

Tribute

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The Lady Who Pioneered Bollywood Dance as A Different Genre: Saroj Khan



Introduction of Nirmala Krishnachand Shadhu Nagpal

In 1948, a girl named Nirmala Sadhu Nagpal was born to parents, Krishnachand Sadhu Singh Nagpal and Nonni Singh Nagpal. Both were partition sufferers who migrated to India. Upon reaching India, they could manage to find a small place at Mahim in Mumbai (then known as Bombay). When Nirmala was 3, she used to see her shadow and move her hands. Occasionally, she would even jump and dance. Her parents were so worried that they visited a doctor. After diagnosis, the doctor told her parents “she loves dancing, let her dance.” The same doctor introduced her parents to a few people from the film industry, and this is how Nirmala Nagpal started her career at the tender age of three. She danced in the film *Aagosh* (1953) as Radha, and as baby ‘Shyama’ in the film *Nazrana* (1961). Then, this little child grew up to become the famous Indian ‘Choreographer’ Saroj Khan, who introduced nuances of Bollywood dancing to the Indian audience.

The veteran Saroj Khan started her journey from a child artist to a background dancer for Madhubala in the song ‘Aiyee mehereban’ in *Howrah Bridge* (1958) and many more. She was a student of the much-renowned dance master B. Sohanlal, who taught dance nuances to great dancers and actors like Vyjayanthimala, Dev Anand, Waheeda Rahman, Shashi Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna, and so. At the age of 13, Saroj Khan became Sohanlal’s assistant. She then learned and started teaching dancing, expressions, beats, hands, and leg movements to many leading actors. She was also the first lady who made her presence felt in the world of choreographers which was rather patriarchal.

The legacy of Saroj Khan as a background dancer to dance master

India is known for its rich, vast, and diverse cultural heritage. Indian dance styles have numerous patterns and aesthetics from classical to folk dances. Every dance style is treated as a celebration, and songs are an integral part

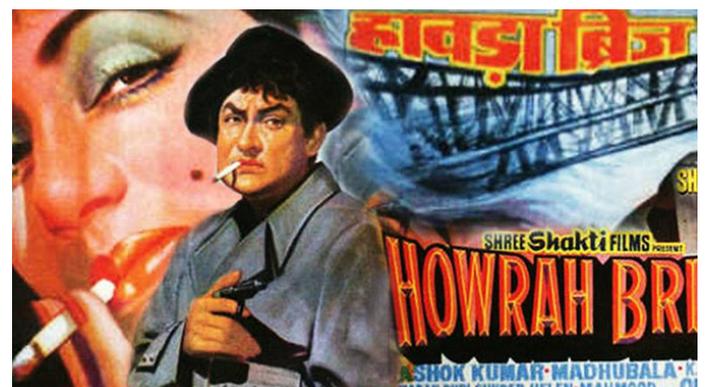
of the Indian film industry. If we talk about dancing in Indian cinema, mainly in the early 50s and 60s, shoot locations were mainly studio-based. There were many film songs based on westernized rock & roll, twists, and a few classical or semi-classical opera-based themes.



Saroj Khan's journey cannot be started or completed without her dance master B. Sohanlal, one of the finest dance masters from Rajasthan and professionally based in Chennai. His (B. Sohanlal) excellence in Kathak and other classical dance forms and his minute nuances of expressions, made him the first choice of leading filmmakers to choreograph dancing divas like Vyjanthimala, Madhubala, and Helen. He was one of the uniquely talented and highly acclaimed choreographers in the film industry from the year 1958 to 1978. In contrast to Sohanlal's stature, Saroj Khan was a minor girl who fed her family with her dancing roles in the film industry. There was a time in her life when she was not demanded as a child artist as she grew up to be a teenager. She lost her father at the age of 10 but she continued to be a part of many film songs as a background/ group dancer. Thereafter, it was a blessing in disguise, she somehow managed to join B. Sohanlal (Masterji) dance group.

