



Biography and contribution of Kashmiri folk artist ‘Ustad Ghulam Hassan Sofi’ towards music

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Abstract

Kashmir which is known as the Paradise on earth, has been the abode of eminent music maestros, scholars and poet. Besides them there were saints musicians and poet who preferred to use their own Kashmiri dialect for conveying their messages and thoughts. The folk singers of Kashmir are rich repositories of culture of the region and speak of the chivalry, devotion, simplicity, hospitality and superstition of the people through their music.

Ustad Ghulam Hassan Sofi was the only Kashmiri male folk singer having proficiency in both folk music as well as light music of Kashmir. He was born with visual impairment, yet achieved the status & grand success in the field of music. He was recipient of many awards, like the prestigious Sangeet Natak academy Award, J & K State Award, Life Time Achievement, Sa, Ma, Pa Award, and Sher-e- Kashmir.

Keywords: ustad, sofi, folk, Kashmir

Introduction

Ustad Ghulam Hassan Sofi happens to be the only Kashmiri male folk singer who is equally well reputed, proficient & distinguished artist in both, folk music as well as light music of Kashmir. Most singers sing for a living, very few live to sing. Almost no singer lives his songs. Ghulam Hassan Sofi did all the three. What distinguished him from all other singers is that he lived his songs. Looking back & reminiscing, it would appear as if he sang only either to anticipate or to rationalize his own life & that of many others. Every facet of his life, from his being a prodigy to the neglected towards the end of his life, has been described by the songs that he sang throughout his musical career.

Ghulam Hassan Sofi, is among those rare Kashmiri folk artists who has been able to achieve grand success in the realm of both folk music as well as light music of Kashmir. Sofi was best known for innovation, creativity & versatility. Besides this he was also well known for his distinctive melody & melancholy, with a unique & specific blend of emotional expression & feeling which lead many critics to state his vocal talent as the greatest & most distinctive of they have ever heard. Sofi is considered as one of the greatest versatile singer of Kashmir who could sing high & low tenor of notes with ease & perfection. His ability & inspiration to show his extempore while singing was extremely graceful & always maintained the purity & modesty of singing folk songs. In his singing Sofi never shows anything to be violent in his vocal modulations, but always makes the most of the aesthetic value of each note in the light of local tradition & the poetic theme, this style & approach make his singing simply amazing & enchanting.

It is to be noted that multi-faceted legend Sofi, was born with visual impairment, yet achieved the status & grand success in the field of music due to his inborn natural & amazing talent. He was a role model & inspiration to many people as he

overcome his disability of blindness through his adamant hard work, dedication & talent. This should not come as a surprise considering that his father has sought him from the Darbar of “Hazrat Moin-ud-din Chisti”. The greatest Sufi saint of the land seems to have blessed the unborn Hassan Sofi. After his birth going to Ajmer Sharif along with his father, became an annual pilgrimage. He owed his spiritual allegiance to the Chisti Silsila & in this his murshid was “Zia Sahib” of Pampore region. It is during his frequent visit to Ajmer that he was fully exposed to the field of music through the Qawaalis, which seems to have forged a lasting association of Sufiasm & singing in him. In this way the singing talent was awakened by such spiritual musical surroundings. This was the period in Kashmir when Hafiz nagma was at its peak. One of the most famous Hafiza’s of that time was a woman called “Gill ded” who has managed to capture the hearts of fans through his graceful dancing etiquette & melodious voice. Sofi was so much impressed & inspired by her sweet singing that he often secretly watch to her performances. It was Gill ded, who recognized Sofi’s immense musical talent & took him under her careful & watchful guidance. She encouraged & supported Sofi to seek further training in music for both vocal as well as instrumental music. Sofi was adept at playing on folk instrument Sarangi. In later years his zeal, passion & his dedication to learn helps him & within a short period of time he learned the skill & technique of playing all the native folk instruments of Kashmir with good command & competence. Sofi learnt the art of folk singing from Mohammad Subhan, a well-known folk singer of his time, who plays a vital role in shaping & boosting his art & talent. Mohammad Subhan would conduct folk oriented mehfiles at every evening, singing with him till late hours in order to encourage & expose his talent. Eventually all over night singing brought a unique sweetness to his voice & a good command & hold on rhythm. Thus he became famous very shortly.

In the beginning of his career Sofi, mainly sings Kashmiri folk form "Chakri" & with in no time mastered it. His repertoire is vast & includes all music forms of the region. His first co-singer was Habibullah Bamboo a great & famous folk singer of Kashmir. Sofi has to his credit a number of folk & light songs & all these songs are a manifestation of his musical brilliance & untapped potential. He gives each song the actual treatment it deserves from all aspects suitable to the poetic content that he chooses to sing. At the peak of Sofi's career his voice graced many major musical events & plate forms in Kashmir & outside Kashmir & at one point of time, he had become almost a cult figure in the field of Kashmiri music & melody & his success persited throughout his glorious career.

