



An interview to remember



The first meeting with any of the icons you love is always difficult to handle emotionally. The mind is anxious and constantly whirring with questions: how will it be meeting them in person, how much time will you get, how will they react to your questions - so on and so forth! These very questions were circulating in my mind while dreaming about an exclusive interview with Lata for my then forthcoming Marathi book (*Gaaye Lata Gaaye Lata*) on her.

I had come to India from Sharjah, on a 45-day-vacation and with just the last ten days of that vacation at hand, I was desperate to complete my mission. Earlier in the same month, I had thrice managed to talk to Lata over telephone and twice I had managed to shoot myself in the foot by failing to recognize her voice and asking, "May I talk to Lataji?" But somehow fortune had decided to smile on me and Lata finally uttered the magic words, "Tomorrow I am recording a song at Bombay Lab. Why don't you come over there? I don't think it would be possible to talk at length, but..." No ifs and buts were now going to prevent me from going to Bombay Lab. I wasn't going to waste an opportunity to see a Lata Mangeshkar recording *Live!*

September 20, 1994. My planetary positions and Tarot card combinations had finally conspired to grant me my wish of meeting Lata in person. At exactly 12.15 p.m. I arrived at Bombay Sound Services, situated in Mumbai's crowded Agar Bazaar area. Immediately I was greeted by a person who looked a lot like Manna Dey!

"You are from Muscat...?" he asked. I corrected him saying, "No - from Sharjah!" He continued, "I am Mr. Kutty - Lataji's secretary. She had told me that you would be coming here today." This was the first surprise for me - Lata had remembered her promise well!

With the wide eyes of a novice, I started to soak in the recording studio atmosphere. The central hall was full of the typical recording paraphernalia of mikes, speakers, musical instruments, wooden stands and partitions. On the right, there was a recording room where the sound recordist sat with the music director on the recording panel and on the left, there was the singing-room. Every room was glass-panelled and was soundproof.





Through the glass panel of the recording room, I first saw Lata - up close and personal. Eyes closed, deep in concentration, she was listening to her own recorded rendition of a devotional song, a Sai *bhajan*. The first sighting was enough to make me swoon! But soon, I was to meet her from closer quarters. After finishing her listening session, she was briskly walking to the singing room, when suddenly her secretary introduced me to her - "This is Dr. Mandar." "Namaskar. Please, make yourself comfortable. Have some tea. We will talk later." Lata was sweet, polite and quick in her short response. So far so good - that was my first reaction!

Slowly but surely I was progressing in the right direction! From the visitor's hall, I had now entered the recording room. For the first time, I was witnessing advanced recording technology from close quarters. On that day, Lata's voice was getting dubbed on the pre-recorded instrumental track. The songs had been already recorded, only the 'patchwork' was going on - meaning Lata was only going to sing the parts where the composer or the recordist wanted some corrections. Then those re-recorded parts were going to be incorporated into the previously recorded songs.

The album's composer was Uttam Singh - a Sardar in his late forties. (Later he would go on to compose the hugely successful *Dil To Paagal Hai* soundtrack!) 'Didi yeh aise lenaa', 'Yeh aise acchha lagega' - his instructions were booming on the speakers. That day, I once again realized why Lata is Lata! The legendary singer - then just a week away from her sixty-fifth birthday was unquestioningly accepting her much younger composer's suggestions and untiringly singing the lines till he was satisfied. In fact, once even after her 'take' was okayed by him, she said - "No, I am not satisfied with that. I will sing that again!" In my mind, I saluted her perfectionist attitude. My wishful thinking then started running too far ahead or rather too far back. How I fervently wished to see a Lata in her prime, recording for stalwarts like Naushad, C.Ramchandra and Shankar-Jaikishan. Doesn't the mind always strive to attain the impossible!

At 3 p.m. the unit started packing up. The lunch proceedings began. Lata was having her lunch inside with the composer and some music company executives. Sitting outside in the hall, I had my lunch with the support staff. After lunch, the people slowly started dispersing. From the glass window, I kept looking at Lata, who was merrily chatting with her colleagues. A new singing group entered for another recording. "Oh, look. Lataji is there!" I kept listening to their hushed comments. By then, I had lost any realistic hopes of having an interview.

