Nationalism remixed? The politics of cultural flows between the South Asian diaspora and 'homeland'

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Abstract

This article examines 'Asian electronic music', a generally progressive diasporic South Asian scene which fuses electronic dance music beats with instruments/sounds traditionally associated with the subcontinent, and how it became embedded into 'majoritarian' Indian nationalism. In India, the music's perceived 'fusion' aesthetic became emblematic of an emergent India which was economically prosperous while 'respecting' its cultural heritage. Using the case of an album which remixed India's national song, *Vande Mataram*, this article explores the convergences and divergences between Asian electronic musicians in Delhi and Hindu nationalists. The article concludes that the musicians in Delhi did not lend to Hindu nationalism. However, they perhaps gave secular Indian nationalism a 'cool' gloss. Ultimately, the production and consumption of Asian electronic music in Delhi raises significant questions regarding the scene's relationship to Indian nationalisms.

Keywords: Nationalism; diaspora; India; ethnicities; globalization; transnationalism.

This journal, almost a decade ago, had a special issue (edited by Chetan Bhatt and Parita Mukta) which made a case for exploring the links between Indian nationalisms and the South Asian diaspora. The issue (23(3), May 2000) broadly argued that understandings of diasporic Indian nationalisms (especially Hindutva) were not only relevant objects of scholarly attention, but also critical to understanding these nationalisms 'back home'. What its authors could not have predicted, however, was that the products of progressive

(explicitly anti-Hindutva) diasporic South Asian movements would also shape discourses of cultural nationalism in India. This article examines the case of 'Asian electronic music', a diasporic genre which fuses electronic dance music beats with instruments/sounds traditionally associated with the subcontinent, and how it became embedded into 'majoritarian' nationalism – what Upadhyaya (1992, p. 815) defines as 'the official nationalist brand of Indian secularism'. The music's rise in the UK was part of a larger trend in which (middle-class) South Asians were trying to escape alterity and marginalization in British popular cultures (Murthy 2009). In New York City, the scene and its music was intertwined with the progressive politics of the Indian leftists and Youth Solidarity Summer [YSS] (Murthy 2007). Music is, of course, polyvalent. Asian electronic music in Delhi took on a perceived 'fusion' aesthetic, which became emblematic of an emergent India which was economically prosperous while 'respecting' its cultural heritage. At times, it seems as if the musicians/participants in the Delhi scene are in consonance with majoritarian Indian nationalism (though not Hindutva). This article explores how a diasporic cultural product experienced a fundamental transformation through its exchange with 'the homeland'. In this case, a music which once had a more progressive and universal mode became rerouted and redefined into discourses of majoritarian Indian nationalism. Furthermore, the case of Asian electronic music highlights the often unforeseeable exchanges that are produced within and in between diaspora and 'homeland'.

The growth in the numbers of well-heeled, well-educated, cosmopolitan children of economic liberalization, what Jain (2001, p. 121) terms 'nouveau-maharajas', marks a visible shift from years of Nehruvian austerity to a new wave of conspicuous consumption. The emergence of Asian electronic music in Delhi exemplifies this trend. However, for the children of Delhi's 'ruling class' (political, economic and social elites), Asian electronic music has been a means for articulating a 'modern', emergent Indian national identity. To contextualize these processes, nationalism in India will first be very briefly outlined as a way of background. The MIDIval PunditZ, Delhi's first and most influential Asian electronic music group, is introduced and used as a case study. An inadvertent clash between Asian electronic musicians (including the MIDIval PunditZ) with the ultra-right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] in 2005 over an album titled *Vande Mataram*, India's national song, highlights how the products of this scene are expressions of Indian cultural nationalism, but ones which stand in distinction to Hindutva/'Hindu nationalisms'. Ultimately, this article concludes that the Asian electric music scene in Delhi has been in sympathy with elements of majoritarian Indian nationalism, but the routes by which this has transpired involve

complex and unique engagements with the South Asian diaspora. This analysis is firmly empirical and is built upon ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi (from 2004 to 2005).

'Majoritarian' Indian nationalism versus Hindutva

This article will be relying on an understanding of a key distinction in Indian nationalism between 'majoritarian' Indian nationalism and Hindutva/Hindu nationalism. Indian 'majoritarian' nationalism, as (Upadhyaya 1992) highlights, is a secular nationalism. It is nationalism derived from a democratic ideal of India. In operation, however, a democratic majority is a Hindu majority (echoing India's demography). Bhatt (2001, p. 4) observes that, historically, 'Indian nationalism was solely or largely coextensive with … Hindu religious or ideological precepts'. 'Majoritarian' Indian nationalism is secular, but, in reality, heavily Hindu-influenced.

Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are most visibly associated with the BJP. As their names suggest, these nationalisms are far from secular. As Hansen (1999) notes, a key mission of the BJP has been the realization of a polity based on 'ancient' and 'true' Hindu culture. Hindutva has its roots in early anti-colonial Indian nationalism and, as Bhatt (2001, p. 4) observes, heroes of the Indian independence movement like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar laid the ideological foundations of modern-day Hindutva. Savarkar not only defined a Hindu in racial terms, but also as one 'who "looks upon" or "considers" the land that extends from the Indus to the Seas as his Fatherland (pitribhu) and Motherland (matribhu)' (Bhatt 2001, p. 99). With this definition, Savarkar extended Hindutva to the diaspora – as he puts it: 'The only geographical limits to Hindutva are the limits of our earth!' (Sarvarkar quoted in Bhatt 2001, p. 99). Therefore, Hindutva is explicitly Hindu rather than merely Hindu-influenced. The BJP, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS], and other Hindu nationalistic groups have also tended to promote more conservative visions of a Hindu India, while Indian majoritarian nationalism has, at least outside of BJP rule, been less conservative and more inclusive.

These distinctions between majoritarian and Hindutva nationalism are knowingly introductory and specifically tailored for the scope of this article. The convergences and divergences between these strands of Indian nationalism are hugely complex and others (e.g. Jaffrelot 1996; Hansen 1999; Bhatt 2001) discuss these distinctions in nuanced detail.

Music and nation

Before exploring the specific case of Asian electronic music's interplay with nationalism, it is useful to highlight some comparative cases of

nationalism and music and the roles of diaspora in these processes as a starting point. These comparisons are intentionally cursory, and my purpose here is to merely draw attention to broad similarities which arise when nationalism meets music. 'mariachi' in Mexico and 'morna' in Cape Verde will be briefly introduced.

In the context of Mexican music in the early 1940s, Moreno Rivas (1989, p. 239), describes the pervasiveness of nationalism as '*el rostro oficial*' (the official face) of musical culture at the time. But, the translation misses a subtlety of the original Spanish, which is its etymological derivation from the Latin word *rostrum*. The rostrum is not only a conductor's platform, but also refers to the beaklike projections of old colonial galley ships. When the conductor Carlos Chávez took the newest articulations of Mexican musical nationalism to New York City for a 1940 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, he filled his galley with energetic composers whose music represented an emergent Mexican modernity. For example, Blas Galindo, a Chávez disciple, had his traditional Western-style orchestra imitate a mariachi band in the composition *Sones de mariachi*. Galindo is from the Mexican state of Jalisco, the birthplace of mariachi music. His early mixing of the 'modern' (orchestra music) with the 'traditional' (mariachi) was considered to be articulating an authentic 'Mexican-ness' (Rivas 1989, p. 243), but a strand, like Asian electronic music, which was ultimately derived from Western musical tropes.

The power of a diaspora to influence musical cultures back in the 'homeland', a process often termed 'musical remittances',[1] is a historically recurring trend. In Cape Verde, morna music emerged in the 1930s. Morna uses a poem as its core with the solo vocalist singing in Kriolu and backed by violin, viola, clarinet, the cavaquinho and the violâo (Palmberg 2002, p. 124). The genre is considered to reflect Cape Verde's Portuguese, Jewish, Anglo-American and slave histories. As Palmberg (2002, p. 130) observers, the Cape Verdean diaspora was responsible for preserving and spreading the genre. A record company was set up by emigrants in Holland and records were produced in Europe and the US. With the morna still considered an icon 'in the construction and maintenance of an all-Cape Verdean identity' (Palmberg 2002, p. 130), the diaspora's role cannot be overstressed.

In the case of Asian electronic music, instruments and sounds traditionally associated with the subcontinent are ascribed with 'national meaning'. Following Elizabeth Grosz (2007), music is 'the most visceral of the arts', and in the case of Asian electronic the visceral is read by its consumers not just as a gut felt vibratory pleasure (from the percussion of the tabla or the strings of the sarangi), but also as a base level 'primordial' ethnic identification (i.e. subcontinental instrumental sounds as cosanguinary). And as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) (whom Grosz is drawing from) argue,

music is constantly becoming, and is, therefore, deterritorialized and then reterritorialized. Whether or not one supports a Deleuzian temporaral territorialization – in their words, a 'refrain' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 310–50) – music is certainly used to territorialize constructions of ethnic identity (e.g. a 'black music club'). Similarly, the sounds could theoretically be used to demarcate nation through Asian electronic music – a visceral primordial 'Indianness' is perceived, however problematically, in the digitally manipulated polyphony.

The 'homeland' strikes back?

The consumers of Asian electronic music in Delhi fall under Jain's (2001) label of 'nouveau-maharajas'. They are the twentysomething beneficiaries of India's market liberalization years – rich in economic and social capital. For these affluent young Indians, Delhi is a boom town and Asian electronic music – with its fusion of subcontinental stylings with Western electronic dance music – is definitely considered an aural representation of flourishing postcolonial, metropolitan capitalism in India. Vikram, a thirty year-old Indian journalist with the BBC in Delhi, recounted to me how he sees this music as an affirmation of India's rising postcolonial position:

> A lot of my friends like the whole idea of beats with the sitar and the tabla. It's kind of an India which is saying that we are important . . . [it represents] the idea that we have arrived, this is the global music. It's not just us listening, it's the whole world listening, and it's got the sitar, the tabla – our instruments.

