

Desi Remix: The Plural Dance Cultures of New York's South Asian Diaspora

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On a sweltering August afternoon in 1996, New York City's Summerstage concert series brought the South Asian dance music known as bhangra to Central Park. South Asian families from all over the tri-state area sunned themselves, jostled for room, and danced in a jam-packed sandy space under sun-dappled plane trees. New York turntablist DJ Rekha added some hometown flavor, spinning bhangra remixes to much applause before the Safri Boys, one of Britain's hottest bhangra bands, took the stage. Although bhangra remix had been transforming South Asian youth culture in the US at least since the release of UK musician Bally Sagoo's pathbreaking "Star Crazy" album in 1991, the concert in Central Park was a particular milestone. Here, visible to a broad public, was a display of the compelling cultural forms through which South Asians of the diaspora were articulating new, composite identities. The multiple regional contrasts and tensions that define identity within the subcontinent were harmonized in this diasporic context. The result was a powerful sense of cultural unity and pride. Desi (Hindi for "homeboy" or "homegirl") culture had definitely arrived.<sup>1</sup>

Asian culture has been 'kool' in Britain for quite some time. Fusion artists like deejays Talvin Singh, State of Bengal, Badmarsh and Shri, Apache Indian, and Bally Sagoo, to name but a few of the crossover stars in Britain's musical firmament, spearheaded the new Indo-chic which focused mainstream attention on Britain's bhangra subculture. Despite the role of prominent British intellectuals like Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha in theorizing such syncretic forms, some commentators have questioned the ahistorical and simplifying character of many descriptions of contemporary British Asian youth culture (Ahmad 76). Nevertheless, British Asian kool has begun to have an impact in the United States, where, to take the most visible instance, Madonna took up yoga several years ago and began singing techno tracks in Sanskrit. As Cornershop sarcastically put it a few years ago, "funky days are back again/and we're in

vogue again.” But what of South Asians in the United States? Is music playing an analogous role here as it did for South Asian communities in Britain during the Thatcher years? How do the cultural forms of the South Asian diaspora challenge existing theories of club- and subculture? To what extent has the remarkable efflorescence of Asian culture in Britain in recent years become the summit of creativity towards which South Asian youth culture in the U.S. orients itself? These are the fundamental questions which I will explore in the anatomy of South Asian club cultures in the New York City region that follows.

### Performing Desi Identity in the United States

South Asians have been migrating to the United States in considerable numbers since changes in immigration laws during the mid-1960s made it easier for qualified professionals to apply for residency. Unlike Britain’s South Asian population, which was originally of predominantly working class or peasant background, the early waves of migrants to the United States from South Asia were comprised mainly of professionals or of students pursuing higher education. As Vijay Prashad has forcefully pointed out, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 constituted a form of state selection whereby the U.S. skimmed off the subcontinent’s technocratic elite in order to increase its competitiveness in a technological race with the Soviet Union following the launching of Sputnik (74). Although the period since the mid-1980s has seen groups of less affluent migrants arriving, the class formation of the desi population in the United States differs markedly from that of Britain as a result of this earlier pattern of elite bourgeois migration. Indian Americans make up less than .5% of the country’s population, but represent more than 5% of the nation’s scientists, engineers, and software specialists and have

the highest per capita income of any ethnic group in the United States. This class formation has a distinct impact on cultural production.

Musical performances among South Asian Americans were originally tied closely to celebrations of South Asian heritage. At annual ceremonies such as the Navrati Utsav, the Gujarati Festival of the Nine Lights, folk music and dance like the Raas-Garba was a highlight of community performances that stressed links to subcontinental tradition. These were cross-generational occasions, where the young members of the first American-born generation socialized under the watchful eyes of their parents (Ganti). Such performances of ethnic identity remain a central element of desi culture in urban areas throughout America. Young middle class children are often schooled in the arts of classical Indian dance and song in order to keep connections with the “motherland” alive. As the recent documentary *Miss India, Georgia* shows, such performances often take on a specifically gendered caste. The young women most likely to win this beauty contest are the ones best able to embody a traditional image of female “Indian” beauty. Such young women are, in other words, enjoined to enact the idealized traits of ethnic identity with which particular communities identify (Maira “Identity” 35). Never mind the fact that such performances tend to emphasize simplified and static notions of South Asian cultural heritage that can be highly oppressive for Second Generation youths who grow up exposed to multiple different traditions in the U.S. (Prashad 131). The performance of nostalgic traditions is also very much in evidence at annual festivals such as Diwali, held during the autumn in New York’s South Street Seaport. Classical dancers and musicians appear during the Diwali festival alongside prominent but controversial politicians such as mayor Rudolph Giuliani in a display of the Asian community’s political muscle. While such ceremonies allow desi youths too young to attend clubs to socialize, the Hindu nationalist underpinnings and essentialized representations of

