ESSAY

Underground 'Sutta' to Mainstream 'Kolaveri di': Understanding Social Media through Changing Perceptions of Popular Music in the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the development of social media soundscape of South Asian cyberspace in the latter half of the decade of 2000s and the early years of

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2010s. The locus that this paper treads in this attempt is the trajectory of changing perceptions of what has been called underground music as opposed to what is generally known as mainstream music. The inquiry begins by locating popular songs such as 'BC Sutta' released by the Pakistani singer Saqib Abdullah in 2005 and 'Kolaveri di' released by Telugu film star Dhanush in 2011 at the opposite ends of this spectrum. Neither of the songs was produced or distributed in the traditional manner by corporate production houses. Also to be noted is that both these songs became known and extremely popular, especially among the youth, only through circulation on the Internet. Why, then, was BC Sutta considered 'underground' and Kolaveri di as 'mainstream'? The paper suggests that this owes to the development of Web 2.0 technologies, such as social media, that democratised and redistributed the agencies of production and consumption of popular music in South Asia. It argues that this democratisation takes place because of the reconfiguration and redistribution of what French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had called 'Cultural Capital', and what Australian scholars Michael Emmison and John Frow have identified as 'Information technology as cultural capital.' In this process, the paper also makes overtures toward providing a corrective to the lack – identified by cultural geographer Susan Smith – in culture studies of attention given to soundscapes.

In April 2005, Saqib Abdullah, born to Pakistani parents in Saudi Arabia, recorded a song, now famously known as "BC Sutta" at a live jam session in a Karachi studio and released it on the Internet for

free download. The song was downloaded 7,600 times in the first 21 days, and within a month, it was being shared and downloaded all over the Internet. On 16 November 2011, the song "Why This Kolaveri Di" composed by Anirudh, and written and sung by Dhanush, was released on YouTube. It went viral, with 3.5 million views on YouTube and more than 1 million shares on Facebook within the space of one week. In between the two megahits, there have been numerous lesser hits, such as "XL ki kudiyan", "*gaand mein danda*" or "GMD" (a bawdy song making liberal use of expletives), "ye condom hai" (a bawdy parody of "ye jeevan hai" from the Hindi film *Piya ka Ghar*) and many more. While in 2005, songs such as Sutta and GMD were said to be 'underground', the word was not heard in reference to Kolaveri. The latter was monumentally popular and that was that. It was 'mainstream'.

That the production, distribution and consumption of such music are a resultant of social media is a foregone conclusion. However, such dynamics of Internet social media as effect this phenomenon still remain under-recognised and under-appreciated, the correction of which is precisely the undertaking of this paper. In other words, the paper seeks to understand the characteristics of social media that have brought 'agency' back to where it belonged, i.e., the people, whereas, cyberspace, which in the Sardarian paradigm, was another dark side of the West, seems to have turned into the site of the renewed agency of the people. The questions that then make themselves asked include, among others, has the McLuhanian retribalisation of the world finally been achieved (McLuhan, 1994 [1964])? Does cyberspace require a new understanding? What implications may this new understanding have

for our future engagement in cyberspace? It is through the prism of the phenomenon of the underground music going mainstream that this paper attempts to understand this apparent transformation.

'Social media', as the term stands today, resists pinning definitions and its meanings continue to be contested. This is hardly surprising given that amongst all popular media, social media is the newest. Theorizations too, of and on social media, have not kept pace with its fast evolution. The causes of this gap are several, and they may have more to do with the very archaeology of social media, which is ever evolving than with any lack of scholarly efforts. Nevertheless, social media now seem to form a legitimate field of inquiry, as is evidenced by the works of, *inter alia*, Noor Al-Deen and Hendricks (2012) and Mandiberg (2012). The issue at hand is, therefore, one of exploring the possibilities that this new field opens up under the broader rubric of cultural studies. However, the treacherous terrain that 'cultural studies' is, one must tread with caution. Therefore, this paper will limit itself to providing only a nudge in that direction by picking up one of the many fields that social media inhabit.

