

**The Unforgettable Music of**  
**HEMANT KUMAR**



**MANEK PREMCHAND**

Foreword by **GULZAR**

With a study of his Bengali repertoire by  
Antara Nanda Mondal & Sounak Gupta

“This is a fascinating book. Manek Premchand is the  
Munshi Premchand of Hindi Film Music.”

—Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma



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## Author's Note



The author with Gulzar

Perhaps no one alive has a better understanding of the life and times of Hemant Kumar than Gulzar saab, whose enormous work as a filmmaker is loved and whose poetry is respected by millions of people across several generations. No wonder that he is also the recipient of the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award. Hemant Kumar and Gulzar funnelled their enormous talents together to leave us with many memorable songs, a fact highlighted in this book by an essay that speaks about their musical associations, both in films and off-cinema. When one great man speaks about another great man whom he knew at close range, the impact can be awesome.

Gulzar's reminiscences that follow were actually a part of an interview that he recently gave me, but because of the weight of his observations, I thought it would seem more appropriate if we took the Question and Answer form out of the conversation and instead carried it as a Foreword. That decision has received Gulzar saab's endorsement.

**Manek Premchand**



## Priceless Memories

To speak about Hemant Kumar is a privilege for me. My association with Hemant Kumar began in 1961, when I was the Chief Assistant Director for the Bimal Roy film *Kabuliwala*. Prem Dhawan, who was known to me from my IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) days, had already written a few songs for the film, and they had been recorded too, by Salil Chowdhury. Among them was my favorite *Aye mere pyaare watan*.

I had shared my love for this song with Bimalda who had said thoughtfully, "Hmmm. *Doosre gaane ka kya bolta hai tum?*" I wondered to myself, '*doosra gaana?*' I didn't quite understand him but I left it there. About a week later, he asked me to visit Salil Chowdhury and write a song for the film. I was perplexed, since Prem Dhawan was the film's lyricist. At that point Salilda informed me that because Prem Dhawan was to go on a tour as an actor, Prem Dhawan himself had requested for me to be given the job for one song for which he didn't have the time. After which, in consultation with Bimal Roy, I was asked by Salilda to write the lyrics of the song that later became famous as *Ganga aaye kahaan se*.

Salilda made me hear the Bengali version of the same melody and write the lyrics for it. That song was from a Bengali film called *Ganga*, in which Salilda had both written the lyrics and composed the music. I wrote the lyrics and Kanu Ghosh, his music assistant, sat at the piano and together we started creating the song. Once the song took shape, Hemant Kumar was chosen to render it. What a wonderful choice that turned out to be! The song touched the heart with his singing.

Memory is a strange thing. One of the first memories I have of Hemant Kumar is that he owned a Mercedes. But the bigger recall is about something marvellous that Hemantda did when Bimalda passed away. He took over the responsibility of Bimalda's unit. All the technicians, everyone. He got them jobs. He had his own production company, Geetanjali, where he absorbed many of these people suddenly out of a job. That was a huge thing and it said so much about his character.

One other thing. Hemant Kumar was the only singer I have known who would light up a cigarette before standing in front of a microphone.

He would take a few puffs and then sing his song. I had carefully mentioned this to him too. But he would say, “No, the grains of my voice work better after a smoke”.

I also know that Hemantda was a strong Rabindra Sangeet exponent. He would have these late night singing outings. There would be other singers too, which is why he would be asked to make his entry late at night. He made it a point to mingle with the rural population away from Calcutta and be one with them at these outings.

In one of the songs I wrote for his music in *Us Raat Ke Baad*, Hemant sang a song that some people think represented his own life. That Hemant-rendered song is *Meri awaaz kisi shor mein agar doob gayi, Meri khamoshi bahut door, bahut door, bahut door sunaayi degi*. That song was not intended to be autobiographical. I just wrote it for the situation. But since the words are about a voice, they can make for an interesting story. Since I have just talked about Hemantda’s *Meri khamoshi bahut door sunaayi degi*, my mind makes me revisit the film *Khamoshi*, and Lataji’s song in it: *Humne dekhi hai un aankhon ki mehekti khushbu*.

