

Beat Of The Streets

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I remember that I had earlier talked to you about five categories of Indian music. Popular music is, perhaps, the most expansive of them all. It reaches so many ears, one is tempted to call it the most alluring of all forms of music! Popular music is so accommodative that it appears to be a virtual bridge between non-music and music. Expansive, alluring and accommodative: can you ask for more?

Let me list some varieties of popular music: street-cries of sellers/vendors, election-songs/slogans, stadium songs/slogans, jingles, 'tuned' door-bells or motor horns, signature-tunes in broadcasting/telecasting, film songs and so on.

If you have an 'ear' for music, you will detect that items listed as popular music have one inherent but not-easy-to discern quality. Popular music is - forgettable! I am not joking. Nor am I derisive. I am making a statement of fact. Popular music attracts or hits or touches us immediately, but rather superficially. It almost makes a passing thrust at listeners. What it gains in speed, it loses in depth. As Shakespeare said, "Lightly won prizes are lightly lost." Popular music never intends to, or does manage to reach deeper layers of our mind. It is more like a breeze, you feel its impact only for minutes.

One of the primary assets of popular music is its 'topicality.' Its avowed purpose is to keep pace with the times as no other category of music can. Price rise, victory of a candidate, a dream goal in a football match, miracles like normal functioning of telephones or trains can generate popular music items. But can one imagine a khayal or a kriti on such momentous happenings? (Imagine a khayal singer singing in Darbari Kanada, *chaval mehanga hua* instead of *mubark badiya!*) It is obvious that such themes do not have a long life. If they did our mental life would be shortened! Popular music, indeed, serves a viable cultural function.

What gives it this extraordinary power to engage with the here and now? In one word: the media. Even if one does not take the MacLuhan view which casts a very wide net in defining media, it is easy to see that radio, disc, TV, video, in fact, every sound producing mechanism can serve the purpose for generating and transmitting popular music. Popular music is a category which is media-conceived, media propagated and media-received. Hence, its wide reach, and also unique power. Though to a varied extent, the media simultaneously engage all/most or at least many of our

senses. Popular music adopts a 'package-approach.' Music in the category is never simply 'heard' as melody or rhythm. It is projected in such a manner that one also 'sees' it, or senses it as a body movement, or takes it as a group of gestures. Even in the 'heard' channel, it may repeat in plain language what is otherwise concealed under melody/rhythm ensuring that the message is not missed. Through one or the other channel, it manages to reach us. The well-meaning underlying belief is, "Nobody can be blind to everything at the same time!"

There was a beggar boy who was 'appointed' by a dada to sing 'piteously.' The boy went out and began singing 'well.' People heard him, smiled, nodded, marvelled at his untrained musical prowess and then passed by. After a while, the dada came, saw that there was no collection. As a man of the world, he sensed what must have happened. He slapped the boy hard and said, "You fool, they are to get the 'message' not your damned music!" Indeed, music which makes an impact need not necessarily be sweet, melodious and harmonious etc. When will we learn to accept this as a legitimate facet of music?
