

“Musicalized identities”: South Asian musical Third Space of Enunciation in Britain

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Abstract

Within a multicultural society like Britain, cultural identity has become a pivotal concern for the nation's various ethnic minorities. South Asian minorities, notably, the third generation, have adopted different strategies of integration within the mainstream British society while attempting to preserve their cultural idiosyncrasies. South Asian identities or what can be generally called “Asianness” manifested themselves in different socio-cultural expressions. Music has been one of those media of cultural and identity expressions. This article argues that music can be deemed as a “Third Space of Enunciation” for the new generations of ethnic minorities in general and South Asian ones in particular. Ethnic or “ethnicized” music seemed to proffer new horizons and possibilities of articulations for British ethnic minorities.

By analysing some contemporary British South Asian musical outputs, we attempt to show how fusion-based and hybrid music was a strategy to mobilize dominant British musical discourses to fight against racism and celebrate cultural identity within the context of multicultural Britain.

Keywords: Cultural identity, ethnicity, musical identities, integration.

Introduction

Music has widely been deemed as a vital component of peoples' cultures (Bennett, 2000 and Frith, 1996). It both expresses and encompasses cultural values and individual idiosyncrasies. Apart from its aesthetic aspects, music can be a major archive of popular identity and a medium to communicate with the other. Adopting a post-colonial approach, this article tries to trace how music has been employed by some British South Asian musicians to articulate their identity and to come to terms with the other's (British whites) culture. Building on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, the article argues that British South Asians managed to create hybrid music or a western oriental music, which enabled them to live their cultural “in-

between-ness” more comfortably. Musicians like Talvin Singh and Apache Indian, and music groups such as Asian Underground, the Hustlers HC and Asian Dub Foundation (ADF), through such hybrid music like Bhangramuffin, were able to make their voice heard and to familiarize the mainstream British society with South Asian musical artefacts. Such mission was largely achieved via a music carefully composed to reflect both ethnic minorities’ distinctiveness and their need to integrate into the mainstream British culture. Thus, music became a form of resistance and survival, an instance of identity formation for British South Asians. Yet, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that produce identity and in which circumstances identities manifest and consolidate themselves (Hall, S, and Du Gay, 1996).

Identity has been a central concept in virtually all human sciences ranging from anthropology, literary theory, cultural theory, postcolonial theory and obviously the list is endless. However, for the aim of this article, a brief account of how the concept of identity is approached and understood is offered. Fundamentally, the “Self” seems to be the initial bloc that constitutes identity whether in its collective or individual dimension. Moreover, the self is reflexive in identity theory since concentrates on itself as the subject matter of identity studies. In the process of identity creation and expression, the self categorizes, classifies and states itself in various socio-cultural roles. Such activities are always performed in relation to other categorizations and classifications. Thus, identity is a positional concept that stems its particularities and idiosyncrasies from its being contrasted and compared to other social categories and constructs. Arguably, it is through and against such processes of self-categorizations and self-identifications that identity is formed, managed, expressed and maintained.

However, identity formation is done mostly via socio-cultural comparisons and contrasts. This would churn out a checklist of differences and similarities that constitutes the theoretical repertoire from which the identity of the “Us” and that of the “Them” are constantly negotiated and constructed. Individuals and groups that conform to the criteria of inclusion are constructed as an “in-group”. Those who exhibit differences make an “out-group”. So, identity is both an inclusive and exclusive concept simultaneously. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams (1988) suggest that social categories, so constitutive of identity, are components of an already structured society. Individuals and socio-cultural groups use those prior categories in the creation and interpretation of their identities within the confines of their various roles that they perform in both the macro and micro social structures. As suggested above, those identity-based roles and categories are always orchestrated in relation to other contracting ones. Hence, the binary categories of blackness/whiteness, manhood/womanhood, East/West...exist against each other in endless paradigm of negotiation, communication and conflict. In crucial respect, they lose their meanings, relevance and even *raison d'être* if constructed separately and in

insulation vis-à-vis other contrasting categories. However, identity cannot be understood as a fixed entity, systemically rigid. Identity, to use Stuart Hall's expression, is a "system in flux"; it is a process of dynamic becoming rather than a destined being. This means that social agents have a range of possibilities and options that they can use in their identity stuff. Equally, they can combine different socio-cultural categories and roles in their individual and collective histories. Importantly, British ethnic minorities have a wide range of self-categorization and identification in their identity creation and expression. Numerous socio-cultural outlets (from which music is one) are available to them to use in that project.

