

Meri Awaaz Suno

Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema

Abstract

“Meri Awaaz Suno: Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema” analyzes the theme song of the Bollywood blockbuster Lagaan (2001) to understand how playback singers’ voices become sites for the construction of national identity. Lata Mangeshkar monopolized female playback singing for over four decades, and is known as the ideal voice of Indian femininity. The Lagaan theme song juxtaposes a saccharine, ultra-feminine Mangeshkaresque voice with two female choruses—one sensual and aggressive, the other light and airy. These varied female voices embody a range of sexual, national, and racial meanings, evoking an India that seems inclusive and progressive. Yet within Lagaan’s utopian nation, and certainly within the film industry and broader social milieu, women with “ethnic” and sexually provocative voices are often deemed dangerous and are disallowed from speaking (or singing) for the nation. The social norms embedded in Lagaan’s female singing voices thus reveal the limits that Hindi film music imposes on the voice of the nation, and vice versa.

“The very heart of India throbs in your voice,” wrote poet and music director Naushad of Lata Mangeshkar, the most famous singer in the history of Indian film (quoted in Bhimani 1995, 16).¹ Cast in the form of a ghazal (lyric Urdu poetry), Naushad’s tribute to the legendary singer may be unique in its style and economy of expression, but the sentiment it express-

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es is not his alone. Three generations of Indians know Lata Mangeshkar as the quintessential and ideal voice of Indian femininity. But what does it mean to claim that a physical attribute such as voice represents the essence of India, and Indian womanhood specifically? How can a single voice—the voice not of a political leader or public activist, but of a film singer—stand for the hopes, dreams, and ideals of 900 million citizens?

In this essay, I listen to how female playback singers' voices—Mangeshkar's, but also more contemporary voices—become sites for the construction of national identity. I first chart how Indian film audiences have historically received various singing voices. Mangeshkar's virtual monopoly over the playback industry between the 1950s and early 1990s provides the basis for understanding how questions of morality, nationhood, and modernity were, and continue to be, mapped onto women's voices.² Next, using the theme song of the hit Hindi film *Lagaan* (Land Tax, 2001) as my primary example, I consider the following questions: What kinds of citizens are interpellated in “Choote Lagaan”? What ideas about femininity are performed in the singing voices of *Lagaan*'s leading women, and what do these voices reveal about the gender, racial, ethnic, caste, and class composition of the nation? Does the India that emerges in the interstices of these voices fit the vision of national community promoted by the rest of the movie? Finally, what relationships do the cultural meanings embedded in playback voices bear to India's sociopolitical context, and how might these meanings change when Hindi film music travels beyond India's borders?

My reading of “Choote Lagaan” suggests that the juxtaposition of the voices for the characters Mai, Elizabeth, and Gowri lays bare three modes of female participation in the nation: as national symbol, as benevolent and supportive outsider, and as active, politically involved citizen. The vastly different vocal timbres and styles assigned to each of these characters speak to differences in their positions and roles within the national family. We learn to distinguish among different women, only some of whom can epitomize India and truly participate in the national community. Within the seductive voices of the women in *Lagaan* lurks a vehemently nationalist and religious agenda, one that is only partially revealed in the visuals and narrative of the movie.

In pointing thus to the subtle and invisible ways in which systems of inclusion and exclusion operate, I argue for a sustained critique of the politics of film music. The attractiveness of music, its subliminal impact,

and its putative ability to transcend all manner of difference often disguise the sociopolitical implications of this wildly popular cultural form.³ This essay seeks to broaden the purview of film and postcolonial studies—areas of inquiry that assume the primacy of images and texts in the cultural transmission of ideas—and account for more widespread, arguably more potent, evocations of embodiment and national belonging. Bringing feminist music analysis to bear on Hindi cinema, “*Meri Awaaz Suno*” (“Listen to My Voice”) also calls for the inclusion of vocality in theories of the body. I demonstrate how vocal music works, in conjunction with but also independent of the cinematic narrative, to embody and disembody the nation.

History of Playback Singing

To understand how singing voices register to Indian audiences, we first need to consider the history of playback singing in Hindi cinema. By playback singing, I am referring to the standard Bollywood practice of having professional vocalists lend their voices for song sequences. Unlike in Western musicals, in Hindi films actors do not sing their own lines.⁴ Trained singers record songs in advance; the songs are then “played back” on the set and actors lip-synch to these recordings. Playback singing is such a vital aspect of commercial cinema today that few realize that, in the early years of the industry, actors were expected to sing their own songs. Since Indian cinema drew inspiration from various folk traditions, in which music, dance, drama, and storytelling intertwined, song sequences have always been an integral part of films. *Alam Ara* (1931), the first Indian talkie, included about twelve songs. Other films of that era contained up to twenty songs and were billed as “all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing” extravaganzas (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 69). A marketable singing voice was thus a necessity for actors in the 1930s (“Evolution of the Hindi Film Song—Part 1” 2002). Given the limitations of available technology, the “singing stars” (as actor-singers were then called) had to record each song in one continuous shot, standing close to the orchestra with microphones hidden strategically in the set.

The introduction of the playback technique in 1935 enabled radical improvements in visual and musical choreography (“Evolution of the Hindi Film Song —Part 2” 2003). Music directors were able to compose longer,

more complicated pieces using bigger orchestras, which in turn led to more jobs for musicians. Actors could move around more freely and naturally during filming, and singing was no longer a prerequisite for an acting career. At first playback singers were chosen on the basis of a perceived match between their voices and those of the actors. Such “voice casting” eventually faded away in the late 1940s and early 1950s when, due to a specific conglomeration of social, economic, and political factors, a handful of singers came to dominate the industry (Majumdar 2001, 164–68).

Prior to the 1950s, Hindi films were largely a product of a studio system akin to that of Hollywood. By the end of World War II, however, major financing for films came from wealthy individuals seeking to protect and multiply their illegal wartime profits. To ensure box-office success, these independent producers were willing to pay star actors huge amounts of money to act in their films. Stars in turn began freelancing, often signing on to multiple films at once and drastically hiking up their fees. This “risk-free” production system also applied to playback singers, who were becoming stars in their own right (Majumdar 2001, 170).⁵

Equally important to the history of playback singing is the mass migration and civil war that accompanied Partition.⁶ Many talented artists moved to Bombay in search of work, and the city fast became the new Mecca of the film industry. However, Hindi cinema also lost luminaries like the actor-singer Noorjehan, who migrated to Pakistan. These changes in the social organization of the film industry enabled a few singers, most notably Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle, Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, and Kishore Kumar to establish what critic Neepa Majumdar calls a “voice monopoly” (Majumdar 2001, 163).⁷ Not only did this small group of exceptionally talented playback artists sing almost all the Hindi film songs composed between the 1950s and late 1980s, they also enjoyed tremendous popularity among Hindi film audiences. Movies began to rely increasingly on the recognizability and allure of particular singing voices to attract filmgoers.

Good Girls and Bad Girls

Voice monopoly was especially pronounced in female playback singing. Lata Mangeshkar and her younger sister Asha Bhosle were virtually the only female soloists in Hindi film for over four decades.⁸ Though Bhosle was and is very well-loved, it was Mangeshkar’s high-pitched, unadorned

singing that came to represent ideal Indian femininity. Mangeshkar's strong grounding in Hindustani classical music and the long hours of practice she still puts in bolster her fans' sense of her vocal precision.⁹ This purity of vocality translates in the public imagination into "purity" of character. Referring to Mangeshkar's songs in *Aag* (1948), Vijay Mishra writes, her "virginally pure voice . . . [is] a symbol of the lovelorn, *viraha*-stricken, constant woman of canonical literary texts of love" (Mishra 2002, 104).¹⁰ As this quotation richly suggests, "purity" for women in Hindi cinema is fundamentally about their sexuality. When the heroine falls in love, she gives her heart and soul to her hero but does not engage in sex before marriage (marriage being her destiny). This quasi-spiritual ideal of love and the moral strictures on female eroticism do not keep women's bodies from being fetishized in film visuals and dialogue. However, the singing voice that represents these same heroines does not carry "immoral" sexual connotations (Majumdar 2001). The chastity, innocence, devotion, and self-sacrifice expected of the ideal heroine are so strongly encoded in Mangeshkar's voice that even today, fifty years after she first shot to fame, Mangeshkar (b. 1929) is described in the same glowing terms as in her younger years.

The phenomenal popularity of Mangeshkar's "shrill, adolescent-girl falsetto" speaks not only to the widespread sexist assumption of women's infantile status, but also to the specific gender and religious politics of post-independence India (Srivastava 2004).¹¹ Lata Mangeshkar's rise to fame coincided with Indian independence (1947) and the "golden years" of Hindi cinema (1950s and 1960s). During this period, film served as a key site for the consolidation of national identity (see, for instance, Chakravarty 1993 and Viridi 2003). Equally, however, the medium challenged the gender politics undergirding the concept of nation.

