

## **Cultural Production in the British Bhangra Music Industry: Music-Making, Locality, and Gender**

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This article draws on five extended interviews with British bhangra artists, musicians and producers, as well as other sources, to offer a commentary about cultural production in the workings of the British bhangra music industry. This industry located in key metropolitan centres of Britain, namely in Birmingham and in London, has been crucial to the growth and development of a Punjabi folk-based music into a distinct genre of urban British music. The article considers the British bhangra music and cultural industry as one that operates independently from the mainstream of British popular music. It outlines the historical formation and development of the British bhangra industry. It offers an account of the interaction of British bhangra music with the mainstream music industry, and considers the importance and role of Birmingham as a site of production for British bhangra music. The role and experiences of women artists in the industry is also introduced and discussed.

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British bhangra is a genre of British popular music fusing Punjabi lyrics and the beats of the Indian drum, the *dhol*, with other Black music and British pop sounds, producing an urban anthem and commentary about the lives of its British South Asian audiences. Existing academic studies of British bhangra have offered an account of the music's interplay with urban British South Asian lives, and analysed the music as a diasporic text (see Banerji 1988; Banerji and Baumann 1990; Baumann 1990; Gopinath 1995; Huq 1996; Kaur and Kalra 1996; Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma eds. 1996; Dudrah 1998, Kalra 2000; Dudrah 2001, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the role of British bhangra artists and producers themselves has not been a central feature of these aforementioned studies. Their contributions to the development and sustenance of the British bhangra music and cultural industry has not yet been charted and analysed as a culture of production and distribution, albeit on the margins of mainstream British popular music. This essay attempts to fill in that gap, and contributes to the growing number of academic studies about the social roles of cultural practitioners<sup>2</sup> within popular music (for example on the social roles of musicians see Becker 1963; Finnegan 1989; Frith 1988; Bennett 1990; Cohen 1991; Negus 1995; Toynebee 2000; and on constructions of gender in popular music-making see for instance Frith and McRobbie 1990; Clawson 1999). This body of growing literature has drawn up some useful thematic issues about artists and musicians

in terms of making popular music as a form of cultural production. These issues can be summed up in the following broad ways.

First, that the varied histories and accounts of different music industries require documenting as making popular music is not free from the ideologies of race as it intersects with cultural production (Gilroy 1993:103). Making minority popular music, especially that which is marked as 'ethnically different', as is the case of British bhangra, entails a dialogue and negotiation with the mainstream white Anglo-American music industries. What is the nature of the relationship between the 'mainstream' and the 'marginal' music industries, and are 'marginal' music industries able to sustain themselves? What are the possibilities in the future of a 'marginal' music industry?

Secondly, in making popular music artists often have to negotiate a number of positions from making and performing music in their spare time, to being full-time professional artists.

Third, that music-making and cultural production can be context specific, i.e. it can often be a localised form of activity. In this way, audiences, fans, artists themselves, as well as music commentators often refer to a sound from a particular place, region or city. For example, 'the Liverpool scene' or the 'New Orleans sound'. The local sound and music-making practices also articulate with global socio-cultural flows enabling the music to reach audiences elsewhere as well as being fused with genres from around the world.

Fourth, that singers and musicians can be seen to be actively involved in cultural production in which they strive towards economic remuneration, self-realisation, social aspiration, as well as assisting in the construction of social ideologies. These factors are articulated together through their music and music making. In this sense, a focus on cultural practitioners can reveal a number of social commentaries ranging from confirming the status quo to challenging prevalent social orthodoxies, sometimes simultaneously. The issue of gender in music-making is interesting in this respect, as in most spheres of cultural and social production it also entails an ongoing debate about the role and status of men and women and how each is accorded more social power or status than the other.

These above thematic issues can be usefully deployed towards a study of the British bhangra music industry. They offer a broad conceptual framework through which to make sense of the British bhangra music industry. What this article offers, then, is an account of some aspects of cultural production in the workings of the British bhangra music and cultural industry by drawing on extended qualitative interviews with British bhangra music practitioners in Birmingham and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Three interviews were undertaken in Birmingham, one in Northamptonshire and one in Sheffield intermittently during April 1997 and February 1998. The interviews involved talking to and listening to the experiences of British Bhangra practitioners and this has informed much of the commentary that follows. Other sources are cited from as well, such as a personal e-mail correspondence with an Asian music distributor in the Austral-Asia region, and the contemporary popular British Asian press.

These are elaborated on in the essay. The five artists who were interviewed are introduced as they appear in the text. They gave freely of their valuable time and contributed important insights into the workings of the British bhangra industry. Although the two female artists are not from Birmingham, their work constantly brought them into contact with the British bhangra industry in this city and their insights were thus useful about 'the Birmingham scene' as well as other aspects of the industry. The data upon which this article is based, including the interviews and other sources, was collected between February 1996 and January 2000.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, and as a result of issues emerging out of the interviews, this article will pay attention to the following: An understanding of British bhangra music as a cultural industry operating independently from the mainstream of British popular music.<sup>5</sup> The historical evolution of the production of British bhangra by its cultural practitioners. The interaction of British bhangra music with the mainstream music industry as illustrated through an account of Music Live 95, a national music festival which aired British bhangra on Radio 1. The importance and role of Birmingham as a site of production for British bhangra music, and the role and experiences of women artists in the industry. These areas, then, are used to elaborate on the broader thematic issues that have been drawn from the literature about music-making and cultural production.

### **The British bhangra Music Industry and Cultural Production**

To date very little is known in academic music scholarship about the workings and production of the British bhangra music industry. Since its emergence in the late sixties it has consisted of and brought together hundreds of cultural practitioners and workers (British South Asian and others) throughout the UK and beyond; including singers, musicians, technicians and those involved in the record companies. This sizeable space for British South Asian cultural production and its ensuing economies undoubtedly warrants its recognition as an industry. This space includes the economies related to, and of, the buying and selling of music and recording equipment; technological expertise; production, marketing and selling of music tapes, records and compact discs; music sale returns for the investment of future projects and work; and the performance of live music and DJs at gigs. Also, practitioners involved in the production and distribution, as well as those regularly playing the music over the radio airwaves, and writers in the British South Asian popular press (see for instance the 'Spice' section of the *Eastern Eye* newspaper every Friday) describe the collaborative music scene as such. Furthermore an awards ceremony, known as the Asian Pop Awards, is organised and held by its practitioners (usually annually, or at least biannually) in recognition and applause of the industry's work.<sup>6</sup> Yet it remains a cultural industry that operates independently at the margins of mainstream British popular cultural production.

Drawing on Theodor Adorno's original coinage of the term, Nicholas Garnham describes cultural industries in the following way:

...as a descriptive term, 'cultural industries' refers to those institutions in our society which employ the characteristic modes of production and organization of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural goods and services, generally, though not exclusively as commodities. These include newspapers, periodical and book publishing, record companies, music publishers, commercial sports organizations, etc. In all these cultural processes, we characteristically find at some point the use of capital-intensive, technological means of mass production and/or distribution, highly developed divisions of labour and hierarchical modes of managerial organization, with the goal, if not of profit maximization, at least of efficiency. (Garnham 1987:25-26)

Whilst there are similarities with the mainstream music industry in terms of the technological means of mass production of music, there are notable differences too in terms of how the British bhangra industry is able to operate. For example, the British bhangra industry shares very few benefits of the mainstream British cultural industries particularly in their affiliation with the dominant private market sector. For instance, the British bhangra industry has not been presented with the opportunity of association with the above mainstream cultural institutions and, therefore, does not enjoy any of the 'privileges' (cultural, material, social or otherwise) that may arise from such an affiliation. For example, when was the last time a bhangra band or artist was invited to 10 Downing Street at one of its leading private sector gatherings to be able to network with leading business people, ministers, and high profile international pop stars?<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, British bhangra is not as financially rewarding when compared with its mainstream counterparts due to the incomparable economies of scale of production, distribution and retail. In comparison to other British popular cultural industries, rock and pop music perhaps being the most obvious examples, British bhangra receives unequivalent amounts of monetary returns from its album deals and from the sales of its cheaply priced music. For example, until 1997 British bhangra albums on cassette were sold for a constant £2.50 for over a decade. Currently, in the summer of 2002, an eight-track bhangra album on cassette sells for £3 - £5 compared to British pop albums on cassette and CD priced around £13 and above. This difference between the two music industries has to do with the pricing of bhangra music by its retailers and distributors who have found that Asian audiences are unwilling to pay higher prices in line with mainstream music.

