

MANTRA MUKIM

Listening for Thresholds: Kesarbai Kerkar and a Step Beyond

September. Leaves defy known shapes and fall to their death. Though even as they fall and leave behind barren branches, they do not entirely remove themselves from the life of the trees they leave behind. As they lie on the cold earth waiting to be broken down—awaiting the bacterial crackdown—the roots that brought them to life in the first place also remain participants in the very soil where they fall. Even the crossing, from life into death, is not enough for the leaf to mark a clean departure from the world it knows; or ensure an arrival into something or somewhere entirely unknown. Familiarity is its curse, and ours. The threshold keeps changing and the difference between what is inside and what is conclusively outside, what belongs to the home and what is pledged to the world, keeps dimming.

Autumn is the slowest kind of violence.

I cross the borders for the first time to arrive in this new country in the middle of autumn. This new country, surprisingly, does not feel very different from the last one. I remain unaffected by my own arrival; the enigma that was supposed to accompany this arrival never arrives. It is rather the sameness that affects me. I listen to *viraha-pradhan* ragas to reflect on other kinds of borders, ones that enforce separation or cause the imminent departure of a beloved. But the longer I listen, the more I realise how porous sound is and how it is playing around with the very borders—ones that insist on physical contiguity and cohabitation—that the musical pieces claim to bemoan. The sound separates itself from its source, crosses a channel and comes to me. It draws its life from this separation, a *viraha*. I welcome it, receive it; in fact, I become the site where it unfolds. I listen to Kesarbai Kerkar and keenly follow all the moments in her repertoire that involve one kind of departure or another. I start listening for the remote references to threshold, to transit points, and to arriving and leaving the world itself. I also listen to how her voice enters the world, what allows it to have a place in the world of

twentieth-century Indian stage that is full of upper-caste male performers. At times, I forget every other narrative that surrounds her voice and listen to her voice alone. I listen.

England does not hold many surprises. If arrival is necessarily marked by a cut, a distinction, between what one is departing from and what one is arriving at, I have not truly arrived. The alienating alterity that the word *pardes* holds in Hindustani music is far from realised. The enigma of crossing a border, of transgressions, so entrenched in Kesarbai's music, is still far from my reach. And then one day on the sidewalk I am stumped by what the green grocer says. It is directed at me, in his joyful Midland accent: 'Are you alright there, mate?'. I check myself. There is nothing wrong with my clothes or my posture. I look at him confusedly and walk away. He doesn't pursue the matter further. After being part of exactly the same exchange a few times, I realise it is less of a serious question and more of a pleasantry—another way of asking how I was doing. I have already looked away quite a few times before finally answering the question now with 'I am fine'. He turns to me in shock, 'You are finally acquiring the language, mate'. He has of course never heard of Macaulay and I refuse to be the bearer of that knowledge. The enigma of arrival is dispersed, or partially evaded, with a single reply, with a mere combination of sounds. Ironically, it is only in the moment one is accepted that one knows one has crossed a border, one has opened up the possibility of being accepted. I listen for other kinds of arrivals around me—new films, migratory birds, rainwater, expatriates. I listen for how they are accepted or turned away. There is also an illicitness, and sometimes an impertinence attached to these departures and arrivals, and that is what draws me to Kesarbai's world. Every time the *nayika* in the compositions crosses the threshold or anticipates the arrival of a loved one, I hear in Kesarbai's voice the creaking of floorboards, the rusty hinges of a door. These are the illusions I live with as I await the arrival of other things, other seasons and other enigmas. I continue my belief in spring.

'So leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied' —when Rilke insists that 'we live, always taking leave', it seems like he has more in mind than just a physical flight from one place to another, or from Paris to the rest of Europe in his case. It is the flux between the self and the world, between the safe space of domesticity and the great outdoors that is constant, inevitable, and

consumes our lives entirely. I turn to Kesarbai Kerkar again. I listen to bandish *Jaat kahan ho gori* set in *Bhairavi*. It is a bandish arrested in the moment of departure. The words spoken are spoken to someone whose one foot is already outside the door. Crossing the threshold, I leave the house for a walk, and I continue listening to Kesarbai.