In historian Partha Chatterjee's famous argument, the "women's question" that had consumed social reformers in the mid to late nineteenth century—the question, that is, of women's position in a modern society—was "resolved" (or, more precisely, ignored) by twentieth-century nationalists who conflated womanhood, spirituality, and tradition, relegating these matters to an inviolable "inner domain" (Chatterjee 1989). Cinematic representations of women were problematic because they inevitably placed women in the "outer," public realm. Srivastava contends that Mangeshkar's voice provided the perfect solution to this dilemma: "at

the same time that women's bodies became visible in public spaces via films, their presence was 'thinned' through the [limited] expressive timbre granted them" through Mangeshkar's voice. In other words, her desexualized vocal style helped contain the dangerous visual and aural presence of female bodies in public (Srivastava 2004).

In cultivating her distinctive style and timbre, Mangeshkar consciously moved away from the vocal heaviness and nasality of her predecessors, singers like Noorjehan and Shamshad Begum.¹² In effect, her voice was "cleansed" of all those qualities that would in time be read as markers of decadence, immodesty, and by extension, in the warped logic of Indian nationalism, Muslimness. Her vocal transformation was thus part of the larger process of "purifying—Hinduising and gentrifying—the figure of the ideal Indian woman of postcoloniality" (Srivastava 2004).¹³ Her function as the hegemonic voice of middle-class Indian femininity did not preclude Mangeshkar from singing for marginalized female characters. It is significant, however, that her voice never revealed non-normative aspects of those characters' identities; that is, the women she sang for rarely sounded Muslim or lower-class. Indeed, Mangeshkar's "pure" voice lent such characters an aura of respectability and goodness not easily granted women of marginalized groups, whether on or off screen. For Srivastava, the fact that Mangeshkar sang for Muslim characters is evidence of the "incomplete" and uneven process of Hinduization of public culture in India. While I agree with Srivastava's larger point about the continuing struggle over cultural representations, I lay more emphasis on the power of aurality—of Lata Mangeshkar's "good" Hindu voice—in this struggle. The "success" of her voice lay precisely in its ability to represent Muslim characters while musically erasing their religious identity.

Majumdar adds that the positive cultural meanings associated with Mangeshkar's voice derive in part from her carefully cultivated public persona as a respectable, middle-class woman. Famous for her simple lifestyle, religiosity, and devotion to her family, Mangeshkar encapsulates the virtues of Indian womanhood. Her modest white and off-white saris, lackluster stage persona, and consistent refusal to sing "vulgar" songs draw attention away from the female body—her own body and, by extension, the bodies of the women she represents vocally (Majumdar 2001).¹⁴ This disavowal of the body effectively contains female sexuality in film. The fact that Mangeshkar never married silently confirms her apparent

virginal status. Public discourse has never marked her as an anomalous, sexually independent and hence dangerous woman. Instead, her singleness is treated as proof of her absolute devotion to music. Remarkably, it is the stunning public silence regarding Mangeshkar's long-standing "association" with the Rajasthani prince, Raj Singh Dungarpur, that sustains her image as the "pure" and ideal voice of the nation (Majumdar 2001, 175).

Furthermore, Mangeshkar's vocal style still dominates the industry. Contemporary playback artists such as Alka Yagnik and Kavita Krishnamurthy follow in the footsteps of "Lata didi" (big sister Lata), emulating her high-pitched and austere vocal style. Mangeshkar's continuing, if indirect, voice monopoly is due partly to the fact that some of today's leading singers worked as "dubbing artists" in the early stages of their careers, and consciously modeled themselves after her.¹⁵ As late as 1987, it was possible for music critic Bhaskar Chandavarkar to write, "today it is difficult to imagine a female voice that is not Lata Mangeshkar's" (quoted in Manuel 1993, 53). Admittedly, the Mangeshkar-Bhosle "monopoly" has loosened since the early 1990s. Ila Arun and Richa Sharma's raw, sexual, and "ethnic" voices; Sunidhi Chauhan's nasal, high-pitched, and often very sexual style; Jaspinder Narula's substantive *ghazal*- and *sufi*-inflected voice; and Shweta Shetty's husky, pop-inflected idiom have more of a place in Hindi cinema today than they did in the late 1980s. However these singers tend not to be the primary voices of film heroines. Mangeshkar's voice continues to be regarded as the ideal and the standard against which all artists are judged.

For several decades, Asha Bhosle provided the perfect counterpoint to Mangeshkar with her playful and seductive singing. Music director Naushad once noted that Bhosle's voice had "a tinge of the *bazaar* (or the marketplace)" (quoted in Bharatan 1995, 69). It was not the voice of a woman in the respectable private sphere. The teasing, pouting, and "oozing sensuality" of Bhosle's voice were all crucial elements of the stock vamp figure in 1960s cinema, a role often played by the actor-dancer Helen.¹⁶ The conflation of immorality, flagrant and uncontrollable sexuality, and modern, Western (or Westernized Indian) identity in "cabaret Queen" Helen's screen persona meant that she—and Asha Bhosle who sang for her—was the polar opposite of the good Indian woman represented by Mangeshkar. Although Bhosle sang for most leading female actors and "good" film characters, and her voice was quite similar in pitch to that

of her elder sister, the actively desiring presence audible in her voice deprived her of the sobriquets of perfection heaped on Mangeshkar.

The sexist dichotomy of vamp and virgin meant that for half a century female vocalists had only two places from which to speak, or sing, in Hindi cinema. In navigating these two extremes, Bhosle was also dealing with other tensions at the core of postcolonial Indian identity: the constant tussle of tradition and modernity, and of Indianness and Westernness. Since Bhosle's voice lacked the nasal heaviness associated with Muslim courtesans, her "sexiness" was more in danger of being heard as "too modern" or "Western," and thus bad. Bhosle managed to walk this fine line by demonstrating her obvious proficiency and versatility as a singer and winning the approval of the finest musicians of the day. Though more glamorous in style and non-traditional in her outlook than Mangeshkar, Bhosle also took care to maintain her respectable, middle-class image. She remained quiet on the details of her first marriage and thus staved off media gossip.¹⁷ Her second marriage to the music director Rahul Dev Burman (or R. D.) is held in high regard because it represents the union of two musical giants. The son of legendary music director S. D. Burman, R. D. is famous for his incorporation of rock and pop music into Hindi cinema. According to one source, "his Westernized, beat-oriented compositions [in the 1960s and 70s] . . . irrevocably changed the course of Hindi film music" (Gulzar et al. 2003, 536). As R. D. Burman's primary singer, Asha Bhosle voiced postcolonial India's careful negotiation of modernity and Western culture.¹⁸

The dichotomization of voices described above—the mapping onto voice of such binaries as tradition and modernity, modesty and immodesty, morality and debauchery, East and West—was limited to the realm of female playback singing. While men like Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, and Kishore Kumar were famous for their unique vocal styles, their voices did not have any specific moral connotations. For one, because there were always multiple male singers, the meanings attached to their voices were not as fixed as they were in female playback. Second, unlike women performers, men did not have to contend with restrictions on their participation in the public sphere. The public presence of men in cinema—both on and off screen—was the norm rather than a threat. Consequently, men's voices were not as loaded as those of their female counterparts.

This history of playback singing shapes how Indian audiences continue

to hear and understand voices in cinema. Film viewers are accustomed to really listening to music in film; songs are more than just muzak behind the drama. The voice assigned to a woman in a particular song is still crucial in determining audiences' reading of the image on screen. More than men's voices, female singing voices carry the weight of morality, sexuality, and Indianness.

The Three Good Women of *Lagaan*

One of the interesting things about *Lagaan*, given the above discussion, is that the movie has not two but three key women characters, all of them conventionally good women and all connected to the hero Bhuvan. Set in the late nineteenth century, *Lagaan* narrates the plight of Indian villagers under British colonialism. Faced with the villagers' complaints about the heavy annual land tax, or *lagaan*, that the British demand despite the ongoing drought, the haughty Captain Russell of the local cantonment challenges the villagers to a game of cricket. He promises to waive the *lagaan* of the entire province for the next two years if the villagers beat his team; if they fail to do so, however, their tax will be tripled. Bhuvan accepts the bet on behalf of the villagers, reasoning that they have nothing to lose but their lives. He spends the rest of the film inspiring his ragtag group of friends to set aside their differences and form a united front against the British. The villagers manage to come together to learn the colonial game and defeat their colonial masters.

The classic love story woven into this fictional period piece positions the village belle Gowri and the British woman Elizabeth as contenders for Bhuvan's affection. Whereas Gowri is Bhuvan's love interest and constant support from the start, Elizabeth falls in love with him as she teaches the villagers to play cricket. The third important woman in Bhuvan's life is his mother, or Mai, and she serves as his constant moral touchstone. The voices of Mai, Gowri, and Elizabeth constitute the three distinct leitmotives of "Choote Lagaan" (End the Land Tax), the film's theme song.¹⁹

"Choote Lagaan" differs from other songs in the movie in two important ways. First, it functions as background music rather than as a discrete song sequence. That is, it is not attached to a single dramatic or dance number, and hence there is no clear visual segment to analyze alongside the music. Second, one does not hear the theme song in its entirety during the movie.

