

Drum N Dhol¹: British Bhangra Music and Diasporic South Asian Identity Formation

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, which is a large and diverse area of geography stretching the borders of India and Pakistan.² As a music for people of South Asian origin in Britain, British Bhangra has been extant since the post-war period with the arrival of migrant workers from South Asia and East Africa. Gerd Baumann, one of the first 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.³ 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.

Despite British Bhangra's presence in British culture and society for over thirty years it remains a marginalized song and dance genre in mainstream British music. Only in the late nineties, with the emergence of South Asian voices in British and Western academia, have South Asian music genres begun to be discussed as serious sites of social and cultural inquiry revealing the hitherto uncharted formation of diasporic

South Asian identities in urban settings (Gopinath 1995; and Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma eds. 1996).

This paper engages with the debate engendered by these new studies of South Asian music and identity politics, and in the spirit of dialogue continues the discussion and analysis in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps left by them. In particular this paper offers a reading of British Bhangra music as it encapsulates meanings of British South Asian identity formation. The paper begins by surveying existing approaches to the study of British Bhangra music and South Asian identities. It then goes on to outline the findings of a qualitative piece of research conducted in the city of Birmingham, England, with 6 young British South Asians about their engagements with British Bhangra music and identity formation.⁴ Analysis is also made of some of the lyrics in British Bhangra songs thereby offering a textual reading of the music genre and its interplay with urban British South Asian lives.

Academic Commentaries of British Bhangra: Early and Contemporary Accounts

Gerd Baumann and Sabita Banerji have individually and together written the first academic commentaries of British Bhangra music (Banerji 1988; Baumann 1990 and 1996:156-157; Banerji and Baumann 1990). 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 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 Britain 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 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 Hip-hop, 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. 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 these complex musical processes and cultural exchanges. Quoting from the lead singer of the east London based band Cobra, Baumann goes on to assert that a simple case exists for the relationship between British Bhangra and South Asian identity formation:

I can remember going to college discos a long time ago, when all you heard was Reggae, Reggae, Reggae. Asians were lost, they weren't accepted by whites so they drifted into the black culture, dressing like blacks, talking like them and listening to reggae. But now Bhangra has given them 'their' music and made them feel that they do have an identity. No matter if they are Gujratis, Punjabis or whatever, - Bhangra is Asian music for Asians.
(Baumann 1996:156)

Baumann overlooks other narratives of syncretic Asian youth identity formations negotiated and made actively with and alongside modes of Black cultural expression. He appears to read the affirming moment of British Bhangra music as an essentialist

formation of Asian identity. As Sharma puts it, '[h]e too simplistically essentializes what has remained a nebulous, relationally defined and situated identificatory category of 'Asian' for these youth' (1996:35). Undoubtedly British Bhangra does enable a moment and means of carving out *one* distinct sense of a varied British South Asian youth culture. Banerji and Baumann suggest that Bhangra music in its specific derivations of a Punjabi folk dance carried equal attraction to all British South Asian youth. This is somewhat 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 Rap-based Asian Dub Foundation are two such examples of artists termed under the genres of post-Bhangra and "Asian Kool" or Anglo-Asian pop (For a more detailed discussion see Huq 1994, 1996; and Sharma 1996:41).

Clearly, South Asian youth groups have varied tastes and different investments in different music. Furthermore, the different range of musical performances and the context of their reception is never unitary particularly at different Asian gatherings. In this respect the examples of Bhangra played at a Punjabi wedding, and at one of the dance nights of the London-based Asian gay and lesbian support group Shakti are interesting points of comparison. Therefore, it is important to warn against reductive readings of British Bhangra as either simply operating in terms of cultural continuity and tradition or replicating a culturalist notion of Asian identity formation disassociated from wider socio-political contexts and youth cultural movements. In the words of Sharma it is more useful to view the emergence of Bhangra:

...as an *affirmative moment* in the formation of an Asian identity discourse in the early 1980s, a site for Asian youth culture acquiring a sense of identity and visibility in the public domain, and negotiating an ambivalent positionality in relation to a culturally hostile and exclusionary British nation. (Sharma 1996:39 original emphasis)

More fruitfully, then, British Bhangra and other post-Bhangra genres are best seen as constituted by way of a musical dialogue with other Black dance music genres which offers possibilities for the non-exhaustive identifications of "British and Black" and "Asian" as politically available to Asian youth. As Sharma goes on to say:

These musics enable Asian youth to articulate and deploy a sense of 'Asianness' that is not necessarily in opposition to notions of being Black, and, though more problematically, even British. These dance musics may, then, act as a site for the *translation* between diasporic Asian, Black and British identifications. This presents an alternative route for Asian youth, as opposed to the choice of either resisted assimilation or the search for 'tradition' and 'authenticity'.

