The Music Hindi Cinema Forgot

Ghazals, Nazms, Masnavis, Rubais, Qawwalis, Loris and Other Lost Treasures



MANEK PREMCHAND

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Dedicated to my mother,
Ganga Bhabhi

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Introduction

The seed for this book was planted by my appreciation for exceptional poetry, both within and outside of Hindi cinema. That seed blossomed into a resolute call for action during an hour spent in a taxi. More on that a little later.

Meanwhile, look at this couplet:

Saagar se ubhri leher hoon main saagar mein phir kho jaoonga
Mitti ki rooh ka sapna hoon mitti mein phir so jaoonga
(Sahir Ludhianvi/ non-film/ from his poem *Main pal do pal ka shair hoon)*

And this quatrain:

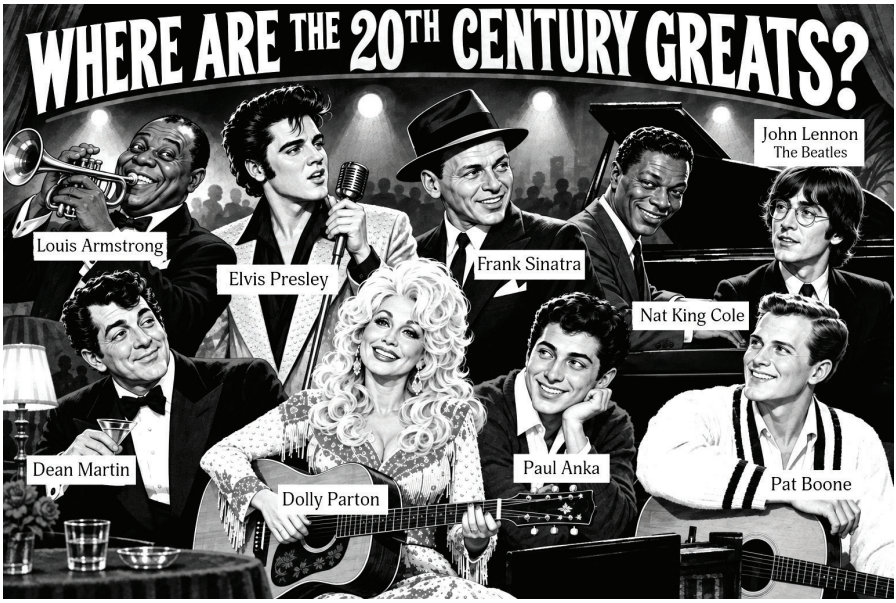
Humse mat poochho kaise mandir toota sapnon ka
Logon ki baat naheen hai ye qissa hai apnon ka
Koi dushman tthes lagaaye to meet jiya behlaaye
Man meet jo ghaav lagaaye use kaun mitaaye
(Anand Bakshi/ *Amar Prem*, 1971/ from his poem *Chingari koi bhadke*)

But Shakeel was no less. Here is a striking example:

Gulcheen ne to koshish kar daali sooni ho chaman ki har daali
Kaanton ne mubaarak kaam kiya, phoolon ki hifaazat kar baitthe
(Shakeel Badayuni/ *Pak Daaman,* 1957/ from his ghazal *Hangaama-e-gham se tang aa kar*)

A 'Retrospectoscope' of Enjoyable Film Songs, Mostly from the Golden Age

The list of exceptional lyricists is long, and many appear in the pages that follow. But poetry just read from a page isn't half the fun compared to hearing it recited. And when it is sung, backed by instruments, it can become really beautiful. Such permanent beauty is evident in the songs that were created during the golden age of Hindi film music, which, by consensus, means from the mid-40s to the late-60s.



The 1940s through 1960s period was the Golden Age of Music in the West too

So yes, lyricists just by themselves couldn't have given us wonderful songs to last us a lifetime of memories. It took fine, restless composers to make tunes for powerful poetry. It took exceptional instrumentalists to execute the ideas started by the lyricists and composers. It took gifted singers to express the songs, for the music to become endearing and long-lasting. It also took talented scriptwriters and much imagination to create situations that would warrant many of these songs. In short, hundreds of creative people collaborated thousands of times to produce the unforgettable music we still cherish.

