

Nilaksha Gupta's Calcutta Telegraph article

What was the unique nature of his music and why is there no one else today to replace him? Nilaksha Gupta explains

When a great artiste dies it is customary to say that his death leaves a void that 'cannot be filled.' This is, I suppose, absolutely true in the case of the great sitar player, Nikhil Banerjee, who left music lovers distraught on January 27 last. It is also customary not to say why there is a void, what the nature of this void is and why it 'cannot be filled.' However, this time we shall try to do exactly this and not bother whether this rubs a couple of king-size egos the wrong way.

The main thing about Nikhil Banerjee is that he evolved the most complete and most satisfying sitar style within living memory. This is something most people realise but will not admit. It is normally found enough to say that Nikhil Banerjee's main achievement was that he was able to create a third style in an atmosphere in which the magnificent styles of his two seniors, Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar were ruling the roost. This is an understatement and an underestimation. But it is something one can say without attracting the wrath Vilayat Khan, who I am told, has a photograph showing Nikhil Banerjee sitting at his feet with Vilayat's right palm on his head in a sort of gesture of blessing and Ravi Shankar, who after Nikhil's death included him in his list of disciples (Bartaman, Feb. 6, 1986, page 8).

That he created a third style is definitely a fact. It would be a fitting achievement for a sitar player of a very high order. But Nikhil Banerjee was a sitar player of much greater significance than this. Unless we assess his style and compare it with his peers we can hardly make a proper estimation of his worth as a classical musician.

Nikhil Banerjee, as in the case of certain great poets and authors, had a genius that was accompanied by great critical intelligence. His final style bore ample evidence of this. With his thorough and solid training in finger-technique under his father and advanced training under Ustad Allauddin Khan, he could through his critical intelligence select technical knowhow from Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar's styles, blend it with the Amir Khan approach to note-progression and phrase development and cement it together with his personal and serious philosophy of music into a style which was the most complete within living memory.

That, I suppose, is a rather complex statement and requires clarification

and elaboration. The Vilayat Khan style is advanced finger technique oriented. Very advanced meends (several notes deflected off a single plectrum or mizrab stroke by means of a controlled lateral left finger pull), tans (quick note movements), gamaks (quick two or three-note deflections repeated in rapid stages), murkis (quick, deflected ornamentations), sooths (rapid slides up and down the fretboard) all similarly advanced and clear four-stroke jhalas at fast pace with numerous variation from the backbone of this style. This in turn has its moorings in very scientific methods of

(the aristocratic sarod player) once told me, there was nothing more to be technically done on the sitar after the emergence and ripening of Vilayat Khan. He was talking about this when many of us were very enthusiastic about a young sitar player playing tappas. "This chap is supposed to be the first to play tappas on the sitar", Radhikamohan had said, "but he plays the zamzamas as ekhara tans. The zamzamas, to sound like zamzamas proper, have to be deflected like gamaks: Vilayat long ago perfected this and has now got fed up with it and given it up."



With Pandit Samta Prasad during a recital

sitting and holding the sitar.

Having been taught perfect technique by his father, Inayat Khan, who died before Vilayat entered his teens, Vilayat Khan took the sitar playing technique to unsurpassed heights. He incorporated meends and gamaks into long tans which as a result became very similar to those used in khayal singing. With his superior technique he can inject subtle vocal nuances and timbre into slower note movements. Along with this, came as conscious and deliberate imitation of khayal texture and material on the sitar.

As the late Radhikamohan Maitra

Then a technical wizard is always in danger of becoming merely a technical wizard. This is a danger Vilayat Khan could never overcome. Ever-increasing portions of his recitals became platforms for display of superior technique or technical wonders if one wants to put it that way. The content and structure suffered and still suffers. Whenever Vilayat does give a superb recital (these are getting more and more rare) it is because on those special occasions he forgets or is able to suppress his penchant for display of technical virtuosity.

