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► **To cite this version:**

Pramod Ranjan. Social and Political Concerns of Lata Mangeshkar: An Ambedkarite Perspective. Contemporary Voice of Dalit, 2022, pp.2455328X2211390. 10.1177/2455328X221139097. hal-03904837

HAL Id: hal-03904837

<https://hal.science/hal-03904837>

Submitted on 17 Dec 2022

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Social and Political Concerns of Lata Mangeshkar: An Ambedkarite Perspective

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Abstract : Playback singer Lata Mangeshkar was the uncrowned queen of Indian music for over seven decades. Her songs were heard and admired not only in India but also in many other countries including Pakistan and Bangladesh. This article is about her social concerns and political leanings. At the level of thought, she was close to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is infamous for its Nazi-like ideology. Many incidents of her life show that she preferred communal politics over secularism. She also kept away from the Dalit issues.

Key Words : dalit perspective on culture, sociology of popular culture, Lata Mangeshkar, hindutva in bollywood, music and political propaganda

Lata Mangeshkar (28 September 1929 – 6 February 2022) was a

celebrated playback singer of the Hindi film industry. She was the uncrowned queen of Indian music for over seven decades. Her popularity was unmatched. Her songs were heard and admired not only in India but also in Pakistan, Bangladesh and many other South Asian countries.

In this article, we will focus on her social concerns. Lata lived for 92 long years. Music ran in her blood. Her father also belonged to the world of music. Her two sisters, Asha Bhonsle and Usha Mangeshkar, are well-known singers. Lata might have been born in Indore but the blood of a famous Devdasi family of Goa courses in her veins. Her grandmother was a Devdasi. According to Sujata Parmita, a notable Hindi and Marathi Dalit writer, Lata Mangeshkar was a Dalit from a Devdasi family. Parmita claims that Lata's father was also the son of a Devdasi.¹ Others say that Lata came from a Bhatt Brahmin family. Be that as it may, her voice had a natural attraction, which few, if any, could resist.

Looking back, we can say that two factors combined to keep Lata at the pinnacle of playback singing in India for over seven decades. The biggest factor, of course, was her voice, which was unique. It was nature's amazing gift. As famous Hindustani classical vocalist Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan once affectionately remarked, "Kambakht kabhi besuri hi nahin hoti, wah, kya Allah ki den hai" (She is never out of tune. Good heavens, what a gift from god)²

But a political force also helped her scale the summit and stay there. She was the favourite singer of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Dictators like Hitler and Mussolini are among the sources of inspiration of the RSS – an organization which is said to believe in Nazi ideology.³

This, indeed, was a strange contradiction. She sung innumerable romantic and love songs but stood with the RSS, which has been charged with backing those who slit the throats of young men and women marrying out of their caste or religion.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose inspiration was behind the founding of the RSS, was Lata's idol. She didn't let go of any opportunity of praising Savarkar. She used to tweet regularly on Savarkar's birth anniversaries, describing him like her father and a true son of Bharat Mata.⁴ Like Savarkar, at the personal level, Lata did not believe in women's lib. Neither did she have any love for Indian secularism.

Harvard University professor Ashraf Aziz in his article, "The female voice of Hindustani film songs" makes glowing references to Lata's contribution. But it is also his construct that *"Lata Mangeshkar's voice helped domesticate Indian women and make them obedient."*⁵ She was elated by the demolition of the Babri Masjid, an incident that was the biggest blow to Indian secularism. On 5 August 2020, amid the raging Covid-19 pandemic, when the country's present Prime Minister laid the foundation stone for the construction of a Ram Temple at the place where the Babri Masjid once stood, Lata tweeted, "The dream of many kings, of many generations and of the devotees of Ram all over the world has come to fruition today."⁶

She did not approve of popular resistance to the oppressive policies of the State.

In 2021, when the famed international pop singer Rihanna tweeted in support of the farmer's movement in India, Lata posted a tweet

admonishing her. At the time, besides Lata, some other celebrities including Sachin Tendulkar, Akshay Kumar and Sunil Shetty, had also lashed out at Rihanna. Interestingly, later it came to light that not only the thrust but even many words were common in their tweets. It was also reported in media that the tweets by Lata Mangeshkar and others were based on content provided by the IT cell of the BJP.⁷

In 2001, the government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political wing of the RSS, conferred India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna, on her. Again, it was the BJP government which nominated her to Rajya Sabha. But she rarely attended the House.⁸ And lest anyone points fingers at her, she did not accept her salary as an MP.⁹

Sometime after she was decorated with the Bharat Ratna, the government started constructing a flyover near her residence in Mumbai. Lata threatened that if the construction was not stopped, she would quit the country. The government had no option but to acquiesce. The flyover was never constructed.¹⁰ This was an example of her extreme selfishness, demonstrating that when it came to serving her personal interests, she had no hesitation in emotionally blackmailing her admirers and even the Government of India by threatening to 'quit the country'.

