

UNDERSTANDING RAILWAYS THROUGH POLITICS AND BOLLYWOOD SONGS

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Abstract

Indian Railways in their 167 years of operations have undergone a transition in perceptions in the minds of people and have emerged as an important economic instrument in the post-Independence era. On the other hand, Bollywood, a term often associated with popular Hindi cinema has used Indian railways as part of narrative and mise-en-scene. The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection of the narrative of some popular Bollywood songs which have used Indian railways as a backdrop to suggest socio-economic inferences and also examine the link between pop culture and the representation of Indian railways in Hindi songs

Keywords: India, railways, Bollywood, films, politics, songs

Introduction

Railways in India are mostly related to budget and the aspirations of people reflected in the budget. But much more than the economic returns that the railways provide to the country, railways has over the years gained an important place in the creative domain. It has not only been symbolic of the phases of life and a romantic medium reuniting the lovers, but it has also had a predominant role in shaping the domestic politics of India as well, right from the time of Independence. The introduction of railways symbolized imperial dominance and the rise of industrial revolution.

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The Indian nationalist leader's initial response to the introduction of railways was mixed. According to G.V Joshi, the expansion of railways has been highly detrimental to varied growth and industrial activities. Though he is also sceptical of the possible benefits of this new colonial instrument since the government did not undertake the construction of the railway line directly rather appointed eight private companies under the guarantee system to build it on behalf of the government. From the evolutionary perspective of railways and the subsequent development, it seems to a case of interesting insights (Joshi 1884).

Gandhi, who termed railways as a development moving at devil's pace in his publication 'Hind Swaraj', eventually travelled throughout India in the third class of Indian Railways to understand the plight of a common man (Chandra 2006). The perception of the railways (initially as an evil omen) changes as India enters the phase of Independence which came at a cost of the nation's division into two halves. This Partition which is considered to be the biggest immigration between and to the newly built borders, India and Pakistan, also saw stories of bloodshed spattered across platforms and in the carriages. The trains and stations become 'dumbwaiters of partition' (Chatterjee, 2017).

Railways have over the years gained an important place in the creative domain, symbolising the phases of life and becoming a romantic medium to reunite the lovers, it has had a predominant role in shaping the domestic politics of our country as well, right from the time of independence. In days leading to the independence struggle, railways were often targeted by the nationalists to instil fear in the minds of the British while also expressing their displeasure at the systematic exploitation of the resources through railways.

There is one more reason why Indian Railways should be re-imagined. The relation between railways and celluloid is as old as the medium itself. One of the first Lumiere brother films was about 'Train arriving at a station'. Ever since then, films have time and again been part of the film narrative. In fact, during the Victorian era, audiences in the cinema watched films inside a moving coach, which altered how film and rail technologies intervened in everyday life by marrying two ordinary spaces in one architectural site. Inside the space, which transformed movement and vision, spectators simultaneously travelled through both imagined and actual landscapes (Harrison, 2014). The celluloid train journey is the perfect setting for intrigue, drama, mystery, and even a side of murder. Its corridors and roof provide ample opportunity for edge-

of-the-seat action. And the train song is almost a genre unto itself, with the locomotive serving as a veritable orchestra with its piercing toots and the *chuk-chuk* of its wheels (Kohli, 2016).

But the role of railways cannot be solely attributed to the point of independence. Railways, post-independence also contributed towards the changing perspectives and priorities of the first independent government. A greater portrayal of the death stories can be seen in *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (Talwar 2001), which is largely based on the plight of the people migrating to another side of the border. A stampede situation arises after the announcement of Partition, with the Sikhs and Muslims lynching their counterparts in the trains fuelling riots.

If one were to introspect the overall impact of Partition on railways as a medium of transportation, there stands a greater irony to the fact that the very people who condemned railways, were the sole dependents on railways.

The Historical Journey of Railways from Steam to Independence

The railways made their humble beginning in India technically in 1836, though numerous sources start the history of railways from 1853. What distinguishes the period before 1853 and the period after 1853 is the presence of steam locomotive in the latter part of 1853, while the period before 1853 was marked by the harness of wind energy and animal power for hauling trains. Another challenge faced was with regards to the apprehension by the local people who termed the railways as *Lokhandi Rakshas* or the iron demon (Wolmar 2017). The onset of the steam era was representative of the age of modernisation (Livingstone 1995). The farmers were concerned about proper irrigation of their fields, while the native population feared incursion of Western culture with the expansion of railways. To devout Hindus, “*the very nature of railway, demanding punctuality and exactitude, and breaking down caste, was alien*” (Wolmar 2017). The railways were looked upon as an instrument of civilizing the native population.

