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The cassette industry and popular music in North India

PETER MANUEL

Since the early 1970s the advent of cassette technology has had a profound effect on music industries worldwide. This influence has been particularly marked in the developing world, where cassettes have largely replaced vinyl records and have extended their impact into regions, classes and genres previously uninfluenced by the mass media. Cassettes have served to decentralise and democratise both production and consumption, thereby counterbalancing the previous tendency toward oligopolisation of international commercial recording industries.

While the cassette boom started later in India than in areas such as the Middle East and Indonesia, its influence since the early 1980s has been no less significant. In other publications, including a previous article in this journal, I have referred briefly to the ramifications of the cassette vogue in India and other countries (Manuel 1988a, pp. 173–5, 1988b, pp. 6–7, 214). This article attempts to summarise, in somewhat greater depth, albeit still superficially, the salient effects of cassette technology upon the production, dissemination, stylistic development and general cultural meaning of North Indian popular music, by which I mean to comprehend all those genres, including commercialised folk music, which are marketed as mass commodities and have been stylistically affected by their association with the mass media.

Popular music in India before 1980

In the aforementioned publications I have summarised the development and major styles of North Indian popular musics since the advent of recording technology around 1900. At this point it will suffice to reiterate a few of the most basic and relevant characteristics of the popular music scene during this period. The most salient of these features was the relatively undemocratic structure of the music industry, control of whose production was concentrated in a tiny and unrepresentative sector of the Indian population. From the mid-1930s until the advent of cassettes, commercial film music accounted, by informed estimates, for at least 90 per cent of record output.¹ The dominant entity throughout was the Hindi film industry, whose production itself lay in the hands of a small number of firms, producers, actors and actresses, and music producers. Given the vast output of film songs, a certain amount of stylistic and regional variety was naturally evident, as has been stressed, for example, by Arnold (1988). Nevertheless, the stylistic homogeneity of the vast majority of film songs was far more remarkable, and was most conspicuous in the overwhelming hegemony, for over thirty years, of five singers – Asha Bhosle, Kishore Kumar, Mohammad Rafi, Mukesh, and above all,

Lata Mangeshkar. Since vocal style in music is such an essential and basic aesthetic identity marker, the stylistic uniformity of these singers – especially of Lata's several thousand songs – stands in dramatic contrast to the wide diversity of folk music and singing styles throughout North India.² Further, while regional folk musics did contribute to many film songs, most film composers and musicians avoided recognisable folk elements in an attempt to appeal to a pan-regional market (Chandravarkar 1987, p. 8). As a result, the overwhelming majority of songs adhered to a distinctive mainstream style, which, although itself eclectic (Arnold 1988), was hardly representative of the variety of North Indian folk musics.

Song texts were equally limited in subject matter, dealing almost exclusively with sentimental love, again in contrast to regional folksong. In this respect, however, they were suited to the romantic and fundamentally escapist nature of Indian movies themselves, which studiously avoided realistic portrayals of the grinding poverty and class antagonisms so basic to Indian society.

Popular music was apprehended largely through cinema and the radio; only the urban middle and upper classes had extensive access to records, due to the expense and power requirements of record players. His Master's Voice (of EMI) enjoyed a virtually complete monopoly in the record industry, having absorbed or eliminated regional rivals in the early decades of its appearance in India.

While charming melodies, moving lyrics and professional production standards were not lacking in Indian popular music, what was remarkably deficient was any sort of affirmation of a sense of community, whether on the level of region, caste, class, gender or ethnicity. It is such a sense of community that may be said to be the most vital and essential aspect of folk songs, which celebrate collective community values through shared, albeit specific performance norms and contexts, musical style, textual references and language. Insofar as film music succeeded in appealing to, if not creating, a homogeneous mass market, it did so only at the expense of this affirmation of community, thereby, it could be argued, becoming as ultimately alienating as the escapist cinematic fantasies it was embedded in.

The advent of cassettes: alternatives to His Master's Voice

While commercial Indian music cassettes began appearing in the early 1970s, it was not until a decade later that they appeared in such quantities as to restructure the entire music industry. In India as elsewhere, cassettes and players were naturally preferable to records due to their portability, durability, low cost and simple power requirements. Aside from these advantages, the timing of their spread in India was attributable to another set of factors. First, the number of Indian guest workers bringing 'two-in-ones' (radio-cassette players) from the Gulf states had by that point reached such a level that luxuries of this kind had become familiar throughout the country. More importantly, in accordance with the contemporary economic liberalisation policies pursued by the ruling Congress Party from around 1978, many of the import restrictions which had inhibited the acquisition of cassette technology in the 1970s were rescinded, thereby permitting the import of players and, more importantly, facilitating the local manufacture of cassettes and players with some foreign components. Thirdly, indigenous industry itself, after decades of infant-industry protection, had improved to the point that Indian

manufacturers were now able to produce presentable cassettes and players, whether using some imported components or not.³ Finally, the aforementioned economic liberalisation policies, while of questionable benefit to the lower class majority, considerably enhanced the purchasing power and general consumerism of the middle classes and even some sectors of the lower-middle classes, in the countryside as well as the cities. This development, among other things, has greatly contributed to the proliferation of televisions and cassettes in slums and villages throughout the country.⁴

The advent of cassette technology effectively restructured the music industry in India. By the mid-1980s, cassettes had come to account for 95 per cent of the recorded music market, with records being purchased only by wealthy audio-philosophes, radio stations and cassette pirates (who prefer using them as masters).⁵ The recording industry monopoly formerly enjoyed by HMV (now Gramophone Co. of India, or 'GramCo') dwindled to less than 15 per cent of the market as over 300 competitors entered the recording field. While sales of film music remained strong, the market expanded so exponentially – from \$1.2 million in 1980 to over \$12 million in 1986⁶ – that film music came to constitute only about half of the market, the remainder consisting of regional folk and devotional music, and other forms of 'non-filmi', or in industry parlance, 'basic' pop music.