Cinema was quite often a mirror to the world we lived in. As such, many film situations were drawn from real life, and songs were outfitted for them. Sadly, those situations have almost disappeared from today's films, revealing a growing disconnect between cinema and society. Consider: we still celebrate Raksha Bandhan, don't we? But where are the Raksha Bandhan songs? We still light lamps at Diwali, ride boats, take planes, get married, feel cheated by fate, and expect babies. There were songs for each of these situations, but you'll really have to search hard to find them in today's features. Genres like qawwalis and loris, gone. Poetic formats like ghazals and rubais, gone.

Gone, just like someone we loved intensely. And we can't do anything to get them back. But whether it is people or songs, no one can restrain us from thinking about them. No one can stop us from dreaming about them.

Speaking of dreams brings up a Sahir Ludhianvi thought:

Tujhe apna naheen sakta magar itna bhi kya kam hai
Ke kuchh ghadiyaan tere khwaabon mein kho kar jee liya maine
(From the song *Muhabbat tark ki maine*/ *Do Raha*, 1952)

Clearly, the man is counting his blessings. With thoughts like these, you wonder if such 20th-century people were any less than wise men like Gautam Buddha from the distant past.

Now for that taxi ride.

A Young Man Listening to Old Hindi Film Songs

About a year ago, during an hour-long Uber ride, I was pleasantly surprised to hear old Hindi film songs coming from the car's stereo. *Jaane na nazar, pehchaane jigar* from *Aah* (1953) was followed by *Ye raaten ye mausam nadi ka kinaara* from *Dilli Ka Thug* (1958). More romantic ditties from the 1940s, '50s and '60s followed.

I soon realised we were not listening to the radio because no overexcited announcer was introducing the songs. Hence, I asked myself: if the radio was not playing, surely the playlist belonged to the driver? It did. That's good, but what surprised me was that the driver could not have been more than 30 years old, meaning he was born long after the golden era of Hindi film music had ended. So I asked him why he was not listening to contemporary songs.

"Sunta hoon, sir, lekin kabhi-kabhi. Puraane gaane zyaada sunta hoon."
"*Magar puraane kyoon?*"
"*Naye gaanon mein meaning naheen hai.*"

Meaning naheen hai. Young people in their twenties and thirties often tell us that old songs have lasting value because they have meaning in them. Perhaps that is also why teenagers on television talent shows so often sing songs composed before they were born, and even before their parents were born. It is common to hear from people in their 30s and 40s that such music can be heard repeatedly without losing its charm. I suspect you may have had similar experiences yourself—not necessarily with taxi drivers, but perhaps with other young people.

So what exactly is this "meaning" that people speak of? Let's examine the three main components of a Hindi film song: vocals, tunes, and lyrics.

We know that the vocals are "the front office" of songs, and they are important because they add valuable listenability to lyrics and tunes. The singer is the most immediate human presence in the music, the one

carrying the emotions, phrasing, and performance. That's why most people worldwide can identify a singer first, and only after that the composer and the songwriter. The singer's feelings—what we in India call *bhaav*—make the poetry come alive and infuse it with meaning. It's another matter that not every singer can convey *bhaav* through their voice. A technically perfect voice is no guarantee of emotional depth, just as an untrained voice can sometimes surprise us with extraordinary emotion.

The essential tune and the musical instruments also contribute meaning to songs. The choice of instruments and who plays them—in conjunction with which point of the song and for how long they are played—can dramatically alter our mood. It needed Pandit Ram Narain to make his sarangi wail to accompany Manna Dey's pathos in *Tum bin jeevan kaisa jeevan* (*Bawarchi*, 1972), and it took maestro Goody Servai to play his accordion so artfully that we would want to accompany Rafi in *Baar baar dekho, hazaar baar dekho* (*China Town*, 1962). Musicians like these consistently raised the bar, becoming the gold standard in their art and lending meaning to a song.

