

# LATA CONSISTENTLY STRUCK THAT DIVINE SUR

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Lata MangeshkarThe Hindu ArchivesThe Hindu

The nation of more than a billion lost its most popular voice, as Lata Mangeshkar (1929-2022) transcended to the heavenly stage on Saturday. More than just a name, over the years, the Bharat Ratna became an adjective, an emotion that got so deeply ingrained in the Indian consciousness that her voice became the benchmark of excellence and purity. Usually, film personalities have fans, Lata has devotees for if the melody is the link that connects man to almighty, Lata consistently struck that divine *sur*. Ephemeral phrases like singing sensation were not for her. She was always the voice of virtue. No wonder, her voice inspired Raj Kapoor to mount *Satyam Shiva m Sundaram*. Or the way Gulzar simply put for her in the *Kinara song*, *Meri Awaaz Hi Meri Pehchan Hai* (my voice is my identity).

She fought for giving playback singers their space under the sun. Before Lata, the line between actor and singer was a blur. The discs featured the name of the character rather than the playback singer. She along with Mohammad Rafi gave shape to the culture of playback singing in Hindi cinema. Like Noor Jehan and Surayia, Lata was also offered acting parts but she wanted only her voice to be heard. And she did become the *prima donna* of playback singing in no time. From Madhubala to Kajol and Preity Zinta, women actors were considered to have arrived on the scene when they got an opportunity to lip-sync to Lata's voice.

Born in a conservative musical Marathi household, her training started early when she eavesdropped on her father Dinanath Mangeshkar's training sessions. A stern taskmaster, the noted classical singer and theatre veteran one day discovered a young Lata correcting one of his students, telling him how her father renders a particular raga, in his absence. He promptly took her under his wings and a five or six-year-old Lata would sing alongside her father and sleep on his lap.

But for the fate that reduced her to the sole breadwinner in the family of five siblings at a very young age, Lata would have shone on the firmament of classical music. It was something that she regretted all her life. It also meant that singing became her life. She would starve through the day so that she could save every single penny for the family.

In the recording studio, none could match the purity and clarity of her voice and the control over the pitch. After listening to *Ye Zindagi Usi Ki Hai*, the poignant number from *Anarkali in raga Bhimplasi*, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan remarked *Kambakth Kabhi Besuri Nahin Hoti* (The wretched girl never goes out of tune). It was 1953 and the best of Lata was yet to come.

Her mentor Ghulam Haider instilled in a young Lata the importance of feeling the joys and pain of the character. Anil Biswas taught her the value of breath control and Naushad and Salil Chowdhury tested how high she could go with notes. Her sweet voice quickly displaced the robust nasal voices like Shamshad Begum and Geeta Dutt.

Outside the studio, in white saris and side parting hairstyle, she carefully crafted an image where even the film media, which thrives on gossip, presented her as a sisterly figure who loved to tie *rakhis* on the industry's big wigs.

However, beneath that benign half-smile and muted silks, the resilient Lata was all steel. When producer Shashadhar Mukherjee termed her voice too thin, she worked on her timbre. When

Dilip Kumar offhandedly remarked that her voice smelt of *dal bhaat*, she made sure that she got the nuances of Urdu right. *Beqas Pe Karam*, the naat in *Mughal-e-Azam* is a testimony to her command over the language, and Khayyam's serene *Ae Dil e Nadan* (Razia Sultan) remained her favourite song.

She didn't budge an inch over royalty rights even if it meant a cold war with Mohd Rafi. At the peak of her career, when S.D. Burman made an uncharitable remark, she didn't work with the master composer for five years. She refused to perform in film award functions until a separate category was created for playback singers in 1959.

Lata emerged unscathed from all battles as none of it could stop her from becoming a phenomenon and staying on top for six decades.

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