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## ARTICLES

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# Reality TV and Participatory Culture in India

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This article focuses on events surrounding the third season of *Indian Idol* in order to assess the changing relationship between television, everyday life, and public political discourse in contemporary India. In the summer of 2007, media coverage of *Indian Idol* focused on how people in Northeast India cast aside decades-old separatist identities to mobilize support for Amit Paul and Prashant Tamang, the two finalists from the region. Situating this media phenomenon in relation to the changing landscape of Indian television and the socio-historical context of ethno-national politics in Northeast India, I explore how reality television, combined with mobile media technologies and practices, has enabled new modes of cultural and political expression. Positing the notion of “mobile publics,” I argue that participatory cultures surrounding television create possibilities for the renewal of everyday forms of interaction in public settings that may have been forgotten, subdued, or made impossible under certain political circumstances.

“Singing along karaoke style, as the nation sings and swings with him, Amit Paul knows he is the king,” began a television news report on one of the finalists on the third season of *Indian Idol*. With shots of a large open-air stadium packed to capacity, close-ups of fans carrying posters declaring their support for Amit Paul, and people from different backgrounds queuing up at telephone booths to cast their vote, this news story went on to explain why Amit Paul was attracting attention across northeast India:

Not only has he got a huge fan following rooting for his selection as the next Indian Idol, but in Shillong, in his Khasi warrior outfit, unknowingly he is doing the impossible — bridging the divide between the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes of Meghalaya with that of the nontribals. Little wonder then that Meghalaya wants their new pin-up boy to be their brand ambassador. (Sen, 2007)

In September 2007, as the contest reached the final stages, several other news reports began focusing attention on how people in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya had cast aside

decades-old separatist identities to mobilize support for Amit Paul. While some fans set up websites and blogs to generate interest and support from the rest of the country and abroad, others formed a fan club and facilitated efforts by a range of groups and organizations to sponsor and manage public call offices (PCOs) in different parts of Meghalaya, distribute prepaid mobile phone cards, and set up landline voting booths. Recognizing the ways in which these activities were beginning to transcend long-standing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and spatial boundaries, state legislators and other politicians soon joined the effort to garner votes for Amit Paul, with the chief minister D. D. Lapang declaring Amit Paul to be Meghalaya's "brand Ambassador for peace, communal harmony and excellence" (*Shillong Times*, 2007). It seemed that this campaign around a reality television program could set the stage for a remarkable refashioning of the socio-cultural and political terrain in Meghalaya. As one commentator remarked:

When Meghalaya's history is written, it could well be divided into two distinct phases — one before the third *Indian Idol* contest and one after it. A deep tribal-nontribal divide, punctuated by killings, riots, and attempts at ethnic cleansing, would mark the first phase. A return to harmony and to the cosmopolitan ethos of the past would signify the second. The agent of change: Amit Paul, the finalist of the musical talent hunt on a TV channel. (Mazumdar, 2007)

During this time, residents of Darjeeling and viewers in other cities and towns of West Bengal, Sikkim, and Nepal were rallying behind Prashant Tamang, the other finalist of *Indian Idol-3*. Tamang, who had taken time off from his job as a police officer in the city of Kolkata to participate in the contest, was able to capitalize on support from ethnic Nepalese across India and even Nepalese working in countries such as Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and UAE who financed a "Save Prashant" SMS (short message service) voting fund. During the final stages of the contest, 600 people were reportedly hired to send SMSes round the clock to secure Tamang — dubbed the "pride of the hills" — a spot in the finals.<sup>1</sup>

Tamang's success also attracted political attention. Recognizing that Tamang's participation in *Indian Idol* had galvanized Gorkhas across the region, Bimal Gurung, an activist and politician, launched a fundraising effort to finance a mass SMS campaign for Tamang as a step toward renewing the struggle for Gorkhaland. Capitalizing on this fan following and leveraging his position as chief advisor of the Prashant Tamang fan club, Gurung went on to form a new political party called the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. Within days, Prashant Tamang fan clubs were transformed into Gorkha Janmukti Morcha offices, and fans were drawn into Gurung's campaign for a separate state of Gorkhaland carved out of West Bengal (Denyer, 2008). Reality television, it seemed, had played a key role in altering the dynamics of Gorkha nationalism. There was little doubt that this reality television phenomenon had drawn the attention of millions across India to the complex socio-cultural and political struggles in a region that continues to be neglected and often misrepresented by mainstream media institutions.

