

Shahir Sable

INFORMATION CARD

Theatre Personality

Name	: Shahir Sable
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Bio-data

Name	: Krishnarao Ganpatrao Sable
Date of Birth	: 3 September 1923
Address	: H 27, Ambekar Nagar, Ambekar Road, Parel, Bombay 400 012.
Place of Birth	: Pasasani, Wai, Satara
Education	: Upto 7th standard
Profession	: Millworker
other than theatre	: (till 1945 in Swadeshi Mill, Kurla)
Honours and Awards:	1984: Sangeet Natak Akademi Award 1988: Shahir Amar Sheikh Puraskar 1990: President, 70th Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natya Sammelan, Bombay 1990: President, Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Shahir Parishad, Bombay 1990: Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar

Ranade: *In what way did the folk music you listened to from your childhood influence you?*

Sable: The way I remember I heard notes of music on my mother's lap. She used to hum while feeding me or putting me to sleep etc. In addition, in my native village Pasarani, the tinkling bells of the cattle or those

bells sounding from the temples, or my mother singing *ovi*-s etc. permeated the atmosphere. This was followed by devotional music . . . *bhajan*, *bharud*, *abhanga*, *gaulan* etc. Little later I started understanding the meanings of the words and following what I had heard, started composing my own *ovi*. It runs thus in translation:

"Gandhi is my friend (*sakha*)

I will sing *ovi* to him,
and I will go to the jail
to win freedom."

As you know Jawaharlal, Subhashchandra, Nana Patil and other names followed when I composed a string of *ovi*-s.

Ranade: *You changed the text to suit your content. It*



Shahir Sable in 1983

seems you also altered the tune.

Sable: But I took care not to disturb the character of the tune.

Ranade: It is not known that ovi-s too have different tunes. Will you please sing for us different moulds of ovi-tunes?

(Shahir Sable sang at least three different tunes of ovi-s each describing a different event.)

Ranade: What other folk songs were you exposed to?

Sable: Work-songs of the farmers. Farmers help each other and many operations were carried out collectively. Apart from the work-songs dealing directly with a particular farming activity, songs with comments on daily life, songs expressing desires, ambitions and cravings were also sung. There were songs which teased others with humorous and satirical tone. And as you know even the work-songs had a devotional content.

Ranade: You have roamed all over Maharashtra. To what extent do the tunes differ?

Sable: You would not believe but the same work-song will have a different tune as one moves to Karad, Kolhapur etc . . . In fact tunes change 'per twelve miles' as we say in case of language.

(Here Sable sang a work-song in Kolhapur, Konkan and Khandesh styles.)

Ranade: When you began performing you used to play dholki and you were also the composer-singer. Did this fact affect your singing?

Sable: The fact is that I come from a *santha* (slow) *sampradaya* (school)! The *gaulan*-s or the *bbajan*-s I sang were slow in tempo. One of the first *abbanga*-s I composed and sang was on Sane Guruji, the man who fasted to ensure entry to harijans in the temple.

Ayre: You began as a shahir. Now there are three kinds of shahir-s. Firstly those who sing songs of valour and bravery to enthuse others engaged in wars etc. These are Veer Shahir-s. Secondly those who deal with the perennial theme of contesting greatness of Brahma and Maya. As you know these are called Kalgi-tura Shahir-s. And thirdly there are those singers of love songs or erotic songs. These are Shringara Shahir-s. When you started your work in the textile workers' area how did you use the forms?

Sable: The truth is that I was educated with the worker-class. At Amalner where I took my education I stayed in a kamgar-chawl. When I came to Bombay to earn my living I went straight to Delisle Road. Vanyachi chawl, Hararawala Building and all these I am familiar with. I began my work of giving expression to the workers' agonies. I became a *shahir* influenced by the 1942 movement to sing the woes of the proletariat through poetry, tunes and rhythms. Ayre, Ram Mangeshkar, Raja Mayekar and others were impressed by my signing and joined me. They became my accompanists and colleagues.

Ayre: *Shahir*, it must be remembered that those were the times when bhavageet dominated the scene. Gajanan Wathe, for example, was singing about "the loosened hair of Radha" and you came with your shahir-songs depicting village life . . . and that influenced us.

Sable: Gandhiji was advocating prohibition and we were acquainted with the ills that affected the proletariat. I, therefore, wanted to propagate prohibition. I presented a programme called *Darabarat Darudya* (a drunkard in a court). The court is of Chitrugupta. The drunkard stands before Chitrugupta and is asked:

"Why did you come up?"

