

# When A Song Paid Fifty & Petrol Was Six Annas A Gallon

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## Singer RajKumari talks to Ashok Ranade (Translated by Hilla Sethna)

"I was born in a family which did not have much to do with music or singing. But just opposite the place where I lived stood a cinema hall. Close enough for me to be able to hear the songs - film songs, which gave me immense pleasure."

"I was only a six or seven-year-old then. I'd get into a little frock, run across and spend hours with the cinema projectionist who I'd befriended, and who'd allow me to watch the film, standing on a stool in the projection room. And my joy knew no bounds when a song flashed upon the screen and I would sing along with it. There were many famous singers then, but I never got to know them for my social background was a different one."

(I regard RajKumari as a representative singer of the pre-Lata stage of development as far as Indian film music is concerned. RajKumari's information that she has been brought up on film music and not on stage music is interesting. Because this means that she does not belong to a tradition of music which was permeated with classical music. This seems to negate the general rule in India - where the all-pervasive stage-music was a precursor to the equally pervasive film music.)

"When my Guruji first asked me to sing, I felt shy. Then I sang him a film song - as I understood it - from Laila Majnu, with Kajjan and Nissar. Then, one was made to sing sargam for days - even years together. If the Ustad so willed, then one proceeded further. I was taken to Siddheshwari Devi's house and I sang for her mother Rajeshwari Devi. She said, 'This girl is quick-witted. She should go ahead now.' The system then was to learn tappas after sargam, and then raag, raginis. I see this system is no longer followed today - today one does not hear the tappa.

(In spite of RajKumari's assertion that she has no intensive training in classical music, it is clear that the atmosphere in Benares was itself conducive to taking up a career in music. It is also interesting to know that she has learnt tappa in the beginning. Maybe it is this that helped her in acquiring a mobility of voice which she displays even at this age.)

"I was just eight or nine when I was obsessed by a desire to act in films. I was determined to act, to dance, to sing. To master these arts one has to be thoroughly trained. You must have heard of Imperial Film Company which existed in Bombay those days. Their main star was Sulochana (Ruby Myers). Ardeshir Seth made films which were directed by Lallubhai Kapoor, who was my father's close friend. One day, when he came over to our place he said to me, "I believe you sing extremely well. How about singing for me?" This I did. He was pleased: "Come along with me to Bombay. I am about to start a film which I will be directing myself."

(RajKumari's taking to films seems to be a result of some sort of musical drift. She does not seem to be keen on any particular medium of musical experience. However, she went through all the media experiences and this in itself may single her out as a versatile and adaptable singer.)

**Ashok Ranade: Didn't you see plays/dramas?**

"There were plays performed - like those by Madan Theatres, but I was very small then and did not see any plays."

**Ashok Ranade: What about nautankis?**

"I've never seen or heard a nautanki in Benares. Nautankis had started to fade out then . . . Besides, those were the days-when I was in Bombay and did not really get to see any."

"I came to Bombay. You must have heard of the famous singer Gangaprasad Pathak? He hailed from Gwalior. He was to compose and direct the music for Lallubhai Kapoor's new film. The story and songs were written by D. N. Madhok. Gangaprasad had become famous for his music in *Radhe Shyam* . . . I was taken to him and asked to sing. I refused, "I will not sing - at least not without any payment." I was given a rupee. I was very very happy - I had earned a rupee!"

(Apart from the omnipresence of the classical musician on the early film scene RajKumari's early career also brings out the sense of adventure which the artiste

enjoyed. Perhaps the cinema had not become an industry when RajKumari began to sing.)

"I was acting in plays when Prakash Pictures were on the look-out for a singing-actress. Prakash made Hindi and Gujarati films like, *Sansar Leela*, *Nai Duniya*. Artistes sang their own songs then. I got to know these people through Firoze Shah Mistry. Shankarbhai, Bijubhai (Bhatt) had come to see my play. They saw me and said, 'This girl will be okay for us'."

"I was quite fat then. But that did not deter them. Fat or thin made no difference then. There were heroines, those days, whose faces were a fright! At least I did not have a 'bhayankar' face. I left working in plays."

"People tried to advise me: 'Your voice has developed a sweetness of its own by continuous singing in plays. This sweetness you will lose if you join films. Those were the days when no one had heard of loud speakers or mikes. We had to sing on top of our voices. The higher and louder we sang, the louder the applause and the encores."

