The Sounds of Politics in South Asia
(with Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan)

[opening music]

00:21 **Juan Llamas-Rodriguez**: Welcome to the Media Cultures Podcast, I'm your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today, we're discussing the circulation of songs across different media, and how social movements can take up these songs to make specific political interventions. We have two guests with us today. Our first guest is Dr. Aswin Punathambekar, an associate professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. His research and teaching focus on the impact that globalization and technological change have on the workings of media industries and the formation of audiences and on cultural identity in politics. He's the author of *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry*, from NYU Press, the co-author of *Media Industry Studies*, and the co-editor of three books, *Global Bollywood*, *Television at Large in South Asia*, and *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*. He's currently working on a co-authored book provisionally titled *The Digital Popular: Media, Culture and Politics in Networked India*. He also serves as an editor of the peer-reviewed journal, *Media, Culture and Society* and co-edits the Critical Cultural Communication book series for NYU Press. Aswin, welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast.

01:40 **Aswin Punathambekar**: Thank you, Juan. Thank you for having me on the series.

01:43 **JLR**: Our second guest is Sriram Mohan. He's a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication and Media, and Rackham Predoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His research examines digital media cultures, political expression, and state-citizen relationships in South Asian contexts. His work has appeared in journals like *Television & New Media*, the *International Journal of Communication*, and *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. He is the other co-editor of *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, and serves as an associate editor of the peer-reviewed journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*. Sriram, welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast.

02:23 **Sriram Mohan**: Thank you very much, Juan. I'm very happy to be here.

02:26 **JLR**: So I wanna start by asking you, can you tell us more about where your work is about? Why does it interest you? Why do you think it's an important area that needs to be studied?

02:35 **AP**: So, like you said, both Sriram and I are interested in understanding the impact that globalization has. And both globalization and technological change, these twin forces, that they've had on the workings of media industries, the way audiences come together around different kinds of media texts, and cultural identity and politics. And our site for exploring these questions is South Asia, and India in particular, but we approach this site, not as a place that is somehow exceptional or culturally different, always in comparison to some centers in the West, but rather as a part of the world from which we can examine the intersections of various local, national, regional, sometimes inter-regional, and certainly global forces that shape the media cultures we are all interested in. And we feel that playing up the global and interconnected nature of media is particularly crucial if we want to avoid the problem of always centering the anglophone western work.

03:33 **AP**: So, for example, students may recognize already that since media and communication studies began in the 1970s, its object of study has changed in quite fundamental ways, right? Almost every decade, there's a new object of study. And in the beginning, media were taught almost wholly within the framework of discrete nation states, and that media could only be understood in relation to those national politics and cultures. But since then, thanks in part to technological diffusion and innovations driven by large world-encircling processes, this landscape is now unrecognizable, it's changed beyond recognition. So we draw inspiration from scholars like Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, and their statement on global modernity, where they say... And we work with that premise, to say that, "Any medium: radio, film, television, and now a range of digital platforms, they are now everywhere, they're simultaneously everywhere, and they're also interactively everywhere."

04:31 **AP**: So any given medium is not only everywhere, but it's also in a series of somewheres. And so for us, that particular somewhere happens to be South Asia, from where we then look at various media infrastructures and platforms. And given the state of the world right now, as we're producing this podcast, we both feel like this transnational and trans-regional perspective is even more important, given that

frictions, more than flows, seem to be defining global connections right now, in this moment we're living through.

05:04 **JLR**: Today, we're discussing specifically your article called, "A sound bridge: Listening for the Political in a Digital Age," which was published in the *International Journal of Communication*, Volume 11, in 2017. Could you give us a brief history of this article: when you began working on it, how did the project originate? How did the ideas change in the process of researching and co-writing it?

