SINGING THROUGH THE SCREEN: *INDIAN IDOL* AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ASPIRATION IN POST-LIBERALIZATION INDIA

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Anaar Iris Desai-Stephens

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SINGING THROUGH THE SCREEN:
INDIAN IDOL AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ASPIRATION

Anaar Iris Desai-Stephens
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This dissertation examines how discourses and practices of aspirational self-transformation are circulated, consumed, and materialized through sites of popular music practice. Focusing on reality music television shows, such as Indian Idol, and the new music schools that are emerging around them, this study combines nearly two years of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai with close analysis of musical and visual media texts. I argue that popular music practice has become a privileged medium for imagining and cultivating new kinds of selves in the aspirational economy of globalizing, liberalizing India. Simultaneously, I show that these sites of aspirational musical practice re-inscribe social hierarchies based on class, caste, and gender, even as they espouse a meritocracy grounded in talent.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anaar Desai-Stephens received a B.M. in Violin Performance from the Manhattan School of Music and an M.A. in Ethnomusicology from Boston University. She has studied Hindustani violin with Kala Ramnath, and Hindustani vocals with Warren Senders and Rajeshree Pathak. Her doctoral work has been supported by the Howard Mayer Brown Fellowship from the American Musicological Society and the Randel Fellowship from the Cornell Department of Music. Anaar has an article forthcoming in MUSICultures, and she has presented her research at national conferences in the fields of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and South Asian studies. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, where she is teaching courses on music and colonialism, film music, and South Asian musical culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work emerges from a lifetime of travel to India; more than a decade of studying, living, working, and researching in Mumbai; and out of a journey from being a professional musician to being a scholar of Indian music. As such, it is made possible by intellectual guidance, emotional support, and artistic mentorship from innumerable individuals. Woven through with insights enabled by so many, any mistakes are, of course, my own.

In India, I am fortunate to have a large and loving family. In Ahmedabad, my extended family - Shrutimami and Falgunmama, Chitramasi and Maulibhai, Vijaymama and Hetalmami, Tikumama and Keyurimami, and all my cousins - have always welcomed me back to 38 Jawaharnagar at a moment's notice, nourished me with the tastiest Gujarati food possible, and enthusiastically supported my burgeoning interest in Indian classical music and then my research in reality music TV shows. Thanks, in particular, to Vijaymama and Hetalmami for thoughtful conversations on changes in Indian music and for introducing me to their musician contacts.

 In Mumbai, the Mehta-Vakil clan taught me how to navigate and love that crazy city; you, quite literally, kept me alive. My special gratitude goes to Jagumasi: from teaching me how to cook Indian food to offering a practitioner's rich perspective on the world of Indian performing arts and aesthetics. Your home has always been a place of great care, learning and reflection for me.

This dissertation research was enabled by a network of informants whom I often met through the most improbable of circumstances. Many have subsequently become good friends

Ramnath generously took on a naive young violinist and introduced me to the magnificent ocean that is Hindustani music, while Warren Senders helped me start to swim in that ocean. Warren, your intellectual rigor, passionate warmth, and "no-B.S." approach are ever an inspiration to me. My sincere thanks, too, to Rajeshree Pathak, who welcomed me as a student during my time in Mumbai and shared from her amazing repertoire of *bandishes* and *ghazals*.

On either side of fieldwork, developing a research project and then condensing years of rich experience into a coherent and meaningful ethnography can often feel like such a solitary endeavor. Yet I am intensely aware of the multiple forms of support - intellectual, personal, financial, familial, and musical - that have enabled this work to come into being. There are more people to thank than I can name here, but my gratitude encompasses many across Ithaca, New York City, Boston, East Meredith, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and beyond.

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reading and sharing of her extensive knowledge of the field; her work has been an inspiration to me since the beginning.

My participation in the International Doctoral Workshop at Hildesheim, Germany allowed me to begin the dissertation writing process in conversation with a group of ethnomusicologists at a similar stage of career. The encouraging scholarly community that emerged out of this workshop continues to be a source of support for me. Jayson Beaster-Jones and Matt Rahaim offered thoughtful feedback and analytical guidance, both in the field and while I was writing. I am grateful for their ongoing collegial mentorship and to have them as ongoing interlocuters.

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My deepest thanks go to my writing group: Charis Boke, Ashley Smith, and Beth Reddy. Your willingness to read my writing, no matter how messy and often at the last-minute, your thoughtful and insightful feedback, and gChat-enabled support has structured the writing of this dissertation. Our conversations and email threads are implicitly footnoted throughout.

Finally, what would the writing process be without caffeine? My thanks to the staff at Gimme! Coffee, who have provided invaluable and delicious coffee and a convivial atmosphere for the sometimes grim task of dissertating.

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INTRODUCTION

"India has become a very increasingly aspirational society" - Arun Jaitley, finance minister ("The Week," February 13, 2017).

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"I am #OneStepCloser to being the best version of myself" - Advertisement for Standard Chartered Bank's Mumbai Marathon, Marine Drive, Mumbai

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I am sitting in the Starbucks that is attached to the edge of the Mumbai domestic airport. Outside, taxis and rickshaws zip by to carry passengers into Mumbai's thick morning traffic. Gauzy light filters in through a wide sunroof while baristas in black aprons and hats serve up caramel lattes and sandwiches to recently arrived passengers carrying briefcases and pulling small travel bags. This is my third or fourth time in this particular Starbucks, which has turned out to be a particularly convenient place to meet busy elite members of India's film, television, and music industry who are willing to fit me in at the edges of business trips to other cities, both small and large, across the country. This morning, I am meeting with Rahul, who served as director and producer of the immensely popular reality music television show *Indian Idol* in its first three seasons.[1] Rahul has just returned from a trip for his current job with the media and

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[1] I have anonymized most of my informants to protect their identity, following standard anthropological practice. I have made exceptions for those figures who are so prominent that they are already public figures – such as judges on reality music television shows and major production figures– and for upcoming singers, whose biographical details (such as the television show they appeared on) would likely give away their identity and for whom publicity is valuable. At moments, those individuals have asked to

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entertainment company Disney/UTV and we are surrounded by other duos clearly engaged in business over coffee. I begin by telling Rahul that I am researching reality music TV shows in India and that I am interested in the role of these shows in relation to aspiration. "Aspiration has become such a buzzword," I remark, and Rahul concurs, "It has." For the next hour and a half, we talk about Rahul's work on the early seasons of *Indian Idol*, the differences between *Indian Idol* and singing shows that preceded it, and the changes he has observed in the realm of Indian television and film - "the industry" - and the kinds of celebrity associated with it since the early 2000s. As part of his current job, working with the youth channel Bindass[2], Rahul has gone out into small towns to meet consumers and he shares some of his impressions of this population. "They have a tremendous sense of confidence, a tremendous sense of confidence," Rahul reflects. "Yes, they do think that the packaging is better in Bombay - in terms of the way you dress, the way you talk - but it's not an impediment anymore, being from a small town. Which it probably was ten years ago, in terms of your own self esteem and thought process. Now, you can achieve whatever you want. Yes, maybe the guys in Bombay are a little more savvy and it will take them less time to…" Rahul pauses to find the right words. "Get. To overcome it, maybe," he continues, without specifying what needs to be overcome. "But it's not impossible for us anymore. So, there's a tremendous sense of confidence."

As we exit Starbucks, I quickly return to the question of aspiration, asking why he thinks the term has taken on such currency in the present moment. "India is more aspirational," Rahul replies matter-of-factly as we part ways, I walking to catch a rickshaw back home, he walking to grab a taxi to go work in a corporate office complex in northern Mumbai.

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remain anonymous in regard to sharing certain opinions and information; I have of course honored their request.
[2] A slang term meaning "cool," "carefree," and generally unconcerned.

A few weeks later, I sit in the Starbucks on busy Juhu-Tara road, parallel to the ocean, lounging on a plush sofa as I talk with Poorvi Koutish, a recent contestant and finalist on *Indian Idol*. "I never thought I wanted to be a singer," Poorvi tells me, describing how her experience activated a sense of ambition. "But then, *Indian Idol* changed me. I realized, I have something inside me. I realized, I like to work long hours."[3]

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This dissertation poses a critical investigation of "aspiration" as it is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and negotiated through media and musical practice in contemporary India. Focusing on reality music television shows such as *Indian Idol* and related sites of popular music training, I examine aspiration as a palpable quality of everyday life in Mumbai, as an affect that is increasingly being circulated through musical media and advertising, and as a primary facet of an ideal subjectivity. Taking aspiration as a newly marked cultural practice, I illuminate its centrality to the kinds of subjects being desired and rewarded in India's present.

Specifically, I explore aspiration as it materializes in and is produced through popular musical practice which, I argue, has become a crucial site for the circulation of ideas about subjectivity and a privileged medium for aspirational self-transformation in neoliberally inflected, aspirational India. This work therefore tells a story of changes in the world of Indian popular music and Hindi film song: changes in sites of pedagogy and performance, in vocal timbres and musical styles, in the trajectory of musical careers, and in the structure and

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[3] My interviews were conducted in Hindi, English, and, most frequently, in "Hinglish," the colloquial mixed language that dominates conversation amongst the middle and upper-classes in Mumbai. I have kept the Hinglish intact at certain moments to illustrate the vernacular use of certain English loan words.

production practices of India's Hindi-language film, television, and popular music industry. In what follows, I focus ethnographic attention on producers within these industries, on upcoming singers who have been involved in reality music television shows, and on aspiring singers who seek training in Hindi film song in order to break into the Bollywood music industry as playback singers.[4] In so doing, I attend to the construction of aspirational discourses and practice while opening up analytical questions about who seeks to participate in India's aspirational project, the sites they locate, and the forms of self-cultivation they undertake in order to do so.

In this chapter, I contextualize the contemporary practice of aspiration relative to the economic, cultural, and technological shifts enabled by India's "liberalization" in the early 1990s. I then situate aspiration and aspirational musical practice in relation to literatures on media, subjectivity, and aspiration in South Asia, anthropological approaches to neoliberalism, and scholarly engagements with the body and voice in musical practice. I conclude with a narrative about my fieldwork process and methods and an overview of my chapters.

Locating Aspiration

When I began fieldwork in 2013, "aspiration" was not on my radar, let alone the focal point of my research; instead, I intended to study reality music television shows as a means of understanding cultural and musical shifts in India since the economic and cultural liberalization of the early 1990s. Yet aspiration was everywhere, from billboards reminding youth that "The

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[4] Playback refers to the long-standing division in Hindi film between the singers who provide the voices for songs and the actors and actresses who dance and lipsynch in them. The singers, who often record the songs first, are called "playback" singers and the subsequent shooting of the visuals is called the "picturization." For more detailed explanation of this process and the history of the playback system, see Ganti 2013 and Majumdar 2009.

world speaks English – Why don't You?" to newspaper articles about the rise of the "aspirational classes," from pedagogical exhortations to "live your own life!" to, indeed, reality music TV shows promising glamour and fame. Aspiration in contemporary India emerged as a set of dreams and ambitions configured by the circulation of visual, textual, and oral discourses regarding personal potential and transformation.

While individuals have always held aspirations for a better life, the aspiration I trace here is of a different kind. At once more widespread and more intensely focused on the individual, aspiration in the present moment focuses on the production of striving, positing individual betterment and self-transformation as a precondition for economic and social advancement. This heightened, intensified form of aspiration has taken on increasing salience as an affective marker of and marketing buzzword in liberalizing India - it is at once used to describe a quality of modern India even as it hopes to *create* that reality in evoking it.[5]

In this context, reality music TV shows perform crucial work. They are central sites for the production and circulation of these aspirational discourses and ideals of subjectivity, proffering promises of fame, recognition, and the realization of one's musical and professional dreams in a slick, glossy format. Drawing on themes of talent, hard work, and self- cultivation, reality music TV shows showcase contestants' transformation into more accomplished singers and, simultaneously, into individuals who read as more urbane and "modern." These shows thus position their participants as desiring and desirable subjects of contemporary India. As they yoke self-cultivation and transformation in the present to promises of economic and social mobility in

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[5] In this, it closely mirrors discourses about the "Indian middle classes" themselves, as touted in the Indian (and international) media in the early years of liberalization. As Mazzarella shows, such discursive maneuvers were an attempt to attract investment, a way of reconceiving India's image (2003). Here, I am also drawing on seminal work in social theory on the productive power of discourse (Althusser 1972, Butler 1993).

the future, reality music TV shows epitomize and dramatize the simultaneity of desiring and striving that lie at the heart of an aspirational subjectivity.[6]

An Aspirational Economy

I use the term "aspirational economy" to conceptualize how aspiration is being produced, circulated, and consumed in the present moment, echoing Sara Ahmed's idea of an "affective economy" (2004). As a concept, aspirational economy is intended to capture the ways in which aspiration is purveyed, circulating and being circulated by large multinational corporations and individuals alike. Economy, then, is not just a metaphor: aspiration is being produced, sold, and consumed on a scale that has profound implications for Indian society at large. The term suggests the material consequences of and conditions for aspiration and the ways in which aspiration has become a driving force for consumption of commodity goods, new experiences, and tools of self-transformation. Drawing on Purnima Mankekar's reading of Ahmed, I show that aspiration is economic in that "it takes on social force through circulation" (Mankekar 2015, 16).

The idea of an "aspirational economy" also captures two important features of how I am theorizing aspiration. Firstly, the term "economy" allows me to point to new forms of value built around the individual as an entrepreneur of the self, following Foucault (2008(1978)). Wendy Brown's description of individuals "who must constantly tend to their own present and future

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[6] Such shows are also referred to by other titles, such as "singing competition shows" and "reality singing shows." Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "reality music TV show" to specifically denote those shows aired after 2004, when Indian Idol first introduced "reality" elements by focusing on contestant backgrounds and integrating audience voting. Similarly, "Bollywood" is a term that has only come into usage over the past two decades (and has been met with ambivalence from film producers), even as it is the moniker now used internationally to reference India's Hindi language film industry. I use the term in particular moments to highlight the film industry's increasingly globalized orientation in the post-liberalization era. See Ganti 2012 and Sarkar 2010 for important historical contextualization of the term.

value" aptly describes many of my interlocutors and friends - from former contestants on and winners of reality music TV shows to young aspiring singers attending a Hindi film song oriented music school to, indeed, some of the most prominent members of the Hindi film music industry - and the kinds of self-commodification, branding, and promotion they continually felt compelled to participate in (Brown and Shenk 2015).

Secondly, following Ahmed and other scholars of affect, I understand aspiration as a circulating affect, one which inheres in individuals and objects but also forms part of a broader "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) that links individuals into collectivities (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Massumi 1995). Building on recent scholarly conversations on affect, I trace how aspiration operates as a felt, sensorily experienced "intensity" that is "in excess of any narrative line" (Massumi 1995, 26) *and simultaneously* emerges in popular mediatized discourse across a range of sites and media (Gray 2013). In particular, I am interested in how musical sound and practice - particularly on reality music TV shows, but in other sites as well - effectively circulate aspiration as an affect to be imbibed and inhabited on both a public and personal level. As both an embodied, non-discursive affect and as a discursive trope, aspiration circulates densely to act upon individuals.[7]

As I will show, contemporary aspiration resides in and thrives on what media anthropologist Purnima Mankekar calls "a disjuncture between how subjects navigate the present and imagine the future" (2015, 190), becoming a quality of life rather than a gap to be bridged. For this reason, I focus on this quality and condition of "being aspirational" as a form of

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[7] Here, I follow Purnima Mankekar's theorization of "affective regimes" that are constituted through media in India: how, through TV, affects slide between and constitute subjects who are, nonetheless, always constituted by other identities and social positions such that affective regimes are never totalizing (2014, 43).

subjectivity which both encompasses and exceeds individual aspirations. At the same time, "being aspirational" is understood as a broader social condition, as my opening vignettes indicate. I mark this as the aspirational project of contemporary India.

The aspirational subject position that the aspirational project seeks to create is marked by the twin forces of striving and desiring. Emerging in conversation with mediated and pedagogical discourses that focus on the individual and her sense of possibility, this aspirational subject seeks self-transformation as a precursor to other forms of economic and social transformation. Put another way, to become an aspirational subject is to be marked by striving not only for social mobility, but for a new habitus, (Bourdieu 1990, Mauss 1934), a new embodied subjectivity, a new way of being. Driven by a sense that you can and should be something different than what you are, to be aspirational in contemporary India is to be working upon the self.

Liberalization

The aspirational project, and the intensified and commodified aspiration that marks it, is intimately related to a host of economic and social changes that took place in India the late 1980s and early 1990s, a broad moment that is now referred to as "liberalization." In this section, I will briefly outline the contours of liberalization and discuss the legacy of caste and class that emerge out of this moment, leading to the rise of a neoliberalizing "Aspirational India."

In the first decade after India's Independence in 1947, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru established a planned economy wherein industry was controlled by the state and foreign business involvement was strictly curtailed in favor of an "import-substituting model of industrialization" (Menon and Nigam 2007, 9). Seeking to provide social welfare for all, the

Nehruvian planned economy's four decades were marked both by relative stability and low

levels of growth. Starting in the 1980s, however, India began to shift towards a consumer-led

economy built on international trade, precipitated by economic reforms that included the

deregulation of the banking industry, the gradual dismantling of the "license-permit raj," and an

increase in the importation of foreign "luxury" consumer items, such as televisions, scooters, and

refrigerators. As social theorists Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam note, "This also signaled the

coming of age of the Indian middle class, whose pent-up consumerist desire was tapped by the

new regime to power the new growth of the economy" (2007, 9).

But the emerging consumer economy was also marked by debt that, at 70 million dollars,

marked it as the third largest debt in the world (Mankekar 2015, 48). In the debt crisis of 1991,

India was forced to take a $5-7 billion dollar loan from the International Monetary Fund. The

IMF bailout came with strict economic reform requirements, including the devaluation of the

Indian rupee, liberalizing foreign trade, and beginning to privatize industry (Mankekar 2015, 47).

These forced economic reforms opened to the door for accelerated multinational investment in

India.[8] Although the liberalization of the Indian economy was a gradual process, taking place

over the course of two decades, aggressive measures adopted in response to 1991 resulted in the

increased presence of multinational corporations and an increased interpenetration with global

media and consumer markets that mark the "opening" of the Indian market.[9]

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[8] A New York Times article (Weinraub 1991) reporting on India's debt crisis in 1991 described the
internal political turmoil and anxiety about the IMF loans. It quotes Indrajit Gupta, then secretary general
of the Communist Party of India, anticipating the broader consequences of liberalization: "Is the I.M.F.
imposing its economic sovereignty over India, that's what we want to know. The economic situation is
serious. Something must be done. But when they want us to cut subsidies, who will actually be affected,
the rich or the poor?"

[9] This conjuncture is understood and analyzed from a range of perspectives, including the end of
Congress' decades of rule and rise of the Hindi Right (Oza 2006, Menon and Nigam 2007), the
establishment of new caste reservations (Mankekar 1999, Menon and Nigam 2007, Lukose 2009) and a

As Menon and Nigam argue, these economic shifts led to a profound change in the kinds of material and social possibilities that became available to Indians, particularly for the middle-class: "It was the unshackling of imagination and the production of a new economy of desire that would push the growth of the future…the new economy was not simply about consumption; it was equally about desire, pleasure, and production at a dispersed and molecular level" (2007, 85). This "new economy of desire" was made possible in great part by profound changes in the mediascape. Most important was the rise of satellite and transnational television, beginning with STAR TV, broadcast from Hong Kong, in 1991 and followed by Zee TV, India's first "homegrown" private network, in 1992. As the number of television sets grew exponentially, the number of transnational channels also exploded so that by 2006, India had the third largest television market in the world (Mehta 2008). The increased presence of transnational, global media laid the groundwork for both the proliferation of reality music television shows and for the commodified form of aspiration that I discuss here.

The Rise of Aspirational India

If the early 2000s was supposed to mark newly liberalized India's arrival on the world stage, heralded by the branding campaign "India Shining" and predicated on the burgeoning middle class,[10] the more recent moniker "Aspirational India" marks something quite different. India has come into the global consciousness - primarily by way of outsourced call centers and Bollywood

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crisis in terms of Indian selfhood and identity relation to its new global orientation (Mazzarella 2003, Mankekar 2015). See Oza 2006, Lukose 2009, Mankekar 1999, Mankekar 2015, Fernandes 2006, and Menon and Nigam 2007 for more on the details and social implications of the long moment of liberalization.

[10] For more on the "Indian Shining" political branding campaign and its spectacular failure, see Fernandes 2006, 189-193

films - but not as the full-fledged economic success story it was supposed to be. While economic growth has been steady, poverty, corruption, and lack of access to education and jobs are still major issues. Moreover, more than 65% of India's population is under the age of 35 (Virmani 2014), with 12 million people entering the work force every year (Bhattacharya 2015). This demographic distribution has meant both stiff competition for a small number of jobs and a strong potential youth consumer base. The moniker "Aspirational India" therefore indexes a paradoxical condition: a widespread state of striving and desire that is nonetheless individualized rather than collective, and which carries little guarantee of fulfillment or realization.

The imagining of "Aspirational India" in the media rests on the rise of what are called "the aspirational classes." Broadly, this group consists of those who came of age with the promises and consumerist practices of liberalization (circulated in great part through television) and who feel entitled to a certain cosmopolitan status. More specifically, this designation is used to connote lower-class, lower-caste, rural youth, who are credited with electing current Prime Minister Narendra Modi (who himself is lower-caste and who has famously risen from being a tea seller to his current status). Thus, Rahul's emphasis on the "confidence" of rural media consumers is one strand of a broader reconceptualization of who holds political and economic power in "Aspirational India."[11] While the aspirational subjects I investigate in this work come from a range of class and caste positions - not just this specific lower-class, lower-caste

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[11] See Mankekar 2015, chapter 6, for an excellent comparison of "Aspirational India" and "Other India" through the film "Bunty aur Babli." The marketing trade publication Afaqs.com asks critically "Is 'aspiration' the most abused term in marketing?" In tracing the usage of the term, they point to the global "Aspirational Consumer Index Report" to both highlight India's high number of "aspirational consumers" (closely linked to its high youth population) and foreground the global circulation of "aspirational" as an important marketing term (Gangal 2014). For a more in-depth cross-section of how the press is diagnosing, analyzing, and referencing "Aspirational India," see Aiyar 2016, Bhagat 2016, Dileep 2016, and Thakur 2014.

demographic - and are primarily urban, issues of caste and class are central to the workings of India's aspirational project. Here, I will briefly review how caste and class have been reformulated and consolidated since liberalization.

<div align="center">The Consuming Middle Class</div>

The primary discursive marker of liberalization was the much-heralded emergence of the "new" Indian middle-classes, whose assumed purchasing power underlay both the new consumption oriented economic model and multinational corporations' interest in the Indian market.[12] Scholars have noted the difficulty of defining "middle class" in socio-economic terms, in light of the wide economic range and heterogeneity of this new social formation. Instead, they have suggested that the Indian middle classes be understood in terms of a set of practices, desires, and forms of distinction based around consumption and consumer goods, appropriate behavior and (often gendered) respectability.[13] Discourses of and desires for middle-classness have thus been central to the forms of consumer citizenship and the kinds of aspirations that have marked post-liberalization India.

Yet it is important to emphasize that, despite the hype, class distribution has not significantly changed from the pre-liberalization era (Bhattacharya and Unnikrishnan 2016). As anthropologist Meredith McGuire writes, "…while the post-liberalization economic boom has made some people wealthier…it remains debatable whether the total number of people who

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[12] Mazzarella points to the generation of increasingly inflated population estimates regarding this new middle-class. These unreliable estimates, generated by the advertising industry to attract international companies and brands, indicate the indeterminacy of the size of this class and, by extension, its buying power (2003, 263).

[13] See Dwyer 2000, Fernandes 2006, Ganguly and Ganguly-Scrase 2009, Jeffrey 2010, Liechty 2003, Mankekar 1999.

identify as middle class has grown since the 1980s," since many of those who identify as "middle class" now also did so earlier (2011, 119). In a more critical vein, Leela Fernandes argues that the middle-class is invested in reproducing discourses about the promise of liberalizing India for its own gain, so that the "newness" of this middle class refers not to the expansion of the middle class through upward mobility, but to "a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization" (2006, xviii). In this way, the "middle class" is understood as an ideological construct that preserves the cultural dominance of a heterogeneous array of groups (Baviskar and Ray 2011).

<center>The Legacy of Caste</center>

The moment of liberalization was also marked by an increasingly sectarian and virulent form of caste-based politics. The political ascendance of Hindutva - literally "Hindu-ness", a highly ideological form of right-wing cultural nationalism which argues that "Indian" must be synonymous with "Hindu" - was epitomized in the 1992 "Babri Masjid" incident wherein a four-hundred year old mosque was destroyed by a mob who claimed that it was built upon the birthplace of Ram, one of the most significant Hindu deities.[14] This event became the flashpoint for intense Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai, resulting in 900 deaths and significant changes in the social fabric of the city (Remembering 1992). In the intervening decades, Hindutva has become a naturalized common sense that shapes historical narratives and contemporary cultural representations in the service of further marginalizing Muslims and more firmly establishing Hindu economic, political, and cultural dominance.

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[14] See Jaffrelot 1996 for a detailed account of the incident and the political mobilizations that enabled it.

Simultaneously, in 1990, a new governmental initiative introduced increased caste-based reservations in government positions and educational institutions.[15] Proposing 27% reservations for Otherwise Backward Classes (OBCs) (Menon and Nigam 2007, 15), in addition to long-standing reservations for Dalits ("Scheduled castes") and tribals (adivasis, "original inhabitants" or "scheduled tribes"), the Mandal Commission report, as it was called, was met with intense protests from upper-caste youth. Caste was putatively abolished at Independence, leading to an official policy of caste-blindness. Yet the Mandal Commission report and responses to it were a stark reminder of the ongoing importance of caste in daily life in India even as, as Menon and Nigam point out, such agitations were conducted "in the most immaculately secular and modern language of 'merit' and 'efficiency'" rather than of caste privilege (2007, 17).[16]

As sociologist Satish Deshpande has so importantly argued, the contradictory policies of caste-blindness and caste-based affirmative action have enabled a situation wherein, as upper-caste practices have become synonymous with "modern" India, "the privileged upper castes are led to think of themselves as 'casteless' while the disprivileged lower castes are forced to intensify their caste identities" as a form of "identity politics" and in service of seeking reservations (2013, 32). Thus, a post-caste worldview is held primarily by those of upper-caste status. Further, it is precisely this belief in a post-caste ideal that enables purportedly meritocratic systems and practices in contemporary India.

While caste and class cross each other in complex ways, caste - as read through someone's last name, facial features, skin color, and cultural practices, among other attributes - continues to be a highly salient category for social differentiation and the distribution of social

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[15] For more, see Fernandes 2006, Jaffrelot 2000.
[16] Menon and Nigam also report that as of the Mandal Commission report, 60% of India's population was OBC, yet OBCs constituted only 4% of government workers (2007, 16)

capital (Fernandes 2006), even as it is no longer considered "polite" or "modern" to ask about someone's caste status, particularly in urban areas. To paraphrase Lukose, caste is an absent presence, a highly influential force in daily life that is nonetheless unavailable for public discussion (2009, 177).

Thus, while the aspirational project of contemporary India and the aspirational subjectivity it seeks to create is seemingly available to anyone, according to meritocratic discourses of opportunity and reward, I show how these social structures continue to be highly salient in India today, structuring who has access to what kinds of opportunities, on reality music TV shows and beyond.

Finally, it is worth noting that liberalization has been a long historical moment; not only did liberalization efforts precede the opening of the markets in 1991, but liberalization has been an ongoing process, one that continues up to this day.[17] Thus, I alternately refer to post-liberalization India, to emphasize the passage of time since the historical moment of "liberalization," and to "liberalizing" India, to mark the ongoing and uneven nature of the liberalization project.

Anthropology of South Asia: Situating the Aspirational Subject

Throughout this work, I focus on reality music television shows as sites of mediated musical performance that are created and shaped by people and that, in turn, shape people, their

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[17] For example, in June 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi relaxed Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) regulations in the aviation and defense sectors, so that foreign companies can own up to 75% of a company. What is notable here is that despite a narrative of economic liberalization and opening, most sectors in India have continued to be carefully controlled and overseen by the government; this marks the first moment wherein a foreign multinational can own more than 49% of a company operating in India. See Matsangou 2016 for a more detailed account of these changes.

sense of personal possibility and the trajectories they imagine for their lives. In this section, I lay out my understanding of how media articulates new subject positions and influences processes of subject formation, building on key literature in the anthropology of media in South Asia. I then consider aspiration as a thread running through South Asian anthropology since liberalization, even as it has not always been marked as a significant site for analytical focus.

Media and Subjectivity

As I have just detailed, the arrival of satellite television, transnational media, and imported commodities were three of the most noticeable markers of liberalizing India, icons of a palpable shift in public culture and emerging forms of citizenship and subjecthood. It is therefore no surprise that anthropologists of liberalizing South Asia have explicitly focused on the impact of mass media on subjectivity and the ways in which media, following Appadurai (1996), "offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" (1996, 3). For example, anthropologists have shown how television creates gendered, classed, and national subjects (Mankekar 1999) and how transnational film become pedagogical tools as they offer viewers new worlds of experience (Liechty 1998). Others have brought crucial attention to the work of media producers - in the worlds of advertising and Hindi film - in imagining and producing subject positions such as "the Indian consumer" (Ganti 2012, Mazzarella 2003). More recently, anthropologists have attended to the circulation of film songs through multiple media forms as sites of re-animation and self-fashioning (Weidman 2012a) and considered media forms as one amongst many sites of consumption through which young people shape themselves and make claims to national belonging (Lukose 2009).

Across these ethnographies, there is a keen attention to the ways in which media - including television, film, print advertising, and YouTube - can offer certain kinds of voices and practices

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through which individuals can form themselves and render themselves legible in a given historical and ideological context. Eschewing any simple narrative of interpellation, and echoing Mankekar's attention to "how media moves us" (2015, 17), I consider Indian reality TV shows as pleasurable resources for subjectivity that are enmeshed in fields of power and influence.[18] I investigate the ways that media forms can simultaneously compound dominant ideological discourses and become affective pedagogical tools that enable people to work on themselves. Interested in how people use media and mediatized discourses in projects of self-subjectivation, I draw on these and other anthropologists of post-liberalization South Asia who explicitly understand subject formation as a process of becoming that is inherently unstable, fraught, and never complete (McGuire 2011, Lukose 2009, Mankekar 1999, 2015). Here, I build on feminist anthropology beyond the context of South Asia that emphasizes the power relations that exists within processes of subject formation and the interpenetrations of subjectification and moments of agency (Mahmood 2011, Butler 1990).

I also trouble the distinction between media production and consumption, simultaneously investigating media producers' labor and discourses in tandem with practices of agentive consumption. Here, I am in conversation with scholars of South Asia who have long noted how consumption, broadly conceived, can be productive of social meanings, practices, and selves (Breckenridge 1995). Following recent scholarship that expands understandings of "mass media" I am particularly interested in analyzing the social life of media beyond a defined moment of production or consumption. As such, I trace how televisual and musical media alike circulate widely, creating social affinities and prompting individuals to think about their lives and their

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[18] My understanding of interpellation builds on Althusser's conception of hailing subjects into being, the ways in which subjects are formed through ideological modes of address (Althusser 1972).

horizons of possibility in new ways. In doing so, I contribute to recent work in South Asian anthropology and media that troubles the very idea of "mass media" by considering a seemingly disparate array of social sites of mediation (Hardy 2016, Nakassis 2016, Mazzarella 2004).

Aspiration in South Asia

While media has been an explicit focus of anthropological scholarship on South Asia, attention to aspiration has been threaded through this corpus since liberalization in more and less subtle ways as a means of marking changing material, ideological, and subjective conditions. Part of what these diverse ethnographic works produced over the past 15 years demonstrate is the way in which "aspiration" has become increasingly central to post-liberalization India's self-definition even as it becomes naturalized and part of a daily common sense. Here, I briefly situate my theorization of aspiration relative to several scholars who have most explicitly developed it as an analytical term.

The term first takes on scholarly life in Arjun Appadurai's essay "The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition," originally published in 2004. Focusing on activism amongst slum dwellers in Mumbai, Appadurai offers several important claims about aspiration that contextualize my thinking about this concept, even as aspects of my theorization of aspiration stand in distinction to his. Firstly, he characterizes aspiration as a "cultural capacity" that allows individuals to navigate between specific desires, cultural norms, and broader horizons of possibility. Appadurai thus opens space for a conceptualization of aspiration beyond "concrete, individual wishes and wants," that is, beyond specific aspirations and beyond the individual (2013, 188). However, this leads him to state that this "capacity to aspire" is more fully developed by the wealthy since they have more experience utilizing this "navigational capacity;" it is a capacity that must be strengthened amongst the poor. Conversely, in the

aspirational project as I detail it, aspiration has been "democratized" so that an aspirational subjectivity is available to all. If anything, aspiration is now understood to be a province of the lower and lower-middle classes; not only are they understood to want and need more, but the very experiential distance between their current experience and the lives they strive to inhabit makes them "more aspirational," in Rahul's words, lending an intensity to their desirous striving.

Writing at the same time as Appadurai, Mazzarella brings important attention to the construction of an "aspirational consumerism," an orientation towards objects and images that indexes a desire for personal transformation and advancement (2003, 102). Mazzarella's work brings into relief the broadening usage of this term "aspirational" over the past fifteen years, wherein advertising discourse has so suffused and structured society that upcoming singers now experience themselves in the same terms as brands and commodities. Furthermore, Mazzarella usefully distinguishes between "desire" and "aspiration," arguing that "advertising transforms desire into aspiration by routing it through a symbolic field defined with reference to taste" so that there is "the *naturalization* of both individual desire and the socially mediated goal of aspiration, as well as the harmonization of the relationship between the two" (2003, 105). This alchemical relationship between desire and aspiration prefigures the intensified state of aspiration that I investigate today which is marked by a desire *for* aspiration or *to be aspirational*.

In the world of Mumbai media production and musical performance, aspiration was taken to be an overwhelmingly positive quality. Yet not all individuals were seen to be equally suited to be aspirational subjects or capable of convincingly transforming themselves in an aspirational mode. Here, I follow Jocelyn Chua's attention to what she calls "a pathology of aspiration" in the context of a Keralan suicide crisis (2014). These discourses of "inappropriate" aspiration, as she traces them, often center on casted "overambition" and youth demands for instant gratification,

thus resonating with the dismissal of lower-caste men that I encountered both on *Indian Idol* and in popular music schools. Chua's work is a reminder of risks inherent in aspiration, and the exclusions inherent in the aspirational project, for transformational techniques of aspiration do not apply equally to all subjects.

Finally, my conception of aspiration is in close conversation with Purnima Mankekar's recent work on aspiration and affect, the first to explicitly consider aspiration in relation to a neoliberal India. In investigating call center workers' "growth" - a term that encompasses both personal and nationalist aspirations for change - Mankekar points to how these workers attempt to acquire cultural and symbolic capital for the purpose of ultimately accruing economic capital so that "aspirations to growth and mobility were hence inextricably entangled" (2015, 210). Simultaneously, this growth encompasses the ways in which call center agents re-make themselves at the level of the body and subjectivity as they cultivate "American" personae and immerse themselves in new affective regimes.

Mankekar understands aspirations as "an affective-temporal formation" in which individuals remake themselves in the present in order to find mobility in the future. This disjunctive temporality undergirds my contention that India's aspirational project is predicated on the work of self-cultivation as a pre-cursor to social and economic mobility. Pushing this further, I show that it is precisely the labor of self-cultivation and self-transformation, and the quality and ethos of striving that accompanies this labor, that defines the aspirational subject. Put more starkly, it is the quality of *being* aspirational, "on the make," that renders one visible as a subject in "Aspirational India," not the successful materialization of one's specific aspirations.

Thus, while aspiration has been a resonant term for anthropologists of South Asia for the past two decades, this dissertation places a new and important emphasis on the quality of being

aspirational as a valuable state in itself, rather than as a means to a specific, material end. Indeed, Appadurai's use of the phrase "the terms of recognition" to qualify aspiration was prescient. In contemporary India, to be aspirational - that is, to act in an aspirational mode and inhabit an aspirational subjectivity - is to make oneself recognizable as a valuable - and value producing - modern subject.

A Cultural Neoliberalism

This work focuses on changes in the conditions of cultural productions following the liberalization or "opening" of the markets that took place in India in the early 1990s. This is in many ways a familiar story, resonating with neoliberal interventions and structural adjustment programs that were undertaken across the globe in the 1980s and 1990s: an IMF bailout in response to national debt, which in turn necessitated deregulation of markets, loosening of restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI), and devaluation of currency. And yet, over two decades later, the liberalization of Indian markets has been uneven and slow, and many parts of the economy (such as defense, aviation, and news media) continue to be tightly controlled by the government. Indeed, it was only in 2016 that the government, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, began allowing foreign corporations to own a majority share of an Indian company (Matsangou 2016). Thus, India cannot easily be marked as "neoliberal" in an economic sense.

But, as many scholars have noted, neoliberalism is not only an economic project; it is equally a discursive and cultural project that rewards certain kinds of subjects.[19] I thus situate

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[19] Such a perspective grows out of Foucault's initial lectures on neoliberalism and the rise of *homo economicus* at the College de France, 1978-1979 (Foucault 2004).

India's aspirational economy within this richer conception of neoliberalism in order to register the increased salience of neoliberal ideals of selfhood, a culture of entrepreneurship, and an idealized, meritocratic vision of how society *should* be.

The practice and performance of popular music is central to the emergence and expansion of this emergent cultural neoliberalism in India. Reality music TV shows are crucial sites for the production of desires for new forms of subjectivity and they showcase the kinds of self-transformation that are both desirable and necessary in this new ideological context. Moreover, tropes - such as "talent" and "hard work" (*mehenet)* - which are populate these shows accord with discourses of neoliberal meritocracy. The *idea,* or ideal, of meritocracy is increasingly salient in India - Bollywood films, TV shows, and news outlet are replete with stories of individuals who "made it," rags-to-riches tales that parallel, and draw their strength from, India's rise on the global stage. If meritocracy promises to recognize and promote individuals on the basis of their talents and abilities rather than social background, the Indian understanding of meritocracy in a moment of emergent neoliberalism implicitly holds that such skills may be inborn, acquired through effort (evidence of the intertwining of the "American Dream" and neoliberal ideologies), or purchased. This dissertation thus draws attention to the ways in which reality music TV shows participate in the circulation of an idealized neoliberal society predicated on a meritocracy of musical talent (Meizel 2011**,** Stahl 2012).

Music and Cultural Neoliberalism

As affective and immaterial labor become the prized domains of a neoliberal or "new capitalist" economy (Nyong'O 2013, Jackson 2012), the creative industries have become central sites for neoliberal cultural production and the creative individual figured as the ideal neoliberal subject (see Chapter Three for further discussion). Performance scholars Ridout and Schneider

note, "neoliberal rhetoric promotes 'creativity' as the font of economic promise" (2012, 7); to this, I would add that "talent" has become a synonym for an increasingly precarious, mobile, and competitive labor force. As such, the performing arts have become newly implicated in the reproduction of neoliberalism.

Yet the body of scholarship on neoliberalism and music is surprisingly small.[20] This work thus importantly contributes to recent efforts to theorize the linkages between musical sound and practice and neoliberal affects and logics. In so doing, I follow performance scholars' Cvejic and Vujanovic's provocative call to attend to how the performing arts are *complicit* with neoliberal capitalism "for which performance practices today supply a training ground" (2012, 167). In examining how aspirational and affective musical practice works on and through the body to produce new embodied subjectivities, I offer an initial response to Ridout and Schneider's crucial rhetorical prompt: "What of the performing body in an economy where the laboring body, and its production of affect, is the new commodity du jour?" (2012, 5).

Neoliberalizing India and subjectivity

One of the goals of this work is to explore emergent neoliberal ideas of selfhood, what Purnima Mankekar calls "neoliberalism as an ethic of self-governance and self-production" (2015, 221), as they are increasingly circulating India through mediated visual and oral

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[20] An important exception is the special edition of Culture, Theory and Critique on "Music, Music Making and Neoliberalism," edited by Javier Leon (Leon 2014); the articles therein offer excellent examples of the nuanced ethnographic and multisited work necessary to adequately theorize music's role in reproducing and resisting neoliberal logics (see Butterworth 2014, James 2014, Weidman 2014, Whittaker 2014). In his introduction, Leon speculates that the lack of attention to neoliberalism and music is due to lingering disciplinary tendencies to assert the transcendence of art, attachments to the ability of music and musical communities to remain outside of capitalist alienation, and understandings of the artist as an exceptional, or at least autonomous, figure. For more on neoliberalism and music, see also Guilbault 2007, Morcom 2015, and Taylor 2016.

discourses and through spaces of self-cultivation. Indeed, many of the discourses and tropes that

mark the aspirational subject in contemporary India - such as the valorization of a self-reliant,

entrepreneurial individual making her way up in the world due to her inherent abilities and hard

work - resonate with discourses and ideals of neoliberal subjectivity. Following scholars such as

Aihwa Ong and Wendy Brown, I argue that transformations in subjectivity are central to how

neoliberalism operates, rather than a byproduct of or secondary to changes in material

conditions. Here, I offer a brief overview of these approaches.

At the political economic level, neoliberalism is seen as an economic philosophy or

ideology marked by the reduction of the social welfare net in favor of governance by market

forces, in the interest of guaranteeing individual "freedom" (Foucault 2004, Harvey 2007, Ong

2007). In the words of David Harvey, "Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic best

practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of

entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property

rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (2007, 22).[21]

But while issues of economic domination and the aggressive opening of markets are highly

visible manifestations of neoliberalism, neoliberalism is not solely, or even primarily, an

economic project. Instead, building upon Foucault's prescient genealogy and analysis of

neoliberalism, scholars have developed an understanding of neoliberalism characterized as a

mode of governance that "*involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions*

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[21] Harvey nicely calls out the two-faced nature of neoliberal rhetoric, the split between a neoliberal "utopian" rhetoric of advancing the economic best interest of the individual while to support her freedom, while it is in fact a system for the re-consolidation of upper class power following the re-distributive effects of social welfare laws in the post-war era (2007).

and social actions" (Brown 2009, 39).[22] In other words, neoliberalism is a way of re-making

society and subjects in the model of the market, casting "people as human capital who must

constantly tend to their own present and future value." (Shenk and Brown 2015). This

"neoliberal subject," *homo economicus*, is interpellated and construed as a self-maximizing, self-

actualizing individual, the famous "entrepreneur of the self" (Foucault 2004).[23]

My intention is not to confirm a pre-determined or experience called "neoliberal

subjectivity." Rather, I show that changes in the sites and sounds of popular musical practice and

pedagogy since liberalization have facilitated the formation and spread of new visions of

selfhood that resonate with neoliberal ideals. And I examine how such ideals are negotiated

through the body and voice in musical practice such that musical practice is framed as an

important site for the re-shaping of the self on reality music TV shows, in music schools, and in

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[22] Foucault offers a genealogy of two distinct, but intertwined forms of neoliberalism: American and German. In the post-war reconstruction of Germany, Erhard links the freedom of the citizen to the legitimacy of the state so that the measure of success of the state, and the basis of its claim to represent its citizens, is, paradoxically, its ability to guarantee "freedom" for its citizens, particularly in the economic domain (2004, 83). It is this that Foucault characterizes at the "historical and political 'first objective' of neoliberalism" (2004, 102).
Pulling together a theory of "human capital" - "the extension of economic analyses into domains previously considered uneconomic" (2004, 219) - and governmentality - "the way one conducts the conduct of men" (186) - Foucault conceives of neoliberalism as a new mode of market-oriented state-driven governance that puts individual "freedom" and "liberty" at the center: "It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society" (2004, 148) with the individual at the center.
Importantly, for Foucault, and others who follow him, neoliberalism is not necessarily synonymous with governmental "pull back:" "Neo-liberal governmental intervention is no less dense, frequent, active, and continuous than in any other system," but now, government intervention is not to *protect* society from the effects of the market but to ensure the effects of the market on society so as to make possible "a general regulation of society by the market" (2004, 145).
[23] Wendy Brown importantly updates this understanding of homo economicus in light of increased financialization and changes in financial technologies: "Today, market actors…are more often concerned with their speculatively determined value, their ratings and rankings that shape their future value, than with immediate profit" (Shenk and Brown 2015).

daily discourse. Here, I heed Sherry Ortner's call for close ethnographic attention to how people are making meaning in neoliberalizing spaces and moments (2011).

Moreover, I am skeptical of conceptions of neoliberal subjectivity that rely too heavily on ideas of "neoliberal logics" or "rationalities," which imply an overdetermined relationship between forms of power and forms of subjectivity.[24] Instead, I trace these neoliberal aspirational ideals through sets of discourses and practices that are increasingly influential, yet by no means dominant or hegemonic in terms of how individuals are conceiving of themselves. Exploring how individuals negotiate multiple social imperatives in tandem, I follow Ganti in her reminder to attend to a multiplicity of motives, troubling "our notions of any simplistic, economistic rationality" (2014, 99).

<center>The Affects of a Cultural Neoliberalism</center>

In emphasizing aspiration and its links to a cultural neoliberalism, I build on recent anthropological work that has traced the rise of neoliberal social formations through specific affects and "structures of feeling" (Berlant 2011b, Stewart 2012, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). My examination of aspiration in contemporary India particularly resonates with Lisa Rofel's work on desire as a key cultural practice in globalizing China (Rofel 2007). Tracing the rise of a "desiring subject" as the ideal citizen-subject, Rofel highlights the urgency of embodying this position of the desiring subject even as the specific nature of concrete desires are considered less important (2007, 5). And by drawing out the affective, sensed potency of desire as spread and engaged through forms and sites of public culture, Rofel offer a richer account of the emergence

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[24] For example, Ong refers to "the calculative nature of neoliberal logics," implying both a uniform "global" neoliberal logic of governance that slyly insinuates itself into multiple "local" situations (2006)

of new forms of subjectivity than a narrative of "rational" techniques of subjectification might offer.

