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Democratizing Indian Popular Music

From Cassette Culture to the Digital Era

Peter Manuel

The history of Indian popular music constitutes in itself a significant development in modern culture, as this set of genres—especially but not only in their Bollywood forms—have been cherished by hundreds of millions of listeners not only in South Asia but internationally as well. At the same time, the trajectory of Indian popular music represents a dramatic case study of media culture as well, as its patterns of ownership, consumption, and even musical structures themselves have been conditioned by technological changes. Most striking is the way that a highly monopolized, streamlined, and homogeneous popular music culture dominated for several decades by Bollywood gave way in the 1980s and 1990s to a dramatically decentralized and heterogeneous commercial music culture due to the impact of new technologies—initially, cassettes. As India entered the digital era in the new millennium, other media, from VCDs to YouTube, have intensified the general process of democratization, while adding their own distinctive dimensions. This chapter (drawing extensively on an earlier publication¹) surveys the trajectory of Indian popular music culture through the cassette era and makes brief observations about more recent developments in the digital age.

From the early 1970s the advent of cassette technology began to profoundly affect music industries worldwide. This influence was particularly marked in the developing world, where cassettes came to

replace vinyl records and extended their impact into regions, classes, and genres previously uninfluenced by the mass media. Cassettes served to decentralize and democratize both production and consumption, thereby counterbalancing the previous tendency toward oligopolization of international commercial recording industries.

POPULAR MUSIC AND MEDIA CULTURE IN INDIA BEFORE 1980

An outstanding feature of the Indian music industry until the 1980s was its relatively undemocratic structure, as control of its production was concentrated in a tiny and unrepresentative sector of the 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. 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 music producers. Given the vast output of film songs, a certain amount of stylistic and regional variety was naturally evident. 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 30 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 music did contribute to many film songs, most film composers and musicians avoided recognizable folk elements in an attempt to appeal to a pan-regional market (Chandravarkar 1987: 8). As a result, the overwhelming majority of songs adhered to a distinctive mainstream style, which, although itself eclectic, was hardly representative of the variety of North Indian folk music. Song texts were equally limited in subject matter, dealing overwhelmingly with sentimental love, again in contrast to regional folksong. In this respect, however, they were suited to the romantic and escapist nature of Indian movies themselves, which generally avoided realistic portrayals of the harsh poverty so basic to much Indian life.

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 [(HMV, of Electric and Musical Industries Ltd (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 abounded in Indian popular music, what was largely missing 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 an especially vital 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 at the expense of this affirmation of community, thereby, it could be argued, reinforcing some of the alienating aspects of the cinematic fantasies in which it was embedded.

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 the 1980s reached such a level that luxuries of this kind had become familiar throughout the country. More importantly, in accordance with the contemporary economic liberalization 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 belatedly able to produce presentable cassettes and players, whether using some imported components or not.³ Finally, the aforementioned economic liberalization policies 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, greatly contributed to the proliferation of televisions and cassettes in slums and villages throughout the country.

The advent of cassette technology effectively restructured the music industry in India. By the mid-1980s, cassettes had come to account for some 95 per cent of the recorded music market, with records being purchased only by wealthy audiophiles, radio stations, and cassette pirates (who preferred using them as masters). The recording industry monopoly formerly enjoyed by HMV (now Gramophone Company 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—by a factor of 10 in the first half of the 1980s⁴—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 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 40 years. The crucial factors were the relatively low expense of the cassette technology, and especially its lowered production costs, that enabled small, 'cottage' cassette companies to proliferate throughout the country. The new small labels tended to have local, specialized, regional markets to whose diverse musical interests they were 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 had been previously ignored by HMV and the film music producers. Rather than being oriented toward undifferentiated film-goers, most of the new cassette-based musics were aimed at a bewildering variety of specific target audiences, in terms of class, age, gender, ethnicity, region and, in some cases, even occupation (for example, Punjabi truck drivers' songs). The smaller producers themselves have been 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

thus became 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 and her own community as mass-mediated alternatives to His Master's Voice.

