



Surinder Kaur

PROFILE

## Surinder Kaur: A Life Well Sung

○ Nirupama Dutt

She took women's songs out of the confines of the home and spread them round the world. A profile of Surinder Kaur, a pioneer in Punjabi music, who turns seventy having sung some 25,000 songs over 57 years.

It is a clear summer night sky and the whole family has spread out their *charpais* on the sprawling terrace of a Chandigarh home. Lying on the cool and white sheets beneath the gentle moonlight, it is the pleasant half-hour of drinking the last tumbler of water from the earthen *surahi*, with its slim long neck and a mouth shaped like a lion's head, counting the brightly shining stars and slipping into blissful sleep. Just as the eyelids are drooping, the oldest of my brothers, a college student not yet 20, gets up with a start and shouts: "Just listen, who is singing?"

The attention of the whole family is drawn to the Punjabi song that is heard faintly as it is being piped from some loudspeaker far away. This summer night's tale dates back to 40 years when Chandigarh, the city of squares, was still being built and sound travelled from one end to another. Before the voice of the singer could be identified, my brother exclaimed, "It is Surinder Kaur. It is her voice. No one else can sing like this." Without waiting for even a moment, he rushes into the house, changes into trousers, puts his

autograph book into his pocket, takes out his bicycle and rides away after the voice.

It is past midnight when he returns humming: *Lathe di chaddar utte saleti rang mahia* (The cotton cloth has been coloured grey, my love). He has much to tell and it turns out to be a very exciting night. Something which I can still recall so vividly four decades later. Big brother is full of the songs he heard and he proudly shows us the autograph book in which Surinder has written out a line of one of her favourite songs - *Nimmi nimmi tarean di lao* (Softly the stars glow) - and signed her name below. The line is from a song by the famous Punjabi poet, Amrita Pritam. This is my first introduction to a voice called Surinder Kaur who can cause such a stir that people do not mind losing a good summer night's sleep for her music.

"...my eldest brother took a stand that if [his sister] showed a talent for music she should be allowed to get trained."

Such is the magic this singer cast right from the moment she recorded her first song at the Lahore Radio Station some 57 years ago. But how did this girl from an orthodox, middle class Khatri Sikh family get to learn music and actually sing on the radio? For those were times when this art was restricted to professional singers or *tawaifs* of 'ill' fame from Hira Mandi.

Looking back at what seems long-long ago, Surinder sitting in her little lawn in her Riviera Apartments home in north Delhi says, "When I was growing up, girls from respectable families just did not sing except at family weddings and functions at home. That too only before an all-woman audience. The only other singing allowed to girls from Sikh families were the hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. Our mother Maya Devi would sing folk songs at home and so the first lessons in music came from her. My elder sister Prakash Kaur, who was 11 years older to me, showed a talent for singing and wished to learn music. Our father, Jiwan Singh, was a professor of chemistry in Government College, Lahore, and a progressive person. But even he did not quite like the idea that my sister

should learn music professionally. My mother, of course, was horrified. But my eldest brother Harbans Singh, a police officer, was sensitive to the arts and he took a stand that if Prakash Behanji showed a talent for music she should be allowed to get trained.”

So Prakash started taking lessons in Hindustani classical vocal music from Master Inayat Husain who was also to become Surinder’s first Guru. In Punjabi there is a *boli* (a short verse sung to the *giddha* dance) which says, *Nachan wale di addi nahi rehandi, Gaon wale da moohn, Hania taahli te, Ghughi kare ghoon ghoon* (The heel of a dancer will not rest, the lips of a singer will not shut; my companion, the dove sits on the branch cooing).

So it was with these two singing sisters. Their voices just could not be silenced, even as relatives tattled and their mother had to cut a sorry figure giving all kinds of explanations. “It was not easy to go on with our practice. The neighbourhood was scandalised that the daughters of the *sardars* were singing. So for our *riaz*, we would shut the doors, windows and even the ventilators lest the sound of music travelled outside,” says Surinder.

When Surinder went for audition to Radio Lahore way back in 1943, Prakash Kaur was already a radio singer. “My older sister made things easier for me in a way. Those were the days of Shamshad Begum, Zeenat Begum and Umrazia Jaan, all very great singers in their own right but all coming from families of professional singers and thus singing was no taboo for them. Prakash Behanji was the first ‘Kaur’ to break the taboos of her community and sing on the radio. And hold her own among the abundant talent. “I went for auditioning for the children’s programme. But I was chosen for the adults’ section. I naturally felt

very proud of myself. I recorded the first song with my sister. We were to sing many duets together in the times to come,” recalls Surinder.

