

The Moving Image and Music in India

Ashok D. Ranade

THERE ARE WELCOME SIGNS today that film music in India has at last succeeded in engaging the attention of serious music-thinkers. An all-important advantage that has accrued could be simply stated. It has become possible to attempt an explanation for the abundance, the unevenness as well as the continued hold of film music without indulging in apologetics. The parent category of film music, i.e. popular music, is increasingly being understood as a legitimate socio-cultural product catering to definite and equally justifiable social needs. As a consequence, there is a greater appreciation of the need to evaluate the nature and role of film music not on the basis of aesthetic or musicological criteria alone. The protean personality of Indian film music is rightly seen as a case for fascinating cultural study.

On this background it follows as a corollary that film music can be approached from the angle of cultural musicology. The discipline suggests that certain features of Indian culture cannot but produce the film music it has, while some characteristics of Indian film music cannot but find its correlates in Indian culture. It is inevitable that such an approach employs a multiple-criteria method for appraising the concerned aspect as the Indian reality. What follows is therefore an exercise in analyzing a complex scene, inviting an interdisciplinary investigation into a phenomenon which has simultaneously aroused extreme responses.

I

It is essential to place film music in the larger Indian tradition of presenting moving images with music. To bring together music and what could be described as picture-play can hardly be viewed as a sudden and isolated achievement of the present century. Every culture is inclined to evolve modalities and formats to combine different media or products thereof in order to enrich, heighten and make more appealing the total value-experience available through media operations. In the present context the Indian experience clearly reveals the following five developmental phases leading to

the contemporary relationship of moving images and music.

1. A series of still pictures is devised to induce perception of movement in order to recreate an incident or incidents effectively. The series may or may not attempt narration and may become a part of an audio-visual presentation optionally.
2. Still pictures or drawings are moved manually or mechanically to the accompaniment of story and/or song,
3. Still images are arranged serially and *projected* sequentially to the accompaniment of narration, song, etc.
4. A further phase is reached when movement is filmed and synchronized during projection with the relevant acoustic material presented to form a unified whole—the latter is provided live.
5. Finally a point is reached when filmed movement and the relevant acoustic material are pre-shot and pre-recorded respectively and projected in synchronization.

Illustrative details pertaining to the five developmental phases would help in clarifying the concepts involved.

The first phase is best exemplified by Shubharai Mahārāj's (1750-1820) serially drawn picture-frames. Born in Malur in Madras State, Shubharai came to hold high posts under Tipu Sultan of Mysore before retiring to Sholapur in 1785. Adept in music, dance and literary studies the saintly Shubharai prepared sequential picture-frames of 6" × 14" or 6" × 18" size on paper-strips. Due to the manner they are drawn, the successive frames suggest progressive movement. In some frames he is seen to have taken a step further as far as visual verisimilitude is concerned. In such frames separately drawn human figures are subsequently pasted in the midst of natural settings, etc. drawn previously. To an extent this enabled him to achieve a relief effect. The themes are taken from the perennial sources *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata* and *Geeta Govinda*. In all probability the colours Shubharai employed—red, blue, yellow, etc.—were of herbal origin.

The second phase is easily understood by a reference to the numerous traditions prevailing in India in various regions. *Yamapat*, *Pabuji-kā-pādh*, *Jādu Patua*, *Chitrakathi* continuities can be mentioned in this respect. On account of their essential similarities a brief description of any single format can be useful.

The *Chitrakathis* of Mahārāshtra are professional story-tellers—*kathi* who employ pictures, i.e. *chitra*, for their narration. They are described in as early a work as *Mānasollāsa* of king Someshwar (1131 A.D.). These story-tellers form a separate caste and it is incumbent on every caste-member to keep one set of the pictures at home though they are allowed to prepare and sell such sets to outsiders.

The folk-style picturizations of mythological stories are in colour and are often strung together. Each individual picture is used for the musico-narrative presentation. The person who handles the picture set according to the requirements of the presentation employs a peacock feather as a pointer to ensure that the attention of the audience is focused on the relevant details of the picture. Two other accompanists (on *dholki* and *ektārī*) participate in the narration, verse-recitation, some singing and some dramatized dialogue added at places. In its entirety the narration is stylized but improvised to a great extent.

