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The Age of Aspiration? Music Classes and the Limits of Gendered Self-transformation in Mumbai

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Abstract: Contemporary India is marked by salient aspirational discourses, yet not everyone is understood to be capable of aspirational transformation. This article focuses on middle-aged "housewives" studying Hindi film song in a Mumbai music institute. Analyzing the professional visions they held alongside the domestic constraints they faced, I show how gender, generation, and life stage complicated their aspirational mobility. Yet, even as these housewives were marginalized within "Aspirational India," they used training in Hindi film song to remake themselves as singers and expressive selves. This work of musical self-transformation, I argue, made them visible as aspirational subjects in liberalizing India.

Resume : L'Inde contemporaine se caractérise par la prééminence des discours sur l'ambition mais, cependant, tout le monde n'est pas capable de se transformer pour répondre à ces ambitions. Cet article porte sur les « ménagères » d'âge moyen qui étudient les chansons des films hindi dans une école de musique de Bombay. En analysant la façon dont elles se représentaient la vie professionnelle à laquelle elles aspiraient parallèlement aux contraintes domestiques auxquelles elles devaient répondre, je montre comment le genre, les générations et les étapes de la vie compliquaient leur aspiration à la mobilité. Cependant, même si ces « ménagères » étaient marginalisées au sein de « l'Inde ambitieuse », elles utilisaient leur formation en chansons de films hindi pour se réinventer en tant que chanteuses exprimant leur personnalité. J'avance que ce travail sur l'auto-transformation musicale les rend visibles en tant que sujets ambitieux dans l'Inde en voie de libéralisation.

It's my second day back in Mumbai for a period of follow-up fieldwork in 2013, and I receive a message on my phone via the social messaging app WhatsApp. "Hi Anaar! U back??" It's from Pooja, a self-identified "housewife" and mother alongside whom I studied Hindi film song playback singing at the Institute for Performing Arts. We chat and I ask how her music has been going since we last saw each other, when Pooja was trying to make contacts and circulate her demo

CD of Hindi and Punjabi film songs. "Anaar, I actually couldn't do anything regarding my work [singing]," Pooja responds. "And [I] always thought of you – that you came from the US and do sooo much and went back. Things are sooo difficult staying in a joint family," she writes sadly, referring to the practice of living with her husband's extended family, "now I realize it" (WhatsApp, December 10th, 2013).[1]

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In contemporary India, the simultaneous processes of globalization and liberalization are producing wide-reaching economic, cultural, and social changes. These changes are accompanied by powerful aspirational discourses, discourses that yield new desires for social mobility and self-transformation that lead individuals to embark on projects of self-cultivation. But the extent to which individuals can materialize their aspirational dreams is profoundly configured by their social location, including their gender, caste, class, and, as I will show, life stage and generation. As my WhatsApp exchange with Pooja illustrates, urban middle-class housewives who seek to participate in this aspirational project encounter a range of complications.

In this article, I draw on my ethnographic research in a music institute in Mumbai that taught "playback" singing and billed itself as a professional gateway to Bollywood in order to investigate the confluence of gender, life stage, and generation in shaping access to aspirational promises. In particular, I focus on the numerous middle-aged housewives who attended these classes with dreams of becoming professional popular music singers.[2] In contrast to the younger female students – whose age marked them as the explicit objects of aspirational discourses – the housewives' practices of professional transformation were circumscribed by their familial and domestic commitments.

Attending to these housewives allows me to pursue two important analytical goals. Firstly, I emphasize life stage and generation as social categories that crucially impacted how these housewives were able to access aspirational mobility. While attention to life stage reveals the constraints imposed on these women by social and familial expectations of how middle-class housewives should act, generation affords insight into the configuration of their ambitions and desires and the durability of their "capacity to aspire," to borrow the words of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013 [2004]). Secondly, I highlight the disjuncture between the kinds of individuals I expected to encounter in this new site of musical pedagogy and the

housewives with whom I spent my time. In so doing, I take these housewives' presence in this aspirational space as a provocation to rethink the nature of aspiration in India today.

I begin by laying out my definition of aspiration and situating it within India's liberalizing and globalizing present, increasingly dubbed "Aspirational India." I then introduce the Institute of Performing Arts and the students whom I encountered there. Homing in on the housewives, I examine the familial and domestic obligations that they were navigating alongside their work of professional development. Finally, I return to the question of who counts as an aspirational subject. Emphasizing the housewives' life stage and generation, I propose a new understanding of aspiration in India that both recognizes the constraints that these housewives faced and yet accords value to their professional desires and work of self-transformation. Throughout, I highlight the significance of this singing class as the site of these women's projects of self-cultivation, suggesting that musical practice and the cultural economy of Bollywood are central to this age of aspiration.

Aspiration in the Context of Liberalization, Globalization, and Cultural Neoliberalism in India

"Aspiration" is a crucial marker and quality of life in contemporary urban India. From billboards reminding youth that "The World Speaks English – Why Don't You?" to reality music TV shows promising glamour and fame, aspiration can be understood as a set of dreams and ambitions emerging through and configured by the circulation of visual, textual, and oral consumerist discourses regarding personal potential and transformation. Aspiration has taken on increasing salience as a marker of (and marketing buzzword in) liberalizing India – it is at once used to describe a quality of modern India even as it hopes to *create* that reality in evoking it.[3] Indeed, if India of the early 2000s was branded as "India Shining," India in the present moment is increasingly known as "Aspirational India"[4] (see Fig. 1).

