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The role of a song in a Hindi film

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The article will explore the role of the ‘Film Song’ in the life and popularity of a Hindi film and study its unique narrative attributes and purpose vis-à-vis songs in other world cinemas. The Hindi film song has been an integral and integrated part of a Hindi film’s script. It not only exists in a musical Hindi movie but is also used as a narrative device in films of every genre from comedies and romances to crime thrillers and horror films, most of which, routinely, may have five or more songs. The lyrics of songs are used to convey progressions in sequence and character moods much more succinctly than volumes of dialogues and visual sequences, accompanied by vocal music backed by an appropriate orchestral tenor in both popular and art-house Hindi movies. Though this may seem unreal to a viewer from another culture, it is not so for the traditional Hindi film audience as the format and presence of a song in a celluloid narrative traces its roots to ancient Indian folk theatre (called Nautanki) and age-old storytelling traditions. The article, while providing a historical perspective to the origin of the Hindi film song, will introduce readers to some of the greatest legends of Hindi cinema’s music-making industry that enjoys an independent life of its own, often much beyond its source films’ run and popularity. It will explain the role of the primary collaborators involved in the making of a Hindi film song, and discuss the structure, functions and integral narrative duties of a good film song for a fair appraisal of its existence. Stand out examples of songs from the 84-year-old journey of the Hindi film song will be used to argue why it should be appreciated as one of the most crucial forms of Indian popular culture.

A historical perspective

The saga of the song in Hindi cinema began in 1931 with the first-ever Indian talkie, *Alam Ara* (Light of the World), which happened to be in the Hindi language, one of the many languages spoken in India. Though the audiences were in throes of excitement because movies now spoke, they were completely enthralled by the songs – all seven of them in this case.

However, the magic of the spoken word dimmed very fast, and the reason was simple: people were missing the fast pace and action of the silent film, now replaced by the theatrical verbosity in the lines the characters spoke. Most Indian films then were historicals, fantasies, mythologicals or devotional movies, and the stylized “dialogues” (a term peculiar to Indian cinema where special writers pen the actual lines that the characters speak) were found to be boring.

Nevertheless, the songs were another story altogether. In a country accustomed to folk and classical music (with huge diversities across states and languages), the audiences now got to hear their simpler, hum-worthy variants in the movies. Hence film songs became instantly popular.

Though silent films continued to be made for as long as three years after the talkie cinema arrived, the savvier filmmakers decided that songs were the answer to the issue of box-office acceptability. The policy was twofold: songs had to come as an antidote to the ‘ill-

effects’ of dialogues, and hence if possible, the film should be a complete musical with minimum scope for prosaic dialogues. Soon it became a trend to have twenty, thirty or even more songs per film.– The all-time record for the highest number of songs in a film is held by *Indrasabha* (Lord Indra’s Court, 1932) with 69 documented songs and two more speculated to have been filmed (the print of the film no longer exists).

The decade of the 1930s also saw the arrival of the first popular singing star-pair – Master Nissar and Jahanara Kajjan. They acted in five films together – besides *Indrasabha*, they worked together in *Shakuntala*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Gulru Zarina* and *Chatra Bakavali* (all these titles referred to proper names of the pivotal characters) within a span of two years. A fact worth noting here is that the genre of film songs (as in other Indian languages like Marathi, Tamil, Bengali, etc.) has followed a parallel track in popularity, though its sweep was restricted to the specific regions or states. However, with Hindi being India’s officially preferred ‘national’ language, the Hindi film songs had a head start not just historically but also in terms of appeal.

Technologically though, India was still in a primitive stage of film music recording as the actors sang their songs ‘live’ while shooting, as recording studios were non-existent. Naturally, this needed silence and so shooting was done past midnight in parks and gardens, when man-

made sounds by and large ceased and birds had yet to begin chirping. Two musicians, one with a harmonium and the other with a *tabla* or *dholak* (variants of Indian drums) moved alongside the actor or actors, out of the viewing range of the camera.

However, people did not want to listen to their favourite songs only within a movie – they wanted to take them home, and that needed a gramophone record. So were born the first primitive recording studios – small sheds in the compounds of filmmaking institutions. Most of their equipment had to be imported, a fact facilitated by India under the British rule. The Gramophone Company of India Ltd., the Indian wing of the British music label His Master's Voice (HMV), had begun operations in the country in 1902. Its first issue of a film soundtrack was of the film *Madhuri* in 1932. The film had 16 songs, though not all were issued on the disc. The same was the case with many other films, and not every producer made albums of the songs either. With those who cut albums, separate versions of the songs had to be taped for the film's print and for the disc. Soon, film songs caught on as popular music on radio.

There was a catch, more creative than a technical one, however – that a star singer was not necessarily proficient in both acting and singing. This gave rise to the 'playback' tradition, now well entrenched for almost eight decades.

The playback system was to become the single greatest trendsetter in Indian popular music. In this, the actor merely moved his or her lips while a professional singer looked after the actual singing, with a voice that seemed to match the face on screen. Parul Ghosh, who sang the song *Main khush hona chahoon* in *Dhoop Chhaon* (1935) under the baton of music director Raichand Boral, became India's first playback singer. The system resulted in a better class of actors making it big, as they no longer had to have a compulsory modicum of singing skills.

After the arrival of the song recording concept, even the singing stars began to record the songs, and orchestration went beyond just two instruments. Hindi films then were being produced in Mumbai, Lahore and Kolkata. The music directors from Kolkata, in particular, were well-groomed in orchestration in the Western sense of the term. Gradually, this skill permeated to the other filmmaking centers as well. The first composer to use a 12-piece orchestra was Anil Biswas in *Dharma Ki Devi* in 1935, the same year in which playback singing was introduced into Indian cinema. From this time to 1949, the journey of the film songs continued. Popular singing stars included Kanan Devi, Shanta Apte, Amirbai Karnataki (who shifted exclusively to playback after her 1943 blockbuster *Kismet* in which she was only a singer for the heroine), Leela Chitnis, Khursheed, Suraiya and Noorjehan among the

female singers. Among the male singers, which included Ashok Kumar, G.M. Durrani, Pahari Sanyal and K.C. Dey, the most important singer whose songs endure to this day was Kundan Lal Saigal.

From the early 1940s, the future giants of playback singing rapidly arrived, prominent among who were Shamshad Begum (*Khazanchi*, 1941), Geeta Dutt (*Bhakta Prahlad*, 1946), Lata Mangeshkar (*Aap Ki Sewaa Mein*, 1947), Asha Bhosle (*Chunaria*, 1948) and Suman Kalyanpur (*Mangu*, 1954). Amongst the male singers in the same period, the list was led by Mukesh (*Nirdosh*, 1941), Manna Dey (*Tamanna*, 1942), Mohammed Rafi (*Pahle Aap*, 1944), Hemant Kumar (*Iraada*, 1944), Talat Mahmood (*Raj Laxmi*, 1945), Kishore Kumar (*Ziddi*, 1948), and Mahendra Kapoor (*Madmast*, 1953).