05:29 **SM**: Yeah, so my master's thesis was on Tamil film music. And "Why this Kolaveri?" Was one of the songs that I've actually written about. So when I started my PhD in 2015, and Aswin was at the University of Michigan then, and we started working together, we realized that we'd both been thinking about the song, its circulation, and how there were things happening with it or around it beyond the discourse of just viral marketing or viral marketing success from South Asia. So we'd both been thinking about it, but we then managed to, I think, work together to find, "Okay, what are our points of interest around this song?" Like, "Why does it seem to appeal to us? Why does it matter to us?" So as we continued to track the afterlife of the song on social media, this is like, three to four years after the song is released, and it still continues to keep popping up on our feeds. And we realize there's something there, that there was a bridge between the song Kolaveri and the hashtag Kolaveri.

06:31 **SM**: And it increasingly became clear to us that the sonic connections there had to be explored carefully to understand its enmeshing within deeply mediated political cultures. And once we figured out the idea of the sound bridge... The sound bridge as sort of an aural cross-fade, as one that connects different contexts, things really began to fall in place. So I think this took a while to write. We, I think, wrote over the course of a year, meeting every week, and sitting together and writing together, which was a really fascinating experience. So, again, I'd be typing and there'd be like text disappearing on the screen on Google Docs, and I would do the same to Aswin, and we kept doing that, and over a period of time, we were getting... We got to a point where we felt, "Okay, I think we have it down."

07:21 **JLR**: So you mentioned the sound bridge, which is one of the main conceptual contributions. Can you elaborate on that? How did you settle on the sound bridge? What is the sound bridge doing for explaining the phenomenona you were thinking about?

07:35 **SM**: Yeah. So, the sound bridge, as we mentioned in the piece, refers to an editing technique that's used to smoothen out transitions in films. So it's often used to connect two scenes together by overlapping the sound from one scene to another, or sometimes it's used to foreshadow stuff. For instance, in a movie, you could have the roar of a jet that could slowly turn into the growl of a car to mark the character's move from an aircraft to an automobile, right? So we were drawn to it, I think, as an idea, because at the heart of it, it's an aural technique. So much of our scholarship in media, and especially digital media, relies on visual metaphors and textual approaches, whereas so much of our lives online, whether it's the use of hashtags or other viral formats on like, let's say TikTok or any other platform, relies so much on sound. So we thought it was important to prod at the creative sound work that was happening around #kolaveri, and the notion of the sound bridge really gave us the opening to talk about the song being used to connect diverse contexts, to transition from the cultural to the political as we do on a day-to-day basis.

08:51 **AP**: Well, I guess, this might be a good place to just quickly outline, in brief, the two main interventions, right? So just picking up on that thing about the over-reliance on visual and textual metaphors to talk about our media experiences. The first thing we realized was to just foreground the fact that our engagement, our experience with public culture is completely intersensorial, it's a bodily thing with all kinds of senses coming into play. And so this article was an attempt to explore the significance of sound and listening. And once that became clear to us, we realized we also need to offer a model for how to trace a particular sound. It could be a chant, it could be a film song, it could be a piece of dialogue that emerges from the domain of popular culture, often mainstream commercial popular culture, and that somehow becomes transformed into a more, at an almost infrastructural level, it becomes a communicative infrastructure that can host all kinds of other expressions, aspirations, desires, that can span the spectrum from the progressive to the reactionary and everything in-between. And then finally, what we also realized was, it's not enough to just stop there but we also have to then think about, "Well, does this then suggest that there is a much larger shift happening in terms of the cultural foundations of media and citizenship?"

10:15 **AP**: And doing that means looking at media institutions from where some of these sounds come from, looking at digital platforms with their unique affordances, and looking carefully at audience imaginaries and the range of creative practices.

10:29 **JLR**: Right. So the Kolaveri sound, in particular, comes from a film. Could you give us a brief overview of where it comes from, and then how does it get taken up by the different political and social movements that you referred to?

