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The Global *Desi*: Cultural Nationalism on MTV India

The article examines how the introduction of satellite television into India during the 1990s has led to the emergence of a new form of cultural nationalism based on the active and self-conscious indigenization of global media. Using MTV India as an ethnographic case study, this process is demonstrated through analysis of the images themselves and by a consideration of what they mean to informants. It outlines a now-mythical historical narrative whereby a wired-in middle class forced the indigenization of programming on MTV India, programming that was initially aimed at a more abstract global audience. It then demonstrates the ways and reasons why this cultural nationalism depends, somewhat paradoxically, on its own global dimensions.

This article examines some effects of the introduction and expansion of satellite-based commercial television in India during the 1990s. Most of the existing scholarly work on Indian television has appeared relatively recently and focuses on how discourses of the Nation and issues of gender have been treated on the various channels run by the government broadcaster, Doordarshan (known commonly as DD). Especially notable are two book-length studies, Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television* (2001) and Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* (1999). In her epilogue, Mankekar detailed the arrival of satellite television in India and raised a number of questions for future research.

What does the Indianization of transnational satellite production imply when the meanings, symbols, and discursive practices relating to nationhood, national subjectivity, and national culture are themselves undergoing rapid transformation in conjunction with global capitalism? Whose experiences gain center stage in these new cultural productions? . . . What spaces do transnational texts create for resistance, subversion, or appropriation through the production of desire, fantasy, and imagination? How do viewers' interpretations of these texts articulate with their social relationships? (P. 350)

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These are undoubtedly complex questions, and this article cannot presume to address them comprehensively. That said, the challenge of finding answers to such questions can be understood to have guided the exploration that follows. The article attempts to identify a new form of cultural nationalism in India, a nationalism that is clearly distinct from both the original Gandhi-Nehru version and that put forth by the Hindu Right. This new nationalism emerges most clearly in the active and self-conscious indigenization of global media. Using MTV India as an example, I aim to demonstrate this process through analysis of the images themselves and by a consideration of what they mean to my informants. The article examines how 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. Moving from a brief history of Indian television, I explore the precise ways in which 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*.” The article concludes with some observations about the broader context in which this cultural dynamic flourishes.

My argument is based on a combination of textual analysis and interview data. The research included twenty-two interviews with media professionals, feminist activists, and scholars based in Delhi and Mumbai. The study also incorporates textual analysis of eighteen hours of selected programming, comparisons of matrimonials during the past decade, interviews in online chatrooms, and a survey with women students at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi and Saint Xavier’s College in Mumbai. Participant observation took place in the MTV studio and in public spaces frequented by the MTV generation.

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

Independent India has always had a class that saw itself as part of an international set. 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.¹ This study, however, looks at the more recently emerged and 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. According to a few informants, the middle class, or yuppies and puppies (Punjabi yuppies), appear to them far too fasci-

nated with their children and overly concerned with status symbols; they are seen as swarming holiday spots blaring their music, clutching their cell phones, buying, and gawking like those one might imagine at Disneyland. One scholar blurted out, "They're crass. They really think they can buy things with money. They push you. They're awful."

This urban group has increased dramatically in size in recent years. According to the often repeated statistic, they constitute 30 percent of India's population, or 300 million people.² This is the target group for MTV and other satellite stations. MTV's director of strategy and research, Sangeeta Gupta (interview by author, 28 July 2000), 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.³ Because of the political, economic, and cultural forces that work to separate this group out from the Indian population in general, it is important to emphasize the scope of this study, which is limited to a specific sector within urban India. Like the traditional elite that it supercedes, this group is found in metropolises such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Calcutta. But it is also, and perhaps even more significantly, associated with cities such as Pune, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, which, because of the dynamism of their new technology-driven economies, are perceived to be models for the new India that is in the process of emerging.

During the past decade, urban centers have undergone a massive change in India. Economic liberalization, stemming in part from structural adjustment policies, has transformed the protected Indian economy of the postindependence period into a section of the global, advertising-driven marketplace. Pizza, hamburger, and other fast-food businesses arrived in short order to cater to the middle class, and the beauty industry, dominated by transnational companies such as Clinique and L'Oreal, jumped into what Indian feminists and scholars call a ready-made market. Ads for cell phone companies, credit card introductory offers, e-businesses, and a variety of new foreign vehicles paint the landscape of cities such as Delhi.

