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## The Evolution of Music in Popular Indian Cinema

### Introduction

Any Westerner who has seen a commercial Indian film can attest to some striking differences with the commercial films of the West. The most obvious difference is the prominence of singing and dancing in Indian film. Westerners may find the sudden halts in the narrative while actors break into song jarring at the least, if not downright silly. But the fact is that this entertainment is enjoyed by hundreds of millions of people in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe, as well as by Indians living abroad throughout the world. While music in the West music has always played a subservient role in cinema – aside from that in the “musical” film genre – in India, “cinema is an excuse for music” (Lata Mangeshkar, qtd. in Majumdar 167). Several topics are of interest regarding music in Indian popular film. Among them: Why is music so prominent in the first place; what influences have shaped this music; and how has this music impacted Indian and foreign cultures? Additionally I would like to investigate the evolution of the female voice in Indian film music.

I concentrate mainly on North Indian film music for which most information is available. In this context the following terms are all roughly equivalent: Hindustani film, Hindi film, Indian popular cinema, commercial Indian cinema, Bollywood. South Indian film music is generally quite similar to that of North India, although it influenced more by the Karnatik classical and regional folk traditions of the South (as opposed to the North Indian Hindustani classical and folk traditions) (Manuel, Popular 185).

In addition there are a couple of terms that should be defined. One is “picturization”. This is the process in India of filming the visuals that the music is, or will be, played over. The

other term is “music director”. This is the composer of a film’s main songs, and usually of the background music as well. The lyrics to the songs are written by someone else.

### Why the Song and Dance Routine?

The story of Indian film music begins in 1931. That year saw the release of the first Indian sound film Alam Ara (Arnold 14). Produced in 1930 while Gandhi was marching in protest of the British colonial government’s Salt Tax (Aziz 3), this now lost film contained at least seven songs, possibly a dozen (Arnold 35, note 4). The “astounding success” of this new type of film ushered in the domestic film production market in India (14).

Music was an important aspect of all early commercial films produced after 1931, and sometimes *the* most important aspect. Peter Manuel points out that “some films, such as Indrasabha (1932), which contained 72 songs, were little more than sequences of verses and songs woven into a familiar plot” (Popular 176). And the release in 1937 of a Hindi film without songs caused “widespread discontent” among audiences. The producer of the film was even forced to “insert an apologetic trailer explaining the film’s absence of songs” (Arnold 31). Since then songless commercial films in India have indeed been rare.

At this point we might pause to consider some of the reasons why including song and dance sequences seemed to be such an automatic choice for Indian film producers. Sara Dickey cautions that, “the search for motivations of present-day forms in those of previous ones can be risky and even arbitrary” and that “South Asian traditions are heterogeneous enough to account for almost anything....” However, as she also notes, there are ancient traditional practices and conventions that make the culture of South Asia quite different from that of the West (48). It seems probable that certain of these traditions have had an impact on modern cinema.

Music has always been an important part of Indian theatrical traditions, beginning at least

with classical Sanskrit theater. As conceived in the Natyashastra, an early treatise on the dramatic arts, theater is blending of speech, music, and dance. According to this philosophy, “the pleasure or pain represented in the theatrical event cannot be enjoyed unless they are supported by music and dance. Nor can the event in question be complete without them” (Chaturvedi 165). For Bharata, probable author of the Natyashastra, music is an inherently necessary part of drama (166).

Although Sanskrit theater virtually disappeared from India after 1000 CE (Barnouw 66), various types of musical folk drama were prevalent all across the subcontinent (68). In the nineteenth century, when regional theaters inspired by European models began to thrive in many Indian cities (66-67), the new styles soon began to adopt music and dance as essential elements in keeping with the ancient classical and folk traditions (67). The main predecessor of the Indian sound film was the Urdu-Parsi theater, which included songs based on folk and classical traditions. The cinema naturally adopted this structure (Akhtar 4), and in fact many early sound films, such as Alam Ara, were based on popular stage plays of the time.

And so popular Indian cinema can seem merely a modern continuation of ancient Indian dramatic practices. Given this history of the fusion of music with other performance arts it is not surprising that Indian audiences do not find it so disconcerting when a film actor suddenly “bursts into song” (Beeman 4). Indeed, one of the “earliest visionaries” of Indian popular film, Debaki Bose, “believed that songs and dances *integrated with the film narrative* were necessary to appeal to the Indian people” (Aziz 4). Even today with the wide availability of radio and cassette and CD players, filmgoers will view a film repeatedly for its songs, preferring to *see* them performed than to merely listen (Manuel, Popular 174).