My attempt will be to understand how South Asian perceptions of popular music have changed over the past decade, affected by the changes in the relationship between the producer and the consumer of this music, as brought about by evolving cyber-technologies, social media being a prominent one among them. The scope of the paper is limited to analysing the shift over the past decade of what can be called 'underground music' to what is 'mainstream music'. To this end, I shall employ concepts such as 'soundscape', 'cultural capital', and 'information

technology as cultural capital', developed in the works of Smith (1994), Bourdieu (1986), and Emmison and Frow (1998), respectively. The rationale of this paper draws a parallel between the silences that pervade the scholarship on cultural geography and the scholarship on social media in particular and all cyberstudies in general. Thereafter, my attempt will be to understand the cultural capital that 'taste' in music forms, and how access to and use of social media itself becomes a form of cultural capital, which throws up newer configurations of the cultural capital of musical taste.

Since I am trying to look at social media through the prism of underground music, a brief note on what constitutes underground music may be in order. Although several definitions—far too many to be listed here—have been suggested, few common denominators can still be identified. It has been understood as an umbrella term which encompasses several music genres that lie outside the mainstream musical culture. Thus, whatever it may be or may not be, underground music almost always gets defined in opposition to mainstream music, in terms of creative/political expression, artistic freedom, and its dissemination or lack thereof. Mainstream music mostly relies on corporate funding by record companies for production and distribution, thus controlling creative expression too, and it is precisely these traps that underground music seeks to avoid. However, the Western experience of underground music tells us that in the long run, nearly all music genres that materialise in response to or resistance against mainstream music genres get appropriated into/by the mainstream. This has been the fate of hard rock, punk, all varieties of metal, rap, hip-hop, and so on.

Similarly, in South Asia underground music has been constantly co-opted into the mainstream, thus contributing to newer configurations of South Asian popular music. The near inevitable trajectory of contemporary underground music in South Asia is thus: it begins inevitably on the Internet, is mostly bawdy and explicit, has the eyes of the mainstream set upon itself, gets sanitised, and then gets appropriated in the mainstream. For instance, rapper Honey Singh, who began with posting explicit songs on YouTube, has been signed by mainstream Hindi film producers. Although there is a considerable body of scholarship on the musics of all South Asian film traditions, there is hardly any to come by if one were to look for critiques of music on the Internet. Cultural geographer Susan Smith's concept of 'Soundscape' may help us find a possible explanation for this lack.

Smith (1994) notes that, "in social sciences generally, the 'ideology of the visual' has afforded an epistemological privilege to sight over hearing, even though sound … is more allied than vision to those emotional or intuitive qualities on which the interpretive project rests" (p.232) By 'ideology of the visual' is meant the pre-occupation with landscapes in cultural studies projects, especially those of cultural geography. Smith (1994) points out that even stalwarts of cultural theory such as Williams (1958) and Turner (1990) have also been preoccupied with "observational strategies and written texts" (p. 232). Citing other scholars, she identifies three limitations of the visual approach. Firstly, it does not account for the entire sensory experience through which space and place are structured and understood; secondly, this body of scholarship excludes the experience of the visually impaired, and

thirdly, it excludes sound as an art form from the understanding of human geography. Smith's views on this gap in cultural studies have found resonance with other authors. For instance, Jazeel (2005) makes the larger point that "geographers have been reluctant to treat music as a cultural product" (p. 233), and qualifies this point for the field of social sciences by saying that "the analysis of music within the social sciences raises inherently geographical questions, particularly around how it shapes social spaces of identity, belonging and community" (p. 233).

The argument of this paper emerges from connections between identity, belonging, and community as contingent on cyber-soundscape in general, and social media in particular, and Bourdieu's ideation of cultural capital. Although cultural studies, in general, has sought to correct the visual bias in the preceding two decades, the study of cybercultures, or the cyberian turn in culture, has tended to follow this bias, severely limiting our understanding of the digital culture. Cyberstudies is still engaged with questions pertaining to archaeology of cyberspaces, internet pornography, cyborgs, memes, online fan-fictions, and so on and so forth. The research on sounds of cyberspace, or cyber-soundscape, is severely limited. A fine example of this lack are the two editions of a seminal collection of essays on cyberculture, titled *The Cybercultures Reader*, the first edition of which was brought out by David Bell and Barbara Kennedy in 2000, and updated into a second edition in 2007. In both the editions, the contributing scholars have not thought it pertinent to engage with the aural component of the cyber.