For Vikram, the music's aesthetic is singularly 'Indian', despite his labelling of it as 'global music'. And the overseas commercial success of this 'Indian' cultural form has led respondents such as Ankit, a twenty-one year-old who recently finished a degree in Information Technology, to feel that that 'perceptions of India abroad' have been positively changed by the successes of Asian electronic music artists. The fact that Asian electronic music has become emblematic of a modern and commercially successful metropolitan India for some Delhiites raises some important questions. The location of the authenticity of the music, the selective explanation of the music's international success, and the possible euphuism of the importance of subcontinental influences are some examples. In terms of the first, the inclusion of instruments traditionally associated with the subcontinent is equated with an 'authentic' ownership of the music. The 'electronic' (Western) elements are downplayed. DJ Sundeep, a resident DJ at the Delhi lounge bar Shalom, described to me how his listeners identify

with the music by dividing it into a discernible dyad of 'Indian' ('this sound belongs to my country') and 'Western' ('beats and bass lines').

Second, the music's international success is disproportionately attributed to India – especially in relation to the country's cultural emergence. The most glaring omission in this logic is that of the diasporic history of Asian electronic music. Performances by British Asian and subsequently South Asian-American musicians in Delhi were instrumental to the growth of the scene in India. Furthermore, the corpus of Asian electronic music is almost exclusively located in the South Asian diaspora. India-based artists only make up a small minority of the scene. This history is conveniently transformed into one in which 'South Asian sounds' predate the diaspora and *ipso facto* the diaspora's involvement is merely an incidental repackaging of the sounds. However, it is in the diaspora that 'Indianness' was felt to be marginalized. It was through the wilful articulations of diasporic South Asians in the UK and US that the music became perceived as a South Asian cultural form. That being said, music is a 'floating signifier' to borrow Hall's (1992) term. Its direction and use is ever-changing. Furthermore, its adherents in Delhi need not pay homage or even acknowledge its diasporic history. Regardless, a key question remains: is the iteration of Asian electronic music in Delhi the outcome of a dialogic relationship, even if those in Delhi do not acknowledge the music's continued engagements with the diaspora? In other words, is Asian electronic music a product of a continuing conversation between diaspora and 'homeland', even when the interlocutor is only implicit?

It is in its transit that Asian electronic music has sonically captured the feelings of respondents such as Vikram, who strongly believe that the music exemplifies an emergent postcolonial India. Its jump to nationalist soundtrack is built on an equation of Western 'beats' with modernism, development and industry; sitars and tablas represent a 'traditional', authentic Indian essence.[2] At a minimum, questions about how subcontinental Indians 'see' their diasporic counterparts are raised. 'Successful' Indians from the diaspora (most notably the dot com Silicon Valley billionaires) were aggressively courted and actively linked with their 'motherland'. With Asian electronic music, the subcontinental musicians 'see' diasporic musicians as 'not quite'[3] Indian/'South Asian'. The success of the music in India, therefore, is partially due to its position as a 'return to roots'. Interestingly, this packaging has been supported by diasporic musicians, who feel that Asian electronic music's success in India brings them 'closer' to their 'motherland'. For diasporic musicians, their identity becomes partially routed through the homeland. In particular, the ways in which they conceive of themselves as South Asian are mediated by their performances alongside musicians in India.

Cyber mehfils

The Asian electronic music group which most prominently exemplifies this notion of an emergent India discussed in the previous section is the Delhi-based duo MIDIval PunditZ, composed of Gaurav Raina and Tapan Raj. The MIDIval PunditZ are both well educated Brahmins (Raina studied architecture and Raj is an engineering graduate of the highly acclaimed Indian Institute of Technology). Their eliteness was further confirmed when *India Today*, a widely read national news magazine, put them in their list of India's top-fifty high achieving/most influential youth (I*ndia Today* 2005). The MIDIval PunditZ are considered to be India's first internationally recognized Asian electronic music band (*The Statesman* 2007), a standing strengthened after they performed at the Glastonbury music festival in England in 2007. Echoing Vikram, a previously quoted respondent, their music is positioned in the Indian press (e.g. *The Statesman* 2008b) as 'usher[ing] in a new era of possibilities for the sound of contemporary India'. The musical aesthetic of the MIDIval PunditZ is built on a perceived fusion of 'traditional' Indian heritage (i.e. North Indian Hindu) with 'modern' Western electronic music. This aesthetic has also been translated from sound to space in their regular live performances, which they term 'cyber mehfils'. These events were the hatching grounds for the Asian electronic music scene in Delhi.

