

## What Brown Can (not) Do For You: MTV-Desi and the Limits of Diaspora

- Aswin Punathambekar

In July 2005, MTV Networks announced the launch of MTV-Desi, a niche channel for South Asian American youth. Launched with great fanfare and made available on Direct TV, MTV-Desi featured Bollywood sequences and Indi-pop (sourced from MTV India), diasporic artists in North America and the U.K., and shows about *desi* life in the U.S. Recognizing the transcultural nature of South Asian American youth culture, executives and producers at MTV-Desi worked hard to define MTV-Desi as a unique site of cultural production that neither mainstream American television nor Indian satellite TV channels could match.

Eighteen months later, MTV Networks pulled the plug on MTV-Desi, stating that the distribution model failed to draw in South Asian Americans. As one prominent South Asian journalist commented, “we published next to nothing on the channel, because I couldn't find anyone who watched the satellite channel: no college students, no twenty-somethings with spare change. And it wasn't just me. All the tastemakers I interviewed - DJs, other music types - said they didn't know any MTV Desi subscribers either.”

While pricing and poor marketing were cited as the major reasons for failure, it is worth noting that MTV-Desi's business and content-production strategies were shaped not only by the institutional politics of the U.S. television industry but also by the operations of satellite television channels such as ZEE, STAR, and Sony Entertainment that cater to South Asian audiences worldwide. MTV-Desi executives were also attuned to reports emphasizing that South Asians are now among the fastest growing minorities in the U.S. and, more importantly, as a niche demographic with tremendous purchasing power. Thus, at one level, it appears as if executives at MTV-Desi did nothing wrong in terms of identifying an audience community. So what, besides the premium distribution model, went wrong?

I wish to argue that the MTV-Desi experiment constitutes an important moment in the history of diasporic media production, and that a critical post-mortem will allow us to grapple with challenges faced by media producers and cultural critics in imagining and mobilizing a diasporic audience community. Outlining the changing dynamics of migration between South Asia and the U.S., and competing definitions of *desi* identity and being brown in the U.S., I will tackle these questions during our roundtable discussion:

- In what ways does the institutional framework of the television industry in the U.S. limit the possibility of imagining a “post-national” audience community?
- If Bombay, as a film and television capital, is dominating and defining the production and flow of “South Asian” content, what possibilities remain for diasporic television production?

- Does “diaspora,” as a socio-cultural and political critique of the nation-as-community, need TV?