



At Great Wall of China, 01 September, 1983

Shyamadas Chakrabortty

My master
Pandit Ravi Shankar

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To my most revered and beloved guru
Pandit Ravi Shankar
to whom I am indebted for all the best things
of my fairly long association with music



In front of Great Buddha at Leshan, 04 September, 1983

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On Great Wall of China, 01 September, 1983

Preface

This book primarily deals with my reminiscences of Pandit Ravi Shankar. I had the privilege of studying sitar under him. Later on I accompanied him on the tanpura at recitals and attended to him during his tours in India and abroad. As such there was plenty of scope to observe him from close quarters as a musician, a guide and a human being.

My days with Panditji are of course the most fruitful and blessed ones in my life. But before that I had studied under other music teachers as well. One way of paying my humble tributes to their memory is to reminisce about them. I would also like to recount my memories of a wonderful old man who indirectly helped my study of music and let me know many little known things about my master's master. I did not take up music as a profession. But giving lessons to students of sitar has ever been my fond preoccupation. I was fortunate to be encouraged in this mission by no less a personality than Panditji himself. Some preliminaries of this art are discussed at the risk of proving irksome.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One concerns Panditji's China tour. Part Two deals with other musical personalities and the old man mentioned above. Part Three consists of my reminiscences of Panditji along with a brief account of certain basic instructions in sitar playing, mainly based on Panditji's talim.

Most of the contents of this book have already been published in Bengali, in a journal or a regular book. On going through the book Guruji expressed his pleasure to me over the phone more than once, adding that it revealed many aspects of his personality which are not generally known. This English version seeks to

reach a wider circle of his admirers. Many new materials have been added and occasional amendments made. The present work does not claim to make any original contribution to the voluminous literature on this rare breed of artiste. My only intention is to share with others my own experiences and impressions that might be of interest to them. I could not avoid recounting comments made by Panditji about myself that may smack of self-glorification. I apologize if this violates the code of decency.

I heartily acknowledge my debt to Hironmoy Chakravarty, my friend-cum-disciple for the immense help received from him in writing this book. He elicited from me many useful or relevant data to supplement the original version. Without his support and active cooperation I would have been hard put to it to give a final shape to this book. However, if this work is an humble homage to my guru, he is equally entitled to acknowledge his debt to his teacher in this manner. If this modest venture gives any satisfaction to the admirers of Panditji I shall consider my labour amply rewarded.

I take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to the publisher Monfakira for the pains taken by them. I must acknowledge gratefully my obligations to Sandipan Bhattacharya for regarding this book as worth publishing on the recommendation of Bholanath Bhattacharya, supported by his own assessment. I wonder how to express my thanks adequately for the alacrity and efficiency with which he accomplished the task in a forthright manner. May God bless him and his worthy institution. I apologise for any mistakes in the data given in the text and also for any other mistakes.

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My master Pandit Ravi Shankar



Chapter I

Pandit Ravi Shankar invited to China

“Welcome, Ravi, we haven’t seen the sun for the last three days,” said someone, making a pun on the name of Ravi Shankar. In course of the warm welcome that he received from the people of China on landing at Beijing airport Pandit Ravi Shankar was greeted by someone with these mildly uttered words. Ravi, a Sanskrit word, denotes the sun. It was not easy to guess from his instant reaction of a smile if he paid much of an attention to the clever use of the word in the midst of the general excitement around. But the initial impact of this startling comment over, the profound suggestiveness of the words struck me as conveying the symbolic significance of Panditji’s cultural tour to China for about three weeks, in course of which I was fortunate to accompany him. Even after so many years I still remember most of what happened during that tour. However, for want of space I would like to recount mostly those details which throw light on his personality as an artiste, a teacher and a human being.

