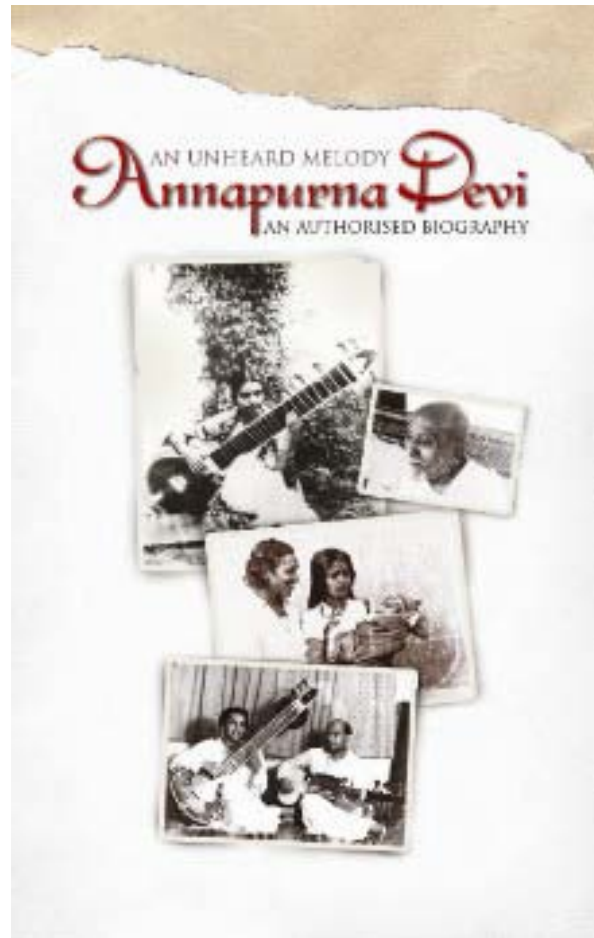


*In all my lifetime I have never come across
any musician who is so precise, melodious, and involved. her sur pierces the heart*
Nityandnad Halipur

**An Unheard Melody
ANNAPURNA DEVI
An Authorized Biography**



Swapan Kumar Bondyopadhyay
Roli Books Pvt. Ltd., M-75, GK II Market, New Delhi-110040.
2005



**The greatest musician
of the No. Indian *Senia Mailar Gharana*
is also the least heard, at least w. regard to vehicles
for music in our era – the concert hall, the CD, even U tube.
You will not hear Annapurna unless you are as fortunate as
I was, crossing her path, indeed seeking her out – as a young
woman
in a moment of humiliation but also of inspiration.
She was moved, by way of divine empathy, to open her vast
estate – to offer & to extend the limits of the *gharana* – the
ordinary barriers – of religion & culture &
those less ordinary
of
instrumental hierarchy.**

**Her father an unusual musician, was also an unusual humanitarian,
teaching freely to pupils of widely divergent talent & circumstances,
regardless of caste, gender & other factors so
divisive, in general, in Indian society**

*

Only a very unusual woman cld. have accomplished this. Hers is a talent, so natural, so profound, so inherently allied to the deepest & most esoteric resonance of both music & *mantra* that to hear her play as I did, one late afternoon in Mumbai, is a truly indescribable experience.

Was I listening to my mind waves, who was the player, who the listener?

**Annapurna,
born *Roshanara Khan*
in Mailar, No. India, 1927 was the 3rd daughter of the great master Allauddhin Khan, teacher to the most prominent Indian musicians of the 20th century & to an orchestra of orphans.
He was the father of Ali Akbar Khan, several years older than Annapurna. She, it is generally agreed, wore the mantle of the *gharana* (as its most profound exponent). She was also the most profoundly silenced, as far as the expectation of the Indian public was concerned.**

At 14 she is the bride of Ravi Shankar, himself a devoted student of her father, but a late comer, his first art was that of the dance. At 15 Annapurna is the mother of Subho (Shubhendra Shankar). At 16 her heart is broken. Shortly thereafter she returns to Mailar, to her father's refuge, to begin what must have been a period of almost unbearable solitude (& *sadhana*).

Intense introspection, accomplished through the idiom of music allowed her to nurture a transcendent relation to the music, for her a conduit to self effacement. She was immersed in a divine & divinely musical presence.

