

Exploring 100 Years of Bollywood's Infatuation with Birds

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Abstract: Bollywood is the popular name which encapsulates the Hindi film industry which is based in Mumbai in the Central Indian state of Maharashtra. Indian cinema, as is true for any other cinema in any other part of the world, is a reflection of the society it is located in. Film makers in Bollywood have always remained sensitive towards societal issues. At the same time, the films made in Bollywood have been such that the average Indian citizen can relate to them physically and/or emotionally. One theme that Bollywood has constantly explored and relied on is nature - flower and birds. The following paper attempts to analyze and explore the depiction of birds in Bollywood in the over 100 years long history of the latter. The paper also attempts to assess the changing trend in depiction of birds in Bollywood over this time period.

Keywords: Bollywood, birds, films, environmental awareness, human emotions.

Cinema in India is dominated by its Hindi speaking version, known as Bollywood. Indian cinema began much before the Independence of India (1947). The first feature film was shot by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913 in Marathi, and was titled "Raja Harishchandra" (based on a Sanskrit script). First sound movie of Indian cinema was made by Ardeshir Irani in 1931, with the title "Alam Ara", a South India production. Films continued to be made before independence, though the Golden age of Indian cinema started only after India's independence. Thus, the Indian film industry has been a witness to over 100 years of history and transformation of India, right from 1913 till the present day. It is for this reasons that several researchers have used the depictions in Bollywood as a case study for addressing various research questions on the Indian society (Rao, 2007; Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

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A characteristic feature of Bollywood, which sets it apart from certain other film industries, is the ubiquitous inclusion of songs in the films. The following research communication is an attempt to study the depiction of birds in the songs of Bollywood films over the last hundred years. The representation of birds is studied from the perspective of the species depicted and the expressions these depictions are used for. The Indian sub-continent has been home to a large number of birds since the very beginning (Ali and Ripley, 1990). Delhi, the National Capital Territory of India, itself boasts of being one of the most bird diversity rich capital city in the world. However, of late, unplanned urbanization and environmental pollution have led to the reduction in birds' number and diversity in Delhi. It is for this reason that sparrow, an otherwise commonly found bird, was declared the State Bird of Delhi in 2012. The research work therefore also attempts to explore the possibility of using film media as a tool for raising awareness for the conservation of avian diversity.

The research work was begun by making a database of all the songs which included the mentioning of birds in them. This was done by using the Internet as well as discussions with senior relatives. A total of 100 songs could be identified in this process. The songs were later searched on YouTube for further observation and the database was maintained. The database was then analyzed to check which bird species is being mentioned and what expression the depicted species depicts.

The rich avian biodiversity of India finds its mention in Indian cinema. Bollywood holds an important position in world cinema and has indeed provided adequate inclusion to India's bird diversity, which also has cultural relevance. At the very outset, the research finds that many of the films have titles which include names of birds or mention birds in general. Some of these are Hum Panchhi Ek Dal Ke (1957), Aas Ke Panchhi (1961), Pyase Panchhi

(1961), Tota Maina Ki Kahani (1976) and Lafangey Parindey (2010). A detailed analysis of the 100 songs reveals that in addition to the generic word panchii (bird) in the songs, the most commonly used bird is the peafowl (Fig. 1). The peacock has been used in songs from the beginning, perhaps because of its beauty and size. This perhaps also explains the reason why the peacock was chosen to be the National Bird of India in the 1960s even when ornithologist Salim Ali had recommended the endangered Great Indian Bustard to be made the National Bird of India (Ali, 1962). The sparrow, koyal, bulbul and parakeets are other birds which find prominent mention in the Bollywood songs to depict various human emotions. Interestingly, the parakeet and the myna are often used together to depict a love-pair even when these two are two different species altogether.

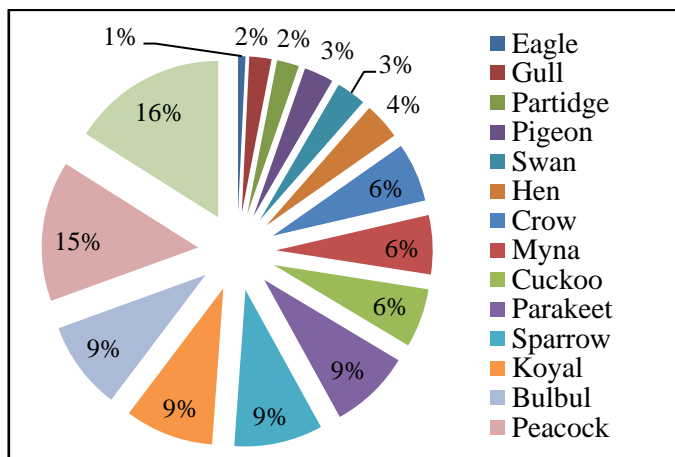


Figure 1. Percentage mention of different species of birds in Bollywood songs (Note that generic use of the word *panchhi/ parindey* has been excluded).

Birds are generally personified as human beings and considered to express all the emotions of a human. There are a lot of poetries, dance forms, sketches, classical music and different cultural art forms in which birds are depicted as a creatures with emotions. A similar finding came forward from analyzing the songs database. Throughout the hundred years of its existence, birds have been significantly used in Bollywood songs to showcase various other emotions of human life including love, happiness, freedom, sadness, etc. The human emotion most widely exhibited using bird as a metaphor is that of love (Fig. 2). This is followed by happiness, freedom, sadness and beauty. Some of the songs do bring forward important and true attributes of birds. For example, the song ‘Do Hanso Ka Joda’ (1961), actually represents the life-long bonding of the male and female individuals of the Sarus crane (Hammer, 2009).

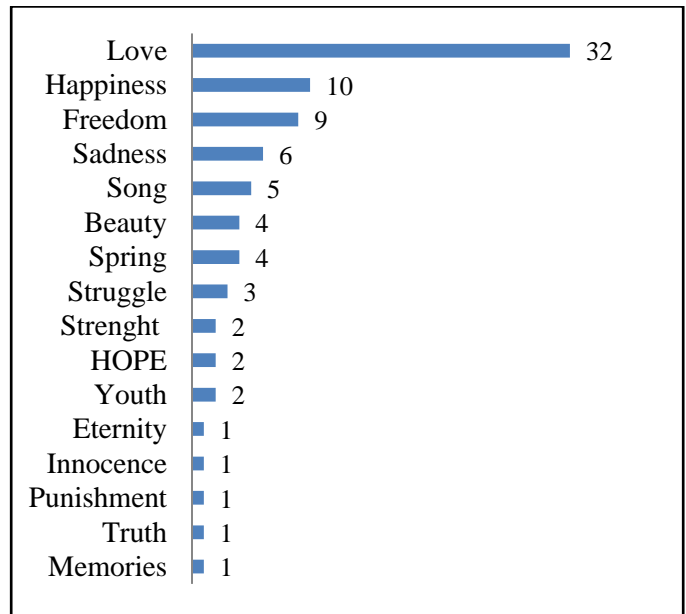


Figure 2. Percentage use of birds as metaphors for expressing different human emotions.

A great dance/ dancer is also often attributed to peacock or bulbul. Freedom is another human emotion which is often attributed to birds. The contribution of Bollywood in reminding the citizens about their natural heritage in terms of bird diversity cannot be ruled out. However, Bollywood has so far focused only on the more popular bird species most of which are not under threat of extinction. Bollywood can play a much more significant role in bird conservation if it can learn from local folklore and shift towards depicting endangered species of birds in some or the other form.

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