India has seen a communication revolution this past decade, with optical cable ready to cover twenty-eight cities by 2002 (Ranjan Bakshi, interview by author, 20 July 2000). In five years' time, the country went from one government-run channel, DD, to sixty-nine channels (Cyrus Oshidar, MTV's creative director, interview by author, 28 July 2000). 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 (Page and Crawley 2001, 20). 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. Despite increased competition from television, India also has seen a surge in Bollywood (India's very productive com-

mercial 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 (Ganti 2001).

From DD to MTV: A Short History of Indian Television

To appreciate the cultural impact of these developments, it is necessary to backtrack and briefly consider the terrain against which they registered.

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 (Thomas 1996, 67). 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 MTV Asia. 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 “cable-wallahs” (cable-operators) in business throughout the country (Thomas 1996, 61). As Ananya Bannerjee (interview by author, 4 July 2000), chief producer at DD, said, “suddenly all these little umbrellas sprouted all over the roofs.” Today, at least 15 million homes have cable and satellite (approximately 75 million people)⁴ (Sangeeta Gupta, interview by author, 28 July 2000).

DD was slow to realize the intensity of the competition suddenly on it. Although DD still has the most reach (it comprises a national channel and eighteen regional channels) and is available to both the haves and have-nots, it suffers from a pronounced loss of purpose. Government rules regarding DD’s commercial sponsorship and codes of ethics—and now severe budget cuts—have tied its hands. According to Ananya Bannerjee (interview by author, 4 July 2000), DD is supposed to be self-supported in four to five years’ time, compelling the channel to become more commercial than it would like to be—or perhaps knows how to be. Meanwhile, other channels are perceived as doing educational shows better than DD. The fact that DD has failed to add new ideas to its old program formats is probably a big reason it is having trouble today. One of the few really clear results in college surveys for this study was that no one is watching DD.

In contrast to DD, Zee TV, created in 1992, rates with many people as the new family channel. Vice President Ranjan Bakshi (interview by author, 20 July 2000) said about DD, “Before the advent of Zee, you had two mighty tribes: the bores and the bored.” Commenting on controversy about some of the new television programming, Bakshi proclaimed, “The family that watches television together stays together.” Zee creates programming for what they call the family vision: 30 percent soaps, 30 percent thrillers, 30 percent sitcoms, 10

percent game shows (Ranjan Bakshi, interview by author, 20 July 2000). The station is a convergence company, straddling all media, and proudly calls itself India's "click and brick company."

Owned by Viacom in New York, MTV was launched in the United States in 1981 as a twenty-four-hour cable program service presenting a continuous flow of music videos featuring pop and rock songs (Banks 1996). MTV tried to distinguish itself from other channels by being unconventional (e.g., using messy sets and poor lighting, having the hosts make on-air mistakes), focusing on a spontaneous, casual feel (Banks 1996, 34). Vee-jays, or VJs (an update from DJs), are MTV's on-air announcers and are pivotal to providing the desired image of hip irreverence and relaxed informality (Banks 1996, 34). MTV invented the self-contained music clip, something that has become entirely entrenched in Western popular culture.⁵ Advertisers borrowed from the MTV video style by imitating its visual techniques to enhance their commercials (Banks 1996, 1). At the same time, the content of MTV video clips stimulated consumer purchase, particularly in the fashion industry (Banks 1996, 2). In the late eighties and nineties, MTV extended its reach further afield, broadcasting in Latin America, Japan, Australia, Russia, and Asia. The company has been criticized for attempting to shape a global audience of youth for transnational advertisers, by enticing viewers to develop their sense of identity through the acquisition of advertised goods, and by ascribing to MTV lifestyles and worldviews (Banks 1996, 89).