It was towards the middle of July 1983 that Dipak Chaudhury, my friend and fellow disciple of Pandit Ravi Shankar, informed me to my great surprise and joy that my master had selected me to accompany him on his coming tour to China. Meanwhile, I also received from Panditji a letter dated July 14th 1983 informing me that he had been invited by the Government of the People’s Republic of China through the Government of India, Ministry of Cultural Affairs for sitar recitals in China during August-September and that he would like me to accompany him as tambura or tanpura player for his recitals. All my expenses would be borne by

him. I should therefore arrange for leave, passport, etc., latest by 26th July to complete all other travel formalities.

On the 19th of July, when I had an occasion to accompany him on the tanpura at a concert of Malhar groups of ragas at the Kalamandir auditorium of Kolkata, Guruji asked me, "Well, Shyamadas, don't you relish the prospect of visiting China? Ain't you feeling excited?" I replied, "Much indeed. The very thought thrills me." Guruji smiled, "I am excited too." Any ordinary Indian like me would naturally have considered himself singularly fortunate to get an opportunity to visit a country like China. For me the trip was all the more valuable because of the prospect of closer association with Guruji for a long spell in special circumstances. It was twenty-five years since he had accepted me as a disciple. But as ill luck would have it I had been forced to suffer a long separation from him owing to circumstances beyond my control. Of late, some six years back, he had taken me back into his fold. We all know how important it is to a disciple under the traditional gurukul system to remain in close touch with his master for as long a period as possible in the interest of his training. My master being an artiste with a very busy international schedule of programmes, we could but look forward to only occasional short spells of training classes in course of his visits to India. So this unexpected prospect of companionship for such a long spell seemed to me, as it were, the boon of an extended study tour with a different kind of opportunities to learn and communicate. I gathered that Panditji would be required to present a number of lecture demonstrations in China. He had given a hint that my selection in his entourage had something to do with my previous experience of similar performances, though on a lesser scale, in course of my cultural tour to the USA and Canada some sixteen years ago.

Although the Chinese authorities had been sounding Guruji since 1982 for this tour, he could not make it earlier owing to his

busy schedules. Our itinerary was from Delhi to Hong Kong via Bangkok, then Beijing in the north, Cheng-du towards the south-west, Sanghai in the east and finally Canton in the south-east, from where we would return to Delhi via Hong Kong. If these places are plotted on the map of China the graph would assume the shape of the letter 'Z'.

The only other artiste in the entourage was Ishwarlal Mishra, a young tabalchi or drum player of Baranasi. It may not be out of place to add a few words about him before passing on to the journey. Guruji used to address him by his nickname 'Laloo' by way of endearment. Being senior, I used to take a similar liberty with him. This was the first time I met him. This was also his first tour abroad as accompanist for Guruji, and as such it was a particularly memorable trip in his life, as he frankly admitted to me. Not that he was a green horn, having already toured the USSR and the USA to accompany noted instrumentalists and vocalists on the tabla. He had received training under such masters as Pandit Anokhelal and Pandit Santa Prasad of Baranasi. He had the privilege of playing the accompaniment for Guruji once or twice at his residence at Baranasi. He must have impressed him enough to get selected as the accompanist. As it turned out, it was a happy selection. I heard Guruji praising him categorically during the tour. At the concerts he would introduce Laloo as one of the best drum players of India. Moreover he confided to me of his own, "Just consider and notice carefully how sharp and how very intelligent the lad is indeed!" When Guruji himself was so lavish in his praise for him there could be no reason to doubt. But then since he had specifically asked me to observe, I kept watching Laloo at every step, not by way of verifying his words but in order to find out how deep his understanding was. I had to conclude that his musical sense was really commendable. He was so quick-witted that no musical point had to be explained to him more than once. Panditji is noted for his legendary knowledge of

tempo and rhythm, laya and tal. Even maestro drum players did not hesitate to approach him occasionally for guidance. Few drum players have the ready wit and skill to play the accompaniment for him in response to his masterly extempore layakari or rhythmic patterns. So it was by no means an easy job for Laloo. Above all this would be Panditji's first series of programmes with him. But I could not help marvelling at his mastery and virtuosity. Whatever Guruji asked him to play, he grasped and executed it readily with exquisite skill and intelligence. His fingering was excellent and the tonal quality of the sound agreeably pleased the ears. However, Guruji once gave him a technical advice to practise the basic 'bol' of 'na dhin dhin na' at a greater pace.

