

Rekha



# Rekha

The Untold Story

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*For  
Nazia, Myra  
and  
Rekha*



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## Author's Note

After my book on Rajesh Khanna was published in 2014, I kept getting handwritten letters and emails from die-hard fans of his. Some still find their way into my inbox. There was a common thread in all those letters: his fans were distressed, and surprised, to learn about Rajesh Khanna's loneliness, little known about before. Not only was he a regular at Bollywood mehfilis but his colourful and energetic on-screen persona was difficult to reconcile with his loneliness. This made me want to take a closer look at the lives of popular film stars and what seems to be a common thread in them: a feeling of loneliness. That was why I wrote Rajesh Khanna's story. This is why I am writing this story.

I asked the film-maker Muzaffar Ali why he cast Rekha in *Umrao Jaan*, when there were arguably better actresses like Smita Patil around. Pat came the reply, 'Her eyes conveyed the experience of having been broken and then having pulled herself together. She has that strength,

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that striking feature which draws from her past.' Rekha's past is, indeed, shot through with sadness and stories of overcoming adversity.

From a troubled childhood during which she was unloved and unaccepted by her father to being pushed into the film industry that was not an easy place, to put it mildly, for a young girl; from the disturbing controversy about her being coerced into a kissing scene at age fourteen to her multiple failed relationships: there was no dearth of drama for Rekha as a child and young woman. These early experiences, perhaps, never left her. The film-maker Shyam Benegal told me, 'She was thirteen or fourteen when I did some ad films with her. She didn't know Hindi and yet she was in the Hindi film industry for some reason. But I can never forget that spark in her eyes and the confidence she had in front of the camera. That was something.' Despite the odds, Rekha clawed her way up in the cut-throat film industry.

When I was researching for this book, I interviewed people who had worked with Rekha or were close to her, personally and professionally. I was surprised that many of them reacted to this project with 'Why Rekha?' Several spoke about her in the most sexist of ways, called her unprintable names and ridiculed her relationships and affairs – always off the record, of course, when my dictaphone was switched off. Once the interview went on record, they made generic, platitudinous statements like 'It

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was great working with her', 'She is a fabulous actress', and dropped subtle, or not, hints about how she underwent a considerable transformation after she met 'him', referring to Amitabh Bachchan. Most were long interviews without anything substantial in them. In contrast, when I had interviewed the same people for my previous book, they shared numerous stories about Rajesh Khanna. In Rekha's case, there was an odd reluctance. Perhaps people were overwhelmed by the dominant love angle of her story, or maybe it was the habitual bias against women achievers at play. Of course, there were also those who let their guard down, like Gulzar, Shyam Benegal, Muzaffar Ali and several journalists who had been close to Rekha at some point or the other.

As a TV producer and journalist, I have seen numerous features on Rekha's alleged involvement with 'The Superstar'. Every year at the major film award functions, the cameras cut to Rekha when Amitabh Bachchan is on stage, and vice versa. Their supposed relationship is always at the centre of a discussion on Rekha. The fact that she is an award-winning actress in her own right and has worked in more than 150 films, a staggering number by any reckoning, takes a back seat. In an industry where heroines have a short shelf life, Rekha continued to play the lead for two decades. But the national interest in her love life that has sustained for more than forty years has always trumped and overshadowed interest in her career.

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She is, of course, partly responsible for this – for instance, Rekha herself publicly credits even her miraculous makeover in the 1970s to Amitabh Bachchan.

I have to admit that I am not a huge fan of Rekha's. I grew up in the 1980s when her career was on the downslide. But I certainly love some of her performances from that decade and have always especially enjoyed her interviews. Her current carefully cultivated reclusive and withdrawn public persona, though, is in sharp contrast to her old uninhibited interviews which have been painstakingly recollected throughout this book.

When I started writing this book, I naturally tried to reach out to Rekha for a meeting and an interview. Several calls were made to her official landline number. Gulzar even tried to help me by putting in a good word. Then, one morning, I got a phone call from her secretary, Farzana. She politely asked me what I was writing about. I explained my vision for the project: to present Rekha's *true* story and requested an appointment with her. Farzana graciously heard me out, we had a nice chat and she told me that she'd get back to me. That call never came. I tried phoning multiple times, only to be greeted by a message on an answering machine – yes, she still uses one. I gave up.

Would this book have had another dimension had Rekha agreed to speak with me? Perhaps, but I doubt it. After the 1990 suicide of her husband, Mukesh Agarwal, the tone of Rekha's interviews changed considerably.

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Unlike her previous blithe and straightforward answers, she became reserved. I can't imagine she would have said anything substantially different from what she's already said in her more recent measured and guarded manner.

Rekha seems to have consciously decided to cultivate an image of a reclusive 'diva'. Her interviews have become philosophical and abstract. Millennials think of her as retiring and distant. But how did she get there? Who is the real Rekha? Is she the mysterious and elusive woman of the years after her doomed marriage? Or the carefree and loudmouthed teenager who never shied away from speaking her mind? Is she the product of her association with Amitabh Bachchan? Is there more to the story of Bollywood's 'eternal other woman'?

