

S.D. Burman: The Royal Composer Who Gave Hindi Cinema Its Soul

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Abstract

This article examines the musical journey of Sachin Dev Burman from 1906 to 1975. Sachin Dev Burman, also known as S.D. Burman or "Burman Dada", was widely regarded as one of the pioneer music composers of Hindi cinema's golden-era. He was a trend setter whose work played a key role in evolving Indian film music between the 1940s and 1970s. This study analyses his relation with Bengali folk idioms, Hindustani classical traditions, and how he transformed modern music. Through historical review, filmography and testimonial evidence from collaborators, this paper argues that "Burman Dada" institutionalized melody as the structural and emotional core of mainstream Hindi film music. His career reflects the negotiation between regional identity and pan-Indian modernity.

Keywords: S. D. Burman, Hindi film music, Bengali folk idioms, melody, Indian cinema, Hindustani classical traditions.

Introduction

The golden age of Indian cinema cannot be imagined without the songs of S. D. Burman, affectionately known as "Burman Dada" (Anirudha Bhattacharjee, 2022). "Burman Dada", as a composer, was able to mix and match Indian folk music with classical and modern music. He was able to change the face of Hindi film music from the 1940s to the 1970s. He was able to set the tone of mainstream cinema. He was also able to establish that melody as the driving force of Hindi film music.

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The framework of this research article captures the paradoxical coexistence of both traditionality and modernity in his music. S.D.Burman re-contextualized the core of folk music into modern media systems, thereby transforming the folk-art form into national cultural expression. "Burman Dada" was also very calculative neither to abandon the regional specificity nor to allow it to be subsumed entirely by industrial standardization.

While earlier researchers have examined the development of playback singing and the industrial history of Hindi cinema, melody as a structuring principle of cinematic modernity has received comparatively less attention. By emphasising melody as a musical and ideological form for S.D.Burman this article fills this gap.

Three main points are made here: first, Burman's minimalist orchestral techniques constituted a purposeful aesthetic intervention; second, his work helped to create a common auditory culture that supported Indian modernity after independence; and third, testimonials of different eminent individuals about him and his work.

Research objectives

The following are the objectives of the current research:

1. To examine the formative factors that contributed to S.D.Burman's compositional identity.
2. To explore the development of his musical style in the industrial setting of Hindi cinema (1940-1975).
3. To assess his collaborative efforts with filmmakers, lyric writers, and playback singers, and their contribution to the definition of cinematic narrative through music.

S.D.Burman's early life

S. D. Burman was born on 1 October 1906 in Comilla, which was a part of the Bengal Presidency in British India (now Bangladesh) (Suran, 2014). He came from the royal family of Tripura. His father, Nabadwipchandra Dev Burman, was a renowned sitar player and dhrupad singer (Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, 2012). This ensured that music was an integral part of his childhood and upbringing. Despite his wealthy background, Burman was greatly influenced by the folk traditions of Bengal (Kusnur, 2025). He imbibed

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soulful sounds such as Bhatiali (boatmen's songs), Baul mysticism, and country devotional tunes. These sounds formed the backbone of his distinctive musical identity. Annu Kapoor on the radio program *Suhana Safar* shared one incident about S.D.Burman when he was young (Big, 2016). During his young age he loved to explore natural beauties of north east India with his friends. One day he and his friends went to explore by train without a ticket and got caught. Eventually he and his friends were jailed for a night. On that night he started singing a devotional bhajan. The song was so enchanting and filled with devotion that the station master and his sister, who were disturbed by the song, were deeply moved. Instead of being punished, Burman and his friends had dinner and were let off with honours the next morning. S.D.Burman was a pioneer of understanding the importance of folk music (Burman, S D Burman: *The World of His Music*,). His music brought essence of folk music in his songs. Although close to poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore being his father's friends, S.D.Burman's inspiration remain concentrated towards folk music.

