Music Television and the Invention of Youth Culture in India

Vamsee Juluri

*Television New Media* 2002 3: 367
DOI: 10.1177/152747602237283

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/3/4/367

Published by:
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Television & New Media* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://tvn.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/3/4/367.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Nov 1, 2002

What is This?
Music Television and the Invention of Youth Culture in India

Vamsee Juluri
University of San Francisco

MTV is often associated with concerns about global cultural homogenization and the spread of a rebellious youth culture. However, the political economy of satellite television in postliberalization India has ensured the construction of a music television audience that is neither antinational nor antiparent. On the basis of a reception study of music television in India, this article argues that audiences construct a sense of generational, national, and global identity in a manner that calls for a deeper understanding of cultural imperialism and audience reception. The findings of this study suggest that although the emerging youth culture in India does not seem confrontational in generational or national terms, it is not so much a case of audience resistance as that of co-optation by global hegemonic forces.

Music television, and MTV in particular, are often associated in discourses about globalization with concerns about worldwide cultural homogenization and in discourses about youth culture with concerns about degeneracy and loss of parental authority. However, in the case of India, the postliberalization political economy has ensured the construction of a music television audience that is neither antinational nor antiparent. Despite the positioning in certain debates of cultural imperialism and audience studies as opposing traditions, this article examines the process in which Indian music television audiences construct a sense of generational, national, and global identity on the basis of a reception study of nationalistic Indian music videos conducted in Hyderabad, India. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the transgenerational and pronational youth

Author’s Note: I wish to thank the Department of Mass Communication of the Sarojini Naidu School at the University of Hyderabad for research support and the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft for instructive suggestions.
culture emerging in India is not evidence of audience resistance but, on the contrary, the form in which global hegemony is indeed taking place.

The advent of satellite television in India since 1991 in the context of economic liberalization and the attendant proliferation of consumer culture raises numerous questions about the place of youth cultures in relation to the broader social and cultural implications of globalization. The postliberalization era in India has been marked not only by the rise of a qualified form of youth culture in the context of music television broadcasters such as MTV and Channel [V] but also by a broader shift in television content that journalist Amrita Shah (1997, 254) characterized as a move from “worshiping senility” to “worshiping juvenility.” This criticism highlights, on one hand, what used to be a common urban middle-class complaint about the state television network Doordarshan’s seeming obsession with covering the daily routines of “senile” politicians within the logic of the development paradigm of broadcasting. However, the critique of present-day commercialized television as “juvenile” is not exactly well-known but is nonetheless loaded with import.

As this article will show, the supposed juvenilization of television in India is fraught with cultural tensions inflected along lines of generation, class, nationality, and globality. It represents a particular historical articulation of economy and culture in which a new charge of foreign and domestic investment in youth markets seeks to secure a youth identity premised on the equation of consumption with the national interest and the global imperative. In other words, being young is not only a metaphor for the message of commercial television but a particular moment or opportunity being delivered to certain television audiences in India to self-identify, through the new representations on television, with emerging notions of being oneself; as a youth, a student, a friend, a son or daughter, a fan of music and popular culture, and as an Indian in a visibly global context. Given these twin developments in terms of the creation of youth markets as well as the proliferation of discourses about youth in Indian television, what lessons may be drawn about broader concerns about globalization and culture? In particular, what does the rise of a commercial and media-driven youth culture say about questions of cultural imperialism?

In the context of the West, the invocation in public discourses of “youth culture,” as Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers (1999) wrote, tends to raise conservative social concerns about degeneracy and crime on one hand or an attempt to understand youth as resisters of class and generational oppression on the other. In a global context, such concerns may also be enmeshed with broader concerns about cultural sovereignty in a rapidly globalizing context. Appadurai and Breckenridge (1996, 1), for instance, wrote about the widespread fear that “Americanization or commodification
or McDonald’s... is seducing the world into sameness and creating a world of little Americas,” which they believe is somewhat overstated. In the case of India, these two sets of concerns about youth culture and global culture come up against a rather puzzling set of conditions that would require a closer examination by media and cultural studies scholars.

Simply put, the globalization of Indian television audiences since the rise of satellite television broadcasting has been marked by the rise of a music television culture that is neither antieler in its youth appeal nor antinational in its global outlook. The two main foreign-owned music television channels operating in India, News Corporation’s Channel [V] and Viacom’s MTV, have followed a market strategy of aggressive “Indianization.” This has taken the form of programs featuring Indian film songs and music videos, and a vibrant promo culture featuring satirized and exoticized vignettes of Indian everyday life and film culture. Thus, Indian film music composers and singers such as A. R. Rahman and Lata Mangeshkar continue to be far ahead of global pop stars such as Michael Jackson in youth popularity surveys.