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 (e.g., Western pop music) in India (Page and Crawley 2001, 149). This programming was "not convincing" according to informant Natasha Malhotra (interview by author, 28 July 2000), a vice president and executive producer at MTV. Moreover, it was seen as a cultural invasion (Page and Crawley 2001, 149). Full-time Western music clearly did not work (the group wanting Western music was very small in number according to Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000—the Bombay elite type of crowd), and lyrics were perceived as too ideological (Natasha Malhotra, interview by author, 28 July 2000). The graphics were thought to be too numerous and too fast. There was an irreverence, a rebellious quality to the channel, that was perceived as too Western. "In India," Malhotra stated, "kids actually respect their parents. It's not cool to disrespect your parents here."

Besides the choice of music, MTV's wholly English-language programming presented an obstacle. Practical matters aside (i.e., that more people speak Hindi than English), on a symbolic level, people felt disrespect over MTV's choice of language. "There are old souls in India," a former VJ said. "Some might be blinded by Westernization, but you can't pull a fast one on them. They *like* their own culture" (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author,

5 April 2001). In 1995, MTV was forced to go off the air to reconsider its strategies, including conducting market research. At this stage, it was on the brink of closing down altogether in India.

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” (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001) 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 (Sharika Sharma, interview by author, 20 June 2000). People literally began to leave work early to catch her show (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001). This event was taken to demonstrate that the success of music television lies in going local.⁶

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 (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001). 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 (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001), 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) (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001). It began making choices out of fear (Rishma Malik, phone interview by author, 5 April 2001) and soon found itself falling behind.

But beyond the fact of its greater capital, MTV’s rise to the top of the market was dependent on the deftness with which it localized its product. Cyrus Oshidar, a newly returned nonresident Indian (NRI), was brought in as creative director, responsible for “creating the brand”—or what MTV stands for (Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000). Natasha Malhotra also joined MTV India at this time. Both of these people claim responsibility for Indianizing MTV and creating a success out of it in India, making it the third or fourth most popular MTV in the world (Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000).

Striving to make a comeback, MTV did the “light-switch,” as Malhotra (interview by author, 28 July 2000) put it. The three words at the time were “Indianize, humanize, and humorize.” Creative direction changed completely, and overnight, MTV staff flipped the whole channel around. 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 (Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000; Natasha Malhotra, interview by author, 28 July 2000). 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 stupendous, autonomous, self-standing videos, and this in itself effectively Indianized (and localized) MTV. The new music programming was homegrown, was produced in India, and reflected cultural lifestyles there (Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000; Natasha Malhotra, interview by author, 28 July 2000; Sangeeta Gupta, interview by author, 28 July 2000). Although we will consider the dynamics of this process in greater detail, it is important to note the essential shift: by drawing on rather than competing with an existing popular culture, MTV India made the global seem like a natural extension of the local instead of a threat to it.

Western music was dropped to non-prime-time slots (such as after midnight) and reduced to 30 percent of the music aired so that as Oshidar (interview by author, 28 July 2000) put it, viewers could “snack in and snack out.” MTV effectively switched things around so that, for instance, Michael Jackson and his *Thriller* dance moves appear to fit into the proliferation of similarly styled Hindi film dance scenes—and not the other way around. MTV did have Canadian and British Indian VJs (including another Miss India-Canada), but in general, the VJs lost all their international accents and became solidly Indian VJs with Indian accents—and most important, Hinglish-speaking VJs (Cyrus Oshidar, interview by author, 28 July 2000). As will be illustrated further on in this article, all the promos, the environment, and the packaging of the shows became much more Indianized. “Once we understood them [the viewers] right and learned what to do right, we’ve had no negative feedback to be concerned about,” said Gupta (interview by author, 28 July 2000), MTV’s director of strategy and research.

