

“ Bollywood Flashback:” Hindi Film Music and the Negotiation of Identity among British Asian Youths

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Abstract:

The songs that punctuate Hindi films and give them much of their remarkable international appeal are particularly significant sites in the cinema's attempt to deal with challenges to traditional structures of authority. Focusing on spectacular moments of non-narrative - and often explicitly erotic - pleasure, such songs proffer utopian scenarios within which the tensions raised by the narratives of kinship in crisis that dominate Hindi film are emolliated. It is the moments of melodic fantasy embedded in Hindi film, the song and dance routines which offer these condensed images of reconciliation, that predominantly working class youths in Britain appropriate in order to express the conflicting hopes and fears that characterize their own cosmopolitan identities. In this article, I discuss two of the most important instances of remix culture in Britain over the last decade in order to offer a retrospective take on the uses of Hindi-language film by second-generation Asian youths.

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During the 50th anniversary of Indian independence in Britain, South Asian dance music broke into the mainstream pop charts and set bodies moving to funky sitar and tabla grooves in urban dance clubs across the land.¹ British music pundits were suddenly giving their audiences crash courses on the hitherto obscure music produced by the Hindi film industry and on the intricacies of Sufi devotional music from Pakistan.² What London-based DJ and producer Talvin Singh calls the “soundz of the Asian underground” were going mainstream in a nation where the popular culture of the country’s significant South Asian population has been marginalized for the better part of thirty years.³ Yet, from the re-invention of the Punjabi folk music form called bhangra in the early ‘80s to today’s polyglot post-bhangra soundscapes, music has played a vital role as metaphor and site of cultural production among British South Asians.⁴ Moreover, since such musical forms were initially stimulated by and continue a vital dialogue with the folk and popular musics of South Asia, they provide a powerful instance of diasporic affiliation that complicates simplistic oppositions between the Western and the non-Western world.

Unfortunately, critical discussions of the British Asian diaspora’s cultural specificities have been just as lacking until recently as mainstream musical attention. Instead, the experience of the predominantly Afro-Caribbean immigrants from the West Indies during the post-1945 period has been taken as the template based on which most theories of diasporic expressive culture in Britain are elaborated (Gopinath 305). This approach has tended to reinscribe a schematic black/white binary that contributes to the significant forms of ethnic essentialism which continue to characterize British discourse around racial issues. Homogenizing, exclusionary notions of racial identity and difference are unlikely to be undermined by a theoretical framework that continues to foster such binary relations. Only by conceptualizing diasporic culture as the product of multiple, overlapping communities and histories can such binary frameworks be dismantled. More specifically, the complex forms of borrowing, solidarity

and reciprocity between Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities need to be placed squarely at the center of our accounts of diasporic culture in Britain.

The composite character of diasporic experience both within local contexts and across transnational spaces is particularly significant in relation to youth culture. Recent ethnographic work among Asian youth in Britain has demonstrated the particularly cosmopolitan character of the vernacular culture produced by diasporic teenagers.⁵ On the cusp of adulthood, South Asian youths occupy interstitial points in their lives, stages during which they engage in particularly intense forms of negotiation over their identities (Gillespie 2). These youths are highly adept at the forms of code switching and inter-cultural navigation that minority communities in general rely on to survive. Cutting and mixing multiple different cultural reference points, Asian teenagers in Britain create the striking recombinant cultural forms and non-essential identities that Stuart Hall argues characterize “new ethnicities.” Yet we should not let the aesthetic power of such recombinant cultural forms diminish our awareness of the pressures felt by second-generation youths to adopt stances of ethnic authenticity or purity.⁶ Asian youths feel the pull of such constructions of cultural heritage from a variety of quarters, including their parents’ often nostalgic memories of “home,” multiculturalist ideals in the broader public sphere, the lived experience of racism in Britain, and cultural practices of cool and nostalgia within youth subcultures themselves (Maira 189).

But this does not mean that second-generation youths are passive consumers of essentialist cultural representations. Rather, like youths in other subcultures, young British Asians adapt and transform themselves with dexterity based on the perceived requirements of particular social situations. Indeed, it is from the reworking and intermingling of these different ethnic “traditions” that much of the appeal and innovation of diasporic youth culture is generated. It is this need to negotiate between multiple, at times conflicting representations of cultural identity that helps explain the prominence of Hindi films for British Asian youths. Hindi films offer second generation Asian youths a visual and aural archive from which they may appropriate elements of cultural identity.⁷ Of late, such images have also included glamorous

representations of diasporic or “Non-Resident Indians” (Desai 46). Nonetheless, many of the images produced by mainstream Hindi film remain relatively alien to young Asians who have been born and raised in Britain. Yet for young people growing up in the context of the often hostile racial climate of Britain, the web of transnational links and the forms of imagined community embedded in Hindi films can provide a potent set of alternative identities.⁸ As this second generation has grown increasingly self-confident and has garnered more attention from the mainstream, so these mediated images of cultural tradition have increased in importance. Yet the notions of heritage mobilized by this cinematic tradition cannot be seen as static, for, as many critics have observed, Hindi films have been notably concerned throughout the postcolonial period with Indian attempts to mediate between tradition and modernity.⁹ Hindi films offer seductive images of the means through which traditional structures of authority in South Asia cope with the transforming impact of modernization. They consequently provide a crucial set of discourses and images in relation to which Asian youths in Britain adapt to, avoid, contest, and appropriate the multiple authority structures that surround them as they mature.