In addition to the nationalistic paeans that music television culture has produced, there is also a sense of intergenerational acceptance that pervades the nascent youth culture of Channel [V] and MTV. These channels, in other words, represent on an unprecedented level a form of youth culture for urban middle-class audiences, but this is a culture that has not taken generational defiance as its definitive point. The implications of this phenomenon may be borne out in surveys that have found that Indian youth are staunch supporters of “traditional Indian family values,” even as they are more career oriented, individualistic, and competitive (Ghose and Jahagirdar 1998). On the face of it, it would appear that the experience of globalization through MTV and Channel [V] in India has laid to rest all the fears about cultural imperialism in terms of national sovereignty and family and intergenerational ties. However, this article attempts to show, through audience study, that this seeming success may have more serious consequences for cultural politics under globalization.

Investment and Invention

Liberalization and Satellite Television

The rise of music television and youth culture in India may be situated in the broader historical context of Indian cultural politics and political economy in the early 1990s. In particular, the seemingly unstoppable advent of satellite television across Asia as well as the aggressive commercial
response of Doordarshan contributed to this phenomenon. Although the Congress-led Indian government had been pushing the domestic economy from the principles of import restriction and self-sufficiency toward a foreign-aid-dependent consumer sector since the 1980s, the economic liberalization policies announced in 1991 are especially important in terms of their causes and perhaps consequences as well (Kurien 1994).

By the middle of 1991, India had reached a near-crisis stage in terms of its foreign-debt service operations because of a number of factors including the loss of remittances from Indian workers in the Persian Gulf during the war. Furthermore, life in India had been hard hit by a series of violent conflicts connected to the rapid ascendancy of the Hindu right-wing political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The liberalization policies initiated in 1991 under the international regime of structural adjustments thus had stronger compulsions, and with the rapid growth of media and consumer culture, more pervasive manifestations than ever before. With the beginning of Hong Kong-based Star TV’s transmission across Asia in 1991, the experience of television in India entered a new phase symptomatic of the changing relations between state authority and commercial technocracy under liberalization. The rapid response of local entrepreneurs in setting up satellite dishes and providing cable connections to their neighborhoods was largely ignored by the government. The initial lack of response by the government to the cable and satellite phenomenon may be attributed not only to an absence of a vision for policy or the ability to intervene but also to the broader goal of the government toward economic liberalization policies at that time (McDowell 1997). With the opening up of Indian markets to foreign consumer goods and a rapid growth in advertising, the proliferation of satellite television channels began to take place at various geocultural and geolinguistic levels.

Despite a substantial increase in the number of satellite television channels, programming strategies, constrained by competition for largely similar audience demographics, focused on Indian-film-song-based programs. Thus, Zee TV, the first privately owned Hindi language channel, and Doordarshan, with its larger nonsatellite audience base, both squared off with Hindi film music countdowns. The prevalence of film music–based programs was also dominant in the numerous regional language satellite channels that had begun as well, such as ETV in Telugu and Sun TV in Tamil. While music television programs and genres, in a broad sense, thus came to constitute the backbone of mass audience programming at the national and regional levels, a somewhat unusual and pioneering creative effort was unfolding with the rise of the two main youth-oriented global music television channels, MTV India and Channel [V].
MTV and Channel [V]

The entry of MTV into Indian households began with the first wave of the satellite television boom in 1991, as one among the small line-up of channels being broadcast on the Star TV platform from Hong Kong across Asia. Although MTV at this time featured mainly American, European, and East Asian pop music, it also introduced a Hindi film music countdown, Oye MTV (which was to later reappear on Channel [V] as BPL Oye). In May 1994, MTV went off the Star TV platform. Star TV, which, by this time, had also been acquired by News Corporation, launched its own music television channel, Channel [V]. Channel [V] began as a pan-Asian channel but then localized rapidly and “blazed the Indianization trail” in the words of its general manager, Don Atyeo (Hussain 1997). With its self-conscious mixture of Indian film music, the nascent Indian pop music repertoire, and promos featuring images of Indian everyday life, Channel [V] became synonymous with music television and youth culture in India under the slogan “V are like this only.” Its anchors, many of whom were foreign born and/or biracial people of South Asian heritage, became instant celebrities and embodied an emerging sense of Indian-Western hybridity. In addition to repackaging Hindi film music for an upmarket urban audience that traditionally eschewed Indian film culture, Channel [V] also began to promote Indian pop music videos. That Channel [V] had found an immense popular resonance was perhaps best evident in one simple example: Indian film song lyrics began to refer to “V Channel” as well.

