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Music, the Media, and Communal Relations in North India, Past and Present

Peter Manuel

Much of the discussion of communalism has attempted to ascertain the depth of the evident communal sentiment reflected in recent disturbances and the rise of Hindu militancy. Amrita Basu’s essay above echoes a similar question about cultural history: do current developments reflect profound, long-standing, grass-roots animosity, or, alternately, are they merely the products of contemporary elite manipulation, ultimately conditioned by factors other than religious ones? While sociopolitical history is a natural focus for such inquiries, the study of expressive culture may reveal much about social practices and attitudes, both elite and grass-roots, past and present. This chapter focuses on musical culture in north India, outlining relevant aspects of the social history of classical music, and presenting some observations on twentieth-century folk and popular musics. My discussion of the contemporary scene will also refer to related forms of expressive culture, notably Hindi cinema and the sociopolitical uses of cassettes.

Given the extraordinary diversity of South Asian musical genres and practices, any attempt to generalize about music’s relation to communalism is destined to a degree of superficiality. However, a few themes recurrent in north Indian musical culture do stand out in historical perspective. First among these is the inherent syncretism of the most characteristic forms of north Indian music, whose style, patronage patterns, and associated social practices reflect their evolution as the common heritage of a society more profoundly divided by class than religion. Secondly, north Indian musical culture can be seen as a site of interaction of two opposing tendencies: one, the tendency for music to transcend sectarian differences,
and, conversely, its often inherent association with particular religions and the associated desires of individual communities to claim music in their bid for cultural hegemony. An exploration of these themes may provide a significant perspective on communal relations, while helping us situate recent socioreligious uses of the mass media in the context of issues of class and technology.

**Syncretism in the Evolution of Hindustani Music**

Since the spread of Muslim patronage in the twelfth century, north Indian classical music (Hindustani music) has served as a site for the intense and direct interaction—both amicable and competitive—of musicians and patrons from both Hindu and Muslim communities. It has also been a site for the confluence of distinct, yet in many ways compatible streams of Hindu and Muslim aesthetics, ideologies, and social practices. Hindustani music has thus evolved as an inherently syncretic and collaborative product of Hindu and Muslim artists and patrons. As such, while music has in some respects been a site of contention, it has often been praised as a symbol of the fundamental pluralism of north Indian culture.

In accordance with Muslim political domination of north India from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries, and the concurrent disbanding of large temple establishments and their retinues of *devadasi* (temple courtesans) performers, art music in the north—much more than in south India—was patronized and sustained for some six hundred years primarily by Muslim potentates. Indeed, Muslim patronage remained crucial to the art even until 1947, as the several predominantly Muslim princely states recognized by the British continued to be important centers of musical activity.

While music has often been censured in orthodox Islamic ideology, such proscriptions have generally had little direct impact in north India, due to the more tolerant forms of Hanafi Sunni ideology that prevailed from the Mughal period on. Moreover, in India, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, music has always been embraced by particular Sufi orders, and by a more general Sufi-derived attitude that regards song as a means of expressing devotion and, ideally, attaining mystical ecstasy. Thus, *gauwali* has flourished since the fourteenth century as a devotional song genre, while Sufi tradition allowed virtually any amatory verse to be interpreted as expressing divine love as well as or instead of worldly love. Accordingly, Muslim dynasts and nobles in South Asia were, with a few exceptions, ardent patrons of music, and insofar as they felt obliged or inclined to find religious justification for their love of music, they could always turn to Chishti Sufism for legitimation. In the absence of orthodox Islamic institutional music patronage, the Sufi orientation of performers and patrons further served to predispose music toward syncretism and tolerance rather than toward notions of sectarian or aesthetic purity.

The inherent pluralism of Hindustani musical culture was to a large extent a product of the combination of Muslim patronage with an inherited musical system that was to some degree imbued with Hindu extramusical associations. While at one level Indian classical music could be apprehended as an abstract system of modes and meters, at another level it was (and in south India, remains) linked in various ways to Hinduism, with its Krishnaite song texts, quasi-religious Sanskrit theoretical treatises, and its traditional associations with Hindu cosmology, mythology, and epistemology. The fact that Persian-speaking, ethnically Turkish dynasts so ardently patronized such music reflects how effectively South Asian such rulers had become in culture and self-identity. As has often been noted, what transpired was a process of Indian reconquest of the Muslim invaders through assimilation and acculturation.

Of course, the tenuous nature of Muslim rule itself necessitated accommodation with the overwhelmingly Hindu population, both by means of cultural pluralism as well as by the widespread reliance on Hindu revenue officers, soldiers, and indigenous feudal infrastructure in general. However, from the Mughal period on, the Muslim aristocrats' patronage of Indian music was clearly motivated less by a sense of strategic expediency than by a genuine enthusiasm for an art they came to regard as their own. Such attitudes were epitomized by poet, musician, and Sufi devotee Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), who, while synthesizing Middle Eastern and local musics, composed songs in Hindi and praised Indian music as superior to that of any other country. By the time of Akbar's rule as Mughal emperor (1556–1605), nobles, Sufi literati, and the emperor himself were taking pride in penning Hindi (*Braj-basha*) lyrics and singing Krishnaite classical *dhruypad* songs. Occasional bigots—like Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707)—notwithstanding, throughout subsequent centuries Muslim rulers and nobles avidly patronized Indian music, wrote vernacular Hindi poetry, commissioned translations of Sanskrit treatises, and cultivated interest in indigenous culture in general. One can generalize that
among the dominant class, traditional elite values of cultural patronage, connoisseurship, and personal cultivation of the fine arts were more significant than sectarian ideologies.

