



'He always felt he was not given his due'

My association with Ustad Vilayat Khan *saheb* is 60 years old. I first met him in 1943 and he was kind enough to accept me as his student.

I had actually come to Bombay from Ahmedabad to audition for All India Radio since I had learnt the sitar for a couple of years. It was sheer chance that, as I got off the train, I bumped into a friend who told me Ustad Vilayat Khan was coming to his house. I was a great admirer of Khan *saheb* and told my friend I would love to meet him.

When Khan *saheb* heard I was going to audition for the radio in a few hours, he asked me to play for him. He knew I was going to fail because I was just no good. But he still taught me a few compositions. He even phoned the radio station and told them, 'I am sending one of my students. Look after him.'

If I had any kind of merit, I should have passed. But I had absolutely no merit whatsoever.

Yet, as far as I was concerned, the trip to Bombay was fruitful. Khan *saheb* had accepted me as his student. He said, '*Ab hamare college mein admission mil gaya hai, tum yahan aao* [You've been admitted to my college, so shift your education to Bombay].' I was studying in Ahmedabad then and I moved to Bombay's Elphinstone College.

Since we were both fairly young then -- around 17 or 18 years old -- our

relationship had several dimensions. There was the *guru-shishya* relationship; he was my teacher and I was his student. We were also friends; we enjoyed going out together. I also acted as his secretary -- I organised his concerts, helped him take care of his finances...

Though he was facing a lot of financial difficulty, he was very innocent when it came to money matters. Khan *saheb* was just 10 or 11 years old when his father passed away in 1938. The responsibility of his family -- his mother and his younger brother, Imrat Khan, was on him; his three sisters were already married -- when he came to Bombay in 1943.

He was struggling to make it as a musician. Life was not easy for him. But he was ambitious and had unbelievable determination. He would never compromise. His determination was the key to his success.

He was not a public relations man, so I took on the task of cultivating concert organisers and getting him programmes. I would fix a concert for Rs 500 and lie to him saying he was to be paid only Rs 350. I would save the rest of the money for him. What I did not realise then was that he knew I was doing this.

One day, he asked me, '*Arindbhai, kitna paisa jamaya hai tumne* [How much money have you collected]?' I was surprised and asked him, '*Aapko kaise pata* [How do you know]?' He just laughed. I had collected Rs 5,000 by then. He said he wanted the money. The wife of a Hindu musician, a harmonium player, was about to deliver a baby and if she was not hospitalised and looked after properly, there were chances both she and the baby would die. 'He needs the money more than I do,' Khan *saheb* told me and gave him that Rs 5,000.

You don't forget something like that. It was these qualities of Khan *saheb* that made me a better human being.

But he worried about money. He used to always tell me, '*Dekho, Arvind, main tumhe music sikhata hoon, tum mujhe business sikhao* [Look, Arvind, I'll teach you music; you teach me business].'

By this time, we shared a good relationship and would spend three to four days in a week together. We used to go out to films; we would go out on drives. We'd do all kinds of things as long as it suited my conservative nature.

Let me give you an example. Sitara Devi, the famous dancer, had arranged

Khan *saheb*'s programme at her house. It was only after we went there that we realised some of her guests were from the film industry. He knew I was not a big fan of the film industry. After a while he said, 'Arvind**hai**, this atmosphere is not right for you. Wear your chappals and go.' 'Khan *saheb*, the programme...?' I asked. 'Forget about the programme,' he said. 'I am a professional and I have to earn money so I am going to play. I don't want you to get involved in all this. Go.'

He, on the other hand, loved the glamour of the film world. He enjoyed meeting actors and actresses. Many great actors were fans of his music. He used to attend many film world parties. Motilal was a great friend of his. Dilip Kumar knew him well. Nargis was his student for many years.

Khan *saheb* loved socialising. He enjoyed going to clubs. He enjoyed drinking. He was fond of cars, good clothes and perfumes. He was a very fine ballroom dancer. He was a fine billiards player. He was very good at snooker. He loved horse riding. Whatever he did, he did it well. He would go deeper and deeper into any subject he was interested in. He was a very meticulous and thorough man. He never compromised and never did anything haphazardly.

He was always a leader. Even at social gatherings and meetings, he would talk and everyone would listen. He was a great showman. He was very witty and enjoyed playing jokes on people. But the jokes were never harmful. He never liked to hurt people.

He never forgot those who helped him either. He would always talk about one Mushtaq**hai** in Delhi, whom he had met when he was around 14 years old. 'Arvind**hai**,' he would say with tears in his eyes, 'that man taught me how to behave in society. That man taught me how to wear good clothes.' Once, he even showed me the barracks where they lived.

I don't think he was disappointed in his students. He had many talented students and their devotion and respect made him happy. He was very happy that both his sons were doing well and had made a good name for themselves.

He was aware of his weaknesses. One day, I remember asking him if it was necessary to smoke. That was when told me how he began smoking. His teacher Kalu Mian would promise him one bidi if he practised for one hour. '*Us bidi ki laalach mein main riyaaaz karta tha* [I used to practise so I get my hands on that bidi].' So I asked him, 'Khan *saheb*, is it necessary to smoke to practise?' '*Khabardaar* [I'm warning you],' he said, 'cigarette

ko haath lagaya tho... [if you touch cigarettes...]. It's a very bad habit. I know, I have been smoking from childhood. If you ever smoke a cigarette, I shall be very annoyed with you.'

At the same time, he was a man of strong opinions. It was not easy to change his mind. I think that was because he was very intelligent. He did not read a lot, but he knew exactly what was going on.

His level of expectation from the world at large was very high. He always felt he was not given his due recognition; he would say, '*Is desh mein meri koi kadar nahi ho rahi* [this country does not value me]. *Kya ho raha hai mere liye yahan* [What is being done for me here]?''

He was not media savvy, so there was very little publicity about him in the newspapers. He did not go out of his way to cultivate the market place. But he did feel very strongly that he was not given his due. I believe the more intellectual a person is, the higher is his level of expectation. It starts with disappointment and then becomes frustration and then ultimately it becomes...I would not say bitterness. He was bitter around 10 years ago. In the last few years, he had mellowed down but the level of frustration was there.

There were influential people in America who were great followers and devotees of Khan *saheb*. They offered his entire family a green card. All kinds of facilities were given to him. He got good concerts there. His style of living was good. He would stay there for six months and come to India for six months.

Just three months ago he told me, 'Arvind**bhai**, I have a great social life there (*in America*). I have a lot of friends. People come and go all the time. But, musically, I am feeling lonely. I am coming back.' He wanted to return to the world he belonged to, where music and discussions about music are a way of life. This was going to be his last year in America. He would have come back here.

Arvind Parikh, businessman and musician, spoke to Savera R Someshwar