

The Singer and the Voice: Where is the Music?

Ashwini Deshpande

(Originally published in *Economic and Political Weekly* in November 2004)

This is a detailed response to Sanjay Srivastava's 'Voice, Gender and Space in Time of Five-Year Plans: The idea of Lata Mangeshkar' (*EPW* May 15, 2004). The article covers a wide canvas, but hinges on the voice and singing of Lata Mangeshkar and is in essence an analysis of a hugely popular and successful singer, with a career that has few matches in the history of popular music anywhere in the world. An academic, socio-historical-political analysis of Lata Mangeshkar is indeed welcome. It would be fascinating to see how the musical and extra-musical persona of a hugely popular star becomes a site where ideas of nation and gender get played out. However, Srivastava's effort is likely to impede, rather than enable, such an analysis.

Perhaps the most striking fact about Sanjay Srivastava's (henceforth SS) article is that he does not feel the need to cite a single recording, either of Lata Mangeshkar or indeed any other singer, in support of his argument. This is extraordinary. Would SS dare to discuss the music of, say, Bob Dylan without citing a single song, and expect to be taken seriously in the western academic world? How can one analyse the voice and/or the singing style of a singer without any reference to her *music*?ⁱ And this, about a singer who is believed to hold the world record for the largest number of recordings! The lack of citation extends to movies as well: the paper makes a gender analysis of representation of women in Hindi cinema, into which Lata's voice allegedly fits, again without examples.ⁱⁱ Since no evidence is forthcoming from the author about assertions he makes about Lata's music, we are expected to meekly accept his assertions, as if they are facts beyond dispute. Which, of course, they aren't: SS makes broad, sweeping generalizations that are simply not sustainable.

Having said this, I must confess that I am an economist by profession and am neither familiar with the language of cultural studies nor with the literature and the debates in the area. However, I have been

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.



addicted to Hindi films and their music ever since I can remember. Thus, I have simply raised some questions that occurred to me as I was reading SS, based on the films that I have watched and the music I have loved for decades.

The ‘falsetto’

The basic hypothesis in SS’s article is that a particular singing voice, Lata Mangeshkar’s, became an expression of gender identity in India. Instead of classifying Lata’s voice as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it might be better, SS says, to describe it more objectively in a manner more conducive to an analysis of her singing style. He describes her voice in a combination of subjective and objective terms: ‘shrill adolescent-girl falsetto’. Let us consider first the objective part of the description: the falsetto. The Penguin *Dictionary of Music* defines ‘falsetto’ as ‘the kind of singing (or speech) produced by adult males in a register higher than their normal utterance: this is the standard type of voice-production used by the male alto or counter-tenor voice and is sometimes specified (generally as comic effect, e.g. imitating women) in other voices’. Now, even if we ignore the fact that Lata is not an ‘adult male’, SS imports a technical term used in western classical music without sparing a thought about its appropriateness in the new context. There are very few examples of falsetto singing in India: fans of Kishore Kumar would recall a song from *Half Ticket* picturized on Pran and Kishore Kumar himself, where the latter dresses up as a woman and sings in both the male and female voices. *That* is falsetto. Other than such exceptions, none of the major male playback singers sing in a falsetto. Narendra Chanchal’s voice is high pitched, but cannot be described as a falsetto.

Since SS doesn’t define a falsetto, his use of the term is an example of imprecise terminology and inappropriate borrowing across musicological cultures. Let us assume SS simply means that Lata employs a false voice to sing. He is wrong: her natural pitch is high and she sings with ease at *kali* 1 or 2, which is usually considered the ‘male’ scale. At the high end, she is neither out of tune nor does she employ a false voiceⁱⁱⁱ. It needs to be noted that she is one of the most tuneful singers^{iv}. Does SS mean that she uses “falsetto” notes? This is a highly debatable point and needs a very careful study of the various scales in

which she has sung and the highest notes she reaches in each. A worthwhile study but best left to musicologists. Finally, what is meant by a “girl falsetto”? Women’s voices do not change in the physiological sense in which men’s voices break and change post-puberty. Thus, most women continue singing in the same scale through their lives: some move up a note or two with substantial training.

Thus it is definitely incorrect to characterize Lata’s voice as a falsetto. Can we replace the falsetto with another western musicological category? This is a tricky terrain: Indian singing voices have not been classified in terms of the precise western music categories. I am not sure why; it could be because the categorisation will hinge crucially on the placement of the tonic or the “sa” of the scale in which the singer sings. If the exact frequency of each *shruti* (microtone) could be codified, this coding could potentially be used as the basis for identifying objectively the range of each singer, but whether this exercise will yield categories analogous to western music categories is a moot point, again best left to musicologists.

