

## HINDI FILM SONGS IN THE POST-MTV ERA: ANALYZING THE NEW LYRICISM

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### ABSTRACT

Songs, dance and melodrama are idiosyncratic to Hindi Cinema which has a formidable presence in South Asia. Over the years both Hindi cinema and songs have crossed their native boundary and become a global cultural product. In recent years aggressive marketing of Hindi cinema in Europe and America and their easy access through internet have earned Hindi songs new popularity in the western world too. However, there's also a perceptible qualitative change in the lyrics over the last few decades. The lyrical, poetic, aesthetic and emotional type songs of yesteryears are being overshadowed by a large number of songs which sound trivial in comparison. This phenomenon may also be a concern of ethnomusicology. Principal objective of this paper is to examine the changes in the lyrical quality of Hindi film music in the post-MTV era through a comparative analysis of the songs over the decades and to explore the change in their lyrical and musical quality.

**KEYWORDS:** Cinema, Ethnomusicology, Lyrics, Music, MTV, Natyasastra

### INTRODUCTION

#### Summary

It'll be naïve to judge Indian popular cinema without songs. They're reconsidered essential to the creative genre called cinema in India. Film songs or *filmi geet* in India are both the creator and product of popular culture. Considering creation of *rasa* (sentiment) and *bhava* (emotion) essential for *natya* (drama) in the classical Indian tradition, popular cinema, the modern avatar of *natya* banks heavily on songs to achieve that; albeit not entirely in conformity with the classical treaties of *Natyasastra* (composed circa 200 BCE and 200 CE). Much of Indian cinema's success and failure depends on songs and music. Music in the Indian psyche is synonymous with *filmi geet*. Unlike the background score which creates mood in the western and Hollywood cinema, popular Indian cinema uses lip-synced songs which in the classical sense transfer the *bhavas* (emotions) of the performer and instill *rasas* (sentiments) in the audience. *Filmi geet* in India are the most cherished genre of popular music which often maintained rich lyrical quality. However, with the changing socio-cultural landscape in the post globalization era the lyrical quality and musical composition of songs are also changing rapidly. The contemporary Indian film songs can thus also be analyzed in the light of ethnomusicology which gives the insight to study music in its cultural context. In this backdrop this paper examines how commodification of music in general is influencing the lyrical and musical quality of *filmi* songs in India.

#### The Beginning of Transition

Economic liberalization of the 1990s overwhelmingly exposed India to western material culture, products, lifestyle, media, communication and host of entertainment products. Impact of liberalization were visible on the socio-economic as well as cultural sphere influencing Indian cinema and music both thematically and stylistically. MTV, and Channel [V] the postmodern cultural product, which commodified music in the west began considerably impacting young

urban Indian audience during this period. But the resilient Indian film industry was quick to respond. It recognized the commercial value of songs and converted it as a commodity by itself. Morcom (2007) explains: 'If films are a big business, and songs are essential to the commercial potential of films, then we may presume that the film songs themselves have considerable commercial power.' Consequently, songs of the post-MTV era also changed both in terms of lyrics and music and became more global stylistically catering primarily to the younger generation by imitating the fusion, remix culture of the west. It turned the *filmi geet* into commodity and more fashionably into 'numbers'. Ever since then the lyrical value of Indian film songs has changed considerably. The richness of poetry, the imagery, the metaphor are being overwhelmed by the plebian, shoddy and at time crude subaltern expressions and high voltage music. To present the contrast one may cite example of the song *Chandan sa badan, chanchal chitvan, dheere se tera ye muskana* from the 1968 film *Saraswatichandra* and *Are don't touch my body o more saiyan* from a recent 2013 film *Bullet Raja*. Both describe the physical beauty of woman. But while the earlier uses the fragrance of sandalwood as the metaphor of beauty, describes her quivering glance and the mild hesitant smile; the latter seems downright sensuous and deficient in poetic quality.