10:43 **SM**: Yeah. So Kolaveri is the... "Why this Kolaveri?" as it's called, is the song from... Was released in November, 2011 as the promotional track for a Tamil-language film called *3*. So the quick context to that was that somebody within the production had leaked a version of the song, a scratch version of the song, and the makers of the film panicked and said, "Oh, okay, we really need to address this somehow quickly." So they managed to finish up the final version of the song and quickly put it up. And they felt that given that there was already a scratch version of the song out, the only way to keep attention to the song was to do a making video. So they put it out with a video of the person singing, the music director recording it, etcetera.

[clip from "Why this Kolaveri?" song]

12:01 **SM**: And then it really, really takes off. There's something about it that makes it really catchy. It's very simple, it's very, very straightforward, it's a simple tune, anybody can sing along, it comes with English subtitles, Sony Music was the, I think, label, so they had English subtitles in the video as well. So I think it helped access a lot of that. So it becomes crazy popular in a very short span of time. And then it sparks off discussions on a range of issues, including gender and sexual violence, caste injustice, etcetera. But it's mimetic value was perhaps most forcefully employed in discussions of political corruption. So this was in 2011, so when the song it released, there had already been months of protests and demonstrations across India to introduce a citizen's ombudsman bill to tackle what was seen as endemic political corruption.

12:56 **SM**: So this was after a string of high-profile scandals over the past few years, at that point, including a particularly sensational one around the allocation of mobile telephony and internet spectrum. So there was a range of scams, a range of scandals, people who were very angry and frustrated, and a couple of the key figures were somebody called Anna Hazare, a Gandhian sort of figure, who helped mobilize the movement, he was one of the central figures. And there was another Right to Information Activist called Arvind Kejriwal, who emerged as a sort of lieutenant and became another central character who later split to form his own political party.

13:38 **AP**: And who is now the Chief Minister of New Delhi.

13:42 SM: So much of this had already occurred even before Kolaveri had released. So I think one of the things that's important to remember is that songs don't particularly emerge outta nowhere and cause political revolutions or whatever. I think that's a bad way to think about it. But given the highly mediatized nature of the protests and the percolation of public anger around questions of corruption, Kolaveri provided a near-perfect vehicle to resonate this anger and frustration through a range of mash-ups, remixes, and other creative uses. And it was a Tamil film song, so it had been completely removed from the context, and it circulated well beyond that. And as far as Tamil films are concerned, it's one of the biggest film industries in India. It's largely based out of the South Indian city of Chennai, which is a media capital where films have been produced in a variety of languages. So Tamil films, and especially Tamil film songs, have had outside circulation for quite a while now, and this seems to have only expanded in the age of YouTube and algorithmic recommendation.

14:51 JLR: Right. And it seems like it's something the producers themselves were banking on, right? Producing that making-of video and putting it with subtitles, it's like, "This will be perfect because it circulates widely. People don't need to know Tamil to catch on to the song, they can just follow the subtitles as well." And as you said, it's a really catchy tune.

15:11 SM: That's right, and I don't think even they expected the sheer scale of its circulation. But like you said, they did do much of the ground work to help it circulate, or nudge it along, certainly.

15:25 JLR: Right. Right. And that's crucial, too, to think about, there's never a direct cause and effect, right? They were thinking about, "How do we respond to the unofficial release of the film?" And then so they released it in a way that it allowed it to circulate fully. But then all these other projects were already happening, and so was able to latch on, which I think it's something that I find we need to always counter, this idea that media is the sole cause of something, right? It's the, "The song did this." or, "Twitter did this, and therefore the revolution came." But it's actually a number of things that just happened to come together, and that recreates the momentum, expands the phenomenon, if you will, in some way.

16:11 AP: Yeah. I think it's okay to say that at least for the last 25-odd years, I think it's perfectly fine to say that any political movement, any social movement or so on is thoroughly mediatized in the sense there is no getting away from media logics at this

point in time. But that shouldn't then go to the next step of saying that the directionality is media leading to things. That's one step too far. Yeah.

16:37 **JLR**: Yeah, it's not a one-to-one cause and effect relationship, yeah, things are complex. So, specifically to the Kolaveri, moving from the "Why this Kolaveri?" song to the #kolaveri moment, you situate this within where you put the "re-sounding of the public sphere," which is the term that Kate Lacey uses. Could you explain a little bit what Lacey's getting at with the re-sounding of the public sphere, and why this is important to your project as well?

