
New Media and Folk Music in Rural India

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a preliminary ethnographic study of folk music practices in rural Malwa, Madhya Pradesh (India), specifically on the impact of new media on the production and dissemination of this music. Our findings show that new media can lead to increased listening and appreciation of folk music, but that better mechanisms are required for remunerating and recognizing folk artists themselves.

Keywords

Entertainment, Ethnography

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5 Arts and Humanities, H.5.1 Multimedia Information Systems

General Terms

Human Factors

Introduction

In rural India, oral folk music traditions have been used for generations, to bring about common understanding and awareness among listeners. Lent's study [1] on folk media in the developing world shows that this can serve as a counter force to the constant stream of urban media to rural domains, empowering and increasing the voice of marginalized communities.

In recent decades, production and dissemination of folk music in India has evolved considerably with the advent of cassettes, CDs, and mp3s, and of advanced low-cost recording technology in general. Not only have these changes affected existing listening communities, but folk artists have also been able to use technologies to reach wider and more geographically distributed audiences. In this paper, we look at the evolving relationship between new media adoption and folk music culture in rural India, focusing on the region of Malwa in central India.

Background

This paper summarizes the results of field work conducted in collaboration with the Kabir Project [2], based at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology at Bangalore (India). The Kabir Project has worked extensively with folk musicians in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The goal of this collaboration was to observe folk music communities in these regions, and to study the role that new media plays in the local production and dissemination of their music.

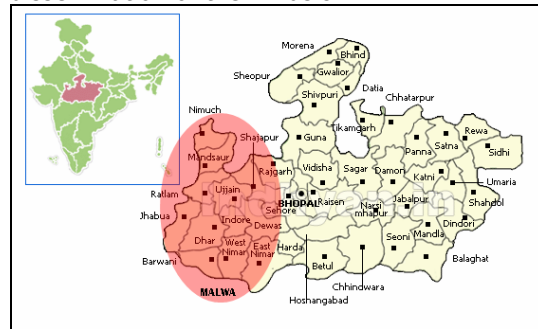


Figure 1: In the central state of Madhya Pradesh, Malwa includes all districts to the west of Bhopal, the state capital.

The first phase of this study involved exploratory visits to the villages of Pugal and Chhatangarh in Rajasthan, and Luniyakhedi in Madhya Pradesh. This phase included participant observations and informal interviews with the folk music community. Our initial findings highlighted that new media use was more prevalent in the Madhya Pradesh region of Malwa where Luniyakhedi is located, than in rural Rajasthan where infrastructure, including electricity, is more limited. The second phase of the study, as a result, focused on the Malwa region. This paper primarily focuses on our subsequent findings in Malwa. Our methodology is detailed in the following section.

Study Methodology

The fieldwork for our study included participant observations in small and large village concert settings, a focus group discussion, as well as semi-structured interviews with folk artists, members of the listening community, and small business owners who distribute music in villages and neighboring small towns.

Participant Observations

Participant observations were conducted during several *satsangs* – regular, informal gatherings of villagers including performers and a varied audience. In these *satsangs*, musical performances are typically interspersed with discussion of song lyrics and their varied interpretations. These gatherings are organized either in the (small) houses of the villagers, or in shared community spaces within the village. The attendees are mostly middle-aged with a fair representation of village elders who actively participate in ensuing discussions. Children, youth, and women are occasionally, but not always, present.



Figure 2: Women perform as well, though more occasionally than male artists.

Other participant observations included one small and one large concert setting. The former was organized in a house with approx. forty villagers gathered around to hear 8-10 artist groups perform in succession. The latter was organized in a large tent outdoors and included a night of performances by various performers/groups. While the former type of gathering is more frequent, these are attended primarily by local villagers and last generally only a couple of hours. At the larger gatherings, villagers attend from far and wide and spend almost twenty-four hours at a stretch listening to music.

Focus Group Session

The goal of the focus group discussion, held in Dewas – a small town in Malwa, was to understand music sharing practices within the village community. It included folk artists, active listening members of the community, and a representative from Ekalavya, a local non-profit that uses folk music for spreading awareness

of social issues in villages [5]. The discussion was hosted by Ekalavya in their Dewas office.

Interviews

To obtain further detail, we conducted semi-structured interviews with folk artists, listening members, and small business owners involved in music production and dissemination. The objectives of these interviews was to gain an understanding of their respective backgrounds, how their singing/listening/sales practices have evolved with the advent of new technology, and how they view this influx of new media and its impact on folk music.

Folk Music in Malwa

Folk traditions have been passed down for generations, forming an integral part of village life across India. This is especially true of Malwa, where folk music concerts are held regularly in villages, and villagers congregate in large numbers to attend. In one such annual event attended by the first author in Luniyakhedi, organized by Prahlad Tipanya – a popular local artist, approximately 3,000 attendees came from neighboring villages to listen to more than twenty different groups perform. While these large-scale concerts take place once every quarter on average, smaller-scale concerts are far more frequent and take place 3 or 4 times a month in many communities. We found that the artists we interviewed performed roughly fifteen days in a month on average. These events keep interest in folk music alive, while also offering communities a regular cultural meeting point.

