"I Have a Song to Sing": The Politics of Lip-Syncing, Authenticity, and Identity in India and the United States

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COMM 445

December 12, 2013

The spotlight finds Abhishek Bachchan as he enters the arena and begins dancing his way through the crowd that has come to see the 2013 International Indian Film Awards (IIFA). The golden child of Bollywood's esteemed Amitabh Bachchan, who has made his way into Hollywood films such as Slum Dog Millionaire and The Great Gatsby, is dressed to the nines; sunglasses on, hair gelled back, and American jeans coupled with a lime green *kurta,* or Indian collarless shirt, Abhishek Bachchan screams "cool." He finally makes his way to the stage and begins to lip-sync the spoken-word intro of a popular song that is not his own. He dances around the stage, flanked by a group of dancers and back-up singers in muted colors, and by the sounds coming from the audience, it's clear that they love him. Indeed, they don't seem to notice, or care, that he doesn't even pick up a microphone until halfway through the performance – they're here to see the style, the undeniable coolness, of a Bollywood celebrity. The music itself is secondary.

Musical performances by lip-syncing actors are not uncommon in India. The country's largest film industry, Bollywood, has set this precedent, employing both playback singers, who provide the polished vocals for films' musical sequences, and actors, who lip-sync and give the music a face and a particular, desirable style. This practice is widely known and accepted in India. Indeed, Bollywood music accounts for 72% of music sales in India (Pinglay). In the United States, however, lip-syncing is demonized. Artists and their managers go to great lengths to make lip-synced performances look as natural and authentic as possible, and those who are unsuccessful in doing so lose substantial credibility – some even lose their careers. Why does this practice elicit such different reactions? What are the effects of these

different beliefs and practices? What is at stake when celebrity trumps artistic identity, or when an artist attempts to claim a voice that is not his or her own?

The opposing attitudes towards lip-syncing are a reflection of the different ways in which the commercialization of music has manifested in India and America; Bollywood is selling a collective fantasy that rests on a standardized idea of authenticity, while America is selling the unique identity – the entire persona: voice, body, and personality – of the artist. Though lip-syncing to create a “perfect” performance is common in both countries, in India the practice is transparent and accepted, while in America it is shoved behind the curtain – when exposed, it diminishes the value of the “product.” However, with the increasing globalization of the Indian economy after and westernization of Indian culture after 1991, American ideas of authenticity are gaining traction in India as well, giving rise to new forms of independent music.

Recent research suggests a major ideological split, regarding the conceptualization of social identity, between American culture and Indian culture. According to psychologists Markus and Kitayama’s meta-analysis of several behavioral and psychological studies, many Asian cultures – including that of India – are “collectivist,” meaning that individuals’ behaviors and perceptions of the self are other-directed. “[T]he significant features of the self according to this construal are to be found in the interdependent and thus, in the more public components of the self” (Markus and Kitayama 227). American culture, on the other hand, is individualist, and individuals’ behaviors and perceptions of the self are *motivated by* the self. Markus and Kitayama explain that in this view, the individual is “an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity who (a) comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g., traits, abilities, motives, and values) and (b) behaves primarily as a consequence of these

internal attributes" (Markus and Kitayama 224). The differences between these two ideologies can be seen in the import that Americans and Indians, respectively, place on authenticity in musical performance.

For instance, in her essay, "Unsung Heroes? A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Lip-Syncing in American and Indian Film," Lucie Alaimo makes a distinction between different forms of authenticity, between which film producers, musical directors, etc. must strike a balance; not surprisingly, Americans and Indians have followed opposing paths in this regard. Alaimo argues that Americans tend to value "personal authenticity," which "validates the performer to be self-originating and sincere in his or her work" (Alaimo 2). Here the emphasis is on self-expression and originality; respectable musicians must create their own, expressive work and be able to perform that work sincerely and passionately, if not perfectly, thus making lip-syncing unacceptable. On the other side of this, however, is the Indian emphasis on "authoritative authenticity," or authenticity that comes from "the authoritative, or original, source" and results in a "perfect" performance (Alaimo 1). The majority of Bollywood films draw from a limited pool of successful, respected playback singers, most notably Lata Mangeshkar (Kvetko). This limits the kinds of musical styles and sounds that one can expect to hear in Hindi films, but, at the same time, satisfies the many listeners who "have pre-conceived expectations of a performance, wanting to hear music in a particular way" (Alaimo 1).

