

A photograph of Nayan Ghosh, a man with glasses and a red kurta, sitting and playing a veena. The instrument is dark wood with many frets and tuning pegs. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

NAYAN GHOSH
LIVE AT ALI AKBAR
COLLEGE OF MUSIC
TABLA: MALLAR GHOSH

Nayan Ghosh on Shree Rag

Ira Landgarten: People sometimes have different descriptions or interpretations of a rag — its implications, its mood, the way it's performed — that's why we'd like to hear specifically about Shree rag directly from you.

Nayan Ghosh: Shree rag is definitely one of the most revered among ragas. It has a gravity, an intensity that is really difficult to match. The rag itself has a very strong inherent strength. It is a dusk-time rag. My uncle (Pannalal Ghosh) was one of the two or three artists who were almost synonymous with Shree Rag; the others being Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and D.V. Paluskar. My father used to mention about his meetings with Mamman Khan, the uncle of the Sarangi legend Bundu Khan. Mamman Khan always brought in references of Shree Rag to whatever he spoke about. That was everything for him.

The Shree Rag as my father taught me — he used to teach me more the alaps and the actual rag, and the first time I received my training in Shree Rag was very interesting. It was at a hill station near Bombay; no cars go up it, you have to walk all over the hill station. There are ponies and hand-pulled rickshaws and all that. It's a beautiful hill station and one evening he took us to an edge of that hill station, on the cliff, and we were facing the west side and in front of us between our mountain and the opposite one was a deep valley down. It was evening, sunset time and the swallows and the birds were returning home. A very light breeze was there and for sometime the breeze stopped; he told us to stop talking — all of us, the whole family was sitting there — and he said, "Just listen to the silence." We listened to it for about twenty minutes or half an hour, and the was a very great experience! Then he started humming the Shree Rag, and I, my mother, my brother Dhruva and my sister Tulika gave the backdrop, the sa and pa — we created the tanpura effect by humming. And my father was very inspired; he was looking at the pink sky, the setting

Facing page: Nikhil Ghosh, Nayan Ghosh's father.



sun, and he went into the alap of Shree. That was the first time I heard Shree; I was maybe ten or twelve years old and it had a very deep impact on me. He sang and he sang for half an hour and we all lost consciousness of things happening around us. Everything was still. After he finished singing there was a long silence then he told us, “Always sing to the mountains, to the ocean.” I don’t know how much all that meant, but he said, “Sing to the mountain; you don’t know what response and blessing you’ll get.” The next morning again we were at the same spot, the next evening, too — we were there for a few days — and we just had fun singing open-throated and the voices would go to the mountain across and come back echoing a couple of times. And we sang Adana; one night we went there in absolute pitch dark...Oh, what an experience it was! And we sang Shankara, open-throated Shankara, with the same thing — sa and pa humming. These experiences...but Shree was the first and even today I remember it so vividly — the birds returning and even the breeze stopped for some time. The sun had set and the sky was absolutely glowing pink. So whenever I play Shree, I imagine that. That whole landscape comes in front of me; it’s very intense, it’s very intense. Then, of course, I try to invoke my uncle, or Ali Akbar Khan and all these people when I play Shree. Those are the people who I have heard play Shree, I still haven’t heard any other artistes play or sing Shree. So those impressions are deep.

Isn't Shree considered one of the 'Adi' ragas?

NG: It is one of the Adi ragas. My father once just by the by casually mentioned that there is another way of classification of ragas known as ‘Janaka-janya’ ragas, that is, ‘father and son’ or ‘father and children’ ragas. Just as there are ragas and raginis; that’s another way of classification. For example, he said Shree is the father and Desh is the son. I asked how, so he said, “Sa ri ma pa ni sa ri — Shree.” He said they have the same features, the shades of notes are different. Then Shree comes back — ri ni dha pa dha ma ga ri, ri pa ri ga ri sa. Desh comes back — ri ni dha pa

Facing page: Gyan Prakash Ghosh, Mallar Ghosh's father.



dha ma ga ri, ri pa ri ma ga ri ga ni sa. A little different at the end, at the very end, but he said Desh is the son; he must have read it somewhere. So Shree is a janaka rag and Desh is one of the many sons, he said.

