

51 The Rise of the Ghazal Singers

Ghazal singers have become the new cultural celebrities in India. They sing to packed houses, their programmes are very popular on television, and their records sell better than many Hindi film records. Why have they suddenly become so popular? ROHINI SOMAN investigates

STILETTOES and high buns mingled with a curious mixture of the fragrance of paan and perfume; it was a typical audience at the Birla Hall in Bombay. An assorted crowd ranging from Bhendi Bazaar Muslims to the elite of Malabar Hill gradually grew impatient as the clock pushed ten thirty. The compere looked helpless — "*Intezzar aur abhi, intezzar aur abhi*".

There was a hush as the lights dimmed and the curtains gradually gave way to a brilliant stage; a prolonged applause. "Here you are ladies and gentlemen, at last! The king of ghazals — Jagjit Singh . . .". And then the magic flowed, the familiar, heady music, ghazal after ghazal, that unique form in the hands of one of its most popular exponents, the duo Jagjit Singh and his wife Chitra. The audience, hungry for this, sat back and took it all in.

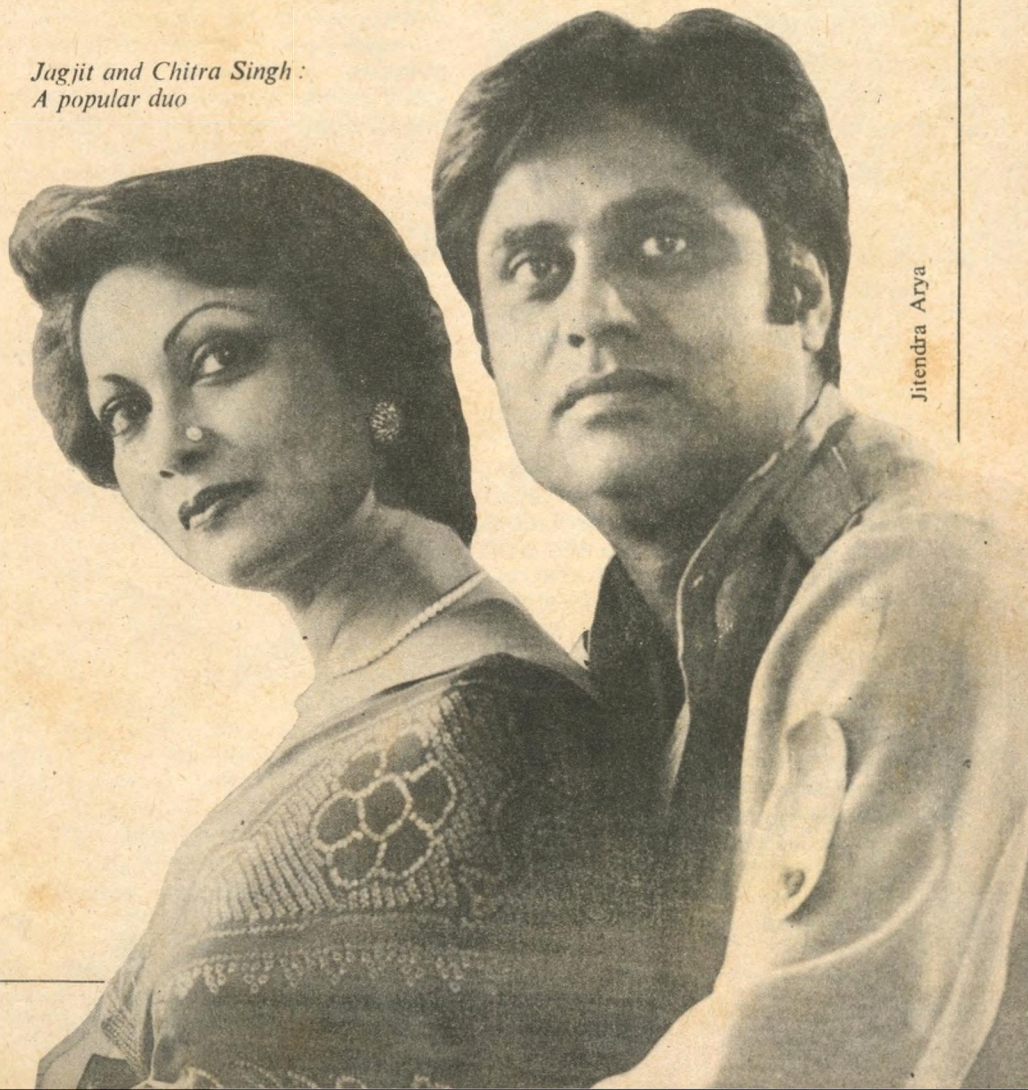
At last, even as one wondered if it would happen at all, the Hindi film audience appears to have put behind it the noisy fare from our film music. A sizeable chunk is seemingly on the point of abandoning the westernised and synthetic form in favour of the softer and more melodious music. What could be softer than a ghazal? Think of Mehdi Hasan caressing the words of "*Muhabbat Karnewaale*" or a Begum Akhtar pleading "*Mere Hamnawaaz*". "After all," says Rajendra Mehta, "how long can one listen to something like '*Baith jaa, Baith gaai*' and things like that? A ghazal has good lyrics plus good music, and above all that softness . . . that soothing softness."