Meanwhile, MTV had become at best a marginal presence, broadcasting for a few hours a week on Doordarshan. However, with the launch of MTV India in late 1996, it was clear that the global music television giant would capture the Indian imagination as well. Initially, MTV India followed a cautious “Indianization” strategy with a focus on Indian pop music and promos. Then, in August 1997, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of Indian independence, MTV India went vehemently Indian, prominently featuring Indian film music, and even presenting the MTV logo in the three colors of the Indian flag (a move that raised objections from members of the right-wing BJP government when it was repeated the following year). By 1999, MTV India’s success was so evident that Channel [V] announced that it was contemplating a major relaunch strategy (Hussain 1999).

Nation/Generation in Music
Television’s Global Youth Culture

Despite some statements from MTV’s executives indicating faith in the existence of an “international generation” whose members “are much more
similar to each other than they are to their parents” (Banks 1996, 104), the investment in building a youth audience in India by both MTV and Channel [V] has been shaped by important social and economic constraints and considerations that preclude such a sweeping generalization. According to one marketing executive, a fundamental difference between the experience of youth in contemporary Asia and that of different generations of youth who have grown up in a media-saturated environment in the West since the 1950s is that although the latter have successively “rebelled out” from their parents’ generation, the former are in the process of “rebelling in” to the middle class (McCaughan 1998). In India, the generational experience of nationalism and globalization has also been understood by marketing executives along similar lines. Young, middle-class Indians, it is believed, are ready to become aggressive consumers—and consumers of national identity—because their parents’ generation had finally tired of nation-building Nehruvian ideals of austere consumption and was vicariously consuming through its children (Bijapurkar 1998).

From a marketing perspective, it appears that youth in Asia in general are situated in a more optimistic relation to other generations, and to global culture, with this optimism taking the form of a mixture of a “light attitude” toward social issues and a strong determination to succeed individually. These perceptions are also borne out in the sphere of cultural production in the fact, for instance, that the work of Ken Ghosh, one of India’s best-known music video directors, is described as having “little of the angst-ridden rebellion or even morbid sexuality so profuse in international videos” and is, instead, “happy, peppy stuff” (Chopra 1997, 81). Music videos, film songs, and advertisements in India have all tended to celebrate an ethos of happy cordiality between generations and between East and West, mostly in moments of consumption.

Music television in India therefore takes on the task of constructing a youth culture with a mandate that is not necessarily oppositional to older generations. In addition to the commercial opportunities that media and advertisers see in not overtly disturbing intergenerational relations, another factor, that of media access, has also ensured a set of limits on the extent to which music television could pursue a niche youth audience. The fact that most Indian television households have a single set has meant that even if parents do not necessarily watch MTV, their presence has to be taken into account in making programming choices. Thus, Channel [V] initially presented itself as a “youth channel in attitude” but a “family channel in demographics” (Hussain 1997).

In addition to generational considerations, the culture of global music television channels in India is marked not only by a mere sensitivity to local culture but by an aggressive campaign to be more Indian than the other. For instance, Channel [V]’s general manager, Don Atyeo, situated Channel
[V]'s Indianization in contrast to the fact that “MTV . . . (was) ramming Western music down everyone’s throats” (Hussain 1997), while MTV India’s general manager (at that time), Sunil Lulla, maintained that MTV is “the territory of music which young Indians love . . . [and] V is the in the territory of international music which young Indians certainly don’t love” (It’s open war 1997).

For both channels, Indianization equals Indian film music, even as Indian nonfilm pop music is a growing genre as well. The broader question in relation to the notion of global youth culture, however, pertains to the fact that despite their avowed quest—within limits—to reach a youth audience, and to negotiate Indian and international programming in a manner that combines Indian content with a “global” brand resonance or “look” (Butcher 1999), MTV and Channel [V] account for only twenty-five percent of the time Indian viewers spend watching music television (Hussain 1999). It would seem therefore that Indian television audiences, young and old, are watching Indian film and pop music on a variety of channels. The question, however, remains as to what cultural negotiations arise at this moment at which a particular form of generationality, youth, arises not only as the site of investment by media and marketing firms but also as a location from which nationality, globality, and identity in general become meaningful for those who are indeed interpellated as youth; those “kids” who have been told, in the words of Channel [V] General Manager Jules Fuller, to “look at film music, it’s really cool” (Hussain 1997).