Thus, Lata’s is a thin voice and sounds shrill to SS, but is *not* a falsetto. And what sounds shrill to SS does not to others. Consider this description of Lata’s voice, from the Marathi writer Gangadhar Gadgil: ‘it is a voice that is ageless, pure, vibrantly alive, untrammled in its range and flexibility, hauntingly expressive and enchanting in its sweetness. Above all, it has a certain ethereal quality, an indefinable something, with a unique appeal for us Indians’.^v Others would doubtless have their reasons for liking or disliking Lata’s voice. The point, however, is that a subjective element is inevitable in any appreciation of music and SS, contrary to his claim, is as subjective as anyone else.

Thin voices and female identity

SS makes several propositions in his argument. The first is that Lata’s dominance in Hindi films and her vocal style became ‘recognized as an aesthetic marker of “modern” Indian female identity’. The second proposition is that ‘Lata’s singing voice has instituted a very specific identity for Indian womanhood, one which has almost no precedence in traditional forms of Indian music’. It is entirely unclear what SS means.

First, what is this ‘*very specific* identity of Indian womanhood’ (emphasis added, of course), a phrase SS uses repeatedly, but does not care to specify? Are we to assume that SS means by this the highly simplistic, erroneous, and objectionable notion, often encountered both in popular perception and in scholarly writings in the west, about the submissive, silent, suffering Indian woman, who has no agency and voice? If indeed this is the case, SS will have to tell us where to encounter this woman – is she a real woman who inhabits Indian villages and cities, or she is a mythical creature of literature and cinema? I feel a little foolish in pointing out that Indian women display all kinds of distinctions: rural/urban, class, caste, religious, psychological, cultural, and so on, for surely SS knows that. Indian women, then, have many faces, and many voices. Some of this variety is also evident in Hindi cinema, despite its undeniable patriarchy, and I will come to that in a moment. For the moment, my point is that the onus of proof is on SS: he will have to tell us which ‘very specific’ identity of Indian womanhood he has in mind, and he will have to *demonstrate*, by quoting examples, how this identity is reinforced by Lata’s voice and singing style.

Second, SS argues that in ‘traditional forms of Indian music’ the Lata-type thin voice has ‘almost no precedence’. Now, we assume that ‘almost’ is supposed to cover exceptions to the rule, and it would have been useful for us to know which exceptions SS has in mind. Maybe he is thinking of singers like Parveen Sultana, Kishori Amonkar, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, Veena Sahasrabudhe, and a host of others, all of whom have thin voices, and all of whom are Hindustani classical singers, which we presume is included in SS’s ‘traditional forms of Indian music’. To my mind, no one has done an empirical study to see how many female classical singers have thin voices like Parveen Sultana et al., and how many have voices like Kesarbai Kerkar or Malini Rajurkar (slightly heavier) or Shruti Sadolikar and Shobha Gurtu (much heavier). So we don’t really know which is the rule and which the exception.

As an aside, though, it is interesting that the only Hindustani singer SS mentions in this context is Gangubai Hangal. I am not sure if SS has heard the early recordings of Gangubai (Gandhari) Hangal. She had a very sweet, much *thinner* voice, very unlike the thick, heavy voice that characterizes her later singing. The story of how her voice changed is anecdotal; she had some form of tonsillitis, and though it is unclear if she

underwent a surgical operation or not, her voice changed. Given her early brilliance, there was some trepidation about her singing abilities post-illness, but it turned out that those fears were unfounded. Her voice retained its flexibility even in its heavier version.

Contrary to SS's claim, then, in Hindustani classical music the female voices span a spectrum, from very thin to very thick (which, incidentally, is just as true of male voices). Thus, when SS mentions Farida Khanum (a ghazal singer) or Begum Akhtar (highly trained in classical music, but better known for her thumris and ghazals) as exemplifying the thick voices that are supposedly the norm in non-film music, he is looking at only one end of the spectrum. Runa Laila from Bangladesh had a much thinner voice compared to the well-known ghazal singers from Pakistan and our home-grown Chitra Singh ruled ghazal singing for years with a laser-thin voice. While SS makes the point about the 'striking heterogeneity' of tonal and other styles, the only examples he provides are those with heavy voices, thus creating a false dichotomy between film music (dominated by Lata) and other types of music (dominated by thick voices). One wonders why SS makes a big deal of thick and thin voices, till one realizes that for him, they are ideological categories, since there is supposed to be an association between thick voices and sensuality. How tenuous this association is will be seen below, when we look at Lata's recordings.