In effect, the cassette revolution had definitively ended the unchallenged hegemony of GramCo, of the corporate music industry in general, of film music, of the Lata-Mukesh vocal style and of the uniform aesthetic of the Bombay film music producers which had been superimposed on a few hundred million music listeners over the preceding forty years. The crucial factors were the relatively low expense of the cassette technology, and especially its lowered production costs which enabled small, 'cottage' cassette companies to proliferate throughout the country. The small labels tend to have local, specialised, regional markets to whose diverse musical interests they are able and willing to respond in a manner quite uncharacteristic of the monopolistic major recording companies, which, as we have seen, prefer to address and, as much as possible, to create a mass homogeneous market. In the process, the backyard cassette companies have been energetically recording and marketing all manner of regional 'little traditions' which were previously ignored by HMV and the film music producers. Rather than being oriented toward undifferentiated film-goers, most of the new cassette-based musics are aimed at a bewildering variety of specific target audiences, in terms of class, age, gender, ethnicity, region and, in some cases, even occupation (e.g. Punjabi truck drivers' songs). The smaller producers themselves are varied in terms of their region, religion and, insofar as many are lower-middle class, their class backgrounds as well. Ownership of the means of musical production is thus incomparably more diverse than before the cassette era. As a result, the average, non-elite Indian is now, as never before, offered the voices of his own community as mass-mediated alternatives to His Master's Voice.

The cassette producers now vary greatly in size, orientation, operating practices and other parameters. On the one hand are the handful of major firms, *viz.*, GramCo, which, hampered by inefficiency and inability to compete, relies primarily on its back catalogue of film music; CBS and a break-away firm, Magnasound, which specialise in releases of Western music; Polygram's Music India Ltd. (MIL, formerly Polydor); T-Series/Super Cassette Industries (SCI), a newer business founded by the ruthless entrepreneur Gulshan Arora, with a

diverse catalogue now including most current film music; Venus, a Bombay-based concern with a similarly diverse repertoire; and TIPS, which specialises in cover versions of pop songs. On the other hand are the smaller regional producers, which probably number between 250 and 500 nationally.⁷ These themselves range in size from regional folk/pop producers like Delhi's Max, Sonotone and Yuki, with over a thousand releases each, to operations like Chandrabani Garhwal Series, whose series, as of 1989, consisted of a single cassette. Beyond this level are numerous provincial entrepreneurial individuals who record music and sell copies upon request out of their residences, dubbing them with simple one-to-one setups.

Technology, financing and piracy

The expenses and technical resources of the cassette producers naturally vary in accordance with their size, audience orientation and other factors. Both large and small companies may have their own recording studios and dubbing facilities, and/or they may rely on rented studios and other duplicators. While a few of the better studios have such features as sixteen-track recorders, most professional studios have only four-track technology. Recorders are almost all imported; dubbing machinery may be either imported, or may consist of one-to-four duplicators made for around \$6,000 by indigenous and generally unlicensed companies. Similarly, blank tape and cassette shells may either be imported, acquired from indigenous makers, or, in the case of larger companies like T-Series, manufactured by the firm itself; smaller producers assemble the cassettes by hand.⁸ Cassette recorders themselves range from high-fidelity products of Japanese-Indian 'tie-ins' (e.g. Bush-Akai and Orson-Sony) to locally made players, in which only the heads and micro-motors are imported, and which sell for around \$18.

Recording expenses vary widely. With studio charges and fees for engineers and musicians, production of a 60-minute tape of mass-market film songs and Hindi pop music may on occasion cost up to Rs. 200,000 (\$12,000). While the average recording expenses are closer to \$1000,⁹ many recordings of folk music are produced for as little as \$75. Cassette duplication then proceeds in accordance with demand, with retailers often being able to return unsold tapes to the manufacturer for re-recording (hence the absence of labels on many regional cassette shells). Most cassettes sell for around Rs. 18, or slightly more than a dollar; HMV's tapes range from Rs. 24 to Rs. 36. Tape fidelity ranges from acceptable to worse, with poorer cassettes leaving oxide deposits on tape heads and wearing out after a few listenings; customers learn to request to listen to tapes before purchase to ensure that they are not already defective.

Piracy, or the sale of unauthorised duplications of recordings, has plagued the cassette industry from its inception. The first half of the 1980s was the worst period in this respect. Extant copyright laws were unequipped to deal with cassette piracy, while the government showed little interest in prosecuting offenders. HMV's inability to reissue its old film hits provided the pirate producers with ample repertoire to market. New companies faced onerous bureaucratic obstacles in legitimately obtaining licences, including absurd export requirements. Due to high government taxes on blank tape, and the myopic pricing policies of the large cassette companies (especially HMV), legitimate tapes cost nearly twice as much as pirate versions. Further, while most pirate cassettes were of inferior quality, some, such as the tapes of Goanese music produced and purchased in the Gulf states by

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guest workers, were actually superior to the legitimate cassettes. By 1985, pirate cassettes were generally estimated to account for 90 per cent of all tape sales.¹⁰ While most of the piracy was perpetrated by small producers, the fledgling T-Series was widely accused of being a major culprit. Meanwhile, cassette stores and dubbing kiosks proliferated throughout the country, recording favourite songs selected by individual customers.