Not for nothing is Annapurnaji described as the very embodiment of Allauddin Khan's pure and deep devotion to his music. She is rightly hailed as the ultimate reference point to the musical ideology of Allauddin Khan. It is only in her that the quintessence of the Maihar parampar is preserved.

http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm

Another of the daughters,
Jahanara, the elder sister of both Ali Akbar & Annapurna,
is, as a child, trained in music. As a married woman, her
talent alienates her in-laws (the mother of the groom burns
her tambura) – she returns to Mailar to die in her own
mother’s arms. Shocked, Allauddhin resolves to spare his
youngest (& only remaining daughter – a 3rd Sharija has
died in childhood) fr. the rigor & commitment of the *talim*
(or training). But, returning fr. an engagement, one
afternoon, Annapurna is discovered teaching her older
brother Ali Akbar Khan, 5 yrs. her senior, the morning’s
lesson – she has memorized it fr. behind a curtain. Finding
his children engaged in such prodigious study, he accepts
Annapurna
as his pupil.

Of
the 3 pupils,
Annapurna is the most intrinsically devoted –
within a few years, it is reported, she masters the Surbahar.
(She herself says that all 3 were equally talented & that she,
Ravi Shankar & Ali Akbar Khan
wept openly as they studied,
immersed in the *sangeet*.
A friend, describing the very last lesson given by her
brother,
recently deceased, spoke of the same phenomena – every
student in the room weeping at the perfect beauty of the
music – Ali Akbar Khan insisted to sit up
& teach a final lesson on the final evening of his life.

**Annapurna,
through a rigorous process of renunciation &
transubstantiation,
internalizes & then liberates the ‘courtly music’, she moves
backward to the source of the music & forward to a realm
beyond time. She is undistractedly devoted to her father’s
instruction. Instead of hiding behind the curtain to secretly
memorize the lesson, she sits w. her brother & then w. her
brother & Ravi Shankar for the next decade or more. The
singularity of her music cannot be exaggerated –
I heard her in 1971 & to this day remember all details
of that afternoon & the extraordinary effect her music,
her talim, had – truly impossible to
impart in words.**

*

**If Ravi’s musical powers are to predominate
professionally & within the context of his marriage, her
mastery must manifest outside the confine of concert hall,
radio station & recording studio.**

(It is rumored, in India, that
Annapurna took a vow of silence – her biographer states,
*Annapurna, however, told me that something worse had happened than Ravi
attempting to make her take this oath. But she added that she would divulge it to
none. . .)*

**If Annapurna's music
is to reclaim the divine heritage
of *sur, swara & raga* – only those who have heard her
personally & not in the covertly recorded music of the 50s –
fragments of which remain (see the links which follow)
can attest to this – such isolation, was part of a greater
intention.**

**The music which follows her isolation in Mailar & the first
separation fr. her husband – there were several – seals her
youth w. an extraordinary sign, extenuating her loss but also
transforming it. The loss is transmuted, an otherworldly gift
manifests. It is our loss, for the music is inaccessible, but it is
not the loss of a woman whose dignity so touched me that 35
years later,
our lessons might have taken place
35 minutes
ago.**

**Even on Surbahar, the bass sitar,
her technique was astonishing – one can still hear fragments
of this early music in a duet w. her former husband – the
only
recording that exists of the two of them.**

**Shankar turns toward the public & what he perceives to be
its needs. Annapurna, a classicist, strictly adheres to her
father's *talim* & applies herself to the spiritual discipline
inherent in it.**

The court system, in India,
at least, in general, is presented as a protector of the music,
sheltering its musicians & giving them sustenance.
Annapurna's position is that the *shastra sangeet*, at this
point,
suffered a permutation, fr. which it did not recover –
in some sense, her role, as the gifted daughter
& abandoned lover of the *gharana*, puts her in the position
to penetrate to the depth of the music, mining its resources,
in a way not permitted to its public performers & especially
those who were,
in yet another permutation, to present this music,
not only beyond the boundaries of the palace,
but beyond the boundary of Bharata
or
India itself.

'Public performance'
she said to me *'why should I play for those fighters'* referring
to the Indian elite in judgment of its most prodigious
cultural exponents (i.e., Why should she play
competitively?). She hears the rustling of an invisible *sari* –
applying herself to her *riyaz* – the ringing of bells – night
after night. Her audience – Saraswati & entourage. The
Hare Krishnas – living above her on Warden Road where
we studied
ask her to please
stop practicing.