There is, however, an argument made in musical circles about the shift from thick/heavy to thin female voices in Hindustani classical music, as singing shifted from the preserve of the *bais* and courtesans to girls/women from 'respectable' families. However, this argument is nuanced, and does not contradict the fact that female voices in Hindustani classical music span a large range and defy stereotyping.

Unfortunately, for lack of space, we cannot go into all that. Why I bring it up here is to only say that this is an argument SS *could* have made, but in fact *does not!* But perhaps this is not surprising, since the argument is actually that in the post-independence period, *thinner* voices, contrary to SS's claims, have dominated Hindustani classical music.

Let us return to Lata, her voice, and its association with female identity. Reading SS, one would assume that 'Lata's voice' is a singular, unchanging entity. Forget the physical process of ageing and the resultant change in the voice, a process that must be all too painfully apparent to millions of Lata's admirers. Let us consider other changes. Lata Mangeshkar recorded her first song for films in 1942. Her first break in Hindi cinema was in 1945 in Master Vinayak's *Badi Maa*, when she was not quite sixteen. Her first song was a chorus, '*channon mein guzar jaaye, guzar jaaye umariya*'. For the first few years, her songs were like cameo appearances. There is debate over her first solo: some claim it is '*chidiya bole ku, ku, ku*', in *Jeevan Yatra* (1946), while others believe that it is the Datta Davajekar composed thumri in Raga Pilu, '*shyam mose na khelo hori*', for the 1947 film *Aap ki Seva Mein*. The latter is a spectacular composition, which Lata has executed to perfection, in traditional thumri style, replete with *shringar ras*. The hallmark of a good singer is that voice production and hence its quality must match the genre of singing. In this thumri, Lata's voice is thick, with a lot of texture, she is playful and coy, as the lyrics demand. In appreciating this song, Vish Krishnan, the compiler of a private collection called *Man Veena Ke Taar*, puts it most aptly: 'One can only speculate what texture Lata's voice might have taken had she pursued this manner of singing', i.e., thumri singing as opposed to film singing.

It was only in late 1948 and through 1949 that Lata became a definitive presence, singing with mainstream music directors like Anil Biswas, Khemchand Prakash, Master Haider, Shakeel, and others. There is a 1948 recording of Lata's, from *Heer Ranjha*, of the famous wedding song, '*kahe ko byahe bides babul more*', which is just a year later than the thumri mentioned above, but has Lata singing in a completely different voice and style. There is the necessary pathos, a certain virginal quality of tenderness and uncertainty of the new bride as she leaves her paternal home. In this song, she is reminiscent of Noor Jehan, the reigning singer-actress of Hindi cinema at the time, whose influence on Lata's early singing was very strong. Lata, then, had the ability to mould her voice and her singing style according to the needs of the song very early in her singing career.

One needs to examine only the next two decades, the 1950s and the 1960s, to appreciate the changes in Lata's singing (both style and voice quality) as she recorded with Khemchand Prakash, Husanlal Bhagatram, Anil Biswas, Shankar Jaikishen, Naushad, Roshan, C. Ramachandra, Madan Mohan, S.D. Burman, among others. Would SS seriously argue that the voice in '*aayega aanewala*' (*Mahal*, 1949), is identical to that in '*bade armanon se rakha hai balam teri kasam*' or '*Kahan ho tum, zara awaaz do*' (both *Malhar*)? Or that the voice in '*patjhad chhai*' or '*saiyan saiyan*' (*Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*, 1955) cannot be distinguished from the one in '*aaj phir jeene ki tamanna hai*' (*Guide*, 1965)? If we take examples from the next two decades, the contrasts are even sharper, as the quality of compositions underwent a huge change and affected the singing of not only Lata, but of all playback singers. Most singers who last for any significant period of time undergo important changes in their voice and singing styles and Lata is no exception. In other genres however, like classical, ghazal, folk, etc., there is a relative autonomy that singers have, and the best among them are able to use this autonomy to produce breathtaking innovations in their genres, for example, Ustad Amir Khan or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. For the film singer, however, this relative autonomy is virtually absent. Which is why the Lata of, say, the brilliant Madan Mohan or Roshan compositions seems like a different singer when compared to the Lata of the mediocre Ram-Lakshman (*Hum Aapke Hain Koun*) compositions.

We also need to ask: doubtless Lata's persona has towered over Hindi film music, but how accurate is it to think of this presence as the only voice of the 'Indian woman' in Hindi cinema? SS offers a quote that suggests that other singers copied Lata so much 'that it is difficult to imagine a female voice that is not Lata's', but where is the evidence? SS will have to ask, and answer, several questions. Which other voices have represented Indian women in Hindi cinema? How different have they been to Lata's? What existed before Lata and, considering that Lata has sung relatively few songs since the early 1990s, what has followed her? In other words, we need to think of a pre-Lata phase, we need to examine Lata's contemporaries, and we need to see what those who have come later have done. And, to make the argument that SS does, he will need to correlate the changes in the representation of women in Hindi cinema with the changing voices in which they have been singing.