identity that circulate here have implications that extend beyond the desi community in North America (Gopinath 315). NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) have become a major source of economic support for India's right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government (Prashad 146). A specifically diasporic cultural politics of nostalgia thus ironically has a transnational impact.

Desi remix culture first appeared in cross-generational sites of ethnic heritage with affinities to celebrations of ethnic heritage such as Navrati and Diwali. DJ Lil' Jay, for instance, describes his first encounter with Bally Sagoo's remixes of Hindi film music at the local Gujarati Samaj, a community center in Flushing, Queens attended by his father and uncle (Sengupta). While Lil' Jay initially felt disdain for these venues where his parents' generation congregated, the appeal of remixed versions of Asian music quickly galvanized his attention. The genesis of remix culture in such sites suggests that desi youth culture is the product of a complex and unstable negotiation between parents and children. As Marie Gillespie has stressed, teenagers, the traditional subject of analysis by cultural studies theorists interested in subcultures, are at an interstitial point in their lives (2). Exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences as a result of the proliferation of electronic media, contemporary adolescents develop remarkable skill at maneuvering in and between particular cultures. This is, of course, particularly true for youths growing up in a diasporic context since they must learn to code switch between the values and cultural forms of the dominant white community and those of the "parent" community in which they have been raised. As Stuart Hall and his colleagues argue in their classic analysis of youth subcultures, adolescents are "double articulated," subject to pressure from at least two different sites in the social formation (15). This cultural studies model should not be confused with the dominant sociological approach of the day, which represented Asian youths as trapped in an "identity crisis" that robbed them of agency. Instead, the styles developed within subcultures

should be seen as part of a symbolic repertoire through which young people attempt to win space, in both a literal and a figurative sense, in relation to their double articulation.

The British bhangra scene developed in a manner that supports this idea of double articulation. Since their parents were unlikely to allow them to attend the late-night clubs frequented by youths of other ethnic backgrounds, British Asian teens originated the “day-timer,” a party typically thrown in a pub or community hall for students who went truant from school in order to dance to the latest bhangra tracks. The traditional sound of the dhol drum, a loping beat produced by the complex, interwoven rhythms musicians pound out of double-headed wooden drums during the Punjabi harvest festival, was quickly updated through the addition of synthesized beats, electric guitars, and music from the incredibly fertile Hindi film music tradition. Mix-masters like Bally Sagoo have taken this process of syncretization much further. Their music splices together the disjointed, convulsive rhythms of contemporary club music with the myriad traditions of subcontinental music making. The resulting musical forms testify to what now has to be termed the multiple articulation of British Asian cultures.

In the United States, remix culture quickly moved out of community centers once entrepreneurs realized how much money was to be made from the second generation’s desire for autonomous spaces. Away from the gaze of parents, there is far more room to indulge in transgressively syncretic forms of behavior, not to mention open displays of sexuality. Sunaina Maira, for example, reports the common practice of young women who change into the slinky fashions that are essential for club life while on the road, and then change back into more modest garb on the way home (Maira “Identity” 26). This anecdote suggests an important *caveat* concerning subcultural analysis. Too often, such analysis has focused exclusively on delimited sites of subcultural identification such as the street. Although this focus has allowed analysts to

stress the resistant aspect of youth subcultures to great effect, it has also marginalized or completely ignored the multiple other identities that young people must inhabit as students, workers, and obedient children.

