

Muslim punks online: A diasporic Pakistani music subculture on the Internet

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This article seeks to explore how Internet media is shaping transnationally-mediated South Asian music subcultures. Rather than serve as a literature review of new media and South Asian popular culture, this paper is especially interested in how particular music websites, discussion forums, social networking sites, and IP-based technologies in general are facilitating the creation of progressive South Asian virtual spaces. One particular South Asian musical scene, ‘Taqwacore’, a transnational Muslim punk music scene, is used as a case study. Reference is made to other non-Muslim diasporic South Asian musical scenes including Asian electronic music and Bhangra as well to contextualize Taqwacore. Ethnographic research (participant observation and interviewing) was conducted both online and offline using Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blogs, discussion groups, and face-to-face meetings.

A diasporic Pakistani student was deciding whether to take a class of mine. The class partially examines diaspora and identity and this particular student was interested in South Asian identities and popular music. He talked about a couple of bands and scenes that he follows – ones I was not familiar with or only peripherally aware of. I carefully scribbled down details. I mentioned to him that we would be studying the significance of contemporary South Asian diasporic musicians ranging from Asian Dub Foundation to Talvin Singh. He similarly scribbled down details. Though an interesting conversation in itself, what particularly struck me was that all of the ‘scribbling’ consisted of Web URLs (Web addresses). No mention was made of tracks, albums, or record stores who would stock these genres. Rather, the presumption was that a slew of MySpace (a major online social networking website)¹ and record label URLs would do the trick. This was indeed the case as just one of the student’s MySpace URLs served as a gateway to several of the diasporic Pakistani scenes he had mentioned.

Of course, there has been scholarship on new media and South Asian popular cultures. However, it is vastly overshadowed by the discussion of matrimonial websites (e.g. Adams and Ghose), diasporic discussion forums (e.g. Mitra ‘Nations’), and satellite television.² This work, it should be said, was groundbreaking and it has clearly facilitated the academic discussion of new media and South Asia. Working on the Internet in South Asia specifically, Ananda Mitra³ has perhaps been the most prolific, his research spanning a decade. Though sometimes, but by no means always, gendered and totalizing, his work has, without question, inspired discourse on the Internet and South Asia. In distinction to Mitra, Lal’s, Rai’s, Gopal’s, and Gajjala’s⁴ work on South Asian diasporic cybercultures have examined the diversity of

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South Asian Internet experiences, rather than opting for totalizing constructions of South Asia online, something Adams and Ghose and others fall victim to. South Asian popular culture online includes, but is in no way limited to, Bollywood online (including fan sites, official websites, blogs, and discussion boards), art exhibitions online, Flickr albums, YouTube videos, MySpace pages, Facebook pages, BitTorrent and other peer-to-peer repositories of South Asian music and film files, fashion websites, experimental and traditional South Asian theater, South Asian forums online, and the downloading of South Asian music from iTunes and other online websites/stores (both legally and illegally).

This article seeks to explore how Internet media is shaping transnationally-mediated South Asian music subcultures. Rather than serve as a literature review of new media and South Asian popular culture, I am especially interested in how particular music websites, discussion forums, and IP-based technologies are facilitating the creation of progressive South Asian virtual spaces. I will use this particular South Asian musical scene, 'Taqwacore', a Muslim punk music scene, as a case study, although I will refer to other non-Muslim diasporic South Asian musical scenes including Asian electronic music and Bhangra as well. Taqwacore is an Islamic punk music scene which took its name/inspiration from Michael Muhammed Knight's novel of the same name. The most prominent band in the scene is 'The Kominas', who self describe their music as 'explosive Pakistani punk rock'.⁵ Their MySpace presence consists mostly of album track samples and corresponding images from their debut album, *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*. Their music and visual aesthetic, like that of the UK-based band Fundamental's most recent album *All is War*, is a response to post-9/11 and 7/7 Islamophobia. Although my initial entry into the Taqwacore scene was through a physical meeting with my student, my first phase researching it was done purely online (including ethnographic interviews and observation). In this phase, I observed Taqwacore-related Facebook and MySpace pages, discussion groups, and blogs. I also maintained a user account on Twitter.com, a popular social media website, which I used as a conduit for participant observation (at the time of writing, nearly 40 individuals involved in the Taqwacore scene showed interest through Twitter). I conducted virtual interviews by e-mail, Twitter, and Facebook messages. In the second phase of my research, 37 face-to-face interviews were conducted in eight metropolitan US cities.⁶ As a way of background, I will first introduce the Taqwacore scene.