In this work, I use aspiration - as an affect that produces subjectivities - as an analytical tool for tracing broader social and cultural shifts that are both informed by neoliberal policies and exceed any clearly neoliberal logic. Thus, my focus on an aspirational economy and an aspirational subject function not as a cipher for neoliberalism, but as a way of examining new conditions of cultural productions and associated forms of subjectivity in a neoliberalizing and globalizing India.

Complaints about Neoliberalism

As numerous scholars have noted, neoliberalism, as an analytical framework, has become both "routinized" (Shenk and Brown 2015, Harvey 2007) and, potentially, meaningless, an empty signifier that loses its diagnostic and analytical value.[25] For example, Tejaswini Ganti, in an Annual Review article on "neoliberalism," worries that as anthropologists uncritically deploy the term as a catch-all descriptor, the result is an effacement of the particularities of historical and cultural context and "an absence of contingency in our representations of social, political, and economic life" (2014, 99). She asks, "Can one claim that all forms of privatization, entrepreneurship, or even self-interest are 'neoliberal'?" (2014, 99).

Yet, while drawing much needed attention to what might be occluded in the uncritical use of "neoliberal," Ganti and others acknowledge that neoliberalism continues to be a central area

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[25] Anne Allison and Charles Piot, in their capacity as editors of Cultural Anthropology acknowledge the potentially totalizing implications of the term as a ""catch-all descriptor of the contemporary condition, this promiscuous signifier loses much of its force as a diagnostic of what is distinctive about the current moment" (3, 2014).

of concern for anthropologists and a critical framework for analysis (Allison and Piot 2014). As a gloss on contemporary political economy, it allows a range of disparate contexts and phenomena to be assembled within the same analytical frame. Moreover, the term has both political and historiographical connotations, for it is most often deployed as a term of critique that references a global field of power and rising conditions of inequality and exploitation; and it thereby acknowledges a newer and "darker" narrative than that indexed by its companion terms "globalization" and "late capitalism[26]" (Ortner 2011, Ganti 2014).

Rather than jettison "neoliberalism" as an analytical category, scholars such as Wendy Brown and Aihwa Ong specifically critique accounts of neoliberalism that posit it as a totalizing, monolithic, and teleological force or phenomena. Instead, they argue for the need to develop a more historicized and culturally nuanced account of neoliberalism[27], what Ong encapsulates as neoliberalism "not as a system, but as a migratory set of practices" (Ong 2006, 5). I thus take up the designation of "neoliberalism" with caution, cognizant of the totalizing risks attendant in using it as an analytical lens. Yet I am committed to the political work the term can do in affording recognition of the threads of global formations of power as they weave through multiple contexts and drawing attention to new forms of precarity. While situating India's

[26] See Ortner 2011 and Ganti 2014 for detailed analyses of how these terms differ in terms of their economic, historical, and political referents and in the kinds of critical implications they imply. Ortner also characterizes this shift as a "change in the narrative" - from the problematics and possibilities of globalization to a decidedly darker narrative of inequality and exploitation

[27] Brown, for example, insists that there is nothing "inevitable" about neoliberalism as a historical development of capital. Instead, she argues, "it represents a new and contingent organization and operation of both" which must be historicized and analyzed in order to generate effective political responses (2003, 45). Ong, in turn, takes issue with the militaristic and tsunami-like account of neoliberalism sweeping the world as "an ensemble of coordinates that will everywhere produce the same political results and social transformation" (2006, 3). Ong pushes back against analyses that assume what she calls "neoliberalism with a big 'N'," which assume "an all-encompassing condition under the hegemony of unfettered markets" (2006, 4). Focusing on neoliberal changes across Asia, she proposes an understanding of neoliberalism as a "global assemblage" that emerges out of "interacting global forms and situated political regimes" [emerging milieus] (Ong 2006, 5).

aspirational economy within a larger neoliberalizing field of cultural production, I highlight the very particular and uneven way in which neoliberal discourses are infusing certain parts of India's cultural life and cultural economy.[28]

Bodies and Voices in Musical Performance

Threaded through both considerations of neoliberalism and questions of aspiration is the issue of self-transformation, subjectivity, and subject-hood. In this dissertation, I investigate musical practice and training as a practice of self-making, impacting and shaping subjectivity by intervening at the physical, ethical, emotional and affective levels, with both intended and unintended outcomes. In conceptualizing musical practice as a simultaneously affective and embodied practice, I show how music offers the tools for self-transformation in line with changing ideological conditions.

Ethnomusicology and the body

In ethnomusicology, most work on embodiment has centered on listening and the ways in which the diverse bodies of listeners (including both audiences and dancers) ground individually and socially specific meaningful engagements with music (Downey 2003, Madrid 2006, Qureshi 2000). While ethnomusicological methods have long relied on a form of musical participant-observation routed through the body of the ethnographer (Weidman 2012, Rice 1997), far less

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[28] For example, Wendy Brown emphasizes that neoliberalism can become dominant as a governmentality without being dominant as an ideology (2003). In a similar vein, Ong notes that neoliberalism can be one amongst many modes of governance. With her characterization of neoliberalism "as exception," Ong recognizes that in many, perhaps most, contexts, neoliberalism is "not the general characteristic of technologies of governing" - it can co-exist in a range of political settings, from authoritarianism to post-socialism (2007)

attention has been paid to *how* bodies are formed through such transmission. Recent work by Tomie Hahn and Matt Rahaim have importantly grappled with this issue, focusing in intimate detail on the ways in which bodies and senses are cultivated and formed through regimes of artistic training in the Japanese dance form *nihon buyo* and in Hindustani singing *gharanas*, respectively (Hahn 2007, Rahaim 2012). While these works offer important and rich accounts of embodied training, their analytical thrust is, ultimately, more geared towards explaining the transmission and reproduction of artistic forms; by extension, this approach serves to explain the stability of cultural structures and forms of habitus more broadly.

Building on the rich attention to embodiment found in the work of Hahn and Rahaim, I show how artistic training and performance shapes *individual* embodied subjectivities in conversation with broader musical, social, and ideological imperatives in a given historical moment. At the same time, I seek to avoid the structural teleology that this work falls into by showing how individuals both consciously *use* musical training to shape themselves as subjects *and* by highlighting moments of failure in these projects of self-transformation. I therefore highlight the contingency of these training programs in producing bodies, musicians, and subjects.

The practice of "playback singing" in India is often discussed and theorized in reference to the apparent split between body and voice that marks film song production across South Asia (Majumdar 2009, Morcom 2007, Sundar 2008). Important recent work, however, has begun to investigate the complex and nuanced ways in which playback singers' bodies are deeply implicated in the creation and re-animation of a film song's expressive meaning, whether in the studio or in live performance (Mason 2014, Weidman 2014b). I follow this scholarship in drawing attention to how aspiring playback singers use their bodies to simultaneously access the

"feel" of a song and index their inhabitation of the song's affective state. Further, this attunement to the body of the playback singer is of particular importance at a time when popular music celebrity in India is becoming increasingly visual and popular music singers, both aspiring and established, are finding fame and livelihood beyond the playback mic.

A Musical Anthropology of the Body

My commitment to understanding music as an act of embodied self-cultivation across this dissertation also builds on recent work in an anthropology of the body. While anthropologists have long argued for the importance of attending to the body and embodiment as a site through which individuals negotiate various cultural imperatives and norms (Mauss 1973(1935), Bourdieu 1990, Latour 2004), more recent scholarship has emphasized the insufficiency of an understanding of "the body" as a bounded and stable biological entity. Instead, arguing for the need for "going beyond the body proper," scholars have importantly emphasized the ways in which bodies are socially constructed and historically contingent, drawing attention to the variety of ways in which bodies might be configured and come to mean as they emerge through specific moments and sites of practice and discourse (Farqahar and Locke 2007). To this end, I highlight the ways in which musical practice and pedagogy involves the disciplining and shaping of the body. This is crucial in a moment when embodied comportment has become an index not only of the individual's social status but of one's proximity to and fluency in the aspirational project. Approaching the body as a flexible tool of selfhood, I examine in close sensory detail how projects of self cultivation are carried out while considering how certain bodies are desired and rewarded more than others at this particular historical juncture.

Further, my interest in thinking music as embodied practice goes deeper than a consideration of how bodies come to "look" different as aspiring musicians become comfortable

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holding and singing with a mic, don new clothes, and experiment with new styles of stage performance. Instead, I understand the body not just as a site for social inscription, but as "the substance and the necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed" (Mahmood 2005, 29). I attend to how the embodied actions and experiences that arise through musical training and performance are constitutive of subjectivity, "the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her position in a field of relational power" (Das et al 2000).

Across the sites of my dissertation, Hindi film song - as performed by professional singers and aspiring amateurs alike - becomes a crucial "expressive resource" (Kaley Mason 2014), offering access to different affective states – such as desire, flirtation, and longing - depending on a song's lyrics, melody, and original filmic setting. In this way, popular song offers a way of practicing and accessing new subject positions and cultivating what I call a "feeling-ful subjectivity," marked by the ability to easily access and express one's inner feelings. In proposing this term, I argue that the cultivation of "feeling" through musical practice also allows a form of musical agency - the ability to impact others with your expressive voice. At the same time, in a moment of when affect is increasingly heightened and commodified through advertising discourses, this feeling-ful subject is easily transmuted into a consuming subject, living from and through desire. The forms of subjectivity, then, that arise through popular music practice in the present moment are experienced as enabling and agentive even as they participate in and work towards neoliberal ideological projects.

Ideologies of voice in aspirational India

In an aspirational moment wherein singing is understood to be an affective embodied medium for self-transformation, I ask: how does the voice "itself" shift and become reconstituted

in parallel with, reflective of, and generative of new forms of personhood? Here, I contribute to recent work on the anthropology of the voice by investigating the voice both as an instrument of musical sound and expression and as a tool for subject formation in a broader social field. This body of work has problematized "the voice" on two levels. Firstly, echoing anthropological work on the body, scholars have argued for need to attend to "the voice" as a historical and anthropological object that must located within a particular time and place. Secondly, in so doing, anthropologists have specifically questioned an assumed link between voice and "self", wherein the voice is understood as the natural expression of an interior self and truth and too easily correlated with an autonomous agentive subject. Instead, they have called for attention to "ideologies of voice" or "politics of the voice" - broadly, "culturally constructed ideas about the voice" and the kinds of meanings that can attach to it (Weidman 2006, 2014, Feld et al 2004).[29] Taking this further, I analyze how certain voices - both in the sense of musical soundings and as certain subject positions - emerge and come into favor at particular moments.

Scholars have importantly emphasized the materiality of the voice in order to more persuasively theorize the role of the voice in processes of subject formation (Eidsheim 2012, Kunreuther 2014, Weidman 2005, Weidman 2014a, Harkness 2014, Gray 2013). For example, Weidman offers this compelling overview: "Voices are material in the sense that they are produced through bodily actions and the training of bodies…[therefore] the very embodied act of vocal production shapes singing and listening bodies into subjects that inhabit those [racial] categories" (2014a, 42). And Laura Kunreuther further highlights the importance of considering

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[29] In Amanda Weidman's Annual Review article on voice, she defines "ideologies of voice" in this way: "Ideologies of voice can be characterized as culturally constructed ideas about the voice, including theories of the relationship between vocal quality and [social categories]; where the voice comes from; its status in relation to writing and recorded sound; the relationship between the voice and the body; what constitutes a "natural" voice; and who should be allowed to speak and how" (Weidman 2014a, 45).

the materiality of the voice in theories of subject formation through interpellation: "By taking seriously the materiality of voice - its sounds and how these sounds are linked to particular persons - we can enrich our understanding of how subjectivity and intimacy are constituted, not only through the hailing practices of interpellation, but through the hailing by a particular sound of voice, which is itself entirely social" (Kunreuther 2014, 14). Building on this work, I show how training in singing Hindi film songs becomes a form of *self* interpellation wherein an interpretive tradition that relies on the assumption of "original" voices both forces and enables new embodied subject positions.

I am further attentive to the interpenetration of discourses about and practices of vocal production, highlighting the "co-production" of voice through discursive and embodied practice (Gray 2013, Weidman 2005, Feld et al 2004). Thus, I trace the rise of "new voices" in Bollywood as both a discursive and musical phenomenon which connects new timbres, registers, and vocal styles with new subjectivities. As I show, conversations about the sonic materiality of the voice draw together aesthetic ideals - the kind of singer one should be - with ideals of subjectivity - the kind of individual one should be in the present moment. These pedagogical discourses - as they occur both on reality music TV shows and in the realm of singing classes - circulate as sites of performative power that function to bring embodied voices and embodied selves into being. In this demand for "new" and "unique" voices that correlate to unique and authentic selves, we certainly encounter "neoliberal logics of voice," to use Amanda Weidman's term (2014b). At the same time, I show that this ideology of voice is emergent, unstable, and far from hegemonic, for it co-exists and contend with other, often more powerful and entrenched logics of sounding and meaning.

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In carefully attending to how young aspiring singers use vocal training to cultivate feeling-ful subjectivities, and thereby to access the aspirational project, I explore vocal practice as a space of embodied negotiation and self-cultivation. More broadly, I argue for the importance of attending to musical practice as one that operates on simultaneously embodied, affective, and sonic registers wherein the formation of embodied subjects and subjectivities is, sometimes, as important as the creation of pleasing or meaningful sound. Yet while the voice becomes a tool for the embodied remaking of self, it can also function as an index of the casted, classed, and gendered self, reflecting and reinforcing structural inequalities through disparities in the kinds of vocal transformation and growth that different subjects are understood to be capable of. In this way, music and singing should not be assumed to be operating in a liberatory vein.

Aspirational Fieldwork

Through a stroke of fate, I had gotten connected to a high-level producer at Sony Entertainment Television (SET) who had, in turn, introduced me to the head of marketing there. I had spent the weekend preparing for this interview, excited by the opportunity to discuss Indian Idol and to get his perspective on broader trends in the television and media industry.

I took the train to a northern suburb of Mumbai and from there grabbed an autorickshaw to the Interface complex, a collection of tall anonymous glass buildings. After going through security, I took the elevator, exiting into a large dim reception room. Crossing the room, I approached the long reception table and told the receptionist that I'd come to meet the head of marketing. A few minutes later, she called to me "Anaar, are you sure that you have a 10:30 appointment?" I stood up, confused – "yes...just let me check my email..." My contact was out of the office; in fact, he was out of town, flying back to Mumbai on a plane, and his phone was

switched off. Hoping that he would perhaps return before I attempted the long commute home, I

sat in the reception area, observing people exit the elevators. After 2 hours, I went back up to the

receptionist and asked if there were any other people in the marketing department with whom I

might speak. 'The problem is,' she replied politely and with some embarrassment, 'that they are

all out today for this business!' I smiled back; but inside, I was incredulous. Would this gracious,

well-rehearsed act ensure that I never spoke to anyone?

<div align="center">Accessing a corporate network</div>

The research for this dissertation took place over 18 months of fieldwork, carried out

between January 2013 and June 2014, with two periods of follow up fieldwork in the winters of

2014 and 2016. My initial plan had been to enmesh myself in the production of these shows,

following anthropologists of media (Mazzarella 2003, Ganti 2012), in order to learn how they

were produced. How do such media products - which are both immensely popular and viewed

with some scorn and mistrust - emerge through the actions and work of individuals?

However, it proved immensely hard to get access to spaces and moments of production,

due to the simultaneously unpredictable and tightly guarded nature of the Mumbai media

industry.[30] I had the opportunity to watch the shootings of only three episodes. The first was the

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[30] For example, Indian Idol Junior - a version of the format that focuses on contestants ages 8-16 - was just completing its season when I arrived back in Mumbai for my most concentrated period of research. Although members of the production team assured me that preparations for the next season would start shortly, a disagreement at the channel as to whether the subsequent season should focus on "juniors" or adults (the normal 16-33 range), along with turnover in personnel, held up production for a significant amount of time, so that auditions for the new season were just being announced when I left India nearly a year later.
In the production cycle of the shows, the "talent team" spend several months going through their network of musical contacts across the country, flushing out "talent" who are then pre-screened through a series of "blind auditions." The director and music director also travel around, hearing preliminary auditions and pre-selecting certain promising individuals. Auditions are then announced in a number of large cities

Mumbai auditions round for *Indian Idol Junior* in May 2013, held at a hotel in the Mumbai suburbs. The second was the finale for *Indian Idol Junior* in September 2013, a full-day affair in Mumbai's Film City. The last was the finale for *SaReGaMaPa Marathi,* the Maharashtrian regional version of India's first singing competition show, in March 2014, shot in a large auditorium in the distant eastern suburbs of Mumbai. I was also successful in making a wide range of contacts across the television, film, and music industries, as I will discuss shortly. Yet the contours of my research were shaped by the fact that I was never able to "infiltrate" a production team to spend prolonged periods observing the production process (although I was tantalizingly close, or so I thought).

Part of what this issue of access revealed was the challenge of comprehending and pinning down was emerged as a much larger corporate network. *Indian Idol* is not itself a corporation. Instead, it is a corporate product, materializing at the intersection of multiple corporate entities. Technically speaking, Indian Idol is a "format" or "property" owned by Fremantle Media, a UK-based company which owns the Idol franchise and the Got Talent franchise, amongst many others, leasing these formats across numerous global media markets. Fremantle was founded in 2001 as the content production arm of the RTL Group, which is, in turn, owned by Bertlesman Media Group (BMG), one of the largest mass media companies in the world.[31] In India, *Idol* is licensed by Sony Entertainment Television (SET), the channel that broadcast and promoted the show, part of the global Sony corporation. *Indian Idol* is produced by a rotating series of

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(although the number seems to vary from season to season), held over the course of one to two months. Finally, contestants chosen in each of the regional auditions are flown to Mumbai.

[31] The history of Fremantle Media, as detailed on its website, is one of a series of acquisitions and mergers between some of Europe's biggest media companies during the second half of the twentieth century. Fremantle was established in 2001 as the "content division" of the RTL group, which is majority owned by Bertlesman.

production houses, media production companies that are a crucial business entity involved in the creation of this hugely popular show.

In order to get access to *Indian Idol* "itself", I had to navigate this matrix of corporate actors and firms, which seemed to replicate itself internally in terms of labyrinthine complexity.[32] Thus, as a newcomer to this professional world, I mapped this corporate network to figure out who to access. Slowly, I learned about the General Entertainment Channels (GEC) and about the plethora of production houses that produced their shows. I determined which parties were involved in which aspects of producing Indian Idol - from the channel to the production house to the franchise holder to multiple firms which might be involved in some aspect of marketing or promotion. I tracked the various teams and departments in these various companies, which individuals held which positions, and whose perspectives might be useful for me. As a crucial center for the production of aspiration, orienting my striving and that of my informants, the corporate network within which *Indian Idol* was situated remained complex and opaque, despite my efforts.

It has become almost de rigeur in anthropology to reflect upon the difficulties and contingency of constituting "the field" as a temporally and geographically bounded space of knowledge production (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Certainly, this was true for me both as my original methodological plans failed to materialize and as my research increasingly became centered on the issue of aspiration, how it is produced through reality music TV shows and engaged through musical practice. Rather than finding myself backstage or in the midst of elaborate musical productions on-set - that is, in discrete and immersive "sites" - I spent

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[32] Other usefully ethnographic work on musical corporations include Kheshti 2015 and Negus 1998. See also Welker 2014 for a rich consideration of the disciplinary and epistemological challenges posed by ethnographic efforts to study corporations.

enormous amounts of time making phone calls, sending messages on social media, and sitting in corporate waiting rooms, trying to get an audience with a range of individuals connected to Indian Idol. I also attended trade shows; went to innumerable concerts of classical, pop, and "evergreen" film songs; watched TV (in the company of others and alone); read the ads in the newspaper; followed news of "the industry," including filmi star gossip, Television Rating Points, and corporate mergers; played violin with a band gaining fame on YouTube; took classical singing lessons; followed and interacted with young singers on social media; traveled to Delhi, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad to observe start-up music schools that advertised themselves with reference to reality music shows; and participated in several months of Hindi film song singing classes.

"Multi-sited fieldwork" has become an increasingly common paradigm for anthropological fieldwork (Marcus 1995). Yet the term still implies a coherence of individual sites, now brought together as a more holistic constellation. It implies that we know what these sites are. In contrast, I often felt like I was groping in the dark, bumping into the edges of a larger formation - corporate, cultural, aspirational - without ever being able to see the whole. Indeed, I often thought of anthropologist Jae Chung's reflections on the limits of "the social" as a method, the inadequacy of the participant-observation paradigm for grasping broader transnational and networked phenomena **(**Chung 2009**).** If I was thinking about the production of aspiration, what wasn't off limits? And if I was trying to understand aspiration via reality music television shows and musical practice, how could I rationalize all the time I spent on the computer, studying media trade reports? Even my Bollywood singing classes at the Institute for Performing Arts, my most recognizable ethnographic "site," felt tenuously connected to reality music shows on a day to day basis as we sat singing ragas and trading film songs.

Good luck and networks

As I strove to gain ethnographic access to *Indian Idol* - an effort that continued until I left India - I conducted numerous interviews with a range of people involved in the production of reality music television shows over the past ten years. I spoke with judges, show directors producers, and music directors and with former contestants, many of whom were now working to establish themselves as popular music singers. I spoke with assistant directors, members of *Indian Idol*'s "reality team," and members of the "talent team." I spoke with executives at Fremantle and at Sony, the television channel that hosts *Indian Idol*, including individuals involved in marketing and development. And I also talked with individuals involved in Zee TV and its hit music competition show *Saregamapa*, although that was a secondary focus.

There were two important characteristics that cut across the interviews I conducted. Many of these high-powered individuals were used to talking with media and they seemed to have "their story" ready about who they were and how the industry was changing. I noted how they consciously placed themselves in relation to salient current issues (such as stylistic interpretation, questions of "talent," and the social impact of reality music shows), not hesitating to respond with impatience when I raised a topic that irritated them or when I tried to circle back around to an issue.

At the same time, my interviews with individuals who had been involved in the initial seasons of *Indian Idol* and *SaReGaMa* yielded important information about the production structure, musical content, and experiences that marked the early years of each show. A further corollary to conducting research musical production within a corporate network is the unreliability of and lack of access to corporate archives. There are few videos of the first seasons of *Indian Idol* or *SaReGaMa* available on such "public archive" platforms such as YouTube or

Vimeo; such archival records reside with the channels and production houses that produced them, which I did not have access to. I therefore treat my interviews both as forms of discourse and as important sources of oral history.

The connections and opportunities that allowed for this aspect of the research emerged through moments of serendipity and *kismat*, fate. One of the most striking examples of this occurred during an international trip I was taking to visit my brother in China. As I waited in the security line at Mumbai's T3 terminus, I caught glimpse of a short, slight man going through the nearly empty VIP security line; although his head was down as he fiddled with his phone, I was sure it was Shekar Rajviani, one half of the famous Bollywood music director duo Vishal-Shekar. Early the following morning, as I walked through the Bangkok airport during a brief layover, I saw that both music directors were now behind me. I approached them, apologizing for bothering them at this early hour, and, gesturing to my violin on my back while producing a card, introduced myself both as a researcher and as a musician. Shekar knew my Hindustani voice teacher while Vishal knew the band that I played violin with and this made them amenable to talking. We exchanged numbers before parting ways.

Although there were several other instances in which I successfully approached people directly, more often musician and creative friends put me in touch with their friends who might be former participants or producers on these shows. In another moment of fortuity, I was sitting at a concert of the Bombay Symphony Orchestra, one that I had impulsively decided to attend by myself, when my seatmate struck up a conversation after he noticed me taking notes. It turned out that he was involved in the film industry and was close friends with some of the television channel producers involved in the production of *Indian Idol*. A few weeks later, at a dinner party at my new friend's house, I met Rahul, a former producer and director *of Indian Idol*.

Networks of friends of friends, or even friends of friends of friends, were thus invaluable. These networks not only provided me with coveted names and numbers, but with the necessary references to make the individuals on the other end of the line actually listen. When they answered, the name of our mutual reference was to be dropped as soon as possible in the midst of a hopefully compelling, but brief explanation of who I was and what I wanted. A weighty name might make them pause and listen during a recording session, an on-set shoot, or any of the other busy activities they might be involved in. And I was constantly experimenting with and calibrating my story - was it better to be an academic or journalist? A New Yorker or Mumbaiker (depending on how much Hindi I used and how I tightened or broadened my English pronunciation)? There was no clear consensus.

A pattern emerged, despite the variety of strategies I used: after getting a contact, I would call within a day or two. My unknown phone number, not yet saved in their contacts, would usually yield a brusque pick up which I would try to assuage by introducing myself in as compelling terms as possible, only to be told to call back within anywhere from a few days to a month. This would yield a cycle of follow-up calls, SMSs, messages exchanged through WhatsApp, and more phone calls which, finally, usually, yielded an interview. (For example, in the case of Vishal-Shekar, despite our friendly initial meeting, it took me another four months to have them agree to an interview.) Then, all of a sudden, the interview might be scheduled for that same afternoon ("can you meet me at 4?") or the next day - whenever the individual suddenly had time.

The temporal irregularity of this process was unnerving to me, and the prospect of being curtly interrogated by the person I called ("Yeah? Who's this?"), and even hung up on, was emotionally bracing and exhausting. Yet I came to realize that there was nothing personal or

calculating about this. Although I felt stonewalled at times, I was learning to "be" in industry time, to "inhabit the temporal flux of the domains we seek to understand" (Pandian 2012, 557). And while I had tacitly expected invocations of "America" or "New York" or "Cornell" or even "writing a book" to facilitate these connections, I came to understand that such invocations meant little to most of my informants, who, in this process of "studying up" (Nader 1978), rightly understood themselves to be powerful individuals in the most powerful industry in the South Asian subcontinent and one of the most important media industries in the world. And they were busy.

Over time, I became attuned to these networks of power as they manifested in a body, in an environment. I could see the powerbrokers in a cafe or in the audience for a concert. I understood how to dress and carry myself so that I could easily walk on to the set of a television show without any questions. My phone filling with contacts, I too became a gatekeeper, wary of whose number I might share with whom, careful to manage my relationships, reputation, and brand. As I sought contacts, pursued interviews, and carefully placed myself in proximity to important figures, I noted with irony the quality of striving that marked my fieldwork: I too had become an aspirational subject.

<center>IPA and voice as methodology</center>

As I worked to gain access to the reality music TV shows, the Institute for Performing Arts (IPA) emerged as my primary ethnographic "site" (at least in the classic ethnographic sense). I went several times a week - and, later, daily - to sit alongside 10 or so fellow students in my "batch," work on our voices, learn the nuances of singing Hindi film songs, absorb pedagogical gossip about "the industry," and converse about our professional dreams and challenges. Grounding my research in this aspirational musical site, singing became my primary mode of

"participant-observation" (even as I did not, at the time, conceive of my research being focused on the voice or vocal practice).

My practice of research through the voice made me acutely aware of my multiple subject positions and the multiple projects I was engaged in. Raised in America, but of Indian descent, I was typically able to "pass" in Mumbai - through my use of Hindi and Hinglish, my accent, my clothes, my looks, my fluency with the city. To be sure, my "halfie" status (**Abu-Lughod 1991**) meant that I was always ambiguously situated, but I could nearly always move through Mumbai without attracting any questions or suspicious looks. My singing voice, however, was a different matter.[33] Despite my obsessive practice, my voice had a very different timbral quality than the normative female voice of Hindi playback singing; while I sang in the correct register, my voice was wide rather than thin, less pointed and nasal. Beyond timbre, subtle melodic and ornamental nuances escaped both my ear and throat, as my fellow students and teachers often made clear to me through their lukewarm responses and direct critique.

My lack of expertise as a singer of Hindi film songs threw into stark relief the difference and tension between singing as a musical endeavor versus singing as a research endeavor. In order to be at IPA, I had to be a singing student - the school's administration condoned my dual activities as researcher and student as long as I paid the hefty fees. Thus, my willingness to use my voice was the ticket to conducting ethnographic research. Here, it was not enough to "just" sing. To participate in good faith meant to take on the dedication, sincerity, and striving that marked the vocal practice of my fellow students - to learn Hindi film songs, to work to improve, and to attempt the creation of satisfying musical sound. As a highly-trained musician already

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[33] According to Feld et al, "the voice is the first mechanism of difference" (Feld et al 2004, 341). But I am also wary of the essentializing move here in making the voice a locus of "cultural difference."

(violinist, not vocalist), I was primed for this other subject position - musical practice, progress, and performance were familiar idioms to me.

Yet, as our classes started meeting on a daily basis, providing only a few free hours in the late afternoon and evening, I often found myself debating the relative virtues of writing up fieldnotes versus practicing towards our next class (Weidman 2012). They seemed to represent two different modes of inscribing and internalizing the cultural knowledge that was being transmitted through my singing class - one the discursive inscription and description of phrases, stories, individuals and their reactions; the other an attempt at the embodied absorption of bodily, vocal techniques, the corpus of a musical genre as constituted by lyrics and carefully nuanced melodies. Which would prove more durable? Which would provide the most insight into questions of subjectivity and aspirational self-transformation? Which would help me write my dissertation?

In the study of cultural practices, the ethnographer's body is her primary tool of investigation, the primary interface through which she engages with the space-time of her research. Yet my failures as a singer as Hindi film song serve as a reminder that the body and voice are not general, unmarked conduits for cultural knowledge. The practice of singing Hindi film songs alongside other aspirational, female students highlighted the embodied, social, and historical contingency of my voice, and the stakes of producing a certain kind of voice relative to my commitments and projects.

Embodied participatory practice has long been the cornerstone of ethnomusicological research. Yet, as Amanda Weidman writes in her reflections on musical apprenticeship as a form of ethnography, building on Thomas Csordas' work: "The dominant characterization of ethnography as 'participant-observation' encourages anthropologists to 'confront social reality

through a disembodied gaze" and to forget - or leaves no way to write about - the 'somatic modes of attention' we use to learn certain things (2012, 217). As I continued my research at IPA, I too wondered: How does embodied knowledge become ethnographic knowledge? As an ethnographer committed to embodied knowledge, how do I make sense of and through my own body and voice? This work emerges out of the double meaning of "sense:" as that which is ordered and made comprehensible and as an act of immersive embodied attention. In the pages that follow, I draw on the sensitivities I cultivated during this research to offer deeper insight into the aspirational project of contemporary India and the ways in which it is embodied and voiced.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1 lays out the histories and ideologies that make possible the ascendance of *Indian Idol* and the widespread condition of cultural aspiration that mark India's present. I begin with a detailed account of the changes in television following India's liberalization and a genealogy of Indian music television shows that enable the entry of *Indian Idol,* India's first "reality" music show, in 2004. Drawing on interviews with producers involved in establishing *Indian Idol*, I emphasize the professional, cultural, and affective work entailed in constructing a local version of a modular global format. I propose an understanding of the *Indian Idol* brand as an idealized social imaginary which emphasizes a meritocracy of "pure talent," a democracy based on audience participation, and the possibility of social mobility through self-transformation. At the same time, focusing on the story of Ravinder Ravi, a low-caste contestant whose success in the first season caused a "brand crisis," I expose contradictions in the discourse that undergird the *Indian Idol* brand to show the very real ways in which caste and class still operate on and through the show.

Chapter 2 investigates changes in the vocal style and musical interpretation of Hindi film songs as reflected, discussed, and negotiated in the context of *Indian Idol*. I begin by discussing the role of Hindi film song as a repository of nostalgic musical and cultural meaning consolidated by decades of circulation. I then discuss the aesthetic changes that have taken place in Hindi film music over the past twenty years which have yielded an emphasis on "new voices." However, judges on *Indian Idol* hold differing perspectives on Hindi film song aesthetics and questions of interpretation. I propose that this tension reveals a broad generational divide between media producers who came of age before and after India's economic and cultural liberalization. Contestants on these shows find themselves in a double bind, caught between an increasing premium placed on musical innovation and an ever-present demand for fidelity to culturally nostalgic "originals." Further, I argue that this recent emphasis on interpretive agency and distinctive voices in Hindi film music reflect emergent conceptions of individuality and subjectivity in liberalizing India.

In Chapter 3, I draw on my research with former reality music TV show contestants to illuminate the challenges of building a career within the changing production structures of the Hindi film music industry. Drawing on anthropological literature on "precarity," I show that this work of establishing a popular music career is accompanied by a condensed economic, social, and affective insecurity, whereby contestants must constantly re-commodify themselves in order to keep their "brand" alive. Here, I emphasize the changing nature of fame as changing performance economies and the rise of social media put increasing emphasis on visuality over aurality. I close by showing how this precarity can also compel forms of creativity and agency as more young singers seek to control their artistic production and means of livelihood. These

stories illustrate the ambivalence that young singers today experience regarding the prestige of a Bollywood recording career against forging their own path.

Chapter 4 is the ethnographic heart of the dissertation. Here, I draw on my ethnographic research in the Institute for Performing Arts (IPA) – a school that promised students access to musical careers in Bollywood – to articulate the mundane, everyday practices that constituted this new site of aspirational musical education. In tandem, I introduce my fellow, primarily female, students and explore their motivations for being trained as a playback and popular music singer. The core of this chapter is an investigation of the practice of "feeling," the ways in which Hindi film songs became a critical resource for cultivating and practicing an expressive subject position. Exploring how "feeling" as an embodied practice was engaged by students and teachers alike, I argue that learning to feel was central to the projects of self-transformation underway at IPA. Indeed, feeling and expression are increasingly understood as ideal qualities of the aspirational Indian youth subject. At the same time, both the practice of feeling and the work of creating a professional future as a singer revealed the tenacity of long-standing concerns about middle-class gendered respectability. This chapter thus examines how my fellow, female students used musical training to negotiate two salient, yet often contradictory social discourses regarding the kinds of subjects they should be.

Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes conceptualizations of "the natural voice" that emerges in aspirational musical sites such as IPA and *Indian Idol*. I show that this "natural voice" is a culturally constructed aesthetic ideal that articulates a specific relationship between body and vocal sound. While these aspirational musical sites take the voice as an object of intervention and a tool for transformation, the natural voice is understood to be already constituted in importantly fundamental ways. Just as an individual cannot change their background or life history, so too

must they accept and understand the characteristics of their natural voice. In this way, the ideology of the natural voice in the context of popular music complicates aspirational and neoliberal ideals of self-transformation. As such, it raises important questions about musical meritocracy, and about neoliberal aspirational visions of society and subjectivity in contemporary India.

CHAPTER 1:
ESTABLISHING A BRAND: MAKING IDOL INDIAN

The first episode of *Indian Idol* was broadcast from Mumbai on October 28th, 2004.[34] As the name indicates, *Indian Idol* is the Indian version of the globally popular *Idol* franchise, a singing competition show that promises "fame and name" to singers who, over roughly 30 weeks, demonstrate the musical talent and personality to garner a winning number of judge and audience votes. In return, they receive cash, a contract with Sony music, a car, and some degree of fame amongst the general public as well as Hindi film music industry professionals. While success on the show does not guarantee further professional success, it does offer a significant platform for attempting to establish oneself in the popular music industry.

Amongst the dozens of contestants who had made it through grueling rounds of auditions in Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai was Ravinder Ravi, a 26 year-old house painter of the Dalit Valmiki caste from Ludhiana, Punjab. Ravi's story - of struggling to make ends meet for his wife and two children, of borrowing money for an impulsive trip to the *Indian Idol* auditions in Delhi to try his luck - initially brought him much sympathy and support from across the viewing populace. However, as he continued to progress on the show, widespread audience support was matched by surprise. As Ravi continued all the way up to the Top 5, viewers, media commentators, and even the judges expressed outrage that he continued to triumph as those

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[34] http://www.indianidol.org.in/.

singers who had better voices were voted off. Judge Anu Malik, a famed music director, said in exasperation, "I have nothing to say to you because it seems that [the judges'] words carry no weight and the people of India love you."[35] Co-host Mini Mathur publicly reflected, "We had announced that the top five contestants would get Rs. 60,000…and I feel that the public wanted Ravi to get that money and that's why they ensured that he remained in the top five positions."[36] As a fairly sympathetic article on Indian news and entertainment site Rediff.com put it, "For a show that aimed to highlight a complete package of good singing with looks and attitude to match, one wonders how the small-town Ravi managed to pull it off for such a long time."[37]

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This chapter tells the story of the first season of *Indian Idol* in order to draw out the histories and ideologies that are threaded through it and other reality music television shows in contemporary India. I begin with an account of the changes in the television industry during India's liberalization, including shifts in broadcasting technology and the subsequent growth of the field of television broadcasting. This includes a focus on the popular *SaReGaMa,* which began as the first music competition television show in India in 1995. When *Idol* entered the market nearly a decade later, however, it introduced a range of changes - primarily in regard to technologies of voting and audience participation - that marked it as a "reality" show, changes which other shows quickly moved to emulate. Highlighting the work of producers, I talk about these changes as well as the contestations that took place as the *Idol* franchise format was adapted to the perceived demands of the Indian market. Utilizing Tejaswini Ganti's idea of the "audience imaginary" (Ganti 2012), I show how producers' construction and perception of the

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[35] ""

[36] "Life after Indian Idol," Rediff.com Business section, Abhilasha Ojha, April 23, 2005.

[37] ""

"Indian audience" at once legitimated their work as important cultural mediators in the post-liberalization moment and simultaneously necessitated a defense of the *Indian Idol* brand.

In the academic literature on global reality television show formats, ideas of derivation and adaptation hold sway as scholars attempt to make sense of the rapid growth of the reality television genre since the early 2000s. For example, the only edited volume on the global *Idol* phenomenon is entitled *Adapting Idols*. Going further, leading reality TV scholar Marwan Kraidy describes reality shows in the Middle East as an example of "creative adaptation" (2010, 9), characterizing certain shows as "knockoffs" of European shows, and as "'hybrid texts' that mix foreign and local cultural sensibilities" (2010, 12). Such language suggests the tenacity of a center-periphery model of globalization, wherein "western" cultural forms travel to "other" parts of the world where they are then hybridized and adapted. Indeed, much of the scholarly work on reality music television in multiple geographical instantiations analyzes these shows as sites of negotiation between the global and local, wherein global cultural forms are adapted to suit local audiences and cultures.[38]

This language of hybridity and adaptation is supposed to retain space for "local" cultural agency in the face of "global" cultural flows; indeed, many of these scholars push back against overt narratives of cultural imperialism. Yet, conceptualizing a show such as *Indian Idol* in these terms is problematic on several levels. Firstly, as so many scholars have already noted, ideas of hybridity and adaptation (or "indigenization") reinscribe an essentialized understanding of

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[38] See Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2009 and Zwaan and De Bruin 2012. Scholarship on reality music shows has also focused on the contestation of cultural and political identities (Kourtova 2012, Ghattas 2012, Meizel 2006, Meizel 2011, Tay 2010); media spectacle and celebrity (Coutas 2008, Fairchild 2007), and narratives of meritocracy (Stahl 2004). In the Indian context, scholars have investigated the participatory political culture that arises around Indian Idol (Punathambekar 2010) and gendered, consumerist narratives of self-transformation that the show displays (Jhingan 2012).

"culture" as a discrete and spatially bounded entity.[39] Secondly, conceiving of regional versions of *Idol* as "adaptations" misses a crucial point: that the format is *inherently modular*, designed to travel and change. As such, this language reifies the *Idol* format as a media product with its roots in Euro-American cultural contexts rather than understanding it as a mobile set of production practices, aesthetic requirements, and dramatic conventions.

Indian Idol is variously referred to as a show, a brand, and an entertainment property in media industry publications while on Fremantle's website, it is called a "local version" of the global franchise format. In this chapter, I attend to *Indian Idol* as both a format and a brand in order to offer several interventions into dominant conceptions of reality music TV shows. Firstly, I ground accounts of "adaptation" by focusing on the professional, cultural, and affective work involved in the creation of a "local version" (using the industry term) of a global format. To do so, I draw on interviews with television producers, including those involved in the early years of private satellite entertainment television in India and those who worked on *Indian Idol* from its inception through third season (2003-2007). Using their memories as historical archive, supplemented by print media articles and industry reports, I trace the complex dynamics of and negotiations that took place in those early years. In so doing, I follow anthropologists of media who have importantly attended to the very human labor involved in creating cultural media texts and the ideological narratives they may contain.[40]

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[39] See Appadurai 1996 for a thorough overview of approaches to globalization and a nuanced consideration of how "the local" and "the global" are mutually produced. In proposing his famous set of "scapes," Appadurai notes the inadequacy of existing theories of global development in capturing "the complexity of the current global economy [marked by] fundamental disjunctures between economy, politics, and culture" (1996, 33). For further critiques of the "culture concept," see Clifford 1988 and Abu-Lughod 1991. For critical considerations of hybridity, see Hutnyk 1998 and Werbner 2001.

[40] See the chapters by Dornfeld, Davila, and Ganti in Ginsburg et al 2002 and two useful edited volumes on production studies and media industries (Mayer et al 2009, Banks et al 2016). See also Mazzarella 2003 and Ganti 2012.

Secondly, I consider these producers' labor as essential to establishing not just a show, but a brand. While reality music TV scholarship is often quite attentive to the practices of consumption and forms of commodification that are interwoven with these shows, here I draw on anthropological theorizing about brands, brand surfeits, and brand maintenance to highlight issues of excess and instability that were constitutive of the *Indian Idol* brand.[41]

At the heart of this chapter, then, is a consideration of the kind of modern "brand" that *Indian Idol* tries to be, the production practices that maintain it, and the social work that it does. Drawing together discourses of meritocracy, practices of self-transformation, aspirational desire, and "democratic" audience participation, *Indian Idol* offers an idealized social world wherein talent trumps social background and where the broader public is trusted with important decisions. Yet, as the case of Ravinder Ravi suggests, there are fundamental contradictions inherent in the *Indian Idol* brand discourse: conscribed understandings of what constitutes "musical talent," concerns about managing the audience, and very real ways in which caste and class still operate on and through the show. As I will show, the brand crisis that erupted around Ravinder Ravi in Season 1 necessitated critical interventions by producers, pointing to the inherent instability of the brand and the meritocratic social imaginary contained within it.

Liberalization and the rise of satellite television in India

The emergence of reality music television shows in India must be understood within the context of changes in the television industry during India's liberalization in the early 1990s. As Indian markets were expanding and becoming more globally oriented, Indian television was

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[41] See, for example, Campaiolo-Veen 2012 and Jenkins 2006.

undergoing seminal changes. Prior to the early 1990s, Indian audiences could only tune into Doordarshan, the state-controlled TV channel, which had limited hours of broadcast and focused on pedagogically oriented programming. In 1991, Hong Kong based billionaire Li Ka-Shing invested in AsiaSat 1, the first private, commercially-available satellite to cover the Asia-Pacific region, to start STAR (Satellite Television for the Asian Region) TV, the first trans-Asia television company. In 1992, Indian entrepreneur Subhash Chandra rented one transponder of the satellite in order to begin the first Indian-owned satellite television channel, Zee TV. Zee TV was the first private entertainment-oriented channel to be broadcast in India.[42]

Zee TV's owner Subhash Chandra - a former rice mill owner and founder of EsselWorld, India's first amusement park - was hailed as an Indian hero, of sorts, for his business acumen and media prescience. A 1994 article in *India Today* introduced him as an unsung visionary, detailing his rise from humble origins ("He's a curious species: a *bidi*-smoker who likes to go to five-star health clubs in the evening") (Agarwal 1994). His nationalist integrity was celebrated even as he engaged in business dealings with Rupert Murdoch, the Australian media baron who bought Star in 1993 and subsequently acquired 49.9% share of Asia Today, Limited, the broadcaster of Zee TV, for 47.5 million dollars (which Chandra re-purchased in 1999) (Mankekar 1999, 345; Agarwal 1994). The article quotes Chandra saying, "India is not for sale, Mr. Murdoch," when the latter offered a large sum to acquire the rest of the company. ("From Rice to Riches," India Today, 1994). In the midst of the corporate media fights, transnational acquisitions and mergers that would mark the television industry in the 1990s, Chandra was understood to simultaneously be a defender of the national interest and a savvy broker in the newly liberalized environment.

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[42] Mankekar draws attention to the fact that Doordarshan had been using a combination of terrestrial and satellite signals since the 1960s in order to reach rural populations with its pedagogical programming (Mankekar 2016, 111).

In tandem with the rapid increase of television sets in India - from 6.8 million sets in 1985 to

27 million in 1988, and then to 45 million in 1996 - Zee TV quickly grew in popularity

(Mankekar 1999, 341; Oza 2006, 11). By 1994, Zee held 65% of the Indian satellite TV market,

with the share of viewership peaking in 1995 with 72% of the market (Mehta 2014, 156). But the

satellite market was booming and new competition was emerging. By 1994, in addition to Zee

TV and Star TV's four channels, there was CNN, BBC, Jain TV, Sun TV, El TV, Asianet, and

ATN (Mankekar 1999, 339).[43] By 1995, 10 million households were watching transnational

satellite television via cable and by 1996, there were seventy-six channels, showing a total of

1800 hours of daily programming (Mankekar 1999, 339, 341). Between 1995 and 2007, more

than 300 satellite networks emerged (Mehta 2008, 6), making it the 3rd largest TV market in the

world, after the USA and China. Over the span of fifteen years, Indian audiences went from

watching a single channel to having access to several hundred.

