



The Indian Side of Sampling

SHORT
ESSAY

by [Audio Pervert](#)

This article by Indian musician and blogger SamratB aka Audio Pervert examines the aesthetics of «sampling the political» in contemporary Indian electronic music. He takes us on a journey through various ways of sampling political words and speeches, from the militant cutting of Bollywood soundtracks by MumBai Mafia to Kid Kishore, who samples Indian vernacular streams without understanding them. These artists and their sampling aesthetics, our author argues, are borne of a tendency to resist, to subvert, and to disobey norms of sampling.

«I have a dream» declared Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963, addressing a huge civil rights rally in Washington DC. With those words, he joined Gandhi and Lincoln in the ranks of men who have shaped modern history. King adapted the phrase from a 1921 tune by gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. This case shows: many narratives that speak of moral courage and resistance do not appear out of thin air. Instead, they have a lineage, a connection with history, with time, and past personas. We re-adapt, adopt, and sample from the past, heading into a future that has not been written (sampled) yet. This process is mostly DIY and often bears political characteristics. That political aspect of sampling also exists in Indian electronic music, currently on the fringes and mostly unsung. Thus, this feature explores four Indian artists and their variables of «sampling the political» in their compositions.

The Dirty Way: Remixing Bollywood

The first example is [MumBai Mafia](#). Very little is known about this artist based in the Netherlands, who is infamous for sampling and ripping apart Bollywood soundtracks, creating a distinct yet dislocated narrative. The sound is subverted, perverted, and rebellious. Eerie, haunted, and loaded with irony and machismo, the sampling leans a lot on dark humour. «Jay Jay Hanuman» (All Hail Monkey God) features a popular «kirtan» (Hindu religious hymn) running deliberately off-time under crusty beats and a grinding synth-line.

Or take the example of «I Just Phoned to Call You a Benchod (Stevie Wonder vs MumBai Mafia)» – a hilarious conversation on the phone between a girl and boy living in Mumbai. The girl's conversation with the boy, about love, life, Bollywood stars, and the boy and his mother riding over a looped chunk of Stevie Wonder's epic hit, «I Just Called to Say I Love You». MumBai Mafia's music contains hundreds of long and short copyrighted samples from Bollywood movies and songs. The pillaging of Bollywood songs against a backdrop of ghoulish melodies and jarring beats makes up the overall narrative. This sort of mash-up electronica is anarchic in nature, always overriding the hegemony of copyright and IPR (Intellectual Property Rights). Bollywood bastardized!

Dissent and Sampling

[Bagula Bhagat](#) («Shady Person» in Hindi) is an artist based in Kerala, India (originally from New Delhi). His music is shaped by post-dub aesthetics, formed around dissenting narratives. Bagula Bhagat is sampling the spoken word of visionaries, philosophers, actors, and even forgotten shamans. As an artist he remains reclusive, critical of current trends in electronic music (EDM, house, and trance). As we hear in his 2014 hit «No Mahatma in Gandhi (feat. Dr.B.R Ambedkar)», which turned out to be much talked about in New Delhi's underground electronica circles. The tune is based around a scathing

speech by political visionary B. R. Ambedkar, explaining why he refuses to address Gandhi as a «Saint». When I asked the artist what draws him to sample such narratives, he responded with:

It's a way to keep history relevant at a time where it seems to have lost its meaning. A lot of these narratives stand to question capitalism, mass-culture, globalization... For me, the sampling of B. R. Ambedkar and such visionaries is not based on romanticism nor historicism, but reflecting on the human condition of today.

This collision of political narratives, dub music, glitch, and the occasional Indian melody is revolving around the artist's quest to cull a hybrid form.

Politics of Production

[Ravana](#) (the infamous demon king of The Ramayan¹) is an artist based in Delhi and a self-professed «dub militant». His music is largely influenced by post-1990s forms like trip hop, jungle, drum and bass, dub, and leftfield. Sampling is a given inside this militant arena. What drew him to sampling and to create the political framework of his music was Muslim Gauze (Bryn Jones) and Dr. Das (ex-bassist of Asian Dub Foundation). As an artist with limited means and resources, Ravana has released more than ten odd albums and dozens of remixes in the last ten years on digital, tape, and vinyl.

In one of our conversations, he spoke about his approach to sampling: «As I don't know how to play any real instruments, sampling is a huge dividend for me. For my music production. It opened a whole new world for me... To me, sampling is an art and a necessity as well.» Take the example of his tune «Sabe Kahtarnak», which reflects the cycles of civil unrest and state-controlled violence against minorities in India. The tune features a thick Southern Indian tribal percussion loop, rolling over a voice which cautions us about the biggest danger, of losing one's identity and dreams. The voice is of a Maoist activist in Chattisgarh, a region which is witness to many incidences of state violence and thousands of dislocated people.

Sampling Kitsch = Identity!

The final example, Kid Kishore, is an artist from Copenhagen, Denmark, who is of Indian and Danish decent. His early formation was shaped inside a first-world-order with liberal inter-racial ethics. However, his artistic narrative and visual projection is quite the opposite. He is known for his penchant to combine breakcore, dubstep, trap, and crispy vinyls riding on massive «desi» sampling. The Indian landscape is audible from the onset of this Danish barrage. Call it kitsch, call it shocking, or plain unpredictability.

The ironic part about his sampling practice is that Kishore does not understand the languages (Hindi and Punjabi) that he so heavily samples. He has little interest in the original narrative of the singers and sounds, instead subverting and mutating the sampled material within a pandemonium of beats, blows, and distorted bass-lines. It's hard to guess his intentions, but the sound of Kid Kishore's music is an oscillation of sorts, swinging manically between the East and the West. His childlike and brash tendencies are also at the forefront of his live DJ sets.

Connecting the Past to the Present

Sampling of sounds, music, and speech from the past forms the identity and ethos of many compositions and within many genres of electronic music. A multitude of producers color their music with sounds, voices, and narratives from the past. Their contemporary aspirations collide with the dreams and ideas of the past, via the act of sampling; the act of connecting the past, the previously unrelated, with the present environment is transcendental. Sampling politics is an artform and practice in itself.

→ footnotes

1. The Ramayana is one of India's oldest mythologies.

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