



*Raag Gandhi: The Musical
Community of the
Mahatma*

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“Music does not proceed from the throat alone. There is music of mind, of the senses and of the heart.”

Someone once asked the Mahatma, “Mahatmaji don’t you have any liking for music?”

Gandhi replied, “If there was no music and no laughter in me, I would have died of this crushing burden of my work.”

Introduction

The Mahatma that we know as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has his presence engraved on every path he ever crossed, every life he touched, every community, country or, to be precise, he changed the perspective of humankind and opened doors of an awakening we are still short of fully assessing and admiring. The world remembers him as a mascot of human rights, crusader of the freedom struggle, the prophet of Satya & Ahimsa (Truth & Non-Violence). All these are at the core of Bapu’s essence and presence, equating Gandhi with just one of these is limiting his immeasurable greatness. When you dive deep in the ocean you discover pearls, our journey of Raag Gandhi has taken us on a path of enlightenment of Gandhi the Artist or, more precisely, Gandhi the Musician.

Gandhi the Artist

“...there are so many superstitions rife about me that it has now become almost impossible for me to overtake those who have been spreading them. As a result, my friends’ only reaction is almost invariably a smile when I claim I am an artist myself.” (Roy 1950, 65-66)

When one tries to trace the imprints of Gandhi, the man who had an eye for beauty and aesthetics, who had unparalleled sense of the healing touch of music (as is evident by the opening statement of the article), who wrote a prayer in prose (‘Hey Namrata ke Sagar’), who wrote and translated hundreds of volumes in English and Gujarati, we discover an unexplored dimension of his personality. We come across a different man. We meet Gandhi the Artist.

Gandhi the Lyricist

In 1934, Gandhiji wrote a prose poem as an answer to a question on prayer and God with its opening lines as –

Lord of Humility,

Dwelling in the little Pariah hut

Help us to search for Thee throughout...

In 1969, the Government of Maharashtra released this song in Hindi to mark 100 years of Gandhiji’s birth. The Hindi version goes by the name ‘Hey Namrata ke Sagar’ (Chandvankar, 2012). This song has been the opening verse of Raag Gandhi performed by us throughout the nation in the past couple of years. This song signifies the yearning of Gandhi to strike a balance between Spirituality and Art. So we consider it to be the cornerstone of the journey of Gandhi on the path of finding the healing touch of Art that soothes one’s soul, relieves us of our worldly burdens and takes us to a land where Art and Music elevates us to become one

with the Almighty. By submitting oneself to the Creator we bring peace, and Gandhi chose Music be the path and medium of this submission.

Gandhi's Music (bhajans) as a catalyst to bring Religious Harmony, Compassion and establishing Secularism

“We see Hindu and Mussalman musicians sitting cheek by jowl and partaking in musical concerts. When shall we see the same fraternal union in other affairs of our life?” (Neuman, 2011)

Gandhi wondered what can be the common platform that could bring people from different strata of society together; he found his answer in music. To him music had the charm and silent power of binding the otherwise divided society. The lyrics of his favourite bhajan is a testimony of that – ‘Vaishnav Jan to Tene Kahiye je peed parayi Jane re’ (One who is a Vaishnav-devotee of Vishnu, knows the pain of others). By placing importance on this, Gandhi emphasized on compassion for fellow humans as the only criteria to judge oneself. So, Gandhi's Music is all about establishing equality among the socially, economically, politically differing individuals and bringing harmony.

i. Africa: The Tolstoy Farm: Gandhi's tryst with the Ashram and a unique lifestyle of self-reliance, the experiment of bringing the deprived together, began with the establishment of Tolstoy Farm in 1910 (Gandhi Museum, Rajkot). Gandhiji attributed his success in the struggle against racial discrimination prevalent in South Africa to his experiments at Tolstoy Farm. It is here that he began the practice of reciting religious hymns (bhajan) in the evening prayer meets held at 7pm every day (Bhana, 1975). This bring to the fore the fact that Gandhiji believed in Spiritualism as a must for attaining 'cooperative commonwealth' and he chose his bhajan sandhya meet as a tool in attaining his goal.

