

Popular Music: Intercultural Interpretations

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The photograph on the cover was taken in fukuoka, Japan, on 14 November, 1961.

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Part 1 'East' and 'West'?	
Oriental culture in Greece: Music and international relations <i>Kevin Dawe</i>	3
The cultural work of Miss Saigon: A postcolonial critique <i>Ellie M. Hisama</i>	17
What happens to western popular music histories when the "east" gets a look in? <i>David Hesmandhalgh</i>	26
Non-domestic music in Japanese TV commercials <i>Hideko Haguchi</i>	33
Living in confusion, remembering clearly: Rock in China <i>Jeroen de Kloet</i>	38
Cantonese popular song: Hybridization of the east and west in the 1970s' Hong Kong <i>Ivy Oi-Kuen Man</i>	51
A jazz novel in prewar Japan: The soundscape in Kawabata's <i>Asakusa Kurenai-dan</i> <i>Naoyuki Ishizaka</i>	56
'Echoes' of the West: Kobo Abe, Haruki Murakami, and the rock and roll imagination <i>Russell Reising</i>	60
Soundscape, post-structuralism and music education <i>Tadahiko Imada</i>	67
Popular music as acquired capital: Some problems in Japanese music education <i>Kyōko Koizumi</i>	77
Part 2 Intercultural Reception	
The globalization of music <i>Paul Williams</i>	87
Dancing to Latin American music: Exoticism and creolization <i>Ute Bechdorf</i>	93
Marketing British pop: The promotion of British pop acts and British records in Japan <i>Mike Jones</i>	99
Where did dance music come from?: A social history of the taxi-dance hall in Japan, 1920s-1930s <i>Yoshikazu Nagai</i>	106
Signifying China: The exotic in pre-war Japanese popular music <i>Edgar Pope</i>	111
The reception of popular music in the early stages of acculturation in China: With particular reference to jazz <i>Mamiko Naka</i>	121

Was it torture or tune?: First Japanese music in the western theatre <i>Aya Mihara</i>	134
Crossing over: Japanese popular music artists in the UK <i>Mark Percival</i>	143
The global and the local: The paradoxical career of a Brazilian Death Metal band within a global music scene <i>Keith D. Harris</i>	160
Korean popular music and modes of identification in Korea and America <i>Sarah Morelli</i>	168
The emotional uses of popular music by Japanese adolescents <i>Alan Wells, Ernest A. Hakanen and Hiroshi Tokinoya</i>	174
Mr. Big in Japan: Perception of rock music by Japanese rock fans <i>Yasushi Ogasawara</i>	182
Limits of musical freedom <i>Johan Fornäs</i>	185

Part 3 Intra-national Currents

'Been all through the nation...' <i>Paul Oliver</i>	193
'Just in it for the craic?': Irish theme pubs and local music production <i>Abigail Gilmore</i>	200
Elvis Presley and the impulse towards transculturation <i>Rob Bowman</i>	220
Dutch radio: Valuing pop music through institutional changes <i>Wilfred Dolfsma</i>	226
Class acts?: Taste and popular music <i>Martin Cloonan</i>	229
A tale of two festivals: Music and festivals in Manchester, England, and Turku, Finland <i>Henri Terho</i>	240
Local music policies within a global music industry: Cultural Quarters in Manchester and Sheffield <i>Adam Brown, Justin O'Connor and Sara Cohen</i>	246
'Diving in the river or being it': Nature, gender and rock lyrics <i>Hillevi Ganetz</i>	261
'I've been shushed at Bluebird': The role of a Nashville, Tennessee cafe in shaping music and musical behavior <i>Amy R. Corin</i>	266
The allure of sexuality in the music of <i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927): The Jewish icon in blackface minstrelsy <i>Yuko Satō Nakamura</i>	273
Autochthonisation of rock music in rural Slovenia <i>Rajko Muršič</i>	281
What's international about the International Bluegrass Music Association? <i>Neil V. Rosenberg</i>	289
'I, Prince Jazzbo, come to stay, and I will never be late as I would tell you!' <i>Hasse Huss</i>	298