The first song they sang together on the radio was a sad soulful number sung when the bride is leaving the parent’s house to make a home with her husband and his family. It captures the tense and intense moments when the mother and daughter sit together for a while before the final parting. It goes thus: *Maavan te dhian ral baithiyan ni maye; Koi kardan galorhian;*

**Women's songs in any language or culture have to them a special laxative quality.**

*Kananka lamiyan dhian kyonjamian ni maye* (Mother and daughter sit together a while talking to each other; the wheat stalks have grown and why were daughters born, my mother).

“We had heard our mother singing this song in long plaintive tones. For the recording we gave it a livelier beat while retaining its intensity. This song was on the lips of every Punjabi woman at that time and retains its popularity till date. It is my favourite song too,” says Surinder, her voice choking with emotion, “Everyone has daughters and the sad part is that daughters have to go away one day. I have myself given away three daughters in marriage. In 1993, I was invited to England and America for concerts to celebrate 50 years of my singing. For this song, the stage was shared with me by my daughter Dolly Guleria, a singer in her own right, and granddaughter Sunaini, who has also learnt music. As we were singing, I noticed my daughter was weeping and there were tears in the eyes of all the women in the audience. Some were

even sobbing aloud. Such is the cathartic power of music.”

It is known that the deepest melodies come from those who are suffering the most: the slaves in chains, martyrs going to the gallows, labourers bearing a heavy burden, fishermen braving storms in frail boats and women confined to the four walls of the home. Women’s songs in any language or culture have to them a special laxative quality.

As for the songs of the soil of Punjab, one hears of the possible and the impossible sung with a never-before gusto. All the complaints against the husband are aired, the tormenting mother-in-law is actually given a thrashing, the vicious sister-in-law is called vile names, the awful other woman is drowned in the Holy Ganga and even the God up there in the heaven is not spared and is chided for making a woman’s life so difficult. Such were the songs that the Kaur sisters took out of the domestic realm and sung them over the radio and on the stage. “I do not like to boast. Nature bestowed me with talent. But one thing I like to take pride in is that we took the women’s songs out of the confines of the home to the streets of villages and cities not just in Punjab but all over the world,” says Surinder.

How come Surinder was not offered a role in films given her good looks combined with a great voice for those were the days of singing stars and Lahore was a film city? “It did happen. One day a person approached me at the radio station and asked me to come to the Pancholi Studios. I thought that I was being called for playback singing. When I reached there, I was given a paper with some dialogues written on it and asked to read it out. I was always bold and never hesitated. When I finished reading the page, I was told that the screen test was successful and that I had

## Her Mama's Daughter



**Dolly Guleria**

For someone who dared to defy the conventions way back in the Forties, it was strange that Surinder did not encourage her daughter Dolly to take up a career in music even though she took formal training from Ustad Rehman Khan. Surinder says, "An artist has to face many things in life; the good and the bad. The mother's protective instinct in me did not wish that any of my daughters take up a career in singing. Dolly was married when she was barely 19. But now that she is coming up as a singer, I feel proud of her,"

Dolly, on the other hand, says that taking up a career in singing was quite a challenge. "Mama's was a rare gift of talent. I inherited only the tone of her voice but not her range. But my intention was never to compete with Mama but sing the best that I can," she says. Dolly, who is married to an army officer, started singing professionally after her children were somewhat grown-up., "This is so because as a child we would miss our mother who would be out giving concerts

sometimes 26 days in a month. She would come back with gifts but that wasn't enough. However, our Dariji (father) made up for her absence palying father and mother both," she recalls.

But to be indentified as Surnider Kaur's daughter has always been a matter of pride for her. "The time she gave us and still gives us was quality time. Then she was not Surinder Kaur the singer, but our mother: tending and caring."

been selected for the second lead in the film. At this, I started trembling with fear. For once, even I was afraid. I refused the role because in my mind there was a notion, however misplaced, that acting was something bad. Singing was my first love and so I sang and sang and hope to sing till the end of my life," says Surinder.

Even now in the evening of her life when concerts are few and far between and the stamina is not what it once used to be , the singer still takes out her harmonium and practices every day. Or as she waters the plants in her well-tended garden, she hums to herself, *Ni Main jaana rabb de kol* (I have to go to God one day). Written and composed by her in the Sufi style, it is one of the songs very dear to her. And she likes to listen to the music of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Mehdi Hasan, Nusrat Fateh Ali and Tufail Niazi.