Another noteworthy aspect of these prayer meets was that it had prayers from all religions and prayers emphasizing humanity rather than devotion to a particular religion. The idea of accommodating every religion and establishing a secular

environment was an experiment that helped Gandhiji later during the freedom struggle of India.

ii. Gandhi's experiment with violin: It is a known fact that Gandhi found solace in music; however, it is less known that he actually bought a violin and tried learning music formally (Orwell, 1949). Because of the call of duty, he could not continue with it as passion or profession. But his attempt at learning music qualifies him as an enthusiastic music lover who fell just short of and had the yearning for being a disciple of music.

iii. Gandhian Music: Gandhiji started a community life in Africa, and the Shramik Prayer was a part of it. He published a collection of hymns that were sung as "Proverbs Poem". Along with the characteristics of Pragya located in Gita, he started singing at the time of prayer. Prayer meetings and music became a symbolic Gandhian activity in the pre as well as post independent India. The songs selected for the prayer meetings were popular bhajans, nazms with musical and melodic appeal. Gandhiji himself deliberated on the raag and rendition tunes of the same (Subramanian, 2020). Narayan Moreshwar Khare (1922), the music teacher and musician at the Sabarmati Ashram, compiled and published Ashram Bhajnavali, the bible of Gandhian Music, reflecting the secular fabric of the prayers, raags, moods, tunes selected carefully to connect with the masses. As the life of the ashrams bloomed, so did the collection of hymns and bhajans, and in the process this gave birth to a different genre of Music-Literature that healed the distressed and helped everyone cross the class & religion divide to become one whole. Music became the thread to hold the pearls of different origins together.

Raag Gandhi: Our journey in the world of Gandhi's Symphony

The team started the journey of discovering a single musical show on Gandhi's 150th Birth Anniversary with the title "BAA-BAPU 150- *Sangeet mien Gandhi* (Gandhi in Music)". This took us to a path untraveled, visiting libraries across Mumbai,

meeting Gandhians, trying to understand the lifestyle of Gandhi Ashrams. What astonished us was the hundreds of books of poems, ghazals, bhajans and every form of literature written on The Mahatma and his ideology. It was like we got a treasure trove in disguise. And this was meant to be, as we were destined to bring Gandhi to people again, but this time, with our music. We not only found Gandhi Music, we became spellbound by the great symphony that Gandhi is!

i. Literary Expedition: The first step was to look for the literature we can present and what we came across was a sea of literature in different languages, written under different genres, published in different states, even countries. Such is the legacy of Gandhi – the phenomenon that the countless words still fall short of comprehending completely. Mukhtar Khan did the first draft of the research for the project.

ii. Bhajans & Nazms (Poems): Among everything we found in exploration of these writings, we decided to include ‘Hey Namrata ke Sagar’ written by Gandhiji himself as it shows the spiritual height of a person who was a karmayogi and a leader of humanity too. ‘Vaishnav Jana to’, the bhajan that was part of daily prayers at ashram, was also sung by Narayan Khare when Gandhiji ventured on the historic Dandi Yatra (Lal, 2014). The ultimate definition of being human rather than just living as a human being, it is synonymous to any Gandhian bhajan sandhya. A poem written in Urdu by Allama Iqbal ‘Lab pe aati hai Dua’ that gives message of devoting one’s life to learning and enlightenment and ‘Allah tero Naam Ishwar tero Naam’ was included to reflect the Gandhian idea of Sarvadharm Sambhav (Equality of all religions). Apart from this many devotional songs, prayers & hymns were included in various shows depending on the region of shows and the local languages of the venue.

iii. Gandhian Principles in Music: The biggest challenge as well as inspiration was to draw a parallel to the famous Gandhi Katha popularized by the greatest storyteller on Gandhi, Shri Narayan Desai. The essence of our presentation of the principles were influenced greatly by *Gandhi Katha* (Desai, 2011). *Mrutyuanjyi* (1969), a collection of poetic literature on Gandhi in 12 languages, edited by Bhavani Prasad Mishr, was a gem we found. A poem that gained immense popularity during this musical journey is ‘Shakti Ahimsa Mein Jitni woh Nahi Shashtra Hunkar

Mein' (Nonviolence is a greater power, than any weapon or war cry), written by Shri Poddar Ramavtar. It is a testimony to the fact that Gandhian Music is not just about the musical notes but about how it reflects and propagates Gandhian ideology. The struggles of Gandhi in personal, public, spiritual life and his determination to fight alone for the truth was presented through Gurudev's '*Ekla Chalo Re*' (Keep walking alone). Across the spectrum of different languages and dialects, what remained constant was Gandhi the teacher who practiced what he preached come what may.