The structural and cultural ties uniting Hindu and Muslim nobility became particularly strong in nineteenth-century Awadh (Oudh), where, as Dwarka Prasad Mukherji argues (1948, 66–67), both groups came to form a single socioeconomic class, ultimately answerable to a third party, the British (Manuel 1990, 55–56). As a result, Hindu-Muslim amity and cultural interaction reached a sort of zenith, as elite Hindus mastered Persian, wore Mughal sherwanis, and worshiped at Shia shrines, while Muslim nobles celebrated the vernal Hindu festival of holi, and the Awadh nawab (ruler) Wajid Ali Shah staged dance-dramas in which he himself played the role of Krishna.

Particularly influential on musical culture was the spread of syncretic devotional forms of worship, especially as associated with Sufism and Vaishnava bhakti (devotion). The two traditions had much in common; Sufism’s pluralistic saint worship could conflate with folk Hinduism, and both traditions stressed the utility of vernacular-language music as a form of devotion and a vehicle to mystical ecstasy. Both traditions emerged primarily from the lower classes, offering alternatives to male Brahmanic and Muslim priestly orthodoxy; at the same time, both sects were influential in elite circles as well. Thus, for the Muslim gentry, patronage of music and poetry cohered with venerable poetic and Sufi traditions of mocking Islamic orthodoxy and celebrating madness, inebriation, and antinomianism in general; at the same time, bhakti’s implicit monotheism and inherent syncretism made it palatable to Muslim patrons. Hence, Muslim rulers at once cultivated ties to Sufi shrines and enthusiastically patronized Krishnait poetic and musical traditions.

While north Indian music retained its Krishnaite texts, from the Mughal period on, its actual performance, like its patronage, came to be dominated by Muslims—specifically, hereditary professionals—unlike in south India, where Brahmans continued to dominate the field. In the subsequent centuries, Muslim preeminence became absolute, such that by the early twentieth century, there were very few prominent Hindu performers. Given the orthodox Islamic disapproval of music, the dominance of Muslim musicians might seem paradoxical, but it was largely conditioned by other factors. It appears that the ranks of low-caste Hindu converts to Islam included many professional rural musicians (for example, Mirasis) seeking to improve their status in the more egalitarian Islam. Other Hindu performers may have converted in order to adapt better to Muslim patronage. Although we can only surmise as to the precise motivations of converts like Tan Sen (the foremost musician of Akbar’s court), one can generalize that Muslim patronage has tended, however benignly, to promote the Islamicization of performers, and vice versa. Thus, for example, it may not be coincidental that in the century before Indian independence, Hindu performers were most prominent at the Hindu court of Gwalior, and in Benares, with its Hindu maharaja and substantial religious institutions (Qureshi 1991, 161). As we shall mention below, Hindu performers are becoming increasingly numerous and prominent under the modern patronage of India’s predominantly Hindu bourgeoisie.

Nevertheless, what is more striking than such coherences is the way that the social and patronage patterns of Indian music have tended to transcend sectarianism. Thus, for example, it has long been common for Muslim musicians—from south Indian nagaswaram (oboe) players to north Indian dhrupad singers—to provide music in Hindu temples. Shahnaï (boe) artist Bismillah Khan for years initiated Hindu prayer sessions in Benares, while in Rajasthan’s Nathdwara temple, dhrupad singer Ziauddin Dagar performed in a sacred ritual space inaccessible even to officiating Brahmanas. (Equally remarkable is that drums with leather straps were allowed in such temples.) Similarly, leading performers of light-classical devotional music have belonged to distinct religions; Muslim vocalists like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Abdul Karim Khan were famous for their Krishnait devotional bhajans and light-classical thumris, while conversely, the Hindu duo of Shankar-Shambhu were among the most prominent qawwali performers of the last generation, specializing in explicitly Sufistic songs.

Given the character of its patronage and performers, it was natural for Hindustani music to evolve as a fundamentally syncretic art form that cannot be characterized as Hindu or Muslim. Thus, dhrupad, the predominant genre of the Mughal period, evolved as the product of a triangle of the Agra Mughal court, the Hindu court of Gwalior, and the temples of the Mathura region. Instruments like the sitar and sarod combined Near Eastern features with local ones, and Persian modes (maqam) like Huseni were transformed into Indian rags. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the semiclassical thumri, with its Krishnait Braj-bhasha text, and the Urdu ghazal-song developed as complementary sister genres, sung side by side by the same performers; the light idiom dadra epitomized the syncretism by combining Braj-bhasha and Urdu verses.
In general, the Muslim rulers did not introduce any revolutionary changes in the music system they inherited. Whatever imported elements that Muslim performers incorporated into Hindustani music were on the whole woven seamlessly into its fabric. Such admixture was facilitated by the essential compatibility between Indian and Middle Eastern (and Central Asian) music styles, all of which were based on monophonic, linear modal systems; on a more general level, the syncretism was also aided by the fundamental compatibility of Central Asian Muslim and Hindu feudalisms.