Also, unlike its white British rock and pop contemporaries the production and circulation of British bhangra albums and music have a non-existent relationship with 'the majors' (mainstream multinational record companies) and their financial and cultural might of representation and successful profiling of

popular music. As Simon Frith describes the working relationship between the mainstream major and independent record companies:

In the record industry ... the majors and independents have a symbiotic rather than oppositional relationship, with the small labels acting as the research and development departments of the majors, which, in turn, take on the task of marketing any promising 'discoveries' (and many 'independent' companies are, in fact, part owned or bank-rolled by the majors). (Frith 1991: 145-146)

In contrast British bhangra music relies on and operates through the alternative and financially smaller British South Asian music companies (like Kamlee Records Ltd, Nachural Records, Oriental Star Agency, and Roma Music Bank operating in Birmingham) which simultaneously function as recording studios, promoters and distributors, and record shops. Consequently, British bhangra has developed itself as a result of the enduring work of South Asian artists, musicians and entrepreneurs together with the support of their fans, friends and families. The articulations of British South Asian cultural identity in the listening to and the uses made of the music genre (see Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996; and Dudrah 2001, 2002) become heightened in the context of the music's alternative modes of production and distribution. It is in a related manner, that Simon Frith describing the workings of the popular British cultural industries writes:

Cultural production is thus defined both as an economic activity and as a process of self-realization (Frith 1991: 148).

What follows, then, is an elaboration and exploration of cultural production related to some aspects of the history, workings and concerns of the British bhangra music industry.

### **The Development of British Bhangra Music Making**

The cultural production of bhangra music and the inception of it as a cultural industry in Britain occurred in the late seventies amidst the fusion of South Asian, Black, and Western popular cultures. The early days of the British bhangra industry began most notably in Birmingham and in Southall, West London. As Amarjit<sup>8</sup> explains how the formation of Birmingham's *Chirag Pehchaan*, one of the first Asian entertainment bands, developed in Britain:

Amarjit: We had the background from India, earlier formative days in terms of music. Having that sort of knowledge behind me and then in this country having Western influences, you know, like in the sixties for example we were heavily influenced by the music of this country as well, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones etc. and so we were faced with having the Asian element and the

Western element in isolation from each other. When I got to university and we formed the band, we thought the bands that were around at the time were very traditional ... and wouldn't it be a great idea if we had a band that could incorporate still the traditional side but bring in the Western side, the Western touches like, for example, a drummer, a bass guitarist, lead guitarist, modern synth sounds which were never in the traditional bands. It was always the harmonium, the tabla or sitar, that sort of thing ... we wanted a band that reflected what we [referring to sections of an emerging first generation of British South Asian youth] were influenced by, which was Western music but still retaining our Asian element. That's where it all began in the late seventies.

Amarjit illustrates the coming together of, what can be described as, the interplay and transformation of South Asian traditions and musical experiences in the context of a late British modernity. An emergent generation of British South Asians, first generation British born and including those who came as children and settled in Britain with their families, began experimenting and improvising with technology and traditional music genres as an extension of their experiences and British South Asian identities. The alternating fit between modern technology and traditional South Asian music genres was able to occur not only because of technological developments within western modernity but also because of the flexibility inherent in the musical genres themselves. These already consisted of innovations and improvisation through their capacity to include and develop from a range of musical formations. For example, rhythms found in the bhangra beat are harmoniously syncopated with equivalent reggae beats to produce a pulsating urban sound. Suky Sohal, musician from the Birmingham based group Achanak,<sup>9</sup> neatly describes the similarities in bhangra and reggae rhythms which help to explain how they are fused and work together so easily:

Suky: Reggae and bhangra use similar grooves and beat patterns. What you could call syncopation, a sort of dotted rhythm. You can hear one in the other, which is why they work so well together.

The development of Bollywood film music, amalgamating both classical Indian music and ragas alongside Western music genres and singing styles for contemporary audiences, is another example.<sup>10</sup> As Amarjit goes on to say, the appeal of British bhangra bands like *Chirag Pehchaan* was because of their fusion of Asian and Western musical elements that enabled them to cater to a variety of audiences:

We started *Chirag Pehchaan* purely for that reason where we wanted to, sort of, expand on different ideas, we wanted to be innovative in a way with our music and with the output that we were producing. We wanted to cover the Punjabi side, the Hindi

film music, the *Qwallis*, so we wanted to be a band that was an all rounder not just for one specific sort of scene, you know, like the wedding scene, not just the university scene or family programs or whatever, we wanted to be a band that could entertain anyone. That's what we wanted to develop and I think we did.

### **The Heydays of British Bhangra Music Production: Mid-Eighties to the Mid-Nineties**

The late seventies, then, witnessed the beginnings of bhangra cultural production in Britain and particularly in Birmingham and in Southall. The mid-eighties and the early nineties were the heydays of British bhangra bands. Predominantly young men from their mid teens to early 30s were getting together through networks of friendship, locality, and kith and kin, to form different bhangra groups who were responding to the musical demands of a growing British South Asian youth culture. Bands consisted of anything between 5 to 8 members. Often there would be a free movement of musicians between different bands through informal agreements, or members of one band would often perform for, or help in the arrangement of music on, another band's album. Such was, and still is, the informal nature of the bhangra industry. As in the heydays, there remains very little by way of formal contracts tying down individual musicians to a single band, but this also means that virtually no 'job security' exists. Often the lead vocalist would be signed by a record label for a flat fee per album. In the early nineties a new artist would be awarded a payment of around £5,000 and this amount would have to be distributed amongst the band members who also collaboratively worked on the album. During the heyday the average sales of bhangra albums was 5,000 tapes and around 500 CDs for a relatively well known band. Bigger artists with exceptional albums that 'clicked' with listeners would be able to sell 5-6 times more than the average figures. Investment for future albums, and updating equipment would be financed through fees from live performances at Asian nights and 'the wedding circuit' (summary from personal communication with bhangra artists).

The wedding circuit, in particular, is articulated from performances at Asian weddings and parties held mainly on the weekends, and most notably during the summer months. Depending on the popularity and appeal of a band, prices could vary anything from £500 - £2000 for a three to four hour performance. The fee would often be open to a margin of negotiation between the band and the budget of the family hiring them. In the heydays the most popular bands would be booked months in advance and sometimes play everyday, right through a Friday to Sunday weekend, across a 6-8 week consecutive period. At the actual wedding party, relatives of the bride and groom would often bestow anything from £1 - £5 in front of the performing band on stage as a sign of appreciation of the music. In this way anything up to a quarter, if not more, of the band's fee would be raised leaving the immediate family to pay the

remaining sum. Fees for live performances at Asian nights in mainstream discotheques up and down the country would be higher than on the wedding circuit due to the more commercial nature of the venture. However, a handful of only the most popular bands and artists would be deemed as financially beneficial by gig promoters. Considering the humble figures of economic returns, the heydays of British bhangra music production is best considered as composed and performed more out of a 'love for the music' and heralding of one's cultural identity than for monetary profit alone. Within this context, very few artists and musicians were able to perform on a full-time basis as many of those involved held full-time jobs and bills to pay, thus singing and playing music as a part-time activity (see later for contemporary state of the British bhangra industry).

With the limited financial returns from music sales, and the fact that artists wished for greater exposure and recognition, attempts were made to interact with the mainstream of British popular music. For instance, there were various attempts until the early nineties to crossover bhangra music into the mainstream British charts by fusing it with rock and house music. However, these were unsuccessful. 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 that were not included in the official sale returns of British pop music. An early image and language 'problem' also 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 'foreign language' of Punjabi (from personal conversation with Ninder Johal<sup>11</sup>). 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. In fact, working with the mainstream music industry to promote British bhangra more widely suggests, at best, a well-intentioned initial response but one which turns out to be anything but beneficial, as the following commentary of Music Live '95 illustrates.

### **Music Live '95**

The 'Music Live 1995' was a national live music festival organised by BBC Radio in May 1995 to showcase 60 hours of a variety of live music and broadcasting over 160 events throughout regions of the country. It was transmitted nationally as part of a series of programmes on BBC Radio 1. A major achievement of the festival was its broadcasting of some live music that hitherto might not have been heard by a national listening audience in Britain. Amarjit Sidhu helped to organise the performance of live British bhangra and Asian pop music in Birmingham at the Dome Nightclub which was played live on the BBC radio's Asian Network programme 'Eastern Beat' throughout the

East and West Midlands on 24 May 1995. Recordings of live British bhangra music from the Dome were played on BBC Radio 1 on 28 May 1995.<sup>12</sup> A considerable amount of excitement was generated amidst the news on the BBC's Asian Network that the playing of British bhangra might enable an opportunity for artists to make connections with the mainstream British music industry with a view to promoting their talent nationally. As Chris Lissard, Executive Producer of Music Live '95, told Eastern Beat presenter Pam Samby:

Events like this, it's going to go out on Radio 1, it brings it to a national attention, it'll give it a focus and from that I hope that there will be opportunities.