By the early 1990s the cassette producers had come to vary greatly in size, orientation, operating practices, and other parameters. On the one hand have been the handful of major firms, namely, GramCo, which, hampered by inefficiency and inability to compete, relied primarily on its back catalogue of film music; CBS and a break-away firm, Magnasound, which specialized in releases of Western music; Polygram's Music India Ltd (MIL, formerly Polydor); T-Series/Super Cassette Industries (SCI), and a newer business founded by the entrepreneur Gulshan Kumar (murdered, gangland-style, in 1997), with a diverse catalogue now including much current film music; Venus, a Bombay-based concern with a similarly diverse repertoire; and TIPS, which specialized in cover versions of pop songs. On the other hand have been the smaller regional producers, which probably came to number between 250 and 500 nationally.⁵ 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 emerged numerous provincial entrepreneurial individuals who would 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 varied in accordance with their size, audience orientation, and other factors. Both large and small companies would have their own recording studios and dubbing facilities, and/or they could rely on rented studios and other duplicators. While a few of the better studios had such features as 16-track recorders, in the 1990s most professional studios had only four-track technology. Recorders were almost all imported; dubbing machinery could be either imported, or might consist of one-to-four duplicators made by indigenous and generally unlicensed companies. Similarly, blank tape and cassette shells could either be imported, acquired from indigenous makers, or, in the case of larger companies like T-Series, manufactured by the firm itself; smaller producers could assemble the cassettes by hand. Cassette recorders themselves would range from high-

fidelity products of Japanese-Indian 'tie-ins' (for example, Bush-Akai and Orson-Sony) to locally made players, in which only the heads and micro-motors would be imported.

Recording expenses varied widely. With studio charges and fees for engineers and musicians, production of a 60-minute tape of mass-market film songs and Hindi pop in the 1990s music might on occasion cost up to Rs 200,000. While the average recording expenses would be closer to Rs 20,000, many recordings of folk music were produced for considerably less. Cassette duplication would then proceed 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 would sell for around Rs 18; HMV's tapes typically ranged from Rs 24 to Rs 36. Tape fidelity ranged from acceptable to worse, with poorer cassettes leaving oxide deposits on tape heads and wearing out after a few listenings; customers learned to request to listen to tapes before purchase to ensure that they are not already defective.

Piracy, or the sale of unauthorized duplications of recordings, 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 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. 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 1980s, 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, realizing 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, in the early 1990s I estimated its share at roughly one third of the market.

THE IMPACT OF CASSETTES ON MUSICAL TRENDS

The cassette vogue played a central role in the flowering of a number of commercial music styles of north India, especially the 'non-filmi' genres that came to rival, if not surpass the popularity of film music. Film music, of course, has continued to be the single most dominant North Indian genre, and cassettes 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 came to serve as vehicles for a set of heterogeneous genres which have provided, on an unprecedented level, stylistic alternatives to film music. In the process, relatively new genres of stylized, commercial popular musics arose 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 standardized 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, popularized 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, namely, ensemble interludes between verses, occasional use of Western instruments and harmony,

absence of improvisation, and a standardized vocal style epitomized by its main exponents, Talat Mehmood and a handful of other singers, including, of course, Lata Mangeshkar. 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 popularized first by Pakistanis Mehdi Hassan 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 restaurant ambient 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 alienated by the recent film music trend toward disco-oriented styles more appropriate to the action-oriented masala ('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 became 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 rendered it immediately recognizable. 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 popularization 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 consisted of poor-fidelity tapes of film hits aimed at lower-class buyers).⁶ 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.⁷

While our informant was 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 popularize 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 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 formal ritual. Commercial film versions of *bhakti git* had been familiar for decades, and several film bhajans and *artis* had acquired the status of hits, being subsequently sung by devotees throughout the country (such as the arti 'Om Jai Jagdish Hare' from the film *Purab aur Paschim*). Filmi versions of Muslim qawwali had also become a common feature of Bombay movies. 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 Maharashtrian Ganesh Puja), when the public goes 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's version of the Ramayana epic. 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 Mahabharata and Ramayana epics played an even more important role in promoting mass-mediated realizations of

religious works, including cassette recordings of devotional musics. As with ghazals, however, the cassette medium itself played the crucial role in popularizing commercial bhakti git. Cassette producers recognized 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. Further, producers saw that the country’s extant devotional music traditions constituted a relatively untapped gold mine of inestimable commercial potential. Accordingly, several commentators 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 Purshottam 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.’⁸ 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’.⁹