Typically, music is a synthetic cultural production. This means that music, being a universal langue, is culture-specific. The hybrid factor is arguably evident in musical pieces. I suggest that music is equally expressive of both personal and collective identities. Music represents and offers an immediate and emotional experience of collective identity. The British socio-musicologist Simon Firth elaborated on the close relationship between music and the concept of identity. He wrote that

Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics. (Firth, 1996: p.109)

Accordingly, there is an interesting fusion between the individual and the social, the private and the public and the personal as well as the political in musical performances of South Asian musicians. Firth added that "Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective (1996: p.110). Nevertheless, identity theorists distinguished between individual identity and social identity which is indicative of the complex nature of identity and identification. In social identity theory and identity theory, there has been a systematic distinction between social identity (group identity) and individual identity (personal identity). This theoretical distinction postulates the existence of at least minor differences between these two types of identity. There seems to be a dialectical relationship between the collective and individual aspect of identity and identification. Both complement each other. However, I argue that both aspects of identity are typically identical and voice almost the same concerns. The difference, if any, is to be discerned in their focalization. The individual identity often focuses on the idiosyncratic and the different while collective identity stresses the common and the similar. This may seem a simplistic account given that collective identity also stresses differences when contrasted and compared to an out-group identity. Yet, compared to the personal aspect of identification, similarity is emphasized in the group formation and cohesion more

than being the case with individuals. Relationally, there are crucial links between individual identity and group one. Concrete models and patterns of individual behaviours are linked to the abstract ones of collective identity. They represent the macro and the micro dimensions of the social act. Individuals are social agents that work within an already established social categories and structures. This can be best understood within the famous Structuration Theory of the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984). So, social identity is indispensable in forming and crystallizing individual identity. Selfhood is thus meaningless or at least incomplete in isolation from the social world of its existence. The self is virtually a socio-cultural construction. Social agents are engaged in an ongoing process of defining and being defined throughout their lives. After all, no person is an island! Importantly, the “Self” constitutes a constant and simultaneous dialectics and synthesis of internal self-definition and external definitions of the self offered by others. Richard Jenkins described this identity constitutive process as “the internal-external dialectic of identification” (2008: p.20). In this model, the internal stands for the “I” while the external stands for the “Me”. Ethnic minorities are thus projecting their specific identities in relation to the hegemonic identity of the mainstream British society. Yet, what seems to be their own and pure self-identification is in many respects influenced and even shaped by the views and social categories offered by the mainstream cultural repertoire. Ethnic minorities may tend to present themselves into carefully established individual and collective identities. They can pursue different impression management tools and strategies in their identity formation and exhibition. However, there are no guarantees that other out-groups including the dominant one would receive such impressions and identities the way those in-groups desired. Ethnic minorities cannot control and even anticipate the various interpretations and understandings that their self-presentations may generate in the wider socio-cultural community. Here, to be clear, it should be noticed that identity formation, management and expression are reciprocal. Even those mainstream majoritarian identities have their own strategies of self-expression and identity management. Virtually, they follow the same processes; the difference, if any, between the identity of the minority and that of the majority is that the former is often on the defensive while the second is offensive. This is, above all, a question of power distribution in society. Thus, the concept of identity seems to be an obsession of minorities more than majorities. Ethnic minorities tend to feel that their socio-cultural identity is in a state of crisis and suffers from the out-group pressure. Thus, they appear to be in dire need to find or create outlets to express their identities and make them noticeable and recognized by other ethnic minorities’ cultures and especially by the dominant cultural community. Being relocated from one culture to another immigrants and ethnic minorities find great difficulties in adopting of and adapting to the new host culture. In his influential book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*,

Iain Chambers elaborated on the in-between-ness that new immigrants are likely to face in their new host communities. He wrote:

The migrant's sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present, is perhaps the most fitting metaphor of this (postmodern condition. This underlines the theme of diaspora, not only black, also Jewish, Indian, Islamic, Palestinian, and draws us into the processes whereby the previous margins now fold in on the centre (Chambers 1994: pp.28-29).

