

# Ustad Akhtar — protagonist of a rare art

By Rauf Sheikh

THERE are several reasons for the collapse of classical music in Pakistan, but one major reason is the official apathy. Once, before partition, Lahore was a cultural centre with patrons of music all around. But after independence from British Raj the trend was on the wane in Pakistan notwithstanding the fact that many Muslim artists like Amanat Ali Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Fateh Ali Khan, Ustad Salamat Ali Khan, Nazakat Ali Khan, Roshanara Begum shifted to Pakistan from India. But the patrons, unfortunately, migrated to India and the system of patronage came to an end.

The thing that further aggravated the situation was the govt policy, which had been very tolerant initially but the incessant criticism from orthodox quarters influenced it at the expense of many forms of classical music.

The artists were at a loss in view of the gradually diminishing audience. They forbade their next generation from following in their footsteps. The trend kept shifting to film music or ghazal singing. In



Ustad Akhtar Khan

the last one decade or so, pop music got the popular support, though about half of those singing in the pop groups are descendants of great masters. So our musical heritage, which is mainly classical, is facing extinction.

Ustad Muhammad Akhtar Khan hailing from the Shyam Chaurasi Gharana is one such artist in Lahore who is fighting against all odds to keep classical music alive in Pakistan. With no official patronage or popular audience, he said in a talk with The News, it is quite tough for him to stick to his commitment to classi-

cal music. At times he has to suffer starvation for want of means, but he has never thought of giving up. On the other hand, he always welcomes those who are fond of learning classical music. With no means to open a sophisticated academy for the purpose, he in himself is an academy. Ask him for some time to learn music, he will for surely eke out some time for you the very next day. He would even keep in view your convenience before choosing a place to give you music lessons.

His father was a master of dhrupad gayaki as he is of khayal gayaki. He acquired early training in music from his father Ustad Malang Ali Khan and elder brother Ustad Maqsood Ali Khan. Thereafter, when he went to Ustad Ghulam Shabbir Khan and Ustad Jafar Khan for further learning, Ustad Shaukat Hussain Khan, Ustad Talib Hussain Khan and Master Manzoor Hussain were also present there, who asked him to sing something. When he sang a few lines composed in Raaga jay jay vanti, they were really impressed.

During those days, Ustad Ghulam Haider Khan advised him

never to hesitate from asking the Ustads to guide him as the learning process continues till death. Acting upon this advice, a humble Ustad Akhtar Khan is always after improving his art besides teaching music rookies.

He has made his mark in music on TV, radio, stage etc. He earned the best classical gayaki award, which was conferred upon him by the Masood Khaddar Posh Trust. His performance in radio programme Aahang-e-Khusrawi has also earned him plaudits. Recognised as Hajwari Gayak, he has been singing devotional kalam at Data Darbar for the last 15 years.

Recently a volume of lyrics that he sung in classical Raagas has been released which has won him the praise of connoisseurs. His name was proposed for pride of performance in 2002.

Despite all this to his credit, Ustad Akhtar complains of financial constraints that render him unable to even pay the monthly rent of his house. He has requested the authorities to patronise the classical gayaks who have kept this rare art alive even in this age of artificiality and affectation.