

British Bhangra Music and the Battle of Britpop: South Asian Cultural Identity and
Cultural Politics in Urban Britain

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British bhangra can simply be described as developing out of the more traditional forms of the folk dances and musics of the people of the Punjab.¹ The Punjab being a large and diverse geographical area stretching the borders of India and Pakistan. As a music for people of South Asian origin in Britain, bhangra has been around since the late 1960s with the arrival of migrants from South Asia and East Africa in the post-war period. Gerd Baumann, one of the few western academic commentators of the music, describes British Bhangra as celebrating "the robust and energetic punctuated rhythms and iambic meter of the double-sided drums *dhol* and *dholki*, the supple directness of Punjabi-language strophic poetry, and the pleasures associated with its main social occasion, the harvest festival *bhaisakhi*" (Baumann 1990: 81).

The term 'British bhangra' is widely used and accepted by singers, musicians, radio DJs, and the British South Asian print and broadcast media.² As a descriptive term it appropriately captures the music's fusion of traditional folk bhangra lyrics and beats with urban Black British and pop sounds, thereby transforming early forms of bhangra from the Punjab into a new and distinct genre of British bhangra dance and music. Interestingly, this genre is informing the composition and reception of bhangra music more generally throughout the South Asian diaspora in exciting ways: for example it has been a benchmark for the production and development of bhangra music in North America.

However, despite British Bhangra's presence in British society for over thirty years it remains a marginalized song and dance genre in mainstream British music. Interestingly what is usually deemed as mainstream British music is often to do with associations of

'whiteness'.³ From rock, to pop, punk, and grunge, and particularly in the appropriations of reggae music by white artists for one-off chart singles, 'whiteness' has been an unquestioned and invisible marker of race that is beyond the need for justification or legitimacy. This is of a time when 'whiteness' is often replaying old ethnocentric concerns. Most notably, perhaps, the resurgence of 'whiteness' in contemporary British popular culture was witnessed in the music of Britpop, a genre of young British pop music fusing the sounds of rock, pop, punk, and grunge with the urban styles of a retrospective white British youth. The whiteness of Britpop was most striking in the summer of 1995 in what came to be known through the British media and music press as 'the battle of Britpop'. This battle was fought between two bands who came to epitomise the genre of music. On one side we had the north of England based Oasis and on the other side the southern based Blur who were competing for chart supremacy by releasing their singles on the same day.⁴ Amidst the British media and music press's coverage and instigation of 'the battle' a number of ongoing debates in British society were prominently highlighted which revealed the 'whiteness' of the whole affair. The traditional post-war tension of British class politics were being played out through Oasis's geographical links and upbringing in 'the grim North' which were in direct contrast to Blur's affluent image as Southern-based ex-art students turned pop group. This occurred alongside the assertions of Britpop as a rebelliously happy, white-British and predominantly young male domain. Evidently, 'the battle of Britpop' can be read as an orchestrated 'white' moment in British popular culture in which certain (predominantly white) youth and different sections of the white British music industry could harmlessly take sides. One of the main casualties to emerge from 'the battle' was the emergence of the deep-seated ethnocentrism of British culture and society, and so one is perturbed to ask 'what about the marginalization of the 'Other' battles of Britpop, of which British bhangra music is one constituent'?

This essay begins from the starting point of a committed discussion and theorizing about the marginalization of South Asian popular cultures and the way that these cultures have

been continuously shaping and transforming themselves. There is a need to construct a strategic theoretical intervention against views of culture that continue to homogenize and displace South Asian cultures in the West as frivolous and stereotypical, thus denying them their legitimate position in studies of popular culture. Undoubtedly, the reasons for the marginalization of South Asians in Western culture and society are many and complex and throw light on the need for an understanding of British bhangra music in its own right. What follows, then, is an outline of some of the reasons that have led to an ongoing marginalization of British South Asian identities and popular culture. Consideration is also given to some of the alliances and differences within Black British cultural politics that British Asian identity is a part of. This article also pays close attention to British bhangra's historical emergence and development as a South Asian music and dance genre in Britain and makes analysis of the lyrics in some bhangra music. This is important in order to draw out the importance of South Asian identities and their interplay with urban cultural politics for young British Asians.

Locating Asian Identity in Britain and the West.