The BJP and the RSS didn't show great respect for her without reason. When BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani began a Rathyatra demanding the construction of a Ram Temple at the place in Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid stood, Lata especially recorded a devotional song for the Rathyatra. This fact came to light for the first time when after the death of Lata, paying tributes to her Lal Krishna Advani recalled this incident. He said: "/

*remember that when I was to embark upon my Ram Rath Yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya, she (Lata Mangeshkar) had recorded a beautiful devotional song hailing Shri Ram. That memorable song goes like this, 'Ram naam mein jadu aisa, Ram naam man bhaye, man ki ayodhya tab tak sunee, jab tak Ram na aa jayein' (The name of Ram has a magic, my heart yearns for Ram; the Ayodhya in my heart will remain gloomy till Ram arrives there)...That song became the signature tune of my Yatra".*¹¹ This infamous political odyssey was a well-planned exercise to whip up communal frenzy against the Indian minority communities. At the time, besides the opposition parties, leading writers, poets and cultural activists were expressing their deep concerns over what it would lead to. Ultimately, this Rath Yatra brought about the demolition of the Babri Masjid and triggered Hindu-Muslim riots in the entire country in which more than two thousand persons lost their life. It was this Yatra which catapulted a small political outfit like the BJP into a powerful political force in India. In the general election that followed the Yatra, the BJP emerged as the main opposition party.¹²

How the RSS and the BJP exploited the popularity of Lata Mangeshkar for furthering their interests is evident from an episode of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Mann Ki Baat' radio programme. In this episode, which was broadcast in 2019, the Prime Minister played the recording of his 'personal' telephonic conversation with Lata Mangeshkar. According to the Prime Minister, the recording was of a 'surprise' call he had made to Lata Mangeshkar to wish her on her 90th birthday. At the beginning of the programme, Modi says that his conversation with Lata was "like that of an affectionate brother talking to her elder sister."¹³ He says, "I normally don't

talk about such personal conversations but today I want you to hear what Lata Didi says."¹⁴

In the recording, Modi says, "Lata Didi, Pranam. I am Narendra Modi. I have called you because I will be travelling on your birthday. I thought that before leaving I should wish you...wish you in advance on your birthday...I am telephoning to greet you before I leave for America."

Modi tries to pose that this is a spontaneous conversation between two persons – a conversation in which Lata sings paeans to the achievements of his government. But it is clear from the recording itself that it was a pre-planned conversation, which was stage-managed by the publicity team of the Prime Minister to exploit the popularity of Lata. In the recording, Lata says, "When I was told that you will be telephoning me...."¹⁵. Lata's spontaneous comment lets the cat out of the bag. It is clear that the conversation was orchestrated. But all media institutions presented it exactly as the Prime Minister's publicity team would have wanted them to. They described how the Prime Minister greeted Lata Mangeshkar on her birthday and how the nightingale of India believes that the country was fortunate to have Modi as the Prime Minister."¹⁶

Narendra Modi is 31 years younger to Lata Mangeshkar. But in this recording, Lata seeks 'blessings' from Modi. "If you will bless me on my birthday I will consider myself very fortunate," she says. The Prime Minister interrupts her to say that it is he who needs her blessings.¹⁷ Against the backdrop of the ongoing media management and censorship to benefit the BJP¹⁸, the stage-managed Lata-Modi dialogue evokes no surprise. But

when an incident involves a top artist and her dignity and decorum, it can't be ignored. Such incidents, even small ones, have serious implications.

After Lata's passing away, I questioned her social concerns in a post on my Facebook wall.¹⁹ Immediately, a trads gang²⁰ issued a call to abuse me. More than 700 persons responded to the call of this group, hurled invectives at me and issued life threats to me. Even my friends, including famous Gandhian activist Himanshu Kumar, who had shared my post, were not spared.

But can this trad army brush under the carpet some very pertinent questions that are being raised for some years now by popular Dalit Marathi singer Sambhaji Bhagat?

Sambhaji had revealed how Lata Mangeshkar had refused to sing a song about Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, a valiant fighter for social justice and the biggest icon of the Indian Dalits. What Sambhaji had said about this incident at a concert organised by Ulgulan, an organisation of young Adivasi and Dalit lawyers at Ranchi in 2015, is worth quoting verbatim. That will help us comprehend his deep pain.