This point certainly seems to hold in relation to South Asian culture in America. While desi youths may engage in remarkably hybrid performances on the turntable and the dance floor, these syncretic sites exist in tension with others in which identity is more tightly policed. When the party's over, teens must return to households where, it appears from Maira's fieldwork, there is less tolerance for such experimentation and code switching - particularly in relation to young women. What is more, Maira's work convincingly demonstrates the extent to which essentialist, gendered, and racialized constructions of ethnic identity obtain even within subcultural spaces. While hip hop style is a mainstay of desi youth culture, actual relationships across ethnic lines - with, for example, African-American or Latino friends or lovers - are not encouraged within many segments of the desi community (Maira "Identity" 21). The subcultural capital proffered by hip hop culture's association with hyper-masculine blackness does not necessarily translate into forms of anti-racist solidarity with other minority communities. In addition, parents' policing of their daughters' sexuality, construed as symbolic of family and community honor, has a strong impact on desi youth subculture. Young women are submitted to a double standard by boys, who expect them, on the one hand, to be sexually alluring and, on the other hand, to be chaste embodiments of the faithful wife of the future (Maira "Identity" 32). While this heterosexual double standard for young desi women may be a structural feature of social relations within South Asian communities, the ability of particular women to negotiate this contradiction is clearly affected by a host of other factors, including their class, education, age, and residential location. Generalizations are clearly dangerous given the diversity of the desi

community. And, as I suggest in the following section, desi remix culture itself is fragmented by a remarkable proliferation of subcultures.

### “Semi-formal or ethnic attire is requested:” the Desi party scene

The metropolitan character of the New York region has produced a rich, plural tradition of desi parties over the last decade. These parties reflect the increasing organization and stratification of the community itself along class, generational, geographic, and political lines. Promoters, usually young professionals who organize parties on the side, work in conjunction with or hire the services of a well-known deejay, with whom they divvy up the proceeds of the party. They then book a venue for the party such as a restaurant or club, and promote the party using an Internet site such as <desiparty.com>. Just as is true of the celebrations of ethnic heritage I've already discussed, these parties are attended almost exclusively by members of the South Asian community. This party scene is not limited to the New York area, or even to the United States, but is part of a global network of diasporic affiliations that exist totally autonomously of the mainstream club culture while, of course, continually tapping into the newest innovations in that culture. Popular deejays traverse the globe, regularly playing to South Asian communities in Hong Kong, the Caribbean, Britain, the United States, and the subcontinent itself (DJ Kucha). As George Lipsitz, among others, has argued, South Asian diasporic culture is a central instance of the kinds of trans-national flows of culture, commodities, and bodies that are redefining the contours of lived community and political sovereignty (5). This brashly self-confident subculture is, however, a surprisingly recent development.

Parallel to the tradition of heritage festivals such as Navrati and Diwali that I described earlier, a tradition of private parties for occasions such as weddings and “sweet sixteen” celebrations grew up during the 1980s among the affluent families of metropolitan areas in Long Island and New Jersey. Many of the deejays who currently MC parties for thousands of people cut their teeth and earned the money to buy their systems at these much smaller affairs. Such parties remain an important source of money for deejays (DJ Kucha). According to Magic Mike, one of the pioneering Asian deejays of the New York area, the records he was asked to spin at such parties in the mid-1980s were totally unconnected to South Asian music (Ganti *Gimme*). Young people initially wanted to listen to the music of the West, associating Asian music with their parents’ generation and with geographical sites that were foreign to them. By the early 1990s, however, remix culture had become a mainstay of this party scene. Deejays like Magic Mike are now expected to play not simply bhangra tracks, but also to mix other Asian musics like Raas-Garba and Hindi pop with hip-hop, techno, reggae and Latino beats (DJ Kucha).

This eclecticism is particularly important given the reputation for violence that desi parties have acquired over the years. In the New York Times article that first brought desi remix culture to national attention, Somini Sengupta describes the organization of teenagers into gangs such as Punjabi By Nature and Madina, groups that are explicitly identified by regional, linguistic or religious provenance. Often, dance floor melees, stabbings, and even shootings erupt over affiliations that are themselves reflected in musical forms. While bhangra, for instance, has become identified with a kind of pan-Indian identity in the context of the diaspora, its roots in the Punjab can still cause problems at parties. In fact, one of the deejays whom I interviewed, a Sikh, related that he was not initially considered a viable deejay because his turban identified him too closely with the Punjab. This regional identity apparently suggested to

some that he would not be capable of mixing the varied palate of subcontinental traditions necessary to make a successful - and violence free - party (DJ Kucha). Deejays must, in other words, skillfully negotiate and reconcile the fragmented and frequently hostile identities that young desi men and women bring to the dance floor. They are cultural arbiters, sculpting not simply an eroticized dance space with their mixes, but also maneuvering through a politicized sound-scape with intimate connections to and surprising impact upon the communal conflicts of the subcontinent itself.