Theorizing Indian Music Television Audiences

The Indianization strategies of global music television, combined with the construction of youth culture within certain intergenerational constraints, warrant a reexamination of some of the traditional assumptions about cultural imperialism and audience theories. The traditional assumptions about cultural imperialism as worldwide cultural homogenization through the global economic dominance of Western media corporations (Buell 1994), and the perceived susceptibility of third-world youth in particular to the influences of Western media (Petras 1993), belie simple confirmation or denial given the national and generational inflections in audience building described above. Localization, however, does not mean that concerns about global cultural domination are over, given the fact that it is precisely through localization that the globalization of media, and MTV in particular, is taking place (Philo 1999).

The positioning in scholarly literature of cultural imperialism and audience studies as opposing traditions (Schiller 1991; Roach 1997) often assumes that audience studies place an a priori belief in audience activity.
Tomlinson (1991), for instance, argued that audience studies may not answer any questions about cultural imperialism, whereas for Ang (1996), audience studies become a near impossibility given the larger elusiveness of audiences from media and scholarly discourses about them. Despite these criticisms, there are clearly useful lines of inquiry that can be pursued through audience studies (Jensen 1995), especially in the context of a postcolonialist understanding of globality (Juluri 1998). In the case of music television in India, there are two sets of questions that audience studies can help address: (a) the investments in and limits to generationality in audience members’ readings of music television, and the articulation, in particular, of generationality and visuality and (b) the investments in and limits to globality in audience member’s readings of certain music videos, and their negotiation, in particular, of their own locations in the global and the national.

These questions are examined in the following sections on the basis of a reception study of music television programs conducted in Hyderabad, India, in 1997. The broader goal of this study was to examine a number of issues surrounding music television audiencehood in the context of globalization such as the relationship between the rise of music countdowns as a pervasive music television genre and the ideologies of globalization connected with film songs and music videos celebrating Indian national identity in an international context. In the following sections, I examine two of the main themes relevant to this particular article, generational and global/national issues in audience readings. A more comprehensive treatment of this study may be found in Juluri (forthcoming).

**Interview Design**

The in-depth interviews that are discussed below were conducted with a total of 42 participants between May and August 1997. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes and was structured around the viewing of four short video segments: a series of title sequences from countdown shows, an excerpt from a popular countdown show, the music video of Alisha Chinai’s “Made in India” (which is discussed in detail below), and an excerpt from a vox pop music video program (Public Demand) featuring impromptu interviews with people on the streets. These screenings were preceded and followed up with general questions on viewing contexts and parental involvement (in appropriate cases) in viewing. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of English, Hindi, and Telugu (the regional language spoken in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh of which Hyderabad is the capital city).
Participants and Place

The participants in this study were representative in some ways of the broader urban, middle-class Indian population, although their own location in Hyderabad may be emphasized for its uniqueness. Hyderabad is one of India’s largest cities, with a population of nearly five million and has historically been a confluence of various cultural influences that are religious (Hindu and Muslim), linguistic (Telugu, Hindi, Urdu), and subregional as well (between the underdeveloped Telangana area around Hyderabad and migrants from the wealthy coastal regions of the state of Andhra Pradesh). More recently, the city has been promoted as one of India’s own “Silicon Valleys” under the leadership of its “laptop” chief minister, the information-technology and foreign-investment-friendly Chandra Babu Naidu (whose regional Telugu Desam party supports the national BJP government as well).

In terms of media, Hyderabad is an especially rich and complex site. Although the Telugu film industry is one of the three largest ones in India (and has produced its share of film-star politicians including the legendary, late N. T. Rama Rao), its satellite television base is multilingual as well, with access via cable to global/English channels, national/Hindi channels, and local Telugu channels (and, for non-Telugu-speaking Hyderabadis, a host of other regional language channels as well). Globalization in Hyderabad has meant, briefly, a proliferation of career opportunities and consumer pleasures for middle classes and further exacerbation of struggles for the underprivileged around World Bank-dictated policies such as the privatization of electricity.

Tastes and Interests

With the exception of a few university students who were residents of the hostel, most participants in this study were longtime residents of Hyderabad. Although there are numerous axes in terms of demographic composition among participants, it may be useful to classify them at the outset in terms of their role in this study as “music television audiences.” About one-quarter of the participants were simply not familiar with the emerging conventions of music television programs, although they did watch film songs—perhaps as film songs—on television. These participants were mostly older and comparatively underprivileged in terms of income and occupation (some of them were domestic workers). The rest of the participants were fairly familiar and involved with music television and its conventions, although there were some variances in terms of
particular program and channel choice. For instance, Telugu and Hindi film music programs such as “Santoor Top Ten” on Gemini Television and “Philips Top Ten” on Zee TV were the most popular shows among them. MTV and Channel [V] programs were familiar to most, but intimate involvement with these seemed to be the exclusive prerogative of two groups of participants drawn from somewhat elite high schools and colleges. In general, most of these participants may be characterized as middle to upper class, and they ranged from high school students to young professionals and postdoctoral researchers.

