



The Influence of Indian Classical Music on Film Soundtracks and Visual Narrative

Dr. Sonia Ahuja

Assistant Professor, School of Liberal and Creative Arts (Department of Theatre and Music),
Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

E-mail: vocalmusic84@gmail.com

Abstract

Indian classical music has played a significant role in the glorification of film scores. It has been crucial in depicting cinematic storytelling and increasing emotional and narrative qualities of film through its rich auditory palette. Over the decades, music composers have blended prominent classical music elements, raga and talas into film music to evoke specific moods, reinforce character development, and create a deeper audience connection. By analysing existing research, literature and experts' opinion, this paper discusses the domination of Indian classical music on film scores and cinematic storytelling. The study uses a qualitative method combining information from scholarly sources and critical evaluations of movie soundtracks. The paper further proceeds to investigate how ragas are used thematically in orchestral exhibition, song composition and background music to support cinematic storytelling. The study also evaluate how classical music enriches various Indian film genres, such as historical, mythological and commercial cinema by reviewing ancient and contemporary examples. The study analyses the amalgamation of Indian classical music in film tracks, contributing to the understanding of the relationship between traditional music and modern cinematic practices. It throws light on the versatility of Indian music in cinema and its role in preserving cultural heritage while evolving to capture modern audiences.

Keywords: Indian classical music, film soundtracks, raga, compositions, cinematic narratives, Indian film.

Introduction

Indian cinema and music have been closely related to each other since the beginning of talking films (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026a). The integration of classical music played a pivotal role in shaping film narratives. Classical compositions not only enhances emotional depth of bollywood soundtracks but also serves as a cultural marker of tradition and heritage (Rahman et al., 2022). While modern Bollywood music has embraced electronic and fusion elements, classical music remains an essential component of cinematic storytelling, evoking specific emotions, reinforcing character development, and enriching visual narratives (Lal, 2023).

Historical Evolution of Indian Classical Music in Cinema

Bollywood's reliance on classical music is evident from its early days, where films like Tansen (1943) and Baiju Bawra (1952) depicted the importance of ragas in storytelling (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026b). Booth (2005) explores how Bollywood portrays classical musicians as cultural custodians, while Gorbman (1980) emphasizes the role of music as a narrative tool that reinforces thematic depth. Borgohain et al. (2023) further explain that classical music is closely tied to mental imagery, which enhances the cinematic experience, making it a crucial aspect of Bollywood storytelling (Lal & Sharma, 2021).

There has been a lot of debate on how classical music evolved from early Bollywood to modern film (Deb et al., 2026). Composers like Khemchand, Naushad, S.D. Burman, and Roshan preserved classical traditions while modifying them to suit the demands of Indian cinema as it developed. Contemporary composers like A. R. Rahman, Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy and Pritam chakraborty continue to integrate classical music into new-age bollywood (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026b). More recently, filmmakers like Sanjay Leela Bhansali have championed the revival of classical sounds through indian films such as Devdas (2002) , Bajirao Mastani (2015) Padmavat (2018) and Series Heeramandi (2024) proving that classical music remains an essential part of the bollywood experience (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026a).

Objectives

1. To examine the influence of Indian classical music on cinematic storytelling.
2. To analyze the use of ragas in film compositions and their role in evoking emotions and supporting character development.
3. To explore how Indian classical music has evolved in bollywood across historical, mythological, and commercial film genres.

4. To assess how Indian classical music preserves cultural heritage while adapting to modern cinematic trend.

Literature Review

The role of Indian classical music in cinema has been extensively discussed in scholarly works. Gorbman (1980) highlights the function of music as a narrative device, reinforcing emotional depth and character arcs in films (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). Duncan (2000) examines the use of leitmotifs in Bollywood, which allow composers to establish continuity and enhance storytelling. Borgohain et al. (2023) explore how classical music evokes mental imagery, influencing audience perception of cinematic narratives (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026c).