Desi dance culture is also segmented by age and class. In fact, age and income differences are one of the primary means through which the more affluent members of the desi community attempt to lock out their less desirable compatriots, and thereby to banish some of the violence associated with other precincts of the party scene. Promotional flyers sent out electronically by the Association of Young Indian Professionals, for instance, aggressively specify an age limit of 21.<sup>2</sup> The class identity and subcultural identification of desired party goers is also stipulated in a range of other subtle and not so subtle ways. Attendees are asked to wear “semi-formal or ethnic attire” or “corporate business attire.” Reduced admission to parties is offered to those who can produce business or corporate cards. Parties are advertised as prime sites for business networking. A typical venue is described as filled with plush decor that creates “an Edwardian Gentlemen’s club atmosphere replete with old-world charm and elegance” (D-N-D Productions). Not only does this description conjure up markers of class distinction, but it also suggests a specifically gendered appeal. Although none of the ads from professional organizations and upscale promoters that I examined resort to the “ladies night” rhetoric that some organizers adopt, men are clearly the implied audience of such advertising. This lends credence to the perception of some of my interviewees that these parties are gendered spaces in

which women are often made the target of uncomfortably aggressive sexual advances (Ganti, Maira). Finally, as if the preceding signifiers of distinction were not enough, some promoters find it necessary to distance themselves explicitly from previous outbreaks of violence, suggesting that the *cordon sanitaire* of class may not be as secure as some would like it to be (J.R. & S.A.P.N.A.).

Probably the most important site for identity formation among post-adolescent desi youth is not the preceding professional clubs, however, but the university scene, where cultural organizations promote the retention of South Asian traditions. Many of the current top deejays in New York come, for instance, from a particular university in the city. South Asian social clubs at specific universities form teams that compete with other schools on a regional and national level in meetings such as the annual “Bhangra Blowout,” which attracts top deejays and dancers from around the country. These college groups provide important sites where newly independent desi youths negotiate hybrid identities by reworking the ethnic traditions imparted to them by their parents’ generation. The music performed at this competition is, again, consciously syncretic, blending the diverse musical traditions of the subcontinent with “western” forms (DJ Kucha). These competitions and parties clearly play an important role in connecting members of the diaspora. Such forums for the consolidation of local, regional, and national affiliations also provide important sites for the formation of self-conscious ethnic identities. Yet while this identity politics is clearly important in the context of enduring forms of cultural racism and exclusion in contemporary America, these organizations seldom take on an explicitly political inflection. As Vijay Prashad, among others, has emphasized, musical fusion may allow for a certain amount of social exchange in the university environment, but should not be confused with forms of political solidarity (181). In fact, such groups seldom attempt to forge

coalitions with other racialized members of university communities (Maira “Identity” 19). Despite the startlingly syncretic performances of identity that take place among members of such groups, these venues often preserve and foster some of the same essentialized constructions of identity that mark sites where nostalgic performances of ethnic heritage take place. In fact, observers note that youths are less rather than more likely to cross ethnic boundaries as they move from adolescence into adulthood (Jones). As Tim Taylor has argued, although globalization has made a multiplicity of subject positions available to diasporic youths, the crucial question is how these subject positions are negotiated in particular contexts (163).

### Hierarchies of Hipness in Desi Club Culture

Close to the end of her film *Gimme Somethin’ To Dance To!*, the first documentary made on desi remix culture in the United States, Tejaswini Ganti includes a particularly telling juxtaposition. She’s been interviewing Magic Mike and DJ Kucha, who talk about their desire to follow Bally Sagoo’s path to a major label recording contract and mass stardom. Ganti cuts from this scene to an interview with DJ Rekha, who unequivocally states that she feels no need to have her work succeed with the dominant white music-listening public. This stark contrast reveals a great deal about the forms of capital that circulate in different sectors of the desi population in New York. In addition to a politicized critique of the pressure for ethnic assimilation, there is also a kind of subcultural capital at work in Rekha’s pronouncement. As is true of so many other musical subcultures in the United States, claims to authenticity within desi club culture are centrally connected to the evasion of commercial success. The kinds of taste hierarchies that Sarah Thornton has described in her analysis of the micro-politics of club cultures are clearly at work in this context (208). Unlike more mainstream desi remix artists like Bally Sagoo, the