MTV kept its Western format but indigenized (or localized) it to suit Indian middle-class tastes. The MTV brand is kept in place; the focus on youth culture is maintained but refitted to suit Indian tastes presented by Indian players. This is what many producers in general have done in India this past decade. They have taken Western program formatting, analyzed techniques within the formatting, and Indianized it. The framework of the soap—such as the often referenced *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *Santa Barbara*—has been adopted and the content indigenized for Indian audiences. Similarly, the Western-style talk show *Movers and Shakers* on Sony is a *David Letterman* takeoff, complete with a large window and cityscape as backdrop and a band the host consults with off to the side. One informant at Trisoft Design in Delhi is a producer of *Indiaguide.com*, a copy of *TV Guide*. This was an internal project at Trisoft, where employees looked up *tvguide.com* in the United States and simply cop-

ied the format (Sharika Sharma, interview by author, 20 June 2000). On MTV India, a Latino show called *Olay MTV* mimics the somewhat infamous U.S.-based MTV dance show *MTV Grind*. These programming formulas are perceived as tried and true—an essential quality in a highly competitive marketplace where a channel can go off the air very quickly. Producers find themselves needing to continuously adjust or experiment with formulas to keep audience attention, making the risk of burnout over such exercises a constant possibility.

MTV continues to push at traditional social attitudes, but from what informants expressed in interviews, it obviously learned a painful lesson about heeding the idea of a one-TV household, where grandparents and kids may often be viewing together. Oshidar (interview by author, 28 July 2000) said, “When people are watching it in groups of four or six, you have to pitch it up or turn it down. You can be edgy but not over the top.”

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.⁷ 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 2* 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.

Graphics add to this impression of an endless stream of images. In the commitment to humor, Oshidar created an animated MTV icon, a flatulent boxer named Gaseous Clay, who appears in approximately one-minute spots, accompanied by sidekicks who draw on a range of indigenous and international stereotypes. On music shows, a watch with a green digital face comes up periodically at the bottom of the screen, giving the viewer additional facts about the video or Hindi film clip being played. Chito, another animated figure, appears courtesy of McDonald’s to give the viewer gossipy tidbits about the personal life of the artist currently on screen: “he’s married to a model,” “he needs his mobile all the time,” or “in this video he wanted real models to walk the ramp.” The tertiary screen (if cinema and television are one and two), the World Wide Web, is also incorporated into the visual text. For instance, a

music video or a film will have its own Web site, giving location information (“visit: www . . .”) during the playing of a song. Taking all these elements into account, MTV India presents itself as a window onto a musical utopia of endless consumption, a youthful and relentlessly hip ideal for the young,⁸ urban middle class to aspire to. As already noted, this stream of images can function in this way only because of a number of calculated localization strategies. MTV works at being local in a variety of ways, both through its programming content within the Mumbai studio and by explicitly moving outside of the studio.

Indigenizing: Outside the Studio

In contrast with the DD model, in which a heterogeneous audience is asked to identify with an abstract ideal of the spectator as model citizen, 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.

Bakra, like other programs on MTV, is clearly situated in the sights and sounds of urban India. Taking the visuals outside of a studio and into the streets is the quickest way to localize programming and enhance the sense of being a national, or local, channel. Involving the person in the streets (the potential viewer) is also key. For instance, one countdown show relies on shots of the public: young men and women standing on a street corner singing a popular Hindi song into a microphone. They are framed by an animated graphic (a TV screen), and one of these everyday people holds the microphone. We then cut to the actual video of the song they sing. The mixing of nonprofessionals and professionals (in this case, visuals of the public singing wholeheartedly right beside visuals of the artist) is critical to a sense of democratization of programming, making the programs accessible to the viewer and making the programs the viewers’ programs—which is essential to MTV’s viewership lure.

Show promotions also are situated in the local setting. For example, a security guard holds a sign for *MTV Housefull*, a nonstop hits show, outside the MTV studios at the Film Center, a quite well-known complex on Tardeo Road in Mumbai. In “streeters” (on-the-street interviews), the host is in the shot on the street with the interviewee, a member of the public. Although the interviewer still has the position of authority, the interaction with the interviewee onscreen is essential. This is a marked departure from DD’s more conservative method where the interviewee appears in the shot by himself or herself, the interview is clipped down for the desired answer, and the interviewer’s ques-

tion is often cut out, along with any conversation between interviewee and interviewer. MTV's emphasis on the casual interaction between interviewer and interviewee implies an empowerment of the common man, in direct contrast to the DD experts and an overall tone of paternalistic didacticism.