(It is significant that RajKumari makes the point about voice projection particular to stage singing before the advent of microphone. It is to be noted that her advisors were becoming aware of the fact that projection of voice and its strength can be overdone - at least when the 'sweetness' of voice required by a microphone is considered.)

**Ashok Ranade: What was your scale?**

"Kaali paanch . . . the higher the note, the louder was the applause."

**Ashok Ranade: What kind of songs did you sing for your plays?**

"All the songs were of the classical type."

**Ashok Ranade: But I've heard that the Hindi Parsee theatre had mostly light vocal music along with a lot of action songs.**

"Yes. There were 'action' songs. Yet, these were based on classical ragas. Or shall I say they were similar to classical tunes? People like Ashraf Khan sang only classical kind of songs - compositions that had classical variations, like different gayakis, tana, paltas, etc."

**Ashok Ranade: What were the instruments used those days? The harmonium?**

"The musicians sat opposite the stage. The instruments were just the harmonium, the tabla, and, at times the ghungroos. Nothing else, really. There was no violin or anything else."

**Ashok Ranade: Not even the organ?**

"No Just an organ-type peti (harmonium) played by one's feet."

**Ashok Ranade: What about the Marathi Sangeet Natak?**

"I've not seen those."

"To come back to films...I sang four songs for *Sansar Leela*. All were very popular. This was followed by several films made by Prakash Pictures."

"After a while I decided not to work in films. I started playback singing. Do you know why I made this decision? You'd never believe it. (Laughs) Someone said I was putting on a lot of weight. So, I started to take electric massage."

"Listen to me attentively - it was not a laughable matter. I wanted to be slim. I was put off food and I had to consume Brooklax (a chocolate-type laxative) daily. I had to live on black tea. Not that I followed this strict routine. When my mother cooked rice or potatoes, I would stealthily eat the food up. I ate everything I wanted to eat. My masseuse, who was a German lady, was confused and scolded me: 'What is this RajKumari? Your weight is increasing day by day!'"

"How can that be? I don't eat anything, I lied."

" 'Don't tell lies,' she scolded. 'I will keep you in the 'light-box' for half-an-hour.' To which I replied that I would not remain in the light box for even fifteen minutes!"

"Don't you want to reduce? If you eat the way you do, you will remain as heavy as you are."

"But I could not give up food, for which I have always had a weakness. I loved good eating and living. . . "

"The best thing about those days was that every artiste got the kind of work he or she was capable of doing. A song would be composed, for instance, to suit the singer's range, style and voice quality. That kind of working was fruitful. One can't say the same of today. Today, I'll have to sing the way I am told to sing. The way another

sings. I've to change my style. This never happened then. That is why every individual style was appreciated, and so was every individual singer. No one was looked down upon. Everyone was equally occupied. Every artiste had work according to his potential, his capability. This gave satisfaction to both the singer and the composer."

(RajKumari's comment about the earlier music directors is significant. It clearly brings out the fact that the music director considered the singer as a participant with an equal status. Singers were not expected to give command performances, but they were encouraged to give their best.)

"In those days certain playback singers were fixed for certain heroines. For example, I always sang for Shobana Samarth, as I did for many other heroines. Their agreements with the makers would specify that RajKumari would sing for them. . . . Again, after signing the contract, the actresses concerned would inform me about it, giving me the name of the company, the film, and so on, adding that when I would be called for the take of her songs I should do so right away, even if it meant cancelling someone else's recording and so on."

". . . I have sung for actresses like Madhubala, Geeta Bali, Urmila, Nargis . . ."

(RajKumari's point that there were clear correspondences established between heroines and their playback voices is worth noticing. This can be treated as a significant step in the direction of what I call voice-casting. It also means that film songs had not become totally dissociated when heroines and their playback voices were supposed to match. It need not be added that the present day circumstances are totally different. Apart from rare combinations like Raj Kapoor and Mukesh we do not have any other significant attempts of matching voices. To have the same voice for all the heroines is a position that denies art though it might have commercial effectiveness.)

"The music of those days was very popular and well-received. That very music is just as much appreciated today, if not more. Music itself does not have bhav - feelings, emotion. That can be brought about only by soulful rendering and by the lyrics. But these days, music has taken over the functions of the song. That is, there is so much importance given to (instrumental) music that one has to understand the mood/the feeling of the song only through its music – not the rendering or the words."

