

Sound of Horror: Sound and Dread in Hindi Cinema

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"There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it."--
Alfred Hitchcock

Mainstream Indian cinema is known throughout the world for its excessive and much debated use of songs. Anyone familiar with mainstream Indian cinema can tell you how different it is from films of any other country. Through the years it has also been observed that any Indian film that is a commercial success, owes a lot to its dialogues. But it is quite surprising to observe that film sound *per se* (i.e. background score, effects sound, etc.) has been a neglected area in the study of Indian cinema until recently, with a few exceptions.

Hindi 'horror' films have been operating mostly in the "B" grade halls, offering a sleazy kind of entertainment to a lower class audience. Such films have suffered from all sorts of problems arising out of working in the underbelly of the industry. These used to be typically low budget films. But recently, one can observe a change in the production of horror films. Films dealing with supernatural subjects have been catching up with their romantic or other generic counterparts. But what is more interesting about this phenomenon is the use of sound in them. There is much debate whether Indian films can be classified into genres, but definitely there are instances where a certain group of films can be clubbed together according to thematic preoccupations. The Indian horror film, in that sense, can constitute a generic object for us.

In this paper I will try to investigate the reasons behind this sudden upsurge of the films which can be loosely clubbed under the 'horror' genre. But I do

not intend to limit the study to horror, but will try to address a larger domain, i.e., the realm of 'dread'. While doing so, I will also touch upon films that use sound to invoke the atmosphere of 'dread'. One could take into account any mainstream Hindi film having some emphasis on the sound design to create the atmosphere of 'dread'. But before I start my analysis, I would like to suggest a distinction between two terms, 'dread' and 'fear', which will help me explain my point. Let me say what I mean by the distinction between 'dread' and 'fear'. By 'fear', I point to emotions of a more visceral kind, something like a physical threat, which does not leave its impact on a psychological level for a prolonged period. I do not mean fear does not have any psychological impact or it does not have any psychological basis attached to it. I am trying to point out that 'fear' is more inclined towards an instant reaction and is definitely a short-lived one. In short, 'fear' is more of a bodily reaction. 'Dread', on the other hand, is a purely psychological phenomenon. It is meant to stay and it is often culture and class specific. 'Dread' does not lie in the threat of being physically hurt, but in the anticipation of an unknown attack. I will try to elaborate on these terms further as the discussion proceeds.

It is evident from the nature and subject of the films that there is a definite difference between films with supernatural subjects and those dealing with other subjects but using sound to invoke 'dread'. Therefore, I have tried to treat these two categories differently. Firstly, I will take up the case of horror films. The primary purpose of these films is to frighten the audience. Now, in the process of frightening people, horror films use two methods: either create some kind of a monster, or adopt a device to produce some kind of shock, Indian horror films can be divided distinctly in two different generations depending on their visual style, treatment and target audience. But what intrigues me is the marked shift in sound design over the last few years in horror films. Definitely, there is a shift in the visual style as they move from monsters to shock, from visceral 'fear' to psychological 'dread'.

But to study the change in sound design I would draw attention to the devices used to create 'dread' and 'fear' on screen.

According to Nic Ransome, screen writer and script consultant, "By definition, the Supernatural cannot be contained, circumscribed or erased. Horror, at its most fundamental level, plays out Freud's return of the repressed, and as all humanity is only too painfully aware, you can't ever fully destroy the repressed. The best you can do is repress it again..."^[1]. Now, if we look at the earlier sleazy, 'B' grade horror films made by the Ramsay Brothers and circulating mostly in the underbelly of mainstream Hindi cinema, we will find out that those films involved monstrous figures, which came back at regular intervals and scared the audience. With their not so convincing make-up and antique behaviour they lacked 'realism'. But since the whole construction of the monster was a visual one there was not much scope for sound-designers, except for adding ghastly effect sounds. Take, for example, the case of *Purani Haveli* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1989). The plot is somewhat like the following: Kumar buys an old mansion deep in the countryside from Rana. When Kumar goes to take possession of the mansion, he takes his orphaned niece Anita and her friends, Shobha and Anand. Kumar's wife Seema and her brother, Vikram, who wants to marry Anita, also join them. Anita's friends secretly invite Anita's lover Sunil over. They in turn invite several other friends, including Sunil's assistant, Manghu, and travel in a bus. What the group does not know is the mansion holds an evil secret, and that beneath the mansion, locked in a dungeon by its very own biological father, lies a monster - and its primary diet is human meat. The plot conforms to Ransome's claim and shows that the source of fear has to be generated visually through the evil acts of the monster. Several other films such as *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche* (Tulsi Ramsay, 1972), *Darwaza* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1978), *Guest House* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1980), *Sannata* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1981), *Dahshat* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1981), *Purana Mandir* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1984), *Haveli* (Keshu Ramsay, 1985), *Saamri* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1985), *Veerana* (Shyam

