

UNPLUGGED

# The unsung heroes

Hearing less-performed ragas is a rare treat

One of the great draws of a daytime Hindustani classical concert, and that too on a Sunday morning, is that one can reach the venue relatively unscathed by traffic. But more importantly, it is the promise of morning or late morning or afternoon ragas. And if the recital is inside the thick-walled, cool dark interiors of a temple, minus the paraphernalia of electronics, then all the better.

Sometimes, one of the biggest takeaways of a recital of this kind is that you get to hear ragas that you knew, but had kind of forgotten. They are the ragas that do not have the exalted status accorded to the Big Ones. They are unassuming, almost modest ragas, rendered even more modest by the fact that they are not popular anymore on the performance circuit. As the tanpura or swaramandal tunes up, it is as if a searchlight has been trained on the inner recesses of your memory, and with that, various forgotten gems are awoken.

It is something like playing the word game Taboo, which I do in a creative writing class that I teach – it leads people to not so much learn new and bombastic or ‘big’ words as to remember and revisit existing ones in their vocabulary, which have fallen into disuse. It turns the Taboo player back to the riches that reside inside us, which have gone into some kind of blind spot, while we overuse just a handful of words. When words fall into disuse, our vocabularies shrink, and with that, our repertoire.

Whether you are a writer, speaker, reader, performer or listener, everyone loses, when words, phrases, swara combinations and ragas are simply left by the wayside. Sometimes, we under-employ our vocabulary or our engagement with ragas out of sheer laziness, taking the path of least resistance, presenting as well as lis-



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tening to the familiar, the popular, the easily accessible. There are about 150 ragas that are more commonly sung now, from the 500 or so existing ones in Hindustani classical music. But most performers will present from an even smaller bandwidth of 30 or so ragas, letting dust gather on hundreds of other gems.

**Guaranteed nods**

Now whether this is because it is safer to pander to the popular and easily accessible, or because even the artists have begun to forget or have not been trained in the lesser-performed ragas that lie outside this tight circle of 30, is a bit of a chicken-and-egg question. Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, in his later years, would say in a tired and ironic tone, upon hearing the standard request for Puriya Kalyan from the audience, “Yes of course, I will sing it, and exactly as I sang it in the long-playing record that you have at home.” The irony was lost on most of the audience. Not just performers, even music programme organisers sometimes insist on the performer singing the familiar. They want guaranteed nods and *waah waahs*, and will not risk a ticket-paying audience being challenged to listen to something new.

There are a slew of ragas that are considered *apchalit* or *anwat* – less heard, uncommon, difficult, sometimes combining two ragas and creating an unusual synthesis. However, there is a whole lot that is not exactly uncommon, but has been relegated to waiting patiently in the wings, over just the last few decades.

At a recent recital by Agra gharana singer Pt. Ram Deshpande in one of the small halls of the 18th century Omkareshwar Mandir in Pune (organised by The Baithak Foundation and the Sakal Group of Publications), some of us were delighted to catch up with just such a raga. Even the name of the raga – Devgiri Bilawal – when announced, seemed to come from far away. It was like meeting someone from very long ago – you need a few seconds to place the person, but once their features, their voice, their mannerisms become apparent, you are infused with a rush of affection and warmth.

When a performer presents a less performed raga, you are grateful that a light shower has fallen beyond the usual circle, and places farther afield have been re-greened in the performance space as well as in the listener’s mind.