17:07 **AP**: Sure. So, Kate Lacey, in several articles, and especially in her book called Listening Publics, she argues that listening has to be understood as absolutely foundational to the workings of any public sphere. And she points out that the various forms of communication that happen in public, often that matter in personal and private spaces as well, that listening is central to all of it. And that as an act that is so central to any form of communication, and one that's also very participatory, right? When we make the mistake of assuming that listening is passive, and in fact it is an actually deeply participatory and active thing to listen carefully, that it is actually, for her, entirely political. And as she sees it, and we agree with her, that political science and political theory does not consider listening practices, and tends to remain focused on things like speech, expression, visibility, and even appearance, what kinds of people appear, what kinds of bodies are allowed to appear and be visible, and those are valid concerns to be sure, but she says that we've tended to focus only on those. So for us, this line of critique was crucial because we recognize the silence around sound and listening in post-colonial and global media studies as well.

18:26 **AP**: So while there is a wealth of scholarship on the expansion of media infrastructures beginning in the mid-1980s across many post-colonial nations, all of whom are making the transition away from statist, development-oriented media institutions towards more market-oriented, globally integrated media economies, as they were making that transition, a lot of people have written about those transitions. They've written about it from a regulation and policy perspective, from an audience perspective, all kinds of angles.

19:00 **AP**: And so what we realized was even there, there was a silence around sound. So we returned to a couple of key exceptions to that work. There's, for example, Peter Manuel has a brilliant book on Cassette Culture, analog cassettes, and Vinod Pavarala another scholar based in Hyderabad has done some wonderful work on community

radio, for example, during the time of this moment of '90s globalization. And so what we tried to do was connect that work to more recent stuff in sound studies. For example, people like Rahul Mukherjee and Abhigyan Singh have written about SD cards and how songs travel through SD cards and people share them on the various devices. Jennifer Lynn Stoever has written about the sonic color line on sound, and racialized forms of listening and violence, or Nabeel Zuberi, for example, who writes about listening while Muslim. So that's, broadly speaking, what we mean by, and what Kate Lacey meant by, resounding the public sphere. How do we rethink a history of media transformation that laid the foundation for something like Kolaveri from a sonic angle, and not just from a visual, filmic way?

20:07 **JLR**: Right, for sure. And this leads into thinking about taking the sound bridge, which usually was tied to... It's only the bridge, right? It's the images in the film and what we're interested in is how these are connected by the sound, but actually foregrounding the sound aspect of it and the listening aspect of it. I was wondering... I think Sriram started to get to this when mentioning TikTok, right? But I'm interested in how sound bridge as a concept helps us to think differently about this circulation, rather than just calling it a meme. Rather than just saying Kolaveri was a meme and then it helped with all sorts of political expression. But how does this, thinking of it as a sound bridge, and as a sonic cue that becomes a sound bridge, more helpful than thinking of it as only a meme, let's say?

20:56 **SM**: Right. So that's a fascinating question because if you look at the article's title, we talk about listening for the political in a digital age. So a key aspect of sound as it is is in terms of, what do we listen for? How do we listen carefully? How do we... So then it brings about, I think, feminist concerns around care in a way that I think a lot of the conversation around memes, etcetera, doesn't always do. And memes, especially, have sometimes had an unsavory reputation as being associated with more reactionary, more sexist elements as well, and more racist elements as well. So what sound does, in some sense, is make the idea of media more of a process. Media as social practice is very, very clear when you think about it through the lens of sound and listening.

21:52 **AP**: So, for example, one good way of thinking about social practices, we were talking about this in preparation for this, and your question about the very specific sound of the "-*u*," the epenthetic "-*u*" sound, that so many of the... That the song played with, and that so many of the English language words were then made to sound or they were resounded in a Tamil idiom with the "-*u*" epenthetic, right?