(Sharma 1996:40 original emphasis)

Unfortunately, Sharma analyses the lyrics of post-Bhangra bands Asian Dub Foundation, Fun^Da^Mental, and Hustlers HC. Like Banerji and Baumann he makes no analysis of the lyrics in British Bhangra tracks and what they reveal about British South Asian identities and their interplay with urban cultural politics.

In fact, 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). One is curious to ask how is having 'a good time' on one's own terms in the context of a multi-racist Britain which ridicules "foreign" cultures, not part of the urban politics and well being for social groups?

In moving on from Banerji and Baumann and avoiding the pitfalls of understating the political importance of Bhangra music there is very little analysis of British Bhangra lyrics in comparison to the analyses made of newer forms of post-Bhangra music genres throughout the essays within the *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* book. Also, whilst the theoretical readings offered by the contributors to *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* offer advanced understandings for conceptualising the relationships between Asian

identifications and Bhangra music (i.e. British Bhangra as music primarily for British Asians), they lack a concise description of how South Asian *identity formation* occurs through British Bhangra music. In this respect my extended interviews proved useful in terms of how my respondents were able to understand and negotiate their South Asian identities through the music.

Gayatri Gopinath (1995), writing in the journal *Diaspora*, develops an argument of British Bhangra music from an advanced understanding of its complex relation to South Asian, British and Black identities. Analysing selected lyrics of the music and its associated videos by Malkit Singh and the early remixes of Bhangra tracks by Bally Sagoo, and also through the music of post-Bhangra artist Apache Indian, she convincingly locates British Bhangra music as a diasporic text revealing multi-faceted meanings of the diaspora and the nation:

Reading Bhangra as a diasporic text allows for a far more complicated understanding of diaspora, in that it *demands a radical reworking of the hierarchical relation between diaspora and the nation*. Bhangra, a transnational performance of culture and community, reveals the processes by which *multiple* diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging.
(Gopinath 1995:304 original emphasis)

Gopinath goes on to add that the eclectic mixture of different music genres within Bhangra and its dialogic movement between Britain, India, North America and elsewhere allows for the beginnings of a critical engagement about the nation state, away from monolithic constructions which inevitably imply exclusion. The exclusionary forms of the nation state can be interrogated and challenged through the composition of a nation's diasporic formulations:

A reading of bhangra as a diasporic cultural practice, then, offers a new model of the place of the nation in diaspora: not only is the nation part of the diaspora, but the diaspora becomes (part of) the nation.
(Gopinath 1995:313)

This suggests critical and fruitful implications for moving away from simple formulations of the hierarchical relationship between the nation and diaspora: a

hierarchy which posits diaspora as, in some sense, 'the bastard child of the nation - disavowed, inauthentic, illegitimate, an impoverished imitation of the originary culture' (ibid:317).

Gopinath also points out the patriarchal and heterosexual structures of the cultural production of diaspora through some of the gender suspect lyrics in Bhangra and their construction of women as reproducers of community as mothers and daughters (see Gopinath ibid:310-311). This limits the role for women as producers of diaspora within the discursive fields of representation of diasporic texts, but also in terms of their limited access to the means of production of diaspora, particularly in a music industry predominated by men. Furthermore, she argues the roles prescribed to women in the lyrics of Bhangra music are highly sexualized for heterosexual objectification.

