

The Extraordinary Importance of the Indian Film Song

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Film music has a tremendous hold over the film-viewing or music-exposed sections of the society taken as a whole. How can one explain this extraordinary attraction? Why was the film song so important? Why is the film song so important?

It is rightly maintained that next to 'stars', composers of music - or music directors as they are popularly called - enjoy star status in the Indian film world. This only confirms that film music has a tremendous hold over the film-viewing or the music-exposed sections of the society taken as a whole. How can one explain this extraordinary attraction?

Composers have their own separate images, and clientele. Hence it might appear that knowledge of their motives might prove to be a logical and fruitful starting point. But in the final analysis, motivation search turns out to be a false start. Firstly, because intentions, motives, and such other internal personality features are too difficult to fathom with sufficient correctness. Secondly, even if we do manage to get a clear idea of these motives; they prove to be poor indicators of the quality of the product ultimately reaching the people, because numerous agencies operate before the composer's musical idea or aesthetic intention is concretised into a song etc. Under the circumstances, motivation-based discussion is bound to be a deceptive and fruitless exercise.

The shaping forces of Indian film music are, therefore, best viewed as changing compulsions. The compulsions are of various types and though they are not mutually exclusive, the degree of ascendancy they have enjoyed during different periods have been extremely varied.

Even a very cursory historical glance reveals that in the Indian context, film music has been very much confined to being a song - at least in the earlier stages of the art. Within a year of the advent of the talkies, we had *Indrasabha* (1932) with its 71 songs! A little later, when the enterprising Wadias produced a film without a song (*Naujavan*, 1937), the viewers were so disgruntled that the producers started screening a trailer

seeking to explain the unexpected absence of the song-cushions! In fact, it was not till K. A. Abbas's *Munna* (1954) that a songless film could be produced without being apologetic. A question thus becomes inevitable: Why was the song so important? (In reality even today, it is important.)

Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1963) have argued chiefly in favour of the following two reasons to explain song-dominance:

1) In its reliance on 'song', Indian film was exploiting the readymade receptivity of the 'audience' created and conditioned by the regional theatre which had newly emerged in the 19th century. The presentations of this theatre were replete with songs. Thus films were following the strategy of imitating the successful in order to succeed.

2) For all purposes, Indian film was a continuation of the tradition popularised and perfected by the musical folk dramas of various regions (for example, Tamasha, Jatra, Keertan etc.) These folk dramas in turn, were carriers of the heritage so thoroughly systematised in ancient Sanskrit dramaturgy.

However, to explain song-dominance, it is not enough to show the origins of the intensive use of songs. The real causes are to be detected in the nature of the filmic content itself. In this respect, it is to be remembered that till the late thirties it was mythology which provided the chief source for filmic content in India, in both the film-producing centres, Bombay and Calcutta. As has been pointed out by Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, the first five years of talkie turned out no less than three Tukarams and five Harishchandras! Now it can be stated as an anthropological truth that in all cultures, music is invariably employed to establish links with the supernatural - the element which enables mythology to have a firm base. The cinematic impulse in India, was, therefore, congenitally bound with music. As primacy of vocal music in India is also an unquestionable trait, song-dominance becomes almost automatic.

Secondly, it is obvious that due to the very nature of the medium, films aimed at an all-India audience. Phalke - the father of Indian cinema - used to have explanatory titles in Hindi and English for his silents, as far as back as 1913. In effect it so transpired that while the regional theatres were language-based, the films tended to be culture-based. Music and mythology are known expressive agents with an in-built cultural appeal which is also extra-regional. Hence, they became the chief components in Indian films. This is the background on which song-dominance of the early films is to be understood.

