *Kinara gharana*.

● **After winding up your stay in Hubli**

**you returned to Goa to take up a job with AIR. Did your interaction with Gangubai continue thereafter?**

▲ Of course, I was in touch with her till her death. In fact, I would visit her every year on the Guru Pornima day to pay my ritualistic obeisance to her. Whenever I could not make it to her place on the Guru Pornima day, I would go a little later, say after fifteen days or so, but I would never miss my Guru Pornima ritual with her at her place.

Only this year, I missed it. Actually, I wanted to go to her that day, but someone told me that she was in coma. Later, I learnt that she was discharged that very day and was not in coma as I was wrongly informed. I also learnt later that she was actually waiting for me to come there on the Guru Pornima Day. She knew it was going to be her last Guru Pornima.

● **She died this year, within a few days of Guru Pornima, right?**

▲ Right, she died on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July. Her death made me extremely sad because of the special relationship I had enjoyed with her. I stood out for almost an hour not able to summon enough courage to enter the hall where her body was lying in state in Hubli. Even today, tears well up in my eyes when I think of her death. The Karnataka government observed a three-day mourning for Gangubai. That will make it clear to you as to what she meant to the state of Karnataka.

● **Now, let's change track and move on to the CD you came up with the other day. Tell me, in brief, what that CD is all about.**

▲ It's a collection of songs, all sung by me. There is a lot of variety in those songs. They are compositions from poets like Uday Bhemre, Manohar Rai Sardesai, Bakibab Borkar, Purushottam Singbal, Ramesh Veluskar, Madhav Borkar. The CD includes one composition by me - *Oxech Asle Dolle*. I have included some of the hit songs in Konkani in that CD. I have chosen the songs in such a way that both Hindus

as well as Catholics of Goa would find them enjoyable. I have also done a bit of experimentation. I am happy with the response I am getting for that CD. Those who have listened to it so far have got back to me saying that they have really enjoyed listening to that CD.

I must give a lot of credit to Udaybab for having given me some extremely valuable suggestions whilst it was being made.

● **Besides showing your dexterity as a singer, today you are regarded as a master hand at 'compering'. How did you develop that talent?**

▲ It's all natural. I have not taken special pains to develop my skill as a compere. I am glad people like my compering. But, to be frank, it doesn't give me the type of satisfaction I get when I give a vocal recital. Becoming a great compere is not my goal. My goal is to get recognised as a good, if not a great, singer.

● **Your versatility goes well beyond singing and compering. I am aware of the big name and fame you have acquired through your spell-binding radio jockeying. Tell me something about that.**

▲ Yes, that role gives me a great deal of satisfaction. I am able to make a direct contact with people from all parts of Goa. I must thank *Akashwani* for giving me this opportunity.

I enjoy having a heart to heart talk with my listeners. They have been showing so much happiness at the way with the way I conduct the Rainbow FM show of AIR that I get flooded with appreciative calls and letters from them.

I have always loved the radio. As a child, I used to participate in kids' programmes at AIR. Later, I started participating in the youth programmes. I even worked as a casual artiste. And now, for the last 18 years I am working in *Akashwani* as an announcer and enjoying every moment of my stay with that establishment.

● **Don't you think if you were to concentrate fully on music - meaning, if you were not to be distracted on account of your commitments with AIR, you would have scaled greater heights of glory as a singer?**

▲ I don't look at it that way. In fact, I think my work with AIR has proved to be beneficial in my evolution as a singer, as a compere, as a music critic and in so many other ways. *Akashwani* has given me a firm base. Not only to me, but it has done it to so many other stalwarts as well in the past. Ramnarayan, Jitendra Abhisheki, Vasantrao Deshpande, Bakibab Borkar, Uday Bhembre - all these greats had a start with AIR. So, I am proud to be associated with AIR. I have never regretted my decision to work for AIR.

● **One thing that escaped being asked earlier is about your special relationship with Kishoritayi Amonkar. Could you say something on that?**

▲ I have known *Tayi* for the past so many years. But we really came close in 2009 when the Konkani Sangeet Sammelan was held in Margao. As a member of the organising committee of that Sammelan, I had insisted on getting *Tayi* to perform at this event. From that time, our relationship thickened. I am like a daughter to her. People ask me as to why I am always seen with *Tayi*

because as far as music is concerned, we don't belong to the same *gharana*. While *Tayi's* classic singing belongs to the Jaipur *gharana*, mine is of the Kirana *gharana* since I am a disciple of Gangubai. So, I have to explain to them about my special relationship with *Tayi*, which is at the emotional level and having very little to do at the professional level.

● **You have also been into writing. Could you adumbrate on the music books you have written so far?**

▲ I have two books of Music. My first book was *Swaranand*. It was published in 1995. It is an introductory book to Hindustani Classical Music. My second book was published three years ago. It is titled *Nadbrahm*. It contains an encapsulation of the Indian Classical Music.

● **Are you working on any book presently?**

▲ Yes, I am writing a biography of Pandit Prabhakar Karekar. I have almost completed it.

● **Finally, what is your blueprint for future?**

▲ I have not made a blueprint as such. I would like to continue doing the things I enjoy doing. I know you can't compare me with Gangubai at present, but I would surely like to be remembered as her worthy disciple.



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