Let us focus on the ‘thin voice’. If we believe SS, thin was not the dominant voice before Lata. While Shamshad Begum and Mubarak Begum had very different voice qualities, how would SS describe Suraiyya’s voice? Even Noor Jehan, whose voice quality is not identical to Lata’s, often sang in a thin voice, sounding very much like early Lata (for instance, in songs such as ‘*mujh se pehli si mohabbat mere mahboob na maang*’). It is true, however, that there is a sweetness to Lata’s voice that is unique. And, while she dominated the singing scene, many others tried desperately to mimic her. Some were successful in their own right, like Anuradha Paudwal and Alka Yagnik, while others didn’t quite make it, like Sulakshana Pandit and Hemlata. All these singers have the Lata-type thin voice, but their voices are devoid of both the sweetness and the musical virtuosity that characterises Lata’s singing.

However, and this is the crucial point, at no point was Lata’s the only type of voice in which women sang. To list only the major singers, she first overlapped with Suraiyya and Shamshad Begum (by the time she emerged as a major singer, Noor Jehan was already in Pakistan), then with Geeta Dutt and finally with her younger sister, Asha Bhosle. Geeta Dutt had a distinctly different voice quality, and we will come to Asha Bhosle in a moment. But there were also less successful singers with a range of voices like Suman Kalyanpur, Vani Jairam and Sharada. Now, Sharada was a singer with a thick voice who alleged that Lata thwarted her success with her manipulative behaviour. This may or may not be true. But what is undeniable is that Lata’s singing abilities exceeded Sharada’s by miles. It is difficult to believe that Lata was preferred over Sharada by music directors only due to Lata’s manipulation.

And what about Asha Bhosle, to whom SS makes *no* reference? She is also the only singer who matched Lata’s virtuosity, musical skill, training, and even popularity. The two are contemporaries, and were often competitors as well. It is not widely known that Asha has recorded *more* songs than Lata, thus making her, in fact, the more prevalent voice^{vi}. Asha’s voice is thin too, but has a distinct personality that is, by no means, a copy of her sister’s. And their singing styles are vastly different. One thinks of Lata singing for the female lead, while Asha sang for other female characters, including the vamp and the cabaret dancer. But

even this distinction blurred with time; Asha has sung literally thousands of ‘heroine’ songs. SS argues that after the rise of Lata Mangeshkar, her type of thin voice became the voice of the controllable, subjugated woman. But this same woman also sang in the voices of Suraiyya before Lata emerged, as well as in the voices of Geeta Dutt and Asha Bhosle while Lata ruled. More tellingly, what do we make of the fact that the vamp and the cabaret dancer also sang in a thin voice (for example, Asha’s). And how do we understand what is happening today, when the distinction between the cabaret dancer (or ‘item girl’, in the current lingo) and the heroine has been blurred to a great extent, and both sing in a range of voices?

SS quotes Manuel, who talks about the ‘creation of film music as a common denominator mass-music style, produced in corporate, urban studios and superimposed on a heterogeneous audience . . . that has no role to play in the creation of this music. . . .’ How does this ensure that only the Lata style of singing will be more popular to the exclusion of other styles? How does this account for the co-existence of styles? What Manuel says is equally true of the contemporary film music scene that has a much wider range of female voices (from the pencil-thin, saccharine-sweet Alka Yagnik to the much heavier Sunidhi Chauhan and Richa Sharma) and a greater variety of singing styles than the Lata-dominated era. One is struck once again by the absence of any attempt at periodization by SS; the trends that he talks about are supposed to be universal and unchanging.

SS is led to his argument since he makes an a priori association between thickness of voice and sensuality. He describes Farida Khanum’s voice as ‘sensuous, pleading, cajoling’, which by implication, Lata’s is not, since it is thin. But this association is completely arbitrary; recall Asha Bhosle’s numerous songs that are just as sensuous, pleading, cajoling, notwithstanding her thin voice. Or think even of Lata herself. She began her career with a thumri, and went on to sing numerous sensuous songs – so numerous, in fact, that any attempt to give examples seems inadequate. Even so, here is a sample: ‘*lag ja gale ke phir ye hasin raat hona ho*’; ‘*sapnon mein agar mere tum aao to so jaaun*’; ‘*mora gora ang lai le*’; ‘*aa jaane ja*’ (incidentally picturized on Helen); ‘*wo chup rahen to mere dil ke daag jalte hain*’ – all of which cajole, plead, beckon and

mesmerize. Indeed, Lata probably has the maximum number of ghazals to her credit, some of which, particularly those under Madan Mohan, are the finest ever in Hindi film music.

