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FM radio and the Malayali diaspora in Qatar: at home overseas

Irene Ann Promodh

Georgetown University Qatar, Doha, Qatar

ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on trans-oceanic exchanges between the Persian Gulf and South Asia has delved into previously neglected minutiae of everyday migrant life beyond labour. Combining ethnographic research and media content analyses, I build on this scholarship through a novel study of vernacular radio as a critical means of sustaining South Indian (Malayali) diasporic communities betwixt and between their home and host societies. This paper shows, firstly, the interwovenness of work and leisure in the everyday lives of Malayali migrants in Qatar; and secondly, the role played by radio listenership and production practices in crafting distinctive ethnolinguistic spatialities of sound (*sabdam*) via sonic connections that transcend the binary between being at home and abroad. Paying attention to sonic waves and networks that bind together radio stations and audiences in Qatar across work and home spaces, I argue that diasporic vernacular radio both reinforces and challenges notions of 'Malayali-ness' within the Gulf Malayali community (*bandham*) and beyond.

Introduction

Recent scholarship on trans-oceanic exchanges between the Persian Gulf and South Asia has delved into previously neglected minutiae of everyday migrant life beyond labour. Combining ethnographic research and media content analyses, I build on this scholarship through a novel study of vernacular radio as a critical means of sustaining South Indian (Malayali)[1] diasporic communities betwixt and between their home and host societies. Paying attention to sonic waves and networks that bind together radio stations and audiences in Qatar across work and home spaces, I argue that diasporic vernacular radio both reinforces and challenges notions of 'Malayali-ness' within and without the diasporic Malayali community or *bandham*. As such, I trace how Malayalis in Qatar construct new forms of diasporic belonging refracted by class, occupation, and gender.

This paper contributes to two overlapping areas of scholarship. First, my ethnography of Malayalam migrant radio in Qatar enters into a conversation with the emerging field of sonic studies, particularly in the context of the Indian Ocean rim. Taken together,

CONTACT Irene Ann Promodh   iap12@georgetown.edu

recent scholarship in this field (Hirschkind 2006; Ulaby 2012; Basu 2008; Punathambekar and Mohan 2020) invites us to reimagine the Indian Ocean as a site not only of human mobilities but also of translocal 'sonic atmospheres' (Eisenlohr 2018) that mobile groups (re)create, inhabit, and mobilise across the littoral. Ulaby's historicization of maritime musical production and exchange among pearl-divers in the western Indian Ocean brings forward most poignantly the dialectical relationship between work and leisure as mediated by soundwaves (Ulaby 2012). Following Ulaby, I study Malayalam diasporic radio in Qatar as a form of sonic media that binds together a particular South Asian ethnolinguistic community - Malayalis from the southwestern Indian state of Kerala – in a Gulf monarchy across the Indian Ocean. Diasporic radio, though overlooked today as an antiquated communication medium, is, this paper argues, a deeply personal means of disseminating and receiving information for many migrants overseas. Highly affordable and accessible, radio uses migrant *sabdam* or familiar 'sounds' to create ethnolinguistic spaces of sonic belonging for migrant workers otherwise alienated from their host society. In drawing historical parallels to sonic practices associated with Malayalam radio in Qatar today, this paper situates the Malayali *sabdam* in mediated leisure practices along a longer historical arc connecting Kerala to the Persian Gulf. It looks, in particular, at shipbuilding folklore along the Malabar Coast and song-making practices associated with pearl-diving in the pre-oil Persian Gulf. The everyday interweaving of migrant work and sonic forms of leisure today, I argue, harks back to older cultural practices of mobile groups in the western Indian Ocean prior to the discovery of oil.

Second, this paper examines the nuances in home-host dialectics and the means by which diasporic social institutions such as radio stations enable migrant diasporas to negotiate new ways of being 'at home overseas' and stake new claims of belonging to their host state. It builds on recent anthropological scholarship on South Asian migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states which reveals how migrants' conceptions of belonging go beyond statist logics of *jus sanguinis* citizenship based on paternal descent (Babar 2014). In Kuwait, for instance, Attiya Ahmad has shown how female domestic workers of South Asian origin negotiate a sense of local belonging via religious conversion to Islam (Ahmad 2017). These women stake claims to their host society in Kuwait in malleable ways that sync with their pre-existing lives and obligations. In this paper, I build on her rich insights and those of other anthropologists, most notably Neha Vora (2013) and Filippo and Caroline Osella (2008a), to argue that Malayalam radio in Qatar is best understood as a set of negotiated and mediated cultural practices between Kerala and the Gulf. FM radio in vernaculars such as Malayalam represents a form of state-sponsored media that produces new forms of belonging even as it contests the very subjectivities that constitute the Malayali diaspora or *bandham*.

Methodology

This paper draws on ethnographic and interview data I gathered through forging 'conversational partnerships' (Rubin and Rubin 2012) with radio producers and audiences in Doha, Qatar during 2019–20. As a Malayali woman who lived in the United Arab Emirates for over a decade before moving to Qatar, I relied on prior contacts in Qatar to deploy snowball sampling techniques that helped me meet my interlocutors.[2] To restrict the empirical scope of my paper, I limit myself to insights gleaned from extensive

conversations with a dozen interlocutors, tracing key themes and motifs that recur across my interviews and fieldnotes. As my prior contacts and new interlocutors meshed into an intricate network of Malayalam radio listeners and jockeys, I became acutely attuned to the textured nature of migrant leisure practices among Malayalis in Qatar. Additionally, meeting my interlocutors at their worksites, I was struck by how their everyday work was tied inextricably to their leisure practices. These worksites, including a radio station, beauty salons, banks, tailor shops, university libraries, limousine taxi offices, and construction offices, form the basis of the multi-sited ethnographic practices (Marcus 1995) at the heart of this paper.