iv. Kasturba Gandhi – A shadow that showed the path: Kasturba Gandhi, the Mahatma's soulmate, shadow, an unsung freedom fighter, the functional head of ashrams, started Satyagraha even before it was popularized by Gandhi. Gandhi believed her to be practicing nonviolence in life (Basu, 2011). As we were celebrating 150 years of Baa Bapu, poems and songs were written and performed to pay homage to her.

v. Writings worth a Mention: Excerpts of 'Bapu', a poetic narration of Gandhi's life, written by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar (1948) was used to narrate the show poetically. Literature of Sheri Bhopali, Dr. Masood Hussain, Majaz Lucknowi, Balkrishna Rao, and others were used to bring balance and meaning to the Musical. Writings of Hridayesh Mayank and R K Paliwal were presented too, who remained an unflinching support and encouragement to the idea that Raag Gandhi is!

vi. Fresh Perspective, Fresh Tunes: Bringing Gandhi to the young generation was a challenge and so we decided to use a few renowned and mostly fresh literature tuned by the young singer, composer and music director Faraz Khan, who not only composed the whole show but also presented it in his velvet voice to mesmerize the audience, ranging from 5 years of age to as old as people who grew up in Gandhi's presence. We started with a show that became a life mission for its crew. Delivering, spreading, professing, propagating and understanding Gandhi, to learn, unlearn and re-learn what Gandhism is through the lens of music.

vii. Harmony of Classical and Modern Instrumentals: While keeping the traditional Classic Music of Gandhian era intact the young team of teenagers and musicians in their early 20s like Shikha Srivastav (Singer), Utkarsh Jadhav (Flutist), Roshan Gayekar (Tabla), Joshua Urunkar (Guitarist), Aman Jadhav (Synthesizer) brought a breath of fresh air to the music that could connect and appeal to younger audiences. The soothing tunes and some upbeat western music - reinventing and reincarnating Gandhian Music to bring Gandhi to the Gen Next - is another aim of our project.

viii. Analogy of Tunes used:

Ashram Bhaj nawali (Khare, 1928) has mentioned specific ragas under which the rendition of bhajans are to be done. What is noteworthy here is that the tunes and ragas were handpicked and for it to be authentically a musical even tunes were mentioned in writing. Raags originate from 'thaats' (Manna, 2016). Most of the bhajans are in Raag Khamaj, Raag Des, Raag Kaafi followed by Raag Bhairav and Bhairavi. Raag Des and Raag Khamaj are from same thaata called "Khamaj Thaata", that has the 'ras' (mood) of praising. Apart from ras the thaata also represents the folk texture of presentation. Thus, the music Gandhi preferred were praising the lord, connecting the people by using music close to the folk culture, thus creating connection with masses and finally serving them the message of unity, equality and humanity with the carefully picked lyrics of hymns, poems and narratives.

ix. From Gandhi Bhajan to Gandhi ko Gaana (Singing Gandhi): Our Experience of interactions with Gandhian Shri Sanjay Tula, Shri Kiran Chavda, Vice Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth Shri Anamikbhai Shah and our stay at Lokniketan, Ratanpur and Gandhi Ashram, Zilia, opened a new window of understanding Gandhian lifestyle, where music is a part of daily routine. It made us realize that Gandhi is not just about a few bhajans that the world knows, it is a whole genre of music to be explored. As Shri Sanjay Tula Ji aptly said 'Gandhi ko Gaana' (Singing Gandhi) is a genre, and our exploration of this genre will not be possible without these greats enlightening our path.

Raag Gandhi – Today & Tomorrow:

What remains constant and fails to adapt, perishes and decays slowly but surely. Any legacy however great it is, if not reinvented, redesigned for the next generations may become obsolete and may be not accepted at all by the future generations. Gandhism is an eternally accepted lifestyle, an ideology based on *My Experiments with Truth*. The name of his autobiography, carefully chosen, evokes the idea of continuous evolution of the ways in which Gandhi can be taught tomorrow. Gandhi is not meant to be only in history books, he is to be instrumental in understanding today with his prism of truth and more importantly in moulding the tomorrow. Keeping the essence pure, presenting it through the medium of music – what Gandhi believed to be harmony and equality – the only leveler in a world full of inequalities, is the purpose and mission of our Journey that is RAAG GANDHI.

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