During the post nineties Indian cinema also went through the 'Bollywoodization' (Chaudhary: 2010) (a hybrid expression referring to Hollywood influence on Bombay film industry) to cater to the diasporic Indian audience, large chunk of whom was settled in the western part of the world, middle-east and south-east Asia. The music of post nineties was primarily aimed at the sizeable Indian diaspora and the youth at home exposed to western genres of music from rock, pop, rap to hiphop, reggae. The term 'diaspora' which means dispersed immigrant communities; generally implies those communities who're settled in another nation for generations. However, presenting a perspective on ethnomusicology and Indian diaspora in America Diethrich (2000) argues that:

'Indian youth in America, comprised of some immigrants and predominantly second-generation Indian-Americans, fit into the parameters of "diaspora," and I find the theorization surrounding this term useful for understanding their group dynamics.'

The concept of diaspora is important to understand the relationship between people and *filmi* music in the globalized context. Seeger's (1987) observation that music does not simply happen in society, but often society happens in music (paraphrased) also explains how music reflects social changes. Besides throwing light on the social processes, music also delivers the contexts in which cultural meanings are framed and exchanged. Indian popular cinema either shot in the west, crisscrossing between India and the west, depicting diasporic themes such as pain of separation from motherland or cultural conflict in films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Love Aaj-kal*, *New York*, *kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*, *Dostana* and so on are different not only in terms of narrative but also in songs and music composed with the diasporic audience in mind. The lyrics of the songs of these films are a hybrid of Hindi and English such as: *Sapno ke din hain sapnon ki raaten, where's the party tonight* (days of dreams and nights of dreams, where's the party tonight); *shut up and dance and dance, behaki-behaki jaayen ye jawaaniyan* (shut up and dance, the youth is losing control); *Let's start some ronauk-shounak, let's have some party now... chalo-chalo ji dhoom macha lo* (let's have some celebration, let's have some party now, let's have some pomp and show); *Girl you're my chammak challo, where you go girl I'm gonna follow* (you're my hottie girl, wherever you go, I'm going to follow you).

Considering the global influence on Indian audience both in India and abroad several Indian popular filmmakers have adopted newer methods of film making which has changed the storytelling, cinematography, special effects, animation, songs and music. The connoisseurs of music see a great loss to the lyrical and musical value of film songs in

this process. One of the striking differences between the music of the earlier times and now is the absence of classical influence and *ragas*. Although western musical instruments and their impact was visible on the songs of 1950s and 1960s too, yet the impact of folk and classical was still predominant. The songs today are now high octane yet short lived commodities which arouse passion rather than touch emotions as they previously did. The contemporary songs also lack the lingering melody. The generation which grew up with the magical voice of Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle – the inimitable Indian melody queens; the versatile and youthful Mohammad Rafi and Kishore Kumar; the soulful Mukesh; the classical conjurer Manna Dey, the grave sonorous Hemant Kumar during the forties, fifties and sixties had a shockingly different musical experience by the nineties. Not only that, the lyrics of Hindi film songs has traditionally been influenced by the richness of Hindi and Urdu poetry, their delicate metaphors of love, beautiful imagery of nature, intense personification of human emotions.

### The Linguistic Nuances of Lyrics

For a long time the nuances of Hindi-Urdu poetry were at the core of a song's aesthetics. Highlighting the impact of Urdu poetry on Hindi songs Morcom (2007) writes: 'the lyrics of Hindi film songs are largely drawn from the Urdu poetic tradition, which has its own repertoire of images and themes.'

Despite being a refined language with enviable literary quality the use of Urdu both in dialogues and lyrics of Hindi cinema successfully connected popular cinema to the masses without compromising on its creative and aesthetic value. But for the remarkable finesse of the language (Urdu) actors like Dilip Kumar, Gurudutt, Rajkumar in some of their finest films *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, *Pyasa*, *Chaudahvin ka Chand*, *Pakeezah* would not have hit the crescendo of their melancholic romanticism. The song *Koi sagar dil ko behlata nahi, bekhudi mein bhi karar aata nahin* (no glass of wine consoles my heart, no oblivion gives me the comfort) by the lyricist Shakeel Badayuni and *Ye mahlon ye takhton ye taazon ki duniya, ye insan ke dushman samajon ki duniya, ye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai* (this world of palaces, thrones and crowns, this society inimical to man, what even if I achieve it all) by lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi are among the Hindi cinema's finest poetic expressions. Urdu poetry has the inimitable capacity to express the intensity of love and poignancy of despair at the same time. Besides literature, it was in the medium of cinema where Urdu language also flourished and created a unique reservoir of its metaphors and imagery which enhanced the cinematic experience. Prasad (1998) rightly points out:

'... lyrics are written in a language which has its own set repertoire of images and tropes for themes like romantic love . . . [with] a predilection for certain recurrent motifs. This repertoire of images is drawn from the frozen diction of romantic Urdu poetry.'