"Because I did not have enough to eat."

"Then how did you have money to spend on drinks?"



Before starting the 50th show of Yamrajyot Ek Ratra (1961)
Shahir Sable and Raja Mayekar
presenting Pathe Bapurao's
lavani.

"Because I did black marketing. The police caught me, robbed me of the grains and I died for lack of food." Etc., etc. I commented humorously on all the social ills. During the same period the political *shahir* troupes were also functioning. Comrade Amar Shaikh, Annabhau Sathe, Gavankar, Vasant Bapat and Leeladhar Hegde were prominent. On the contrary I was without a political affiliation. I worked on campaigns such as prohibition, eradication of illiteracy, social reform etc. The irony is that even though I did not get a regular honorarium from the Government, I was branded as Government Shahir. I was fed up with this situation and decided to turn to the commercial stage because I needed a platform.

Ayre: To begin with, you performed for workers. How did you become popular in a more educated, elite audience?

Sable: Though I was presenting performances with a rural content I had a good voice and a judgement about what is good and bad. The middle-class audience struggles to live as does the proletariat, but it also has an intellectual approach. It is always sandwiched! We performed by sensing the woes of the middle-class.

Ayre: Your mukta-natya (free play) Andhala Daltay is a good example . . . in Kase Kay Wat Chukla you deal with corruption rampant in the society.

Sable: Yes in *Kase Kay Wat Chukla* I commented on rulers who have forgotten patriotism because of their lust for power.

Ayre: The credit for bringing mukta-natya in vogue goes to you. How did you think of it?

Sable: Lok-natya (folk play) is in fact *tamasha*. *Tamasha* may not require make-up, property etc. You can present

it under a peepul tree! However the times have changed. The proletariat has been influenced by plays staged by Bal Gandharva etc. in Maharashtra. This form was exploited by the Kamgar Rangabhoomi. On this background I felt that the age of open-air *tamasha* has ended. The enclosed theatre-space with its lighting etc. is waiting to be exploited. By disciplining the folk play a little and by liberating the proscenium drama in equal measure I created my form of *tamasha* i.e. *mukta-natya*. This is different from both *tamasha* and the conventional drama.

Ayre: What about your activities as a shahir?

Sable: They continued. On the occasion of external aggression or at the time of Samyukta Maharashtra Movement I was active with all other *shahir*-s. At that time our individual political affiliations did not matter. All of us sang under the tricolor!

Ayre: A true shahir has his hand on the pulse of the common man. He knows his difficulties and he sings about them. This is why he is truly popular.

Sable: In my T.V. serial entitled *Maharashtrachi Lokdhara*, I have presented programmes in which the folk music of Maharashtra I know is presented entirely with young men and women as singers. In a sense I have passed on the heritage, I am aware of, to the next generation.

Ayre: What is the state of shahir-s today?

Sable: I feel sad that the *shahir* is pushed aside.

Ayre: Don't you feel that the contemporary street theatre is related to your shahiri?

Sable: To some extent. However a *shahir* essentially sings.



*Subas Bhalekar, Raja Mayekar
and Shahir Sable
in Aandhala Daltay.*

Shahir Sable: Performance Index

No.	Name of the play	Playwright	Director	Music Director	Set Designer	First Performance	Total No. of Plays
1	Indrachya Darbarat Tamasgeer	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1947	550
2	Chitraguptachiya Darbarat Darudya	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1949	125
3	Koyna Swayamwar	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1950	250
4	Kodyachi Karamat	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1952	100
5	Bapacha Bap	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1955	2,000
6	Nashib Phutke Sandhun Ghya	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	—	1957	550
7	Yamarajyat Ek Ratra	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Vyankatesh Kamble	16 January 1960 Amar Hind Mandal	600
8	Gyanbachi Mekh & Aaburavacha Lagin	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Manohar Shetye	15 October 1963 Rang Bhawan	700
9	Meech To Badshah	Pan. Tu. Patankar	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Manohar Shetye	13 March 1963 Ravindra Natya Mandir	135
10	Aandhala Daltay	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Shahir Sable	Manohar Shetye	13 August 1966 Ravindra Natya Mandir	800
11	Asuni Khaas Malak Gharacha	Shahir Sable	Suhas Bhalekar	Vishwanath More	Damoo Kenkre	12 October 1968 Shivaji Mandir	200
12	Makdala Chadhli Bhaang	Chin. Tryam. Khanolkar	Suhas Bhalekar	Shahir Sable	—	9 February 1969	75
13	Phutpayricha Samrat	Vijay Tendulkar	Suhas Bhalekar	Datta Dawjekar	—	13 March 1970	50
14	Ek Tamasha Sundarsa	Sai Paranjpe	Suhas Bhalekar	Shahir Sable	—	1971-72	75
15	Kashi Kay Vaat Chukla	Shahir Sable (Idea: Baburao Marathe)	Suhas Bhalekar	Atmaram Morajkar	—	22 September 1973	1,000
16	Kondu Hawaldar	Pan. Tu. Patankar	Suhas Bhalekar	Shahir Sable	—	1974	200
17	Ekach Nat Anek Samrat	Netaji Bhoir	Ram Mungi	Shahir Sable	—	—	75
18	Maharashtrachi Lokdhara	Shahir Sable	Charusheela Sable	Devdutt Sable	—	1 May 1984 Ravindra Natya Mandir	1,000