While individuals and communities across India have always held aspirations for a better life, the aspiration I trace here is of a different kind. Aspiration in the present moment focuses on the production of a striving subject, positing individual betterment and self-transformation as a precondition for mobility. It is this broader condition of being aspirational, which both encompasses and exceeds individual aspirations, that I call the aspirational project of contemporary India. Defining aspirations as "an affective-temporal formation," anthropologist Purnima Mankekar argues

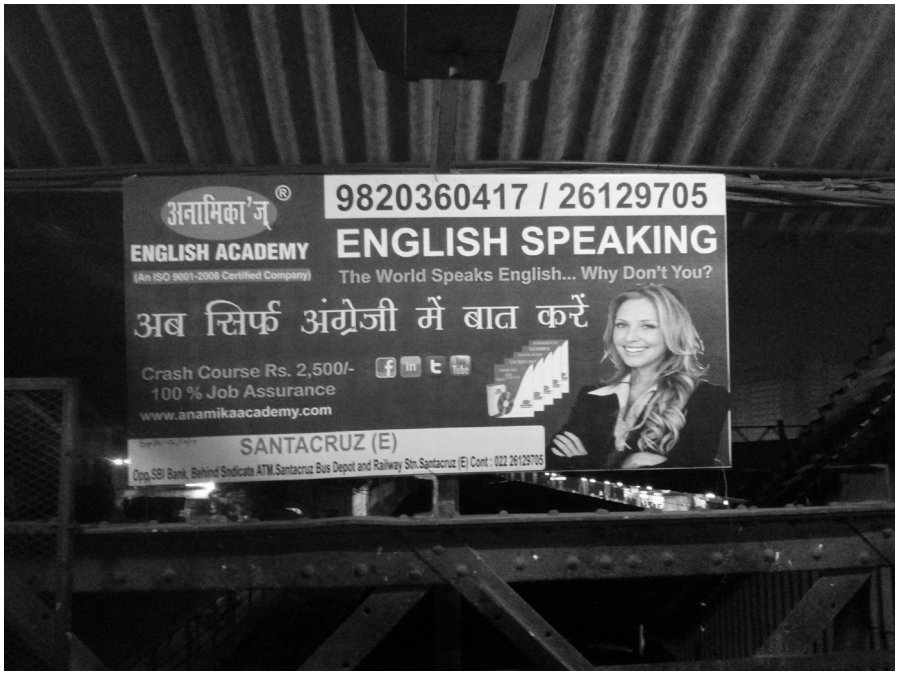

Fig. 1. "The World Speaks English … Why Don't You?" advertisement in Mumbai train station.

that as they "[draw] sustenance from a disjuncture between how subjects navigate the present and imagine the future, they are generative of specific forms of action and agency" (2015: 190). Contemporary aspiration, I will argue, resides in and thrives on this disjuncture as a quality of life rather than a gap to be bridged.[5]

The rise of "Aspirational India" is intimately tied to the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s. Prompted by a debt crisis and subsequent bailout by the International Monetary Fund, this historical juncture saw a shift away from the "Nehruvian" planned economy that had guided the Indian nation for the first half-century of its independence towards a consumer- and commodities-driven economy. The result was the increased presence of multinational corporations and a greater interpenetration with global media and consumer markets, resulting in the increased circulation of both consumer goods and commodity-oriented advertising discourses. Further, as social theorists Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam argue, these economic shifts led to a profound change in the kinds of material and social possibilities that became available to Indians, particularly for the middle class:

> It was the unshackling of imagination and the production of a new economy of desire that would push the growth of the future … the new economy was not simply about consumption; it was equally about desire, pleasure, and production at a dispersed and molecular level. (2007: 85)

This was the shifting social context in which the housewife students at IPA came of age, shaping their sense of self and their visions of the future.[6]

The aspirational project of contemporary India is certainly related to these new material possibilities and forms of desire that accompanied them. Further, I argue, this aspirational project is predicated on the work of individual "self-betterment." It implies that social mobility can be effected through, and indeed *requires*, a transformation of the self. In this way, the aspirational project is an important part of an emergent cultural neoliberalism in India. There has rightly been a great deal of ambivalence regarding the increased tendency to mark as "neoliberal" a range of practices and phenomena across a range of cultural contexts.[7] Indeed, India can hardly be called "neoliberal" in any clear-cut sense: the liberalization of the markets has been uneven and slow, and many parts of the economy continue to be tightly controlled. But, as many scholars have noted, neoliberalism is not only an economic project; it is equally a discursive and cultural project that rewards certain kinds of subjects.[8] Indeed, many of the discourses and tropes that mark the aspirational project of contemporary India – such as the valorization of a self-reliant, entrepreneurial individual making her way up in the world due to her inherent abilities and hard work – resonate with this second understanding of neoliberalism. It is for this reason that I turn to conceptualizing a "cultural neoliberalism" in contemporary India, what Purnima Mankekar calls "neoliberalism as an ethic of self-governance and self-production" (2015: 221). One broad question undergirding this paper, therefore, is: how are the opportunities seemingly promised through practices and discourses of aspiration unequally available to subjects who are differently placed in this neoliberal cultural economy?

The Institute of Performing Arts: A Site of Musical Aspiration

The aspirational project, and its emphasis on the cultivation of the self as an integral part of social mobility, has generated a range of new schools, institutes, and training programs seeking to capitalize on a widespread demand for sites wherein new skills and new ways of being can be learned.[9] Here, I focus on

the Institute of Performing Arts (IPA) as one such site wherein individuals could work on and develop themselves through music.