[clip from "Why this Kolaveri?" song]

22:30 **AP**: So that's a great example where we noticed that, interestingly enough, the more expressly political uses of Kolaveri, emerged from contexts that were actually quite far removed from the world of Tamil cinema, and even the kind of political fan practices that have marked Tamil and other South Indian subcultures for like five, six decades now. And so what was interesting was that the epenthetic "-*u*" did make a difference, quite simply, because that particular usage actually remains quite wide, but in pejorative ways, to often mock Tamil accents. And that often comes to stand in for a blanket South Indian voice and identity. So if there's a popular Bollywood, Hindi language Bollywood film, a stock so-called South Indian character would simply use that epenthetic "-*u*" and be marked off as this distinct South Indian other.

23:22 **JLR**: Right.

23:22 **AP**: Whereas in this case, it actually became useful, in a sense, and was picked up quickly. And it allowed people to rewrite the song's lyrics in relation to this ongoing political movement, but using that "-*u*" sound that was already so familiar, that they were primed for it for so many years and decades. So that gives you a sense of how and why sound opens up ways of thinking about social practice and media practice.

23:45 **JLR**: Yeah, and a fascinating sort of reclaiming of what would usually be used as pejorative sounds, right? In order to mobilize it for different aims. Yeah, that "-*u*" at the end is very... Really catches you, too.

24:01 **AP**: And they even hard-coded in the subtitles, that's the interesting bit. They actually almost give you the script to remix it, the lyrics.

24:09 **JLR**: Great. So one of the things that you point out is, not all sonic cues become sound bridges, right? There are specific ways in which sonic cues, which could be any part of a song, any clip of a sound, become more important, become something bigger, which is why you're calling it a sound bridge. So could you elaborate on these characteristics? You mentioned availability, performativity, and resonance. What do these mean to you, and why are these important to think about in terms of sound bridge?

24:38 SM: Right. So when we talked about availability performativity and resonance in relation to Kolaveri, we also wanted to think about the multiple meanings of something like, availability. For instance, this was a viral success, and it produced a lot of discourse and popular writing about it being a viral marketing success, a digital marketing success and stuff like that. And surely there's something to that, but availability also goes beyond that. So for instance, in Kolaveri, Kolaveri literally in Tamil means "murderous rage." "Veri" is rage. And I think what really helped Kolaveri was, it was made available through the indeterminacy of something like rage. This is a lot of popular and public anger and rage and frustration around a range of issues, around a range of popular discontents that Kolaveri made itself available to.

25:43 JLR: So the rage wasn't the same as in the film, but then there were all these other rages going on in society. Yeah.

25:50 AP: Exactly. In the film, it's really just cathartic rage, of a boy basically, having been rebuffed by his romantic attachment, and him singing, "Why this murderous rage?" There's a different kind of gendered... And violence around that gendered violence, there's a history within Tamil cinema and Tamil film songs, and a certain kind of masculinity being performed through the song. But that's not what gets taken up. The indeterminacy, like Sriram said, gets picked up and attached to a different circulation of sentiments.

26:30 SM: And when you talk about performativity, again, yes, it does get performed in a range of places and by a range of people, but what was really fascinating to us was how enshrined the idea of performativity was with respect to its use online. We have a couple of tweets that we show in the paper. There's a tweet where it's written in the tone and tune as... When you read it, you can't just read it, you have to sing it. You have to be like...

Handla Suitcase
2G scam-u
Suitcase full ah Currency

27:06 SM: When you listen to the song, the tweet is then part of that song.

27:12 AP: It's written in verse, the tweet.