I

Kesarbai Kerkar was born in Keri, a village in Goa, on 13 July 1892. In a family that drew its subsistence from their musical talent, it is believed that Kesarbai inherited this heritage quite early as a child and started learning from professional musicians from a very early age. Although, there wasn't much continuity in her musical training until she expressed her resolve to learn from Khan Sahib Alladiya Khan, the eminent founder of Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana, and was at the darbar of Kolhapur at the time. It took the ardent persuasion of friends and relatives for Khan Saahib to accept her as his pupil. Kesarbai was 28 at the time and remained a student of Ustad Alladiya Khan till his death in 1946, learning her last raga from him when he was around ninety years old and she was fifty. Quite fittingly, the last raga exchanged between them was *Sampoorna Malkauns*, which literally means complete or whole Malkauns, bringing her long and difficult training with Khansahib, and within the idioms of Jaipur gharana to an end. Namita Devidayal narrates the incident in *The Music Room*, where, after listening to a bewitching Malkauns performance, Kesarbai adamantly tries to learn the piece from her old and rather frail teacher:

‘Please. I wish to learn it.’ Her voice was softer this time. Baba gently pointed out that the Khansahib was too old to travel all the way to Shivaji Park, where she now lived. Kesarbai said she would arrange for their lesson to take place down the road from the Khansahib's place in Babulnath, at the table player Vishnu Shirodkar's home on Laburnum road. For the next two months, both Kesarbai and Alladiya Khan showed up diligently every morning and Kesarbai learned her last raga: Sampoorna Malkauns.

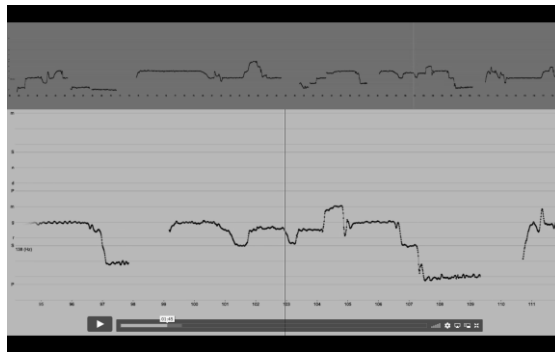
The Jaipur-Atrauli gharana is known for its khayal renditions in the vilambit or medium tempo. The lyrics in these usually long renditions, sung in Awadhi or Braj, unfold slowly and are carefully elaborated in a systematic and distinctive note-combination. The designated notes of the raga are also set in a variegated rhythmic pattern and the singers of Jaipur gharana often sing them with an open-voice (akaar)—lingering on each note with a singular attachment. Listening to *Jaat Kahan*, I listen for the melodic line of bhairavi that uses both natural and flat Re, and most likely the natural Dha. Kesarbai's voice wavers between different notes and works within the limitation of the rpm record to render, in the very compressed composition, all the possible intonations and moods of a bhairavi. The notes are tightly wrapped around each other, and I keep walking in the general direction of the river trying to sever one note from another, one building, one street, one person from another. It is late evening and the town is cast in the light of Kesarbai's voice—exuberant, seamless but also divided between light-touches and overcast crevices. There is a public library at the end of the road, whose glass façade has trapped the day's last light inside it. The reading room floor is crimson and all the distinct shelves, generally visible from the reading room, have turned indivisible. Walking around its perimeter, I am struck by the monolithic silhouette in front of me. A sudden loss of distinction makes me wonder whether it is even a good idea to listen to Kesarbai's voice for the minor variance between notes. Despite the voice being an accretion of notes, melodic-lines, rhythm, which, in Kesarbai's case, is Deepchandi, can voice also be just voice without any divisions? Or is it all of those things—a practiced formula, an auditory trick, and an unexplainable burst of light? *Jaat Kahan* speaks to me even before I can make out the words. It is the movement within the composition that talks. I move away from the public library building in confusion and continue walking on the designated trail to the river. It is well-paved. Another separation awaits me.

Although a bhairavi is capable of capturing many moods, it is generally agreed that a thumri sung in bhairavi is best suited for a song of separation or anticipation. *Viraha*, as the genre is known within classical aesthetics, is sung by a voice that either stays behind after the loved one departs, or is anticipating the arrival of one. This does not always have to be human lover, as is apparent in the devotional compositions, set in bhairavi, that address the

absence of a cosmic force, a deity or powerful figure. *Jaat Kahan* is a composition set within this mould of *viraha*, except it is also an interplay between two voices—one voice chiding the other for leaving the house and trying to overcome the separation. But each separation is not merely a physical boundary or a token of absence, it is also a figure of time that is spent without someone, or rather, a time spent with someone's absence. I count the minutes of Kesarbai's composition. That is the time that has marked my separation from all other voices except Kesarbai's. As one's attention is tamed upon hearing one's name called out, *Jaat Kahan* singles one out as its listener.