It’s like this. I used to be like a family member to Hemant Kumar. I used to go to his home, Geetanjali, every day. His rehearsals and music discussions happened there. Now the song, *Humne dekhi hai un aankhon ki mehekti khushbu* is essentially a male expression. It was written for a specific situation and a male point of view. After Hemantda made the basic tune for it, he got really excited about it. “*Arre ye to Lata gaayegi*” he said. I reminded him this was a song to be sung by a man, and the situation also demanded it. He maintained, “*Naheen, ye to Lata gayegi*”. Asit Sen, the film’s director arrived upon the scene. Hemantda told him what I had said about the song. Asit Sen agreed with my view, but he said, “I’ll change the situation. Lata, it must be”. Who wouldn’t want Lata? Everyone loved her voice. She delivered predictable excellence, and Hemantda’s point was validated.

As I recall Hemant Kumar I feel enriched; my association with him is part of my treasured and valuable memory bank. These memories are priceless.

Manek Premchand’s biography, *The Unforgettable Music of Hemant Kumar* promises to be an invaluable treasure of Hemant Kumar’s life and work. It will certainly find pride of place in my collection of books.

**Gulzar**

## Introduction

As I write this, my thoughts go to a show I attended in 1971 at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chowpatty, Mumbai. The place has a special corner in my heart for that show, but also because I have been fortunate to have worked with Bhavans closely over the past decade or so, hosting dozens of musical events—including one on 100 Years of Indian Cinema—in their beautiful auditorium.

At that show decades ago, a friend and I were lucky to be sitting in the first row in the balcony, listening to some divine singing by Hemant Kumar, Sursagar Jagmohan, Talat Mahmood, and Juthika Roy. The temperature must have been nice, the lights were just right and there was no anchor ruining the day. The singers themselves were speaking about



Hemant Kumar

the songs they were about to render. Hemant Kumar came out first, without any fuss or introductions. He was wearing white clothes: a starched dhoti and full-sleeved shirt rolled up to expose his lower arms. A few years

before then, a few of us boys used to go to the homes of many film folk, to collect autographed photos. We had gone to Hemant Kumar's home as well, and had been delighted to see his car pulling up, with him coming out of it in a similar dhoti and shirt. Such clothes can look wonderful if you can carry them off, but beyond the optics too, Hemant was stalwartly Indian, as can also be assessed by some of his music.

He welcomed everyone in the auditorium now, and then spoke very nicely about the others who were going to follow him, as also their importance in India's musical firmament. I remember thinking that you have to harmonise with someone who has such values. His voice—even when he spoke—had a certain cultural gravitas, charming us right away. And when he started singing, the evening became magical. Fifteen minutes later, his voice had seduced the audience into a sense of well-being and joy. And half an hour into the program, the vast majority of people in the auditorium were putty in his hands. Such old sepia images of my mind should have become blurry by now; instead they must have impacted me very highly to remain so megapixel clear.

Driven by thoughts of that unforgettable day, I had often wrestled with the idea of sharing my thoughts about this sensational singer and composer, especially since 1997 from which year I turned my entire focus to writing about our music and musicians. After all, as far as I knew, there was no English language book on this man and his incredible opus, which was a pity. But since I had no idea of the man's huge Bengali oeuvre, such work remained only a desire in my mind. Just how much merit would there be in a book on Hemant Kumar, if we didn't at the very least take a helicopter view of the man's Bangla work? However, from 26 September 2019, his death anniversary, it became difficult to resist the effort once it dawned upon me that his birth centenary was around the corner, on 16 June 2020. My first port of call was my Bengali friend Antara Nanda Mondal, who is a music lover, writer and publisher based in Delhi, requesting her to put together something huge and exclusive for Hemantda, as he was lovingly called. Her excited assent a couple of days later gave the idea the traction it so badly needed. Her equally learned friend Sounak Gupta from Calcutta came on board too, making the idea complete. Both are passionate music buffs, and both have been earning respect for their deep knowledge of music. Their huge chapter looks at Hemant Kumar's Bengali work, from films and outside films. This also includes a bit of the great man's Rabindra Sangeet oeuvre, about which I too have written a little in these pages.

Next, I spoke to Jayanto, Hemantda's son, whom I had met a few times

before, during and after my days at WorldSpace Satellite Radio. Jayanto was experiencing some health issues, but was very warm towards the idea. Of course he would help in whatever way.

All that excited me, but my excitement wasn't because I thought this was going to be an airport bestseller. These days reading a physical book is, for many people, a frustrating affair. Plus who would want to read about a singer, especially one from the past? The excitement was because in some way I would be touching the hem of a great man whom I had first met as a boy of 13, then whom I had seen on the stage later, and finally, whose voice and music had often given me so much to thank my lucky stars for.

