

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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Hot beat for Bombay



Uma Pocha catapulted to overnight stardom with *Bombay Meri Hai*

Bom bom bom bom" the staccato rang out. How my brother and I chuckled as children to first hear that syllabic quartet. Our giggles muffled by mouths stuffed with an edge of the living room curtain we hid behind. Little dreaming that quirky snatch of chorus was to end up beyond being funny repetition. Or that the final laugh would be on us.

Bombay meri hai became an instant swinging success. Then we were guilty of guffawing out of turn at a sassily significant moment. There he'd been — Mina Kava (the name short for Mino Kavarana at the advice of publicists) composer of the zingy, zany number which was soon to assume anthem status — testing his wife Naju's lyrics in the hall of our Bandra home.

Kava was my father's senior at St Xavier's School, quite the hero known for his tap dancing talent. Later, a neighbour down the road across Almeida Park, he often visited our place with a mutual music lover pal Sohrab Khambatta. The three friends thrilled to Western classical LPs spinning slowly from our Grundig player. The man helming Kava and the Music Makers did refreshingly dent Sohrab and dad's purist tastes. So it was that Pat Boone purring Pearly Shells plus the synthetic strains of Popcorn also filled our ears around 1969. The same year HMV asked Kava to produce a ditty toasting the city.

He did. And the rest is smash hit history. Said to be the solitary Kava piece to make money, his paean to Bombay looked to lure listeners the world over — from England to Poland as the opening bars urged everyone "come to Bombay, come to Bombay, *Bombay meri hai*". Boldly bilingual, blessed with beat and bounce, it reigned happily at parties and picnics, dances and weddings, charity galas and 'Made for Each Other' contests. As Naresh Fernandes notes in his book *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*, the song broke the mould to form the template for an Indo-pop peak cresting in the mid-1990s.

Interesting that much before Me Marathi-style slogans ruled, this single track swore gentle loyalty to a city yet to bear communal burn. Earlier in 1966, Kava's innocently titled *Evening in Gay Maharashtra* won a fair bunch of fans, though nowhere near the number rocking to *Bombay meri hai*... which, importantly, catapulted singer Uma Pocha to overnight fame. Only she could pack words which went, "Puri bhaji, *bhel puri you can try and tell/Idli dosa, hot samosa you will like too well*" with the earthy punch the dholak rhythm demanded. We couldn't but prefer Pocha's delicious ethnic diction to the Anglicised accent of Parveen Vachha whose primmer Parsi voice prevented her crooning *Evening in Gay Maharashtra* with lush local abandon.

Recalling the rah-rah reception to her heady solo, Pocha credits the chartbuster's charm to a melodic mix of Goan mando-meets-Maharashtrian laavni background score. Belting it out with the typical pep and pizzazz that made theatre icon Adi Marzban hail her "my queen of song", she found *Bombay meri hai* aired with furious frequency on BBC, Radio Australia and especially Radio Ceylon. It even inspired a catchy Sinhala cover version called *Ran Ran Ran*.

"I was invited to perform in Colombo at the Prime Minister's 'Save the Country Fund' show with Hamid Sayani," Pocha remembers. "What an unforgettable experience — red carpet treatment all the way, an amazing breeze through customs when they saw my name on the passport and a radio announcement as I was escorted to my hotel: 'Uma Pocha has just landed in Ceylon on board the Trident!' Wow, those were the days my friend!"