

R.D. Burman: The Singer of a Timeless Song **By M. Asif Alvi**

It was a song to remember. A strong beat of a Nepali drum suddenly burst onto my aural plane followed by heady notes of a bass guitar and subtle hints of an accordion, and then a full-throated voice bordering on the baritone made a grand entrance. Actually, the song '*Mehbooba mehbooba*' (*Sholay*, 1975) was so stunning in its overall structure and the singer R.D. Burman (Panoram) sang it so heartily well that it gave me goose bumps right when I first listened to it. Forget the drum, forget the guitar, and forget the accordion. No interplay of any musical instruments and no wizardry of any compositional arrangements could have contributed anything to Panoram's own energetic entry as a singer into the song's sumptuous scheme of things.

In fact, in those mid-1970s boyhood days, when I was busy exploring various playback singers of Hindi cinema and getting used to their carefully cultivated charm, Panoram's voice in the legendary song from *Sholay* nearly jolted me out of my comfort zone. I remember I literally sat up and took notice. The voice sounded different, full, catchy, and, above all, trained. Soon I discovered that everybody else in my family and neighborhood loved it too. The film went on to become a blockbuster hit for a thousand reasons, and this song was one of them. But, as a boy I kept wondering why Panoram sang a song in the film. After all, I had lately gotten to know him only as a marvelous music director. "If he could sing so well, why does he not sing more?" I had thought excitedly.

The appeal of his voice in this song was often so strong that Panoram the composer would take a backseat and I would scan photos of singers in various film magazines, looking for him around the microphone and conveniently forgetting that he could instead be discussing his music with his singers. It was exhilarating to find out a couple of years later that he was nominated for the Filmfare Best Playback Singer (Male) Award for the *Sholay* song in 1975; I still wish he won it too. Years later I read somewhere that Manna Dey was originally supposed to sing this song but reportedly changed his mind and asked Panoram to sing it himself when he learned that it was inspired by the Greek singer Demis Roussos' song '*Say you love me*'. According to one legend, Manna Dey thought that only Panoram could do justice to such a pulsating song. The late actor Jalal Agha finally sang it on the screen; however, it was the legendary Helen who did her own full justice to the song and benefited most from it by dancing superbly to its scintillating beat. A legendary singer, a legendary composer, and a legendary dancer! When such distinct legends merge into a singular charm the study of their arts often turns into a passion and a pleasant pastime.

Little did I know then that Helen, quite appropriately, had danced on the silver screen earlier to Panoram's formal playback-singing-debut-making song '*O meri jaan maine kaha*' (*The Train*, 1970) too and probably also inspired him to start singing professionally in Hindi films. After all, most of the early songs that he sang in the 1970-74 period were lively, foot-tapping numbers invariably featuring the famed dancer. When I finally got to listen to *The Train* song a few months later, I marveled at the sheer vocal chemistry that both he and Asha Bhosle might have shared during its recording. The song is a fine example of their excellent harmony and superb breath control. They could as well have sung together earlier in *Teesri Manzil* (1966) too. I can easily imagine them belting out, in their own inimitable styles, the song '*Aaja aaja main hoon pyaar tera*' that Mohammad Rafi and Asha Bhosle eventually sang and made memorable. The

song, especially with its fundamental rhythm, perfectly suited to Pancham's versatile singing voice capable of hitting high notes in the song's stanzas and maintaining the middle ground elsewhere in it, especially in the vital '*aajaa a a aajaa aha ha aajaa*' refrain that required a tough break-dance-like singing. In a friendly film production setup like the many he found later in his career as a music director, he probably would have sung the song. But, as it turned out, the film was going to be a landmark break as a music director for him and he had hardly proved his credentials as one by then, so he did well to lay dormant his desire to sing too for now. Interestingly, Helen remains part of the *Teesri Manzil* folklore too, you know.

