



## Revisiting 'Lag Ja Gale' and Bollywood's Obsession With a Classic

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From the millions of songs that Indian cinema has produced, there are a few which are just truly timeless, exceptional and inimitable. And if one were to sift through those few for a phenomenal rare gem, it could arguably be *Lag Ja Gale* sung by Lata Mangeshkar with music by Madan Mohan and lyrics woven by Raja Mehdi Ali Khan, featured in the Manoj Kumar - Sadhna suspense drama *Woh Kaun Thi*.

The song has not only stood the test of time, but has time and again been used by Bollywood to accentuate an emotional note in several

films, even contemporary ones like Karan Johar's *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* to the new *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster 3*. Here's a quick chat with the legendary music composer Madan Mohan's son Sanjeev Kohli on the iconic *Lag Ja Gale*, which (believe it or not) was initially rejected by *Woh Kaun Thi*'s director.

◀ **Q. What is your earliest memory of *Lag Ja Gale* composed by your father Madan Mohanji for *Woh Kaun Thi* that released in 1964?**

**Sanjeev Kohli:** The songs of *Woh Kaun Thi* were recorded in 1963, when I was just 7-years-old. So I was not very connected to its creation process, except by subsequent information and awareness of it from my dad sometimes, conversations at home in later years etc.

I do recall that in 1964, along with my 10-year-old sister, I managed to accompany our parents to see the “adult” film (*Woh Kaun Thi*) at a private late night preview at that time. I was pre-conditioned to believe how scary the ghost saga would be and the songs were used in the narrative to haunt and accentuate the mystery, so even though it starred our absolute favourite ‘Sadhana Aunty’, I saw the songs and most of the film with eyes shut most of the time, including *Lag Ja Gale*, fearing that the beautiful lady on screen would soon turn ghostly! But enough to boast to school friends the next day that I had managed to see an adult film, a big achievement in those days for any of them! Of course, the melody of the song had captivated me at that very time, even though the more popular song then was *Naina Barse Rim Jhim*, the theme song of the film, since it appeared often in the film as the signature chant of the lady in white.



**Madan Mohan with son Sanjeev Kohli.**

*(Photo Courtesy: Sanjeev Kohli)*

◀ Q. The soundtrack of *Woh Kaun Thi*, though nominated for a Filmfare, did not win an award, which seems almost unbelievable today with such a magnificent song in it. They probably didn't have a best song or singer category in those days?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** Filmfare Awards for Best Music started in 1954 and Best Singer in 1958 (both presented in the subsequent year). It was the only award at the time and much coveted by all. Madan Mohanji was nominated for the first time in 1962 for his music in *Anpadh*, but missed out to *Professor*. He was nominated again for *Woh Kaun Thi* in 1964, but lost out to *Dosti* with music by newcomers Laxmikant Pyarelal. It is undignified for me to comment on this. *Dosti* was a great score indeed, but many felt that Madanji deserved the award. Pyarelalji, the composer for *Dosti*, has gone on record about why this happened, but I will not comment further on the matter. Incidentally, while in earlier years the award was for a specific song, in a few years it became the award for the Best Soundtrack and *Woh Kaun Thi*, had 5 chartbusters and much loved songs, each so varied and of different genres.

◀ Q. Do you remember any mention of the song or the recording of it made by Madan Mohan during any of his conversations?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** He was very disappointed at losing the coveted award, which was the barometer of achievement in those days and this did cause him to feel bitter, I must say, especially as it was the second successive instance when he lost the award to another film when all had concluded that it was a one horse race, both times!



Lata Mangeshkar with Madan Mohan.

(Photo Courtesy: Sanjeev Kohli)

◀ **Q.** You must have heard about the song from Lataji, did she make any reference to how the song was recorded, any memories of it at all?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** It is also one of Lataji's favourite songs. At the time of recording it she was keeping unwell and in fact for *Naina Barse*, Madanji had to sing the song himself to send it in time for the Shimla shoot, and Lataji had to dub it later. That song was filmed on Sadhana lip synching to Madanji's voice!

