

Om Shanti Om (2007) vs Gangs of Wasseypur (2012): Two Strains of Bollywood Musical

Anand Subhash Borse

MA, Film Studies, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper compares *Om Shanti Om* (2007) and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) to analyze two divergent strains of the Bollywood musical. It situates the Bollywood song-and-dance tradition within Indian aesthetic theory (Nāṭyaśāstra), historical theatrical practice, and economic imperatives. *Om Shanti Om*, directed by Farah Khan, exemplifies the traditional Bollywood musical, integrating lavish song sequences and self-referential tributes to Hindi cinema and Hollywood musicals like *Singin' in the Rain*. In contrast, Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* redefines the use of music, deploying songs as narrative tools grounded in realism and character psychology. The paper argues that this newer strain, marked by films such as *Masaan* and *Newton*, signals a shift from spectacle toward subtle, story-driven musical integration. Through close analysis of narrative structure, musical style, and cultural context, the essay highlights how contemporary Bollywood is renegotiating the role of music in cinema, balancing tradition with evolving cinematic sensibilities.

Keywords: *Bollywood musical, Om Shanti Om, Gangs of Wasseypur, Hindi film music, narrative aesthetics*

Cinema for the first few decades remained "silent" in the sense that the characters could not speak what they felt. Although the use of inter-titles helped convey what the character was saying to the audience, moving image being the prime reason behind cinema's attraction, constant appearance of inter-titles was surely not a great idea to follow. Therefore, inter-titles as a means of "spoken word" had to be used sparsely and carefully. Looking at these limitations of the silent film to emote as real human beings do, constant efforts were made to find ways to synchronise sound and image together to make it more realistic (and more saleable) right from the beginning. When the technological

advancements finally allowed it, the music that had always accompanied film as an external addition joined it as a part of its world in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) (Pfeiffer, 2023). Later, when dialogues too started being voiced on film, the era of talkies began, but the songs somehow remained a part of films for quite some time. Songs that initially started as a norm and mere attraction, just as the first Lumière films were for their ability to imitate human movement, later became a special rarity as human speech became more lifelike and regular in films owing to technological advancements and a matured understanding of the medium. This, thereby, gave rise to a specific genre of film that included song-and-dance numbers, called the movie musical in the West, specifically Hollywood.

In India too, as it had done in the West, when the ability to record sound and image on the same material appeared, it was obvious that music would play an important role in it. However, unlike the West, Indian films somehow could not do away with the song and dance sequences and retained it as an integral part, which continues to be so even today. Contrary to popular opinion that the presence of song and dance sequences in Indian films is arbitrary and therefore makes no sense, a closer look at *Natyasastra*, a treatise on Indian aesthetics, helps us understand why the presence of songs and dances is so integral to Indian films. Talking about the *Natyasastra* and thereby the roots of musicality in Indian theatre and, resultantly, cinema, Philip Lutgendorf writes:

The format of alternately spoken and sung performance, which gave great emphasis to poetic and musical experience of emotion, survived the demise of Sanskrit drama toward the end of the first millennium CE and became characteristic of a range of regional folk dramatic forms using vernacular languages; it was transferred to the urban proscenium stage by the (mainly Hindu/Urdu language) “Parsi theatre” troupes of the nineteenth century. It also became, after the introduction of film sound to India in 1931, the standard format for commercial cinema. Just as, in Sanskrit and most regional languages, there was no word for “play” that did not imply “music-and-dance drama,” so Indian-English “film” normally means one incorporating songs and dances... (Lutgendorf, 2006, p. 235)

Along with the cultural and historical reasons, the economic factors behind the presence of song and dance numbers in Indian films cannot be overlooked. Film music has also served as a marketing

tool to attract audiences to the theatres. The film album often releases weeks before the film and helps create buzz around the release. In fact, a scholar notes that "film music is India's pop music" (Bose, 2007, p. 234) Therefore, a lot depends on the songs and dances for the Indian film to become a commercially viable "product."

