

Bollywood, Music and Phagwa: A Study in Cultural Representations

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Celebrated over a vast expanse in India and across the world, Phagwa or Holi is an important festival in the Indian tradition. Mostly associated with the mythological lores of Radha and Krishna, Rama and Sita, Shiva and Parvati, Prahlad and Holika, the festival of Holi signifies a tradition of victory of good over evil. The celebration of Holi is hence popularly associated with *Holika dahan*, followed by a play of colours. However, Holi is also a signifier of release and liberation. Embodying the spirit of the carnivalesque, the festival of Holi serves as an environmental signifier of transition from winter to spring, marked by vibrant use of colours. Metaphorically, it also marks a celebration of fertility associated with spring.

Music is an essential component of Phagwa. Music denotes community participation and is integral to the spirit of celebration. Music is also therapeutic – it releases negativity and infuses a sense of well-being and positivity. In the

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context of Phagwa, it embodies a melodious indulgence in vibrant colours and merry-making, steeped in the traditions of faith and love. In terms of traditional Hindustani Classical music, Holi songs adhere to classical ragas like *Kaafi*, *Misra kaafi*, *Pahadi*, *Khamaj* and *Pilu* among others. These compositions are based around the love pranks and exploits of Radha and Krishna chiefly and are fast paced, mostly set to the pace of *taalas* like *dhamaar*, *keherwa*, *teental*, *ektaal* and *jhaptaal*. However, any discussion of Holi songs remains incomplete without a reference to the vivacious folk culture of India. Implying the people or the masses, the term 'folk' is essential to the understanding of India and its traditions.

Several songs of the folk genre – as markers of community gathering and participation, form an integral part of Phagwa, such as *phaag*, *hori* and *ullara*. Consisting of descriptions of nature or portraying playful indulgence or popular mythological legends or even erotic sentiments, these songs are known to have a wide range of components. The traditional *chowtal* performed in an antiphonal format is a major component of the Phagwa or Holi festivities. Usually sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as *dholak*, *jhaanjh* and *kartaal*, it is a boisterous genre evolving from the Bhojpuri region of India. In recent times, the traditional *chowtal* has acquired a transnational character and continues to be an integral part of the diasporic population based in the Caribbean and Fiji.

Inseparable in its essence from the festivity associated with Holi, these songs convey merrymaking, joy, and primarily, a release from the regular structure and hierarchy of order. There is a violation - even if temporary - of order and a release from all kinds of restrictions. Music related to Phagwa is so essentially integral to the traditional idea of Holi that portrayal of songs based on and around Holi celebrations have been a part of the largest onscreen representations of Holi in Bollywood. Undoubtedly, with its global reach and popularity, Bollywood is credited with cultural representations of the traditions of India and Indian festivals worldwide through its films and music. Besides constructing the exotic colours of the Orient from the postcolonial perspective, the Bollywoodisation of Phagwa and its representations in popular culture present an interesting study against the backdrop of the wide canvas of musical traditions linked with the festival.

Serving as iconic cultural portrayals, especially in present times of diasporic existence, these Bollywood songs have significantly altered the face of the music associated with the festival, contemporizing the spirit of Phagwa. In fact, even in these representations, there is a marked shift in perspectives discernible in the songs popularized through films such as *Navrang* (1959) to *Silsila* (1981), or the more recent *Baghbaan* (2003) to *Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani* (2013). However, what remains common to almost all these songs is the emphasis on

rhythm, the transgressive lyrics, the inclusive spirit of community and the visual play of colours – perhaps signifying a release from the routine-bound monotony of day to day existence. This paper proposes a study of the popular Bollywood songs associated with Phagwa – to study the implied narrative of liberation and merrymaking and also to trace how these songs have evolved or how they have deviated from the traditional music associated with the festival.

The first Bollywood song under consideration would have to be the very popular *Are Jaa re Hat Natkhat* from the film *Navrang* (1959), composed by C. Ramchandra and sung by Asha Bhosle and Mahendra Kapoor. Depicting the writer's block being suffered by Diwakar, a poet in British India, the song is a picturization of his muse Mohini, inspiring in him a composition for Phagwa. As he imagines Mohini indulging in a play of vibrant colours beneath a tree full of flowers through the course of the song, it releases him from his writer's block and he is able to compose the melody – inspired by Mohini. The song is then sung in the court during the Holi celebrations. The entire performance of the song has the tree occupying a central position on screen. The focus seems to be on the beauty of spring, signifying a release from the monotony of regular existence through its freshness and blooms. Based on Raga *Pahadi*, the song is fast paced and involves performance. It begins with a recital of *boli* by Diwakar and concludes in a picturesque depiction of colourful showers emanating from Mohini herself. What is noteworthy here is that the picturisation of the song hints at androgyny as it is Mohini who plays the parts of both the man and the woman engaging in love pranks and mischief on the occasion of Holi, perhaps reiterating the literary idea that the poet's mind is essentially androgynous and hence, liberated from the societal norms of gender code.