In this article, I focus on these events surrounding *Indian Idol-3* with two goals in mind: first, to assess the changing relationship between television, daily life, and political discourse in contemporary India and, second, to use these events as an occasion to examine participatory culture surrounding television, a topic that remains unaddressed in the Indian context. The article begins by situating *Indian Idol-3* in relation to the socio-historical context of ethno-national

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prashant\\_Tamang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prashant_Tamang)

politics in northeast India and the changing landscape of Indian television over the past two decades. Drawing on recent scholarship on the politics and pleasures of reality television (Kraidy, 2009), I work with the premise that reality television and its plebiscitary logics have enabled new modes of cultural and political expression and that convergence between television and various mobile media technologies is leading to the “mutual modification of politics and entertainment” (Hartley, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). I contend that *Indian Idol-3* is an exemplary media phenomenon that points to the importance of examining participatory culture as a site where politics, popular culture, and daily life intersect in new and unpredictable ways.

Further, in order to move away from a conception of fan consumption and participatory culture primarily in relation to formal politics, as has been the case with scholarship on cinema and fandom in South India (Dickey, 1993; Srinivas, 2009), I posit the notion of “mobile publics.” The term mobile publics draws attention to the defining role of mobile media technologies and practices (e.g., PCOs, cell phones, texting) in the formation of publics around contemporary television, and underscores their shifting and transient nature. I suggest that mobile publics create possibilities for the renewal of *everyday* forms of interaction in public settings that may have been forgotten, subdued, or made impossible under certain circumstances. As we will see in the case of *Indian Idol-3*, the mobile public that cohered around Amit Paul revealed the possibility, however fleeting, of everyday life and sociability in Meghalaya that transcended ethnic, linguistic, religious, and spatial boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

## POLITICS AND DAILY LIFE IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Northeast India, comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, is connected to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land (20 kilometers wide at its narrowest point) commonly referred to as the “chicken’s neck.” Even as scholars recognize that the term “northeast” is a reductive construct for a “bustling terrain sprouting, proclaiming, underscoring a million heterogeneities,” it remains unavoidable and widely used (Menon & Nigam, 2007, p. 138). The region has been known as “Northeast India” since the 1960s, when the region’s political map was redrawn by the Indian state in “an attempt to manage the independentist rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as preempt, radical political mobilization among other discontented ethnic groups” (Baruah, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, even though states in this region share international borders with Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar, the complexities of India’s relations with these nation-states have restricted cross-border flows and exacerbated this region’s isolation. Over the past four decades, virtually every state in the Northeast has witnessed the emergence of powerful militias that have contested the Indian state’s narrative of socio-economic progress and of becoming a part of the “national mainstream.” As a number of academics and activists have pointed out, the Indian state’s brutal repression of political struggles and implementation of draconian measures

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<sup>2</sup> I have decided to focus on Amit Paul and the situation in Meghalaya partly because it would not be possible to also consider the case of Prashant Tamang and Gorkha nationalism within one essay. Second, Amit Paul’s position as a Bengali speaking non-Khasi, born and raised in Shillong, and ability to speak and sing in Khasi, Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, and English, allow us to delve into the complexities of ethnic strife in Meghalaya. Finally, focusing on Tamang’s case does not open up the possibility to move past thinking about fan activity solely in relation to the sphere of politics.

such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), which gives security forces the authority to use lethal force and legal immunity from independent investigation of their actions, have done little to ameliorate the situation.

If, on the one hand, the Indian state has been unwilling and unable to think outside the national development-nation building narrative and continues to maintain a colonial attitude toward managing difference, on the other hand, political movements in this region also seem unable to imagine a viable alternative to the logic of statehood. As Menon and Nigam point out, “in a context of extreme economic and cultural alienation of indigenous or local populations, the ‘foreigner’ issue is also on top of the agenda of many ethnic movements in the northeast” (2007, p. 139). For more than a century, the northeast region of India has attracted migration from different parts of the subcontinent and the resulting demographic shifts have been one of the major causes for ethnic violence and the implementation of a “protective discrimination regime” that seeks to safeguard the rights of historically disadvantaged “tribal” peoples to property, business, trade licenses, and so on (Baruah, 2005, p. 185). However, this system has led to a “notion of exclusive homelands, where certain ethnically defined groups are privileged” and others are treated as outsiders (p. 184). Consider Baruah’s account of the tensions between Khasis, designated as one of the Scheduled Tribes of Meghalaya, and the “outsiders” (dikhars, in the Khasi language).

While tensions between Khasis and non-Khasis have shaped everyday life in Meghalaya for nearly three decades, struggles over who could and who could not claim to be a Khasi became particularly fraught when the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council passed the Khasi Social Custom Lineage Bill in 1997. As Baruah explains, the question of who is and who is not a Khasi is of great importance given that their Schedule Tribe status entitles Khasis to “the lion’s share of public employment, business and trade licenses, and even the right to seek elected office” (p. 184). Baruah recounts the controversy surrounding this bill to point out that the divisive language of insiders and outsiders continues to shape political struggles in the state and other parts of Northeast India and is central to understanding the region’s mediascape and the significance of the *Indian Idol-3* phenomenon.