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.⁹ 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 (Watts 1984, 103). 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." His comment is very telling insofar as it points to one simple fact crucial to understanding the new cultural nationalism: the old Congress party ideology underlying DD was and is, to a certain extent and in a certain way, perceived as alien and alienating, as more Western than the desi-inflected accents of MTV India.

Another important way MTV has directly involved and implicated its audience in its productions is through its VJ hunt. The concept of VJ is new in India. Malhotra (interview by author, 28 July 2000) described it like this:

we did a VJ hunt three years ago. We opened out for the first time the concept of being a VJ to the whole country. "Any of you can compete." We do it every two years. The first time, there was some skepticism. We were a bit worried. But we found three VJs. We did it again last year—two years later. They saw how these three guys [one man, two women] had turned out. Stars. Youth brands in the country. They were in people's living rooms. On satellite. "We should give it a shot," they said. We had ten thousand entries this year. Incredible. It's become a new career option for people. Girls and guys. They are doing stuff they enjoy; they travel; they get paid money. They can't believe their good fortune at the end of it.

In the future, it seems likely that live programming will also be used to localize content. Situating itself in the immediate, being live on location throughout the country, MTV will thus extend its appearance of involvement with its audiences.

Indigenizing: Inside the MTV Studio, Mumbai

In addition to breaking down the barriers between production and consumption by crossing the studio-street boundary, MTV India addresses a new India through the content of its in-studio programming.

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. For instance, the narrator of one ad made a sympathetic inquiry and offered an immediate solution: "jeans banned in College? Eat 'Direct Dilse' cookies." These techniques create the impression of an ongoing dialogue between the programmers/on-air talent/advertisers and the viewing audience. 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.

Developing new catch phrases, or generating new local language shared by the middle class, is another localizing technique. One informant, Vijaya Nidadavolu (interview by author, 6 July 2000), an aspiring filmmaker, explained it like this:

old Indian words have been taken up by MTV and others and made a part of their language. "We are like this only," with "only" at the end of the sentence. This was something South Indians used. MTV took it and made it trendy. It means we are so cool. Also, MTV's "Enjoy." It's become a word that means cool, trendy, happening. It says a lot of things. They've revitalized and found a new set of words.

"MTV—Enjoy" is the key station identification for MTV, and the pink and yellow slogan lines all the studio windows in the heart of Mumbai.

The emphasis on the local is also seen of course in the music program foci. India's most popular film producers, directors, music writers, singers, and actors are main features on the shows. On *Made in India*, different stars (such as the Bachchan with the small *b*) take turns being in the hot seat and are premiered for a week. Artists are given spots to greet the viewing audience on behalf of MTV, saying, "Hello friends." Never before has the general public had such an imagined closeness to India's stars, and this impression of intimacy is only heightened by its reproduction in other mass media sources—such as teen magazines.

Viewers are invited into the studio (so to speak) through constant invitations to contact MTV VJs by letter ("please write to me"), phone calls, or e-mail. This perceived participation or interaction is essential. The viewer is also invited into the wider imagined studio space through a particular technique

that has worked well against government-sponsored, formal-styled broadcasters in North America. By having the VJ converse on camera with the floor director (an employee in a headset, holding a clipboard and standing off to the side) or by having “the guy who gets the tea” suddenly appear in front of the camera, the viewer is given access to the TV world behind the scenes. Similarly, the viewer is introduced to technical studio elements by way of graphics depicting, for example, the “record” button on a camera or the sign “load” beside a tape deck. Although MTV also glamorizes the camera, this demystifying of television helps the viewer to claim the station as his or her own.

Further entrenchment in the local is seen in an MTV clothing line, a designer line called MTVstyle, which has helped to extend the brand to the middle-class community. Sangeeta Gupta (interview by author, 28 July 2000) said that a piece of clothing such as an MTV T-shirt “gives the consumer the opportunity to touch and feel it as opposed to just watching it.”

