

EMPIRE OF DESIRE

Asha Bhosle's body of song is the evolution of desire in Hindi cinema. By giving voice to every kind of fantasy and longing, she liberated us all

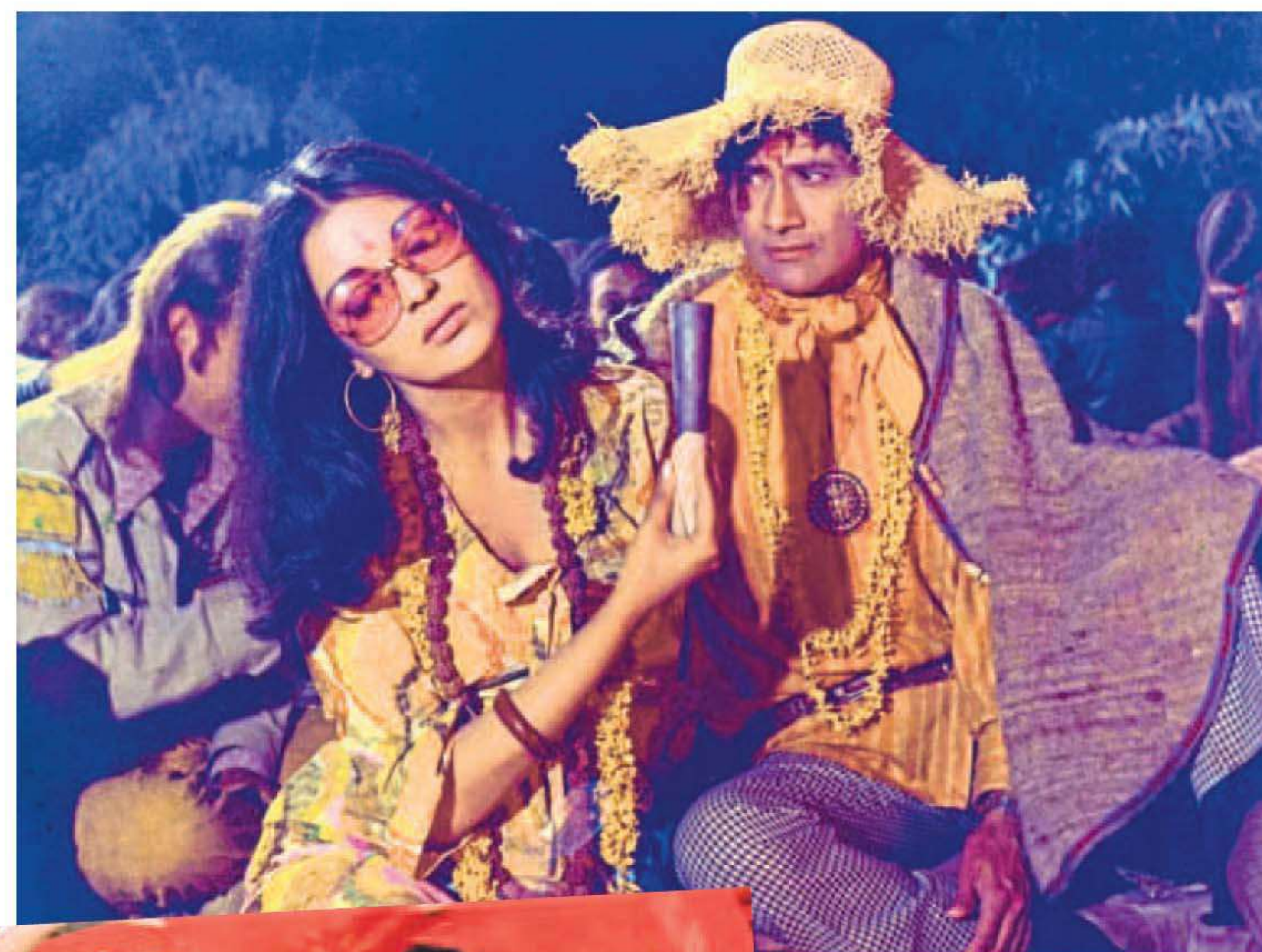
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It's about an hour into *Jewel Thief* (1967). The plot is cheerfully sordid but the music has been respectable. Lata Mangeshkar has sung two chaste songs. Now it's time for some fun. The next two songs are by Asha Bhosle, singing, as she usually did when her elder sister was on the same soundtrack, for the second heroine and the vamp. First, *Raat Akeli Hai*, her vocal a languorous sigh as Tanuja tries to seduce Dev Anand. Then comes a remarkable dance number with Helen. "*Baithe hai kya uske paas/aaina mujhsa nahi/meri taraf dekhiye (why sit with her/no better reflection than mine/look at me)*," the chorus goes. There are naughtier songs by Asha for Helen, but I love the directness of the sexual challenge here. Look at me!

