

Lyrical legacy of tabla maestro Sabir Khan

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Calcutta: "I am deeply saddened by the sudden demise of my dear friend Sabir. We belonged to the same gharana and shared a long family association. Sabir was an extraordinary tabla player whose greatest strength was the melodic beauty of his playing. He had the rare ability to create sweetness even within the most powerful strokes. His passing is truly a great loss to Indian classical music," said Anindya Chatterjee, one of the greatest tabla players of our time, who shared the *guru-shishya parampara* with the late tabla exponent Sabir Khan.

The world of Indian classical music became quieter on Thursday with the passing of Ustad Sabir Khan. His death in Calcutta at the age of 66 created a deep emptiness in the hearts of musicians, students and listeners across the country.

Sabir Khan belonged to the famous Farrukhabad gharana, one of the most respected schools of tabla playing in Hindustani classical music. The Farrukhabad style is known for its balance between power and sweetness, speed and delicacy. It carries the elegance of poetry within rhythm. In the hands of Sabir Khan, this tradition became truly melodic. Every stroke of his fingers seemed to speak a language of memory and emotion.

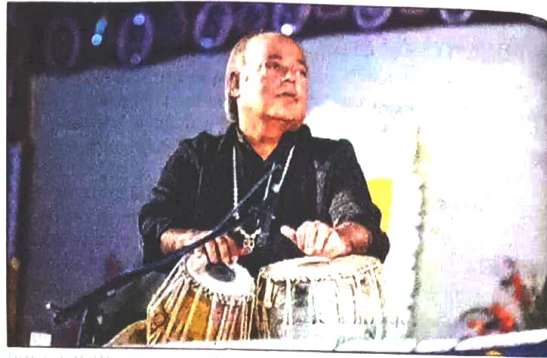
Born on December 4, 1959, in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, Sabir Khan inherited music not simply as a profession but as a family destiny.

He came from an extraordinary lineage of tabla players. His grandfather was the legendary Ustad Masit Khan, and his father was the celebrated Ustad Karamatullah Khan, one of the towering figures of twentieth-century tabla music. Under his father's guidance, young Sabir began learning tabla at a very early age.

Like many musicians from traditional gharanas, his training was strict. The art was not taught only through notes or compositions; it was passed from one generation to another through everyday living. Rhythm became part of breathing, walking and speaking. By the time he entered the concert stage, Sabir Khan had absorbed the deep essence of the Farrukhabad style.

Sabir Khan carried the responsibility of preserving and guiding a tradition that travelled through generations for hundreds of years. According to several accounts, he represented the thirty-third generation of the Farrukhabad lineage.

What made Sabir Khan special was his ability to combine scholarship with emotion. His tabla playing had astonishing clarity, but it never



Ustad Sabir Khan

felt mechanical. Whether he was accompanying a vocalist in a slow *khayal* or performing a dazzling solo recital, there was always warmth in his music.

In his career, he accompanied some of the greatest Indian musicians. He performed with Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, and many more. Accompanying such masters required not only technical brilliance but also sensitivity and humility.

A great tabla accompanist must know when to lead and when to disappear into the music. Sabir Khan possessed that rare balance. At the same time, he was a brilliant solo performer. In his solo concerts, listeners could hear the entire architecture of the Farrukhabad gharana unfold slowly.

Over the decades, Sabir Khan received several honours for his contribution to Indian classical music. He got the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, one of India's highest recognitions in performing arts.

Internationally, too, Sabir Khan carried the spirit of the Farrukhabad gharana across the world. He performed in prestigious venues across London, Paris, New York and Toronto, introducing global audiences to the depth and sophistication of the Indian tabla tradition.

Another important aspect of his life was teaching. In Calcutta, he established the Ustad Karamatullah Khan Music Society in memory of his father. Through this institution, he trained many and kept the *guru-shishya* tradition alive.

Sabir Khan also crossed the boundaries of pure classical music. He worked in films and composed music for Hindi, Bengali and Tamil cinema. Yet he never diluted the dignity of classical rhythm. Even outside the concert hall, he carried the fragrance of the gharana with him.

Co-artists like Anindya Chatterjee admired him not only for his artistry but also for his personality. He was known for warmth, humour and generosity towards younger artists.

His son, Asif Khan, remem-

bered his father as a true giver. He used to say 'Asif yeh mat socho ke tum ko kya mila, socho ki tum kya de sakte ho' (Asif, don't think of what you might get, think of what you can give). He was equally excited about recognising talent and promoting talent. He never thought of anything in return."

Sabir Khan's death marks the end of an important chapter in Indian classical music. He leaves behind not silence, but rhythm that will continue to echo for years to come.

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, whose family has a deep connection with the Farrukhabad gharana, said the world of music had "lost a luminous soul".

"Deeply saddened by the passing of Ustad Sabir Khan Saheb — an extraordinary maestro who carried forward one of the richest legacies in Indian classical music with immense dignity, brilliance, and devotion. Sabir Khan was the grandson of the legendary Ustad Masit Khan saheb, who was invited to Kolkata by Ustad Haafiz Ali Khan saheb — a moment that played a significant role in the establishment and flourishing of the Farrukhabad gharana in Kolkata. Carrying this extraordinary lineage forward, he further elevated his illustrious father Ustad Keramatullah Khan saheb's legacy through his unmatched artistry and dedication to the tabla. His tabla spoke a language beyond words — filled with emotion, rhythm, spirituality, and profound depth. Every performance reflected both the strength of tradition and the spark of fearless creativity," Ustad Amjad Ali Khan said.

He went on: "Beyond his genius as a musician, Ustad Sabir Khan will always be remembered for his warmth, humility, affection, and generosity towards fellow artists and audiences alike. His presence on and off stage was deeply inspiring.

"His legacy will continue to resonate through every beat, every composition, and every disciple fortunate enough to learn from him or hear him perform. Prayers and deepest condolences to the family, disciples, friends, and countless admirers around the world. May his soul rest in eternal peace."