
Bollywood Dancing: Dance in Hindi films in India

Arundhathi Subramaniam, poet and critic, reflects on the importance of film dance in Indian popular culture

One may wince at its incongruities, scoff at its sense of overblown fantasy, roll one's eyes heavenward at its bump-and-grind antics. But the fact remains that Indian film dance, now better known as Bollywood dance, is an integral part of India's collective consciousness.

And although like popular artforms, it is intended to reflect contemporary social values – including the vulgar, the superficial, and the ephemeral – it is truly remarkable how many film dances remain enshrined in the cultural memories of Indians.

Who can forget, for example, Hema Malini's legendary dance on glass smithereens in the film *Sholay*? One suspects that the boneless fluidity of Prabhudeva in *Muqabla*, Madhuri Dixit's vibrant sensuality in *Ek Do Teen*, Shahrukh Khan's spirited *Chhaiyya*, *Chhaiyya* atop a moving train, or Ashwariya Rai's ethereal dandiya number *Dhol baaje*, could well be counted among the golden moments of Hindi film dance in the future.

Strangely, despite its unabashedly hybrid identity that revels in cultural contaminations of all kinds, the rhetoric of purity continues to pervade popular film criticism. Many commentators continue to speak of an age when dance was cleaner, less vulgar, more original, less Westernised,

less manic, less robotic – always forgetting antiquity, as Voltaire reminded us long ago, is always full of eulogies of another more remote antiquity. Nostalgia, as always, is a great fictionaliser.

Thus, dance in Hindi cinema, like cinema itself, has had a colourful and variegated history, its journey shaped by capricious markets, serendipitous encounters, idiosyncratic forgeries and re-appropriations, individual talents and tastes. The absence of any comprehensive documentation on the subject does not make the matter any easier for anyone who chooses to investigate the area. Trends, therefore, are difficult to map, and new directions only fuzzily discernible.

Nonetheless, it would be impossible to discuss even the potential journeys and embryonic impulses without some sense of the changing context down decades.

Firstly, it is clear that the song-and-dance number is an integral part of Indian cinema that cannot be wished away. As film historian Rosie Thomas elucidates, Western critics and the Indian middle-class intelligentsia have long tended to evaluate Indian cinema according to the canons of European and Hollywood filmmaking and filmmaking practices that it has itself rejected. To wonder why Indian cinema cannot aspire to the realism of

a Western cinematic aesthetic, as many do, is, then, to miss the point.

Gradually over the decades the slow-paced languorous solo and duet were replaced increasingly by adrenaline-infused numbers – usually large ensemble pieces. Particularly with surge of action-oriented cinema from the mid-70s onwards, the mandatory lovelorn number was increasingly relegated to the background and every second or third song was, and continues to be, accompanied by fast-paced dances. Additionally the willing suspension of disbelief – always a vital requisite in Indian cinema – was liberally extended to allow lovers in rural India to carouse along the snow-kissed Alps and breakdance furiously along the sun-drenched beaches of Mauritius, before returning to their respective realities – all in the course of a single song.

A significant characteristic of Hindi film dance is its artistic syncretism – an ability to appropriate elements of diverse vocabularies and integrate them into quintessential film dance chutney. The result of such unabashed borrowing is rarely a heap of quotations, however. Indeed the end product is only deemed successful if it creatively integrates and transforms these elements into something that works within the parameters of

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cinematic and box-office acceptability.

Closely allied to its hybrid and syncretic nature, however, is its standardisation of the song-and-dance sequence – a long-term feature of Indian cinema. Thus the folk dance in Hindi cinema is, almost by definition, exotic and folksy, because regional features have to be ironed out to make it seem like it could be performed in almost any hamlet in the country. The essentialised 'jhatak matak' style, is now considered to epitomise the sexy gait of the archetypal Indian village damsel and may well have been re-appropriated by various folk dance traditions as well!

Since the 1950s choreographers like Uday Shankar, Gopi Krishna and those who trained under him, shaped the approach to dance in films. Dance in films at this time also introduced classically trained dancers, such as Vyjayanthimala, Padmini, Waheeda Rahman and Asha Parekh who gave a fillip to this choreographic strain.

In the post-independence era Western movement vocabularies permeated Indian cinema... the impact of the waltz, rumba, samba, jive, rock 'n roll, twist and cha-cha-cha were apparent. Since 1998 dance in Indian cinema continues to grow slicker, more glamorous and youth-oriented, reflective of an affluent consumerist post-liberal Indian life-style. The upsurge of bhangra-pop, dandiya-jazz, disco-kathak, even kalari-break dance combinations also reflect an ethos of conscious cultural hybridisation. The growth of the Indian middle class in an era of globalisation, the boom in international communication networks, and the growing markets in the diaspora are, no doubt, responsible for these changes – many of which are evident in Yash Chopra's *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), for instance, where the dance



routines seem to recreate the modern bourgeois urban aesthetic of the young and privileged.

Today there are, on an average, six to eight songs in each Hindi film, several of which are accompanied by frenzied dance routines. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* boasted of 14 songs, all of which were accompanied by dance sequences. Many lament the growing disjunction between the song-and-dance sequence and the film plot. With the impact of television and MTV in particular, the relative autonomy of this sequence has increased, and the

music-and-dance video is now launched well in advance of the film itself.

Moreover, song-and-dance has frequently been an aesthetic device to transport film lovers and viewers into dreamspace, undefined by socio-economic realities of time and space. It is possible here for a middle-class small-town heroine to metamorphose into jiving, disco-savvy, skimpily attired cosmopolitan young woman. It is equally possible for the young NRI (Non-resident-Indian) heroine to transform into wide-eyed village lass, performing a folk dance in the idyllic mustard fields of Punjab, with the fluid ease of a seasoned daughter of the soil.

The impact of the MTV dance video on Hindi cinema of the '90s has been

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Saroj Khan, Bollywood's leading choreographer, demonstrating her inimitable style. Photo: Vipul Sangoi www.raindesign.info

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much discussed in the media. Evidence of this is discernible in the emphasis on sleek and glossy dance sequences, fast cuts, special effects, hip designer apparel, slimmer bodies in the chorus lines, and of course, the choreography. Interestingly dance choreographers like Saroj Khan, Farah Khan and Shiamak Davar are familiar names to the general audiences in India today and have acquired celebrity status.

A new chapter in Hindi cinema and the cinema viewed by the Indian diaspora opened when Shiamak Davar, who trained at the Pineapple

School of Dance in New York and now runs hugely popular jazz ballet classes in Mumbai with branches in many other metropolitan cities, was invited to choreograph dance in mainstream movies. It only confirmed that a new phase in Hindi film dance has, indeed, opened. Davar lays emphasis on precision, coordination, and above all, fit and agile bodies.

Dance in Hindi films today remains, therefore, the irrepressibly parodic movement compound that it always was. Dynamic, richly diverse, and flagrantly inconsistent, it seems to

revel in defying every definition that one seeks to bestow upon it... Cultural meteorologists may keep predicting the apocalypse; purists may still dismiss it as mere running and dancing around trees. But, dance in Hindi cinema continues to cavort on its own whimsical path, blithely irreverent of dire predictions, and never failing to attract its mobs of enthralled viewers, as much today as ever before.

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