In the latter half of the decade, the situation improved somewhat. Most legitimate producers lowered their prices, making pirate tapes less competitive. The government, under increasing pressure from the industry, reduced its various taxes and bureaucratic hindrances to registration of new companies; more importantly, realising the extent of its tax losses, it enacted a more effective copyright act in 1984 and intensified attempts at enforcement. Legal cover versions of the classic hits became widely marketed. Consumers gradually became aware of the advantages of buying legitimate tapes. As a result of these changes, piracy, although still open and widespread, diminished considerably, at least in relation to the market as a whole. In the absence of accurate figures, I would estimate its share at roughly one third of the market.

The impact of cassettes on musical trends

The cassette vogue has played a central role in the flowering of a number of commercial music styles of North India, especially the 'non-filmi' genres which have come to rival, if not surpass the popularity of film music. Film music, of course, continues to be the single most dominant North Indian genre, and cassettes have naturally served to disseminate it considerably more widely than before. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, by making possible more diverse ownership of the means of musical production, cassettes have served as vehicles for a set of heterogeneous genres which provide, on an unprecedented level, stylistic alternatives to film music, and to which listeners have responded to the tune of some \$60 million annually. In the process, relatively new genres of stylised, commercial popular musics have arisen in close association with cassettes. The following discussion, rather than attempting a descriptive survey of these styles, endeavours to outline the connection between their emergence and cassette technology.

Ghazal

The Urdu *ghazal* has played an important part in North Indian culture since the early eighteenth century. As a literary genre (consisting of rhymed and metered couplets employing a standardised symbology and aesthetic), it has been and remains widely cultivated among educated and even many illiterate North Indians, especially Muslims. As a musical genre, it emerged as a rich semi-classical style, popularised by courtesans and, in the twentieth century, by light-classical singers of 'respectable' backgrounds. With the advent of film music, a 'filmi' style of *ghazal* emerged, distinguished from its semi-classical antecedent by characteristics typical of film song in general, *viz.* orchestral interludes between verses, occasional use of Western instruments and harmony, absence of improvisation, and a standardised vocal style epitomised by its main exponents, Talat Mehmood and a handful of other singers, including, of course, Lata Mangeshkar.¹¹

While the film *ghazal* had declined after Mehmood's heyday in the 1950s, in

the late 1970s a new style of *ghazal*-song flowered which was at once commercially popular, distinct from the earlier film and light-classical styles, and lacking direct association with cinema. Indeed, the new crossover *ghazal*, as popularised first by Pakistanis Mehdi Hasan and Ghulam Ali, was the first widely successful popular music in South Asia which was independent of cinema or, for that matter, radio. With its leisurely, languorous tempo, its vaguely aristocratic ethos, its sentimental lyrics and soothing, unhurried melodies, the new *ghazal*, though disparaged by purists as yuppie relaxation music, came to acquire an audience far wider than *ghazal* had ever had before. Much of the new *ghazal*'s audience consisted of devotees of the formerly melodious film songs who were dismayed by the recent film music trend toward disco-oriented styles more appropriate to the action-oriented *masālā* ('spice') films of the 1980s. In the hands of the subsequent *ghazal* stars – Pankaj Udhas, Anup Jalota, Jagjit and Chitra Singh, and others – the crossover *ghazal* style has become even more distinct, with its diluted Urdu, often shallow and trite poetry, general absence or mediocrity of improvisation, and a silky, non-percussive accompaniment and vocal style which render it immediately recognisable. As the genre became ever more remote from its semi-classical antecedent, 'pop goes the *ghazal*' soon became a journalistic cliché.

What is significant for the present study is the role that cassettes played in the popularisation of the crossover *ghazal*. The *ghazal* vogue had gathered momentum by the late 1970s, but reached its apogee in the first half of the next decade, in tandem with the cassette boom. The two trends, indeed, reinforced each other, at the expense of vinyl records and film music in general. Cassette producers in the firms most closely associated with the *ghazal* vogue – GramCo and MIL – saw themselves as not merely responding to popular demand, but actively promoting, if not creating the trend. Thus, MIL vigorously pushed *ghazal* tapes partly in order to outflank cassette pirates by creating a market for a genre distinguished by relatively high fidelity and an affluent, yet mass audience (unlike pirate cassettes, most of which consist of poor-fidelity tapes of film hits aimed at lower-class buyers).¹² Similarly, a GramCo executive related:

What became necessary [after the decline of melody-oriented film music] was to take *ghazals* and *bhajans* to a wider market, thus simplifying them and making them more universally accepted . . . Many such trends can be created.¹³

While our informant is no doubt overstating the ability of the music industry to create trends outright, it is clear that the deliberate promotion of *ghazal* cassettes by the larger recording companies actively helped popularise both the medium and the music. In the wake of these developments, commercial cassettes were established as the most dynamic sector of the music industry by the early 1980s, such that future developments in the realm of Indian popular music were closely allied to the new medium.

Devotional music

If the crossover *ghazal* boom confirmed the transition from vinyl to cassette recording, it was the unprecedented vogue of commercial versions of devotional music that accompanied and fed the extension of the cassette market beyond the urban middle classes. The devotional music trend did not, of course, emerge from a vacuum. India, with its vast, diverse and intensely religious population, continues

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to host an extraordinarily rich variety of devotional music traditions. The most widespread of these have been the various, often collectively performed songs associated with the Hindu *bhakti* traditions, which celebrate personal devotion rather than karma, caste or formalistic ritual. Commercial film versions of *bhakti git* (song) had been familiar for decades, and several film *bhajans* (Hindu religious songs) and *ārtis* (prayer chants) had acquired the status of hits, being subsequently sung by devotees throughout the country (such as the *ārti* 'Om jay Jagdish Hari' from the film *Purab aur Paschim*). Film versions of Muslim *qawwālī* had also become a common feature of Bombay movies (Manuel 1988a, pp. 167–8). Further, record companies (primarily, of course, GramCo) had traditionally come to time new releases with the main Hindu festivals (especially the simultaneous Bengali Durga Puja, Gujarati Navratri, and Maharashtra Ganesh Puja), when the public went on gift-buying sprees. Nevertheless, the extent of the commercial *bhakti* vogue in the early 1980s was quite unprecedented.