Segments of “Choote Lagaan” come up at different points in the film (most notably at the beginning of the film and during the historic cricket match), but the full song is available only on the soundtrack. Still, “Choote Lagaan” is a memorable piece and is instantly recognizable as the *Lagaan* theme song. Like an opera overture, it pares down the messy details of the story to the bare minimum, compressing into a span of just four minutes and ten seconds a movie that lasts three hours and forty-two minutes on screen. As the only song that features all three of *Lagaan*’s heroines and no men, it gives us a parallel narrative to the masculinist national vision of the rest of the movie. The women-dominated musical story that “Choote Lagaan” tells lays bare the gender, ethnic, and racial dynamics structuring Bhuvan’s national community, while also challenging some of those power relations.

The theme song’s status as fragmented background music also raises the question of how to treat film music that is not specifically bound to an image. This non-visual song evokes the most vivid images of Mai, Gowri, and Elizabeth, and manages to flesh out the idea of nation for its Indian audiences. Despite being a “disembodied” piece of music—it is not attached to any visuals, especially images of bodies; the song is divided into short musical segments and distributed throughout the movie; and it utilizes two light, incorporeal voices—“Choote Lagaan” presents an eloquent argument for the importance of aurality in body theory. It demonstrates that ideas about the body are not always mediated by images.

Music routinely recalls in the mind’s ear physical bodies of different sorts. Depending on the social context, listeners may be able to discern not just affect in voice, but also race (e.g., the South Asian Apu’s “brown voice” on *The Simpsons*), gender (male voices as opposed to female ones), sexuality (“He sounds so gay!” is an oft heard, sometimes homophobic, comment in U.S. society), and ethnicity or regional affiliation (Shamshad Begum’s “heavier Punjabi voice”).²⁰ The bodily nature of voice—the fact that it, like skin color for instance, is “of the body”—even bestows on it a naturalness and authority that some other identity markers lack. In this essay, I seek to denaturalize the cultural connotations of voice, while also emphasizing voice as a bodily production. My close reading of “Choote Lagaan” demonstrates how female playback voices evoke specific bodies—bodies, that is, with different personal, moral, and ostensibly physical qualities such as race, ethnicity, and religious identity—and render audible a highly circumscribed ideal of national community.

Lata Mangeshkar as Mai

“Choote Lagaan” opens in grand style with the sound of trumpets. This quickly establishes the context of our story: colonialism and empire. Next we hear a solitary female voice humming a soft, quiet melody. The voice is that of Anuradha Sriram and the tune a variation of the second stanza of “O Paalanhaare,” a *bhajan* (Hindu hymn) that the villagers sing, asking for divine intervention when their defeat seems imminent.²¹ In referring thus to the devotional song that Bhuvan’s mother leads at the village temple, “Choote Lagaan” invokes the rhetoric of faith that is at the core of the villagers’ sense of themselves as a group. This musical intertextuality also establishes Sriram’s voice as that of Mai. Significantly, in “O Paalanhaare,” Mai’s part is sung not by Anuradha Sriram but by the famous Lata Mangeshkar.

As discussed earlier, Lata Mangeshkar’s voice has long been considered “the norm for the Indian middle-class notion of feminine beauty in music.”²² A mere ten years after Indian independence, her voice came to be associated with Nargis, the star of Mehboob Khan’s classic film *Mother India* (1957).²³ The numerous national awards bestowed on Mangeshkar, including the Dadasaheb Phalke award (1989), the Padma Bhushan (1969), the Padma Vibhushan (1999), and the Bharat Ratna (2001), solidify her status as a premier citizen of India. Further, as in the Naushad *ghazal* invoked at the beginning of this essay, Mangeshkar’s voice is often linked to nation and god in the same breath. In some descriptions, she herself becomes a divine avatar.²⁴

A related aspect of Mangeshkar’s public face that has strengthened over time is her “Meera image.” Meerabai is the revered medieval singer-saint famous for her devotion to the Hindu god Krishna (Majumdar 2001, 174–77).²⁵ Like Meerabai, Mangeshkar is known for her ordinary lifestyle and deep religiosity. Her solemn professional habits (many that reflect her Hindu beliefs), her strong personal and vocal identity as a Hindu, her musical devotion, and the “soulfulness” and “divinity” of her voice paper over potentially controversial facets of her life.²⁶ As discussed earlier, Mangeshkar’s unmarried status is problematic for a national discourse that links women’s virtue with “proper” (that is, controlled and heteronormative) sexuality. However, just as Meerabai is never denounced for being more devoted to Krishna than to her husband, Mangeshkar’s

devotion to god and music prevents any “inappropriate” reading of her sexuality. Over the years, thus, her “divine voice” has come to represent not just the ideal Indian woman but the nation itself.²⁷

Anuradha Sriram’s voice resembles Lata Mangeshkar’s quite closely. It can be difficult to tell her voice apart from Mangeshkar’s legendary voice because she (Sriram) only hums a few bars in “Choote Lagaan.” The melody of Sriram’s part, moreover, is from the Lata Mangeshkar prayer song “O Paalanhaare.” The fact that there are no words and few accompanying instruments to distract from Sriram’s singing in “Choote Lagaan” results in a “pure,” uncluttered quality. Thus, even though the voice we hear in the opening bars of the theme song is not Mangeshkar’s, the ideological effect is the same: we hear Mai. Sriram’s voice focuses our attention on the hallowed place of the mother figure in the national imaginary, and on the Hinduness of her identity.

Though Mai does not have much of a speaking role in the movie, she is of crucial importance to the national drama unfolding on the cricket field. In times of trial, Bhuvan relies on his mother’s advice and takes solace in her confidence in him. As in the rest of the movie, Mai has almost nothing to “say” in “Choote Lagaan”: there are no lyrics in her musical part; she only hums a few lines. Yet her sage and serene voice is critical to the song, serving as an internal frame. As the tension of the massive confrontation subsides, Sriram’s hum floats back into our ears. We are left at the end of the song and the soundtrack as a whole (this being the last song on the CD) with nothing but a “timeless” and “ageless” voice—the enduring spirit, that is, of the nation. In the form of this ethereal voice, the nation exists before and lingers beyond the conflict between the Indians and the British.

White Woman as “Other”

The Elizabeth motif follows on the heels of Mai’s opening hum. We hear the white woman in the light and airy voice chanting the slogan “choote lagaan” about a third of the way into the song.²⁸ The anglicized accent emphasizing the first syllable in *lagaan* (LUH-gaan) and the sweeping strings in the background mark these voices as British. Similar musical and linguistic details demarcate racial and national boundaries in the rest of the soundtrack. British musical segments in *Lagaan* are primarily melodic, while sections sung by and representing Indians are emphatically

rhythmic and percussive. Unlike the Indian sections that use a wide array of instruments, the British ones consist mainly of violin, cello, and harp.²⁹

Another telling detail in “Choote Lagaan” is the breathiness of the British voices as they reach for high notes. Asha Bhosle’s “bad girl” voice described earlier—the voice she used when singing for Westernized Indian characters, usually immoral and wanton women—did sound breathy at times. Several contemporary pop artists also adopt this style to express sexiness and desire, qualities that have long denoted Westernness in Indian popular culture. What is interesting about the Elizabeth motif is that it sounds Western but not morally corrupt. The British choir in “Choote Lagaan” may sound breathy in the upper registers, but the political content of the lyrics and the somber, almost sorrowful, tone of the voices adequately protect Elizabeth’s reputation. Devoid of any sense of corporeality, the Elizabeth motif does not threaten Gowri’s position as Bhuvan’s love interest and, as I argue below, as warrior-citizen of the nation.

The voices that dominate the second half of “Choote Lagaan” have a deeper, fuller, and hence more serious sound than the Elizabeth choir. This last leitmotif, which I call the Gowri motif, is rough in texture and bears an Indian accent. Its steady, pounding rhythm has a martial ring that is completely missing in the thin, airy British sound that precedes it. As I discuss later in this essay, the use of an all-female choir to represent angry Indians here is a significant departure from the meek representation of women in the rest of the movie. At the very end of “Choote Lagaan,” the Gowri motif is overlaid with what sounds like a national anthem. Though there are no words to mark this anthem as Indian, it sounds sufficiently like many familiar, patriotic Indian songs. This national anthem sound intensifies the difference between the Indians and the British. It also makes it harder to dismiss the anger in the Gowri motif. By contrast, the British chant sounds more like an expression of hope (fervent though it may be) than a demand. Rather than saying “End the land tax now!” they seem to be saying “I wish the land tax would end.” It is not surprising, thus, that when the action intensifies on the cricket field, the background score uses the aggressive and urgent Indian mantra rather than the more fragile British one.

To be fair, although the Elizabeth motif sounds ineffective in relation to the *lagaan* crisis, it does occupy a prominent position in “Choote Lagaan.” It marks Elizabeth as a key player in the anticolonial struggle and sets the

scene for the Indian choir's dramatic entry. Though we hear imperial trumpets at the beginning of the song, it is only during Elizabeth's section of the song that we get a sense of the monumental confrontation between colonizer and colonized. Her voice grows increasingly intense and ends with a flourish amid the sound of clanging cymbals, drums, and wailing violins.

