

# Female playback's Bombay conquest

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**M**Y mother used to say that among the first words I learnt to mutter were 'Aayega Aayega' — having been born when Lata Mangeshkar's 'Aayega Aanevala...' from the film 'Mahal' established her as the leading 'female playback' singer in 'Bombay cinema', a position she would retain for decades thereafter. Reviewing a book about 75 years later, I gain interesting insights into why it was so.

The importance of music in commercial Indian cinema, especially after the emergence of the playback system, is well understood. But the underpinnings of this phenomenon, in the context of Bollywood films in particular, had never been analysed earlier with such depth and imagination.

This is a condensed work, based on an extensive study of literature on the subject, growing from Shikha Jhingan's dissertation submitted at JNU, New Delhi. Enriched by her personal experience as a filmmaker, two of her projects have formed the core of this book.

However, the book is not bereft of interesting stories and anecdotes that would engage an educated mind interested in Hindi film songs, seeking to penetrate the surface of reality. In fact, the introduction of the playback system from the mid-1930s



## THE FEMALE PLAYBACK IN BOMBAY CINEMA — VOICE, BODY, TECHNOLOGY

by Shikha Jhingan.  
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started changing the character of mainstream cinema. Box-office success depended, to a large extent, on the appeal of the songs and music permeating the films.

This book dissects popular Bombay cinema over the decades and establishes the linkages between Voice, Body and Technology; especially the female body and voice accentuated with the help of technological advances. There's a chapter devoted specifically to 'The Intimate Voice of Lata Mangeshkar'. Introducing 'The Sonic Force of the Female Voice', it covers in two parts 'The Magic of Playback', including one on 'Courtesans, Vamps, Crooners, and Street Singers'.

Part II, titled 'From Singers to Listeners', is composed of three chapters — 'The Critic as Biographer', 'Cassettes, Fans, and Singers' and 'Television to Digital Data'. In conclusion, Jhingan writes: "...by focusing on how the voices were imagined, recorded, edited, and repurposed in the analogue phase and the post-digital ecology, this book has tried to create a longer arc of the female voice in Hindi film songs to its shifting presence in contemporary sonic cultures and the way they have become co-constitutive of on-screen multi-sited bodies."

The heaviness of the conclusion gets mitigated once the reader goes through the carefully developed thesis. Seriousness of the book can be gauged by the last 66 pages being devoted to Glossary, notes to chapters, works cited and an Index.

Lata Mangeshkar's voice was considered 'thin' in her initial years, leading to many

rejections when 'the microphone paved the way for her aural stardom in the film industry'. In fact, the microphone became a 'musical instrument to be used creatively', enabling Lata to bring out the finest shades of expression. How did Lata signify a departure from the melody queen Noor Jahan?

There is considerable discussion on how Lata's voice for the microphone and her controlled breathing "helped create an image of aphysicality, a practice of singing film songs without involving the body". Her voice to stardom was viewed as a sign "of the eclipse of heavier or 'rustic' female voices". Several scholars have argued that the timbre and tonality of her voice has played a critical role in fashioning the modern Indian female identity, middle-class femininity, and the discourses of nationhood.

However, this book is much more than about Lata Mangeshkar. It briefly touches upon her sister, Asha, who has just passed away, together with other singing stars like Kanan Devi, Noor Jahan, Geeta Dutt and Shamshad Begum too. As the chapters would indicate, it delves into many more serious and connected issues. One has to go through them to have a clear idea of the evolution of this genre of female singing.

How long have we to wait to know of the evolution of the Male Playback, with such academic rigour?

— *The reviewer is a former IAS officer and a film aficionado*