

Negotiating a Newer Hybridity: Technology in Bollywood Film Songs

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This presentation studies some exemplary ways in which sophisticated audio processing and packaging technologies have been used in the hybrid aesthetic of Hindi film songs in the post-90s period, especially with regard to how such uses of technology correspond to post-liberalization narratives of national identity in India. Just as films have mediated post-colonial nation-building — often seeking to construct a coherent idea of national subjectivity vis-à-vis the tension-ridden dynamics of gender relations, or sectarian/religious and class/caste differences — film songs too can be located in terms of their strategies to narrativize and aestheticize the nation(-al subjects) in the face of these tensions. This narration of nation in films and their songs can be seen as becoming all the more urgent in the period of economic and media liberalization, broadly periodizable from the late 80s/early90s through the 2000s — the time of the rise of Hindu right and various controversies and contests in the public sphere regarding issues of culture, gender, sexuality, and religion (Kapur 1999). In this period, we do not just see an articulation of citizenship and nationality in terms of globalization or liberalization, but also a re-appropriation and commodification of folk cultures and regional identities, resulting in a hybridity that mediates and negotiates between constructed polarities like ‘folk/regional’ and ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘rural/traditional’ and ‘urban/modern’. This could be seen as resulting from the attempt of Hindi films to encompass a variety of sites to create a viable national narrative, addressing inequalities of economic and cultural access, yet foregrounding certain locations and subjects (generally urban, upper/middle class) as central. Film songs, too, while updating themselves vis-à-vis globally disseminated genres like hip-hop and techno and using the latest studio technologies to record/process audio, have turned to folk or semi-classical genres and styles to fashion hybrid musical identities, remixed Punjabi folk music being an example.

Following Ella Shohat’s caveat that hybridity is not a singular phenomenon and has different modalities and political effects (Shohat 1992), I shall make an attempt to explore and delineate at least two different tendencies of

hybridity that can be discerned in the use of technology, which for convenience of nomenclature I shall designate as a hybridity of quotation and a hybridity of synthesis. The hybridity of quotation and stylistic separation tends to index or bracket musical styles, and can be seen as opposed to hybridity of continuity and stylistic synthesis that tends to deconstruct stylistic boundaries, subsuming ‘original’ or ‘source’ styles in the new. Of course, both tendencies can simultaneously interact in a single piece of film music within its encompassing structure, and each can contextually correspond to different semiotic strategies in the narration of the nation and national subjects. Technology itself is not just a neutral device, but bears cultural markers that are negotiated likewise — especially if its use is evident in the sonic product and not just in the process of recording or mastering.

A brief contextualization of hybridity in Hindi film music might be helpful here. Arnold’s analysis of eclecticism in Hindi film songs is a fruitful starting point. Arnold seeks to show how film composers have creatively united diverse intra- and inter-national styles into one that has pan-national appeal, an “integrated, eclectic music [...] with a new outlet for musical experimentation and syncretism” (Arnold 1988). However, in trying to focus on the logic that makes film songs work, Arnold fails to pay much attention to the politics of this mainstream aesthetic of hybridity, the tensions it addresses, and what it includes versus what it excludes. Manuel takes greater account of the politics of film music — locating it as a centralized, studio-bred art that at the same time appropriates and marginalizes regional or ‘folk’ styles (Manuel 1993), but he doesn’t provide any analysis of how this happens at the level of song structure and aesthetics. Of course, with the incorporation of sophisticated studio technologies, the studio aesthetician’s power increases, and recordings of instruments and singers can be sampled, processed, looped and layered to manipulate and (com)modify existing genres and styles far beyond the scope of older recording technologies; reducing the role of embedded artists and performers (leading film composer A.R. Rahman acknowledges this in a 2007 interview). At

this juncture, thus, it becomes all the more important to examine the politics of this newer hybrid aesthetic, and the subsequent parts of the paper do so by analyzing the songs from some prominent films of recent years that very consciously mediate the question of the nation within globalization.

