

# Pandit of Playback

**This month marks the 101st birth anniversary of legendary Bollywood singer Manna Dey. Vidhi Salla explores the singer's multifaceted career and the strong roots of classical music that revealed themselves in the songs he sang.**

For the film *Basant Bahar* (1956), music directors Shankar-Jaikishan appointed Manna Dey to sing the raga-based tracks of the film. One such song, 'Ketaki Gulab Juhi', composed in Raga Basant was to be a *jugalbandi* between Bhimsen Joshi and Dey. The latter was terrified at the thought of not only singing with one of the stalwarts of Indian classical music, but also defeating him in the *jugalbandi* which was required of the song sequence. He squarely refused the offer and allegedly even disappeared with his wife for a few days to avoid singing the song. After much persuasion from Joshi, who also suggested they practise together, Dey relented. Finally, when the song was recorded, Joshi had nothing but praise for Dey's effortless rendition of the song and his improvisations within the raga. While ardent fans of the singer lament how he never received the recognition he deserved as a playback singer, Dey was unmatched when it came to classical numbers and was a favourite among music composers. He imbibed the quality of his uncle and legendary actor-singer-composer Krishna Chandra Dey, of singing classical music in a way that would appeal to the layperson.

## SEEDS OF MUSIC

Prabodh Chandra Dey, whose *daak naam* (nickname) 'Manna' became his *bhaalo naam* (good name), was born on 1st May, 1919, in North Kolkata into a musically inclined family. His paternal uncle, popularly known as K.C. Dey, doted on him and had musical aspirations for his favourite nephew. Under the tutelage of his uncle, a naughty prankster turned into a dedicated musician who left an indelible mark on the music industry. In his autobiography, *Memories Come Alive*, Dey writes, "To

me, music is God – the sole source of inspiration and knowledge. I live for music. Yet, I spent a large part of my childhood wrestling with my friends and picking up fights. Music never appealed to me at the time... The musical ambience of our ancestral house was instrumental in effecting the turnaround from a mischief-monger to a music-maker. It inculcated the desire in me to excel in music." After completing his graduation from Kolkata University, Dey began receiving singing lessons from his uncle as well as from Dabir Khan, whose lineage has been traced back to Tansen. When K.C. Dey moved to Mumbai, it was natural that his nephew-protégé followed him.

Dey made his foray into playback singing with the 1942 film *Tamanna* while assisting his uncle on the music of the film. The song was a duet with the then star Suraiya called 'Jaago Aayee Usha' and was an instant hit. Dey received his first solo break with the 1943 film *Ram Rajya* when K.C. Dey refused the offer because he sang playback only for films he was acting in. By the 1950s, Dey was singing for Bengali as well as Marathi films, his strong linguistic talent flourishing as a result. He was very particular about enunciating the lyrics of a song clearly and audibly.

He went to great lengths to learn Urdu and Farsi from a tutor named Sayyid saab before singing qawwalis and ghazals. His penchant for perfection is evident in his diction in one of his most famous qawwalis, 'Na Toh Karwaan Ki Talaash Hain', from *Barsaat Ki Raat* (1960) composed by Roshanlal Nagrath (more famously known by his first name, Roshan). In his seven-decade career, Dey recorded more than 3,500 songs. Apart from Hindi and Bengali, he sang in a number of languages including Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannada, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Magadhi, Maithili, Konkani, Sindhi and Chhattisgarhi.

**"You listen to my songs. I listen only to Manna Dey's," singer Mohammed Rafi had once famously said to his fans**



## A MAN OF RAGAS

Among the many classical compositions sung by Dey, the one that often comes to mind is the Roshan composition, 'Laga Chunari Mein Daag' from *Dil Hi Toh Hai* (1963). Sahir Ludhianvi wrote the lyrics of the song based on Kabir's poem, 'Chunari mein parri gayo daag piya'. Rajesh Roshan, popular Bollywood composer and Roshan's son, recalls in an interview, "He [Dey] was like this batsman who walks in, hits a match-winning sixer and walks out to the roar of the crowd." Dey would often finish learning and recording a film song in less than two hours and sometimes in one take. He attributed a lot of his achievements to the rigorous classical training he received from his uncle and many other gurus throughout his lifetime. Among the many raga-based renditions of Dey, some of his best ones include, 'Poochho Na Kaise Maine' in raga Ahir Bhairav from *Meri Surat Teri Aankhen* (1963), 'Bairan Ho Gayi Rain' in Jaijaiwanti from *Dekh Kabira Roya* (1957), 'Tu Pyar Ka Sagar Hai' in Darbari Kanada from *Seema* (1955) and the uplifting 'Bhor Aayi Gaya Andhiyara' in Ahilya Bilawal from *Bawarchi* (1972), to name a few.