deejays whom Rekha currently cites as having the most influence on her work largely eschew the melodramatic song traditions of Hindi film and the rolling beats of bhangra. When these traditions are sampled, they are cut apart by frenetic drum 'n' bass breakbeats that totally change the character of the music. Refusing to be boxed into the ethnic subcategory of bhangra, artists like Talvin Singh aggressively claim a globalized modernity for themselves. As Singh puts it in the liner notes to an early album: "calcutta cyber cafe is a virtual band created as a meeting place / for those on a musical journey for global communication and reconfiguration / in this time of diversity one must still defy categorization / in life / as in music..." (Drum + Space). The graphics that accompany these albums also insistently foreground such images of the liquid present, the flowing world of diverse -scapes described so influentially by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (27-47). Singh's latest album, for instance, characterized by David Toop as "a living history of peoples in transience, looking for firm ground," is festooned with images of the elephant god Ganesh as well as digital codes and futuristic sound devices.

The cyber-thematic in Singh's work suggests a link with strategies pursued by Afro-nauts such as George Clinton and Sun Ra. In *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, Kodwo Eshun argues that the impetus to seek refuge from a bleak and oppressive present in a visit to alien worlds on the mothership acts as a definitive rewriting of the original abduction to a foreign land, that is, the middle passage of slavery. Eshun may be seen as amplifying Paul Gilroy's argument in *The Black Atlantic* that black diasporic culture is in fact the acme of modernity in its central thematic of displacement and remembrance (46-59). Unfortunately, like Gilroy, Eshun totally ignores the South Asian diaspora. In the futurism of deejays such as Talvin Singh, a diasporic emphasis on recuperating traditional musical forms gets joined to the world of science fiction to suggest a thoroughgoing appropriation not simply of historical memory, but also of the shape of the future.

Given the orientalist exoticism that accompanied the recent buzz about Asian kool, Singh's futuristic rejection of ethnic stereotyping should hardly be surprising. However, there are certain contradictions at work in the images of flow his work invokes. The kind of mobility suggested by Singh's liner notes is the preserve of an increasingly small global elite. This is even more so within the musical domain, where cultural cores and peripheries are more intractably separated by the economics of production and distribution than ever (Taylor 200). This unhappy reality is also in evidence on the micro-level of the New York area. Kids growing up in working class desi neighborhoods such as Jackson Heights have little access to the cutting edge music produced by Singh and other experimental deejays (Shankar). Their taste for more "traditional" musical forms such as film music and bhangra is largely a product of their class formation. What does it mean that recordings by the artists who dub themselves the "Asian underground" can be purchased exclusively through music megastores like Virgin and HMV rather than in local Asian-owned shops in places like Southall in London and Jackson Heights in New York (Ganti "Interview")? How deeply can the embrace of cultural syncretism whose cutting edge seems to be located on the dance floor of Manhattan clubs impact desi youth culture more broadly?

### Mutiny! The Politics of Progressive Desi Subculture

The title of the club conjures up a politics of radical anti-colonial nationalism. Like British clubs such as Swaraj (Hindi for self rule or independence), New York's "Mutiny" seeks to foster diasporic affiliation across ethnic difference. Mutiny draws both its aesthetic and its political inspiration from the overtly anti-racist traditions of British Asian youth culture. Opened in early 1997, the club was originally designed to raise money for a film project undertaken by

co-founder Vivek Bald. Bald's film documents the emergence and growing profile of British Asian artists like Talvin Singh, Asian Dub Foundation, and FUN^DA^MENTAL (Mutiny). These musicians draw on a long history of anti-racist organizing in Britain, one in which the label "black" was embraced as a political rather than a somatic category. Racialized groups stood together against violence that victimized all those who were perceived as "immigrants." Black British communities, including South Asians and West Indians, created durable ties in the face of the brutal attacks, coded racism, economic polarization, and draconian policing that characterized the Thatcher years. Although the post-Rushdie affair period saw growing assertions of Asian specificity, the appearance of groups such as Asian Dub Foundation and FUN^DA^MENTAL suggests a grassroots return to the politics of Black solidarity (Hutnyk 184). Just as was true during the years when punk and reggae youth cultures united to fight against the rise of the National Front, contemporary British Asian music is a crucial medium through which politicized youth cultures are fashioned (Gilroy 124-30).

