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The regional North Indian popular music industry in 2014: from cassette culture to cyberculture

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Abstract

This article explores the current state of the regional vernacular popular music industry in North India, assessing the changes that have occurred since around 2000 with the advent of digital technologies, including DVD format, and especially the Internet, cellphones and 'pen-drives'. It provides a cursory overview of the regional music scene as a whole, and then focuses, as a case study, on a particular genre, namely the languriya songs of the Braj region, south of Delhi. It discusses how commercial music production is adapting, or failing to adapt, to recent technological developments, and it notes the vigorous and persistent flowering of regional music scenes such as that in the Braj region.

In my 1993 book, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, I endeavoured to present a holistic study of the revolutionary impact of audio cassettes on vernacular Indian music production, content and consumption during the years around 1990. From the present vantage point some 24 years later, one can see that some of the changes inaugurated by cassettes – especially the dramatic decentralisation of the music industry and the proliferation of regional and niche folk-pop genres – remain fundamental today. In other respects, the advent of digital technologies in the last two decades has made the cassette period seem, in retrospect, like an ephemeral moment, of which my book provided a snapshot, in some respects now of primarily antiquarian interest.

In this article I revisit the North Indian popular music scene to attempt a brief update on aspects of contemporary music culture, exploring some of the ways that new digital technologies have at once reinforced and supplanted aspects of the commercial music culture I documented earlier. As was to a considerable extent the case with *Cassette Culture*, my interest is less in the upper-end, high-budget and high-profile Bollywood and Indi-pop hit parade than in the myriad regional vernacular music scenes, which are less extensively documented, and which have been, if anything, more dramatically impacted by technological upheavals, whether precipitated by cassettes or computers. After a cursory overview of general developments in the Indian music industry per se, I comment on the regional music scene in general, summarise earlier findings on the Bhojpuri and Haryanvi scenes, and then look in somewhat more detail at a particular genre, viz., languriya songs of the Braj region, south of Delhi.

The Indian music industry, from cassettes to the digital era: a brief overview

As I explored in *Cassette Culture*, the advent of cassette technology dramatically restructured the Indian popular music scene in the 1980s. Cassettes definitively ended the overwhelming dependence of commercial popular music on the 'old media' of commercial cinema and vinyl records, with their concentrated ownership, capital-intensive modes of production and, in many ways, homogenised common-denominator product. By contrast, cassettes – together with cassette players and cassette duplicators – constituted a quintessential 'new media' form: inexpensive to make and consume, and conducive to decentralised and diversified production. While cassette technology restructured music scenes throughout most of the world, its impact was particularly revolutionary in India. For one thing, the North Indian popular music industry prior to the cassette era was distinguished, by global standards, by an extraordinary degree of concentration and monopolisation, dominated as it was for some 40 years by a tiny handful of music producers and singers, embedded in the Bombay film industry and a single record company (the Gramophone Co. of India, with the logo His Master's Voice). Secondly, the introduction of cassettes was delayed by state-imposed import restrictions, whose belated relaxation, in the early 1980s, had the effect of opening the floodgates to the new technology, whose advent was thus all the more precipitous.

The effects of the cassette revolution were numerous and pervasive. The 1980s saw the emergence of several hundred producers, large and small, of diverse micro-musics – whether associated with regions, cults, castes or other communities – which had never before enjoyed mass media dissemination. A great abundance of folk-pop hybrid genres emerged, reflecting a popular demand for diverse, community-specific musical idioms that had been neglected by the Bombay, one-size-fits-all, mass-production hit factories. While cassettes extended the consumption of film music, they also ended its hegemony by offering consumers an unprecedented range of musical choices. Whether in the field of regional popular song or hymns to some local goddess, the cassette market stimulated not only dissemination of the extant traditional repertoire, but also a vast production of new material to meet demand. While many commentators lamented the crude and often vulgar nature of much of the cassette output, hundreds of millions of Indians clearly relished the way that the music industry – especially in the form of cottage cassette producers – was now able to offer a gamut of genres marketed to their specific taste cultures. While hierarchies of class and caste were not entirely absent from the new modes of production, most cassette producers were socially, economically and geographically far closer to their audiences and performers than was the Mumbai film music industry.

In the years around 2000, as I have outlined elsewhere (Manuel 2012), digital formats came to impact the music industry and effectively eclipse the use of cassettes. One entity was the mp3 disc, which offered clear advantages over cassettes as an audio medium. Mp3 discs are cheaper and more space-efficient than cassettes and can contain a few hours of music – typically, 50 or 60 songs, but sometimes as many 100 – on a disc retailing for the equivalent of 40 pence (67 cents US). Accordingly, mp3 discs, although a digital rather than analogue medium, have basically perpetuated and reinforced the decentralisation and diversification of music production that was inaugurated earlier by cassettes. With Walkman-style mp3 players available for around £10 (US\$17), cassettes soon went the way of vinyl; those that can

be found at all in music stores today consist largely of dingy unsold product from the 1990s, warping and gathering dust on some neglected shelf. Meanwhile, audio CDs, due to their higher cost, have consisted primarily of genres like classical music, ghazals, Sufi pop, film music evergreens and the like, marketed to the urban upper class.

Contemporaneous with the advent of mp3 discs was the even more dramatic spread of another new medium, the video compact disc or VCD, which accommodated audio and video content, like a DVD, but with cheaper discs and players. As I discussed in greater detail in an earlier essay (Manuel 2012), VCDs did not introduce a new entertainment format, given the prior existence of music videos and song picturisations in films, but they did make the production of such videos incomparably cheaper, and thus conducive to dissemination, especially in association with lower-class rural musics in poor countries. In India, VCD videos came to coexist with other Indian music-and-video formats, including the familiar Bollywood song-and-dance scenes, as well as 'music videos' per se. The latter, like their Western counterparts, have been produced by recording companies primarily to promote sales of audio recordings; aside from the Internet, they are viewed primarily on various music-oriented television channels in India.¹ Lastly, the belated deregulation of Indian television in the 1980s led to the emergence of private TV networks that feature live music performances, including *Indian Idol*-type amateur competitions, often of regional music.

In the first years of the 2000s, VCDs became the preferred media format for most commercial popular music – especially the regional folk-pop genres that can be termed 'vernacular' in their language and their diverse syntheses of traditional folk and modern elements. Most extant cassette companies switched to production of VCDs and, to a lesser extent, mp3 discs, while often retaining their original names (e.g. Gupta Cassettes).² While typical VCD recording costs might naturally exceed those of an audio cassette, desktop editing, economies of scale, minimal storage requirements and other factors enabled VCDs to be retailed at even lower prices than cassettes – typically around 50 pence (80 cents US). Aside from merely listening to the discs, consumers could view the videos via Walkman-style CD/VCD/mp3 players which sell for around £10, and which could be connected via a patch cord to a television (which itself can be purchased for as little as £15, or US\$25). Since televisions can be run off a car battery, VCDs can be enjoyed in rural areas lacking electric power, and by viewers who lack access to cable packages. Like cassettes and mp3 discs, VCDs and players are cheap to produce and purchase, and are thus conducive to low-budget production often aimed at specific regional or sectarian communities. Accordingly, VCD producers have ranged from large corporations like T-Series to a sole entrepreneur who contracts performers, hires a film crew, duplicates discs and covers, and markets his product via regional distributors.³

The new video technology came to generate a 'VCD culture' with its own characteristic genres, conventions and clichés, and associated modes of production and consumption. While I have discussed VCD video content in greater detail elsewhere (Manuel 2012) and offer further comments below, here I will merely reiterate that the most standard convention is to portray one or two dancers or models, perhaps accompanied by others, mouthing the lyrics in lip-sync while cavorting in various sites, such as a park, a lawn or a field. Although low production budgets preclude the use of extravagant Bollywood-style sets and effects, other conventions, as I suggest below, make it clear that the often glittery and sumptuous Hindi-film format does not constitute a model or ideal for producers or consumers.

The years around 2005–2007 saw the advent of unprecedentedly cheap DVD players introduced from China. A slim player itself, plugged into a TV monitor, presently retails for around £5, while a stand-alone, ‘laptop’-style unit with a 6–8-inch screen costs around £25 (US\$42). DVDs themselves accommodate around 4.7 GB, allowing three to four hours of content. Hence music producers rapidly switched from VCD to DVD format. A typical music DVD today might contain five earlier VCD albums, with over five hours of content, retailing for about 35 rupees (around 40 pence). Such low prices leave relatively little profit margin or incentive for piracy, which seems to be mostly confined to copies of Indian films.