Given the Indian state’s relationship with Northeast India, the intensity of ethnic strife in several states, and the strategic importance of the region, it does come as a surprise that neither All India Radio nor *Doordarshan*, the state-controlled television network, invested much effort in extending coverage and producing locally relevant programs. Even into the 1990s, All India Radio was broadcasting with low-power transmitters that could not compete with the more powerful transmissions from border stations of neighboring countries Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, and the Philippines (Malik, 1995). The lack of technical facilities and support for production staff meant that these All India Radio stations were, more often than not, unable to produce programs in local languages and tap into the history and cultural resources of the region. Hindi-language programming only served to alienate listeners further and reinforce perceptions of New Delhi’s inability and unwillingness to understand the Northeast. The situation with television production was worse. For instance, the Doordarshan station in Meghalaya’s capital of Shillong was, as recently as 1995, operating with just two program executives who produced 75 minutes of daily programming. They did so, moreover, with no knowledge of the local language and without key production personnel such as editors and floor managers. Where news was concerned, New Delhi did not use dispatches from Northeast India, relying instead on correspondents who rarely ventured outside the confines of district headquarters in large cities such as Guwahati in the state of Assam (Malik, 1995).

This state of affairs did not change with the advent of cable and satellite television. Not surprisingly, television networks such as Star, ZEE, and Sony paid no attention to Northeast India simply because the region did not represent a commercially lucrative market. Compared with other parts of India, the number of cable and satellite homes in the Northeast remains low, as does tele-density. In fact, Northeast India did not even figure in the 14-city auditions for *Indian Idol*; Prashant Tamang auditioned in Kolkata and Amit Paul was shortlisted in Mumbai. As Bhattacharjee notes in one recent commentary, “unfortunately, none of the [satellite television] channels are keen to treat the northeastern region as anything other than a repository of violence, cross-border drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and ethnic unrest” (2005, n.p.). Further, while one could point to numerous instances of stereotypical portrayals of people from this region across print, television, and film, a comment by Javed Akhtar, one of the judges on *Indian Idol-3* — that participants from the Northeast had “won the *dil ka daaman* and *ghar ka angan*” (heart and home) of viewers across India — speaks directly to the “othered” status of the Northeast in the Indian imagination and the racial fault line that marks relations between the Northeast and the rest of India (Bamzai, 2007a). However, commercial television channels and reality television shows such as *Indian Idol* and *Fame Gurukul* in particular have created opportunities for audience involvement and participation in ways that state-regulated broadcasting never did. Even though All India Radio and Doordarshan would, in the name of “national” public culture, allocate space for music, films, and other forms of cultural production from the northeastern states, they failed to respond to audience interests and desires. It would be useful, therefore, to map the shift from public to participatory culture in Indian television before examining the events surrounding *Indian Idol-3*.<sup>3</sup>

## REDEFINING PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN TELEVISION

It would not be an exaggeration to state that television in India has undergone major changes over the past 10–12 years. As Shanti Kumar has documented, the establishment of influential transnational networks such as Star TV and translocal networks such as ZEE, Sun, and Eenadu during the 1990s “disrupted the hegemony of the state-sponsored network, Doordarshan” and transformed the ways in which television operated as a cultural institution (2005a, p. 2). What began with local cable operators stringing cables across rooftops to connect homes to the new and fascinating world of Star Plus, Star Sports, MTV, and BBC News had, by the mid-1990s, grown into a stable satellite and cable industry with rapidly expanding viewership. By the end of the 1990s, the number of cable and satellite television viewers was estimated at 110 million and current industry figures claim 425 million viewers across the country (Bamzai, 2007b).

In comparison to the pro-development and nationalist sitcoms, dramas, and documentaries that defined the Doordarshan era, these new television channels offered a wider range of programming, including American soaps, dramas, talk shows, and music videos. While these programs initially attracted English-speaking urban elites, the launch of ZEE TV, which catered to Hindi speaking viewers, and Sun TV and Eenadu targeting Tamil and Telugu-speaking viewers in south

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed consideration of the complexities of media privatization and reconfigurations of the “public” in Indian television, see Shanti Kumar (2010).

India forced Star TV to rethink its pan-Asian production strategies and begin formulating ways to “Indianize” its programming. The emphasis on “Hinglish”-language programming on channels such as Star Plus and ZEE TV and the growing number of regional-language television channels led to several programming innovations. For the purposes of this article, however, it would be useful to focus on film and film music-based programs that proved to be immensely popular across the country.

