The Bollywood Reader

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Inside and out: song and dance in Bollywood cinema
by Sangita Gopal and Biswarup Sen

Of the various components that make up the standard Bollywood film, one feature in particular – the song-and-dance sequences which are present in every Bollywood film – draws special ire. Pointing to the blatant 'unrealism' of these musical interludes – the many changes of costumes within the frame of a single song, the sudden shift of locales from verse to verse, the depiction of armies of extras swaying and dancing along with the hero and the heroine – critics contend that song-dance sequences symbolize, in a condensed fashion, what is wrong with Bollywood films as a whole. The vulgar use of sexuality and the ostentatious displays of wealth which characterize most song-dance sequences point to a central truth about Bollywood: that it is a sensationalist and escapist art form which is driven solely by the dictates of the marketplace and is incapable of playing any progressive role whatsoever. This contribution argues that song-dance sequences, far from being exploitative segments of escapist fantasy, are in fact powerful acts of imagination which play a crucial role in the construction of Bollywood film as a unique and powerful popular art. Seemingly redundant to the text, the song-dance is actually an enabling device which has allowed Hindi film to posit versions and visions of modernity that would otherwise be unrepresentable. Song-dance is therefore both a measure of Bollywood's difference from western cinema, as well as an explanation of Bollywood's immense popularity all over the global South. It posits exterior and interior scenarios of modernity that the narrative is unable to depict, it envisions ways of acting and behaving not coded into the text, it registers the shock of the new not recordable by the prose of the film, and it affords the possibility of *jouissance* or joyous release that cannot be spoken by any character or voice. Overall, song-dance is a sign that helps us read the meaning of Bollywood films.

Music and the movies

It is agreed upon that if there is one feature that radically distinguishes Bollywood from other cinemas, it is the ubiquitous presence of the song-and-dance sequence.

This difference is most keenly felt by western observers used to the very different conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. Richard Corliss observes that 'in the midst of the starkest plot twists, everyone sings and dances. Virtually all Bollywood films are musicals'.[1] Even sympathetic foreign critics are forced to admit that 'For many Westerners, though, the songs are the real deal-breakers – which is why they are often the first element a Bollywood go-getter thinks about removing when plotting a crossover to the "mainstream" (read "white") audience in America and Europe'.[2] But songs are not a problem only for white audiences; many Indian commentators also believe that song-and-dance sequences detract a terrible toll from aesthetic value of Hindi films:

> The most irritating aspect of the song in the Hindi film is its sheer irrelevance. Many of them can be deleted entirely without in any way affecting the film's content, and many of them suppressed would do much to improve the general quality of the film. In an avowed musical of the *Baiju Bawra* type [1952 film about a musician], it is a different matter – for it is part of the film – but the interminable singing in films of a totally different nature is rarely justified. It merely slows up the action and confuses the major issues at stake. The mounting tension of a drama suddenly collapses it and it holds up the story. In the middle of what should be an exciting chase, it is an inanity. These sort of things account for the illogical and shapeless nature of an otherwise good Hindi film.[3]

Addressing the topic almost thirty years later, Ram Gopal Verma reiterates Sarkar's critique when he states:

> I believe … that songs are principally responsible for 70 per cent of the bad films we make today. Songs will work … when they are integral to a film …but the problem arises when no matter what the nature of the subject, you *ghusao* some songs into it and start manipulating the screenplay … I'm not going to have any songs in *Bhoot* either. My intention is to scare the hell out of people. Why should I subject them to locations in New Zealand?[4]

Some critics go even further than Verma, denying all validity to artworks that employ these devices. Questioned by an interviewer as to whether she would ever try her hand at a Hindi film extravaganza, the noted director Aparna Sen announced: 'No, I am not into song-and-dance movies. That's not my kind of cinema so I can't do it very well. I usually opt for meaningful cinema.'[5]

