



## Nation Building and Reimagining the Nation through Songs:

*'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' and 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara'*

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**Abstract:** The concept of a nation is closely tied with the idea of it as being an imagined community, with the people coming together with a sense of a common history, traits, beliefs and attitudes despite their differences. In this paper, I am trying to map the trajectory of the change in the notion of India as a closed market economy to a Capitalist one by analyzing the visuals and the people who are featured in the diegetic spaces of two songs 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' (1988) and 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' (2010). I am also looking at the historical events that cast their shadows in the songs.

**Index Terms – Nation, Songs, Mile Sur Mera Tumhara, Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara**

### I. INTRODUCTION

Benedict Anderson theorized the circumstances that led to the development of nationalism in the 18th and 19th century in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson defined a nation as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Anderson elaborates that the nation is imagined as a "community" because people imagine they belong to the same collective despite their differences and this sense of collective usually comes from a belief of common history, traits, beliefs, and attitudes. Anderson further argues that though the notion of a nation is an imaginary construct, its political effect is tangible, and a "deep horizontal comradeship" created by this imagined community prompts countless people to willingly sacrifice themselves (7). The concurrence of capitalism and print media lead to the development of nationalism according to Anderson. This was made possible through the emergence of mass-produced newspapers through which the readers could imagine sharing a collective experience of news, irrespective of their geographical distance from each other and of social hierarchies (35). One can take Anderson's argument forward and say that the emergence of television made it possible for a nation with vast geographical boundaries and an assortment of cultures and languages to imagine itself as one unit through the representations of the nation as an inclusive entity.

India is a melting pot of many religions, castes, sub-castes etc. This mixture is unique to the subcontinent and more unique to India. One of the cornerstones laid by the early leaders was the Nehruvian idea of unity in diversity. However, how far they succeeded or failed to reach their goal is another question. There have been many cases where the government has tried to show the concept of "unity in diversity" through the help of the media. In this paper, I would be focusing primarily on two songs 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' and 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' and how they contributed to the idea of nation-building.

Doordarshan along with the Ministry of Information promoted the song 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara'. The concept of the song was developed in 1988 by Lok Seva Sanchar Nigam (The Council for Public Service Communication), a voluntary non-profit making organization. Suresh Mullick, who was the All-India Creative Director of Ogilvy & Mather, a company that predominantly provides services in brand strategy, public relations and influence, conceived and directed the project. Piyush Pandey, who was then an Account Manager and later became an Executive Chairman and Creative Head of Ogilvy & Mather, India wrote the song 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara', Ashok Patki, a music director and composer, composed the song, Louis Banks, a composer, record producer, keyboardist, and singer, co-composed and arranged it (Deol). The song featured common people from different states of India and a group of popular musicians, sportspersons, and film stars of that time. The song was broadcasted on 15 August 1988 soon after then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi's Independence Day Celebration speech, it gained popularity among the people and is considered as one of the most famous Indian patriotic songs. The song was broadcasted with the intention of promoting unity amongst diversity by highlighting the different linguistic communities and societies that live in India by instilling a sense of pride amongst the citizens.

Kailash Surendranath, who was assistant director of the program recalls that Rajiv Gandhi gave them a brief of what he envisioned for the video after watching the 'Freedom Run' video. Gandhi's instructions were along the lines of "bring together Hindustani,

Carnatic, popular, folk and contemporary music, the country's many regions and at least 14 languages in one piece that was visually and musically appealing" (Khurana).

Twenty-two years later the song was re-recorded with a different cast and was telecasted by Zoom TV on 26 January 2010. This version was titled 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' and features Indian musicians, singers, sportspersons, and film actors predominantly from the Hindi film industry and few regional industries as well. This new version misses out on the common man.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF A NATIONAL SYMBOL

A nation's symbols, rituals, and traditions are the elements that constitute a nation's identity, the image of the nation projected by national leaders both to their constituents and to the world at large. This identity, as much as any institutional factor, defines a nation. "National symbols project a message. That message is purposively, meticulously constructed, with leaders of national governments consciously picking and choosing its elements" (Cerulo 245).

It is important for a nation that the masses feel a sense of belonging, especially in a country like India which is home to different communities, religions, beliefs, customs, etc. For the peaceful working of the nation, it is important that everyone feels accepted as they are. India, the nation is formed along the lines of "Unity in Diversity", therefore there has always been an effort to portray the concept of unity in diversity, i.e., an effort to homogenize the masses.

'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' can be seen as an effort to bring together the different ethnic groups that are a part of India. It also is to be noted that the song 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' was released in 1988 when the scars of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots were healing, 1988 was also a pre-election year and like any pre-election year, it brought with it a charged political atmosphere, public disenchantment with the performance of the ruling party. All these factors can be seen as a reason why this song was broadcasted. Even though it managed to arouse the feeling of unity it failed to help the Congress Government headed by Rajiv Gandhi to win the elections in 1989.