In tune with Appadurai's conception of the cultural flows of globalisation (Appadurai 1990), this paper situates Radio Yatra FM[3], a new diasporic radio station sponsored by the state of Qatar, at the intersection of a soundscape of rhythms from Kerala and a Malayali ethnoscape overseas. To tease out the relationship between this soundscape and ethnoscape, I draw on sustained conversations and repeat visits with my interlocutors, including both producers and listeners of the radio station at the centre of my study. My interlocutors developed an affinity for Radio Yatra since the 2017 GCC diplomatic crisis. On 5 June, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar for allegedly supporting terrorist groups and acting against the interests of its neighbours. Qatar denied these allegations. The ensuing diplomatic crisis produced an unprecedented breach within the GCC states, and a new rift in the Malayalam radio soundscape in the Gulf. Malayalis in Qatar had previously tuned into Malayalam radio stations airing from the UAE as their primary source of leisure. However, with the diplomatic faceoff between Qatar and the UAE, Yatra became the new sonic medium for Malayalis in Qatar to connect with Kerala and express loyalty to their host state. This shift in radio listenership was also facilitated by weakened or scrambled radio signals from popular stations in the UAE. Negotiations concerning diasporic belonging thus led to a recalibration of the relationship between the Malayalam soundscape or *sabdam* and the Malayali ethnoscape or *bandham*.

My extended case study (Burawoy 1998) of a single radio station in Qatar does not treat it as a kind of exception in Malayali listening practices or vernacular radio stations sponsored by Gulf states. Instead, the case of Yatra helps us make sense of a new dialectic between host states in the region and diasporic groups, particularly from South Asia, and by no means does Yatra enjoy an exclusive monopoly over its audience in Qatar. In fact, my interlocutors access and switch between a number of different Malayalam radio stations based in the Gulf. Some even prefer the content of UAE stations over Yatra's despite the attenuated radio signals since the summer of 2017. Yatra itself builds on the earlier success of its sister station that broadcasts popular Hindi content to a much wider audience in Qatar. Yatra and its sister ventures, now including Bengali, Nepali, and Tagalog stations, tell us about a new phenomenon of host state-sponsored ventures in which vernacular cultural spaces are being defined via personnel and content tailored to each migrant diaspora. These ethnolinguistic spaces ought to be seen, on the one hand, as components of a mosaic public sphere, and on the other hand, as affective sites in which translocal belonging can be negotiated by major migrant diasporas in Qatar and other GCC states. As such, the producers of Yatra, much like their counterparts, are acutely aware of regional political sensitivities and abide by state censorship policies

even as they enjoy full autonomy to craft their Malayalam infotainment programming according to the tastes and preferences of their audience. The case of Yatra thus enables us to unravel knotty issues of the production of diasporic belonging vis-a-vis the dialectics between home and host societies. Amid recent diplomatic tensions in the Gulf, this paper shows how the production of a new diasporic Malayalam soundscape reconfigures notions of belonging among Malayalis, a key migrant community in Qatar and the wider Gulf region.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first explores the dialectical relationship between work and leisure in contemporary and past oceanic soundscapes connecting Kerala to the Gulf. The second section studies Malayalam radio production in Qatar vis-a-vis contested meanings of Malayali-ness among radio producers at Radio Yatra and in their programming content. The final section addresses the gendered tensions within the Malayali *bandham* in and outside the Radio Yatra station in Qatar. Taken together, the three sections share a single thread that ties them together: how meanings of Malayali-ness in the *bandham* are negotiated across the home and host societies via Malayalam *sabdam*.

Radio, a 'Malayali's best friend'

In this section, I sketch out two ethnographic vignettes – one of Aji and the other of Shahul – to portray how the worlds of work and leisure are connected intimately to each other in the everyday lives of Malayalis away from 'home'. Through their narratives, I place the interweaving of work and leisure in contemporary Malayalam radio production and listenership along a longer historical arc of maritime musical practices across the Indian Ocean. This historical awareness matters because the cosmopolitanism that animated pre-oil circularities of people, ideas, and things across the Arabian Sea is now often brushed past or denied in the contemporary Gulf by scholars and states. By focusing on the pivotal role of Malayalam radio in forging new diasporic bonds of sonic companionship among Malayalis in Qatar, this section also reflects simultaneously on their sense of alienation in the host society.

Aji is a single Malayali woman in her mid-40s who has lived in Qatar for over twelve years and works as a beautician at a small Qatari-owned salon within a shopping complex. She is brought to tears when I ask her, 'What does the radio mean to you in Doha?' Aji replies,

> Radio is my best friend. My friends call me the 'radio lady' because they know I always listen to it, from the morning itself. I also go to sleep while listening to the radio … It makes me feel like someone is talking to me. I feel very lonely here sometimes, but when I listen to the radio, time doesn't go so slowly anymore, it is a really good *swasthatha* [time-pass].

The omnipresence of vernacular radio in Aji's life is quite telling. At the parlour, she plays the radio intermittently during her work-day, whenever she can. At home she does her housework before 8 AM and after 8 PM while listening to the radio, without the visual distractions of a television set. She then goes to sleep clutching onto the radio, listening to 'a man's soothing voice while falling asleep.' Evidently, the radio sonifies Aji's day from sunrise to sunset, across her work and home spaces, bringing her work-leisure worlds in the diaspora closer still.

The gendered dynamics at play here reverse the terms of engagement between male listeners and female radio jockeys. Typically, the mellifluous voices of young women are treated as 'ear-candy' by male audiences. In the recent Bollywood film *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), for example, a housewife-turned-jockey with a sensuous voice offers relationship advice and chats with male listeners during a popular late-night radio show. Aji directly flips this gendered dynamic between (female) jockeys and their (male) listeners: she is a single mother whose romantic desires are fulfilled by a *man's* voice every night.

Much like others, Aji has always relied heavily on Malayalam radio from Dubai, particularly since my interlocutors claim that Dubai-based AM[4] channels have a wider geographical reach than the FM[5] channels traditionally do. However, Aji also cannot choose to tune into other radio channels, including the newly introduced ones in Qatar, since the radio receiver that she brought with her from Kerala more than a decade ago can only tune into AM, not FM, channels. When asked about the prospect of buying a new radio, she stated that she has always intended to do so, but never did, since, like other single-earning migrants in Qatar, her first priority is to save as much money as possible to remit back home to support her two daughters studying in Kerala.