In beginning to map out the marginalization of British South Asians this requires an exploration of the difficult and complex relationship between these so called 'migrant' groups living in Britain and the way knowledge has been produced about them. Most pervasively, the social and cultural outlook of these diverse people has been perceived as either homogeneous or foreign but never as legitimately belonging to the West. In particular, the exoticization of 'classical' South Asian arts and culture suggest that what little attention is accorded to such forms can be seen as a continuous source of 'entertainment' and pacification, derivative of on-going effects of older colonial power relations and the 'all powerful' gaze of the West. Kavita Amarnani sets out a useful critical perspective on this in her study of popular Indian cinema:

The noisy silence one encounters when researching Indian cinema in Britain is paralleled by the phenomenal amount of critical work on folk traditions and Sanskrit art which has come, in its own way, to symbolize 'India' in the aesthetic and political sphere. Folk traditions are seen to represent the rural poor in a

perfectly mythologized account of cultural identity and history untainted by the information flows of capital, pure in their ethnic authenticity, and most importantly at odds with both the elite, native cultures as well as the corrupting influence of Western (post)colonial domination.

In a parallel way, 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: 1)

At the same time as this anti-Orientalist critique deployed in very general terms there is a more clearly argued and politically loaded debate being played out in British race relations at political (local and mainstream), academic (the Sociology of race) and administrative (equal opportunity policies) levels. Much of this debate revolves around as to what extent the term 'Black' in British politics is a relevant unit of analysis to describe the collective cultural, social and political experiences of British African, Caribbean and South Asian communities (Modood 1988; Brah 1992; Modood 1994). Put in a simple way, much of this debate appears to ask and respond to the question - under what circumstances is it appropriate, if at all, to collectively order people of colour under any kind of unitary organizing category?

Some social commentators, Tariq Modood (1988 and 1994) for instance, have argued that in terms of antiracist struggles allegiance to an inclusive notion of Black politics has been useful in highlighting and counteracting some forms of racism prevalent in British culture and society. However, as Modood has gone on to argue, such collective organisation alone is not always sufficient to understand how specific groupings emerge to form alliances and how they may be consolidated. This is particularly the case when people termed under one broad category have a wide range of social and cultural affiliations and in spite of this are still grouped under one category, without thinking through how it ignores their importance of cultural identity. Modood makes his argument in relation to British South Asian cultural identity which he sees as being subsumed and marginalized

under the political term Black. He states that this has often been the case when political blackness has been used to represent or speak on behalf of all racially oppressed people, specifically in the arenas of local and mainstream political rhetoric.

However, Modood appears to have overlooked that cultural identity is only one of many processes of identification (Brah 1992), and that no individual or groups of people have total control over the processes of labelling identities as this is always a site of contestation. Identifications need not be wholly or only grounded in an ethnic absolutist or essentialized understandings of a 'culture' as the work of Modood suggests. Instead cultural identifications are better understood as being deployed as strategic markers to counteract misrepresentation and marginalization on the one hand and in making partial claims about oneself on the other.⁵ Indeed a *strategically* essentialized cultural identity for non-white ethnic minority people in Britain has often proved invaluable in creating some form of group identity that positions individuals within that group to negotiate a sense of themselves through self determination in relation to mainstream white British society. It also allows them to form a sense of themselves in relation to other forms of diasporic and ethnic identity. This can be seen to be the case in relation to bhangra music and its popularity in proclaiming a cultural identity for certain groups of youth as British South Asian. For example, in numerous bhangra tracks by different bands we have the continuous playing of the *dhol* in an iambic meter to the lyrics '*Punjabi munda pao Bhangra*' (literally translated as 'boys from the Punjab dance Bhangra') and '*Dhol Wajje*' or '*Dhol Wajha*' (the *dhol* plays, or play the *dhol*). This musical activity is further fused with modern urban sounds that invoke an energetic antiphonous call and response between the performing band and the dancing crowd. More importantly such lyrics are immediately recognized as an exclamation of a broad South Asian cultural identity. This identity is constructed initially through the call of the Punjab as an historical and imagined geography where the music emerged from but is translated and transformed to a much wider audience from South Asia through the playing of the *dhol* and other percussion instruments. These instruments are familiar musically throughout the Indian

subcontinent as associated with lived experiences and sounds of pleasure and enjoyment. The starting point of the Punjab therefore historically locates the music in terms of origins but is more openly defined, contested and negotiated through the mixture of instruments and musical styles from South Asia and urban Britain. The different range of music instruments and sounds articulate together to signify a sense of 'urban British South Asianness' which accounts for bhangra's large following among many young and diverse South Asian Britons.

