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Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia

One of India's greatest musicians first trained to be a wrestler like his father

By Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore, India

I had long cherished a desire to hear the extraordinary bansuri flute master Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia in concert. Eventually, it became sort of an obsession. But time after time, I was unable to make it happen. Then one morning I woke up feeling light, almost euphoric, a feeling beyond expression. That night, in my dreams, I had sat through a long, mesmerizing bansuri concert of Pandit Chaurasia in an open air auditorium, his evocative ragas intermingling with cool breezes.

Two months later, I received an invitation to go to a real-life concert of his. I vowed to brush aside everything and attend it. My mother had agreed to babysit my little kids. But, as karma would have it, we had an unexpected guest that day. Still we went, only late by half an hour. As we entered the auditorium, the smooth, haunting bansuritones filled the hall. Seated on the dais in a cream-white silk chudidhar, deep red kurta, shawl over one shoulder, a big red bindion the bridge of his nose, totally engrossed with his flute was the great maestro I had only seen in dreams. In his hands, the bansuri whispered and

then instantaneously quavered up the swarasto the highest tonal peaks. With powerful breath control he makes everything from vigorous, thundering tones to light, birdlike quivers. Lost in his magical realm, my husband and I lost track of time. Three hours passed like a moment. The concert was over.

I scurried backstage to meet the legend. It was 10:00pm. He was preparing to leave and I heard he was taking the early morning flight to Bombay tomorrow. Still, I approached him and begged for an interview. Surprise! He just smiled and agreed. We went straight to his hotel. His paan-stained mouth twitched into a kindly, half smile as I began my interview with a prosaic first question. (See below.)

Chaurasia hails from the ancient city of Allahabad. The city has produced stalwarts in all walks of life, especially Hindustani music--many of them able to trace their talent back hundreds of years through generations of musical giants. In contrast, Pandit Chaurasia inherited no such ancestral musical pedigree. He is a first generation musician in his family--no easy path in India where son-follow-father professional expectations are nearly inviolable. In fact, at the outset, the budding musician so feared his father's objection, he played music totally in secret. His father, a wrestler, never knew. Eventually, Chaurasia climbed to international fame, performed at Albert Hall in London at age 30 and received acclaim from violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin.

Off stage, the bigger-than-life Panditji, a strict vegetarian, is actually a quiet, unassuming man, preferring his soulful world of nada, raga and tala. He loves tasty food, especially South

Indian idli, sambar and dosa. The drawn, saggy lines on his square face and locks of grey hair reveal his sixty-plus years. Deep set, reflective eyes and a weak voice unmask exhaustion from a near-continuous travel/performing schedule.

Chaurasia's wife occasionally accompanies him to his concerts. His only son, studying for an MBA in America, plays the sitar. "With academics he does not get time to practice," Chaurasia shares. "He feels that if he takes to music, he should live up to my expectations and excel. And for that he will have to devote all his time practicing. I don't force him." Over the last three decades he has been honored with many awards, but his greatest joy remains creating celestial sound for temporal audiences.

Sidebar: Interview with Hariprasad Chaurasia

Hinduism Today: At what age did you begin to learn music?

Hariprasad Chaurasia: I started when I was ten. I was fond of music and would listen to the radio. I began learning vocal Hindustani music from Pandit Rajaram, my neighbor. He recognized my talent and encouraged me a lot. But my father was a wrestler and he very much wanted his sons to take to wrestling. I would go to the wrestling ring with him. I was very scared of my father, and I would hide from him. He would listen to music but was not deeply interested in it. He did not want any of us to take to music. So I began my lessons in music without his knowledge. I would practice secretly in my friend's house.

HT:What about your mother? Did she know?

HC:My mother died when I was four-and-a-half. I don't remember seeing her. My father did not remarry and had taken the burden of bringing up four children by himself. He was very strict. I was scared even to see him.

HT: Do you miss your mother?

HC:Yes, even now. All my life I have been missing her. Every time I see a child with his mother I feel a pain tug at my heart. I don't even have a photograph of her. She is just there in my imagination. I see her in the form of a goddess.

HT:Why did you switch over to instrumental music?

HC:Somehow I did not like my voice very much. After studying vocal for two years, I decided to learn bansuriflute. I had heard the great master Pandit Bholanath of Varanasi perform. I immediately surrendered myself to him and became his disciple.

HT: What about your school education?

HC:I studied up to intermediate. I discontinued because I was zero in studies. I wanted to concentrate on music.

HT:When did you give your first performance?