### **Living in the past**

“Don't judge me by my past—I don't live there anymore” is a famous quote meant to help us judge a person in a good light. Perhaps it hints, not without a sense of humour, that the speaker has atoned for his mistakes. This emphasis on the present moment is also the most distinctive characteristic of Zen Buddhism.

The idea of Living in the Present must be good, which is perhaps why it has gained much currency universally. But such focussed living is easier said than done, since human beings are complex creatures who constantly travel between the past and present. It's very hard to stop such present-past shuttles that most of us take, consciously or otherwise, so very often. Not to forget that living in the past has its upside too, especially if there's something we enjoyed in the past. Many people in fact have parts of them that live quite happily in the days gone by, even as they remain anchored to the present. Such retrospective living could be in cherishing old values, in recalling loving relationships, in reading the classics, or in listening to old Hindi film music.

So yes, *The Unforgettable Music of Hemant Kumar* is a trip to the past, into the life and times of singing-composer Hemant Kumar. It is mainly divided into several essays about his Hindi work, even as many of us now know that close to three-quarters of his work was in Bangla. As such, as mentioned above, to take care of this latter work, two respected friends have written a huge chapter. Additionally, in these pages can be found exhaustive listings of all the Bengali songs that Hemantda sang in and out of cinema. The songs he sang in Hindi are also detailed, with his film songs listed chronologically and alphabetically. In his extraordinarily prolific career, Hemant Kumar also composed many songs in 55 Hindi

films, details of which are furnished too. In total he composed music for 207 films, including 6 non-Hindi, non-Bangla films (3 in Bhojpuri, 1 in Marathi, 1 in Tamil and 1 in English). There is a list of these films too. Also mentioned are what used to be called “version” recordings, which were a kind of warm-up exercise for the musicians. These recordings were not taken into the film; the same songs recorded later in another singer’s voice were filmed. We have also made out a sizable list of similar-sounding tunes that were recorded with lyrics in a different language.

The book’s essays address his singing—in that famous baritone voice, his compositions, the classical raags that his tunes romanced with, the instruments he frequently used, his Rabindra Sangeet, an interview with his son Jayanto and much more. Popular personalities like him, who have spent decades doing stellar work, often have plenty of trivia attached to them and their work. As such, there is a largish chapter on such trivia about Hemant Kumar.

In this our effort we have made a diligent, jigsaw-like reproduction of the colossal work of Hemant Kumar Mukherjee, the singer, composer and filmmaker both in Hindi and Bangla cinema, in an assortment of films in other languages, and in non-film albums. And yet, when the book nears its end, when all the jigsaw pieces you find here are put in place, an odd piece or two may still be found missing, because his corpus was really quite large, with perhaps a tiny little bit of it (especially his Bengali work) lost in the mists of time. Consider, for example, that in 2018, i.e. 29 years after Hemant Kumar’s passing away, Joydeep Chakraborty, a Professor of Mathematics at Murshidabad Nagar College, West Bengal, claimed to have found two Bengali non-film songs recorded by Hemant Kumar in his visits to Bangladesh, one in 1971, and the other in 1989.<sup>1</sup> A handful of more such rare recordings that collectors have not made available to the public may still exist. And this is only Hemant Kumar’s singing. His compositions are also very many, counting his cinema and off-cinema work, and there may well be something not yet catalogued lying somewhere out there. I invite readers to help identify any songs missing here, as also any errors they find. As for the essays themselves, while I have overarched to offer many facets of Hemant’s voice and compositions, I have shied away from overstretching, to include some slots like his tunes in mujras, qawwalis and western music. Or his use of different patterns of rhythms. Even the horror themes that ran through many of his own productions. That might have led to this book never seeing the light of day.

That said, my senior friend, Musicologist VAK Ranga Rao of Chennai

not only has an enviable collection of 78 rpm records but has an equally enviable knowledge and memory of Indian cinema and its music. I am delighted with his brief chapter on Hemant Kumar and Bela Mukherjee. With all these pieces in place, I certainly hope you will eventually get a fairly complete image of the jigsaw puzzle mentioned above.

### **Hemant Kumar was lucky to be born at a time when the music scene was sizzling**

The late 1940s were the beginning of great Hindi cinema and its music, a time when scores of gifted people crystallized in Bombay and together elevated filmmaking and its melodies into an experience that we enjoy even today. It was a pivotal era, when talented and enthusiastic people brought transformative schools to their art. This was like the Axial Age, a term coined by philosopher Karl Jaspers, referring to 800-200BC, when huge thinkers like Buddha, Socrates and Confucius existed. These people laid down the spiritual foundations for humanity.