What does SS mean by “sensuous”? Surely not the stereotypical notion: songs with overt lyrics, because Lata does not, it is true, match her sister at those. But consider this irony: some of the raunchiest remix hits in recent times have been Lata numbers: ‘*kaanta lagaa*’, ‘*aaja piya tohe pyar duun*’, ‘*pardesiya yeh sach hai piya*’, ‘*bhor bhayee panghat pe*’! Here the actors/dancers try to achieve with their bodies what Lata did invisibly, with her voice. Most of these numbers, in my opinion, are based on songs that are not the best in Lata’s repertoire. But think of the remixed version of that sensuous, pleading, cajoling ‘*lag ja gale ke phir yeh haseen raat ho na ho*’. The video adds explicitly sexual images, and yet is not able to evoke a fraction of the original’s sensuality which, readers will recall, came to us in Lata’s “thin, shrill falsetto”.

Why did Lata dominate playback singing?

So why was Lata so popular? What the SS thesis boils down to is that Lata happened to be in the right place at the right time: the nationalist project was looking for a thin voice to suit a regressive representation of women and Lata just happened. I am not persuaded by this historical accident or a pawn-in-the-male-domination-project story, since it has very little analytical value. We need to remind ourselves that playback singers, at best, impart a particular style to the singing, but the resultant music is a combination of several partnerships: of singers and music directors and of music directors and film-makers (combination of directors, producers, financiers). Thus, Lata, at best, instituted a singing style under the baton of several music directors, rather than pioneering the ‘submissive-controllable women’ portrayal.

I am sure there are very good historical and sociological reasons that account for Lata’s popularity. But it would be nice to also acknowledge that there is a musical reason as well. She happens to be an exceptionally good singer. She is classically trained, has a vast range, her virtuosity is unmatched. Mohammad Rafi is known for his wide range (the notes that his singing spans). He is often used as an example of tuneful singing in the higher octave. It is believed that Lata reaches only two notes short of Rafi. On the other hand,

in the lower octave, she can reach far lower and can sing with much more ease than Rafi, suggesting that she perhaps has a greater range than even Rafi. So maybe her dominance also has something to do with sheer musical ability. This is not a universal argument, and certainly all successful singers are *not* great singers and vice versa. However, there is no shame in admitting that sometimes the two do overlap: Rafi, Lata, Asha, Kishore Kumar.

The point was brought home to me quite forcefully when, on the occasion of Lata's 75th birthday, a programme was organized in Mumbai where almost all the leading contemporary singers (male and female) paid tribute to Lata by singing her songs. It was shocking how poor the singing was compared to the original numbers, even when most singers chose the relatively easier Lata songs. It was painful to watch otherwise tuneful singers like Hariharan, Sukhwinder Singh, Sadhna Sargam and others make a mess of the song they chose: they were frequently out of tune and most could not execute even the simple *harkats* and *murkis* that sound so effortless in Lata's singing. Maybe they were nervous in her presence. Or maybe she is just a superior singer.

SS of course has a larger point to make: 'Indian culture became attached to landscape and territory – how was nationalism to deal with this increasing visibility of the filmic woman “out of place” i.e. in public spaces? . . . Lata's stylistic innovations offered a viable solution to the above problem of representation in public sphere: at the same time that women's bodies became visible in public spaces via films, their presence was “thinned” through the expressive timbre granted them . . . the potentially powerful image of the heroine enjoying the freedom of the public space in equal measure to the male hero and singing in a voice that may express an ambiguous femininity was, through Lata's voice, undermined' (p. 2021).

This assumes, of course, that the timbre of the singing voice is linked to the image of women, an assumption that is both theoretically tenuous and empirically false. But consider the other aspect of the argument. The period that Lata's career spans is a period of flux. It witnessed, of course, the rise of religious bigotry, fundamentalism and conservatism, but also the increased participation of women in politics, education, and

mass struggles. Through this period, the depiction of women in Hindi cinema changed, though not in a single direction. Indeed, the change was often contradictory, confused, bewildering. Consider two random examples: Rita of *Awaara*, a young, dynamic, highly educated lawyer played with grace and power by Nargis, and Mohini (Madhuri Dixit) of *Tezaab*, who dances sexily to earn her living. The two are separated by nearly forty years. Who is more 'emancipated'? I have my reasons for preferring one over the other as well as for recognizing the limits of their relative emancipation, and I am sure others will have their own. But that is not the point here. The point is that things were changing, and to make his argument, SS will have to map these sorts of changes, correlate them to changing times, and then demonstrate, by examples, how his theory of timbre fits in.