Addressing the programme, Sambhaji Bhagat said, "*Lata bai, Asha bai, Usha bai – they all sing. Ganapati is ahead of them. And Ganapati is behind them. But where are we in this scene? Lata bai's voice is excellent...once our people had approached Lata bai. They said, why don't you sing a song about our Baba Saheb Ambedkar? But Lata bai refused. I say what is rejected is very important. Why did Lata bai refuse? Because Ambedkar was an untouchable? She has sung songs about everyone. We*

told her that if money is the problem, we will give money...She has a beautiful voice. But if such a beautiful voice becomes impure by uttering the name of our Baba Saheb, then that voice is dirt for us. We don't need it. They have ruined thousands of Lata bais and Asha bais in villages. Those who have massacred thousands, she describes them as her brother. An artist has to choose on which side she is. If the mass killers are his brothers, she cannot be our sister." ²¹

If one wants to know what kind of songs she happily sung, one should see the video in which she is singing Savarkar's song "He Hindu shakti sambhoot deeptam teja". She seems to be deeply immersed in the song. The lines of this song, which communalises Shivaji, are as under:

*"Hey Hindu shakti sambhoot deeptam teja,
Hey Hindu tapasya poot ishwari oja
Hey Hindu shri saubhagya bhutichya saja
Hey Hindu nrisangha prabho Shivajiraja
Kari Hindu rashtra hein tootein"* ²²

This Marathi song was set to music by her brother Hridaynath Mangeshkar.²³

Lata and her family also find mention in 'Vikas Ke Path', a recently-published collection of the speeches of RSS Pracharak and former BJP chief Nitin Gadkari. Gadkari writes, "*Lata Didi is a hardcore nationalist*"²⁴. She holds the fountainhead of rabid Hindutva in the country..."*freedom fighter Veer Savarkar in great reverence*".²⁵ Gadkari writes, "*During the*

groundbreaking function for the Worli-Bandra bridge in Mumbai, I told Lata Did and her brother Hridaynath Mangeshkar that it was my ardent wish that the songs written by Savarkar should be sung either by her or any of her family members...Hridaynath Mangeshkar came to the programme and in keeping with the great respect this family has for Veer Savarkar, he beautifully presented four songs written by Savarkar." ²⁶

Be that as it may, as has been said in this article earlier, many people will talk about Lata's songs, about how her voice mesmerised crores of people. All her admirers know that her voice had a natural magic. She was a born singer. It was a gift which had nothing to do with her. But what Lata did in her life is more important – her social and political values and her conduct.

A natural gift needs to be respected, no matter who its recipient it. But it is also important to identify the forces whose interests are served, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the natural gift and how these forces used it in socio-political terms. The above-mentioned incidents clearly show that secular values had no place in her ideology. There is no evidence of her commitment to women's lib. As I had written on FB, Lata's ideological leanings were retrograde and reactionary. I can't say whether she had consciously opted for retrograde social concerns, just as the upper-caste persons associated with the RSS do.

But it seems that either she did not have any thoughts about how the world should be; which powers are inimical to the wellbeing of the world and which powers are struggling to better it. Or if she had any thoughts on these issues, they were extremely reactionary and retrograde.

The issue is not why Lata Mangeshkar didn't sing songs about Ambedkar. Such symbols are prone to all kinds of misuse. Someone may quote her formal utterances about Ambedkar. Others may showcase her pictures with Nehru or with a Communist or a Bahujan leader.

But the basic question is whether she upheld religious fanaticism or whether she was in favour of spreading scientific temper. What were her views on the women's freedom to love, on the struggle of the Dalits-OBCs for socio-political equality? And how will history remember her for what was her own? Which side she was on? These issues should be discussed and debated openly.

¹ Chandan, Sanjeev *Facebook* 7 Feb. 2022. Web. <<https://www.facebook.com/sanjeev.chandan/posts/4781172681938441>>.

² Bhimani, Harish: *Lata Didi: Ajeeb dastan hai ye (Lata: It's a strange tale)*, Vani Prakashan 2009. Print.

³ Marzia Casolari. "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-Up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no. 4, Economic and Political Weekly, 2000, pp. 218–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4408848>.