As I walk further towards the river, the river that separates the gentrified north part of the town from its working-class, immigrant southern counterpart, I look up the etymology of the word *viraha* on my phone. I amuse myself with the three choices my search yields— if for Jainism, the word *viraha* has the connotation of “duration”, in Pali language it just stands for both separation and emptiness, which is not too far from the Sanskrit meaning of the word *viraha* meaning separation. Despite the apparent difference in meaning it seems that the kind of *viraha* in *Jaat Kahan* involves all these three delineations—the ‘duration’ the beloved spends away from Krishna, the ‘emptying’ of entitlements and material attachments as she leaves the safety of her household for Krishna, and, obviously, the separation that she is fighting against and one that awaits the mother after she leaves the house. *Viraha* made of *vi+raho*, literally means being empty of, rid of, or without something. I hear in *Jaat Kahan* both the agonising duration of separation and the rejoice at someone finally getting rid of their domestic attachments—the *joie* of departure. The website also nudges me to check out a related word—विप्रलम्भ (*vipralambha*), which conveys the feeling of love in separation. But I ignore the word altogether and continue walking. For me *Jaat Kahan* is not about a feeling as much as it is about a single gesture—of departure, of crossing the threshold. In some ways Kesarbai's composition is set at the limits of the genre—the genre of separation or being separated, or the anguish that follows the separation. Instead, the protagonist of *Jaat Kahan* makes a rather bold commitment to leave the house and pursue the ineluctable object of its desire—Krishna.

Kesarbai's departure from Keri, from the then Portuguese-occupied Goa, to the centre of performances spaces in Bombay and then all over India, is a movement that I listen for in the sounds of *Jaat Kahan*. The fluctuations of the notes, the lush gamaks, and a rapid oscillation between different octaves, is not something unusual for a Jaipur-Atrauli musician. The several microtonal shifts within the piece set up a kind of movement that is distinct from the movement of the speakers in *Jaat kahan*. The sounds in composition, unlike the beloved, do not sacrifice their resting place in pursuit of another life—a life in silence, noise or a different order. Rather, the notes are tied to the logic of bhairavi, and every tonal departure that finds a new resting place has an eventual homecoming. I tinker around with PRAAT software tracing every node of the voice as it leaves the median sound of the first note or sa in Hindustani music. The frequency keeps changing, the voice keeps finding shelter in different notes. I listen for the most minute changes, for the threshold space between two notes, or just for the moment of departure itself that is marked by an invisible pause. The composition turns into an image, a pixelated wave, moving in a grid pattern between assigned notes and time signatures. The fixed resting place or *vadi-samvadi* notes customarily assigned to the piece become quite prominent on the graph. I see the sound of *Jaat Kahan* checking itself, holding itself back and returning from silence back into sound.



Uday Bhawalkar singing Bhairavi.
<https://autrimncpa.wordpress.com/bhairavi/>

II

Kesarbai's voice, despite the distinction and authority it holds, is not her alone. It is tied up with the voice of her teachers and of the gharana to which she belongs. It is that shared voice that sings *Jaat Kahan*. It is because of this collaborative nature of her voice that it is all the more fascinating to note how Kesarbai's solo career began almost around the same time as the demise of her teacher, Ustad Alladiya Khan. As has been the tradition in Hindustani Classical music: an end comes handcuffed to a beginning. A teacher's passing is more than just an end of lineage, it is also a clearing of space that becomes inhabitable again after his or her demise. In most cases, this space becomes habitable *only* after the teacher withdraws from it. One has to remember that Kesarbai herself restricted her disciples from giving public performances as long as she could. It may have stemmed from either her insecurity about the quality of her students or an attempt to save them from the influence of patrons early in their career. There is another contiguity to Kesarbai's career though, which has no precedent in Hindustani music and will probably never find an iteration in future. The same year Kesarbai passed away, 1977, NASA launched the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecrafts into space, with enough energy-generating fuel that would allow them to leave solar system and, hopefully, come into contact with extra-terrestrial life. Riding on this hope, NASA fitted these spacecrafts with snippets of human culture, in the form of music and images. One of the many musical pieces sent aboard these spacecrafts, and the only one from the Hindustani tradition, was Kesarbai Kerkar's *Jaat Kahan*. The Voyager spacecrafts bearing Kesarbai's voice were launched on 5 September, 1977, exactly eleven days before Kesarbai's death on 16 September, 1977.

The rise of Kesarbai Kerkar to the prominence on Indian stage is interlaced with developments in space technology, calibrated by the cold war, which, until 1977, was at a point that it could launch the twin Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft into unending cosmic space with an imaginary addressee in mind. This imagined listener of Kesarbai's music still remains evasive, and the spacecrafts have continued on their more than 40-years journey since 1977 and are now much farther away from Earth and the sun than Pluto. In August 2012, Voyager 1 made the historic entry into interstellar space, the region

between stars, filled with material ejected by the death of nearby stars millions of years ago. Voyager 2, following suite, entered interstellar space on November 5, 2018. Both spacecraft are still sending scientific information about their surroundings through the Deep Space Network, or DSN, but the sonic material they carry remain unheard.