I discovered IPA when I was living in Mumbai, conducting multi-sited dissertation research on so-called "reality" music TV shows, such as *Indian Idol* and *SaReGaMaPa*. I was fascinated by these shows as a cultural phenomenon. The popularity and reach of the shows was staggering,[10] and the very fact that a "home-grown" show like *SaReGaMaPa* had started in the early 1990s, a full decade before the rise of the *Idol* franchise, destabilized still-common assumptions about the "Western" origins of global cultural flows. Moreover, the popularity and influence of the shows raised interesting questions about their impact on the popular music economy in terms of showcasing new performance styles and voices and providing new forms of access to a musical career in Bollywood, thereby changing the very nature of what it meant to be a popular music singer in India.[11]

Indeed, these shows have brought a new visibility to the career of popular music singing at the same time that they have connected professional musical careers with aspirational stories of "making it big." While narratively highlighting musical successes and failures on the show, they emphasize the material wealth and social stature that can potentially accrue to young people who pursue this path. For "youngsters" and, importantly, their parents, reality music TV shows have rewritten the social meaning attached to a career in popular music, a professional path that was once regarded with some skepticism and suspicion, through promises of economic and social gain. As a result, there has been an increased demand for training in music, as many of the individuals involved in the Hindi film music industry with whom I met attested. IPA was a direct manifestation of this renewed interest in musical training.[12]

Reality music television shows are central producers of neoliberal aspirational discourses, showcasing stories about how anybody from any rung of society and any social background can achieve social mobility, fame, and success, provided that they have "talent." As Shikha Jhingan demonstrates, narratives of individual growth and transformation are integral to these shows (Jhingan 2012). Beyond improvements in their singing and performance abilities, the contestants are shown becoming comfortable in front of the cameras and lights, increasing savvy with fans, and undergoing makeovers. They actively perform a transition from their ordinary, often small-town middle-class backgrounds to being cosmopolitan pop music stars-in-the-making. Reality music TV shows therefore implicitly posit popular musical practice as a site wherein personal transformation can be effected. And they suggest that there is a necessary connection between

the transformation of the self, realization of one's professional ambitions (here, becoming a playback singer), and economic and social mobility.

I first learned about IPA through a regularly occurring advertisement placed in the back of the Mumbai Mirror, one of the most popular English-language newspapers in the large metropolis. Set amongst promotions for gym trainer certification and English classes, the small ad for IPA boldly promised yet another way to get ahead in contemporary urban India. "Your Gateway to Bollywood," it proclaimed, listing classes in acting, dancing, and singing and promising "… untold advantages under one roof!" In small red print was yet another promise: "Specialized training for reality show participants (Singing/Dancing)." Although I had not previously encountered such a training institute in India, I was not altogether surprised. The *New York Times* had recently run an article about the K-pop industry in Korea and the specialized schools that trained students from a very young age to succeed as K-pop stars (Sang-hun 2013). In the Indian context, a school focusing on playback singing and the training of students for reality music TV shows made sense, given increasingly mobile wealth and new desires to succeed.

As I started attending classes at IPA, the institute met many of my expectations for what a site of aspirational musical practice and training should be like. It was located in a large, gated corporate complex in a northern Mumbai suburb, and was thus squarely situated – both physically and metaphorically – within the global flows and new money of contemporary urban India. Although modest in size, it was glossy and shiny in all the right ways, from the large flat screen TV mounted on the wall of the impeccably white reception room to the enclosed recording studio and the large mirror-lined dance rehearsal room. The institute had started only a few years earlier; in addition to singing classes, it offered courses in acting, dancing, and "personality enhancement," and there were always students buzzing in and out of the reception area and small canteen. The classes were expensive: I paid nearly one *lakh* rupees (100,000 rupees, or roughly 1,600 US dollars) for four months of group singing classes that met almost every day for several hours, enhanced by the guarantee that we would record a demo CD and receive a certificate of course completion. Other music schools charged less than a tenth of this amount, and even private lessons with the most exclusive teachers would be half the cost of what IPA charged.[13] IPA's fees were emblematic of the exclusive image the school cultivated and the level of professional opportunity and social transformation it seemed to promise.

IPA's classes were further distinguished from most singing classes and schools across the city in that they focused on Hindi film songs and on

the techniques of "playback" singing rather than classical music.[14] Guided by one male and one female teacher, we spent much of class working on Hindi film songs, from old classics to recent hits, focusing on their musical nuances and attempting to conjure the right sentiments and emotions. Our two teachers had distinguished pedigrees in Hindustani classical music: one came from an illustrious family of singers, while the other held a Masters degree from a prestigious music college. Both had made forays into the world of Hindi film music ("the industry") as singers and composers; more importantly, both had acted as vocal coaches and behind-the-scenes judges in the early rounds of reality music TV shows. While they were by no means stars, they had enough experience in the music, media, and film world to speak authoritatively about "the industry" and to guide us in the specific requirements and subtleties of Hindi film songs. Playback singing, after all, was the art of lending your voice to an on-screen actress, so our teachers schooled and scolded us about what it meant to act with our voices. When they wanted a break from our sometimes clumsy musical efforts, they would gossip about the Bollywood film and music industries, teaching us about success, ambition, and professional savvy through stories of playback singers both past and present. As the course progressed, we began to work towards creating demo CDs, trying out songs that would showcase our voices and practicing singing "on the mic" over backing tracks. First in rehearsal and then in the recording booth, we sought to emulate the recorded versions of the songs by channeling the famous voices that had first recorded them. This, it turned out, was what the ad for IPA had referred to in its promise to train students for reality music TV shows: a focus on the repertoire of Hindi film songs and the nuances of vocal expression and technique, practice singing with a mic, and insight into the professional world of playback singing.