Rehman (2016) provides a historical analysis of classical music in Bollywood, illustrating the transition from traditional ragas to fusion styles that blend orchestral and electronic elements (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c). Sharma (2013) discusses music as a non-verbal communication tool, showing how classical compositions serve as expressive mediums for complex emotions (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025c). Narain (2007) delves into the role of Indian classical music in shaping narratives of dissent and identity in films (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining textual analysis, literature review and case studies of selected Bollywood films that prominently feature classical music, such as Tansen (1943), Baiju Bawra(1952), Mughal-E-Azam(1960) and Bajirao Mastani (2015)). Data is gathered from reviewing existing research on Indian classical music in cinema. Examining and analyzing the compositions of selected songs and their underlying raga structures (Singh et al., 2022). Cohen (2001) explains that film music guides audience perception even in the absence of dialogue. Similarly, Duncan (2000) highlights the role of leitmotifs in reinforcing character emotions and relationships, a concept that aligns with Bollywood's raga-based compositions.

The Role of Classical Music in Cinematic Storytelling -Case Studies of Bollywood Movies

Indian classical music has been an essential tool in shaping visual narratives in cinema and storytelling (Saika et al., 2021). With its deep-rooted connection to emotions, aesthetics and philosophy, classical music enhances the mood, setting and character development of a

visual piece. Many Filmmakers and composers have long relied on the rich tapestry of ragas to communicate complex themes, evoke emotions and create immersive storytelling experiences (Kumar & Lal, 2023). Even in modern Bollywood, classical music finds a place in compositions, maintaining the connection between tradition and contemporary storytelling (Sharma, 2013)

Tansen (1943) is a landmark musical biopic in Indian cinema, directed by Jayant Desai and produced by New Theatres. The film stars K. L. Saigal as Tansen and Khursheed Bano as his love interest, Tani. A cinematic tribute to Mian Tansen, the legendary musician of Emperor Akbar's court, the movie is celebrated for its rich classical soundtrack and visual storytelling, which bring to life the grandeur of the Mughal era. Before Tansen, Bollywood relied mostly on folk and semi-classical songs. This film introduced a mass audience to pure Hindustani classical music in a dramatic and accessible manner (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). Tansen played a pivotal role in shaping the musical and historical genres of Indian cinema. Indian classical music served as a training ground for many of the music composers who worked on Hindi films back then (Singh et al., 2021). One such was Khemchand Prakash, who received training in the dhrupad genre from his father and is regarded as one of the greatest film music directors. The film's soul-stirring soundtrack were composed by him, is one of the finest examples of Indian classical music in cinema. Many songs are based on pure ragas, capturing Tansen's musical genius. The story goes that Tansen had the power to light lamps with his rendition of raga Deepak so Khemchand composed 'Diya Jalao Jagmag Jagmag' in raga Deepak sung by K.L.Saigal. Another notable songs of this film are 'Bairan Neend Na Aaye' (Raga Bhairav) and 'Sapt Suran Teen Gram' (Raga Yaman Kalyan). Tansen is a milestone in Indian film history, blending Hindustani classical music with grand visual storytelling. By using authentic ragas, Mughal aesthetics and powerful performances, the film captures the mysticism and brilliance of India's greatest musician. Even today, it remains an inspiration for filmmakers and music lovers.

Naushad is credited with introducing Indian classical music to the general public when he composed the music for the groundbreaking film Baiju Bawra(1952), which was directed by Vijay Bhatt and is best recognised for its classical-based songs. Baiju Bawra is a landmark in Indian cinema, known for its powerful storytelling through traditional music. The film, set in the Mughal era, revolves around the legendary musician Baiju, who seeks to defeat the great Tansen in a musical duel to avenge his father's death. The soundtrack, composed by Naushad, is one of the finest examples of how Indian classical music can drive a film's narrative,

emotions, and character development (Rahman et al., 2024). O Duniya Ke Rakhwale, Mohe Bhool Gaye Sanwariya, Man Tarpat Hari Darshan Ko Aaj, and other songs in Baiju Bawra are all based on well-known classical ragas including Malkauns, Darbari, Todi, Puriya Dhanashree, Bhairavi, and Megh. In the movie's last moments, Tansen and Baiju perform a jugalbandi (duet) called "Aaj Gawat Man Mero" in raga Desi. Ustad Amir Khan and Pt. D.V. Paluskar, two of the greatest stalwarts of the day, playbaked some of the songs. The others were performed by Mohammed Rafi and Lata Mageshkar, who had classical music training and perfected the raga-based tunes.

It seems that the film industry at the time was very sceptical about producer Vijay Bhatt's plans of making a film with all classical based songs, but he and Naushad were not swayed, and as we know, the film made history with its popularity and the many awards it won.