Viewers wear the brand they think is coolest, or trendiest. In addition, the word “MTV” has become a common adjective (often via the press), so much so that Oshidar (interview by author, 28 July 2000) thinks that because it is in the papers a lot of the time, it has become an adjective to the people who do not yet even know the channel. “MTV style” and “MTV generation,” for example, have become well-known phrases. The MTV generation is called the MTV generation according to informants such as Vijaya Nidadavolu because the station and the viewers are so obviously related to each other. The MTV generation dresses like clones of each other. “They wear flared trousers, spaghetti strap shirts with their bra straps showing, strappy shoes. Totally MTV” (Vijaya Nidadavolu, interview by author, 6 July 2000). Sharika Sharma from Trisoft said that one can quickly spot the MTV generation. “It is something about what they look like. You go to a party and there are forty women there who look the same—whether it’s their hair or what they drink” (Sharika Sharma, interview by author, 20 June 2000).

The New Cultural Nationalism: How the Local Becomes Global

Having considered how MTV establishes itself as local, we now need to examine how this new local culture becomes in turn the medium for a new form of cultural nationalism, that is, for an assertion of the worth of the local against a global or universal standard of measurement. This dynamic can be considered from a variety of angles, only a few of which I will touch on here.

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. After years of the relatively poor production value found in DD

programming (in the form of shabby sets and bad acting, for example), 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).

This affirmation of India's place in a global economic system is clearly reflected in the pervasive popular discourse about the NRI (manifest in Bollywood films, in the press, and on television). Cyrus Oshidar and Natasha Malhotra, two key programming heads at MTV, have lived abroad for periods of time, Oshidar for most of his life. They both exemplify the idea that Indians go away to be educated but then want to come back "to be recognized here [in India], and not just be another body there." According to informants, "you should travel but then come back. We want to be recognized in India now. We are Indian. We want to be known as leaders" (Sharika Sharma, interview by author, 20 June 2000). The NRI has in a sense become a model citizen of the new cultural nationalism.

The cultural perspective of NRIs is fluid. In their daily business, they identify with both Western and Indian values. The fact that plenty of young NRIs have come back to India to work is a source of national pride to those in their twenties and early thirties, and on their part, NRIs involved in media production seem very aware of their role in helping to create a new nationalism for the middle class. Although they may have some cynicism about India,¹⁰ the focus on localization and empowering the common man, that is, the middle-class consumer, is a constant theme of their decision-making rationale and can be seen as a defiant response to traditional bickering among politicians and the press about the definition of Indianness. Against both the stale patronizing liberalism of the Congress definition and the rigid fundamentalist purity of the Hindu Right's version, the MTV version of the Indian citizen is an irreducible and unashamed cultural hybrid.

Further to this, inherent in the new cultural nationalism is the explicit claiming of global elements. This active negotiation and agency should be heavily weighted in any discussion about globalization in India. 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). The assumption at work was that the individual derived his or her cultural identity by maintaining integral connections or roots in a larger collectivity (i.e., the Indian people) as this was defined by various nationalist ideologies. In this context, anyone who sought identity and meaning in Western culture was seen to have violated his or her roots through excessive individualism. More specifically, in the original

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.

Against this backdrop, the new nationalism depends precisely on the presentation of a liberated individual-as-consumer as builder of the nation. 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. Although one may certainly question the quality and ultimate significance of this consumer agency, it is important to register the simple fact that this engagement does function to subvert the West = modernity/India = tradition binary that has dominated much of India’s relation with the world.

While one could analyze this phenomenon in far greater detail, on MTV, this engagement is reflected in the following very basic ways:

1. There is a fluidity of moving between Western and Indian clothes. Although VJs are usually dressed in jeans and tops, the videos themselves show artists changing from Western outfits (ranging from zebra pants and spandex to leather jackets and halter tops) to shalwar kamizes, for example, in the space of the same song. While artists in Western dress do not appear in every song, there is a marked propensity in videos and film clips to make the change back and forth in costume.

This cultural fluidity is not a new social phenomenon; the Indian upper classes have always worn both Western and Indian clothing. The point is that only now is this extended to the middle class and explicitly represented as a desirable quality, something to be flaunted.