When state-regulated Doordarshan opened its doors to sponsored programming in 1983, signaling a departure from an earlier model of public service broadcasting with the express goal of utilizing television for “development” and “modernization,” some of the earliest and most popular shows were film-based. The Saturday evening Hindi language film, the film songs show *Chitrahaar*, and *Showtheme*, which used popular film songs and scenes to speak to a theme each week, always garnered high viewer ratings. By 1984, these shows had established an immensely lucrative “national audience” for Doordarshan (Bajpai, 1985). During the 1990s, newly established television channels also discovered the appeal that film-based programming held with viewers and the potential for advertising revenues. ZEE, Star Plus, and other channels introduced a number of innovative film music-based shows such as *Antakshari*, *Sa Re Ga Ma*, and *Videocon Flashback* and weekly countdown shows such as *BPL Oye* and *Philips Top Ten*. Further, channels like MTV realized that they could not operate in India by offering Euro-American music-themed programming and turned instead to Hindi films and film music (Juluri, 2003).

*Indian Idol*, I would argue, could be traced back to these film-music themed television programs and *Antakshari* and *Sa Re Ga Ma* in particular, shows which tapped into the enduring popularity of film songs and introduced an element of audience participation that further distinguished television channels such as ZEE from Doordarshan. Popular across the country, *Antakshari* is a musical game played by two or more people in which participants have to sing a song that starts with the last consonant letter of the song sung by the previous participants. What had been a fun group activity that livened up journeys and family events took on another avatar when ZEE TV launched a television version of *Antakshari* in September 1993. While *Antakshari* was designed as an amateur singing contest, *Sa Re Ga Ma*, which premiered on ZEE TV in 1995, was framed as a serious competition that could launch contestants’ careers in the world of playback singing in the Bombay film industry. These shows redefined film-based television programming in important ways and even anticipated some generic elements of what we today consider reality television. However, the show that marked the onset of a new televisual regime and set the stage for *Indian Idol* was *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, which premiered on Star Plus in 2000.

At first glance, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* appears identical to any other international version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. As Kumar reminds us, “the producers of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* were contractually obligated to reproduce, down to the exact detail, the trademark title design, the show’s sets, music, question format, and the qualification process, all of which are laid out in a 169-page document created by Celador Productions” (2005b, p. 328). However, examining the ways in which the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the megastar Amitabh Bachchan, makes different elements of the show more relatable for Indian viewers points to the “interplay between generic innovation and imitation” in television programming (Kumar, 2005b, p. 333). While Kumar draws our attention to questions of genre, I would argue that *Kaun Banega Crorepati* also engendered important changes in television’s relationship with new media technologies and how television industry professionals imagined and mobilized the “audience.”

By all accounts, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* was a major gamble for the Star TV network and part of a strategy to re-brand Star Plus as a mainstream “general entertainment channel” that could cater to Hindi-speaking audiences just as well as ZEE, Sony, and other entrants such as Sahara. With viewership and advertising at an all-time low, executives at Star approached the UK-based Celador Productions for the license to produce an Indian version of the *Millionaire* show and also managed to get Amitabh Bachchan, arguably the most popular film star in India, to host *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. Produced on lavish sets in Bombay’s Film City and backed by one of the most expensive and aggressive marketing campaigns, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* attracted audiences immediately. By July 2000, more than 200,000 people across India were calling each day for a chance to participate in the show and share a stage with Amitabh Bachchan, leading producers to recognize that the 570 telephone lines that had been installed in four major cities were grossly inadequate (Aiyar & Chopra, 2000). Further, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* represented a major departure in that it complicated industry professionals’ understanding of the “audience” by bringing viewers in smaller cities and towns — ones that were never included in the audience measurement system of people meters — into the picture. “Middle India,” as the English-language press dubbed this segment of viewers, had registered in metropolitan television executives’ imaginations in an unprecedented manner. By 2005, when the second iteration of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* aired on Star Plus and *Indian Idol* premiered on Sony, phone usage had grown exponentially (256 million landline and mobile phone connections) and the practice of texting had become an unobtrusive and taken-for-granted feature of daily life (Bamzai, 2007b). It was clear that the television and marketing industries had to redraw the map of the “television audience” and grapple with the challenges of understanding novel and rapidly evolving patterns of new media usage surrounding television. There was, however, one element of certainty during this period of technological and cultural flux: television corporations, cell phone companies, and advertisers were quick to recognize the financial opportunities that this expanded and “interactive” viewership represented. In 2005, 55 million SMSes and phone calls for *Indian Idol* translated into interactive revenue of 150 million rupees and advertising sponsorship worth 450 million rupees for Sony (Bhandari & Bamzai, 2005).<sup>4</sup> It is in relation to these institutional and cultural transitions that we need to examine the events surrounding *Indian Idol-3* that I sketched earlier in this article.