The then ace choreographer B. Sohanlal never had any dance assistant. While completing dance sequences, he used to assign his dancers, different stanza. Once Sohanlal was choreographing a dance sequence for a film, as usual, he assigned the sequences to different

dancers and Saroj was one of them. At that point, Saroj completed her portion and started repeating sequences assigned to others. Sohanlal noticed this, though he was annoyed and asked Saroj, why was she copying dance steps instead of practicing her own sequence. However, the Master asked her to perform the sequence. What else? She was waiting for this opportunity! Dancing in front of her Master, she surprised him with every movement he taught or assigned to other dancers and the leading lady. At a very young age she was probably the first dance assistant to Master Sohanlal. She continued as a dance assistant to Masterji for the next 20 years. When she started her journey as assistant choreographer, the first lady she trained was the ace dancer Vyjanthimala in the film *Dr. Vidya* (1962), directed by Rajendra Bhatia, and it was a classical dance for the song 'Pawan diwani na mane'. Though Saroj Khan was never a trained classical dancer, her talent gave her this chance. Then, the journey continued with many films like *Aayi Milan Ki Bela*, *Nartakee*, *Guide*, *Dil Hi to Hai*, *Farz*, *Mera Saya*, *Bobby*, and so on. Whatever Khan learned, she was a gift of her guru. Be it the minute expressions, nuances of Kathak, mudras of Bharatnatyam, or other cinematic rhythmic expressions. Saroj Khan eventually became Sohanlal's wife at the age of 13 when he was 43. However, her personal life was a roller coaster ride. As an assistant choreographer with Sohanlal, she created and composed many dance sequences for two decades in many renowned films like 1967 *Jewel Thief*, 1971 *Hare Ram Hare Krishna*, 1973 *Bobby*, 1971 *Hulchul*, and many more.



Saroj Khan was always cordial with her leading heroines and heroes and all of them used to admire her dancing excellence. The ace actor Sadhana was very close to her, and was very much convinced with her work that she told the director R.K. Nayyar to give her (Saroj) an opportunity as an independent choreographer. Her first breakthrough as an independent female choreographer was with the film *Geeta Mera Naam* (1974).

Saroj Khan's journey was never easy. From the inception of the Indian film industry, except leading actresses or main artists, mostly directors, producers, and the lead actors used to dominate the industry. Being in a male-dominated industry, Saroj Khan was the first lady to have started her expedition as the first female choreographer. Nevertheless, it took a few more years to achieve the recognition she deserved. Meanwhile, in her initial days, she had independently choreographed hit films like



Hero (1983) with Jackie Shroff and Meenkshi Sheshadri, in *Nagina* (1986) the famous song with Shridevi "Main teri dushman", *Hifazat* (1987), and a few Tamil films like *Thai Veedu* (1983) with Rajnikant and so on, until she grabbed all eyes in her epic dance sequence of the film *Tezaab* for the song 'Ek do teen'. In her prolonged career, she choreographed approximately three thousand songs.

Saroj Khan's accomplishment as Choreographer with Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit

Every teenager of the late 1980s and 90s danced in the tunes and steps of Sridevi's and Madhuri's dance numbers. Both leading actresses always complimented Saroj Khan's

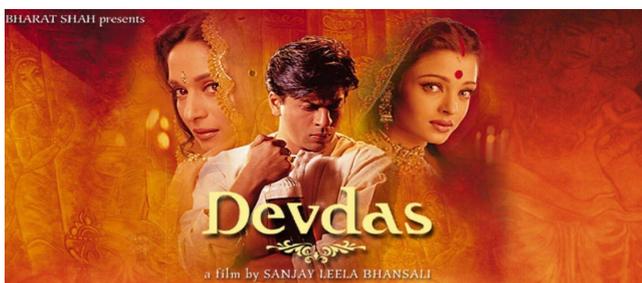
dance moves and expressions. Saroj Khan had a long association with these two ladies and both were equally famous for their dancing apart from acting. Saroj Khan's first film with Sridevi was *Nagina* (1986) in the song 'Main teri dushman'. The song immediately grabbed the audience's attention. Then, the unforgettable evergreen song 'Kaaate nahi kat te ye din ye raat', in the film *Mr. India* (1987), Sridevi's sensuous chiffon saree dance. This song was indeed an instant hit. In the same film, the pick of Sridevi's expressions in the song 'Hawa hawai' spilled over with numerous expressions, and they were all created by Saroj Khan. The saga continued together with the comic sequence 'Na jane kaha se ayi hai' from the film *Chalbaaz* (1989), then again, the snake woman dance in the film *Nigahen* (1988). The film *Chandni* (1989) when Sridevi performed in a semi-classical dance wearing a white attire in the shooting locations of Switzerland was another mesmerizing piece of brilliance. The same film had another famous song, which then became a household marriage anthem 'Mere hantho mein nau nau chudhiya hai'. By then, Sridevi was a superstar and the saga continued.