The Indian chant commences at this climactic juncture. This musical representation of Elizabeth parallels the filmic narrative, which shows that without her generous offer to coach them, the villagers do not have a fighting chance. Elizabeth fosters nationalist sentiment among Bhuvan's teammates by teaching them the rules of the colonial game of cricket. Some of the Indian men are shamed into joining the team when they see her risk the wrath of her brother Captain Russell to help them. Thus, her actions generate narrative and musical momentum. She, as much as Mai and Gowri, brings Indian nationalism into being.

But despite this crucial intervention, Elizabeth is granted only a secondary position within the film's visual, narrative, and musical imagination. The juxtaposition of the white woman's young, polite, and very feminine voice with Gowri's more grounded and gruff chant presents Bhuvan's two potential love interests as polar opposites. Absolute racial and national difference is mapped onto the Indian and British women's bodies—onto their voices specifically—in the guise of temperamental, timbral, linguistic, and stylistic differences. Elizabeth's voice does not evoke an angry or aggressive woman the way Gowri's does in the theme song. Though we know Elizabeth's love and political inclinations are not confined by racial and national boundaries, she does not sound transgressive. She expresses her support for the Indian men's political project in a safe, acceptable way. Throughout the movie and the soundtrack, she comes across as ladylike and devoted. Her love for Bhuvan registers as chaste rather than lusty or frivolous (which was how Western and Westernized Indian women were represented in Hindi film until quite recently). And yet Bhuvan does not serenade her.

Notwithstanding the visual play throughout the movie regarding the real object of Bhuvan's desire and the verbal slippage between Gowri and *gori mem*—literally “white woman,” which is how the villagers refer to Elizabeth—the *Lagaan* soundtrack is clear that Elizabeth poses no threat to Gowri. Consider for a moment the love song “O Rey Chhori,” in which both women express their love for Bhuvan. In this song, Elizabeth's lines are set apart from Gowri and Bhuvan's duet by means of language, accent, and

instrumentation. The two Indian lovers address each other directly and in Hindi; the words, imagery, and structure of their lines are also similar. Such reciprocity and connection is absent in the few lines Elizabeth sings as she fantasizes about Bhuvan. Her verses are in English and they sound like detours, brief distractions from the “real” love story, that of Bhuvan and Gowri. Though very memorable, the lovesick Elizabeth’s verses do not create a wedge in Bhuvan and Gowri’s romance. Thus, “O Rey Chhori” implies that the white woman can never be a legitimate and lasting object of Indian nationalist male desire.³⁰

The musical structure and instrumentation of “Choote Lagaan” presents a similar configuration of desire. Since the British choir that backs Elizabeth’s voice in the love song described above is the same one that represents Elizabeth in “Choote Lagaan,” we as the audience immediately sense that this set of voices represents the third term in *Lagaan*’s romantic saga. Here, as in the “O Rey Chhori” love triangle, Elizabeth’s important musical presence does not overshadow the Gowri motif. Though the growling female choir representing Gowri enters only midway, it constitutes the most memorable aspect of “Choote Lagaan.” Elizabeth’s lament may be a necessary prelude to Gowri’s singing, but it is the Indian women’s powerful, rhythmic chanting that really carries the theme song, the drama on the cricket field and, arguably, the movie as a whole.³¹ Gowri’s voice in this motif has more substance and vitality. She is the real subject and agent in this music, not Elizabeth. Though Elizabeth seems to be crossing racial and national boundaries by siding with the Indians, her singing voice keeps the racial boundaries of the nation in place: the white woman can only be Bhuvan’s partner in certain limited contexts.

Women as Musical Warriors

So far, what we have in “Choote Lagaan” is a fairly conventional image of India: the nation is gendered female, the Indian woman is the “natural” partner of the good Indian citizen (who is, obviously, male), and the white woman occupies a peripheral position despite her important contribution to the nationalist struggle. What is striking, however, is the blatant aggression in the voices of the Indian choir. Women are far more active and violent participants in the making of the nation in the theme song than in the rest of the movie.

Musically, Gowri's "choote lagaan" chant is the female equivalent of Bhuvan and his friends' fight song "Chale Chalo" (Let's Go). The women of "Choote Lagaan" are as loud, fierce, and focused as the men in "Chale Chalo." They sound stronger and more severe than the breathy choir singing for Elizabeth. Also, unlike the representation of Elizabeth, the Indian women's tone in the theme song matches the content of their lyrics: "O brother, end the land tax now!" they declare angrily, over and over. Dramatic strings, drum beats, and clashing cymbals accompany the Gowri chant as "Choote Lagaan" moves to its national-anthem-like ending. The Indian women's voices are neither drowned out by, nor do they blend in with, the symphonic music that signifies the escalating tension. On the contrary, their chanting is the most powerful and memorable musical element of the theme song. Not only are the women right there in the middle of the (musical) action, they seem to be directing it.

In short, several facets of the Gowri chant—its strong and angry tone, loud volume, rough timbre, martial marching beat, repetitive lyrics, and sense of direction (both in terms of lyrics and musical movement)—combine to musically position the female villagers as an advancing army. Just as Bhuvan and his friends' elaborate display of virility in "Chale Chalo" shores up their status as warrior citizen-sons, the Indian women's aggressive enthusiasm in the theme song confirms their commitment to the nation. Women are no longer just glorified icons who galvanize men to action. Rather, in this music, women are active members of the citizenry who are as willing as the men to take up arms in the service of their beloved nation.

As mentioned earlier, the Gowri motif constitutes the primary background music of the cricket match and other confrontational moments in the film. In preparation for the match, the women of Champaner (*Lagaan's* fictional village) are shown cooking, cleaning, and sewing the men's cricketing gear. While the match is in session, they sit on the boundaries of the field cheering for their husbands and lovers, nursing them when they are injured, and consoling them when they get out (that is, when their batting turn ends). The women thus support their men by performing domestic and feminine labor in a public space. In a sharp departure from this stereotypical visual representation of women, the music that accompanies the cricket scenes depicts the Indian women making a direct and belligerent political statement. Gowri and her friends might as well be

marching and chanting slogans on the streets. Moreover, in this music—as opposed to the visuals and the narrative of the movie—it is the Indian women and not the men who occupy center stage.

Whereas in the visual domain of the movie all cricket- and hence *lagaan*-related action focuses on the men, it is the women who are the heroes of “Choote Lagaan.” Men are all but absent from the national community that this, the theme song of the movie, constructs. This vocal domination of women is also striking because there is no hint of female violence in the rest of the movie. *Lagaan* contains absolutely no images of women as warrior citizens; only men get to be aggressive in the visual realm. Gowri is often jealous, anxious, annoyed, and upset at Elizabeth, but she never expresses the kind of focused anger that the men display when they deal with the British.

This masculine emphasis pervades much of *Lagaan*'s musical ambit as well. Bhuvan's uplifting team-building song “Mitwa” (Friend/Partner) exhorts only male villagers to be anticolonial warriors. The lyrics in women's musical parts dwell on stereotypically feminine issues: love and religion.³² Women are also paired with high, lilting, melodic instruments such as the flute rather than the loud, vigorous *dhol* (barrel drum). The musical and visual choreography of “Mitwa” and “Chale Chalo” also constantly foreground men. Since women's lines are short and come late in these songs, they never overpower the men's voices. Most of the *Lagaan* soundtrack thus continues age-old assumptions about docile femininity and women's lack of participation in the public, political sphere. It promotes an emphatically masculine national imaginary that values women but associates them mainly with matters of the home and the heart. In the context of the rest of the film, thus, the significant and hostile vocal presence of Indian women in “Choote Lagaan” stands out as an anomaly.

The question that arises at this point is why women like Gowri are allowed to be political actors in this admittedly limited auditory realm—that is, in this one song—when they are barred from national participation in other registers of the movie. Why is female aggression in “Choote Lagaan” not a threat to men? What does it mean to have a theme song composed only of women's voices and not those of men? Does the theme song's foregrounding of female voices challenge the masculinist vision of nation presented in the rest of the movie?

The exigencies of the filmic narrative provide some answers. Women are

made active national citizens, albeit only in the background music, because the dire situation demands it. Without the contribution of the people on the margins, including women, a Muslim man, a Dalit (formerly “untouchable,” low-caste individual), the elderly, and even the foreign Elizabeth, Bhuvan’s team has absolutely no chance of surviving. Including otherwise marginalized peoples has the added benefit of distinguishing Bhuvan’s nation as just and progressive, endearing him all the more to his modern-day audiences. The specific form that the women’s participation takes—the fierceness and intensity of the Gowri motif—also makes sense given the life-or-death situation that the villagers face. The women are as devoted to the nation as their male counterparts, and hence their music is in sync with the mood of the male warriors on screen. Gowri’s musical activity also compensates for her subordinate position in the cricket saga as compared to Elizabeth, the team’s coach. Gowri, Mai, and all the other women of the village constantly provide moral and domestic support to the men, but they are not considered key players in the fight. The Gowri motif changes this.