Historically, mehfils were intimate concerts or artistic gatherings presented in courts and palaces with an audience of 'landed aristocrats steeped in sophisticated traditions of artistic tastes and refinement' (Manuel 1989, p. 81). The significance of naming Asian electronic music events 'mehfils' cannot be overstressed. Like their antecedents, these mehfils are also restricted gatherings of a 'select company of connoisseurs' (Massey 2004, p. 158), whose social and economic capital unambiguously delimits them. The club spaces where these mehfils are held are true to their name. The Laidbackwaters club, one cyber mehfil venue, is an opulent 'Moroccan'-themed lounge bar/restaurant tucked away in the five-star Qutab hotel in South Delhi. Though the MIDIval PunditZ themselves portray their mehfils as 'the platform for pushing this music [Asian electronic] to the masses',[4] the reality is that they are selective mehfils and not public concerts. A bartender at Shalom, another mehfil venue, energetically boasted to me that Priyanka Gandhi (daughter of Sonia Gandhi) had made appearances at several events. Broadsheets (e.g. *Hindustan Times* 2005) also joined in on the act of celebrity spotting at these events, even naming royalty such as Aishwarya Singh from the royal family of Madhya Pradesh as followers. The socialite nature of these events is clearly in plain sight.

The MIDIval PunditZ launched the mehfils with much fanfare, touting them as the 'breeding grounds of the future soundz [sic.] of

India'.[5] Their publicity statement passes over in silence the very narrow segment of India they are referring to. For the Indian 'masses' they are supposedly trying to reach, Bollywood will probably continue to dominate the soundscapes for the foreseeable future. Being a mehfil, perhaps what is implied in their omission, is that these 'future soundz' are of elite India or even a very particular section of the Indian elite. Talvin Singh, the British South Asian musician considered the founder of Asian electronic music in India and mentor to the MIDIval PunditZ, labelled them as a 'new class' who had the economic means to participate in club cultures (*London Asian* 1997). Similarly, DJ Mukul, a member of Singh's Anokha collective (which pioneered Asian electronic music in London in the 1990s), remarked in a newspaper interview that the club scene in India is 'stuck to just a privileged few' (Sebastian 2006), a sentiment he also echoed when I interviewed him in Delhi.

Although it is tempting to conclude that this scene is socially meaningful merely as an elite musical form, this would miss the more interesting question of its self-representation at 'home' and abroad. For example, Indian Asian electronic musicians tend to position themselves as either ambassadors of an India which is 'modern' yet 'traditional', or an India which needs to reaffirm its 'heritage' in the face of globalization. Both can be considered progressive articulations of a postcolonial identity. However, the latter ideology is also redolent of Indian nationalism. The idea of a lost heritage to be reclaimed and (musically) passed on to the 'next generation', a recurrent mantra of the MIDIval PunditZ, is promoted through the positing of a declining Indian 'heritage'. Gaurav Raina of the MIDIval PunditZ does this in a compelling way. He frames his music as a means to combat a perceived threat in which globalization has brought a corporatized 'McDonaldized' (Ritzer 2000) cultural identity to India:

> For people frustrated with corporate, globalized reality, Indian music is one of the places to turn ... We hope to help connect all these new people with the classical tradition, because it's so rich. (Raina in Krich 2005)

Contrast this to Bhatt's (2001, p. 175) observation that the BJP also invokes the strengthening of 'India's ancient cultural heritage' against globalized cultural encroachment. Not only are the MIDIval PunditZ appealing to ancient cultural heritage, but, as will be discussed later, their association with the Republic Day website (foregrounded by tanks and missiles blazing; see Figure 2) gives them a set of nationalist credentials. This is not to conflate the rhetoric of the MIDIval PunditZ with that of Hindutva/Hindu nationalism. Indeed, as I argue in the next section, the BJP successfully shut down an Asian electronic music event. However, their interpretation of the role of the Asian electronic

music scene can be seen to shape majoritarian Indian nationalism (i.e. centrist Indian nationalism).

Raina's means of articulating 'Indianness' echoes a logic which, in the context of Indian independence movements, Partha Chatterjee (1986) has termed a 'derivative discourse'. Namely, the nationalist discourse against colonial domination 'accepted the very intellectual premises of "modernity" on which colonial domination was based' (Chatterjee 1986, p. 30). Within Raina's claim, the supposed opposition to a 'corporate, globalized reality' is itself a derivation of globalized Western exoticizations of India. This becomes clear with even a cursory glance at the Cyber Mehfil website. The mehfil is described as a simulacrum of an 'Indian wedding', replete with incense, flowers, and music.[6] The event is described as a 'celebration of the [Indian] heritage' where attendees can 'absorb the [Indian] heritage' and 'take it forward to the next generation'. Not only is a sense of a 'lost heritage' asserted, but Asian electronic music is offered up as the solution to this void. Nevertheless, while many of my respondents in Delhi affirmed this idea of Asian electronic music as a vehicle for reaffirming this constructed, essentialized 'Indian heritage', others vehemently opposed such a statement, opining that the scene was merely about parties for Delhi's bored elites – a ludic postmodern form and nothing more. Rather than exclusively falling into one or the other camp, the consumption in the scene straddles both – a mildly politicized social scene for some and an opportunity to 'party' for others.