The VCD/DVD era can be seen as a perpetuation, intensification and enhancement of the changes and developments wrought by cassettes. Low production and consumption costs reinforced the decentralisation of the music industry, while the video format added a new vehicle for creativity, in the form of dramatic interludes, local attire and vistas and, above all, dance. As with cassettes, critics have disparaged the predilection for lewd ribaldry, but there can be no doubt that the new format has stimulated a tremendous amount of grassroots-level expression and constituted a new and dynamic vehicle for the affirmation of diverse forms of regional, sectarian or occasion-specific aesthetics. It also added – or more properly, restored – the visual element to music consumption, indeed making the cassette period seem, in retrospect, like a brief interlude of ‘audio-only’ popular music.

Since around 2000, as is well known and endlessly documented and discussed, a second wave of digital technologies, including especially the Internet, have precipitated a new revolution in global music cultures, posing new opportunities and challenges to music industries. The free availability of music via p2p file-sharing and sources like YouTube has decimated the production and sale of physical phonograms and crippled many music producers worldwide.⁴ Many aspects of music culture have reverted to pre- or early-industrial modes in which artists generate revenues only or primarily through live performance, with mass media dissemination useful only for promotion. Throughout the world, legitimate music producers have attempted to offset such losses by seeking to restrict Internet piracy and file sharing and, more productively, by exploring new ways to generate revenue through the Internet and related technologies. These have included online purchases of music (e.g. iTunes), commercial cellphone ringtones, streaming radio services such as Spotify and Pandora monetised through subscriptions or ads, and the addition of advertisements to postings on YouTube and other video sites.

On the whole, the Indian music industry has experienced the same vicissitudes as its counterparts in the developed world, although with various idiosyncratic features. In the most general terms, since the turn of the century the industry has been gravely wounded and diminished by the new developments, but in the last few years it has begun to claw its way back to profitability by exploiting the aforementioned new sources of revenue. Many of these developments are discussed extensively in diverse forums and publications, although this literature has focused overwhelmingly on the capital-intensive, highly visible sectors of the industry – especially film music and upper-end commercial pop productions.⁵ In the following paragraphs I will summarise some of the major developments, while shifting the focus to the lower-end, regional vernacular music scenes. I organise the various developments in terms of four admittedly interrelated spheres: physical audio and video albums, the Internet, pen-drives and mobile phones.

Physical commodities in a virtual soundscape

The fortunes of physical phonograms in India have ebbed and flowed wildly in accordance with technological developments. The commercial recording industry got off to an early and energetic start in India, with HMV and assorted smaller labels marketing a wide variety of genres on 78 rpm records from 1901. The advent of sound film in the early 1930s, however, exponentially expanded the consumption of mass-mediated music, especially to audiences who could afford occasional cinema tickets but not records and record players. From the 1940s, radio – whether broadcast from India or Sri Lanka – became the other most common medium for music listening. In the 1960s, popular music – almost synonymous with mainstream film music – also became available on LP records, but consumption of these was largely limited to the urban bourgeoisie who could purchase records and players (and who had access to electrical power).

With the advent of cassettes, physical sales of music skyrocketed, as the commercial music market extended to lower-class and rural music lovers who could enjoy listening to cheap tapes, of an unprecedented variety of genres, on their battery-powered players. Although pervasive and endemic piracy limited profits and bankrupted a few producers, the cassette industry as a whole flourished with great vigour from the mid-1980s until the turn of the millennium. Some momentum continued with the switch to mp3s and especially VCDs in the early 2000s. Piracy continued to plague the industry, although the government, under pressure from producers, continued, however irregularly, to raid and prosecute offenders.⁶ Since around 2002, however, more crippling to the industry, both at corporate and cottage levels, has been the ability of consumers to bypass the music producers via unauthorised digital downloads; it is this practice that has bankrupted many businesses and drastically limited the profits and production of new content. The legal sector of the Indian music industry as a whole shrunk by 38 per cent in value during the years 2001–2003 (Gurtoo 2013). Paralleling developments in the developed world, most major CD stores in India have closed shop;⁷ a final nail in the coffin was the 2013 shuttering of Kolkata's Music World shop, which had been the last remaining retailer of a chain that formerly numbered over a hundred stores throughout the country (Chatterji 2013). Accordingly, legitimate producers have been, in various stages, shifting their marketing strategies from physical sales to digital music services and value-added services for cellphones; by 2011 these revenue sources had come to surpass profits from sales of CDs and DVDs in the industry as a whole (e.g. Gurtoo 2013; Sameer 2013).

As mentioned, most such available data on these developments pertain to the visible sector of film music and upper-end Hindi pop, ghazals and the like, marketed by major labels such as Saregama (formerly Gramophone Co. of India), T-Series and Tips – the latter two having grown from 1980s fledgling cassette producers to corporate megaliths. Considerably less verifiable information is available on the vernacular regional music industry, much of which operates in the informal sector to begin with. My own investigations, however unsystematic, in fall of 2013 established to my satisfaction that the quantity of video production has indeed dropped precipitously from that of a decade earlier. Several DVD shopkeepers in Pune, Agra and especially in Delhi's Lajpatrai Market (across from the Red Fort) attested to this decline. The number of such sellers itself has also dropped. The labyrinthine Lajpatrai Market – the major wholesale distribution outlet for music recordings in North India – formerly

hosted several dozen music shops (offering cassettes, and then VCDs/DVDs). At present these seem to number less than 10. Shami Sharma, manager of Yuki Cassettes – itself in the process of closing operations – offered me a producer's perspective, showing me a page of his notebook listing the market's shops which sold his products; these formerly numbered about 10, but all save two or three had gone out of business or been obliged to switch to other merchandise, such as consumer electronics.

However, it readily became clear to me that VCD/DVD production, if grossly reduced and perhaps even dying, is by no means dead. Entering Lajpatrai Market – the hunting grounds of my cassette research 23 years earlier – I had to wander through the maze of congested alleys for several minutes before finding a VCD stall. This vendor had literally found his niche, that is, a 10-foot-long corridor less than three feet wide, against whose wall I repeatedly had to flatten myself in order to make way for some peon bearing boxes of DVDs to or from a tiny basement. The shelves of this stall, however, were packed with colourful DVDs of a variety of North Indian regional genres, especially Bhojpuri, Punjabi, Haryanvi and Braj music. As the Hindu festival of Chhath was approaching, roughly a quarter of the shelves were devoted to freshly minted DVDs of devotional songs celebrating that occasion. Accordingly, the youth manning the stall assured me that, while sales in general were down, production of new DVDs continued briskly, and that were I to return in two weeks I would find a whole gamut of fresh items. I was especially impressed to note a few dozen releases of *nautanki*, the folk theatre genre which, though grievously weakened by the advent of cinema, was obviously enjoying some sort of revival associated with DVDs. In my cassette research two decades earlier I had found a few commercial tapes of this genre, but it had clearly been reinvigorated by the added visual component of the DVD format. The DVD boom had also evidently invigorated its producer, Rathor Cassettes which, operating out of a ramshackle electronics store in an isolated market town 20 years earlier, had evidently adapted well to market changes.⁸ Rathor's current catalogue includes several releases each of *nautanki*, the lengthy *Ālhā* ballad, Hindi comedy skits, Braj-region rasiya and languriya, traditional *kissa* stories set to music, and several 'Hindi sexy stage show' items.

After availing myself of some 15 DVDs of Braj rasiya and languria, I found my way to the outlet of Shishodia Cassettes, one of the few veteran producers of Braj music still active, whose manager told me a similar account of decline but persistence. My next random stop turned out to be the stall of Neelam Recordings, whose market niche consisted of vernacular music from Mithila (eastern Bihar), and the music of the Garhwal, Uttarakhand and Kamaoni hill regions. Business was less than brisk, as I was the only visitor during the hour or so that I chatted with the manager (who took the occasion to share several pages of his Hindi poetry with me). Neelam, another holdover from the cassette era, survived partly by diversifying its operations; like several DVD producers, it had an allied unit, 'Neelam Films', which offered various video and audio production services. It also received some revenue from offering its product on websites and YouTube, and it continued to market mp3s, targeting those lower-class individuals who lack video sets of any sort.⁹

I will say more below about DVD production in selected regions, but at this point it may suffice to note that DVDs remain a popular format for those who already have players and monitors, and who find their use more convenient than downloading videos onto pen-drives and mobile phones.