The variety of commercially marketed devotional musics that emerged in North India is remarkable. The most conspicuous genre has been what may be described as a ‘mainstream’ or ‘stage’ 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 Ramayana and, more importantly, the ghazal vogue. Hence it is not surprising that in style, instrumentation and leading performers (Anup Jalota, Pankaj Udhas), the mainstream pop bhajan had marked affinities with the crossover ghazal. While this sort of bhajan continues to enjoy mass appeal, cassette producers subsequently 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 (for example, *Hanuman Chalisa*, or the epics), bhajans devoted to various cult leaders (such as Sai Baba), or to deities (such as 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 also came to be well represented. Qawwali cassettes continue to sell, as do tapes of semi-melodic discourses by Muslim religious leaders. Sikh devotional songs—especially *shabd gurbani*—came to enjoy a large market (and are

remarkable for their avoidance of the stylistic commercialization typical of many other devotional musics). Christian hymns, Jain bhajans, and even Marathi Buddhist songs also established 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 Katha* 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 would frequently produce tapes for specific festivals celebrated annually at shrines or temples. In the years around 1990, for example, a fledgling company in Lucknow would produce a tape of songs connected with the annual festival in nearby Deva Sharif, selling some Rs 12,000 worth at the event every year. Such profits, of course, might be too small to interest the larger recording companies, but would 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 have accounted 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 comprised cover versions of prior hit songs. Such recordings could 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 (a term in this usage lacking any comedic sense) 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.¹⁰

Like ghazal and devotional songs, cover versions and cross-language parodies were 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. Furthermore, since the mid-twentieth century 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 was 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 came to constitute a separate market category that occupied a sizeable niche in most urban cassette stores. Further, every major hit song of recent years, regardless of its original language, would spawn several parody versions in regional languages.

A primary impetus for the vogue of cover versions was 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 Kumar was the first to capitalize 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, Kumar 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 acknowledged, in small print, that the singers are not those of the original recordings. The versions were recorded in stereo, using modern technology, and thus offered 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 specialized in offering regional-language versions of non-Hindi songs (such as Sargam's version series of past Marathi hits). While GramCo

belatedly began reissuing some of its back catalogue, its cassettes, as noted above, remained considerably more expensive than those of other labels, including versions.

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

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 decentralization 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 have served to promote linguistic diversity rather than the hegemony of Hindi–Urdu in pop culture.

Regional Musics

While pop ghazals, bhajans, and version songs came to form new and important components of the Indian popular music scene, it was the commercial recordings of regional folk musics that came to constitute the most significant development within the music industry. By 1990, regional folk musics or stylized versions thereof appeared to account for around half of all cassette sales in north India.¹¹ Moreover, it was the emergence of regional commercial musics which most clearly illustrated and derived from the decentralization and democratization 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, stylized 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, modernized versions of such songs continued to sell, but then came to compete with an unprecedented variety of other genres. Styles popular primarily among the lower classes, previously largely ignored by the record industry, came to be represented on cheap cassettes. Further, unrestricted by the time limits of 78 or 45 rpm records, cassettes could offer a wide diversity of genres which require longer time to present, and are in many cases more representative of folk music genres than the short songs formerly marketed on records. Thus, for example, western Uttar Pradesh residents could purchase dozens of cassettes of their cherished *kathas*, or narrative song-stories (especially *Alha* and *Dhola*), representing different episodes sung by different performers. Meanwhile, Rajasthani and Haryanvi listeners could choose from a few hundred cassettes of old and new *kathas* in their own dialects. Extended, narrative genres like Bhojpuri *birha* also came to be 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 was 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, came 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 consisted of either traditional folk songs, or more often, new compositions in more or less traditional style. Needless to say, while film music sought to homogenize its audience's aesthetics, the cassette-based regional musics were 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 has resisted easy classification into 'folk' or 'popular' categories. Many cassettes have consisted of traditional genres recorded in straightforward traditional style. Others are 'modernized' 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. Such sales, however, are highly unusual for regional folk music, and some indications suggest that recordings of traditional folk music have declined since the early boom of the cassette era. 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.

CASSETTES, STYLE, AND FILM MUSIC AESTHETICS

Thus far, this article has emphasized the ways in which the cassette-based music industry differed from the film music industry in offering a much greater diversity of musics and styles, which more faithfully represented the variety of north Indian genres and aesthetics. Nevertheless, the effects of cassette technology were complex and contradictory, and in some respects could 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 maximization 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 could 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 that 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 were marketed on cassette. A case in point is the commercial music scene in the Braj area, around Mathura. Most cassettes here consisted 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, presented only the latter kind of format. Further, while many traditional rasiyas are devotional portrayals of Krishna and Radha, the vast majority of rasiya cassettes have been secular, spicy (*masaledar*) erotica. Some of the best singers continued to go unrecorded because they sing in styles other than that favoured

by cassette companies. Producers also tended to avoid vocalists who perform in peripheral, lesser dialects (for example, Mevati) with smaller potential markets. Thus, while cassettes were able to offer incomparably greater regional and stylistic variety than did film music, there are limits to the degree of diversity they could represent.

