

A consummate artist, Begum Akhtar (1914–1974) was a torchbearer of several traditions: the syncretic Hindustani culture of Awadh, the idiom of Hindustani classical music bound by the *guru–shishya parampara*, and the legacy of talented independent women musicians who, after the advent of the recording technology, became new icons of feminism. She made her stage debut at the age of seven, and subsequently had her training in Hindustani classical music with Ustad Ata Mohammad Khan of the Patiala *gharana* and Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan of the Kirana *gharana*. Begum Akhtar was well known for her singing of *thumri* and *dadra*, in which she combined both the Purab and the Punjab styles with a characteristic flavour that was her own and got reflected in her rendering of ghazals. Begum Akhtar lent her voice to many Hindi films including *Roti*, *Panna Dai*, *Dana Pani* and *Ehsaan*, and also acted in several films such as *Mumtaz Begum*, *Ameena*, *Naseeb Ka Chakkar*, *Anaar Bala* and *Jalsaghar*. For her eminence in the field of music and her contribution to its enrichment, Begum Akhtar received the Padma Shri, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan.



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THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE has wide-ranging functions including preservation and conservation of India's cultural heritage and promotion of all forms of art and culture, both tangible and intangible.

INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL CENTRE FOR THE ARTS (IGNCA) is a centre encompassing the study and experience of all the arts—each form with its own integrity, yet within a dimension of mutual interdependence, interrelated with nature, social structure and cosmology.

NAADSAAGAR ARCHIVES AND DOCUMENTATION SOCIETY FOR SOUTH ASIAN MUSIC is a non-profit, educational and research society that works on archiving, documenting and disseminating classical, folk and community music, as well as other oral traditions of South Asia.

#### PROJECT TEAM

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In Memory of Begum Akhtar

“ Do your fingers still scale the hungry  
Bhairavi, or simply the muddy shroud?  
Ghazal, that death-sustaining widow,  
sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you.  
She wears her grief, a moon-soaked white,  
corners the sky into disbelief.

You've finally polished catastrophe,  
the note you seasoned with decades  
of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:  
I innovate on a note-less raga.

— Agha Shahid Ali



The Begum Akhtar Centenary Commemoration Project has been conceptualized by NaadSaagar Archives and Documentation Society for South Asian Music for the commemoration, celebration and consolidation of the rich legacy of Begum Akhtar on the occasion of her birth centenary year. It is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, under its scheme of commemorating eminent personalities, and supported by the Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). The project consists of the following components:

### **DIGITIZATION AND DISSEMINATION**

The tangible legacy of Begum Akhtar lies in several collections spread across the country. This includes audio–video recordings, photographs, newspaper clippings, handwritten material and other memorabilia. The project implementation team at NaadSaagar Archives is attempting to consolidate and digitize these holdings from various institutional collections such as All India Radio, Doordarshan and Sangeet Natak Akademi, as well as the individual collections of Vidushi Shanti Hiranand, Vidushi Anjali Banerji, Dr Rita Ganguly, Prof. Saleem Kidwai and others who have been closely connected with her.

The consolidated material would then be disseminated through the following:

**WEB PORTAL** The web portal on Begum Akhtar would utilize all the material digitized and documented along with complete audio–video recordings of the three proposed festivals under the aegis of this project. NaadSaagar Archives is designing the portal, while technical expertise in terms of hosting and

integrating it is being extended by the IGNCA. It will comprise a biographical section, a collection of rare archival recordings and photographs, and e-books (in English, Hindi and Urdu), and, most importantly, build on Begum Akhtar’s legacy by inviting authoritative contributions from scholars, disciples and close associates.

**EXHIBITION** The material collated from digitization and documentation would be creatively used to curate a digital exhibition, which would be made available through the web portal.

### **COMMEMORATION FESTIVALS**

Given the rich and diverse legacy associated with Begum Akhtar, NaadSaagar Archives has conceived of the festival in a manner that does justice to the various musical genres Begum Akhtar was associated with as well as the places where she earned critical acclaim and connoisseurship. The festival is thus conceived as a travelling festival, held in collaboration with cultural organizations in the cities it would be hosted in. NaadSaagar Archives has been assigned the responsibility of organizing festivals in Hyderabad, Bhopal and Lucknow. The festivals would include performances, audiovisual presentations, exhibitions, poetry readings, film screenings and symposia.

