

Bhairav Se Sohni

Second All Women Music Festival

THE second all India women's *sangit sammelan*, held in New Delhi on March 8 and 9, 1986, was distinguished by the high standard of achievement of the participants. The group which organised the *sammelan* was Geetika, founded by Dr Shanno Khurana, who also performed.

The two day programme was spread over three sessions and consisted of a *tal vadya kacheri*, a flute recital, a sitar *jugalbandi*, a panch *veena* concert, *tabla* solos, and three forms of vocal music: *khayal*, light classical, and *dhrupad*.

The two *sitarists*, who played a duet, Suneera Kasliwal from Delhi and Reshma Shrivastava from Allahabad, had only one day to practise together. Shobha Kudesia from Bareilly, who is a *tabla* player, was asked about three months before the *sammelan* whether she would be able to play the *pakhawaj* for the *dhrupad* recital by Sumati Mutatkar. Shobha courageously set to work practising. She put in a commendable performance when the time came and became the first woman to play the *pakhawaj* for a *dhrupad* recital.

I had an opportunity to meet some of the women who took part in the *sammelan* and was able to learn a little about their problems and work. Shannoji, who is the originator of the idea of an all women music festival, is also the guiding spirit behind it. She was inspired to organise it because in her 40 year career as a classical singer Shannoji had realised that although there are so many talented and accomplished women musicians today, it is more difficult for women than for men classical musicians to find the financial and organisational backing necessary to achieve professional status. Therefore, she feared that classical music might die out amongst women.



Goka Lakshamma on the thavil

She pointed out that even though music education is now more widely available, being offered in universities and colleges as a course, the spread of education is not enough to develop students into artists. A professional attitude and sound backing are also necessary. Shannoji pointed out that in many sections of society, particularly in northern India, a stigma is still attached to female performing artists. Often, when she has invited talented young girls to work with her in her operas, their parents have refused permission, saying: "Shanno ji, stage per nahin"

Shannoji firmly believes that a conscious effort must be made to encourage professionalism among women classical musicians and a system of music management introduced. Under such a system, musicians could be freed

from the tension of making appointments, arranging tours, and finding sponsors.

I also met Dr Aban Mistry, the renowned *tabla* player and music scholar from Bombay. Hers is a particularly tough field, because it is completely dominated by men. Originally, she had set her heart on being a Kathak dancer, but it was not to be. At age 14, after a stomach ailment and operation, she was forbidden to dance. She was rescued from misery and self pity by Pt. Keki S. Jijina, who began to teach her *tabla* because he had seen that her understanding of rhythm was very good. He told her: "*Jahan nach se palnmchti, vahin pahunchayenge.*" Later on, Abanji's talent and devotion to music was noticed by the late Ustad Amees Husain Khan who offered to help her perfect her skills. Abanji received the

unstinting support of these two fine men but, in general, she has faced problems as a performer in a male dominated environment. She explained that men used to bother her so, finally, she began to use the title "Shrimati" before her name, even though she is not married. Her experience has shown her that "when a woman performs, the old attitude comes back somewhere in the minds and eyes of men.."

Abanji has made a significant contribution to musicology with the publication in 1984 of her book *Pakhawaj aur tabla ke gharane evam paramparayen*. She did the research for this book, helped by Pandit Jijina, over a period of 10 years. She travelled all over the country, from village to village, wherever material was to be found, often sleeping under trees in temple courtyards. The NCPA *Quarterly Journal* has said that the book "must be regarded as an important landmark in the

history and development of percussion instruments. It has thus become a source book on the subject."

I was also able to meet the five member *tal vadya kacheri*, percussion group from Bangalore. In this group the *konokol*, Smt. Jagannatha Vasudeva Murthy, who speaks out the drum syllables, is an accomplished *mrudangam* player. As a young woman she had become an acclaimed performer, but then she had to stop for the sake of marriage and children: "I felt very bad, but one needs time and peace of mind to practise so I remained quiet." She has come back to the stage after about 20 years. In contrast to the experience of Smt. Vasudeva Murthy stands that of the younger members of the group. It was encouraging to learn that Geetha Shrinidhi, the *ghatam* player, and K. Shashikala, the *mrudangam* player both got married on condition that they be permitted to continue their practice and

performances. As Geetha put it: "We cannot leave music."

B.R. Latha, the *kanjeera* player, is the daughter of Shri H.P. Ramachar, an eminent *mrudangam* player and the founder director of the group. Latha says "I am lucky" and appreciates the fact that she is allowed by her parents to perform at concerts all over Karnataka as an accompanist. V. Goka Lakshamma, the *thavil* player, at 16 is the youngest member of the group. She has given up school for the time being, to be able to devote herself full time to her music study.

The *Sammelan* was a massive and expensive affair to organise. It cost nearly Rs 100,000. The money was raised solely through private effort. Next time Geetika hopes to obtain more institutional and governmental support. Whether that comes about or not, we hope that Geetika will continue this pioneering work of focusing attention on the achievements of women musicians. □

Christian Women Demand Reform

On February 4, 1986, the Joint Women's Programme of CISRS took a delegation of Christian women to hand over to the prime minister a memorandum demanding change in the Christian personal law. The appeal emerged out of recommendations made by women at various meetings organised by the Programme in different urban and rural areas.

Christian laws in India were made by the British to suit their oppressive policies and are no longer relevant for the Indian church. Incidentally, the English laws have undergone a great deal of change but Indian Christian personal laws remain outdated, irrelevant and inhuman. They discriminate against women in matters of divorce and succession.

There should be a uniform marriage law for all Christians. Dowry should be prohibited. No church should perform a marriage where dowry has been given

or taken. A minimum age of marriage should be laid down in the Christian Marriage Act. The provisions which permit marriage of boys below the age of 21 and girls below 18 should be amended.

The Indian Divorce Act, 1869, should be amended to make grounds of divorce more liberal. Section 10 should be changed to give both men and women the same grounds of divorce. At present, men can get divorce on grounds of adultery but women can get divorce only on grounds of adultery coupled with bigamy, incest or cruelty. Mutual consent should also be available as a ground for divorce. Harassment for dowry should be treated as a specific ground for divorce. Section 17 should be changed, allowing the decree of divorce to be granted by the court where the petition is filed. At present, the high court has to confirm the decree after six months, which unnecessarily delays the process.

There should be one law of

succession for all Christians, irrespective of the region they belong to. Therefore, the Travancore Christian Succession Act and Cochin Christian Succession Act should be repealed as discriminatory.

The Indian Succession Act, 1925, should be changed to give a wife full rights over the property of a deceased husband, if he dies without making a will and without leaving children or parents. She should not have to share the pro-perty with his distant relatives. The provision in section 32, depriving a widow of her share in her husband's property if she had made a pre-marriage contract to that effect, should be deleted. Christian women and men should have the right to adopt children of either sex. The adoption should be capable of being effected without court permission. The object should be the evolution of a common law for Christians, a law that should recognise the equality of the sexes. This is a part of a struggle for a uniform personal law for all citizens of this country. It is but a first step towards that ultimate goal.

—Joint Women's Programme