

The Queer Sound of the Dandiya Queen, Falguni Pathak

Pavitra Sundar

Blog post published October 23, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/thjb2-ewd19>

Abstract

co-edited by Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Authenticities, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound

Recommended citation

Sundar, P. (2017, October 23). The Queer Sound of the Dandiya Queen, Falguni Pathak. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/thjb2-ewd19>

Copyright

Copyright © Pavitra Sundar 2017. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



co-edited by Praseeda
Gopinath and Monika
Mehta

Our listening practices are discursively constructed. In the sonic landscape of India, in particular, the way in which we listen and what we hear are often normative, produced within hegemonic discourses of gender, class, caste, region, and sexuality. . . This forum, *Gendered Soundscapes of India*, offers snapshots of sound at sites of trans/national production, marketing, filmic and musical texts. Complementing these posts, the accompanying photographs offer glimpses of gendered community formation, homosociality, the pervasiveness of sound technology in India, and the discordant stratified soundscapes of the city. This series opens up for us the question of other contexts in India where sound, gender, and technology might intersect, but, more broadly, it demands that we consider how sound exists differently in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. How might we imagine a sonic framework and South Asia from these locations? —**Guest Editors Praseeda Gopinath and Monika Mehta**

For the full introduction to the forum, click [here](#).

To read all of the posts in the forum, click [here](#).

—

The late 1990s was a pivotal time for activism around queerness in India. The violent response of the Hindu right to [Deepa Mehta's *Fire*](#) (1998), a film portraying a romantic and sexual relationship between two women, prompted widespread debate on the question of censorship generally and of sexual-minority rights in particular. By rendering homosexuality explicit in its visuals and dialogues, and charting a linear trajectory of queerness—the protagonists move from unhappiness to happiness, denial to acceptance—*Fire* valorizes “coming out.” In the film, as in liberal strands of LGBT activism, it matters not only that one is out, but that one is *seen* as such. The premium placed on visibility in this formulation is undercut by the “queer” figure of Falguni Pathak. A tomboyish singer with a high-pitched voice, Pathak shot to fame with her debut album [Yaad Piya Ki Aane Lage](#) in the same year that *Fire* was released in India. Her performances mobilize disparate, even contradictory, signs of gender and sexuality at once, inviting us to examine the relationship between visibility and aurality in constructing queerness.

Falguni Pathak's stardom is typically understood in the context of economic liberalization and the reconfiguration of Indian public culture that followed. The 1990s boom in the music industry was facilitated by the spread of satellite television, which gave non-film singers a new platform and a new set of audiences. Pathak's "cute" and catchy love songs circulated endlessly on television countdown shows, turning her into an unlikely sensation. I say "unlikely" because Pathak's apparent tomboyishness seemed at odds with the hyper-femininity and heteronormativity of the narratives in her music videos. Romantic quests, schoolgirls giddy with love, feminine bonding over make-up and men—these are standard features of Pathak's videos, as is her own smiling presence as the singer-narrator. Through her gestures and lyrics, she comments on the lovesick teen's plight and steps in occasionally to comfort or help the young girl, as in her first hit, "Chudi."



<https://youtu.be/Xna3I1v9Vs>

For instance, in "[Maine payal hai chhankai](#)" ("The tinkling of my anklets," 1999) she cheers on a group putting on a dance and puppet show for a school function. In songs like "Chudi/Yaad piya ki aane lagi" ("Bangles/I remember my lover," 1998), "O piya" ("O beloved," 2001), and "[Rut ne jo bansi bajai](#)" ("The music of the weather," 2012) she is portrayed as a pop star.

<https://youtu.be/coJG9walQP4>

The singer-as-pop-star was a common trope in early Indipop music videos ([Kvetko](#)). But Pathak dressed very differently than other pop stars. Whether on or off screen, she was (and is) always in men's clothing, with a short, unfussy haircut and little make-up. Pathak's style was mirrored on occasion by a minor character in her music videos. ("Chudi" includes a tomboyish school girl who struggles with the dance moves her friends choreograph.) Thus, Pathak's visible presence in her videos brushed against the pitch, timbre, and style of her singing, which together articulated a hyper-feminine pop sensibility.

This sense of a "mismatch" ([Fleeger](#)) continues in Pathak's contemporary performances. She is the most sought-after vocalist for Navratri festivities in Mumbai each year. On each night of this nine-day long Hindu festival, the "Queen of Dandiya" appears on stage dressed in a brightly colored

kurta, vest, and trousers, and sings traditional Gujarati songs and hymns. The women in her audience dress more conventionally and more elaborately, in saris, salwaar kameez, and ghaghra-cholis. They dance in circles, performing recognizable *garba* moves. Meanwhile, Falguni Pathak saunters around the stage, engaging cheerfully with her fellow musicians and fans. Neither Pathak's clothes nor her unfeminine dance moves bother the revelers as they dance the night away. For example, note how Pathak sways and rocks to the beat 34 seconds into this lively 2012 stage performance of Suneeta Rao's hit song "Pari hun mein."



<https://youtu.be/ssh7iliB19E>

Falguni Pathak's [temple](#) performances at other times of the year are similar. They draw huge crowds unconcerned with the apparent mismatch between sound and image in her star persona. She tends to be as immersed in the devotional songs she sings as her audience. But her movements, plain clothes, and floppy hair-style make her look more like the male percussionists who accompany her, rocking and whipping their heads from side to side as they keep the beat, than the middle-class women clapping and singing along.