*

**The biographer
has done a remarkable research &
obviously earned the trust of his subject. But one wonders if,
in trying to elucidate the ‘scandal’ of the genius disciples– to
set the record straight – he falls into the limitation of
precedence & sacrifices his subject to the personalities which
surrounded her. The reader wants to understand
Annapurna & *her* music. We do understand, of course, the
subjectivity of biography, the fragility of memory – the
complexity fr. which our human karmic vision –
our view of ourselves
& others
arises.**

**Mr. Bondyopadhyay penetrates a *purdah* of more than 40
years – but we do not – cannot – hear the music through his
reportage, we do not understand what made her music so
distinguished.**

It was during my years of studentship that my father would repeatedly tell me that my music should not be treated as a product for public display. It was a means of achieving one's own fulfillment, which should lead to one's own development as a human being.... This reminds me of what Amir Khan, one of the greatest vocalists of our time) reportedly told one of his close friends. He had said: ``Annapurna is 80 per cent of Ustad Allauddin Khan, Ali Akbar Khan is 70 per cent and Ravi Shankar is about 40 percent.

http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm

.....

**The author can hardly be criticized –
for this, as Annapurna does not play for the public. But as
an unsuspecting, in the time, initiate, I feel obliged to at least
embellish, if I cannot succinctly review, An Unheard Music.**

**I thank all those who have encouraged me to do this, I
myself silent,
on this subject,
until now.**

**Annapurna,
on the dissolution of her marriage,
takes ‘*purdah*’, the Muslim refusal to
leave the house. Remarried she continues to live in this
manner, never setting her foot in public domain.
*If you were to put me in front of this apartment, she said, I
wld. not***

be able to find my way back to it ...

**Immense dignity a strange combination of
frailty & resolve, crystallized in the young woman
& created a dialogue, a musical dialogue, rooted in the
origins of the music & its capacity to liberate
the mind fr. thought & thought fr. time.**

**Annapurna is an exponent of NADA yoga
that yoga of sound which leads to transcendent perceptual
faculty**

&

liberation fr. that faculty.

If one listens to the available recordings

.....

Smt Annapurna Devi- Surbahar-Raga-Kaushiki
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TARyHE-i1W8>

Srimati Annapurna Devi, surbahar, Raag Manjh Kham
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jetdF9v4LPI>

.....
her fluency is astounding, even in the 50s, when a saddened musician returns to her father. There are NO recordings of her mature music & few have ever heard it

*

In the wake of brother's passing, a great, an epic pillar in the majestic temple of the Indian canon, I salute the sister, whose voice was removed fr. the public sphere decades ago but whose Surbahar & kindness as a teacher has continued to resonate & to instruct, as is detailed in the biography, musicians such as Hari Prasad Chaurasya & the late Nikhil Banerjee & several Western pupils, Daniel Bradley, being the one upon whom Bondyopadhyay generously concentrates. For these pupils Annapurna Devi is the very embodiment of the Sangeet Guru in the Indian Sastra.

Unheard is not a masterful biography – for readers accustomed to contemporary English usage, the diction will distract but the material it covers, has been hidden from view, perhaps consciously & it is singularly important that this material come to light, especially, as the time frame it covers, is rapidly receding fr. us.

*

**The biographer reports
that Annupurna wished to
clarify certain features of her history.**

**Such matters can defy elucidation – inherently complex,
subjective detail mutates in relation to our perception of it.**

**For
the modern connoisseur,
it is important to understand Annupurna
within the context of her father's *talim* – ultimately it is hers.**

**For her, it may be impossible to dissociate fr. the power
of the 3 men who so influenced her formation & fr. the bond
to her only son – teaching Shobu, she told me, almost all she
could in a mere 6 years – before such instruction was so
rudely interrupted. Here the biographer defers fr. what was
told to me directly
re the prematurity of the separation
(& the subsequent death, in America
of her only offspring**

**An Unheard Melody
is the first to expose this story.**

**The reader traces the dynamics of the gifted pupils,
the seemingly inevitable circumstances that evolved &
the profound impact the music was to have, particularly
through her brother & former husband, on the musical
cultures of planet Earth fr. 1960 to the present. The genius
of Ustad Allauddin Khan is beyond ordinary comprehension
– he lived to be 110.**

Tribute to Baba Allaudin Khan

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO0OkEgNIGs>

My Indian Heroes Saintly Baba Allauddin Khan 1862-1972

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI1TfQMYtXI>

Ravi Shankar & Ustad Ali Akbar Khan are household words in the music community – Annapurna's name is hidden. Even in the obituaries which followed the death of her brother Ali Akbar Khan only one of those I perused on the Internet even mentioned Annapurna.