(RajKumari possesses a sweet voice which is strong and not sharply high pitched. Her comment that today music – i.e. the orchestra part of film compositions - is high-lighted at the expense of emotion, is thought provoking. Very rightly she is equating emotion with the human voice. It is true that instruments are emotionally

neutral and all specific appeals to emotion are made through the medium of the human voice. If the instruments are gaining an upper hand over the voice, then it may mean that we are not interested in specific emotional messages and that our interest in creation of vague emotional status is just flag-waving.)

**Ashok Ranade: What were the singers paid, those days?**

"I don't know of others. There were playback singers like Amirbai Karnataki, Goharbai Karnataki and some three-four Maharashtrian girls who were not so well known. Then, when I started just playback singing, I was in demand. For every song I earned Rs.50 which was indeed a very good sum those days when the rupee had value and petrol cost just six annas a gallon!"

(When a vocation has attained the state of being an industry, a very general indication of the fact is provided by the importance given to money and such other matters. Even though we make allowances for the lower cost of living in RajKumari's heyday, a payment of Rs.50 per song, with no name of the playback singer indicated on the disc are surely eye openers.)

**Ashok Ranade: But tell me just one thing. Why was it that discs did not carry the playback singers' names?**

"I don't know the reason. The disc just carried the name of the artistes on whom the songs were picturised."

**Ashok Ranade: When did they start acknowledging the playback singers?**

"I think Bombay Talkies started the practice. . ."

**Ashok Ranade: What was your range – your key-note – for film songs?**

"I mainly sang with kaali paanch as my sur. But there were times when we would mutually agree to a key which would sound good, without stretching the voice or being uncomfortable. I would be able to sing one antara (verse) and if it sounded good we would go by that note! Today, one is told to sing at a definite pitch - even if you've got to stretch your voice."

(I have already commented on the regard by the composers for the singer as an individual artiste. As far as singing is concerned, concentrating on high notes can certainly be taken as symptomatic of many things. For example, high notes may mean brilliance at the costal depth, it may mean an attempt to rise above the noise level that surrounds us and finally it may also mean indifference to the individual quality of a

singer's voice. After all, singers are better differentiated in lower ranges than in the higher.)

"Today, the rhythm of music and songs has changed to the extent that most songs sound like Western tunes - but then, what can we do about it!"

**Ashok Ranade: How long did it take to rehearse a song in your time?**

"Well . . . I did not believe in rehearsals. I used to be invited to drop in for tea on a certain day. Mood permitting, I would go along, hear the tune and understand the new song - and that was that!"

(I do not know whether lack of rehearsals is to be interpreted as indifference to the polish and the finish of the ultimate product. But it certainly seems probable that the relaxed conditions of singing made it easier for spontaneity in the song.)

"Methods of recording are far far advanced today. The singers have different mikes, the musicians have separate mikes, too. That's wonderful. In our days just one mike was shared by all and sundry. Singers, artistes and the musicians all shared just one mike. Sometimes they stood under a tree and sang, sometimes on top of a hill, other times in a studio, or may be knee-deep in water. . ."

**Ashok Ranade: But it is said that in spite of all the discomforts, the quality of rendering was far better than today. Do you agree?**

"That's because of the tight bookings of re-cording studios and artistes today. They work in multiple shifts."

**Ashok Ranade: How many songs did you record in a year?**

"I sang (recorded) a minimum of three songs a day. They were either recorded early mornings or afternoons or even late at nights, starting 9 p.m. and finishing at 4 a.m. the next morning. . ."

(RajKumari's schedule does not seem too relaxed in itself. But perhaps the music-making as a whole was less complex, and the 'enjoyment of music-making' more.)

**Ashok Ranade: Do you ever remember having had problems with the rendering of any song? A song you could just not sing and for which you delayed its recording?**

"Never, I've had no such problems, you'll be surprised to know."

"Take the song from *Mahal* (*ghabrake jo hum sar ko takrayen . . .*) - which is popular up to this day. If you remember, Khemraj ji was on the harmonium, Bholu Shreshta on the tabla, and a Bengali - I don't remember who - played the clarinet. These were the only musicians we had. There was only one mike and Mukul dada (Bose) was recording. We were casually rehearsing the song, and I asked Mukul da to make the necessary adjustments. He said he had already done so. So we recorded."

(In a way I was amused and even felt envious when RajKumari asserted that she doesn't remember having come across a 'difficult' song! However, the way she describes the recording of the famous song from *Mahal* surely speaks of her command over her medium, her affection for the simplicity of the industry then, and also the sense of team spirit every song perhaps invoked in her days!)

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