

An appraisal of Indian film singer, S.P. Balasubrahmanyam (1946–2020)

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Millions of Indian music lovers around the world have mourned the passing of playback singer, S. P. Balasubrahmanyam, from COVID-19. Popularly known as SPB or Balu, the acclaimed singer died on September 25, aged 74, having struggled with the disease for more than a month in a Chennai private hospital.

Playback singing—where songs are pre-recorded for films and then mimed by actors—is an essential element in Indian and Pakistani cinema, particularly movies from Bollywood and other popular production houses on the subcontinent. Playback singers in Indian cinema, one of the most prolific film industries in the world, have the same status as actors.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi responded to SPB's death with a routine tweet: "With the unfortunate demise of Shri SP Balasubrahmanyam, our cultural world is a lot poorer."

Modi's trite and perfunctory comments are hypocritical. Political responsibility for Balasubrahmanyam's death, along with tens of thousands of other needless fatalities, lies with the failure of the Indian government to take any serious measures to prevent the spread of the highly infectious virus.

Modi's reference to culture is equally cynical. His extreme-right Hindu fundamentalist regime is openly hostile to all genuinely creative artists, who attempt to elevate the cultural horizons and critical thinking of the broad masses, let alone challenge its communalist ideology and provocations.

Balasubrahmanyam, whose sister, S. P. Sailaja, and his own son, S. P. Charan, are both popular singers and film actors in South India, was born in 1946 to a Telugu family in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh.

While SPB was interested in music from an early age, his first influences were from his father, S. P. Sambamurthy, a "harikatha" singer. Harikatha is a performance genre using poems or songs about the Hindu gods and involves embellishments and techniques commonly employed in Indian classical music. The two basic musical traditions—Carnatic in south India and Hindustani in the north—are based on thousands of ragas that provide melodic structures, tone and an improvisational framework.

SPB, who studied to become an engineer, received no formal musical education and was largely self-taught. He transcended the limitations of the religious music performed by his father to acquire and refine his own unique singing style. If given the time and opportunity to undertake a detailed study of Indian classical music, he no doubt would have developed his technique to an even more refined level.

In 1964, SPB won an amateur singing competition held in Madras by the Telugu Cultural Organisation. Two years later, he began his playback singing career in *Sri Sri Sri Maryada Ramanna*, a Telugu-language film. Eight days after its production, he was invited to record non-Telugu songs for another movie.

SPB had a naturally sweet, energetic and youthful voice, but one that possessed a maturity and emotional depth. He was able to seamlessly transition from soft to loud volumes and higher and lower registers without distracting from the mood, and to also quiver notes (known as "gamak") that intensifies the sweetness and romantic passion of the song.

These skills, and his ability to rapidly absorb the essential musical elements of any song, were employed by numerous composers and film directors and his career quickly took off. As legendary musician M.S. Viswanathan noted: "Balu would listen to the tune just once and would be ready for the take. Such was his ability to grasp by just listening."

Indian cinema releases an extraordinary number of films, often in excess of 1,800 features annually. Many attempt to sensitively explore human life in all its emotional and social dimensions, but these are overshadowed by the hundreds of superficial love stories and action adventures released each year in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and other Indian languages.

These movies provide regular work for hundreds of talented individuals, but the clichéd character of these films, and their commercial success, can artistically entrap and reduce the vision of their creators. Notwithstanding these limitations, the extraordinary musical talent of Balasubrahmanyam is undoubted and rightly celebrated by tens of millions across the subcontinent and internationally.

During his more than five-decade career,

Balasubrahmanyam recorded over 40,000 songs in 16 languages, including Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi, Sanskrit and Urdu, many of them his own compositions. Up until last year, he was being hired by young song writers and film composers.

Three thousand of his 10,000 Tamil songs were produced in collaboration with legendary Indian film composer Ilaiyaraaja. The combined harmonies of the Ilaiyaraaja-Balasubrahmanyam-Janaki trio (later joined by K.S. Chithra) were an immense contribution to South Indian film music.

Balasubrahmanyam, who received six national awards and many other prizes, won his first national award for the songs composed by K. V. Mahadevan in the Telugu film *Sankarabharanam* (*The Jewel of Shiva* [1980]). The movie was about a family committed to classical music and dance. SPB's contributions to the film encouraged other filmmakers to employ components of Indian classical music in their work—for example, Ilaiyaraaja's compositions for the dance-based *Salangai Oli* (*The Sound of an Anklet* [1983]).

Balasubrahmanyam also worked as a multi-lingual dubbing artist for many well-known actors, including Kamal Haasan, as well as singing and acting in several films.

Whilst there are major pronunciation differences between Hindi and the South Indian languages, Balasubrahmanyam skilfully preserved the musical character and emotional content of the songs, irrespective of the language. His performances for South Indian cinema stars, such as Rajinikanth, Murali, Mohan, Kamal Haasan, Ajith Kumar and Vijay, and popular North Indian actors, such as Salman Khan, and Shah Rukh Khan, contributed greatly to their popularity. His voice also perfectly harmonised with all the female singers, including duets with Lata Mangeshkar, one of the best-known playback singers in Indian cinema.

One example of his many international collaborations was the Tamil song “Araro Aaro Arivaro” (Lullaby), which he sang with Vani Jayaram for the film *Vasandaththil Oru Vaanavil* (1981). Composed by Sri Lankan Premasiri Kemadasa, the song employs western musical styles and vocals.

In 1992, Balasubrahmanyam sang three songs for Mani Ratnam's film *Roja*, with music composed by the celebrated A.R. Rahman. The song “Roja Jaaneman” (My Rose Sweetheart) is one of the singer's most captivating efforts. Stage performances of the song by SPB, first in Hindi and then in Tamil, always saw audiences spontaneously burst into applause.

Despite his extensive and impressive artistic record, SPB's understanding of society was limited and never saw him challenge the existing political and social order. He often viewed social problems as the consequences of individual mistakes, thus letting India's ruling elites off the hook.

SPB's vast body of work and his ongoing recorded and live collaborations with musicians from all language, religious and ethnic barriers throughout the region, stood in stark contradiction to the communalist hysteria and provocations by the ruling classes across the Indian sub-continent to divide the working class. Balasubrahmanyam's undoubted commitment to the universality of all musical creativity was reflected in his work and embraced and enjoyed by millions.

Thousands of fans rushed into the streets on learning of SPB's death and scores of actors, filmmakers and other artists visited his family home to pay tribute. His funeral was broadcast live on Indian television while millions across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and internationally mourned his passing.

Two months after his death, radio and television programs, and scores of social media postings, continue to pay tribute to this extraordinary artist. Had he lived, this popular and prolific singer would no doubt have continued making valuable contributions to his artistic genre.

For those wanting to hear more of SPB's singing, the authors recommend the following video selection of Tamil- and Hindi-language songs:

Mandram Vanda Thendralukku (The Breeze That Came to the Parlour)

Nilave Vaa (Welcome Moon)

Vilihal Meeno (Fish Eye)

Kadvul Amaithu Vaitha Medai (Marriage Arranged by God)

Ilaya Nila Polihiradu (Young Moon Arise)

Mannil Inda Kaadal Andri (Without Love on Earth)

Malare Maunamaa (Is the Flower Mute)

En Kaadale (Oh My Love)

There Mere Bich Mein (Between You and Me)

Saathiya Ye Tune Kya Kiya (What Have You Done My Soul Mate)



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