Cyberculture and music culture: the Internet, the pen-drive and the mobile

As is well known, India is a land not only of bullock-carts and mud huts, but also of the high-tech IT centres of Bangalore and a space programme currently sending a satellite to Mars. A 2012 study claimed that some 137 million Indians use the Internet, constituting a population penetration rate of 11 per cent (Vikas 2012). Although only roughly a quarter of China's rate and a third of the global average, in absolute terms it represents a considerable number, which would itself be greatly exceeded by those whose lives are in one way or another impacted by the Internet. In contrast to such countries as the USA (but in a manner akin to Japan), most Indian Internet usage involves not computers per se but mobile phones (or cellphones, in American parlance), and in the dissemination of music it would further comprehend the use of downloads onto USB drives.

On the Internet (independently of mobiles), the most characteristic dissemination of music occurs on websites offering downloads or online listening via streaming. As elsewhere, these sites are either legitimately licensed or are essentially illegal vehicles for Internet piracy. The volume of music accessed via the latter sites, of course, would exponentially exceed that of legitimate sites, and it is the pirate sites that have posed such formidable challenges to the survival of music industries worldwide. These sites are, of course, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection; they, together with legitimate websites, will appear in considerable numbers if one Googles the name of any popular Indian artist, e.g. Bhojpuri singer Manoj Tiwari or, more productively, something like 'manoj tiwari bhojpuri songs download'. In recent years particularly popular sites have been djmaza.com and songspk.com, although the latter seems to be engaging in evasive tactics at the time of writing. Such sites may feature ads from various businesses, including American ones, who are thus complicit in the piracy. Some sites present disingenuous disclaimers avowing their honourable intentions;¹⁰ some offer free listening but not downloading. While Bollywood and upper-end Hindi pop may dominate the fare on most sites, a considerable amount of regional vernacular music is also available.

While the Indian government banned Napster-style p2p music sharing in 2001, more substantial has been the state's attempt, in response to pressure from the Indian Music Industry (IMI) consortium, to repress the unlicensed websites. In 2012 the Calcutta High Court directed 387 Internet service providers (ISPs) to block 107 music websites (see Pahwa 2012). However, many of the websites have been able to reincarnate themselves by registering under new domain names and redirecting traffic, or by migrating to different servers. In 2013 I found several of the banned sites still operant, offering a wide variety of regional music.

Some pirate sites (possibly including some of the 107) may become legitimate by brokering deals with industry 'aggregators' by which the latter receive ad revenues which are forwarded to producers. Indeed, such is said to have occurred with some of the handful of currently legitimate music streaming websites (just as T-Series – one of the country's largest and most energetic music producers – is said to have engaged in cassette piracy in its early years). As of 2013, the most prominent legitimate sites are gaana, saavn, musicindiaonline, saregama and hungama (all '.com'). These sites offer unlimited free listening (with playlists, share options, recommendations, etc.), and paid subscription services providing streaming radio on a variety of 'channels', including several devoted to regional musics. In order to generate volume and undercut piracy, these services are offered cheap; for around 30 rupees

(ca. 35 pence, about 60 cents US) a month, one can enjoy unlimited streaming. Like Spotify, these enterprises report growing numbers of listeners but disappointingly low profits (see, e.g., Vardhan 2012). Some are starting to experiment with paid download services, but are aware that even consumers willing to purchase songs lack a convenient way of doing so via their mobiles. Hence, Flipkart, another legitimate Amazon-type online shopping site, discontinued its fledgling music download service in 2012, finding it unprofitable. iTunes itself offers a substantial and growing download catalogue of Indian music (including, for example, over 500 Bhojpuri vernacular songs). For their part, iPhones are not nearly as common in India as in, for example, China and Japan, being far outnumbered by Samsung models and inexpensive Chinese handsets without Internet access.¹¹

In the realm of Internet consumption of music, YouTube (and to a lesser extent, smaller counterparts like Vimeo) constitutes a vast entity in itself and occupies a considerable presence in Indian music culture. Aside from innumerable user postings of Bollywood song-and-dance scenes, of particular relevance here are the thousands of VCD/DVD videos of regional vernacular music, often supplemented with entertaining and, in their way, revealing and informative viewer comments. The videos range from the slick and tasteful productions of T-Series to the most unpretentious, low-budget and often smutty regional fare. Many of the clips, of course, are uploaded by individual enthusiasts, and their consumption – whether in the form of viewing or downloading – thus bypasses the music industry and could be regarded as a form of ‘piracy’. Indian music producers have attempted to counter this by two strategies. First, T-Series sued YouTube/Google (along with MySpace, Yahoo and Ibibio) and won a settlement (Pahwa 2012). Of greater impact has been the practice of music producers, large and small, of uploading their own music videos and encouraging viewers to subscribe to their channels. Thus, for example, Sonotek – which has emerged as one of the largest North Indian regional music producers – offers, among other things, a ‘*lokdhun* Punjabi’ (Punjabi folk music) channel, which has some 62,000 subscribers, and other channels consisting of products from labels it has acquired, such as Chanda and Chetak. Most of these videos are prefaced by ads, which generate revenues for Sonotek. Meanwhile, many singers themselves upload videos in which they are featured, in order to generate publicity; some artists also set up Facebook pages. Writers, sidemen and producers also offer their services and contact information on comments they append to YouTube postings. Because of the shortage of computers, music videos are in fact most commonly viewed on (and often uploaded from) mobile phones, whose role in Indian music culture deserves special attention.

Mobile phones, as mentioned, constitute the prime vehicles not only for Internet usage, but also for mediated music consumption in general. Personal computers themselves remain beyond the budgets of most Indians, and Internet service remains slow throughout much of the country.¹² Hence, it is mobiles, rather than computers, that have had the most revolutionary impact on the social, economic and cultural lives of hundreds of millions of Indians. Many aspects of this impact have been ably discussed in the engaging ethnography *Cellphone Nation*, by Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron (2013; American edition: *The Great Indian Phone Book*). As these authors document, since around 2003 the advent of inexpensive, easily obtainable phones (available from around £12, or US\$20), coupled with the cheapest call rates in the world, has generated an extraordinary amount of cellphone density in India, which as of 2012 counted over 900 million mobile subscriptions (Jeffrey and Doron 2013, pp. 6–7). The mobile, in fact, has become the single most basic and

important commodity for most Indians; casual chats with diverse Indians accordingly reveal that the man in the street – whether a rickshaw driver or a sidewalk vendor – has not only a mobile but also an easy familiarity with matters pertaining to 3G, 4G, GSM, SMS, Bluetooth, and so on, and the respective merits of various handset models and service providers.

The ramifications of cellphone usage have been dramatic, especially since land-line phones were so scarce, expensive and inefficient prior to the mobile revolution. Individuals, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, urban or rural, can now communicate easily by phone. All sorts of business transactions as well as social correspondence have become incomparably easier than before. Mobiles have engendered an entire sector of contingent economic activity, including tower construction, account management, and the manufacture, sale and repair of handsets. Particularly conspicuous have been the liberating effects for women who, if empowered with mobiles, have been able as never before to communicate with their friends, allies, out-of-town relatives and – most provocatively – real or potential lovers, beyond the four walls of their homes and the eyes of watchful family members. Such liberation, indeed, has provoked a violent backlash from men who feel threatened by it.¹³ (The titillating image of the *mobile wāli* – the girl with the phone – has also become a standard trope in vernacular song; see, e.g., Jeffrey and Doron 2013, pp. 187–9). Meanwhile, in a country where access to computers has remained limited, the mobile has become the preeminent electronic medium not only for communication, but also for banking, commerce, amateur photo and video shooting and sharing and, last but not least, music consumption and mediated entertainment in general.

Consumption of music on mobiles takes several forms. One can listen via the internal speaker, external speakers or via earbuds; the latter practice need not be solitary, as it is common to see a couple, or two friends on the Delhi metro or elsewhere, listening together, each with one bud.¹⁴ One can also watch videos accessed from YouTube and other sites. Westerners with desktop computers, with their ever larger monitors, might think that watching videos on a postage-stamp-sized screen would be unrewarding, but a few hundred million Indians are quite accustomed to the practice, whether in place of, or to supplement watching on, a TV monitor. Indians watch entire Bollywood films on mobiles, and one can often see several people – such as construction workers on a break – clustered around a tiny Nokia cellphone, enjoying a music video. When I asked a hotel menial in Agra in what form he consumed music, he immediately produced his mobile and scrolled through various music videos, along with clips of his children. Listeners can easily exchange songs via Bluetooth. Phones can be recharged at various sites, including the stalls of humble street vendors. In general, the boom-box, radio, television and stand-alone DVD player may remain nice commodities to own, but the mobile is more essential and can actually substitute for those entities. Meanwhile, Indians are avid users of personalised and caller ringback tones, which may be either obtained free in various ways, or legitimately purchased for anywhere between 5 and 30 rupees, thereby constituting another growing source of revenue for music producers. However, in general, the heavy usage of cellphones rather than computers for Internet-based listening constitutes an obstacle to music producers, due to the inconvenience of purchasing music on mobiles and the difficulty of using advertisements to generate revenue (see, e.g., Kholi-Khandekar 2013, pp. 305–6).

