

Kundan Lal Saigal

(1904-1947)

Cinema in the subcontinent dates back to about 1913, when Dadabhoi Phalkay was the first to make a silent film called *Raja Harish Chandra*. To make up for the lack of sound, a man stood by the side of the screen to explain what was happening. Back then, cinema was commonly known as bioscope.

Sound recording in films started in 1931 in the subcontinent and the first talkie was *Alam Ara*. Songs were included in films from the very beginning of the talkies and Kundan Lal Saigal, popularly known as K.L. Saigal, was an important addition to the intricate art of film-making.

One hundred years to this year, Saigal was born in 1904 in Jammu. Although according to some he was born in Jullundhur, he only lived there. The young Kundan Lal Saigal would accompany his mother to the temple where he would sing *bhajans* and dance. He belonged to a middle-class family and his father was a Tehsildar. He attended the convent (asthana) of Sufi Saint Sulman Yousuf, who, it is said, initially helped him in the art of singing.

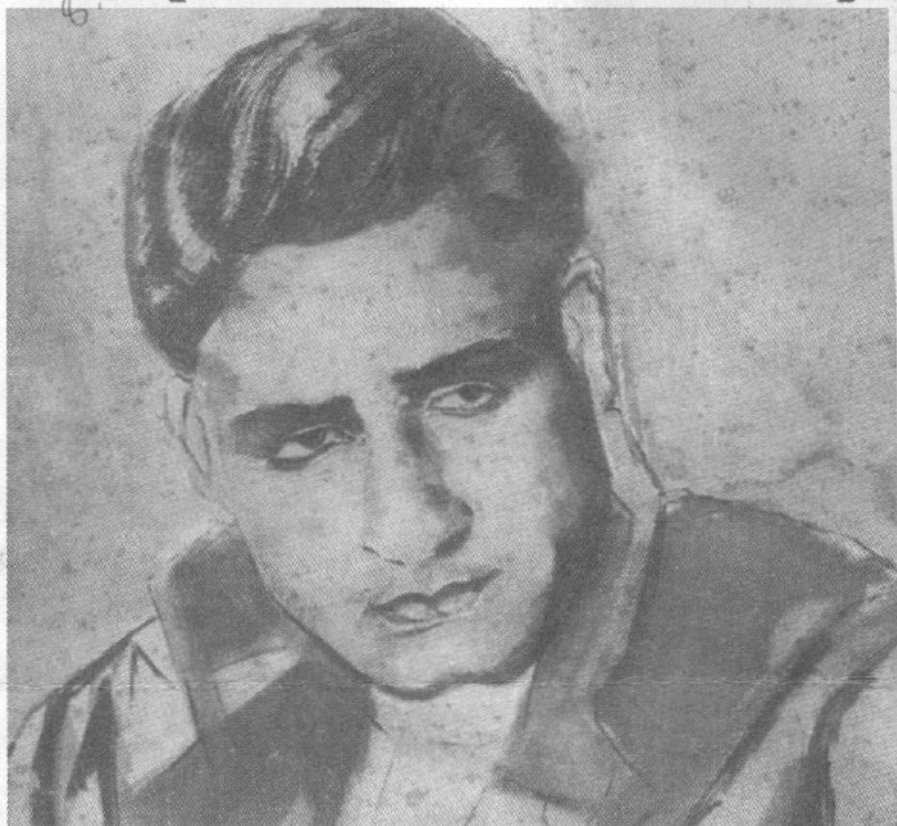
Kundan Lal married a girl called Asha Rani from the village of Himachal and after working as a time-keeper for the railways, went to Calcutta and joined a typewriter manufacturing company named Remington Rand as salesman for a monthly salary of Rs80. It was here that he met B.N. Sarkar, founder of New Theatres in Tollyganj, Calcutta. Sarkar offered him a job as actor-singer and the salary was fixed at Rs100. At that time, R.C. Boral (Roy Chandra Boral), Timir Baran and Punkaj Mullick were music directors at New Theatres.

K.L. Saigal wanted to learn music from Ustad Faiyaz Khan, who told him that he already knew so much that he did not need any formal training. Saigal had had no orthodox training in music, but he had a very good sense of rhythm. His mastery of *sur* and *taal* made him truly unique. In those days, the orchestra comprised very few musical instrument players. It is also said that K.L. Saigal's voice was so melodious that when he sang, it sounded like music.

Saigal sang geets and ghazals with equal ease. Some of the geets sung by him are *Main jo dinan ki chori, Jan jaori, Hori raj dularay, Lag gayee chot karejwa main, Main bairhi thi, Harajolion ki thi, Kawn bujhaay Ram, Bhajo man bhav say, Panchi kabay hot udas and Jhoolna jhulao re*.

Some ghazals by him are: *Baqadri-i-shauq iqrar-i-wafa kya, Ishq khud mail-i-hijab hai aqar, Aiy bekhabri-i-dil* (Seemab Akber Abadi), *Phir mujhay deeda-i-tar yad aaya, Har aik baat pe kahtay ho, Main unhain cherhoon, Woh aakay khwab main, Dil se teri nigah* (Ghalib), *Lae hayat aeey qaza lay chali chalay* (Zauq) and *Kaun veeranay main daikhay ga bahar* (Ameer Meenai).

K.L. Saigal's first film as an actor was *Muhabbat Kay Aansoo*, followed by *Zinda*



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Laash and *Subha Ka Sitara*. All three were flops. They were produced in 1931 under the banner of New Theatres. In 1932, he starred in *Puran Bhagt* with the blind singer, K.C. Day, who sang *Jao jao aiy merey sadhu* and *Kya karan hay roney ka*. Saigal sang *Radhay rani*. All three were hits.

The films in which K.L. Saigal starred and sang after 1932 are: *Chandi Das* (1933-34); *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1934); *Raj Rani Meera*; *Devdas* (1935); *Dhoop Chaoon* (1938); *Crorepati*; *Pujaran*; *President* (1937); *Zindagi*; *Street Singer* (1938); *Dushman*

(1939); *Lagan* (1941); *Karawan-i-Hayat*; *Bhagt Surdas* (1941-42); *Tansen* (1943); *Dharti Matn*; *My Sister* (1944); *Harjayee*; *Tadbeew*; *Krukshetra*; *Omer Khayyam*; *Shah Jahan* (1946); and *Parwana* (1947).

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