Obviously, these new immigrants and even the already established ethnic communities are in dire need to assert their identities and ask for their cultural visibility within a highly hegemonic host society. As far as this article is concerned, music can be a fertile terrain for the expression of ethnic identity and gaining cultural recognition. Different modes of self-expression are created and made available to British South Asians. Music is one major mode.

Hybridity and the post-colonial third space of enunciation

Britain has become irreversibly a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. However, despite such multiculturalism, race relations remain a delicate and problematic issue. Ethnic minorities, and notably South Asians, hold a subordinate position in the distribution of power (Mason, 2000). They suffer from subtle forms of racism and socio-economic deprivation. While the first generation of Asians seem to accept such secondary and subordinate position, their offspring, being British citizens by birth refuse to be treated as denizens. They resort to various forms of resistance to assert their identity and ask for their rights (Anwar, 1998). The race riots of 2001 in some northern British cities represent a remarkable evidence of how second and third generations of south Asians are eager to defend their communities and rights. Music can be another tool to attain the same ends. In the article, I attempt to show how south Asians succeeded in getting recognition via creating new forms of music that served goals of both resistance and integration. Studied from a post-colonial perspective, south Asian music is a hybrid and mixed musical genre. It created a favourable space of identity formation and expression for second and third generations of south Asians. Homi Bhabha in his *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (1994) shows how post-colonial identity is a hybrid identity that goes beyond both the original and colonial essentialized identities.

Post-colonial theory stands as a critique of cultural imperialism. The notion of the "hybrid" becomes highly central as a technical term. The hybrid is so important in the process of inter-cultural negotiations and dialogue. British cultural critics such

as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy, being aware of the increasing multicultural discourse during 1990’, churned out how pivotal hybridity has been as an analytical concept of race relations in Britain. To them, hybridity is vital in describing and framing south Asian identity in contemporary Britain. Moreover, hybridity stands against the political and cultural polarity between the coloniser and the colonised. It is a concept that transcends (or tries to) the cultural differences between the host mainstream British society and ethnic minorities. Among postcolonial theorists, Bhabha looms large in theoretically elaborating the concept of the hybrid. Bhabha suggests that post-colonial hybrid cultures constitute a new space for new subjectivities and offer a fertile background for resisting colonial insistence. Ironically, the same strategies of domination are reused to topple the hegemony of colonial dominant powers. Thus, hybridity is a complex and elusive concept. Yet such elusiveness is its very source of power. Bhabha wrote:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). (2006: pp.155-157).

Bhabha’s theory of cultural difference provides us with the concept of hybridity. It is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-between-ness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt, 1997: p.158). Post-colonial critics in general, and Bhabha in particular believe that identity is a process of becoming not being. Identity is not pre-given. It is ever-changing and multiple. Bhabha asserts that “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity; never a self-fulfilling prophecy-it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification-that is, to be for another-entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness” (1994: p.45). Hybrid identities represent a *Third Space of Enunciation*, which defies the discourses of authenticity and originality. The Third Space “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (1994: p.37). What emerges from this post-colonial analysis is that hybridity represents a third way and a liberating force that transcends the chains of tradition and hegemony. British South Asians are located within such hybrid space and cultural in-between-ness which offer them more tools and alternatives to articulate and to shape their hyphenated identities without being under hegemonic control from either the home land of origin or that of birth. The hybrid’s potential is with their innate knowledge of ‘transculturation’, their ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a

dynamic of exchange and inclusion. They have encoded within them a counter-hegemonic agency. As soon as the dominant society presents a normalising, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy opens up a third way of/for rearticulating of negotiation and meaning. They are referred to as western orientals (Hall, 1992 Kraidy, 2005 and Krishnaswami, 1998). Their identity combines and harmonizes the “us” and the “them” in one concocted and complicated whole.