As I will argue in more detail later, the songs which punctuate Hindi films and give them much of their remarkable international appeal are particularly significant sites in the cinema’s attempt to deal with challenges to traditional structures of authority. Focusing on spectacular moments of non-narrative - and often explicitly erotic - pleasure, such songs proffer utopian scenarios within which the tensions raised by the narratives of kinship in crisis that dominate Hindi film are emolliated. The lyrics of these songs tend to be based on the idealizing and pastoral romantic verse of the classical Persian and Urdu traditions. This ideal realm of the emotions is often “picturized” in Hindi film through an abrupt cut in the narrative and a spatial shift to a dramatic landscape, often in Switzerland - which closely resembles Kashmir, without the bloodletting. As Ronald Inden has argued, these lyrical interludes function for the newly affluent Indian middle class who are the hegemonic producers and consumers of Hindi film as idyllic expressions of their own desire for effortless mobility between India and the Western world. By extension, the NRIs of the diaspora play an increasingly central role within Hindi

films, according to Inden, as icons of the reconciliation of tradition and consumer utopia to which this Indian middle class aspires. It is the moments of melodic fantasy embedded in Hindi film, the song and dance routines which offer these condensed images of reconciliation, that predominantly working class youths in Britain are appropriating in order to express the conflicting hopes and fears that characterize their own cosmopolitan identities. In this article, I discuss two of the most important instances of remix culture in Britain over the last decade in order to offer a retrospective take on the uses of Hindi-language film by second-generation Asian youths.

Hindi Film Music in the Diaspora

One of the most dramatic instances of transnational cultural flow in recent years has been the album of remixed Hindi film music produced by British Asian DJ Bally Sagoo. On Bollywood Flashback, Sagoo recasts the Hindi film tradition of musical fusion by recording an album dedicated to the work of the renowned Bollywood musical director R.D. Burman.¹⁰ Taught to play the sarod by the master Ali Akbar Khan, Burman went on to mix psychedelic rock and jazz with the forms of the classical Indian tradition to create the soundtracks for some of Bollywood's greatest blockbusters of the 1970s and '80s. Just as Hindi film culture once fed on regional folk musics in India and, in the work of R.D. Burman, incorporated contemporary Euro-American experimental music, so Sagoo's post-bhangra mixes now draw life from the popular traditions of Hindi film. On Bollywood Flashback, the frenetic beats of London's underground club scene blend with piercingly nasal singing and Burman's "gypsy-style" instrumentation.

"Mehbooba Mehbooba," a remix from the Hindi film *Sholay* and one of the most compelling songs on the album, seems particularly appropriate in the context of this discussion. Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*, made in 1975, remakes the classic expression of American imperial hegemony: the Western. As such, it provides a powerful example of the indigenizing dynamic through which Hindi film absorbs the products of the globally dominant Hollywood industry.

This transformative dynamic forces us to rethink traditional arguments concerning cultural imperialism and one way relations between center and periphery (Appadurai 31). Specifically, *Sholay* transforms the U.S.-based Western's concern with regeneration through genocidal violence into a visceral depiction of traditional Indian authority structures in crisis.¹¹ Literalizing this scenario in graphic terms, *Sholay* presents us with the spectacle of the upper-caste Thakur who represents such authority having his arms chopped off in the course of the film by the leader of a gang of outlaws or dacoits.¹²

The popularity of the young heroes who revenge this violent attack on authority, played by Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra, is integrally related to the processes of urbanization in India during the 1960s and '70s. Ashwani Sharma has argued convincingly that Bachchan's apotheosis as voice of the oppressed in this and subsequent films is a product of his ability to canalize the angers and desires of the newly-formed underclass of slum dwellers who constituted the main audience for Hindi films during the period.¹³ In scenes of spectacular violence and tear-jerking melodrama, Bachchan developed an "angry young man" persona whose alienation from the corrupt materialistic world that surrounded him in each film provided a powerful sense of identification and catharsis for the displaced and impoverished audiences of the period. *Sholay* pits the ambiguously individualistic morality of this persona against the forces of corruption and social dissolution in a hyper-violent melodrama released, coincidentally, during the same year that Indira Gandhi proclaimed a "State of Emergency" to deal with supposedly anti-social elements within the nation.