The emotional connection Aji has with the radio transmitter is amplified by her inability to visit her few relatives in Doha. Workplace restrictions by the parlour's management, namely, the Qatari female employer or 'madam', restrict her to the accommodation provided, even during most weekends.[6] Under the circumstances, radio, for Aji (as it is for many Malayali migrants), is more than just a source of entertainment or information. Radio yokes the work lives of migrants to the deep longing they experience in leaving behind their families and cultures back home to work in Qatar. Aji's responses to my questions echo among other radio listeners from a similar socio-economic background. Their narratives suggest that radio soundwaves diffuse over a certain space even as the radio content itself inscribes a sharp and rigid territoriality. This line of reasoning resonates, in particular, with Punathambekar and Mohan's recent work on 'sound clouds' and the use of sound to territorialise and reshape (or 're-sound') the public sphere (Punathambekar and Mohan 2020). They show how locally produced and politically charged sound cultures in contemporary India challenge parochial understandings of citizenship and territoriality in the making of urban spaces. Anthropological conclusions drawn from Latin American popular music studies also speak to the circulation, transculturation, and exchange of diasporic sound across the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe in the translocal production of sonic spaces (Jáquez and Aparicio 2003; Anguiano 2018). As such, these paradoxical spatial dynamics of radio waves lead us to reconsider notions of physical space beyond the 'local' in, say, Kerala and Qatar, with sonic space mapped out by soundwaves in the making of new soundscapes.[7]

For Aji, as well as her Malayali colleagues in the parlour, soundscapes defined by Malayalam radio braid together leisure and work, enabling her to inhabit a private world circumscribed by her ethno-linguistic identity during the day. When customers are few at certain hours of the afternoon, Aji sits down with her fellow Malayali employees in a corner of the parlour to listen to radio shows as she rests her aching feet after hours of threading eyebrows, trimming hair, and waxing arms. During peak working hours, however, Aji turns off the radio since non-Malayali customers, particularly Qataris in Aji's experience, often demand that Malayalam radio programmes be

turned off in the parlour. The parlour itself is viewed as a 'non-Malayali' workplace in a public space, even though most employees and customers here are Malayalis themselves. As Aji described, the parlour that she works at is well-known among Malayalis in Doha due to its prime location, affordability, range of services, and the South Asian beauticians themselves with whom female South Asian customers grow to befriend. By nativizing an impersonal, foreign, and public space through language, radio listeners such as Aji both depend on and actively use vernacular radio to engage in leisure across work and home spaces in Qatar, even as they project their Malayali-ness as a distinctive migrant identity in Qatar.

Aji's hostile encounters with non-Malayali customers at her workplace due to her use of Malayalam radio in a 'non-Malayali' space can be juxtaposed with the nature of the Malayalam language itself, both within and without the state of Kerala. Historically termed the Malabar Coast, the Indian subcontinent's southwestern littoral adjoining the Arabian Sea has been central to maritime economic and socio-cultural networks well before the Common Era.[8] Its lingua franca, known as 'Malayalam' after the 15th century, is a Dravidian variant of Manipravalam that mingled coastal Sanskrit literary traditions with Tamil vernaculars farther inland (Kooria and Pearson 2018). As a derivative of the *vaṭṭeḻuttŭ* script, literally translated as 'Round Script,' (Coulmas 1999) Malayalam is estimated to have more than 36 million speakers today both regionally and abroad (Non-Resident Indians Online [NRIOL] n.d.). The interactions with Sanskrit and, subsequently, Arabic as a result of regional maritime socio-cultural exchanges also led to the development of the Arabi-Malayalam vernacular language in the seventeenth century (Kooria and Pearson 2018). It is interesting to observe, however, the ways in which historical continuities between the South Indian and Arab worlds are disrupted, even undone, in contemporary attitudes in the Gulf towards migrant, particularly South Asian, workers like Aji.[9]

In the Qatari context, what a public workspace hosting a Qatari clientele is allowed to feature, even linguistically (irrespective of the demographics of the workers themselves) is policed routinely in everyday citizen-migrant encounters. As Aji and my other interlocutors' narratives suggest, their in-person engagement with Malayalam as a migrant language in non-Malayali spaces is both discouraged and curtailed. Language is thus an exclusionary medium in the creation of new sonic spaces along citizen-migrant lines. It situates the native migrant speaker within, excluding *particularly* the Qatari customer in a workspace such as Aji's parlour where customers are otherwise typically South Asian. The rentier model of sponsorship that binds non-Qatari expatriates (Chakravartty and Dhillon 2015) to their Qatari *kafeel* is thus subtly yet sharply turned on its head through a spate of Malayali phonemes.

Similar forms of workplace territorialisation via sound are also evident in Shahul's experience as a limousine driver in Qatar. Having lived in the country for over thirty years, Shahul, too, referred to Malayalam radio as a 'Malayali's best friend'. He emphasised that sonic companionship with vernacular radio was particularly important for those who work as drivers over long stretches of time during the day and night. Large networks of Malayali drivers are in active, daily operation across Qatar. It is thus hard to overlook the ubiquity of vernacular radio in their taxis and Uber vehicles that become deeply personal and enclosed ethno-musical carriers of the driver's own identity (Frishkopf 2010) as they traverse Qatar's highways.

As a devout Malayali Muslim who regularly played the *adhan*[10] on Dubai-broadcast Malayalam radio in the limousines he drove every day, Shahul deployed Malayalam radio in a way that conveniently tied his work, leisure, and religious obligations together. Radio channels based in both the UAE and Qatar are required to comply with the socio-religious and cultural stipulations of the host state, particularly regarding music or other programmes, broadcast timings, and *adhan* broadcasts. Nonetheless, Malayalam radio challenges and complicates the relationship between migrant workers and their *kafeels*[11] or employer-sponsors in Qatar. Shahul revealed that he and his colleagues often turned off the radio when they picked up new customers to avoid offending them, particularly if they were 'locals' or Qataris. Shahul's encounters with local customers are akin to Aji's, with non-Malayali clients taking offense at Malayalam radio being played in workspaces such as beauty parlours, just as an Uber, too, is viewed by the customer as an impersonal *public* space. The sonic spatialities traced by Malayalam radio can provoke non-Malayalis, particularly Qataris, to anger or unease with a raucous, foreign-sounding stream of sounds. These emotive responses to diasporic radio in Qatar situate Malayalis and, indeed, other South Asian migrants, as transient foreigners or resident-outsiders against a historical backdrop that narrates a very different story in an Indian Ocean context.