27:13 **SM**: It's written in verse, yeah, it is written to be performed, and I think that was another key aspect of this sonic cue being taken up as well. And the third thing we talk about is in terms of its resonance. And here we draw on Michael Schudson's work, where he talks about the resonance of a symbol or a cultural artifact has to do with about how a public emerges around it, how cultural relationships between the object tradition and audience emerges around it. And I think that really, really happened with something like Kolaveri. Like, for instance, you could take something like Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," and it is very resonant in some sense, but there's not a broader political or cultural relation between the object tradition and audience as much that lets it transform into a range of political uses. So I think, thinking about resonance in this broader way, not just as, "A lot of people like it." or, "It's resonating with a lot of people," but to think about what sort of cultural relationships it establishes or helps to unearth, and how a public gathers around it becomes really, really crucial.

28:25 **AP**: And I think it's worth quickly pointing out also that it definitely was helped by the fact that this emerged from a very playful domain of popular culture. It's very fun. It's like a bunch of cool people, like in a very MTV Making Of style, hanging out in the recording studio and just chilling and just ribbing, goofing off, and just somehow magically produce this super hit song, right? And I think that did help because there are other songs that are just as available, that are incredibly resonant, but are so loaded with political meaning already, when they enter the public domain, that any use of it would invite incredible state violence and censorship. It will be shut down within a matter of minutes by the state, there would be all kinds of pressure on digital platforms to shut things down. So one of the key words, for example, in the South Asian context, in the Indian context would be "azadi," which means freedom. And because of the Indian state's occupational, settler, colonial relationship with some parts of the territory, any use of that as a resonant sound would go nowhere.

29:37 **JLR**: Yeah, it's a fascinating flip side to a phenomenon where there's particular protest songs, for example, that are then taken up, because the melody is so catchy and so they're evacuated out of that political strength. But here, the phenomenon is the opposite. The song itself didn't actually bring with itself all of these political connotations, but because it was so catchy, it was able to be mapped on to all of these political phenomena, which made it all the more resonant, as you pointed out, to different groups and different systems. And crucially, it allows for different social movements to latch onto it. So it's not just the one social movement that resonates with the Kolaveri, but it's actually different ones with different aims at different

moments, but it's actually the sound, the sound bridge, the sound itself is the one that keeps reverberating throughout, right?

30:32 **SM**: Absolutely.

30:35 **JLR**: So let's talk about some macro-level issues, specifically I'm really interested in... As you pointed out, there's now... Any digital media is transnational in nature, it moves all around the world, it is probably hosted on a server that is halfway around the world and then it comes back. So as scholars, we think about what are the questions of circulation, and how do you argue for a given object, like how did it move around the world, or why was it significant that it had moved beyond just the place where it was produced? But then as trying to build an argument around it, there is the question of evidence. So how do you argue for an object's significance? There's the quantification argument. It had this many retweets, it had this many views on YouTube, and therefore it was important. But is that enough, are there some qualitative ways of thinking about social significance or as you've been putting on question of resonance of media around the world or in different places?

31:40 **AP**: So, I think we both get at this in slightly different ways. So I think, just right off the bat, it's worth stating our particular disciplinary and our methodological orientations, that we are both trained as media and cultural studies scholars, we tend to read widely in this field, but also cognate fields including cultural anthropology, science and technology studies, and we do that with an inter-Asian lens, which means we're interested in Asia and scholarship around that, but also with Middle East and North Africa regions because of the long history of interconnections, going back almost a millennium. And when we do engage the social sciences, we engage the more interpretive side of things, which quite simply means we tend to favor archival research, ethnographic field research, and above all, very, very close readings of all sorts of texts, from a piece of archival memo to one single tweet, like we were talking about. So with this project, our goal was never to quantify likes, retweets, or even do any kind of network analysis to see where Kolaveri moved from, a tweet to a Facebook page to a nightly news show, we never set out to do that. Now, this doesn't let us off the hook, though, because when it comes to demonstrating significance, we do have to do that.

33:00 **AP**: And here, I think we would point to scholars like Andre Brock and Lori Kendall, who have argued for what they call a deep data approach. So they refute, they push back against the idea that the only response to big-data analysis is small data,

because that comes with all the pejorative connotations of smallness of scale, smallness of significance and so on, and they really reject that.

