

# The Commercialisation and Commodification of Bollywood Music

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the evolution of Bollywood music. Shifts in consumer preferences and consequently commercialisation, the cultural impact of this shift and its larged commodification of Indian elements for mass consumption. The study analyses the changes in song structure and composition in Bollywood which is owed to westernisation of the film industry as well as consumer preferences. It also takes into account the origin of classical Indian compositions while providing context for general changes in Indian classical music over time- which is what Bollywood music stems from. Furthermore, it examines the commodification of songs due to the dilution of the industry and digitisation making music production easily accessible. It also explains the commercialisation of Bollywood music as a reaction- a response to consumer preferences as compared to an independent evolution caused by digitisation.

**Keywords:** Commercialisation, Commodification, Digitalisation, Bollywood music

## **1.0 Introduction**

Music is perhaps one of the most crucial, wonderful parts of being alive. It has evolved as life has- and different types of music have responded differently to change. Looking at how music has responded to commercialisation in particular, we see that music, since the advent of phonographs and gramophones, has focused on selling recorded music to the masses. Music ceased to be a community wide in the west (here, referring to Europe and areas around Europe like the United Kingdom) celebration by the late 19th century (Anonymous Publisher, section 6.2 ) This was, however, not true for India. Still heavily focused on classical music and performances, partly due to princely states' Maharajas' fondness for providing patronage to budding singers, which they'd indulge in only after seeing a live performance, they created a culture emphasising the importance of in-person performances (*CARNATIC MUSIC I Notes Origin and Development of Indian Music*). This also meant Indian music leapt almost directly from live performances to radio (observing the life journeys of several notable Indian classical vocalists- namely Ustaaad Faiyaz Khan, Omkar Nath Thakur, and so on (Harishchandra, vol. 3, pp. 190-200))which led it to develop differently. At its core, music was marketed and commodified differently due to differences in socioeconomic structures in India and the west. This led to different developments in both music cultures. Interestingly, though the evolution of consumer preferences in the west are notably different as compared to the evolution of consumer preferences in India, the results of both are nearly the same. In the west, live performances saw a decline in popularity as phonographs became commonplace in upper middle class households, soon evolving into gramophones. A gradual series of upgrades and enhancements in technology (vinyls, cassettes, etc.) culminated in music being played on the internet. With each upgrade in technology, people were less and less intrigued by live performances. This applies to Indian music as

well, where live performances reached the radio, and then films- playback singing was an extremely reputable career within the singing community. Soon enough, Indian music was available on the internet as well. The two journeys part ways at the last stage. Due to a general wave of globalisation, music tastes have also diversified (Krüger (ed.) and Moy (ed.)). With more and more Indians being drawn to a mix of western and Indian music cultures and song structures, Indian artists too, have evolved. This has been happening since the introduction of the culture of recording music as compared to performing live (a parallel of which can be observed in efforts to preserve Native American music (Cottrell pp. 3-25)) and due to a sudden boom and intermingling of cultures, Indian music has changed fundamentally to incorporate stylistic choices in songs that do not particularly reflect Indian musical ancestry. This can be reaffirmed through the fact that ‘gharanas’- groups of people, typically stemming from one family that teaches music, are near extinction (Harishchandra, vol. 3 pp. 100-105). It demarcates a general gentrification of Indian classical music in and of itself, but more worryingly still, it indicates an unwillingness to adhere to norms and rules that differentiate Indian classical music from the rest of the world. This is in stark contrast to western musicians still deriving some fundamental basic aspects of producing and composing music (timing and rhythm, notations, chords).

Indian music has evolved to be a response to the world, as compared to creation and composition in the old times. It is a response to a need to sell to consumers with increasingly polarised and diverse tastes (for which it is more profitable to appeal to generally somewhere in the middle of the spectrum as compared to one of the extremes) as well as a growing disconnect from “pure” Indian classical styles caused by globalisation.

This study will highlight historical transformations in Bollywood music- starting at the origin of Indian classical music and the way the changes in the Bollywood film industry have been reflected in Bollywood music, the impact of commercialisation on Bollywood music (especially due to the prevalence of recording culture in the digital age) and consequently, the commodification of music. It will also explore the cultural implications and audience reception of Bollywood music and the mass reaction to its evolution (as a result of a change in consumer preferences).