The sense of being South Asian in urban Britain is not at odds with being Black in a political sense either. More often than not the other urban music genres that British bhangra readily draws from and references are almost always British Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American soul, rnb, hiphop, rap and more contemporarily garage lyrics and sounds. These genres in themselves are invested with and constantly creating meanings of, amongst other things, cultural and political exclusion from mainstream spheres of life amongst its audiences. It seems fitting, then, that these are the same genres that are part of the composition of British bhangra that translate into a musical experience that signify the lived experiences of urban South Asians, particularly in the inner cities. Thus, I am arguing differently from commentators like Modood. I am also aware like others (Mercer 1994: Chapter 4) that people who are designated as Black by political activists and academics might not consider themselves in these politicized frames of reference. Nonetheless it is important to recognise the continual of Black British political identities as being opened up by newer forms of identification, as in British bhangra music, that illustrate simultaneous and multifaceted positions which are Asian, Black and British in the cultural and political fields. Rather than simply replace British Asian over Black British struggles in an easy culturalist and ethnic absolutist sense it is more useful to view the struggles of different non-white people in staking a claim of belonging and advancement in Britain as far from exclusive. Often they are one and of the same. The use of the term 'Black', then, referring to the anti-racist category that represents the

common experiences of colonialism and contemporary racism for African, Caribbean and South Asian communities in Britain is still relevant.

Inevitably, any argument attempting to locate South Asian popular cultural forms and expressions within the context of strategically essentializing identity in terms of 'Asian' or 'Black' must take on board the deconstruction of the terms 'Asian' and 'South Asian' as these themselves are open to further contestation. This entails questioning the broader use of the continent Asia/Asian as a signifying practice of homogenization and the more heterogeneous uses of geographies and locales within Asia/Asian such as South Asia/South Asian. Uses of the term Asia/Asian in political rhetoric and debates within contemporary British and North American society respectively illustrate the way the term signifies different groups of people in each context.⁶ In Britain, especially in the larger cities and due to the number of Asians settled there, the term Asian generally refers to people originating from South Asia (specifically the countries Bangladesh, India and Pakistan). Asians in Britain other than those from the Indian subcontinent are literally marginalized as "Other" on census forms and other official state documentation.⁷ North America's situation is somewhat reversed in that for the similar reasons of numbers and community organization the term Asian summons the East Asians as the main protagonists. The point being made here is one about a politics of language and identity that avoids "the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences" (Lowe 1991: 28). This is important if we are to avoid inhibiting a more fully worked out democratic and political sphere to address local identities and exchanges of culture, let alone to deal with similar issues on a global scale. In terms of British South Asian popular culture and its ensuing identities, then, a political engagement could begin with the notion of Black British politics and Black British identities as a useful and broad coalition based on unity. That unity is important having been struggled for and contested over the last three decades. To solely imply differences, therefore, could jeopardize contemporary Black-British political alliances and their meanings, definitions and activities in Britain and the wider West. However, to rely entirely upon that unity as the basis to promote the cultural

and social life chances of all people of colour would be to avoid an important engagement with diversity. As Lisa Lowe has argued,

...just as the articulation of the desire for identity depends upon the existence of a fundamental horizon of differences, the articulation of differences dialectically depends upon a socially constructed and practiced notion of identity. I want simply to remark that in the 1990s, we can afford to rethink the notion of ethnic identity in terms of cultural, class, and gender differences, rather than presuming similarities and making the erasure of particularity the basis of unity. (Lowe 1991: 39)

Evidently, then, it is important to analyse specific forms of cultural expressions whilst maintaining an overview of their interconnectedness and differences to global issues and geographies. Such an approach is required in order to bring facets of an Asian lived experience and South Asian cultural identity in the West into contact with processes of cultural and political democracy. Particularly important are those processes of attempting to make sense of democracy through the writing of theory as used by cultural and social critics to engage with issues around marginal cultures and identity. It is easy to forget that what is termed as 'marginal' is itself complex, diverse and larger than one can anticipate. Such is the case of the cultures of the British South Asian.