Still, why is music—and the theme song, in particular—the means by which women enter the nation? One might argue that this is because “Choote Lagaan” is a relatively benign means of allowing women into the nation. First, women’s presence in the nation is non-threatening because they are allowed to participate only in song. The narrative itself makes no room for female aggression. Second, unlike their male counterparts, the Indian women do not get a discrete visual and musical segment to demonstrate their patriotism. The one song in which we hear feisty women is only part of the background score. Third, the theme music is attached mainly to scenes concerning cricket, which is a highly male-dominated sport. The masculine drama on the field makes it quite easy for audiences to miss the fact that the background music consists almost entirely of female voices. Women remain peripheral to the nation-building project because their singing voices do not draw attention to the female characters (at least, not when one is watching the movie). By detaching women’s voices from images of women on screen, “Choote Lagaan” disembodies women and thus blunts their agency. Finally, Gowri’s chant is ostensibly directed at the men: “*re bhaiyya, choote lagaan*” (O brother, end the land tax!). The implicit assumption in these lyrics is that the agents of anticolonial resistance are men, not women.

While the above arguments deserve some consideration, they all emphasize visuality, narrative, and language (song lyrics) at the expense of music. They underrate or altogether ignore the ideological effects of music. Women's presence in "Choote Lagaan" cannot be dismissed as catchy but irrelevant background material. In many parts of India, singing is a crucial mode of female participation in the public sphere (Raheja 2003). The social and ideological constraints that shaped Lata Mangeshkar's vocal timbre, and the fact that the industry continues to favor similarly contained voices, also attest to the cultural freight attached to female vocality. Mai's, Gowri's, and Elizabeth's voices in "Choote Lagaan" are all the more important because the song is a kind of distilled, purely musical version of the movie. In dominating such an important sonic space, women carve out a vital position for themselves within the nation.

The Gowri motif also commands attention because it is played over and over again in the movie, especially during the most contentious scenes. Sheer repetition drives home the theme song's gendered national meanings. The embedded chant is all the more potent because it operates under the radar. As any music lover will attest, we respond to music not just cognitively (by attending to lyrics and musical nuances), but also on a more intuitive, gut level. Gowri's "*re bhaiyya, choote lagaan*" gets under our skin. It gets us riled up and willing to support *Lagaan*'s nationalist warriors. Thus, as counterintuitive as it may seem to the scholarly eye, I argue that women's voices in *Lagaan* are powerful precisely because they go unnoticed.

But perhaps the most compelling argument for listening to the women in "Choote Lagaan" is the quality of their voices. Of the theme song's three leitmotiven, Gowri's is the one with the most substance. By this I mean that it feels heavier and denser than either Mai's or Elizabeth's voice. While Mai's voice derives its power from its disembodied, ethereal quality, the strength of the Gowri motif lies in its physicality. Its grittiness recalls Roland Barthes's theorization of the "grain of the voice" (Barthes 1977). According to Barthes, certain singing voices evince a materiality that emerges out of the interface—or the "friction," as he eloquently puts it—of language and music (Barthes 1977, 185). Speaking of the Russian church bass, Barthes writes:

Something is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only that), beyond (or before) the meaning of words, their form (the litany), the melisma,

and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings. (Barthes 1977, 181–82, emphasis in original)

The “grain of the voice” is that space where music explores and identifies with how language works, how it sounds. The process is a material one: it happens in and through the singer's body. The result is a physical quality that exceeds signification. This grain communicates beyond and despite words—and yet it is based deep inside language, music, and the body.

Unlike Barthes, I do not care to focus on language in music or the music of language. Instead, I attempt to understand the materiality of music as experienced in a particular historical and cultural context. What I want to retain of Barthes is his recognition of the corporeality of voice.³³ All voices emerge from bodies, but certain voices announce, even flaunt, their physical origins. Barthes's description of the grain of the church bass voice could apply to the sound of the Gowri choir in “Choote Lagaan.”

For listeners accustomed to Hindi cinema's hegemonic female voice—thin, high-pitched, disembodied, and hence considered virginal and “pure”—the Gowri chant has a distinctly different, much more visceral feel. Yet the tangible, material quality of the Indian choir in “Choote Lagaan” means something only to the extent that the light, airy voices of the Elizabeth choir (for instance) mean something else. That is, the specific meaning of the grain of Gowri's voice can be grasped only in relation to the history of playback voices charted earlier in this essay. In bringing Barthes's “grain of the voice” back into the realm of culture and history, I seek not to re-privilege language as the primary semiotic system (the theoretical position Barthes writes against) but to show exactly how music makes meaning.

The Gowri chant in “Choote Lagaan” is markedly different from the other two musical *leitmotiven* of the song, Mai's humming and the Elizabeth soundscape, both of which use incorporeal voices. Gowri's voice in the final section of the theme song stands out all the more because it comes directly after such thin, light voices. It also sounds different from the female voices used in other songs in the movie. This representation of

women as national warriors is completely different from and yet complements the figure of nation-as-woman with which “Choote Lagaan” opens and closes. Mai’s voice in this song feels like a mirage, intangible and elusive. It is not something one can lay one’s hands on or grasp for long. This is very much like the enigma of Lata Mangeshkar’s voice for Bollywood fans. Her voice is disembodied but—or as Neepa Majumdar argues, *therefore*—attractive. As the impossible ideal to which most film singers aspire, it wields immense cultural power. Similarly, Sriram’s Mangeshkar-esque voice for Mai in “Choote Lagaan” works because it suggests an ethereal presence. It is a *symbol* for the nation.

By contrast, the bodily Gowri sound reifies the nation. It invokes a mass of physical bodies that gives form to the abstract concept of “nation.” We get a concrete sense not only of the collective (we hear multiple voices) but of the citizens’ *bodies*—aggressive, female bodies at that. The Indian woman no longer waits for her knight in shining armor. She becomes one herself. The bodily texture of Gowri’s voice in “Choote Lagaan” is consonant with the visual and musical aesthetic of the men’s fight song, which also foregrounds the body (albeit in slightly different ways).

If, as Barthes writes, “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs,” then we do not have to *see* Gowri’s body to know her as a warrior, as someone who has the bodily capacity and the will to fight (Barthes 1977, 188). The grain of Gowri’s voice should—and I think it does—suffice. In other words, the audible body combined with the rousing chant “*re bhaiyya, choote lagaan!*” (O brother, end the land tax!) endows Gowri with a kind of citizenly agency that is all but absent in other dimensions of her character. Thus, it is the very “invisibility” of the Gowri *leitmotif*—the fact that it is cast as music, that it takes the form of a fiercely physical voice—that summons the national citizenry.

Sexuality, Ethnicity, and the Body in Voice

Despite this powerful representation of women, I propose that the women in “Choote Lagaan” are not particularly transgressive. This is, first of all, because the timbral and stylistic differences among Mai’s, Gowri’s, and Elizabeth’s voices solidify, rather than challenge, the racial boundaries and violent nationalism outlined in the rest of the movie. A second related point is that, as different as they may be in texture, Gowri’s voice in

“Choote Lagaan” and the hegemonic Lata Mangeshkar sound are oddly similar in their effects. As Srivastava and Majumdar argue, the triumph of Mangeshkar’s voice was that it quelled masculinist anxieties about the threat of women in public. Mangeshkar’s sugary-sweet, hyper-feminine voice drew attention away from the bodily presence—both visual and aural—of women in the public space of cinema. In my argument, Gowri’s voice is doing the exact opposite: it makes women crucial, active, and violent participants in the political sphere.

This virulent and corporeal vocal persona is possible only because the historical moment that *Lagaan* occupies is vastly different from that of the 1950s, when Lata Mangeshkar first entered the film world. A woman singing in public is no longer an anomaly; she does not pose the symbolic threat that Mangeshkar did in her early years. The prominence of the women’s movement in India has also meant that women are recognized as key agents in all realms of life, including national politics. The “women’s question” is not as easily relegated to the private, domestic sphere. Thus, not only can the “good Indian woman”—Gowri, in this case—appear and sing in public, she can now afford to sound loud and angry in certain musical moments.

Yet, like Mangeshkar’s voice, the Gowri motif allows women into the public sphere in a limited fashion. This becomes clear when we compare the Gowri chant in “Choote Lagaan” to the musical representation of men in the movie. Bhuvan and his friends are represented in music by such prominent vocalists as Shankar Mahadevan, Udit Narayan, Shaan, Sukhwinder Singh, and Srinivas. These celebrity voices span a wide range of timbres, styles, and traditions, yet they complement one another nicely on the soundtrack. While Narayan is the primary playback voice for Bhuvan, the men’s fight songs accord the other singers equal importance in terms of the number of lines, volume, accompanying instrumentation, and lyrics. Music director A. R. Rahman’s own prominent vocal contribution in “Chale Chalo” is also relevant in this regard. While Rahman is a well-respected Bollywood name, his singing voice is distinctly non-normative. Thin, high-pitched, and wailing, his is not a voice that generally attaches to Hindi cinema’s manly man. *Lagaan*’s juxtaposition of many different kinds of male voices, including typically marginalized ones, the compatibility of these various voices, and the roughly equal value assigned to them, speaks to the (ostensible) diversity and non-hierarchical nature of Bhuvan’s team.

This rich representation of the male warriors is quite different from that of female warriors in *Lagaan*. When the women sing as a group, they do so in a single and generic voice. The Gowri motif deploys a little-known choir rather than an assortment of famous playback voices.³⁴ We do not hear in the women's rabble-rousing the complex layering of voices audible in the men's singing. Men's voices in *Lagaan* are unified—that is, they hold together as a cohesive unit—but they do not all sound alike. By contrast, *Lagaan*'s women warriors sound uniformly gruff and fierce in the theme song. It becomes difficult to distinguish between individual women. Thus, though the Gowri motif in “Choote Lagaan” diverges from standard representations of women as passive secondary characters, it is far from radical in that it flattens vocal differences and creates a homogeneous community of female citizens.