While 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' focused on national Integrity, 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' can be seen as a product of the modern Capitalist society. 'Phir Mile Sur' can be seen as a commodity produced by Zoom Television, a channel launched in 2004 and catering to a largely urban audience, which tried to use the brand values associated with the film stars and the feelings of nationalism to promote their channel. This is not the only instance of a private company trying to make a profit tapping into the idea of nationalism. One notable instance of the same would be Pepsi drawing upon the feelings of nationalism to sell their products during the 2003 Cricket World Cup when they launched the Pepsi Blue as a gesture supporting the Indian team. The drink was originally launched in the United States and Canada in mid-2002 (Krishnankutty). The change in which anonymous everyday citizens who found a place in 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' were replaced by actors and other people who have market value in 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' should be read against the background of economic changes that had occurred in India in the span of the twenty-two years between the release of the two songs; the liberalization, privatization and globalization in 1991 and also how India is adopting global strategies of the market which come with these changes.

## III. THE CHANGING NOTION OF THE STATE

Britta Ohm in her essay "Doordarshan: Representing the Nation's State" observes that television in India belonged to a public sphere and its mission "was to 'civilise' the imagine in contrast to its 'vulgar' exuberance elsewhere – abroad and in the country" (Ohm 75). While the nation tried to project its unity and diversity and socialist image the rise of capitalism could not be ignored, and one can observe Doordarshan trying to grapple with this conflict in the imagined image and the emerging system. Furthermore, Ohm states, "Concerning the choice of images, DD was much more restricted with regard to representing the state. After all, anything it was broadcasting could be accused of being 'wrong'" (Ohm 76). I argue that 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' tried to balance this ideological clash between socialism and capitalism through the choice of the people who were featured in the video. The song represented the common man and acknowledged statehood by giving space to a Punjabi couple on a tractor, the man on the elephant in Kerala, the Assamese dancers, the Kashmiri man on a shikara, or the Oriya couple. One of the last frames of 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' also incorporates shots of employees and their families from Ogitvy & Mather. 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhar' also had a fair share of national icons along with the common man. It featured singers (Bhimsen Joshi, M Balamuralikrishna, Lata Mangeshkar); actors (Amitabh Bachchan, Mithun Chakraborty, Kamal Hasan, Jeetendra, Waheeda Rehman, Hema Malini, Tanuja, Sharmila Tagore, Shabana Azmi, Deepa Sahi, Om Puri, Deena Pathak, Kamala Hasan); dancers (Mallika Sarabhai); cartoonist (Mario Miranda); filmmaker (Mrinal Sen); sportsmen (Narendra Hirwani, S Venkataraghavan, Prakash Padukone, Arun Lal, PK Banerjee, Syed Kirmani). The song also featured the Calcutta Metro, India's first metro rail service which was inaugurated in 1984 and the Deccan Queen that runs between Pune and Mumbai to highlight the strides the nation was taking towards modernity. These seemingly harmonious communion of national icons and common man made the song special to every Indian viewer, the viewer felt included in the song. The inclusion of the Calcutta metro and the Deccan Queen could be read as an attempt to exhibit an image of a strong and booming economy which at that point was at the cusp of collapse.

Though there were attempts to liberalize the Indian economy a few times, it was the New Economic Policy of 1991 that opened India's market and expanded the service sector. Karen Cerulo argues that modernization presents a completely new phase of existence to each of the nations in which it occurs. In addition to the introduction of industrialization, modernization produces drastic changes in social relations. In modernizing nations, leaders must convince a heterogeneous citizenry that they are now a part of a larger, more cohesive unit-one that transcends old tribal, group, or regional loyalties. Some refer to this task a political modernization. "As political modernization progresses, a national population moves from existing as a heterogeneous collection of individual groups to a single national body with a more unified, more homogeneous focus"(250). 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' fails to incorporate the above-mentioned ideas. It fails to assimilate the idea of unity in diversity and inclusion of people from all walks of life. The new version can be seen as a miserable attempt on the part of a Media House which tried to cash on the popularity of the old version. The new version fails to bring out the feeling of pride and unity among the citizens. All it does is to bring forth icons from different fields and put them together. The common man features as a backdrop in many shots as the primary focus is on the celebrity in the frame. The song 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' also propagates the feeling that actors predominantly from Bollywood and regional film industries, a few sportspersons, a few singers, composers and business tycoons overshadow the achievements of the nation.

#### IV. THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' is a fusion of fourteen languages namely- Hindi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Sindhi, Urdu, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Bangla, Assamese, Oriya, Gujarati and Marathi, the languages present in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India then, which was later amended to include more languages, Konkani(1992), Manipuri (1992), Nepali (1992), Bodo (2004), Dogri (2004), Maithili (2004) and Santhali (2004), at present, there are twenty-two languages that are included in the Eighth Schedule. 'Phir mile Sur' fails to incorporate all the languages in the Eighth Schedule.