Their primary mission was the exploration of Jupiter and Saturn. After making a string of discoveries there — such as active volcanoes on Jupiter's moon Io and intricacies of Saturn's rings — the mission was extended and, as of March 12, 2020, Voyager 1 is at a distance of 148.61 Astronomical Unit (22.2 billion km) from Earth, making it the most distant man-made object from Earth. I realise that the sound that is closest to me, which is in my ears at the moment—the sound of Kesarbai's voice climbing through the lower-octaves of *Jaat Kahan*—is also the sound that can possibly be the farthest from me, from this world. For me, the limit of the known world comes tinged with Kesarbai's voice, softly imploring me to even go further, to leave. Voyager Golden Record, the formal name for the record bearing *Jaat Kahan* and a host of other music, was constructed from gold-plated copper and was 12 inches (30 cm) in diameter. The record's cover was made of aluminium and electroplated upon it is an ultra-pure sample of the isotope uranium-238. Uranium-238 is recorded to have a half-life of 4.468 billion years, which means that the intelligent extra-terrestrial life upon encountering the record can use mass spectrometry to get a clear measure of lost uranium, and thus, would be able to date the record. Like the weathering of a wax-candle, or the number of rings on a broken tree bark, the record carries its historical signature in its ability to materially erode. Kesarbai's history, the historical specificity of her voice, is amalgamated within the history of the record and holds no distinction. I walk a mile through abandoned farmlands, waiting for the slope that will take me down to the river and onto the bridge. I have walked for the length of six *Jaat Kahan* tracks, and yet. I haven't been able to see a break in the land; I have certainly not been able to lift myself from it. The fields around me are barren and have rills running deep towards the grassland.

Robert Brown, the ethnomusicologist that Ann Druyan and Carl Sagan were consulting while choosing music for the Golden record, had placed

Surshri Kesar Bai Kerkar's *Jaat Kahan Ho* at the top of his list of world music for outer space. In *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record* (1978), a compilation of essays from everyone involved in curating the Golden record, Ann Druyan talks about Kerkar's recording going out of stock around the time Brown suggested they include it. They tried to get another name from Brown, as an alternative Hindustani classical track in case they didn't find Kerkar's recording, but he did not budge even as the deadline for the final list of recordings drew nearer. The difficulty of finding Kesarbai's recorded music is quite real even today and owes to her reluctance to set foot in recording studios rather than the demand-driven market forces that have been responsible for wiping out quite a few other classical records. For someone whose voice was the only one chosen to be sent aboard the Voyager, and to be disseminated to alien life-form, Kerkar remains deeply possessive of who she shared her voice with and how. After unrewarding conversations with librarians and cultural attachés, when Ann Druyan desperately called Brown to ask him: 'What's the next best thing?', Brown is reported to have replied: 'There's nothing close. Keep looking.' Druyan finally found the records in a store on the Lexington Avenue, New York. Owned by an Indian family, the store had three unopened copies of 'Jaat Kahan Ho', gathering dust in a brown carton with a 'madrass cloth' thrown over it. Having made her purchase, Druyan rushed home and called Brown, as she describes:

Why I want to buy all three occasions a great deal of animated speculation on the part of the owners. I fly out of the shop and race uptown to listen to it. It's a thrilling piece of music. I phone Brown and find myself saying thank you over and over.

One doesn't have to work so hard to find Kesarbai's music now. It is easily available on streaming websites, with most of them using an image of the voyager record as a thumbnail. I am by the edge of the river now, earphones out, listening for slow movements of the river. There are no fields around me that hint at the frolic that Kesarbai speaks about in the composition. There is nothing around me to remind me of saffron except the word *kesar* that is part of lyric sung by Kesarbai. I wonder if that is some kind of a signature that older singers who wrote their own compositions were prone to including. If it

is, it is buried quite well in the words of the three-and-a-half-minute composition, heard in the recording above. Here is a transcript and a loose translation:

॥ जात कहाँ हो अकेली गोरी, जाने न पैय्यों
केसर रंग के माथ भए होय, होरी खेलत कान्हा रे ॥

Jaat Kahan ho, akeli gori, jaane na paiyyon
Kesar rang ke math bhaye hoy, Hori khelat Kanha re

where do you go alone,
do your feet know where they take you, girl,

the fields are tainted in saffron—that is where I go,
I go where Krishna plays holi

The sense I get from the first verse-line is of a companion or an elder figure, not necessarily the mother, asking a young lady (gori) why she is leaving the house unaccompanied. She gives a rather oblique response saying, the fields outside are smeared in saffron as Krishna (Kanha) plays Holi (Hori). The colour saffron standing as both the colour of euphoria and renunciation, as the joy that the Gori derives from sacrificing her home and her family in devotion of Krishna. If the thumri starts as a warning, a cautionary tale, to the daughter of the impending dangers of the world, it ends with her playful reply. Kesarbai's voice flits between the imposing, and yet pleading, voice of the family elder and the casual abandon of gori, who has already made up her mind about leaving. The same voice gathers both the dangers of the crossing, the corroding powers of what lies beyond is, and the beguiling enigma of this beyond. The girl pledges to what is beyond the threshold, as foreign to the mother and as it is probably to herself.