Nikhil Banerjee, by listening to Vilayat Khan recitals or even practice



Nikhil Banerjee as a young man

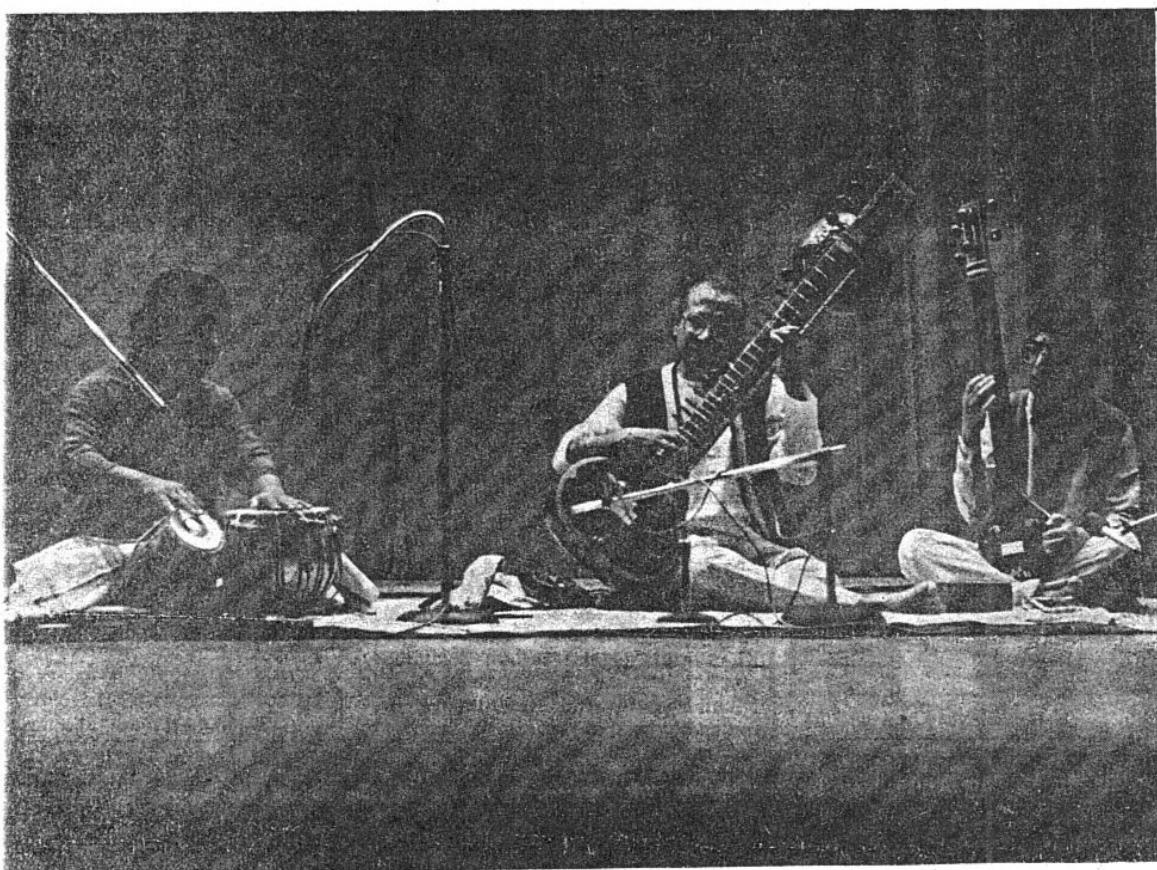
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sessions perhaps (one can never be sure about such things—Nikhil may have just picked up the idea and the rest by himself) developed mastery in the art of the deflected or meend incorporating tan. The other technical items were also selectively incorporated into his style. The ekhara tans—played purely on the frets with one mizrab stroke per note—also owed something to the Vilayat model and so did, most probably, the jhala technique. For Ravi Shankar usually employed the three-stroke jhala and the sarod-model jhala he experienced with Ustad Ali Akbar Khan (his final guru) and Ustad Allauddin Khan was different.

Now, that is about all he adopted from Vilayat Khan: knowhow or means to an end. The end was his and so was the content of the musical figures he built with the knowhow. The technique was never used as a thing in itself—a thing to display, to develop for its own sake. To put it in another way, he never borrowed the content or ideas of Vilayat Khan's music or even the Vilayat Khan sitar tone—Nikhil Banerjee's sitar tone was his own and an integral part of his personality.

I consider Nikhil Banerjee's sitar style more complete and satisfying than that of Vilayat Khan because in it technique was ancillary to content as it should be in the case of any fine art. We may even go a step further and say it was more satisfying because in its technical discoveries of Vilayat Khan found aesthetically superior use or even proper utilisation. As I have said before, in the Vilayat Khan style proper, technique very often becomes more important than content or one is very often served awe-striking virtuosity in place of art proper. Nikhil Banerjee's style was more satisfying and complete also because it was also the vehicle of a much more intelligent, serious and aesthetically cogent attitude to ragas and music itself—this is something I shall elaborate later on.