Part 4 Intercultural Production

Rock aesthetics and nationalism	
<i>Motti Regev</i>	311
'Something old, something new': Expatriate musicians and musical authenticity	
<i>Andy Bennett</i>	318
'Celtic Connections': Transnationalism or localism in popular music?	
<i>Peter Symon</i>	325
Changes in conceptions of the 'authenticity' of Japanese folksongs: A case study of Tôru Kasagi	
<i>Mamoru Tôya</i>	332
Knockin' on China's door	
<i>Dave Laing</i>	337
Looking East: The socialist rock alternative in the 1970s	
<i>Michael Rauhut</i>	343
Early Czech rock'n'roll: Social conditions and four sounds in preserved recordings	
<i>Aleš Opekar</i>	349
A musicological analysis of melodies and singing in Japanese neo-rockabilly	
<i>Terumasa Shimizu</i>	357
Reception and perception of rock music in India	
<i>Takako Inoue</i>	366
'Brothers': The indigenization of American male close-harmony-group song style in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s	
<i>Christopher Ballantine</i>	374
Rapping around: Fad or sign of identity	
<i>Claire Levy</i>	379
Salsa musicians and the performance of a Latin style and identity	
<i>Patria Román-Velázquez</i>	383
Latin American popular music in Japan and the issue of international aesthetics	
<i>Steven Loza</i>	391
Classification of rhythm patterns	
<i>Masato Yakô</i>	398
Hamburg '60-'64: Cradle of British rock?	
<i>Tony Sheridan</i>	412

Part 5 The Pacific Rim

Popular music beyond the Pacific: The multi-cultural radio station in Ôsaka	
<i>Hiroshi Ogawa</i>	421
Local space in the PNG music scene: String band sub-styles	
<i>Denis Crowdy</i>	426
'Popular music in Yap?': A study of the conceptualization of popular music in a non-industrialized island	
<i>Junko Konishi</i>	432
The Papua New Guinean music industry and the world music market	

<i>Philip Hayward</i>	442
The invention of heritage: Popular music in Singapore	
<i>Lily L. L. Kong</i>	448
East-West synthesis or cultural hegemony?: Questions on the use of indigenous elements in Philippine popular music	
<i>Jonas and Amapola Baes</i>	461
Localism, nationalism, and transnationalism in pre-postcolonial Hong Kong popular song	
<i>J. Lawrence Witzleben</i>	469
Folk in China	
<i>Xin Tao</i>	476
Shibuya-Kei (Shibuya Sound) and globalization	
<i>Kōji Ōnishi</i>	480
Women in Japanese popular music: Setting the subcultural scene	
<i>Jennifer Milioto</i>	485
The rock still rolling: Local subcultures	
<i>Masahiko Ōyama</i>	499
Across a crowded room: Television and rock in Australia in the fifties	
<i>Bruce Johnson</i>	505
'Brits and Pieces': The 1960s' 'British Invasion' within Australia	
<i>Jon Fitzgerald</i>	513
From the Australian bush-land to the chill-out-zones of technoparties: The didjeridu in the labyrinth of cultural borderlands	
<i>Susanne Binas</i>	522
New Zealand music on the internet: A study of the NZPOP mailing list	
<i>Tony Mitchell</i>	529
Citing the sound: New Zealand indie rock in North America	
<i>Geoff Stahl</i>	541
Contributors	553

Reception and perception of rock music in India

Takako Inoue

The purpose of this paper is to examine how rock music is perceived in India through an analysis of the position of rock in the Indian popular music scene. I'll first give an overall picture of the Indian popular music scene, and then analyze the current situation of Indian rock through one specific band as an example. I'll also examine Indo-West crossover or fusion music through a comparison of its reception by Indians and Westerners. Finally, I'll explore the position of rock music in the context of Indian social situation.

Indian popular music scene

Popular music hits had been dominated by film songs for almost fifty years until the arrival of satellite TVs in 1991, because cinema had long been the biggest entertainment medium for the Indian masses. These film songs, usually called *filmi*, which are not actually sung by the actors and actresses in the films but by so-called playback singers, were recorded by a limited number of singers until the late 1980s. This situation is typically described by the phrase 'Mangeshkar monopoly': Lata Mangeshkar and her two sisters had monopolized *filmi* hits.¹