However, the meaning of the scene amongst musicians commands a discernible consensus. The musicians and producers I interviewed in Delhi unanimously believed that the Asian electronic music they were creating was politicized. Specifically, like the MIDIval PunditZ, they felt their music served as a platform to: (1) challenge a perceived loss or disconnection of the modern metropolitan Indian from 'Indian heritage'; and (2) celebrate/mark a watershed in postcolonial Indian culture – a move from what they saw as the construction of domestic popular cultural forms as subservient to global forms to one which marks them as liberating and empowering. In terms of the former, James Clifford's (1988, p. 4) work in which he describes a perceived 'feeling of lost authenticity, of "modernity" ruining some essence or source' is useful. For the Asian electronic musicians in Delhi, an anterior Indian essence is taken for granted. Their music is felt to be redressing the loss Clifford is describing. What is distinct in this example, however, is the fact that these processes are normally observed in music produced by the diaspora and not in the 'homeland'. Though Clifford's observation can be applied in principle to the loss of authenticity felt by these elite Indians in post-liberalization Delhi, it is qualitatively different to the loss felt by the diaspora. The diaspora,

of course, has a geographical estrangement which critically influences these processes.

Both the 'homeland' and diaspora converge in that their shared constructions of an anterior Indian essence(s) are based on an imagined pre-modernity or pre-capitalist India where the populace was in touch with their 'heritage'. For the migrant in the diaspora, the threat to this essence is perceived to be assimilation, while for the elite Delhiites, it is in selected aspects of globalization. Literature on 'Latin(a/o)' musics highlights this division well. For example, Duany, in his study of salsa music in Puerto Rico, concludes that, 'Salsa is above all a symbol of resistance to the loss of national identity, whether through *the migration experience* or *the cultural penetration* of the island' (Duany 1984, p. 199, emphasis added). Following Duany's division of types of identity loss, Asian electronic music's function as a mode of perceived symbolic resistance in the diaspora (due to migration experience) and the 'homeland' (due to a globalized cultural threat) is a critical distinction. Also, unwittingly (but very importantly), a boundary between 'homeland' and diaspora becomes broken.

Secondly, the mehfils are represented as a product of a newly acquired postcolonial 'freedom', represented by the MIDIval PunditZ in their early mehfils through a remix which had excerpts from Nehru's epochal 'Tryst with Destiny' speech. The standard inspiration for this feeling of 'empowerment' given by musicians or participants in the scene is the overseas success of Asian electronic music. In the words of Alokh, a nineteen year-old student from Gurgaon, an increasingly affluent city just outside Delhi, 'I feel proud that West [sic.] is buying music from the East'.[7] As his words indicate, this pride arises more from the music's commercial successes abroad than from an idea of cultural emancipation or global 'mediation'. As 'Indian' cultural forms like bhangra and Asian electronic circumnavigate the globe, the feeling in Delhi's elite dance halls is overwhelmingly jubilant and you can cut the feeling of 'empowerment' with a knife. Deshpande's (2000) case of bhangra's success in Delhi echoes this: 'We are no longer only consumers of other people's cultures – now we produce the music that the world wants to listen to.'

However, the feting of the scene in Delhi is more about liberalization than liberation. The MIDIval PunditZ's nationalist likening remains forceful in that it appeals to an emergent India, an idea popular amongst Indians who have disproportionately prospered post-liberalization. These respondents do not consider this perceived empowerment in relation to the global commodification of Asian electronic music. Along with the MIDIval PunditZ, they passionately believe that this music is expressive of 'being Indian'. In an interview with me, Raina of the MIDIval PunditZ details this idea that their music is cohered through a belonging/commonality between Indians:

Being Indian is the *basic* thing which ties it all together. . . . everywhere in India you go, the *basic* feeling or the *basic* sense of belonging everybody has is similar. (Personal interview, emphasis added)

This nascent nationalism (replete with the emphasized classic ethno-nationalist verbiage) illustrates the power of Indian cultural nationalism. It parallels the BJP and Bajrang Dal's celebration of a pre-existing monolithic essence of 'Indianness'. Raina's language is also reminiscent of the spirit and tone of the BJP's 1996 campaign platform of 'one nation, one people, one culture' (Bhatt 2001, p. 174), a rhetoric which conveniently glosses over enormous religious, social and class differences in India. However, the MIDIval PunditZ and BJP do strongly diverge on how this unitary Indianness should be represented. The BJP and Bajrang Dal favour an explicit Hindutva nationalism and the MIDIval PunditZ lend support to a more centrist, majoritarian Indian nationalism.[8]

The *Vande Mataram* affair

The Hindu Right and MIDIval PunditZ are both celebrating 'Indianness', but the latter do not lend to Hindutva. Indeed, the Hindu right publicly clashed with the MIDIval PunditZ/Asian electronic music scene over the production and release of the album *Vande Mataram*. The album features eight remixes of the *Vande Mataram* (salutation to the mother[land]), India's controversial national song, by the MIDIval PunditZ and other India-based Asian electronic musicians. *Vande* (or *Bande*) *Mataram* was written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (also Chatterjee) in the late nineteenth-century and first appeared in his novel *Anandamath* (Chatterji and Lipner 2005). As Tanika Sarkar (2001, pp. 169–70) argues, Chattopadhyay turned from a supporter of certain British policies such as the suppression of the local vernacular press, to a fomenter of Indian nationalism. The climate in India, post-1857 Mutiny, as Sarkar (2001 p. 170) observes, was one of 'racist repression' which 'created serious self-doubt in the Bengali middle classes, which had been entirely loyal in 1857'. Chattopadhyay was no exception.