(From the audio interview)

Ranade: *Who were the other shahir-s you found impressive?*

Sable: When I went to Amalner the first *shahir* who impressed me was Shahir Seedram Basappa Mochate. He was imprisoned nearly for fourteen years for taking part in the freedom struggle. He was a forceful singer of *povada*-s. I used to accompany him and that made me listen to him carefully. He was extremely popular in villages . . . Shahir Mochate used only *tuntune*, the high-pitched instrument, and the boys' voices contributed the musical quality to Mochate's vigorous singing . . . On the other hand Shahir Khadilkar employed a slower tempo . . . Nanivadekar, the other *shahir* I heard, dealt with themes of social reform. For example, criticising bad habits which the Indians picked up from the British. Nanivadekar sang about the ill-effects of drinking tea! Tea-drinking was regarded criminal at that time . . . This was around the 1930s . . . Obviously these *povada*-s could not be sung as forcefully as those with a 'braver' content. But movements such as 'back to villages' etc. were thought to be a fit material for singing by the *shahir*-s . . . Then came on the scene Shahirs Gavankar, Amar Shaikh and Annabhau Sathe. Gavankar was a good poet but too decent a human being to sing like us performers! Annabhau was a poet who would compose on the spot. Amar Shaikh, my contemporary, was a genius . . . My relations with him were competitive and yet full of affection. I did not write anything significant after his death . . . Amar Shaikh was an inspired artiste and a dedicated person. He sang first and melody and rhythms followed him! Sometimes he used to miss both melody and rhythm and we made fun of the fact. But he never failed to reach the people and this I regard as more important.

Ranade: *What about your exposure to lavani-singing?*

Sable: I have not seen many *tamasha*-s. But I have seen Kausalyabai Kopargaonkarin and Radhabai Budhgaonkar. Kausalyabai was tremendously influenced by Bal Gandharva. I remember her singing in slow tempo, sweet, delicate and with an alluring *abhinaya*. I have also heard Manohar Gondhalee who used to perform with a *tambora* in *tamasha* . . . I also remember Rambhau Sonar from my native village. He would attend a whole night *tamasha*, come to the temple in the morning and sing *bhajan*-s with *tamasha* tunes . . . All these I have heard and digested, though I have not learnt anything systematically . . . I always try to use the traditional material but modify it so that I can reach my audiences. I have followed this strategy in case of song-types such as *koli-geet* (fisherman's song), *bhalari* (farmer's work-song), *abhanga* and *bharud*. In *bharud*, which I have popularised, there are two types: *bhajani-bharud* and *songi-bharud*. The

latter used to be presented with some enactment . . . I have also exploited the *bhajan*-form as well as the popular *ovi*. Very often *phatka* and *katav* also find a place in my performances as both these forms are useful to tell a story. Especially *katav*, employed by *dangat* performers to do a running commentary on an event taking place, has served me well.

Ranade: *You have a good voice and an aptitude for music . . . Why did you not take to classical music?*

Sable: My circumstances were such that I could not afford the luxury of having a systematic training!

Ranade: *Mostly you have used your talent for propaganda. Do you feel you could have done better if you had not opted for propaganda?*

Sable: I do not think so. Anyway I imposed the limitations on myself because I did not want commercialisation!

*Interviewers: Shri Datta Ayre and
Dr Ashok Ranade*