Some scholars explain the existence of the song-and-dance sequence by arguing that it evolves both from the classical traditions of Indian civilization as well as from the tenor of daily life. Thus, Barnouw and Krishnaswamy point out that in the Golden Age of Sanskrit theatre, the idea of drama was inseparably linked with song, dance and music. Though drama in India went into decline under Muslim rule, it was revived in the nineteenth century. Even though this new drama sought to imitate and adapt European models, it simultaneously reverted back to ancient usage by including song and dance. This practice was then

imported into cinema with the advent of sound, 'the Indian sound film of 1931 was not only the heir of the silent film; it also inherited something more powerful and broad-based. Into the new medium came a river of music, that had flowed through unbroken millennia of dramatic tradition'.[6] This argument from tradition is not very convincing, for it begs a number of important questions. First, since so little of contemporary culture has any links to the age of Kalidasa, why was song-dance the one element which has survived till today? 'Continuity' by itself is not sufficient to account for this persistence; we need to demonstrate why this one facet from classical Sanksrit culture continues to be of such importance in the modern world. Second, this thesis cannot explain why song-dance sequences are so popular in cultures (like Russia, the Middle East and East Asia) which have no Sanskritic antecedents. Are we then required to posit similar underlying features for the classical traditions of all these cultures? Third, this argument makes no attempt to account for the entertainment value of the song-dance sequence. If the song-dance is detrimental to the work as a whole, why do so many people continue to be fascinated by this device?

The traditionalist explanation for the song-dance is complemented by a culturalist or anthropological account, like the one below from film director Vinay Shukla, which argues that the song-dance is a reflection of what happens at the level of the day-to-day:

> Why don't we just look at our own society? Every occupation – fisherman or postman, farmer or warrior, rajah or jogi – has a song attached to it. Every occasion – birth, death, marriage or separation – is accompanied by a song. Every festival, every season has a song about it. Songs are a way of life for us. If an important occasion is a meal, songs are its spices – leaving the meal incomplete without them.[7]

Shukla's point may be empirically true, but it lacks force. A culturalist account of this sort is true not only for India but also for all primitive and traditional societies. In fact, the only societies in human history where songs are *not* a way of life are the modern, industrial societies which we now inhabit and where music and all arts in general are detached from daily life practices and placed in a sector labelled 'entertainment'. The weakness of the culturalist approach is that it takes the relation between music and ritual or practice found in traditional societies (the link between music and religion or sowing and reaping for example) and illicitly transposes it onto that between two spheres of culture (music and narrative film). Nor does such an argument offer any evidence that we are more musical than other cultures. In fact, one could point to instances where we are *less* musical. Thus, while it is common for sports fans in Britain or the United States to start singing in unison, sports audiences in India are noisy but never burst into song the way they do in the terraces or stadiums in the west. Moreover, what such an argument forgets is that Bollywood is also a factory which produces art in a commodity form, it is pure artifice which need pay no fealty to the real conditions of life. Even if song-dance is integral to our daily lives – and this assumption is questionable – there is little reason for Bollywood to pay such an extraordinary degree of

importance to it. Neither the traditionalist nor the culturalist accounts, then, provide adequate explanations of a phenomenon which not only is important in its own right, but also has had a huge impact on other cultural forms.

Given the extraordinary significance of the song-dance, it is quite astonishing that Indian academics writing on film have largely chosen to ignore the topic. Song-dance, then, remains crucial to Hindi film. Any film theory which aspires to completeness must therefore engage with the phenomenon and seek to explain it. The film scholar Lalitha Gopalan challenges the commonly held view that song and dance sequences are inserted into films only as spectacles tangentially linked to the narrative.[8] Rather, she argues, we need to differentiate their relationship to the storytelling and examine how they delay the development of the plot, distract us from other scenes of the narrative, yet also bear an integral link to the plot. Moreover, song and dance sequences call our attention to other interests: 'For instance, the abrupt cut to exotic locations sparks the tourist interests of the viewer, and similarly the object-laden *mise en scène* endorses consumerism'.[9] Importantly, Gopalan brings to the foreground a notion that many others have only implicitly alluded to – that the alliteration is misleading, that Bollywood cannot be read as a kitschy version of Hollywood, and that in fact its utilization of song-dance constitutes a radically different way of filmmaking.

The specific role played by song-dance in Bollywood films can be understood only by analysing its relation to the rest of the filmic text. Most commentators have held that the song-dance does no work for the text, and is a mere distraction or diversion. The argument here is that song-dance in Bollywood films is in fact a crucial component of the filmic text because it performs a function that the rest of the text – the story or the narrative – cannot perform.

