

Film Reiview:

Title	:	Om-Dar-B-Dar
Year	:	2014
Director	:	Kamal Swaroop
Producer	:	National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC)
Cinematographer	:	Ashwin Kaul & Milind Ranade
Duration /Running Time:		101 Minutes
Available on	:	Youtube

Very few films in Indian cinema have successfully carved a niche for themselves as Kamal Swaroop's masterpiece *Om-Dar-B-Dar*. Since its release in 1988, the postmodernist film has become a cult classic despite its commercial failure. What makes *Om-Dar-B-Dar* relevant even in today's day and age is the carefully constructed "nonsense" that supercedes meaning and coherence. Far from flashy dialogue writing and linear storytelling akin to Indian cinema, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* is less of a film and more of an experience – an absurd, chaotic, and utterly mesmerizing experience. Like a fever dream where time, reality, and logic blend into each other, it constantly slips through your fingers, leaving you gasping, confused, and oddly satisfied. This is not a film about linear storytelling; it is an assault on all senses, an abstruse mosaic where science, mythology, and politics are jumbled together. It is worth noting that despite its status as a cult classic today, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* was never released theatrically in India upon its completion in 1988. Instead, it languished in obscurity for decades before finally receiving an official release in 2014. This delay only added to its mystique, allowing the film to gain legendary status through underground screenings and word-of-mouth appreciation among cinephiles.

Plot-wise, the film challenges the very notion of storytelling. Instead of following a traditional plot arc, Swaroop narrates his story through vi-

gnettes that interloop with one another. These vignettes inform each other, without entirely dissolving into one complete body, creating a mosaic of seemingly disconnected events and characters. Such a fragmentation serves a dual purpose of mirroring the absurd, chaotic nature of being along with inviting the audience to actively engage in meaning-making. Due to these unconventional qualities of the film, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* has served as an inspiration to likes of Imtiaz Ali and Anurag Kashyap. The film is merely a suggestion of *telling*, the *story* is to be perceived by the viewer, independent of the narration.

The songs of the film are an an absurd cacophony of organized nonsense. The audio-visual experience of the film employs unconventional sound design that juxtaposes discordant noises, eclectic music, and spoken word, creating an atmosphere of tension and unpredictability. The auditory overload occurs most in the songs where dialogues transfuse into song refrains. This auditory overload is particularly evident in the film's key musical numbers, where the frenetic energy of the performances mirrors the visual frenzy on screen. The result is an experience that feels like a fever dream, where the listener is swept up in a whirlwind of sound that is at once disorienting and captivating.

The influence of *Om-Dar-B-Dar*'s soundtrack extends beyond the film itself. Notably, it inspired contemporary filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap, who drew from its audacious approach to sound in crafting his own iconic tracks, such as "Emosanal Aattyachar," inspired by Swaroop's "Meri Jaan A Meri Jaan B." This legacy highlights how the film's soundtrack transcends its own narrative, resonating with future generations of artists and continuing to challenge the norms of musical storytelling in Indian cinema. Another major song from the film is "Bablu Telephone Se," embodying the film's chaotic and absurdist spirit. The song serves as a microcosm of the film's broader themes, blending elements of humor, social commentary, and cultural critique into a frenetic audio-visual experience. Musically, "Bablu Babylon Se" is characterized by its eclectic mix of sounds and styles, reflecting the postmodernist ethos of the film, where dialogues fade into chorus and vignettes eclipse one another.

Rajat Dholakia's score for *Om-Dar-B-Dar* is a bold and radical departure from the typical musical conventions of Indian cinema. By embracing the principles of avant-garde and experimental music, the soundtrack becomes an integral part of the film's overall aesthetic, amplifying its absurdist and nonlinear nature. The auditory experience is a crucial element in the film's ability to transcend the boundaries of traditional storytelling

and immerse the viewer in a realm of pure cinematic poetry.