(All transcript excerpts of the Music Live '95 festival in this essay are taken from a personal recording of the 'Eastern Beat' programme which covered the event live on the evening of 24 May 1995)

However, excitement turned to disappointment as the role of media-as-gatekeeper became apparent in the promotion and profiling of British popular music. The playing of live British bhangra music on BBC Radio 1 displayed signs of cultural gate-keeping with a double edge to it. First, the use of Radio 1 as the exclusive popular music radio station on the main FM frequency transmitting to all radios across the UK was billed as a special privilege for British bhangra music, i.e. Radio 1 was doing British bhangra a favour. Second, and perhaps most cutting, the benefits bequeathed to British bhangra practitioners and the music industry were non-existent. Not surprising really, as the recorded live playing of British bhangra was transmitted at midnight on the Friday evening of 28 May, when its listening figures are one of the lowest throughout its transmission. As Jay Patel, another presenter of the BBC's Asian Network speaking on the night of the festival at the Dome night club, summed it up:

Johnny Beerling [former Chief Controller of Radio 1] was saying that it would be nice to get this kind of music [British bhangra] played on the mainstream, but my question to Radio 1 is, at MIDNIGHT?! Midnight on a Friday night, I don't know.

Unfortunately, the decision taken by Radio 1 to broadcast live British bhangra in the middle of the night decreased the potential mass listening audience for the music.

Many in the British bhangra industry were cautiously optimistic about the presence and role of Radio 1 at the performance of live bhangra. As the interview between Shin, lead singer of the Birmingham based British bhangra band DCS, and Eastern Beat presenter Pam Samby revealed:

Pam: So what do you think about Music Live '95, honestly?

Shin: Honestly? I think it's a great event, right, and it should happen virtually every year, something like this. It's great with Radio 1 involved as well and Radio West Midlands coming here

on to the actual scene where the thing happens. It's nice to see so many bands here as well [10 British bhangra bands performed live on the night]. You know, it's not often that so many of us get to perform on one stage together, and the vibe's great here.

Pam: Do you think this is a great way of opening the door for the bhangra industry?

Shin: I think it is, yes. I think Radio 1 have taken their time of getting here, you know, but they say 'better late than never' I suppose, you know '*dehar se ayan, drusht se ayan*', so it's nice to see them here and I hope they do something positive with what they're gonna record today.

Pam: I hope so as well.

The recording of live British bhangra music played at midnight on Radio 1 consolidated the caution of the British bhangra industry into disappointment. In fact the words 'disappointment' and 'disappointing' were often used by those interviewed to describe their experiences of attempting to promote British bhangra with and through the mainstream music industry and its affiliated networks of music circulation. The example of the Music Live '95 festival demonstrates its failure of being unable to live up to its hype in that only a small fraction of a national listening audience had a chance to hear British bhangra in comparison to one of its prime-time slots. More importantly the festival illustrates the workings of mainstream media and cultural institutions, such as BBC Radio 1, serving their role as gate-keepers who insidiously fulfil their obligation to represent a 'minority' sound on mainstream radio, even if it is at midnight. Interestingly, there has not since been any further transmission of live British bhangra music on Radio 1.<sup>13</sup>

With attempts at working with the mainstream music industry serving only one or two marketable artists at best (i.e. the relative successes of post-bhangra artists Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo; see Housee and Dar 1996)<sup>14</sup>, British bhangra remains a localised form of cultural production operating from select urban centres in Britain. Birmingham is now the most prominent site for the British bhangra industry.

### **Birmingham: Cultural Capital of British Bhangra Music**

Birmingham's large South Asian population<sup>15</sup> has meant that it is a haven not only for the consumption of South Asian popular cultural forms but also an important centre of production and distribution. This is certainly the case of British bhangra music where Birmingham is commonly referred to by commentators in the British South Asian media as the heart of the British bhangra industry. In fact some of the first bands and artists that developed the genre of British bhangra music can be found in the city, including the group *Bhujhangy* founded by brothers Balbir and Dalbir Khanpur in the seventies.

British bhangra's audible manifestation in the soundscapes of the inner city reveal a number of insights into the fluid social possibilities taking place in Birmingham, and their ability to reach out to different parts of the international web of South Asians both in the diaspora and in the subcontinent:

RKD: How do you see Birmingham as a city in terms of your work and your music?

Ninder: [mimicks a Brummie accent] I was born in Birm-ing-ham, I was educated in Birm-ing-ham, and I live in Birm-ing-ham. [Switches to a normal tone of voice] It also happens that most of the music scene is in Birmingham from a bhangra perspective, so I see no reason to move out.

Certainly in 1991 when I set up in central Birmingham the whole scene had moved here by then. I would argue that the whole infrastructure of bhangra is now here. Not only have we got the bands and most of the artists based here in Birmingham, the infrastructure is here now. The major record companies are here, everything happens from here. The North has been very slow in picking up the talent, I don't know why that is. Down South I think they're more interested in running around and making money than sticking with the product. They don't seem to have time for music. I cannot see now anyway that the bhangra base will move from here. I think bhangra will now remain in Birmingham and in the Midlands more generally.

By mimicking himself as a bonafide Brummie, Ninder outlines the importance of Birmingham as a home to British bhangra music. The transformation of a Punjabi folk-based music from the Indian subcontinent into a distinctive genre of British popular music took place most notably in Britain's second city, and in the West London suburb of Southall during the mid-eighties (Baumann 1990). The setting up of Nachural Records, Ninder's record label and distribution company, in the early nineties was a conscious decision assisted by the establishment and growth of the British bhangra cultural industry in Birmingham during the late eighties.

At the time of writing (2002), Birmingham is by far the cultural capital for the music having superseded Southall in terms of the largest number of bands in any one locality (Achanak, Apna Group, DCS, Safri Boyz, XLNC...). It has several recording and distribution companies (Oriental Star Agency on Moseley Road, Nachural Records in Smethwick, Roma Music Bank in Handsworth...), the steady production of new albums, and the growing number of live DJs, and dance groups all from the city. The continued efforts of those working in the bhangra industry, together with support from Asian, black and white local government workers, has seen the music being celebrated at annual awards ceremonies held at the National Indoor Arena in the city. Bhangra bands have also performed live in public parks during the summer months and even performed at new year civic celebrations in Centenary Square in the centre of

Birmingham. As Ninder goes on to argue, the mainstay of British bhangra in Birmingham is not only to do with the city's large South Asian population but more to do with the nurturing and developing of cultural capital, music skills, consistent passion for the music, and networks of support amongst fellow artists, musicians, and distributors. Ninder brings about an understanding of the popularity of British bhangra in the city through the specificities of cultural production in a given time and place context. As Ninder goes on to say British bhangra in Birmingham is produced through an 'authentic, like-minded togetherness' (*desi-fied*)<sup>16</sup> which has fostered a culture of support in terms of production, distribution, and sustained consumption in the city during the late eighties and into the nineties:

RKD: Would you say that the popularity of bhangra in Birmingham was because of a demographic reason in terms of the large number of South Asians settled in the city?

Ninder: But No. I would argue that Southall has got just as many [South Asians], Bradford has got as many, and so has Leicester. Up North you've got Newcastle or at least in comparable terms.<sup>17</sup> So rather than just demography maybe it's because the West Midlands are a bit more *desi-fied*, perhaps? I mean I don't really know, this is something I'm throwing at you. But I think certainly a lot of the talent is here now. There is talent in other regions but perhaps the people behind them aren't as organised.

The female artist Sameera<sup>18</sup> lives in Northamptonshire, a county just over an hour's drive south-east of Birmingham. She describes the importance of Birmingham as being central to the formation of the bhangra industry in terms of the close-knit nature of the numerous artists and musicians who were living and working in the city.

RKD: You live in Northamptonshire. How does that place you in terms of being local or not to where the music is happening?