As Daniel Neuman (1985) has shown, the most significant effect of Muslim rule on Hindustani music was a subtle process of secularization, rather than any form of Islamicization per se. While this trend may be true of the arts in general, the change was particularly evident in the realm of song texts. The Muslims do not appear to have made any attempt to discourage the use of devotional texts that continued under their patronage to pervade dhrupad, khyal, and thumri. Similarly, Muslim patrons made no significant attempt to Islamicize the use of language or content (aside from also cultivating ghazal and qawwali). Instead, as Neuman argues, the song texts in classical dhrupad and khyal were simply deemphasized, becoming insignificant and often unintelligibly rendered concatenations of syllables, while emphasis shifted entirely to abstract expression of melody and rhythm. The very few khyals composed in honor of Muslim saints are sung in Braj-bhasha rather than Persian or Urdu, even at the expense of mangling the saints’ names with Hindi phonetic equivalents (for example, Nazakat and Salamat Ali's recording of the khyal “Hazrat Turkomen,” in which the holy man's name is unintelligibly sung as “Ha-ja-na-to-” on EMI CLP 1308). In this sense, Hindustani music contrasts markedly with south Indian classical (Karnatak) music, whose devotional texts are intrinsic to the art form, and are correspondingly expected to be rendered clearly. Similarly, the Hindu ideal of the Brahmanic singer-saint—epitomized in the north by Swami Haridas and in the south by Tyagaraja—was largely replaced under Muslim patronage by that of the secular craftsman (Neuman 1985). Accordingly, Hindustani music came to be regarded less as a form of prayer and devotion than as one of the secular “fine arts” (funun-e-latifah). One may again note the contrast with Karnatak music, which retains its devotional character even in the modern concert hall. Secular-humanist tendencies in Akbar’s rule were particularly pronounced, as evident, for example, in the ordinary scenes depicted in representational painting, the trend toward rational and practical rather than mystical music theory, and the entire orientation of Abul Fazl's writing (Greig 1987).

The secularization of Hindustani music has in some ways rendered its underlying aesthetics more compatible with that of Western music and has perhaps facilitated the genre’s remarkably successful adaptation to modern bourgeois Indian patronage as well as to reception by international audiences. At the same time, however, it has opened Hindustani music, as cultivated by Muslims, to the accusation of being sensuous and decadent. In Hindu ideology, explicitly erotic artworks can be sanctioned if they admit mystical or devotional interpretation, but the quasi-secularized Hindustani music, as patronized by Muslims, could be seen as ineligible for such legitimation. Thus one reads in numerous modern books and articles on Hindustani music how the art became fleshly and vulgar under the patronage of the sybaritic nawabs. In this perspective, the Muslim impact is thus seen to cohere with that of the British, in that both were foreign, secularizing conquerors. Such a view also contributes to the present Hindutva ideology, which sees the Muslims as being pampered and appeased by the Westernized and similarly anti-Hindu Indian elite.

In the twentieth century, Hindustani music successfully underwent the transition from Muslim feudal patronage to predominantly Hindu bourgeois patronage (H. S. Powers 1986, Meer 1980). The concurrent renaissance of Hindustani music has derived largely from its becoming allied, whether overtly or implicitly, with modern Indian cultural nationalism. Inspired by the early twentieth-century proselytizing efforts of V. D. Paluskar and V. N. Bhatkhande, the emergent middle class came to regard traditional art music as an important cultural heritage worthy of support from the state, private sources, and a network of institutions. In the process, it has been inevitable that Hindustani music has become to some extent a contested entity in the redefinition of national culture. Regula Qureshi (1991) has perceptively outlined some of the aspects in which the Hindustani music world, in the process of serving the new nationalist agenda, has in some ways become subtly re-Hinduized. In the hands of its new patrons—the Westernized, mainly Hindu elite—music, she argues, has become part of “the assertion of Hindu ideals and traditions, but in a frame of reference that [is] Western, or at least Westernized” (Qureshi 1991, 159). Thus, for example, pioneering musicologist V. N. Bhatkhande (writing in 1932) explicitly envisioned the cultivation of a modernized music theory by Hindu scholars as one means of rescuing the art from the hands of
the Muslim musicians and patrons (Purohit 1988, 873). And indeed, as Qureshi notes, Muslims have played a negligible role in modern Indian music scholarship, hampered as they have been by their traditional reliance on oral transmission and by the absence of Islamic institutional support (especially in Pakistan).

Accordingly, just as most Muslims now constitute a poor, backward, relatively un-Westernized minority, so has their contribution to music often been devalued by modern Hindu writers, some of whom have pointedly criticized Muslim performers for their illiteracy, ignorance of written theory, alleged lack of spirituality, and historical ties to archaic court and courtesan culture. In accordance with the bourgeois nature of modern patronage, Muslim musicians have in many cases been hard-pressed or unwilling to affect the Westernized, middle-class manners now deemed appropriate for artists. With every generation, more and more prominent Hindu musicians—often from bourgeois families—are emerging and may soon outnumber Muslim hereditary professionals. Similarly, as Qureshi observes (1991, 165), one now encounters Muslim musicians speaking openly about their supposed Hindu ancestry, and occasionally adopting secular surnames (for example, sitarist Jamaluddin Bharatiya). Nevertheless, it is important to note that music itself has not been significantly marked by the Hinduization process, aside from such phenomena as the eccentric form of tabla (drum) pedagogy used in music schools (Kippen 1988, 138).