Lata sings with a high-pitched falsetto voice and it is very likely that this style is adopted partly for creating the typical image of heroines emphasizing femininity, which is characterized by beauty, frailty, weakness, dependency, loveliness, tenderness and so on, and also partly for duets with the male voice in love scenes which are essential for the Indian entertainment cinema. Since this particular singing style gained wide acceptance and became accepted as the only way to make hits for the *filmi* scene, other singers have come to follow her style. It should also be noted that classical or folk songs are sung not with Lata-like voice but with each singer's own natural voice. The male playback singers who could make *filmi* hits were also limited to three giants; Kishore Kumar, Mohammed Rafi and Mukesh. Their singing style is also highly standardized with a tenor voice which seems to create a hero image, emphasizing gentlemanliness, princeliness, youthfulness and so on.²

Film songs are usually accompanied by a typical Indian orchestra which includes both Indian and Western musical instruments. The favourite instruments are strings instruments such as the violin, the sitar and the santur, which are used for melismatic phrases or interlude melodies, and percussion instruments such as the tabla and the dolak, which can produce the typical Indian beat: the first beat is accentuated. A base line is naturally weak and chords used in a song are limited to a few which should not interrupt a flowing melody line. Though not as popular as *filmi*, so-called light classical, including the *ghazal* (an Urdu love poem), the *bhajan* (a Hindu religious song), has also been arranged and sung like *filmi*, and as a result it acquired a pretty large following. Consequently, the styles of Indian

Reception and perception of rock music in India

popular music hits have been so uniform from various aspects until around the 1980s, though Western influences have been increasingly observed after the late 1980s when electronic musical instruments became increasingly popular.³

The Indian popular music scene has undergone radical changes since the emergence of Star TV, which is one of the satellite TVs that first appeared in India in 1991 along with the economic liberalization policy. The number of TV channels has rapidly increased: previously, only three channels could be received and were all government-managed. In contrast, the number of channels available now is over fifty.⁴ TV soon became the main entertainment medium for the Indian masses. Popular music, except films, which had been previously produced but did not create any big hits, now could be enjoyed by a wider general public. Since MTV, ATN & Channel V started broadcasting video clips of Indian pop songs along with foreign pop songs, many big hits resulted. Now we can find some pop hits in the hit chart, though it is still occupied mainly by filmi hits.⁵ TV singers are naturally not the same as playback singers whose physical image cannot be seen by their listeners. The new stars on TV have to look nice, young, smart and fashionable, and should also be able to move well.

It is also notable that video clips of foreign singers also became available to the Indian mass audiences. Previously, foreign hits were not easily accessible to the Indian popular market except to knowledgeable fans who had enough money to obtain cassettes and playing facilities. Now, the Indian public can easily get access to any kind of popular music through TV programs, which has resulted in an increased acceptance of non-Indian music arrangements and singing styles with a natural voice or even a husky voice, rather than falsetto.⁶

Contemporary hit songs are usually divided into three genres: filmi, pop and folk. These divisions depend neither on musical characteristics nor on the type of media. Roughly speaking, even if the music is influenced either by rock or by Indian classical music, film songs are all categorized under filmi, and songs in regional languages, not made for films and influenced by Western pop, are all categorized under pop, and songs in regional languages, not made for films and influenced by the regional music, are all categorized under folk.⁷

According to the above categorization, bhangra beat (originally the traditional folk dance music called bhangra hailing from North Western Indian state of Punjab which had added Western and modern influences by UK Asians and introduced to India) is categorized under folk so that the Indian bhangra beat is never sung in English, thus preserving the original Punjabi style. Indians regard bhangra beat, which was certainly born in the UK, as their own musical creation. Though some of the UK bhangra musicians are actively collaborating with Indians, we should, for the moment, deal with the Indian scene and the UK scene separately. Though the analysis of bhangra beat is not the purpose of this paper, I would like to refer to a few points. According to my observation, the UK bhangra beat seems to be reflected more in the UK club music such as reggae, hip-hop, techno, jungle etc., while the Indian bhangra beat has no direct connection with such kinds of musical styles but seems to be reflected in the Indian pop scene itself. As a result, the Indian bhangra beat is more similar to the initial UK bhangra beat like the music of the most famous band, Alaap.⁸

In addition to the above-mentioned music, remix versions of film hits have been produced, to meet the increased demand for dance music with an Indian taste in discos. But there is no demand for rock. Why does rock, the music conceived as rock by Indians, remain unpopular, even though many songs have actually been influenced by the rock musical scene?