But the song that truly brought her fabulous footwork and Pancham's sonorous singing together into a fabled mass hysteria was '*Piya tuu ab to aaja*' (*Caravan*, 1971). The song was, for all practical purposes, a showcase for Asha Bhosle's singing genius and Pancham's compositional triumph. Over the years and possibly in its debut year 1971 too, however, the song came to be identified more by his charismatic clarion call '*Monica, o my darling*' in it. He actually waltzes into the song by calling out just '*Monica*' a full 1 minute after Asha sets up with her own opening line a restively forlorn mood like a lull before a restless storm that arrives sooner than you would expect – first those dynamic drums explode, then Asha sizzles with '*wo aa gaya, dekho, dekho wo aa gaya*', and finally Pancham surges with his twin calls '*Monica, Monica*'. The restlessness that he oozes into the way he repeats '*Monica*' is simply amazing and pops up the bubbly excitement this song is all about. I knew he had a complete grasp of the mood of the song not only as a composer but also as a singer. It was equally good to hear him singing in his natural, soothing singing voice. This song effectively set the ball rolling for his parallel career as an occasional playback singer in Hindi cinema.

Although the *Caravan* song catapulted Pancham as a singer into the national spotlight, it did not really bring him the respect usually accorded to full-time playback singers in Hindi cinema. The song '*Duniya mein logon ko*' (*Apna Desh*, 1972) brought it and finally established him as a singer par excellence. I vividly recall when the song greeted me first time from the radio in those boyhood days I almost jumped in a pleasant surprise to hear him singing with a great gusto and a greater breath control and setting the stage for Asha to match him note for note. In this song he pitched a notch or two lower into the range of a bass voice apparently as an experiment, and the effect was simply mind-blowing. The song, as I found out later, was a big hit of its time and the biggest attraction of the film too. I was delighted by Pancham hitting low pitch similarly in the song '*Dil mil gaye to ham khil gaye*' (*Yaadon Ki Baaraat*, 1973) too. But when he repeated the same experiment a year later in the song '*Dil to maane na*' (*Shaitan*, 1974), with Asha Bhosle again singing with him, the result was extremely disappointing. The lackluster tune of the song probably made a mess of whatever he wanted to offer as a singer, but I sincerely wished he stuck to his natural, more appealing voice.

As luck would have it, my wish was fulfilled in many songs that I got to listen in quick succession – '*Mere jeevan saathi*' (*Mere Jeevan Saathi*, 1972), '*Sharaabi aankhen gulaabi chehra*' (*Madhosh*, 1974), '*Sapna mera toot gaya*' (*Khel Khel Mein*, 1975), '*Doli mein sawaar sajni ka pyaar*' (*Balika Badhu*, 1976), and '*Dhanno ki aankhon mein*' (*Kitaab*, 1977). He excelled in all these songs by singing at a relatively relaxed pace and in a truly natural voice. The *Kitaab* song really thrilled me with its freshness, vivacity, and exuberance, all in terms of his singing, his own wonderful music in it came second. The *Mere Jeevan Saathi* solo and the *Madhosh* duet both truly amazed me with Pancham's uninhibited and spontaneous singing in them, the former igniting a restless fire of erotic sentiments and the latter fanning it. The *Madhosh* duet in particular was a wholesome entertainment in music, magic, and *masti*, with Pancham in his

true elements as both a composer and a singer, and both gloriously off the beaten track of a typical Hindi film song. "*Tumse miloon to kuchh yaad naheen aaye chaahat ke siwa*," he sang so sensuously and his own lively music complementing his singing so heavenly that I just did not want to get out of the sheer ecstasy I got out of the song. If he could get lost in so much sensual joy of his own, then who the hell I was to get out of mine? More than 20 years later I happened to buy the film album's CD in combo with *Raton Ka Raja* (1970) at a local music shop, and I clearly remember having rushed back home and playing the song at least 20 times straight in an exciting tribute to my first boyhood lust that the song had fanned then by chance. The *Khel Khel Mein* song remains one of my all-time top favorites mainly for Asha Bhosle's superb rendition, but I would take it any day also for Pancham's admirable singing of his supporting lines in it. "*Suno na Raja, aahista please, aahista*," she nervously pleads while hitting the height of hallucination. "*Sharmaana chhod de tuu, ghabraana chhod de tuu*," he croons back with a contrasting calm while sobering her down. Actually, both Pancham and Asha sing the song in such a fantastic harmony, especially in the lines, where he changes chord and she picks it up as a cue, or where she trails off and he joins right in, that I often fantasized about them to be the doomed lovers instead of the more youthful pair of Rakesh Roshan and Aruna Irani who enacted the song in the film, as I subsequently found out in a film magazine. The entire song was an electrifying listening experience to me, and I still remember I just freaked out on the song on my first date with it.