But Khansahib himself kept her picture directly before him, w. the photos of his parents, as he steadfastly taught his students in San Raphael, California, the school to which he devoted the later half of his life (w. a warmth, understanding & musical *siddha* only his pupils knew). The music he taught in his later years, especially in the vocal classes, close to the music Annapurna played – but a teacher's presence must remain – to guide –

When Annapurna played it was as if nothing remained, nothing.

It is also on record that even [Ali Akbar Khan](#), her elder brother, reportedly hesitates to play his sarod in her presence. Besides, it speaks volumes for the maestro's open-mindedness and magnanimity that he sent his sons Ashish Khan and Dhyanesh Khan (who died prematurely at 49 in 1990) to benefit from guidance from his sister in their sarod-playing. The father initiated his daughter into the mysteries of Hindustani music while she was still a child, and thoroughly groomed her in vocal music, the sitar and the surbahar for over 15 years. To the master's touch, she added an amazing degree of practice with singular dedication and determination under the vigilant but affectionate guidance of her father.

http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm

**The book traces the life of Shrimati Annapurna.
To its credit it is unbiased – one understands the young Ravi
Shankar, Annapurna said to me *Panditji was a genius* – She
honors the most well known of her father’s disciples but she
had been immersed in the *talim* – since birth – when he
arrived on the scene, so to speak, to study w. Allauddhin
Khan – the latter accompanying choreographer & dancer
Uday Shankar,
Ravi’s elder brother, on their ground breaking
tour to the West –**

**(Rene Daumal, Uday’s secretary, on these tours, was later a major exponent of Indian
Aesthetics –
see RASA , Essays on Indian Aesthetics & Selected Sanskrit Studies, Rene Daumal).**

**I can only say, in closing,
that practicing xitro – (Buddhist practice for the dead)
for Ali Akbar Khan, as I did, following the announcement of
his death, I saw a palace, a huge musical palace.**

**I saw a tiny window, the least significant perhaps,
that window shed its light on me, it was reserved for me. For
unknown reasons the author of this review was the recipient
of a fraction of the musical light that filled the palace. It is
impossible for my reader to hear the music I heard the
monumental day when Annapurna Devi played for me.**

**Ali Akbar Khan,
in his master classes,
sometimes approached this sound, w. his voice, only w. his
voice, that she displayed instrumentally &, toward the end,
he wld. teach, in the vocal classes
as she did, a very few notes or a phrase at a time.**

*

**In an era of absolute chaos,
we mourn the loss of Ali Akbar Khan & we remember
Annapurna DEVI, the remaining sibling. May her music,
even if we can not hear it directly, purify our minds. Such
perfection will penetrate us if we are aware of it. She, who
directly inherits the Haridas – Mian Tansen lineage is a
royal musician –
one who has lived & will live in solitude.**

*To be honest I have never thought that there is anything special about me to
write on;*

*I see myself only as a humble student of music who learned fr. Baba Allauddhin
Khan, my father & a great Guru to many besides myself...I will be most happy,
she says to her biographer if your book marks the sharing of his divine musical
gift w. the disciples.*

*

**For those seeking sophisticated musical analysis
Eastern or Western, look elsewhere to find this kind of
approach. Unheard is a straight forward biography,
– but for those seeking to unravel the mystery of the
daughter of Allauddhin Khan, so hermetic, she has not left
her house for decades, the book is a treasure & the author is
to be respected for the reserve he shows. The book does not
cater to parasites – but
a perspicacious report on the music of the great master &
why she is considered to be the true holder of the gharana,
for this reader,
is missing.**

Having heard her play I am obliged to write – not as literary review but as revelation – of a musician whose specific mastery I only encountered once, in her.

I still hear her, patiently training me on the 3rd. note in the Indian scale, the Ga, sound of the sheep, for an entire afternoon, & never once did the note bore me, the note was as infinite as her patience.

Biographic interpretation of certain features in her life, especially concerning her son (who died in LA in 1991) contradicts, to a certain extent, w. what she herself told me as the crucial separation was taking place. One might wish the author had spent less time on her (then) husband, but ironically, her life is so inextricably tied to the most illustrious musicians of her *gharana* & of India, indeed the world, that to separate herself & her developmental years fr. them, is nearly impossible for a biographer, even the most ardent.