A question, however, certainly arises as to what, then, is the function of song and dance sequences in Indian cinema other than making the film commercially viable? Tejaswini Ganti tries to answer this in her book *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. She highlights several functions that songs in a Hindi (or Indian) film play. She first says that "the presence or absence of songs operates as a method of generic differentiation" (Ganti, 2013, p. 92), giving us three categories of films: 1. Films with no songs as "art" films, 2. Art films but with songs as "middle cinema," and 3. Films with songs as "commercial" cinema (Ganti, 2013, p. 91). In addition to this, she further says that another "main function of songs within a screenplay is to display emotion" (Ganti, 2013, p. 92). Owing to the highly conservative nature of Indian society and strict censorship rules over display of physical intimacy (which has now loosened), songs provided a better alternative to express the development of a romantic relationship between a couple in a Hindi film. Similarly, unlike the West, each emotion would have a different song for itself to be conveyed to the audience. The Hindi film would therefore have different songs serving different purposes depending on the situation in the screenplay. This too has roots in the *rasa* theory of the Indian aesthetic system as highlighted in the *Natyasastra*. Songs play a similar function in Indian films. The third function that a song plays in an Indian film is to show passage of time (Ganti, 2013, p. 94).

In this essay, I would like to argue that although a Hindi film is not a musical in the sense it is in the West, particularly Hollywood. Bollywood has in recent years started making use of this compulsion of the presence of a song in the film in a more effective way than it was before. This has been an outcome of exposure to Western cinema and newer sensibilities being developed both in the filmmaker and the audience. This can be understood from two films as case studies—*Om Shanti Om* (2007) and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012): one that uses songs and dance numbers in the traditional way compared to the other that uses them in a different way than the usual Bollywood film. The comparison between these two films would also help us understand how *Gangs of*

Wasseyapur is a quintessential new-age Bollywood musical, whereas *Om Shanti Om* is the traditional Bollywood musical.

Directed by Farah Khan, *Om Shanti Om* is a film set in the film world of the 1970s till the intermission. The film is about a junior artist Om Prakash Makhija (Shahrukh Khan) who acts as extras in films and aspires to be a superstar one day. Son of junior artists themselves, Om Prakash is madly in love with a star actress Shanti Priya (Deepika Padukone) and does not leave any chance to see her. His friend Pappu is always with him and supports him in whatever he does. Incidentally, during the shooting of a film in which Shanti Priya is acting as the lead actress and Om is one of the extras, Shanti Priya is caught in a fire. As no one comes forward to rescue her, Om Prakash jumps into the fire and saves her. This helps him befriend her and they spend some time together. One day while Shanti Priya is shooting for a film, Om Prakash visits her but she ignores him and leaves. Om follows her to a desolate building where he sees her talking to Mukesh Mehra, a well-known rich producer who is producing the biggest film of Bollywood, also titled *Om Shanti Om*, starring Shanti Priya. From their conversation, Om (and with him the audience) comes to know that Shanti Priya is secretly married to Mukesh Mehra and she wants Mukesh Mehra to publicly acknowledge it but he refuses, saying it would not be good for her public image and will affect the film's success. Shanti tells Mukesh that even if he does not tell people, in a few days everyone will know about their relationship as she is pregnant. Mukesh is surprised knowing this and tells Shanti that he will publicly marry her soon. Om is shattered and leaves. A few days later, Mukesh takes Shanti to what he says is the set that he was making for *Om Shanti Om* and tells her that he will marry her. Shanti is initially happy but is shocked when she realises Mukesh is lying. He tells her that marrying her would mean risking his career as a producer. He then sets the set on fire and locks her in to kill her. Om happens to be around and tries to save her but Mukesh Mehra's henchmen beat him. Om somehow manages to enter the set but a cylinder blast throws him out of the set, leaving him severely injured. While Shanti is killed in the set, Om is hit by Rajesh Kapoor while he is driving his pregnant wife to a hospital. Worried, he takes Om along with him to the hospital where after some initial treatment, Om also dies. At the same time, Rajesh Kapoor's wife gives birth to a son. The film then jumps to 2007 where Rajesh Kapoor's son, also named Om, is a big superstar with huge fan following. Om Kapoor, also played by Shahrukh Khan, is no one else but Om Prakash's

reincarnation. Over the course of a few scenes, Om remembers his past life as he visits places related to his and Shanti's death and when he coincidentally meets Mukesh Mehra at a party thrown by Rajesh Kapoor. Seeing Mukesh Mehra, Om Kapoor decides to bring justice to Shanti's death by making Mukesh Mehra confess his crime. Pappu, who now knows that Om Kapoor is in fact his late friend Om Prakash, helps Om in his plans. When Mukesh Mehra expresses his desire to work with Om, Om immediately says that he would like to do his film *Om Shanti Om* that Mukesh wanted to make years ago and also tells him that the film would be shot where the original *Om Shanti Om* was planned. Om and Pappu try to find an actress that looks like Shanti to scare him and make him confess his crime. After struggling initially, they find Sandy, who is not Shanti's reincarnation but looks exactly the same as Shanti Priya. Initially, Om, along with Pappu and Sandy, is able to scare and confuse Mukesh but Mukesh eventually finds out the truth and goes to confront Om at the launch event of *Om Shanti Om*. At the event when Om comes to know that Mukesh knows their plan, he tries to stop them but Sandy kills Mukesh and, in the end, it is revealed that it was Shanti's soul and not Sandy who kills Mukesh. Shanti thus avenges her death and attains liberation.

