

Chapter 2

The Life Journey of Dr.Aban Mistry

2:1 Family and Education

2:2 Learning and Establishment in the Field

2:1 Family and Education

Dr. Aban Mistry was born in Mumbai, on 6th May 1940 in a Parsi Family. As we know that Parsis worship Zoroastrianism as a religion and in order to save their religion, about 1400 years ago, this community came from Iran to India (in Gujarat) and since then the Parsis have merged with Indian culture just like sugar get mixed with milk. Even the Gujarati tradition, customs, language, culture, social traditions, etc. were adopted by Parsis. These rituals were also seen inside Abanji as she spoke Gujarati language very well. She has also written articles in Gujarati throughout her life. Her correspondence (patra-vyavhaar) with various artists living in Gujarat was also done in Gujarati by her. She wore a Gujarati sari throughout her life, as she was a Parsi and has a close association with Gujarat, the researcher has tried to present her lifestyle here.

Her father's name was Shri Eruch Pirojshaw Mistry and mother's name was Smt. Khorshed Mistry. Abanji's father worked at TISCO SALES of Tata Company and retired from there in 1972 and spent his retired life dedicatedly for the musical instincts of Abanji and also voluntarily providing his services as an ambulance driver as a form of social service. Her father was a good violinist and especially knew western music. He was very well mannered and a disciplined person and also taught the same to Abanji from her childhood. There was no musician in her father's family, but her father already had an interest in music and her mother used to go to the music school in Mumbai, founded by Pt. V.N. Bhatkhande, to learn singing. Apart from singing, she also learned to play Dilruba. Abanji was also have a sibling named Mernaaz Mistry who was very much fond of music and even won many trophies in various singing competitions, but because of some diseases she died at the age of 25. Abanji's aunt Kum. Mehroo Workingboxwala was a vocalist and disciple of Vilayat Hussain Khan.⁽¹⁾

After marriage Abanji's mother was not able to pursue her career further in Music as at that time, women were not allowed to learn music. So, her mother could not learn music specifically, but she always dreamt of having a girl child and also wanted her to become a great artist. Due to her faith and immense affection for music, she started giving her life's mission as a sacrament to her beloved daughter Aban and vowed that "she will make her daughter the best performer" and in the same way she raised her daughter.

1. Dainik Lokmat/ 07-06-1995/ Mumbai.

From childhood, Abanji was always encouraged by her mother to become an artist. ⁽¹⁾

2:1:1 Statement of Abanji about her family and community

“My mother took pains to ensure that I develop an interest in music. When I was still a baby, she tied ghungroos around my wrist, so that I could hear its sound every time I moved my hand”.⁽²⁾

“It isn’t unusual of Parsi to learn Hindustani Classical Music though there is a myth that Parsis are attracted only to western music. My mother and my aunt were deeply into classical music, with each of them being entitled into it. Around the same time, a group of local Parsis came together and formed a “Gayan Uttejik Mandali”. This organisation wound up on its golden jubilee, but not before it had encouraged scores of upcoming as well as established musicians by giving them platform”.⁽³⁾

Here the researcher is not hesitant to say that it also seems right in the context to upbringing of Abanji by her parents, that there will be many mothers in India who in the womb itself started to train and nurture their children to the Indian culture, disciplines and national language. Just like Jijabai taught certain cultural traits to Shivaji Maharaj, Subhadra gave rites to Abhimanyu, and so there are many such examples in India. Researcher had also heard from somewhere and would also like to mention that when Ustad Zakir Hussain was in the womb of his mother, Ustad Allarkha Khan Sahab used to sit near his wife and recite various compositions (padhant) of Tabla and used to rehearse around her so that Tabla disciplines and values could come inside the divine soul breathing in the womb. There are many such stories that we get in the land of this virtuous India the same way, the rites Abanji received from his parents.