But the greatest responsibility—and reward—of meaning belongs to the lyrics, because words are what most people understand most directly. As an example, the words "I love you" or "I hate you", even if just spoken, can offer more meaning to a listener than any instrument or voice can manage without words. As such, words that make sense to the listener and touch him translate into meaning. Lyrics written unimaginatively or just to fill the music notes waste the opportunity.

In sum, "meaning" in the context of a song is the product of collaboration between lyrics, tunes, voices and orchestration, with lyrics holding the largest share. That said, let's now see how songs took birth.

How Songs Were Typically Built

In my interviews with many of the greats who contributed in the golden era, I learned that lyricists often laid the foundation upon which composers built their melodies. Interviews done by scores of other writers tell us the same thing. The first thing planned was the film's situation, for which were written the lyrics, then followed the essential tune, then the instruments that gave body to the tune, and finally the singer, who vocalized the lyrics with his art. In this way, as the song came into being, it kept acquiring layers of meaning.

In a few cases, when a filmmaker loved a poem written outside cinema, he created a situation for it. But as far as the song itself was concerned, the lyrics came first anyway.

So, the linear way was lyrics-tunes-instruments-singers. But it is also true that a few composers preferred to create a tune first and have the lyrics fitted into it afterwards. This is a top-down approach, which, for example, architects sometimes use when planning a building. A competent engineer can execute that approach well, and the same is true of a gifted poet: he can write well, both when left free to choose his own imagery and meter as also to fit imagery into any given meter. After all, what a top-down composer does is create a melody, which is nothing but a tune, say on a harmonium, piano, flute, or violin. In other words, a melody is just a sequence of notes that makes a tune. It is not a song yet, because a song consists of a melody to which are added lyrics, other instruments, a sense of harmony maybe, and a voice to deliver the lyrics. When a composer makes such an essential tune, he simultaneously thinks of the beat or meter that will go with such a tune[i]. He then conveys this meter to the lyricist via nonsense syllables like *la la la* or *da da da*, or then identifies the beats with the help of a musical instrument. The lyricist disregards the tune and focuses on the meter. Then he proceeds to write his poem with that meter in mind. No problem for the likes of Majrooh Sultanpuri and Rajinder Krishan; they could tailor a foundation that made such composers happy. That said, such top-down sequencing hardly argues in favour of the tune or singer conveying more meaning than the words. That share remains unchanged.

The Importance of Literature in the 20th Century

In the last century, literature—with films, which arrived and matured later—was a key route people took to understand society, beauty, politics, war, and romance. Consequently, poets and novelists were held in high esteem. A quick look at the titles of old films reminds us how often the hero himself was a poet: *Shahjehan* (1946) starring KL Saigal; *Shair* (1949) with Dev Anand; *Teen Batti Char Rasta* (1953) starring Karan Dewan; *Kavi* (1954) with Bharat Bhushan; *Mirza Ghalib* (1954) starring Bharat Bhushan; *Gateway of India* (1957) starring Bharat Bhushan; *Pyaasa* (1957), starring Guru Dutt; *Navrang* (1959) starring Mahipal; *Babar* (1960) with Sohan Kapila; *Lal Qila* (1960) with Kumar (Syed Hasan Ali); *Barsaat Ki Raat* (1960) with Bharat Bhushan; *Chhaya* (1961), with Sunil Dutt; *Naya Qanoon* (1965) with Bharat Bhushan, *Anupama* (1966) with Dharmendra, and *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) with Amitabh Bachchan. Had poets and poetry been downmarket, filmmakers would never have touched such stories, or then have Kaifi Azmi write *Heer Raanjha* (1970) entirely in verse.

Lyricists and poets painted vivid scenes of long roads walked, social challenges battled, or a sole shama still burning in the menacing night,

giving us the strength to stay optimistic in troubled times. We experienced imagery of quiet love and the joys of simple living, of outings by the beach or in parks, and of playful banter we call chhed-chhaad.

What Has Happened Since

We have come a long way from the last century. Literature and cinema don't sit at the centre of culture any more. They share that space with TV, gaming, and social media. So there are huge changes happening around us. But perhaps we can leave that to social scientists and look just at the situation concerning the music in our cinema.