The Gowri motif also belies no trace of marginality other than the heroine's gender. As discussed earlier, given Mangeshkar's continuing hegemony, voices that sound overtly sexual or irreverent are rarely assigned to Hindi film heroines. Instead, such “sexy” voices are reserved for minor characters performing “item numbers.”³⁵ One such non-normative voice is that of Ila Arun, who shot to fame in the early 1990s with her popular renditions of Rajasthani folk-inspired tunes. “Morni Bagama” from *Lamhe* (1991) and the notoriously popular “Choli ke Peechhe” from *Khalnayak* (1993) established her as the “ethnic” voice par excellence. The distinctive coarseness of Arun's voice, her nasal yet full-throated style, and uninhibited vocal presence earned her the title “Rani of Raunch” (Queen of Raunch).³⁶ The double outsider status—in terms of sexuality and ethnicity—signaled by this pop journalistic label is heightened by Arun's use of rural dialects. Her voice has a raw, earthy feel that in the world of Indian pop music and films signals not only rural India but also assertive female sexuality.

On screen, Arun's voice is embodied by women in traditional Rajasthani (particularly, *banjarin* or “gypsy”) attire—colorful, heavily embroidered *ghaghra*-cholis, oxidized silver jewelry, and intricate *bindi* patterns on the forehead—singing unabashedly of desire and sex.³⁷ While this “ethnic” look is all the rage among middle- and upper-class Indian women, the aesthetic it references is that of rural, lower-caste, and poor women in the interiors of north India. Ila Arun's voice thus represents a glamorized conflation of ethnic, caste, class, and sexual othering. This “folk” or

“ethnic” dimension of Arun’s persona distinguishes her from the rough and nasal pre-Mangeshkar voices that are now construed mainly in religious terms as “Muslim.” However, the language used to describe Ila Arun in the popular press suggests that her sexual, “ethnic” voice stands for all the caste, class, and immoral connotations (if not the religious ones) that have been purged from Mangeshkar’s voice.

Given that, until quite recently, Arun’s “ethnic” voice was one of the few ways of representing non-mainstream Indian women in film music, it is significant that “Choote Lagaan” steers clear of this sound. The corporeality of the Gowri motif is quite different from the brazen, pleasure-seeking voice of Ila Arun. In fact, Gowri’s voice in “Choote Lagaan” is emphatically not sexual. She does not sing of romance or marriage; she also does not play the supportive wife in this music, as she does in other songs in *Lagaan*. By the codes of Hindi film musical culture, neither the tone nor timbre, nor even the bodily grain of Gowri’s voice, suggests an interest in such matters.³⁸ In other words, physicality and aggression are not eroticized in the women’s voices in “Choote Lagaan.” We hear more body in the Indian choir as compared to Mai and Elizabeth’s voices, but what we do not hear in that body is desire.

When it comes to conveying female desire, *Lagaan* reverts to the familiar and by now safe voices of Asha Bhosle and Alka Yagnik.³⁹ While these artists have sung some rather risqué film songs, they have also managed to maintain their “good girl” image. Their vocal styles and lyrics in *Lagaan* portray Gowri as an attractive, appropriately demure young woman who expresses her feelings for Bhuvan without ever overstepping any boundaries. Unlike the highly eroticized representation of masculine aggression (as emblemized in the men’s fight song “Chale Chalo”), Gowri’s assertiveness in “Choote Lagaan” is not linked to sex, sexuality, or romance. Thus, female aggression is sanctioned insofar as it does not carry with it the threat of sexual transgression—or indeed any “taint” of sexuality. The vocal representation of Indian women in *Lagaan* is then a throwback to the days of the Lata Mangeshkar “voice monopoly.” Whereas Mangeshkar’s voice was completely disconnected from the bawdiness of the female body, the Gowri motif in “Choote Lagaan” embraces the body but disavows sexuality altogether.

Hindi cinema today allows for a variety of female voices, some of which—Ila Arun’s, for instance—do sound strong, worldly, and sexually

provocative. This gradual broadening of the vocal and stylistic range of “Indian” voices reflects a vastly different historical moment from the days of the Lata Mangeshkar–Asha Bhosle “monopoly.” While a Mangeshkar-esque voice is still prized above all others, women playback singers’ voices are not forced into a binary “good-girl-versus-bad-girl” configuration. The use of three different “good” voices in “Choote Lagaan” tells us that the nation has a place for many different kinds of women. The use of a choir rather than a solo voice in the Gowri motif and the tangible, bodily quality of those Gowri voices help invoke a sense of the collective: we hear, loud and clear, the many individuals who form the national community.

Not only does the “grain of the voice” in the Gowri motif give concrete form to the nation, it also suggests that Bhuvan’s nation is not marked by traditional gender hierarchies. By centering a strong, low, and aggressive set of voices, “Choote Lagaan” reassures modern audiences that women can be critical actors in the national saga. While the rest of the soundtrack dresses up conventional gender ideals in charming music, this song claims that the nation can set aside those traditional values if necessary: women can and will be called upon to defend the nation in times of crisis.

But the nation has its limits. Granting Gowri a voice as bawdy and willful as that of Arun would not only allow minority women to represent the nation at large (a radical move in and of itself), it would also endorse a dangerous kind of independence for women, one potentially disruptive of the hetero-normative basis of nationalism. The uncoupling of sexuality and aggression—rather, the complete absence of such a connection—in the musical representation of women in *Lagaan* is not a problem by itself. It is significant only because the most common way to represent assertive female sexuality in late-1990s Hindi cinema has been via recourse to the “ethnic” voice. In not marking itself as “other,” the Gowri motif grants women agency in a very limited sense. The absence of any voices and accompanying sounds or instruments that signal marginality in “Choote Lagaan” implies that the ideal citizen subject is a good Hindu woman (as is the nation, the sound of Mai’s voice). In this sense, Gowri’s voice in “Choote Lagaan” is fairly domesticated.

To clarify, I do not mean to argue that music ought to continue linking women’s sexuality with their ethnic and religious minority status. I am also not arguing in favor of sexually aggressive or violent women in film. I am not asking for female aggression to be sexy. Rather, my point is that, in

eschewing the few available representations of minority women, *Lagaan* reverts to conventional assumptions about Indian femininity. Music is a space of possibility for Indian women in *Lagaan*, but only certain women—sexually modest, upper-caste, and middle-class Hindu women—can inhabit this space. What women do in the space that “Choote Lagaan” opens up is also rather disturbing. The agency that women claim as they break out of their traditional roles during the Gowri motif cannot be described as feminist or progressive because, in the end, their actions and voices sustain a highly exclusive and violent ideal of national community, not altogether different from the one proposed in the men’s fight song. Moreover, women’s freedom is limited to their contribution to the patriarchal nationalist project—only in one particular song and only in the service of the cricket match and tax struggle. “Choote Lagaan” is thus not a larger declaration of independence, sexual or otherwise, for women.

Listening To, and Beyond, the Nation

Listening to women’s voices in *Lagaan* brings us then to some rather disheartening conclusions. Still, I hope I have demonstrated the immense value of bringing a feminist ear to Hindi cinema. Music sometimes tells a different story from the rest of the film—a more women-oriented if not feminist one in the case of “Choote Lagaan.” By reading the music’s “silences”—that is, by listening for voices and sounds of marginality that are readily available in the musical world of Hindi cinema, but that are not included in the *Lagaan* soundtrack—I lay bare the music’s normative biases. For Bollywood fans, *Lagaan* may be a film like no other and its music may be the freshest, most exciting sound to emerge in recent years. Yet the political implications of this music are all too familiar. The social mores encoded in the voices of Mai, Elizabeth, and Gowri reflect and reproduce hegemonic ideals regarding women’s sexuality, morality, and the religious, racial, ethnic, caste, and class composition of India. Attending to vocality in “Choote Lagaan” thus significantly alters our reading of *Lagaan* and challenges the widely held view of the film as a paragon of multicultural inclusiveness.

More generally, my analysis of women’s voices demonstrates the extent to which we comprehend bodies through the way they sound. The body, as well as the lack of body, in Hindi film music cannot be understood apart from the cultural context of the music’s production, circulation, and

reception. A case in point is the reaction of British film audiences to *Lagaan*'s "O Rey Chhori," the love song I alluded to earlier in this essay, in which both Gowri and Elizabeth declare their love for Bhuvan. The public consensus on this song in India was that it was the perfect blend of Indian folk and Western classical styles. Music director A. R. Rahman's musical interweaving of the East and the West is mirrored in the language of the lyrics: the song alternates between Hindi in Bhuvan and Gowri's verses and English in Elizabeth's sections. Given the Indian public's appreciative response to "O Rey Chhori," Aamir Khan, the star actor and producer of *Lagaan*, was shocked to find that British audiences burst out laughing during Elizabeth's verses. In an interview at the National Film Theatre in London, Khan observed, "In India we didn't get this reaction, but that (sic) has been a consistent reaction amongst British audiences. They seem to find it really amusing. It's not meant to be that way" (Khan 2002).