From 1st Std till S.S.C Abanji took her education from Manekbai Navroji Gaamadiya Girls High School. She passed S.S.C with first class and her education reports were always on the better side. She took music as one of the subject during her S.S.C and school had granted a special class of music for her. She stood third in music in the whole board during her S.S.C. During her schooling she took kathak training for four years from one of the school teacher

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1. Sannari – Supplement of Gujarat Mitra/ 07-09-2002/Surat.
 2. Sunday Mid-Day/ 14-11-1999/Mumbai
 3. Sunday Mid-Day/ 14-11-1999/Mumbai

Smt. Kumi Lakdawala. Besides Kathak, school was also conducting special classes for classical vocal music, the classes for classical gayan were conducted by Pt. Laxman Rao Bodas who was a disciple of Pt. Vishnu Digambar Paluskar who came to Mumbai during the time of partition and join Abanji's school as a music teacher. Abanji got her vocal training during her schooling itself and she completed her Sangeet Visharad in vocal music simultaneously with her S.S.C.

2:2 Learning and Establishment in the Field

Dr. Aban Mistry has started learning music (vocal) at the tender age of 4 years under the tutelage of her aunt Kum. Mehroo Workingboxwala. Later, she was given extensive training by Pt. Laxmanrao Bodas under whose guidance she blossomed her unique vocal style. At the age of 5 Abanji had given her first vocal performance in November 1945 organized Cultural Academy, Thane, by Gayan Uttejik Mandal.⁽¹⁾

Abanji wanted to become a Kathak dancer and so she started learning kathak from one of the teacher at her school Mrs. Kumi Lakdawala and later on she took her further training under Pt. Jaisukhlal Shah. By witnessing her dedication and hard work in vocal music and dance as well, her parents and gurus wanted to make her a renowned artist. But an unexpected incident took place that changed her life, she become ill and she had to go through a stomach surgery which left her with no choice but to quit dancing, this incident of her life made her helpless and she went through a tough time during those days.

After sometime, Abanji's mother Shrimati Khurshid took her to the music school of Pt. Keki S. Jijina and requested panditji to teach Sitar to her daughter but he refused to teach her. She was disappointed and left the place but Abanji had firmly decided that she will take the training of sitar and Tabla under the guidance of Pt. Keki Jijna. Following next day on much insistence from Abanji, her mother again went to Panditji but he refused to teach any of the girl, but Abanji was stuck to her decision stubbornly, due to which her mother continued the same till the next five days and tried to convince Guruji to accept Abanji as a student. Finally, on the sixth day, after much convincing she fell in Panditji's feet and asked him to accept her child as his student as she had already accepted him as her Guru. At last Panditji accepted

1. Gruhshobha Magazine/August 1994/Delhi, Pg. 58.

Abanji as his student but instructed that he is very strict when it comes to Taleem (Training) and she has to be very well-disciplined if she wants to learn from him. In this way Abanji had started her training of Tabla and Sitar from Pt. Keki Jijina. By observing Abanji' dedication, Panditji did not limit his training to music, but also imparted the knowledge of Meditation, Yoga-Sadhana and Spiritualism.⁽¹⁾

2:2:1 Statement of Abanji about her childhood

My music training had actually started from the age of 4. I have never enjoyed my childhood as others. Only one thing was there in my life "Riyaaz (practice)", many times I even got tired with it. By the age of 8 year my friends were leading their routine life and sometime they would talk about the interesting stuffs happening in their lives that I would feel very bad about my life, they all would even go to enjoy movies and would come back and start discussing about the same, I always used to listen to them quietly, at that time one question was always there in my mind "why I can't enjoy my life like all my friends?" Sometime I had even cried. My Guruji (music teacher) was very strict, he would always scold me even for a tiny mistakes, during that time I would feel very bad and sometimes feel very angry too, I would even decide many times that from tomorrow I will not go back to this person, however, I do not know why, the next day I would be desperately waiting for my 3:00 o'clock tuition.⁽²⁾

During that period of time Pt. Keki Jijina who himself was an eminent sitarist (Disciple of Pt. Ravishankar) recognized the talent of Abanji and trained her in playing Tabla and sitar as well, laying the solid foundation of laya in her over an intensive training period of over seven years. This talim of Tabla and sitar fired enthusiasm of wanting to master the percussion instruments i.e Tabla and Pakhawaj.