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

Similarly, cassettes tended to perpetuate the aforementioned practice of 'improving' or 'decorating' songs with instrumental interludes and accompaniments (frequently including chordal instruments). Of course, many cassettes employed purely traditional instrumentation, in cases where producers think their more traditional-minded listeners would disapprove, or when they were 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, was clearly being spread by cassettes.

Another tendency of Indian popular musics that was reinforced by cassettes was the promotion of short songs. While as mentioned above, lengthy narrative song genres were widely marketed on cassette, other more flexible genres (for example, qawwali, rasiya, bhanga, ghazal, and bhajan) tended to be compressed into four to six minute formats. One producer of qawwali 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 standardization, cassettes 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, insisted 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 kept 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 appeared 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 kathas and the Brajbhasha *dhola* are both said to be considerably more sophisticated and varied in their styles and melodic content than a generation ago. While professionalism and mass media influence in general appear to have contributed to this development, the cassette-based commercialization of these genres may well have accelerated the process. Another factor related to this phenomenon was 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 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 were vehicles not only for the spread of filmi aesthetics and borrowed film tunes, but also of film music itself. In the 1990s film music still accounted for around half of cassette sales. Even in stores in provincial towns, roughly half the shelf space would often be devoted to film music. While cassette technology enabled other competing genres to flourish, some of the same virtues which enabled this development to occur—low cost, portability, etc.—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 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 was contradictory. (See Figures 14.1 to 14.3.)



FIGURE 14.1 Some Typical Regional Music Cassettes from the 1980s–90s

Source: From author's personal collection.

Note: Bhojpuri sohar, sāvan, songs to Durga, and a volume of Mukesh's *Tulsi Ramayana*.



FIGURE 14.2 Lewd Bhojpuri Cassette Covers from around 1990

Source: From author's personal collection.



FIGURE 14.3 A Typical Bhojpuri VCD Cover, Featuring the Titillating Image of the 'Mobile Wali'

Source: From author's personal collection.

INDIAN POPULAR MUSIC GOES DIGITAL

Since the late 1980s the Indian popular music scene has entered the digital age—unevenly and idiosyncratically, but with prodigious effects. The impact of digital technologies on Indian popular music culture has been diverse and profound, and merits expansive scholarly treatment. This chapter will limit itself to a few cursory observations, relating in particular to the core themes of decentralization and democratization.

In India, as elsewhere, the initial presence of digital consumer technology came in the form of music compact discs. By around 1990 CDs had become the dominant audio format in the developed West, replacing both vinyl and audio cassettes, which had exerted a less dramatic impact on music culture than in India. Since that period audio CDs have occupied a stable niche in Indian music culture. However, their relatively expensive nature has tended to limit their domain to upper- and middle-class milieus, and to the associated music genres, such as classical music, high-end Hindi pop, and of course, film music. CDs never established much presence in the realm of regional folk-pop hybrids.

Instead of standard music CDs, two new digital formats came to dominate the Indian popular music scene, with diverse sorts of effects. One of these is audio CDs of MP3 files of songs. MP3, as most readers are aware, is a digital audio format in which audio files are compressed without excessive loss of fidelity. An MP3 disc can contain several times as much music as a normal CD, and its audio fidelity is considerably superior. Moreover, both production and duplication costs as well as consumer playback equipment costs are even lower than those of audio cassettes. A typical MP3 disc, whether of qawwali or regional folk-pop, might retail for around Rs. 20–40, and contain a few hours of music. Accordingly, MP3 discs have increasingly come to replace cassettes, and many cassette companies (for example, ‘Gathani Cassettes’) have switched to MP3 production, while retaining their original names. Audio cassettes are still marketed for purchase by consumers who still own cassette players, but cassettes are clearly going the way of vinyl. MP3 discs can be seen essentially as occupying the place formerly held by cassettes in the market, and being equally conducive to industry decentralization.