Thus, by 2011, marketing giant Deloitte could easily claim that "Television is King" in its

annual "Media and Entertainment in India" report with the presence of 131 million television

households, 103 million of which watched via satellite-based cable ("Media and Entertainment

in India" 2011, 11). A similar report by PriceWaterhouseCooper in 2013 listed television

revenues, gathered through both advertising and subscription services, to be at 383 billion INR

(roughly 7 billion USD), with a growth rate of 14.5%, across 821 licensed private channels, an

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[43] Because the state retained a monopoly on the right to broadcast signal until 1995, through the 1885
Indian Telegraph Act (Mehta 2008, 10), STAR could only make signal available and make money
through advertising (also known as "free to air"); illegal cable operators, otherwise known as "cable
wallahs" filled the gap by downlinking the satellite signal, installing satellite dishes, and then linking
many homes to the dish via cables (Mehta 2014, 152).This had important implications for television
revenues, resulting in the overemphasis of Television Rating Points (TRPs) in luring and retaining
advertisers. The arrival of satellite television in India was not without contestation from the state. Rather
than an active contestatation, however, most scholars characterize the state's response as a trepidatious
neglect or even ignorance (Roy and Sen 2014).

increase from 230 licensed channels in 2007 ("Indian Entertainment and Media Outlook" 2013,

11). The "General Entertainment Category" (GEC) channels - a category used to mark

entertainment channels not focused on sports, music, news, or kids' content - were, and remain,

most popular, led by Star, Zee, Sony (which had entered the market in 1995), and Colors, which

entered in 2008.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Zee TV in these early years of satellite television and

in the television boom in India. Zee's use of Hindi (in contrast to STAR's reliance on English)

gave it access to the 400 million Hindi speakers in India, and its deployment of Hindi films and

film-based programming were a magnetic draw for audiences. Through its strategic cultural

positioning, "…the popularity of Zee TV helped the cable TV networks to expand from a cottage

industry to a national media presence" (Page and Crawley 2001, 78). Thus, while Zee may have

been characterized as "downmarket" (Mankekar 1999, 339) and even "tacky" (Agarwal 1994),

its formula of "hindigenization" was both successful and groundbreaking.

As head of Zee TV, Chandra's media-nationalist credentials came, in part, from his

promotion of "homegrown" content, a result of his reliance on newcomers in the television space

as a way to cut costs.[44] One of these newcomers was Gajendra Singh, who approached Chandra

to propose a new film music-based game show. The show was to be based on the popular

drawing room music game, Antakshri, wherein someone sings the first lines of a song and the

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[44] As numerous commentators have noted, the arrival of satellite television in India did not result in an onslaught of American or "western" culture. To the contrary, multinational corporate brands - most famously MTV and Coca-Cola - experienced disappointing performances for their failure to adequately "Indianize" their product. As William Mazzarella points out, this spectacular failure became a point of both pride and mockery amongst Indian cultural producers, who then vied to position themselves as mediators for subsequent multinational attempts to enter the Indian market (Mazzarella 2003). As Vamsee Juluri notes in his study of MTV and music countdown shows, "by the mid-1990s, satellite television in India seemed very much "Indian," even if many of the channels were 'international' or foreign-owned" (2004, 5).

next person must use the last consonant of the last word to start a new song. Launched in 1993, *Close-up Antakshri* was the second-highest-rated show on Zee (Mankekar 1999, 348).

Antakshiri emerged amidst a broader turn to Hindi films and film songs as a driver for the new satellite television expansion. Indeed, media scholars Page and Crawley argue that it was precisely Zee's emphasis on Hindi film culture that accelerated the spread of cable television (2001, 89). With increased competition for viewership, the GEC channels and Doordarshan began to rely on programming that drew on the reliably popular Indian film industry (Mankekar 1999, 347). While Doordarshan had established film music programs *Chayageet* (1970s) and *Chitrahaar* (its successor from 1982-present), the new batch of music television shows adopted new formats and made use of new technologies and production values to create more engaging, modern shows.[45]

Yet Singh was aware that *Antakshiri* rewarded contestants for their knowledge of film songs, not for their ability to sing well (Anand Sharma, October 11th, 2013). Thus, in 1995, he launched *SaReGaMa*, the first televised singing contest in South Asia, which, in turn, set the stage for *Indian Idol*.

SaReGaMa: India's first singing competition show

In the first episode of *SaReGaMa*, broadcast on May 1st 1995, the young host and star playback singer Sonu Nigam earnestly addresses the audience: "Music is the union of pitch,

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[45] In his overview of music count-down shows (2004), Juluri lists the following shows: Doordarshan had Superhit Muqabla, All the Best, and Ek Se Badkar Ek; Zee had Philips Top Ten; MTV had a Hindi music countdown, Oye MTV until 1994. Channel V launched in 1994, providing youth-oriented music programming, while MTV returned in 1996.

tempo, and rhythm. We have famous singers whom we love and who are like legends. But maybe. Maybe, there is some voice that up to now has not been able to reach you, to reach us. So why wouldn't we start this program? In which we will unearth exceptional, hidden talents (*pratibha)*, which might be in any part of India - North, South, East, West, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, Kanyakumari, anywhere. This is *SaReGaMa*'s goal: to present these hidden talents to you, filter out the best, and give them a fair chance. On behalf of myself and the *SaReGaMa* team: Namaskar." Nigam is grinning by the end - he is clearly excited.

Nigam then explains the structure of the show. There will be eight preliminary round episodes, each featuring two female and two male singers. The winners of the preliminary rounds will then participate in four semi-final episodes. From amongst these singers, four contestants - again, two women and two men - will be chosen for the finals. Nigam's explanation makes clear that gender parity will be maintained. "In all of this," Nigam continues, "the main attraction is our judges, who come from the world of film music, from the fields of classical music and theatre." Indeed, the judges for *SaReGaMa* included the most famous musicians in India, such as classical singers Parveen Sultana, Pandit Jasraj, and Jagjit Singh, early playback singer Rajkumari, tabla player Zakir Hussain, flutist Hariprasad Chaurasia, and legendary music directors O.P. Nayyar, Anil Biswas, Khayyam, Naushad Ali, and the duo Kalyanji-Anandji.

Nigam then introduces the contestants who, up to now, have been standing to his side, watching somberly: two women in puffy *salwar kameez* and a sari with long-sleeved blouse, two men in ill-fitting dress shirts and slacks. Nigam asks their name and inquires whether they study music or if it just a *shauk*, hobby. In turn, each contestant answers that they are studying seriously, naming their teachers and gurus, who happen to be some of the most established singers in Mumbai. Each chooses to sing a classically oriented film song, demonstrating great

technical skill and expressivity as they perform, backed by a live band that includes tabla, drum pads, and flute. The audience listens intently, nodding their heads and marking the beat.

By the time of the *SaReGaMa MegaFinal* series in 1998, the show has visibly grown in scope. This season brings together the winners and top performers from the previous three years to compete against each other. For the final, they perform in front of a judges' panel consisting of ten music legends (including many of those listed above) and a live audience of at least several hundred people. The judges, many of whom are elderly, crack musical jokes and trade poetic quips in high Urduized Hindi with a few English phrases thrown in. The audience, too, seems more comfortable, cheering loudly while Sonu Nigam sets the stage: "This moment is much awaited. There is happiness, there is expectation. And there is also some psychological stress. Today, you are about to witness *SaReGaMa*'s most difficult competition."

SaReGaMa was thus understood as a serious music show for unknown, yet highly trained, experienced singers. As the judges and song choice alike indicate, it was located at the interstices of Hindi film song and Hindustani classical, while the presence of the young Sonu Nigam as host gestured to the rise of a more popular, crooner-oriented singing style. As former *SaReGaMa* winner (1997) and contemporary pop singer Parthiv Gohil recalled, there was little stage direction or concern about the visual presentation. Contestants would come wearing their own clothing and sing two or three songs that they had prepared; the production team would then choose one for broadcast. Winners received a cash prize (roughly 50,000 rupees or $1200) plus products from the sponsors; Gohil remembers being inundated with multiple varieties of fans - exhaust fans, ceiling fans, personal fans - because the sponsor was Havells, a fan manufacturer.

Gohil further emphasized the impact and popularity of the show as it coincided with rise of entertainment television in India

"It was the *only* show on a national channel, the only show on a big platform where you could showcase your talent. All the others were state level or national level competitions, and they were limited to college students. And you didn't get exposure through them. For me, because I was coming from a small city, it was next to impossible that I would come to Mumbai and do struggle. This [show] was a *big* thing. Because of this platform, I could think of risking my career in this field…And TV, that had only recently started becoming huge - Zee TV was on top."

While several other channels attempted to emulate the success of Zee TV's hit music show (such as *Meri Awaaz Suno* (Hear My Voice), a talent show hosted by Doordarshan in 1996), *SaReGaMa* set the standard for television singing talent shows in India.[46] Thus, when *Indian Idol* entered the Indian market in 2004, it entered an entertainment field where singing competition shows were already well known and established.

The presence of *Indian Idol* did, however, have important ramifications for singing competitions shows in India. Where *SaReGaMa* and its contemporaries sought out and rewarded highly skilled singers, *Indian Idol* declared that it was looking for *performers* - individuals who could sing the necessary popular songs along with an added compelling stage presence. Furthermore, it emphasized the contestants' backgrounds and life stories by including the auditions as episodes and having short clips introducing the contestants. Finally, it incorporated audience voting through phone call, SMS text message and, later, the internet. While *SaReGaMa* and other shows were understood as "singing shows," all of these new elements marked *Indian Idol* as the first "reality" music television show in India.

SaReGaMa scrambled to adjust, rebranding itself as *SaReGaMaPa*, incorporating audience voting, and similarly featuring auditions as part of its episodes. In the decade since

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[46]*SaReGaMaPa* is also the only Indian reality show which has regional franchises in Gujarati, Marathi, and Bengali. It has also produced seasons that explicitly include diasporic Non-Resident Indians (NRI) as contestants.

Indian Idol's appearance in India, the number of music competition television shows has proliferated, with shows such as *Jo Jeete Wohi Superstar*, *Star Voice of India*, *Sur Kshetra*, *Music ka Maha Muqabla, X Factor India,* and *The Voice (India)*, to name just a few, offering different formats and configurations to grab audience attention. *Indian Idol* and *SaReGaMaPa* continue, however, to be the most successful and well-regarded "brands," drawing tens of thousands of contestants to networks of auditions across the country and millions of viewers for their final episodes.[47]

Indian Idol: The first season

In 2003, two years after the launch of *Pop Idol* in Britain and one year after the premiere of *American Idol*, Fremantle Media, the global media conglomerate that owns the *Idol* franchise, was looking to launch in the rapidly expanding Indian television market. According to one source, Fremantle was in conversation with STAR, but when the head of programming at STAR left to join Sony Entertainment Television (SET), he took the show with him.

Anupama Mandloi was an executive producer at SET in 2003. Now the managing director of Fremantle India, she spoke with me about establishing *Indian Idol* at the Fremantle office in the Mumbai suburb of Andheri. As she recalled, no-one in the television and media industry at that time had produced a show of this scale and scope, and few players in the industry had any experience with "reality" shows. This lack of experience led herself and Tarun Katiar, Head of Business at SET to hire not one, but two production houses to create the show. Miditech, a production company founded in 1993 by the Alva brothers, had produced a show called

[47] Essel Group Press Release, January 29, 2009.

"Hospital," one of the first real-time drama shows, for Doordarshan. They were therefore hired to handle the "reality" portion of *Indian Idol*, comprised of the auditions and the portion of the subsequent episodes that showcased the contestants' "journeys" (that is, their background and their "real life" interactions off the stage). Optimystix, founded in 2000 by a former advertising filmmaker and a screenwriter, was hired to handle the performances and in-studio work (May 27, 2014).

Rahul, who was the Head of "Reality" in Season 1 and then the Project Head and Head of Creatives for Seasons 2 and 3, recalled this rather unwieldy and chaotic production structure in an interview at the Starbucks at the Mumbai domestic airport: "It was the first season, so people didn't really know anything…We had a reality team [from one production company] shooting backstage while the other team [from the other production company] shot front stage - not the wisest thing, but I don't think anyone knew any better!"[48]

In order to set up the show in accordance with the international format standards of *Idol*, core people on the team were sent to Singapore for training.[49] At the same time, Fremantle sent over a number of individuals from their UK headquarters to help set up the show in India. Known as "flying producers" for their work setting up show franchises across the world, these individuals were closely involved in production and provided valuable support and knowledge.

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[48] Production titles seem to be fairly flexible and not highly standardized. From what I understand, the production team is divided into Reality and Creative units, each of which have their own head. This is all overseen by a Project Head, who is the director of the show. But sometimes the Project Head is also the Head of creative – this was the case with Rahul and also with Ashok, current director of Indian Idol. I use the titles that were relayed to me.

[49] In discussions of the entrance of international channels in the mid-1990s, others involved in television and media production recalled a similar trajectory wherein they were sent to Southeast Asia, most often Singapore, for training.

For example, Mandloi recalls that the flying producers would sit in on the edits and provide

helpful suggestions:

> …because none of us had done edits in this major way. You just had hours and hours
> and hours of audition footage - how do you construct that into an episode? That doesn't
> drag, that's not repetitive, or not too fast, that has enough storytelling? I think they gave
> us a *lot* of learning...I mean, they *really* put in a lot of support to make the show viable.

These producers were also responsible for ensuring that the format was adhered to. They

had the final say in any production decisions and were scrupulous in ensuring that none of the

important aspects of the format - from the show's appearance to the minutiae of bureaucratic

process - were deviated from. Rahul illustrated the degree of control that these flying producers,

and, by extension, Fremantle, exercised in his memory of a particular incident:

> At the auditions, you had to get a consent form, release form, signed by [the
> contestants] - but the concept of a release form was something that was…alien. Indian
> television, you didn't ever bother with a release form. What I remember is an episode
> was going out and those guys, Fremantle, asked for the release forms of everyone
> involved in the episode - and we were like, 'really'? We thought it was just for,
> whatever, formality's sake, so I remember people having to stay up overnight - it's not
> that [the forms] weren't there, but they were just piled up in stacks somewhere, so
> people actually had to go through and pull out all the forms. So it was very - as per
> process."

In this insistence on being "as per process," the British Fremantle producers were insisting

that the Indian producers change their standard professional practices to conform to the practices

and standards associated with the format. Rather than resent the surveillance and intrusion,

however, both Rahul and Mandloi understood Fremantle's presence to be essential to the

successful establishment of the show. Mandloi expressed her gratitude for all the support and

work that Fremantle had put in while Roy linked the involvement of Fremantle's flying

producers to the "purity" of the first season in terms of format and production process. By the

second season, the Fremantle producers were less involved, coming every few months, and by

the third season, they were hardly involved anymore. The assumption was that enough production knowledge had been transmitted and that the "local version" of the format was now stable, capable of reproducing itself without oversight from Fremantle headquarters.

Although the production team was explicitly aware of and working in reference to other "local" versions of *Idol*, audiences, in contrast, had little awareness of the *Idol* franchise. As a result, the production team had to work hard to draw people to the auditions, publicizing audition locations in the media and actively bringing people in buses. The decision to have open auditions wherein anyone can show up can hardly be conceived of now, when thousands of people show up for each city's auditions, which now must be strictly monitored and controlled.. Through the technical expertise of the flying producers, the advertising and promotional work of the channel, and the round-the-clock, year-long labor of the founding production team, *Indian Idol* moved from being a virtually unknown "reality" television show to being one of the most-watched shows in India and the Indian diaspora.

By all accounts - viewer statistics, advertising revenues, and general public buzz - the inaugural season of *Indian Idol* was a huge success. Anupama Mandloi reflected enthusiastically:

> I think we just ended up creating magic. The show was just phenomenal…we all went into it wanting to create something which we *knew* existed as a great franchise outside and we knew we could leverage those learnings - but NONE of us and, speaking for myself, I NEVER thought this would be such a big show. It crossed all our expectations. And the numbers just kept growing and growing.

Part of this unexpected success came from the novel formation of the judge panel, which brought together music director Anu Malik, playback singer Sonu Nigam (who had served as the host on the original *SaReGaMa*), and famous Bollywood choreographer and director Farah Khan in a novel combination that went beyond music to represent the industry as a whole. Beyond having "great chemistry," Mandloi recalled, the judges brought a new attitude to their roles:

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People were seeing judges for the first time playing this larger than life role, deciding people's destinies; and then the way the career graph or the growth of each contestant was built, because the auditions are fun [more informal] - the viewers were, I think, shocked! Anu Malik was *rude* - there was outrage, there was lots of debate…people said how can a judge talk to people like this? So it created lots of water cooler conversation, in that sense.

Viewers were engrossed as the norms of social interaction were turned upside down and as lives were changed, all on television. Another television producer who was to join *Indian Idol* in Season 3 recalled the buzz around the show as colleagues and friends talked to her incessantly about it. As Rahul confirmed in our interview, "it really captured people's imaginations."

This wide popular appeal was based on the three elements that were so central to *Idol* and which distinguished it from *SaReGaMa* and other earlier singing competition shows: the "reality" element, a broader emphasis on "performers," and audience voting. I will now describe and unpack these elements in detail.

Firstly, *Indian Idol* was the first show on Indian television to bring in what is called the "reality" element. Rahul recalled the state of reality television a decade ago and the pivotal role that Idol played in shifting the field:

> …whether it's Idol and music and singing, or dance in *Dance India Dance*, or the cooking in *Masterchef* - [these elements] essentially function as a backdrop. And what you get *engaged* with is a particular person's journey through the series, the story. *SaReGaMa* didn't do that. It was a singing competition, but it was purely a singing competition – it was only the layer of *music* that used to entertain audiences. So *Idol* was the first show that brought in this layer which went on to be the overriding layer – of the person's journey. And music kind of became the backdrop."

"Reality" was thus synonymous with narratives constructed around contestants' personalities and life stories. While reiterating that it was essential to get good "talent" - that is, talented contestants who were skilled in singing - producers with experience in reality music television shows emphasized the centrality of contestants' stories in generating audience

engagement. Referring to contestants' "journeys" and "graphs" of growth, these producers spoke of the need to create ("build") compelling characters. By choosing contestants with interesting, yet relatable backgrounds and then curating and highlighting their growth and transformation through careful song selection, strategically showcasing their personality and background, and careful editing, the producers could "create" "characters" - that is, the contestants *as* characters, albeit ones grounded in "reality" - who engaged and attracted viewers. As Shweta, who worked as a producer on *Indian Idol 3, 4, 5* as well as *X Factor India* put it to me: "You need to make the audience feel connected with the protagonist - the contestants. The judges, of course, bring in the popularity quotient, they bring their own brand - but you hope people will tune in because of the contestants." (May 28th, 2014).

At the same time, the common wisdom, as Rahul's words above indicate, was that while *SaReGaMa* was a singing show, *Indian Idol* was something different. In privileging contestants' life stories and journeys alongside their skill as singers, the show attracted and showcased a different kind of aspiring singer. *SaReGaMa* was considered to hold the monopoly on good singers - all the producers readily conceded that *SaReGaMa* had better singers, better "talent."[50] But *Indian Idol* was able to showcase those who had what Rahul called "television talent," singer-performers who perhaps had less technical expertise but were compelling nonetheless and who additionally were able to hold the stage with authority and ease. As Mandloi acknowledged,

> Idol, [it's thought], brings in great characters with great attitude, but they don't
> necessarily sing so well. On *SaReGaMa*, they sing *really* well. The thing is -
> internationally as well, it's not that *Idol* isn't about great talent. I mean, *American Idol*
> has thrown up some great talent. So that's what we wanted to merge - to *create* people
> who can hold their own on a stage and at the same time, they do it with their voice. And

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[50] This changed with *Indian Idol* 5 when SET and Fremantle jointly decided to place more emphasis on talent. This resulted in the recruiting of a director-music director duo who had previously directed *SaReGaMa*.

with a little attitude. Because you don't want to lose what *Idol* is known for - which is that youth and that attitude and interesting characters."

This contrast reflects a broader discursive and evaluative distinction between "singers" and "performers," a distinction that draws its salience, both historically and today, from intertwined ideas of gendered respectability, classed distinction, and musical quality. While "singer" might refer to someone who has devoted much time, energy, and focus to pursuing an art form, "performer" implies less specificity in terms of performance genre and a certain dilettantism. Further, to be a "singer" is to be represented by your voice whereas to be a "performer" is to be represented by your body. Enmeshed in a complex historical intertwining of the classical arts and classed politics of respectability, the status of "singer" has historically been accorded greater social respect than that of "performer."[51]

What is interesting, then, is how the weight of this distinction seemed to shift in the early 2000s so that it is performers who were desirable. To be clear, contestants on *Indian Idol* are certainly not dancing or even noticeably moving; the performance paradigm of the singer standing still and singing into the mic obtains (although this begins to shift in later seasons as more performative elements are incorporated). But by distancing itself from "singers" and "singing competitions," *Indian Idol* sought to encourage a new kind of musical subject position

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[51] Scholars have offered rich historical insight into a gendered and classed politics of respectability that governed the reformation and classicization of both Hindustani and Karnatic musics in the early twentieth century (Bakhle 2005, Weidman 2005, Post 1987, Soneji 2012, Subramanian 2011). Importantly, as hereditary female practitioners of the arts were actively marginalized, a new performance practice arose in which middle-class female performers practiced either singing or dancing, thus distancing themselves from the integrated art forms practiced by hereditary female performers. As Amanda Weidman writes, "For female musicians in particular, a convention of music performance developed in which the body was effaced; too much physical movement or 'show' on the stage was seen not only as extraneous to the music but as unseemly" (2005, 131); this "purposeful dissociation of body from voice" persists in the present moment (2005, 147). Likewise, in her ethnography of "Special Drama" actresses in South India, Susan Seizer starkly lays out the associations between performing women and prostitution and between lower classes and "a propensity to excess" (2005, 77). I discuss this legacy further in Chapter 4.

marked by a performative presence that went beyond the prevalent practice of effacing the body while showcasing the voice. This moment also marks a shift away specialized musical knowledge and training that was so privileged and highlighted on *SaReGaMa*. Indeed, of the top 3 contestants on *Indian Idol 1*, Rahul Vaidya, the only one with formal training, was also the first to be eliminated.

Rahul, the producer from the first seasons of *Indian Idol,* drew an additional contrast in terms of the kinds of futures and rewards available to contestants on each of the shows. Beyond the material rewards, he argued, *Indian Idol* was able to brand contestants in a way that *SaReGaMa* never was: "*SaReGaMa* was popular, but it didn't turn out *stars*. It was a singing competition; you really enjoyed it for the singing part of it. You didn't necessarily remember that *that* person won in *that* season - there wasn't much of an identity that it gave the singers. So, *Idol* was the first time that happened."

As a result, both Mandloi and Rahul recalled, the kind of fame and recognition that participants on *Indian Idol* received entirely changed viewers' and aspiring singers' expectations for future music shows. Following *Indian Idol* Season 1, the same team went into production on a new show called *Fame Gurukul*, a version of Dutch media company Endemol's *Star Academy* wherein a group of musicians lived, studied, and performed alongside each other in a music academy. As they had done with *Indian Idol*, the production team once again held open auditions. But, following on the success of *Indian Idol*, many more people attended, creating a near-riot situation. The production team was forced to stop auditions, come up with a new strategy, create an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system to manage the high number of people calling in to get audition slots, hire more security, and then re-start. Further, Rahul recalled, "We saw an immediate change in the kinds of people who came in to audition in Season

2 as opposed to Season 1. Because [by that time,] people knew what it could do to their lives, right? So they came with a lot more focus, determination, many of them in there to play the game…Season 1 was much more innocent in that sense."

Finally, where *SaReGaMa* had relied solely on its panel of expert judges to decide who was to be promoted, *Indian Idol* relied on audience voting. Like *American Idol*, *Indian Idol* utilized judge votes during its auditions while subsequent rounds - piano rounds, theatre rounds, and the galas - relied solely on votes from the viewing audience. These votes were placed via phone calls, SMS, and voice message. In later seasons, this was expanded to include online voting through a website, "missed call,"[52] and, more recently, through an app.

This voting system led to some pronounced problems, which I will discuss in more depth below. For now, suffice it to say that this was a revolutionary change. As numerous scholars of reality television have argued, it is precisely this interactive audience engagement that is at the heart of reality television's appeal (Kraidy and Sender 2010). *Indian Idol* Season 1 generated 30 million SMSes; by the second season, in 2005, 55 million votes were tabulated via SMSes and phone call. (Punathambekar 2010, 247). The channel also took advantage of the internet as an emerging technology to promote the audience's sense of involvement and engagement through an *Indian Idol* website which provided up-to-date coverage on the contestants and the contest; other new websites hosted discussion forums where viewers could debate the merits of the contestants. This interactive viewership, what Ashwin Punathambekar theorizes as a new

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[52] A South Asian phrase used to denote a phone call which is hung up by the caller before the other answers in order to avoid being charged

"mobile public" in relation to *Indian Idol 3*, was made possible by these changing possibilities regarding media usage.[53]

Reality television shows are built around the slippage between two forms of "choice:" that of the democratic voter and that of the consumer. In relation to *American Idol*, Katherine Meizel writes: "*American Idol* both is and is not like an election. It represents the pinnacle of consumer choice camouflaged in the familiar trappings of democratic process. Its interactively engaged audience, with universal suffrage in the U.S., is offered a compelling sense of agency, both in the narrative of the televised program and in the selection of the end product" (2011, 3).

Indian Idol Season 1 certainly made use of this resemblance between democratic choice and consumer choice. In the run-up to the final episodes, large bulletin boards were erected in the major metropolitan cities featuring an image of the final three (male) contestants on the keys of a piano, crouched as if about to start a race. Above their heads, a question was posed: "Who will be YOUR Indian Idol?" This reliance on tropes of electoral politics was further reinforced through a pre-finale tour by the final two contestants, Abhijeet Sawant and Amit Saana, to the cities of Delhi, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad, in what was characterized by the advertising and television news outlet IndianTelevision.com as "a typical election campaign trail" (August 14th, 2005).[54]

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[53] Writing about Indian Idol 3, Punathambekar uses voting practices in relation to Amit Paul, the finalist from Meghalaya in India's Northeast region, to propose the idea of "mobile publics" in order to understand "how mobile media technologies are engendering new forms of sociability around television" in a way that overcame longstanding ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences in the region (2010, 252). Where Punathambekar points to the transformative political possibilities afforded by the "mobile publics" that assemble around Indian Idol and other reality TV shows, my work with producers leads to an emphasis both on the "unruliness" of these mobile publics and producers' efforts to contain them. I develop this in the last section of this chapter.

[54] http://www.indiantelevision.com/mam/headlines/y2k5/feb/febmam78.htm

Figure 1:"Who will be your Indian Idol?" (Adesara 2005, IndianTelevision.com)

Further, the interactively engaged choosing and consuming viewer represented big business. SET embarked on an ambitious marketing campaign to create "on-the-ground buzz" and draw viewers. Beyond the standard radio, television, and print advertisements, the channel utilized inflatable sky balloons, bus-backs, "street singers, branded auto-rickshaws with microphones and fanfare, human billboards, over 200,000 post it's [sic] were stuck on vehicles at high traffic areas in Mumbai and Delhi, [and] crank calls were made to key clients and media planners asking them to watch *Indian Idol" (*IndianTelevision.com, August 14th, 2005).

Voting itself yielded profits. Votes cast by SMS, in particular, were important sources of profit, with telecommunications companies charging higher rates for these messages and then

sharing the profits with the channel.[55] The votes cast in 2005 generated "interactive revenue" of 150 million rupees and advertising revenue of 450 million rupees for Sony (Punathambekar 2010, 247).

Finally, SET partnered with Proctor and Gamble in a promotional marketing initiative wherein viewers were encouraged to buy a bottle of "Rejoice" shampoo which then had an SMS code. Having sent the SMS, the individual received a second text asking them to answer three questions about *Indian Idol*. Those who answered correctly were entered in a drawing for free passes to the Gala episode performance. *Indian Idol* was thus at the forefront of integrated consumer marketing in India, appealing to viewers qua consumers qua viewers through a range of media and experiences, and closely yoking its television music platform to a range of other consumer commodities.[56] In this way, newly empowered viewers were encouraged to consume and consumers to view in a commodity-holistic model of participation and engagement.[57]

Producers' Labor and the Audience Imaginary

As these producers discussed their specific work in creating the first season of *Indian Idol*, their recollections were colored, in turn, by excitement, distress, and nostalgia. It was clear that, nearly a decade later, this moment still held great professional and affective significance for them. Moreover, they understood themselves to be important actors at this historical juncture,

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[55] According to a New York Times article, Indian reality shows made nearly thirty to forty percent of their overall revenue from this model, which was twice as high as shows elsewhere in the world (Timmons 2011)

[56] This illustrates the increased integration of media industries in India and resonates with Henry Jenkins' understanding of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006).

[57] See Jhingan's emphasis on the role of commodity consumption in the kind of transformation depicted on Indian Idol (Jhingan 2012)

mediating between the demands and expectations of a global format and those of the "Indian audience."

Rahul illustrated this work of mediation in his memory of a conflict that arose in the editing room over the question of aesthetics between Fremantle's "flying producers" and members of the *Indian Idol* team. Explaining that reality TV in India is dramatic "almost to the level of fiction," Rahul went on: "So there's very dramatic emotional music playing in the background and you have these slow motion shots and all that. And this edit language to them was very offensive, they were like, 'how can this be reality?? This is *not* reality.' It needed to be clean, without music, without Bollywood songs. This was a huge conflict at that point in time." The conflict was resolved only when Tarun Katiar, the head of business for SET, put his foot down and insisted that this "Bollywood treatment" was necessary in the Indian context.

Anthropologists of media and media theorists have increasingly pointed to the ways in which the discursive figure of "the audience" shape production processes. In the Indian context, William Mazzarella focuses on the practices and discourses of Bombay advertising professionals to investigate the construction of the "Indian consumer" as a "counter-commodity" to the globalized commodities of multinational corporations (2003). And in Tejaswini Ganti's work on Bollywood film producers, she uses the term "audience imaginary" to convey how Bollywood film producers use their projected understandings of audience taste, as divided along lines of gender, class, and geographical location, to make important production decisions.[58]

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[58] Ganti presumes that television is less dependent on an audience imaginary, since it has more access to market research. However, it is widely agreed-upon that the current rating system, which doubles as market research, and the Television Rating Points (TRPs) it produces are faulty to the point of irrelevance.

In the audience imaginary that governed these producers' work, the "Indian audience" responded to an emotional aesthetic. Shweta, Rahul's assistant director, was explicit about the need to highlight "emotion:" "The Indian audience is not that difficult to figure out, they like anything Bollywood. They like anything that's emotional. They like anything that makes them feel that the underdog will win. It's down to a science now - there are three or four buttons and you keep pressing each one. I think I really have it down."

Further, Rahul articulated the need for background music and the "Bollywood treatment" by explaining the consumption habits of Indian viewers, implicitly contrasted with audiences elsewhere, to me:

> "Over here [that is, in India], people don't really consume television in a deeply engaged fashion. So the TV will be running in the background while they're doing their other things in life as well. So, for instance, if you watch "24" [the American fiction television show which uses a real-time narration style to cover twenty-four hours], you have to *sit* and watch it - if you miss out on something, you're lost. But that's not necessarily the way viewers consume television here - which is why there's this heightened sense of *music*- so the minute there's that music, I know, 'Ok, now I'm supposed to *watch*.' So it's almost like an audio cue that you're giving the viewer - ok, this is the time to pay attention."

Producers positioned themselves as having privileged insight into the "Indian audience," the tastes and needs of this (seemingly monolithic) social group. This "audience imaginary," therefore, not only informed producers' decisions, but allowed them to understand themselves as crucial cultural mediators, reconciling the structures and strictures of *Idol* as a global format with the aesthetics and narrative structures that would need to define *Indian Idol*.

In his work on "the relationship between globalization as process and reality TV as cultural form," Biswarup Sen points to the dizzying proliferation of reality TV shows over the past decade as particular formats (such as *Idol)* have spread rapidly across the globe and as the number of formats has multiplied (2014). Indeed, when *Indian Idol* launched in 2004, it was

roughly the twentieth "local version" of *Idol,* following the launch of *Pop Idol* in 2001.[59] What

the memories of these early *Indian Idol* producers reveal, however, is that the "local" emergence

of franchise reality television shows such as *Indian Idol* is based on human labor, labor which

has strong affective components. The recollections of these producers reveal the hard work that

goes into creating a television show, marked by long hours in the studio and editing room over

nearly a year of production. Further, their memories revealed the strong feelings that

accompanied and emerged out of this work of production as intensive, but collective labor. As

Anupama Mandloi remembered earnestly, "We all put in our best people, we all gave it our

best!" Many of the producers recalled the strong connections they formed with the contestants -

developing and rooting for their favorites, staying in touch via Facebook - and to the show itself,

watching it years after their professional relationship with it had lapsed. And the affective

experience they were privy to in the course of production work mirrored that which they hoped

to create for audiences: exposure to powerful performances, the intensity of "journey" stories, the

excitement over character development, the thrill of celebrity, as well as personal and public

connection to contestants.

In emphasizing the professional, embodied, and affective labor at the heart of creating

Indian Idol, these producers' memories add important nuance to often overly general narratives

regarding the global spread of corporate cultural forms. Reality show franchise proliferate

through a union of transnational corporate initiative and human labor on the ground. Going

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[59] After the launch of Britain's *Pop Idols* in 2001, Idol was franchised in Germany, Netherlands, Poland, South Africa, and the United States in 2002. In 2003, it spread to Armenia, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, France, Kazakhstan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, and Serbia. 2004 was the first year that Idol went beyond the western hemisphere, extending its reach to Greece, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Slovakia, Sweden, and Turkey. By 2017, Idol has established 50 "local" versions.

further, I want to emphasize that *Indian Idol* is an *effect* of this "local" human labor. That is, it emerges through the ongoing interaction between three corporate entities (the production house, the channel, and the international format owner) and the production work of those they hire, even as, over the course of time, it appears to become a thing unto itself. And the work of establishing a "local" version is both challenging and fraught. While *Indian Idol* is a success story, such versions can, in fact, fail (as exemplified by *Fame Gurukul)*.

Establishing the *Indian Idol* brand

As they laid the groundwork for and then created the first season of *Indian Idol,* television producers were working to create a "local version" of a global format. Here, I argue that *Idol* as global format is inherently modular. While shows like *Pop Idol* or *American Idol* may be founding and most famous versions of *Idol*, respectively, both are still "local versions," albeit privileged ones. By extension, neither does "local version" imply a derivative or knock-off. Rather, the format exists in order to take form and take on meaning in each new cultural site.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider *Indian Idol* as a brand and the work of these producers as that of establishing an Indian brand that was importantly related to but distinct from the global brand. As a "modern" "Indian" brand engaging its viewer-consumers, *Indian Idol* was marked by the following characteristics. Firstly, it emphasized audience participation, figured as both agentive and "democratic. Secondly, it sold itself as a meritocracy wherein "pure talent" could transcend the social structures of class and caste. Thirdly, the *Indian Idol* brand gestured to

the possibility of self-transformation and the rewarding of aspirational desire through participation.[60]

In an attempt to define a brand, Constantine Nakassis writes: "Brand is a complex notion. At first pass, by *brand* I mean the relationship between a range of materially sensible object-signs (commodities, trademarks, slogans, salespersons, sponsored events and spaces, etc) and some imputed virtual commonality, dubbed by marketers as the brand's "image," essence," or "personality." This relationship holds when such object-signs, or brand instances, are taken as indexes of, and entrances to, *the social imaginaries* that the brand's image, essence, or personality affords" (2013, 111, emphasis added). And William Mazzarella notes that the successful brand "…can be offered to consumers as a virtual world, into which it is both their human right and their social privilege to be invited" (Mazzarella 2003, 191).

Indeed, the *Indian Idol* "brand", here, is comprised in great part of the affective discourses and relationships that circulate through the show. The "journey" of contestants-as-characters and the successful performance of popular Hindi film songs together generate audience investment and participation, a kind of social praxis in itself. But the brand also points to something larger, implying and projecting a set of potentialities that inhere in the individual and in the world and whose successful realization is inextricably linked with the Hindi film song industry. In this way, the *Indian Idol* brand (and the global *Idol* brand-format as well) is crucially formed around an idealized social imaginary in which contestants are recognized and promoted - by both judges and audience - on the basis of their musical talent *and* personal qualities, irrespective of social background. Further, adding to Nakassis' working definition of brand, I add producers' work, a

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[60] The aspiration that is highlighted on *Indian Idol* is dramatically linked to family. During the auditions, potential contestants often speak of realizing their parents' dreams (rather than, or in tandem with their own), "mera parents ka sapna pura ho jaye" (my parents' dream will become whole).

set of production practices and knowledge that reliably reproduce this social imaginary as it emerges through a narrative aesthetic that is equally comprised of "reality" journeys, visual and musical aesthetics. *Indian Idol* as brand, then, is this idealized social imaginary and the set of production practices that reliably communicate it.

In tandem with his theorization of "brand," Nakassis proposes the idea of a "brand surfeit:" "The material forms that, to varying degrees exceed the brand's authority and legibility" as well as "the immaterial excess of social meaning that emerges out of engagements with branded goods…but cannot be fully reduced to the brand concept." He sums it up as the "'more than' of the brand" which is simultaneously disruptive and constitutive, a kind of constitutive excess which troubles the brand edifice (2013, 112).

I investigate this idea of brand surfeit, and the ways in which it seems to simultaneously constitute and threaten the brand, by returning to the case of Ravinder Ravi with which I opened. As *Indian Idol* producer Rahul emphasized, showcasing contestants' journeys and creating compelling stories for them was a defining element of *Indian Idol*, one that differentiated them from previous music competition shows. I asked Rahul how he integrated story line in that first season and Rahul paused:

> [Ravi's] journey started right at the auditions. He had a very raw powerful voice, but he wasn't a great *singer*. There was one kind of Punjabi folk song that he could do well. As the series went on, we kind of figured out that - he doesn't have the versatility to really be a *singer* per se. But right from the audition, you saw where he came from. And there was a huge…almost democratization of singing talent.

Rahul corrected himself.

> Not of singing talent, of televisual talent. So there was a huge amount of public empathy for him – despite the fact that he was *not* a great singer, he went on till pretty late in the journey, because people started voting [for him]. So this is why I say the

democratization of talent, in the sense, it was the euphoria of having one of *us* being up there.

For the production team of *Indian Idol 1*, Ravi offered the opportunity to craft the perfect rags-to-riches story, to make real *Idol*'s promises of rewarding unknown aspirants regardless of their social background. And yet, this very selling point – Ravi's markedly less privileged background, which provided such a convincing story – simultaneously made him a liability on "Indian Idol," Rahul recalled:

> Every time you saw [Ravi], on the glitzy stage, amongst the rest of the contestants, you could see a sense of discomfort he had in that setting, you know? Not having the confidence to deal with the judges, not having – he was more of an outcast among the rest of the contestants – so he was a classic underdog. He was a painter who basically used to paint buildings. Suddenly he found himself in this setting, not accepted with open arms, maybe – so he was a classic underdog that the audience empathized with."

Convinced by Ravi's compelling social story, more and more audience votes rolled in for him, propelling the low-caste house painter from a small, rural city to the Top Five of *Indian Idol*. A decade later, the acuteness of the dilemma was still palpable as Rahul exclaimed: "He *can't* be the first Indian Idol that we put out!"

As the head of "reality" in the first season, Rahul and his team had overseen the creation of all the stories and narratives around personal "journey." From this perspective, Ravi was a highly successful televisual character whom they had, at least in part, *created*. Yet they nearly lost control of their Frankenstein when he took on a life of his own via an audience that was eager to participate in the elevation of "one of their own" (in Rahul's words). Thus, the democratization of television talent threatened to undo the primacy of musical talent and, by extension, the promise of meritocratic reward.

The producers responded in the same vein as they had in generating so much popularity for Ravi, shaping the story to highlight particular aspects of the contestant: "…as makers of these

shows, you – *sometimes* try to play God. And you try to alter narratives to try and make people

fall in love with someone or [have someone] fall out of favor with the audience. Nothing we did

seemed to work – and we were very worried at one point of time that he would go on to become

[the winner.]" Yet, as Rahul related, the producers were eventually able to decrease Ravi's

popularity:

> …honestly, part of the reason [Ravi] was not accepted by everyone was also because – now that I think back – there must have been some serious insecurities he was going through…his defense mechanism was to come across as really aggressive... Which further compounded the fact that not too many people liked to be with him. So he was pretty much a loner. So, trying to show the other, not so pleasant side of him. So, those are the kinds of things [producers] try and do.

Clearly, Rahul's remembered experience of this moment of crisis in the first season of

Indian Idol was shot through with barely latent class and caste discourses, which undergirded

this socially loaded question of who could be an "appropriate" Indian Idol. Ravi was voted off in

the nick of time and the first *Indian Idol* was Abhijeet Sawant, a tall, baby-faced young man

raised in Mumbai and from a Maharashtrian Buddhist Dalit family.

I asked Rahul how Abhijeet was different from Ravi, and Rahul responded in terms of

Abhijeet's personality:

> Abhijeet, the person that he is – he just found himself on the surfboard, riding the surf…I'm not saying he didn't *want* to win – but he always had that demeanor, that thing – he was *literally* the dark horse – no-one expected him to be the winner….Abhijeet's father was a worker with the BMC *[Mumbai municipal governance body]*, so he used to live in this BMC worker, slightly rundown, dilapidated place in Mahim, close to Dharavi…But Abhijeet didn't have [a hunger to win], he was just riding the wave – here was an underhorse who's a nice guy."

The contrast drawn between Ravi and Abhijeet by Rahul - and, indeed, Abhijeet's own lower

social position - prevent an analytical reading in which it is simply, or overtly, Ravi's caste-class

background that made him a dangerous proposition for the title of "first Indian Idol." Instead, he

lacks the 'total package' of 'good singing, with attitude and looks to match," to return to the newspaper quote with which I opened. In contrast, Abhijeet is tall and slim (although Rahul marks him as "literally the dark horse") and he has a certain worldliness, a working-class Bombay boy who is on his way up without being too hungry for fame.

In one of the few videos of *Indian Idol* Season 1 to be found on YouTube, there is a short clip of the show's grand finale. After numerous excited and preparatory announcements by the hosts - "Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to announce our *first* Indian Idol! The first Indian Idol is…Ladies and gentlemen, our first Indian Idol is…" - Abhijeet Sawant's name is read. The audience jumps to its feet as confetti falls and Abhijeet is hoisted onto the shoulders of his fellow contestants, who have all assembled. As judge Anu Malik presents the trophy, we catch our first glimpse of Ravinder Ravi, standing at the edge of the re-assembled group of contestants. He is literally a head shorter than all the other men, darker skinned, and bearded. In a show whose brand thrives on the meshing of personal "journey" and a certain kind of musical and performative ability, Abhijeet is the right kind of underdog; Ravi is not.

Figure 2: Sonu Nigam presents Abhijeet Sawant with a trophy as Ravinder Ravi (second from right) and Anu Malik (far right) look on.

Here, discussions of performance style and musical ability become a proxy for less "speakable" discourses related to caste and class. Thus, Ravi's inappropriateness as an Indian Idol is framed in terms of his discomfort on stage, his unease in this glamorous and high-powered setting, and his voice, which has "raw power," but lacks "versatility" – he is marked as "not really a singer." To back this up, his "aggressiveness" and lack of "people skills" are invoked. If caste and, to a lesser extent class, are inappropriate criteria for judgement in a modern Indian entertainment brand such as *Indian Idol* – and yet continue to so powerfully shape social interactions – they can be routed and judged through discussions of vocal style, stage presence, "demeanor", and personality. This is to say that if caste and class cannot be explicitly considered as factors, one's habitus - comportment, on-stage style, and, indeed, vocal style - can be. Both Abhijeet and Ravi are low in the hierarchies of caste and class, but Abhijeet's way of

being in the world, his embodied self-presentation renders him a more acceptable choice for "first Indian Idol."

Managing Brand Surfeits

In his discussion of brand names and naming, William Mazzarella notes that brand names emerge not despite but in the midst of crisis (2014). Indeed, this brand crisis, as marked by Ravinder Ravi's near ascendance, is immensely revealing, pointing to the instabilities and uneasy suturing of discourses and ideologies at the heart of the *Indian Idol* brand.

The *Idol* brand is predicated on two poles of the neoliberal project: autonomy of consumer choice coupled with the promise that individuals will be rewarded on the basis of merit, regardless of their social background. Yet this moment of crisis points to the risk of yoking these two tenets together as the "empowered" and engaged audience propelled Ravi up based on his social background *rather than* his musical merit or raw talent, as narrated by media producers and news articles alike. *Indian Idol*'s promise to reward raw, undiscovered talent and to simultaneously entrust "the masses" with this task - to let the market decide, so to speak - ended up necessitating hasty intervention on the part of producers in order to ensure that their first "Idol" accorded with emerging neoliberal ideals in modern India.