The Mehtas, Rajendra and Nina, are obviously on the fore-

front of the new resurgence of the ghazal. "We were among the first to sing ghazal duets," they say. "The style has caught on, some of our predecessors would be surprised to find how popular the form is today." An then there is Pankaj Udas. "I was the first to sing to a large audience in Canada," he recalls. Quietly dressed and unassuming, I recalled having heard him at a small mehfil once and feeling that his name

quite belied the lilting romance in his ghazals. Talat Aziz, a young Hyderabad, and a success with his first long playing record and performances on television, is typical of the new generation that has emerged with the form. One can see this contrast among generations if one met Shobha Gurtu. "I'm a bit out of touch with the new singers," she told me candidly. "Ours is an old fashioned way of singing, like Akhtarbai's."

*Jagjit and Chitra Singh:
A popular duo*



Jitendra Arya

Uncharacteristically for a ghazal singer, she doesn't understand Urdu.

I asked Shobha Gurtu about the revival of the ghazal. She had no hesitation in advancing her explanation: "Mehdi Hasan", she answered, which surely goes a long way towards explaining the phenomenon. For, as even Rajendra and Nina Mehta admit, it was the Mehdi Hasan craze that really woke up audiences all over. Till then, says Rajendra Mehta, "Nobody would bother about us, nobody was willing to pay us even Rs 200 for an evening. It was Mehdi Hasan who commercialised the ghazal. In fact it is the very funny ways in which things happen in this country — we allow foreign artists to come and dominate our scene. And these people have come and raised the floor price of our Indian singers." A Mehdi Hasan comes, or a Ghulam Ali comes and the rates are as high as Rs 200 or even Rs 300, whereas even for a Jagjit Singh recital they are never over Rs 100. Mehdi Hasan is not just the biggest hit going in the ghazal world, but also the one who has done the most to create his style of singing. "Many of his *chelas* try to sing just like him," says Nina Mehta. Pankaj Udas and Talat Aziz, both fans of Mehdi Hasan and singers who have learnt from him, one finds staunchly denying it on precisely the very same grounds. "There is no point in copying anyone; there is always a comparison which one would naturally wish to avoid." Udas admitted that his singing had improved after his association with Mehdi Hasan.

Ripples in musical taste naturally mean waves on the records front. Neither HMV nor Polydor could precisely disclose the actual sales figures of the ghazal records. Ramesh Jagtiani, assistant sales manager of Polydor, put it this way, "Ghazal record sales have improved, but even if you put together all the artists singing ghazals, you would still not be able to outsell Feroz Khan's film record 'Qurbani'." "A popular ghazal singer will sell slightly better than an average Hindi film record," says Rima Kashyap, editorial executive of HMV. No better. Even Pankaj Udas has to admit

that the audience is "hung up on the Western style".

What sort of money do these singers make then? (And they make quite a bit.) Mainly through public and private performances, at which the more renowned singers do well by themselves, but not the lesser known people. For Rajendra and Nina Mehta it was not much of a problem because Rajendra took up the full-time profession only three years ago when he quit his job. On the other hand Jagjit Singh has always devoted himself entirely to his music. Not that he too did not have to compromise! "It is only now that he doesn't have to sing advertising jingles to make some money," says Mehta.

For today it is an art patronised by the rich. One sees select little soirees in elegant living rooms where diamond earrings swing and chiffons rustle to the strains of a deep, haunting Jagjit Singh or a soft, romantic Pankaj Udas. "There is more to it than the mere 'Keeping up with the Joneses'," I was assured. "People understand and appreciate our music."

These days the style of spontaneous variation is in, which gives the singers with classical backgrounds a decided asset.

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"No poetry is effective without the music, just as the music itself is enhanced by good lyrics," explains Shobha Gurtu. "Feel is everything." Since many of the Indian singers have less-than-complete knowledge of Urdu, to say nothing of perfect diction, it becomes specially important for them to concentrate on this traditional deficiency. Few succeed to the extent that Gurtu has, however, in creating the evocative mood of the lyric *without* being thoroughly conversant with the language. "Cultivating perfect pronunciation is particularly essential because in a ghazal the words are definitely more important," says Nina Mehta.

