

**FROM MADE IN INDIA TO MISS INDIA: READING GENDER, NATION  
AND LANGUAGE IN INDIAN POPULAR MUSIC OF THE 1990S**

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**Abstract**

My attempt in this paper would be to offer a close critical analysis of a set of three popular songs from the decade of the 1990s- Alisha Chinai's *Made in India* (1995), Mehnaz Hoosein's *Miss India* (1996) and *I love my India* (1997) which is a popular patriotic song from the Hindi film *Pardes*. The larger intention would be to examine how the musical and visual narratives of the song videos open up a space where the politics of gender, nation/national identity and language get intertwined in a complex network of meanings and representations.

The decade of the 1990s witnessed a drastic transformation of Indian popular culture especially in the realm of popular music, cinema, media and television culture. My attempt in this paper would be to offer a close critical analysis of a set of three songs which belong to this particular decade that includes Alisha Chinai's *Made in India* (1995), Mehnaz Hoosein's *Miss India* (1996) and *I love my India* (1997) which is a popular patriotic song from the Hindi film *Pardes*. The larger intention would be to examine how the musical and visual narratives of the song videos open up a space where the politics of gender, nation/national identity and language get intertwined in a complex network of meanings and representations.

As one can clearly see how each of the songs listed out invoke the concept of the Indian nation and this process of imagining and representing the nation becomes ideologically enmeshed in a politics of gender and language. At the same time the gendering of the nation takes on divergent and multiple configurations. The music videos, for instance, reveal how the Indian nation can be mapped simultaneously through the images of the married upper caste/class Hindu woman; the archetypal Mother; the newly modernized and/or Westernized Indian woman and also as the muscular/ virile young Indian man. While the nation can be both masculinized and feminized, it is interesting that the feminization of the nation can occur in multiple yet contradictory and conflictual ways. But the question arises as to how one explains and locates the

forces behind this fascinating yet complex negotiation between Indian popular music of the 1990s and the cultural representations of nation, nationality and national identity. This would require us to contextualize the popular culture scenario within the economic, social and political climate of the 1990s.

The year 1991 witnessed economic liberalization in India which also coincided with the advent of satellite television bringing in channels such as MTV and Channel V. With the cassette revolution simultaneously changing the face of Indian music industry, the audiences were exposed to huge heterogeneity of genres of music such as *Indipop*, devotional music, *bhangra*, *ghazal* and such others that challenged the sustained dominance of film music (Kasbekar 24). Channel V offered the stage for the emergence of *Indipop* music which can be described as a “modern, urban, cosmopolitan music” embodying a fusion of “Indian music combined with western, African, samba, and other rhythms to create exciting new sounds” (Kasbekar 21).

As Vamsee Juluri observes, ever since its inception in 1994 Channel V had followed Zee TV’s principle of “Indianization “ and created a cultural space that would be “simultaneously global and Indian” (Juluri 34). In other words, the popularity of Indian pop music and Channel V’s celebratory ‘Hinglish’ character becomes symptomatic of the process of cultural globalization or rather ‘glocalization’ in India. While Channel V self-consciously catered to a “youth culture centred around television, music and the urban middle class audience” at the same time it also used the strategy of localization to portray its youth culture as an expression of “stylish nationalism” (Juluri 34). This new sense of national identity then gets to be defined through a principle of consumption (Juluri 35). So considering such a context, it becomes clear as to how a sense of new nationalism gets connected to popular music in India via the complex workings of cultural globalization and economic liberalization.

I now move on to the discussion of the three music videos to further elaborate on the intertwining of globalization, nation and gender. Among the videos that I have chosen, two of them belong to the *Indipop* genre while the third is a popular Bollywood song. In fact, the video narratives multiply the popularity of these songs even as the singer or the lyrics draw popular attention. Alisha Chinai’s *Made in India* released in 1995 is seen as a landmark moment in the history of *Indipop* music. And as Juluri notes, it is because of the grand success of this particular video that *Indipop* “gained visibility and a market presence only in the 1990s” (Juluri 40). But what makes this video so phenomenal becomes an interesting question to be explored. As I would argue, *Made in India* offers a socio-cultural and ideological site where in a gendered nation can be imagined through the theme of romantic union of an Oriental princess (played by Alisha) and her Indian suitor (played by the model Milind Soman). Chinai sang a modified version of the song a year later at the Miss World pageant in Bangalore in 1996 as a symbolic announcement of India’s supremacy in the new global market.