Bollywood films may involve a lot of singing and dancing but there can be no justification for equating them to Hollywood musicals. In fact, as many commentators have pointed out, most Hindi films contain elements of all the genres: comedy, slapstick, musicals, action adventure, thrillers and drama. The proliferation of styles within the same text has led some to claim that all Bollywood films fall under the rubric of one super-genre – the 'social'. That may well be true, but we also ought to acknowledge the possibility that a categorization based on western notions of genre may not be very productive in the case of Indian cinema. The use of indigenous genres – like BACHCHAN films or NRI (non-resident Indian) films – is more likely to give us a better grasp of the similarities and differences that make up the body of Bollywood films. Such an inquiry must still of course account for universality of the song-dance. Since an analysis based on genre is unlikely to provide us with an answer to this question, here, the strategy is to try to elucidate the meaning of the song-dance by looking at its functionalities, that is, by analysing the work that it does within the film itself. More specifically, we suggest that the song-dance performs two crucial sets of tasks on behalf of the filmic text: first, it creates an 'outside' for the filmic text providing both a context for the film as well as linking it to other cultural practices, and second, it acts as an instrument for building interiority and subjectivity, for projecting models of the individual self. In

the enactment of these tasks the song-dance enables the film to articulate a stance which it could not otherwise. In other words, without song-dance the Hindi film would be less, not more.

As an agent of exteriority, ever since the introduction of sound, film songs have enjoyed an existence outside of the films they were written for. As others have argued, film music became practically synonymous with popular music, being regularly featured on state-run media like All-India Radio and Doordarshan. Though songs and song-dances were tied by nomenclature to their textual origins – thus a song like 'Gaata Rahe Mera Dil' would always be identified as being a number from the film *Guide* – their circulation on Vividh Bharati and television shows like *Chitrahaar* ensured that they ultimately became autonomous objects. This detachment is best illustrated in the case of remixes: when Bally Sagoo remixes 'Roop Tera Mastana' for club audiences in London and Toronto, it is the song which is the object of reference and fetishization and its filmic origins lose all significance. Thus the notes in Sagoo's *Best of Bally Sagoo* CD attribute the song to Anand Bakshi and R.D. Burman but make no mention of *Aradhana*.[10] Songs, played on radio, cassettes and CDs, and song-dance sequences played on television and on DVDs as well as in clubs and parties constitute a vast extra-textual world which extends far beyond the films where they were originally located. In other words, song-dance establishes a cultural space which is external to film and autonomous from it.

The externality of the song-dance is not just material for it also diverges from the text at the level of semantics. It has been observed by many that song-dance serves the touristic gaze as well as tying in with an ideology of consumerism. Through the frenetic display of landscape and monuments the song-dance makes the viewer mobile, while the equally flashy montage of bodies fashioned by commodities enforces an appetite for consumption. If song-dance is a sort of advertising tool for capitalism, it is also an instrument for reportage that inserts bits of reality into the filmic text. Song-dance in Hindi film has foregrounded city streets (most notably in Raj Kapoor films) and rural landscapes, public spaces like schools, railway stations, military displays and parades, factories and bazaars. Over the years, song-dance can be said to constitute a vast documentary giving us glimpses of modern India: the machinery of its progress, snapshots of its leaders, and the various constituents that added up to make its social whole. In fact song-dance has often come closest to being a social realist art form. It is quite ironical therefore that song-dance has been repeatedly castigated as 'escapist' or 'fantastic' or simply 'unreal'. Those critics who have focused exclusively on the 'singing round the tree' (which itself contains the realism of advertising) have misrecognized the strongly realistic components of the format. In conclusion then, song-dance creates a fertile outside for the text which is articulated through a variety of media and energized by the flow of commodities that has very little relationship to the film itself. Song-dance can, therefore, be described as participating in the construction of a public or national culture, where the latter terms are to be understood in a spatial and territorial way. The more the spread of a cultural form the more public or national it is. Song-dance therefore *publicizes* film by

spilling beyond its boundaries. Yet song-dance is more than just a conduit between film and the outside, it is an autonomous art form that establishes a secondary zone of culture within the public sphere.