I read Yoko Tawada's *Where Europe Begins* the same day I moved to England. I wonder where Europe begins. The yellow line at the immigration wasn't it. The threat and wonder of the outside that Europe represents for me,

takes tangible forms when I step out. However, what is more threatening and ever more foreign, and I think Tawada would agree, is a foreignness I carry within. For Tawada the threshold is not out there, not between Europe and Asia, but between the self that one thinks one is and the language one is spoken by. There are many frontiers in *Where Europe Begins*, frontiers that are ripe with possibilities as they are with risks and with precarity, and the national borders are only one of the many such frontiers. If *Jaat Kahan* is a song of frontiers, of flagrant crossings, of sliding from inhibition into desire, it gathers many frontiers into one. For *Where Europe Begins* foreignness lies within, which is where Europe truly begins, and is only ratified later when Tawada moves to Berlin to be ethnically classified as a foreigner. The Voyager spacecraft bearing *Jaat Kahan* is moving around empty celestial space searching for this very threshold, having found which it could make the leap, encounter its imaginary addressee—the intelligent alien life— and actually come to terms with foreignness that has so far been elusive for this world. For the self-same planet we all inhabit, another Europe is yet to begin and when it does, *Jaat Kahan*, a song about thresholds, would be one of the first few voices making the introductions.

Kesarbai, on the other hand, felt this foreignness much closer to home in the shape of recording studios. Not only did she think of recorded gramophone music as foreign to her form, she felt quite alienated by the studio setting and how it dispersed her voice without her authority. Kesarbai, at the very pinnacle of her craft and popularity was discomfited by something that most of her contemporaries had already taken to quite warmly. Apparently, she was completely mortified having found a record of hers being sold on a pavement for a quarter of its original price. This is probably where Europe began for Kesarbai. Ironically, though, it was the very recording of *Jaat Kahan* that was a last straw of sorts, as Devidayal records in her account:

It was because of this very record label that Kesarbai had developed her passionate disapproval of recording and banished all record companies from her life. Around the 1930s this Madras based company had bought the rights for producing gramophone records from a British company. The select records were manufactured by the Crystalate Gramophone Record Manufacturing Company in London.

III

Jaat Kahan is partly a call for radical departures and renunciation and partly a cautionary tale, depending on who speaks. In the voice of caution, I hear the voice of an older sibling or mother. Though the caution stands more broadly for any law of the land that restricts gori's movement, be it the gravitational force fighting which the Voyager spacecrafts crossed into the interstellar space. The threshold of her house is the threshold of the world as we know, and when Kesarbai sings of these limit-points there is playful irony and fortitude in her voice that is hard to miss. Yet each such crossing demands a price, a toll tax, even if it comes in the form of burnt fuel or an uncertain future. The threshold keeps shifting for the Voyager craft, but for Gori the renunciation and, thereby, the departure is final. For Kesarbai, one of the first well-known female performers of Hindustani Classical music, there were one too many such checkpoints.

As one of the last great *bai-ji* or commercial kalavant singers, Kesarbai had to leave her home early in life for her musical training. Not unlike other kalavant singers from Goa, Kesarbai settled in suburban Bombay to continue working as a performer and a tutor. Her leaving her house and trying to find a professional footing in the world of classical music wasn't made easy by the reforms initiated by turn-of-the-century Brahmin reformists such Pt. Bhatkhande, who was trying to purge classical music of all its salacious influences and histories. By giving it a more respectable character or, at least by inventing one, Bhatkhande was merely making classical music more palatable to the middle-class households in North India. As Tejaswini Niranjana points out in *Musicophilia and the lingua musica in Mumbai*, Bhatkhande's attempt was 'to 'save' Hindustani music by bringing it away from the decadence of the older locations of performance, and to spread the appreciation of the music among a wider public – something that would appear as the hallmark of a civilized country, and be a fitting response to colonial criticisms of Indian society.' At the same time, the kalavant women singers from Goa and their descendants became important figures in the Marathi sangeet natak or musical play; while some of them even went on to act in Marathi films.