I suggest that the case of Ravinder Ravi can be understood as kind of brand surfeit, following Nakassis' second understanding of surfeit as the "immaterial excess of social meaning" that emerges out of consumers' engagement with material aspects of the brand, yet cannot be fully contained within it. If the brand projects a social imaginary or "virtual world," surfeits are the brand's "unruly potentials that power the vital aura of the brand and defeat any attempts definitively to discipline its meaning" (Mazzarella 2015, 12). While *Indian Idol*

attempted to project a coherent, neoliberally-inflected meritocratic social order, Ravinder Ravi -
as televisual character and as social catalyst - threatened to expose the ideological projects and
discourses that make possible *Indian Idol*'s very existence and that are interwoven with its brand.
And rather than understanding this moment as an aberration, Ravi, as a brand surfeit, points to
the unpredictability of social practice that simultaneously threatens to disrupt, and is constitutive
of, the *Indian Idol* brand. As Nakassis reminds us: "The brand's surfeit image is the brand's very
vitality and profitability. The brand's very fragility and openness to (re)signification creates
surplus value because it makes the brand a possible site, and medium, for sociality and affective
attachment" (2013, 122). In striving to tell a story of idealized social practice, *Indian Idol*
contains within itself a reminder of the incoherence and unruliness of social practices in the
world.

Defending the brand

Earlier, I argued that it is the professional and affective labor of producers that makes
possible these "local versions" of global formats. I conclude by proposing that it is precisely the
management and control of these brand surfeits that constitutes producers' work as they labor to
construct a "local" brand from a global format.

As the format is realized in various "local" contexts, surfeit meanings will inevitably arise
in ways that exceed the ideological and aesthetic parameters of the global brand, troubling even
the predictive creation of "cultural difference" that global franchises rely on.[61] While this surfeit

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[61] From this perspective, "local versions" themselves can be understood as part of the broader global
brand apparatus in that their "difference" is yoked to and ultimately used in service of the global brand
(cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). See also Erlman 1996 for a consideration of the relationship between
musical aesthetics and ideologies of difference.

meaning can, as Nakassis argues, contribute to the vitality of the brand, it must also be controlled and curtailed when it is seen to threaten the brand.

The response of Rahul and his team to Ravinder Ravi's ascendance represents one such instance of clamping down on brand surfeit. And yet, even as the next several seasons of *Indian Idol* enjoyed high ratings, audience voting habits continued to threaten the core tenets of the *Idol* brand. This sense of crisis is reflected in the text and anxious tone of the official Sony blog for *Indian Idol* at the conclusion of Season 3:

> The Judges were concerned about the voting pattern and [judge] Anu Mallik was of the view that the *deserving contestants* are being voted out while those who could have rightfully gone are still continuing on the show Indian Idol. [Judge] Javed Akhtar asked all audience to *rise above region, caste and creed and vote purely on merit* while selecting a contestant. Indian Idol has reached its crucial phase in its run for finding that one voice who will become the next Indian Idol, so *don't be biased, vote genuinely* (http://sony-tv-indian-idol-3.blogspot.com/, July 26th, 2007, italics added).

Ultimately, this brand crisis necessitated a radical intervention, as relayed to me by Ashok, the creative and project head of *Indian Idol* since its fourth season in 2008. I met Ashok in the noisy canteen of the Reliance Studio in "Film City" where he was shooting *Indian Idol Junior*. Ashok was finishing up his lunch; "Pepsi nahin chahiye, Thums Up chahiye," he told a young assistant firmly, favoring the soda brand that dominated the Indian market prior to liberalization. Having received the desired soft drink, he gestured that we should continue our conversation outside, where he lit up a cigarette.

I asked Ashok how the voting worked and he nodded knowingly, as if he expected the question. In the first seasons of *Indian Idol*, he told me, results were entirely based on audience votes, "you know your American Idol, right? Like that." But, Ashok went on, "we can't do it like that here." He took on the imagined voice of an audience voter: "This person is from my city, they're from my caste, they're like me (Mera shahervala hai, meri jati se hai, mere jaise hain)"-

in other words, the audience voted along caste, regional, and ethnic lines. And so, Ashok narrated, he had gone to the top (presumably Fremantle): "I told them, the brand is about to die. Bring back the judges, otherwise, your brand will die (na to aapka brand mar jayega)".

The result was that, from *Indian Idol 5* onwards, the judges continued giving marks throughout the show, with eliminations based equally on judge marks and popular vote.[62] As one of the show's hosts explained in the first episode of Season 5, unironically drawing on corporate lingo: "Our judges are here, but we need *you* to vote. It's a 50-50 partnership."

As a brand, *Indian Idol*'s foundational promise was to reward raw, undiscovered talent and to simultaneously entrust "the masses" with the task of choosing an "Idol"; built on the intimate conflation of democratic and consumer choice, it was a "place" where the market was to yield the best results. Yet in the "audience imaginary" put forth by Ashok, it was the newly interactive and "empowered" audience itself that threatened to unravel the *Indian Idol* brand and the social-musical imaginary it offered through their aberrant deployment of consumer choice. As producers intervened to defend and save the brand, they had to confront the tension between meritocratic reward and consumer choice, two neoliberal tenets that lie at the heart of *Idol*. As the audience was thus brought under control through the implementation of necessarily paternalistic checks and balances in the form of judge expertise, "talent" was preserved as a significant tool for realizing aspiration. More broadly, this moment represented a consolidation of the promise of meritocratic reward in aspirational India, however "real" it may be.

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[62] Indeed, it was only after this restructuring of the voting process that female contestants first made it to the Top Three; this occurred in *Indian Idol 4* (2008).

CHAPTER 2:
MAKING THE SONG YOUR OWN: FIDELITY, UNIQUENESS, AND CONTESTATIONS OVER VOCAL STYLE ON INDIAN IDOL

Dozens of production assistants, cameramen, costume and lighting people swirled around me, taking advantage of the lunch hour to smoke cigarettes and drink cups of chai. I was standing outside Reliance Studios in Mumbai's "Film City," a collection of anonymous white concrete buildings set in the jungle of northeastern Mumbai, where shooting takes place for the innumerable films and television shows that constitute the Indian Hindi-language entertainment world. Inside the studio, the contestants and set were being prepared for the grand finale of *Indian Idol,* the culmination of many months of planning, production, and shooting. With me stood Anand, who had served as *Indian Idol'*s music director for the past three seasons. A short man with tight wiry curls and expressively droopy eyes, Anand hailed from a family of prominent classical musicians and had been involved in the production of music competition television shows since the early 1990s. We talked about his role, and I asked Anand how he worked with different musical elements – such as tempo, pitch, instrumentation - when putting together a song on the show. Anand immediately corrected me to say that they tried to keep the original feeling of the song in terms of tempo and "presentation" as much as possible. "You see," he laughed, "Lataji is still the standard [referring to the great Hindi film singer Lata Mangeshkar], so if she is at 100, [the contestants] should at least try to come to 80." Anand's meaning was clear: it was the responsibility of an aspiring singer on these shows to attempt to successfully emulate the great singers of the past. "We are used to seeing our mothers in certain avatars, isn't it?" Anand continued, "so if she were to suddenly change, from [traditional

clothing] to jeans…" he trailed off, having made his point: audiences for these reality television shows expected to hear a song in an established, recognizable form which shouldn't be tampered with.

This conversation about how a Hindi film song should be rendered on *Indian Idol* points to the issues explored in this chapter. As Anand suggests, audience expect a certain fidelity to already-established, beloved vocal styles and modes of song interpretation. At the same time, the kinds of musical genres and vocal styles that are now finding purchase in Hindi film song have greatly diversified and many producers of Hindi film music are increasingly placing a premium on uniqueness of voice and interpretation. These contrasting sets of expectations form an analytically productive tension on *Indian Idol,* wherein contemporary contestations over vocal style and musical interpretation are made visible in the interplay between contestants' performances and judges' commentary.

This chapter investigates changes in the vocal style and musical interpretation of Hindi film songs as reflected, discussed, and negotiated in the context of *Indian Idol*. I begin by discussing the history of popular *filmi* (film style) music, including the nearly singular importance of Lata Mangeshkar. The dense circulation of "evergreen" film songs (sung by Mangeshkar and a handful of others) has created a repository of nostalgic musical and cultural meaning that form the foundation of India's popular music economy today. I then discuss the aesthetic changes that have taken place in Hindi film music over the past twenty years. I argue that on *Indian Idol*, differing perspectives on Hindi film song aesthetics reveal a broad generational divide between media producers who came of age before and after India's economic and cultural liberalization. This divide is expressed through competing discourses about the interpretive obligations and potential agency of the performer today. Performers on these shows

find themselves in a double bind, caught between an increasing premium placed on musical innovation and an ever-present demand for fidelity to culturally nostalgic forms.

Further, this tension is not unique to musical practice. The competing ideals it espouses find their corollary in larger anxieties within contemporary Indian society about India's place in the world and the kinds of qualities that are most critical for Indian subjects today. In particular, ideas around innovation and creativity are the subjects of heated debate in the worlds of education and corporate entrepreneurship. In this context, a more recent emphasis on interpretive agency and distinctive voices in Hindi film music reflect emergent, if contested, conceptions of individuality and subjectivity in liberalizing India.

The Construction of Fidelity

In this chapter, I use "fidelity" to capture the salience of a social-sonic expectation of asymptotic resemblance to an "original" song and, more importantly, its "original" voice. Here I draw on Jonathan Sterne's work on the problem of mediation and the impossibility of the original. In "The Social Genesis of Sound Fidelity," Sterne argues that the notion of a sonic "original" in the context of recording and reproduction is untenable, for "…the sound event is created for the explicit purpose of its reproduction. Therefore, we can no longer argue that copies are debased versions of a more authentic original that exists either outside of or prior to the process of reproducibility" (2003, 241)[63]. Indeed, in the context of Hindi film song, the "original" song is always already mediated, created for the explicit purpose of reproduction and circulation; this is equally true for the beloved iconic and canonic voices that mark them.

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[63] Philip Auslander puts forth a similar argument in *Liveness* (2008), although he sets up a dialectic between liveness and mediatization in order to question this distinction while Sterne rejects a "philosophy of mediation" altogether (2003, 219).

However, as Hindi film songs circulate widely over long periods of time, they become the center of a community of nostalgic sentiment that, in turn, reifies "the original" as a canonic set of sounds and affective associations.

While "fidelity" is a term associated with sound recording, both Sterne and anthropologist Amanda Weidman point to its social grounding. For Sterne, fidelity reflects the social relations, processes, and labors that make sound reproduction possible (2003, 19). In Weidman's account of the gramophone's impact on ideas about authenticity and modernity in early twentieth-century South India, she shows how technologically based discourses of fidelity provided the basis upon which cultural critics subsequently promoted the guru-shishya system of musical pedagogy as a "social" form of fidelity. I draw on this discussion of the simultaneously social and technological nature of fidelity to illuminate a tension at the heart of the social and musical life of Hindi film song. Listeners have a desire for musical faithfulness to an already mediated original, which then becomes the standard for subsequent interpretive practice. In this way, my use of fidelity, too, points to the ways in which "the original" is both technologically and socially produced.

Playback Singing and the rise of Lata Mangeshkar

Anand's invocation of Lata Mangeshkar, the most famous singer in Hindi film over the past half-century, was both reflexive and deeply loaded. Popular music in North India over the past century has been synonymous with Hindi film songs, and its stars have been "playback singers", lending their singing voices to the film's lead actors and actresses who flirt, vamp, emote, and execute often difficult sequences of dance moves over the course of a song. The first sound films in South Asia were released in 1931, featuring singing actors who could execute both the

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dramatic and musical functions required of them. However, as technological developments

enabled the separate recording and synchronization of visual and audio information, singing and

acting began to be separated. Increasingly, the practice of "playback" became the norm as

singers "…selected exclusively for their vocal abilities gradually took over more and more of the

singing for films, while film actors, chosen for their appearance and acting skills, were limited to

acting" (Booth 2008, 45).[64]

While a number of great playback singers, both male and female, emerged in the following

decades, Hindi film song has historically been dominated by certain names. Here, it is almost a

cliché to offer the names of Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle, the sisters who recorded a

majority of the female vocals for songs released between the 1950s and the 1990s and who

effectively ruled the playback industry for nearly a half-century after India's Independence.[65]

Born to a father who was a theatre director and light classical singer and to a mother who, by

some accounts, was a courtesan singer, both Lata and Asha were trained and deeply steeped in

classical Hindustani music; Lata also performed *sangeet natak*, light theatre songs, in her father's

plays. While Lata began trying to break into the Hindi and Marathi film industries in the early

1940s, it was not until 1948 that she had her first successful song, "Dil Mera Thora" ("My Heart

Has Broken"), composed by music director Ghulam Haider for the film *Majboor*. Perhaps not

coincidentally, this breakthrough followed the departure of the Hindi film industry's leading

singer, Noor Jehan, to Pakistan after Partition; scholars have argued that Jehan's move created

space for the young Lata to get a break (Beaster-Jones 2015). Over the next several years, Lata

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[64] For further discussion of these changes, see Majumdar 2009 and Morcom 2007

[65] As an example of the almost hyperbolic position attributed to these two singers, Mangeshkar was long named as the most recorded singer of all time. That honor was, in fact, awarded to Bhosle by the Guiness Book of World Records in 2011, who tallied her total recording count at 11,000 songs.

would have several more hit songs, including the immensely popular "Aayega Aanewala" ("He who is about to come") in *Mahal* (1949). According to Hindi film scholar Rachel Dwyer, All India Radio was besieged by fans asking for the name of the singer, after which the song's record jacket was re-printed with Lata's name on it. This was an unprecedented linking of the singer and the song, a move that Lata herself advocated for (cited in Beaster-Jones 2015, 56). In this way, Lata's name was synonymous with the rise of playback singing as a socially accepted institution and with the aural fame that accompanied it. As film scholar Neepa Majumdar notes, this "voice monopoly" that Lata represented had important consequences: "It involves the repetition, one might say during the entire lifetime of the Indian nation, of the same female singing voice as the ideal norm of aural femininity across numerous female bodies" (2009, 176).

In her consideration of Lata's "aural stardom," Majumdar cites a famous story in which a young R.D. Burman accompanies his father, music director S.D. Burman, to a recording session featuring Lata. He waits to hear the famous voice and sees her lips moving:

> …but it still seemed as if she was not singing at all…and then, I hear the 'terrific voice', sounding exactly as it did in the records. So I asked Baba, "She's not singing in there, so where is this voice coming from?' And Baba explained, 'That is her style – she appears to be singing so softly, but her voice carries such tremendous power and is so appropriate for the microphone, that the results take your breath away" (Bhimani 1995, 235, cited in Majumdar 2009, 191).

While Majumdar uses this story to develop a broader argument about Lata's role as the "consummate disembodied voice" (Beaster-Jones 2015, 62), I wish to emphasize the other obvious take-away of this story: that Lata's voice, which was considered so suited to the mic, is itself understood to be fundamentally mediated.

As numerous scholars of South Asian popular culture have noted, Mangeshkar not only held a monopolizing position as a singer, but she emerged as a symbol of the Indian nation within

several decades of Indian Independence in 1947.[66] She performed at public events with Indian

political leaders at the time of defining events in India's early nationhood (such as the 1961

border war with China and the 1971 war with Pakistan) and at iconic nationalist sites such as the

Red Fort, the Mughal-era fort-palace in Delhi where Jawaharlal Nehru first addressed

independent India and where the Prime Minister gives the yearly 'State of the Union' speech.

Crucially, these performances were widely broadcast via radio, so that Mangeshkar - and, more

specifically, *her voice* - became a national symbol. Through a potent combination of musical

valorization and national cultural meaning that was sedimented through mediated circulation,

Mangeshkar's voice has come to represent the classic Indian female voice.[67] High, thin (nasal,

according to some), and agile in its ability to execute fast runs and subtle ornaments alike, Lata's

voice continues to be held up both discursively and in practice as the vocal ideal to strive

towards, as illustrated and confirmed by Anand's statement above.

Hindi Film Song: A Culture of Circulation

The import that Mangeshkar's voice has held in India is grounded in the long-standing

dominance of Hindi film music. It is a truism to state that Hindi film music has long served as

the main form of popular music across northern India, propelled by the immense popularity and

importance of Hindi movies in daily life (Rachel Dwyer estimates that, as of the 1990s, nearly 15

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[66] See Aziz 2012, Booth 2008, and Majumdar 2009, amongst others.
[67] Jhingan offers a fascinating supplementary explanation for the nostalgic fetishization of Mangeshkar's voice, grounded in the practice of "versioning" that became popular during the cassette tape boom of the 1980s and HMV's response to such unauthorized song versions in the form of a large number of re-packaged songs and albums by Mangeshkar with accompanying promotional materials that reinscribed her position as the idealized "voice of the nation" (2013)

million Indians went to the movies every day and millions more watched them on television).[68]

Firstly, Hindi film music is the genre, broadly speaking, that a majority of audiences can identify with, across urban and rural spaces and across the regional, ethnic, and linguistic divides that mark the Indian sub-continent. Secondly, it is by and large the most economically profitable musical form. It is estimated that from the 1960s up through the present, film songs have comprised seventy percent of sales for HMV, the largest record producer and distributor in India; and even the most wildly successful non-film music albums sell only twenty percent of the copies that a well-regarded film music album does (Morcom 2007).[69]

The pre-eminence of Hindi film song is continuously underscored and reinforced by the dense network of its circulation. Hindi film songs from the 1950s up through the most recent releases are continuously played on local radio stations, ranging from the youth-oriented Radio Mirchi (Spicy Radio) to the government-owned station Akashvani. Taxis and rickshaws invest in sound systems for playing cassettes and, more recently, MP3 cards and USB flash drives filled with an assortment of popular film songs. Hit-parade style TV shows run on television sets in homes, restaurants, and shops, circulating an infinite succession of Hindi film song-and-dance sequences, featuring well-known melodies and beloved actors and actresses. On any given day, newspapers in Mumbai are filled with advertisements for revue shows featuring the songs of a single beloved music director, playback singer, or even actor of yesteryear. Such stage shows,

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[68] This is not to say that it is the *only* form of popular music. As a recent edited volume demonstrates, although film music is always "the elephant in the room," Indian popular music far exceeds the boundaries of Bollywood (Booth and Shope 2014). As Anna Morcom rightly notes, such genre boundaries are porous: *filmi* music is incorporated into a range of genres, including wedding brass bands and various folk forms (2007, 9).

[69] See Morcom 2007 for a fascinating chronological account of the changes in Hindi film song's commercial value and the gradual realization by film producers that songs could be a separate source of revenue.

featuring young, lesser-known singers with small orchestras, always play to packed audiences, humming along and tapping their hands to favorite "evergreen" hits. These multiple, intersecting paths allow Hindi film songs to circulate as both musical sound and cultural knowledge. Through this continuous re-iteration, songs are re-inscribed for the listener as a singular familiar melody, complete with characteristic vocal flourishes, ornaments - *harkaten, murkiyan* - and accompanying instrumentation. This becomes the "original."

Given the aural prominence and economic dominance of the Hindi film industry and its songs, therefore, it is unsurprising that Hindi film music is *the* music sung by contestants on *Indian Idol* and other music competition television shows. The position of playback singer is invested with a great deal of social prestige and recognition, and most of the aspiring singers who enter the field of reality music television contests are ultimately seeking to break into the world of playback singing.[70] Although contestants may occasionally perform a folk song from their region or a popular song from a "private" (that is, non-film) album, it is in their best interest, both in terms of doing well on the show and with an eye on their long-term careers, to sing the Hindi film songs that are most often to them. These songs are at once familiar to the audience and allow the contestant to showcase their own abilities as future playback singers in front of industry insiders.

Here, the shadows of iconic playback singers loom large. As each performance on *Indian Idol* begins, a box appears displaying the name of the song, its composer, the film it originally appeared in, and the original singer, re-inscribing the biography of the original song. As

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[70] Over the course of my interviews with former contestants, a number of them expressed their desire to also be involved in the world of non-film Hindi popular music. However, with the exception of one singer, who was adamant that she wanted to write and sing her own songs, the others were all hoping for an opportunity to sing for a Hindi film, even as they cultivated other aspects of their career.

discussed above, these facts are often already known to the audience; and every individual involved in this televised performance - the judges, the studio and broadcast audiences, and certainly the contestants themselves - is acutely aware of the melodic nuances, vocal inflections, and dramatic context of the song through its circulated form.

Indeed, shows such as *Idol* are deeply reliant on this complex of cultural nostalgia that is built on and triggered by deep intimate knowledge of these songs. In his discussion of the controversy over remixes of "evergreen" songs, Jayson Beaster-Jones notes that the quality of aesthetic "timelessness" ascribed to these songs is undergirded by the historical context of their production and circulation.[71] "Evergreen" songs are primarily drawn from the 1950s and 1960s, when popular song was predominantly circulated through Radio Ceylon's hit parade show, *Binaca Geet Mala.* Beaster-Jones argues that "…the ritual of tuning into a dominant hit parade may be one of the most important reasons that the songs of this period have been nostalgically dubbed evergreen. Hence, memories of these songs are tied both to the optimism of the early years of the Indian nation-state, as well as resistance to its policies" (2009, 431). Thus, Beaster-Jones concludes, Hindi film songs, and "evergreen" songs in particular, have become "…a shared past, a collective memory that is sacred…" (2009, 441).

In a similar vein, Shikha Jhingan argues that Hindi film song listeners and singers alike are "immersed in the recuperation of aural memories associated with the original song" (2013, 104). Importantly, she offers a multimodal conceptualization of listening which is equally about "an impersonal, nomadic memory, not necessarily connected to an actual event" and embodied

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[71] Beaster-Jones defines "evergreen" songs, a term utilized in both Hindi and English, as an "aesthetic-marketing category…that idealizes a particular set of aesthetic values, even as it serves as a category that enables music companies to capitalize upon their vast music archives" (2009, 426). These aesthetic values include a "clean vocal style," an emphasis on the melody over accompaniment and rhythm, and lyrics grounded in poetry (2009, 432).

sensate experience, stimulated by a familiar sonic experience (2013, 104). From this perspective, Hindi film songs' ability to function as catalysts for an affective nostalgia is grounded not just in the delimited historical moment that Beaster-Jones identifies for "evergreen" songs, but in their ability to simultaneously invoke and layer social-historical memory and personal, embodied experience(s), meanings which subsequently accrue and deepen as the original song circulates across public and private space.[72]

In their theorization of a "culture of circulation," Lee and LiPuma propose that circulation is not simply about the movement of people, ideas, and commodities; rather, it is "a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the *interpretive communities* built around them" (2002, 192, emphasis added). In recognizing the social significance of Hindi film song's penetrating ambit of circulation, I suggest that Hindi film songs and their performances have come to be a powerful fulcrum for an interpretive community of nostalgic sentiment and a bearer of affective cultural memory.[73] In the space of *Indian Idol*, such songs unite listener-viewers through the deeply meaningful familiarity of a song, and the voice, melody, and timbre that mark it. These songs thus become important affective capital and catalysts, guaranteeing an already meaningful, nostalgia-imbued listening experience for the audience.

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[72] Svetlana Boym describes a "global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" based in a dissatisfaction with contemporary experiences of time (2007, 10). Hindi film songs offer a form of nostalgia that resonate with her idea of a "reflective nostalgia [which] thrives on algia (the longing itself)" (Boym 2007, 13)

[73] See Appadurai 1990 for his theorization of a "community of sentiment," Qureshi 2000 for a rich consideration of how sonic material anchors cultural memory, and Lacey 2013 for the idea of "listening publics" constituted through the radio.

Vocal diversity and Interpretive Tensions

It would be misleading to imply that *Indian Idol* only showcases these older songs, for contestants also perform popular film songs from the 1970s up through the present. Nor do I mean to paint a picture of an insular music industry simply recycling its greatest hits. The liberalization of the Indian economy, and the accompanying transformation in India's social, media, and economic landscape, has had a profound impact on the aesthetics of the Hindi film industry, the kinds of music it produces, and the kinds of voices it now disseminates. As more foreign capital and consumer goods entered the country in the late 1990s, the Hindi film industry itself underwent significant changes. Officially granted "industry" status by the government in 1998, it started to receive large amounts of foreign investment which was paralleled by an increased interest in creating movies that played well with a diasporic NRI (Non-Resident Indian) audience. This included more film shooting abroad and plots that focused on the lives and concerns of "cosmopolitan" Indians. At the same time, as Tejaswini Ganti has shown, filmmakers in the globalized industry now known as "Bollywood" began orienting their films towards the urban middle-class film viewer by casting urban middle-class characters as the new protagonists and, by extension, ideal citizens (2012, 17).

This transformation of the Hindi film industry found its corollary in changes in the music industry. As India opened its economy, lifted import bans, and began to imagine itself as part of global cultural flows, the Hindi film music aesthetic shifted and diversified through increased availability of new technologies of music production and recording and access to global pop

music trends.[74] The aesthetic and ideological roots of Hindi film song in liberalizing India lie in

Indipop, arguably the first commercially successful non-film music in India (Kvetko 2005). As

documented by Peter Kvetko, Indipop drew on western pop conventions such as chord

progressions, guitar riffs, and the use of African-American oriented vocal melismas; it also used

new studio techniques to move away from the high pitched "treble culture" that marked much

early Hindi film song and, in contrast, emphasized bass (Beaster-Jones 2015, 161). Equally

importantly, Indipop traded in discourses of authenticity and individuality by producing

"private" (that is, non-film) albums that focused on the artist's persona rather than the narrative

of a film. This emphasis on the individual artist leads Beaster-Jones to note: "It is no accident

that Indipop discourses emerged in the neoliberal era in India, a historical moment when

discourses of privatization and entrepreneurship came to dominate…" (2014, 161). Equally,

Indipop emphasized an ideology of voice that connected an individual's vocal timbre and

interpretive style to an expressive interior self. In this way, it set an important precedent for the

discourses of "sounding like yourself" on *Indian Idol* that will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 5.

Although Indipop temporarily destabilized the dominance of Hindi film music, particularly in

large urban centers, its aesthetics, production techniques, and key players were eventually folded

back into the Hindi film music industry. Independent songwriters and music producers became

film music directors and singers such as Alisha Chinai, who were unique in having little to no

training in Indian classical music, lent their voices to highly successful film songs (Kvetko

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[74] As detailed by Greg Booth in his excellent oral history of the Hindi film music industry (2008), these new technologies included programmable synthesizers, multitrack recording and editing machines, which allowed for separate tracking of orchestral sections, "punching in," and multitracking. The introduction of synthesizers also crucially allowed musicians to be separated from their sounds and to, ultimately, be rendered redundant. See also Pond 2005 for a remarkably resonant account of changes in studio recording technology in 1970s America and the influence this had on jazz and pop musical sound and production practices.

2009). Rather than interpreting this as yet another example of "moments in which possible pop music challengers to *filmi* hegemony are simply absorbed by the film production machine" (Beaster-Jones 2014, 112), we can also appreciate how a wider availability of musical sounds, genres, and vocal practices had a significant impact on the aesthetic possibilities available within Hindi film song in the years following liberalization. Ethnomusicologist Natalie Sarrazin summarizes these changes as follows: "The change in Hindi film music during this time was nothing short of revolutionary. Songs exhibited an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan musical sensibility informed by a myriad of styles and approaches to popular music…Overall, vocal styles took on a distinctly Western pop affectation while waves of world music genres influenced instrumentation and composition" (2014, 39).

The New Voices of Hindi Film

The change in and expansion of vocal styles and types is perhaps the most aurally prominent change in Hindi film music since liberalization. Importantly, Lata Mangeshkar - now in her sixties - cut back on recordings and performances in the 1990s, allowing for the rise of a new generation of singers, such as Kavita Krishnamurthy, Anuradha Paudhwal, and Alka Yagnik. These singers still favored the thin, fine vocality and classically oriented style that Mangeshkar had been known for, but their very presence diversified the landscape of Hindi film music.

Subsequently, this shift to music more inflected by western and world popular music has created a demand for a wider variety of voices, from singers who can still reproduce the older semi-classical film song style to those more interested in (or capable of) belting like a rock singer or utilizing a sensuous breathiness. This demand is fed by a new generation of music directors, many of whom grew up listening to western popular music and playing in bands in tandem with, or in lieu of, ongoing training in Hindustani classical music. So, for example, a 2013 article in

the Times of India about the young singer Shefali Alvares quotes her saying: "I remember [music director] Pritam telling me they were looking for new voices. A western element is what they called it. All the others here are classically trained in Hindustani or Carnatic music. I think they want me to sound like…me" (Durham 2013).

Here, I focus on three songs to draw out some of the characteristics of these "new voices." The first is "Choli ke Peeche" ("Behind the Blouse"),[75] a controversial dance number from the 1993 film *Khalnayak*.[76] The song features two female singers. The voice of Ila Arun, one of the first middle-class "folk" singers in Hindi film music, is chesty and brusque as she sings, "What's behind the blouse? What's behind the veil?" in an interrogative, declamatory style. Alka Yagnik was one of the most prominent of the new crop of Lata-esque voices in the 1990s; her voice is high and quite nasal, both piercing and sweetly melodious, as she answers, "Oh, in the blouse is my heart. Behind the veil is my heart. I'll give my heart to my love." This exchange is book-ended by a chorus of female voices singing an aggressively staccato "coo-coo-coo" ostinato on a single note. While Yagnik's voice offers a familiar timbre, it is recontextualized in this very forceful musical setting, while the hoarseness and direct address of Arun's voice are startlingly new.

The second song is "Balam Pichkari" ("Beloved with a Water Gun") from the 2013 film *Yeh Deewani Hai Jawaani* (*Youth is Madness*), sung by the young playback singer Shalmali Kholgade.[77] Kholgade uses a light breathy tone for the high pitched opening words, "so much fun," then switches to a tighter, chestier tone to deliver the rest of the syllabic line, "where is this

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[75] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nd5NLbUu44
[76] See Monica Mehta's work on "Choli ke peeche" for further details on the public controversy the song incited and the censorship it faced for its seemingly provocative lyrics (Mehta 2011).
[77] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WtRNGubWGA

coming from? Have you mixed pot in the air?," ending with a slight growl of vocal fry. In this upbeat, assertive song, driven by heavy pounding *naqqara* drums, Kholgade's voice is heavily compressed, smoothed with Autotune, and she uses little ornamentation. Most interesting is how Kholgade moves between styles of vocal production – a high breathy head voice, a tight throaty chest voice, the closing of the throat to produce vocal fry – so that her embodied vocal mechanism becomes audible as well and her choice to use it in a variety of ways is foregrounded.

The third song, "Kabira," is also from *Yeh Deewani Hai Jawaani,* but it has a very different character and a very different voice.[78] The song is sung by Rekha Bhardwaj, a playback singer known for her distinctively velvety voice and "Sufi" style. When Bhardwaj enters on an "Ahh," her melodic movements – use of subtle ornaments, fluid slides between notes, and quick scalar jumps – immediately mark her classical training. Yet the song takes on a distinctively pop feel as she sings in her unusually rich voice - at once guttural and fine - over a plucked acoustic guitar, the melody ascending until it breaks out into the chorus.

These three songs thus illuminate some important shifts in the kinds of female voices being heard and circulated through the Hindi film industry over the past two decades.[79] Most noticeably, there is a much wider range of vocal timbres (referred to as "voice texture" in industry terms), from the fine nasality of Alka Yagnik to the thin, but chesty voice of Shalmali Kholgade to the rich alto of Rekha Bhardwaj to the aggressive and grainy voice of Ila Arun. There is also a shift in the register used by female singers; where Lata was known to "sing from

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[78] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHNNMj5bNQw&vl=en
[79] There has been far less change in male voices, perhaps because there was already a wider variety of voices represented amongst canonical male singers, such as Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Mukesh. One trend has been an increased dominance of "crooners," as epitomized by Udit Narayan and Sonu Nigam, although one of the first playback singers, KL Saigal, was also marked as a crooner. Another trend has been the increased presence of male folk-style singers, such as Sukhwinder Singh.

C" (that is, to use C as her tonic), these singers are significantly lower.[80] Singers are also drawing on a wider range of musical styles and vocal deliveries. While there is indeed a noticeable influence from western pop vocal styles, as Sarrazin notes, Indian folk vocal styles also begin to have an important presence, contributing a grittier timbre and loud, open singing style. Finally, it is significant to note that a wide variety of female voices are used in a single film; this is an issue that I will return to in the next chapter.

This musical shift and diversification in voices and vocal styles has set up an interesting tension within *Indian Idol* as a television singing contest that showcases beloved Hindi film songs in their original, canonized versions and is at the same time committed to producing singer-performers who will succeed in relation to current demands in the popular music industry. This can be seen in the conflicting drives to both render songs in a way that is faithful to their original, now-canonized versions and to innovate stylistically and put one's own mark on a song. The approaches of interpretive-stylistic fidelity and interpretive-stylistic uniqueness both have proponents, economic and aesthetic rewards, and sets of affective associations attached to them, which I will discuss in more depth shortly.

The tension between stylistic fidelity and innovation is vividly illustrated by a performance by the young singer Bhoomi Trivedi in the final rounds of Indian Idol 5, produced and aired in 2010. Trivedi's performance is preceded by a narrative video in which she tells us about her ideal partner, who should be "good-hearted and sensitive, a little emotional; of course, he should also be a little naughty, and adventurous." As the video ends, Trivedi appears on the blue-hued stage, dressed in a dark sequinned skirt and blouse combination. She begins singing the iconic

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[80] Both "Balam Pichkari" and "Kabira" are based around Eb, a 6th below Lata's tonic. In "Choli ke peeche," Ila Arun sings from G, while Alka Yagnik sings from C, Lata's tonic.

film song, "Jab Tak Hai Jaan" from the 1972 classic *Sholay*, a song composed by RD Burman and sung by Lata Mangeshkar herself. Trivedi's slightly husky voice sounds tight and strained; one judge frowns while another smiles and nods encouragingly. Trivedi sings gamely, but it is clear that she is struggling - her upper notes are strained, her pitch wavers, and she looks grim.

When Trivedi completes her performance, the first to speak is guest judge Hema Malini, an older Hindi film actress who played the female lead in "Sholay" and upon whom this song was picturized: "The way you sang, the pitch was a little low, wasn't it? Because Lataji was singing in that high pitch…" Trivedi nods as her smile fades. Judge Anu Malik, who has been an established music director since the 1980s, interrupts, "I want to ask: Bhoomi, is this the original scale?" to which Trivedi replies "No, Sir." "What happened today, Bhoomi? Did you not want to take the original scale?" Malik presses, and Trivedi confesses that the register of the original song was too high for her. When Malik asks further about the relatively low quality of her performance, Trivedi says that she strained her voice. At this point, one of the show's hosts intervenes to "reveal" that Trivedi was struggling during the technical rehearsal. We are shown a short black-and-white clip of Trivedi, first in the rehearsal, then sitting in a studio chair, with a picture of Lata Mangeshkar strategically placed on the wall behind her. Looking at the ground, Trivedi tells the camera that she has been working hard, but the song isn't coming in the rehearsal. As the video shows Trivedi coughing in slowmotion, she reflects that she is scared about the final performance, because she isn't able to make the song flow. "I am really nervous, I don't know what will happen."

A younger judge, the successful playback singer Sunidhi Chauhan, jumps in and offers Trivedi an impromptu vocal masterclass. Demonstrating, she encourages Trivedi to sing in a more open and forward voice in order to get the sparkle and edge of Mangeshkar's voice. "If you

had thrown your voice, as you know how," she coaches, "then the pitch would have sounded higher." Trivedi gamely tries again but with no luck, and Chauhan sits back, shaking her head.

Figure 1: Bhoomi Trivedi: "I am really nervous, I don't know what will happen"

The last to speak is Salim Merchant, who emerged as a successful music director in the early 2000s due to his catchy, rock anthem songs. Dressed in a white T-shirt and black leather vest, Merchant assertively takes another tact: "Yes, if you sing with an open voice, then your pitch will come better. But I've said it in previous episodes and I'll say it again: you have a *different* voice and that's what makes you different from other singers. That's your plus point! And that's

why I feel that lots of music directors will be willing to work with you - so bank on that, and take all the good tips."

It is clear that this aspiring Bollywood singer was an aesthetic double bind. On the one hand, Trivedi was compelled to situate herself and her performance in close proximity to the original rendition of the song. Indeed, she closely mimicked Mangeshkar's vocal inflections as she moved through the song's melody. But her need to transpose the song a fourth lower was immediately detected and critiqued. Beyond her scale, Trivedi is criticized for failing to capture the sparkle and verve of Mangeshkar's original version. Reflecting the perspective of the older generation, the comments of judges Malik and Malini bring to mind the aesthetic evaluation offered by music director Anand at the beginning of this essay: all three emphasize Mangeshkar as a vocal ideal and hold up the original version of the song as the standard to which the contestant should aspire. At the same time, the judges' panel also contain younger music directors, who are producing much of the most popular and lucrative music coming out of Bollywood today. Making a favorable impression on them can have a significant impact on a singer's career. Indeed, Salim Merchant conveys his impatience with the existing mimetic and comparative paradigm, reminding Trivedi that it is her uniquely husky and full voice that will *actually* lead her to professional success in the form of offers from music directors like himself.

This ten-minute clip of an *Indian Idol* episode is analytically informative on several levels. Firstly, it showcases a range of perspectives from professionals within the Hindi film and film music industry, illustrating their conflicting criteria for evaluation and the ways that they respond to and negotiate their colleagues' perspectives. Secondly, the specificity of the comments of actress Malini, music director Malik, and playback singer Chauhan again remind us how

intimately classic Hindi film songs are known and how deeply they are embedded in the popular consciousness.

Finally, the story of Bhoomi Trivedi herself sheds some light on the stakes of musical interpretation within popular music careers today. After this performance and her inability to conjure Lata Mangeshkar's voice, Trivedi was indeed eliminated from the Top Three, as she had feared. Yet four years later, in 2014, she was awarded "Best Playback Singer of the Year" at the International Indian Film Academy Awards for the "item number" song "Ram Chahe Lila" from the film *Ram-Lila* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali.[81] The song features Trivedi singing in a low pitched, husky tone. Her voice, interspersed with improvised Arabic style melodic flourishes, immediately marks the song as distinctive, sensual, and compelling. Coupled with a provocatively sexy video starring the actress Priyanka Chopra, the song-sequence was an overwhelming hit: the YouTube video received three million views within days of being released and Trivedi's voice filled the airwaves.

Having "your own voice:" Producers' Discourses

Salim Merchant's perspective, as expressed in this *Indian Idol* episode, is representative of a larger shift in the kinds of voices and aesthetic practices that are being sought after and rewarded in the Hindi film industry today. While older producers often seek the compelling emulation of an already familiar song, younger music directors and playback singers continuously emphasize the importance of individuality and uniqueness in the music industry today. In this section, I

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[81] An item number is a song-and-dance number which features explicitly suggestive lyrics and sexualized dance moves performed by an actress labeled as an "item girl." I discuss item numbers in more detail in Chapter 4.

draw on interviews with four of the most prominent individuals of the younger, post-

liberalization generation active in the Hindi film music industry today to illuminate these

contrasting generational perspectives on the idea of musical innovation and interpretive agency.[82]

Merchant told me that he prided himself on giving breaks to many young singers. Speaking

in his expansive basement level studio, he described how he worked with contestants on the

shows: …most of the time, the contestants…they're listening to the original recording and

trying to emulate the original singer. Which is a completely wrong technique. Because they'll

never have their own personality and their own voice," he explained.

 "So what would you say to them about that?" I asked.

> I'd say, I understand that you're trying to sound like Kailash Kher or Sonu Nigam –
> don't do that. Don't do that. Try to sound, try to sing it with your soul. Try to sing with
> your own heart and have your own voice. That's very important. That's what will
> groom you, that's what will impress; because ultimately, the *ultimate* plan is to sing – in
> movies, in Bollywood. And that'll NEVER happen if they're emulating another singer.
> Why would I call someone [into the studio] – who sounds like somebody [else]?? (May
> 10th, 2014).

A month later, I met with the established young music director team Vishal Dadlani and

Shekar Ravjiani, otherwise known as Vishal-Shekar. The two have served as judges on a range

of music competition shows and their interestingly divergent musical backgrounds - Vishal

gained musical fame as the lead singer for Indian heavy metal band Pentagram, while Shekar had

received deep training in Hindustani classical singing - made me particularly interested in their

perspective on the musical choices that aspiring singers today must engage with. Sitting at a

noisy cafe in a hip Mumbai neighborhood, I asked them what they were looking for in a singer,

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[82] This generational divide is not hard and fast and seems to depend on the songs under consideration.
Older classics are much more likely to incur comparative scrutiny with the original, while newer songs
sung by respected but less iconic singers are more likely to invite discourses about individuality from all
the judges.

both as judges and as music directors. Vishal, an imposing guy with a deep authoritative voice and shaved head, replied:

> Of course, technical qualification, as a singer- but apart from that, also, a certain vibe. See, any good singer essentially has their own personal vibe. [In the old form of the shows], while the voices were very musical, the voices that were being focused on, the styles that were being focused on were very generic. Nowadays what happens – anyone who stands out – has a greater chance of getting somewhere. That's really crucial.

"So how do you guide expression?" I asked. Shekar jumped in: "Also, these kids, they've really heard a lot of this past 10-15 years in music, so they've kind of been following some singers…so what happens is, when they start singing that [person's] style, we need to try and figure out what their *own* style is…" Vishal interjected:

> I mean, no disrespect to the greats – but everyone has to find their own vibe…That's what *makes* a singer. It's not just the singing – it's not just the technique, or it's not just sounding like somebody – what makes a singer stand out is *how much of themselves they're able to bring to a song*…And you find that *all* the greats always had that ability – at first hear, you can tell, 'this is that voice.' You know? And then that style may have become a genre…And that's the mistake. *The whole point is that individuality is key* (May 22nd, 2014, emphasis added).

Finally, I spoke on the phone with Sunidhi Chauhan, one of the leading playback singers in Bollywood today and herself a former contestant on *Meri Awaaz Suno*, a television music contest held by national TV channel Doordarshan in the early 1990s. When I asked Chauhan what kind of guidance she offered to contestants in her capacity as a judge, she immediately responded: "See, I have one thing I really believe. *Please* try to sound like yourself." She went on to say:

> I've heard so much of Kishoreda [Kishore Kumar, the iconic male singer of the 1960s and 1970s]…I just love him - but I don't *sound* like him. Of course, that's partially because I am a woman and he is a man; but *it's also about how you get inspired, adapt it, make it unique.* People want to be everything but themselves - because they don't think [being themselves] will work...(June 17, 2014, emphasis added).

Across these conversations, younger members of Bollywood's elite emphasized the importance of vocal uniqueness and interpretive individuality for finding success, both on reality music television shows and after. They tell a story of changes in the aesthetic market of the Hindi film music industry whereby self-expression and finding one's "own sound" and "own style" have become qualities that are emphatically privileged. Vocal uniqueness and individual, personality-based self-expression are tightly intertwined, as Vishal's repeated emphasis on finding one's "own vibe" illustrates.

In contrast, individuals from the older generation of Hindi film music industry professionals expect and guide young singers to always situate themselves in relation to established singers and canonic versions of songs.[83] This generational divide was further reinforced in Anand's discussion of how he chose songs for the *Indian Idol* contestants. I asked Anand how he honed in on a song when there was such a vast corpus of Hindi film songs: did he go with songs that were popular or well known, or were there other criteria he used? Anand responded strongly that his song choice was not governed by popularity: "The Fevicol song [an item number], I don't assign that, right? Vada pav [a fried street food] is popular, it's our national food, but still, we don't serve it when guests come home. There should be some thought…," some sense of curation and taste by which songs were presented. Instead, Anand emphasized the importance of finding songs that suited the contestant's voice and that spoke to the audience's sensibility: "Yes, our audience is mostly music lovers. So they like to hear songs that they know."

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[83] Indeed, several former reality music show contestants, when asked how they had learned their assigned songs, told me that they were coached by the show's music director (who also happened to be Anand Sharma) to listen to the song dozens of times before they tried to sing it themselves.

I pressed Anand for his perspective on singers' ability to experiment, bringing up the example of a recent winner of *SaReGaMaPa* who had, in my opinion, been fairly experimental as a performer. Anand replied that a singer shouldn't experiment so much that the original song was distorted. Furthermore, he felt that it was inappropriate for a singer to always be experimenting and modifying a song. "Our Bollywood is old," he explained, and the standard for songs was set; audiences expected a particular, proven product. Thus, for Anand, an aspiring singer would do well to respect the established and codified form of a song. To experiment was to at once risk losing audience favor and, he implied, somewhat disrespectful to the long tradition of beloved Hindi film songs in which audiences and singers were knitted together through an affective and musical familiarity.

Theories of Musical Meaning: Making a song your own

The "new voices" of Hindi film song - Bhoomi Trivedi and others like her - are singers whose voices and interpretive styles are distinct from playback singers of eras past and sufficiently differentiated from their competition in the increasingly diversified market of vocal "talent" vying to be recognized and make it into Bollywood today. Contained in these contrasting sets of aesthetic commentaries, then, are implicit but strongly held understandings of how songs gain meaning and how such meaning can be mobilized in the space of a reality music television show.

For the older generation of music producers and industry insiders who appear as judges, Anand's gendered analogy between the original rendition of a song and the familiar form of the mother takes on particular salience: audiences know these songs as intimately as they know their mother, and their emotional connection to a song depends on this reliable familiarity. Familiar

vocal timbres and styles carry affective power, the ability to tap into years and decades of cultural meaning associated with the original version of the song and the voice of its singer. In the space of *Indian Idol,* the dissatisfied reactions of judges Hema Malini and Anu Malik make clear the stakes of failing to establish this familiar sound: the song's power weakens and the link between performer and audience is broken. Conversely, if this sonic-affective link is maintained intact, the performer receives audience approval as well as approbation from the judges, which translates into votes and, potentially, jobs.

This generation of creative professionals thus privileges *the song* as a locus of already established meaning, whereby it is the singer's responsibility to re-enliven an already meaningful musical creation, bringing it to life in performance in order to activate already-primed audience aesthetic and affective expectations (Mazzarella 2012). Such expectations are, as I have argued, grounded in the circulatory network of Hindi film songs, which serves to renew their familiarity and re-inscribe their nostalgic meaning.