These titans, especially the last three women and all the males were to redefine playback singing and endure for decades, with Lata and Asha still being around and professionally active in the second decade of the millennium. These voices, as the faces of the Hindi film song, were to shape its destiny and progress forever. But if ever there was a single score that made Hindi film music a parallel industry to that of the movies, it was debut-making composer duo Shankar-Jaikishan's epic *Barsaat*, released in 1949. *Barsaat*, produced and directed by Raj Kapoor, had 11 songs, all of which were hits. New

records were set when the discs sold in huge quantities despite the fact that the Long-Play records (LPs) and even the Extended Play discs (EPs) were not really affordable for the common people. What's more, partly because of the music, the film became a blockbuster too, which set in a cycle as even more discs were sold!

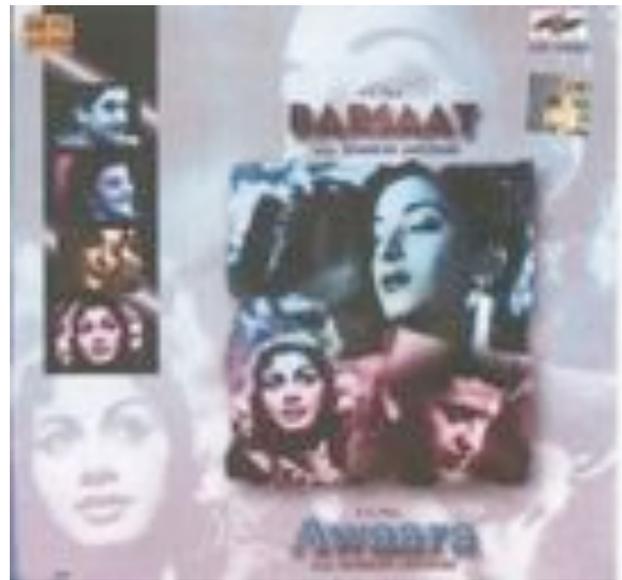


Figure 1: A Saregama (the present name of the Indian HMV label) compilation of twin Raj Kapoor scores, the 1949 *Barsaat* and the 1951 *Awaara*. These were the first scores to sell in a huge volume and get international recognition. Both films had music composed by Shankar-Jaikishan

From *Barsaat* to the present times, the film song went through a complex metamorphosis where so much changed – and yet nothing did. While the format, content, structure and sound kept evolving, two parameters remained constant: one, the listener's consistent craze for the film song, and two, the related fact that a song was about communicating with the viewer.

It is ironical that while politicians and religious heads divided the diverse populace of India with their rhetoric, the Hindi film song united the countrymen through a common love and shared passion for film music. Moreover, many songs often delved on themes of religious and communal integration over the decades, whenever there was an apt situation in a movie.

In the 1950s, when the Russians made ‘*Awaara hoon*’ (I am a tramp) from Raj Kapoor’s *Awaara* (The Tramp/1951) a cult favourite, the Hindi film song achieved its greatest triumph – winning its first international accolades and popularity. With the dawn of open economy and globalization in India (in the 1990s) and the arrival of the digital era in the millennium, this global fame has increased even more.

Understanding the Elements of a Hindi Film Song

The Components of A Song

Like any vocal piece of music, the Hindi film song is composed of the lyrics (the words), music (the melody and accompanying orchestration) and singing (by one lead singer or more, sometimes with a chorus or backing vocals). In Hindi films, however, the fourth but very vital element is the accompanying situation in the script, which results in the visuals. This, in Hindi film parlance, is termed as ‘picturisation’ (conversion into a picture!). In most such songs, as said earlier, there is a

‘lip-sync’ in which the actors on screen move their lips as per the words, while songs in the background are rare.

The Music Director or Composer

From among the creators of the song, the most important and high-profile member is the ‘music director’ or ‘composer’, terms used synonymously in Hindi cinema. Hindi film songs generally follow the Western symphonic form of orchestration blended with many Indian instruments, and contrary to the West, the person who composes the tune or melody is called the ‘music director’. However, music directors may or may not write the notations, arrange the orchestration or conduct the recording.

In the times of ‘live’ orchestration, only Pyarelal, of the Laxmikant-Pyarelal duo (who started independently working as music directors in Hindi cinema in 1963) was a complete musician until the 1990s – i.e. he could compose a melody, read and write both Indian and Western notations, arrange the music, conduct an orchestra and also sit with the recording engineer to supervise the recording and mixing. He could also play multiple instruments, specializing in the violin.



Figure 2: Late Laxmikant (left) and partner Pyarelal (right) in the '60s – they composed music for almost 500 films from 1963 to 1998

Because of this and the fact that they became very busy later, his partner Laxmikant would concentrate on making the melodies and rehearsing the vocalists, though they continued to be mutual sounding boards and overviewed each other's work. Most composers, however, needed professional arrangers or conductors irrespective of their ways of working together. As recording technology changed from 'live' to 'piecemeal' recordings in cubby hole-sized studios from the millennium, wherein musicians and vocalists recorded solo or in small groups, modern concepts like programming and 'sound production' came in vogue. Beginning with A.R. Rahman, a lot of the younger composers also participated in most or even all departments of song making. In Hindi movies, a soundtrack is branded as a composer's handiwork, more than that of any of its other collaborators. It is he who gets both the bouquets when it is appreciated and the brickbats if it disappoints. This is also because

a single music director entity usually composes all the songs in a film. We used the term 'entity' because over the decades, composer duos have been a tradition in Hindi films, with over a dozen well-known entities beginning with Husnlal-Bhagatram in the 1940s. In the late 1990s, Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy became the first and so far only trio.

The lyrics in a soundtrack may be shared by two or more writers, while the singers are distributed as per the songs' individual needs. Thus a soundtrack like *Sargam* (1979), a musical love story of a village drummer and a mute dancer, is branded as a Laxmikant-Pyarelal album rather than that of Anand Bakshi, the frontline lyricist who wrote all its seven songs, or the perennially popular singer Mohammed Rafi, who sang each one of them, three of which were duets with Lata Mangeshkar. It is, however, an incontrovertible fact that some of the finest light music in India in the 20th and 21st centuries has been heard in cinema.

The Lyricist

Some of the finest lyrics in India have been written for Indian film songs. The songs have been expressive of not just romance and lost love, but also of beauty, various deities, the nation and its natural bounties, as well as seasonal experiences like the onset of spring, monsoons and more.

Songs have celebrated key Indian festivals like *Holi*, *Janmashthami*, *Eid* and Christmas and

have been addressed to gods of various religions. They have even extolled the glories of patriotism, communal harmony and national integration, and inspired the human spirit, especially in contexts of social or individual crises.