The music video of *Made in India* uses the fairy tale narrative where Alisha, an Oriental princess in her exotic palace rejects suitors who come from various parts of the world and finally goes to a sorcerer who shows her glimpses of a muscular, charming man. Later on, this same person arrives in a box labeled ‘Made in India’ and she marries him eventually. The lyrics are in Hindi except for the main English slogan as sung by the chorus- “Made in India”. It is interesting how the video portrays markers of Indian culture especially through the use of animal imagery. The royally clad elephant, the tiger (being the national animal of India) and the snake evoke the image of Indian exoticism and also underscore their centrality in Hindu iconography. The

recurrent presence of a Kathakali dancer who evokes *bhayanaka* rasa (emotion of terror) in the video along with the different snippets of dance movements from the Indian classical tradition (we also see a man performing *yogic asanas*) serves to represent the cultural tradition of India.

It is interesting to note that the opening shot of the video shows the page of a fairy tale book wherein it is written- “*Once upon a time far far away in the land of Qashab. There lived a princess named Alisha.*” But as the narrative unfolds, Alisha’s portrayal as a princess is marked by deep ambiguities. She is both orientalized and westernized at the same time. While she is modeled on conventional femininity, she also acts as a desiring agent seeking her love. She embodies a cosmopolitan spirit visually evident in how easily she can switch over costumes of different countries. Yet she is surrounded by the sights and sounds of Hindu culture as manifested for instance, in the figure of the dancing Rama. However there are certain moments in the video itself where those sacrosanct symbols of Indian culture get destabilized. There is a scene where Alisha sees her would-be Indian suitor flexing his muscular body on the magical smoke. The sexual energy that the vision creates is visually articulated through the restless movement of the snake and the intense facial expressions of the Kathakali dancer. However, the video finally ends up normalizing and sanitizing this excess of female sexuality through her incorporation into the ritualized Hindu marriage.

The central tension in the narrative is created between “*duniya*” (the world) and India in the search for romantic love. As Alisha sings out - “*Dekhi hain saari duniya / Japan se leke Russia/ Australia se leke America*” meaning she has travelled across the globe and embodies an international and global spirit. The princess desires to marry a man with a good heart, irrespective of his colour and appearance- “*Tan gora ho ya kala/ Par ho saccha dilwala*”. As the lyrics already anticipate and the video eventually reveals in its climax, she finally finds her ideal lover and who at the same time happens to be an Indian. At the same time there are moments of disjunction and irony between the lyrics and the video as for instance, we clearly see how the facial expressions of the Princess change every time a suitor arrives and she is terribly repulsed when she sees the suitor from Africa. In other words, the corporeality and hierarchy of racial identities is ideologically endorsed in the narrative even while it celebrates the notion of an authentic Indianness.

The final scene in the video which makes use of the box imagery demands critical attention. It is through the figure of the Indian male in the box whereby an ideology of sexual economy gets conflated with political economy. The hero then symbolizes a Hinduized masculinity of the Indian nation whose romantic and matrimonial victory becomes emblematic of India’s increasing visibility and prominence in the global market. In other words, we are taken to an “imagined marriage bazaar” where Indian culture comes across as a competitor in an international/global marketplace in the true spirit of liberalization (Juluri 101). I endorse Juluri’s argument about how this music video also engages in a self-Orientalizing of Indian culture through the use of magical, supernatural, religious and traditional imagery and tropes. (Juluri 107). And one should also note that the video does not portray a larger “Indian” culture but rather equates the nation with a particular code of Hindu classical culture that is presumed to be visually appealing to a global audience.

Juluri aptly observes through her analysis of audience response that it actually represents Indian culture in the manner that “it is being represented to a global audience” (Juluri 107). This argument becomes clear when placed in the context of Alisha’s performance at the Miss World

pageant in Bangalore. At the event Alisha sang a modified version of the song that was more 'Hinglish' in its content and spirit while the entire performance was embellished with exotic, ethnic and classical rhythms of Indian dance forms. The opening English lines of this new version mark a significant departure from the music video- "From the land of the rising sun/ Am in search of my true loved one/From Africa, Australia, America." She has now become a quintessential Indian princess, unlike in the video, who seeks a lover from distant lands. It is also indicative of how Alisha Chinai, the pop singer has also acquired a cult status and whose modern and cosmopolitan femininity is made to represent Indian culture at the beauty pageant which in itself becomes a celebration and exhibition of transnational femininities.