Mutiny is an important venue for the forging of trans-Atlantic links between the Asian diaspora in Britain and America. Unlike the parties I discussed earlier, Mutiny takes place on a regular basis, following the dominant club model of allowing particular artists to claim a space under the roof of a well-known club. A significant number of "Asian underground" deejays have performed at Mutiny, including Talvin Singh, State of Bengal, Badmarsh & Shri, and Joi. Although these British performers and their anti-racist ethos played a formative role for the club, Mutiny consciously pairs these British performers with local talent. American desi turntablists such as DJ Rekha, DJ Siraiki, OmZone, Karsh Kale, DJ Navdeep, Suphala, and Anju spin disks next to "a slew of New York's own diasporic diabolics" -- DJ Spooky, Mutamassik, Badawi, Wunmi, Singe and Verb, Mike Ladd, and TC Islam (Mutiny). This potent mix suggests that the

new Black Atlantic ties being woven on the dance floor of club Mutiny are also helping forge bonds of cultural solidarity among New York's communities of color.

But the politics of Mutiny are not simply cultural. The club has become a home away from home for some of the new crop of progressive desi organizations that sprang up over the last decade or so in New York. Many of these groups are motivated by a politics that challenges the cultural conservatism of some segments of the South Asian community. For activists in groups like the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) and the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA), Mutiny has become a space for radical community building. The members of such groups no doubt find the politics of Mutiny's performers attractive. In addition, according to one interviewee of mine, the atmosphere fostered at Mutiny contrasts favorably with the hyper-sexual one that characterizes the parties I discussed in previous sections (Maira). DJ Rekha, the other co-founder of the club, is quite frank about her attempts to steer away from the cultural politics that prevail in some of these parties (Rekha). Not only does she do benefit gigs for organizations such as SAWCC and SALGA. Flyers for Mutiny and Basement Bhangra also refuse the "ladies first" rhetoric employed in many clubs. As she puts it, promoters can make conscious decisions to prevent their clubs from becoming meat markets. In addition, Rekha explicitly designs her shows in a manner that will work against the forms of chauvinism that characterize spectacles of ethnic heritage such as the Diwali festival. Promotional flyers and the club website, for instance, contain no references to Indian nationalism. The visuals that accompany her shows also explicitly avoid invocations of Hindu mythology, despite the temptation to cut and paste such materials from Indian television or the Hindi film tradition. When she and her visual mix-master do screen such images, they are placed in an explicitly satirical context. Finally, Rekha's musical mixes themselves consciously avoid

the invocation of divisive regional or national affiliations. No chants of “Punjabi, Punjabi” at Mutiny.

Explicitly politicized performances such as the ones that take place at Mutiny are clearly intended as a corrective to the chauvinist, heterosexist cultural nationalism that prevails in certain segments of the desi community. Mutiny thus forms a separate enclave where grassroots movements for social change have carved out a social space. Integral to this space is a critique of dominant values. Mutiny’s strategy is similar to that adopted by an organization such as SALGA, which recently decided, in the face of both overt and coded homophobia, to rethink its strategy of applying for permission to march in New York’s India Day parade. SALGA chose instead to organize a fair with other progressive organizations such as Workers’ Awaz at the end point of the parade route (Gopinath). The durability of this strategy remains to be seen. On the one hand, desi clubs have been placed under consistent pressure from the Guiliani administration, which explicitly targeted venues attended by people of color for draconian inspections (DJ Rekha). On the other hand, with the increasing popularity of clubs like Basement Bhangra and Mutiny comes the danger of a progressive constituency being literally elbowed out by more well heeled club goers.

In stressing the political role of a space such as Mutiny, I’m anxious not to overlook the aesthetic nature of the performances that are the club’s primary *raison d’être*. Some might see the New York desi scene - Mutiny included - as derivative given the fact that it is dependent on music from the subcontinent and from Britain, where almost all of the contemporary bhangra bands are based, for example. In fact, this is one of the factors that forces the desi remix culture in America to remain a subculture. Remixes are inevitably complex but ultimately recognizable bricolages of copyrighted materials. This limits the possibilities for national distribution. In

addition, it also threatens locally distributed albums with impoundment and the storeowners who stock such recordings with the closing of their businesses. Yet, despite the lack of what could be called primary producers of live music, remix deejays still see their work as highly original (DJ Kucha, DJ Rekha). They do not feel inferior to their British comrades. The complex soundscapes created by desi remixers demonstrate creative skills and turntablist virtuosity that challenge the distinction I've just made between primary producers and remixers. While this distinction might be important in terms of marketing recordings, it clearly has no bite in relation to the dance floor. What matters there, of course, is the pulsing dialectic between bodies and beats that the deejay orchestrates with her associative cut-and-mix of musical textures.