The immediate forerunner to the trend was the widely successful series of recordings by Mukesh consisting of tasteful musical settings of Tulsidas' version of the *Ramayan* epic (Manuel 1988a, p. 175). Although first released on LP format, it was not until it was issued on cassette in the late 1970s that this series achieved mass sales. The phenomenal popularity of subsequent television serials of the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* epics played an even more important role in promoting mass-mediated realisations of religious works, including cassette recordings of devotional musics. As with *ghazals*, however, the cassette medium itself played the crucial role in popularising commercial *bhakti git*. Cassette producers recognised that a successful devotional cassette may enjoy a considerably longer 'shelf life' than most other pop music releases, whose sales generally dwindle after a few months.¹⁴ Further, producers saw that the country's extant devotional music traditions constituted a relatively untapped gold mine of inestimable commercial potential. Accordingly, several commentators have opined that the vogue of pop *bhakti* music was due primarily to the advent of cassettes rather than to any resurgence of religious fervour in the country. Thus, for example, veteran *bhajan* singer Purshotam Das stated:

Bhajans have always been popular in certain segments of our society. But now the catchy tunes have been successful in attracting the youth. Essentially, it is the cassette medium which is responsible for the growing sales rather than growing interest (Upadhyay 1985, p. 15).

Similarly, a music journalist argued, 'Perhaps the real reason for this manic following of *bhajans* was the spectacular rise of audio-visual electronic consumer goods and the rise of the *ghazal*' (Lalitha 1988).

The variety of commercially marketed devotional musics in North India is remarkable. The most conspicuous genre is what may be described as a 'mainstream' *bhajan* style, sung by a solo vocalist with light instrumental accompaniment. It was this genre that started the *bhakti* boom, in the wake of Mukesh's *Ramayan* and, more importantly, the *ghazal* vogue. Hence it is not surprising that in style, instrumentation and leading performers (Jalota, Udhas), the mainstream pop *bhajan* had marked affinities with the crossover *ghazal*. While this sort of *bhajan* continues to enjoy mass appeal, cassette producers have since marketed an extraordinary variety of religious musics, which, needless to say, come incomparably closer to representing the rich diversity of Indian devotional

musics than film musics ever attempted to do. Predominant in the field, naturally, are sub-genres of Hindu devotional music, including musical settings of traditional prayers (e.g. *Hanuman chalisa*, or the epics), *bhajans* devoted to various cult leaders (e.g. Sai Baba), or to deities (e.g. Santoshi Ma), *bhajans* sung in light-classical style by classical vocalists like Kumar Gandharva, and all manner of old and new songs in regional languages. Musics of other religions are also well represented. *Qawwālī* cassettes continue to sell, as do tapes of semi-melodic discourses by Muslim religious leaders. Sikh devotional songs – especially *shabd gurbānī* – enjoy a large market (and are remarkable for their avoidance of the stylistic commercialisation typical of many other devotional musics). Christian hymns, Jain *bhajans*, and even Marathi Buddhist songs also have their own customers.

While most cassettes, including the mainstream *bhajans*, are essentially for recreational listening, others are more functional in intent and usage. Housewives, for example, may routinely play a cassette of the *Satyanarayan kathā* during their occasional ritual fasting, in place of inviting a *pandit* to chant the story, or reciting it themselves. The important thing, in terms of spiritual benefit, is that the story be heard, regardless of whether one recites it oneself or listens to it while doing housework.

Smaller cassette companies frequently produce tapes for specific festivals celebrated annually at shrines or temples. A fledgling company in Lucknow, for example, produced a tape of songs connected with the annual festival in nearby Deva Sharif, and has been selling some \$600 worth at the event every year since. Such profits, of course, may be too small to interest the larger recording companies, but suffice to keep many smaller producers in the market. Indeed, aside from the appeal of *bhajan* superstars like Anup Jalota and Hari Om Sharan, it is the ability of cassette producers to represent the innumerable 'little traditions' that accounts in large part for the extent of the devotional music vogue. Perhaps due to the virtually inexhaustible nature of these traditions, the commercial *bhakti* boom, unlike that of the *ghazal*, shows no signs of abating at present.

'Versions' and parodies: recycling the classics

A third important genre in the contemporary cassette-based popular music scene comprises cover versions of prior hit songs. Such recordings can be grouped into two broad categories: in one case – that of the cover version proper, or in modern Indian parlance, a 'version' recording – an extant song is re-recorded, generally by a different label, with different vocalists; the second category consists of cases where a new release uses the melody of an extant hit, but set to a new text. The latter instance, of course, constitutes parody (and is commonly referred to as such in India). Parodies substituting new texts in the same language – a common practice in modern film music – are generally not classified in the 'version' category, and lacking direct association with cassettes, will not be discussed in this article. Of greater relevance here are those parodies substituting a new or translated text in a different language from the original.