Musicians themselves have their own uses for mobiles. Many singers upload their videos to YouTube via their cellphones. Ethnomusicologist Shubha Chaudhuri



Figure 1. A DVD store offering music downloads for 50 rupees.

(p.c.) relates how Manganiar and Langa performers in western Rajasthan use apps and videos on their mobiles to tune their instruments and study the performances of others. As she has observed, many of those living in isolated villages – beyond which communication used to be formidably difficult – are nowadays constantly using their mobiles, not only chattering with others but casually videotaping song sessions and even lively conversations and sending them around.

Music consumed on mobiles may be acquired in various ways. If one has Internet capability (which cheaper phones do not), one can stream or download from the various licensed or unlicensed sites mentioned above. For consumers lacking the Internet, Nokia has stores where music can be downloaded for small fees. Further, many cellphone purchases are bundled with free music amounting to thousands of songs. These add-ons may or may not be licensed and have been the subject of ongoing contestations with music producers. Lastly, and perhaps most commonly, mobile owners can have detachable cards (about the size of a little fingernail) filled up with music of one's choice at neighbourhood vendors (typically consisting of a man with a laptop full of songs; see Figure 1). For instance, one may say, 'Give me 50 rupees worth [under a dollar] of the latest Bhojpuri music', thereby acquiring 4 GB worth, amounting to hundreds of songs.¹⁵

Songs may also be loaded in the same manner onto a 'pen-drive' (i.e. flash drive, thumb drive, USB drive, etc.), which have in fact come to constitute, together with mobiles, a preeminent conduit for music. The pen-drives may be then plugged into USB ports in computers, DVD players, car stereos, dedicated players, sound systems in tractors and other devices. Music heard at some public venue – e.g. a temple

or a shop – most typically turns out to be coming from a pen-drive plugged into a digital player.¹⁶ Hence, it is common parlance in music circles to refer to the present as ‘the age of pen-drives and mobiles’.

It is such mobile chip and pen-drive offline listening, more than the piracy of physical products, that has dealt the most savage blow to the music industry, from Bollywood hits to regional folk-pop. T-Series – now a corporate giant that produces feature films and consumer products as well as music – has independently pressured hundreds of storefront downloaders to pay a negotiated annual fee. Further, the government itself has raided and prosecuted over a thousand such outlets (e.g. Dubey 2011), although they operate at such grassroots levels as to be ineradicable.

It remains to mention the role of television and radio as media for music, and especially regional music. Since the liberalisation of television broadcasting in the mid-1980s, cable channels have proliferated in India. A typical urban cable package might include a few hundred channels, a few dozen of which would be music based. In North India these tend to be dominated by film song-and-dance scenes, upper-end regional popular music, and devotional music (Hindi or regional language *bhajans*, Sikh *shabd gurbānis*, and *qawwālī*). Vernacular-language music videos from a few major regions – especially the Punjab – are well represented, while most regions are not. Thus, although Delhi abuts the state of Haryana, whose vernacular music is thriving, standard cable TV packages in the city offer no Haryanvi content. As I discuss below, the hundreds of cable channels in my hotel in Agra – the urban hub of the Braj region – included only two pathetically low-tech channels offering local music videos. Similarly, although the Bhojपुरi music scene is exploding, it is poorly and only recently represented on television, aside from occasional Bhojपुरi items on *Indian Idol*-type shows on Zee TV and other programmes.

Representation of regional vernacular music on radio is equally uneven. Regional stations of the venerable All India Radio continue to broadcast local musics, but mostly in the form of studio-style folk and devotional songs rather than contemporary folk-pop styles (especially in their ribald forms). For its part, FM radio stations have become important media for film music, but they generally neglect the more roots-oriented regional genres and only pay royalties to producers if a song is played a substantial number of times. Punjabi music is thus well represented on FM and Internet radio, but a smaller region like Braj, to be discussed below, is largely neglected.

Music producers – especially the cassette companies that emerged in the 1980s–1990s – have reacted in various ways to the challenges presented by the digital era. The larger producers – especially those involved in film music – have managed to adapt to the new era, earning royalties from TV, FM, YouTube and streaming sources, as well as ringtones. Due to such gains, the Indian music industry as a whole has grown substantially in recent years; as Kohli-Khandekar notes in her informative study, *The Indian Media Business*, much of this growth has ‘happened on the back of digital, which, after battering the music industry with piracy and peer sharing services is finally delivering results’ (Kohli-Khandekar 2013, p. 227). However, it is difficult to assess the degree to which such growth has occurred in the poorly documented realm of vernacular music, especially the informal sector of cottage cassette/DVD producers. Many of these – especially the myriad smaller ones – have gone out of business or sold out to larger producers like Sonotek.

Some have stayed afloat by riding the wave of selected expanding markets, such as Bhojpuri and Haryanvi music. A few smaller companies have pattered along by concentrating on devotional music, whose sales are relatively steady and whose consumers are more likely to purchase licensed music. Such, for example, is the case of Amrit Vani, which started in the 1980s as a producer of Sikh devotional cassettes; as its manager informed me, the company has not felt a need to branch into DVD production or third-party Internet marketing, although it does have a website (amritvanistudio.com) through which its downloads can be purchased. Other smaller niche companies, like the aforementioned Neelam, survive by diversifying into assorted audio and video production services.

The fate of Yuki Cassettes illustrates one sort of trajectory for regional music producers struggling to adapt to changing conditions. By the mid-1980s Yuki (established 1975) had become one of the most dynamic regional music producers, with a particularly strong catalogue of Rajasthani vernacular music, numbering several thousand releases and 80–90 per cent of its product. When I interviewed its owner, Sailesh Mathur, in 1990, business was booming, and the company had just opened a spacious new store in Lajpatrai Market (see Manuel 1993, pp. 183–6). Folklorist Komal Kothari of Jodhpur, Rajasthan, also bore witness to the frenzied cassette-based activity of the 1990s, corroborating my own observations. As he chronicled, there were six cassette studios in his town, recording local groups around the clock. The subsequent releases were listened to by truck and taxi drivers, field and construction workers, marriage parties and others. Cassettes consisted variously of ribald songs, *kathās* (narrative ballads), songs associated with *melās* (festivals) or local deities, and traditional women's wedding and childbirth songs. Cassettes of such folksongs might conceivably replace live singing in certain contexts, but several Rajasthanis attested that such cassettes served to revive many songs whose words were otherwise being forgotten by the women who used to sing them (Kothari, in Bharucha 2003, pp. 279–85). Yuki was particularly active in marketing cassettes of old and new songs.

In 2013 I revisited the Yuki headquarters in Delhi, and was disappointed to learn that Mathur had passed away; the business was now run by his son, Ramit. As he explained to me, profits had been so eroded by digital piracy in its various forms that plans were being made to shut down the business within two or three years. 'Everything is stopping due to the pen-drive', he remarked. In the meantime, he explained, Yuki's profits came from a mixture of sources. About 10 per cent came from physical sales (of both new and old 'catalogue' products). The remainder came from various sources that were handled – as is the current custom – by a third-party 'aggregator' that manages the diverse online revenue streams. Of these, caller-back tunes constituted 32 per cent of revenues, mobile radio 19 per cent, YouTube 33 per cent and sales from the Nokia store 17 per cent. Much of Yuki's catalogue is available in audio form on gaana.com and saavn.com, and in video form, on YouTube. Mathur added that the iTunes-type download service of Flipkart had also provided some revenue until it was discontinued in 2012, sending its clients a message to the effect that: 'Our estimates have been wrong, we have not been able to make money, India is not ready for an online music store, so we are closing.' With production costs of a music video album ranging around 40–50,000 rupees (ca. £500 or US\$833), Yuki had reduced its production to a trickle. Ramit noted that only film music and devotional music were able to enjoy reliable profits in this perverse climate.