### RALLYING AROUND AN INDIAN IDOL

Produced jointly by Sony Entertainment Television and two production companies, Optimystix Entertainment India and Miditech, *Indian Idol* emerged as one of the highest rated shows, attracting more than 40 million viewers and 30 million SMSes during the first season in 2004–2005 (Bhandari, 2006b; Pearson, 2005). With judges from Bollywood, celebrities making guest appearances, and specially designed episodes in which contestants met *jawans* (soldiers) in New Delhi on Republic Day, attended workshops with Hollywood star Richard Gere, recorded songs to be used for tsunami relief fund-raising and so on, viewers’ interest remained high. Further,

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<sup>4</sup> These figures are comparable to the interest generated by *American Idol*, which attracted 41.5 million SMS votes in 2005 (see Jenkins, 2006, p. 59).



from the very beginning public discussions of the show revolved around voting patterns and how “regionalism” ensured that participants from small towns and cities managed to stay on in the competition even if judges had given them poor evaluations. However, the first two seasons did not spark the kind of mobilization and intense debates around contestants that *Indian Idol-3* did.

The most striking aspect of the fan following that developed around Amit Paul was the sheer range and number of organizations and groups involved: the Shillong Arts and Music Lovers Forum, Civil Society Women’s Organization, Society for Performing Arts Development, Bihari Youth Welfare Association, Frontier Chamber of Commerce, Marwari Ekta Manch (Marwari Unity Platform), and several smaller clubs in different localities of Shillong that drew in people from different ethnic, caste, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, with the Amit Paul fan club serving as an umbrella organization. In addition to organizing rallies through the city to raise awareness and drum up support for Amit Paul, these groups worked hard to ensure that their contestant received enough votes to stay in the competition. Working closely with local businessmen, including the influential figure Dwarka Singhania, treasurer of the Meghalaya Chamber of Commerce and Industry, fans ensured that PCOs in residential areas and several prominent locations in Shillong remained open all night for people to come forward and cast their vote. As Amit Paul progressed through the competition, attracting attention in Meghalaya and other northeastern states, fan activity intensified and funds were raised to create publicity materials (e.g., posters and banners placed throughout Shillong) and even distribute prepaid mobile phone cards for free. It is useful to note here that unlike *American Idol*, where viewers are allowed to vote for a period of two hours after the show’s broadcast, *Indian Idol* viewers are permitted 11 hours (from 9 p.m. until 8 a.m. the next day). Viewers could cast their vote by sending an SMS via mobile phone or “televote” through a landline telephone, use an interactive voice service available for mobile phones and landline phones, or online through [www.indianidol.sify.com](http://www.indianidol.sify.com). Further, voting for *Indian Idol* was open not only to viewers residing in India but also in the United Kingdom and the Middle East (i.e., UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain).<sup>5</sup>

Over a period of three months, it became clear that the mobilization around Amit Paul had created a “neutral” space for a range of people to work together, and the many public activities had dramatically changed the way different groups inhabited the city of Shillong. In a city where areas are clearly demarcated along ethnic and linguistic lines, for instance, Bengali-speaking denizens tended not to wander into Mawlai, described as the “cradle of Khasi subnationalism,” the tumultuous reception that Amit Paul received when he visited Mawlai as part of his first visit to Shillong after competing in *Indian Idol* seemed remarkable even to the most jaded observers in Meghalaya (Mazumdar, 2007). While news organizations from New Delhi and Mumbai looked upon these events with incredulity, commentators in Shillong began debating how Amit Paul, a middle-class, Bengali, non-Khasi, had emerged as a catalyst for changing relations in Meghalaya.

The situation in Meghalaya had begun to change over the past four to five years, with tentative moves being made on the part of different groups to reach out and work toward peaceful resolutions of long-standing issues. Second, Amit Paul’s background — a high-school dropout who had to struggle in a marginalized state and region of the country — resonated deeply with

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<sup>5</sup> For further details, see [http://sify.com/indianidol/images/jun2007/voting\\_terms.html](http://sify.com/indianidol/images/jun2007/voting_terms.html)

youth across the region, with questions of ethnicity receding into the background. As Manas Chaudhuri, editor of *Shillong Times*, remarked:

In a place where there's nothing much to celebrate, Amit came as a godsend. He's talented, and has won all our hearts by singing Khasi, Nepali, Hindi and English songs on the show. It reminded people of the cosmopolitan culture that once prevailed in the state, and they have been overcome by the desire to restore the happy, multi-ethnic character of this state. (quoted in Mazumdar, 2007)

Finally, Amit Paul's participation in a "national" contest like *Indian Idol* was seen as a unique opportunity for Meghalaya and other states in the Northeast to assert their presence in the nation and claim belonging in the "national family." This was evident in the case of Prashant Tamang's fans as well. As one television report observed, "It's an emotional battle for honour and identity for Indians of Nepali origin who feel they are marginalised from the nation's mainstream. Tamang's win would enable them to prove a point or two" (Deb, 2007). This report also cited a fan as saying, "This madness should be there because we *gorkhas* are not destined to sit as guards in hotels. We can compete in each and every field and can become number one citizens of India."