So far I have been trying to pay attention to neglected South Asian creativity and politics which I argue must begin from the standpoint of being aware of how Asian popular culture in white Britain and the wider West can be accorded a marginal status. I have also tried to highlight some of the alliances and differences within Black British cultural politics that British Asian identity is a part of. By illustrating some of the broad areas where there is a need to interject the beginnings of an understanding of South Asian cultural identity in current cultural and social theory, it is hoped a clarification of thinking and positions around Asian identity may thereby productively address the study of South Asian popular culture more generally. The point is to enable these socio-cultural forms and expressions to be considered as a claim for cultural autonomy in and of the West. By focusing on diasporic South Asian popular forms we can begin to discuss issues of being of South Asian descent in 'the West' generally and in specific

contexts such as America, Britain, Canada, Europe and elsewhere. The case of British bhangra as a song and dance genre in British popular music can be understood in the context of such a claim around South Asian diaspora and identity.

The Emergence of British Bhangra.

Sabita Banerji and Gerd Baumann have individually and together written the first academic accounts of British bhangra music (Banerji 1988; Banerji and Baumann 1990; Baumann 1990 and 1996:156-157). Drawing loosely from the interdisciplinary concerns of popular music studies they chart the emergence and rise of British bhangra from the 1960s up until the late eighties by way of social commentary based upon informal interviews with British bhangra band members in eighties Southall, West London. Their argument can be summarised as follows: with the arrival of South Asian immigrants in the early 1960s, particularly from the Punjab, the first forms of bhangra came in the shape of records imported from the Indian subcontinent alongside early Indian film music. These records were listened to in the private sphere of the home or the bedsit. Here the first generation of South Asians could be nostalgic about their home countries and cultures, especially in the context of their grim employment and housing conditions, and their confrontations with direct racism from sections of white British society. Bhangra in this form of culture, as strategically affirming ethnic identity, 'roots' and belonging through personal entertainment, was only meant to be provisional up until the return to the originating homeland of the first immigrants. However, with the sending for families left in South Asia, the birth of the next generation of South Asians, and together with the fact that many of the unskilled workers had also found that it was no longer possible for them to return home to villages where their place had been filled by others, the foundations for the settling of the South Asian community in Britain had been laid (Banerji and Baumann 1990: 138 - 139).

Banerji and Baumann go on to tell us that the transition from traditional Punjabi bhangra music into British bhangra was taking shape in the mid-1980s. Traditional bhangra was

developed in the late 1960s by South Asian musicians who began their music careers in Britain by singing hymns in Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. These musicians formed amateur bhangra bands and performed in the traditional folk style of the Punjab at weddings and community celebrations. Around 1984 the emergence of bhangra beat, modern technology and urban Black sounds – reggae, dub and soul, and the Black sound system culture more generally - fused with traditional Punjabi lyrics, was witnessed in Southall and in Birmingham. Bhangra beat simply evolved as the first and emerging second generation of South Asian musicians began to experiment and improvise with technology. Moreover, they started to locate their music in terms of a British South Asian experience. The popularity of bhangra beat soon reached British South Asian communities nationally and particularly the South Asian youth who had hitherto solely favoured reggae, soul, jazzfunk, hiphop, and British pop music. In this way Banerji and Baumann argue that a British South Asian youth culture was constituted, predicated on the re-invention of a folk bhangra which cut across internal cleavages of caste, ethnicity, and religion.

Banerji and Baumann provide the customary accounts of bhangra music which are rehearsed with some variations in Back (1996), Farrell (1997), Gillespie (1995), and Mitchell (1996). This account of the rise of bhangra has been challenged by the contributors to the *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* book (Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma eds. 1996), an important contribution to the cultural study of South Asians in Britain. Engaging with theoretical debates of race and identity and drawing on a wide range of South Asian music dance genres - from hiphop, qawwali, through to bhangra and soul, indie and jungle - this edited collection of essays gives voice to a new generation of scholars and researchers concerned with cultural and social formations and their interplay with Black urban cultural politics across local and global frontiers (see Dudrah 1998 for a fuller critical review of this work).

Sanjay Sharma (1996) in particular argues that Banerji and Baumann make easy readings of British bhangra in relation to South Asian cultural identity by simply mapping out a cultural authenticity and tradition argument. This argument can be summed up in that Baumann and Banerji read British bhangra music as illustrating a homogenous and unchanging Asian identity in Britain, rather than attempt to analyse some of the complex negotiations and translations that are occurring in British Asian cultural identity through the use of popular cultural forms such as British bhangra music. Whilst it appears an informed account of the historical emergence of bhangra as a fusion-based music and its Punjabi cultural roots has been presented, Banerji and Baumann fail to comprehend fully the complex musical processes and cultural exchanges taking place in and around the music. For instance and as argued earlier, bhangra music does not simply reflect British Asian identities in a straightforward manner. Instead, like the identities it helps to create and produces meaning from, British bhangra itself is composed from different cultural traditions and experiences such as wider Black British musical influences.