Learning the craftsmanship

"Burman Dada" honed his craft under renowned maestros including K. C. Dey, Ustad Badal Khan, Allauddin Khan, and Pandit Bhishmadev Chattopadhyay (Bhattacharjee, 2024). By the early 1930s, he gained recognition in Bengal as a singer-composer, with his non-film Bengali songs becoming popular on the radio by 1932. In 1944, S.D.Burman shifted to Bombay (now Mumbai), the hub of Hindi films (now known as Bollywood). The early days of S. D. Burman were full of struggles. The music industry only favoured rich orchestration and dramatics, whereas Burman's music tended towards simpler and folk-inspired melodies (Burman, S.D.Burman: *The World Of His Music*, 2023). "Burman Dada's" music was influenced by folk tunes from Sari, Bhatiali and Dhamail traditions of north east India (Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, 2012). S.D. Burman had a very powerful accent which he used in his songs in a very poetic way. As Pandit Shivkumar Sharma said that Burman had an inner innocence and could compose for different situations while keeping a unique style, listeners could immediately recognize his music as soon the song starts (Lalwani, Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma on Dada

S.D. Burman, 2014). His first assignment in Hindi films was for the movie 'Shikari', directed by Savak Vacha and released on 5 January 1946 at Roxy Cinema in Bombay (Sivaramakrishnan, 2020). His first composition was sung by Ashok Kumar (Courtney). The initial struggles made him contemplate going back to Calcutta. But at this juncture, he was encouraged by actor Ashok Kumar to continue and sing for the film 'Mashaal'. The success of this film was the turning point, and Burman's position in the Mumbai film industry was cemented.

Golden era of music

The 1950s were the beginning of S.D. Burman's and Hindi cinema's golden period (Jhingan, 2011). S. D. Burman collaborated with Dev Anand and Navketan Films. His collaboration with Dev Anand and Navketan Films resulted in the production of classics such as: *Baazi*, *Taxi Driver*, *Nau Do Gyarah*, *Kala Pani* and *Guide* (Ranade, 2006). In an interview Dev Anand said in 1987, "He was a great master of music, a great composer, a great singer" (Emotions, 2021). He also added that Burman's unique singing style made it impossible for anyone else to recreate the same magic. S.D.Burman worked with one of the India's eminent filmmaker Guru Dutt. They together created one of Indian cinema's most emotionally charged musical landmarks named "*Pyaasa*". Songs like "*Jaane Woh Kaise Log The*" and "*Yeh Duniya Agar Mil Bhi Jaaye*" continue to express deep existential emotions. Waheeda Rehman on an interview said she credited Burman's composition "*Jaane Kya Tune Kahi*" for boosting her recognition and public appreciation (Lalwani, Waheeda Rehman on S.D. Burman Dada (Part One), 2016).

On S.D. Burman's influence on music of past generations, Annu Malik in one of his interviews said he grew up listening to S.D.Burman's songs (Lalwani, Anu Malik on Maestro Sachin Dev Burman (HD), 2018). He also stated that what "Burman Dada" has composed, it would take another 1000 years even to come close to any one of his songs. S.D.Burman collaborated with many iconic playback singers including Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Asha Bhosle resulting in timeless classics. His major works are segregated throughout the decades. In 1940s his few famous works were - *Do Bhai*, *Vidya* and *Shabnam*. In 1950s some of his famous

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works were - *Jaal*, *Devdas*, *House No. 44*, *Funtoosh* and *Sujata*. In 1960s his major works were - *Kala Bazar*, *Bandini*, *Tere Ghar Ke Samne*, *Jewel Thief* and *Aradhana*. The era of '70s is an important time for both Indian cinema and S.D.Burman. A unique nature of popular films and music shaped the Hindi cinema (Booth G. D., 2011). S.D.Burman was one of the pioneers of that movement. In 1970s, his major works were - *Prem Pujari*, *Gambler*, *Abhimaan*, *Chupke Chupke* and *Mili*. *Mili* was his final completed work, released in the year of his death. He is so widely celebrated throughout the country that Ramesh Tendulkar named his son Sachin Tendulkar after S. D. Burman-a lasting tribute from one generation of talent to another (Chowdhury R. R., 2025). While making *Aradhana*, Burman faced a serious heart issue. His son, R.D. Burman, played a significant role in orchestration and recording. The soundtrack became historic. "*Mere Sapno Ki Rani*" and "*Roop Tera Mastana*" helped Kishore Kumar become the leading male playback voice of the 1970s. Legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan also expressed his admiration for "Burman Dada's" music and unique singing style (Suran, 2014). He felt his voice resembled 'mitti.' Mr. Bachchan also recalled working on the film "*Abhimaan*" with him, cherishing those songs. He described Burman Da as a simple man, with the simplest habits and lived in a simplest of environments. S.D. Burman also made Gulzar enter the film industry. During his book launch he said that he used to work in a motor garage. "Burman Dada" took him to the film industry (Lalwani, Gulzar on Dada S.D. Burman, 2014). He described Burman's behaviour as "princely."