The popularity of the song is so much so that the same chorus has been reused in another song in a film called *Mere Pyaare Prime Minister* (2018). However, in this version new beats have been used with a pronounced effect of *dhol*. Picturised in the context of Holi celebrations in a community of slum dwellers, the song is called *Bajaa dhol bajaa*, composed by Shankar Ehsan Loy and with lyrics by Gulzar. The lyrics at the very beginning mention instruments such as *dhol*, *dafli*, *khanjari* and *khol*, setting the tone for a boisterous performance against a backdrop of vibrant colours. It is against this invocation that the sixty years old melody rings out in the same beat like the actual song, acting as an almost intertextual allusion to the spirit of liberation from all constraints, release from all considerations which is linked with Holi. A Bollywood song hence becomes a cultural signifier of the spirit of Holi despite a span of six decades and despite all the changes occurring through this time.

It would be noteworthy here to consider the significance of the colours used for Holi. Traditionally used as symbolic of the colours and freshness of spring, and signifying the end of winter, the colours used in Holi have each their

own meaning. However, when used for cinematic effect visually on screen, these colours also serve a different purpose. While smearing of colours is an accepted manner of celebrating Holi, these colours might also be read as bestowing upon the individual a kind of new identity which is temporary and lasts only for the duration of the festival. The entire body of the individual is transformed into a canvas with various colours playing out the demarcation of an identity which is different from who they actually are in their daily lives. Hence, the visual impact of colours in the picturisation of Bollywood songs adds to the romanticization of the exotic colours of Holi. In both the songs discussed above, as well as those that follow, use of Holi colours adds a different dimension to these pieces of cultural representation as Holi becomes an occasion for oblivious indulgence in the temporality of a festival promising a re-enactment of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque – where existing orders, such as those related to class, caste and race for instance, will be subverted or violated even if for a while, and a new wishful or even licentious identity will be played out by the individuals breaking away from the sordidness of routine. In other words, *bura na maano, Holi hai!*

The next song picturised on Holi which further substantiates the point made above and has remained immensely popular till date is *Holi ke Din Dil Khil Jaate Hai* from the film *Sholay* (1975). Composed by R.D Burman, the lyrics of the song were penned by Anand Bakshi. Portraying the jubilations around the celebration of Holi in a small village fair, the lyrics of this song uphold the spirit of inclusivity as characteristic of the festival. *Rango mein rang mil jaate hain* reiterates the idea of an inclusive humanity, while *dushman bhigale mil jaate hain* eliminates mutual differences, thereby upholding the universality of humanity against the transitory nature of fleeting moments and passions. What purpose the song serves in the structural dimension of the film is a different matter altogether; what remains important is that the song – independent of the film, lives in the collective memory of viewers as inseparably linked with the spirit of the festival. It is also very interesting to observe the camera angles and dynamics through the picturisation of this song. Mostly captured through a wide-angle lens, the camera compliments the lyrics of the song by conveying to the viewers a general sense of happiness and well-being for all the people of the community, across all age groups. The love pranks and mischief embodied by Basanti and Veeru comes across as only one episode in a larger picture of fun and frolic.

Another memorable Bollywood song based on Holi is undoubtedly *Rang Barse* from the film *Silsila* (1981), composed by Shiv Hari and with lyrics by Harivansh Rai Bachchan. This iconic song set to the taala *keherwa*, has an interesting story to offer. It is said to have been originally derived from a traditional *bhajan* composed by the 15th century mystic poet Meerabai. The original *bhajan* is said to have begun with *rang barse o Meeran, bhawan mein rang barse* and

hence the tune for the chorus resonates with the melody of the traditional song. However, with Bollywood-isation, this song in its picturisation and technique presents a fantastic blend of tradition and modernity. Set within the context of a family drama as Amit revives his old relationship with Chandni who is now the wife of Dr. Anand, the occasion of Holi provides the scope for such social transgression in public. The implications of the lyrics as also the onscreen enactment, breaks the prevalent social orders and hierarchies of marriage as a social institution and yet this teasing – even if it is offensive - is publicly permissible since the occasion is that of Holi. The use of the colour white as uniform for all the people on screen invokes the comparison to blank canvas as colours of desire play themselves onto human passions. In terms of performance, the song begins in the manner of a typical traditional *chowtal* as Dr. Anand and Amit, each play their *dholak* and the initial lines are short ones sung by the main singer and repeated by the chorus after him. This song remains so successful in its blending of tradition with the urban modern cinematic context that even forty years later, it remains an indispensable Bollywood number associated with Holi.