"Mehbooba Mehbooba" is performed during the heroes' raid on a camp of gypsies, where the dacoits have gone to buy arms. The camp site offers a suggestive alternative to the conventional mores found in the village the heroes are defending, on the one hand, and the homosocial thuggery of the bandits' lair, on the other. Indeed, the song sequence that unfolds in this scene centers on the dance performed by a gypsy woman, a performance delivered in a provocatively sexual manner for Hindi films of the time. The dance is accompanied by music with an overtly sensual Middle Eastern theme and heavily Persianized lyrics.¹⁴ Like most other

film songs, “Mehbooba Mehbooba” draws on traditions of Persian and Urdu romantic poetry for its imagery and principal themes; the lyrics are, however, relatively stripped down and direct:

Mahbuubaa ("Beloved") - 4X

gulshan meM gul khilte haiM
Flowers bloom in the pleasure garden

jab se raah meM milte haiM maiM aur tuu
ever since you and I met on the road (on the journey)

Mahbuubaa.....

Dilrubaa....
Lover/Darling.....

khushbuu ishq giraaOM meM
The perfume of love is in [your] words/speech,

baahoM meM nigaahoM meM
in your arms, in your glances,

Mahbuubaa....

The overdetermined exoticism and steamy sexuality of the “Mehbooba Mehbooba” sequence associate the film’s villains with social and cultural liminality. This is a standard element of the melodramatic structure of Hindi films, where evil is often associated with Western or other non-Indian values (Thomas, ‘Melodrama’ 168). Ironically, the Bachchan character and his sidekick, erstwhile outlaws themselves, enter the dacoit’s camp to revenge the Thakur’s mutilation only to get an eyeful and earful of precisely the non-normative values they are commissioned to destroy. *Sholay*’s heroes thereby provide the audience with access to this realm of illicit sexuality and “foreign” culture. In addition, as Rosie Thomas has argued for the genre of Hindi films as a whole, the heroes in the film mediate between this zone of illicit identity and the realm of traditional authority represented by the Thakur. Their mediatory role is signified chiefly through superficial signifiers of difference such as their Western bell-bottom jeans and through narrative elements such as their individualistic approach to social justice (Thomas, ‘Melodrama’ 160).

How might this process of mediation have relevance for an audience of contemporary South Asians in Britain? Clearly the explosive anger of the Bachchan character may hold substantial appeal for young men in Britain who have been subjected not only to escalating racist attacks but also to media stereotypes concerning Asian passivity.¹⁵ The growth of cosmopolitan cultures in Britain has occasioned a substantial backlash from the political establishment, as well as a dramatic upsurge in brutal racist attacks.¹⁶ According to the Home Office, the number of racial incidents more than trebled during the 1990s - and Asians are the targets of a growing number of these attacks (Younge 24). Although recent government legislation has sought to proscribe religiously based hate crimes, attacks on and discrimination against Muslim Asians have escalated significantly since 9/11 (Casciani). Furthermore, despite the substantial heterogeneity of Britain's South Asian population as a result of regional, caste, religious, linguistic, and class differences, young Asians remain subject to the same structural racism as their parents. This is particularly true for youths of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. Working in industries on the decline and living in the urban areas hardest hit by the restructuring of the world economy, these groups are among the first to suffer from Britain's economic woes. In addition, British Asians in general did not reap the rewards of the nation's halting economic revitalization during the 1990s (Hattersley 19). In cities such as Birmingham, unemployment among British Asian teenagers is twice as high as that of white school dropouts. Sixty percent of young Black Londoners are currently out of work as compared with 11 percent of their white contemporaries. Asian youths' access to the means of self-expression, whether through education, commodity culture, or control of public space, is being profoundly curtailed by these changes in the post-industrial city. The ascent of "Asian cool" to the epitome of fashion in Britain over the last few years needs, then, to be looked at more than a little skeptically (Ahmad). Indeed, the syncretic work produced by many South Asians artists today underlines the travails as well as the pleasures that attend diasporic identity in Britain. Given this social context, it should come as little surprise that Bachchan's angry young man persona resonates strongly with British Asian youths.