## 2.0 Literature Review

The music industry is primarily classified as a subcategory of the entertainment industry. Thus, it reflects any and all changes in the way consumers interact with the entertainment industry. Uptil now, the main changes have been identified as a shift over the last twenty years from consumer electronics (CE) to information technology (IT) as the most powerful sectoral force shaping how music and culture are mediated and experienced (Hesmondhalgh and Meier pp.1565-1570). Technology has evolved at a rapid pace in the last few decades, resulting in frequent and radical changes in the way people experience culture- in the way people experience entertainment. This has caused changes in the way people experience music. This can all be traced back to the ‘recording boom’ when the consumer experience of recorded music was consistently evolving due to something known as ‘mobile privatisation’. This, however, was before the Second World War. The consumer boom experienced by most of the world following the war allowed for the development of the ‘recording’ industry as we know it today. Interestingly, this led to the music industry being labelled an oligopoly by the 1990s, due to the sheer power over the industry a small number of record labels had (Samuel George et al. pp. 4632-440). It is this point in time one can argue music became truly commodified.

This new fanaticism related to recording and recorded music triumphed over an outnumbered consumer population's enthusiasm for live performances. This led to legal frenzies- copyrighting was in vogue (Hviid and Sanchez pp. 11-14). The copyright holder was the record label- so musicians were forced to consider the true value of their work before signing themselves over to any one label. As mentioned above, in this time period, it was a small group of record labels competing against each other. Thus, musicians made the most out of the economic rivalry, and sold to the highest bidder. It is here we see the first hints of true commercialisation seep into musicians' perspective of their own work (Hviid and Sanchez pp. 4-8).

So far, the research conducted implies that the modern music industry, which is heavily commercialised and music is commodified via the process of recording. However, this largely focuses on western music- and how it evolves after the war and in response to consumerism. It is a chart of questions proposed by consumers and answers provided by *western* musicians.

This is paralleled by Indian music, although for different reasons.

### 3.0 The Historical Transformations in Bollywood music

Indian music, whose final stage is modern day Bollywood music, has had a complex journey. The history of this type of music can be divided into three major parts, which can be subdivided into smaller periods of time. [10]

1. The Ancient Times (प्राचीन काल), older than 800 AD.
2. The Middle Ages (मध्यय काल), 800 AD to 1800 AD.
3. The Modern Period (आधुनिक काल), 1800 AD to now.

Though this study will focus on the later Middle Ages to the Modern Period, but one must look at periods before that to fully understand the nature of music in the later Middle Ages.

In the ancient times, music was highly spiritual- it was limited to a means of communication with God or, at the very least, the idea of a higher power. This is partly due to the simplicity of the system- there were only three notes, so the variation occurred largely in the words. Repetition of phrases, however, was not unusual- yet again, a result of religious origins. This kind of music was known as 'margi' (मार्गी) music. This died out fairly quickly- and was completely extinct by about 800 AD. This was due to the establishment of new notes, and the evolution of the Indian notation system. This led to composers considering not just at the purpose their music served, but its aural appeal as well.

The Middle Ages are divided into three periods in and of themselves- the second period of time within the Middle Age is considered the golden age of Indian music. Unfolding parallelly to the Renaissance, composers discovered music could be composed for human pleasure- not just as a means of serving god. Much like how painters flourished due to their newfound freedom and independence from the church, composers eagerly availed the patronage of Muslim rulers present in India at the time. They enjoyed great luxuries and pleasures in their court lives- and thus, many well known *raagas* today were composed during this period. ("The Gharana System of Teaching in Hindustani Music: A Critical Analysis - ProQuest")

Directly after this, India faced a period of prolonged colonisation. This led to the steady weakening of the culture of *gharanas*- and this caused musicians to pursue independent, isolated paths. This led to a plateau in the evolution of Indian music- not much progress, not much change.