The English segment of the revised lyrics allows the space for explicit self-orientalization. Lines such as "all I want is a heart that is Made in India" or "make my dream come true in the mystic land of India" highlight the emotional, cultural and ideological representation of India on an international forum. Hindi part of the lyrics create, as they do in the music video, imagined binary between "Hindustani" and "Englishtani", and between "Duniya" understood as world/global and "India". Alisha's song nevertheless remains problematic as it may affirm certain First World stereotypes about India while it simultaneously conveys deeply ambivalent message to the Indian audience.

Just as Alisha's *Made in India* becomes a site where *Indipop* and the beauty pageant come together, Mehnaz Hoosein's debut song *Banoongi Main Miss India* (trans. "I will become Miss India") glorifies the grand pageant. Released in 1996 concurring with the Bangalore pageant, the song found itself in yet another co-incidence as a year later in 1997 Diana Hayden had won the Miss World title. Mehnaz received instant fame as her song captured the spirit of the times as the beauty pageant made it possible to imagine a new figure of the Indian woman who could represent the globalized nation. The music video that popularized Mehnaz's song also deserves critical attention. The short narrative depicts how a girl from a humble background who does menial job in a fashion house manages to win the Miss India title. As the video opens, we are taken inside the world of the fashion house with all its glitter and glamour, with models busy doing their make-up and walking the ramp. There are snapshots of newspaper headlines about a "French designer in town to select Indian model", thereby indicating how the pageant has a global context. The girl compares herself with the other models as she sings - "*Main sundar na sahi/ magar chehra mera kuch bura nahin/dil saccha hain mera...*" - meaning that though she is not beautiful, her looks are decent and she has an honest heart. Later on, an elderly designer in the fashion house who is probably her father helps her in getting a make-over and hence transformed like a fairy tale princess she walks on ramp and wins the Miss India crown. This brief yet interesting narrative based on the cult of the pageant engages with gendered femininity in complex ways.

The lyrics of the song construct an imagined figure of the new Indian woman as someone who embodies an ideal femininity by combining elegance with a morally upright character. And this imagined femininity is then made to represent the newly, globalized India. And as we see in the video, the figure of Miss India also becomes an emblem of the confident, determined and emancipated woman. The use of the father-daughter pair in the video becomes interesting for it combines the personal with the political. It creates a fantasy figure of the 'new daughter' that culture globalization has made possible for the middle class family. Equipped with an ideal beauty, it is now possible for her to command social prestige and also to represent the nation. In

other words, the beauty pageant brings together a gendered femininity and an imagined nation. However this gendering politics of the beauty pageant has been widely critiqued from the feminist standpoint.

In her essay “New Patriotisms: The Beauty Queen and the Bomb”, Kumkum Sangari observes how the popularity of the contests during the 1990s marks a “third-worldization of the international contests” that coincides with their downgrading in the First World on account of both feminist protests and their rejection by metropolitan high culture (Sangari 154). Sangari also outlines the ambivalence in the conservative reactions to the pageant. While the Hindu right led government saw the winners of beauty contests as exemplars of Indian woman, the more militant wings such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal vehemently opposed the event as an “economic and cultural invasion” by drawing a binary between the Hindu and the Western woman (Sangari 157-58). In other words, femininity becomes the site of national and cultural identities.

By juxtaposing beauty contest with India’s nuclear weaponization, Sangari argues how both beauty and the bomb get “narrativized as fairy tales of globalization” whereby the nation-state can be simultaneously feminized and masculinized in relation to the West (Sangari 162). As we see in Mehnaz’s song, there is an attempt to refashion a new womanhood around the cult of beauty. But paradoxically this beauty gets embedded in a particular codification of the female body within the fashion industry. Mehnaz’s song and the video then become ironical as the girl wins the crown when she accepts the inadequacy of her looks and goes for a makeover that is made possible by her father’s access to the cosmetic resources of the fashion industry. Sangari aptly observes how the agency of the female contestant in reality gets predicated on the inadequacies of the body and involves a process of self-objectification. The beauty queen gets further inscribed in a political economy as she embodies a fetishized national identity in the context of transnational globalization. Her beauty represents as Sangari puts it, “the benign dream of the neo-liberal, the enticing advertisement for globalization” (Sangari 164).