Sameera: I think I'm slightly at a disadvantage. No matter how good you are you have to be there where it's happening. Of course people know me and I have had a lot of exposure but I think if I was in Birmingham, or in London, where the industry is booming I think I'd be more in touch and involved really ... There are more studios there, more Asians, more musicians, so people don't have to travel so far. You know you could call anyone for a session, or if you have to re-record, or practice and things like that, it's just quicker if you live locally. Everyone's local.

Suky Sohal, musician from the band Achanak, also describes the social diversity of Birmingham's population as an important contributory factor to the development of British bhangra music.

RKD: Can I ask you to reflect on Birmingham as a city in which you live, and as a place in which you make and play your music?

Suky: I think for bhangra music it's the ultimate place. It's the heart of the bhangra industry Birmingham is. It used to be London in the eighties but that's all changed.<sup>19</sup> Nearly all the bands now just come from Birmingham, there's only a few that come from the South. It's such a thriving place for music, it's very sort of inspirational in that sense to produce music with the mixture of different cultures in the city. I mean I was brought up in a white school, I work in a Black area, and I play for a bhangra band so I've seen a lot of different cultures, and that does help the music a lot. I think that is why Birmingham is thriving musically [for bhangra] because you got a lot of different cultures musically, and in everyday life. It's also what you learn, you learn little bits from different cultures.

The eclectic composition of British bhangra drawing on a range of lyrics, styles and genres from Punjabi folk, Western pop, and urban Black musics takes influence from the lives and cultures of people in Britain's second city. Simon Frith has usefully argued that the experience of music listening and music-making is an articulation of the self-in-process (Frith 1996). Popular music in essence is a sociable domain of activity. Popular music listening and making is a way of telling stories about oneself and others, a way of making sense of oneself and their position in relation to the world at large. Thus, music becomes a metaphor for articulating cultural identities. In this way it is useful to think of British bhangra music-making as drawing on a stock of references from the lived experiences of locality, ethnicities, different cultures, and their interplay in the production of a popular aesthetic. Just as Birmingham is cited as important as part of the identity and development of British bhangra music, equally British bhangra is *one* important popular expression of the social multiplicity of the city and its connections to international places.

Birmingham has become a prominent site for local production, and national and global distribution of British bhangra music. Interestingly, British bhangra is not only exported to the Punjab from where its folk influences derive, but also across the South Asian diaspora enjoyed by South Asians and non-South Asians alike. In this way, not only in lyrical content but also on the pathways of the distribution of British bhangra, Birmingham is an important juncture on the routes of the South Asian diaspora and *one* actual site in the struggles for minority cultural creativity. In a personal e-mail correspondence with Balvinder<sup>20</sup> from Singapore, an Asian music distributor in the Austral-Asia region, I was surprised to learn of the actual global spread of British bhangra from Birmingham and its enthused reception amongst diverse music revellers:

Balvinder: Very nice 2 hear from someone all the way from B'ham, love that place!!! I make my annual trips there at summer

time for business. I run a distribution/retail business here in Singapore called MusicVision International. We do most of the distribution for the record companies in Birmingham and London. Mostly Kiss Records, Roma, Nachural, and Multitone. I've been doing the operations here from Singapore for South East Asia and Australia. There is a huge market here for bhangra music. U see, not only the Indians are into bhangra music we also have the Chinese, Malays and other races that are into it. You can walk into any club in Singapore and be rest assured that the DJ has got a bhangra record in his collection ... Presently we have 3 clubs that have bhangra Nites on the weekends [in Singapore]. Although the Asian community is bigger in Malaysia, Singapore is more active and updated when it comes to the new releases for the bhangra music scene. We also have regular gigs happening here. Acts like The Safri Boys, Apna Sangeet, DCS, Achanak, Alaap, Heera, Premi, and Malkit Singh have already toured this region with tremendous success .. Personal e-mail communication 22 February 1996)

Balvinder describes the popularity of bhangra music in the Austral-Asia region that has successfully transcended a number of ethnic and cultural boundaries. In fact British bhangra is cited as being an integral part of the club scene in Singapore. The fact that bhangra has remained, by and large, a marginalised music for South Asians in Britain and yet has crossed over its appeal elsewhere suggests the need for a further exploration of the music's popularity across different international borders which is unfortunately beyond the remit of this article. One can only outline some tentative lines of thought and questions here. For example, what potential is there for *actual* global dialogues and alliances in different parts of the world through popular music and musical fusions that a focus on British bhangra across Austral-Asia suggests? How might the global journeys and connections of British bhangra's musical flows and distribution be made more sustainable and interactive? What is being alluded to here is the need for getting at the more exciting and difficult task to think through a notion of cultural production and politics as entwined with everyday cultural practices and creativity as possibly leading to a transformative notion of cultural understanding. An understanding that can go some way towards arguing that non-white and non-mainstream western music genres are much more than 'smelly Pakis' or 'demonised Blacks' doing their own ghettoised thing! The interaction of ethnically diverse Singaporeans listening to, and coming together in the dancing of, British bhangra suggests for exciting possibilities across similar and different music experiences. As Balvinder went on to illustrate, the reception of particular bhangra and post-bhangra artists in the UK was not necessarily the same in Singapore:

Balvinder: Believe it or not Johnny Zee is the BIGGEST act here in Singapore!!! His album *Spirits of Rhythm* has outsold Bally

Sagoo's *Bollywood Flashback* here. I know he doesn't go down that well in the UK but over here everyone's into him. Maybe it was the style of his music in that album, it got a lot of attention from the non-Indians. A bit of Soul and Raggamuffin.

As far as the venues go in Singapore/Malaysia, we usually have our gigs in major discotheques. In some of the bigger clubs in Singapore the bhangra nights are able to attract an average of 1,000 - 1,500 each time! Not bad for a country that's smaller than the size of Birmingham huh? It'll take you only 25 minutes to drive from one end of Singapore to the other. Now how's that for small?! (Personal e-mail communication 22 February 1996)

In a country smaller in size than that of bhangra's capital city notable differences are taking place in the popularity of certain artists over others. This observation points to something more than just different audience taste in different parts of the world as it begs questions about the similar and dissimilar uses of Black music genres around the globe which have been made possible through the conduits of music industries, distribution and exposure, colonial and neo-colonial histories, and social formations. In this respect, soul, bhangra, and raggamuffin have played a part in the formation of urban Britain linked with social uprisings and the formation of Black British identities, but how have these musical genres been introduced and utilised in the making of identities in Singapore in equal and distinct ways? Could this be one actual site in the geographical constellation and cross-cultural connectedness of 'Asian spaces' which needs further empirical research? The possibilities for inter-cultural communication arising from the use of British bhangra across parts of Asia and wider afield seems to suggest so.

The work of distributors like Balvinder and Ninder Johal and their regular movements between Birmingham and beyond in promoting and selling the music has been crucial to the development of British bhangra music across international boundaries and markets. As a result of their continued efforts unforeseen openings have been made for different artists to work together. Suky from Achanak, for instance, was brought into contact with Kiko, a Japanese pop star. Their coming together illustrates the possible dialogues and musical exchanges that can occur across the web of Asian cultural spaces:

Suky: It's like this Japanese album I worked on. It was with an artist called Kiko from Osaka. ... They got in touch with the label [Nachural Records] and said they wanted to do an album with Japanese lyrics but with a bhangra feel to it. I didn't have a clue about Japanese music. They came down spent over a fortnight at the studios with me. We listened to loads of their records and bhangra tracks, got to know each other a little better. Recording the album was really good fun and I learnt a hell of a lot as well in terms of combining the two musics. I mean at first they just didn't

mix at all but we managed to do it. It's like two completely different styles of music, it's not as easy as mixing Black music and bhangra music, or Latino music. Japanese is such a different style of music in terms of the chord arrangements, the vocal arrangements, the beats. It was difficult to do but we managed to pull it off and we were both pleased.

British bhangra music is at home as a cultural industry in the city of Birmingham. Consequently, the city is also opened up to a number of regional, national and international connections and routes through the workings of the British bhangra music industry. This industry continues to operate at the margins of mainstream cultural production through the continued work and efforts of a handful of dedicated cultural practitioners.