and Tulsi Ramsay,1988), *Tahkhana* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay,1986), *Dak Bangla* (Keshu Ramsay,1987) and *Shaitani Ilaaka* (Kiran Ramsay,1990) seem to support this claim. With minimal variations the plot remains more or less the same, and so does the visual and aural invocation of fear.

But as we move towards the late 90's horror films, we see a growing charge of realism. This second generation of horror films does not depend on the scary monsters, but more on everyday figures. In Ram Gopal Varma's horror films, for example, ghosts are not monstrous; they look very much like us. Now, if you do not show the monster, you need to create some audio clues that suggest the uncanny-ness of the characters or the plot. But I would like to inquire why Varma cannot show the monster. It can very well be a director's decision to use or refrain from using certain cinematic devices, but my question is: Is there anything else that forces this decision? If we take a closer look we may find that unlike the Ramsay films, Varma's films are not meant for the 'B' circuit film halls, they are targeted towards a more urban, literate and affluent audience; these are multiplex films. There is a marked difference between the target audience and reception pattern of the two kinds of horror films.

What is common to all supernatural narratives is that they all deal with something of the unworldly origin. Keith Hennessey Brown draws upon Tzvetan Todorov's work on *The Fantastic* (1973)^[2] in his discussion of Hollywood horror films. Todorov, in a study of literary narratives of the supernatural, proposes five categories, 'marvellous', 'marvellous/fantastical', 'fantastical', 'fantastical/uncanny' and 'uncanny', with the point of distinction lying in the attitudes taken towards phenomena beyond our everyday experience. In the 'marvellous', the existence of a supernatural being is not to be called into question—it simply is. In the 'marvellous/fantastical', the real existence of a supernatural being would initially be questioned, but ultimately accepted, other explanations having been exhausted. In pure 'fantasy', the existence or non-existence of a supernatural being remains undecided. Its existence cannot be proved but it cannot be disproved too. In

the 'fantastical/uncanny', as opposed to the 'marvellous/fantastical', we would initially wonder about its existence, then finally find a natural explanation to prove it was not something supernatural. Finally, in the 'uncanny', we would be in no doubt from the outset that such beings do not exist and the supernatural being in question, therefore, must be something else. The earlier films like *Bandh Darwaza* (Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay, 1990), *Purani Haveli* or *Tahkhana* belonged to the 'marvellous' category; whereas recent films like *Darna Mana Hai* (Prawal Raman, 2003) or *Bhoot* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2003) belong more to the categories of 'marvellous/fantastical' or simply 'fantastical'.