IPA looked and felt like a musical site of aspiration, a place where students could come to work towards new versions of themselves and new lives. However, if the aspirational subject on display in media discourses and reality music TV shows is marked by her youth, my classes were populated by housewives, women in their thirties and forties whose age rendered them ineligible to even audition for, let alone appear on, a reality music TV show. Their presence productively complicated my understanding of the school, which I had assumed was focusing on preparing the performers who wished to be included in the next generation of reality music and playback singing success stories. In the next section, I introduce my fellow students and draw out the tension between the "normative" or ideal, aspirational subject and the women I encountered at IPA.

Singing Students and the Youthful Object of Aspiration

My singing class was composed of approximately ten women, ranging in age from 16 to 40, who travelled from across the suburbs of Mumbai to attend classes.[15] On the first day of classes, we were introducing ourselves, sharing our musical and personal backgrounds, when the door opened slowly and a skinny, wide-eyed girl entered. Tanvi had just arrived in Mumbai to pursue her dream of becoming a playback singer. She had come to Bombay two years earlier to audition for *Indian Idol*, standing in line for hours only to be told that she was ten days too young to take the audition. Nonetheless, her dream of becoming a Bollywood playback singer persisted, supported by her immediate family – they had pawned jewelry while assuaging familial concerns about the respectability of having a daughter who was a popular music singer and the risks of sending her off to a large metropolis on the other side of the country. Now, at the age of 18, Tanvi had moved from the eastern state of Orissa explicitly to attend classes at IPA after finding the school through online searches. Staying in a paying-guest house with other young female singers and attending daily classes at IPA, she was also carefully navigating the process of trying to make connections in the Hindi film music industry. Tanvi was relatively unschooled in music and she knew little about musical terminology and structures. She had a sweet voice, though, and a thorough knowledge of Bollywood songs from the past ten years. In particular, she was infatuated with the popular singer Arijit Singh, and she sang his love ballads with a moving intensity, eyes closed, brows furrowed with yearning and pathos.

Tanvi was the kind of student I had expected to meet in this aspirational musical site. In popular media discourses and scholarly literature alike, youth are figured as the emblematic aspirational subject in contemporary India.[16] For example, Shikha Jhinghan investigates how teenage female contestants on reality music TV shows negotiate their aspirations in the space of global media (2012). Ritty Lukose focuses on college students in rural Kerala, arguing that although these students are far from India's metropolitan centres, "on the margins of [globalization's] dominant articulations, [they are] fully formed by its structures of aspiration and opportunity" (2009: 3). And Mankekar draws out the relationship between aspiration and subject formation by examining how young professionals in Delhi call centres enter into this field in order acquire certain forms of cultural capital (2015).

There is a certain common sense to this linkage between aspiration and youth. India's population is heavily youth oriented: more than 60% are under the age of thirty-five, and 45% are under the age of twenty-five,

with a median age of 27. If "Aspirational India" is marked by promises of social mobility that require geographic mobility, by increased social power through consumption, and by an increased attention to neoliberal discourses of individual self-worth informed by globalized media, young people seem the most well situated. They are, potentially, the most mobile and the most connected to new technologies. While many are still dependent on their parents for financial resources and their consumptive power, they are also the targets of much consumer advertising. Most fundamentally, young people are positioned – because of their age and stage of life – to believe that they can change their lives and their futures can be different from those of their parents and others around them.

Young, mobile, and having taken on significant economic and social risk to pursue her ambition, Tanvi was the aspirational subject par excellence. But if she, and the several other young students, were the ones who "should" be there in the narrative of aspirational India, then what to make of the rest of my fellow students who identified firstly as wives and mothers, and whose primary obligation was their domestic labour? For example, Pooja introduced herself as a mother and *bahu* (or daughter-in-law). She had sung in school and won competitions; now she managed her house and took care of her in-laws and young son while her architect husband travelled for work. Hearing this, our teacher responded that she was very lucky that her husband supported her desire to sing, commenting, "I'm sorry, but for ladies, it can be very difficult!" Nishika, a round-faced Bengali woman, introduced herself as a mother and self-employed graphic designer. Nishika had studied classical music when she was younger, even performing in a few stage shows of "light" music, and she made sure to have time for singing within all her professional and home responsibilities. She had found IPA through a Google search, and hoped that it would allow her to update her training and start a musical career as a stage performer. A few weeks later, we were joined by Preeti, a gregarious, skinny housewife and mother of two. Preeti had studied classical music previously, and had dabbled in a career in music while in college after being told she had a good voice. She told us a story of calling up a well-known film music director and convincing him to listen her. "What happened?" we all gasped, and Preeti laughed at her own youthful brazenness: "I went there and told him, listen to me sing and give me work. He said, 'How? You aren't ready! Practice for five years, then come back,' because I didn't know *anything*!" Subsequently, her desire to be a professional singer had been derailed by marriage and children. She had seen the IPA advertisement in the newspaper and thought it might be a place where she could "get a chance." "Singing is my passion," she exclaimed. "This much is clear to me:

I have to sing." Pooja, Nishika, and Preeti brought an undeniable sense of commitment and discipline to the classes. And yet, cognizant of the broader societal emphasis on youth as agents of social mobility, and the constraints placed upon women with household obligations, I wondered: what were these "housewives" doing in a school that explicitly marketed itself as a space for professional mobility and success, and which seemed to promise forms of self-transformation in the process?

