

The Musical Glory of Dharwad

by Nachiketa Yakkundi
California, July 2014

Karnataka has historically been an ardent patron of the performing arts. From the Kadambas of the 4th century CE to the Chalukyas to the Rashtrakutas to the Hoysalas, down to the Vijayanagar empire in the 16th century CE, and even to the present day, Karnataka's identity has always possessed a rich element of music, dance, poetry, literature, drama, sculpture and architecture.

That it continues to offer a strong base with welcome arms in which a wide variety of artists bearing a diverse range of fields, styles and backgrounds thrive only fortifies its glorious reputation. Of great significance specifically in the field of Indian classical music is the proud fact that Karnataka is the only state in India, if not the only overall geographical region, where India's two distinct schools, Hindustani and Karnatic, coexist, and that too vibrantly.

For the last two hundred or so years, roughly the southern half of what is present-day Karnataka has been dominated by the Karnatic school of classical music, whereas its northern counterpart has greatly ensconced the Hindustani tradition in its collective ethos. Chief among the reasons for this to have been the case is the geopolitical climate that existed in pre-independent British India for nearly two centuries. North Karnataka, and primarily the city of Dharwad, came under the Bombay Presidency, which in turn encompassed most of the present-day Indian states of Maharashtra, Goa and Gujarat and even certain parts of the country of Yemen. To the south and south-east of the Bombay Presidency lay the affluent kingdom of Mysore, whose rulers were consistently great aficionados of all forms of the arts and patrons renowned nationwide. Upon invitations by the Mysore maharajas, Hindustani performers from all over the land travelled to Mysore, and almost all their travel routes passed through Dharwad, which served not only as a rest stop for the weary travellers but also as an ideal location due to its welcoming climate, verdant surroundings and salubrious atmosphere. Many a performing troupe that intended to merely break their Mysore-bound journey in Dharwad in those days of travel that lasted for weeks and months on end went on instead to settle in Dharwad and make the city their home. Over the decades Dharwad continued to attract talent and call itself home to a rich tradition of Hindustani music. Soon cities surrounding Dharwad saw themselves as augmented Hindustani hotbeds. Thus the city of Dharwad itself as well as its geographic neighbours, which now consisted of towns like Hubli, Kundgol, Miraj and Gadag, saw legendaries like Abdul Karim Khan, Alladiya Khan, Sawai Gandharva and Rehmat Khan establish and fortify their roots to produce a strong Hindustani tradition in Dharwad and north Karnataka. Interestingly, the "gharana" (or style of interpretational expounding) system that originated in north Indian towns like Kirana, Jaipur, Atrauli, Gwalior and Agra blossomed and witnessed rapid growth in Karnataka, a region decidedly distant from the gharana origins. The subsequent generation, which comprised of such luminaries as Mallikarjun Mansur, Gangubai Hangal, Basavraj Rajguru, Bhimsen Joshi, Kumar Gandharva, Ramarao Naik, Karim Khan (sitar), Vasant Kanakapur, Arjuna Nakod, Sangameshwar Gurav, Chandrashekhar Puranikmath, Gururao

Deshpande, Krishna Hangal, Madhav Gudi, Venkatesh Godkhindi and Bale Khan, illuminated the Hindustani sky with its stellar prowess during most of the twentieth century. Their predecessors and contemporaries, although not originally from the Dharwad area per se, greatly revelled in pride to perform, teach and stay in Dharwad; the list includes stalwarts like Mogubai Kurdikar, Kesarbai Kerkar, D. V. Paluskar, Vasantryo Deshpande, Rasiklal Andharia and Kishori Amonkar. In fact, the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, after a performance in Dharwad in the 1960s, declared that for a Hindustani artist to be renowned and accepted in all of India, it was adequate that they be accepted by the musically fastidious and consciously discerning audiences of just three cities – Calcutta (Kolkata), Poona (Pune) and Dharwad. Thus Dharwad had become, and to this day continues to be, a de facto cultural hub for not only cradling Hindustani performers but also one for producing exacting music connoisseurs.

In the nurturing shadow of such rich culture grew sister art forms as well. The Dharwad area went on to produce celebrated poets, litterateurs and dramatists like D. R. Bendre, V. K. Gokak, Keertinath Kurtkoti, R. V. Jagirdar (“Shrirang”), S. B. “Shamba” Joshi, Basavaraj Mansur (older brother of Mallikarjun), Betgeri Krishna Sharma, G. B. Joshi (uncle of Bhimsen), Lakshmanrao Bendre (cousin of D. R.), Chandrashekhar Kambar, and Girish Karnad. A significant contributor to the Kannada drama field continue to be the “company naatak” productions, like those of the Dhuttargi Company, the Huchcheshwar Company and others, that produce and present dramas of all flavours in troupes that traverse the entire north Karnataka region. To the film industry as well the Dharwad region supplied personalities like Amirbai Karnataki, Shanta Apte, Shanta Hublikar, Leela Chitnis, V. Shantaram and Suresh Heblikar. Balappa Hukkeri put the north Karnataka region and its signature dialect on a statewide popularity with the rendition of a great many folk songs in his impeccable style. In his recently published book “Sangeet Sangam” detailing the history, culture and glory of Dharwad, Ramachandra Sidenur, a passionate history enthusiast and otherwise consummate maven of Dharwad, points out the artistic contributions that the overall Dharwad region has effected in making Karnataka proud of the glorious diversity of its fabled culture.

It is often said that there is something in the *soil* of Dharwad that makes it so artistically rich. A greater claim can be made thusly: Music, and indeed its extended kindred of the varied performing arts, has so effloresced in Dharwad only because it dwells in the *soul* of Karnataka, a state that reveres art as a means of uniting with the Divine and regards music as a universal source of attaining unmitigated bliss.