The South Asian maritime presence in the pre-oil Persian Gulf in terms of work-leisure and work-home binaries is best understood historically through an ethnomusicological lens. Music-making traditions across the Arabian Peninsula's desert (or Bedouin) and maritime domains can be traced back to the earliest roots of a pre-colonial Gulf cultural heritage and Indian Ocean networks. Pearling came to the fore with the colonial era particularly from the 18th to early 20th centuries, subsequently bringing with it deeply multiethnic musical practices among both divers at sea and family at land. The former viewed their daily song-traditions as repose from their repetitive, arduous and often hazardous work-lives; the latter, predominantly women, engaged in musical rituals invoking protection from the perils of the sea for male family members away from home (Ulaby 2012). In addition to the crew on board the dhows or local sailing ships, a higher-paid *nahhām* or singer would be hired to boost the sailors and divers' morales, invigorating them with music culturally influenced by the East African slave trade and various Indian Ocean exchanges (Sulayman n.d). Even during off-seasons, one or more *nahhāms* would gather in the *dar* or meeting house with the crew to continue their communal music-making practices (Ulaby 2012). The Gulf's maritime culture thus paved the way for more intimately drawn connections and cross-cultural exchanges between the dhow crew and inhabitants of the Indian Ocean littoral, even musically. Akin to contemporary Malayalam radio in Qatar, the nineteenth century *nahhām* fulfilled similar needs of the workers on board the dhow – straddling divers' work-leisure lives and bringing their desert 'homes' to the seas through both familiar and hybrid sounds.

On the Malabar Coast, similar maritime musical practices were not unfamiliar to South Indian shipbuilders, particularly in the eighteenth century. Centred on themes of ship-building and Indian Ocean trade, Malabari folklore famously included *tōttam* legends sung to the mother goddess Marakkalattamma believed to reign over oceanic voyages and wooden sailing ships (Kooria and Pearson 2018). In his translation of this *tōttam*, Abhilash Malayil describes the goddess herself as a representation of 'a local variety of seaside cosmopolitanism and liminality' with her iconographic depiction as

a form of the Arabian dhow and her recitation of the Muslim *adhan* in the *tōttam*'s opening itself (Kooria and Pearson 2018). Kerala's cosmopolitanisms within the context of pre-oil Malabar-Arab socio-cultural exchanges through Indian Ocean trading networks are, however, brushed past in contemporary Gulf narratives. Gulf states choose to prioritise the desert or Bedouin life over the maritime, thereby projecting a more 'authentic' or 'pure' Arab identity relative to the multiethnicity associated with the region's Indian Ocean maritime history (Ulaby 2012). There is, thus, a rhetorical disjuncture from the region's cosmopolitan pre-oil history. As Fahad Bishara et al. remind us, the cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean and the Eastern Arabian trading ports situated along the littoral did not dissociate the coastal from the desert (Bishara et al. 2016). Instead, the Gulf's maritime and coastal worlds were closely connected and even interdependent, with the port towns themselves experienced as both Bedouin *and* maritime, by both the desert *and* coastal communities (Bishara et al. 2016). Situating Aji and Shahul's encounters with Qataris in non-Malayali spaces within this wider historical arc of Indian Ocean circularities, it is possible to contextualise the modalities of local hostility towards transoceanic languages such as Malayalam in terms of the strategic downplaying of maritime historical influences in the Gulf (Vora 2013).

Radio production and the Malayali *bandham* in Qatar

I will now turn to a study of Malayalam radio production in Qatar, situating radio alongside a number of other migrant media that Malayalis in Qatar rely on. Using Radio Yatra FM as a case study of state-sponsored migrant media in Qatar, I show how diasporic belonging is produced, contested, and negotiated among Malayalis through mediatised leisure practices that are tied inextricably to their work lives in Qatar. As such, this section extends my analysis of diasporic belonging through sound and contested meanings of Malayali-ness among radio listeners in the Malayali ethnoscape or *bandham* to the radio producers at Yatra as well.

   Established in Doha, Qatar in November 2017, Radio Yatra FM awakened the diasporic media-scape for local Malayalis such as Aji who previously relied on Malayalam radio stations airing from the United Arab Emirates. Since the GCC diplomatic crisis (2017-present), however, Malayali radio listeners tuning in from Qatar found radio transmissions from the UAE to be increasingly distorted. These radio signal distortions, as described by my interlocutors, forced listeners of UAE-aired Malayalam radio in Qatar to turn to local vernacular media platforms, though such alternatives did not always exist. After a brief period of precariousness regarding the future of the local diasporic radio scene with the ongoing Gulf diplomatic crisis, Malayalis and other South Indians feted the introduction of Radio Yatra within Qatar itself. Incidentally, the only other Malayalam radio station in Qatar today was founded just a day prior to Yatra in November 2017. Nonetheless, competition between these two FM stations for local Malayali listenership is, according to Yatra's employees, 'non-existent'. Yatra's station head and jockeys established a clear distinction between their station and their Qatar-based FM competitor in terms of programming style, structure, content, and jockey-listener interaction, confident in their relatively larger following among the local Malayali population. My interview with Aji, however, offers a more critical view of Yatra from a radio listener's point of view. Even with the introduction of two Malayalam FM radio

channels in Qatar in 2017, Aji explained to me that she wholeheartedly preferred AM stations from Dubai over the local FM stations, including Yatra, despite the attenuated and distorted signals since the onset of the GCC crisis. She found the kind of songs played on FM radio disagreeable, the content unhelpful and uninteresting, the radio jockeys unengaging, and the advertisements irksome. As an avid listener of Dubai's Malayalam AM radio, Aji is, thus, far from uninformed about the diasporic radio scene within and beyond Qatar. Her disenchantment with FM radio in general, however, has much to do with its very 'FM-ness' in style and content that the new Qatar-based station, Radio Yatra FM, prides itself in.

