

Sridhar Parsekar - In Memoriam

Sridhar Parsekar (1920-1964) of Goa was the finest Hindustani violinist of the 20th century. He was a musician and a composer of the highest class. But his life was one of tragedy wrought by a wanton love of alcohol. That dissolute habit exacted from him a heavy price, drawing and quartering with withering efficiency every ounce of his mind, body and spirit (pardon the pun). Sridhar Parsekar perished in the late 1960s at the age of 44.

Awhile back I requested **Ravi Shankar** to share some memories of Sridhar-bab. He sent this reply:

"I knew Sridhar. He was a wonderful violinist, a disciple of Gajananrao Joshi. Sridhar Parsekar was a staff artist at AIR Bombay when Alla Rakha was also a staff member there. This is the period I knew him in the early forties. He was a smart young fellow, dark and very good looking. He came to hear me a lot and I also heard him a lot. I played one duet with him as I did with his Guru in the late 40's in Bombay. It was a wonderful duet I played with him and Alla Rakha accompanied us. Along with many other musicians Kishen Maharaj was sitting in the front. I admired him as a musician and I have always felt very sad how he ruined his life and killed himself with his addiction to alcohol."

In 1993, the violinist **V.G. Jog** sent a message to the Usenet newsgroup **rec.music.indian.classical** (RMIC) in response to my query regarding Parsekar:

"Sridhar Parsekar was a tayyar and sweet violinist. Excellent presentation. SP used to call me Bandu Jog! The tragedy was that such a big artiste did not maintain his kala. Before preparing any students, he passed away and that caused me great sadness. Else there might have been excellent violinists in India today. When he was at his peak, I was just a student, but AIR programs were greatly appreciated and he was also a great composer especially for Marathi films. Ramakrishnabua Vaze blessed him. He learnt from Gajananrao Joshi and once he played a Jugalbandhi with Ravi Shankar."

Presented here is an essay by the late **Gopalkrishna Bhobe** from his book **Kalaatm Gomantak** ("Gifted Goa") published by Kala Academy, Panjim (1972). It has been superbly rendered from Marathi by **Dr. Ajay Nerurkar**. Dr. Nerurkar's professional training and expertise are in the area of Theoretical Computer Science. He is also a connoisseur with an abiding passion for music.

Warm regards,

Rajan P. Parrikar

Sridhar Parsekar
by
Gopalkrishna Bhobe
(Translation by Dr. Ajay Nerurkar)

Months have passed since Sridhar Parsekar left us. Years shall pass too. I was stunned when I heard the news. And sad; but at the same time I was relieved that his tortuous existence had come to an end. Sridhar was gone -- a dazzling star on Goa's cultural firmament had burnt itself out. I also felt much had been lost by his passing. I had been witness to the start of his career, his glorious middle years and his horribly nightmarish end -- all in the span of 44 years. What had he done to deserve such punishment? Why had he suffered so? There are sinners in this world who seem immune to the scream of a million curses. They, who should burn in hell for all eternity, instead are found to be living in the very lap of comfort. Some others, however, have instant punishment meted out for minor lapses. But who can argue with capricious Fate? Her mind is a closed book for the best among us. At the same time can she honestly be called cruel? Wasn't it Fate that placed Sridhar on the summit of renown at such a young age? Endowed him with a musical mind? Gifted him with a rare understanding of laya, and a talent that astounded even the big guns of classical music? I had seen a very young Sridhar play the clarinet in a band. The chubby, dark-complexioned, good-looking child would attract attention whenever he played; the band was popular around Bardes in Goa. Parsekar could play almost every instrument used in the band expertly, but what he really wanted to play was the organ (paaNya-peTi) that accompanied stage musicals. He could use his breath to create music, but he was fascinated by the notion that music could be produced by the use of hands and feet. He was enthralled by the organ; he decided that he just had to learn it. Once while playing the harmonium he told me about it. "I would go wherever the plays were being staged, however far it may be, and sit all night staring at the fingers and the feet of the organ player. But would I be allowed to even touch the instrument? Finally, almost by magic, I found that I could play it and play anything I wanted!" Besides the harmonium, he was also adept at playing the tabla and the jaltarang. Like other young talents from Pedne, Sridhar left home to pursue fame and fortune in Mumbai. When he got there he began studying music without wasting a moment's time. At first, his only objective was to master the harmonium. He practised twenty-four hours a day, wherever he could find empty space -- under the stairway, in the balcony, on the verandah. He was helped in this endeavour by his uncle Parshurambuwa Parsekar, and Madhukar Pednekar, who was also from Pedne. Not even in his dreams would he have thought that he would take up the violin. It was not that the violin was an instrument unknown to him. No Goan could be said to be unfamiliar with it. Goan Christians have to learn it as a part of their religious instruction, and it is taught by a church-appointed expert violinist. But very few Goan Hindus ever paid any attention to the instrument. Those who did were made fun of. Recently, a handful of people had attained a measure of mastery over it. They played (and still do) during religious festivals -- for plays or bhajan performances. Close to where Parsekar lived in Mumbai was a music school run by the famous violinist Gajananrao Joshi. As the sounds of violin being taught there wafted in his direction,

