

AT KHANSAAB'S DOORWAY

A COUPLE OF MEMORIES

JYOTI HEGDE

Khansaab was extremely strict, disciplined, and a man of strong principles. He was a true king in his field and lived with that dignity throughout his life. I believe his strictness with me shaped me into a stronger person-strong enough to pursue the Rudra Veena. He would get furious over even small mistakes and never tolerated them, which made me constantly aware of the need for precision and perfection. I believe his way of showing love was through scolding. He did not teach me every time I visited-sometimes I received nothing, sometimes very little, and sometimes an abundance. I believe that in the seven years I spent learning from him, I received only a single grain of semolina. Khansaab was a deep, endless ocean, with no shore in sight.



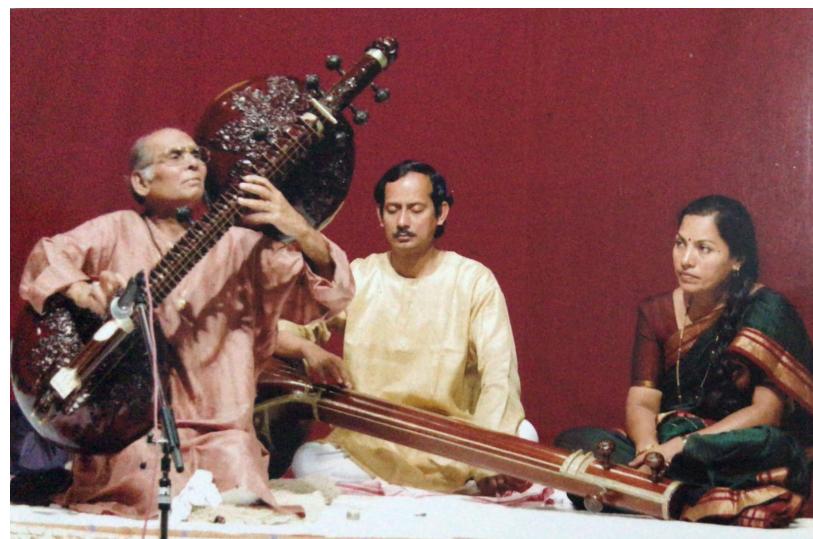
Vidushi Jyoti Hegde with Ustaad Asad Ali Khan. COURTESY **JYOTI HEGDE**

When I first met Ustad Asad Ali Khan, I was already a B-grade artist at All India Radio. I initially learnt from Dr Bindu Madhav Pathak of Kirana Gharana and then the foundations

Jyoti Hegde is an Indian classical musician, known for her mastery of the Rudraveena in the Dhrupad tradition and her artistry on the sitar. She has been a disciple of Ustad Asad Ali Khan. *Anveshanā* interviewed Jyoti Hegde in the July 2025 edition, available [here](#).

of Dhrupad by Pt. Indudhar Nirody ji of Agra Gharana. I was deeply drawn to Dhrupad, and as my Guruji, Pt. Indudhar Nirody was moving from Dharwad to Mysore, and I began seeking a guide who could lead me to its deeper understanding. Learning from Khansaab was my biggest dream, and though I knew it would not be easy, I was fully prepared to take up the challenge.

I somehow managed to get his phone number. The first three or four times I called, I could not reach him. His students answered and told me that Khansaab was busy. Finally, one day, I got a chance to speak to him. His voice was deep and powerful, full of authority, and in his royal, Urdu-influenced Hindi, he began explaining how difficult the path was—you are a girl, you live in Karnataka, and I in Delhi, and so on. He seemed more focused on telling me why learning the Rudra Veena would be challenging.



Jyoti Hegde with Ustaad Asad Ali Khan playing Rudra Veena. COURTESY JYOTI HEGDE

But when I told him, I already play, and I am a B-High grade artist, yet I want to learn from you to understand it deeply. Without that, I feel incomplete. The conversation took a different turn. He simply said, “Alright, send me your cassette. Baad mein dekha jayega.” [We will see later] I sent him my recording, and soon after, I was called to his home in Delhi. It was pretty challenging. I was not earning at the time, and travel itself was not easy in those days. Carrying my Veena and traveling by train from Karnataka to Delhi, with my fifteen-year-old son accompanying me, was a journey in itself. I hardly realized when the journey ended. I was lost in dreams of receiving my first lessons from him. But unfortunately, he did not teach me then. For a woman who had come so far, managing home and family while depending on her husband for financial support, it could have been deeply disappointing. I would not