Ideologies surrounding the now-archaic dhrupad are particularly illustrative of the current tendency to identify musical traditions with one religion or the other. The leading dhrupad family in India, the Dagars, are remarkably explicit about the Hindu orientation of their art, perhaps in accordance with their hereditary associations with Rajasthani temples, and with the current Hindu domination of art music patronage in general. Hence, as Richard Widdess (1994, 70–71, and personal communication) notes, vocalist Aminuddin Dagar, although a Muslim, describes his art as “an offering to the feet of bhagwan [God]” and likens the genre’s reverential, serious, opening alap section to the ritual decoration (sringar) of a Hindu deity’s image. Dagar further claims that the nonlexical syllables used in alap (that is, a, na, ri, ta, nom, tom) derive from the Hindu invocation ananta narayan hari om. Conversely, vocalist Amir Khan claimed that these syllables (as used in the related genre tarana) derived from Persian, while Pakistani dhrupad singers of the Talwandi ghvirona (family tradition) claim that the word alap derives from Allah ap (“Allah, you”). In the current polarization of traditions, some Pakistanis have gone to further lengths to de-Hinduize Hindustani music, referring to it, for example, as abhang-e-Khusrau (“Khusrau’s sound”).

It is of course inevitable and natural that both Hindu and Muslim musicians may interpret Hindustani music as expressive of their own religious and cultural heritages. Muslim musicians take natural pride in their preeminence: accha khana, accha gana (“good food, good music”), as one Muslim singer told me when I expressed my fondness for Mughlai cuisine. Similarly, for a devout Hindu singer like Pandit Jasraj, Hindustani music has a strong religious component, and he commences his recitals with Sanskrit devotional verses. Yet despite the attempts by some Hindus and Muslims to claim Hindustani music for their own communities, it remains a fundamentally and indissolubly syncretic art form, and its network of practices, institutions, and related aesthetic ideologies still constitute a powerful symbol of communal harmony. While sectarian conflicts tear at the nation’s social fabric, classical music remains an arena where Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha formed an inseparable duo, where Hindu music conferences routinely book Muslim artists, and where a Pandit Jasraj does not hesitate to sing at a 1992 arts marathon devoted to communal reconciliation.

**Folk and Popular Musics**

While generalizations about north Indian folk music are inherently even more hazardous than those about classical music, one can posit that many of the tendencies we note in classical music—syncretism, transcendence of sectarianism, and prominence of Muslim professionals—also obtain in folk music. Naturally, while classical music is to a large extent a secular, abstract art form, much folk music is specifically associated with particular religions, especially given its generally greater emphasis on song texts and, often, life-cycle events. In Hinduism, such music would include the vast and diverse body of explicitly devotional songs, as well as all manner of less overtly sacred genres that nevertheless acquire devotional status by being incorporated into religious functions. Since there is no orthodox Islamic music per se, Muslim devotional music constitutes a smaller category, consisting primarily of traditional qawwali, the ambiguously Sufistic ghazal, and lesser Shia devotional genres like na’t and marziya.

Like Hindustani music itself, many of the most popular and widespread folk music genres are the shared heritages of their regions, and are
enjoyed, patronized, and often performed by members of all religions. Such is the case, for example, with Punjabi Hir-Ranjha, Bhojpuri birha, Braj raslya, and other genres. Even explicitly devotional genres are often interpreted in a mystical, pluralist fashion in order to apply to all religions. Thus, for example, qawwali has traditionally been performed not only in Muslim shrines, but for Hindu ceremonies in Benares and elsewhere, while Bengali Baul music is widely sung by both Hindu and Muslim musicians, who freely interpret the lyrics’ Tantric Hindu content in mystical fashion. Whether due to the heritage of devotional Bhakti and Sufi movements, or to the nature of music in general, it is much more common for devotional folk music to celebrate pluralism, syncretism, and mysticism rather than orthodoxy and bigotry. The poems of Kabir, synthesizing Hindu and Muslim devotion, remain paradigmatic and still-cherished symbols of this pluralism. And while contemporary Hindu militants may promote an exclusivist and chauvinistic image of Rama-rajya, still more familiar to most north Indians is the conception of Rama articulated in the familiar bhajan text:

Raghupati raghava raja Ram patita pabana Sitaram
Ishvar Allah tero nam, sab ko sammati de bhagwan . . .

[King Rama of the house of Raghu, savior of the fallen.
Whether your name is Ishvar or Allah, let everyone give respect . . .]

As with classical music, one finds among folk musicians a disproportionate number of Muslim hereditary professionals, most presumably descendants of former lower-caste Hindu converts. Many such musicians perform primarily or exclusively for Hindu patrons, such as the Rajasthani Manganhars, who even provide ritual music at Jaisalmer’s Bhattianji temple, while claiming to be of Hindu Rajput descent (Jairazbhoy 1977, 54). As with art music, again and again in the realm of folk culture, one sees that music, in terms of its meanings and associated social practices, enjoys a special status that transcends communal boundaries. In that sense, folk music’s ethos of pluralism and syncretism reflects the shared village life and class affinities of its primarily subaltern patrons and performers.