In specialised genres, we have also had wedding songs (in all aspects from pre-wedding to the ritual of *bidaai*, where the bride leaves her maternal home), songs on childbirth followed by lullabies and birthday and other party numbers. There are also *ghazals*¹) as well as *qawwalis* and other *Sufiana* songs and *bhajans*². The list further includes Western forms of music from jazz, scat singing, pop, waltz and cabaret in the past to disco (club) numbers, rock, Hip-Hop, reggae, blues, fusion and world music today.

In the last few years, a new category of sorts has emerged called the ‘Item Song’, which usually is a spectacularly filmed dance number, but not always featuring a top star. In most cases, this star does not have a featured role in the film and appears only for the song. In most cases, such songs have only a tenuous link with the narrative, and are brought in to entice viewers, boost album sales, music downloads and the appeal of the film.

The nomenclature however, is newer than the concept, which we have sporadically

witnessed in the past – e.g. dancer-actress Mumtaz doing the fiery *Tik tik tik* in *Humjoli* in the 1970s. Post 2000, hit songs in this category include Katrina Kaif’s *Chikni chameli* in *Agneepath* (2012), though the same actress also did an ‘item song’ *Sheila ki jawani* in *Tees Maar Khan* (2010), in which she was the heroine. Each of these songs has a distinct lexicon and leitmotif in words and music. Their composers and lyricists have to stay true to them while being aware of the needs of the situation within the film, the tastes of those who want the songs and prevalent trends. Thus creating such songs is indeed a tough calling. Every lyricist and composer is called upon to produce songs of every variety, So a Muslim poet or composer may have to create a *bhajan* while their Hindu counterparts may have to compose a *qawwali*.

More importantly, a lot of the genres mentioned above, especially the classical and traditional, are pure forms of music, but what we hear in films is a simplified, universally-appealing toned-down version of the hardcore classical music. Thus, a film *qawwali* (a form that dates back to the 13th century) must sound like a film song, while still being true to its vintage format.

It is generally accepted that the lyricist is equally important, because while it is the tune that first attracts a listener, the words are

¹ A specialized form of Urdu couplets whose rhyming pattern is A-A, B-A, C-A, D-A and so on...

² Forms of devotional music in Islamic and Hindu traditions.

undoubtedly the reason why the songs endure in the hearts of the listeners for decades. This is true even when the listener has never watched the film in which a 'favourite' song has appeared. Besides, instrumental music is an elite rather than popular genre in India, underscoring the importance of words in connecting with our psyche of the overwhelming majority of our people. It is in this section that the most crucial difference has been seen between the creative aspects of lyrics and music. Occasionally, many great classical, semi-classical and folk musicians besides those from a classical Western background have attempted to become film composers. With perhaps a passing exception in some era, they have all proved unsuccessful. However, in lyrics, most of the great poets have succeeded in writing songs in movies, even if they initially came in only to earn more money vis-à-vis the paltry earnings in their profession. India is thus perhaps the only country wherein a multitude of famous littérateurs have become professional lyrics writers, like Neeraj, Pradeep, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi and Shailendra. This partly explains the high standards of the classic Hindi film song. This is where great thoughts and language seamlessly blend with popular appeal and become the vital foundation for India's biggest 'pop' music. A great aid to such exquisite lyricism also comes from the 'synthetic' nature of the language of Hindi cinema, termed Hindustani (translation:

Indian), a spoken variant that mixes Hindi (the national language) with Urdu. The two languages have been skillfully blended to paint a rich canvas of thoughts and emotions, though they have been exclusively employed to great impact as well.

The Playback Singers

The playback singers have long evolved from being just good voices in the background for actors to become celebrated institutions in their own right. The high benchmarks, as we mentioned, were set by the '40s discoveries, who along with many later arrivals, went on to become legends. These singers may be, as one of India's singing legends, Mahendra Kapoor had once humbly stated, 'just couriers of a film song after its parents – the composer and the lyricist – have given it birth,'³ but over the decades, they have proven themselves to be much more. For example, the voices of Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi had magically seemed to suit a whole range of actors, including romantic leads, comic actors and older character artistes, because of the tiny nuances they brought into their vocals. This ability, combined with their complete vocal command over all the three octaves in Indian music, dialects and genres of songs, led to their complete supremacy in playback singing for decades.

³ In a personal interview in May 14 1998.

Generations of actors, filmmakers, composers and lyricists changed, but these and other musical maestros such as Kishore Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey, and Asha Bhosle remained ‘in circulation,’ so to speak, despite crossing 50 years of age, to be still asked to make their voices sit pat on the latest stars. So, if Lata Mangeshkar was the prime playback voice for Nargis, the top female star who started out in the 1940s, she was also the first voice of Raveena Tandon, Manisha Koirala and Preity Zinta, all of who started their careers in the 1990s!



Figure 3: Lata Mangeshkar has sung playback for heroines for over seven decades and was the choice voice for debut-making actresses across several generations.

Thus some of the greatest singers in Hindi cinema have even ended up calling a lot of musical clout in the industry, mentoring younger composers and forming teams with

top stars. Hindi and Indian film music, again, is the only entity in the world where albums are sold as a collaborative effort, in disc compilations based on **popular** teams, like ‘Mohammed Rafi sings for (actor) Shammi Kapoor’, ‘Asha Bhosle sings for (composer) O.P.Nayyar’, or ‘Duets of Lata Mangeshkar and Mukesh’.

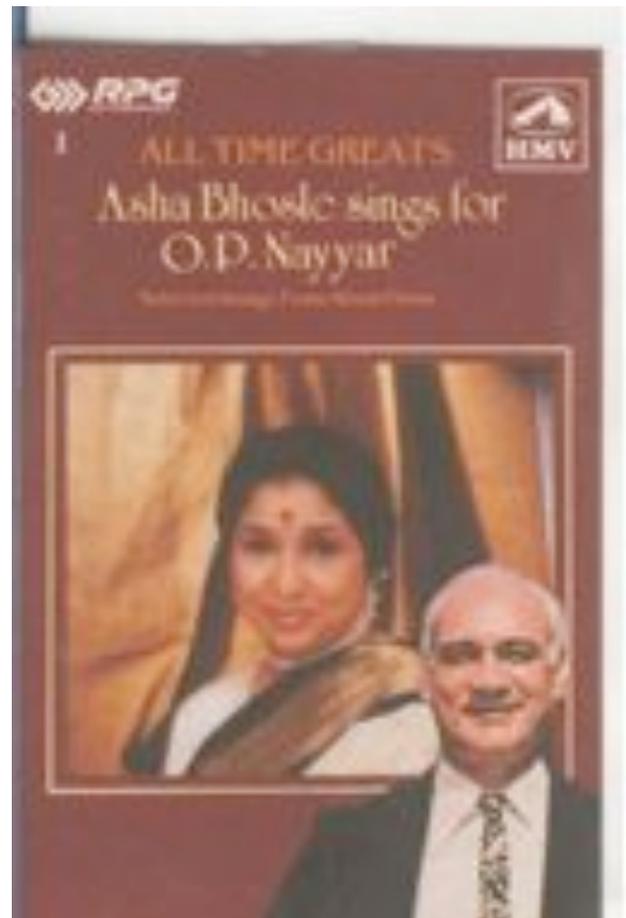


Figure 4: Volume 1 of a ‘90s 4-cassette HMV compilation of singer Asha Bhosle’s hits with composer O.P.Nayyar

A key factor was that composers across time were inspired to touch great heights in compositions purely because such talented singers existed. For example, Mukesh who, despite his versatility, was unsurpassed in

songs articulating a ‘sad’ mood. After his sudden death in 1976, the ‘sad songs’ in Hindi films reduced drastically.