Housewives and the Paradox of Professional Futures

For all of us, the classes were a pleasurable space, a chance to delve into Hindi popular song in devoted company, and to socialize at lunch break. For the housewife students in particular, the classes were a welcome opportunity to escape the tedium of daily domestic responsibilities – such as cooking for their family, tending to children, husbands, and in-laws, overseeing domestic help, and other activities associated with managing the house – and to have an excuse to get out of the house. They were both affectionate and slightly patronizing towards the younger students, teasing Tanvi about her starry-eyed dreams and lack of knowledge about "the industry."

The classes were, however, by no means simply "time-pass." To the contrary, everyone approached the project of learning to sing playback with great seriousness. When one of our teachers turned the *tanpura* on for the morning session, we would straighten up, plant our feet on the floor, close our eyes as we located the pitch and allowed it to resonate in our bodies.[17] As we warmed up by singing increasingly complex *alaaps* and *tans* in a given rag, many of the students would screw their eyes shut with concentration and furrow their brows with effort as they attempted to replicate the intricate patterns.[18] In the afternoons, we took turns presenting Hindi film songs that we had prepared at home, ranging from old classics to newer hits. This was the focal point of the class, and students would quickly duck into the hallway to practice or listen to a song one more time on their headphones. One by one, we would attempt to reproduce a song's complex melodic ornamentation with exacting precision and to convey the right sentiments, using our hands, eyebrows, and bodies to both guide and represent the feelings we were drawing out. Students' bodies and performative presence changed depending on the mood of the song: a slower love song might yield closed eyes, eyebrows raising as the singer reached for an expressive high note, while more upbeat songs were marked by open chests, lifted chins, tapping feet. After each song, our teachers

gave feedback and we listened intently, internalizing the commentary and promising to do better (see Fig. 2).

As we sat in the small school canteen during our lunch break, my classmates would discuss their future professional plans. This was particularly true as the course drew to a close and we began to record songs for our "demo CDs." These demo CDs were understood to be an indispensable tool for launching ourselves as professional singers – we could post them on YouTube or SoundCloud, send the files to producers, or simply pass out copies of the CDs to useful contacts. Pooja planned to share the CD with a friend who was already in the industry in the hopes that he would be impressed and pass her name on to others. Nishika and Preeti both wanted to send the CDs to people who might be able to give them a break, or, as Nishika proposed, "If we go to meet someone, we can show them the CD." Preeti agreed, strategizing by saying: "Contacts are essential – but we don't have any! So we'll have to approach people directly." Nishika had a still more elaborate plan. As a Bengali, she would get herself featured on one of the many morning music shows that aired in Kolkata: "Maybe I'll have to give some money, but I'll get a lot of publicity, a lot of promotion … many people watch [these shows], so I'll quickly get recognition." The CDs and the song

Fig. 2. A recording session in progress at the Institute for Performing Arts.

recordings they contained thus took on great significance as crucial tools for, and in, an imagined professional future.

The act of recording itself was equally significant in establishing the students' professional credentials and dreams. Through the process of recording at the school, students could claim experience singing "on the mic" and working in a studio, distinguishing themselves from other, less prepared singers and positioning themselves that much closer to the professional futures of live and recorded performance they envisioned. This "experience" gained during recording was not merely technical or technological. It was an important chance to practice the very essence of playback singing, capturing one's "vocal acting" in recorded form, as the great playback singers, from Lata Mangeshkar to Sunidhi Chauhan, had done.

Yet the professional ambitions espoused by each of the middle-aged students were interlaced with the gravitational force of their domestic obligations. On the final day of classes, our teacher announced that his housing society would be having a talent show in the evening, and invited any of us to show up and sing one or two songs. I turned to Nishika and Preeti – surely, this was the opportunity they were seeking! But they hedged: "We don't really have any songs ready … " Later, Preeti explained that since the show was in the evening, her husband wouldn't allow her to go alone. "But concerts will always be at night," I pointed out, and Preeti nodded, pondering this fact: "I need a friend to go with me." The demands of Preeti's domestic life, which required that she be home in the evening tending to her family, in tandem with concerns about the propriety and safety of her going out alone at night, limited what she could do. Preeti, it turned out, hadn't told anyone in her family, aside from her husband, that she was taking singing classes. "It's not that they're so orthodox," she explained, "but they'll ask: 'why are you doing this at this age, with all your home responsibilities, at so much cost?'"

The demands and expectations of one's in-laws were major obstacles to the housewives' ability to realize – or even pursue – their professional musical ambitions. Pooja seemed to be frequently in conflict with her *saas-sasur* (mother and father-in-law), who wanted her singing classes to end so that she could be back in the home, taking care of them. She would show up to class looking exhausted, dark circles under her eyes, full of stories about how they were jealous of her relationship with her husband and manufactured reasons to make her do more around the house. As we rode the train home together, I asked Pooja how her in-laws felt about her taking this singing class and she replied with exasperation, "You know, my mother-in-law, she's always asking me: 'when is that class going to be done?'" Pooja revealed her

plan to enroll in another class once this one was done: " … perhaps a dance class – I can't just stay home all day!" She reflected that living together in joint families was the reason that so much tension formed in so many families. Although I too was married, I was often told how lucky I was that my in-laws were far away and were not there to make demands on me.