It is interesting as well that, given the obstacles involved, early sound filmmakers would so readily include music as a principle component of their films. One primary obstacle was technical. The picture and sound in the early years were recorded onto the same negative, and

this imposed many limitations on filmmakers. A microphone had to be concealed as close to the actor-singer as possible in order to record the voice. The musicians also had to be as close to the singer and microphone as possible but out of range of the camera. This made moving shots particularly difficult. Many songs were also picturized at night because of the lower degree of noise, and the musicians would have to play in complete darkness (Arnold 29). Occasionally for certain scenes it would be impossible for the actor-singer and the musicians to be close enough, and they would have to perform in-time and in-tune with each other while being “mutually inaudible”. If the film director wanted to have a song picturized in two or more different locations, the music director would have to find a way to keep the performances at a consistent tempo and tuning between recording periods (30) (for example, while working on Mehboob Khan’s film Watan, Anil Biswas “had to continue beating the rhythm of his song for two hours between picturization of the song’s two sections while the indoor set was being prepared [38, note 45]).

Another major problem with emphasizing music was one of musical talent. Many silent film actors were unable or unwilling to make the transition to sound films (Arnold 21). In consequence stage actors and various nonprofessionals – who may or may not have had any musical training – began to filter into the film industry. So the music director was faced with having to compose songs that fit the film’s narrative and were also suitable for the given actor’s vocal ability. Needless to say, performers who could both sing and act well were difficult to find (27-28); fortunately this problem would be solved in the 1940s by the playback system. Nevertheless, despite these early obstacles song sequences became a necessary part of commercial Indian cinema right from the beginning (it is still commonly stated that to be successful an Indian film needs six songs in addition to a star and three dance sequences).

## Important Influences on Indian Film Music

Alam Ara was, like several early sound films, based on a stage play. The music for these films was often simply the same music used in the stage version. Films based on new scripts also utilized music in a style similar to stage music of the time (Arnold 17-18). One of the first major film companies of sound cinema's early years was Prabhat Film Company (42). Two of its music directors, Master Krishnarao and Govindrao Tembe came from the theater and incorporated musical theater traditions into their film song compositions, particularly "the conservative use of classical *rags* as a basis for songs" (43). The methods these first film composer used are interesting in their traditionalism.

Creating a film song in the 1930s would typically begin with the music director deciding upon a classical melody to fit the situation in the film and then singing this melody to the lyricist. The lyricist would then write lyrics that both fit the melody and the narrative of the film. The music director might also utilize melodies from the traditional and popular folk music of the region (Arnold 43). The creation of new melodies at this time was rare; most film song compositions were composites of bits and pieces of existing tunes (64). Musical accompaniment during this period was in keeping with the performance of light-classical and stage music: harmonium, *tabla*, and occasionally *sarangi* or violin to support the vocal line (43). The vocals were done variously by a solo male, solo female, male and female duet (or occasionally female and female duet), or chorus either in combination with one of the preceding or by itself. If more than one vocalist was singing the same line it was always in unison. In keeping with India's indigenous musical traditions, harmony and counterpoint were not utilized at this time (74).

The early film songs of the 1930s were probably mostly of a through-composed form, that is each line of text had different music and there was no repetition of a musical refrain (Arnold 66). There were variations on this structure, including a combination of a refrain-verse text format with through-composed music (68), a refrain-verse structured song with different

music composed for each verse and common music for the refrains (70), a strophic musical structure married to through-composed text (72). There were other methods used as well, but generally the music of this period tended to be more dynamic than the more fixedly strophic, refrain-verse songs that would become common later (65).

By the end of the 1930s harmony began to be a common feature of film songs as more and more instruments began to be added to the accompanying orchestra (Arnold 79). The harmonies used in Indian film music tend to be quite simple by Western standards. However the impact of harmony on Indian listeners is likely much different than the impact on Westerners. The role of harmony in film music is not definite: sometimes it seems to be ornamental; at other times it seems to serve a structural function similar to what is found in Western music (Manuel, Popular 183).

Indian film music has been influenced by just about everything. To be sure its early sound was modeled on traditional Indian forms of expression, but later composers drew inspiration from a variety of musical styles from across the globe. Early film music was quite obviously grounded in the classical and folk traditions. As mentioned above, early Indian films were often taken from the urban theater of the time, especially Parsi theater. The songs of Parsi theater were generally based on the *thumri*, the *ghazal*, and the *kajri* (Akhtar 4), which are essentially fusions of folk and classical music. The *ghazal* has been particularly influential in film music.