Taqwacore

The Taqwacore scene, which Knight fictionalizes in Buffalo, New York, centers on a house shared by a group of 'punk Muslims'. The novel chronicles their negotiation/reconciliation of punk music and Islam. Taqwacore became a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, with a fictional non-existent music scene giving birth to a real one through bands such as The Kominas, Vote Hezbollah, and Secret Trial Five (an all-women band) to name a few. Vote Hezbollah, the name of one of the bands in Knight's novel, was brought to life by Kourosh Poursalehi, a Sufi Muslim teenager in San Antonio, Texas. In 2004, he put to music a poem at the start of Knight's book titled 'Muhammad was a punk rocker', unwittingly setting in motion the nascence of the non-fictional Taqwacore scene. Poursalehi sent the track to Knight. Around the same time, two young diasporic Pakistani Muslims in the Boston suburbs, Basim Usmani and Shahjehan Khan, had been in touch with Knight, impressed by his novel. Knight visited them and brought along Poursalehi's track. Listening to it on repeat in Knight's car, Khan was shocked that 'there was this kid down in Texas writing this music' (qtd. in Crafts). Khan and Usmani, deeply inspired by Poursalehi, were later to start 'The Kominas', the most recognized of the Taqwacore bands.

Though the Taqwacore scene was initially spawned through physical media (i.e. Knight's book) and physical exchange (i.e. tracks being posted and Knight's trip to Boston), its subsequent growth spurt has been largely mediated by the Internet and IP-based technologies (especially peer-to-peer file sharing).⁷ The Internet has been a prime breeding ground for the scene (freely sharing tracks, a process which has virally exposed the scene to like-minded young diasporic Muslims). Furthermore, forums/blogs discussing Taqwacore have enabled old and new scene members to meaningfully discuss both the novel and its offshoot music scene. The Punkistani Live Journal,⁸ for example, comments on The Kominas' album and the Taqwacore Forum⁹ showcases posts ranging from the scene to a critique of popular Orientalist imagery. In the latter, posts visually critique popular Orientalist essentialism. One post (from March 2008) has a copy of an advertisement for 'Fatima Turkish Cigarettes' with a veiled woman proffering a taste of the exotic Orient with every smoke. Historical and extant popular Orientalism are juxtaposed and contested through new media's ability to embed images. Similarly, the embedding of YouTube videos and music has proved a fertile ground for the anti-essentialist politics of Taqwacore to be highly expressive. Furthermore, the openly activist nature of these particular forums/blogs is reminiscent of early (offline) punk 'zines' (home-made fan magazines). The rough DIY aesthetic of blogs (with images and text sometimes quickly slapped together) often oozes a quasi-punk aesthetic.



Figure 1. E-flyer for a Taqwacore event in Chicago.

‘Cybertaqwa’

Whether online or offline, the authenticity (and often this is critical to ‘success’) of a punk scene depends on engaging with one’s fan base through accessible communication mediums (zines were critical to this in pre-online punk movements). However, zines tend to circulate only so far. Usually, they are available at concerts, events, and record stores important to the scene. Historically, this is been an acceptable arrangement for a locally bounded subculture. However, there is not a high enough concentration of Muslim youths interested in Taqwacore in many American urban centers to maintain a scene actively. One of the differences between old and new media forms has been extended reach. In the case of Taqwacore, tracks and event information have circulated far beyond their immediate locales. For example, a Taqwacore event in Chicago in 2007 was predominately advertised by e-flyers (see Figure 1). The audience at the performance included a fair few people outside of the Chicago area. Although alluding to the middle passage, ‘9000 miles’, a track by The Kominas, simultaneously reminds us that the Muslim diaspora is dispersed across great distances (a sentiment doubly reflected by the e-flyer’s use of camels).