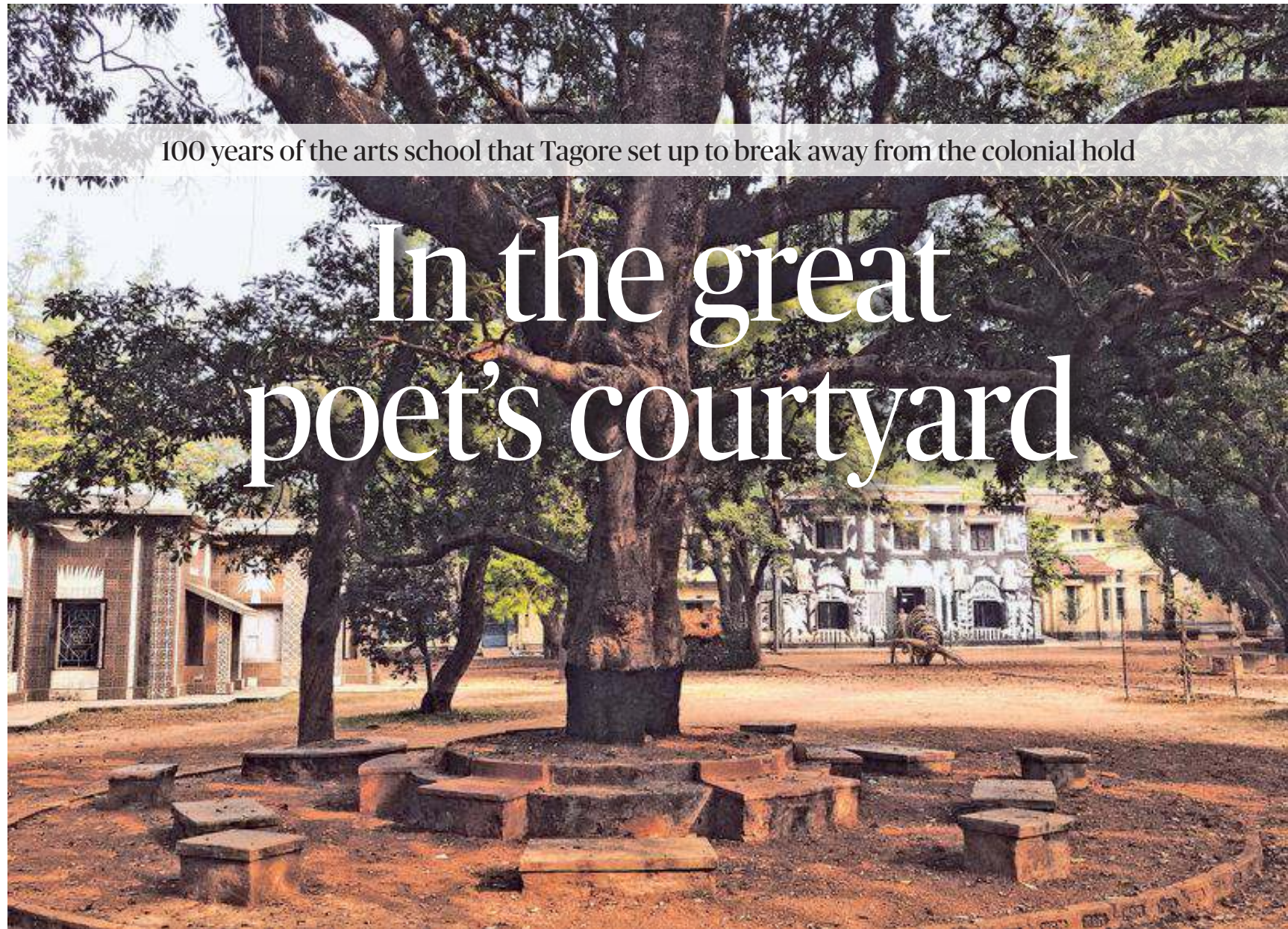


Gouri Dange is a novelist, counsellor and music lover who takes readers through the Aladdin’s cave of Indian music.



**Ceramics exhibition**

Gallery Ark in Vadodra is hosting an exhibition with a focus on ceramics and the use of clay as a narrative tool, titled ‘Elements in Mythology’, until January 18. Works by artists including Ira Chaudhuri, Jyotsna Bhatt, Madhavi Subramanian, Savia Mahajan, Reyaz Badaruddin, Vineet Kacker and Vineet Daroz are on view.



100 years of the arts school that Tagore set up to break away from the colonial hold

# In the great poet’s courtyard

Bishwanath Ghosh

The cow poking its head into the canteen window is real, but the raging bull nearby isn’t – it’s made of bamboo strips. The two puppies fast asleep near a camel are real, but the camel isn’t – it’s made of junked two-wheelers. The birds on the numerous trees are real, but those countless birds on the lawn are synthetic, part of an installation. There’s an angry anaconda too, fortunately made of twigs.

One word binds it all together, the real and the unreal: creation.

It’s a word that drove as well as defined Rabindranath Tagore. In 1919, when the country was still bleeding from the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, he planted fresh seeds of life in the soil of Santiniketan by setting up Kala Bhavana – a school of arts.

The word *bhavana* may bring up the image of a large building in mind, but Kala Bhavana is anything but grand. Its size lies in its expanse: low-rises dotting a vast open space landscaped with ancient trees and art installations – the bull and camel and anaconda are only some of them.