There is, however, an additional process at work that can help to explain the appeal of Sagoo's appropriation of this material from *Sholay*. The tensions between authority and its subversion that circulate within the "Mehbooba Mehbooba" sequence clearly resonate with those that manifest themselves in the domestic sites where young Asians often consume Hindi films. When such films are screened in the context of family gatherings, they help catalyze debates about values such as kinship, sexuality, and gendered access to public space. In addition, the forms of (distinctly masculine) visual pleasure offered up by this notably transgressive sequence and the overtly Orientalist song that backs it are likely to have a very different impact than they do on the subcontinent. While British Asian viewers are apt to be familiar with the melodramatic codes of alienness discussed above, they are unlikely to share the same sense of indigeneity as Indian viewers. Nonetheless, just as Orientalist conceptions of Indian identity were appropriated during the struggle for national liberation from British rule, so the melodramatic codes within Hindi films are adopted by young British viewers as images of heightened "Indianness."¹⁷ The spectacular erotic displays found in Hindi film sequences, moments of non-diegetic pleasure embodied in particularly graphic form in "Mehbooba Mehbooba," offer an alluring supplement to the everyday lives of (male, heterosexual) Asian youth in Britain. As popular culture so often does, the potent music and images found in the song sequences of Hindi films provide a compelling source of alternative identities, a set of invented traditions that speak to both the limitations and possibilities of the traditions young Asians in Britain grow up with.¹⁸ It is not so surprising, then, that such sequences have become central icons for Asian DJs intent on broadcasting and capitalizing on their ethnic identity.

In addition to referencing such cultural politics, Bally Sagoo's rendition of "Mehbooba Mehbooba" is also a wry comment on practices of musical appropriation. The song begins with the heavy-duty rhythmic drive train and the body-positive chants of "Go Go" that have become standard elements of the electronic dance form known as techno. Gradually an additional beat and an ascending synthesizer line is layered in. Then Burman's high, nasally pitched voice enters, initially heavily processed into broken fragments. These fragments gradually solidify into

the intoxicating “Mehbooba Mehbooba” refrain from *Sholay*, in which a characteristically plangent plaint is delivered to a beloved in a flower garden. The song breaks down and builds back up in typical techno fashion, until a sample of the violin theme from Echo and the Bunnymen’s “The Cutter”, an underground hit in Britain’s Neo-Romantic rock movement during the 1980s, enters to add its suave sensuality to the already heady blend. “The Cutter” begins with a sweeping string theme orchestrated by Ravi Shankar, the sitar player and composer whose association with George Harrison first introduced Indian influences into Western popular music. Influenced by the Beatles’ excursions into the exoticization of South Asian culture, Echo employs an Orientalist musical lexicon to give their song a narcotically romantic edge. Bally Sagoo seems quite aware of this Orientalist tradition in British pop music. By mixing *Sholay*’s most explicitly hybrid track together with the hippy drone of a British group such as Echo, Bally Sagoo stakes his claim as the ultimate mediator, capable of synthesizing and reprocessing multiple takes on Asian identity into an adroitly syncretic set of sonorous possibilities.

Sagoo has been marketed as a prime exponent of South Asian diasporic hybridity. The cover for Rising From the East, an album released shortly after Bollywood Flashback, features a glossy black-and-white photo of Sagoo mounted in a rickety wooden frame festooned with ancient looking incense saucers, bangles, and folkish figurines. Sony, Sagoo's new record company, represents him as a performer of authentically Indian music set to a western beat. As Ashwani Sharma has argued, Sagoo is receiving the same marketing as have the many other World Music stars - from Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to the Throat singers of Tuva - who have been sold by transnational music corporations boxed into the neat categories of essentialized ethnic identity (Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 23). Yet the notion of hybridity celebrated in relation to Sagoo's work is predicated, as the foregoing comments suggest, on the encounter of a reductively conceived East and West. It is the blending of these neatly discrete cultures which is said to produce a new, hybrid condition. As Pnina Werbner has argued concerning multiculturalism, contemporary notions of cultural mixing are often predicated on the assumed homogeneity and boundedness of the cultures that are encountering one another (6). Moreover, within the terms of

this Manichean logic of East meets West, the repository of “tradition” is, not surprisingly, to be found in the Orientalized East. As has so frequently been the case, Western celebrations of the aesthetic accomplishments of the “Others” are animated by a thinly veiled primitivism.

Additionally, contemporary primitivist discourse locates progressive values and technological innovation in the multicultural space of the Euro-American global city, just as was true in Modernist subsumptions of Otherness.

Bally Sagoo’s major label output can, however, be read as an archly self-aware undermining of this popular Orientalism. First of all, the title of his 1996 album - Rising From the East - takes a sarcastic swipe at the kind of moral panic that has spurred the passage of increasingly repressive immigration legislation in Britain since the 1960s. Despite the fact that the South Asian population of Britain is expected to crest at 6% of the nation’s total, a postcolonial moral panic concerning reverse colonization has led to the passage of a series of bills making it ever harder for non-white Commonwealth citizens to enter Britain. While Tony Blair’s Labour government abolished the Primary Purpose Rule - which prevented Commonwealth husbands from joining their British wives - no steps have yet been taken to eliminate the Nationality Act of 1981, with its two-tiered system of citizenship that places a firm line between “Patrial UK” and “Commonwealth” subjects. The Queen’s recent description during a visit to Pakistan of Britain as a “multi-ethnic society” will remain a wish rather than a reality as long as such racialized boundaries are being policed by the state.