The overall perception of music television among these participants may be characterized as a positive one. Participants see the proliferation of music countdown shows and vox pop shows as signs of the liberalization and democratization of television under commercialization and private ownership, and the slew of nationalistic music videos such as Alisha’s “Made in India” as representing their true national identity in a context of growing international recognition for India. Although these perceptions are also tempered by numerous critical observations, what is important is that these may also be seen as ideologies emerging from a specific historical context that have been more or less naturalized in reception. Within these readings, the role of generationality and youth culture is somewhat less obvious. However, it is also clear that there is indeed a nascent sense of youth identity among some participants that intersects with their sense of global and national identities, as well as their particular relation to music television as a visual form.

**Generationality and Visuality**

Although it would not be accurate to differentiate the young participants of this study as a “watching” generation in opposition to an earlier “listening” generation given the facts that the practice of watching film songs in India (in theaters, on television, and on video) precedes satellite television and the satellite television audience is an intergenerational one as well, it is clear that music television, in its visuality (in terms of aesthetics and in terms of the quantitative increase in channels, programming, and images), presents a point of intergenerational negotiation in Indian television households. One important generational difference, however, does seem to arise in the absence, in this study, of any mention by participants of parental objections to music in general, whereas music television—and television in general—is clearly an arena of intergenerational negotiation.5

In general, most participants also did not mention overwhelming objections from their parents to watching music television in general or MTV in particular. This may suggest that music television has indeed been some-
what normalized among parents and children, or that the specific participants in this study perceived their own situations as somewhat more liberal than that of other families. In any case, as the following remark made by an undergraduate student shows, there is indeed a perception that some things cannot be “shown [because] it’s India,” even if it is supposedly some other families that say such things:

It differs from family to family, I think. Some people, [think] it’s OK. Some people think no-no, shouldn’t be shown, it’s India.

Since most young participants (those who still lived with their parents as opposed to the young professionals and postdoctoral researchers) seem to get little objection from their parents for their watching television in general, the following comment is somewhat unique. In this case, it is a female undergraduate student who observes a gendered difference in her own family:

Like, I can watch with my father, but I can’t watch with my mother. And my friends also, they can’t watch with one parent, but they can watch with the other. Like, your mothers don’t accept all this. Fathers are a bit OK. They’ll say OK, fine, this is how it is, come on.

Intergenerational negotiations about watching music television, it would seem, encompass issues ranging from norms about what can be shown in India to a mere contest for the remote control. However, it is clear that there are moments in which images on music television are perceived to be embarrassing, particularly for young viewers to be watching in the presence of their elders. On this note, it is also worth emphasizing that parental objections and young viewers’ discomfort arise from images that are not necessarily confined to the global music television channels such as MTV and Channel [V]. The point of negotiation, hence, is not so much the foreignness of these channels as the perception of what constitutes a vulgar image. One group of participants, for instance, are all graduate students of classical dance and mainly Telugu Channel [V] viewers and say that they have frequently experienced discomfort (and so have their parents) because of the growing trend of obscenity in Telugu film songs (including nudity, suggestive body movements, and “double-meaning” lyrics).

It may be fair to characterize the intergenerational music television audience in India as one with differing perceptions, interests, and investments in the visual aspects of music television; an indication, perhaps, of how the programming strategy of situating Indian film songs in a visual environment of popular youth culture translates into reception. Parents may toler-
ate the relentless graphics and icons, and the antics of veejays, and take some interest in the music. Young viewers, on the other hand, take an interest not only in the music but in the whole music television environment, or what many participants call “attitude” or “background” as well. For instance, one participant, an undergraduate student, mentions (like many others), that Alisha Chinai’s “Made in India” was a favorite song for him as well as his parents. However,

Both of them (parents) like it, but to see the video doesn’t occur to them [emphasis added].

Although many parents may have indeed watched the video, what is relevant here is the perception for a young viewer that a conscious investment in watching music videos is something that elders do not make—and by implication—something that only young viewers make. Such an equation of visuality and youth identity is also emphatically stated by another participant, a high school student, in the context of a comparison between watching music television and simply listening to music:

Actually, I can tell about teenagers. We assume in that song that we [are] ourselves singing that song, or something like that. When we are hearing that [song], we cannot do that. I can say that about what teenagers do. I guess, not all of us, but some of us do.