An Indian rock band, Parikrama

Parikrama is a Delhi-based rock band, formed in 1991, and voted as number two among the Indian

rock bands in the annual reader's poll of 1996 held by The Rock Street Journal, India's only rock magazine launched in January 1993. I've continuously been in contact with members of Parikrama since I attended their live concert in March, 1996. Here, I will examine the situation of Indian rock bands through the observation of their live concert and subsequent discussion with members of the band.⁹

Parikrama basically consist of a vocalist, tow guitarists, a bassist, a keyboard player and a drummer, and occasionally a tabla player and an Indian-style violinist (the violin is one of the most popular musical instruments for South Indian classical music in which it is used not only for solos but also to accompany vocals) join them, which characterizes and differentiates Parikrama from other bands. Parikrama seem to express their originality through using the Indian sound. But this fact should not be taken as the expression of 'Indianness' because the audiences who come to listen to Parikrama are not foreigners but young Indians who just love rock. The expression by using Indian sound is facing not toward outsiders but toward their own people. As rock is hardly popular in India, most bands were recently formed and have just started by imitating Western bands. Considering such a situation, the way chosen by Parikrama has an effect of awakening an interest in rock by using their familiar sound among Indians who have less experience in listening to rock, rather than appealing to any 'Indianness' which often reminds one of a kind of national identity usually constructed by the government who is threatened the foreign cultural invasion.¹⁰

All the members were Delhi University students when they formed the band. Each one of them has got a job and Parikrama still remain an amateur band. According to them there were no professional bands in India because it was impossible to make a living by playing rock. For example, another band, Indus Creed (number one according to the 1994 readers' poll) which were the oldest band in India formed more than fifteen years ago, still cannot sustain themselves only by playing rock, though they released an original album. Parikrama have now one or two concerts per week which are mainly held in colleges or give free rock shows sponsored by some institutions, and the number of the concerts is gradually increasing. Guarantees paid to them (usually too small to maintain a band) are pooled to purchase expensive equipment. These conditions seem to be quite similar to those of any other amateur band, according to my own experience as a member of an amateur band.

The live concert I attended was held as one of the events on the occasion of a student festival at Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management, Delhi. It mainly consisted of copies or cover versions of Western rock hits of such famous bands as Deep Purple, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. Most songs chosen were their favourite hit numbers from around 1970. Some of the audience frequently requested Parikrama to play these numbers by shouting the names of their favourite bands. They apparently have some idea of Parikrama's preference and speciality, and share the same perception of rock. The fashion and performing style of members of Parikrama are also just like those of Western rock bands around 1970. One of their original numbers "Till I'm No One Again" was first released in a compilation cassette, *The Great Indian Rock*, vol. 1, produced by *The Rock Street Journal* in 1995, consisting of one song each from 14 bands selected out of demos sent by 150 groups.¹¹

Parikrama rarely play original numbers at live concerts. The reasons were given by the manager cum keyboard player of Parikrama, Subir Malik with whom I discussed several matters,¹² as follows:

- 1) The audience always asks them to play only Western rock hits as they want to listen to something more familiar rather.
- 2) The band should entertain the audience in compliance with their demand, so that a concert cannot be consisted only of original numbers which nobody is familiar with.
- 3) The position of rock in India doesn't allow the programming of concerts without Western hits which are relatively well-known, though the band actually intend to make the audience listen to

Reception and perception of rock music in India

their original numbers. Actually all Indian bands, even comparatively major bands like Indus Creed and Millennium (number one according to the 1995-1996 readers' polls) are more or less doing the same as Parikrama.

- 4) For the purpose of making the band more recognizable, the first thing to be done by the band is to make rock itself more familiar to Indians.

Taking the reasons given above into account, it is certain that the non-popularity of rock itself causes a considerable lack of original numbers in concerts. I suggested to Subir the following ideas of reasons why rock is still non-popular in India, as given below:

- 1) Most people have listened to rock only since the arrival of satellite TVs. It is too early to judge that rock doesn't suit to Indian taste.
- 2) It is very difficult for ordinary people to form amateur bands in India, as musical instruments and equipment are all imported and quite expensive, even though prices of imported goods have come down since the economic liberalization policy of 1991 . This practical condition prevents rock from being spread to the Indian mass market.
- 3) As far as western popular music is concerned, the Indian public started to receive many musical genres such as rock, funk, reggae, hip-hop etc. altogether, and music belonging to any period from the Beatles to Madonna has been accepted at the same time. It is interesting that Western rock bands which disbanded long ago are featured on a large scale in every issue of *The Rock Street Journal*.
- 4) Foreign dance music seems to have quickly attained its popularity, because dance scenes have been indispensable for entertainment films and those who want to be actors or actresses generally learn break dance. In addition to the above reasons I gave, Subir pointed out another reason as follows:
- 5) A song in English would never be a big hit in India.