Regardless of the station's popularity in FM terms, nonetheless, it is the mundane *every-dayness* of Yatra's programming that fosters an undisputed sense of 'community' or *bandham* among diasporic Malayalis, especially newer migrants to the city. The station broadcasts twenty-two programmes daily on both weekdays and weekends in addition to its regular contests and interactive meet-ups between jockeys and their audiences. Each programme is slotted into a 'radio clock' which the station head described as an hourly, predetermined programming schedule (including advertisement slots) catering to targeted demographics expected to consume certain kinds of radio content at certain times of the day. For example, the early to late morning 'rush hours' have a range of programmes that cater to: (1) professionals leaving for work, thus keeping them abreast of new happenings in Qatar (including traffic updates during early working hours); and (2) housewives at home after their husbands and children leave for work and school respectively, with content aired on cooking, healthcare, and beauty. Broadcasts during later hours of the evening feature old and new tunes, pre-recorded (and edited) calls, and selected WhatsApp messages from the Yatra group chat, all intended to help listeners unwind after a day of work. These time-sensitive programmes before, during, and after working hours encourage dialogue among listeners across occupational lines regarding their daily lives at home and/or at work. Consequently, a new and stronger Malayali *bandham* via vernacular radio emerges, fostering sonic belonging in the diaspora.

Within their *bandham* overseas encouraged by a sonic belonging tied to Malayalam radio, diasporic Malayalis describe a sense of dual belonging to both their home and host societies. This duality of translocal belonging is lived not as a contradiction but as a humdrum feature of being 'at home overseas' in the Gulf. They inhabit, in the words of the anthropologist Neha Vora, a 'state of permanent temporariness,' (Vora 2013) in which they embrace a transient existence, while straddling the anxieties that accompany it in both the Gulf and Kerala, even as they forge new social connections and a sense of belonging to both places. Malayalis do not posit a sharp binary between a national or ethnic homeland and diasporic exile. Diasporic radio allows Malayalis in Qatar to practice a kind of 'local cosmopolitanism' (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Menon 2010 that draws on a flexible notion of being Malayali and yet inhabiting multiple spaces simultaneously. It refuses the familiar terms of a Kantian cosmopolitanism that entails a trade-off between one's own ethnic identity and an abstract globalism. With Malayalis – a highly mobile people – constituting what historian Enseng Ho terms 'Inter-Asian mobile societies,' (Ho 2017) their *bandham* transgresses space–time boundaries and reconceptualizes the 'local' overseas. Indeed, as the Osellas have shown, Malayali migrants consider Qatar – and the Persian Gulf more broadly – as *nadu* or 'home,' a *part* of Kerala itself (Osella and Osella 2008a). Local cosmopolitanism, then,

is lived and grounded in the everydayness of the Malayali *bandham* at work and leisure when mediatised through vernacular radio production and listening practices round-the-'radio clock'.

Yatra's programmes suggest a deep-seated familiarity with the idea of Qatar as a Malayali migrant's *nadu* or 'home' as opposed to a merely transient host-state. Even mediatised modalities of 'Malayali-ness' or the ways of being Malayali in Qatar are, thus, tied to a cosmopolitan existence that can be traced to Kerala's longstanding historical connections to and presence in the Persian Gulf. At the same time, such an affinity to Qatar as 'home' and not just 'host' is coupled with both the jockeys' programmes and their listeners' calls on-air that weave together narratives of familial and socio-cultural nostalgia for their lives left behind, albeit temporarily, in Kerala. As a result, as the Osellas remind us, what is *nadan* [local/home] and *foren* [foreign/host] for a Malayali at any given time when abroad in the Gulf is complicated at a foundational level and even interchangeable over a longer period of time (Osella and Osella 2008b). Shifting away from strictly defined home-host binaries, therefore, serves as an entry point to the study of the Malayali *bandham* and the ways in which diasporic vernacular radio weaves the *bandham* together when at home overseas.

Within the context of a diasporic *bandham* that produces new forms of belonging, namely *sonic belonging*, the Malayalam radio case study deployed in this paper can be situated alongside other forms of migrant media in the diaspora, namely phone calls, films, and online networking. The cell-phone has served as a primary medium for migrants to both receive and send new information about their everyday lives to family and friends overseas via phone calls and image or video transfers through WhatsApp and other social media. In doing so, migrants reconfigure representations of their lived realities away from home in creating and sending 'mobile images' (Nail 2019) with the migrant and his/her message at their core. Regular phone calls between migrants and their family in India or elsewhere re-establish kinship ties via sonic exchange. Maintaining social ties with one's kin in the home country is of particular importance to migrants in conjugal and maternal or paternal relationships involving family members living apart from each other due to migration (Osella and Osella 2008b). How migrants use cell-phones in this regard is, however, constrained wholly within the private sphere whereas institutionalised, diasporic media platforms, such as Yatra, straddle the line between what is 'public' and 'private' in Qatar, often under duress.

Tensions ineradicable from public-private dialectics across Qatar's entrepreneurial media landscape stem from a general exigency among Malayalis for politically charged content. This yearning for political engagement in media rhetoric can be and is, however, also satisfied via other media. For example, vernacular radio's apolitical-ness stands in stark contrast with the socially, politically, and oftentimes religiously fuelled home-films from Kerala that are commonly screened in Malayali households and across labour camps in the Gulf (Menon and Sreekumar 2016). While a home-video movement, these films address concerns over labour precarity to attract lower income Malayali migrant viewers in particular (Menon and Sreekumar 2016). While circulating in the Gulf, however, these films remain tightly bound to the private sphere given issues of censorship that might arise if distributed without discretion. In the case of Yatra, however, both private media producers and their audiences straddle the line between

private media circulation and the state's media governance, choosing to conform with the latter for the sake of institutional survival.

And finally, when propped alongside diasporic media practices elsewhere in the world, Radio Yatra's apolitical and self-censoring practices bring the station's Qatar-specific idiosyncrasies to the fore. Victoria Bernal's study of digital media and cyberspace in the Eritrean diaspora provides one such source of insight.[12] With much of the Eritrean diaspora situated across Europe and North America, Bernal notes that national (Eritrean) political participation, dissent, and mobilisation are galvanised in the diaspora, *away* from the homeland, through the use of online forums created by the diaspora itself over a twenty-year period (Bernal 2014). New communication and cyberspace technologies have thus made it possible for the diaspora to stake stronger claims to Eritrean citizenship and belonging in ways that locals in Eritrea itself cannot quite relate to (Bernal 2014).