Film Music and Film Culture

Although commercial Hindi film music represents quite a distinct idiom from folk and classical music, one can generalize that it has exhibited a similar tendency toward pluralism and syncretism. Muslims have figured prominently in the ranks of music directors (Naushad, Ghulam Haider), lyricists (Kaifi Azmi), singers (Mohammad Rafi), and actors (Amjad Khan, Nasiruddin Khan, Shobana Azmi, Zeenat Aman, Waheeda Rehman, and others) (Jain 1994). Accordingly, however varied and eclectic film songs may be in terms of style, they cannot be marked as either stylistically Muslim or Hindu, and their appeal crosses sectarian boundaries. As with classical and most kinds of folk music, there are no distinct “Hindu” or “Muslim” ways of singing or playing. Similarly, while some film songs use Braj-bhasha and invoke Krishnaite themes, most have been in Urdu. Indeed, both the dialogue and song lyrics of most so-called “Hindi films” have generally been in a simplified form of Urdu, which, communal tensions notwithstanding, has continued to enjoy a privileged status as a proverbially sweet and romantic language. Accordingly, pop versions of the Urdu ghazal have attained mass popularity since the late 1970s, sung and enjoyed by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike.

An allied and more problematic issue is the relation of Indian film culture in general to communal sectarianism. On perhaps the most overt level, film culture’s influence on communal relations can be seen as relatively benign. Commercial films have generally avoided being communally provocative; for example, the religions of villains and heroes are generally the same, so as not to inflame sectarian sentiments. Many films, from classic costume dramas like Mughal-e-Azam to more recent blockbusters like Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, are steeped in Muslim culture and present its protagonists and their religion in a sympathetic and moving manner. Other films, like Baiju Bawra, juxtapose Hindu and Muslim cultures without glorifying or demonizing one or the other. In this respect, most commercial films, with the obvious exception of Hindu mythological dramas, have adhered roughly to the avowedly secularist and balanced orientation of the state broadcast media. Indeed, if films and their music have been criticized for weakening rich and diverse folk arts and homogenizing Indian culture in general, such effects may not be entirely unwelcome in the realm of communal relations, insofar as Muslim and Hindu audiences unite in appreciation of such a genuinely syncretic and ostensibly pluralistic idiom.
In other respects, however, the superficial pluralism of Indian film culture may mask a more subtle and perhaps more influential form of fundamentalist chauvinism. In his insightful book *The Painted Face: Studies in India’s Popular Cinema*, Chidananda Das Gupta argues persuasively that Hindi cinema promotes, however obliquely, the “macabre marriage of consumerism and fundamentalism” that now threatens the unity and integrity of Indian society (1991, 253). The 1980s revenge films of Amitabh Bachchan and others glorify nihilistic violence and pandem to the asocial values of an alienated lumpen proletariat easily manipulated toward fascism and bigotry (Das Gupta 1991, 240–41, 267). Far from promoting multiculturalism and tolerance, Hindi cinema largely excludes or marginalizes minorities, reducing India’s plural society to “the one dimension of Hindi-speaking North India,” as represented by fair, well-built, upper-caste stars (Das Gupta 1991, 271); regional cinema merely perpetuates these exclusivist stereotypes in different languages. The compatibilities with resurgent Hindu fundamentalism are even more marked in the phenom- nally popular television version of the *Ramayana*, which transformed what was originally a rich, complex, profound, and secular epic into a simplistic good-versus-evil cartoon pitting the militant and virtuous Rama against the alien Other (Das Gupta 1991, 176ff.). Das Gupta’s indictment of popular cinema and its relation to communalism is trenchant; at the same time, he pointedly argues that its faults derive less from hoary Indian traditions or grass-roots attitudes than from the insular and culturally shallow world of the Bombay film producers and their targeting of a lowest-common denominator consumer (1991, 268–69).

Music, Cassettes, and Contemporary Communal Conflicts

Like commercial cinema and its music, the state-run broadcast media in independent India have maintained a generally neutral stance in the field of sectarian relations. Influential All India Radio (AIR) director B. V. Keskar has been criticized as a moderate Hindu chauvinist, and, given the nation’s demography, a certain predominance of Hindu-oriented music, reporting, and language has been inevitable. On the whole, however, radio and television have reflected the Congress Party’s traditional official policy of secularism and communal harmony, and its practical goals of maintaining a coalition, however fragile, of power blocs, which included the Muslim vote. In the 1980s this status quo was altered, first, by the decline of the Congress Party and the subsequent power vacuum, and second, by the emergence of new mass media, specifically, video- and audiocassettes (Farmer, above).

