



NAVINA JAJA

Sitting in a rocking chair in her home in Civil Lines, Sheila Dhar, author, singer and connoisseur, once reminisced about the culture of Delhi in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. “We were taught to use cutlery, my mother was given tuition in English. On special occasions, songstresses such as Siddheshwari Bai were invited to sing when we had a British officer for a meal. Even she would sing thumri in English,” shared Dhar in a candid conversation with this writer. The cultural geography of a large number of known and unknown towns in India are peppered with various nuances of the Raj culture. Among this, is the choral singing which has made a place for itself in contemporary India.

It is no longer about winter or Bada Din (Christmas). The ‘summer concert’ of The Capital City Minstrels (CCM), a well-known Delhi choir group, celebrating its 25th year, sang to a jam-packed audience at the India Habitat Centre last weekend. Their performance ended with a standing ovation. The audience rose, whistles shrilled the air, and claps roared. There was demand for not one but ten encores. The performers chose to sing, ‘The Book of Love’ - Magnetic Fields. The Chorus sang: “But I, I love it when you sing to me; and you, you can sing me anything”. There rose a nostalgic image of the culture of Raj.

The choral music in India forms an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of the colonial period. Organisation of cities, development programmes such as building Railways presented two broad categories: sacred and secular leisure cultural activities in the Raj. A range of cultural manifestations and activities were evident in cities and towns like Agra, Lucknow, Madras, Calcutta, Bangalore, along with hill stations and several railway towns like Bandi Kui (Rajasthan) and Kharagpur where areas like Civil Lines, Cantonments, Railway colonies, and markets became cultural spaces.

The secular tangible heritage comprised official buildings, designs of homes, clubs, boarding schools, band stands, gardens and market places. The intangible heritage manifested itself as lifestyles in clubs, coffee houses, theatre, tea parties, and sports like tennis, cricket, and billiards.

#### Sacred spaces

The tangible heritage of the sacred spaces were the churches and cemeteries. Churches represent a range of architectural designs like Gothic and Romanesque Baroque. Their interior décor has stained glass and indigenous Eurocentric artwork such as the Wedgewood designs in the chapel of La Martinere in Lucknow.

Music, integral to the culture of the churches in the Raj, quite often included unique pipe organs dating back to the late 18th-19th Century and choral music. The tradition of sacred music and religious festivals, in turn, brought a variety of celebrations, cuisines, and rituals laced with local flavours.

The number of those who understood appreciated and participated in

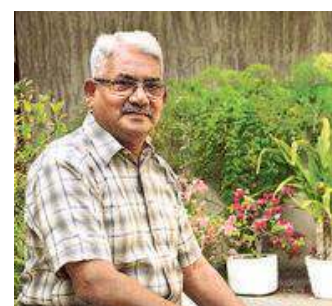


The torchbearers Music conductor Neil Nongkynrih alongwith the members of the Shillong Chamber Choir; (left) Sharmila Livingston ■ THE HINDU

## The expanding sound of harmony

No longer just the intangible heritage of the Raj, choral music is embracing different genres, and is providing a healing touch to parched souls

the world of Western Classical Music as part of the Raj was and continues to remain small. Choral music's roots are in the Church, says Sharmila Livingston, present conductor of CCM. “The Choral musical tradition has Euro-Western roots in the Gregorian chants (9-10th century) sung by young monks. Gradually with time, the music came to be performed in secular



**The most interesting part was that we sang “Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram” which became a signature tune for the BBC website... Maxwell Pereira**

spaces. The amplification led to the incorporation of different genres of opera, ones that appealed to masses. The nature of choral music is multi-layered in voice qualities which becomes a metaphor of the distinct character of choral singing which is ‘harmony’. The music is much like a bunch of flowers, where simultaneous qualities and ranges of voices sing together to produce a harmonious effect. Each singer dissolves his personal identity and works together for the same idiom.”

#### The cosmopolitan nature

Most choral groups in India are linked to churches and present platforms for real-time community bonding. However, recently several secular groups like CCM have evolved. Reem Khokhar, a writer and part of the governing body of CCM, expresses that it is not about once a week meeting but about coming together of so many people from different backgrounds and countries who become family.