### **The Role and Experiences of Women Artists**

The story illustrated so far of British bhangra's musical productions has been told mainly through the narratives and experiences of male artists and workers. To suggest that these were the only voices in the music industry would be to fall foul to an account of cultural production in which women were omitted. Women artists have been present since the inception and development of bhangra music from its folk derivations in the Punjab to its present status as an urban anthem in Britain. For instance, the female singers and sisters Surinder Kaur and Prakash Kaur from India were immensely popular folk singers during the fifties and sixties, and even toured Britain on a number of occasions for stage shows. With their powerful voice tones and folk sonnets they often questioned the predicament of women in heterosexual love relationships in which men were primarily considered as the source of a woman's heartache. Other female folk artists of the post-war period included Jagmohan Kaur and Narinder Biba. Their songs often criticised family structures and politics in which women had to negotiate a number of positions from housewife, lover, daughter-in-law, to matchmaker, and at the same time create a space for themselves of their own. Their songs remain inspiration even for today's artists and bands and provide material for numerous cover versions. Admittedly, the histories and development of women's involvement in bhangra music remains to be charted comprehensively.

In May 1996 the *Eastern Eye* newspaper ran an overdue feature by its music reporter, Raj Ghai, asking male and female artists 'Why is the bhangra industry dominated by men?' ('Let's Talk About Sexism', *Eastern Eye*, 10 May 1996). Bina Mistry, a female artist based in London, replied:

I think the world is very male-dominated not just the Asian music industry or even the non-Asian industry at that. But it's all changing rapidly.

Good music will always surface whether it's male or female led. This bias has always been there but I myself have never faced it

directly, well not enough to make me want to cry - but I'm always whinging about it. (ibid)

The British bhangra industry like any other sphere of cultural production which is led by men is also guilty to charges of gender bias and sexism.<sup>21</sup> The role of women in the British bhangra industry is one which has been dictated through gender relations in favour of men, but which has also been transformed by the input of its women artists.

On the whole, women tend to work in the bhangra industry primarily as singers or professional dancers, with a few who solely manage and promote music and artists. Bhushra Ahmed, for example, is based in London and is the Head of Fruitcake Music, a record company, and manages the female artist Sabina. At the time of writing (2002) there was no record of any South Asian women working in the technical side of music production. Like most of their male colleagues in the bhangra industry women also produce and perform music in their 'part time' or as a 'hobby', but more so in addition to their family commitments and roles which they served at rates far exceeding that to which men were expected to play.

Sameera and Anupreeta<sup>22</sup>, the two female artists interviewed, both described their entry into the bhangra industry by a way of audience demand. Both were keen to pursue their music interests by singing ballads and slow melodies ranging from popular Bollywood tracks to ghazzals but the demand for British bhangra required them to take up its singing at live performances and in the recording of their albums. Consequently female artists were entering a field of music in which men had a strong foothold:

Anupreeta: I enjoy singing more the 60s and 70s Lata Mangeshkar's [popular Bollywood playback singer] melodies. I had to learn bhangra songs in order to respect the wishes of the audience.

Sameera: I was introduced to bhangra purely because the demand was for bhangra in this country. It was thought I would sell better if I was able to sing in Punjabi and bhangra tracks. If I was in Bombay, on the other hand, there would be more opportunities for me to sing perhaps in the film industry.

From the outset, then, women artists were under musical constraints to perform British bhangra if they were to be given exposure and then able to move into singing other genres. This was particularly the case in the heyday of British bhangra upto the mid-nineties. Sameera recognised the importance of women's limited opportunities in terms of the music genres they could sing in Britain in comparison to India where she cites there being more opportunities for female artists. Performing in a male dominated industry and the different social constructions placed upon women by men led to notable differences in experiences based around gender.

First, the top sales figures of best selling bhangra albums are usually always held by men.<sup>23</sup> This is due to the fact that there are numerically more male artists in the industry than women, thereby having more opportunities to produce and release albums and singles. Also sales figures are related to audience expectations and listening habits that have been socially cemented around the gendered constructions related to British bhangra music. For instance, Ninder Johal signed Sameera to Nachural Records for the release of her first album *Infinity* in 1995. In terms of monetary returns it did not perform as well as male-led albums which were on the market at the same time. The reason for its limited success is revealing:

Ninder: If there's a female artist on a bhangra tape nobody wants to know. Why? Because it's seen as such a macho thing, women should not be singing those type of songs. Therefore the Asian market is holding female artists back. I invested in Sameera's album *Infinity*, it was a superb product, she sang really well. At the end of the day nobody wanted to know, they wanted something with a bit of *Karakhaa!*, which means a bit of aggression, a bit of noise, a bit of a bang, which only men can allegedly do.

*Infinity* was released at a time when the bhangra market was comprised of albums with loud and energetic tracks. *Infinity* was a break from the norm as it consisted of tracks sung in Hindi as well as Punjabi ranging from sweet melodies, ghazzals and bhangra. In this way it was slightly ahead of its time in terms of audience expectation but was also compounded by gendered notions of what was acceptable as an album of British bhangra music.

Secondly, there exists an imbalance in terms of the income generated by male and female artists. At a general level where the figures earned from album signing fees for the bhangra industry on the whole are much less than its mainstream counterparts, women artists despite being able to sing across a range of different music genres and vocal styles are not able to command as high a price as their male counterparts. As the artists put it:

Sameera: The demand for bhangra is more, and men predominate. If I was a man I'd make more money.

Anupreeta: In terms of making money women have to struggle maybe three times more to survive in the industry. Not twice, but three times more I would say.

Thirdly, Anupreeta and Sameera both had experienced a tendency by a few male artists and other band members who would treat female artists in a patronising and condescending way. This ranged from passing implicit comments about women artists as being inferior to 'male stars', to assuming that women had very little or no knowledge of the workings and internal networks of British bhangra, to the more menacing perception of women artists as

'performers' who were available to be leered at sexually. The latter experiences of harassment were also encountered in 'small doses' at gigs in which inebriated men were predominant and were making a nuisance at the front of the stage. The stances adopted by female artists to such male aggression towards women varied according to the situation they were confronted with. This would range from at first, ignoring male perpetrators as 'not knowing any better', to outright confrontation over sexist treatment and assumptions which would shock and belittle even the most rowdiest of men. These discriminatory experiences encountered by women artists in the bhangra industry are similar to those experienced by their mainstream counterparts in the Anglo-American music industries and in the Afro-American rap industry (see for instance Frith and McRobbie 1990; Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Rose 1994; Whiteley 1997).

Finally, all the artists interviewed (male and female) referred to the British bhangra industry as, on the whole, 'informal and friendly' in its workings in that almost everyone knew each other, or knew someone who had could easily put them in touch with another artist or worker. This atmosphere of affability is one which men benefit from the most. Male singers, musicians, and technical staff often meet up after gigs and recordings and socialise together. This includes going out together to public houses, playing pool, and even sporting each other in football with teams comprised from the different bands. As such informal conversations around music will occur and playful ideas can lead to future music projects, or for different artists to work together in collaboration. Unfortunately, the social events after the recording sessions to produce British bhangra are not equally experienced by women artists. Furthermore, they are not faced with as many opportunities to work together due to their personal commitments as working professionals, partners, wives, mothers, daughters and so forth which take precedence to their music.

RKD: Do women artists in the industry meet or work together to discuss music ideas or projects?

Sameera: I don't think they do. They are bound by other commitments first, I don't think they can fully concentrate on music as a career because the role of women in society more generally is limited. And that's one of the reasons they don't get to meet. At the pop awards there are opportunities to meet up but these are so few between.

*Sistas Doing it for Themselves: Diversification of the bhangra Industry and the Female Voice*

Taken together, the four experiences of the plight of women artists in the British bhangra industry might easily be read as depicting them as perpetual victims with little autonomy to bring about change. However, notable generic transformations have occurred within the industry since the heyday of bhangra

music, and the emergence of young, fresh, and outspoken female talent on the scene has seen women artists carving out their own niches.

The bhangra industry has diversified taking into account the popularity of Bollywood film music amongst its audiences. This has led to bhangra albums featuring musical influences from Bollywood film tracks encompassing a range of South Asian music genres, as well as the performance of Bollywood songs with a bhangra feel to them at live gigs. The generic shift towards Bollywood re-mixes, ghazzals, qawallis alongside bhangra music has seen women come into their own and taking charge of the reigns of music production in a number of aspects. Female artists are now finding they have more autonomy to be able to sing on their own terms over a wider range of music genres.

Sameera: I have always been singing Hindi melodies and I think my voice is more suited to ballads. I consider ballads more difficult to sing than faster dance tracks because the slower you sing the more difficult it is to maintain the voice and keep it in tune over a stretch. Now that the Hindi re-mixes have come on the scene, I have gone back to what I really loved doing singing in Hindi, and that's where I feel I'm at my best.