The American writer Hannah Arendt has given later examples. The Germans had occupied France during the Second World War. At this time, there was a collection of French intellectuals and activists, together called The French Resistance. These people left whatever they were doing and in the 4 years of the Resistance, created a treasure, especially by publishing underground newspapers. Such treasures had appeared in previous historical events too, such as the US Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution three years later. In the USA such treasures were called Public Happiness. Such a term can also be applied to the treasure Hindi cinema left us, during its golden age of perhaps 18-20 years, starting in 1948. It was just around then that Hemant was clearing his throat to dive into the huge tidal wave of great melody, only to soon ride the crest of the wave himself.

Hemant Kumar's journey is plotted in some detail in the coming pages, but one point deserves a little attention here as well. In the late 1950s, Hemant Kumar was doing very well singing and making tunes for so many films. But he was also tiring of the demands that producers were making on him, like the choice of singer or lyricist, or then the dates for recordings. So he decided to make films himself. However, his decision to foray into film production was finally not a good one, since more often than not his company ended up flirting with disaster. The financial reverses and the extra workload were also telling on his health. But he soldiered on, without paying attention to those reverses. By the '60s he

was so bulletproof, you couldn't get to him. He had courtiers who were advising him to keep at it; that he was on to a good thing.

### **The Emperor's New Clothes**

Hemant's courtiers remind you of a story called *The Emperor's New Clothes*. There was a cruel and imbecile monarch who just loved to dress up, and you could be beheaded for not liking his clothes or general appearance. One day, a couple of crooked tailors fooled the monarch into believing they could stitch him a magical suit that everyone except the stupid or disloyal would be able to see. This was a sublime idea for the monarch to identify those who were intelligent and loyal to him. The tailors conspired on making him an invisible suit. The commoners believed that neither would the daft monarch say a word, nor would his courtiers have the courage to tell him he was only in his underwear. Others too, for that matter, would be terrified of telling him what they were seeing. It was a perfect scam. When the imaginary suit was ready, the commoners mimed the act of wearing it on the monarch, who was delighted to be outfitted thus. He showed up in the royal court, followed by a ceremonial walk through his kingdom. It was eventually an innocently giggling child who pointed out the con! Children are often known to surrender to the innocence of a situation.

Even though Hemant was neither cruel, daft nor an imbecile, we do not know if he woke up to the realities of his own situation; if he did, the grapevine suggests that his children were involved in such an awakening. That apart, he did engage a lot with kids, as his music abundantly illustrates. We have a dedicated essay on Hemant Kumar's songs that have to do with children, but before leaving this thought, consider, too, this social experiment which urges us to learn something.

A story called *Pearls Before Breakfast*, written by Gene Weingarten for *The Washington Post*, won the author a Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for feature writing. The writer arranged for a gifted violinist named Joshua Bell to play incognito during the morning rush hour at a public transit station in Washington DC. His mission, in his own words, was: "In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"

Here's what happened in that social experiment: Over 1000 people passed by without a care, and just 27 people paused briefly to listen to Bell. A few put money in a tray in front of the musician. There was nothing in common among those who stopped. They were young and old, men and women, blacks and whites and Hispanics and Asians. Statistically then,

there was no noticeable takeaway. But the behaviour of one demographic group was remarkable. Each time a child was walking past, he or she tried to watch and listen, only to be pulled away by the accompanying adult! But now see what happened a few days later. It was publicized that to promote music education, the famed violinist Joshua Bell would play at a Metro station. This event became a hit, choc-a-bloc with people, dozens of whom showed up hours in advance. That should tell us something too. We do not know how many adults brought children with them, which may have added another dimension to our learning.



Bees Saal Baad (1962)

We return to Hemant and his own experiments in cinema. In 1972, i.e., 10 years after *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), he made *Bees Saal Pehle*. *Kohraa* came earlier, in 1964, and it did well. *Faraar* in 1965 was a commercial flop, as was *Biwi Aur Makan* in 1966.

*Rahgir* (1969) too, though *Khamoshi* (1969) did fairly well. Basically, then, just *Bees Saal Baad*, *Kohraa* and *Khamoshi* were commercially successful. By the way, if you think this wasn't enough output, you must remember that he was making films in Calcutta around the same time. Moreover, he was taking trips to places abroad, where the homesick Indian diaspora just couldn't get enough of him. Plus he was singing for himself and others. His plate was more than full. But his health was paying a price for all this, first gently, but later heavily. Unseen in the background, Fate was quietly slipping toxins into Hemant's vital organs. This was the sad reality.