Without a doubt, there were several schisms that threatened to disrupt the momentum generated by hundreds of fans across Northeast India, with groups such as the Shillong Arts and Music Lovers Forum complaining that politicians were leveraging this moment for narrow reasons. Activist-writers such as Patricia Mukhim did pose critical questions, asking readers why recognition from the rest of the country was so important and if it was because people in Meghalaya were unsure about their belonging in the nation (Mukhim, 2008). For the most part, however, this reality television phenomenon was seen to have set the stage for a gradual reconfiguration of socio-cultural and political relationships in Meghalaya. The question is, given the socio-historical context of Northeast India and the complex politics of ethnic strife, what happens when a public that coheres around a reality television program dissipates? What are the cultural and political implications of a zone of participation that lasts a few weeks or months at best?

## MOBILE PUBLICS

Where the question of fan participation in India is concerned, scholarly literature on fan associations that cohere around Tamil and Telugu film stars in south India has been particularly influential. Focusing on the Telugu film industry and viewing practices in the state of Andhra Pradesh more broadly, Srinivas (2009) has written extensively on fan activity surrounding cinema. Examining the struggle between fan expectations and the industry's careful management of star personas such as Chiranjeevi, Srinivas (2003) considers fan practices as a domain of political activity that does not fit within classical liberal accounts of citizenship and political representation but rather one that has clear links to linguistic/regional identity. In this account, the performative dimensions of fan practices, especially as they cohere in and around the cinema hall, leads to a conception of a cinematic public sphere where "the consumption of film becomes an occasion for a range of performances that are broadly *political* in nature," one manifestation being the links to party politics and election campaigns (Srinivas, 2003, n.p). Further, while he argues that we also need to understand the political nature of fan associations beyond their "linkages with the politics of linguistic/identity nationalism," Srinivas maintains that fan

activity is political mainly because it “develops around the notion of spectatorial rights” (2003, n.p). He writes:

The cinema exists because of my presence and for me. Further, the “I” at the cinema is always a member of a collective: *we make the film happen*. Anyone who has watched a Chiranjeevi or Rajnikanth film knows exactly what I am talking about. Not only do these stars address spectators in rather direct ways (including by looking at the camera) but seem to perform according to “our” demands. (2003, n.p)

This articulation of cinema’s relationship to public culture and democracy, with the figure of the “fan” occupying center-stage, lies at the heart of our understanding of participatory culture surrounding cinema in India. Thus, even as Srinivas exhorts us to examine the various “webs of public transactions” involving cinema and to re-think what constitutes the “political” beyond the narrow sense of the term, his analysis remains bound by one particular, highly visible mode of participatory culture and the film industry’s perception and management of such activity. We also have to grapple with the image of the fan derived from a focus on the cinema hall and its surroundings: obsessive, male, working class, and rowdy. The “excessive” behavior that marks viewers in front rows of cinema halls, what Lawrence Liang calls the “protocols of collective behavior” — whistling and commenting loudly, throwing flowers, coins or ribbons when the star first appears on the screen, singing along and dancing in the aisles — is routinely cited as what distinguishes fans from the rest of the audience (2005, p. 371). Further, the publicness of fan associations’ activities — celebrating a star’s birthday or 100 days of a film, organizing special prerelease functions, adorning street corners with giant cutouts of the star, decorating theaters where the film has had a successful run — and press coverage of such activities have further served to both marginalize and circumscribe fan activity as undesirable, vulgar, and at times, dangerous. While this research has been of great importance in opening up an opportunity to move away from conceiving of cinema in purely textual terms (cf. Singh, 2003), it is clear that an understanding of publics and participatory culture derived from cinema needs to be revised where television is concerned.

The crucial difference we need to acknowledge is that television is predominantly home-centered, which explains to an extent why participatory culture surrounding television tends not to have the same kinds of public dimensions that cinema does in the Indian context.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that television does not forge links between the home and the world. Raymond Williams (1974) identified this as one of the key problematics for television studies when he pondered the implications of a technology which “served an at once mobile and home-centred way of living,” what he went on to term a “form of mobile privatization” (p. 26). How, then, do we approach and analyze the relation between television and its publics? Arvind Rajagopal’s (2001) analysis of links between television and Hindu nationalism in India provides an important starting point.