The songs of another celebrated Urdu poet and lyricist Kaifi Azmi also added to the aesthetic experience and expression of Hindi cinema. He was one of the most renowned Urdu poets of the 20th century; a leftist by orientation, he wrote passionate songs to inspire social change. He commanded pre-eminence both as a noted lyricist who wrote for some of Bollywood's best-known films and as a remarkable *shayar* (poet) of Urdu *adab* (literature). His lyrics are known for their poignant simplicity, eternal optimism, and grace. The poignancy of his emotions reverberates in the deep voice of Hemant Kumar: *Ya dil ki suno duniya walon, ya mujhko abhi chup rahne do, main gham ko khushi kaise kah doon jo kahte hain unhe kahne do* (either listen to my heart or let me remain silent, how do I describe grief as gladness, those who call it so let them say so). His other landmarks: *Are dekhi zamane ki yari, bichade sabhi baari baari* (such is my friends' affection to me, all deserted me steadily); *Ye nayan dare dare, ye jam bhare-bhare, jara peene do, kal ki kisko khabar* (O, the

anxious eyes, O, the glass full of wine, let me drink a little, tomorrow who has seen); *Koi ye kaise bataye ki wo tanha kyon hai* (how can one say why he's lonely) enjoy the richness of poetic beauty and poetic truth.

Songs of popular cinema are not sublime. They're not even meant to be as they have to cater to the audience of diverse tastes and varied degree of aesthetic refinement. So they strike a balance between aesthetics and popular appeal. Three distinct linguistic variations namely – Urdu, Hindi and Hindustani (a mix of Hindi-Urdu) have often been used in lyrics and dialogues to arouse different shades of emotions besides meeting the requirement of the narrative. In fact, the creativity of the *filmi* narrative structure lies in creating scope for the musical interpolations. Morcom (2011) explains the situation:

'Hindi film narratives can also be seen as making room for songs, adapting themselves for songs, by having things happen in contexts where music takes place, such as the cabaret bar, the courtesans' salon, the village where people are dancing to a folk song etc.'

Besides Urdu, it was also the aesthetic richness of Hindi poetry with its Sanskrit influenced idioms, metaphors, imagery and prosody which created another set of poetic landmark in *filmi* songs. From philosophical, devotional to songs of *sringara* (love), *hasya* (comic) and *veer* (valour) *rasas*, Hindi poetry enriched the lyrical value of the songs enormously during the decades of fifties and sixties. For instance, the pathos in the song *Man re tu kahe na dheer dhare, wo nirmohi moh na jaane jinka moh kare* (O, my restless being why don't you calm down, why're you so attached to one who remains insensible to your feelings) from the film *Chitrlekha* highlights the conflict between the sense of attachment and detachment. The song *Mora gora ang lai le, mohe shyaam rang dai de, chhup jaungi raat hi mein, mohe pee ka sang dai de* by the versatile poet, lyricist and director Gulzar from the 1963 film *Bandini* is rich in *sringara rasa* (love). The song uses *Krishnite* theme and metaphors to instil *sringara rasa*. Thematically it's about the fair (skinned) *Radha* seeking union with her consort *Krishna*. Since *Krishna* is dark, *Radha* requests the dark night to provide its hue to her so that she can merge with *Krishna* and become one with him. No doubt, the subtlety of philosophy here can only be appreciated by the connoisseurs (or *suhridas* per *natyasastra*), nevertheless even the common man can enjoy the song's beauty. Yet another song by Bharat Vyas from the 1964 film *Sati Savitri*: *Tum gagan ke chandramaa ho, main dharaa ki dhool hoon, tum praano ke devataa ho, main samarpit phool hoon* (you are the moon that illuminates the skies. I am the dust of the earth that aimlessly flies. You are the God of love, my paramour, I am a flower offered in your splendor) epitomizes devotional love as a kind of spiritual experience. Songs of Bharat Vyas also captured the rhythm of words to create musical effect as in: *Are ja re hat natkhat, na chhoore mera ghooghat palat ke doongi aaj tujhe gaali re, mujhe samjho na tum bholi-bhali re* (go away you mischievous, dare not touch my veil, I'll curse you, I'm not so innocent).