Both of these conceptions of authenticity are, however, important in both American and Indian culture; there must be some kind of balance between the sincerity of the artist and the quality or perceived "perfection" of the performance in order for music to be commercially successful. According to Theodor Adorno in his essay, "On the Fetish

Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," works of music and even artists themselves can be commodified into objects that are sometimes valued more than musical performance. He argues that, "The star principle has become totalitarian. The reactions of the listeners appear to have no relation to the playing of the music" (Adorno 35). While this may not be the whole story in every case, it is true that in America, an artist's public image takes on immense value; the image is at least as important as the music in determining the commercial success of said music. The same can be said for Bollywood, though it is not the artist's image but the actor's that is significant. Looking back to Abhishek Bachchan's performance at the IIFAs, it is clear that the audience's excitement was primarily linked to celebrity and not to music. Moreover, according to Adorno, the music itself is standardized: "Voices are holy properties like a national trademark…Most of them sound like imitations of those who have made it, even when they themselves have made it" (36). This is often true in Bollywood films, where contemporary singers emulate the classical style of early, successful playback singers. Thus, as Adorno argues, nearly every aspect of music and performance can be commodified; the commodified voice is the source from which authoritative authenticity comes in Bollywood, and personal authenticity is commodified in the creation of an artist identity in America.

Interestingly, despite the different routes that American and Indian film producers have taken in emphasizing different forms of authenticity, they seem to have started from the same place. Due to technological limitations, early Hollywood and Bollywood talkies and musicals found their way to playback singing. Emerging from the silent era of film, producers in the 1930s had difficulty finding more than a limited number of actors who could also sing (Alaimo). At first Indian producers focused on casting talented singers who had command

over classical styles of music, but in response to scathing reviews of these singers' poor acting ability – and "pudding-like" faces (Alaimo 4; Majumdar 167) – they began pre-recording musical numbers and casting more talented, attractive actors; American producers did the same. Thus, in both cases, entertainment and perfection – authoritative authenticity – won.

However, the similarity ended here; while American producers worked to conceal the voice-body split established by playback singing, Indian producers were transparent about it. According to Alaimo, the reason that lip-syncing is rarely brought to the public's attention in America is because "the use of it has been kept from the public to avoid ridicule, making it a case of neglect instead" (5). Wary of admitting divergence from the ideal of authentic, live recording, and intent on bolstering both box-office sales and the reputations of actors (Alaimo), early American film producers hid playback singing from an audience that valued personal authenticity. This often meant that playback singers, such as Marni Nixon, were not credited for their work; Nixon, who sang for many prominent actresses including Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*, didn't get credited at all in the film or the soundtrack. "As a result, the personal authenticity of the singers was ignored in order to save the reputation of the stars and risk of financial loss" (Alaimo 5).

Bollywood producers, on the other hand, could both rely on the existing Indian cultural ideal of collectivism and actively use it to their advantage. According to Alaimo, "Indian film was derived from its theatre traditions with themes of mysticism, fantasy, and gods…[L]acking [in films] was the sense of realism…[They] were boasted for their fantasy-like qualities and high levels of entertainment…" (4). Rachel Dwyer supports this in her book, *All you want is money, all you need is love: Sexuality and romance in modern India*, explaining that historically, Hindi cinema has portrayed a "collective fantasy, a utopian

solution to counteract anxieties…" (Dwyer 72). Relying on this collective, fantasy framework, Bollywood film producers in the 1940s and 50s publicized films using playback singers as having "multiple talents" (Alaimo 7); in other words, they projected an image of a utopian world of film production in which individuals possessing different talents came together to bring a single vision to life. The combination of this marketing strategy and the ideal of collectivism on which it rested led to greater acceptance of playback singing in India.

