

Taking cringe-pop seriously: An unpredictable arena for the unsettling of centre-margin dynamics

The relatively new music genre known as cringe-pop, notorious for its jarring, often-discordant tunes and barmy texts, has in recent years been particularly prolific in South Asia. YouTube sensations such as the Pakistani Taher Shah and the Hyderabad Vennu Mallesh gained considerable fame not only among the music channel's community, but also among national and international media. However, it is only in the past few months, with the sudden rise to fame of Delhi-based Dhinchak Pooja, whose songs "Selfie maine leli aaj" and "Diloon ka shooter" quickly reached millions of views, that the reach of cringe-pop expanded beyond the fringes of popular culture and entered the echelons of mainstream youth pop culture, becoming a common theme of everyday parlance.

While commentaries on Dhinchak, Vennu and Taher's artistic productions abound, what I wish to do here, rather than focus on any artist in particular or on any of their songs, is to reflect upon the phenomenon of cringe-pop *per se*, and, specifically, on the hidden motives that govern its distinctly unfavourable reception across large sections of the audience.

Other than being attributed to the same, vaguely defined, music genre, the three artists¹ have two essential characteristics in common. One is their endorsement of what are, in conventional understanding, identified as Western,² modern values: while Taher Shah's "Angel" is an invitation to transcend rigid boundaries of gender, race and even human ontology, in a manner that is reminiscent of recent trends in race- and feminist-theory as it is formulated in predominantly American and British universities, Vennu Mallesh's hit "It's my life whatever I wanna do" is a praise of self-determination, freedom and individuality, traits that are considered the pinnacle of a Western, modern society. Similarly, Dhinchak Pooja's hymn to selfies builds on the escalation of consumerism and objectification that are emblematic of capitalist societies.

The other striking characteristic that connects these artists is the sheer animosity that their songs elicit across media. While innumerable disparaging comments to their videos and derisory full-length articles may be facilitated by the unregulated nature of social media and driven by the logics of sensationalism, the death

¹ Because of their current popularity in India I have referred only to these three. However, this is not a comprehensive list.

² My preference for the capitalisation of West and Western, despite its furthering the West's privilege and creating the illusion of a unified West, is because I refer to a specific, rather than relative, location, albeit in a metaphorical geography.

threats that compelled Shah to leave his country, and the sudden revocation of Pooja's videos from her channel without adequate explanation, suggest that cringe-pop evokes more than just an opportunity to assert one's supposedly superior and more sophisticated taste in music.³

I contend that the battle of tastes that has fiercely animated social media and excited public opinions over the past weeks is, in fact, a contest about identities and access to power. In a social context where caste boundaries have become increasingly porous, and where financial success is, even though often only in principle, no longer the prerogative of a few preselected ones, the game of social hierarchy is played out on ever more abstract grounds. Primary amongst these are the familiarity with, and the display of, values and attitudes considered to be markers of exclusivity and superiority – which, within the prevailing narrative of a global history centring around the West, are irredeemably associated with Europe and the USA.

The sudden and widespread success of artists such as Malleesh, Pooja and Shah destabilises carefully crafted and sparingly managed routes of access to, and assimilation of, such values, threatening current positions of privilege in society.

Where earlier the inflow and diffusion of goods and ideas that conferred prestige was reliant on a sojourn abroad or the scrupulous maintenance of networks (often over decades) with relatives overseas for the few who had them, today the same familiarity with, and consumption of, Western trends are within reach for a majority of India's growing urban population. Alternative routes to Western ideologies and consumer goods have steadily increased ever since the economic liberalisation in 1991, witnessing major breakthroughs with the spread of satellite TV and Internet on the one side, and malls and delivery services such as Amazon on the other side.

Cringe-pop artists embody what is perhaps the most blatant and concentrated manifestation of the gradual loss of monopoly over the circulation of cultural capital that the elites have witnessed in recent years. From palpable status quo markers such as branded clothes and expensive cars, to intangible ones such as outspoken preferences for individuality, rebellion and self-assertion, these musicians flaunt many of the indicators that once were within the exclusive purview of elites; moreover, their unpredictable and rapid success appears as an affront to the meticulous and enduring cultivation of tastes and attitudes set in place by the privileged minority.