As one recalls the women to whom Lata gave voice, one is struck by the bewildering heterogeneity of personalities and characters they portrayed in films. Madhubala, Geeta Bali, Nutan, Waheeda Rahman, Nargis, Meena Kumari, Vijayantimala, Asha Parekh, Mumtaz, Hema Malini, Sharmila Tagore, Zeenat Aman, Parveen Babi, Rekha, Dimple Kapadia, Madhuri Dixit, Kajol, Karishma Kapoor: the list is endless. The characters portrayed were *tawaifs*, college girls, housewives, doctors, cops, mothers, daughters, urban women, rural women, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, upper caste, low caste: an incredible array of characters, with agency, guts and voice, *within* the mainstream genre, often surpassing their male colleagues by leaps and bounds. However hard I try, a single vision of 'the Indian woman' eludes me: the only common characteristic that I can see is that all women sang songs and all spoke Hindi. This does not mean that the Hindi film industry is not male-dominated, or that it does not often take a patriarchal view of men, women, and their relationships – however, the precise contours of this patriarchy and the changes therein, will have to be elucidated, not assumed.

And it is not as if rebelliousness is absent. Recall Madhubala singing '*pyar kiya to darna kya*' in *Mughal-e-Azam* and Waheeda Rahman singing '*kaanton se kheenche ke ye aanchal*' in *Guide*, both in Lata's voice. In the former, the emperor, the ultimate representation of authority, is challenged in full public view by a defiant Anarkali. The latter song could almost be an anthem of the feminist movement: Rosie singing and

dancing with abandon as she emerges out of the shackles of an oppressive marriage to a respectable man and openly accepts the love and partnership of a lowly tour guide. The rebelliousness of this act is magnified manifold as she wears *ghungroos* (dancing bells) and takes up dancing as a profession, regarded as dishonourable, in defiance of social norms.

Just as SS fails to hear differences in quality of voice, he fails to see diversity in female characters. Or maybe the former is linked to the latter in a relationship of causality.

Lata's persona: public and private

SS makes a comment on Lata's public performances, where she stands 'rigidly on stage, and sings with her head buried in a notebook. What matters is the voice and the way and the way it has been defined by the "notebook", by the authority of the writing.' If she had all the songs memorized, would that give a qualitatively different performance? How exactly is the 'voice defined by the authority of the writing'? Is it that those who read from notebooks have thin voices and represent subjugated women: there must exist a logic here which I have missed.

While it is true that Lata was particularly austere in her public performances, in general, most playback singers of the time were subdued and lacked today's flamboyance in their public performances. We need to keep in mind that these were the days of radio, not TV, and playback singers were meant primarily to be heard, not seen. Also, in Hindustani music, the voice is supposed to come from the stomach: several classical singers produce the most complicated *tans* and *murkis* without moving their body or face at all.^{vii} Several practitioners consider it a virtue to be able to produce intricate patterns in their singing while keeping their bodies ramrod straight, and indeed frown upon upstarts whose bodies express more than their voice.

Those who have seen performances of Rafi, Manna Dey, Hemant Kumar will recall that they all sang from notebooks, and Rafi could sing the most tragic numbers with that benign smile on his face. How is this

different from what Lata does? Kishore Kumar was an exception, but he was an actor, and a comic one at that. Asha's performances became more and more flamboyant with the passage of time, reflecting her desire to adapt to the changing mores.

SS discusses Lata's personal life, describing her as 'virgin mother' and says her life has remained free of 'relationship linked gossip'. Actually, for those who care to find out, Lata's relationships are well known, including the current one. She may not have flaunted her relationships, but they have not been hidden either. In the film industry, Lata has been a hegemon for several years. There have been consistent allegations of manipulative and aggressive behaviour, and of using her clout to play favourites – Mukesh was a particular favourite and she is believed to have promoted him unabashedly; Suman Kalyanpur was seen as a potential threat and therefore had to be thwarted. Other very powerful singers and music directors have been in and out of favour with her: she never sang for C. Ramchandra after their early fabulous association; she fell out with Mohammad Rafi who was the reigning king of playback singing at the time, but subsequently made up with him; O.P. Nayyar never recorded with her; Raj Kapoor recorded only with her; and so on.

Such behaviour is conventionally associated with aggressive, powerful, domineering men: a far cry from the meek, saintly, virginal personality that SS paints. It could be argued that it is precisely her power and her domination that has ensured that personal gossip about her and her relationships remains minimal. It has certainly never been used to denigrate her, as often happens with single women, particularly those who live life on their own terms. SS either does not know all this, in which case he needs to do more research, or he ignores it, since it contradicts his thesis of the 'subjugated suffering Indian woman'. He is not the first to make this error: outsiders often have trouble in understanding how certain individuals from oppressed sections (women, dalits, etc.) can wield so much power.

