



An eerily still night; a lonely palatial mansion shrouded in the dark; a slowly rocking swing with no one around; the magnetic, mystifying Madhubala as a lady in white and the bewildered look on Ashok Kumar's expressive face.

Against the backdrop of this bewitching black and white celluloid imagery, a mesmerizing song pierced through:

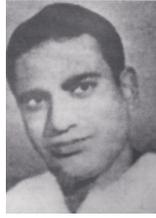
**'Aayegaa, aayegaa, aayegaa  
Aayegaa anewaala aayegaa, aayegaa, aayegaa! Aayegaa!'**

The year was 1949. The film was *Mahal*; the composer Khemchand Prakash and the singer Lata Mangeshkar. It was an unforgettable, haunting audio-visual odyssey. An odyssey that marked the birth of an era.

The late 1940s was a crucial period in Indian history. Independence was just around the corner. In those days, Ghulam Haider was a big name among Hindi film music composers. He was a trend-setter, whose super-successful soundtrack *Khazanchi* had brought the rhythmic Punjabi style to the fore. That's why when he started praising a rank newcomer as a potential musical genius, many an eyebrow went up. Most of those 'knowledgeable' people just laughed off his prophecy.

They had a valid reason to laugh. How could a tiny, teenaged, two-braided Maharashtrian girl with such a thin voice survive in Hindi film music? That era belonged to robust, rustic Punjabi voices like Shamshad Begum, Zohrabai Ambalewali, Amirbai Karnataki and Noor Jehan. Yet Haider's words soon started making an impact. A lot of famous composers like Shyamsundar, Husnlal-Bhagatram, Anil Biswas and Naushad started discovering something new, something different in that girl's voice. Soon her songs from films like *Bazaar*, *Badi Bahen*, *Anokha Pyar* and *Chaandni Raat* started making the rounds on jukeboxes. But most of those songs had an unmistakable Noor Jehan tinge and failed to establish her uniqueness. This situation was to change very soon. For that, destiny had chosen a man called Khemchand Prakash!

Born in 1908, in a small town called Sujangarh in Rajasthan, Khemchand first learnt classical and folk music and Kathak dancing from his father, a performer in Jaipur's royal court. Beginning his career as a musician in the royal courts of Bikaner and Nepal, Khemchand moved on to Kolkata's All India Radio. From there, he entered the Hindi film industry as an assistant to New Theatre's music director Timir Baran.



As an independent composer, Khemchand, (who sometimes also assumed a name – Khemraj!) made his musical mark in Ranjit Movietone's films. His music in the 1943 film *Tansen*, in which Saigal and Khursheed sang many memorable songs, proved an acclaimed masterpiece. This success turned Khemchand into an industry heavyweight. Even noted composers like Naushad and Bulo C. Rani worked as his assistants early in their careers.

The quality of Lata's voice immediately appealed to Khemchand and he decided to make her his main singer. But he couldn't convince Ranjit Movietone's owner Sardar Chandulal Shah to back his decision. Disappointed, he quit and entered rival studio Bombay Talkies. That studio was then in the process of making *Mahal*. It was a movie with a seemingly supernatural, mysterious storyline, which was to be the first ever Hindi film in that genre. Kamal Amrohi was directing the film and Khemchand Prakash fitted the bill perfectly as the composer.

'Masterji', as he was fondly called, selected Lata to sing the theme song for the movie. Nakshab Jarchavi penned the lyrics. After numerous rehearsals, the final recording session started and to quote Usha Mangeshkar, "The final rehearsal started at 6 p.m. and the song was recorded at 7 a.m. the next morning!" 'Aayegaa Aanewaalaa' had arrived!

Now let's try to go back in time and imagine the listeners' reactions when the song was first played on radio. Breaking through the stillness of night, the grandfather clock strikes two. A superb blend of violin strains and piano bars creates a chilling, haunting atmosphere. Deepening that mist of mystery, an ethereal voice comes through, bringing with it a disturbing sense of solitude and pain:

***Khaamosh hai zamaana, chupchaap hain sitaare***  
***Aaraam se hai duniyaa, bekal hain dil ke maare.***

(The cosmos is silent, even the stars are still.  
The world is resting but the lovelorn are distressed.)

Then comes a piercing violin piece followed by some soft piano notes. The atmosphere is built up brilliantly. Pure spine-tingling, goose-bump stuff! The voice continues:

***Aise mein koe aahat is tarah aa rahee hai.***  
***Jaise ki chal rahaa ho man mein koe hamaare***  
***Yaa dil dhadak rahaa hai is aas ke sahaare.***

(In such a setting, a sound comes through  
As if someone is walking through my mind,  
Or is that my heart quickening with hope!)

There is a fetching twirl on ***Aahat*** that immediately draws an appreciative nod. The expressive way in which that word ***Dhadak*** is rendered makes an overwhelmed heart skip a beat. The surreal voice continues drawing us deeper and deeper into an unknown world:

