

One of my most vivid memories of watching Hindi films in the 1980s – at home, on a video-cassette player – was that almost each time a song came on, someone would get up to press the fast-forward button. Or we would let the scene play out but it would be treated as a breather, allowing us to see to other things for five minutes: one of us might take a bathroom break, another would go and check on the food cooking on the stove.

It should be mentioned that the 1980s was generally a poor time for Hindi film music, and the movies I mainly watched as a child were revenge-and-violence sagas where music played a perfunctory role. The songs tended to be tuneless and the cinematography uninspired.

Perhaps this attitude wasn't restricted to that time: perhaps it has always been a part of the wider snobbery directed at popular Hindi cinema, even by viewers who enjoy watching it as a guilty pleasure. There is a telling scene in Basu Chatterji's 1974 film *Rajnigandha*, a gentle and thoughtful example of so-called 'middle cinema', which occupied a niche between the dramatic excesses of mainstream movies and the stark minimalism of 'art films'. In the scene in question, the talkative Sanjay (Amol

happens / that the mind breaks its own boundaries / and starts thirsting after the unknown". The scene has Deepa and Naveen travelling through Bombay in a cab together. He is being polite and distant, but she throws surreptitious glances his way, clearly wondering what her life would have been like if they had stayed together. Any viewer who missed this sequence because they decided to step outside the hall (or fast-forward a video cassette) would have missed a vital part of the film's plot.

It should be mentioned that this scene is – by the standards of the mainstream Hindi movie – a restrained one. There is no lip-synching by the actors, no dancing around trees. The song, as a soundtrack to Deepa and Naveen riding together, serves as commentary and interior monologue. But anyone who has grown up watching Hindi cinema has seen hundreds of far more flamboyant song sequences. Music, and the way it is presented on the screen, are an integral part of this cinema.

And why not, for a great song – where rhythm, lyrics and singing combine to optimum effect – can reach emotional depths and express poetic truths in a way that conventional narrative cannot. Similarly, a well-filmed musical

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IN DEFENSE OF THE BOLLYWOOD SONG SEQUENCE

JAI ARJUN SINGH

Palekar), having carelessly entered a movie hall long after the film started, wastes little time in getting up again for some fresh air when a song sequence begins on the screen in front of him. "Dekho gaana aa gaya, main thoda ghoom ke aata hoon" he says, "Oh look, a song, I'll go out and walk around for a bit."

Emotional depths and poetic truths

Given how cramped and squalid-looking the hall shown in that scene is – this being decades before the arrival in India of posh mall-multiplexes – you can almost sympathise with Sanjay's desire to escape. (This was one reason why most of my early movie-watching was done in the comfort of the home!) Yet there is an irony here: *Rajnigandha* itself made very delicate use of songs, which are integral to the story and to a psychological understanding of the principal character. The film is about a woman named Deepa who finds herself torn between her current romantic relationship – a happy but occasionally monotonous one – and the idealistic memory of an ex-boyfriend, Naveen, with whom her path crosses again. Her state of mind, and the film's central theme, finds beautiful expression in the song 'Kahin Baar Yun', which includes the lyrics "Kahin baar yun bhi dekha hai / yeh jo mann ki seema-rekha hai / mann tohne lagta hai / anjanee pyaas ke peechhe, it often

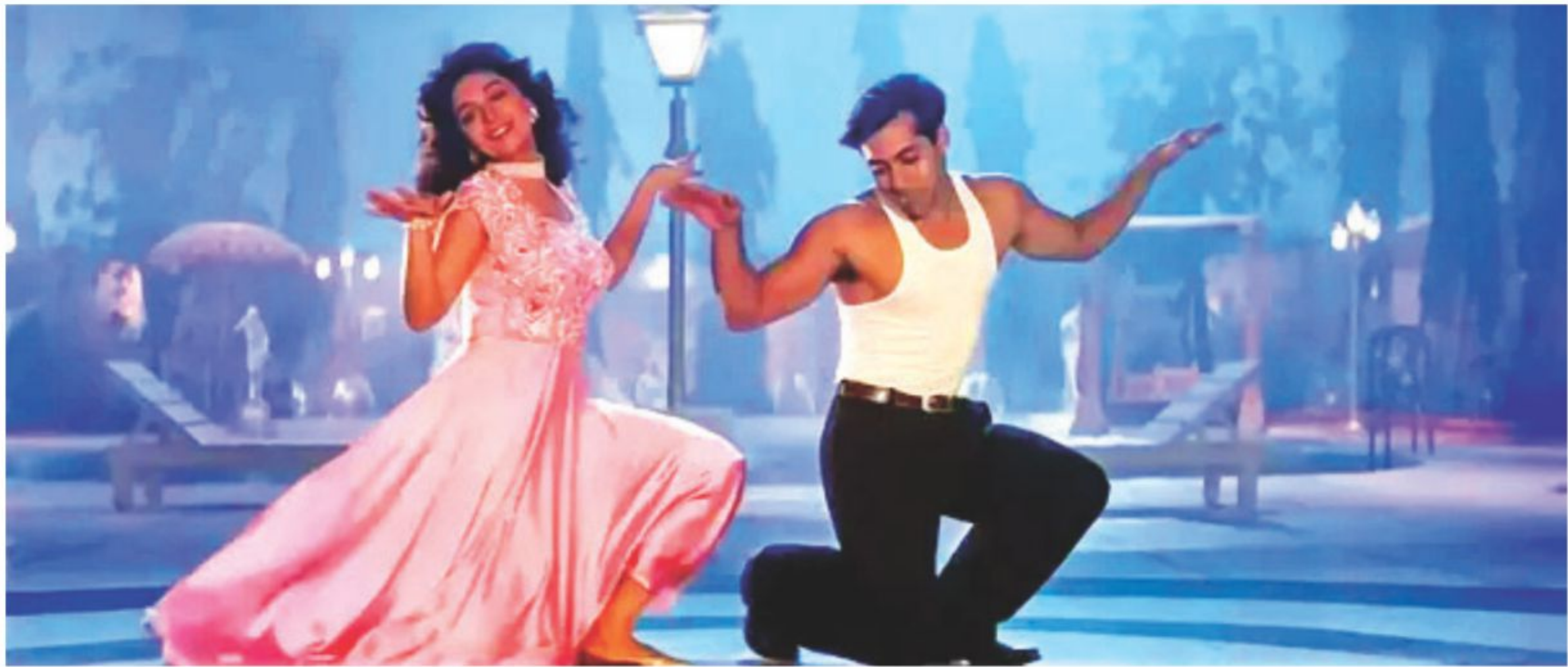


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sequence can work within the context of a movie to deepen our attitudes to the characters and situations. In fact, it can be argued that the history of form in the popular Hindi film is inseparable from the history of the song sequence. Very often, directors and cinematographers have experimented with stylistic flourishes in musical sequences – perhaps because these scenes tend to be inherently non-realistic – while holding themselves back when it comes to the prosaic passages. Consequently, at times it is like the film has temporarily entered a magical realm, moving beyond the commonplace of routine, plot-oriented storytelling.

The use of the song in popular Hindi cinema – its disruption of narrative, its

apparent lack of logic – has for decades been the subject of derision from those who have a narrowly defined view of realism in art. The most simplistic questions run along the following lines: how have the actors' voices magically changed to those of professional playback singers? Where has the background music come from if they are singing in a garden? But to ask such mocking questions is to forget not just one of the origins of Hindi cinema (Parsi and Sanskrit theatre) but also the very nature of film as a medium grounded in artifice and stylisation, so closely associated with the magic show in its early years. As the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid pointed out to me a few years ago, there is something

fundamentally irrational about walking into a darkened hall, sitting amongst hundreds of strangers and watching images flashing before your eyes at 24 frames per second. In any case, there are many possible modes of cinematic expression. At one extreme is kitchen-sink realism – so spare that even a feature film can be made to look like a stark documentary – and at the other extreme is great stylisation, or the expression of emotions through hyper-drama. Both modes, and the many others in between, are equally valid as artistic forms. What should concern the critic is not the mode itself but how well it is executed to realise the internal world of the film.

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LONGFORM

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Popular Hindi cinema has derived its episodic and occasionally disjointed structures from a long tradition in Southasian theatre, literature and other art forms. In becoming obsessed with psychological realism and logical continuity, we forget that art has traditionally never been expected to conform to such parameters.

In a stylised film, a song sequence can be a stand-alone piece of performance art that punctuates two conventional narrative scenes. The song itself may clearly be non-realist, being 'sung' in an outdoor setting without visible musical accompaniment, and in the voices of seasoned playback singers rather than the actors. But depending on the quality of its constituent elements – such as the music, lyrics, performance and cinematography, and how well they come together – such a sequence can work brilliantly on its own terms. There are also the sequences that are explicitly presented as dreams or fantasies. A famous example is the long dream sequence in Raj Kapoor's 1951 *Awaara*. This almost Dali-esque sequence – in which the film's hero Raj confronts the key people in his life, his lover and his adopted father – is so magnificently conceived and shot that only the most straight-laced viewer, blind to cinema's qualities as a visual medium, would fast-forward it. But it also serves an important symbolic function, introducing lyricism into a prose work and subtly commenting on the larger themes within the film. As the Hindi film scholar Rachel Dwyer observes: "[The sequence] condenses the film's themes into a dream about love, religion, women, motherhood, punishment, and crime, and shows how Hindi film enacts these in songs". In other words, it is an organic part of the film.