Retired super cop Maxwell Pereira, says that CCM provided relief in his high tension life. “The choir provided a cosmopolitan musical experience. There were people of different age groups, from different religions and regions. They are corporate, professionals and several diplomats and members of the expatriate community.”

However, Christopher Daruwalla a theatre professional, actor and writer who has always been part of choirs has other views. He says, “I sing in my church Sacred Heart Cathedral, and other places in Delhi such as the chapel of the Apostolic Nunciature of the Holy See -Vatican and the Church of Redemption. I did sing with the Capital City Minstrels, the Neemrana Foundation in India and several other choirs abroad. There is a difference, while the choir members in the West are serious and professional - not that they do not have fun - the ones in India still have a long way to go. They largely remain social groups.” It appears that memory, traditional and functionality of choral singing in India as a leisure activity and community bonding is deeply etched in the character of choral singing groups.

One member of the CCM remarked warmly, “sometimes we are also called the ‘Capital City Munchers’ as there is a tradition that members for their musical gatherings or rehearsals bring a variety of snacks.”

Another initiative is by the Neemrana Music Foundation co-founded by Frenchman Late Francis Wacziarg who along with Amanath laid the foundation of Heritage Hospitality in India. The Music Foundation now has multiple choir groups for both adults and children along with summer workshops. Says, Priya, Wacziarg’s

daughter, and managing trustee, “My father’s set up the boys’ choir at the Blind Relief Association. We now have a children’s choir for the underprivileged at one of the Khushii centres, and we even have a music class for toddlers. And so it happens that at Neemrana, we teach music from birth to death.”

In contrast, in 2001 Padma Shri awardee Neil Nongkynrih founded the first professional Shillong Chamber Choir. “All members are full-time musicians and deeply spiritual, not necessarily religious. For us, the idea of the choir had little to do with the church. We work in a secular space. It was founded to counter the gun culture and enlarge the metaphor of harmony through music.” The professional and commercial group gained popularity when it won the reality show - “India’s Got Talent” in 2010 and other awards. The national and international success of the group has served to bring the marginalised North East India into the mainstream as a matter of national pride. “Our music is truly like the idea of choir, a metaphor of harmony and peace,” says Neil.

#### Changing contours

Most choirs used to be a lot about Western Classical, but gradually CCM with a variety of conductors expanded the repertoire. “In 2008, CCM had

its first concert abroad. It was an exciting time. Conductor Gabriella Boda, a French married to a Hungarian, brought different languages and genres like African Tribal and Arabic compositions, among others. For the concerts abroad we carried a series of Indian music such as a fisherman song while Sharmila Livingston our present conductor wrote a Ruh-aa - (A prayer in Urdu for church). But the most interesting part was that we sang “Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram” which became a signature tune for the BBC website, and the title tune for a German Choir - Remscheider Ensemble,” informs Pereira.

For Neil, it was about accepting that Bollywood music ‘is’ India, and the manner to negotiate the music in their repertoire. Says Neil, “Although I grew up with the music of Mozart and other greats of the Western Classical World, I had to leave my snobbery. Including Bollywood is like a marriage of Freddie Mercury with LataMangeshkar with a swing of malt glass. That is my music. I prefer old Bollywood music. It has a soul, lyrics, melodies which we even sang in the St. Paul’s Cathedral in Calcutta. The audience went bananas, they found the music sacred.”

#### Healing touch

At times, the choir also plays an important social role in bringing togeth-



Music should not be contained, it should be fluid. Hence, I did not believe in limiting the music to the church  
Neil Nongkynrih

er communities. “Some years ago, when there were communal clashes in Shillong, my son, singers and I went with our music to stand up for peace,” says Neil.

While Sharmila Livingston says, “We incorporated in our summer concert ‘Bring Me Little Water, Sylvie’, a beautiful melody that factors interactive body percussion rhythm; but we instead have introduced dance for which our members find another occasion to practice separately and bond.”

In the present world defined by virtual reality that has engineered greater human isolation and alienation, the repositioned choral singing, the musical echoes of Raj, provide hope to nurture real-time bonding and coexistence. “When I teach young Eva, it is eight hours of humility and two hours of singing, the choir is about synergy, melting of the cancer of the self,” sums up Neil.