Pt. Keki Jijina was an exceptional disciple to one of the greatest Guru, and because of his far sightedness India has got a great artist like Dr, Aban Mistry as a Female Tabla Player. Abanji had great respect and honor for her Guru and she also had so much of faith that she blindly followed all the instructions that were given by her Guru. During the research work, researcher has noticed many times that Pt. Keki Jijina has played an important role in

1. Samajkalyan Magazine/ 2007/Asfaq Kadri/Pg.34

2. Sannari, Gujarat Mitra/ 07-09-2002/Surat

successfully making Abanji a remarkable artist and social worker in music. Here, the researcher feels that an introduction is imperative of the great guru Pt. Keki S. Jijina.

2:2:2 Introduction of Pt. Keki .S. Jijina

A classist both by training and temperament, Pt. Keki Shapurji Jijina was a life-long devotee of Maa-Saraswati and made it his life's mission to propagate the divine art of Indian Classical Music. Born into a Parsi Zoroastrian priestly family in 1921 at Suwali near Surat, Pt. Keki Jijina was the heir-apparent to the prestigious seat of the high priest at the Mithaiwala fire-temple in Mumbai. He took priestly training from his uncle Sant Manekji Bhatena but his deep love for Indian Classical Music made him give up this benefit and underwent overwhelming deprivations to pursue his goal. He trained under Pt. Pandurang Amberkar in vocal, Pt. Rajaram Koparde, Shri Dastogir Khan and Pt. Ravi Shankar in sitar, Pt. Jaisukhlal shah in Musicology and Tabla under master Mohan who was also his spiritual guru. Later, he acquired spiritual knowledge from Swami Kashikar Maharaj of Kala Hanuman Mandir-Kandiwali.

Soon Pt. Jijina experienced the difficulties of struggling artistes and decided to uplift their status. He realized the dire need to generate keen cultural awareness of Indian Classical Music amongst the masses also. So he founded a non-commercial institution, the Swar Sadhana Samiti on 19th October 1961 along with his disciple Dr. Aban Mistry. When panditji was at the peak of his career as an outstanding sitarist, he met with a near fatal bus accident in 1974 which truncated his stage performances, but he was not dis-illusionised and continued working with zeal to promote art and artistes. He passed away on 14th August 2003 in the serene surrounding of hill-station Panchgini, Maharashtra, Where he had been staying with his disciple in the last three years of his musical and spiritual journey of life.

At the age of 15, Abanji started doing solo-performances of Tabla, a field which was known to be male dominant. During that time females did not learn or play these type of instruments where there is lots of physical and mental strength required, but when Abanji started presenting solo performances the artist community and people were surprised of her mastering all the difficult aspects of this male dominant percussion instrument – Tabla.

When Abanji was taking training of Tabla under the supervision of Pt. Keki S.Jijina at that time a miracle took place in Abanji's life, which was unforgettable. Because of this incident

Abanji came in contact with a great Guru of Tabla, the researcher wants to present this incident by the following saying:

Our scriptures state that

**“गुरु गोविंद दोनों खड़े काके लागू पाय
बलिहारी गुरु आपकी गोविंद दियो बताए”**

It has been said that for the attainment of the divine, it is necessary to have a guru. In any field, it is necessary to have a guru in some form or the other to achieve perfection and fulfillment. The maturity of knowledge comes only through the Guru, with rigorous practice. In context of the same, Saint Shri Tulsidas has said that

**भवानीशंकर बंदे श्रद्धाविश्वासरूपिणौ ।
दाभ्यं विना न पश्यंति सिद्धाः स्वान्तः स्वमीश्वरम् । ॥**

(Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya, Akhand Jyoti Sanstha Prakashan, Mathura first instance-1995)

That is, maturity of knowledge produces trust and faith. It is possible to feel close to God, with the help of knowledge and emotion.