Performative traditions of mimicry and cross-dressing abound in India. But Pathak's gender performance does not align with those religious, folk, and filmic traditions (and tropes) because it never registers as masquerade. The very casualness of her look, the fact that she dresses in t-shirt and trousers in *all* of her public appearances, suggests that this is not a temporary or theatrical adoption of a gender role. When asked in interviews why she eschews traditionally feminine clothing, Pathak always responds that she never has worn anything other than pants and t-shirts and is comfortable as she is. There were certainly other pop stars in the 1990s whose musical performances had masculine elements to them. Recall, for instance, Shweta Shetty's suited look in "[Johnny Joker](#)" (1993). But none of Pathak's peers sported a butch look as consistently and nonchalantly as she did—and none of them sang in as saccharine a voice. After six decades of Lata Mangeshkar's vocal hegemony in Hindi cinema, such a "sweet," contained, and unadorned voice has come to represent ideal Indian femininity. Pathak sounds charming and benign in her songs and interviews, but she does not dress the part.



Pathak's challenging of conventional gender norms through her appearance and through the fact that she has never been married raises the specter of queerness in public discourse. But even that is difficult to pin down. Popular commentators and fans sometimes suggest that she looks like Kiran Bedi, a high-ranking (retired) police officer who enjoys celebrity status, making it hard to read the masculine details of Pathak's persona as "gay." Even as she is a queer icon ([Giani](#)), Pathak never comments on her sexuality or love life. She either evades questions about relationships or simply states that she is single. Where some celebrities come out publicly or keep alive innuendoes about their sexuality ([Singh](#)), she treats it as a non-issue. All in all, what we get in Falguni Pathak's music videos and star persona is a queerly gendered performance that seems both utterly "natural" (because it seems comfortable and casual) and profoundly mismatched.

To be clear, my argument is not so much that Falguni Pathak looks or sounds queer. The latter point is as hard to prove as the former is easy. If, for just a second, we manage to shut out of our mind's eye the image of Pathak singing, her voice sounds thoroughly conventional. She sings in a traditional idiom, of traditional themes. No matter how intently I listen, no "queer timbre" ([Bonenfant, Chaves Dasa](#)), no "butch throat" ([Glasberg](#)) reaches out to touch me. Thus on the one hand, Pathak, like the other "mismatched women" Jennifer Fleegeer writes about, confounds heteronormative expectations about gender and sexuality. On the other, her voice eludes "queer listening" ([Bonenfant](#)). What do we do with a queer figure who doesn't *sound* queer? How might we understand her voice vis-à-vis queerness in Indian public culture? How do her live performances today continue to disrupt the emphasis on visibility in queer studies and politics—that is, the fixation on visual representations and "coming out" of the closet? Finally, how might Pathak's "vocalic body" ([Connor](#)) help us conceive of the intersection of aurality and queerness in South Asian public culture?

Falguni Pathak intervened in a cultural field that was just beginning to deal with LGBT *visibility*. This becomes apparent when we remember that the 1990s was a period not just of economic liberalization but of vibrant queer activism as well. Pathak's non-feminine image was startling for a pop star, but her voice was familiar and "good." Her safe sound allowed her to push the boundaries of desire in televisual representations of the time. But it did more than that, too. The disjuncture between her feminine voice and butch look was critical to the complex landscape of

desire her music videos evoked. It created space for ambiguity and incongruity amid charged debates about alternative sexual identities.



<https://youtu.be/B537x76HO-4>

In “Main teri prem diwani/Indhana winva” (“I am madly in love with you,” 2001), Pathak stars as the neighbor to whom the protagonist turns for advice in matters of love. In an amazingly campy move, Pathak urges the young woman to seduce her lover by donning outfits inspired by *Moulin Rouge* (2001), specifically the song “Lady Marmalade” (00:36-00:55), and *The Mummy Returns* (2001) (1:59-2:03). Queerness is also writ large in “Meri chunnar udd udd jaye” (My scarf flies away, 2000), where Pathak appears as the beloved friend of a young girl in exile. The girl misses her friend intensely and attempts to recreate the dance moves and games she played with her older friend, this time with another mysterious woman who steps out of a painting.



<https://youtu.be/p9r2GxMIRD4>

Men's roles in this and other Falguni Pathak music videos are ambiguous at best ([Giani](#)). Thus, despite the happy ending to the teen love stories, what lingers is Pathak's simultaneous disruption and enabling of straight romance. This is why she is remembered fondly as a queer icon, even as the music scene in India has moved on from the "cuteness" of the 1990s. She offered LGBT audiences a way to read and revel in non-normative desires ([Giani](#)), without completely unseating "traditional" ways of living and loving.

The broader lesson in Falguni Pathak's performances is that we cannot think of visuality apart from aurality, and vice versa. No matter how hard NBC's "The Voice" tries to convince us ([Tongson](#)), we cannot in fact understand the sound of a singer's voice as separate from the image of her as a performer and the contexts in which she emerges on the scene. It is not Pathak's tomboyish appearance so much as the apparent disjuncture between that look and her voice that is key. What is queer about her voice is the look of it.

Featured Image: Falguni Pathak's classic pose.

Pavitra Sundar is Assistant Professor of Literature at Hamilton College, where she teaches courses on global film and literature. Her scholarly interests span the fields of cinema studies, sound studies, postcolonial literary and cultural studies, and gender-sexuality studies. She is currently completing a book manuscript on the politics of Bollywood film sound and music. Her work has been published in journals such as *Meridians*, *Jump Cut*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, and *Communication, Culture, and Critique*, as well as in anthologies on South Asian and other cinematic traditions.



REWIND!...If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[Ritual, Noise, and the Cut-up: The Art of Tara Transitory](#)—Justyna Stasiowska

[Moonlight's Orchestral Manoeuvres: A duet by Shakira Holt and Christopher Chien](#)

[If La Llorona Was a Punk Rocker: Detonguing The Off-Key Caos and Screams of Alice Bag](#)—Marlen Ríos-Hernández