Apart from song-dominance, the classical base of Indian film music of the early phase is also to be noted. The reason is to be found in the nature of musical traditions current in India. It is a truism to say that for various historical reasons India is to be broadly divided into two large segments: Hindustan and the South. The former has nurtured the Hindustani tradition of art music and the latter has developed the Carnatic variety of it. Naturally, irrespective of the immense multiplicity of the linguistic and the literary sub-traditions, art music and mythology can provide common cultural hinterlands of their own to both North and South. Further, Indian films started operations in Bombay and Calcutta - centres which are located in the Hindustani-music-influenced areas of art music. Hence it follows that in view of its extra-regional appeal and predilection for song, Indian film music fell back on the art music which was common to all Hindustan. This had to be so since the regional musical varieties suffered from a limited appeal till the advent of the mass media which increased their reach considerably. The new cinematic experience could be better patterned and readily received through the help of the readymade moulds of art music and mythology. When thus presented, the filmic experience became better defined and durable because both music and mythology performed a sort of cementing act. It is possible to note a corroborative sidelight in respect of the capacity of art music to reach beyond linguistic confines. Almost contemporaneously with the phases of Indian film music discussed here, the Marathi musicals staged in Bombay, were successfully attracting non-Marathi crowds. In these plays, the narrowing language-based dramatic structures were suffused with the more comprehensive and common musical culture of Hindustani art music.

Before we leave behind the abundance of song and touch upon other varieties of music, a subtle distinction should be made between 'song' as it is understood today and songs of the earlier films. In reality, all the compositions of these films can hardly be called 'songs' in the true sense of the term. Often, they were merely verses set to tunes. For instance, the film *Indrasabha* mentioned earlier is reported to have been structured as a verse-play. They were verses in the sense that they were deviations from prose or narration-tone and hence they were less positively inclined towards musical quality which is after all the hallmark of a song. The rationale behind this phenomenon must be clearly understood. In cultures that are permeated with oral tradition, it is a common procedure to move away from prose-tone repeatedly and unobtrusively, then fall into metrical strides but still to keep away from a full-scale song-structure and again to return to the prose-tone. The constant deviations from the prose-tone are to avoid monotony, and the non-use of the song proper is to ensure that the content is not obscured. Indian film music followed the same strategy with a slight change while

taking the second step. Instead of dry metricality it opted for simple but perceivable rhythm and equally simple but clearly felt tunes. In this way even though it did not become a song proper, the composition was a little more musical than a metrical recitation. The deliberate, logical exercise of a delicate and efficient choice continued till the hold of the oral tradition weakened with the advent of the literary cinema. It was then that song-spaces were created in the dialogues, naturalistic causation was sought for, in using singable material. Carving out musical occasions is also done in the oral traditions, but it is less deliberate. This is so because, briefly stated, a very important principle operative in any oral tradition is to treat the voice-speech-verse song-music categories as degrees on the same continuum of content-projection. This is the reason why there is a continuous back and forth movement between prose and intoned verse in the earlier film music. The easiest parallel is to be found in the Keertan in Maharashtra, etc. It is a pity that this verse-in-tune phase of Indian film music is often confused with the present 'plot and song' dichotomy in films. This confusion is then used to put forward the argument that Indian films today are only carrying on the tradition of being full of songs. In reality however, song is a much-processed version of a literary intent while the verse-in-rune is only a crystallization of the narrative function with a musical overlay. It is a logical profanity to lump together two different manifestations because that means an unwarranted attribution of an artificial art-intent to a simpler but more authentic sensibility.

Can we consider instances of early film music as compulsions of an aesthetic nature? I do not think so. In the phase discussed, the main concern and the effect was to reach and hold the audience. No bias of the valuational category was in operation. This is the reason why so many of the early examples of film music are musically so unexciting. They had no aesthetic functions to discharge. The underlying compulsions were compulsions of communication which, though fundamental, are not aesthetic. One need not be on the defensive in this respect, because in denying their aestheticness we are not rejecting their excellence. The point is that for lack of conceptual awareness of its own composite character, the early Indian film followed the model intrinsically relevant to the performing arts i.e. dance, drama and music. According to their model, the very first requirement to be met with is to communicate efficiently. As communication features like audience-response and its participation, improvisation etc. are specific to the performing arts, the aesthetic comes to the foreground only later in their case. On the other hand, films are made for hypothetical audiences that are temporally and spatially distanced from the filmic creation. The cinematicians sensed their special brand of composite sensibility only later. The late arrival of background music on the filmic scene or a similar delay in introducing sound effects in the films is