Another comparatively recent Bollywood song on Holi composed to the tune of a popular folk song is *Holi Khele Raghuvveera Awadh Mein* from the film *Baghbaan* (2003). With lyrics by Sameer, the song has been composed by Aadesh Srivastava. Heavily drawing from the folk tune prevalent in local bhajans, the song depicts joy and contentment as the family and the community comes together for Holi celebrations. The festival of Holi here becomes a signifier of togetherness and happiness. Alluding to the fable of Lord Rama indulging in the colours of Holi, the portrayal in the film sticks to image of Lord Rama as *mar-yaada purushottam* – the ideal one. Accordingly, the song is set within the context of a family and there is no transgression or violation of social norms in this song. The male protagonist is drawn in the image of the holy one who revels in colours of joy accompanied by his wife and his family. The folk idea of the community coming together is also portrayed as the camera takes a wide angle shot to show a multitude of people on screen celebrating the festival of colours.

However, the most prominent Bollywood song on Holi in the last five years has perhaps been *Balam Pichkari* from *Ye Jawani Hai Deewani* (2013), composed by Pritam and penned by Amitabh Bhattacharya. This song has been a breaking away from the traditional flow of Bollywood Holi songs so far in the fact that here the lead singer is the female protagonist. It is she who initiates the song with an explicit reference to *bhang*-induced intoxication. The song plays out her desires inviting the male counterpart to participate in it. This serves as a clear subversion of the gender hierarchy. The innuendos embedded in the lyrics are prominent and transgression of social norms related to sexuality and relationships is hinted at openly. Unlike the songs discussed previously, *Balam Pichkari* does not strive to connect with the folk or the traditional Holi celebrations.

The ethos is very urbane and the mood is indulgent. The characters on screen do not involve all age groups but only youth, who are dressed in casual wear, but the merry-making involves participation of the entire crowd. The canvas portrayed, hence, is once again, wide. However, it is not an inclusive frame like the erstwhile songs. Picturised around the young couple Naina and Bunny, the song has become a new-age youth anthem for the ‘celebration of Holi’.

Across these decades of representation on screen, what has remained constant to these Bollywood songs of Holi is the performative aspect. Whether it is *Navrang* or *Ye Jawani Hai Deewani*, the songs are fast paced and meant to be performed. Performance is spectacle in terms of cinema, but performance is also the central aspect of celebrating Holi or Phagwa. In the act of playing with colours, the individual performs a deviation from the accepted norms and participates in the larger social spirit of togetherness. Beyond the dimensions of semi-otic and cinematic analyses, these songs resonate with the spirit of the festival – indulgent, licentious and liberating. They uphold the community celebration where individual utterances are just a part of the larger narrative of Holi, filled with fun and frolic. Whether following the legends of Radha-Krishna or Rama-Sita, the songs assure the message of love and portray transgressions that are temporary and harmless. While deviations from the traditional lines of music associated with Holi are abundant in these songs, the element of folk or what is known as *loka* remains constant in the colourful portrayal of community celebrations.

Bollywood, in these times of diasporic existence, has come to be the most influential medium of cultural representations. With the largest outreach among the film industries worldwide, Bollywood stands out as the strongest branch of popular culture in the present times. The very fact that the festival of Holi or Phagwa has repeatedly attracted the attention of the film makers, lyricists and composers, underlines the importance of the occasion in showcasing Indian culture

It is, however, interesting to note that in all the popular Bollywood songs discussed above, the festival of Holi has little to do with the main plot of these films. It is used almost as a recurrent motif of joyous release from the mundaneness of routine-bound lives. Just as Phagwa as a festival is philosophically construed to be an indicator of the fleeting nature of seasons and life, so do these songs reverberate with the transitory-ness of the moment where life becomes a canvas to be painted with the colours of imagination.

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