Sweeping Changes

Consider the sweeping changes that have taken place in our soundtracks. Songs were once built around melody, with rhythm mostly keeping time. That suggests that music used to be aimed at our heart and mind, so that we could feel a *waah-waah* within us. Nowadays, songs are governed by beats, with melody taking a back seat. The focus has shifted to our feet and legs, so that we are compelled to dance, which is the key barometer of a song's success in current times. Further, things were not so visual in earlier times. Now, it is quite so; great visuals can influence us into believing an ordinary song is a beautiful one. But the reverse, i.e., a beautiful composition accompanied by poor visuals, can punish a song's destiny[ii].

Disappearances

Earlier generations enjoyed a natural balance between sad songs and happy ones. Today, sad songs are considered commercially risky. The last is an important point and needs some attention. Happiness and sorrow are the warp and weft of existence. They visit everyone, in different intensities and a variety of ways. In traditional societies, there was a time for contemplation and withdrawal. The belief was that when we heard a sad song, it allowed us to vent our feelings, which perhaps the songwriter could express better than we could. It also worked as a balm on us because we felt that someone else was also suffering, that we were not alone in our condition. Nowadays people have begun to hide their sorrows behind masks of false optimism. As such, while wedding songs are still made in huge numbers so that we dance to them at our own wedding functions, *bidaayi* geets, essentially sad because the family and friends of the bride have to send her away, have disappeared. Songs celebrated India's many festivals, but western influences have homogenized our cultural differences, enough to rob the essence of these festivals even from our real life. Of course, people went out for picnics, where they sang and danced. This was especially true for the beach, which

was featured in dozens of songs. At present, locales like the sun and sand are left for lesser mortals. Singing on cycles? Now that's really downmarket.

Think too of the hundreds of songs filmed 'background', meaning without the actors moving their lips; this was the director's way of either sending a message to the characters they were filmed on, or a reflection of the characters' thoughts. They have gone, only to re-emerge in a different avatar, with the character often lip-syncing only a part of the song, confusing us viewers. There used to be surrogate songs, too, in which the feelings felt by the main character were "transferred" to a junior actor; it was the latter who moved his lips. These could be sad thoughts (because of course one can't sing in public when deeply grieving) or even happy ones like falling in love, in which the characters were too shy to make a clear move yet; hence the director astutely let someone else express it for them indirectly. Such songs just do not exist these days. We once had many duets and trios; now the emphasis is on solos.

Consider too that one can hardly imagine a modern composer using a solo violin in the course of a song, as was done in *Keh do koi na kare yahaan pyaar* from *Goonj Uthi Shehnai* (1959), or *Kisi ne apna bana ke mujhko* from *Patita* (1953). Nor are we likely to hear a sarod used as memorably as in *Saranga teri yaad mein* from *Saranga* (1960) or the Lata version of *Mere naina saawan bhadon* from *Mehbooba* (1976). Acoustic sounds (for instance, of the sitar, flute, violin, accordion, sarod, shehnai, and sarangi) have almost completely disappeared from our recording studios, put out to pasture by composers utterly dependent on synthesised instruments.

In addition to all that, film situations allowed maestros to feature Senza Misura (singing without any rhythms) as in *Kisko khabar thi* (*Devdas*, 1955), or *A Cappella* (no instrumental backing at all) as in *Unhen qissa-e-gham jo likhne ko baitthe* (*Naya Qanoon*, 1965). These have disappeared.

How about qawwalis, mujras, lullabies, or bhajans? These genres are mostly a thing of the past. Ten or more songs in a film, like in *Dil Deke Dekho* (1959) or *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960)? No! Several sad songs in a film, like in *Anarkali* (1953) and *Dil Ek Mandir* (1963)? No way. Songs smell of sentimentality that sits at odds in a progress-driven society.

Other things have disappeared too, such as songs centred on children and childhood, inspirational and philosophical narratives, and the emphasis on family values. Most people may not consciously notice these changes, but somewhere deep down, they sense that today's music misses the bull's-eye much of the time.