I have also been particularly struck by the ways in which Taqwacore audiences and artists have reconfigured their traditional roles as producer and consumer. In particular, Web discussion forums, social networking sites, and artist websites have enabled Taqwacore fans to communicate directly with artists. This unique communicative engagement has not only resulted in ‘audience’ members participating in the production process, but has also enabled ‘audience’ members to become co-producers. Artists such as Usmani of The Kominas do not shy away from sharing their e-mail addresses. Furthermore, this direct relationship has extended the reach of smaller South Asian musical scenes such as Taqwacore. As such, Taqwacore artists have not had their albums on sale in most mainstream record stores. Rather, fans buy CDs online or download tracks from iTunes or for free from peer-to-peer files haring sites, a process which The Kominas themselves have encouraged.¹⁰

The multimedia elements of cyberspace (textual, video, photographic, etc.) have been an integral factor in the success of online Taqwacore presences. Social media and social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook, which I will discuss later, have introduced like-minded youths to one another, a process which has also helped this South Asian musical scene to attract a relatively bountiful membership.¹¹ Furthermore, Internet-based technologies have facilitated collaborative transnational music-making (e.g. Usmani of The Kominas was living in Pakistan but collaborating with diasporic South Asian musicians in the US). This is not meant to marginalize/downplay the non-virtual, but rather to highlight the significant role of Internet-based media. In particular, Facebook has been instrumental. Though the Internet has been critical in maintaining the scene (through global expansion of its reach and facilitating transnational music-making), the medium has also been integral as an uncensored space for Muslim youths who feel unable to be fully expressive in both mainstream Western public culture (e.g. due to Islamophobia, Orientalism, and exoticization) as well as within dominant Muslim communities (especially orthodox Muslim communities who would consider the scene to be blasphemous).

In the shadow of Rushdie

The publication of Knight’s novel exemplifies this role of the Internet. Specifically, when the British printing of *The Taqwacores* was due to be released by Telegram Books in 2006, sections of it were censored for fear of being considered blasphemous or, more

worryingly, the harbinger of another Rushdie Affair. Knight reluctantly agreed for those sections to be cut and replaced by an asterisk. The American publisher of the book, Autonomedia, a historically progressive publisher, responded by putting a page on its website showing the censored sections.¹² The British Taqwacore fans printed out this page, which arguably contained the passages that most deconstructed diasporic Muslim identities, and kept it on hand when reading or re-reading the book. For example, in the British version, the following section in square brackets was censored:

You have to stop trying to make sense of Punk – what it's for, what it's against. It's against everything. [The singer from Vote Hezbollah pissed on a Quran.] Everyone loved it. Then he picked up the kitab, shook some drips off, carefully turned the frail wet pages and recited Ya Sin with absolute sincerity. Somehow the whole thing made sense. (Knight 231)

Post 9/11 and 7/7, diasporic American Muslims have been subject to not only a wave of Islamophobia,¹³ but a rampant media-driven portrayal of them as maniacally religious terrorists.¹⁴ This censored section in which one Muslim punk urinates on the Quran simultaneously deconstructs prevalent Muslim essentialisms and offers an alternative vision of one type of new Muslim youth identity. The ability of the Internet to publish the complete, uncensored text from America should not be underestimated in its significance to the British Taqwacore scene, which is just in its infancy now.

Appadurai (15–16) discusses 'culturalist movements', which he sees as the 'conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics'. For him, culturalist movements are usually 'counternational' and 'metacultural'. What he does well is highlight the larger globalized processes, in an epoch of changing mass media, which have affected individual and group 'cultural' identities. However, what is missing from his discussion is how this is occurring in praxis. The censoring of *Taqwacore* and the subsequent Internet response is one example of how the transnational politics of a progressive Muslim youth culture consciously mobilized in aid of its British adherents and how the Internet has supported culturalist movements like Taqwacore.