even call the Rudra Veena a “big” instrument-for me, it never was. What truly sustained me and gave me the strength to keep pursuing Khansaab was my pure, unwavering love for the Rudra Veena and Khansaab’s style. After two or three visits to his home in Asiad Village, Delhi, he suggested that I meet him whenever he was closer to Karnataka for concerts-whether in Mumbai or Bangalore-instead of traveling all the way to Delhi. That is when I truly began learning from him. Most of my lessons happened in the green rooms or in the hotels where he stayed, never in a continuous or regular manner, as many people would come to meet him. He never allowed me to sit on the *tanpura* during concerts. Instead, he made me sit beside him and asked me to closely observe his finger movements. He never allowed me to imitate or merely follow him. Instead, he asked me to observe deeply, absorb the lessons, and shape them according to my own nature. As he was imparting advanced taalim, he would often say, “Don’t become another Khansaab—be yourself.” He expected me to evolve into my own authentic version, which is why he never permitted me to memorize or blindly reproduce any lesson.

I remember an anecdote I will never forget. Whenever I went to meet him, I would look for a small, affordable lodge near his hotel. I would go with my Veena and one accompanying person—sometimes my son, sometimes my niece.



Jyoti Hegde with Ustaad Asad Ali Khan and Zaki Haider. COURTESY JYOTI HEGDE

One such day, he taught me something complex. He never really taught in the conventional sense. He would play or sing and then ask, “Ise baja paoge?” [Could you play this?] or his

favorite line, “Main jo keh raha hoon, aapke sar se guzar raha hai?” [What I am speaking, are you making sense of it?]

Somehow, I grasped that lesson and returned to my lodge. I spent the entire day practicing it continuously. My fifteen-year-old niece found it quite amusing to watch her aunt play the exact note again and again, like a damaged gramophone. Finally, I managed to play it exactly the way Khansaab seemed to expect. I was thrilled and eager to show him.

I took my Veena and went back to his hotel. He was in the washroom, and I thought it would be nice to start playing so he could hear it. But instead, he came out furious. Extremely angry, he said, “Meri ijazat li saaz uthane se pehle?” [Did you ask for my permission before picking up the instrument?] I was completely confused—it was my own Veena! I did not understand what had gone wrong, but soon I realized. By then, it was too late. He asked me to leave and refused to teach.

I still remember how terrible I felt that day. I cried all the way back. I didn’t sleep the entire night—I cried and played the veena, again and again. I didn’t eat anything. Early the next morning, around 5 or 6 a.m., I got a call at the hotel reception. It was one of Khansaab’s students: “Khansaab ne Veena leke bulaya hai.” [Khansaab has called you with Veena.] Despite having no sleep and no food, I suddenly felt full of energy. I immediately picked up my veena and went.

He said simply, “Haan, bajao. Kal kya bajana chahti thi.” [Yes, play. What did you want to play?] I played. Then he began teaching continuously until 10 a.m. He had a flight at 11. I gently reminded him, “Khansaab, aapki flight 11 baje hai,” [Khansaab, your flight is at 11], only to be scolded again: “Aapka dhyaan seekhne mein hai ya meri flight mein?” [Are you more interested in learning or in my flight?]

Even after that, he continued teaching and ended up missing his flight, so the organisers had to arrange another one for him. This is how learning with Khansaab was. It felt like walking on thorns - but today, I realized how beautiful it was. Whatever I am today is because of that discipline.

Though he appeared very strict, he was kind at heart. Once, after returning very late from a concert, the hotel kitchen was closed. Since it was Khansaab, they had arranged food specially for him. He was fond of non-vegetarian food, while I am a strict vegetarian. I quietly left for my lodge, assuming I would have to sleep on an empty stomach. Suddenly, Khansaab called me back to join them for dinner. He noticed my discomfort in seeing the dishes and immediately separated the green salads and other vegetarian side dishes for me, insisting that I eat.

At times, I wish he had been with us a little longer. Perhaps we could have received a few more drops from that endless ocean.

C.S. ARAVINDA

Certain events in life unexpectedly leave indelible imprints. So it was, almost 20 years back, in the month of February of the year 2006, that I was immensely fortunate to experience a feast of musical extravaganza – the three-day Dhrupad Music Festival – featuring two performances each day, organized by the Prakriti Foundation at the Egmore Museum Theatre in Chennai.

**Prakriti
Foundation**

in association with

Sangeet
नाटक
अकादमी

Sangeet
Natak
Akademi

presents

The Dhrupad Music Festival

Celebrating the oldest form of Hindustani Classical Music

Dhrupad is essentially a poetic form incorporated into an extended presentation style marked by precise and orderly elaboration of a raga. The term Dhrupad itself means "The literal rendering of verse into music" and so the songs have a particularly potent impact.