Two glimpses: Bhojpuri and Haryanvi vernacular musics

In my *Cassette Culture* of 1993 I attempted to provide a holistic – albeit less than comprehensive – study of the North Indian popular music scene, exploring most aspects of production, marketing and consumption in the cassette industry, with reference to the major regional genres, and particular attention to the Braj region, around Agra. In the present article, which draws on a far shorter research period, I revisit the Braj region, focusing on a particular genre and prefacing this case study with glimpses of a few other regional scenes for purposes of comparison and contrast. Other specialists would naturally be able to comment in greater depth on individual regions.¹⁷

A few initial observations about regional continuities and distinctions may be useful. One can easily note many similarities between North India's regional music scenes, not only in terms of industry structure but also in terms of sorts of genres. The latter comprise ribald songs, devotional musics, dance-oriented items and narrative ballads, all of which can be said to occupy spaces on a continuum between folk and commercial popular orientations, and to represent various syntheses of tradition and modernity. Particularly popular in most regions have been 'spicy' songs portraying the traditional flirtation between the young wife (*bhābhī*, *sālī*) and her husband's younger brother (*devar*, *jījā*). At the same time, regions differ qualitatively from each other in several significant ways, such that genres or characteristics of one do not necessarily have counterparts in another. Hence the profile of an individual region may be highlighted when contrasted, in however cursory a fashion, with other areas.

The Punjab constitutes in some ways a particularly distinctive region. Straddling India and Pakistan, it is demographically large, wealthier than many regions, and closely linked to its substantial diasporic communities in the West, which now date back several generations. At the risk of making value judgments, I believe it is safe to say that Punjabi popular music displays a prodigious richness, variety and sophistication, and represents and constitutes (rather than merely 'reflects') a Punjabi form of modernity, as it were – a mode in which its consumers can be comfortably Punjabi and modern at the same time.

I would argue that certain other regional cultures are still in the process of working out ways of affirming at once modernity and regional identity, especially when that identity is most characteristically associated with rural traditions. A case in point is the Bhojpuri region, whose popular music has undergone a veritable explosion since the 1990s. The Bhojpuri region – defined by its Hindi dialect and distinctive local culture – straddles Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh and has long constituted one of India's poorest and most backward areas. It is often disparaged by outsiders for its famously corrupt politics, abundant crime, vicious caste dynamics and what many regard as the low cultural level of the millions of migrant workers who seek labour throughout North India. Bhojpuri popular music per se emerged in the cassette boom of the 1980s, and went on in the next decades to enjoy an extraordinary boom in quantity and popularity. To some extent this music boom has been shaped by an intensifying labour migration to cities, whether nearby (see Rawlley 2007) or in far-away Mumbai, as vividly depicted in a recent documentary film (Sharma 2013). As I have discussed (Manuel 2012), many popular songs and videos dramatise the vicissitudes of such migration and urbanisation. However, as Tripathy's engaging ethnography (2012) shows, the Bhojpuri region itself remains the centre of musical activity, not only of song-and-video production but also of a thriving live performance scene. Production of music DVDs is frenetic, especially

as aspiring singers – male and female, of diverse class and caste backgrounds – fund their own releases, hiring dancers and film crews to promote themselves. As I noted (Manuel 2012), a great preponderance of Bhojpuri vernacular music consists of *masāledār* (spicy) ribald songs that many outsiders regard as vulgar, and which are a source of embarrassment to bourgeois Bhojpuri urbanites. However, a growing number of songs and their videos exhibit a tasteful and polished charm, representing, as I have argued, a newly evolving sort of ‘Bhojpuri modernity’ that seeks to rearticulate local dialect, tunes and dance moves as fashionable and urbane rather than inherently ‘folksy’. Moreover, even – or perhaps especially – the ribald songs enjoy considerable popularity among young and lower-class people outside the region.

Another region enjoying a musical boom is Haryana. Like the Bhojpuri region, Haryana has never been celebrated (by outsiders, at least) for its music, being more commonly regarded as a land of ‘sturdy’ Jāt farmers. Although Haryana adjoins Delhi to the west and north, Haryanvi dialect and culture have no particular presence or status in that city. Haryanvi music – unlike its Bhojpuri counterpart – is seldom heard outside its homeland, but like Bhojpuri music it has nevertheless been undergoing a fairly robust boom, comprising both VCD production and a vigorous live performance network.¹⁸ The core traditional Haryanvi music genre was *rāgini*, which traditionally denoted the song form employed in a body of narrative music-dramas called *swāng* or *sāng*; in the first half of the 20th century, a set of known singer-poets composed what became a fairly codified and standardised repertoire of *rāginis*. In the mid-1980s the cassette boom came to Haryana, generating a whirlwind of musical activity. Most recordings presented condensed versions of the established *rāgini* repertoire, alongside short, spicy *devar-bhābhil/jījā-sāli* songs, which also loosely came to be called ‘*rāgini*’. Folklorist Deepak Kadyan, echoing Kothari’s description of neighbouring Rajasthan, described how during the cassette heyday of roughly 1984–1994, the popular *rāgini* singers were recording constantly, especially for the Delhi-based Max and Maina Cassettes. As he further noted, the vogue of cassettes, rather than replacing live performances, seems to have stimulated them, especially in the form of night-long *rāgini* competitions featuring two or more singers and their accompanists. Such competitions – whose audiences often number in the thousands – have continued apace.

In the current ‘pen-drive and mobile era’, while the absolute number of commercial recordings may have attenuated somewhat, commercial DVDs abound, generally portraying dancers mouthing light, erotic *devar-bhābhi* songs in lip-sync, or else live or simulated footage of competitions.¹⁹ (A YouTube search of ‘ragini competition’ will yield dozens of such clips.) As with Bhojpuri music, the vogue of Haryanvi vernacular music has played an important role in a resurgence of local pride, especially among the Jāts (a clan-derived community designation that comprises most Haryanvi farmers).²⁰ Also as in the Bhojpuri region, it is no longer the case that female singers – even those with a somewhat ‘saucy’ demeanour – can be assumed to be ‘loose’ women of one sort or another. Rather, many are college students or housewives, of ‘respectable’ bourgeois backgrounds; most, indeed, seem to be Brahmans. However, the appropriateness of bourgeois young women singing titillating lyrics remains contested, as articulated, for example, in the following pithy YouTube comments regarding one ‘hot & sexy’ song:

I am educated and a modern jat. [...] this video is so disgusting that I can’t believe. I have seen modern and educated girls but they do not behave the way it is shown in this video. This is just

the refecton of some uncultured people, no mater which caste or region they belong.

stop giving these dirty comments friends,, its time to grow, things are changing now why you are not appreciating that a girl is singing!!!!!!!1 watch the punjab where many of girls singing & being liked by them [...] ager lata mangeshkar haryana me peda hoti to tum to salo use gane na dete!!!!!! [If Lata Mangeshkar had been born in Haryana you jerks wouldn't even have let her sing]

what is wrong with you bloody illiterate haryanvi boys she is just singing song [...]you all crap guys have affair outside and you all are acting as if you are saints...bastards I have seen you [heckle] girls when they pass by you ...

master piece of CHEAPNESS²¹

While such polemics echo counterparts in discourse about Bhojpuri erotic songs, one can note certain differences from the Bhojpuri scene. While there is some overlap of style, dialect and personnel with neighbouring parts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab, Haryanvis and their music do not enjoy any particular prominence (nor disrepute) far outside their state. The persistence of the *rāgini* format in modern Haryanvi vernacular music also could be said to contrast with contemporary Bhojpuri music, which does not adhere to any particular traditional genre.

A case study: Languriya songs of the Braj region

In the following pages I take a closer – yet still cursory – look at one regional genre, which in some respects typifies the impact of the changing mass media since the cassette era, but at the same time highlights the sorts of distinctions that can obtain between different regions. In this section I build upon my earlier publications on Braj music (Manuel 1993, Chapter 9; 1994), updating their perspective and looking more closely at a particular genre.

The 'Braj mandal' (Braj region) lies to the southeast of Delhi, roughly bordered by Agra to the south and Hodal to the north. It is on one level a linguistic zone, being the provenance of the Braj Bhasha dialect of Hindi, but it also has its distinctive forms of folk song and dance, and enjoys a special renown in India as the legendary home of the god Krishna, in his pastoral amorous persona. Hence from the 16th century Braj Bhasha, or a stylised version thereof, became the favoured dialect of Krishnaite and even secular *rīti* poetry (following the same imagery and rhetorical conventions) throughout much of North India, including in classical *khyāl* and light-classical *thumri* lyrics, and in folksong genres like *cautāl* (chowtal), sung not in the Braj region, but in the Bhojpuri and Avadhi districts well to the east.