**Anti-colonial**

The institution is celebrating its centenary this year. No one is quite sure about the exact date Kala Bhavana was started, but art historian and Santiniketan veteran Prof. K. Siva Kumar says it was most likely in June that year, going by letters written at the time. In other words, barely weeks after Tagore had returned his knighthood in protest against the massacre.

“At the time, art in India was governed by colonial tastes and needs. This was the first institution to break away from the colonial method. It was a part of the nationalist movement, a model of anti-colonial education,” says Siva Kumar, a professor in the art history department, formerly



head of the department as well as principal of the institution (in Santiniketan institutions, the posts of principal and HoD are assigned on rotational basis).

“But Tagore was not a narrow nationalist; he wanted to connect with the larger heritage of world art, including non-Western traditions such as Chinese and Japanese. At the same time, he also wanted to redefine Indian art. His stay in the villages of East Bengal was an eye-opener for him. He realised there was so much of nature to engage with, and so much of urban-rural divide that needed to be responded to,” says Siva Kumar.

Having joined Kala Bhavana as a student in 1974, Siva Kumar, a native of Kera-

**Back then, people came to Santiniketan because they subscribed to Tagore’s ideology, but now they come for the salary and job security because this is a Central government institution**

la, is one of the very few serving teachers who has clear memories of watching legendary sculptor-painter Ramkinkar Baij at work. Today, he sees “a lot of dilution” in Tagore’s ideals. “Back then, people came to Santiniketan because they subscribed to Tagore’s ideology, but now they come for the salary and job security because this is a Central government institution.” (Visva-Bharati came under Central control in 1951.)

But Kala Bhavana, the professor insists, still remains different from other art schools because the teaching here continues, by and large, to be individual-oriented – a tradition started by Nandalal Bose – and also because of the strong inter-personal relationship between teacher and student.

Bhavna Khajuria, a former student who now teaches ceramic art, agrees. “The interaction between teachers and students extends beyond class hours,”

says Khajuria, who hails from Jammu. “Students can walk into the studios of their teachers even at 1 in the morning to watch them work. There may be colleges with better infrastructure but Kala Bhavana has the best atmosphere.”

**Feet at home**

Her colleague, Lawanshaiba Kharmawlong, also a former student of Kala Bhavana, quit his arts teacher job in Doon School some years ago and returned to Santiniketan as a member of the faculty. “I come from a village in Meghalaya and my family had not even heard of Tagore, leave alone Santiniketan. Then one day my father, while leafing through a booklet, came to know about Tagore and brought me to Santiniketan. Now I feel at home here – the only thing I don’t like about this place is the heat,” says Kharmawlong.

The campus is strewn with creations, most of them products of young minds. In the workshop that once served as Ramkinkar Baij’s studio, young Lakshmi from Thiruvananthapuram is busy giving finishing touches to a fish that has a human leg sprouting from it. She is so engrossed that one hesitates to initiate a conversation. On the first floor of another workshop next door, young Suchetana Das from Howrah is not so busy because she has just finished her work – Arjuna aiming at the fish’s eye – and has placed it by the window to dry in the sunlight.

“I first visited Santiniketan as a child on a family holiday. I became so enamoured with the place that I decided to study here – it has exceeded my expectations,” says Das, a second-year fine arts student.

To cap the centenary celebrations, Kala Bhavana is planning a series of camps on the campus in association with Lalit Kala Akademi, as well as two large exhibitions, one in Kolkata and another at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. “The schedules are still being worked out. As of now we are preparing a list of former students whose works will be exhibited,” says Sanjoy Mallik, principal of Kala Bhavana.

One hundred years, times have changed, but the campus, nestled in nature, still belongs to the time of Tagore. If Tagore were to be spotted today, walking across the courtyard with his hands clasped behind him, he wouldn’t look out of place. “Tagore is always watching over us,” says Khajuria. “Even unconsciously we are conscious of his presence.”



Inspired minds The Kala Bhavana campus is strewn with creations, from murals to sculptures, of young students. • SAYANI CHAKRABORTY



**Plastic problem**

Malaysia is turning into a major dumping ground for the world’s plastic waste. ‘Recycling Sham’, the fourth episode of the investigative documentary series *Broken* on Netflix, looks into the country’s legal and illegal recycling of plastic, and how a lot of supposedly recycled scrap – that is in fact not recyclable – is ending up in landfills.

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