Comparing Eritrean diasporic media practices with those of Gulf Malayalis, socio-political breaches in the radio production-listenership dialectic among Malayalis become increasingly evident. Though a politically-inclined audience, Malayalis self-censor and curtail their own socio-political tendencies to comply with the Qatari government's stipulations that prohibit most, if not all, forms of political expression and dissent on local media platforms. Migrant media, too, is not excepted from this protocol. As the Radio Yatra station head informed me during an interview, the station was required to sign legal documents prior to entering Qatar's media landscape in 2017, assuring the state that the programmes broadcast would not contain any regionally sensitive or political content. The Qatari state's illiberalism in media governance is thus laid bare through the lack of the obvious in a Malayalam infotainment medium characterised typically by a high level of socio-political consciousness and commentary in Kerala (Guillebaud 2011; Ahmed 1986).

Radio and femininity: internally and externally gendered dynamics

This section delves into how gendered dynamics in relations between radio listeners and jockeys on-air are coupled with gendered contestations over meanings of Malayali-ness among female radio jockeys at the Radio Yatra station itself. I argue that, as a migrant population consisting predominantly of single male workers, the Malayali community or *bandham* in Qatar is far from a coherent, gender-neutral whole. Questions of 'ideal' Malayali femininity, as well as gender normatives associated with masculinity and womanhood, undergird the content broadcast by Radio Yatra for its largely male audience and reconfigure the relations between female radio jockeys and their male supervisors within the Yatra station itself.

Through the interviews conducted and even a broad overview of radio Yatra's broadcasts, it is hard to overlook the gendered discrepancies that rupture the Malayalam *bandham* or 'community' both created and encouraged by radio, within and without the station itself.[13] In terms of programming, much of the content broadcast is tailored to the kinds of employment or occupations that men and women are expected to occupy. Content for women, in particular, is limited to home, beauty, and childrearing-related topics during the hours that housewives are expected to be at home alone, with their husbands and children away until at least 1:00 PM. Furthermore, during a 24-hour cycle of

the programmes broadcast, some advertisements and 'comedy' sections are based on strongly gender-normative content. For example, one advertisement involved a mother pleading with her peeved daughter to finish drinking her glass of milk, after which the mother is heard yelling after the daughter to remind her to eat her lunch as she runs out to catch the bus. Another segment involved a husband slapping his wife after an argument escalated from what was a frivolous scuffle between a wife withholding a secret from her husband. Tensions were subsequently 'resolved' with the wife adopting a conciliatory tone of voice, having been physically retributed for what the husband saw as insolence.

While much of the gendered content is cloaked in 'a mother's unmatched love,'[14] comical conjugal or parental encounters, and otherwise frivolous themes, there is, nonetheless, an exclusion of women from certain roles and a reinforcement of gender-specific expectations such as female docility and compliance. At the same time, the gendered discrepancies at play among the radio station staff, namely jockeys and managers, must be contextualised vis-à-vis the 'ideal' Malayali family and the norms of femininity or womanhood associated with it. While the post-1970s 'Kerala model'[15] is typically used to depict Kerala and its people as largely progressive in socio-cultural terms, a post-Kerala model patriarchy has been forming in both the homeland and diaspora, (Devika and Thampi 2011) even in light of the radio content broadcast. These modalities of gendered bias in diasporic vernacular radio are particularly apparent, given that the radio programmes are intended to match the cultural realities of the target audience to allow for the creation and reinforcement of the diasporic Malayali *bandham* away from but tied to 'home'.

In terms of the radio content itself, it is important to note the ability of radio waves and sound itself to attribute a deep physicality to the messages transmitted in terms of both emotion and action, with the latter imagined freely in the mind of the listener. That is, the absence of the visual is not a 'lack' thereof, but rather a complement that often exaggerates the effects of the audio-centric nature of radio (Hirschkind 2006). Programmes with underlying themes and messages, as described in the two examples in the preceding paragraph, can, thus, be understood to have a profound impact on listeners, thereby governing the level of engagement or disengagement they choose to have (or not have) with the content they consume. As the station-head and radio jockeys concluded over the course of their individual interviews with me, Malayali listeners are remarkably astute in their forte to detect what is 'fake' and 'authentic', what is included and excluded, and what is intended and unintended. They are far from a merely passive audience.

Yatra's station-head disclosed a recent challenge that the station has struggled to deal with: an inability to encourage or attract higher levels of female listenership and engagement. Radio jockey Anjana reaffirmed this issue, stating,

> Our female listeners are very reluctant to call and come on-air. Maybe they have a lot of work and so prefer to just listen to the radio while they do their chores. Or they just prefer not to [call us] - they are laid-back like this. They just don't take the effort to take the phone, dial our number, and engage with us on-air like the men do, but I know we have a lot of female listeners who are also housewives.

The question of *why* this reluctance really exists is, however, left unaddressed. Another female jockey, Roshini, stated, 'we have a large female audience that shows up to our public events with their families. This is when we also get to know how many housewives listen to us every day. They remind us of things we said that they liked, … they are very perceptive.' When asked about the gendered content potentially deterring some women or discouraging their participation, the station-head and jockeys dismissed such a possibility. Their reaction is puzzling, given their own analysis of Malayali listeners as perceptive, engaged, and invested in Yatra's broadcasts more generally.