However, the concept of hybridity has faced escalating criticism. Hybridity, as a theoretical concept, has been the target of criticism from different theoretical perspectives. The concept has been accused of being a promoter of the very racist thinking that it ardently demotes. Robert Young in his popular book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995) suggests that the new cultural theory of Hybridity, whether consciously or unconsciously, offers theoretical accounts in which the concept of race and, hence, the ideology of racism are legitimated. This takes place since the concept of hybridity seems to postulate the existence of “pure” and “fixed” races against which it sets its theoretical underpinnings. Another crucial strand of criticism was introduced by Stephen May (2004). May argued that the concept of hybrid cultures promotes a discourse of primordialism and essentialism, which overlooks the dynamic and ever-changing nature of ethnic identity and virtually all types of identities. Importantly, within a postmodern contemporary world, hybridity can be regarded as a self-contained, self-congratulatory and self-justificatory grand narrative. Identities are rather fractured and fragmented; they do not fit the categorical requirements of Hybridity as originally understood and introduced by Bhabha (1994). Seen as an in-between space, Hybridity seems to fail to capture changes and continuities within collective socio-political action. Aijaz Ahmad (1995) showed that political agency is historically linked to its socio-cultural background in which the concepts of place and time along with a sense of belonging to a given identity are pivotal. Nevertheless, the concept of Hybridity can find resonance in the everyday lived experiences of immigrant and ethnic minorities. This means that as a descriptive and analytical tool, Hybridity is still an influential concept in postcolonial studies as well as in critical theory in general. Les Back reminds us that to some considerable extent hybridity is a fact. It is something that can be discerned in the zones of contact between different cultures and ethnic identities. Back argues that hybridity is not an abstract intellectual construct but reflects the fact that human lives are inseparably intertwined and intermingled. Thus, there are overlapping dynamic histories that make the total separation and self-contained-ness of the self a practical impossibility (Back, 2002). No self, no culture and no ethnicity are pure. Consequently, Hybridity seems a plausible concept that captures a crucial aspect of ethnic and cultural minorities within multicultural communities.

British South Asians’ musical space of enunciation

Music plays a paramount role in identity assertion. It mediates between the culture of the “us” (source culture) and that of the “them’ (the target culture). It is assumed that, despite musical differences and variations, music is a global language easily understood by a global audience. Ravi Krishnaswami, an American South Asian musician and ethnomusicologist, states that “As a mode of communication, music offers a wider and more subtle variety of articulations, textures and overlapping layers. It cannot be contained by national boundaries, ideological rhetoric, ethnocentrism and politics” (Krishnaswami, 1998). British South Asian musical groups like Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) and musicians such as Indian Apache and Talvin Singh managed to work outside the essentialized and authentic categories of musical genres. They went beyond the traditional categories of pop, rock, dance, reggae and Bhangra. They negotiate and re-create their identities via enacting new hybrid genres of music that truly reflect and constitute their cultural in-between-ness. They simply regenerate their identity. Tension between South Asian heritage and British way of life is another activator to hybridity.

British South Asian minorities found music as an alternative outlet to their quest for identity. Comparatively, they have been suffering from cultural marginalisation and socio-economic deprivation. Socially and culturally, ethnic minorities have been filtered through the prism of white majority’s colonial prejudices and stereotypes. The diverse ethnic minorities have “been perceived as either homogeneous or foreign but never as legitimately belonging to the West” (Dudrah, 2001: p.3). British South Asians seem to be caught in essentialist identificatory categories that lock them up into stereotypical racism-charged images and representations.

Kavita Amarnani highlighted such stereotyping even in Western academia. She showed how “the persistent critical emphasis on Sanskrit art, drama and poetry shares the same ethnocentric romanticism here for the idealized Indian past. Such work is significant in its remarkable intellectual stubbornness in reproducing the India which has come to characterise the Orientalist vision in all its homogeneity - philosophical, mysterious, and of course ancient. We thus have...the popular and elite cultures banners...which have unfortunately come to represent cultural activity in India through the tired old Orientalist prism characteristic of ethnocentric scholarship” (Amarnani, 1993: p. 1). Hence, identity and socio-cultural recognition have been a top priority to various generations of South Asians. There has been a pressing need to counter-discuss the prevailing western eugenicist arguments of the other’s exoticism, primitiveness, and thus, inferiority.