That's very interesting; the Adi rag system predates the 'thaat' system of Bhatkande.

Yes, the thaat system dates just from the beginning of the 20th century.

About the structure of Shree; what is the vadi? The samvadi? The aroha and avaroha?

The vadi is komal ri; in fact, ati komal ri, and the samvadi is pa. The aroha is — sa, komal ri, tivra ma, pa ni sa. The avaroha is — komal ri, ni, komal dha pa dha ma ga ri, ri pa ri, ma ri, ga ri sa. The chief phrase is 'pa ni sa ri' or 'dha ma ga ri.' These the the two main characteristic phrases of this rag. And 'ri pa,' of course, which stands out from all the ragas of the same scale — Puriya Dhanashree and all those. 'Ri pa.' It's one of the most solid ragas for that time, the dusk time, like Marwa.

One really doesn't hear that sort of scale in the west, and the mood it creates is very unusual... What 'rasa' or mood is attributed to Shree?

Shree basically is 'vira' ras; vira means 'brave, warrior, heroic.' But it is certainly extremely, entirely meditative in nature. I think for an evening prayer or evening meditation, Shree is more suitable than any of the other evening ragas. It's spiritually very intense. And therefore the bhakti (devotion) ras is also dominant. Marwa has a different flavor; some people say it is vira, but no, it's more karuna (longing). There is a feeling of loneliness in Marwa because the 'sa' (tonic) is used in such little quantity; you feel something is missing! You feel something is missing, and finally you get it but as soon as you get it, it's gone again from you! It's fleeting. So Marwa makes you feel lonely. — *New York, November 1999*

Producers' Note re Tilak Kamod: *As there was enough space on the disc for a good taste of Tilak Kamod, we chose to include some of it rather than none at all...it makes for a refreshing change after mighty Shree Rag. (It was the second and final piece of the concert, and ran about 50 minutes).*

Nayan Ghosh and Mallar Ghosh are not related, although both their fathers were musical giants of the previous generation. Nayan's father, Nikhil Ghosh, younger brother of legendary flautist Pannalal Ghosh, was one of the tabla virtuosos of the past century, and a leading vocalist, instrumentalist, composer, author and scholar. Nikhil Ghosh started his training with Mallar's father Gyan Prakash Ghosh, then spent 25 years under Amir Hussain Khan and Ahmedjan Thirakwa. (He may be heard accompanying Nikhil Banerjee in Bombay, 1965 on Raga-216). Nayan Ghosh has pursued a very unusual two-track career — in addition to being a very accomplished sitarist he is also one of today's top-ranking tabla players. His grandfather, Akshaykumar Ghosh, was an erudite sitarist and disciple of Bhagwan Chandra Das of Dhaka and Mia Qasim Ali Khan Rababiya of the Senia lineage, and since the mid-nineties, Nayan had been receiving guidance in sitar from the esteemed sarod maestro Buddhadev Das Gupta. His tabla playing reflects the influence of his father as well as Ustad Ahmedjan Thirakwa, who lived in the Ghosh home for several years. He has accompanied many of the stalwarts of Indian classical vocal and instrumental music including Nikhil Banerjee, Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Khan.

Mallar Ghosh is the son and disciple of Gyan Prakash Ghosh, a renowned percussionist and composer who trained many great musicians, including Dilip Das, Kanai Dutta, Shyamal Bose, vocalists Arun Bhaduri and Tanima Thakur, Gobindo Bose, Sanjoy Mukherjee, Anindo Chatterjee, vocalist Ajoy Chakravarty and Abhijit Banerjee.

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Booklet cover photo: John Wilton. Back cover and tray card: Ira Landgarten. Nikhil Ghosh: Pradip Gupta. Gyan Ghosh courtesy Nayan Ghosh. Above, with Ravi Shankar: Arup Banerjee.