2. Physical elements of the international within the videos themselves are significant indicators of claiming the global. Videos typically use both Indian and non-Indian locations, making a statement that reflects on India’s place in the world. One Hindi film clip is shot at the Eiffel Tower. Another uses animation to achieve the effect of Indian men and women walking on stilts across the globe. Although it is important to contextualize this by remembering that global images, along with the highlighting of international artists, are a much more common occurrence to begin with outside of North America in general, there is a deliberate championing of the global in Indian film clips and videos screened on MTV India.
3. Not only is MTV claimed as Indian, as a part of middle-class culture, but there is a sense of doing it one better on a global level. Talking about the VJ hunt, Malhotra (interview by author, 28 July 2000) said, “Incidentally, the U.S. [MTV] borrowed it from us and has done it for two years. It’s very successful.” Informants also referenced the first American MTV version in India, and the fact that it was absurd to have it beamed into the country. A common refrain was, Why would we use a beam from the United States when there is not an Indian beam in the United States?

The cultural confidence that emerges from such comments should, of course, be seen as both a cause and a product of the larger narrative I have just outlined. Recent history has, as it were, legitimated the ambitions and tastes of the new middle class by overwriting the original nationalist narrative of socialist development with a far more palpable and dramatic narrative based in the dynamism of market economics. Though it is not without its internal and external contradictions (which I will address in my conclusion), this transformation clearly effects a measure of liberation for many of those engaged in it and bears comparison to the well-known model of hybridization proposed in Homi Bhabha's (2001) work. In this context, the incipient dynamism of the middle class can be seen to have been restricted by a moralizing nationalist ideology, one that subordinated that class to an entrenched political and cultural elite for whom any form of conspicuous consumption was a betrayal of a more inclusive Socialist program of national development; trapped between this elite and the peasants in whose name it acted, the cultural and economic ambitions of the middle class were stifled, and it is against this backdrop that the dramatic cultural changes of the 1990s registered as liberating for those who participated in them. Undoing the binary between India and the West, home and the world, that underpinned the old nationalism, the advent of MTV India and related phenomena opened up a space that was, in Bhabha's words,

a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. The challenge lies in conceiving of the time of political action and understanding as opening up a space that can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without rushing to produce a unity of the social antagonism or contradiction. This is a sign that history is *happening*. (P. 2385)

As I read it, my research confirms that MTV India can in fact be interpreted as making a difference in the particular domain of cultural politics that Bhabha (2001) is concerned with. Asserting a claim for recognition against an indigeneous elite by deliberately inhabiting a cultural space-time that is neither the old traditional India nor the new modern West, the new middle class thereby articulates itself as an indissoluble and discontinuous hybrid. Producers such as Oshidar and Malhotra create content for a middle-class audience with the understanding that they are, again in Bhabha's words, "now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference" (p. 2397). In all their varied contributions to the narrative of cultural ascendance outlined above, my informants affirmed that from their point of view, it was and continued to be a positive experience that carried exactly the connotations of personal creativity and expanded scope that

Bhabha identified. That said, it is important to note that this narrative has been treated in isolation and from the inside and that we have yet to consider the wider ramifications and effects of this efflorescence of imaginative agency.

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 deprovincializing 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 often idealized in Congress or Sangh Parivar versions of the nation. Acknowledging the differences between them, one may nonetheless affirm that in both these official versions of Indian identity, access to modernity is paradoxically achieved by identifying with a collective body (i.e., the Indian people, the Hindu nation) whose essential characteristics are imagined as nonmodern (i.e., the Indian peasant, the Hindu warrior-noble). Through such self-denying identification, the individual participates in the appropriation of modernity in the collective project of nation building. In contrast to this explicitly moral appeal to a complex amalgam of traditional-modern loyalties and aspirations, the new nationalism I have tried to identify begins by recognizing the inherent hybridity of the individual's cultural affiliations; it affirms what other notions of Indian identity have tried to condemn, repress, or deny. In this contrastive sense, it is popular despite the fact that it tacitly brackets out the overwhelming majority of the population. But it is perhaps symptomatic of the residual power of those older versions within the popular imagination that MTV India works so hard to present itself as nationalist. As I have tried to show, it does this through a simultaneous double movement in which the global adapts, or answers to, the local and a new local then affirms its functional equality and frequent preeminence (e.g., nuclear bombs, cricket matches, beauty contests) among other nations on the world stage. 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.