³ As an example of the ephemeral and relative nature of music preferences one may take notice that even The Beatles' songs were received by their contemporary critics with utter dismay.

By effortlessly and audaciously proclaiming lifestyles that position them in proximity of a metaphorical Western centre, public figures such as Dhinchak Pooja and Vennu Mallesh disrupt the centre-margin relations espoused by the elites. The diffused endorsement of Western values, in fact, suggests not only the penetration of a Eurocentric framework across social strata, but also the ascent of imaginary peripheral communities who, along with the upper classes, compete for cultural authority.

Too different to be assimilated, yet too similar to be ignored, the rising middle classes occupy a social position that is too vague and fluctuating for the comfort of the powerful. In an effort to govern the dynamics of proximity to the imaginary centre and to secure their privilege, dominant classes thus operate subtle recalibrations in the appraisal of tastes and values: what was once considered sophisticated and polished is exposed as kitsch and unrefined, and what defies classification is rendered taboo.

The devaluation to which elites subject attitudes and consumer preferences once these become identity-markers for larger social strata, is complemented by the upper classes' revival of items and choices once ignored because too popular. Hand-woven fabrics, for example, are increasingly the dress material of choice among affluent consumers, as previously sought-after prefabricated branded wear is becoming easily affordable. Similarly, the consumption of processed foods, once accessible only to wealthy urban populations, is slowly being replaced by a predilection for organic, locally grown produce amongst the upper classes, at a time when readymade meals and soft drinks are increasingly becoming available to the masses.

Paradoxically, hand-woven textiles and organic products, nowadays primarily associated with prosperous and highly educated customers eager to distinguish themselves, were until recently the default clothes and edibles of the majority of the population. While the new choices of the elites are usually advocated in the name of fair-trade and environmental sustainability, the surge in price that the products' rebranding and their demand among a new wealthy clientele generally causes, ensures the upper classes' exclusivity upon such preferences. At first sight it may appear that the reassessment of local textiles and home-grown staples defies the general Eurocentric framework; it must be remembered, however, that affluent Americans and Europeans have in recent years been assiduously vouching for eco-friendly and health-promoting lifestyles too.

It is common that circumstances defying social criteria of classification are rendered taboo by dominant groups in the name of social order.⁴ The potential threat

⁴ Be it sufficient to think about the inhibitions surrounding menstruation or extra-marital sexual activity.

that such instances represent derives from their inherent instability, which renders any regulatory framework perennially temporary.

In conjunction with the phenomenon of cringe-pop the state of flux, that typically characterises middle classes, is exacerbated and rendered essentially unpredictable. Because of its fundamental dependence on social platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, which are susceptible to numbers of viewers rather than logics of market, the music genre cringe-pop lies outside the purview of relatively familiar and seasoned modes of social predictability. Not only does the sheer number of their exponents endow the middle classes with an unprecedented power to influence trends while circumventing dynamics governed by financial assets; the apparently erratic release of songs, mostly independent from managers and major production houses, often exceeds the pace of the mechanisms of taste-devaluation that the elites instead set in motion successfully in other social domains.

Foregoing the dominant logics of financial power and, consequently, of value reassessment mobilised by the upper classes, cringe-pop defies conventional methods of containment and control that govern centre-margin relations. Its ambiguity and unclassifiability confer the music genre the power to challenge the elites' proximity to the metaphorical centre, threatening to reallocate them at the peripheries of a universal geography blindly revolving around the West.

It is in view of the absence of alternative viable mechanisms to preserve their social prestige, that the dominant classes' measures of censorship and almost univocal manifestations of hatred for the apparently innocuous and unelaborate music genre and its exponents have to be understood. In a context where money and high caste are no longer one an indicator of the other, that which is too different for assimilation, yet too similar to be comfortable with, has to be rendered taboo, in order to maintain the status quo.

However, last week's defiant return of Dhinchak Pooja with her new song "Baapu dede thoda cash" and the restoration of her former video-songs on alternative web-links, only prove further that power no longer follows the legacy of lineage, and that the foundations for new social arrangements have been laid. Rather than scornfully attempting to cling onto often-undue privileges, it is time for the elites to accommodate and listen to those who, unapologetically and resiliently, have come to stay, and talk (or sing) to be heard.