In stark contrast, for the younger generation of producers, discussions of vocal style project an ideal expressive person, a vision of a singer whose voice and emotional output are unquestionably rooted in *themselves* without overt reference to the sounds and voices that have come before them. These producers foreground *the singer* as the locus of creative agency, encouraging the discovery and expression of a "true self" that should then guide and inhabit musical interpretation. As Vishal Dadlani challenged: "How much of themselves can they bring to a song?" Here, it is the singer who gives the song meaning; the song is an important, but relatively empty vehicle for the expression and performance of self.

At play here are multiple meanings of "voice" and what it means to "have a voice." In their seminal article on "An Anthropology of Voice" (1994), music scholars Feld, Fox, Porcello and

Samuels point to a potential disjuncture between exploring the voice as a "metaphor" for subjectivity and agency and attending to the sonic materiality of the voice. Resisting, or bridging, this disjuncture, they call for attention to voice "in its multiple registers" in order to gain insight into "…the intimate, affective, and material/embodied dimensions of cultural life and sociopolitical identity." In the context of *Indian Idol* and its mediatized vocal performances and discussions *of* voice, these producers' discourses intimately link multiple registers of the voice, condensing the sound of the voice – timbre and register - with questions of musical interpretation and style, and ideals of subject and self. Further, producers' discussions about the sonic materiality of the voice simultaneously figure the voice as a "metaphor for subjectivity" – that is, a way of talking about ideal subjects and their experiences - *and* implicitly posit the voice, and expressive vocal practice more broadly, as a tool for shaping subjectivity and creating subjects. In these professional discourses, then, the voice is both a reflection of one's subjectivity and a tool for constituting it.

<center>Making the Song "your own"</center>

These contrasting discourses bring to mind the injunction heard on *Idol* shows across the world to "make the song your own." Indeed, the tension between interpretive fidelity and uniqueness is a tension held in common across many of these shows, as Katherine Meizel illustrates in her monograph on *American Idol.* On the one hand, the "cover song" is of particular importance on *American Idol*; even as singers are ultimately expected to establish themselves as independent artists, "…on their way to this independence, they must undergo an onstage training course in canonic literature in order to understand their place in music history as it can be imagined by *American Idol*" (2011, 62). At the same time, the judges are continuously exhorting

the contestants to "make it your own" and praising them for doing so, thus establishing the

contestant as a true 'artist' who is able to move beyond mere imitation:

> In *American Idol* the idea of a unique performance becomes a key trope, a duty and goal for contestants trying to reach a precarious balance between two understandings of originality - an originality of *origins*, the need to live up the origins of the song's original artist, and an originality that is seen as an innovative expressive of individuality" (2011, 63).

This tension that Meizel describes resonates with the two models of musical

interpretation that I am locating in *Indian Idol*: one emphasizing fidelity, the other innovation.

But the means available to render a song "unique" on *Indian Idol* are quite different from those

utilized by *American Idol* contestants. In the space of *American Idol*, this act of "making it your

own" requires some kind of obvious manipulation of song content and setting - switching from

major to minor key, radically shifting the tempo, transposing genre, or creating a markedly

different arrangement are but a few of the ways in which a contestant can reinterpret and lay

claim to an already well-known song.

In contrast, contestants on *Indian Idol* are also rewarded for "making a song their own,"

but the means by which they can do so are far more subtle. For example, in one *Indian Idol*

performance that won accolades for its originality from the judges, the young female singer

Poorvi Koutish sings both male and female parts of the duet, "O meri jaan ne kaha,"[84] originally

sang by Asha Bhosle and music director-singer R.D. Burman in the 1970 film *The Train*.

Alternating between a rough, growling and a light, fine vocal texture, and interspersing some use

of head voice and scatting, Koutish gives the impression that the song has been sung by multiple

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[84] https://vimeo.com/45956150

people in multiple styles; it is a virtuosic and impressive performance. Yet the song remains largely unmodified in terms of melody, tempo, and structure.

It would be inaccurate and simplistic to say that older judges and members of the Hindi film industry are only seeking for a contestant to create a simulacra of an already-rendered and already-meaningful song. Rather, they too offer a version of "you have made the song your own" as high praise, but such a performance is not marked by overt differentiation from the original.[85] To the contrary, to appropriate a song, from this perspective, is to so faithfully and convincingly sing it like the original that one actually inhabits the song as singer, even if temporarily. If the post-liberalization understanding of "making the song your own" implies that a performer has "colonized" a song through a convincingly unique rendition of it, this older understanding has the singer being subsumed *into* the song through a convincingly authentic and faithful rendition; the song makes the singer its own.[86] This older interpretive paradigm thus participates in the circulation and reinscription of the "original" song as it circulates through public and private space in both recorded and "live" forms.

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[85] My understanding of this mimetic process and its power resonates with Michael Taussig's rich exploration of mimesis and the "resurgence of the mimetic faculty" which allows for a sensuous, embodied recognition and connection between the object and the copy, between the perceiver and the perceived, the self and other (2003, 19-21). Further, Taussig connects this mimetic process to the idea of sympathetic magic (ala Frazer) which affords "…a notion of the copy, in magical practice, affecting the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented" (1993, 48). This profound proposition – that a "copy" can be so effective as to take on properties of, and even reciprocally influence, "the original" - resonates with regard to the "mimetic" interpretation of Hindi film songs and is an interpretive avenue that I plan to explore further.

[86] In stage shows of evergreen songs, and even in the early years of Indian Idol, young singers are introduced with the announcement that a certain song will be sung "x ki avaaz mein," that is, "in X's voice." This seems to reinforce the idea of an autonomous, unchanging song being filled or "covered" by a particular voice.

Locating the film song's aura

Walter Benjamin famously wrote that "[aura]…is that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin 1969 (1935)). Rather than taking this statement at face value as an expression of loss in the face of modernity and mass culture, Jonathan Sterne argues that Benjamin's formulation shows that "…aura is a construct that is, by and large, retroactive, something that is *an artifact of reproducibility*, rather than a side effect or an inherent quality of self-presence. Aura is the *object* of a nostalgia that accompanies reproduction...reproduction does not separate copies from originals but results in a *new form of originality*" (2003, 241, emphasis added). Building on Sterne's reading of Benjamin's account of the technologically mediated "original" of the film scene, I have attempted to demonstrate how the "original" Hindi film song exists *only* in its reproducible *and circulating* form.[87] The Hindi film song *accrues* authenticity and meaning precisely through its repetition and circulation through various mediums, both mechanical and performed. It is the very fact of reproducibility and circulation that allows the Hindi film song to be perceived in an "original" form and that gives it its retroactive power and "aura."

From this perspective, "aura" inheres in the listener, a member of this nostalgic affective community (Madrid 2008). Authenticity is thus located in "an intensity or consistency of the listening experience. It is a claim about affect and effect, rather than a claim about degrees of truth or presence in a reproduced sound" (Sterne 2003, 241). Further, this reproduction and circulation allows for a reification of the "original" song and of the voice of the playback singer

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[87] Such a formulation resonates with Dard Neuman's account of the rise of a live concert culture for Hindustani classical music in which the mediated recorded performance preceded any encounter with the "live" performance, acting as an "originary mechanical experience" that subsequently structures live performance (Neuman 2009).

as an originary marker. The voice of the playback singer becomes the bearer of aura and vocal fidelity a crucial mark of authenticity.

Conclusion: Musical Labor in Liberalizing India

In the new musical economy, individuality and distinctiveness of vocal style and interpretive instinct are paramount, necessary selling points in an increasingly crowded field of aspiring playback singers. In this view, it is the singer who gives the song meaning, and these new modes of musical performance are new modes of self performance. Further, when young members of the film music industry exhort contestants to "be themselves" and "express themselves" in order to find professional success, they are speaking from personal experience, for Vishal-Shekar, Sunidhi Chauhan, and Salim Merchant are some of the biggest Indian artists touring domestically and internationally these days. Young Indians who attend their shows at college music festivals across the country are not seeking recreations of classic songs and voices from the 1960s, but new styles of singing and, more importantly, new modes of performance that speak to their experience and that situate them within global practices of youth consumption of popular culture.

The tensions I have been exploring between interpretive fidelity and uniqueness find their mirror in other current debates in Indian society, particularly in anxious public conversations regarding education and corporate entrepreneurship. Here, a range of thought leaders and industry CEOs are insisting on the need to cultivate creative and independent thinkers in order to enhance India's competitiveness in the global marketplace. Such a push directly contradicts the long-standing markers of intellectual excellence demonstrated by mastery of rote knowledge and measured by India's competitive examination system. As just one amongst many examples, this anxiety is illustrated by a LinkedIn article that went viral in 2013, entitled "Can India create the

next Apple or Google?" Written by Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, a leading entrepreneur, the article argued that India eschews a culture of real risk-taking and instead relies on already proven models of success, with Shaw going so far as to say that India is fearful of innovation.[88]

Shaw's argument illuminates a moment of profound transformation as changing economic – and political – regimes mark a deep shift in the kinds of selves that are being imagined, cultivated, and promoted in order for India to successfully navigate a globalized modernity. I argue that we can locate a corresponding tension in contestations about vocal practice in the very public, high-stakes space of *Indian Idol*. Contestants must situate themselves between two different musical economies – one built on the cultural capital of nostalgia in relation to already established song forms and voices, the other built on practices of individuation and musical uniqueness through "self-expression." Each requires and rewards different kinds of subjects and selves. And yet, musically mirroring the challenge faced by all those of their generation, aspiring performers on *Indian Idol* find themselves beholden to both.

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[88] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20131114095731-28180694-can-india-produce-the-next-apple-or-google

CHAPTER 3:
MUSICAL LIVELIHOODS AND PLAYBACK PRECARITY

After a follow-up interview over coffee with the young singer Abhilasha Chellum, we exited Starbucks together and strolled the broad brick sidewalks of the upscale, "integrated township" built into the former jungle of north-eastern Mumbai. Abhilasha had been a contestant on not one, but three "reality" singing television shows, most notably emerging as the second-place winner on *SaReGaMaPa Singing Superstars* in 2010; as we strolled down to the street, we continued chatting about her musical experiences. After a few blocks, the tall buildings and wide boulevards of the planned neighborhood abruptly ended, followed by smaller shady sidewalks punctuated by sleeping dogs and lined with rows of small shops. We stopped at one snack store to munch on *sevpuri*. Standing on the sidewalk, sharing the crunchy snack drizzled with tangy and spicy chutneys off the small paper plate, we talked about her upcoming show in the neighboring city of Pune over the weekend and I asked if she might have a show in Mumbai any time soon. Abhilasha replied that she didn't get very many shows in Mumbai. Why is that? I pressed. Was it because there were simply less shows in Mumbai, or did they just all go to big-name performers?

"We strugglers, we don't get many shows in Mumbai (We strugglers, humko bahut kam shows milte hain Mumbai mein)," Abhilasha mumbled. "Do you really think of yourself as a struggler?" I asked, surprised, and Abhilasha paused: "Well - a struggler - and a student of life."

She was getting frequent work in the form of stage shows and live performances, and the music director duo Sajjid-Wajjid often called her to record scratch tracks[89] for their songs. However, Abhilasha had not yet had her "break," where her voice remained on the final track. Although she felt that Sajjid-Wajjid really fought for her, thus far the film's producers had not agreed to let the voice of a young, largely unknown singer remain as the featured voice and name on the track.[90]

<center>***</center>

So often, singing competition television shows, now known as "reality" music television shows, are perceived by the general public as a quick and easy road to fame: a shortcut to the invaluable connections and access necessary to create a career as a playback singer or, more disparagingly, a means of circumventing years of hard work and training. As the brief anecdote above indicates, such a perspective is simplistic, given the challenges and complexities that young singers face in trying to break into the Bollywood playback industry. Contestants on singing competition TV music shows emerge into an increasingly competitive and precarious field wherein numerous young singers are seeking to establish themselves as "new voices" and where popular music careers at once carry social prestige, economic reward, and a good deal of risk. Although appearing on a singing competition television show has its distinct social and material advantages, as I will discuss, finding sustained success as a popular music singer is a fickle, often elusive endeavor.

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[89] An initial track recording which is used as a placeholder as the other tracks comprising a song are assembled. In the Hindi film industry, a big-name singer is often called in later to re-record the lead vocals.

[90] Ganti also notes the use of the word "struggler" in the Hindi film industry, defining it as "a common term for actors without any kin or social connections who are trying to get a break in the film industry" (2012, 134).

In this chapter, I draw on the stories of the many former contestants I interviewed to illuminate the challenges of building a career in the Hindi popular music industry. Tracing changes in the structure of production, I show how the very conditions that allow contestants coming out of singing competition TV shows to "get a break" also work against the likelihood of a stable long-term career. Drawing on anthropological literature on "precarity," I show that this work of establishing a popular music career is accompanied by a condensed economic, social, and affective insecurity, whereby contestants must constantly seek to capitalize on their "face value" in order to keep their "brand" alive and generate further opportunities for themselves. Building on Anne Alison's idea of "sensing precarity," I also argue that this anxiety about one's achievements and status as a "struggler" pervades the sites and scenes of the industry to create a certain affective atmosphere (Allison 2011, 2012). In this way, aspiration and precarity form two sides of the same coin - they are the conditions of possibility for each other.

I close by showing how this precarity can also compel a certain kind of creativity and agency as more young singers seek to control their artistic production and their means of livelihood in the form of creating and arranging their own songs, producing their own videos, and becoming music directors. Here, I draw on the examples of several former contestants to show how they have generated their own opportunities in response to the increased unpredictability of a career as a Bollywood playback singer. These stories also illustrate the ambivalence that young singers today experience regarding the prestige of a Bollywood recording career against forging their own path.

In the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008, the attention brought to high levels of global inequality and disparity by the global Occupy movement, and the focus on precarity as a political rallying cry in the May Day protests in Europe, amongst other flashpoints,

anthropologists have increasingly been attuned to and interested in precarity as a quality of life in the contemporary global ecumene. Attention to the global "precariat" is grounded in a perceived shift in the conditions of labor from the regularized, Fordist stability of the post-World War II industrial economic boom to the conditions of increasingly flexible and irregular labor that have come to mark "work" and "livelihood," as both economic and social structures, in tandem with increasingly integrated global markets.[91] As Lauren Berlant notes, precarity is an importantly multivalent term:

> Precarity has taken shape as many things: a realist term, denoting a condition of instability created by changes in the compact between capital and the state; an affective term, describing the historical present; and an ideological term, a rallying cry for a new world of interdependency and care that takes the public good as the a priori whose energies do not exist for the benefit of private wealth and which should be protected by the political class (2011a, 2).

In turn, Anne Allison notes that precarity cannot usefully be conceived of simply as an economic marker: "…Precarity is related to, but not necessarily interchangeable with precarious labor…Precarity is insecurity in life: material, existential, social" (2012, 349).[92]

Following Allison and others, it is not the economic, material conditions of my informants' lives that prompt an engagement with precarity in this chapter. Rather, I point to a social precarity arising from a disjuncture between the social distinction attached to a career as a

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[91] Indeed, a range of scholars have recognized that "insecurity has always been an inherent feature of capitalism" (Dezeuze 2013, 227) and that Fordism was an "exception" rather than a stable norm (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), a temporary truce between labor and capital (Ridout and Schneider 2012).

[92] In her discussion of gendered precarity in India, Raka Ray points out that "precarity" and "informal" are two different ways of talking about insecurity and labor, with the former more frequently associated with discussions of neoliberalism in western contexts, while the latter is used to refer to conditions of labor in the global south (2014). However, I believe that it would be a misnomer to characterize the position of playback singer, historically, as one of "informal" labor, inadequately capturing the highly structured nature of the Hindi film industry and the relationship between playback singers and the music directors with whom they worked.

playback singer, the elusiveness of success as a playback singer, and the multiple professional

paths that young singers must pursue in order to find economic stability. The diversification of

voices discussed in previous chapter has created new conditions of opportunity *and* instability

wherein new *kinds* of voices have also been paralleled by *more* voices. Drawing on Allison and

Berlant's emphasis on the affective experience of precarity, what performance scholar Anna

Dezeuze refers to as an existential state of "precariousness" (2012), I show that this experience

of precarity is grounded in the economic and production conditions of Bollywood today, even as

it has always been a marker of musicians' lives and their attempts to make a livelihood.

Singing Competition Television Shows: A Path to Bollywood?

"Now, the industry is very open," stated Harshit Saxena, the second-place winner in

Voice of India 2007. Reflecting on the industry, he declared that when he began his career in

2007, it was "not very open - it was all about playback singers like Shaan and KK." Now,

Harshit insisted, the situation had changed. Indeed, it is frequently observed - by Hindi film

producers, musicians, audiences, journalists, and scholars of Indian popular music alike - that

there are an unprecedented number of singers active in Bollywood right now. This situation

stands in stark contrast to the Hindi film playback industry prior to liberalization, when a small

group of singers and voices - namely, Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar, Geeta Dutt, Mohammed

Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Mukesh - were consistently featured in the plethora of film songs

released between the 1940s and 1980s. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a new group of

singers – Alka Yagnik, Kavita Krishnamurthy, Udit Narayan, Kumar Sanu, and others – became

active as Bollywood playback singers, leading to a marked diversification in the voices that were

heard in Hindi film songs (as discussed in Chapter 2). This trend continued throughout the 1990s

and has only accelerated in the new millennium. As Indian newspapers repeatedly exclaim, and older playback singers decry, this is a golden age of access for young singers trying to break into the playback industry.[93]

Singing competition television shows have played an important role in this expansion of the number of voices and singers active in Hindi film music. Starting with the introduction of *SaReGaMa*, the first such show to appear on television, in 1995, singing competition TV shows have been providing a platform for a steady stream of "young talent." Indeed, when looking at a list of singers whose voices have appeared in Bollywood songs over the past decade, this impact is readily apparent, for the majority of these singers have participated in - indeed, got their start in - a singing competition TV show. Both Shreya Ghoshal and Sunidhi Chauhan, the most commonly recorded and popular young playback singers today, initially came into the national limelight through the first iteration of singing competition TV shows in the early 1990s. Ghoshal was the winner of the *SaReGaMa* "Children's Special" in 1996 and then of the adult version of *SaReGaMa* in 2000 while Chauhan won *Meri Awaaz Suno*, a singing competition show put on by national television channel Doordarshan in 1996. More recently, singers whose names have started to take on a currency of their own - such as Neeti Mohan, Shweta Pandit, Bhoomi Trivedi, Monali Thakur, Harshdeep Kaur, Antara Mitra, Neha Kakkar, Arijit Singh - all have a reality music show as a significant part of their career path. And amongst the multitude of singers who have more recently sung one or two songs in Bollywood, nearly all have participated in one or more reality shows over the past several years.[94]

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[93] For example, Dubey 2014, "Bollywood Playback Singers Who Are Tuned Out!," Mid-Day Online Edition.
[94] These observations are based on my perusal of multiple singer biographies, newspaper articles, Wikipedia, and online industry journals in order to corroborate the linkage between playback singers and reality music shows today.

Singer	Show
Sunidhi Chauhan	Meri Awaaz Suno (1996, winner)
Shreya Ghoshal	SaReGaMaPa (2000, winner)
Neeti Mohan	Popstars (2003, winner)
Arijit Singh	Fame Gurukul (2005) 10 Ke10 Le Gaye Dil (2005, winner)
Antara Mitra	Indian Idol 2 (2006)
Monali Thakur	Indian Idol 2 (2006)
Neha Kakkar	Indian Idol 2 (2006)
Harshdeep Kaur	Junoon – Kuch Kar Dikhaane Ka (2008, winner)
Mohammed Irfan	Jo Jeeta Wohi Super Star 2 (2008, won) STAR Voice of India (2007) SaReGaMaPa Challenge (2005)
Shweta Pandit	Mission Ustaad (2007)
Bhoomi Trivedi	Indian Idol 5 (2010, runner-up)

Fig. 1: Reality music television debuts of successful playback singers

This direct linkage between singing competition TV shows and a career as a playback singer in Bollywood is not surprising. These television shows provide an unprecedented level of "exposure" to young, previously unknown singers, bringing them into direct contact with the most influential figures in Bollywood today - film producers and actors, music directors and singers - and broadcasting their faces and voices to millions of viewers across India. Indeed, former contestants acknowledge the advantages of such a platform in enabling them to jumpstart careers as popular music singers. Vipul Mehta, the winner of *Indian Idol* 6 in 2012, talked about the crucial "face value" he received from participating in the show: "You see yourself, you have some face value; face value, success, these shows give you a lot!...And there's a big responsibility to go into good opportunities." Harshit Saxena agreed: "When you compete on these shows, people come to know you - you are given a chance." Producers, too, emphasized the importance of such shows in initiating the careers of young singers. Reality music TV show

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judge, playback singer, and music director Shankar Mahadevan hearkened back to *Fame Gurukul*, one of the first music-based reality TV shows in India, recalling that Arijit Singh, now an in-demand playback singer and pop heartthrob, was voted out by the public in round five of the show, "but *we* [the industry] noticed him - it's about being noticed by *the right people*."

The palpable effect of these shows in generating "face value" and recognition was made clear one afternoon as I attended a folk music workshop with Aditi Paul, a professional singer who had been a semi-finalist on the first season of *Indian Idol* in 2004. After the workshop, as all the participants stood out in the small courtyard sipping chai, a young woman approached us to tell Aditi how much she had enjoyed sitting next to her and hearing her sing. "Do you learn singing?" she asked and Aditi demurred, "well, I'm a singer." In an instant, the young woman's face lit up with recognition: "You're Aditi Paul! I used to watch you on Indian Idol! I stopped watching after the second season, I felt that there wasn't enough focus on the singing…but in the first season, you were my favorite!" Aditi laughed awkwardly, at once embarrassed to be so vociferously recognized and yet clearly familiar with this mode of interaction, even a decade after her appearance on the reality music television show.

Yet former contestants from reality music television shows, while acknowledging the benefits they receive from participating in these shows, maintain that their participation hardly guarantees a ready acceptance in Bollywood; the professional and social capital accrued through the reality music television shows, as encapsulated in the idea of "face value," does not directly translate into the Hindi film industry. Harshit Saxena, for example, insisted that while reality music shows do mean that "people come to know you," this does not equate to having an advantage in trying to become a playback singer: "In Bollywood, you have to start from zero. It's not like, 'Oh, you're from this reality show…'"

Television producer and former director of *Indian Idol* Rahul contextualized this sense in shifting understandings of what reality music TV shows can offer: "[Earlier], it was almost …as if you want to make it big, if you want to be famous, to be known, *this* [participating on reality music TV shows] is the step. I think there's a certain realization, a certain maturity now, that, yes - this acts as a boost, but it's not the *only* step. There's a rise and fall. Judges don't say, 'this is going to make your life' anymore." The whole nature of Hindi film music production itself has shifted, Rahul argued, so that:

> You really can't [accommodate all the new singers]. For [contestants], it's a big step towards getting into Bollywood. But Bollywood itself has changed. Earlier, there were four, five *really* big singers who were celebrities in their own right; now there are many singers. Audiences don't really know the singer of every song by name. Eventually, they'll go, 'Ohh, so you're the one who sang that song.

This increase in the number of singers being used is related to a broader shift in the practices of film music production since liberalization. Playback singer Sunidhi Chauhan, for example, further noted that, "Maybe at one time, one or two singers would do all the songs in a film. But now you have five singers in one film; leave that, you have five music directors in one film!" From Chauhan's perspective, this change in production practices was linked to shifts in narrative aesthetics in the Hindi film industry: "In a film, the music director can create a certain atmosphere. But if there's no [coherent] story, then there's no need for connected songs. Instead, you have three, four different sounds in a single film; it doesn't stay connected." Since film soundtracks have become increasingly comprised of atomized, disconnected songs, according to Chauhan, there is no longer a need to use a limited number of singers in order to maintain a vocal continuity; instead, each song can feature a different singer according to the whims of each individual music director. The demand for a wider variety of voices and the use of a larger

number of singers is intertwined with a fragmentation of narrative and aesthetic continuity in film more broadly, as lamented by Chauhan.[95]

Rahul and Chauhan's statements also point to the ways in which specific changes in the production practice of Hindi film songs intersect with the increased challenge of establishing oneself as a playback singer. As detailed in the previous chapter, the stylistic range that marks Hindi film music today demands a diversity of voices capable of offering a range of textures and styles. In tandem with what many singers and industry insiders decry as a near-fetishization of the new - a desire for new names, new voices, new vocal textures - this has created many more openings for young singers trying to break into the industry today. Such aesthetic and production conditions are partially beneficial to aspiring singers coming out of reality music television shows. Equipped with a level of professional savvy and a few crucial connections, such singers are more likely to be able to "get a break." At the same time, there is no guarantee that any one singer will get more than one or two songs. If, previously, prominence of name and voice were hallmarks of the playback singer and a small handful of singers were allocated all the songs, now the opposite is true: many singers will have the opportunity to sing a small number of songs, but neither their names nor their voices will receive a high level of recognition.

These comments highlight the specific form of precarity that attaches to the endeavor of becoming a playback singer today. As many producers and singers alike noted, more and more

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[95] For others, this increase in the number of voices being used in Bollywood and even in a single film is a welcome change for it allows for a more "realistic" depiction of characters as the actress' speaking voice can be matched in timbre and register by the singer's voice. Interestingly, this hearkens back to the practice of "voice casting" that was common in the early years of the Hindi film industry. Further, as Tejaswini Ganti has shown, Hindi film makers are increasingly moving away from the practice of creating lip-synched song and dance numbers in favor of incorporating songs as "background" music. This further undermines the need for "narrative continuity" that a single singer's voice might offer (Ganti 2012).

singers are getting "a break", an opportunity to record a film song (although, as Abhilasha reminds us, that goal too can remain elusive). But it is increasingly challenging to turn the break as a one-off opportunity into more sustained work. Harshit Saxena reflected on his own work: "To *sustain* in Bollywood today is *very* tough." The irony, then, is that the very changes in production practices and aesthetics that create more opportunities and demand for a larger number of singers are paralleled by a decrease in the recognition that any individual singer might receive and thus in the demand for their *specific* voice. "Getting a break" is no longer a guarantee of further recording opportunities or playback employment, and "success" – the ideal of long-term stability in terms of opportunities, income, and social and professional recognition - is increasingly elusive.

Financial Wealth, Social Risk: Tensions of a Precarious Livelihood

Both Allison and Berlant emphasize that precarity cannot usefully be understood as either solely a classed claim or one that is grounded in some economic material reality, for, as Berlant notes, there is a fascinating class incoherence to those claiming precarity (2011a). This increased emphasis on the insufficiency of a primarily materialist, economic examination is particularly important for my argument regarding the increased precarity that contestants from reality music TV shows encounter as they attempt to establish careers as popular music playback singers.

Indeed, if the burgeoning careers of young singers were considered only in financial or material terms, it would be difficult to establish such a claim of precarity, for these young singers receive ample economic compensation in the years following their appearance on such shows. Top winners are given recording contracts and taken on national and international tours; more importantly, all participants are in great demand on the live performance circuit, which

encompasses shows at college festivals, corporate events, and private functions, such as parties and weddings, across the country. A singer might receive anywhere from sixty thousand to seven lakh rupees (approximately one-thousand to eleven-thousand dollars) for such a show, depending on the status of the reality music television show they are associated with and the degree of public recognition they receive.[96] As Shankar Mahadevan wryly observed: "After the show, these people are busy. And they can buy houses, cars - they're earning more than most executives and MBAs!"

Rather, the kind of precarity that marks a popular music career today resonates with what Allison calls a "social precarity," the social outcome of increasingly precarious labor. Where Allison encapsulates social precarity as a loss of place in society and increasing isolation due to the conditions of precarious labor, I argue that social precarity in regard to popular music careers in India is located more subtly in the divergence between the social prestige discursively attached to the job of Bollywood playback singer and the actual professional musical activities through which young singers can make a living.

Most young singers rely on live shows as their main source of income, supplemented (for a lucky few) by singing advertising jingles. These shows run the gamut from corporation-sponsored events to weddings to concerts at colleges to international shows for NRI audiences. Live shows are, as indicated above, highly lucrative and every singer I spoke to – from established playback singer Sunidhi Chauhan to the most recent reality music show contestants –

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[96] Singers expressed a clear ranking wherein *Indian Idol* carried the most prestige and thus allowed its contestants to charge more, followed by *SaReGaMaPa* and then other shows. Fees also depend on how active a singer has been both in recordings and live performance; those who have returned to their home cities to finish their studies or pursue further musical training see themselves at a disadvantage in this regard relative to their peers who immediately started pursuing a career after appearing on a reality music TV show.

expressed their enjoyment of live performance. However, most live performances (particularly domestic ones) carry less social prestige and more social risk. Harshit Saxena spoke of the need to be "choosy" and only take "good" private shows. He emphasized that he preferred college festivals and corporate events over weddings, where guests would likely just be milling about and not really pay attention.

Further, for female performers, live performances can carry a degree of social risk since they entail traveling by one's self and interacting with a range of unknown men, from drivers to wedding organizers. Several of the female singers noted that they only performed at private events where there would be no dancing so that the show was seen as more of a concert and less as "entertainment." All of the female singers with whom I spoke had either hired managers or used their parents as managers so that they didn't have to engage in financial negotiation and could distance themselves from the act of receiving money for embodied performance. The social ranking attached to these various kinds of performances come from a complex social history wherein performers were seen to be of dubious moral quality, a legacy that young singers, particularly women, are still responding to.[97] To be a popular music singer who primarily sings and earns through live performance - the most readily available and remunerative activity available to young singers - is to receive less respect in the eyes of the public *and* the industry.

For most young singers, then, a career in playback singing continues to be the ideal. Many of the singers with whom I talked spoke of their desire from a young age to become playback singers. Such individuals' dreams are nestled within a larger social understanding of popular music as, on the whole, being synonymous with Hindi film music and a public whose

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[97] For more in-depth discussion of these points, see Weidman 2006, Majumdar 2009, Morcom 2014.

engagement with Hindi film songs as recorded entities parallels any encounter they might have with the song "live," as discussed in the previous chapter.[98] Playback singing continues to act as a metonym for a popular music career and it accordingly carries the most social prestige and value.

Thus, while professional and social recognition is primarily accorded on the basis of playback recording activity and "getting a break" equates with entrance into the playback singing field, the economic livelihood of upcoming singers does not, for the most part, come from playback singing. This negotiation of social distinction and financial stability is, I would argue, one part of the social precarity that young singers encounter as they seek to establish careers[99].

Here we can locate another tension that attends to the project of trying to become a popular music singer today. Even as the industry today favors more voices and offers more chances, a few singers continue to predominate. Abhilasha reflected somewhat bitterly on the likelihood of breaking into playback:

> Ya- because if you rely on playback, it's a bit difficult to get into this. I know, very well…I *did*, I did two [songs], for [music directors] Sajjid-Wajjid, they are very nice. They call, I mean. They have *tried*, they have given me chances, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work – it's like that, you know, the producer is the main. Because he is the one giving money. So he doesn't want to go in vain, he doesn't want to go in loss. So, sometimes, Shreya Ghoshal - is a brand. So in *that*, sometimes, we - newcomers lack. And it's a lot of struggle.

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[98] For a compelling analysis of the ways in which engagement with recorded music preceded and created demand for live performance of Hindustani classical music, see Neuman 2009.

[99] Amanda Weidman locates a number of similar dynamics in her research on the changing characteristics of the Tamil film music industry, including the use of a much wider array of voices and the corresponding need for singers to pursue a more diverse of professional opportunities. However, she notes that "The ideal of voice recognizability has lost its salience; previously associated with divine inevitability, it is now tinged with automaticity and formulaicness" (2014, 9). This is quite different from the sentiments expressed by my informants.

Even with an increase in accessibility for new singers, older financial structures and psychological habits mean that "a brand," an established playback singer, is always preferred in Bollywood.[100] To establish oneself as a brand is to have one's name associated with a certain vocal quality and certain genres. More subtly, it is the complex but recognizable combination of voice, name, and face recognition generated as audiences receive sustained exposure to certain singers through film songs and their circulation on the radio and television, articles and photos in the newspapers. As Abhilasha notes, younger singers are at a disadvantage here, for, to establish oneself as a brand requires a track record of successful songs and appearances which can only emerge out of a certain amount of experience. A singer who has successfully established their brand is then more appealing to film producers, who are famously risk-averse in how they use their money, even as music directors may be pushing for newer voices.

Face Value and the Changing Nature of Fame

In this consideration of singer-as-brand, what is striking about the terms I have emphasized here – "face value," "exposure" – is their emphasis on the visual. If, as former *Indian Idol* director Rahul notes, audiences can no longer recognize the voices of playback singers or identify the singer of a given song, this heralds an increasingly *visual* form of musical fame wherein name and face recognition have become equivalent to, and perhaps even surpassed, vocal recognition.

The new emphasis on visuality has important consequences for musical fame in India. Film scholar Neepa Majumdar has traced the rise of an "aural stardom" in the early years of the playback system – that is, the 1940s – in which viewers recognized the dual visual and aural

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[100] See Ganti 2012 on the aversion to risk within the production structures of the Hindi film industry.

nature of the "star text" as it was split between singer and actor (Majumdar 2009). The aural

stardom of the playback singer, built on the split between body and voice that inhered in the

playback system, was further reinforced as beloved singers like Lata Mangeshkar sought to

downplay the bodily source of their voices in both recording and in live performance (recall the

anecdote in the previous chapter about RD Burman not being able to locate the "source" of

Lata's voice). Indeed, in live performances, Lata is famous for standing perfectly still, reading

lyrics from a notebook, and not displaying any emotion. If the playback singer has long been the

primary popular music star in India, Lata's performance style is an almost comical repudiation of

star presence – she refuses to presence herself except through the voice.[101]

Yet these conversations with Rahul and upcoming playback singers seem to indicate the

demise, or at least the diminishing power, of this "aural stardom" wherein only a few playback

singers are recognizable by voice alone.[102] With the rise of visual media such as television in the

post-liberalization era and with the more recent significance of social media such as Facebook

and Instagram, singers understand the centrality of "face value" in constituting themselves as a

brand and beginning to accrue some form of recognition and fame.

In this context, "face value," "exposure," and "name recognition" are more than casual

industry phrases; they are valuable resources that must be carefully maintained in order to be

capitalized on. Young singers are all too aware that the progress of their career is directly linked

to public and industry perceptions of their ongoing relevance and that the recognition afforded by

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[101] Notably, this performance style seems to only hold for female singers; videos of live performances by Mohammed Rafi and Kishore Kumar show them smiling, making eye contact, tapping feet, and snapping fingers, often to direct the band.

[102] It may also be the case that such "aural stardom" is now reserved for those few singers – such as Shreya Ghosal, Sunidhi Chauhan, and Arijit Singh – who record frequently. Indeed, fame based on one's sound still seems to be the discursive ideal. Harshit Saxena's Facebook profile has the tagline, "Music for your ears, not your eyes," even as his page primarily features pictures of himself.

their participation on reality music TV shows is finite. They therefore attempt to revive such recognition by circulating their names, faces, and voices through the avenues that are available to them.

For example, most of the young singers I spoke with had appeared on multiple reality music TV shows, some participating in up to four such shows. Vipul Mehta appeared on the "Children's Special" of *SaReGaMa* (2003) and had been a finalist on STAR *Voice of India* (2008) before he appeared on, and ultimately won, *Indian Idol* 6 in 2012. Abhilasha Chellum had first won the Marathi version of *SaReGaMaPa* before appearing on the Hindi language version of the show (indeed, winners of the regional versions were given direct entry into the main Hindi version). Harshit Saxena was a finalist on both *Music ka Maha Muqabla* and STAR *Voice of India*, after which he was invited to participate in *Jo Jeeta Wohi Superstar,* a show which brought together previous participants and winners from various reality music TV shows to compete against each other. This show was won by Rahul Vaidya, the second runner-up in *Indian Idol* 1, who had also participated in *Music ka Maha Muqabla*. Abhijeet Sawant, the winner of *Indian Idol* 1, was the second runner-up.[103] Several successful contestants also transitioned into acting as hosts for such shows. Rahul Vaidya was the host for dance reality show *Aaja Mahi Ve* (2008) and then for the dance reality show *Jhoom India.* Meiyang Chang, fifth runner-up in *Indian Idol 3*, became one of the hosts for the subsequent season. And Abhas

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[103] While the rules for *American Idol* stipulate that no contestant may already be a "professional" singer, *Indian Idol* features contestants who may have already had some musical success. In the most recent season of *Indian Idol*, winner LK Revanth was already a fairly established playback singer in the Telugu film industry. His decision to participate in Indian Idol represents both a desire to work in multiple language markets (upon winning, he promised the media, "I will work on my Hindi") and a recognition of Bollywood and the Hindi language film industry as potentially most lucrative and prestigious.

Joshi, a contestant on *Star Voice of India* (2007) then acted as the host for the "junior" version of the show, *Chhote Ustaad* (2008).

By participating in multiple reality music TV shows, first as contestants, and then as hosts, these young singers were able to heighten their face value and increase their brand recognition through renewed exposure so that audiences and industry members began to know who they were. (Indeed, young singers are sometimes *invited* to audition for new shows by producers who have already seen them in another shows). Far from being frowned upon, the decision to appear in multiple shows is understood as a prime opportunity for self-marketing and the renewal of one's brand. Indeed, such a strategy is not limited only to young singers attempting to get a break. The need to maintain one's face value and brand, alongside generous payment packages, is part of what motivates already established playback singers and music directors to act as judges and guest judges on multiple seasons and iterations of these shows.

Social Media and the Circulation of Self-as-Brand

Social media has become an indispensable tool for circulating one's name and face and increasing one's exposure. What better way to build "face value" than by literally promulgating images of one's face throughout the screens of social media networks? In the use of social media to circulate themselves as "a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed" (Martin 2000, 258, cited in Gershon 2011), upcoming singers attempt to mitigate against precarity by keeping their names, faces, and voices visible and audible. Social media allows them control over this circulation – its content and regular frequency - in a way that "mass media" such as television and newspapers do not.

In the performance of self (Goffman 1959) that social media both facilitates and mandates (Gershon 2011), the identity of "struggler" is rarely present. Instead, singers showcase

themselves as confident and cosmopolitan young people while simultaneously underscoring their identities as "normal" Indian kids by posting pictures with family and friends, engaged in a family ritual or some act of "time pass," such as eating street food. Even photos that index a singer's rising fame, such as a picture with an established music industry figure, are framed in terms humility and gratitude for God's grace, fan blessings, and the generosity of a celebrity.

This highly calibrated presentation of self demonstrates how social media allow performers to build a self-brand that is both aspirational and intimate, projecting themselves as successful upcoming musicians while fostering relational connections with fans via online sociality. This latter form was evinced through message "blasts" aspiring performers made using the highly popular "peer to peer" messaging service WhatsApp. One young female singer's message read: "Hello Hello :) I'll be coming online on Sunday from 6:30-7:30 pm to interact with my fans and well wishers virtually. Please register yourself at www.lypdonline.com to meet and video chat with me. Am really very excited to meet you all - love -." Another young singer sent several messages containing her new YouTube videos and then included a link to her new Facebook page with the plea: "Hey all, please Like my New page on Facebook. I really need you [sic] blessings an [sic] support. Thanks ☺"

The most effective social media artifact produced and circulated by young singers is the personal video. Singers often post short videos – anywhere from thirty seconds to three minutes – in which they sing directly into their phone cameras in a casual and seemingly impromptu location, such as a bedroom or a park. Prefaced by a direct address to the viewer-listener – "Hi guys, I just wanted to sing a little something for you all and I just *love* this song, I hope you do too"– these short performances build intimate affective connections between singer and fan by emphasizing their proximity and by framing the song as a spontaneous offering. The creation of

brand through social media therefore goes beyond projecting oneself as a skilled performer via the circulation of images and performances. Young singers construct a self-as-brand built on *the performance of* intimacy: "staying in touch" with fans by "touching" them regularly through the affective intimacy that social media affords.[104]

Further, social media function as a crucial public-private space, granting young singers increased visibility without the full set of risks attendant in actually making connections and meeting strangers out in public.[105] Given the gendered nature of who gets to access what kinds of visibility and be "public," social media is a particularly important tool for female singers, who cannot always avail themselves of some of the other strategies for creative agency that I discuss in the final part of this chapter.

Experiential Precarity – the Industry atmosphere

One afternoon, I sat in ChaiCoffi, a cafe tucked off the main road in Versova, an ocean-side Mumbai suburb that is home to a range of people involved in "the industry" because of its proximity to film, television, and recording studios. The cafe's outdoor seating was filled with duos and trios drinking tea and coffee, smoking cigarettes, checking their mobile phones. By most appearances, they were simply hanging out, friends chatting and catching up on a beautiful

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[104] Here, I want to emphasize how rapidly social media is changing in India. As data plans quickly become more affordable, more and more people are utilizing smart phones to watch music videos and to take part in social media platforms. Each social media platform, in turn, engenders different protocol and practices. For example, the personal video seems to have arisen as many more of my friends and informants join Instagram. Facebook, in contrast, seems to facilitate more performative, less intimate posts; this is, in part, because most young singers have "professional" pages and profiles on Facebook, thereby separating their "personal" and "professional" identities.
[105] As a reminder of the risks in being a "public" performer, a recent article in the Mumbai newspaper Mid-day featured a host of singers talking about difficulties they had faced in live performance. Most spoke about drunk audiences and unruly audience members (Tiwari 2017).

Mumbai winter day near the ocean. There was a clear presence of "industry" individuals, however. Slender young men and women with clear skin, fine features, and carefully cut hair entered, carrying themselves with a certain comportment and composure - a tight efficiency and confidence in the women, a slight sway of their hips, a slight swagger in the guys' walk as they looked around, found a seat. Other tables hosted groups involved in production, poring over pieces of paper, arguing fiercely in Mumbaiya Hinglish. The real power brokers were the older men innocuously dressed in jeans and black polo T-shirts, wide-chested and easily confident; as they sat and drank tea with business partners, people would stop by to shake hands, check in about the state of business. The cafe was filled with a casual concentration: individuals planning, pitching, schmoozing, frequently answering their mobiles, keeping their eye on who walked in, diligently greeting colleagues and superiors.

I was joined by Raja Hasan, a former contestant on *SaReGaMaPa* 2007, who sat down opposite me, placed his cigarettes on the table, and ordered us another round of chai. Sporting long, greasy hair, Raja was unusual amongst the contestants I had met: he was from a family of hereditary Muslim musicians from Bikaner, Rajasthan, but his father had moved to Mumbai decades earlier to pursue a musical career in conjunction with the film industry. Raja was no newcomer to Mumbai - he had lived there much of his adult life and had his wife with him as well. He also had an unsettled, frenetic energy which sometimes made it difficult for me to follow his heavily Urdu-inflected Hindi. As we talked about his musical upbringing and the impact that *SaReGaMaPa* had had on his career, Raja took several phone calls, apologizing to me through gesture, and pointedly telling the caller: "My interview is going on - can I call you back later?"

It was clear that, eight years after his participation on a reality music TV show, Raja was *not* settled as a musician in the Hindi film industry - he had received some big breaks through music director duos Vishal-Shekar and Salim-Suleiman, but these hadn't generated further work. His frenetic energy was, in part, related to the project he was currently involved in, serving as music director for a Hindi movie directed by a friend from Australia. "After the interview, you have to come to the studio - then you'll really come to know what I'm doing!" he kept saying excitedly. There was a certain desperation in his need to tell his story and tout his accomplishments. Indeed, when I asked him how he had gotten into music direction, he responded, "If I may speak honestly, Anaar, it was because of need" - he wasn't getting songs as a singer. At the same time, Raja too had his recognition and connections. When an older, clearly important couple came in, he jumped up to greet them and was warmly greeted in return; others tapped him on the shoulder to say hi.

Both Berlant and Allison develop an understanding of precarity as a fundamentally affective state, an anxious recognition and experiential sensing of the fundamental instability of life as it is being lived. Allison, in particular, emphasizes this *feeling* of risk, "…the affective state of precarity as it is psychically sensed, ordinarily experienced, and socially embodied" (2012, 350). As I met and conducted interviews across innumerable cafes in neighborhoods where industry individuals preferred to live, I began to tune into the lived sense of precarity that pervaded these sites and scenes, manifesting as a slight desperation, an anxious eagerness for recognition. This affective precarity emerges out of a stark awareness of the temporal cycles and shelf life of the recognition and advantages afforded by one's appearance on a reality music television show, and an anxious understanding that a simultaneous economic and social stability are increasingly elusive.

Allison's emphasis on "…the existential and social conditions of a life that *feels* risky, uncertain, and unstable" (2011, 1, emphasis added) also echoes in Abhilasha's use of the phrase "We strugglers." At once a self-appellation, the phrase also evokes a larger anonymous community of young creatives working to establish themselves and get a stable foothold in the industry. While being a "struggler" is a normal phase of career development, there is an anxiety attached to the knowledge that to be a struggler for too long is to tarnish one's appeal. There is a great deal of pressure to convert "face value" and "exposure" into the more stable capital of a "brand" and a hit recorded song. In contrast to the short lifespan of reality music TV shows and the even more finite live shows, a recorded song can take on a circulatory life of its own and transform the voice of the playback singer into something recognizable and, therefore, valuable (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Even a high-profile song, however, does not equate with success. Music director and playback singer Shankar Mahadevan, while noting that reality music TV shows brought a significant degree of financial success, exclaimed: "To really get success - you need blessings! Destiny! You need the perfect song, you need the perfect moment." The elusiveness of this goal of stable "success" was continuously underscored to me by the trajectory of the career of Aditi Paul, the finalist from *Indian Idol* Season I. When I first met Aditi in February 2014, she had just had a song released in blockbuster film *Ram-Leela*. Ads for the movie were all over Mumbai's billboards and television channels, and the song, "Ang Laga De Re," was frequently heard on the radio. Yet, six months later, when we were attending a Hindustani classical music concert together, I asked if she had been called for any further songs and she replied cheerfully, "No - I am supremely unemployed!" Her upbeat tone belied some concern; while Aditi was still busy as one of six female back-up singers in A.R. Rehman's live show chorus, she hadn't recorded a

song in months. Nearly ten years after her appearance on Indian Idol, and even with one highly regarded playback song to her credit, she was still in the in-between space, professionally; not quite a struggler, neither was she in great demand as a playback singer.