To probe the question of female listenership and engagement within the context of vernacular radio in Qatar, two important matters must be noted. First, the station-head acknowledged that the single male dynamics in Qatar heavily influence listenership trends and the ways in which this predominantly single male audience engages with a largely unmarried group of female jockeys on-air.[16] And second, it would be problematic to assume a Westerner's gaze that may problematise or take offense at what is understood within Malayali notions of womanhood and ideal femininity as simply *normal*, even reminiscent of home. With single men outnumbering women almost five-fold within Qatar's expatriate population of which Indians form the bulk, (De Bel-Air 2017) it is not hard to see how this disproportionate gender ratio skews the demographic make-up of Radio Yatra's audience base. In contrast, female jockeys largely outnumber their male counterparts at Yatra, though this demographic composition at the station is an anomaly when juxtaposed against that of Qatar's South Asian migrant population as a whole. When questioned about any gendered dynamics at play in their work environment, jockey Roshini replied, 'there is no gender discrimination that I am aware of. Being a female RJ [radio jockey] is nothing different from being a woman in any other workplace – they get harassed everywhere, so nothing exceptional about working as a female RJ here.' Radio jockey Anjana also mentioned that 'female RJs are given the same work opportunities as the men are, with no differences in shifts, projects, or shows,' although she did acknowledge that, in terms of listener engagement, female jockeys on-air during certain female-led programmes receive more call-ins from male listeners. Nonetheless, Yatra's broadcasts remain an attractive and easily accessible media-leisure platform for a largely single male audience, even with the station's struggle to attract greater female listenership.

Discrepancies in radio listenership among my male and female interlocutors arise in terms of their listening practices and preferences. In response to my question regarding his use of radio during his work-shifts as a limousine driver, Shahul replied,

> In our first years [here], radio helped us to manage loneliness, but as time passed for us as drivers, we used the radio to keep ourselves awake when we were very tired or at night to prevent road accidents. We listened to the radio when waiting to pick up customers because they often get late, but this is good, more late means we get more time to listen to the songs and news on radio while waiting!

As in the case of Aji, Shahul and his male colleagues use Malayalam radio as a source of companionship. They rely on Malayalam music played back on the radio every night to keep them awake during their late-night driving shifts, and live radio shows during the day to punctuate their work-day regimen of picking up, waiting for, and dropping off customers across Qatar. For Aji, the radio and the male jockeys on-air help her fall

asleep each night and enliven her work-space during the day with both live shows and Malayalam music played back intermittently. As such, there are obvious romantic connotations associated with these listening practices, even across gendered lines, particularly among single, low-income individuals. The female jockeys on-air at Yatra and other regional stations offer these male drivers a form of *sonic companionship* during the day, whereas, for Aji, the same is true but with a man's voice from a Dubai-based Malayalam radio station fulfilling similar needs and desires, particularly at later hours of the night. Furthermore, Shahul's quoted statements above corroborate those of my other interlocutors who use the radio primarily when commuting between places for work or personal reasons, with or without family. The highly mobile nature of radio listening practices among Malayalis is, thus, noteworthy in the context of this study. While commuting in and across Qatar, Malayalis physically navigate traffic-heavy routes while simultaneously tuned into news from Kerala and India, particularly when they listen to the more politically charged AM radio shows aired from Dubai.

On the other hand, my female interlocutors from predominantly middle-class backgrounds acknowledged that they used Malayalam radio to a lesser degree than their husbands did. They preferred to use CDs in their family cars instead to allow them the freedom to choose which tracks they wanted to play, especially after other family members were dropped off to school or work. They also preferred to exercise choice in their consumption of infotainment and music, using online or televised sources of news and entertainment at work and home on a regular basis, most often *with* their families at the end of the work or school day during late evenings. Individuals from lower-income backgrounds such as Aji, however, experienced a greater level of dependency on and intimacy with radio as a direct *result* of their inability to choose. Aji's only available source of entertainment was a decade-old radio device while Shahul relied most heavily on radio during his early years in Doha as a contracted driver. Thus, while radio listening practices are fundamentally gendered, other discrepancies arise when one moves higher up the socio-economic ladder and achieves a more nucleated family status while in Qatar. In other words, single, lower-income Malayalis, particularly longer-term residents, share a greater affinity for and dependency on Malayalam radio than those from higher-income backgrounds whose media practices are not only more diversified but also centred around their family and children, as opposed to listening to say, radio, for one's personal leisure alone.

Having looked at jockey-listener dynamics along gendered and broadly socio-economic lines, we will now turn our attention back to the dynamics at play within the Yatra station itself. Among Yatra's employees, all managerial positions are held by men, some of whom recruited the station's female radio jockeys I interviewed through their networks among Malayalis across India. Anjana described her decision to come to Qatar and work as a radio jockey for the first time in a completely new environment away from family and friends as a 'learning process', battling severe homesickness for almost a year. Roshini too said that she came to Yatra in Qatar to move away from what she was familiar with and lead an independent life here for the first time. She had worked at an established media firm in Kerala prior to her current job at Yatra, but when she heard of a start-up company in Doha, she chose to join to 'contribute to its growth in a unique way' and 'make a brand for [Yatra]'. Given its highly anticipated arrival in Qatar's vernacular media landscape, Yatra has given these radio jockeys an opportunity to attain a near-celebrity status among Malayalis in Qatar, enabling them

to build a brand for themselves as individuals or personalities who many in the Malayali expatriate population are both familiar with and fond of. My interlocutors at this station even confirmed that fellow jockeys at Yatra share similar stories, with colleagues now becoming surrogate 'family' members for each other away from home.

In addition, both Anjana and Roshini were deeply supportive of Yatra's programming autonomy offered to radio jockeys, with each show produced and spearheaded by a single jockey at its core. With this autonomy, however, comes a heavy responsibility since the show's success or failure would be credited to or blamed squarely on the jockey alone. Roshini described the anxieties that accompany the autonomy she enjoys at the station in the following terms:

> [Yatra] never does live calls. All calls from people are pre-recorded, edited, and then broadcasted on air in different shows throughout the day - this is to prevent any instances of awkward conversations happening since live calls cannot be controlled and they are too risky for us … each RJ is responsible for his/her segment and what happens on it, so it is a risky ordeal. RJs at the same time have complete autonomy over what is included or excluded. If I don't like what a caller says in a pre-recorded call, I don't have to include it, so I can make my show the way I want it to be.

While Roshini and her colleagues are allowed a significant degree of production autonomy over their respective shows, as she described, they still fall under the supervisory purview of their male managers whose approval is a prerequisite for any broadcast to go live. The question that then arises is: to what extent do radio jockeys really have autonomy over the content they produce? How are the parameters of 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' content defined, who decides where these parameters lie, and what makes the autonomy that these female jockeys experience 'risky'? Given the indifference that the radio jockeys expressed to the gendered hierarchies in place at Yatra, one would be amiss to grapple with these questions without taking the specificities of the Malayali socio-cultural context into account.