In most cases the creative career of a woman is cut short the moment

she marries. But Surinder was lucky to find a husband who not only loved her but also admired her voice. She was married at Lahore when still in her teens to Jogindra Singh, a lecturer of psychology. "I couldn't have asked for a better husband. I was a singer who had just done her Matric and not very good at her studies. He was an educated and cultured man and among his friends were people like the playwright Balwant Gargi, poet Amrita Pritam, opera director Sheela Bhatia and so many others. Not only did he allow me to continue singing but he nurtured my talent," she says.

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After the Partition, the young couple moved to Bombay. There, for the first time, Surinder sang songs in Hindi. It was a film called *Shaheed* with the freedom struggle in the backdrop, starring Dilip Kumar and Kamini Kaushal. Surinder sang three songs for it and one was to become an all-time hit: *Badnam na ho jaaye mohabbat ka fasana; Ai dard bhare ansooyon aankhon mein na aana* (Please don't come to my eyes, sorrowful tears, lest my story of love be mocked at). Go to her house and her cook Paan Dev, a Garhwali who has been with her for the past 44 years will make it a point to play this record. However, the Bombay climate did not agree with her and they moved to Delhi.

It was in Delhi that her talent took on many new dimensions. "I resumed my training in classical music with Ustad Abdul Rehman Khan for my Guru. It was here that I came into contact with music composer Panna Lal Kathak who was an exceptionally

## Writing Nani Ma's Story



Grand daughter Sunaini

"Oh! Nani Ma, why do you not plait my hair more tightly, "little Sunaini would grumble as Surinder Kaur got her ready to go to Rosary Convent in Delhi. Home from school, she would join her granny in singing. And she came to be known as Ustad Abdul Rehman Khan's youngest disciple.

After graduating from Lady Sri Ram College, she did a course in fashion designing and works as a fashion consultant in Chandigarh. "When I accompanied Nani on a tour of England, I realised that she was no just an old granny but a famous woman who was loved by many. It was then that I decided to write her biography."

Surinder too is happy with the project, "Although many have written essays and books on me in Punjabi, I feel I am able to talk more freely with Sunaini," The book is to be a pictorial with each picture leading to a story and is to be divided into seven parts. "This so because there are seven notes in music and seven decades in Nani's life," says Sunaini.

talented man and who composed many of the songs that I sang. Every other evening there would be a *mehfil* in our home for my husband loved music," she recounts. It was in this period that Surinder moved from folk songs to sing literary compositions by poets like Amrita Pritam, Mohan Singh, Nandlal Noorpuri and Shiv Kumar Batalvi. She was the singing star in a number of Sheela Bhatia's operas. In 1952, she went as a delegate to Russia. This delegation included many famous artists including Nargis, Raj Kapoor, Balraj Sahni, NirupaRoy and singer Aasa Singh Mastana. "On returning to India, Mastana and I formed a singing pair on stage. We sang very few duets and *tappas*, but we became a very popular team. I felt very sad when he died," says Surinder.

Surinder continued to remain a formidable name in the singing arena. Even though she had two sisters who sang, Prakash and Narendra, it was

she who got unparalleled acclaim and overshadowed all others as far as the singing of Punjabi songs went. In the villages they would say, *Ajj Surinder Kaur ne akharha lagana hai*. Loosely translated this would mean that "Surinder Kaur is the star of the

wrestling ring today." Remembering this Surinder laughs and says, "Yes, singing would often be equated with wrestling in Punjab. But singing does require energy. I remember Shamshad Begum, who loved me very much, would roll up her sleeves and advise me that I should take milk and almonds. Singing is like *kifshiti* (wrestling) she would say."

The Eighties brought about a change of tastes in Punjabi music. The beat changed as did the rhythm and the beginnings of Punjabi pop were made by Gurdas Mann and Malkit Singh, who danced as they sang to elaborate electronic music. These were the days of *Dil da mamla* and *Tutak tutak tutian*. So some 20 years after I had been first introduced to Surinder on a starlit night on the terrace of our Chandigarh home, I sadly watched another spectacle during the annual Rose Garden Festival. The grand dame of Punjabi music got up onto the stage with her Jittle bunch of bells in her hands to sing her heart out. But the crowd of young people started hooting for they wanted her off the stage and Gurdas Mann on. While this was a sacrilege to the admirers of Surinder, it was a shock