⁴ Amar Ujala Digital. "*Savarkar ke sath rishte par Lata Mangeshkar ka khulasa, virodh karne walon ko pehle hi bata chunki hain nadan*" (Lata Mangeshkar speaks out on how she perceives Savarkar, had termed the opponents ignorant) Amar Ujala 20 Sept. 2019. Web. <https://www.amarujala.com/photo-gallery/entertainment/bollywood/lata-mangeshkar-open-her-relationship-with-veer-savarkar>

⁵ Aziz Ashraf. "The Female Voice in Hindustani Film Songs." *Light of the Universe: Essays on Hindustani Film Music. Three Essays Collective*, 2012. (I came to know about this article through a Facebook post of young poet Dhires Saini, which he wrote after the death of Lata Mangeshkar. Dhires Saini was also the first to ferret out the video of Dalit singer Sambhaji Bhagat, which has been mentioned elsewhere in this article)

⁶ Dainik Bhaskar, "*Ayodhya mein bhoomi puja; Bollywood mein khushi: Lataji ne kaha sadiyon mein se adhura sapna aaj sakaar hota dikh raha, Anupam Kher*" (Groundbreaking ceremony at Ayodhya; Bollywood elated: Lataji says centuries-old unfulfilled dream coming to realisation, Anupam Kher). 5 Aug. 2020. Web. <<https://www.bhaskar.com/entertainment/bollywood/news/indian-film-and-tv-artist-from-bollywood-reaction-on-ram-mandir-bhumipujan-ayodhya-news-and-updates-127587034.html>>.

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- ⁷ Pande, Avinash. "Celebrity tweet mamle mein BJP IT cell ke pramukh ka naam aaya samne: Grihmantri Anil Deshmukh" (BJP IT Cell chief's name crops up in celebrity tweet controversy: Home minister Anil Deshmukh) *Navbharat Times* 15 Feb. 2021. Web. <<https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/metro/mumbai/politics/home-minister-anil-deshmukh-said-that-bjp-it-cell-was-involved-in-celebrity-tweet-case/articleshow/80923242.cms>>.
- ⁸ Patel, Aakaar. "Sachin aur Lata nahin the Bharat Ratna ke haqdar" (Sachin and Lata did not deserve Bharat Ratna) *BBC News Hindi* 24 July 2016. Web. 7 Feb. 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/hindi/india/2016/07/160724_bharat_ratna_politics_tk?>.
- ⁹ Live Hindustan: "Jab Lata didi ko bheje saare cheque vapas aa gaye, rajyasabha saansad ke taur par nahin liya vetan, bangla bhi thukraya" (Lata returns all cheques sent to her, refuses to accept salary as Rajya Sabha member, turns down offer of bungalow, too) *Hindustan* 7 Feb. 2022. Web. <<https://www.livehindustan.com/national/story-lata-mangeshkar-not-takes-single-penny-as-a-rajya-sabha-mp-and-rejects-bungalow-5758351.html#>>.
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- ¹⁶ ABP Live "Lata Mangeshkar-PM Modi Conversation: Namaskar, I am PM Modi speaking...know why suddenly Lata Didi" *ABP News* 6 Feb. 2022. Web. <<https://www.abplive.com/news/india/must-listen-an-interesting-conversation-of-pm-modi-with-lata-mangeshkar-2055477>>.
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- ¹⁹ Ranjan, Pramod, *Facebook* 6 Feb. 2022. Web. <<https://www.facebook.com/janvikalp/posts/2121813037984201>>.
- ²⁰ Arya, Divya, and Vineet Khare. "Trads vs Raytas: The Young Indians Spreading Hate Online." *BBC News* 11 Feb. 2022. Web. 17 Feb. 2022. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60321129>>. [Trads, or traditionalists are youth who believe that the BJP is not rightist enough. They want the party to become even more violent and aggressive. They unitedly pounce upon anyone who talks about secularism or Dalit and women rights and mercilessly troll them. Their numbers on social media are growing]

²¹ Bhagat, Sambhaji, "Sambhaji Bhagat @ Ulgulan2015 - Palkichi Boi." YouTube 23 July 2015. Web. 7 Feb. 2022, https://youtu.be/9_tteC2yjs0

²² Mangeshkar, Lata. "Prabho Shivaji Raja...Geet Swatantryaveer Savarkar Awaz Lata Mangeshkar" (My Lord, King Shivaji...freedom fighter Savarkar, Voice: Lata Mangeshkar) *YouTube* 20 Oct. 2017. Web. 7 Feb. 2022. <<https://youtu.be/d4rImyyfb3Y>>.

²³ Savarkar Vinayak Damodar. Hey Hindushakti sambhoot diptam teja." (anthology of Marathi poems) N.p., 26 Nov. 2008. Web. 7 Feb. 2022. <<https://cutt.ly/wOLYwNu>>.

²⁴ Gadkari Nitin. "Lata: Bharatiya Sangeet Ki Dharohar" (Lata: Heritage of Indian Music) Vikas Ke Path. Parabhat Prakashan, 2020. Print.

²⁵ Gadkari Nitin. "Lata: Bharatiya Sangeet Ki Dharohar" (Lata: Heritage of Indian Music) Vikas Ke Path. Parabhat Prakashan, 2020. Print.

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