Gangs of Wasseypur, on the other hand, is an epic revenge drama spanning across decades starting in 1941 when the Britishers were still ruling India and ends in 2009. Unlike *Om Shanti Om*, *Gangs of Wasseypur* covers almost all the decades covering important milestones of Indian history vis-à-vis the gangs of a North Indian town called Wasseypur. Inspired by the rivalry of real-life gangs, the film is about generational revenge where animosity becomes more important than the enemy, killing becomes an obsession rather than a motive. In 1941, Shahid Khan, a local, masquerades as a well-known dacoit Sultana Daku and starts looting agricultural goods from trains to sell them in the market and earn money. When Sultana Daku comes to know about this, he kills Shahid Khan's gang but lets Shahid Khan go at the request of the village headman. Shahid Khan is asked to leave the village and settle somewhere else. He leaves with his pregnant wife and settles in Dhanbad, an adjoining town. In Dhanbad, he starts working as a mine worker in the coal mines owned by Britishers. When India gains freedom from the English rulers, they give the mines to the local politicians. Ramadhir Singh gets a few such mines and instead of supporting his fellow countrymen, he exploits them more. Looking at Shahid Khan's power and attitude, he hires him as a

bahubali (a person who would act as the goon and control workers from rebelling by threatening them on Ramadhir's behalf). However, when Ramadhir comes to know that Shahid Khan might overpower him and take over his coal mines, he gets him killed. Ramadhir also plans to kill his son Sardar and Nasir, Shahid's loyalist, asking Ehsaan Qureshi, who is a descendant of Sultana Daku's family, to do it. However, Nasir along with Sardar manages to escape and they both are thus saved. Ehsaan Qureshi lies to Ramadhir that he has killed Sardar and Ramadhir forgets about it. Little Sardar decides to avenge his father's death and kill Ramadhir when he comes to know the truth. Years pass. Sardar Khan manages to become a powerful goon and a businessman in the area and leaves no chance he gets to trouble Ramadhir Singh, who is now a powerful politician. When Ramadhir comes to know about who Sardar is, he befriends Sultan Qureshi, another member of the Qureshi clan, to kill Sardar Khan. The animosity that started with Shahid Khan and Sultana Daku (who is also a Qureshi) is thus transferred to the next generation, Ramadhir Singh acting as the perpetrator of that animosity. Over the next few years, the game of cat and mouse goes on between Sardar Khan, Sultan Qureshi, and Ramadhir Singh. Although Sardar Khan gets several opportunities to kill Ramadhir Singh and avenge his father's death, he decides not to kill him just to trouble him more. He says, "*Keh Ke Lenge Uski*" [I will not kill him so easily, I will tell him, challenge him in his face and then kill him] (*Gangs of Wasseypur I*, 2012, 00:39:00). While Sardar is already married to Nagma Khatoon and has four children—Danish, Faizal, Perpendicular, and another unnamed child—with her, he gets involved in a relationship with Durga and has a child named Definite with her too. Though he never marries Durga, he continues the relationship, dividing his time between his wife and his mistress. Durga, however, is unhappy with the treatment she and her son Definite get and therefore secretly joins hands with Ramadhir Singh and Sultan Qureshi to kill Sardar Khan. Meanwhile, Danish, Sardar's eldest son, too joins his father Sardar Khan in his work and Faizal Khan, the middle son, remains the uninterested good-for-nothing son loitering around with his friends, watching films and chasing Mohsina Hamid. As time passes, Danish Khan falls in love with Shama Parveen, Sultan Qureshi's sister and marries her. Sultan, however, with the help of Ramadhir and Durga, is able to kill Sardar Khan while he is driving alone. Although the film was shot and made as a single 5 hour 21 minute long film, due to commercial reasons, the film was released in two parts within a timespan of one month. The first

part ends with Sardar Khan's murder and the second part starts with it. In the second part, a lot of members of each gang are killed which includes Sardar's elder son Danish, his youngest son Perpendicular, his wife Nagma Khatoon, Danish's wife, Sultan Qureshi, and others who were involved in Sardar Khan's murder. After Danish's death, the responsibility of the family and of taking revenge falls on Faizal's shoulders. He, with the help of Definite, his half-brother and other gang members, is finally able to kill Ramadhir Singh but is himself killed by Definite. The film ends in 2009 with Nasir, who had taken Sardar Khan to another village after his father's death, taking Mohsina and her son to Mumbai, away from Wasseyapur's violence and world of crime.