Therefore, what is evident here is that from a purely unquestioning and passive attitude horror films are shifting towards the domain of doubt. Though the earlier films added effects sound to establish the monstrosity of the ghost, it had little to do with its frightening effect. Since in the later films there is no monster present on screen to frighten people there has to be an alternative way to create the effect of 'dread', and that has to be something else than a visual clue. What is peculiar to these films is their minimal use of background music. Unlike other Hindi films, these depend heavily on ambient and effects sound. As the supernatural world is supposed to be beyond the reach of living people using only ambient sound may be a statement to underline that we are merely intruders there. All supernatural audio incidents are overheard by us. Elisabeth Weis's argument of "eavesdropping" as an aural-analogy to "voyeurism" notes, "Although psychoanalysts vary in their interpretations, all agree that overhearing is a primal phenomenon that invokes anxiety. Freud thus prefigured the very cinematic axiom that a threat that is heard but left unseen can allow the audience to imagine something more terrifying than anything a filmmaker could embody in a specific image."^[3] The transition from sleazy 'B' circuit horror flicks to the sleek multiplex films is therefore a journey from spectacle to anxiety. Rather than showing a scary figure directors are using the psychological impact of a shock and to creating the 'atmosphere' of fear. If we try to investigate the

reason behind this shift we will have to think of the fact that urban space is based on distractions. The visual style of these films relies heavily on short takes and close ups, whereas sound works more or less in continuum. So, a planned jerk in the audio track immediately grips the audience with an eerie feeling. In this connection, one can investigate the specific effect that is used to create 'dread'. Take for example the soundtracks of *Bhoot* or *Darna Zaruri Hai* (by six directors including Ram Gopal Varma, 2006) that are full of such planned audio jerks. If we carefully listen to the soundtrack of the horror films of recent times, we will find there is not much music in them. Most of the film relies on natural ambient sounds. This is the result of the growing realist tendency in Indian mainstream cinema. This trend restricts the commercial directors in using music, or in abruptly breaking into a song. These films rarely have any song sequences; and even if they have one it is not likely to be used in the main body of the film.

As the crowd grows more urban for horror films in India, the city dweller's fear of the countryside, *Urbanoia*, is now being turned into the uncertainty of the modern city life. Fear and anxiety come from the unpredictability and ever-changing surroundings of the city life. As the city keeps changing at an incredibly rapid speed, one is always uncertain about the next change, and perhaps one also starts believing in the possibility of the impossible happening. In the city you don't even know whether the man living next door exists at all. Take, for instance, one of the episodes of *Darna Mana Hai* involving John Rodriguez (Nana Patekar) and Amar (Vivek Oberoi). John hitches a ride in Amar's car in a place close to a desolate cemetery and claims himself to be a ghost during the conversation. In spite of Amar's dogged skepticism John keeps on claiming he is a ghost and resorts to more and more unrealistic and weird means to frighten Amar. Finally, when Amar tries to throw him away out of disgust from his car, he finally admits that he is playing his part in a famous television programme to fool people. But when he wonders why Amar never got afraid for a single moment, Amar reveals he is the ghost and disappears, leaving John in utter shock. Closer examinations

of such plots simply suggest the source of 'dread' in the new horror films remains in the intelligent play of the cinematic devices. A monster just cannot do it; the shock effect stems from the startling similarity of the ghost with a common man.

The other group of films that involve scenes which deal with 'dread' are the underworld films. Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975) is definitely a milestone in sound design in Indian cinema. *Sholay* for the first time tried to link a specific background score to a specific person and successfully created the atmosphere of fear through sound. One more thing to note about *Sholay* is that it convincingly used eerie sounds for which the source cannot be determined. Curiously enough, Ram Gopal Varma uses the same kind of effects sound in *Sarkar* (2005) to establish the fear and awe about the character of Subhash Nagre (Amitabh Bachhan). Now, films about underworld are definitely of a different kind altogether. They do not operate in the zone of horror but can be linked to terror.

This, crucially, is something that distinguishes works of horror from works of terror, "which, though eerie and unnerving, achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychological phenomena that are all too human."^[4] In other words, going back to Todorov, we may say that, whereas the domain of horror is the marvellous/fantastic, that of terror is the fantastic/uncanny and the uncanny—those narratives in which the existence of the supernatural is posited only in order to be denied or the supernatural plays no part; that the domain of terror is that of 'reality'. Another formulation might be that where horror emphasizes the transgression of the 'natural', terror foregrounds that of the human or social. My question is why sound becomes so important in the recent films to create the sensation of 'dread' as a whole? The above cases show that these films have started to address the dilemmas of the urban mind rather than just emphasizing the performance. Both at the level of content and treatment, these films show an increasing complexity of characters and plots, and an enhanced realism. The world around us does not present any monsters in that way but we often face atrocities from fellow