Furthermore, the female voice has played an important part in the popularity and success of Bollywood re-mixes. Bollywood re-mix albums that outsell those of traditional bhangra beat albums are those predominantly sung by women artists. In particular, the artists remarked that certain tracks which have gone down well with audiences is possibly due to the fact of their diverse singing talents which contemporary audiences appreciate. When performing live for instance, Anupreeta is often requested to sing her rendition of the ballad *Chalthe Chalthe...* [On My Journey I Met A Stranger] from the 1970s movie *Pakeezah*. This song takes up lyrics from Urdu poetry laced with a haunting melody which expresses the desires of two strangers who are unable to communicate directly but have become enthralled with each other's presence. The crowd at many gigs has been known to become transformed into a sea of swaying ballad devotees each time Anupreeta performs this track:

Anupreeta: The female voice certainly has a place. Some powerful emotions and gestures can only be best expressed through the female voice. The music industry isn't complete without it.

The diversity and power of the female voice is making a noticeable impression upon audiences who have become fans of women artists and keep in regular contact with them. Anupreeta for example has received numerous phone calls from men and women complimenting her on her albums and singing prowess. Comments such as the following have helped women artists to deal with some of the sexist attitudes which exist in the industry and in culture more generally, and to get a perspective on what they are doing as important to themselves, their fans, and to other listeners:

Anupreeta: Some fans are really happy with my singing and albums. I have received phone calls saying ‘You sound really young. God bless you. We can’t wait for your next album. The Asian community needs female singers like you. We really enjoyed your live shows’ and so on. You know real positive messages and these help to outweigh some of the negative criticisms. For one bad message I may get there are at least 50 good ones.

RKD: What kind of bad messages do you get?

Anupreeta: Oh just silly things like ‘women shouldn’t be singing’. These messages just come in one or two but are enough to show how some people may think women shouldn’t have talent and a place in the industry.

#### *Band Management and Young Talent: Sistas Calling the Shots*

With Bollywood re-mixes becoming a considerable market segment of the British bhangra industry the role of women artists is one which cannot be taken lightly. The female singer of the live Hindi bands is often the one who heads the group and she also hires male musicians for performances at her own discretion. As the female artists Shama, and Bharti who specialise in singing Hindi film tracks put it in response to the *Eastern Eye* newspapers call ‘Why is the bhangra industry dominated by men?’:

Shama: When I was a freelance singer it was a bit more difficult but now that I’ve got my own band - I call the shots! I employ the male artists and musicians, I’ve turned the tables.

Bharti: It’s like another world in the Hindi market where it’s almost vice-versa, I find that males struggle more than women! If you look at bookings for shows, in general, you’ll find more females being approached by the organisers. Even though the musicians are male, the scene is controlled by women because 90 per cent of the time they’ve got their own set-ups and they employ or book the male singers.

The diversification of the bhangra industry to include a wider repertoire of South Asian music genres as production niches in their own right has seen the development of women artists into band management, as well the emergence of new and younger female talent in their late teens to early twenties. Since the mid-nineties artists such as Sasha, Sabina, Shabnam, Hard Kaur and others, based in the Midlands and in London, have entered the industry. They have taken British bhangra and Bollywood re-mixes to advanced levels in terms of lyrical content and musical fusions and added to the emerging genre of Anglo-Asian pop.

Hard Kaur for instance has adopted black rap styles with bhangra influences to make incisive comments on the racist nature of British society from policing

in the inner cities to racist attacks. Furthermore, donned in slack urban attire with dark glasses intact she has created a no-nonsense demeanour for herself which she extends to the realm of sexual politics in her lyrics. Hard Kaur often sings about men's sexual impropriety towards women but also allows the women protagonists in her songs agency of their own choosing to accept the male advances on offer or to reject them outright in the heart and mind games that can follow.

Sasha leads an energetic dancing ensemble, and sings in Punjabi, Hindi, and English. Her songs cover a range of themes including upbeat teenage love songs in which heterosexual norms of courtship are affirmed, to critiques hailed at men for being far from perfect lovers in their empty promises made to women. Furthermore, her robust command of the stage through her varied dance steps - drawing on freestyle, disco, and kathakali - together with her vibrant dress sense - a blend of Asian chic and rock styles - defies simple and easy classifications of exotic and passive Asian femininity. However, the emergence and development of young female artists with their timeless social critiques and cultural interventions must also be continually assessed in terms of the changing perceptions of the role of women in the spheres of cultural production more generally, to the opportunities available to women cultural practitioners to sustain themselves as artists and to continually produce themselves anew. Anupreeta and Sameera ended the interviews on a positive yet cautious note, being well aware of the mutant forms of patriarchy and the need to overcome it at every step of the way. This was *in addition* to the problems faced more generally by all those working in the British bhangra industry who were attempting to make good music for a sense of themselves, and to create wider appeal with the mainstream:

RKD: What do you think needs to be done in order for women to have greater access and control into, and in, the bhangra music industry?

Anupreeta: The industry needs to accept that women can also produce good music. They have completely ignored and bypassed them and they have rejected them by thinking 'women and music, no it can't happen'. I don't know whether the record companies are doing enough for them as well. They need to be launched in the right way, their image needs to be portrayed in the right way. So to some extent the record companies could be doing a bit more in terms of publicity with the radio stations and media. I must admit there are some presenters on the radio who have really supported women artists in a nice way, and there are female presenters who have actually promoted and supported women in the right way. I don't know whether there is a simple answer that could make changes overnight. It needs a lot of commitment, a lot of work and giving away some power which I don't think sections of the bhangra industry are ready to do, because giving away

something is considered as a loss. It should be about sharing power and access and what they have.

Sameera: For women to do well in the industry or in any sphere, they should be encouraged by friends, families and their wider social circles ... I hope to break through into the mainstream. I have sung in English and would like a chance to get wider appeal. I would ultimately like to sing in Bollywood, I hope I find the right contact. If I was a man I think I could just fly over, but as a woman it isn't as easy.

The current role and experiences of women in the British bhangra industry reveal a number of insights straddling the more general ongoing gender inequalities women encounter in most spheres of cultural and social life, to the culturally specific dynamics of the status of women in British bhangra music as changing through the evolution of South Asian music genres in which women are able to command centre stage. As such women continue to 'make noise' and contribute to the ongoing struggles of and in British bhangra music and cultural production as it enters a new millennium.

### **The Futures of British bhangra Music Production**

At the time of writing (2002), the bhangra industry is undergoing diversification taking up the call for new South Asian music genres as album production and performance niches. The current popularity of the UK garage sound, with its fast-paced digital beats, synthesised sounds and urban chatting, has also been amalgamated and itself transformed through a union with the bhangra beat, thereby rejuvenating both genres further.

British bhangra has also come to influence different styles of bhangra music the world over such as Canadian bhangra and interestingly traditional folk bhangra in the Punjab too. Folk bhangra, in particular, has become more upbeat since it was introduced to its diasporic cousin and is itself responding to the local and global experiences of rural and urban youth in the subcontinent by a way of lyrical and musical content. With the popularity and influence of British bhangra pulsating in India, musical exchanges have taken place between 'legendary' artists of the Punjab and with bands in Britain. For example, male artists such as Gurdaas Maan and Hans Raj Hans, who have been folk artists for the last fifteen years, have been touring Britain bi-annually over the past decade with much success and British bands have been well received in India. Moreover, the racy bhangra beat appeal that struck a chord with folk artists in the Punjab in turn caught the imagination of diverse listeners throughout India via its national distribution outlets. Folk bhangra's meeting with the British bhangra beat soon caught on and in turn became translated into many late-nineties Bollywood film soundtracks (see Namrata Joshi 'Musical Mystic' *India Today*, 1/3/1999:24h). Also, folk bhangra singers as well as Bollywood playback singers have recorded bhangra albums with artists in Britain. One

product of such a venture is Amarjit Sidhu's union with Sonu Nigam from Bollywood on the album *Pyaar* [Love] which was well received across India, North America, and the UK. The coming together of varied music traditions, genres, and artists from across South Asia and its diaspora illustrates the networks of opportunities that South Asian artists and musicians continue to forge for themselves.

The diversification of the British bhangra industry and the relatively limited resources within which it continues to operate has also led to a number of developments, some more welcomed than others throughout different sections of the industry. For instance, an emerging preference for DJs on the wedding circuit is superseding the hiring of live bands. DJs can be hired from anything between £100 - £1000 for a 4- hour party with the most popular DJs incorporating a dhol player, live mixing, and an indoor firework show. This has brought to the fore an affordable culture of music entertainment and dancing orchestrated predominantly by young men whose creative flair and technical wizardry has brought them into the limelight with British bhangra enthusiasts. However, this has also meant that the live bands are increasingly having to compete with monetary scales that weigh in favour of the DJs - DJs are cheaper to hire than live bands. The opportunities for live performances of British bhangra remain to be seen.

