

## Raghunath Panigrahy : The Genius

*Bhaskar Parichha*

Gita Govinda was his strong point. And, so mellifluous was his tone of voice when he rendered the verses that he left the audience mesmerized. Indeed, it was Pundit Raghunath Panigrahi who promoted and popularized twelfth century poet Jayadeva's eternal love poetry across the globe.

With Raghunath's death a year ago, Indian classical music has certainly lost a doyen. But the world of traditional Sanskrit music too has lost a great enthusiast. Gita Govinda singing will not be the same again after Raghunath's death. The music maestro had celebrated his own birthday and the birth anniversary of his wife, the legendary Odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi just a couple of days before the demise. Sanjukta had pre-deceased him in 1997, in cancer.

Raghunath Panigrahi was born in Gunupur a small town in the backward south Odisha district of Koraput on the banks of river Vamsadhara. If Raghunath was a prodigy, he inherited music from his classical vocalist father Nilamani Panigrahy. The unique style of singing the Gita Govinda came from none but his father. The numerous renditions of the poem in tune with the traditions of the Lord Jagannath Temple in Puri earned him a unique distinction. He was possibly the only vocalist who could sing all 24 verses of the Gita Govinda. Raghunath was a multi-faceted personality: Classical vocalist, composer and Odissi

musicologist. His career spanning six decades is a chronicle of events that are spectacular and amazing.

The maestro's genius sparkled not in Odisha, but in distant Chennai in the late 1950s. It was in the recording studios of Prasad and Vauhini at Kodambakkam in Chennai that Panigrahi got a break as a singer on par with the then greats like Ghantasala and P.B.Srinivas. And it was again at Kalakshetra in Chennai's Adyar, that he met his Odissi and Bharatanatyam dancer wife, Sanjukta Misra, with whom he was to team up in the 1960s to take Odissi dance and music to greater lengths.

So, the short stint of less than five years in Chennai that proved to be the game changer for this 21 year old lad from Odisha. Lovers of old Tamil film music still remember Panigrahi's song 'Naan Thedum Podhu' and 'Kan Kaanum Minnaldhaano' in the 1959 Sivaji Ganesan-Pandari Bai starrer *Aval Yaar* directed by K.J. Mahadevan and music by S.Rajeshwara Rao. The film sank without a trace, but Panigrahi's songs are now seeing a revival thanks to YouTube. Even today, his songs shimmer in the memory of Tamil music lovers. Panigrahi's soothing voice was ideally suited for romantic songs. The slight Hindustani touch which he gave to his songs only added to their appeal to the South Indian ear.

He was a one film wonder in Tamil, but he sang four or five songs for Telugu films. In the 1956 award winning L.V.Prasad production *Ilavelpu*, starring A.Nageswara Rao and Anjali Devi, he sang a solo *Yenadu Kanaledu Ee Vinta Sundarini*. With P.Suseela and P.Leela he sang 'Challani Raja O Chandamama' a big hit in those days. In the 1959 Telugu musical hit, *Jayabheri*, he sang 'Maadi Saradadevi Mandirame' with Ghantasala and P.B. Srinivas. He also played a small role in the film. 'Ilavelpu' was directed by D. Yoganand. The story is based on the successful Tamil film, *Ethirpaaraathathu*, itself a big hit and was remade in Hindi as *Sharada* (1957), starring Meena Kumari and Raj Kapoor.

Panigrahi had good rapport with some of the finest music directors of those days like Pandyalanageswara Rao, S.Rajeswara Rao and Susarla Dakshinamurti, the music directors of *Jayabheri*, *Aval Yaar* and *Ilavelpu* respectively. Raghunath even sang for Kannada films. Raghunath Panigrahy would have gone far if he stayed on in Chennai but destiny had different plans.

The brief stint of about five years in Madras was cut short by his marriage to Sanjukta Misra in 1960. After years of struggle and incessant travel across India, the Raghunath-Sanjukta Panigrahi duo made Odissi dance and music nationally acceptable as a classical art form on par with Bharatanatyam. This was before the arrival of Indrani Rahman and Sonal Mansingh who took Odissi overseas. The Panigrahis used to come back to Chennai later to perform at the Music Academy. The wife-husband duo, like a couple of other artiste pairs, had devoted their lives completely to dance and music. So inclusive was the devotion that they never put their feet up.

Back home, Raghunath composed music and sang for several Odia films; but Odissi music was his foremost preoccupation. From the beginning of 1970 and until the 1990s the Sanjukta-Raghunath travelled across continents for the cause of Odissi. After the death of Sanjukta, Raghunath was also associated with Bengaluru's 'Nrityagram' and gave music for many of its productions.

On his own, Raghunath Panigrahi became a great exponent of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, which got him a Padma Shri only in 2010 a belated honour for a great master. But he was the first Odia singer to be honoured by the French government for his 'Gita Govinda' composition in 1978. Raghunath Panigrahy has been conferred upon few other outstanding awards including the prestigious Jayadev Samman instituted by the Government of Odisha.

The soft-spoken and ever smiling singer was a man of determination when it came to taking bold decisions in life. It was a very tough life for the couple in the initial days and they had problems tackling survival issues for quite a few years. But he refused to crack under pressure and continued to pursue the 'great dream' together with his better half. Sanjukta and Raghunath, great couple and wonderful beings, were simple and down-to-earth. Nothing else mattered to them except music and dance. Devotion par excellence !

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