Even more widespread than MP3 discs, and more strikingly new in their ramifications, are video compact discs, or VCDs. VCD consumer technology started to be marketed in the late 1990s. In the more affluent

developed world, VCDs could not compete with DVD video format, which offered higher quality and longer run time. However, in the developing world—especially Asia—VCDs became well established in the early 2000s. In India, VCDs themselves are cheap, typically retailing for Rs. 25–45, and ‘Walkman’-style players are themselves cheaper than cassette players, and are easily plugged into the inexpensive televisions that now abound throughout the country, including in lower-class communities. While discs can be damaged by being scratched, both they and players are tolerant of high humidity and generally well-suited to Indian climate and conditions. They can also be viewed in regions or during periods when and where there are no television broadcasts available. Most advantageous, of course, is that VCDs offer visual as well as audio data. Music producers have thus found themselves able—and indeed, obliged—to produce music videos. Unlike in the West, these videos are not conceived primarily as promotional tools for audio recordings, but as commercially marketed products in themselves. One might think that video production costs would significantly impact retail prices, but surprisingly, such has not been the case. Rather, VCDs market for roughly the same prices as MP3 discs, typically Rs. 30–50. Essentially, video producers have been able to use digital production techniques and cheap labor to generate picturizations that entertain viewers without raising retail prices.

Indian VCDs can be seen to some extent as perpetuating trends established earlier in popular music culture. On the most general level, the videos themselves perpetuate the well-established tradition of song picturization standard since the inception of Indian sound film in 1931. Like cassettes and MP3 discs, they are inexpensive to produce and purchase, and lend themselves well to decentralized, democratic production by diverse regional and religious ‘cottage’ industries. A VCD production company, indeed, might consist of no more than a producer with a mobile phone, who contracts performers, rents studios, and orders mass duplication of discs, colorful paper cover labels, and the like. Just as cassettes could reinforce and revitalize diverse, specialized forms of Indian vernacular music, so have VCDs enhanced this trend by adding visual dimensions. A regional-language folksong tradition, unprecedentedly disseminated on cassette, could now be marketed with visuals portraying local garb, dances, scenery, and the like. Further, the VCDs, like cassettes, are at once appreciated as democratic, decentralized forms of cultural expression while disparaged for their often shoddy quality and vulgar orientation.

In other respects, however, the ramifications of music video format inaugurated by VCDs are new. While Bollywood song and dance scenes might constitute a sort of ideal model for many VCD producers, most of the latter operate on shoestring budgets obliging them to be more modest in their picturizations. As might be expected, standard formulae soon emerged, such that most VCDs, especially on the lower-budget end, follow what has become a set of familiar norms. A few VCDs present live concert or stage footage, but the quantity of such productions is limited by the preference for studio-recorded audio tracks. More standard is to have the singers, or more photogenic dancers and models, mouth the lyrics in lip-sync, Bollywood-style. Hence, a qawwali VCD might show the group singing, with appropriate gesticulations, in some 'virtual' studio setting, with various sorts of computer graphics interspersed with stock footage of shrines, Mecca, and other religious imagery. A regional-pop video could portray the vocalist 'singing' in various picturesque sites. Often, the video shows the one or two supposed singers cavorting in a park, perhaps accompanied by dancers gyrating predominantly in Bollywood style, though perhaps with some choreographic elements more typical of regional tradition. Dancers' attire might vary from traditional to contemporary Western, depending on whether the VCD is a 'family-oriented' production or one aimed at consenting adults, especially young men. Perhaps most engaging are the various videos that dramatize the narrative content of the lyrics. For example, the country bumpkin encountering the sophisticated, scantily clad city girl, or the amorous newlyweds chafing under the lack of privacy in their village home.

One of the very few published studies of 'VCD culture' to date is Vishal Rawley's (2007) online essay 'Miss Use: A Survey of Raunchy Bhojpuri Music Album Covers', which also offers information on Bhojpuri VCDs in general. Rawley notes that much of Bhojpuri VCD production, like the regional-language folk-pop cassettes I discussed in my book *Cassette Culture* (1993), tends to consist of playfully spicy masala quintessentially oriented toward young male rural migrants to the cities. Liberated from village restrictions on comportment, exposed to new mass media images, and yet still retaining aspects of their regional culture and language, the VCD consumers are fed fantasies of 'loose' women in 'two-piece' outfits, dancing to *chat-pate lokgeet* ('sweet-salty folksongs') that are at once fashionably modern and distinctively regional in language and tune. Such VCDs become components of a 'B-industry' of vernacular urban media comprising 'cheaply made porn films, horror flicks, cheesy music

albums, pirated foreign films', and the like. As he notes, 'this B-industry shares a common pool of talent and facilities—music arrangers, editing studios, publicity designers, etc.' Accordingly, some VCDs bear an 'A' stamp indicating that they are for adult consumption only.