Banerji and Baumann in their accounts also tend to suggest that bhangra music in its specific derivations of a Punjabi folk dance carried equal attraction to all British South Asian youth. This is inaccurate. It is important to point out other British South Asian music ventures which partly informed by British bhangra have articulated their sense of 'Asianness' in different and equally interesting ways. The music of East London based Joi Bangla influenced by sociocultural affiliations with Bangladesh, and the cosmopolitan Asian Dub Foundation are two examples of artists termed as 'post-Bhangra' and 'Asian Kool'.⁸

Banerji and Baumann's story of British bhangra music comes to a close in the late-eighties. We need to bring the account of British bhangra up to date. Also whereas the contributors to the *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* book rightfully challenge Banerji and Baumann's account of Asian identity in bhangra music, like Banerji and Baumann they

make no analysis of the lyrics in British bhangra tracks. This is an unfortunate omission as a focus on bhangra lyrics can tell us something about the construction of British South Asian identities and their interplay with urban cultural politics in and around the music. The remainder of this article attempts to redress both these imbalances in the existing academic accounts of British bhangra.

British Bhangra: Late-80s to the Present

Of note in the history of British bhangra in the late 1980s were the various unsuccessful attempts to 'cross-over' bhangra music into the mainstream British charts by fusing it with rock and house music. The failure to get into the British charts was due to a number of reasons such as the exclusion of bhangra record sales by GALLUP polls in its compilation of Britain's top 40 best-selling music. This was of a time when bhangra bands sold records and tapes by the thousands through specialist Asian shops. However, an early image and language 'problem' retarded white-British music industry acceptance and promotion of Bhangra music. It seemed to them to consist of middle-aged, overweight men wearing lurid coloured shirts and white trousers, singing in the supposedly 'foreign language' of Punjabi. Bhangra remained, therefore, cut off from mainstream music representation other than in racist and stereotypical terms thereby distancing further a sense of place for South Asians in mainstream British culture and society.

Currently, as in the 1990's, British bhangra continues to be heard on 'the Asian wedding circuit', at other community gatherings and especially at night clubs on 'Asian Nites' where its main impetus lies as an active form of cultural expression for British Asians. On the one hand, the 1980s can be described as a period of marginalized emergence into British popular culture for bhangra music. On the other hand, however, the 1990s and the

contemporary period can be characterised as testimony to cultural change being made by young South Asians through the transformation of bhangra music to encapsulate new dimensions of South Asian traditions and experiences encountered in the context of a late British modernity. This is an understanding of modernity that does not put forward a simple binary of South Asia as a set of primitive and backward cultural traditions and Britain as a forward looking modernity. On the contrary, South Asian traditions here are invoked as an imagined and actual landscape in which the history of British bhangra music can be made sense of as a formative precursor to begin to deal with the lived experiences of South Asian Britons in modern times. This does not make redundant the notion of South Asia as having nothing more to do with British South Asians, rather it raises questions around the complex and exciting cultural and social histories and identities of these groups to be asked and contested in writings addressing South Asian cultural productions. Thus, 'tradition' here is used reflexively as well as historically.

The current bhangra music scene has changed little since the nineties in terms of the presence of artists and bands. It has also seen the rise in the popularity of a culture of live DJs at Asian discos and family gatherings. The live band scene consists of new and young groups, especially from the Midlands who formed in the late eighties and early nineties. These include Achanak, The Safri Boyz, XLNC, Malkit Singh, and The Sahotas who are dominating the scene in terms of album releases, live performances, receiving the most number of Asian pop awards, and the fusion of greater music styles. The older 'die hard' bands who are committed adherents to folk bhangra are also still popular. They include Alaap, Heera and Premi from Southall and Apna Sangeet from Birmingham but they too have incorporated in their music the culturally diverse and modern experience of South Asians in contemporary urban Britain.

The image of bhangra music underwent considerable change from the late eighties and onwards as an ongoing process of the fusion and professionalization of the music's attempts in the eighties to 'cross-over' into the mainstream British music industry. This was particularly as a consequence of the emergence of the younger bands and artists who aligned themselves with a smarter, clean-cut and modern image whilst retaining their historical roots in the Punjab specifically and South Asia more generally. Thus considerable money was spent in creating and marketing a modern and vibrant image alongside traditional cultural referents from South Asia for many bands in the forms of stylish album cover sleeves and music videos primarily aimed to launch bhangra into the mainstream charts. This marketing effort was also used to take bhangra across the globe as part of international music festivals in the early nineties. As in the late eighties, these attempts were unsuccessful in achieving recognition in mainstream music spheres. However, they were highly successful in further responding to and shaping a diverse urban South Asian youth culture in Britain. A youth culture that most visibly manifested itself in the music of Birmingham born Apache Indian.