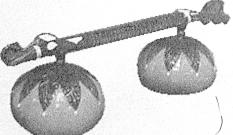
at The Museum Theatre, Egmore, Chennai.
16th to 18th February, 2006

16th February 6-8 pm - Uday Bhowalkar - Vocal
8-10 pm - Pandit Abhay Narayan Mallik - Vocal

17th February 6-8 pm - Ustad Bahadur Dagar - Rudraveena
8-10 pm - The Gundecha brothers - Vocal

18th February 6-8 pm - Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar - Vocal
8-10 pm - Ustad Asad Ali Khan - Rudraveena

www.prakritifoundation.com
prakritifoundation@gmail.com



Pamphlet of the Dhrupad Music Festival in Chennai, 2006. COURTESY C.S. ARAVINDA

Even after having stayed nearly a decade in Chennai by then, it was the first time I had been to this excellent venue. And it was also the very first time I was listening to Ustad Asad Ali Khan on the Rudra Veena, second of the two performances on day three, which means the last concert of the grand three-day feast of incredible music, focused on the central theme of Dhrupad.

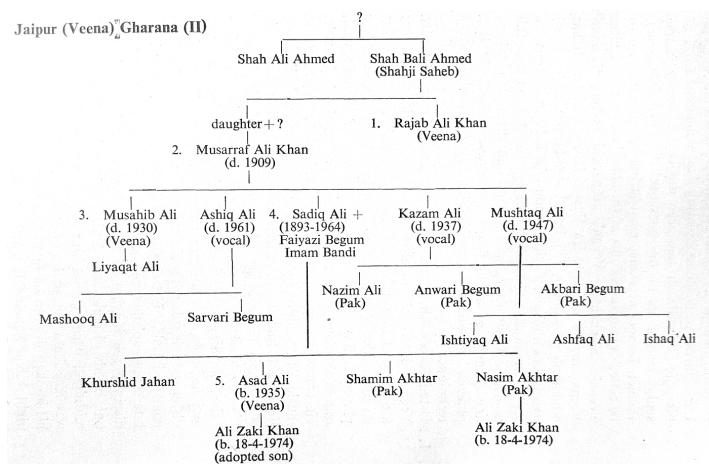
Indian classical music is believed to have its origin in the *Sāmaveda*. For someone who learnt a bit of Vedic chanting in the traditional way for nearly five years in Bangalore from Swami Chidananda, a swamiji belonging to the tradition of *sādhus* of Sri Ramakrishna Math, I was exposed to the musical elements of the *Sāmaveda* chanting. I had also listened to a lot of Indian classical music, including Dhrupad, before. However, it was not until that wholesome and intense three-day listening experience of Dhrupad from different artists that I could discern a semblance of connection to the *Sāmaveda* chanting style. I was able to feel the meditative aspect encapsulated by the Dhrupad tradition.

C.S. Aravinda is a mathematician and a retired faculty at TIFR-CAM, Bangalore. He is the chief-editor of *Bhāvanā*—The Mathematics Magazine.

Thus, by the time of the performance of Khan Saheb on the last day, I was already attuned to absorb the spirit of his music. In the performance prior to his, the vocalist Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar had sung Raag Bihag before concluding his concert. When Asad Ali Khansaab came on the stage, he first placed a small soft carpet and said he sits in the position of Vajrāsana, which was already something new to me. He then took the Rudra Veena and held it close to his body, like a Sitar, with one of the two drums resting on his left shoulder. This is the trademark style in which his ancestors played the instrument Rudra Veena, or 'been' as they referred to it. Announcing that he belongs to a long lineage of beenkars of Jaipur, he mentioned that the tradition they perpetuated from generation to generation is known as the Khandarbani style of Dhrupad. After this brief introduction, he announced that while he had planned to play the Raag Darbari, listening to the Raag Bihag by the previous musician, he had now made up his mind to play Bihag instead of Darbari, and the whole two-and-a-half-hour concert of his was just playing this one piece. Truly an experience of a lifetime.

The festival had left a deep impression on the audience, and the reports were all over the newspapers. It was the talk of the town, so to speak, and I was mesmerized beyond words, coming under the spell of a novel experience of Khansaab's unique Rudra Veena performance for the next week. In fact, I was going to go to Delhi on an academic visit a couple of days later, and learning that Khansaab lived in Delhi, I just wanted to go to his home and meet him personally.