Further, even scholarly works that take social media as their primary engagement have not addressed the au-

ral, preferring to investigate only the textual and the visual in the main (see Mandiberg, 2012; Noor Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2012). It is here that I suggest the investigation of the cyber-aural as well to attempt a fuller understanding of cybercultures. Now of course, it is near impossible to explore the entire cyber-soundscape within the space of a short paper. The spectrum of cyber-soundscape is immensely broad and may include sounds such as the beep of error message, computer bootup/shutdown sounds, chimes of incoming or outgoing email or IM message, the background score of online/offline computer games, music, and could form the subject matter of a full-length critical project. Nevertheless, it should be possible to present one case study, if not many, as a potential opening into this kind of scholarly engagement. Thus, the query that this paper address is, "How has social media affected the South Asian popular soundscape, particularly in the case of popular music?"

While we speak of South Asian popular music, we realise that there is no one popular music this side of the world. On the contrary, it is as an extremely heterogeneous category. Manuel (1988) identifies film music as the overarching framework within which Indian popular music is located, along with other popular forms such as, for instance, folk. Since Manuel, there have been two notable additions to this repertoire of Indian popular music. The first of these two additions is what came to be known as 'Indipop', which boomed in the late 1980s and continued to be hugely popular throughout the 1990s. Low-cost distribution and consumption, if not production, through cassettes and CDs, sustained the Indipop movement till the arrival of the Internet. The closing years of the 1990s and

the early years of the 2000s were the overlapping years of the decline of Indipop and the rise of independent music, which was produced by small bands, or at times, even by individuals, and simply released on the Internet for peer-to-peer sharing.

It is noteworthy that these were precisely the years when Internet penetration in South Asia was in its initial stages and social media technologies were not fully developed. With the advent of Internet, Indipop nearly died out, and independent music emerged in its stead. It is also remarkable that Internet has not displaced film music as *the* popular music of South Asia. On the other hand, it has enriched the South Asian soundscape by making it possible for independent music makers to find an audience. A curious aspect of this independent music was that it provided space for the creation and dissemination of music which could otherwise be labelled as 'underground music'. By this term is meant that music which because of its aesthetics will not find space in the mainstream Bollywood or cassette industry. Here, I am referring to music which does not cater to 'popular' taste as such, but still manages to find an audience without attracting unsolicited attention from the mainstream. Unlike in the Western world where underground music has now had a considerable history, in South Asia, underground music was made possible only by Internet. Also, unlike the Western underground which arose out at specific historical junctures of cultural crises and has always been music of protest and subversion, South Asian underground by and large lacks this political colour. Hardly ever is it directed at the political establishment. On the contrary, its main subject matter is informed by the immediate social life of its creator. For

instance, 'the Sutta song' laments the social disapproval of smoking and the censures that young smokers draw from elders in a society, which is run by the law of the aged, and songs such as 'GMD' and 'XL ki kudiyan' speak of life issues on college campuses.

The use of the term 'mainstream' for 'Kolaveri' is not entirely unproblematic or free of qualifiers, and hence needs to nuanced. 'Kolaveri' was not mainstream music in the sense this term is conventionally understood. Altough it was produced by Sony Music India, it was still outside the framework of film music, which for various reasons remains the mainstream music genre of the Indian subcontinent, though later it was indeed made part of the Tamil film *3*. Other factors that set 'Kolaveri' apart from mainstream music include its vocalisation by an 'actor' and not a professional 'singer', its picturisation inside a music studio and not on a film set, and so on. Essentially, the aesthetics of this song are deliberately 'amateur' and in imitation of the underground. Thus what had started as simply an experiment of creating music outside the matrix of corporate music production, a deviation from the 'grand', had now come to represent the mainstream.

The question that then begs itself is how this transformation of the musical soundscape may be explained. This may be explained both in terms of technological changes and its resultant cultural impacts. Apart from what has been discussed above, there are other differences that can be observed between 'BC Sutta', 'GMD', and 'XL ki Kudiyan' on the one hand, and 'Ye condom hai' and 'Kolaveri', on the other, in terms of their language, and their production and distribution. Whereas all these songs except 'Kolaveri' rely on bawdy/obscene language for their

appeal, 'Kolaveri' appeals to the sentiments of young men who have failed in love and pokes fun at it.