Rajagopal’s analysis is premised on the understanding that the “normative fiction of a bourgeois public” (2001, p. 25) becomes difficult to preserve when it comes to electronic media. Building on the work of scholars Freitag (1991) and Chatterjee (1993, 1998), he argues that we need to focus on how “split publics” — along linguistic and caste lines, for example — structure

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<sup>6</sup> Television spectatorship does have public dimensions as well, the most obvious example being that of crowds gathering outside storefronts to watch an ongoing cricket match. But this dimension of television viewing has also been affected by the mobile phone (e.g., score updates via SMS).

political discourse in India (p. 18), and that the “interaction or lack of interaction between these spheres is itself part of a larger historical and political process, through which relations of domination and subordination are reproduced and changed” (p. 148). The work and power of television can be understood as extending “the reach of the prevailing political terrain, bringing into one orbit zones of society that seldom encountered the same ideas simultaneously” (p. 151). Without a doubt, the notion of split publics certainly explains the cultural and political terrain in a state such as Meghalaya. However, Rajagopal’s analysis of television and political mobilization, concerned as it is with a very different televisual regime, needs to be broadened to account for the mobilization of different kinds of publics by cable and satellite television beginning in the early 1990s (Kumar, 2005a). It also needs to be broadened in the case of contemporary reality television, the impact of mobile media technologies on television to consider viewing practices, in creating new spaces for conversation and participation, and the ways in which fan participation has become an integral aspect of contemporary television in India and across the world. Examining how mobile media have altered television entertainment is crucial for understanding the dynamics of participatory culture in contemporary India.

Thus, I posit the term *mobile publics* as a way to draw attention to the centrality of mobile media technologies to the formation of publics, highlight the fluid and ephemeral nature of these publics, and suggest that the transient nature of mobile publics allows for the articulation of new cultural and political possibilities that might not be possible in more formal institutional settings. At one level, the term relates to the emergence of a hybrid mediascape and the development of technological and cultural capacities to circulate and share ideas, images and information in ways that were not possible earlier. We need to recognize the many ways in which mobile media, that is, mobile phones, most prominently, but also cybercafés, have expanded and reconfigured relations between television and its audiences and, more broadly, created a new infrastructural network (Larkin, 2008). For Larkin, infrastructure refers to both “technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities” (p. 6).<sup>7</sup> In the case of *Indian Idol-3* and television audiences in a city such as Shillong, it is clear that texting and casting a vote for one’s favorite contestant did signal a new way of being at home and in the world. To be sure, fan participation around Amit Paul was carefully orchestrated by professionals at Sony Entertainment Television (e.g., the public performance in Shillong where he appeared in a Khasi warrior outfit). In one sense, then, this moment of participation can be characterized as “just-in-time fandom,” “a performance of fandom which is cut to the specific temporalities of the commodity-text” (Hills, 2002, p. 179).<sup>8</sup> It is crucial, moreover, to recognize other influences at work including local politicians and various civil society groups. Casting even a cursory glance at the number of different civil society organizations that became

<sup>7</sup> They are, in Mizuko Ito’s terms, “networked publics” that are now “communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side-to-side” (Ito, 2008, p. 3). Marwan Kraidy uses the term “hypermedia space” to refer to the “integration of television with the Internet and mobile phones” (2009, p. 11).

<sup>8</sup> As Kraidy’s (2009) analysis of reality TV in the Arab world, and Hartley’s (2008) account of the Chinese government’s anxieties surrounding fan participation in *Mongolian Sour Cow Yogurt Super Voice Girl* contest suggest, the relationship between the “everyday-ness” of mobile media and the operations of “plebiscitary industries, that is, those agencies, production companies, and technical service providers whose business it is to commercialize the popular vote by turning it into an entertainment format” (Hartley, 2008, p. 126), need to be carefully mapped and analyzed.

involved in the effort to make Amit Paul the Indian Idol suggests possibilities for mobilization that are not wholly anticipated and controlled by media corporations and other vested interests.

