

**Speech for the Honourable Minister of Culture, Shri Shripad Naik, to be delivered on
07/10/2014.**

Distinguished members of the audience (to be altered depending on the people present),

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning, among renowned artists, musicologists and music lovers, at this inaugural function of the centenary commemoration celebrating the birth anniversary of Begum Akhtar.

Begum Akhtar is often called the *malika-e-ghazal* of the sub-continent. But such is the unique glory of Begum Akhtar's art and the charisma of her personality that any epithet we use for her, even this poetic one that was bestowed with great love and honour –malika-e-ghazal or the queen of the ghazal – somehow falls short in acknowledging the breadth of her craft and the extent of her influence in shaping the contours of semi-classical or light classical music in modern India.

Though it is the ghazal for which she is perhaps best-known, Begum Akhtar was, equally, the queen of the thumri and the daadra. It was not range that distinguished her voice among her contemporaries, but feeling. It was as though she was blessed with an incredible ability to express emotions, a complete malleability, so that every note she uttered came alive with a rare intimacy. It comes as no surprise, then, that her rendition of marsiya and noha around the time of Muharram was as remarkable as her mastery of purabiya forms, like the kajari that celebrates the coming of monsoon, Hori, which is sung during the festival of colours and the chaiti, sung in the holy month of Ram Navami. In fact, it is recorded that the last song she sang at her final concert in Ahmedabad on 27th October 1974 was the beautiful chaiti, 'Sawat nindiya jagaye, O Rama...' But more than anything else, Begum Akhtar was

the queen of hearts. When she performed, every single member of the audience felt that she was directing her soulful melody at only his or her direction. It is this quality that her listeners continue to remember – and to look for in artists that have come after her.

These centenary celebrations offer us an opportunity to reflect anew on her life and her work. Over the next year, the Ministry of Culture will conduct festivals that promote her music across India. Artists who have continued to endeavour in the traditions popularized by her will be showcased in these festivals, recognition will be given to them, and new scholarships have been envisioned to support young artists. These are only the most important of the many steps that the Ministry of Culture hopes to take in order to truly honour the memory of Begum Akhtar, and her life and work.

There is much to admire and respect in her story, a remarkable journey, where public achievement and personal sorrow performed a life-long jugalbandi. In India we have this traditional belief that the greatest of our artists are ‘gandharvas’ who come but rarely to this mortal world. But when they do, the music they create is deeper and more beautiful than anything witnessed thus far. It is also believed that these gandharvas in human form suffer great pain in their personal lives, and many say it is perhaps this sorrow that breathes into their art, a scent of heaven. This is true of Begum Akhtar’s life as well, from the time in her very early childhood when her father abandoned her mother Mushtri Bai, and her twin sister died as a toddler, to deeper wounds in her later years. Yet, it is this awareness of grief in love and life that has made the voice of Begum Akhtar resonate across the decades, and made her rendition of ‘Ae Mohabbat tere anjam pe rona aayaa’ bring tears to people’s eyes.

I shall not say anything more since I am sure the audience gathered here is waiting to be transported by the music that shall be presented this morning, music that remembers Begum Akhtar and is offered as a tribute to her memory. I extend my greetings to the gifted

musicians who have come here, to New Delhi, from far and near and I wish the audience a memorable listening experience.

Jai Hind

Speech by Secretary (Culture), Shri Ravindra Singh, to be delivered on 07/10/2014.

The Honourable Minister for Culture, distinguished musicians, musicologists and music lovers, friends,

We are gathered here today to commemorate the birth centennial of one of the finest artists the Indian sub-continent has seen, Begum Akhtar. She was born in 1914 and was often called Akhtaribai Faizabadi, from the place of her birth. This name has ended up connecting her forever to Faizabad, the former capital and cultural nerve centre of Awadh, famous for its, and also home to her historical other, Umrao Jan Ada, the famous courtesan and poet whose life was captured in Mirza Hadi Ruswa's eponymous novel.

After tasting great success in the music scene early on – her coming of age had coincided with the popularity of gramophone records in India – Akhtaribai Faizabadi soon found herself in Bombay, acting in films. Quickly she became a star, and her performance in movies like *Ek Din Ka Badshah*, *Nal Damayanti*, *Ameena*, *Jawaani Ka Nasha* and *Naseeb Ka Chakkar* in the early to mid-thirties – and Mehboob Khan's *Roti*, the grand finale of her film career that was released in 1942 – brought her both fame and celebrity. However, she soon gave up on films and returned to the world of music, setting up her salon in Lucknow.

