



Worth of the words

An analysis of the top 200 Hindi songs over the last decade reveals that there has been a resurgence of songs with meaningful lyrics

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Summary

- Compared to 2011-15, the proportion of Hindi songs driven by their lyrical depth, than their beats, increased in 2016-20
- This trend has emerged in parallel with the rise of Arijit Singh as a superstar singer over the last few years
- The findings lay to rest concerns around today's Bollywood music being all beats and no soul

There has been a lot of talk in recent years about how Bollywood music is losing its soul. Those who have heard the music of the golden era (the 60s & the 70s), and even the 90s, lament about how meaningful lyrics have been overpowered by nondescript words set to

noisy beats. The 'expert' opinion going around is that most songs these days are conceived as music videos, and lack emotional depth and texturing.

At first glance, this hypothesis could seem right. There are more remixes today than ever before, rap has proliferated Hindi film music, and Punjabi words are being used as hooks to create catchy dance numbers. Do lyrics even matter anymore in a Hindi film song, one may wonder?

Unsure of how true these perceptions are, we decided to test this hypothesis using some hard data from **Ormax Heartbeats (OHB)**, which is Ormax Media's weekly music popularity tracking tool, in existence since September 2010. OHB tracks Hindi songs every week based on consumer research among music consumers across platforms. Each song is assigned an OHB score based on two parameters: Recall & Likeability. Recall captures the buzz (conversation value) around the song, while Likeability is a measure of how satisfying the experience of watching or listening to the song is, and hence, how much repeat value the song carries.

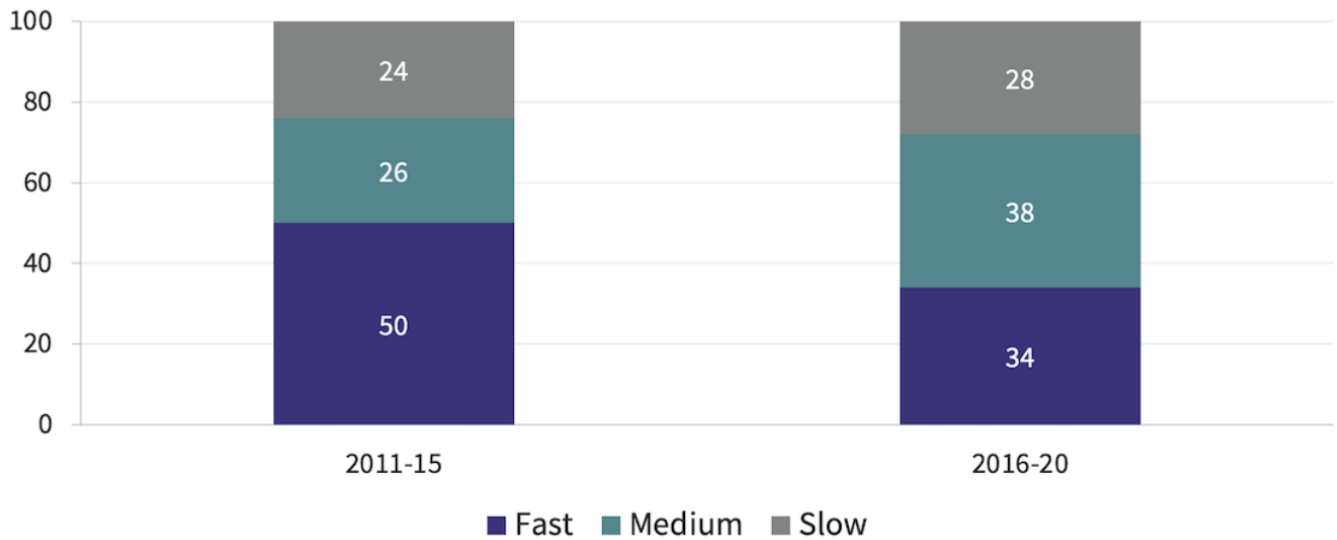
We looked at two time periods: **2011-15 and 2016-20**. For each period, we looked at the Top 100 songs on OHB, based on their cumulative performance across their lifetime. If the hypothesis stated above were true, the second period would have more songs that work for their beats and their videos, than for their lyrics.

We classified these 200 songs on two parameters. The first parameter **Tempo** is used commonly by music channels and radio stations as an important programming filter. Songs were classified as **Fast, Medium & Slow**, based on their tempo. The second parameter **Lyric Type** is a simplistic but very useful way of looking at songs through the binary of **Hook vs. Depth**. Songs whose lyrics rely on a hook-word or a hook-line were classified as the former, while those that rely on poetry and soul to convey an emotion were classified as the latter.