That said, I should finally re-place this dynamic within the larger context from which I extracted it in delimiting the scope of this study, situated in terms of the realities of Indian society beyond the middle-class enclave. Given the particular modes of consumption that are its prerequisites, one may assume that the particular nationalism discussed in this article is imaginatively inhabited by less than half of India's citizens. Imperialism of language and culture also occurs, of course, within a country (Thomas 1996, 73) and thus relates to

any questions of hegemony or power. The cultural dynamics this study has considered need to be viewed in relation to their function within Indian society as a whole. One might ask, for example, whether the lower classes of society in India are now being economically and culturally colonized by new middle-class rules and values. In 1976, communications scholar Herbert Schiller wrote, “Freedoms that are formally impressive may be substantively oppressive when they reinforce prevailing inequalities while claiming to be providing generalized opportunity for all” (p. 45). This statement relates well to a deeper stratification between middle and lower classes (including the upwardly mobile poor) that seems to have embedded itself through the nineties. How are televised images of the lower classes on a station such as MTV India—the guy who gets the tea or the MTV security guard who holds up a sign promoting a show outside the studios in Mumbai—actually used to assert a new middle-class identity that distances itself from poorer India? To fully understand the working of the new nationalism, it is crucial to recognize the degree to which it articulates a fundamental disaffiliation from and marginalization of the poorer classes of India. Based on the frequent number of times informants effectively stated that there are too many Indias in one, one realizes that there is a growing sense in at least some of the middle class that they could do without the rest of India.

In this context, Bhabha’s (2001) valorization of discontinuity appears strikingly idealized and theoretical: any cultural phenomenon is implicated in a complex multiplicity of engagements, and a positive displacement along one axis may well be at the price of a debilitating entrenchment along another. The disavowal of the poorer classes in India seems to be an inextricable corollary of the new nationalism’s production of agency. A study of the power relations between the middle class and this marginalized majority would be crucial to a full evaluation of the findings outlined here.

Notes

1. For this elite, the “familiar is located in the international, rather than within the realm of national boundaries” (Parulekar 2001). This is a contrasting sentiment to that of India’s new middle class, as will be seen in this article.

2. Currently, the 30 percent figure is consistently used by MTV researchers and scholars alike.

3. On average, India’s largest cities house 10 million people. One can thus imagine that 300 million people housed in those cities works out to about 30 cities.

4. Satellite television is still very much an urban phenomenon in India.

5. Throughout this study, I use the adjective “Western” to designate those forms of culture that are perceived to be Eurocentric or nonindigenous; I do not mean to suggest that an East-West binary is in any sense natural or absolute.

6. It is generally believed that the language of TV is Hindi and the language of the press is English. The audience elite is reached through English and the press. TV producers say that if

you want to get the numbers, you want to get the middle class, and you do not translate, it will not work. Intellectuals who speak English, at the top end of the market, do not even generally watch TV, so English becomes a niche on the medium. The English on TV must be simple and colloquial (if at all) and must be heard in tandem with Hindi (Ranjan Bakshi, interview by author, 20 July 2000). With Hinglish, taken up by many broadcasters, a pride seems to exist in consciously departing from the formal “All India language” of the past, the language of radio and television news broadcasts (Doordarshan), controlled from Delhi (Lelyveld 2001). It should also be noted here that MTV and Channel V still use much more English in their programming compared to, for instance, Zee—which is almost all Hindi with a splattering of English.

7. Note that MTV did not bring the countdown show to India; Doordarshan had had them earlier (Ananya Bannerjee, interview by author, 4 July 2000).

8. MTV’s target age range is fifteen to thirty-four years of age.

9. It should be pointed out that MTV has access to an extensive variety of picture compositions, and camera angles within these, via its music videos. Thus, a lot of the creation is done for MTV through this acquired software.

10. Cyrus Oshidar (interview by author, 28 July 2000) was particularly critical about politics and nationalism, and even young people, in India today.

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