Music has offered a fertile space for the enunciation and articulation of Asianness. Yet, Asianness is not an easily tenable identity within a white dominated British society. There has been a continuous competition of identity spaces between Asianness and Britishness. In this context, Britishness is equated with Englishness and hence whiteness. However, the concept of Asianness itself risks being essentialized and fossilized which renders it no better than the hegemonic (generally perceived as exclusive) British identity. British South Asian cultural critic Sanjay Sharma commented that Asian identity has to escape the essentializing discourses of identity and difference promoted by late postmodernism. Following Stuart Hall's conception of popular culture, Sharma argued that South Asian music in general, and Bhangra music in particular constituted dynamic musical spaces that have to be struggled for in order to understand that the signifier "Asian" "can be one of the many temporary positionalities that offer us strategic places from which to speak in this racist Britain" (1996: p.34). Thus, no identity, even Asianness, is a fixed self-contained phenomenon. Identity is a question of positionality and it is highly context-governed. Those kinds of debates about and conceptions of identity "open up alternative political positionalities and ways of being in their de-centring of normative notions of 'Asianness'" (1996: p.34). The normativeness and essentialization of identity hampered genuine articulations of real-life identities. This fossilized identity and identification turned out to be a new grand narrative that imprisons more than liberates ethnic minorities in contemporary Britain. The discursive and essentialized discourses of identity were transgressed by the hybrid musical genres like Bhangra. Asian identity has become, thanks to hybridity, a contested signifier that signaled the multiplicity of identity and identification. Such multiplicity of positional identifications worked against any culturalist moorings. Reinventing ethnic identities, Stuart Hall offered a novel account of what he termed "new ethnicities". Those new ethnic identities are multiple, dynamic and positional. They enable social agents to "speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position...We are all, in that sense, ethnically located and that our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are." (Hall, 1988b: p.258). If not seen from this perspective Asianness and Asian ethnic identities will inflict the same harm, which they claim to strive against, on their social agents.

In the same line of thought, the South Asian community was largely alienated culturally and musically. Being unable to identify with white English/British musical genres and cultural patterns, South Asians found themselves immersed into and absorbed by the hegemony of blackness. They identified with black music and culture to resist the insistence of white British hegemony. One South Asian musician expounded such tendency. He stated

“I can remember going to college discos a long time ago, when all you heard was Reggae, Reggae, Reggae. Asians were lost, they weren’t accepted by whites, so they drifted into black culture, talking like them, and listening to Reggae. But Bhangra has given them their music and made them feel that they do have an identity. No matter if they are Gujuratis, Punjabis or whatever- Bhangra is Asian music for Asians” (Quoted in Sharma, S, Hutnyk, J and Sharma, A, 1996: p.18).

Thus, the appearance of Bhangra presented an articulation of an 'Asianness' and Asian identity in alternative public spaces. This stands in contrast to state of vacuum that Asians used to live in; they had a limited means of expression and articulation before the emergence of Bhangra as an established music genre in contemporary Britain. The music journalist Dil Neiyar has stated the centrality of Bhangra in the creation, expression and maintenance of Asian distinctive identity in multicultural Britain:

Bhangra ... the music, clothes and dances are the medium through which the otherness of British/South Asian experience is articulated ... it is both a form of cultural resistance and an affirmation of the lives we lead ... it is perceived as something distinct, belonging to us.... It is a definite break from tradition, but its reference points are rooted in tradition.... The Bhangra beat is a pulse, a soundtrack, a distinct manifestation of the South Asian urban experience (Quoted in Sharma, S, Hutnyk, J and Sharma, A, 1996: p.6).

As stated by Dil Neiyar (1988: p. 6), Bhangra, being a hybrid musical genre, presented both a rupture from and a continuation of tradition. This in-between-ness bestowed Bhangra with a considerable flexibility and adaptability, which offered alternative positionalities for South Asians in Britain to assert their identity. Bhangra could be seen as an affirmative action or moment within a generally hostile or marginalizing society. Playing Bhangra or just listening to Bhangra was an act of identity assertion and a moment of genuine articulation. It offered socio-cultural visibility to already invisible South Asian community in Britain.

The British cultural critic Rehan Hyder (2004) deciphered how South Asians have attempted to evince an authentic sense of creativity and originality in their music, while at the same time they aspired to assert a positive ethnic identity. Such tension has been so clear in South Asian music mainly during 1990s and on. Nowhere has it possible for young South Asians to reach such equilibrium than in embracing a hybrid music that has been reflective of their hybrid identity.