Song-dance produces exteriority, but at the same time it also contributes to the creation of interiority and private space. Song-dance provides a space inside which the characters of the text can be more deeply individualized than what the narrative would allow. In other words, singing, rather than dialogue, expresses the innermost aspects of heroes, heroines and even sidekicks. This individualizing function explains the song-dance's overwhelming focus on romance. If by romance we understand that desire which belongs uniquely to one individual, then the song-dance facilitates the process of individuation and the creation of a private self through the mechanism of romantic love and yearning. Song-dance privatizes at the level of the body by depicting lovers alone in vast public spaces. In Raj Kapoor's classic film *Sangam* (1964), the song-dance 'Ye Mera Prem Patra Parkhar' shows Gopal (played by Rajendra Kumar) and Radha (played by Vyjanthimala) confessing their love for each other via the instrument of a letter (which is later discovered by Radha's future husband Sundar, played by Raj Kapoor). The song is sung while the lovers run around in a large garden which is absolutely empty. This desolation is not realistic, for the song-dance knows fully well that public gardens in India are always teeming with people. Indeed, in its exteriorizing mode the song-dance overpopulates space, with ensembles of dancers or just plain crowds. The garden in *Sangam* is empty not by accident but due to a theoretical necessity: because it signifies the asocial terrain where the desire of one reciprocates the desire of the other. The evacuation of the social, the emptying out of history occurs because the philosophy of romantic love demands that the self that loves can only come into being in a shared solitude with the other. Love is private, as is well known, but more importantly only the private can love.

Most Hindi film stories involve a struggle about love, because it is the burden of almost every filmic text to carve out some sort of independent individuality for its protagonists. Insofar that the text promotes this philosophy of individualism in conjunction with older notions of self and society (feudal, religious etc.), it is forced to make compromises in its depiction of individualized love. Thus parental approval always casts its shadow upon romantic love: lovers often meet each other as little children pushed into friendship by their parents; or they fall in love with exactly the person their parents wanted in the first place, or the nobility of the loved one convinces a reluctant parent that this love ought to be blessed. Whatever the strategy, the narrative always flows towards parental consent, because the text is always bisected into a half that projects freedom, desire and individuality and another which brings into play societal forces structured around family and convention. By masquerading as just 'song and dance', the song-dance can get away with more. It is not required to pay fealty to tradition and can represent individuality in a far more radical manner than the narrative. The song-dance therefore posits a strong version of the privacy and the private self. This is evident even in those sequences which are peopled. It is customary for lovers to speak to each other (and only to each other) while in the midst of the social through the device of the song. Song lyrics very often become a secret code utilized by lovers to

speak desire in the midst of many. Though this device is hackneyed it continues to have strategic value because of the text and the audience's joint assumption that privacy and the interior is not quite private and is always encroached upon by the public and the outside.

To recapitulate, the song-dance has a double function, it over-produces the text in two directions: outside and inside. The song-dance inhabits an external territory of other media through the circulation of songs and videos, more crucially it becomes a site for the representation of several orders of externalities: of landscape and sightseeing, of fashion and sexuality, of history and politics, of industry and agriculture, in short of the ever-changing face of the social. Concurrently the song-dance functions as an agent that institutes many registers of interiority: private thoughts, private gestures, private languages, romantic love with all its sorrows and joys, in short psychic desire. Song-dance is a coin stamped with the measure of the social on one side, and the likeness of a self driven by longing and desire on the other, and it allows the filmic text to purchase a version of modernity which the narrative cannot afford. Whereas the 'story' in a Bollywood film always labours as a mediator between tradition and modernity, the song-dance is at liberty to perceive and to jubilantly announce the modern in all its contemporary glory.

The suggestion that modernity is encoded in 'fantastic' song-dances may seem preposterous to those who hold that only 'realistic' cinema can lay claim to representing the truth about the present. From this perspective it is not Bollywood but alternative cinema – known variously as new cinema, parallel cinema or art cinema – which can justifiably be described as providing a window to the modern. The distinction between art cinema and popular or commercial cinema is usually framed simply as the difference between good serious cinema and bad degenerate entertainment.