Precarity as Aspiration's Shadow

Discussions of precarity, such as those undertaken by Berlant and Allison, generally situate precarity in relation to moments of prolonged historical crisis and the feelings of social isolation and anxiety that result when the individual can no longer achieve the economic stability, or locate the accompanying normative social structures, to which they were once entitled. There is indeed a palpable anxiousness, a tangible unease experienced and carried by the young singers who are laboring and striving to establish careers as playback singers, based on the ever-present awareness that social and financial well-being is contingent upon the ongoing production of demand. Young singers attempt to fan the flames of this demand by keeping *themselves* in circulation: through TV shows, live shows, other kinds of guest appearances, social media, YouTube videos, and by talking with journalists, anthropologists, and others who might give them publicity. This experiential precarity exceeds individual experience to create a broader atmosphere that suffuses the constellation of sites that constitute the industry with the constant labor of positioning and promoting oneself as relevant and visible.

Moreover, precarity is intimately tied to India's aspirational economy. To start moving within this modern aspirational mode is to actively seek a self-transformation in terms of one's class-caste habitus – not for future generations, but now. This is one reason why reality music TV shows are so potent: aside from their implicit promise to make one famous, they place great emphasis on stories of personal realization and transformation, and they take pains to ensure that

contestants are *seen* to change over the course of the show, becoming more confident performers, more polished singers, and more worldly individuals. And yet, these young singers emerge from this required transformation of subjectivity without any guarantee that their final societal position will be commensurate with their new selves.[106]

Indeed, to be aspirational *is to render oneself precarious*.[107] To enter into the aspirational economy, particularly as a singer, is to renounce standardized societal expectations regarding the course of life. One aspiring singer leaves college during his last semester of exams to be on *Indian Idol*. Another has his girlfriend break up with him because her parents are nervous about having a son-in-law who is in "this line" of work. Almost none of the singers with whom I spoke are married, as it might interfere with their work. And few of them had many friends, since it was hard to find time to get together and other industry singers were not seen as particularly trustworthy. Speaking of a reality music TV show contestant from his city, my uncle reflected, in a tone of both admiration and skepticism, on the decision to pursue a popular music career: "It's not a choice that most people are ready or willing to make."

These are the contours of the social precarity that mark the lives of young singers coming out of today's reality music television shows. To become an aspirational subject is take on risk, both socially and economically; aspiration and precarity provide the conditions of possibility for

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[106] Many producers and contestants alike referred to the psychological and emotional difficulties that contestants face after the shows end. One former contestant told me that when she returned to her home city in western India, she was overwhelmed by the adulation and attention she received. As that waned and the thrill of the show receded, she found herself "in a very dark place," unmoored and confused. Rahul, the director-producer involved with the first several seasons of Indian Idol, reflected on the fleeting nature of televisual fame and the psychological crash that it creates: "...the euphoria lasts about six months, and then it's gonna wane. And it's very tricky to live with that, because you...were riding the crest and you thought you were there. And then you see it fall apart." He alluded to attempted suicides.
[107] In her discussion of young people migrating to Mumbai in search of jobs in the Hindi film industry, Raka Ray offers a version of this argument: that these individuals embrace precarity in order to create the conditions of possibility for realizing their aspirations (2014).

each other. Put another way, precarity is the shadow of aspiration, that which is rarely discussed while aspirational images and discourses of self-betterment and transformation are widely circulated and celebrated.

The Precarity of Creative Labor

The conversation on precarity that I reference is a relatively recent one, contextualized within late capitalism and the emerging predominance of flexible and contingent forms of labor. But the creative and performing arts have, of course, long been precarious, marked by instability and uncertainty. As Shannon Jackson notes, many aspects of what is now viewed through the analytical lens of "precarity" looks familiar to those in the arts: an emphasis on "flexible" labor oriented to the production of immaterial and affective ends, marked by temporary contracts and itinerancy (Jackson 2012).[108] Many performance scholars seem torn as to how to interact with a newer academic discourse around precarity – recognizing a longer-standing order of creative insecurity even as they identify with the political work that "precarity" does. "While precarity is no more representative of life now than it has been at other moments in history or on other present-day points on the globe (in fact it is probably less so)," writes The Critical Art Ensemble, "it has become a noisier part of the collective consciousness as traditionally secure economic and ethnic groups move closer to or into downward mobility" (2012, 49).

So what then is the relationship between the kind of neoliberal playback precarity I have explored in this chapter and the forms of precarity that have traditionally been associated with

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[108]For further work on precarity in the creative and cultural industries, see Gill and Pratt 2008, Curtin and Sanson 2016, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008, Ridout and Schneider 2012, and Nyong'o 2013.

being a musician in India? While such a question necessitates a far more sustained investigation than I can manage here, I'd like to offer a few preliminary thoughts.

Certainly, a musical career in India has long been marked by economic and social insecurity, shifting patronage structures and societal ambivalence regarding the social value and moral character of the musician. Classical and folk musicians alike have had to travel to locate patrons and offer performances (although it would seem that at least for the top echelon of classical performers, it was possible to find a stable patron for many decades). The past century has seen significant shifts in structures of patronage and sites of performance as classical music has moved from being performed and consumed in courtly and aristocratic contexts by hereditary performers to being performed by primarily middle-class non-hereditary performers in urban environments for a middle-class audience. Such radical changes have created new conditions of insecurity and necessitated what Daniel Neuman calls "adaptive strategies" on the part of musicians (Neuman 1980).

Regarding the specific material and aesthetic context of the Hindi film music industry, however, it is possible to ground emergent forms of precarity in changing conditions of production therein after the liberalization of the 1990s. By all accounts, the production structure of the Hindi film music industry was remarkably stable from the 1950s up to through 1990s, what Greg Booth calls "Old Bollywood," marked by the independent producer industrial system.[109] This system – dominant during the times of India's managed economy and expansive regulatory framework – consisted of a hierarchical structure of independent contractors: musicians worked for freelance music directors who worked for freelance producers who rented

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[109] Booth also provides a useful overview of changing industry structures from the 1930s until the early 2000s. He does not, however, focus on vocalists.

space and equipment for each film (2008, 99). Despite the contingent nature of this system, the experience of working in the industry seems to have been one of professional stability and prosperity, as Booth illustrates through his oral history of the musicians and engineers who made the music of the Hindi films during this era. Informal, yet structuring professional relationships (many music directors, for example, formed their own de facto studios, regularly calling certain musicians) and strong demand for film music provided a guarantee of employment and a sense of continuity. The shifts in production that have marked "New Bollywood," as Booth dubs the Hindi film industry since the 1990s, have therefore been all the more devastating to all but the most famous musicians. Most importantly, the increased use of synthesizers and live sampling, alongside changes in financing structures, have rendered obsolete the orchestras that once defined the Hindi film music sound and which employed so many musicians.

In regard to singers, the number of playback singers was small in Old Bollywood, but those singers were given many songs and were well recognized and compensated.[110] In "New Bollywood," the situation is nearly the opposite: there are many more singers and, with a few exceptions, they get very few songs, little recognition and little compensation. As I have laid out in this chapter, there are a greater number of young people seeking to "get a break" and make it as singers in Bollywood than ever before. Thus, in strictly economic terms, the precarity I am discussing here is the result of greatly increased competition for a finite number of jobs. Going

[110] Booth implies that the reliance on a handful of singers in the pre-liberalization era was primarily related to the perceived box-office draw of a given singer's voice and the risk averse producers who wanted to guarantee good financial returns (2008, 47). Simultaneously, it's worth noting that the singers themselves were, to some extent, involved in maintaining this exclusivity. Lata Mangeshkar, for example, is known to have actively frozen many female competitors out of the industry. With this in mind, it may be worth re-considering the apparent stability of this era for singers by asking what happened to the singers – Rajkumari, Amirbai Karnataki, Zohrabai Ambalewali, and others – whom Lata marginalized and displaced. Such "major and minor voices" are given some consideration in Ranade 2006.

beyond the financial and social insecurity that may have marked the lives of previous generations of musicians, this playback precarity, marked by twinned aspiration and insecurity, is playing out on a much larger scale than ever before.

Reality music TV shows have been central to this endeavor, as they seem to promise fame, material rewards, and a path to Bollywood. Beyond the specific context of reality music TV shows, there exists a broader discourse that encourages young people to pursue their passion and do what they love, locating transformation at the individual level rather than the social level, and offering the arts as a privileged site for such self-transformation, as I will discuss in the next chapter. As Raka Ray puts it, "the neoliberal incitement to transformation is working," yielding new kinds of precarity from the disjuncture between the forms of desire that undergird these moves to musicianship and more acceptable careers and sanctioned modes of social relation (2014).

This has led to the affective or experiential precarity that I have noted. In the sense of anxiety that pervades so many sites of industry socializing and in the references to the changing nature of playback fame that emerges across so many conversations, I locate a shared sense and awareness of insecurity. Abhilasha's phrase "we strugglers" marks the emergence of a creative precariat, a group of elite culture workers who nonetheless understand themselves to be precariously situated.

At the same time, the resonance between a more recent neoliberal precarity and a longer-standing creative precarity are not coincidental. Jackson importantly traces how the ideal worker under neoliberal capitalism draws upon the model of the creative worker. In an increasingly "flexible" labor environment, "risk" has "…become synonymous with thrill and creative speculation rather than with precarity and insecurity" and flexibility has become "the key to

social agency" (2012, 22). In this "prefigurative view of creative cultural labor" (Stahl 2013), aspects of a creative life which used to mark it as insecure have been celebrated and generalized to the labor market at large. As Jackson puts it, "the emergence of today's precarity was helped along by the fact that so many of us cathected to flexibility's marketing campaign" (2012, 22). Self-entrepreneurial, flexible, oriented towards the production of affect, the creative worker has become the neoliberal worker-subject par excellence, the "poster boys and girls of the new 'precariat'" (Gill and Pratt 2008).

Strategies for Stability: Creativity and Agency

Raka Ray argues that the precarity that comes first with migration and then with work in Mumbai's creative industries is a "welcome precarity" for her informants, for it is a precarity experienced by choice and it thus becomes an "enabling condition." Indeed, in performance studies, a number of scholars seek to carefully emphasize the positive aspects of precarity, asking how precariousness might open up new possibilities in terms of ways of navigating and experiencing the world (Critical Art Ensemble 2012, Dezeuze 2013, Ridout and Schneider 2012). Given the close structural relationship between creative instability and neoliberal precarity, as discussed above, I am wary of attempts to mobilize the former in order to critique the latter. Nonetheless, in the final portion of this chapter, I deploy the idea of agency to point to some of the strategies that singers avail themselves of as they seek to avoid the precarity that accompanies playback singing today. Rather than smoothing over the textural anxiety that marks the lives of young singers or offering a facile celebration of agentive choice, I understand agency

here as a tactic produced in response to and compelled by experiences of precarity, a way of repositioning one's self in the hierarchy of production.[111]

Nearly all the singers I spoke with had started to arrange and write their own songs, often releasing them as videos on YouTube. Mugdha Hasnabis, a finalist on *SaReGaMaPa SuperStars* 2011, had provided Hindi lyrics for a song created by the popular Indian-American fusion composer Shankar Tucker and appeared as the main singer in that video. She had also started creating her own arrangements, such as a sparse, almost avant-garde version of the Marathi *bhajan* "Gananayakay" whose video featured an up-close shoot of the creation of a statue of Ganesh. Vipul Mehta, the winner of *Indian Idol*, had composed a song entitled "Vande Mataram," based on lyrics by an army general. The video, billed as a tribute to the armed forces, showed him in live performance at the Waga border crossing in Punjab. Abhilasha Chellum was working on a fusion Karnatic-Hindustani live project in which she was setting Karnatic songs in a Hindustani style for a live show project in Chennai. As a whole, young singers were creating songs, videos, and albums that went beyond the scope of Bollywood.

Several male singers had transitioned into the role of music director. Harshit Saxena first composed a song for the psychological thriller *Murder 2*, in which he was also the featured singer. He was then very successful as the music director for *Super Nani,* for which he was nominated as "Best Debut Music Composer" in the 2014 Global Indian Music Academy (GIMA) Awards. Raja Hassan, as previously mentioned, was also acting as a music director for a new

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[111] I follow feminist scholars who have argued for situated rather universal understandings of agency and who have attended to the process of subjectification as a form of agency (Mahmood 2005, Mani 1989, Mankekar 1999, Abu-Lughod 1990.) For a useful discussion of approaches to agency in South Asian historiography, see Ghosh 2006.

film; in their studio, he played me a song that he had composed featuring the voices of many prominent singers.

Raja's earlier comment that he had become a music director "out of necessity" points to a significant aspect of these new professional capacities: whether as music directors, lyricists, composers, or arrangers, all of these singers were creating opportunities to feature their own voices. Taking on these new roles not only allowed them to claim more control over the artistic product that they were part of, but to actually create more work, and thus exposure, for themselves.[112] Furthermore, having an active role in the creation of an artistic product differentiated them from playback singers who might only be creatively active through the vision and direction of others. It placed them in a position of relative power. As Harshit claimed in relation to his experiences as a music director, "For a singer, it's max one-and-a-half hours of work. But the composer is like a chef, the singer is like the waiter - they always get the tip but no-one really knows who made the food." To be a music director, then, was not necessarily a means of achieving recognition amongst the broader public; instead, it entailed a level of responsibility and creative oversight that ultimately placed one much higher up in the production hierarchy of Bollywood.

This power relationship was made all the more clear as Harshit talked proudly about having other famous playback singers sing his songs. Using the Hindi verb *gavana*, literally, "to make someone sing," he boasted, "I made Sunidhi [Chauhan] sing my song, I made Sonuji [Nigam], Shreya [Ghoshal] sing my songs." It was because of this work, this shift in position,

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[112] This collapsing of the roles of music director and playback singer is a broader phenomenon. As previously mentioned, established music directors like Vishal-Shekar and Salim-Suleiman are widely in demand as performers and they often feature their own voices in their songs. This conflation of roles is decried by many, who see it as "unfair" in terms of taking away work from other aspiring singers.

that Harshit was able to say emphatically, "I'm not a struggler anymore! I've earned a lot of money, a lot; God has been good to me and I've been good to him." Indeed, Harshit was a rare exception amongst the singers I spoke with in his level of confidence in his career. In renouncing the label "struggler," he was consciously marking a distinction between himself and the dozens of young singers who, like him, have emerged from reality music TV shows over the past decade and now fill the industry, searching for opportunities and, increasingly, working to generate their own.[113]

Overall, these strategies rely on the further diversification of musical careers in a less stable, more volatile popular music market. In placing themselves in roles other than singer, and in working in genres outside of Bollywood, singers seek to move themselves into positions of power, against the dependency that "struggler" and "getting a break" imply. In so doing, they find a renewed sense of artistic and personal control that might mitigate against the anxiety of *waiting* - for a break, a call. Here, I return to Raka Ray's emphasis on the productive aspects of precarity. Even as these young singers live with an anxious sense of precarity regarding the long-term stability and success of their careers, this precarity has generated and necessitated new forms of creative activity which are simultaneously exciting and fulfilling.

Yet the paths and strategies for further success available to young singers are deeply structured by gender. Ganti notes the gendered contours of being a "struggler" in the Hindi film

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[113] Regarding Ganti's point about ambivalence and distinction in reference to producers' discourses and perspectives on their own work in Bollywood, it seems to me that young singers are willing to acknowledge their participation on reality music TV shows as a tool, which they discuss with some disdain (though not all), for higher-level success. Once they have started to make a name for themselves beyond those shows, however, they are more likely to want to downplay the shows and their potential import in their career. This is a matter not just of the passage of time, but of the creation of social space: discursively and socially, these now-successful individuals need to distance themselves from the "strugglers" who populate these shows, both then and now.

industry as young men show up and hang out on film sets in the hope of getting discovered while women are expected to have someone intercede on their behalf. She thus points to the ongoing salience of archetypical gender binaries: "men are active and struggling; women are passive and waiting to be discovered; men are public, women private" (2012, 135). This was not quite the case for the aspiring female singers I worked with, many of whom were working quite actively to locate opportunities for themselves. Nonetheless, expectations of appropriate gendered behavior and the very real risks that came with trying to "break in" to the industry as a woman certainly impacted what young female "strugglers" could do.

For example, while Harshit Saxena had transitioned to being a music director, there are few female music directors in Bollywood. Thus, when I asked the young singer Mirande Shah if she would attempt this transition, she voiced reservations, explaining that it was hard for women to engage in the "Ji Hazoori," or "Yes, Sir" game, that was required to climb the production ranks. To be so obsequious could put a woman in a compromised or risky position. Instead, she acted as creative director for her world music band, composing and arranging songs and planning a few videos for YouTube, in addition to acting as lead singer. Another friend recounted the story of when she first came to Mumbai to try to break in to the Hindi film industry. Accompanied by her mom, she paid a visit to a music director; he, in turn, told her to come back, alone (she did not return and, in fact, did not move to Mumbai for another few years). Later, the same friend offered to connect me with famous music directors in order to further my research; as she gave me one famous music director's number, she warned me: "Just watch out, he really likes women." I never called him. If aspirational precarity simultaneously encompasses risk and possibility, young female singers must nonetheless be far more careful about the kinds of risks

they undertake than their male counterparts as they all work to establish their careers and produce new professional opportunities for themselves.

Postlude

Mugdha Hasnabis was a finalist on *SaReGaMaPa Singing Superstars* 2011, but had gotten eliminated early. By her telling, she was not a fan of such shows; she had only attended the auditions to keep a friend company. Mugdha had studied Hindustani classical vocals intensively as an adolescent and then received training in opera at A.R. Rehman's K.M. Music Conservatory in Chennai; she thus had exposure to a wider range of musical and vocal styles than most singers. This became her trademark on *SaReGaMaPa*, as the producers continuously had her sing medleys of popular Hindi film songs and Italian arias. Mugdha was also emphatically clear that, "I didn't want to just sing someone else's songs!" – following the show, she wasn't keen to go knocking on music directors' doors in order to break into playback singing. In a stroke of good fortune, Mugdha was contacted by Shankar Tucker, a multi-instrumentalist fusion composer who has become a star both in India and amongst NRI audiences abroad, after he saw her perform on *SaReGaMaPa*. Over two years of collaborating with Shankar, Mugdha co-wrote songs, performed across India, and toured the United States. She also began working on new ways of using her voice (drawing inspiration from Eastern European women's choirs) and, as mentioned above, has begun to produce her own YouTube videos featuring her own arrangements.

However, Mugdha had also started to feel nervous about her career prospects. Even after connecting with Shankar, recording work and concert tours still offered irregular work. Mugdha lived in a remote suburb of Mumbai, so commuting was a time and energy intensive affair to be

undertaken only if she had a recording session; it was difficult to attend concerts and meet other

musicians. Her friend and fellow *SaReGaMaPa* contestant Abhilasha kept chiding her: "I keep

telling Mugdha, you've got to get out there. People won't remember you forever!" Meanwhile,

Mugdha's father had been unable to find work after returning from a job in Saudi Arabia. Thus,

in order to meaningfully contribute to the household income, provided by her mother's work as a

postal clerk, Mugdha had begun working as a singing teacher through Shankar Mahadevan's

online music academy. She rose early each morning to teach Hindustani voice via Skype,

teaching from 5-7 A.M. so as to connect with her eighteen students from across the Indian

diaspora. While she loved the teaching, this number of students and the details of her contract

meant that it would be difficult for her to go on a one-month tour, if such an opportunity should

arise.

When I went to have lunch with Mugdha and her family on a warm January afternoon,

she had just received an email asking her to audition for a new reality music TV show. It was

written as a form letter:

> "Hello Everyone, Sandeep here and I work for [a big television production company].
> We are coming up with a Hindi Music Reality series on a popular Hindi GEC [General
> Entertainment Category] channel and this mail is in regards to that. We have heard your
> recordings and now our vocal coach would like to listen to you personally and for that
> you'd have to come down to our office for an audition."

It ended with a date, address, and contact numbers. Mugdha laughed about it until she

realized that the production company was a well-established one. "I don't know," she said

doubtfully, "should I do it?" A week later, she called me to tell me that she had ended up going

to the audition, laughing dismissively even as she went into minute detail about her song choices,

her interactions with the judges, and the large, intimidating camera. "So why did you do it??" I

asked. Mugdha paused: "I felt — I should not regret that I did not take this opportunity in the

future. Because even if I hate reality TV shows, I met Shankar through that, I met you all, everything has happened from that [experience]."

Mugdha's story, in which a young aspiring singer eschews more conventional career paths in favor of new opportunities afforded by reality music television shows and the film song industry with which they are connected, point to the condensed economic, social, and affective insecurity that compromises the precarity of a popular music career today. Still far from success in "the industry," Mugdha has found ways to make ends meet, even as she wrestles with a sense of unease about her career. Whether she ends up as a Bollywood playback singer, a music teacher, or a singer-producer in the burgeoning YouTube driven independent music scene in India, one thing is certain: she, like so many other strugglers, is still beholden to and reliant on reality music television shows to generate anew recognition and opportunities that might sustain her in and for the future.

CHAPTER 4:
IMAGINING PROFESSIONAL FUTURES, LEARNING TO FEEL: BEING TRAINED IN PLAYBACK SINGING

On a nearly daily basis, I took the train a half-hour north to the Mumbai suburb Goregaon. As the suffix "*gaon*" (village) indicates, the area was sparsely populated until several decades ago. Today, however, Goregaon has become a hub for multinational corporate businesses; gated office complexes of reflective glass high-rise buildings stand interspersed with large shopping malls and small older concrete buildings and bungalows. Outside the train station, I joined the crowd of commuters - men and women in their twenties and thirties wearing slacks and button-down shirts or pressed *salwar kameez* heading to low and mid-level corporate office jobs - vying for a spot in one of the many black and yellow auto rickshaws that clogged the main station road. I would make my way down the line of "autos," telling each driver my desired location until one finally curtly gestured to the back seat with a flick of his chin and I'd hop in. Alighting at the large metal gate of the Techniplex complex, I would sign in at the guards' desk along with other young professionals working in real estate development firms, business process outsourcing (BPO) centers, and other enterprises housed in the tall glass and concrete buildings. There, our paths diverged as I walked to a small glass door tucked into the corner of a near building, marked by colorful posters featuring attractive, fair-skinned models involved in various kinds of performance: "ACTING-DANCING-SINGING-SINGING-DANCING-ACTING: Your Gateway to Bollywood."

I had first encountered the Institute of Performing Arts (IPA) through a series of newspaper advertisements placed in the Education and Employment section of one of Mumbai's most popular daily newspapers, alongside promotions for classes to improve English, get certified to become a gym trainer, and more. One ad touted IPA as "Your Gateway to Film and Television," offering "Topnotch faculty, Spacious and State-of-the-art Campus Industry Placement and Exposure, Accommodation Facilitated." In larger print was the grand claim: "Never Before Advantages Under One Roof!" Below, in smaller font, was a further promise: "Specialised Training for Reality Show Participants (Singing/Dancing)." Intrigued by the idea of musical training specifically geared towards reality music television shows, I enrolled at IPA, attending almost daily singing classes there for nearly four months and then more sporadically for another two months.

Beyond the advertising buzz, IPA was indeed unique from a host of other music institutions in Mumbai in its emphasis on the repertoire of Hindi film song and the professional practice of playback singing. IPA promised exposure to the range of genres and singing techniques that are now woven into Hindi film songs - such as *ghazal* and "western" - as well as guest visits from prominent playback singers. After a one-month introductory course (the "guruji" level) and a three-month "professional" course costing nearly one lakh (one-hundred thousand rupees, or roughly sixteen-hundred dollars), we would receive a certificate of participation and completion. More crucially, we would complete the course having recorded a demo CD that we could then use in starting our own careers. It was this set of promises - of being trained in Hindi film and associated vocal genres, of gaining fluency in industry techniques such as recording and "working on the mic," and gaining proximity and access to the gated professional world of Bollywood - that drew my fellow students to IPA.

In this chapter, I explore IPA as a site of social production in this economy of aspiration, a position indexed both by its emphasis on playback singing and its advertised promise to train singers for reality music TV shows. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, reality music TV shows are now seen as an important platform for a career as a Bollywood playback singer. In turn, the proliferation of these shows - and the kind of successes that they imply are available to singers - have generated increased interest in the possibility of a popular music singing career.[114] Cannily claiming both playback singing and reality music TV shows as its purview, IPA capitalized on India's aspirational project. It positioned itself as a new kind of music school and attracted students with the promise of potential access to new careers and, implicitly, new selves through the transformative power of musical training.

Although IPA advertised itself with grand promises of access to and success in the film and television entertainment world, I begin this chapter by examining the mundane, everyday practices that constituted this new site of musical education and aspirational self-transformation. In tandem, I introduce my fellow, primarily female, students and explore the motivations that prompted them to invest so much time, money, and effort in these classes and in the project of being trained as a playback and popular music singer.

I then turn to the practice of learning to "feel," wherein Hindi film songs became a critical resource for cultivating and practicing a feeling-ful subject position. By investigating how feel was taught and negotiated by the teachers and female students, I highlight the centrality of feeling and expression to the projects of self-transformation underway at IPA. Further, I suggest that a feeling-ful subjectivity is desirable in aspirational India. At the same time, the work of

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[114] Indeed, many of my interlocuters - from singers to music teachers to reality show directors – traced what they saw as an increased demand for music education directly to the popularity of these shows.

becoming a more feeling-ful subject and working towards a professional future as a singer was crossed, and sometimes disrupted, by the tenacity of long-standing concerns about middle-class gendered respectability. This chapter thus examines how my fellow, female students used musical training to negotiate two salient, yet often contradictory social discourses - one emphasizing gendered respectability, the other privileging an expressive neoliberal subjectivity - regarding the kinds of subjects they should be.

Of course, India has long had its own discourse of systematized aesthetic sentiment, located in the concept of *rasa*. Rasa refers to the "taste" of an aesthetic experience as elicited through stylized aesthetic conventions and forms.[115] I thus briefly situate the idea of "feel" being taught and rewarded at IPA relative to rasa aesthetics, showing that while each engage feelings and emotions in performance practice, they conceptualize the relationship between feeling and emotion and between interior experience and outward expression in very different ways. By weaving together rasa theory, affect theory, and understandings of the production of embodied subjectivity, I explore the productive and shifting relationship between body, song, feeling, and self in contemporary India.

A History of Performance and Gendered Respectability

First, as a music school catering to middle-class women, IPA must be placed within a larger historical perspective. Scholars have written extensively about the role of the performing arts in India in the anti-colonial cultural nationalist project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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[115] For a more sustained consideration of rasa, see Chari 2014 and Orsini and Schofield 2015.

centuries.[116] The efforts of cultural nationalists to reform Indian music entailed a massive shift in how music was taught, learnt, performed, and consumed. This process of classicization was simultaneously one of modernization, undertaken by institutionalizing musical pedagogy and practice. Music schools and academies were founded across India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, catering to the urban middle-class elite.

Simultaneously, these cultural nationalist reformers worked to separate musical knowledge from hereditary lineages of practitioners. While musical training had nearly always been undertaken through a formal teacher-discipline relationship with a hereditary musician, these changes – such as the establishment of music schools, the use of notation, and the printing of music books - allowed musical knowledge to circulate separately from practitioners. In the classed and gendered politics of respectability that undergirded these efforts, hereditary practitioners of the arts - who were usually lower class and lower caste or Muslim - were understood to be "degraded" and disreputable. At a time of transition from privatized courtly patronage to a public cultural sphere supported by the middle-classes, court culture more broadly was understood as a site of excess and decay. Most markedly, female hereditary performers were primarily courtesans, linking skilled music and dance performance with other sensual, sometimes erotic, activities. As cultural nationalists worked to promote musical knowledge and training amongst the middle classes, they simultaneously sought to dissociate musical knowledge and practice from the hereditary practitioners they saw as disreputable.[117] In the process, these art forms themselves were transformed. Singing and dancing were severed, and the embodied

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[116] See also Allen 1997, Bakhle 2005, Du Perron 2002, Peterson and Soneji 2008, Subramaniam 2006, Weidman 2006.

[117] For more on the specific practices through which this separation was effected, see Weidman 2006, Bakhle 2005, and Katz 2012. See Post 1987, Chakravorty 2008, Qureshi 2006, Qureshi 2010, Soneji 2012 for more in-depth discussion of the legacy of female courtesan performers.

sensuality that had been part of courtesan artistic practice in the form of amorous lyrics and expressive facial gestures (*abhinay*) was eschewed.

   As numerous scholars have discussed, following Partha Chatterjee, the "new Indian Woman" of anti-colonial nationalist discourse was a social construct that condensed the spiritual, domestic, inner, and feminine realms – figured against the secular-political, public, materialist, masculine realms - to represent an "Indian culture" that was simultaneously ancient and modern.[118] Figured as the protectors and representatives of national culture, middle-class women played an important role in efforts to reform and modernize the arts. Firstly, they were seen as an inherently moralizing force, a counterpoise to hereditary courtesan performers. Secondly, receiving musical education allowed middle-class women to be appropriately "cultured" and thus to impart "Indian" culture in the domestic realm.[119] These efforts by Indian nationalists to reclaim the arts as a "respectable" space were thus both *on behalf of* women and used women as tools. This work to modernize music and make it respectable also reconfigured the social value of musical training. Thus, if education more broadly was understood as a tool for the inculcation of bourgeois virtue (Chatterjee 1993, 129), musical education allowed middle-class women to be more "cultured" wives and mothers (Allen 1997). At the same time, the musical activities of middle-class women were firmly tied to the private and domestic realms while professional, public female performers continued to be stigmatized, perceived as morally suspect. Music schools thus occupied a critical space in this process, allowing women to pursue musical training

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[118] See Chatterjee 1990, De Alwis 1990, Sinha 1996, Sangari and Vaid 1990, and Sarkar 2001, amongst others.
[119] As Amanda Weidman importantly argues (2006), building on Partha Chatterjee's idea of the "Resolution to the Woman Question."

as amateurs in a space that was marked as private and respectable by virtue of their modern institutional aspects and the caste-class status of their clientele and, increasingly, teachers.[120]

In the post-colonial era, concerns about and expectations of middle-class female respectability have been transformed and reinscribed in important ways. As Purnima Mankekar has argued, the shift from an anti-colonial to a Gandhian nationalism in the mid-twentieth century allowed women to enter the public sphere in the name of the nation and family, setting up an evolving precedent wherein "late twentieth-century constructions of the New Indian Woman *complicated* notions of women's agency by valorizing 'emancipated' women who dexterously straddled the 'home' and the 'world'" still in service of family and nation (1999, 148).

Further, in the era of liberalization, the longstanding ideological yoking of middle-class women and the nation has been both reinscribed and transformed, as the national citizen-subject is replaced by the consumer subject, and consumption emerges as an important discursive site through which the post-liberalization Indian nation is contested and imagined (Lukose 2009, 59). Anxieties about globalization and increasingly porous national boundaries, constituted by opening economic and media markets, have been projected onto women's bodies, comportment, and behavior; and young women, in particular, have found themselves as both subjects and objects of consumption, simultaneously commodified and targeted as consumers.[121]

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[120] See Weidman 2006 for deeper exploration of the domestic ideologies underlying women's music making; Bakhle 2005 for an account of changes in the gendered make-up of music schools in North India in the early twentieth century; and Katz 2012 for critical details of how Muslim teachers were slowly forced out at the eminent Marris music school.

[121] See Dewey 2008 and Oza 2006 on the Miss World and John 2008 in terms of a "new brand of woman."

Since Independence, increasing numbers of women have become professional classical musicians, primarily singers. Yet ongoing concerns about women's respectability necessitate that they carefully negotiate these concerns that result from the classed and casted histories of musical performance. They accordingly temper their roles as public performers through a range of strategies, including amending lyrics to love songs in order to emphasize devotional aspects (du Perron 2002), adopting markers of the private realm in public (Seizer 2005), and downplaying their bodily presence on-stage (Weidman 2006). Even in the realm of Bollywood, Tejaswini Ganti describes how actresses - who seem to push the boundaries of accepted societal female respectability in their on-screen clothing and behavior - adopt a range of defense tactics and mechanisms to ensure that their classed and gendered propriety is recognized backstage and off-screen (Ganti 2014).

At IPA, the residue of these concerns over the respectability of female performers were always present. Some of the female students had hidden their attendance in these singing classes from their families, or changed the songs they were singing to appease a husband's concern about propriety. And the project of learning to feel, which necessitated an embodied engagement, was met with varying degrees of discomfort and embarrassment. Yet, like the music schools of the early twentieth century cultural reform project, IPA offered the right kind of modern, private space in which these middle-class women could work on themselves and participate in an important cultural project – that of the aspirational economy.

The Commodification of Affect - Feeling in India

This ongoing concern with gendered, classed respectability, which demands that women downplay their bodily presence, is complicated by the increased circulation of visual media discourses that valorize feeling and affect. These images present the modern, neoliberal youth

subject as emotionally complex and simultaneously free, unfettered in their emotional

expression. Feeling and expression have become markers of a desiring, self-actualizing, "feeling-

ful" subject in India's neoliberalizing present.[122]

Indeed, ideas of feeling and emotion circulate broadly through public visual discourses. For

example, Coca-Cola is advertised with the tagline, "Taste the Feeling."[123] A series of advertising

posters for the TV dance reality show *Dance India Dance* in 2014 showed dancers expressing

their "mood," as described in the tagline "This my happy dance (Yeh mera happywala dance),"

and "This is my hopeful dance (Yeh mera hopewala dance)."

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[122] This resonates with Kunreuther's observation that there has been "a proliferation in public expressions of personal feelings and intimate relations" in Nepal (2014).
[123] This is Coke's global tagline now, part of the "one brand" approach that they began in 2016.

A widely-watched television ad for Pepsi, aired in conjunction with the 2013 International Premier League cricket championships and created by Lintas advertising agency, illuminates this emphasis on feeling and emotion. The ad opens with a feeling of pensive restlessness.[124] A starlet (played by Priyanka Chopra) is backstage in front of a large mirror with stage lights. Quick cut to a shot of Bombay traffic and a guy (Ranbir Kapoor) sitting pensively in taxi cab. Then a shot of a

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[124] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7d9dBO3fxMk

case of glass Pepsi bottles, vibrating ominously and tinkling against each other. The starlet throws her head back, eyes closed, in a gesture of anticipation and the camera focuses on her neck as the voice-over continues: "This very moment. This very place. Why *not* now?" The guy in the taxi is shown rocking back and forth, suggesting both nervousness and sexual charge. The voice-over turns into a male voice singing, "Now, now, The heart demanded it now!" ("Abhi ke abhi. Dil mange abhi") as the soda in the bottles froths upwards and explodes in a gesture of orgasmic release, "Oh yes, now." The starlet makes brief, knowing eye contact with the camera and strides down a hallway, flanked by two large bodyguards; the guy jumps out of the taxi and runs between the lines of traffic. We see the starlet swirling and dancing on a nightclub stage, surrounded by a cheering audience, as she mouths the last words to the jingle, "Right here, now." As a club synth track breaks out, the guy runs up to a streetside chaat (snack) stand. Throwing his arms around the two college guys standing there and grabbing a bottle of Pepsi, he tells them, "Live now." Grabbing the bottle, one of the guys laughs, "Drink now!" and takes a swig. The male singer/voice-over/jingle completes the slogan for us: "The heart demands it now!"

This ad is a compelling affective performance of the value of "feeling" in contemporary India. Dramatizing and reiterating the Pepsi tag line, "Live now. Drink now. The heart demands it now (Jeene abhi. Peene abhi. Dil maange abhi) " it valorizes an emotive, expressive (and decidedly middle and upper-class) subject who has ready access to and can act from their feelings. Moreover, in the work that this ad does, this feeling-ful subject is simultaneously constituted as a consuming subject, their agency and freedom to "live from the heart" specifically linked to their ability to pursue pleasure through commodity objects.

Finally, it is essential to note the intimate relationship established between the performing arts and this increased emphasis on "feel" in these visual discourses. It is no coincidence that the

starlet in the Pepsi is revealed to be a *singer*. As she swirls ecstatically, singing knowingly to the camera and joyfully communing with her cheering club audience, the singer is figured as the expressive subject par excellence.[125] Similarly, the large billboards for *Dance India Dance* remind the viewer that dance is a salient medium for experiencing and expressing one's "moods."

I draw out the tension between these two subject positions – that of the respectable middle-class woman and that of the aspirational and feeling-ful youth subject - in the ethnographic material presented throughout this chapter, returning to explicitly consider respectability in the last section of this chapter.

The Daily Life of IPA

Entering the building, I pass through a small reception area with a large flat-screened television on one white wall. Two more brown doors and a short hallway bring me to our classroom, a boxy space with a large window to the outside and another window which looks in on the attached recording studio. The walls are covered with large images of a Venetian-style gold mask covered in musical staff notation. A few other students have already arrived and are sitting in the desk chairs chatting or sending messages on their mobile phones. We greet each other enthusiastically and wait for our teachers to arrive, anywhere from ten minutes to an hour after the official start time of 11 am. Hema ma'am is a large imposing woman with frizzy black hair who speaks authoritatively about her experience as a music director in the industry and sings

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[125] For further analysis of this media campaign, see Saha 2013; note her use of the term "moods." http://www.media4growth.com/ooh/article.html

with a soft faltering voice; Laxman sir is a short gregarious man from a well-established family of classical musicians who spends much of his time joking and talking about food. The two teachers split the class time so that morning sessions are led by one, afternoon by the other, on a rotating basis.

The mornings are dedicated to Hindustani classical music, its theory and terminology, its system of warming up and developing knowledge of a raga. As our teachers emphasize, although we have not come to IPA to become classical music singers, it is imperative that we know classical music. In addition to forming the basis of much Hindi film music, especially of earlier decades, knowledge of classical music - its basic terms, ragas, and ways of developing musical material - is a form of musical literacy that our teachers consider necessary for any musician.

We begin by warming up our voices, singing Sa (the tonic), accompanied by the bulky harmonium sitting atop the large table that separates the students from the teachers. As our voices and the drone fill the room with a single tone, the chatty social energy that has preceded the class dissipates as we close our eyes, matching our voices to the harmonium. We then slowly sing up the scale of the raga that we are currently working on, followed by *paltas*, different permutations of melodic patterns drawn from the raga, sung in both *sargam* and on "ah," imitating our teacher in a call-and-response as they introduce new material and permutations. As our minds and voices warm up and ease into the material, we move faster, doubling the tempo of the scales, singing *aakar gamak* (fast glottal stops on "ah") as we move up and down the octave. We conclude the morning sessions by working on a composition in the given raga. This might be a simple *svar vistar*, an exposition of the raga in *sargam*, or a full *bandish*, a song with several lines of lyrics, a lower and higher section (*sthayi* and *antara*).

In the beginning of the course, we spend weeks on raga Bhairav; by the end, we are learning a raga per week. In the Hindustani classical system, singers will spend months, sometimes a year, learning the intricacies of a single raga. At IPA, however, we are just trying to understand the basic facts of the raga - its *aroh* and *avroh* (ascending and descending scales), *vadi* and *samvadi* (main notes of emphasis), *gayan samay* (singing time), characteristic melodic shapes or gestures. We write all these defining aspect of the raga in our notebooks alongside a list of Hindi film songs that are in this raga - these are the "lay" or popular manifestation of the raga which we presumably are all already acquainted with. For example, we learn that the classic song "Mausam Hai Ashikana" sung by Lata Mangeshkar for the 1972 film *Pakeezah* is actually in raga Yaman. It is a revelation to find that these intimidating, almost esoteric musical structures are already known to us in these familiar song forms.

On one the of the first days of class, Laxman Sir has us brainstorm a list of "Important Points for Singing," which he writes on the white board: 1)Sur 2)Tone 3)Diction 4)Pitching 5)Projection 6)Landing Notes 7)Starting notes 8)Throat 9)Punch 10)Soulful 11)Ear pleasing 12)Be alert to sharp and flat. He stands back and surveys the list - this is the range of musical elements that we will learn to be attentive to over the course of the semester.

Our teachers vacillate between all levels of musical discourse. The intricacies of vibrations, as Hema ma'am shows off her knowledge. Complicated expositions of ragas, as Laxman Sir shows off his skill. Gossip about playback singers. Discussion of musical gharanas and lineages. Definitions of the most basic Hindustani musical terms, such as *saptak* (octave), and the names of notes in *sargam* (solfege) and their tonal modifications (*tivra* – sharp, *shudh* – natural, *komal* – flat). I am surprised to find that I – of Indian descent, but raised in America - know more about Indian classical music than many in the room.

In the afternoons, we work on the techniques of playback singing through Hindi film songs of our own choosing, mostly popular Bollywood songs from the last few years, with the occasional appearance of older classics. While many students struggle to grasp the complex melodic ornamentation of the classical singing, they take Hindi song presentation very seriously, quickly popping in headphones to hear the song one more time or going into the hallway to practice. Our teacher calls on us one by one to sing our prepared songs from the safety of our desks. I usually write out the words in advance in my notebook, while others initially read lyrics off their phones before committing a song to memory. Some of these mini-performances are expressive and compelling; often, however, they are self-conscious and marked by issues of intonation.

We are taught that playback is a form of vocal acting, and that every song has its own sentiment and emotions that have to be conveyed. References to feeling and emotion also pepper our musical practice, framing how we should learn and practice: "sing from the heart" ("dil se"), "if you enjoy, you'll learn faster," "aum - feel it, don't just say it." Early on, our teachers attempt to guide our practice through inspirational discourse: "live note to note," "show your passion!" We are told: "Practice means what? Those things that don't come, do them many times." Singing is presented as a worthy, ethical practice in itself: "singing is the highest form of *sadhna* (meditative practice)."

As the semester progresses, we are instructed to choose two songs that we will record for our final demo CD. Sometimes we leave our small classroom and troop over to the next room, a large windowless box with blue mirror-lined walls usually used by the acting students for their dance classes (we hear the thumping Bollywood music as they practice their dance routines). There, our teacher cues up a backing track, or "minus one," CD and we practice singing our

songs with a microphone. This practice of "singing on the mic" is essential, for it is understood that the mic, handled with skill and familiarity, can transform and enable our singing and expressions.

To record the CD, we take turns going into the small recording studio that is attached to the classroom, with a small glass window to peer from one to the other, while class continues in the other room. We are each given one afternoon per song. The studio is crowded: one of our teachers sits and coaches us from the couch against one wall while the recording engineer, Dhanish, sits at long desk containing the computer and recording equipment. The bare microphone, no pop filter, is tucked into a corner. The singer stands in a tiny alcove of the room, facing the wall. Above her is a large image of a pair of bright red lipsticked lips gently parted, singing. The audacious image seems to represent the promise of IPA: with the right training and access to the right technological tools, we can each transform ourselves and, perhaps, find new lives as singers.

Figure 2: The view into the recording studio

Introducing the Students

In between the morning and afternoon sessions, we take a half-hour break in the small canteen of the institute, ordering chai from the canteen custodian for 10 rupees per small ceramic cup and saucer. Combined with homemade snacks and modest portions of leftover lunch carried in small plastic containers, the tea reinvigorates us and we talk animatedly about all manner of things: recent movies, hit songs and singers we admire, travails with in-laws at home, different kinds of Hindi film industry gossip.

The students range in age from 16 to 40 and come from across the suburbs of Mumbai, most traveling at least an hour to attend classes. While we start with several men in the class, by the second month of the "professional" course, we are a group of approximately ten women, attendance varying day to day. Most of the students are in their thirties and are either housewives or combine life as a mother and wife with a part-time career; a few are students just out of college. Some of the students have ambitions to start musical careers - if not as Hindi playback singers (which is, admittedly, a stretch), then in regional language films or in stage shows. While a few can't sing in tune, a few have received prior training and are very good. All want to improve their singing - regardless of their skill level, singing is their "*shauk*," their hobby *and* their passion.

Preeti is a skinny, gregarious housewife in her upper 30s. In her college days, she had dabbled in a career in music, even managing to get a meeting with a famous film music director. Needless to say, they told her that she wasn't ready, musically; life had gone on and she had gotten married and had two children. But she continued to feel called to music and was haunted by a sense of as-of-yet unfulfilled potential. She had come to the Institute to "get a chance" after seeing the ad in the newspaper. "I have to do something!" she exclaimed, "of this I'm certain."

Tanvi is a slight, skinny, wide-eyed sixteen-year old who has moved from the eastern state of Orissa explicitly to attend classes at IPA after finding the school through online searches. She had come to Bombay two years earlier to audition for *Indian Idol*, standing on line for hours only to be told that she was ten days too young for the cut-off. Nonetheless, her dream of becoming a Bollywood playback singer persisted, supported by her immediate family - they had pawned jewelry and pushed back against relatives' concerns about going into "that" line of work. Now, she was staying in a paying guest house (PG) with other young female singers as she

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studied at the Institute, carefully navigated the process of trying to make connections in the Hindi film music industry and, she told us, staying up late into the night dancing and singing in front of her mirror.