#### Conclusion: The Alchemy of the Dance Floor

The dis-identification with national identity that initially animated my interest in diasporic culture has been challenged in numerous ways during the research and writing of this paper. While I continue to find the hybrid musical forms evolving within desi youth cultures immensely compelling on an aesthetic level, it is important to stress that such texts cannot be read in isolation. For these are less texts than performances. As such, they are part of a flexible ensemble of embodied gestures through which desi youths enact multiple, situated identities. Musical performances are, in other words, a site where inherited structures of feeling are adapted, transformed, and, in some cases, reenacted. Despite the peculiar power of music to cross borders and break down barriers, the hybrid space of the dance floor is always deeply sedimented with prior meanings. While the dance floor has an alchemy all its own, the elements that are mixed in such a space are hardly neutral ones. The slightest flick of the finger, sway of the hips, and shuffle of the feet is embedded in a whole complex of cultural traditions. Although

such traditions are constantly in flux, they exert a decisive influence on the configurations of bodies, emotions, and politics that emerge in dance cultures.

Desi youth cultures in the New York region demonstrate the extent to which such sedimented cultural forms impinge on the performative space of the dance floor. Regional and national chauvinism, gender and class inequality, and complex forms of internal and external racism all have an impact on what music gets played in particular clubs, and what kind of reception this music receives from its audience. As I have shown, such differences in fact help to determine who can even attend particular clubs. But such assertions of difference are not the whole story. My research into desi remix culture has also illuminated the emotional investments and cultures of solidarity that are attached to these performances on the dance floor.

For South Asian youths, dance and the music that moves the body are crucial sites for self-fashioning. The significance of such moments of empowerment should not be slighted. In one of the conversations I had while doing my research, a researcher described how moved she was by the elaborate spectacles orchestrated by working class teenagers in Queens (Shankar). After putting vast amounts of energy into choreographing elaborate dance routines, these young people felt tremendous pride and power as they danced before their friends to the sound of Hindi film music. As Marie Gillespie has shown in her research, such performances allow young people, in certain circumstances, to defy the authority of their parents openly (108). Under the mantle of recreating a “traditional” subcontinental cultural form like the Hindi film, or through the process of hybridizing a Western film, these youths assert their autonomy from the values inculcated by their parents and the dominant culture.

In conducting this research, I have also been heartened by the links being established between desi youth culture in the United States and in Britain. The popular anti-racism that has

arisen in Britain since the 1970s certainly has crucial limitations, including the tendency of leftist groups to see race as simply a smokescreen for class-based disparities (Gilroy 131-51).

However, the anti-racism of Britain's Black communities also represents traditions of pan-ethnic solidarity that seem particularly compelling from an American perspective, where racial formation has militated against such forms of unity in recent years (Omi 95-136). Admittedly, the trans-Atlantic connections being forged at a club such as Mutiny have their limitations.

Mutiny is, at the end of the day, still just a club. It caters to a clientele who possess significant forms of cultural and economic capital, and who may use that capital in certain instances to distance themselves from less fortunate members of the desi community. However, as I have shown, despite these contradictions, the dance floor at Mutiny is structured around a consciously progressive sense of community. Mutiny's role as a gathering space for grassroots social movements suggests that more is at work in club cultures than simply the drive to accumulate subcultural capital. Mutiny serves as a venue where the racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia of mainstream American society are challenged. In addition, the club also allows desi youths to articulate alternatives to the encoding of such repressive values through diasporic national and regional chauvinism. If it is imperative to acknowledge the complex negotiations through which desi youth define their identities in and outside club spaces, we also need to hold on to the critical space such sites provide for the performance of new, emancipatory identities.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Although I use the terms South Asian and Desi in an interchangeable manner in this paper, it should be borne in mind that the former is a far more politicized and consciously anti-factional term while the latter is more of a slang word. Both, however, are inclusive terms, covering Asians from all of the nation-states of the subcontinent (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka).

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