However, as the nationalist sentiment spread during this period, classical music saw a massive reappearance. Many musicians sought it out as a way of connecting with their roots and protesting against colonialism. This is where we observe the most change Indian music has ever experienced- knowledge of

music is no longer reserved for the elite, or *nawabs*' and *maharajas*' favourites. Songs are simplified, lyrics are easy to understand- the objective is not to produce sweet sounding music for the ears of a select few, but rather to have the masses echo in chorus as the nation fights for independence. The foundation of the older style of bollywood music emerges.

Shortly after independence was achieved, the film industry was in full swing. So was the radio industry- and both of them were fully inseparable from Indian music. Though famous musicians still did perform for rulers of princely states, it is to be noted they now also entertained the masses via platforms like All India Radio, or performing as *playback singers* (a reputable job for renowned classical singers- if one sung well, film makers would seek them out to sing songs for films, and actors and actresses would lip sync to said songs) in films. (Guha pp. 32-33) Yet again, music is further simplified- songs sound similar due to the usage of common *taals* ( the Indian system of rhythm in music is starkly different from the western system; the number of beats in a bar aren't fixed, nor the sound each beat makes. Thus, every taal sounds unique- and varies further because of the tempo or timing). (Shrivastava 187–190: Three)

This, however, was prior to the introduction of western media to Indian audiences. Though western media did not significantly impact Indian media and audiences for a long time, with the evolution and the increased impact of the internet, Indian musicians in the modern periods have slowly adapted to the western system of rhythm. Though this is the most notable shift, we can observe westernisation in other parts of songs as well- inclusion of one or two lines of English in lyrics, simpler compositions melody wise, etc. Yet again, this can be linked to the evolution of the film industry (with more 'liberal' films being made, Indian films being viewed globally, the emigration from India to other countries leading to further evolution of Indian films, etc.) as well as the shift from radio to digital music. However, this is largely in response to a shift in consumer preferences- as the Indian youth evolves, so does the music.

#### **4.0 Impact of Commercialization on Bollywood music in the Digital age**

The Bollywood film industry in India has gradually carved out a niche for itself as one of the biggest film industries in the world, to the extent that it currently competes with the American film industry, vying for audience attention around the world. One of the chief reasons why Bollywood cinema has become crucial to the Indian way of living is the way it has come to permeate the daily life and culture of the Indian society. (Guha pp. 29-31)

Bollywood music is successful as it dotes on and presents the Indian lifestyle in an aspirational and entertaining manner. It presents an appealing, Indian way of living- which is what attracts consumers. One must note that if this music was unreflective of the lifestyles of the average Indian consumer, or did not in some way present a lifestyle they would enjoy or find entertaining, this music would not sell. The commercialisation of Bollywood music is a direct consequence of globalisation. (Levitt, on Economies of Scope) This has manifested itself in Bollywood films' and consequently music's newfound westernised viewpoints- it tries to introduce elements of common western culture, differing from older films which were reflective of Indian society and its values. Older films were more of a commentary, or observation on what already was- newer films actively introduce new concepts. This can be seen in minor details- the fact that characters often have western breakfasts, and are attired in western clothes.

It is through globalisation the everyday lives of average Indian citizens have radically changed to incorporate westernised elements- especially imminent in shifts in clothing trends, preferences for certain brands, and general trends in consumer goods. (Sridhar and Geetha pp. 572-575) As stated above, media is successful only as long as it successfully mirrors and adapts to the evolving modern culture of its

consumers. This has led to the general need for Bollywood media as a whole to respond to this demand through radically changing the kind of values and messages on culture it propagates.

Initially, it was sparked by a need to keep Bollywood alive.

However, as one observes films such as *RRR* attain critical success in the global spotlight, one begins to question if the *intensity* of this response is warranted. Many argue it has commodified common elements of Indian culture- cutting down complex and diverse cultures and subcultures into digestible pieces in hopes of receiving global recognition. (Guha p.31)

This has been reflected in Bollywood music as a natural consequence. Music is an integral part of any Bollywood film- and as a result, it directly mirrors the evolution of the film industry. One can observe that westernisation in Bollywood music is a response to commercialisation of the film industry. Bollywood films require songs to be composed for them- and as a result, Bollywood music mirrors the needs of the film. As a direct consequence, one can observe the many changes in Bollywood music. Bollywood has also changed because of the prevalence of ‘recording’ culture- recorded music trumps live performances. It adds to the pressure of artists who are unable to secure themselves to successful films to produce music that can reach to and cater for a larger audience due to the nature of music streaming platforms (the greater the streams, the higher the income). Yet again, the way artists solve this problem is by including western elements in their music.