This was in the mid-'60s, when doctors asked Hemant Kumar to do two things quickly: to slow things down, and to quit smoking, or else he would soon be in a total-collapse situation. He was in marginal decline already.

He reduced his output slowly, and by the early '70s had returned to Calcutta, where he continued to make music in an easy manner, to do many non-film recordings, as well as lend his voice for Durga poojas and Rabindra Sangeet operas. His going away from Bombay was a good move, especially for his health. Many of his contemporaries had passed away or had retired, and he was feeling somewhat downbeat. They loved him in Calcutta more than they did in Bombay.

After gifted and passionate people like him left Bombay, many mediocrities arrived on the scene, armed with new ideas that included sounds coming out of cacophonous machines. These new gents did not lower the bar overnight, it was nuanced. But lower it they did. And because this lowering was gradual, they did manage to leave us with some good melodies here and there. But the question is, how can the virtues of such composers, singers and lyricists be allowed to triumph over their vices? It was they who, in the 1980s, brought into Hindi cinema and its melodies what is called the amateur hour, a time when art turns careless and forgettable.

In 1978, the Government of India offered to bestow on Hemant Kumar the civilian honour of Padma Shri, but he turned it down because he thought it was offered too late: it had been given to juniors before him. He may have been referring to his one-time assistant Ravi, who was schooled at Hemant's knee, and who received it for the year 1971. Some people think Hemant was referring to Kalyanji Virji Shah, but that is not true, because the latter got the Padma Shri for 1992, years after Hemant Kumar passed away. A couple of years before his passing away, the government had sent him feelers for Padma Bhushan, which is a step higher than Padma Shri. Hemant had declined that honour as well.

As is outlined in more detail in the chapter titled *The Rahgir's Journey*, Hemant Kumar passed away on 26 September 1989. Nine years later I had called his son Jayanto to meet him and his sister Ranu for a chapter I was doing in my book *Yesterday's Melodies, Today's Memories*. At that meeting, among other things I had asked them if their father was a better singer or composer. I was about to add, "Gun to head, what's your opinion?" I didn't have to add that part. They decided on "singer".

Then I met Jayanto over a decade later, in 2009, for a WorldSpace Satellite Radio interview that has been transcribed in these pages. We met again later during an event that I anchored to celebrate the great composer and singer in 2012. At such events, many people like Chennai's super-singer Surojit Guha have made it their profession to sing Hemant

Kumar's songs, for which the recognition and rewards have been high. That's because over the decades, Hemant's songs have developed a sheen of culture and character. A kind of aural patina that comes to a song after time has tested it. When you hear Hemant's songs sung by other singers on stage nowadays, the reactions in the audience tell the eloquent story. Audiences clap for the new singers, but it is also a salute to the man who often stirred their souls.

At many places in this book, we have shared links to YouTube songs or interviews, as well as links to other sites. We know that these are not clickable links, but they will be of great help to those of us who may ourselves want to type the links on our computers or mobile phones to examine the point being quoted.

I am grateful to many friends who offered their advice and shared their deep knowledge on various aspects of music as I was writing this. In addition to Antara Nanda Mondal, Sounak Gupta and VAK Ranga Rao mentioned above, it was Monica Kar's editing and plenty of other help that spruced up the work so much. Raj Kumar's book on Hemant Kumar, *Tum Pukar Lo*, was an invaluable help which saved me many weeks of research. Significant clarifications or advice also came from all of these friends: Anil Nagarkar, Archana Patankar, JP Obhan "Kakaji", Meenu Gidwani, Dr Pisharoty Chandran, Sultaan Arshad Khan, Sundeep Pahwa and Yogesh Kamdar. For her constant advice and orientation, I owe so much to my wife Lata Jagtiani, who is herself a wonderful author of many invaluable books. Some years ago, she had written a moving piece on Gulzar in *The Pioneer*, and I am fortunate to share relevant parts of it with readers here. Please feel free to write to me for anything that you like in these pages, or even something you don't.

I do hope though that you love Hemant Kumar's music.

Unforgettable, wouldn't you agree?

**Manek Premchand**

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## The Rahgir's (Wayfarer's) Journey

**H**emanta Kumar Mukherjee was the second oldest of 4 brothers and one sister. Born at Varanasi, UP on 16 June 1920, he passed away in Calcutta, West Bengal on 26 September 1989. Sandwiched between these milestone dates is his musical corpus of approximately 400 Hindi film and non-film recordings as well as some 1200 Bengali recordings. He sang and composed in other languages too, leaving his footprints in other corners of India as well. Details of these are included in exhaustive lists in this book.