to be ascribed to this later awareness of the composite character of the art by its practitioners. The very idea of background music presupposes a conscious, methodical splitting of the unit of experience into its components to make them amenable to manipulations of the art-intent. Aestheticizing aims at fusion preceded by a fission of creative forces. Whenever aestheticizing takes place, the experiential units which have been conceived and operated in an integrated manner have to undergo successive processes of dismantling and reassembling. Conception and use of background music or sound effects was a result of such a deliberate procedure. A similar cool and aesthetic act was to be performed later, to make emergence and entrenchment of playback singing an indivisible feature of Indian film music.

To make the distinction between the communicative and the aesthetic compulsions clearer a few characteristics of the latter can be enumerated. Firstly, the aesthetic compulsion is seen in the frequent use of the criterion of correspondence as reflected in the choice of music for a particular filmic situation. In some way or the other music chosen or composed in this manner was supposed to reflect the nature of the event or the mood of the character. In other words, the correspondence-aesthetique consisted of discovering music that matched the filmic fact. Thus, music utilised the situation, its structure etc., to take off. It was then expected to enhance or add to the effect of the filmic event correlated with it. The relationship between the two components - music and film - was thus based on the principle of similarity. Admittedly, there is no reason to believe that 'correspondence' is the only aesthetique in operation or that the principle of similarity is the only possible way of building a relationship between filmic and musical events. But that does not invalidate either of them.

It is instructive to see how correspondence was established. For this purpose, two devices were chiefly employed. One of them was acoustic and the other can be called musicological. Acoustic correspondence meant using appropriate sounds or musical instruments etc. This was such a consciously designed, aesthetic device that the booklet containing the dialogues and lyrics of *Kunku* (1937) also listed all the sound effects composed for the film! Deployment of the musicological device resulted in exploitation of the conventional Raga-Rasa theory while composing music. Thus Raginis like Bhairavi etc. were equated with the Karuna Rasa, while Adana, Malkauns etc. with the Veera Rasa, and so on. It is not surprising that these musicological equations held considerable sway over the imagination of the composers because the line-up of music composers for both Pune and Calcutta centres included persons who were basically trained for being professional art musicians. For instance, the roll-call

included Govindrao Tembe, Master Krishnarao, Keshavrao Bhole, Pankaj Mullick, R. C. Boral, Saraswati Devi et al. The lone lady was in fact a degree-holder in music from Maurice College of Music, Lucknow! It can be suggested that till the late forties, film composers were art musicians turned composers and hence the categories which they assumed almost unquestioningly were musicological. Their faith in the predetermined correspondences between musical stimulants and audience-affects was in reality designed to trigger off stock responses. The device might therefore rank lowly on the aesthetic scale, yet its legitimacy cannot be denied. Associations are after all cultural fixtures and till such time as the films were culture-centred, to exploit association clusters of various types was a foregone conclusion.

However, composers were able to shake off the musicological tyranny very often due to another feature of the aesthetic compulsion - the criterion of naturalism (and not naturalness!), prevailing in the overall directorial vision. Directorial naturalism was partly reflected in the portrayal of non-urban characters and the consequent use of dialects etc. While composing music for such characters the composers were obviously compelled to leave aside the well-established categories of art music. In a way, this could be described as a literary compulsion vis-a-vis film music; because the filmic conception of the non-urban was itself modelled after the stylised version of the non-urban in the contemporary literature. Then the literary sensibility was loyal to naturalism and the canon of realism was not in currency. But musically speaking, loyalty to naturalism brought about a radical change in the range of music employed and this loosened the hold otherwise enjoyed by art music. The phenomenon of a 'made up' literary sensibility serving as a liberator should not surprise us, because till very recently our filmic sensibility and the changes that came about in it, were literature-based. Whether it is humanism in life, nationalism in politics or aestheticism in art - all have sought their initial inspiration from literature. Consequently, in all cultural periods the quality of contemporary literature, along with the obsessions it suffers from, have often proved an obstacle in the realisation of the individual sensibilities of other arts. Thus, instead of responding to the inner demands or urges of their own and relevant aesthetic area, composers have often tended to eat their revolutions out of the hands of their literary colleagues! Inevitably our filmic language too has suffered through this dominance of literature and the literary. As late as 1940 Phalke admonished the Madras film world for being too wordy and for forgetting that filmic art is essentially a photo play. The bane of literature-dominance is so comprehensive that all non-literary artists can temporarily turn literary and exclaim, "Thus literature does make cowards of us all!" It is indeed ironical that in a country rich in oral tradition, extreme atrophy of arts has been allowed to go unchallenged due to overindulgence