This westernisation begins with the gentrification of *taal*- taal, as mentioned above, is unique and extremely specific to Indian music. One type of taal is known as ‘keherwa’ - which is now most commonly employed in Bollywood songs. This can be attributed to the fact that it fits in perfectly in the western rhythmic system. It is a direct response to a growing demand for music that is *digestible*. This kind of music can be enjoyed and performed by western musicians- and is composed for the same purpose. A direct response to commercialisation.

One can also observe the inclusion of one off English lyrics. It is, again, an attempt to be more inclusive of western audiences. It also possibly targets NRIs, in hopes that a fusion of two primary languages will lead to the identification of the song as more enjoyable. It is a consequence of wanting to pander to a larger crowd (as compared to the narrow focus of Bollywood prior to this period).

This is followed by an increase in the use of synth, paired with a reduced focus on vocalists. Earlier, Bollywood took great pride in producing singers with golden voices and lungs of steel. Observing the journeys of renowned playback singers (an elite job- indicative of the sheer status of vocalists in not only the music, but the film industry as well) such as Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar, etc. one concludes vocals were perhaps the greatest charm of older Bollywood compositions. This has certainly ceased to be the case, considering the near meagre fame of singers today in comparison- which can largely be attributed to the increased focus on synth and electronic elements within music. Highly reflective of the evolution of western music and what is popular today, it is yet again indicative of Bollywood’s desire to ‘branch out’.

### **5.0 Cultural Implications and Audience Reception of Bollywood music**

Bollywood films, thematically speaking, often mirror Indian life by the way of showing Indian people what the ideal Indian life looks like. This was true for most film industries around the world for quite sometime- grand lives, dramatic stories, shiny cars. Bollywood, however, persisted in its idea that there was a correct, classy, and Indian way to live life. (Guha, p.30) Though the ideal has evolved with time, the ever present message is the same- there is a ‘correct’ way to be Indian. Bollywood music is irreversibly tied to these films, and as a result, it has some interesting cultural implications when looked at closely.



Bollywood music's nature itself has evolved, as mentioned earlier in the paper- a consequence of globalisation and commercialisation, it has changed to sound more digestible to a larger number of people. However, when the lyrics of these songs themselves are looked into, one can observe many instances of curious 'lists' of things Indians should desire- and this is a trend that predates the modern period in Bollywood music. Mohammad Rafi's '*Yeh Chand Sa Roshan Chehra*' talks about the beauty of fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes (features not typically found in Indian women). It is one of many ways the industry tries to sell a lifestyle to the consumer- the film that the song was originally composed for repeatedly tries to put across an ideal of 'love' and what love should look like.

This has led to the commercialisation of some key cultural elements in Indian lives. Take for example the idea of a Hindu wedding. Hinduism, in and of itself is a large and widespread religion- and how the faith is practised varies across states. The Hindu wedding- or the 'great Indian wedding' put forth in movies reflects marriage culture in north India. The glorification of a 'great Indian wedding' has caused several generations of South-Indians and Hindus from other parts of India to opt for a wedding that imitates the ones seen in films- the red saree over the white one with red borders- the henna, choosing to forego any 'tiresome' traditional customs. (Guha, p.31) It's a result of successfully being convinced the 'correct' way to marry is to be married this way. A 'sale' of culture. It is one of the ways that Bollywood has fundamentally altered Indian culture through film.

However, Hindu Indian weddings haven't just been affected by the gross oversimplification of what it means to have an 'Indian' wedding- Bollywood music itself has evolved to be unfit and underrepresentative of other wedding cultures present in India.

This is caused by a split in Bollywood's influences. It draws not only from North Indian culture, but from South Indian culture as well. In the south, the predominant style of classical music is Carnatic music- and in the north, the predominant style of classical music is Hindustani music. (Shrivastava 199-200: Three) They differ in taal variations, notation systems, and much more- and as a result, Bollywood music that can be played for a North Indian wedding cannot be played for a South Indian wedding and vice versa (if one wants to be culturally thorough regarding this matter). (Sridhar and Geetha p. 572)

The sheer influence Bollywood film and music has on its consumers is purely because it is reflective of what consumers desire, and to some extent, is able to market a lifestyle that they would like to pursue.