Analysis of Select Hindi Songs

Railways have played an important role in films, through songs and movies, each portraying social understanding of the railways through documentaries such as *Monsoon Railways* (2004) which narrates the life of the railway employees and the work hazards faced

in their line of duty during the monsoon season in Bengal and parts of the North-East while facing external threats from extremists in the Northeast during the then insurgency movement by ULFA terrorists. But a more philosophical understanding can be obtained through the songs across themes executed in the films using railways in the background. Some of the songs have been discussed below

Aradhana (1969)

Shot in the backdrop of Darjeeling, the song 'Mere sapano ki raani' is from the film *Aradhana* (1969) directed by Shakti Samant. *Aradhana* (worship) is a romantic drama film about an unwed mother and her sacrifices, her journey to provide legitimacy to her love child. The first half of the film is predominantly shot in Darjeeling and it tries to capture the splendid beauty of the Himalayan range on the one hand and the naivety of the people from the region on the other. Besides the fact that Darjeeling has been a popular tourist destination, by the end of the 19th century, Darjeeling became an epicentre of the literary, artistic, political and cultural event as many significant Gurkhas began to rise and gather in Darjeeling hills (Roy, 2012). Picturised on popular Bollywood film stars Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore song 'Mere sapano ki rani kab aayegi tu' captures the initial attraction between both the protagonists and establishes their fascination towards each other. The male protagonist of the film is in the jeep with his friend driving parallel to the train in which his lady love is travelling. The female lead in the 'toy train' reading English language book written by Alistar Mclean reflects her educational background, reading taste and gender dynamics of that time since women from progressive families were allowed to study in English medium. It also establishes the co-existence of roadways and railways in the mountain/hill regions of Darjeeling, with the actor moving alongside the train singing a romantic song, persuading her when will she come?

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is often considered a reminiscence of the colonial era, a popular tourist ride and a symbol of an engineering marvel. Here, Darjeeling epitomizes romance and the coming of age of both, the new India and the women. A journey of a modern woman and the setting of new railway networks making it practically the lifeline of India. This is also one of the early songs where this particular train journey has been established as more of a heritage ride rather than a regular trip which also reflects the vulnerability of the train and the protagonist in terms of fragility and

tenacity. The Mountain Railways of India represent different phases of development in high mountain areas.

Dost – 1974

‘Gaadi bula rahi hai, siti bajaa rahi hai...’ is a song, sung by Kishore Kumar, composed by Laxmikant-Pyarelal and the lyrics written by Anand Bakshi, from the film *Dost* (1974). The literal meaning of the song means that that train is blowing the whistle and calling people to tell that life is like the journey of a train and it keeps moving on. The song begins with the train entering a tunnel and taking a turn on a bridge indicating the birth of life and how since birth one goes through various turns.

Picturized on actor Dharmendra, it is shot on Shimla-Kalka railway line. The lyrics of the song draw parallel with the journey of train and life suggesting how one needs to work at the whistle of life and listen to the call of duty. Train, similar to life, is in continuous movement and the motif of whistle suggest steaming off difficult times in life. It is human nature to adapt to newer challenges and come out to the brighter side of life which as the visuals of the songs suggest is on the other side of the tunnel —the other world.

The song is placed as part of the opening credit scroll of the film when the protagonist (Dharmendra) is returning to his caretaker who has raised and nurtured him only to realise he is no more and thus the juxtaposition of life with the moving train in arduous terrain seems only apt. As put forth in the song, the purpose of life is to go beyond the physical and it can be achieved by staying on track and staying focused. The narrow passages/spaces depict the reach of the railways in the mountain. The curvaceous path the train takes represents the turning point in the protagonist life after which there is no looking back and he chooses to move forward in life leaving the empty tracks of life far behind.

Kitaab -1977

Kitaab is a 1977 Hindi film written and directed by Gulzar. The film stars Uttam Kumar, Vidya Sinha, Shreeram Lagoo, Keshto Mukherjee and Asit Sen. The film was based on the Bengali story “Pathik” by Samaresh Basu. The song ‘Dhanno ki aankhon mein hai raat ka surma aur chaand ka chumma’ is sung by music director R.D. Burman. The focus of the lyrics and visuals of the song is on a steam engine passenger train that releases black smoke with every whistle.