Following Partha Chatterjee (1986), Chattopadhyay's work can be read as linking national culture and power in India. For him, a powerful nationalist resistance required mass support of, what Thomas Blom Hansen (1999, p. 69) calls the cultural 'reconstruction of the nation'. *Vande Mataram*'s Hindu construction of national Indian culture propagated through the ranks of the nationalist movements and became, as Bhagavat (1909, p. 1) argues, the Indian equivalent of the hymn *La Marseillaise*. However, unlike the French battle anthem, it

did not make an explicit call to arms. Rather, its legitimacy in the nationalist discourse, as Sethi (1999, p. 16) argues, stemmed from its powerful evocation of India as an enslaved 'mother' and the freedom movement as the struggle to free 'her'. The image of India as Bharat Mata, the motherland,[9] upset colonial administrators, leading them to ban it – a move which unwittingly promoted the song's rise. In addition to the British, a range of Muslims also had trouble with the song. They not only objected to the song's explicit personification of the nation as Durga, a Hindu goddess, but also as Sarkar (2001, p. 163) observes, its use as the Hindu rallying cry during times of communal violence between Muslims and Hindus after 1926. In *Anandamath* itself, *Bande Mataram* served this function with passages such as:

> "Say Bande Mataram or we'll kill you!" . . . No sooner did they see a Muslim, than the villagers chased after him to kill him. (Chatterji and Lipner 2005, p. 214)[10]

Gould (2004, p. 216) also cites the example in 1937 of Muslim shopkeepers in Allahabad protesting against the chanting of the song by 'congressmen' – most likely a reaction to national political representatives endorsing (and therefore further legitimizing) the *Vande Mataram*. As Muslim leaders opposed the singing of *Vande Mataram* as a Hindu nationalist entity, the song was quickly demoted to national song from being the *de facto* national anthem. More recently, the song has become emblematic of *deshbhakti* (Hindu patriotic) nationalism. When the BJP won the 1993 state election in Delhi, it mandated the compulsory singing of *Vande Mataram* in state schools (Pinch 1996, p. 163). The RSS, a powerful militant Hindu nationalist group which engineered the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and is generally considered to be the backbone of the BJP, mandates the singing of the song in its entirety (including the original Bengali passages) at their training meetings (Sarkar 2001, p. 164).

A key distinction between the meaning and reception of the *Vande Mataram* in colonial and contemporary India is its loss of any leftist revolutionary meaning. In Gandhi's time, the airing of the *Vande Mataram* on the banned Congress Radio could and was read as an anti-colonial text. In India today, the song remains emotive. For many Hindus, it remains a powerful nationalist text. However, for many Muslims, *Vande Mataram* remains, as in its original context in *Anandamath*, a violent anti-Muslim text. For others, it symbolizes an imposition of Hindu norms in a purportedly secular state. This was evidenced by Sikh and Muslim protests in 2006, the centenary of *Vande Mataram*. At a minimum, *Vande Mataram* remains highly politicized. Therefore, the active choice of these Asian electronic

musicians to proudly release an album remixing the *Vande Mataram* and its response warrants serious attention.

   India Today classed the album as a patriotic tribute, and ends its overwhelmingly positive review by exclaiming: 'Who says patriotism doesn't rock?' (Ranjit 2005). In an interview in the *Bangalore Times*, Tapan Raj of the MIDIval PunditZ acknowledged *Vande Mataram*'s prominence and also added that they were 'happy and honoured, as playing a song of national importance is a matter of great pride' (Singh 2005). However, this welcome coverage of the album as nationalistic had unwelcome consequences.

   On 12 August 2005, a launch party for the CD was scheduled to take place at the Odyssey restaurant and club in the upscale Sahara mall in Gurgaon, a prosperous IT and call centre hub close to Delhi (see Figure 1). As is the norm at these events, many of Delhi's young society types were in attendance. Activists from the BJP and Bajrang Dal also decided to pay a visit. They had taken offence that the revered song would 'be played before [an] alcohol-sipping audience in a nightclub' (Nanda 2005). The hardliners also emphasized that the album represented an 'Italy-nisation' of the national song (Nanda 2005), referring to their larger campaign of hate and xenophobia against Sonia Gandhi and the Congress Party in general. The Hindutva ranks threatened to violently protest if the launch party went ahead. The musicians acquiesced and cancelled the event. In this single incendiary