There is also in motion the 'cheap' and hurried production of British bhangra and Bollywood re-mix albums by a few opportunists. These are being made in several numbers each month by a few young male mixers who are more interested in making a 'fast buck' than developing artists or producing new and innovative sounds. In some extreme cases the quick technological production of bhangra and Bollywood re-mixed tracks is done without permission of the original artists or bands. Such albums often go unchallenged by the Asian record companies due to the large legal bills involved in bringing about redress. By a way of response, the frustration of keen South Asian music producers and lovers was aptly captured in an article by one of *Eastern Eye's* regular music commentators, Wicked Miah [pseudonym]. As the headline caption read in his humorous and bold report:

We let our pet rat Chakk de Patel free at the record shops to sniff out some of the new releases. He returned with a fistful of monkey's plop and put forward the question: WHAT IS THIS RUBBISH? (*Eastern Eye Magazine* 6/3/1998:8)

Far from the cry of a gullible audience buying into anything and everything that the machination end of a cultural industry might throw at it, British bhangra music listeners and critics are informing themselves of the 'not-so-good music' which finds its way into music stores vying for consumers' cash. Ninder Johal also concurred with this view as he put it:

Album sales were higher in the early nineties as a lot of people were into the bhangra scene and buying different tapes seeing what's on the market. Now [late nineties] the figures aren't as

high as they were for say an average artist. Well known artists obviously continue to sell in big numbers. The market and audiences have matured, nothing is instantly sellable. They know that there's some real crap being churned out so they only go for what they like.

With bhangra audiences in Britain, on the whole, more critical as to what they are purchasing and listening to, it is hoped that the few unprofessional opportunists will find they have no place, or learn to respect audience taste and produce more pleasurable music. Meanwhile music producers and distributors like Ninder Johal are busy looking to develop the British bhangra market overseas, partly contributing to the growth of the genre of World Music in recent years. As Ninder revealed in a recent magazine interview contemplating the future of British bhangra after its heyday heights:

We have had all the limelight in the UK over the last ten years. You can only take a market so far until that market becomes stagnant. Bhangra was big business for us in the 80s now it helps to pay the bills. But the big deals are elsewhere to be found. We have since '95 been looking at the market overseas and that does not just mean in India, which would have been the first port of call. There is such a large market for bhangra outside the UK that we have been so busy that we have had to delay releasing records for the UK market. We have just set up deals in France, Italy, Holland, and we already have deals in Japan and the Far East. (Boy Chana 1998:35)

It remains to be documented what opportunities such international ventures will bring for the music in terms of global market appeal and also what kinds of artistic and musical developments might be possible, or not as the case may be. Far from over, then, the futures for British bhangra music keep on drumming. Let us see where the beat of the *dhol* takes us...

### **Conclusion**

This article drew on four thematic areas from the literature about making popular music as a form of cultural production and applied them to a study of the British bhangra music industry. Broadly conceived, they were organised in the following way: firstly, history of cultural production in British bhangra; secondly, articulated with this history, attention was paid to the relationship between the mainstream music industry and British bhangra; thirdly an examination of Birmingham as a site of local production for the music industry was offered and finally attention was paid to the role and experiences of women artists in British bhangra music making.

A focus on the cultural production of British bhangra music illustrates the makings of musical creativity and expression albeit in the margins of mainstream British popular music. In spite of the limited access to resources and to mainstream circuits of dissemination and exposure, as argued in the case of Music Live 95, British bhangra remains an urban anthem for its artists and its audiences. The role of bhangra cultural practitioners as dedicated workers in the realms of music production, distribution, and performance has been crucial to the sustained buying, listening, and dancing of British bhangra. Their ongoing work has allowed bhangra audiences to take pleasure and make meaning from the music as contributing to the ebbs and flows of their cultural identities. The development of the British bhangra industry from 'underground' status to limited visibility in the sounds of urban Britain has occurred in the context of a lack of adequate financial resources and support, cultural racism, and the achievements of its practitioners.

This paper has demonstrated that the British bhangra music industry began in the seventies and came into its own in the eighties in Birmingham and in Southall. It came together through the work of 'amateur' singers and musicians who musically began to construct a sense of being both British *and* Asian for themselves and for their audiences.

Birmingham and, to a lesser extent now, London have been considered as important centres for British bhangra music. In particular, due to the large number of artists and bands and recording and distribution companies, and the steady production of new albums in the city, Birmingham can be thought of as the cultural capital for the music. The workings of the bhangra industry in Birmingham and beyond, in terms of its local cultural production and consumption, and the distribution of its artists and musical texts to regional, national and international places, locate the city as an important juncture on the routes of the South Asian diaspora. The distribution of British bhangra music (recorded and live music) opens up Britain's urban cities to cultural, social, and geographical connections which transcend local and international boundaries in ways which have yet to be fully analysed.

Paying attention to the historical formation of the production of British bhangra music, particularly in its heydays, also illustrates the dominance of male cultural practitioners in its industry. The prevalence of men over women contributed to a loud and energetic masculinised aesthetic of the music genre. This set a precedence which women were expected to follow in order to be nominally accepted as artists. However, with the development of the British bhangra industry responding to the demand for wider South Asian music genres, such as ghazzals and Bollywood film tracks, the role and presence of women within the industry has shifted from simply singing to band management as well. This development has upset some of the traditional gender hierarchies of the British bhangra industry as well paved the way for new female cultural practitioners to emerge. Women artists have also been held back due to the limited social roles they have been expected to play, primarily as domesticated social subjects. However, women artists have challenged such fallacies by

asserting their different talents and performance abilities, as well as hailing critiques at the very structures that have held them down. Contradictorily, however, women artists have also reproduced some of the ideological positions of South Asian women in heterosexual love relationships through lyrical content.

The British bhangra music and cultural industry has come some way and continues to develop, from its heydays in the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties, to its current status as reaching out to international audiences and markets. Examining some of the internal workings of this industry is as important and illuminating as analysing the meanings produced in lyrical content and/or musical performance as offering a commentary about the formation of a British Asian and Punjabi popular music.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Banerji and Baumann offer the customary accounts of British Bhangra music. These have been challenged by Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma (1996). In particular Sanjay Sharma (1996:34-35) argues that Banerji and Baumann simply map out an Asian cultural authenticity and tradition argument. This argument can simply be summed up as reading British bhangra as illustrating a homogenous and unchanging Asian identity in Britain. Unfortunately, such an argument fails to analyse some of the complex negotiations that are occurring in British Asian cultural identity through the use of popular cultural forms such as British bhangra music. For example, British bhangra can be also be used to profess a sense of political Blackness alongside cultural assertions of 'Asiannes'.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'cultural practitioners' is used, and illustrated throughout the article, to describe the role of singers, musicians, producers, and so forth in the British Bhangra music industry as partaking in cultures of music production, as well as contributing to social processes of cultural identity formation for themselves and audiences of the music as 'British Asian'. Put another way, cultural practitioners are people who contribute to the formation of cultural practices as inherent with meaning about themselves and the wider social groups of which they are a part.

<sup>3</sup> Extended interviews were conducted as part of a larger doctoral thesis research (Dudrah 2001). Methods such as qualitative extended interviews are useful in the uncovering of marginalised voices. Qualitative methods proved

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especially helpful in the case of the thesis research where the production processes and textured meanings of popular cultures (in this case music) were sought after.

4 The decision to interview the five artists and cultural practitioners was a conscious one as very little is known about the workings of the British bhangra music industry. The practitioners interviewed were interesting for a number of reasons, not least because they were representative of the eclecticism involved in the British bhangra industry. Many practitioners often occupy numerous working sites within the industry ranging from artist (singer and/or musician), production and management work, to post-production distribution and retail. The practitioners' numerous years of experience within the industry was also of importance as many move in and out of the music scene as casual practitioners, compared with a few who remain constantly involved in a sustained manner. As such the narratives of the development and struggles of the British bhangra industry offered were fruitful and enduring accounts drawing on a wealth of historical insights of affiliation with the industry and its relationship to, and experiences with, the mainstream British music industry. In addition to these insights, speaking to the women practitioners was also interesting in terms of their contributions to the music and experiences of participating in the industry as female artists. These interviews were particularly salient as the British bhangra industry is male dominated.