Naturally, as the audience changes, their desires will also change. The generational gap and the entry of the internet have caused some fundamental divides in older and newer audiences. Bollywood now aims towards newer audiences, and newer audiences, being exposed to western media and having knowledge of many cultures, generally is more difficult to generalise. Due to innate and intricate variations in each Indian's interactions with global cultures and subcultures, it is difficult for film-makers and musicians to pinpoint what exactly makes a song 'click' with audiences. There are some sure fire methods musicians employ to ensure a song is likeable, at the very least- they've been mentioned earlier in the paper. Simpler beats and rhythms and English lyrics being a few of these methods indicates audiences no longer look for direct reflections of their culture in films and music- they are not searching for the correct way to be 'Indian' or for a lifestyle to pursue.

They seek, more than anything, entertainment. This entertainment is prevalent on the internet in the form of short video content- which has led to the emergence of 'trends', a culture of their own. Trends span globally, but typically, Indian audiences engage with trends involving Indian and Euro-centric music and concepts. As a result, musicians have to cater for these audiences- it is these consumers that unknowingly actively promote their music and provide them with revenue. (Wright p.3)

With shortening attention spans and shorter video content taking over the internet, it is difficult to draw consumers in without having something that ‘clicks’- and typically, that something is an indication of gentrified music. Countdowns in lyrics, or build-ups in the rhythm, or usage of slang are just few of many ways to get a listener’s attention- it indicates the audio can be used to start, or take part in trends.

Bollywood music’s target audience- has evolved and changed drastically- and the musicians who are a part of this industry have had to adapt. Thematic shifts in films, the emergence of trends and short video content, and most importantly, globalisation of audiences have led to drastic shifts in their work.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Bollywood music has evolved immensely as a result of commercialisation. The reason this commercialisation is perceived unforeseen is because India never experienced the phonograph/gramophone/vinyl eras. It went directly from live performances ( the predominant culture in the context of Indian music ) to radio- and then another jump to recorded, digital music. It was three big leaps, and music changed immensely each time. The first wave of commercialisation was because of the development of the film industry’s reliance on ‘playback singers’ as well as Bollywood’s general affinity for music and the introduction of copyrights. This, however, did not commodify music- it wasn’t exactly a product to be sold, since consumers appreciated it along with the film it was attached to. Independent musicians were fairly uncommon. The second wave of commercialisation was when the recorded music industry became digitised- this ushered in an era of independent musicians. This was a more recent step- and it is the direct consequence of India’s connection to the outside world- in particular through the internet to the west.

As a result, one can conclude the second wave of commercialisation is a direct consequence of newer Indian audiences being exposed to western media, and consequently, general culture being more westernised by the means of clothing, changes in language. This has led to an evolution in what consumers want to see on screen and hear in songs- instead of viewing an ideal Indian lifestyle, they seek entertainment above all else. The quality of the film or song is largely irrelevant as long as it holds a higher entertainment value- a shock factor, or slapstick comedy. As the Bollywood music industry is largely tied to the Bollywood film industry, it reflects the changes the latter has gone through.

These changes have resulted in the commodification and generalisation of Indian cultural elements, and have produced subtle cultural shifts in the Indian population.

Independent artists who aren’t tied to the film industry, but produce music in the same genre are reliant on social media- and thus their music too, has changed significantly. Undergoing processes like adding one off English lyrics and using simpler, western beats, independent musicians have started producing songs that are palatable for the western audience. They rely on consumer preferences towards short form video content- they focus on including ‘countdowns’ or music that is easy to dance to in hopes that a trend will be centred around their audio/song clips.

Music is no longer a means to introduce and celebrate culture- it is not a commentary on the essence or the identity of being Indian rather it has morphed into means for entertainment as a consequence of musicians, producers, and the Bollywood film industry treating music like a product to be sold as compared to a fundamental part of Indian culture.

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