

Citation: Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1972)

BEGUM AKHTAR

Begum Akhtar was born on 7 October 1914 in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh. She was one of the foremost vocalists of the country. She had her training in Hindustani classical music with Ata Mohammad Khan of the Patiala gharana and Abdul Wahid Khan of the Kirana gharana and made her debut at the age of seven.

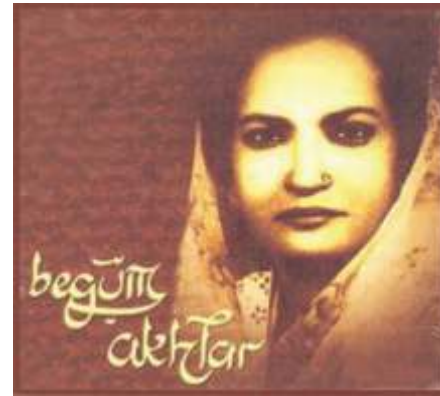
Begum Akhtar was well known for her singing of thumri and dadra, in which she had combined both the *Poorab* and the *Punjab* styles with a characteristic flavour of her own. Her rendering of ghazals was of a rare quality.

Begum Akhtar had lent her voice to many Hindi films including *Roti*, *Panna Dai*, *Dana Pani* and *Ehsaan*. She had also acted in many Hindi films such as *Mumtaz Beghum* (1934), *Jawani Ka Nasha* (1935), *King for a Day* (1933), *Ameena* (1934), *Roop Kumari* (1934), *Naseeb Ka Chakkar* (1936), and *Anaar Bala* (1940).

For her eminence in the field of music and her contribution to its enrichment, Begum Akhtar received the Padma Shri (1968), the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1972), and the Padma Bhushan (posthumously) in 1975.



MINISTRY OF CULTURE
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



ہم کو مٹا سکے یہ زمانے میں دم نہیں
ہم سے زمانہ خود ہے، زمانے سے ہم نہیں
جگر مراد آبادی -

हमको मिटा सके ये जमाने मे दम नहीं
हमसे जमाना खुद है, जमाने से हम नहीं
& ft xj ejnklckh