In the Ravi Shankar style meends are shorter and they at times have their resonance deliberately cut off to keep in tune with the maestros very individual approach to music. It was the first, most probably, to use the surbahar-like bass kharaj string and thus impart a Been-like grandeur and sombreness to the alap jor. As a result it used a variety of Been-style figures in the alap and jor which were not used on the sitar earlier. It represents an aspect totally absent in Vilayat Khan's style. Vilayat Khan has totally dropped the bass string aspect from his sitar by having the bass pancham string used on most traditional sitars at that time removed. This was done to



Immersed in his music during a public performance

highlight and technically facilitate his individual khayal, fast tankari and jhala oriented style.

Nikhil Banerjee, with his training under Allauddin Khan, automatically opted for the Ravi Shankar model sitar. But he played much longer meends on these bass strings. In fact he fully exploited their resonance by playing the meends as long as possible on the sitar. Longer meends are possible only on the surbahar bass strings. He did use the Ravi Shankar Been-phrases but only selectively. In other words he achieved whatever Ravi Shankar does in the bass region with a large variety of things that were exclusively Nikhil Banerjee's own. In this way he can be described as having made much more exhaustive use of the bass strings than Ravi Shankar has.

Then another aspect of the Ravi Shankar style is the intricate and carefully structured rhythmic work or layakari. This is a thing absent in the Vilayat Khan style in which a few simple, set rhythmic patterns are played and only in teental. Nikhil Banerjee's rhythmic work and layakari showed a marvellous balance of rhythm and melody and tans. It had a few general ideas that could be traced

to the Ravi Shankar style but it never made the rhythmic or mathematical aspect as pronounced as in the Ravi Shankar style. This delicate balance and unbroken flow of melody made a more satisfying total impact on the listener. Certain stages of Ravi Shankar's layakari can only be appreciated by laya or rhythm buffs (I include myself) but those who don't have much of a feel for layakari often get left out. But in the case of Nikhil Banerjee everybody was there throughout—the melody enthusiast, the tan lover and the rhythm buff. It is true that though Nikhil Banerjee did not restrict his gat work (the part played with the tabla) exclusively to teental (16 matras or beats) in the manner of Vilayat Khan, he did not play in a wide variety of talas as Ravi Shankar does. It was, however, usually teenthal that he played. There was occasionally a gat in Dhamar (14 matras), Rupak (7 beats), Jhaptal (10 matras) or Char Tal ki Sawari (11 matras)—but it was usually teental.

To round up then, one can say one could listen to the Nikhil Banerjee style gat work with an unified sensibility—with the part it appreciates melody, the part that appreciates

rhythm, the part that delights in quick rounding-off movements all switched on and equally aroused. This is something one can never say about Vilayat Khan and only about parts of Ravi Shankar's gat work. This is why I find Nikhil Banerjee's gat work more satisfying than those of Vilayat Khan and Ravi Shankar.

In the alap portion Nikhil Banerjee's style scored over that of Ravi Shankar by the virtue of the impression of a continuous flow of notes, very similar to that of vocal music or those played in wind instruments that he managed to conjure up with his long meends, smooth tone and programmed mizrab strokes. There was no broken-up, jolting phrases punctuated by chikari strokes as in the case of Ravi Shankar or unevenly spaced out meend work with big pauses in between as in the case of Vilayat Khan.

It scored over the Ravi Shankar style also in the intellectual aspect as there was always a great deal of new ideas and the unusual development of these in the Nikhil Banerjee style alap. Ravi Shankar believes in simple traditional development of simple melodic ideas that keep the raga structure as pure as

possible in the Been-Dhrupad style. Nikhil Banerjee too never took liberties that violated a raga but he was often seen stretching the note progression to the very brink in the advanced khayal style of Amir Khan. Here too he had merely borrowed knowhow from the great khayal singer—neither ideas or phrases proper—and thus maintained his individuality.