Like *ghazal* and devotional songs, cover versions and cross-language parodies are neither new nor unique to Indian commercial music; for that matter, the use of stock tunes is basic to folk music in India and many other countries.¹⁵ Furthermore, for several decades, Indian folk musicians throughout the country have freely borrowed and adapted film melodies. Nevertheless, the extent of the current popularity of commercial versions and parodies is quite unprecedented in India

and, to my own knowledge, unparalleled in any other country (with the possible exception of Indonesia, for which see Yampolsky 1989). The deluge of 'version' recordings covering classic film hits now constitutes a separate market category that occupies a sizeable niche in most urban cassette stores. Further, every major hit song of recent years, regardless of its original language, has spawned several parody versions in regional languages.

Rather than being a fortuitous fad, the boom of versions and parodies can be attributed to specific conditions obtaining in the Indian musical environment. The wide use of stock and borrowed tunes in Indian folk, light-classical and even classical music constitutes an initial precedent. In the realm of popular music, a more immediate precondition has been the relatively lax Indian Copyright Act (of 1956-7, section 52), which allows any party to make records of an existing work by filing a notice of intent and paying a nominal royalty. Added to this legal tolerance is the unwillingness or inability of the government to prosecute the innumerable small cassette producers who release recordings, typically of folk or devotional music, which employ melodies borrowed from films or other pop music.

Beyond these factors, the primary impetus for the vogue of cover versions has been the inability of GramCo to meet the demand for releases of its vast catalogue of past film songs. GramCo, by virtue of its longstanding virtual monopoly, held the rights to essentially all film songs recorded until the early 1970s. While many of these were forgettable and forgotten, many others were still in demand, but were not being re-issued, largely due to the company's monopoly-bred inefficiency. The advent of cassettes and the subsequent emergence of competing producers provided, for the first time, a means of meeting this demand. T-Series founder Gulshan Arora was the first to capitalise upon this situation; since the original recordings were copyrighted by GramCo, he set out to produce 'versions' of the most popular classic film hits. As the original vocalists were either prohibitively expensive (Lata), deceased (Kishore, Talat, Mukesh), or bound by contract obligations to GramCo, Arora scouted college talent shows for clone singers, coming up with a stable of inexpensive, undiscovered vocalists. He then released an ongoing series of 'version' tapes entitled *Yaaden* ('Memories'), whose labels acknowledge, in small print, that the singers are not those of the original recordings. The versions are recorded in stereo, using modern technology, and thus offer considerably better fidelity than the originals. Other labels followed suit, and the category of 'version' recordings boomed. Most of these have been based on Hindi-Urdu film songs, but some labels have specialised in offering regional-language versions of non-Hindi songs (such as Sargam's version series of past Marathi hits¹⁶). While GramCo belatedly began reissuing some of its back catalogue, its cassettes, as noted above, remain considerably more expensive than those of other labels, including versions.

Critics and aficionados often complain that the version singers are inferior to their models. Nevertheless, the wide sales of these recordings suggest that the public, when given an alternative, is not as exclusively fixated on Lata and Kishore as film producers have been. The vogue of versions also illustrates how cassettes can contribute to the decentralisation of the music industry even where ownership of the repertoire remains monopolised.

The boom of parody songs in regional languages is another development intrinsically tied to cassettes and the diversification of music industry ownership. Of course, Bombay film music producers had often borrowed melodies from

regional folk music and given them new or translated texts, generally in Hindi. But the advent of cassettes and the decentralisation of the music scene enabled this process to occur on an unprecedented scale, and in reverse. First of all, the new parody recordings were marketed independently of cinema, whether the borrowed hit melodies originated in film music or not. Secondly, the parody songs generally contain new texts in regional languages, rather than mainstream Hindi-Urdu; thus, they have been aimed at regional markets (Punjabi, Bengali, Marathi, etc) and in that sense serve to promote linguistic diversity rather than the hegemony of Hindi-Urdu in pop culture.

For example, the three top hit songs of 1988–9, 'Hawa hawa', 'Tirchi topi-wala' and 'Ek do tin', have all appeared in versions in various North Indian regional languages. They have also, for that matter, been relentlessly parodied and plagiarised, with new texts in Hindi, by film composers like Bappi Lahiri. Usually the regional parodies are marketed in the form of cassettes parodying several top songs. (Both for market purposes and in public conceptions, such tapes are classified separately from folk music cassettes which occasionally use borrowed film tunes.) T-Series, Venus and, above all, the TIPS labels have been the most aggressive in tapping, if not creating the lucrative market for regional-language parodies. Some current hit cassettes – both filmi and non-filmi – borrow Western tunes, such as Alisha Chinai's 'Madonna' tape, consisting of Hindi-language versions of her idol's songs, with a cover depicting Alisha dressed, appropriately, in a gaudy brassiere and no shirt. Interestingly, two of the most successful parody tapes (TIPS' 'Love me' and 'Follow me') have consisted of settings of current Indian pop tunes, including those mentioned above, with English-language texts, thereby exploiting, and again, helping create an entirely new market for Anglophone, Indian-style pop music. Although English is not a 'regional' Indian language, the vogue of such songs is another illustration of the ability of the cassette industry to target diverse, specialised markets – in this case, a certain sector of educated, middle-class Indian pop music fans.

The ideological and aesthetic implications of the vogue for regional-language parody songs are too complex and contradictory to be treated in depth in this article. As Yampolsky (1989) has noted in reference to Indonesian inter-language parodies, such songs could be seen as revitalising and empowering regional cultures, since hit songs are now available in various languages aside from the dominant one (Bhasa-Indonesia in Indonesia, Hindi-Urdu in North India). However, as Yampolsky also observes, it may be more accurate to regard such songs as extending a hegemonic mainstream *style* into regional markets. In that sense, it could be argued that such regional parodies are better seen as reinforcing the dominant class/region/corporate aesthetic rather than constituting commercialisations of the practice of tune-borrowing in regional 'little traditions'.