In addition to such jibes at Britain’s enduring racism, Bally Sagoo organizes his album according to a loaded musical trajectory. Rising begins with evocations of classical Indian music and gradually segues from song to song into contemporary Western electronica. This musical itinerary undermines the binary dynamic implicit to orientalist discourse. Sagoo’s work suggests that East and West are no longer homogeneous and neatly bounded entities, that traditional definitions of British identity are being rearticulated in complex and creative ways by the second generation of the South Asian diaspora. Having discussed the potent instances of such composite culture in Bally Sagoo’s work, I turn now to an exploration of Cornershop’s “Brimful

of Asha” and the social milieu that promotes cosmopolitan attitudes among young South Asians in Britain.

Consuming India

Like Sagoo’s work, Cornershop’s “Brimful of Asha” has helped fuel interest in all things Asian, drawing Western attention specifically to Hindi film and its parallel music industry.¹⁹ The song, which hit #1 in British charts during 1998, is a paean to one of Hindi film’s most famous playback singers, Asha Bhosle. Since the early days of sound in Hindi film, actors have routinely lip-synched songs on screen. Indeed, the fame of the playback singers and their characteristic vocal styles are often just as responsible for making a movie into a hit as the quality of the film’s narrative or the star’s acting. Over a funky, retro-sounding guitar line, the group’s singer and songwriter Tjinder Singh croons nostalgically about the joys of listening to Asha’s songs on old seven-inch vinyl singles:

There’s dancing
 Behind movie scenes
 Behind the movie scenes
 Sadi Rani [Punjabi for “natural queen”]
 She’s the one that keeps the dream alive
 from the morning to the evening
 to the end of the light
 Brimful of Asha on the 45
 Well it’s a brimful of Asha on the 45
 And dancing
 Behind movie scenes
 Behind those movie screens
 Asha Bhosle
 She’s the one that keeps the dream alive
 from the morning
 past the evening
 to the end of the light
 Brimful of Asha on the 45
 Well it’s a brimful of Asha on the 45
 And singing
 illuminate the main streets
 and the cinema aisles

We don't care 'bout no
 government warnings
 'bout their promotion of a simple life
 and the dams they're building
 Brimful of Asha on the 45
 Well it's a brimful of Asha on the 45
 Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow
 Everybody needs a bosom
 mine's on the 45
 Mohammed Rafi - 45 [Punjabi playback singer who worked with Asha Bhosle]
 Lata Mangeshkar - 45 [Asha's elder sister, Hindi film's most recorded playback singer]
 Solid state radio - 45
 Ferguson mono - 45
 Bon Publique - 45 [a reference to George Bransen's French track concerning community]
 Jacques Dutronic and the Bolan Boogie ['60s French singer & Marc Bolan of T Rex]
 The Heavy Hitters and the Chichi music
 All India radio - 45
 Two in ones - 45
 Argo Records - 45 [label famed for its range of music]
 Trojan Records - 45 [Jamaican ska and reggae label where Bob Marley first recorded]
 Brimful of Asha on the 45
 77,000-piece orchestra set
 Brimful of Asha on the 45
 Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow
 Mine's on the RPM!

Asha Bhosle, the voice behind countless Indian female film stars over the last forty years, is notable for challenging the singing style made dominant by her elder sister Lata Mangeshkar. Lata's style was characterized by an exquisitely sweet and girl-like delivery; by contrast, Asha introduced a passionate singing style into Hindi film that registers as the carnal opposite to Lata's virginal tones (Chatterjee, 'Melody' 59). Indeed, the two sisters were frequently employed in the same movie to sing the voices of heroines who embodied the contrasting good and evil values of the melodramatic form.

While Asha has now become one of the titans of South Asian popular culture, her path to such stardom was not a smooth one. This makes Cornershop's decision to dedicate their song to her rather than, for example, to her more successful elder sister particularly interesting. Unlike Lata Mangeshkar, Asha had a stormy personal and professional life. Becoming a playback

singer when her father's repertory company, the Mangeshkar Travelling Theater, folded in the 1940s as Hindi film became an increasingly dominant form of popular entertainment, Asha's success was placed in doubt when she married against her family's wishes. The marriage did not go well and, following her divorce, Asha was branded a fallen woman by the film industry, constantly being played off against her more successful sister (Chaudary 14). This scandal ironically seems to have made a more compelling figure out of Asha. As Rosie Thomas has demonstrated in her analysis of the gossipy Indian fanzines that track the lives of Hindi film actors, female stars become more alluring to the public gaze the more contradictions they embody and the greater their transgressions ('Sanctity' 11). This is particularly true given the thematic concern with the control of female sexuality and women's social identity that is a central structural component of the Hindi film tradition (Thomas, 'Sanctity' 19).