The *ghazal* as originally practiced was more a poetic than musical form, with lyrics often drawn from the works of Urdu poets. While its melody may or may not be based on the *rag* system, its rhythmic structure is based on folk music. In some hands the *ghazal* can seem like a “sophisticated pop song” (Siddiqi 213-214). The film-*ghazal* can be quite different than its traditional counterpart. While traditional *ghazals* are usually accompanied by harmonium and *tabla* or *dholak*, film composers often gave their *ghazals* Western-style harmonies and fuller

orchestrations. Missing from the film-*ghazal* was the traditional improvisation (Arnold 155).

The *ghazal* film song went out of style in the late 1950s when composers began to be influenced by foreign, particularly Western and Latin American, music (Akhtar 7-8). The faster pace of modern films, and perhaps an impatience with poetry, have further contributed to its decline in usage (8-9). Although a new form, the *ghazal*-song, did become popular in the 1970s (Kabir 221), the *ghazal*'s main impact today is apparent mostly in film song's diction (Akhtar 7).

Another traditional song form, the *qawwali*, has also been popular in film. The *qawwali* is a Sufi devotional song in which one or two singers are accompanied by a chorus, harmonium, and *tabla* or *dholak*. Hand clapping and interaction between the performers and the audience are also distinguishing features. The lyrics are often in *ghazal* form. Film *qawwalis* are musically very similar to their non-film counterparts, although they usually utilize additional instruments, may feature female singers, and the lyrical texts tend to be more concerned with worldly rather than spiritual love (Manuel, Popular 181).

Most songs however don't follow any particular musical tradition. In fact aside from the short length, general refrain-verse structure, and Hindustani text, one film song may have little obvious in common with another. Yet audiences find film songs to be quite recognizable as such (Arnold 137). Film songs are neither classical nor folk, though these two traditions "form the bedrock from where the film song emerges" (Aziz xxvi). Film music in India was a completely new type of music.

In the early 1940s Ghulam Haider introduced Punjabi folk music into the film song. Earlier film song compositions were concentrated mainly on the melody; Ghulam Haider gave the film song its "rhythmic grounding" by employing Punjabi rhythm and percussion. The lively rhythms he created revolutionized the film music of the time (Aziz 8-9), and the Punjabi folk percussion and rhythms he popularized are still common in film songs today.

Among other innovations of music director Naushad Ali was the use of Indian classical music in films such as Baiju Bawra. This music for this film in particular had a powerful impact when first released, and continues to influence music directors today (Aziz 83). The film itself is about a conflict between a rebellious folk musician and a courtly classical musician. Although much of the music in Baiju Bawra is considered classical it is not. Many of its songs are however based on classical rags and even sung by classical vocalists (81). One interesting device is a musical “duel” between the two characters, where the folk musician’s music is rendered with an orchestra of Indian and Western instruments as well as percussion, while the classical musician’s performance is accompanied only by his own *tanpura*; this is perhaps a metaphor for the film song composers’ inevitable conflict with the keepers of the classical tradition (88-89).

Naushad enjoyed listening to the orchestras accompanying silent films as a child (Upperstall.com); he became one of the earliest composers to experiment with Western orchestra instruments and harmonies, which he married to the folk melodies of his birthplace, Uttar Pradesh (Aziz 97-98). But despite his use of classical music in certain films, Naushad was fundamentally a champion of folk music (99), and believed that film music “was the real folk music of modern India” (Barnouw 205). In addition he attempted to augment his songs with ideas from Middle Eastern music, American jazz, European classical music, and other sources (106).

Another prominent music director, S.D. Burman, based his film compositions on the folk music of Northeast India, especially East Bengal, and was also influenced by American jazz (Upperstall.com). His son, R.D. Burman, one of the most eclectic and ingenious of music directors, used such diverse styles as swing jazz, flamenco, circus tent music, can-can, psychedelia, Hungarian Gypsy rhapsody, and marachi in his compositions (Hunt).

The modern film song may combine many disparate musical elements, and yet to be successful it must remain fundamentally Indian. Typically this means the melody should be

essentially Indian in character (Arnold 183). The melody is traditionally the most important aspect of a song after the lyrics, and as long as that is appealing to the audience the composer is pretty much free to make use of any outside musical styles he wishes.

### The Influence of Indian Film Music Outside the Cinema

Although music directors have turned to folk music for inspiration they have usually altered the tunes to make them less regionally distinctive (Manuel, Cassette 52). This, in combination with the many other musical influences utilized by composers, has led to the creation of the distinct film music genre which has been able to appeal to audiences across India. Considering then the great popularity of film music, it is not surprising that it has had a big effect on the culture of India and on the many regional styles of music within that culture.