A generation or two before him, the family's surname was Mukhopadhyay, but the British had shortened long names and added a convenient suffix to them: jee. Thus Mukhopadhyay had become Mukherjee, Chattopadhyay had become Chatterjee and Bandhopadhyay had been shortened to Banerjee, and so on. Some people chose the change, others retained the original. Hemant himself preferred the shorter surname. In Bombay, where he spent many fruitful years, the surname wasn't needed. Many successful people on or off screen were known by just their first name. So, just Hemant Kumar was enough.

Hemant Kumar was born at Varanasi because that is where his maternal grandparents lived, his mother having gone to her parents' home for the delivery. This city is a key passage point for the river Ganges, to whom he would offer many singing salutes in his adulthood later. But he spent his early years in Baharu, a tiny settlement 52 kilometres

south of Calcutta. Here lived Hemant's parents along with his paternal grandparents. The place is so small that according to the last Census of India, conducted in 2011, its population was just 16155 men, women and children. Perhaps in the 1920s, it had less than a thousand people living there, which also suggests poor infrastructure to and from the place. Therefore the 52 kilometer journey to big city Calcutta, achieved on a bullock cart, could easily take 5 to 6 hours. Three generations lived in Baharu: Hemant's grandparents, parents, as well as he and his siblings. At one point, his father Kalidas Mukherjee got a job in Calcutta as a clerk in the large shipping company MacKinnon Mackenzie. Calcutta had been the capital of British India and it continued to be a busy port long after the capital shifted to New Delhi in 1911. This was a great opportunity for Kalidas Mukherjee, even though the company gave him a small place, not family quarters, to live in.

The combination of Kalidas Mukherjee's workload and the bad road connectivity to Baharu ensured that he couldn't travel to his village more than once every few weeks. But he had enough earnings and wisdom to buy a piece of land in Calcutta and, over the years, to construct a small villa on it, home to everyone once Kalidas' father passed away. As such, after a bit of schooling in tiny Baharu, little Hemant was sent to urban schools in Calcutta. These were Nasiruddin Memorial School and Mitra Institution. It is in this latter school that people first noticed the music that the boy seemed to be enjoying. It is also here that he met Subhash Mukherjee, who would become a poet of substance in the coming decades, and with whom Hemant would nurture a long association. In the classroom Hemant would often be found drumming his fingers on a desk and singing along, soon to begin dreaming of becoming a singer. Saigal was already beginning to make waves in Calcutta, and New Theatres was getting so much attention. Hemant too wanted to be a recognised talent.

### **But neither nature nor nurture explains his unusual interest in music**

No one quite knows from where little Hemant got infected by the music bug, beyond the infections many boys and girls of that age receive during their schooling years. A friend named Shyam Sunder had plenty of 78 RPMs at his home, as well as a tabla and harmonium, enough for Hemant to get on this boy's right side to be invited to enjoy touching and playing these. Perhaps that was the trigger. Hemant set about singing and playing the harmonium here. A day soon came when Subhash Mukherjee took him for an audition to All India Radio (AIR). He did well and thus got his first break at AIR, to sing on air two Bangla songs, *Akaasher arshite*

*bhai*, which was a traditional *Bhatiyali* song sung by boatmen, and *Amaar gaanete ele nabarupe*, written by his friend Subhash Mukherjee. Hemant was in the ninth standard in school and only 16 when he got this singing opportunity.

In spite of this performance and a locally expanding reputation for a great voice, many recording companies turned the teenager down. They didn't think he had a great voice. Decades later a similar rejection would await another man with a beautiful baritone voice—even if it was as a speaker, not a singer—Amitabh Bachchan. Anyway, Hemant persisted, and while he persisted, he put his mind to his studies and graduated from school with first-class marks. He also learned typewriting, which, according to his father's advice, would always parachute him into a job.