Figure 1. *Flyer for* Vande Mataram *launch*
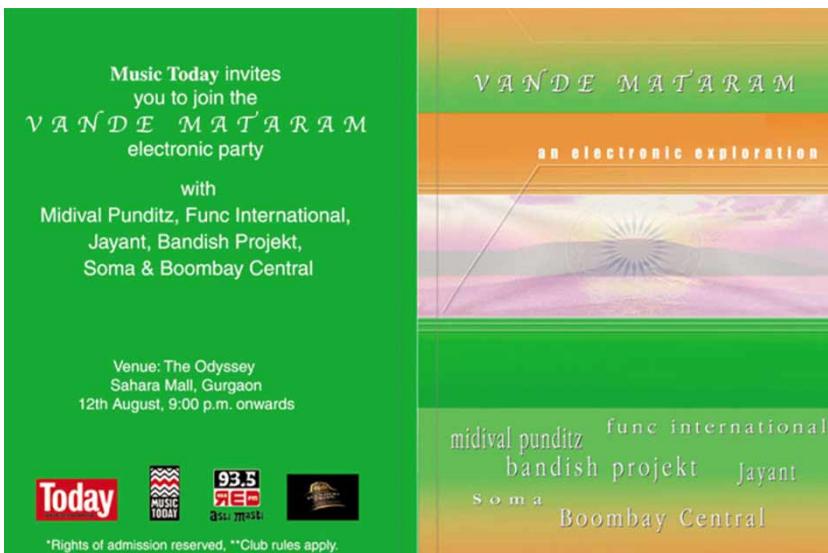
Source: Courtesy of India Today Group

moment, the song itself became a site for contesting an authentic 'Indianness'. The point of divergence between the musicians and the Hindutva camps was not a lack of nationalistic drive. Rather, the Hindutva organizations took offence at the shift of *Vande Mataram* from Hindu nationalist anthem to majoritarian Indian nationalist anthem. This is a critical distinction. Mainstream Indian nationalism is still majority Hindu-influenced, but is technically a 'secular' nationalism as discussed earlier. The asperity of the Hindu nationalists therefore associated the transformation of the 'sacred' national song into a profane club anthem with larger political discourses of the Congress party in which Indian nationalism had moved away from Hindutva Indian nationalism. The album was a badly chosen target. Had they looked past its dancehall performances, they would have seen the album was in congruence (or at least in sympathy) with certain 'cultural' elements of BJP nationalism:

> The [BJP] party is pledged to build-up India as a strong and prosperous nation, which proudly draws inspiration from India's ancient culture and values. (Bharatiya Janata Party 2005, p. 72)

The musicians' and my respondents' recurrent references to the music as an interpretation of an India which is modern but continues to articulate its 'heritage' is quite similar to the BJP's party philosophy mentioned above. Granted, the MIDIval PunditZ's invocation is not Hindutva. However, it is also not in opposition to Hindutva.

Additionally, both the BJP's/RSS's and the album's reading of the *Vande Mataram* includes at least some association with violence and military strength. The *Vande Mataram* hymn, as Sarkar (2001, p. 177) opines, is textually violent as images of Durga are transformed into Kali, another avatar of the mother goddess, but one that is 'a destructive, angry force'. This message seems to have been carried literally in contemporary representations of the hymn. One example is *Vande Mataram*'s use on the 2007 Republic Day 'Made in India' website.[11] Downloadable clips from the *Vande Mataram* album are placed on the Republic Day homepage under 'patriotic' imagery replete with the Indian tricolour, tanks, armed helicopters and marching soldiers (see Figure 2). The album's association with a militarized nationalism cannot be overemphasized. For the same tanks, armed helicopters and scores of soldiers are the military instruments usually deployed against Pakistan in another iteration of Indian nationalism. Disturbingly, the inclusion of these clips appears to be serving the greater political goal of mobilizing nationalist sentiment amongst Indian youth – a strategy often deployed by the RSS. After all, it is an extremely clever PR ploy associating nationalism with popular club music. Youth are brought to the website with the promise of listening to

Figure 2. *Republic Day webpage*

hip new electronic music tracks and leave with ringtones, a spectre of the nationalist agenda emanating from their Nokia handsets. This is not to say that youth visit the site uncritically. Rather, the power of associating products through a very deliberate product placement is highly relevant in this case.

Following in the same vein of digital nationalism, the album's record label, Times India, put up a webpage describing *Vande Mataram* as a 'tribute to the motherland, and they emphasize that '[e]very musician on this album feels honoured to be a part of it.'[12] It is quite clear from this marketing abstract that the artists are complicit – happily cashing in on the increased album sales that nationalist fervour easily drums up in India. However, this explicit approval/'pride' of *Vande Mataram* raises the question of whether this vein of nationalism is as secular as they would have us believe. Its divisive position raises the first alarm bells. Secondly, as Bhatt (2001, p. 27) argues, *Bande Mataram* has become 'a virtual anthem for the contemporary Hindutva movement'. This is well known in India (as evidenced by the Sikh and Muslim protests discussed above), and it would be nothing short of naïve for us to think that the Asian electronic musicians involved were oblivious to this political association.

Conclusion

> The contemporary Indian elite is hardly different from its pre-
> decessors ... (Pandit 1984, p. 16)

To some extent, Pandit is right. The Indian urban elite are rich (perhaps more than ever), they continue to be highly educated and they remain in positions of great influence. The 'nouveau-maharajas' are generally Hindu, they are nationalistic and they are usually men; but the frequent (if not continuous) interactions between the elite and the diaspora are, broadly speaking, a relatively new phenomena. The new media technologies which facilitate the production and consumption of Asian electronic music as well as the maintenance of the scene in Delhi have also been responsible for enabling vibrant multilateral flows between the diaspora and the 'homeland'. It is through these technological mediations that the music proliferated in Delhi in its infancy.