The emergence of a youth identity around music television in an inter-generational context is premised, as this statement suggests, by a self-conscious investment in the visuality of music television. Although this is not necessarily oppositional to other generations, it is clearly a sign of the formation of generational identity rooted in the images of music television. For instance, the particular example this participant goes on to give for such a youth-oriented video (Shaan’s “Love-ology”) may seem somewhat innocuous with its invocation of a bespectacled student who has failed all his subjects and has come “first” in “Loveology” thanks to a little attention from a group of disruptive women who cause his eyes to pop out in animated heart shapes. However, the political ramifications of even such a seemingly mundane example may be better fleshed out by locating it, and its light-hearted youthfulness, in the context of its emergence along with music television as an important aspect of the experience of globalization in India—not in the very least because of the massive effort made by the music and music television industries to package and sell a new youth-oriented nationalism appropriate to a global context.
Globality and Nationality

Music videos have been an especially favored form of expression of nationalist celebration in India, and the fiftieth independence day celebrations of 1997 in particular coincided with a number of videos and albums ranging from box sets of old Indian film songs to newer pop releases. These videos mark a shift in two important ways, which once again converge around the emerging music television youth culture. The first shift pertains to the fact that the state (and Doordarshan) became somewhat marginal in terms of the cultural production of nationalist discourses, leaving it to private media corporations—both Indian and foreign. The second shift pertains to a clear change in the conceptualization of nationalism. Although 1950s Indian cinema was renowned for its Mother Goddess iconography of the newly born nation (featuring worshipful songs and dances before a goddess figure shining forth within the outline of an Indian map), the new music videos, such as a series sponsored by Coke, are described as representations of “the India of the ’90s: vibrant, liberal, assertive, sexy” (Sethi 1997, 9).

The implications of some of these developments are evident in the readings made by participants of Alisha Chinai’s “Made in India,” a pioneering music video not only in terms of its depiction of themes of nationality and globality but also because of its role in pushing—for the first time ever—the sales of a pop album to that of successful film music albums. The video uses a fairy-tale setting replete with snake-charmers, fakirs, elephants, and dancers, and tells a story about a princess turning down suitors from different parts of the world, and finally accepting a man who arrives in a box labeled “made in India.” The implications of this narrative must also be seen in light of the fact that it emerged in the early 1990s and precedes most other music video discourses about the nation in a global context.

“Made in India” is situated by participants, at the outset, as a representation of what it means to feel Indian, and in direct opposition to discourses of patriotism, which are seen as somewhat inauthentic and paternalistic. It is also worth emphasizing that this perception was by no means confined to the high-end MTV viewing groups but was shared by many somewhat older participants as well, including some who said that they appreciated the song in spite of not knowing Hindi. For instance, the following comment, made by a high school student, is indicative of the overall distinction made by participants between the seemingly transparent representation of Indianness in “Made in India” and the somewhat insufficient discourses of patriotism:

[It is] not a patriotic song, but it has lot of meaning in it.
Such a perception, however, is also shared by another participant who is not only an older university student who mainly watches Telugu language programs but is also from a rural family and has had little urban, English, or Hindi language experiences:

Desabhakti gurinchi cheptaaru kaani, feeling, Indian feeling gurinch kaadu ([They] tell us about worshiping the nation, but not about feeling, the Indian feeling).
(Translated from Telugu)

The reading of “Made in India” as somehow having more meaning than something merely patriotic is enabled not only by the idiom of pop music and music television culture that young Indians relate to but also by the fact that participants are actively engaged in thinking about what it means to be Indian, and particularly what it means to be Indian in a global context. Thus, despite the lack of subtlety in the video’s espousal of Indian supremacy vis-a-vis men from other places, some participants engage with the lyrics of the song and produce a reading that is more self-critical. The following comment, made by a female high school student from one of the more expensive schools, shows a moment of critical self-reflexivity in the context of an excited exchange during the interview about the nobility of Alisha’s aspirations and choices:

It’s not compulsory that an Indian’s heart is only good. You know, a foreigner can be much better than an Indian. It doesn’t matter which place you are from, it’s the character that’s important. [Emphasis added]

“Made in India” is therefore not perceived as a direct slogan about national pride in the face of global competition but as a more complex articulation of identity and place. The narrative of the song, despite the sloganistic refrain, sets up what seems like a truly meritocratic situation: The Princess wants the man with the best dil (heart) and it just turns out that the Indian man has it. For the most part, participants engage with the notion that such a “heart” or “character” are important, defining these in terms of values such as “respecting elders” and beliefs such as the sanctity of marriage as an institution. Then, in turn, these values are frequently situated as staunchly “Indian.” Such an articulation of positive relational values and national identity does not necessarily take an oppositional stance toward the perceived values of the “West.” At the same time, such an articulation is frequently situated in relation to the West in broader discourses of globalization in India by politicians and media artists alike, positing “Indian values” as a competitive export commodity.