Regional folk-pop musics

While pop *ghazals*, *bhajans* and version songs have come to form new and important components of the Indian popular music scene, it is the commercial recordings of regional folk musics that constitute the most significant development within the music industry. Regional folk musics, or stylised versions thereof, now appear to account for around 40 to 50 per cent of all cassette sales in North India.¹⁷ Moreover,

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it is the emergence of regional commercial musics which most clearly illustrates and derives from the decentralisation and democratisation of the music industry at the expense of Hindi-Urdu, corporate-produced film music.

As with the other genres discussed above, commercial recordings of non-filmi regional folk-pop musics had been extant for several decades before the cassette boom, but they were limited in quantity and variety, and their audience was largely restricted to urban middle-class consumers who could afford record-players. Mostly they consisted of short, stylised settings of lively folk songs, or new songs in folk style, accompanied by instrumental ensembles playing pre-composed interludes between verses. With the advent of cassettes, modernised versions of such songs continue to sell, but now compete with an unprecedented variety of other genres. Styles popular primarily among the lower classes, previously largely ignored by the record industry, are now represented on cheap cassettes. Further, unrestricted by the time limits of 78 or 45 rpm records, cassettes now offer a wide diversity of genres which require longer time to present, and are in many cases more representative folk music genres than the short songs formerly marketed on records. Thus, for example, western Uttar Pradesh residents can purchase dozens of cassettes of their cherished *kathās*, or narrative song-stories (especially 'Alha' and 'Dhola'), representing different episodes sung by different performers. Meanwhile, Rajasthani and Haryanvi listeners can choose from a few hundred cassettes of old and new *kathās* in their own dialects. Extended, sequential genres like Bhojpuri *birhā* are also widely marketed, along with shorter song forms like the Braj-bhasha *rasiya*, which had previously been represented by fewer than a dozen records.

Even more dramatic is the vogue of commercial cassettes in regional languages which had been essentially ignored by the record and film industries. For instance, Garhwal, Haryana and the Braj region, all within 150 miles of Delhi, have come to constitute lively markets for cassettes in their own languages, with several producers, large and small, issuing new releases each month. Most of these tapes consist of either traditional folk songs, or more often, new compositions in more or less traditional style.

Needless to say, while film music sought to homogenise its audience's aesthetics, the cassette-based regional musics are able to celebrate regional cultures and affirm a local sense of community. Unlike film songs dealing exclusively with amorphous sentimental love, regional song texts abound with references to local customs, lore, mores and even contemporary socio-political events or issues.

Much of the new cassette-based regional music resists easy classification into 'folk' or 'popular' categories. Many cassettes consist of traditional genres recorded in straightforward traditional style. Others are 'modernised' or 'improved' (as producers put it) by the addition of untraditional instrumental accompaniments. Once marketed, even traditional songs can sometimes be 'discovered' and enjoy the ephemeral mass popularity of pop hits; for instance, the Punjabi nonsense song 'Tutuk Tutuk', as recorded by the UK-based Malkit Singh, sold over 500,000 copies.¹⁸

Such sales, however, are highly unusual for regional folk music, and the indefinite continuance of the commercial market for folk music is uncertain. Several producers of regional folk cassettes told me that the majority of their customers were of the older generations, who were less interested in film music than the young. To the extent that such is indeed the case, the present abundance

of folk music cassettes may constitute a unique and relatively brief moment in recording history.

Cassettes, style and film music aesthetics

Thus far, this article has emphasised the ways in which the cassette-based music industry differs from the film music industry in offering a much greater diversity of musics and styles, which more faithfully represent the variety of North Indian genres and aesthetics. Nevertheless, the effects of cassette technology are complex and contradictory, and in some respects can be seen to reinforce, rather than negate, tendencies manifest within the earlier, corporate-dominated Indian music industry. Cassettes, after all, are commercial commodities whose production is subject, in varying degrees, to the same constraints and incentives of capitalist enterprises in general, such as goals of maximisation of profit and economies of scale. Accordingly, if film music can be accused of distorting consumers' aesthetics by superimposing values deriving from the inherent structure of the music industry, cassette-based musics can be seen to perpetuate some of the same tendencies.

An initial constraint is that cassette producers, whether small or large, will only market those genres which prove profitable. Thus, for example, because a market must have a certain minimum size, within a given region it may be only certain genres, or certain styles of a given genre that are marketed on cassette. A case in point is the commercial music scene in the Braj area, around Mathura. Most cassettes here consist of *rasiya*, the single most popular folk music genre. *Rasiya* itself is rendered in a variety of styles, including village women singing informally in the evening, a dozen or more devotees singing responsorially in a temple, a *dangal* ('competition') between two professional groups, a chorus singing in the *Hathrasi* style influenced by *nautanki* theatre, or a solo professional accompanied by drum and harmonium. *Rasiya* commercial cassettes, with a very few exceptions, present only the latter kind of format. Further, while many traditional *rasiyas* are devotional portrayals of Krishna and Radha, the vast majority of *rasiya* cassettes are secular, spicy (*masāledar*) erotica. Some of the best singers continue to go unrecorded because they sing in styles other than that favoured by cassette companies. Producers also tend to avoid vocalists who perform in peripheral, lesser dialects (e.g. Mevati) with smaller potential markets. Thus, while cassettes are able to offer incomparably greater regional and stylistic variety than did film music, there are limits to the degree of diversity they represent.