Figure 5: Mukesh was one of our singing legends and was considered a specialist in ‘sad’ songs. After his death in 1976, the frequency of sad songs reduced in Hindi cinema

The Musical Support

In India, top non-film instrumentalists across all genres have played for the Hindi film song, whether it was Rais Khan, the legendary *sitar* player, renowned flautist Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia or Pt. Shivkumar Sharma, the *santoor* ace. Among players of Western instruments, there have been names like Sivamani, the legendary percussionist. Nevertheless, a whole lot of people also went on to achieve legendary status though they were only film musicians – like Manohari Singh on the saxophone, Dattaram, Shashikant

and Babla, who looked after (both Indian and Western) percussions and Sebastian and Sonik, who were brilliant arrangers. Some of them achieved that status despite working only with one composing entity, like Shashikant for Laxmikant-Pyarelal and Babla for Kalyanji-Anandji.

The ‘Selectors’ Of Music

Though their contribution is lesser vis-à-vis the creators and singers, we must mention the other names who contribute to the sustained glories of the Hindi Film Song as an entity – those who choose the musical and lyrical wares from what is offered by music directors and lyricists after the latter are briefed about a song situation. This category is primarily led and defined by filmmakers and actors.

Several filmmakers such as V. Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Nasir Husain, Vijay Anand, Yash Chopra, Raj Khosla, L.V. Prasad, Manoj Kumar, Manmohan Desai, Prakash Mehra and Feroz Khan have excelled in this skill and acquired a reputation for great music, including some of the most innovative ways of filming (‘picturising’) songs. In recent times, Subhash Ghai, Mahesh Bhatt, Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Vidhu Vinod Chopra are filmmakers, who have been appreciated for their ‘keen’ musical sense and ‘natural’ aptitude for good music.

Stars like Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Manoj Kumar and Rajesh Khanna also possessed a musical sense and became famous

for choosing brilliant songs. Rishi Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan, Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan were among those who also inspired diverse composers to create great melodies just by of their sheer personae and auras.

On the female side, actresses like Madhubala, Nargis, Nutan, Sadhana and Madhuri Dixit have inspired great melody.



Figure 6: Madhuri Dixit, a top musical star, seen here in *Khal Nayak* (1993) was a great source of inspiration to composers because of her persona and image

Lead-cum-character artiste Mehmood, comic actors Kishore Kumar (also a top playback artiste) and Johnny Walker, character artistes Pran and Bhagwan, and dancer Helen were among those who needed distinct kinds of songs, irrespective of composers, because of their sharply-etched personalities and on-screen images, thus enriching the canvas of Hindi film music.

Heroines like Vyjayanthimala, Asha Parekh and Hema Malini, who were trained in classical Indian dance forms (e.g. *Kathak* and *Bharatanatyam*), and went on to become

leading on-screen actresses, helped spawn memorable dance numbers in accompaniment with great songs.

Last but not the least, we must mention Shammi Kapoor (the late 1950s) and Zeenat Aman (the early 1970s) who were trailblazers among leading stars, for modernising the image and graph of Hindi film hero and heroines forever and thus altering the film song in (r)evolutionary ways that others followed with varying success.



Figure 7: Shammi Kapoor, seen here in the 1968 film *An Evening In Paris*, modernized forever the image of the Hindi film hero and had many followers

The Market Leaders in Hindi Film Music

In the 84 years of film music, the most prolific composers have been Laxmikant-Pyarelal (known as L-P), who composed songs as well as background music for almost 500 films between 1963 and 1998. For the record, the

highest number of musical scores by an Indian music director rests with Ilaiyaraaja from South India (Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Kannada film industries), who has composed for over 1000 films in multiple languages, including over a dozen in Hindi and one Marathi film. Pyarelal and Ilaiyaraaja are the only Indian composers to have composed Western classical symphonies and presented them in the UK and the USA.



Figure 8: South Indian veteran composer Ilaiyaraaja holds the record of composing music for over 1000 films, including over a dozen in Hindi



Figure 9: Lyricist Anand Bakshi remains the most prolific lyricist, having penned songs for nearly 600 films between 1957 and 2002, of which over 300 were composed by Laxmikant-Pyarelal

Anand Bakshi teamed up with the L-P duo as lyricist in over 300 films . He has written some or all songs for a total of almost 600 films between 1957 and his death in 2002. Asha Bhosle and Mohammed Rafi top the singers' list with approximately 7,500 and 6,000 songs respectively – Asha started her singing career in 1948 and is still active, while Rafi, who made his debut in 1944, passed away in 1980.



Figure 10: Mohammed Rafi remains the male playback singer with the highest number of recorded songs – about 6000, between 1944 and 1980

The Key Players

Over the decades, Ghulam Haider, Husnlal-Bhagatram, Naushad, C. Ramachandra, S.D. Burman, Shankar-Jaikishan, Roshan, Madan Mohan, Salil Chowdhury, Ravi, Usha Khanna

(Hindi cinema's only successful female composer), Kalyanji-Anandji, R.D. Burman, Rajesh Roshan, Bappi Lahiri, Nadeem-Shravan, Anu Malik, Jatin-Lalit and A.R. Rahman have been among the foremost players in music. The last-mentioned name (Rehman) incidentally began his career in Tamil cinema in South India and is now known internationally. Pritam, Himesh Reshammiya, Sajid-Wajid, Vishal-Shekhar (Vishal also writes lyrics) and Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy are the latest frontline players.