to the singer too. She who had ruled the stage so that even the birds stopped chirping to listen to her, could not hold back her anger. Snatching the mike, she shouted, "Today, you are hooting me out. But mind you, one day you will remember that there used to be a Surinder Kaur." These were certainly prophetic words. For when in the fiftieth year of India's Independence, HMV brought out a collector's set of five cassettes on "50 Years of Punjabi Music," which had old timers like Shamshad Begum, YamlaJat, Rangila and newcomers like Gurdas Mann and Daler Mehndi, nearly two cassettes were dedicated to the songs of Prakash and Surinder. Their third sister, Narinder, too sang. "So many of my people are gone. The greatest loss was the death of my husband Jogindra Singh, who was my friend, philosopher and guide. I can never recall him saying a harsh word to me. He always called me Surinderji. There was between us a complete understanding. Now when I find couples squabbling, even my own daughters and sons-in-law, I just cannot figure out what they are fighting about. Prakash Behanji's

death was a big loss to me and so also Narinder's. But that is life," she says.

The gate outside her home still bears a nameplate with two names - Jogindra Singh and Surinder Kaur. "I moved to this house from Model Town after his death. Let me tell you something. My favourite flower is the rose. I had quite a rose garden in our Model Town house. But after his death, roses just did not bloom in my garden. I kept the nameplate as it was. It pained me to remove his name. During the killings of the Sikhs in November, 1984, my neighbours got worried for me. They asked me to take off the nameplate. But I refused. If death had to come thus, let it. But they took off the nameplate without telling me. When normalcy returned, I put the nameplate right back," she says.

Losing the strong emotional anchor she had in her husband and losing out the large masses to Punjabi pop, Surinder went through some years of depression. Her daughter Dolly recalls, "For a while Mama was very despondent. She felt that she had lost the purpose of life. But we three sisters supported her emotionally. She also turned to prayer and reading the Guru Granth Sahib. This helped her a lot. So also did her many admirers who continued to yearn for her songs."

So Surinder turned to smaller concerts with more discerning audience. And her fans trail her still. Recently during the SAARC writers' conference in New Delhi, Urdu poet Ahmad Faraz who was here from Pakistan made a big effort to meet her but she was away to her daughter in Panchkula near Chandigarh. "Surinder has a great fan following on the other side of the border. Some years ago, she was there and her singing of the Batalvi song - *Loki*

*poojan rabb te main tera birharha* (People worship God but I worship your memory) was just wonderful. I want to hear the song once more from her," said Faraz.

Surinder's visit to Pakistan some years ago was preceded by a very interesting incident. Dolly was giving a performance in London. During the concert, she received a chit. She thought that it was a request for a song but it turned out to be a request by someone called Z.A. Chaudhri to meet her after the performance. "After the performance an ageing couple came to me and the man handed me a small packet and asked me to open it. I opened it and saw that it was an album. It contained some pictures of a house that I could not recognise," recalls Dolly. Chaudhri then told me that it was Mama's parental house at Lahore which had been allotted to them after the Partition. "After my tour of London, I went to New Jersey where Mama was staying with one of my sisters. I gave her the album. Mama, opened it and wasn't she overjoyed? There was major excitement that night as Mama went over picture after picture recalling the old times," says Dolly.

Surinder says that once a newspaper reporter asked her on what her unrealised wish was. And she told him that it was to go back once to Lahore and see the home she

was born in. This happened some years ago when Surinder went with a cultural delegation to Pakistan. "I visited our house there. The street is still named after my father and called Bishan Street. And the house is still named after my mother; it bears the plaque 'Maya Bhawan.' What made me happier still was the fact that I met many of the old people, including my classmates. They gave me so much of love. And I sang out my heart to them as never before," she says.

What strikes one as one visits her at her home in New Delhi is that Surinder lives with a contentment of a life well sung. There is a library full of the books of her husband. Her own awards lie scattered around. She literally has awards by the dozens including the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, Padmashri and the Punjab Sangeet Natak Akademi award. Most of the awards are kept dusted and polished by Paan Dev and his wife in the kitchen. "My greatest award has been the appreciation that I have got from my listeners," she says. For summers she goes to her daughters Nandini and Pramodini in New Jersey. Her family here is Paan Dev, his wife and their young son whom she is educating. Paan Dev says, "She has been my mother and she arranged and bore the expense for the marriages of my three daughters," he says. And Surinder plans to move with them to Punjab. "After the Partition, I never could live in Punjab. But now I am going to sell this house and buy myself a house in Mohali. My daughter, Dolly, is in Panchkula but that comes in Haryana. I want to breathe my last in Punjab and Mohali is the nearest place in Punjab to Panchkula," she says. Well, the nightingale must fly home singing, as she always did, in Punjabi. □

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