

Enchanting harmon

PASSING BY

Playing the shehnai is not just an art for Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary. It's his religion.

SAVITHA GAUTAM

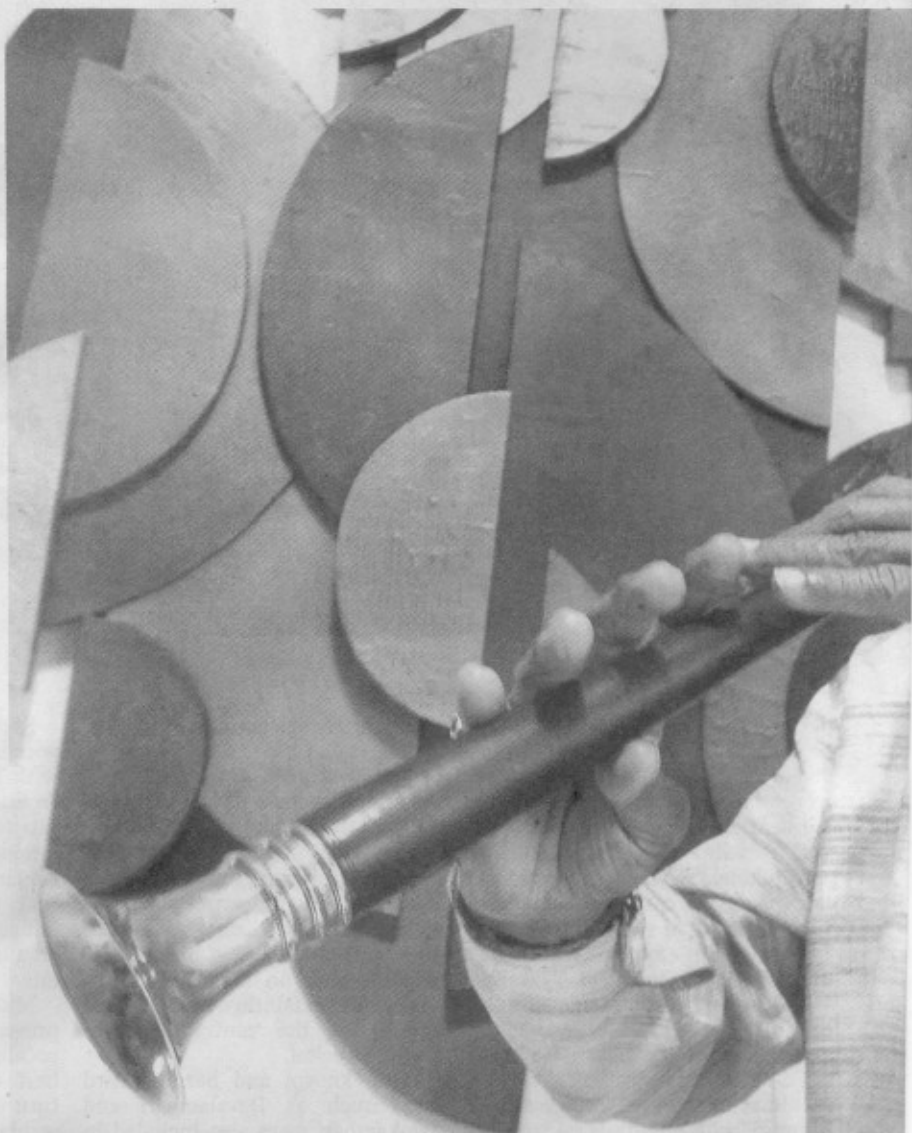
The members of the hotel staff are busy setting the tables and chatting as they get the dining hall ready for the evening. They hardly notice a frail man in a kurta sitting in a corner and adjusting his shehnai as he prepares for a photo shoot. But as soon as Pandit Krishna Ram Choudhary picks up his shehnai and plays a tune, there's absolute silence in the room. At once! Well, that's the power of his music.

The 72-year-old shehnai maestro, during a visit to the city to participate in the Gharana Music Festival organised by Prakriti Foundation, is excited and nervous all at once when a request is put forth for an interview.

"Aap Hindi baat kar sakte hain?" (Can you speak Hindi?) is his first question. Once assured, he gets talking and is full of confidence and energy.

"This is my third visit to your city," is Choudharyji's opening comment. "My first was in 1993 when I performed at the Radio Sangeeth Sammelan. I stayed in Mylapore and still remember the excellent food I ate. Do you know I am a great fan of Sheikh Chinna Maulana?" he says, smiling.

This recipient of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award for 2008 is one of the few artists who continues to keep the shehnai tradition



ADHERING TO TRADITION: Pt. Krishna Ram Choudhary. PHOTO: R. SHIVAJI RAO

LP I heard of his; it was in 1952. It was divine."