For most writers on the subject, it is the new cinematic tradition rather than Bollywood escapism, which is capable of comprehending and adequately repre-senting Indian modernity. This dominant view needs to be supplemented by looking at how Bollywood alongside the new and parallel cinema has played the crucial role in articulating the contours of Indian modernity. In saying this we do not mean in any way to detract from the significant achievements of new cinema: its focus on material problems, its advocacy on behalf of the oppressed, its refreshing departure from the star system in its casting, its use of a realist mode of storytelling, and its laudable mission of exposing our societal ills. What we are contesting is the view that this list of attributes adds up to the only and the most adequate representation of modernity. Stylistically, new cinema was modelled on neo-realism and it inherited all the limitations of that form. By being excessively committed to the quotidian and the ordinary, new cinema ended up as somewhat dreary and outdated even at the moment of release. Its syntax and imagistic was that of the documentary, its semantics were that of progressivist social engineering. In its determined and dour manner new cinema was at one with the rest of statist production: governmental architecture, dams, factories and other industrial sites that bore the mark of planning. It is hardly surprising that like all State goods, new cinema had little appeal for either a global cosmopolitan market or for the public at

home. Satyajit Ray's reputation notwithstanding, most new cinema met with a polite reception abroad, for it offered nothing to viewers in the first world. More importantly it failed to capture the imagination of Indians at large.

Those who hold new cinema to be inherently superior to Bollywood face the burden of answering two crucial questions. First, why did new cinema fail to tantalize a foreign audience in the way Bollywood is doing today? Second, why does new cinema gather dust in the archives, while films like *Awara*, *Mother India*, *Sangam* or *Sholay* continue to resonate in the collective memory of the film public? The fact that new cinema petered out at the very moment when India opened up to global media via television suggests that new cinema belonged to a protectionist moment. Bred by state patronage and overly committed to a mission of earnest reformism, new cinema collapsed under the pressure of the global real. This failure of new cinema to survive the advent of globalization ought to lead us to also question its most vaunted attribute: realism. It could be argued that the adoption of realism by new cinema was a function of its role in nation-building. As Madhav Prasad has observed, 'Under the FCC aegis, realism became a national political project ... It was a realism devoted to the mapping of the land, producing the nation for the state, capturing the substance of the state's boundaries'.[11] As the work of the western film theorists on mainstream Hollywood cinema has demonstrated realism can be an ideological tool serving to legitimize the given state of things and block out the possibility of radical thought. Such a mode of representation is incapable of productive fantasy and of imagining the new. Modernity is not simply the transposition and application of a set of ideals and practices that are already in place (and it is this limited sense of modernity that motivates new cinema), it is equally concerned with the articulation of what has yet come to be. Thus only those forms which re-present reality, and not just represent it, through a manufacturing of the new, can truly be called modern.

Unburdened by new cinema's doctrines, Bollywood too can produce moments of transcendence where what is truly new can emerge. Hindi film's ability to generate utterly new conceptions of the present is very well brought out in Sudipto Kaviraj's essay on the song 'Ay dil hai mushkil' (Oh my heart, it is difficult) from the Dev Anand film *C.I.D.* Kaviraj contrasts the image of the city produced by this hit song with more literary representations of urban spaces found in the work of several modernist Bengali litterateurs. The latter can only pessimistically portray the cityscape as one of decline and death, the song, on the other hand, while cataloguing the many hardships that attend city life, can simultaneously affirm 'yeh hai Bombay meri jaan [This is Bombay, my life]'. As Kaviraj points out

> Both poetry and popular films gave rise to specific aesthetic structures with very different readings for the meaning of city life. For the high poetic discourse the image of the city is a dark one where lives are unfulfilled and people go through the subtle defilement of their everyday existence ... By contrast, the cinematic image of the city is more complex, it contains the dark image, but this is constantly relieved by an opposite image of hope and optimism ... The filmic representation might be less self-consciously artistic [but] its image of the city was of a space of contradictions – where different

types of things took place. It was not just a scene of constant, unremitting despair. The Bombay of the films was in this respect in subtle and important ways, unlike the high artistic depiction of Calcutta, *a city of joy*.[12]

The joy that Kaviraj points to is the joy of urban life; it is the *jouissance*, or ecstasy, that arises from being in the city, from city-being. This being is *new* in the sense that it is not derivable from history, from cause and effect, from tradition and convention, or from previous expectation and anticipation. Nor is the new of modernity oriented towards the future, it is most definitely not a blueprint or a precursor. It stands resolutely in the present; its duration is only of the moment. The new is never realized, it never fully comes to be. We only glimpse the new but never grasp it.