The housewives' husbands were generally more supportive. They had encouraged their wives to attend these singing classes and to develop themselves as singers; indeed, they were the ones covering the high fees for the course. Yet with them, too, there were limits. Pooja's husband travelled frequently, making it hard for her to actually leave the house to pursue professional opportunities. Nishika's husband had encouraged her to perform a few songs at a function put on by his company, but he also wanted her to re-record her demo CD because he found one song objectionable. Nishika had recorded "Julmi Re Julmi," ("O Cruel One"), a sassy and sexy "item number" song from the 2013 film *Rajjo*. She had done an impeccable job, to the point that my fellow students thought that she had actually rendered it better than the original. Nonetheless, Nishika's husband was uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because of the playfully suggestive lyrics.[19] Or perhaps he didn't like the fact that the song's video featured scantily clad women dancing in front of a male patron. Whatever the reason, he didn't want Nishika to play it for anyone. "There's nothing dirty in it, but …" She shrugged, acquiescing.

Generation and Life Stage: Re-Thinking Aspiration

In the months following this fieldwork, I struggled to make sense of these urban middle-class housewives' presence in this aspirational musical space. It was clear that the kinds of professional development these women could undertake was profoundly conscribed by their domestic and familial obligations. Needing to be home in the evenings to prepare meals, tend to their husbands and in-laws, and put their children to sleep, Preeti, Nishika, and Pooja, were, to varying extents, unable to attend concerts and shows, which were crucial sites for networking and making connections. During the daytime, the many responsibilities built into their home-oriented schedules made it difficult to suddenly go to auditions, meet with contacts, or otherwise follow up on opportunities that might arise at a moment's notice. Even if they could go out, they had to be very careful about maintaining their respectability in terms of who they could meet, where they could safely go, and even, as Nishika's husband's complaints about her CD illustrated, what they could sing.[20] In an industry that demanded a great deal of flexibility –

the ability to respond to a call, go to a meeting or a recording session, even travel domestically or abroad for gigs, all with short notice – and depended so much on "face value" and being seen around as a precursor for getting a break, they were at a real disadvantage.

Here, I want to emphasize the importance of what I am calling "life stage," that is, the socially constituted phases of the life cycle. The traditional Hindu (male) life cycle was once divided into four ideal stages or *ashrams*: Student (*Brahmacharya*), Householder (*Grihastha*), Retiree (*Vanprastha*), and Renunciate (*Sannyasa*). While the ashram system was not historically intended to apply to women or lower castes (Lubin 2011), the lives of urban middle-class girls and women in contemporary India are clearly structured by a modified life cycle that sets the expectation of educational studies (usually through college), followed by marriage, and then children. While some women go on to have various kinds of careers, most women occupy what I am calling the "housewife" stage of life – where their primary obligation is to tend to their children, spouse, and extended family – until they become either a mother-in-law or a widow. It is a life stage that carries strong societal expectations in terms of women's behaviour, obligations, and priorities.[21]

The importance of life stage, and the ways in which it configures the possibilities of action, affords a partial explanation for the disjuncture between what was possible for me and my fellow students in ways that age, as an analytical framework, cannot capture. Indeed, I was at the time in my early thirties, roughly the same age as Nishika and Pooja, and I too was married. But the fact that I did not yet have children and that both my parents and in-laws were back in America meant that I simply did not have the same kinds of demands on my time and was not expected to orient myself to care of the household in the same way that they were. Thus, the stages of life that marked my life – as a woman of Indian descent raised abroad, married to a white American, and pursuing doctoral research – meant that I had access to forms of geographic mobility, social connectivity, and professional opportunity that my fellow housewife students viewed with jealousy.

Neoliberal discourses of aspiration currently circulating in India promise the possibility of social mobility to anyone regardless of their social position – the confluence of gender, class, caste, and, indeed, life stage – as long as they are able to work hard and effect forms of self-transformation. These discourses are manifestly individualist, positing the individual consumer-subject as the locus of change, independent of the social structures which have marked, and continue to mark, daily life in India. Yet, as the examples of these housewives make abundantly clear, one's social location profoundly impact an individual's ability to materialize aspirational self-transformation. These students' duties

– and, indeed, identities – as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law were supposed to supersede their professional desires and individual ambitions. In a moment when aspiration is so much about the cultivation of the individual self, these women were profoundly responsible for and beholden to other lives. Their stage in the gendered life cycle configured and limited how they could fulfill their aspirational visions, from the songs they could sing to the professional opportunities they could pursue.

Yet, while the housewives in my singing class did not fit into the broad conception of aspirational subjects currently circulating in India, there was no denying that they *were* aspirational. Nishika and Preeti, for example, articulated a simultaneous sense of desire and renewed possibility that had driven them to come to IPA and imagine professional futures beyond it. "I'm well educated," Preeti said, "I'm from a good family, but that identity doesn't matter – I want to be known as a singer." "Yes, me too, as a singer," Nishika said, her words spilling out and overlapping with Preeti's. "This is the second phase of my life – I'm taking it like that. One phase has gone, this is the second." For these housewives, then, this class was understood to be a significant step towards a new stage of their life wherein they might be known not as mothers and wives, but as singers. Further, each was driven by a sense of her own promise, both as a musician and as a charismatic actor in the world. Preeti reflected this sense of compulsion and propulsion when she explained her decision to come to the school by exclaiming, "Mujhe kuch karna hai – I have to do something!" This sense of potential was partially grounded in their earlier histories of musical success, such as winning competitions and awards when they were younger. But in order to more fully understand the motivations and conceptions of self that underlie these women's desires and ambitions, it is critical to place them generationally.