In *Om-Dar-B-Dar*, Kamal Swaroop doesn't just challenge cinematic conventions; he dismantles the deeply entrenched cultural, religious, and spiritual symbols of Indian society with a surreal toolkit of satire, absurdity, and biting humor. Religion, an omnipresent force in Indian cultural life, is not presented here as a grand narrative or a moral anchor. Instead, it becomes a fragmented, almost schizophrenic presence—one that oscillates between reverence and ridicule, transcendence and triviality. Swaroop's lens doesn't dismiss faith outright, but it mocks the institutions, rituals, and dogmas that strip spirituality of its humanistic core and reduce it to performative spectacle. Swaroop renders religious rituals and practices not as gateways to spiritual transcendence but as loops of mechanical absurdity. They become repetitive performances stripped of their original meaning, where participants seem unaware of their purpose.

The characters themselves—Om, Gayatri, and Jagdish—are not merely individuals but metaphors, each carrying their own symbolic weight drawn from Hindu mythology, religion, and philosophy. The titular character Om is not merely a character name—it is one of the most sacred syllables in Hinduism. Representing the primal sound of creation, *Om* is a symbol of the infinite, the eternal, and the transcendental. However, in Swaroop's universe, Om is not a sage or a seeker—he is a boy caught in an absurd existential experiment. The juxtaposition of a sacred syllable with the fragile innocence of a child is one of the film's core ironies. His obsession with holding his breath underwater can be seen as a child's playful act, but also as an unconscious spiritual practice—a parody of yogic asceticism aimed at achieving divine power or immortality. Om embodies the tension between scientific reasoning and religious superstition. While he pursues science as a tool for discovery, society continues to impose astrological fate and spiritual dogma upon him. It is worth noting that Om is not portrayed as an enlightened hero or a tragic figure; he is every man and every child trying to make sense of an absurd world where religion, science, and fate overlap and contradict one another. The name Gayatri evokes the Gayatri Mantra, one of the most powerful and sacred chants in Hinduism, symbolizing enlightenment, knowledge, and divine wisdom. Far from being a beacon of wisdom or grace, Gayatri exists in a state of mundanity and emotional inertia. She is neither a feminist icon nor an enlightened sage; instead, she is bound by the small-town expectations of her gender and relationships. Gayatri's character oscillates between being indifferent to her surroundings and being consumed by the trivialities of her small-town existence. Despite carrying the name of a divine mantra,

she is not portrayed as empowered or transcendent but as trapped in an ordinary, suffocating reality. In Hindu mythology, Jagdish—“Lord of the World”—is often associated with Lord Vishnu, the preserver and stabilizer of cosmic order. The name suggests grandeur, power, and authority. However, Swaroop’s Jagdish is trapped in a life so small, so mundane, that the irony practically bleeds from the screen. Jagdish is not a preserver of order or a master of his domain; he is a man caught in the cyclical, monotonous grind of small-town life. His world doesn’t extend beyond the narrow lanes of his city and the gravitational pull of Gayatri. Yet, his obsession with her seems less about love and more about the illusion of purpose she provides in his otherwise directionless existence. Despite the grandiosity of his name, Jagdish lacks ambition, vision, or control over his circumstances. He is not a leader, nor a guide—he is a man caught in stasis, pretending to play a role he does not understand.