The song depicts rural landscape with a shot of the reflection of the train in the water body suggesting the arrival of the train in most interior parts of the country.

The night shot illustrating train journey during the night is inspired by the 1936 documentary film *Night Mail* produced by General Post Office of London and directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright. The lyrics suggest a romantic association of the night train yearning to travel in the wilderness to kiss the moon. Here the name 'Dhanno' can be interpreted as the name of the train and also the beloved whom the train driver has left behind and is waiting for him to come back. Here the song makes constant association of train with a beloved separated from the dear one as s/he is travelling to a distant land. The echo effect of train and whistle symbolises alertness for unknown territory.

Baton Baton Mein (1979)

'*Suniye Kahiye baton mein pyar ho jayega*' is from Basu Chatterjee's film *Baton Baton Mein*. *Suniye Kahiye* is a background track picturized on Tony (Amol Palekar) and Nancy (Tina Munim) is sung by Asha Bhosle and Kishore Kumar while the characters are commuting in the local train which is the lifeline of Mumbai. The film is true to the spirit of Basu Chatterjee's signature of depicting the common man's sensibilities, middle class and urban settings. Both the protagonist share the commute time together, have an everyday conversation and nuanced emotions that bring them close to each other. Mumbai local trains witness numerous stories of real people falling in and apart during their work travel. The song symbolises the subtle ways in which the local trains become the meeting point for the protagonists. The characters are soaked in reality with simple movements and steady progression of their relationship which is similar to the history of Mumbai locals which has its unique identity. Typical to Basu Chatterjee's style of film-making, the heroes are travelling to work in a local transport, they discuss everyday concerns and celebrate the mundaneness, avoiding any grandiose just because the medium has been conventionally depicting so. Simple hummable lyrics depict the large heart of daily commuters which includes various shades of all the colours of life.

Tony (Amol Palekar) and Nancy (Tina Munim) are courting each other and the background song filmed inside a local train personifies Mumbai as a fast-paced city as local suburban train allows commuters to remove the barrier in terms of caste/class because everyone travels

in a local train. The railways are looked upon as a transport where new bonds are formed during the long journeys.

The Burning Train (1980)

Momentary connection symbolises life and temporality of relationship, the story of *Rajdhani Express* much-acclaimed first AC train which introduced the concept of chair car, superfast express with the new corridor between Mumbai and Delhi. Sung on-screen by an ensemble of both popular and lesser-known artists, this song '*Pal do pal ka saath hamara, pal do pal ke yaarane hai*' from the film *The Burning Train* which symbolise the idea of India and unity in diversity with passengers from diverse background, culture and religion coming together to reach to a common destination. The train also symbolises the emerging middle class.

Vidhata (1982)

'*Haathon ki channid lakiron ka*' is onscreen sung by two stalwarts of Bollywood Dilip Kumar and Shammi Kapoor. Unlike the other songs discussed in this paper, this song focuses on a goods train rather than a passenger train. The dilemma also symbolises the disillusionment of new India after opting for industrialisation and moving away from the Nehruvian idea of India. This song is more like a conversation between two long-time friends who are steam engine drivers and are contemplating their journey so far, their association with the train, heartburn they experienced and how through their travel they have learned to toughen up. It draws more human connection and choices/beliefs of whether one is predestined or creates one.

Conclusion

The railways have assumed an important role beyond being an economic instrument. The railways have become an important part of the narrative, weaving around stories of not just the railway employees, but also the people and their experiences through the rush of life and effective employment of railways as a narrative device in films drawing relations between the struggles of life and the growing fantasies of people signifying important life lessons as seen in the movie *dost* of moving ahead irrespective of the challenges life throws at us. The railways have been important in breaking the stereotypes and boundaries between people created by the society

on the grounds of caste, creed, race, religion and colour by bringing people together in the course of the journey with the coaches and stations acting as venues of interaction amongst people of different socio-economic backgrounds and with every passing year undergoing transition and redefining the way India travels. The songs therefore is not just representative of the railways as a transport, but also the interactions and the long-lasting impression that those journeys have left in the minds of the people as both passengers and viewers.

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