He said that the band have no intention of singing in Hindi, even though he was actually advised to play Hindi songs, to maintain their popularity He believed that rock could be sung in English but not in Hindi or any other regional languages, or rather that rock was so universal that it could be shared with world-wide rock fans and should not be subjected to regional differences. He answered that he had no objection to Hindi rock or whatever, though the band would sing only in English. Actually all the members have long been listening to rock sung in English so that singing in English seems quite natural to them. As there are a few bands singing in Hindi, which are not popular at all, popularity cannot be acquired by simply changing the language of lyrics from English to Hindi. He also emphasized that the band played rock because of their love for rock and didn't want to play only to obtain popularity, even though singing in Hindi might pave the way to make the band more popular. In fact, not only Parikrama but also most Indian bands sing only in English. Thus, the listeners of rock in India are naturally restricted to the elites of society who speak English (the population with English as the second language has never exceeded 4% of the Indian total population according to the Census), though English is not a foreign language but the official language of India.¹³

The language issue above reminds us of a similar language controversy which occurred in Japan during the early 1970s.¹⁴ Without analyzing the social context, we should not simply compare the above case with the Japanese case. In case of Japan, the main controversy about the language used in rock music was whether rock could be sung in Japanese or not. Those who advocated singing in English asserted that the rhythm of the Japanese language itself did not fit properly with the rhythm of rock, and that the real rock sound could not be produced in singing in Japanese. While those who were against singing in English questioned whether rock could be enjoyed only by its sound, and whether rock could be really understood without knowing the meaning of lyrics, because of the limited knowledge of English among the Japanese in general.

This controversy symbolized a process of transformation of rock in the course of its acculturation, with a result that in the mid-70s' many rock bands started to sing in Japanese.¹⁵ In the case of India, there's no question as to whether rock can be sung in Hindi. They are able enough to sing and compose in English without any difficulty, because it is quite natural that those who have been given English education speak English as well as their mother tongue, and, above all, they have long listened to rock in English.

In short, the language controversy in rock is an issue of the perception of rock in Japan while it is an issue of commercialism in India.

Parikrama and Indo-West crossover music

As I mentioned above, Parikrama take Indian musical elements back in their original numbers and some of their cover versions by featuring the tabla and the violin. Frankly speaking, their favourite Western rock numbers are directly or indirectly influenced by Indian music. So-called raga rock and many songs of psychedelic rock can be regarded as examples of such direct influences, under which Indian musical instruments or those producing similar sounds are used, and the typical characteristics of Indian classical music, particularly its melody (using modes like Indian ragas) and drones are adapted. Later hard rock and progressive rock can be regarded as examples of indirect influences because their characteristics, like long improvisations with a drone or over a few chords, are also like those of Indian classical music. In other words, rock around 1970 and Indian music shared the same musical structure.¹⁶ If so, it's quite natural that Parikrama are interested in incorporating Indian musical elements into their own music, which was already attempted by Western rock musicians very intensively more than 20 years ago. It can be argued that Parikrama are trying to take current Indian rock back to its birth place, and their efforts are not merely the imitation or reproduction of Western rock.

Taking the way adopted by Parikrama into consideration, I should like to examine the Indian reception of Indo-West crossover or fusion music.

Most of Indian musicians who collaborated with Westerners are trained in Indian classical music and regarded as pure classical musicians in India. They have supplied the typical Orient flavour in order to meet the demands of Westerners regardless of any genre, either popular or classic.¹⁷ Moreover, through the collaboration with Westerners in Europe and America they have actually paid much better dividends than playing only classical music in India. While inside the country, such classical musicians have played an active role within the elite musical scene: understanding or pretending to understand classical music has functioned as a qualification of the cultural elite since the period of British India when classical music was established as a 'traditional art' symbolizing the Indian spiritual heritage.¹⁸ These musicians have neither entered into the Indian popular music scene nor collaborated with Indian pop musicians except in a few cases,¹⁹ so that they could successfully protect their status as classical musicians. Popular music, particularly entertainment-film music, which represents mass culture or commercialism, and classical music representing high culture have been established as two separate fields in India, though the former is inspired a lot by the latter and the musicians of the former field often start their musical experiences in learning the latter.