It was not until Laloo performed on the stage that I came to witness his excellence as a tabla player. However, what I was worried about for the present was not how he would fare there but what sort of a room-mate he was likely to be. I was apprehensive that in case he was given to drinking, as some artistes are, I might react vehemently enough to make a nuisance of myself. But on seeing Laloo from close quarters and associating with him intimately, I realised in no time how baseless my misgivings had been. We did not of course have to share a room all throughout. But his temperament was too nice for his company and conduct to be unpleasant. He was not merely a high-class artiste but also a man of many admirable qualities such as self-restraint, rectitude, politeness, amiability and a sense of decency. Essentially a pious man, he would not take anything without performing his daily worship and rituals the first thing in the morning. On gathering that I was about seven years' senior to him, he used to address me as 'dada' (elder brother). I reciprocated by calling him 'Laloo-bhai' (brother Laloo). At times I even had to act as an admonishing elder brother. One day I learnt that he had been to consult a physician for a stomachache. I rebuked him mildly, "Well, Guruji has entrusted me with so many medicines of different kinds for

an emergency, and here I find you going to a doctor! You could as well have approached me in the first place, couldn't you?" He then apologetically said, "Dada, please forgive me, there won't be any recurrence, I assure you."

Guruji would treat him affectionately too, though he was not above cutting innocuous jokes at him. As it so happened, Laloo luxuriated a bit in sleeping. Guruji had observed it and indulgently remarked, "Just notice, a replica of Allarakha, isn't he? He is so very fond of indulging a little in sleeping and relaxing." Again, as it happened, both of us had been out for a while to find on return that Laloo had just got up from a siesta. Guruji poked fun at him amiably, "Well, Laloo, you didn't waste the chance to snatch an hour's rest at bed, did you?" Laloo would blush to hear it. Anyway I had grown a fondness for him. On some days he felt like sitting at practice session indoor and requested that I kept time by clapping. I complied, to the delight of us both. Occasionally, either he or I would prepare tea and treat each other with a cup of it. In this way a sort of amiable relationship developed between us.

I went from Kolkata to Delhi by a flight of the Indian Airlines on the 24th of August, for which Guruji had arranged to send the ticket beforehand. At the Dumdum airport those who came to see me off included my wife Juthika, Dipak, my friend-cum-disciple Hironmoy Chakravarty, and a few other members of my family and neighbours. I still remember the innocent question put to me by my neighbour's five-year old son, "Well, uncle, you are going by air. But do you know how to fly?" It was beyond me to explain to him how my mind had already soared high in excited fancy over the various prospects of the journey.

As advised by Guruji, I was travelling as light as possible to keep myself free for carrying his luggage to some extent, if needed. I had all my things packed inside a suitcase and a hand-bag. For the present of course I was mostly concerned about the

contents of the handbag, namely, the rare and most precious tapes of the background music played by Guruji under the name of Ravindra Shankar while he was a member of the Uday Shankar troupe. I had collected them a couple of days back from his nephew Ananda Shankar. I was relieved only after delivering the tapes to Guruji. On the 25th August AIR and Doordarshan, Delhi made an announcement about our China trip. On that very evening the Chinese Embassy gave us a dinner, where we were given an idea of what kind of weather we were likely to face in China on arrival. Interestingly enough, these suggestions or forecasts came to be of no avail in reality. For instance, we had been told that we might find the weather rather cold at certain places to be visited. In practice, however, we found the weather to be rather warm nearly everywhere. We did not of course have to face any difficulty on this account since everywhere— hotels, cars or auditoria— there were air-conditioning arrangements. At one auditorium, however, fans had to be provided in the absence of air-conditioners. But the heat was quite palpable when we occasionally went out for a walk to the parks or on the streets or for shopping at premises without air conditioners. In fact at the entrance of shops they used to provide us with cute-looking fans for use against the sultry atmosphere inside. The inland air transport of China also lacked air-conditioning arrangements and, until the plane rose to heights, we had to take recourse to hand fans. I brought back a few fans as souvenirs. On the whole the arrangements of Air India struck us as the better of the two.