The propaganda potential of audiocassettes—with their accessibility and relative immunity to censorship—was first exploited on a mass scale to disseminate Ayatollah Khomeini’s speeches in 1978 during the Iranian revolution. In India, promotional videocassettes were first used for Indian political campaigns in the 1983 Andhra Pradesh state elections and, subse- quently, by Rajiv Gandhi’s Congress-I Party in 1985. Separatist movements in Punjab and Kashmir subsequently used audiocassettes to consider- able effect, as have competing Pakistani political parties. In the 1989 Indian national elections, both video- and audiocassettes were widely used by the three major parties (Congress, Janata Dal, and BJP). The BJP has made the most extensive and sophisticated usage of videos, touring the north with specially constructed video rath (chariots) bearing three-hundred-inch screens. Promotional video- and audiocassettes are widely disseminated by the nation’s vast informal duplication infrastructure (otherwise used for commercial piracy). Activists play audiocassettes at rallies, from speakers mounted on trucks, and from party centers, be they formal offices or enthusiasts’ tea-stalls. Most tapes contain various mixtures of speeches and songs, the latter often consisting of new lyrics set to familiar film-music tunes.

Of particular relevance here are the audiocassettes associated with the Hindutva campaign, as led by the VHP-BJP-RSS combine. Aspects of the Hindutva use of the media have been discussed elsewhere (T. Basu et al. 1993, Manuel 1993). In the following pages I offer some further perspectives on the usage and roles of audiocassettes and music in the contemporary communal disturbances, and conclude by relating these phenomena to the themes discussed above.

In 1989–90, audiocassettes produced by Hindutva militants played a crucial role in raising the Ram janmabhoomi campaign to fever pitch. The three most influential cassettes contained vitriolic speeches, recorded at rallies, by VHP-BJP leaders Uma Bharati, Ashok Singhal, Sadhvi Rithambara, and others. The speeches reiterate the now-familiar Hindutva themes: the marauding, barbaric Muslims came as foreign invaders, looting, pillaging, and enslaving the peace-loving and tolerant Hindus; not content with dividing the country and taking Pakistan, they now have seized Kashmir and still seek to rule the country; but the time has come for Hindus to fol- low the tradition of Maharana Pratap and Prithvi Raj Chauhan; not only will the Babri Masjid be destroyed, but three thousand other mosques as
well, India is a Hindu nation in which only devotees of Rama may remain. And so on.

On the cassette entitled *Jai Shri Ram*, the unidentified speaker (evidently Rithambara), rants in a hysterical tone of voice:

Today's Muslims shun the tradition of Rahim and [Krishna devotee] Ras Khan, and think of themselves as Babar's progeny, tying themselves to Aurangzeb. ... You Muslims link yourselves to Aurangzeb, not to India. Mahatma Gandhi sang songs of "Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai" [brotherhood], but it didn't happen. We were ready, but you tried to rule us. Your Quran says to destroy all idols, while our tradition says we should be tolerant even if we're being ground underfoot. The two religions are as different as the earth and sky. But we tried, we sang, "Bande Mataram" [Hail to the Motherland], but now we need our Ram Janmabhoomi. ... Hindus, wake up! They've looted you and you stayed silent; they sacked your temples and you stayed silent. What reward did you get for your forbearance? Your mothers and daughters went on being raped, your temples destroyed.

The speaker recites a Hindi poem also printed on the inlay card:

May our race not be blamed
And may our mothers not say
That when we were needed, we weren't ready
If there must be a bloodbath
Then let's get it over with
Because of our fear of a bloodbath before
Our country was divided [at partition]
Since their arrival until today
They have killed so many Hindus
We tried to appease them
But there was bloodshed after all
Instead of having it simmer slowly
It's better to have it burst with a big flame
If they don't understand our words
Then we'll make them understand with kicks
If there must be a bloodbath, then let it happen.

Another tape, entitled *Mandir ka nirman karo* ("Build the temple"), mixes speeches with snappy songs, most rendered by film singer Narender Chanchal. These contain lyrics such as the following:

The time has come, wake up, young men, and go to Lucknow
You must vow to build Ram's temple
The conches sound, Ram's forces are standing ready for battle
Gandiv [Arjuna's bow] is twanging, his conch calls
Whoever joins with the wicked, smash their dreams
Turn the political dice and blast their policies
Advance in the battlefield of politics and hit hard
To compare Ram with the wicked is beyond disrespect
Destroying his temple is the limit of madness
Don't play their farcical game of acting in a courtroom
Liberate the Janmabhoomi of the jewel of the house of Raghukul
If they don't heed with words, whip out your swords . . .
Face our enemies with courage
Now isn't the time for contemplation.

The Hindutva tapes are regarded as playing direct roles in instigating the wave of anti-Muslim riots and pogroms that subsequently swept north India, in which thousands of lives (mostly Muslim) have been lost. Other tapes containing bloodcurdling screams, gunfire, and inflammatory slogans were blared from speakers on cars that drove at night through tense neighborhoods of Agra, Ghaziabad, and elsewhere, bringing armed men into the streets and directly igniting riots (Davis, Basu, and Hasan, above).

Despite being officially banned, the Hindutva cassettes continued to circulate freely, albeit clandestinely, and were still deployed in the late 1993 regional elections. By this period cassette stores were also openly marketing more "moderate" tapes by Chanchal and others (for example, *Le Ram ka Nam*), with bhajans hailing Ram-rajya: "We'll bring back Ram-rajya, let the nagara and dhol [drums] ring, Jai Shri Ram!"