In this section, I try to highlight some aspects of musical hybridity of some South Asian musical experiences. I start with the musical endeavour of Apache Indian. His original name is Steven Kapur. Apache Indian was a politically-charged name. It

was an Indian tribe which fought white colonists and resisted their invasion. This means that Steven Kapur, by adopting such a name, opts for fighting British whites' racism and stereotypes. Kapur's first Album was released in 1993. It was entitled 'No Reservations'. Apache Indian was the first Asian musician to attain mainstream success. His musical style reflected his hybrid culture. He transcended the well-established musical genres: Indian Bhangra and black reggae. The outcome was a new hybrid musical style called Bhangramuffin. Bhangramuffin was a mixture of both ragamuffin and popular Bhangra. Such mixture owned him a large multicultural audience. 'No Reservations' introduced his new musical tradition. It is also a social protest album in which he dealt with issues such as arranged marriages and discrimination. His second album is untitled 'Make Way for the Indian' (1995) (Apache Indian discography). As the title suggested, it was more self-assertive and defiant to mainstream British society. Appraising the importance of Apache's musical output, Back and Nayak were among the first to churn out how Apache's music, and south Asian music in general paved the way for a new dis-oriented musical soundspace. They wrote: "Apache's music is a crossroads, a meeting place where the languages and rhythms of the Caribbean, North America and India intermingle in the context of Europe. Apache himself was raised in the multi-ethnic area of Handsworth, Birmingham, born of Hindu Punjabi parents. He performs and expresses himself through snatches of Jamaican patois, Punjabi and a culturally diverse vernacular English. This language is part of a wider urban experience and symbolizes the dynamic culture of Birmingham. (Back and Nayak, 1993: pp.141-143)

Talvin Singh and his Asian Underground group represented a remarkable experience in British South Asian soundscape. His music is unique in its combination of electronic dance music styles, particularly ambient and jungle, with the tradition of Indian classical music. Singh believed in the power of new technology and internet to add power and global currency to aesthetic and cultural aspects of Indian classical music tradition, the outcome of which was what came to be known as Tablatronics (Tabla electronics). He regenerated the role of Indian tabla sound. Thus, sounds and bits of classical and film music from India and the typically British "Drum n Bass" dance music were combined to produce a cocktail that seemed to satisfy the in-between nature of the second generation of south Asians. In his album 'Anokha: Soundz' of the Asian Underground was a success and also it managed to advance "Tabla n Bass" as an alternative to "Drum n Bass". "Tabla n Bass" was used as a backdrop for the British-Asian singer Amar in the first track 'Jaan'. Melodies were sung in Hindi with Indian modality and pitch but with sporadic parts in English. That was an innovation, a new meeting of styles, a West orientalized or an Orient westernized. 'Flight IC 408 State of Bengal' was another famous song of Talvin Singh and his Asian Underground group. The song evokes a musical journey from

Britain to Indian Sub-continent. The audience is addressed as if it were airplane passengers. The track starts as follows:

“Your attention please....
Your attention please....
Indian Airlines announces the departure of their flight
IC 408 to Calcutta.
Passengers are requested to proceed to the aircraft.”

The song recreates the atmosphere of an aeronautic journey. The sense of place in the song is dynamic. The audience/passengers fly with their imagination from Britain to India in a musical virtual experience. The song conveys a true sense of hybridity. It fixes on the sound of Diaspora and exhibits a cultural pride in moving freely to and from between two homes. It is about the imaginary space that airplane traverses. The airplane’s restless movement between London and Calcutta perfectly highlights British Asians’ dynamic and moving identity. It is an identity under constant construction and revision. An identity that refuses to be chained by either British culture or south Asian one; it is the in-between culture that constantly vacillates between the two. Asad Rehman, a south Asian community organizer, when he heard such hybrid music stated that “It might not have spoken our literal language, but it spoke the language of our hearts” (Color lines Magazine, 2003).

Other social and cultural protest South Asian rap musicians expressed the worries of South Asian communities in contemporary Britain. They employed different musical and discursive techniques to offer alternative identification outlets and identity formation signifiers to second and third generation British Asians. The two-man Rap group Hustlers HC expressed the cultural and social dimensions of the lives of South Asians in Britain. They focused on the political antagonisms and marginalization faced by their respective communities. Their popular track “Big Trouble in Little Asia” stands as an expressive masterpiece of such identities-related worries. Seen from a postcolonial approach, the song bears a tone of defiance of the traditional British colonizer. It starts with a reminder of the past colonial relations between the British Empire and its Asian colonies notably India. The language of protest creates two seemingly antagonistic worlds: the British White and the No-White Asian. The singers recite:

“Your corrupt culture makes my rich culture looks poor,
I’m trying to learn more about my past,
I’m fighting to make my culture last,”

The Asian culture is presented as pure and authentic. Such features render it highly appreciated and thus rich compared to the corrupt culture of the British white

majority. Yet, such corruption seems to stain the purity of Asianness. Britishness seems to dominate and overwhelm Asianness. It voids it of any meaning so that Asian identity seems to lose its *raison d'être*. The various strategies of assimilation that post-war British governments followed aimed at creating cultural uniformity, which meant the obliteration of the essence “alien cultures” and containing them within the mainstream dominant culture. The song challenges such containment strategies and promises that Asians are doing their utmost efforts to know their original “pure” and uncontaminated culture and thus to secure its survival within the allegedly hostile host British community. The song escalates its defying tone and it resumes:

“I have no loyalty I'm here as long as it suits me
 It wasn't my intent or my idea
 Sometimes I wish I was born a million miles from here
 'cos born I am a child without a home
 Homeless I've grown up, Homeless I will roam
 A citizen of the world, with Asia on my mind
 My culture's all I have, my culture I will find
 I hope you're sitting comfortably I'm gonna burst your bubble
 Tell you much stories about big trouble in Little Asia.”⁵

The song challenges the assimilationist discourses of British mainstream culture. The loyalty of British ethnic minorities has been a tricky issue in British media, politics and even academia. For instance, the notorious cricket test, also known as the Tebbit test, could be considered as a representative case of how the British doubted the integration and the loyalty of Asian minorities. The test was a controversial procedure suggested by the British Conservative politician Norman Tebbit in April 1990 in reference to the perceived lack of loyalty to the England cricket team among South Asian and Caribbean immigrants and their offspring. Tebbit insisted that those ethnic minorities who support their native countries rather than England are not significantly integrated into Britain and their loyalty is put into question. The Hustlers HC do admit that they cannot have a loyalty to a country that thinks about its minorities in that way. Asian minorities are, accordingly, living in Britain as sojourners to meet some social and economic needs. They did not have the intention to integrate and become British; they have their dream of return (some may call it myth of return). The diasporic discourse can be traced up to the idea of homelessness and being “A citizen of the world, with Asia on my mind”. The Asian identity seems to be a global identity that transcends the narrow British confines of cultural identification. The Hustlers HC are aware of such global transnational

⁵ (Hustlers HC, 'Big Trouble in Asia', Nation Records, f 994- Words by Paul Arora and Mandeep Walia of Hustlers HC. Published by QFM/Warner Chappell Music)

dimension and they are intent to rediscover their authentic culture and restore its force. They are keen to be an equal antagonist to the British hegemonic culture. However, they are equally conscious that the task is hard to perform given the socio-cultural and political internal fragmentations from which South Asian minorities suffer. Cultural and religious cleavages are so entrenched within such minorities that they hamper any genuine organic or even mechanistic solidarity. At the end of the song, the Hustlers HC clearly diagnose the ailments of their community by clarifying that,

“Religion breaking up the community
Asian man the storm coming and we need unity
The Hindu, the Muslim and the Sikh
United we stand, divided we are weak”

The religious and cultural diversity within the British South Asian communities eradicate any solid political unity and organization of South Asians in Britain. They constitute the major weakness of the community. Ethnic and religious affiliations enfeeble strong consciousness-raising about socio-cultural and political oppression that South Asians meet in Britain. It equally endangers organized mobilization against the politics of exclusion and marginalization. The result is a double-layered failure: failure to conceptualize and failure to realize. To exceed such frailty, Asians had to unite and know their common “enemy” (racist entities like the British National Party BNP). “United we stand, divided we are weak” echoes the famous expression of the American president Abraham Lincoln when he uttered that “A House divided against itself cannot stand” (Lincoln, 1858 in Basler 2006). Intra-group antagonisms contribute to the failure of the common ethnic cause. If not eliminated, they may fragment the Asian communities further and their common cause “cannot stand”.