Programme

Rita Ganguly, Delhi: Vocal

Accompanists

Akhtar Hussain: Tabla

Ghulam Sabir: Sarangi

Ikhtlaq Hussain: Harmonium

Sushant Sharma: Guitar

Shashank Shekhar, Ghaziabad: Vocal

Accompanists

Mihir Kumar Natta: Tabla

Ghulam Sabir: Sarangi

Prabhati Mukherjee, Kolkata: Vocal

Accompanists

Manas Chakraborty: Tabla

Tanaya Bhaduri: Harmonium

Biplab Roy: Musical Effects

Rupa Mukhopadhyay: Tanpura



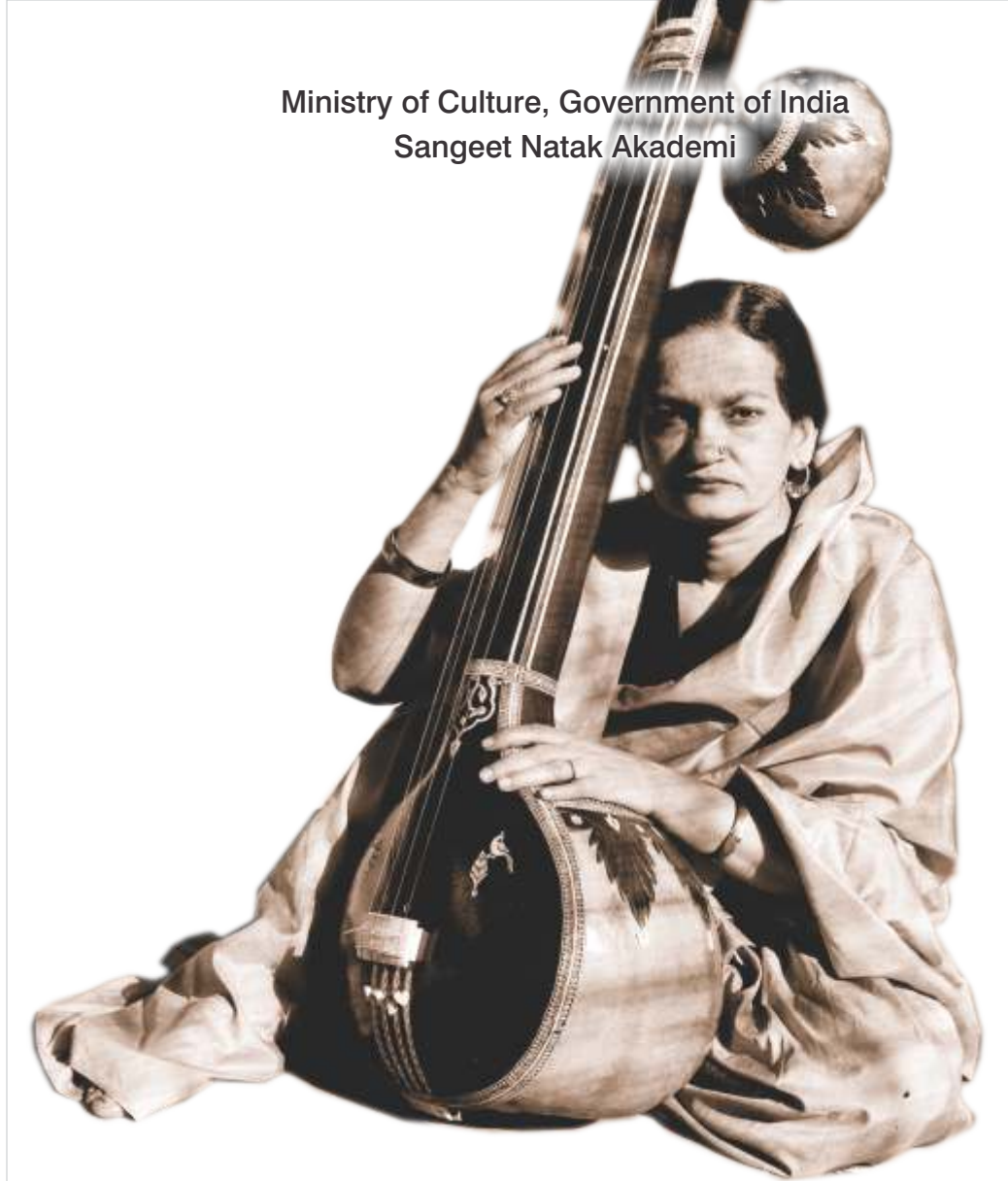
संगीत
नाटक
अकादेमी



Sangeet
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Ministry of Culture, Government of India
Sangeet Natak Akademi



Inauguration of
BEGUM AKHTAR BIRTH CENTENARY
COMMEMORATION

7th October 2014, 11.00 a.m.
National Museum Auditorium, New Delhi



بیگم اختر

BEGUM AKHTAR

A consummate artist to the end, Begum Akhtar (1914-1974) can be seen as the most charming torchbearer of several traditions: the syncretic Hindusthani culture of Awadh, the tradition of classical music in India that was nurtured for hundreds of years by teachers and students bound by the old quasi-mystical laws of the guru-shishya parampara, and the tradition of fiercely talented independent-minded women singers who, after the advent of recording companies, became new icons of feminism.

Akhtari was born in Faizabad, one of a set of fraternal twins. Her father had been a lawyer but abandoned her mother, Mushtri Bai, once the girls were born. They lived in penury, and then were visited by a great tragedy when, at the age of two-and-a-half, Akhtari's twin died. A few years after that their house in Faizabad burned down with most of their possessions. Mushtri Bai went, along with Akhtari, to live in Gaya with her brother. That is where Akhtari's phenomenal talent was truly appreciated and her uncle insisted on getting her proper training. Later, she spent several years in Calcutta, where she ran her salon and acted in theatre. Ever since technology made gramophone records so popular, her voice began to gain a wider audience. After a brief period as the artist-in-residence in Rampur (where it is believed the Nawab fell in love with her and proposed marriage) and a very successful stint in Bombay when she appeared in many films, she eventually settled in Lucknow.

After her marriage with Barrister Ishtiaq Ahmad Abbasi, an aristocrat from Kakori (the place that is famous for kababs), she embraced the purdah and for nearly six years she would no longer sing. However, in 1952, when she was fighting severe depression after her mother's death, it was advised that she be allowed to sing again and her husband encouraged her to perform once again. Soon her voice began to be a regular feature in All India Radio's programming. In leaps and bounds, Begum Akhtar's fame began to increase, and she continued to record prolifically as well as perform live till the very end.

It is interesting that her first public performance, as Akhtaribai Faizabadi, was in Patna. In 1934, an earthquake had devastated large parts of Bihar and Nepal, and subsequently a charity concert was arranged to raise funds for this. Ata Mohammad Khan, her guru, asked her to perform here, and after overcomeing her nervousness, she agreed to. Sarojini Naidu, 'the Nightingale of India', was present that day, and she was so deeply affected by this young singer's performance that she later sent a khadi saree over as a gift for her.

One of the central themes in the life of any great artist is the ability to make great sacrifices for her art. Begum Akhtar was no exception. By the time of this charity concert, she had already acted in two films. In fact, this is not very commonly known, but as an actress she found success and fame almost instantly. However, her guru, Ata Mohammad Khan Saheb, distanced himself from this new-found stardom that the film world had bestowed upon her. For a while she was on her own musically. At the height of her film career, she was invited to a prestigious music conference in Bombay where all the stalwarts of that day and age had come to perform – for example, Gauhar Jaan had come down from Lahore. Hearing these distinguished vocalists sing, Akhtari was filled with guilt at her own lack of preparation. She decided to give up on the glamorous world of films altogether and returned to music, to train again, this time under Ustad Waheed Khan. The legendary film-maker Satyajit Ray would later manage to persuade her to appear in a short cameo as an ageing courtesan in his film *Jalsaghar*. But other than this, she resisted the lure of the silver screen after this incident and gave herself completely over to the rigour of riyaz and taleem.

In later years, when she herself became a teacher, she followed the whimsical, sometimes-cruel sometimes-charming, yet absolutely compelling rules of the guru-shishya parampara herself. Her closest students have recorded how they would get absorbed in her large household, become an integral part of her family, cook in her kitchen, keep roza with her, feed her prasad from their own homes, sometimes sleep at her feet and, of course, spend hours learning from her. She never accepted any monetary payment from them.

The centenary celebrations offer an opportunity to pay homage to everything that Begum Akhtar stood for: sacrifice, art, love, poetry, and the rigour of taleem. But it also gives us a renewed sense of all the things she probably did not know she stood for (all her life, in spite of winning critical acclaim and popular celebrity, she suffered from that artistic sense of intense inadequacy). The centenary celebrations, thus, are also meant to acknowledge her as the pioneering woman she was in her times, as a feminist icon, as someone who broke the glass ceiling many times over in her life. One hopes that in this year, many young artists will take her body of work forward, break new ground, and more than anything else, they will shatter other glass ceilings. Only then will the memory of Begum Akhtar be truly honoured.