Gulzar, one of the most accomplished directors and lyricist of Hindi cinema makes amazing use of metaphors, simile and imagery in his songs. His lyrics touch both the senses and emotions and creates a mesmerizing atmosphere of romance. In his song one *hears* the passing of time and fragrance *touching* the eyesight– *waqt jaata sunai deta hai.jaise khushboo nazar se chhoo jaye*. It's the subtle note of melancholy which makes his romance so profound as we find in the song from his own film *Aandhi*: *Tum aa gaye ho, noor aa gaya hai, nahin to charagon se lau jaa rahi thee* (your arrival has brought light to life, without you the flame of the lamp was dying). His another landmark from the 1969 film *Khamoshi*: *Humne dekhi hai un aankhon ki mahakti khushboo, haath se chhoo ke ise rishte ka ilzam na do* (we have seen the scented fragrance of these eyes, don't blame it of relationship by touching with hand) he uses *aankhon ki mahakti khushboo* (the scented fragrance of these eyes) as an inimitable metaphor of love.

### Songs and the Melodrama

Since Indian cinema is largely melodramatic, songs are pivotal in strengthening the melodrama. Explaining the emotional and moral import in melodrama which requires methods other than normal speech or dialogue in case of cinema, Elsaeseer (1991:76) writes that: 'The feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said', makes songs so central of Indian cinema. However, at occasions the disconnect between the songs and melodrama is now becoming apparent. The so called *item numbers* such as: *my name is sheela*, *sheela ki jawani*, *I am too hot for you main tere haath na aaniand munnii badnam hui darling tere liye* from the film *Tees Maar Khan* and *Dabang* respectively are the case in point. *Item songs* may be ineffectual concoctions in the cinematic narrative but they're considered important for their 'audio value' which Morcom (2007) explains as: 'song's ability to sound good on its own and have scope outside of the film.' In fact *item songs* are the new *avatars* of sensuous cabaret, enticing *mujara* performed by the sumptuous dancing sensations like Helen, Bindu, Aruna Irani and their like during the sixties and seventies. One of the basic differences between a cabaret and an *item song* is that while the earlier was performed by a vamp who was a character in the film, an *item girl* performing on *item song* is often an inconsequential extra who has no other role to play. Songs like *Piya tu ab to aa ja*; *Mujhe yaar ne pilayi to kya ho gaya*; *Mehbooba mehbooba*; *Husna ke lakhon rang* etc. were not forcible interpolations in the narrative rather an extension of the story itself whereas the present *item songs* have no direct relation to the narrative. Basu (2011) elaborates:

'An item number does not necessarily have to be an integral part of the plot of the film. In doing so it defies the authority of anything that can be deemed as the plot of the film. It's a separate discourse in itself, sometimes having little or nothing to do with the main story of the film.'

### Music and Popular Culture

Manuel, who along with Arnold has done some interesting scholarly study of Hindi film songs states that: 'to some extent, Indian film music assumed a life and significance of its own that was independent of cinema' (Manuel, 1993:42). Their usage in the Indian cultural context substantiates that. Songs often outlive their films and homogenize with popular culture. Thus, the folk based song *Rang Barse* from the Hindi blockbuster *Silsila* gained a ritualistic relevance for the celebration of the festival of colours Holi. Similarly, *Baharon phool barsaao* (film: Suraj, 1966), *Aaj mere yaar ki shadi hai* (film: Aadmi Sadak Ka, 1977) and the folk *bhangara* based song *Ye desh hai veer jawanon ka* (film: Naya Daur, 1957) have been patronized by the musical bands playing during marriage processions (*Baarat*) in India with such enthusiasm that they have almost become like the anthem of marriage. Festivity, social, cultural gathering, entertainment events and even days of national pride viz. independence and republic day; no celebration is complete without *filmi* songs in India. There're numerous numbers for every occasion. Cultural homogenization of songs has also shaped India's popular culture.