The third phase became possible due to an imaginative use of the popularly known device of projecting and magnifying a picture, namely the magic lantern. One of the more documented efforts was of Mādhavrāo Patwardhan, a resident of Kalyān near Bombay. In the 1890s Patwardhan, following in the footsteps of one Mr Pitale, started making picture-slides and by 1894 he had perfected a technique of using multiple and simultaneous sources of slide-projection to present a picturized story. In his presentations three magic-lanterns were used. Two of them projected slides that depicted the main action and the third added background scenes such as forests, palaces, etc. With these 'movies' the Patwardhan family toured all over Mahārāshtra and Gujarāt and attracted full houses for their shows. The producer-exhibitor had a collection of about a thousand picture slides and the repertoire consisted of many mythological stories. A written running commentary added to dialogues delivered, and songs sung 'live' completed the development of the unique format ponderously called *shambarik kharolika*, meaning magic lantern in Sanskrit. The shows proved a great success till 1910.

As is well known, during the silent-movie phase live music often accompanied the screening, constituting the fourth developmental phase. The 'talkie' presents the final phase in the continued association of moving image and music in India. Live music conducted by S. Seymour during screenings in Bombay (1896) or Devki Bose's direction of live sound effects for silent productions of the British Dominion Film Company in the mid-1920s in Calcutta are instances of the fourth phase. The final phase was initiated by the 1931 *Alāmara*—the first Indian talkie.

Some important generalizations follow from tracing the moving image-music relationship as outlined so far:

a. The movement of the image becomes less and less virtual as one shifts to successive phases. The earlier the phase the greater the reliance on depicting a movement through inter-image non-visual

happenings than conveying it through movements of the images themselves.

b. To the extent image movement continues to be virtual the live component (whether in music or narration) plays a more significant role. In fact the lack of actual image movement is compensated by the movement of sound. In other words there seems to be an attempted substitution of senses at the experiential level.

c. Apart from the inter-sensory substitution referred to, music operates to accentuate a specific quality detected in all communicative activity, that of continuity. As continuity of image movement becomes available through other channels, music associated with the moving image takes up a qualitatively different function—that of reinforcing the content of the images or adding to the desired emphases.

d. It is contended that the moving image—music interrelationship stabilized certain patterns of interaction in the pre-talkie stage. These had far-reaching consequences for the later history of Indian film culture. These patterns were the basic formulae elaborated upon and retained their core-validity till they continued to respond to real socio-cultural needs.

In a brief but specific application of the generalizations arrived at, it can be said that till the point the images could register only a virtual movement music was more or less equated with uninterrupted sound-projection. To the extent the movement of the images became 'real', music also became 'real' music—melody being basically a continuity. It is when the images started to move as well as talk that music could become music, i.e. an autonomous and parallel structure within a framework.

II

If the two major components of filmic reality are image and movement the musical counterparts are sound and silence. While dealing with film music it is therefore necessary to examine the nature and role of both sound and silence in the total musical behaviour of any particular culture. Such a reference to fundamental concepts of the stature of sound and silence is of course to plunge into musicological depths.

The Indian musicological position in this respect can be briefly stated as follows:

1. *Nishshabdātā*, which is the closest terminological equivalent to 'silence', has been allotted a very positive rôle in Indian musical-grammatical tradition. It is employed to carry out *kriyā* (literally

'process'), an important feature of the ten characteristics of *tāla* (the well-known rhythmic principle of Indian art music considered as a whole). Hence it becomes obvious that silence is not to be treated as mere absence of sound. In fact four kinds of silent processes are prescribed for use during rhythmic operations.

2. However, it is interesting to note that the usually perceptive compiler of the ancient Indian thesaurus—*Amarakosha*—does not list words for silence though four verses are devoted to cataloguing variations on the theme of sound. On the other hand Indian music pays considerable attention to the principle of sound—though under different headings. For example, the following terms are noted for their direct relationship to the concept of sound in its various connotations:

<i>dhvani</i>	roughly translatable as acoustic activity		
<i>dhvanigunabheda</i>	"	"	" different qualities of acoustic activity.
<i>dhvanibheda</i>	"	"	" different categories of sound
<i>nāda</i>	"	"	" musical sound
<i>nādadvaividhyam</i>	"	"	" two types of musical sound
<i>nādapradhānyam</i>	"	"	" primacy of musical sound
<i>nādabheda</i>	"	"	" categories of musical sound

It is symptomatic that the former term with its wider connotation is employed to designate a very important literary theory based on the principle of suggestivity—the *dhvanisiddhānta* of Ānandavardhana. In other words, the term *nāda* is more closely aligned with music-thinking and *dhvani* with the non-musical areas which however continue to be associated with value-experience.