beings. A realist film cannot show monsters, but it may be required to keep the atmosphere of 'dread' alive. Sound originating outside the scopic world can be easily related to the fear of unknown. Through years of viewing practice we have learnt to interpret the visual codes, but the aural world of cinema still largely remains outside our explanatory competence. Therefore, anything done through the soundtrack strikes us more immediately. In the case of terror films, my suggestion is, there is a shift in the primary emphasis from visual to audio-track in an attempt to do away with onscreen violence. I will have to bring in the question of the urban spectator once more here. For the urban literate audience, the blood and gore on screen may prove only too disturbing and unrealistic. The everyday encounter with violence in the city life often works towards making people both hyper- and non-sensitive to such issues. So, the visual depiction of violence often does not affect them psychologically as much as sound does. It is always more effective to hear a gunshot than to actually see a man die. Think of the gang-war of *Sathya* (Ram Gopal Varma, 1998) that climaxes on a railway overbridge in the killing of a ganglord owes its share of shock and dread to the magnified double gun burst sounds of *Sathya* and *Bhikhu*, mixed with ambient rail station sounds. Similarly, the surprise of a the underworld network spreading through phone calls owes its invocation of the atmosphere of dread to the use of the very common ringtone sounds mixed and magnified in a chaotic manner in *Company* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2002).

In the recent years, there has been a significant change in the technology involved in film-making and film-screening facilities. While the filmmaking process has started to move towards sync-sound, film-viewing facilities have grown towards the surround sound experience. Today, any theatre has a multi-channel sound projection facility. More channels mean more clarity in sound. Therefore not a single little sound goes unnoticed by the audience. They can pick up the slightest clues in audio. This technological advancement plays a major role in the sound design of a film. With incredibly clear audio reception one can take the risk to experiment with sound-design knowing it

will be heard by the audience. The sound mixers today are capable of producing synthetic sounds that cannot be produced naturally. Now, such a sound keeps one guessing about its origin. Along with this, there has been an increased interest in producing lower frequency sounds. With the new woofer, sub-woofer and bass-boost facilities, one can now produce sound of extremely low frequency. The background score of the opening credit of *Bhoot* is a perfect example of privileging low and medium frequencies and underplaying higher ones. The peculiarity about low frequency sound is that it can give the audience a sense of pseudo-silence. By the term pseudo-silence I mean an intense atmosphere of unrecognisable sounds. The audience actually has to hear the sound less and feel it more. The urban cityscape provides sound-designers with an array of weird and unidentifiable sounds. Someone living in a city for a long time loses his/her capacity to individually identify each of those sounds, as one always keeps hearing a mixture of a thousand of them. Therefore, when someone hears the bang of a door, ten times magnified than it usually is, and isolated from the mix of other sounds, it comes as a shock. If a director uses this kind of a sound with no visual clue attached to it, the effect is dramatic. Most of those who have seen *Bhoot* in a movie theatre will understand the experience I am talking about. So, there is a new viability for low frequency, isolated and magnified sound to create the atmosphere of dread. The new class of films are targeted towards an urban literate audience, who are not ready to see those sleazy, low budget horror films. They have a hunger for crime-thrillers that have complex characters, plot and narrative density. These facts contribute to a film viewing practice that demands the filmmakers to impact psychologically and not just show, but also make one hear and feel the sounds of horror.

References:

1 Nick Ransome, "Fear is the key", *Scriptwriter*, Issue 15, March 2004.

2 Keith Hennessey Brown, "[Notes on the terror film](#)", *Forum: The University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and Arts*, Issue 2, Spring 2006.

[3](#) Elisabeth Weis, "Eavesdropping : An aural analogue of voyeurism?", *Cinesonic: The World of Sound in Film*, ed. Philip Brophy (North Ryde: Australian Film Television & Radio School, 1999)

[4](#) Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. (New York: Routledge, 1990)