Despite such profound impact on the popular culture the younger generation of the post liberalization era was looking for a different kind of music which was less classical, folk or traditional. The quest for style, energy, glamour, eroticism of sorts made MTV a natural choice among urban youth. It also satisfied the urge for identification with the west and *disidentification* with the traditional. The new kind of music which MTV played was accessible through the proliferating satellite TV channels in India. It was both youthful and youth-centric and cut across the boundaries of language, culture, ethnicity and so on. Frith (1996: 124-215) observes:

‘Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experience it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.... [W]hat makes music special – what makes it special for identity – is that it defines a space without boundaries (a game without frontiers). Music is thus the cultural form best able to cross borders – sounds carry across fences and wall and oceans, across classes, races and nations...’

The new hybrid, experimental music was a kind of replacement for the film music which the youth considered archaic, even insipid. So it gave rise to the revival of neo-ethnic, experimental hybrid genres like fusion, Hindi-Pop, Hindi Rock and so on. Experiments of fusing folk lyrics with western composition were also becoming popular. It created apprehensions that westernization and globalization may one day subjugate the cultural sovereignty to the extent that purity and originality of cultural expressions may be lost forever. However, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1996, 1), believe that the widespread apprehension that “Americanization or commodification or McDonald’s . . . is seducing the world into sameness and creating a world of little Americas,” is rather overstated. On the contrary, the two music channels – MTV and Channel [V] went for aggressive *Indianization* of their music content featuring ‘Indian film songs and music videos, and a vibrant promo culture featuring satirized and exoticized vignettes of Indian everyday life and film culture’ (Juluri: 2002).

### **The Popular Frivolous**

Indian film industry in the post-MTV era is churning out a considerable chunk of songs which are gaining instant popularity not due to their lyrical or musical value unlike the songs of fifties and sixties but because of the triviality. The emerging culture treats audience as consumers rather than connoisseurs whose taste for music is marked by refinement and sophistication. Vasudevan (2000) calls this phenomena ‘an infantile culture which needed to grow up.’ Indian popular cinema faces scathing comparison with the linear narrative of Hollywood and Indian ‘art’ cinema which eschew both the ingredients of popular cinema; its melodrama and *masala* (spice). Prasad (1998) prefers to explain popular cinema as ‘a *not yet cinema*.’ In this kind of cinema which is yet to become what it should be (from the western perspective of course) songs serves the purpose of aligning cinema with the ‘pre-industrial mythical style of discourse’ ubiquitous in India Das Gupta (1991) points out.

As compared to the old songs, a sizeable number of post-MTV *filmi* songs sound conspicuously trivial and hybrid. From the perspective of ethnomusicology they may qualify for a new cultural category which redefines the cultural boundary of lyrics and music. It’s now Hinglish (Hindi-English hybrid) which marks the new lyricism. Consequently, rendering and composition of the songs are now stylistically different; a blend of Indian and western. Rock, rap, remix, reggae, fusion have changed the landscape of *filmi* music. The impact of Hinglish on lyrics also makes the accent of the singer sound more western in the contemporary songs. Besides that, explicit sensuous expressions in songs leave nothing to imagination. Pelvic thrust and bouncing bosoms dominate the dance sequences these days. The songs often capture such body movements quite literally as in: *Engine ki seeti mein mharo bum dole* (my buttock swivels on the whistle of the engine) in the 2014 film *Khoobsurat*. Two recent Hindi Rap songs *Char bottle Vodka, kam mera roj ka, na mujhko koi roke, na kisi ne roka*, (four bottle vodka is my daily dose, nobody stopped me boozing earlier, nobody stops me now) from the 2014 film *Ragini MMS2* and *Aaj peeyenge Champagne, ba ba ba boozing dancing and we cruzing, bouncer panga leta hai toh, gotta keep it moving, char baj gaye lekin party abhi baaki hai* (it’s 4 0’clock but the party is still on) from 2011 film *F.A.L.T.U* glorify boozing as the new style statement. Yet another song of same nature from a 2007 crime thriller

Shootout at Lokhandwala has a rather prosaic composition: *Yeh Ganpat chal daru la, ice chala soda kum thoda pani mila, thoda table-vebel saaf kar de na yaar* (O Ganpat serve me liquor, bring some ice, add less soda more water, clean the table buddy). It sounds more like an inebriated monologue than a song. A number of songs now celebrate boozing. References of champagne, vodka, *daru* (country liquor) in songs are not culturally blasphemous any longer.

