

Legacy of a legend

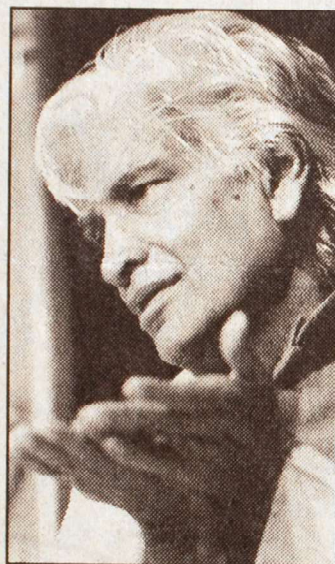
On the posthumous release of Pandit Amarnath's book of poems
Hamsa Ke Bain, Vithal C. Nadkarni tributes the maestro

THE sound of the raga Shri fills the hall. It's a recording of a broadcast Pandit Amarnath made for the All India Radio many years ago. The luminous quality of his voice comes unhindered through the indifferent quality of the transcript which prefaces the posthumous release of a collection of Amarnath's Hindi poems in Mumbai. The book, *Hamsa Ke Bain*, with a preface by the noted poet Gulzar, was released by the sarangi maestro, Pandit Ram Narain, recently. It is being released in Delhi on the inaugural day of the Shankarlal music festival on April 10.

Amarnath was known to the cognoscenti as the foremost disciple of the great Ustad Amir Khan, founder of the Indore *gharana*. A gifted teacher and exponent of the famed Meru Khand style of singing brought into vogue by his guru, Amarnath left behind over 300 original classical raga compositions. He composed these under the pen name Miturang. "Besides their sheer musical value, what made the compositions so special," recalls Amarnath's pupil, Chandranath Chatterjee, "is their lyrical, poetic quality. Panditji was a true pioneer. Not for him the tried-and-tested world of traditional *bandishes* peopled by spying sisters-in-law and jilted her-

oines. He wrote moving couplets filled with mystical elements drawn from the Sufis, the Nath Yogis, not to forget the intense ardour of Bhakti or devotion. Unlike many musicians who tend to subordinate the word or the lyric to the grammar of music in their presentations, Panditji believed in harmonising these elements."

"Pandit Amarnath was a high-wattage expounder of musical idioms," the Delhi-based music critic Raghava Menon once wrote in a review. "He communicated his understanding of the nature of Hindustani ragas with the kind of flair and pleasure that Bernstein brought to Western music. To enjoy his music, therefore, he had to be seen and heard in these two roles as a demonstrator of Hindustani raga music. As a demonstrator he had few peers except perhaps the late Bade Gulam Ali Khan or Kumar Gandharva whose prodigious intellects have a dimension that is like having an additional limb in the experience



of life."

Amarnath's great contribution was that "he evolved a contemporary vocabulary or idiom for traditional music," says Mumbai-based musician Satyasheel Deshpande

who runs the Samvad Foundation. "It wasn't poetry masquerading as music," he clarifies, "but a set of symbols which satisfied the most rigorous canons of both music and poetics. Consider, for example, his composition in the raga Kalingda. It contains a heroine's plaint all right, just as its traditional counterpart does. But her unusual sentiment is expressed with an economy and elegance completely in tune with the total musical experience. If, on the other hand, one had used a poem, say, by Nirala or even Ghalib for a raga exposition, it would have certainly stood out."

Amarnath died last year at the age of 71. "Even in his last days when he was in great pain, he sent me a cassette of his musical musings," recalls his daughter Gajra. "He was very fond of Sufi poetry. He had a such a soft corner for the poet Kabir that his eyes would often well up at the mere mention of his *dohas*. In fact, he's even named his grandson Kabir. While bad verse did turn him off, he went into

raptures with good poetry. And he loved etymologies and exploring the origins of unusual words — sometimes smack in the middle of a conversation — all of which ex-

documentary on *Mirza Ghalib*," Gajra adds. "What made this venture doubly memorable for music-lovers was Ustad Amir Khan's participation: the Ustad who never sang thumris or light music in public deigned to sing a *ghazal* for the first and the last time for his beloved *shagird*."

Amarnath also composed the music for a feature film, *Garam Coat*, starring Balraj Sahni and Nirupa Roy. The songs from the movies are widely regarded as classics of their genre. Indeed, one of them, *Jogiya se preet keye duhh hoye* was included by Lata Mangeshkar in a special album of her favourite songs. Incidentally, Lata refused to charge fees for the privilege of being able to sing such a wonderful song. Amarnath also gave music and sang for the one of the earliest serials on trouble-torn Punjab, which was made by M. S. Sathya and called *Choli Daman*.

As one flips through the book of Amarnath's poems, one is reminded of his rendering of the raga Ahiri Todi. It is a measure of the late singer's brilliance that his Punjabi composition — *Bhag jinaade change/Sajna gal lagiya* (Fortunate are those embraced by their beloved) — compares favourably with the same sentiments evoked by the classical Sanskrit poet Bhrtahari. ■

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plains why he was able to work in a variety of fields one would not associate with a tradition-bound classical musician.

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