Mughal-e-Azam (1960) Directed by K. Asif, Mughal-e-Azam is one of the most iconic films in Indian cinema, known for its majestic storytelling, opulent visuals, and soul-stirring classical music. The film masterfully blends Hindustani classical music with grand historical drama, using melodies to heighten emotions, enhance character arcs, and create an unforgettable cinematic experience (Aarzo & Lal, 2025). The film's soundtrack, composed by Naushad, is deeply rooted in classical ragas, adding richness to the narrative. 'Prem Jogan Ban Ke' a defining moment in the film, where Tansen's rendition of Raga Sohini sung by Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan mesmerizes Akbar's court. The grandeur of Akbar's Darbar, the expressive close-ups of Anarkali and soft lighting enhance the deep emotions of love and devotion. 'Mohe Panghat Pe Nandlal'(Pilu) a classical based kathak dance number picturized on Madhubala as Anarkali. The song is set in a royal setting with intricate Mughal architecture, enhancing its traditional aesthetic. Anarkali's grace and charm, while the expressive mujra-style movements in 'Jab Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya' signify defiance and passion. 'Bekas Pe Karam Kijiye' (Kedar) a song of plea and sorrow, expressing Anarkali's suffering. Mughal-e-Azam set a benchmark for integrating classical music into Bollywood cinema, inspiring later films like Baiju Bawra (1952), Jodhaa Akbar (2008), and Bajirao Mastani (2015). Naushad's compositions became an enduring example of how classical music can create deep emotional connections with audiences. The film's historical grandeur, combined with its musical richness, solidified its status as one of India's greatest musical epics.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Bajirao Mastani (2015) is a cinematic masterpiece that seamlessly blends Indian classical music with grand visual storytelling. The film's soundtrack,

composed by Bhansali himself, is deeply rooted in Indian classical music, elevating the emotional depth of the narrative and enhancing the film's historical authenticity. The music of Bajirao Mastani incorporates various classical elements, including ragas, traditional instrumentation, and intricate vocal styles. Song like 'Albela Sajan' (Deshkar) pay homage to Hindustani classical traditions. 'Mohe Rang Do Laal' (Puriya Dharashree) sung by Shreya Ghoshal, is a stunning Kathak-based piece that reflects the elegance of Mastani's character.

The composition 'Aaj Ibaadat' (Yaman) uses Sufi influences, blended with classical nuances, to highlight the spiritual love between Bajirao and Mastani. The orchestration of 'Deewani Mastani' (Kirwani) is another fine example where Bhansali fuses classical elements with a cinematic approach, using instruments like the sarangi, tabla, and pakhawaj to enhance the Mughal and Maratha cultural interplay (Jain et al., 2023). The integration of Indian classical music in Bajirao Mastani elevates its storytelling, making it a visually and aurally immersive experience. Bhansali's musical vision not only pays tribute to historical and cultural aesthetics but also reinforces the film's emotional depth, proving that classical music remains a powerful medium in contemporary cinema.

Expanded Studies and Analysis of Songs Based on Ragas

Indian classical music is structured around ragas, each designed to evoke specific moods and emotions. Indian film composers have utilized this raga system to create powerful emotional cues that guide audience perception and deepen the cinematic experience (Mane & Lal, 2021). Renowned composers such as Naushad, S.D. Burman, and Madan Mohan integrated ragas into film music and this era witnessed the extensive use of classical music in film compositions. Iconic songs 'Bole re Papihara' based on raag Malhar and Jab deep jale aana based on Raga Yaman showcased the influence of classical music on Bollywood melodies.