The song '*Doli mein sawaar sajni ka pyaar*' (*Balika Badhu*, 1976), though a rather different and livelier gem of a song, still somehow reminds me of another similarly themed song '*Doli mein bithaaike kahaar*' (*Amar Prem*, 1971) that he could have sung as well as his illustrious father S.D. Burman actually did. Did Pancham not see a great singing opportunity for himself in this song just because he was busy singing those spirited dance numbers around the same time? Today I can only guess about it. When I bumped years later into his brilliant rendition of '*O maajhi teri naiyya se*' (*Aar Paar*, 1985), I could not help thinking he could have chanted Kishore Kumar's '*O maajhi re*' (*Khushboo*, 1975) equally magically too, maybe also adding an extra ounce of the *Bhatiyali* flavor and a bit more melancholy to it. Well, let me stop speculating about all those missed chances lest I would start wondering how he would have crooned Mohammad Rafi's '*Ek bechaara pyaar ka maara*' (*Waris*, 1969), a song that he probably composed with his own playful voice in mind, or Amit Kumar's '*Bade achchhe lagte hairi*' (*Balika Badhu*, 1976), a song that he probably recorded in his voice first and then coaxed Amit Kumar into just imitating it. How about Mohammad Rafi's '*Mere liye aati hai shaam*' (*Raton Ka Raja*, 1970)? Well.

Anyway, all those songs that he actually sang in his natural voice seemed to have finally settled him in the groove, and just when I decided that Pancham had found a niche for himself among the galaxy of top-class playback singers of his time, he struck a bit jarring note with '*O tum kya jaand*' (*Hum Kisise Kum Naheen*, 1977). I still vividly remember when I saw the film as a boy in Allahabad in 1977, all those lively songs in the film greatly thrilled me, yet I came out of the cinema hall a little worried. The Pancham solo, with him hitting the bass banality yet again, sounded grossly misfit in an otherwise fabulous album of fluent songs. But when that solo became a big hit, I feared for more such songs to follow. Although he regaled me back by singing '*Kal kya hoga kisko pata*' (*Kasme Vaade*, 1978) and '*Golmaal hai bhai*' (*Golmaal*, 1979) in a favored voice, Pancham, probably overexcited by the success of his *Hum Kisise Kum Naheen* solo, went too far ahead and stressed his tender vocal chords too much for my listening comfort in the song '*Kisne dekha hai kal*' (*Heeralal Pannalal*, 1979). This song was as bad as it could be, and I felt saddened by his various singing experiments that probably also harmed his

chances at settling into a greater public acceptance with one, consistent singing style. It is a pity that his more mellow solo in *Kasme Vaade* did not become a hit; nevertheless it was one fine song that was possibly also Pancham's tribute to Kishore Kumar whom he modeled on in this song quite liberally but within graceful bounds of inspiration. He could have been just fine by being a Kishore Kumar clone if he disliked his own natural voice so much, but, sadly and apparently, the success and the luck both have strange ways of dictating stranger things.

