

A melody called Lata

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In Sanskrit, the word Lata means 'a creeper'. Generally, it is suggested that a 'lata' lives and moves mainly with supporting branch, wall etc. It is pointed out that the word breathes interest only when suffixed to some other major word such as bhuja (hand), vidyut (lightening), bhru (eyebrows). But the Lata most Indians know has added a shade to the meaning-field of the word. She, on her own, has carved out a place for herself and space for film music in Indian cultural expression!

Lata began singing when I was about to earn my 'musical ears'. Soon it was Lata's voice everywhere, in all kinds of musical situations. Her presence was felt in all contexts. All girls were trying to sing like her. It was easy to forget that artists become 'great' musicians because they do *not* sing or play like anybody else! The real test of an artist is his or her capacity to recognize greatness in other artists and yet to have the ability to avoid imitating them! Imitation is an admission of inferiority. Lata has always sung on her own.

In fact she could not have done otherwise - so unique was her voice when she began. How can one describe it? I would say fresh (i.e. largely untutored), thin, quick moving, tuneful, transparent, high pitched, melancholic and pure. Her musical grasp and sensibility distinguished her from many other 'gifted' voices of '40s. Stories still circulate how majority of early composers were compelled to compose music to suit many gifted singers of that time! Most of these early singers managed to sing a given tune while Lata could create a "song" out of a given tune. Paradoxically, she sang so transparently that one could really bear composer's original, musical ideas - and yet one remembers many songs as 'her' songs! Finally, songs belong to singers just as roles belong to actors.

Lata has sung all kinds of songs. But I think she has not excelled in two types of songs: nightclub songs and (truly) classical songs. The reasons are traceable to both voice and temperament. Nightclub singing is a distinct genre, which needs a saucy projection of voice. It is as if one sings while looking at the patron (and perhaps at his purse) with slanting eyes! This kind of projection needs an ability to step out of music of a song -even slightly going out of tune - if you like. Lata has of course sung such songs

quite efficiently but not effectively. Lata is obviously not liberated from her tunefulness even when it is in the interest of effective music making. Eliot once said 'every word in a poem cannot be and should not be poetic!' Similarly in music - you cannot, and should not be musical at all times.

In 'classical' songs her performances rate less than hundred percent. But it must be admitted that this is also due to our composers' usual, rather limited idea of what constitutes 'classical music'. Most of them are happy the moment they have landed on a raga-base for their tune - as if to draw a sketch of a throne is in itself like installing a throne! The more naïve among them believe that using tabla/tala is the key to enter the 'classical' arena. Finally there are others who suffer from an obsession with tan-s, tihai-s in music, and air-cutting gestures and exaggerated grimacing by actors. As if only such gimmicks in visuals make 'classical' music! May God forgive them all. Only he can forgive such ignoramuses.

Lata's 'classical ventures' do not impress us as much because of her voice which cannot be emotionally ambiguous. Also because it does not lend easily to slow tempo elaboration of musical ideas - which is the crux of art music.

But an artist is to be judged by his or her best. Lata regaled generation after generation with her tunefulness. This meant that even an uninitiated listener has now a standard to judge musically deviant characters. She made emotive tone a pervading influence, which is once again accepted as a music shaping influence - especially after microphones/speakers/mixers made 'close-up' of voice possible. When 'classical' music was getting all the credit and critical attention, she made us sit up and take notice of the evergreen power of a 'song'.