Pooja introduces herself as a mother and *bahu* (daughter-in-law). She sang in school and won competitions; now she manages the house and takes care of her in-laws while her architect husband traveled. This fact prompts Laxman Sir to respond that she is very lucky that her husband supports her desire to sing because, "I'm sorry to say, but for ladies, it can be very difficult!" Pooja lives in a wealthy neighborhood close to where I stay and we end up commuting to and from class together on the train. During these rides, Pooja pumps me for information about life in the USA, asking, "Tell me honestly, Anaar, where do you prefer - here or US?" She and her husband are considering applying for green cards; in Pooja's vision of the better life that would be met there, she could focus on her nuclear family and perhaps teach singing without the burden of taking care of her in-laws, with whom she often fought.

Nishika is a round-faced Bengali woman who works from home as a graphic designer and mother. Nishika had studied classical singing and had even done some stage shows of "light" music, and she was keen to improve her skills and start a musical career as a stage performer. Other students included Priyanka, an earnest and mature eighteen year old who was waiting to take her Chartered Professional Account (CPA) exam and was using the gap as her last chance to learn music. Roshni was a soft-spoken young college woman, the only Muslim in the class, while Madhuri was a gawky thirty-year old, hoping to gain confidence and pass time through these classes before getting married. Shanta was in the process of moving to Bombay from Bangalore, where she had attended college, and was going through a personal crisis as her Muslim boyfriend's parents rejected her. Rishika, a rail-skinny teenager with long hair and cocky

confidence, was probably the best singer of the batch; she had studied both Hindustani classical and western singing and her mother had pushed her to attend classes at IPA because it would be a good platform for her.

Spending so many hours singing, chatting, and envisioning our futures together generated an intimacy between all of us. After the course finished, we managed to meet collectively several times - once at a mall to see a movie and get food together, once at my house to sing and then wander around the neighborhood. But despite our closeness, I never met the families of any of my fellow students nor visited their homes. The majority of our time together was spent within the walls and gates of IPA and what I knew of their life beyond - and of the kinds of life transformations they were trying to effect - was gleaned primarily through our conversations.

During the first month of classes, the "Guru-ji" level, we had male classmates too. Archit, Girish, and other male, aspiring singers showed up sporadically, staying for a few classes or a few weeks and then disappearing. But the core of the class was a group of eight to ten women. The ability to dedicate several hours a day to singing classes turned out to be gendered as well.

Imagining professional futures

For many of my fellow students, the classes were a welcome opportunity to escape the tedium of daily domestic responsibilities - such as cooking for their family, tending to children, husbands, and in-laws, overseeing domestic help, and other activities associated with managing the house - and socialize with other women. The classes were, however, by no means simply "time-pass."[126] Indeed, the stakes were rather high. The fees to attend IPA - one lakh rupees

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[126] See Jeffrey 2010

(roughly $1,600) for four months of daily classes – were much higher than the standard rates for music classes.[127] For most of the women, whose husbands or parents were earning lucratively, it was not an unmanageable sum; in Tanvi's case, however, her father had had to take a loan on her mother's jewelry in order to cover the fee. Furthermore, all the students were commuting at least an hour one way through a combination of rickshaw, bus, and train, expending considerable energy and incurring additional expenses to travel in the congested and polluted city. All took the class very seriously, practicing before class, maintaining a concentrated demeanor in class, and participating in the project of learning to think of themselves as professional, regardless of their level.

On the first day of the "professional" level, Hema ma'am speaks authoritatively about changes within the industry and performance scene today. "Today, the requirements are all different," she tells us. Formerly, the job of the playback singer was simply to provide the voice for the actor, so that even in live performance, famous singers like Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle would stand still and read the songs off the page. But now times had changed and being a singer equally involved the voice and the body (as discussed in Chapter 3): "You have to look good. Standing in front of the mic, you have to perform." Later, in response to someone's story about a missed opportunity, she responds sternly: "You should've gone with them, grabbing them. Remember, girls, you have to show your passion!" As the rare woman attempting to create her own music at the periphery of the Hindi film music industry, Hema ma'am was intimately aware of the challenges facing women and she worked to pry the students away from their

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[127] By way of comparison, fees at an established music school in Mumbai were only four thousand rupees for four months of group singing classes. However, these classes met only twice a week for one hour.

habituation to respectably gendered behavior: "You'll have to be shameless. Let go of your inhibitions (besharam hona pardega. Inhibitions chodte ho)".

   More broadly, our teachers used inspirational exhortations, admonishing advice, and pedagogical stories to try to teach us how to succeed: how to pursue opportunity and how to keep one's confidence in the face of inevitable rejections. Spanning the range from educational gossip about the Bollywood industry and the people within it to the nature of ambition and success to the minutiae of vocal production and music theory, classes at IPA allowed us the opportunity to practice thinking of ourselves as "professional" by gaining intimate knowledge of "the industry" and the personal and professional skills required to succeed within it.

   We spend ample time talking about how we should take care of our voices as singers. We are told not to drink soda, have ice cream, or eat oily and spicy foods, because they create acidity and then you can't breathe. If our throats were to go bad, due to a cold or the pollution of Mumbai, we should treat them with natural remedies - hot water with black pepper, tulsi, and honey was effective. In worst-case scenarios, we should consult an Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor. But the most important thing was that we carefully watch what we ate and drank and keep our voices in shape through regular practice.

   This coaching in imagining one's professional self was augmented by constant discussion of and gossip about well-known playback singers. While the stars were always treated reverentially, their personal and professional practices were also scrutinized for lessons about "the industry." Gossiping about Shreya Ghoshal and Sunidhi Chauhan, the most established female playback singers of the moment, Hema ma'am says that while Shreya has never been married and has no plans to be, Sunidhi has been married, divorced, and married again. Her words carry little judgement; instead, she's reporting on the state of the industry and, to be sure,

relishing the opportunity to expose us, a group of naive middle-class women, to the range of

practices in Bollywood. Indeed, she goes on to say that it's no longer taboo to be a married

woman in Bollywood; in fact, the opposite is true, for married women can do *more* with their

bodies.[128]

Less established singers were subject to less generous treatment. Hema ma'am tells us

about an awards ceremony performance she attended featuring the recently famous singer

Monali Thakur. Although Thakur was apparently paid 4.5 lakh rupees for the performance, it was

"pathetic," Hema ma'am tells us with relish, shaking her head and pursing her lips. There is a

slight thrill in the classroom - at not only attending such an event, but, more importantly, at

having the gall, the *authority* to evaluate and dismiss a famous singer. Such gossip and insider

evaluation made us feel that we were near to the center of the professional action, learning from

and spending time in proximity to someone who themselves was part of the industry and who

had contact with so many of the famous figures we knew only as distant celebrities.

As we sat in the small school canteen during our lunch break, my classmates would

discuss their future professional plans. This was particularly true as the course drew to a close

and we began to record songs that would form our demo CDs. Pooja planned to share the CD

with a friend who was already in the industry in the hopes that he would be impressed and pass

her name on to others. Nishika and Preeti both wanted to send the CDs to people who might be

able to give them a "break"; "or," Nishika proposed, "…if we go to meet someone, we can show

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[128] Where female performers, including actresses, were once seen as immoral and disreputable precisely because they used their bodies to entertain male audiences in a public or semi-public forum, Hema ma'am seems to be pointing to a new strategy for mitigating this stigma. If an actress or singer is married and is still professionally active, this means that, firstly, their husbands approve and, secondly, that their bodies are already "claimed." Being married thus may protect female performers from claims of immorality or looseness.

them the CD." Preeti agreed: "Contacts are essential - but we don't have any! So we'll have to approach people directly." Nishika, a Bengali, had an even more elaborate plan: to get featured on one of the many morning music shows that aired in Kolkatta: "Maybe I'll have to give some money, but I'll get a lot of publicity, a lot of promotion….many people watch [these shows], so I'll quickly get recognition."

Tanvi, it turned out, had been especially active during her few months in Mumbai - she had sung back-up chorus in a few shows through contacts from her roommates. After recording her first song - a saccharine ballad originally sang by Arijit Singh, her favorite pop icon - Tanvi immediately put her recording on YouTube, accompanied by a slideshow of photos of herself. The CDs and the recorded songs they contained thus took on great significance as crucial tools for and in an imagined professional future.

The act of recording, too, held deep meaning. It significantly distinguished these aspiring singers from so many other singing students: through the process of recording, they could claim experience singing 'on the mic' and working in a studio, positioning themselves that much closer to the professional futures of live and recorded performance that they envisioned, and were working towards. Nishika had decided to record "Julmi Re Julmi," an item number song from the 2013 movie *Rajjo*, originally sung by Bela Shende, the winner of *SaReGaMa* in 1998. I sat in on her recording session which, after a rocky start, took on the right character. As an item number, the song contained all sorts of extra vocalizations - little gasps, sighs, and jerks (jhatkas) in throat, flirtatious questions ("Hmm?") Nishika carried this all off with aplomb, nodding her head slightly, with her hands keeping the *dhol* beat, foot tapping, hips slightly bobbing. Despite the playful and flirtatious nature of the song, she maintained a look of serious concentration the entire time while using her voice to conjure the appropriate character. The last stanza had a few

intricate vocal runs, which Nishika nailed, thanks to her classical training. When the last section was recorded, we all clapped - the song sounded great. Nishika had perfectly balanced vocal acting, musical execution, and a serious, concentrated demeanor, the way we all envisioned a professional playback singer would.

Engaging in these conversation and musical practices allowed us to experience a professional proximity to the career of playback singing and the broader world of popular music performance. Privy to industry gossip, the crucial practices of singing on the mic and recording, and informed about a range of musical genres and vocal practices, we gained cultural and symbolic capital. This, in turn, allowed us to talk about music, the Hindi film music industry, and ourselves with seeming fluency and assurance, imagining and projecting ourselves as professional singers.

Learning to feel

"Feel" was a term encountered nearly daily in our classes - deployed primarily in the English, rather than using the Hindi terms *mehsoos* or *ehesaas* - and it was understood to be integral to the practice of playback singing. As Laxman Sir explained, "in film songs, feel and expression are most important - we are singing for someone else, so we have to act with our voices."[129] For Laxman Sir, singers were, or should be, more expressive; they felt more deeply. As he baldly stated, "You have to feel to sing." Indeed, teaching how "to feel" was a primary pedagogical focus for Sir. It was pursued through every aspect of his teaching: the songs he

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[129] Reality music shows are certainly instrumental in emphasizing the importance of "feel." For example, contestants on Indian Idol are repeatedly commended or castigated on the basis of how much "expression" they bring to a song; aspiring participants are eliminated from the auditions precisely on this basis.

chose to challenge students with, his feedback and exhortations, and his frequent asides and discourses. For Laxman Sir, the project of preparing aspiring amateurs was the project of teaching them how to feel – to embody and express – the songs of the genre.

In this section, I propose understanding Hindi film songs as a critical technology through which students practiced becoming expressive subjects. Here, I develop Kaley Mason's characterization of film songs in Kerala: "As expressive resources for locating selves vis-a-vis others in society, songs influence how people envision themselves being and becoming" (2014, 24). Although the idea of "feeling" typically brings up associations of a natural or innate state, "feel" in this musical context was a cultivated practice that generated embodied responses. In focusing on this explicit pedagogy of feel, I develop Gray's emphasis on the "implicit and explicit pedagogies [through which] one develop tools for a sensuous understanding of 'emotions as a quality of sound'" (Cumming 2000, 3, cited in Gray 2013, 69).[130] And while terms such as "practice" and "acting" suggest the attainment of different personal states that are superficial and temporary, I argue that the embodied practice of feeling through song impacted the students and shaped their subjectivities in more penetrating and profoundly transformative ways than "acting" might connote.

Laxman Sir heckled Pooja as she delivered a popular love song in a pretty but tentative voice: "Why can't you sing romantic songs?? Come on! Connect with that thing!" to which Pooja blushed embarrassedly. When Madhuri, an awkward young woman, struggled to find her pitch, Laxman Sir coached her, "Forget the pitch, just sing from feel." In response to another unconvincing performance, he responded shortly: "No feeling? Then your song is useless." The

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[130] Here I follow scholars who have focused on "emotional pedagogies" and explicit training in feeling as part of projects of creating (often neoliberal) selves (Brison 2016, Hochschild 2003, Kondo 1990)

exhortation to "Feel! Come on!" was one of Laxman Sir's favorite teaching techniques as he listened to one of us sing, pounding his fist on the large desk for emphasis and attempting to have the students crack open under pressure of his own demonstrative emotions.

Often, the exhortation to 'feel' led the student to close her eyes, as if locating the feeling inside herself. Indeed, we were told that, first, we had to experience the feeling inside ourselves ("apna mehusas karna"). "Feeling," though, in the space of playback singing, could not simply be an internal experience - it had to be externally, musically projected in the form of expression. As Laxman Sir put it, "It's not about feeling *for myself* - rather, what will I express?" Our task as students of playback singing was to cultivate our ability to feel, which would allow us to *create* feeling in and for others. Indeed, as Laxman Sir told me and so many others in the industry repeated, with technology these days, you can fix pitch, you can fix timing, but you can't add expression.

<div align="center">Learning to Feel through Item Numbers</div>

Laxman Sir's primary method for teaching us to sing with feeling was to recommend exemplary songs. This might be an old, "evergreen" classic in an ornamented, classical style, filled with longing and pathos. Or, at the other extreme, it might be an item number, the upbeat, sassy, and highly sexualized song-and-dance sequences found in every Hindi film. In fact, Laxman Sir insisted that we practice "item numbers," arguing, "You know why I have to [assign] item numbers? Because all these sharmili [shy] types who come, hiding - it totally changes them!" Having learned item numbers at home, we performed them in front of each other with varying degrees of pleasure and comfort.

As Pooja sang "Fevicol Se," a recent item number that teasingly extolled the virtues of the heavy-duty glue Fevicol, she brought a brash edge to her voice as she sang the hook: "Mere

photo…mere photo ko seene se yaar chipkaale saaiyaan fevicol se. Fevicol Se!" (Attach my photo to your heart, my beloved, with Fevicol). But when she got to the second iteration of the hook, containing one of the most famous lines of the song, "Main to tandoori. Main to tandoori murgi hoon yaar. Gatkaale saayiyan alcohol se" (I'm a tandoori chicken, ravish me with alcohol), she cut off and burst out in rather hysterical laughter, seemingly out of embarrassment. Indeed, these lyrics had been the subject of much debate in public discourse for the way in which they explicitly categorized the item girl as, literally, a piece of meat.

As the youngest in the class and the newest to Mumbai, Tanvi was normally quiet and mousy in class, sitting slightly slouched with her shoulders tipping forward; if she got flustered or bored, she seemed to shrink into herself, her already tiny frame disappearing into the chair. Near the end of the semester, however, Tanvi was working on the song "Dhunki," an item number in the form of a rock anthem from the 2011 film *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* (*My Brother's Bride*). The original picturization features the actress Katrina Kaif in short shorts and mid-riff T-shirt, smoking cigarettes and rocking out while playing guitar. As the opening distorted guitar riff sounded over boomy speakers from the backing track CD, Tanvi sat back on her hips, tapping her foot in time to the beat, wearing big pink platform shoes, skinny green jeans still baggy on her tiny frame, a striped pink shirt, camaflouge sweater, and headband. Grasping the microphone just under the bulb and thrusting her shoulders back, she projected an unusual confidence as she delivered the first, intensely articulated lyrics in a tight, explosive staccato. As she approached the second verse, she opened her chest and held the microphone up at a side at angle, her jaw squared, to aggressively enunciate "Hai jahaan ki tujhko khabar, Khudse hai par tu bekhabar" (you know the world, but you don't know yourself), tensing her throat and throwing her head

back as she growled the final words (tu be*kh*abar). Drawing on the hard-rock energy of the song and its original picturization, Tanvi transformed herself as an embodied performer.

As discussed earlier, Nishika had chosen to record the item number "Julmi Re Julmi" for her demo CD. One of the song's vocal features was the insertion of extra vocalizations and expressions, such as little gasps and sighs and spoken phrases that required dramatic flair. Nishika carried these all off with panache, making me laugh with her over-the-top vocal coquettishness. I noticed, however, that Nishika maintained a look of concentration even while uttering the silly, flirtatious prose. Immediately after that, however, she laughed, bent over in surprise at her ability to produce this sing-song flirty intonation. Laxman Sir, who was overseeing the recording, nodded approvingly: "In this kind of song, there should be some *masti*," he remarked, using a densely meaningful Hindi word that connotes fun and mischief, with connotations of illicitness.

While Hindi film songs were generally understood to be expressively rich, item numbers, with their intensely bold and sexy content, were taken as an effective way to "open" students up. Marked by a bold and coquettish vocal style, sexual (and sometimes controversial) lyrics, and associated with highly erotic visuals, they demanded that the female students offer highly expressive and frankly emotive vocal performances. They *ensured* the production of a certain kind of feeling and feeling-ful sound.

For the students at the Institute, the realization and rendering of these songs with "feeling" involved the reconfiguration of the body in intimate relationship to the affective state suggested by the song.[131] As shown above, performing an item number required an embodied transformation to effectively render the upbeat and aggressively confident mood of the songs.

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[131] See Mason 2014 for an analysis of the role of the body in creating sentiment in song in Kerala.

But this expressive embodied re-shaping was of varying degrees of explicitness. As we took turns performing the Hindi film songs that we had prepared, I often noted what I referred to in my notes as "the crinkled brow," one eyebrow slightly raised, the other slightly furrowed. This expression appeared in conjunction with sentiments of nostalgia and longing, expressed lyrically or melodically. Simultaneously, it registered effort - the work of reaching, often, for a note just a little out of one's range. Sentiment and effort were combined in this subtle, yet re-occurring facial position.

This willingness to use one's body, in more and less explicit ways, to generate and communicate an emotional state signaled a certain commitment to transformation. Whether through a change in stance, opening one's mouth wider, or raising a gestural finger, these embodied expressions conveyed a deepened ability to feel and express, the two most important aspects of Bollywood singing.

Yet songs by themselves were not enough to fully convey and teach students how to feel. Sir often took breaks from teaching singing to discourse on the topics of love and relationships as another means of having students connect to the appropriate emotions. He asked after everyone's relationship status, whether their marriages were "love marriages or arranged marriages" (the former was preferred).[132] One day in October, Laxman Sir seemed to tire of listening to us sing our Hindi film songs and shifted the conversation by asking who had been in love, a question that elicited fidgety, sidelong glances between the students, but no affirmative answers. "It's necessary to love," Laxman Sir announced, "Not just one time - you can fall in love many times!" He asked Girish, a stocky middle-aged man, if he had ever been in love and Girish

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[132] This question is ubiquitous, a popular question, source of discussion and debate. "Love marriage ya arranged marriage" is also the title of a popular television serial which ran from 2012-2013; in this way, Laxman Sir was also drawing on a broader social discourse.

responded in the negative, although he clarified, "I'm married, I have a wife." "It's never too late!," Laxman Sir replied, laughing and teasing Girish that his married status was the cause of his stolid musical delivery, so that singing words about love sounded like asking his wife for a roti.

 "Sir, you haven't asked me," prompts Rishika, a skinny, confident young woman, who then proceeds with self-assurance: "I haven't been in love, but I've had a lot of crushes - I remember each of their names and where it was!" I watched with bemusement. What made our singing class an appropriate, perhaps even important, place for discussing practices of love, relationship, marriage?

Sir linked this conversation about love and marriage with another of his favorite talking points - the need to do something for yourself. He complained, "you know what's wrong with us Indians? We do everything for everyone else" - study particular subjects to please mummy-papa, marry the person our parents choose, and on and on. In contrast, Sir opined, you needed to do something for yourself - and singing could be that thing.

These discussions of love, relationships, and familial duty, then, were another part of teaching these female students how to feel, arousing and inculcating certain sentiments and subjective states. Through these conversations, which filled the spaces between our singing practice and performance of Hindi film songs, Sir positioned himself as our guide to an ideal expressive, artistic subjectivity, marked by feeling and "doing for one's self".

In her article, "The Voices of Meenakumari," Amanda Weidman investigates the performance of an item number song beyond the realm of the film. In the contexts she analyzes - the live performance of a song by a playback singer, a YouTube video realization of a film song by an amateur college troupe in Kerala, a performance on an amateur television show - Weidman

characterizes these performances as "complex projects of self-fashioning" that offer "new sounds and new possibilities for female performing subjects" (2012, 314) wherein they can "try on" forms of voice and performance that were previously considered "vulgar" and off-limits.

Weidman's analysis has distinct resonance with the classes at IPA, particularly in her emphasis on thinking performance in relation to the reconfiguration of standards of respectability associated with the new middle classes. For my fellow students, many of whom were married with children, the classes became a way of escaping their daily domestic milieu - not just in terms of getting out, physically, but in terms of the kind of person they could *be* when not tasked with caring for husbands, children, and in-laws. The practice of feeling through Hindi film songs allowed these amateur female singers to practice inhabiting a range of embodied gendered subjectivities that they often did not have access to in daily life.

Yet this "practice" of feeling through Hindi film songs by the students entailed more than just a temporary, transient inhabitation of various affective states. In Purnima Mankekar's work on call centers, she describes the process of young call center workers taking on American "identities" - the adoption of new names, styles of speaking, and cultural knowledge - as one of "impersonation." Rather than characterizing the affective training that makes this "impersonation" possible as one of mimicry, Mankekar argues that it is transformational and constitutive of new kinds of subjectivity. She characterizes impersonation as "a cultural practice driven by aspiration" which goes far beyond call centers to constitute a wide-spread tool for the creation of selves and subjects (2015, 188) Following Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, Mankekar argues that all impersonation is a form of personation.

Drawing on these ideas of impersonation and performativity, I understand our practice of singing Hindi film songs with feel as one that allowed us to practice inhabiting different affective

embodied states. Using Hindi film songs as expressive resources, as informed by both their picturization and sound, the students worked towards becoming more feeling-ful subjects. Learning to sing with feel was a profound experience, enabling the students to explore new kinds of musical effects and affects and affording a new way of *experiencing* one's self while simultaneously impacting others. Thus, the practice of singing with feel was a process of exploring a new feeling-ful subjectivity and, quite literally, *becoming* a different kind of self, even as it was never complete.

<center>Rasa and Affect, Interiority and Communication</center>

In his analysis and reading of rasa aesthetics, the Indian theory of performance and emotion, Richard Schechner argues that "artistically performed emotions…are separate from the 'feelings' - the interior, subjective experience of any given performer during a particular performance. There is no necessary and ineluctable chain linking these 'performed emotions' with the 'emotions of everyday life'" (2001, 32). Here, Schechner importantly distinguishes between feelings and emotions, characterizing the former as internal, individualized experiences while the latter are externally communicated and socially constructed (32, 39). In Schechner's formulation of rasa theory as involving a full-bodied, somatically grounded production and dissemination of emotional experience between performer and audience, the question of "true" feeling is of minor importance in relation to the broader project of communicating and conveying emotion. A meaningful shared emotional experience can be created within the audience regardless of whether the performer is "really" experiencing that feeling.

Schechner states: "When an actor's abhinaya [expressive form] is strong, the emotions are communicated and audience members feel feelings - whether or not the actor is feeling something" (2001, 32). In teaching these middle-class female students to feel, Laxman Sir

<div align="right">189</div>

similarly emphasized that our goal as singers was to communicate with our audience by converting our feelings into expressions. Yet his methods - discoursing upon love and emotions, having students sing item numbers, and exhorting them to emphasize feeling in their singing - clearly privileged feeling, an individual, interior experience, as a necessary precursor to expression. In contrast to rasa theory as understood by Schechner, it was understood in our classes at IPA that we had to feel *first* in order to effectively communicate emotions and expressions through our songs. There was an intimate dialectic between being an expressive individual and being an expressive singer, between the feelings we experienced in our daily life – what Schechner refers to as "the emotions of everyday life" - and that which we were capable of expressing in the performance of a song. Thus, while the musical classroom seemed an unlikely place for the cultivation and production of intimate feelings and emotions, learning how to feel turned out to be a central part of our training as aspiring professional singers.

Scholars have spent considerable time discussing and delineating the distinctions between emotion and affect, with the former being associated with conscious mental formations while the latter encompasses sensations (contagious vital forces and intensities that are not conscious), with feeling and sentiment floating somewhere in between.[133] But in this ethnographic context, the practice of "feel" seems to encompass both affects and emotions, discourse and sensation, both implicit and explicit. Further, although the idea of "feeling" typically brings up associations of an innate interior state, here "feel" was a *cultivated* practice that coordinated bodily sensations and configurations, emotions and sentiments, and musically-mediated affect to produce shifts in subjectivity.

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[133] See Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" (2002) for a foundational formulation of this distinction; Gregg and Seigworth 2010 and Mankekar 2015 offer useful overviews of this literature. Gray (2013) also vacillates between the usage of "feeling" and "affect" in her discussion of fado.

This process of becoming a more feeling-ful embodied subject raises a number of questions about the nature of the relationship between body, song, feeling, and self, to put it starkly. Are the students understood to be already endowed with feeling, which just needs to be brought out? Or, as middle-class domestically-oriented women, are they deficient in feeling, which therefore needs to be cultivated and taught? Does one need to take on particular emotional states in order to effectively deliver a song, as Sir's exhortation, "come on, feel it!" seemed to imply? Or do these songs make certain affective states accessible - do they "trigger" certain subjectivities, as Sir's prescriptive use of item numbers seemed to imply?

Here, I point to an important pedagogical paradox in terms of the relationship between the internal experience of "feeling" and its external, musical manifestation ("expression") in the classroom at IPA. Musical sound and its affective impact are understood to index an internal subjective state. That is, Sir could tell if we were "feeling" appropriately by listening to how we rendered and delivered a song; feeling-ful sound is used to read interior states. At the same time, these songs are used to create and cultivate this desired subjective state; they become a guide to how to feel, which is why item numbers are useful teaching tools. And in both of these figurings, the body is both sign and medium – its' shaping and configuration simultaneously aids in the creation of feel and indicates the attainment of a feeling-ful state.[134]

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[134] As Bruno Latour beautifully argues via the example of "training noses" in the perfume industry, bodies and body parts are "acquired" in the very process of engaging and registering the sensory world (2004). Saaba Mahmood also draws out a similar point in her discussion of the practice of veiling in Egypt: the veil is *simultaneously* the sign of a pious subject and a material medium for *cultivating* this pious subjectivity (2005).

As body, subjectivity, and sound are mobilized towards the creation of "feel", they function as mediums for creating it as well as signs of achieving it. It is precisely this simultaneity that I find intriguing and important - that body, subjectivity, and musical sound are equally bound up in this practice of "feeling." And as students practice rendering a song in a "feeling-ful" way, each of these realms is re-made as new forms of bodily expression, affective engagement, and musical sound are learned and performed. "Feel" is a practice that coordinates bodily, affective, and musical realms to create subjectivities; and learning to "feel" becomes a project of musical self-making.

The Return of Respectability

Learning to be feeling-ful embodied subjects was a complicated project of self-making, at once desirable and risky. While IPA was figured as a space of aspirational transformation, concerns about female respectability were re-occurring, informing and configuring the kinds of transformation the students could enact both within in the space of the school and in their broader lives. In tandem with the professional ambitions espoused by each of the students - their imagined futures as working singers - the labor of self-transformation was counterpoised with the gravitational force of their domestic obligations and ongoing concerns about the respectability of female performers.

Indeed, IPA, it turned out, was a tricky, ambivalent space for this desirable, but somewhat transgressive work of becoming more expressive. While its gated location and high fees marked it as a "private" space, Laxman Sir's presence and constant interventions were discomforting to the women. To have a male teacher be the conduit to experiencing and expressing these often intimate and sensual feelings was often awkward and uncomfortable. Tanvi was singing "Kaisi

Paheli Zindagani" ("What a Riddle Life Is"), a jazzy cabaret number that had had her using a husky voice and coquettish air; wagging her index finger, her eyes narrowed coyly and she moved her chin side to side. At one point, Laxman Sir interrupted to remind Tanvi of a moment of voice acting, a coquettish descending laugh that was to be inserted. Tanvi immediately became nervous; her eyes shifted to the side, an embarrassed smile played across her lips, and she slumped back in her chair.

Such discomfort was heightened by the fact that Laxman Sir came to be seen as lecherous and untrustworthy over the course of the semester, asking students to stay individually after class and making inappropriate jokes about spending time with them. When he started asking students for hugs and touching them on the back, Preeti and several other students went to the IPA administration to complain. There, they were told that these kinds of people and behaviors come with the Bollywood industry, so they might as well get used to it and learn to manage.

On the final day of classes, Laxman Sir announced that his housing society would be having a talent show in the evening, and invited any of us to show up and sing 1-2 songs. I turned to Nishika and Preeti - surely, this was the opportunity they were seeking to showcase their talent and make connections! But they hedged: "we don't really have any songs ready…," despite the fact that we'd been presenting songs in class every day. Later, Preeti explained that since the show was in the evening, her husband wouldn't allow her to go; and since it was sponsored by Laxman Sir, it could be risky. "But concerts will always be at night," I pointed out, and Preeti nodded, pondering this fact: "I need a friend to go with me…" The demands of Preeti's domestic life, which required that she be home in the evening tending to her family, in tandem with concerns about the propriety and safety of her going out alone at night, limited what she was able to do. Preeti, it turned out, hadn't told anyone in her family, aside from her husband,

that she was taking singing classes. "It's not that they're so orthodox," she explained, but they would question her, saying 'why are you doing this at this age and with all your home responsibilities?"

When we all met up a few months later, there were some further complications. Nishika had presented two songs at a program put on by her husband's company. She also wanted to record new songs, because she couldn't use her demo CD as it was. We all protested: "Why? It sounds so good!." "Yes, but not everyone wants to hear an item number. My husband doesn't want me to play it for people…There's nothing dirty in it, but…" she shrugged. Pooja was the most frustrated - she felt that she was entirely beholden to her in-laws, who were happy that her singing course was over and that she was back in the home. Pooja confided that part of her desire to become a professional singer was, in fact, to bring in more income and perhaps be able to move out of the joint family house with her son and husband.

For many of these women, these six months of intensive singing classes had offered profound spaces of sociality and self-transformation beyond the domestic realm. But, although we seemed to have left the course with so much momentum, the prospect of becoming professional, public performers was met with resistance by husbands and families. The demands of domestic responsibility had reasserted themselves, carrying a weight of social expectation and personal habit that was hard to escape:

On my second day back in Mumbai for a period of follow-up fieldwork, I get a message on my phone via WhatsApp. It's from Pooja: "Hi Anaar! U back??" she writes. We chat and I ask her how her music has been going since we last saw each other in May, when Pooja was trying to make contacts and get her demo CD out. "Anaar I actually couldn't do anything regarding my work (singing)," Pooja responds. "And always thought of you - that you came

from the US and do sooo much and went back. Things are sooo difficult staying in a joint family," she writes sadly, referring to the practice of living with her husband's extended family. "Now I realize it."

Conclusion

Carefully situating itself within a politics of respectability and distinction – new and shiny, safely gated, and expensive - ITA served as a focal point of aspiration for my fellow female music students. It was a place where dreams and desires regarding their personal and professional futures were simultaneously fostered and capitalized on, and where they could, at the very least, work towards new versions of their lives.

In attending classes at IPA - a school that promised access, of some kind, to the world of playback singing and reality music TV shows and which positioned itself as a node in this new economy - these women were explicitly situating themselves as active participants in this aspirational economy. Moreover, as the opening discussion of visual advertising discourses and the ethnographic exploration of musical training at IPA have shown, the performing arts are increasingly positioned as a privileged space to cultivate a highly valued feeling-ful subject position. Thus, in coming to IPA, these female students were simultaneously buying access to musical training *and* to affective training, which, together, offered them new forms of embodied selfhood and subjectivity. In envisioning and preparing for imagined professional futures and developing themselves as feeling-ful subjects, they were doing what modern aspirational subjects are supposed to be doing in India today: finding ways to transform and *develop* the self. But as this training made them viable as aspirational subjects, so too did it further situate them within a cycle of commodification and consumption. Indeed, this desire for "feeling" is being used to sell

both media products – such as reality dance and music TV shows and the commodity items they advertise – *and* to sell training in the arts (which increasingly takes place in new, glossy, and expensive schools like IPA).

Coda: Having Learned How to Sing with Feel

Two months after the completion of our course at IPA, Tanvi and I were talking on the phone, in an informal interview, of sorts, I asked her how she brought feeling to her singing, since it seemed to come so naturally. "Before," she reflectively confessed, "I was just copying and that's why it seemed like expression" - that is, she was replicating the feeling in the song (in its recorded version). When she just closed her eyes and sang - before, there might be some "gardbard," some confusion, something might go wrong - but now she could go inside herself and still stay on pitch. She talked about a recent experience, where she had sang at a friend's birthday party and the guy standing in front of her had burst into tears. "I sang from feel (feel se gaana gaake) - from my mouth, from my heart (muh se, dil se) - and it reached him (usko pahunch gaya)."

CHAPTER 5:
TALENT, MERIT, AND THE NATURAL VOICE

Several weeks before my course at IPA officially starts, I journey up to the school to meet the main administrator and get a better sense of the school and the course. Anish and I talk about the structure of the classes and the fees, agreeing that I will start in the "Guruji" or introductory level; there are currently six students enrolled, but he expects it to double. I tell him about my research project and my interest in attending classes to see how students are trained. To my surprise, Anish is unfazed, even delighted, agreeing that attending classes at IPA is a perfect way to get such insight, especially since I am a musician as well. He then invites me to sit in on a singing class that being conducted by a guest artist, the playback singer and light classical artist Roop Kumar Rathod.

When I enter the classroom, taking a seat behind the circle of students, Roop Kumarji is talking about how he transitioned to being a singer after being a successful tabla player, giving up all his concerts, tours, and nice hotel rooms to just sit with his tanpura and do riyaaz (practice). Do it because you love it, he counsels, not because you want to become a playback singer, rich and famous. If you sow good seeds of intention and take care of them, good things will come; where there is Saraswati (the patron goddess of the arts and learning), Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) will follow.

After a while, he seems to tire of talking and asks the students to sing. The students straighten up, nervously; I can see them planning, choosing a song in their head, humming,

tapping their hand. The first girl sings a filmi song, the second a ghazal. Then come two guys,

who sing more recent Hindi songs. A few more girls, and a final woman who apologizes for her

bad voice, to with Roop Kumarji replies, "it's ok, it's your hobby." Listening to the students sing,

I am struck by the great variety in voice qualities as well as the ways in which voice quality

maps to song choice. The girls who sang ghazals and older songs have more classic playback

voices, thin and lithe, though with varying abilities to keep track of their pitch (one started too

high and broke off half-way, laughing rather hysterically until she re-started at a lower pitch).

The guys are obviously more keen on western-style pop and sing songs that contain much less

ornamentation, marked by syllabic delivery and straight pitches, huskier voices. Roop Kumarji

encourages one heavier set guy, wearing converse, jeans, and a striped shirt, to really play up the

huskiness and melodrama of his delivery.

At the end of the class, Roop Kumarji brings up the distinction between svabhav (one's

nature) and prabhav (influence). He counsels us to keep the two distinct as we pursue our

musical training. You can be influenced, he implies, and take inspiration from other singers and

their styles. But, ultimately, you have to know yourself, recognize the nature of your voice, and

honor that nature. On the train ride home, I ponder this idea. How did one know the nature of

one's voice? Was my voice more suited to certain songs and genres? What was the relationship

of musical training to this voice nature? Wasn't the voice a flexible instrument and couldn't one's

voice sound many different ways?

<center>***</center>

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how middle-class female students used Hindi film

songs to re-make themselves as more feeling-ful subjects. In this chapter, I specifically attend to

the role of the voice in these projects of self-making. In particular, I hone in on understandings of

"one's natural voice" that emerges in aspirational musical sites such as the Institute for

Performing Arts (IPA) and *Indian Idol*. As I will show, the complex conception of voice that circulates through these sites understands this natural voice to be fundamentally grounded in, produced through, and representative of the body of the singer. The natural voice, then, is apprehended as a sonic materialization of the cultural, ethnic, and biological background of the singer, what I will explore as culture condensed and essentialized *as* biology. Further, while these aspirational musical sites take the voice as an object of intervention and a tool for self-transformation, one's natural voice is understood to be already constituted in importantly fundamental ways. Just as an individual cannot change their background or life history, so too must they accept and understand the characteristics of their natural voice.

I propose that this "natural" voice be understood as a culturally constructed aesthetic ideal that articulates a specific relationship between body and vocal sound. I develop this idea by analyzing pedagogical discourses surrounding the voice that I encountered both at my classes at IPA and on reality music TV shows.[135] Tracing these discourses and associated vocal practices, I highlight vocal typologies established along lines of gender and ethnic-regional origin, which are then further inflected by seemingly fixed attributes of the voice, such as register ("scale") and timbre ("texture"). The understanding of one's "natural" voice presumes an equation between body and voice, between embodied habitus and what I call vocal habitus. This conception of voice is accompanied by a conversation about "suitability" and the importance of knowing which songs and styles suit one's voice. The ability to determine suitability is linked to the need to

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[135] On the most basic level, "pedagogical discourse" refers to instructional commentary by teachers; but I also use "discourse" in the Foucauldian sense to capture how this commentary functioned as a performative act imbued with cultural capital that positioned the teacher, or speaker, in networks of social relations and power. As such, "pedagogical discourses" are also a way of discursively acting upon the singer and their body. See also Annette Schlichter's use of "discourse-practices" in her investigation of embodied vocal training in the Linklater method (Schlichter 2014).

know your voice and, by extension, know yourself. While the present musical moment is marked by popular music singers singing in a greater variety of styles than ever before, efforts to change your voice were met with ambivalence by my singing teachers; these efforts were considered foolhardy, perhaps arrogant, and sometimes even vocally dangerous.

Beyond the important work of unpacking essentialized notions of (vocal) difference that discourses of the "natural" voice enable, I show that this understanding of the "natural" voice directly contradicts understandings of musical talent, which is also presumed to be natural, yet is taken to be socially unmarked. In this way, the ideology of the natural voice in the context of popular music in neoliberalizing India raises important questions about musical meritocracy, and promises of meritocracy more broadly.

Talent and/as Merit

It is a hot day in February in the city of Ahmedabad and I am at the launch of Indian Idol Academy, a music school franchise that aims to bring "music education to the masses" through digital, tablet based singing lessons. Indian Idol Academy is a project of KarmaYog, an educational technology social enterprise based in Kolkata, which has been chosen by Fremantle to lease the *Indian Idol* brand name. Now, the director of the show, Ashok, has flown up from Mumbai to see the launch of the educational product. Inside the local franchise center, a set of brightly painted rooms tucked into the front of a small shopping complex marked only the name "Indian Idol Academy" in the proprietary blue cursive script, chairs have been assembled in front of a large flat screen TV. A group of parents, their children, and a few journalists and cameramen trickle in for a press conference and demo of the product, an interactive video featuring prominent Bollywood musical figures introducing basic musical ideas. When he is introduced,

Ashok - a tall barrel-chested man - stands in front of the parents and journalists and holds the mic with ease. "In this," he proclaims, simultaneously referencing the TV show and the music education enterprise, "there is no discrimination, not of money, not of class. All that matters is talent" ("Isme koi discrimination nahin hai, na to paise, na to class - sirf talent.") Indian Idol Academy, he promised, would locate those children who had talent ("jo bacche jiske ander talent hai"); and, for those who didn't have talent, they could attend to learn more about music.

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In the narrative it presents and sells to the public, *Indian Idol* portrays itself as a musical meritocracy. As Ashok's performative proclamation above indicates, and as discussed in Chapter One, central to this meritocratic claim is the promise that "talent," a supposedly neutral and natural quality, will trump the inequalities and markers of social difference that permeate daily life, such as class, money and, by extension, other social vectors such as gender and caste.[136]

In a now-classic sports sociology article, "The Mundanity of Excellence," Daniel Chambliss provides the following, useful encapsulation of social understandings of "talent":

> "Talent' is perhaps the most pervasive lay explanation we have for athletic success. Great athletes, we seem to believe, are born with a special gift, almost a "thing" inside of them, denied to the rest of us - perhaps physical, genetic, psychological, or physiological. Some have "it" and some don't. Some are "natural athletes" and some aren't. While an athlete, we acknowledge, may require many years of training and dedication to develop and use that talent, it is always "in there," only waiting for an opportunity to come out…We believe it is that talent, conceived as a substance behind the surface reality of performance, which finally distinguishes the best among our athletes" (1989, 78)

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[136] I understand neoliberal meritocracy in contemporary India to be predicated on two different forms of recognition and valuation. One is a valorization of the naturally skilled individual who should be recognized regardless of his social background. The other is a valorization of the hard working individual, a reminder of "American Dream" valence of neoliberal ideology. This second understanding manifests through pervasive narratives of "mehanat" or hard work, which I do not engage in this chapter.

Chambliss goes on to describe "talent" as a "dogma," a matter of faith, and a "reification" of far more mundane embodied habits and dispositions. But Chambliss' investigation (and frustration with) talent parallels broadly held understandings of talent in the musical realm, one that seems to hold for the Indian popular music context which I have been investigating. Talent is a mythic "substance," a discrete entity that some have and some don't, that can be recognized but not defined. More importantly, it is something innate, inherent, and natural. As Ashok observes at the Indian Idol Academy launch, talent can be located and cultivated, but not created.[137]

Chambliss' definition also points to the opaque quality of "talent", which is at once taken to be so important and yet is impossible to articulate or define. In ethnomusicologist Henry Kingsbury's ethnography of a western classical music conservatory, one of the few works in music studies that explicitly treats "talent," he points to the ideological function that "talent" plays. Kingsbury argues that "the very meaning of musical 'talent' is inextricably linked to power relations" and that the inherent ambiguity of the term, as noted by Chambliss, is "resolved through reference to those higher in the power structure [so that] the invocation of 'talent' is linked to the reproduction of a structure of inequality" (1988, 79). "Talent" is an ideologically imbued means through which promotion occurs while obscuring relations of power and social inequality. In this chapter, I draw out the ideological work performed by talent by focusing on that which it obscures: the fundamentally social nature of the voice.

To state the obvious, the "talent" under consideration on *Indian Idol* is specifically located in the voice; it is vocal talent that is being rewarded. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, while talent is understood to be a socially neutral "gift" or attribute, distributed across the

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[137] Indeed, discourses of musical talent seem to figure it as a precious "raw" resource to be mined, extracted, and unearthed from the various remote corners of the country in which it is hidden.

country and populace in a way that is unrelated to social position, the *voice* is conceptualized as fundamentally social. At once profoundly individual and cultural, the voice is understood to be a manifestation of the embodied subject position of the singer. I therefore use this richly essentialized understanding of the "natural" voice to complicate and intervene into an ideological discourse of "natural" talent and the musical meritocracy it is supposed to serve.

Several understandings of "natural" are at play here. Firstly, I analyze discourses of one's "natural" voice" (with the term used in English) that dovetail with the idea of the "nature" of the voice as espoused by Roop Kumarji at the beginning of this chapter.[138] Within the examples I discuss, there is sometimes slippage between a generalized, ideal "natural voice," marked by particular aesthetic conventions, and the "natural" voice *of the individual*, a distinction that I attempt to draw out on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, there is the understanding of talent as "natural." But in contrast to the "naturalness" of the voice, which is *primarily* shaped by one's background, the "naturalness" of talent is presumed to be primarily asocial. It is this tension, the ways in which these two forms of naturalness contradict and undo each other, that I draw out in this chapter.

In her work on the prestigious IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology), anthropologist Ajantha Subramanian critically investigates understandings of and claims to merit in these educational institutions in relation to caste position. Investigating the "social life of caste in contemporary India" through a "politics of merit," she argues that while "the claim to merit is presumed to be a disclaimer of social embeddedness", the context of IIT shows that explicit claims to caste and to merit can and do co-exist (2015, 293). Drawing on Satish Deshpande's

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[138] "Svabhav," the term used by Roop Kumarji, is a Sanskrit word that literally means one's own disposition, one's own mental and emotional state; it is also used in the Bhagavad Gita to connect with one's station in society (caste), an important corollary that I would like to further develop.

investigation of claims to "castelessness" by the already privileged and "modern" upper castes (2013), Subramanian highlights the ways in which merit "favors those with accumulated cultural and social capital" (2015, 317).[139]

In this chapter, I take "talent" to be synonymous with "merit" in the context of the musical meritocracy that *Indian Idol* purports to be, create, and showcase. My concern is with the broader set of structuring social forces (what Subramanian calls "ascribed identities") of gender, caste, class, and regional/ethnic identity and the ways in which these ascribed identities are marked and re-asserted through understandings of the voice that circulate through reality music TV shows and through the educational sites that position themselves in proximity to such shows. While talent participates in a musical meritocratic ideal built upon a post-liberalization glorification of "talented, socially disembedded individuals" (Subramanian 2015, 300), pedagogical discourses emphasizing the social and pre-determined nature of the voice are a reminder of the social basis of "merit" (Subramanian 2015, 294). This chapter thus provides further insight into the unevenness and paradoxes of what Subramanian deems "a nationally proliferating politics of meritocracy" (2015, 312) and the contradictions that are woven into it in the present neoliberalizing moment.

Pedagogical discourses on the "natural" voice

As I discussed in the previous chapter, part of the reason I attended IPA was to gain insight into how young singers were trained for playback singing careers; I assumed that a

[139] See also Karen Ho's work on "smartness" as an embodied disposition in Wall Street investment banking culture (2009).

central part of this endeavor would be the work to improve and transform one's voice. After all, isn't a singing class precisely the place where you learn to change and transform your voice in more and less subtle ways - to expand your range, improve your technical control, practice a wider array of styles and genres and their associated timbres, and be more convincingly expressive (amongst other outcomes)? Yet, alongside this work of developing our voices and our abilities as singers, I repeatedly encountered pedagogical discussions and characterizations of the voice as something that was, to a great extent, *already* constituted. The work of the class, then, was to gain a deeper understanding of your "natural" voice, using pedagogically-imparted knowledge and practice. It was a process of excavation rather than one of formation.