The rap group Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) adopted a multiplicity of musical genres and styles. This diversity of genres allowed the group to express different tones and themes akin to various ethnic minorities in Britain. Yet the group was so engaged in South Asian cause and in many cases, it expressed their concerns in a direct and violent way. Suggestively, the group is nicknamed by Sanjay Sharma as “lyrical warriors” (Sharma: p.47). We critically analyze the musical track “Strong Culture” to churn out the mood of the group. Within the cultural war of positioning, “Strong Culture” championed the need to appreciate the South Asian identity and make it visible within multicultural Britain. The track asserts the political and cultural agency of British South Asians. ADF group resorts to the strategy of revitalizing the imagined community of the “homeland” in Asia so that they can first distinguish Asianness from Blackness and further from white Britishness. They chant:

Another critical rhyme
 Make you wanna look
 Observe it
 It's like a comic book
 Coming from the place
 With a capital B
 I'll let you guess -
 No let me tell you:
 The B and the A and N and

The G and the L and the A
 With the word called Desh
 Sums up the country
 The word and the place
 Called Bangladesh
 So you never contest
 Yes you thought
 I couldn't do it
 I'm not a Black man
 This time it's an Asian
 Some fear the white man
 Some fear the Ku Klux Klan
 But they ain't up to no good..
 Listen up to this rap
 It's Asian guys coming correct⁶

They invoke the state of Bangladesh as an imagined moment of the diasporic experience and community. They stem identity and identification from their strong roots in an authentic strong culture. This strong culture gives essence and power to their being Asians within hegemonic anti-racist political community traditionally dominated by the black paradigm. "I'm not a Black man/ This time it's an Asian" emphasizes the fact that Asians aspire for specific cultural positionality within British ethnic minorities. There seems to be desire to move beyond the domination of the black paradigm to an alternative Asian one. For ADF group, music represented a practical cultural space where they managed to articulate and assert their South

⁶ (ADF, 'Strong Culture', Nation Records 1995.
 Words by Dr Das, Savale, Zaman, Uddin.
 Published by QFM/Warner Chappel!)

Asian identity vis-à-vis not only hegemonic white society but also their black ethnic counterparts. The hybrid nature of Bhangra and post-Bhangra music offered novel spaces for/of articulations and cultural visibility.

Conclusion

To conclude, Bhangra music has been extended from its Punjabi folk origins. It has been geared to the cultural needs of the diverse urban of British South Asians. British Bhangra has been crafted as a fusion (hybrid) based music incorporating Black music genres and western pop with Punjabi folk beats and lyrics. British south Asian musicians, via their hybrid music, managed to exploit the benefits of Bhabha’s “Third Space” to enunciate and articulate their identity. Music was an affirmative act of resistance and survival. It was a way to counter-attack racial stereotypes. In this respect, Singh affirmed: “I want to change the preconceptions of Asian music. It’s not about primitiveness. You go to India and Bombay, and everyone is carrying around cellular phones. The days of primitiveness have gone. We’re not the Third World. I want to bring that forward without losing the aesthetic and culture of our music. I’m in the position to do that.” (Quoted in Micallef, 1997: p.32). This affirmation can be read as an instance of defiance and subversion to British mainstream white hegemony and act of resisting colonial discourses of cultural superiority. Music was then a form of empowerment. Commenting on the role music plays in sustaining ethnic diasporas, Paul Gilroy wrote that

The power of music in developing our struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness and testing out, deploying, or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, individual and collective, defensive and transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this tradition of expression and its distinctive *moral* basis. . . . In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present. (Gilroy, 1990: pp.10-12)

Music, and notably hybrid music, becomes a vital weapon in the arsenal of anti-racist movement in contemporary Britain. It is more than a mere communicative tool or artistic aesthetic creation. It is a battlefield par excellence; a battlefield that shapes the identity of the warriors no less than being shaped by them.

British Bhangra can be deemed as an act of identity formation for British South Asians that is not in opposition to notions of being Black and British (Dudrah, 2001). Music crosses conventional boundaries and allows a novel re-imagination of the self

and the group. It also facilitates intercultural and multicultural communication. Firth elegantly stressed the infinite unbridled possibilities that music offers both to its players and listeners. He confirmed that “what makes music special - what makes it special for identity - is that it defines a space without boundaries (a game without frontiers). Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders - sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races and nations - and to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us”. (Firth, 1996: p.125)

Music is a process of identity formation and creation that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries and enunciates the identities of its creators in a continuous process of shaping and being shaped. And this is how music can be a kind of empowerment, liberation and engagement.

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