From our analysis of Alisha’s *Made in India* and Mehnaz Hoosein’s *Miss India*, it is clear as to how the *Indipop* genre becomes expressive of the globalizing ethos of the 1990s where different narratives of imagining the gendered nation are presented before the audience. At the same time, it is crucial to note the politics of language as it becomes a mediator between these cultural texts and the audience in a context that is often termed postcolonial. For example, Alisha’s *Made in India*, especially the bilingual version, reveals how both Hindi and English can work in harmony to establish the cultural and ideological themes. The use of Hinglish then destabilizes the conventional polarity between Hindi and English, an extended ideological opposition between Hindi/India and English/Non-India/West. The synthesis and reconciliation of the two languages especially in the realm of popular culture marks a paradigm shift from the colonial to the postcolonial and finally to the global. Harish Trivedi labels Hinglish as the “globalized Hybrid” and sees it as part of a larger trajectory of how Hindi language has evolved through the twentieth century in India- as “Brajbhāsa to Khari Boli through Hindustani now to Hinglish” (Trivedi 981-83).

In the globalized and globalizing context, Hindi is re-harnessed to foster a new sense of national identity. The use of Hindi in *Made in India* and *Miss India* adds to the cultural authenticity of their narratives, it promises that *Indipop* music is committed to the nation even while it is shaped by a cosmopolitan and global ethos. Hindi also ensures that *Indipop* can cater

especially to the Indian middle class audience by celebrating certain images, fantasies and stereotypes about bourgeoisie life such as the lavish wedding in *Made in India*, or winning a beauty contest in *Miss India*.

I would now like to shift the focus from Indipop music to the film song genre by offering a close reading of *I Love my India*, a popular song from the Bollywood film *Pardes* released in 1997. 1997 becomes a significant year of that decade as it marks the fiftieth anniversary of India's Independence and this national euphoria becomes visible in A.R. Rahman's hit song *Vande Mataram*. *Pardes* also thematizes the dual nature of the decade where there is a renewed nationalism on the one hand and globalization on the other. When counterposed against the songs by Alisha and Mehnaz, *I Love my India* reveals yet another different configuration of the nation-language-gender relationship. In this context, it is to be noted that during the 1990s Indipop and film music become two rival genres in the Bombay music industry. As Peter Kvetko argues, "while filmi music and imagery evokes collective experiences and sensibilities, Indipop articulates an individualist sensibility more in line with the era of neo-liberalism and global capitalism" (Kvetko 112). But despite their differences both these genres engage with the imagined nation.

The film *Pardes* (tr. *Foreign Land*) revolves around the female protagonist Ganga who has an arranged marriage to an American Indian and later when the abusive husband attempts to rape her, she is rescued by her true lover. Behind this simple melodramatic narrative of a failed cross-cultural marriage and romantic union, there lies a deeper ideological investment in nationality where the foreign land becomes a site of threat, a danger to the purity of Indian culture as embodied in Ganga's (who is named after the Hindu Goddess) chaste femininity. But my interest lies in the song track *I Love my India* that appears early in the film to anticipate the later events and themes. The song glorifies the nation and the scene focuses on the two central characters- Kishorilal (Ganga's would be father-in-law) who embodies a nostalgic return to the homeland and Ganga who embodies the nation itself. The vibrant scene also shows a group of children who are westernized but are initiated into patriotic sentiments.

Through the use of 'Hinglish', the song track engages with the sacred and the secular, with tradition and modernity in complex ways. It is also interesting to study the scenic presentation of the song in conjunction with the lyrics. As the song is about to begin, we are given a panoramic view of a hillock and a river with a priest offering his early morning prayers. Then a group of children are shown singing on Western musical beats in a typical nursery rhyme fashion- "*Hara Rama/Hara Krishna*", "*We want to go...America.*" The interaction between the younger and the older generation becomes the central idea in the song as also in the cinematic narrative. The children are made to represent a newly modernized, hybridized and globalizing culture where Hinduism can blend with Western music. But as the musical narrative unfolds, Kishorilal takes on the role of a traditional patriarch and instructs the children about the cultural heritage of India.

The song has a recurring catchphrase- "*Ye duniya ek dulhan/ dulhan ke maathe ki bindiya/ yeh mera India/ I love my India*" meaning that the world resembles a "bindi" meaning the red dot that decorates the forehead of a Hindu bride. Through the poetic use of extended metaphor, the sacred ornament of the Hindu bride is made to represent the cartographic model of the globe that maps the world and the geopolitical space of India contained within it. Sumathi Ramaswamy offers a sophisticated analysis of how both in the colonial and postcolonial India, nationalist ideology deployed the globe, the map, and the female body to "visually map India through the

technology of the bodyscape” (Ramaswamy 156). Ramaswamy investigates how the nation is symbolically represented through the mythical figure of Bharat Mata modeled on the Hindi Goddesses and the way visual representations superimpose her body onto the official map of India. In other words, she fills “the empty social and cartographic space” with her sacred body (Ramaswamy 175).