In this context, Indian playback singers, unlike their American counterparts, often received credit, recognition, and even immense fame. Lata Mangeshkar, for example, provided vocals for a film for the first time in 1942; according to Alaimo, "After the film's release, there were so many requests for the song on the radio that it eventually became known as Mangeshkar's own song" (8). Thus, Mangeshkar, who went on to record over 25,000 songs and continues to produce music today, did manage to maintain personal authenticity and identity. However, Mangeshkar's fame and voluminous discography also reveal her domination of the music scene in Indian cinema; an emphasis on sameness and authoritative authenticity precludes innovation and experimentation with new styles of music. Mangeshkar has become the standard, the most highly sought-after female voice in Bollywood (Alaimo 9). For decades, film audiences have expected to hear her voice – or at least voices that employ nearly identical musical styles and attempt to channel the "holy properties," in Adorno's words, of Mangeshkar's iconic voice – and producers have catered to this expectation. Indeed, the application of a single, classic voice to different characters in different films, "[i]nstead of appearing absurd…seems to provide a comforting sense of security" and contributes a collective voice to the fantasy world of Bollywood films (Kvetko 113).

For example, in the dance scene for the title song in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai,* the voice of Alka Yagnik is applied to both Anjali and Tina, two female characters who are in love with the same man: Rahul. The camera shifts back and forth between the two women, who are both dancing in faraway, fantasy settings – meadows, mountains, historical ruins – that separate the scene from the rest of the film's narrative. Both are lip-syncing the same song, sung, as mentioned above, by a single voice. Here, the use of a playback singer is glaringly transparent, yet the film was hugely successful and popular with audiences when it premiered in 1998. The use of playback was even more obvious when Rani Mukherjee (Tina) and Shah Rukh Khan (Rahul) "performed" a medley of film songs, including "Kuch Kuch Hota Hai," live in 2002 (Kumara). As the faces associated with the song, they lip-synced, giving the crowd the best of both worlds: flawless singing and attractive celebrities. Similarly, film stars Hrithik Roshan and Kareena Kapoor performed the song, "You Are My Sonia" from the top-grossing 2001 film "Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham," on a live stage (Irene2277); they even wore the exact same outfits that they had worn in the film, thus recreating the scene and meeting the audience's expectations. In staying true to the original sources from which the music came (films), both of these live performances demonstrate clearly the emphasis on authoritative authenticity in India and the commodification of both the actors and the singers' voices.

The situation is drastically different in the United States, where audiences vehemently express feelings of betrayal and disappointment when musicians lip-sync. This was certainly the case in the fall of 1990 when it was revealed that pop group Milli Vanilli, who had won a Grammy for Best New Artist earlier that year, hadn't sung any of the songs on their debut album. The backlash was fierce: the Grammy award was revoked (for the first time ever),

"[r]adio stations declared themselves 'Milli Vanilli Free'" (Meyer), and fans were outraged. In a *Washington Post* article published shortly after Milli Vanilli was exposed, Joel Achenbach wrote, "Any fool can see that this is part of some larger, uglier phenomenon, a deterioration of authenticity, a breakdown of the barrier between truth and illusion. Forget world hunger and global warming and war and disease and poverty. This is deeper, vaster, stranger: Reality Erosion" (Achenbach). Unlike Bollywood fans, Achenbach sees lip-syncing as dangerous and manipulative, as a "too-clever marketing scheme" (Achenbach), and as a sign of cultural degeneration – a problem that, in his view, is on par with war or poverty. This reaction can likely be attributed to the deception behind the Milli Vanilli scandal, and the deception itself – which rarely, if ever, occurs in Bollywood – can be seen as an attempt to satisfy audience expectations of personal authenticity.

The failure to demonstrate personal authenticity in the United States results in a substantial loss of credibility, while, in some cases, mediocre-but-authentic performances are praised. Discussing the possibility of a book deal for Milli Vanilli, Achenbach ends his *Washington Post* article on a bitter note: "Whether they will write [the book] themselves is not a great mystery" (Achenbach). Having already failed its audience, Milli Vanilli could no longer be trusted to produce any sort of authentic work. On the other hand, Johnny Depp's credibility as an actor was not shaken after a personally authentic, but less than perfect, performance in Sweeney Todd. According to one fan, "Depp sing-talks his way through the film and while his vocal skills aren't likely to land him a record contract, he does hold up admirably while tackling Sondheim's bizarre lyrics" (Murray 2011). Here there is a clear appreciation for Depp's personal authenticity even though, as in Bollywood, a playback singer could have provided stronger vocals without detracting from Depp's acting.