All these female performers who made the journey from the margins to centres of cultural life in Bombay and elsewhere, were, in many ways, making

same wager as Gori in *Jaat Kahan*—crossing thresholds against odds and towards the unknown. When Carl Sagan suggested that the Voyager Golden record was to be like ‘images of home’, his idea was that this image was to be more comprehensive than providing a galactical address, ‘—its place in space, its diverse biota, its wide-ranging cultures with their lifestyles, arts and technologies—everything, or at least enough to get the idea across. And do it on one long-playing record.’ An idea of home, even if not what Sagan had in mind, is certainly ingrained in Kesarbai’s track and also ingrained in them, however unwittingly, is the history of kalavant performers. These performers leave their homes, as does the girl in *Jaat Kahan*, either to never return or return as professional performers. The leave Voyager spacecrafts took from this world was irreversible, and it was meant to be so, but some of these female performers did return home, either reviled or celebrated. So did Kesarbai; the school she started in her ancestral village in Keri, Goa still exists. The home, however, the very home I leave behind to approach the river, changes behind me. It is estranged by my absence and renewed upon my return, but it will never be the same home again. On listening to *Jaat Kahan* again, all I can hear is the peril of return—of returning without arriving. In leaving the house for Krishna, Gori alienates not just her mother but also the certainty and security that comes with home. In her assertive departure, though, there is another kind of displacement that is suggested — home is probably not where we thought it was. For Gori home offers no rewards, which is why many would read the composition as a tale of renunciation, home for her rests in the uncertain, the unknown, in the very fragile world of desire and devotion. Freud’s *unheimlich*, often understood as just a German word for uncanny or strange, has at its root the word *heim*, German for home. Freud writes in *The Uncanny*: ‘this *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning.’ Going by Freud’s account, *Jaat Kahan* is a second homecoming rather than a departure from one.

Also included on the Voyager are photographs, snippets of different aspects of life on Earth. One of the only photos to be included from India is a street scene—a four-lane highway in Bombay. The committee justified their selection by suggesting that the image conveyed ‘a subtle point that

extraterrestrials from crowded cities may note is that there are four lanes of traffic going in one direction and only one in the opposite direction, suggestion that a majority of people go to or come from some place at the same time.’ The comings and goings of humans, an essential feature of life, again takes me back to *Jaat Kahaan* where the entire composition is saturated in the moment of departure, and it is Gori’s movement that is put into question. The flow of traffic for kalavant performers was always one-way though. These women had moved to Bombay from Goa and acquired patrons ‘amongst the Gujarati merchants, especially from the upwardly mobile Bhatias, who often lived with the women and paid for their lessons from the ustad.’ For Kesarbai, however, these older codes of patronage had no relevance as her era was also marked by a rapid rise in public performances over private mehfiles and mujras. Instead of being bound to a princely state or wealthy patron, Kesarbai had much more autonomy as professional musicians, and she was one of the first female performers in India to do so. Despite this much coveted autonomy, Kesarbai was herself known to keep a tight leash on the comings and goings of her disciples, the legendary Dhondhutai Kulkarni being one of them. Upon being probed by her student Namita Devidayal she is reported to have said:

That’s not true’, she retorted. ‘In the beginning, yes, she did not like me to give solo concerts, but that is because most teachers are wary of presenting their students to the public until they deem them fit representative of their tutelage but I knew there had been terrible moments between them when Dhondhutai had to suffer taunt after taunt in silence, just so that she could become a better musician. I could only imagine the scene for there was no way of verifying what went deep inside the house in Shivaji Park.

Despite the changing structure of classical performance, the close and often hierarchical bonds between a teacher and student in Hindustani tradition remains unchanged. With Dhondhutai, there was also the added shame of learning from a *bai-ji*, something that her father, Ganpatrao, was keenly aware of throughout her discipleship under Kesarbai. Apparently during her training, Kesarbai is known to have jokingly referred to her as Dhondhu-bai,

which incensed her father, who, despite supporting young Dhondhutai's music, wanted nothing of the lewd past that came attached with it. While Kesarbai never shunned away the title of *bai*, even when she became a major performer and respectability became a deep-seated concern, Dhondhutai's father made sure that she did not embrace any aspects of the *bai-ji* culture, from which the music of her legendary teacher came. As Devidayal recalls in her account, Dhondhutai's father was always on the side of caution and did not allow anyone, fan or organiser, to interact with Dhondhutai outside of the performance space. Devidayal writes: 'This was exactly the kind of thing he had dreaded. His daughter might be learning music but she would not be treated like one of the bails.' *Jaat Kahan* is also an intimate record of these regulatory powers that directed the lives of female performers of the twentieth-century, at times by their teachers, their parents and, at times, by the social universe of their upper-caste audiences.