If we take Tejaswini Ganti's categorization mentioned before into consideration, *Om Shanti Om* would fall into the category of "commercial cinema" without any qualms. The film had one of the biggest superstars of Bollywood, Shahrukh Khan, as the lead actor and was the first film of Deepika Padukone, now a leading actress of the Hindi film industry. Farah Khan, the director of the film, had been a part of the film industry as a dance choreographer and had choreographed many popular dance numbers for films like *Jo Jeeta Wahi Sikandar* (1992), *Dil Se* (1998), and *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), all known for their songs and dance numbers before becoming a director. Therefore, when she decided to make *Om Shanti Om*, music had to be an integral part of the film. The music used in the film is in the traditional way where the actors and actresses would break into songs and dances with a plethora of background dancers suddenly appearing and joining the dance. However, being a film about the film world, the dance sequences make sense, unlike other Bollywood films.

As summarized above, the film revolves around a film that is being made within the film, making it highly self-reflexive. As a backstage musical, it opens up the secrets and tricks of the film world to the audience. All this mostly happens in the song sequences of the film. The song *Main Agar Kahoon* that comes when Om and Shanti have just become friends is all about how "love songs" are shot in Bollywood films and is itself a love song in which the actor expresses how lucky he is to have befriended the lady. It reminds the viewer of the Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Harshini K, in her video essay, juxtaposes scenes from *Om Shanti Om* and *Singin' in the Rain* to highlight the similarities that the films share and therefore claims that *Om Shanti Om*

pays tribute to *Singin' in the Rain* (K, 2017). Derek Elley, in a review of the film for *Variety*, also highlights the same. (Elley, 2007).

Other than references to *Singin' in the Rain*, the film, both in the songs and other scenes, refers to old Hindi films, songs, and industry anecdotes. Towards the end, when Pappu says that their plan will never work out, Om's mother says, "Picture abhi baki hai" (the film is not over yet) (*Om Shanti Om*, 2007, 2:26:00), heightening the self-reflexive nature of the film. Footage from old Hindi songs is directly used and made a part of this film using CGI, which makes the musical numbers even more sensible. *Om Shanti Om* is thus one strain of Bollywood musical that uses songs and dances in the traditional way. *Om Shanti Om*, particularly, is also closer to what a Hollywood musical is. Keeping this in mind, let us now take a look at how *Gangs of Wasseypur* is different than other Bollywood films and also the Hollywood musical.

Gangs of Wasseypur is a tough film to categorise. It is neither a mainstream film nor completely an art film, nor can it be called an independent film since Viacom 18, one of the leading studios, was involved in its production. The film also had a theatrical release and has gained a significant following, which is uncommon for non-mainstream films in India, where they rarely receive proper releases. The director, Anurag Kashyap, is known for his independent style and unique approach to filmmaking. Influenced by Hollywood noir films, his work is often dark and centres on crime and politics. *Gangs of Wasseypur*, as discussed earlier, is a revenge drama involving two gangs—the Sardar Khan gang and the Qureshi gang—and a politician, Ramadhir Singh. The film is distinct from usual Bollywood fare, yet Bollywood itself becomes a character in the narrative, serving as a marker of time throughout. The portrayal of characters as fans imitating actors is common in India, and Kashyap uses this to add depth, showing characters as admirers of actors from specific eras. The film, spanning over decades, often feels more like a documentary than a fiction. Although an action drama, Kashyap presents the violent protagonists more as comic fools than typical action heroes. For instance, Faizal Khan is a fan of Amitabh Bachchan, famous in the 1970s and 80s for his portrayal of the 'angry young man' in social dramas, while his half-brother, Definite, idolises Salman Khan and styles himself after the character Radhe from *Tere Naam* (2004). These references to Bollywood films make *Gangs of Wasseypur* self-reflexive (Cinema Beyond