Transnational South Asian identities online

Mitra's ('Nations and the Internet') study of the newsgroup 'soc.cult.indian' [SCI] was one of the first to examine how emerging Internet-based technologies were mediating the creation of new transnational South Asian cyber-identities. Rather than viewing the newsgroup as a 'little India' online, he emphasizes the divergent as well as convergent ancestries/beliefs/opinions of the group's users. He quotes divisive 'flame' (inflammatory) posts on Muslim/Hindu communal tension (56) as well as ones calling for communal reconciliation (62–63). Although these posts are not relevant to South Asian popular culture *per se*, Mitra's argument that the news group represents a form of transnational South Asian identity, albeit a hotly contested one, is cogent. What Mitra misses however are the nuances of power relations on not only that particular newsgroup, but also the Internet in general. He seems to fall victim to the same cyber utopian visions of Dyson, Gates, and Negroponte¹⁵ in that he believes that the Internet gives 'voice' to everyone:

dialogue is possible because the space [SCI] cannot be co-opted by any particular point of view. The power and the uniqueness of the dynamics of the electronic community lies precisely in the absence of restrictions and controls on anyone's voice. This is indeed a forum where everyone who is able to access the space is also able to speak within the space. Everyone has a 'voice' in this space. (Mitra 'Nations and the Internet' 67)

The problem in Mitra's analysis is that it conflates the possibility to speak with the ability to speak. The Internet is hardly a space devoid of power relations. Rather, the

hierarchies of the offline world frequently manifest themselves in online worlds (Harp and Tremayne 249). Gajjala (14), commenting on Mitra's work, highlights that SCI and other manifestations of the 'cyborg-diaspora' are often complicit in continuing, rather than disrupting, offline hegemonies. Gender is one of the clearest examples of offline hierarchies being transferred to cyber diasporic worlds. Rai highlights how most diasporic Indian cyberspaces take a particular re-inscribed Hindutva masculine identity as normative.¹⁶ This ontological baseline ipso facto not only genders these South Asian diasporic cyberspaces, but also inherently excludes Muslim Indians. This is not surprising given, as Bhatt and Mukta illustrate, the political leanings of many in the Indian diaspora. However, it is a point contra Mitra which needs to be forcefully made.



The poster features a central graphic of a Buddha figure with a futuristic, mechanical head, set against a dark background with a purple-to-pink gradient. Two women in dark, futuristic attire stand on either side of the Buddha figure. The text is primarily in yellow and white, with some red accents.

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Figure 2. Supersonic Buddha e-flyer.

Though Mitra's ('Nations and the Internet' 66) argument that cyberspaces like SCI 'cannot be co-opted by any particular point of view' is tenuous, his argument that new Internet-mediated transnational South Asian identities – that Gopal ('Home Pages') terms 'a global Indian subject' – can be discerned remains very useful indeed. This is especially true in the case of marginalized South Asian groups such as diasporic Muslim youths, and Taqwacore is a case in point. Basim Usmani's Punkistani blog became a conduit for like-minded Pakistanis, both in the subcontinent and diaspora, to connect. Usmani's own experience highlights of his online interactions shaped his offline interactions:

My first interactions with sympathetic Pakistanis who I went on to meet afterwards started online.¹⁷

After The Kominas had gained a measure of success in the US, Basim moved back to Lahore (where he was born) from suburban Boston. He soon met these 'sympathetic Pakistanis' in person and started a new Lahore-based Taqwacore band, Noble Drew. This band also used the Internet to spread their music and its progressive politics. For example, Noble Drew posted a video on YouTube for their track *Thaliyon vi chimero*,¹⁸ which explores the dissonance between state ideology and sexual praxis in Pakistan (including being gay in Pakistan). In Usmani's case, the Internet was critical to the transnationalization of Taqwacore and its politics. He recounted to me how The Kominas' MySpace page attracted punks from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.¹⁹