Modernity is encoded in texts not only by historicist representations of its encounter with tradition (which involves a fixed notion of what modernity is) but also by the irruption of the new and the joyous. While narrative in Bollywood is preoccupied with a working out the implications of the historical binary, song-dance is the device which presents modernity in its autonomous version, unmediated by history, as that which is radically novel. The presentation is a mere glimpse, for both the new and the joyous are ephemeral and transitory. Song-dances are quanta, packets of bound energy, that tantalize us with the notion of possibility. Consider two examples, one from the 1960s, one contemporary. The song-dance sequence 'Main Kya Karun Raam Mujhe Buddha Mil Gaya' performed by Radha (Vyjanthimala) is a production of female sexuality which is radically new for its time: it suggests that the heroine, normally represented as pure, can perform a 'cabaret' and yet remain within the space of conjugality. Moreover, the song-dance grants Radha an agency and authority that is denied her in the narrative itself. The story marginalizes Radha's desire in favour of the homoerotic dynamic between Gopal and Sundar. Thus even though Radha loves Gopal, and he secretly loves her in return, he is unable to announce his love because Sundar has already laid claim to her. Gopal's friendship for Sundar becomes the hegemonic principle which governs the action in *Sangam* leading in the end to Gopal's sacrificial suicide at the end of the film. While this negation of female desire is in keeping with the patriarchal practices of Indian society of the 1960s, the song-dance produces a set of new possibilities for female sexuality. It may be argued that such an empowered sexuality has not yet come to be and that desire is still under patriarchal control. Such a critique is misplaced because it assumes that the new, to be valid, must be predictive. We ought to countenance the possibility that the new may never be realized, and that the aesthetic and ontological force of the new may lie in precisely the fact that is never instantiated in history.

To take a more contemporary example, consider the song-dance 'Pretty Woman' in *Kal Ho Na Ho*. During this sequence Aman Mathur (played by Shah Rukh Khan) stands outside the house where Naina Catherinen Kapoor (played by Preity Zeinta) lives, and proceeds to woo her through song. The gesture is common enough in the tradition of song-dance; what makes the difference here is the locale. By situating the song-dance sequence on a Manhattan street the film is able, through a number of innovative artistic moves, to transform a simple love

song into a stunning tableau of global India. First, there is the audacious transformation of the classic Roy Orbison song into a 'Hinglish' number that melds Hindi lyrics, English phrases and electric guitar into a contemporary love song. What is different here from previous borrowings from the west is that the 'theft' is openly announced, indicating India's growing global stature and increasing sense of equality with the first world: if the Beatles could put classical sitar into English pop, we can as easily place rockabilly into Hindi *gana*. Globalization at the level of music is replicated at the level of visuals. As Aman sings his romantic message, he is joined not only by New York desis, but also by an entire rainbow coalition – black, white, yellow, brown. Suddenly, the entire world is singing along in Hindi, the new global lingua franca! The moment is fecund one for it amounts to a revelation of two intertwined but independent truths: first, Indians are now fully global, they are here, there and everywhere, at ease and assured of their place; and second, our sensibility, our way of singing and dancing, which we may call Bollywood is now the world's mode of being as well. The 'Pretty Woman' sequence in *KHNH* is extraordinary: what we witness is Bollywood using its own techniques to announce its arrival on the world stage. Song-and-dance, judged by common sense to be a peculiarity or aberration, paradoxically becomes, in this context, a passage to universality.

Song-dance functions as a sign for Bollywood and for Indian popular culture as a whole and is a device of *excess*, one that allows the filmic text to posit ecstatic visions of the new. It is this very excessiveness that allows Hindi film to find international fans and thus become transformed into the cultural form known as Bollywood. The song-dance, known and loved all over the world, is Bollywood's essence. Bollywood, more than any other cultural form, has taken on the task of presenting the emerging shapes of modernity to our eyes. It has done so with song and with dance, and has in the process, enabled our popular culture to become truly global.

Notes

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