Braj folk music itself comprises a rich variety of secular and devotional genres but, with the advent of cassettes, two genres emerged as cores of the new vernacular folk-pop repertoire. The more predominant of these has been rasiya, or a secular soloistic rather than group devotional version thereof, distinguished by its frequent use of a set of stock tunes, and its playfully erotic lyrics, abounding in euphemisms and double-entendres. Such songs can be seen as counterparts to *masāledār* songs in Bhojpuri, Haryanvi and other regional musics. Particularly characteristic, however, of rasiyas is the deliberately ambiguous conflation of the *dramatis personae* of the archetypal lovers, Krishna and Radha, with the stock *devar-bhābhī/jjā-sāli* personages of North Indian secular ribald songs (see Manuel 1994).

The second most popular song genre of vernacular Braj music is languriya, which is distinguished by a set of features. One of these is the usage – in roughly half the songs – of two stock melodies, which I have shown in an earlier essay (Manuel 1994, p. 59) and will not reproduce here. The other is the lyric convention portraying a young woman speaking to or of the protean and curious figure of the languriya himself (after which the genre is named). The languriya – whose name implies a monkey with a long tail or penis – is, on one level, a sort of junior sidekick to Kaila Devi (Kaila Maiya), a regional goddess whose shrine stands about 80 miles southwest of Agra. Kaila Devi is widely worshipped in and around the Braj area, especially by women. Her *melā* or festival, held every spring, is nowadays attended by over 200,000 devotees, who gather to seek her blessings, enjoy communal solidarity and to merrily dance and sing languriya songs.

Many of these songs are far from pristine. The languriya himself, aside from being a bodyguard or attendant to Kaila Devi (as is the monkey-god Hanuman to Ram and Sita), can also constitute – to the young woman from whose persona song lyrics are voiced – an annoying suitor, a mischievous child, a lecherous bachelor, a fellow devotee or simply her husband or lover (see Entwistle 1983; Lutgendorf 2006, pp. 314–18). Any couple attending the *melā* could be regarded as a *jogin* (female mendicant) and her languriya. Hence languriya songs, while adhering to certain lyric conventions, and while retaining the loose but inherent association with Kaila Devi, portray the couple in a wide variety of ways, often with ample use of ribald innuendos. These conventions, as we shall discuss, have persisted faithfully in the cassette and DVD eras, in which languriya songs have enjoyed prodigious dissemination and popularity.

The mass mediation of languriya songs, like that of Braj music and verse in general, commenced much earlier, with the explosion of vernacular-language printing in India in the mid-1800s. Much, if not most, of this printed output consisted of songbooks, including many volumes of lyrics in Braj Bhasha. Most of these Braj lyrics were to be sung as *bhajans* or *thumris*, in genre formats cultivated throughout North India. I have not seen 19th-century songbooks containing languriyas, but such inexpensive chapbooks certainly were common by the 1980s. Although a printed mass medium, they were used as aids to singing, thus serving as supplements to oral tradition rather than purely literary works. Many follow the familiar women's strophic folksong format in which a single word or name is changed with every verse, as instructed in parentheses in the chapbook.

Mass mediation of languriyas entered a new and far more intensive phase with the cassette boom. Cassettes of familiar devotional languriya songs were the first to be produced, marketed especially as souvenirs at *melās* and temples (see Figure 2). These could on occasion replace or drown out live singing, but they also served to remind singers of lyrics they had forgotten, to provide new songs to sing, and in general to legitimise this otherwise rustic and humble genre. Hence, as with many other genres, there is no evidence that live performance of languriyas, at *melās* or other events, has declined since the cassette era. Meanwhile, demand for new cassette material stimulated much creativity, especially of the playfully ribald variety.

Most cassette languriyas in this vein followed familiar conventions, albeit with a greater tendency toward eroticism. As in most *thumri*, *khyāl*, *rasiya*, and Krishnaite and *rītī* verse in general, the young wife is usually the lyric speaker, and her sentiments are the aesthetic focus. Hence, she asks the languriya to take her to Kaila Devi's *melā*, preferably in a motor car rather than a bullock-cart. She requests various

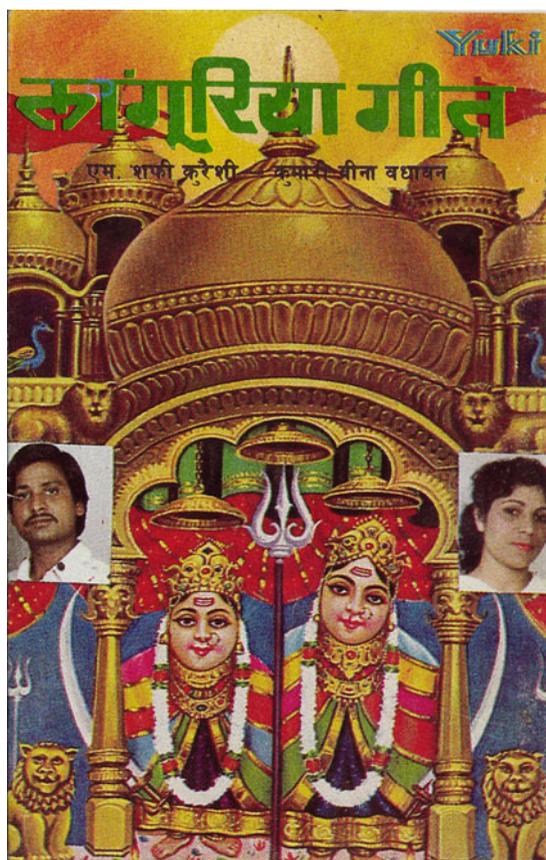


Figure 2. A typical languriya cassette cover from around 1990. Kaila Devi, the figurine on the right, is invariably depicted as accompanied by an obscure lesser goddess.

gifts from the market (such as a fan, or the recent cassettes of the recording's producer). She complains to her friends about the languriya's mischievous or wayward behaviour, or his fondness for hashish, or how he seduced her the night before. Or she orders him about or indulges him as if he were a child or perhaps even an adolescent who might conceivably be a consort. Alongside these conventional themes, a few more ambitious writer-singers, such as Sevaram 'Tanatan', found the lyric genre, with its traditional textual freedom, to be a vehicle for clever satire and humour (see Manuel 1993, p. 227; 1994).

The advent of the VCD around 2000 enabled a new visual dimension to be added to commercial languriya recordings. As elsewhere, cassette companies quickly switched to the new medium, and were joined by a host of new producers. Most of these were based in Agra. Aside from being the site of what is arguably the world's most magnificent edifice (the Taj Mahal), Agra is in most respects a typical North Indian hinterland city – congested, noisome, malodorous and run down. Typically seen as a place of no particular cultural distinction, it also lacks the religious status of nearby Mathura and Brindavan, mythological homes of Lord Krishna. However, as the largest city in the Braj region, it became in the 1990s the hub of regional cassette and then VCD production. In the early 2000s there were at least

two dozen VCD/DVD producers in the city, churning out rasiyas and languriyas for a thriving regional music scene.

The Braj region (with a population of around 15 million) and its music scene are smaller than, for example, its Bhojpuri or Punjabi counterparts, and there does not appear to be the same heady sense of dynamic cultural renaissance as in the Bhojpuri or even Haryanvi music worlds.²² Braj devotional music – including Krishnaite rasiya – enjoys some pan-Indian appeal due to its religious prominence, but Braj vernacular music, unlike that of the Punjab or Bhojpuri region, has not achieved any particular audience outside its homeland.²³ However, its internal market thrived vigorously in the cassette and early VCD/DVD period, and in that sense it is typical of many small and medium-sized regional scenes.

In the US and UK, the music video format, when it emerged in the early 1980s, served as a vehicle for an extraordinary flowering of daringly innovative, postmodern creativity (often far surpassing the music itself in that regard). By contrast, languriya VCDs – like their counterparts elsewhere in the country – mostly took the form of fairly literal picturisations of the songs' lyric content, with the added element of dance. Accordingly, most languriya lyrics in the VCD era followed the extant conventions of the cassette era. However, these conventions, as noted, accommodated considerable flexibility, whimsy, and a combination of devotion and playful eroticism which might seem incongruous to an outsider, but is in fact inherent to the languriya genre. The general conflation of secular and spiritual desire is, of course, typical of Krishnaite and *rīti* song and verse, in which the male suitor may be interpreted as being either the amorous Krishna, the playful *devar* or the lecherous bachelor next door. The configuration is somewhat different in languriya songs, whose devotional sentiment, whether explicit or secondary, is directed toward not toward the languriya himself, but toward Kaila Devi, clips of whose statue (or *murti*) are invariably inserted here and there in the videos.