The 1997 Vande Mataram project, which consisted of a Sony-released album of music composed by A. R. Rahman and spectacular music videos,
is a good example of this phenomenon. Advertising executive Bharat Bala, who conceived and codirected the project, situates his vision in terms that highlight not only what is arguably the dominant discourse about nationalism in relation to globalization in India but also a key generational aspect to it. Bala said he had two aims for his project: (1) to display “Vande Mataram” as “India’s property” to the whole world (achieved through interviews with world leaders such as Nelson Mandela by CNN’s Riz Khan) and (2) to convey the message of India’s freedom struggle to the younger generation in a way that they would not merely respect but actually feel (Bhatia 1997).

From such a nationalistic perspective, it would seem that globalization has been far from a cultural threat to India. The rise of music television and youth culture has been accompanied, it would appear, by neither a loss of respect for elders, nor a loss of national pride. Young music television viewers espouse what may be seen as commendable human values (especially by parents) and associate these with their national identity, without forgetting for an instant that their generation’s experiences would be far more global than that of their parents and that globalization would not have to mean hatred for themselves or for other nations. Given these observations, would it be fair to say that all that audience study has done in this case has been to simply establish once again that cultural imperialism does not exist?

Conclusion

The unfortunate answer to this question is that the reception of music television in India and the rise of youth culture call for a deeper understanding of cultural imperialism than a mere celebratory dismissal. Apart from the obvious irony of the fact that it is foreign media firms that are providing Indian audiences with the means for self-representation, there also remain the implications of the specific media representations around which viewers construct their identities, and the broader ideologies of globalization that are belied by the social costs of globalization—ranging from the wider fallout of economic restructuring to the domestic pressures of work and success on families.

One way of characterizing the impact of these developments on what Appadurai (1990) called the “transgenerational stability of knowledge” is that although young Indians (of a particular privileged disposition) celebrate the new liberalization values of self-indulgence and consumption with high fashions and discos, their parents may simply excuse these because the new youth lifestyle may include a “Bolo Indian!” (“Say ‘Indian!’”) bumper sticker and a nationalistic pop song on the stereo. Given the career pressures of middle-class youth, parents may also find it difficult to do anything but approve the emerging competitiveness among their
children. In addition, many parents are making up for their own lack of consumer opportunities growing up in the Nehruvian era by indulging their children’s consumerism (Bijapurkar 1998).

The nationalism of youth culture is problematically articulated not only with religious nationalism and intolerance but also in the fact that music video discourses of nationality are profoundly orientalistic. Although it may be Indian or diasporic Indian talent involved in music video production, the fact that Indian audiences see their greatness in what are clearly traditional Western stereotypes of India (such as the snake-charmers in “Made in India”) indicates a failure of creative imagination as well. In addition, the exoticization, spectacularization, and parodying of subaltern figures such as tea sellers and daily wage workers on music television promos shows a clear divestment from social accountability on the part of the middle-class world of music television.

These facts also seem to result in some mistaken perceptions among music television viewers. Some participants in this study, for instance, assume that the exoticization on music television implies that Indian videos are being watched by viewers all around the world. This, in turn, feeds into a broader perception of globalization among participants as an opportunity for the nation to be recognized by the rest of the world. The truth, of course, is that the rest of the world is watching its own MTV (and some American MTV, inescapably, as well).

One particular image illustrates the sadness of this partially self-constructed delusion. A young female viewer appears on one of Channel [V]’s request programs and dedicates the song in a long monologue to her “boyfriend” who has gone off to America to study and became incommunicado. She expresses the fervent hope that her boyfriend is watching Channel [V] in the United States and will remember to write to her. Globalization, in this context, may be seen not just in the pathos of a message in dead space but must be understood also in terms of its consequences at the very local and personal level of one person’s suffering as well. The challenge for a youth culture under globalization, it would seem, is at the very least a better-informed understanding of one’s place in the world, and it seems unlikely that this would come from MTV or Channel [V].