To find answers to these questions we have to go back into her past, into her childhood and early setback-filled years in Bollywood before she became the recluse we know today. That is where her story is hidden.



# 1

## ‘Baserā’

*‘How will I spot the right man? By looking into his eyes. I am a good face reader. My intuition seldom goes wrong. The moment I see the right guy I’ll know.’ – Rekha<sup>1</sup>*

Metamorphosis is a rite of time. The caterpillar transforms into a butterfly; Madras becomes the cosmopolitan Chennai; Bombay becomes Mumbai; Bhanurekha Ganesan becomes the glamorous Rekha. Each is far removed from its origins. Yet essentially, at core, unaltered. We will be visiting each of these cities, for they resonate with stories from the past. Stories of the woman whose love and life have captivated national interest for more than four decades. But first we go to Delhi, for that is where the phoenix rose from the ashes.

Here is her story.

Even before liberalization, the rich and elite of Delhi

had started to spill further south into Chhatarpur, famous for a temple by the same name. In the late 1980s, if you drove past the Qutub Minar and turned into Gadaipur district, a dirt road would have led you through rows of farms until you reached a simple sign that said 'Basera' (abode).

As the gates opened, you were transported into a private little dreamworld, a sanctuary, where you were confronted by a split-level home of stone and glass built on a hill, surrounded by greenery. This was the residence of Mukesh Agarwal.

Born into a middle-class Bania family, Mukesh had abandoned studying at the age of thirteen. For many years he did odd jobs. Then, in the late 1970s, at the age of twenty-four, he started a company of his own that manufactured kitchenware under the brand name Hotline.

Sifting through the pages of Mukesh's past, I came upon Neeraj Kumar, Mukesh's one-time friend. A retired Indian Police Service officer, Neeraj Kumar had served as Delhi's commissioner of police. Mukesh's and Neeraj Kumar's paths had crossed at the time that Hotline made ripples in Delhi due to its success. According to Neeraj Kumar, 'Mukesh Agarwal belonged to that breed of entrepreneurs who made it big at a time when others had not emerged. All these start-up scenarios had not happened.'

From an ordinary background, Mukesh had always wanted to break into the circles of Delhi's elite. Craving



## Rekha

for social prominence, he threw lavish parties for Delhi's socialites. He made it a point to invite every film celebrity who happened to be in town. Neeraj Kumar remembers Mukesh as a 'very nice guy, very kind, but he had a complex. The complex was that he wanted to show that he has arrived. He did not believe in keeping a low profile.' Mukesh was known for his eccentricities; he'd do practically anything to catch a celebrity's eye. Neeraj Kumar said, 'He bought a horse and he had a farmhouse in Mehrauli. When he was expecting a guest, he would mount the horse and sit there waiting!' This was no ordinary horse; it was, in fact, an enormous stallion. Perhaps his gimmicks worked because, in Neeraj Kumar's words, 'He had befriended a whole lot of Bollywood actors and actresses. He knew Feroz Khan, Sanjay Khan. Perhaps this thing about the horse was taken from Feroz Khan.'<sup>2</sup>

It was Mukesh's long-standing desire to hobnob with celebrities and somehow become part of the film industry.



There was a time in Delhi when the glamorous Rekha and the famous fashion designer and socialite Bina Ramani would catch up with each other often. Over one such meeting,<sup>3</sup> Rekha expressed a desire to get married and to settle down. All she sought then was a man who could be her partner for life.

It was early 1990. One evening, Rekha's phone rang.

It was Bina Ramani from Delhi. She wanted Rekha to talk to her 'crazy fan'. Bina told Rekha that this crazy fan of hers was a well-known businessman from Delhi, and also a very good human being. 'His name is Mukesh Agarwal. Shall I give him your number?' Rekha told her not to. Instead, she took his number.

She probably wouldn't have guessed it then but this one phone call was going to change her life forever.

The story of Mukesh Agarwal's life was filmi, much like Rekha's. And, like her, he too had failed to find a lasting companion in life. Perhaps their paths were destined to cross.



Rekha recollected later that 'Bina Ramani had introduced him to me. At first, I was totally disinterested in him. When Bina goaded me on, I phoned him.'<sup>4</sup>

The first conversation between them was formal but it is said that Mukesh was completely enamoured by Rekha's husky voice. He was also over the moon that a woman worshipped by millions in India had rung him up. Rekha had taken the first step.

A series of phone calls between the two then followed. Rekha's Delhi-based friend Surinder Kaur was witness to this relationship since its beginning. Surinder was an air hostess and was very close to Rekha at that time. She wanted to see Rekha settled down. Bina and Surinder

repeatedly coaxed Rekha: ‘He is a great guy...don’t let this chance go by.’

Rekha and Mukesh met for the first time in Bombay within a month of their first phone call. For Rekha, tired of the pretences and demands of showbiz, Mukesh was a pleasant change. His simple and honest demeanour signalled a rare genuineness to her. Clearly star-struck, Mukesh paid her dazzling compliments, something that Rekha had always loved. He left no stone unturned in wooing her, and lavished her with affection. As with everything else in his life, Mukesh went overboard.