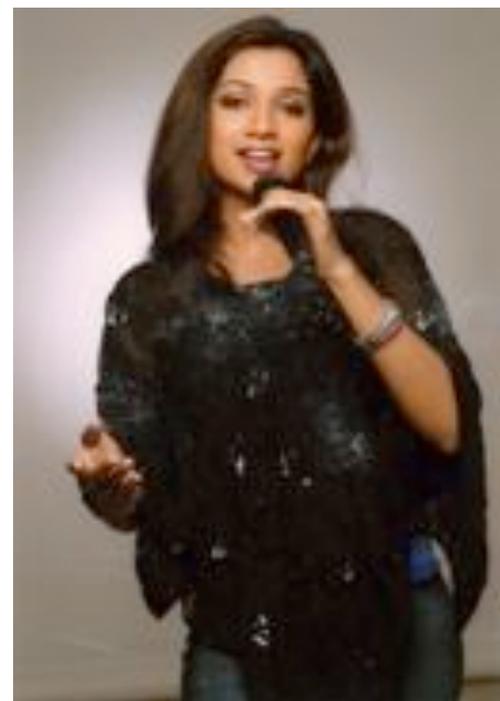
Lyricists across eras who similarly made lasting impacts in films were Dinanath Madhok, Pradeep, Rajendra Krishan, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Shakeel Badayuni, Sahir Ludhianvi, Indeevar, Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra, Anjaan, Kaifi Azmi, Gulzar and in present times Javed Akhtar, Sameer Anjaan, Prasoon Joshi, Irshad Kamil and Swanand Kirkire.

The singers who have made great impressions after the legends include Anuradha Paudwal, Alka Yagnik, Kavita Krishnamurthi Subramaniam, Sunidhi Chauhan and Shreya Ghoshal among the women and Amit Kumar, Suresh Wadkar, Udit Narayan, Kumar Sanu, Sonu Nigam, Sukhwinder Singh and KK among men. Each of these major players has had their influence in the overall scheme of making the Hindi film song a timeless entity of repeat pleasures. Many less prolific or popular names added to this elite list and contributed

significantly, some of them in just one immortal song or score that will live on forever.



Figure 11: Music director Pritam at his recording studio in Mumbai





Figures 12 & 13: Shreya Ghoshal (previous page) and Sunidhi Chauhan (above) are leading female playback singers since 2005



Figure 14: Sonu Nigam, a popular post 90s' singer, has also cut a tribute album, *Rafi Resurrected*, with The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO)

The Structure of The Hindi Film Song

The overwhelming majority of Hindi film songs have a classic *mukhada-antara* structure common to Indian music even in the non-film segment. The *mukhada* is the main thought of a song, encapsulating the essence of what is being conveyed. It may be one, two or more lines long. It is generally repeated at intervals after each *antara*, usually with either the first line or in its entirety.

The *antara* is the body of the lyric, the stanza that expounds on the thought in the *mukhada*. The word *mukhada* literally means 'countenance' and *antara* refers to what is within. Most film songs have at least two *antaras*, though they may go as high as four, and, rarely, even more. Good lyricists always maintain an ascending graph in the successive *antaras*, giving the song a narrative feel where the greatest punch comes in the end.. The rhyming patterns of the *mukhada* and the *antara* vary, while the connecting portion where the *antara* goes back to a repeat of the *mukhada* is called – the 'cross-line'. The cross-line usually rhymes with at least one line in the *mukhada*.

As an archetypal example, here is the first stanza of a classic song, written by Shakeel Badayuni, composed by Ravi and sung by Mohammed Rafi for actor Guru Dutt in the

1960 film *Chaudhvin Ka Chand*⁴ (The Crescent Mooned Beauty) wherein the lover goes into raptures about his beloved's beauty.

The *mukhada* is:

Chaudhvin ka chand ho
Yaa aaftAAB HO
Jo bhi ho tum Khuda ki qasam
LaajawAAB HO
Chaudhvin ka chand ho... (First line repeated)

Here is the translation:

Are you the full moon?
Or are you the sun,?
Whoever you are,
I swear on God, you are exceptional!

The *antara* is:

Zulfein hai jaise kaandhon PE
Baadal jhuKE HUE
Aankhen hai jaise maye KE
Pyaaale bhaRE HUE

The translation:

Your flowing tresses are like clouds
Humbly resting on your shoulders
Your eyes are like goblets
Brimming with heady liquor

And here is the cross-line:

Masti hai jis mein pyar ki
Tum woh sharAAB HO.

⁴ It means the moon on the fourteenth day of the first quarter moon – i.e. the day before the full moon – a day in which the moon is the brightest. In Bengali or Sanskrit 'Chaudhavin' will refer to *Chaturdasi*.

Translation:

You are the wine that contains
All the intoxicating power of love.

The repeated *mukhada*:

Chaudhvin ka chand ho
Yaa aaftaab ho
Jo bhi ho tum Khuda ki qasam
Laajawaab ho.
Chaudhvin ka chand ho.

Translation in progressive sequence:

Are you the full moon?
Or are you the sun,?
Whoever you are,

I swear on God, you are exceptional!



Figure15: Guru Dutt sings the song *Chaudhvin ka chand ho* in his own production *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* to leading lady Waheeda Rehman

The lyrics in some cases may be augmented with an introductory *sher* (rhyming couplet) or longer verse spoken in a rhythmic way leading to the main thought. There may be interpolations in prose (a device usually used for romantic statements) before the beginning

of each *antara*. Some songs have a separate concluding part that is connected in concept to the main song but takes it to a higher level, usually a rousing climax.

In duets, the *mukhada* is generally divided between the male and the female and may even be in the question-answer or repartee format, when it is not just an echo of the same (romantic) sentiment expressed by the second character. Multi-singer songs, necessitated by more than two artistes' contribution to a situation, may follow a free distribution of verse between the artistes but usually adhere to this *mukhada-antara* structure. So do most of the situational songs, like devotionals, patriotic numbers, *qawwalis* and *ghazals* and even the rare background numbers.

The chorus may sing words or only *alaaps* (stretched notes) or hum other syllables. In a *qawwali*, as per the demands of the pure genre, the chorus is there almost in every line, either singing along with the main vocalist or immediately repeating the same line.

The instrumental section comprises the prelude, which may not be there in every song and comes before a *mukhada*, and the interlude music between *mukhada* and *antara*.

Most Indian songs, including the seemingly Westernised ones, are usually based on a *raag*, a combination of musical notes.

Raags have been developed in Indian music over centuries to correspond with moods, time of day as well as seasons, and the

purist composers preferred to restrict their tunes according to these conventions. A *raag* is based on a combination of specific musical notes from the Indian *sargam* (*Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni*, just like the Western *Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti*) and generally creates a mood unique to it, besides providing a framework for the composition.

However, films are not meant to be heavily classical and many composers prefer to create their own free music, unfettered by such conventions. Several composers, either out of choice or ignorance, even mix two or more *raags*, or use what a purist may consider as completely unacceptable. Film music is where, in short, the end justifies the means.

Hindi film music has seen rules and conventions of the classical musical tradition often to be broken. There have been song exceptions to the *mukhada-antara* structure, a full song in chorus minus lead singers, and every kind of deviation from the 'normal' over the years.