I did some prior homework and prepared myself by reading all about his music and his ancestors from the book *Musicians of India: Past and Present*, with particular focus on the 'gharanas of Hindustani music and genealogies', by Amal Das Sharma. I had bought this book only a couple of years before, with the intention of understanding the historical traditions of the present-day musicians whose music had struck a deep chord in me. The book, in particular, carried small snippets of whatever information was available about the ancestors of Khansaab. The genealogy chart shown here is a compilation by the author after an extended conversation with Khansaab.



32

Lineage of Jaipur Gharana of Ustad Asad Ali Khan. COURTESY C.S. ARAVINDA

Premising that the book¹ may not be easily available, I reproduce below what it says about Khansaab:

Ustad Asad Ali Khan, born in Alwar on December 25, 1935, began his studies under his father, Ustad Sadiq Ali Khan, when he was only six. In the beginning, he had only to listen to music for hours together. In the course of time, he grew into a renowned Veena player. As a young man, he liked sports and played cricket. He is very fond of white dresses and sherwanis. He is virtuous and sweet-tempered. Unmarried, he adopted his sister's son, Ali Zaki Khan, whom he taught with love and care. He performs regularly on radio and television and at music conferences in India and abroad.

Asked to recall some memorable event of his life, he narrated to this author a miraculous incident which had occurred in 1977 while he was performing at Sydney, Australia. The stage was old-fashioned, with a rolling curtain. During the performance, suddenly the curtain (about 85 kg in weight) started rolling down with a terrible sound. On hearing the awful noise and seeing the curtain fall, a dumb girl in the audience screamed loudly. Two or three feet above Khansaab's head, the curtain suddenly stopped. At the end of the performance the girl's overwhelmed parents congratulated him for the double miracle. He has been saved and their daughter, who had lost her voice some years ago, could speak again.

This was one thing I recalled to Khansaab when I met him at his home. He said he remembered this conversation but had not seen the book.

Meeting Khansaab at his home was special. He introduced me to his sister's daughter and son, Zaki, whom he was grooming to be his successor. He was very warm and full of affection. He said that he respects anyone who respects the Rudra Veena, which was to him an incarnation of the divine. I was overcome with emotion to say anything more, and it was evening, about 9:30 pm, when I left his home after offering my respectful pranams.

Back home, I managed to acquire a second copy of the aforementioned book after some patient waiting and sent it to him. He called me over the phone and said he was very happy to see it. I collected almost all available recordings of his music, and I kept in touch with him from time to time in order not to miss any opportunity to listen to him live again. It turned out that his Chennai performance was the only one I heard.

I, however, visited him at his home the second time in 2010, on my way to the Harish-Chandra Institute in Prayagraj for an academic visit. He was waiting for three young students who had

¹*Musicians of India – past and present: Gharanas of Hindustani music and genealogies* by Amal Das Sharma, Calcutta : Naya Prokash, 1993, xiii, 348 p. ISBN: 81-85421-18-8.

an appointment to interview him for SPIC MACAY. I had a brief talk with him before the students came, and what ensued during the interview was a delightful conversation. After about half an hour, Khansaab said we would have a chai break. That was when I exchanged email IDs with the students and also took a couple of photographs. I had to leave halfway, having to catch my train to Prayagraj, and I did so very reluctantly.



Pictures taken during the interview in 2010, New Delhi.

Left: Ananya Chaturvedi, Taruna Kumari, and Raghav with Ustad Asad Ali Khan and Zaki Haider.
Right: C.S. Aravinda with Ustad Asad Ali Khan and Zaki Haider. COURTESY [C.S. ARAVINDA](#)

Sadly, Khansaab passed away the very next year, on 14 June 2011. I was not in India then, but upon my return, I spoke with Zaki Haider, who narrated the last days of the music-incarnate Khansaab, and said the end was rather unexpected and sudden.

As luck would have it, one of the students who interviewed Khansaab that day, Ananya Chaturvedi, later did her PhD in mathematics in the US. Upon returning to India, she was a postdoc with me, and so the contact was renewed.

All of this memory suddenly rushed back to me after I read the delightful interview of [Jyoti Hegde Ji](#) in the July 2025 edition of *Anveshanā*, and I proposed to its editors the idea of possibly carrying this sixteen-year-old conversation in case it had not been published before. The interview may perhaps have been the last one Khansaab gave. Kind permission from Ananya and friends came soon, and the result is what you see in this January 2026 edition of *Anveshanā*.

Looking back, one cannot help but marvel at the unexpected turn of events in life, and the remarkable way they return in surprisingly different ways. Reading this interview now, in original Hindi and in its English translation, a vivid recollection of that particular evening of 24th January, 2010, became palpable to me, and listening to his voice brought him alive – truly a great gift of the technology and remarkable friendships forged and connections established.