It is interesting that the Muslim community does not appear to have retaliated by circulating similarly inflammatory cassettes. Of course, in Pakistan, political parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami have produced their own promotional tapes, using catchy film tunes. But my own investigations in India turned up no tapes of speeches by militant leaders like Inam Bukhari and Syed Shahabuddin; in winter 1993–94, the only relevant Urdu tapes I encountered were speeches by Maulana Obed Ulah Khan Azmi, whose tenor was overtly moderate, albeit indignant in its denunciation of the VHP for "spreading the poison of hatred in India's atmosphere." For example, Azmi denies the Hindutva depiction of Indo-Muslims as descen-
dants of Babar, noting that Islam was spread in India more by Sufi saints than by conquerors, and that Babar himself instructed his son Humayun to ban cow slaughter in respect for Hindus. As suggested by the results of the 1993 elections, the explanation for the evident absence of inflammatory to ban cow slaughter India than by congress, and that Babar himself instructed that Babar himself rejecting the militancy and fundamentalism of Bukhari and Shahabuddin, recognizing that its best hope for security lies not in confrontation, but in joining the secular mainstream.

In my volume, Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India (1993), I explored some of the ramifications of the advent of cassettes, stressing how they constitute a democratic-participant "people’s medium," resistant to centralized control and conducive to grass-roots expression. Cassettes and tape players are cheap, portable, durable, and easily mass-produced. As such, their spread has revolutionized the formerly monopolistic Indian music industry, making possible the emergence of several hundred production companies of various sizes, which have revitalized regional folk traditions formerly threatened by homogenizing film music, and spawned the growth of dynamic, syncretic folk-pop genres. At the same time, the negative potential of such a democratization of the media is painfully evident in the uses of cassettes by the Hindutva movement to foment bigotry and violence.

Musical genres, like individual mass media, are not entirely neutral entities, but are linked to certain forms of usage, control, and associated social practices. Like religion, music deals in sentiments rather than engaging reason or empirical logic, and thus lends itself well to devotional uses. Similarly, the social meaning of a given musical genre or work, like that of a religious doctrine, is often largely dependent upon the context and forms of its reception, usage, and subsequent interpretations. As we have seen, the polysemic ambiguity of musical meaning has allowed the most characteristic forms of north Indian music to transcend sectarian boundaries, such that, for example, devout Muslims have been able to sing explicitly Hindu texts without sense of contradiction. The variability of musical meaning is similarly evident in some of the uses of Hindu devotional music in the contemporary situation. On the one hand, when a Muslim classical vocalist sings a Rama bhajan, he may be interpreting it as a form of mystical devotion; when such a song is performed in a Sai Baba worship session, its significance may be tied to a self-conscious ideology of religious pluralism. On the other hand, the meaning of a Rama bhajan is quite different when it is sung in an RSS rally, or when—as sometimes happens nowa-
class Hindus against Muslim scapegoats. It is hardly coincidental that the northern state least beset by communal violence has been Bengal, where a resilient left movement, however imperfectly represented by the CPM government, has created an atmosphere of proletarian solidarity where communal sentiments have been unable to flourish. Such an orientation also helps explain the resounding victory of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP)—with its dalit-lower-caste-Muslim alliance—over the BJP in the 1993 UP elections. Ultimately, however, such campaigns will have to use the new media—including audiocassettes and popular music—in as skillful and sophisticated manner as has the VHP. If cassettes have proven to be an ideal medium for the instigation of communal riots and the propagation of religious bigotry, they could be used with equal effectiveness to promote a progressive platform.

Although such uses of cassettes remain marginal in north India, there have been significant and innovative attempts, however tentative. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the cassettes produced by Jagori, a Delhi-based organization devoted primarily to women’s rights. Jagori’s cassettes feature songs that are intended to be listened to, sung, and freely altered by women in informal song sessions. The songs, set to familiar folk and film tunes, are recorded by women singing to dhol accompaniment. They thus lack the market appeal of commercial film music, but they can be cheaply produced and may also serve as performance models to women who are not trained musicians but who retain strong traditions of informal collective singing. In their use of borrowed film melodies they encourage disenfranchised people to resignify and appropriate entities taken from the mainstream media. The songs deal with a wide variety of topics, including religious bigotry. Some are of particular relevance to the contemporary situation, including the following:

God has become divided in temples, mosques, and churches...

The Hindu says the temple is his abode
The Muslim says Allah is his faith
Both fight, and in fighting die
What oppression and violence they wreak upon one another!
Whose goal is this, whose scheme?

In such songs, Jagori activists are reclaiming and revamping the hoary Indian tradition of using music to transcend sectarian difference. More importantly, they are exploiting the liberating and democratic potential of the new medium of cassettes. Such tapes represent precisely the kind of oppositional, grassroots use of the new media that some progressives have envisioned (Enzensberger 1970). Free from state and corporate patronage and guidelines, resistant to official or market censorship, and oriented toward amateur consumption and reproduction rather than commercial success, the Jagori tapes could ideally be duplicated throughout north India, inspiring other low-budget cassettes and strengthening the foundation for a national movement to oppose class, gender, and religious oppression. Cassettes thus provide an ideal technological infrastructure for the mass dissemination of a progressive discourse; it is only the subjective social conditions that inhibit the spread of such a message and that have allowed cassettes to be used more extensively by elites to manipulate grass-roots anxieties.