A particularly conspicuous characteristic of Indian cassette-based popular musics is the tendency to eliminate improvisation. This trend is especially apparent in *ghazal*, whose traditional light-classical style was based on *bol banāo*, or improvised textual-melodic interpretation. While several cassettes of Mehdi Hasan, Ghulam Ali and others do feature some improvisation, the majority, like earlier film *ghazals*, consist of purely pre-composed renditions whose appeal lies in the fixed tune, rather than in the singer's skill at improvisation. Similar trends can be observed in other commercialised North Indian genres, suggesting that the more a genre becomes dependent on the mass media, the less improvisation will be tolerated.¹⁹

Similarly, cassettes have tended to perpetuate the aforementioned practice of 'improving' or 'decorating' songs with instrumental interludes and accompani-

ments (frequently including chordal instruments). Of course, many cassettes employ purely traditional instrumentation, in cases where producers think their more traditional-minded listeners would disapprove, or when they are disinclined or unable to pay for extra musicians, arrangers and rehearsal time. But the trend toward non-traditional instrumental accompaniments, already established in film music and radio broadcasts of folk music, is clearly being spread by cassettes.

Another tendency of Indian popular musics which is being reinforced by cassettes is the promotion of short songs. While as mentioned above, lengthy narrative song genres are widely marketed on cassette, other more flexible genres (e.g. *qawwālī*, *rasiya*, *bhangra*, *ghazal* and *bhajan*) tend to be compressed into four- to six-minute formats. One producer of *qawwālī* cassettes told me that in his experience, this format was the first thing customers looked for in a cassette. Whether deriving from the influence of record format, or from the desire to acquire several tunes in a single purchase (the favourites of which can always be replayed), the perpetuation of this custom on cassettes reinforces the 'sound bite' aesthetic in popular musics and extends it to genres previously uninfluenced by the mass media.

While reinforcing a degree of stylistic and formal standardisation, cassettes have provided a remarkable stimulus for the creation of new texts and, in some cases, melodies. Many cassette companies, from T-Series to several smaller producers interviewed, insist that their performers, regardless of genre, sing primarily new material, that is, material with new lyrics. In the case of regional folk genres like *rasiya*, a considerable amount of the familiar traditional repertoire may have been exhausted in the first years of the cassette boom, such that the producers' demand for new material keeps several lyricists occupied (while generating much verse that aficionados find forgettable). Insofar as novelty is a virtue in itself, this aspect of cassette impact should not be regarded as unwelcome.

Similarly, certain genres appear to have acquired markedly greater melodic variety in recent decades, although it is difficult to attribute this development solely to the cassette boom, or, for that matter, to any other specific factor. Modern renditions of Rajasthani *kathās* and the Braj-bhasha *Dhola* are both said to be considerably more sophisticated and varied in their styles and melodic content than a generation ago.²⁰ While professionalism and mass media influence in general appear to have contributed to this development, the cassette-based commercialisation of these genres may well have accelerated the process. Another factor related to this phenomenon has been the aforementioned borrowing of film tunes, which, of course, had also become a common practice in North Indian folk music well before the advent of cassettes. Cassettes have not only served as vehicles for such parody tunes, but may have intensified the practice by increasing demand for new material.

In discussing how cassette technology may reinforce, rather than oppose certain features of film music and other related tendencies within the Indian music industry, we may also reiterate that cassettes are vehicles not only for the spread of filmi aesthetics and borrowed film tunes, but also of film music itself. Film music still accounts for at least one third, and possibly as much as sixty per cent of cassette sales. Even in stores in provincial towns, roughly half the shelf space is often devoted to film music. While cassette technology has enabled other competing genres to flourish, some of the same virtues which enabled this development to occur – low cost, portability, etc. – have also promoted the increase of film music sales, especially among the lower-middle classes and rural dwellers. Thus, while

film music's share of cassette sales as a whole has dropped significantly, film music sales themselves do not appear to have declined, as the entire market for recorded music has expanded so dramatically. In this sense, the impact of cassettes has been contradictory.

Cassettes and live performance

A further factor to be considered in evaluating the impact of cassette technology on musical life in North India is the influence cassettes have had on live performance and the general vitality of traditional music genres. It has been a commonplace observation that the mass media often flourish at the expense of live performance, and that they have contributed significantly to the decline of many traditional musics worldwide, if not to the decrease of communal social life in general. In North India, several scholars have attributed the well-documented decline of various folk music genres to the influence of the mass media, and particularly cinema (e.g. Tewari 1974, p. 18). Given the remarkable spread of the cassette industry, it would be logical to suspect that, sooner or later, it may have a similarly detrimental impact on live performance traditions.

At this point, however, it is difficult to verify such trends with certainty, due to the fact that they tend to be overdetermined by a wide variety of social factors, and also due to the relative novelty of cassettes and the fact that significant changes in performance traditions generally take more than a decade to become apparent. Evidence does suggest, however, that in certain cases, cassettes have exacerbated the media's tendency to discourage live performance. One particularly common example is the aforementioned widespread practice of housewives playing cassettes of ritual *vrats* (prayers) or *kathās* rather than personally chanting them or hiring a *pandit* to do so. Rajasthani folklorist Komal Kothari has also suggested to me that the professional standards of proliferating cassettes may intimidate lesser skilled amateurs from taking part in collective genres where participation was traditionally valued over vocal expertise (or even basic competence). In the realm of professional performance, several of my informants, including a few village former concert-goers, opined that the spread of cassettes constituted a disincentive to attend live performances (of genres like *rasiya* or Bengali *adhunik gān*), and that the frequency of such programmes was diminishing accordingly. Similarly, one *Dhola* singer told me that he had resisted offers to record out of fear that his present audiences would subsequently simply listen to his tapes rather than book him for a programme.

