

Biography of Gaayanaacharya Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar ji

Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji was born on 18th August, 1872 in a town called Kurundwad in a state of Maharashtra in India. Kurundwad was a small kingdom and Shreemant Daajeesaahab Patwardhan was its king. Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji's father Shree Digambar Paluskar was a favorite Keertan kaar (skilled story teller, lecturer and entertainer who performs using wit, music and instruments) in Shreemant (this was the title of kings in Maharashtra) Daajeesaahab's court. Hence Paluskar family was sheltered and supported by the king. Young Vishnu was growing up along with Daajeesaahab's son, prince Naanaasaahab. Young Vishnu was known to be a brilliant student in his school. But, in the year 1887, at the celebration of birth day of Lord Datta, poisonous gas from the fireworks damaged young Vishnu's eyes and left him almost blind.

It is a quirk of destiny that this mishap was a great blessing to the music world. Young Vishnu was brought to town of Miraj for treatment but the doctors advised that regular schooling was now not feasible for him. In Miraj kingdom, Gwalior gharana style expert, Maharshi (great sage) Pandit (expert, scholar) Balkrishnabua Ichalkaranjekar was the court musician / vocalist. The keertankaar father left his son with Pandit Balkrishnabua Ichalkaranjekar to learn music. According to the instruction of king of Miraj kingdom, Sir Gangaadharrao or Baalaasaahab Mirajkar, Pandit Balkrishnabua Ichalkaranjekar started teaching music to young Vishnu. For nine years there was regimented study. Vishnu Digambar ji worked very hard to transform his strong voice into musicianship worthy of Baalkrishnabua and learnt his taan pradhan 'gaayakee' (singing style full of powerful taans).

In those days, musicians were not respected in society. There were several reasons for it. The music was usually performed and practiced in kings' courts or in houses of ill repute (dance halls, homes of ladies of night etc.). Kings and emperors used to organize music concerts for vocalists and instrumentalists, but everything depended on whims of kings and his minions. Hence the music world was in a bit of chaos. Artists were kind of detached from general society and did not pay much attention to their duty towards society. Accomplished artists were reluctant to teach new students. They were also frequently forming bad habits like addictions to alcohol etc. Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji decided to salvage classical music from such terrible conditions.

In 1896 he accepted this challenge and set off from Miraj. Bringing divine music to ordinary people in society became his biggest contribution to field of music.

He was a highly confident person and became a very successful vocalist. He performed in Baroda. The queen Jamanaabai of Baroda wrote and gave him several recommendation letters to give to kings in Gujaraat, Kaathiyaavaad and Rajasthaan. Hence he also performed in several other places. Some kings asked him to become a court appointed musician / vocalist in their kingdoms. However, Pandit ji was very focused on his quest. He declined these positions. His main ambition was always to create conditions where ordinary people in society can easily learn classical music. For this, he needed to settle down in one town. The destiny was such that favorable incidents took place. Near a town of Junaaghadh on Girinaar parvat (mountain), there is a temple of lord 'Dattatray'. Near Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji's home town there is a place called Narsobaavaadi which is Lord Dattatray's temple domain and in his family Lord Dattatray was reverently worshipped. Hence he went to Girinaar mountain to visit the Lord Datta temple. There he met a monk and the monk suddenly said to Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji – "Go and live in the state of Panjaab. Start your work there. You will be successful in your quest of music propagation. You have my blessings."

In this way, Pandit ji went to Laahour and he established a Gandharva Mahaavidyaalaya (Gandharva school) there on 5th May, 1901. (Laahour is now in Paakistaan. Paakistaan was formed in 1947 on India's independence day, August 15. Until then it was in India.). He collected funds from his own performances and provided for tuition fees and living expenses for music students in his school. This way there was substantial prevalence of music in Panjaab. After this, a branch of Gandharva Mahavidyaalaya was established in Mumbai in 1908. More schools were also started in cities of Naagpur and Pune. In Mumbai, students were learning vocal and instrumental in about 20 divisions. Some 150 ladies were also coming to school to learn music. As the number of students increased, there was a need to open one more school in Mumbai. One new place was acquired and a big building was created for the Gandharva Mahaavidyaalaya. It was the talk of town. This building with four stories was used for many activities like teaching classes, housing principal's office, hold student concerts etc.

But destiny had something else in mind. Number of students had increased, but the income from Pandit ji's performances was insufficient for their expenses. As the loans for the building could not be repaid on time, the building was auctioned off. It was a big shock for Pandit ji. Also in his private life he had already lost many children in infancy and was left with only one living son, whose name was Dattatray Paluskar. Slowly he became a recluse. He started living in the town of Naasik at 'Raamnaam Aadhaar Aashram' (a monastery). He started reading 'Tulasi Raamaayan'. He passed away on August 21, 1931.

In his short life of 59 years, Pandit Vishnu Digambar ji successfully brought dignity to music profession and musicians. He not only taught music (vocal, instrumental and dance) to his students, but he also taught them to live disciplined, clean life free of evil habits and become decent mannerly citizens. He created 'Swaralipi' (script of writing music), opened a printing press for publishing books for music and established a factory for manufacturing musical instruments. He taught his students to repair and maintain instruments. He worked hard at becoming a good orator and made sure his students were good artists as well as good orators. He awakened patriotic feelings in children. Increased affinity for music in ordinary citizens. The art of classical music that was confined to courts of kings, was made popular in society at large through public concerts, conferences, ceremonies. Information about western music was made available to music lovers. Instrumental and dance lessons were included in the music instruction. While bringing honor to music and musicians he also worked in many other related fields.

He published over 60 high level books in the field music. He organized music conferences. In these conferences, famous musicians discussed music theory during the day and performed live music at night. Along with a magazine called 'Sangeetaamrut Pravaah' (Flow of music nectar) he edited and published over sixty books like 'Sangeet Baal Prakaash' (Children's music beacon), 'Baalbodh' – (Children's knowledge) 5 volumes, Raag Pravesh (Entry into Raagaas) – 19 volumes, 'Mahilaa Sangeet' (Ladies' music). He created enterprises like 'Tablaa Tarang' (Tablaa Vibrations), 'Kaashtha Tarang' (Wood Vibrations) in concerts like musical instrument ensemble. He wrote special books like 'Exercise with Music'.

Names of his prominent students are: Pandit Vinaayakraao Patwardhan, Pandit Omkaarnaath Thaakur, Pandit Naaraayanraao Vyaas, Pandit Shankarraao Vyaas, Pandit Vaamanraao Paadhya, Pandit Vishnudaas Shiraalee.

To make women and children comfortable while performing classical music, he replaced and established traditional erotic lyrics by compositions from poets and saints like Soordaas, Kabeerdaas, Tulsidaas etc. He loved his country and performed patriotic songs with his students during national gatherings of Congress party.