In any case, being armed with a lot of suggestions and precautionary measures, we finally boarded at 8 P.M. on 26th August, 1983 a Jumbo Boeing plane of Air India on its flight to Hongkong via Bangkok. It took about three and a half hours to go to Bangkok and, after an hour's stopover there, another two hours and a quarter to reach Hongkong. Guruji was in the first class while we were in the economy class. I passed on through an air-

ways official a Bengali magazine bought by me at Dum Dum airport and containing an article by Nikhil Banerjee for perusal of Guruji. I did not try to go over to him because of the barrier between the two classes. However, I could see him gesturing to us from the distance by way of communicating. He was watching whether we had taken our seats. Later, with a gesture of hands he asked us to have our meal, indicating that food was being served. In other words he was all the time looking after us as far as possible from a distance. His repeated gestures to the officials by way of pleading while pointing to our seats also seemed to suggest that he was requesting them to take care of us. He was also bringing to their notice the fact that one of us, namely, Laloo, was a vegetarian.

While accompanying Guruji, I was invariably entrusted with his sitar. Naturally, I would be quite concerned and wary of likely hazards to the safety of the sitar since the slightest injury might spoil the entire recital. Noticing my excessive anxiety and cautiousness, Guruji at times jokingly said, "I find that you are too much worried, just like Noduda. Take it easy, that instrument would get carried quite safely, I assure you." Noduda refers to Naderchand Mullick, a close associate of Panditji, who is also an amateur manufacturer of sitar and a workman of exquisite skill and an innovative talent. It was on him that Guruji depended for not only devising his sitar but also its necessary repair or renovation. In any case I felt that I could never be too careful about the safety of Guruji's sitar. The instrument would be kept inside two consecutive covers. The first one was a soft silken stuff. On it was superimposed another cover made of a special kind of water-resistant cloth, rather fine and soft, bought abroad for this specific purpose. Its colour was deep bottle green with a touch of grey and its look was quite attractive.

On the plane a separate seat used to be reserved invariably for carrying the sitar. It would further have to be ensured that it was

a window seat in order to guard against the hazard of any injury due to the passengers' movement along the seats from at least one side. While seated, I used to lay on the floor the smaller cushion of the seat booked for the instrument and then let the larger gourd of the sitar rest softly on it. The upper portion of the sitar was supported against the seat in a slightly inclined position after fastening it with the help of the seat belt. The smaller gourd at the top rested against the backside of the seat. Initially, I used to be wary of possible injury to the strings on account of a too severe fastening. But Guruji reassured me, "There's nothing to worry, you can tighten the grip a little more." He would also tell me at first how tightly it could be fastened after verifying it himself. To tell the truth, not being sure of my own judgment initially, I used to leave it to him to determine how far the tightening could be pushed without risk of damage. After observing him doing it several times I soon learnt the art of carrying on the fastening operation to the optimum degree. Still, however, a bit of apprehension lingered in my mind that at the time of landing, when the plane would jolt to a halt, the sitar might sustain some injury despite all this precaution. But Guruji reassured me amply, "I have been moving with the sitar in this manner all around the world, no harm is going to befall it, as you will find out. Just keep it in a still position inside the plane and stop worrying." Ultimately, I found that he was right.