The findings can come as a surprise to many. The proportion of fast songs in the Top 100 list has dropped significantly in the second time period. From as many as 50 out of 100

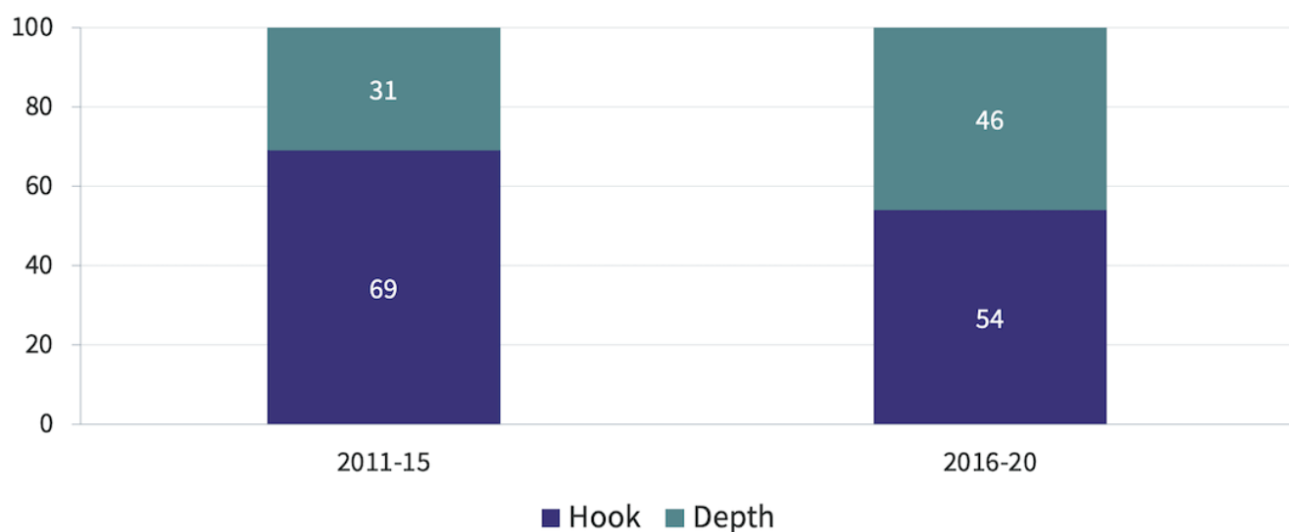
songs being fast-tempo in 2011-15, the number stood at only 34 in 2016-20. The shift has largely been towards medium-tempo songs.

Tempo Break-up of Top 100 songs



In line with the shift with tempo, there has been a significant shift in the lyric type too. Hook-led songs dominated the first time period, with 69 out of 100 songs falling in this category. However, the second time period sees a more balanced profile, with a shift of 15 songs from hook-led to depth-led category.

Lyric Type Break-up of Top 100 songs



Some of the biggest hits in the 2016-20 period are medium and slow-tempo songs whose lyrics are high on substance and depth. 2019's biggest album, Kabir Singh, leads this list with three songs. Two songs each from Ae Dil Hai Mushkil, Dil Bechara, Half Girlfriend, Kesari and Raazi add to this group of songs.

There's an unmistakable Arijit Singh impact in this list, with as many as 17 Arijit songs among the 46 depth-led ones, compared to just 5 out of the 54 hook-led songs. Arijit shot into limelight with Aashiqui 2 in 2013, which means that he was in the reckoning in only half of the first time period. Compared to 22 songs in the second time period, he has only 11 in the first, of which 9 are depth-led.



It's quite remarkable that a single artist can have such a strong impact on the music landscape of the Hindi film industry in such a short span of time. But it's also a case of unmet consumer demand for a certain type of music being addressed by the artist in question. Heartbreak songs (also called 'love failure' songs by many in India) have been a hallmark of our film music for decades, and Arijit's arrival on the scene may have been perfectly timed, given that this category of songs was losing ground in the period leading up to Aashiqui 2.

It's not such bad news after all. The soul is finding its way back into Hindi film music, it seems. Both types of music, the fast party songs, and those with depth and substance in their words, have found a way to co-exist, at least for now. Post the lockdown, nostalgia has

been in vogue, and this could fuel the making of more songs with an old-world romantic charm, at least for the next couple of years.

So, lyrics matter, and will continue to. Take our word for it.