### First recordings and compositions

He now joined Jadavpur Engineering College, but the music bug never left him alone. At college he continued his musical pursuits by singing and arranging musical performances. One day, a family friend took him to Columbia Records, where its music head Sailesh Duttagupta showed keenness in launching Hemant's recording career. Many years later, Hemant recalled having first recorded in December 1937 two songs for the two sides of a 78 RPM record: *Bolo go bolo more* and *Janite jodi go tumi*, with poetry by Nareshwar Bhattacharya and music by Sailesh Duttagupta. The actual records were issued a few months later, in 1938. Within a couple of months, he recorded *Debota phiriya chao* and *Tomaare chahiya priyo*, with poetry by Ajoy Bhattacharya and music by Sailesh Duttagupta. And then, after a few more months, two more Bangla songs were recorded by him: *Jokhon sandhyatara* and *Pujaro phuley tomaar paaye*, with words written once again by Ajoy Bhattacharya and music composed by Sailesh Duttagupta. All these were his first recordings, and they were all non-film ones.

Two years later, in 1940, Hemant recorded his first film songs, these being *Kahaan kaanu kahi* and *Prabhu dekha dao*, both written by Ajoy Bhattacharya and composed by Hariprasanna Das for the film *Nimayi Sannyas*, though the film itself was released a year later, in 1941. Meantime he also recorded for another Bengali film, *Rajkumarer Nirbasan*, released in 1940, with SD Burman as composer, Hariprasanna Das as his associate and penned by Ajoy Bhattacharya: *Bandhu hei tumi ele*, and *Jaago pratham pranay laaj loye*. Two years later still, he opened his Hindi film account, singing solo *Aankhon ki ot jo rehta tha*, and with Suprova Sircar, *Ab preet*

*ki jeet manaayen saajan*, both in the film *Meenakshi* (1942), with music by Pankaj Mullick and lyrics by Pt Bhushan. He was getting popular, so getting breaks was not an issue any more. For Kamal Dasgupta he now sang, off-cinema and to the poetry of Fayyaz Hashmi, *Kitna dukh bhulaaya tumne pyaari*, and *O preet nibhaane waali... Meri ashaon ki basti ko mitaayegi tu*. These were followed after some time with *Bhala tha kitna apna bachpan*, as well as *Aanchal se kyoon baandh liya mujh pardesi ka pyaar*. It was the same Kamal-Fayyaz team that had given early hits to Talat Mahmood in songs like *Tasweer teri dil mera behla na sakegi* and *Soye hue hain chaand aur taare, aaj ki raat andhiyaari*.

Soon, Hemant also became a composer, in *Purbarag* and *Abhijatri*, both Bangla films released in 1947, and he was on a roll in Calcutta. More and more doors were opening for the young man now.

### **We go back a bit to see what else was up for Hemant Kumar Mukherjee**

Earlier, in 1938, armed with money and confidence, Hemant had said hello to his own harmonium and bye-bye to his anonymity. He had started getting the feel of Rabindra Sangeet under Anadi Kumar Dastidar, and had begun singing passionately like that diehard Rabindra Sangeet fan, Pankaj Mullick. He had been getting busy on the radio and recording circuits as also on Durga Puja celebrations, always so huge in Calcutta. In 1943, he had started learning music formally—classical and everything—under a guru named Phanibhushan Banerjee. He learnt for less than two years when Mr Banerjee passed away. He had found another guru but the guru had a condition: “If you want to train with me, stop singing for films”. That was a tough call for the young man. For one thing, he had already started building his career and earning handsomely too. Secondly, his father had retired, so the money was needed. That was the end of Hemant’s desire to learn more from a master.

Meantime, on the personal front, love had happened between him and Bela Mukherjee, who was herself making waves as a singer. He had taken the idea to his parents who perhaps did not agree to this union. But the two lovers went ahead anyway, with Hemant doing his best to take care of old people on both sides not long after tying the knot. They got married on 7 December 1945. Jayanto, their son was born in Calcutta on 4 October 1947. And Ranu, their daughter was born in Bombay on 4 June 1953. Between the births of their two children, the gifted Mukherjees moved to Bombay. Here’s why.

S Mukherjee, the *de facto* boss at Filmistan Studio, Bombay had signed



Hemen Gupta, Geeta Dutt and Hemant Kumar

up Hemen Gupta to direct the classic tale of *Anand Math*. Hemen Gupta was the same man who had produced and directed the Bengali *Bhuli Nai* (1948), with Hemant Kumar's music. In August 1951 was released *Biyalish* (42), again directed by Hemen Gupta and with music by Hemant Kumar. This last film was about the Quit India Movement of 1942, and in many ways similar to *Anand Math*. Extremely happy with Hemant's tunes, Gupta had urged the filmmaker to take Hemant Kumar for *Anand Math*'s music. That is why Hemant was approached, and why he accepted the assignment, which paid him Rs 1500 per month. To put that figure in perspective, in 1951 in Bombay, an American luxury sedan would typically cost Rs 20000, while with Rs 30000 you could both buy yourself a plot of land and build your home on it in the Bandra-Khar area. In time, Hemant would procure both. He would name his new home *Geetanjali*,

