

# Singers, melodies and sound

THE FEMALE PLAYBACK IN  
BOMBAY CINEMA: VOICE,  
BODY, TECHNOLOGY  
By Shikha Jhingan,  
Orient BlackSwan, ₹1,725

Shikha Jhingan traces the trajectory of the singing voice as a material object through changing technologies and mediums — from radio and gramophone to cassettes and reality shows — in this book. Divided into two parts, “The Magic of Playback” and “From Singers to Listeners”, it has five chapters.

Looming large is the figure and the voice of Lata Mangeshkar. Particularly fascinating in this regard is Chapter 4 (“Cassettes, Fans, and Singers”), which delineates the ambivalent relationship that many new singers had with Lata Mangeshkar — beginning as devout listeners of Lata in their formative years, continuing as avowed fans as they started performing themselves, and the complex negotiations they entered into with the iconic ‘voice’ they emulated. Anuradha Paudwal and Kavita Krishnamurthy are two examples of “dubbing artists” who have been analysed at length in this context — with telling anecdotes about Paudwal’s accidental debut in *Hero* and the way her popularity was facilitated by T-Series cassettes prior to that.

Chapter 4 can be read as a counterpoint to Chapter 1 where we see how the voice (that of Lata’s) that became the accepted norm in Hindi film playback singing (for heroines), the benchmark against which every new entrant was subsequently tested, had to herself overcome the challenges of negotiating a space of her own in the 1940s/50s. While on the one hand, she admired and was influenced by the lead singers of the day — Noor Jahan in particular — she had to navigate away from “the ‘open throated’ style identified with the courtesan, gramophone singers, and theatre actresses of the early 20th century” to “a more intimate form of singing that became the norm in postindependence cinema”. New playback technology in the form of sensitive microphones played a significant part in this. Jhingan analyses four genres of solo songs through which this “intimate voice” became synonymous with the private selves of heroines. This was in sharp contrast to songs meant for courtesans, vamps, crooners and street singers in Hindi films — in other words, songs performed by the musicking body on screen.

“The Critic as Biogra-



pher” (Chapter 3) focuses attention on influential music critics of the 1960s — Bharatan and Dhurandhar, who wrote for the magazines, *Filmfare* and *Madhuri*, with extensive quotes from their reviews. The main argument here is that these reviews were mostly speculative, assumed elite male listenership, and often assimilated unrelated resources to press home a prejudiced point about the artist. The personal lives of Lata and Asha, especially their relationship with C. Ramachandra and O.P. Nayyar, respectively, came under frequent scrutiny in these reviews, making them little more than gossip columns with the veneer of aesthetic content. Jhingan also gives a comparative analysis of two biographies of Lata — by Bharatan and Harish Bhimani — with the latter claiming more authenticity for being a “concert travelogue”.

The final chapter explores the immense new possibilities that television and digital data have opened up since the 1990s. The evolution of Hindi film song-based music competitions on television — from DD’s *Meri Awaz Suno* and Sony’s *Indian Idol* to Zee’s *Sa Re Ga Ma* — is something that all viewers of these shows can relate to. What the non-expert would mull over in this chapter, however, is how new recording technologies fragmented the production of the song when “The voice of the singer in the digital studio became just one more sound to be processed”. Jhingan discusses A.R. Rahman in this context; and within it, the soundtrack of *Rangeela*.

The book is full of such instances of specific analyses of songs/ singers/ films that will appeal to the informed reader of at least three generations, while those invested in sound studies will appreciate its theoretical aspects.

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