Whilst Gopinath's criticisms are very pertinent at a general level of feminist reading of British Bhangra, which alerts one to the gendered constructions of diaspora, she overlooks the differing ways in which lyrical pleasures and contradictions are negotiated by its users and listeners. Female listeners as active readers and listeners of Bhangra musical texts do not simply take on board the gendered roles assigned to them but these are open to negotiation and contestation with the patriarchy present in some of the lyrics. For instance, the performance of Bhangra on dance floors opens up spaces where the socially constructed identities of "male" and "female" can be *recreated* and mimicked across genders. This was certainly indicated by my female respondents as I shall demonstrate later. Similarly, subversive pleasures along the lines of sexuality can also be created from conservative lyrics as in the performance of Bhangra songs and dance at Asian gay nites. Due to the constraints of space in this essay one can only speculate the following question: how do we begin to understand the complexities of sexualities as they are constructed, negotiated and embedded in

the narratives and performance of musical texts in a range of listening and engaging spaces from the walkman to the dance floor?

Furthermore, whereas Rock music has been characterised as phallic in its performance and in the use of instruments by men (most notably through an analysis of the masturbatory "stroking" and "plucking" of the electric guitar, see Bayton 1997) British Bhangra in contrast is primarily lead through the playing of South Asian percussion instruments - the *dhol*, *dholki*, and tablas - alongside Western musical instruments, and together they produce sounds that are not so easily gendered as male and female. This can be witnessed in the response to the musical sounds among a dancing crowd of Bhangra consisting of both men and women. Here, Bhangra dancing is comprised of hands free in the air, shoulders shrugging, the swaying of bodies, and the expression of facial and hand gestures made according to the music and lyrics. Bhangra dancing is in essence sociable in that it encourages a more personal and physically close contact between different genders and members of the same sex. This can lead to playful banter in which male and female identities and heterosexual narratives are simply affirmed, but can also create moments in which looks, thoughts, signs, and experiences are exchanged which cut across the normal hierarchies of gender and sexuality. How might further research be conducted into uncovering these spaces and their potential for understanding gender and sexuality in music more fully? Simply put, the repertoire of possibilities, identifications and negotiations available in the listening, dancing, and performance of Bhangra should not be contained by dominant readings from any particular critical analyses.

Using my extended interview responses let us consider the relationships between British Bhangra music and diasporic South Asian identity formation in a little more detail (see footnote 4). In particular, and as a result of themes emerging out of the interviews, I want to pay attention to the way in which identities are made sense of through a wider conception of the way in which British Bhangra music encapsulates a

dynamic urban British South Asian experience, how gender- and caste- suspect lyricisation of the music is negotiated by its listeners, and how some of the inter-generational formulations of British South Asian identities are performed at celebratory social gatherings.

British Bhangra and Urban British South Asian Experiences

British Bhangra music is part and parcel of the urban soundscapes of British cities implicated in wider city struggles for minority cultural expressions which contribute to meanings and definitions of one's sense of place and locality. British Bhangra can be characterised as renewing itself over the past thirty years by incorporating the pleasures, pains and politics of urban British South Asian lives. South Asians in large British metropolises, alongside other Black British groups, have produced musical and cultural expressions which illustrate the complex and hybrid interplay of different music styles, lyrics, and cultural identities that constitute a dynamic experience for young South Asians in urban locales. This eclectic mix was read as inherent and constructed in Bhangra music by my respondents as part of their everyday listening of, and investment in, the music:

Reshmo: I like the way the *dhol* and the bass comes together.

Manjit: The way the *dhol* works in the music is important as it is the beat, but also it's mixed together with other instruments and sounds and you can relate to all of them.

Negget: I like the beat, the music. How it all goes together. These days you see people rapping in Asian in Bhangra music. There's faster beats, more Western type music going into it. It's good to see that how we're changing the style of the music. How we can relate to Black music and also Western music, and putting it all together in a mix.

Reshmo and Manjit's coupling of the South Asian percussion instrument the *dhol* with heavy bass lines derivative from modern Black music styles, and Negget's description of the cross-fertilisation between Asian, Black and Western musics captures not only the 'togetherness' of how the music works as a mix, but also how identity is thought of and imagined by a way of experiencing the music as a whole,

composed of different styles and genres. The dhol with its sounds and meanings of "Asian" and the bass lines connoting urban Britain fuse together to articulate a sense of a fluid British South Asian identity.