The music, for most decades, has followed an interesting trail. Most songs have had a base in percussion (*tabla*, *dholak*, the rural *duff* or *dhol* besides drums, bongo or congo) and it is also very rare to hear a song minus strings, which may include the *sitar*, *santoor* and other Indian instruments to Western instruments like the guitar and violin. Until acoustic music ruled (almost to the mid-1990s) the Western classical form of orchestration thrived with as

many as 80 to 100 musicians divided into recording chambers like wind, strings, rhythm and percussion playing for a single song. Thus a full orchestra ‘magically’ accompanied a pair of lovers expressing themselves in a secluded spot.

With the arrival of the keyboard, instrumentation became sparser and the sound was longer as ‘big’. Most current generation music makers term the classics ‘over-produced’ and restrict their musical decoration to what they feel is ‘realistically’ needed for a song. But this realism also inculcates within it a certain license to be mass-friendly and imaginative. The film song thus has been a strong melting-pot of influences from within India and outside. With film plots and subjects culled from just about any source and the need to gratify audiences from diverse linguistic, social and economic backgrounds, apart from demographics such as age and the urban/metro/rural divides, the *filmi gaana* (film songs) is a cauldron of cultures in which folk, classical and contemporary music from not just India, but the entire globe are present in decontextualised yet appetizing blends.

Though filmed sometimes like its counterpart from a Western musical, and with modern cinematographic and editing techniques, the Hindi film song as a form is inspired by the *Nautanki* (Indian folk theater) wherein messages and stories are told through a song. This is where the larger-than-life

element comes to the fore. To repeat, Hindi film songs are all about a license to communicate a part of a film’s story through a visually-appealing musical form, with the narration taking a pause from the normal cinematic one.

The “Duties” Of A Hindi Film Song

The astounding aspect of the Hindi film song is that there are only about a dozen genres/situations for which hundreds of creators, in over 12,000 talkie films, have created a mind-boggling 80,000 songs or so in 84 years! Naturally, it needs exceptional talent to come up with innovations and variations at both the musical and lyrical levels and still connect with the listener⁵.

The ‘title-track’ (and rarely, the ‘theme track’) of a film contains the movie’s title in its *mukhada* and is always expected to be special. In the early decades, it was usually the first song to become popular in a score. Even today, it is considered to be an incentive to watch a film once its music album releases weeks before the movie does, like *Chahe koi mujhe jungle kahe* (Let people call me the wild one) from *Jungle* (The Wild One, 1961) or *Tumse accha kaun hai* (Who can be better than you?, 1969) in the film of the same name.

Yet each song has to also connect independently. This is definitely the most

⁵ I use this term ‘listener’ because not everyone watches the film from which a song is taken.

interesting duty of a song – to sell a music album outside the film. Every song, potentially, is a key contributor to the multi-billion Indian popular music industry.

However, within the context of a movie the music score has a lot of work to do: it has to generate interest in and create the first ‘vibe’ of a film⁶ and help fetch an opening audience for it. After that, if the music is outstanding enough audio-visually, it has to create a repeat-watch value for the film days, weeks or years down the line.

The Hindi film song has almost always been an integral part of the script. It is not just a mere musical number but is used as a narrative device in films of every genre. Sometimes the song performs a dual purpose when it is playing in a film. Besides the main situation, in the interlude music we see visuals with reference either to the past of the characters or even the sequences to come after the number is over – like a police team on the way to arrest the hero who is singing at a party, or a reunion about to happen even as the heroine is mourning her lost love. These are to whet audience interest.

It is also interesting to know that in hundreds of cases the music score or just one or two songs from it are all that is remembered about a movie a decade or more down the line. For example, the successful 1963 fantasy film

⁶ This was the case even in the years when there was no television or digital device to ‘promote’ a new film.

Parasmani is recalled 50 years later only for its score, and the first well-known Hindi song with English words, ‘*Aana meri jaan meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday*’ (Let’s meet every Sunday, darling) is all that remains as memory of the popular 1947 film *Shehnai*.

On the other hand, songs have been known to kick-start the careers of even actors, or turn those who have been around for a while into sensations. Zeenat Aman, who was Miss India in the late ‘60s, came into films with a rare movie minus songs, *Hulchul*, and a film called *Hungama* (both in 1971). But it was thanks to the chartbuster *Dum maaro dum* (*Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, 1971) that she entered the league of stars. Of course, her role and performance were attention-getting, but what made the first – and even the lasting – impact was the song.

Recent examples of similar success stories include the ‘re-emergence’ of the ‘90s heartthrob, Madhuri Dixit with her first hit song *Ek do teen char* in *Tezaab* (Acid, 1988) after going virtually unnoticed in multiple flop movies before, and superstar Aamir Khan courting instant stardom with the song *Papa kehte hain* in his lead role debut in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (From Doom to Doom, 1988). Of course, it was a prerequisite that the films too needed to work at the box-office to convert newcomers or struggling actors into big stars, but the song was the first magnet to attract people to both the actor and the film.

The Hindi film song sometimes had a minor (and optional) ‘duty’ of providing an attractive title for a future film. A classic example is *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave Will Take Away the Bride), the mega-blockbuster of 1995 that catapulted Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol to superstardom. While this title fitted the story perfectly, it was taken from a hit song in the 1974 film *Chor Machaye Shor*, in which the hero sings ‘*Le jayenge le jayenge, dilwale dulhania le jayenge*’ (We are brave-hearts, who have come to take away the bride) as a request to the unwilling father of the girl.

Another piquant role that the classic Hindi film song has played, especially in the last few decades is to be heard once again in a new film in a different but apt and relevant situation. In such cases, either the original song is treated to a new sound or, as is more frequently the case, it is re-recorded with a fresh singer and orchestration. In many such cases, the old song can even become an apt title of the new film, like the abovementioned *Dum Maaro Dum* itself. Senior music composers however remain critical of this tendency to re-create old classics. They opine that it is an indicator of creative bankruptcy in their younger colleagues.

Last but emphatically not the least of the duties of film songs is to entice the overseas viewer who does not know Hindi. In this regard, the Hindi film song has spectacularly triumphed.

International Recognition

Hindi films have won over non-Indian audiences primarily because of their entertaining song-and-dance quotients for decades now. There are thousands of viewers addicted to Hindi cinema across continents that hum or sing our songs without knowing what the lyrics mean, and even go out to watch Hindi movies for the songs, besides viewing them on Indian channels at home.

There are some standout moments of global triumph of the Hindi film song, apart from being frequently heard in clubs, pubs and international gatherings. One such case is of eminent French composer Pascal Heni, who came out with an album of Indian songs, *Pascal Of Bollywood*, which he recorded in his own voice in Paris – after he was smitten by the song ‘*Zindagi ek safar hai suhana*’ (Life is a beautiful journey) rendered by singer Kishore Kumar in *Andaz* (Style, 1971). Though the album had songs of multiple Hindi composers and some non-Hindi songs, it was arranged by Pyarelal.