And since today's music fails to connect with the heart, songs have

become distractions, if not liabilities. That offers a stark contrast to the films of the golden era, when an overwhelming majority of films were musicals. Unlike Hollywood, where a musical is treated as a specific genre—with less than 10 per cent of its films being musicals—Hindi cinema evolved differently. Songs were a feature across every genre, like comedy, tragedy, romance, historicals, mythologicals—you name it. In India, musicals were the norm; everyone sang across genres. That distinction captures the unique place music occupied in the Hindi films of yesteryear.

In truth, though, it is not only music that has suffered. Screenplays and stories have declined too, and as a result, great filmmakers have become rare. Bimal Roy, BR Chopra, Mehboob Khan, V Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, Vijay Anand, and Guru Dutt all cared deeply about strong stories and well-written screenplays. For them, these were *sine qua non*.

But the story of our films is not entirely one of decline. New strengths have emerged as well—most notably, in excellent cinematography, along with extraordinary advances in recording technology. You gain some, lose some.

The Voices-Tunes-Lyrics Scene Today

A vast majority of people feel that we have many excellent voices today, offering both technical brilliance and emotional depth. Among these, the talent in those below the age of 25 needs to be heard to be believed. The only issue is that there is not enough distinction between the vocalists of today. In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, we could instantly identify the singer. Today, it is much harder to tell, and much less enjoyable to hear. It's like the early 20th century, when Henry Ford was rolling out his successful car, the Model T. He would tell people, "You can have any colour, as long as it is black". So, just like vintage cars with no colour options, we have many good singers without much vocal originality.

As for tunes, creativity has declined noticeably, even though something worthwhile bobs up once in a while. Hours, days, and weeks fretting over a single tune are history, as composers now use computer tools to do much of their creative work.

But it is poetry that has declined most severely, robbing music of the meaning that once resonated across society. That is why, when people look for meaning in new songs, they are often disappointed.

In this context, see what Dilip Kumar said in 1995, when he was felicitated after receiving the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. The evening's host, Kabir Bedi, asked him what changes he had seen over the years.

"A decline in writing is the most obvious change," replied Dilip Kumar.

He was talking about lyrics, stories, scripts, everything. He knew. He had been around for half a century.

So, to sum up the Hindi film music situation, the current scene seems like this: voices have seen a slight drop. Compositions have experienced a medium drop. Lyrics? Big drop.

This is not entirely the fault of the current crop of writers. Society itself has walked away from the arts and moved towards commerce. Poets, in particular, have slipped far down the cultural totem pole. A society that doesn't reward great lyric writers can hardly provide fertile soil for them to survive, much less flourish. Because poets are not celebrated, we tend to get substandard meanings in the vast majority of songs. This is truer in the new millennium, with lyrics often ranging from the merely passable to the downright embarrassing. Amateur hour is on full display.

That brings to mind a couplet from *Amateur Hour*, a 1974 song by Sparks:

It's a lot like playing the violin
You cannot start off and be Yehudi Menuhin

The great violinist Yehudi Menuhin was rightfully used here as the standard of excellence.

The thing is, composing music and writing imaginatively requires practice, patience, and independent thought. Shailendra, Shakeel, Sahir, SD Burman, Naushad, and dozens of their contemporaries knew this. None became sensations overnight. But patience is in short supply today, so writers and music composers quickly manufacture work that is mediocre much of the time. When it fails, they blame society for lack of recognition and respect. Then why do it at all? Perhaps for the money and fame. Hence the amateur hour.

One would have imagined that as a society we were improving, and films being an integral part of our society would march in step. Look, for instance, at the explosion in the world of food; there are more choices today than ever before. Consider the exceptional attraction of modern-day cricket too. The fitness levels, the records, the visual excellence, all have raised the bar of the game. Medical technology? It wows us these days. Not so the music of our films, which not only doesn't reflect real society, but has also plummeted. This is ironic, since we have been making the highest number of films worldwide, year after year. It's a larger pool, after all, and finding merit from large numbers shouldn't be as hard as it has been.

END OF SAMPLE

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