The difference in these flows, however, is that it is actually a diasporic musical form which has been rerouted by these Delhi-based musicians. Perhaps, this is not surprising. Although the pre-liberal-ization years were marked by high import duties, the subcontinent explicitly privileged the foreign, eagerly marking any such product as 'imported' and revering it above all others. In the case of Asian electronic music, 'foreign' is never invoked. Its diasporic roots are conveniently erased and the musical form is taken to be authentically 'Indian' because of the music's usage of instruments and sounds traditionally associated with the subcontinent. The music of the elite mehfils, the nationalistic remixes of the *Vande Mataram* and even catwalk soundtracks[13] are largely based on the musical stylings of the South Asian diaspora. The significance of this is that 'homeland' sounds reproduced and qualitatively modified in the diaspora still retain a palpable 'Indian essence'. But more importantly, should the Asian electronic music scene in Delhi be considered a product of a continuing dialogic relationship between the 'homeland' and diaspora as the former does not acknowledge the role of the latter?

Perhaps the elites involved with the scene in Delhi are uneasy with their position of managing what constitutes 'Indianness'. Rather than exclusively rehearsing historically xenophilic constructions of Indian-ness, their answer is to define themselves as successful Indians, who are 'modern', yet pay homage to 'tradition'. This brand of 'Indianness' is predicated on much the same anterior essences of Indian 'tradition' and 'modernity' that the BJP and other Hindutva camps exalt, albeit a secular iteration. As the privileged classes continue to be most populous in the scene, the essentialization of Indian 'tradition' is subject to an elite ideological dominance. What is particularly striking is that they seem to either be completely unaware or ignore the fact that

the 'Indianness' that they glorify is an elite, aristocratic and refined cultural invocation.

Ultimately, the transformation of Asian electronic music in Delhi as emblematic of what the BJP calls a 'resurgent India' (Bhatt 2001, p. 150) raises significant questions. The construction of a homogenous, elite notion of Indian modernity is potentially counterproductive as it stifles diverse subjectivities. These articulations of 'Indianness' in conjunction with new youth nationalisms have hardly been innocuous (recall the Republic Day website with its irredentist sub-text). The choice of the musicians to record the album cannot be viewed as a purely secular nationalism given *Vande Mataram*'s tight association with Hindutva. Though the album is not allied with Hindutva (as the clash with the BJP clearly illustrates), it does, however, serve to further erase the shared history of Muslims in India. The song is not unifying but inherently divisive. That being said, it is also critical not to downplay the ludic dimensions of Asian electronic music in Delhi. The elites of Delhi are experiencing unparalleled economic, political and cultural success globally. Dancing to breakbeats mixed with sitar samples is at one level celebratory – what Nietzsche (1974, p. §4) calls 'superficial out of profundity'. At the most obvious level, superficiality went out the door when *Vande Mataram* hit the dancefloor. However, perhaps the BJP cottoned onto something in its distress over the desecration of this 'sacred' song. Even if the aim of the musicians and the producers on the album was not to give the *Vande Mataram* a cool/*en vogue* gloss, this most definitely is one of the perceptions by listeners (both on and off the dance floor). Therefore, this listening of *Vande Mataram* might ultimately render any 'sacred' nationalist message banal and superficial.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. See Flores (2008) for a detailed discussion on musical remittances.
2. This theme continues to be propagated by the Western media. For example, Spencer (2005) described the music of the MIDIval PunditZ as mirroring 'modern India's mix of ancient and modern'. Here, the 'modern' and 'traditional' become purposefully exaggerated tropes.
3. I am borrowing this term from Essed and Trienekens (2008).
4. Retrieved from the MIDIval Punditz website http://www.punditz.com/biography.html (June 2003).
5. From the Cyber Mehfil website at http://www.cybermehfil.com/camp.html

6.   From the Cyber Mehfil website at http://www.cybermehfil.com/camp.html. See also *The Statesman* (2008a).

7.   Personal interview.

8.   This mimics the larger divergence in nationalist discourses as Devji (quoted in Ansari 2005, p. 113) argues, 'The actual contest taking place is between a secular state nationalism and a Hindu nationalism.'

9.   From Hansen (1999, p. 112)

10.   Interestingly, early colonial-era translations do not refer to the killing of Muslims in this passage. For example, Sen-Gupta (Chatterji and Sen-Gupta 1906, p. 167) translates the second part of the passage as, 'The villagers would chase any Mussulman that they would meet', omitting any direct reference to communal murder.

11.   http://in.mobile.indiatimes.com/mobile/made-in-india/index.html

12.   From their label's site http://www.music-today.com (accessed 29 June 2007).

13.   The well known fashion choreographer Aparna Behl regularly uses tracks by the MIDIval PunditZ for shows.

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