There is a saying that partnerships create opportunities and it increases when you help others to win. This is the apt phrase for Saroj Khan and Madhuri Dixit. This duo complemented each other in every click. Madhuri Dixit is known for her extraordinary dancing skills and for exceptional expressions. But, behind the curtain, there was a lady who created 'Madhuri Dixit the dancing diva'. And it was none other than Saroj Khan. The voyage started from the song 'Ek do teen' in the film *Tezaab* (1988). This song was an instant hit and it catapulted Madhuri Dixit in demand. For this film Saroj Khan won the first Filmfare award for best choreographer. Earlier there were no such awards for choreographers in the Indian film industry. Here was the point where both the ladies showed the path to other female choreographers and leading danc-

ers to create their own position in the rather male-dominated industry.

After the success of the film *Tezaab*, there were many splendid dance numbers like Koli dance 'hum ko aaj kal hai' in the film *Sailaab* (1990). The versatility of Saroj Khan, who was known for the traditional dance forms also showcased western dance numbers with Madhuri and Sanjay Dutt for the song 'Tumma tumma loge' in the film *Thaanedar* (1990).

In the film industry, the censor board is always a barricade for creativity, though it is

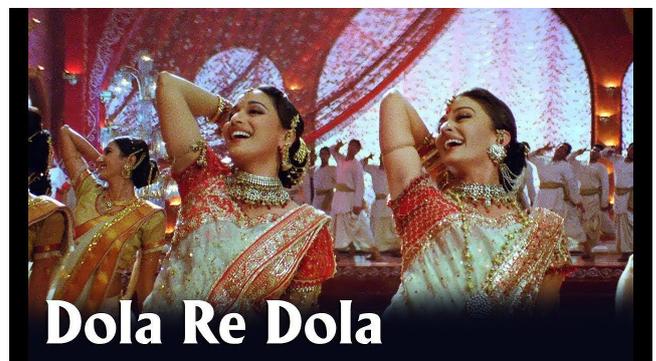


essential to restrict unethical content. For the film *Beta* (1992), the song 'Dhak dhak karne laga' and 'Choli ke piche kya hai' in the movie *Khalnayak* (1993) were the talk of the town for their lyrics and dance moves. Even the censor board had objected, but Saroj Khan convinced the board members and it got the certificate without any cuts. These two songs defined both ladies in their flabbergasting dance movements.

Saroj Khan was always known for her easy and catchy hook steps. She always considered children as her potential audience, so that they can easily catch those steps. The ace choreographer created several milestones with Madhuri Dixit, unforgettably famous hook steps to name a few like "Chane ke khet mein" in the film *Anjaam* (1994), 'Akhiya milaau kabhi akhiya churau' in the film *Raja* (1994), 'Mera piya ghar aya o ram ji' in the film *Yarana* (1995). She won her first National Award and one Filmfare award for best choreographer in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2003) for the famous Mujra 'Maar Dala', and the song 'Dola re' with Madhuri and Aishwarya Rai.