Swades (2004), for example, tells the story of a young non-resident Indian in the US who gives up his lucrative career to go back to his native village and improve its lot, as such it is a national allegory of reconciliation between the cosmopolis and the periphery, as well as a progressivist film on social responsibility and development. The song *Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera* (This country of yours) occurs at a crucial juncture when the protagonist makes the decision to return. The song quotes a looped sample of a *shehnai* (a north Indian woodwind instrument) and a short clip of crowd noise over which the vocals are layered; the vocals bridge a film style with a loose western pop vocal style. The accompanying visual sequence contrasts his busy professional life in the US with short static scenes that he remembers of India. This is an interesting juxtaposition of the tendency toward stylistic quotation with that of synthesis (the sampled *shehnai* that indexes north Indian traditional music versus the vocals that elegantly bridge western and Indian styles), to build up the image of a rural India that is static and waiting for the metropolitan protagonist to make his decision; while he too is in emotional need of that India, he is clearly the agent who bridges the gap by going back and helping develop that backward land. Just as the frozen *shehnai* clip is the backdrop for the urbane, hybrid vocals, that static rural India is the backdrop for his metropolitan hybridity and agency.

A similar interaction of these tendencies of hybridity is evidenced in another film, *Rang de Basanti* (2006), another allegory about the urban middle class youth of the nation in the period of liberalization, who must rise above consumerism, self-immersion and a general apathy toward politics to a more responsible and active role within the nation. The film hinges on the energy and joie-de-vivre of this group, which it suggests needs to be harnessed so that the national resurgence that liberalization promises may truly happen. This vital energy is evoked vividly in the title song, which layers a processed sample of the *tumbi*, a Punjabi folk instrument traditionally used to accompany folk group dances, under a hybrid pop-rock beat. The *tumbi* is used to evoke a raw energy and rurality, but is processed such that its timbre is smoothed to a more urbane aesthetic that simultaneously harnesses and marginalizes the folk. Again, it is middle class protagonists who fashion their hybridity by selectively negotiating with the rural, the regional or the folk, but the latter is processed and appropriated without much agential quality of its own.

Other songs, in comparison, explore regional/folk styles more fully, using technology to extend their already-hybrid, non-static aesthetic, rather than reference them within an entirely detached register. The result is of course neither folk nor typically filmy — one notices how reverb and equalizers are used skillfully to blend riffs on a bass guitar with a *Qawwali* (Sufi devotional) vocal style in the song *Kehna Hi Kya* (from *Bombay*, 1995), or how synthesized sounds complement the elaborate vocal phrases typical of the north Indian courtesan-song genre in *Namak Ishq Ka* (*Omkara*, 2006). Of course, this does not unproblematically translate into a radical politics that can represent agency outside the centralized metropolitan context, which frames and enables Hindi films and their music. As Vasudevan shows in his analysis of *Bombay* (Vasudevan 2001), the film continues to work with stereotypes of the Muslim community (a community with an especially fraught position in the liberalizing nation) whose music it uses, though at its more complex moments it militates against such representations. The effortless layering of *Qawwali*-bass guitar certainly approaches the *Qawwali* style from the outside, but studio technology here tends not to bracket out and package the style as much as use it as a living element in textural and structural weave of the song.

In musical hybridity, the line between creative synthesis and appropriation is always thin and depends upon interpretive context. This presentation has yet concentrated on a more semiotic study of song texture and structure, to demonstrate how while technology may seem to merely add to the power of the metropolitan studio aesthetician, thus strengthening the centralizing and appropriating capacities of Hindi film music, it also evidences differential tendencies while building a hybrid aesthetic. Perhaps it is the tension between these tendencies that could make for the most fruitful encounter that metropolitan film music has with its others — destabilizing coherent and centralizing tendencies in narratives of the nation in favor of more tentative, open-ended ones.

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