In several scenes, characters are seen engaging in rituals with mechanical precision but hollow intent, almost as if sleepwalking through inherited traditions. The futility of these acts is amplified by Swaroop’s surreal framing and exaggerated repetition. Astrology is another recurring motif in the film. Horoscopes, fate, and planetary alignments drive characters’ decisions, their lives seemingly dictated by abstract celestial forces. Swaroop mocks the cultural reliance on these astrological certainties by showing their outcomes as comically arbitrary or disastrously absurd. The irrational confidence characters place in the alignment of stars serves as a mirror to society’s obsession with predetermined fate over free will. In the film, frog emerges as one of the most potent religious symbols—both sacred and grotesque. It operates on multiple metaphorical levels, blurring the boundaries between mythology, superstition, and absurdity. Frogs are elevated to a divine status in certain moments, worshipped or treated as talismanic symbols. However, the film’s portrayal of these ‘sacred frogs’ is so exaggerated and nonsensical that it turns worship into farce. Secondly, Frogs have cultural and mythological significance in Indian folklore, often associated with rain and fertility. Swaroop weaponizes this symbolism, placing frogs in bizarre scenarios where their mythological gravity is reduced to comic absurdity. Third, on a more abstract level, the frog could symbolize societal stagnation—an amphibian creature caught between water and land, much like a society caught between blind faith and modern rationality. It is also worth noting how mythological references in the film often feel like fragments of overheard conversations—casual, misplaced, and slightly absurd. They appear not as sacred teachings but as relics of cultural memory, detached from their context. Statues of gods casually populate surreal landscapes, mythological allusions are made

offhandedly, and moments of supposed spiritual transcendence dissolve into comical non-sequiturs.

However, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* doesn't dismiss faith entirely, nor does it present a coherent argument against it. Instead, it portrays faith as fragmented, chaotic, and deeply human. It's neither sacred nor wholly absurd—it's a messy, imperfect tapestry woven into the fabric of existence. Kamal Swaroop's approach to religion in *Om-Dar-B-Dar* is less about rejecting belief and more about stripping it of its theatricality, its blind repetition, and its misuse as a tool for control. Faith in the film is not about grand revelations or divine interventions—it's about fleeting moments of absurd clarity, where chaos briefly aligns into something resembling meaning before scattering again. Much like the film itself, faith here is less about answers and more about questions. And perhaps that is where its subversive power truly lies—not in mocking religion, but in holding up a mirror to its contradictions and letting us decide what we see.

Language and allusions in *Om-Dar-B-Dar* operate not as linear tools of storytelling but as symbols of a fractured cultural psyche. Swaroop uses a collage of mythological references, historical symbols, scientific jargon, and bureaucratic nonsense to highlight the absurdity of both colonial residues and native traditions.

The chaotic use of language in the film mirrors the chaotic reality of a nation in transition—a space where English and Hindi overlap without coherence, myths and science collide without resolution, and ambition rises from the ruins of failed promises. This fragmented bilingualism reflects postcolonial India's relationship with English—not just as a language but as a symbol of power, prestige, and alienation. In *Om-Dar-B-Dar*, language doesn't explain—it disorients, provokes, and transcends meaning altogether. Like the recurring frog motif and the echo of Babylon, it invites us not to understand but to experience—a linguistic fever dream where every word is both significant and meaningless at once. The allusion to Babylon also speaks to Swaroop's postmodern approach—taking a symbol from one cultural mythos and transplanting it into an Indian cinematic context, blurring geographical and temporal boundaries.

The film's exaggerated performances and theatrical absurdity bear resemblance to Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect", where the audience is deliberately kept from emotionally identifying with the characters. Swaroop ensures the audience remains aware of the film as a constructed reality, not an escapist narrative.

Swaroop's surreal universe isn't one to be passively consumed—it demands participation, interpretation, and, at times, surrender. Characters like Om, Gayatri, Jagdish, and Baba are not merely individuals but symbols of a larger cultural and existential quandary. Language becomes a battleground for postcolonial anxieties, religion is exposed as both sacred and performative, and every absurd vignette serves as a mirror reflecting society's contradictions. In the end, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* refuses to offer clarity, coherence, or closure. Instead, it leaves us with fragments—of meaning, of satire, of fleeting transcendence—that demand introspection. Its power lies not in providing answers but in asking uncomfortable, existential questions. It is a rebellion, a satire, and a profound existential meditation masquerading as “nonsense.” Decades after its release, *Om-Dar-B-Dar* remains an enigma, a cult classic, and a timeless critique of societal absurdities, proving that sometimes, the truest meanings are found in chaos.

Rajshree Gautam