Actresses and lead dancers are incomplete without a song choreographed by Saroj Khan

The brilliance of Saroj Khan named her Masterji of the film industry, as she used to call her own guru as Masterji (B. Sohanlal). Not only these two leading ladies (Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit) conquered the film industry, there were many actresses who danced and got famous and sparkled on the silver screen with Saroj Khan as their choreographer. In her early days, she taught the veteran dancer Helen on her moves and in the film '*Khamoshi: The Musical*' (1996) too. In fact, Aishwarya Rai is known as a great dancer, and her first song in the movie *Iruvar* (1997) which was in Tamil by Mani Ratnam was choreographed by Saroj Khan. Then, one of the best expressive songs in the film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1995) the song 'Ye nimboodha', won Saroj Khan the Filmfare for best choreography. Both worked in many movies together like in the *Taal* (1999) and in *Guru* (2007) in the song 'Bar-



so re megha megha' where again she won the Filmfare for best choreography.

The ace choreographer taught many leading ladies and carved their dancing skills. There are many other popular songs such as film *Lagaan* (2001), in the song 'Madhuban mein kanha kisi gopi mile' with Amir Khan and Gracy Singh, and again Khan won the Filmfare for best choreographer.

The queen choreographer of Bollywood was the first choice of film directors

The queen of Bollywood dancing was not only limited to the Hindi film industry. Saroj Khan conquered in various other languages too, special mention to a very traditional Tamil period-drama film *Shringaram* (2007) directed by Ms. Sharada Ramanatha, based on Devdasi culture. There, she choreographed a few amazing expressive Bharatnatyam moves with Aditi Rao Hydari and Hamsa Moily, which won her the second National award for



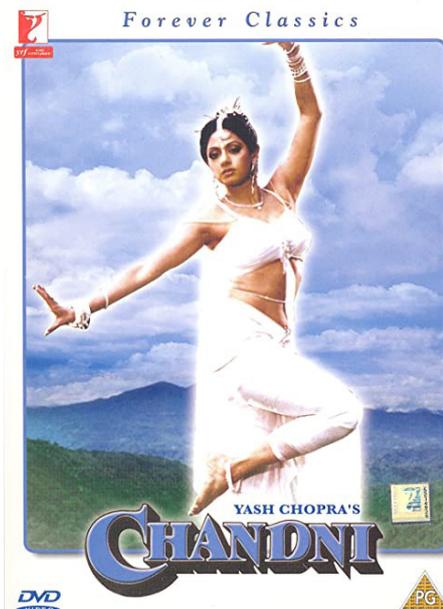
the best choreographer. The director Sharada Ranganatham said ‘this is unfortunate, we could not shoot the making of the film and there was a moment where the heroine was waiting for her beloved, she (Saroj Ji) performed sixteen different expressions such as anticipation, anxiety, breathlessness, tension, excitement, worry, and many in one line, which left the director and the actress speechless with her hold on dance, nuances, and expression’.

Subsequently, after the film was released, she was invited by one of the very prestigious Sabha in Chennai, which is a completely classical Sabha’s called Shree Krishna Gaan Sabha, which is one of the premiere Sabha only for classical arts. And she (Saroj Khan) was invited to demonstrate a lecture. This kind of Sabha hardly invited anyone from the film industry.

Subhash Ghai is one of India’s finest directors who trusted Saroj Khan in her struggling days and was a huge admirer of her. First, Khan worked in the film *Vidhata* (1982) where Subhas Ghai gave an opportunity to a newcomer and specially to believe in a female

independent choreographer. Subhash Ghai trusted on her in the film *Hero* (1983) and then many blockbusters dance numbers with *Ram Lakhan* (1989) with Madhuri Dixit and Anil Kapoor, *Khalnayak* (1993) Madhuri Dixit and Sanjay Dutt, *Taal* (1999) with a fabulous dance number with Aishwarya Rai. Subhash Ghai always used to say, Madhuri “if you can copy seventy percent of Saroj Khan’s dance moves and expressions it means you are there at the right note”. According to him, Saroj Khan’s personal life was full of struggles and hardship, but she transformed all her bitter and sad emotions into wonderful expressive dance moves.

Saroj Khan had a great legacy of dance. She knew how to use classical dance in an innovative way in Bollywood songs. She had a wide range of brilliant art pieces from Helen’s *Khamoshi: The Musical* to Aishwarya’s *Guzarish*



(2010). She may not have known Kathak as good as Birju Maharaj Ji, but she knew the use of Kathak in songs. ‘It may be folk, classical, or Indian expressions, there is only one name i.e. Saroj Khan. No one can do better than her’, said the ace director Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The classic example is the song ‘Maar dala’ in the film *Devdas*. Her excellence was seen in her dance. There were sixteen ‘Maar dala’ words in the sequence and she would teach

sixteen different ways of 'Maar dala' with different minute expressions. It could be hard for actors to match up to her capacity.

