

India



Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema*

Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2007. xii + 281 pages, b/w illustrations, 19 music examples, bibliography, filmography, index. Cloth, £60.00; ISBN-978-0-7546-5198-7.

READING Anna Morcom's book *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema*, the music of well-known film songs resound in the mind's ear. A vibrant joie de vivre lifts you up when reading her analysis of the song *Yah dostī* from the film *Sholay*; delicious tragedy washes over you as she pursues the changing musical idiom of *Muhabbat kī jhūthī kahānī pe roye* from *Mughal-e-Azam*. The imaginary soundtrack that accompanies the text adds to the pleasure of reading Morcom's well-worked-out case studies about the processes of production of Hindi film songs, its musical styles, and its audiences. It speaks to the lasting power of Hindi film songs to move and

bring listeners into the narratives of Hindi films. This way, the power of the recalled songs underscores Morcom's central argument in the book, that the songs of the Hindi cinema are not trivial additions or diversions, but crucial elements of the narrative structure and progression in Hindi films.

For those less familiar with the Hindi film industry and its music too, this book opens up the world of Hindi film music in an accessible manner. Based on extensive fieldwork within the Bombay film industry, interviewing and observing music directors, lyricists, film directors, producers, and other film personnel, Morcom's research adds ethnographic depth to the study of film music. And also if less acquainted with the methods and idioms of musicology, the book presents its material in an intelligible way. In the introduction, she sets out her aim to study Hindi film songs within the context of the films they are part of, trying to understand their production process, their musical style, and their commercial life as an integral part of the cinematic process. She suggests that much earlier work has neglected to place Hindi film songs in the diegetic context of the films in which they feature, the production context of the film industry, and the sociocultural context of India simultaneously. Chapter 2 is an account of the production of film songs, based on ethnographic fieldwork, that sets out the production process step by step. Through detailing the production cycle of the songs, Morcom shows how film songs are shaped by the needs of the film that they will be part of. Chapters 3 and 4 offer the most in-depth case studies of individual film songs in the context of their parent film. Using *qawwālī*—ritual Sufi music—as it appears in Hindi films as an example, she compares eight songs on key elements of song style in chapter 3. She concludes that the jumble of stylistic markers, often vague and full of exceptions, can only be made sense of when placing the songs within the cinematic contexts in which they feature (136). Chapter 4 looks at the use of “Western” music in Hindi cinema, both in song and background music. The final two chapters move to the commercial life of Hindi film songs and pursue the marketing and audiences of the songs respectively. Chapter 5 presents a historical overview of the marketing and distribution of Hindi film songs, and treads the complex terrain of indicating profitability of these often very popular songs. Chapter 6 looks at the ways in which audiences come in contact with Hindi film songs and in what ways they are made present in the public sphere. Unfortunately Morcom has not done any ethnographic research into the consumption and audience reception of the film songs, which would have added significant depth to the book.

Morcom's book is part of an increasingly prominent trend in South Asian cinema studies towards genuine engagement with cinematic production and consumption practices and in-depth study of elements of film culture and the cinema. As Hindi cinema has come into its own as a field of legitimate scholarly research and debate, new methods and foci of research have opened up to engage with this complex and many-layered cultural industry. Morcom's work fits into this trend with its combination of ethnographic methods, detailed analyses, and in-depth accounts. It is a welcome addition to South Asian film studies.

As the legitimacy of popular culture as a field of academic study in general, and the Hindi and Tamil film industries in particular, has taken hold, the need to “defend”

artefacts of popular culture such as Hindi film songs against any vaguely Adornian critiques of their ignorances or dangers has decreased. Nonetheless, Morcom's insistence on the narrative "sense" that Hindi film songs make at times comes close to such a defence. She invokes Adorno in a number of places but her real argument about the cinematic sense of Hindi film song is with M. Madhava Prasad. In his 1998 book *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, Prasad suggests that Hindi cinema is marked by a heterogeneous mode of production (43), emphasising the industrial context and its conventions for the production of these cultural artefacts. While his analysis may in places be over-determined by the Marxist framework he employs, and he is unjustifiably curt about film music, his work is nonetheless an important account of the specificities of the Hindi cinema in relation to classical arguments about the consolidation of the mode of film production of Hollywood cinema.

Morcom picks up on Prasad's suggestion that the component parts of Hindi cinema are made in relative isolation from an overarching narrative, instead drawing on other sets of cinematic and non-cinematic practices. Stripping Prasad's argument bare, she sets up Prasad as a straw-man who argues that narrative has "little relevance to the form and style of film songs" (12). Against this, Morcom effectively makes her argument that Hindi film songs are produced within the context of film narratives. She does her rich material a disservice by setting it off against a largely caricatured version of Prasad's argument. It is not a contradiction to say that a film's component parts are shaped by traditions internal to the artistic practice while also saying that the film production process is significant in the way those artistic practices shape up, but Morcom sets these two strictly off from one another, leaving no middle ground (25). Her resulting claim that "in all film songs, the film situation governs the music" (130), isn't really tenable if taking seriously Morcom's own diagram on page 89, where she suggests theatre, light classical, and classical music sources, the musical creativity of composers, *and* cinematic demands come together to create film song style and individual music.

The different interpretations offered by Morcom and Prasad may be better understood if the Hindi film industry was not approached as a clearly delimited and already known object of study. The film industry needs to be disaggregated, both temporally and structurally. The historical transformations of the Hindi film industry have been well documented and it is fair to say that major changes have taken place in the industry over time, and most recently since the early 1990s. Similarly, the Hindi film industry is—and never was—a homogeneous whole. Films of higher and lower production values and for different distribution circuits are made in Hindi. Production processes are historically and structurally diverse and generalisations for "the" Hindi film industry are therefore hard to make. Anna Morcom's book adds much to the understanding of Hindi film songs, is an important addition to the study of Hindi cinema and is a pleasure to read. But these complex terrains of the Hindi cinema as a differentiated industry remain to be explored, not only by her but by scholars of Hindi cinema in general.

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