Asha's perceived transgressions through her refusal of a traditional arranged marriage, her subsequent divorce, and her various affairs are particularly significant in the context of British Asian youth culture given the social character of Hindi film consumption. While Tjinder Singh's "Brimful of Asha" describes his encounter with Hindi film songs and other recordings in what is presumably the relatively privatized space of the bedroom where most teenage music consumption takes place, most Hindi film is consumed in a far more collective setting. Members of the South Asian diaspora in Britain have always relied on film technology to maintain ties with their homelands. Specialist Asian cinemas began to appear throughout the UK in the 1970s. At the height of this boom, the UK had as many as 120 cinemas showing exclusively Asian films (Tyrrell 21). By the late 1970s, however, video technology had begun eclipsing theatrical exhibition venues. Indeed, South Asians in Britain were world pioneers in the use of this technology. By 1980 they had become one of the world's first mass video audiences, supporting up to 20 specialist video shops in each major British city. Asians have been correspondingly quick to embrace the new technologies of satellite and cable television.²⁰ The speed with which British Asians have adopted such technologies helps explain why they now constitute the dominant global market for Indian films.²¹ In addition, there have been recent signs of Indian

film's return to the silver screen in the UK with the debut of Bollywood films in a number of multiplexes around the country (Tyrrell 22). Yet despite the success of theatrical releases such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* over the last decade, Indian film continues to be consumed in a predominantly domestic setting.

Cornershop's "Brimful of Asha" takes an ironic distance from nostalgic modes of diasporic cultural production and consumption in a number of ways.²² While Tjinder Singh clearly emphasizes his pride in his Asian heritage through the song's invocation of Asha Bhosle's glamour, he also includes a series of critical remarks that indicate his distance from a purely nostalgic frame of mind. Like Asian youths who use the Hindi film tradition to appropriate, transform, and, in some instances, flout, their parents' ideas of Indian custom, Singh pens an ambiguous homage to Indian cultural tradition. On the one hand, Singh's refrain of "everybody needs a bosom for a pillow" suggests that Asha and her metonymic bosom provide some sort of solace for the singer. Such a reading, which is clearly the primary one given the song's multiple additional allusions to Hindi film culture, would seem to support an argument concerning the nostalgia that at times animates diasporic consumption of Indian cinema. Nostalgia is, literally taken, a desire for home, a desire that the seductive celluloid images of Hindi film cultivate through their presentation of an ideal and ultimately united community. Yet "Brimful of Asha," with its references to Asha "behind movie scenes" - an allusion to her career as a playback singer - also points to the constructedness not just of the female personae in such films but of the entire set of imagined communities that such films invoke and enact. Sumita Chakravarty's suggestion that the performances in post-Independence Indian films are a form of "imperso-nation" which plays a central role in consolidating the imagined community of the nation is particularly useful here (4). Singh's archly ironic comments about such performances destabilize traditional ideas of the boundedness of Asian community. Singh is clearly capable of more heated attacks. His group's name angrily satirizes the racial stereotyping engaged in by the white majority in Britain, who think that all Asians run small grocery stores called 'cornershops.' By contrast, the relatively gentle parody of diasporic nostalgia found in "Brimful of Asha"

suggests Singh's awareness of the complex terrain that second-generation youths traverse.²³

In addition to the song's allusions to the invented character of tradition, Singh's refrain also refers coyly to the increasingly explicit sexual spectacle of recent Hindi film. That the principal link with India fostered by Hindi film takes the form of frankly sexual fantasies would probably not sit particularly well with parents anxious to inculcate "traditional" values in their children.²⁴ Indeed, as we have already seen, Hindi film traditionally banishes explicit sexuality precisely to the songs that are woven through each film. Singh's rereading of this tradition manages to allude both to the role played by such films as vehicles of nostalgia for the "mother land" while also underlining the sexual spectacle through which such nostalgic fantasies are often mobilized. This sly subversion is particularly apparent in the song's dedication to Asha Bhosle, whose vocal style and life off-screen, as we have seen, confound nostalgic filmic representations of gender that position women as vehicles of pure or authentic national identity.

Moreover, Singh's work carries an ironic edge that subverts the nationalist text embedded in much of the Hindi film tradition. When he sings "We don't care 'bout no government warnings/'bout their promotion of a simple life/and the dams they're building," Singh takes a telling swipe at the didactic use made of Hindi film by nationalist forces in early postcolonial India.²⁵ The kind of nationalist rhetoric that animates images such as the opening of a dam in the framing plot of Mehboob Khan's classic *Mother India*, to take one of the most famous instances of such didactic contents, is clearly the target of Cornershop's irony. Singh takes for granted a new global cultural sphere, in which connections are made across the lateral axis of space rather than the vertical hierarchy of the nation and its modernizing bureaucracy.