In the late 1950s, professional disagreements caused a temporary split between S.D.Burman and Lata Mangeshkar. Lata Mangeshkar on one of her interviews said, she got offended by an article where "Burman Dada" said Lata was made by the composers only (Jha, 2023). During this time, he worked more with Asha Bhosle and other singers. The rift ended in the early 1960s, leading to renewed creativity in films like *Bandini* and *Guide*, showcasing his flexibility and artistic strength. S. D. Burman passed away on 31 October 1975 in Bombay at the age of 69 after a long illness (Desk, 2021). During his illness also he remained dedicated towards his work. He refused to go to hospital as said by his son R.D.Burman because he

had a recording with Kishore Kumar. Audiences kept enjoying the melodies of *Chupke Chupke* and *Mili* during his final months (Chowdhury H. , 2018).

Influence of Indian musical traditions

The influence of Indian traditions is very much visible in the songs of S.D.Burman. He was very much influenced by the folk music which are deeply rooted into his compositions. Batiyali, is a style of music which is associated with Bengali boatmen's songs. This can be heard in many of his film songs. Some of his songs where it is very much eminent are *Bandani* (1963), *Guide* (1965), and *Prem Nagar* (1974). His affirmation towards Indian musical traditions can also be seen by the use of instruments in his songs. "Burman Dada" tried to use more Indian instruments in his songs than western instruments. Flute was one of the common instruments that he used. Songs like "*Sun Mere Bandhu Re*" and "*Gaata Rahe Mere Dil*" we can see the significant use of flute as an instrument to make the song more soothing for the listeners. To give an essence of classical touch, S.D.Burman also used Sitar as an accompanying instrument. We can find that in songs like "*Pia Tose Naina Laage Re*" and "*Mo Se Chhal Kiye Jaaye*". His folk influence is also very much eminent in his selection of instruments. He used Ektara also in many of his songs like "*O Re Majhi Mere Saajan Hain Us Paar*" and "*Sun Mere Bandhu Re*". It is not that he would only stick to Indian musical instruments; in many of his works we can also find us of western instruments. For example, he used acoustic guitar in the song "*Khoya Khoya Chand*" and saxophone in the song "*Yeh Raat Yeh Chandni Phir Kahan*". Another key aspect that kept S.D.Burman's songs very much culturally rooted is using musical styles with the film's narrative situations; this is also referred to as Indian classical or folk idioms (Booth G. , 2009-2010). This synergy between the film's concept and the music produced by him kept his compositions significant for Indian culture.

Musical aesthetics

S.D.Burman's musical aesthetics can be categorised as minimalistic melody. He preferred using melodic lines over complex musical elements. The songs which are immensely popular till this

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day because they are built around memorable melodic phrases. This helps the listeners to create an emotional engagement and also this helps them to remember the song. Melody was the most important factor in his songs. "Burman Dada" meticulously used rhythms which are both easy to remember and can be easy to understand. The period from 1950s to 1970s also experienced a shift in the use of music from royal courts to more public and democratized systems (Sarrazin, 2020). The music became more accessible to the people and laid groundwork for the rise of prominent musicians and film composers who would influence Indian popular music. S.D.Burman was one of the first musicians who made it a practice, to make his songs more connected to the listeners, he used singers voice as the focal point of his compositions and used music just to compliment the vocals. He had a keen ear of selecting singers which will easily blend with the emotions of the situation. This kind of practice is very much common in the tribal songs, which definitely been a key inspiration for S.D.Burman in his entire music carrier. "Burman Dada" firmly believed that a song in a film should always compliment the film, the song should exactly carry the emotions based on the situation of the film where the song is introduced. Ultimately it can be concluded that S.D.Burman's musical sense and aesthetics lie in his ability to balance sophistication with simplicity. This created compositions which are timeless, cultural rooted and gathered emotional appeal from the mass audiences.

Conclusion

S.D. Burman was more than a composer. His contribution to Indian music gave a pathway to many upcoming singers, music directors and composers to make modern music with a traditional touch. His melody became grammar of modern Indian music. His artistic vision didn't go unnoticed. Throughout his career, "Burman Dada" received multiple awards. He won multiple *Filmfare* awards, for his film *Abhimaan*, *Taxi Driver* (Filmfare). He was awarded Padma Sri by Government of India in 1969 (Affairs). Although his greatest achievement was how he impacted the Indian music industry. Even decades after he passed, people throughout India admire the legendary musician S.D.Burman simply as "Burman Dada".

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