Internet media and transnational South Asian popular culture

Regardless of where one is in the diaspora, new media in its various forms (satellite driven, IP-based, etc.) has enabled the hyper-transnationalization of South Asian subcultures and niche scenes. Taqwacore is only one of many South Asian musical scenes touched by new media in this way. For example, I am a member of several e-mail lists circulated by labels and those interested in the Asian electronic music scene, a transnational South Asian dance music subculture I have investigated elsewhere.²⁰ I recently received an e-mail from one Asian electronic music list, that of the Shiva Soundsystem, inviting me to a special live Asian electronic performance celebrating the Brick Lane festival in East London. On the flyer (see Figure 2), four URLs are listed. The first is for the record label (a site which includes a discussion forum/blog, downloadable audio clips, and other multimedia materials), the next is for the event's venue, the third is for a related radio program on BBC Radio 1, and the last is for a related radio program on the BBC's Asian Network radio station. The sheer quantity of Web URLs on this flyer is worthy of its own discussion. However, for the purposes of this article, I will draw attention to the significance of how Internet media is encouraging the transnationalization of scenes such as Asian electronic music.

A quick look at the blog discussions on the Shiva Soundsystem not only confirms the transnational membership of those who follow the Asian electronic music scene in London, but also that they use sites including these as key modes of participation/affiliation. Though online and offline participation are qualitatively different, the former is just as immersive and intense, albeit in very different ways such as the inclusion of rich multimedia material. For example, on the Shiva Soundsystem blog, posters frequently embed YouTube videos. A post from February 2008 is illustrative. It has a YouTube video titled 'Little Superstar' embedded,²¹ a clip from a 1990s Tamil movie, *Adhisaya Piravi* (also *Adisaya Piravi*) which features Thavakalai break dancing to a remix of Madonna's 'Holiday'. In the clip, the 1980s Tamil megastar, Rajinikanth, uses a tape deck to create a break dance beat. The clip became an Internet hit, garnering over 15 million views on

YouTube alone. Though not obvious, the embedding of the ‘Little Superstar’ video clip draws viewers into discourse including racial essentialism and crass racism. The clip on YouTube has been heavily consumed and has over 8000 text comments (at the time of writing). The exchange below reminds us of how South Asian popular cultures continue to be racialized, exoticized, essentialized, and othered.

sidscout: That little spick can dance
 Tdotspic: I think you mean Indian, ignorant
 Naghtora: Fucking Hindus

Similarly, another poster named Irishman182 describes Thavakalai as a ‘Muslim Chucky Doll’. The overt marginalization (and demonization as ‘chucky doll’) of South Asians in the video clip’s discussion comments serves not only as a reminder of the alterior position of South Asian popular cultures both online and offline, but its linking from progressive websites/scenes (such as the Shiva sound system blog) offers the chance for counter-hegemonic/anti-racist responses. Scrolling through the numerous responses to Little Superstar, one sees evidence of this, albeit less than we would desire. The lateral connection between the Little Superstar video clip and the Asian electronic music scene is merely one example of how South Asian popular cultures have become exponentially intermeshed through new media forms. These hyperlinked associations also illustrate the potential for diverse South Asian cultural scenes to meet in unforeseen/serendipitous ways.

‘Pretty fly (for a white guy)’²²

One of these ways has been the ability of social networking sites (especially MySpace) to serve as vehicles for non-South Asian fans to participate in South Asian musical scenes. This is definitely, though not exclusively, noticeable in bhangra scenes. There is many a white bhangra fan who feels an unease of being the only non-South Asian at an Ealing, Birmingham, or New York City bhangra (though not ‘Basement Bhangra’)²³ gig. Notwithstanding discourses of Orientalism, exoticization, and tokenization, there are non-South Asian fans who feel comfortable participating actively online in Bhangra and other South Asian musical scenes. Often, their participation online is enriching rather than diminutive.²⁴ South Asian diasporic musicians and DJs are well aware of this stereotype. DJ Nerm, during an Electro East BBC radio program exclaims, ‘Asian network is not just for brown people’.²⁵ It is a message at once recognizing and welcoming current non-South Asian participants, but also making it clear to Asian listeners that he believes that South Asian music scenes should not be ethnically endogamous.