HC:I was fourteen. It was a very small performance. I left home and went to Cuttack in Orissa when I got a job in All India Radio in 1954. I was about 19 years old then.

HT:How did your father react to your leaving the family?

HC:He was shocked and very hurt. That's when I told him I was scared of him and would always hide at his sight. He was happy that I had gotten a government job. There was no music in my family, and we were not very well off. So I decided that if I did not accept this job, I may never be able to pursue music again. When you are keen on pursuing something and you get an opportunity, you don't feel unhappy about giving up anything. I don't feel unhappy or regret over leaving my family.

HT:Could you have become a good wrestler?

HC:No. I was not any good at it. I went there only to please my father. But maybe because of the strength and stamina I built up then, I'm able to play the bansuri even to this day.

HT:How was your stint at All India Radio?

HC:I joined there as an accompanying artist for big musicians

at their concerts. I was able to practice for 12 to 14 hours a day. Back home, I could hardly practice for two hours. Later I resigned from my All Radio job and became a freelancer. I went everywhere with big musicians. Up to then I wasn't keen on becoming a professional. I only wanted to master the art. It was God's will.

HT: Since you didn't come from a family of musicians, how difficult was it for you to find a guru?

HC: I had a very difficult time. It was a long struggle. In 1966, I found a real guru in Guru Ma Annapoorna Devi of Maihar Gharana. She was the daughter of the great maestro Ustad Alladdin Khan and wife of Pandit Ravi Shankar. Every time I approached her, she sent me away saying, "Why do you want me to teach you? I don't teach. Go to my husband, he will teach you." I was disappointed that after ten years I had found a real guru and she had refused me. For three years I waited. Finally, my persistence convinced her of my genuine interest in music. She accepted me as her disciple.

HT: Who are the people who have inspired you?

HC: My inspiration was from listening to great masters. Lord Krishna inspired me into playing the flute. There are no records of His. But He is always there guiding me.

HT: You are one of the greatest musicians of the country today. How do you feel being at the top?

HC:There is no "top" in music. I don't feel elated at all. I'm still fighting for excellence. You have to listen to great masters, have a music sense, practice hard, do research and use your own imagination. I'm always learning. I have never given any best performance. I'm not satisfied. I may have become famous but the struggle continues at every stage. If people have enjoyed my music, I'm happy too. But when people come and tell me my concert was good, I'm confused. If they tell me which ragal played well, which part of the concert they enjoyed most, or which part did not impress them, that would be good feedback. I can learn and perfect myself only when I get critical opinion.

HT:How do you relate to your audience?

HC:When I play, it is not for the audience. I play for that superior Power in between the audience and me. There are different kinds of people in the audience, and it is difficult for me to satisfy everyone. I perform for "that Power." If He is satisfied and happy, I feel blessed.

HT:Do you consider yourself an orthodox Hindu?

HC:Well, I almost never go to temples. I don't find the time. I'm not religious in that sense. My religion is my music. Lord Krishna is my God. Whenever I want to pray, whenever I want to meditate and concentrate, I take my flute. I can feel God. The feeling is difficult to explain, but I feel lost when I'm in it.

HT:Does the tiring travel schedule affect your music?

HC:Flute is an instrument which gives you more power as you play. It's like the breathing exercises in yoga. I'm able to increase my lung power by playing more. But because of travelling I don't get time to practice.

HT:How do you spend your typical day?

HC:My day starts at five in the morning. I take the bansuri and keep on playing 'till it tires me. I spend my entire day immersed in music. I don't know what time I sleep. Even in my sleep I think of music.

HT:What new innovation have you tried with music?

HC:People have said my music is meditative. Surgeons have written to me saying that listening to my music before an operation enhances their concentration and eases their tensions. I have recorded some cassettes only with alaap for those who seek a meditative music experience [e.g. Flying Beyond by Eternal Music of Seattle, Washington, USA].

HT:At times during the interview I could see streaks of sadness run across Pandit Chaurasia's deeply etched, expressive face. His gentle voice betrayed a childlike pathos. Though out of context, I spontaneously asked him if he was a "pained man." I said it in a caring, almost motherly tone.

HC:Yes, I'm very much pained. The difficulties of my childhood have left a deep mark on me. Everything has been difficult for me in life. But I'm much stronger now. Difficulties have made me take life in its stride. I'm able to think better. When everything is tuneful, I'm happy.

Choodie Shivaram, a journalist for 15 years, holds a BA degree and a full law degree. She lives in Bangalore with her husband and two children .