However, I would argue that mobile publics are more than just collectives that are informed and/or networked through new communication technologies and managed by media industries and other powerful interests. Avoiding the theoretical impulse to explain such moments of participatory culture solely in relation to the realm of formal politics is crucial if we are to understand why and how the everyday-ness of watching a reality TV show and sending a text message becomes deeply meaningful in places like Meghalaya. Without a doubt, the question of reality television's "democratic" (Coleman, 2006; Van Zoonen, 2004) and "demotic" (Turner, 2006) aspects — the ongoing debate over the extent to which reality television does in many cases foster civic engagement — is a crucial one.<sup>9</sup> It is also important to remember that the world of "public life" is not limited to questions of citizenship or civic engagement. As Jeff Weintraub suggests, "the key to this alternative version of the 'public' realm is not solidarity or obligation, but sociability" (1997, p. 21). Weintraub's argument, that the vision of public life celebrated by writers such as Jane Jacobs "lies not in self-determination or collective action, but in the multi-stranded liveliness and spontaneity arising from the ongoing intercourse of heterogeneous individuals and groups that can maintain a civilized co-existence," is pertinent in the Indian context as well (1997, pp. 21–22). Spaces of everyday interaction such as the street corner, balconies and verandahs, the public phone booth, and the cybercafé are, as Kumar points out, "spaces of sociability that are neither public nor private in the liberal-economic sense of state versus market forces, or in the civic sense of communitarian responsibilities and citizenship, but constitutes the heart of public life in colonial and postcolonial India" (2010, p. 23).

In Shillong, where the idea of people from different linguistic, ethnic, or religious backgrounds coming together in spaces such as tea shops, telephone booths, and so on has been unimaginable for several decades now, the notion of mobile publics allows us to recognize how mobile media technologies are engendering new forms of sociability around television. *Indian Idol-3* was a crucial media phenomenon precisely because the public that cohered around Amit Paul created the possibility and the space for the renewal of *everyday forms of interaction* across ethnic, religious, spatial, and linguistic boundaries that had been subdued and rendered difficult, if not impossible, over the decades. In other words, *Indian Idol-3* created spaces in which people had to acknowledge their differences and set them aside, if only for a brief period of time, as they stood in lines at telephone booths, shared mobile sim cards, and took part in rallies to support their idol. In doing so, they were afforded a glimpse of the everyday that was not shot through with suspicion and the threat of violence.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in the first instance, mobile publics are tied to the time and space of the television event. Texting, going online to participate in a fan community, and creating a blog such as

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<sup>9</sup> Also see the "From participatory culture to public participation" project directed by Henry Jenkins: <http://sites.google.com/site/participatorydemocracyproject>

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as numerous news reports suggested, this renewal of everyday engagement between different people — at rallies and other public gatherings, fan club meetings, in queues at public call offices and so on — also evoked the cosmopolitan past of cities like Shillong and sparked discussions of how that cosmopolitanism could be a vital resource in struggles to overcome ethnic divisions. I use the term cosmopolitanism with the awareness that it has a very specific embodiment in a city like Shillong and is a matter for further inquiry.

*amitpaulrocks.wordpress.com* remain bound by the temporal and spatial constraints of television. We have seen, moreover, that such mobile publics are never entirely autonomous from the interests of the government, various politicians, and civil society organizations with their own vested interests. What the *Indian Idol* case suggests is the potential for such moments of participation to move beyond the time and space of the media event into other times and spaces to generate, in the process, an altogether new kind of public, one that needs to be understood in the first instance in terms of sociability. We can then ponder, given that neither the state nor various political movements have seemed able to imagine viable solutions to a range of problems in this part of India, if and how such spaces and moments of sociability might generate new and sustainable ideas for social and political change.

## CONCLUSION

Focusing on a series of events surrounding the third season of *Indian Idol*, I have asked how we might rethink the relationship among television, daily life, and public political discourse in contemporary India. Making the case for examining participatory cultures surrounding television, especially given the ways in which mobile media technologies have altered viewing practices, I have posited “mobile publics” as a term that could help us map and analyze new kinds of fluid and transient social formations that cohere around television. Situating fan mobilization surrounding television in relation to the politics of ethnic strife in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, I have argued that the mobile public that cohered around Amit Paul, while partly a function of the “plebiscitary industries” and powerful political interests, was also about people from diverse backgrounds (linguistic, ethnic, and religious) leveraging new technologies of communication and coming together with a shared purpose.

I have also argued that we need to understand such moments of participation first in terms of sociability instead of seeking links to the realm of politics proper. It is only when we fully comprehend the importance of this aspect of public life that we can ask: what traces has this mobile public left behind? In the near future, how and in what contexts will memories of *Indian Idol-3* and Amit Paul be invoked? Will the fleeting renewal of interaction and engagement across existing faultlines sustain themselves over time? Has the spatial reconfiguration of the city of Shillong, a key aspect of this mobile public, endured? These and other questions that emerge from this attempt to understand the relationship between television entertainment, public political discourse, and everyday life suggest not only the need for further critical examination, but also that the term mobile publics does not have to be limited to the socio-political context of Northeast India or reality television.

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