

THROUGH THE EYES

THE CAESAR OF SITAR FIROZ KHAN

With sitar in his bloodline, Firoz Khan was destined to delve deep into the tunes of the gods' musical instrument. At an early age, Khan inevitably picked up the instrument and mastered its secrets. In an interview with Star Showbiz, the current Music Director of Bangladesh Betar recalls his lifelong journey with the sitar.

Out of Soft Clay

My uncle Ustad Khurshid Khan has been known as a prominent sitar player across the world. His playing amazed my parents, and so they wanted me to learn playing sitar. It was 1970, when my father brought me a sitar. And that is when my learning started. The next year, during our great Liberation War, our family took shelter in India. There I met Ustad Badal Hossain Khan, who happened to be my mother's uncle. He taught me some great lessons. I was told that I had a natural aptitude for playing the sitar. Great players like Ustad Ayat Ali Khan, Alauddin Khan and Sheikh Saadi Khan belonged to my bloodline, so I suppose I had an inherent quality. After the war we returned to Rajshahi, but my old sitar was nowhere to be found. Seeing me disheartened, my dad requested Ustad Lakhsmikant Dey to arrange for another sitar. My new sitar was an expensive one, bought exclusively from Kolkata. I embraced that sitar like a beloved companion, and practiced day and night. My journey as an instrumentalist began in 1974, as I performed in Bangladesh Betar. I won a gold medal for playing sitar in 1978. I also used to perform in the Rajshahi station of Bangladesh Betar. The thoughts of developing a career in music slowly stirred up inside me. I moved to Dhaka a few times in search for a decent living, but had to return to Rajshahi with no luck. I was a young lad of only 22 or 23 at that time. I could play classical pieces and in commercial projects at the same time. In 1984 there was a SAARC convention, where a number of sitar players were required for a special performance. I was one of the chosen few, to play the special piece which was composed by my uncle. Eventually, I got in *Bangladesh Betar* as a regular artist. In 1988, I joined *BTV*. However, it didn't match some of my interests and I left the job. Later I joined the transcription section of *Bangladesh Betar*, where in 1990, I became a permanent staff with government facilities. I still have this job, currently holding the post of Music Director. Ustad Vilayat Khan has been my lifelong idol for playing sitar. I play in his gharana, and follow his styles. Most other players in Bangladesh play in Ustad Ravi Shankar's gharana.

A Tough World for Musicians

It has always been evident that surviving in this country as a musician is very difficult. But I never took it as a pressure. I have had my demands controlled. If I earned 10 taka, I would spend the 10 taka and no more than that. Previously, there used to be better work atmosphere for the musicians. Singers have always been

appraised by the mass audience, but it takes a little more understanding of musical harmony for one to grasp and appreciate the works of those who solely play instruments. Learning Sitar requires just as hard dedication and practice as singing or dancing or painting does. But the appreciation has never been the same for the musicians in our country. Now that music recording and editing has become easier, even teenagers are seen to be making songs sitting in their bedrooms. This, I think, would be a positive factor for the next generation of musicians. When they have all kinds of instruments in digital forms inside their computer, their interest of experimenting with those might increase compared to previous times. Digital music making is definitely a challenge for the artists who have given their everything to master the physical instrument, because

thing is presented to people has a huge impact on creating its acceptance and popularity to them, regardless of its actual value. It can be related to the old joke of paying different price for the same tea, just because one was offered in a porcelain cup while the other came in a plastic cup. I am not sure whether it is all about pretentiousness, or there's more to it. Maybe it is coming from our ever-growing competitive mentality as well. Maybe the corporates felt challenged and thought – 'So X country is making money this way? Why don't we also do that?' My only opinion is, music is not any concrete substance that money can physically buy. Music cannot be placed on a scale to see how much it weighs. Music has to be taken the way we take oxygen, inhaled beyond any hesitation or doubtful thoughts based on manmade parameters.



men can hardly reach the level of perfection that a machine can touch with its artificial intelligence. But the wave of change is inevitable, so there is nobody to blame. I have two sons, and I have encouraged neither of them to learn to play sitar. If they pick the instrument up out of passion, that's fine; but if they don't, I won't ever force them.

Admiration or Pretentiousness?

It is funny to me that, when we play the instruments in the background or behind any prominent singer, most people hardly notice us or our technical efficiencies. Yet when the same 'hands' (as mentioned by many) play the very same instruments on the stages of events like Bengal Classical Festival or Darbar Festival, people spend hundreds on the tickets. They come in clusters and enjoy the music for countless hours. So it is obvious that, how some-

My Resonance across the World

I have played in the UK multiple times. I have been invited to play sitar in Russia, Germany, Austria, Netherlands and some more countries. I have performed both solo and group items in such international platforms. I think all of my musical tours have been fascinating for me so far, I cannot really recall any bad experience. Though there have been times when I introduced myself as a Bangladeshi, and the reply was like, 'That country beside India, right?' Once during a show in Austria, I had to face a hard time convincing one of my co-players that I was not from India, because he thought sitar was only available for the Indians to learn and play. But I never took this as an offence. I think it is OUR job to introduce our country to each and every corner of the globe with our hard work and efficiency,

because those are the only things that sustain. Once in Bangladesh, I had the opportunity to play alongside maestro Ghulam Ali. In fact, Ghulam Ali himself insisted that only Firoz Khan will be playing sitar with him. As much as I felt honored by one such offer, I could hardly gather myself to play because I had a fever that night, close to 104 degrees! But when I received a call straight from the high commission conveying me Ghulam Ali's salaam, I couldn't sit back and rest anymore. Eventually the show started, and I was doing my best to keep pace with Ghulam Ali's mesmerizing vocal charisma. Then began the '*Sawal – Jawab*', the part where the singer asks a question and the instrumentalist gives an answer, all using musical verses! Ghulam Ali was on top of his flares as he kept returning my replies with even longer and more complicated counters. I closed my eyes, only to discover myself in a zone, where harmony was the only truth that existed. I don't know how I managed to go on for so long with such high fever. But once the show was over, Ghulam Ali embraced me and congratulated me, along with our own Subir Nandi, Shakila Jafar and Robi Chowdhury who also performed at the show. They told me that it was a matter of our national pride, and I held it straight, bold and strong! I also played with Feroza Begum, a great artiste I have always admired.

A Dream Yet to be Realized

I have a dream of establishing an institute that will principally focus on teaching how to play musical instruments. But I am afraid that is not possible without any government or private funding. Having an academy is very important, in the sense that proper guidance is crucial for any disciple to find the right path to true music. I am sure that there are many parties who have more than enough money to make this dream come true. But, it is sad that cultural development is not amongst the key considerations of those parties. Their first question would be, 'Where is my benefit in all that?', and I do not yet have any answer to satisfy them.

For the Memoir

Last year the Music Department of University of Dhaka honored me with an award. The Vice Chancellor himself handed me the award on their *Sangeet Utsav*, and this recognition has been utterly pleasing for me. I sincerely hope that this music department becomes successful in producing skillful and promising musicians for the future.

By Tasbir Iftekhar