Cleansing the present?

SS also goes into another question: communalism and its impact on music. It is true that like other areas of Indian society, the religious-communal angle is not absent from the field of music, even though the way it plays out is more nuanced than SS allows.

SS refers to post-independence changes in the selection procedure of AIR, where musicians who were seen as 'respectable', who had skirted the 'illicit influence of the Muslim dominated *gharana* and allied system of performance', were hired. Unfortunately, SS is completely out of his depth here. The cleansing project, aimed at respectability, began in the pre-independence period with the idea of a musician not associated with public scandals. It is believed that this hit the *baijis* (courtesans) most and they started calling themselves *devis*. By reducing this process to a simple religious/ communal angle, SS presents a narrow, misleading and muddled understanding of musical history.

As a result of the changes in the selection procedure, musicians had to appear for an audition before a committee that was, by all accounts, dominated by the Agra *Gharana*, a school of music with a substantial Muslim lineage. Musicians got selected (and rejected) by this committee and there were others who were denied even auditions: there were both Hindus and Muslims in each of these categories. Thus, when SS equates selection based on respectability to lack of a Muslim influence, he needs to give names of those selected and those rejected to enable us to verify the validity of his thesis. More importantly, which *gharanas* is SS thinking of? There is no *major* classical music *gharana* that does *not* have a significant Muslim influence.^{viii} And what exactly is 'allied system of performance' supposed to mean? Does SS mean that the differences in singing styles of individual singers within a *gharana* are a function of their religious affiliation? Or does he mean that Hindu singers across *gharanas* share something in common, as do Muslim singers? Abdul Karim Khan and Bhimsen Joshi are both from the Kirana *gharana*, Faiyyaz Khan and Dinkar Kaikini are from Agra, and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Ajoy Chakrabarty are from Patiala. What are we to make of this? Do Bhimsen Joshi and Abdul Karim Khan differ musically *because* one is a Hindu and the other Muslim? Or do Faiyyaz Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan share something common because both are Muslims?

This is a serious question: without doubt individual musicians can be communal or secular or a bit of both. There are stories of how Omkarnath Thakur used to carry ‘*gangajal*’ to performances and sprinkle it on stage in order to cleanse ‘unclean’ influences; but there is also Bismillah Khan who performs in temples. But about the *music*, it is impossible to tell what is Hindu and what Muslim. I am not sure if SS is importing a parallel from Black musical genres such as jazz, blues, hip-hop in the US that can be distinguished *stylistically* from the music of white musicians. If he has something similar in mind, it is completely inappropriate in the context of Hindustani classical music.

From here, the argument makes a leap to a supposedly similar cleansing of film music that led to ‘new kind of film songs’. And, predictably, ‘Lata Mangeshkar’s singing style was the most obvious manifestation of this process’. It should not come as a surprise by now that SS defines neither the ‘new kind’ of film singing, nor does he elaborate on how exactly Lata contributed to this whole process, other than being born with a thin voice.

And anyway, what is it about Lata’s voice that suggests her Hindu identity: just the thinness? What about Parveen Sultana: how does a Muslim have such a thin voice? Or what about Shobha Gurtu, Girija Devi, or Gangubai: Hindu women with thick/heavy voices? Musically, these associations are untenable; by making them, SS opens himself to the charge of serious and objectionable stereotyping.^{ix}

Again, it cannot be anyone’s case that communalism has not impacted Hindi cinema, and it would certainly be very interesting to see how precisely it has changed film music. For that, one would have to go into the details of film songs, lyricists, composers, the pressures exerted by film directors and producers, the larger political context, the inroads made by the Hindu Right in the film industry, and so on, and link all this to singing styles of individual singers – assuming that such a link can be established. Either SS has not bothered to do that kind of painstaking research, or if he has, he has not made it public.

But I would like to give an instance of how SS misreads the evidence he does present. This is his reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's reminiscences of Nargis from *Meena Bazar*. Manto recalls how his wife and her sisters clandestinely befriended Nargis, without his knowledge. SS interprets this to suggest that this visit was clandestine because Nargis was seen as being 'dishonourable', and they were afraid that Manto would disapprove. That this is an unlikely possibility should have occurred to SS since Manto had deep friendships with several industry women, who might have otherwise have been considered disreputable. In the process, SS misses the fun of the story.