Instead, what MTV and Channel [V]’s ingenious experiment in globalization with its seemingly protraditional and profamily rendition of youth culture and global culture in India seems to be doing is a vast reordering of common sense and relational value along generational lines. That its successful creation of a transnational and transgenerational form of hegemony in a time of increasing social separation of privilege and accountability for privilege is unrepresentative of globalization may be little surprise. However, the full import of this process may be understood best by turning in conclusion to the question of tradition itself. Although it is far from socio-
logically correct to think of tradition as an unchanging essence that has only now begun to respond to the foreign forces of global media, it is also useful to note that the redefinitions and fixing into definitions on alien terms of communities and cultures under colonialism and modernity that postcolonialist scholars such as Ashis Nandy (1983) have critiqued have now assumed an even more pervasive and inescapable form with the attractions of music television.

What MTV and Channel [V] seem to have colonized, in this present phase of globalization, is not only the hitherto relatively untapped spheres of home and family in postcolonial life, but in doing so, the very ground of definition itself. To illustrate, at this moment in history, young and old Indians may all share a structure of feeling within their lives as familial and relational subjects or even as national subjects. Along comes MTV and “Made in India” with all their grandiose representational claims parading on grotesquely self-parodying orientalistic images. What these images and claims have captured and begun to feed off from, perhaps, is that very heartspring of community that has somehow survived colonialism and modernity, despite many severe beatings. On public shows, and in music videos, everything becomes represented and rendered into easy naturalness—poverty, individualism, greed.

At this time, though, parents and even young Indians may still see that feeling, even if it is now increasingly hitched to the representational regimes of MTV and global modernity. For future generations, such as the children born into an India of seventy channels of satellite television, personal gunmen, and air-conditioned classrooms (at the very “best” of privilege), the nation and tradition may have lost their last hope of redemption for making them see the insanity of their lives in relation to the teeming humanity on the doorstep of their homes and cars before they all flee to America, where they can even afford not to see the humanity at all. The nation, tradition, and even the global could still be frames for living against the tyranny that employs them; these could be, respectively, anticolonial struggle, community and living structured within social obligation, and the most exalted universalism that one could aspire to in an age of global dreams. The role of generational mediation that music television has assumed for itself, of course, will take much effort to be grappled with if such goals are indeed to live on and be lived for.

Notes

1. A fifty percent interest in Channel [V] was purchased from Star TV in 1995 by four global music corporations, Sony, EMI, BMG, and Warner Music (Banks 1996).
More recently, Star TV announced that it had reacquired the stakes held by BMG and Warner Music (Dey 2000).

2. An Asiawide study by McCann Erickson Asia Pacific found that Indian youth consistently voted for Bill Gates as the “world’s biggest star,” edging out Michael Jackson (McCaughan 1998).

3. A sensitivity that translates into promoting issues such as fighting music piracy, practicing safe sex, and avoiding political controversy. As MTV CEO Tom Freston said, in response to a question about MTV’s prospects with a right-wing government in India, “there is room for . . . MTV in any political culture” (Pinto 1997).

4. The Indian music market (the second largest in the world in terms of unit sales) has been dominated by Indian film music (67 percent in 1995), although Indian pop music was expected to grow significantly (from 6 percent in 1995 to 21 percent in 2000). International music was also expected to grow from 5 percent to 15 percent in the same period, according to a BMG-Crescendo study (Agarwal 1996). For a detailed discussion of the Indian music industry, see Manuel (1993).

5. It may be qualified here that “intergenerational negotiation” may refer more to young participants’ perceptions of their parents and does not claim to be an exhaustive analysis including parents’ perspectives as well.

6. Vande Mataram (“salutations to the motherland”) is a Bengali song popular during the Indian freedom movement and is India’s official national song (the national anthem is “Jana Gana Mana”). Its recent revival has been controversial because of its association with the antiminority positions of the Hindu nationalists. The pop song, however, enjoyed a huge success (outselling Elton John’s tribute to Princess Diana on its day of release), and for a while “Vande Mataram” became a popular catchphrase to say among people.

7. Rahman, a South Indian film music composer, is frequently voted by young Indians as their favorite musician, easily outclassing Western stars such as Michael Jackson (Bora 1996).

References


Pinto, J. 1997. In Sync With the Audience. The Times of India, June 16, 3.


Vamsee Juluri is an assistant professor of media studies at the University of San Francisco and the author of the forthcoming book Becoming a Global Audience: Longing and Belonging in Indian Music Television (Peter Lang). His work on audiences and globalization has been published in the European Journal of Cultural Studies and Critical Studies in Mass Communication.