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Transnational Music for the Global Market: A Culture Studies Perspective

Abstract

Music industry in India is an integral part of the popular culture shaping and redefining cultural discourse in India. It is also a global enterprise with its wide reach into the global network of music lovers, which includes a huge population of the Indian diaspora. My paper attempts to read into the transnational elements in popular Indian music and analyse its popularity in a global market. The focus is not on Bollywood music, but on the music produced in the independent music scene.

Keywords: Globalization, Popular Culture, Music industry, Culture studies, Fusion music, Indian band music

Popular culture was often sidelined by academicians and theorists for a long time. But with Culture Studies and similar perspectives, it is now perceived as vital in any analysis of a social structure. Popular music falls under this category. In India, music of all genres are appreciated and analyzed. The history of Indian music reveals to us the growth of several streams of music ranging from classical to folk and tribal songs. The popular music scene has seen the growth and flourish of several genres while the classical tradition still survived even though it is highly stylized. Folk and tribal music remained marginalized for a long period, perhaps till the early 1990s. When the trends of globalization began in India, music scenario responded to them through fusion music which used forgotten versions including tribal traditions. An attempt is being made in this paper to explore the trend of incorporating folk and tribal music into western music traditions which has resulted in transnational world music. Malayalam songs set to music by popular bands like *Avial* and *Akom* will be used for reference. My attempt will be to put them under the purview of Culture Studies and explore

the commodification process behind this trend. My paper will also discuss the process of globalization and transnational trends in India.

Culture Studies has helped in forming new equations regarding cultural practices and its relation to other narratives, and power relations existing in a social structure. The dialectical interaction between human life experiences and the complex systems and institutions of social life is studied in this context. This dynamic process helps create human history in artifacts, symbols, codes and linguistic as well as non-linguistic utterances. Structuralism helped place culture in a better perspective in relation to social systems. Stuart Hall in his essay *Cultural Studies* observes:

Culture was better understood as the inventories, the folk taxonomies, through which social life is 'classified out' in different societies. It was not so much the product of 'consciousness' as the unconscious forms and categories through which historically definite forms of consciousness were produced. (92)

Althusser's work on the concept of ideology has great relevance to Cultural Studies and helped raise several questions. Stuart Hall writes in his essay "Cultural Studies":

Thus, for Althusser, ideologies were those images, representations, categories through which men 'live', in an imaginary way, their real relation to their conditions of existence. ... Ideologies were materially located and were therefore best examined, in their practico-social effect, in the institutional sites and apparatuses (the ISAs) which elaborated them. But also ideologies worked by constituting or interpellating 'subjects'. The "I", the seat of consciousness and the foundation of ideological discourses, was a ... contradictory discursive category constituted by ideological discourse as itself. (94)

Along with Althusser, another theorist who helped Cultural Studies gain a firm ground was Gramsci and his concept of hegemony which plays a major role in this context. Stuart Hall explains thus:

In essence, it refers to all those processes whereby a fundamental social group which has achieved direction over the 'decisive economic nucleus', is able to expand this into a moment of social, political and cultural leadership and authority throughout civil society and the state attempting to unify and reconstruct the social formation around an organic tendency through a series of 'national tasks'. (96)

With the emergence of Cultural Studies as another theoretical framework, the study of cultural narratives began to assume a different dimension.

India with its pluralistic nature and multi-ethnic culture is home to several music traditions ranging from classical versions to tribal music.

Classical music with its highly stylized form has enjoyed the patronage of the elite and remained an integral component of high culture in India. Popular music, on the other hand, included film music, folk music and tribal songs which are of a varied nature and remains hugely popular among the masses. Folk and tribal traditions are not songs created merely to amuse, but they are also reflections of the socio-political and economic discourses which have resulted in the marginalization of certain sections of society. There are innumerable variations in these songs created by the people who sang about the collective and personal trials and tribulations as well as their jubiliations and festive moments. Folk music and tribal music traditions remained confined within the isolated social groups and never emerged into a pan-Indian or transnational scenario till the forces of globalization transformed Indian sensibility and social fabric in the 1990s.

Globalization brought about significant changes in economic, political and cultural discourses with far reaching consequences on countries around the world. In *Global Transformations*, Held and his associates discussed globalization and isolated four dimensions that characterize globalization process. He spoke of the extensive global networks in all social aspects. The interconnected links that bring the world together and its impact on countries all over the world is unique in this aspect. He also identified the speed at which global flows happen – be it capital, people, news or ideas. Such complex processes that transcend national boundaries impact upon the dimensions of time and space and major structural changes have been happening around the world. Transnational culture and transnational organizations have taken centre stage.