33:21 **AP**: And so for us, what a deep-data approach looks like, and that we've tried to model in this article, is to begin with, to pay attention to questions of form, to ask what kind of a song is Kolaveri in the first place? What is the history of this type of song? What are the industrial and cultural contexts from which it emerges and circulates? And that when we put all of these things together, maybe it helps us understand why this song became popular, not some other. There are thousands of Tamil film songs every year, right? Why this and not another? So asking these sorts of questions might help us get to that question of popularity, and more important than the popularity, it's affective pull. There's something deeply affective about it, you get into it, you can't avoid being caught up in its... Just in the tune, in the video itself and so on.

34:16 **AP**: And so we also then pay attention to matters of intertextuality, so, which is, and especially in a global media class, this becomes all the more crucial when things move across all kinds of borders, national borders, regional borders, is what is being referenced when audiences draw something into their own world and re-situate it, or in this case, retune it to their own particular concerns, and in doing so, what kinds of representations then become possible. Then we can ask what kinds of representations. But to do that, you need to do this careful historical work, questions of form, industrial context, cultural context. So, to me, that's where the question of significance gets addressed.

35:00 **JLR**: So you end by gesturing at what you see is an issue with this research, right? Where you say that there's a problem with framing the link between the popular and the political in terms of effects. So could you expand on that? What is the issue with that, and why do you see we need to move beyond the framing it only as effects?

35:25 **SM**: Yeah. So the effects approach to, let's say in an artifact like Kolaveri, becomes too centered around the artifact. Because if you have to start tracing effects, then it becomes about... You have to figure out a point and then have to trace the effects of that point or that object or that artifact. Whereas, what we're really interested in is the question of the ceaseless remediation of public cultures and how artifacts like this participate in that remediation and advance it in a variety of directions. So there are deep historical relationships to take into account. One is, of course, the history of the Tamil film song, and how its circulation and its uptake changes through various eras, through the cassette eras, and then through online sharing and MP3's, and being

available on memory cards, and then turning up on platforms like YouTube or other music-streaming platforms. And with each of these moments, there are various relationships being tugged and pulled into place. So there's a certain way in which... There's a certain indeterminacy, again, to the connections between the popular and political that have to be explored, deeply contextualized with, and has to be well historicized. So a presentist lens on this with a focus on specific effects is less useful than paying attention to the affective gestures that it then makes possible or generates. And that's the approach that we've really taken with the Kolaveri paper.

37:10 **JLR**: Right, and it gets to an earlier point about not tying down the causal link, right? It wasn't, the song came out and the song produced everything by the end of itself, as if it existed in a vacuum, right? I think a lot of the emphasis on indeterminacy is crucial rather than the very one-to-one direction on what one media object will do, which we can't just isolate it in those ways.

37:36 **SM**: And at the same time, we can't use the indeterminacy as a sort of excuse to say, "Oh yeah, that's just how it is." The indeterminacy is often a function of various social and historical relationships. And I think as researchers, if we map them out carefully to the extent possible, I think that's valuable because that helps us understand why certain moments produce certain artifacts and why those artifacts generate a certain range of affects.

38:04 **AP**: So for example, in the article, we talk about the distance that social context, Indian popular culture, has moved from a song that released in, I think the mid-90s, early to mid-90s, it was called "Take It Easy Urvashi." Incredibly popular, just burst onto the scene at the moment when MTV and Channel V, two very popular music TV channels had just made their presence felt for the first time in the Indian context, so these songs were on every top 10 rotation, watched endlessly, people would record it on their VCR's and watch it endlessly. But in that moment of this exuberance and this promise of globalization, of joining market economy, and the turn to a decidedly capitalist sector, was about, take it easy, you have a problem with corruption, take it easy, you have a problem with the buses not showing up on time, take it easy. But then, by the time Kolaveri comes along, it's murderous rage. So mapping that historical transition of how market-led globalization, market desires, had reached a certain level of incredible frustration, that was then being indexed by all kinds of protest movements, gender-related, sexual violence-related, economic-related, of course, that I think doing that kind of work gives us a better lens than simply asking, "Did Kolaveri

impact the way the anti-corruption movement played out?" Well yes, but also no, there's much more to that story than just that.