However, in the case of many genres, both participatory and professional, there is little evidence that the cassette vogue, or the mass media in general have decreased live performance. I have noticed that some housewives may play a cassette at a household ritual in order to sing along with it, rather than to replace their own singing. Similarly, my urban Punjabi acquaintances insisted that despite the sales of wedding-song cassettes, and their occasional usage at marriages, there was little tendency for such tapes to replace live singing by women at weddings. As for professional genres, several performers and producers insisted to me that renown via cassettes boosts rather than lessens a performer's fees and concert bookings, and, when told of the aforementioned *Dhola* singer's fears, they invariably scoffed at his 'backward' attitude. Contemporary scholars have also noted that some genres which are now widely marketed on cassette, such as Rajasthani *kathā*

and Bhojpuri *birhā*, today appear to be performed live more than ever before within memory.²¹ Accordingly, it is clear that aside from studio accompanists, very few, if any, performers rely on recording fees for more than a small fraction of their livelihood; rather, cassettes are seen as useful for publicity, and for the flat payment received, which is often no more than the standard fee for a live programme.

Conclusions

Popular music has been well described as a site of negotiation, where diverse and often contradictory social ideologies and aesthetics are mediated, dramatised and contested (e.g. Middleton 1985). The mass media themselves, including cassettes in North India, can be seen to embody this process. On the one hand, cassettes have perpetuated, if not exacerbated, many features of corporate music industries in general, and of the film-dominated Indian music industry in particular; such tendencies include the discouragement of improvisation, the replacement of live performance by passive listening, and various other features associated with the commercialisation of genres which were previously relatively free of market and media influence.

On the other hand, cassettes have decentralised and diversified the music industry, challenging the alienating hegemony of the escapist, corporate-controlled film music industry. By offering a greater variety of products and drawing extensively from the rich 'little traditions' of regional musics, cassettes are able to affirm a sense of local community and revitalise traditions, rather than obliterating them with musics superimposed by a mass-market, lowest common denominator pop music.

At the same time, the affirmation of aesthetic and ideological diversity is not without its costs. While negating some of the alienation promoted by a hegemonic culture industry, a decentralising music technology naturally may promote certain 'community values' which are controversial, if not reactionary or even destructive. Hence, in India one finds tapes of Rajasthani *kathās* glorifying *sati* (widow-burning), as well as all manner of political campaign songs and speeches, from Punjabi paeans to Beant Singh (an assassin of Indira Gandhi), to Hindu chauvinist calls for the expulsion or murder of Muslims. Further, one might question whether even the innocent celebration of regional and sectarian difference is desirable when India is being wracked by the most vicious ethnic and religious violence. For an optimist faithful in the ability of individuals and groups to work out their differences rather than having heavy-handed ideologies imposed on them, a decentralised, if provocative music industry should seem preferable to one consisting of a tiny corporate elite mass-producing bubble-gum music for a captive audience. Unfortunately, in the context of Indian capitalism, it is difficult to imagine any alternatives to these two scenarios.

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Endnotes

- 1 Music critic and record archivist V.A.K. Ranga Rao, interviewed in 1989.
- 2 Thus, while Lata may have recorded in over a dozen languages, she cannot really be argued to have sung in more than one style.
- 3 Anil Chopra, editor of *Playback and Fast Forward* (a music industry trade journal), interviewed in March 1990.
- 4 See, e.g., 'Rural consumerism', *India Today*, 15 March 1990.
- 5 See Vijay Lazarus, interviewed in *Playback*, June 1986, p. 30.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 7 Anil Chopra, interviewed in March 1990, estimates the number of cassette companies at 500. A 1987 survey (cited in *Playback*, July 1987, p. 27) listed 256 producers. I myself enumerated about 200 in selected regions of North India. Note that the record industry distinction between 'majors', who own production and distribution as well as recording facilities, and 'indies', who generally only record, is not meaningful in reference to most cassette producers.
- 8 India, indeed, is now the world's second largest manufacturer of blank tapes.
- 9 Biswanath Chatterjee, interviewed by Anil Chopra in *Playback*, July 1986, pp. 36-7.
- 10 See, e.g., Dubashi 1986, and Vijay Lazarus, interviewed in *Playback*, June 1986, pp. 30-1.
- 11 For further discussion of the *ghazal* in Indian popular music, see Manuel 1988a, p. 167, 1988-9.
- 12 See, e.g., Vijay Lazarus, interviewed in *Playback*, June 1986, p. 30.
- 13 GramCo manager Sanjeev Kohli, interviewed by Anil Chopra in *Playback*, August 1986, p. 31.
- 14 This aspect of devotional music cassettes, initially pointed out to me by Scott Marcus, was corroborated by cassette producers in India.
- 15 See articles by music journalist and archivist V.A.K. Ranga Rao (1986) for a sketch of the history of version recordings in Indian film music.
- 16 See 'Marathi versions booming', in *Playback*, January-March 1990, p. 11.
- 17 Anil Chopra, interviewed in March 1990, estimates 50 per cent. Accurate figures are unavailable due to piracy, the unreliability of sales reports from the major companies, and the absence of data from the smaller ones.
- 18 'HMV fights back', in *Playback*, November-December 1989, p. 7. Folk songs in the West, like 'La Bamba', can also acquire 'hit' status.
- 19 Contrast, for example, the improvised guitar solos on many 1960s acid-rock records, with the carefully-crafted, over-dubbed, pre-composed solos of today's heavy metal guitarists.
- 20 Personal communications with Komal Kothari and Susan Wadley, respectively.
- 21 Personal communications with Komal Kothari and Scott Marcus, respectively.

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