For instance, as seen in the case of Yatra's jockeys among the Malayali expatriate population in Qatar, Malayali women in the urban public sphere exercise their agency through their voluntary acceptance of and conformity with official norms and procedures, whether patriarchal or otherwise (Devika and Thampi 2012). J. Devika and Binitha V. Thampi juxtapose female public altruism and Malayali femininity vis-à-vis the 'ideal' Malayali family and the ways in which Kerala-specific gender normatives are produced. They suggest that the female radio jockeys' enactment of 'gentle power' (Devika and Thampi 2011) in line with Malayali notions of femininity is coupled with pragmatism and an acceptance of existing institutional hierarchies. Over the course of my interviews with the two female jockeys, it became quickly apparent that their unmarried and employed status away from the Kerala homeland was a central feature of their identity as jockeys in Qatar. They reiterated that they had 'moved away' from family, were 'choosing' to live independently in a new country for the first time, and now, are 'making a name for Yatra' by transferring their knowledge skills from prior employment in media firms in India, to Qatar's Yatra station. Their acceptance of the existing norms and hierarchies in place, therefore, allows these women to venture into, become visible, and effect change or 'make a difference' in the diasporic public sphere. Therefore, for these women, the male-dominated management systems in place are somewhat, if not

wholly, irrelevant, as they themselves mentioned. Their personal conceptualisation of agency is not influenced by top-down employee relations but rather results from what they construct from experience, both past and present.

Conclusion

Through the ethnographic evidence presented in this paper, I have highlighted how, as members of a specific ethnolinguistic migrant community in Qatar, Malayali radio listeners and producers negotiate and contest intersubjective meanings of Malayali-ness across the home-host binary. In examining how diasporic belonging is both produced and contested through Malayalam *sabdam* or 'sound' in the host state, I have zoomed into one of many social processes by which Malayali migrants in Qatar transcend the home-host binary, forge new notions of belonging overseas, and work out modes of translocality that help them retain and revitalise their ethnolinguistic identities. This approach to a study of every-day migrant lives in the Persian Gulf refuses presentist and economistic understandings of migration in two ways. First, it shows how pre-oil historical continuities in the western Indian Ocean are observable not only in patterns of mobility today but also the manner in which migrants negotiate their lives betwixt and between home and host societies and between work and leisure. Second, it moves beyond the economics of labour and rentier models of patron-client or kafala ties in the Gulf to capture a hitherto unexamined and underappreciated aspect of everyday migrant life in the Gulf - namely, the production and contestation of Malayali diasporic belonging through sound and leisure.

Across the three sections of this paper, I have argued that Malayalis deploy diasporic radio in Qatar across a transoceanic soundscape to create translocal iterations of 'home' *away* from home in their workplaces via everyday mediated practices of leisure. In particular, Malayali migrants interweave work and leisure through their sonic connections, albeit differently along the axes of class, occupational status, and gender. In the radio station that serves as my case study, Radio Yatra FM, I tease out the gendered dynamics of radio production and programming as well as the gendered relations between jockeys and their audiences. The gender roles and expectations embodied by female radio jockeys and their listeners derive, ultimately, from norms and habits cultivated back home in Kerala. At the same time, as the predominantly male migrant population in Doha seeks to craft new forms of sonic belonging in their host country, their listening practices enable them to negotiate ways of being 'at home overseas' without running afoul of laws and bureaucracy in Qatar. Malayali women, embedded within these diasporic or trans-local social structures, including those in the radio station itself, seek with considerable caution to contest these structures and the norms associated with them in Kerala. The dialectics between home and host societies are, thus, challenged, reworked, and reinforced simultaneously in locally-specific ways. What migrants hear on radio in Qatar and how they engage with it are shaped ineluctably by these negotiations over the meaning of Malayali-ness in a media-saturated global village.

Notes

1. The term 'Malayali(s)' refers to speakers of Malayalam which is the official language of the South Indian state of Kerala.

2. The names of all interlocutors and radio stations in this article have been replaced with pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality.
3. 'Yatra' can be translated from Malayalam into English as 'journey'.
4. AM broadcasting refers to 'amplitude modulation' transmissions used in radio broadcasting.
5. FM broadcasting refers to 'frequency modulation' transmissions used in radio broadcasting.
6. According to Aji, her 'madam' or female Qatari employer restricted employees' movements across Doha even during weekends to ensure the 'safety' of these women in a city with a large single-male migrant population and to keep them close to the parlor at all times.
7. For more on soundscapes and the creation of unbounded spaces, see Pistrick and Isnart (2013); Samuels et al. (2010); Atkinson (2007).
8. Kooria and Pearson (2018); for more on Indian Ocean circularities between West Asia and South India, see Vijayalakshmy (1995); Thomas (2003).
9. For more on Arab and other non-citizens in the Gulf and their relations with the local citizenry, see Chowdury and Rajan (2018); Longva (2005).
10. *Adhan* (or *azan*) is the Islamic call to prayer that is recited five times a day, helps Muslims keep track of prayer times, and invites all Muslims to the mosque to pray.
11. The *kafala* or visa-sponsorship system in the Gulf Cooperation Council states binds each migrant worker to his/her local employer or visa 'sponsor' (*kafeel*).
12. For more on vernacular radio and auditory media in other contexts, see Casillas (2014), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfsqt; McEnaney (2015).
13. On gendered soundscapes and radio, see Ehrick (2015).
14. This quote (translated from Malayalam) comes from an advertisement broadcast by Yatra on the theme of maternal affection.
15. The 'Kerala model' is a product of the economist K. N. Raj's seminal work on equitable growth and high development indices in the South Indian state of Kerala as part of a wider study on development policy conducted by the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala in the 1970s.
16. For more on Qatar's migrant demographics and its single male dynamics, see De Bel-Air (2017); Seshan (2012).

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ORCID

Irene Ann Promodh 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7954-2520

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