3. Whether one takes an analytical look at the active and passive vocabularies of Indian music-thinkers or whether one goes into a conceptual analysis of musicological terminology, the primacy of voice over other varieties of sound (and hence of vocal music over instrumental music) is revealed. This is the reason why so fundamental a term as *sangeet*, which literally means the complete song, is traditionally allowed to expand so as to include instrumental and dance expression in its connotation.

4. It is easy to follow that on account of the overall importance of the sung and the song, one specific quality, that of continuity in projection of stimuli, acquired special significance. Further, it is to be remembered that music is only one of the many oral traditions in

India. It is natural that all the oral traditions within a particular culture interact. These processes have taken place in India. As a result it has become relevant to be aware of the changing fortunes of contemporary oral traditions while examining the film music of a particular period. Needless to add that this is not an easy task because the very essence of oral traditions denies the investigator easy availability of documentary evidence.

III

It needs to be stressed that changes in the compulsions that influenced the moving image-music association in India are not regarded with adequate seriousness. As a result it has been assumed that 'music' was employed to achieve effects that are intended to be musical. This has hardly been the case. Film culture in India reached various phases of development rather speedily in a short span of about three-score years. Music in India on the other hand had a longer and heavier tradition and hence it changed but at its own pace. In other words, to unravel the mysteries of many-sided changes in Indian film music it is advisable to keep an eye on the individual dynamics followed by the cinematic art and the musical arts. Once this logic is properly grasped it will become impossible to make simplistic statements such as: 'Indian films always had/have abundant music in them'. Or, 'Indian film music can be easily equated with a multiplicity of songs in them'.

In other words a subtler periodization based on an alert observation of the pace of change in Indian music seems to be essential. If an overview of the cultural dynamics is taken it is generally observed that music tends to change the least and last. This is reflected in the meandering progress of Indian film music. When properly included in the analytical apparatus the feature is surely to prove helpful in explaining some aspects of Indian film music. The following observations are to be kept in mind in this respect:

1. All the three major centres, i.e. Pune, Calcutta, Bombay, have been strong seats of art-music traditions and hence (till Bombay became truly metropolitan during the 50s) the pan-Indian approach was equated with art-music.
2. The producer, the music director, the 'star' and the playback singer were products of or responses to a situation in which Indian films were making a determined bid to become a big industry rather than continuing in the 'art' format.
3. To put it briefly, musical formulations passed through various stages before they could become 'film songs' as understood today.

Film song had not been a song throughout its career. It was in turn rhythmic prose, recitation-mould, *pad* (i.e., an elaborated musical and poetic idea) and 'classical' short composition prior to becoming 'song'.

IV

A great deal of the discussion on Indian film music errs in conceiving it as a monolithic entity mainly because of an obsessive interest in Hindi films. It is hardly justifiable to equate Hindi film music with the Indian film music. Apart from being a gross simplification of the situation it also runs contrary to evidence.

Firstly (as Dharap's annual volumes clearly bear out), in the totality of the Indian cinematic output Hindi films come to about 30 per cent.

More importantly, examined quality-wise it is the non-Hindi films that have made an impact. Whether in terms of international recognition or with reference to the critical acclaim received, these films have won acceptance for successfully establishing Indian identity. Under the circumstances it is unthinkable to speak about Indian film music unless regional achievements are taken into account.