More interestingly, the upbeat tempo characteristic of much contemporary British Bhangra produced through the vigorous interplay of percussion sounds defies a simple and neat distinction between the *dhol* and other percussion instruments. Percussion sounds, produced instrumentally and digitally, are often sampled together and are played simultaneously at live performances to produce a deep bass effect. This is particularly true of a number of Bhangra re-mixes as exemplified in the early Bhangra albums of Bally Sagoo, and also in other British Bhangra music with Jungle drum and bass elements. The music of Birmingham based Punjabi MC is a fitting example of the latter fusion styles. In a moment of technical wizardry and musical innovation the assignment of musical instruments and sounds into easily defined nation state boundaries is impossible as one sound merges with, and becomes, the other. Moreover, both work in relation to each other because of the similar sound qualities and feelings of "depth" each produces. Suky Sohal, musician from the group Achanak, also makes a related point about 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.⁵

The fluid composition of music and identity, therefore, open up possibilities wherein people are able to identify in a number of ways and with a number of identifications from Asian, Black, and British that isn't exclusively one of these identities, but a collective articulation of all three. As Negget speculates about the hybrid musical scores and eclecticism of urban Black lives:

RK: Would you say that the mixing you describe in the music was also going on in wider society around you?

Negget: It could in a way. The clothes people are wearing, people mixing in groups. These days you can see black people listening to Jungle, Ragga etc. but if it's all mixed and Asian people can do that as well, other people will probably listen to some Asian music as well. My black friends have asked me about Bhangra music when I have it on.

Inner city areas with Black social groups are comprised of layers of multi-textual sounds, images, and feelings (see Dudrah 2000:chapter 3). These layers jostle and blend with each other to produce a unique post-colonial experience of the city which is both indicative of the residents that dwell in the urban metropolis as multiple citizens, but also how they make sense of each other through the repertoire of sounds, images and feelings. Each community displays a system of signs and ensuing meanings (music, tastes, aromas, politics, local economies, the interaction of different people and so forth) as a cut and mix from around the world. These representations allow for the symbolic construction of *distinctive* communities *and* communities *alike* each other working to renew versions of Britain on their own terms, and in the context of a multi-racist nation. If Bhangra and other Black musics share similar rhythms and beat patterns which are open to be read and appreciated by its musicians and listeners, than equally an uncontainable discursive space exists in which identities are open to be imagined and re-imagined. This helps to set up opportunities for dialogic exchanges and appreciation between different social and cultural groups about their relationships and identifications with music.

RK: What are some of the things your black friends ask about the music?

Negget: They like the songs quite a bit, especially Apache Indian's stuff. They ask us what this means and that means, and how you pronounce this and that. So, it's had quite a big effect on more than just the Asian communities. It's a sort of common ground for two different communities to come together and enjoy music and culture.

The relationship between music and identity formation, then, is one which can be thought of as illuminating each other as a fluid melody continuously being played and

re-played, in the telling and re-telling of stories about ourselves imaginatively. This is particularly the case each time we hear a favourite track over and over again, but the creative possibilities in what we hear and how we make sense of it, and ourselves, are never identical. This view is further complexified when we hear live music being played and performed, or if we listen to a re-mixed version of a piece of music: what possibilities for music and identity formation open up here?

However, British Bhangra music does not solely consist of musical instruments interwoven with technological developments in modern music making. Central to the popularity of British Bhangra are the lyrics which further reveal facets of the political meanings and pleasures inherent in urban British South Asian lives. My respondents clearly stated a preference for the lyrics in Bhangra songs as part of their appreciation and enjoyment of the music.

Reshmo: I like the voice and the lyrics.

Negget: I understand the words. I like the beat, the music. How it all goes together.

Attif: I like the beats and some of the words I can understand.