Learning years

Choudharyji hails from a musical family from Benares. "My grandfather was a shehnai player. He used to play at a temple there. In fact, he specifically bought a house on Kabir Chouraha as famous musicians such as Sitara Devi, Kishan Maharaj and

uncle) would be doing his riyaz (practice)."

Choudharyji started formal tutelage under his father when he was 12. He refined his art further under the watchful eye of the inimitable Pandit Mahadev Prasad Mishra, an exponent of the

Benares gharana. He recalls "Guruji would insist on riyaz because that was the only way to perfect this art. He taught me the art of 'singing a raag on a shehnai.'"

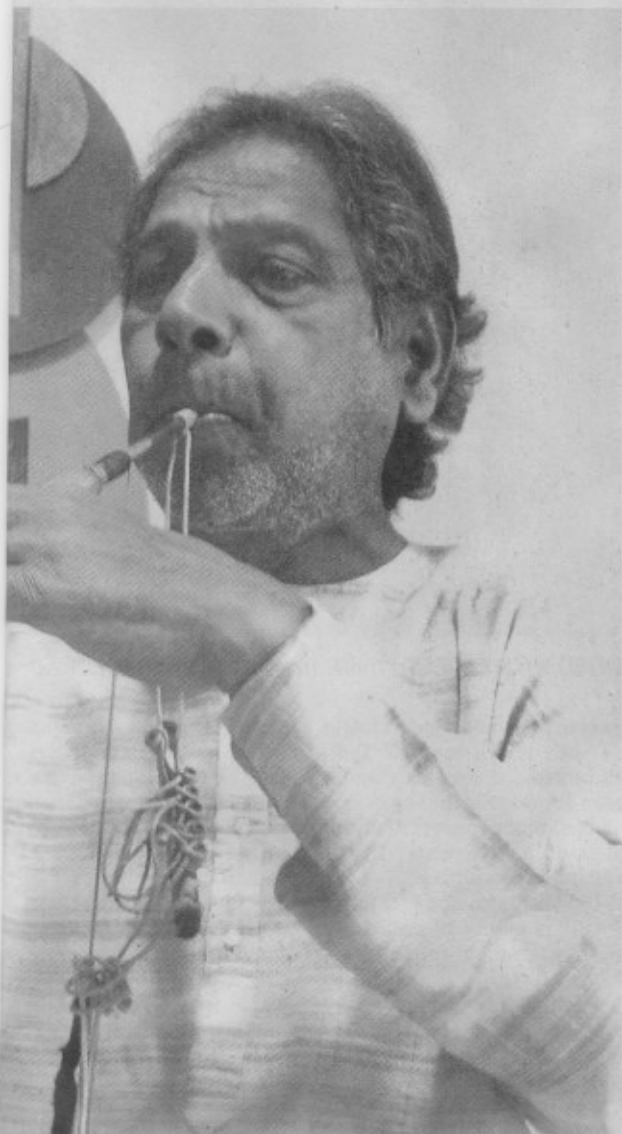
Another great influence on his musical career was his uncle Ramlal 'Sehera', a ve

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BUT FOR USTAD BISMILLAH KHAN, THE SHEHNAI WOULD NEVER HAVE GOTTEN GLOBAL RECOGNITION.

is found only in two places in North India? Dumaon in Bihar and Mirzapur. So, you can imagine how tough it is to make this instrument." That boy's grandfather and father to make shehnai is saying he is very proud to claim. That he is a smaller version for when he was just seven different matter.

Choudharyji, however, comments the fact that there are not many takers for the shehnai today. "Sitar, sarangi, tabla... all these instruments are taught at music schools. But not shehnai. In fact, this is one instrument that has its origins in Bihar. Yet, nobody seems to be doing anything to keep it alive. There are a few students. But, how many of them will continue to play. I agree that the shehnai is not as financially viable as nobody is willing to pay money to listen to it. I wish the Government had introduced it in the curriculum. In fact, he has four sons. Only his eldest, Ustad Bismillah Khan, plays the instrument and runs his own companies him.

Career-wise though, he has been quite fulfilling. He is a Pandit Choudhary. He has played with other musicians such as Pandit V.G. Jog, Ustad Shujaat Khan and Pandit Ramu Prasad Shastri. He has accompanied dancers such as Gopi Krishna and Birju Maharaj on several of their productions. He has travelled overseas quite extensively. Finally, for Choudharyji, playing the shehnai is not just an art, it's his religion.

known musician, who worked with V. Shantaram on films including 'Geet Gaya Patharon Ne' and 'Sehera'. "My uncle played shehnai for almost all great music directors of his time."

Was Choudharyji not attracted to the glamorous

world of cinema, especially since he used to accompany his uncle occasionally for recordings? He is honest. "Of course, I was. I would have made a lot of money and I would have also gained fame. But my father forbade me to work in films. And his word was law." If it was of any compensation, he did get to work on a couple of documentary films.

He then goes on to explain more about his favourite instrument.

"The shehnai is quite diffi-

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