Unfortunately film music has impacted traditional folk music in an often negative way. For example, in Uttar Pradesh traditional folk singers have begun performing film songs instead of their traditional repertoires; film music at weddings has decreased traditional wedding song performances; and various types of folk song and theater from the Punjab and elsewhere have been disappearing under film music's influence. In most folk genres it has become common for performers to incorporate film song melodies. Some folk styles have seen increasing popularity, but this is likely only due to their increasing use of popular film songs (Manuel, Cassette 56). It could be argued in some cases that the prevalence of film music has in fact enriched folk music and promoted a greater degree of professionalism among performers, but on the other hand this could be seen as the mere homogenization of disparate forms of expression (57).

In the 1950s there was a governmental backlash against film music. In 1952 Dr. Balkrishna Vishwanath Keskar became Minister of Information and Broadcasting. A devoted fan of classical music he disdained popular film music, and one of his early policy decisions was to limit the time devoted to film music on the government run All India Radio. In addition the

names of the films from which the songs came could not be mentioned on the radio, as this was considered “advertising”. Angry film producers then decided to discontinue licensing their songs to All India Radio, and film music disappeared from the airwaves altogether (Barnouw 200-201).

For classical music enthusiasts this was a victory; they felt that film music “was rapidly blunting Indian ears to the nuances of traditional Indian music” (Barnouw 201). Most of the music broadcast on All India Radio during this period indeed came to be Indian classical and folk music (202). Other programming included discussions by experts on obscure points of classical music and literature – even readings in Sanskrit, a language spoken by only 555 people out of a population of 400 million, were broadcast at this time (205). Sadly for AIR most radios were being tuned to Radio Ceylon, which took advantage of AIR’s ban and was broadcasting film songs exclusively (203-204). Eventually AIR gave in and created a new channel, Vividh Bharati, which would be allowed to play film music, and since 1957 this is where most Indian radios have been tuned (Manuel, Cassette 40).

Beyond its culture of origin, Indian film music has spread throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (Manuel, Popular 187). One of many examples of the effects of this is Indonesian *dangdut* music. A music that was popularized in the 1960s in Indonesian copies of Indian films, *dangdut* “[mimicked] the *tabla*, the flute, and the vocal ornamentation” of Indian film music (Miller 68). It also utilized the North Indian *kaherva* rhythm common in much Indian film music (Manuel, Popular 188). And in Russia, the singer Elmar Rajsur makes his living by singing Hindi film songs in hotels and Indian restaurants, and has toured with the Russian circus. Although he mostly performs for Indian communities in Russia, Indian films themselves have been quite popular in Russia, particularly those of Raj Kapoor (Singh).

## The Female Voice in Indian Popular Cinema

A study of the female voice in Indian film music can be instructive; this voice is provided by the playback singer. The technology to record sound and film separately came to India in the mid-1930s and was quickly adopted in all major production centers (Arnold 104). By using this technique filmmakers were able to record a song first and play it back over loudspeakers while filming the picturization. The star merely had to lip-synch to the music. This technique greatly expanded the creative possibilities of filmmakers and solved the problem of actors who couldn't sing. A new type of performer was thus created: the playback singer.

In the early days of this technique actors mostly still recorded the songs they were shown singing on the screen (Arnold 102). However in the 1940s playback singers began to be increasingly used (Majumdar 167). This was not immediately accepted. Part of the audience's enjoyment of early sound films came from their knowledge that the actor on the screen was actually singing the songs they heard (166). When playback singing first became common, the sudden disjuncture between the voice of the singer and the body of the actor was a "source of discomfort" for audiences. Particularly unnerving was the use of one singer's voice for many different actors. Playback singing was seen by some at the time as inauthentic and emotionally chilling; others sensed in it the possibility for greater creativity and entertainment (168).

Nevertheless, in the years following, the use of playback singing became the acceptable standard practice. The field of playback singing came to be dominated by a handful of singers, and these singers became stars in and of themselves, able to draw audiences to theaters by their voices alone (Majumdar 168). The most famous voice to emerge from this group was that of Lata Mangeshkar. Why her voice in particular was and is seen as the most desirable female voice in Indian cinema is an interesting question. Perhaps it would be illuminating to look briefly at the recent history of women singers in India.

Although there is a long tradition of female musicianship in India, by the end of the

twentieth century the performance of music by women had been seriously curtailed. Due to the decline of the Moghal court culture female singers and dancers had to cater to a less refined audience of petty kings and rich landowners (Arora 153). Professional women of this time began to take on two roles, that of musician and that of courtesan or prostitute. In consequence the social status of female performers declined significantly (Post 409). Generally only women of certain of the lower castes sang. Ashraf Aziz write that these performers had “heavy, contralto voices. To be good a woman’s voice had to compete with/equal that of a man.” Their voices tended to be bigger and heavier than what is common today (Aziz 117).