Pooja, Preeti, and Nishika were teenagers and college students in the early-to-mid 1990s, which is to say they came of age precisely during the moment of India's economic liberalization. Their young adulthood was marked by profound shifts in the kinds of consumer commodities available, increased awareness of globally informed tastes and patterns of consumption, and changing discourses about Indian selfhood. To borrow Ritty Lukose's phrase, they were "liberalization's children," shaped by the desires and new possibilities that arose during this economic and cultural shift (2009). But for these women, there is also a sense that the timing was off: they came of age early in the process of liberalization, when the expectations for women's lives had not yet shifted to open up new possibilities and opportunities, as they have for young women coming of age today. Still, in their adult lives, they found themselves constantly interpellated by aspirational discourses that

spoke to their sense of individual potential and the need for self-realization. Whether through TV shows, advertisements, billboards, or conversations that circulated in their homes and communities, aspirational discourses had permeated these women's domestic lives with enough persuasive force that they had been moved to come to IPA, curtailing their domestic responsibilities, going so far as to deceive in-laws, and exerting considerable money, time, and effort to attend classes where they could be trained in singing film songs. Certainly, there was a dissonance between their stated aspirations and their ability to *materialize* their felt potential and parlay it into new professional opportunities. And yet, there can be no doubt that IPA was a site that afforded them a new sense of possibility and allowed them to undertake substantial practices of aspiration.[22]

Scholarly investigations of aspiration in India, therefore, must at once be broadened and refined in order to include these housewives' experiences and efforts in our conception of the aspirational project. When Appadurai first began to theorize the "capacity to aspire" as a "cultural capacity" in 2004, the cultural impact of liberalization was just beginning to be felt; the demographic and cultural-discursive framework for a neoliberal "Aspirational India" was just beginning to be laid. Appadurai's conceptualization of aspiration is dominated by "aspirations," in the plural, as specific goals and desires to be realized. While acknowledging the personal importance and deep meaning of such discrete aspirational visions – such as becoming a popular music singer – my research suggests that an emphasis on the materialization and realization of aspirations is inadequate for capturing the nature and scope of the contemporary neoliberal aspirational project. In order to expand our understanding of the aspirational project, I turn instead to Purnima Mankekar's recent work on aspiration and affect in neoliberal India.

Using the lens of "im/personation," Mankekar focuses on the ways call centre agents remake themselves at the level of embodied subjectivity, acquiring cultural and symbolic capital as a precursor to economic capital. This resonates with the way in which the housewives in my class used musical practice to embark on projects of embodied self-transformation. Further, Mankekar's observation that "aspirations to growth and mobility were hence inextricably entangled" (2015: 210) mirrors my conceptualization of India's contemporary aspirational project with which I began this article: predicated on the work of self-cultivation, the aspirational project posits self-transformation as a precursor to social mobility. Pushing this characterization further, I argue that it is precisely the labour of self-cultivation and self-transformation that defines the aspirational subject. In fact, as I noted earlier, it is the disjuncture between an individual's current social position and that

to which they aspire that constitutes an aspirational existence. The quality of *being* aspirational or "on the make," then, is what allows the individual to be a participant in "Aspirational India," not the successful materialization of one's particular dreams and ambitions.

Discursively situated at the margins of India's aspirational project by virtue of their age and life stage, but still very much influenced by aspirational discourses, the housewife students were navigating twin imperatives. Having come of age in tandem with India's liberalization, they sensed that they could – and should – lead lives different from those led by women of previous generations, seeking out new professional opportunities and forms of expressive subjectivity. Yet social expectations regarding the activities and behaviours that should be enacted by married women with children were tenacious. The women continually faced resistance to their aspirational musical efforts, sometimes from in-laws, sometimes from husbands.

Nonetheless, these housewives had already succeeded in shifting the horizons of their domestically oriented lives by attending singing classes at this new kind of music institution, which positioned itself as a gateway not only to Bollywood, but also to the aspirational project of modern India. At the Institute for Performing Arts, they had become privy to gossip and insider information about the Bollywood industry, practiced in the nuances of singing Hindi film songs, and newly familiar with the technological practices of using a mic and recording. Regardless of whether they might audition for a reality music TV show or sing as professional playback singers, the singing classes at IPA had given these women a privileged experiential proximity to the Bollywood film and music industry, arguably the leading producer of aspirational visions, desires, discourses, and sentiments in contemporary India. Further, in singing Hindi film songs, they had accessed new emotional and expressive states, so that their aspirational efforts were undergirded by powerful changes at the level of subjectivity. Indeed, as the course drew to a close, I asked Preeti whether she had found the class valuable and she perked up, her eyes glinting and smile widening: "I am so happy! My whole atmosphere and mood have changed! A strong positive feeling has come." She recounted that, before beginning the class, she was wondering, "Is this all there is in life?" After coming to IPA, everything was going better: "I have confidence. I feel happy. I feel, I can be a singer; it's become possible. I've found a direction and I'll put all my dedication there." In envisioning and preparing for professional musical futures, these housewives were doing what modern aspirational subjects are supposed to be doing in India today: finding ways to develop and transform themselves. In so doing, they were making themselves visible as subjects in "Aspirational India."

Notes

1. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity. All conversations, interviews, and observations are drawn from my fieldwork at the Institute for Performing Arts between August 2013 and March 2014.

2. The label "housewife" (*grihirni* or *gharvali* in Hindi) denotes a woman who primarily tends to her home and family. In India, where only 24 percent of women work outside of the home (Pande and Moore 2015), "housewife" is a common designation, one that women across a variety of backgrounds and ages apply to themselves without the negative connotations that it carries in the West.

3. My characterization of aspirational discourses draws on Mazzarella 2003 and his account of how advertising professionals in early liberalizing India sought to create "the Indian Consumer."