This is in distinction to much of the bhangra scene, which has historically been constructed as ethnically South Asian. In the words of one of the lead singers of the British bhangra outfit Cobra, ‘Bhangra is Asian music for Asians’ (qtd. in Sharma 35). The use of new media by non-South Asian fans of Bhangra is, for this reason, more revealing than within Taqwacore (the event in Chicago mentioned before attracted many white punks) and Asian electronic music (half of whose audiences are usually non-Asians). I was particularly interested in how they were negotiating bhangra scenes (in the UK and elsewhere) online and offline.²⁶ Predictably, white males were aware that they were being labeled as ‘goras’²⁷ and realized that this awareness had to be made known. Their MySpace pages exemplify this process. Two particular MySpace pages are illustrative.²⁸ The first is that of Lukas, a 20-year-old male student from Northampton; the second is of Aamil, a 24-year-old Anglo-Indian male living in Patiala, Punjab and working in a call center. Lukas is not only clearly knowledgeable of the bhangra scene (both live and

recorded), but also has a good-faith understanding/appreciation of Punjabi culture. Although he does wear a turban, his donning of it does not come off as tokenistic. This is in distinction to the overt exoticization of South Asian popular cultures exemplified by bindi-wearing clubbers, for example (Banerjea 64–79). Lukas' online presence also reveals how some diasporic South Asians have positively responded to him. One of his MySpace 'friends', a South Asian, refers to Lukas in posts as *bhai* (brother). Moreover, out of his over two hundred MySpace friends, many of them are South Asian.

Aamil's background, as self-defined by his MySpace presence, is unique. His grandparents had emigrated from Ireland as civil servants under the British Raj. In distinction to Lukas, Aamil is actually living in South Asia. He was born and lives in India and is 'Indian'. His affinity towards bhangra stems from this rather than from diasporic exposure. Given this, charging Aamil with appropriation or exoticization of South Asian culture is tenuous from the outset. That being said, Aamil's and Lukas' MySpace pages are both similar in their awareness of their whiteness. However, despite their very different backgrounds, they are viewed, *prima facie*, by some South Asians as interlopers. Their online presences make known their reflexive awareness of their whiteness, but also affirm their appreciation/understanding of bhangra (through sound clips, lists of bhangra artists,

facebook Home Profile Friends Inbox

Noble Drew ← Browse

radio is asking for...
stereo is asking for...
uncle is asking for...
auntie is asking for...

Thaleon vi Chimro!

Members:

- Basim (vocals, bass, no love/tension)
- Asif (vocals, samples, bhainchodiat)
- Mamoon (drums, aukha-pun)
- Shahjehan (guitars, paseena)

Genre: Punjabi Punk Rock

Hometown: Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Record Label: LPC

Information

Website: <http://myspace.com/nobledrew7>

Current Location: On the Nehr, Nehr-o-Nehr, On the the Nehr

General Manager: Ramzaan Bhai

Artists We Also Like: Naseebo-Lal

Influences: Bhang, WAPDA, Radio FM Punjab 95

Become a Fan
View Updates

Share +

Fans
6 of 89 fans

Kulsoom Wasti
Usman Khalid Kashmiri

Anique Jamil
Mahnam Jamil

Photos
1 album

Noble | Create | 9

Figure 3. Facebook screenshot of Noble Drew.

etc.). Aamil and Lukas are two examples from many possible ones. My reason for selecting them is that they reveal the ability for virtual worlds to support negotiations of South Asian popular culture which may not always be possible offline.

Desi punks on Facebook

The purpose of social networking sites has been to network friends and like-minded individuals. Though News Corporation's MySpace discussed earlier in this article remains a dominant player, Facebook has recently been more influential in South Asian musical subcultures. Facebook was launched in 2004 and initially relegated to American college campuses (restricted by college e-mail addresses). It was later opened to students of international universities and, in September 2006, to the general public. As of 2006, it had 7.5 million members registered and was rated the top website for youths aged 18-24 (Barsky and Purdon 65-67). By 2007, Facebook had grown to 21 million registered members and garnered an average of 1.6 billion page views per day (Needham & Company qtd. in Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 1143-68). Like MySpace, Facebook has a separate section for bands to create pages and solicit 'fans' to become page members.