Dey expressed openly, in several interviews, how producers pressured music directors to choose the relatively popular singers Mohammed Rafi and Mukesh

## DID YOU KNOW:

- Manna Dey's trademark fur cap was gifted to him by a fan from Kashmir. Once during winter, when the singer was performing a concert in the state, he was shivering on stage from the biting cold. A fan from the audience, stepped onto the dais and offered him a brown fur cap that Dey gladly accepted. Since then, he always wore it as a mark of respect towards that kind gesture.
- Manna Dey was a highly capable composer as well. Early in his career, he composed music for a number of mythological films, which he was embarrassed to be associated with, never once mentioning that he made music for such "pious and serious films."

for the lead over him. As a result, Dey's voice was typecast into singing for other characters in the film or whenever a song demanded a classically trained voice. This led to the incidental creation of a genre in which Dey fit perfectly: the classical-comic singer. Take for instance, the song 'Lapak Jhapak Tu Aa Re Badarwa' from *Boot Polish* (1953). This classical piece hinting at ragas Miyan Ki Malhar and Darbari Kanada is picturised on David Abraham Cheulkar who is regaling his fellow balding jail inmates with a *bandish* (classical composition). With perfect *taans*, Dey's voice sings comical lyrics that appeal to the rain gods to bless the barren heads of the inmates so that the droplets of water may sprout new hair growth: "Boondan Se Tu Baal Uгаа De." More memorable perhaps, is the humorous singing competition in 'Ek Chatur Naar' from *Padosan* (1968) between a Carnatic singer played by Mehmood, voiced by Dey, and a Hindustani classical singer portrayed by Sunil Dutt, voiced by Kishore Kumar. 'Phool Gendwa Na Maaro' from *Dooj ka Chand* (1964) and 'Hato Kahe Ko Jhooti Banao Batiyan' from *Manzil* (1960) are along similar classical-comic lines.

## ONE VOICE, MANY FLAVOURS

Despite the strong association with raga-based songs, Dey was equally at ease with all kinds of compositions. He sang the rock 'n' roll number 'Aao Twist Karein' with as much ease as the folk tune 'Chalat Musafir Moh Liya Re', blended mischief with mockery in 'Dil Ka Haal Sune Dilwala' and instilled longing for the country in 'Ae Mere Pyaare Watan'. Unlike his peers - Rafi, Kumar and Mukesh - Dey was never associated with any one hero, or even "hero songs" for that matter. Music directors could not cast his voice into any one mould, and this allowed the singer to be fluid and experimental. Composers like Shankar-Jaikishan and S.D. Burman explored this rare quality of Dey to the fullest. Soon music makers were composing songs specifically for Dey and when he did playback for the hero in a film, the songs invariably became legendary. He sang 'Yeh Raat Bheegi Bheegi' and 'Pyaar Hua Iqrar Hua Hai' for Raj Kapoor at a time when singer Mukesh was considered the voice of the actor. He immortalised 'Zindagi Kaisi Hai Paheli' for Rajesh Khanna in the decade when a majority of Khanna's songs were sung by Kumar.

"You listen to my songs. I listen only to Manna Dey's," Rafi had once famously said to his fans. Composers S.D. Burman and Anil Biswas maintained that Dey could sing any song sung by Talat Mehmood, Rafi, Kumar or Mukesh...it was this protean quality of his that made him unique. Throughout his lifetime, Dey received many accolades and awards including the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, several National Awards, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award and the Bongo Bibhushan Award. His non-film work stands out as prominently, within which, voicing poet Harivanshrai Bachchan's Madhushala, is a much-admired rendition. Above all, what he held most dearly were his values of always giving his uncompromised best, taking no shortcuts whether it was recording music, performing live shows or giving interviews. Dey leaves behind a legacy and outlook that is unparalleled, having inspired many artistes along the way. ■