The first group of songs was released as sound files without any visuals. Only searchable textual hyperlinks were made available. Also, the files needed to be downloaded to a computer and then played through a media playing software installed on the computer. The Internet only served as a medium of file transference and the consumer had to be in possession of the file to be able to consume it. The second group of songs could be downloaded onto the consumer's device, if the consumer so wished, and knew how to download, though it was not necessarily required. Mere online access to the media files was sufficient, and possession was not required. This was made possible by Web 2.0 technological platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, wherein the media playing software was integrated either into the web browser or into the website itself, unlike the previous browsing platforms. Web 2.0 made consumption possible without possession. In other words, what Web 2.0 made available to the consumer was a simulation of the original file uploaded on a server, thus making the knowledge of downloading process redundant, and making consumption more consumer friendly.

Prophesising about Web 2.0 even before its emergence, DiNucci (1999) writes,

> The Web we know now … is only an embryo of the Web [2.0] to come … and we are just starting to see how that embryo might develop. ...The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens. It will still appear on

> your computer screen transformed by video and other dynamic media made possible by the speedy communication technologies… (p. 32)

It is from these prophetic words of DiNucci that the cultural argument emerges and dovetails into the theories of subcultures. Although it is almost a given that musical cultures shape social spaces of identity, belonging, and community, it is also pertinent to note that what we may have here is a case of a subcultural soundscape. Cohen (2003) notes two key points regarding emergence of subcultures. Firstly, all human actions, including those leading to emergence of subcultures, are "efforts to solve problems" Secondly, any subculture never emerges in its entirety in a flash at one go. Instead, the process of emergence of a subculture is always an incremental one, wherein an initiator's "*exploratory gestures*" are responded to and collaborated with by members who feel disadvantaged by the dominant frame of reference. If this incremental collaboration acquires enough members by way of "*mutual* exploration and *joint* elaboration of a new solution", then the "emergence of these 'group standards' of this shared frame of reference" causes the emergence of a new subculture" (p. 266).

In the light of Cohen's theory, it is possible to say that the subcultural soundscape was made possible because the first act found enough supporters. If 'BC Sutta' had not become popular, it would have been difficult for others to follow and we might not have had 'Kolaveri' either. While 'BC Sutta' made possible by Web 1.0 provided the exploratory gesture, 'GMD' and 'XL ki kudiyan' made for the mutual exploration and joint elaboration culminating into 'Kolaveri' made possible by Web 2.0. Thus, the

cartography of the South Asian soundscape came to be redefined by cybertechnologies like Web 1.0 and 2.0. charting new areas of soundscape hitherto unknown, and severely denting the top-down processes of South Asian soundscape, with Web 1.0 initiating it and Web 2.0 taking it to an altogether new level. The South Asian soundscape was top-heavy in terms of production and distribution, which left hardly any room for a consumer agency except for the choice of picking or not picking a particular record, cassette or CD.

Without causing an outright rejection of old soundscapes, cyberspace makes it possible for them to coexist with newer soundscapes, thus making media participation a part of media consumption. In that sense, the phenomenon of subcultural soundscapes leads us to newer understandings of cyberspace as a whole, different from that of cyberspace as the darker side of the west which was created only so that it could be colonised, or cyberspace as only a virtual community. Instead, in a McLuhanian sense, it is retribalising our cultures. As early as 1964, McLuhan (1994) wrote,

> A speed-up … may serve to restore a tribal pattern of intense involvement such as took place with the introduction of radio in Europe, and is now tending to happen as a result of TV in America. Specialist technologies detribalize. The non-specialist electric technology retribalizes. (p. 24)

It may be said that the direction Internet technologies have taken in the last two decades and more specifically in the last eight to ten years has further despecialized digital technologies. Taking on from McLuhan, Logan writes, “A social grid of highly independent individuals

gives way to tribal patterns of intense involvement with one another and a return to elements of the oral tradition."

It is here that the redistribution of production agency gives a voice to *every individual who has access to Internet*, thus turning passive consumers into not only active producers but also active citizens in the "global village."