In 1945, she married the barrister, Ishtiaq Ahmad Abbasi, and in keeping with the traditions of the time, she gave up singing and embraced life in purdah. However, after her mother

passed away a few years later, she was subsumed by a terrible depression, and in order to draw her out of it, her family encouraged her to sing again. After the silence of six claustrophobic years, Begum Akhtar returned to the world of music through All India Radio. It is said that one of the first ghazals she sang was 'Koyaliyaa tu mat kar pukaar/ Karejwa laage kataar', almost a reference to her own story. After this return to the limelight there was no looking back for her. Independent India had begun to promote classical and semi-classical music in right earnest, and Begum Akhtar was constantly in demand across the sub-continent, continuing to record prolifically, perform live, for the radio and for Doordarshan, till her last concert in 1974. She won both the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padmashree in her lifetime and was awarded the Padma Bhushan posthumously.

On the occasion of her hundredth birth anniversary, I would like to take this opportunity to apprise this august gathering of the steps taken by the Ministry of Culture to strengthen the tradition that Begum Akhtar represented in her life as well as to remember her own contribution to the world of Indian music.

Over the next year, music festivals have been planned in several Indian cities that will commemorate the life and achievements of Begum Akhtar in Mumbai, Lucknow, Benares, Goa, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, to name just a few. Efforts will be made to showcase artists who work in the genres popularized by Begum Akhtar, chiefly, the thumri, daadraa, and the ghazal. Recognition will also be accorded to many artists who have been tirelessly working in these categories over the last few decades. And finally, what we consider to be the most important step of all. Scholarships will be accorded to bright young artists through the Sangeet Natak Akademi in order to support them in their pursuit of music and facilitate their

budding careers. We are fully cognizant that it is the young artists more than anyone else who require some level of support from the state in order to not get distracted by trying to earn a living from a whole-hearted almost obsessive quest for mastery in the musical form of their choice.

I would like to conclude with just one instance that displays the wide-ranging nature of Begum Akhtar's influence. The late Indian English poet Agha Shahid Ali had been deeply devoted to her music, and in the last few years of her career, he followed her diligently from concert to concert. Later on, Agha Shahid Ali would go on to gain great fame, experimenting with the ghazal form in the English language. Ali wrote a deeply moving obituary to Begum Akhtar in verse, and since this particular poem best encapsulates how a great artist sets into motion the unique cyclicity in the inner life of art, which morphs from form to form – from poetry to music to poetry again – and jumps across languages, coming back to its own fountainhead in the end, I would like to read a few lines from this poem:

In Memory of Begum Akhtar

-Agha Shahid Ali

Do your fingers still scale the hungry

Bhairavi, or simply the muddy shroud?

Ghazal, that death-sustaining widow,

sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you.

She wears her grief, a moon-soaked white,

corners the sky into disbelief.

You've finally polished catastrophe,

the note you seasoned with decades

of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:

I innovate on a note-less raga.

I shall now let the musicians strike the right note and innovate on it for the rest of the evening.

**Inauguration of the Centenary Commemoration of the
Begum Akhtar
7th October, 2014**

MINUTE-TO-MINUTE PROGRAMME

- 11.00 am Minister of Culture arrives
- 11.03 am Lighting of lamp
- 11.05 am Welcome speech by Secretary (Culture)
- 11.12 am Release of commemorative coins
- 11.15 am Speech by Culture Minister
- 11.25 am Classical Music programme by Sangeet Natak Akademi artistes
- 11.40 am Vote of thanks by Additional Secretary (Culture)
- 11.45 am High Tea

DAIS PLAN

Additional Secretary (Culture)	Hon'ble Culture Minister	Secretary Culture
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Background note on 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.

It is a very difficult task to *write* about the art of Begum Akhtar. Suffice it to say that all she would need to do was clear her throat once and sing just one or two lines, for everyone present in the vicinity, to immediately feel a peculiar hush descending on their hearts. A silence; a severance from everything else in their own lives for the length of a song. Such was the spell Begum Akhtar's voice cast around her.

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 overcoming 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.