Even the early female film singers had more forceful, lower voices often in the contralto range. Aziz concentrates particularly on Noorjehan. Although Noorjehan was a soprano she had a forceful voice that was also quite flexible (Aziz 118). Classically trained she also used a rural, *ragi* style of singing which is often “loud, earthy, and declamatory” (10). Aziz describes her singing as provocative and muscular (12), and her *qawwali* performance in the film *Zeenat* became an anthem for women’s liberation (14).

Aziz sees in the female singing of the 1940s evidence of the agitation for Indian independence. Women were enlisted to fight alongside men in the struggle against the British (119). However, once independence was achieved in 1947 “it was time to send the ladies back to the kitchen” (120). Noorjehan for her part migrated to Pakistan along with several other prominent singers (119). Into the confusion of this post-Independence migration stepped a young singer by the name of Lata Mangeshkar. Indeed 1949 was the “Year of Lata Mangeshkar” (121). Her voice was an immediate hit with audiences, and she was perhaps the first playback singer to receive wide name recognition (Majumdar 171). She went on to dominate female playback singing for the next fifty years.

There are some troubling aspects with Lata’s success however. Although Javed Akhtar claims that “Lata Mangeshkar is to playback singing what Shakespeare is to literature” (47) other

commentators have been less enraptured. Aziz claims Lata merely appropriated Noorjehan's "small girl" voice – one of the many singing styles used by Noorjehan. Lata's voice was light and agile and rather sexless – "she sounded like a prepubertal adolescent" (120-121). Vijay Mishra describes her voice as projecting "pure, uncontaminated, virginal qualities" (166). This was an important change from the "earthier" female singers who had come before. Finally, at least in the cinema, "men could now experience women without encountering the dark anarchic force of female sexuality, or assertions of equality" (Aziz 120).

As Lata's voice was used throughout the years for the singing voice of numerous actresses it became a sort of standard of "ideal femininity" (Majumdar 172). Her voice and her vocal style, which has been imitated by most female vocalists since, have become synonymous with popular film music. Hers is the voice most Westerners – unknowingly – are likely to associate with Indian music in general. This is troubling considering that South Asian culture is the home of many diverse and distinctive folk and classical vocal styles, none of which any longer seem to have a place in Indian popular culture. In fact, Lata's is "one vocal style that is difficult to find in North Indian folk music..." (Manuel, Cassette 52). It is unclear why Lata's voice became the voice of popular film song in India. Perhaps it was partly because – as music director Anil Biswas has noted – Lata was able to learn new songs more easily than any other singer of the 1940s (qtd. in Manuel, Cassette 53). And perhaps also, as Sanjay Srivastava argues, it was due to the "modernization of patriarchal norms" in postcolonial Indian culture. At the same time that women's bodies were becoming more visible in popular culture their voices were thinned and homogenized into a single, unvarying style (qtd. in Mishra 167).

Interestingly, the other most recorded female voice since Independence is Lata's sister, Asha Bhosle. Asha's voice is "smaller and finer" than her sister's, and also more sensual. Aziz writes that "Asha reintroduced sex to the female voice," although it was a "safe, watered down, manageable sexuality" (Aziz 122). She often sang more "vulgar" songs, which Lata refused to do

(Majumdar 176). The two sisters came to embody the two sides of the traditional virgin-vamp dichotomy (172), apparently supplying the market with all that it needed from the feminine voice.

### In Conclusion

The song has a place of utmost importance in commercial Indian film. Perhaps even, as Ashraf Aziz claims, “The song is the *raison d’etre* of the Hindustani movie” (113). For Indian audiences music give the movie its “emotional and spiritual meaning”. Whereas Westerners see a jarring combination of disparate elements, Indians see a natural whole: the music is not only essential to the narrative – the music *is* the narrative! (xvi). In addition it was the first domestically produced music to reach across all boundaries in India and to appeal to Indians from vastly different backgrounds. Music directors have gone beyond the barriers of religion, caste, language, and region in order to find inspiration for their music (Arora 161), and this music has served to unite Indians living around the world in a common culture. Thus I believe that its history and evolution need to be taken seriously, despite its possible musical and cultural shortcomings. For although film music is widely disdained by the educated in India – and often dismissed by the few in the West who even acknowledge it – it has had a huge impact on Indian culture and many others cultures as well. It is important to try to understand this boundary-traversing musical phenomenon on its own terms.

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