Picture 16 (previous page): French composer Pascal released his tribute to Indian music, *Pascal of Bollywood*, comprising of songs he had rendered in different Indian languages.

The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), in 2008, cut a double album of 18 Mohammed Rafi numbers, *Rafi Resurrected*, with Indian vocalist Sonu Nigam, besides presenting some live shows on his home turf and in India as well.

As mentioned earlier, the first song to become an international favourite was ‘*Awaara hoon*’ from *Awaara*. Since that 1951 film, Raj Kapoor and a lot of his songs, especially by his preferred team of composer-duo Shankar-Jaikishan, lyricists Hasrat Jaipuri and Shailendra and playback singer Mukesh, have become hot favourites especially in Russia and nations of the erstwhile Communist Block, along with many countries in the Middle-East. Between 2004 and 2007, composer Pyarelal was invited to teach music to British musicians of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and his symphony called *Om Shivam in A-Minor* was registered in 2009 at New York.

Mention must also be made of composer duo Kalyanji-Anandji. The veteran music directors were felicitated in USA (Kalyanji was posthumously honoured) by the Broadcast Music, Inc.(BMI), a society that collects licensing fees and distributes royalties, when the American Hip-Hop group, The Black-Eyes Peas, won the Grammy for their track ‘*Don’t Phunk With My Heart*’. The song was almost

entirely made up of with the melodies of two Kalyanji-Anandji songs, ‘*Ae naujawan hai sab kuchh yahaan*’ (*Apradh*, 1972) and ‘*Yeh mera dil pyar ka diwana*’ (*Don*, 1978), with due credits given by the band to the duo.

The duo’s music (including background scores from their movies) has been further featured in international albums like ‘*Bombay The Hard Way: Guns, Cars and Sitar*’, ‘*Around The World*’, ‘*Bollywood Funk*’ and ‘*The Beginner’s Guide To Bollywood*’ cut in various countries.

In 1962, a West Indies band took permission from Indian composer Ravi to use his tune from *China Town* (1962) called ‘*Baar baar dekho*’ for a song in their language.



Figure 17: Anandji, surviving half of the Kalyanji-Anandji duo, is felicitated by BMI, a music licensing body in the USA in 2006, after a Hip-Hop Group won the Grammy with a track, *Don’t phunk with my heart*, which was inspired by one of their film songs.



Figure 18: In happier times, Anandji (left) with singer-actor Kishore Kumar and Kalyanji (right) at a function

A.R. Rahman has worked on several international films and projects, notably *Bombay Dreams*, a Broadway stage presentation in UK wherein a lot of Hindi film songs were used, and some international films, including the Oscar- and BAFTA-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The Hollywood film *Moulin Rouge* used the ‘item number’ song ‘*Chhamma chhamma*’ from *China Gate* (1998), while three Hindi songs from different films were heard playing on a music system in the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*. ‘Addictive’, a 2002 chartbusting single recorded by Truth Hurts, was an unlicensed rip of the song ‘*Kaliyon ka chaman*’ from *Jyoti* (1981) with music by Bappi Lahiri.

Conversely, songs and melodies from various countries have inspired the making of Hindi film songs and composers over the decades, have reworked tunes from American, European, African and Middle-Eastern sources and Pakistan post independence. In the overwhelming proportion of cases, rights were not taken due to ignorance, economic constraints or lack of access to the original rights holders. This situation however has improved in the last decade with Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy doing a Hindi version of *Pretty woman* in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Tomorrow May Or May Not Be, 2003) with due acknowledgement of credits and licenses. In most cases, the Hindi film adaptation of such a song often took only a few bars, riffs or segments, like music directors Kalyanji-Anandji and Viju Shah use of ‘*Oye oye*’ refrain from Gloria Estefan’s song in the hit *Tirchhi topiwale* (*Tridev*, 1989) or Laxmikant-Pyarelal using just one line of Mory Kante’s *Tama* in the famous *Jumma chumma* (*Hum*, 1991). Brazen lifts however are not unheard of – be it music director Salil Chowdhury’s borrowing the tune of Mozart’s 40th symphony to make *Itna na mukjhse tu pyar badha* (*Chhaya*, 1961), Bappi Lahiri’s *Hari om Hari* (*Armaan*, 1981) from Boney M’s *One way ticket* or R.D. Burman’s *Mil gaya humko saathi* (*Hum Kisise Kum Nahin*, 1977) from Abba’s *Mama Mia*.

In the new millennium, filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt has pioneered the trend of official

sourcing of songs from their creating artistes. These artistes are now contacted and usually asked to re-record their songs (modified according to the needs) especially for Hindi films. Increasingly, more filmmakers are now opting for this ‘healthy’ copying, as evident in the reproduction of a composition by the Australian Spice Girls in *Heyy Babyy* (2007) with due permission.

The Eternal Give and Take

The genre of the Hindi film songs has also borrowed from or has been inspired by folk sources. In the Indian popular music scenario, it is believed that folk music is crucial for all kinds of song situations. Film songs include pulsating raw rhythms as well as classical songs or *bandish* (singular terms for a fixed melodic composition set in a specific *raag*). It is considered that most, if not all, songs of composer Naushad’s musical marvel, the 1952 film *Baiju Bawra*, were simplified versions of Hindustani classical compositions and folk songs from Uttar Pradesh.

India has a very rich tradition of folk music in every region. It is strongest in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, Goa and Gujarat apart from the musical tradition of the Southern Indian states⁷. Examples abound of folk

musical traditions being reworked in films, like the Rajasthani *maand*, the Bengali *baul*, the Punjabi *bhangra*, the Gujarati *garba*, the Marathi *koli-geet* and more. The Hindi film simplifies folk songs according to the needs of a movie. But the converse is also true today. So there are some songs of the day that will probably go into the folk music tradition with the passage of time, and the process has already begun with some benchmark compositions. The patriotic ‘*Mere desh ki dharti sona ugley ugley heere moti*’ (My motherland’s soil yields wealth akin to gold, diamonds and pearls) from *Upkar* (1967) is a case in point. There are more examples – like there is hardly an Indian wedding where local bands do not play ‘*Mere pyari beheniya banegi dulhaniya*’ (My beloved sister will soon become a bride) from *Saccha Jhutha* (1970). ‘*Aaj mere yaar ki shaadi hai, aisa lagta hai saare sansaar ki shaadi hai*’ (Today is my friend’s wedding and I feel the whole world is getting married) in *Aadmi Sadak Ka* (1977) or ‘*Mehndi lagaake rakhna doli sajaake rakhna*’ (Keep the bride and her palanquin ready) from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995).