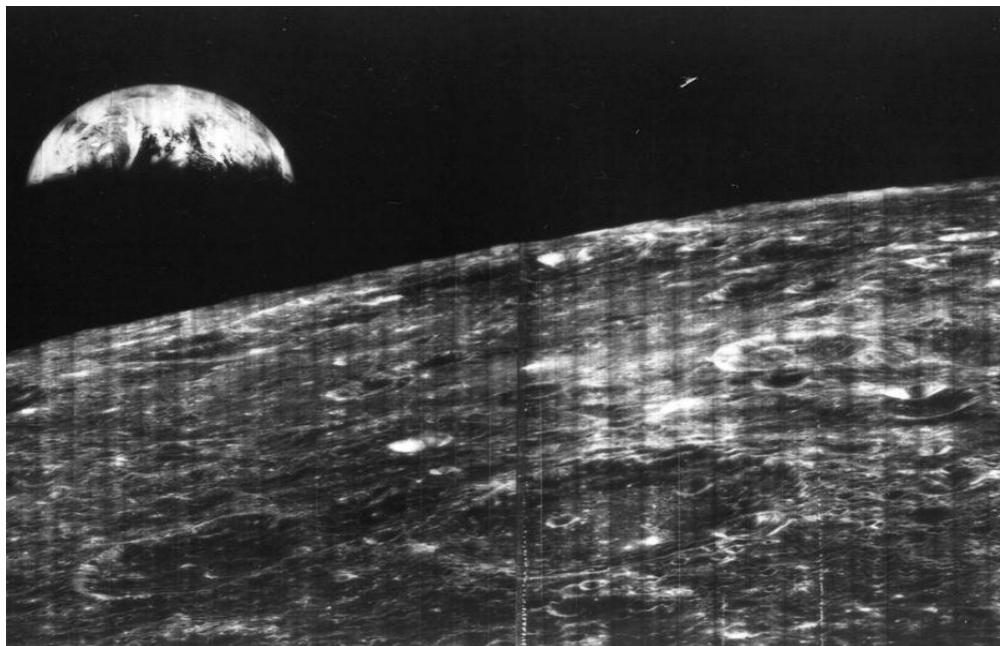
Voyager 1 is expected to reach the theorized Oort cloud in about 300 years and would take about 30,000 years to pass through it. Though it is not heading towards any particular star, in about 40,000 years, it will pass within 1.6 light-years of the star Gliese 445, which is at present in the constellation Camelopardalis. That star is generally moving towards the Solar System at about 119 km/s (430,000 km/h; 270,000 mph). NASA says that 'The Voyagers are destined—perhaps eternally—to wander the Milky Way.' In 300,000 years it will pass within less than 1 light year of the M3V star TYC 3135-52-1. All these portraits of unimaginable distances, spaces, would have no meaning if the home Voyager left behind would have disappeared behind its back. The spaceships, with the Voyager Golden Disc, would then simply be carrying vestiges of a land that would never exist again. There would be no corroboration possible, and Sagan's entire effort at sending an 'image of home' would turn into a fiction. Another possibility is that Voyager never encounters any other extra-terrestrial species to pass the message onto and continues sauntering in a boundless cosmic field. I wonder what it is going to be—a message without a source, a source with a message but without a target, or a message with neither a source nor a target. Just the *Jaat Kahan* all alone without its planetary origin—Earth— and without an audience.

Is Krishna really playing holi outside? Will Gori ever find him? Are the fields really tainted in saffron or is it all just a ruse as the mother predicts? Kesarbai's composition is actually not interested in answering any of those questions. In fact she spends most of her energy on refining the first two lines of the bandish—where we still don't know what is it that Gori is leaving for, except that she is leaving the house. In some way those first two lines act as the emotional epicentre of the composition for which the object of one's travel or one's desire is less important than the desire itself. It is that trace of desire itself that terrifies the mother; a desire that takes many figures of Kesarbai's composition beyond the thresholds of morality, materiality or domesticity. Just beyond this threshold—although never threshed out by Kesarbai herself in the song—lies the erotic, the mysterious, the possibility of both finding freedom in the world and giving up on it. Kesarbai's *Babul Mora* is rendered in the same accent, where she concentrates on the line *naihar chuto jaye* or 'leaving home' at the expense of later lines that identify the place which awaits her beyond the threshold. Kesarbai's compositions remain enamoured of this threshold space—a space that is violent as it is erotic, as enticing as it is enigmatic. What is more important to the narrative vitality of *Jaat kahan* is that Gori leaves, which she does regardless of certainty of finding or possessing Krishna. The Voyager spacecrafts move in the fey reaches of our universe with the same promise—forever taking leave.