**Pregnant at 15 – when I meet her,
Sobhu has only recently departed fr. her tutelage –
for new life in the West. Subject to its expansive life styles,
expecially in the 1960s, he is unable to fulfill or
to develop his training. Not to open wounds, but to honor
biographic heritage, one wonders if Bodopadhyay sought to
protect those responsible, or if, with the passage of time,
the story itself
transmuted.**

**In India,
the *garana* (*ghar* = house) were kept in the family.
Early Western students will attest to the difficulties
encountered – Annapurna told me that in the 6 years of her
training, her son had absorbed almost all that he cld. have
fr. her illustrious heritage. She needed a few more years to
complete his training. Shobhu dies ,
in America,
unknown
&
as the biographer reports often unmiked at the concerts
he played w. his father.**

**Perhaps, through
divine agency, before she too leaves for pure land,
somehow, even a fraction of her mature music, will be
preserved & Budopadhyaya, by bringing her secret life to
the public eye,
will have accomplished his true mission – the
revelation of a music that surpasses time
& resolves the agony of our
bound condition.**

*

***Dhrupad ang tlalim* imparted to her by her father does not differentiate w. regard to the manner in which music was taught to male & female pupils. Annapurna, decades after the traumas says to her biographer**

I have great respect for women who stand up for what they believe in and fight for the cause of women against all odds. I do not agree that for women career and marriage do not go together. If there is mutual respect and understanding between the husband and wife, if there is an absence of jealousy, both can build their careers & still be happily married.

Ravi Shankar, agonized by these traumas & other factors, eventually bonds to an Indian Spiritual master – Annapurna, says the biographer had *bhakti bhavana* but she had no faith in ‘*idolatrous guru worship*’ i.e., her music was her object, her path & her liberation.

*

Allauddhin Khan taught his students according to their personality or aptitude.

Babab was truly a saint and did not discriminate on the basis of caste, creed or class. When Baba built his house in Maihar it was a modern house by any standard. Many from the adjoining areas came to see it. I was a child then. One day I noticed that one of the old sweeper women fr. the village who used to lift human excreta was peeping through a window admiring the new house. I wondered why she had come there. Baba noticed my expression. He then went outside & respectfully said to the sweet woman 'Ma, why are you standing outside? Please come in.' He held her hand and brought her insider with great respect. He made her sit on the cot and ordered me to touch her feet saying Mahai charan sparsh karo bita. She is like you others. Touch her feet. I had to touch her feet. That was the greatest lesson I learned in my childhood.

*

For Western readers of this material, the organization of the interviews & quotes, the diction, as stated, the obscure Indian terms, present obstacles. It is difficult, at times, to read & one wonders if the author's obsessive need to detail the relation between A & RS when the book is really a biography off the former is necessary (or even, in certain instances, accurate).

Yet. one cannot impose a post modern understanding on an author who is deconstructing relationships that adhere to tradition (the arranged marriage) & even more complicitously the respect afforded, in the same tradition, to those who share the *talim* of a particular *gharana* & the terrible consequences – rumored to be inflicted upon he or she who breaks the *guru bhenji/guru bhai* vow (*samaya*) or promise shared by disciples, even non-family members of the same *gharana*.

The need to protect the *gharana* & its famous exponents is self evident & in conflict w. the story that is being told.

The same fire that burns in the spiritual domain, burns for glory in this world – the later not always & not necessarily in contradiction to the later.

**Understanding
the powers of the dedicated artists, AA RS & A , at the feet
of their
master, is almost beyond the power of a book to convey &
it is also understandable that the biographer, an initiate
will not want trespass
on forbidden
realms.**

**& yet,
the silencing of a woman artist,
as brilliant as Shrimati Annapurna Devi
is a source of great personal pain to this writer.
Perhaps it is enough that the gods are witness to such
resonance, perhaps fr. her room in her father's house – &
onward – waves of grace were generated – inspiring future
composition in the West & the harmonic inquiry that
developed in the 50s, later expanding into almost all fields of
music, both popular & classical, from that time to ours, in
the new
millennium.**

**As Annapurna practiced
internalizing the gharana & returning it to root
La Monte Young, Terry Riley & in Italy Giacinto Scelsi,
in the same time frame, were
re-evaluating the musical system of the West**