Apache Indian was the first British South Asian artist to break into the British music charts, the reggae dance charts, and South Asian music charts respectively in 1993 with his single *Arranged Marriage*. This track enabled him to launch a successful career as an international singer. Apache Indian cannot simply be classified as a British bhangra artist as his musical influences not only draw heavily on the bhangra beat but also on Caribbean derived ragga music. In several of his radio and television interviews he has stated that musically and commercially he does not want to be identified solely as a Bhangramuffin (the term given to the combination of bhangra and ragga music). However, the music of Apache Indian illustrates the complex and hybrid interplay of music styles, lyrics and cultural identities that constitute the experience of young South Asians in urban locales. As Les Back and Anoop Nayak describe the music of Apache Indian:

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: 141-143)

The urban experience and dynamic culture of Birmingham for young South Asians (as in other cities where there are large areas of South Asian settlement) consists of in car entertainment systems that are used to 'cruise around' and reclaim the urban setting whilst playing loud the latest Bhangra tracks. South Asian urban culture also includes daytime discos that are attended largely by teenagers, the live band gigs in the evening, as well as the popularity of bhangra at weddings and family parties. The urban scene of 'cruising', discos and live gigs remains predominantly organised and attended by young men. However, whilst British bhangra music culture continues to be male-centred, this is not to deny the popularity of female singers such as Amar, Sangeeta, Sasha and Hard Kaur amongst young male and female bhangra fans. Additionally there is the mixing of males and females on the dance floors of bhangra music especially at wedding parties and other social gatherings.⁹ In fact the point of bhangra's popularity amongst a growing South Asian youth culture specifically and South Asian popular culture generally lies in its flexibility to incorporate the cultural politics of the South Asian communities in Britain.

Sabita Banerji inaccurately cites the mid-eighties era of bhangra music as lacking any sort of political conviction. As she puts it "But Bhangra is not about politics, it is about having a good time in true, boisterous Punjabi fashion and the 'message' to the white community is incidental" (Banerji 1988: 212). In contrast, bhangra is better understood as immersed explicitly being heard and taken seriously in the cultural and mainstream politics of urban Britain. Even if Banerji intended to imply that eighties bhangra tracks were bereft of much mainstream political content this view ignores the notion of announcing oneself as here and now through popular cultural expressions. British

bhangra has been and is part of the diasporic struggles over belonging in a British nation which is often constructed around notions of white Englishness which in turn marginalises minority and especially Black groups.

This view of bhangra as immersed in a vibrant politics of being heard and taken seriously in the cultural and mainstream politics of urban Britain is evident in the track 'Dhol Tax' by the Birmingham based British Bhangra band Achanak from their 1990 album *paNACHe*.¹⁰ This song was a direct attack at the ruling Conservative Party of the time and its then leader and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for introducing the infamous Community Charge. The charge was compulsory for each member of the British general public over eighteen years of age for the use and provision of community services. In one of the many processes of opposition to the community charge it became popularly known as 'the poll tax', and the song's title clearly is a play on this. The song through its combination of humorous and satirical lyrics with energetic *dhol* playing and urgent synthesizers articulated the message to South Asian communities that they were one of the hardest hit groups by this new tax and that they should refuse to pay. The refusal to pay was a widespread strategy adopted by many groups on the Left. The song offered an alternative tax of the *dhol* - the '*dhol* tax' - which was free by way of listening to the sound of the incessant drum beat. This playful reference to the *dhol* tax is not accidental but explicit about the racism and social inequalities of British society and the effects of such acts to marginalize South Asian Britons. Thus, the *dhol* becomes a signifier of calling for collective strength and unity in which South Asian pleasures, pains and politics take shape in the reaction to a hostile and Conservative British experience.