In an otherwise caste-based society, these gatherings are often attended by villagers across the socio-economic spectrum. They are also commonly used for

propagating messages of awareness and empowerment, especially directed towards women and children. Folk traditions involve the singing of spiritual poetry, which provides a code of ethics for singers and listeners alike to live their lives and educate their children. As a spiritual practice, many villagers listen to folk music daily and at home. This has been facilitated by the advent of modern recording and playback technology.



Figure 3: A house concert where more than 40 people are gathered in a small indoor setting.

Technology Use in Malwa

Mobile phones are increasingly being adopted across rural India, with 19 per cent of families owning a phone as of October 2009 [3]. An informal survey conducted in Luniyakhedi and nearby villages in Malwa indicated that 80% of the households own televisions, roughly 50% own VCD/DVD players and nearly 100% own a radio. All families were said to have access to at least one mobile phone.

While cable TV and radio both have considerable coverage, and relatively new computers are available in technology shops in the town, the Internet is still not widely accessed in villages. However, during our fieldwork, we observed a few educated individuals running small businesses that focus on providing technology services to less savvy rural folk. Villagers usually listen to and obtain electronic media through these intermediaries, who charge their customers a small fee for each product or service.

Often phone and airtime retail outlets that flourished due to the widespread adoption of mobile phones have, over the last 3-5 years, evolved to address the rising demand for electronic audio and video content in neighboring villages, including folk and film music recordings. This increase in demand is a direct result of the increased availability of inexpensive TVs and VCD players, as well as the audio playback and ringtone capabilities of mobile phones that villagers were observed to be making frequent use of.

New Media Use for Folk Music

Cassettes were the first affordable sources of recorded music that allowed villagers to listen to music in personal spaces, at a time of their choosing, instead of attending live concert performances [4]. Our interviews reinforced that cheap audio cassettes were largely responsible for generating a more regular and widespread audience for local folk music.

More recently, small businesses have erupted in villages, marketing recorded music in the form of CDs, VCD/DVDs, and digital audio/video clips downloadable directly onto mobile phones. These businesses either use existing recordings, or attend concerts to make

new recordings of live performances (proceeds from which are generally not shared with the artists). The business owners we interviewed explained that they also obtained a large portion of their media libraries through connections with businesses in larger towns of the region, such as Indore and Ujjain. These businesses also augment their collections by downloading their customers' CDs and music libraries, again, without compensation. They package these recordings into collections and sell them to villagers for a small fee (starting at approximately Rs. 50 / USD 1). Villagers usually do not mind making small and frequent payments for music (folk and otherwise).

Using these technologies, more villagers are able and can afford to listen to music in the privacy of their homes. Mobile phones have rapidly become the primary means to store and listen to music and watch video clips. They are also used as recording devices. VCDs are also popular for listening and viewing. Our interviews indicated that some villagers spend 1.5 hours daily, listening to recorded content. As a result, folk music listening has become even more pervasive than before. Folk tunes can be heard playing in the marketplace; individuals often set these tunes as their mobile ringtones; women listen to them as they go about their household duties, etc. Radio stations and cable channels also broadcast folk music, although they have less coverage in terms of listeners. This could be because there is no local radio station; the nearest one is at Indore – the largest city in Malwa. Mobile phones and CDs are also much more convenient, allowing people to listen at a time and place of their choosing.

Future Work

Media piracy is rampant in Malwa (and throughout India), with some artists often making little or no money from the sale of recorded music. One possibility is allowing artists to record and distribute music themselves; given that the technology needed to do so is becoming cheaper and more accessible. In the future, we plan to develop new online / offline platforms allowing rural artists to record, market, and distribute their work to local retailers, where they receive some payment.

We will also explore alternate systems of content sharing and distribution that result in better remuneration for artists. In other contexts, the Fair Trade [6] movement has provided marginalized producers with a chance to market products to premium overseas markets. This ideology could be adapted to provide folk musicians in rural India a similar chance to access increased revenues. Gift economy-based solutions such as Magnatune [7] have, on a smaller scale, also been successful, by allowing customers to decide how much to pay for a product, in the process directing 50% of the revenues to the artists. The first author is involved in *Ektara* – another gift economy-based social enterprise aimed at providing a platform for underprivileged artists across the developing world to market their music to a worldwide audience.

Conclusion

In this study, we have presented our observations of local practices for listening to and creating folk music in the villages of Malwa, and how the adoption of new media has affected these practices. The last few years have seen the remarkable growth of several small

businesses involved in the production and dissemination of local music, which has resulted in increased access to and appreciation for this music. In the future we plan to build new platforms increasing artists' access to these emerging value chains. We also plan to conduct more ethnographic studies with communities in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and other parts of Madhya Pradesh to better understand the evolving impact of new media on folk music production and listening across several locations in India.

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