after Tagore's anthology of poems, which tells us how much he respected the great poet. Later he even named his production banner Geetanjali Pictures, which we will look at in a bit. Meantime, Anand Math's music was nice, with songs like *Jai Jagdeesh hare* and *Vande mataram* (the latter has merited a full essay, which can be found in these pages), but the 1952 film itself wasn't a commercial hit. Down, but not out, Hemant scored music for another Filmistan feature, *Samrat*, which took two years to make and opened in 1954. Unlike Anand Math, which was a Historical, *Samrat* was a Costume Drama, full of pirates, a king and palace intrigue. The songs were nice, even if a notch lower than those of Anand Math. But for this offering too, moviegoers punished Filmistan. Hemant was a deeply worried man now.

He wanted to head back to Calcutta, without informing anyone. But S Mukherjee, the boss of Filmistan heard about this attempted departure from Victoria Terminus station. He caught up with the downbeat composer and ordered him thus: "You cannot go back defeated like this. First make great music like Naushad does, then go back to Calcutta with honour". This specific line was what Jayanto used in my first interview with him way back in 1998.

So yes, Hemant Kumar was a worried man, but the Filmistan guys weren't worried. Just a year before, in 1953, they had offered Anarkali to an applauding public, the movie becoming the highest commercial success of the year, beating the likes of *Teen Batti Char Rasta*, *Aah*, *Dil-e-Nadaan*, *Do Bigha Zameen* and *Patita*. So, after collaring Hemant back from VT station, the studio invited Hemant to score music for *Nagin* (1954), which became a hit and which as we know completely turned the tide in Hemant Kumar's favour. Incidentally, most female songs of *Anarkali* and *Nagin* were rendered by Lata Mangeshkar, a voice that Filmistan's boss S Mukherjee had turned down as unsuitable for cinema just a few years before!

During the making of *Nagin* itself, Hemant had started getting music-making assignments, like *Shart*, *Ferry* and *Daaku Ki Ladki* (all released in 1954). But importantly and in parallel, he was singing for so many other composers. Earlier he had sung two cover-version songs for Naushad in *Babul* (1950): *Mera jeevan saathi bichhad gaya* and *Milte hi aankhen dil hua deewaana kisi ka* (with Ruma Devi). Such cover-versions used to be something like warm-up exercises for the musicians, till the actual singer arrived in the recording studio on that day or later. Such songs were not finally taken into the film. But now, Hemant had also rendered proper

songs taken into films, such as for SD Burman (*Aa gup chup gup chup pyaar karen*/with Sandhya Mukherjee in *Sazaa*, 1951), for Ali Akbar Khan (*Wo chaand naheen hai dil hai kisi deewaane ka*/with Asha in *Aandhiyan*, 1952), and for S Mohinder (*Do naina tumhaare pyaare pyaare*/with Geeta in *Shrimatiji*, 1952). Shankar-Jaikishan had called him to sing *Yaad kiya dil ne kahaan ho tum* (with Lata in *Patita*, 1953). Mohd Shafi had composed for him *Do bol tere meetthe meetthe* (with Lata in *Daara*, 1953), and he had sung for Madan Mohan, *Hum pyaar karenge* (with Lata in *Dhun*, 1953). C Ramchandra had composed for him three songs in the landmark musical, *Anarkali* (1953), *Aye baad-e-saba ahista chal*, *Zindagi pyaar ki do-chaar ghadi hoti hai*, and *Jaag dard-e-ishq jaag* (with Lata). Now, in the year *Nagin* released (1954), he was called by other musicians to sing for them. A sampling: Timir Baran-SK Pal (*Kaise koi jeeye/Baadbaan*, 1954), Salil Chowdhury (*Jhoom-jhoom Manmohan re/Biraj Bahu*, 1954), and Naushad (*Chandan ka palna resham ki dori/Shabab*, 1954). By this time, Hemant's career was up and away. His parallel music journeys, both as a singer and as a composer, both in Calcutta and Bombay were now soaring.



Bina Rai as Anarkali in *Jaag dard-e-ishq jaag* (*Anarkali*, 1953)

### **Double parallels, singing and composing, in Calcutta and Bombay**

His success in Bombay did not mean he had said goodbye to Calcutta. Not at all. He decided to continue singing for others and composing for

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