Though love is still the predominant theme of most of the songs, but the new expressions of love seem rather superficial and mundane and lack the poetic finesse as compared to the songs of fifties, sixties and early seventies. The expressions are often explicitly physical and frivolous as in the song: *Mere photo ko seene se yaar, Chipka le saiyaan fevicol se. Main to tandoori murgi hoon yaar, Gatka le saiyaan alcohol se* (paste my photo on your chest with Fevicol (an adhesive), I'm your tandoori chicken my love, swallow me with alcohol). The use of 'sex', 'sexy', 'kiss', 'hot' in lyrics is no more a taboo; it's rather fashionable. The title track of the 2010 film *Love, Sex and Dhoka* repeats the word 'sex' several times over in its violent and aggressive lyrics. Another 2010 film *Teesmar Khan* song: *My name is Sheela, Sheela ki jawani, I'm just sexy for you main tere hath na aani* overtly talks of Sheela's youth and her elusive yet enticing sex appeal. In fact, It was the 1994 comedy *Dulara* whose song *Meri pant bhi sexy, meri shirt bhi sexy* (my pants is sexy, my shirt is sexy) gave the word 'sexy' a kind of legitimacy in *filmi* lyrics. Boldness and sensuality mark a sizeable number of love songs of the post-MTV era which reflect in songs like: *Zara-zara touch me, touch me, touch me, zara-zara kiss me, kiss me, kiss me* (touch me a little, kiss me a little); *Ik tu. ik main. Aur ho dim dim ye light, ho saari night besharmi ki height* (you and I and this dim light, let there be height of shamelessness whole night); *shake it saiyan, main naach sharabi rayiaan, ho chaal farebi gayiaan*; (shake it my love, I'm dancing drunk, I have become a cheat); *abcd padhli bohota, thandi aahen bhar li bohota, achhi baaten kar li bahut, ab karoonga tere sath gandi baat* (read enough of abcd. now I'll talk nasty things with you); *hey Chhanno! saali atom bomb... Channo ki kamariya patli patli, haath na aaye saali titli titli. launde sadak ke phokat me dekehin, Channo ki aanch se aankhein sakein* (Chhanno is an atom bomb, Chhanno has a slim waist, can't catch this butterfly. the roadside buggers stare at her free of cost, gratify their eyes with her heat). The list is long and growing.

## CONCLUSION

Joshi (1988) writes that it was in 1934 when the first gramophone records of film songs were produced and played on radio. Ever since then film songs never lost their status of being a mass cultural product. It will be erroneous to think that the lyrical and musical quality of film songs have changed overnight. Western influence on music itself is believed to have started from C Ramchandra, the famous Music Director. Ramchandra introduced in his musical compositions alto sax together with guitar and harmonica. In one of his evergreen songs *Aana meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday* in film *Shehnai* Ramchandra used whistling too. He experimented with a combination of bongo, oboe, trumpet, clarinet and sax for the song *Shola jo bhadke, dil mera dhadke* in film *Albela*. The musical experiment continues. Similarly, the lyrical quality have also changed successively. The change in the lyrical quality is also a reflection of the simultaneous change in the kind of cinema being produced. As a marketable cultural product Hindi cinema and music are competing with their western and global counterparts. Therefore, to sell and succeed in the mass market becoming a little sensuous, somewhat voluptuous and at times downright frivolous has its commercial justification. The metaphors, the imagery, the simile of the contemporary songs may often look trivial but they reflect the new cultural edifice of the post-liberalization era. For the myriad audience songs are now just rhythm and music, a *joie de vivre*, not a sublime piece of poetry anymore. The loss of lyrical value is just its reflection.

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