Whilst arguing that British bhangra music has a political dimension, I do not wish to overstate this case as bhangra is heard in many different contexts and marks cultural space in many different ways. For example, it is played at the daytime discos, at the live band gigs, or at the familial setting of Asian weddings and parties. Bhangra can also be characterised as the male counterpart to the traditional women's songs and dance genre,

Ghidda (see Kaur and Kalra 1996:228 for an outline of *Ghidda*). Furthermore, not all British-Asian audiences of bhangra music simply understand the lyrics. Bhangra lyrics are sung primarily in Punjabi, a regional language spoken in the states of Punjab in both India and Pakistan. Whilst listeners of the music may predominantly be British Asians with affiliations to the Punjab, due to the fact that many second, third and fourth generations of British Asians do not fluently speak or understand the language, an assumption of simple translation of the lyrics by all its listeners must be avoided. Nonetheless, the wider appeal of British bhangra is due to the fact that it is an energetic fusion based dance music that can be enjoyed by a number of different British Asians other than Punjabis. The point being made is to avoid creating single grand narratives around music at the cost of multiple readings and meanings that allow for exciting possibilities in grasping social formations and their interplay with urban cultural politics. However, in each of the aforementioned contexts a genre of music is taking shape in the light of a British South Asian experience. Hence the innovative change of a Punjabi folk music fused with other elements of South Asian popular cultures and 'World Music'¹¹ results in the emergence of British Bhangra, and the newer genre of Asian pop - Indian film songs re-mixed with Black dance music. These musical transformations have resulted in a unique fusion, which is informing the way the music is produced and performed in the South Asian diaspora the world over, as well as back in South Asia.

For example, in the use of 'Soho Road' (a popular street of predominantly South Asian shops, restaurants and businesses in Handsworth, Birmingham) in the lyrics of countless number of British bhangra tracks, as seen in the 'Dhol Tax' song, has also been articulated in the lyrics of the songs of the Indo-Canadian bhangra singer Jazzy B. The Canadian-born singer is indicating and reusing the name of a British street in an area of large South Asian and Black settlement as an easily identifiable social, cultural and political space made and developed predominantly by non-white minority groups. This street is recognised as thriving as a cultural centre despite the difficulties of racisms, and inequalities of wealth and opportunities experienced by its residents. It has become an

immensely popular reference that is recycled in the lyrics of bhangra songs as affirming the rightful place and identity of British South Asians as contributing to and developing the meaning of contemporary political and urban culture in the West.

Contemporary British bhangra and Asian pop is thriving on the releases of classic Bollywood¹² and bhangra re-mixes. This has particularly been the case since the international success of Birmingham based Bally Sagoo's signing with Columbia records for his *Bollywood Flashback* album back in 1995. Additionally, there are the re-mixes of popular bhangra and Indian film tracks with jungle and garage music as well as bhangra beat albums made by bands old and new.¹³ Evidently this fusion of a variety of cultural practices, such as the watching of Indian films and listening to their music, and the varied and numerous music styles from house and techno to ragga and garage, combined with heavy bass lines and sounds familiar to an urban youth culture, is further testimony to South Asian cultural change and transformation. This is a transformation that includes the assertiveness of a dynamic cultural heritage of South Asia that is used to narrate and construct a cultural identity in the face of ideological constructs of white cultural racism. It is also a transformation that has been made possible by British South Asian bands and artists investing heavily in innovative synthesizers and state of the art sampling machines, coupled with sophisticated drum kits and drum machines supplementing percussion instruments like the *dhol*, *dholki* and *tablas*. Most strikingly perhaps, these musical transformations and fusions through the use of technological instruments as tools to be utilized have played in the formation of late-modern *British* identities.

Conclusion

Through a descriptive account of the historical emergence of British bhangra and its marginalization from the mainstream music industry, it is clear that this genre of music has been extended and translated from its Punjabi folk derivations to incorporate the diverse urban experience of British South Asians. The wider appeal of the music results

from a fusion of different cultural traditions and music styles that form the basis of an eclectic British South Asian youth culture.

South Asian popular cultural and diasporic texts like British bhangra music are such because they include, for those that partake as its audience, scripts and narratives about actual and imagined senses of selfhood that articulate the interplay of their everyday South Asian, British and Black lives. British bhangra has been illustrated as a fusion based music incorporating Black music genres and western pop with Punjabi folk beats and lyrics. In this way, British bhangra can be read as an instance of identity formation for British South Asians that is not in opposition to notions of being Black and British. In fact part of the process of British South Asian identity formation *vis à vis* British bhangra music includes a cultural politics towards some of the more conservative and exclusionary acts of white British culture and society. A focus on the cultural productions of South Asians in Britain illustrates the importance of South Asian popular cultural activity as part of the history of migration, settlement and development of British South Asians in urban Black Britain.