Globalization was once understood to be an economic phenomenon that was the result of major multinational corporations and economically powerful nations spreading their activity across the globe. But the process did not remain confined to economic relations, they grew into powerful phenomena encompassing other fields of social discourse. This was aided by the development in mass communication technologies and faster, cheaper means of travel. Globalization processes soon began to make their presence felt in every sphere of social activity and cultural narratives began to reflect the impact of these processes. Issues of cultural meaning, including texts, representation and identity soon became subject to discussion within the purview of globalization. Arjun Appadurai made interesting observation regarding global culture and the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. In his essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” Appadurai observes:

The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. A vast array of empirical facts could be brought to bear on the side of

the homogenization argument.... Most often, the homogenization argument subspecies into an argument about Americanization or an argument about commoditization, and very often the two arguments are closely linked. What these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one or another other way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of Science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions. (94)

Appadurai laid the framework to understand the processes of globalization within the cultural context. He proposed to look into the relationship among,

five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscapes (b) mediascapes (c) technoscapes (d) financescapes and (e) ideoscapesThey are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements and even intimate face-to-face groups,These landscapes are building blocks of ... multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. (95)

In the Indian context, globalization which began to make its presence felt by the beginning of 1990s was an inevitability. The impending financial crisis in the 1990s demanded major policy changes which initiated structural adjustments following liberalization and the opening up of the Indian economy to the world. Along with finance, the social fabric of India felt the presence of global tendencies in other aspects of social life as well. Globalization soon had its impact across India with the help of the communication technologies and the Indian sensibility began to get transformed and Indian identity absorbed the processes of globalization and reshaped itself to accommodate these structural changes. The assimilation of this new identity can be perceived in various art forms as well. Indian music is a form of narrative that has reshaped itself to accommodate this new global Indian identity. Music, being a hugely popular medium of entertainment, has felt the presence of globalization in several ways. The popularity of the medium demands adjustments, taking into consideration, the changing sensibility in the aesthetic patterns of the listener. The medium is also part of an industry and hence obeys the rules of the financial market. The global corporations in the music industry require talent and content that satisfy a larger number of consumers and hence local music has to shape itself for the bigger market. Global media demands similar assimilation and so does the social media networks across the globe. Hybridity is welcomed by the global media.

In the context of Indian music, globalization has had a major impact and it is reflected in the increasing presence of Indian musicians in the world music scenario. World music as a genre has developed immensely with the globalizing process happening across the globe. They are examples of a hybrid culture with combinations of Western and non-Western genres. Indian music is a strong presence here with several Malayalee rock bands ruling over the hit charts. Malayalee rock bands are representatives of the hybridity seen around the world, post-globalization. Visually, they represent their regional culture in their attire, but in totality, they resemble any other Western rock band. The instruments used are primarily Western and the positioning of them on stage, is no different either. The songs have lyrics and sometimes basic rhythm patterns in Malayalam but apart from that they emulate Western music. The amalgamation of the local and the global, or rather Western is a hugely popular trend all over the world. Popular rock bands contributing to the world music scene include *Avial*, *Akom* and *Thakara* – all from Kerala. These groups of musicians rely heavily on popular folk or tribal song patterns and borrow heavily from these traditions. They incorporate these lyrics into Western music patterns, relying on Western instruments and chord structures.

The use of lyrics which are heavily coded becomes problematic in a cultural discourse since the meaning is lost to a global audience. Tribal or folk music builds into its structure, the social, political and economic structures that define their identity. Culture codes strengthen this narrative and offers insights into the dynamics of social relationships in their community. So we often hear about the rampant exploitation of these marginalized groups and gender issues faced by them, in their songs. The modern rock bands borrow their music and puts them in a framework where the meaning is completely lost and the process of signification becomes meaningless. *Avial*, the rock band sings about the rustic charm, the tribal women who are sexually exploited by the feudal lords, the economic and political subalternity of these communities. *Thakara*, another popular band sings about a popular breakfast in Kerala and contrasts the humility and simplicity associated with this food to the rich who have lost their honesty and righteousness.

These songs seek to commodify the local tradition and transform local music for the global crowd, which is largely urban. The commoditization happens as a part of the globalizing process, music being another industry in post-modern world. Transnational media corporations and music industry encourages such fusion music since the underlying cultural homogeneity appeals to a larger section of the world population. Diaspora communities encourage such assimilation and extend their patronage to them. For a deterritorialized community, these bands represent their own identity. Moreover, it is also interesting to note the demand the market makes on cultural products with the advent of digital music production. It

has commercialized music production to a great extent and the success of musicians is judged by the CDs sold in the market.

To conclude, forces of globalization are constantly at play and transnational hybrid cultures are constantly evolving. Indian music scenario has grown tremendously post-liberalization and musicians have evolved new patterns that attract both local and global community. Fusion music often aims at cultural homogenization where local flavors get lost when used within the framework of Western music. Global also becomes Eurocentric in this aspect. Although forces are at play that encourages cultural homogeneity the dialectics at play brings out a synthesis. When products, images and ideas enter the local culture, they are transformed and adapted to suit the land and end up as heterogeneous narratives contributing to the building of a transnational identity.

Works Cited

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