Lataji often says *Lag Ja Gale* was a tough song to sing, especially to bring in all the *murkis*, and variations suggested by Madanji, and some added by her. In those days a song had to be completed in a 4 hour shift, with all musicians and singer together with retakes by all if a musician faltered and yet

despite limited technology, the song sounds so fresh even today in its original version.

*She has also said on record that when she heard Madanji had not got the award for Woh Kaun Thi, she visited him to express her disappointment and show solidarity, and all he said was... 'just the fact that even you are disappointed, is my award!'*

Lataji was compelled to sing this song at almost every concert she performed, on listeners' demand. In fact, when she performed in London with the Wren Orchestra, 10 songs from a short list were selected by them for the symphonic presentation and this was one of them. The conductor, Ed Welch when he first heard the original song, was so impressed by its melody and musical structure that he called Lataji from London to express his appreciation.

◀ **Q.** In an interview Manoj Kumar said that Raj Khosla had initially rejected the song, which left Madan Mohan disappointed and he went with it to Manoj Kumar, who then made Khosla listen to the song again, after which he hit himself with a slipper to show what a fool he was to reject a song like this. Have you heard about this anecdote before?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** Yes, this story has been personally shared with us too by Manoj Kumarji. Interestingly, the director Raj Khosla and Madanji were good friends, in fact, Raj Khosla, a good singer himself, had sung a song for Madanji in his debut film, *Aankhen* in 1950. When they worked together for the first time in *Woh Kaun Thi*, it was the very musically attuned. Raj Khosla, who reminded Madanji of a haunting tune he had composed in 1949/ 1950, which was never used for a decade thereafter as many directors rejected it in all the years ... that song became *Naina Barse*, the theme song of the film. It would probably never have been recorded had Raj Khosla not recalled it.



Madan Mohan with filmmaker Raj Khosla (L).

*(Photo Courtesy: Sanjeev Kohli)*

*And yet it was Raj Khosla who rejected the tune of Lag Ja Gale in the first sitting, as he possibly felt it was not haunting enough for the 'ghost story'. A disappointed Madanji, who was confident that he had created a good and apt melody, requested the leading man (who was also involved in the screenplay work) to intervene and give his view.*

Without specific reference to the earlier sitting, a second sitting was arranged with Manoj Kumarji also present and the same tune was

presented again...this time the director was blown away. I would attribute this to the director possibly being preoccupied and not very receptive initially. And what a great job he did with the picturisation of the song later! If this song had been rejected again, it would never have been recorded.



Madan Mohan (R) with the lyricist of *Lag Ja Gale*, Raja Mehdi Ali Khan.

(Photo Courtesy: Sanjeev Kohli)

- ◀ Q. A key contributor to *Lag Ja Gale*.. was lyricist Raja Mehdi Ali Khan, though he isn't as popular as some of his contemporaries - Raja Mehdi Ali Khan has some really popular songs credited to him and from what I know this extremely talented writer passed away when he was as young as 37. Is there anything more that you would know about Raja Mehdi Ali Khan and his collaboration with Madan Mohan saab?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** Raja Mehdi Ali Khan and Madanji were great friends, the lyricist had written earlier even for *Shaheed* in 1947, (a film made in Bombay Talkies Studios which was

managed by Madanji's father) and then also in Madanji's early films *Aankhen* and *Madhosh*. His indifferent health deterred him from getting the big banner films with other composers and thus he was not as active as his contemporaries. Even Madanji worked less with him in the latter part of the 50s. They revived their team with *Anpadh* in 1962 and the song *Aapki Nazron Ne Samjha* became a big hit. While all the songs of *Woh Kaun Thi* were excellently written, indeed *Lagja Gale* has outstanding lyrics. The timeless quality of the song is because of a confluence of great lyrics, a memorable composition and musical embellishment, an outstanding rendition, and also the filming and enactment in the film. *Shayad Phir Is Janam Mein Mulaqat Ho Na Ho...* is a poignant sentiment that anyone of us can relate to and adapt to our lives.