He persuaded Rekha to visit Delhi, and she did. Soon, she stood at the centre of attention in his sprawling farmhouse in Chhatarpur, Basera. This was a welcome change from the glitz of Bombay. One could easily get used to the fawning respect, adulation and attention she got. A bond grew between the two of them: he loved her queen-diva image and she loved his till-death-do-us-part devotion.

Bina Ramani said in an interview that Rekha and Mukesh met a few times though Rekha herself recalled: ‘I had met him just once before marriage, then met him once at Bina’s. That’s about it. It was Surinder who persuaded me to meet him again. I met the family in Delhi. I liked the people. They looked very simple. Mitho Bhabhiji [Mukesh’s elder brother Anil Gupta’s wife] totally won me over.’<sup>75</sup> Mukesh’s sister-in-law once told him, *‘Hamare ghar hoor aayi hai.* (An angel has visited our home.) You

must be proud of her.’<sup>6</sup> This was the acceptance that Rekha was looking for.

Mukesh had a close friend in Bombay, the actress Deepti Naval. Ever since their meeting at a common friend’s house in Delhi in 1981, they had been good friends. Deepti recalled, ‘After he spoke to Rekha on the phone and the two met in Bombay and again in Delhi, Mukesh couldn’t stop talking about her. He used to gush about her... I thought he was totally bonkers over her.’

Rekha and Mukesh didn’t ponder over each other’s past. They didn’t think too much about the future. Nothing mattered but that present, pressing feeling of love.



Sunday, 4 March 1990. It had been just over a month since Rekha and Mukesh had first met. He was restless. Noon found him sitting in Rekha’s house along with Surinder Kaur. Without preamble, he proposed marriage.

‘Surinder goaded me into saying yes to Mukesh when he came over to Bombay again,’ Rekha said recalling that day.<sup>7</sup> Mukesh couldn’t control his excitement. Jumping up with joy he said, ‘Let’s get married right away!’ Neither of their families were in Bombay; still, they decided that the wedding had to take place that very day.

It was as if they were scared that if not then, it might not happen at all.

Rekha was finally getting married. When evening fell,

she wore her favourite red-and-gold Kanjeevaram sari with exquisite jewellery. Along with Surinder, they set out in search of a temple in Juhu. They found a temple but there was no priest inside. Some distance ahead was the Iskon temple, but it was incredibly crowded. In front of it, however, was another temple: Mukteshwar Devalaya. The junior temple priest, Sanjay Bodas, had already gone to sleep in his little room behind the temple. Mukesh woke him up and told him that he had to get married immediately. The confused priest looked at Rekha and was stunned. It's not every day that such a well-known face appeared at his temple. And that too to get married urgently, without the customary entourage. He was dazed and, perhaps, the wedding party was too. Though the temple was not allowed to be opened after the evening aarti, and the priest was not supposed to solemnize the wedding, the rules were broken that night. (The priest was later barred from the temple.)

At about 10.30 at night, the wedding mantras were chanted, and Rekha and Mukesh exchanged the ritual garlands. Thirty-seven-year-old Mukesh and thirty-five-year-old Rekha were now man and wife.

The world suddenly felt more accommodating to Rekha Agarwal.

After a lifetime of seeking, Rekha, born out of wedlock, had finally got what she most desired: a legitimate surname.



After the ceremony, the glamour-obsessed Mukesh suggested that they visit a few of his film-star friends. But Rekha turned down his idea to visit Akbar and Sanjay Khan. 'Let's visit Hemaji,' she is said to have suggested. Rekha and Hema Malini's friendship went back a decade. The newly-weds, with Surinder in tow, dropped in at Hema Malini's house. Dharmendra was there too. 'Don't tell me you married this guy!' Hema Malini remarked softly in Tamil. 'Yes, of course,' replied Rekha. 'Is he very rich?' was the next question. Rekha did not answer that time.<sup>8</sup>

The next morning, Deepti Naval got a phone call from Rekha. 'Guess what? I have become your bhabhi!' Rekha exclaimed. Deepti was confused. Rekha continued excitedly, 'I am Rekha Agarwal now. I've married Mukesh. Isn't he like a brother to you?' 'I couldn't believe it for a while,' Deepti recalled.<sup>9</sup> Twenty-four hours later they were in London for their honeymoon.

The initial days in London were beautiful. That was the first time that Rekha and Mukesh had spent so much time together. But it took only a week for Rekha to realize that they were very different people. She was also shocked to see Mukesh taking several pills a day. Still, she thought, now that they had to spend the rest of their lives together, such matters would have to be overlooked. 'I've to make [a] success of it,' she told herself. 'Can Rekha fail in anything she attempts?'<sup>10</sup>

Rekha

They had been in London for more than a week. Rekha could see that something was troubling Mukesh. And then, one day, a gloomy Mukesh looked deep into her eyes and said, 'There's an AB in my life too.'