towards the written word. However, film music seems to have secured a brief respite from art music when it followed the artificial literary mode of thinking.

Correspondence-quest, acoustic and musicological basis of sound-affect syndrome, literature-based concept of naturalism and the consequent freedom from art music are the main features of aesthetic compulsion. Apart from these, some others, like new awareness of timbre, sense of movement-oriented musical punctuation, conscious exploration of the speech-music continuum and the fuller use of musical time could figure in a more detailed discussion of the issue. In addition, some of the sophisticated applications of recording and play back techniques etc. can also be elaborated upon - especially in the contemporary context. However, the present statement has the limited task of tracing a broad conceptual framework which might prove useful for a serious consideration of Indian film music. It is in this perspective that we turn to the third category of the compulsions: the musical.

To make a generalisation: the tendency after the forties has been to make each composition musically attractive so that people should retain it as a song. The desire was to compose an item that is self-sufficient in its melodic draw and which can therefore be received, reproduced and remembered in isolation i.e. irrespective of the filmic setting in which it is intended to appear. The advent of the mass media (e.g. stage-song discs from 1921, cheaper Japanese phonograph machines from 1928, broadcasting from 1931) considerably accelerated the process of severing the internal bindings of film music and enabled it to become a free agent in popular music. The whole stance of the composer then changed. He was no longer satisfied with a complementary role. He wanted and also won an independent status because repeated and isolated exposures to his music made the people take a separate and more specific interest in his creations. The composer and the film directors thus became adjuncts of a common business-cum-art venture instead of being associates in a unified filmic exploration of a composite sensibility. My hunch is that it was during the same period that the film director was supplanted by the film producer. The musical fare of the period mainly consists of catchy tunes, large orchestras, a frequent and often blatantly plagiaristic use of 'foreign' musical idioms etc. In the era of the silent films, receivers of cinematic creations constituted an 'audience'; a little later the audience was replaced by 'the people'; since the forties the people have been supplanted by 'the public'! It is symptomatic that abundant use of meaningless words in songs, frequent use of non-musical intonations, employment of prose-rhythms, overwhelming and deafening deployment of percussion instruments and high-pitched singing have all become pervasive. Music has become liberated from the constraints imposed on it by virtue of

its being in a film that it had ceased to be film music. It has become a joint presentation of film and music - each making an excuse of the other to hang together. The cumulative effect has been that it has become less and less culture-bound. It is worth noting that the Indian service of the B.B.C. could have used a choral theme from a Bombay Talkies production *Janmabhoomi*, 1936) as its signature tune. A similar situation can hardly be imagined today. Indian film music has started reaping all the advantages of being a success formula in circulation. It is mass produced, quick to act, easily available and almost the same everywhere! The compulsion that made possible such music has no doubt given us music of greater abandon, more tonal colour, variety and polish. But it has also become transient, rootless and artificial.

The commercial situation thus created needed a remedy which the art cinema movement sought to provide. Under such circumstances one needs a new philosophy, a new strategy and also a new common-sense. Art cinema tried to accomplish all these and similar feats. It could be rewarding to examine how Indian film music has positioned itself in relation to the art cinema.