The dynamic director Imtiaz Ali, who conceived his iconic character in the film *Jab We Met* (2007), "Ye ishq hai" a song in which he had to represent the whole characteristics of the flamboyant, bubbly, and spirited girl Geet, was searching for a choreographer. He could meet Saroj Khan in between of her work schedules and asked her to choreograph this song. She readily accepted it in-between the time of her two projects. Also, around 10 days,



she practiced with many Himachali dancers at Manali, created and even performed the whole dance. Saroj Khan said 'You can reject my ideas as many times as you want. Iss dukan mein saman bohot hai' (there are lots of products in this shop), so if you don't like something, 'fikaar mat karna' (don't worry), I will do something else'. Her dancing procedure was clear, yet simple according to the director. Her excellence in dance and simplicity again made her win her third National award for the song 'Ye ishq hai' with Kareena Kapoor Khan in lead. Her recent few film songs were also very popular among dance lovers such as the modern mujra 'Yu to premi pachhatar hamare' *Agent Vinod* (2012), 'Bawali ho gayi' *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), the latest song with Madhuri Dixit, and Alia Bhatt in the film *Kalank* (2019).

She appeared many times in Indian Television platforms such *Nach Baliya* (2005) in Star One, *Nachle Ve with Saroj Khan* (2008) in NDTV Imagine, *Jhalak Dikhlaja Season 4* (Sony Entertainment), and many dancing shows as judge and in special appearances.

She won eight Filmfare awards, three National awards, Lifetime Achievement in IIFA. More than awards she believed in hard work and love for her dance and GURU.

An Institution and a path - breaker female choreographer of Bollywood

Once Saroj Khan was asked what her best reward, she happily replied that when she was shooting for the film *Koyla* (1997) with Rajesh Roshan. The team selected a remote, unseen location in the outskirts of Ooty (South India). Since morning, she could not get a cup of tea and started moving to the location. On her way, somehow the crew found a tea stall. A tribal old lady came in front of her car and said, "Are you Saroj Khan?" in her local dialect. It was the greatest reward for her to receive this kind of acknowledgment.

Saroj Khan a self-made, fiercely independent dance warrior who conquered the film industry for decades. She was the first female choreographer who boldly fought in the male-dominated industry with her only weapon i.e. her excellence in dance. Her immense love and respect for her Guru was the base of her brilliance. On the other hand, her abusive and estranged relationship with her husband who was her guru made her path on fire. She was rejected, dejected, and unaccepted many a time in her personal life. She lost her two children during her career. Saroj Khan was a winner of all the odds of her life and accepted and recognized as the leading female choreographer. She opened paths for many new female choreographers such as Farah Khan, Vaibhavi Merchant, Rekha Prakash, Geeta Kapoor, and many more. Saroj Khan in her more than five decades of her career touched and polished many leading actors and actresses. She carved herself as a junior artist to group dancer to a dance composer to a famous Choreographer only because of her unconditional love and dedication to dance. Bollywood dance will always be described as before and post Saroj Khan era. The plight is that we still do not find

the bold name of any choreographer in any film posters, advertisements, and trailers. And not even in YouTube or Wikipedia description of films compared to the way they write the names of actors, directors, screenplay writers, lyricists, and cinematographers. Nevertheless, Saroj Khan set the milestone of awards and achievements for the upcoming generation of choreographers.

On 3rd July 2020 Saroj Khan (71) took her last breath in Mumbai and left us with her dancing legacy and incredible artwork behind. She was survived by her children and grandchildren. She was always outspoken and raised her voice for group dancers and cine association members' rights. She was a gifted dancer and was an institution of Bollywood dance and expression. More than Saroj Khan she will always be remembered as Master Ji. Every aspiring dancer would take lessons from her incredible dance work for ever.

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