The Facebook page of Usmani's Lahore-based band Noble Drew has been instrumental in extending their fan base. As the screenshot of their Facebook page (Figure 3) illustrates, icons of their fans are listed and those not yet fans are invited to become ones. Usmani recounted to me that over the course of a few days, the Noble Drew Facebook page received more 'fan' requests than his previous band's (The Kominas) MySpace page did over three years, leading him to conclude that 'there are a lot of Pakistanis on Facebook!'²⁹ If you scroll down the page (an area not pictured in Figure 3), comments from these fans appear on a section of the page known as 'The Wall'. In the case of Noble Drew, Wall posts were posted by fans from Canada, the US, and Pakistan. Besides The Wall, Facebook pages also can contain embedded video (usually hosted at YouTube) and other multimedia content.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Murthy 'Digital Ethnography'), Facebook (and MySpace) enable 'friends' and compound relations (i.e. friends of friends) to network together. Part of this process allows friends and compound relations to see what bands and music scenes their social circle follows. This, in itself, encourages the growth of niche South Asian music subcultures like Taqwacore in that many members of the scene were 'introduced' to it by like-minded diasporic South Asians, a process echoed by many desi music scenes offline.

Though Facebook has been a positive agent of exposure, the ability of new media to reach wider South Asian audiences, though important, has already been well researched.³⁰ An under-researched significance of spaces such as these is as cocoon, socially protected by the vetting of members and deletion of comments as needed. In the face of violent Islamophobia, it is easier to discuss and distribute Taqwacore material 'privately' online in these secure zones rather than in a shop or at school, leading Usmani to observe that cyberspace can be 'a "safe" place for [Muslim] activists to communicate'.³¹ The ability of these spaces, such as the Al-Thawra, Secret Trial Five, Noble Drew, and the (umbrella) 'Taqwacore' Facebook groups, (to at least be perceived) as 'safe' has been alluring to young diasporic Pakistani Muslims who have often felt demonized and otherwise marginalized offline.³² This cocoon feeling is also partially responsible for the activist sub-topic threads such as 'Muslims in the Media' on the 'wall' of the Taqwacore Facebook page. Gajjala (71), writing about South Asian feminist e-mail lists,³³ similarly found that some list members achieved a 'cozy' rapport, forming 'caucus' subgroups. Mandaville

(146) adds that the ostracization of Muslims in ‘Western communities’ has encouraged them to go online to ‘find others “like them”’.

Conclusion

The presence of South Asian popular cultures in new media is already significant, but continually rising. The explosion of Bollywood-themed and diasporic popular culture websites is case in point. It is tempting to stop at this moment, basking in South Asia’s concrete new media presence. However, presence does not always beget position. Moreover, in this case, South Asians continue to be othered/exoticized/otherwise marginalized online and offline. The online presences of Taqwacore and Asian electronic music discussed in this article have been spaces where these marginal essentialisms had been contested. Furthermore, in the face of post-9/11 and 7/7 Islamophobia, ‘Taqwacore’ cyber-spaces have been viewed as ‘safe’ outlets for progressive South Asian Muslims to discuss and organize. Though the Internet’s role in growing South Asian musical subcultures is important, it is critical not to let this overshadow the role of these virtual spaces as cocoons where South Asian youths (especially marginalized Muslim youths) can express themselves creatively and freely. Furthermore, the ability for non-South Asians, who may feel excluded offline, to comfortably participate in South Asian music scenes (such as bhangra) online is noteworthy. Their presence on MySpace and Facebook not only renders visible exclusion created by South Asians offline, but also illustrates how online encounters can positively shape South Asian popular cultures offline. Durkheim (*Elementary Forms*) argued that rituals give birth to ideas of social importance. The same can be said of the online rituals of the three South Asian musical scenes I have highlighted. Their rituals and behaviors (posting on Facebook ‘walls’, participating in e-mail lists, posting YouTube videos, etc.) underline the possibility of online South Asian cyberspaces to function as meaningful social worlds which produce ideas of social importance online and offline (a case in point for the anti-Islamophobic leanings of the Taqwacore).