Despite all of these differences in ideology and practice, the music industry in India appears to be changing. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, after four decades of an economic policy of heavy government control and nonintervention, opened the country up to global – mostly Western – influence (Trautmann 206). This change, and the resulting growth of a consuming middle-class, seems to have inspired a subtle shift away from the collective. Though Bollywood's presence and influence in the music industry is still unrivaled, the era of post-liberalization has given rise to Indipop, a genre in which artist identity is marketed in much the same way as it is in the United States. Indipop artists emphasize their independence from the film industry and, accordingly, their freedom to create work that is not created for the (other-directed, collective) needs of a film but rather for their own individual expression (Kvetko 115).

Here there is a shift away from the collective fantasy that Bollywood continually produces; according to Peter Kvetko in his essay, "Private music: Individualism, authenticity and genre boundaries in the Bombay music industry," Indipop "purports to offer the vision of an authentic self and an alternative to the perceived escapist fantasy of Bollywood…[its] promoters and artists [emphasize] the creative mind of the individual. It is the persona of the singer, not the narrative context of the song that is for sale" (111). This "authentic self" (112) is depicted on Indipop album covers, which tend to present a close-up of the artist by him- or herself. Bollywood soundtracks, on the other hand, often present images of choreographed, collective dance scenes with popular actors as the focal point (Kvetko 120). Indipop, then, is a relatively new form of Indian music that is characterized by the promotion and commercialization of personal authenticity – of personal, unique, expressive identity.

In this context of increasing privatization and individualism, playback singers have begun to seek greater visibility and recognition. Though their presence and their role in the film industry is, as discussed earlier, acknowledged and credited, the level of fame that Lata Mangeshkar has acquired is not the norm for “faceless” playback singers. For example, playback singer Abhijeet Bhattacharya recently announced that he will no longer sing for prominent actor Shah Rukh Khan because he feels that the actor and the director of his recent films with Khan have not given him enough credit. His name appeared at the very end of the film credits, which most viewers never see (“Shah Rukh Khan- The uncrowned King of controversies”). Moreover, in August 2013, the Indian Singers Rights Association (ISRA) made a push for legislation securing royalties for playback singers every time their songs are used for commercial purposes. Voicing his support for this cause, singer S. P. Balasubramaniam said, “We are not fighters…We are artists and demanding what is long overdue to us. It is going to be a small sum that most of us would get as a recognition of our work” (Subramanian). Thus, rather than challenging the entire widely-accepted system of prerecording and lip-syncing, playback singers in contemporary, globalized India are seeking greater recognition of their identities as artists – of their personal authenticity.

Ultimately, attitudes toward lip-syncing in India and the U.S. appear to be closely related to cultural beliefs about identity and authenticity. These beliefs shape the ways in which music, musicians, and performers are commercialized. In consuming Bollywood’s collective fantasy and subscribing to its emphasis on authoritative authenticity, Bollywood filmgoers and listeners are paying for consistency and the highest possible level of entertainment, even when that requires a split between a talented voice and a talented performer. In “consuming” artists’ commercial personas along with their original music (their

personal authenticity), American listeners are paying for the "whole package" – a voice to match the performer. India's cultural beliefs about lip-syncing and authenticity allow for greater transparency and more (if not always enough) recognition for playback singers; however, they also inhibit artistic, personal creativity and innovation in both musical recording and performance. America's beliefs, on the other hand, force lip-syncing – an affront to personal authenticity – underground, but it never stays there for long; "scandals" occur often, and when they do, they are regarded with hostility and seen as signs of cultural deterioration. In both cases, however, the most highly-valued aspects of musical performance – the pairing of a talented voice with a celebrity persona, whether the two come from the same source or not – are commodified.

With the liberalization of the Indian economy came the development of a private, middle class culture that was, more than ever before, open to global influence. This created room for music, such as Indipop, that strays from the collective fantasy portrayed in Bollywood films, allowing for the kind of emphasis on individuality and personal expression that exists in the U.S. Many musicians want to create and perform their own music; others are content to write and sing songs for film as long as they are recognized more fully by the industry and by the public. Thus, although Indipop and other non-film music is certainly not, at this point, powerful enough to challenge Bollywood's domination of music in India, its emphasis on personal authenticity is gradually changing perceptions of music and identity. Such music is, in the words of Indipop singer Biddu, "a bridge between the east and west" (Kvetko 115).

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