The Global Desi: Cultural Nationalism on MTV India

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India’s New Nationalism

- This new nationalism emerges most clearly in the active and self-conscious indigenization of global media.
  - Where a wired-in middle class effectively forced the indigenization of programming on MTV India, programming that was initially aimed at a more abstract global audience.
  - MTV India localized its programming and then offer an interpretation of how the new nationalism created by this localization hinges paradoxically on its own globalized dimension, how the global and the local, the cosmopolitan and the traditional, modernity and tradition, are all inextricably bound together in a hybrid I call the “global desi.”

A Nation of Its Own: The Wired-In Middle Class

- This very small elite group was located mainly in such metropolitan centers as Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai, and Delhi and was usually connected to the upper echelons of the colonial-capitalist project and/or Indian royalty.
  - More recently emerged a much greater middle class of India in the 1990s, a class that is both a product of independence and the driving force of a new consumer culture.
  - The older upper-class elite tends to look at this middle class with a certain amount of disdain, seeing it as vulgarly nouveau riche, and not traditionally educated with grandfathers, for instance, who spoke English.
  - They are seen as swarming holiday spots blaring their music, clutching their cell phones, buying, and gawking like those one might imagine at Disneyland.
A Nation of Its Own: The Wired-In Middle Class

- They (new middle class) constitute 30 percent of India’s population, or 300 million people.
- This is the target group for MTV and other satellite stations.
  - MTV’s director of strategy and research, Sangeeta Gupta, said, “First and foremost you want to leave out the 700 million in rural India and look at things only for the 300 million,” or about thirty cities in India.

In five years’ time, the country went from one government-run channel, DD, to sixty-nine channels.
- Overnight, CNN, MTV, and a host of other channels were within people’s living spaces twenty-four hours a day.
- Satellite has opened a window to worlds that were once only accessible to the well-to-do.
- At the same time, the computer industry exploded in India, resulting in more overseas jobs in the United States and in Europe, a fact that in turn has resulted in an increased familiarity with other lifestyles.
- India also has seen a surge in Bollywood (India’s very productive commercial film industry centered in Bombay/Mumbai) box office hits, as producers rush to make films specifically targeted at this trend-setting, middle-class, urban audience.

From DD to MTV: A Short History of Indian Television

- In India, television was introduced in 1959, somewhat earlier than in other countries in the region. It was used primarily as a development tool, providing education and information. DD, the government-run national station, had a broadcast monopoly until the 1990s.
- In 1991, transnational television arrived with the launch of StarTV, a satellite network that offered five channels, including MTVAsia.
  - The quick growth of transnational satellite television after 1991 was due to the fact that India was cabled before StarTV came in.
  - Due primarily to unregulated hookups to CNN during the Gulf War there were by that time an estimated two hundred thousand "cablewallahs" (cable-operators) in business throughout the country.
MTV started in India as MTV Asia, carried by Star TV; in 1994, it broke from Star, launching out alone as MTV India.

When MTV had first come in, it simply tried to relocate Western MTV product in India.
- This programming was “not convincing” according to informant Natasha Malhotra, a vice president and executive producer at MTV. Moreover, it was seen as a cultural invasion. Full-time Western music clearly did not work.

During this time, a crucial event occurred. Channel V, a strong competitor to MTV for the music video market, hired Ruby Bhatia, an Indian VJ from Canada, who had been Miss India-Canada.
- Bhatia went on air speaking Hinglish, a mixture of Hindi and English, to introduce Hindi music clips from Bollywood films. She came across as “very Indian” to viewers, and Channel V became an instant success.
- Channel V had discovered the key to the successful VJ: good looks, hipness, and the ability to break into Hindi when cracking a joke.

MTV realized it had to Indianize to stay alive.
- Channel V had become by far the favorite during this time, but MTV proved extremely agile at indigenizing. As well, MTV (through its owner Viacom) had the budget for production value (from glossy promotional ads and glitzy graphics to expensive clothing for its VJs).
- MTV had the same budget for Indian shows as it did for the production of its Florida shows, which amounted to a substantial amount of money in Mumbai.
- Channel V, originally perceived as cutting edge, suddenly had to compete with the influx of capital its competitor was capable of mustering (it did not have the same budget as MTV).
From DD to MTV: A Short History of Indian Television

- The three words at the time were “Indianize, humanize, and humorize.”

- Research on record sales in India showed that the most popular genre in the country—at 70 to 80 percent of record sales—was Hindi film music.

- This music was brought in, particularly to prime-time slots, and MTV’s music videos became 70 percent Hindi music videos.

- Hindi film clips, popular song and dance numbers taken from hit films, made for stardomous, autonomous, self-standing videos, and this in itself effectively Indianized (and localized) MTV.

Indigenizing MTV

- The Look

- MTV India today is one continuous stream of short music shows (in fifteen minute to half-hour segments) and music ads (mainly for cassettes and CDs), profiling Indian artists most often already popular due to their Bollywood film fame.