Consequently, the collaboration with Westerners has never drawn public attention inside India, though it has definitely served to make Indian music exposed to the world. It should be noted that the apparent contradictory way adopted by those who chose to collaborate with Westerners outside has not been only satisfying to both elite Indians' and Westerners' demands but also conformed to market economy.

Reception and perception of rock music in India

The violinist of Parikrama is a regular classical musician for All India Radio. The emergence of classical musicians like him who play both in the classical and popular fields suggests a radical change is undergoing among musicians. He has crossed the barrier which the elder generation put up. The same tendency can even be seen in Hindi pop. For example, in the case of a pop duo, Colonial Cousins, who recently became popular, one of the members is a vocalist of South Indian classical music and they include in their repertoire classical songs, which were not welcomed before as damaging the authenticity of classical music.²⁰ The fact that Colonial Cousins are now widely accepted by the Indian public may suggest that the Indo-west crossover or fusion music performed by Indians will become more popular from now on, while the concept of authenticity in 'traditional art' among elders will gradually be transformed by the young, though the latter will definitely keep on paying respect to Indian traditions.

The situation of rock in Indian society

The contradictory position of rock in India was clarified by the discussion above: rock, which was argued to be born among the working class in the West, is actually the music for the restricted elite who was educated in English or, we can say, for the bourgeoisie who has got enough money to purchase expensive musical instruments and equipment in India. Rock still remains something difficult to get access to Indian masses. The present condition of rock is also reflected in the social situation of post-colonial India; English embedded in Indian society both as a colonial heritage and as the basis of high education is juxtaposed to a strong attachment to Indian tradition both as a production by the nationalist elite and something to awaken or appeal to the Indian public emotion.

The Hindu communalism has come to power since the early 1990s. The communists frequently appeal to the nationalistic emotion among the public that Western culture will damage Indian tradition; for example, they opposed to events such as The Miss World Contest held at Bangalore in November 1996, in which wearing swimsuits was considered to be against the Indian traditional feminine value.²¹ Even nonpolitical traditionalists among the elderly generation oppose to Westernized culture and criticize the present popular music scene as vulgarization. For example, a video clip of Alisha, a famous female pop singer promoted as the Indian Madonna, in which a bed scene was featured, was banned from TV as obscene in 1991. She later had another video clip shot, in which she acted like Sita, a chaste wife of Rama, who is one of the popular Hindu gods described in the famous epic Ramayana, in contrast to the previous video clip.²² Consequently, she gained popularity by playing a role of a conventional idealized Indian woman.

Rock has not met with such oppositions yet as it is not popular enough in India. Traditionalists or nationalists may not have been exposed to rock at all or even not been aware of its existence. The examples shown above, however, may cause one to imagine that the social situation of today's India will turn to be an impediment to make rock popular, though the young people whom I talked with always emphasized that Indian tradition and imported modern Western culture were compatible.²³ This is not a problem of discord between generations, which seems to be quite natural in any society. The issue of communalism versus secularism is not such an age-old phenomenon but a quite modern one, which is connected with entangled contradictions: those between the East and the West, between tradition and modernity, and between the past and the present.

Thus, it can be argued that the situation of rock in Indian society reflects the ambivalence of post-colonial India, which has become more visible since the economic liberalization.

Endnotes

1 Lata Mangeshkar (1929-): Recorded over 25,000 songs in 14 Indian languages. The first song appeared in 1942 and came to prominence in 1948. Until the late 1980s, They recorded about two songs per day. (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1995: 135)

2 I resided in India from 1983 to 1987, and thereafter yearly spent a few months there for field researches. This observation is based on many films I saw in India. I also learned ghazal and bhajan from Ms. Sapna Awasthi, who is now one of the famous popular singers, in addition to learning Karnataka (South Indian classical) music at Delhi University.