Over 60 years, Asha issued the same challenge in boisterous party songs, intimate seductions, cabaret performances, drunken confessions, item numbers. She sang for sexually confident heroines across eras: Helen in the 1950s, Zeenat Aman and Parveen Babi in the '70s, Urmila Matondkar in the '90s. You can track the evolution of most things in Hindi cinema—romance, nationalism, religion, female agency—through Lata's library of song. But to understand the history of desire in Hindi film, you have to listen to Asha.

"She played a defining role in how we've come to understand desire," says Shiv Datt Sharma, a doctoral researcher studying Sanjay Leela Bhansali's cinema in relation to questions of desire and fantasy. "Hindi film songs have always given voice to urges and fantasies that the narrative doesn't allow for. Asha gave this a more sexual twist."

That this wasn't the path she likely envisioned only makes her journey more fascinating. Initially, though she had a steady career, Lata was the unquestioned star. In the biggest films of the day, with her sister collecting the prime vocal parts, Asha would get the more risqué songs, often picturised on dancers rather than actors. In the beginning, even the ones we'd think of as Asha songs don't sound distinctive (in 1954's *Taxi Driver*, Lata and Asha both sing bar numbers for actor Sheila Ramani and the difference is minimal). But a year later, in another bar song, *Dam Hai Baqi To Gham Nahin* from *House No 44* (with Sheila Vaz, a dancer), you could hear a new



was one in which stress was placed on a particular word...").

The 1950s Hindi noirs all had nightclub songs, mostly sung by Asha or the versatile Geeta Dutt. In the 1960s, Asha took over the genre. In such seedy settings—and with the slightly looser moral standards colour cinema brought with it—she could throw her voice with abandon. The jazzy, frantic cabaret song *Sambhalo Sambhalo Apna Dil (Kala Bazaar, 1960)*, one of her many hits with Helen, has a roguishness that anticipates the vibrating excitement of her rockabilly duet with Mohammad Rafi on *Aaja Aaja Main Hoon Pyar Tera (Teesri Manzil, 1966)*. "Bhosle's vocal performances, deployed with volatile movements in pitch, volume and timbre, played a crucial role in crafting the soundscape of the nightclub," writes Shikha Jhingan in her book *The Female Playback in Bombay Cinema: Voice, Body, Technology*. To her growing repertoire of seductive vocals Asha added boundary-pushing vocal effects. These included orgasmic trills, screams, exclamations, heavy breathing—and a distinctive coquettish laugh ("This sexualized laughter became a hallmark of Asha Bhosle's vocal strategy in cabaret songs," writes Jhingan). She became so adept at this that, for the musical sequence in *Kati Patang* (1971) where a brazen Bindu reduces Asha Parekh to tears, composer R.D. Burman doesn't have Asha sing at all, only speak in her teasing voice.

style forming: coy trills, swoops, exultations.

In the Hindi cinema of the 1950s, a wink was as potent as a love scene. Nudity was out of the question; there wouldn't even be onscreen kisses for decades. Change came in tiny increments: a feather caress here, a smouldering hug there. Asha was the perfect singer for these times, her voice an invitingly raised eyebrow to the audience. With the right actress, there was electricity. Madhubala's performance of *Aaiye Meherbaan (Howrah Bridge, 1958)* is an extension of Asha's vocal, the undulating sensuality of her movements matched by the singer's lazily distended syllables (in Nasreen Munni Kabir's book *Lata Mangeshkar... In Her Own Voice*, the singer says: "[Asha] came under the influence of Burman [S.D. Burman] and developed his style further. His style

"There is no singing without acting," Asha said in

a 2009 interview to *India Today*. She sings a line from *Husn Ke Lakhon Rang (Johnny Mera Naam, 1970)* where her voice curves coquettishly to match the attempted seduction onscreen. "If I sang this *saada* (plain), people would say it's not supposed to be a *bhajan*." This is acting, but it's also feeling. Asha could get under the skin of a song. In *Jaan-e-Jaan Dhoondta Phir Raha*, a lush romantic duet from *Juveni Divani* (1972), Kishore Kumar sings for Randhir Kapoor, who's searching for Jaya Bachchan in a forest. As he cries out for her, Asha contributes a succession of astonishing wordless harmonies that entwine themselves around Kishore's vocal. The girl is out of sight, but thanks to Asha, she's close enough to touch. It's a measure of the intimate charge she brought even to non-sexual songs.