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Notes

1. See <<http://www.myspace.com>>
2. Basu ‘Mantras’; Desai *Beyond Bollywood*; Dudrah 163–81; Juluri ‘Music Television’; Juluri ‘Global Audience’; Thomas *Imagi-Nations*.
3. Ananda Mitra ‘Nations and the Internet’; ‘Virtual Commonality’; ‘Diasporic Web Sites’; ‘Marginal Voices in Cyberspace’; ‘Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet’; ‘Creating Immigrant Identities in Cybernetic Space’.
4. Lal 137–72; Rai 31–57; Gopal 213–32; Gajjala *Cyber Selves*.
5. <<http://cdbaby.com/cd/kominas>> 15 Sept. 2008.
6. My current research on Taqwacore was conducted from September 2008 to August 2009.
7. Peer-to-peer file sharing (also known as P2P) enables individual users to share files (audio, video, and otherwise) with other interested users. Software clients such as BitTorrent and Soulseek are often used for this sharing.
8. <<http://punkistani.livejournal.com/>> 14 Sept. 2008.
9. <<http://taqwacore.forum2u.org/>> 12 Sept. 2008.

10. The back cover of their CD states: 'Copying & duplicating this album is encouraged'.
11. A view confirmed by posters at the popular alternative South Asian website Sepia Mutiny. See <<http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/003285.html#comments>> 15 Sept. 2008.
12. <http://autonomeia.org/taqwa_censorship> 10 Sept. 2008.
13. Or as Sena Hussain (qtd. in Butt 10) of the Taqwacore band Secret Trial Five puts it, 'There's so much animosity towards Muslims'.
14. Gottschalk and Greenberg *Islamophobia*; Kaplan 'Islamophobia in America'; Semati 'Culture, Difference'; Sirin and Fine 151–63. See Saeed (443–62) for a discussion of similar processes in the UK and Gardner, Karakaolus and Luchtenberg 119–36 in reference to Germany and Australia.
15. Dyson *Release 2.0*; Gates, Myhrvold and Rinerason *The Road Ahead*; and Negroponte *Being Digital*.
16. Chopra (187–206) unpacks this further, arguing that an online South Asian 'global primordiality' has developed which even permeates subaltern cyberspaces such as the online Dalit discourse.
17. E-mail interview with Basim Usmani. 28 Sept. 2008.
18. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jz4vwPjzHU>> 11 Sept. 2008.
19. E-mail interview with Basim Usmani. 28 Sept. 2008.
20. Murthy 'A South Asian American Diasporic Aesthetic Community?'; 'Communicative Flows between the Diaspora and "Homeland"'; 'Representing South Asian Alterity?'
21. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gx-NLPH8JeM>> .
22. Taken from The Offspring's 1998 track of the same name.
23. The 'Basement Bhangra' nights run in downtown Manhattan by DJ Rekha were an exception. The progressive politics of the nights attracted non-Asians from activist, GLBTQ, and journalistic circles.
24. In my research on Asian electronic music online, I have come across several non-Asian respondents who first participated in the scene online, making friends and building a solid knowledge and connection to the scene before participating in it offline. Speaking with them; it is clear that these initial online incursions made for a richer, more comfortable experience off-line. For example, I met John, a black British respondent with ancestry traced to Martinique, at an Asian electronic music event in Shoreditch, East London in 2006. At this club night, he recounted to me how he first participated online for several months before attending an Asian electronic music club night. Before participating online, John felt that this scene was ethnically endogamous. His online interactions with other participants of the scene challenged this notion and were a pivotal reason for his decision to participate physically in the Asian electronic music scene.
25. DJ Nerm during the 7 September 2008 Electro East radio show on BBC Asian Network.
26. From May to August 2008, I examined the MySpace pages of biracial and non-Asian bhangra fans.
27. 'White boys'.
28. These have been anonymized.
29. E-mail interview with Basim Usmani. 28 Sept. 2008.
30. For example, Karim; Gajjala; Mitra 'Marginal Voices'; Mitra 'Voices of the Marginalized'; Purkayastha *Negotiating Ethnicity*.
31. E-mail interview with Basim Usmani. 28 Sept. 2008.
32. See Lange (1–7) for a further discussion of this demonization in praxis.
33. The two main e-mail lists she studied were 'women-writing-culture' and 'SAWnet'.

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