The same fact illustrates Abanji's life. She found the God; she was looking for as Ustad Amir Hussain Khan. When she was 16 years old, one of her performance was witnessed by the Late Ustad Amir Hussain Khan, the Doyen of Farukhabad Gharana at the Alexander high school, Girgaon (Mumbai) and after seeing the whole performance he decided to make Abanji his student, so he told Pt. Keki Jijina that “ I am going to give further training to Aban”.⁽¹⁾ From then, Abanji's initiation of advanced education began and with the help of the knowledge and spirit received from her Guru, Abanji made it possible to attain Ishwara (Guru), the spiritual ecstasy. In this way, Abanji's interest was further monitored and nurtured by the great Tabla wizard – Ut. Amir Hussain Khan for next six to eight years where she got educated about the playing style of all major 4 gharanas of Tabla. She did continuous riyaz which led her to the core of Tabla playing. Riyaz is like a chanting practice and it is said in our scriptures,

1. Navbharat Times/28-11-1999/Mumbai.

नाम जपत मंगल दिसि दसहूँ
जपही नाम जन आरत भारी
मिटहीं कुसंकटहो ही सुखारी

Goswami Shri Tulsidas, Shabdabrahma Naadbrahma

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That is, Jap or chanting is a spiritual exercise. There is a scientific process that has a definite impact on our mental and intellectual sphere. Various achievements are obtained on the basis of Jap. The above facts are absolutely meaningful for Abanji. She did a lot of Jap Sadhna – Riyaz that she was able to recognize her own talent and kept moving forward under the guidance of the Guru.

2:2:3 Statement of Abanji about her training

“To learn Tabla from such a towering personality and a great guru was my stroke of luck. One had to pay handsome amount of fees to learn from ustadji and my parents were not capable to pay such an amount, nevertheless it was in my destiny to learn from him and he told me, ”not to worry about the fees and pay whatever you can but now onwards I will give you further training of Tabla”. This is how I got the opportunity to learn from him and acquire priceless lessons of my life which I cannot express in words”.⁽¹⁾

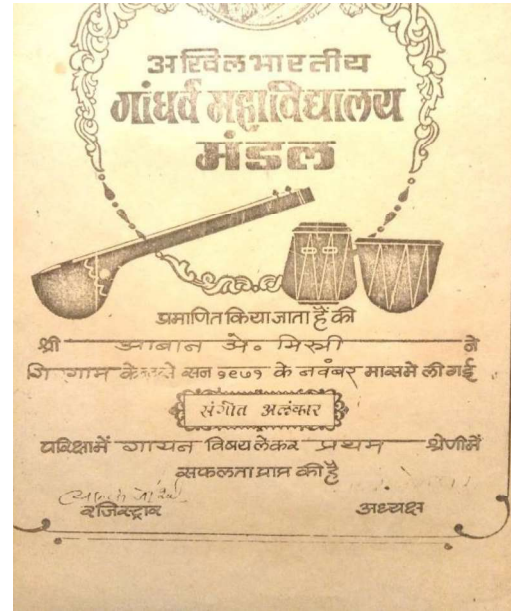
Along with Tabla Abanji had also mastered the concepts and techniques of Pakhawaj from the illustrious guru Pt. Narayanrao Mangal Vedhekar. She was also having valuable command on different mathematical aspects of Tabla which she had learnt under the guidance of great Guru Khapru Mama and trained herself about the different laykaris and mastered the calculation of all different time cycles (odd matra taals) other than the common taals which were usually played on Tabla. These invaluable talims from all the gurus guided her through Sangeet Visharad in Sitar (1964), Sangeet Alankar in Vocal (1970), Sangeet Alankar in Tabla (1975), Sangeet Praveen in Vocal Music (1978) with the knowledge of 225 Ragas, She went on to do her Doctorate in Musicology i.e Sangeet Acharaya (1984) by presenting the thesis on “Tabla aur Pakhawaj ke Gharane, Udbhav, Vikas, Vishesta evum Parampara” (Practical and Historical Approach) from Akhil Bhartiya Gandharva Mahavidhyalay, Miraj.