Like almost any other popular music British Bhangra also encapsulates a diversity of themes about life in general. These range from unrequited notions of love between a young couple in their mid-teens, to families celebrating a wedding, to songs about male friendship and bonding often through playful lyrics about drinking alcohol. More specifically as a modern Punjabi folk music British Bhangra lyrics also display diasporic affiliations with the Punjab as "homeland". In some of the more discerning tracks critiques have often been hailed at some of the injustices within South Asian cultures and British lives. For example, the song *Is Daaj Noon Kardeo Bandh* [Stop the Dowry System] by the Birmingham based band Golden Star, from their 1987 album *I Love Golden Star*, was a direct attack on the dowry system in Asian marriages. The song calls on youth to become agents of radical social change in the

choices they make related to the more conservative rites and rituals of arranged marriages. What follows, then, is an example of some of the meanings in lyrics of selected British Bhangra tracks. Rather than offer a musical development of different bands and their lyrical meanings I want to illustrate a sample of politicized lyrics intertwined with urban British South Asian lives which hitherto have not been examined in any detail in the aforementioned academic commentaries of British Bhangra.

As cited earlier in the paper, contrary to Sabita Banerji's formulation of British Bhangra as simply 'boisterous' fun and its message to white Britain as 'incidental' (Banerji 1988:212), Bhangra is better understood as immersed explicitly in being heard and taken seriously in the cultural and mainstream politics of urban Britain. Even if Banerji intended 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 white Englishness which in turn marginalises minority, and especially Black, groups. Babs and Manjit, two of my respondents, aptly capture the relationship between Bhangra music and its possibilities of feeding into, and creating meanings from, British South Asian lives:

Babs: A lot of social aspects are picked from the music and lyrics.

RK: What kinds of aspects?

Babs: Like living life in general in Britain.

Manjit: Some of the music you just dance to, but then there are those songs with stuff about Soho Road, and Punjab and other things. You can dance to those songs as well or just listen to them but they have meaning.

Different British Bhangra bands in equally different ways have articulated an engagement with the struggles and pleasures of urban South Asian Britain. This is evident in the track *Dhol Tax* by the Birmingham based band *Achanak* from their

1990 album *paNACHe*.⁶ This song was a direct attack at the former ruling Conservative Party and its then leader and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for introducing the infamous Community Charge during the late eighties. 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.

2 Band Members: OO! Heathrow Airport.

Customs Official: Excuse me sir but you'll have to pay a small duty on that colourful barrel of yours.

Band Member 1: Oi don't be cheeky dats my *dhol* you know.

Band Member 2: Sohan Singh what shall we do now?

Band Member 1: We can't live without our *dhol* so I guess we'll have to pay the tax.

Band Member 2: But the Poll Tax has already killed us man. It's already too much.

Band Member 1: What we'll do is pay the *Dhol* tax but we won't pay the Poll Tax.

Band Member 2: Yes. Good idea.

The song begins with a brief dialogue sketch between two band members arriving at Heathrow Airport who are confronted by a pompous customs officer. The airport is an interesting site of connection and movement within the diaspora encompassing travel and contemplation between country of birthplace and origin, and questions of citizenship and identity. However, the airport is also an apparatus of the state which classifies "insiders" and "outsiders" according to citizenship with an emphasis on cultural traits. Upon arrival in London the band members are rudely reminded of their "foreignness" by the airport official referring to their importation of the 'colourful' South Asian drum, the *dhol*. The imposition of state authority over a musical instrument illustrates the inequalities of immigration procedures, and the exoticisation

of South Asian lives in Britain. The band answers back with a vibrant and radical message denouncing the Poll Tax and those who seek to use it as an ideological tool to serve their own political agendas.

Dhol tax hon dehna lokho
Poll tax nahin dehna wai (Chorus x 3)
[Pay the Dhol tax people
Don't pay the Poll Tax]
There is no hassle with the Dhol Tax
You will really feel the effects of the Poll Tax
That is why we sing this song

Chorus

Thatcher has done a bad deed
She has created more problems for everyone
'Poll Tax is the simple solution' (Thatcher voice impersonation)
We have bills to pay
We can't sleep at night with worry
That is why we sing this song

Chorus

When we go shopping on Soho Road
We have to watch our purse strings
'We are concerned with your needs' (Thatcher voice impersonation)
Those with big and full houses
How would they understand our plight?
That is why we sing this song

Chorus

We get little wages from work
What other pains of the heart shall we tell you?
'Every individual must pay' (Thatcher voice impersonation)
Thatcher should be shot
Why doesn't she hear our pleas?
That is why we sing this song