I think all this more or less establishes the reason why Nikhil Banerjee's style was more satisfying and complete than that of Ravi Shankar. Of course, I don't want to mean that



Ustad Vilayat Khan

therefore it was much superior to that of Ravi Shankar. It had its drawbacks too. Let me give an example. I once had the opportunity of listening to the raga Marwa played by Nikhil Banerjee and Ravi Shankar within, say, two weeks of each other. I had heard the Nikhil Banerjee recital first—it was in the early 1970's I think and it was in huge courtyard of the Laha house. I remember coming back very satisfied. Then came the Ravi Shankar Marwa. I immediately noticed the raga mood, its awesome sombre effect was palpably greater in the Ravi Shankar recital. By

comparing mental notes—I was not a music critic at that time and didn't carry a note pad around—I realised that Nikhil Banerjee, by the flowing mellifluousness of his style and his penchant for working out unusual combinations had diluted somewhat the sombre roughness that gives Marwa its potent character.

Such things happened with certain other ragas as well. Again many other ragas sounded as they should or even better than they do in the styles of other maestros when played in the Nikhil Banerjee style. When we analyse particular cases we find that everything depends on what the artiste is playing—whether it is a raga that suits his style, whether he is in the proper mood, whether his instrument is playing sweetly or giving trouble and so on and so forth. But had you gone to a music programme in which Ravi Shankar had already played on a previous evening and Nikhil Banerjee was scheduled to play at midnight with Amir Khan two items later and Vilayat Khan in his usual 'last item' position, you could usually bet your boots that Nikhil Banerjee would floor them all. I remember being present at such a programme and Nikhil Banerjee did floor them all. As far as I remember he played alap in Darbari Kanada—he tried such a long deflection from the lower pancham fret of the nayanika (main) string during the jor tankari that he broke the string, a rare occurrence in any sitar recital. The main gat work, as far as I remember, was in Hemant. Funnily enough these were the two ragas he played in the same order at the last recital of his life—a few days before his death—at the Dover Lane Music Conference.

The advantage of his style was

definitely a factor in this but so was his philosophy of music. This was marked by what English literary critics of yore called "high seriousness." He was a man totally dedicated to, totally engrossed in music. When the curtains opened he was busy with his final tuning. Once this was over he was immediately engrossed in his alap—head turned towards his left shoulder, slightly lowered and face partly hidden by the huge fretboard. He hardly ever had time to greet his audience: in fact I think he hardly remembered their presence when he was playing.



Pandit Ravi Shankar

When one heard him play the same raga twice or thrice over a couple of years one realised that the same engrossed seriousness had persisted in the off-stage period for, each time the same raga came with a fresh orientation, a fresh bounty of unusual developments and very often, a fresh character.

It is because there is no one around who can build a style as complete and as satisfying and use it with such an engrossed seriousness that there is such a void and a void that "cannot be filled."

Simple to a Fault

It is said that the great master of the Kirana Gharana, the late Ustad Abdul Karim Khan Sahib, while travelling from Madras to Pondicherry suddenly, as if with the visionary clarity that characterised his music, felt the approach of death. He got down from the train and told his accompanying disciples: "I am about to die. Tune the tanpuras." So, sitting on the platform of an obscure railway station, and singing the famous Darbari khayal Jhanak Jhanakwa Bole Bichwa," Abdul Karim Khan passed away; it was as if the greatest singer of India had realised that nobody else was fit to sing his funeral anthem. Nikhil Banerjee's death may have lacked this sense of high drama, but he too was aware that death was not far away.

A couple of days before he died, he played at the Dover Lane Music Conference. The Ragas that he chose were again Darbari. Their regal majesty acquired some under tones in Nikhil Banerjee's hands. Those who were fortunate enough to hear this recital are unlikely to forget it. The great sitarist was, however, far from satisfied himself. His heart ailment, which had drastically curtailed his recitals in the past few years, had been particularly aggravated in recent times. His disciples recall his anguish after the performance, at the failure of the body to execute what the mind conceived, at his awareness that death could not be far away.

But the day the end came, things had started in an ordinary manner. It

was his younger daughter Debdatta's birthday; but nevertheless, Nikhil Banerjee's sat down with his close disciple Amit Roy for a session of talim and riyaz. It is fitting that the day should have started this way, for more than anything else it was riyaz, practice, the pursuit of perfection, that characterised his whole life.

Roma Banerjee, the griefstricken widow of the maestro, tearfully remembers a story she had heard from her mother-in-law of how Nikhil Banerjee's father, Jiten Banerjee, a well-known amateur sitarist of his time, was fiercely possessive about his precious instrument. Everyone else in the family was forbidden to touch it. One day, he heard strains of the sitar