1. Gujarat Mitra/18-02-1996/Ahmedabad.

Under the Guidance of eminent artist and musicologist, Prof. V.R.Athavale (Head of the Department of Music at S.N.D.T College, Mumbai). Along with music Abanji has also acquired Masters in Hindi and Sanskrit Sahitya Ratna in 1961.



Sangeet Acharya



Sangeet Alankar

During the time she was working on her thesis she had travelled across the country from 1975 till 1983 to collect data from all the great gurus and artists of all the Gharanas of Tabla as well as Pakhawaj and collected first-hand information by interviewing them face-to-face. Collecting information about the shishya parampara of all Gharanas and to meet great maestros of all different gharanas was not easy during those days because people use to think that what will a lady talk about- Tabla or Pakhawaj (a male dominant instruments). There is an instance that once upon a time in Kolkata Abanji went to meet Ustad Karamatullah Khan to interview him on her thesis, after facing so much of difficulties Ustadji agreed to meet her, on his meeting with Abanji the discussion which took place between them on Tabla and Pakhawaj made Ustadji realize that “Being a lady she is having so much of authentic information and not only theoretical but also a practically sound knowledge about these percussion instruments”, looking at the dedication of Abanji, Ustadji gave her proper time and that meeting continued for six hours where Abanji had collected firsthand information

related to her thesis and Ustad karamatullah khan sahab had also motivated her to meet the great maestros of all other gharanas.⁽¹⁾

At that time Dr.Aban Mistry had already performed many solos all over the country and in 1974

Along with her journey of Tabla vadan she had published her gramophone record which was the first record of a lady Tabla player in the whole country. In that record Abanji with her Guru Pt. Keki Jijina on nagma had played the full solo in taal Teentaal, Jhaptaal and Pancham Savari and had also tried to present all different compositions which she had learned from her Gurus.

Along with Tabla solo Abanji had also given many performances of Gayan and Sitar as well but after 1980 she stopped singing and playing sitar and only concentrated on her Tabla concerts. Keeping in mind her interest in music and literature Dr. Aban Mistry emphasized more on Tabla and performed many Tabla concerts not only in India but all over the world. In 1983-84 she travelled to England, France, Germany, Netherland, Rome and Switzerland for the concerts and in 1988 she performed in the Indian Festival at Moscow(Russia) and brought name, fame and pride to our county, then in 1986 she had been to Dubai, Muscat and Bahrain for the concerts and gained international fame throughout these years.⁽²⁾

2:2:4 Statement of Abanji about her concert

“People used to come just to see me in my concerts”, before 45 years from today it was not acceptable by the people, their thinking was like “a Lady playing Tabla? Impossible!”, and that time they did not come to listen to my concerts but just to see me. It was their mentality that lets go to see a girl, they were keener to observe minutely how I dressed up and what kind of jewelry I wore during my concerts. It was a time when I was young with a beautiful face and boldness of Parsi. It was in my nature to talk to anybody innocently without any hesitation, whether the person is known to me or not. But my guruji always took care of me and always tried to make me understand that this bold nature can create misunderstanding in the minds of other people. He was so strict that if I gave smile to someone without any reason he would scold or sometimes slap me. During those days it was really essential to be careful if one wanted to stand

1. Kadri, Asfaq/Ahilya Magazine/July 2010/ Hyderabad, Pg. 45.

2. Kadri, Asfaq/Ahilya Magazine/July 2010/ Hyderabad, Pg. 44.

in this field otherwise a person could be easily distracted and would not be able to stay focused and achieve what he or she want in this field, that is the reason why I didn't get married and I added Srimati before my name so that everyone thought that I am married and it wouldn't create any obstacle in my musical journey. "Music is just like a prayer for me and spiritually I am much attached to it that I do not perform in any kind of food festival where people are sitting with their food plates."⁽¹⁾

The reason for giving up vocal music as stated by Abanji was:

"Often my sinus would start bothering me just around the time of performance. If I sang despite the problem, the audience would feel that I was not a good artist and if I cancelled the show, it would put many people, especially the organizers to great inconvenience. Very reluctantly, I had to give up vocal music"⁽²⁾