- A music countdown show follows a call-in request show to another countdown show, and so on. The all-important VJ simply stands in front of a new background to introduce the music.

- In between, the CD ads for Bryan Adams and MTV Party Zone get airtime. Among all this, animated MTV station identification promos fill the screen. The effect is one of a nonstop flow of images, with the shift between selling one product and then another entirely seamless.

Indigenizing: Outside the Studio

- MTV presents itself as a channel that identifies with its audience’s desires and worldview. One way it does this is emphatically locating the MTV world within an India inhabited by and recognizable to the urban middle class.

- For example, in Bakra, the anchor of the show absconds on a regular basis.

  - “He is a master of disguise,” says the voice-over, and was spotted disguised as a dining table, a local train, a tummy trimmer, and a bed pan. The show is an ongoing saga of this host’s whereabouts in the local streets of Mumbai.
Indigenizing: Outside the Studio

- The style of camera shots also enhances the casual effect:
  - the hand-held camera, the wide-angled lens, or the unusual high shot are seen as experimental, as breaking the rules, as democratic.
  - Local sound bites or synchronized sound effects are emphasized for local atmosphere that lends texture to the programming. Sync sound is generally thought to double the meaning of pictures.
  - In contrast, DD often dislocates the local by wiping out all sync sound, leaving the viewer with only the commentator’s studio voice-over. “What you want,” said Oshidar (interview by author, 28 July 2000), “is the sound of the street versus the traditional Western voice... Things rooted in this culture.”

Indigenizing: Inside the MTV Studio, Mumbai

- Localization/indigenization is enhanced through the VJs’ emphasis on the immediate concerns of its youthful audience.
  - Issues that have been raised in the national print media or on television news (often about television itself) are discussed. At Saint Xavier’s College in Mumbai, where one of two surveys was conducted, provocative clothing (e.g., not wearing a dupatta or wearing sleeveless shalwar kamizes) had been recently banned by the principal.
  - In Delhi, jeans for women were also disallowed at some colleges. VJs solicit opinions on such controversies, asking viewers to comment by telephone or by writing a letter.
  - Sponsors add to this by making reference to the issues in their commercials.
  - It is important to emphasize once again that this impression registers in contrast to that of DD, where the audience’s concerns are only recognized insofar as they coincide with those of a model citizenry.

Indigenizing: Inside the MTV Studio, Mumbai

- Further entrenchment in the local is seen in an MTV clothing line, a designer line called MTV style, which has helped to extend the brand to the middle-class community.
  - Viewers wear the brand they think is coolest, or trendiest. In addition, the word “MTV” has become a common adjective (often via the press).
  - “MTV style” and “MTV generation,” for example, have become well-known phrases.
The New Cultural Nationalism: How the Local Becomes Global

- Perhaps the most basic level on which MTV India serves as a medium of a new cultural nationalism has to do with the transnational capital involved in its production.
  - MTV's high production values can be claimed by the middle-class audience as evidence that it is capable of world-class technical prowess.
  - In addition, the pronounced Indian inflection on MTV is treated as a measure of the middle-class market's ability to command the attention of transnational capital by virtue of its size (the often touted biggest middle class in the world).

The New Cultural Nationalism: How the Local Becomes Global

- Further to this, inherent in the new cultural nationalism is the explicit claiming of global elements:
  - In the past, identifying with cultural elements perceived to be international or cosmopolitan was often treated as a form of self-alienation or betrayal;
  - In trying to be Western, one became "neither fish nor fowl" and an object of ridicule for both cultures (e.g., numerous stock comic figures such as the Bengali Babu).
  - In the Gandhi-Nehru model of the citizen, one could access modernity only by participating in the collective project of building an independent Indian nation.
  - Individual engagements with the West and modernity were seen to be frivolous, wasteful, and verging on antinational.

The New Cultural Nationalism: How the Local Becomes Global

- Against the above mentioned backdrop,
  - Rather than a debilitating aping of the West, the identification with Western culture is taken to represent the ability of Indians to compete with Westerners on a level playing field.
  - Perhaps most important, it assumes—in explicit contrast to previous versions of Indian identity—that it is possible to engage with modernity and the West as an individual and still maintain one's Indianness.
Conclusion

- As a means of fetishizing the icons of mass culture and using these to sell a commodified lifestyle, MTV India is clearly a powerful ideological force in the service of global capitalism.
- But in the self-understanding of those who make and consume its images, it also plays a crucial role in depenalizing India.
- It does this by virtue of the fact that it creates a space to acknowledge the hybrid nature of India’s popular culture as a national culture— and an alternative to the rigid, patronizing, and disempowering versions of national culture.
- This new India created through this cultural dynamic will certainly play an important role in the social and cultural life of the country in the years to come.