Entertainment, 2017, 5:13). The only truly sensible character is the antagonist Ramadhir Singh. As the narrator Nasir observes, the other characters consider themselves “Fanney Khan” (a term meaning ‘stud’ in Hindi). What makes the film most unique is its use of music. Composed by Sneha Khanwalkar, the soundtrack is unconventional and distinct. Unlike typical Bollywood films such as *Om Shanti Om*, *Gangs of Wasseypur* features no dance sequences and avoids the common lip-syncing trend. Even in *Om Shanti Om*, where the setting justifies the musical numbers, songs do not serve as narrative devices. In contrast, *Gangs of Wasseypur* uses songs purposefully to develop characters or intensify situations. The first song, “*Ik Bagal Mein Chand Hoga, Ik Bagal Mein Rotiyaan*,” plays when Shahid Khan is forced to leave his village and settle elsewhere, conveying hope for a new life while simultaneously illustrating their physical journey and dreams. Unlike the Bollywood norm of regularly spaced songs, *Gangs of Wasseypur*’s songs appear only when the narrative allows. For instance, the second song arrives almost half an hour after the first, while the third and fourth follow each other rapidly as the situation demands. The film contains 27 songs within its approximately five-hour runtime. Each song is uniquely treated depending on the situation and time period portrayed, an approach unprecedented in Bollywood. The first song, set in 1941, is slow and melodious, evoking nostalgia for the old world. Another song, “*Kaala Re*,” highlights a romance in the 1990s and is styled after A.R. Rahman, a composer who rose to prominence in that era with films like *Rangeela* (1995) and *Dil Se...* (1998) (Cinema Beyond Entertainment, 2017, 4:05). Vineet Masram of Cinema Beyond Entertainment notes, “The beauty of Khanwalkar’s music is that it caters to the film, its mood, and the character’s state of mind, not to the listener. For this reason, the music became famous only after the release” (Cinema Beyond Entertainment, 2017, 4:13). This distinguishes the film from other Bollywood productions. The tone of the songs signals the era of each scene to viewers familiar with these references.

Ramachandran Naman, reviewing the film for *Sight and Sound*, observes, “Though the film is undoubtedly Kashyap’s most accessible and hence commercial to date, it doesn’t bear any resemblance to the routine Bollywood fare churned out by Mumbai’s dream factories” (Naman, 2013). Beyond Khanwalkar’s original compositions and G.V. Prakash Kumar’s background score, the film incorporates well-known old Hindi songs at strategic moments to highlight Bollywood’s

influence on characters and establish historical context. This use of vintage songs as part of the score was also novel in Bollywood.

Gangs of Wasseyapur thus inaugurated a new strain of Bollywood musicals, where songs function more effectively as storytelling tools rather than pauses for dance sequences. In these films, songs remain important but serve as background elements as the narrative unfolds. What was once a commercial obligation, becomes a potent narrative device. Films like *Masaan* (2015) and *Newton* (2017) exemplify this new strain, marking a clear departure from traditional Bollywood musicals and classical Hollywood musicals alike.

References

- Beeman, W. O. (1981). The use of music in popular film: East and West. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 8(1), 77–87.
- Bose, M. (2007). *Bollywood: A history*. Tempus.
- Cinema Beyond Entertainment. (2017, February 26). *Gangs of Wasseyapur | A violent opus* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oy9noTWNFE0>
- Elley, D. (2007). *Om Shanti Om*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2007/film/markets-festivals/om-shanti-om-1200554687/>
- Ganti, T. (2013). *Bollywood: A guidebook to popular Hindi cinema*. Routledge.
- Gopal, S. (2015). The audible past, or what remains of the song-sequence in new Bollywood cinema. *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 46(4), 805–822. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0050>
- Gopal, S., & Moorti, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi song and dance*. University of Minnesota Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=346039>
- Harshini, K. (2017, June 19). *Om Shanti Om & Singin' in the Rain* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7Tv7i9q7po>

Lutgendorf, P. (2006). Is there an Indian way of filmmaking? *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 10(3), 227–256.

Muni, B., & Ghosh, M. (1995). *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A treatise on ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics, ascribed to Bharata Muni*. Manisha.

Pfeiffer, L. (2023). The Jazz Singer. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Jazz-Singer-film-1927>

Ramachandran, N. (2013). Gangs of Wasseypur, Gangs of Wasseypur II. *Sight and Sound*, 23(3), 84.

Shastri, S. (2011). “The play’s the thing, wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king”: Intertextuality in Om Shanti Om. *Journal of Film and Video*, 63(1), 32–43.

Filmography

Gangs of Wasseypur. (2012). Directed by A. Kashyap [Film]. Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.

Om Shanti Om. (2007). Directed by F. Khan [Film]. Eros International.

The Jazz Singer. (1927). Directed by A. Crosland [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Peer Reviewed Online
Journal in English

www.ijdus.org

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
OF
DIGITAL HUMANITIES
AND
UBIQUITOUS SCHOLARSHIP



Volume IV Issue 1: January- June 2025

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)