What of the audiences, though? The problem the singers have with the language often gets multiplied with the audience, most of whom begin with almost no understanding of Urdu. Rajendra and Nina Mehta have discovered that the ideal solution for them is to explain to the audience the more difficult words, so that they could better follow the essence of the ghazal. "It is most frustrating not to fathom the words of a song one is listening to," complains Mehta. I certainly agree, recalling the countless L.P.'s I have listened to of Mehdi Hasan or Begum Akhtar straining my imagination on the unintelligible Urdu. When they started this system of explaining to the audience there was a lot of opposition, recall the Mehtas. But now many singers have taken to it as the easiest way of overcoming the barrier. "And why not?" questions Pankaj Udas. "You have to find a middle way when an audience doesn't understand. In Lucknow, for instance, the prob-



Talat Aziz : Early success



Shobha Gurtu : " Mehdi Hasan is responsible "



Pankaj Udas: "Simple ghazals have mass appeal"



Rekha Surya : Carrying on the old tradition

lem just wouldn't arise, but in Bombay or Toronto it does, and there is no point in ignoring it and acting as if there were no problem."

"Making the poetry colloquial would give the ghazal mass appeal instead of restricting it to a particular class," says Pankaj Udas, outlining what could be a simple solution to the problem. Sure enough the younger poets have been using simpler Urdu, with liberal sprinklings of Hindustani. "It is the only way poets can get encouragement and publicity," he adds. There is, according to him no dearth of talent in the country, so "although having Daag and Ghalib is like keeping the Kohinoor, it doesn't mean other diamonds are not to be worn!"

So the singers take a lot of trouble to hunt out some good lyrics from lesser-known poets, and strive for some sort of originality. But what in effect happens is that no sooner is the ghazal sung in public, then it is lifted by almost all the singers around — by people obviously not quite so intent on originality. "It gets quite irritating sometimes when a verse that one has taken so much trouble over is promptly copied by all, though one can imagine that the poet himself can only benefit from this." Udas is more pragmatic, and looks at the problem in the context of marketing. "In toothpastes, if Colgate is the brand leader, the others only survive or can at best cater to the surplus market. Similarly, if one introduces a new ghazal, one becomes the brand leader, and others copying it are always compared with the original..." The unanimous comment here is simply that poetry, being nobody's particular property, cannot be monopolised. "Though," adds Talat Aziz, "It would be unethical if one used the same *tune* as the original."

The plight of the poets themselves is none too enviable. Rajendra Mehta confessed that the poet gets nothing for his pains. "But," he added cautiously, "many a time we pick up a ghazal from a magazine or a publication of the poet himself. In that case he has, of course, already been paid." He added quite frankly that the point had not been brought up before and that it could raise quite a controversy.

Kaifi Azmi, himself a poet, had his own story to tell. "When a disc is being cut, the poet does get royalty — if he is known at all. Sometimes the singer doesn't even know whose ghazal he is singing. I do know however that a company like the Gramophone Company makes every effort to find the *shair*. "Otherwise," he concluded, "the poet has to derive satisfaction from the fact that his ghazal is being sung at all!" Some consolation, that!

So, while the singer gets all the limelight, and the money, the person whose contribution is supposed to be of primary importance, the *shair*, remains in the background. One of the reasons for this could be, as Kaifi Azmi puts it, that people have begun to lay more stress on the *gayaki* (singing style). "The ghazal today is sung either like a *chota Khayal* or the tune is very Westernised," he observed. "Originally, the verse was all important. When Begum Akhtar sang, for instance, she would send out to the listeners the feel of the poetry. She must be given the sole credit for lifting the ghazal from the *kothas* and bringing to it the respect accorded to the *khayal*. In those days," he reminisced, "even the audiences used to be different."

I asked him what he felt about the kind of ghazals being sung these days, simple both in language and concepts. "Ghazal is in essence Urdu poetry," he re-

plied. "But I am not against the use of simpler words. In fact, people used to sing Daag such a lot precisely for the reason that he was more easily understood than Ghalib! Unfortunately, that old beauty is no longer there in today's *shairi*. People have begun to lay more stress on the singing style."

"Now the listeners come more because it is the fashion," Kaifi Azmi added. "Just as one would keep beautiful furniture to decorate one's drawing rooms, it is now deemed necessary to keep a few cassettes or records of Mehdi Hasan. It is a kind of prestige symbol."

"And then we have ghazal singers in India who are heavily influenced by Western music. There is heavy orchestration and the ghazal sounds so filmi." He



Rajendra and Nina Mehta : "We never sing when people eat"

shook his head. "The fast, light tunes, the rhythm variation — it sounds like pop music." He seemed fairly unhappy.

But he brightened visibly as he remembered: "There is a young girl called Rekha Surya who was a disciple of Begum Akhtar. *Shukar hai*, she is carrying on the same fine tradition. She is doing very well in places like Lucknow and Hyderabad. People here in Bombay prefer the modern ghazal." Obviously, Kaifi Azmi didn't think much of them for that.

With the resurgence in popular interest, ghazals these days are being piped down to the common man through radio and TV. Door-darshan is the new hot ghazal medium. "It was 'Aarohi' and 'Sham-e-Ghazal' that made a lot of difference with musicians

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