Laga Chunari Mein Daag (Dil Hi To Hai, 1963)

Raga Bhairavi based, this song, is sung by Manna Dey and composed by Roshan, presents the metaphor of a stained veil symbolizing lost innocence. The film's use of classical compositions strengthens its emotional weight, supporting Borgohain et al. (2023) on how music evokes strong mental imagery

Tu Jahan Jahan Chalega (Mera Saaya, 1966)

Madan Mohan's composition in Raga Nand Kalyan expresses deep emotional devotion. The song reinforces the idea that classical music enhances the emotional impact of storytelling, a theme explored by Gorbman (1980)

Ek Chatur Naar (Padosan, 1968)

This song in Raag Durga, composed by R.D. Burman and performed as a comedic jugalbandi, demonstrates how classical music can be used humorously in Bollywood. The contrast between Manna Dey's classically trained voice and Kishore Kumar's exaggerated folk style represents

Jhanak Jhanak Tori Baje Payaliya (Mere Huzoor, 1968)

This gem by Roshan, based on Raga Darbari Kanada, is an exquisite piece that highlights intricate classical vocals by Manna Dey. The song's delicate execution reflects Cohen's (2001) argument that music enhances the unfolding narrative of a film, making it an inseparable part of the storytelling process

Raina Beeti Jaye (Amar Prem, 1972)

Composed by R.D. Burman in Raga Todi, this song, performed by Lata Mangeshkar, is an evocative portrayal of longing. Rehman (2016) discusses how Bollywood's classical compositions often mirror the protagonist's internal conflicts, making songs like these integral to the cinematic experience

Chalte Chalte (Pakeezah, 1972)

Growth of female characters in Bollywood is frequently underscored by classical compositions. In Pakeezah, the melancholic tones of 'Chalte Chalte' in raag yaman reflect the protagonist's journey from vulnerability to self-realization

Hume Tumse Pyaar Kitna (Kudrat, 1981)

Based on Raga Bhairavi, this song, composed by R.D. Burman, is a testament to how classical melodies can be adapted into romantic ballads. This supports Kumar & Govindarajan (2022), who argue that Bollywood seamlessly integrates classical elements into diverse themes

Albela Sajan (Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam ,1999)

This song features classical arrangements in Raga Ahir Bhairav, representing themes of royalty, devotion and grandeur in Bhansali's films. Kumar & Govindarajan (2022) highlight how modern composers incorporate classical elements in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Mere Dholna (Bhool Bhulaiyaa, 2007)

This classical duet by Shreya Ghoshal and M.G. Sreekumar is rooted in Raga Rageshwari and Bageshwari. The song's placement in the film aligns with psychological tension and supernatural elements, demonstrating how classical music enhances storytelling. Borgohain et al. (2023) argue that certain ragas evoke vivid mental imagery, making their application in cinema particularly powerful.

Khawaja Mere Khawaja (Jodhaa Akbar, 2008)

While Western influences grew in Bollywood music composers like A.R. Rahman continued to incorporate classical elements in their compositions. Khwaja Mere Khwaja is one of an example a soulful sufi qawwali , composed and sung by A.R. Rahman, the song is a tribute to Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. It is based on the Raag Khamaj and beautifully blends devotion with classical and qawwali elements, creating a meditative and divine ambiance.

Ghar More Pardesiya (Kalank, 2019)

Sung by Shreya Ghoshal, this song is a mixture of five ragas Khamaj, Rageshwari, Bilawal, Shyam Kalyan and Alhaiya Bilawal and showcases intricate Kathak choreography. It symbolizes longing and cultural nostalgia, reinforcing the film's historical setting. Sharma (2013) explains that music as a non-verbal communication tool conveys emotions beyond language, making compositions like this integral to storytelling.

Results and Analysis

Narrative Enhancement: Indian classical music adds depth to Bollywood film narratives by evoking specific moods and reinforcing character emotions.

Cultural Preservation: The use of ragas in film compositions helps maintain India's classical music traditions while integrating them into contemporary settings.

Audience Engagement: Research indicates a growing appreciation for classical music in Bollywood, particularly in films by directors such as Sanjay Leela Bhansali and in projects like *Bandish Bandits* (2020).

Composer Contributions: The work of Khemchand, Naushad and Bhansali demonstrates the continued relevance of classical music in Bollywood's evolving soundscape.

Future Scope

With advancements in digital technology, Indian classical music can be further explored in cinematic compositions through AI-assisted music generation and virtual reality experiences. Future research can investigate global audience engagement with classical music in Bollywood and its influence on cross-cultural collaborations.

Conclusion

Indian classical music remains a fundamental aspect of Bollywood's sound identity, bridging tradition and innovation. While modern film music incorporates various global influences, classical compositions continue to shape cinematic storytelling, providing emotional and cultural depth. The evolving role of classical music in Bollywood highlights its adaptability, proving its timeless significance in the world of cinema.

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