Chorus

'I'm the voice of my country' x2 (Thatcher voice impersonation)

'It's the Queen here (Queen Elizabeth II voice impersonation)
Now listen Margaret it's not your country
So just sod off or I'll set the Corgis on you'

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 racisms and social inequalities of British society and the effects of such acts to marginalize South Asian and other minority 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, and at the familial setting of South 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*). The point is to avoid creating single grand narratives around music at the cost of multiple readings and meanings which allow for exciting possibilities in grasping cultural and social formations and their interplay with urban cultural politics. However, in each of the aforementioned contexts a genre of music is taking shape and being transformed in the light of a British South Asian experience. Hence the innovative change of a Punjabi folk music fused with elements of other popular music cultures, results in the emergence of British Bhangra. 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 in the Indian subcontinent itself.

For example, in the use of 'Soho Road' (a popular street of South Asian and other Black British shops, restaurants and businesses in Handsworth, Birmingham) in the

lyrics of countless number of British Bhangra tracks, as seen in the 'Dhol Tax' track, 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 by British South Asians and other 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 which is recycled in lyrics of Bhangra songs.

In another example, the hugely popular song *Soho Road Uteh* [On Soho Road] by the Birmingham band *Apna Sangeet* [Our Music] describes a love story in which two lovers meet in India, become separated and then attempt to find each other through a love quest-cum-song as journey. Among the places traveled and searched we hear of Bradford, Coventry, Derby, London, and Soho Road in Handsworth. Interestingly, all these areas are inscribed with their South Asian settlements as politicized movements. Invoking Soho Road in this transnational context of a culturally politicized Bhangra music therefore affirms the identity of British South Asians as contributing to and developing the meaning of contemporary political and urban culture in the West. Soho Road becomes one defining and identifiable landscape in which urban British South Asian experiences are collated and articulated alongside other connecting points of the South Asian Diaspora spanning several cities in different continents. Music and identity formation, therefore, is further complexified through an understanding of the importance of lyrics and their invocation of global cultural geographies. Lyrics together with an eclectic repertoire of international music styles opens up possibilities in which listeners are able to use and make sense of British Bhangra in a process of self-realisation which is locally constituted but with a global frame of South Asian reference in mind. As my respondent Manjit put it:

Manjit: The lyrics also help you to think about India, the Punjab and that. I was in India last year and when I'm listening to some of the music now it reminds me of certain places I visited, or when I was with my relatives. Even food mentioned in the lyrics you can relate to.

RK: How do those memories of India relate to you being British?

Manjit: I know I'm not really from India as I'm born in England but it [India] has a special place in my mind because of my roots and family, and the fact that I've been there. So it's part of me being British too.

Listening to British Bhangra music opens up reflexive moments wherein listeners are able to "open up" and revisit a range of experiences from their life histories. British South Asian listeners, as in the example of Manjit, are able to formulate their identity as a process consisting of, amongst other things: the articulation of memory: generational histories: diasporic travel: affiliations with country of origin: affectionate pleasures of time spent with relatives: and the aroma of different food. In this way Bhangra music opens up dialogic moments for internal reflection which are unique according to individual life experiences. These dialogic moments are also collective in that other British South Asians are able to internalise similar life experiences but not necessarily in identical ways. Nonetheless, it is the reflexive act of being able to experience and revisit one's life histories as evoked through transnational music and lyrics that generates an understanding of British Bhangra as entwined with urban British experiences and at the same time inter-connected with global cultural identity formation as well.

However, not all lyrics in British Bhangra are as politically progressive or equally appreciated by all its listeners. For instance, issues of caste and gender are sometimes ominously played out through the music. These were interpreted by my respondents in a number of ways.

Caste- and Gender-Suspect Lyrics

The British Bhangra music industry is dominated by men. This has meant that some lyrics offer women limited representations as unashamed objects of pleasure in an unapologetic heterosexual fashion (see Gopinath 1995:310-311; and Kaur and Kalra 1996:228). Also, caste-specific overtones continue to be played privileging the *jat* (hierarchical landowning class of the Punjab) as primary producer and consumer of the music. The *jat*, and his female counterpart the *jati*, are respectively portrayed through stereotypical notions of male strength articulated with farming skills and youthful prowess, and a feminine beauty that is "sharp" in looks and allegedly unique to this caste. Interestingly, there is no reference to the social and economic exploitation rendered by sections of this caste to lower castes in terms of labour exploitation in South Asia!