The songs ‘*Satyam shivam sundaram*’ (Truth is eternal and beautiful) from the film of that name and ‘*Om namah Shivay*’ (I bow to Lord Shiva) from *Bhairavi* (1996) are devotionals songs that were first created for a

⁷ In South India the other great Indian musical tradition, viz. the Carnatic classical tradition

predominates, though this form is rarely used in Hindi film music.

film, but are now an integral part of many prayer rituals in the temples today. ‘*Govinda aala re aala zaraa matki sambhaal brijbaala*’ (Lord Krishna has come, protect the pots of milk from him, o maidens) was a traditional tune incorporated with some changes in words in the 1963 film *Bluffmaster* that has now in turn become *the* chosen version to go back into folk!

The Today’s Song

From the mid-1990s, however, the Hindi film song has undergone substantial changes, and these must be highlighted to make the story of the film song and its role both complete and contemporary.

The arrival of music director, A.R. Rahman on the Hindi film scene in 1993 with the dubbed version of his debut film *Roja* (in Tamil) sparked a mini-revolution. The success of this version and its music in pan-Indian circuit triggered off a new sound and musical grammar. Since the Hindi verse for *Roja* was written to the original (Tamil) tunes, for the first time lyrics became truly secondary to the composition. Rahman’s first original Hindi movie, *Rangeela* (1995) saw its maker Ram Gopal Varma filming its trendy songs, laden with a lot of catchy beats, as self-sufficient music videos, around the time when the international channel Music Television (MTV) had just made its presence felt in India. Some of these songs did not have any link with the

script at all, and so another time-honoured convention was broken. As Rahman barely knew Hindi, his wordsmith had to provide makeshift lyrics that fitted the tunes and the role of the lyrics in providing perspectives to a scene in the larger context of a film’s narrative, began to undergo a decline from here.

With Rahman’s unprecedented success, the floodgates opened for composers to come in from different music making backgrounds, like musicians hailing from the world of advertisement jingles, rock bands, fusion bands and Hip-Hop. Most of these music makers had little time for the conventions of Hindi film or even Indian traditional music. Groomed primarily in Western music and in English as a language, along with a generation of stars and filmmakers increasingly trained in (or raised on) ‘World’ or Western cinema rather than Hindi films, they, along with Rahman, changed the whole pattern of film music. Sound (which is just the packaging) increasingly began to dominate the creative content of a song. Gone was the time when most music makers had to be assistants to established talents before turning independent composers (Rahman was the last, assisting Ilaiyaraaja). The large orchestras and recording studios vanished, and even the singers now are of a different breed.

As globalization and the digital revolution spread, all these factors gradually undermined the fortunes of most of the existing legends amongst composers, lyricists and singers. As

the spoken language of India became more hybridised with liberal inclusion of English, lyrics too transformed and singers fluent in this language started getting an edge.

Simultaneously, Punjabi pop (which meant a ‘modernised’ form of Punjabi folk music that was already popular in UK, USA and Canada) and high-pitched Sufiana songs of the Islamic tradition made significant inroads. The younger breed of music makers preferred to blend these elements into a film score.

Suddenly, no one was interested in classical music, good language, impeccable diction or a voice ‘suitable’ for the faces on screen. Many filmmakers began to forfeit songs in their films, or recorded OSTs (Original Soundtracks) where only a few parts of some tracks were actually heard in the films for which the songs were made, while the rest of compositions were limited only to albums. Multiple composers in a film, re-creations of old melodies and even songs from non-film creators like pop and folk musicians dabbling in movie music became common. Lip-sync songs went out of fashion in tune with the ‘realistic’ approach. This change was at its height in the late 2007 to 2010 phase. Film soundtracks now worked only if the films did, and that too more in the digital domain than the physical.

Nevertheless, tradition has a way of coming back in a new form. With the 2010 game-changer *Dabangg*, once again, one heard

melodies in the classic larger-than-life mould with an attempt to excel in all aspects. Not only did the album (with four songs composed by Sajid-Wajid and one by Lalit Pandit) sell, but as in the ‘good old’ days it drove people into the auditoriums to watch the film – and then watch it again.



Picture 19: *Dabangg* (2010) was a game-changing trendsetter. This is the CD of the soundtrack that brought back the classic film score after a gap

Composers rooted in Indian music traditions, who were lying low with the arrival of the new ‘generation’ musicians, once again made a mark with similar films. Two parallel schools have now gradually evolved that concurrently run today – the classic school where we have typical film melodies in a new avatar like the music of *Rowdy Rathore* or *Bodyguard* or the new-age kind of songs and scores, best exemplified by *Delhi Belly* (all 2011 releases). Then there are those filmmakers who inculcate elements from both

schools in their scores, often with brilliant results like in *Barfi* (2012) or *Nautanki Saala!* (2013).

The fact that the new generation of Hindi cinema stars had begun to face a severe drought of songs filmed on them, which they could then dance at shows (a trendy source of income for many actors) has made them insist on lip-sync songs again, even in offbeat, realistic films as in the past. So today, the lip-sync song – the USP of Hindi film music – has been revived though for the wrong reason. Today, we watch a happy marriage of the old-world and the new-age in which one accepts the different ‘other’ unconditionally. We see excellent lyrics in new-age scores like *ABCD – Anybody Can Dance* (2013) and *Nautanki Saala!* and contemporary and youth-oriented music in the more traditional *The Dirty Picture* (2011) or *Chashme Baddoor* (2013).

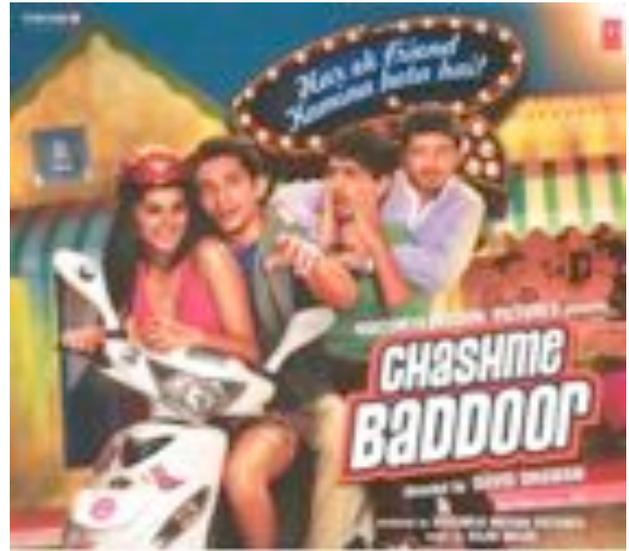


Figure 20: The CD cover of *Chashme Baddoor*, which has a youth-centric music score

The Hindi film song has survived its greatest identity crisis ever. It is still thriving, with its classic elements quite intact but in a new contemporary form suited to the times. It is that rare example of a popular form of art that has always been loved by *its fans and listeners for its unique pleasures*, and hence must be appreciated unreservedly for what it is. 🤖