By a way of conclusion let us return to the issues that were highlighted at the outset of the paper by the story of the battle of Britpop. Undoubtedly, we have come some way since the mid-nineties popular music scene, at least in terms of being presented with more varied and eclectic representations of artists and musicians, both black and white. However, the whiteness of mainstream British popular music continues to be constructed as one of its predominant defining features. This also becomes one of its ongoing problems as the struggles for musical creativity and performance of non-white ethnic groups in Britain as articulated with questions of identity and belonging to the nation are far from resolved. Thus, one is left to ask how long will the battles in Britpop continue? And will the casualties to emerge almost always be the lack of opportunities to engage with Britain's growing popular cultural activities that consist of multicultural diversity? To respond to such questions is of timely importance. One hopes that the answers that

are possible might assist in making real the social, cultural and political aspirations of diaspora communities who wish to establish themselves as legitimate actors in Britain and the wider West.

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¹ For a general and very descriptive account of the different styles and forms of folk dances of the Punjab see K.S.Duggal (1980).

² Often, the single word 'bhangra' is also simply used but this is almost always as a shorthand for, or synonymous with the genre of British bhangra music.

³ The terms 'white/whiteness' have only recently been highlighted as problematic. One of the emerging trends of analysis in contemporary cultural and social theory is the construction and legitimation of the term 'white' as an ethnicity. However, it remains to be seen whether this growing body of literature can begin to come to terms with the problems of white racism and white fear of the 'Other', or whether paradoxically such studies inadvertently help legitimise white ethnocentrism (see for example Frankenburg 1993; Roediger 1994; Young 1995; and Dyer 1997).

⁴ Blur was said to have won the battle by reaching the number one position with their single *Country House* but later on Oasis allegedly won the war with their album sales for (*What's The Story*) *Morning Glory* ? out numbering that of Blur's.

⁵ I am thinking of strategic essentialism as developed by D.Fuss (1989) and G.Spivak (1987).

⁶ For an account of the complexities of the term Asian in the North American context see Lisa Lowe (1991).

⁷ I am thinking of the marginalized British Asians as people with ethnic origins from Bhutan, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Maldives, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of and examples of the different styles of music termed under the label post-bhangra see Huq 1994, 1996; and Sharma 1996:41.

⁹ For a more detailed account of gendered British Asian identities in bhangra music and how these are used by male and female audiences see Dudrah 2001:Chapter 4.

¹⁰ Achanak (literally translated as 'Suddenly' which refers to the band's immediate appearance and success on the British Bhangra scene) continually use the word 'NACH' in all or part of the titles to their Bhangra albums: NACHrally, paNACHe, sigNACHure, sNACH, and Top NACH. 'Nach' means 'dance' and the clever play and combination of this Punjabi/Hindi meaning with a vernacular British vocabulary serves to illustrate the band's eclectic vision for British popular music.

¹¹ 'World Music' is a dubious category to define music in Britain other than British mainstream pop music - as if British pop is not part of the world and therefore beyond the category of World Music! 'World music' is defined in Hardy and Laing as 'originally a marketing term invented to sell African, Asian and Latin American musics to European audiences, world music also refers to styles which mix those styles with contemporary studio or performance technology' (1995: preface). One of the marketing ploys of world music is evident in its cunning to comprehend bhangra music only through the narrow labels of 'authentic' and 'from over there' i.e. from Asia for the consumption of white Europeans. The fact that bhangra defies such incorrect classification as it is quintessentially a British music and more specifically Birmingham based (just as Balti restaurants and curries are a British phenomenon) illustrates the problematics of 'World Music' in its moments of 'Self' and 'Othering'. However, from this broad category British bhangra has been influenced by: Classical Indian music; Popular Indian film music; *Qawalli*, a type of Muslim religious music associated with Sufism in the

Indian Subcontinent (see Baily 1990); African-Kenyan drum music as in Deepak Kazanchi's re-mixes of popular mid-eighties bhangra tracks in his *Bhangra Fever* Volumes 1 and 2; and European musical instruments such as the oud and mandolin in the Birmingham based Bhujhangy group's 1989 album *Bhujhangy(Ra)*.

¹² 'Bollywood' is the nickname for the popular Hindi cinema of Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India.

¹³ For a more detailed account of the history and development of the contemporary British-bhangra music industry, including the role of male and female artists and musicians see Dudrah 2001:Chapter 4.