Singh also balances his nostalgic invocation of Asha's singing by placing Hindi film within a set of plural and multi-sited cultural references. Name-checking a list of cultural figures from the 1970s that extends geographically from Jamaica to France to India, Singh reiterates the lived history of cultural hybridity that characterizes members of the Asian diaspora in Britain. The sheer internationality of this list offers unimpeachable evidence of the singer's cosmopolitan character. Singh thereby situates his links to South Asian culture within a much broader web of

transnational connections and influences. This suggests that India is no longer seen by second generation South Asians like Singh as the “mother country,” the primary locus from which identity and memories are derived, despite cultural pressures to perform authentic Asian identity at appropriate moments (Gopinath 304). Such cosmopolitan affiliations clearly trouble essentialist notions of communal heritage and national belonging.

Cultural hybridity is also evident in the sonic collage that marks each song on the album. Often, songs begin with a fragment of Hindi or Punjabi recorded in India, mix indie-style guitar with classical Indian ragas, use abundant hip-hop scratching techniques, and bring together different performance styles. The most prominent example of the latter, and one of the most interesting songs on the album, is “Good to be on the Road Back Home.” This song adopts the conventions of the U.S. country-and-western tradition to deliver an evocative love song that captures the pain and longing that accompanies displacement. Like the British feature film *Wild West*, which follows the comic exploits of a group of young British Asians who aspire to success in Nashville as a country-and-western band, Cornershop scrambles cultural and geographical coordinates in their song. This reference to the American representations of Indian (Native American) identity in “western” movies and television shows is part of a strategy based on affirming South Asian heritage while recasting that heritage in playful, punning terms that make it acceptable within the cosmopolitan youth culture of non-Asians in Britain (Gillespie 5). The fluency of Cornershop’s country-and-western song suggests a brash and assertive sensibility born of substantial cosmopolitan cultural capital. Self-confidently appropriating a tradition associated with dramatic forms of imperialism, Cornershop also implicitly parodies parochial Western stereotypes of cultural difference. Just as *Sholay* transformed the U.S. genre of the Western into a *masala* form, so Cornershop adapt the country-and-western music tradition to meditate on the meaning of mobility in contemporary Britain.

Conclusion

Tjinder Singh’s catalogue of his record collection on “Brimful of Asha” reminds us of

the extent to which transnational connections have been fostered by contemporary forms of media. Offering substantial challenges to the nation-state, new media create forms of affiliation that function through the global reach of consumer capitalism (Lipsitz 5). DJ and record collecting cultures, however, are overwhelmingly male-oriented and thus raise issues of the equality of access afforded by this new public sphere.²⁶ In addition, as I indicated earlier, Asian performers of both sexes continue to face serious obstacles to success within the recording industry in places such as Britain. For example, in 1994 Bally Sagoo became the first Asian performer to sign with a major label; he did so, however, only after selling millions of albums worldwide through exclusively Asian outlets. Many of these Asian outlets have no policies for preventing bootlegs, making it extremely difficult not only for a performer to generate reliable data concerning his or her sales, but also to make any substantial profits from them.

Like Sagoo, Cornershop use the history of western musicians' appropriation of Indian music to criticize enduring disparities of economic and cultural resources. The group close their album with a stinging cover version of the Beatles' "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)." Delivering the lyrics of the Beatles' classic in Punjabi, Singh foregrounds the song's use of Asian instrumentation such as the sitar by taking this Eastern "inspiration" to its logical conclusion. This kind of parodic strategy suggests that producers of South Asian popular culture such as Tjinder Singh feel little need to be apologetic about their cultural heritage. By unearthing the uses made of Asian culture by white performers in the past, artists like Sagoo and Singh undermine myths concerning the absolute difference and alienness of such culture. In addition, by highlighting the power relations that underlie apparently cosmopolitan cultural forms, the work of Sagoo and Singh encourages us to develop more complex, contextually based notions of hybridity.

Indeed, the cosmopolitan identities of working class Asian youths in Britain share relatively little with those of white middle class musicians such as David Byrne, Beck, and Paul Simon, whose transnational reach can, in the worst instances, be nothing more than aural neo-colonialism.²⁷ MIDI technology, which allows digital samples taken from highly diverse sound

sources to be harmonized and set to a programmed beat, has opened the sound archive of recorded history, turning the contemporary musician into a species of sonic archeologist. This new technology has also exposed musical performances around the world to the appropriative urges of Western musicians looking for fresh sounds. The power relations that facilitate such global flows need to be examined. For instance, copyright laws that do little to protect musicians from developing nations often facilitate best selling “world music” remixes. In the case of India, for instance, such laws focus on the protection of particular performances rather than on lyrics, preventing composers and lyricists from collecting royalties when their songs get adapted by world music proponents. The upshot is often a highly inegalitarian relation between cultural producers in various sites of the global cultural economy. The catch all character of theoretical terms such as hybridity often obscures rather than illuminates such disparate material conditions.