The use of caste- and gender-suspect lyrics was recognised by my respondents but these did not diminish their pleasures of the music, or cramp their creative rebuffing of the narrow versions of cultural identities that some of the words entailed:

Manjit: In some of the songs you get the higher castes chatted about, especially the *jat*. It's as if the *jats* only listen to Bhangra or live in the Punjab. It can kind of isolate the other castes. Don't get me wrong, I mean for a lot of young people caste doesn't really matter, but now and then you still get some people, young and old, who are into caste and shit and when those kind of songs are played it can be ammunition for them.

RK: Do you have problems with listening to some Bhangra tracks in which men sing about women in a certain way?

Reshmo: Some of the stuff they are saying are bad towards girls, but still, you know, I like the songs. I don't really have a problem as I can listen to them on my own as background music when I'm working or doing something so I'm more interested in the music. But I'd be careful what I listen to in front of my mum, because she sometimes objects. She's say 'Do you know what that means? I don't like it.'

But then at parties sometimes you don't care what the lyrics are saying as long as you are having a good time and enjoying the music or the beat. Even then my mum will dance to the same songs that she might have objected to. Everyone joins in.

The different contexts in which Bhangra songs and lyrics are made sense of range from personal listening spaces to collective instances of song and dance at celebratory functions such as births, engagements, weddings and so forth. The different identities engendered in each of these spaces initiates a different set of responses to the lyrics and music in which my respondents make sense of themselves. The conservative positioning which some of the lyrics entail does not necessarily lead to a complete imposition on one's sense of self but can be reworked through the combination of lyrics and music. Often, as suggested by Reshmo, precedence can be given to the music over the lyrics in which the fluidity of the sound and beat can outplay the inherent conservative status quo of lyrical meaning. The fluid interplay of identities, music, and lyrics was further opened up on the dance floor at parties where genders, generations, kith and kin, all mingled in a performance of collective selves:

RK: What happens at the parties, could you say a bit more about that?

Reshmo: Most of our cousins are there, and we all dance together as a family. Occasionally parents dance in the one corner and the young people dance in another corner. At some parties the middle aged women they'll dance together cos they might feel we're going too fast for them so they'll be dancing slow, and our crowd will be just freaking out, going too fast for 'em [laughs]. But then we all get together and dance as families and cousins. Sometimes we make fun of each other, and depending on who you're dancing with we can dance in different ways.

RK: How do you mean dance in different ways?

Reshmo: You know like teasing one another, messing around, to dancing together and singing songs with each other, stuff like that.

The dance floor is an outlet for the performance and recreation of social selves. British Bhangra acts as a conduit through which triggers of individual and group identities are signaled and the dance floor becomes a literal and metaphoric space in which these are actualised. The performance of identities is not always a straightforward replica of the social self, but a mobile exchange of bodily movements, looks, gestures, feelings, and personal constructions of social space. The cost of conservative or discriminatory lyrics of caste or gender can be overcome

through the force of the music as a social cement which brings together different cultural experiences and social constituencies of personal leisure, emotional filters, parodies, genders, relationships, and different generations all mixed on the dance floor.

Whilst containing conservative streaks in some of its songs British Bhangra is also marked by its flexibility and reciprocity to tap into cultures-in-the-making across a range of identities. For instance the re-mixing of older tracks with urban sounds and other musical genres, repackaged for a more contemporary and diverse audience, is testimony to the music's potential for bringing about inter-generational dialogue and communication:

Reshmo: Some of the songs they have brought back and re-mixed. Like my parents use to listen to an old Bindrakhia [name of an artist from India] track without the bass, whereas they have brought it back re-mixed for us. My mum said 'Oh that's come back, I used to listen to that'. The song was in a Punjabi film which she'd seen and then we started talking about that film and when she was a young girl.