Ustad Sofi's songs reflected a perfect weave of poetry, emotional appeal & melody for capturing the essence, aesthetic flair and mood of lyrics in different genres ranging from the serious mystical renderings of Rajab Hamid's "Afsoos Duniya to ghazals like "Tsche Looguth Sormue Chashemann" to folk song "Choon Poaknuy Parzanoamy Dooreyai" and also to his classic song "Mani Manz Ganaiyam Rai" etc. are an example of absolute perfection of his versatility.

Ghulam Hassan Sofi was approved as A- top class casual artist by Radio Kashmir, which also played a key role in flourishing & popularizing his art & talent. Besides Radio Kashmir, he also performs for Doordarshan, Department of information & Cultural academy, state tourism as well. Sofi also served in Song & drama division from 1967 to 1994 as an instructor & composed many songs. With the help of Song & drama division he visited many far flung areas of J & K & everywhere enthralled & entertains the public through his soulful renditions & gained immense experience & reputation as the years went by. Sofi also got ample opportunities to visit outside the state where his voice graced many prestigious musical events & plate forms & everywhere his performances were highly acclaimed & accredited by the audience.

Sofi's passion for purity & the oral tradition enabled him to compose most of his songs himself. He also sang the famous folk song "Rinde Pooshe Maal Gindenay Draye Lolo" in the film Rasool mir, & this very song became the hymn of the region at one point of time. He is also remembered for rendering of "Hazaar Dastaan" for being innovative & versatile with in the tradition, which was characteristic of his repertoire together with his energetic singing created the impression of a performer for whom art was inseparable from life.

In one of his interviews from Prasar Bharti broadcasting corporation, a few years ago Sofi's message to the younger generation of Kashmiri singers reiterated the significance of purity of language, tradition & diction. Money or fame would not lure him towards anything he would consider hybrid or filmy. I being a researcher consider myself fortunate enough to sing in the company of this great legendary artist in one of his live musical programme at Gulmargh Resort, organized by Cultural Academy in 2004. While interacting with him he would say that if you wanted to become famous in the field of singing Kashmiri songs, then first you need to understand the Concept of the poetic content of the verses in its totality & then find the appropriate notes in the local tradition to which the song actually belonged. This is what he practiced himself

throughout his excellent career that makes him a perfectionist in this field.

From romance to spirituality Ustad Sofi would sing with seamless ease, perfection & feel in order to have an extraordinary blend of romance, peace & solace of mind and soul, and leave indelible imprints on the souls of his audience. His ability & skill to lift his listeners above the materialistic worldly concerns was ultimate & unparalleled & it was evocatively done in many of his songs especially "Yena Chun Duniya, "Qadd Choanuy Vuch Meabaala""Zamanai Poknu Humdam" and many others.

Sofi's greatest assets as a singer was that he was quite at home rendering the mysticism of Kashmiri renowned Sufi poetess like "Shamas Faqeer, Neyam Soab, the romantism of Rasool Mir, the revolutionary of Mehjoor & the devotion of Wahab Khar. All this was done only with just a specific style & unique intonations, not even supported by music. What took his songs from the ear to the heart was the mystical acuteness of feeling for the song in his singing. It is nothing short of being divine. The devotion & the perfect blend of aesthetic flair sparkling with melodic beauty, energy, pathos & emotions that he brings into the song "Jaan Wandyo Ha Bu Paan Wandyoa" in his ecstatic style has created thousands of new listeners, & ardent fans of kashmiri traditional music.

Ghulam Hassan Sofi didn't merely sing songs, he vocalized the rich & glorious Cultural philosophy of the Kashmir valley, & have made it possible to keep our roots alive & cherish the music which is our own. Not only his style his sensibilities too were pure & deeply Kashmiri. What was it about that he enthralled three generations of Kashmiris & has been associated with Radio Kashmir for 29 years. Sofi's has not only contributed extraordinary & enormous to the Culture of J & K, but has also opened the doors & vision of Kashmiri art lovers like me to explore the fascinating world of our Sufi & mystic poets like Shamas Faqeer, Neyam Soab, Wahab khar, Soache kral, Samad mir & many more. Sofi is often regarded by many experts as the best ever & undisputed melody king of Kashmiri folk & traditional music.

One of his personal favorites that gives everyone an insight into what his own innermost beliefs & philosophy was," Kam Kam Sikandar Ayi Matyo, Jaai Katyo Chhai". His eyes would get moistened while singing it, showing how he had imbibed the transitory nature of this life & its glory.

Awards / Honours

Ghulam Hassan Sofi has been the recipient of many awards and honours for his invaluable & tremendous contributions in promoting & preserving art & culture of the state of Jammu & Kashmir, like the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academy Award by the President of India, J & K State Award, Life Time Achievement Award by the Ministry of information and Broadcasting, Sa, Ma, Pa Award, and Sher-e-Kashmir Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Award 2006, which carries a cash award of Rs.25000/ with a Shawl and a memento.

Sofi's velvety & golden voice will always echo and reverberate in every nook & corner of the valley. The songs sung by this great artist have become eternal. May Almighty Allah grant him the same peace & tranquility that he gave to millions of Kashmiris by his Soulful & enchanting Singing.

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