The British "misreading" of "O Rey Chhori" was more than just a matter of people's varied musical preferences. The very viewers who laughed at Elizabeth happily cheered as the Indian characters broke into song and dance. The melodramatic feel of the film and its music was acceptable so long as it seemed untranslatable. The racial and linguistic difference of the Indian villagers made their music palatable, even enjoyable, to *Lagaan*'s British audiences. But the moment "O Rey Chhori" slipped into English, it ceased to have the desired musical effect. The apparent transparency of Elizabeth's lyrics broke the audience's suspension of disbelief. Suddenly, Elizabeth seemed cartoonish and excessive.

Unschooling in Hindi cinema, *Lagaan*'s new audiences took great pleasure in the song but missed the complex musical cues that positioned Elizabeth as the outsider in a love triangle. They did not hear how different she sounded from other Western or Westernized Indian women in Hindi cinema. They also did not understand the depth of Elizabeth's feelings for Bhuvan, for they were probably unaware that songs typically enact an intensification of emotion in Hindi cinema. In fact, one of the functions of Hindi film songs is to communicate what cannot be spoken of directly (love and sex, for instance). Thus, as funny as it sounded to Bollywood's novice audiences, it was critical that Elizabeth express her romantic fantasy in English rather than Hindi.

The "O Rey Chhori" incident suggests the extent to which Hindi film music demands audience familiarity with its linguistic and musical

vocabulary; it relies on such familiarity for its effect. Unlike Aamir Khan, though, I contend that the lack of such cultural knowledge produces, not *misreadings* (“it was not meant to be that way”), so much as new readings, new effects. Thus, for instance, the Bollywood song “Chaiyya Chaiyya” is completely recoded in Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* (2006). In the opening scene of Lee’s film, we see a van navigating the streets of New York to the sound of A. R. Rahman’s mega-hit song from *Dil Se* (1998), “Chaiyya Chaiyya.” Few Spike Lee fans would know that this song is coded as “ethnic” in the original film: the hero Shahrukh Khan dances on top of a train along with a group of women and men dressed in “ethnic” clothing, singing of love and passion. Like Ila Arun’s voice described earlier in this essay, the voices of playback singers Sukhwinder Singh and Sapna Awasthi in “Chaiyya Chaiyya” evoke a very particular notion of the “ethnic.”

This musical coding and the broader nationalist dimensions of *Dil Se* make little sense in the context of *Inside Man*, particularly to mainstream U.S. audiences. What matters is that “Chaiyya Chaiyya” is a fast-paced song, appropriate for a crime thriller and for the chaos of New York City. It also perhaps sounds exciting and vaguely mysterious to non-Indian ears (while a short, slightly modified version of Rahman’s original composition plays at the beginning of the film, *Inside Man* uses Panjabi MC’s hip-hop and rap-inflected version, “Chaiyya Chaiyya Bollywood Joint,” for the end credits).

The soundtrack of *Inside Man* is not an isolated example. As Bollywood appeals to and gains new audiences in the West, its music travels far beyond the films and cultural spaces of the Indian diaspora. Hindi film music is regularly remixed and sampled in Western pop music, house music, and hip-hop. In 2005, the Kronos Quartet collaborated with playback star Asha Bhosle on an album of R. D. Burman songs titled *You’ve Stolen My Heart*.⁴⁹ *Bombay Dreams*, the Andrew Lloyd Weber musical whose music was composed by A. R. Rahman, was fairly successful in London and on Broadway.

Western audiences, who often come to Bollywood through these new and hybrid cultural forms, are even less likely than second-generation Indians in the U.S. to know the film and musical history I chart in this essay. They are unlikely to be familiar with the cultural and musical cues that a seasoned Indian filmgoer understands. Instead, these new audiences bring other kinds of associations and meanings that then attach to this music.

Given this transnational media landscape—and that *Lagaan*, in some ways, initiated this wave of U.S. mainstream interest in Bombay cinema—what do diasporic and non-Indian audiences see and hear in *Lagaan*? What aspects of film and musical history and which “Indian” meanings persist as Bollywood gains currency in the West? How do the gendered meanings of vocal music, as examined in this essay, change in new contexts, and how do those changes in turn shape the sound of nation? What happens too when “nation” is displaced as the organizing rubric of this film? These questions point not just to the “problem” of (mis)translation and cultural appropriation of Bollywood in the West, but also to the possibility of alternative, potentially radical new musical meanings. In dismissing Bollywood songs as “just music,” we not only risk ignoring and reinforcing the hegemonic values of this music, we also miss the potential for social change implicit in the musical exchanges that characterize Bollywood as a global phenomenon.

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NOTES

1. Indian film composers are called “music directors.” For the Urdu lyrics and the English translation of the *ghazal*, see Bhimani 1995, 16. Naushad (1919–2006) himself was a doyen of Hindi cinema, having composed music for such classics as *Baiju Bawra* (1952), *Mother India* (1957), and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960).
2. The scope of this essay is limited to an analysis of Hindi film heroines’ singing voices. I follow musicologist Suzanne Cusick and literary scholars Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones in emphasizing voice as a physical phenomenon. I do not consider a monolithic “female voice” that represents women’s unique perspective on the world. Nor do I explore how such a “feminine” voice relates to the gender of a particular singer, music director, actor, or character. See Dunn and Jones 1994; Cusick 1999.
3. Hindi films usually contain five or six songs composed specifically for the

movie. These may be part of the background score but they also form discrete segments within the film. Soundtracks are released weeks before the movie; they serve as crucial publicity material and sometimes generate more revenue than do box-office sales. This is because Hindi film songs get played and replayed constantly in public: in school assemblies, festivals, weddings, dance clubs, markets, and on television and radio shows. Woven thus into the fabric of daily life in urban India and throughout the diaspora, they stay in public memory and in circulation long after other details of the film fade away.

4. “Bollywood” refers to the Hindi-language commercial film industry based in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. The term is of relatively recent coinage and signals an industry that is increasingly being recognized, especially by the West, as a global force. For a quick summary of the connections between playback singing and the concerns over the “authenticity of song performance” in Hollywood cinema, especially as thematized in *Singin’ in the Rain*, see Majumdar 2001, 165.
5. Also see Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 127–30.
6. As the British left in 1947, they divided the subcontinent into two separate states: India and Pakistan. On how this affected film, see lyricist and director Gulzar’s essay “Music: In Tune with the Times . . .” (2003, 276).
7. “Monopoly” is, of course, not strictly accurate since there was more than just one singer on the film scene. Majumdar uses the term to refer mainly to Mangeshkar’s four-decade-long hegemony and “aural stardom.” Mangeshkar’s influence stems more from her place in the national public imagination than the actual number of songs she has sung (Majumdar 2001, 163, 177).
8. In Western terms, Mangeshkar and Bhosle would both be considered sopranos. Mangeshkar established herself in the business earlier than her sister. It is widely acknowledged that the careers of some singers like Suman Kalyanpur, Anuradha Paudwal, and even Asha Bhosle were stalled because of Mangeshkar’s hold over the industry.
9. India boasts two distinct traditions of classical music: Hindustani (north Indian) music and its southern counterpart, Carnatic music. Both are considered pristine and ancient art forms, quite distinct from—and implicitly, more sophisticated than—various kinds of “folk” music and film music. In this essay, I do not use the terms “classical” and “folk” as insular categories; rather, I mean to draw attention to the cultural clout (or lack thereof) of various musical styles. Despite the commercial success of different popular musical forms, classical music is still the ultimate marker of musical seriousness and proficiency. This explains why singers like Mangeshkar and Bhosle were at pains to demonstrate their classical expertise.
10. *Viraha* is the grief at separation from one’s lover.
11. Note that in the Indian context, falsetto refers to a voice that is high-pitched and nasal (hence “false,” not from down in the gut). It can be used to describe both men’s and women’s voices. In describing Mangeshkar’s voice as “falset-

to,” Srivastava takes his cue from ethnomusicologist Manuel (1993, 52–53). Given the connotation of artificiality in the term “falsetto,” fans of Mangeshkar are more likely to describe her voice as “naturally” high-pitched. The adjective “adolescent” is, however, used by Mangeshkar fans. For instance, in his hagiography of Mangeshkar, the noted TV personality Harish Bhimani describes her voice as “clear and soft, like that of a girl on the threshold of adolescence” (Bhimani 1995, 34).

It is important to note the significant gap between “reel” and “real” life. As both Manuel and Srivastava emphasize, Hindi cinema’s hegemonic falsetto stands in sharp contrast to the impressive diversity of female vocal timbres and styles one hears in non-cinematic Indian music. See Manuel 1995, 52, and Srivastava 2004.