However, this redistribution of the agency of production/dissemination is far more complicated than the above may suggest, and is a terrain of vociferous contestations. In the first place, the debate centers on the nomenclature of the content that social media carries. While the capital intensive corporate media prefers to call it 'user-generated content', thus making clear its intentions of being the arbiter of legitimate and illegitimate content, others prefer terms like 'convergence culture', 'the people formerly known as audience', 'participatory media', 'peer production', 'Web 2.0' and so on (Mandiberg, 2012, p.2). According to Mandiberg, "each of these terms defines one separate aspect of the phenomenon [social media] and does so from the specific point of view of the different actors in [the] system" (p.2). For instance, except Web 2.0, the rest of terms listed here are politically charged in terms of who gets to show/say/see what, whereas Web 2.0 is a purely technological designation signifying a second generation Internet technology. Of these, the term that is of maximum significance to the present discussion is 'the people formerly known as audience'. The term 'former audience' was coined by the American technology writer and columnist Dan Gillmor in his eBook *We the Media* (2004). By former audience, Gillmor referred to people who before the advent of Internet were mere passive consumers of news, but gradually turned into 'citizen journalists' once the

technologies of news production became cheaper and accessible. Rosen (2012) furthers this point by saying that "The people formerly known as the audience are simply *the public* made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people. But whether you do or not we want you to know we're here" (p. 15). And that "The people formerly known as the audience are those who *were* on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another—and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all*" (p. 13, emphasis original).

Although Gillmor and Rosen make these observations in the context of news broadcasting, I believe the argument is equally tenable in the field of music as well. With the proliferation of the personal computer, the composition and distribution of music could now be performed on the same device. Even if the composition was not executed on the computer, it could surely be used to publish it and reach the audience directly, and in the process, entirely bypassing corporate distribution companies. Thus, it was not only creative expression that was freed from corporate financial muscle, but it also altered the entire dynamics of music distribution. Earlier, whereas the consumer was always at the receiving end and the flow was always unidirectional, now it took the form of a conversation. The consumer was no longer just a consumer in the music market but in a retribalised sense, the consumer was also a music enthusiast, who could respond to the music in much the same way as a listener would in the pre-gramophone, pre-cassette, pre-CD era, when making and

listening to music was always a communal and intimate activity, wherein the maker and listener shared the spatio-temporal coordinates. In other words, the specialist technology of music making – recording instruments, cassettes, CDs, etc. – detribalized the act of experiencing music by making it a specialist activity, whereas the non-specialist technology of Internet and then social media, retribalized this experience.

It is this retribalization of the music experience made possible by social media technologies that now presents itself as a kind of social and cultural capital that Bourdieu (1986) first ideated. Bourdieu distinguished three forms of capital as follows:

> ...as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu 1986: 243, cited in Emmison & Frow 1998: 41)

To put it briefly, cultural capital is the advantage or disadvantage accruing to individuals in a society, contingent on their *habitus*, i.e., the socio-cultural environment that they inhabit, or in other words, their position in the society vis-à-vis other individuals in matters concerning birth, education, access and control of resources, and

so on. Emmison and Frow, in their discussion on the penetration and impacts of information technology in Australia, focussing especially on the use of personal computers, extend this concept to argue that access to and the ability to use digital and information technologies is itself a kind of cultural capital, which forms out of the kind of cultural capital conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986).

> Emmison and Frow (1998) conclude:
> A familiarity with, and a positive disposition towards the use of, [*sic*] the burgeoning technologies of the information age can be seen as an additional form of cultural capital bestowing advantage on those families which possess them and the means of appropriating their full potential. (p. 44)

The authors argue that this extension is possible as they believe that Bourdieu's formulation, though not directly related to competencies in information technologies, is flexible enough to incorporate these additional dimensions (p. 41). Following from Emmison and Frow, it should be possible to argue that it is not only the technologies of personal computers, but access and ability to engage with social media can also be thought of as a kind of cultural capital.

It is this new cultural capital which – when it is utilised to make and share music independent of corporate control – disrupts the traditional modes of functioning of the music industry, effectively normalising it and rendering it as a non-specialised non-industry. Thus, whereas at specific moments of the twentieth century, the corporate music industry was successful in creating categories such as mainstream or underground, the social media of the

twenty-first century renders these categories redundant, possibly altering the South Asian soundscape forever or for at least the foreseeable future. It is possibly for this reason that 'Sutta' was underground and 'Kolaveri' was mainstream. Of course, to conclusively demonstrate that social media does constitute a cultural capital, significant empirical evidence, as collected by Emmison and Frow, would be required. However, the arguments as delineated in this paper should be effective towards unpacking and opening new discussions in this field and lead to a fuller understanding of the social media phenomenon.

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