RK: You said you liked Bally Sagoo's Bhangra re-mixes, and especially his *Bollywood Flashback* album. What do you think about all that mixing he does bringing together Indian film music, Bhangra beats, rapping and so on?

Negget: I think that it's really good mixing old songs with new beats. The older generation used to listen to those songs when they first came out. I don't know if they like it or not, but we certainly do. I think he's bringing back our parents' culture but in a different way, in a way that we would like it. It's obviously changed from what it was all those years ago. We might not have liked it the way it was then.

Evidently, an analysis of the meanings inherent in Bhangra music, and its relationship with British South Asian identity formation reveals the social construction of cultural identities as contradictory as well as open to fluid possibilities. Given the problems of discrimination which arise from limited representations of caste and gender, perhaps asking for more ingenious and critical lyrics is not too much. As my respondent Rita summed up:

It would be good if they could sing more about women in better ways.

Assuredly, many Bhangra fans will be keeping vigilant ears as they continue to revel in the music and dance to the rhythms of the *dhol*. In this way, British Bhangra artists and musicians will have to deal with some of the music's more contradictory pleasures if they are to maintain a critical engagement with some of their more discerning listeners.

Summary

This essay has discussed existing academic accounts of British Bhangra music and in particular more recent studies which have linked diasporic South Asian identities with urban Black cultural politics. The paper has provided a qualitative analysis of actual voices in terms of their listening to and engagement with British Bhangra music. These have been offered not as a corrective to theoretically informed commentaries, but as an addition to open up further the realm of cultural and social inquiry relating to diasporic texts and identities.

Admittedly, the role of British Bhangra artists and producers themselves has not been covered in this paper. Their contributions to the development and sustenance of the British Bhangra cultural industry remains to be fully charted and made sense of in terms of cultural creativity and expression, albeit on the margins of mainstream popular music (see Dudrah 1998a, and 2000:chapter 4, for an account of the British Bhangra music industry in Birmingham, England).

Taken together, the meanings produced from the listening to, and dancing of, British Bhangra music illustrates a continued making of British South Asian identities in urban Black Britain. British Bhangra has been illustrated as a fusion based music incorporating other 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. Music listening and dancing is a way of making sense of oneself, and to narrate oneself internally to other social group members, and to the world at large. Diasporic South Asians are making meaning from, and adding to, Bhangra music as contributing to the ebbs and flows of their cultural identities and are announcing their presence through the audible soundscapes of Britain's major cities and beyond.

^NOTES

¹ Taken from the Wolverhampton (UK) based British-Bhangra band *Azaad's* [Free] 1989 album of the same name.

² For a general and very descriptive account of the different styles and forms of folk dances of the Punjab see K.S.Duggal (1980).

³ 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.

⁴ Extended interviews were conducted as part of a larger doctoral thesis research entitled 'British South Asian Identities and the Popular Cultures of British Bhangra Music, Bollywood Films, and Zee TV in Birmingham', Dept. of Cultural Studies and Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, January 2000. In total twenty-three extended interviews were conducted with 14 - 26 year old South Asians for this thesis. The six individual interviews used in this essay were conducted during December 1997 and February 1998. The respondents, under pseudonyms of their own choice, are:

Babs - 17 years old, female, A-levels student.

Manjit - 22, male, Bank clerk.

Reshmo - 17, female, A-levels student.

Neggett - 16, female, GCSEs student.

Attif - 15, male, GCSEs student.

Rita - 24, female, Crime Bureau Officer.

⁵ Extract from interview conducted with Suky Sohal, keyboard player and band member of Birmingham based *Achanak*. Interview conducted during period of thesis research, see footnote 4.

⁶ *Achanak* literally translates as 'suddenly' and this refers to the band's immediate appearance and success on the British Bhangra scene in the late eighties with their track *Lak Noo Halade* [Move That Hip]. *Achanak* continually use the word 'Nach' in all or part of the titles to their music albums: *NACHurally*, *paNACHe*, *sigNACHure*, *sNACH*, and *Top NACH*. 'Nach' means 'dance' and the clever play and combination of this Hindi/Punjabi/Urdu meaning with a vernacular British vocabulary serves to illustrate the band's eclectic aspirations and vision for British popular music.