12. On the singers and vocal style popular in the 1930s and early 1940s (the pre-Mangeshkar era), see Arnold 1991. Mangeshkar emulated Noorjehan early on in her career and still counts her as a model.
13. Music was one of many cultural sites in which this struggle over national identity played out. Srivastava rightly points out that on the one hand, the hybrid form of Hindi film music defied all governmental attempts to codify Indian music in strict classical (read middle-class, Hindu) terms. On the other, the cinematic singing voice itself became the battleground for gender, class, caste, and religious politics. The “kotha (brothel/courtesan) style of singing, echoes of which can be discerned in, say, Shamshad Begum’s voice” is, for Srivastava, the most obvious counterpoint to Mangeshkar’s singing. Noorjehan was equally famous for her mastery of *ghazals* and *qawwalis*, musical genres associated with the Urdu language, courtesan culture, and Muslimness. She migrated to Pakistan during the Partition years and established herself as the nation’s leading actor and singer (“Noorjehan” 2005).
14. Unlike Asha Bhosle who has a flair for engaging her audience, Mangeshkar stands rigidly on stage, head buried in her notebook as she sings (Manuel 1993, 49). Neepa Majumdar emphasizes that technology is also central to the construction of Mangeshkar as a powerful, disembodied voice. Mangeshkar was so adept at modulating her voice to match the new recording technology that “she exists only as a recorded voice, a voice mediated by technology . . . she is disembodied even in the very act of recording her voice” (Majumdar 2001, 172–73).
15. “Dubbing artists” are anonymous singers who record a song when the actual playback singer is not available. The song is filmed using the dubbing artist’s recording; later in the editing process, this temporary version of the song is replaced by the star singer’s recording. Sometimes the dubbing artist’s rendition may be kept in the final cut of the film, thus giving the young singer a chance at stardom. All aspiring playback singers, but especially dubbing artists, work hard to match their voice, style, and technique to that of reigning stars (Mangeshkar, in this case).

16. The term “oozing sensuality” was used by music critic Sumit Mitra (quoted in Majumdar 2001, 172). Helen was famous for her “cabaret” numbers, which in Indian cinema means dance songs performed by a professional dancer (cabaret artist) in a nightclub. The cabaret dancer is often construed as a prostitute and is associated with the movie’s villain.
17. According to Asha Bhosle’s daughter and film journalist Varsha Bhosle, one of the reasons her mother was typecast as “the perennial cabaret/*mujra/qawwali* singer” even though she excelled in many genres and vocal styles was that she walked out of her abusive first marriage. (*Mujra* and *qawwali* are genres associated with courtesans, and in turn with Muslim and lower-caste women.) The unspoken label of “fallen woman” made it difficult for Bhosle to compete with Mangeshkar’s virtuous image (Bhosle 1997).
18. Asha Bhosle has continued to cultivate her classic but hip image through her openness to contemporary remix culture, collaborations with younger Indipop artists such as Leslie Lewis and Adnan Sami and with international pop artists (she sings in Boy George’s “Bow Down Mister”), and more recently, her foray into the U.S. pop and classical world with the Kronos Quartet album *You’ve Stolen My Heart* (2005).
19. On CDs and cassettes of the soundtrack, “Choote Lagaan” has the same title as the movie: “*Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*.” However, for the sake of clarity, I will be referring to the song by its one-line lyrics: the slogan “choote *lagan*.” Although *Lagaan* is set in colonial times (1893) and makes no direct reference to the Indian freedom struggle, the film still registers as a nationalist—rather than simply a universal good vs. evil, David vs. Goliath, or even a racial or colonial—narrative. Among the many cinematic details that suggest such a reading are the stark racial, cultural, and linguistic divides between the two teams; veiled references to Gandhian philosophy; the use of cricket, India’s national obsession; and the tokenistic “national integration” logic that shapes the villagers’ team.
20. This is not to say that voice expresses the essence of any identity category; rather, specific vocal qualities are culturally encoded and interpreted as signs of race, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on. On Apu’s performance of “an ‘Indian accent’,” see Davé 2005. The description of the 1940s singer Shamshad Begum is from “Lata Mangeshkar” 2005.
21. Sriram sings playback for both Tamil and Hindi cinema. It is unclear why music director A. R. Rahman used Sriram’s voice, rather than Lata Mangeshkar’s, in the *Lagaan* theme song.
22. Classical vocalist Neela Bhagwat, as quoted in Willemen and Rajadhyaksha 1999, 144.
23. As a saintly mother figure, the character of Mai itself calls up the long history in Hindi cinema (and popular culture at large) of nation-as-mother.
24. Bhimani ends his hagiography with a list of quotations by Indian celebrities, many of whom explicitly deify her voice. For instance, Hindustani flautist Hari

- Prasad Chaurasia says, “Traditionally, Saraswati ([Hindu goddess of] knowledge, art) and Lakshmi ([Hindu goddess of] wealth) are not supposed to be residing together. But look at Lataji . . .” (quoted in Bhimani 1995, 16, 311–38).
25. This comparison was made as early as 1967, even before Mangeshkar released an album of Meera bhajans: “It would have been . . . appropriate if a voice such as Lata’s had sung exclusively the ecstatic bhajans of Mirabai . . . [which] are an expression of total surrender to God” (classical vocalist Gangadhar Gadgil, quoted in Majumdar 2001, 174–75).
 26. Descriptions such as the following abound in fan literature, implicitly marking Mangeshkar as a devout Hindu:

[She] never sings with her shoes on. She considers singing akin to the worship of Goddess Saraswati [Hindu goddess of knowledge]. For her the recording room is a temple. She never begins anything on *Amavas* (new moon day). She wears white saris with a coloured border for each day of the week. (Khubchandani 2003, 487)
 27. Mangeshkar’s voice is described as such by Illaiyaraja and Madan Mohan, prominent music directors of the Tamil and Hindi film music industry respectively (quoted in Bhimani 1995, 314–15).
 28. Though there may be both men and women who sing in this choir, I read this as the “Elizabeth” motif (and not a general English one) because she is the only British character in *Lagaan* who supports the Indians. The male voices are pitched so high in this song, it is hard to tell them apart from the women’s voices or the high strings. This keeps the focus squarely on the white woman until the entry of the Indian voices.
 29. There are only three segments on the soundtrack that represent British characters: the Elizabeth motif of the theme song, Elizabeth’s love lyrics in “O Rey Chhori” (a love song that weaves the voices of Bhuvan, Gowri, and Elizabeth), and the instrumental piece “Waltz for a Romance,” which constitutes the music for the officers’ ball. All of the other song sequences in the movie focus solely on the Indians.
 30. The impossibility of cross-racial love or friendship is a prominent trope in colonial texts as well (E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India* is a prime example).
 31. I say this because the Gowri motif surfaces as background music at several key points in the narrative.
 32. The love song “Radha Kaise Na Jale” depicts Gowri’s affection for Bhuvan and her jealousy toward Elizabeth because of the special relationship that she (Elizabeth) shares with him. Both women sing of their love for Bhuvan in “O Rey Chhori.” Mai leads the *bhajan* (Hindu devotional song) with Bhuvan when the villagers’ spirits are sagging. The women’s contributions to the fight songs position them as faithful, supportive consorts and mothers.
 33. In the West all music (not just vocal music) has long been associated with the body, and accordingly feminized and racialized. This association is not as strong in the Indian context.

34. The film credits two choirs: Voices in the Wilderness (Mumbai) and The Methodist Church Choir (Chennai). However, neither of these groups is well-known in film music circles and it is unclear which parts each choir sings.
35. A mainstay of Hindi cinema since the 1990s, “item numbers” are highly sexualized songs that showcase actors’ dancing talents but have little to do with the movie’s plot. Leading singers like Alka Yagnik do sing item numbers—“Ek Do Teen” from *Tezaab* (1988) was Yagnik’s earliest hit—and increasingly these songs include famous models and star actors. However, my point is that “ethnic” voices that are specifically slotted for such sexualized songs rarely become the primary voice of the heroine.
36. Rajasthan is a state in the northwest of India, just above Gujarat. This phrase “Rani of Raunch” recalls the title of a famous historical figure, the Rani (queen) of Jhansi, a young woman famous for her leadership during the 1857 Indian mutiny against the British. Jhansi is a city in present-day Uttar Pradesh, a state that borders Rajasthan. “Rani of Raunch” also recalls the Rann of Kutch, an extensive wetland region located in northeastern Gujarat and Sind (in Pakistan), at the lower end of Rajasthan’s Thar desert.
37. *Ghaghra-choli* refers to the long, colorful, embroidered skirt (*ghaghra* or *lehenga*) and tight blouse (*choli*) worn by women in rural Rajasthan and Gujarat. Ila Arun sports the traditional Rajasthani, “ethnic” look in all her public appearances, music videos, and in the *Lamhe* (1991) song “Morni Bagama.”
38. Here again, I diverge from Barthes for whom the visceral connection that the “grain of the voice” inspires between performer and listener is an erotic relationship (Barthes 1977, 183, 188). I argue that given the countless ways we experience and interpret our bodies, sensing the body in voice does not necessarily sway us to *jouissance*. How we hear the grain of the voice, the sensation it inspires, is at least in part a function of culture.
39. Asha Bhosle represents Gowri in the love song “Radha Kaise Na Jale”; all the other songs use Alka Yagnik’s voice for the heroine.
40. The Kronos Quartet’s album title is a loose translation of “Chura Liya,” the title of a popular R. D. Burman song from the 1973 film *Yaadon Ki Baaraat*.

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