In this context three supporting arguments also need to be noted:

- a. At least till the 1940s music composers had not become free-floating entities in the sense that they were on the regular staff of film-producing institutions. This manner of employment generally meant that the composers selected had regional roots. The early organizational pattern of film companies was a family-house pattern with the owner assuming a patriarchal status. This too had a bearing on the strong regional bias.
- b. Both the important initial centres, i.e. Pune and Calcutta, were also seats of the Marāthi and Bengali cultures respectively till the 1940s. As both Mahārāshtra and Bengal had a strong art-music tradition as well as traditions of music peculiar to them (such as Marāthi stage music and *Rabindrasangeet*), film music emanating from these centres was permeated with regional flavours. It is obvious that unless the regional spirit is noted the nature of the film music involved cannot be fathomed.
- c. Even after the enveloping advent of 'commercial' Hindi films, music composers such as Vasant Desāi, S.D. Burman and Salil Choudhury could make significant contributions because they introduced music with a regional stamp into an otherwise faceless film profile. On some occasions composers with pronounced

region-based melodic loyalties continued to work both in Hindi and non-Hindi films—often using the same or similar tunes with success. Music-wise, it is to be admitted that the regional flavours created the main or active vocabulary of music in Hindi films.

d. A very important manifestation of the regional compulsion is films that are broadly classified as art-films. These are mostly very deliberately and firmly localized. The locale, chosen carefully and strictly adhered to, allows the effort to be more logical. Apart from all other advantages regionality enables the film to follow a less-frequented path—in itself a gain if one reckons with the immense productivity of the Indian film industry. This is obviously reflected in music.

V

Lastly, a very influential shaping force that moulded Indian film music has been provided by the pulls exerted by the target audiences. The target audiences were different for the different developmental phases and these were determined by interaction of varied forces. However in general there have been in operation three types of pulls, the regional, the pan-Indian and the metropolitan. The thesis is that the type of music envisaged and employed for a particular film was governed also by the pull or force in operation.

a. The regional pulls not only meant use of regional languages but also a marked preference for regional folk music. Contrary to expectations and irrespective of the seat of origin, the early and initial attempts were not regional, which fact influenced the content, the handling as well as the music concerned. The recognition of the regional pull makes a late entry on the film scene. As the entire country is covered by two systems of art-music—*Hindustāni* and *Carnātic*—the regional pulls had to opt for specific folk musics to maintain their separate identities. It is also necessary to remember that the all-consuming Hindi commercials have always relied on regional musical contributions via region-rooted music directors, as explained earlier. Regional films were therefore forced to identify more closely with folk music of the respective areas.

b. The pan-Indian pull was recognized by Indian films from the initial stages. This was the reason for their early switch-over to Hindi, mythological content and music—three elements which could *prima facie* be expected to carry filmic appeal across regional boundaries. The pan-Indian pull also accounts for the fact that art-music traditions of the country appear more in these films than in regional films.

c. The metropolitan pull is essentially associated with art-films. The regional element comes into prominence again but the target audience being chiefly based in urban areas, subtitles and other bridge-devices come into operation. Very often a not-too-localized Hindi or similar music finds a place. On occasions the folk in music is confined to musical phrasing and the language and other elements remain pan-Indian, perhaps by intention. Under such circumstances it is the middle-class city-dweller's nostalgia for the rural that exerts influence.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages it has been argued that Indian film music cannot be appraised properly unless five types of interrelationships are considered. These interrelationships were: between moving image and music, roles assigned to sound and silence vis-a-vis music and literature, changing compulsions with reference to cinematic changes and musical changes, regional contributions to the Indian filmic identity, regional, pan-Indian, metropolitan pulls acting on film-makers. Cultural musicology being the discipline that offers relevant criteria for evaluating Indian film music, the norms emerging from the discussion of the interrelationships prove to be two-ended. On the one hand they are related to musical features while the other end leads to cultural characteristics. Even though these and other ideas can benefit from more elaboration it should become clear that the salient features of Indian film music can only be explained with the aid of the wider framework they provide. It is this framework that establishes the link between continuity as a value, vocal expression as the primary expressive mould, and the song as the end-result. The framework also explains how the pervasive oral tradition and resourceful use of prosodic and prose moulds led to an abundance of non-song songs. The hold of music and the pan-Indian attitude easily indicate the inherent relationship they have with the need of the film industry to ignore the inter-regional boundaries. The separate and more or less close alliances of commercial Hindi films and art-films with art-music and folk musical idioms respectively also appear in a better light when the wider perspective is given its due weightage. In other words, the entire scene appears to be less chaotic and the element of arbitrariness is reduced.