Conclusions

This essay has emphasized the ways that north Indian music and its associated social practices—past and present, elite and popular—have tended to transcend sectarian differences, embodying syncretism and pluralism rather than exclusivity and chauvinism. Of course, the concept of “syncretism” is itself inherently ambiguous, and when interpreting it as a favorable historical phenomenon, one must be careful to specify what sort of syncretism is involved; does it relate, for example, to the conditions of production and consumption, or to the nature of the artwork itself? For example, if a Muslim ruler builds a mosque from the rubble of a Hindu temple he destroys (or a Hindu prince builds a temple from a Jain shrine he smashes), we might naturally be mistaken to celebrate the product as a syncretic, collaborative creation. Similarly, if a Muslim ruler sacks a Hindu palace and brings its musicians to adorn his own court, we should not necessarily hail the subsequent coexistence of Hindu and Muslim musicians as evidence of communal harmony and collaboration. The nature of Hindu-Muslim creative collaboration under an imperial Muslim authority is not the same as that represented, for example, by the amicable and voluntary interaction of Hindu and Muslim folk musicians of relatively equal social standing. Similarly, as Sumit Sarkar suggests below, it would be a mistake to overromanticize premodern India as a multicultural paradise ruined only by colonialism and modernity.

However, as this essay has tried to illustrate, the exclusivist and chau-
vinist aspects of north Indian musical culture are far less striking than the
genuinely pluralist features—in particular, the transcendence of sectarian-
ism not only in style, but in sociomusical practices and attitudes, whether
in the realm of classical, folk, or film music culture. From this perspective,
the attempts by certain zealots to claim Hindustani music for one com-
munity or the other, or to link Hindu bhajans to provocative cassettes, seem
to stand out as exceptions in a musical culture otherwise distinguished by
tolerance and cooperation.

In view of the recent communal disturbances, there are two possible
ways of interpreting the evident pluralism of north Indian musical culture.
One would be to regard the music world as representative of north Indian
culture as a whole, suggesting that the present communal tensions do not
reflect deep-seated, pervasive prejudices, but are rather the product of re-
cent sociopolitical and economic developments. The second and contrast-
ing approach would be to interpret north Indian musical culture as merely
an island of harmony and transcendence in a vast sea of communal mistrust
and hostility—an island conditioned by special and unusual circumstances
(for example, the preponderance of Muslim patrons and artists, and per-
haps the natural inclination of music itself toward sentiments of bonhomic
rather than bigotry). In other words, is the syncretic and pluralistic spirit
of Indian musical culture representative and typical, or is it a sort of felici-
tous aberration?

Answering this question fully is beyond the scope of a short essay
and, indeed, beyond the scope of this author. However, a few initial points
can be made. First of all, even if one were to conclude that Indian musical
culture represented merely an atypical island of communal harmony, it
would constitute not a tiny atoll, but rather quite a large island (perhaps,
indeed, as big as a subcontinent). Musical culture, with its associated ide-
ologies and social practices, is a substantial and significant part of South
Asian culture as a whole. Furthermore, similar sorts of Hindu-Muslim cre-
tive syncretism and collaboration can be seen in the other arts as well.
Without digressing too far beyond the scope of this essay, we may point
out that Indian miniature painting from the Mughal period on evolved as
a truly syncretic form, typically, for example, incorporating Persian influ-
ence in the realm of composition, architecture, ornamentation, and color
scheme on the one hand, and Hindu Rajput-style depiction of figures and
landscape on the other. It was routine in the Mughal courts for an indi-
vidual picture to be the work of two or three artists, who, judging from
the rosters of court painters, were often of different religions. Similarly,

the mutual influences between Hindu and Indo-Muslim architecture styles
have been well documented, from the temple-derived layouts and deco-
ratiq forms of innumerable Indian mosques, to the many small Hindu
temples, which, with their Mughal-style onion domes, are virtually indistin-
guishable from Muslim shrines when viewed from the exterior (Brown
1936, 1-2, 48ff.). Finally, as we have noted, in the realm of poetry, many
Muslim rulers and nobles patronized and personally cultivated Krishnaite
Hindi poetry, just as Hindu literati avidly mastered Persian until the twen-
tieth century. Thus, one can see a prodigious degree of pluralism and syn-
cretism in north Indian artistic culture as a whole.

Secondly, regardless of our verdict on the depth, age, and extensive-
ness of grass-roots communalism, the study of musical culture would seem
to corroborate the conclusions of other essays in this volume—that com-
munal attitudes and relations are conditioned primarily by nonreligious
forces. In musical culture, the amount of stylistic syncretism and collabora-
tive social practices within each horizontal stratum of society suggests that
class divisions may be more important than religious ones. Such a perspec-
tive coheres with the interpretation of recent communal tensions as being
the product of sociopolitical and economic factors, including the elite ex-
ploration of grass-roots anxieties. Finally, such an approach also suggests
that a successful campaign to overcome communalism must combine a ma-
terialist social theory, a skillful use of the new mass media, and, lastly, an
invocation of the profound traditions of tolerance and multiculturalism in
Indian society.