The conventions of languriya videos are recurrent in the numerous postings on YouTube. In the devotional-souvenir vein, one typical video, 'Dwar pe thaando languriya' (Stand by the door, languriya) shows footage of the *melā* at Kaila Devi's shrine, including women dancing in the traditional Braj style; spliced onto this background are clips of the vocalist, and of Hanuman, with whom the simian languriya may conflate. The song uses one of the two stock languriya tunes.²⁴ In other videos on typical themes, the young woman (the *jogin*) requests the languriya (a young man, presumably her husband) to take her to the *melā*, footage of which is interwoven with clips of the young couple dancing and arguing. In several songs, she demands to be taken in a car – preferably a Bolero van.²⁵ Alternatively, the solicitous, pestering languriya (again a young man) invites a young woman to join him in his Bolero.²⁶ In another typical theme, while the two are walking to the shrine she requests the languriya to buy her various items, such as a Pepsi, or some food for their hungry toddler.²⁷ In 'Ras pi jā languriya', she offers him guava juice, in a song that combines slick production with a reworking of one of North India's most venerable and widespread folk tunes.²⁸ Other songs and videos focus more explicitly on the playful, perhaps flirtatious relationship with the languriya, while still inserting footage of Kaila Devi's shrine. In several videos, the languriya – in keeping with his sometimes impish persona – is a dwarf, who is able to dance well and flirt without being threatening. Particularly popular have been various versions of 'Languriya nek pump chalāide' (Pump it up, languriya), in which the young woman, attempting to bicycle to the shrine, asks a handsome young repairman to fix her flat tyre (see Figure 3).²⁹



Figure 3. A languriya DVD, combining explicitly devotional items with the more whimsical hit, 'Pump it up, languriya'.

Despite the playful eroticism of the request, her demeanour and attire are modest, and the obligatory insertion of clips of Kaila Ma's *murti* affirm the devotional aspect of the video and inspire several comments of 'Praise Kaila Ma'. (In all such videos, the characters are dancing throughout.) A few other videos are more explicitly erotic, such as one in which the languriya urges the woman to eat his carrot or banana.³⁰ Such *masālā* (spice) may be commonplace in rasiya and Bhojpuri music, but is of questionable propriety in languriya, as is evidenced by several comments denouncing the clip's vulgarity. Some songs are purely whimsical, such as 'English hai gayo fail' (I failed my English test), showing a plump woman dancing rather clumsily

in front of Devi Ma's statue and singing to effect that she is giving up her studies after the latest fiasco.³¹

A few observations may be made about these videos. Firstly, despite the frequent use of auto-tune/vocoder, new melodies, assorted computer graphic effects and references to items like Pepsi Cola, the videos present in many ways thoroughly faithful picturisations of the conventional character of the songs. In this respect, for example, what might seem like the irrelevant and gratuitous liberal insertion of shrine footage is in fact an accurate visual rendering of the devotional dimension inherent to all languriya songs. Similarly, the portrayal of the languriya himself variously as a young man, a dwarf or a juvenile Hanuman is entirely consistent with his protean character in traditional song, and his lack of fixed iconographic form.

Secondly, the videos consistently affirm the unpretentious charm and validity of lower-class village life by being staged in typical rural settings – a field, a riverside or a courtyard by a mud hut. In this sense they stand in direct contrast to Bollywood cinema, whose default backdrop of cabarets, mansions, palaces and Western tourist sites could be said to display not only escapism but also an active contempt for the humble reality of lower-class India. It is clear that producers of vernacular DVDs opt to set their videos in rural milieux not because they are unable to afford Bollywood sets, but because they recognise that many Braj dwellers enjoy their surroundings, are proud of their local culture, and do not dwell in perpetual fantasies of glitter and glamour. One YouTube comment pithily expressed what is doubtless a common sentiment about such various videos cited here: 'Fun, folksy, and funny.'³²

A similar observation may be made about the dancing in vernacular music videos – including and perhaps especially Braj languriya and rasiya videos. Dance in such videos is overwhelmingly in traditional Braj style rather than Bollywood style. Indeed, just as cassettes ended the mass-mediated hegemony of Bombay film music and enabled regional musics to flourish as never before, so has the advent of VCDs/DVDs provided an unprecedented mass medium for the showcasing of regional dance styles – not to mention the talent of individual dancers and the semi-professional dance troupes found in places like Agra. The new music videos – as posted on YouTube and elsewhere – provide ancillary employment for such dancers and lend a new legitimacy to regional dance styles, while offering them up for global appreciation. If I may indulge in a value judgment, I would contend that Braj folk dance is one of the most appealing regional styles of India, with a suave grace and charm quite distinct from what one Indian critic called the 'jerky calisthenics' of the Bollywood style (Sarkar 1975, p. 110). Accordingly, when Braj-dwellers dance among themselves at festivals and weddings, they generally dance in the local style rather than the studio-created Mumbai style.³³ Film dance, although popular as spectacle on screen and amateur stage shows, has never made inroads into grassroots social dance styles.

Braj music production in the era of the pen-drive and mobile

Arriving at Agra in 2013, I hoped to find the same lively music production scene that had existed a decade earlier (not to mention during my cassette research of the years around 1990). At my hotel, I noted that television programming included two low-budget cable stations (Digi Maharaj Desi Tarka and Digi Maharaj Satsang) that broadcast non-stop music videos of languriyas, rasiyas and Kaila Devi *bhajans* (however obscured these were by the ads plastered all over the screen), mixed with

amusing Braj comedy videos set in rustic surroundings. However, I was soon disappointed to learn that almost all of the dozens of local production companies earlier extant had disappeared. Local informants gave me several reasons for this decline: company X was busted for piracy, company Y for evading taxes, and company Z for violating censorship laws with its lewd videos. Eventually I concluded they had instead simply been casualties of the ‘pen-drive and mobile’ era. Several, such as Trimurti, had been bought out by the Delhi-based Sonotek, which had emerged as a major producer of regional musics. The only smaller producers of local music seemed to be Anjna (nearby, in Rajasthan), the Delhi-based Ambey, Shishodia and Shyam, and perhaps an Agra firm I shall call ‘Lila’.³⁴

The surviving producers were, on the whole, trying to adapt to the new situation. The covers of Ambey’s DVDs provided lists of SMS numbers through which one could download ringtones of the album’s songs. Some music videos also contained such information. Sonotek – clearly an energetic and ambitious firm – has a website (sonotek.in) and Facebook page offering much of its extensive catalogue of North Indian vernacular music. Meanwhile, a fair amount of languriyas and rasiyas have become available via streaming on gaana, saavn and musicindiaonline, not to mention on YouTube, whether posted by the producers, fans, or by the artists themselves for self-promotion. (I was told that producers receive no royalties from the Digi Maharaj TV stations.) For some reason, most of the new crop of singers – such as current star Ramdhan Gurjar – are from the Gujar/Gurjar community (whose social status is traditionally below that of Jāts).

Live performances – rather than recordings – continue to constitute primary income sources for singers and dance troupes as well. Some music videos as well as YouTube posts offer contact information for the featured artists. Through such a post I met Gunjan Upadhyay, a young and in many ways representative singer featured on several videos (some uploaded to YouTube by herself), residing in Agra. In response to my question about her musical background, she related (in Hindi, sitting next to her father):

I’ve always been singing, ever since childhood, and I started professionally when I was nine; until then, my family didn’t support it. Here without family permission one can’t do anything. One can’t even go outside. But I would sing at home, on the balcony, while working in the kitchen, wherever, and even the neighbours would praise me, and encourage my parents to let me sing. Then when I was nine, my relative who had a *bhajan* group liked my singing a lot and encouraged me and had me sing in the group, and I started giving programs in it, and people praised it, and then I started singing professionally, with my parents’ support.

At present, while studying classical singing at a nearby college, she is performing live several times a month, even as the DVD recording scene has largely dried up. In accordance with the religious fame of the Braj area, she often performs programmes of rasiyas, langurias and Krishna *bhajans* out of state, where she tours accompanied by her father, who also writes some of her lyrics. Although fond of Braj music, her ultimate goal is to be a Bollywood playback singer like Richa Sharma, who also started out in regional music.³⁵

Concluding perspectives

While the main intent of this paper has been to provide an updated glimpse of the regional music scene, a few general observations may be made about the current

scene in relation to earlier decades. Firstly, given the decline of production in the 'pen-drive and mobile' era, the cassette and VCD periods stand out in retrospect as roughly two decades of extraordinary – indeed, almost frenzied – creativity and productivity. It is clear that a certain momentum was established, and output continues, but the sheer quantity of professional productions – ranging from the sublime to the vulgar – may not resume.