At the most gross level, the natural voice was understood to be produced along gendered lines. Hema ma'am often lectured us on the gendered distinction between voices, saying: "You are female - there are many things that will not come from your throat. You're not male - it depends on your voice!" She chastised Preeti for singing only in *khuli avaaz* ("open voice," synonymous with chest voice), telling her "Don't sing full throated! You have a sweet voice! Before, you were yelling. It was a very male way."[140] Later, in the canteen, Pooja said wistfully, ""I wish I could sing totally open-voiced, like Sir." "No, no," Nishika argued, "Men singers can do like that - but we have to control our voices." Gender thus determined both what a voice could do and what it should do, even as vocal production had to be policed to maintain gender differences.

One's natural voice also depended on one's regional and ethnic origins. Upon hearing Nishika's voice, Hema ma'am remarked, "the Bengali voice is genetically sweet." The

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[140] Khuli avaaz is primarily found in classical and folk music. It is also associated with a pre-microphone style of singing associated with courtesans.

Maharashtrian voice was understood to be thin and nasal, as exemplified by Preeti's voice.

Pooja's voice was noted to be typically Panjabi - a bit strident, with the capacity for more

"throw."[141] I, as an American-raised woman of Indian descent, was expected to be the epitome of

the western voice in the class. This meant that I could create a thicker, huskier timbre (used to

good effect every time I was asked to sing Celine Dion's "My heart will go on," a favorite of my

classmates'). Moreover, while everyone else in the class needed learn how to move up into "head

voice,[142]" this technique was presumed to come "naturally" to me. Such essentialisms based on

one's regional and ethnic background were not only embraced, but were taken to be predictive of

an individual's vocal sound and style.[143]

 While gender and ethnic-regional origin were shared social characteristics that informed

the production of the voice, other characteristics of one's natural voice were understood to be

individual and personal, yet still pre-determined. For example, "vocal texture," as timbre was

referred to, was informed in part by one's ethnic and regional background, but still understood to

be specific to each singer. Similarly, we learned that we each had our own "scale," a term which

encompassed both register and range in demarcating the span and notes where our voices were

most comfortable and which determined the tonic or Sa from which we would most comfortably

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[141] Such correlations between regional identity, vocal tone, and techniques of voice production resonate with Eidsheim's brief discussion of "national" schools of western classical singing, referring to "a region's preferred tonal quality" (2015, 360). Building on the work of Richard Miller, Eidsheim argues that such correlations are the result of explicit embodied vocal techniques taught in different regions.

[142] "Head voice" is a term used in western vocal practice and pedagogy to mark the lighter upper range of a female voice above the *passaggio* or break; such registral distinctions do not exist in Indian musical practice beyond discussions of different octaves.

[143] This is grounded in a larger tendency to talk in essentializing terms - both fond and mocking -about other regions of India. Upon finding out that I was of Gujarati descent, individuals ranging from friends to cab drivers would say some combination of the following: "Oh Gujarati, jalebi, fafda, dhokla!" (referencing popular Gujarati snack foods and Gujaratis' love of snacks), "oh, you must like sweet things" (referencing Gujarati cooking, which adds sugar to savory dishes), or "Khem chho, bahen?" ("How are you, sister?" in Gujarati, referencing both their knowledge of common phrases and the Gujarati practice of addressing every individual as a family member).

sing. One's scale was related to one's gender - most female classical singers sing from around A, female playback singers sing from C, and men sing from around D - but was also considered to be particular to the individual.

Both texture and scale were much fetishized, understood as a sonic fingerprint for the individual. In a brief phone interview with me, playback singer, music director, and reality music show judge Shankar Mahadevan described vocal texture as the "character" of the voice, that which would allow a singer to uniquely mark a song and bring something different to it. In our classes at IPA, Hema Ma'am proclaimed that one's scale was pre-destined, telling us that "God has given a range to a particular person." The young playback singer Neha Bhasin further underscores the ways in which one's scale is taken as both inherent and fixed in an interview with the newspaper DNA: "Your base scale is your unique signature, which you are born with. There is a limit to how much you can stretch your vocal chords. No song is worth damaging them" (Pawar 2011).

Finally, one's natural voice for singing should be intimately tied to one's speaking voice. At IPA, Archit, a young, goofy eighteen year old, was singing in an artificially full and deep voice redolent of a large sixty year old man, a hollow, bass-heavy sound that resonated in his throat. Laxman Sir cut him off: "Is that how you speak? It should be natural. Sing like you speak (jaise tum bolte ho, vaise gate ho)." He teased him for his "Bacchan sahib" sound (that is, sounding like the famous older actor Amitabh Bacchan whose sonorous bass voice marks every kind of commercial, from cars to cleaning products to biscuits). When Archit continued to produce this sound in subsequent classes, Laxman Sir eventually just got irritated, asking Archit why he was making that "artificial" sound. In the reminder to "sing like you speak," speaking was marked as the most ordinary of acts, of which singing should be an extension.

One's natural singing voice, then, was constituted by this slippery mixture of factors that were understood to be simultaneously biological and cultural, individual and social. An individual's voice was formed through and informed by their gender, their ethnic-regional origins, and the cultural context in which they had grown up, even as these shared social and cultural influences manifested differently in each voice. While the voice was understood as a tool for cultivating feeling and creating expression, as discussed in the previous chapter, the sonic characteristics of one's natural voice - marked by timbre, register, range, and something more ineffable (for how do you mark "sweetness"?) - would inherently reflect one's background, a combination of inherited, biologically rooted identities and personal history. These were aspects of the voice that were not available for modification.

Voice and body

If voices could be discussed in terms of one's background, this was because of presumed correlations between one's background (understood in both biological/genetic and cultural terms) and one's body, and then between one's encultured body and the sound of the voice. Put another way, the sonic materiality of the voice was grounded in an individual's embodied experience and life history.

I draw out this series of linkages with a focus on regional-ethnic background. While I never encountered explicit discussion of a "Gujarati body" or "Bengali body," these regional-ethnic identities implied that one inhabited a life-world marked by a certain language and language production; a certain cuisine, marked by particular foods and tastes; daily habits; and even particular temperaments and proclivities. This regional ethnic "habitus," to borrow Bourdieu's formulation, suggests a set of stable embodied dispositions that configure one's way

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of being in the world (1990). Such an ethnic-regional habitus is taken to be formed through one's

participation in certain rituals of life, and rests on a near-biological understanding of ethnic and

regional identity. This perception of regional identity as genetic is bolstered by the fact that most

Indians marry people from their own regional, linguistic, religious, and (often) caste group. Thus,

social habitus is essentialized as an "inherent" identity, in which Bengalis, for example, are

understood to look, behave, and even think in a certain way.[144]

The extrapolation of an essentially sweet "Bengali voice," in turn, rests on an implicit

assumption of the embodied materiality of the voice. That is, the voice is a product *of* the body

and bodily constitution and vocal constitution are in direct relation to each other. While each

individual has their own "natural" voice, this voice is mediated by and reflects their social

background. Thus, each of us had our own particular "vocal habitus," of sorts, an embedded and

embodied vocal disposition that emerged at the conjuncture of the different social structures in

which we were embedded.[145] This was our essential or "natural" voice, which we were to both

understand and respect.

In *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, Weidman details how ideologies of voice

arose in early twentieth-century South India that relied on metonymic associations of interiority,

bourgeois respectability, and cultural authenticity, and which thus privileged an aesthetic based

on "naturalness" and "expression" over "technique." Weidman argues that during this period, the

ideal "natural" voice emerged as "…a kind of pure voice from within, a voice deeply contained

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[144] For example, in *Indian Idol* 3's auditions in Kolkata, they repeatedly reference the "sweet voices" of Bengalis, the quality desserts and sweets they eat, and the high number of intellectuals who are from Bengal.
11 Eidsheim notes a similar paradox in her research with opera teachers in California for whom the "individuality" of the voice often referred to a perceived ethnicized timbre, rooted in the social construction of ethnicity (2015, 6).

within the body, but neither connected to nor manifested on its surface" (2006, 129). This ideological conception of the "natural" voice was thus grounded in an effacement of the body that manifested, in part, through a kind of non-performance onstage, as well as through the conceptual and physical separation of music and dance (2006, 130, 135).

As I have shown in the previous chapter, female respectability is still at play in these classes in the ways that female students negotiate the use of their bodies as they practice being more feeling-ful singers and individuals. However, the natural singing voice here, in the context of early twenty-first century playback singing classes, is marked less by an abdication of the body and more in terms of maintaining an audibly perceptible connection to one's culturally informed body; one's natural voice should directly reflect and express one's body. Privileging the "natural" voice, then, was about appropriately matching voice and embodied self, wherein the body was understood to be a material condensation of biology and genetics, personal history and cultural upbringing.

To examine this connection between the "natural" voice and the socially marked body, I draw on literature that grapples with the materiality of the voice in both the Indian and the American context.[146] In her investigation of the racialized aesthetics of vocal timbre, Nina Eidsheim importantly observes: "Despite its thorough enculturation, vocal timbre is habitually naturalized and racially differentiated" (2015, 22). In an attempt to make sense of the persistence of racialized perceptions of the voice, Eidsheim proposes an understanding of vocal timbre as a "metaphor" in which the sound of the voice is understood to be the reflection of an unmediated,

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[146] The resonance as well as real contrasts between race in America and caste in India are beyond the scope of this work. Nonetheless, the fact that both have become "unspeakable" in "modern" discourse, even as belief in their structuring force and difference (black bodies, lower caste beings) is naturalized and woven into daily discourse and relation, suggests a salient parallel.

unified subjectivity.[147] By extension, qualities of the embodied subject that are taken as "natural", such as race and, in India, one's ethnic, regional, and casted background, are then layered onto the embodied voice so that certain bodies and certain subjects are expected to sound certain ways. Eidsheim locates the naturalization of this metaphoric, dialectical relationship between the sound of a voice and its social meaning in terms of commonsense understandings of the body as "a repository of truth, and bodily sound as a revelation of truth" (2015, 22), so that the voice is understood to communicate innate interior qualities (2015, 26).

Where Eidsheim and others focus on modes of aurality and listening in order to account for the perception of "sonic blackness" (Stoever-Ackerman 2010), Weidman importantly reminds us of the ways in which social categories and constructs are built into and reinforced through aesthetic practices and training themselves: "Voices are material in the sense that they are produced through bodily actions and the training of bodies…[therefore] the very embodied act of vocal production shapes singing and listening bodies into subjects that inhabit those [racial] categories" (2014a, 42). It is to the production of this "natural" voice that I now turn.

Producing the Natural Voice

Indeed, the work of locating and producing one's "natural" voice existed in in close and slippery relationship with the kinds of techniques of vocal production one used and the genres one sang. For example, my Hindustani classical singing teacher Rajeshree emphasized the importance of knowing of one's scale, the natural limitation on how high and low one can go. Reflecting on herself, Rajeshree said, "See, I can sing up to upper Ma, maybe Pa [that is, D or

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[147] For further discussion of this point, see Kunreuther 2014, Sterne 2003, Weidman 2014a.

E]. Beyond that, it will sound very different." She made a face. "Why to go beyond? Lower Ma [that is, below the tonic] to upper Ma [above the tonic an octave above] - it's enough!" Clearly, Rajeshree *could* go higher; but to do so would require her to use a different technique of vocal production. The thought of changing the *sound* of her voice - which had a husky nasal timbre - in service of an expanded range was antithetical to Rajeshree's aesthetic and professional ideals. After all, she exclaimed, "people come to my concerts for my *voice*!", drawn by her unique timbre as much as any of her "cultivated" skills (such as singing complicated improvisations or being able to develop a particular raga). As Rajeshree understood it, her voice was constituted by a particular timbre, which both necessitated and *required* a certain scale.

Further, Rajeshree understood this ability to stick to one's appropriate scale to be a hallmark of classical music, whereby she could change the tonic to stay within her comfortable range without any negative effects or commentary. Conversely, she declared, playback singing was never a professional option for her because the scale was "fixed" and she couldn't go that high: "For ladies, because of [the influence of] Lataji [Mangeshkar] and Ashaji [Bhosle], they always have to sing very high…I do sing Lataji's songs, but I sing them in *my* register." She said this defiantly, and we both smiled.

Rajeshree was articulating a complex feedback loop between the specific characteristics that marked her voice as *her own* ("My voice"), the musical choices she made to preserve her voice in this recognizable sonic form (Rajeshree had the training and technique to extend her voice, if she had so wanted), and the kinds of musical opportunities that were thus made available or foreclosed upon, in the form of the genres she could sing professionally.

Rajeshree was a highly trained professional classical singer and she was able to reflect upon these vocal choices with some distance and humor. At IPA, however, the link between

one's scale, one's natural voice, and the opportunities available were both more in flux and more significant. Even as we were told that we each had our "own" scale, the exigencies of a group class necessitated that we settle on a single scale and tonic from which we could sing, and where we would set the drone from the tanpura machine.

While C is the standard tonic for female playback singers, Shanta was having a hard time reaching the upper notes of the octave when singing in khuli avaaz (chest voice), as she was being coached to do by Laxman Sir. Yet when we tried setting the tanpura to B, Pooja and Nishika complained that it felt very low and, moreover, that it sounded bad. Laxman Sir agreed, telling us that it was better that we practice from C in order to produce the necessary pressure in the vocal chords that would open up our higher register. He advised Shanta to sing from her stomach rather than her throat and to simultaneously control her voice in terms of volume and force. It was a difficult set of instructions to actually realize, and even as Shanta forced her voice to go up the scale, she was unable to go above "ni" (the 7th note of the scale). Ultimately, Laxman Sir conceded, "Maybe that's not your scale." It was immensely frustrating for Shanta; a few times, she put her head down on the desk and silently cried.

By the end of the semester, however, I noticed that Shanta had given up trying to sing from her chest in the classical style of vocal production. Instead, she had found a very pretty, high and nasal sound, a more classically "filmi" sound, in which she could move through a wider range of notes, albeit with less power. If, as Rajeshree had pointed out, one's scale was intimately related to the genres one could sing, it seemed that the requirements and conventions of a genre could, conversely, determine the very technique by which one produced voice and, therefore, the

sound of one's voice.[148] One's "natural" voice, then, was contingent upon the genres one wanted to sing and the kinds of vocal production prioritized in that genre.[149]

This material equation between the encultured body and the embodied voice lay the groundwork for an assumption of how people could and should sound, based on the constitution of their body. Because I had a more "western" voice, due to my upbringing, I was told by Hema ma'am and others that I would sing Sunidhi Chauhan's songs well, given the famous playback singer's penchant for singing upbeat, bold songs and using a range of vocal techniques, including belting and head voice. Conversely, Preeti, whose Maharashtrian voice was thin, nasal, and lithe, was told that she would sing Lataji's songs well, but should not attempt Sunidhi's songs.

Yet my mixed background caused some confusion regarding how, exactly, I should sound. As an American of Indian descent, I was constantly afforded leeway in terms of my vocal texture and pronunciation. For example, when I attempted a classic Lata song, "Pyaar Kiya to Darna Kya," my teachers and classmates were puzzled by the strangeness of my rendition, my inability to reproduce Lata's vocal timbre and to exactly imitate her melodic line. Nonetheless, they were gentle in their commentary; since I had grown up "over there," it was natural that I would use my voice in different ways. At the same time, I understood to be "basically" Indian and Gujarati. As such, I was constantly being told to sound "more Indian," to narrow my vowels

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[148] Here, I follow Gray's work on fado and her argument that genre has agency, reflecting the profound way in which genre becomes a repository for histories, sounds, and practices, including those of vocal production (2013, 5).

[149] I do not mean to imply that the main "genres" of Indian music – classical, light classical, filmi, folk – are defined by a single technique of voice production or a single voice, nor do I mean to imply that a singer cannot move between these genres. Nonetheless, there are broad associations between a genre and a certain kind of voice. For example, it would be highly unusual for a film singer to sing in khuli avaaz, a technique that is explicitly associated with the pre-microphone era. Conversely, classical music is understood to be the most flexible in terms of vocal timbre.

and bring more of a focused quality to my voice. As Laxman Sir put it to me one day, "more jalebi and fafda," naming popular Gujarati snacks, "less Big Mac!" This imperative to "try to sound more Indian" was explained in terms of my pronunciation, but, it seemed equally rooted in my timbre and tone. And the invocation of food was not just a value judgement – that the crunchy salty-sweet flavor of snacks was preferable to the large-mouthed bite of a rich mushy burger – but a signal that I needed to access the Indian parts of my life history and culture that were materialized in my body in order to produce the right sound.

Unsettling the Body-Voice Connection

On reality music television shows, this presumed linkage between body and voice was sometimes disturbed for comic or dramatic effect. The audition clip of Mugdha Hasnabis for *SaReGaMaPa* 2010 provides a useful case study.[150] As Mugdha is shown walking up on stage, comically awkward music is played in the background, mocking her heavy weight. After the judges tell her "Please start," she is further mocked by being shown staring blankly at the camera as she waits for the backing track to start. The first surprise, then, comes as she begins singing in an elegant high operatic falsetto, in Italian. As the judges burst into applause, Mugdha begins bouncing on her hip and rhythmically moving her head as she transitions into "O Rey Chhori", a Hindi song from the 2010 movie *Lagaan*. At the end, she receives a standing ovation.

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[150] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCrFCIXU3YY This was one of the first Indian reality music TV show clips I ever watched. Having stumbled upon it online in 2012, I was both impressed by Mugdha's stylistic flexibility and intrigued by the way that the show used her audition as a pedagogical moment to teach audiences about non-Indian music (after being accepted, she is asked to explain opera). By sheer coincidence, Mugdha was the first former contestant who I interviewed, having been put in touch by a mutual musician friend.

Figure 3 Mugdha Hasnabis singing opera and then a Hindi film song

Mugdha's audition thus plays with and disturbs the presumed link between body and voice twice over. First is the surprise of having an angelic voice come from a heavy body, and a western operatic voice come from an Indian body. Second is the unusual pairing of Italian opera with Hindi film song, the unexpected, perhaps unsettling, ability of one body to produce multiple kinds of voices, both timbrally and stylistically.[151] While such vocal flexibility can be risky, as I will illustrate later, here it was carried off successfully, a testament to Mugdha's vocal skill, training, and savvy song choice.

Yet attempting to redirect the voice away from one's bodily habitus was considered risky. This was illustrated by Rajeshree's story of her former student, the IndiPop star Sunita Rao. Rao had come to Rajeshree when she started encountering troubles with her voice, which Rajeshree explained in terms of Rao's reliance on a western vocal style: ""She was used to singing in that western style, no? So even when she would talk, she would sound like 'hi'...'," Rajeshree imitated a breathy, falsetto. When they started working together, Rao couldn't even sing a straight tone in

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[151] This might productively be thought of as an instance of what Nicholas Harkness calls "qualic tuning," the adaptation and manipulation of the "qualia," sensuous qualities, of the voice in different social-aesthetic contexts (Harkness 2014).

chest voice - her voice would crack and pop. Even worse, Rajeshree recounted, it was happening in her talking voice too, so that her voice would crack when she answered the phone - "'heLLO'" - and if it was someone from the industry, well, then, they might say 'Sunita, what's the matter? your voice is not well?' Rao could also sing in head voice, what Rajeshree characterized as "that artificial voice…," although she laughed that Sunita would always correct her, "Rajeshree ma'am, it's not artificial – it's head voice!" But, she proceeded to say seriously, Rao had lost use of her "natural" voice. It was a vocal crisis with great professional risks.

After studying intermittently with Rajeshree for two years, Rao could sing from Sa to Ni - almost a full octave - in khuli avaaz, chest voice. To go higher, she would still switch to head voice, but she still needed help smoothing the transition between registers. Rajeshree was unable to offer much guidance beyond having Rao sing whatever she was preparing for her pop stage shows, because she herself didn't have experience with moving between chest and head voice. As Rajeshree said to me proudly, "learning to sing this way, we don't use this artificial voice at all!" Clearly, she believed very strongly in sticking to one's "natural" voice - an established sound and texture in someone's voice - as a simultaneously aesthetic choice and as physiological necessity. Sunita Rao's story, then, was a cautionary one about the importance of respecting and hewing to one's "natural" voice, of understanding the limits of the malleability of the voice, even if at the cost of professional gain.

Suitability and Self-deception

The naturalized connection between encultured body and voice also yielded a more explicit conversation around "suitability." Indeed, learning which kinds of songs suited which kinds of voices was an important strand of the musical education at IPA. When Laxman Sir was

late to class one day (as he so often was), the students talked amongst themselves, agreeing that we should push Laxman Sir to tell us which songs and genres suited our voices. Conversely, even as our teachers were interested in exposing us to different genres and styles, they pushed us towards singing songs that would suit our voices, particularly as the time to record our demo CDs drew near.

I'll begin to unpack this question of suitability by attending to my own experience, and frustration, in finding songs that "suited" my voice. Laxman Sir had recommended that I sing the song "Jiya Re," a peppy, bold song from the 2012 film *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*. Originally sung by Neeti Mohan, the song had won her the Filmfare Award for Best Female Playback Singer that year. Demonstrating the song for us in class, Laxman threw his voice after the first declarative line, "Chali re," so that "re" had a punchy, sharp ending. "It will suit your voice," he told me, perhaps because the song's declarative style and belting-style of vocal delivery seemed more "western." Still, I needed a second song for the CD.

Tanvi approached me after class to tell me that she thought the song "Kabira," from the film *Yeh Jeewani Hai Deewani,* would really suit my voice. Beautifully melodic, the song features the singer Rekha Bhardwaj, whose textured, slightly husky voice and lower scale marks her as a departure from the classic playback singer model. Perhaps it was this unconventional voice and its noticeable texture that led Tanvi to recommend it to me, for my voice was certainly a far cry from the thin, fine female playback voice. Or perhaps it was the guitars, rock drums, and harmonic structure of the song - marking it as "western" - that made her to think of me.

Despite the "western" nature of "Jiya Re," Mangal Sir was concerned that I wasn't doing a more "western" song and pushed me to work on two songs. "Aaj ki Raat," a song from the 2006 movie *Don,* was marked by a breathy, sensual voice (that of IndiPop singer Alisha Chinai)

over a heavy drum-and-synth track. "Ti Amo," sung by Sunidhi Chauhan for the 2011 film *Dum Maro Dum*, was a sappy pop song, marked by syllabic word-setting, a digital pop drum beat, and an intimately breathy female voice. The texture of the voice, instrumentation, word setting (syllabic versus more intricately ornamented), and a certain kind of delivery (sensual, intimate, and confident) marked these songs as "western." And it was, I think, a combination of this unusual vocal texture and a certain kind of mood or attitude conveyed in these songs that made them "suited" to my voice, grounded as it was in my western-trained body.

Beyond the specific sound and attributes of one's voice, "suitability" was also related to one's temperament and personality. When Roshni attempted to sing "Mayya Mayya," a seductive item number from the 2010 film *Guru*, Laxman Sir frowned: "The kind of girl you are - so peaceful - this song doesn't suit you." Roshni sat back her in chair, looking deflated. While playback singing was supposed to be about vocal acting, only the most professional and accomplished playback singers were able to convincingly inhabit a range of songs; everyone else had to carefully choose songs that suited them and their voices.

Indeed, this issue of suitability in song choice was a serious matter, for it indicated that you understood your own voice, its limitations and strengths, its natural character. The foundation of making a suitable choice was understanding your vocal habitus, an understanding and insight gained by spending much time practicing and, equally importantly, paying close attention to your voice, heeding the qualities and characteristics therein. As Hema ma'am guided us in how to practice, she commanded us to pay attention to the essential defining characteristics of our voice and vocal apparatus. "What is the constitution of your throat?" she prodded. "'You have to know that" in order to cultivate a flexible voice and find flow; you couldn't force your

throat to produce sounds that were unnatural to it.[152] If you did, you ran the risk of strain. Hema ma'am sardonically framed this lesson as a singing "technique:" "That which won't come from your throat, absolutely don't do it!" Singing without knowing one's singing body intimately, therefore, was physiologically dangerous.

Suitability was about choosing the songs that showed your voice in the best light; it was about "knowing your own capacity," as so many people coached, and creating an ideal environment in which your voice would thrive and shine.[153] But to sing a song that did *not* suit your voice was taken to be more than a merely unfortunate or foolish choice. Instead, it implied an ignorance of your vocal habitus or, worse, an arrogant disregard for it, a refusal to accept the naturally given conditions of your voice.

While teaching a lesson on breath control and pitch, Hema ma'am warned us to heed what we could and couldn't do and not to make fools of ourselves ("khud ko bevakoof na karo"), not to deceive ourselves. This idea of self-deception regarding one's musical skill is highlighted during the auditions round of *Indian Idol.* "Bloopers" or "worst auditions" are a narrative sub-plot unto themselves across the *Idol* franchise, and the bad auditions on *Indian Idol* showcase aspiring singers (usually men) with unpleasant voices - scratchy, shrieky, or extremely nasal -

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[152] Similarly, Sunidhi Chauhan emphasized this link between voice and body, vocal knowledge and body knowledge, saying, "See, I know my voice. You have to understand your voice, like going to the gym, lifting weights, you have to know which weight class you lift in, you need to understand your body."

[153] This conversation about vocal suitability importantly dovetails with a parallel obsession with song choice. While the art of choosing a song certainly involves a consideration of suitability, it also incorporates a range of other factors, including an audience's relationship to a song, choosing an appropriate genre for a given environment, and showcasing one's versatility. Indeed, this is one of the most important jobs of a music director and his team on a reality music TV show – determining which songs might suit a contestant's voice and, conversely, which songs might productively challenge them. Such decisions are made with an eye to the overall musical and narrative trajectory of the show, as a way of developing a contestant's "storyline" in terms of how they grow, improve, and change as a singer and performer.

often in tandem with an inability to keep pitch. Alongside the quality of their voices, what seems to be equally distasteful, in the eyes of the judges and the camera, is the comportment and performance style of these singers. Often, they are attempting an impassioned, self-involved performance: eyes closed, nodding their head to emphasize important words, gesticulating heavily and using their hands to mark the pitches, as a Hindustani classical singer might. In response, the judges wince, pretend to follow the direction of the singer's overly active hands, and even sneak behind them when their eyes remain closed for too long.

What seems to make these performers – who are mostly men, often Muslim, from lower-caste backgrounds and third tier cities - worthy of ridicule is their self-involvement coupled with the unsuccessful attempt at performing a different habitus, to take on the trappings of a cosmopolitan, urban, upper-middle class youth subject. In their investigation of Afro-Asian music in America, Tamara Roberts draws out the distinction between "minstrelsy," "passing," and "identification" as different modes of laying claim to cultural material not deemed one's own. Minstrelsy is "the temporary crossing of racial lines" in such a way that the performer's original identity remains intact, whereas passing takes place over a longer period of time and requires "a provisional disavowal of the self…in order to forge a new social identity." Central to this distinction is the relative temporality of such crossings and the relative ability of each to transform the performer. Roberts adds a third level of contrast in terms of the transparency and visibility of each: "While minstrelsy gains power from its transparency, passing requires the obfuscation of racial transgression" (Roberts 2016, 60). These young, lower-caste men are indeed attempting a form of crossing as they try to convincingly perform a casted and classed subject position not their own through choice of song and performance style. Following Roberts' distinctions, I would argue that while these subaltern men seek to "pass" – to achieve a more

permanent transformation of self, one that *Indian Idol* itself would facilitate – the judges'

reactions quickly reduce their efforts to minstrelsy, a temporary form of mimicry that loses its

transformative, and transgressive, potential. Self-deception regarding one's musical skill and

"natural" voice exists in metonymic relationship to another form of self-deception regarding

one's place in the world and "natural" way of being. Together, these forms of *aspirational*

impersonation, to draw on Mankekar's terms developed in the previous chapter, seem to

necessitate public ridicule and shame. [154]

To draw out this last point and illustrate the vitriol that this kind of aspirational self-

deception incurs, I offer an account of a telling incident at IPA. One day during our first month

of classes at IPA, a new guy joins. Irffan is skinny, with a scruffy haircut, wearing tight jeans,

button up shirt, long thin dress shoes, face slightly pocked. His name marks him as Muslim, his

thin dress shoes, skinny jeans, and white button-down shirt as lower middle-class and fashion

conscious. He tells us that he tried out for *SaReGaMaPa* three times, but never made it past the

first round. Laxman Sir asks him to sing something, and Irffan sings a song by Nusrat Fateh Ali

Khan. It's a gutsy move, attempting the bold vocal delivery, intricate ornamentation, and wide

range of a song in the *qawwali* style, especially one popularized by this great qawwali master.

Irffan is intensely concentrated and sincere as he sings. He closes his eyes, head turned

slightly to the side, and although his voice strains slightly in reaching the very top notes, I find

his performance convincing - he is fairly comfortable in rendering tans (intricate runs) and in

throwing his voice to get the forward, assertive vocal style that marks qawwali.

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[154] Here, work on "black voice" and passing will be invaluable as I develop these ideas (Bucholtz 2011, Bucholtz and Lopez 2011, Stras 2007).

Laxman Sir, however, listens with a frown on his face. When Irffan finishes, he says

flatly, "If you go [to audition] 10 more times, you still won't get past the first round." To my ear,

Irffan has a lot of potential and I'm surprised by Laxman Sir's harsh comment. Laxman Sir

continues with a culinary analogy: "Just because I like biryani doesn't mean that I can make it.

This song doesn't come from your throat. You have to teach it. Everyone thinks that in auditions

they have to sing a hard song…[but] you have to know your limits (Aapko hud ko pata hona

chahiye)…You have a lot to learn. You have some misconceptions in your mind (Bahut sikhna

hai. Aapke dimag mein kuch galat conceptions hain)."

Laxman Sir's harsh response to Irffan reinforces this link between suitability and self-

knowledge, the need to understand your vocal apparatus as well as your limits. Irffan's story also

brings out the slippage between vocal suitability and broader social forms of social suitability as

well as the problematics of the conception of voice I have drawn out here. One's "natural" voice

and embodied vocal habitus is understood to be a condensation and reflection of one's social

background, constituted by gender, caste, class, region, upbringing, and more. To attempt to

circumvent or push one's natural voice by attempting a song seen as unsuitable is to disrespect

the natural constitution of one's voice - whether in ignorance or knowingly. But this moment

carries more serious implications, for Laxman Sir's comments function as a barely veiled

commentary on social mobility and who can attempt transformation under the sign of aspiration.

Here, discourses of the natural voice point to ideologically inflected ideas of what kinds of

transformation are available to whom, and where, in India's aspirational economy.

Talent and the natural voice

Across the globe, "talent" has become a cipher for talking about individual worth, both in terms of more ephemeral ideas of individual potential and, quite literally, in terms of an individual's financial potential.[155] "Talent" is a way of claiming one's value and place in society through reference to one's future potential and maximization. Claims of talent in the neoliberal-inflected aspirational economy are claims to belonging by figuring oneself as a simultaneously productive, modern, and self-maximizing individual.[156] Reality music and performance TV shows are particularly invested in purveying an understanding of talent as a promissory note to be capitalized upon. For, in the neoliberal social ideal offered by shows such as *Idol*, talent is a form of merit and, as such, it should implicitly yield recognition, promotion, and reward.

If "the claim to merit is presumed to be a disclaimer of social embeddedness," as Ajantha Subramaniam writes, the voice through which talent manifests is profoundly socially embedded. These complex conceptions of the voice illuminate what is obfuscated under claims to talent, serving as a reminder of "the social basis of merit." The inherently socially and culturally produced "natural" voice, as articulated across these aspirational sites of musical practice, anchors a counter-discourse to that of the musical and social meritocracy that talent participates in.

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[155] Crucially, the word "talent" is not used in the first episode of *SaReGaMa*. Instead, host Sonu Nigam uses the term *"pratibha"* or "skill," even as he deploys now clichéd language about searching from north to south, east to west, in every corner of the country, for these hidden, skilled individuals.

[156] An increased emphasis on the idea of "talent" is intimately tied to the context of globalization. Mackenzie's 1997 report entitled "The War on Talent" put the word in circulation as a way of talking about globalized labor markets. In India, beyond music, "talent" circulates as a stand-in for discussing Indian workers and the capabilities of the Indian labor force in the context of globalized economies.

Indeed, not all "natural" voices are created equal, as the example of Ravinder Ravi shows. Marked as having a powerful, folk-inflected voice, Ravi's "natural" voice (in tandem with his compelling story) earned him a spot on the first season of *Indian Idol*. But, this "natural" voice, ultimately, was deemed entirely unsuitable for playback singing: rough, loud, and rooted in a particular folk genre marked by region and class. If we look at the canonic playback singers – such as Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle, Geeta Dutt, Mohammad Rafi, and Kishore Kumar – we can see that upper class and upper caste voices have become the generic ideal in Hindi film song, and the extent to which different "natural" voices hew to that ideal informs the kinds of opportunities available to individuals.

Yet in this moment marked by a search for "new" and "unique" voices, as discussed in Chapter Three, shouldn't Ravi's earthy, folky voice have been of interest precisely for its difference? Here again, the politics of voice and vocal difference consolidate structural hierarchies. The singers who have gained success for their "earthy," thick, and folksy voices – such as Kailash Kher, Ila Arun, and Harshdeep Kaur – are all middle-class and upper-caste.[157] Less frequently, hereditary folk musicians from Rajasthan are brought in to record Hindi film songs; their historical lineage and more recent success in the world music circuit has made them desirable as authentic "voices of the earth."[158] In this equation, Ravi is neither upper-caste nor from the right kind of "authentic" low caste background. Of equal importance is the fact that Ravi is seen to lack the ability to produce a voice that goes beyond his limited habitus, for he is characterized by *Indian Idol* producer Rahul as "only able to sing one kind of Punjabi folk song."

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[157] It is difficult to independently verify the caste background of these and other singers. According to Indpaedia's page on "Scheduled Caste Talent in Indian Cinema," Kailash Kher is Chammar (as is Sonu Nigam); elsewhere, he is listed as a high-caste Kashmiri Pandit.
http://indpaedia.com/ind/index.php/Scheduled_caste_talents_in_Indian_cinema
[158] For more on Manganiyar musicians and their recent "global" turn, see Ayyagiri 2014.

While the upper-caste singers mentioned above have become representatives of genres that derive from lower-caste and lower-class folk songs, lower-caste, lower-class aspiring singers are deemed incapable of transcending their background, an essentialized culture-as-nature that is materialized through the voice. In this way, these singers are denied a cosmopolitan vocal subject position.

In the abstract use of "talent" as it circulates through these aspirational sites of musical practice, it is important to remember that talent inheres *in* voices and in the bodies that produce them. Even in explicitly aspirational sites such as IPA, *Indian Idol,* and *Indian Idol Academy*, pedagogical discourses lay bare the tension between aspirational projects of self-improvement and entrenched ideas regarding the innate qualities and fundamental nature of each individual. If the ideal aspirational, neoliberal subject is to be working on and transforming themselves, the fundamental intransigence of the self that is articulated through these discourses of voice raises a crucial question: For which subjects will such aspirational labor of self-cultivation and transformation actually yield fruitful results? The tension implicit in this question marks the paradoxical situation of the aspirational subject in India today: compelled to strive as part of the mandate of a modern India while constantly reminded of the limitations that history and social position enforce.

CONCLUSION

Shortly after I concluded the majority of my fieldwork in July 2014, I was asked to give a talk on my research experiences and initial findings. Sitting down to organize my thoughts, I found myself producing pages of fluid writing about, strangely enough, real estate development in Mumbai:

> By official estimates, there are nearly 1,000 buildings under construction, ranging from immense skyscrapers to the upscale residential housing complexes that are emerging under a "redevelopment" scheme wherein real estate developers can create a luxury building, give original residents new, fancy apartments and then sell the remaining apartments. This has created a real estate development bubble based on the idea of "air rights," the empty space above an extant building.
>
> Of course, corruption runs rampant in Mumbai's building industry, as well as in its government, so many buildings coming up are far taller than they should be. Conversely, there are skyscrapers at least 100 stories high that are still shells; the developer apparently ran out of money and just disappeared, leaving the half-built building. Municipal governing bodies hint at impending changes in the rules governing construction that would allow for ever higher building heights, so real estate developers, having secured the blessing of a buildings' residents, sit and wait to begin redevelopment, waiting for conditions to become ever more favorable to them. Sometimes this waiting goes on for years, so that you also have all these small decaying buildings, falling apart on the people who live in them as they sit awaiting the deliverance of "redevelopment."

Perhaps it is obvious why I found myself writing about construction and building redevelopment. The elegant rising buildings and frequent sites of demolition were visual symbols of the intensified aspiration circulating in contemporary India, while crumbling cement buildings stuck in the morass of re-development served as reminders of the risk and precarity that attended aspiration. Further, the tangible remaking of Mumbai's physical landscape was

attended by an affective tone that suffused public space and private lives. Excitement, hopes and visions for the city's future intermingled with fears, grievances, and insecurities. In the aspirational economy, the economic, affective, embodied, and subjective elements of the neoliberal project interweave and co-evolve.

I have been cautious about too hastily marking India as "neoliberal," wary of a teleology in which India's recruitment into global structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s necessarily lead to an economic and cultural condition called "neoliberalism." Undoubtedly, aspects of India's aspirational project and the aspirational subjectivity it promotes resonate with aspects of cultural formations marked as neoliberal across the world in terms of the kinds of ideal selves being promoted and social formations being imagined.

However, it would be facile to re-assert some version of a base-superstructure argument here in which cultural practices shape subjects for an ultimately economic, perhaps exploitative, end. By emphasizing the idea of an aspirational economy, I have worked to complicate a dichotomy between the economic-material and the affective-subjective, showing how subjectivities and affects *are* material as they inhere in, shape, and manifest through bodies and voices. Aspirational subjectivities are formed *and maintained* through feeling-ful embodied cultural practices. At the same time, certain embodied subjectivities and voices become tools for social mobility and economic gain. In this way, the affective, subjective, cultural, and economic realms are profoundly intertwined in this encounter with an emergent neoliberalism.

In this dissertation, I have explored the contours of the aspirational economy of contemporary India and demonstrated the central role of popular music practice within it. I have investigated how changes in media and, specifically, the arrival of transnational media forms and outlets have enabled and required changes in musical sound, performance, embodied voices, and

subjectivities. Sites of mediatized musical performance, such as reality music television shows like *Indian Idol* and *SaReGaMaPa*, propagate aspirational discourses through their musical and biographical narratives of growth and transformation, showcasing contestants becoming simultaneously more compelling performers and more worldly individuals. In this way, reality music TV shows showcase new ideals of musical performance that are simultaneously new modes of self performance. Moreover, the success and popularity of these shows have produced new sites of musical training wherein amateur singers work on themselves, molding their bodies and voices through the expressive resource of Hindi film song in order to encourage new embodied and affective subjectivities.

At the same time, as I have demonstrated, popular music in no way obviates the structural hierarchies of contemporary India, despite the aspirational promises on which reality music television shows are premised. To the contrary, popular musical sound and practice often work to consolidate ascribed identities and reinforce unequal access to opportunities by re-inscribing essentializing links between bodies and voices. On reality music shows, while contestants from lower-caste and less privileged backgrounds drive the dramatic "reality" element, the ability to convincingly inhabit an urbane performative presence, marked by a smoother and more versatile voice, is what allows a contestant to actually succeed on the show. While popular music is figured as a site of transformation and reality music TV shows as potential platforms for social mobility, it is the consolidated embodied cultural capital held by upper class and upper caste aspirational subjects that most often seems to be recognized and rewarded.

As Ilana Gershon writes: "Neoliberal labor is not merely one of replacement but continual translation, in which people continually struggle to make neoliberal principles livable given their understanding of how one is social" (Gershon 2011, 544). Indeed, popular music has

become an important space for encountering, negotiating, and – for some – inhabiting new

neoliberal ideals of self and society. Yet, as a site of already established cultural meaning and

memory, popular music also highlights the tensions and internal contradictions of this emergent

neoliberalism in India: between consumer-choice by the masses and a musical meritocracy based

on elite, expert decision making; between aspirational discourses that promise reward regardless

of social background and musical social tastes that understand upper caste bodies and voices as

the desirable modern musical norm; between popular music as an established national heritage

and popular music as a site of stylistic innovation and self-expression.

As subjects are being remade and subjectivities shaped through musical practice, the

question remains: what is the aim of this aspirational economy? I contend that the aspirational

economy attempts to habituate its subjects to striving as an experiential, affective part of daily

life. The project of the aspirational economy, then, is the production of subjects who can *function*

as neoliberal selves. However, this does not necessarily mean that aspirational subjects are

coterminous with, or even in the process of becoming, ideal neoliberal subjects. As Gershon

reminds us, the "neoliberal self" of academic discourse is a "composite heuristic" (2011, 553)

that our informants' lives will necessarily pull at and distort in crucially productive ways, so long

as we attend to such distortions. Indeed, aspirational work on the self through popular music is

taken up toward many ends: economic gain and fame, to be sure, but also experiences of

satisfaction and accomplishment, social agency, community, and a sense of purpose.

I therefore conclude by taking recourse to music and its affordances in order to hold

space for the experiences of conviviality, sincerity, pleasure, and contentment that emerged in

the musical spaces of aspirational Mumbai and which have yet perhaps not been given as much

weight as striving, precarity, and risk in these pages. I draw on music not as an autonomous,

aesthetic form that stands outside of capitalist alienation,[159] but as an intensely relational practice with its own agentive potential. Music produces feeling-ful, expressive sound that resonates one's body and can move others in unexpected ways. Though always part of economies of value and political projects of power, it cannot be fully instrumentalized by an ideological rationality. Acknowledging this agentive capacity of musical sound as it moves between human bodies, mobilizing other histories and practices, is at least one crucial way of thinking and *feeling* beyond an encompassing neoliberal logic into a far richer understanding of aspirational Indian lives.

Postlude

A few months after the end of my classes at IPA, Laxman Sir invited me to a classical concert he was putting on with his father, a famous classical singer from Kolkata. I, in turn, invited my up-and-coming playback singer friend Aditi Paul, who had urged me to keep her posted about the musical events I was going to. We were joined by Preeti, my fellow student from IPA, who had managed to leave her children in the care of her in-laws at home.

Together, the three of us walk through the leafy and peaceful college campus where the concert was being held, chatting. "Are you a classical singer?" Preeti asks Aditi, who softly demurs, saying simply that she is a singer, but not heavy classical. The small auditorium is filled

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[159] Here, I am drawing on Javier León's diagnosis of the reluctance to attend to neoliberalism in music studies, based on "Ongoing Orwellian and Adornian anxieties about totalitarianism, mass culture, and commodification," the desire to assert the "transcendence of art," and a belief that "musical communities are exceptional by their 'rootedness' and therefore protected from capitalism" (2014, 129)

with an eclectic mix of people. The first rows appear populated by relatives of the performers: men, women, and kids in fancy Indian clothes. Others in the crowd are clearly Laxman Sir's friends and contacts from the industry – wearing jeans and t-shirts or collared shirts, with grown-out curly hair (a sure sign of a "creative"), each casually, but carefully groomed. A few minutes in, I am surprised to see Ashok, the director of *Indian Idol*, walk in, accompanied by his wife. I wave to him and he smiles and waves back. Laxman Sir sits on stage in an elegant turquoise blue kurta, carefully noting and greeting each guest.

Laxman Sir's father is elderly and his voice gritty, not sweet. Nonetheless, as he warms up, his voice gains strength, so that he is able to move through fast and heavy gamak tans, ornamented runs, with impressive ease. Laxman Sir, in his replies, is much silkier and lighter; his improvisations are even more adept, prompting applause from the audience. As father and son develop the raga, slowly introducing its melodic contours, then moving into faster runs and improvisations around the tabla beat, their deep expertise in Hindustani classical music and profound knowledge of raga is eminently clear. Preeti, Aditi, and I are sitting together, recording the concert on our phones, figuring out which raga is being presented, following the relationship between the singer's improvisations and the tabla patterns with our hands.

After the concert, we went up to congratulate Laxman Sir. He greeted us warmly and, when I introduced Aditi, exclaimed, "Wow, it's a great honor to have you here!" Aditi then turned to me in some confusion, "I think he must think I am someone else?" while Preeti, whispering, asked "Who *is* she?" I told Preeti that Aditi had sang a song in the recent movie *Ram-Leela* and assured Aditi that Laxman Sir is not confusing her identity; he is savvy and very aware of who is singing in the Hindi film industry. Laxman Sir then introduces Aditi to his

father, stumbling over her name, but saying, "Papa, she sang a song in *Ram Leela* – we're very proud of her!," as fellow Kolkata-ites.

As we exit, Preeti prods Aditi to sing something, "anything". Aditi obliges with a semi-classical song and Preeti is suitably impressed: "Wow, great!" Aditi offers to have her driver drive us to the Andheri train station. As we drive, she and Preeti trade songs back and forth, commenting knowledgeably and easily on different female singers. Preeti has a more encyclopedic knowledge of songs, but Aditi brings a depth to the songs as she sings. They both seem to revel in the chance to sing *with*, each responding approvingly to melodic nuances offered by the other, nodding their heads in appreciation. Although I don't know the words to most of the songs, I lend my support by humming along. The car weaves its way through the dense traffic of evening Mumbai, the sky darkening with the fading light and increasing pollution, as we three aspirants – housewife striver, professional struggler, and student ethnographer – enjoy each other's company and voices, finding camaraderie and pleasure in the shared space of Hindi film song.

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