

Vocal range and longevity put her stamp on Indian cinema

ASHA BHOSLE

1933-2026

BY PRAGATI K.B.

Asha Bhosle, the Indian singer whose astonishing range and longevity made her one of the most recorded voices in modern Indian music, died on April 12 in Mumbai. She was 92.

Her death, in a hospital, was confirmed by her son, Anand Bhosle. Hospital officials said the cause was cardiac arrest followed by multiple organ failure. She had been admitted a day earlier with exhaustion and a chest infection.

For more than eight decades, Ms. Bhosle's voice was threaded through the fabric of Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, the Hindi film industry. She recorded thousands of songs, earning recognition from the Guinness World Records for the most studio recordings by any artist.

Her elder sister, the equally famous Lata Mangeshkar, who died in 2022, tended to be cast as the voice of the sweet and innocent heroine, while Ms. Bhosle was more often the voice of the cabaret dancer or the heartbroken courtesan. Ms. Mangeshkar embodied a desexualized and melodic classicism, and

Ms. Bhosle represented playful reinvention. Their relationship, marked by both familial closeness and professional rivalry, became one of the defining narratives of Indian popular music.

Ms. Bhosle's legacy is in her bold embrace of an unconventional and anapologetically modern female voice in films. Like that of her sister and singers like Mohammed Rafi, her voice was lip-synced by movie actors performing musical numbers. But she created a vocal persona that was flirtatious and rhythmically adventurous, a sharp break from that dominant "playback" tradition, as it is known. That also brought Ms. Bhosle to a younger, more cosmopolitan audience.

To define her solely by cabaret or Western-influenced songs would be to overlook her extraordinary breadth. She moved across a wide variety of genres, recording devotional music, folk songs and pop, as well as ghazals — lyrical, poetic compositions rooted in classical traditions.

Her early years in the film industry were marked by struggle. Overshadowed by her sister's meteoric rise, she was often assigned to secondary songs or lower-budget productions. These constraints became the crucible of her originality.



RAHAV SEGEV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Asha Bhosle at Carnegie Hall in New York in 2008. She recently collaborated with the British band Gorillaz on an album. Her career encompassed a variety of musical genres.

Her breakthrough came through her collaboration with the composer O.P. Nayyar, whose sensuous and playful compositions like "Aaiye Meherbaan" ("Come, Kind Sir") and "Yeh Hai Reshmi Zulfon Ka Andhera" ("The

Darkness of Silky Tresses") suited her huskier voice.

It was her later partnership with the composer R.D. Burman, whom she would eventually marry, that transformed her career. Mr. Burman's experi-

mental arrangements and global influences of jazz, rock and Latin rhythms found their ideal medium in Ms. Bhosle. Together they produced some of the most iconic songs in Indian cinema, including the sultry "Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja" ("Beloved, Come to Me Now"), from "Caravan" (1971).

Ms. Bhosle remained relevant even as musical tastes evolved. In her 60s and beyond, she lent her voice to a new generation of actors, working with music directors like A.R. Rahman, who was 30 years her junior. She collaborated with international artists like Boy George, Michael Stipe and even the cricketer Brett Lee. In 1997, she was celebrated in the song "Brimful of Asha" by the British band Cornershop, a track that was later remixed by Fatboy Slim. Her last collaboration was with the British band Gorillaz on their album "The Mountain."

Ms. Bhosle received numerous national awards throughout her career, including India's highest honors in cinema and civilian life, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award and the Padma Vibhushan. She was nominated for a Grammy Award twice. At 79, she made her acting debut in the film "Mai" (2013), portraying a mother with Alzheimer's disease. She also launched an Indian restaurant

brand, "Asha's," with locations in Dubai and Kuwait.

Asha Mangeshkar was born on Sept. 8, 1933, in the state of Sangli, in present-day Maharashtra, one of five children of Shevanti and Deenanath Mangeshkar. Mr. Mangeshkar was an actor and a musician of Hindustani classical music. He died when Asha was 9, plunging the family into financial distress and forcing Asha and her siblings into early careers. She began singing in films as a child, recording her first song in 1943.

She got married young, to Ganpatrao Bhosle, against her family's wishes. She had three children with him before they divorced in 1963. A daughter, Varsha, and a son, Hemant, predeceased her.

She married R.D. Burman in 1980. He died in 1994.

Her survivors include her sisters, Usha Mangeshkar and Meena Khadikar; a brother, Hridaynath Mangeshkar; and a son, Anand Bhosle.

In public appearances, Ms. Bhosle cultivated a distinctive style — embellished silk saris, bold bindis and statement jewelry — standing in visual contrast to her sister's austere simplicity. Her power, as critics have noted, lay not just in her prolific output but also in her insistence on being seen and heard on her own terms.