39:33 **JLR**: Right. So the Kolaveri becomes an entryway into thinking about all these things, an inextricable entry into these things, right? You couldn't have made this argument or this research by thinking about another sound because this was the sound that affected all of this as well.

39:47 **AP**: Right.

39:50 **JLR**: So this was published in 2017, have you built on this or expanded on this work since?

39:57 **AP**: So, we've done a couple of other things. So the language question became really interesting to us. Like you asked Juan early on about, why Tamil, why a Tamil film song? And so on. I think one of the things we've done is tried to look at, what is the enduring significance of languages, and especially regional cultures that are defined around language when it comes to the way digital platforms move around the world? So when YouTube tries to become a part of, let's say, the Asian landscape, what are the ways in which YouTube starts to do local language-related things at a programming level, content level, acquiring and building a library, but also at an algorithmic level, what are the kinds of things they have to do to resonate with cultural formations that are deeply linguistic in nature.

40:44 **AP**: So we've done a little bit of work on that in an article that we published recently. And since then, we've also moved on to doing this edited anthology that you mentioned, on global digital cultures, where once again, language and region figure prominently, but also helping us move beyond purely nation-centric ways of thinking about it. So for example, if you look at streaming video in South Asia, there are platforms, that are language-oriented, that criss-cross the borders of nation states that were established after British rule. So there's a Bengali-language platform, for example, called Hoichoi, that is immensely popular, that moves across the State of West Bengal, which is in India, but also shares a border with Bangladesh, which is also a Bengali-speaking, huge nation state of many, many hundreds of millions, who are also on this, watching, streaming video on this platform. And then of course there were a vast diaspora of Bengali speakers in the US, in the UK, and all over the world.

41:43 **AP**: So we're looking at those kinds of transnational, but at the same time, regional and linguistic formations of media cultures that are enabled through digital platforms. And then finally, we're just starting to work on this book called *The Digital Popular*, which takes this piece that we just mentioned, about how do we understand the link between the popular and the political in an era of digital platforms? That we're just starting to work on that piece. And then Sriram, of course, is finishing a wide-ranging dissertation that looks at other aspects of this.

42:16 **SM**: So there are multiple pieces to it. One of the pieces that's relevant to this is, as I said, the one chapter my dissertation looks at, protest music and protest songs, especially in relation to rap, feminist rap, environmental, pro-environmental rap music, and anti-caste music. So one of the things I've really focused on is to think about questions of defiance, to think about defiance as not just rebellion or disobeying, but as defiance coming to the vulgar Latin roots of the term, as thinking about distrust, saying, how do you express distrust in a post-colonial state's vision of technological progress, while very much using the same tools that are supposed to be part of that narrative of progress? And how music provides a certain... Certain affective registers get opened up by music, and when they see... When they meet the eyes of the state, how they get put down and how they reemerge online. That flow is something that I track in the dissertation.

43:31 **JLR**: Great. That's really interesting. Has there been anything, I mean in the three years I guess since it came out, any new developments in the world, or even as you're working through these new projects, that has gotten you to go back and rethink or add to or reflect on the insights of this article of the sound bridge?

43:52 **SM**: I think one of the key things, for me at least, certainly has been to think more carefully about sound and listening, and to pay attention to the questions far more carefully. Like for instance, like we spoke about TikTok earlier, and this has been popular with Vine earlier, and now with TikTok as well, is that small clips of sound really begin to become the anchor around which a range of cultural production then begins to happen.

[music intensifies]

44:26 **JLR**: Aswin, Sriram, thank you for joining us.

44:32 **AP**: Yeah, this was great, thank you so much for inviting us.

44:35 **SM**: Thanks a ton.

[closing credits music]

40:45 **JLR**: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me, and edited by Alan Yu. Opening music by Podington Bear. Closing credits music by cloud mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.