Sridhar was entranced by this new experience. The overwhelming desire to make music like this took hold of him. He voiced this wish to Madhu Pednekar who then took him to meet Gajananrao. Madhu told Gajananrao about Sridhar's financial situation and asked that the young seeker be taken under his care. Joshibuwa generously offered to train Sridhar and until he became a competent performer taught him free of charge. That was it. Sridhar's obsession with the harmonium ended, and very soon he became proficient at the violin. Madhu Pednekar used to assist film music director Annasaheb Maaenkar at that time. He started using Sridhar's violin as part of the accompaniment. Here too, Sridhar made his mark -- Annasaheb even added his name to the credits for a film, as assistant music director. After he began earning enough, he started taking advanced lessons from the famous singer and teacher Khansaheb Khadim Husain Khan of the Agra gharana. Khansaheb Natthan Khan and Anwar Husain Khan also contributed to his training. After this he found a job at AIR's Mumbai station as a musical accompanist. He had an important reason for accepting this job. In those days, famous musicians like Vazebuwa, Faiyaaz Khan, Vilayat Husain Khan, and Omkarnath Thakur sang at AIR and he hoped to accompany them. He got his wish. Vazebuwa enjoyed his playing and later took him as his concert accompanist, often showering on him praise in public. AIR had an excellent set of musicians at that time. Those who have heard the jugalbandis between Parsekar and DinkarRao Amembal still recall them with relish. His solo concerts were great listening experiences. He had managed to encompass in the four strings of his violin the styles and sounds of a great many vocalists and instrumentalists. In his violin playing were visible glimpses of Bismillah's shehnai, Swamy's veena (a reference to the great vainika Doraiswamy Iyengar?), Ali Akbar's sarod, Bundu Khan's sarangi, and Ravi Shankar's and Vilayat Khan's sitar. As the Punjab ang of vocal music began to become popular in Maharashtra, he lost no time in studying and mastering it. He drew upon the best from everything around him. After playing the asthaai, in the madhya-laya section he would pluck the violin with one finger of his left hand, rhythmically but slightly skewed with respect to the taal, and thus keep the theka swaying. This became his trademark style which was later copied by other violinists. However, the precisely calibrated force he used produced a most pleasing sound, and this was inimitable. In due course, Parsekar succeeded in creating his own personal baaj, and in the process earned his entry into the big league. He was invited to the major mehfiles of his time and achieved nationwide fame. In 1939, he stepped into the world of films as a music composer, and when he achieved a foothold there, he gave up his radio job and stopped accompanying vocalists. Henceforth he would play solo violin, exclusively. He became so famous that the instrument became synonymous with the man. I saw him go from strength to strength for eight to ten years, from Bhaalji Pendhaarkar's 'Bhakta Daamaaji' and Vishraam Bedekar's 'Paisaa Bolto Aahe' to Mo. Ga. Raangnekar's 'Kuber'. His tunes from 'Bhakta Daamaaji' gained enormous popularity all over Maharashtra; every dindi would conclude with his Bhairavi, "viTHTHal viTHTHal gajaree, avaghee dumadumalee panDHaree". Sridhar also composed Marathi songs for record companies like HMV and Odeon. Many famous singers, among them Jyotsna Bhole, Hirabai Badodekar, Saraswati Rane, Vatsala Kumthekar, G. N. Londhe, and Krishnarao Chonkar recorded songs for him. He began composing for plays starting with Rangnekar's "Kanyaadaan". At the same time he was doing music for films too. When working on the music for the play "Maazhe Ghar", he would ride his car in style. He did not even have the time to talk to anyone. His concerts