3 Electric keyboards, particularly Casiotone have increasingly been used, in place of stringed instruments, for producing melismatic phrases.

4 *TV & Video World*, April 1996, pp.35-38.

5 See following web sites: <http://www.indiaworld.co.in/open/rec/films/top25.html> and <http://www.indolink.com/bollywood/index.html>. General Information on Indian popular music can be found in RMIM newsgroup (<http://www.cs.umn.edu/~subraman/rmim>).

6 For example, Ila Arun, whose song "Vote for ghaghra" became a big hit in 1995, has a low-pitched husky voice trained in folk music.

7 For example, songs included in the best album of Ila Arun, who can sing songs belonging to all three genres, can be ordered according to this categorization. (*The Best of Ila Arun: Film Hits, Folk Songs, Pop Songs*, CD132228, Calcutta: RPG)

8 About Alaap and the early bhangra beat in UK, see Sabita Banerji, "Ghazals to Bhangra in Great Britain" in *Popular Music in India* (1988).

9 I continuously discussed with the members of Parikrama through e-mail after coming back to Japan. I am deeply grateful to Parikrama for responding readily to my questions and comments.

10 This point will be discussed more in later sections of the present paper.

11 A free booklet and pre-recorded cassette, "The Great Indian Rock", accompanies the August/September 1995 issue of *The Rock Street Journal*.

12 The following points are based on my interview with Subir Malik conducted in March 1996 in Delhi and thereafter through e-mail. More information on Parikrama can be found in their own web site (<http://www.netfx.net/parikrama>).

13 It should be noted that the population with English as the second language is not equal to the population who understands or manages to use English; it must be much larger than the Census data.

14 The language controversy was mainly featured in the 1971-1972 issues of *New Music Magazine*. Also see Shinohara 1996: 64-67.

15 Shinohara mentions that the controversy resulted in a fade-out after the big success of a rock'n'roll band, Carol, who debuted in 1972. But I believe that the debut of the Southern All-stars in 1978 finally succeeded in appropriating rock into the Japanese culture, because both advocates have coexisted since then.

16 See Charlton 1996: 200-201; Osato Toshiharu, "Rock-to Hiseiyô: Fushizen-na Kyôhankankei-o", *Eureka* (1990), pp. 87-93; and Takako Inoue, "Parikrama!: 70-nendai Rock- wa Indo-ni Yomigaeru!?", *Bessatsu Takarajima* (1996), pp. 120-125.

17 A well-known sitarist, Ravi Shankar, who played together with both George Harrison of the Beatles and a violinist, Yehudi Menuhin, is a good example. Many Indian musicians have followed his way since then. See Shankar 1969.

18 I cannot go into detail on this point due to a limited space. See Purohit 1973: 815-940, and Sundar 1995: 219-235.

Reception and perception of rock music in India

19 For example, a South Indian singer, K. J. Yesudas plays an active part both in classical and popular fields, and a veena player, S. Balachander, directed films and composed music for all of his films. See Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1995: 50 & 222. According to my observation, South Indian musicians seem to be more indifferent to the barrier between two fields than North Indians.

20 For example, the opening phrase of a famous South Indian classical song, "Krishna ni begane baro" (composed by Vyasarayana in the 16th century), is featured in a song, "Krishna" of Colonial Cousins (Colonial Cousins, C4GP1573, Mumbai: Magnasound).

21 The controversy about The Miss World Contest was repeatedly featured in all the papers and magazines in 1996. It is also noted that they did not criticize characteristics of any Miss Contest in which women are put on display as a kind of commodity, as feminists usually do, but criticized it from the view of traditional value different from the Western value.

22 A video clip of a song, "De De Mujhko", was banned in 1991 and that of a song, "Made in India", made Alisha an idol star in 1995.

23 This fact reminds me of the word 'synthesis' suggested by an Indian sociologist, Prof. T. K. Oommen of Jawaharlal Nehru University. This word used for the description of colonial India means a renovated tradition that partly accepts, as well as partly rejecting, Western culture brought by the British. 'Synthesis', namely the renovated tradition, is neither a 'thesis' of Western culture nor an 'antithesis' of indigenous culture in this context. He said that 'synthesis' had been able to produce some unity in colonial contexts, but that the present Indian society was described as a volution of modernity, plurality, and synthesis. Also see Nandy 1983.

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