Such videos are unlikely to be shown on the numerous Indian TV programs that now broadcast a wide variety of regional songs, especially in the form of *Indian Idol*-type amateur competitions. In general, the effects of stations like Zee TV on popular music culture merit further study and are too prodigious to be considered here. The cheap VCDs—whether raunchy Bhojpuri songs or pious Sikh *shabd-gurbanis*—also contrast with the smaller number of more sophisticated music videos that are produced, like their Western counterparts, as promotional items accompanying commercial audio recordings. Rather than being marketed to consumers, the videos are generally seen on television or the Internet. These are typically more glossy and elaborate productions, and in some cases tasteful and self-consciously 'arty'. A popular representative video in the years around 2006 was that accompanying Rabbi Shergill's 'Bulla ki jana main kaun' ('Oh Bulla, who am I?').

It remains to consider the extraordinary impact of the Internet on popular music culture. While the vast majority of Indians cannot afford computers or even access to them, a significant minority—constituting tens of millions of Indians and non-resident Indians (NRIs)—are as enthusiastically 'plugged in' as are any consumers in the world. Like other global music scenes, Indian popular music culture is now enlivened by innumerable websites, online fanzines, and chat groups, peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing networks, and global distribution outlets. Collectively these at once serve to promote musical micro-cultures while adding a new dimension of unity to Indian culture, joining as never before the third-generation Sikh graduate student in Vancouver with the dhoti-clad clerk sitting in some dusty, sweltering Internet café in Patiala. Perhaps the most conspicuous medium for such interactions is YouTube, of which South Asians have made prodigious use. As many readers of this chapter are aware, YouTube contains thousands on Indian postings, representing a wide variety of music genres and formats. Aside from camcorder scenes from local weddings and other festivities, particularly notable are the hundreds of music shows from Zee TV and other programs, thousands of Bollywood song-and-dance scenes, and other thousands of regional folk-pop music videos uploaded from commercial VCDs. Of almost equal ethnographic interest are the comments that viewers append

to YouTube uploads. In many cases, belying the cliché that ‘music brings people together,’ such comments consist of pages of venomous diatribes (typically Hindu versus Muslim, or Indian versus Pakistani), set off by some remark, whether innocuous or deliberately provocative. The YouTube comments, as a quintessential democratic-participant medium, reflect the full range of human thought about music, from the inspiringly clever and sublime to the staggeringly ignorant and sociopathic. YouTube, indeed, has come to constitute a quintessential new medium, characterized by multi-vocal interaction, decentralized input of content, and a level of diversity that is not only unprecedented but was until a few years ago inconceivable.

NOTES

1. Manuel (1993 and especially 1991), from which this work draws heavily. I use the term ‘popular music’ to comprehend all those genres, including commercialized folk music, which are marketed as mass commodities and have been stylistically affected by their association with the mass media.

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. Interview, Anil Chopra, editor of *Playback and Fast Forward* (a music industry trade journal), March 1990.

4. See interview, Vijay Lazarus, *Playback and Fast Forward*, June 1986, p. 30.

5. Anil Chopra, in his interview in March 1990, estimated the number of cassette companies at 500. A 1987 survey (cited in *Playback and Fast Forward*, July 1987, p. 27) listed 256 producers. In 1990 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.

6. See, for example, interview, Vijay Lazarus.

7. Interview, GramCo manager Sanjeev Kohli, by Anil Chopra, *Playback and Fast Forward*, August 1986, p. 31.

8. Interview, Purshottam Das, by M. Upadhyay, ‘The Bhajan Samrat’, *Playback and Fast Forward*, July 1985, p. 15.

9. S. Lalitha, ‘The Business of Bhajans’, *The Times of India*, 1 October 1988.

10. 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.

11. Interview, Anil Chopra, March 1990. Accurate figures were unavailable due to piracy, the unreliability of sales reports from the major companies, and the absence of data from the smaller ones.

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