2:2:5 Statement about marriage by Abanji

To continue the endless musical journey which I have started at the tender age of four and to fulfill the dream of my mother had become my aim of life, because of which I stopped thinking about my marriage. Marriage is a commitment between the lives two individuals, if I get married then I have to look after my house, take care of my husband and children which is really a big responsibility of life, how to manage the musical career and social life together under such circumstances? Which husband will allow his wife to go for concerts till late nights? Any man will get fed-up of regularly staying out of the house for programs, and a time will come when he finally won't allow and ask to quit!⁽³⁾

2:2:6 Statement by Abanji about her dedication

Many times it happened with me that I kept a bowl of milk on gas to boil it and suddenly a bandish came to my mind and I was totally lost in it that the whole milk spill out of the bowl and get wasted. I just want to serve for music and that is why I never had a thought of getting married, I am so lucky that my parents have understood my dedication towards music and

1. Gujarat Mitra/24-08-2002/Surat
2. Times of India /08/01/1994/ Ahmedabad
3. Gujarat Mitra/ 26-03-1995/Mumbai

never forced me to get married. They have supported me so much that they have spent their entire wealth (ornaments and rupees) after my musical studies and journey, which they had saved for my marriage. Today I am alone and suffering from lots of physical problems. Diabetes, Blood Pressure, Arthritis, Spine Problem, Sinus and my body is like a house of diseases, but then also I am living because there is some super natural power which helps me to survive and so I don't feel that I need anyone.⁽¹⁾

“An artist should not think of art only as a medium of business, Art is divine. Changes have brought speed in today's art form. Today's artist can excite the audience for some time only by playing anything for 10-15 minutes, unlike the artist of older generation who could make the audience sit for 2-3 hours to listen to their concert. The ability to keep the audience engrossed for hours only by a single composition is a sign of true art and artist. An artist should develop his skill to infatuate the audience without doing any type of gimmicks and stick to pure art” ⁽²⁾

By going through various newspapers and magazines which was collected during the time of data collection of thesis, it has come to the knowledge of the researcher that Abanji had stated that “Today whatever I am is only because of the divine vision of my first great guru Pt. Keki S. Jijina, without him I would have been like an disinterested and uncommitted student of music with elementary knowledge, so whatever I have learnt in music I dedicate all of it in the feet of my great Guru”.

Similarly the divine vision of my second guru Tabla Wizard Late Ustad Amir Hussain khan (disciple of the Doyen of Tabla, Ustad Munir Khan) entered my life as a source of blessings and made me part of a great disciple lineage of Ut. Munir Khan sahab, he had blessed me by his invaluable talims and deepest thoughts on various aspects of Tabla, he enlightened my whole personality and shaped me as a musician from a simple student. And that is why I always see Bramha, Vishnu, Mahesh and Goddess Saraswati in both of my gurus who have given the shape to a broken rock and converted it into a graceful statue, my gurus have graced me with a vision to move ahead on my journey in the field of music- Tabla.

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1. Gujarat Mitra/25-06-1990/Surat
 2. Gujarat Samachar/18/10/1995/Vadodara.

In the later days of her life, after the demise of her Pujya Guruji Pt. Keki S. Jijina in 2003, Abanji shifted to Panchgini (a hill station in the South-East of Mumbai) in 2005, and stayed with the present secretary of Swar Sadhna Samiti Mrs. Rupa Sethna till the end of her life. Abanji had a very hard time in the later stage of her life as she was suffering from severe Arthritis which led to Atrophy of Muscles. In spite of suffering from many diseases like Arthritis, Diabetes, Blood Pressure, Sinus and Spine Problem, she was very active and self-dependent till the end of her life. From 2009 she became very ill and completely bed ridden. On 30th September 2012, the world of Indian Classical Music lost a rare gem – an artiste par excellence, a celebrated performer, a lady with great dignity, an exemplary human being, a loving daughter, a wonderful guru and above all of these, Maa Saraswati's devoted child.