Shifting techniques

One reason why the traditional Hindi-movie song sequence should be defended today is that there have been seismic shifts in Hindi cinema in recent years. Some of the most high-profile directors – such as Anurag Kashyap and Dibakar Banerjee, whose films are critically praised but also reach good-sized audiences in multiplexes or through DVDs – have been using music in increasingly varied ways. Thus, Banerjee's *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!*, or Kashyap's *Black Friday* and *Gangs of Wasseypur*, have pulsating soundtracks, but they are used as accompaniments to the film's action and they are not part of the narrative diagesis. In recent times there have also been stimulating examples of familiar old songs being reworked to subversive new ends. In Bejoy Nambiar's *Shaitan*, a trippy version of the beloved romantic song 'Khoya Khoya Chand' plays out during a violent action sequence shot partly in slow motion. This is a conceit that might not have made sense on paper, but on screen it perfectly fits the film's hallucinatory mood.

During a conversation last year, Banerjee told me he felt the modified international cut of his film *Shanghai* was better than the version that was released in India, because the song sequences in the former were more minimalistic. For instance, the Indian version has a

rambunctious song titled 'Bhaarat Mata ki Jai', which features a group of street revelers singing and dancing, and one of the film's protagonists Joginder (Emraan Hashmi) joining them. In the sparer international cut, the full song does not unfold on screen, and more importantly Jaggu never participates. The director was right about the stripped-down version being better, but that is largely because of the type of film *Shanghai* is. In its look and tone, it is very unlike the mainstream Hindi movie – it is cooler, more grounded in the contemporary Western sense. And given that the dance is actually happening within the narrative (it isn't a fantasy), it would be out of character for Jaggu, presented as a somewhat diffident person, to participate in it.

But it would be myopic to say that music should only be used in a minimalistic way. With Hindi cinema

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trying to break free from the shackles of the past, there has been an increased self-consciousness about the 'silliness' of the earlier type of song sequence, and a championing of the idea that music should always carry the narrative forward. One should, however, be open to the possibility that there are many ways of carrying a narrative forward. After all, even an apparently conventional romantic song sequence can enhance a narrative or take the place of dialogue scenes simply by recording the growing closeness between two lovers, by indicating that their hearts and minds are becoming attuned to each other.

In fact, the song sequence in Hindi cinema can perform so many functions that one is in danger of running out of space trying to list them all. But perhaps the point will be served with two examples from the work of directors who are not associated with 'commercial' cinema, but who still had a basic love for (and lack of self-consciousness about) the classic song sequence. In their work, one can see genuine thought and skill going into these scenes, to integrate them with the film, and as commentaries on character and story.

A notable instance of songs

performing a clear-cut narrative function occurs in the under-watched 1966 film *Biwi aur Makaan*, directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, one of the most popular of the 'middle cinema' filmmakers. This marvelously crafted comedy didn't do well at the box office, but is historically important, being the first of many fruitful collaborations between Mukherjee and the poet-lyricist Gulzar (who went on to become an important director himself). *Biwi aur Makaan* is about five friends looking for accommodation in the big city, who are eventually forced into a masquerade where two of them pretend to be women. Songs often take the place of dialogue. Hemant Kumar's music brings together conflicting idioms, notes and emotions in the same number. For instance, the song 'Anhonee Baat Thi' (I Have Fallen in Love) has one of the friends, Shekhar, mooning over a girl while the others try



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to bring him to his senses. Thus, while Shekhar sings sorrowful, unrequited-lover lyrics, the others plead, scold and cajole. Their chorus "ab kya hoga, yaaron kya hoga, what will happen now?" provides the counterpoint to his song, creating a symphony of clashing moods.

This establishes a pleasing duality, helps us appreciate the personalities of all the friends, and also adds to the narrative tension of the story. Though the genuineness of poor Shekhar's feelings is never in question, we also know why his friends are so paranoid and what is at stake, and our own emotions vacillate with the ones being depicted on screen. In mainstream Hindi cinema, one is used to seeing 'dramatic' tracks alternating with 'comic' tracks (a bit like Macbeth's inebriated porter and murdered king). But here both modes operate simultaneously, as if to acknowledge that one man's tragedy can be another man's comedy, or at least that the two can go hand in hand. The tone shifts from the sublime to the ridiculous to the hysterical, and even the two cross-dressers begin to acquire shades of the maternal/sisterly figures they are pretending to be. There is more artistic rigour in this apparently lightweight

sequence in a 'fun' movie than there can be found in many films that flaunt their seriousness of intent.

There can also be subtler dimensions to a song sequence, dimensions that only someone who comes to a film with a willingness to appreciate the medium's own language will grasp. Take the 'Bachpan ke Din' sequence from Bimal Roy's 1959 film *Sujata*. If you simply listen to the song, you'll think it is a happy, lilting number sung by two sisters as they recall their carefree childhood, and you wouldn't be wrong. But watch the sequence as it plays out in the film, and new shades of meaning are revealed. One sister, Rama, initiates the song by playing it on the piano, while the other, Sujata, hums along. There are parallels in their movements and gestures; Rama spreads her dupatta playfully across her face, and a second later Sujata matches the gesture with the

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