While carrying the sitar in a motor car the arrangements had to be modified suitably. Guruji had asked me on one or two occasions to sit on the front seat along with the sitar as there was a lot of space there to keep it. Moreover the gourd could also then rest comfortably on the feet. But a problem still remained. The gourd could no doubt be taken care of well, but the entire body of the sitar could not be supported properly on my shoulder. As a result I would have to hold the smaller gourd with one hand all along and sit in an extremely uncomfortable position. This was

because of the different arrangement of seats. In India the size of the front seat is the same as that of the rear one, while in China the front seat is cleft into two at the middle. As a result it would have been difficult to hold the sitar tightly in grip over the narrow surface of the seat so that at any moment the long neck could slide down the seat on the floor due to the swaying of the car and get damaged, particularly at the end of the wooden keys controlling the finer sympathetic strings called 'taraf.' When I explained to Guruji these practical difficulties he agreed to my sitting in the rear to hold the sitar conveniently in a lying position along the entire seat. Usually, Guruji and I travelled in separate cars. However, on one or two occasions we travelled together, when we both sat in the rear and put the sitar on our lap, while Laloo sat in the front.

I mention the mode of carrying the sitar in such minute details not merely because the success of the concert in a way demanded a great deal of care to be taken to ensure the safety of the instrument but also because Guruji regarded his sitar as much more than an inanimate object. I am a witness to his immense fondness, care and respect for the instrument, so that its maintenance was to me nothing less than a pietistic responsibility. It is of course quite natural for a musician to take proper care of his musical instrument for professional reasons. But to Guruji his sitar was not just a piece of equipment made of wood, gourd and steel. In his eyes the musical instrument was, as it were, the very embodiment of music itself, or, rather, a venerable entity or the image of a deity. Incidentally, I am reminded of an incident reflecting his deep reverence for his sitar. At that time Guruji was putting up at the Burdwan Circuit House in connection with his concert in the town. I was in charge of looking after his belongings, especially the sitar. The concert over, it was time to come back home. I started packing Guruji's things. I had just finished putting into the suitcase some of his garments that were fresh

from the laundry but had not been used during the tour. Then, as I was about to get hold of the sitar for packing it in its cover, Guruji, who was nearby, all on a sudden grabbed my hand to prevent me from touching it, and said, “Well, my son, go and cleanse your hands first. You should be careful about these things, shouldn’t you?” I was somewhat taken aback and silently stared at him for a few moments. Then, realising the inner significance of his words, my heart was overwhelmed with a deep sense of respect and adoration. I at once went to the wash room and cleansed my hands to make them immaculate enough to handle the sitar. That day I could realise with what degree of veneration he regarded his musical instrument so that he would demand similarly strict standards of sanctity and purity from others too in the matter of handling it. No wonder that any contact with even as apparently clean and unexceptionable objects as garments fresh from the laundry seemed to him to be polluting or defiling enough to entail cleansing of hands before handling the instrument.

Of the instruments, all the concern or trouble related to the carrying of the sitar alone. In contrast the tanpura or the drone presented no problem at all. It used to be kept inside a box and was safe. It was wrapped in a cloth with a Jaipuri print and kept lying inside the box in such a manner that even if the box swayed the instrument remained safe.

About the author

Shyamadas Chakraborty, the son of Panchanan and Bimalabala, was born in 1936 in North Bengal. After passing out from Siliguri High School, he passed I.Sc. Examination from Vidyasagar College in Kolkata and got himself admitted into the Bengal Veterinary College, from where, after some interruptions, he graduated with a degree in Veterinary Sciences in 1961. He joined Government services under the Government of West Bengal. He retired in 1994. He now resides in Chandannagar in the district of Hooghly.

He learnt sitar playing initially under Dhananjay Mullick in 1952 and later under Birendranath Bandyopadhyay. Around 1955 he received lessons from Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Sm Annapurnaji and Pandit Nikhil Banerjee at Ali Akbar College of music for about one and a half years. He was about to get a chance to learn from Ustad Allauddin Khan at Maihar, which did not materialise. Then he received further instructions for some time from Sm Annapurnaji privately. He came in touch with Pandit Ravi Shankar in 1958 and received lessons from him in two spells— for three years from 1958 to 1961 and then again from 1977 onwards for many years. He gradually became very close to Panditji and accompanied him at his recitals on the tanpura and also attended to him in various ways. He performed at many concerts in India and abroad and taught many students.