Manto recounts how his wife and her sisters used to regularly phone film stars for fun while Manto was at work. One day, they happened to strike a conversation with Nargis that marked the beginning of a long-lasting friendship. As the conversations continued, both Nargis and the women were curious and eager to meet, so Manto's wife invited Nargis to visit. That day, Manto happened to return early and found hectic activity at home. The women were afraid that Manto might be cross, since he had no idea this is what they were up to when he was out at work. Manto writes: 'I tried to be cross, but could not find an appropriate reason to be angry'

When he discovered what exactly was going on, he went outside to receive Jaddan Bai, Nargis' mother, who had escorted her daughter for this strange encounter. Jaddan Bai and Manto were good friends (despite Jaddan Bai's so-called disrepute), but Jaddan Bai was unaware of the fact that it was Manto's wife who had invited Nargis home. There was a big gap between the two families on account of status: there are descriptions of Nargis's house on Marine Drive that contrast with Manto's much more humble abode in the innards of Byculla. A lot of the awkwardness stemmed from that and also simply from the Manto household women's acquaintance with a celebrity. By translating just one line out of context, SS misses this whole narrative and, in fact, misinterprets it.

Similarly, in the paragraph that describes the relationship between the wealthy Mohan Babu and Jaddan Bai, Manto says of Mohan Babu's riches: '*yeh sab daulatein Jaddan Bai ke dar par bhikari ban gayeen*'. SS

translates this as: ‘none of these attributes proved of any use to Jaddan Bai’, and then inserts a clause in his translation that says ‘Jaddan Bai was the main provider for the family’, which is neither written nor suggested in the original. Manto simply means that everything Mohan Babu possessed seemed to amount to nothing in front of the magic and charm of Jaddan Bai.

Frankly, I am also confused about how any of this is linked to Lata’s singing. SS only tells us that ‘through Lata’s artistry, the “disreputableness” of ambiguous tonalities and the threat of uncertain femininity . . . was brought into alignment with the discourses of the “pure” and controllable Hindu womanhood. The most obvious counterpoint to Lata’s style was what could be referred to as the Kotha style of singing, echoes of which can be discerned in, say, singer Shamshad Begum’s voice.’

Logically, then, Shamshad Begum should have been the preferred voice for filmic kotha songs. Well, she wasn’t. How many famous kotha songs has Shamshad Begum sung? Then, whose was the preferred voice of the film tawaifs? Asha Bhosle and Lata Mangeshkar. This suits SS just fine, since, according to him, when the tawaif sang in a sweet thin voice, she appeared controllable. This is pure circular logic. The controllable voice is thin, and since the voice is thin, it represents controllable women!

The final part of the paper is on the post-independence hero: what SS calls the Five-Year Plan hero. The relationship between this representation of masculinity and Lata’s voice is a repeat of SS’s earlier argument: Lata provided the perfect foil for this kind of hero with her thin, controllable, infantile voice. I will not comment on this analysis, since it requires another paper for a thorough discussion.

It is time to introduce music in writings on music.

Authored by:

Ashwini Deshpande,
Department of Economics,
Delhi School of Economics,
University of Delhi,
Delhi 110 007.

E-mail: ashwini@econdse.org

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to Urmila Bhirdikar and Sudhanva Deshpande for their critical inputs. Thanks are also due to Surajit Bose, Partho Datta, Achyut Joshi, Shohini Ghosh, Aditya Bhattacharjea, Irfan Zuberi and Roopa Dhawan for their comments. Needless to add, the responsibility for all errors is mine.

NOTES:

- ⁱ The only citations in the piece are other articles, again quoted without any reference to actual recordings.
- ⁱⁱ Incidentally, SS uses ‘Indian cinema’ (e.g., p. 2021) when he is actually referring to commercial Hindi cinema, and ‘Indian popular music’ to refer to Hindi film music (e.g., p. 2019). What is this – carelessness, insensitivity, faux pas?
- ⁱⁱⁱ Though in some songs, the effect at the high end is not always pleasing, particularly in tandem songs with Mohammad Rafi, where the latter sounds more relaxed.
- ^{iv} Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan is reported to have said about Lata: “*Kambakht, kabhi besuri nahi hoti*” (the wretched woman is never out of tune!)
- ^v Interview with Lata Mangeshkar, on the occasion of Lata completing twenty five years in film music, published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, April 1967.
- ^{vi} Yet, Lata’s is seen as the more prevalent voice. Why this happens is an interesting question, but we can’t address this without adding substantially to the length of this piece.
- ^{vii} Students of classical music are trained in being able to sing without swaying their bodies.
- ^{viii} In fact, the presence of a ‘Khan Saheb’ often imparts an aura of solidity and seriousness to the learning of music.
- ^{ix} One would have expected SS to bring up Lata’s intimacy with the Hindu Right, Shiv Sena in particular, but he doesn’t.