Coming back to the song, the feminization of the nation on the figure of the Hindu married woman entails a gender politics. The notion of “India” as it celebrates then gets allied with a traditional, Hindu hetero-patriarchal India where there is an ideological silencing of other religious, communal and ethnic identities. Turning again to the scenic representation, Ganga hereafter becomes the focus of the song as she sings and dances against the background of the lofty hills. Both topography and Ganga’s body get juxtaposed in a symbolic representation of the nation. Ganga affirms the stereotypical image of the ideal and traditional Hindu woman who charts her trajectory from being a chaste submissive daughter to a dutiful wife after marriage.

It is noteworthy that Ganga’s femininity also represents a typically lush green, rural landscape. In other words, the song creates an opposition between the rural and the urban, privileging the rural as the site of purity and tradition. As the song moves towards its closing section, there is a shift in locale and Ganga is now placed in the interior space of her house where the entire family sings the anthem. So her femininity mediates between the sacred (rural) geography and the traditional joint family, the two sites that culturally define India. Ganga’s body also gets juxtaposed with the sacred and mythical body of the river Ganga as we are given snapshots of pilgrimage sites that stand calmly by the flowing river. The images re-create the image of India as a land of mysticism and mythology where ecology and religion can come together. But once again it is sacred Hinduism that becomes the bearer of a religious nationalism. The lyrics also invoke the classical tradition of Hindustani music - “*jab cheda balhar kisi ne / jhoomke sawwan aaya / Aag laga di pani mein jab/ Deepak raag sunaya.*” meaning how ragas (notes) such as “balhaar” (or malhar) and “deepak” of classical music are believed, according to the legends in medieval India, to have magical powers of bringing rainfall or to create fire. This again involves a self-orientalizing of India, a tendency that was seen in Alisha’s music video as well.

At the same time, the song also seeks to portray a secular impulse as evident in lines such as “*hum apne bhagwaan ko bhi kehte hain baasuriwala*”- meaning “we call our God a flute-player.” This is an allusion to the Bhakti cult of Lord Krishna whose image as a lover and a flute player serves to domesticate and humanize his divinity. He becomes an artist figure and given that in popular mythology the young Krishna is also imagined as a cowherd, there is a celebration of a secular, non-hierarchical and rural ethos through his image. But the use of the flute player trope in this song is also marked by ambivalence. Krishna remains a Hindu divinity nevertheless and becomes the origin of the larger Vaishnavite ideology in India. If the song claims to represent India, the religion it represents is Hinduism which then goes against the very secular worldview that Indian culture seeks to promote. This recurrent engagement with Hinduism can be placed in a wider context.

Arvind Rajagopal in his analysis of advertisement and television politics observes how popular culture in the 1990s exhibits a strong investment in Hinduism which can be linked to the political ideology of the right wing government. Rajagopal outlines how advertisements deploy Hindu images and culture in a larger economy of consumption through the elaborate depiction of

festivals, the invocation of high cultural traditions and finally through the use of religious fetishes and symbols of auspiciousness (Rajagopal 65-66). Even in the case of popular music, we have seen how the nation is represented through an essential Hindu narrative. What is also significant about *I Love my India* is the way it draws a connection between the language of Hindi and Hinduism or rather a subtextual ideology of Hindutva. When the children begin the sequence with their Anglicized “Hare Rama”, traditional Hinduism gets disrupted and so the later narrative has to establish normative Hinduism through the domination of Hindi. As the song portrays, the interaction between Hindi and English then becomes an inter-generational contract, the Westernized younger generation has to accommodate a sense of cultural traditionalism and rootedness that Hindi embodies.

To conclude, we have seen how *Made in India*, *Miss India* and *I Love my India* mark out three different moments in the history of popular music of the 1990s. In the ideological gendering of the nation, their paths both converge and diverge. While Alisha and Mehnaz offer paradigms for a new cosmopolitan, modern femininity to emerge, the film song on the contrary extols the image of the traditional Hindu, married woman. While they represent different possibilities of imagining the nation in the context of globalization- be it masculinity, the beauty crown or marital conjugality- they all subscribe to the normative codifications of the body, especially the female body around the questions of beauty, conjugality and sexuality. And finally all the three songs engage with language in complex ways. While ‘Hinglish’ emerges as the new expression of a globalized India, Hindi retains its position as the site of national and patriarchal ideological constructions as seen in the case of the film song. On the whole, the three songs offer a framework that reveals how gender, nation and language keep changing their texture on the musical beats of globalization.

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