<sup>5</sup> The use of the terms 'the margins/marginal' and 'mainstream' are used throughout the article and are revealing of the nature of the British bhangra music industry *vis à vis* the more established popular music industry in Britain. The 'mainstream' is commonly used by artists, musicians, audiences, and sections of the British South Asian media to refer to the white Anglo-American dominated music industry in Britain. This entails a perception of the mainstream record companies as having the capital and cultural might in their global profiling and selling of music and artists who are deemed profitable. 'The mainstream' also entails a notion of 'white society' more generally incorporating the mass media as it views and constructs British bhangra music as 'foreign' and 'unintelligible'. In turn, 'the margin', also used by artists and audiences, literally refers to a social space, actual and imagined, that is constructed as knocking against the doors of the mainstream music industry but through which very few Asian artists have been able to enter and attain wider exposure (the most cited examples to date would be Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo). Thus, the two terms have been adopted throughout this paper, and are illustrated where possible, to develop an understanding of the peripheral role which British bhangra music-making has been consigned in accounts of British popular music and its industry.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to point out here that references to the 'British bhangra industry' in the popular press and on radio can also refer to, or include the related sub-market of the synonymously known, Hindi or Bollywood re-mixes in Britain. Although this genre of re-mixed music does not comprise an

industry in itself, it equally sells large number of albums compared with British bhangra music. The practitioners involved in the production and distribution of Hindi re-mixes are almost always those involved with, or connected to, the British bhangra music industry and as such their experiences and struggles are often similar. Furthermore, the two genres can also share similar beats and rhythms in their music. As a case in point, Bally Sagoo has a history of re-mixing numerous British Bhangra tracks long before his Hindi re-mix album *Bollywood Flashback* was signed with Columbia Records. Further still, the Asian Pop Awards consists of the gathering and awarding of primarily British bhangra practitioners as well as honouring the achievements of practitioners of Hindi re-mix albums. Those receiving awards for their work in both music genres can often be the same people. Thus, my use of the term 'British bhangra industry' is used in a collaborative sense acknowledging its relationship to different British South Asian music market segments, but where its diversity becomes limited by the single use of the term this is clarified in the essay where necessary.

<sup>7</sup> The invitation for prominent business people, ministers, and pop stars to mingle together at 10 Downing Street occurred as a result of the invention of Labour's spin doctors after the party came to power in the general election of 1997. One of the aims of these gatherings was to present the Labour party in a user friendly and new light that was attempting to establish a 'Cool Britannia' for the private sector, the arts, and the public and media spheres (see the collection of essays in Rutherford 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Amarjit Sidhu: Amarjit has long been involved in the British bhangra music scene since the late 1970s. He has been band member of one of the first popular Birmingham bhangra bands, *Chirag Pehchaan* [Recognise the Light]. During the 1980s he was Manager of various popular British bhangra bands (such as *Apna Sangeet* [Our Music] from Birmingham) as well as producing a number of solo albums. During the 1989 Asian Pop Awards held at the Tower Ballroom in Birmingham Amarjit was presented with the 'Best Personality Award' in British bhangra music in recognition of his continuous work to promote the British bhangra industry. More lately Amarjit is managing his recently launched Kamlee Records Ltd label, the premises of which is located above his pharmacy shop in West Bromwich, on the outskirts of Birmingham. Kamlee Records has invested in the production and circulation of British bhangra and post-bhangra (namely popular Hindi film re-mixes and Asian Pop) artists and musicians. As well as his involvement in the British bhangra industry Amarjit is a 'full-time' Pharmacist by profession, and hosts a music and talk show on BBC Radio West Midlands' Asian Network.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Sukhbir Singh Sohal (also known as Suky) has played the keyboards and synthesizers for numerous British bhangra bands since 1985. Prior to this, Suky had been a member of a few rock bands in Bromsgrove, on the outskirts of Birmingham. From 1989 to the present Suky has remained an active member of the band *Achanak*. Suky has arranged and produced music for folk bhangra

artists in India, as well as a successful bhangra infused melody for a Japanese pop star. Suky is planning to move into the area of independent music production and management with a view to a crossover into the mainstream British music industry.

<sup>10</sup> The case of Bally Sagoo's remixing of classic Bollywood film tracks is an interesting case in point.

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Ninder Johal, Managing Director of Nachural Records; as well as Manager, and tabla player of the Birmingham based British Bhangra band *Achanak*. Nachural Records, formed in 1991, is one of the few remaining record labels in the bhangra industry with a steady and increasing number of artists on its roster; from 1 to 14 since 1991. Ninder has been involved in the playing and production of bhangra music since 1988.

<sup>12</sup> The recording of selected live British bhangra music from the festival as played on Radio 1 can be listened to at the National Sound Archive, South Kensington, London, entitled 'Bhangra: Show of the Century'. Shelf mark/reference number H5257.

<sup>13</sup> Five years on and as part of BBC radio and television's national Music Live 2000 festival, broadcast during the month of May, the British Bhangra band from Wolverhampton, The Sahotas, were featured playing one of their tracks live on television.

<sup>14</sup> Whilst artists such as Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo have their musical roots in a number of genres, not least in British bhangra, theirs is a slightly different story that is yet to be told more comprehensively. Authors such as Huq (1996) and Sharma (1996) have termed artists like Apache Indian, Bally Sagoo, alongside bands such as Fun^Da^Mental and Asian Dub Foundation as 'post-bhangra', implying a related but also different sense of 'Asianness' than that which is constructed through British bhangra, i.e. more besides. Also, post-bhangra artists may sometimes operate within the workings of cultural production as being put forward in this essay for British bhangra. However, they are equally, if not more than, working within the cultural production possibilities of a number of other music industries too with their different working environments and distinct cultural and social problems. As such, the musical career histories and the workings of cultural production for post-bhangra artists can be different to those for bhangra artists.

<sup>15</sup> Birmingham serves a general population in excess of one million people. Nearly a quarter of that population is made up from non-white ethnic groups, originating from over 80 countries around the world but mostly from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean (Birmingham City Council 1996:1)

<sup>16</sup> This is a personal and rough translation of the term.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of British bhangra music and identity amongst young British South Asians in Newcastle see Bennett (2000:Chapter5).

<sup>18</sup> Miss Sameera Singh. Sameera came to England when she was 5 years old in the late sixties. She started singing as a hobby during her child years and was trained by her mother, 'to sing and be in tune', who had been formally trained

with a degree in classical music. Sameera sang in public at weddings and parties and at Asian festivals up and down the country. In 1992 at the Nottingham Asian Arts Festival, Sameera was approached and then signed by Nachural Records. Since 1992 she has sung and worked on 13 albums either solo or duet with other male artists. She has even recorded with Apache Indian on his album *Wild East* (Sunset Records, Birmingham, 1998) on the track *Lovin*. This track was immensely popular and was released as a single. Sameera works full-time as a primary school teacher.

<sup>19</sup> During the mid-late eighties London bands such as Alaap, Heera, and Premi were prominent on the British bhangra scene in terms of regular album productions and live performances. However, members from these bands have left the music scene or gone on to produce the work of other younger artists and bands. Or, as is more often the case, they have gone on to produce Bollywood-based songs and music albums.

<sup>20</sup> Balvinder is a pseudonym for this respondent.

<sup>21</sup> For example, I have argued elsewhere how selected British bhangra tracks which contain dubious lyrics in relation to dominant caste and gender groups can be contested by its listeners (see Dudrah 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Anupreeta Kumar, female vocalist of numerous Hindi Remix albums and British bhangra tracks. Anupreeta has worked solo and as a duet with male singers from the British Bhangra industry. Having been classically trained as a singer in India since her teenage years, Anupreeta became involved in the British bhangra music industry and Hindi Remix scene in 1990 after singing at a friend's party and being overwhelmed by the response she received. From here on she began singing live with a number of Hindi bands in the north-west of England performing all over the country before moving into the recording studios. During her seven years of performances and production, conducted in her 'spare time', Anupreeta has recorded seven albums and has others awaiting development. In 1995 at the Asian Pop awards held in Birmingham Anupreeta was awarded the 'Favourite Female Newcomer'. Anupreeta is also the female singer of the band *Tarang* (Melody). *Tarang* consists of four other band members, all male, who together perform a wide range of South Asian popular music in addition to British bhangra.

<sup>23</sup> Male artists will almost always dominate the top ten sales of music albums in the British Asian music press. See for example music chart listings in the British Asian magazine *Snoop*.

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