Finally, if, as Sagoo and Singh’s work highlights, some of the most vibrant elements of British culture have been based on appropriations of the cultural forms created by members of the South Asian diaspora, then the kind of ethnic chauvinism articulated by many in Britain today is hardly tenable. In opposition to such xenophobic and parochial thinking, Britons need to acknowledge the extent to which their identities have been forged through a long history of imperialism. The syncretic cultures of Britain’s former colonial subjects may be an uncomfortable reminder of this history, but they are also among the most inventive aesthetic forms currently being produced. By invoking and remixing the hybrid forms of music found within the Hindi film tradition, musicians such as Bally Sagoo and Tjinder Singh compellingly document the cosmopolitan character of diasporic youth culture. Unfortunately, in the post-9/11 conjuncture, the success of this syncretic style with music fans and the mainstream media has done relatively little to increase public awareness of the economic and social marginalization of second-generation Asian youths in Britain.

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Endnotes

¹ Sheila Chandra's work with Monsoon had topped the charts prior to this, but, unlike the phenomenon under discussion here, it was an isolated instance.

²See, for instance, the canned explanation of Cornershop's hit song "Brimful of Asha" in The Daily Mail [London] 4 Mar. 1999.

³Singh's compilation album features many of the most important new producers in the South Asian music scene, including State of Bengal, Future Soundz of Indian, Amar, Osmani Soundz, The Milky Bar Kid, Kingsik Biswas, as well as his own work. See Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground, LP, Omni Records (LC 0407), 1997. The other essential compilation of contemporary British Asian dance music is Untouchable Outcaste Beats, Vol. 1, LP, Outcaste Records (TBCD 3086), 1997.

⁴For a detailed discussion of bhangra's history in Britain, see Baumann.

⁵Cosmopolitan here refers to the condition of openness towards divergent cultural experiences that is one aspect of contemporary globalization. See Hannerz, 238.

⁶For an extremely nuanced and ethnographically grounded discussion of the politics of ethnic authenticity among South Asian youths in the U.S., see Maira, particularly pp. 189-95.

⁷While there are certainly other regional centers of film production within India, Bombay's Hindi-language production remains overwhelmingly dominant, particularly in terms of the foreign market. This dominance is apparent within the products of Britain's Asian youth culture, which are predominantly derived from Hindi film sources.

⁸These alternative identities should not, however, be seen as inherently liberatory. For a discussion of the problematic gender implications of subcultural nostalgia, see Maira, 149-188.

⁹See, for instance, Prasad 7, Dissanayake and Sahai 21, and Thomas 160.

¹⁰Bollywood is a term developed by western journalists that alludes to the Bombay-based Hindi film industry. The term is highly ethnocentric since it implies that Hindi film is simply an Eastern version of Hollywood. This is ironic given the fact that 'Bollywood' produces more films annually than Hollywood does. In addition, the term erroneously implies that Hindi films are derivative of U.S. movies, a kind of cinematic equivalent of V.S. Naipaul's notorious notion of postcolonial mimicry.

¹¹For a discussion of violence in representations of the U.S. West, see Slotkin. *Sholay* is discussed in great detail in Dissanayake and Sahai.

¹²*Thakur*, literally "lord, master," is a respectful title for a member of one of the landlord castes who trace their lineage to ancient *kshatriyas* or warrior-aristocrats according to the Digital Dictionary of South Asian Languages, <<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionary/platts>>

¹³Sharma provides a useful overview of the social conditions surrounding Bachchan's rise to stardom.

¹⁴Thanks to Philip Lutgendorf for help with the translation and contextualization of these and other lyrics.

¹⁵For more on this issue, see Westwood.

¹⁶Perhaps the most important discussion of racism in Britain is found in Gilroy, who, however, makes no reference to the specificity of Asian experience in Britain.

¹⁷The colonial analogue I'm drawing is discussed in detail in Chatterjee.

¹⁸Compare Hebdige's reflections on the power of American popular culture for working class white British youths during the immediate post-war period.

¹⁹Manuel notes that film music was the predominant popular music in India from Independence until at least the late '70s, when cheap cassettes began to revolutionize the domestic music market.

²⁰For a discussion of television and Asian identity, see Dudrah.

²¹British South Asians now make up over 50% of the global market for Indian films, having recently surpassed the Middle East precisely because of cable television technology. See Pendakur and Subramanyam.

²²For a critique of diasporic film viewing and the nostalgic representation of "homelands", see Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*.

²³For a discussion of the 'strategic nostalgia' employed by diasporic youth at times, see Maira, 193.

²⁴See Maira on ethnic purity and (female) chastity, 149-188.

²⁵For a detailed discussion of the film industry and the Indian state, see Chakravarty, 55-79.

²⁶Gopinath's critique of the heterosexism of much bhangra music is particularly apposite in this regard.

²⁷Taylor makes some particularly acid observations concerning the revival of the explorer stereotype that is evident in much of the world music scene today.