When more songs like the one in *Heeralal Pannalal*, such as '*Yamma yama*' (*Shaan*, 1980), '*Aa dekhien zara*' (*Rocky*, 1980), '*Dil lena khel hai*' (*Zamaane Ko Dikhana Hai*, 1981), '*Dukki pe dukki ho*' (*Satte Pe Satta*, 1982), and '*Ye din to aata hai*' (*Mahaan*, 1983), thrived one after another on air waves and hit parades, I struggled with my now failing fascination with the sensational singer in him. Luckily, around the same time one film album *Sanam Teri Kasam* (1981), where Pancham got back to basics with two excellent and equally popular songs, offered me hope – the duet '*Jaan-e-jaan o meri jaan-e-jaan*' with Asha was a thrilling throwback to their breathless beauty '*O meri jaan maine kaha*' (*The Train*, 1970) and the solo '*Jaanaan o meri jaanaari*' a rare gem by itself. My hope remained a mirage though, as he now started singing as many as 4 songs in a film – a far cry from the special, solitary singing appearance he used to make in an occasional film in the 1970s – and yet almost none delighting me at all. In fact, all 4 songs that he sang in *Pukar* (1983) were rank pedestrian and utterly forgettable. Several other songs in his voice in most other films from the 1980s like *Naram Garam* (1981), *Jagir* (1984), *Karishma* (1984), *Rahi Badal Gaye* (1984), *Bond 303* (1985), *Zabardast* (1985), *Hifazat* (1987), and *Joshilaay* (1989) were nothing to write home about too, thus giving me an uneasy feeling that here was a talented singer consumed ironically by the fire of success. Yet, he rose like a phoenix to delight me occasionally with nice songs like '*Ye zindagi kuchh bhi sah*' (*Romance*, 1983), '*Dilbar diljaani*' (*Hum Hain Lajawaab*, 1984), '*Pyaar nagma hai*' (*Zameen Aasman*, 1984), '*Laapa changa mein naache*' (*Ek Se Bhale Do*, 1985), '*O maajhi teri naiyya se*' (*Aar Paar*, 1985), and '*Tuune kiya kya jaadoo*' (*Apne Apne*, 1987), but then they were the only songs (in his voice) from the 1980s, besides 2 songs from *Sanam Teri Kasam*, that I liked. Out of a total of 63 songs that he ever sang in Hindi films, 34 alone came out in the early 1980s, and it clearly shows how he got carried away too much by a false sense of success. He was a special singer and should have remained special and selective about singing in the 1980s like he did in the 1970s, especially since he was now a heart patient. But then there is nothing we can do about the strange ways of both the success and the luck.

The last song that Pancham sang in Hindi films – '*Aaja sun le sada*' (*Gurudev*, 1993) – had a strange premonition about it. On one hand this poor Asha-Pancham duet disappointed me with its overly open source of inspiration in their own legendary duet '*Piya tuu ab to aaja*' (*Caravan*, 1971) in an apparent attempt to revive Pancham's career as both a composer and a singer, on the other hand a certain calm in his voice attracted my attention. Unlike the *Caravan* duet, he sings out to his imagined sweetheart in this song quite quietly – '*Maria, Maria*' is all you hear behind the din of a rather loud music. The song would have vanished from my thoughts soon after I first listened to it, but I clearly recall I had panicked on listening to Pancham in it and even feared I had lost him forever. The sense of desperation to hear back *that* original, natural voice from the 1970s turned so overwhelming that I seriously thought about meeting Pancham and pleading with him to go back to his *Sholay* and *Khel Khel Mein* days. But it was too late for me to finally make this attempt, because soon he passed away into the eternity. The news of his death through a local Indian newspaper in New York, where I lived in those days, stunned me so much that I struggled to come to terms with it for next several months. Often I would look at that news story and his attendant photo in that newspaper and would still refuse to

believe that he was gone. Although his voice was physically silenced on January 4, 1994, emotionally and perceptually it continues to live on my aural plane. The heady notes of *that* bass guitar and *that* Nepali drum still vibrate in my ears occasionally and reaffirm my greater passion for his music. Yet those musical notes invariably sound like celebrating Pancham as a singer who made a grand entrance to their pulsating party thirty-five years ago and sang a timeless song.

My Top 10 Favorite Hindi Film Songs Sung by Pancham:

1. *O meri jaan maine kaha* (*The Train*, 1970) with Asha Bhosle
2. *Piya tuu ab to aaja* (*Caravan*, 1971) with Asha Bhosle
3. *Duniya mein logon ko* (*Apna Desh*, 1972) with Asha Bhosle
4. *Mere jeevan saathi* (*Mere Jeevan Saathi*, 1972)
5. *Sharaabi aankhen gulaabi chehra* (*Madhosh*, 1974) with Asha Bhosle
6. *Sapna mera toot gaya* (*Khel Khel Mein*, 1975) with Asha Bhosle
7. *Mehbooba mehbooba* (*Sholay*, 1975)
8. *Doli mein sawaar sajni ka pyaar* (*Balika Badhu*, 1976)
9. *Dhanno ki aankhon mein* (*Kitaab*, 1977)
10. *O maajhi teri naiyya se* (*Aar Paar*, 1985)