I am reminded of the Chandrayan-2, launched from Sriharikota in 2019, that failed to land safely on the dark side of the moon. It became a public spectacle, televised and followed by hordes of people in India, as it entered the lunar region but then lost contact despite being only minutes away from its designated landing site. It did land, but not softly enough to remain intact, and all that remained of it was some superfluous debris on the floor of the moon and a meticulous record of its failure in ISRO offices. While Chandrayan left with a fixed landing target in sight—the volcanic underbelly of the lunar surface—the Voyager left with only vague sense of destination and definitely no landing plans. It seems like there is nothing to break its fall—a suspended autumn—and nothing to interrupt it, at least not yet. And even if the world vanishes behind it, Voyager would still carry on with the task of carrying this world hidden in one of its many capsules. Paul Celan wrote: 'The world is gone/ I must carry you'; Voyager finds itself with the imperative

‘must’. The departure in *Jaat Kahan* is much smaller in scope, in that gori does not leave the world, and yet the alterity that Krishna brings to her world carries the same weight—it unravels the idea of home. Kesarbai’s composition, in the voice of gori, wields the power to imagine another world, a world which is yet to come, a world which is just beyond the threshold and yet demands all our sincerity and courage to become accessible. Kesarbai sings of the moment before such a departure is actually made. *Jaat Kahan* is very much a song of this world that imagines another—with all its buried potential and latent tragedy.

Just before completing his magnum opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger gave public seminars illustrating the three ways one can exist in this world. He distinguished these states as *welt-los*, *weltarm*, and *weltbildend*, and, with the help of examples, explained that ‘the stone is without world’, and is thus *weltlos*; without language or agency ‘the animal is poor in world’, and is thus *weltarm*; and ‘the human is a builder of worlds’ and is thus *weltdbildend*. In contrast to Heidegger, the human figure of *Jaat Kahan* lives in the world bearing all these qualities— like the stone it loses its home only in order to gain the world, it is poor in the world like an animal by giving up on all entitlements, and yet it makes an incredible agential gesture by building a world for herself outside her known world.



1 The first photo of Earth, taken from moon on August 23, 1966. (Lunar Orbiter 1, NASA)

IV

Who possesses sound? Is it the audio file—a free lossless audio codec—that I play, the device that plays it, the singer it is named under, or my ears in that they give an audience to it? Kesarbai's irrational dream of possessing her sound, not letting it disperse as a record into the world, comes crashing when faced with younger musicians such as Pt. Bhimsen Joshi, who, having received training in the same gharana as Kesarbai, can now 'reproduce' the same sound.

In Abhik Majumdar's *Bhimsen Joshi: A Passion for Music*, Kesarbai is reported to be sitting in the first row of a Bhimsen Joshi concert when Joshi spots her and climbs down the stage to touch her feet. He bows down reverentially and asks her: 'Bai...aap?' and is met with her characteristic bluntness: "Haanh, haanh, kya kya chori kiya hai dekhne aayi hoon... jao gaana shuru karo." ('Bai...you, here?' 'Yes, I want to make out how much you have stolen from me...go, start singing'). One will never know if Kesarbai's retort was just some harmless banter or a sign of her dispossession.

An interiority does not afford a view of itself from the inside. It needs a boundary, a crossing from which a vantage point can be created to observe this interiority. The first image of Earth, 'The Blue Marble', taken from on December 7, 1972 and from a distance of about 29,000 kilometers (18,000 miles) was one of the first images of Earth in its entirety and was also the first object to cross that boundary and allow us a view of the home planet, and, by extension, ourselves. The only way towards home is from the outside. If *Jaat Kahan* is a peek into this great outside, it also needs a vantage point of its own. As three-minute track it displays Kesarbai's expertise in Khayal singing and her mastery over an ancient classical form, but it also hides the historical accidents and coercions that give it shape. The presence of female performers was quite common in the Muslim and Rajput courts, some of whom were public performers while others were given the specific task of serenading the royalty into private chambers. The social-reform movement in India in the late 1890s, however, sought a blanket ban on professional music and dance performances. Niranjana notes: 'Between 1910 and 1947 formal bans on the practice of temple dancing took effect in Mysore, Travancore, and Madras swelling the movement to abolish this once-widespread practice'. These bans,

and an aggressive adoption of Victorian morality in public culture meant that quite a few female performers lost their roles as temple-dancers and mujra performers and, thus, turned to Khayal singing in the late nineteenth-century. *Jaat Kahan*, along with much Kesarbai's oeuvre, comes at the cusp of this moral and economic demand that forced women singers to take up Khayal as their choice of performance.

'Name? Nationality? Place of origin? Purpose of visit? Will you be working here?' are all questions that I once answered in order to cross the boundary, the threshold, in order to arrive. Fulfilling a horizon of expectations, I was allowed in, into their country, into a worldliness, and like all arrivals, my own arrival depended on whether they had the space or the capacity to accept me in the first place. Neither *Voyager* nor *Jaat Kahan*, nor the kalavant singers migrating from their hometowns in late nineteenth-century, know with any certainty whether the new world that they are beholden to has any place for them. Kesarbai's voice sings of this risk and of the possibilities that come with it. I cross the bridge again, staring at the river gliding underneath. It has no sound of its own.