A second observation is that, despite the oft-celebrated, decentralising, do-it-yourself aspects of music production in the digital era, at the same time there exist clear tendencies toward a certain form of concentration in the industry. Hence, most of the dozens of 'cottage' producers of Braj cassettes and videos have folded or been bought out by Sonotek, which is emerging as a new titan, rivalling the mighty T-Series in some genres. This contradictory tendency, in fact, is evident in various world music scenes, and has been accordingly noted in scholarly and journalistic literature (e.g. Azenha 2006).

Such concentration, however, is qualitatively distinct from the monopolistic hegemony of the 'old media', with its homogenising, standardised fare which, while occasionally availing itself of regional tunes, studiously ignored regional or community languages and markets. Bollywood music and dance continue to enjoy great popularity throughout North India but, as the Braj case shows, regional music and dance scenes are flourishing, especially as enlivened and enriched by cassette and DVD representation. Whether in language, music style, dance style or background settings, Bollywood does not constitute a model for regional productions. Many Braj dwellers, for example, enjoy mainstream Hindi cinema, but once cassettes and VCDs provided them the opportunity to produce their own mass-mediated entertainment, they showed that they also enjoyed products that celebrated their own local culture, however rustic and humble, and whether in traditional or modernised forms.

Progressive observers would be mistaken to celebrate this development as a sign of revolutionary subaltern solidarity; for one thing, the representation of gender dynamics in videos is at best contradictory, with its diverse mixtures of female liberation and sexist objectification. Nevertheless, the cassette and VCD/DVD eras have introduced an unprecedented and immeasurable variety and richness into the Indian cultural scene, definitively ending the prolonged era when a tiny handful of film music producers could provide the commercial popular music for several hundred million North Indians. In this new emergence of community and regional creativity, the current situation – despite the challenges posed by digital piracy – remains remarkably dynamic and, indeed, revolutionary.

Endnotes

1. For example, Gurmeet Singh, president of *Music Today*, pers. commun., February 2007. Also see, for example, Cambridge Dictionaries Online, *Definition of Video [NOUN]*. http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/video_1#video_1__3 (accessed 21 January 2014).
2. Cf. the venerable publisher of Hindi poetry, literature and songbooks, Venkateshvar Steam Press, established in 1871 and still operant.
3. Hence, for example, 'RRK Production', whose logo appears on several Haryana DVDs, evidently consisted of a single personage, who humbly announced his availability on the Internet: 'I finished B.Sc. Film Technology [...] I'm looking for production/post production.'
4. See, for example, Goldman (2010).
5. See, for example, Morcom (2007, Chapter 5) for an astute discussion of the Indian film music industry in the digital era. Among the innumerable publications on the Indian music industry, many in the *Times of India* can be accessed online, for instance, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Music-Industry>. Kohli-Khandekar's volume (2013), in its various editions, constitutes

- an extraordinarily informative resource, although like most industry publications it says little about regional, lower-level music media per se. An informative forum is <http://www.medianama.com>.
6. Another strategy widely adopted from around 2003 was the affixing of tamper-proof holograms to VCD/DVD covers to enable consumers and enforcement agencies to differentiate between fake and legitimate products. A master hologram costs around £108 (US\$180).
 7. For further data on the marketing of music in physical form in India, see Beaster-Jones (2007).
 8. Accordingly, Rathor has a Facebook page, with many uploads of its releases, and the apt tag: 'Rathor Cassettes make Uttar Pradesh related songs & videos. We have a long list of hit singers, artists, writers & directors. Producer ... A.S. RATHOR.'
 9. Sushil Shukla, p.c. See their website: <http://neelam.in>.
 10. As of 2013, for example, mp3sk.net offers the following statement: 'Disclaimer: All contents are copyrighted and owned by their respected owners. mp3sk is file search engine and does not host any files. No media files are indexed hosted cached or stored on our server. They are located on third party sites that are not obligated in anyway with our site. mp3sk is not responsible for third party website content. It is illegal for you to distribute copyrighted files without permission. The media files you download with mp3sk must be for time shifting, personal, private, non commercial use only and remove the files after listening.'
 11. See, for example, <http://appleinsider.com/articles/13/02/11/apples-iphone-sales-up-threefold-in-india-as-company-turns-to-payment-plans>.
 12. Internet cafes are of course found in cities, but connections are typically slow and the equipment dusty and rickety. In Agra I found myself using a keyboard whose characters had been entirely worn off, taxing my touch-typing skills to the utmost.
 13. See also Baily (2011).
 14. The ability of mobile owners – especially young people – to privately listen to music of their choice has been intolerable to many moralists. Hence in 2012 the Muslim *panchayat* (village council) in an Uttar Pradesh village banned listening to music on mobiles, with offenders to be punished by being hit five times with a sandal (a traditional odious humiliation). See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/article-2205715/Village-bans-listening-music-mobile-phones--On-pain-hit-s-hoe.html>.
 15. A new 4GB card costs about £1.50 (US\$2.60).
 16. A new 4GB flash drive costs around £3.50 (or US\$6).
 17. For an informative discussion on the Garhwali music scene, see Fiol (2011, 2013).
 18. The information on Haryanvi music presented here derives primarily from an unpublished essay by Deepak Kadyan (n.p.). Some of his research notes are accessible at http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/urbanstudygroup_mail.sarai.net/2006-April/002284.html and at http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/urbanstudygroup_mail.sarai.net/2006-May/002367.html. I am grateful to Kadyan for sharing his essay with me.
 19. As Kadyan notes, in 2006 a typical VCD might cost some 12,000–13,000 rupees (ca. £120–150 or US\$200–250) to produce.
 20. See, for example, the websites <http://jaatmusic.com>, <http://jatland.com>, <http://haryanavimusic.com> and <http://youtube.com/Haryanvistar>.
 21. From http://youtube.com/all_comments?v=ANRY6bqXvL0.
 22. For example, I have not found any Braj counterparts to the Haryanvi websites mentioned in footnote 20.
 23. In marketing taxonomies, Braj music also seems to suffer from being typically subsumed into the larger, undifferentiated category of 'Hindi' song, as in music websites that direct viewers to specific headings such as Bhojpuri, Haryanvi, Punjabi, Hindi, etc. Whether on such websites, on YouTube or in a shop in Lajpatrai Market, Braj items are best sought under the genre headings of rasiya or languria. (Bhojpuri, Haryanvi, and Braj Bhasha are all dialects in the Hindi language family. Standard Hindi can itself be seen as a regional dialect – *khari boli* – which became a mainstream lingua franca.)
 24. At <http://youtube.com/watch?v=JabN6oS89IM>.
 25. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJUw98zMKYQ>. This uses the same stock tune as the video cited in footnote 24.
 26. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odB_DVxNnhQ.
 27. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfwnmgEmaUg>, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2LbLANqqRY>.
 28. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sh9lszf2xVU>.
 29. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuuZevOWjMc>.
 30. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8HNokwQXyY&feature=c4-overview&list=UUaP-NL8SqT25236cUwtp7eg>.
 31. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpLxwXQaPco>.
 32. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyPoa9aS8Wg>.
 33. Typical Braj dance moves include the following: leaning, say, to the left, while pumping the hips laterally to the right, with the left hand raised and the right resting near the waist; the same movement, with hands reversed; hands clasped, as if praying, or with fingers interlaced and palms facing out, and moving them in a pumping or circular fashion; leaning back and churning or bicycling the arms, with lower arms parallel to the chest. These movements can be seen in the various videos cited above. Some videos show footage of rural women dancing, with their faces demurely veiled; see, e.g.: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwfQ5NRjKGM>.
 34. After purchasing several 'Lila' DVDs in the market, I tracked down its owner, with whom I had an utterly useless interview. This entrepreneur evaded all my seemingly innocuous questions and was openly suspicious of my intentions, at one point

rifling through my pocket notebook. Mystified by this fiasco, I was later told – accurately or not – (by a pirate dubbing-stall owner) that ‘Lila’ had been closed for financial irregularities and only released items intermittently and somewhat

surreptitiously. Hence the sensitivity to my innocent questions such as ‘Are you still in business?’
35. I am grateful to Upadhyay, and to Ramit Mathur and Shubha Chaudhuri for sharing their thoughts and time with me.

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