&

**literally forging new ties,
especially to systems such as the Indian one in which the
harmonic series has been intact for millennia. Later
musicians, jazz artists John & Alice Coltrane, Thelonious
Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis,
pop musicians, Brian Eno, groups Sonic Youth, Shakti &
others,
Frances Marie Uitti, Charles Curtis, Hilary Jeffery
continue this
inquiry.**

**Harry Smith
denizen of the Anthology of American Folk Music, wisely
put a Pythagorean symbol on the 3 volume set, also in the
50s
understanding & not stating that the same harmonic series
was preserved in the 78 RPM records he painstakingly
collected.**

***I wanted to make a revolution w. music*
he said when he won his Grammy in 1997.**

*

**It is many decades
since a young Annapurna returned to her father,
heartbroken,
it is a few decades since the son of the two masters died,
in a hospital in LA.**

**Bondyopadhyay's
casual reportage of the afterlife of RS, the American chapters.
also conflict w. what had been personally confided.
Does feminist theory reveals the conspiracy --?**

**There is no doubt
that APD, hermetic, reclusive, understood her path
& carved it, at a certain point, consciously. The heart of the
music is hers, she knows & she offers this. She instructs fr.
this center
to students fortunate to have
been accepted by her.**

**Even in the West,
flautist, Dorio Dwyer, teacher of my teacher Yaada Weber,
was the first female to play flute in a Western symphony
orchestra. Was the female presence such a disturbance to
the occidental orchestral genre?**

**Times have changed
but it will be decades, centuries, even millennia
before a musician of the caliber of Annapurna Devi appears.**

It is not too late to beg for a recording, even a taped interview, as Thurston Moore suggested, Sonic Youth, a supporter, among others: Mr. & Mrs. Bhattacharya, Mookerji or Dutt, i.e., the Indian patrons- of the Ali Akbar Khan Digital Archives. The Indian girl who memorized lessons fr. behind a curtain, then tutored her brother, 5 years her senior, grew into a beautiful young woman. Now she is an elder, in the same apartment to which she took refuge, w. her son, when her marriage irreversibly – w. Ravi Shankar’s permanent residence in the USA, 1957 & onward – dissolved.

**While in retreat,
recently I dream of her brother, in
multi-dimensional dream spectre, we are in the back seat of
a car, something so familiar, so serious about that car. The
master put his left arm, in a comforting manner, around my
shoulder.**

**I woke w. the dictum ‘*see my sister*’. See her?
To offer comfort, for her loss of him – as a child she knew
only 3 or 4 people, her brother, Ravi & Sucharita, the
neighbor’s child – cld. I comfort her? Or did he, fr. a car
that felt like a hearse & perhaps was one, his own, tell me to
go to her & to beg for a recording,
however fractional, of a music of which most people can only
dream, a music that truly is the fulfillment of the *Nada
Brahma* or 1st. Sound for indeed, the player Annapurna
disappeared in an oceanic sensibility, articulated, on the
Surbahar
by her playing,
alone.**

Louise Landes Levi

*w. grateful thanks
to Roshikumar Paadaya, Daniel Bradley & Ken Zuckermna
of the Senia Maihar Gharana
&
to Raymond Foye & Thurston Moore*

Even though she has remained aloof from the world of concert music, Annapurna Devi's greatness, as an erudite guru has been mercifully recognized and appreciated at the official level. She has been a recipient of Padma Bhushan (1977), Sharngadev Fellowship of Sur singar Samsad (1988) & the Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1991). She has served as professor of music at the NCPA since its inception, till 1983 and presently is the guiding spirit behind the activities of Acharya Allauddin Music Circle in Mumbai. Indeed, such distinctions do not have any significance and meaning to Annapurnaji. So immense has been her contribution to our musical heritage that one is tempted to say that by bestowing these honors on her, the bestowers have honored themselves. http://www.kamat.com/database/articles/annapurna_devi.htm

Louise Landes Levi – poet & musician –translator; The Love Poems of Mira Bai & RASA, Essays on Indian Aesthetics, by Rene Daumal. Recent books, Avenue A & Ninth Steet, Banana Baby & The Book L. Recent chapbooks: Don't Fuck w. the Airlines & Tower 2/ TARA or dc-x,. Recordings: Kinnari, Padma & Kyerang, Music for Meditation.