◀ **Q.** *Woh Kaun Thi* was remade in Tamil and Telugu and *Lagja Gale* was picturised on Jayalalithaa in those films, did Madan Mohanji hear them, do you recall him or Lataji talking about it?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** I learnt later that *Woh Kaun Thi* was remade in Tamil and Telugu, with the original tunes used. I believe it was official and done through the right channels. I also believe Lataji was asked to sing, but was too busy to go to Madras for the recordings, hence P Sushila, the leading singer for Tamil films, sang the songs.

It is unfortunate that in these days of free exchange of misinformation in social media, many listeners, especially fans of films made in the South, choose to believe that Madanji used tunes from a Tamil film in *Woh Kaun Thi*.

◀ Q. There has been this sudden rediscovery of *Lagja Gale* in the last few years... Karan Johar used it in his short in *Bombay Talkies* (2013), so did *Saheb Bibi Aur Gangster Returns* in the same year. Karan Johar's last film *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* again used the song, it's been a part of an extensive TV commercial, the new *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster 3* has a new version of the song by Jonita Gandhi and of course there are so many cover versions of it online, I also saw one by a foreign band. How do you react to this new obsession with the song?

**Sanjeev Kohli:** Apart from the instances referred above, there are many more. In many films, if a song is being used as radio play, one can hear *Lagja Gale* in the background. Karan used it in his films and has often said how much he likes the song. It was used very appropriately in *Fanna* as well... and then in many TV serials. Of course, it only amplifies that a great melody is timeless and transcends all generations. It also has been awarded the most popular love song by radio channels in a public poll, featuring responses from young listeners and then almost all our young singers of today perform this song in their live shows and concerts to much applause.

In fact the audience, comprising mostly youngsters, sing the song along with them with the lyrics known to them. In every concert of Madanji songs, this one is a must it is just one of the most recognised songs today. Of course, today this is exhilarating, except for the regret that Madanji never saw this in his lifetime or got adequate credit for it. and while the song is loved, even today he hardly gets any posthumous credit for it.



Ranbir Kapoor and Anushka Sharma waltz to *Lag Ja Gale* in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*.

- ◀ Q. Is this rediscovery and popularity of *Lag Ja Gale*... in any way benefiting the music composer and lyricist's family in terms of royalty as it rightly should? The Indian Performing Rights Society has been quiet active in this matter lately.

**Sanjeev Kohli:** For us, as family of the deceased composer, it is not the monetary benefits that attract us but we feel elated with the appreciation this song and many such others continue to receive. Having said that, yes, due to the copyright laws, lack of awareness leading to ill-informed assignments of copyrights by original creators over the years, there are anomalies on who really benefits but little can be done as the 'law was followed'!

While yes, recently composers and lyricists are being represented by agencies, the systems etc are still not fully in place to accord benefits to the respective composers and lyricists for specific usage of their creations. It would not be fair for me to comment more on this, even if I may have some views. An effort is being made and we should continue to be supportive during the process.

I definitely have one strong view, while it is legal by music labels/ copyright owners / agencies etc to randomly grant rights to new users, there is no protection at all of the original credits. The music labels / agencies should at least be

responsible custodians of the rights they acquired in good times by ensuring the original creators are acknowledged wherever a song is used / redone! Almost no young listener today knows the original creators of the song.

◀ **Q. Recently there was news that Woh Kaun Thi will be remade and Lagja Gale... will be recreated for the new version. Your thoughts? Will you join us in our prayers that everyone just lets this inimitable classic be and not tinker with it?**

**Sanjeev Kohli:** I have heard so many many versions of the song – some really well done, some so embarrassing. I cannot comment on any forthcoming versions and hope the people behind such a project have the sensitivity to do justice to creations they are just borrowing from earlier times and to give due credit to original creators.