would take him from all over the country. Wealth and fame had come knocking at his door. He wrote a book about violin-playing called "Swara-ninaad" whose cover he wanted the artist Dalaal to design. I went with him to Dalaal's house and the book was published to Sridhar's satisfaction. In those days, I visited him numerous times at his Bandra home. He would make me listen to multiple tunes he had prepared for a song, and then we would debate their relative merits for hours on end. Sometimes, he would ask me to play a theka on the tabla while he explored new varieties of tihaai. His experimentation with layakari was okay as long as it was limited to tihaais, but he often got carried away and began imitating the alap-jod-jhaalaa sequence of a sitar performance in an ambition to become another Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan or Ali Akbar. In the process, his playing lost its original sweetness and his concerts became displays of laya arithmetic more suited to plucked instruments. As a result, his performances often became quite drab. A jhaalaa is inherently meant to be played on a plucked instrument like the sitar. When played on a violin, the musical notes tend to be smeared together, and the overall sound is like a saw being filed. He had the ability to play the whole repertoire of ustaadi gaayaki on the violin. Sur and laya would become one in his music. When he merged into the shadja in the middle of some delicate aalaapi, the jawaaridaar sound of the two tanpuras behind would mingle so thoroughly with the sound of his violin that the entire audience would spontaneously exclaim, "Waah Parsekar....waah waah!" (Bravo, Parsekar, bravo!) I still remember many of his best concerts -- the Ahir Bhairav at the Radio Conference and the Miyaan Malhaar at C. J. Hall, the Darbari Kanada at Dadar's Vanmaali Hall and the Puriya Dhanashree at Lakshmi Baag. The performers that took the stage after him would find it very hard to make any kind of impression. And given all this it is inexplicable why he overdid layakaari and chose to indulge in the jhaalaa. I often thought I should point this out to him but felt overawed by his eminence. Around this time I began hearing stories about his fondness for alcohol and his habit of coming to concerts in an inebriated state. I dismissed these reports as the work of people jealous of him until a concert I attended confirmed them as true. This time I did stir up the courage to talk to him, because of our brotherly relationship, but he wouldn't want to hear of it. At a concert around this time, at which he and Vilayat Khan were both slated to play, Vilayat Khan had arrived early especially to hear Parsekar's violin. They had done numerous such joint programmes, even jugalbandis. But on this day Vilayat Khan was sad and angry to see the condition he found Parsekar in. He held his arm, pulled him aside and scolded him. "Parsekar, God has been so kind to you! He has granted you swara, taal, knowledge and fame in a time so short as to make others envious. Your name is on everyone's lips wherever I go. Artistes like us should thank the Almighty and humbly submit ourselves to saadhanaa. You fool, has all your good fortune turned your head? You come to a mehfil drunk? Drink if you can't help it, but please don't come to a mehfil like this. Everyday we see and hear of the destruction wrought by alcohol in people's lives. A young musician like you should stay away from it." Parsekar heard Vilayat Khan out. He even placed his hand on the instrument that had given him so much and took an oath. Almost immediately, though, he forgot about it and the incident that had occasioned it, as he continued his "work" with redoubled vigour. On subsequent occasions, I saw him drunk quite a few times. People stopped inviting him for concerts and Akashwani also closed its doors to him after another such incident. There was a period of three to four years after this when I did not meet him at all, and then one fine afternoon he came to my

house. He asked me, "Can you try to get me into the Sur Singaar music conference? Forget about all that has happened. I have given it up. Now I want to recapture my old glory. Will you help me?" I pulled some strings and managed to get his name on the roster. But I was nervous. I was afraid he wouldn't show up on time. He did, but he so heavily drunk that he played terribly. The organisers were deeply disappointed. Sridhar's talent earned him a lot of admirers. Those close to him tried to bring him to his senses. Khansaheb Alla Rakha, among his AIR colleagues, also tried his best to give him a helping hand from time to time. He took him along to Patna where he organised a concert for him. But soon thereafter, Parsekar immersed himself in alcohol once more. Sub-inspector Sawant also treated him with a lot of affection and helped him in various ways. But nobody could save this sinking man. His talents brought him the love of people, but he was lost to them. Shri Rangnekar appointed him to give music to his play, "Himaalayaachi Baayko", and after a very long hiatus Sridhar Parsekar came to see me. What an appalling state he was in! He who had once come to meet me like an aristocrat in his own car, was now standing before me in tattered clothes. I could not take my eyes off him. Before I could utter a word, he said, "Could you arrange for a paan? I have given up everything else. Don't worry, I have given it up for good. I swear on God, on my violin!" It was impossible for me to trust him now. I brought him a paan and we spent hours reminiscing about the past. When he came the next day to rehearse the songs, his speech was slurred and he could barely stand up. As the end was drawing near I saw him at Mahim, in an unspeakable condition. He was an extreme example of what alcoholism could do. Stunned, I had to lean against a storefront for support. I stood there as if rooted to the spot. My eyes welled up and I began to cry. His was a predicament not to be wished on your worst enemy. Sridhar Parsekar is gone. He was a self-made man who achieved much in life and who, while he lived, was always ranked among the best musicians Goa has produced. He was gifted with enormous talent but was cursed by ready success, and finally reduced to nothing. Many things about him shall always remain in my memory. His clarinet-playing, his jaltarang, the ear-tickling laggis he played on the tabla, his harmonium, his soft-voiced singing, his grasp of swaras, and, above all, his astonishing fiddling. His violin was also a unique instrument -- he had added taraf strings to it in the style of a sarangi. He never spoke ill of anyone and was completely free of conceit. Among his students, Pune's Smt. Pushpalata Kulkarni, through her playing, reminds us of him. There are many excellent violinists in Maharashtra today, intelligent musicians and successful concert performers. But Sridhar Parsekar was something else. His was a God-given gift. He was simply peerless.