Playback singing involves a unique displacement—an invisible voice projected onto a visible

(clockwise, from above) Asha Bhosle performs at the '75 years of Asha' concert at Carnegie Hall in 2008; Rekha in 'Umrao Jaan'; Urmila Matondkar in 'Rangeela'; and Zeenat Aman in 'Hare Rama Hare Krishna'.



in Europe is, inevitably, Asha.

While the outré songs were central to her reputation, some of Asha's best work involved more muted investigations of desire. *Umrao Jaan*, a 1981 Muzaffar Ali film starring Rekha as a tragic courtesan, is widely regarded as her signal achievement. Though there's some cultural snobbery in this assessment (why is an Urdu *ghazal* better art than a sonically adventurous rock 'n roll number?), Asha's work is tremendous. *Dil Cheez Kya Hai* and *In Ankhon Ki Masti* offering deeply felt expressions of female yearning. There's a similar complexity to *Katra Katra Milti Hai* from *Ijaazat* (1987), a plea to bask in present happiness with the knowledge that the future may not be as sweet.

By the 1990s, Lata and Asha had been singing for 40 years in films. Younger rivals had emerged: Alka Yagnik, Kavita Krishnamurthy, Sadhna Sargam. It felt like a natural endpoint was approaching. But something curious happened in 1995. On the hottest soundtrack of the year, *Rangeela*, Asha had two big hits, picturised on the 21-year-old Urmila Matondkar. Lata, though still being handed massively popular songs, now sounded very old. Asha, on the other hand, seemed energised. She was doing what she'd always done, singing about sex and risk and fun, for a generation that saw her as the cool aunt of playback. Over the next few years, there was the erotic *Zehreela Pyaar (Daud, 1997)*, the tart rejoinder to the male fantasy of *Sapne Mein Milti Hai (Satya, 1998)*, the slow-burning *Janmion Ki Juwala (Hey Ram, 2000)*, the soaring *Kambakth Ishq (Pyaar Tune Kya Kiya, 2001)*, and so many others.

Asha's legacy as a barometer of desire—and, through this, emancipation—is further embellished by the contexts in which her classic songs are reckoned with and reused. In *Queen* (2013), as Kangana Ranaut's character starts to find her confidence, the song that plays when she goes out clubbing is *Hungama Ho Gaya*. More recently, in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* (2024), the three female leads—each searching for her own form of release—bond over Asha's *Daiya Yeh Main Kahan Phasi (Caravan, 1971)*.

Her association with boundary-pushing songs also endeared her to the queer community. In a piece this week for *Vogue*, Arman Khan writes that Asha's music "felt like a soundtrack for queer men's lives: unaffected by public morality, not confining the definition of desire to just husband and wife, acknowledging that the 'other woman' existed..." You can see why songs like *Parde Mein Rehne Do (Shikar, 1968)* and *Kajra Mohabbat Wala (Kismet, 1968)*, with its cross-dressing couple, were embraced by queer folk: Asha gave forbidden love its place in the mainstream.

body. But Asha, with her many tones and tics, made singing in films a palpably physical act, which fed back into the wild songs she had to interpret. "Her voice lends itself to dance very well," says Sharma. "The question of body is really important to her body of work."

Once Asha became the voice of female transgression, it stayed that way. You have Bindu in *Anhonee* (1973) detailing the joys of getting smashed in the club ("*maine hothon se lagayi toh hungama ho gaya*"—I took a sip and it was a commotion). There's Zeenat Aman's hippie getting stoned and singing *Dum Maaro Dum*, which Asha renders in a deadlier lower register. Helen in *Yeh Mera Dil (Don, 1978)* has revenge on her mind as she throws herself at Amitabh Bachchan. All the way to *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), in which Lata has all the respectable songs, but the one where Kajol is drunkenly dancing

This past week, along with every other Indian film fan, I've been playing Asha on repeat, going where the algorithm will take me. Taking in her legacy this way, skipping across eras, it's easy to see how of a piece it all is. It's staggering to think that the same person who sang for femme fatales in black-and-white films would go on to sing rock 'n roll and disco and techno raves, and infuse them all with the same sense of longing. One of her most memorable sung lines is in *Katra Katra Milti Hai: pyasi hoon main, pyasi rehne do (I'm thirsty, let me remain so)*. It's our great fortune that for so many years, Asha stayed thirsty so we could drink.