4. "India Shining" refers to a marketing campaign and slogan deployed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2003 as they sought re-election by projecting visions of a prosperous and globally competitive India. Faced with low levels of economic growth, however, the BJP lost soundly to the Congress Party in 2004, and the "India Shining" campaign was quickly turned into mocking evidence of their disconnect from the realities of the Indian populace at the time. Reflecting on the campaign, journalist Aakar Patel writes: "["India Shining"] told Indians that they were a Great Power and a middle-income nation. The problem, of course, is that we were neither" (Patel 2013). The "India Shining" label, however, has persevered in the press and popular discourse as a metonym for the gap between India's increasing global economic and cultural clout and its struggle to address domestic issues of poverty, education, and unemployment. For further analysis of the "India Shining" campaign in relation to the political and economic potential of the new middle classes, see Fernandes (2006: 189-198).

5. Chua (2014) studies the "problem" of aspiration by examining suicide in the state of Kerala in South India, a reminder of the stakes of aspirational disjuncture.

6. There is a robust body of literature on the social and cultural effects of economic liberalization in India, with particular attention paid to the rise of the "new" middle classes and the social practices associated with them. See Brosius (2010), Fernandes (2006), Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2009), and Oza (2006).

7. See Ganti (2014) for a thoughtful and trenchant critique of the term in the South Asian context, and Ong (2006) for a critical appraisal of theorizations of neoliberalism as a totalizing system.

8. Such a perspective grows out of Foucault's initial lectures on neoliberalism and the rise of *homo economicus* at the College de France, 1978-1979 (Foucault 2004). See Allison (2013), Brown (2003), Comaroff and Comaroff (2001), and Ong (2006) as examples of scholarship that explore neoliberal subjecthood and subjectivity.

9. See McGuire (2011) for a useful investigation of how young Indians undertake embodied training in order to effect upward mobility.

10. For example, the finale of *SaReGaMaPa* in 2009 drew 22.9 million viewers (Essel Group Press Release 2009).

11. In fact, the shows often play a conservative musical role, rewarding performances that emulate the "original" song and singer. See Desai-Stephens (2016).

12. This increased demand for music training and the rise of institutes catering to it is preceded by the phenomenon of Bollywood dance schools catering to middle-class women and youth. See Chakravorty (2011) and Morcom (2014, 2015) for more in-depth studies of Bollywood dance classes and the new aesthetics, values, and ideologies that they represent. Morcom's chapter, "The Bollywood Dance Revolution and the Embourgeoisement of Indian Performing Arts" (2014), which analyzes the appeal of such classes to middle-class housewives, offers an illuminating parallel to the singing classes I focus on, including ongoing concerns about female respectability and the emotional and subjective changes that such classes afford. However, while Bollywood oriented dance schools are now widespread across India and in places with a large South Asian population (such as the UK and America), Bollywood oriented singing schools are far less common. My research turned up only a handful of institutes across India, including the short-lived *Indian Idol* Academy and a few other institutes in Mumbai and Delhi that offered playback singing courses. This discrepancy can, in part, be attributed to a consensus that the musical training and skills required for playback singing are not markedly different from those required for classical or light classical music.

13. By way of comparison, fees at an established music institute in Mumbai are only 4,000 rupees for four months of group singing classes. However, these classes meet only twice a week for one hour.

14. Playback refers to the long-standing division in Hindi film between the singers who provide the voices for songs and the actors and actresses who mime them. The singers, who often record the songs first, are called "playback" singers and the subsequent shooting of the visuals is called the "picturization." For more detailed explanation of this process and the history of the playback system, see Ganti (2013) and Majumdar (2009).

15. Although male students did appear for a few classes, they rarely stayed, as they were called back to their jobs and businesses, or were more willing to undertake the work of trying to get a break and become a singer on their own.

16. Beyond the context of India, Dewey and Brison provide a useful overview of the "explosion of scholarly interest in youth cultures … [and] the question of how young people shape, and are shaped by, the experiences of globalization in late modernity" (2012: 5).

17. A *tanpura* is the four-stringed plucked lute that Indian classical and light classical singers use to create an underlying drone. In contemporary performance practice, the tanpura drone is often provided by a "tanpura machine," a small box that replicates the sound; apps are also available for iPad and mobile phone.

18. An *alaap* is an unmetered melismatic vocal solo that begins both practice and performance. Singing on "ah," the singer uses the alaap to explore the contour and notes of a given *rag* or melodic mode. *Tans* are melodic patterns that can be used as part of an improvisation.

19. "Julmi Re Julmi" narrates a lover sneaking into the female singer's house and "disturbing" her sleep. The chorus ends with the line, "Slowly, my *bindi* [the dot on the forehead that signifies marriage and respectability] slipped off," hinting at a sexual liaison or extramarital affair.

20. Questions of gendered and classed respectability are importantly at play here in ways that I cannot explore for reasons of space. For accounts of the historical linkage between female respectability and artistic performance, see Allen (1997) and Weidman (2006).

21. See Donner (2008) for a rich ethnographic account of middle-class women in Kolkata, the impact of life cycle, and the importance of family as an institution. Significantly, India has one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation amongst developing countries, a rate that has been dropping over the past decade; additionally, that rate is even lower in urban areas and decreases as family income levels go up (Das et al. 2015).

22. There are, however, increased efforts to include middle-aged women in India's aspirational project. One example is found in the popular reality television show *Dance India Dance* (DID), which premiered their "DID Supermom" series in 2013. Advertised as "a show that will give a platform to those women who gave up their dream of becoming a dancer and settled for a career, family life, and motherhood," the show features women from across the country showcasing their skills in a variety of dance forms while sharing their stories of being a "supermom," that is, a woman who "does it all."

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