When you watch both the songs closely many things may strike you. For example, in the 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' you will notice that no specific architectural structure is seen in the background except the view of the Taj Mahal. Whereas in 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara', you can see a lot of architectural structures of national and historical importance in the background. The Gateway of India, the Taj Hotel (Fig 1) that regained its splendour that it lost during the terrorist attacks, the Howrah Bridge, the Red Fort, the Qutab Minar, the Golden Temple, the then constructed Worli Bridge (Fig 2) to name a few. The presence of these structures is a subtle way of instilling a sense of pride in the cultural and architectural past of India, it focuses on the development of the nation.



Fig 1. Amitabh Bachchan with the Taj Hotel in the background



Fig 2. Sharukh Khan with the Mumbai- Worli Bridge in the background

'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' has an evident omission of the Anglo-Indian community as well as the North-Eastern parts of India. But on the other hand, it has included a segment with sign language that features Salman Khan with a group of children with hearing loss. 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' also has moments when a celebrity's presence overshadows the structure of the song, be it the sequence where Sharukh Khan's signature arm spread eclipses the Worli Bridge or the sequence with Amir Khan which has the son slip into the tune of the song "Aati Kya Khandala" from his movie *Ghulam*.

'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' had a group of children coming together to form the national flag, an indication that the future of the nation lay in the hands of the future generations. The timing of the song is significant here, as India was trying to showcase itself as a mighty power during this decade. The Pokhran nuclear test in 1998 and a series of events that unfolded in its aftermath which lead to the Kargil War in 1999 is important and needs to be mentioned here. These events lead India consolidating and expanding its military power. The song 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' has a montage of the Indian armed forces and the Indian flag towards the end and seems to emphasise more on the armed forces and the military strength of the nation.

#### V. REPRESENTATION OF THE NATION

The notions of a nation seem to have undergone a drastic change in a span of twenty years. 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' featured film stars but they did not seem to occupy the entire screen space and the common man was used as a face that represented the nation. On the other hand, in 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' the celebrities appear to occupy the screen and represent the nation making the common man a mere backdrop. It is also interesting to note that even though there was huge publicity and promotion, 'Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' was screened exclusively on Zoom TV first, denying the common man not only the space on screen but also limiting his access to the song.

Nationalism has been one of the biggest marketing tools for the capitalist economy. Not just for the capitalist economy, the state which is now close with the capitalist powers is one of the major promoters of nationalism. Both songs represent the State's idea of invoking nationalism at a moment of crisis within the nation. The first song came after the Sikh revolt which left a lot of scars and outlook of insecurity in the hearts and minds of lakhs of Sikhs in India. The opening scenes are very important in this context. The first clear geographical region captured in 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' is that of Kashmir (Fig 3), which was always at the centre of the dispute between India and Pakistan since the formation of the two countries in 1947. And the shot that follows the scenes with Kashmir in 'Mile Sur Mera Tumhara' features a Sikh family praising the nation (Fig 4). So, this is a perfect example of attempts at nation-building through the song.



Fig. 3. A boatsman in Kashmir



Fig. 4 A Sikh Family on a tractor

Another event that is etched into the collective memory of the nation is the 2008 Mumbai attacks which were predominantly covered live by news channels. ‘Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ starts with a shot of the Gateway of India and the Mumbai Taj Hotel which were also targeted during the attack and reopened post renovations. The inclusion of these monuments invokes the audience’s memory of the attacks over the nation; in doing so it also indirectly juxtaposes Pakistan, the so-called enemy of the nation, into the consciousness of the audience. Here the Taj Hotel represents the nation’s pride which cannot be touched by any foreign power and at the same time for the necessity of a nation with thousands of various cultures, to invoke a feeling of nationalism, a common enemy, is symbolized there. The song ‘Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ celebrated the sense of nationalism through the idea of unity in diversity and paved the way for the patriotic songs written and filmed later. Whereas ‘Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ tries to tap into the popularity of “Mile Sur Mera Tumhara” and also the feeling of a treat against the nation and uses them as a background to feature celebrities and their aura.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The songs ‘Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ and ‘Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ clearly mark the change in the idea of the nation. ‘Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ a song produced by a state-sponsored body showed the nation grappling with the principle of being a mixed economy that is on its way to free its market which finally arrived in 1991. The strong sense of unity in diversity and the inclusion of the fourteen languages in the Eighth Schedule were central to ‘Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’. ‘Phir Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ produced by a private organization trying to cash in on the popularity of ‘Mile Sur Mera Tumhara’ celebrates symbols of consumerism and indicates the rise of India as an armed nation with a strong military force that cannot be ignored.

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